

THE HOBOKEN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
Wilfred Fernandez of J. Apicella and Sons interviewed by Carol Foster

INTERVIEWEE: WILFRED FERNANDEZ

INTERVIEWER: CAROL T. FOSTER

DATE: MAY 28, 2003

SIDE ONE

Ms. Foster: Thank you for participating in the Oral History Project.

Mr. Fernandez: You are welcome.

Ms. Foster: How long have you been in Hoboken?

Mr. Fernandez: I have been working here for 43 years.

Ms. Foster: 43 years, wow. Has the store always been Apicella's?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, since 1906.

Ms. Foster: Were you born in Hoboken?

Mr. Fernandez: No. I'm Cuban.

Ms. Foster: Oh, you're Cuban?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes.

Ms. Foster: What part of Cuba?

Mr. Fernandez: From the last province in Cuba, Oriente

Ms. Foster: Oriente, how do you spell that?

Mr. Fernandez: O-R-I-E-N-T-E

Ms. Foster: Thank you. That's great. So, when did you come to Hoboken?

Mr. Fernandez: In 1957.

Ms. Foster: In '57. Tell me a little bit about your early days in Hoboken?

Ms. Foster: At what point did your family own this place?

Mr. Fernandez: No. They never did.

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Ms. Foster: They never did?

Mr. Fernandez: No. The Apicellas were the owners until 1982. I was working here for 22 years. When they retired I took over.

Ms. Foster: I see. So your last name is...?

Mr. Fernandez: Fernandez.

Ms. Foster: Oh, I see. I was under the mistaken impression that you are a member of Apicella family. But you can still tell us a lot about the business. Who worked here when you first started?

Mr. Fernandez: The three brothers.

Ms. Foster: Just the three brothers?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes. And also the Apicella sister, the brother-in-law, his nephew, and a few drivers.

Ms. Foster: I see. And, um, at this point, are there any members of the Apicella family left?

Mr. Fernandez: There's only one of the brothers alive. He lives down in Florida and the sister on Springlakes.

Ms. Foster: I see. But the name remained the same?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes. It's been called Apicella's since 1906. It doesn't make sense to change a good thing.

Ms. Foster: This is very interesting. Tell me a bit more about your own family. How long have you been living in Hoboken?

Mr. Fernandez: 47 years.

Ms. Foster: So, it must have been very interesting for you to see how things have changed.

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, it's a bit different from before, especially in 1970 when Hoboken was reinvented.

Ms. Foster: It was? How was Hoboken reinvented?

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Mr. Fernandez: Well we had riots in here, and um...the town was run down.

Ms. Foster: Oh really?

Mr. Fernandez: It was like that until the '80s. Actually, in '82, that's when it started coming back.

Ms. Foster: I see. What made it come back?

Mr. Fernandez: Well, the new housing, you know. Condominiums were built, and the economy was better in the '80s. That made a big difference.

Ms. Foster: Since you started working here, have you ever thought about returning to Cuba?

Mr. Fernandez: No.

Ms. Foster: You like it here?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, I was only 17 years old when I got away.

Ms. Foster: Oh really? Did your family come with you?

Mr. Fernandez: No. My family came after.

Ms. Foster: I see. So you came all alone?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes. All alone.

Ms. Foster: Well, I'd like to know a little bit more about Apicellas. Can you tell me, give me some impressions that you may have about how the store has grown, and how it has affected the community

Mr. Fernandez: Well, the old man Apicella started in 1906 with a pushcart. He used to go to the market with a pushcart. Then after a while, business got a little better and he bought a horse. He had a horse and a wagon, and then finally, they bought a truck, and ...

Ms. Foster: And you remember all this?

Mr. Fernandez: Well, I wasn't there, but they told me how they started. They used to deliver to all of the hospitals in Hudson County, Holland American Line, American Export Line, United States Line, Italian Line.... I used to be the driver.

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Ms. Foster: Oh you did? That sounds quite interesting. Please tell me a bit more.

Mr. Fernandez: Well, there wasn't that much competition around. There were only a few fish markets, and all of the hospitals in Hudson County counted on you for deliveries. Apicella's had four trucks at this time, making deliveries all day long with four drivers. I started out driving and about a year and a half later, they put me inside to work.

Ms. Foster: And you've been here ever since?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes. Mr. Apicella, who used to run the business, had a stroke in 1969. I had worked very closely with him and he taught me a lot about the business. I was able to actually run the business myself.

Ms. Foster: So who owns the business now?

Mr. Fernandez: I do.

Ms. Foster: You do? How many people do you have working for you at this time?

Mr. Fernandez: Right now we have seven.

Ms. Foster: You have 7? Is that considered a large number of employees?

Mr. Fernandez: No. Right now we're slow.

Ms. Foster: I see.

Mr. Fernandez: We have had as many as seventeen people working at one time.

Ms. Foster: I see. And the store has always been the same size?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes.....

Ms. Foster: Did you speak English when you came to the United States?

Mr. Fernandez: No.

Ms. Foster: Did you find it difficult?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes.

Ms. Foster: But it was also helpful to be able to speak Spanish here in Hoboken, was it not?

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Mr. Fernandez: Yes, A lot of the customers were of Spanish descent, so it was good for me, to help them out.

Ms. Foster: Right. Do you have a lot of Spanish customers today?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, we do.

Ms. Foster: Tell me a bit more about your customers. What type of people frequent your store today?

Mr. Fernandez: We have customers who speak several different languages. Many of our customers are young and fish is an important part of their diet.

Ms. Foster: Do you have a family?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, I have three boys.

Ms. Foster: Three boys? Are they interested in this business?

Mr. Fernandez: Two of them work with me.

Ms. Foster: Oh, they do? Good. Do you think they would be interested in taking over the business one day?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, I think so. Richie has been here for twenty-two years. Yes, he's been here since I started.

Ms. Foster: He lives in Hoboken?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, he lives right above the store. He doesn't have to travel much!

Ms. Foster: No, he doesn't. So there would be no excuse for being late for work.

Mr. Fernandez: That's right.

Ms. Foster: And what about your third son?

Mr. Hernandez: He's a lawyer. He works for the US Department of Justice, in Dade County in Florida.

Ms. Foster: You must be proud of your family.

Mr. Fernandez: Yes. They are very good kids.

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Ms. Foster: Based on your experience, what do you see in Hoboken's future? What will it be like in another five or ten years?

Mr. Fernandez: It's gotten to a point where they can't grow that much more. It's come to a point where there are no empty lots or anything to build on here. But it depends on how the economy grows. I hope we never go back where it was in the seventies. There is a different type of people living here now. Most people work on Wall Street or are lawyers. I don't see it going back to the way it was. This change has been for the better.

Ms. Foster: Is there much of a Hispanic population here in Hoboken?

Mr. Fernandez: Not that much left. The rent is so high you know. There are a few but not like it used to be in the seventies. Right now, it's not that many Hispanics. The rent here is outrageous. So are the taxes. Taxes are high, so rent has to be high.

Ms. Foster: Do you own your own place?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes.

Ms. Foster: Free and clear?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, I paid it off many years ago.

Ms. Foster: Oh that's great. Do you have any family left in Cuba?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, some cousins. The last time I was there was in 1959, so actually if I saw them in the street, I won't know them. I haven't seen them for forty-four years.

Ms. Foster: Wow.

Mr. Fernandez: All my uncles, my grandmother, everybody died.

Ms. Foster: So there's no one else?

Mr. Fernandez: No. There's nobody. That's the reason that, not even for the beach, would I go down there.

Ms. Foster: Do you have strong feelings for Cuba?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, I would love to go back there one day, but I will never go back, not with Castro there.

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Ms. Foster: Do you think Castro will be gone one day soon?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, it will have to happen...the only guy left was him. It would be nice to go back anytime you want, on vacation. It's a beautiful country. Well, it used to be. I don't know about any more.

Ms. Foster: Is there anything in Cuba that would make you want to retire there, if it were possible to do so?

Mr. Fernandez: Not really. I would love to go back to my hometown, to where I was born, the school I went to. I would love that. But to stay there, I'm so used to the way it is here. I wouldn't even like to try. My granddaughters are here. All my family is here now, so I won't go back.

Ms. Foster: If you could say something to future generations about getting a job, making a living, starting a small, what would you tell them? Hopefully they will be reading this interview.

Mr. Fernandez: You gotta work hard. You have to put your mind to it. When I came over, I didn't know anybody. I had no money and I never said no when we used to work overtime, you gotta work, keep at it. You put it in your mind that you are going to get to a certain level, and you work, work, until you get there. That's the only way to do it. I started with nothing. Thank god, I own the buildings in here, the business, I own my house. You gotta keep at it. I'm going to be sixty-five years old, I'm going to retire. I'll work part time, but completely retire? I won't do it. I love to be here, taking care of customers, talking to people. The thing is you gotta like what you do, otherwise...

Ms. Foster: What made you want to get involved in this business?

Mr. Fernandez: Well, when I came over, I started working here, always in my life I used to like to deal with customers, and I saw this as a chance to attain the things I wanted in life, saw it as where the money was.

Ms. Foster: I see. So it wasn't just handling fish that attracted you?

Mr. Fernandez: Well, Joe Apicella was one of the smartest people I have ever met, and to me, he was like my father. Because I was all alone here, and any time I had a little problem with anything I used to come to him and he used to tell me you should do this, you should do that. And I learned from him the way he used to talk to customers, and the way to deal with the public, and little by little it has become a part of my life. My wife says I'm married to the fish store.

Ms. Foster: I think you have to be that way in order to be successful in what you do.

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Mr. Fernandez: Yes, that's the only way. You've got to work at it. You have bad times, you have good times, but you've got to keep going.

Ms. Foster: Right. Well that makes a lot of sense to me. Something that you said really interested me. You said Joseph Apicella acted like a father to you. You came here from Cuba, and he gave you the opportunity to work. He, in a sense, acted as your father so you've actually in many ways assumed the role of son.

Mr. Fernandez: That's right.

Ms. Foster: And now you're probably the only person left who can tell us how this business was run and interesting things about the family.

Mr. Fernandez: Well to me they were my whole family. I had nobody else. It's all the little things that he helped me out: to do the right thing, to want to do it. It started when he helped me buy my first house. He's the one that helped me out with the loan, the mortgage and everything. He used to say, if you rent, you're never going to own anything, so you should buy, and he helped me buy. Every time he told me something, it was the right thing to do.

Ms. Foster: This is all interesting but I must confess I thought that you were actually part of the Apicella family. It's my mistake.....

Mr. Fernandez: Well, I'll tell you one thing, a lot of customers here think they deal with my father.

Ms. Foster: Oh really? That's what I was thinking. That's what I wrote down: Willie Apicella.

Mr. Fernandez: A lot of people think that. Freddie was the youngest son. He was like a brother to me. We used to hang around together, go out together. And Frankie was the older one. We always got along. Eleanor, the sister was the same way. If I had any trouble with my kid, she used to call the doctor, make appointments.....Like my family.

Ms. Foster: Was Joseph Apicella the original owner?

Mr. Hernandez: No. His old man....

Ms. Foster: I see.

Mr. Fernandez: (Looking at pictures on the wall).....I have pictures from 1921. That one's got to be old....This one over here is Freddie, we worked together for thirty-two years. That's Freddie, the youngest one.

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Ms. Foster: Do you know, what this building was before Joseph Apicella opened the fish market? Do you have any idea? I know it was a long time ago.

Mr. Fernandez: It was a long time ago. This part over here, I don't know. Next door was a drugstore, but over here, the main store, I don't know what they had in here. Because at the time they only had the little place next store. I don't know what it was.

Ms. Foster: There's a meat market next door, isn't it?

Mr. Fernandez: Well, over here is part of my store too, that's where we have the icebox, the ice machine, and where we prepare all of the orders. (Taking a picture from the wall) I think I'm going to take my picture down from there. On that wall there, it's only him and me that are still alive. Everybody else is dead.

Ms. Foster: Well, that's good. It's kind of a memorial. I have a place in my home where I put pictures of all the members of my family that are deceased, and all of the pictures are in one spot. Are those the only photographs you have of the owner?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes.

Ms. Foster: You should try to preserve them... Keep them for posterity. You said your store has been written up a couple of times.

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, that's Frank. That's when we used to deliver the Holland American Line. We used to hold the turtle in here and we used to keep it in here, and when we used to make the trip around the world, we used to take the turtle for racing, on the ship. And then when they came back they used to bring it to the store over here.

Ms. Foster: Oh, racing turtles? On the Holland and American Line?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes.

Ms. Foster: That's really interesting. Was that an unusual activity?

Mr. Fernandez: Well, I don't know. Around the world used to take I don't know how many days for the cruise. They had to entertain people with something. Those days there wasn't much gambling or anything else. But this was a kind of gambling. They would put all of the turtles in a circle and put a number on them. And then there was an outside circle, and whichever turtle got to the outside first was the winner.

Ms. Foster: Oh, so it was a form of gambling? Did people bet on them?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes. They bet on them.

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Ms. Foster: Now see, that's a little interesting fact. I bet not many people know about turtle racing. What happened to the turtles after the races?

Mr. Fernandez: They used to bring them back here to the store.

Ms. Foster: And you'd sell them?

Mr. Fernandez: No, we used to keep them in the back with water, and we'd feed them there, until they were ready for the next race.

Ms. Foster: Oh, I see. You'd actually house them here and feed them and take care of them. Were they a specific kind of turtle?

Mr. Fernandez: No, they didn't grow that much. They called them racing turtles.

Ms. Foster: They were actually racing turtles? And they put the numbers on the back?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, on the shells.

Ms. Foster: That's very interesting. Can you remember any other things like that about the Holland and American Line that might interest future readers?

Mr. Fernandez: Not really?

Ms. Foster: Do you remember what types of fish the people ate while traveling on the Holland and American Line?

Mr. Fernandez: Oh they used everything, crabmeat, clams, oysters, lobsters, and shrimp. Everything. They also ate a lot of halibut and swordfish. I remember they used to take a thousand pounds of halibut and a thousand pounds of swordfish.

Ms. Foster: It seems to me that fish was more plentiful than meat.

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, and it was a lot cheaper in those days. Nowadays the price of fish is getting out of hand.

Ms. Foster: Have the price of fish gone up a lot over the years?

Mr. Fernandez: Yes.

Ms. Foster: But it's not priced out of the means of most people, is it?

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Mr. Fernandez: Some fish are, like lobster tails are \$22 per pound. A family can't afford that. If you've got three or four people, for \$22 you can buy a lot of chicken.

Ms. Foster: That's true.

Mr. Fernandez: Years ago it was different because like King crab legs, for example, used to go for 89 cents a pound. Right now it's \$15.99. Live lobster was \$1.89, \$2.00. This week lobster **went down** to \$8.49 a pound. But like I said, to feed a family of four, if you need four lobsters, it's going to cost you close to \$40.00. For \$40.00, you can get a lot of meat, a lot of chicken. But, thank God, they say that fish is very healthy, otherwise we'd be in trouble.

Ms. Foster: Yes, that's right. And you have many customers living in Hoboken who eat a lot of fish.

Mr. Fernandez: Yes, they all follow a diet, and fish is one of the main things in the diet.

Ms. Foster: My favorites are salmon and flounder.

Mr. Fernandez: I love salmon. I can eat salmon everyday.

Ms. Foster: And you always have the best salmon.

Mr. Fernandez: We try to. Every pound of fish that comes into this place has to go through my hands. And it has to be good. Otherwise I won't buy it. We make a living in retail, so it's got to be top of the line, otherwise we won't be here.

Ms. Foster: You have a good reputation to maintain.

Mr. Fernandez: Yes.

Ms. Foster: Well, I am sorry that I didn't realize that you are not part of the Apicella family, but you I realize that you really are in a sense.

Mr. Fernandez: To me, I feel like it. 90% of the people never call me Hernandez, it's Willy Apicella.

Ms. Foster: When I came in and asked if I could interview the owner I was told that you had been here for 40 some odd years. And I thought, this is great, the business has been passed down from family to family to family, and now the son.

Mr. Fernandez: Well, neither one of the two were born when I started working here. The youngest is 33 and the oldest is 40.

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Ms. Foster: And they're with you everyday. What's it like working with your family everyday? I've often wondered about that myself.

Mr. Fernandez: We get along so good. There is one thing that happened here, the Apicella brothers didn't get along too good. But I guess because since it was the three brothers it was different. Now it's my two sons. With a father and son it is different. And they got along like it was unreal.

Ms. Foster: The Apicella brothers didn't get along?

Mr. Fernandez: No, they used to fight a lot. But they kept the business because that's what kept them together.

Ms. Foster: I see.

Mr. Fernandez: Actually once they sold the place, they didn't even see each other. Each one went their different ways. One guy lived in Weehawken, the other guy used to be in Fort Lee, the other guy down in Florida. They were all spread apart. You know it was like they weren't close after that. I guess that happens in every family.

Ms. Foster: Right. Have you ever thought about changing the name of your store? You probably wouldn't change the name, because it has such a great reputation.

Mr. Fernandez: No. When I bought the place the first thing they asked me was if I was going to change the name of the Fish Market. The business wasn't that great in 1982, but the name was, so that's what I called it. Who would know Willy? But Apicella – anyplace you go in Hoboken, you ask about Apicella Fish Market, everybody knows. To me, the name was worth more than the business.

Ms. Foster: Well this has been great. I have enjoyed talking to you. I'm sure the future readers will learn much from this interview. Thank you very much for your time.

Mr. Fernandez: You're welcome.