

Kansas City Garment Industry Project

Transcript of Interview with Rosa Guarino

(with interpretation and elaboration by Maria Leone, her sister-in-law)

John A. Dvorak: Welcome to another interview for the Kansas City garment industry project. Today is May 24, 2010. I'm John Dvorak and I'm interviewing Rosa Guarino, who worked for many years in the Kansas City garment industry after coming here from Sicily. Helping with interpretation is her sister-in-law Maria Leone. The videographer is Mark Titus. Rosa, tell us why you came to the United States.

Rosa Guarino: Well, before I come, there was never work over there. My sister-in-law here, she said to come here, there's a good life, if you come here . . . Then when we come here, we no like, we want to go back, we want to go back. We cried. We used to cry, every night, every night they want to go back, they want to go back. And my mother-in-law said: "No you're not going back, you're not going back." And then my sister-in-law and some friend, they come and said: "Don't worry, it'll be fine and everything." And then my sister-in-law said you know what you do, you're going to work, you're going to do better, you know, so you're working. I never worked in my life.

Q What did you do back in Sicily?

Rosa Oh nothing. Just stay home with the kids.

Maria Leone Well, they didn't come from Sicily.

Rosa I lived 10 years in France.

Maria That's what I mean, Sicily in those days, the things was too bad, too poor. My brother, he decided to take his family and they went to France. They was there 10 years. They came from France.

Rosa I had two kids bom in Italy ... I mean in France.

Q So you actually came here from France?

Rosa Yes.

Maria See, once they get there, France, my brother was working, they was doing okay. After the war she didn't have to work. My mother, god rest her soul, she wants her son here, and his wife, that's how they came here.

Q Were you in Sicily during World War II?

Rosa Yes.

Q What did you think of Kansas City when you got here?

Rosa Well, I don't like it. Everything different. Everything is different. You didn't understand nothing. Really, really hard.

Q Did you have to work, did you have to get a job when you came to Kansas City?

Rosa Yes. Yeah. Yeah. In three months that I'm here, she said: "Come on, I will take you to the factory and you are going to work. So, you'll feel better," she said. So she take me over there.

Q What factory was this?

Rosa This is at Coronet. I work over there for six months . . . Many people were so mean. You can believe it because they said: "You took my work. You took my work." Everybody was jealous because I wanted to work.

Maria What happened then, the boss, she would give everybody work. But she didn't give nothing to her. She couldn't figure out why. She said: "How come she don't give me work?" Some women that had been there a long time, she asked her, she said: "Do you give her so much a week?" She was new. She said: "no."

Rosa She said better to give her some money.

Q What kind of work did you do for Coronet?

Rosa I sewed the collar in the coat. . . mink coat

Q Did you know how to do that, or did they train you?

Rosa No, they trained me. I never worked. They trained me. Then, after six months, there was no more work at Coronet. They lay me off.

Q How long did you work at Coronet?

Rosa Six months.

Q About six months?

Rosa Yeah.

Q Where was that located?

Maria You know where it was located, it was downtown.

Q Near Broadway?

Rosa Yeah. Broadway.

Q So you didn't really like the work?

Rosa No, I liked the work. But I no like the people because they were mean to me.

Maria Everybody was jealous.

Rosa Everybody looked at me because I took work. She said: "you took my work." ... I feel bad.

Q Did you not speak English at that time?

Rosa No. No. No.

Q Was that a problem?

Rosa Well, they had a lot of Italians over there. Most of them were Italian. There were some nice people that took care of me, telling me what happened . . . Then I spent three months at home. Then she take me to another factory, Betty Rose factory.

Q Where was that located?

Rosa Thirty-first street.

Q About 31st and Linwood?

Rosa Yeah, Linwood.

Q And you got a job there?

Rosa I got a job there. I worked 13 years over there.

Maria I took her there. The woman, the manager, was Mary Jane. I remember like it was now—I said my sister in law, she was new in this kind of work ... I tell her I said she didn't speak English.

Rosa But they closed the factory. When I was 46, the factory closed.

Maria She was 46 years old when they closed the place.

Q What type of work did you do for them?

Rosa I sewed the collar and the buttons on the coat.

Q Did you like the work?

Rosa Oh yeah, I liked the work. And I liked the people better.

Maria They were nice people.

Q Were they Italian?

Rosa Italian, yeah, they have Italian, they have Spanish, English, they have all kinds.

Q Did you all get along?

Rosa Oh yeah, yeah.

Q Did you make a pretty good wage at the factory?

Rosa Yeah, when I finish they pay me \$7 an hour ... At the time that was good money.

Q Did you have to join a union to work at the factory?

Rosa Oh yeah. . . Now they send \$37 a month . . . all my life.

Q What year would it have been that you went to work at Betty Rose?

Rosa Nineteen-sixty-eight.

Q And you were there 13 years.

Rosa Thirteen years, yes.

Q You must have liked sewing.

Rosa Yeah. Like it or not, I liked money. What are you going to do? I had three kids.

Maria She sewed by hand.

Q Was that the only kind of work you felt you could do?

Rosa They showed me how . . . When you put the buttons on you stood up . . . All day long you you stood up . . . You were tired every night.

Maria She never sew before.

Q You had children.

Rosa Three—two boys and one girl.

Q Did you get to really enjoy the work, you had not sewed before, but did you get to where you really enjoyed it?

Rosa You know what, I'm going to tell you the truth. It was a piece of work. They gave you money.

Q You were creating a coat out of nothing. Did you take pride in that?

Rosa Well, we didn't have a choice. We were making money.

Maria They wanted to buy a house, they had kids to support. She done the best she could.

Q There were a lot of garment companies in Kansas City at that time, did you know about that, or did you just sort of go to work and do your business?

Maria I didn't know then. I was not familiar with the work.

Q Were most of the people at the factory women, or were there some men?

Rosa Yeah, women. The guys, they didn't work with us. They cut the stuff.

Maria They cut the material.

Q Who was your boss?

Rosa Well, you got a lot of bosses. You got a boss for the sew the buttons. You got a boss for the sew the collar. . . Everything that you do, you have one boss.

Q Was your boss a nice woman?

Rosa Sometimes. Sometimes mean.

Maria But she met some nice people there.

Q Do you know who owned the company?

Rosa Well, they called him Peter, I don't know the last name. Peter and Mary Jane were the big bosses in the office.

Q They didn't talk to you?

Rosa No, no. They were big shots.

Q What happened at the end, you said they closed the factory?

Rosa I was at two weeks vacation. And then when we go back, everything was gone.

Q Shut down?

Rosa Yeah ... No work . . . They said they were going to put a factory in China . . . Because they pay the people less.

Q Did you know the company was in trouble and might close?

Rosa Yeah. Yeah. The work got to be less, less, less . . . We imagined that they would close. But they no believe it because there were 500 people that work in this factory. Really really big, a big factory.

Q Did they begin to get rid of people toward the end or did it just all collapse one day?

Rosa It just closed in one day. . . There was less work. . . Sometimes, 12 o'clock, they send me home . . . they didn't have work they send you home, 12 o'clock, one o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock.

Maria They knew it was a problem.

Q Were you sad when the company closed?

Rosa Well, not really . . . My husband was working as a carpenter . . . making good money . . . All the factories closed. Where would I go? I don't go no place.

Q You knew that the other factories in town were closing and it would be very difficult to get a job?

Rosa Yeah.

Q So what did you do? Did you get a different kind of job?

A Yeah, I worked a little bit in the school. Then church, day care.

Q You never worked in the garment business again?

Rosa No.

Q Did you keep sewing?

Rosa No, no more.

Q You said they moved the factory to China. How did you feel about that?

Rosa Well, I feel bad, because we don't have no more work.

Q Are the coats that you buy today as good as the coats that your company made back in the '60s?

Rosa I don't know, it depends, what you buy. But there are no more coats like we made in the factory.

Q That was a good coat?

Rosa Right. That was a good coat, nice style. Everything has changed.

Q You just don't think it's quite as good a coat today?

Rosa No.

Q One more question, did you have any feeling that you were part of a very important industry in the United States that helped the United States become a great country.

Rosa Yeah. Now, yes.

(transcript has been abridged, shortened and edited for clarity)

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