

Interview with David Spelgatti  
Big Bay, Michigan  
5 August 1993  
Boarding Houses

## START OF INTERVIEW

### SIDE A

Interviewer (I): Today is August 5, 1993. I am in Big Bay, Michigan speaking with Monsignor David A. Spelgatti. We're going to be talking about boarding houses. You were saying about the?

David Spelgatti (DS): A point that you just brought up about the, were any of the boarding houses company owned. It seems to me that it was true in the matter of two boarding houses that were in North Lake that were in Ishpeming Township on Highway 41. You turn off at \_\_\_\_\_ street, now they call it Westwood I think where the high school is. Those two are homes I visited a few times but the memories are very little about them. All I know is that my cousin and his wife, Mossimo and Margret Spelgatti, ran one of them maybe 4 or 5 years I think. Other than that I don't remember. Something about that one, comes to mind that also in Palmer where the Empire Mine is now, there was a boarding house right in Palmer, and somewhere it was on the right side of the road going into Palmer across from where there is a nursing home, Palmer Nursing Home I think is what it is called. There I went as the pastor of St. Paul's in Negaunee, I used to go down there once a week to say mass. I don't remember, most that I remember about it was the smell of moonshine!

I: [Laughter]. The still was in the basement?

DS: Yeah, the woman who ran it made moonshine and sold it to the residents you know. I think a good part of them probably were Italians or Finns. That Palmer mining operation was, did from probably 1910 or 12 I guess somewhere around in there. There was an Italian woman who ran it and my only contact with it was go down there in this big upstairs room there where they kind of used it as a recreation room and whatnot, card table and whatnot. And that's where she sold it by the shot!

I: [Laughs]. Enterprising lady!

DS: Yeah, right! I remember the pastor telling me you know, he knew I was interested in going into the seminary. One day he drove up the road a little bit in an old Studebaker, I don't know what you'd call it...coup! And he stopped, he smoked a Wellington big pipe always, to fill his pipe and then to drive back to Negaunee. And he first took me by the head like this and turned it to look out through the back window and says "Here David, heaven help whose ever been sent to take care of this hell hole!" [Laughs]. Finally the lady gave up the boarding house, there were no boarders left any more then. They were all already moved into the Negaunee area, the Gwinn area, and married and things of that sort so she gave it up.

I: When the boarders married, they generally moved out?

DS: Yeah. There was always, a good number of those women as I recall were widows or something like that and wound up marrying one of the boarders. Most of the time it was the boarder that got the best break! He got free board and a woman to do all the work. At the North Lake ones, when my cousin owned it I was up there a couple times as a little boy but I can't remember the site of them even, where they were. I got a hunch that they were probably, figured the whole town was a company town, they had to be somewhere near what we ultimately got, it was the community hall that the company built. There were two bowling alleys in the basement and then you had a little bit of a gym. I don't know how they played basketball, couldn't dunk because if you dunked your head would go through the ceiling. My guess was that the boarding houses, at least that I can remember, were across the street the two together. Two big long colored like the white wall here, buildings.

I: Sandstone?

DS: No, they were wood.

I: Oh, sort of the sandstone color?

DS: Yeah, something like that. I think one of them, if I'm not mistaken was not operating anymore. My cousin ran the one that was the last one and only stayed there 3 or 4 years.

I: About when was that?

DS: That must be 19... I was born in '15 so I'd probably say 1920.

I: Okay.

DS: When Ford was offering \$5 a day and he was opening up in Iron Mountain and Kingsford you know, my cousin was victimized by that \$5 a day. Ran off up there and of course that lasted his family of 9. So I must have been probably through high school maybe when Ford closed up that plant up there. Ford was cutting the wood right here in Big Bay, hauling it up there for his wooden station wagons.

I: Oh yes!

DS: So then they moved back to Negaunee and my father who was the boss at the Athens Mine in Negaunee, got his stepbrother back into the mines and they ultimately died here. The only home that I really know anything about personally and kind of lifestyle was what kind of was really involved was that of a lady that I called grandma but was a distant cousin on my mother's side. She was, she came over here, was married then came over here and her husband died here. I don't remember when but just before I'm around, so he must have died sometime before 1915. So she went to Italy then she came back here, again I would say maybe around 1915 and ran that house there and, well there was 1 boarder, the last one. He went to live somewhere else, I don't

remember where. His name was John Paris. One time, this Nona that I mention, came in and she's in that book, her name was mentioned Angelina Zerzagi [spelled phonetically].

I: I've seen pictures.

DS: She had as many as, trusting the memory I've always said 27, but I was thinking last night and trying to visualize the big attic that was converted into a barracks like. So there were 3 double beds on that side of the wall and you could walk between the three on this side. And that was half the attic so you had room for 12. Then the back half as we called it, as good as I remember, had I think also, I thought it was 5. Somewhere around there there was a back stairwell that also would take you to a room for another double bed. Seems to me there were 5 in there so there would be 10. So that would give us what 22?

I: Then you said they slept on a double shift?

DS: Yep, double shift.

I: So she could actually accommodate 44?

DS: In a sense yeah. As I'm just starting to remember, I wasn't around at night to see that operation. All I was told was that when the mines were working steady, the two shifts, that one got out of bed and went down for their breakfast and picked up their dinner buckets that she had prepared and went off to the mines and the other one, probably they met on the way and went back.

I: You were a little boy then?

DS: Yeah, maybe 5 or 6 years old. We'd go down to get the milk. Grandma always had a couple of pigs, a lot of chickens. Couple of cows, big garden, two big hay fields to take care of you know. So as a widow she had a daughter, who became my aunt, married my mother's brother Uncle Ambrose, of course he helped out with the chores and things, taking care of the cows. She always had, to my mind, at least 4 or 5 good helpers amongst the boarders who pitched in helping, then of course collecting wood for the winter. You know, you heated with wood blind really. Hay time I know my dad, and ultimately his two brothers who boarded and married my mother's two nieces. So this Nona kind of took care of 3 of the Spelgatti's with good wives. I can picture the lady now as I'm just talking about her, as sitting in this kitchen with the old wood stove, that's all there was, it look like \_\_\_\_\_ and if I remember correctly a 6 burner wood stove. Either she was cooking a stew of some kind or a polenta if you know about the cornmeal mush.

I: Yes, yes.

DS: Polenta, either sausage cudighi as they called it nowadays. At the same time sitting in the middle of the floor in the evening when I went down to get our milk, we lived oh maybe a quarter of the mile up street from Negaunee Ann Street there, beginning of the highway 480, up the hill and down the hill. Through the woods that you know, could scare a kid if he heard a

movement, I'd run through that to get across the road to the boarding house. She'd be sitting there either patching some of these woolen underwear that the miners wore and one foot churning milk while she's sewing this thing, and with a chair beside here and her three children, Paul was the oldest boy and Ida was the oldest girl, and Karina. Who just visited me, she's with her daughter out in California, who is in her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. She's the only one who didn't help around the house very much, she worked downtown in the Lavin's and Lowestine's [spelled phonetically], dry goods store you know. She lived to be 90, Grandma with all the work that she had to do there lived, I'd have to check it for sure, but somewhere around 1968 or so she died. She was in her 70s, so hard work never killed anybody that's what they say. She'd be sitting there doing these two chores at the same time and I know Nona couldn't read or write, I never saw her do anything but sign her name. But she was listening to the lessons of the 3 kids who were high school age at that time and had the book turned upside down. She'd look at the pages there and she'd ask them "what does it say here? What are you supposed to study tonight?" [Laughs]. Someone told me that Napoleon who was the only fellow who could go 3 things at one time, and I says I got a match for her!

I: [Laughs].

DS: She'd probably did maybe even 4, or had her eyes 4 because probably, as I picture that kitchen wasn't very much wider than this. About once and half of that long, and sitting in the middle of that floor doing those chores. Stove cooking, patching, and churning, teaching, listening school lessons. I don't know what they were, they weren't all alone I don't think at that time. Pots, getting pots ready for bread. Mix up the dough and waiting for it to rise.

I: Oh, sure. Yeah.

DS: To make the bread, she'd make two or three of those sitting there waiting before she went to bed at night she'd have to bake it too.

I: Right.

DS: I never saw her bake it but I ate a lot of that nice bread.

I: What a treat!

DS: And butter that she made. Things of that sort, she had a lot of help even amongst the men boarders too with some of the house type keeping. Help clean upstairs. I remember her doing all the washing you know, the sheets and things of that sort.

I: She did the laundry for the men too?

DS: Sure! Where else to go? Nobody. As far as I remember there was Chinese laundry in town. That was only after I was even ordained that I remember anything about that laundry because we got had our collars starched there for a while. Although Uncle Scotty I guess I might say took care of the chickens and the cows. A couple of the others including my housekeeper's father, Gaetano Beltrami [spelled phonetically] he did a little bit of work for them for the maintenance

and things. But these were in its last year. She was down to maybe 5 or 6 boarders that I remember, that didn't marry and stayed there. One by one, Stephanie's father went back to the old country and remarried, he was a widower. Remarried then stayed, I think in those days passports were valid for 2 years or something like that. So he stayed home almost two years then came back again to Nona's, worked in the mines for, this I would know my accurately, until 1936 I think he went back to Italy and stayed there and died there some 15 or 20 years later. He went to Italy the year before, he went back and stayed the year before I went to Rome to study which was in '37. I do remember, was responsible for a lot of correspondence. My mother did most of the corresponding and writing to girlfriends. My mother was, see right there that was 54 years ago my ordination day picture, mom and dad.

I: They look very proud.

DS: My mother was a librarian in the village back there in Italy where she was born. She was into dramas and things of that sort, they presented it back home for entertainment. They say she wrote the letters back to the parents for some of these bachelors. They'd tell her what to write, what to say, and she was I guess through correspondence, I don't know about a matchmaker but brought ultimately together those who had girlfriends back in Italy. Her own story, my dad came in 1902 but he never married until 1914. So somewhere around 1908 or '09, grandma at that time had at least 20 some boarders. Watched them, my dad went to work and he often told the story of 12 hours for \$1.27 a day and the highest he ever got was \$1.68 a day in the mines for 12 hours. And coming home as a little boy, he was the oldest of 5 orphans plus two, the one I was telling you had the boarding house in North Lake. Their father died and the mother remarried and the guy didn't want the two boys that she had. So grandpa had 5 in the hay barn and there was room for 2 more, so he raised them like brothers. There was 7 of them then. She was the matchmaker suggesting around 1908 or '09 that my dad through a, you know, "you got a girlfriend back in Italy?" he said "no." "Don't you think it's time for you to get married?" and he said "no I'm not interested in any of that." So about 4 years later I guess, in 1913 anyhow, she again suggested it to him saying, a wise old lady, she had written to my grandpa and told him that she had a good man here for her oldest daughter which was Sarina, and send a picture! So the picture came, I don't know if it came in the winter months of 1913 or the very first days, it would still be winter, of 1914. Anyhow she showed my dad the picture and he says "how much is it gonna cost me to send for her like that?" It's like ordering from Sears row books!

I: Right! [Laughs]. Mail order bride.

DS: Yeah right. She said "I don't know, but if you interested I guarantee you're gonna get a good wife!" She knew mom too, it wasn't just that they were related. When she was back home between her widowhood, two times she was over there, so she knew the family well. So she inquired and found a guy by the name of Tezagi [spelled phonetically] in Negaunee was kind of a consulate representative for Italy and also a salesman I guess for ocean fares, and he had a grocery store.

I: Travel agent!

DS: Travel agent now. Also had a big grocery store that supplied the boarding houses that were around. Anyhow, for \$100 he was able to send for her. So he gave her the 100 bucks to send for ma, and she came and arrived on her birthday which was April 10<sup>th</sup> and it happened to be Good Friday. At that time they came across Canada into Sault St. Marie and then crossed over in Sault St. Marie and took the, what was called the South Shore, through Negaunee and Ishpeming. The South Shore went on to Copper Country too, but that's now out of business. She told my dad that "she's gonna be on tonight's train on Good Friday at night on the train, go to the depot to meet her. She'll probably be the only lady getting off." The trains came in around midnight, so my dad went up there. But as I know him, and he never denied it he'd just look at me and grin. He hid behind one of the pillars and he came home and said nobody got off, no woman. Well it's a good thing that Mrs. Tezagi's cousin, James Batoni [spelled phonetically] had a tavern down the street from the depot and whatnot and he knew she was coming too. So he took a walk up there too. So he saw this poor little girl walking up and down a little bit looking lost. The train went on to Ishpeming, see. So he took her home and he went over and talked to her in Italian so she knew she was in good hands. So he took her down to his, he lived upstairs of the tavern there in Negaunee. The next morning brought her down to the boarding house. The shift that was having breakfast come home from work was having their breakfast when he came in with my ma, and had 10 or 12 bachelors... "if he won't take her I will!" Imagine if that was today you know? That was April 11, on May the 7<sup>th</sup> they were married. The longest time they spent together was the half hour or so at the rectory preparing for the wedding on May the 7<sup>th</sup>.

I: Oh for heaven's sake! Your dad really wasn't having brides [laughs].

DS: They had 52 years together. Never heard them quarrel, once in a while they'd tease a little bit. My dad used to say to her, even after he retired and then they moved in with me down in Marquette when I was in the newspaper business across the street from the courthouse. He'd say to her "someplace, someplace here you've got a sock full of money someplace." Like that and she would say "yep there it is! Right there!" and point to me! I paid my way all through the seminary, at that time my first year was \$250 with board and room, for a year of schooling.

I: Uhh, considering what we pay today!

DS: That same school today is operating down in Wisconsin, and the tuition is around I think 21 hundred right now with board and room, plus the education. But about 4 years later, Grandma says we got a good girl back in Italy for Uncle Amadao [spelled phonetically] was the first one. So he said okay send for her, they came the same way, took a month and married. Then the third brother did the same thing, sent for the sister. Regina married Amadao and Angela was her name, Angelina married Enrico, Henry Spelgatti. They married off all good and all, and only in recent years that same thing, the two stepbrothers that, when Mossimo and Margarita ran the North Lake boarding house. Howard died within the last say 15 years. All of the memories that might have been available through them and all the other older people that would have any knowledge, all gone. The only thing I know is the Grandma always had a big garden too. Most of it was women that did the gardening. She had a big garden and I know my dad used to go down, he always kept a big one himself, but sometimes he would go down and help weed the garden or things of that sort as the number of boarders diminished. It depended more on my father and his

two brothers to go down there. In the meantime she wound up, as I can recall, at the, what we called Polestra chicken, a rooster really.

I: Ahh, a ladies man then?

DS: Yeah, \_\_\_\_\_ bartender for the cousin and then never married. When he died, I think he was the second last of the boarders. I remember two went back to Italy and I saw them, Pezzoli and Minelli, the Minelli family is out of Gwinn and that area. There's a Minelli jewelry store in the Westwood Mall as they call it. They both went back over there and were victimized. They both went back with the idea of marrying my mother's two sisters. But neither one of them were interested! They died, one died now and the other one I'm going to go and visit this September. She's in her 84<sup>th</sup> year, she'll be in her 85<sup>th</sup> in September. They got trapped by expired passports and Mussolini wouldn't let them out.

I: Oh, I see.

DS: They went to Milan from out in the country villages where they were to get their passports renewed. It happened to be Labor Day and the embassy was closed there and the consulates office. They went home, the day after they came back and they were not, the government, was not allowed. They were expired too bad, so Mussolini caught two of them. Now the last one, John Paris was the last one I remember. He spent I would say at least 30 or 35 years at the, with Nona as well called here. He was the last one that she really had in the boarding house besides her family. I'd say married off, returned to Italy, some came back then with wives or later sent for them.

I: Did she set up any matches for any of the other fellows?

DS: I wouldn't be aware of that, I'm not quite sure of that. I know that indirectly she positively directed my mothers and through mama and my father's two brothers. Other than that I don't remember anybody that she may have worked on to fix up. I have a hunch she might have done so for a few, she never succeeded with this John Paris and this...

I: The rooster, [laughs].

DS: Casper, what was his Casper... Dezetti [spelled phonetically], Dezetti.

I: Okay

DS: They were the last ones, the last that died there. I wound up, I was ordained and already a priest, I wound taking care of their burial and estates or whatever you want to call it which wasn't very much on either side. But I was involved with a lot of them in some way or the other. In those last years, either sending a notification that so and so died, they left wives over there. That was a thing that I never could understand, how they could leave women over there and have a family of 3 and 4 kids and not send for them. Basically I think the thinking on their part was that they were all going to go back home. We make our fortune in the mine, and some of them did. I cannot in anyway point out that there might have been any monkey shines as I would say,

on the part of some them had wife over there and then a girlfriend here ultimately that they maybe lived with. I don't know that to be the case in her boarding house. My first assignment was up in Iron River, not in Iron River but in Caspian and Gaastra. There I know there was a lady that ran a boarding house when I was there, she still ran one that had two boarders there. You know married for what they had, and I found out later that they had family back in Italy too.

I: A family on each side of the ocean.

DS: In fact the only place that I saw that happen or became aware of that was that one time up there in Iron County. It was always a scene like the last supper, you see in the dining room you know there's this kitchen like this and a dining room that was this way.

I: Sort of a T shape?

DS: The dining room here, 10 or 12 husky men sitting there gobbling up polenta. When they made polenta it was a boiler full. A lot of those boys and men were involved in hunting and fishing too.

I: I see.

DS: So whatever they caught they brought back, so that helped with the budget. I think she, if I remember, she was charging only a \$1 a day for the board and the room.

I: Oh my.

DS: And laundry and anything else that was necessary. Many of them pitched in, helped with the chores especially during the haying time or lumbering, wood for firewood. And some of the heavy work around the house too. They helped to maintain the property, worked the garden also a little bit. She has two gardens, one right close to the house for lettuce and tomatoes, things like that that she needed for cooking. Then the stuff that took a long time to grow like cabbages and that sort of stuff there was another plot there.

I: The house itself, was it a big sort of Victorian kind of structure?

DS: No, as it seems to me it was a two story L shaped type building, like the kitchen was added on. Downstairs she had the kitchen, you came in through the kitchen and walked straight through up a couple steps to the dining room, and that was the length of the house across the front. But behind on the either side of the dining room one side was the stairwell and one bedroom. That's where Uncle Scotty and Aunty Ida had their bedroom after they married. On this side there was kind of a, today we would call them archways, went in and there was Nona's bedroom and the bedroom for Katrina the other daughter and Paul, he slept with the boarders.

I: Oh I see.

DS: There was no upstairs to the kitchen, that was kind of added on I guess to the boarding house area so she could grow into that business. Upstairs there was kind of a partition about half and

half with the 6 beds on one side and the other side I think there were only 4. 2 of them I remember distinctly then I think 2 with the stairwell that went down.

I: What about bathrooms?

DS: I was just gonna say there was two holer outside, nothing special you know. I remember the other day, just in some magazine I think that came here, the *Reminisce*, are you familiar with that?

I: Yes, I've seen that.

DS: Okay, I just put it over there. There's a little line about a little boy being brought to the boarding house, big boarding house you know, and as they were showing the boarding house off the little boy said to the mother "look there's a sugar bowl under each bed!"

I: [Laughter]. This is the new edition I haven't seen that!

DS: It's a little memoir.

I: Well I haven't seen that edition. What about taking baths?

DS: All of them had their baths at the mine, you know there was showers at the mine see so that's where they got their baths. The rest of it, when they came home if they were crowding up on each other they'd wash outside, there were a couple of spigots that came out and I know my dad used to say that Nona, when they were coming home from the mine in those beginning years he sat down two or three times every time and cried. When he got home he'd sit on that long bench along the kitchen there where the miners sat, took off their clod hoppers, what most of them wore in those days those sneakers, and washed up. She's come out with a towel and wipe his face you know, cool him off. So that's the way they had it. There was no, the boarder emptied his own mugs and sugar bowl! [Laughs]. When they came down you know, and they went out to these latrines. So they emptied their bowl and did their duty. Came back for breakfast, went to bed or went to work. The early crew went to work and the other ones had breakfast and then to bed. And so she was constantly cooking, constantly kneading flour and making bread, constantly repairing. The miners washed their own clothes, most of them. She had enough, they washed them at the mine really and brought them home wet. The room, what you'd call a washing machine would be before the electric.

I: The ringer?

DS: Yeah with the ringer. If they didn't do a good job cleaning and washing them she'd throw them in the dish machine and then have, run them through the washing of it and take it out and dry it. And then if they were torn or there were buttons off, things of that sort, she'd fix them up. Aunty Ida I think was assistant cook and general housekeeper. She was the oldest of the girls, the two girls. Katrina worked and brought home decent, or I shouldn't say decent but for those days, what she brought home went to the personal needs of her and her sister and her brother. I can't remember anything other than that out of the ordinary. Except that everybody that I knew in

town had great love for Nona as they called her and marveled at how she could do that kind of work you know for that size place. She was a loveable woman I guess and I never heard any of them say a bad word about her, like I heard about some other places. Like that place in Palmer I was thinking of. They used to call them a *labankana* (?), if you every heard that word.

I: I don't know that.

DS: I can't figure out, it's a bankana. To me there's no word to hang on to except she was the home operator, period.

I: I see, so she was a madam then basically? It was a brothel?

DS: I guess, yeah.

I: Oh okay.

DS: Oh no, no. No brothels ideas at all, just I didn't know if it was a dialect word maybe for head honcho, the main cook.

I: I see, okay.

DS: No, no, it's nothing, no brothels involved. I never heard of that in any one except that one in Palmer.

I: Yeah, that's what I was referring to.

DS: Yeah that one in Palmer, she probably, what's the word milked, most of the money that those guys brought.

I: I see.

DS: And halved a little bit. That's what they say, I can't prove it except that from what the pastors tell me, "that's one hell of a hellhole." Today's it's the, my dad after I was ordained even he said "if they ever assign you to Palmer I'll shoot ya first!" [Laughs].

I: [Laughs].

DS: Today, the Empire Mine is down there. My dad said he remembered when Palmer was booming with the iron ore business with the pot. In Pa's 57 years of mining, never dreamt that people would come back, and he didn't see it come back either. He did see the development of Ishpeming and Tilden though a little bit.

I: What did the miners do for, the boarders, what did they do for fun?

DS: Recreation? A lot of card games, Italian card games and whatnot. Some took a walk every night, it was a little over a quarter mile from the boarding house up town in Negaunee is there

where the fire hall is and then Iron Street, and they'd go to taverns. Most of them went to Jim Batoni, or stayed at grandmas there. I suppose they shot pool. I remember going there with my dad Thursdays nights we'd go into town to cash the check and stop and have one schooner of beers and a chocolate bar for me. If we ran into somebody my dad would have a second beer and I'd sit there by the pool tables in Jim's tavern and there was a slot machine there that for every nickel, if you didn't get anything you could turn the little lever and get a row of mints. Like Lifesavers. Not many of them took them so I'd just sit there and somebody would put in a nickel, got nothing and walked away, I'd turn the button and come home with a pocket full of mints! Rows of mints!

I: [Laughs].

DS: And then they played bocce ball you know that was a standard. Then on Sundays they went to some of these guys who were married and played \_\_\_\_\_ homes of built wooden frame houses and had the bocce courts and they'd have tournaments between say the Bangamore [spelled phonetically] people against the Piedmont, \_\_\_\_\_ things of that sort. They'd rotate those tournaments on weekends. Picnics a lot, with whole barrels of beer on the weekend. They'd hang around there all day and into the night. And then it was Fourth of July every Saturday and every Sunday because they used to bring dynamite home and carbonite and they'd have cans and blow the covers off the cans up there where Teal Lake is once you go up the hill, the curve that you would come down and come into Negaunee on your way to Marquette at Teal Lake. They'd call it the pageant ground, that was pretty much picnic area for them. I don't remember any except one from Gwinn that was in the moonshine business who was caught three times and Michigan was the only state that had the four time law with life imprisonment if you're caught 4 times. And this fellow was caught, and of course I knew because he was from my father's area. He had raised a family of I think three boys and a girl, he jumped bail \$5000 bail which was paid to the guy that gave it to him who had the grocery store in Negaunee. He jumped on the caboos of the train in Negaunee and there was this steam engine that was there to go to Chicago. Then to go to Chicago, took the train to New York and he missed the boat by about twenty minutes. He hired a boat to take him out to meet the boat and he beat the raft anyhow. And they never came back, he stayed over there. He's the only one I know that was involved in bootlegging on a large scale you know, so buying it for the bars in town and things of that sort. People came there, I know a few other like this. The last of it was Casper Dezetti, he was a brew master here, and it's the only other word. He was the guy that stood by and boiled the mash. He was supplying the six months old whiskey that was not even six hours when it was being peddled! Put it on ice quick for it to cool off and then hauled it away. In hot water bottles, that's the way they used to travel.

I: Oh my.

DS: Four hot water bottles, two hanging down on each side under their coat. And they'd walk to town and stop off and make their deliveries.

I: How about wine? Wine making?

DS: Oh yeah, okay. The wine making, grandma didn't have the basement facility. But my father's house that he bought, they had a big basement, we had a big basement at the house and-

SIDE B

TAPE CUTS IN ABRUPTLY

DS: From California, from Fresno and they lost the other family there. The man that was sending it up was one of the immigrants to Negaunee that had spent a year or so at the boarding house too before he married. Gabriel Perenkial [spelled phonetically]. His son later sold the vineyards out and invested in MGM and made a fortune. They'd get the grapes, bring it to our house and of course my memory is of that is in prohibition time already.

I: Yeah.

DS: I know that the \_\_\_\_\_, now they call it state police they used to call it \_\_\_\_\_. It was horses, and up on the end of Irons Street there used to be the barn and the barracks of the state police. They'd follow these trucks who's getting the grapes and how much, things of that sort. Standing there when they were emptying the trucks and bring the baskets of grapes down into our basement, and the state policeman picking grapes off of a bunch you know and watching how much is going in and the horses stomping his hooves there. But they never bothered anybody except those who were making moonshine to sell. The Italians were mighty smart, the bootleggers never sold a drop if it came from a grapevine.

I: Right.

DS: That was theirs. They made the corn junk, sugar and corn you know. And the state police often wondered. Did the pasta... I never asked the question, I remember my dad and his brothers explained to them how to make the wine for their own use.

I: Right, well it was considered food!

DS: Surely, for the Italians you know. Coffee and tea and that stuff, they didn't know what it was. It was no good, see they'd have their pitcher of wine. I remember, with a half a ton of grapes you could fill two 50 gallon barrels with the grapes. Then I remember the...mashing it you know. They'd have a few pairs of white boots.

I: You really did the stomping?

DS: Yeah, thick boots. I even did it in bare feet. I remember them, in those days women work what they called gloofers, that's what they'd put on to get into the barrels and then they'd stomp it away and then get out to wash their feet and let it ferment. I am picturing that in our basement at least, there were 6 50 gallon barrels on our bench on one side and 6 on the other. Most of them each bought a half a ton and each one just stomped it and then drew it off and then had the barrels put out in the barn and had the barrels for which they poured the wine done by Christmas time. Usually at Christmas time they'd finish up the old stuff and ready to tap the new barrels.

Yeah. No drunkenness all. It simply took the place of coffee, tea or the Finlander's milk. I never saw anybody of our folks that got drunk. I know a few who developed a drinking habit, but it wasn't from our stuff. It's from going uptown to the saloons and the moonshine and mixing it with beer you know.

I: I see.

DS: It's what they call today a boiler maker, a shot and a bottle of beer.

I: Oh okay.

DS: Whiskey and a bottle of beer. Like I was saying, my dad I never saw him drunk once in his life. And man, he was pretty much the patriarch for all those people and being a boss ultimately. He got to be boss because he was a good miner. He worked safely and insisted on working safely. Then the captains of the mines in this area all came from England, Cornwall. The miners over there, as soon as they came over they were captains. This captain took to my dad, Captain Trivani [spelled phonetically] and when they started the Athens Mine Captain Trivani, he said to my dad "come with me!" From the Negaunee mine he went with him and the officials of the company, same one that's on strike right now CCI, turned the first saw and handed the shovel to my dad and he was with it till it closed.

I: I'll be damned.

DS: 57 years of responsibility at the mine. Then of course the company used him then for the welfare and all that kind of stuff through the times. But he never ran for political office, he wouldn't do that. But I think sometimes he had more influence in the welfare department than I think the supervisor. My dad if he saw something that wasn't right it was going to be corrected and they were gonna do this. They were gonna give this women money for things like groceries and things of that sort, period. A lot of pleasant memories. But that wine business you know of course went it to the moonshine. We didn't throw the mash away know, it was good mash. We'd take a couple more boxes of grapes and either just hand crush it or stomp it again in what they called a soya half barrel. That half barrel was used to draw the good stuff off after it fermented. We'd have the still and I have my father still, it's going to go into the archives here for the Italians in Ishpeming. I'm one of Paisano officers in the Paisano club and they're storing it until we get a place set up for our own museum, Italian heritage its good stuff. And they'd boil it down and I think all of them, they took turns. That went on for, we get into the grapes in the last of August or early September, the moonshining went on then from maybe the middle of October until Thanksgiving.

I: I see.

DS: Before everybody, you know, with the one boiler the cooper boiler. Probably half of a ton of mash from a half a ton of grape usually made four to five boilers of, grappa as the Italians call it. Which was 100 proof, anything less than 100 proof was thrown back in the next boiler.

I: [Laughter].

DS: All of them had their little 10 gallon barrels with the grappa, and at the boarding house they didn't have it. So they'd come by our house and there was an entrance to the basement. Coming from the mine they'd go down and take their shot and go on down to the boarding house for their meals and take their jug of wine. They'd make it last them a week, maybe it'd last them 2 or 3 days depending on what they had to eat.

I: Yes.

DS: If it was dry stuff like polenta it wouldn't take long for a fella eating two days of polenta to clean out his jug of wine.

I: What about competition? You mentioned that in some cases there were Finns and Italians living together. Then you've got the English, Welsh, Cornish neighborhood, you know the bosses. So you've got 2 and sometimes 3 nationalities together. And you've also got the regional differences within Italy itself. How did all of that move over here? What happened as far as the dynamics?

DS: How they got here to start with?

I: No, as far as the guys? How did they get along? Did they get along? Was there a lot of competition?

DS: First place, the Finns didn't know any more than the Italians as far as the English went, it was just difficult to learn. The only words they learned, as we say, are the bad words! The cuss words that went with, they were working in the mine and one did something that put stress or strained on the other fellow you know, and they called each other some of these names. That was they began to learn to language, picking up the language. I never sensed any real rivalry. Cooperation, admiration I do remember this, sometimes things are worn out. See I went to school, to the seminary, beginning from 9<sup>th</sup> grade I didn't make it to 12<sup>th</sup> see. In Negaunee were we lived it was our house, and then my Uncle Amadeo's house and then a third one that was the Renaldi's [spelled phonetically]. Then there was a big afield that was used as kind of a dump. Then up Baldwin Avenue there was maybe 8 families there and there were 12 homes. Three this way and then up the avenue. The mine was right behind over there. The language, as far as the language went they all progressed about the same time. Those you came say in the early days from 1902, was the big days. My father came because he had had an uncle over here who went back and told him what it was like you know so he signed up to come. But the uncle never came back. The Finns had the same thing. Some one guy settled then starting bringing in the others. My dad worked so he had enough to send back to get Amadeo, when Amadeo came then there were two working. Then they sent for two more, and that would be Uncle Henry and Uncle Louis, Uncle Louis went back and married with the intention of coming back and got sick and within a couple years, never did come back. He died young. They started bringing in people from their own villages, that's why you'll find them. Brad Domasskivic [spelled phonetically] settled in the Negaunee are, and some of the Piedmont family, up in Ishpeming. That's where you some are, you had the Sicilians and the Colobrasee [spelled phonetically]. All that same process, with one guy getting involved and started bring over and helping each other until they brought over

half a community. In their rivalries, during their competitions and whatnot, the Italians I guess were the most gregarious. That's because of their Sunday games together. But the Finns never could get interested in the bocce game and I really don't know what they did except to either hunt, fish, or spend the days taking saunas.

I: Well I've got, I've talked to one lady over in Ironwood who said that around Wakefield they were, they'd do a lot of baseball. So I guess that was their version of the United States during the Depression.

DS: Not in Negaunee. In Negaunee they were more woodsman and campers. We were the ones who started the building of these camps out in the woods down in the Gwinn area, Shark Lake and that area. Then they'd spend the days in and out of the sauna on the weekends. Even in the winter time, chop a hole in the ice! Run out boiling hot and shove...

I: Not for you?

DS: I tried the saunas a couple of times, not for me. There was one in the house back here they put up and they used it I think about 3 times over there and I haven't seen that smoke stack go in the last 5 years.

I: I see. What about the language? Did they speak Italian in the boarding house?

DS: Yeah, oh yeah.

I: So they weren't really practicing English? They weren't working on that?

DS: No, they weren't working to learn the language. They learned the language in the lunch room, in the shower, at the mines. That's where they picked up the language. Very few, I can't vouch for this, but very few of them went to anything like a night school. Later in the '20s when they started sending for girlfriends or went home and married and came back, that's when they were starting these naturalization schools. And they went to evening night school a little bit. Otherwise they just picked up the language hearing it and translating it into Italian, see what it sounded like and remembered, phrase by phrase. I know my mother and my dad, my dad always read the Italian newspaper. I think he could read the headlines, the big print, in the local paper *The Mining Journal*. But my mother, I think I was about 6<sup>th</sup> grade when they finally subscribed to the paper. She learned to read, write the English. Self-taught and how would they say, a tutor to me as I was learning see. She'd learn from the reader that I had and things of that sort. Dad he learned from Ma then. There was a form that he had to fill out, reports every week. Between me reading it to him in grade school or Mom in some instances, reading the form asking the question "what is the condition of ladder way alongside the shaft?" or something like that. He'd have to fill in "good, very good, bad, needs repair" and things of that sort. In my high school years dad was doing his own and he learned to read that more because it was the same form sheet every week.

I: What about Grandma?

DS: Grandma Zerzagi?

I: You said she never learned to read?

DS: No.

I: But what about her English? Did she?

DS: It grew along with her as it was with the other boarders. And of course with the two girls, Paul went into the Marines. So after he came out from the Marines he started work and two or four of those single men had a boarding house and a couple of them got into the bootlegging business. The job of not selling it, making it for the guy who was selling it. So it was like a second job, the miner and the still watcher I guess would be a good word. Because it was boiling, boiling down the mash. Most of them became proficient in understanding it, the English. But there was no good speakers of English, they all spoke with an accent and sometimes it didn't have the tenses down, you know present, past, or future. But they all got along well enough, but in the boarding house it was a constant chatter of either Eric Emosco [spelled phonetically] or Tim Oltazy [spelled phonetically]. They got along together and they understood each other. And for some reason or another they even paired off. Instead of two \_\_\_\_\_ Eric Emosco and Tim Oltazy as partners. They pretty well dominated in the Negaunee mines area, the Negaunee min, the Athens and the Moss mine. The other mines that were in the area didn't last. Like the Mary Charlotte and the Queen mines. Those mines were in different company operation and they all folded as production costs climbed.

I: There's one last thing that I wanted to ask you about. I've run across a reference to a man who, well by this time would be about 100 years old so I imagine probably gone. But he lived in the Hancock area and they refer to him as the "Boarding Boss." He ran a big boarding house, he was an Italian. He was referred to on one of the other tapes in the project that Magnaghi did. Have you ever come across him or anything about?

DS: No, none of those. Those are all gone within the last ten years. The Copper Country was heavily inhabited by Italians. Especially up in the city of Calumet and Laurium you know. Not in Houghton Hancock, most of them were in Laurium and Calumet. The families there that I know, through the Paisano Club operation, were Caesar Cappel, C-A-P-P-O. Caesar Cappel, his son is pastor at the Cathedral now in Ishpeming. But he and his father's father, and mother, both died, the father over 20 some years maybe 25 years. The mother just last year. I'm not aware that the Cappel was running the boarding house, but he was kind of the boss man up there having learned the language in the south range and the \_\_\_\_\_ mine in Calumet and Laurium. Then there was a, oh the signs of old age is showing with me too! I'm trying to think of the name, he was a real leader up there. Do you have any names that you can see if they light a light? Do you remember anything?

I: Well, it was a little, it was bit indistinct on the tape. Something like Bossay [spelling phonetically] or Possay [spelled phonetically] or something like that.

DS: No. Bacco [spelled phonetically]. That was in the Iron Mountain area with Ford, drew quite a few Italians with that \$5 a day wage. You know they left the mine jobs where they had maybe 10, 15, 20 years to go. Ford had you working outside, so that was the attraction. Oh gosh, Teneti [spelled phonetically] Paul Teneti, did you run into that name?

I: Not yet know.

DS: He's one.

I: Well it was just a possibility.

DS: If I can find the book, then I'd see it right away and I'd remember, bring to mind. And the local here just buried the son who was 80 years old last week. Francis Marquetti [spelled phonetically], that name you must have run into see.

I: Yes.

DS: Nowadays it's spelled T-T-Y instead of T-T-I, kind of anglicized. They were the pioneer in this Italian area. They were off the island of Corsica and some off the mainland of Italy. Paul Teneti, and the word Toriano [spelled phonetically] keeps coming into my mind and they're a Negaunee family. Some name like that.

I: Well, I'll see what I can do to follow up on that. Just a possibility.

DS: How long are you going to be here?

I: I have to be home by the 23<sup>rd</sup>.

DS: Of August?

I: Of August.

DS: The Paisano for the first time we're getting a chapter organized up in the Copper Country. It's going to be on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September

I: Oh, well I have to be home.

DS: At St. Paul's Parish for the mass, that's in Calumet. But the assembly and banquet is in, I forget what building they call it, at Michigan Tech. This is where we will finally make an opening up there because they had active lodges up until, a few, up until a couple years ago. They've folded and my purpose in establishing that Paisano was to gather together the minute books and things of that sort. They're all reluctant to let it go, so where does it go in the end? It goes to the dump, the fire, because whoever buys the house, kids. They don't know, "what's in these books" and they look at them and "oh that's Italian" out it goes. We've been hollering and hollering since 1964 to get those books all in one place. We haven't had really great success in

doing that. But with the tapes on the individual families, that has taken. I think there are 200 and some of those tapes.

I: Well I know it's a tremendous project and I understand you were the man who really started all this and I think it's terrific. I found out about the project only very recently and so almost by accident. Because I was research midwives and come across Magnaghi's book and then it said in there about all the tapes and that there were more materials and so forth. It was a topic rather than an ethnic group that I was interested in following up. Anyway, it's brought me up here and I think it's just a tremendous project and I'm so glad that this kind of thing is going on. I know what you mean about things being lost.

DS: I just wanted to show you that one, just something that I coined. Sugar bowl!

I: That is cute. Well in the meantime let me end this tape then and thank you very much for your time.

DS: Oh it's no problem of time, I've got plenty of it.

END OF INTERVIEW.