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Interviewee:

Sybil F. (Mrs. R. P. [Renato]) Casselli

Interviewer:

Elbert R. Hilliard

Title:

An interview with Sybil F. (Mrs. R. P. [Renato]) Casselli,
November 9, 1990 / interviewed by Elbert R. Hilliard

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**Interview with Mrs. R. P. Caselli
Nitta Yuma, Mississippi
Elbert R. Hilliard
November 9, 1990**

It's Friday, November 9, 1990, and I'm Elbert Hilliard and I'm in the home of Mrs. R. P. Caselli of Nitta Yuma, Mississippi. And, Mrs. Caselli, we've known one another a long time, and I regret the fact that I never took the time years ago to come and interview you and Mr. Caselli.

And I appreciate the fact that you have assembled some of the family papers here and we're going to go through those and talk about those, and I would like to talk a little about the family history and you have started out here by showing me a photograph of a building which stood in Jackson, Mississippi, and I'd like for you to tell me about this photograph. I believe this building stood on the grounds of the present University of Mississippi Medical Center, and the building perhaps dates back to the time when the state mental institution was located there. Would you tell us about the buildings and your interest in the columns and what happened to the columns?

Mrs. Caselli: Well, the picture is just before they tore it down and we went to Jackson, and we saw them tearing it down.

Mr. Hilliard: This was you and Mr. Caselli?

Mrs. Caselli: Uh huh, yes, Renato, and we just had to stop; we were into (?),....and I wanted some columns for my house.

Mr. Hilliard: Let me interrupt you here and ask you when did you all build your home?

Mrs. Caselli: We started it in 1935, and I guess we finished it in '40. It took a long time because we were in debt right after the Depression and then the war came on. We stayed in debt, in fact, until the Second World War. So we just ----

Mr. Hilliard: Where had you all lived before you built the house?

Mrs. Caselli: We lived in the little cottage that was over here and when the division, Mrs. Crump's, it was Mrs. Crump's cottage.....and when we divided Mrs. Crump's land and property when she died, she had no heirs, and it was left to the Georges, Phelps, and Casellis./

Mr. Hilliard: Now, Mrs. Crump was Mr. Caselli's

Mrs. Caselli: Aunt.

Mr. Hilliard: Aunt, all right.

Mrs. Caselli: She was Mrs. Caselli's younger child, younger sister, and she had no children. She had married Dr. Crump from whom she had inherited a great deal of property because he was well known.

Mr. Hilliard: Now, when you say she was Mrs. Caselli's younger-----

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Mrs. Caselli: Sister.

Mr. Hilliard: Younger sister, so Mrs. Crump was a Phelps.

Mrs. Caselli: That's right.

Mr. Hilliard: And Mr. Caselli's mother was a Phelps, and they were sisters.

Mrs. Caselli: Mrs. Caselli, Renato's mother, we all called her "Aunt Mamie," was the oldest, and the next was "Uncle Harry," Henry Phelps' father.

Mrs. Caselli: And the next was Nannie George. She was the second daughter and the third child.

Mr. Hilliard: Now did she marry Mr. Peter George?

Mrs. Caselli: Yeah, who was the Scotchman.

Mr. Hilliard: And their son was Alonzo George?

Mrs. Caselli: Alonzo George. Alonzo Jefferson George; he was named A. J. George.

Mr. Hilliard: We've gotten away from the columns a little bit, but I want to put that on hold and we'll come back to the columns because I don't want to forget that, but to get the family history pinned down here a little bit, your late husband's name was Renato---

Mrs. Caselli: Piola, P-i-o-l-a

Mr. Hilliard: P-i-o-l-a Caselli

Mrs. Caselli: C-a-s-e-l-l-i

Mrs. Caselli: In Europe, it is Piola-Caselli, the whole name, and all of our children were named Piola-Caselli, but we never used it because of the American---we used the last name.

Mr. Hilliard: You used the given name, and you all Anglicized it to use the Piola for "P," Renato P., R. P. Caselli. Mr. Caselli-- can you give me off the top of your head, from your memory - can you give me his birthdate?

Mrs. Caselli: Uh huh. February third, 1900.

Mr. Hilliard: February 3, 1900. Now his father was a native of Italy, and his father was also named--

Mrs. Caselli: Renato Piola-Caselli.

Mr. Hilliard: Renato Piola-Caselli Now his mother was ---

Mrs. Caselli: Mary Phelps Caselli

Mr. Hilliard: Mary Phelps Caselli, and Mrs. Mary Phelps Caselli was the daughter of Dr. and Mrs. A. J. Phelps

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Mrs. Caselli: Dr. and Mrs.; uh huh, Alonzo Jefferson Phelps and Mary Vick Phelps

Mr. Hilliard: Dr. Phelps' wife was Mary Vick..

Mrs. Caselli: Vick, the daughter of John Wesley Vick.

Mr. Hilliard: So that ties the Nitta Yuma, the town of Nitta Yuma, ties it into the Vick family, and Nitta Yuma then was one of the early plantations of the Vick family that founded Vicksburg. Is that correct?

Mrs. Caselli: That's right. Uh huh. Now, Newitt Vick, I have Burwell Vick's. . . she was a descendant of Burwell Vick. You know Burwell was Newitt Vick's brother.

Mr. Hilliard: Who was a descendant of Burwell Vick?

Mrs. Caselli: Mary Vick Phelps Caselli.

Mr. Hilliard: Let's stop now, and let's check it and see if we are picking up good.

INTERRUPTION

Mr. Hilliard: We'll continue here, and the next question I would ask would be when did or how did Mr. Caselli's parents meet? Here we have a lady from Nitta Yuma marrying a gentleman from Italy. That's an interesting story.

Mrs. Caselli: In 1895, they had a World's Fair in Chicago, and he was appointed from the Italian king, and they were under the... -

Mr. Hilliard: Monarchy.

Mrs. Caselli: Monarchy, at that time. He was appointed to bring the exhibit to the World's Fair in Chicago.

Mr. Hilliard: The Italian exhibit.

Mrs. Caselli: Uh huh. And she was - they spent - the girls, the Phelps girls and Uncle Harry spent most of their time on the way back and forth to Washington and Chicago, and they were in school in places like that.

And she was in Chicago visiting. I have forgotten who she was visiting, some of the family, and she met him at the Fair. They had some function there, and she met him there and she stayed on for ... You know, years ago, you didn't visit three or four days like we do now. You visited three or four weeks or three or four months.

Mr. Hilliard: Now we've cut it down to about three or four minutes, haven't we?

Mrs. Caselli: Isn't it the truth? That's so true. We live so fast. But anyway, she was very smitten with him, and he was with her. And I have some letters. I don't think they are in there, of Mrs. Crump's diary, and she kept this - the only part we copied was about them falling in love with each other and writing. The father and the dowry, he didn't have any money, and, oh, they had to go through so much and then they had to get - so they did not get married until 19-- - Let's see, Mary was born in '95-'97. They married in '96. He went back to Italy and then came back over here and they married here in Nitta Yuma.

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Mr. Hilliard: Now we always, growing up, I remember we always respectfully referred to Mr. Caselli as "Count Caselli" and was his father also called "Count Caselli," was he a member of the nobility?

Mrs. Caselli: Oh yes. That's where he got his commission, you see, through--- At that time, the royal family appointed all of the officers, and so he was appointed. He was in the army when he came over here to bring the exhibit.

Mr. Hilliard: Now do you have photographs of . . .

Mrs. Caselli: Papa?

Mr. Hilliard: Your father-in-law?

Mrs. Caselli: Yes, I put some in there.

Mr. Hilliard: And your mother-in-law? You have photographs of them?

Mrs. Caselli: I think, I think there is a picture of Aunt Mamie in there. If not, I have another in there I can give you.

Mr. Hilliard: How many children did they have?

Mrs. Caselli: They had three. Mary Piola-Caselli was born in '95 [97], and Renato was born in 1900, and Theresa was born about four and a half years later, 1904 or 05.

Mr. Hilliard: All right, what became of Mr. Caselli's sister and ..

Mrs. Caselli: Mary never married. When Mrs. Caselli decided in 1919 after Renato had been to the war, and you know they sent fifteen and sixteen- year-old children to the war - they had gotten down to so few - and so he . . .

Mr. Hilliard: Now this is your late husband, Mr. Caselli, who actually was called into service. I ran across . . .

Mrs. Caselli: No, he was not called. They joined. Everybody had to join.

Mr. Hilliard: This was during the First World War?

Mrs. Caselli: Uh huh.

Mr. Hilliard: I ran across something in an old newspaper sometime ago. I think I made a copy to put in the file on Nitta Yuma, and it was a reference to Mr. Renato Caselli, Sr., Count Caselli, Sr. having been killed during the First World War. Is that correct?

Mrs. Caselli: No.

Mr. Hilliard: That must have been a . . .

Mrs. Caselli: That must have been an error.

Mr. Hilliard: That must have been a misprint then.

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Mrs. Caselli: Because he was not - he didn't die until 1948.

Mr. Hilliard: That's interesting. I will try to find that and send you a copy. That may have been a false account that came from the battlefield then that was in error.

Mrs. Caselli: It probably was. It probably was. But he went in ---Papa, was --- Renato's father was commanding the bersaglieri, which is the king's own guard, it is the (?).

Mr. Hilliard: Can you spell that for us?

Mrs. Caselli: I have it in here.

Mr. Hilliard: It's in the material here. O. K. We'll go on, and we can find that then, and---

Mrs. Caselli: Yes, it's in here. We have it in the papers.

Mr. Hilliard: Well tell us then about his role then- Count Caselli Sr.'s role in the military.

Mrs. Caselli: Well, he was - as I said - he was the count and he was in the bersaglieri, and as years went by, he went up further and further, and when he retired he was a general of the corps, the army corps. And this thing up here with the family coat of arms -

Mr. Hilliard: This is a ---

Mrs. Caselli: It is an interesting thing, I think. -

Mr. Hilliard: Would you call this a plate or a platter?

Mrs. Caselli: It's just a - you see, this says "General," here it is--

Mr. Hilliard: Yes, General Renato dei Conti [the Count] Piola-Caselli. This is dated 14 of November 1932.

Mrs. Caselli: This is when he retired from the army.

Mr. Hilliard: That is a magnificent ---

Mrs. Caselli: These are the officers who were under him at the time. I've never seen one like this.

Mr. Hilliard: What do you call this? This is a --- do you call it a--

Mrs. Caselli: We just call it a platter. We have used it as a platter, we've used it---

Mr. Hilliard: It is beautiful.

Mrs. Caselli: Isn't it beautiful!

Mr. Hilliard: Well, that is a touching -

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Mrs. Caselli: It has his---all of these and then something---what is that? Bari. Oh, that's the command in Bari. That's where he was; I have the pictures here of Bari in all these pictures. I think---

Mr. Hilliard: I know that is a wonderful family memento that you all will always treasure and will want to keep in your family.

Mrs. Caselli: Oh, we do; we love it, and Renato loved it so. He loved it. I have the pictures in here with Papa and ---

Mr. Hilliard: All right. So, your late husband, Mr. Caselli, also saw service in World War I as a young teenager.

Mrs. Caselli: That's right. He was seventeen when he went. And they were in the Caporetto retreat there along the Piave River, and they were there. And another thing, Victor Emmanuel was king at that time, had become king - Victor Emmanuel No. One, and he sent his son, Umberto, who became the king for a few - thirty days, I think, and then he had to retire because of Mussolini. Papa was ---

Mr. Hilliard: Now, Mussolini came to power in 1922, I believe, that was about when he came to power.

Mrs. Caselli: Papa was the head of the ---and so he, Umberto and Papa and Renato, Papa took Renato and Umberto and trained them in the army. That's the reason we have so many pictures of Umberto and Papa.

Mr. Hilliard: I'm ashamed to say I have not kept up with my world history. What happened to Umberto? I have not gone back---

Mrs. Caselli: Umberto, Umberto No. One died.

Mr. Hilliard: Is this the one who was a friend of your husband's?

Mrs. Caselli: No, this was his father, who Papa guarded, the bersaglieri guarded him for about ten or twelve years. And then, Umberto came and Mussolini was pushing and carrying on, and Papa was getting older and he was disgusted, and he didn't want to---he didn't believe in it and he kind of drew back. He wouldn't - Mussolini wanted to appoint him army, you know, over the whole - what he was going to take over - and Papa told him that he was too old and he didn't feel like he - and so he retired from the Army. But Umberto became king, and he was king for I think he said for thirty-one days. And he was such a nice fellow.

Mr. Hilliard: This was Umberto the second?

Mrs. Caselli: Uh huh, Renato and I went to, we were in Rome, and we were going to Portugal. He lives in Esterol (sp. ?), right ---

Mr. Hilliard: Is he still living?

Mrs. Caselli: No, he died about three years ago, and they buried him up at Savoia (sp. ?) where the ---

Mr. Hilliard: But you all were able to visit with him --

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Mrs. Caselli: Yes, we visited with him. Had a nice visit with him. And he had planned then to come to the United States. They had asked him to speak at Baylor University, but his daughter got sick and they had, he and his wife had trouble - and they separated, so he never did come, but he was such a nice, fine fellow. I enjoyed that visit so much.

Mr. Hilliard: Let me ask now then. When did Mr. Caselli, your husband, when did he come to the United States?

Mrs. Caselli: When---after the war, he - this thing in here, I reckon I put it in here - he had to either be a priest - a nobleman didn't do it--- there were very few things the noblemen - usually they had enough money they didn't have to, but they didn't have any money left you see at that time. He had to be a priest. He had to go in the Italian army, or I've forgotten what the other---three choices, they were not good--- So Papa and Aunt Mamie, Renato's mother - I've always called her Aunt Mamie, I'm sorry, but anyway, they decided to send him over here to farm. He was, that was in 1919, he came over here. So they wrote to friends in Philadelphia and Washington. They were kin to the Blairs who owned Blair House in Washington, and Renato came to Washington and stayed at Blair House one summer to learn - to polish off his English - but the Blairs were living there. That was before, you see ---. Violet Blair was Mrs. Caselli's first cousin on the Clark side of the family. And so, he stayed there, and he didn't like Washington and he didn't want to, so then they decided to put him in the--- near the tractor business so he would learn---they were beginning to use tractors down here, although they never used it on Nitta Yuma Plantation, never used them. So he went to Detroit and worked in a factory to learn about - just to learn something.

Mr. Hilliard: The mechanical processes of tractors.

Mrs. Caselli: Uh huh, and he stayed there two years and then he went to---back to, went to Philadelphia, and was in the McFadden Cotton Company for a couple of years buying cotton and then they thought he had enough and around and then he came down here in 1921.

Mr. Hilliard: Well, here we have a case of a gentleman who had never been to the South.

Mrs. Caselli: That's right.

Mr. Hilliard: I suppose this was his first trip to the South. His first actual eye witness, his first account of witnessing a plantation firsthand, but yet he has received some preparation from the standpoint of being prepared for the coming mechanization and the buying of cotton.

Mrs. Caselli: As the family has said many times, they started him at the top, hoping that he would stay there, but it was not -- you know buying cotton is no way to start. You have to start at the---

Mr. Hilliard: You can buy cotton a lot easier than you can raise cotton.

Mrs. Caselli: Well, you can't buy cotton and then run a plantation. And he knew by then that he wanted to come here. This---you know who Harris Dickson was?

Mr. Hilliard: He was a writer.

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Mrs. Caselli: Uh huh.

Mr. Hilliard: Yes.

Mrs. Caselli: Well, he came up here. We had high water one year, and Judge Dickson - we had known him for years, this was after we married -

Mr. Hilliard: About what year did you all marry?

Mrs. Caselli: 1934.

Mr. Hilliard: O. K.

Mrs. Caselli: And Judge---this was about 1935 or 36. We were real close to Judge. We loved him, and his daughter married Joe Dockery, this good friend of ours and we were just real close to him. So Judge came up here, and they stopped running the trains about a week after he got here, and he stayed six weeks. We had more fun, I never had so much fun in my----

Mr. Hilliard: At that time, were you all living in your new house down there?

Mrs. Caselli: Yes, but we didn't, the upstairs - he was staying upstairs

Mr. Hilliard: It was unfinished?

Mrs. Caselli: Unfinished. It was a sight! But it didn't bother him. He had the time of his life talking to everybody around, and so he wrote this and there are so many cute little things in there that I want you to take it with you.

Mr. Hilliard: We may have this for the Archives, then. Is that right?

Mrs. Caselli: Uh huh, yes.

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Mr. Hilliard: This is entitled "The Making of an American Farmer."

Mrs. Caselli: And he had known Mrs. Caselli all her---for years and years and the Caselli family. I haven't read it the last few days, but there is so much in there that I think you will enjoy, and so much of the old times, how things were at that time. We adored Judge. He was so...

Mr. Hilliard: This looks most interesting, and I look forward to sitting down and reading it in detail.

Mrs. Caselli: I think you'll love it. This is the family tree. I've got the family tree.

Mr. Hilliard: That's wonderful.

Mrs. Caselli: Then, I don't know whether you want that or not, but here is something Frank [Alhgren] wrote about, I don't know what it was. I'll put that in there. There are little things in there---

Mr. Hilliard: Now let me get back now in sequence here. When did you first meet Mr. Caselli?

Mrs. Caselli: Oh, goodness. I don't know.

Mr. Hilliard: Now, you grew up in Rolling Fork?

Mrs. Caselli: Yeah, but we used to see 'em pass.

Mr. Hilliard: Tell me who you were and who your parents were.

Mrs. Caselli: I was -- my mother was Sybil Clements, the youngest daughter of Dr. Early Coleman Clements and Ann Foote Clements.

Mr. Hilliard: So you were named for your mother and Foote is F-O-O-T-E, so this probably ties you all in with Shelby Foote and does it tie you back in with Governor Henry Foote?

Mrs. Caselli: Yes. They are all the same family. And I have a family history that Emma Catherine Clements has written. It is an interesting history if you need to use some of it. I'll give you that if you want it. But I didn't put it in here because I thought this was more---... you know, when you get all the family trees and everything, it overpowers you, but these three little things I want to tell this. Do you know who Michael Grehl was?

Mr. Hilliard: Well, let's see, this is Michael Grehl.

Mrs. Caselli: Grehl.

Mr. Hilliard: Grehl. It looks like G-r-e-h-l. I'm not familiar with him.

Mrs. Caselli: He was editor. He followed Alghren as editor of the Commercial Appeal, and he was editor until about five or six years ago. About ten years ago, he developed cancer and he stayed on and on, but he came to see us once--- it's a--- he was smart, smart, smart, and such a nice fellow.

Mr. Hilliard: Well this is a wonderful article, and this is an article that was printed in the Commercial Appeal on July 6, 1958, and it is an article on Renato Caselli ---

Mrs. Caselli: And there's Renato---

Mr. Hilliard: And there's a photograph - this is a great article; this is great.

Mrs. Caselli: And I think you will get a lot out of that because he was such a good interviewer. He ---

Mr. Hilliard: This is great. When did you first come to Nitta Yuma? Back in those days, uh ---

Mrs. Caselli: I used to ride up to Nitta Yuma with Uncle Green to see Dr. Crump and Mrs. Crump. I learned to drive a car. Uncle Green was my--- his brother married my Aunt Annie, Mama's older sister, and the Baggetts are all kin to us. And when I was about --- Uncle Green lived at Egremont with us, lived down at Egremont. We lived in one house, and he lived in the other.

Mr. Hilliard: Now, when you say Uncle Green, is this Green Baggett?

Mrs. Caselli: Yeah. Uh huh.

Mr. Hilliard: O. K., O. K.

Mrs. Caselli: This was our Uncle Green Baggett, and "Little Green" was named for him. "Little Green" was five when Uncle Green died, so Uncle Green took Frances Perry, Earle Perry's wife, and Newt Baggett who lived in Indianola, and Will Baggett who died in the War, and Green and they moved to Egremont and Mama lived up here and Uncle Green lived down there...both houses are still there. They are all falling down, but anyway, we lived down there together, and Uncle Green used to try to manage the boys and Mama was a little bitty thing about this tall and that was---but we did have grand help. Uncle Green had Emma and Sam, and we had Aunt Ann and John. We didn't have, we didn't have any household ---

Mr. Hilliard: These were your black servants that you have just named here?

Mrs. Caselli: Uh huh. Uh huh. They lived with us. Then after they died, their children were there. And so, we lived down there, and these boys just nearly ran Uncle Green crazy. He sent 'em to Bell Buckle and sent Frances to Abbington, Virginia, to school. And she'd come home in the summer and stay with us because it was not decent for her to stay down there, with all these men, although they were her brothers. But they - and then finally, I got to where I was driving---learning to drive the car, and we'd drive up here to see Dr. and Mrs. Crump, but I never saw Renato except just to see him pass by because he was just too old.

Mr. Hilliard: Now, at this time, at this time, you were not related to the Crumps were you by kin?

Mrs. Caselli: No, no---

Mr. Hilliard: These were just interesting people to visit, is that it?

Mrs. Caselli: Dr. Crump and --- well, we didn't visit them, we just rode up here... Uncle Green would go over to the--- we would drive to the store--- just somewhere for us to go. You see, he would ride up to school, drive the car up to the school house and then Annie Clements and Elizabeth Clements, Elizabeth Shropshire, Ed Shropshire's wife, and Edna, my sister, and I would get in the car with Uncle Green, and we would go to Meeks' Drug Store and get ice cream.

Mr. Hilliard: This was in Rolling Fork?

Mrs. Caselli: Rolling Fork. And then we would drive somewhere, go out all over Glen Allan and just everywhere. We didn't come up here all the time. We went to Cary and Fidler--- Uncle Green just was so good to us. And that's the first time I saw Renato, but he was too old. I just didn't dare ---you know---but the first time, I think I met him, was in Rolling Fork. I think the first time I really met him. At somebody's house, I can't even remember where it was. And then years later, five or six years later, I went to Vicksburg to where--- I was working; I had finished high school, and that summer I had worked for the Red Cross in Rolling Fork and then I went on back to school and when I finished school I got a job with the Red Cross and I decided ---I worked a long time up in Greenville, but I didn't like it. I don't know, I just didn't like it...six or eight months, and so they moved me to Vicksburg. Then the WPA came in, and the Red Cross had to give so many--- well they did, they gave all of us

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who were young to the WPA, so I handled the WPA in Vicksburg for about a year and a half, and then I met Renato at parties and things down there in Vicksburg, and that's when we started going together. And that's when, and we married---Joe and Madelyn married in February

Mr. Hilliard: Now this would be Joe---

Mrs. Caselli: Dockery, from Dockery, Mississippi.

Mrs. Caselli: Yes, and Renato and I married in June.

Mr. Hilliard: What was the day of your marriage?

Mrs. Caselli: June 18, 1934.

Mr. Hilliard: June 18, 1934. Well, Mrs. Caselli, as I told you earlier, I got off to a late start this morning for which I apologize.

Mrs. Caselli: Well, that's all right.

Mr. Hilliard: And I think we will stop here since this brings us to the point where you and Mr. Caselli married. It takes what about fifteen minutes to get to Rolling Fork?

Mrs. Caselli: Yeah, it does.

Mr. Hilliard: How long does it take to get from Rolling Fork or from here, Nitta Yuma, to Vicksburg?

Mrs. Caselli: About an hour and ten minutes.

Mr. Hilliard: O. K.

Mr. Hilliard: Yes.

Mrs. Caselli: Well, he came up here. We had high water one year, and Judge Dickson - we had known him for years, this was after we married.

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