Connie Bardinelli-Interviewed By Sue Flokos-6-18-84

SUE FLOKOS: Today is June 18, 1984. And your name is?

CONNIE BARDINELLI: Well, they always called me Connie. It's Constance, but they called me Connie.

SF: OK, and Bardinelli, right? OK. I'm interviewing Ms. Bardinelli in her house. OK. Now to get to the questions. (laughter) OK. Your name is Ms. Bardinelli, right? OK. When were you born?

CB: I was born in February, 1906.

SF: Nineteen oh-six? OK. What was it like -- well, you were born in Bridgeport, right?

CB: No, I was born in Italy.

SF: OK.

CB: Yeah.

SF: What made your parents come to Bridgeport after, you know, from Italy?

CB: Well, I guess they felt they can make a better living here, and well, they make a little more money, whatever it was. And they had [01:00] a little more freedom here. And I guess that's about it, as far as I can remember.

SF: When did you come to Bridgeport, the area of Bridgeport, when you were little?

CB: Oh, I came here at -- wait a minute, now. So I was 10 years old, 19, 1916. Fifteen or sixteen, either one.

SF: What was it like growing up in Bridgeport?

CB: What was what?

SF: What was it like growing up in Bridgeport?

CB: Oh. Well. In my day, I thought it was just beautiful, you know? We had --

SF: Excuse me a minute.

(break in audio)

CB: -- had well, I'll tell you. We felt as though we could go downtown, walk very freely. And downtown, we had, I'd say, about oh, at least eight or nine theaters down there.

SF: What was --

CB: You didn't have to worry about what theater you wanted to go to. [02:00] And it was really a whole lot easier to walk downtown. And the -- you know what, downtown, like I said, when I was younger, it was like, say, for instance, New York. You know? People walking back and forth, one another, and very friendly, you know? And we had so many different theaters there, if you didn't like one you'd go into another. The town was full of beautiful stores. They had every kind of a store you could think of, downtown. They had expensive stores, they had, well, stores -- well, to your own...

SF: Taste?

CB: Whatever you could afford, you know?

SF: Yeah, right, OK. What schools did you attend when you came to here, when you were little?

CB: Oh, I went to Webster [03:00] School.

SF: You went to Webster School? And what -- did you go to high school?

CB: No, no. I got out of school when I was in seventh grade.

SF: OK. What was the reason for you getting out of school so early? Was it because, you know, your mother, you had plans, you were going to go to work?

CB: Well, I didn't have a mother; it was just my father and I. And I had to go to work to support him because he, he worked outdoors, he was a laborer. Them days, they didn't have the machinery that they have today. Them days, everything was pick-and-shovel, you know? If they had to fix a road -- he used to work in the roads, you know, and he would have to, they would have to -- you know what a pick is?

SF: Yes.

CB: Well, they'd have about, oh, maybe 40 or 50 men do the work of only two men do today, really.

SF: Gosh, yeah.

CB: With the machinery that they have. And then, them days, they would only work in the summer, like from, let's say [04:00] they'd start, like, maybe April, you know? And they'd work until about October. Then, when it would start, the weather would start getting cold, real cold, they didn't work all winter. Well that, of course that was my father. But of course a lot of other people worked in factories, but my father didn't, my father worked outdoors. And of course, in the wintertime, I'll tell you, them days, the pays were very small. So I went to work. And I'll tell you, I, to help out my father. You know. And well, them days, I worked, we worked 50 hours for $6 a week.

SF: Oh my gosh.

CB: But of course, like I say, it was $6 a week but we bought sugar for five cents a pound. [05:00]

SF: Oh, wow.

CB: You know?

SF: Right.

CB: The cost of living was oh, much cheaper than it is today. And --

SF: So how about when the Depression came? Was it hard?

CB: Oh, yes. But of course, I'll tell you. Well, when the Depression came I was married, you know? And it was very, very hard for a lot of people. But we were very fortunate

because [Vic?], my husband, rather, he worked for a soda company. And they worked pretty much steady, you know, they worked pretty steady. But I had a lot of friends that they were on -- well, thank God, I'm very, very, I feel very fortunate that I never had to go on welfare, but I've had, oh, I had an awful lot of friends that were on welfare, you know? And they, them days, [06:00] today there are so many that have welfare. They send them a check, you know, money? But them days, they didn't give them a check. They would give them a box of food, you know? And they had to manage with that food the best they could. And then when it came to, like, the heat in the wintertime, they would give them so much oil. Of course, I think they do that today too, they give them the oil for their heat. And this is, I'm talking about my friends, now.

SF: Yeah, I understand.

CB: As I said, I didn't have to do that, I'm very, very thankful for that. But we had to manage. And then we had the '29 crash --

SF: Yes.

CB: Oh, well. Well, I remember. When we had the '29 crash, I had $200 in the bank. That was the most money I had.

SF: Did you (inaudible)?

CB: Oh, it's going away from me again, huh? I'll hold it this way. Is this [07:00] all right?

SF: Yeah, that's (inaudible).

CB: Well, the banks, well, I'll tell you. There was about three or four banks that closed down. And the bank that I had the $200 with, they're closed down. But then another bank took over. And well anyway, we had to wait, I think, oh, about five or six years before they gave us, I think, about $5 or $6 at a time. So that lasted, oh, maybe about 15 years I guess, I don't know how long it was. But we never got all of our money back. Now, we only got $5 or $6 like, oh, until we got about maybe -- I don't really remember now, it was 50 or 60%, and that was it. We didn't get any more [08:00] of that. But of course, that was all the money we had. But a lot of other people, they had a lot of money and they lost all of it, you know? And it was really, really -- I really felt bad for them poor people, when they lost all that money, you know? We didn't have much but oh, we got along. I got along, and I was happy. And that's what we did, in them days. You know?

SF: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

CB: Yes, I have a brother but he's up in New York State. So. But we go to visit him once in a while, you know. And we write to each other once in a while.

SF: That's nice.

CB: Yeah.

SF: Was any of your member, like in the Depression, did they have, you know, like, were they like in the war, World War II or something like that? Did anything affect you [like that?]? The World War II?

CB: Oh, I had a son in the [09:00] service. Oh, I had a son in the Service. Thank goodness, though, he's home. And he was in the Service for two years, I think, and he went to Guam, and oh, I can't think of all the other places that he went.

SF: And I mean was there anything to deal -- that, dealing with World War II or World War I that affected you or your family like that? You know, in a special way or something?

CB: Well, I had brother-in-laws that were in the Service, but they came home, they came back safe and sound, too. Yeah. Yeah.

SF: But what was it like, you know, with them being away from you? Was it, you know, everybody --

CB: Oh, oh.

SF: It was really sad and everything?

CB: Oh, yes. It was very sad. Sure. When we saw them go away? Well, I'll never forget. When my son had to go away, my youngest son, he, the poor thing, he was sick.

And I couldn't go to the station [10:00] to bid him goodbye, you know? And he just walked out of the door and says, 'Well, goodbye, Ma." And I wanted to really go to the station. But when I saw him go away and I couldn't go to the station -- all my friends were going to the station with their children -- well, I was really heartbroken then, that was really heartbroken. Then there was another time that he didn't write to me for about, oh, maybe about three months. I didn't get any letter from him. Well then, I was worried about him. But he was supposed to have been in the States, you know? He was in the States. But they [come in?] to find out when, he did write. He was in the hospital, sick.

SF: Oh, gosh.

CB: He had scarlet fever.

SF: Oh, wow.

CB: And -- but the, you know, at the time that, when they had scarlet fever, them days, everything was quarantined. And they couldn't write, they couldn't send any letters out, or... [11:00] I couldn't send any letter -- well, I kept writing but I didn't get any answers, see? And that really got me worried, you know? I thought, "My goodness, I'm not getting any answers, why?" And then I thought, "Well, I'll wait another week and if I don't get an answer, I'll have

to look into it." Well, I kept saying, "I'll wait another week," and I, until, you know, a few months went by. Then finally, when I did get an answer, then he explained to me why he couldn't write. Then I felt relieved. But it is, believe me, it's a very heartache when you're, you know, they're gone away, you know? And --

SF: What, like, was it, when -- you said your son had scarlet fever, was it, you know, at the case where they couldn't enough, they tried to do their best but they didn't have the medication that they have today?

CB: Oh, that's right. That's exactly what it is. Oh, the medication that they have today is just really wonderful, you know? But in them days, they didn't have the medication, you know, that they have. [12:00] So they did the best they could. Thank goodness he's all right now, you know. And oh, about all I can remember about the Service. Then of course, after two years, the war was over. Oh, and then we -- everybody was all excited, them days, you know? We went out and we start marching up and down the street, and we were so happy. And well, of course, the [I saw?] tours, the First World War. When the First World War ended, that was in 1918, I think. See? I don't remember, I think it was --

VIC: Seventeen.

CB: Was it seventeenth? Seventeenth or eighteenth? Well anyway, I remember that. When that ended, oh, they had all kinds of parades then. You know? And then of course, I experienced the Second World War. When that ended, we, they had a lot of parades and you know, [13:00] pa-- paper ticking, what do they call it? The --

SF: News things?

CB: The (inaudible) was [skating?], all that, gee, that was really exciting. And then of course, what made it more exciting -- and then about six or eight months later that my son came home, you know? And then that was a very happy occasion.

SF: Of course.

CB: Yeah. So we, it was, that was nice, you know?

SF: How did the mayor of the city and the president feel about, you know, the kids going into war after such a long time, and their experience with, you know, the worrying feeling, they can't write to them or they don't know what the heck's happening?

CB: Oh, I don't know. I guess, oh, I guess the president felt sorry but there wasn't really, wasn't much. Well the First World War was Roosevelt, huh, Vic?

VIC: Wilson.

CB: Oh, yeah. That's right. The Second World War was Roosevelt?

VIC: Roosevelt, yeah.

CB: Yeah, yeah. Wilson was the first president. [14:00] And well, I don't know. Then, of course, I was a lot younger. But well, them days, then they, I don't know, I guess you know, they blamed -- what was it, [Kaiser?], Vic?

VIC: (inaudible) yeah, Kaiser's the [principle?] one.

CB: Was that the Russ--

VIC: (inaudible) the First World War.

CB: And he, yeah, if that was the First World War. And of course the Second World War, well, that was really --

VIC: That was Hitler, (inaudible)?

CB: That was Hitler.

SF: Right, right.

VIC: Hitler [wasn't he?]?

CB: Yeah.

SF: OK. But what I'm saying is, how sis the mayor of the city feel about all this? Did he, you know, did he say, "We demand," you know, "we have special things for the people who are in war because they went to go and fight for our country and everything," or was it a joyous occasion, that your sons were out there fighting for the world, or... But you know, you missed them because they were away such a

long time, or you know. [15:00] What did he say about the whole thing?

CB: Well, I don't really remember. I think he'd say, you know, he was -- we had to fight for our liberty.

SF: Yeah.

CB: Naturally, we always had to fight for our liberty, and then they mur--

(break in audio)

SF: Ah, let's see where I'm at. OK. What was the employment outlook for you in your day? I mean, was there a lot of jobs open to young people?

CB: Yes. Because everything, there wasn't as much machinery as they have today, everything was made by hand, you know? And well, it was very easy to get a job. If you didn't like one job, you know, at -- of course, I worked at the factory. If we didn't like one job, the next day you could find a job in another factory.

SF: What kind of job did you work in?

CB: Oh gosh, I've worked in -- making boxes, [16:00] well of course, they had sort of machines, but then there was a lot of work, handwork, to be done.

SF: At what age did you begin work?

CB: (laughter) Well, I went to work at -- I was really 13, but you were supposed to be 14. But I lied a little bit.

Because I had to help my father, and I told them I was 14, so they let me go to work, you know? And then I worked in Warner Brothers, and that I worked on -- well, them days, see, the girls don't wear those heavy corsets like they, today it's just these little girdles, but them days, the women used to wear those corsets with steels in them, you know? And well, each corset had about, oh, at least 10 or 15 steels in them. And I worked on [17:00] a, oh, a huge machine that, it was a press. And I had to put these steels inside of a press. You know, I had to put five steels inside of a press, then I'd have to put my foot down. And if I ever got my finger in there, or any of my fingers, I'd lose my fingers. And this big press would come down and make holes in the steels. Because, see, they had to make the holes in the steels because then they'd have -- what do you call it? The lace. You know the -- do you remember the laces? Well I mean, you've seen them on movies lots of times, haven't you?

SF: Probably, yeah.

CB: Well, they had put the laces through these holes, and I had to make, I had to put five in at a time, put my foot down on the press, hold the steels tight, and the press would come down and make a hole in each steel. Then I'd take those five out and I'd put five more in. [18:00] And I was

only 13 years old, doing that job, but today everything is automatic, it's beautiful. I don't think they even use them any more. But of course, if they do use anything for steels, they just press the button, and wonderful.

SF: Could you describe the neighborhood that you were living in when you were little?

CB: Well, I lived in The Hollow. You know, Lexington Avenue? We were all very friendly, oh, much more friendly than today. Much more friendly. Everybody, they were always out to help somebody, always. And then, them days, everybody had a front porch, you know? And the neighbors would sit on the front porch. Like a rainy day like today, now, they couldn't go walking, so they would sit on the front porch. And the neighbor would sit on the porch next to them and say, "Hello there, how are you? Come on over, [19:00] sit on my porch." You know? And they would sit on, we'd go to the neighbors' porch. And if anybody was sick, the first thing they would do was bring a pot of soup over.

SF: Oh, that much have been (inaudible).

CB: They all helped one another, they really did. Today, everybody wants privacy, they want their own back porch, their own -- everything is in the back of the house, you

know. And really, do you know -- now, I live on, I've been here for 31 years. Do you know I hardly know my neighbors?

SF: Oh, I believe it.

CB: That's a fact. We hardly know our neighbors. Well of course I know the one across the street but we, I don't see her, maybe, once a month. You know? And the other neighbors, it's just, if we see each other, "Hello," and that's it. But we don't run into each other's house like we did years ago. Of course, I don't believe that you have to be a nosy body and run into everybody's house [20:00] every minute.

SF: Oh, I (inaudible) that, yeah.

CB: But just to be a little more friendly, you know. Much more friendly than, oh God, years ago. And then of course, today of course, you know very well that nobody's afraid to walk the streets. But hey, years ago, ten, eleven o'clock at night, no one, nobody thought anything of walking up and down the street, going home. And then of course, them days, there weren't as many cars. You see? And of course, I -- well of course, when I went to work, if the factory was a little distance away from me, well, then I would take the bus to go. But (inaudible) --

SF: (inaudible) cars? Trolley cars?

CB: The trolley cars, yes. That's right, too. We took the trolley cars. And then they had, in the summertime, they had the open cars. There was no doors or windows on the open cars. And we'd just hop right in, the seats were all across there, we'd sit on the seat. [21:00] But then, in the wintertime, they had the cars with the doors on them and the windows, you know? Then, after a while, I don't know. They decided to have buses because -- see, the trolley cars, they had to have tracks in the middle of the road, you know? And I guess they decided to have buses because the buses could come to the curb. And then there was more -- by that time, there was more people having cars, you know? But then of course, I didn't have a car and I took the bus.

SF: Do you still do that today?

CB: What?

SF: Do you still take the bus, or do you now drive or what?

CB: Oh, I take the car. I go by car. Ver-- oh, I haven't taken a bus, now, in I don't know how many years. Today there's more cars on the street than there are people.

SF: True.

CB: That's a fact. Every home, if they've got two, three children in the house, if they're grown-ups, [22:00] they all have their own car today, they hop in the car and they

go. You know? Nobody walks today. Although I do, I go walking down the center, down the shopping mall? Have you ever been down there?

SF: Yeah, the shop-and-park.

CB: Down Trumbull, here?

SF: Yeah.

CB: Well, I walk from here to there every day.

SF: Oh, that's good.

CB: Oh, I do that every day, I love it. I would rather walk than take the car down there. Because I feel -- if I took the car down there, I wouldn't have any exercise, I wouldn't walk. So I walk down there every day, and back. It takes me half an hour to get there, although I don't walk as fast as the young person would walk, 10, maybe take them maybe 15, 20 minutes, but it takes me a good half hour. Then I walk all around the mall, and then I walk back.

SF: That's pretty good.

CB: So that's about two and a half, three hours that I, you know, break up the day. You know? And I love it. I enjoy that, you know. But cars, [23:00] there are so many cars today. It isn't funny anymore, you know?

SF: What did you do for fun besides go to the theaters or something like that?

CB: Oh, we went to dances.

SF: What kind of dances? Were they anything like today, or...

CB: Oh, nothing like today! No, not in my day. In my day, we did waltzing, we did foxtrot, one-step -- there's my son, coming home from work, I guess. And then, them days, them days were really -- see, they didn't, they had a dancehall, it was just for dancing, you know? And then they'd have, like, a little soda fountain on the side of the, on the out-- the lobby of the hall, you know? And we would just dance the waltz, the foxtrot, one-step, two-step. [24:00] And then they used to have two bands, big bands. They weren't, like, just three or four pieces, each band was about 10, 12, 15 pieces. You know? And they would have two bands. Well, that was right up my alley. I danced every dance, I used to love it, you know. One dance would have intermission -- I mean, one band would have intermission and the other band would start playing. Well then, we would dance all over again, you know? They had one dancehall, it wasn't -- well, of course, from here it's far. But I mean, from where I lived at The Hollow, there, they called it Quilty's Dance Hall then, that was on Fairfield Avenue. Then they had a dancehall -- they had, on Main Street, they used to call it The Lyric, that was a,

they had The Lyric Dance Hall. Then they had [25:00] oh, I can't think --

VIC: The Ritz.

CB: Oh, The Ritz Dance Hall, that was a big one. That was a big dancehall. There's where they had the real big bands. Then they had Pleasure Beach.

SF: Yeah, I've heard about that.

CB: Oh, that was beau-- oh, it was really, I'm telling you. We had somewhere to go all the time. And I'll tell you the truth, all they drank was soda, that's all they had, was just soda, and maybe they'd sell hotdogs or popcorn, but that was the limit. There was no heavy drinking, no. But -- of course, today, they don't have the dancehalls that we had. Today, they go into these -- what do they call it? Dining? They eat and drink. That's all they do, is just eat and drink. But there was, it was really pleasure. It was really dancing. You danced all night, and you'd go and have a drink, or maybe an [26:00] ice cream cone or something like that, and that was it. Then sometimes after the dance, or after the theater, we'd go into an ice cream parlor. That was all, there was an ice cream parlor on every corner, you know? And there was a theater. Oh, Main Street was full of theaters. If you didn't like one, you know, you'd go into the other.

SF: How much was ice cream then?

M1: How much was the ice --

CB: Five cents a cone.

SF: Oh my gosh.

CB: Oh, yes. Five cents. Then, I remember, when I was a little girl, now we're talking about ice cream, I'd say about seven or eight years old, ten years old, they had ice cream for a penny a cone.

SF: Oh my God.

CB: But the cones weren't as big as the five-cent ones. They had the penny cone. The cones were about, say, four inches long, you know? And about that big. So you'd get maybe, they'd give it to you like the spoon, you know? They'd take a spoon, and [27:00] they'd put it on the cone. But for a penny? Well, this is all we got. When we were a kid, if we got anything, the most we got was only a penny. You know. And then they'd have a vendor come around with the ice cream, they'd, you know, push the cart like, and they'd come around, and we'd get the ice cream, and then sometimes they had this -- what do they call this. Flavored ice? You know the --

M1: Italian ice.

CB: The, yeah, they'd scrape the ice and put the flavor down it. That was only a penny a cup. Everything was only a

penny. And then candy, you could go in the candy store and buy -- they had a lot of loose candy and they'd say, "Well, I want a penny's worth of that." And sometimes you'd get

(break in audio)

M1: Oh, no.

CB: Maybe another time.

(break in audio)

CB: Yeah. Licorice. Oh, you'd get four or five long sticks of licorice for a penny. Oh, yes, yes. And there was a big [28:00] variety. You know, of candy. And then, stores -- of course there were a lot of small stores, you know? These little individual stores, they didn't have these big markets like they have today. And everybody, we used to do our shopping every day. You know, they didn't go to the shopping center and buy enough for a whole week or two or three weeks, we, our meat, we would buy it every day, we would go to the meat market. And we'd buy whatever amount of meat we wanted, and we'd bring it home. And if we went -- the next day, we'd buy more meat. We always bought our meat, every day. Because we didn't have the refrigeration they have today. You see? We had these little ice boxes. Of course, I don't think you know that.

SF: Yeah. I know. (inaudible) --

CB: We had an icebox, and we would buy, we would buy a cake of ice -- [29:00]

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