

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project
Transcription of Helen Brauer recording 2016.mp3
http://digiport.athabasca.ca/aasmp/people/h_brauer.htm

Narrator: Helen Brauer
Interviewer: Brenda Gilboe
December 18, 2015

[Start of Interview]

Brenda This is December 18th, and I am interviewing Helen Brauer at the Pleasant Valley Lodge. Brenda Gilboe is the interviewer. Helen, we've talked about how we're going to start. If you'd like to maybe start with your grandfather's family, that would be super.

Helen My grandfather Raniero Aloisio left Italy when he was a fairly young man, probably in his early 20s. He was married and he had maybe one, possibly two children by that time – my dad Antonio and my Aunt Matilda. He left and started to work in the European countries. First, he was in Germany and Turkey and worked around there. I think he also put in some time in one of the other countries there, Germany I believe it was, and he worked there for quite some time, going back and forth to Italy. It seemed with each trip back to Italy, there was a new baby and Uncle Rudy was born, then I think later Uncle Edward.

Helen When grandma was having Uncle Edward or carrying Uncle Edward, grandpa left for the United States then to work, as he had a mother-in-law, a mother, three children to support and also a young brother. The older brother had left for I think the United States at that time. He was a half-brother to my grandfather by the name of Tony Lusso. They never seemed to get along very well. He wasn't the best character. So, grandfather and Uncle Fiori left, and I believe they were working in Turkey somewhere when my uncle got involved with some young lady that was already spoken for. So, grandpa had to intervene. Consequently, he got a slash on his upper lip, and that's when granddad had to grow his mustache to cover the gash in his lip.

Helen From there, they headed out I think to Canada once grandma was already having the fourth child. No, they headed out to the United States. The first thing grandpa had to grab was the first job he could get as he had a lot of people to support. So, didn't he end up with the Mafia? Of course, he was a big, burly man, but he had a heart of gold and was very soft. He found out he got sent to collect money from a woman. I guess with the Mafia, you either paid up or got your knees broke. He said that wasn't his line of work at all. He skipped out and hoped he could make it to Canada without being brought back and caught by the Mafia. So, he headed for Canada. Apparently, he hadn't been with them very long cause they didn't pursue him or chase him down. He said he could not take money from a woman that didn't have it.

Helen There [in Canada] I think he worked for some time on the railroad. He took a homestead in Perryvale, one that was not much good for anything. Later it was to become a very good gravel pit. At that time all he could grow mostly down there was

blueberries, right down at the river bottom. He built a house down there and they lived there for a while.

Helen In the winters the men went to work in the mines – grandpa and my dad, who was a 16-year-old boy when they came from Italy. Mother was only 17 and my father was 18 when they married. He married Matilda Faragani, and they headed out for Cardiff, the coal mines. There my two brothers were born in Cardiff. By that time that mine had slowed down, so they moved to Brule mines, in the foothills of the mountains.

Helen I was born in Brule. By that time, it was getting to be a little bit much moving from one mining camp to another with three little children, so they bought the homestead or came to the homestead at Perryvale and lived down in grandpa's house for some time. From there, dad decided he couldn't farm those hillsides, so he bought a piece of land on top of the hill. That was where his farm started out. He bought a farm from a guy by the name of Billy Smith, and he started farming there. They worked in the coal mines in the winters and in summers came back to farm. For some years grandpa worked back and forth also. I think before that, they all worked down from Drumheller, right up the coal branch to Luscar, and all the little coal mines in between.

Helen Then I think he decided he would bring grandma over from Italy. The younger son by that time was 15 years old. They came from Italy and they lived on the farm there with mom and dad for some time. Then grandpa kind of took a permanent home and settled near the mine at Robb, Alberta. He took grandma up there and they had a home there for the rest of their lives in Robb. We girls lived with them for a few years. Grandpa worked the graveyard shift, as they called it. That was at night and grandma was afraid to be alone, so we stayed with her. I was there for three years and my sister for five. Then we came back home to live on the farm. Grandpa and grandma lived their life out there at Robb with their youngest son, Uncle Edward, who also became a miner and then a pit boss. So, they worked in the mines.

Helen Of course, Dad worked in the mines for a while in the winter, but then found that farming was too big a deal when you had cattle and that. So, he stayed at home to farm. We grew up on the farm there. Life wasn't terribly exciting, I don't remember, but I remember it being very hard up, but everybody was in the hungry 30s. It didn't seem to matter so much in those days. Everybody helped everybody. It's not like now ... "How much are you going to pay me for so many hours of work?" It was all exchange work at that time.

Helen We lived there, and I went to school in the Lewiston School [near Perryvale] except for the three years I spent with grandma. I got my schooling there and I quit school about 15 because mother needed me at home. There was a new baby in the family after 10 years. So, I had to stay at home to help mom. From there on, we just went on farming. I think for every neighbour that had a new baby, I was volunteered to go and help. So, I had a lot of experience with babies long before I had my own. I worked out as a domestic for a lot of years. I think the last year of my working out, I met Albert.

Brenda/Helen How old were you at that time? I was 22.

Helen We went together for about three years I guess before we married. During that time, the last year I spent looking after an invalid. She had been in her chair for 15 years with arthritis. She couldn't get out of her chair. She had to be fed, bathed, washed and looked after properly. I worked there for quite some time before Albert and I got married. I was about 22 years old, and I think he was 24. We had our first child a little over nine months and two weeks later. We had Gloria. She's Gloria Rein now.

Helen I guess life just went on in general. He was trucking at the time. Then some years later, he quit trucking and decided to work for the County of Athabasca. First he started driving construction equipment. He was very good at that sort of thing in constructing roads. Then he became their foreman. He didn't work so much, but trained boys to help to do the jobs and kind of was a supervisor for them. He worked there until the time of his death, in 1991 I believe it was he passed away. I just continued to live on the homestead there, on the acreage it was, for 25 years by myself.

Brenda How old were your children at that time?

Helen Gloria was married when dad passed away. I believe Dee was too. They were both married. They decided it was not good for me to be out there by myself. There were a lot of new people moving in, so we sold the acreage and I bought in the condo down in Athabasca. I still own my suite and have it rented out. I moved into Pleasant Valley Lodge, and really I thought I landed in heaven. There was no work, no dishes to wash, no food to cook, or to prepare or to buy. I'm totally content here now.

Brenda/Helen And so many people you know here? Yes.

Brenda/Helen I wonder if you could just backtrack a little bit to Italy, where your grandfather and father were from. What part of Italy were they from? They were just about central, just a little north of Rome. In a town, in the province of Abruzzi, they were from the little village of San Nicandro. That's where they came from.

Brenda/Helen When he came from the United States to Canada, was there a particular reason that he chose Perryvale to homestead? I don't think so.

Brenda/Helen Was he the first Italian immigrant in the area? Oh, no. There were several families. There were the Carolines.

Brenda/Helen They were there before your grandfather arrived? Yes, and there was an old fella who didn't go over very big with any of them. His name was Tom Pesto. He wasn't a very nice character either, so they had nothing much to do with him. There were the Carolines. Who else was there? Jim Delleva came there. He was to marry mom's sister and become our uncle. Let's see who else was there? John Delphonso and his mother.

Brenda/Helen A Faragini – was your mother from Perryvale? Mother was from Perryvale. When dad first came out, his dad had the homestead already in Perryvale. I believe my grandfather and my dad worked on the railroad for some time before the others came out. It wasn't until they were in the mines that grandmother came from

Italy. In Italy, it was a rough life. Nobody had big acreages or pieces of land. The daughter was left there to look after the two older mothers, his mother and hers.

Brenda/Helen Did the daughter eventually immigrate to Canada? No, she never did. No, she stayed in Italy.

Brenda/Helen I remember you saying that your grandfather had special mining skills. Could you talk a little bit about that? Yes, grandpa was very efficient with dynamite, and worked first on the trunk line going through the mountains into Washington. He was the one responsible to blow. He could tell with dynamite where he was going to put anything. He could load it so it would make the cut where he wanted.

Brenda/Helen Did he do that in Turkey and in Germany? Yes, in those mines too.

Brenda/Helen When he settled in Brule, did he still work with dynamite? He did whatever the mine called for.

Brenda/Helen You said that he was a pit boss? No, that was my uncle who became a pit boss. Grandpa was always a miner. He knew how to place the dynamite so that he could get the cut where he wanted. He was very efficient, and he trained a lot of young miners, including my dad and my uncle and my mother's brothers, so that they could mine. Any young miner that came along, they would put him with grandpa.

Brenda/Helen When you were growing up, did you speak only Italian at home? No, we never did. We always spoke English. Dad always spoke English to us kids, even if it was broken.

Brenda/Helen Isn't that interesting because your dad would not have had English in Italy? No, he learned it here. Mother was a very good teacher.

Brenda/Helen She probably had lived here for a long time? She only learned Italian herself from grandmother when she came. She knew a lot of words because of grandpa and dad, you know.

Brenda/Helen With your mother's family, how long had they been in Canada? Was she born here? She was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in the States. Actually, in a little town called Lemmon, South Dakota. Then she moved to Cleveland, Ohio, and from there they came to Canada.

Brenda/Helen Her parents had been in the United States for a while before she was born? Oh, yes. I think probably granny and granddad married in the United States. They weren't married when they came from the old country. Grandpa Faragini came from a little town, right on the border of Italy.

Brenda You've actually summarized things very, very well. I'm impressed that you had all the timing right for when they came. It's a very interesting history. If you could just tell me a little bit now about your life after you were married, where you lived.

Helen It was probably the most uninteresting life around. We married and we went down to a little town just north of Brooks, by the name of Shaughnessy. We lived there

and Albert worked in the mine there. Not in the mine down below, but in the tipple. At the time, they called it the tipple, like the outside hut for coal hoists and he worked in there for quite some time.

Brenda/Helen How many years were you down in southern Alberta? Not that long. Gloria was born down there. I think she was about nine months old when we moved back. We came home on a visit and my dad decided the baby wasn't going back. So, Albert bought a truck and went trucking.

Brenda/Helen Isn't that interesting. Did you live in Perryvale then? No, we lived in Meanook.

Brenda/Helen I think you said something when I was here before about your husband. Was he an MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly]? No, my father was an MLA.

Brenda/Helen Let's talk a little bit about your father. My father started out many, many years ago, even though he was from a different country. He was always a first-class citizen. The country he lived in was the country that was his. He believed in this. He was a very young man when he became a member of the hall board and a member of the school board, the little local school board.

Brenda/Helen What was the hall board? Was it like a community association? Yes. I don't know how many years he was president of that. I think until he actually had to retire. I think he put in 47 years in politics between the county and the provincial government.

Helen He was on the municipal hall board, then the school board and then he became a councillor for the county. He served I think for forty some years as chairman of the county. I can't remember for sure the year it was, but he became the MLA for Athabasca, for the Social Credit party. He was there, I think, for 18 years as the MLA.

Brenda/Helen That's an impressive history, isn't it? Yes, it is. His health got kind of bad as he was diabetic. One thing after another follows with the diabetes. Then he decided he should retire, so he still stayed on as a county man, but he didn't run again as the MLA. I think Frank Appleby took over from him.

Brenda/Helen How did that impact you, having your father be the MLA? Oh, bad! We didn't dare do anything out of line. We sure didn't because he said he could tolerate other people's kids getting into trouble, but not his. He was very strict. The older brother never did listen. He was one of those who didn't pay any attention. He went his own way after he got old enough.

Brenda/Helen How many children were in your family? We had four of us, 18 months apart. Then there were no children for ten years. Then mother had another four children, four years apart. I was 12 when our sister was born. It seemed like to me, I was a mother forever after that, because each one that came along, I was there. In fact, my youngest sister is about six months younger than my daughter.

Brenda/Helen Are all your siblings still living? No, the two older boys are both gone and the one sister. She passed away with heart trouble when she was in her 40s. She was an epileptic. She looked sturdy and all that, but she never really was. One of us was always helping her.

Brenda/Helen Was she the baby? No, she wasn't. The baby was much more sturdy and is still living and still very much on her own most of her life. I think being an epileptic, dad kind of spoiled the one sister.

Brenda/Helen Your father must have been a very special man to have come to this country and worked all over? Yes, he did a lot, he homesteaded, had a farm, worked on the railroad and then in the mines.

Brenda/Helen Can you tell me a little bit about your mother? Mother was born in the States. I don't know what brought them from the States up north. Grandad just decided he was leaving the States and coming to Canada. Mother was always a bit suspicious. They had run a hotel down there, and it burnt down. She kind of thought he couldn't get granny to move any other way. That maybe he had a little something to do with it. She said, "I don't know. I just don't see that place burning down the way it did." But granny wouldn't leave. She was quite happy where she was. So as soon as that little place burnt down, he got his insurance and headed for Canada. That's how they got into Edmonton, and my mother's family, the Faragini family, lived and worked there. My grandfather was a janitor at a school. The two boys were older than my mom and they both worked as janitors in the schools.

Brenda How did they get to Perryvale?

Helen I guess the family was getting to be a pretty good size, so they moved the family out to this homestead at Perryvale. Granny, and I think the boys after, moved out to the farm, to the homestead, to the little home in the hillside of Perryvale. There wasn't much land to be worked there, but they had a lot of river bottom for grazing and putting up hay. At that time, there was no tame hay, everything was wild. They could put up hay, so granny had herself a little herd of cows, milk cows. She supplied the town of Perryvale, which wasn't very big. She supplied the railroad men. She made homemade butter and printed it in pounds and sold it at the store. So, she supplied the milk, the cream and the butter for the local store.

Brenda/Helen So she was an entrepreneur? She was a real go getter. He wasn't much for work, but she was.

Brenda/Helen You said, there were about six or seven families in the Perryvale area that were of Italian descent. Did you socialize with that group, or with everybody in town? Everybody. Yes.

Brenda/Helen Was the community association the center for Perryvale? Yes.

Brenda/Helen Did you have suppers there? There weren't a lot of suppers at that time.

Helen The main events were the Christmas concerts and the Perryvale picnic in summertime. Each little community had a picnic. That was the only time you ever tasted ice cream. We never had a bottle of pop unless it was at the picnic. There was no money to waste on anything like that. They all had their little get togethers. Those were very, very important events that everybody looked forward to. They had sack races, foot races and three-legged races. Also wheelbarrow races. Pillow fighting, sitting on a rail and fighting with pillows. There were a lot of things that went on there. They always had baseball games, of course.

Brenda/Helen And everybody looked forward to that? Yes, my two uncles were both pitchers in the baseball.

Brenda You were very organized in your presentation here today with coming through your family. Were there other people in the mining business that were in Perryvale, the other Italian families? Did they have anything to do with mining?

Helen I think most of them started out in the mines, but none of them stayed with it. They weren't fussy about going underground to work. The Carolines had quit and they had their farm here. They had some land on top of the hills, but most of it was below the hills. They soon left and went to the city and both got work, both Charlie and his brother. I can't remember his brother's name. Charlie's last name is Caroline. Then there was a John Delphonso and his mother. I believe they started out in the mines, but his mother got very, very sick and she had cancer. That's one of the first times I ever heard of cancer. We lived about a quarter of a mile from them. I can still hear her. That cancer got bad before they came to take her out. We'd go over with grandma to visit her, and she'd be laying there, and she'd have a cold stone holding that to her tummy to cool it off.

Brenda/Helen You said your grandmother? Yes, Grandmother Aloisio. She had come from Italy by that time.

Brenda/Helen Was that hard for her? Yes. Do you remember her well? Did she learn English? Yes, she tried, but she never really wanted to get into it.

Brenda/Helen You said that you spoke English at home, but did you understand Italian? Once grandma came, we all learned Italian. We didn't speak the pure Italian. We spoke a dialect, but you get around with that too.

Brenda/Helen When you lived in Brule, those three years you went to stay with your grandmother? No, no Brule is where I was born.

Brenda/Helen Oh, then you went to live in Robb [with your grandmother], and how old would you have been then? I think I was about eight, because I think I was in grade two.

Brenda/Helen So you went to school during the day, then, and you would relieve her [grandmother] at night. When you said the three girls went, did you all go at the same time? It was just the two of us. There were only the four kids at that time. Two brothers and two sisters.

Brenda Do you remember how you felt when you left your family?

Helen That part didn't seem to bother us too much. We'd lived with grandma for many years. She lived with us, I should say. We were part of the family with grandma, that didn't bother me. What really bothered me was when I came home three years later because my mother was expecting a baby and needed help. We came home, but she [my grandma] took my sister back, and not me. I couldn't go anyway because mom needed me. Grandma insisted on taking my sister back. We'd never been separated. We were 18 months apart and we were very close. That just about drove me out of my mind. My parents phoned and told her to bring her back because I was too upset. Grandma said, "Not a chance! She'll get over it." That would be her attitude. How long did your sister stay for? She was there five years. I was there three years. Mom finally said no to grandma. She said this little sister has been born and she doesn't even know her bigger sister. She said she's coming home and she's coming home to stay. Mom put her foot down.

Brenda/Helen Was your grandfather still working at the mines? Yes. How old was your grandfather when he died? I think just about 80, not quite. My dad didn't quite make 80 and I think grandpa was just around that same age.

Brenda/Helen What about your grandmother? How old was she? Grandma was 86 or 87.

Brenda/Helen Did she stay on at Robb by herself? No, no, she came and lived with dad until Uncle Eddie got married. Then she went back to the branch and lived with him. That was her baby.

Brenda/Helen Did you say she went back to the ranch with Eddie? No, to the branch, they called it the coal branch at Robb. She lived out her life there. Actually, Uncle Eddie did and so did his wife.

Brenda/Helen The coal branch, is that the name of the company? No, no, the coal branch that stretched from Drumheller in the south, clear up to Luscar, up in the mountains. That was all referred to as the coal branch. There were mines all along there. There was Nordegg and Drumheller. Lovett was higher up the mountains. Mile 32 was a coal mine. Robb was Mile 33. Coalspur, Mercoal, Cadomin and Luscar. That was the coal branch.

Brenda/Helen When your father was an MLA, that's quite an honor to be an MLA. Did he go and stay in Edmonton when the house was sitting? Yes, he'd be there and come home on weekends.

Brenda/Helen Did your mother ever go and stay with him? She did sometimes, just depends what was going on. When she would go, I would have to pick up my chick and go down and stay with the family and look after them at her house. So, my husband did a lot of batching. I don't think it was pleasing.

Brenda/Helen So you would go back to the farm? I'd go down and look after the rest of the family there. The boys were big enough to look after themselves, but there were the little ones, two little sisters; actually, there were three sisters. One was older, but I

say sometimes that's when they need the most looking after. So, I would go down and look after the family when mom stayed with my dad in the city.

Brenda/Helen Did your mother resent him being away all week? Oh, no, no, no. Mom was proud of him. She backed him up in everything. In fact, mother was his stenographer, you might say, as she wrote the letters. He would dictate them, but mom did the writing because she had the spelling that he didn't have.

Brenda/Helen They would be all handwritten? Yes. She was very good. Mom was very good to dad. I would have been sick to death of feeding people. Mom always had people for meals. It didn't matter whether it was morning, noon or night, it seemed like people always stopped.

Brenda/Helen Why do you think that was? I don't know. I guess because they were always made so welcome.

Brenda/Helen Would they be coming to seek guidance from your dad? For that, for business and then there was the hall board and then there was the school board. Sometimes it was just a friendly visit with the family. Mom was perpetually cooking.

Brenda/Helen It's funny when I think back of my friends of Italian background, I think that's part of the Italian heritage? Oh, absolutely.

Brenda/Helen You can always put more water in the stew or the sauce if someone else is there. You can always throw an extra potato in the pot or an extra fistful of spaghetti, or one of the two.

Brenda/Helen Did your mother make her own spaghetti? She did. Yes, she could. Grandma taught her how to make homemade pasta.

Brenda/Helen Did she hang it over the brooms to dry? No, no, it was made fresh every time. You would chop it with a knife. It was just a regular rhythm when grandma cut noodles. It was amazing to listen to.

Brenda/Helen Did you carry that into your family, too? I did make them once in a while, but not as often. My husband was not as fond of pasta as our family. He used to prefer a dumpling that they made with potatoes. We made the potato gnocchi and they called them Knoephla. That would be German. It was a dumpling just made with the potatoes and the flour and they dropped it by little spoonfuls into the water.

Brenda/Helen Can you tell me a little bit about your husband? He was born there in Meanook, right at home. His dad came from Germany. I think his mother was from Romania if I'm not mistaken. They were married in the States. He met her in the States. They had a pretty good-sized family, too. The oldest daughter was Julia, then there was John, Ann, Walter, Albert and Clarence. There must have been at least six of them, at least.

Brenda/Helen They were all born in Meanook? No, Julia was born in Cardiff, I believe. He [Albert's father] worked in the mines there. John maybe was born there too. I think the rest of them were born on the farm. No, Grace was also born in the mines.

Brenda/Helen So Albert's father would have worked in the mines and then, like your father, decided he was going to leave and go farming? Homesteading, yes.

Helen So Albert pretty much grew up on the farm and he was born on that farm. He must have been around 20 or close to 20 when he drove truck for Mr. Hopps. Arthur Hopps, who had a trucking business and Albert was driving truck for him. Later, when we married, we left and went down to work at a mine at Shaughnessy in southern Alberta. He couldn't stand it down there. He hated every minute we were there. The wind blew, the tumbleweeds flew, and there were no trees around. I liked it, but he just detested it. Oh, he hated that prairie.

Brenda When you came back for a visit, and your father said that he didn't want his granddaughter moving back to Brooks, and so Albert bought a truck? Now, where would he have got the money for the truck? Times were pretty tough then.

Helen They were. I had a feeling that some of it was backed up by my father. I think his dad give him a little backing too and then we just made payments. We had the down payment on the truck and then he started trucking and paid them off. From there on, it was just smooth sailing. Then he decided he had enough of this trucking business. He decided to take a job with the county. He stayed at the county until he finally retired.

Brenda/Helen The County of Athabasca is a pretty big operation? Yes, it was once it went into the county system. It was a big, big operation. Then you had nine councillors to please.

Brenda/Helen And all the people that they represent and all their different opinions? Oh, yes. He enjoyed the job. After some time of running equipment, he went into foreman and then he was their mechanic in the shop. He had gone and taken a mechanics course, too.

Brenda/Helen Very interesting. I'm so impressed with how organized you are in giving all that information. I thought I'd be here for three different visits. But you had been thinking about it, hadn't you? Yes. That part, you know, I can go back and remember. Just don't ask me what I ate for dinner!

Brenda That's pretty common, I think.

[End of Interview}

Machine transcribed by: trint.com
Edited by: Roseann Laplace
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