Narrator: Charles Merzian
Interviewer: John W. Tedrick
Date and Place: November 1, 2001, Mr. Merzian's home, [redacted]

John W. Tedrick: I am John W. Tedrick, this is the 1st of November 2000 and 1,I'm interviewing Charles Merzian at Fairview Heights, Illinois, Mr. Merzian could you state your full name and spell it please.

Charles Merzian: Charles Merzian, M e r z i a n

Mr. Tedrick: Thank you

Mr. Tedrick: Mr. Merzian, you used to live in Lincoln Park, could you tell me about living in that area?

Mr. Merzian: It was Lincoln Place

Mr. Tedrick: Thank you, Lincoln Place

Mr. Merzian: I was born there actually in our home on Chestnut Street and my sister also almost five years later we were both born at home and at the same address on Chestnut Street. We grew up there and both of us finished our high school education and graduated from the local Granite City high school and then after I graduated I joined the Army and was gone for almost two years. Upon returning I went to college at the University of Illinois. At about the same time my parents moved from Granite City from the Lincoln Place address across the river to St. Louis and then we lived there for quite some number of years. All of our growing up years through high school was at Lincoln Place and it was great, we loved Lincoln Place and we still do today.

Mr. Tedrick: What year did you graduate from high school?

Mr. Merzian: 1946

Mr. Tedrick: What were some of the things, about going to high school at Lincoln Place that stick in your mind at the Granite City area?

Mr. Merzian: Well, in high school I was on the wrestling team in high school and I was captain of the wrestling team my senior year and I was also wresting state champion in 1945 and 1946 I was also president of my senior graduating class, which were nice memories because a few years back when Granite City put in their sports hall of fame I was inducted in the original class of those who were honored to be in the hall of fame on the initial induction period which was a nice honor which we enjoyed. But, growing up in Lincoln Place was in my mind rather unique because in Lincoln Place we had quite a few different nationalities and in all cases, almost in every case of those who were in my age or a little bit older and a little bit younger, we all spoke the native tongue of our parents and basically we were the first generation Americans and our parents didn't speak any English so we all grew up speaking our native tongues and in the growing up process we learned to speak a few words of the next guy, the guy across the street or the guy next door and we would get the greetings of their languages and that was always fun. But, those are the kind of memories that we had, we had six or seven different nationalities there and it made it a little extra spice of, spice of life, and a lot of jokes and stories go with that. So in that respect it was nice. We grew up in the depression years. We didn't know we were poor, but we were poor. My family was on relief as most of the other families were on relief. It was something we did not understand except that we went up and they gave us free food and the packages were stamped not to be sold because these were part of the government packages. We did not necessarily understand what that was about but we were participants in the program. But we also had a very unique center there called the club house and that was our gathering center it had a full size gymnasium and auditorium and small ball field, we couldn't play baseball there, it was to small for baseball so we played softball. They had rings and travelers and few other things of that nature. That was our gathering center, before school we went there, before we

became school age we went there. Nobody said anything it's just that that's where everybody went. Whoever had the baseball or the ball, softball usually, and the bat, they got to be captain or they got to pitch because baseballs or softballs and bats were very few and whoever owned one got to pick his choice and that was always full of controversy. But that's the way the teams were also selected and during the summer especially as I remember that's where we were every day. As we got a little older though we would still gather down there or on the empty corner lot that was across the street. We'd bring some twigs and trees and things of that nature and play games like hide and seek and twenty one and some of the other games but we all seem to remember that the factory whistle would blow at nine o'clock and at nine o'clock regardless of what we were playing, I mean everybody took off for home, you didn't see that many clocks on the walls and in the windows we didn't have wrist watches, but everybody recognized the factory whistle blew at nine and usually by the time it stop blowing we were all at home and it was just kind of an automatic thing. Those were some of the things. The club house was open all year round we played a lot of basketball there. Even as short as I am I played a lot of basketball and could handle the basketball pretty fair for a short guy. If others don't mention it of course that's where Andy Phillips grew up, Andy Phillips was an All-American who played for the University of Illinois and played for several professional teams as well as coached some professional teams and you could see Andy in there almost every day especially during the summer when it was not the basketball season. That same club house was a center for a non-denominational Sunday school. I don't know who sponsored it some church from the downtown area sponsored it, but I don't know who. But I don't recall any driving force as far as becoming a member of this church or that church, it was just kind of a Bible Sunday school. That was every Sunday and that gymnasium, I can't remember how many classes, but there was many circles of kids of different

ages. I do remember some of the staff being from Lincoln Place, some of the older kids and probably we had some from the church that sponsored the Sunday school and we would have plays and Christmas carol plays and things of that nature. I remember, not initially, not in the initial years, but at a later time when they put in a ping-pong table and that's where we first learned to play ping-pong. That was a great sport, we all enjoyed that immensely. You'd have to wait a long time to get to play because you'd have to wait your turn and those who won got to play again, so you'd have to wait till the loser was put out. That was a great thing, but because of that quite a few of the kids got be pretty adept at the game. Another game that they had at Lincoln Place also was horseshoes. A lot of the older kids, the kids might have been my age, but bigger, I had great difficulty with horseshoes because I was so little I couldn't throw the twenty feet or what ever the regulation distance was between the pegs. I had a difficult time with that. Another thing that usually happened down there is that because we had such ethnic diversity, I mean everybody was, most of the kids were called by their ethnic first names and we never thought anything of that it was just kind of a natural thing to do because that's what their names was and that's what we would call them. But any way, those were in general some of the things that happened in the younger days in Lincoln Place.

Mr. Tedrick: That's some interesting times there. According to some of the readings that I have done, they talk about the club house being a place where [people] learned what it was like to be an American and those type things. Do you have any memories of that?

Mr. Merzian: Well, in a sense to become Americanized you know, it brings to my mind a little bit more about our parents and that age because all of our parents in most cases spoke very little English and in some cases none, and consequently they would have, I don't remember them having any kind of English for foreigners class which they do today, in today's language that's

what it's normally referred to, English for foreigners, or English for a secondary grade, secondary language.

Mr. Tedrick: Yes, ESL

Mr. Merzian: I remember more so the citizenship classes for immigrants like my parents and most of the parents in those days and what happened, my mother went to these classes. I remember one of the teachers, her name was Pauline Cox, she, I have to refer to her as an American woman, she was not [an immigrant]. Anyway, she taught these classes and she was good friends with my mother and dad. She taught these classes and they would go once or twice a week, I can't remember exactly their schedule, but they would go once or twice a week and they had lessons and would learn about some history of the US and the forms, the different forms of the government and that type of thing. Those classes apparently didn't go very fast because of the language barrier, Pauline Cox didn't speak anything but English. So when they would take the questions, sometimes it would take a long time to understand what the question was like and what it had meant. My mother spoke, besides English, four languages, she spoke Armenian, Turkish, Greek, and French, and Spanish, so she spoke five languages, I guess. So sometimes she would interpret for them in order to get the points across and so take kind of a double interpretation. Because a lot of the, especially some of the Bulgarians and Hungarians, also because of the Turkish dominance in their country, a big issue, they to spoke Turkish, sometimes Turkish became the common language for the Balkan area countries. That was a unique class. My mother spoke English very well even when I was a kid and I could never understand, cause I knew a lot of the other older people and they would have, I can't remember for sure, but once or twice a year, they would have a group go up in front of a judge and see if they could pass their citizenship examinations. So time after time I was always wondering I said, "How come my

mother doesn't get her citizenship classes?" My father was not a citizen yet either but my father had great difficulty with the English language, but my mother didn't, but yet she couldn't apparently pass these tests. Well, I wasn't aware at the time, but she didn't even take them. So there was no passing, since she didn't take the examination. But then some time in 1943 or 44, my father took his citizenship exam and he passed. An interesting little story about that is that my father didn't speak very much English. At the time for the day of his appearance before the judge, they didn't do this group thing, I mean they questioned everybody individually, you'd appear, your class would appear in front of the judge, but the judge would ask each person several questions to see if they knew enough about the American government and how it works to see if they were eligible to pass. When the date came for my father's class to go up there he was very, very ill, he had a terrible, terrible cold, this Pauline Cox that was their teacher went to the judge and said, "When you get to this Bedros Merzian, (Bedros in English is Peter) when you get to him he is very, very ill, if you could just kind of treat him lightly, you know, they would appreciate that." The judge took that into account, when my father appeared in front of the judge, the judge asked him, "If the president dies, who takes his place?" and my father says, "The second president." and he says, "Ok you pass."

Mr. Tedrick: It seems like there was an awful lot of respect there for the work your family had done.

Mr. Merzian: Then later on I found out, I'm in high school, there are people going through the neighborhood and going to the schools, I was in high school so my sister still would have been in grade school, there are investigators coming around and they're asking about me and my sister, they're asking the neighbors about my parents. What had happened is when my mother came to this country, she actually came from Istanbul, from Istanbul, she went to Marseille France where

my father had relatives. When she came here she was going to marry my dad. From Marseille she went to Mexico, there she had a relative in Juarez Mexico. She went to Juarez and she stayed with her relative for several months and that's how she learned to speak Spanish. Then when it was time for her to come to the US she had no visa, she couldn't get in. She was going to sneak across the border and come to Granite City. When she made the arrangements to come at the gathering point there were so many people who were going to cross the Rio Grande, and get into the US, my mother said, "No, there's too many people, I'm not going to cross with this group." In essence she crossed, I guess, a few days later and came to Granite City and she married my dad. So she in essence became a wetback. My mother was an illegal immigrant and that's the reason why she never went to the class. She went to the class, but she never appeared in front of the judge, because she was here illegally. So when my father became a citizen, then she declared herself as an illegal immigrant. She went to the immigration office and said, "I'm here illegally. I'm now married to a citizen and I have two children, etc, etc." In those days they did a fairly thorough examination of illegal immigrants. That's why they went to the schools and checked on me as a student and my sister. Checked with the neighborhood to see if my parents were good parents, etc., and good citizens and that type of thing. Once they declared her a good person of course she went and took her examination and she passed with flying colors, she had no difficulty and then she became a citizen of the US.

Mr. Tedrick: About what year was that, sir?

Mr. Merzian: Probably 1945, 44 or 45, a short time after my father became a citizen.

Mr. Tedrick: Seems like she didn't let that get in the way of helping others though.

Mr. Merzian: Oh no, My mother had a lot of schooling in Istanbul and so she could read and write and she would write letters for other people in Armenian or in English and translate letters for, you know, some of the immigrants who were not able to read and write.

Mr. Tedrick: About what time frame did your mother and father immigrate?

Mr. Merzian: My father came in 1910 and I know that he traveled, I don't know where he came to first. Ok, but I think it was Granite City. Even after that, he traveled to Montana, Oregon, Washington, he worked for the Great Northern Railroad and they were laying tracks. So he was part of that group that was expanding to the west and he says he remembers when he was in Portland, Oregon. He said they had all mud streets, they had no paved roads or brick roads or anything, He said it was all mud. I don't know how long he spent working on the railroad, I have no idea. But I know also that he had a restaurant, prior to marriage, they got married in 1925. Prior to that, he and another Armenian man had a partnership, relationship of some kind, I don't know much of those details, and I don't know what years they were, but they had a restaurant. In those days there was a lot of bachelor men there, you know, people that were either bachelors or their wives weren't here yet from, you know, in some cases husbands and especially from the Armenians, some Armenians came early, like my dad and he was single, but others came who were married and left their wives and families over there. Then the massacres came in 1915 and went through the 1920s and families separated and they didn't even know how to get a hold of each other. So I guess his restaurant business included some of those people. What I remember when I became four or five years old, was the depression and they worked sometimes in the WPA projects, I'm not sure exactly when those projects started, but he worked there off and on a few days here and there. In his case I don't remember him working like a forty-hour week or anything like that. They tell you to come in tomorrow or not to come in, so

he worked the WPA projects. I remember that we had this home on Chestnut Street, he had a very big garden, on the side of our house and he would grow a lot of our vegetables and things like that that we used to eat. We also had a chicken coop that raised our own chickens; chicken was usually our meal on Sunday. That was our Sunday meal. Then, I guess, in the late thirties when the wars in Europe broke out then there was more work and then he went to work at the Commonwealth plant in Granite City. Now that Commonwealth plant had another name, but I can't remember it, I think it was General Steel Casting. He worked there for many, many years and then at some point when I was still six, seven or eight years old we moved out of our home and we moved into a .... Pacific Avenue, which is today Niedringhaus avenue. In those days it was Pacific Avenue. We rented, my dad and mom rented a store, three rooms in the back. We lived in the back and had the store in the front, which was a coffee house. We called it a coffee house, but it only served Turkish coffee in the .... cups. It was mostly a bachelor hangout; we sold cigarettes, candy, and just a few items. We were in that location for several years and then we moved across the street. There is a little court like area there that's in the 900 block of Niedringhaus avenue. In fact it's still there, but we had that and the store next door. When we had that place we sold a few more things like watermelon in the summer time and that type of thing. Then we moved back across the street next door to our previous place in the corner building there. We were the third store in and we opened up a little cleaning shop, dry cleaning branch would be a more proper term. My folks kind of got into the dry cleaning business there. At some point the business got good enough that my father left his job and worked full time in the cleaning shop and my mother did sewing and alterations and took in laundry work and things of that nature. That's basically what we had been doing during the war, but then after the war we moved out of the, let's see, about a year after the war I joined up, I joined up in September of 46.

I joined the Army and served for a year and a half, so I was gone overseas most of the time to Japan. While I was gone my parents had bought a dry cleaning shop in St. Louis and then moved from there, so they moved out in 1947, sometime.

Mr. Tedrick: Did your father ever, talking about the fact that he immigrated about 1910, did he talk about the process that he had to go through to

Mr. Merzian: My father came through, I'm not sure, but some how, some how he went from Van, which is a city and a province in, well it's in Turkey, when he left, but it was part of historic Armenia. He left there, went to Marseille and from Marseille he came to New York. He came through Ellis Island. He came in 1910, January, I forgot exactly what date. I think January 24th 1910. I can't remember the name of the ship. Then I think he came to Granite City from there.

Mr. Tedrick: Did he mention or did the family talk about what prompted him to go ahead and immigrate to the United States?

Mr. Merzian: I think in my father's case, he didn't actually say and there really wasn't a whole lot of discussion with my dad about that, but I think he came as a person who wanted to come here to the US work, earn some money, and then maybe go back, you know. I can't say that in a concrete way, but I think his intentions were to return. But after he was here, what, for five years basically is when the genocide started and then he, there was no way he could go back. In fact there was a whole group of Armenians, I guess, from all over the US who wanted to return and fight and I think some of them got to Canada or maybe the East Coast and then couldn't find convenient ways, or they didn't let them go, but for some reason they were stopped there. I guess, in my father's case came back to Granite City.

Mr. Tedrick: I've done some reading and talk with others on that, there may have been financial things that got in their way.

Mr. Merzian: That could have been, yes.

Mr. Tedrick: You know we've talked briefly about the club house and the impact it had, were there other, on the other end of that, the Americanization, were there places were people kind of got together and talk about heritage?

Mr. Merzian: Well, I don't recall talking about heritage, except maybe when we were a little older we'd be joking with each other. You know, like, "Hey you Hungarians, you Macedonian, you Mexicans" or whatever. In that light, but to talk about each other's national, I don't recall having that experience. We did, when the kids got a little bit older, let's say teenagers, there was a place in Lincoln Place called Sim's place. Actually, it belonged to my cousin from my father's side and that was the gathering point for us teenagers and they had, they played, they had pool tables in there and they sold penny candies and nickel candies. They had a whole array of penny candies because that's all we had was pennies. They sold tobacco and ice cream, the older guys played cards in there and shoot pool for money, you know, for nickels and dimes. Then they would play cards for nickels and dimes. But as they got older then they would play for ten cents and a quarter and so on as their age group went up. Then even later on, they put pinball machines in there. Then later, even my aunt started selling sandwiches in there. That was the gathering place, other than the club house. We went to the club house to play, but for more socializing and a little bit older we went to Sim's place. My cousins, my father's relatives, they had two children, one was Simone, which became Simon, and then their nick name Sims, he was the oldest and he was older than me by maybe 10 or 12, I would say 1915 he was born, he was probably about 15 years older than me. Then he had a sister who was born in around 1925.

There was a big age span between them and the age span was because the father, whose name is, English name is Harry, whose Armenian name was [Harvtian sp?], he was over here when the ..... broke up. [Reference is to the Armenian genocide.] He and his wife actually got separated for that many years until his wife came over around 1924 or 1925. Finally they located each other and then she came over here and then the sister was born and her name was Nell, Nelly or Nell. Anyway that was the children of my father's cousins. That was the big gathering place for social, socializing and playing cards and that type of thing. Especially on Saturday nights when we got to be teenagers before we went out and Friday nights also, everybody went there first. Left their home, went to Sim's place. I remember helping people in my age group to tie their ties, they didn't know how to tie their ties, one special mirror hanging on the wall and everybody is in front of the mirror tying their ties, making sure their clothes were right and in my case I help some of them tie their neck ties because they couldn't seem to get it right. Then after a while, I don't remember when I was real young, I went there when I was real young because they were my relatives, but the other kids, the little kids would only come in there to buy soda or penny candy and then they would go outside. They were too young. Actually the women were like that too, the young girls, you know, it was not a place for the girls, not even little girls. They came in, bought their soda, ice cream or whatever, and then they left. Then they went outside, it was mostly like a boy's place. So the women and the girls only came in there a short period of time to buy their merchandise and go out. I don't remember when I was real young, but at some point, the name Sim's College came on. So Sim's place, that was not an official name by any means, it had a name on the window of Sim's place, but it became Sim's college. There was an educational exposure to Sim's place. The local people, like myself, refer to that as Sim's college. An interesting point about that, when they had a, I can't remember exactly what year it

was, it might have been 1980, when they had the forty year reunion of Lincoln Place and it was the fortieth year reunion of the basketball team, the high school team that won the state championship, I guess it was in 1980, my cousin Simon was given a very nice plaque in honor of Sim's college. That was kind of the first time something official became attached to the words Sim's College rather than Sim's place and he was awarded this plaque for Sim's College. It was a rather unique place because everybody wanted to go there. I mean us kids who were born in Lincoln Place. Everybody wanted to go there. He ran a very strict place. If you cussed out loud or too much, you could be barred for a week, and you would cry. I mean you would cry because you weren't allowed to come in and everybody else was inside. He wouldn't even allow you in the front of this place. If you ever go down there, there is a platform porch about two feet high all across the building. You couldn't even get on the platform, he wouldn't let you, the closest you could get into the sidewalk which is maybe ten feet away from the actual front door. So you can't stand on his platform and he would bar you for a week or two weeks. If he thought you were really bad you were out and you would cry, literally cry. Then whoever was barred, they would stand on the sidewalk, hopefully somebody would come outside to talk to them and socialize with them. It was a learning lesson. You're not going to go around and cuss and say nasty things in a loud voice where other people could hear you because you'd be barred. That was the term they would use, "You're barred, you're out of here, two weeks." You know, they'd beg to get back in, it was the funniest thing. Along side of the building, in fact there is a picture, I don't have it right now, but there is a picture that was taken and I happen to be in this picture, of the kids playing bottle caps, I don't know if you ever played bottle caps.

Mr. Tedrick: I haven't, but I've heard of it from the oral history class. If you would describe a little of that it would help.

Mr. Merzian: OK, I remember us calling it [ge jo's sp?] for whatever reason and I don't know what that word means, but it's bottle caps. You play it like you play cork ball. We didn't have a cork ball and we didn't have a cork ball bat. We used a broom handle, or a mop handle that was cut out. We'd get the bottle caps from Sim's place because he sold a lot of soda there. The side of the building there, in the street and the side of his building, the side of his building would be the backstop for the bottle caps. You'd play pretty much like cork ball and that was always good because the loser would have to buy a soda maybe and that was a nickel. I have a great picture that I'll have to make you a copy of it and send it to you. I have a picture of it in Granite City. When I was little I saw the big guys, then as we got older of course we got to play. That was my cousin's place and on the other side of the building you had the little shoe repair shop, Simon was a shoe repairman. He learned that trade as a very young guy and I don't know the history behind that. As young as I can remember there was shoe repair equipment in the other side. There were two stores in this building. He did the shoe repair work and then when he got drafted and in the army they sent him to Iceland. He repaired military shoes; the shoes were his job. He had no sense of taste or smell so he was four F for a while and then as they got particular, they took him and said that he would have stateside duty, but then they sent him to Iceland and he repaired shoes. In fact, because he was born overseas, he was not a citizen so they didn't draft him, but then they drafted him and upon his discharge he automatically became an American citizen with the effect of his discharge from the army.

Mr. Tedrick: One of the things that I've noticed through reading and conversations is the real sense of community at Lincoln Place.

Mr. Merzian: Oh we were a great

Mr. Tedrick: It sounds like it was very much self-policing.

Mr. Merzian: Yes, absolutely. In fact, all the kids from Lincoln Place went to Washington school. That school is torn down so it's gone now, but Washington school was in West Granite. Not in Lincoln Place, it was in West Granite. We all walked to school. Back in our early days we had no bus service. They had school bus service, but not in Lincoln Place. Everybody in Lincoln Place would walk or take their bike. We went to school at Washington School in West Granite. In the winter times it seemed like we would get a lot of snow when I was a kid. More so than when we were older. We had snowball fights. We had snowball fights with the West Granite kids. They were a group from West Granite and we were a bunch of Hunkeys, you know, a bunch of foreigners from Lincoln Place. We'd have snowball fights and if they were getting the best of us, then we'd run into Lincoln Place and gather up the troops and then we could meet in north base, this big open field that was between us and West Granite. We'd have snowball fights and eventually there was a winner. As I recall it was mostly us that was the winner, then we'd all go home. I mean everybody would turn out for the fight. We didn't have any of that "You're a Hungarian", or "You're a Macedonian," or "You're a Mexican," we didn't have any of that animosity between us. I don't remember any of that. We'd enjoy each other's food and learn some of each other's languages and that type of stuff. We grew up together and practically everybody who was plus or minus my age group was first generation so we had no problem with understanding "Hey" mother and father doesn't speak any English at all. I would speak with the kids and the kids would translate for us if they wanted to tell their parents what we said.

Mr. Tedrick: One of the things that was really neat about that is that everybody grouped together. Were the snowball fights between West Granite and Lincoln Place groups; were they basically friendly type things?

Mr. Merzian: It was just a good snowball fight, it was not meant to be friendly. I remember one other thing, I was in the fifth grade in Washington School, now Washington School went through the sixth grade. I was in the fifth grade at the time and I was in this geography class and if I remember her name it was Tanzberger. One day out of the blue she asked, "How many kids here speak more than one language?" There were maybe half a dozen of us at least that raised our hands, but then we were all kind of embarrassed and sheepish. We didn't know why she asked the question and what initiated the question. In many cases we were kind of reserved and maybe a little bit self-conscious at that time. Our parents were foreigners and didn't speak English, so we were a little bit on the reserved side so only about a half a dozen of us raised our hands. I remember at least three, maybe four Armenian kids in this class. When I remember a girl named Deloris [Vorseloff sp.], I remember her real well, she's passed away now, she spoke two languages besides English, because her parents, one was like a Macedonian and one was maybe Hungarian or Bulgarian, so she spoke both because she learned both from her parents. There were others, but I just don't remember who they were, but I remember there were six or seven kids maybe. Miss Tanzberger just shook her head, she just couldn't hardly believe that here they are at this age in forth grade, about ten years old I guess, and that here at that age they spoke fluently for each groups. I remember one time when I was in Sunday school, which was the seventh and eighth grade. My friend that I grew up with, his name was Zorab Hagopian. Zorab and I we got up in front of this English class and had to speak in Armenian. I think in that class we might have been the only two who spoke a different language that was the same language. We had to get up in the front and do a little skit, maybe greetings and how are you, and what's going on and that type of thing because it was so different for them to hear it. We were reserved and kind of embarrassed and maybe even a little bit ashamed because we didn't know exactly

what was going on. There wasn't anything bad with it, but I guess just from our background we felt a little bit embarrassed and a little bit awkward about it, we did it. I think that wore off when we got to high school. When we got to high school we kind of lost that little bit of embarrassment and reserved feeling. One of the unique things about Lincoln Place also is that there is at least during a lot of years that there were three different grocery stores down there. One was Armenian; one might have been Bulgarian and the other one Macedonian or something or Hungarian. Two of them were from the Balkan countries, I think. I remember that, and then when your parents would send you to one or the other, we would go to the Armenian grocers. My father or mother would send me down there and we would go down there and we would order whatever my mother wanted in Armenian. We spoke to the people who owned the place, who were Armenian, Vartan's, it was Vartan's market, in those days you would go to the counter and you would tell them what you want. They would go and get all your order and bring everything back to the counter and tell you to go home. In fact, they gave credit because at that time, the Vartans for a long time carried a lot of people for their groceries because they had no money. I know that they carried my folks. Then when they started to work they paid their bill off weekly and then paid off some of what they owed from prior to the time that they made an earning. So the Vartans were very instrumental in carrying a lot of the Armenians who were down there. Kind of a blessing in disguise. There were others as well in the neighborhood who had shops. In fact, I remember this one Armenian had a tavern down there and he didn't know how to read and write, but he could sketch very nicely and he would sketch your face and then say if you had a beer or whatever, he'd put down five cents or ten cents under your face, the sketch of your face. When the time came you had to pay up because he knew who it was. That was a great little story, I can't help but remember that.

Mr. Tedrick: Looking at my notes here, you mentioned graduating from college, what area did you study in sir?

Mr. Merzian: In those years they had a special area for servicemen, but my concentration was in business, accounting, actually marketing and management was my major, but I didn't graduate even though I went three and a half years, I didn't. I didn't graduate, I went to the University of Illinois at Champaign. I started in fall of 48 and left in January of 52. I was on the varsity wrestling team too while I was there. I was on the G.I. Bill of Rights. I also worked; I had a job almost 35 or 40 hours a week. In fact, my sister, I might have been a sophomore or a junior when my sister came. My father gave her forty dollars and said this is all that I can spare. She came up to the University of Illinois. Forty dollars in those days would cover your tuition, but that was it. OK, so from my earnings I put her through school for a year and she quit after that. I paid her room and board and her expense money, things of that nature, spending money etc. But it took a toll on me because I was out for sports and I worked almost 35 or 40 hours a week, so I had my academic woes. It was another interesting story.

Mr. Tedrick: What jobs were you working at then, just out of curiosity?

Mr. Merzian: When I was at the university? I worked at a dry cleaning plant, because I had got the experience at home. I went to the student employment office and told them that I was looking for a part time job; I had a job the next day. In those days, they were paying the students, those students who worked around the campus, they were paying them 65 or 70 cents an hour or you worked for your meals, but the going rate was 65 or 70 cents. I got a job paying a dollar and a quarter an hour. In fact, the government was paying me seventy-five dollars a month, as my monthly stipend from the GI Bill. I was at the point that I was almost making too

much money and if I made any more money I would have been cut off or reduced in my earnings from Uncle Sam.

Mr. Tedrick: I'm trying to think, to sum it up, you've given me a wonderful amount of information,

Mr. Merzian: What was nice down there, John, was that the Hungarians, the Hungarians had a very large hall in Lincoln Place. In fact, it's called "A Magyar House," which means a Hungarian home. The Hungarians in their own native language when they said Magyar; that means Hungarian. If you see it in their maps or other old stuff, it looks like it is spelled mag yar, but it's Magyar [pronounced Ma Jar]. The Magyars built their place around, somewhere around 1927. They built an ethnic place, but then all the other ethnic groups would rent it. The Armenians would rent it, and they would have dances there or they would do plays and that type of things, social activities. It was rather unique that the Magyars had this nice, big building. Today it belongs to the Mexicans. The Mexicans now own that building, so it's called the Mexican home or hall. I think it's called the Mexican Hall now. The Magyars put that thing together and they were the first ethnic group in Lincoln Place who built their own .... .

Mr. Tedrick: I went on a walking tour of Lincoln Place about a month ago, I guess now, and the community center or club house is still just going strong, young folks in there, basketball court is available. I like the rules and such they have up there to where they keep it very well focused on behavior. Seems like that's maybe a holdover from past times that says, "Hey, we're here to support, but we want to develop good citizens and good members of the community."

Mr. Merzian: You could have been, I don't remember getting banned, I do remember you couldn't use your shoes to play on the basketball courts. A lot of times we played bare footed or with socks. In most cases, we couldn't afford tennis shoes. There are stories where Miss

Prather, who was the guiding light when we were going to Lincoln Place, of her buying tennis shoes for some of the kids, I was not one of them, but we heard a lot of stories of her buying shoes. But the rest of us who didn't have tennis shoes, we couldn't get on the court. Unless we went barefooted, took our street shoes off and played in our socks. That was a very strict rule. In fact, I guess it got to some point when even the kids enforced it on each other when you might of tried to sneak in, or something of that nature. She was a very strong guiding light for us, but even when we got to be teenagers and other people came in, other staff, people came in. We had dances down there. It was with people from, as we referred to them, as from across the tracks. As they got a little braver, they came down and we had nice dances down there. But we heard lots of stories about the parents of the kids from across the tracks, they wouldn't let their kids come down there, especially the girls, they couldn't come down to Lincoln Place. They didn't know the right kind of people. The right kind of people didn't live down there.

Mr. Tedrick: It seems that that type of thought or prejudice exists everywhere.

Mr. Merzian: Oh yeah, we knew it existed. In fact, we used to at some times tease them and say, "You guys can't come across the tracks unless you've got passports." Then when the war came out, they put this tank [military tank], cause American Steel made tanks, they put this tank there, right at the tracks. We said, "That tank was there to keep you guys out of there." So we used to tease them in that respect. There was a very definite line at the tracks. Year by year, as the years went by, [things got less segregated] we even got bus service. Then the city, when the basketball team, the state basketball championship, … seven of the team, first team, were from Lincoln Place, so they had to come to Lincoln Place. There was a big parade. I remember it because, I was not in high school, but as a kid I was still living there, I remember a big parade came down to see the governor. I think it was still Pacific Avenue then, they came down and

toured through Lincoln Place. I don't know where it went, but it came down Niedringhaus from the tracks. It made a big showing, so a lot of people found out about Lincoln Place.

Mr. Tedrick: Kind of an opening to the community. "Hey, wait a minute, this is people."

Mr. Merzian: Exactly

Mr. Tedrick: Ok, that's neat. How would you sum up the overall effect of growing up in a community like that. That seemed like it was some challenges, but a neat place to live too?

Mr. Merzian: There were no rich people down there. A couple of people were, say the grocery stores or whatever, they might have been, you know, ... In a sense of speaking. There were very few cars down there. Cars were just almost a no no in Lincoln Place. There were very few. I remember the age group above me, even as I got to be a teenager, really working on 1932 Fords that they bought for a few dollars. Rebuilding them and things of that nature, just to get them going. You notice in the very late thirties, early forties that was their vehicle of choice that they maybe bought for twenty-five or fifty bucks that they normally had to scrape together. I for one enjoyed it immensely, because in my later years as I was working, you know, I was mostly in the sales field. As I would meet these different people, with different European ethnic names, in many cases I was able to recognize what ethnic group they belonged to and maybe I was able to say a couple of words and say hello, how are you, in their languages. That would put me in good standings with them and it made my selling job a little bit easier. Just the fact that I recognized their ethnic group, and they might have had, if not their parents, maybe their grandparents might have been the immigrants, it gave me a little bit closer relationship to them. In fact, I think it helped me immensely in my sales career, as the years went by, in my older life as a working, as a working person. I think it was great and then of course in my working career I was with other Armenians and we would speak the language. That certainly gave me the advantage over others.

Even when I was in the service, when I would meet other Armenians, and even other ethnic groups, that would give us a closer relationship. When I was in the service and people who, I met people who knew Armenians, they might not of been of any particular ethnic group or strong relationship there with any particular ethnic group, but they knew other Armenians, that brought us to a closer relationship. In the overall score, the fact that I had a strong ethnic background and multi-ethnic relationship in growing up was a definite asset for me as I grew up and in my working career.

Mr. Tedrick: Wow, I appreciate your time, our time here.

Mr. Merzian: That's all right; Lincoln Place was really very unique with the people. People from Lincoln Place remember there's no doubt. I was talking today, even today, to a guy, a Mexican guy who came from a family of ten; he was three years younger than I am. He was telling me that when he was nine years old he and all of his brothers and sisters went to Alton to the orphanage, because his mother had died. He and his brothers and sisters spent several years there, but he remembers enough about Lincoln Place to talk about it. He remembers, because he was still nine years old when he left, he brings out these names. Today he brought the name of Timber. I remember Timber, he was a Mexican kid and Weche [sp?] another Mexican kid and another boy named McCamareno. I said, I thought about the last name, I said, "You know McCamereno had a dog," and he said yes, "A police dog." I said, "What was that dog's name?" It was like a trigger then. He says, "I don't remember." I said, "That dog's name was Oso." Oso I think means King in Spanish, I'm not sure, but I think that's what it means. He says, "Yes that's right." But this guy moved out of Lincoln Place basically when he was nine years old, because he had to go to the orphanage. Yet he talks about Lincoln Place, because when he became sixteen, he had, they told him, "You are too old now for this orphanage" and today was

the first time he told me this part of the story. He went to the Alexian Hospital, he went there and he worked there and they gave him room and board. When he became eighteen he said you know, "how long am I going to stay here?" and they told him he could leave anytime you want. He didn't know he could leave. He said, "I want to go back to Granite City." So they took him back to Granite City and he moved in with his sister. But he didn't know he could leave. So he was telling me that story, his name is Pete Martinez. Anyway, he has a bunch of brothers and sisters who were orphaned in Lincoln Place. But when he found out that I was from Lincoln Place, it was a whole different relationship immediately. It was like finding a lost cousin. When I found this out several months back, I saw this guy and we were talking and as we found out that we were from Lincoln Place it just brought us that much closer. We started telling these stories about Lincoln Place. Because Lincoln Place, for us kids, we go back before the Engineering Depot was there. We used to walk from Lincoln Place out to the channel, Mississippi channel; we used to call it the slough. We didn't know it but it wasn't too far from the sewer exit. But we didn't know that, we were to dumb. Anyway, we used to go out there and swim. We learned to swim out there and do a little hunting, well I didn't, but some of the kids did a little hunting and fishing out there. Fact, I remember one time during the war we went out there with Louis Bison and we went in a canoe. Then the canoe tipped over and we lost all of our clothes. I mean every stitch. I did, I lost every stitch of my clothes. He had, Louis had something and he came back into Lincoln Place and got a pair of pants or something for me and brought it out there. I was able to put it on and come home. But it was during the war, so it must have been during the early years of the war. I had lost my shoes in that episode. We had to, my mother had to take me up to Granite City city hall and apply for special stamps to get shoes. So anyway, I was able to get an extra pair of shoes. That's a story by itself.

Mr. Tedrick: Quite a life.

Mr. Merzian: Yes, it was. I remember my best friend; his name was Nazar Donjoian. I think somebody will be asking him questions. [Reference to the Lincoln Place oral history project] He used to come; we lived just three or four houses apart. There was a real elderly, remember we were kids, that couple was elderly already, they weren't like our folks, they were elderly. That guys name was Melcon and his wife's name was Nubar, and they didn't have any children. But Nubar [I think Mr. Merzian meant Melcon] was a, had a bad leg, had a bad limb. He would pay my best friend Nazar, he would give him a nickel or a dime, I can't remember, to pull his wagon up to the relief hall to get food, because they were on relief also. He said yes, old Melcon used to give me a nickel or a dime, I think it was a nickel, and he said, I pulled my wagon up to the relief and fill it up with the food items or what ever they were and he'd pull the wagon. It wasn't worth a nickel, but anyhow, he said, I got a nickel. I got a nickel. I'm sorry because this poor old man, he couldn't get up by himself. He had no kids and he had no wagon either. On top of that, he had one bad leg. I can't remember which one it is, but this Melcon was a character, was a character himself. On our block on Chestnut Street when we were little, we had, there were four Armenian families on our side of the street. I think there were either four or five on the other side of the street. Then after those four or five families, then there was a row of Mexican families across the street, and then one more Armenian family on the very last house. Where these Mexicans lived, those were company owned homes, factory owned homes. I think General Steel Casting; the Commonwealth plant owned them. They were just kind of catty-cornered from ours, across the street and maybe the next house. Because my mother spoke Spanish, but we didn't say Spanish in those days. That Hispanic word and Spanish thing are more recent terms. In those days, they were Mexican people and they spoke Mexican. So my mother spoke

Mexican. They were very good to my mother, because she would help them out and all that, and she spoke Mexican. Once in a while, they would send over Mexican goodies to my mother because she would help them out or she would speak Mexican to them.

Mr. Tedrick: Sounds like everybody just kind of looked out for one another.

Mr. Merzian: Yes. I have to tell, my famous quotes though, as we got older, in those days, in those days we ate inside and went outside to the john. Now we are eating outside and going inside to the john. There were a lot of houses that didn't have inside plumbing. They had water, but they didn't have inside toilets. A lot of houses in Lincoln Place were like that. In those days, we ate inside and went outside to the john and as we got older, things got better and we reversed the process.

Mr. Tedrick: I appreciate, like I say, I appreciate your time and you helping me out and educating me on the area.

Mr. Merzian: That's ok, are there some other questions you want to ask?

Mr. Tedrick: I think you've, you have covered about everything that I was wanting just by talking in general conversation, and I appreciate it.

Mr. Merzian: Oh, ok, John.

Mr. Tedrick: Thank you.