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DATE:

J = JOHN
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D: Now you mentioned that, that there were Italian, did I have this right? That there were Italian churches over in Lawrence?

J: Oh yeah, they had an Italian Church. Still have.

D: Do they celebrate any of the, the important feast days?

J: Yeah, I think, I think so. I think, I think they had, of course you know, I'm not fully qualified to talk about you know, their, their situation. I know they have an Italian Church, my sister attended it with her husband, and they did have, they did put on some festivals, you know, from time to time on the Italian Feast days. Maybe, I don't know if it was Saint Anthony's, or like they do in the North End in Boston. (D: Right. But would they have) I think they had one or two a year.

D: Would they have processions, that kind of thing?

J: Yeah, they used to. I don't know about whether that practice you know, is still prevalent today, because there have been so much changes, you know. And even in Lawrence there's been a lot of changes, you know.

D: Yeah. Yeah.

J: But they do have, the Church of the Holy Ghost I think is the name of it. And they did, they did have a festival or two, because we used to go when we were younger. You know, on the streets? Yeah, we used to go. And I forget what they called it, what they, whether it was named

after a saint or what. But they, but uh, and we went, once in awhile we used to go to the ones in Boston. My middle name is Anthony. I used go to the Saint Anthony's Festival down there. And that was my late mother's saint and she named me after him. And we used to go there every now and then. That was quite a sight down there. I don't know if you've even seen it when they have those festivals.

D: I never have. No, no.

J: They have the parades and the saints, and of course the streets are all, have all kinds of concessions. And the Italian bands. And you want to take that in sometimes. It's quite a (--) They still have that in Boston down in the North End area where, where they're all Italians. A lot of, done a lot of physical changes down there, you know, in terms of property. It isn't the same as it was forty, fifty years ago, but, but that area is still Italian, you know. We just ate down there in one of those Italian Restaurants several months ago, my wife and I.

D: I'll have to ask you what the good restaurants to eat in [unclear]. Um, so obviously there was a fair amount of intermarriage between the Italians and the other groups. I mean you yourself married someone from the Irish community.

J: I didn't, I didn't get, I didn't get you. What?

D: There was a, a fair amount of marriage between the groups in the, in the flats in that area? Why don't you tell me about, a little bit how you, how you happened to, to meet your wife and (--)

J: Well we had, during the time that we grew up as young people in my generation, and my chums and my relatives, my chums, our groups through high school and after high school, we had, dancing was a big thing you know. We had, during high school, after high school, a lot of the, a lot of the fellows, boys met the girls at dances. That's where I met my wife. And we used to have the Commodore Ballroom in Lowell, which was recently demolished. That was a famous ballroom for years and years on Thorndike Street. And people came there from the, the whole area, you know. And they had dances twice a week. That was a commercial place, you know, with [unclear]. And you used to go up there and uh (--) Now not everybody met their wives in there, some guys didn't dance. But most of the fellows liked to go to the dances. And they used to have dances Tuesday and Saturday nights. And they used to have the Big, The Big Band there, the Big Name Band on Tuesday, and the regular bands on Saturday. And that's where, of god, I don't know how many people, that's where my, my oldest sister who lives in Lawrence met her husband. They used to come down from Lawrence, him and his gang. And she used to go up with her sisters. And it was very easy to meet a girl at a dance, you know, unless you were, unless you were so, so backward and bashful that, that you probably didn't even belong there. You know, you, you asked for a dance, or somebody introduced you. You got to know somebody and it went on from there. You might want to, you might, if you like them you try to dance with them again. Probably try to take them home. In those days there's no, very few fellows have cars. You know, they, one out of ten guys maybe had a car, in the late thirties, early forties. And I'm not exaggerating. So you walked them home, you know, and everybody lived within walking distance, you know. And they could walk, he could walk the streets at night. He

could walk the streets at night without getting bashed, or mugged, or hit over the head and held up, which is a sorry, it's a sorry commentary you know in terms of today. Today you wouldn't be found, you can't really walk the streets at night today. You can't, you can't take a girl home, walk on the streets at midnight, or one o'clock in the morning today. I don't know if you agree with that, but you can't.

D: I agree.

J: You go, you got to get in your car. You met somebody there you liked, you kept dancing with them, you took him home, and eventually if you liked them enough and they liked you, you got married. But that's how, that's how a good many fellows met their girls.

D: How did that, how did that work with your parents. Did you have to bring them home and [unclear].

J: Yes, yes. Well the, the old fashioned parents always had a lot, you know, to say about it. And they, first of all I think the felling always existed that they hoped that you met a girl you know, of your same ethnic nationality, whether it was Italian, if you were an Italian, or if you were Portuguese, or a Polish person, or whatever, a Greek, that you bring home a girl with the same nationality. And most times the fellow doesn't, you know? And uh, but they accepted it. They, they always acted a little bit startled and somewhat put out, amazed at first, but as they got to know the person they accepted it. That was the old timers. They were all like that. Because if you'd bring an Italian girl home they go oh, they were in clover. You know, they were, they were in heaven. But when you brought somebody else home, they'd you know, they'd have to think, what would they say, don't go out with her, you know? But they might talk to you after and say uh, you really like her? Why don't you, you know, why don't you see if you can see somebody else, something like that. But that's human nature. That's how the old people were, you know, the ethnic people. Sometimes I think that, with that generation gone, with my father and mother's generation all passed away, I'm a second generation person. You know, that feeling is gone altogether I think, from the second generation on. It doesn't, it doesn't make any difference to me who, who my daughter would go out with. You know, whether it was an Italian person, or some person, another Irish, French, it doesn't make any difference.

D: Was that, did that come from a, did the older generation have a concern that they wanted to hold on to the culture and all of that?

J: I would say so. I would say so. I think that was part of it, that you know, that naturally they, they felt they had their own culture and they were always proud of it like they were, you know, their religions, their food, their other, their other cultures that they had nurtured and then they, that they had been brought up to, to understand and regard as important. Oh yeah, they, they figured that maybe you know, if you met somebody of your, your own nationality, you'd be able to maintain these cultures a lot easier, you know, than you would. And that's logical thinking, and you would otherwise. But I think it gelled. It certainly gelled. You'll never make, you'll never make a person you know, that of another nationality into your nationality, but you can gel, you know. I've been married forty-three years. And, and I think sometimes that the, that if you get a person, I'm married to an Irish girl, her folks were both Irish. It makes, it makes a

wonderful, I only [unclear] on child. I have a wonderful child. It makes for a, I don't know, it's just, that's part of the, I think part of the melting pot of America. It makes for a great, a great union. Not to say that you couldn't be married to an Italian girl or an Irish girl married to an Irishman it wouldn't be perfect. But that happened more and more and more. We, we, and I don't think it was ever, it was never too big an issue. I think what was probably a greater issue was the religion rather than the nationality, you know, when we were growing up. If somebody was outside the religion, you know, then you had more of a problem. See, if you were the same religion, and most of the time we met people of the same religion, you know? Most of the time, not all of the time. But 90% of the time, you know.

D: So for the Italians [clears throat], for the Italians it would be easier to marry someone who is Irish, or someone who is French, then it would be to marry say, somebody who is Greek. Is that how it worked?

J: Yeah, Greek, yeah, that's right. Probably Greek will probably, if you're not Greek (--) The Greeks have an Orthodox religion right? It's close probably it's closer to our religion, you know? Uh, [unclear], marry into the Jewish race. And we didn't have that many, we didn't have that many Jewish people around here, and the Jewish people were always wonderful people. All the ones that I ever met. You know, they were wonderful, wonderful. I worked for them when I was a kid going to school, you know, in stores and all that. (D: Oh really?) I grew up, I grew up working part-time all the time. I worked, I always worked, you know, on Saturdays. And when I got old enough I used to work, you know, at night after school, or (--) And we had I think only a small Jewish community in Lowell. And they were all, they were all, all darn nice people. And we, we didn't, we didn't meet that many you know, outside of (--) As I said earlier, the greatest groups in Lowell are Irish people, French, Greek. Those were the three main groups of people. And they still are in this city. Probably now they're going to be up against these new groups that are coming in. If they, if these new groups keep coming into our city, they're going to have quite a, they're going to have quite a number of them. But anyway, that's, that was the I think as far as meeting people and intermarriage, the, probably the greatest problems occurred if they were outside the religion, you know? Whether you were a very religious person, or not, they'd still, it still held you know? I think the nationality was, was secondary to, to that as far as overcoming problems were concerned, you know. I know, I know that as I grew up and I think, I don't know if it stills holds today, that the Jewish people always seem to be very strict about that. And do you find it that way at all? That they always hope more or less that their children would marry within the same sphere. Although there's been a lot of outside marriages. I think in New York City, I have cousins in New York City. I spent vacations there when I was a little boy. And I grew up, you know, I learned a bit about the city and the nature of the people. And gee there were so many Italian people in New York and Jewish people. That's the two biggest groups in New York City. And they had a lot of intermarriages, you know. I mean comparison. They have a lot of intermarriages because there was so many of them.

D: Tell me a little bit about working, working for the Jewish people when you were young?

J: Well I worked, I worked in, see when we, when we to, when we were getting, going from Junior High School, High School, we were in the middle of a big depression. You heard of the great depression? And you, there wasn't, things weren't like today. There was very little money

around, there was very few jobs. Most families, in families they all needed help economically. That is if they had children, that the children could contribute, or at least make something for themselves and helped out. Very few people went on to college from high school compared to today. That's one of the reasons that I didn't get there. I can't blame it all on that. I should have, should have made (--) Sure I got there regardless, but when you get out of high school, when I got out of high school, and before that, before that I worked in, they used to call them "open air markets." These are fruit and vegetables markets, that used to have, that you'd put the doors on at night. You know, and they were called "open air markets". I worked in those things since I was twelve years old. And Saturdays, and after school sometimes like from two to six. I worked in them all the time. I always had a job, always. I remember going to work on a Saturday morning in those markets and, at eight o'clock and we'd work until midnight for two dollars, or something like that. And uh, many, many a job you got a dollar for it, you know, if you worked a few hours. And then I worked in the stores like they used to have the, before the supermarket days. A&P, A&P Stores. First National Stores. Vermont Grocery. These were all chains, and they all had stores. I worked in all of those for a given time. And I worked in a couple of clothing stores. I had, in the market, the "open air markets", most of my employers were Jewish people, and they were, they were very nice people. The clothing store I worked in, most of them were Jewish people. And they were, they were very, they were very nice people. And they, you know, they expected you to work, but they, but in my case they treated, always treated me right. I had very few bad experiences. I went right to, I went to high school. After high, from the time I entered high school I always worked after school. I come out of high school in '32 and there was a big depression on. You couldn't get a job, for the love of money you couldn't get a job unless, no matter how smart you were, you had to have, in those days you had to have somebody bring you in. Really recommend you. Even a factory job, you know, you had to have somebody get you in the factory. Today they can't get help in these places, you now, in those days you had to have a recommendation from the Superintendent, or a boss in the place that you know, when the next time an opening came along you had somebody you want to bring in. I went to work in knitting mills, garment mills, shoe shops, everything, you know, before I (--) And finally I landed in a textile mill in the middle thirties, which is now being developed into a condominium on Market Street in Lowell. It was a textile mill called the Abbott Worsted Company. And I worked there about six or seven years. And those were the days, you know, they were just beginning to make a lot of progress. And Roosevelt was the president and different laws come out. Minimum wage laws and all that. But people used to go to work in those places for twelve, thirteen, fourteen dollars a week, and less before the minimum wage laws come out. And you worked. You didn't have any breaks, and you didn't have this, and you didn't have your work. But of course the cost of living was very cheap. A dollar would take you a long, long way. And I ended up from there at the General Electric Company in Lynn, and then I ended up in the insurance business for John Hancock, and I stayed in there for thirty-two years. And I retired from there. This is my retirement ring. And I got married while I was in the General Electric Company in Lynn. But I, but I worked there before I went in the service. And I came out of the service, I went back there. Then I, because of commuting and all that.

D: I see, you were commuting to Lynn. (J: Hm?) You commuted to Lynn?

J: I commuted from Lowell to Lynn.

D: That must have been quite a commute.

J: Are you from Lynn?

D: No, but I know where it is? Yeah, that's a good commute, isn't it?

J: Well it's about(--). They didn't have some of the highways they have now, you know, when I was going. They didn't have no 495.

D: Yeah, yeah, I mean that must have taken quite a while.

J: And they didn't have, I don't know if they had 128 when I was going. See we used to go down the back ways, you know. And they go out Tewksbury here, Wilmington, to Wilmington and down that way. And uh, early in the morning, but also there wasn't as much traffic (D: Umhm) like today, there wasn't as many cars. I didn't have a car of my own. I rode with somebody. And uh, worked there, I worked there a couple of few years, and decided I either move there, or we were going to (--). I got married while I was there [unclear] either move there, or I was going to come to work in Lowell. So I had an opportunity to go and become an insurance agent. I took it and I remained there until I retired ten years ago. So uh, (--)

D: You said before that most of the Italians worked in the, in the mills, or worked in the quarries. Were those the two main occupations for the Italians? (D: Would they what?) They worked at either in the mill or in the quarry?

J: Well there wasn't, there wasn't too many quarries around here. There was one in Westford they call the (D: the Fletcher Quarry) Fletcher Quarry, yeah. There, there was, I remember in the Italian Club we used to go down and play cards on a Friday night once in awhile. There was, and from being present, there were several people there, Italian people who worked at Fletcher's Quarry all their life. Most of them became stone cutters, you know? And that was hard work, but it was good paying work compared to other jobs in those days. People that worked in quarries made more money than people who worked in mills. Different type of work altogether, and then more arduous, more laborious, but they made more money. And they, and they worked in mills and they worked in, some of them worked in shoe shops. We had, at one time in Lowell we had quite a few shoe shops, see. They're all gone now, but at one period there, right up until several years ago we had quite a few shoe shops, and they kept moving out, moving out, called "closing up", going out of business. Most of the time they would move out into an other area where their prospect for help were better, at cheaper labor, or whatever. And uh, so eventually they, they were all gone, but there was, there was quite a few of the Italian people worked in the shoe shop. I worked in a shoe shop for, well the first years I come out of high school, it was in the Depression year I worked in the shoe shop. And uh, you know, you were really transitional then. You were going from one job to the other. I went to a garment factory after that. But that's where they worked mostly. The only quarry around here was Fletcher's. But my, my father before he retired, his last job was as a, he was a salesman, a representative of an Italian American wholesale grocery company in Boston that was run by a friend of his that he knew from Italy. So called poison, but he was the owner of it. And after getting out of business of his own he went to work for him, became a salesman that traveled, he traveled throughout New England. He used to

go to Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. Now he sold to Italian families in houses, in residences, and he built up a route. And he used to go probably every, I forget exactly, I can't recollect, but every couple of weeks to route. All through up New Hampshire, into Vermont and up in Maine, way up in Maine, way up to [Milinocket?], and visit these Italian families and take their orders. Now of course they wouldn't do this today. He'd bring them back, bring them to his headquarters in Boston, and for each order they would ship that stuff to the person's home. Would be probably olive oil, would probably be cheese, would probably be can goods, and all that stuff. And he would also collect the money. He would also collect the money when he went up there. Now get this, he did that without a car. Without a car. He never had a car. He never drove a car. And he went up in the winter too. He used to have cleats in his rubbers when there was snow on the ground. You know, that it would dig in to the snow. He walked. He naturally stayed in hotels, but he walked as a rule everyday. And they did that for quite a few years. And he opened up a big area up there for this company. And this was individual orders coming into your house. He'd say, you know, "how do you do Mr. so and so? How are you?" The people up there came to know him and love him. And I don't know how many families he had. I've, I've lost track of that. But he, he did that right up until he retired.

D: That's amazing.

J: And then what brought me to that was a lot of these people in the New Hampshire and Vermont area, they worked in quarries. They worked in quarries. They had several quarries up there. They call New Hampshire the "Granite State". And Vermont, they call it the "Green Mountain State", but it's really a granite state too. There was a lot of quarries up there. And most of these families he had in Vermont and New Hampshire worked in these quarries. Now up in Maine there was some quarry work laborers, but I mean he went way up. He had paper workers, paper mill workers. You know up there they have paper mills that make paper? [Milinocket?] and those places. And that's what, his, his families up there were engaged in more or less, in the paper mills. So you know I think back to that myself sometime and I tell my wife and I can't believe it, that, that a man could do that. Although I worked as an insurance agent. I followed my father's footsteps in a way. You know, the average insurance agents before, it's changed now, we had one, we had a debit, a route. We went from house to house. That went on for almost a hundred years. Now it's, now it's different. Now it's, but right up until several years ago that's what we did, you know, and we went from house to house. Probably had four or five hundred families on our route. And we collected and we sold. And we collected and we sold. We collected insurance premiums, and we sold insurance. And he, he did that, only it was commodities. You know, he sold groceries and commodities, food commodities.

D: Let me ask, there's one more thing I wanted to ask you about. You, you mentioned it in passing before, talking about the botcha, playing botcha at the Italian American Club. (J: Botchie) Yeah. (J: Yeah) Now were there, did, did people build courts here in Lowell?

J: Yes, yes. In the back of the club, if you, if you have occasion on this, which you probably will have, you know, in this study, uh, this project you're on before you're through, in the back of the club we have a yard. That's the first thing they did, they built botchie courts. Yeah, and they played, they played in the back. I don't know how much they played today, but when we first moved over to this building, and they built the courts, and all the old timers were alive, they say

most of those guys are gone. But I, I would imagine they still play today. They built two or three Botchie courts and played. And that, my memory is refreshed in that, because I just went to a cookout a week ago Sunday that my daughter ran in Andover near here, and she had a lot of things for the guest to do. And she had bought botchie balls, you know, and we played botchie. Although I personally never played much up there, I was always busy, but they played botchie and they really, that was some game boy. The Italian people really love that game, they're playing it, they love that game. They got very very, you know, dedicated to it, they get emotional about it. (D: Yeah, yeah) And it's a good game. They had that, and they ran their, they ran their parties up there too. We had our spaghetti suppers, you know? Two and three times a month we have a kitchen there. So that uh, they follow you know, they follow custom to a great degree. But again, you know, that generation is gone and I don't, I don't know how much the, the generation that's there now would follow the customs, or those cultures as much. It's a different kind of a, it's a different ball game. You know, but they may still play it. I, I don't drop out, I'm a life member of the club now because of my age. You know, I'm a paid up life member. And I, I imagine they must still play botchie. Botchie is a really famous Italian, ever play it?

D: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Never on a court. We always just played on the lawn.

J: Like we did at this outing here. (D: Yeah) This cookout, yeah. Played on the grass. But in a court we can see the ball better, you know. And uh, you can, it's an interesting game. It's an interesting game. And so you know, every culture has their, sort of sports games, or recreation let's call it, that they like. You know, every, every group. I don't know, I say, I can, before you leave I can give you some names also that people that you might want to see as far as, [unclear], because I know that you people are going to be taken up with a lot of groups, right?

D: Yeah, yeah, but you know, I'd be real interested to get whatever names you have. I'll tell you what. Why don't, why don't we turn the tape recorder off and I'll pull out my, my notebook. But let me just say thank you now for taking the time to talk with me like this.

J: Yeah.

end of tape