

Wilman Iacomini (WI), born 20 March 1934, Tagliacozzo, Abruzzo, Italy Torella Rubino Iacomini (TRI), born 21 April 1936, Tagliacozzo, Abruzzo, Italy Daughter Anna Iacomini Bernardi (AIB), born 25 September 1964, San Jose California

Wilman Iacomini's parents are Mario Iacomini and Elena Pietrosanti-Iacomini

Interview by Teri Ann Bengiveno (TAB)

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TAB: Did your grandfather Gennaro Pietrosanti come to the U.S. alone?

WI: He came here before the Depression, probably in the late 1920s or so. Like the other Italian immigrants from other parts of Europe searching for jobs and work. It was kind of rough back then all over Europe not only Italy. Most of the Italian immigrants stopped in New York. He went to Yonkers. That is where we all lived before we moved to California (me, my brother, mother, father and sisters). Before he came here he went to work as a miner in Luxembourg. That is where my mother was born in 1912, in Luxembourg. When they went to Italy, my mother was two years old. That is the reason we came to this country because there was a law that came out after WWII that all the families whose parents were born in Luxembourg for some reason they could immigrate to the U.S. without putting themselves in the quota.

AIB: Because my grandmother (Elena) was born there (Luxembourg) they used the Luxembourg quota system to arrive in this country because the Italian one (quota) was full. Somebody had to remind her in her town that she was born in Luxembourg.

WI: Her sister, my aunt Ameila Pietrosanti Persichetti, did the application and she happened to come here in 1951 (my aunt). Then my father applied to do all the paperwork. That was in my youth when I was enjoying playing in the band, soccer of course, and all of a sudden they decided to come to the U.S. (1953) We couldn't afford to come here (U.S.) all at once. My mother, my brother and I came here in 1953. We disembarked in Naples and arrived in New York City August 3 1953. We didn't have to go through Ellis Island for some reason. Then we went to Yonkers. There was a big population from our hometown (Tagliacozzo). There were more Tagliacozzani in Yonkers then there were in my hometown. Tagliacozzo is a small town about 10,000 people. In Yonkers probably between the ones born here and the ones that came from Italy, more than 20,000 (Italians). Going back to Nonno, my grandfather Gennaro, after he came back from Luxembourg and stayed a few years in Italy, then he came here (U.S.). He stayed two or three years and then the Great Depression came and at that time it was really hard. There was no work. The Italians also had to fight racism. They had a hard time. They spit on him and pushed him off the sidewalk. He had to walk in the dirt street. That is how it was with the Italians back then. After the Depression, he came back to Italy.

TAB: How many trips did he make back and forth to the U.S.?

WI: He made quite a few trips back and forth and then the following year he would have another daughter or son (before staying in Italy). He never brought my grandmother over here.

AIB: Who would have known fate would have it that my grandmother, his daughter (and her sister) would come to the U.S. in the 1950s with the same big trunk I have in my garage that my great

grandfather used for all of his voyages. The trunk made at least four trips with my great grandfather and the final trip in the 1950s with my grandmother.

TRI: When I decided to come to America my uncle, Antonio Iacomini, had just come back (to Italy) from America where he was for fifty-five or sixty years. When he knew I was leaving Italy, he cried. He said since you decided to go and marry Wilman, I gotta give you something. He gave me a silver dollar. He said when he left Italy to go to America years before at the port in Genoa one guy had come back on the boat from America and he was old. He said hey, "you young guy, you go to America. Ok, I have this dollar. I never used it. I give it to you because I finished my journey in America. Now you start one, but listen. I was hungry. I didn't have nothing to eat. I didn't touch this dollar. Now I give it to you. If you are hungry, don't touch it. Keep it in your wallet." My uncle said "Torella, I was hungry. I had the dollar. With a dollar you could eat a lot. I didn't do it. I give it to you. Keep it in your wallet." Now this is the third generation. I've been here forty eight years; I still have it. Now I'm supposed to pass it to somebody, an immigrant. But they don't come anymore. This is history. I want to give it to a place to display because it is three or four generations with this dollar. I've had it in my wallet for forty-eight years.

TAB: How old were both of you when you came to the U.S.?

TRI: He (Wilman) was eighteen. I was twenty-four.

WI: I was eighteen. My brother Luciano was seventeen. We worked our butts off. My brother and I used to work in construction during the day. We were young and strong. We were not afraid to do whatever. We worked eight hours building high-rise buildings and stuff like that. We worked as hod carriers. You push the wheel barrel with mud, bricks, rocks. There was this superintendent on the job over there. He used to see who was a hard worker. He yelled "Iacomini" all the time. After work I would notice lots of guys were getting their checks. How come they are getting paid earlier? Because they were getting laid off. Every job I used to go to, they kept me till the end and then brought me to the next building. There was one hot and humid summer in New York. I worked in a pair of short pants. Between the dust and sand, lime and then you sweat and pushing the wheel barrel was so hard I got a rash in between my legs. I used to take the bus. When I got home that afternoon, my mother said "there is a letter for you. I don't know what it is." I went to read it and they called me for a physical for the Army. This was a Friday and I had to go over there (for the physical) on Monday morning. There was an office near Wall Street. First they give you an examination and a reading test. I knew a little bit of English because I studied in Italy before I came here. With the reading and writing test, everything went well. Then when they examined me, they said who have you been with. So they made me 4F.

AIB: They (the Army) thought the rash between the legs was syphilis.

WI: When I back home, I went through the report. Thank God, they didn't take me; so I didn't have to go in the service. A friend of mine also from my home town, they took him and he wound up in Korea and he got malaria and everything. That was 1954, the summer. The rash went away in a few days. The first year (in the U.S.) my brother and I after we got home from work we knew this old man who was a supervisor of a factory where they make clothes hangers. So we made some extra money. We sacrificed ourselves. Right after work at our day job we had a little bit to eat; we used to go to work over there till three or four o'clock in the morning. At six or seven o'clock we had to get to the

other day job. We did that for a year and we made enough money to bring the rest of the family over here the following year.

AIB: My grandmother could come over with two dependents; so she took her two oldest boys. There were three younger girls left behind with my grandfather, her husband. You (to her father) had to borrow some money to come here. They paid everybody back every penny. Nobody in their home town believed they would ever see the money again. The old people in the town (Tagliacozzo) still remember that.

WI: In between (in New York) we used to play soccer on weekends. We were pretty damn good. My brother and I were selected for a tryout to play at the Olympics.. Back then I think it was Melbourne in 1956. This was 1954 or 1955. The time when we were supposed to be selected that was when we decided to come to California.

TAB: Did you have family in California? How did you decide on California?

WI: In 1956, the *Andrea Doria* sunk.* It was that day. When we came back from work there was this gentleman, this man on the step where we used to live, talking to my father. This is Toby Salciccia, a friend of my father's from Tagliacozzo. He lived in Campbell, California. He used to live in Yonkers before he moved out here (California) with his family. From Yonkers they went to live in Hornell in upstate New York. From there he decided to come to California.

TRI: Toby Salciccia he used to come in my café (in Tagliacozzo). He said California is so beautiful. "When I look out my window I can reach the fruit and nut trees."

WI: This was the same story he was telling my father and then when he went back to Italy he did the same thing. Then they went to live in Campbell at the corner of Campbell and Union right across from today's Pruneyard (shopping center). At that time I remember there was nothing but orchards over there. In fact later he and his old man and my father used to go pick mushrooms in the winter time. That is how we decided to come over here (to California). He (Toby) started to talk to papa. "Hey in the morning I get up over there if I want a fig I go get them or apricots." We were young and my brother was the first one to say "why not, I'll give it a try." He got on the train and he came to California first. He stayed with Tom Salciccia (Toby's son) who is a lawyer in San Jose.

AIB: They (the Salciccias) came out here (to California) because Tom wanted to go to Santa Clara University Law School. They followed their son and brought the whole family.

TAB: What year did your brother come to California?

WI: He came in spring 1956. Right away he found a job. Toby's son Frank Salciccia, he was a great guy. He was a good cabinet maker and good carpenter. He was a supervisor of some of the houses they were building in Saratoga. He started to work right away; then he was introduced to another company they were just starting: The George Day Construction Co. He built a lot of homes. We all ended up working with George Day. He (brother) wrote to us; it would be a good idea if we all settled here. We had nothing to lose. My father decided to come here (California) first with my younger sister Iris. They got on the train. My father didn't hardly speak any English. My sister was starting school and knew a little bit of English. They got on the train and they settled over here. They stayed with the Salciccia family for a week or so and then they bought a house right away in downtown San

Jose between N 2nd and 3rd streets. Papa called by phone and said we bought a nice house over here. We like it. The next step was for me, my mother, and my two sisters to go. We decided in September 1956 to leave Yonkers. We got on the plane. It was our first plane ride. My mother suffered all fifteen days on the boat from Italy. And on the plane she got sick also. We settled in California and I started working. I was twenty-two. My sister got married first: Alba. They are twins: Alba and Roseanna. Alba married Tony Salciccia who is Toby's son. She got married in 1958. I played saxophone in the band at the wedding. In 1961 I got married. Actually my other sister got married first. Roseanna got married in 1960 to another Italian immigrant. A week after she got married I went to Italy. I became an American citizen that year. I decided to go see the Olympics in Rome. AIB: It gave him an opportunity to go back to Italy for the first time since he arrived in this country.

WI: I already had ideas about her (Torella). A lot of Compari sodas and espressos.

TRI: You know why he came every day? In the afternoon everybody sleeps (in Italy). He comes from America. I was the only café who was open. I sat there knitting a sweater. He used to come in and get a coffee. We start talking. We went to school together. I was in the first grade and he was in the third. Luciano was the same age as me.

AIB: My grandfather (Mario) loved her (Torella). He worked in the schools.

TRI: I was in high school and he cleaned the rooms.

WI: After the war he lost his job and became a custodian.

TRI: He was a good man, and I knew he had to go home to eat. I said, "can I help you clean one room?" Every day I stayed and cleaned two rooms. I was thirteen. It was like a father and daughter. We loved each other, really. He smiled all the time and sang to me. My father was very stern. He never smiled. I'm crazy like he (Mario) was. When Wilman decided to come back to Italy, he (Wilman's father) said "I don't know if you like it or not but if you are looking for a girl, go in the café. Go see Torella."

WI: I didn't want to get married in the U.S. In my mind it was some day I'm going to go back to Tagliacozzo. I used to think of her.

TRI: Yeah, cause your father was looking out for you. When he left, I went to the train station. He hugged me. I said, "Mario, I'm sorry you are leaving, you were a very good friend." He said, "I don't leave here at all, you gotta come with me one day." I said, "Are you kidding? How can I come to America because I have my business." He said, "you gonna come to America with me."

AIB: He was very happy at their wedding. He was "Mr. Social." When he died in 1985, they had the rosary at Lima's on Willow Street. There were people lined up outside on the street to pay their respects. In Willow Glen, everyone knew him. He'd ride his bike everywhere. He used to go into Lincoln Lane Foods all the time for everything. He lived a couple of blocks behind (Lincoln Lane). He drove, but he'd ride his bike and get his exercise. Everybody knew Mario. He couldn't speak much English, but he communicated with everyone. When he (Wilman) went back in 1960 to see the Olympics, he went back to his hometown to visit his grandparents. All his extended family is

there. So my mom (Torella) is doing her bar thing (the café) and he is going down to visit. In the middle of all this, he gets in a motorcycle accident.

WI: Some friends from my hometown. We were going to take a trip to a little town. I was staying at my grandmother's house way up at the top of the town...I used to use zio's Lambretta just to get around. I don't think that Lambretta had any work done to it. This friend of mine said, "I know your uncle has a Lambretta." I said I don't think it is a good idea. Three of us on the Lambretta. We went uphill no problem. Coming down, he tried to put the brakes on and we couldn't break. At the bottom of the road there was a curve and a retaining wall and a sixty feet drop down...he took a chance going through the arch and a cobblestone road. We hit a guy who was carrying a jug of wine on his shoulder...I was sitting on the back (of Lambretta) and heard a thump. I just remember flying and I fell down and hit my face into the stone. I had stitches, and my shoulders were in bad shape. The other two guys didn't get hurt. The guy we hit was all smashed up...At the hospital they took my passport away for no reason, because I was an American citizen...the brothers of the guy we hit tried to sue me. I had to cancel the return of my trip and stayed about two months longer. During this time, I spent a lot of time at her place (Torella's café). Like she said I didn't want to stay in bed and take a siesta after lunch. There was this other guy who was also visiting from Yonkers, NY who I knew well. We used to hang around with her.

TRI: I used to sit and knit. (a beautiful sweater I still have today). In the afternoon in my café, nobody comes.

TAB: So, you came back to San Jose after two months?

WI: Yeah, I was supposed to come back here in September and I came back the 21st of October.

TAB: Were you still working in construction in San Jose?

WI: I was working for Carl Swenson (Barry Swenson's grandfather). I worked on many high rise buildings: Santa Clara University Men's Dormitory, the old City Hall, IBM, Stanford Hospital; I worked there two and a half years. In fact, when she came over here, I was still working there.

TAB: When you (Wilman) came home were you writing letters (to Torella) back and forth?

WI: Yes, until she came here the following year.

TAB: Was the marriage proposal in a letter?

WI: That is a long story.

TRI: I was twenty-three.

TAB: Were you the only one from your family in California?

TRI: No, my sister was in San Francisco. For me it was hard to leave because of my brother. He didn't

want to say goodbye to me.

AIB: Her brother was a scholar. He was a doctor of political science. The café was her father's business and it had been in the family for many generations. He (my grandfather) had one son and four daughters. She (Torella) was the youngest daughter and the son after her. They wanted to leave everything to their son, but the son wanted nothing to do with it. He only wanted to go to school and continue to study and now he didn't want to run the café. She (Torella) left the café to him and he wasn't happy.

TRI: He wanted to be a doctor of medicine but at the time we did not have the money because it was very, very expensive. My mother told him "why don't you study to be a lawyer?" So he did but he wasn't happy. One day I was at the café and he was in Rome at the university. He came back at night, but he used to order all the chocolate for me. I was tired. I started working at sixteen but then my father died. It was the best thing for me to marry. I was here (in California) three months before I got married. My cousin in Rome told me "Torella they won't give you a VISA to go because they are afraid you will stay." He talked to my mother and they put the café in my name because then they will see she has property and will say "she won't want to stay in America." He and my mother went to the lawyer and put my name on everything. When I went to the American Embassy in Veneto, they asked me a lot of questions. I was ready. I said yes I plan to marry in Italy. After three months I was supposed to go back (to Italy). Now in three months we decided to get married.

TAB: Where did you live when you got married?

WI: We lived in downtown San Jose. The Italians were mostly on 13th, 14th, 17th streets. We lived on the corner of Second and Hensley.

TRI: We stayed one year with his parents till our daughter was born, Elena.

TAB: Where did you move?

WI: Near St. John Vianney.

TRI: We had a small house. I had the other two Anna and Mario in this house.

TAB to WI: Was it your parents who worked at Holy Family Church?

WI: When my father came here he first worked on the railroad with Joe Romano and his son Benny. Then he was doing hard labor kind of work and it wasn't for him. Before World War II, he had a good job working for the government in Rome. He was working for the Minister of War from the late 1930s till WWII started. They told him if he wanted to stay working for the government, they were going to transfer him from Rome to Bologna. He said no way. He had family. He didn't want to move. So he lost that job and the war went on and that is when he started working with shoes. When I was a little kid he used to take me to the mercato (market) once a week. We called it la fiera (little fair). We used to go all over to little towns and in the winter we had to stand up it was so cold.

AIB: Before the war my grandfather had a really good job. He lost that job and during the war there was no work, nothing. He went from a nice job to shoemaking.

WI: He was also a musician. He played in bands. Sometimes he travelled during the summer time from town to town. Then he found a job at the high school where we both went (me and Torella). He was a custodian. He was there until we came to this country. Then in San Jose he had to have back surgery. They told him he should try to sue the railroad. They told him to talk to Boccardo, the Genovese lawyer. He promised him that he (my father) would be a millionaire, and he got nothing. Then he wasn't able to do any hard labor anymore. That is when there was an opening at Holy Family Church to cook for the priest. They worked there from 1965 until they moved to Willow Glen in the 1970s (1972 or 1973)... Actually, my mother worked there too and it was a place to stay. This was the church the Italians built. I don't know for sure; it must be late 1800s. It was a beautiful church. It wasn't too big of a church but it was nice. We spent quite a few holidays like New Year's Eve over there...Fr. DeLucchi was the pastor and before him was Fr. Roccati for many years before he passed away.

TAB: What type of activities did you participate in at home?

WI: Music and soccer. We all spoke Italian and we had a lot of get togethers and parties at home.

AIB: He played soccer in Italy and in Yonkers and San Francisco (San Francisco Soccer League).

TAB: Were you involved in any of the other Italian clubs?

WI: The Sunnyview Club in Mountain View. Before I got married, I used to go there all the time. I even played in the band there a couple of years. There was a beautiful bocce court. Many friends of mine met their girlfriends there.

AIB: It was a respectable place for the girls to go.

WI: The people who came from Italy used to meet each other over there. One from Toscano, one from Sicilia.

AIB: Most of the ones who got married here are from different regions of Italy whereas they (Wilman and Torella) are from the same town which is very unusual. All of his (Wilman's) sister and brother married people from different regions of Italy. He is the only one who married someone from his own town. I'm 100% Abbruzzese. The closest are the Salciccias. Toby married a Sicilian, Maria. My uncle is half Sicilian, half Abbruzzese.

WI: In 1956 we found one friend of mine in San Francisco who was Sicilian, Ciro di Vittorio. I was practicing soccer, my brother and I. We played in Italy and Yonkers. He (Ciro) said, "I play (soccer) for the Sons of Italy in San Francisco. We are looking for good players. Would you be interested to come and try out?" San Francisco, that is far away. We agreed to go for a try out. But we didn't want to go there for free. At that time they gave us twenty-five dollars each. We were the only ones who used to get paid. We used to play at the Beach Chalet near Golden Gate Park. We played in South San Francisco and at Balboa a few times.

TAB: Did you play other teams from San Francisco?

WI: Yes, Greek Americans, Hungarians, Germans, Scots.

AIB: Every nationality had a soccer team, a club. They were all club sponsored.

WI: We played a couple of years over there, and then we organized a soccer league with the Peninsula Club (Juventus Soccer Club). with Aldo Costelli, he was Piemontese. He was managing the team. There were teams from Redwood City, South San Francisco, and San Jose area.

AIB: The big name here was Umberto Abronzino. They have the Abronzino league now. WI: He was from Campania (Sessa Aurunca). The Peninsula Soccer League was started in 1958-1959. Then started referring all the games.

AIB: He referred until he was eighty years old. I remember watching when he reffed Guilio's (Bernardi) games after Guilio finished playing pro and we got married. He played in San Jose for Guido's Italia team. He also played for the Sons of Italy. Abronzino would sit at the ticket booth with his wife and take the money coming in. (Looking at photos)

TRI: I was over here fifteen years in America and I never, never heard on the radio or television one word in Italian. I didn't know for fifteen years what was going on in Italy; just my mother wrote me every week. One day I turn the radio on and a lady was speaking Italian, Rosana Ro. She was the first lady who had an Italian American radio in San Jose. I cried when I heard her. AIB: Guido Polverino did a lot for the Italian American community in San Jose: restaurant, radio program, and soccer team. Abronzino started the first semi-pro team in San Jose. They named the most competitive club league the Abronzino league here in the San Jose Area. He was the soccer pioneer in San Jose. Dominic Cirincione did so much too.

WI: He (Dominic) helped a lot of Italians get things straightened out with their paperwork from Italy. He was the one made it possible to have the Christopher Columbus statue and also the festa della repubblica June 2. He was very patriotic.

TRI: Firato's Delicatessen by Bank of America. They had everything. They made ravioli. Every week we went shopping there.

WI: Especially during the holidays, Christmas. They had all the Italian goodies. We went to the Italian restaurants-my brother-in-law's. It was called the Napoli Café on South 1st Street which was owned Carmine & Giovanni Citrigno. It was also a bar and that is where I met my brother-in-law Gabe Citrigno. That was back in 1956 or 57 till 1960. He met my sister through me because I used to hang around and his father owned the place. Gabe was a bartender over there. He came here two or three years before we did. It was a pretty active place. We'd go there on the weekends mostly Saturdays. There was a jukebox. There were a lot of gals and quite a few Italians and Italian Americans. We had a good time. We danced. We'd stay till around closing time around two o'clock. Then we'd go back to the kitchen where they cooked. We'd have spaghetti and stay till three or four o'clock in the morning.

AIB: Her side of the family (Torella's) had some interesting political people. Some were fascists; some were socialists. Her brother was a Christian Democrat.

WI: (Looking at letters his father wrote to Torella). Mario Iacomini had beautiful calligraphy.

AIB: When you read it in Italian, he was poetic. My grandfather wrote like it was poetry.

TRI: For me the letters from Mario to me is everything. I don't care for stuff. (looking at photographs). Mussolini came into my piazza on a beautiful white horse, il duce. I was five years old. I was a very cute girl when the Americans arrived in Italy. When they came to my town, everybody said "the Americans are coming, let's go, let's go." We went to receive them 1 kilometer from my town. This guy he was in charge of everything and he said to me, "you have to come with me Torella." He told my father, we want her to bring flowers to the Americans. I had a beautiful dress. When we arrived we saw the jeep with the General. My father for two years closed my café because the German people were always getting drunk. We had a bad time then. We left my piazza and went to the main street of Tagliacozzo. When my father knew the Americans were coming, he started to open again and thought we could make a little bit of money. He had a lot of chocolate and cookies. When the Americans arrived in the piazza on the jeep I was riding on, we went around and they stopped at my café. It was the only café that was open. My father saw me arrive with the soldiers and we went inside (the café). The General told me in English but I didn't understand nothing, "take whatever you like." We had beautiful chocolate you could see through the glass. I didn't know what to do. I took a big chocolate. Now, I wanted to eat it but I put it in my hand and the General said "come on eat it." My father behind the counter says, "Torella, please don't eat it. We can sell it again." I wanted the piece of chocolate so bad, but I gave it back to my father.

AIB: A couple of years earlier, they went through horrific things. Their town was taken over by the Germans and they had a command post there. There were a lot of atrocities. The Jews were hidden in the steeples of the Catholic churches up there...What about the Madonna dell Oriente? picnic. My grandfather and Toby Salciccia, his buddy who moved to Campbell started this.

WI: From 1956, they started the Madonna dell Oriente club. These two families: the Iacominis and the Salciccias; Mario Iacomini and Toby Salciccia.

AIB: It was to honor the patron saint of Tagliacozzo. The first weekend of September in Tagliacozzo, they have the big feast. When they moved here (San Jose) both families got together; Toby's son married his (Wilman's) sister Alba. So the two families joined and the two grandfathers started the feast cause they were all from Tagliacozzo. We've been to Vasona or Oak Meadow in Los Gatos every year since 1956. To honor the Madonna dell Oriente, we have an Italian priest come out and he says mass in Italian under the oaks.

WI: We do a BBQ and make pasta.

AIB: Then we do a raffle to raise money to send to the shrine in Tagliacozzo to help with repairs and maintenance. They send to charities as well. Lately it has been the earthquake victims of L'Aquila (2009). We sent money for Hurricane Katrina (2005).

TAB: How many people attend?

WI: When it started it was about fifteen to twenty people; now it is in the hundreds.

AIB: We average about 150 a year. Now it includes extended family and friends that come. It is now the second weekend of September after Labor Day. We try to avoid Labor Day.

*“45 miles south of Nantucket Island, the Italian ocean liner *Andrea Doria* and the Swedish ocean liner *Stockholm* collide in a heavy Atlantic fog. Fifty-one passengers and crew were killed in the collision, which ripped a great hole in the broad side of the Italian vessel. Miraculously, all 1,660 survivors on the *Andrea Doria* were rescued from the severely listing ship before it sunk late the next morning. Both ships were equipped with sophisticated radar systems, and authorities were puzzled as to the cause of the accident.” (www.history.com/this-day-in-history.do?action=Article&id=6969)