

EI-898

PHYLLIS (FILOMENA) CICIA FELICE
BIRTH DATE: MARCH 27, 1921
INTERVIEW DATE: MAY 29, 1997
RUNNING TIME: 44:10
INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.
RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME
INTERVIEW LOCATION: MANCHESTER, CONNECTICUT
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 10/1997
TRANSCRIPT NOT REVIEWED

ITALY, 1933
AGE 12
SHIP NAME NOT RECORDED

ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Funding for this transcript, one of many interviews conducted with Italian and Sicilian women, was generously provided by interviewee Elda Del Bino Willitts, EI-8. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 8/14/1997.

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Thursday, May 29, 1997. I'm in Manchester, Connecticut, with Phyllis Felice. Mrs. Felice came from Italy, she came in 1933, she was twelve years old at that time. Present also in the room is her daughter, Mary Kiley. Mary Kiley, her daughter, and her daughter-in-law, Ann Morrin. I'll spell both of those last names. Kiley is K-I-L-E-Y, and Morrin is M-O DOUBLE-R-I-N. Anyway, thank you for letting me come. Can we begin by you giving me your birth date, please?

FELICE: March 27, 1921.

SIGRIST: And where in Italy were you born?

FELICE: I was born in Casola.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Casola for me, please?

FELICE: C-A-S-O-L-A.

SIGRIST: I'm going to pause just for a second. I want to fix your microphone. (break in tape) All right, we're resuming now. I fixed the mike.

FELICE: Casola is a little town near Casserta[ph].

SIGRIST: Casserta[ph].

FELICE: And it used to be a province of Naples.

SIGRIST: How far away from Naples is it?

FELICE: About an hour's ride.

SIGRIST: Oh, not very far.

FELICE: No.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the town itself?

FELICE: It's very small, a lot of farms, a lot of grapes, and walnuts, and, you know, and cows, and donkeys. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Do you have a story about a donkey? You're laughing when you say

donkey.

FELICE: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me about the donkey?

FELICE: Well, my grandfather used to have fig trees.

SIGRIST: Fig trees.

FELICE: Fig trees, yeah. And when they were ripe, he used to put me on top of the donkey and I'd pick the figs and put them in the basket. (she laughs) So, uh, that's how I remember the donkeys.

SIGRIST: When you were a little girl, where was your favorite place to go in town?

FELICE: Gee, I don't know. We didn't have any, no place to go, except go to school.

SIGRIST: Is there a building that was in town that sticks out in your mind?

FELICE: Well, the neighbors' houses, they had flowers around, and it was pretty.

SIGRIST: Can you describe your house for me?

FELICE: Oh, it was made out of stone. We slept in the second floor, and the kitchen was in the next house, like, you know, they were separated. So . . .

SIGRIST: How many rooms?

FELICE: Well, our bedroom was only one bedroom, and then we had the kitchen downstairs. It wasn't some big house.

SIGRIST: You said it was made out of stone. What kind of floor did it have?

FELICE: A cement floor.

SIGRIST: What kind of roof did it have?

FELICE: Those, you know the Howard Johnson's? (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Tiles, orange tiles.

FELICE: The tile, the orange tile, yeah.

SIGRIST: How did you light the inside of your house?

FELICE: Hmm. Gee. With candles, I imagine, or lanterns.

SIGRIST: How did you cook in the house? You said that kitchen was sort of . . .

FELICE: In the fireplace.

SIGRIST: . . . apart from the building. Can you describe how food was cooked?

FELICE: It was like a place, you know, they made, to put the coals in, and light the fire, and have a rack over it to put the pots and pans on.

SIGRIST: Did it ever get cold in this part of Italy?

FELICE: No, no. We only had maybe one snowstorm in the winter, and it used to melt the next morning. It was all, you know, it didn't stay very long.

SIGRIST: Tell me what name you were born with in Italy.

FELICE: Filomena.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Filomena, please?

FELICE: F-I-L-O-M-E-N-A.

SIGRIST: And do you have a middle name?

FELICE: No.

SIGRIST: And what was your maiden name?

FELICE: Cicia.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

FELICE: C-I-C-I-A.

SIGRIST: Excuse me. (break in tape) We're resuming now, having all seen the bird in the birdhouse out the front window. (they laugh) Um, what was your dad's name?

FELICE: Domenico.

SIGRIST: Domenico. And what did he do for a living in Italy?

FELICE: Well, he was in, as far as I remember, he was in the first World War, and he, well, he had, they had some land, you know, they used to work on the land, but he didn't want that, so he had a brother here living in Massachusetts. So after the war he left me when I was three months old, and he came to America.

SIGRIST: Did he ever talk about his experiences during the First World War, stories that you might remember?

FELICE: Not very often, no. He didn't like to talk about it. Oh, he was a prisoner of war for 18 months in Germany.

SIGRIST: And what did he ever tell you about that?

FELICE: Well, it was rough. They didn't have nothing to eat, so they used to go out in the fields and steal potatoes out of the,

somebody's garden, and they'd rub it off on their clothes, and they used to eat the raw potatoes.

SIGRIST: So he did talk a little bit about it.

FELICE: A little bit. Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: What did your father look like? Describe him in words.

FELICE: Oh, gee. I got a picture of him.

SIGRIST: Don't point to a picture. Just describe him.

FELICE: Oh, he was about, I don't know, how tall would he be? Five feet four? He was handsome.

SIGRIST: What color hair?

FELICE: Brown.

SIGRIST: And what was his temperament like, his personality?

FELICE: Very mild, you know. He wasn't, he wasn't one to beat us up or anything. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: When you were a little girl in Italy, what kinds of things did you enjoy doing with your father?

FELICE: I didn't see him that much.

SIGRIST: Oh, that's right, because he had come to the United States.

FELICE: He had come to America, and he stayed here seven years. Then he came back to pick us up, but my mother got pregnant, and she couldn't travel. (she laughs) So then he came back by himself again, came back here, stayed another few years, and I have a brother that was two years old when we came over here.

SIGRIST: And that was the brother that your mother was pregnant with.

FELICE: Yeah, that's right.

SIGRIST: In September, when he came home.

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: When your father was in America and you were in Italy, how did you think about your father? What did the word "father" mean to you, not having seen this man?

FELICE: Well, I wasn't, I wasn't too happy to see him when I saw him. I didn't know him. Because I hadn't seen him since I was three months, so I didn't know him. And I didn't want to have nothing to do with him. But when he left, I got a fever. (she laughs)
I was so upset, after being, getting attached to him, you know.
(disturbance to the microphone)

SIGRIST: Whoops, you just lost your mike here. (disturbance to the

microphone)

FELICE: So, anyway, he came back in 1933, and we all came over here.

SIGRIST: Where in Massachusetts did you say he was?

FELICE: Amherst.

SIGRIST: He was in Amherst. And what was he doing in Amherst?

FELICE: He worked for the railroad.

SIGRIST: Doing what?

FELICE: He was a section foreman.

SIGRIST: Which means what?

FELICE: Well, he used to take care of the tracks, but he was the boss of the workers.

SIGRIST: What do you know about your father's family background? You mentioned his experiences in World War One. What do you know about his childhood, his growing up?

FELICE: Not very much, because his mother and father died when he was young. Well, his mother died when, during the war, because people kept telling her that he would never make it home, and she was all upset, you know, crying all the time. So I don't know if

that was the reason she died, but she died. And his father died when he was a little boy.

SIGRIST: So you never knew his parents.

FELICE: I never knew them, no.

SIGRIST: I see.

FELICE: No.

SIGRIST: Um, what was your mother's name?

FELICE: Filomena.

SIGRIST: Like yours.

FELICE: The same, yeah.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

FELICE: Cicia.

SIGRIST: Spelled the same way.

FELICE: The same way, yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. Were they related, cousins, or?

FELICE: No, no. The name is the same. It's very common over there.

SIGRIST: What do you know about your mother's growing up, and her, and her . . .

FELICE: Well, we lived with my grandparents.

SIGRIST: Your mother's parents?

FELICE: Yep.

SIGRIST: What did your mother tell you, though, about her childhood? Did she ever tell stories about when she was a little girl?

FELICE: No. They had to work hard, because they had a big farm, and take care of all the animals and everything. The only thing she used to tell me was she used to fight with her sister about the combs. (she laughs) Because they all had long hair, and the combs used to break, and every time her sister would borrow it, the comb would break. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: So she did tell you some things.

FELICE: Yeah, something. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Let me just put the wire around your arm here. There you go. Um, what was your mother's personality like?

FELICE: I don't know. (she laughs) I don't know. What would you say?

SIGRIST: Talk to me, not to the audience over there.

FELICE: I don't know. She was, you know, like a mother, like me. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: But what, I mean, was she, was she hot tempered? Was she very gentle? Try to characterize her.

FELICE: I don't know. I don't think she was hot tempered, except when she had a fight with my father. (she laughs) No, she wasn't.

SIGRIST: What were some of the things that she had to do around the house? What were her responsibilities in that house?

FELICE: Keep the house clean and cook and wash clothes and . . .

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me how she washed clothes at that time?

FELICE: On the scrub board. I did that, too.

SIGRIST: Where did the water come from?

FELICE: From the house, it came.

SIGRIST: Did you have running water in your house?

FELICE: Yeah. We lived in Stafford Springs at the time.

SIGRIST: No, I'm talking about in Italy.

FELICE: Oh, in Italy!

SIGRIST: How did your mother do the wash in Italy?

FELICE: Oh, they used to have these tubs. They'd fill them up with water, and then use a washboard and wash clothes.

SIGRIST: And where did the water come from?

FELICE: From the well. They have to, you know, pump it.

SIGRIST: Was the well inside the house?

FELICE: No, outside.

SIGRIST: Whose job was it to get the water?

FELICE: Hers, I guess. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Someone other than yours, I guess.

FELICE: Well, I used to wash diapers for my brother.

SIGRIST: Well, all right. That was one of your chores.

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: After he was born. Do you remember . . .

FELICE: I had to wash diapers.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when your brother was born?

FELICE: He was, oh, geez, 19, 19 something. I can't remember.

SIGRIST: Not the date so much, but do you remember the event, the day that he was born? What sticks out in your mind about . . .

FELICE: No, the only thing I can remember, when he was about one or one-and-a-half he got pneumonia, and we didn't think he was going to live. But thank God he lived, because my mother cried her eyes out, because she was afraid that my father would say, "Oh, you didn't want to come to America and the boy got sick and everything." He would blame her. She was afraid of that.

SIGRIST: What was your brother's name?

FELICE: Ralph, Raphaele.

SIGRIST: Raphaele. And was he named after somebody?

FELICE: He was, he was named after my father's father.

SIGRIST: Whom you never knew. That was the man who died early on. You said that you lived with your mother's parents, that they lived. Talk to me about your grandmother and your grandfather.

FELICE: I can't remember my grandmother that much.

SIGRIST: Why? Why is that?

FELICE: Because she would never have her picture taken, and I don't, I

was too young to, to remember. But I remember my grandfather, because my mother had pictures of him at her house.

SIGRIST: You said that they lived with you.

FELICE: Yeah, they, we lived with them, but, uh . . .

SIGRIST: You lived with them.

FELICE: But then, uh, during the war, my grandmother died. And my grandfather died soon later.

SIGRIST: So you were just little when you lived with them?

FELICE: Yeah, I was little.

SIGRIST: I see. So you don't actually remember . . .

FELICE: I remember the cow. I was walking down the street. My mother always told me this, that, uh, I was walking along, and this cow walked right over me, and it never hit me. (she laughs) I was lucky.

SIGRIST: What other animals were around the town at that time?

FELICE: Oh, God.

SIGRIST: You had the donkey and the cow.

FELICE: Oh, the ducks, pretty ducks, white ducks.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the ducks?

FELICE: Oh, they were lovely. I used to feed them, you know, throw them the food. And I, we went back in 1975, so . . .

SIGRIST: Okay, but we haven't gotten you out of there . . .

FELICE: Oh, you haven't gotten me out of there yet. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Did you go to school in Italy?

FELICE: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you talk to me about going to school?

FELICE: I can't remember too much about it. I remember going, but . . .

SIGRIST: Was it a separate building somewhere?

FELICE: Yeah. Yeah, I used to walk to school and walk home.

SIGRIST: Do you remember like a teacher that you had?

FELICE: No.

SIGRIST: Could your mother read and write?

FELICE: No.

SIGRIST: Could, could your, um, I assume your father probably could.

FELICE: Yeah, he did.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Um, who, was it your mother or your father? For whom was education more important? Did your . . .

FELICE: Both of them, I guess. But my father kind of pushed us along, made sure the boys went to high school. I didn't, because I had to stay home and help my mother take care of the rest of the family.

SIGRIST: Was there anything that your mother tried to teach you at home in Italy before you came here?

FELICE: Crocheting. She taught me how to crochet. See all my doilies?
(she laughs)

SIGRIST: Oh, you made all these?

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Wow. Can you talk to me . . .

FELICE: And the Afghans.

SIGRIST: Can you talk to me about how she learned to do that? Do you know who taught her?

FELICE: No, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Do you remember something that you made, like the first thing that you made when you were a little kid?

FELICE: A little scarf for the, your vanity, you know, like a vanity scarf. I still have them around somewhere.

SIGRIST: What religion were you?

FELICE: Catholic.

SIGRIST: Was there a Catholic church in town?

FELICE: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about going to church as a little girl in Italy?

FELICE: I remember when they had the palms, Palm Sunday, and they'd bring these olive branches in the church and bless them, and then they would have the procession all around the church, and the priest would say, you know, his, his whatever he said. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: You're doing a great job. You've got a good memory. Can you tell me about how you practiced your religion at home? What did you do at home?

FELICE: Oh, I don't know. We said our prayer. We observed our holidays, you know.

SIGRIST: Did you have any religious objects in the house?

FELICE: Oh, yeah, plenty, like the little, the Mary and her baby, and different things. And then at Christmas time they'd put the kresh[ph], the kresh[ph] up, you know, the, like we do over here.

SIGRIST: Is there a prayer that you learned as a child in Italian that you can still say?

FELICE: No, I don't think so.

SIGRIST: Were there special foods that you ate at Christmas time?

FELICE: Oh, I don't know. The same as we have here, you know. Spaghetti and meatballs, and I can't.

SIGRIST: Who did the cooking in your family?

FELICE: My mother.

SIGRIST: And can you talk to me about what your typical food, Italian food, in the 1920's, was? What did you eat on a daily basis back then?

FELICE: Spaghetti.

SIGRIST: And where did the spaghetti come from?

FELICE: Potatoes.

SIGRIST: Where did the spaghetti come from?

FELICE: When we were here, or over there?

SIGRIST: No, there.

FELICE: Over there. Well, they used to make it.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the process, how the pasta . . .

FELICE: They used to make the flour, you know, mix the flour. Or, I don't know, I don't remember if they used eggs. And then they roll it out, and then cut it up, and then either let it dry or cook it the way it was. So it wasn't that much different, you know? Like now, here, they make pasta.

SIGRIST: What about, did you have vegetables that you ate in Italy?

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What kinds of vegetables?

FELICE: Squash, potatoes, zucchini.

SIGRIST: You said squash so definitively. (Mrs. Felice laughs) Is there a, can you tell me something more specific about eating squash, like the way it was prepared, or when you ate it, or . . .

FELICE: I don't know. I don't know. I can't remember.

SIGRIST: Okay. When you were a little girl in Italy, how did you think about America? What did you know about America before you got here?

FELICE: Nothing.

SIGRIST: How did you think about it?

FELICE: Well, like they said, that the money, you find money in the streets, the way the story goes. I don't know. I don't, I didn't think too much about it. I was too young, I guess.

SIGRIST: Do you remember games that you played as a little kid?

FELICE: Yeah. We used to use those, uh, those little nuts, and use them as marbles, because we didn't have marbles, so we'd play with those little, what do they call them?

KILEY: Filberts?

FELICE: Filberts.

SIGRIST: What about a toy? Did you have a toy that sticks out in your mind?

FELICE: No.

SIGRIST: Or did someone make something for you?

FELICE: No. We entertained ourselves, you know. We didn't have no toys.

SIGRIST: How did your mother support the family? When your father was in America, where did the money come from to buy food and necessities?

FELICE: Well, the, uh, she worked, you know, we lived with my grandfather, so he supported us, and my father would send the money over sometimes, you know, when he had it.

SIGRIST: So you say . . .

FELICE: But he, he was trying to save money so he could come over and get us, because my mother wouldn't come by herself. With two children, she didn't want to travel alone, so he came over again.

SIGRIST: So your father came, he went to America, he came the first time.

FELICE: The first time on his own.

SIGRIST: That's right. Your mother got pregnant, she didn't want to come.

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: He went back.

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: So then the second time what happened?

FELICE: He came back, and he says, "We're going back on the same boat that I came on." He wasn't wasting any time.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how that made you feel? How did you feel about having to leave your house?

FELICE: I wasn't too happy about it, but I had to do what they were doing. My grandparents wanted to keep me over there, but my mother said, "No, she's coming with us." My father, too, he didn't want to leave me over there.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the process of getting ready to leave Italy?

FELICE: Well, we had to go to get our passports.

SIGRIST: Where did you go to do the passports?

FELICE: In the city, Casserta[ph]. Then we had to go to Naples to get the boat.

SIGRIST: What about before you got to Naples to get the ship. When you got your passport, did you get photographed?

FELICE: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything about that experience?

FELICE: No. I was put on my mother's passport. My picture was on with hers.

SIGRIST: What about medical examinations or anything like that?

FELICE: Oh, yeah, they give us a physical and all that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your family packed to take to America?

FELICE: Just our clothes, but stuff was coming later in a trunk, like sheets and blanks and stuff like that, that we needed.

SIGRIST: Did you take something that was yours to remember Italy by?

FELICE: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. So the four of you, you're twelve, your brother is . . .

FELICE: Two.

SIGRIST: Two. So your mother's got her hands full, a two-year-old, Mom and Dad, you go to Naples.

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay in Naples before you get on the boat?

FELICE: I don't, I don't know. I remember walking to the boat, but I don't remember how long we were there.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how . . .

FELICE: Maybe we left that morning, we left home that morning and got on the boat in the afternoon.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you got to Naples from your town?

FELICE: Uh, with a horse and carriage.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about that?

FELICE: No. My other uncle probably took us.

SIGRIST: Was that your mother's brother?

FELICE: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. He was living . . .

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: All right. Well, let's get you on the ship, then. You remember walking to the boat.

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the ship?

FELICE: No.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you thought when you saw the ship?

FELICE: Oh, I was amazed. The thing that comes into mind is my mother was sick the whole nine days.

SIGRIST: Nine days on the boat.

FELICE: Nine days on the boat. And I had to take care of my little brother, so I remember him walking up and down the gangplank with, you know, I remember taking him up and down to have his lunch or dinner, and my mother wouldn't come out of her cabin, so it was up to me to take care of him. I tell him so nowadays, too.

SIGRIST: So it wasn't your mother who had her hands full, it was you who had your hands full.

FELICE: It was me. It was me. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me where you slept on the ship?

FELICE: In a bunk, inside the boat.

SIGRIST: Does any detail of that room . . .

FELICE: The round hole that you could look out. I don't know what they call it.

SIGRIST: And where did you get your food on the ship?

FELICE: We'd have to go up in the dining room. Go climb the stairs, and go up in the dining room, and they'd serve us at the tables.

SIGRIST: Do you remember eating anything there, or something that you had never seen before?

FELICE: No, no, no.

SIGRIST: And were you allowed to go up on deck of the ship?

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What did you see when you were up on deck?

FELICE: Oh, different people, you know, everybody was walking around.

SIGRIST: Were there any other children on the ship that you remember?

FELICE: Yes, we met a lot of people, but then we lost track of them, you know. They went their way when we got off and we went our way.

SIGRIST: What did your father do while he was on the ship?

FELICE: I don't know. He stayed with my mother, make sure she was all right.

SIGRIST: Had your mother ever been on a ship before?

FELICE: No, no.

SIGRIST: And, um, you talked a little about this before, but I'd like to talk about it again. How did your mother feel about leaving Italy? Obviously she was a little resistant to the idea.

FELICE: Yeah, she was, yeah.

SIGRIST: When she actually left, how did she feel?

FELICE: She cried, she cried here. My father found a house in Stafford Springs, and we moved in. But she used to cry all the time. She wanted to go back. She didn't like it here. Of course, she couldn't understand English, but she got over it. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: So the ship comes into New York.

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did your mother ever get feeling better?

FELICE: Yeah, she was all right after we touched land. Oh, before that the boat sunk in the sand, you know. There wasn't enough water in the, what do they call it, the port? And, uh, so the boat, it couldn't come close to Ellis Island, so they had to get these pipes or, I don't know what they would call them, and they had to pump the water so the boat could make it into port. And the first thing my father said, "There's the Statue of Liberty."

That was his first words, that I remember. So that was a big thrill, to see the Statue of Liberty.

SIGRIST: Did you know what that was before?

FELICE: Well, yeah. I think he talked about it, but I never seen it.

SIGRIST: Of course, he's the seasoned world traveler.

FELICE: Right. (they laugh) Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, what do you remember about when the ship . . .

FELICE: And then we walked into the, the room there, Ellis Island, and my father left us standing there, and he went to look for somebody to take care of our luggage. But in the meantime, this colored man, this black man came up and started to talk to us, but we didn't know what he wanted, so we figured that he wanted to take care of the luggage, so we just shook our heads no, and that was when my mother really got upset. She had never, I had never seen a black man before, and she had never seen before either. So she got a fever that night. (she laughs) She was very nervous.

SIGRIST: Well, you said that your family was at Ellis Island. What happened when you were there?

FELICE: Well, they, uh, I guess they had to check us over. I remember them looking in my hair.

SIGRIST: How did you wear your hair?

FELICE: My hair was very long to my back. And, uh, so they checked my hair, but they didn't find anything, and they let us go through, and we took the train and we went up to Massachusetts.

SIGRIST: Where in Massachusetts did you go?

FELICE: Amherst, Amherst, Mass.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about being at Ellis Island, or going into New York, or any of that, before we get up to Amherst?

FELICE: Well, not really. It was a big, big room, you know. They took us in. But I don't remember too much about it.

SIGRIST: How did you get up to Amherst?

FELICE: On the train.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about that train ride?

FELICE: Just a long train ride. I thought we'd never get there. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: And what happened when you arrived at Amherst?

FELICE: My, one of my cousins, it was late at night, and one of my

cousins opened the door and let us in, and everybody got up to welcome us, you know. And, uh, we stayed there for about a week.

SIGRIST: Did they feed you?

FELICE: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What did they feed you?

FELICE: Spaghetti. Spaghetti or chicken, I don't know. (she laughs)
So . . .

SIGRIST: Do you remember, as a twelve-year-old, what you were thinking about all this, this new country, these new things to see, what kind of an impression, if it made an impression on you?

FELICE: Well, I must have. I'm still here. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: And can talk about it.

FELICE: Yeah. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: All right. Well, in Amherst your father was working on the railroad.

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Where did you live when you went to Amherst?

FELICE: Well, we lived with them.

SIGRIST: With your cousins?

FELICE: With my cousins and my aunt and uncle.

SIGRIST: For how long?

FELICE: For about a week, until we went back, we went to Stafford Springs.

SIGRIST: Stafford Springs, Connecticut?

FELICE: That's where my father, yeah. My father had a home ready for us.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about that first week in America. For instance, where did everybody sleep in your uncle's house? Do you remember?

FELICE: Well, some of the boys slept upstairs, and the girls slept on the couch, and we slept in their bed. (she laughs) They made room for us somehow.

SIGRIST: And, um, the uncle, is this your father's brother?

FELICE: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: What was he doing for a living?

FELICE: He used to work on the railroad.

SIGRIST: He worked on the railroad, too.

FELICE: He came to this country many years before.

SIGRIST: Did his wife work?

FELICE: No, no. She never worked.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what you did that first week in America? How did you spend your days?

FELICE: Well, the first thing they did, took me to the barber shop and had my hair cut off. (she laughs) Which I was upset, I didn't want my hair cut. I had beautiful long hair, you know, but they said that wasn't the style over there, over here. I don't know what the style was, but they had short hair, so they didn't want me to have long hair. So that was the first day. Then they took me, you know, shopping for different things. I don't know what I bought.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Do you remember how your clothing was different than the people's clothing in America?

FELICE: Yeah. The shoes, especially. The kids used to make fun of my shoes, because they were handmade.

SIGRIST: And how did that look different, how did a handmade shoe look different?

FELICE: They were more clumsy than regular, you know, machine-made shoes. I remember going to school, and everybody was making fun of my shoes. (she laughs) Which wasn't very good. But I learned to speak English in six months.

SIGRIST: Did you do that in Stafford Springs?

FELICE: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: All right. Well, let's get you down to Stafford Springs. You said that your father had a house prepared?

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about how he got a house, and what he did to get it ready?

FELICE: Well, he lived, he boarded with some people in the neighborhood, and this woman had a lot of houses that she rented out, so that's how he got the house. He had a two-floor big house.

SIGRIST: What was it made out of?

FELICE: Oh, like today, you know, it was a modern house.

SIGRIST: Did you have your own bedroom in that house?

FELICE: Yeah. We all had . . .

SIGRIST: Was there anything special in it that you can remember?

FELICE: Just like a bedroom, with two big windows, one on each side. My father and mother slept in the room in front of the house, and I slept in the back.

SIGRIST: Did your brother have a room, too, for himself?

FELICE: I think he had a crib in my mother's room.

SIGRIST: Well, tell me about going to school. Tell me, what do you remember about just being put into school, and that whole experience.

FELICE: Well, they, uh, every day I'd have to go from one room to the other. When they were having their reading class, I would have to switch from room to room so I could learn to read and write.

SIGRIST: Can you remember what grade they put you in when you first were put into school?

FELICE: They put me in first grade. And that was terrible. I was twelve years old in first grade. Imagine how I felt? It was very embarrassing. (she sighs)

SIGRIST: What else do you remember about school?

FELICE: I loved school.

SIGRIST: You mentioned the kids made fun of your shoes.

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did they pick on you in any other way?

FELICE: No, no. No, I made friends, you know. The Italian kids were nice, you know. They knew I was Italian, and . . .

SIGRIST: Tell me how you went about learning English.

FELICE: Well, like I said, I went from room to room, and . . .

SIGRIST: But how did they, do you remember what the process was, how they tried to teach you . . .

FELICE: I learned to read. Well, just, they gave me a book and, you know, pointed out the words, and I learned them. And then my penmanship was better than, this girl was very mad at me. (she laughs) She didn't like me at all, because I was, I always used to get a good paper in penmanship. So, because I, I had been to the third grade in Italy. So I knew how to read and, I mean, I didn't know how to read English, but I knew how to read Italian and write.

SIGRIST: Was there a teacher that you remember that was particularly helpful to you at that time?

FELICE: Yeah. Yeah, she was nice. But I just couldn't, can't picture her any more.

SIGRIST: You said your mother was very unhappy about being here.

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did your mother make any attempts to learn English?

FELICE: Well, we, that's another story. (she laughs) My father got transferred to Vermont, to East Northfield, Massachusetts on the borderline between Massachusetts and Vermont. And so he had to go to work up there. So up there there was no Italians. In Stafford there was a lot of Italians, so it didn't bother her. But when we went up there, she had to learn how to speak English, which she did pretty good. Don't you think so?

SIGRIST: And how did she do that?

FELICE: By listening to her neighbors, you know, and us kids.

SIGRIST: Did you help your mother learn English?

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: How would you try to teach her English words?

FELICE: Well, we talked to her in English instead of Italian. We kept saying, you know, English, to tell her to speak English. So she did pretty good.

SIGRIST: Talk to me a little bit about your parents and their social life. Who were their friends, and did they belong to any organizations?

FELICE: Well, my father belonged to the Knights of Columbus, and he belonged to Italian-American club in Stafford. That was after we left to Vermont and came back to Stafford Springs again.

SIGRIST: How long were you in Vermont?

FELICE: Two years.

SIGRIST: Oh, not too long.

FELICE: No.

SIGRIST: The Italian organization, what kinds of things did they provide the community? What kinds of social opportunities did they provide?

FELICE: Well, they used to play bocci every weekend. (she laughs) And, uh, and they'd have parties, you know, at the club. When there was a feast day or something going on, they used to have

things like that.

SIGRIST: Was that an important part of your parents' life?

FELICE: I think so, yeah.

SIGRIST: What about for people, of course, you'd be a teenager by then.

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What about for the younger people, the teenagers? Did those organizations provide any kind of . . .

FELICE: No, nothing. There was nothing then, no. We had to make our own entertainment. I used to stay home and read a lot.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me the first job that you ever got paid for?

FELICE: (she laughs) Oh, God. (she laughs) It was during World War Two.

SIGRIST: How old were you?

FELICE: I don't know. It was hard to find a job then.

SIGRIST: Did you work while you were in high school at all?

FELICE: I didn't go to high school.

SIGRIST: You had to stay home, right.

FELICE: I had to quit school because my mother needed me at home. My father says, "You'd better stay home and take care of your mother and the kids," you know.

SIGRIST: Did they have more children once they came to the United States?

FELICE: Yeah, they had two more.

SIGRIST: What were the names of the two children?

FELICE: Joan, but she died when she was thirty-seven. And I have another brother in Tolland[ph].

SIGRIST: Tolland[ph], Mass?

FELICE: Connecticut.

SIGRIST: Connecticut.

FELICE: And, uh . . .

SIGRIST: What was his name?

FELICE: And he's fifty. His name is John.

SIGRIST: I see.

FELICE: John Cicia.

SIGRIST: So Joan and John were born in the United States.

FELICE: Yeah, they were. Yeah. So, uh . . .

SIGRIST: So tell me about getting, how you got your job.

FELICE: When I was old enough, I went to work in a worsted mill, you know, a factory?

SIGRIST: Worsted . . .

FELICE: Worsted, where they make worsted, uh, material.

SIGRIST: Like worsted wool?

FELICE: Wool, the wool. We used to work on the wool. And we were making the soldiers, they were making soldiers' uniforms out of it. So I got a job there running a big machine.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you got that job? How did you get that job?

FELICE: Well, my father knew the, the guy that ran the mill. (she laughs) This man that my father knew. So he, he tried me out, and I worked out all right, so I got the job. And I worked there six years.

SIGRIST: And what did you get paid?

FELICE: Uh, fifty cents an hour, something like that.

SIGRIST: Your hand is hitting the microphone.

FELICE: Oh, I'm sorry.

SIGRIST: That's okay. And what did you do with the money that you earned?

FELICE: I saved it, put it in the bank, and, you know, bought clothes and shoes. I used to love shoes. (she laughs) Now I could buy any kind of shoes I wanted.

SIGRIST: Well, after the kids made fun of your homemade shoes.

FELICE: Right. (they laugh) Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you ever find it, you know, as you got older and more Americanized, you know, going through school, did you ever find, did you ever find that there was any conflict between your parents and their sort of old world culture, and maybe ideas, and your more modern, you know, the life that you were leading, which was a little more modern, and . . .

FELICE: Well, not too much. I didn't, I was afraid to speak my mind, so . . .

SIGRIST: What were some of the rules that your parents set down . . .

FELICE: Oh, we had to be home, we had to be home at night early. My mother would be waiting in the window if we went out and didn't come home on time. So, they were strict.

SIGRIST: Protective of their children.

FELICE: Protective, yeah.

SIGRIST: Uh-huh. And was that the same for the boys and the girls?

FELICE: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What, um, your mother was unhappy here, at least initially. Did she ever really want to go back and try to (??)?

FELICE: No, she never wanted to go back after she got used to here. She never, she never cared about going back.

SIGRIST: Did she become a citizen?

FELICE: No.

SIGRIST: What about your dad?

FELICE: My father was a citizen.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, was he a citizen before you got here?

FELICE: Uh-huh. That made me a citizen.

SIGRIST: I see.

FELICE: But then I went and got my own. After I was married, I got my own papers.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about what you had to do to get your papers?

FELICE: Yeah. I had to go to Hartford, Hartford, Connecticut, to the courthouse, and fill out the papers, and tell them my whole story. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Like you're doing right now.

FELICE: Right. And, uh, so after a while they gave me my citizen, my own citizen papers.

SIGRIST: Do you know how you felt? Do you remember how you felt?

FELICE: Very proud, very proud, yeah.

SIGRIST: Great. Well, let's, um, in our last couple of minutes, tell me about when you got married.

FELICE: I got married May 1, 1948.

SIGRIST: 1948. And tell me the name of the man that you married.

FELICE: I married Thomas Felice.

SIGRIST: And where was Mr. Felice born?

FELICE: He was born here in Manchester.

SIGRIST: And how did you meet him?

FELICE: He used to wear (she laughs) he used to play in a band, and I came to Manchester with a friend of mine, and we happened to run into them while they were playing, and the minute he saw me, he says, "This is it." (she laughs) So that's how I met him.

SIGRIST: What instrument did he play in the band?

FELICE: He played the drums.

SIGRIST: He played the drums. That was here in Manchester, Connecticut.

FELICE: Yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: How many children did you have?

FELICE: Two.

SIGRIST: And their names?

FELICE: John, over there, and Mary.

SIGRIST: And Mary is with us, was with us. She's since left.

FELICE: That's John and his wife.

SIGRIST: And Ann, who is present still, and John is . . .

FELICE: Yeah, and those are all my grandchildren.

SIGRIST: Wow. We're looking at all the pictures in the living room here,

all up on the wall. Mrs. Felice, tell me about, did you ever go back to Italy?

FELICE: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was the first time you went back?

FELICE: 1975.

SIGRIST: Did you go back to the town that you were born in?

FELICE: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: How did that make you feel to be in the town that you had grown up in?

FELICE: It was nice. Everybody remembered me. They said to my mother, "Is that the little girl you brought to America?"

SIGRIST: Your mother went with you, too?

FELICE: My mother went, yeah.

SIGRIST: How old was she at that time?

FELICE: I don't know. She was in her sixties, maybe. See, my father had died, and before he died he made her promise that she'd take me back to see my relatives. He wanted me to go back. He wanted me to see Italy again. So that's what we did. We made arrangements

and we went.

SIGRIST: How did your mother feel about going back to Italy?

FELICE: She was happy.

SIGRIST: I bet.

FELICE: She was very happy. (they laugh) She even went to a funeral.
(they laugh)

SIGRIST: Someone that she had known?

FELICE: Yeah, somebody she knew, yeah.

SIGRIST: How, how do you think your life would have been different if your family had stayed in Italy?

FELICE: Well, I probably would have worked harder, but I would have had more, more people around me. Like now I'm here alone every day, except when the children come over, you know, but, uh, see, my husband died in 1969, so I was left with the two children. But life has been pretty good.

SIGRIST: Do your children have any interest in learning about their Italian heritage?

FELICE: Yes, I think so. One of my children wrote a nice report for school, remember?

SIGRIST: About what?

FELICE: About me.

SIGRIST: Oh, about you. (they laugh) You mean, about your history,
like what we're doing now.

FELICE: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, they wanted to know how it was in Italy. Like
you do. (she laughs) Yeah.

SIGRIST: When you think of yourself in terms of nationality, who you are,
you know, what nationality, how do you think of yourself?

FELICE: Hmm, that's a hard one. I'm an American now but, you know, I
still think of Italy as my, where I was born. But America is my
home now. I don't know how you, how else I could feel. (she
laughs)

SIGRIST: Well, that's a good place for us to stop.

FELICE: Uh-huh.

SIGRIST: Mrs. Felice, thank you very much . . .

FELICE: Thank you.

SIGRIST: . . . for letting me ask you questions.

FELICE: I enjoyed it. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Oh, good. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with Phyllis Felice, on Thursday, May 29, 1997, in Manchester, Connecticut, with her daughter-in-law, Ann Morrin, in attendance. Your daughter Mary had left half way through the interview. Thank you very much.

FELICE: Okay.