

Port of Los Angeles Centennial Oral History Project

Mary Francesca Giacalone Oral History

Date of Interview: Unknown

Location: Unknown

Length of Interview: 00:32:04

Interviewer: MS – Unknown

Transcriber: NCC

Male Speaker: Please say your name and spell it.

Mary Francesca Giacalone: My name is Mary Francesca Giacalone. Mary is M-A-R-Y. Okay. I go by Mary. Giacalone is G-I-A-C-A-L-O-N-E.

MS: Good. You can talk to me.

MFG: Okay.

MS: Now, here's the tough one too. Please tell us the year you were born and where.

MFG: I was born in San Pedro, August the 6th, 1922, on 9th Street, 360 9th Street, 300 Block.

MS: So, what did your family do in San Pedro? What did your father –

MFG: My father was a fisherman.

MS: Tell me about him. How did he come to San Pedro?

MFG: He came to San Pedro –

MS: You have to say, "My father came –"

MFG: My father came to San Pedro, I think, about 1916. He was born in Italy, the same town that my husband's father was born.

Vito Giacalone: Stop. Let me correct her before she goes on. Your father was in the 1906 earthquake.

MFG: Yes. But in San Pedro – he came in 1916 in San Pedro. Let's start over on my father. Let's start over. Ask me that question again.

MS: Tell me about your father. Start by saying, "My father."

MFG: All right. My father came to the United States in 1906, the year of the San Francisco earthquake, with his father. When they came from Italy, Palermo, Manzana – when they came, they knew they had a job. The job, they were going to fish, crab fishing in San Francisco – they had a job – and Alaska fishing. That was 1906. When my grandmother – let me start, I don't know how to put this. My father and his father worked to send for the other members of the family. It was a large family, eight children and my grandmother. So, what they did is they worked and then they sent for the next son, the oldest son. They got him over. Then they started sending for the girls and had husbands ready for them when they landed in San Francisco, very well to do crab fishermen. Then they sent for the last three. That was all in San Francisco. So, in the meantime when my grandmother came, she brought the bride for my father. He was twenty-nine. So, it was time for him to get married. So, he was married in San Francisco, had four children in San Francisco. Then he decided – he heard about San Pedro, and he heard what

a wonderful place it was for fishing. If you wanted to be your own man, have your own boat – because he was kind of tired of Alaska fishing. There's a story there. He used to cry when he told us that story, caught in an iceberg for forty days. The boat couldn't move.

MS: Tell me that story then.

MFG: That's another story.

MS: You can start. I mean, "When he was in fishing Alaska."

MFG: Alaska.

MS: Start from that. You have to say, "When my father –"

MFG: – was fishing in Alaska.

MS: You have to say it, not me. Wait a second. You have to say all yourself, not me. "So, when my father was –"

MFG: When my father fished in Alaska, the boat was caught in an iceberg. They didn't know the iceberg was there. They were trapped in this iceberg, and they couldn't move. So, they just had to wait until – I don't know the story that well. My father used to tell it over and over again, and he'd cry. They had to wait until the iceberg left them, that they were free, and it took forty days. Well, they ran out of ration. He says if they were lucky, if they got maybe a fourth of a potato a day, and even that ran out. Some of the men couldn't take it and threw themselves overboard and died. It's a story that he used to tell it over and over again at the dinner table. After dinner, my father always used to tell us a story. I always remember that because he survived that. So, by the time he had four kids, he thought he had enough of – crab fishing is very dangerous too. Fishing itself is a very dangerous occupation. So, he heard about San Pedro, and he thought, "Well, maybe we should move to San Pedro." My mother didn't like San Francisco. She says it was too cold. She liked Sicily. When they came to San Pedro, my mother fell in love with San Pedro because the climate is very much like where she came from. She says, "This city, I like." My mother fell in love with San Pedro. So, my grandmother, my grandfather, and all the rest of the family all came to San Pedro, except number two son settled in San Diego. Because the albacore in San Diego was better than here. Yeah. So, my father got himself a little jig boat. He wanted to be his own man. He always had a boat. He was fourteen when he had his first boat in Italy, fourteen years old. So, that's what my father did for a living. He had his own jig boat, and he caught fish for the markets. He sold to the markets. He raised six children, but they had eight. Now, can you get this off? I have –

MS: It's okay. You don't have to go into detail.

MFG: I have something else there – because they had eight children. One boy is buried. Baby is buried in the historic cemetery in Wilmington.

MS: Take a look at me.

MFG: Yeah. In Wilmington.

MS: But I want to get to you now. What's your earliest memory as a little girl in San Pedro? What do you remember?

MFG: We had a wonderful time. I had a wonderful childhood. We had loving parents. My father built that house, the duplex. We were raised in a duplex. He built that house with the San Francisco money, the Alaska, and paid cash for it. We even knew the builder, (Mr. Regan?) was a contractor. The Gregorio brothers did the cement work. But anyway – so, we were raised knowing that we owned the house and a loving family. Later on, Mrs. Anderson, who is a – well, the Anderson playground, she built that playground for her – in memory of her two sons, her twin sons, that were killed in World War I. That was our hangout. We had a tennis court next door to us. We had a swimming pool. We had drama lessons. We had dancing lessons. We had everything. So, we had a wonderful childhood. These are people like (Mr. Dietz?), (Mrs. Knorpp?). They were wonderful people. They worked with the Parks and Recreation. They were the directors. It was like a home base there.

MS: Now, did you ever go down to what was known as the best American beach? Did you know about?

MFG: Well, we were raised very strict, especially the girls. We didn't go too many places. My mother wouldn't even let us go to the USO dances later on, during World War II. We went to Cabrillo Beach, John Olguin – Olguin now – he graduated in my class of [19]41. He was a lifeguard. All those kids were lifeguards there. Ray Falk – I guess you're going to do a thing on Ray Falk – they were all lifeguards down there, young boys, high school boys. So, we did walk. We used to walk. We didn't have a car. We walked to the beach, and we learned to swim in the beach. Then we had the pool next to us. Jack Cheney was the director of the pool. So, we had a good childhood.

MS: Talk about school. Where did you go to school?

MFG: I went to Cabrillo Avenue School and Dana San Pedro High School. Then I went to work.

MS: Tell me about when you're going to school. I know you were restricted in the kind of what you could do growing up.

MFG: Yeah.

MS: You went to the Anderson Center –

MFG: Anderson, we had a –

MS: – and everything. But what else did you do for fun as a little girl? Did you ever go down to the docks and watch your dad?

MFG: No. My father didn't want us down— the wharf was very dangerous. It was very dangerous. He'd take us down now and then at the — but he was so protective, and that dock was terrible. The planks were all — [laughter] it was awful. But no, we didn't go down there that much. No. The boys are different. My brothers are different. But the girls, no.

MS: What about downtown San Pedro? Tell me about that.

MFG: We were always downtown. 6th Street was our — 5th, 6th Street. We used to — well, everything. We had wonderful tailors. My father was a stocky man. They didn't have proportioned sizes in those days, right? So, he had his suits tailor made. Of course, we had a lot of the Navy and Army, Fort MacArthur. So, those tailors, we had (Miller?), (Callister?). There were four or five tailors. We had a lot of tailors down there. When they speak of Shanghai Red there, no one ever bothered us because that was where that — below Pacific is where the action was. Most of the people that worked in the lumberyards, longshoring, the seamen, the fishermen all lived below Pacific at the time that I was born. Because they didn't have cars. They had to get to work. They walked. So, no one ever bothered us. The few drunk seamen, they didn't bother us because there was a hardware — Mr. Korn had his hardware store there. We used to buy our dishes there and things and gifts. 5th and 6th Street were busy streets. There were families. I'll tell you a nice story. The Carisse building is still there. All right. Mr. and Mrs. Carisse were friends of my father and mother. My mother was shopping with a newborn baby — I love that building — the free health clinic. Now, what do they call that building now? Still there.

MS: It's okay.

MFG: What do they call that building?

MS: Go back to the story. The story is flowing.

MFG: Okay.

VG: City hall.

MFG: The city hall, do they call it?

VG: Yeah.

MFG: Yeah. The Fire Department was there. The jail was upstairs. Anyway — and the health office was upstairs. Well, my mother took the ten-day-old baby, my youngest sister, she took to the health office. She had my sister, Fran, holding her with one hand, and I held my mother, her skirt, on the other side. We were coming from the health office. My mother, while we were there on — she came up 6th Street there and did some shopping. Well, I let go of her dress. She had the baby, and the other hand, she had my other sister. I was 5.5, 6 years old. I let go of her dress. Well, she turned the corner to go home on Mesa. We lived between Center and Mesa. So, she turned, and I let go of her dress because I loved to window shop. Little did I know that I

was dressing windows later on in my life, window dresser. But anyway, so I was busy looking at women's – I didn't get lost, but I was a 5.5 or 6 years old little girl walking the street by myself. At that time, I think this is important to know, we had police patrol. We had a police on one side of the street, on 6th Street, and police on the other side. I was never afraid of policemen because we used to see them all the time when we shopped. So, one of the policemen saw me and saw that I was alone. So, he took me to the police station. Well, before he took me to the police station, he saw me there in front of the Carisse building. Well, Rosalie Carisse, the daughter of Mr. Carisse, the youngest daughter, was working in one of the shops there, the dress shop. So, when she sees the policeman with me, with this little girl, she came out. She says, "I know that little girl. That's Maria Giacalone's little girl. I'll take her home." Because that's, what, three blocks away? See, I didn't feel I was lost. I wasn't crying or anything. I was looking at all the windows and having a great time. [laughter] I remember this. I'll tell you the part that I really remember. Well, anyway, so – but the police, once he had me, he had to take me to the police station. Because that's kind of a feather in his hat. That was his duty, right? So, he took me to the police station that was at the city hall there. The building is still there. So, they sat me, and this is the part I really like. Those policemen gathered around me, and they bought me an ice cream cone. This is what I always remember, sitting on that big, big desk with an ice cream cone. I wasn't crying or anything because I wasn't afraid of policemen. So, now, don't forget, we didn't have a telephone. Who had telephones? So, Rosalie knew who I was. They got word. There were always runners. They got word to my mother that I was at the police – that they were holding this lost child at the police station. So, my grandfather and my brother – because my father was fishing, my grandfather used to come to our house every day. So, my grandfather and my oldest brother, Rosario, went to the police station to pick me up. The reason they gave me – my brother was only fourteen, but my grandfather was there.

MS: You have to look at me.

MFG: Yeah. So, anyhow, they took me home. That story, I remember that so vivid because of that ice cream cone, sitting in that big desk with all these policemen fussing over me.

MS: We only have time for one more story, I'm afraid. So, that story is, how did you meet this guy?

MFG: Through his brother, who –

MS: Tell me the story. There you are, you're a little girl having a wonderful life, and suddenly, what happened?

VG: That's the most excitement she's had.

MFG: No, I've had a lot of excitement. Well, not really.

MS: [laughter]

MFG: My brother-in-law's ship was torpedoed, and it was in repair at Todd Shipyard. So, one of his relatives said, "Since you're going to be in San Pedro, go to this address," and give him our

address. He says, "They'll treat you like a son." So, Nick, who is my brother-in-law now, Nick came to our house, and he was treated like a son naturally. When he met my sister, Fran, they fell in love instantly. She was working for Associated Banning. She came home from work, and Nick was there. When Nick got to know me, he says, "You'd be perfect for my brother." I didn't meet him until two years later. He kept promising his brother, he would come for dinner. Because on Sunday, the families that knew us, like from San Francisco, San Diego, if they had a member of the family that was at Fort MacArthur or in the Navy, if they were in San Pedro, to come to our house, and they'd be treated like family. So, on Sunday, we always cooked, did a lot of cook – it was like open house. We'd have these servicemen, and it was just wonderful. Just wonderful. We did that every Sunday. So, his brother, he was in L.A. at the time. My husband was stationed – I don't know where he was stationed to. But anyhow, he was in Hollywood then. So, his brother would call him and tell him, "Come to San Pedro. Come, I have a girl for you. I have a girl for you. She'd be perfect for you." I didn't meet him for two years later. I met him after the war. I never met him during the war. He never showed up.

MS: But when he showed up, what happened? Tell me that story.

MFG: I met him in San Diego. My first cousin was getting married. My Uncle Vito, the one that settled in San Diego, his daughter was getting married, and he was marrying one of his boyfriends. So, we were invited because we were family. He was invited from the other side, the Castagnola side. When he saw me, he told his father – his father was invited to the wedding too. He told his father – he was in the dance hall, he saw me, at a hotel. Well, he knows what hotel it is, I forget, one of the big hotels. When he saw me, he told his father, "I'm going to marry that girl." He didn't even know me. He didn't even talk to me. But he told his father. His father says, "She's already spoken for." Because my cousin's – the groom that was getting Mary's brother was going to come and ask for my hand in marriage. He says, "I don't care. I'm going to marry that girl." So, he came across the ballroom to ask me to dance, and you know what he told me? "You dance like a battleship."

[laughter]

MS: He just won you over.

MFG: When I get angry with him, I tell him, "I didn't like you when I met you, and I still don't like you."

[laughter]

Here, we've been married going on sixty-one years.

[laughter]

We've had a good life. I felt sorry for him. That's the reason I think I married him. Because he was so thin and so sickly-looking. I knew he was in Saipan for fourteen months. So, I thought he was a war prisoner. So, I said to him, "Were you a war prisoner?" He didn't say yes, and he didn't say no. So, I said, "Well, if he doesn't want to talk about it, right, you drop it." So, I never

mentioned it anymore. So, in my mind, I felt sorry for the guy. I knew that he liked me. But he didn't come to San Pedro for, I don't know, about four months. He didn't let us know or anything.

MS: So, when did he win you over and how?

MFG: Well, he planned the wedding. He brought a ring. The second trip he made to San Pedro, he brought a ring. I said, "What's this ring for?" My father died during the war in [19]43. He died during the war years. He brought this ring, and I said, "What's the ring for?" He says, "Well, we're engaged." "I'm not going to marry you." [laughter] His brother and my sister wanted to get married. My other sister was engaged. Talk about pressure. I had the pressure. His brother wanted him to marry me. He'd tell me, "Mary, my brother would be so good to you." He would really build him up. He'd build him up. I loved Nick. Well, we knew Nick for two years before we met him. Like I said, he stayed with us for two years, off and on. So, he didn't want to go home. Nick didn't want to go home after the war. My mother says, "Go home. You have a father. Go home." He says, "No, I like it here." [laughter] Nick loved San Pedro. But anyway, Fran will tell you all that when you interview Nick. So, he took the ring back and went back home. So, then I didn't see him again for, I don't know how long. My mother says, "If you want to be engaged to my daughter, your father has to be here. Your father –" and his stepmother, because his father remarried. "Your father has to be here." So, the next trip he made, he brought his father, his stepmother, his other brother, Gene, and Peter. There were four boys. Nick was already – he brought them all, and he brought a ring. Well, I enjoyed working. I wasn't into – but like you say, I eventually – I wanted to get married and have children. That's one thing I wanted was children, and we were expected to get married. You know what I mean? It was expected of us. So, he and my sister planned the wedding. I just went along with it. [laughter] So, that's it.

[laughter]

Everybody was so excited. "Mary, oh." The whole town was so excited. But I don't know. Even the day before we were going to get married, it was Valentine's Day. He didn't even bring me a rose, chocolate, nothing. I thought, "What am I getting into?" Here I was going to get married next day, Saturday, because [inaudible] married on a Saturday. I thought, "What am I getting into? I mean, this guy is tight. I mean, he's stingy." He did buy a frozen apple at the Y. We went to a free dance at the Y, and he bought one frozen apple, ten cents. That was the only money he ever spent on me when he was courting me.

MS: [laughter]

MFG: Can you believe that? Now, he doesn't know what to do to win me over. In one way, that's kind of good. [laughter]

VG: I was testing you.

MFG: He doesn't know what to do to win me over. He still feels like he owes me. I'm afraid to say if I like something, because he'll buy it.



VG: No.

MFG: See?

VG: I did date her four times before I married her. I dated four times.

MFG: Four times.

VG: One was a free dinner.

MS: You tell about the four dates.

MFG: Well, he came four times to San Pedro. I had that max cup because I was working at Bernard's Dress Shop. We had really good stuff there. A lot of people don't remember Bernard's Dress Shop, but it was on 9th Street and Pacific. There used to be a thrifty drug store there. Next door there was a little, just a hole in the wall, dress shop, Bernard's Dress Shop, and then Newberry's. We opened up Newberry's. When it opened up, it was a beautiful store. Mr. Bernard said, "Mary, come and work for me." He says, "I'll pay you much more money than you're making at Newberry's." He did.

MS: We have about three minutes left to tape.

MFG: Okay.

MS: Give me the four dates.

MFG: So, we went walking. All right. After work, he came picked me up, and we went walking. What's the name of that place? I forgot.

VG: Hawaiian Gardens.

MFG: Hawaiian Gardens opened up. They were opening up. They wanted to drum up business, and they were going to be on TV. They were trying to drum up business. So, I knew the waitress there, the girl, because the customer and all that, and (Mr. Orb?). I knew all those people. So, she saw the two of us walking on Pacific. That was our date, walking. So, we didn't have to spend any money. So, she stopped, and she says, "Would you come with me?" She says, "We need people." They needed people because they're going to be on TV. "Sure," I said. She was no stranger. I said, "Sure, honey. We'll come." Oh, it was wonderful. They fed us. It was just beautiful. That was one of our dates. Free. [laughter] But it was wonderful. He had a good time. Then she brought us home with their car. Wasn't that nice?

MS: What was your favorite of the four dates?

MFG: Of the four dates, I think that was kind of a highlight.

VG: [laughter]

MS: What was the least favorite of the four dates?

VG: The apple.

MFG: The apple, [laughter] the frozen apple. I hate frozen food.

VG: [inaudible]

MFG: When I eat my fruit, I want it room temperature.

VG: I went to the Warner Brothers. I told the guy –

MS: You tell the story.

MFG: Can I tell it real fast?

MS: We have about two minutes.

MFG: Well, we didn't go any place by ourselves. As a matter of fact, when we were kids, we couldn't even go to the theater. The Warner Brothers, I remember it going up. Because I was born in [19]22, and I think the Warner Brothers was built in [19]24 or [19]25, right in there. We were never allowed to go to a theater by ourselves, naturally. We always had someone come. My brothers had to be in the theater when we were younger. But when I was older, here, we were working girls, but my mother was very strict with us. So, she knew what theater we were and all that. So, we were sitting there, looking at the picture, and I felt somebody nibbling on my neck.

[laughter]

At that time, we did have these weirdos in the theater. We were kind of used to it. I didn't know who was nibbling on my neck. I thought, "Oh, my God, here we go again." So, I passed the word to the girls. They were in my wedding, [inaudible] Laurel – you know Laurel. He was only ten years old, but he'd always accompany us, and my two sisters and Angie. So, I said, "Pass the word. There's a weirdo in back of us." Well, they looked. They turned. They saw it was him. So, they didn't say anything. So, this guy kept nibbling on my neck. I thought, "How come they didn't turn around to punch him one or say something?" So, finally, I said, "I'm going to get up and tell what –" we had ushers in those days, ushers with the flashlights that take you to your seat. Now you don't have that. So, finally, I was fed up. These girls weren't doing anything. They were just sitting there. Because he told them to keep quiet. So, finally, I turned around, and it was him.

VG: [inaudible]

MS: [laughter]

MFG: Isn't that something?

[end of transcript]