

TOM PURDY INTERVIEWING
JOHN PEIRANO
9/11/1972

TP: Mr. John B. Peirano. It's a beautiful day here and we're located in his house overlooking the Titicus Reservoir on what is known as Peirano's Point. Today is September 11, 1972. It's a lovely, warm day. And Mr. Peirano's grandfather [*incorrect - it was his father, Steven*] was supervisor of construction of the, of the Titicus Reservoir, Titicus Dam, here, which we can see from here, and he's going to tell us a little bit about how his family came to this country originally, and how the reservoir was built and some interesting stories in regard to it. Mr. Peirano, would you take over?

JP: YES. Sometime in the year of 1838 . An issue came about between the families of the modern Italy of today as to what they should do when they reach the area south of Rome. As to how to control or distribute or destroy the population that....

TP: So, this was under Garibaldi

JP: Under Garibaldi. Now, Mr. Garibaldi's vision was at the first start was the only way to control that tension would be to go ahead and wipe out the rough and ready elements south of Rome. Whereas, why, after why the other two partners, Razini and Cabora moved south of Rome realizing the mass amount of territory there was there they feared that they didn't have manpower enough to control that area. So the friction developed and Garibaldi decided on leading the movement and he came to Staten Island

TP: Garibaldi did

JP: Garibaldi. Before he did he left. He went ahead and gave all his followers who came from his area around Genoa and the northern, northwestern part of Italy the right to a visa from whatever provence they had come from.

TP: Was your grandfather one of those?

JP: My grandfather was one of them who got a visa to go to France, with a, stating that he was medically fit to move around and go from one country, one nation to another. And, on one side what you needed was....was a medical certificate. On the other side it had the symbols of the cross flags of the Provence of Liguria which was the flag, was the controlling flag, symbol, for the entire Genoa area and the Papal flag.

TP: And then he went to France, you say, with this visa, and then how did he get to this country?

JP: He went to France. Started in France somewhere in the month of February and he landed in New York City about the middle of July

TP: They came to New York from France.

- JP: Ya. On a sailing vessel and due to the heavy winter weather the mast had broken on several occasions and it was impossible to control the boat so all that was left was nothing but a number of hard tack and some water
- TP: Now, let me get this straight. You said that they had visas from Italy to France. But then they stayed in France for any length of time?
- JP: They stayed for a few months in France.
- TP: Just a few months and then they came directly to New York. And then you said your grandfather
- JP: My grandfather landed in New York City. And first started working for a firm down on Washington marketing, selling bananas, and while he was delivering bananas he got the bright idea of opening up a fruit store in, somewhere south of the Italian colony which was there founded by Worth?? St. and Mulberry St and Broadway where the federal court house is now, around Foley Square area. And, so, he picked out a place on the corner of Fulton Street and Broadway, which is now the site of 195 Broadway, of the American Tel and Tel building. He went ahead and ran a store there for quite a number of years. But during that time a good friend of his by the name of Steven Salari had moved up to Purdys, NY, where the professional building is now. Off of Route 22. And, you think why, having been well acquainted for a good many years before then, why, my grandfather would come on up here four, five, six times a year. So, this Steven Salari told my grandfather on one occasion. He said, "Say," He said, "a fellow by the name of Charles Sutton died recently. Up on the south side of the Titicus River, in the valley up here, and if you come on up here buy that land, why we would be next door neighbors once again." And it was through that conversation that my grandfather was encouraged, especially in view of the fact that he was already bearing these children, growing up in New York City, as rough necks. Back in the, 1875, 1870s. So he went ahead and decided to buy the land and he bought the property at the estate sale of Charles Sutton.
- TP: Is that this property right here that we are on now? Huh? Was the Sutton property right here?
- JP: Yes. Do you want to know the price?
- TP: Well, it would be interesting to know the price....
- JP: The price at that time, that my grandfather paid for the entire tract of land. And it must have run well over a hundred acres, was \$12 an acre.
- TP: \$12. an acre. That's hard to believe, isn't it.
- JP: Yup. Back in 1879 and 1880.
- TP: Well, now, when the reservoir came along in here, through here, and condemned quite a

lot of that land. Didn't it?

JP: Yes.

TP: About how much do you have left here now?

JP: around that time we had a flourishing town here. The, North Salem, from Salem Center going up toward North Salem, where Route 84 is now, it was a boon town. There was a lot of manufacturing and industries up in there.

TP: Well, now your grandfather came and bought this property and then did he, you said that he, that he, was supervisor of construction.

JP: No.

TP No, was that your father?

JP: My grandfather started farming and went into the dairy business. Together with, in the area here, in this countryside, Slossum Decker, who lived on now what is part of Malcom Smith's land, Mills Road and Cat Ridge, near Woolworth farm. And Slossum Decker had started a creamery which later on led to the development of condensed milk. And my grandfather had a barn down there. We had 34 cows and he ran a dairy business. Together with Slossum Decker, Dave Vail and all that group

TP: That was down where the reservoir is now.

JP: No, no, no. In the lake

TP: In the middle of the lake. That's what I mean. Where the reservoir is. In the middle of the lake. Well, you said that your, then it was your father who was....

JP: My grandfather, when his children first came up here, my aunt was the oldest and the two boys were younger. And, my father, why, as he grew up, he didn't go very much to school because my grandfather would keep the children working out in the fields. If it was a dry day, or if the sun was bright, he'd give chores to complete, day by day. If the weather was bad and it was raining and you couldn't work on outside, then he'd let them go to public school. Down there.

TP: So, where was that school located that they went to?

JP: The school was located somewhere down there where the river is now. Down in the old village.

TP: Near the village

JP: Where the old bridge is. Below the iron bridge that is going to be torn down pretty soon.

TP: Down by that bridge. Down by the bridge that goes over the Croton River, over to Somers.

JP: Yeah.

TP: Near the

JP: Near the existing iron bridge that is there now

TP: Well, now, it was your father, what connection, who was it, what member of your family, was it that worked on the reservoir?

JP: My father went ahead and started to, taking courses. When the City of New York became interested in the valley to, in order to extend the Croton water supply system. My father felt that that was the opportunity to get a little more education, so that, he went ahead and entered, he took courses in the United States Correspondence school, through the mail, it was from Philadelphia. And also the Mechanic Institute and he took, ...by the time the City of New York finally condemned the property of the Titicus Valley here, for the dam, why my father had made contact with a firm by the name of Washburn and Shaver. Mr. Shaver was an army officer who was, who was the major owner. He had a partner Washburn, really Shaver ownership. Having had this advance training in weapons to rely on engineering, why he, Shaver told him, he said, "here, I'll leave the blueprints with you and tell you just what to do from week to week. I'll come up once a week at least and see how you're getting along." And that's how my father, at the age of 24 years of age was already supervising the construction of the entire set up of Titicus Dam and Lake.

TP: Well, about how many people worked down there at the time?

JP Oh, about 400, to 450

TP: About 450 people, worked on there. And then you said that they were largely Austrian.

JP: They had a lot of Austrians who did all the stone and masonry work. All these stone walls were all made by Austrians. The, heavy labor work was done by some colored and some Italians, some in Italy. But, the machinery and equipment was run mostly by either Scots or Irish. My father decided that when it comes to running the machinery where the favorite way, either Scotsmen were especially fine burners, they could get more out a ton of coal than he could.

TP: Well, they got the stone from around here locally, didn't they? Local quarry?

JP Yes, yes.

TP: Do you know where they were located? Or, how did they do that?

JP: Well, they, there's a whole lot of stone all over. They did even take some stone up on the

other side, above where Francis Brown lived, over on that ridge, up in there.

TP: Well, they must have had to do a lot of moving, moving a lot of houses, buildings and cemeteries out of the valley before they flooded it, didn't they?

JP: Yes, there was quite a number of cemeteries and about 30% of the graves were taken, were opened up. The others were flooded over.

TP: Were they?

JP: And the headstones and marble markers were given to the farmers to use for, to make troughs and cow mangers. There's some of them over, along side the garage there.

TP: Outside your garage right here

JP: Over here

TP: And they came from down in the cemetery.

JP: All of them are, all of them. All the monuments and foot stones and markers. Anybody wanted any of them or could use any of them, granite or marble. Got a lot of marble there.

TP: Can you make out any inscriptions on the stone.

JP: Oh, yes, you can, you see them.

TP: you can.

JP: You see them

TP: That's very interesting.

JP: Later on after the cemetery was moved down here. The gully, in Sollar's hollow down Between the island and the mainland where Mills Road is now there was, the last cemetery in there. About, well between 25 and 30% of the graves were moved up there, into, alongside the Mills Road. But the others were left down there.

TP: They were left down there, just flooded right over.

JP: Flooded over.

TP: Well, then, was there any particular way they decided who would be moved and who wouldn't be?

JP: No, because some of them was so early. There was nothing but a stone boulder or a fieldstone mark the grave of a child or a young person died many years ago Now, you

take, up on the On the south side of 116, above that massive rock over there. Sometimes shows up as a little showl or a rock ledge, why, that was the, a sewing machine factory. It had been in use by the name of Wilcox and Gibbs. Hear of that name?

TP: No, I never have. Now, near who's house is that. Is that up near where Bulkley's house is now, or

JP: No. South of where

TP: Didn't Jim Holt live now?

JP: Ira Reynolds lived

TP: Oh Ira Reynolds

JP: Ira Reynolds, The Wilcox and Reynolds sister. No, not Ira Reynolds, Where Sterns live.

TP: Oh, where Sterns live. Caesar used to live. It was higher up.

JP: High up where the sewing machine factory.

TP: Now that's very interesting. Mr. Peirano you were telling me about the City acquiring the road here. You want to let us know a little bit about that.

JP: Yes. Well, at the time of the condemnation proceeding. All our natives here were so anxious to have the City of New York come on up here and extend its limits into North Salem that they impressed upon the town board not to accept any compensation for any of their highways which might have been, might be flooded over. So that all the town roads and town properties were inside of the valley, which was eventually flooded by the Titicus Lake, were not given any compensation awards, for any, for one square inch of that land.

TP: Well, that certainly is a curious thing. They must have been very anxious for the City then to

JP: They were

TP: To come up here

JP: Oh, very much so.

TP: Another thing that you were telling me about was the blizzard of '88. About the problems they had here then.

JP: Well, listen, in '88, blew so much snow up against some of the buildings, why, the only outlet people had was to go ahead and get out, if they had a two story building, get out on

top of the porch roof that they had on the front part of the building and slide down on the snow banks.

TP: Of course, you don't remember the blizzard of '88, but I guess your father did. And, your father was Steven.

JP: Steven J.

TP: Peirano. But he, you said, is no relation to the Steven Peirano who lives over in Somers.

JP: No.

TP: But he came from the same area in Italy.

JP: Township in Europe.

TP: Mr. Peirano, you were telling me about the old blacksmith shop that was run by Eli

JP: Eli Burr.

TP: Eli Burr, across from the Hearsts. And how you used to go up there to have horses shod.

JP: That's right

TP: Want to tell me a little about that?

JP: We used to go ahead and have our horses shod by Elias Burr and at the time. Where 116 and where 124 is, where the bridge is now. You take the opposite, the homestead of the day, which was then owned by William Howe.

TP: William Howe Howe. You used to go up there and it's quite different then than it is now.

JP: Oh yes, we go ahead and bring our horses up there and walk up to Salem Inn and my uncle would drink beer and I would drink my cream soda or sarsaparilla, not being of age.

TP: The Salem Inn was located where, on 116

JP: On 116 going due north, going up towards where the Arch is.

TP: But it wasn't up as far as the Arch, was it?

JP: No. It was almost dead opposite where the rock is that's standing on three pillars.

TP: Yes, that big rock. The Balanced Rock. It was just a little bit south of that, I believe. The foundation is there

JP: There is still a foundation

TP: And that was the Inn.

JP: Still a foundation, still standing alongside the road there. And you take, why, opposite there, all those homes now, which have been turned into dwellings, were at one time all either machine shops, or wood turning shops, or the places for coopers to make

TP: Make barrels.

JP: Make barrels. And,

TP: Do you remember those?

JP: Oh, yes. And where you see the remnants of waterfalls is where some of the old water wheels were, to give them power. The equipment was all about water power.

TP: Then you said that there was somebody by the name of Flower who lived up along the houses across from the ??

JP: Dr. Flowers became acquainted with Mrs. Storrs. Mrs. Storrs lived right west of Eli Burr's blacksmith shop as you come around the bend on 116 in that great big frame house that's still standing up there on the ridge. And, Dr. Flowers encouraged quite a number of our natives here to buy gold stocks in a venture up in Labrador. And, you think my falling for it, why most of them were pretty badly burnt. When they exposed it to the district attorney, why Dr. Flowers, who was one of the men, one of the founders of the Flower Hospital in New York City, later on served a jail sentence. Sentence for embezzlement.

TP: I would like to locate the place where Mrs. Storrs lived.. You said it was on a high ridge. Is that across from where Benjamin Lobdell's store used to be on Keeler Lane, or down near where Route 124 comes in to 116.

JP: Where 124 comes into 116, up on the ridge there.

TP: And that's where, a man now lives there by the name of David Lawrence. Lives up in there. There used to be, there used to be the James Howes lived up in there. It's a great big house.

JP: Yes, a great big house. Painted a conservatory yellow.

TP: Yes, I know where you mean. Well, um, Mr. Peirano you were telling me a month ago about General Grant living here. Could you go on a little bit about that.

JP: Before General Grant had been confined to a nursing home up at Mount McGregor in Massachusetts, he lived up here on the Grant's property. And he often would go ahead and go down for treatments to New York. And when he'd be at the station down there, at the ticket office, Will Gardner, the Purdys railroad station

TP: I remember Will Gardner. He and Jim Day used to be the ticket agents people down there.

JP: Jim Day and Tucker, an operator, too ???

TP: Yes, I remember. He used to play baseball, too

JP: And he'd take....on most occasions when the father and Mr. Kiger, who was then the engineer at the New York water supply system in northern Westchester County near that time. Would be allowed to go into the ticket office at the station there together with a few others like Mr. Keeler and Mr. James Marshall in Somers. You remember James Marshall?

TP: He's a cousin of mine.

JP: Hobart Keeler used to go down.

TP: They are both cousins of mine.

JP: They'd go down won't nobody listening in, they'd go into the ticket office there

TP:

JP: And the day when General Grant would come to the station to go to New York, why, Mr. Gardiner, the station manager, would turn the office to General Grant until train time. And Mr. Grant, General Grant, why, would come on there, why, in a bad shape and I suppose why due to his illness, wonder why, my father claimed, why these he'd dread Abe Lincoln said, why, he hoped that he had known the brand of General Grant drank, of what liquor he drank, maybe he'd solve a lot of his problems as President of the United States.

TP: Did he. Drank a little of the same liquor

JP: You don't drink, know why Grant had been thrown out of the office. Then he settled down in St. Louis, Missouri, growing pigs, hogs, and, when the war started he moved up to Illinois, and he tried to get into the Army but the Army wouldn't. They said you've got an undesirable discharge and we can't take you in. You're no good. So, he got into the National Guard. When the National Guard, his unit got federalized, he pushed in, see. But, they always sided him. Stay home, they said, But with every defeat of the Union army, when one general after the other was given the opportunity to take it over. And one of the time they were going to eliminate So, he asked why, why? They are doing so poorly that we might as well not go ahead and take these people here. He said why not go ahead and give Grant a chance and he brought Grant to the front. And that's how Grant got back into the Army.

TP: That's how he got back in.

JP: So, they, some of the senators in Congress, said, why Harley Dickerson let's go ahead and get him drunk. Lincoln, said, well, I wish I knew the brand he uses and I think I could solve a lot of our problems if I would use some of it too.

TP: Mr. Peirano...

JP: Horace Greeley came to New York and started working for some of the printing houses

TP: New York World

JP: Evening World. He lived in a house on the north side of where Route 116 is now. And, that house was still standing back in World War I days.

TP: I remember it.

JP: In very bad shape. And it was only through, after a heavy, very heavy wind storm and thunderstorm that the house began to tear apart. And having had a Kodak I think a model 200 Kodak camera to make post card pictures, I went over there and I photographed them I'll show you

TP: That house stood just east of Jim Holt's driveway, between there and what was the Caesar property, right on the bend of the road, just before you get to the bend in the road, a little rise there

JP: Yes, that's right.

TP: Now, you want to tell me a little bit about the house? The one he had there?

JP: Well the house was built a little the same style like lot of the old buildings of the early year, the late 1700s, around the 1800s. Well, all it had was just a little venting up there in the attic there. But I don't think it had much space up in the attic at all.

TP: Do you recall how long he lived there?

JP: I don't recall, but after he bought out the Evening World, then he moved over to New York by shifting his homestead down to Chappaqua. But prior to that, in the days when he was only an employee, Horace Greeley lived here over on 116. So, it must have been back in the 18, 1850s.

TP: Around the 1850s. And you mentioned something about a rifle, that,

JP: After the house was vacated, why, that house was being used as a target from our place, down at the Titicus River, by a man who had a 45-70, gunman Springfield rifle, single shot, like was used up until the time of the 1903 Springfield rifle was approved by the army. And you take, Leo Mancusi was a deputy sheriff in White Plains, down there, had this rifle, and he come on up and stood there on one occasion and he shot at the outhouse that was there not knowing that there was anybody in there he fired and hit the side of the

building and imagine, in a few hours they found a man shot in there. It was one of the Austrian fellows who had been building, had built stone walls around the dam here. Had been killed.

TP: Around Titicus Dam

JP: Around Titicus Dam

TP: Had been killed over there in that hot house.

TP: Horace Greeley's outhouse?

JP: Yeh.

TP: Outhouse and he shot him from over here on your place. Your house here looks right across the reservoir to the site of that house. And you're almost across from where Jim Holt's house is.

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