



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Tony Ambrosi

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[NOTE: The interviewer is the interviewee's grandson.]

TAPE 1/SIDE 1

VIQUEIRA: Tell me your name.

AMBROSI: Oh, my name, let's see... See I'm 93 years old, and I'm going to have to go back (laughs)... .

VIQUEIRA: Tell me your name.

AMBROSI: My name is Tony Ambrosi. Mike wants to know about my life in Schott's Alley, or Schott's Place or Schott's Court, take your pick. We liked to call it Schott's Place. It was more than an alley because there were two entrances, one on C Street and one on First Street. But Schott's Court, Schott's Alley, Schott's Place, whatever you term it, was a Shangri-La to us. The Shangri-La of Northeast Washington. I would say the Shangri-La of Washington, D.C., because we were in an enclosed area all to ourselves. We could play, do this, do that, whatever. Soccer ball, baseball, football on the Persian, Persian, no on the Belgian block Street.

VIQUEIRA: On the what?

AMBROSI: Belgian block. Belgian block street. You know what a Belgian block is? A Belgian is a block about a foot long, and it's four inches wide and four inches deep, made of asphalt.

VIQUEIRA: And so the street was paved with... .

AMBROSI: It was paved with Belgian block.

VIQUEIRA: Belgian, as in Belgium, the country.

AMBROSI: Yeah, they called it the Belgian block. I imagine that sort of thing gets discovered and made it. But anyway we had a grand time there. Like I say, it was our Shangri-La, it was our playground, it was where we lived, where we slept, where we ate.

VIQUEIRA: And, what years did you live there?

AMBROSI: I lived there back from, I think, 1904 to 1925.

VIQUEIRA: Wait. 1914?

AMBROSI: I meant 1904. Oh no no no, I wasn't born until 1911. What the hell am I talking about. 1914.

VIQUEIRA: To 1925? Say 1925. They can't hear me; they can only hear you. Just tell me again, you lived there from...

AMBROSI: 1914 to 1925. We moved in 1925 to Fourth Street Northeast. That was out at the, this golden area that we lived in. I lived at 334 Schott's Court, Alley or Place and we owned a house next door to it that my father converted to a garage and which was renting for more than the house.

VIQUEIRA: What do you mean, more than the house?

AMBROSI: Well, the garage was bringing six dollars a month and the house was bringing four.

VIQUEIRA: So you were born in 1911 and moved to Schott's Alley in 1914. Where did you live from 1911 to 1914, when you were a baby?

AMBROSI: Schott's Alley.

VIQUEIRA: Where were you born?

AMBROSI: I was born on Fifth Street, Northeast, Washington. I think that's still considered Capitol Hill. I lived across the street from the Carbery School. I recall my mother telling me an incident, she thought I was lost, thinking that I was lost, she was very much concerned. This was while she was living on Fifth Street. She was very much concerned. She'd heard about the Chinese people eating dead rats and dead cats and children. It was a Chinaman up the street, on D Street next to Pete Lazi's (sp?) some kind of store, (Voice in background: Pilazzi's. (sp?)) and my grandmother happened to walking by, and she wanted to ask him if he had seen me and I was sitting in there on the counter and he was playing with me, according to my mother.

VIQUEIRA: Oh, so you were in the Chinaman's store?

AMBROSI: The Chinaman, yeah.

VIQUEIRA: Your mother thought that the Chinaman might have eaten you?

AMBROSI: Yeah, well, that's the first thing that came to her mind. But that was the way people thought those days. Remember the song "Ching Ching Chinaman eat dead rats, dead cats and people." (Laughs) Anyway, she was very happy that she found me, and...

VIQUEIRA: All right. What kind of economic circumstances did people in Schott's Alley live in?

AMBROSI: Economic circumstances, what are you talking about, economic circumstances?! (Laughs.) They barely lived. They just existed., Mike, but...

VIQUEIRA: Was there a particular ethnicity? What kind of people, were they...

AMBROSI: They were all Italian people, people from Italy. That's when I lived there. I understand that my brother-in-law Charlie that married my sister was the first white person to live in Schott's Court, Alley or Place.

VIQUEIRA: What was his last name?

AMBROSI: Charlie, Charles Passero. He lived in the corner house of what we called the back alley. Now. We lived around the corner alley or place or court and then we moved where Mr. Passero, "Babuchu" [nickname] Passero and "Mamarella" [nickname] Passero lived up the hill, which was the high class section of the area, place or whatever.

VIQUEIRA: What is where Schott's Alley used to be, what's there now?

AMBROSI: We lived at 154 , we lived at 234 around the corner where we had this house next to us that belonged to our mother where we rented out as a garage.

VIQUEIRA: My question is, what does it look like today?

AMBROSI: Laughs. If you're flying over, it looks like a flat building because a Senate office building is sitting on top of it

VIQUEIRA: The Hart Building.

AMBROSI: Well, we called it the Senate office building, the Hart Building, OK.

VIQUEIRA: But there was, there was one Senate office building that was already built, right?

AMBROSI: Right, that was one on First Street, between First Street and Delaware Avenue. That was, incidentally, that was our play ground.

VIQUEIRA: Russell, they call it Russell today.

AMBROSI: What is it called?

VIQUEIRA: Russell.

AMBROSI: Yes, it was a three sided, it was the three-sided building, wide open on the east side and that's where we went because we had the entrance on First Street and we would just go down the Alley, Court or Place, we would just go down and go right in the into the open of the Russell Building, you call it now, Senate Office Building, we termed it then. The Senate office building used to be wonderful skating on the corner of First and B Street, now known as Constitution Avenue, because they had marble steps there and we used to love to ride on the first two steps because they were so smooth with the skates.

VIQUEIRA: Where else did you play, as a kid?

AMBROSI: Played there, in the Russell Building...

VIQUEIRA: What about the Capitol, Union Station? The Capitol and Union Station?

AMBROSI: Oh, my God, the Capitol was our playground. Every summer we had to tour the Capitol Dome at least two or three times or both domes in those days.

VIQUEIRA: You mean walk up, up....

AMBROSI: Yeah, the big dome, the first dome which was bigger in circumference than the top dome.

VIQUEIRA: So you'd walk up the stairs....

AMBROSI: Yeah, yeah, yeah. They were pretty steep.

VIQUEIRA: Today that's completely closed. You've got to get a member of Congress to take you up there.

AMBROSI: Well, I don't know, Mike. Yeah, we'd stayed, we'd stay down, maybe I shouldn't be saying this, but we would stand down on those stairs coming from the big balcony, the one that's the widest, the one that's the greatest, and look up at the ladies going up the steps.

VIQUEIRA: (Laughs.)

AMBROSI: Looking up their dress.

VIQUEIRA: OK Alright.

AMBROSI: And we were only about nine years old, eight or nine years old. But those things were on our mind then, too. (Laughs)

VIQUEIRA: (Laughs.) Oh, we might have to censor that part out. (Laughs.) What about your parents, what did they do? Great grandmom was a grocer, wasn't she?

AMBROSI: I understand my mother had a grocery store on First Street between C and D on the east side of the street while she was carrying me. So I don't remember too much about that.

VIQUEIRA: How did you survive?

AMBROSI: I guess we survived, survived as all peasants in those days and the days before. What you could get, find or steal. I shouldn't say that. It's one thing my mother was against, was stealing. And I never did steal anything.

Well, first of all, I want to tell you about First and C Street Northeast. It was a man that lived there on the corner, and it was a huge lot and he had fence with pickets. And we just couldn't help going past that fence with a stick in our hand and running it along the pickets and making a picket noise, if you can understand what I mean. And he used to tell us in a nice way, don't do that, please don't do that. Bother the dog. And he had a bulldog, the ugliest thing I'd ever seen in my life.

That corner again brings back memories of on a icy day, the street cars running, it had to make a turn, would lose the plow and didn't have any juice or energy for the streetcar to move and they had to wait for the streetcar to come with the necessary equipment to release it, to release the plow from the track so they could move it. That's a fact, Mike. [Pause] That was the Hoover Administration. Oh, how I hated Hoover. We all hated Hoover.

VIQUEIRA: Why did you hate Hoover?

AMBROSI: Well, I guess because he was a Republican and was down on poor people (laughs), the same thing as the man is doing today, everybody's down on poor people. Everybody, I remember going to the theater, the Palisade at 13th and F Street NW, and they were showing the candidates running for the presidency, and Hoover's name came up with his picture, and I booed and booed and booed and then they showed Al Smith who was going to run against him, and I cheered and cheered and cheered. Al Smith never did make it.

VIQUEIRA: That was 1928 then.

AMBROSI: 1928 election, yes. Because Roosevelt took office in 1932.

VIQUEIRA: OK, so the Bonus March was....

AMBROSI: The Bonus Marches were I think were in about '30 or '31.

VIQUEIRA: What were they like around the Capitol?

AMBROSI: Well, they were (weren't?) dressed in uniform, that's for sure.

VIQUEIRA: Tell me about the day that they routed the Bonus Marchers.

AMBROSI: Well, we used to go down every day, there wasn't any great amount of work going on at the time, and we'd go down and visit the Bonus Marchers and see how they were doing. And they were, we found an area Four and a Half Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, there is no Four and a Half Street today, I think it's Fourth Street, but there was a Four and a Half Street SW, and we stayed there for a long...

Somehow or other we had heard that the Cavalry from Fort Myer was going to come in and try to remove the Bonus Marchers.

VIQUEIRA: Hold it, stop. (break in conversation). Say it again, the Cavalry was going to come in—the Cavalry were from Fort Myer...

AMBROSI: We had heard about, we didn't know it was going to be Cavalry or marching soldiers or whatever it may be, but sure enough about two or three o'clock in the afternoon, we were standing there watching, waiting what was going to happen and we see the troops, Cavalry, coming down Pennsylvania Avenue led by MacArthur. MacArthur had the lead horse and to the right of MacArthur was Patton, George Patton, and to the left on our side was Eisenhower.

VIQUEIRA: Really?

AMBROSI: Yeah, really, really. And they marched down there and they stopped, and they looked at one another and then all of a sudden somebody said something or blew a whistle or something, and they came chasing us, was chasing the Bonus Marchers to get off the property, it was all government property.

I was on Eisenhower's side and they were throwing grenades and we were reaching for our handkerchiefs in muddy water and putting them in muddy water and getting them wet and putting them around our mouth. So we wouldn't inhale the, what is it, the gas, the gas. Now, Eisenhower, I was so close to Eisenhower I wanted to pull him off of his horse, and I was tempted. I wish they would have taken a film of that particular scene because I was as close to him as I am to you and he was on a horse. The only thing is, he had a sword in his hand, and here I'm like a damn fool trying to reach and drag him off a horse.

VIQUEIRA: Wait a minute, you were trying to stop Eisenhower?

AMBROSI: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

VIQUEIRA: Why were you against Eisenhower?

AMBROSI: Well, he was anti Bonus Marchers.

VIQUEIRA: Oh, and you were pro Bonus Marchers?

AMBROSI: Yeah, we were for the, of course, the poor, the poor go with the poor. And they die with the poor.

VIQUEIRA: So did Eisenhower take a swipe at you with his sword?

AMBROSI: Well, he took a swipe, he took a swipe but...

(Pause) Believe it when I tell you, if it were still there I wouldn't mind living there and raising my children there.

VIQUEIRA: In Schott's Alley?

AMBROSI: Yeah, right, right because it was no traffic, no nothing, you're in a world of your own and it was a huge, it was a huge alley, place or street, whatever you want to call it. We played baseball in the street there as kids, soccer ball and football, maybe even baseball. We had a great time.



Tony Ambrosi as a young man

VIQUEIRA: What were holidays like? What were they like back then? Did you have enough to eat, and I mean did you...?

AMBROSI: A holiday, Mike, you eat whatever you had, a little better than you'd been doing because it was a holiday.

GRACE VIQUEIRA [Tony Ambrosi's daughter, from the background]: Tell them the orange story, the crate with the paper around them.

AMBROSI: Yes, I thought that was standard, but they got away from that because it cost too much to pack now. Oranges in a wooden box, packed paper all around them with a duck on them. It's called something. White duck, yellow duck or green duck and the paper, we gathered by the handful and used it as toilet paper because it had a nice scent.

VIQUEIRA: Yeah, you can. I was going to let you rest after a line like that.

AMBROSI: I don't want to mention their name but they were the most well-to-doers in, that lived in the area, and they had a christening, I guess it's christening or baptizing, one of the grandchildren, so my mother was there, my father was there and all the elderly people were there, talking and singing and whatever, whatnot, but we kids were not allowed yet, so then they let the kids in, they let us kids in and they gave us some Coke or I don't think it was Coca Cola, it was a soft drink. And the lady held the bottle in her hand and put it to our lips and when she thought we had enough, she would take the bottle away, remove the bottle from our lips and pass it on to the next person. That was before the days of sanitation. (Laughs) So she must have given us, they were six ounce bottles, Mike, I think, six ounce bottles, in those days. In fact a case of Coke in those days cost 75 cents for a case of Cokes, 25 cents for the bottles that she would get back and 25 cents for the crate.

VIQUEIRA: Oh, that was the refund.

AMBROSI: The refund, yeah.

...I can't tell you that Mike, because I wasn't there.

VIQUEIRA: Well, just give me the basic history.. When did you parents get to...

AMBROSI: I understand that my father arrived in this country in 1904. He arrived in this country in Boston area and quite evidently he worked for the railroad, and he worked himself down to Washington, down to the Washington area because he resided here. He lived in Georgetown, he lived in Southwest Washington, he lived around Four and a Half Street Southwest, and then on Fifth Street Northeast. We didn't follow the poor, we followed the rats.

VIQUEIRA: (Laughs.) And but great grandmom was still in Italy at this time?

AMBROSI: No, she was with him all this time.

VIQUEIRA: When did great grandmom....

AMBROSI: She got here in 1906.

VIQUEIRA: So great granddad was here two years...

AMBROSI: The marvel of your great grandmother, Mike, how did she ever find him or reach him, not knowing the language.

VIQUEIRA: When she came to the United States?

AMBROSI: When she came to the United States. She went and knocked right on his door on Fifth Street, I think the address was between D and E, that would be 417 Fifth Street. And when he (she?) knocked on the door and showed up at the door, he wanted to know, he hadn't seen her for two or three years, he wanted to know what she was doing here!

VIQUEIRA: (Laughs.) Great granddad asked great grandmom, what are you doing here? She came all the way from Italy....

AMBROSI: Yeah, he didn't know anything about it; she presented herself at the door. And maybe you shouldn't put this on it, because he was living with someone. So she came into the house, and they got into conversation or must have got into an argument because he wanted your grandmother, your real great grandmother to live there with this other woman that he was living with, together.

VIQUEIRA: Laughs.

(Female voice in the background: He was a Mormon before his time.)

VIQUEIRA: this is going to be on the internet. All right.

[Pause]

Mr. Ambrosi, what buildings did you work on?

AMBROSI: No, I didn't work on this building but I want to tell about this latest building on First and Maryland Avenue, Northeast Washington, I think it was the Democratic Women's Association or whatever it may be and evidently they made some kind of a deal, made some type of a deal with the government because they didn't want to move and they located it on the corner of Second and Constitution Avenue.

VIQUEIRA: Back up, why did they have to move?

AMBROSI: Well, they wanted the space for the Supreme Court. Because that's the building standing there now where they were. Incidentally that was also part of the playground of us that lived in the area. They had steps going up to the first floor or the second floor, whatever you wish, and underneath it these steps they had iron gates like a little dungeon, and we would go in there and pretend we were in jail and whatever have you.

VIQUEIRA: This is the Women's League building? [Sewall-Belmont House?]

AMBROSI: Women's League building.

VIQUEIRA: And they were made to move to Second and Constitution?

AMBROSI: They must have had a lot of power because they built the Senate office building right around them, they're still there.

VIQUEIRA: Right.

[Pause]

AMBROSI: Capitol Hill. I'd like to talk about Capitol Hill because on Pennsylvania Avenue between First Street and Third Street was Chinatown, on Pennsylvania Avenue.

VIQUEIRA: I didn't know that.

AMBROSI: And a few cops were in between. I recall your grandpa going in, your grandfather going in one of the shops and buying a pair of pants, and he bought a pair of pants and they altered them for him the same day, and pressed them and he walked out with a—that's on Pennsylvania Avenue between First and Third.

VIQUEIRA: Northeast? Northwest?

AMBROSI: Northwest. Northwest.

[Pause]

First large construction building that I worked on was the Internal Revenue Building. I think it was a company called George Fuller. George Fuller was the prime contractor, and I worked for the subcontractor pouring the concrete. I could never forget the name because it was an odd name. Sounded Polish to me (Polish sounding name: unclear). He was the concrete contractor. And I worked there with them finishing concrete.

VIQUEIRA: What year did they build that building, do you remember? What year did they build the IRS building?

AMBROSI: '29 or '30, Mike.

VIQUEIRA: So you were nineteen years old when you were working construction. Cement finishing was your trade, right?

AMBROSI: Yeah. I was lucky because the foreman liked me, and they also had a job after that was completed at the Commerce building, and I worked on the Commerce building, from there to the Commerce building. And that was going up to 14th Street and then when we came back and built it next

to the Commerce building on 14th Street, was the Labor building at that time. Next to the Labor building going toward the Capitol, now, was the ICC. And then after the ICC, did I say Labor building, Department of Labor?

VIQUEIRA: Yeah. You're talking about Federal Triangle now, right?

AMBROSI: Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah. Everything was construction except the new, at that time, under Hoover's Administration, except the new Reagan building at 14th and Pennsylvania Avenue.

VIQUEIRA: Everything was being built at that time?

AMBROSI: Yes.

VIQUEIRA: MacMillan Commission time, when they built the Federal Triangle. (Pause) The Pershing Square near the Treasury Department.

AMBROSI: Pershing Square, yes, Pershing Square. That's a very interesting job.

VIQUEIRA: Pershing Square is where?

AMBROSI: Pershing Square is at 15th and Pennsylvania Avenue, back at the Treasury building. How did you know I worked there?

VIQUEIRA: You told me once.

AMBROSI: That was during the Depression, Mike, and we were signed up with the Public Works and they hired my godfather Louie deGeorge and myself to be the cement finishers on the sidewalk. And with that, we worked there every day whether we had cement work or not to do. And it was a godsend to tell you the truth.

VIQUEIRA: Was there work, a lot in Washington, during the Depression? Was there construction work?

AMBROSI: There was a lot of construction work, Mike, with the people from all over the country here where there was no work at all. They came in and wouldn't let us work on none of it because we're native Washingtonians and they had to pass a law, the union that... [Pause] on the cement finishers because they worked for the union and anyone that worked on one of these job sites as a laborer could work on it as a journeyman, mechanic, because he was taking the job away from us city folk. It wasn't really that easy with all of the work that was going on and all of these people coming in from all over the country, California, San Francisco, Oklahoma, hey, you couldn't blame them, they were looking for work, too.

[Pause]

I applied for a government job, and they told me then that every state in the union was allowed two people to work for the government. That meant in those days 48 states, 96 people before they hired one from the District.

VIQUEIRA: Oh, I see, this was during the Depression?

AMBROSI: I guess it would be.

[Pause]

St. Joseph's Church...

VIQUEIRA: St. Joseph's Church...

AMBROSI: That's where I was baptized.

VIQUEIRA: St. Joseph's?

AMBROSI: St Joseph's Church, on the corner of Second and C Streets Northeast, that's where I was baptized by Father Felia (?) I remember the name because my mother kept calling him Father Feely. Father Feely. But anyway across the street from St. Joseph's Church was the Dr. Taylor's drugstore on the corner of Second and C. There was another drugstore on the corner of Second and B Northeast. There was another drugstore at the corner of Second and E Northeast. And there was another drugstore at Sixth and E Street Northeast, no, Sixth and B Street Northeast. So I guess the owning a drugstore at the time was considered the thing.

[Pause]

St. Joseph's Church.

VIQUEIRA: Tell me about how you met, the day, tell me about the day that you and grandmom went to get married. And about Father DeCarlo and Holy Rosary.

AMBROSI: You want to put that in there?

VIQUEIRA: Yeah, because it's part of Washington, it's part of the Hill, Italians on Capitol Hill. Just tell me about Holy Rosary, then, or whatever.

AMBROSI: I was not a Holy Rosary person. I was not a Holy... [Pause; background talk]

RUTH AMBROSI (wife): He called me up on Saturday morning, so he wanted to get married, so....

[Laughs]

AMBROSI: You are asking me about something we like to talk about because your grandmother and I got married, I called her up to meet me at Seventh and D Street NW in front of the McCrory's Five and Dime. Now McCrory's Five and Dime, Louie's Five and Dime, and Kresge's Five and Dime were big time to us folks. That was big time. And she met me there and I asked if she had any money, and she said, how much. I said about two dollars. And she reached into her breast and took out two dollars. [Laughs]

VIQUEIRA: Why did you need two dollars?

AMBROSI: Needed two dollars to get a marriage license. And when we went down for the marriage license, they thought we were crazy, the lady, she was 18, and I'm 22 and they asked us all of the particulars, why we wanted to get married, and who was going to marry you. I didn't know we had to go through that procedure. We didn't know who the hell was going to marry us. So we said Father DeCarlo. And I think I saw Father DeCarlo maybe once in my life, and she wrote down Father DeCarlo and that afternoon...

VIQUEIRA: Father DeCarlo was where?

AMBROSI: At the Holy Rosary Church at 3rd and M Street NW.

VIQUEIRA: And so then what'd you do, after you got your marriage license?

AMBROSI: After we got the marriage license, we went to tell my mother about it. Told my mother we were going to get married. Her mother was out of town. And then she called up several friends, she called up several friends and they came over with a handmade cake and a few soft drinks and that was it. Marriage the same as if it were a big ceremony. The same thing.

VIQUEIRA: So you just knocked on Father DeCarlo's door, and he said come on in, yeah, I'll marry you?

AMBROSI: Yes, it so happen, it happened that way. Looked like he was waiting for us.

[Background voice: There was another couple got married...]

It would have been another priest there I'm sure, there was always a priest on call.

VIQUEIRA: But he didn't ask you any questions or he just said, OK?

AMBROSI: Yes, he did. Yes he did. He wanted to know if something was wrong. At first I didn't know what the hell he was talking about.

[Laughter]

RUTH AMBROSI: I knew what he was talking about.

MBROSI: I said no. (Laughs.) That surprised him too. [Laughs.]

Then after he married us, he married us, I had maybe a dollar to give him for the marriage, but he asked for ten dollars, ten dollars because he had to get special dispensation from Baltimore because that was where the archdiocese was located. So we scraped up ten dollars and gave it to him.

Stanton Park in Northeast Washington between Fourth and Sixth and...

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 1

TAPE 1/SIDE 2

AMBROSI:.. Were surrounded by chains I guess to keep us off of the grass. It was only about twelve inches high. And we used to sit on the chains and rock back and forth, but the chains were the thickest chains I've ever seen, I guess each link was a quarter of an inch thick.

[Note: Included on this side of the tape is an additional short interview with Ruth Ambrosi, Tony's wife. It is not included in this transcript.]

END OF INTERVIEW