

Historical Collections, Bridgeport Public Library
Oral History Project: "Bridgeport Working: Voices from the 20th Century"
Angela Baldino (AB) interviewed by Mary Witkowski (I), November 14, 1997.

I: Can you tell me a little about your parents and where they came from?

AB: Yes. Both my parents were from Italy, of course. My mother was from a town [unclear] and my father was from [unclear], Calabria.

I: Okay. When did they emigrate to America?

AB: That, I don't know. I can't remember.

I: Were they children, or --?

AB: My mother was around fourteen, fifteen. I think my father was ten years older than her, so--. They met here and married here, though.

I: In Bridgeport?

AB: In Bridgeport.

I: And do you know why they chose Bridgeport as a place to settle?

AB: Well, her mother was here. My grandparents, of course.

I: Oh, okay.

AB: They were Mr. and Mrs. Gemarro and he was a shoe repair man who had a business on Sherman Street, the street I was born on.

I: Okay. And when and where were you born?

AB: I was born May 14, 1917 at home on Sherman Street. Midwife was the participant. I was delivered by a mid-wife. That's all I know because my mother told me.

I: Can you tell me about your family? How many brothers and sisters--

AB: Well, my mother was very unfortunate. She had, I think, nine children. They all died except my sister and I. And she thinks, when we would talk about it, they died in infancy, and she thinks it was polio because she remembers the polio epidemic and she says her children had the very same symptoms. I don't know.

I: Can you tell me a little bit about the shop that your parents owned, that was your grandparents' shop?

AB: My grandfather. My mother had a home on Sherman Street. Across the street my grandfather had a home with his shoe repair shop connected to it. Have you ever seen this setup?

I: Yes.

AB: That's it.

I: Did you work in the shop?

AB: No. It wasn't that big.

I: What did your father do?

AB: He was in real estate.

I: He was in real estate?

AB: He died when I was four in an accident.

I: Oh, okay. I'm sorry.

AB: I don't remember him very well.

I: What was it like growing up in Bridgeport?

AB: I think it was wonderful. I love Bridgeport. We lived on Sherman Street, as I say. My grandparents lived across the street. We lived on the opposite side. They both owned their own homes. They weren't beautiful, believe me, but they were home, you know? They had a little yard they would plant. My grandparents planted tomatoes. All vegetables in their yards. Not only they, most of the neighborhood did that. I guess we were all poor but none of us knew it because we were all happy. And that was it about that.

Of course, we went to the movies every Saturday. I think they were five and ten cents each admission. And we saw mostly Westerns. I used to love to watch Westerns.

We killed time after school playing games in our yard, on the front porch. We would all congregate. We were a mixture of Irish, Italian, Jewish and Polish in the neighborhood.

I: How important was the church in your family?

AB: Very important.

I: And where was the church?

AB: We were really fortunate. Our church--. My grandfather was very devout with Holy Rosary Church because he was Italian. However, because we had a church - - let's see if I can explain to you. On the end of our corner on Sherman Street was the convent, a beautiful convent. I still remember the stained glass windows. And the order of the Sisters of Mercy. That's where they lived. And across the street from them was Saint Mary's Rectory and Saint Mary's Church. And across from Saint Mary's Church was Saint Mary's School.

I: So that's where you went to school?

AB: No. I don't know why I didn't go to school there. They had their quota filled and I was sent to Franklin. Franklin School was located on Nichols Street and now it's torn down. It was very odd, because my side of the street had to go to Franklin and exactly the opposite side of the street had to go to Watersville. I don't know why we were sectioned. Every Tuesday we would march from Franklin School to Saint Mary's for our religious education --one day a week. That's how we received the sacrament of communion and confirmation.

I: Were you a member of any social organizations?

AB: Children of Mary, connected with the church. In fact, I crowned one year. Whatever that means.

I: Can you tell me about the dress shop that you worked in after high school?

AB: I started working at the dress shop part time on Saturdays. Then, later on after school when I got older. The dress shop was called -- downstairs was called the Bridgeport Dress Store. It was a store about a half a block long and they sold coats, dresses, underwear, everything you can think of. Women's stuff, mostly. Two brothers owned it. They were the Kunan's. Very nice. I forget their first names, but they were very nice. You don't know Bridgeport at all, do you?

I: Not very well.

AB: They bought Kay's on Main Street. And Kay's on Main Street remained for many, many years.

I: Did a lot of other girls work at the dress shop, part time?

AB: Yes. The dress shop, that was the store. However, we were upstairs also. There was a regular dress shop. [Unclear], sewing machines and so forth. But, we used to make better dresses upstairs and they would go from us to New York City to Seventh Avenue. I remember always talking about Seventh Avenue. To the garment district. And, I guess from there they went to wherever. And they were considered the more expensive. You know, like forty or fifty dollars in those days was, you know, money.

So, I worked upstairs as a draper. They called it drapery. They were girls who worked on pinking machines, sewing machines and men would do the pressing, most of the men.

I: And did your dad support you working to help?

AB: Well, as I said, he died when I was very young so he wasn't around when I was working.

I: So no one, like --?

AB: My mother did. Between my grandfather, planting the yard and everything, we never suffered, we were never hungry. And so, we managed.

I: Did you mom work when you were --?

AB: No. Many of the women stayed at home. We didn't get welfare because we owned our property. We never went for it. My grandfather was too proud. People around us did. They needed it, though. It was necessary. Because I remember my mother, being the landlord. We lived in a two-family and our tenants would pay her two dollars a week to stay there toward a twenty dollar a month rent.

I: Now, did she do the cooking. Did she do cooking and cleaning for them as well? Was that involved in it? Or did they?

AB: No, no.

I: No, she just--. That was it?

AB: No, they had their own flat. She rented it to them and that's what they would pay a month. Twenty dollars a month for four rooms. Well, we had four rooms. We

had a bathtub which was very--. Some houses had big, big basins, --whatever you call them. But, we were fortunate. We had a bathtub.

I: And, you also at the Board of Education?

AB: Oh, when I became older.

I: And what was that job like?

AB: That was even after I was married and I worked for twenty-three years in the Board of Education cafeteria. I started at Central. I worked at East Side Middle. It's not East Side Middle anymore. I think they call it High Horizons or something. It's down -- do you know Bridgeport at all?

I: Only in the last four years.

AB: It's up in that...it's by Bullard Haven, very close to Bullard Havens in that area, near Bridgeport Hospital, that section of the city. Between there and Central High School, I put in about twenty-three years.

I: And, did you work when your children were in school?

AB: Yes.

I: But, you were home?

AB: Yes. That's why I took the job because in the summer time I was home with my family. Of course, I had my mother. She was there when they came home at three o'clock. And I was home about that time, too.

I: Did your job have any perks, beside you had the summers off and it was good for your children?

AB: No, it was hard work.

I: It was hard, yes. And, were you a member of a union, at all?

AB: Yes.

I: Were you active in it?

AB: NAGE, I think it was called.

I: Were you active in it at all?

AB: Not when I started. NAGE came in, I don't what year, but they came in. Took awhile, but I think I was working ten, eleven years in the school system before it became unionized.

I: Did you experience any discrimination because of your sex or your ethnicity?

AB: Well, I think --. The Irish people were here before us, in our section of the city. I don't think they deliberately meant to do it. I don't know. But, I remember having earrings. Pierced earrings became stylish. All the Italians had earrings with pierced ears so I was sitting in church one day--we all went to the same church. I remember them calling us greenhorns because we pierced ears with earrings, but I don't think it was that bad. However, I remember friends of mine, as I say we were lucky that we owned our own house. I remember Mrs. Lattanzi was her name, but I don't know. She went for a rent. She had to use -- like, for instance, my name is Baldino. I would use "Baldwin." So, that she could get the rent. Otherwise, they wouldn't rent it to you. There was-- I don't know, it wasn't so awful, but there was. There was discrimination. I mean, no one harassed us or hit us. It wasn't violent, but it was there. Especially with us. Remember, both my parents never spoke English.

I: Oh, they didn't speak English?

AB: I learned to speak English when I went to kindergarten. My grandfather spoke broken English. They spoke it, but they spoke a few words. And my grandfather used to read the Italian newspaper so her was up on everything. You know what I mean. But it wasn't harmful. We felt bad. We were called greenhorn and wops but no one hit you with a stone or anything. It was more just name-calling words. And then later on it seemed to just disappear more, unless as you grow up --. Like, when you got to high school and everything it was less and less. Now, it's worse again. I don't why.

I: Yes, unfortunately.

AB: Unfortunately, is right. Because I had a very dear friend who was Jewish and we were mixed.

I: On your block, on Sherman Street?

AB: Sure, because her family was really Jewish. The houses there were mostly the Jewish people who lived. And they used to go to their Saturday synagogue and we used to go to our church but there was no malice. The man on the corner of

Sherman Street was Jewish and had a nice store. We'd trade there. And then we had [unclear] Bakery which was a block and one-half from our house and they were Jewish and we used to buy rye bread there. They catered to all of us. It was different. It was a nice community.

I: And this was on the East Side?

AB: This was on the --. Now, I don't even know. I can't believe it. I cannot believe that this is the place where I grew up. The convent is gone. The Saint Mary's School is gone. The church is not the way the church was when I grew up. It was a red brick building. Now it's changed. It's pretty, but it's just not the way it was. It's not --completely different.

I: Do you go back?

AB: I went back a couple --. I like to go back, but I have to be driven down because the streets are all different. They made them all one way and it's confusing. You have to stop to think where you are. But, I think there's still Sherman Street and I think all the street names are still there, but it was a nice area. There was East Main Street with [unclear]. [unclear] was a Jewish store, clothing and everything. You bought everything there. And, then of course, on the other end we had Skydell's that moved out just about eight or nine years ago. They're gone. They were on Arctic and East Main.

I: What was your living situation as a young adult or as an adult? Did you still live on the East Side?

AB: Lived on the East End until I married and then I moved to the North End.

I: Can you tell me a little about your husband and your children?

AB: I had Bernadette and Anthony. Anthony first. He's the oldest. And they went to school. They both graduated from high school. Anthony went into the service when he was called for the Berlin crisis. Bernadette went to high school and then she stayed home for a year, I think. Not home, but she worked in the library for a year and then decided to go to college and she did very well.

I: Where did she go to school?

AB: Notre Dame. Anthony went to Central.

I: And where did she attend college?

AB: She went to -- I don't know but she graduated from Sacred Heart University. She went somewhere to get her masters degree in library.

I: And, did she live at home?

AB: Yes. She always worked in the library.

I: What was your home like.

AB: At the North End, I lived, again across the street from Saint Patrick's Rectory Church and the convent. That was a convent, too. And, of course, when Bernadette went to Saint Mary's School and so it was very homey too because we knew all the sisters that lived there. And now, they're all gone. And her school is gone. It became another school. It's called Middle--. I don't know, it's a different school. And then, she went from there to Notre Dame. Anthony went to Columbus School, which is gone. It moved from where it was originally. There is a Columbus School, but it's not where it was originally. It was at the end of our block. I think it's somewhere in the North End. In The Hollow, I think it is. Anyway, he graduated Columbus and he graduated Central. He didn't go further. He didn't want to. After he came home from the service I tried to encourage. He should have went.

I: Did you encourage Bernadette to go to college?

AB: Oh, yes. I encouraged him, too. But it took a couple of [unclear], but he didn't follow through. I thought that education was very important.

I: And what was your home like, your house?

AB: It was five rooms. It was just an ordinary house.

I: Did you have a yard? Did you have a garden, still like your parent's house?

AB: I have a yard, but not a garden. We mowed the lawn. My children never had to be told, "Get out of the yard." We owned the yard, so it was, "everybody come to my yard," whenever we wanted to come so we never suffered that way like some people. They had problems with their landlord. We never endured that. They weren't beautiful houses, believe me, but they were ours.

I: And, what did your husband do for a living?

AB: My husband worked for thirty years at the Bullard Company before he passed away.

I: If we go back to your childhood a little. Can you tell me more the mix in the neighborhood with all --?

AB: Yes. I told you about the convent on one side and on the opposite side from the church is the school. We had --Mr. [T...] was a pharmacist at the drug store. We had Mr. Macotta who was Italian, a big grocery store. So we knew everybody. You walked down the street there and everybody knew each other. I missed that. I always missed that.

I: It wasn't the same on the North End?

AB: It wasn't as close. After awhile you got to know, but it wasn't as close. We knew Mr. Rizzie, he owned the store, Mr. Macotta owned another store, my grandfather owned the shoe repairing shop. We knew the priests, we knew the nuns. It was very much at home. We loved it. All of my friends who grew up there, they all loved it. We talk about it all the time.

I: Oh, you still keep --?

AB: Well, I've lost too many. I'm eighty years old and my saddest part of getting old is losing my dear friends. The ones around can't walk or something. They're handicapped.

We had fun going to see Seaside Park on the bus during the summer. It was five cents. When we got to be thirteen we thought we were biggies and we'd pack a lunch and go to Seaside Park and come back. No problems.

We spent our evenings on the front porch. Now people don't even know what a porch is. But, we lived on the front porch during the summer. My boy cousins, all the same age, maybe older, would all congregate on the porch with the neighbors. They would play guitars and we'd sing until we were hoarse. We'd play kick the can and things like that. Outdoor games. There was no TV. I think maybe TV did separate us some, you know. Everybody goes into the house to watch TV. That way, you had to go out to get some enjoyment.

I: Did your cousins live on Sherman Street also, as a lot of the family did?

AB: Yes, that's how it was. They all married and none of them married Italians. So we have a mixture in our family. One cousin married an Irish man, Mr. Moran who passed away. He was the fire chief. My other cousin married Paul Mathers, who was Slovak. One did, one married Italian. She married John. Two married Italians, now that I think of it. My cousin, Pat, married an Italian girl. Not from Italy. Born here.

I: How did you meet your husband?

AB: Through some friends of friends.

(Pause)

I: Now, you said that he didn't speak English, your father?

AB: As I say, broken. Not like you're speaking or I'm speaking. Enough to make himself understood.

I: Did he sell real estate to other Italian immigrants?

AB: Mostly.

I: And it was a family style restaurant?

AB: Yes, Italian. It was on East Main at Cedar, the corner of East Main and Cedar. And that was it. But, I don't know what happened to that. That whole building is gone. All the buildings are gone. Such a change came when this thruway came. This Connecticut Thruway came and that cut out Church, cut all those houses near Saint Patrick's I'm talking about, not here. Where I lived it seemed to have cut the whole East Side in half and everybody was forced either to move to the North End. Then the North End became Italians and others moved out, up to Trumbull. But the majority of people bought with the city. But lately, all those people that bought are in Trumbull. They all left the city, too.

I: When did you notice the change of a different wave of immigrants coming into Bridgeport.

AB: I think they kept coming, but not as fast. All of a sudden, I think after the Italians came a lot of Portuguese people came within the past thirteen, twenty years. And, of course, Puerto Ricans. Many, many Puerto Ricans. We didn't have that many

when I was growing up. So immigration -- they came in fast and furious. Ours was steady, but slow.

I: And when your grandparents came over? Your mom came over after them?

AB: My mother came with them about fifty years ago.

I: Then, my grandfather sent for somebody, his family. And my cousins' parents sent for somebody. Sent a few --. I don't know if they still do. I remember them, before they came, they had to have jobs for them, for whoever was coming and you had take care of them in your house until they were able to go on their own. I don't know if they still do that.

I: That's why a lot of your family is concentrated --?

AB: They all worked and had to go to work. That's why the family is all together, in the same neighborhoods.

I: And your grandfather was a shoemaker in Italy, too? That was his trade?

AB: I think that was his trade. Then when the sandals came in and sneakers, his business went right down. People would buy sandals or sneakers.

I: When did that shop go out of business?

AB: Oh, he died and that's when it went out of business. We sold it. There was no more shoemaker shop. The person that bought it didn't use it a shoemaker store. I don't what it was used for but it wasn't a shoemaker store anymore. Of course, on one side was the shoemaker, where he did his work and he would get this leather -- come in -- and he would cut the leather. And the opposite side was a little counter and on the counter was penny candy so everybody would come in and buy penny candy and you got to know the whole neighborhood.

I: So that was part of his shop, too?

AB: He had a variety of stuff, like notebooks, -- nothing elaborate -- five and dime things.

I: And he worked that counter, too?

AB: This side was the candy and that side was the machine that he used to do the leather on the shoes and his counter with his nails and his hammers and that's the way it was. And they made their living.

I: And did your grandmother do anything? She didn't go out to work?

AB: She worked in the store there.

I: Oh, she did help in the store?

AB: Oh, yes. It was very family oriented.

I: Did your cousins help out in the store?

AB: One did, but not my family because I think my cousins had a store of their own so they worked in their store.

I: What kind of store was that?

AB: It was also a grocery store, no shoemaking. So that's the way it was.

I: A lot of your family owned their own business.

AB: Yes. They owned their store; they owned their house. They weren't beautiful houses, but like I say, we owned them.

I: Was that popular for a lot people to have their own business?

AB: It was very important to them, to the people who came, to make a living and buy their own little place. They weren't fussy like nowadays. They want everything, --furnaces and so on and so forth. They bought any ordinary property. Of course, when you hear the prices they paid, it's like three or four thousand dollars; you were able to buy a house. Now you can't even buy a car. So you see, it was different, although at that time, that was a lot of money, but it was reasonable. Now I don't think it's reasonable. I think it's way beyond everybody's reach.

I: Did men have a problem with women working or, as long as they helped out they really --?

AB: Well, women weren't like now. Whatever they were told to do, they did. Now we're more forward. I think the unions helped the women to become more strong because they had to stand up to their bosses. I think they helped. I don't know if they did it all. After all, if you're going in and telling --. Most were all men, the leaders. I don't think any lady really owned a factory in those days. They may have owned a store, a little store, drugstore or something, but everything was owned by men, and mostly by men, --General Electric, everything, all these corporations. And, of course, we had a lot of factories in that area, too. We had

the Singer Manufacturing Company not too far away. We had General Electric. We had all these factories, lots of factories. This was an industrial city that went right down hill after the Second World War.

I: That's when you noticed the decline in industry?

AB: Yes, right down. In fact, I think Bridgeport was one of the leading industrial cities in the state. We manufactured ammunition for the war. That factory was gone after the war.

I: Did you work in a factory during the war?

AB: No, I always did store work or dress work.

I: And what about your sister? Did she work?

AB: Yes, she also worked in a dress factory. She passed away in – real young -- 29. I was very fond of her, too. She died of spinal meningitis within six days.

I: Oh, God. That's horrible.

AB: Do you have any other stories or anything that you want to --?

AB: None that I think would interest anyone. I could tell you something personal, like I had a couple miscarriages and I was sick with tuberculosis. Things like that, but I don't think anybody would be interested in my cases. Things like that. My husband suffered with emphysema for eight years. I could tell you a lot of sad things, too, but not that interesting.

I: Do your children still live nearby?

AB: Bernadette is ten minutes away. She has her own condo. My son has been in Newtown thirty-five years, thirty-two years.

I: And what does he do?

AB: He's been with the gas company most of his life. Won't be long he'll be retiring. He raised his two boys, my grandsons, in Newtown. Newtown High and everything. Ask me more questions, but I didn't go travelling like some people. They really have an eventful life. Mine was ordinary. Grateful for it, though. Grateful for all the nice people I've met. On the whole, I think it was a pretty good life. We didn't reach for the moon as much. We were grateful for what we had because we were surrounded by people who had a lot less and that makes you

realize how lucky ... I think they've overdone it now. They get a car, they want another car. Get the car, another car. They want something else. They're always out --. You're concentrating on those things instead of the ordinary things that make life worthwhile.

I: Do you still volunteer at Saint Patrick's?

AB: Yes.

I: How long have you been doing that?

AB: Ten years. I go there on Mondays and Tuesdays. It's only about five hours a day, four hours. And, of course, answering the phone.

I: Helping out in the rectory?

AB: I don't clean or anything. Like if you need a baptism certificate I write one out for you. You'd be surprised how these things are needed for either going to another city or going to another school. The parents have to bring the child's birth certificate or baptism certificate. Especially if you're going from one Catholic to another. If you need your marriage certificate, maybe the course of your time you feel you need one to go to Canada or wherever, so those are the little things I do. Mostly answering the phone and fixing the envelopes and the bulletin. Little. I mean menial kinds, nothing--.

I: It's good to volunteer for your church, though.

AB: It gives me a chance to get out and it's nice there. And, of course, the secretary, the real secretary, who runs the whole show. People come in to have masses said and done for the week. Each day there's a mass for someone or somebody. And the day goes by. And then Bernadette takes me to her library. And this past week I borrowed books and coded them. I was there yesterday, in fact. Little things like that. As long as I can get around, I'm going to go. And that's about it.

I: Okay.

End of Interview