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Arbini, Lena Interview

Mary Wedegaertner

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Stockton Immigrant Women Oral History Collection

Interviewer: Mary Wedegaertner

Interviewee: Mrs. Lena Arbini

Transcriber: James Lyons

Interview date: June 24, 1980

[Tape 1, Side A]

[Begin Tape]

Mary: First, why don't you tell me a little bit about the part of Italy that you came from?

Lena: By Milano, I lived on a little farm, yeah beautiful. I like Italy but I like this country more.

Mary: What did you father do in Italy?

Lena: The ranch - we have a ranch farm that he used to own.

Mary: What did he grow on the ranch?

Lena: Anything, but mostly alfalfa for the cow, grain.

Mary: Did he raise any grapes?

Lena: Oh yeah, lots of grapes and lots of trees you know, cherry trees, peaches oh yeah good ground.

Mary: How many sisters and brothers did you have?

Lena: We were eleven, but now we are only five.

Mary: Were you one of the youngest ones or one of the older ones?

Lena: No in between.

Mary: Why did you family come to America?

Lena: They use to live - Sicily is good country so they sell their ranch. They try to come here. They was very, very happy here.

Mary: Did you have family here already that came before you and they wanted you to come over?

Lena: Oh yeah.

Mary: But where did you first come? Did you come to California right away?

Lena: Yes, right away to Stockton.

Mary: How did you come? You came by boat of course? Down around the cape?

Lena: Then the train.

Mary: And the train too.

Lena: Oh yeah.

Mary: Did you come in at San Francisco?

Lena: For San Francisco.

Mary: Did you have relatives meet you there?

Lena: Yeah I got relatives. I got relatives in San Rafael. I got my sister and brother there

Mary: What did you think of San Francisco when you first saw it?

Lena: Oh beautiful, you know, right away I like this country.

Mary: What did you like about it best?

Lena: Well, see Italy is a good country but maybe because the food, but if you ask them for
what do you call - you need something you ask them for?

Mary: You ask the government for it or something?

Lena: No, no just like me when I come here I need about \$10 and nobody give me so
I ask to the Italian people they don't give me, but soon as I come in and right away they
ask if I need, you know, oh what a country!

Mary: Who was this that asked you about your relatives or church people?

Lena: To come here?

Mary: Who offered you help when you got here?

Lena: Nobody.

Mary: Oh you were saying that they asked you if you needed any money.

Lena: Because I asked them, I say "gee I need about \$10." In Italy they don't give me because
they are poor but sometimes they are different. This country is better anyway, I got to
say so. I like Italy too.

Mary: Did you ever go back and visit Italy.

Lena: Oh yeah, I went back. I see lots of better industry. They are advanced pretty good now,
Yeah. But when I come here, no they was poor.

Mary: How did you get from San Francisco to Stockton.

Lena: By the train.

Mary: What year was this? Do you remember what year this was?

Lena: Ninety-four I think.

Mary: In 1894?

Lena: Yeah.

Mary: What year were you born?

Lena: I am 86 so you figure out because me my mind not is right.

Mary: What year did you come to California or how old were you?

Lena: I was twenty.

Mary: So you had gone to school in Italy?

Lena: Oh yeah.

Mary: Where did you first live when you came to Stockton?

Lena: With my sister.

Mary: Did all of your brothers and sisters come with you?

Lena: No, they were here already. My sister brought them, they was here. So tthey ask me if I
come, so I come. Then my boyfriend was here too.

Mary: But your parents, did they stay in Italy?

Lena: I got no more parents they all passed away.

Mary: But did they come to the United States with you?

Lena: No, they stayed in Italy.

Mary: You came all by yourself?

Lena: By myself, yeah.

Mary: That was a long trip wasn't it?

Lena: You don't know the language and everything, it is hard.

Mary: Did you go to school to learn the language after you got here?

Lena: No I don't go to school. No, I have a chance to go to school but too lazy.

Mary: You learned English very well

Lena: You think so.

Mary: Yes I do. Did your sister and brother teach you?

Lena: No, Just talk to people. First I come here and you don't understand it is hard but now I appreciate this country. Right away this country was in my heart, course like I say, I like Italy too. I like everyone. I am Italian. I like everyone.

Mary: Did anyone else live with your sister and brother besides you.

Lena: Yeah, I have a couple of sisters and one brother who live together with my sister.

Mary: What part of Stockton was this in? Was this in the city or in the country?

Lena: In Italy.

Mary: No, here in the United States? Where did you live in Stockton? Was it out in the country or near downtown?

Lena: In town.

Mary: Do you remember the street?

Lena: North Commerce.

Mary: Did you have a big house or small house?

Lena: Oh yeah, two story. You know the room upstairs, everything upstairs you know, nice kitchen, nice dining room, nice living room oh yeah it was comfortable.

Mary: What kind of work did your – was it your brother-in-law or your brother who owned the house?

Lena: My brother.

Mary: Your brother. What kind of work did he do?

Lena: Well 'we had a ranch.

Mary: Oh it was a ranch. Here in Stockton? What kind of work did he do in Stockton?

Lena: I forget. We use to live together in the ranch. But then when he got married he go by himself and we are by ourselves. You lose touch.

Mary: Did you start working when you came to Stockton?

Lena: Me, I never worked. No my husband he don't believe to see the wife work.

Mary: You didn't work outside the home, but did you work hard at home.

Lena: I take care of my house, sewing and mending – do everything.

Mary: Did you get married then soon after you came to Stockton?

Lena: Right away, yeah after two weeks, because we use to go together before, see, when I was in Italy.

Mary: Where did you live after you and your husband got married?

Lena: Commerce Street.

Mary: Right, you lived on Commerce Street though that was with your sister.

What street did you and your husband live on? Do you remember?

Lena: I think we lived together. I think it is that way.

Mary: You continued living with your sister? You don't remember moving out?

Lena: No, I don't think we were moving out.

Mary: What kind of work did your husband do?

Lena: He worked on a ranch because we use to own a ranch, not big ranch. We use to raise just like cow, pig and trees, cherries, and peaches.

Mary: And was that here in Stockton?

Lena: Yeah.

Mary: Was that out towards Linden area?

Lena: By Linden area, that is it.

Mary: And you owned a ranch then?

Lena: Yeah.

Mary: And so did you live out on the ranch then?

Lena: Yes, we lived on the ranch. To me I worked pretty hard but enjoyed it – I did it with my happiness.

Mary: Did you have children?

Lena: Yeah but both are gone. I have a boy and girl but both are gone.

Mary: How old were they?

Lena: Oh they were 54-55.

Mary: But you really enjoyed taking care of your house and your family. I can tell. Did you do a lot of your own baking?

Lena: Oh yeah, not everything no, because the place I come from they don't use Genovese you

know, Genova, they do everything at home, they make the pasta, they make them at home. No, the place I come from we go to the store just like here – already done. They even put them in the bag for you. I don't learn too much. But to cook on the top of the stove I am pretty good.

Mary: Did you buy a lot of your bread from the Genova bakery here?

Lena: Oh yeah from the Genova, yeah and the other one too.

Mary: What was the name of the other one?

Lena: Anyone I happen to be near. I say instead to go to the Genova bakery maybe I was more near to another bakery. I use to buy American bread just for change, but really I like Italian bread, but didn't want to wait.

Mary: Did the Genova bakery ever come out and make deliveries to your house with their wagon?

Lena: Oh yeah, lots of times.

Mary: Where did your children go to school? Did they go to the Greenwood School?

Lena: No, Greenwood School. Next.

Mary: I can't think of the names of some of the other schools. Was it out in the Linden area?

Lena: Linden area not very far, the place I use to live – oh no I have a good boy and girl but they are gone, yeah, they leave me alone.

Mary: Do you have other relatives here in town?

Lena: Oh yeah, I got sister and yesterday she come and see me and niece and nephey, but moer my sister and her daughter, my niece. She is the one, she give me a ride to Mama's. Before she is used to drive and by golly, before you know it she lost her eye. Then she find out once she see the stop sign she don't see very good. She say "my gawd" she told her daughter, "how come I don't see the right position's?" so then my niece she told her to come to the eye doctor. Yeah, one nerve break off without no pain, no nothing. So she, after that she don't drive no more. But she got wonderful daughter. No matter what place she wants to go, because she has to play cards, see, in that thing a couple times a week with the bunch, that woman. Oh she use to take care of everything. She had a good girl very good. She had only one but good.

Mary: Did you have to work out in the fields any?

Lena: Once in a while. I use to go, oh yes if they really needed me, you know, maybe not all day just - - .

Mary: what kind of fruit did you have? Did you have fruit trees? Like apples or pears.

Lena: No, not apple. Peaches, cherries, plums.

Mary: Did you pack any of the fruit on your ranch?

Lena: Oh yeah, the place they come from is pretty industrial you know, good ground.

Mary: Did your husband belong to the Italian Gardeners Association? Because a lot of farmers belong to that. Did you belong to any organizations?

Lena: Oh yes the Druids and the other one. But the other I let it go after I got married I let it go.

Mary: Were you involved in any church activities?

Lena: Oh yeah. Oh every Sunday I went to my mass. I am a Catholic see.

Mary: What church did you go to?

Lena: St. Gertrude's. I was living not very far from St. Gertrude's, you know, North Commerce. The church was not very far.

Mary: Do you remember your first automobile, your first car?

Lena: Yeah, I remember. If you tell me the name I don't know.

Mary: Did you use to go for rides on Sundays?

Lena: Once in a while when we have a chance. Just like I say, I like Italy this is my country but I like this country even better because I find out over here they got more good heart. If they could help you they help you. In Italy, no. You're poor, you poor. If you rich, you're rich. I don't like them thay way. You know, I like the way they got here, give you a chance to everyone if they - - got good sayings – what do you call it good, not condition, I mean ability. They got c hance to go ahead. Oh no, this country is better.

Mary: Right, if you're poor over in Italy you probably wouldn't get a chance to go to school very much would you?

Lena: The depends. But now they stick to every regulation. You have to go take twelve years

but not before, they never, they don't pay attention. But now they pay attention over there too. One school that you learn is not just like here ever four hours you come out play, no, over there when you study you study. No, Italy like their reading and writing they are fast, they are fast, pretty good. Oh, I remember my teacher, oh my, he was no – I like this country more than anything else. But I still like Italy too.

Mary: Do you remember any of the floods of Stockton?

Lena: Yeah.

Mary: Did it ruin your property and things?

Lena: Yeah, a little bit, but not too much because we kind of high but lots of poor people they lose everything, lots of poor people. Then in San Jose they have kind a shake.

Mary: The earthquake?

Lena: Yeah, but we was lucky.

Mary: Do you remember the depression?

Lena: Yeah, but I don't see much of the depression cause I was living in the ranch.

In the ranch .you raised your own food. I got to say I am lucky.

Mary: How about the World Wars? How did they affect your family? Like World War II?

Lena: Well, I was pretty nervous cause I could see lots of poor boy loose but like the destruction, no, they have no destruction the place I come from, They don't do nothing there.

Mary: Did your son have to go to the war?

Lena: Yeah, but he come home.

Mary: The second World War, huh. I am sure you worried about him though and prayed.

So you lived on the same ranch all your life then?

Lena: Oh yeah, same place.

Mary: Until you moved in here?

Lena: Yeah, till I moved here. They still got it, they still got the ranch my brother. Nice ranch, nice.

Mary: What road is it on? Is it on Fairchild Road?

Lena: Fairchild no, we was not very far from that.

Mary: Alpine? Near there it is a pretty area out there.

Lena: Alpine pretty yeah not very far from Linden. Oh no, it was pretty good. We work hard but we had happiness.

Mary: Did your husband learn English also?

Lena: My husband he wanted to speak English not to – but he wanted to be in school then, he have a better family than me. My husband, he a good family. He use to read a couple of times, the book, he use to tell you, just like nothing.

Mary: He would read it in English or in Italian?

Lena: Italian and English.

Mary: Both of them, huh.

Lena: Oh yeah, in English, because he come here he was not even seventeen. He come here as a boy see, this way you learn more.

Mary: Right the younger you are. Did you speak Italian in your home here in Stockton?

Lena: Oh yeah, Italian, it depend, depends. Sometime when you got company then you talk English see, but sometimes you want only you talk Italian.

Mary: Did your children speak English mostly or Italian, your boy and your girl?

Lena: Yeah, oh no I like this country, but I like Italy too. Every nation I like them every nation, I \ like people, I like to see everybody do good in their life.

Mary: Did you use to go to town maybe once a week for your shopping or something?

Lena: Oh in town, oh yeah.

Mary: Did you go any certain day of the week?

Lena: Don't make no difference. Depends the chance I have, see. Sometime my sister she use to come home and say I want to go shopping, you like to come. I use to go then. I use to go with her. Depends.

Mary: Did you learn to drive an automobile?

Lena: No, I never learn and my sister she use to go all over.

Mary: Did you want to learn how to drive?

Lena: Oh I use to want to but no ambition, no – scared. No scared, no ambition neither I got to

say the truth. Oh no, for my part, say this country is the best. In Italy it is the best too for me because I born there I know. I went to school and everything there too, you know. I have all my Catholic religion there. Oh I like Italy too, I don't say, but I prefer more this country you know. Before I come I was kind of short for \$10 and I ask to my uncle I say, "Gee, I need \$10 to go to America" They don't give me. Soon as I come in this country they ask me if I need money. I say look at them. What a people.

Mary: You were really impressed by that.

Lena: Oh they won my heart. I say oh this country is good country, is good country. Italy too I don't say because maybe another uncle maybe they offer me that much but this one he say no I kind of short. Yeah I say to myself, my golly it is awful
If you go through the pain you know it is awful. No, this country is the best. Oh I love this country.

Mary: What did your family do for recreation and for fun?

Lena: Oh, sometime we use to talk to you company and then we talk to another branch and we use to make a festival like that. Then some they use to play accordion, yeah violin.

Mary: Did you play an instrument? Did you play a violin?

Lena: No.

Mary: You like to listen though.

Lena: I like to listen and I like to dance in those days
(I had bad times in my life but I had good times too.)

Mary: Did you go to a lot of dances when you lived here in Stockton?

Lena: Oh yeah, yeah If I was invited, and if they come and get me, oh yeah.

Mary: Did your husband go too? Did he like to dance?

Lena: Oh yeah but he died kind of young my husband.

Mary: About how old were you when he died?

Lena: Fifty-five. He was fifty-seven.

Mary: Were your children at home then?

Lena: Oh yeah, oh still at home with me.

Mary: So you lived out at your ranch for a long time by yourself?

Lena: Oh yeah.

Mary: That's kind of hard running a ranch by yourself isn't it?

Lena: Well, no, I have my cousin I give it to him to run for me see so it is better because one lady, it is pretty hard to run the ranch you know. You got to know what you are doing. So I told him to my cousin I say, "listen, now I got nobody no more. I want you to run my place." He did pretty good, honest, because we are like honest people, not it was good.

Mary: Do you remember any special things about Stockton that you - any special places you shopped or?

Lena: No sometime you look the paper. If they got sale you know you welcome to go there - but no difference see. They are good for me there the shopping places.

Mary: When you and your husband first moved out to your ranch did you have an automobile then?

Lena: Oh yeah we have an automobile already, oh yeah.

Mary: So you never had a horse and wagon or anything like that?

Lena: No we had them for the ranch, horse and wagon. They use to use them but for tthe farm.

Mary: What did your children like to do for fun when they were little?

Lena: Dance.

Mary: They liked to dance too. Did you ever have any dances at your house?

Lena: Oh lots of times to see you family enjoy, oh lots of times. So the kids they use to stay home too you know and lots of time we was invited because if you invited they invite you, you know.

Mary: Did your parents ever come here to visit?

Lena: My sister she come.

Mary: But not your mother and father?

Lena: No, they all passed away I got no more. I am 86 myself so you got to remember that they can't be here yet. They passed away past 80 years old. Good Mamma and Poppa.

Mary: Did you when you came to this country, did you try to keep up a lot of the customs and traditions you had in Italy? A lot of the special holidays?

Lena: Yeah, oh yeah special holidays, to go together with you family you know.

Mary: Were there special foods that you kept cooking?

Lena: Special foods, yeah, we use to just like you say everybody they bring something, potluck, see, we use to do that too yeah. No, just like I say I have a kind of a bad, hard time first I come here, you know, kind of poor but I find out right here they are so good. They are so happy, make me happy.

Mary: I am glad you like our country so well.

Lena: Yeah just like I say I like Italy too.

Mary: Did you become a United States citizen?

Lena: I come to be over here.

Mary: You became a United States citizen?

Lena: United States, yeah.

Mary: You studied for your test?

Lena: Oh yeah.

Mary: Did she tell you what a good cook she was?

Lena: No, she didn't talk- well she said she didn't do much baking.

Mary: You cooked a lot of Italian food though.

Lena: Oh yeah.

Friend: Your noodles - you say you cooked the Lasagna.

Lena: Yeah, no but we use to buy already see instead Genovese. You know Genovese different country. They use to do it. They use to make em themselves the dough and oh they use to make a good tasting pasta, but not the place I come from, Milano, they kind of backward in their cook. Genovese they are more advance see. They do more themselves.

Mary: Did you have any special thing that you baked or cooked at Christmas time or any special things that you did as a family?

Lena: As a family yeah. Oh lots of times I use to cook something to surprise them you know. No Italian they good people too.

Mary: Oh I am sure. I know an awful lot of Italians.

Lena: They good people but just like I say I find out here is better just like I say maybe because

they poor they cant help you much but when I come to this country I find out they even ask you if you need I say, "Oh what a country." They won my heart.

Mary: Did you sew your childrens clothes?

Lena: Oh yeah, some, not all because I come from a well family I use to buy pretty near everything but lots of things if they like em you know the patterns they call em, then I use to make em if you like blouse.

Mary: Special things.

Lena: Yes something like that. Oh, underwear no, everything I use to buy you know undershirt I use to buy already made. Oh yeah just like shirt, just like if they like the color I use to make em for them.

Mary: Did you always do all of your own housework. Did you ever have anyone come in and help you?

Lena: No, till I was sick, and when I was sick I said my best is to be in this place see rest home is the best.

Mary: This seems like a very nice place.

Lena: Oh, they treat me just like a millionaire. Of course I like them too.

Mary: How long have you lived here?

Lena: Little over two years, yeah.

Mary: I am sure you have lots of friends here too.

Lena: Oh lots of friends.

Mary: And they have a nice nice lounges and recreation program probably.

Lena: Yeah and clean. Clean, I like clean place you know. In the bed too they don't leave you wet. Oh no, they are really good. Oh, this is my teacher.

Mary: Your teacher? What does she teach?

Lena: Teacher she come here yeah. I like her.

Mary: Does she come everyday?

Lena: No, no she come once a week. She come voluntary. Now she go, oh too bad.

Mary: What does she help you with?

Lena: She talk about the past. She come every week she tell you all the news the week, see, just

like me I don't, I got no paper.

Mary: Well that's very nice of her to do that.

Lena: Oh yeah, then I know what's going on. Oh no she's a good teacher. She's a teacher. She explains so plain I catch on, some people no, but this one the way she explain I catch on.

Mary: Are you able to do much reading? Are you able to read very much?

Lena: Pretty good, pretty good. Sometime I read more better in English than Italian now, yeah I catch on more in English than Italian. yeah, because the way they put them down but in English it is better.

Mary: You probably don't have anyone to speak Italian with too much anymore do you?

Lena: Oh no nobody, nobody. I think I am the one Italian. There are not very many Italian people they come in Stockton. They go San Francisco. San Francisco they call it pure Italian.

Mary: What did they do in the San Francisco area?

Lena: They find the job yeah because around San Francisco there is lots of industrial. Oh yeah, I know they are all working oh yeah. If you like to work you find it.

Mary: I am sure you had a very happy home life.

Lena: Very much. Like I say I lost my kids.

Mary: That was the sad part, right.

Lena: Yeah I can't be everything like I wanted but after I think oh that's the life I can't stay here all the time, but they die a little too, a little too young.

Mary: Right that's when it is hard. It is nice that you have a beauty shop here too to go to.

Lena: Oh they have got everything here bakery and everything.

Mary: Do you enjoy the food here too.

Lena: They cook just like the Milanese, Milano style. Yeah, I even tell them to the cook I say, "but are you Milanese," he say, "I Genovese," and I say, "my golly, you cook so nice, yeah." You know he make the Milanese, Genovese, what do you call it the square thing.

Mary: The raviolis?

Lena: The raviolis. Genovese raviolis is the main dish instead Milanese there the main is Risotto,

rice and broth, nice good broth and plenty cheese. So I told him to the bakery, to the cook I say, "my gawd you cook just like Milanese." Yeah, he was glad but he is a good cook, yeah he put parmesane cheese. They taste so good. Instead when I was home they use to use the cheese we use to make you know we have a – when we was living the ranch we have three or four cow and we use to make cheese but parmesano is better. The taste they give you different taste. No this place I got to say good for my part, they even the nurse they all good to me, yeah and they nice and clean.

Mary: That's important, right. You said that you never worked at all outside your home and that you said your husband wouldn't of liked it

Lena: No, because we have a ranch. We use to hire a man or two to work on the ranch so if it was something we could do it we do it.

Mary: Did you do some work like at your church, volunteer work at your church anytime?

Lena: No, I never did do it, but I use to go every Sunday to the mass and every occasion you know a few minutes, yeah. Somebody I know they use to baptize the baby. I use to go, yeah.

Mary: Did you always go to St. Gertrude's Church?

Lena: Oh yeah very much, very much I use to go or the priest.

Mary: Did you ever go down town to St. Mary's?

Lena: Sometime if I have a chance to get a ride I use to go St. Mary's oh yeah.

St. Mary's is pretty near just like my church.

Mary: Can you remember anything else about the city of Stockton that you liked that maybe isn't there any more – oh any parks or any special thing that maybe you remember? Or any special store that you shopped at?

Lena: Yeah because when I use to meet my niece she use to give me a ride so I got no relation, no to talk to those people. Yeah, we use to buy anything that I needed, good buys. Is a nice place to shop even the town I come from.

Mary: Do you remember like the new shopping centers?

Lena: Oh yeah beautiful, beautiful yeah I like them.

Mary: Do you like them better than the downtown?

Lena: Even better yeah. Even better because when you get in the shopping center you got everything. See, you need something the store is right there but I like Stockton too but just like I say I like the convenience. It is better there cause you got everything.

Mary: Do you remember when you got your first washing machine?

Lena: Oh yeah.

END OF TAPE.

Comments on other side of tape

Lena: With this machine you could make even the record?

Mary: No, this is the radio part. This is my son's.

Lena: You love your family?

Mary: Oh yes, I certainly do. I have two boys.

Lena: You love them even if they do something wrong? They come through.

Mary: One is 18 and one is 16.

Lena: That is the age you got to watch them, you know, because of the company they pick. If they got good company they grow nice. They don't do as much wrong. If they got bad company, without knowing it, they make a mistake. It's because of the company. They don't know the difference.

Mary: We've been very lucky. They're very good boys so far.

Lena: You know why? Because you stay by them.

Mary: Well, I try to. I think I probably { } let you got to the beauty shop now.