

An Interview With
MADALINE McKILLIP

An Oral History produced by
Robert D. McCracken

Nye County Town History Project
Nye County, Nevada
Tonopah
2011



Madaline McKillip
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PREFACE

The Nye County Town History Project (NCTHP) engages in interviewing people who can provide firsthand descriptions of the individuals, events, and places that give history its substance. The products of this research are the tapes of the interviews and their transcriptions.

In themselves, oral history interviews are not history. However, they often contain valuable primary source material, as useful in the process of historiography as the written sources to which historians have customarily turned. Verifying the accuracy of all of the statements made in the course of an interview would require more time and money than the NCTHP's operating budget permits. The program can vouch that the statements were made, but it cannot attest that they are free of error. Accordingly, oral histories should be read with the same prudence that the reader exercises when consulting government records, newspaper accounts, diaries, and other sources of historical information.

It is the policy of the NCTHP to produce transcripts that are as close to verbatim as possible, but some alteration of the text is generally both unavoidable and desirable. When human speech is captured in print the result can be a morass of tangled syntax, false starts, and incomplete sentences, sometimes verging on incoherence. The type font contains no symbols for the physical gestures and the diverse vocal modulations that are integral parts of communication through speech. Experience shows that totally verbatim transcripts are often largely unreadable and therefore a waste of the resources expended in their production. While keeping alterations to a minimum the NCTHP will, in preparing a text:

- a. generally delete false starts, redundancies and the uhs, ahs and other noises with which speech is often sprinkled;
- b. occasionally compress language that would be confusing to the reader in unaltered form;
- c. rarely shift a portion of a transcript to place it in its proper context;
- d. enclose in [brackets] explanatory information or words that were not uttered but have been added to render the text intelligible; and
- e. make every effort to correctly spell the names of all individuals and places, recognizing that an occasional word may be misspelled because no authoritative source on its correct spelling was found.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As project director, I would like to express my deep appreciation to those who participated in the Nye County Town History Project (NCTHP). It was an honor and a privilege to have the opportunity to obtain oral histories from so many wonderful individuals. I was welcomed into many homes—in many cases as a stranger—and was allowed to share in the recollection of local history. In a number of cases I had the opportunity to interview Nye County residents whom I have long known and admired; these experiences were especially gratifying. I thank the residents throughout Nye County and Nevada—too numerous to mention by name—who provided assistance, information, and photographs. They helped make the successful completion of this project possible.

Appreciation goes to Chairman Joe S. Garcia, Jr., Robert N. “Bobby” Revert, and Patricia S. Mankins, the Nye County commissioners who initiated this project in 1987. Subsequently, Commissioners Richard L. Carver, Dave Hannigan, and Barbara J. Raper provided support. In this current round of interviews, Nye County Commissioners Andrew Borasky, Lorinda Wichman, Joni Eastley, Gary Hollis, and Fely Quitevis provided unyielding support. Stephen T. Bradhurst, Jr., planning consultant for Nye County, gave enthusiastic support and advocacy of the program within Nye County in its first years. More recently, Darrell Lacy, Director, Nye County Nuclear Waste Repository Project Office, gave his strong support. The United States Department of Energy, through Mr. Lacy’s office, provided funds for this round of interviews. Thanks are extended to Commissioners Eastley and Hollis and to Mr. Lacy for their input regarding the conduct of this research and for serving as a sounding board when methodological problems were worked out. These interviews would never have become a reality without the enthusiastic support of the Nye County commissioners and Mr. Lacy.

Jean Charney served as editor and administrative assistant throughout the project; her services have been indispensable. Valerie A. Brown, Debra Ann MacEachen, Robert B. Clark, Lynn E. Riedesel, Marcella Wilkinson and Jean Charney transcribed a number of interviews, as did Julie Lancaster, who also helped with project coordination. Proofreading, editing, and indexing were provided at various times by Joni Eastley, Michael Haldeman, Julie Lancaster, Teri Jurgens Lefever, and Darlene Morse. Joni Eastley proofed all the manuscripts and often double-checked, as best as possible, the spelling of people’s names and the names of their children and other relatives. Jeanne Sharp Howerton provided digital services and consultation. Eva La Rue and Angela Haag of the Central Nevada Museum served as consultants throughout the project; their participation was essential. Much-deserved thanks are extended to all these persons.

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—Robert D. McCracken

2011

INTRODUCTION

Historians generally consider the year 1890 as the close of the American frontier. By then, most of the western United States had been settled, ranches and farms developed, communities established, and roads and railroads constructed. The mining boomtowns, based on the lure of overnight riches from newly developed lodes, were but a memory.

Although Nevada was granted statehood in 1864, examination of any map of the state from the late 1800s shows that while most of the state was mapped and its geographical features named, a vast region—stretching from Belmont south to the Las Vegas meadows, comprising most of Nye County—remained largely unsettled and unmapped. In 1890, most of southcentral Nevada remained very much a frontier, and it continued to be so for at least another twenty years.

The spectacular mining booms at Tonopah (1900), Goldfield (1902), Rhyolite (1904), Manhattan (1905), and Round Mountain (1906) represent the last major flowering of what might be called the Old West in the United States. Consequently, southcentral Nevada, notably Nye County, remains close to the American frontier; closer, perhaps, than any other region of the American West. In a real sense, a significant part of the frontier can still be found in southcentral Nevada. It exists in the attitudes, values, lifestyles, and memories of area residents. The frontier-like character of the area also is visible in the relatively undisturbed quality of the natural environment, much of it essentially untouched by humans.

A survey of written sources on southcentral Nevada's history reveals some material from the boomtown period from 1900 to about 1915, but very little on the area after around 1920. The volume of available sources varies from town to town: A fair amount of literature, for instance, can be found covering Tonopah's first two decades of existence, and the town has had a newspaper continuously since its first year. In contrast, relatively little is known about the early days of Gabbs, Round Mountain, Manhattan, Beatty, Amargosa Valley, and Pahrump. Gabbs's only newspaper was published intermittently between 1974 and 1976. Round Mountain's only newspaper, the Round Mountain Nugget, was published between 1906 and 1910. Manhattan had newspaper coverage for most of the years between 1906 and 1922. The Rhyolite Herald, longest surviving of Rhyolite/Bullfrog's three newspapers, lasted from 1905 to 1912. The Beatty Bullfrog Miner was in business from 1905 to 1906. Amargosa Valley has never had a newspaper. Pahrump's first newspaper did not appear until 1971. All these communities received only spotty coverage in the newspapers of other communities once their own newspapers folded, although Beatty was served by the Beatty Bulletin, published as part of the Goldfield News between 1947 and 1956. Consequently, most information on the history of southcentral Nevada after 1920 resides in the memories of individuals who are still living.

Aware of Nye County's close ties to our nation's frontier past, and recognizing that few written sources on local history are available, especially after about 1920, the Nye County Commissioners initiated the Nye County Town History Project (NCTHP) in 1987. The NCTHP represents an effort to systematically collect and preserve information on the history of Nye County. The centerpiece of the NCTHP is a large set of interviews conducted with individuals who had knowledge of local history. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and then edited lightly to preserve the language and speech patterns of those interviewed. All oral history interviews have been printed on acid-free paper and bound and archived in Nye County

libraries, Special Collections in the Lied Library at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, and at other archival sites located throughout Nevada. The interviews vary in length and detail, but together they form a never-before-available composite picture of each community's life and development. The collection of interviews for each community can be compared to a bouquet: Each flower in the bouquet is unique—some are large, others are small—yet each adds to the total image. In sum, the interviews provide a composite view of community and county history, revealing the flow of life and events for a part of Nevada that has heretofore been largely neglected by historians.

Collection of the oral histories has been accompanied by the assembling of a set of photographs depicting each community's history. These pictures have been obtained from participants in the oral history interviews and other present and past Nye County residents. In all, more than 700 photos have been collected and carefully identified. Complete sets of the photographs have been archived along with the oral histories.

On the basis of the oral histories as well as existing written sources, histories have been prepared for the major communities in Nye County. These histories have also been archived.

The town history project is one component of a Nye County program to determine the socioeconomic impact of a federal proposal to build and operate a nuclear waste repository in southcentral Nye County. The repository, which would be located inside a mountain (Yucca Mountain), would be the nation's first, and possibly only, permanent disposal site for high-level radioactive waste. The Nye County Board of County Commissioners initiated the NCTHP in 1987 in order to collect information on the origin, history, traditions and quality of life of Nye County communities that may be impacted by the repository. If the repository is constructed, it will remain a source of interest for a long time and future generations will likely want to know more about the people who once resided at the site. And in the event that government policy changes and a high-level nuclear waste repository is not constructed in Nye County, material compiled by the NCTHP will remain for the use and enjoyment of all.

—RDM
2011

This is Robert McCracken talking to Madaline McKillip at her home in Reno, Nevada, June 3, 2010. At times, they are joined by Merle McKillip.

CHAPTER ONE

RM: Madaline, when and where were you born?

MM: I was born in Manhattan, Nevada, November 27, 1924—I was born on Thanksgiving Day.

RM: Oh, how nice. And what was your father's name and date and birthplace?

MM: His name was Antonio Bracket. He was born in northern Italy—I can't think of the name of the town—December 12, 18-something.

RM: Did he grow up in Italy?

MM: He grew up in Italy and he came over here when he was about 24 years old.

RM: I noted that you have blue eyes and red hair and are fair-complected, and I don't think of Italians having blue eyes and red hair.

MM: Both my parents came from the Piedmont area in northern Italy, Most of the people there are blonds and redheads. My oldest brother, Lou, was a towhead blond and the next brother, John, had black hair, but green eyes and freckles—he looked Irish. At one time, the Piedmont area belonged to France. During the French Revolution, when they beheaded Marie Antoinette, the Piedmont area broke away and they were independent for some time. Their dialect is part French and their cookery is more French.

RM: And eventually they affiliated with Italy?

MM: Yes, they were taken into Italy. My dad came about 40 miles out of the Turin province, where the Olympics were held in Torino and my mom came about 50 miles in the other direction, but they both spoke the same dialect.

RM: Is it in the Alps?

MM: Where my mother came from was at the foot of the Alps. In fact, the word "piedmont" means "the foot of the mountain."

RM: And so your dad grew up and spent his early years in Italy. What was his occupation there?

MM: It was copper mining. There were four brothers in the family, and the oldest one came over first and went to Utah. Then one by one the others came, and they all went to Utah. Three stayed there—only my father deviated and left, and he went to Rhyolite.

RM: Where did they go in Utah—one of the big mining camps?

MM: It was copper mining where they went. The other three brothers were miners.

RM: So all of the boys were miners.

MM: That's all they knew. And where my mother came from, they were all farmers.

RM: Did the brothers then live out their lives in Utah?

MM: Right.

RM: Do you maintain any contact with those families?

MM: No, the brothers have all died; I have contact with one cousin. They all married in Utah. All of them married Italian women and raised their families.

I want to make a comment about my maiden name of Bracket, which is not Italian. I've been over to Italy, and Bracket is like the name Jones or Smith. There are so many Brackets that my part of the family took the name Bracket-Cota, C-o-t-a—so they were from the Cota side. And all the documents, everything, shows Bracket-Cota. Now, when my father and his brothers came over, there was no need for the Cota because Bracket wasn't a common name here so they dropped the name Cota and just became Bracket.

RM: And Bracket—is that really a French name?

MM: I understand in France, it's called Brachet [pronounced Bra-chay].

RM: But it's spelled the same?

MM: No, in Manhattan somehow, they called it Bracket, and so we kids added a "t"—spelled it Brackett, I guess, because we're Bracketts. And it's interesting—with the three brothers in Utah, two became Brocketts and one Brackett.

RM: That's interesting, how they basically adapted the name to English. How long did your father stay in Utah?

MM: I don't actually know. He was killed in the White Caps Mine in Manhattan when I was only eight years old. I think he was only about 47 when he was killed. It was an accident.

RM: Oh, my God. So he started off in Rhyolite?

MM: He started off in Rhyolite. I have the census of 1910 and he was a boarder there. That's where apparently he met my mother, and they married in 1910.

RM: Have you heard any stories passed down in the family about his life in Rhyolite?

MM: I have no idea at all. And after they married, my mother split with her brother, Joe Graglia, who she'd been living with. He went to Las Vegas. My mother and dad went to Tonopah, and I guess he mined in Tonopah and then heard about the rich mines in Manhattan so they moved to Manhattan.

RM: Let's talk about your mother a little. What was her full name on her birth certificate?

MM: Her name was Aurelia Graglia. She was born in Italy in the Piedmont area. There were seven children. The mother had died of influenza and the father raised the children as best he could, with the help of relatives. There were two boys and five girls. The two boys came together over to this country, and they went to San Jose, and then I don't know what happened—George Graglia said he planted grapevines all over San Jose. But Joe went to Ladysmith, Canada. And that's where he met his wife. They married there and they had two children. He had a boardinghouse in Canada.

They needed help once their second child was born, so he wrote back to Italy, offering one of the sisters the fare if she would come over here and work and help. Of the five sisters, the only one who dared was my mother. She thought, "Oh, this is exciting." She was 20 years old.

RM: Where is Ladysmith?

MM: Near Vancouver.

RM: Did your mother cross Canada, then?

MM: No, she landed at Ellis Island—I have all those records from Ellis Island. Then she got on a train and went on up into Canada.

RM: And what year would that have been, do you think?

MM: It was November 23, 1907—she was 20 years old.

RM: And she snapped up the opportunity to come to the New World.

MM: Oh, she thought it was exciting.

RM: And what happened then?

MM: I don't know how long they were in Ladysmith, but they heard about this fabulous gold in Rhyolite, and they picked up and moved there and her brother, of course, opened up a combination boardinghouse/rooming house. And according to the census, my father was one of their roomers, so that was where they met.

RM: What happened next?

MM: By the time they got to Rhyolite, it was on the down, and they realized it. The brother's wife was already in Las Vegas.

RM: And she probably took the kids?

MM: Oh, yes. The Graglias moved to Vegas and Graglia went to work for his brother-in-law in the Union Hotel, and later built the National Hotel in old Las Vegas in 1923.

RM: Is that hotel still standing?

MM: Oh, no, it's long gone. The Union Hotel that his brother-in-law had is long gone.

RM: Talk about your parents' courtship and marriage. It's pretty interesting. "Courtship in Rhyolite"—you could just see it as a chapter heading.

MM: I really don't know; I never asked about it. All she ever told me was that she had four proposals of marriage, and all four men were named Tony. The fourth one was the one she married, my father.

RM: There probably weren't that many women in camp, were there?

MM: I would doubt that.

RM: So young women were probably in high demand, weren't they?

MM: Oh, you could take your pick. [Laughter]

RM: How interesting. How long was their courtship, do you know?

MM: I think it was about a year. And right after they married, she got pregnant. Oh, I should tell you, they honeymooned at the Goldfield Hotel—it was only two years old at the time. She did talk about they had the bridal suite, and they had it for one full week. She said it was elegant.

RM: Do you know anything about your father's mining experiences in Rhyolite?

MM: Nothing.

RM: Did he prosper in mining, do you think? I'm wondering how he could afford the bridal suite for a week—he must have done pretty good. [Laughter]

MM: He must have done pretty good.

RM: And if your mother had the pick of the litter, she wouldn't pick the poorest one, I don't think.

MM: He must have saved his money. [Laughter]

RM: Did they get married in Rhyolite?

MM: Yes, by a justice of the peace.

RM: Do you know what year they got married?

MM: They got married in 1910. I know the population of Las Vegas was only something like 5,000, and it was a railroad town.

RM: That's right. Before that, it was just a couple of ranches, maybe three or four little ranches. And meanwhile, Rhyolite is on the skids—by 1910, it's definitely on the skids; only a fraction of what it was.

MM: Yes. And they go to Tonopah, and he must have worked in Tonopah for seven or eight months. My mother was pregnant, and he put her on the train. They had relatives in Los Angeles, and he sent her to Los Angeles to have the baby. While she had the baby, he heard of Manhattan and he moved there. When she came back with the baby, of course, there was a railroad in Tonopah, and he met her in Tonopah and took her to her new home in Manhattan.

RM: And was the baby you?

MM: No, it was my oldest brother. His name was Lou, Luigi, Brackett, and he was the one that was a towhead blonde—looked like a Swede. The rest of us—they had seven and lost two—were born in Manhattan.

RM: And which child were you?

MM: I was the baby, I was the seventh.

RM: Do you know what diseases they lost the two children with?

MM: One was born right before me and he was full term, but he was stillborn. Now, the other one . . . she had two boys, and then she had a girl they called Rina Nevada, and she was exactly two-and-a-half years old. They would heat water on a stove and one of my brothers, nine years

old, was stoking the fire, but he took the teakettle, or kettle of hot water, and put it down on a piece of wood. Rina was playing with another sister that had been born, and she fell over that kettle. It was really not enough to do that much harm, but they think she swallowed some of the water, or . . . but in three days she died, and it was of shock.

RM: That must have been a horrible experience for the family.

MM: My mother never recovered from it. They had her picture embedded on her gravestone in Manhattan. And for a long time, maybe even now, you could go on the Internet, to ghost towns in Nevada, and that would pop up for Nye County.

RM: God, what a tragedy. And this was before you were born.

MM: Oh, yes. Rina was the third child—she was born in 1919.

RM: And where was your father working in Manhattan?

MM: He had the Manhattan gold mine—I guess he leased it. But my dad always got into the bar business, and he had a bar . . . Val Boni told me this. He had a bar that burned down when Manhattan had a big fire—I don't know what year that was. Then he built another bar. He always would work in the bar and then go mining, work in the bar, and go mining.

RM: At the same time, or in that order?

MM: He had an old crony that would help with the bar, George Clark.

RM: What can you say about him?

MM: Val Boni said he was a sheriff from Dodge City and he was sick and tired of all the shooting and went to Manhattan. He never married. He always ate with us. I thought he belonged to us; he was part of the family.

RM: Did he live with you?

MM: No, he had his own little cabin up on the hill behind the bar, but he took his dinners with us.

RM: Where did you live?

MM: We lived right in the middle of town on Main Street.

RM: Is your house still there?

MM: No.

RM: What would be a landmark where it was?

MM: As you come into Manhattan, there's the Manhattan Bar on the left-hand side. And if you were to continue about a block-and-a-half up, somebody who works at the gold mine in Round Mountain built a two-story house there, and the tall trees there would be the landmark.

RM: How long did you live in Manhattan?

MM: Until we moved to Reno.

RM: So you were born in Manhattan. You were probably delivered at home. Did they have a hospital?

MM: No, I was delivered at home, and I was a three-pounder, blanket and all.

RM: Three pounds, and survived in those days?

MM: I was a preemie.

RM: Oh, my God. How preemie were you?

MM: Seven or eight months. She said she never moved me off of the pillow for three months, and just bathed me with warm olive oil.

RM: Three-pounders don't always make it now, let alone then.

MM: It was amazing. I was very sickly and the first six years of my life, I spent more time in bed than out. And I was on a very strict diet.

RM: What would that diet consist of?

MM: We had chickens, and every day she'd get a fresh egg, and then take the egg yolk, add a little bit of sugar, and whip it until it got a little thick, and then hand-fed me that raw yolk; but it would be a lot of iron. Whenever she killed chickens, she would take the liver and the heart, and fry it in butter and then put it on toast, and that was for me to eat. And I had a lot of soups.

RM: Were you undersized for these years?

MM: Very tiny, yes.

RM: You seem very bright. Were you slow mentally then, or just normal, or what?

MM: Once I started school, I passed every grade—I never had any problems.

RM: Did you start first grade at the regular age? It was just those first years when you were kind of undersized?

MM: And sickly. And everybody in town was told, "Don't feed her; don't give her anything to eat." And nobody did.

RM: Because you had to have your special food.

MM: At school one time, when we had a lot of snow, the teacher tried to make a game of it because we all carried a lunch, and she'd put the sandwiches out and all. But I didn't get anybody's sandwich, and they didn't get mine, because my mother made my sandwiches.

RM: How did she know how to do all that? Was she working on doctor's instructions?

MM: I don't know. I just think it's a marvel that she knew what to do. Another thing she would give me was . . . she did her own butchering, and she'd have a leg of veal hanging down in our cellar. She would cut a slice out of it and chop, chop, chop it, put salt and pepper on it, roll it up, and give it to me to eat, raw.

RM: Did she bring those ideas from the old country, do you think?

MM: I imagine she did. There were two other Italian families—one was the Franciscos and one was the Bonis. And of course Mrs. Boni had nine children. So she probably talked to them and got ideas.

RM: Were the Bonis' children about the same age as you kids?

MM: Well, comparatively. Val would still be about three years older than my oldest brother. Val and Lou were good friends.

RM: What do you recall about the Bonis?

MM: The first dead person I ever saw was Mr. Boni; he had a horrible death. He had left the mines, and he was getting wood and selling it. He was sawing away at some wood, and I don't know what happened, but he cut off his right arm. It was in 1932, when there was a terrible snowstorm. We were snowed in and the townspeople struggled to make a road to get him out and get him to the hospital in Tonopah. But by the time he got there, I think he lived a half-hour and died.

RM: Oh, my God. Probably loss of blood, among other things.

MM: Probably. And in those days, the funeral was conducted in the house. I always remember we got all dressed up, going to Mr. Boni's funeral. My younger brother and I had no idea what

this meant. We got to the Boni home and everybody was going over to this box and looking and talking in hushed voices. My brother Tony and I waited our chance and then we went over. And Tony had to kind of pick me up, hold me up over, so I could look in. Well, I touched Mr. Boni, and oh my God. Cold, I thought. The whole thing scared Tony, and Tony tried to touch him—it scared the two of us. [Laughter]

RM: How old were you then?

MM: I would have been about six or seven. I always remembered that. I told the Bonis years later about the experience.

RM: Did you play with the Boni kids?

MM: Not that much, because they lived at the edge of town and up a hill, so they lived further away. They lived on the main street, but at the very end of town. There was a school on a hill, and you went up that little hill.

RM: They were at the lower end of town, and you lived at the upper end?

MM: I lived up at the upper end, but right in the middle. The upper crust lived further up—that would have been the Humphreys and all those people on Nob Hill.

RM: So there was a status difference depending on where you lived.

MM: There was a lot of prejudice.

RM: Against Italians? Even though you guys didn't look Italian? [Laughter] That's really interesting. So the farther up the hill you went, the higher status it was?

MM: It was kind of tragic. You interviewed Mildred, didn't you—Mildred Cornell?

RM: Yes.

MM: Her mother was such a snob. They had these two horses that Mildred rode a lot and she would saddle them up and then come on down and get my older sister to ride with her and Mrs. Humphrey just hated that. In later years, Mildred apologized and commented on what a snob her mother was, and how sorry she felt.

RM: I interviewed Millie and it was an interesting interview, but we never did get to publish it because she didn't want it to be public.

MM: She was a lovely person.

RM: She was! I thoroughly enjoyed interviewing her. I was shocked; that's the only time that's ever happened. So Mrs. Humphrey was a snob?

MM: Oh, she was; you'd think she had discovered Manhattan, the way she acted. You mention the literary guild, the Toiyabe Club, in your book on Manhattan. She was the head of that, and very discriminatory. She had to like you, or you weren't

RM: Was your mother in that?

MM: Of course not.

RM: They wouldn't let an Italian woman in?

MM: That's right.

RM: So the Italians were discriminated against?

MM: Oh, very much so. We got it worse because there was a path, and if people went to town, they'd have to come by our house. The Humphreys would come by and they would stop and say, "Hey, you dirty dago, you dirty dago! Come out—come out and fight!" One time this one Humphrey came by, and she was the same age as my older sister—she was one of those big girls.

RM: The girls would do it too?

MM: Oh, yes—well, they were taught from their parents. My dad happened to be home, and my dad wouldn't stand for anything. When he heard that, he went looking for my older sister. She wasn't home so he saw me and grabbed me and he said, "When she comes back, you go take care of her, or if you come in this house, I'll take care of you." I was terrified. I went out, and we had a cyanide ditch that ran through town.

RM: A cyanide ditch, from the mill?

MM: From the White Caps.

RM: Did things die in it?

MM: No. I used to make mud pies out of it; we all used to make mud pies. Well, the ditch was running full this particular day. I went out and I was by these tall sagebrushes, and of course I was little. I just dreaded her coming—I was hoping she'd get a ride or something. But I looked up and here she came, and so I jumped out from the sagebrush and said, "What did you call me?"

And she said, "I called you a dirty dago, of course!"

And I said, "That's what I thought you said!" I rushed at her, and I pushed her in the cyanide ditch. She had just had her hair all fixed in Shirley Temple curls. God, that cyanide was red all over. She got out and she started to cry and she ran home. I went in the house, and my dad patted me and said, "Good girl." [Laughter]

RM: What a story.

MM: I expected repercussions but not a word was ever said.

RM: Were there any more taunts of "dirty dago?" Did that end it?

MM: It ended it as far as I was concerned. [Laughter]

RM: But did they still do it?

MM: I guess they always did. It was things like somebody would have a birthday party and everybody in school would be invited except the Italians.

RM: Was there any other discriminations against the poor, for instance?

MM: There weren't any poor—everybody was the same.

RM: Including Mrs. Humphrey.

MM: Yes, we were all the same level. When I look back on it, I think my dad must have made pretty good money in that bar. Because one of the social things was your toilet, and he hired this carpenter that was in town and we had the nicest toilet of anybody.

RM: You had the nicest outhouse in town.

MM: [Laughs] It was the biggest. It was a three-holer, and the third was built low for the kids. We had a nice home. My brothers had their own cabin, and it was big. The Bonis did that, too. When you have that many kids . . . and we had different men, friends of my parents, who lived with us, and they slept in there, too.

RM: In the bunkhouse, in effect.

MM: Yes, like a bunkhouse.

RM: Were the girls forbidden to go in the bunkhouse?

MM: Well, there was no reason; who wanted to go in there? My sister and I slept in the house. And we had three cellars, which was unusual.

RM: How did that work?

MM: There was one off the kitchen built into the hill, and that's where my mother hung meat and groceries. In the back bedroom, there was another one that you could open a trap door and go down the stairs. It was dark and cold, and it was for wine. Then you could go outside at our front porch, and there was another thing that you'd pull up, and that was another wine cellar.

RM: Did your dad make wine?

MM: No, he didn't know how. Where he came from, there was no agriculture—it was strictly copper mining. My mother, being the farmer, made the wine. Every year, she would tell him what grapes to get and he would order them from somewhere.

RM: Were they shipped into Tonopah and then up to Manhattan? Probably on the railroad? Was the railroad still there?

MM: It might have been, but I can remember these big trucks delivering cases of grapes.

RM: And did he sell it in the bars?

MM: No, that was for our use.

RM: Did you have wine at every meal?

MM: Yes.

RM: Where was your dad's bar?

MM: It was downtown, what was considered downtown. There were four or five buildings all together, and there was his bar, and there was the store, a general store—they were all connected. His second bar was down there. The first one burned in a fire.

RM: And he did pretty well in the bars?

MM: I guess he did because we lived high on the hog.

RM: So you were living high on the hog, but still you were Italians and couldn't make it in the status system?

MM: That's right. I guess the same was true of the Francisco family.

RM: Talk about them, now.

MM: They spoke the same dialect, Piedmontese; they were also from the Piedmont area. They could communicate quite easily, whereas the Bonis were different. They were from north Italy, but it was the northeast part and they spoke a completely different dialect.

RM: Even though it was Italian.

MM: At one time, Italy was made up of all these different dialects. When Mussolini came into power, he made one—Toscano—the official language. So that now, from what I understand, the dialects are slowly dying out—everybody speaks Toscano.

RM: Do you speak the dialect?

MM: I used to, but I've been away from it so many years, I've forgotten it.

RM: Would you be able to understand it if somebody spoke to you?

MM: Probably; I'd get the gist of what they were saying.

RM: Did you ever go over to the old country?

MM: I did. I went over in 1959. My mother's youngest sister was still alive, and I got to meet her and see the home that they lived in, this little village called Moncucco. It was very interesting.

RM: So part of the family stayed and part of the family left. One thing I've always wondered about the immigrants that came to this country—it must have been heartbreaking to raise children and have them go away, and in a lot of cases never see them again.

MM: I know, it must have been. This happened to so many immigrants that came over, and they never saw their parents again.

RM: I know. So the parents would be heartbroken, and in a sense, the children who left would be also; they had to cut those ties. I've always wondered how people dealt with that.

MM: When I got involved in genealogy, and I traced our Brackett family in Utah, Merle and I made a trip to meet them; they would have been my first cousins. I was quite surprised that not one of them had pictures of our grandmother—not one of them. It just happened that I had a lot of pictures made and gave each one a picture. They asked, "Who is this?"

I said, "That's your grandmother." Her name was Madaline, also. I was named for her—Maddalena. As I got to know these people, I guess their fathers had married women who weren't interested in their mother-in-law, and they didn't write. Whereas my mother was a writer—she wrote to everybody, and she wrote continuously to my grandmother. She would send us pictures.

RM: Would anybody have saved the letters your mother wrote?

MM: I would doubt it.

RM: They'd be treasures now, wouldn't they, telling about life here from your mother's perspective?

MM: Oh, yes. My mother would write and tell her about each child. I'd be playing and she used to call me in and she would write out something, "I'm sending you a lot of love and kisses," and she would write it in Italian and have me copy it, and then sign it.

RM: Oh, how sweet.

CHAPTER TWO

RM: Talk about your father earning a living, working in the mines, and then running both of his bars.

MM: I know he had a lease for something on this Manhattan Gold, and he worked that mine alone. Sometimes he used to take me with him. He would come by the house and tell my mother to put me in overalls, and he would take me with him, and I just loved it.

RM: You would go down in the mine with him?

MM: Well, it was a tunnel. I can remember going in with him, and he was running a compressor and then he would get dirt and whatnot and fill one of these little cars, and then he would put me on top, and away we'd go out to the dump. Then would come lunch, and that was special [laughs] because there was the two of us. He would come out with French bread, salami, or cheese, and give me pieces.

RM: Did he take wine at lunch?

MM: Yes.

RM: Was his mine successful?

MM: I don't know. I would imagine it must have been successful. But then he went to work at the White Caps, and he and two other men were leasing what they called the third level. He was working in water, and they think that he slipped or something and reached to support himself and grabbed a live wire, so it killed him instantly.

RM: Electrocuted him.

MM: Yeah. And ten cents worth of friction tape would have prevented his death. He had the biggest funeral, according to this newspaper. None of this being in a home—they rented Toiyabe Hall, the big hall. My dad was a 32nd degree Mason. He was also very active in the Eagles Lodge. According to the old paper I've got, it was the Eagles who conducted the service and all. He was buried out of that hall, and it was packed.

RM: What year was that?

MM: 1933 or '34.

RM: When the Depression was really going.

MM: Oh, yes. And then my mother took in boarders.

RM: His accident must have been awful. Here's a widow with . . . how many children did she have still in the house?

MM: She had five. And it was on a Monday, because she was washing clothes. When there was an accident in the mines, all the workers came down. All these cars started coming, and we saw them go to town. The general hangout was a store called Rippies , and all these cars were there. My brother John looked out. He said, "Something happened in one of the mines. I'll go down to Rippies and find out." Within five minutes, he was back and yelling, "Come on, Mom—it's Pop." So she ran and got in the car and they left, but somebody stopped him and told him it was too late. Then, of course, I recall all the women in town came.

RM: To provide comfort and aid. And what happened after the funeral?

MM: Well, she found out she had debts. One of the first persons to come to collect money . . . he had two partners in this third level. One man came and told my mother that my dad owed him \$200 on this partnership deal, and my mother said, "I don't have it, but the first \$200 I get, I'll pay you." The other partner liked my mother—in fact, later on, he proposed marriage to her—and he came over, and she told him about it, and he started swearing. He said, "He came to me, and I paid him the \$200." Later, in cleaning out the saloon and cash register and all, there was a thing, "IOU," and "paid"—my dad had paid him. So my dad had paid him, this other partner had paid him, and my mother paid him.

RM: How low can you get?

MM: The other partner, Bill Donald, wanted to take him out and lynch him. But my mother was, I've always said, the truest Christian I've ever known. She never ran out of cheeks. She firmly believed if you do something wrong, you have to live with it. When Bill Donald wanted to take him on and let the whole town know, she said, "No, he has to live with himself. Just let him be."

RM: And so he got \$600 when he was owed \$200.

MM: That's right.

RM: Whatever happened to him? Did he get his just reward or not? [Laughter]

MM: I don't think so.

RM: What a story. And how lowdown can you get, to do that to a widow woman?

MM: This is true. And then my mother took in boarders, and she was a tremendous cook.

RM: Italian cooking?

MM: Of course, all Italian. Her raviolis . . . do you know Bill Roberts?

RM: Yes, I do.

MM: Bill Roberts's father was a close friend of my brother, Johnny. He used to rave about my mother's raviolis. The last time I saw his father, he asked me if I would give him my mother's ravioli recipe, which I did.

RM: Can a person make it from the recipe, or does it take the hands of an artist?

MM: I have to decipher all my mother's recipes. It was, "Salt pork the size of two eggs," and I worked hard to figure out "salt pork the size of two eggs" is equivalent to a half-cup.

RM: Do you have your mother's cooking skills?

MM: Yes, I learned to cook all of her foods.

RM: What other dishes did she prepare?

MM: She cooked with a lot of veal, and she would stuff these little veal steaks. It was a dish called rolladini—it means they're rolled up. They're cooked with a lot of garlic, parsley, and salt pork. But you never know what's in them. [Laughter]

She could cook, and then she took in boarders, and naturally you could only accommodate so many—I think she could only accommodate ten or 12.

Then one interesting thing happened. This one little peanut-sized man, a Johnny-come-lately here, came to her and introduced himself. He had come from San Francisco. He was very sickly, and he was told to move to a higher climate—Manhattan is about 7,500 feet high. He begged my mother—he said, "I understand you've got this sick daughter, and that you cook in just butter and olive oil, and that food would be so good for me." She said she was sorry, but she just didn't have any room. He said, "Well, where are you feeding your children?"

She said, "They have to eat in the kitchen."

He said, "Please, Mrs. Brackett, if you'll take me as a boarder, let me eat with your children." And she did. He was the only boarder who ate with us kids. It cost \$40 month. For breakfast they could have anything they wanted, they carried a lunch, and then dinner, seven days a week. My older sister waited on tables and worked. Every payday, or when he'd pay her the \$40, he gave my sister 50 cents and he gave my mother a dollar tip, which was quite a bit.

RM: Yes, that was nice. Talk about your father's partner who proposed.

MM: My mother was in her early 40s when my dad was killed. And she was a very attractive woman, 5'7". She had kind of auburn hair, that reddish-brown color, and she had the bluest eyes, blue-blue like the sky. The first seven years that she was widowed—I kept track, because I was snooping, I was always by her side—seven different men proposed marriage to her.

RM: Did they court her or just kind of propose out of the blue?

MM: Oh, they would come over and talk to her, and she'd talk to them. I begged her to marry Bill Donald, the partner; I really liked him. I wanted a replacement for a father but she didn't want anybody—she didn't want to get married, period.

RM: Why do you think that was?

MM: I think it would be tough being married to the old type of Italian because they're very domineering. When she got out from under that and she could do what she wanted to do, she loved her freedom. She took in boarders and saved enough money that, in four years, she come to Reno and bought a two-story house on Lake Street—it was just four years old.

RM: Do you remember the address?

MM: 538 Lake Street. It was the Depression, and it was furnished, and there was a piano, and I played the piano.

RM: What did she pay for it, do you know?

MM: She paid \$4,000.

RM: And she had saved \$4,000? She was saving more than \$1,000 year?

MM: Yes, because she had a cushion to fall back on. She wasn't so gung-ho on banks, you know; she was pretty hostile to George Wingfield. [Laughs] She blamed him for the bank failure. My brother Johnny always told a story of when she selected this house. She chose it on Lake Street because Johnny would want to go to college. Tony and Blanche were in high school and I was in junior high. It was centrally located where the schools were all close, and that's why she chose the home. But it was beautiful—hardwood floors throughout.

RM: And furnished?

MM: And it was furnished. John told the story that he had \$4,000 cash in his pocket, and when they closed the deal, he took that \$4,000 out. He said he was terrified. [Laughs]

RM: And so she owned it free and clear from her hard work.

MM: Yes. There was a big room upstairs and a big double bathroom, and she turned that into an apartment and rented it for \$20 a month. We had a garage that was long, where you'd put one car in after the other. She found an unemployed carpenter who made it into two studio apartments. And those were rented before they were even finished for \$20 a month.

RM: So she was getting \$60 a month rent.

MM: Plus my dad being killed on the job, that was the first year of workmen's compensation. I have to tell you about the ladies from this literary club. They wanted to know everybody's business, and they knew my mother was getting money, a check. They didn't know how much, and they weren't going to approach her and ask her. The postmistress was a good member of the club and she took the envelope when it came and gave it to another good member. This lady came to my mother and said, "Oh, I got this in my box, and I opened it, and I looked at this check, and I said, 'Who could be sending me this money?' Then I looked and saw that it's Mrs. Brackett. Oh, I'm so sorry I opened it." But now everybody knew what my mother was getting.

RM: What was she getting?

MM: It was \$36 a month for her, and \$18 for each minor child.

RM: So she could live on that and she had saved her money in the boardinghouse. So they bought the house and she rented rooms, and was still getting her workmen's' compensation check, so she could survive.

MM: And she lived very well. She got so she loved—when she'd go to church—these big picture hats; she'd get dressed up fit to kill. [Laughs]

RM: And she was still a relatively young woman. What year did you move up to Reno?

MM: Let's see, my dad was killed in '33; we moved here in '37. The Depression was going full blast. Everybody on that block was getting all this food and the Irish family got whole wheat flour, and they hated it.

RM: You mean here in Reno?

MM: Yes. They brought the ten pounds of flour to my mother and they said, "We may be poor, but we're not peasants, and we won't eat that." My mother had never seen whole wheat flour. [Laughs]

RM: Did she take it?

MM: She took it and made pancakes with it.

RM: She was a very resourceful woman, wasn't she?

MM: Yes, she was a creative cook. In Manhattan we had produce that would come to town in a truck once a week. He would start at the bottom of town and he'd come up to our house, and he always stopped there because he liked to come in, and my mother would fix him lunch, a salami sandwich or something, and then he would do the rest of the town. To repay her, on his way out, whatever he had left over, he would give to her. One time he had a case full of seedless grapes, and he gave it to her. The boarders were not going to eat seedless grapes so

my mother cleaned them, put them on to cook, added some lemon, and that night the boarders had gooseberry pie. [Laughter] They loved it. Or he gave her a whole bunch of carrots, and she'd make carrot pie and tell them it was pumpkin.

RM: And it's hard to tell the difference?

MM: They couldn't. [Laughter]

RM: That's good. What was the transition from Manhattan to Reno like for you kids?

MM: We give her a bad time. We didn't want to leave Manhattan. I didn't want to leave, because, in particular, I used to watch my brothers and my older sister . . . they'd have these balls in Tonopah, the charity ball, and my sister would always get a new formal for it and get all dressed up. I looked forward to growing up and doing that, too, and I didn't get the chance. We gave her a bad time, all of us, except the brother that was going to college. But after a while we made friends and we forgot all about Manhattan.

RM: What happened to your brothers and sister?

MM: The oldest brother, Lou, studied correspondence courses—he was one of the first diesel mechanics. In fact, he got a deferment when World War II came because his job was to keep the diesels rolling, the diesel trucks.

RM: Because it was that important to the war effort, I'll bet.

MM: Apparently. John majored in journalism at UNR, and he went to work for the Journal, the Reno paper. Then he worked his way up and bought stock in Spiedel, and ultimately became a multi-millionaire.

RM: What was Spiedel?

MM: Well, the paper would change hands, like John was transferred to Visalia and he was managing editor. And they would get stock options. I think there were about 18 men that took advantage of the stock options—all of them became millionaires.

RM: What was the name of the newspaper chain?

Merle: The Gazette Journal.

MM: It belonged to them but they owned them all throughout the U.S.

RM: Did he leave Reno?

MM: He was transferred to Visalia, and that's where he raised his children. And my sister Blanche married a mining man; she's in Concord, California, now. He was an alcoholic, terrible.

RM: Yes, mining people have trouble prospering [laughs]—it's a fact of life.

MM: That boozing will get them. And the other brother, Tony, spent time in the 7th Cavalry—Custer's old cavalry. He loved it, and he loved his horses.

RM: Really? Was he a professional military man?

MM: Well, no. He came on out—a horse kicked him, and he had a lot of nose problems, and they kept trying to break his nose and repairing it, and every time it got worse. So he got out of the service and then was a carpenter in California.

And then I turned around . . . when I was barely 17, World War II came and they stationed 50 soldiers around here—oh, ratty-ta-ta, we're all patriotic. I ran off and married one, got pregnant; never left my mama.

RM: You stayed home?

MM: Yes, and he was shipped out. When he came back three or four years later, I couldn't remember what he looked like.

RM: Did you correspond with him at all?

MM: Oh, yes, we wrote. But that marriage didn't last long.

RM: You did marry him.

MM: Oh, yes, and then divorced him, and I had a daughter from that marriage, Ellen. He went his way and I remarried, and that husband adopted my daughter, and we went on and had a son, Barry. That marriage lasted a little over ten years, and then I was alone for 16 years.

RM: And how did you earn a living?

MM: I dealt at The Mapes.

RM: Oh my gosh, you were a dealer? Tell me about that.

MM: I went to school with Gloria Mapes, and I had a really good relationship with Mama Mapes. She would get upset with Gloria. I worked day shift for the most part, and she would come down and look for my table. She'd go to the pit boss and say, "Tell those people to leave—I want to talk to Madaline."

And he would just go over and say, "We're closing the game." [Laughter]

Then she'd come and plunk in the middle of the table and talk to me about Gloria, and say, "I wish you'd talk to her."

RM: What kind of problems was Gloria having? Anything serious?

MM: Gloria married and then divorced, and she had a son, and Mrs. Mapes wanted to raise that son. Gloria remarried, a rancher in Smith Valley, and she went to live on the ranch and Mrs. Mapes was very upset that Gloria was taking that boy. She'd tell me, "You go talk to her." It was ridiculous.

RM: Now the Mapes was the Mapes Hotel, right, and the casino was downstairs?

MM: Yes. And they had the Sky Room for a while, and that had a few games.

RM: When did you start dealing there?

MM: I think it was in '47, '48.

RM: How did you learn to deal? Were you dealing 21?

MM: Yes. I went out on a double date, and it happened that the other girl was a dealer. I was so impressed with her. And I was working out at the Reno Army Airbase.

RM: What were you doing there?

MM: Running a donut machine—I had a donut and coffee counter, running this and making donuts. And this Jeanette was telling me, "You ought to come to work and learn how to deal. It pays \$15 a day." Plumbers were making \$8 a day. She said, "I'd help you get on," and she did, but this was at The Palace.

RM: Where was that?

MM: It was on the corner of Commercial and Center Street. It's all Harrah's now—Harrah's has gobbled up everything. But she introduced me to Baldy West, who was a Fallon native, and you started out shilling. The pay was \$5 a day but we made tips, and I made more money shilling than I did running the donut machine.

RM: How did you get tips shilling?

MM: Well, you might be on the dice table, and you might shoot up a good hand. Somebody would make money, and they would turn around and give you \$5.

RM: So you were shilling on all of the things, dice and 21.

MM: Just those two.

RM: Oh, okay, you weren't shilling on roulette. Why don't you explain what a shill does?

MM: A shill simply fills in and acts like a customer, but people who know how to gamble would prefer playing with just a shill than they would with other players. A shill cannot hit 12 or a soft 17—they have to stand. It's safer to play with a shill than it is with another player.

RM: What's a soft 17?

MM: Six and an ace, or any combination with an ace that you could hit it and give it . . .

RM: Why is that?

MM: The shills have a pat way to play. This is where you take people who are high rollers—most of the high rollers come out on the graveyard shift so they'll just play with a shill and not other customers, because it's the other customers that can ruin them. A good player will play just with a shill.

RM: How do you know it's a shill?

MM: Because they always sit in the middle of the table. They're given \$20, they only bet \$1 at a time, and they can generally play all day on \$20, give or take—you never get very much.

RM: So a savvy player can spot a shill pretty quick?

MM: They know them right away.

RM: And they're not offended by a shill—in fact, they like them.

MM: They like them, and most of them even know them by their first name.

RM: Do they still use shills?

MM: I don't think so. I've been out of the dealing for so long, I don't know what's going on.

RM: Did you like dealing?

MM: Not really, because it's a stressful job. It's stressful when you're losing, and the floormen put you under pressure—there's a lot of stress.

RM: Why does the floorman put you under pressure? Isn't it due to chance anyway? I mean, how could he blame you for bad luck?

MM: Go in a casino some time and watch where there's a crowd of people and you know somebody is winning, and watch the floormen—they're puffing away on cigarettes—they want to win; they want a winning shift.

RM: Oh, so they tally up at the end of the shift. And if they've lost, then it looks bad for them?

MM: Yes, they'd rather pull a winning shift.

RM: How interesting. How long did you deal?

MM: I dealt for 20 years. Right across the street from the Mapes Hotel was the First National Bank building, and New York Life had offices in there, and the insurance agents used to come through. The Mapes was a very friendly place and you got so you knew everybody. They'd come in and, "Hi, how are you?"

One day, this one agent came to me and he said, "The boss has decided to put on a woman; he thinks that a woman might be able to sell other women." Reno had a big population of dealers, nurses—a lot of women—and the men weren't able to sell to them. He said, "I would at least like you to talk to my manager. His name is Dale Hanson. And I've told him about you, I put your name in because I think you'd be a good salesman. But at least talk to Dale."

And I said, "Oh, yeah."

And this funny little man comes in [laughs] and catches me, "When you get a break, talk to me." He invited me to his home for dinner—just a nice person. Then he told me, "They put in your name, and I'm thinking of putting on a woman agent because the men are not able to reach the women. Maybe it takes a woman to talk to a woman." We dilly-dallied for about three months, and I wasn't sure.

I talked to Mrs. Mapes, and she was a believer in New York Life—she had all New York Life policies. She said, "It's a very fine company." And she said, "Sure, why don't you give it a try? And if it doesn't work out, you've always got a job here."

RM: Oh, isn't that nice.

MM: Yes. Then we finally get down to the nitty-gritty. I had been alone for 14 years and this manager said, "You know, it's a terrific schedule of studying. You'll be studying every day. Every Monday you take a test. You'll be an apprentice for two years. And before I can even sign you up, you have to know Nevada law and go to Carson and take a test on law."

I thought, "Well, we'll give it a try." He made me promise that if he signed me as an agent, I would not marry while I was an apprentice. I laughed at him; I said, "I've been single for 14 years—I'm not going to get married now."

So he coached me on the law—there were only 20 questions—and I went to Carson and took that test, and I passed it. Then I come back and I signed with him. And he personally tutored me on insurance—and it was true, I was studying, studying, studying. I rarely ever went anywhere. In fact, my boy was ready to enter college and I pushed him off with his father because I couldn't cook and take care of him, and I closed my kitchen.

I was to get off my contract May 29 as an apprentice to become a full agent. He had me go as a speaker to Parents Without Partners.

RM: Because you had raised your boy.

MM: There were a lot of women and I'd been a single parent—it would be a natural for me. So I did this, and I liked so many of the people, and I did good business with them. And that's where I met Merle. His name is Merle McKillip. It was just one of those things—we met at Parents Without Partners and we took to each other. It's frightening when I think back, but we only knew each other for two months before we got married. I got off my contract May 29, and we married June 2. We were married 38 years yesterday.

RM: Oh, congratulations; that's wonderful. So you settled here in Reno into this marriage. And how long did you sell insurance?

MM: I put in 20 years.

RM: So you did 20 years as a dealer, and then 20 years selling insurance.

MM: Right. And I did well with it. I really liked it, and I liked the studying. I've always been a reader, so I liked all that studying, and studying law.

RM: And did you have success with women?

MM: Yes, I was successful with selling women. Then the manager at Prudential called me and asked me if I would talk to a young lady that he was thinking of hiring. All eyes were watching to see how I would do. They have a national convention, or meeting, of all the underwriters. And my goodness, they put out a newsletter and said, "We now have a woman agent, so men, please watch your language." [Laughter]

RM: What year did you enter the insurance business?

MM: In '70. I signed my contract May 29, 1970.

RM: And then you quit in 1990?

MM: Yes, and then I started staying home.

RM: That's great.

CHAPTER THREE

RM: Now, let's talk some more about Manhattan and growing up there. What was it like for you as a kid in Manhattan?

MM: There'd be ten or 12 of us kids, and we would go up into the mountains, and we would just hike.

RM: Which way would you go, looking up Main Street? Would you go to the left or the right or straight?

MM: Any way at all; we'd just go up in the mountains. We'd always carry, like, potatoes with us, because we could roast potatoes. We knew where wild celery and wild onions grew; we knew what wild food we could eat.

RM: How did you know that?

MM: The older kids told us. [Laughs] It was just something they knew. And we would be gone all day. And another thing that we used to do—right up above my house, there was a crystal cave. It was a tunnel, and there were numerous tunnels. I don't know who dug it, or if it was a natural, but you would go in that mountain and you'd come out on the other side of it at Erie Street. We used to go in there and we would strip bark off of cedar trees, roll it between our hands, and use newspapers and have cigarettes that were 15 inches long and we would smoke.

RM: Did you inhale?

MM: No, we didn't, we would just puff away on those. When we married, we went to Manhattan on our honeymoon, and there were two bars. At that time, the Manhattan Bar was owned by what we called the one-eyed woman, Fern.

Merle: A big tall gal.

MM: If she didn't like you, she wouldn't even wait on you—she'd give you this sign, and you'd have to go down to the Miner's Bar and drink. She was temperamental. But she was a friend. So we were in the bar, and who came in but Pete Boni and another local—Frank Brotherton was in town. I was talking to them about the crystal cave, and I said that Merle and I had gone up from the Main Street side, and it had caved in. I knew there was the Erie Street side, and I asked Pete Boni, "Do you think you could find the opening?"

Both men thought that was a terrific idea, and they said, "Let's go."

Well, Fern came out, and she had a big ball of twine, and she had a carbide lamp for us, and she said, "You take these." Pete had his dog with him and we went up and found the entrance and we went in. So we go in this cave—it was cold. But we'd come to these openings, and you'd crawl through an opening and then crawl on your belly in tight quarters. Some ways, we could just barely get through, and then here would be another room.

We figured we'd gone down five levels at least when the crystal turned green. And Merle chipped some, and there was still another cave we could have explored, but we decided we'd better get out of there. So we turned around and followed the string—it was a good thing we had it. We wound it up and got back out. We didn't need the carbide lamp because somehow there was light.

RM: Where was it coming from?

MM: I don't know. But we did go back to the bar and give the twine to Fern, and the carbide lamp. It was quite an experience, but I would never do that again.

RM: I would be afraid the string would break—I would want a rope. [Laughter] If the string breaks, and you lose it, then what?

MM: That wouldn't be my fear; it would be a fear of a cave-in. Nobody would ever find us.

RM: You said you wanted to say something about your father.

MM: Yes, I wanted to tell you a story about him. I told you I was very sickly as a child. And he had the bar. Something must have happened mid-week because my mother got all dressed and got me dressed in my good clothes, and my dad put on his suit, and we went to Tonopah. They had the county doctor, an old Dr. Cowden. We were coming back home, and something happened to my dad's car—the radiator was boiling up and all that. In those days, there was just that one-way road; it was corduroy, and only one car could get by. He pulled over as far as he could, and we were just going to sit there. He had commented that maybe somebody in the bar, when we didn't get back by evening, would send somebody to look for us; but in the meantime, we were stranded out there. But they always carried crackers, wine, water, cheese, something to eat, salami.

I don't know how long we were there, but my dad would get out and look down the road in either direction periodically. Then I heard him talk to my mother—he said, "There's a car coming"—dust in the distance. As the car approached, he could make out that it had California license plates but he didn't recognize the car. And as the car got closer—of course, they were going very slow—you couldn't go fast. As they approached us, he naturally assumed they would pull over and stop. There were two men in that car, and they had to get around us, but once they got around us, they stepped on the gas and went by. My dad jumped back in the car—he always carried a gun, a revolver. He got that gun, got out, and started firing and he shot their tires.

The two men got out, put up their hands—"Don't kill us, mister, please!" [Laughter]

And my dad, in his broken English, said, "What's the matter with you? You see-a my wife, and you see-a my baby, and you leave us here in the desert? Now, by God, we all stay together until help comes."

RM: [Laughter] What a story.

MM: Eventually somebody from Manhattan came looking for us. By the time we got back to Manhattan, my dad was best friends with these two men. They were from Hawaii; they were businessmen, but their hobby was mining towns. They were on vacation. They rented their car in California and they wanted to see the Tonopah-Manhattan-Round Mountain area. They wound up staying with us at our home. After that, every year, they came to Manhattan and stayed with us.

RM: And they would have had to fix their tires. Your dad must have been a crack shot.

MM: He must have been pretty good. [Laughter]

RM: What a story, I love it. They didn't know the protocol, those Hawaiian guys.

MM: They had no idea.

RM: Yes, you help somebody who is stranded on the desert. [Laughter] That's a great story. Do you have any more stories like that, growing up in Manhattan?

MM: I've written quite a few to Joni Eastley that she really liked.

RM: I need to get them from her. What was it like for you to go to Tonopah? That was like going to the big city, wasn't it?

MM: Oh, it was exciting. We would start out from Manhattan, and we would have to pass by Pipe Springs.

RM: Where is Pipe Springs?

MM: It's only five miles from Manhattan on the old road.

RM: Where did the old road go?

MM: It went on a summit, and it went . . . there was Pipe Springs—that was our spa. People brought canteens and all, to get that water.

RM: Is it up the hill from Manhattan?

Merle: Right back at about the middle of Manhattan, if you'd go to the right, or south. You go over a little summit, and then you go down, and then there's Pipe Springs—there's a little spring right there.

RM: Okay, so that was the way you went to Tonopah.

MM: Right.

RM: Over the hill and down . . . what's that, Monitor Valley?

MM: I don't know what it is. But we would always stop at Pipe Springs, and that was a treat—that was like a soda fountain, to drink that cool water—oh! And that was the first stop.

Then we would continue, and there was a huge rock they called Elephant Rock and my dad would always stop the car and let all the kids run. If they were big enough, they would climb that rock and play around and get rid of some of their energy, and then back into the car, and then we would go on our way to Tonopah.

RM: How long was the trip to Tonopah?

MM: About an hour.

RM: How often did you go to Tonopah?

MM: At least once a week.

RM: Why did you go that often?

MM: My parents had a lot of Italian friends there, and they would go visit their friends.

RM: So a lot of it was social.

MM: And our treat was always to stop . . . there was a Pollin's soda fountain, and on our way home they always stopped and we all got ice cream.

RM: Was that across from the Mizpah?

MM: Somewhere by the Mizpah.

RM: Did you ever go to a movie at the Butler Theater?

MM: It was there, but we never went. We'd get movies—these traveling men would come to Manhattan and they would show movies in the Toiyabe Hall. And we would get these traveling medicine shows where they would entertain the people, and then they sold who-knows-what. The seating was always the same—the children always sat in the front. We had our Indians, and they sat behind the children, and then the adults sat behind the Indians. I always remember one traveling show . . .

RM: And it was adult Indians or Indian children?

MM: Kids and adults. And this one medicine show, the man was telling about a liniment that he had that, if you had a toothache, just put some of that on your gum, and your toothache would

go away. In fact, he rubbed his wrist, then he took a large needle and ran it through his wrist and he said, "You see, it killed the pain."

Then he went out into the audience to let them feel to make sure that that needle had gone through his wrist. He went back to the adults and then came on up to the Indians, and he got to this one young Indian man who felt it, and he said, "Now to show this really works, I'll take you up there and put this needle through your wrist."

And the Indian said, "No, no, please, ladies first." [Laughter]

RM: Were these shows held in the Toiyabe Hall or outdoors?

MM: Everything was held in the Toiyabe Hall. And the dances. Val Boni had a band. All of us kids would hang around, then our parents would take us out and bed us down in the cars. Val started his dances one hour early so the children had one hour to dance. I think all the kids learned to dance that way. (I danced with my younger brother.)

RM: How many were in the band?

MM: There was Val; he played the drums and his sister played the piano. He had a rancher from Smoky Valley that would play the saxophone.

RM: Do you remember his name?

MM: Sure, Lester Farrington, and the ranch was called Farrington's Ranch.

RM: Were there any others in the band?

MM: Not that I can remember.

RM: How often would they have these dances?

MM: I would say at least once a month. They played at Darroughs Hot Springs. Our parents would take us, and it was always the same procedure—after a while, the kids got bedded down.

RM: And they would go on until all hours of the night?

MM: Oh, they'd dance, and then they'd have food.

RM: And drink?

MM: I'm sure they drank. [Laughter]

RM: Did they have dances anyplace else?

MM: They had them in Round Mountain and they had them in Austin, and then Tonopah.

RM: And you would go to a lot of those?

MM: Well, if my parents went, they would take us.

RM: They didn't leave the kids at home, then?

MM: Oh, no. Mostly it was my older brothers and my older sister that would go to the dances in Tonopah or Austin. I think my brothers chased every girl from Austin to Tonopah. [Laughter]

RM: So dances were held regularly somewhere in the area.

MM: They were a big form of entertainment. And it was always the same—they would always have, like, a midnight snack. Sometimes a girl would pack a lunch, and they would hold her lunch up, and the boys or men would bid on it—the winner got to eat with her.

RM: And they would use the money to pay the musicians?

MM: Yes.

RM: And did you really enjoy those dances?

MM: I enjoyed the ones in Manhattan where Val played and I could dance with my brother. But if you're little, and you're bedded down . . . they put you to bed in the car, and they had an arrangement where one adult would go check on all the kids.

RM: And what time would you go home?

MM: I imagine around 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning.

RM: What else do you recall about living in Manhattan as a kid? What was the school like?

MM: Like I told you, I'd always been sickly and I was used to my naps. They started me in first grade, and I remember it vividly because I was so tired. They had the first four grades and my brother Tony was in the fourth grade, and I was in the first. And of course, the teacher would go from grade to grade, teaching. I was so bored, and I put my head down—I guess I was falling asleep. The teacher happened to be my oldest brother's girlfriend, and I called her Ila; she was always around my house.

RM: You never called her Miss Jones or . . .

MM: Miss Myers. I called her Ila. I must have fallen asleep, because she abruptly woke me up and told me to sit up straight. I told her, "But Ila, I'm tired, and I'm going to go home. My mother will be waiting for me to take my nap." [Laughter]

And she told me she was going to put me up in front of the room as the dunce. She came over to my desk to get me and I started screaming. I grabbed hold of this desk—it was wrought iron, so I could get a good hold on it. I was screaming and it upset Tony, and he left his desk and came over and he was hitting her. She got ahold of him and she was fighting us both. Well, I leaned over and I got ahold of her leg and I bit her. My brother, trying to fight her off, bit her on the arm. But eventually she got us both, and she made us dunce caps and sat us both in front of the class. [Laughs]

RM: Oh, my Lord, she won the confrontation?

MM: She won it. [Laughter]

RM: I'm fascinated by the fact that you were so sickly when you were young, and yet you are now so vigorous and have apparently had a really vigorous life.

MM: Dr. Cowden told my mother if she could just raise me until I was seven, I would be okay, and that's what happened—I was okay. I do think it was the marvelous food that she gave me, rich in iron . . .

RM: We haven't mentioned religion. Did your folks bring a religion with them from the old country? Was it Catholic?

MM: All Italians are Catholic. But a priest had my dad whipped in Italy, and he never forgave the church, and this is why they were married by a justice of the peace in Rhyolite. He would have nothing to do with it. And after a while, my mother got kind of cool on it. None of us were baptized. It was after my dad was killed and my mother had a major operation, a very dangerous operation . . .

RM: What was wrong?

MM: It was the gall bladder, and in those days that was major. She said she heard somebody walk into her room and tell her, "Baptize your children, and you'll get well." And so she said, "I will." Well, when she came back to Manhattan, the only ones she could control were my sister and me and Tony—the other two were too big. But she got together with her friend Mrs. Francisco and got their three girls, and we all went to Tonopah and were baptized in the Catholic church there.

RM: Do you remember the priest's name?

MM: I think it was Father Devlin.

RM: And have you been a strong Catholic?

MM: Not at all. When we moved to Reno, I would go to church because my friends were all Catholic. And my mother started going to church. The Italians had one Italian priest that was over them all, and they used to fight. They initiated pew rent—you had to pay 10 cents for your seat. My mother started to go to church and the priest stopped her and said, “Now we’re starting to charge pew rent—it’s only a dime.”

My mother turned on him, and she said, “You mean, I have to pay now to pray?” She said, “No, I’ll take that dime and put another dime with it, and I can go to the movie.” She loved movies, and that’s just what she did. In Reno, we had four movie theaters—one you could still do for a dime. She went to every movie, four nights a week at least. The only time she stayed home in the evening was when she had seen every movie.

RM: And were you a movie fan?

MM: Well, sure, I liked movies—I would go. But as far as religion goes, I started thinking about religion. I left the Catholic Church and I wanted to replace it, and I started studying the Mormon Church, and it has a lot of good features to it. Then I went up to the U and took a course in world religions, and the more I studied, I wound up becoming an agnostic, and that’s what I am now.

RM: Why did they whip your father in Italy? What had he done?

MM: He never said what he had done, but he said the priest gave him one of the worst whippings with his belt. My father’s best friend was that Catholic priest in Tonopah, Father Devlin. The two of them would get drunk together, but the only time my dad would go to church was for a funeral or a wedding.

RM: Was he a believer, do you think?

MM: I don’t think so.

RM: But yet, he was good friends with the priest.

MM: Oh, yes. The priest would come into Manhattan and go into the bar.

RM: Did they have a Catholic church in Manhattan?

MM: I think that church that’s up on the hill was Catholic, but I’m not sure.

RM: But you didn’t go there.

MM: No. We took in some services, but not that much.

RM: Do you think your mother ended up agnostic?

MM: I don't think so; I think she was Catholic through and through. She had an experience after we moved here. My sister was working in a drugstore part time, and she would come home and she had these terrible pains. The doctor said she had appendix problems, so they operated on her for that. And the pains continued and my mother felt that if she had to have another operation, that would mean we'd have to go back to Manhattan for money.

RM: You couldn't afford to live here anymore, because you had to pay out of your pocket.

MM: Yes, and there was no health insurance. So she sent her to San Francisco to this clinic, and the diagnosis came back that she had gallstones. Where my mother was from, there was this one saint, Saint Don Bosco—he was the founder of what we have as Boys Town. And he came from that part of Italy, ten miles from her little village.

She started praying . . . I think they call it a novena, where they pray morning and night for 14 days. I would see her in her bedroom on her knees, praying. We had all these relatives in Las Vegas and out of nowhere, one of those Graglias sent her a book that was written by an osteopath about how you could cure almost anything through foods. And there was a diagnosis for gallstones—a fourth-ounce of lemon juice mixed up with a fourth-cup of olive oil, beat together and drink, go to bed, and do it three nights—Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday—and then let the rest of the week go by and resume, and you'll pass the stones. It said if you haven't had them for a long time, the stones will be green, and they'll float on the water. If you've had them a long time, they will be black. Well, why not try it? And my sister passed those stones.

RM: No kidding? Now, that was here in Reno?

MM: That was here in Reno. And we had a neighbor that was a Christian Scientist that came over to borrow the book. Of course, they don't believe in surgery or doctors. But she, too, passed some gallstones, and hers were black. Isn't that amazing?

RM: Yes. Do you have the book or remember the title?

MM: I wish I did. I don't remember anything. And my sister, too—we don't know what happened to it. Probably loaned it to somebody and never got it back, and forgot about it.

RM: But they sent it to her out of the blue—they didn't know that she was having problems, or did they?

MM: My mother might have written to them, but it just seemed . . . this came, and the treatment for gallstones was all underlined.

RM: And she had been praying.

MM: She did her novena.

RM: It makes you wonder, doesn't it?

MM: It does—it made me wonder.

RM: How did you deal with the cold weather in the winter in Manhattan?

MM: We had a kitchen stove that we kept going, and a big stove in the living/dining combination, and that was always kept going; I guess they banked it over. Our bedrooms were like a refrigerator. We would undress in the kitchen where it was warm, and of course we had flannel nightgowns—even my dad had a flannel nightgown. He wore a long white flannel nightgown—it looked just like my mother's. [Laughs]

RM: Did you have a chamber pot?

MM: We did. My sister and I had ours, and my mother had hers, and I assume my brothers had theirs.

RM: Oh, because you didn't go in the bunkhouse? [Laughter]

MM: No. They had their own stove and kept it warm.

RM: At what age did a boy go to the bunkhouse? What was the practice, I wonder?

MM: I can remember my youngest brother . . . they had a cot in the bedroom with my sister and me, and then one day he was moved to the bunkhouse.

RM: And how old would he have been, do you think?

MM: Four years older than me—he was probably ten. He had the two other brothers out there to look out for him.

RM: Did other families besides the Bonis have that custom with big families, that the boys would have their own quarters?

MM: I would imagine they must have. With the Humphreys, there was just Millie and her sister, but I think she had five brothers. They only had a two-bedroom home, so they must have had some arrangement like that for the boys.

RM: Was Millie younger than you?

MM: No, she was the same age as my sister, five years older. I have pictures of Millie bringing those horses—she called them Banjo and something. She'd walk them down and then ask Blanche to come and ride with her.

RM: What other kinds of things did you do as a kid there?

MM: Besides climbing the mountains, we had our favorite game. The bigger boys would get raisins and we'd get a jar, and we would spend hours looking for scorpions and potato bugs. The jar was to push the bugs in. Then we would go to the school ground where the earth was tamped down—it was almost like cement—and shake out a scorpion, and then a potato bug, and watch them fight, and see which one would win. And you never knew.

RM: Sometimes the potato bug would win?

MM: Oh, yes.

RM: I'm not clear what a potato bug looks like.

MM: They're ugly.

RM: Are they those black, needle-looking things?

MM: No, those are stink bugs. We had those, too. A potato bug has a big round head and a big round body, and they're kind of amber colored.

RM: Do they eat potato plants? People didn't grow potatoes in Manhattan, did they?

MM: No, they didn't grow anything. I don't know where they got the name—that's what we called them. And they would always be under rocks, just like scorpions. We'd look under rocks. They would fight with the scorpion. And you just never knew. And we'd bet raisins.

RM: And then you would eat your winnings, huh?

MM: That's right. [Laughter] That was a big-time thing. We spent a lot of time down in the gulch and we'd look for horned toads. I think every home had cages of horned toads. [Laughs] And they would catch chipmunks.

RM: And what would they do with them?

MM: Put them in cages just to have as a pet.

RM: Did they make good pets?

MM: Well, not really. They didn't do anything.

RM: They're still just a wild chipmunk?

MM: They'd get kind of tame, but it was just something to do. We'd go down in the gulch, and coming back, they had houses of prostitution, three of them. They were black; they were covered with tarpaper. We kids knew what they were.

RM: You knew what was going on at an early age?

MM: Well, we knew that something went on that wasn't . . .

RM: Did you know about sex?

MM: No. But we would come up the gulch, and there was always this one woman that would come out with lemonade and cookies. And we just knew, "Don't tell Mama."

RM: That she was feeding you?

MM: Don't tell Mama that we stopped and talked. And this was with all the kids.

RM: Do you remember her name?

MM: Ella.

RM: Was she an older woman or a young woman?

MM: Well, when we were little, they all looked old. I think you mentioned her in your book. At noon every day, people went to the post office, and that was the social hour while they were waiting for the mail. You'd talk—you know, the adults could talk. And Ella and two others would come up.

RM: And they had their own houses?

MM: Yes, and they wore a lot of makeup. They would come up to the post office, and they always stood off. No one talked to them and they didn't talk to anybody. If we kids were with our parents, we might sneak a look at them and want to smile or something, but we didn't acknowledge them.

RM: Were they always the same three women, or was there turnover?

MM: While I was there, there were just the same three.

RM: And you were there what?

MM: Eleven years.

RM: So they were really social fixtures there, weren't they?

MM: Oh, yes. Once, I went back to Manhattan and I met one of my brothers there, and we were looking for purple bottles. At one time, we used to find purple bottles and line them up and shoot them. Oh, terrible. This particular year, we were looking for them and we could find none. My brother thought about it, and he said, "I can remember where those warehouses used to be. I'll bet we'll find something." He took my son, who was about 12 at the time, and they went down. And you know, he hit it, and they dug a pit and found a good case of Mums champagne bottles. They were white, but they were so old that if you put them out, they would turn purple. That tells you they must have had some good parties.

RM: I'll bet they did. I don't think those women were getting rich, though. But I don't know, maybe they were doing better than you think. This would have been in the '30s, right?

MM: Oh, yes.

RM: Was the dredge going when you were there?

MM: No, it came after.

RM: Were there people working in the placer when you were there? There must have been some.

MM: Oh, there must have been. The mines must have been doing pretty good because my mother was shocked, once we moved to Reno, to find out that there was a Depression. There was not a Depression in Manhattan.

RM: You could always go down and make a little money on the placer if you had to, I've been told.

MM: It must have been something because when we moved to Reno, the welfare truck would come by . . . we had the Irish family, and they'd leave all this food. Next door to us was a German family, and they'd leave food. My mother qualified to be on it, but to her, charity was a dirty word—she'd have no part of it.

CHAPTER FOUR

RM: But she did take the workmen's comp.

MM: Oh, you bet.

RM: She didn't consider that charity.

MM: No. But after my dad died, all these attorneys came to town and talked to her—they wanted to sue the mining company for negligence. And she didn't believe in that—she called it blood money.

But she made a lifelong friend. He was an attorney at the time, Mastretti. He had been an Austin cowboy who took a correspondence course and became an attorney, and later he became a superior court judge. He was always a friend. He loved her cooking and if she didn't invite him over, he'd call. He was so likeable and down-to-earth, and his wife was so uppity-up.

Anyway, it was one of those things—when I went dealing, Judge Mastretti by then was an old man. Every Sunday he would come to the Mapes, and he'd always wait for me to get off on a break. We'd go out and have coffee, and he would ask about each family member, always.

RM: So he had contacted her when she was still in Manhattan.

MM: He was one of those that wanted to sue the company.

RM: Now, you said your mother never remarried.

MM: Yes. She loved her freedom. She loved handling her own money. Unfortunately, she had a stroke—she was only 58—that took her life.

RM: Oh, my God. Do you think that she was happy with her decision to immigrate to America?

MM: Oh, yes.

RM: She probably had a better life here, even with its difficulties, than if she'd have stayed in Italy?

MM: Yes. She said they worked so hard, and they raised silkworms.

RM: In Italy?

MM: Italy was a major producer of silk for quite a few years. They raised silkworms, and to raise silkworms, you had to grow mulberry trees.

RM: And then of course, with the Italian artistry, they made beautiful silk fabrics, didn't they?

MM: Yes, beautiful.

RM: Was there any artistry in your family, reflecting the Italian love of art?

MM: My mother did beautiful work, embroidery and all that—beautiful. She was a knitter and a crotcheter. I think all Italian women were taught when they were five. I was taught. In fact, I still knit.

RM: What else do you recall about your childhood in Manhattan?

MM: It was pleasant. Childhood is so wonderful. George Bernard Shaw said, “Childhood is so wonderful, what a pity to waste it on children.” [Laughter] It was so peaceful, and the food was good; there were no worries. Just have fun, go out and play.

RM: What did you do on the long winter evenings?

MM: Oh, those were wonderful. We collected pine nuts—we would use gunny sacks—and we’d have two or three gunny sacks full of pine nuts.

RM: Just the pine nut, not the cones?

MM: Just the pine nut. And on these long winter nights, one of my older brothers would make candy and we would eat fudge. Or when my mother made donuts (she made donuts at night), we would have her donuts. She’d always have apples in the basement or the cellar, and one of us would peel those apples, and we’d have donuts with hot applesauce, and we loved it. Or she would roast chestnuts, and we all sat around this great big dining room table. Each of us had our own little paring knife, and we would eat chestnuts. My parents were great at telling stories, and it was so entertaining.

RM: What kind of stories did they tell?

MM: As I found out later on, it was stories about an opera. Every opera has a story, and they were telling us the stories. I realized this when one year I was taking literature and had to read some of the operas.

In the winters, we had so much snow that we would climb up the mountain and just have a piece of cardboard to slide down, so we played in the snow. This was in the early evening. We would come in and we’d be wet and all, and that was when she always had cocoa, and we would have hot cocoa or something to eat.

RM: What was a typical breakfast in your home in Manhattan?

MM: Big. Always pancakes, oatmeal, or cream of wheat and pancakes, bacon and eggs.

RM: She would have all of that for breakfast?

MM: Whatever we wanted. She always had a good breakfast. Lunch was just a sandwich, and then dinner was big.

RM: Did she bake her own bread?

MM: No.

RM: What kind of sandwiches would you have for lunch?

MM: Salami and cheese.

RM: Probably bought in Tonopah?

MM: She used to order them. She got all of her breads from a Purity French Bakery here in Reno. These were people who had been in Manhattan. Once a week, we got this big box of French bread and sandwich bread. And she ordered other things—a lot of cans of tuna came from somewhere in Sacramento. I think it was by mail.

RM: And then, what did dinner consist of?

MM: Dinner was chicken every Sunday, raviolis, or it might be spaghetti. Our type of Italian specialized in a pasta dish that we call gnocchi. They've become very popular now—they're a cooked potato that you use to make a pasta. You make them into little balls and boil them and put spaghetti sauce on them. The Germans make the same thing and they're called potato dumplings, but it's the same basic recipe.

RM: And of course she made her own spaghetti sauce, didn't she?

MM: Oh, yes.

RM: And it was probably really good.

MM: I always thought it was good, but people [laughs] love that sauce until they find out she made it out of chicken livers, ground up and cooked, and then a lot of porcini mushrooms. The part of Italy she's from they use porcini, the real good mushrooms that are so pungent. In fact, if you buy porcini, I think they're about \$110 a pound. They're the elite of all the mushrooms.

RM: Really, and they're from Italy and that's the only place they grow?

MM: As far as I know.

RM: And she used those?

MM: She didn't use those, but we would go out on the ranches around Manhattan, and there were a lot of mushrooms. She would pick all those mushrooms and dry them. She always had a drawer full of dried mushrooms. Of course, once you dry them, they're more pungent. She would reconstitute them by putting them back into boiling water. And then everything went through a grinder—the chicken livers, the mushrooms, onions, garlic.

RM: She must have known her mushrooms.

MM: She was cautious. She'd fry mushrooms, and she'd always put a silver dollar in because she thought that if they were poisonous, the dollar would turn black. She believed it but it's not true.

RM: So I guess, at worst, she was lucky?

MM: She only knew a couple of types of mushrooms, and she never varied. Even when we moved to Reno, she and other Italians would go out and pick mushrooms. She never deviated from the ones she knew.

RM: Is there a season for mushrooms?

MM: I don't know. It must have been when it rained, maybe in the spring.

RM: So she brought this skill with her to America.

MM: Yes. She told me that in Italy they would go *campagna*, which means they would go out and work the fields. They always carried a basket and a special knife and a piece of French bread, and maybe cheese or salami, for their lunch because they'd be gone all day. They always had a dog that was specially trained for two things—he was trained to smell the truffles, which are a variety of mushrooms, and to kill vipers, because the fields had all these vipers that were mean, and they would attack.

RM: Do you know what snake it was?

MM: I don't know.

RM: Were they poisonous?

MM: Yes, they were. And she said they kind of let out a whistle before they attacked, like a rattlesnake shakes its tail and rattles to warn you. And these dogs were trained to kill them. She would go, like she said, to *campagna*, and the dog would sniff out if there were any truffles, and she used that knife to would dig them out.

RM: So she found truffles?

MM: Oh, yes. And if there were mushrooms, she'd take mushrooms, too.

RM: And were there quite a few truffles?

MM: Quite a few, I guess.

RM: They're expensive now, aren't they?

MM: Yes. In the family, they would eat the mushrooms but they would go to France and sell the truffles on the open market. They also collected snails that were as big as a baseball—escargot. If they saw those, they collected those, but they all were sold in France, in an open market.

RM: And how far across the border were they from France?

MM: She said she could walk in one hour.

RM: Did she make her own salami?

MM: Yes.

RM: How did she do that?

MM: I don't know. [Laughs] My parents always made their own salami. I remember them in the kitchen, and they had this salami maker or whatever you would call it. They used to make their own salami, and it was so good.

RM: What did they make it from? Did they use scraps?

MM: They always had to go and deal with a rancher to get a steer or veal or pig, whatever, and they would share with their neighbors. I would imagine they made their salami out of pork and a combination of beef, but I don't know. I just remember how good it was to eat.

RM: Did she have tomatoes in her spaghetti sauce?

MM: Yes, but the northern Italians do not use a lot of tomatoes because their season is like Reno—they're up high and the growing season is so short. So their sauces have some tomatoes in them, but not really . . .

RM: The heavy tomato is southern Italian?

MM: That's the southern, mostly.

RM: What's the dominant taste or product in the northern sauce?

MM: I don't know, but everybody seems to like it. We've gone out on potlucks, and if I bring spaghetti, they like it. I think what they like about it—it's not real tomatoey, whereas some of those sauces have so much tomato paste that a lot of people get acid reflux from them. But you won't from mine because I don't use that much tomato.

RM: Do you use the chicken livers?

MM: Yes. It's the only way that I know.

RM: Do you fry the livers first?

MM: Yes, sauté them in butter, and then put them through the grinder with the dried mushrooms that I've had steeping in hot water so they get big. I splurge—I go out and buy the porcini. We belong to two Good Sam groups and for a while there, I was making spaghetti—I was making my own pasta, and then of course my own sauce. I thought, "This is getting pretty expensive, using the porcini," so I tried . . . the Japanese put out a dried mushroom—it's a different variety. I had two pots of steaming water going, one with porcini and one with the Japanese—no comparison in the aroma. The aroma and the flavor of a porcini is just outstanding.

RM: How else did you spend those long winter evenings in Manhattan? Did you play any kind of games, any board games, or anything?

MM: Oh yes, Monopoly. We had more games going.

RM: A lot of popcorn?

MM: Well, later on. After my dad was killed, somebody gave me a popcorn popper for Christmas so we started having popcorn, and we learned how to make popcorn balls. But we made a lot of candy—a lot of fudge, divinity, and penuche.

RM: Did you kids drink milk?

MM: Canned milk.

RM: Some Italians, adults, can't drink milk. It gives them diarrhea because they're intolerant to the lactose in milk. But Northern Italians, I think, can. Could your mother drink milk? If she were to drink a glass or two of milk, would it upset her stomach?

MM: I never saw her drink milk—she always said that was for babies. Occasionally when they'd go out to a ranch, they had milk cans, and they would come home with milk. I always remember how much I loved it—I just loved to drink that milk.

RM: And you can drink milk now?

MM: I'm a big milk drinker.

RM: So you don't have that trait. But it sounds like she might have.

MM: I just don't think that they believed in drinking milk. Like she said, it was for babies. And there was always canned milk at the table. The boarders would come in, and they all liked their oatmeal, and they poured that canned milk on it.

RM: Talk about running the boardinghouse. It must have been an enormous amount of work. How many boarders did she have?

MM: She probably had between ten and 12, but it would have been a tremendous amount of work. I think she was up at 5:00 in the morning. The boarders would come in and they would tell her what they wanted—ham and eggs, bacon and eggs . . . and there were always two different kinds of canned fruit on the table. They could even have a steak if they wanted. There was always cream of wheat or oatmeal, and they helped themselves to the oatmeal or whatever, and the fruit, leave an order with her, and when it was ready, she served it to them.

RM: I don't understand how a woman could do that kind of work.

MM: But she did it.

RM: And she didn't have help?

MM: Well, she had my sister.

RM: Was she a big help? How old was she?

MM: She would have been 13, 14. She did a lot. The boarders ordered what they wanted for breakfast, and then they ate. She made their lunches after dinner the night before. The boarders liked pies, so they always had two sandwiches, a thermos of coffee, and a piece of pie—occasionally it might be cake. Their lunch boxes were set out, so when they got through with their breakfast, they came by and picked up their lunch pail and went to work.

RM: Think of the dishes she had to do—it would seem like almost a full-time job doing dishes, let alone cooking.

MM: Yes. But she put my brothers to doing dishes after every meal. One washed dishes, one dried; that took care of that.

RM: Before school?

MM: After breakfast and after dinner. After breakfast, when the boarders were gone, she got in and made her pies, and she'd make a lot of them so that there would be some for their lunches.

RM: And she made them from scratch, the crust and everything?

MM: From scratch. She had a few hours of freedom, and by 2:00, she would be in the kitchen preparing the evening meal.

RM: What would a typical evening meal be for the boarders?

MM: Well, it might be pork chops, mashed potatoes . . .

RM: And how many pounds of pork chops for ten men, or however many?

MM: She just cooked and cooked and cooked. She had all these plates and they helped themselves—they could eat as much as they wanted. She always tried to make extra because then, come Sunday, she made raviolis, and she would use the leftovers; that would be all cut up and ground up.

RM: And from the money they paid, she saved money to buy a home in Reno. What an amazing story, and a really dedicated woman.

MM: Val Boni's wife tried to duplicate that. She tried to take in boarders, but she failed miserably.

RM: Why?

MM: She obviously couldn't manage it or cook food.

RM: She wasn't that good of a cook?

MM: Mrs. Boni had all those sons, so she more or less sat back and those boys worked.

RM: That's after her husband lost his arm and died.

MM: Yes.

RM: I don't know how your mother did it.

MM: I don't, either. I just marvel at all the work she did.

RM: And probably never complained, did she?

MM: No.

RM: Supporting her children and building a better life and a home.

MM: All of us had the opportunity of college. The other families just raised their kids and they became miners. Her goal was to get us out of Manhattan because she knew if she stayed, her sons, three of them, would be miners and her two daughters would marry miners. She wanted to get us out of that.

RM: I'd like to talk a little bit more about working at the Mapes. Were there women dealers in those days?

MM: Sure. All the 21 dealers were women. It was nice at the Mapes. We got the same clientele in, and we talked with them; we could pass the time of day. And our customers . . . one had a plum farm, and she'd bring us plums. Another customer had an almond farm and he used to bring us gunny sacks of almonds. It was a very friendly place.

RM: Were they locals that were doing this, or people coming in from California?

MM: They were people coming in from California. We knew them all—as a rule, they were regulars. One bunch came in and they used to reserve a whole floor, there were so many of them.

RM: A whole floor of rooms.

MM: Yes, there were so many of them. We knew them all and it was just very friendly.

RM: Did you become very skilled with the cards?

MM: I was considered a fairly good dealer. But I talked a lot. The bosses said, "I don't know how you can deal and keep count and not make any mistakes, and you never shut your mouth."

RM: How did you do it?

MM: You just learned. You learned to count combinations. Some dealers learn how to deal seconds.

RM: What's that?

MM: Well, how to cheat and all that. I never got into that.

RM: So the dealer was cheating the customer or they'd come in as a customer?

MM: They can cheat. And it's ironical, but most dealers that are inclined to be dishonest . . . you get all these propositions from customers—they figured out the best perfect way to cheat, if

you'll just cooperate with them. You're always getting these propositions. And some of the dealers were foolish enough to go for it, and of course they'd get caught like that, fired, and blackballed. So stupid.

RM: What are some of the techniques they use to cheat?

MM: I don't know just what they would do, but I always knew if a dealer was doing something. It got so that she would have the same customer. Generally, they would dump the bankroll, and then you'd come in as a relief dealer, and you'd have to sign that slip. That was always a tip-off that something was going on. And you stayed away from it. You have to protect yourself.

RM: Were people counting cards in those days? How did you handle that?

MM: Oh, I didn't care. If they're so smart, how do they know who's going to get the ace?

RM: But if they can count and know that all the face cards are out on the next hand, that'll tell you something about whether to take a hit or not.

MM: It might give them a little bit of an edge. I didn't really care—if they're clever enough to count, go ahead and count. If you're running lucky as a dealer, nobody can do anything. If the dealer is running lucky, they'll make every wrong move . . . if there was a challenger and you knew a single deck, you could always break that deck down.

RM: What do you mean, break it down?

MM: Reshuffle—that's always an option.

RM: Did you like dealing, over the long haul?

MM: Well, it was hard work. You were always under such a strain. You were okay as long as you were running lucky, but when you were running unlucky, it put you under a strain, and you were always under this sense of "you must win, you must win, you must win." So that part, I didn't like. I had several cases of bad nerves.

RM: Did they have an eye in the sky at the Mapes?

MM: They did later—not at that time.

RM: Did you ever regret leaving dealing for insurance?

MM: No. The thing that really floored me was, you saw so many extramarital affairs.

RM: Among whom, the dealers or the customers?

MM: The dealers and the customers, both. It was kind of disillusioning to me. When I finally made up my mind to go with New York Life and sign that contract, I thought, "I'm going to meet a whole new type of people—these are upper class; these are good people." And forget it—there's no difference. [Laughs] People are people.

RM: How would you know something was an affair?

MM: We had a bunch from San Jose coming up—they were all contractors, all good buddies. They would come up and they would bring their mistresses with them, not their wives. But then another time, they would come up and they would bring their wives. They would always say, "Next time I come up I'm bringing my wife, so don't say anything." You got so you'd know who was the wife and who was the mistress.

RM: And among the dealers, how did you know they were having affairs?

MM: That would be right out in the open—they didn't hide it.

RM: So he's having an affair with the cocktail waitress or something, and he's got a wife at home?

MM: [Laughs] Yes. Or it might be a pit boss having an affair with a cocktail waitress, and his wife isn't . . . you just don't say anything.

RM: And it was pretty common?

MM: Quite common, yes. I even remember one time, when President Kennedy was the new president, and he was in Las Vegas. We got in a new floorman from Las Vegas, and he was an Italian—Ledo. There's something about Italians—we gravitate towards one another and become friends. I'll never forget—I said, "Oh, Ledo, gee, President Kennedy was staying at that hotel." (I forget what hotel.)

And he turned, and the disgust—he said, "I never saw anything like that man—'Send me up a girl, send me up a girl, send me up a girl.'" He said, "I don't know what he did with them. He is a hunk of nothing." He was so disgusted by Kennedy, and that was the first I ever heard about Kennedy and his women.

RM: Apparently there were quite a few of them. That's interesting. What did you think of Las Vegas in those days?

MM: I would go to Las Vegas, but it was to visit my relatives. My mother was very close with her family, and they went back and forth. We always stayed in their hotel, the National. And we watched that dam being built. Las Vegas was little, as I knew it. The first time I saw it where there was a Strip, my daughter, Ellen Roseman, was a candidate for Miss Nevada in '74. In fact, she became Miss Nevada. I'd fly down; it was the first I had ever seen the Strip.

RM: What did you think?

MM: Oh, I was gaga—just amazing.

RM: In a positive sense?

MM: Well, in dealing, so many people would tell us they liked to come to Reno because the dealers could be friendly, and it made a difference. Vegas was very unfriendly.

I forget the name of the hotel where the Miss America pageant happened—I know it's not there anymore—they imploded it. Of course, I knew that a lot of Reno dealers had gone to work down there, so I was wandering around with my girl and I saw this one—he had been my pit boss. Oh, he was such a nice person. I was so excited when I saw him, and I went up and I said, "Jimmy, Jimmy, guess what?" I said, "She is Miss Nevada."

And he was afraid to talk to me. Here came a couple of these pit bosses right away. And he said, "I can't talk to you."

RM: Oh my God, between his teeth. That kind of summarizes it, doesn't it?

MM: Yes. I don't know if it's that way now or not.

RM: I think it's probably worse [Laughs]—that'd be my guess.

MM: I don't know. And with Reno . . . in the 14 years I was alone, we used to get—we called them the Jewish court. There was a whole bunch of people—they were all Jewish—that came from Oakland. Oh, they were charming. The women loved to just fool around on 21. The men were big gamblers, the women were not. And those women helped me raise my family, my kids.

RM: That's so nice.

MM: It was.

RM: Do you have any other thoughts on Manhattan in particular, and Tonopah?

MM: I think it was a wonderful place to be raised as a child. I had such a wonderful childhood. I mentioned to Merle that, isn't it funny, I only lived there 11 years, and yet it made such a big impression on me.

RM: Yes, it shaped your character, didn't it? Well, thanks so much for talking with me.

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