

THE HOBOKEN HISTORICAL MUSEUM
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: CARMINE PERCONTINO

INTERVIEWERS: HOLLY METZ, ROBERT FOSTER

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HM: Please tell me your name, and where and when you were born.

CP: My name is Carmine Percontino. I was born in a small town in the Province of Salerno, in Italy. It's called the Monte San Giacomo.

HM: Okay. And when did you come to Hoboken?

CP: In 1965.

HM: And tell me about your family -- how they came here.

CP: We came in 1965. I was nine months old when I got here. My father passed away, so it was a rough trip for my mother.

HM: What was your father's name?

CP: Angelo.

So it was a hard trip. But when we got here, my mother's family -- a lot of them were already here. My grandmother was here, my grandfather was here. He had passed on, but my grandmother was here with all my mother's sisters who came before her and had everything set up. There was nothing we missed. The problem was jobs. That's the way it was, back then.

HM: Where did the family live in Hoboken?

CP: The first place was Seventh and Willow, 710 and 712 and 714. Those buildings were seriously occupied by everyone one of my "townspeople," I want to say. We literally inhabited those three buildings, all the floors.

HM: So how many people, would you say, were living there?

CP: We all had big families. I took one family of four. But there was another family of five, six kids some people had. And the apartment building -- they were decent-sized apartments in that building but, still, for five-six people living together, it was really tough. But we made do.

HM: It was like a little village.

RF: You had a lot of playmates.

CP: Always. The same friends I grew up with -- still, today, we still hang out, we still talk, and we're still close. It's great.

HM: You said there were four children in your family.

CP: In my family, yes.

HM: Could you name them, tell me the order, and tell me where you were?

CP: Yes. My brother, Luigi Percontino, is the oldest. And my sister, Rosa. And Conchetta, and then Carmine. I was an afterthought; I was like six years after Connie.

HM: You said there were family members here.

CP: Yes.

HM: Why did they come?

CP: My grandfather came here the first time in 1906. That was the first time he came to the United States, for work, with the idea to just make a little money, go back, buy land in Italy, and raise his family in Italy. I guess that's the way they did things back then.

HM: Your grandfather on your mother's side?

CP: On my mother's side. My grandfather on my father's side, he was a little bit more established in

Italy. He had land already. If that's the case, he goes back. That's what it was all about. If you had land, you're good. You work the land, you live, and that's pretty much how it was.

They all had numerous children in their families. My mother comes from a family of twelve. My father was a family of nine. Strangely enough, they married two sisters and a brother married two brothers and a sister [sic] from the same families.

HM: In my family, five brothers and five sisters married.

CP: That's fantastic. I love that. We said we're not just cousins but "brother cousins."

RF: Brother cousins. How do you say that?

CP: Fratti cugini. Fratti cugini.

RF: Brother cousins. It sounds so beautiful. You're real blood.

HM: So your father was Angelo. And your mother - ?

CP: Rosa.

HM: Did they have stories about arriving here?

CP: How hard it was, especially for her. She was traveling by herself, with four kids. To ship over back then was, I want to say, a good two weeks to get here. We came on the ship, I think it was, the Michelangelo. There was another ship called the Raphaela, which was the twin ship. One was named after a man, and one after a woman. But they were like little cruise lines, I guess, back then.

RF: Italian cruise lines.

CP: That's how people traveled back in the '60s and '70s. The first time I went back to Italy after I came here was 1970, and we went back on the same ship -- on the Michelangelo.

HM: And you went back to see family?

CP: To see family. Strangely enough, my brother, at that time, was eighteen, nineteen. He and my sister got engaged at the same time. You went to that little town -- she liked him, he liked her -- they called that ammaciata--the whisperer. Like, "Hey -- my son, your daughter --"

HM: Setting people up.

CP: There would be whispering in the room, in the living room. But only if they showed an interest in one another -- which was kind of nice. So that's how it was, even then.

So then we went back in 1975, and they got married.

HM: They got married in Monte San Giacomo.

CP: In Monte San Giacomo. Yeah. Because back then, because of the immigration and everything, they had to be married there, then emigrate, come over and stuff.

HM: So what was Hoboken like then?

CP: Hoboken, when I was growing up -- people say, "How do you remember that?" I do. I remember things from when I was four years old. It's there. I remember all those houses we lived in -- especially at Christmastime, everybody had lights in the windows. No matter how poor you were, you went on any street, and they were all lit up. It's kind of sad, because now nobody does that anymore. I mean, the Christmas spirit isn't what it used to be, unfortunately. I mean, it was a nice town. It was tough. It was a rough town, especially during those years. I've spoken to other people, and they would reminisce about how great it was. And there was always a diversity of nationalities -- the Italians from Madison Street to Willow Avenue, and the Irish up on Garden Street, to the Germans up on Washington Street. It was very segregated, even then, but it didn't feel that way. I think it was just who got here first, and stepped up a little bit quicker.

But the doors were open, and you could still trust. You didn't have that fear of being alarmed. You didn't have that fear of your neighbors. Now you don't know who they are. Later on, in the late '60s, the early '70s, you had a flood of people coming in -- the Spanish people coming in, the Puerto Ricans coming in. It was a different

lifestyle for them, I think. When we came here, we wanted to step up right away. We wanted to get more than what we needed, more than what we were used to in Italy. We came from a town that had no toilets. You had to push the bucket up , you had a bucket to flush. There was no running water. There was a lot of stuff that was pretty "rural." Back in the '70s, there was a lot that was still like that. It started to change in the '80s.

RF: A lot of farmland, right?

CP: Being here for five years and then going back to Italy was like, oh my god, what's -- ? But we would go back for like three months. My mother would stop working. She would get laid off from the coat factory, and we had like from June to September. When we went back -- so the kids there became your friends. It was like a two-week vacation. You got to know somebody. You really got close.

RF: Who would you stay with when you went back?

CP: In my house. We never did get rid of the house that we were born in. It was old, but we all made do. So it was kind of nice. Just recently, maybe seven years ago, I bought the other half of it back -- because they had split the house, originally.

So the people who owned the house we lived in -- which was not very big to begin with -- we just split the house in half, gave one half to somebody, and my mother bought the other half.

RF: It's still a house.

CP: It's still a house. Right. So when I farmed out -- years ago, now, I guess it is -- the person wasn't -- they don't want to use the house anymore, in the old town, because everybody built bigger houses, more modern houses, at the beginnings of the outskirts of town. The old villages, just like over 500 years old, has kind of been abandoned now, at this point, because every time someone dies the owner doesn't live there anymore. But I couldn't back away from it. So it's kind of nice.

HM: So when you go back, that's where you stay.

CP: Yes. I stay in my house. It's not like it's "desolate." There are people around you. Just not as many as there once were.

HM: It isn't a thriving village.

CP: No. Also, people moved to Germany. They moved to Switzerland. It's kind of like we moved here. Because there's really not that much work in southern Italy. Before, the land was what people counted on. Now, your son, your daughter, is educated. When they were growing up, to have a second-grade education was a lot. For them, that was their life. Now, the kids are more educated. They've decided to be doctors, lawyers, architects. They want to grow up and find job opportunities. It's kind of like what we did here. There wasn't an opportunity in Italy for us to advance. So when we had the opportunity, we all came here. I imagine it was the same thing for everybody. It's the American dream.

RF: So why Hoboken? Why do you think people emigrated here?

CP: Well, the first of us who came, from what I've been told, from other ancestors, that it was the first town they kind of settled in here, and they wanted to settle in Brooklyn. Brooklyn never took. A few went to Brooklyn, but the majority stayed here. Because even back then, it was just an easy "transport" to go to New York. Anybody who wanted to went to New York, but there were so many factories here in Hoboken. You had Tootsie Roll, you had all of this. You had the pencil factory. You had U.S. "Testing." I could go on and on and on. There was like everything. I think the city employed over 12,000 people, that just had an influx of 12,000 people, just to come to work here. Who knows how many left?

So anybody that kind of settled, started buying properties. First, the ancestors who came here tried to make Hoboken like a piece of their town in Italy. They bought Sixth and Jefferson, where the club stands today. I think it was a candy store. I was told it was some kind of a candy store. They bought the land, and they started St. Ann's church, and that's where they held services. Then they donated it to the diocese, and the diocese helped them

build St. Ann's church. It was built in the same form as our church in Italy. There was the St. Ann's church that we had, and it sits on the highest point in my town. There are like seventy steps to go up there. It's really cool. It's a lot smaller, obviously, than this church. The altar is identical, except it's much bigger; the way the saints sit inside the little nooks -- niches -- is the same. They kind of copied it, because that's what we wanted in return for the land we donated to the diocese.

RF: So when you're in St. Ann's, you think of home. It's religious, but it's also home.

CP: Absolutely. For us, it's our church. We built it; we helped build it; we donated it to the diocese.

HM: Now Italians who came to Hoboken from other places -- was there tension between the different --?

CP: There were people who also came from Caggiano, which is a neighboring town. It's like maybe fifteen minutes from my town -- south of Teggiano, which is another, neighboring. Mostly from Teggiano, but a lot of the people from Caggiano would up in Brooklyn.

These are neighboring towns. A lot of people -- I think anybody who knew anybody said, "Hey, come here, because it's good. We can do something here." That's how it was. For my people, from my town, there was a huge number who came here. There were a lot of people from Puglia, which is in Southern Italy. They have whole different customs compared to us.

RF: Different saints?

CP: It's that the saints are celebrated in a different way, with a different name. Like they celebrate the Virgin Mary who was found at sea. She saved some sailors. They came upon the statue and made it home, and that's the miracle.

But we celebrate a lot of the same holidays. The holidays are pretty much, traditionally, all the same. Christmastime, Christmas Eve -- you have to have X-amount of fish, seven different fish. And you have to have thirteen different foods. It's thirteen different foods, from soup to nuts. Everything you eat that's different. Several different kinds of fish foods.

You had mussels, you had clams. Scallops. Everybody had their thing to do. Everybody saw things a little bit

differently. Back then it was different. Back then, when you celebrated Christmas, it was like a never-ending party. You started Christmas-Even-day, and you didn't end it until Christmas night. People slept all over the floor.

HM: And what's going on during that time?

CP: We were never allowed to open up our presents until midnight. We had to come to midnight mass; then we would come home and, literally, the tree was covered in gifts. So it was like crazy, because there were so many of us to get together. Give this, give that. It would take two or three hours to give all the gifts. But you were so excited, you never wanted to sleep. And the older guys, they would sit down and play cards. The ladies would play bingo on the other side. Sometimes, obviously, we'd even do things together, not just the guys and the women. Sometimes the guys, after late hours, they just wanted to play cards. So that was kind of nice.

But I remember these things. It's like a dream.

RF: In your family -- would this take place in your parents' house? Or in your grandmother's?

CP: Well, my grandmother lived with us, so everybody came to her. That's what made it nice.

HM: You were talking about your mother working in the coat factory. Was that a really common thing for women who came from San Giacomo?

CP: Most didn't really have an education. Like I said, they didn't have any special trades. Some of them learned to actually sew, and that's what they did. They were seamstresses. For men, I think it was the same thing. A lot of them wound up at the coat factory because there was no other work. It was cheap labor, but back then you really didn't need much. I remember going shopping where the CVS is today. That place, when I first got here, was called Finest. No. I'm sorry. It was called Safeway, and then it became Finest. After Finest, it became Foodtown. It just kept changing names. My brother had to chip in, carrying bags -- for a nickel and dime. Back then that was money. He made \$2.00. My mother got paid maybe \$2.00 an hour. Not even. Maybe like a dollar.

HM: Certainly, not unionized.

CP: Oh, no. No. Not then, no. I think they started the union later on. When we would go shopping, we would fill a grocery carriage for \$30 bucks. That was pretty much our paycheck -- \$38.00. I remember our checks.

RF: Then you would have the fruit seller right here.

CP: Oh, Bobby. Bobby was here forever. Those guys were like landmark guys for us. There was a guy who would deliver milk to your house -- a six-pack in the little metal cans, in the little metal trays, and he had bottles like this. They were like, "How many bottles do you want? Two, or three?" Every third day he'd come buy, to collect the money. I still remember that. I was maybe two, three years old. I remember that guy coming to the door, and he was always chewing on something. I don't know if it was gum. It was like he had a mouthful of nuts.

HM: Tobacco, maybe.

CP: Maybe, because he was always [makes noise]

RF: You remember the sound.

CP: It's crazy what you remember, as a kid. I remember standing next to my grandmother, and my grandmother paid him.

HM: Were there live-chicken sellers?

CP: Oh, yeah. We had the poultry store. You name it. The food stores were crazy. You had three food stores, I think, back then. Then we wound up with two. But they had a meat market. There were so many meat markets back then, too. Anything you wanted. I'm sure you've heard this before. The guy would come with his little red van (I remember this like it was yesterday), and he'd be yelling, Tripa!

I remember it from the '70s into the '80s. I think he stopped sometime in the '80s, if I'm not mistaken, because I was more of an adult then. But I tell you, the guy would literally wrap stuff up on newspaper for you, and that's how you took it home. It was liver, it was a heart, the lungs, and the stomach. Tripe.

RF: Organ meat.

CP: Now it's like a delicacy. Some places they don't even want you to sell it anymore. But we still do it. We still get it from the farm, if we want it. We called it sufrito. Sufrito was the heart, the lungs, and the liver. When I was a kid, of course, I couldn't stand liver. I couldn't stand the smell of it. And tripe! But now, as a matter of fact, I'm going to make tripe for the club.

A delicacy. And so many things -- when I first started going out, when I was sixteen, seventeen, I said, "You know what? At this place we had potato skins." And they said, "You had *what? Potato skins?* That's what you feed the pigs." [Laughter] She said, "You people are crazy."

HM: But now people eat the way our grandmothers ate.

CP: It's more peasant food. Only the poor people ate "polenta." It was cheap. Like the corn meal. You just made it into a big bowl of pasta, and everybody ate from the same dish. It was crazy. Polenta, now -- you try it, and it's like a delicacy. And you have to know how to

HM: But it's a different kind of knowledge, understanding it was going to snow, like with the "polenta."

CP: It was incredible. They knew so much. They could tell you what time it was just by looking at the sun. They never needed their watches. They knew when it was time to go home. They knew what month it was time to go home, because everything changes in the solar system. But they knew, "Okay, let's go. We've got to get up today." Or, "We've got to get up earlier tomorrow, because we've got to come back earlier tomorrow." It was simple, but they understood everything.

HM: It makes me think that that transition, from that way of life to here, must have been so hard for them.

CP: It was. My mother, for the first six months she was here, she cried every day. I can't imagine. For her, it was hard.

HM: Everything you know is gone.

RF: And she was mourning, obviously, your father. Sorry, to --

CP: That's all right.

HM: What's wonderful is that she had people to embrace her, so at least there wasn't the loneliness. And also language.

CP: Well, to this day she won't speak English. She trips and says things, but basically she couldn't hold a conversation with you, if you tried.

RF: Do you tease her about that?

CP: We always laugh about it. I think she did it more so we would speak Italian. So we never lost our language.

I'm grateful, because, because of her I can speak Italian. I don't speak it in the perfect manner, but I took Italian in school. So I can get by. If I speak to a truly educated Italian person, I'll know everything he's saying, and I can kind of fake it. But if I had to speak the true Italian, it's a little difficult for me. But our dialect

goes out. But you know, I never really missed having a father because there were so many people to take his place.

[Begins to cry a little.]

RF: I'm sorry if it's too hard, but --

CP: That's okay.

RF: -- did he die in Italy?

CP: Yeah.

RF: He died in Italy. Then your mom came soon after?

CP: Well, they were all supposed to come, but he never made it. Because it took like years before he could come back. It took like seven years before you could get approved.

It took six and a half years or something to get the paperwork. Like, my mother's younger sisters came -- when my grandmother came they were underage, so they were allowed to come with her. But because my mother and the other sisters were older, they were not.

HM: So they had to be sponsored by someone.

CP: Kind of like today. I don't think that much has changed. You still have to assure that you have a place for them to live; that you have a job.

RF: That you're not going to become a burden to the community, etc.

CP: Exactly. Nowadays, unfortunately -- it's almost sad. People just waltz into this country. I wish we could have done.

HM: Probably a little less waltzing now.

RF: In Brooklyn -- I'm not sure I quite understood. Brooklyn is so much bigger than Hoboken, so it makes sense if 100 folks from your community came and stuck here, they would have more influence in a smaller town. Is that what -- ?

CP: That's what I think happened. They just kind of knew they could be more dominant for themselves, here. They got used to that. They just couldn't get used to

make it, and nobody knows. There are so many things that are like that, like pasta fazool was cheap. Because pasta was cheap. Pasta was the only thing you could eat in Italy. My father had what they called massaria. He had 350 sheep - - him, his brother, his father and his other brother -- and this is what they did. They made cheese. Back then, it was more of a barter system in Italy. It was like you give me the sheep's wool, and I'll give you what you don't have. You give me this, I'll give you that.

RF: No one had cash.

CP: Of course, there were also the people who would buy with money. But that's how it was back then - - a simple life. You need what you had to do every day. You had to go to work, and that was it. You either worked in the fields, or you took the sheep to the meadows to graze. It was rough. Sometimes they'd have these little shanties they would build in the mountains, on your property, and you had to hide out there for the winter, at night, because it was cold. It was kind of rough.

the fact of being in such a big mix. They'd come from a small town. This was a small town. It made more sense. I think it just brought them more together, and it was easier. They weren't so apart from each other. They were very close together. They saw stayed in the same building, in the same neighborhood. It was either Willow Avenue, or Grand Street. Most of them lived on Jefferson Street. You know where the big "key" used to be-- there was a big key. It was a key place.

At Fourth and Jefferson. That's where the first club was formed.

RF: Can you say the name of the club?

CP: Sure. It's the Monte San Giacomo Club. They took the name of the town. That's where the first club was actually made, in the basement. That's where they would gather, all the men, and hang out.

RF: That was earlier. That precedes you.

CP: Way before.

RF: In the '30s.

CP: Even before. We donated the church land in 19-something. I don't know the exact date. They bought the land even before the 1900s, or just around the 1900s. Maybe 1903. Let's see. They celebrated 105 years. So I guess 1910 must have been when they got together and did all that. These were people who couldn't scrape two nickels together, but they pretty much got together and did all that.

HM: Some of those people probably couldn't read and write.

CP: No, probably not. Most of them probably could. Back then, if you had more than a second-grade education, you were considered having gone to school. Very few made it. Because life demanded that you had to work. You had to help in the fields. I guess the more kids you had, I guess, the easier it was.

RF: A work force.

CP: Cheap labor.

HM: Also, here, people didn't often go beyond fifth grade either. A lot of people.

CP: When I was young, I would talk to some of the older guys who were here, who were born here, from my town. There were third-generation-born American. Me, I'm still Italian-born. To them, they were first-generation born here in America, the sons and daughters of the first ones who came. When I talked to them, they were, "Oh, you don't know how this place was in the '30s, and '40s, and the '50s. It was so different." Because my understanding is that it had really gone downhill. By the '70s, there were places you didn't want to drive to. It was a town that had changed to the point where it had gotten so dilapidated. I cannot tell you how many of my paisans (because them paisans because they were from my town) sold property for nothing, just to get out. Because they said Jersey City Heights was -- "You live in Jersey City Heights? Wow." It was so much nicer, so much better. You had a better quality of life. Right now, there are still a lot of paisans up in Jersey City Heights.

You literally did not want to be here anymore, because it had changed so much.

HM: People talked about not being able to get loans, either, even if they wanted to stay.

CP: The property was worth nothing. Let me tell you, my cousin sold, in I think it's 809 and 811 -- no, 809 and 807 -- both buildings --

RF: Willow?

CP: Yes. For \$70,000. These are two ten-family tenement buildings, that today are worth I don't know how many millions. But he sold them for \$70,000, in 1976 or '77, which, unfortunately, if he had waited just a few more years he would have seen a turnaround.

I bought my first house, the house I live in at 827 Willow -- we moved in there when I was just about five years old. My uncle had bought it from another uncle of mine. He took it over, and we moved in with him. Because this was my father's brother, and his wife was my mother's sister. So they kind of looked out for us.

So when they moved in, we moved out of here and we went there. We stayed on the top floor, and they had the basement because he had five kids, too. So there were

like six of us living upstairs, because my grandmother, me, my brother, my mother, my two sisters. They all lived downstairs. They had a very big family, too. They had a family of seven. So we dominated the whole house. And like I say, it was crazy. It was so much fun.

From there, my uncle gave it to his son, Luigi. Another Luigi. There's like so many Luigis in my family, so many Matteos, and so many Rosas, because they all took the first names of the grandmothers and grandfathers. The four dominant names of my parents are Luigi, Matteo, Connie (Conchetta), and Rosa. Me, I should have been a Matthew, but because I was born on July 16th, the saints superseded.

HM: Oh, how great. [Laughter]

CP: So no more Matthews. That was it.

HM: No Matthew for you. If they call your name, it's always for you.

CP: It's true. It's true.

But then, from my cousin Luigi -- he had bought a house in Edison. He was one of the first to go to the suburbs. He

wanted to have a bigger house, with kids, etc. Then my uncle took it back, and he didn't really want it. He wanted to sell it. My brother, at the time, was looking to buy in Jersey City, so he bought in Jersey City. My brother-in-law was living on Eighth and Garden, and he was paying -- he was like, "I don't want to pay rent anymore. I'll buy the house." So in 1982-'83, he bought the house. He had it for five or six years, then I took it over in 1987, and I've been there since then. He paid maybe \$19,000, to \$24,000, but I paid \$215,000. [Laughs] That was a lot of money back then. But it's all relative, right?

HM: Exactly.

RF: You've got to live somewhere.

CP: Then he moved to Palisades Park, which he bought for like \$400-something down. But by that time, Hoboken was starting to change. Hoboken already had gotten more that feeling of people paying higher rents. When I took it over, I was able to take it over because I had the help of other family members to help get a loan, obviously, and the banks weren't as crazy -- although we're paying like nine-percent, when I first bought the house. It was

crazy. But the rents were good. Even back then, I was getting like \$850 for an apartment, which today I can get close to \$2,000 if not more. But, again, it was relevant to the times.

So it was easier to maintain it, to keep it, to pay it off. And I invested in something else. Again, I'm still paying a lot of mortgage, but it's there.

HM: But it's a different thing because it's family member to family member. Where a lot of it now it becomes stranger to stranger.

CP: You know Torno's Pizzeria? Torno's Pizzeria was opened originally in 1960 by my grandmother's brother -- brother-in-law, I should say. My sister and brother-in-law. He didn't want it, because he had the other pizzeria -- La Scala -- another pizzeria that was there for all time. That was on Park Avenue, by the park.

It was on Fourth Street. You actually had to go down steps, and that's why it was called La Scalinate, because of the steps. Then he didn't want it, and he gave it to my uncle, Antonio, which is another brother of my mother. The pizzeria business wasn't for him, so he held onto it for a little while. Then when my uncle came -- he came in 1966,

the year after we did -- because his papers got called in at that time. Then right away he needed something to do, and he says, "Listen. Why don't you take over the pizzeria." So they did. He had a little bit more money and stuff, so he put the pizzeria -- and it's been in our family now forever. It went from son to another to another

That pizzeria hired everybody. I worked there for I don't know how many years. Even as a little kid, six-seven years old -- they'd bring the mussels. The mussels used to come in these big, wet sacks, and the guy used to come with the fish truck. "Okay, you've got to clean the mussels." Argh! They made you work. This is like forever. You wanna eat? You gotta work. Then they'd feed us pizza or whatever we wanted. It was just the idea. They would have fed us anyway; it was just the idea that you had to work.

HM: I wanted to ask you -- you were talking about holidays, and you took Christmas (and we'll get to the creche), but Easter, too. If you could tell me a little bit more about celebrating Easter.

CP: It's a fun holiday. Easter is a good holiday for us, especially back then, because back then

we'd actually buy live animals. It wouldn't be the first time, when I was like six years old, that they had a baby goat. It was my pet for like a month. They made me feed it, they'd play with it in the back yard, me and my cousins. But then -- on Sunday morning I hear, "Whah, whah," I look out the window, and my grandfather has him upside down, tied up, and I'm like, "What are you doing?!" I run downstairs, and "Nooooo." By the time I got downstairs, he was already dead. He did it with a little pocketknife. And in the midst of crying and yelling -- he was like, "Ah, shut up. What do you know? Be quiet."

RF: You're just a kid.

CP: I'm watching him do these things to this poor animal, and I'll never forget -- he stuck this big tube, like a straw, when he cut him, and he blew him up like a balloon. "What're you doing?!" He just peeled him. These guys were masters at doing things with animals. They blew them up so the skin would just fall right off -- the fur.

RF: You must have been crying.

CP: I was like, "What are you doing this for? What are you doing?"

Of course, I wouldn't eat him. I wouldn't eat lamb forever. Now I love it, but -- [laughs] I started to be eighteen or nineteen, and I was always "skittish" with food. I didn't like this and I didn't like that. It's funny how your tastes change as you get older. Some of the smell of tripe -- now I can't wait to make it. It's one of those things, how it changes, and how you develop an understanding. I think everybody "went through that." Probably my grandfather, the first time he saw an animal be killed, was probably the same way. But it was just a common way of life.

HM: And as it's around you, you understand it more. You say, "What is that?"

CP: Well, you don't know how the chicken got to your house. But then the first thing, the chicken -- broken neck, zip, with the saw. In ten seconds. What the hell?

You're kind of just, "Okay. This is life. This is how it is."

HM: And you're cooking tonight. Did someone teach you how to cook?

CP: You just watch over the years, dabbling and doing things. Most of the guys in my family can pretty much cook. My brother-in-law doesn't, but my one brother-in-law is a really good cook. We were watching him. We would go away sometimes for like weekends, in the Poconos, and the men did most of the cooking.

HM: I was wondering if that was traditional.

CP: I don't think it's really traditional. I just think it's either you have a taste for how you want to do it -- you want to like it. And I like that people like my food. And it's good. People have a good time, you have a good time doing it. Cooking is a lot of fun. I never believed that, when I was younger, cooking. But when I got into my late twenties and early thirties, I thought this was pretty cool that I could make a sauce. When I was ten years old -- back then it was different. Now you would never think of leaving a kid home alone. But there were quite a few times Dad would go to work, and there was nobody there to watch me. I stayed home. I learned how to

make coffee. I would do things that most kids today are like, "What?" Back then -- it was different back then. You learned stuff.

HM: And food, like you say -- you can please other people. It's such a beautiful way --

CP: It's love, I think.

HM: And it's an art, too.

CP: It's so much fun. Like last week, for instance, fifty people who came to the club-- normally you expect thirty to forty at the most -- there are people who don't show up all weekend, or show up another weekend -- everybody showed up at the same time. I was like, "Oh, my god." So I was like, "Okay, guys, we've got to ration it."

RF: So you wouldn't prepare a goat now, would you?

CP: No. I've done it. A deer. Now we do everything. Like I said, I don't know if I could kill it, but I could cook it.

HM: The pig roast -- that's sort of a newer thing for Hoboken. Because I don't remember --

CP: Well, the pig roast is something that normally you do in December in Italy. In December and January is when you kill the pigs. That's when you bring the pigs to slaughter. That's when you make the homemade sausage, like the dry sausage and the salamis -- when you cure them, there are months --

RF: You need them for the winter.

CP: Right. In February and March is when they're going to cure correctly, because you can't do it before. So December through March -- my uncle still makes his homemade sausage, and I buy it, I give him the money for it and everything. But he makes it for the family, and it makes it for me. We bought forty-fifty-100 pounds sometimes. A hundred pounds goes a long way. It's a lot of sausage, let me tell you. "Can't I give you some?" You give some guys some, etc. On the holidays you slice it up. There's nothing like the taste of homemade sausage. There

are so many people who do it, and they all spice it just a little bit differently.

RF: But don't you have a hard time, when you go out to eat, that you know that the food you're making is better?

CP: Sometimes people tell me what's a really good restaurant in Hoboken, and, honestly, I'd rather eat at home.

There are some that are a bit better quality, that have that authentic -- if you can get into trattoria Augustino's, he cooks from scratch. It's a small place, so it's easy to do. Because you're not pleasing 100 people, you're pleasing a few people at a time, so you can cook that way. But when you overdo food too much, it's hard to keep it good quality. It's hard to keep it good quality. Lucky for me, I learned to cook in quantity, so everything is good. I cook every Monday night.

RF: Do you do it every Monday night?

CP: Monday night football season. Because it just becomes too much -- my personal life and everything

else -- I do a lot for the club, do it to a certain degree, then you have to say, "Okay. I have to take a break."

RF: So you're growing up in Hoboken as a young -- what? -- in the '60s, primarily?

CP: From '65 on. I was nine months old when I got here, and I turned one year old on July 16th of 1965.

RF: So you were a youngster. A lot of people would talk -- the generation before, and even before that, they would talk about growing up Italian in Hoboken, and getting a lot of discrimination from other groups. Did you feel that? From either kids, or teachers, or -- ?

CP: No. Personally, I never experienced any of that because there were so many of us. When I went to school, I had so many friends who were my paisans -- they weren't even just friends, they were relatives and -- even being bullied in school. I never got bullied.

RF: You had backup.

CP: Well, we had crazy fights in my family. They liked to fight you on the dime. They didn't care. You touch me, I'll get my cousin after you. Oh. Okay.

HM: So you had numbers on your side.

RF: In Brooklyn, it would have been different.

CP: Probably. Again, it was a very small town, and there were so many of you around. I was always extremely shy. I was skinny and I would never fight, because I was afraid to fight. But I got to say, I was always able to talk myself out of stuff. [Cross talk]

RF: So you didn't really feel discrimination.

CP: No, not too much. I heard more stories about it from the older guys. People told me stories about the docks, and how it was, and things you did -- People made a living any way they could. If it wasn't law-abiding, it wasn't law-abiding. It was just the way it was. It was a sign of the times back then. Anybody hostile to them, they

did what they could do. A lot of the older guys had probably -- I shouldn't say a lot, because there were a few you heard about.

HM: We've heard it.

CP: But it was like, "Hey, pick up the box and leave it over there. Don't just walk away and that's it." It was that kind of thing for them.

Then there's the flipside. There's the hard-working class of Italians. That's the majority of it. My whole family, we sacrificed so much. To this day, we still have that same work ethic. That's, unfortunately, not told enough.

HM: That's a great lead-in, because now I want to talk to you about what kind of work you did.

CP: When I was in high school, it was the '80s. I graduated in 1982. In 1982, you needed college but you didn't really need college to get a job. Like a lot of friends of mine at the time -- "I'm going to become a cop. I'm going to become a fireman." -- I had thought about becoming a police officer; then I said, "No, I'm just not

cut out for that. I don't have that personality, to deal with confrontation all the time. Then you start thinking, "Oh, I'd have to deal with bad guys." And I was always a hustler. I always worked on the streets. If it wasn't the little pizza, I was doing something else. I was making money. It wasn't like I wasn't making money, even back then. My brother and my two sisters were married by the time I graduated high school, so it was just me and my mother, and I kind of took care of her after that. She still does everything—makes her own pasta. She won't go nowhere else. I can't get rid of her. [laughs]

So I had to hustle to make money. Then I thought about going to college for a little while. I actually started going to the Taylor Business Institute for a little bit. It was like this was going to take too long. I missed the money I was making. My brother got me to Levolor. I was maybe nineteen. I started working at Levolor, and they were paying pretty good.

In school, I was an A/B student. I was always okay. I wasn't super-smart, but I got around. So the first time I went to work the guy was going to put me in packing, because you don't need a brain to do that. Then he said, "So, kid, do you want to go to the specialty department? " He saw I was really good at geometry. I was like, "Well,

yeah. " So he goes, "Well, come on. We'll take the stairs." So he took me to the department where they paid a little more, so I started out making \$7.50 an hour, which wasn't really that bad. It was all about shapes, shaped blinds, circular blinds. They were called the arts department, specialty shades. So we did all kinds of shapes, different kinds of metal blinds and stuff, and the more you produced, the more you got paid. I was up to almost \$10.00 an hour in a couple of years. It was good. Back then, \$10.00 an hour was not so bad. They had 401(K), they had everything for you. The company was a great company to work for. So that's what I did.

So from there I learned how to do blinds. I learned a trade, and people were asking me, "Carmine, can you get me a set of blinds?" They would allow you to sell a certain amount from a company, and every time I would take the opportunity, and I made a lot of money doing this. Then the company closed down, so now what do you do?

So I did a couple of other things. I went to work for my friend in a bakery. Again, that kind of work -- it's not for me. I can't work for anybody else. I've got to do something for myself, so I went into the blind business. From there --

RF: Do you own the building?

CP: My two cousins and my brother owned this building. In 1973-1974? Nineteen-seventy three, the building had a fire. It was called Ralph's Candy Store back then. That's the guy's name, but he's -- they're gone now. They lived next to the school, the school on Sixth and Park.

So when the fire happened on the top floor (this used to be a five-story building), and he wanted to sell the building, he didn't want to fix it -- so my brother and my two cousins bought it. They really had the whole thing. They did everything different. This basement was about maybe three feet high. They lifted it up --

RF: They really did?

CP: Yeah. So they changed things around in here. But they never added a fifth floor back. They should have, but they'd didn't.

RF: Why spend the money, right?

CP: Right. So they owned it for quite a while. They owned it until like 2004-2005. Then my brother wanted to stay in, and they wanted to sell it. Because he invested in a couple of other things, and the two cousins invested elsewhere. I said, "If you want to keep it, I'll buy the half. You already own a quarter of it." So we did that. I bought the half, he bought the quarter, and then we became partners. Then we both owned the building all the time. Then, unfortunately, he passed away, so that's sad.

RF: Just going back -- I forget. Did Levolor go out of business after the fire?

CP: Shortly after the fire. But it wasn't the fire that did it, actually. If you ask me, everything that burned in that building was just scrap. I'll never forget it. They had stuff leftover into the building next door, which was dilapidated; it was ready to fall down anyway. They had hired a construction crew to tear the building down and make it a big apartment lot, and there was no talk about leaving. Then the construction guys there, they tried to light a fire to keep warm or something, and the whole thing went up.

HM: Just to get back to your work at Levolor -- what is interesting to me is that it had a creative aspect to it.

CP: It had a creative aspect to it. That's what kept me more interested. If I had taken a job packing blinds, I probably would have been bored out of my mind. I had some good friends there in that department. There were only a few people working in there, so it was a tight group of guys. I'm still friends today, with a couple of those guys. So that's nice. I see them all the time. It was a fun place to work.

RF: And you could walk.

CP: It was an easy walk in the morning. It was an easy walk back. Exactly.

HM: Bob told me that you used some of your supplies from your own blinds place in Hoboken -- so that will lead us to the crèches.

RF: Maybe we should segue into the crèches.

HM: We're doing it now. I wanted to go from the creativity of that, because I wonder if the materials inspired it.

CP: The way I got started in all this -- when I was a little kid I would go to my uncle's house, and I was always fascinated by the way they did the little things. And then the tree -- everybody had the Presepio, the Christ and the baby, and it was just such a big tradition around town. In the churches -- even some of the churches in New York City, today -- Mt. Carmel up in the Bronx is amazing the way they do that. They have a beautiful, beautiful Presepio. So just from loving the way they would do it -- they were kind of like toys when I was a kid. "Look at the little sheep!" You wanted to play with them.

But the meaning was always there. They were always, "Hey, don't play -- that's not a toy." And no matter whose house I went to, whether it would be one uncle or another uncle, but there was one uncle in particular -- he wasn't even my uncle -- it was my brother-in-law's father --

HM: And his name?

CP: Angelo. I ought to check that. I'd check that.

HM: And could you spell Accetta?

CP: [Spells] They all did it nice, but he would just have paper bags, and he would make these things, just like that. I was like, "How did you do that?" It was fascinating to me, because I could never get it to look like that in my house. It was nice, but not like his. I said, "Boy, that is so great." He would go and find moss, and put moss, and lilies -- really creative. And he goes, "Oh, but you know, in Italy -- this is what they used to do in Italy. This is nothing." I was like, "Wow." So one day I said, "Show me how to do it."

RF: How old do you think you were?

CP: I was maybe twelve, thirteen. About twelve. So I would do what he told me, and I got better and better at it, and more creative about it. I was like, "How can I get that to look like that on top?" Give it more of a path, or a rock, or a rocky feeling. So I tried and that

didn't work. When I really got into it, I would put stuff behind it. I would find aluminum things, and just bend it and form it, and it became better--pretty cool.

So I used to do it at my house, for a long time. My mother would say, "You made such a mess in here!"

RF: And how old were you, when you were actually making them?

CP: Well, when I got good at it, I was about seventeen or eighteen, when I was getting more involved, and definitely wanted to make a presepio and see it in the house. She made such a fuss. I would make a mess, but it would look great after it was done.

Then I thought, what's the point? Nobody even sees it. Only the family sees it. So I thought, "Let's try putting this outside." So I came up with this idea, "I'm going to this outside. I'm going to make this big box, and --" The first time it was only a 4' X 8'. It was four feet high and eight feet long, just a 4' X 8' box. And I made these cardboard brick houses. It took forever. I started way ahead of time, because I didn't know how long it was going to take. So I had everything together, and I started to put it together the first time. It's like trial

and error. But from the first time, it came up pretty cool, and everybody was like, "What are you doing in there?" People would walk by, people would ask, and finally, it was, "My god, I saw that yesterday, and it didn't look like that." Every day there was more progress, more progress. "Boy, what are you doing now?" It kind of made it fun for me -- the attention; that people would ask.

RF: It's a performance.

CP: So many people would compliment it, and it was kind of like -- There were people who would stop and take pictures of it. Then I'd say, "You know what? I'm going to see if I can get some donations for it." So I thought about making a thing, I put a stand up, and people started giving stuff. That was cool. So I got to give to the homeless shelter for a long time.

HM: I remember that. So you started outside around when? Do you remember?

CP: Around 1996-1997. Something like that.

RF: And how big is it, about, now?

CP: It stayed that way at first, and then I thought, "I've got to make it bigger." It didn't look big enough to me. It didn't look deep enough. It was shallow. I thought the length was good so I kept the eight foot side, but I made it five and a half foot deep -- because the depth is what you need, to put stuff in the front. Then it just stayed there, because it was getting too big for the gate. [Laughter] It covered the whole front.

In the beginning, I would take it apart. I would rip everything out. It was heartbreaking, almost, because every year it came out so nice, and I thought, "Oh, man, I've got to destroy this thing?" Literally, I would just have to destroy the whole thing every year -- take it apart piece by piece; separate the boxes, everything. Everything. Because I had nowhere to store it.

So once we bought this place, I thought, "Carmine, you can't have that thing in the back." By that time, let me tell you, my knees were shot. It didn't feel like too much in the beginning. When I was younger, in my early thirties, even, it was okay. But man, by the time I hit the forties, I was like, "Oh, man, my knees are killing

me. I can't stay in here anymore." It was getting really hard to do.

RF: You're talking about working inside the box.

CP: Yes. Because you're literally on your knees for hours. [Cross talk] Even today, I'm like, "Oh, man [what I'm doing], for this thing." But it was just like a self-sacrifice. You wanted to do it. People looked forward to it every year. Then I did it, but I just kept it. Every year, if something needed to be fixed, I fixed it. If something needed to be changed, I changed it. All those little trees have to come out every year; all that stuff has to be done -- like the water pond. If it isn't good, because you mess it up, you re-do it. Of course, every year, if I wanted to add to it, I would add a character here and another character there, making a little house there because now it needed something else. That's how it just kept growing and growing and growing. Then I started doing these things, so one year I said, "Oh, I want to make it different now," so I put the one with the train -- you remember the train that used to go around?

HM: Yes.

CP: I put that one on top of it. That was just a 4' X 8'. That was short. I still have that one. I tried to put it out this year again. But that one got a little bit more messed up with Sandy. It didn't get totally messed up, but it got a little bit more damaged than the new one. So I kind of fixed it last year, but I didn't have the time to put it out. Plus, I really don't want to put it on top of that one anymore. So I was kind of hoping one of my neighbors would allow me to put it in their gate. The one I just met. [And he said ?] -- "I'm not around." So I didn't want to press the issue. I've got new neighbors now, next-door to me over here. My other neighbors were Jewish people next door. They were great, they were nice people, but I didn't feel it was right --

HM: -- to ask them.

RF: They're playing for the other team.
[Laughter] [Cross talk] Good way to test a friendship.

CP: I could never say anything bad about them. They're all wonderful people. We helped each other so

much, with Sandy and everything else. It was so, so great. They would come over in the summertime, and we would eat. And I'd go over there. They were very great people. But I never felt comfortable, putting that in there. And for a long time, unfortunately, after my brother passed, in 2008, it really wasn't out there -- because my mother -- she didn't feel that festive, so I didn't want to do that.

RF: She didn't want to celebrate.

CP: So the first couple years I took it to the club and put it out there. And people, again liked it, but it never really got the attention. If you would ask, "How come you didn't do it this year?," I'd say, "Well, if you want to see it, it's over there. I put it over there. The thing wasn't there anymore.

But then things get better.

RF: So this is kind of a mini-?

CP: No, this is not it at all. This is just different ones that I've been doing. I had made three or four little ones. I started doing things for other people. Michael said, "Oh, Carmine, this is so beautiful. Can you

make a small one for me? So that one that's in there -- I just finished that one. That one was kind of destroyed, too, because he had gotten water-logged. So I had to take that out. I made it different than it originally was. You'll never get it to look the same anyway, but I'm going to make everything different this time. I'm going to change everything around. I didn't like the way -- it wasn't that I didn't like it. It was like, "Eh, I can do better." He came in here the other day, and he was like, "Oh, my god, it's so beautiful." It was in Moonachie, and he puts it out there. And people there with it, and he's so happy. Oh, my god. He's so excited.

Now this one here I used to put at 1032 Park Avenue, in the gate, and the pane of glass that goes over it this way, so you can look right into it. That, again, is what this was. I figured I wanted to make a waterfront scene, like Hoboken, so I put all the rocks in. It took forever to glue all these rocks in. I'll have to do it again, now. So it's kind of nice. I had the pond and all that stuff. It's going to look real nice when it's all done again.

RF: Are you saying you want to do one up by the Museum?

CP: Yes. So what I wanted to is -- I'm going to finish this next. I wanted to start on yours. It should be done in time for Christmas. I don't know how long before Christmas. I will get it done before Christmas, I can promise you, but I didn't know how much space you have. Or how much space you wanted to dedicate to it.

HM: What he wanted to do was document the stages; then, when you have the booklet, you can see [cross talk]. But before you get into that, I just wanted to ask you -- when we first saw it, and we knew you were from Monte San Giacomo -- I wondered, when I saw it, if you were reproducing anything from that town.

CP: I am.

RF: The mountains?

CP: In my town there is what we call "atafesa." It's like a hillside. It's a big hillside. It's like a mountain hillside. That's what you see. That was the inspiration.

RF: Like St. Ann's.

HM: We just assumed that, but I wanted to ask you.

CP: That's true. That's true. I imagine my town being the town inside and stuff like that.

HM: And that's nice, because you've done more than one. The other one -- a Hoboken thing -- it's different parts of your life.

CP: And an influence, too, which my cousin wanted -- so I gave him a Florida. That was a whole different one that we had out there. I think you might even see that one in a picture somewhere. I [go online] sometimes and put a photograph on, and they actually wrote something about it on Hoboken.com. I'm not sure if it's still there.

RF: Have you had vandalism?

CP: Never. You know, that was always one of the things that worried me.

RF: That's what would worry a homeowner.

CP: That was always one of the things I worried about, actually. But I think because of the religious meaning of it --

RF: It could be. People have been known not to respect that.

CP: That's true.

Want to hear something funny? I just "redid" my house -- the front steps and everything -- because I figured, hey, the last time, I think, if I would have had that step all along, I probably wouldn't have gotten any water -- because that's pretty much where it stopped. So I thought, "I'm going to make it like this now." Somebody -- well, when the cement was still kind of wet. Somebody scratched a swastika in it. I thought, "What the hell? Why would you do that?" Now my neighbor was really insulted, actually. I cleaned it up and scratched it out, and I had the guy come back again. But why would you do that?

RF: And the irony is, you'd been doing this
and putting up a Christmas creche --

CP: Yeah! Like, "You got the wrong house,
Stupid!" [Cross talk]

HM: You're not the one they wanted to
insult, right?

CP: Yeah. You wanted to insult my neighbor.

But getting back to the vandalism thing --
it was never, ever, ever touched. People make stupid
comments, but it's just kind of like people don't get it,
they don't know it, or they don't even understand what it
is. For the most part, everybody knows. Everybody
understands what the meaning of it is and everything else,
but --

RF: But people don't think.

CP: My mother says, "Oh, tonight I was
worried, there is so much noise outside, I thought somebody
was doing something." But [the drunk people] they'll just
sit there and stare at it.

You respect -- it's so obvious that so much work has gone into it. And the kids are fine. It happens quite a few times -- there was this kid one time, "Oh, mommy, I wish I was small." So she says, "But you are small." She goes, "No, I want to be little, so I can go inside that."

RF: That's so cool. I'm glad you heard that.
[Cross talk] There's a goal.

CP: Exactly. It was fun. There are a couple of families on the block -- this one kid, Mickey -- he's grown up now. He's thirty-something years old or something, maybe close to thirty. When he was a little kid -- I don't know if you know Steve -- he's work for National Geographic.

RF: Steve Winter. Yes. He lives right next door with Sharon.

CP: Exactly. His wife. So the kid, Mick, when he was growing up --

RF: That's right. He's a big kid now.

CP: They came out one day, and he goes, "Can I put these little animals in there?" So he put this pig and this -- so I put them in. They're still there, today. Kids would always come around, and watch. I let them help if they wanted to.

HM: Should we go through photographs?

RF: We should. We may have to break this into two sessions --

CP: That's okay.

RF: -- because we've had a lot to talk about, and we know you have -- so you're okay for a while?

CP: Yes.

RF: Do you want to look at some photographs?

HM: I would take them and scan them. Because I know we're going to come back.

CP: Unfortunately, Sandy destroyed everything, everything I had as far as photographs go. I tried to salvage some of them.

RF: Are there still people coming here from your town?

CP: Not many. Not many. Because the necessity for it, unfortunately, has changed. So there's really not a lot of people who even want to come back.

RF: Is the town doing better financially, in Italy?

CP: Not really. It's just, like I said, the stay closer to home, if they need work. [That might go to] Switzerland, again, or somewhere in Europe. It's just easier to visit with their mothers and fathers and stuff.
[More photos]

RF: So I thinking about the crèche up by the Museum. See, the Museum is small. Have you been inside?

CP: I have.

RF: I'm actually thinking in the walkway; putting it on a table with wheels, so we'd have to move it around.

CP: At Christmastime you can display it more inside.

RF: But it will be more outside.

HM: And bring it in [when the museum closes.]

RF: I don't think we'll mess with it. Just sort of test it out. So we could handle something as big as this.

CP: If you tell me the size of the table.

RF: It's a six-foot table, 6' X 30' tables, and [cross talk], and we'll just put a little note, a little bio of who made it, and things like that. Are you still doing that soliciting for the shelter and things?

CP: I wanted to do it last year again, and I lost the "podium" thing that I have [to display a request for donations.] Again, I just ran out of time on it.

[Looking at photos]

CP: You know where the Spanish places are, on Jackson, Fourth and Jackson, on the right side?

RF: Big Banner, or -- ?

CP: That, a long time ago, was Romano's.

RF: I didn't know that. Near the projects?

CP: But that was Romano's restaurant.

RF: It looks like a big place.

CP: We had so many family functions there, in the beginning.

RF: Same building? It's probably the same building? The Big Banner building --

CP: I don't think the building changed, they just changed the use.

RF: But it looks like it was retrofitted to a restaurant. [More photos]

Does anyone at the club these days come in with a guitar and sing or anything?

CP: [Yes.] Like this here, we just had -- during the month of October we had our annual dinner, and it was eighty years for the club, that was recognized by the state. In 1935 we were recognized by the State of New Jersey. We had this big shindig, and there was a whole bunch of people who came from Switzerland, Germany, Italy.

RF: Who had connections with Monte San Giacomo?

CP: Right. Anybody who was from the town, who are now in different parts of the world.

RF: A lot of Brazilians.

CP: Yes, Brazilians a lot. Nobody from Brazil was there, but we had the head of the union in Brazil one year.

RF: And who's head of the club now? You are. Oh, great. Excellent.

[looking at photos of St. Ann's feast]

CP: In Italy, we celebrate St. Ann's and St. Giacomo's at the same time, so they're one day apart. St. Giacomo is the 25th, St. Ann's is the 26th, and then in Italy what they do is, St. Ann's goes out in front on the 25th and St. Giacomo on the back, and vice versa for St. Ann's. Then they follow ... [more pictures]

RF: [Looking at pictures] Did you do the wine?

CP: Yeah. Me, my brother and my brother-in-law, we used to make wine all the time, actually. We used to do it in Jersey City, because he had a big garage. We used to make a lot of wine. My brother and I would make about 600 liters, alone. My cousins, my uncle -- my

brother-in-law's father was who taught me how to do this, he also taught me to make wine.

He just passed, not too long ago, in May. He is sorely missed.

RF: He passed a lot of important things to you.

CP: He was such a great guy, like the life of the water. Whenever you got someone who was so much fun to be around. And he was still strong for his age. He'd grab your hand and squeeze it, and he'd break it.

RF: What type of work did he do?

CP: He always used to tell me stories about him and my dad used to hang out when they were young. They'd chop wood together. They used to call them "the two beasts," because no one could chop wood faster than the two of them. He always told me stories. Back then what they did for fun -- they'd come home and somebody would start playing music, and they go on and sing. That's what they did. People would give them food. There were so many parties in my house. Oh my god, the stories that they told.

Beautiful, beautiful stories. I would one day like to go back there, and see what their life was really like, and experience it. [More photos]

RF: They never really learned English either, I don't think.

CP: My mother -- I'm sure, had she been forced to learn, she would have. But because she always had her sisters around, when she had to go to unemployment -- There was always me. I remember going to unemployment with my mother when I was nine years old to translate for her. "You have to come."

Back then, too, they used to have so many languages. Now it's only English and Spanish. When I used to go to the unemployment office, there was Croatian, English, Italian, Spanish, Yugoslavian, German. There were people who only spoke German. It was crazy.

HM: They said the Lower East Side was like that, too. Otherwise, nobody would get anywhere.

RF: The government was accommodating.

CP: They had to be --

RF: -- because there were so many people.

CP: And there were multiple people who spoke where they came from, because they never learned. [More photos]

I become very sad when I see nobody playing ball outside -- like stickball, just throwing stuff, playing football in the street, two-touch or whatever. Where did all that go? I understand the fascination -- first we had [video games ?] bing, bing, bing, back and forth, but we never really wanted to be inside. She couldn't keep me in the house.

RF: You wanted to get away from Mom, really.

CP: I was outside. We were always with our friends. Then, as you got a little bit older, and girls would come around. You were never home.

HM: Well, the streets belonged to you.
That's what I feel sad about -- kids -- it's all in the
house. Or the parents drive [them to games.]

CP: They want to play ball -- it's nice to
have organized teams and organized city leagues, but if you
couldn't be part of that, hey -- you went out and played,
and you made your own. We had street teams all the time.
There was baseball, football, two-touch, kickball. Whatever
it was.

RF: The fire hydrant was home base, or
whatever.

CP: We made our own fun. Everything we did
was like that.

HM: You learned so much that way. You
learned how to get along. You negotiate stuff.

CP: You learn how to interact.
Luckily, if you had good friends -- we had football
leagues, and some friends like, "Carmin doesn't have --

why don't we chip in and help him buy a helmet." That's the kind of friends. Who does that?

RF: When you talked about still having some of the friends you grew up with -- can you name a couple of lifelong friends?

CP: -- the paisans. There's Mike Rizzo. I slept in the same crib with him. Mike Rizzo, his cousin Jerry Rizzo, Michael "Cappalano," my cousin Nicky Brando, Peter "Cappalano," Mike's brother, and then if you go [?] my cousin Frank Castella. Then there were other guys I grew up with in the neighborhood, like "Lester Salagon, Vito Geneese," man, I could go on and on. So, so many. So many of them.

RF: And you see a lot of them to this day.

CP: Oh, yes. We always try to get together at least once or twice a year. I was with my friend, Mike Rizzo, who was one of my first friends, from when I moved when I was five years old. We were best friends ever since. He just moved to South Carolina.

HM: That's hard.

RF: And when you get together, where will you meet, usually?

CP: We usually get -- my friend Alex "Detta," was great, right after Christmas, we'd have an after-New Year's party -- January 6th or 7th, or whatever the weekend was, we'd try to all get together. Most of the time we'd all participate. But even in between, like if it was just four or five of us we'd get together and meet at Houlihan's, or watch the game here. But once you get married and have kids (obviously I never did, but they all did, so) obviously, I've got to watch this, I've got to watch that. So for me it was always easier, but for them it was hard.

HM: But they did it.

CP: Yeah. We would still get together. It was always fun. It was always just like being together when you were kids.

It's crazy. You grow up together, and when we first started going out with girls, we'd always hang out

together, go out together with a bunch of friends, get together and do that kind of stuff.

HM: Well, you know those people so deeply.

CP: It's true. I know that, to this day, if I ever called anyone for anything, or if they ever called me for anything, we'd be there for one another.

RF: I don't know how many people can say that anymore -- because you get involved in the families, and you move away, and you don't have that core anymore.

CP: But you have such fond memories, and such togetherness -- from all the years, and all the crazy things we did. Like growing up on the streets, I'll never forget -- every summer you'd go through different phases, something else. Like one year we had go-carts, we all had go-carts. I'll never forget. We took the garbage cans, and we'd literally cut the garbage can in half. It looked like the hood of a car, right? And we'd screw it into the boards. We were like bolting carriages.

Some of the stuff we used to do.

RF: It's gone, for sure.

CP: Some of the silliest games we would play. I tell people today, I tell the kids today we used to play this thing called "Johnny on the Pony," and they're like, "What the hell is that?" And I say, "Well, you line up against the wall, and you have one guy on your team who's your cushion, and everybody else has to kind of lean forward, over the other guy, and then the other team has to jump on you. And if they get on, and you say Go, one, two, three times, they get to go again." So we'd put the tallest guy in the back, give them the biggest hurdle for them to jump over. And one big, fat guy [laughter] just crashes into them and knocks him down. It got so crazy, we would actually compete with other kids' teams. Stupid, but it was fun. Just the silliest things you did. A game with just a plain [Spalding ball ?] we always called "Assies."

RF: "Assies." I never heard that.

CP: Well, everybody is against the wall, they'd call out your name and you'd have to catch the ball. Then you'd do the same thing right after, and you'd call somebody else's name. So there would be six or seven of you

or whatever. The first person who missed the ball three times, well, your ass is up against the wall, and they were throwing shots at you. Everybody would have three shots at your butt, so you didn't want to lose.

HM: Got it.

CP: Those were the things we used to do, to tease each other, kinda.

RF: And what would you use? Those "pinky balls?"

CP: Yeah.

My cousin, Nicky, he was a natural at anything. He could do anything without even practicing. He was just like that. You remember the wooden tops, with the little "nail" in it. So we'd play "topsie," and, obviously, you'd put your top on the floor, and whosever top stopped first, that top would go in the middle. So everybody got a chance at "cracking your top." Oh, man -- those kinds of things you did to tease each other, and at the same time it was, I don't know -- [laughs]

HM: Well, there's that element of danger.

CP: It was like learning how to -- just
losing and winning.

TAPE ENDS.