

OH 1979.01.120

An Interview With
MR. FLOWERS PIERINI

August 15, 1977

Interviewed by
Roberta Miller

Mississippi
Department of Archives and History
and the
Washington County Library System
Oral History Project:
Greenville and Vicinity

OH 1979.1.122

Interviewee: Flowers Pierini

Interviewer: Roberta Miller

Title: An interview with Flowers Pierini, August 15, 1977 /
interviewed by Roberta Miller

Collection Title: Washington County Oral History Project

Scope Note: The Washington County Library System, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens. The project interviews took place between 1976 and 1978. The interviewees included long-term residents of the Greenville-Washington County area in their late 50's and older.

This is an interview with Mr. Flowers Pierini, who lives near the Lake Village-Greenville Bridge in Chicot County, Arkansas, near Lake Village, by Roberta Miller, an Oral Interviewer for the Washington County Library System, and for the Department of Archives, Jackson, Mississippi, August 15, 1977.

Flowers Pierini was born February 17, 1894, in Ancionia, Italy. He came to Longwood, Mississippi, about 1905. The ship went from Italy to New York, and then they came down by train to Sunnyside, Arkansas, and then over to Longwood, Mississippi, about fifteen miles below Greenville, Mississippi. The ship had bunks, made like pigeon holes, and the women slept on one side, and the men on the other. Some of the families who came at that time went to Clarksdale, to Rosedale, and about 15 or 20 families went to Longwood. When they arrived, they were met with wagons and taken to their houses, where there was food for everybody - cheese, bread, meat, wine. The Negro sharecroppers were kind to them, and although the overseer wore two guns, he never used them. A few families did not like Longwood, and after two or three years, when they could make enough money, they returned to Italy. Flowers Pierini had an uncle, Mario Pierini, who got so scared because the frogs croaked so loud, that he caught a train, and they never heard from him again. The families who came at that time

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were Fava, Menari, Guidoni, and Cicarelli.

Mr. Merritt Williams, the owner of Longwood Plantation, although he had a manager, used to ride his beautiful white horse over the place every day. With the sun shining on his white horse and his white beard, and on the gold rings he wore, the Italians thought he looked like a god, and they called him "Signor". According to Flowers Pierini, he was very kind to them. He would send barrels of wine around that came in on the train from New Orleans. And if anyone got real sick in the night, he would have the "Cannonball" flagged, and send them up to Greenville to the doctor.

They had plenty to eat, frogs, crayfish, fish from Lake Washington, rabbits, squirrels, coon, opossum, deer, chicken and pigs. Many of them owned cows.

Travel was by oxen, and mule-driven wagons, mostly, throughout the countryside.

The interpreter for their group was named Bundini and for another group was named Roselli. (Mr. Roselli's descendants live in Greenville, and now call themselves "Rosella".) The Oltremari families who now live in Greenville are descended from the Oltremari's who first came to Rosedale.

They did not make much money at first, but they saved every penny they could, and when they were able, moved to places where they could run stores, open blacksmith shops, which were much in demand, and some started dairy farms near

Greenville, where they were very much needed, and some soon became managers of plantations.

Flowers Pierini lived at Longwood for three years, then moved to the Plum Ridge Farm, near Greenville, owned by Mr. George B. Wheatley. Mr. Wheatley was married to a Miss Yerger, and this place had been given to them by Mr. Yerger when they were married. It took two weeks to move from Longwood, a distance of around sixteen miles. The roads were so bad, the wagons could only pull light loads. They farmed on Plum Ridge and his father ran a blacksmith shop.

Mr. Pierini soon started working for Dr. J. D. Smythe, as a manager, and then managed Locust Plantation for Dr. D. C. Montgomery for twelve years (1920-1932). This was a 650 acre place, mostly in cultivation. He then moved over to manage Mr. Nathan Goldstein's place, Lakeport, in Chicot County, Arkansas.

While managing Locust Plantation, Mr. Pierini also managed another place for Dr. Montgomery, which was named Forkland, and was near Winterville, Mississippi, and also close to Metcalfe. There were 35 mules on Locust, and 110 on Forkland. When the 1927 Flood was imminent, Mr. Pierini sent the young men on the places to work on the levee, which was the custom all up and down the river. He took the mules from Forkland and brought them to Locust, and put them all on the levee. Locust was very close to the levee, but Forkland was some distance away. Some of the people on the place

went to the levee when the protection levee blew out. Some stayed in their houses. He found nine people who had drowned. They were hung up on fences or in trees. Some fell in canals when they were wading to the levee and drowned. On knolls which stayed above the water, horses and mules would gather, and sometimes the knolls would just disintegrate and fall in. Animals got so hungry that they would eat the lumber on the houses or barns.

The Pierini family stayed in the old Montgomery house on Locust Plantation, which was very high off the ground. The John H. Bowen family were there, George Peets, and Gordon House. They all went to the levee for their shots. Boats would come with supplies, and you could go down and pick out food for your plantation. Flowers Pierini's father had made boats for them, out of cottonwood.

The camps on the levee which housed the tenants from the plantations stretched for seven miles down the levee from Greenville.

After the water went down, the Red Cross fixed up the houses, and they were able to make a crop. They just threw the seed in the ground, and made about half a crop. Mr. Pierini was paid about \$75.00 to \$80.00 a month as a manager, with a house furnished. In 1932 he went to Mr. Goldstein in Arkansas for about the same price. He then bought about 38 acres of land and a store. He farms, and his wife keeps the store that they own, which is near the Lake Village Bridge.

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In those days, Mr. Pierini says, you controlled everything yourself. There was always some fighting and cutting on the plantations. Captain Frank Merritt was the Sheriff of Chicot County at that time, and he came out to the place after Mr. Pierini arrived. He talked to the people and said, "If anything goes wrong out here, I'll come out, and it'll look like someone shot a cannon! I'll mow you down like toad frogs!" So there was no trouble.

Mr. Pierini says he has had a good life; that he has done what he liked to do all his life, which is to see things grow. He likes the U.S.A. It is his home. In Italy when he left, you had to give half of everything you made to the Government. You could not make but seven or eight cents a day working in the fields, with only a piece of bread for lunch. So he feels good about his life in the Mississippi and Arkansas Delta.

Mr. Pierini was not required to take out naturalization papers until 1966.

On Sunnyside Plantation in Arkansas, which was one of the largest plantations in this part of the country, there was a large colony of Italians, and there was a dummy train to take them over the plantation. The tenants went to school and to church on this dummy train. There was also a large cemetery, which is still there, and which is still used by the Italian people who live in the county. About 750 people of Italian

descent are buried there. There were also some buried at Longwood. At Longwood, there was a small building used for a school and for a church. The priest would come. The Mascagni family, who lived at Longwood, with the help of Charlie Eubanks, a black man, built this church and a school.

Mr. Pierini is married to the former Annie Ventura. He had four children. Carrie and Ned are deceased. Laura is married to Henry Mascagni, of Greenville, and Robert is manager of the Lake Village bridge at this time.

(Note by Interviewer: The name of the cemetery is "Hyner", and it is ten miles from Lake Village.)

(End of Interview)

(Typed by Alice C. Nagel)

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Alice C. Nagel

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