

John Mariani

age 95, 4 mo. Interviewed by Glenn Terry in Ely, Nevada at Mr. Mariani's home  
March 2, 2000

Giovanni (John) Mariani was born in San Pietro Avellana in the province of Campobasso, Italy on October 4, 1904 to Florindo and Vincenza Settefrati Mariani. The Mariani's had a large farm and the farming was done by hand and with horses or oxen. John was well educated in the school in his home town. Italian standards of education were very high and John was always at the top of his class. When John was fourteen years old, at the time of the First World War, his father was an officer in the Italian army and his mother was ill. It became John's responsibility to oversee the operation of the farm. In 1921 John determined that he did not want to someday raise children on the farm and decided to come to America to join his father who had returned here earlier during that year.

John's father, Florindo, had initially come to the United States in 1900 when he was seventeen years old and had returned twice to Italy to serve in the Italian army during which time he was married and his son Giovanni (John) was born.

John left Italy in September, 1921 and arrived at Ellis island on October 15, having had his eighteenth birthday on the ship during a very difficult twenty-three day passage. He passed through the processing and fumigating at Ellis Island and was among those whose papers and health were in good order and he was allowed to embark on his journey to Ogden, Utah where his father was working at the time due to a strike at the copper mines at Ely. The immigrant train on which he traveled was routed from New Jersey to Chicago where the immigrants separated to go to their various destinations by train. "On the train to Ogden there was a porter with a basket with all kinds of fruit and candy. When I saw the yellow fruit which was a banana, I had never seen them before, I bought two of them. I started to chew on one and when I chewed on the inside of the soft spot, I thought it was spoiled. I ate the outside and threw away the inside part. I didn't get a stomach ache or anything. We didn't have bananas in Italy".

"My Dad helped me get work on a track gang in Ogden. I had to work very hard digging out the dirt around ties and putting in new ties. I didn't speak English. I was able to get a better job for a while on the Bamberger Electric Railroad between Ogden and Salt Lake City. After about a year the mines and railroad at Ely reopened and Dad was called back there to work. I came with him to Ely in May of 1922. When I saw the land from the train on the ride down from Cobre, I thought this land looked awful, like the Sahara Desert that I had studied about in school. When we got to Ely we stayed in the Company bunkhouse. The bunkhouses consisted of fourteen units, seven on each side with a common toilet and washroom in the center. Italians were on one side and Greeks were on the other side. We had many funny times. We had to cook all of our own food and we didn't understand the food that each other ate."

After about a month John got a job as a section laborer, repairing railroad tracks and changing bad ties. The crews worked six days a week, nine hours per day for \$2.80 per day with no coffee breaks and no overtime. After about eight months John got a job in the Railroad repair shop which was a hard job to get. "The Boss told my Dad that If John learns English I can promote him ahead. So my Dad found a Spanish woman who could give me English lessons. I walked 2 miles to her house three times a week after work. She taught me very well. The shop foreman, Bob Read, liked me very well and transferred me to the air brake repair shop which was lighter work and very interesting. I took a correspondence course from Scranton, Pennsylvania to learn about air brakes. When they opened a night class for immigrants to learn English at the High School I went there for a one year class session period and I was one of the best students. I studied lots at home in the bunkhouse because I had a lot of books to learn from. Now a year passed by and I was learning faster. My foreman called me into his office and told me that he was

going to put me in every department to learn. He said to me, 'Someday you'll be able to run the job'."

At the time of his arrival in Ely John found that the streets were all dirt or mud and that the main form of transportation was by saddle horse or by horse drawn wagon or buggy. The long roads into and out of the town were not paved. There were a few automobiles but the main form of transportation to Ely was the train. It was also the primary source of transportation between the towns of McGill, Ely, and Ruth and Kimberly.

With news of his mother's serious illness, John's father sent him back to Italy in mid 1924 to look after her. There was; however, a problem. At age 19 in May, young men born in 1904 were to report for compulsory military service. John had not reported.

He was subject to arrest when he arrived in his home town. After leaving Ely, John went to Denver, Colorado to obtain his steamship ticket. While there, he went to the Italian Consulate with the steamship agent to see what could be done. He was told to explain that he did not have the money to return on time but that he was reporting as soon as he was able to buy a ticket to return to Italy. He was given a letter from the consulate explaining that. He was not to mention his sick mother.

As predicted, he was promptly met by the police when he arrived at his mother's home in San Pietro Avellana. He convinced them that he would follow them to the police station so that the neighbors would not talk. Telling them that he had arrived to join the army but upon his arrival finding his mother sick, he was allowed to stay at his home with his mother for fifteen days before reporting to the army. When he reported at the appointed time John was placed under Court Martial for not reporting to enlist on the required date. It was during the Court Martial hearing that John produced the letter from the Italian Consul in Denver which explained that he had not returned at the right time because he did not have enough money for passage and had to wait a little bit longer to earn enough. This was good enough and John was given a job in another district as an office worker until he was to report for the Army for training with the class of those born in 1905. Due to his good education and ability, John did very well on this job. At about this time Prince Umberto of Italy was required to perform a service for the people of his country so he chose to exclude all of those born in 1904 from military service. After a challenge by the local officials because he had not yet gone into training, and following a ruling from Rome which said that John was indeed exempted, John returned to his home.

In the meantime, John's father had returned from Ely and the decision was made that John, who was twenty years old, should be married. This required that the right woman be found.

There was a young eighteen year old woman by the name of Rosina diFlorio who had caught their eye so the decision was made to send a representative to the diFlorio family to see if an engagement could be arranged.

"They did accept so the following week we went to their house to talk about the situation. My dad, my mother and grandmother, Rosina and her dad, her mother and her grandmother were all there. After we talked about what our visit was for and our intention of matrimony to be done soon they told us that they would let us know about their decision in a few days. As customary over there the parents on both sides make all the decisions. The following week we went back over there and they gave us their approval, after they asked Rosina if she wanted to marry me. She accepted and the date was set for the marriage on June 21, 1925. We had to make all the preparations very quickly because there was not much time. The idea for a quick matrimony was that I had a short time to reenter the United States. We had a very

nice wedding ceremony in the Catholic Church. I was married to her for seventy-two years until her death on January 11, 1998. We liked each other, we raised our family and everybody was in good shape."

"The next day, as customary, The groom goes back to work on the farming duty and the bride stays in the house for two weeks to accept visitors. After that the bride has to start on her house duties and take care of the farmers and the working men. One day I told my wife to go feed the farmers because I have to take care of the horses. She said 'no I won't go because I have to go see my mother". I said 'you see your mother every day. You might as well go feed the farmers then you can go see your mother, again'. She said 'no' so we had an argument coming down the steps. My grandmother was by the fireplace and she asked me 'What's the matter John?' 'Oh', I said, 'these women don't understand a man', She said 'I'll tell you John, You let the women win and you'll be a winner'."

"I told my wife, Rosina that I could not stay in Italy forever because there would be no future or opportunities for our children if we have any". "So I left in February 1926 and arrived back in Ely in March."

Vincenzina Mariani was born in 1926. John did not return. though his father returned to Italy in 1928 and remained there with the family.

In order to become a citizen it was required that the applicant remain in continuous residency in the United States for five years. "It was a sacrifice but we had to do it".

John continued to work at Nevada Northern Railroad and learned more about the jobs in the department. At the same time he prepared for his citizenship.

On September 18, 1931 in the Seventh Judicial Court in Ely, Nevada, Giovanni Mariani became a citizen of the United States of America. He returned to Italy immediately with the intent to bring his wife and five year old daughter, whom he had never seen, back to Ely. After he arrived, he heard from the Nevada Northern Railroad that there were many layoffs due to the depression. They informed him that if he chose to stay in Italy they would notify him when he could come back to work and that they would keep the job and seniority for him. John stayed in Italy working on the farm until early 1933 when the Company notified him that the job at the railroad was available for him.

Leaving his family again, John returned to Ely and has never visited Italy since his departure in February 1933. Soon after arriving back in Ely John earned promotions on the railroad. During the next period of time, John was trained in every job under his supervisors jurisdiction in the yard.

"In October 1934 I made application for my wife and family to come to the United States. In the meantime a son had been born in Italy in 1933. We named him Florindo. As he was born after I became a US citizen, he automatically became a US citizen. The application was approved; my wife Rosina and daughter, Vincenzina, had to get Italian passports, Florindo had an American passport. They left the port of Naples on January 20th and arrived in New York on January 29th. Rosina and Vincenzina had to go through Ellis Island for examination, clothes fumigation, shots and paper checkup. Florindo, as an American citizen, did not have to go through all what his mother and sister did. They put them on a train, destination, Ely, Nevada. They were traveling on railroad passes, they were also tagged like a package. I met them in Ogden, Utah. From there, we took the train to Ely. On the train ride down from Cobre, she had the same reaction to the land that I had when I first came. This was a very hard place for my wife to get used to, it took about a year to get used to everything. I had rented a temporary company house by the ore yard. The house did not have any toilet and was very inconvenient. My wife was very

disappointed. She didn't like the food that was available and she didn't understand the language. At this time Vincenzina started school at East Ely Elementary School. We lived in the company house for one year, paying ten dollars per month including water and lights."

"Mr. Roy Noble, who was an engineer on the passenger train locomotive came to see me one day saying that the little boy of mine was in danger playing along the tracks, he was over two years old then. He said that his wife had two small houses in East Ely and asked me if I was interested in buying one. We did not have to go to the bank, she would handle the monthly payment of \$24.50. The payment was twenty dollars with interest of four dollars and fifty cents per month. We went and saw the house which was small and needed lots of repair but was in a good location. I am still living in the same house today. Rosina felt better when I told her that we would be moving into that house soon."

"We made a deal and the following month we moved in. It was small but we had a toilet in the house. We remodeled the house in time, little by little. We have been very happy in our little house at the corner of avenue G and 9th Street. Our neighbors have been very good and helped my wife learn English which she learned very well without an accent like I have. The best two neighbors to help my wife were Mrs. Kathie Christiansen and Mrs. J.C. Wheeler. They both also witnessed the courthouse hearing to obtain her citizenship paper on February 14, 1940. She was very proud to become an American Citizen."

"After a few years I broke in on all kinds of jobs at the railroad; freight car department, all the interchange cars came in here bringing all kinds of material; the ore car department and all the ICC regulations, including passenger trains. The company, in April 1952, promoted me to 1st class airbrake repairman and assistant car foreman which includes to take care of all departments, repairs and estimate report what caused the derailment. Occasionally the ICC representative came in to check on our running equipment. While I was in charge of my department he never found anything to report. I always am trying to keep things in order."

In 1960, the general car foreman retired and the Nevada Northern Railroad promoted me to the position of General Car Foreman, which I held until my retirement on December 1, 1969. I was 65 years old then. I worked for the railroad for 47 1/2 years. After so many years of railroad service I enjoyed my retirement."

John's most memorable experience with a derailment was when an ore train with eight cars derailed in tunnel number one which is the tunnel just west of town. Tunnel number two was between Lane City and Keystone and has since been daylighted. "When I saw the derailment I had to figure out how to do it. We couldn't use a crane, there was no overhead space. We couldn't drag them out because they sink in the dirt. We had to study how to do it. Something came in my mind to use a hydraulic jack. The hydraulic jacks had a capacity of one hundred tons each. On the engine we used four jacks to lift the engine high enough to put new rails under it because all the rails were broken up. We chained the wheels with the engine so the wheels came up with the engine. The section gang put the rail down so that we pulled the first engine off under its own power. We did that continuous thing with the second engine and then with the cars which were all upright because the tunnel wouldn't allow the cars to turn over. It took us from nine o'clock that evening 'til nine thirty or ten o'clock the following day. We had it all re-railed and had it going. This derailment stopped operation in Ruth and stopped operation in McGill. For this operation I was promoted to general foreman for which they gave me more money. This was a very good experience. It was the month of January and it was below zero and the wind through the tunnel was bad so we had a big fire made outside the tunnel. We used half the gang to get warm at the fire while the other half of the gang worked all the time so there was no stop in working. I was well rewarded for that operation."

It was a common practice with a derailment to push the derailed cars off to the side, repair any track damage and keep the trains running with a minimum of slowing on the line. The crews came back and took care of the cars when they had time to do so. It was very unusual for a derailment to cause work stoppage at both Ruth and McGill.

"The passenger train was discontinued in 1940 because there wasn't much business. At the same time they had a school train going up to Ruth through Clark Street where they had the switch by tunnel number one to connect with the ore line. Then from Ruth It came back to Ely to bring the kids back and forth from school and home. The other school train was going to McGill. From East Ely to McGill and back. Then they had another train that they called 'Ping-Pong' which consisted of coaches and freight cars. It took material up to Ruth and up to McGill and passengers both places for whoever wants to buy a ticket to go that way. The Ping-Pong ran that way for many years. It was discontinued when the highway was improved and many truck lines came through so then there was no more Ping-Pong and there were no more school trains. Then they started using buses which they still use today."

There were several spurs along the line between East Ely and Ruth with loading structures for private miners to load their ore into gondola cars for processing in other parts of the country. This ore was not processed at McGill. "One spur was Calumet, one was Lane City, another spur was just before you get into Lane City which they called Boston Mine. I remember I helped put up that spur at the time when I was a young man working on the section gang. They had a mine which had silver, gold and copper. You can still see the dump there. Up a little further up at Keystone they had another spur with a dumping place where the truck backed up against the car and unloaded the ore. Everything has disappeared, it is not there anymore."

"I remember when the Hotel Nevada was built; how they dug the basement. The name of the contractor was John Pescio. He had a team of horses and a scraper. He scraped the dirt from the bottom and took it up to the road then loaded the dirt by shovel into the truck. It took many months to dig that basement. Finally they contracted a firm from out of town and built a big building on top of it."

Most people who grew up in White Pine in the latter part of the twentieth century remember John from the theater. He worked for Vic Walker and finally with his son, Florindo, who was White Pine High School Vice-principal, then Principal and finally Superintendent of Schools and who also managed the theaters. " I worked in the Ely Theater, I worked in the Central Theater, and I worked at the drive-in theater. I was an usher and I worked there for about twenty-five years. Sometimes I ran the theater because the boss was away. I had a good experience there. I had a lot of friends, probably a lot of enemies because I kicked 'em out. But I had to do my work. They never knew how I could tell who was not being good." " I have always been a firm man, either you do what the rule is or else you get out." John had a secret way to watch everyone in the theater to be sure that everyone was behaving. To this day, it is still his secret.

John is justifiably proud of the fine family for which he took the risk to come to the United States.