



# Joanne Mendes

Joanne:  
Doing all that stuff.

Interviewer:  
All right so-

Joanne:  
So you tell me how far or-

Interviewer:  
Yeah-

Joanne:  
Okay. All right. Great.

Interviewer:  
Okay. Why don't you... Hi, Joanne. Nice to see you.

Joanne:  
Hi, Michael. Hi. Nice to see you too. Thank you.

Interviewer:  
Thank you so much for working on the transcription work you do.

Joanne:  
You're welcome. I love it. It's my favorite thing to do.

Interviewer:  
That's awesome.

Joanne:  
It really is. And I'm a little nervous about coming back into the museum. So this works out perfect. I can do it online and at home so-

Interviewer:  
For us too.

Joanne:  
Yeah.



Interviewer:

So you're here for Common Ground today.

Joanne:

I am, yes.

Interviewer:

Okay. So why don't you introduce yourself? Say your name and start off. Tell us what you're going to talk about.

Joanne:

Okay. Well, my name is Joanne Mendes and I am a native of the South Coast. I was born in North Dartmouth, Massachusetts, and today I would like to speak about my Italian side, which was my mother's side of the family. So I'd like to talk about my maternal grandparents and the Italians that immigrated here in the city, in the early 1900s. Not a lot gets discussed about them in the diversity that we have as New Bedford as this wonderful cultural rich city. We always talk about the Portuguese, the Izhorians, the Cape Verdeans. They talk about the mill workers being French, Polish, Irish. The Italians seemed to get lost. I think partly because there were only about 1% of them in the whole city but in my world it seemed like they were all over the place. But my grandparents, both were the youngest in their family.

They arrived here in the early 1900s. My grandfather Luigi arrived in 1909 with four of his siblings and his mother, Maria. And they were sponsored because back in those days you had to be sponsored by a relative, by the eldest, the older brother, Giacomo. And my grandmother, Her name was Maria and she arrived in 1913 with her mother and brother, her two sisters and... No. Yeah, two sisters and brother and father preceded her. And they were also sponsored by her eldest brother, Ernesto. They started their journey in what was known as or what is known as the Piedmont region of Italy, which is north of Turin way up near the French Alps. And it's an interesting people, seemed in a lot of Italians that immigrated into New Bedford at that time were from Northern Italy. It's really a misnomer.

People have this idea or they've always say the Northern Italians are rich. The Southern were poor. That's not the case. My grandmother said because Italy had unified very... And only in 1860 that the only rich Northern Italians were the bankers, the textile mill owners, the rest of them in her case they were tenant farmers. And in my grandfather's case, his mother was a widow. So coming to America for them was a way of getting out of poverty. So they immigrated to New Bedford. How or why, who was the first to come? I don't know. But they were a group and they settled in what was known then as the Holy Acre. And I don't know if you've ever heard of that term. Spinner Publication has a little thing of it in their New Bedford anthology. But my grandmother was... Called it the Holy Acre.

I don't know who coined that term. I still don't know to this day, but the area was sandwich between Cushing Avenue and the railroad tracks bounded on the north by Wamsutta Street and on the south by Pearl. And my grandfather's brother lived on Wall Street and my grandmother's brother lived on Turner's Court. Most of that area was destroyed by Route 18 construction in the 1960s. And by then a lot, if not all the core group of Italians that lived there moved on to other parts of the city or into back then in the fifties or forties, it was known as, or thirties, the country, so of Dartmouth or Fairhaven. My grandfather's mother must have had a good head for money because by 1916 she bought land in North Dartmouth which is on Route six now. If you know where Walmart is across the street, there's a little road there.

My great-grandmother bought land there. At that time the land was farm land. It was then sold to the Union Street Railway and they were buying it up because they wanted their trolley line which stopped at, right around where the mall is now, what they called Smith Mills. From there they wanted the trolley to go to the Westport line because they were starting to build Lincoln Park for the factory workers that worked in Westport. So they



were buying up all the farmland and then the parcel part that they didn't use they were letting their friends buy it. So my great-grandmother bought in 1916 land from some friend of the Union Street Railway board. And at that time my grandfather and his two brothers built a house on it. And then a year later she bought land next to it that was owned by somebody that... For taxes, that's all I could get out of the registry of deeds.

And that land ended up being my parents' house. So I grew up in a neighborhood of... Because slowly my great aunts and uncles all moved in the neighborhood. So my whole childhood were my great aunts, uncles, their families. I had cousins upon cousins, upon cousins and I would... Just thought everybody was Italian and I just thought everybody had cousins and neighborhoods like this. Most of the immigrants that came were mill workers. Although some became entrepreneurs, opening markets. I can remember my youth Bella's Deli, [inaudible 00:06:49] Bakery, which my father ended up working at. But most of my mother's relatives all worked there. My grandfather was a tradesman. He was a carpenter. He built our house. He was a beautiful, finished carpenter but in later years because of the war and depression, he ended up working construction because that's where the money was. A lot of the workers also were stone masons and a lot of the Italian masons built a lot of the really beautiful churches like St. Anthony, St. Lawrence in this area.

And most of my great aunts and uncles all worked in the various mills in the city. When I look back on my ancestors I see that they are part of the fabric of this beautiful city. And we're part of that engine, that manufacturing, that was the jewel in the crown for so many years after the whaling industry went away. Growing up next door, especially now at the holidays time I always reflect on my childhood being next to grandma and grandpa. Their house was party central. So everybody came at Christmas Eve, the people in the neighborhood, the relatives from New Bedford. Everybody just descended there and we'd have some great food, a lot of the regional dishes of the Northern Italian, which was the rice region. So we had a lot of rice dishes, polenta, pork sausage. We never did the Seven Fishes. That's more of a coastal Southern Italian thing. And we just had a house full of people and they'd sing songs and drink wine and sing more songs and drink more wine.

And on my grandmother's side of the family we... Even back my mother told me, even when she was a girl they had a lot of family reunions because they had some cousins that lived in Harvard, Mass. So they would gather at their house and those family reunions ended up turning into what was known as Chiulano Associates. It was a group of Italians that they started as the part of the family and then it grew to become more and more people that had started their American lives in the Holy Acre or their parents. And they planned a trip back to Italy. As I said my grandmother went back for the very first time since she was a 10 years old. And she said, "Do you know in 1967 they still had outdoor plumbing?" But today they don't. I've been to Chiulano they have regular plumbing now.

But that group lasted until the late eighties when all my... The older generation was starting to get in the... My mother's younger generation weren't really interested and everybody scattered. But it really... For me, I loved going to their... They had once a year party. They did a cookbook which I laugh because a lot of my cousins and I still have... We have our mother's version because it's out of print. And it's all the old Italian recipes that we grew up with, I know, that we would not have known how to make because all of our grandmothers were the same. You throw a little of this, sing a little of that. My mother was the same way. So at least we have a written record of some of these. And I look back and it was just such a magical time. And again, I think that along with the other immigrants that came, the Italians really made their mark as well in this beautiful city. So I'm very proud of my Italian heritage as I am of my Portuguese heritage but that's my story.

Interviewer:

Well, that's so wonderful. Thanks Joanne for sharing that.

Joanne:

You're welcome.



Interviewer:

That's great. Yeah. Again, it's such a feeling for the Holy Acre. I never heard of that-

Joanne:

Well, I made a copy. This was in the Spinner Publication. They did New Bedford Volume One and Two. I forget. So this is their... And it's funny, if you Google Holy Acre this comes up, the Spinner Publication but that's... And actually I guess it was the Irish that... You can do that. I wish I had pictures. I have some.