

Interview with Alphonse Ruggieri

Interviewer: Gordon L. Swartz III

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**LOCAL RADIO PERSONALITY DISCUSSES ITALIAN CULTURE
AND THE "NEAPOLITAN SERENADE"**

INTERVIEW WITH MR. ALPHONSE RUGGIERI

Gordon Swartz: First of all, give me your name and the date. That's how we'll start the tape.

Alphonse Ruggieri: The date of what?

GS: Today's date.

AR: Oh, today's date?

GS: Yes.

AR: My name is Alphonse, I go by Al, Ruggieri, and today's date is July the twelfth, no thirteenth.

GS: Thirteenth.

AR: Thirteenth.

GS: Right.

AR: Yeah.

GS: Okay. Let me make sure I've got everything right, because I don't want to have to miss it.

11 **AR:** Yeah, right, don't want to have to do it again.

GS: Right, but this recorder does a good job when I get it.

AR: Very good.

GS: These little things, you wouldn't think they would.

AR: Yeah, but they do, yeah. Our toys have been perfected.

GS: Oh, yes. Okay, what we are is the Wheeling National Heritage Area Corporation. It's been set up by the businesses of Wheeling, the Chamber of Commerce, and they have some federal funds in there, too, and we are doing oral history of the Wheeling area, but, this, we are working with the Italian Festival on this part of it. So, we're even broadening it to the Upper Ohio Valley.

19 **AR:** I see. So Jefferson County is also included?

GS: Right, in the Wheeling Italian Festival, right.

AR: Right.

GS: But what we want is. Well, we're going to put on five panels during this Italian Festival. Now they are "Coming to America" which is immigration, and "Finding a Job," and "Italian Families," "Italian Neighborhoods," and "Italian-American Clubs." What I would like from you, first off, is just some personal background about you, yourself.

AR: Well, I came over in 1948, here to Steubenville. My father was a coal miner for a very, very long time, maybe at least fifty years of his life in the Dillonvale area. In those days Dillonvale area was booming with mining towns, so to speak, and that's what he did for a living, and I came to Steubenville because he was here, and that's where I stayed, practically. I stayed in Steubenville all the time, except for the two years I did in the army in 1950-52, I lived here in Steubenville all my life.

GS: When you came over you came with you mother then?

AR: No. I came over with my brother. The family, part of the family, stayed there. My mother and an older brother stayed there in Italy, and so we had a split family sort of.

40 **GS:** Did you go to work in a coal mine when you came over?

AR: No, no. One look at that hole, if you will, that was good enough for me. I wasn't even built to, so to speak, to work in a mine. I was educated there in a teachers' college, and , therefore, that type of work just didn't entice me at all to say

Interview with Alphonse Ruggieri

the least, you know. Never mind going several hundred feet under the ground, because the mining of yesteryear, that's what it was. You went way down the hole, you know, and so I worked for most of my life. I worked in drapery. I'm a drapery consultant, and, therefore, I did it for twenty years for the Hub of Steubenville and, until it closed, and then for various other firms, and then, of course, I'm retired now, so I don't. If I do anything, I do it on my own.

GS: A drapery consultant. Now what is that?

AR: Well, basically, you sell your material, your drapery, and you put it all together into people's homes. So that's a rewarding type of work, because you can see the full product at the end of the whole thing that you have done, that you have conceived, that you have put together.

59 **GS:** And you worked for different people during that time?

AR: Mostly for the Hub of Steubenville, and then several other people, too, towards the end of my career.

GS: You say you had, did you get a college degree?

AR: Yes, I had, I have a teachers' college degree, but it's in Italian. Here, in the States, I have a business, accounting, administration degree.

GS: How old were you when you? You say you came in forty-eight?

AR: Yeah, oh, I was nineteen years old.

GS: You were nineteen.

AR: Yeah.

GS: And you father was how old?

66 **AR:** Oh, he must have been about sixty-five. He married late in life. He married. He must have been around thirty-five, forty years old. So you could see that by the time I was twenty he was sixty-five, you know.

GS: How long had he been over here working in the mines?

Interview with Alphonse Ruggieri

AR: He had been here since 1908, I think, 1905, until the first time that he come over.

GS: He had been here since 1905?

AR: Yeah, right.

GS: Did he ever come back?

AR: Yeah, he was back there in 1917. He did a long stint in the Italian Army because of the war. We're talking about the First World War here.

75 **GS:** First World War.

AR: Yeah, and then he come back in 1928. That's when I was born. I did not know him, because he left. I must have been an infant, very, maybe seven, eight months old. My brother Dino that lives in Follansbee, West Virginia, he wasn't born, he was born in 1929. So, because of the war, now we're talking about the Second World War, he never had a chance to come back, to go back to Italy. Therefore, we didn't know him until we came here to Steubenville, twenty years later.

GS: You and your brother both came at the same time?

AR: Yes. We came at the same time. Yes.

GS: Forty-eight. Did you go through Ellis Island then, or was that shut down?

AR: No. No. We did not. We just landed in New York Harbor, at one of the piers there, and then we had somebody to put us on the train to Steubenville.

87 **GS:** Did your father? We'll start with the back, past, and come forward. Did your father ever talk about how he got the job as a coal miner over here?

AR: Well, that was a long, long time ago, but, as far as that goes, I think that was, you know, a push and a go, wherever you could find work, that's where you went, and, if you had to bribe somebody to get it, that's what you did. So there was some of that going on in those days, too, where, in order to get a job, you had to bribe somebody.

Interview with Alphonse Ruggieri

GS: Did he retire?

AR: Yeah, he retired from Dun Glen Coal Mining, which in those days was in Dillonvale, Ramsey area, and that was the last place that he worked, and he retired from there.

GS: Was he in the United Mine Workers, or a union?

98 **AR:** Yes, he was, because I remember him telling me he had some type of union in those days, because I remember that he had to go to Wheeling Hospital one time, and that's how you did go there, to this doctor, Dr. Farr. That was his name, and he took care of all the miners, workers, and so he must have been in some type of organization, and it may have been just the one that you mentioned.

GS: You've. I've asked you twice. I'll ask you again. The Hub of Steubenville that you said you worked for.

AR: Yeah.

GS: Exactly what is that?

AR: Well, the Hub of Steubenville was a department store that was probably, in those days, the biggest department store in the area. It had six floors of merchandise and then a basement on top of that. It was big, a big operation. I would say, in those days, second to none. Too bad it is defunct, you know. As a matter of fact, they even tore down the building. So there's a parking lot there now.

GS: They were not a chain. They were just.

114 **AR:** No. They were not a chain. They were owned by the people that found it. So it was people-owned, family-owned, I should say.

GS: When did you begin work there?

AR: I started to work there in 1960. So from forty-eight to sixty, except the two years I did in the army during the Korean War, I worked for different concern, but nothing stable like.

GS: Were you in Korea?

Interview with Alphonse Ruggieri

AR: No. I wasn't in Korea. I was in Germany. Our outfit, the Fourth Division, the Fourth Infantry Division, went to Frankfurt, Germany.

GS: So, did you live, when you came over in forty-eight, was there an Italian community you lived in, or did you live with your father?

AR: No. I lived with, since my father lived in Dillonvale, and he did not have a house, per se, that we could live together, so I lived with my cousin, here in Steubenville.

GS: Was that an Italian community, or just a town?

AR: Well, the Italian community, I would say, not a distinct Italian community, although in, where we lived there was a lot of Italians that lived there, but it was mostly mixed by then. They told me that back before the war that community was primarily Italian, but then it start to mix a little bit.

GS: Forty-eight, yes, I think that's, in the thirties and twenties, that's Little Italies.

AR: That's when you had the little congregation.

GS: Right.

139 **AR:** Then, after that, they start to break down until it was all mixed.

GS: I interviewed a lady in Benwood. She's lived there all her life, but, in the thirties, that was all Little Italy, they called it.

AR: That's the way it was. Right. I remember when the Italian program, which is called "Neapolitan Serenade," the one that I do, started in 1940. Now, it wasn't popular to start an Italian program in 1940, in the ensuing of the war that took place a couple of years later, with a declaration of war, the Italians being on the other side, and so forth. So, but the little Italian community we're talking about down the south end of the town, mainly like Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth Street. They were listening with anticipation, this Italian program, because they never had one before, and, of course, when it went on the air, the place was like a festival, if you will. Everybody was out in the street listened to some radio, because radios weren't everybody's property. You know what I'm saying. Some had it, and some didn't, you know. So the ones who had it, they blasted it out so that everybody

Interview with Alphonse Ruggieri

could hear from outside on the street, and that was the inception of the "Neapolitan Serenade" in 1940.

GS: Tell me more about that. How often do they have it?

160 **AR:** Okay, well, they started. This is the way it was related to me, because, like I said, this is 1940. I didn't come here until forty-eight. So, the way it started. It started live, where they would stand in front of a mike, a microphone, and play the guitar or the mandolin, and someone that had a decent voice also sometime would sing, and that's the way it was, because records were very hard to find, and, therefore, they didn't even have records. So they did it live. You know, a group of people got together, and that's what they did, until, of course, the inception of records, availability of records, those large, heavy plates, if you will, that weighed a ton, you know. Those were it, and then, of course, they did away with the live performance and went to records. When I came, of course, we started to have albums, those thirty-three.

GS: When did you come to the radio station?

AR: I came to, 1960.

177 **GS:** Okay, you said that. I'm sorry.

AR: Yeah. Yeah, and, of course, I stayed there with the founder, Mr. DeLucia. He had founded the radio, the program, and I stayed with him until seventy-three, actually, seventy-two. In seventy-three I took it over, and, until now. So, the show, the "Neapolitan Serenade," is now fifty-five years old, 1940. Yeah. So, that's a show that it's endured all kinds of changes, both because of the radio stations, and also because of the evolution of times.

GS: What are the, has it been with the same radio station all this time?

AR: No, it was born at WSTV, which is still here, downtown. When WSTV, in 1974 or '75, I forget which year now, went total news on AM, I was, I had to leave it, not because I wanted to. I guess nobody did, but they changed the format on AM, because they had AM and FM. They changed the format that AM was going to go total news, therefore, you could not play music. It was nothing but talk, talk, talk, you know. So I said, well, my show can't do that. My show is based on music, mostly, and, since we could not find a suitable spot on FM, we went in with the other radio station that is now defunct and called WLIT, WLIT, and it's no

Interview with Alphonse Ruggieri

longer in the area. It's defunct, like I said, and, when WLIT went down, I went with EIR which was in 1989.

GS: Is that out of Weirton?

206 **AR:** Yeah. WEIR. Yeah, out of Weirton, West Virginia, although the operation, it's at, AM and FM, is in Wintersville right now. It has been there the last three years.

GS: How often do you do this show?

AR: Okay. We do it once a week on Sunday from 10:00 to 12:00 P.M.

GS: Are you the disk jockey still?

AR: Yes. I am the producer, director, and whatnot. I put it all together. I sell my own time, of course, and we do it presently in Italian, as far as the announcements and everything, but there is also English. There is a lot of it, and there is some news worthy of the region in which we live. That is also done in English, and the advertising is done also in English and in Italian.

222 **GS:** Well, not being familiar with this, I'm kind of surprised that you have that big of an Italian market here.

AR: Well, it's not surprising. You know why, because, practically, of all the ethnic groups here, the Italians, I mean, got it. They, I would say, they outnumber all other ethnic group by maybe three or four to one. It's prevalent, you know. The Italians are in great numbers here in this valley and in surrounding communities. We're talking about Steubenville, Mingo, Wintersville, Weirton, Follansbee. They're highly numbers of Italians.

GS: That still speak Italian?

AR: Yeah. Well, there are. I don't know about speaking it actually, except for the first generation, but the second generation, they maybe don't speak it, but they understand it, and to them it's like bread and butter, if you will. They identify with it.

GS: It's something, it's to keep the past alive maybe.

Interview with Alphonse Ruggieri

AR: Right. That bridge, you know, that bridges the old with the new, the Italians with the English.

GS: Do you ever go back to Italy?

242 **AR:** Oh, yes, I go back there often. I still have the homestead there where I was born. The house is still there. So, therefore, when I go, I go home, so to speak, you know, and also to keep up with the changes. Years brings a lot of changes, and you've got to keep up with it, otherwise, you lose it, like everything else.

GS: I want to ask you about some of those changes in Italy. What are some of the changes?

AR: Well, what are those changes? Italy has gone into a big change as far as the economy of Italy, although people may not think so, but it's booming. There is a lot of construction going on in there. Italy has been able to keep up their per capita income, because of their diversification. They can't compete in the world of steel, for instance, because they lack the material to do it right, but they specialize in certain part of making steel, so that they are able to overcome what they lack, and, therefore, the economy is doing real well there, and everybody seems to be making good money and live good. Whereas, this wasn't true fifty years ago. Needless to say, that's the reason why you had such a large immigration.

268 **GS:** I was talking to your friend Mike Sinicropi. He mentioned that they don't have a tax system like we do.

AR: Well, that's true, too. Well, although they have come up a long way in the world, too, taxes.

GS: Is that right?

AR: Oh, yes. I mean, you're not going to get away with that, you know, I mean. They pay tax all right, but is not like ours. Ours, I think, is on the upscale.

GS: Yeah. What about language? Are the people speaking more English in Italy now?

AR: Yes. There is a lot of that. The reason why is because everything is tied in with the English language. The world, as we know it today. I mean, let's face it.

Interview with Alphonse Ruggieri

This is the greatest and richest nation in the world, so you can't help to have an influence on other people, and the Italians are not immune to that. As a matter of fact, they use words such as "picnic." I never heard it before, you know, but they do use that, and, therefore, they've got a lot affinity, even in the music style.

287 **GS:** Have you ever been to this Italian Festival in Wheeling?

AR: Yes, oh, yes. I've been there several times. From the inception, as a matter of fact, and I've seen it, yes. I enjoy it a lot. The shows that they had at the arena, inside. I enjoyed those shows because they had wonderful shows there that I attended, but the Italian Festival is something that the people....

(Break in tape.)

300 **AR:** So, we're talking about the festival in Wheeling, West Virginia. I think it's a good thing for the community. It brings the old with the new. It brings people together for better understanding, besides keeping up with tradition, the old Italian tradition, which is something that enhances the standing of the community as a whole. I think it's a very good thing, and it should be kept up, and should be enlarged, if it is possible, which I think you guys are doing. So, keep it up. What can I say?

311 **GS:** It seems like most of the Italian people that I've talked to, especially, really like it, and, of course, everybody else does too, just for the. It's a good time, too.

AR: Right. Right. Yeah. Everybody has a good time, and, but, like I said, more than that. It brings people of different ethnic background together for a better understanding, which is the main thing. I think it's the main purpose, I think, because once you understand the other person, you don't have any more problem. Problem disappears. It's a must. I think we have to do more of that, if anything. Like the programs that we do, the radio show that we do. It's the music that we play. It brings people together, keeping up the tradition, the heritage. The good that we perform in our community, through clubs, lodges, and other organizations, it helps the community to come together, to not only to identify themselves, but to come together for a better perspective, for a better understanding.

GS: Well, I agree with that.

334 **AR:** No, you can't (deny). The program, of course, is aimed to keep alive the cultural heritage, the Italian roots, to bring to the listeners, if you will, the best of the two worlds, not to forget the old one, but also to praise the new one. We also work hard to see, to ensure, that the Italian-Americans are portrayed honestly in the media. There is sometime too much of saying that this guy is of Italian descent, therefore, he might have a gangster background.

GS: I hear that.

AR: And some people even suggested, and said, well, why don't you screen them, and then you'll know. Well, that is very superficial, to say the least, but it puts the mark on somebody that doesn't deserve it. So, you know, it's very bad idea. Either you are, or you're not, you know, one of those. So you can't say that you are, and then find out later that you are not. You can't do that. We are here in America, we are the fifth largest ethnic group, being at least twenty-six million strong, and our contribution to this country has been second to none, starting with the great navigators, the explorers, not to mention, Christopher Columbus, Vespucci, and Coballo, and so forth, but, also, in the war of independence and the formation of this nation, there was Colonel Vego who aided the great expedition. You don't know about that.

372 **GS:** No. I don't know about that. I'm learning.

AR: You're learning. Yes, and then the exploration of the Hudson River. There was this great Italian, Verazzano, who discovered Hudson Bay some eighty years before Hudson did. It's all documented. So, if you go back to history, I mean, the Italians were there, and no one can deny it, and, if you go back, way, way back to the Romans, and then down to the Italians, there's been no country in the world that has represented civilization more than, as long as the Italians have. You just can't consider, you just can't consider civilization without the Renaissance. It was born in Florence, Italy. We're talking about the 1500's. The greatest violinist or violins were born in Italy, was crafted in Italy, Stradivarius, you know, the gondolas, unique in the world. No one else has that, you know, and even the pizza, yes, I mean, if you will. Look at here. In the States, can you imagine the United States without pizza?

GS: Not now.

398 **AR:** Not now, or not anymore. So, we're, we're, like to say to the people of Wheeling, West Virginia, and the Italian Festival to be proud of their heritage, and

Interview with Alphonse Ruggieri

to profess it. Don't be afraid to profess it, and I'm sure that the land of their ancestors, Italy, from way up north, the Alps, to, all the way down to the Isle of Sicily would say we're a part of you. Thanks for a job well done, and please continue.

GS: I like, we'll use parts of that probably. I'm sure. What about your family here? Do you have children?

AR: No, I don't have children. My wife and I live here on Whitehaven Boulevard in Steubenville, and me, with my wife Mary Ann, and we don't have any children. My brother lives in West Virginia, Dino, and he had him a family, and he has three children.

421 **GS:** Do you belong to any of the Italian clubs, Italian-American clubs?

AR: Yes. I belong to the Columbus Club here in town, and also to.

GS: Columbus Club?

AR: Columbus Club.

GS: Yeah. Okay.

AR: And also to the Italian-American Cultural Club, of which I am the president.

GS: Cultural Club?

AR: Yeah. Italian-American Cultural Club.

GS: We're trying to, as one of the panels, the one on Sunday, we're trying to get representatives from the clubs to show up just to have a discussion, if you'd like to come by on that. It's noon on Sunday.

AR: Oh, I see, this coming, not this coming Sunday, the other.

GS: Yeah. Not this coming Sunday. No. The twenty-first, twenty-second, and twenty-third at the Italian Festival.

434 **AR:** Yeah. Right.

Interview with Alphonse Ruggieri

GS: On the twenty-third we're having one, trying to get anybody that wants to come from the clubs.

AR: I see.

GS: There's, some of the Garibaldi Lodges will be there.

AR: Yeah, I know. Tony, Tony DuLisse.

GS: Yeah. I think Tony said he'd be by, and the ones in Wheeling.

438 **AR:** Yeah.

GS: That'd be Tony Zambito and that group from. Well, they're from Sicily, I think.

AR: Yeah. I think they are of Sicilian extraction. Yeah.

GS: Yeah. Right.

AR: I met Tony several years ago, like I said, at the inception of the Italian Festival, very nice gentleman, dedicated.

GS: I've been working a little bit with Dino Orsatti. He seems like a real nice fellah.

AR: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Channel Nine News. Yeah, he's involved in it.

GS: He's involved with that.

AR: But this is what you need. You need those type of people that gets involved in it and keeps it up, and then there's the ball that's taken from the other guy and then carry on, but that's what you need. One person can't do it.

GS: Speaking of that, was this radio show going to continue after you bow out?

452 **AR:** Well, you know, this is something that has been bugging me. The reason being that not too many people can do it, and not for the sake of being able or not able to do it, but for the sake of giving that flair that's needed. You got to be able to be proficient in both language. One cannot do it, you know. Also, you

Interview with Alphonse Ruggieri

have to be very much part of the community in which you live, so that the people, the merchant, knows you and knows the work that you're doing, and, therefore, they're willing to support you. Without them, you don't have a program. Let's face it.

GS: Certainly.

AR: No matter how many listeners are out there, you know, you just don't have a program because what it takes to put it on the air is money. So, if you don't have sponsors, you don't have air time. So, let's suppose that. Therefore, to find a person that has all those aspects is not an easy thing to do. I could mention a dozen people that would be able to do it, but they have no affinity in the community. They're not known. So, what you have to do is, if a guy is willing to do it, a person. I said a guy, it could be a woman also. That the person who is willing to do it would have to be very much involved in the community and be known, so that, when you show up in any organization or any establishment, they know you. Hey, you don't have to introduce yourself, they know you, and they know the work that you're doing, therefore, they're willing to give you a hand, but how many people are willing to put in years. It may take years before you get to that place where you should be.

493 **GS:** You have to be concerned.

AR: Yeah. Well, I mean, you just don't show up and says well, I am so and so, I like to do this, and I like to do that. Right. Well, the guy says, oh, yeah, I mean, you know, show me. Where is your background? If you have none, of course, then that's what you're going to get, none, nothing, zero. That's very important.

GS: This cultural club that you're the president of, how big an organization is that?

AR: Well, we, the numbers, we number about sixty, sixty-five, so it's not big numbers, but it's what we do that is more important, and that is to bring culture in the community. What we have done in the past is presented live performance of "Romeo and Juliet," of other plays as "Tosca," "Fornuletto of Venice," and many more. Now last year we presented an opera in film, and we would want to continue to do that so that we'll bring entertainment to the community and keep up the cultural aspect.

522 **GS:** Is the Columbus Club a social organization?

Interview with Alphonse Ruggieri

AR: Now the Columbus Club is strictly a social organization. Yes. Yeah.

GS: Mike Sinicropi mentioned something about a history club? Was he talking about this?

AR: History club? In Weirton?

GS: Yeah. He said he was a member of the Italian-American History Club.

AR: I, tell you truth, I don't know where the club is located, but I've heard of this history club. Where it's located, I don't know.

GS: Where, I don't know either.

AR: Yeah. That I couldn't tell you.

533 **GS:** I just wondered if it was the same thing as this.

AR: No. No. No. It isn't.

GS: That's what the Italian Festival is exactly trying to do, the same, what you said this cultural club's doing.

AR: Yeah. Right. It's, I mean, to bring culture in any community is certainly a plus, and it takes a lot of work, but it can be done, you know. Like I said, we did it live in the past. Today, to do that live is much more complicated, and you need a lot of people that speaks the language fluently well, and those are getting fewer and fewer because of the immigration that has died out. Let's face it. Nobody comes over any more. So, therefore, you don't have that fresh input, and to put on a show on stage you need an awful lot of people that you can rely upon. So, so that's why we switched to films, and opera is very known, very prevalent. Who doesn't know of Tosca? Who doesn't know like *****? Who doesn't know, it doesn't come to mind any more, but those are well known opera that will never die.

GS: Well, I've asked about all the questions. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

AR: Not really. I think we covered quite a bit.

GS: Yes. We did.

Interview with Alphonse Ruggieri

AR: Yeah.

GS: Well, I hope you make it down to the Italian Festival.

AR: Well, I'm certainly hoping to, and, if I do, I'll see you there.

GS: We'll have a tent of our own, our little group will.

AR: I see.

GS: "Talking Tent" they're going to call it.

AR: I see. Okay.

575 **GS:** And, we'll, it's open to anybody that wants to come in and discuss.

AR: And discuss, talk about something, talk about some topics.

GS: And my boss will be there, too. Maybe he's a better interviewer than I am. I'm learning.

AR: Okay. Well, you've got to start some place.

GS: See, I'm on a retraining program. I'm just learning this stuff.

AR: Okay. Good.

GS: I was a coal miner myself for quite a while.

AR: Oh, is that right?

GS: Yeah. That's why I was kind of interested in your father.

AR: Yeah. There you go. There you go. Yeah. Well, in those days, I mean, that was the thing to do, you know, but it's dying out though.

GS: Oh, yes. There's no jobs there any more. Well, I thank you.

Interview with Alphonse Ruggieri