

ROHAN BANTON: Today is June 18th, 1984. I'm Rohan Banton, and I'm interviewing --

ANDREW ROLLERI: Andrew J. Rolleri, owner of the Ocean Fish Company at 70 East Main Street in Bridgeport.

RB: Sir, how old are you?

AR: I am 74 years old.

RB: What made you decide to go into business?

AR: We decided to go in business because the jobs that my father and I had at the Stratfield Hotel were terminated.

RB: Do you have any regrets?

AR: No regrets whatsoever. Business has gone well for us from the first day that we ever opened.

RB: What are some of the changes, if any, that you see now that may or may not have taken place when you first opened your business?

AR: Well, [00:01:00] the only changes that have taken place in our business now is the fact that you people -- you cannot hire people to work in our business anymore as easily as you did when we opened. And, of course, the prices of merchandise has increased a great deal.

RB: Is lobster expensive this time of year?

AR: Lobster is expensive at all times of the year.

RB: There's not a time where it drops like a dollar, or --

AR: It used to, but no longer now. It does drop a dollar, but when you say from \$6 to \$5, it still doesn't make it inexpensive. You know what I mean? In other words, there is no -- the spring of the year is the best time of the year, because you have all kinds of fish that migrate and that spawn and that go up the rivers [00:02:00] to spawn. And that's the time of the year when you catch the most fish.

RB: What time of year --

AR: That's the answer.

RB: Compared to now, how was the area where you bought both of your businesses?

AR: Well, when we established our business we were at Main and Congress Street. And at that time we had trolley cars and buses that ran up and down Main Street and to all parts of the city. And that was the transfer point for all buses and trolley cars, whether you wanted to go to Stratford, Milford, North Park, Oak Street Line, North Main Street, everything passed the corner of Main and Congress. So being a good transfer point, it made it a good business location.

RB: What was the first thing you thought about when you got

your [00:03:00] -- when you found out --

AR: When you got out of the war?

RB: When you got out of the war.

AR: Well, the first thing I did when I got out of the war, naturally, was to come back and try and reopen the business that we had closed when we were drafted, see.

RB: What made you decide to let the history of Bridgeport project interview you?

AR: Well, it was nothing. It was just that you came to me, and we discussed it, and that was it.

RB: Did --

AR: No, I never belonged to any [other?] club.

RB: How do you feel the water most helps you and your businesses?

AR: Well, our business, being the lobster business mainly, we have to be located near the water; but good water where you have salinity, and not brackish water. In other words, you have to have a channel that's very deep where you can draw good water for your lobster tanks. [00:04:00] Because if you have heavy rains, such as an inch or two in 24 hours, and you're located on a shallow channel, the lobsters would all die, because your water would become brackish. Our present neighborhood is the same as it was when we moved here.

RB: What was school like for you?

AR: School was good for me, because I always was a good student. And I would have liked to go on to college, but I never had the money to go to college.

RB: What did you do after school was out?

AR: Well, starting in New York when I was in elementary school, from the sixth grade on I always delivered papers in the morning and in the afternoons. So that I worked before and after school.

RB: Do you have relatives living here or nearby?

AR: No. No relations of any kind live near me. [00:05:00]

RB: What were your war experiences?

AR: My war experiences? Well, I -- no particular exciting experiences other than what everybody else had. We were -- we went to England, and we were -- we went to France six days after D-Day. And from France we went to Belgium. From Belgium I went to Holland. From Holland we went to Germany. And then we went to Luxemburg and then back into Germany. And then after that the war was over.

RB: Was there anyone you know that went to war with you that came back with you?

AR: Nobody. Nobody. No.

RB: What was politics like in Bridgeport when you were growing up?

AR: Well, I grew up with Mayor Behrens and Mayor Buckingham. And politics on those two mayors were just as they are now. But under McLevy there was a general improvement [00:06:00] in the political situation. McLevy brought the town out of bankruptcy to a AAA rating in credit at the time that he left office. The only criticism I had of McLevy was that he was too frugal, and that he let everything go to pot. And he didn't even remove snow from the streets when he was mayor.

RB: Do you think Paoletta can compare to Jasper McLevy, or do you think there's no comparisons?

AR: Well, it's hard to make a comparison, because in this day and age the mayor is hampered by all kinds of unions, and commissions, and other things [00:07:00] that McLevy never had to trouble him. So that you can't say that one mayor is better than the other in that respect. And plus the fact that the city now has gone downhill for the last 30 years.

RB: From your perspective did Bridgeport change for the better or for the worse.

AR: Much for the -- well, from my perspective, Bridgeport has gone much worse. Because a lot of the citizens have -- the older citizens that could afford it moved out of Bridgeport. And a lot of the older citizens have died.

And we've lost a lot of the manufacturing here in town, so that the city has gone downhill.

RB: When you brought this place, was the area populated with a mixture of ethnics?

AR: It was just the same as it is now, this particular area here. [00:08:00] Because we had the [UI?] as a neighbor on the other side of the street, and only four or five families -- four or five houses of families up the street. And it hasn't changed any in the last 20 or 30 years.

RB: When you received your draft papers, what was the first thing you thought about?

AR: Well, the first thing I thought about when I got my draft papers was paying off the notes I owed on the Ocean Sea Grill, which we had just purchased at that time. And I owed \$68,000 in notes on the fixtures and kitchen equipment. And so it was up to me to try and get them paid as quickly as possible. Plus the fact that I couldn't even get a deferment so that I had to close one business in order to go into the service.

RB: Are there any members of your family that helped you --

AR: One brother. One brother. Emil, my younger brother. He's six years younger than I am.

RB: In what year did you open both businesses? [00:09:00]

AR: We opened both businesses at the same time, and we opened

them in 1934.

RB: What can you tell me about the Palace and the Majestic Theater? Was it grand?

AR: Yes.

RB: Was it good for your business?

AR: Very good. Both the theaters were real, real, first-class theaters. Brought in real top-notch shows, both vaudeville shows and good pictures. And it was very good for our business, because it brought everybody down into the center of town. And that was where we got the traffic to do our business. And it was across the street from us, and we did a terrific business with all the people that attended the shows. How was that, all right?

RB: Mr. Rolleri, the Bridgeport Living History thanks you for your time today.

AR: Oh, that's all right. Yeah. That's all right. I'm glad that we got it done. Now if there's any--

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