

Catherine Coggio

Interview Transcript: November 15, 2016

Participants: Catherine Coggio, Nicole Librandi, Robbe Brook and David Usher

What brought you to Vermont?

When I was first married (in April of 1953), I came to Vermont with my husband who was at that time an Assistant football and baseball coach with Doc Jacobs at St. Michael's College. We stayed here almost two years when St. Michael's decided to drop the football as a varsity sport, and since he wanted to continue coaching, decided to go back to Massachusetts and we lived there for 12 years. We came up to Vermont in 1965 for the dedication of the chapel at St. Michael's and when we were up here meeting with old friends he went for an interview at Edmunds JHS, He ended up getting a position to come back to Vermont.

How did your connection with the Italian Club start?

OK. The old fire station on Lower Church Street had been made into an educational adult education venue. (Dr.) Ken Ciongoli and Doctor (Mario) Morselli did a series of three lectures on Italy and at the end of the series they asked if we would be interested in a club and it proceeded from there. At that time I was working full time and I was working in Waterbury and I wasn't able to spend as much time becoming involved. But I had immediately recommended Peggy whom I've known for years and I knew she would be interested. So she got involved and consequently ended up being one of the charter members on the original board at that time which it would say probably 70.

Well at the time there weren't too many Italians at St. Michael's in the early 50s. It was very Irish Catholic and most of the Italian boys that I knew went there because they played football and because there were so few Italians they got chummy with Armand. Armand could be very friendly to a certain degree and they'd get together, cook and talk Italian.

But on the other hand he was a very serious professor and he knew where to draw the line. But my husband, who was a student of Armand's remained friends with him through the college years. So he came back to St. Mike's after he had been in the Navy.

Well of course in Italy they used to play soccer but my husband was really into the football team at that time because there was nothing else and so he befriended all of the Italian students and they'd get together and make spaghetti sauce. And they lived right on campus in what was

Catherine Coggio

called "Miketown". St. Michael's bought all the barracks that they could for a buck apiece. They created a little village for married students, instructors and their families. And so Peggy was living in a four room apartment and when I got married I was in the same building but in the three room apartment. And I would have been friends with her no matter where she lived.

We know the first meetings of VICA were at the old fire station on Lower Church Street. What were the first meetings and programs like?

Dr. Ciongoli and Dr. Morselli did some programs on Italy. One was a tour of Italy, one a tour of Hope Cemetery. At the end of the programs, Ken asked if anybody would be interested in starting a club. I raised my hand and recommended Peggy. So we were involved from the beginning.

When it first started - people have been surprised when they hear this - but they would only talk Italian when they first got to the meeting. There were many from northern Italy who worked at IBM living here at the time and they'd get together and they'd yak away. And in the beautiful Italian speaking so fast. I could understand some of the dialects but I never I've never been fluent.

Once the idea had been put out to create a club, how did it grow?

A few of the people continued to get together and ended up being the original board. At first meet at Peggy's house and I never was part of it (I was working at the time). And then when they were a little more organized they used to meet at a restaurant on Church Street.

What do you think the original membership was?

I'm not sure. I seem to remember at one time the membership was almost 200 because people would come from Montpelier and Barre, even the man who started the Law School _____. He was Italian and he used to come with his mother and both of them were about four feet tall. And Patrick Leahy came a few times with his mother. And people would come up from Rutland for some of the events.

What kinds of events did VICA have?

Well when we first started meetings there was always a little social hour and then there was always some kind of a program or speaker or movie. Sometimes there were reports on traveling

Catherine Coggio

or music.

We did start early on with opera and to this day I just cherish those trips. At one time we were going twice a year to Montreal. We'd go to dinner and the opera and I remember one time two busloads went up.

The trips weren't just for members but open to the public who would pay a few dollars more. I think that's how I first met Carol and David was on one of those trips. There were also special events like the annual picnic (photo) and the Carnevale gala. (photo) And some people were always so creative with costumes and we even had a float in the Burlington Mardi Gras parade.

Some other early members were Dr. Morselli's wife, Maria Franca, Ken Ciongoli's wife Barbara and Frank Caruccio who was with IBM, Ed Granai and his son Matt, Dr. Tortolano, Al Bernasconi and his wife, and Celeste Hahn, Janet Sisson. There were usually 30 or 40 and one time we were at the Lincoln Inn and they didn't have enough room so they had a special room down stairs that they put us in and everybody was somewhat claustrophobic down there. God forbid if there were a fire I don't know what everybody would have done. Then another time it was Christmas and we went to the Inn at Essex when it was first built and had a wonderful dinner.

When there picnics there were a lot of children and grandchildren. And some families that would have a family visit from out of town that would come to the picnic. And I remember at least one time was in Ken's backyard. (photo) And then another time we went to one that was way out to Starksboro where somebody from IBM was renting an old farm. And after that we started going up to Grand Isle State park. And that became an annual event

When you think back to the beginning days when you were first involved with it what's your feeling about it? What are your best memories?

Well it certainly was very different from anything that I had done up here in Vermont you know because I wouldn't say in my experience that the Italian community here in Vermont was close. But the Club brought the community together.

Was that what you did at home? Was it very different from where you grew up?

When I grew up in Everett, there was an Italian area where our family. There was also a Jewish

Catherine Coggio

section and a synagogue. There were Irish, Italian and French churches, and I made friends with everyone.

What would you say is your best memory of the early days of VICA?

As I said is this all came about when I was going through a divorce and for me it was the maid's night out. I had a place to go and to be around people my own age and doing something that I would enjoy.

Did you feel like through the club you were exposed to some things that you maybe didn't know about before?

Well I heard about others traveling to Italy and I had made several trips to Europe. One of my boys was in Germany and I went on four tours to different parts of Italy.

I know you were on the board for a while. How was that experience?

Oh I enjoyed it. In the early days, when Ken had his first residency he told me how when he came up here and they were looking for a place to live he had a hard time finding housing. He also wanted to join the Ethan Allen Club or the Burlington Country Club and they wouldn't take him because he was Italian. And I certainly knew that experience because I was familiar with And then I guess somewhere along the line they found out he was a physician and he was approached to join the Burlington Country Club.

Do you remember other early members...for example, Ed Granai. What was your recollection?

I was involved with the League of Women Voters. And when we were doing a fund raiser and I was soliciting and was downtown on Church Street and Ed had his bookstore on the upper end of Church Street. And I don't know why, we just became friends. And then he wrote the book about his mother who was a bootlegger in Barre. And his father was a minister and then the mayor of Barre, and Ed became a state representative. And you know that Barre was Italian, French and Scottish because of the stonework.

Can you remember any formal connections between the Barre and Rutland Italians and Burlington?

Catherine Coggio

I remember that a significant number of people from Barre would come to our meetings and occasionally some would come up from Rutland.

One woman I remember from Barre who came was Lola Pierotti who later married Governor George Aiken. She recently came to the dedication of the plaque on the waterfront marking the old Italian neighborhood in Burlington.

Who else do you remember from the early days of VICA?

Well I knew Dr. Tortolano through St. Michael's because he was head of the music department there and involved with the club also as President. We always did the opera trip to Montreal twice a year. And on the bus he would tell us about the opera that we were going to see and explain about the libretto. And it was really very helpful. And after the opera we would go out to dinner.

We used to have some wonderful speakers at our meetings. Many of the speakers were from St. Mike's....

We always refer to it as the Italian Club. But I like the original name, VICA, the Vermont Italian Cultural Association. I don't think they should ever have changed the name.

Are there any further memories or activities you enjoyed which you'd like to share?

And then we had the idea of a luncheon group, which Ann Arms started and named them the Amici luncheon, which we still have. And we still have the Christmas holiday brunch.

And then there were the movies which Franco had in Underhill and then Carol and Dave had those film nights in their home.

Catherine Coggio