

This is Diana Matthews interviewing Mike Tartaglia at his home, 812 Garrison Road, Fort Erie, August 15th, 1985.

D.M: Hi Mike.

M.T: Hi.

D.M: How are you?

M.T: Fine.

D.M: Were you born in Fort Erie?

M.T: Yes.

D.M: When?

M.T: 1922.

D.M: So that makes you...

M.T: 63.

D.M: Have you lived here all your life?

M.T: Yes, except for five years in the service.

D.M: Is your family from Fort Erie too?

M.T: No.

D.M: Where did they come from?

M.T: My father came over from Italy when he was 14 years old, all by himself. I don't think anybody would do that today. My mother was born in Buffalo.

D.M: What type of work did you dad do when he first got here?

M.T: He was a foreman on the C.N.R. railroad, I imagine that was in the 20's.

D.M: Did he do that all his life?

M.T: Yeah, but he passed away in 1944 at the age of 50, from a heart attack.

D.M: What was Fort Erie like when you were a kid, did you live in this area?

M.T: No, I lived in the North End.

D.M: Bridgeburg?

M.T: Yeah, Bridgeburg. I lived on the corner of Courtwright and Central, where the Looking Glass is now. That's where I was born, in that house.

D.M: Is it still the same house?

M.T: Yeah, right at the end of the Central Avenue bridge there.

D.M: Has Fort Erie changed much?

M.T: Oh, yeah, I think it has. I think back in those days... you see, you

had Bridgeburg, and you had Fort Erie, right? And then they amalgamated in what, '31 or '32, then it became the Town of Fort Erie. At that time, the population was only around 4,000. So, it has expanded. Of course now we have the Regional Government, so it's one big town, Crystal Beach, Stevensville, Fort Erie, and the population is 24,000.

D.M: What do you think of Regional Government?

M.T: Well, it has it's pros and cons, but I haven't followed it that much. It's taken the government away from the people that much more, you know? We were little kids, down in the North End.

D.M: What did you do for fun?

M.T: Well, I can remember when Jarvis Street was paved.

D.M: You saw it being paved?

M.T: Yeah. We used to... at that time they had big barrels of tar, and we used to get some of the tar and chew it as chewing gum! It wasn't bad, it didn't taste bad, we didn't put that much in our mouth! And I can remember Briggs' store having a gas pump that you had to pump by hand. That's the one that was on fire here a while ago, that building's all closed up now.

D.M: What type of store was that?

M.T: They had paints and things, and they had two gas pumps out front. Baker's store was the hub of our little Bridgeburg, that was at the corner there.

D.M: That was a newsstand?

M.T: Yeah.

D.M: Can you remember many of the other stores on Jarvis Street?

M.T: There was Lamb's where the Credit Union is, that was a furniture store. There was Carrol's store on Jarvis Street, there was Everett's on Jarvis Street, that was a dairy. Agrette's had a store down there at one time, there was Seeber's, Grinham's butcher shop, Mike the shoemaker, Valvo's store, Charlie Pong had a laundry... I understand he's still alive, we thought he was old then!

D.M: Didn't Skippy Wong have a laundry?

M.T: Skippy Wong had a restaurant before the war, in the early thirties, down there where Mr. Girdlestone has his office now. That was a hangout for the kids. There was an Olympia restaurant down there where Gibson's is, and there was Ditchburn's hardware store, Yeo's store, they had the Santa Claus every Christmas, down in the basement

that would be where... it's right next to the Post Office, where the drugstore is now.

D.M: There is a store on Jarvis Street at the end that used to be a house, it's right next to Erie Jeweller's. Do you know anything about that?

M.T: Are you talking about where the antique store used to be?

D.M: Yes.

M.T: That was a home there, yeah.

D.M: When was that changed into a store?

M.T: That had to be maybe 25 years ago. Collinridge's... I think John Collinridge lived there. He's still living in Fort Erie. He worked at Horton Steel, I think he's pensioned off now. I can remember when we were kids, every time they had an election year come around, we would all wait at the corner in front of Baker's store to see who was elected, so he had to come... whoever was elected Mayor had to come across the street and buy us all candy! That was a big deal then. Another big thing was when the fights were on... on the radio, no T.V. then of course. And where Glenny's building is...

D.M: Glenny Travel?

M.T: Yeah, there used to be a barbershop there, Mike Purpura's barbershop, that's where the Purpura's lived. We used to sit on the steps of the barbershop and listen to the fights.

D.M: Boxing?

M.T: Yeah. That was a real big deal then. You didn't have that much to do then.

D.M: Did you go to Erie Beach?

M.T: Yeah, Mr. Valvo (Albert) and I went. We ran away from home when we were seven years old, with our little shoeshine box! We didn't have any money, we had a shoeshine box, and we took off, we skipped school, and went up to Erie Beach and we were there all day, and we come back home at night. You can imagine what happened when we got home because our parents didn't know where we were. But we managed to have bits of money and something to eat, and ride all the rides. We used to go there quite often, because there was no Crystal Beach at that time.

D.M: Describe the park to me, what was it like?

M.T: Well, practically, they had the rides like that are up at Crystal Beach, the Merry-go-Round, roller coaster, train. They had a little

train going from the ferry dock up to the beach. The ferryboat used to bring the people across and take them up on the train because there was no bridge at that time. The bridge was built in what... 1927? I should remember that because I sat on the board for 19 years.

D.M: Why did Erie Beach close?

M.T: I don't know what happened. When the Bardol family owned it... they built... when did they build Dominion Road? That was built, I think, after the park closed. I can't recall what happened then. I know I recall the... no, there was Atwood's furniture store on Jarvis too, was there? Yeah, and they had another little store over on Dufferin Street where the apartment building is, across from Dieter Weinmann's with a big barn in behind. They used to have this old horse drawn hearse. I think I mentioned to you about it, did I mention to you about the... that they used to have a firebug in town?

D.M: No.

M.T: That had to be during the war, I think, because I used to come home once in a while, and they used to have a dance every Tuesday night at the Oddfellow's Hall, over top of the Credit Union, and it got there... every Tuesday night at midnight that fire was... this firebug was setting fires to all these big old barns and all that, and he burned the one that... where the hearse was on Dufferin Street. Another big one he burned was across from the high school, and one just right behind where Pike's Cleaners is now, there used to be a restaurant in there, Valacho's. Then there was a bake shop in there, and they had the horses in there for pulling the wagon. I don't know how many horses died in that fire. Boy, they were terrific fires. They finally caught the guy.

D.M: Found out who it was, did they?

M.T: Yeah, he was from Fort Erie... Bridgeburg. He ended up in jail. I don't think he's alive today.

D.M: Do you remember when the Erie Beach Hotel burned?

M.T: I can remember it, yeah, but I don't know much about it. 1935, yeah, I remember that. That firebug actually got to be comical, you know? Because you could just sit there and wait for the fireman, and we were just across the street from the Fire Hall. At that time the Fire Hall was underneath the Town Hall there, where the engineer's office is. Mr. Ross, he lived behind Baker's store and he was the

driver of the firetruck, and he would go whipping out of his house and across there with just his pants on, and sometimes just with his shorts on, and he would take off to the fire. What else was on Jarvis Street, let's see... There was a chap that broke out of the jail once.

D.M: Where was the jail?

M.T: Right there where the engineer's office is, underneath the Town Hall. The bars are still on the windows, I think. We only had one or two policemen at the time. Mr. Huff was the chief once, and Brown was the chief. This one chap broke out one night, and he come running down from the... Mr. Valvo was in his store, and he always kept a club, he had a club in there, it was weighted down a little bit, and he just missed the guys head! Then he ran down the street. I'm trying to think, there was Mullett's store down there on Jarvis Street and somebody was shot in there, or shot at. That was across from the Post Office.

D.M: What type of store was it?

M.T: Vegetables and that, I think. His stepson is still living in Fort Erie, Bill Lewis. He lives on the Boulevard. Those stores... any of the original stores... the one where the automotive... in front of your bookstore, that used to be a... we called it the Holy Rollers, I think, at the time. It was a religious thing, and then there was Fritz's butcher shop next to that. That store is probably the original, that's the original building there. Where Stedman's is was Heckman's pool room and barbershop, then he moved across the street, next to the coffeeshop. Then if you went down the street a little further, there was Charlie Pong, there was White's meat market, the butcher shop, Everett's dairy was on Jarvis Street, and that's where Mullett's was, down there. Of course the Royal Hotel has been there for years, whatever it's called now, I don't know. I used to deliver papers down there and all the way along to Gilmore Road. Wintemute Street was called Mortgage Avenue at that time. That's where all the well-to-do people lived. It was really Wintemute Street, but that's what all the people called it. That was the only street that had streetlights for a while, the fancy ones, and a paved road.

D.M: Which was the first paved road in Fort Erie?

M.T: Wintemute Street might have been, I'm not sure though.

D.M: What about Amigari?

M.T: Amigari was called the West End, where Battery is and all that, over by the Grand Trunk and the Racetrack. The Mayor of Fort Erie lived in Amigari, well, it was Fort Erie then at the time, Mr. Malcolm, and that's when the arena caved in, the roof caved in, in 1936 or '37. I don't know if anyone has mentioned that. It was all owned by Buffalo interests, by the Bairds and that. That's when they had the Buffalo Bisons playing over here, before they had any arenas in Buffalo. They wanted to rebuild it, but the mayor wouldn't let them, or we might still have had a nice big arena. That was a beautiful place.

D.M: How come he wouldn't let them?

M.T: I don't know. He didn't want to go for it. So then, we didn't have any arena here for years. When I was playing junior hockey, we had to go to Port Colborne to practice at 4 o'clock in the morning or 5 o'clock in the morning. There was no heat in the arenas at that time, so it wasn't very nice. Well, of course the Racetrack has changed alot. I don't know if you have seen the old pictures of that, that's changed an awful lot. They used to have... one building was a little clubhouse. The grandstand... the side of it has been extended a little bit, I think, but not that much.

D.M: Did you go there alot?

M.T: No, I haven't been in there this year. It's a beautiful track, though. It's one of the prettiest tracks in North America.

D.M: They only race B horses there, right?

M.T: Yeah. They had a big race there last Monday.

D.M: The Prince of Wales.

M.T: There was close to 10,000 people there. Years ago, the Racetrack in the summertime, carried most of the tourist business. I had a restaurant down the street here where the Ho Ho is now, called Michele's. I bought that in 1947, after I came out of the airforce. That's when we did all our business, because then they were here for a month or two. People would come down from Toronto and stay at the motels, and we were the only restaurant on the road at that time. Four or five motels were built since we started.

D.M: What was the first job you had in Fort Erie?

M.T: My first job? After being a paperboy? I went to work on the railroad for six or eight months.

D.M: What type of work did you do?

M.T: I was what they call a bleeder. I used to release the brakes. I started by taking shorthand and typing and commercial courses in high school. My intentions were to work up to be a manifest clerk on the railroad, working in the yard office. So I started out as a bleeder, but then I left the railroad to go and work for the civil service with the air force at Fleet. From there, I... when I became 18, I joined the air force. I was in the air force for 5 years. Then I came back to Fort Erie and I... well, after my dad died in '44, I got a posting back to Fleet for 6 months. So, when I was home, I was working as a waiter and a bartender at the hotels, at the Racetrack. For the year after I came out of the service, I worked at the Hotel Fort Erie as a waiter and a bartender, then I went into the restaurant business.

D.M: Then you opened up Michele's?

M.T: Yeah. I was there for 20 years.

D.M: When did it close?

M.T: Well, I sold it.

D.M: When did it change names?

M.T: Well, it didn't change names until the boys that have it now took over. I sold my restaurant to the doctor that bought the motel, the Fort Villa, next door. That was owned by my sister-in-law. I can remember before the motel was built, I was sitting there all by myself on that piece of property, with an outhouse next door. That's how Garrison Road was, weeds! There was nothing there. Where the mall is was all weeds, it was just a big field. The church was there, and the cemetery, but there was nothing else across the street. In fact, back in 1949, one of the members of the Legion got the brainwave they should have a big encampment in Fort Erie here.

D.M: Encampment?

M.T: Encampment they called it. They were gonna... expect the crowds, I don't know, thousands, he figured, of veterans he was gonna get into town. So, they had a tent city, they called it, across from where the mall is now, tents all over that field. There was, right after the arena was built, the arena was built in '47. I waited for them to start building the arena, then I started to build the restaurant. I never knew anything about the restaurant business when I started. I used to sit at home and think "Well, jeez, you take two pieces

of bread and put cheese in it, and get 25¢ for it, there must be money in it." So, when I understood they were gonna build the arena... the Town gave all of the veterans a lot, tax free, for 3 years, when they came back from the service, if they wanted one. So I picked out that lot there at the corner of Garrison and Douglas, because I figured the arena was gonna be there and... so, like I say, when they started to build, I started to build. So the centre of this encampment was gonna be the arena. They brought in a midway show which was on Main Street... well let's see, what's down there now... well, it's part of that Cloverleaf and everything else that's there at Central Avenue. There was a big... I think it was called the Plaza Restaurant, right down there by the bridge at the foot of Main Street. They were gonna raffle off an airplane, which they did eventually, but who won it, is still a question today. I think it just went back to the people that were running it. It became a complete flop. I had purchased a thousand weiners and rolls, I built a little stand outside the back of my place, because all these people were coming to town. I ended up freezing them all. I never sold anything, and everybody went for a real ride, It was just a flop. The reason I am telling you this is because they had this big tent city. All these tents erected across the street, and nobody sleeping in them. It was...

D.M: When the people came to town, where did they go?

M.T: There weren't that many that came to town, very few came to town. They had a dance and that in the arena, you know, and the beer was flowing pretty good for the veterans, but it was nowhere near what they expected.

D.M: This was in the 1940's?

M.T: 1949. I still got a pin from that, one of the things that they had made up for it. Phil Dyke was the chap that instigated it. It was a big joke after. Then came along the... when I built, I think the Peace Bridge Motel was started that year too. Mr. Yuhas built the Peace Bridge Motel, he came in from London, he has two daughters living in town. His wife is here, he just passed away last year. My brother-in-law built the motel in '54, the Fort Villa. Then Sunoco came along, and then the Haven, and then the Gateway.

D.M: Is that a motel?

M.T: Yeah, it's still there. Of course there was the Hotel Fort Erie, which

was... what was that called years ago...? It was the only place you could do anything, but do you think I can remember the name of that hotel now? I might think about it, if I do, I'll mention it. So, as you can see, it's changed a bit down there now, though. You know, with McDonald's and all those places. Like I say, when we were sitting there, we... they had all those motels and none of them had a dining room. I can remember on a Sunday morning, we would be serving breakfast, and we would go through a crate of eggs, which was 36 dozen, plus everything else that went with them. It would be packed.

D.M: There was nowhere else for people to go?

M.T. That's right, so it was really nice. So, what else can we tell you about this little town of Fort Erie...?

D.M: Well, what did you do after you sold the restaurant?

M.T. I took a year off, we had purchased this home here then, in fact, we had purchased it just about a year before we sold. After my brother-in-law sold the motel, it was a year later that I sold the restaurant to the... I approached the doctor to see if he wanted to buy the restaurant. At that time, he didn't want to, so I said to my wife, my theory was- you either keep up with the other places, or one step ahead of them. So, we decided, well then, if we are going to stay here, we are going to build on. I had the plans already approved to put on ten rooms, and then a drinking lounge. At that time, we had operated for 13 years with no license or anything. Restaurants couldn't have licenses, then they finally... they had a vote and passed it. We were the first restaurant to receive a liquor license. So, I don't know whether the doctor heard I was gonna build on, which would have blocked off part of his motel or what, but eventually he bought it. Then, like I say, I took a year off, and then I went with Investors, which is mutual funds and that for two or three years, and then I went into real estate selling, my wife and I both did. Then, I think it was '75 or '76 that I got appointed the Lotto Canada distributor for lottery tickets. I was selling lottery tickets for 8 or 9 years.

D.M: Are you still doing that now?

M.T. No, I'm all finished now, just at the end of last year.

D.M: I understood you worked for the Peace Bridge.

M.T. I was on the Board. I was appointed on the Board in 1966. There

were ten directors. Five Canadian and five American. Five were appointed by the Federal Government of Canada and five were appointed by New York State. We were appointed by the Federal Government, and we were the Board of Directors. We... naturally there was a staff there, but then we made the decisions on... are we gonna repave the Bridge or buy equipment. Just like a corporation.

D.M: Do you remember seeing the Peace Bridge being built?

M.T. No... just vaguely. I had to be what? Five years old when they opened the Bridge. Did Mr. Spear [A1] show you the prints they had of the Peace Bridge? I got some prints that... I think it was around 1970, the Board was thinking about widening the Bridge, we recieved quotes anyways. Widening the bridge or building a tunnel or building another bridge down near the International Bridge or another one down further. We had an engineering firm that gave us some projections on traffic. At that time, they figured it would warrant to widen the Bridge.

D.M: To what, four lanes?

M.T. Six lanes. But then, alot of the people are under the impression, well, why don't you take the sidewalks off and make it wider, but you can't do that, because it's not built that way. Those two that project out... the sidewalks, there's no support underneath them. But I think, at that time, we had an estimate of 16 million to widen it. A tunnel was something like 70 million, and I don't know what the... building a new bridge... I forget what was the cost, but we talked about it for a year or so and we decided, well, maybe we will just let it sit. It's probably just as well we did, because the projections didn't come anywhere near what they thought the traffic was gonna be. Right now, what's holding that bridge up is trucks. The cars, they are dropping all the time. Trucks have increased a fantastic amount, and that's where the revenue is coming from. Alot of people don't like those trucks on that bridge if they get behind them and have to wait, but that's what's keeping that toll down.

D.M: I heard a story that the Peace Bridge was never supposed to have a toll, is that true?

M.T. Until it is paid for. They still have a bond against it. That story has been going around for years, but you must remember that costs are going up all the time too. They have over a hundred employees, and they have to give the Canadian Government 200 hundred thousand

dollars a year, and New York State 200 thousand a year right off the top, and if they don't have that in their revenue, they have to raise the tolls to get it. They pay the Town of Fort Erie a grant in lieu of taxes they call it, which is close to a hundred and fifty thousand, and whatever they pay Fort Erie, they have to pay the City of Buffalo, that's in the act. I think at the time we were talking about widening it, that's when they rebuilt the deck. They ripped the whole roadway up and rebuilt it again. That's when they issued the bond issue, I think it was three or four million dollars a the time. So I don't know, I don't think you will ever see no toll on the Bridge. It's still cheap, eh? If you buy the tickets, it's the lowest toll on any bridge. The bridge in Windsor is \$1.25, and they have the exchange too. This bridge accepts the money at par. So, like I say, I sat there for 19 years until the Government changed, so naturally I'm no longer there.

D.M: Were you ever involved in politics?

M.T. Yeah, I was on the Town Council for 8 years. I was a counsellor for Fort Erie, and I was Deputy Reeve for Fort Erie. When I was Deputy Reeve, I sat on the County Council at that time, which is now a Regional Council, I guess.

D.M: When was that?

M.T. That was in 1954 to 1961, the end of 1961. There were only eight members then. When I first got on, I think we got five dollars a meeting, or was it eight dollars a meeting...? Well, the highest we ever recieved was 500 dollars, I think. We used to have some great sessions, you would be sitting there 'til midnight some nights. At that time, the Town Council had control over the waterworks and everything. That's the difference now with Regional, the Regional now has control over the waterworks and the sewage plants. At that time, the pumping station was down at the foot of Lewis Street in Fort Erie North. The one at the South End was down on the Lakeshore. It's since been torn down. The old Fort Erie... Bridgeburg pumping station is at the... I guess the divers have it now, the Fort Erie Rescue. We used to swim there, that was quite a swimming hole, right out the end of Bowen Road. Williams used to have a little boat dock out there, and down just a little further, at the end of Central Avenue, was the rock, we used to swim there. That was quite a swimming

hole, but I don't see anybody swim around there anymore.

D.M: I don't think the river is very clean anymore. Do you know anything about bootlegging or rumrunning?

M.T. Oh, we used to have our stories about it.

D.M: Do you know any?

M.T. No, there's stories that when there was no liquor in the United States, they used to bring the liquor from down here in boxcars, and they used to get a wood drill and drill right through the floor of the boxcar, right into the barrel and have the liquor come running out. I imagine you could still find beer bottles in that river, at the bottom of the river there. Some of the chaps used to run it across in boats and when they would see the coast guard coming, they just threw it overboard. There was quite a bit of that, but that was well before my time, or when I was just a wee little one. There were different familie's that sold wine and that.

D.M: During Prohibition?

M.T. No, before the war, mainly. During the war when liquor was rationed, beer and all that was rationed, there were a couple of restaurants in town at that time, that you could buy a bottle of liquor and take it to them and they would pay you double what you paid for it, because they were selling it. Alot of the buildings are still operating up here, we got one right up the street here. The gentleman that was running it is still living. He would be a good man to interview. Years ago it was different too, because Buffalo was the hub of the whole area, not Toronto. If you wanted some excitement, you went across the river, and then you could come back to the quiet little atmosphere. It's nice. I'm surprised, alot of the people that I have seen come and go, move in here like from factories and that, some of them come back here to live, and they weren't even born here. I think it's a nice little area.

D.M: Can you think of anything you would like to add?

M.T. Well, let's see... I don't know of anything else that I can think of.

D.M: Thank-you very much for the interview.

M.T. You're welcome.