

HAMMONTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
HHS Tape 12A Frank Mazza Furniture 4-9-19

[Start Time 00:00:04.8]

Today is February 17th, 1978. My name is Patty Wagner and today I'm interviewing Mr. Frank Mazza, Jr. He will be speaking about his father Frank Mazza, Sr., who resides 517 Grape Street, Hammonton, New Jersey.

Question: Mr. Mazza could you start talking a little bit about your grandparents, where they were born?

My grandfather was born in Calabria, Italy and came here at the turn of the century for the purpose of working on the railroad. He came over with two other brothers, Joseph and Peter, his name was Dominic.

My grandmother was born in Naples. At the time grandpop came over, actually, like I said, the purpose was to work on the railroad. At a later date the railroad felt it would be more economical to bring women over. And therefore, my grandmother was sent over as a matchmaker [inaudible, check this] at the age of 15.

At that time, she met and married Dominic. Then she had four children that died prior to my dad, I guess due to conditions at that time, because they were very poor at that time.

My dad was born seven months prematurely and was put in a shoebox with cotton, as a form of incubation I guess at that time. Being the oldest of four additional children, my grandfather had an unfortunate accident causing him to become a cripple and my dad became the second father, like most all Italian families. And had to work two jobs in order to support his brothers and sisters, his mother, and also his children. So, he farmed and also worked in the clothing industry.

Question: Did he own his farm, this farm?

He acquired land a little at a time and cleaned it. It was actually wooded land and he cleaned it by hand.

Question: Where was it located?

It was on Pleasant Mills Road, Boyer Avenue, and also on Main Road. We actually cleaned 100 and 20-some acres. When he was told he had a problem with his

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heart, he was told he would have to quit the farm or the factory. At the time the farming was not so profitable, so he took the factory.

Also, at that time I wasn't too keen about working in the farming. I went to work for an Italian delicatessen, Lucas Bakery for a dollar a day, from 7:00 in the morning to 11:30 at night at the age of 10 years old.

I actually worked for a man for two years and learned all the bakery routes. After two years dad's lifesavings was \$67.00. We went into, what we call the driving business, which wasn't really not only driving but it was haberdashery, pots, pans, dishes, socks, work clothing, anything imaginable, any household goods, including curtains and a grill. We went and started actually with '37 Chevy.

Question: Do you remember the year that he started doing this?

Yes, 1946. In 1946, dad still continued to work in the clothing factory. My mom also worked in a clothing factory. Whenever we acquired any money, he would send me whatever monies we had to go to New York or Philadelphia to buy additional merchandise to sell. He built up a route of 1400 accounts, door-to-door, working seven days a week, for \$5.00 a day.

Question: Mainly, did you stay right in Hammonton doing this?

No, this was an installment trade most of what we do, we would sell merchandise and they would pay per week. Actually, I would say we'd go as far as Cologne, maybe almost up to Absecon and some fringe areas north of Acto. West, we would go closer to Buena and east we'd probably be close to Atsion.

Question: Did the people accept you into their homes, when you were going around selling?

No, it's very difficult. Eventually, afterwards, they accepted you naturally. But when you're going into different ethnic neighborhoods, like we went into Egg Harbor. Naturally, I being an Italian descendant and also that's a German descendant there was a feeling of resentment, initially. But then afterwards there was accepting and afterwards a trust, a binding trust even as today. As some individuals from that area would just call and order merchandise over the phone and sight unseen. It's something that you have to build up over a period of years.

It takes a long, long time to get confidence of individuals. Especially, when you're going into their home. These are places where you eventually, then afterwards you learn to eat with them and know their problems, personal problems, more or less like a confessor. It's an interesting business for a young person, but it's a very difficult and very time-consuming business, a very hard business.

Question: How long did you sell from door-to-door?

I personally don't – well up to 1958, my dad continued until 1968. In 1958, I splintered off and went into furniture and appliance business. My dad continued until he retired in 1968, went door-to-door until he was old. In 1958, I had to go into the furniture and appliance business. I started my furniture and appliance business behind my home at 436 Peach Street.

Question: Mr. Mazza when did you build your furniture store on 12th Street?

We officially opened in 1962. We stockpiled lumber from 1958 to 1962. It was all secondhand lumber on that. The lumber for the second floor was actually lumber which we torn down in Haddon Heights High School. And the cedar roof joists were Kyle Shoe Store in Cherry Hill, which is now Calico Kitchen, and DeSimone Cadillac.

Out of necessity you become an inventor to save money. We actually stockpiled this lumber for four years and literally built the building ourselves. There is no blueprint to that building across the street.

Question: How long did it take you to build it?

A year and a half.

Question: What was there before you built your building?

The client in it was the old Nesbitt Soda Company. And our initial intentions were just to add 20 feet on the side, make the front more aesthetically beautiful, and add a little on the back. And then after realizing we've made our footings all around, I said, "My gosh. We still have..." We were trying to make silk purse out of sow's ear, so to speak.

We finally had to tear it down completely and start from scratch. We put the fourth footing in and decided to make it two stories, as a result, that's what you

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see today. Except for one exception, we later on added a service shop, which extends over the top of the loading area, which is extended in there supported by four H columns.

Question: Do you ever plan to make it any larger than it is today?

At the moment, I was just thinking this morning, it's unusual that you ask that, because we have to repair our roof. We intend to possibly put an A-frame roof, which would give us an additional 4,000 or 5,000 square feet. Above that we would not be able to add anything, because of ordinances, because of law. We physically have used every inch of space there at the moment.

This is the reason why we built the building we are in today, because we needed the additional space. We didn't have the area. Now it would have been more desirable to put everything under one roof.

Question: What made you decide to pick 12th Street to put your furniture store? Did you have any other places that you wanted to put it?

At the time, yes. I owned, probably on the White Horse Pike next to the Ideal. And at that time, I felt that downtown shopping was more desirable. When you're building on 12th Street, I felt it was in walking distance, it would be more convenient for my customers to buy.

Of course, times are changing now. Hindsight is always better than foresight. If I stayed on the Pike, that property I owned, I could have extended on this building, which we built in 1972. We would have added right on the back of it. It would have been all under one roof, because we had the property there. It was large enough to accommodate us some more for future growth. So far, we've been lucky.

Question: Are most of your customers, are they mostly people from Hammonton or do you get —?

Initially, I would say our biggest percentage of our customers are from Hammonton. Now we have diversified, we went into contract sales. We went into large institutions, colleges, airports, and things. Philadelphia Airport was our job. Giants Stadium, the Meadowlands, New Jersey, we did all the interior

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for that particular installation. All the county colleges in this area, Stockton, Atlantic Community.

Therefore, when you say, "Are most of your customers from Hammonton?" We've taken surveys with Glassboro State Teacher's College and we find that Hammonton is important us, yes, but our marketing area is strong. It is still also strong in the retail end in Northfield, Vineland area, and Linwood, that area is also very strong. It doesn't surprise me only a few percentage points difference from the Hammonton sales. Of course, when you add your contract sales with the store percentages.

Question: Mr. Mazza would you like to talk a little bit about during the Depression time, what was your father doing during the Depression?

Unfortunately, I wouldn't be an expertise on during the Depression. I can only use hearsay, because my dad was born, excuse me, not born, was married in the heart of the Depression. He was married in 1932, June 5th. And naturally, they had very little money, out of a job, and had to go to work and support a wife. He had purchased a home on Grape Street. At that time, I believe the figure was \$700.00 for the home.

And dad took any job he could find, and I think he went to work for a cranberry, it was Colasurdo's cranberry farm for 50 cents per day, 14 hours a day to clean ditches. They used, wore boots. And it was not full-time employment, it was three days a week or four days a week. You bought very little with the \$1.50 or the \$2.00 you had. Even though \$700 today seems very little for a home, when you have to pay for a mortgage at \$1.50 on \$2 income, it's not very much.

My sister was born in 1933, therefore he had to support a baby also and buy milk with that same dollar and a half, two dollars. I later was born in 1935 and things started to get a little better for him, because my mom also worked. My neighbor baby-sitted for us so they could try to make ends meet. Even though he was married he still had the obligation of taking care of his younger brothers, his sisters, then his mother too, and his father.

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Like I mentioned earlier my grandpa was a cook and there was no pensions or help, like you have today. It was a sink or swim situation. That's why he had to work all his life, 7 days a week, 18, 19 hours a day.

Question: And he did this by going from where?

Well then, at a later date he worked in a farm and it was a farm, and also, in the clothing business and the clothing industry, in the shop working making coats. And my mom worked in the William B. Kessler pants department. Prior to that they worked for Walton prior to Kessler starting his business in Hammonton.

Question: And they just have the two children? You said you had a sister?

Myself and another.

Question: What does your sister do?

My sister, prior to marrying Charles Crowley, President of First Federal Savings and Loan. In other words, she was Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, of Hammonton Savings and Loan, which is now Empire Savings. After school she went to to work for Hammonton Savings as a teller and worked herself up to Secretary and Treasurer of the institution. Then married, Charles, which later became her competitor.

I think, I guess, for business reasons it was more desirable for her to become a housewife. He was elevated to now he's the President, but he moved up too in the First Federal Savings and Loan. And therefore, it wouldn't been a good idea to be husband and wife in two different financial institutions, which have a direct conflict of interests.

Question: Mr. Mazza, what do you see for the future of Hammonton, the growth? Would you like to see any progress?

I certainly would, being very active in the Chamber of Congress and being the past President of the Chamber of Congress, I certainly encourage growth. I have total confidence in this town of Hammonton. I feel we have industrious people, and we have an excellent community. With good orderly growth, I feel as if probably it is now, and will be, one of the most desirable places to live in the state of New Jersey.

Question: When you think about the businesses itself in our Hammonton, do you think they should be growing more than they are?

I feel that there's certain individuals who are probably content. And probably therefore letting their businesses deteriorate, only by choice. I really don't feel although we've experienced an economic setback nationally in the last three years, I still feel that you can't just sit back and complain about it, you must do something about it. The individuals that are content, that are sitting back, are probably deteriorating. There are certain businesses in our community, in the past five or ten years, that have deteriorated that eventually went out of business.

But on the other hand, there are a lot of young businesses, where the owner is aggressive. Hungry so to speak, working very hard, and possibly going to be very successful. They'll probably be the leaders of our business community in time, because they have the ambition, and they're working at it.

Questions: Do you think Frank Mazza, Sr feels the same way too? How do you think he feels about Hammonton?

Well, I think he probably feels that if there's ever a heaven, this is it. He really doesn't know any better, not that he doesn't any better. He has travelled. I would say, potentially, he was born in Hammonton and it's probably his choice to die in Hammonton, and possibly be my choice to die in Hammonton also. Naturally, he works very, very hard even today at the age of 71. He'll be 72 July 4th. He has total confidence, I believe, in Hammonton. If you would really pin him down to it, I'm sure he would have total confidence in our community.

Question: Mr. Mazza, how many children do you have?

I have three children. I have a girl and two boys: Donna Marie, Frank III, and Gary Raymond Mazza.

Question: Are they younger? Are they all grown up?

Donna is now in college studying marketing, and hopefully she'll come and take some of the burden of me. Frank is now a senior in Hammonton High School. And Gary just became a teenager. He's 13.

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Question: Okay. Thank you very much.

Thank you.

[End of Interview]

Transcribed By: Eileen Unger, 5/28/19

**Please send any edits or corrections to the Historical Society of Hammonton at
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