

CATHERINE FRATTO  
Salt Lake City, Utah  
Tape No. I-10

An Interview By  
Phil Notarianni  
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Mrs. Catherine Fratto

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THE FOLLOWING IS AN INTERVIEW MADE WITH MISS, MRS. CATHERINE FRATTO ON NOVEMBER 13, 1971, AT SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH. THE INTERVIEWER IS PHIL NOTARIANNI.

PN: Mrs. Fratto, I am interested in obtaining information concerning some of the Italian folklore which was brought by Italian immigrants, from Southern Italy, to Utah. To begin with, when and where were you born?

CF: I was born in Salt Lake City, on June the 9th, 1925, and I was born in my parent's home, and actually another Italian woman was a mid-wife for my mother when I was born.

PN: Where were your parents from?

CF: They came from Pedivigliano, Italy.

PN: Approximately when?

CF: They came, my mother came in this country with my two brothers in 1920. My father had come two or three times previous to that into the country, was a citizen of Canada, and then went back to Pennsylvania, and lived in Virginia, West Virginia, and then came back to Salt Lake because he really liked Utah.

PN: Where did he work when he was in Utah?

CF: He always worked for the D R & G.

PN: Denver & Rio Grande Railroad. When you lived in Salt Lake where did you live at? Which part of the town, can you...

CF: We lived on the west side of the town and there was a lot of Italian people around us.

PN: So this area was predominantly then, settled by Italians?

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CF: Yes.

PN: Can you remember roughly what blocks this might entail now?

CF: 747 West, let's see, fourth, fourth south, no 747 seventh west.

PN: I see, I see. So, you began, you began to tell me that your mother had a midwife. Was this, was this a predominant aspect?

CF: Yes, this was a common practice at the time, not to many women went to doctors at that time when they and their children and the lady that helped deliver my sister and I was...can I say her name?

PN: Sure.

CF: Mrs. Cosco, and they lived across the street from us, and then after she delivered us my mother though they did call in a doctor to check to see that everything was alright.

PN: What was the main reason that they used a midwife? Do you know? Was it just because they were new in the country and they didn't know anyone, or...

CF: Well...

PN: Or did they trust a midwife a little more than they did a doctor?

CF: No. This is what was commonly used in Italy and I guess that Mrs. Cosco had delivered quite a few children and being that she was a neighbor, this is the reason.

PN: This is interesting because the Greeks used the same thing...

CF: Oh...

PN: Predominantly. So, I, I would like to find out about, about some of the folklore, could you tell me perhaps some of the superstitions or beliefs that you can remember as a small child that your mother believed in?

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CF: Yes, for one thing my mother always told us that if we went to someones's home and they gave us something to drink that we should always leave just a little tiny bit of the...whether it would be coffee or soft drink, to leave just a little in the glass so that no evil spirits or anything that anyone could put upon you. They believed in the evil spirits quite a bit. Also, if a person went someplace and you brought your children along and someone said, she sure is a pretty child, or he is a good looking baby, mother always used to say under her breath, a saying what they say, "Hatta malucia otto nova," (dialect from Calabria meaning, "out goes the evil eye.") and then put your little finger and the index finger in a sign and that supposed to be that no evil spirits will come upon that child, because they did believe that when someone thought a child or a person was real good looking that you could get sick or you could have a headache and not feel very good.

PN: Is this what they call the evil eye? Or the...

CF: Yes...

PN: Yes...

PN: mal' occhio...

CF: Yes.

PN: And they put the sing of a, of, of horns...

CF: Horns...

PN: And this was supposed to a ...

CF: Kind of protect...

PN: Protect the...

CF: Person or the individual. Also, one of their other beliefs was if

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a woman was with child, and she went someplace and she seen a certain type of food or something, she should ask to taste that food, but if of the people didn't give it to her, then she should touch herself on her body except on her face, because if not that child maybe would want it and that child would be born with a birthmark, course doctors claim this is just, you know, a superstition, belief, but the Italian people definetely believed this. That if a pregnant woman sees something she should eat it...

PN: Yes.

CF: And ask for, if not, then she should touch on her arm, or leg, or someplace where the birthmark wouldn't show.

PN: Why do you think they believed in these things? Do you think it was just tradition?

CF: It was tradition. It was passed on to them by their parents and their parents on to them. And mostly, it's belief that was handed down from one generation to another.

PN: Do you think that the, that the Italians from Southern Italy were... had, had a little more of these beliefs than the Italians of any other region?

CF: No, I think...

PN: They all had...

CF: I think...yes.

PN: Some sort of...

CF: Superstition.

PN: Beliefs, rather, it was prebably regional or something like that, huh?

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CF: Yes, definately.

PN: Are there any other that you, that you can remember?

CF: No those were mostly the two that my mother believed in and then of course I kind of believed in it a little, you know, but I've even asked my doctors about it and course they said no that this can't happen, although my doctor said that if when you are pregnant and you desire something go ahead, and eat it, but don't believe your child will have that birth mark; but I know that my mother has told me story after story that this is true that a child will have that borthmark. She claims my father had a birthmark of a, well he did have this mark in the back of his head, which was red and my mother said it was a birthmark of strawberries.

PN: I see. Now Mrs. Fratto could you please tell me, did the, did any of the beliefs that they had,, were they incorporated into any of, of the religious beliefs? Or for instance, were there religious signs, such as the sign of the cross, made in conjunction with any of these beliefs?

CF: Yes. Mostly the Italian people when they would make their bread, homemade bread, they would always pit a sign of the cross on it and this was, I mean, that the lord gave us the bread and, and by putting the sign of the cross this was kind of a symbol to them that we were thankful and grateful.

PN: Was the sign of the cross used in any of the rituals, if that's what you want to call them, in conjunction with the evil eye?

CF: Yes, definately. If a person wasn't feeling good or they think

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that someone had cast a spell, or, or did something to that person, they would quickly make the sign of the cross on the forehead.

PN: At the time that your folks were here, were there any Italian, Catholic priests in the area?

CF: The only time was Monsignor Alfredo Giovannoni.

PN: Did he discourage these beliefs, or did he just ignore them?

CF: To my knowledge he didn't discourage them or encourage them, he just, I remember, one, I can't exactly remember what it was I...oh, one of the beliefs that was on the, St. John, on the feast day of St. John, and the Italian people believed, especially my aunt, that you could get a cup, a saucer, fill it half with water and you hold your two thumbs and another person would hold the cup and you could ask a question and the cup would either turn to the right and...

PN: (laughter)

CF: To the left. This I have done myself and this I do believe because it has happened. Now what makes the cup turn I don't know, you only have to do this on St. John's day. Also, they believed the night before if you cracked an egg and put it in water it usually went into some sort of a design and this would normally would be in a, a design of a ship, of some sort, but you had to do this on the eve of the saint's birthday, the, the night before, and then to actually do this of the cup turning would be on St. John's day.

PN: The feast of St. John.

CF: The feast of St. John, and this I did myself as a child.

PN: This leads into my next question. Do you think these superstitions

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beliefs have developed through the third and fourth generation, or do you think a lot of them have been lost?

CF: I think a lot of them have been lost. I am considered a first generation, here...

PN: Right.

CF: And I believe in some of these things because my mother, you know, practiced, and, you know, did believe in a lot of this, so naturally passed on to me; but I have not passed any of these beliefs on to my children, and my children are second generation and my grandson is third generation.

PN: Why do you think these beliefs tend to fade? Is it...

CF: Well...

PN: Because of the education, or exactly what do you think it is?

CF: Well, I myself think because that we don't talk about them as much, like when my parents were living we spoke Italian in the home, and so a lot more was related, you know, to the way we think. My husband and I still speak Italian, but only when someone comes to our home and they don't understand the English language, then we relate in Italian, but my children do not understand Italian, except a few words that we say in Italian, and my oldest daughter understands a little and really it is a shame, and I mean it's our fault actually. I feel though, if my grand...if their grandparents were alive that maybe a lot more of these customs would be carried on.

PN: So you think perhaps that, the, that not speaking Italian in the home then has contributed to some of this because they have accepted an Anglo-English culture a little bit more readily than they would

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have of, if Italian would have been spoken?

CF: This is true.

PN: That's a very good concept, I hadn't thought about that. Let's move on. Could you relate to me some of the cures that the Italian people carried with them from Italy to Utah? Did they have any beliefs on cures that they produced?

CF: Well, the only thing, one of the cures that my mother said that she brought, you know, with her which I guess a lot of the Italian people, is when a child had a cough and they made a syrup of just lemon, the juice of the lemon, and the lemon and sugar and onions, and they cooked this and then you would just drink the juice of this, and my doctor even of today said that this is really a good cure; they have found out today that lemons and honey, or sugar combined with the onions is a very good cure for a cough. And they have a herb in Italy called "gagumilie" that is, Italian people also use and it's called here in English camellia tea. And they believed that when a baby was upset and had a colic that if they gave him this herb, which they boiled with water and then they strained it, and it would help them, and it really has. I did give it to my first child, but then I didn't give it to any of the other children, but you can buy this in a drug store and it's called camellia tea; it's actually a weed-like, and the Italian people do definitely believe in giving this to their children when they're babies, especially in Italy and even here in this country.

PN: I see. Are there any other cures that you can recall, or is that...

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CF: That's about...

PN: That's about it huh?

CF: Yes.

PN: Fine. Another aspect of this folklore that I would like to discover is what type of social activities did the Italian participate in? First of all, what were the wedding feasts like that they would have here?

CF: Well, they were mostly held in the person's home, at that time they didn't have a lot of these here places where you could go and rent to have a wedding, and usually the churches at that time didn't have any halls, you know, so mostly when a person got married in church then their reception, as it would be called, was held in the individual, usually in the bride's home, and then it would just be all the friends and relatives and usually, at that time, they would always have big dinners, you know, and refreshments, and then they would dance, and do the "tarantella" dance, and that's about the only time, they never ever went actually to dances except when people got married or, also they used to have a big celebration or occasion and all the parents and relatives and friends would be invited, and then they usually would have lots to eat and lots to drink and, and usually someone would start dancing the "tarantella," and then other people would join in. And as far as entertainment, there wasn't really much entertainment for them, at least not for my parents, their entertainment was visiting with one another and spending two or three hours, and then they would get together, they

helped one another quite a bit when they would butcher a hog or a pig and they would have two or three families come in and they would all help make the Italian sausage and then after it was over with they would fry part of that meat and then sit down with a bottle of wine and a pot of coffee and, and this was real fun and entertainment for them, even though it was a lot of work making it, they enjoyed it. And the same way in making wine, they would make their own wine and usually friends or relatives would come in and help them.

PN: Can you remember how they made the wine?

CF: My folks made it at first, my brother was the one that made it... he did have a big pair of these rubber, fisherman's boots...

PN: Hip boots.

CF: Hip boots, and this is what he actually used and they would actually stomp on it. I asked my mom and did and even my brother, if they ever used their bare feet the way we see in movies, you know. He said that they never did, but probably a lot of them did, but they always had these hip boots, these rubber hip boots, and this is what they did; and then years later they did buy a, a type of a hand made machine that they could...

PN: A press?

CF: A press, that they could put the grapes in and turn it.

PN: Did they make quite a bit on an average? Or...

CF: Oh yes, they made quite a bit of wine and then course it, you know, it wasn't legal to make it, you know, and then a lot of them

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stopped making it.

PN: Now considering this wine making during prohibition, could you please tell me where did they hide it so that it wouldn't be discovered?

CF: Well, I guess a lot of it was hid, some of them was hid in the chicken coups too; and someone had their garage, and they'd have a false bottom, you know, top...

PN: Floor...

CF: Floor...

PN: False floor.

CF: A false floor, and this is where, and they they would put the boards on top, you know, making it think it was like a grease pit, or something, and this is hwere they kept it. But during the time when my folks were making it they weren't really bothered too much if you were just making wine. It was people that was making moonshine and whiskey, is the ones that actually had more trouble. But just, if you just made a little bit of wine, just for your own family, use actually you weren't bothered too much.

PN: A question that has just come to my mind that I'd like to flash back to the, the question concerning weddings. Did the Italian women here in Utah, did they have to furnish a dowry when they got married?

CF: The ones that come from Italy did, but not normally the ones that were married actually here, and they actually got what they call more Americanized, is the expression our families used. But in Italy it was definately that a girl should have a dowr..dowry and actually the oldest daughter always got married first. This I know

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happened with my, to my mother, my father was actually going to marry her sister. That's who he had asked in hand of marriage to another person, but my mother didn't want to marry that other person, so my grandparents told my father, which then became my father that the oldest daughter had to be married first, and so my father said, alright that's alright I like her too...

PN: (laughter)

CF: And so, then that's how my father married my mother. And then the fellow that my mother should have married, married my aunt. So, and then, if they had a dowry they had to, you know, that was supposed to be presented, but here in this country usually that didn't...

PN: Even, even with the immigrant that came over...

CF: That's right.

PN: If she came over here and she was here for a little while and then she got married; she did not have to furnish...

CF: She did not have to furnish a dowry.

PN: So this was lost in the transfer.

CF: Yes, yes. I mean if they had something and they wanted to give to them then that was fine.

PN: But it was...

CF: But it wasn't a must.

PN: It was not a rigorous...

CF: No.

PN: Law or custom as it was in Italy?

CF: No. That was definately lost.

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PN: Mrs. Fratto could you please tell me did the Italians celebrate and of the, of the feast days of saints?

CF: Yes, they did, as I remember as a child, they celebrated St. Lucy which is December the 13th, and the Italian people on the west side, each family put, pitched in and put as much money as they could and they got this here saint, helped purchase it, and they had quite a celebration that day at St. Patrick's church, which is located on the west side. And they marched around the church and for a block or so with the saint and course, I guess, a lot of the people that weren't Catholic kind of thought that something was, that something was wrong with these people, but this was a custom, I mean this is what they normally did in Italy is to get the statue or the saint and two or three men would carry it. And they would sing hymns, and I also remember we sang some hymns, and then we went to church. They normally didn't have too many of these celebrations because this was predominately, naturally a L.D.S. community, but, so a lot of this was, I think, maybe, I don't know, I'm sure that the L.D.S. didn't stop it, but I think maybe sometimes the Catholic people were maybe a little bit afraid to carry it on.

PN: Now, the Catholics that participated in these types of feasts, were they predominantly Italian Catholics, rather than, let's say, Irish Catholics? Or another nationality?

CF: Predominantly Italian, but some of them were Irish, and we had a mixture at our parish, and they weren't just Italians...

PN: So you had other ethnic groups participating?

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CF: Yes, oh yes, definitely, definitely, we had quite a few Irish families there at the west side that participated.

PN: And these have generally ceased. Why do you think that is? Is it, is it because of what you just stated to me, or...

CF: Well yes, and just like I say, a lot of the older Italian people have died and passed away and, and the younger generation just don't go in for this sort of stuff.

PN: So these traditions have been lost...

CF: Have been lost.

PN: Through the generations?

CF: Yes, but still in Italy today, in, still in the same towns where a lot of our grandparents and parents come from, they are still carried on.

PN: Yes.

CF: And even though a lot of the Italian people are coming to this country and into Salt Lake, and they have done this back there, they're not doing it here. Now I think though, in some of your other towns in America they still carry this tradition, I, I have heard of people say like, like back in California, New York, back east, they still do, your Italian communities.

PN: Did the Italians that came from, let's say a little village in Southern Italy, when they came to Salt Lake did they generally tend to settle in the same area so that, let's say, the village might have been recreated in, in a section of the town?

CF: Well, there was quite a few; I would say maybe the distance would

be a block, or two blocks, or three blocks, I know that in our area there was at least, I would say twenty to twenty-five or maybe even thirty families all around us.

PN: From the same town?

CF: From, mostly yes, mostly they were all from the same town. There were a few that were from other towns, but they were all Italian people, and most of these were neighbors from the same town they were in Italy, and then they were actually neighbors here in Salt Lake.

PN: Do you think that, that the village life that they knew in Italy was, or at least they tried to recreate some of that here? Or do you think that...

CF: I don't think they could very well. I mean, because it really is different. The only thing that probably I think was the same is they spoke the same language and they tried to do the same cooking. And the Italian people were quite strict with their children. Mostly you know, that girls should not go out unless they were chaperoned to go out on a date.

PN: Who usually chaperoned them?

CF: (Laughter). They would mostly like a, an older brother or sister, or even a mother or father. I know that my mother wanted to that with me and I told her that I definitely wouldn't go out if I had to be chaperoned, and so she relented and let me go out; but I know that we had some neighbors on our street and they were a few years older than I and they definitely had to be chaperoned when they went out, an older sister went with them on their dates.

But this was just custom and you didn't feel too bad at first because there wasn't really too many places to go at that time and usually the boy would come and just sit at your back doorstep or on your front porch, and, and sit in the kitchen. Mostly in the kitchen, that's where you mostly did all your entertaining, was in the kitchen anyway.

PN: Another thing that I would like to know is did they ever use any traditional costumes that they had from Italy? Did they ever use those, or did they ever make them for any of their children, or anything of this sort?

CF: No. My mother never because she didn't do too much sewing, and I really don't know of any Italian family around us that made any Italian costume or dress apparel that they used to wear. And mostly the dress apparel that they used in Italy when they come here was mostly in black. This is another thing. The women, the Italian women, when someone in their family died, especially a mother or a father, or a child, they would go in mourning at least for a year, and sometimes as long as five years. And they would never wear anything but black, I mean their dresses would be black, their socks and shoes were black, and even their aprons were black, and if they couldn't but the black material they would dye it so that it would be black. If they happened to have a radio in their home, which not too many families did, but some of them did, they would not even open, excuse me, they would not even play the radio for a year, and you just went into mourning for a year.

PN: The women wore black, did the men do the same thing?

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CF: The men would wear a black arm band on their arm.

PN: For a duration of a year?

CF: Yes.

PN: Or whatever.

CF: Or a black tie. For a year, but mostly it would be the black arm band, and that would signify that someone in their family died.

PN: I see. Can you recall any of the traditional dress that they wore in Italy? Do you remember ever seeing any?

CF: The only thing, I had some pictures of my mother and they wore a long skirt and a blouse type of effect and it came to the, almost to their ankles, and this is mostly what...

PN: Was it a colorful costume?

CF: No, very dark. Mostly your, your Italian people then did wear quite dark colors although they liked bright colors, you know, they would mostly use them for feasts and holidays, but their traditional dress was a dark nature, dar...black or browns.

PN: I see. Before we close is there anything else that, concerning folklore, that you could relate to me?

CF: No, all I can say is I wish that some of these traditions would be passed on to our generation, and our children and I guess some of this is like my generation's fault, the first generation here. That we have kind of lost this, because a lot of these customs, and maybe they think they are kind of funny or so, but really they're not. But like I say, our parents are gone and so a lot of this hasn't been taught too much in the schools, or in the high schools,

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or in colleges, they man now, but like it seems like mostly your French, and Spanish, and German are taught in you junior high schools and high schools, but not the Italian language. I think if the Italian language was taught that a lot of this would be revived and, and children would take more interest in their heritage.

PN: Getting back to a statement I made earlier, then you believe that the language is the key to the traditions being not passed on, and fading away?

CF: Definitely.

PN: Well, thank you very much for the opportunity for this interview.

CF: You're certainly welcome.