LINCOLN PLACE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH MARY KAMBARIAN ASADORIAN

Narrator:	Mary Kambarian Asadorian
Interviewer:	Norma Vee Throne Evans Asadorian
Date:	October 27, 2001
Place of Interview:	Home of Interviewee, 3245 Fehling Road, Granite City, Illinois

(Begin Tape 1, Side A.)

NORMA VEE THRONE EVANS ASADORIAN: Today is October 27, 2001. This is Norma Vee Asadorian - A-S-A-D-O-R-I-A-N, conducting an interview with Mary Kambarian Asadorian, K-A-M-B-A-R-I-A-N last name A-S-A-D-O-R-I-A-N. [Tape is stopped to allow interviewee to observe ease with which the tape recorder picks up sound, so that she would comprehend the proper volume in which to speak.] Could you please tell me something about yourself--your name and where you live?

MARY KAMBARIAN ASADORIAN: Well, my name is Mary Asadorian. I used to be Mary Kambarian. I was born and raised in Granite City, but born in Lincoln Place by with the parents of Mr. and Mrs. Abraham Kambarian. I loved my childhood because we were all one. All of us immigrants were one because nobody else had anything to do with us. After all, we were not American born. We were foreign born. [Clarification - The parents of Mary Kambarian were born in Turkey. Mary was born in Granite City, Illinois, United States of America.]

NORMA ASADORIAN: But you were born here in the United

States?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes, born here, but to them we were foreigners. And we were raised by a Miss Prather, who ran the Community House down in Lincoln Place who taught us self respect and love for one another. She taught us how to sew. She taught us how to behave like ladies and like gentlemen. I remember an incident where I didn't feel like going to the Club one day and she came with her little switch, opened our basement door, walked down the steps with my mother standing there and she whacked me on my knee, legs and made me go to the Clubhouse because my mother had too much work to do to put up with a child. That's how she ran that Community House. We were all of her kids and she didn't care where we were from and what nationality we were.

NORMA ASADORIAN: How old were you when that incident occurred?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, I would say maybe [chuckle] eleven, twelve years old.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And how old are you now?

MARY ASADORIAN: I'm seventy-seven and I'll never forget it as long, to the day I die because we didn't like her, but we adored her because we thought she had too much responsibility over us children because our parents never dared open their mouths to her. And then, of course, the older we got and

when we did lose her, we lost a friend. But, I grew up playing softball.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Was that unusual for girls at that time period?

MARY ASADORIAN: No, no, no, no. We had a good softball team. And we learned, like I said, how to sew and how to behave and every August we had an exhibition of everything we made. And half the time our parents didn't even know what was going on because it was so secretive. And when it was all displayed, they were all amazed that their children could even hold a needle and thread or thread and needle.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What kind of things did you make?

MARY ASADORIAN: Doilies, quilts, you know. And the boys learned pattern shop. Of course, they had basketball. That's where we got the 1940 basketball team originated from. [The 1940 basketball team at the Granite City High School was a state championship team.] It was all from Lincoln Place. And we had a wonderful time.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What did the Clubhouse consist of?

MARY ASADORIAN: A gymnasium, a West Room that was held for meetings and things, and, or course, she [Miss Prather] had her little, what you call, office, and there were two other small rooms that she used to keep the kids indoors during the

winter, occupied. And there was a stage and under the stage was the pattern shop.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What did they do there?

MARY ASADORIAN: Made woodwork things, learned how to do electrical things. They were taught very well. Now that I can´t help you with. I can´t remember who taught the boys.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Were there regular teachers or were they parents?

MARY ASADORIAN: No, they were friends of hers from Methodist Church. Now we had Sunday School every Sunday. It was a Methodist Sunday School and we had three teachers, Miss Gibson, Miss Miller, and Mr. Liggett, that would come and teach, be our Sunday School teachers. And then we had older ones that were maybe five to ten years older than we were as assistants, you know. And we had that gymnasium then was converted to Sunday School. But no matter where it was, you still had to take your shoes off to walk on that gymnasium floor. That gymnasium floor was immaculate and if you didn´t have tenners [athletic shoes], tennis shoes, you earned them.

NORMA ASADORIAN: How did you do that?

MARY ASADORIAN: Doing little chores and she would give you so many points and then when you had so many points accumulated, she would take you downtown [Granite City

business district] and buy you a pair of tennis shoes with the piddling money that she made.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So she got paid to work there?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: She was like a regular teacher there?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. I'm trying....

NORMA ASADORIAN: What kind of peole lived in Lincoln Place?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, let's see. There were Hungarians, there were Bulgarians [Macedonians], there were Croatians, there were Polish, there were Italians, there were Mexicans, Germans, Armenians....

NORMA ASADORIAN: Now, I have heard some people refer to it as like a mini-United Nations.

MARY ASADORIAN: [Ethusiastically.] Yes! It was. It was. Matter of fact, let me give you a little example. We grew up, like I said in a five block area from Walnut Street to Cedar and two blocks up to 20th Street [West 20th Street] and one block down, west or east or north, whatever you want, south on, off the main drag. At one time it was Pacific Avenue. It became Niedringhaus. Alright from Niedringhaus to West Granite was two blocks and then down to your end of the...

NORMA ASADORIAN: Chicago Avenue.

MARY ASADORIAN: [To] Chicago Avenue was one block [from Niedringhaus Avenue]. And in that little area, all these nationalities lived. And I went in 19.... Oh, what year was it? I went to California for a visit and they are talking about this Chavez [Cesar Chavez, former President of the United Fruit Workers Union], this Mexican leader, Chavez. For two hours on the news, that's all I kept hearing. And finally I turned to my brother [who lived in California] and I said, "What in the world is going on? What are they doing to these Mexicans?" And he started to laugh. He said, "Mary, these are not the Mexicans we grew up with." He said, "These are different." I said, "I thought people were the same." He said, "No. Like every other nationality, they have their good ones and they have their bad ones. We had the good ones. We grew up with the good ones." I said, so it was hard for me to accept, that they were against the Mexicans, cause we would never think of being against anybody. We were all one. Matter of fact, you talked your language in your home. [Vehemently.] But by God, once you got out on that street and were on that street corner, everybody was talking English. I mean, that's all there was to it. But at home, in the house, everybody spoke their own nationality.

NORMA ASADORIAN: How did you learn how to speak English,

then, if you spoke...

MARY ASADORIAN: Through Miss Prather. Like I said, we in that little area, were very, very lucky. More lucky, than the "people across the tracks," because they didn't have a Miss Prather. They didn't have a Community House they could go to. We did.

NORMA ASADORIAN: How old did kids start going to the Clubhouse?

MARY ASADORIAN: How about a year old?

NORMA ASADORIAN: A year old?

MARY ASADORIAN: If they could walk or travel, they could go. That's how she was. [Miss Prather.]

NORMA ASADORIAN: And they could go for how long?

MARY ASADORIAN: To their dying day if she was still living.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did the parents get involved in the community center at all?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. Yes. Matter of fact, she even started citizenship classes at the Community House for our parents. Now my father got his citizenship papers in '28 [1928] and because he was, at that year my oldest brother who was born in Istanbul, Turkey, got his citizenship papers through my father, and, of course, once he joined the Marines, he got

them through the Marine Corps. And my mother didn't get hers until the late '30s [1930s], and I don't know why because she outsmarted my dad all the way around, you know. It was just one of those things.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did she [Miss Prather] teach the citizenship classes, too?

MARY ASADORIAN: That I can't answer. She may have started out, but I think she eventually got somebody to come in and take over.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And who built the Clubhouse? Did the city build that?

MARY ASADORIAN: The...No! Commonwealth, the General Steel Castings, a Mr. Brown, I think, headed it, but providing that they had a suitable person to run it. And he checked around and everybody at Methodist Church that he talked to said that the only one that could do it was a Miss Sophia Prather. So he hired her. I think, and I won't elaborate on this, between twenty-five and thirty-five dollars a month.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Commonwealth you mentioned. Is this some-place that people worked?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. That was General Steel Castings.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Were there other places in Lincoln Place where people worked?

MARY ASADORIAN: American Steel Foundry and, of course, in 1942, the Depot was built. [U. S. Army Engineer Depot, later Charles Melvin Price Army Depot.]

NORMA ASADORIAN: When your parents came here, did they both immigrate together?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. Yes, they did. They came in 1921.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And where did they come from?

MARY ASADORIAN: Istanbul, Turkey.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Were they Turkish?

MARY ASADORIAN: No. Well, they were Turkish born, born in Turkey, but don't you refer to them as Turk. No. They are Armenians.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So they were Turkish nationality.

MARY ASADORIAN: Like we are, like we are Armenian of American descent or whatever. No we are Americans of Armenian descent.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Right.

MARY ASADORIAN: And they were Armenians of Turkish nationality, whatever you want to call it. I don't know. [Mary's parents were both of Armenian descent, living in Istanbul, Turkey. They immigrated from Istanbul Turkey.]

NORMA ASADORIAN: They were Turkish by nationality, but of Armenian descent.

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: OK. They came here in 1921. Was there a reason that they left and came to the U. S.?

MARY ASADORIAN: They came for a visit. My father had never met his dad. His dad in 19..., alright now, let me try to get this straight. My grandfather, God love him, was in West Virginia, in 1903, but moved to Granite City in 1905. And the Armenian underground got him out of Turkey because he killed a Turk.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Was it wartime?

MARY ASADORIAN: No. It was the fact that he couldn't stand that 1896 massacre that the Turks did. [Reference to the genocide massacres by the Turks in 1896.] He was going to get even.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Had Turkish people killed his family during that massacre?

MARY ASADORIAN: That I cannot tell you.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Were there other massacres against Armenians by the Turks?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes in 1915.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So, he was the first one to come to the United States from your family.

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes, yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And was he a Kambarian or...?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes, he was a Kambarian. My father's father. And then my grandmother came in 1920. Let me correct that. My grandmother came here, February, 1921. Because my husband was born about 10 days after she got here and she told my future mother-in-law that she had left a 3 month old grandson in Turkey [Jerry Kambarian, Mary's brother.] So my brother was born the 20th in 1920. And she...my dad and my mother came with my brother in about three, four months later to meet his dad. To see his dad and then they were going to go back. But once he stepped foot on this soil, he said no way. He went to visit his sister in Yerevan, Armenia, in 1970. He hadn't seen his sister since 1918. And when he came back home, he got people to come and ask questions about Armenia was like and one asked, "Would you move there?" And my father's answer was, "What do you think I am crazy? Who wants to leave this country? It's the best country in the world. Why would I want to go anywhere else? I don't care if I have relatives. This is my country." I said, and that's how my dad felt about it. Yes, he missed his sister. He...I am glad he got to see her

before she died. Cause he died a year after he got back.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What did your father do in this country?

MARY ASADORIAN: My father worked at the Commonwealth, General Steel Castings, as a coreman. But when Depression hit, everybody was without a job. But because my father befriended five, well, let me correct this now. There were five of them, Chuchians, but there were three brothers and two brothers. They were cousins, but they called each other brothers. They all came from South Side Chicago. Well, you know what South Side Chicago was in 1920s.

NORMA ASADORIAN: No, I don't.

MARY ASADORIAN: Gangster town. OK. Well, nobody wanted to have anything to do with these people. They are gangsters. But my father said they are Armenians. So he befriended them. And because he befriended them, we were never without a thing during the Depression, but for three months. In all of that whole Depression, three months is when we were the roughest and when they found out that my father was struggling, they blew their tops at my dad for not notifying them. They would send...they owned a cleaning plant in East St. Louis. They would send a driver, pick him up Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Then go and he would sit there and drink coffee all day long. And he got paid for it because they owed him.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Is that typical among Armenians...

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...to feel a debt of obligation?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. Matter of fact, 1966, they begged, matter of fact, I was present when this happened. The wife of one of them got on her hands and knees and begged my father to move to California so they could take care of us. That's how much they adored him and my mother because of their kindness. And when the man that he loved so much died, it kind of broke my dad's heart. But the thing is that the friendship lasts. It holds. You don't see each other for years and you pick up from the day you left. I have friendship like that.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What was your father's name?

MARY ASADORIAN: Abraham Kambarian. They called him Abie.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And what was your mother's name?

MARY ASADORIAN: Hermina. And they called her Mina.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Can you tell me something about her?

MARY ASADSORIAN: My mother to average person here, among the immigrants, let me go that way, when they first got here, was a very highly educated woman because of her brother-in-law, who happens to be my interviewer's grandfather's first

cousin. They...he made sure my mother got her education and she graduated from high school in Istanbul, Turkey, which I found out from our superintendent of schools that it was equivalent to two years of college here in the States. So, yes, my mother was an educated woman, but fell into an area where there were maybe two or three other women her average...No, that's not what I wanted to say...her ability to converse. Cause the rest of them didn't have education.

NORMA ASADORIAN: The rest of the women in Lincoln Place?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. And my mother used to write letters for everybody because she had such a beautiful besides penmanship...How do you outline a story like?

NORMA ASADORIAN: A beautiful way of saying things?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes! Thank you. And she did. She always wrote letters [The telephone begins ringing.] for everybody. [The tape is stopped due to interruption from a phone call.]

[Tape resumes.]

NORMA ASADORIAN: The interview was interrupted just briefly by a telephone call. We are resuming at this point. Could you tell me a little bit about the education level of the people that lived in Lincoln Place?

MARY ASADORIAN: Right now, the only one I could refer to would be my father and my own mother. My father had a fourth

grade education, but because he loved to read, he expanded it. And. I think my mother was a great help to him, although being a man, he would never admit it. He ended up being, matter of fact, it got to the point, he would talk American to me instead of Armenian. And I turned to him one day and I said, "Pop, why are you talking American?" [His reply was], "For my language."

NORMA ASADORIAN: So he could practice?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. And I was proud of him. And when he ran that tavern, boy I'll tell you, they were all wild about his English. Broken English and all, he got across what he had to say.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did he teach himself or did he go to school or just pick it up through work?

MARY ASADORIAN: What, the English language?

NORMA ASADORIAN: Yes.

MARY ASADORIAN: He picked it up himself. He, like I said, had citizenship and that helped him a lot. And then when he opened the tavern in '39 [1939], '37 [1937] correction, that helped him a lot. But, like I said, my mother was the educated one.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Now, you said she went to high school in Istanbul, Turkey. Was that an Armenian high school or a

Turkish high school or public school, a private school? Or do you know?

MARY ASADORIAN: I don't know, but I mentioned it to Mr. Grisby, our superintendent, and he knew right away what school it was. So it must be a well-known school. I was going to say something concerning some incident that happened. Oh, I forgot. It slipped my mind. It will come to me.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Was that unusual for women to have that sort...

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...of education.

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Matter of fact, one other person that I know, two other people that I know that were very educated. One was Mrs. Mgrdichian and the other was Mrs. Yerganian, whose husband was an artist [He painted the ceiling murals in the St. Louis City Hall.] Oh, and Mrs. Satenig [Hairabedian, Armenian school teacher]...Oh, what was her last name?

NORMA ASADORIAN: The Armenian school teacher?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. That was another educated woman. But she got educated in Bulgaria, I think.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Mrs. Yerganian, I recall that her husband was the artist who painted the murals in the City Hall of St. Louis.

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, very talented, very talented man.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What about the other immigrants? Were there schools in Lincoln Place for them to go to or did they go to the schools in Granite City?

MARY ASADORIAN: Only couple of women that I know went to elementary school to pick up, if I am not mistaken. I don´t want to mention names. I may be wrong. But they weren´t born here, but they went they sp.... Now one in particular, Margaret Manoogian was born in Canada, so she spoke beautiful English. She was educated, you know, from Canada. But this other woman I am referring to as far as I know her and her husband were both self taught. Very brilliant people.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What about the children in Lincoln Place? You said that they were taught at the Clubhouse. Where did they go to school once they became of school age?

MARY ASADORIAN: Washington Grade School.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And where was that?

MARY ASADORIAN: That was in West Granite on West 20th Street. After all, now, we were walking to a dangerous zone

there.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Why is that?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, well. We were foreigners crossing the barrier.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So you were going to a part of town where you weren't welcome?

MARY ASADORIAN: It was the same part of town, only it was divided: one was called West Granite, we were called Lincoln Place, and we could have been one, but we weren't.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So West 20th Street was the dividing line...

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...between.

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And what kind of people lived in West Granite if they weren't immigrants?

MARY ASADORIAN: I don't want to say.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Were they people from Tennessee, Missouri, Kentucky.

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes, from the hills, you know. But, of

course, they kind of educated themselves once they moved in. They had to go to school, the kids did, you know.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So did they come to Granite City for the same reason that the immigrants did?

MARY ASADORIAN: For jobs, of course. The steel mills were going full blast.

NORMA ASADORIAN: You mentioned General Steel Castings and American Steel.

MARY ASADORIAN: Then there was Granite City Steel. And there was National Lead in Madison, I think. Madison, Venice. And, of course, like I said, in 1942 the Army Depot opened up.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Now transportation probably wasn't very available at that time.

MARY ASADORIAN: What transportation? You mean our two legs? Yes, our two legs held up very well. Did you ever walk to school in snow and carry an extra pair of tenners and socks with you in your pocket, coat pockets, so you could change and wear them in school? We did.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Because you would get wet walking to school...

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes, yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...so you changed in to dry clothes when you got there? And how far was that?

MARY ASADORIAN: Three miles.

NORMA ASADORIAN: That was to the high school?

MARY ASADORIAN: From Lincoln Place to the High School. Every day. Then they say, "Mary, why don't you go for a walk?" Hah, hah, hah, hah, hah.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So that explains...

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...why you don't like to walk now?

MARY ASADORIAN: How true.

NORMA ASADORIAN: You went to Washington Grade School for what grades?

MARY ASADORIAN: First through six.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And was there...

MARY ASADORIAN: Then Central School from seven to eight.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And then the high school?

MARY ASADORIAN: Granite City High School nine to twelve.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did they have such a thing as kindergarten

then?

MARY ASADORIAN: I don't think so.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And the kinds of things you would do in kindergarten today, did you do those...

MARY ASADORIAN: We did those at the Community House. Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Now I've heard that the parents of Lincoln Place on their hours where they were not at work at the steel mills, built the Clubhouse. Is that true?

MARY ASADORIAN: I don't think so. I think contractors were called in. But I was too young. don't forget, I was born in '24 [1924] and I think that was built, what--'27, '28 [1927, 1928]. As far as I was concerned, it's always been there, you know.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did they have family picnics there or other types of family activities?

MARY ASADORIAN: I don't think so. I think she [Miss Prather] kept it strictly for the kids.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Now, it appears that there was a swimming pool there at some point. Was that there...

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, no. That swimming pool was put in years later. [Laughter] God, no. Huh, uh.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did girls even swim then? Did they wear bathing suits?

MARY ASADORIAN: Noooooo, no, no, no, no, no. If we wanted to go swimming, we went to the Y. M. C. A. [in downtown Granite City across from the City Hall at the corner of 20th and Edison] or Wilson Park.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So you could swim.

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Were you allowed to wear bathing suits?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What did they look like?

MARY ASADORIAN: Normal one piece bathing suits. Now Tuesdays would be Ladies' Day at Wilson Park swimming pool, which meant the ladies got in free. So three or four of us families would get together, pile our old baby buggies up with all the food and push it from Lincoln Place to Wilson Park and swim all day long and eat all day long and then push and walk back.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Was this when you were married or when you were a child?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, when we were children. Matter of fact, that's where I learned to swim.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did the moms swim?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, my mother would swim like a fish. [Chuckle.] Don't forget, she was born in Istanbul, Turkey and was very highly educated by her brother-in-law.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And who was her brother-in-law? Do you remember the name?

MARY ASADORIAN: Haroian. What was his first name?

NORMA ASADORIAN: Yedvart?

MARY ASADORIAN: No.

NORMA ASADORIAN: No, that wasn't his first name?

MARY ASADORIAN: No, no. Yedvart was their oldest nephew. The oldest...who was your cousin's? I can't remember. I'm sorry.

NORMA ASADORIAN: OK. When you lived in Lincoln Place...you started to talk about the clothing you wore to walk in the snow. What kinds of clothing did you normally wear as a girl?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, well, back then you didn't even think of slacks.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What did girls wear?

MARY ASADORIAN: I was the one that broke that, I think. We wore homemade, homemade clothes, but woolen skirts with the full socks, those cotton socks.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Full socks that came up how high?

MARY ASADORIAN: Up to [Interviewee is gesturing with her hand to indicate a height on her leg.]

NORMA ASADORIAN: To the knee?

MARY ASADORIAN: Up past the knee.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Up to the thigh?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. Where you wore like a garter or something to hold it. And then once you got to school, I would take those off and wear anklets cause anklets were better to carry in my pocket. I'm telling you...

NORMA ASADORIAN: Was that allowed?

MARY ASADORIAN: Sure.

NORMA ASADORIAN: OK. What about what kind of shoes did you wear?

MARY ASADORIAN: Saddle oxfords.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did you wear makeup?

MARY ASADORIAN: There is a story behind that. Would you

like to hear it?

NORMA ASADORIAN: Yes.

MARY ASADORIAN: I was thirteen years old. I had come downstairs and getting ready to walk out the door. Oh, we had a tavern. My dad, my mother opened it in 1937, and all the bedrooms were upstairs and the tavern was downstairs. I came downstairs and my grandfather is sitting there at seven o'clock in the morning and he looked at me and he says, "Where're you going?" I said, "I'm going to school." [He said] "You're going to school? You look like an Arab. Go upstairs and put some makeup on."

NORMA ASADORIAN: What did he mean, "You look like an Arab" ?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, I was so dark. My skin was very dark. I didn't look good to him, so he made me put makeup on. I was thirteen years old when I put my makeup on and I've been wearing it ever since, thanks to my grandfather.

NORMA ASADORIAN: That's kind of surprising because...

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...because back then, I think, that women didn't normally...

MARY ASADORIAN: That's right.

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...wear makeup...

MARY ASADORIAN: And...

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...especially young girls.

MARY ASADORIAN: ...my father didn't open his mouth and say a word.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So in your family, it sounds like the men were more dominant...

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...than the women. Is that true in all of Armenian culture, generally?

MARY ASADORIAN: I think so. I think the men need to be, prove that they're authority. I don't know why. Yet the women guide them through the nose like anything.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did the men have much to do in deciding what sorts of things were done in the home...

MARY ASADORIAN: No.

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...or was that mainly the women's responsibility?

MARY ASADORIAN: No. All woman. That was all the women.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What kind of foods did you eat?

MARY ASADORIAN: All Armenian. All Armenian cooking.

Matter of fact, our Sunday special every Sunday was a leg of lamb roast with tomato....

(End of Tape 1 Side A)

(Beginning of Tape 1 Side B)

NORMA ASADORIAN: This is side 2 of Tape 1, an interview with Mary Asadorian conducted by Norma Asadorian on October 27, 2001. Let me repeat the question from the end of Side 1. What kind of foods did you eat in the home?

MARY ASADORIAN: It was all Armenian cooking and I started to say that our Sunday special and it was every Sunday, we had a leg of lamb. And my mother would brown that in the oven and she would put tomato paste with onions and potatoes around it and a little bit of salad and that leg fed everybody that would hit that tavern. And, of course, back then, lamb was cheap. And if I ever find a leg of lamb, I make my roast. I love it.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Is lamb typical of the kind of meat that you...

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. You want good stews, use lamb.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Is that the typical food used in Armenian culture? Lamb?

MARY ASADORIAN: I think so.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What other sorts of things did you eat?

MARY ASADORIAN: Normal pork chops, French fries. I'm strictly a meat and potato gal.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Are there any particular Armenian dishes that are favorites?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. Mine is heresah. I don't know how you are going to explain that. That's cracked wheat mixed with chicken that is cooked so much that it shreds and you beat it until it's a pulp. It looks like oatmeal when you look at it. And you pour gobs of [melted] butter on it. You know, cholesterol free.

NORMA ASADORIAN: It sounds delicious.

MARY ASADORIAN: I'll tell you. That's my favorite.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Are vegetables important in the foods...

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...that the Armenians make?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What kinds of things do they make using vegetables?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, do you want me to run off the stews we make? We make celery stew, we make string bean stew, we make--you call it hamhock and beans--we call it lamb meat and

beans. We have, Ohhhhh, what am I going to say? Oh, stuffed peppers and tomatoes with zucchini. We have grape leaves wrapped. We have cabbage -- pig in a blanket you people call it. We call it sarma. We have cold salads, two or three or four different varieties of cold salads that I think are excellent. Of course, that's my opinion.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Salads like with lettuce or with other things?

MARY ASADORIAN: No. No, no, no. Like I make eggplant salad that has bell peppers, tomatoes, gobs of onions, garlic, and you cook it in, you cook it first in water or put water in it and cook it. And then when it's ready to turn off for the last fifteen minutes, you pour oil. And then you eat it cold. And I made, just recently I made this beans with the tomato paste and it came excellent--and I hadn't made it in years. And we make what you people call piaz, which is white beans with onions and parsley, oil and vinegar. It is so simple to make, it's amazing people don't know. And then we have salad like that, you peel it... that green vegetable. It looks like a flower.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Avocado? Artichoke?

MARY ASADORIAN: Artichoke. They make salad with artichoke. That I don't like. And they love their greens. I used to fight with my mother all the time. I used to say, "If I want

greens, I'll go pull the grass out of the lawn. But they do. They love their greens. Matter of fact, they would think nothing of inviting a houseful of women for these little silver smelt fishes. They would light them over the gas stove with the flame, wash them, cut them up, bread them, hold it over the flame and bring out the parsley, the mint, the bay leaf, and the you name it, and they would make a meal out of it for lunch.

NORMA ASADORIAN: I've heard that Armenian cooking has a lot of spices and garlic, and...

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes, it does.

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...things of that nature in it.
I've also heard that you use rice. What do you use rice for?

MARY ASADORIAN: I use rice. I use two kinds of rice.
Uncle Ben's, strictly for pilaf.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What is pilaf?

MARY ASADORIAN: Pilaf is what the Armenians would regard as a "have to" if you have guests. And it's rice with egg noodles, butter, and chicken broth, which is done in no time at all. But the cheaper rice--I hate to use that word cheaper rice cause rice is rice--like Riceland Rice or Minute Rice, those type of rices, I use for everything else, like when I put rice in my hamburger for the grape leaves and the

cabbage and the stuffed peppers and tomatoes and stuff. I use different rice. I will not use my Uncle Ben for that.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So there are differences in rice?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, yes. I think there is.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Now these things that you've mentioned like rice and beans and parsley and mint and bay leaf, celery--are these things that are native to Armenia? These are recipes that came from there or are these things that people have here developed?

MARY ASADORIAN: I don't know. That I don't know. I assume the majority of them came with them. Oh, I meant to tell you, they also pickle cabbage. How am I going to explain this now? They used to have barrels and they would load the barrels up with either half a head of a cabbage or a whole head of a cabbage and they'd pickle it. And you want to smell something foul? God, but it was the most tasteful thing you ever ate in your life. And then they would pickle celery, carrots, cabbage, green tomatoes, in jars. Matter of fact, my brother Virgil and I one year he wanted to pickle peppers. I said, "Virgil, I don't know how to pickle peppers." He said, "You and I'll learn together." Well, we knew that the best one we are going to love would be the fried peppers. Well, when you fry them, you want it to

color. You don't want it to brown. Now, how are we going to do that? [I said] "Well, Virgil, we have these electric fryers, automatic. They reach a temperature, they click off. Why couldn't we use two of those?" So we made twenty-four jars of fried peppers and they were the most beautiful yellow you ever saw in your life. And then twenty-four jars of regular peppers. These are banana peppers, OK, the sweet. And we had forty-eight jars of peppers that didn't even last us the winter.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So did the women do a lot of canning of their own food?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. Yes, especially during the Depression.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And this pickling process you talked about, is that something that used a salt brine or vinegar?

MARY ASADORIAN: It's two water, two gallons of water to one gallon of vinegar and the way we measured it was we would take a tablespoon of salt after the water and vinegar were combined in the jar and we'd pour a tablespoon of salt into that and cap it and turn it upside down.

NORMA ASAODRIAN: How long did you leave that before it was ready to eat?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, we learned a trick to that, too. If

you take barley and throw some barley in it, it works like yeast. So it shouldn't take more than a month, five weeks.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did people in Lincoln Place raise a lot of their own food?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. Matter of fact, during World War II, when they suggested Victory Gardens, my grandmother had never heard of a Victory Garden, of course, she didn't know English. And she wanted to know what "Victy Gaden" was. And we said, you know, vegetable..."I do that all my life." And that's what it was. My grandmother raised chickens and my grandmother did the garden. That was her job.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Was that typical of people in Lincoln Place? They raised chickens and had a garden?

MARY ASADORIAN: Not all of them. Not all of them. A few of us did.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What was your grandmother's name?

MARY ASADORIAN: Shoig...S-H-O-I-G. [Correct spelling is Shoghig.] Her real name is Shoghagat, but I'm not about to spell that.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And what was your grandfather's name?

MARY ASADORIAN: Zadoor...Z-A-D-O-O-R.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Could you spell that again?

MARY ASADORIAN: Z-A-D-O-O-R.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And they were both from Armenia also?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Do you know where they were from exactly?

MARY ASADORIAN: My grandmother came from Herdif as my father did, but when my father was fourteen years old, he and my grandmother moved to Istanbul, Turkey, cause my grandfather was already here in the States. And he worked. My father worked for my mother's brother-in-law. The one that got my mother her education.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Um hm. [Acknowledgement.]
So did they move to Istanbul because it was a big city and there were jobs there?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes, I think so.

NORMA ASADORIAN: OK. What kind of breads are common in Armenian food?

MARY ASADORIAN: What kind of what?

NORMA ASADORIAN: Breads.

MARY ASADORIAN: Bread? Well, what they call today pita bread, we called flat bread. And years ago, when they would make that over an iron...it had to go over open flame, but

the thing that went over it was made of iron [a flat skillet] and you put it on there...

NORMA ASADORIAN: Like a skillet?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Or a large platter?

MARY ASADORIAN: Like a big platter.

NORMA ASADORIAN: OK

MARY ASADORIAN: And you put it on there and then you flip it over. You don't let it burn or anything. And to use it [the bread], you had to wet it down.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Is that pita bread or is that lavash hatz [flat bread]?

MARY ASADORIAN: That's lavash hatz.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Hatz means bread in Armenian?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. And the thing is that they have now come up, especially a relative of yours and mine that used to make it, and she would roll it up and it was like fresh. I don't know what they did to it, but, boy, it was delicious. You didn't have to wet it down. And, of course, pita bread, to us is nothing but that.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What kind of fruits do Armenians eat?

MARY ASADORIAN: Fruit?

NORMA ASADORIAN: Fruits and nuts, things of that nature.

MARY ASADORIAN: You name it and they eat it.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Could you be a little more specific?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, there isn't a fruit that I don't think any Armenian will not eat. And nuts...I got to tell you a little story concerning nuts. My brother Jerry was a little boy and one year some friend of my dad and mom's walked in and threw two little things at him. He said, "Here, play with these." And my brother, a year and a half, two years old, started playing with them. So every time my mother was going to put my brother to take a nap or anything, she would wash it and put it away and then when he would get up, she would give it to him to play with it. And, oh, about six, seven weeks went by and this man stopped by and here's my brother playing with these two little things. And he [the man] says, "How come you haven't eaten that?" And she [my mother] said, "Eat what?" He said, "Those are walnuts. You eat those. You don't play with them." My mother didn't even know what a walnut was.

NORMA ASADORIAN: They don't have walnuts in Armenia?

MARY ASADORIAN: I don't know.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What types of fruit are mainly associated

with Armenian culture?

MARY ASADORIAN: Grapes, pears, apples, watermelon. Melon of any kind. Bananas, oranges. It, I think took them a while to get used to grapefruit.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Tell me about your sisters and brothers. How many did you have and what were their names?

MARY ASADORIAN: I had two brothers older than myself. They were Jerry and Virgil and then a sister younger than myself...Charlotte or Shakeh.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did you all have Armenian names?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. My brother's was Jerair. My brother Virgil's was Vreg. And my sister's was Shakeh...S-H-A-K-A. I was Mary. It's on my birth certificate. Mary. No Armenian name. But I am Mariam.

NORMA ASADORIAN: People call you by an Armenian name. Do you know when each of them was born?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What year?

MARY ASADORIAN: My brother Jerry was born in 1920, December 16th. Virgil was born 1923, July...Oh, my God, Oh...22nd, my mother and father's anniversary. And Charlotte was born December 12, 1925. And there is a little story that goes

with this whole thing. There were five kids born in five years, lacking four days. We lost a sister after my...between the two brothers. So we never knew her.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did she die in infancy?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. She was six months old.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And when were you born?

MARY ASADORIAN: August 16, '24 [1924]. Anything else?

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did you enjoy growing up in Lincoln Place?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes, I did. I loved every bit of it.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Why is that?

MARY ASADORIAN: Because of the friendship, the education, knowing all these nationalities, regretting never learning another one except your own. To grow up with all these nationalities and because we have the speak our own language in our own homes, we didn't speak to each other except in English. And I'm ashamed that I never learned another language when we had the opportunity.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Do you think that growing up in an environment where you had lot of different cultures made you more accepting of people of other races and cultures as you grew up?

MARY ASADORIAN: I think so. I think so. That's why, lot of times when I used to hear, oh, about "bigots," how could they be a bigot? You were one. They were against you. Don't you realize that? How could you be a bigot?

NORMA ASADORIAN: So are you saying that is the way that other people in Granite City felt towards the people in Lincoln Place?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. Well, like I said 1940 championship [state basketball championship] is when the barrier opened up.

NORMA ASADORIAN: How did that happen?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, the first five players on the state championship basketball team were all from Lincoln Place. There were two Armenians, one Hungarian, one Czechoslovakian, and one Bulgarian [Macedonian]. They were your first five. Now where could you get a group like that?

NORMA ASADORIAN: Do you remember their names?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. We've lost a couple of them, just recently. There was Andy Phillip. He was the Hungarian. And there were Evan Parshegian, who was Armenian, Andrew Hagopian, who was Armenian. Danny Eftimoff, who was Bulgarian [Macedonian]. And George Gages, who was Czechoslovakian or Yugoslavian, one.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And why do you think that winning the state championship made the people of Granite City feel differently about Lincoln Place?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, they found out we were human beings, that we didn't live what they thought we did. I don't know what they thought how we lived. But, matter of fact, we had made friends, my sister and I, with two other sisters and we asked if they could spend the night and their mothers said they would be happy to have them spend the night with us. And I said, "You don't mind?" She said, "Why should I? I think you are wonderful. Your parents have done a wonderful job. Why should I worry?" I said, but it didn't go that far. There was that barrier. We were across from the tracks. But once that championship came in and because we were all from Lincoln Place, then the doors opened up. Oh, we were wonderful kids and how come we waited so long to be friends? But we were the same people.

NORMA ASADORIAN: How did the city show that they felt differently. Was there something that they did?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, when they...the first thing they did when they won the championship, they came straight down Lincoln Place. They did not go to the Granite City High School. And they held the whole reunion down...Matter of fact, at Sim's Pool Hall, on the corner of Olive and

Niedringhaus. It was packed! You couldn't even walk.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Some people have told me that the name of Pacific Avenue changed at that time.

MARY ASADORIAN: That I don't know when it changed. I know it changed during World War II.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Do you remember any other places that were down in Lincoln Place, businesses or other kinds of establishments?

MARY ASADORIAN: Would you believe there were nine taverns in a two block area?

NORMA ASADORIAN: Why were there so many taverns?

MARY ASADORIAN: Because they were making money. What else? The GI...the Depot brought in their soldiers. The first group to come in were cooks in '42 [1942] and then three months later the soldiers started coming in and they stayed until...what...'45, '46 [1945, 1946] when the war ended and they had inspectors come out and inspect all the taverns at least every six weeks and we always got the A-OK.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What did the Depot do? What kind of depot was it?

MARY ASADORIAN: Army depot. That's where, from I believe, it was their last stop before they went overseas.

NORMA ASADORIAN: How old were you when that was occurring? You said 1942. So you were about twenty?

MARY ASADORIAN: I'd have to be...Yes. Oh, yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And your father owned a tavern at this time?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes, it was. It was Abie's Tavern.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Could you tell me about it?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, I loved it. It wasn't a large place, but he always made sure it was clean and he never tolerated any shenanigans. Matter of fact, my father was a small built man. At one point he weighed a hundred and twenty eight pounds and he could put both his arms...hands on the bar behind the bar, lift himself up, and throw him over on the other side because the bar would be so packed, he couldn't get out to see what was going on in the six booths he had. So he would say, "Here I come, boys," and they would part and he'd jump over the bar. And he got there one time and he found a girl on a GI's lap and he scrounged around and he found a chair and he brought it and he said, "Long as there's a chair, you will sit on the chair. You will not sit on nobody's lap. There's no place, you go outside. Not in my tavern. This is family. Only families come here." I said...and they...it was strictly for GIs, but we had five or

six officers that liked my dad so much, they would take their bars off before they walked into the tavern, so the GIs wouldn't feel like they were cut out, you know. And the last week of the month, when the GIs were low on funds, my father had a big ice cooler...ice box and one side was lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers. The other side was lunchmeat and bread, rye bread, white bread, wheat bread, whatever, all with the coupons that we had during World War II.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Ration coupons?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. And he'd tell the boys, "You hungry? It's there. You fix it. I fix it, I charge you. You fix it, you eat it free." And my father fed those GIs every...the last week of the month...every bunch of them, every bunch of them.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So this was a tavern that served food as well as alcohol?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We had a restaurant.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did you cook?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, let me say. I learned how to make beef roast and pork roast.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Who did the cooking?

MARY ASADORIAN: My mother.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And did you do anything in the tavern?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes, I worked behind the bar. I was a waitress, I was a barmaid. You name it. I loved it. I loved every bit of it. And I was treated like one GI said to another GI who got smart with me one night. He said "Young man, this is our sister. You will treat her like she was your sister. Otherwise, get out." I said...I had protection in that bar and I don't care, my father could be gone a week on a vacation. I was protected. I loved it. I loved every bit of it.

NORMA ASADORIAN: I've heard that your father had a reputation for being very generous.

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. Yes. My father loved to drink. Loved to make merry. He loved his good time and he always had a habit. He would come in the morning. Now I'm going to tell you his morning breakfast was a whole egg in a glass of beer. That was his breakfast. And he would stand by the cash register, put his head in his hand and he'd look down on paper, pad and pencil, pencil in his hand and look at the pad and he'd start writing in Armenian all the bottles of beer or whiskey that went out and how much it cost and who took it. Well, this one morning he's standing there and he's standing there and he's standing there. I said in Armenian to him, "Pop, what's the matter?" He said, "I can't remember." I said, "What?" He said, "I can't remember who took what last night." I said, "Why?" He said, "I had wine." And so my

father never drank wine again because he couldn't remember and he didn't want to be taken a fool of. Now he would give credit and he never thought anything of it. He never once had to go down after a man for a penny. But he knew that these bunch of men that were there that night took advantage of him and he couldn't remember who they were.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did he have a cash register to keep track of sales or was everything just in his head?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, both. But more his head. He didn't trust cash register.

(Tape was stopped at this point. Interviewee needed a small break. At this time, Tape 1 Side B was ended and Tape 2 Side A was inserted.)

(Beginning Tape 2 Side A)

NORMA ASADORIAN: This is a continuation of the interview with Mary Asadorian by Norma Asadorian on October 27, 2001. This is Tape 2 Side 1. You were talking about Abie's Tavern and what kind of man your father was. Could you tell me another example or two of how he interacted with the soldiers or the other people in Lincoln Place?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, to him once they were drafted and they were in the Army, they were men, and when he found that one of his boys was seventeen years old, I never saw my father cry so hard in his life that this seventeen year old boy was in a uniform. And the boy was at the last week of the month,

with very little money in his pocket, and my father told him, as long as he was there, he got all the drinks, all the food he wanted, and if he needed a hot...warm coat for the winter, he'd get him a warm coat. And the boy said, "I'm only seventeen." He said, "You're old enough to fight, you're old enough to drink." But my father watched him very closely, made sure he never drank more than one or two beers. But my father had a heart of gold. He really did. And the civilians, let me use that term, started to turn against my father because he was paying more attention to the GIs than to them. And my father says,"Why not, they are here to save our skins. Why are you jealous of these boys?" But he always, always made sure that they had plenty to eat and for a drink [unintelligible]. And he would get what they called back then half pints of whiskey. Cases of them and each GI that came into our tavern and said good-bye to my dad for the last time, got a bottle of whiskey from him as a going away gift. And then he got stuck with income tax. But...

NORMA ASADORIAN: Do you want to tell us about that?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, the thing is, I always had a standing joke. My father would go take a nap between one and three in the afternoon. And when they would come in and say "Where is Abie?" I would say he is taking a nap. "Well, could I wake..." "No, no, no. President of the United States walked

in...nobody. He sleeps til three. This man walked in one day and he wanted to talk to Abie. And I said Abie's sleeping. "But, please, it's very important." I said, "I'm sorry, sir. You're not even the president and I wouldn't wake him for the president." And he pulled out a badge--FBI. He said, "Will this do it?" I said, "What the hell do you want with my father?" I said...not realizing what time it was, I heard the back door of the tavern open. It was my father walking in. And I said "Here he is now. It must be three o'clock." And my father said, "What?" I said, "He's from the FBI." "What you want?" It didn't bother my dad and I'm shaking like a leaf. And he said "Tax evasion." "No, no, no, no, no. No tax evasion. Abie pay his tax. Every penny. Abie owe no government. This government mine. I pay my government." And, of course, my mother had walked in. She didn't know what was going on and my mother was a crier. All you had to do was yell and she'd cry. So I said, "OK. Let's all calm down. Tell me what this is all about." Well, it seems back in 1937 or 38, they had passed a law that every shot, every drop of beer that came out of a barrel, every shot that came out of a whiskey bottle had to be taxed. But nobody bothered to tell the tavern owners. All the alderman knew, but they never mentioned it.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So he was paying income taxes and thinking

that was all he had to pay?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. And the guy told him. He had a record. I said...It floored me. All the cases of these half pints that my father had bought were listed and each bottle, how many came out of each bottle. And my father said, "I bought that. That was mine. I want to take it and dump it in the sewer, I can dump it." He said, "But you have to pay for each shot." So he got stung with $8,000 back taxes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: That was a lot of money back then.

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes, it was very much. But somehow or another, they found out that my father really, really, really was innocent in this whole thing and it came down to $3500, which wasn't bad. But there was a tavern owner in Madison who fought them and ended up paying $28,000. So my father ended up pretty good. But that kind of broke his spirit then a little.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Where did you live at that time?

MARY ASADORIAN: I was already married and living at 2117 Grand Avenue. And the reason I know all this is because I used to bring my kids down and work in the tavern and help my dad, so he could still continue his afternoon naps. But 1953 September, there was that fire.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Where was that?

MARY ASADORIAN: That was in Lincoln Place. It destroyed my dad's tavern, our home, the building across the street, and the building next to that facing the same side of the street.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What streets were these?

MARY ASADORIAN: Niedringhaus and Chestnut. And then the fire changed and went across the street to Niedringhaus and it kind of burned a couple of businesses there. But not the damage that it already done to us. And my father lost everything. Everything.

NORMA ASADORIAN: I've heard this be called the Great Lincoln Place Fire. Is that true?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. Matter of fact, thinking they're going to give my father a consolation, they said, "You know, Abie, your wall became a, your building became a wall to keep the fire from spreading." My father said he didn't give a damn if all Lincoln Place went after his went. But the one wall stayed and it stopped the fire. And there was no fire in the fire hydrants, I mean, no water in the fire hydrants. The Depot came in and saved it.

NORMA ASADORIAN: The city wouldn't come down to Lincoln Place?

MARY ASADORIAN: The city was there, but there was no water.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Oh, I see. Were the buildings in Lincoln

Place made of brick or wood?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, ours was. Ours was a two story brick with a barber shop and a cleaning shop and the tavern and behind that was a six-room home.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And that was where your family lived?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. And that's where we lived and it was all gone. All gone.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So all your memories, all your pictures...

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I stood. We were getting ready, my husband and my two kids. My daughter wasn't born yet. We were going to go visit a friend of ours who had just had a child and we got this phone call from these two sisters I had talked earlier about. One of them, Evelyn called me. She said, "Mary." I said, "Yes." She said, "Honey, do you know your dad's place is on fire." I said, "Ev, you're kidding." And she said, "I can see it from the...where I'm living." They lived upstairs, so she could see all the way down. And I said, "Oh, my God." And I told Ed, "We can't go anywhere. There's a fire in Lincoln Place. They say Pop's place is on fire." We couldn't go. We were stuck. We had to drive all the way around and when we got ...we still couldn't go. The cops wouldn't let us in and I said, "You're not stopping me. That's my dad's place." So I left my husband and two kids and he took the kids back to his

mother and father and he came. And there's my father, I'll never forget it as long as I live, standing all by himself on the street corner with his hands in his pockets, playing with the keys to his business establishment and tears running down his face like a baby crying. And I'm...when he saw me, he kind of perked up. And I said, "Where's Mom and Grandma?" He said, "Down on the corner." And I went there and they're working on my grandmother. And I thought what's wrong here? Well, she saw my father go into the cleaning shop, but she never saw him come out when the building collapsed. And she passed out. Well, they wait...when she revived, they said, "There's your son, standing right there," you know. And so I had to bring them all.... And then we had company from Istanbul, Turkey living with us at the time and they lost everything. So I brought them all to my mother-in-law's home, my father-in-law's home. And we took over. That's all there is to it. But, I'll tell you, if you have never been in a house fire or any kind, don't. It's devastating. There's nothing like it. And I give one hundred percent credit to any fireman, any fireman. That includes my own son.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Why do you say it's devastating? I mean, obviously, everything is lost that you had.

MARY ASADORIAN: The fire itself. Now you got to remember, that was alcohol. And it would shoot out across the street.

I mean, how could I explain it now? It was almost like a bridge.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So the flames were shooting out from the openings?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And they called in the Army Depot soldiers to stand guard for looting. Of course, I don't know what there was to loot. Two people were killed in the fire. One went back for his Social Security check and the other was an older woman who was having trouble trying to get out, and couldn't and was overcome by smoke.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Where did they live?

MARY ASADORIAN: They lived in the Depigian Building. That was...Now we lived on the corner of Chestnut and Niedringhaus and across the street on the corner of Chestnut and Niedringhaus was the Koleff Building. Next to the Koleff Building was the Depigian Building. All of that was gone. All gone. (Interviewee gestured with a clap.)

NORMA ASADORIAN: No one in your family was injured or killed?

MARY ASADORIAN: No. Thank God for that.

NORMA ASADORIAN: But you lost everything?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Now how did they start over?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, when I say they lost everything...Some GI ran around the back of the house and my grandmother never locked her windows, so he opened one of the windows and grabbed everything he could and threw it on the bed and pulled the whole bedsheet up and threw it out in the alley. That was the only thing we had: sheets, a couple of pictures, some clothes. Now my mother...It was so hot and drought, no rain for I don't know how long, that my mother was walking around with a sleeveless dress on, no bra. And my mother was not a skinny woman. She weighed two hundred and forty eight pounds, so she was two-ton Lizzy running with this outfit on. And that's all she had on was her underpants and this dress. But the next morning, my mother-in-law and my husband went shopping to Carp's Dry Goods Store and Ed told Mrs....What the world was her name? Wonderful...Barrett, Mrs. Barrett. And she asked Ed. She said, "What happened to Miss Abie?" And he said, "They're living with us. And we're here to get some clothes for them." She said, "Don't worry," cause she knew my mother's size and everything. So she got all the clothes that my mother needed, two sets of each, like two sets underwear and everything, with two dresses and stuff. And then she did the best she could for my father. And as far as my grandmother was concerned. My grandmother was what? One hundred and

forty pounds? Easy to dress. And all she wore was cotton socks and cotton pants and cotton slips and a cotton dress and a cotton apron, you know. And typical foreign woman. But for two days, at least they had decent outfit until my father was able to get his bank statements straightened out and then they went and bought some clothes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did the people of Lincoln Place come to your family's assistance?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. They offered. They really did. I can't say they didn't. But my father, being a proud man...No. And one of them was your grandfather, who Bucko, your Uncle Bucko called long distance. And they weren't speaking, you know. And he told them, "You take them to our home and you keep them there until we get back." Well, I'd already made arrangements to take them to my home. And he said, "...anything they want...." See no matter how much you don't talk to each other, that love is still there. That love.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Now I've heard that a lot of the immigrants that came to Lincoln Place, especially among the Armenians, that sometimes whole villages came and settled in the same areas. Is that true?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, I don't know. I really couldn't say. There were a lot of Armenians from a lot of different

villages. They were from Mush. They were from Kughe. They were from, of, from Telhetzis.

NORMA ASADORIAN: How do you spell that?

MARY ASADORIAN: I don't know.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Say it again.

MARY ASADORIAN: Telhetzis, I think is the way it's pronounced. But there were more Kughetzis, like your grandfather and my father. And of course, Kughe, the town of Kughe, comes from Erzerum. Erzerum was a big city and these were little villages in there. And there were...my father really came from Herdif. And there was only one other person from Herdif and that was Manoogian, Mrs. Manoogian. So they ended up calling each other brother and sister.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Now you mentioned that a lot of people lived in your house. It sounded like more than just father, mother, and children.

MARY ASADORIAN: At our home?

NORMA ASADORIAN: At your father's home? There were the grandparents also.

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Did other people...

MARY ASADORIAN: We had a bachelor living with...upstairs.

This was at 1649 Maple Street, until we opened,,,until 19...When I was fifteen, we moved over Depigian Building. He was a bachelor and he had...My grandmother had the upstairs, had two bedrooms. One she gave to this bachelor, who was supposed to pay rent. I don't think he ever paid rent in his life. And then we had another bachelor that lived in town, but he spent all, excuse me, all day with us. He ate with us. My mother washed his clothes. I mean, he became our uncle that we never had. And what an uncle he turned out to be. I'll tell you, I wish everybody had an uncle like him.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What was his name?

MARY ASADORIAN: Nishan...Harabedian. Wonderful man. But anyway, and then eventually when we opened the tavern, my mother walked around from November through December, collecting a nickel here and a dime there to open this tavern. And she got enough money to pay the rent. But some bachelor man paid the license the first five years for us. Never took a penny.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So is this common that lots of relatives lived in the same house and sometimes other boarders lived there and...

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. Yes. Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...you helped each other get things, businesses started and...

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes, yes, yes. That's why today, I am tired of having people live with me. I've had people live with me all my life, all my life. Now I had wonderful grandparents. I can't say I didn't. I don't ever remember my grandfather working a day in his life. Where he ever got money, I'll never know. But he was not a cheat and he was not a drunkard. He was nothing, but people adored him. And he got a lot of free meals. If you had seen him, you would have known why. Lot of free meals. And, but he lived with us and this John, whatever his last name, lived with us, and then we lived in that above the tavern and there were bachelors living there. And then when I got married and moved to 2117 Grand Avenue, we had the whole Asadorian clan there, plus my mother-in-law had roomers. So, I've had people living with me...I lived nineteen years with my mother-in-law and fifteen years with my sister-in-law. Now I'm living fifty-four years with my husband.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So this extended family living together is typical of...

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes, it is.

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...of the Armenians or of all of the immigrants?

MARY ASADORIAN: All. All immigrants.

NORMA ASADORIAN: All of them?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. They made sure they take care of each other. Now that's one good thing about them.

NORMA ASADORIAN: How long did your grandparents and your parents live?

MARY ASADORIAN: My grandfather had his wish. 1939, September 1, Germany walked into Poland. And he turned to me and he said, "If God is with me, he'll take me before I see my grandsons go." My grandfather died that November of a stroke. He was sixty, sixty-five, something like that.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So you don't know exactly when he was born?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, no. It's all guesswork. And my grandmother lived til 1955. And she died of cancer.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Do you have any idea about how old she might have been?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, our physician at the time...I asked him. I said, "Dr. Carras, we have no idea how my, how old my grandmother is." He said, "Mary, the only thing I can say is that she will never see eighty again." So she had to be over eighty.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Now I have heard that Armenians are very long-lived people.

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. That's what I hear.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Do you think that is because of their diet or just inherited?

MARY ASADORIAN: I think they're hard-headed. They're determined people. They're not going to let anybody get them down. And, yes, their diet has a lot to do with it. They eat a lot of vegetables and a lot of fruit and a lot of fish. No, they're...My mother could never understand how come I don't eat fish and fruit, cause she lived on it. Of course, like I said, she weighed two forty eight, too.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What did you do for entertainment with your friends, like when you were a teenager or in your twenties? Can you tell?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, alright. Here was my schedule. I worked for my dad, seven days a week. And I mean seven full days a week, until about 19...end of '44, beginning of '45 [1944, 1945]. I started going out. I told my dad, "You go to your Westerns on Friday nights. I'm going to go to my dances." I loved to dance. So I would always go to the White Swan. And there would be three or four of us girls. We would walk to town. We'd catch the Alton streetcar and the conductor got to know us so well, he would slow the

streetcar down and we'd jump off and run down into the highway and go to White Swan. But we always got a ride home by the boys from Lincoln Place. They always made sure we got home. And so I started going out on Wednesday nights, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. And my father says, "I get one night. You get four." I said, "That's right." But, I'll tell you, I enjoyed myself tremendously. I never missed out on anything. I didn't date because, like I said, the GIs would never let me date. It's not that I was anything special. It's just that they didn't trust that guy to be with me. After all, I was Abie's daughter.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So you were more like a sister?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. And so no matter where I went, I'm going to cross some GI. "Hey, Mary, how's Pop?" You know, and they would put their arm around me. Nobody knew that we weren't related or anything. They never knew. But, yes, I enjoyed myself very much, very much. I didn't miss out on a thing.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Is that unusual that you were allowed to date in that time period?

MARY ASADORIAN: We started to make a joke, and it was a joke, believe me. Thank God for the war. The girls from Lincoln Place were reprieved.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Because...?

MARY ASADORIAN: Because the boys were gone and all they had were their daughters and they couldn't control their daughters. Their daughters became, "Hey...we have a right, too, you know."

NORMA ASADORIAN: So you were more Americanized at that point?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Matter of fact, I don't think there was one person in Lincoln Place...See, I can only refer to Lincoln Place.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Um hm.

MARY ASADORIAN: ...one person in Lincon Place that ignored a soldier walking the street. I really don't think so. They were all very good to them.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Um hm. Well, the Depot, I've heard was a big part of the economy there, not just for the tavern that your father owned...

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, no. It helped Granite City tremendously.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What kinds of other little businesses were there in Lincoln Place?

MARY ASADORIAN: Grocery stores, cleaning shops. Matter of fact, a young lady even opened a dress shop and did very well in it. There was a beauty shop. You know, come to

think of it, I had forgotten all about these. Thank you for reminding me. Yes, like I said, there was our tavern, a barber shop, and a cleaning shop in one establishment and across the street was the beauty shop and on the corner on one side was the tavern and on the other side was another tavern. And so, there were quite a few taverns and quite a few grocery stores. There were, I would say, what, four, five grocery stores. There was, let's see, Mitseff's, Vartan's, Lovachoff's, Kirchoff's, and Stoyanoff's. Yes. There were five of them.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Were there any bakeries?

MARY ASADORIAN: There were two bakeries. And they made excellent, excellent bread. But they also baked for the women who would bake with these bakery trays. You know, you didn't fit those in your little oven, you had to take them to the bakery. Matter of fact, I had gone to a bakery to pick some bread up, when this woman walked in, who was an excellent cook. And I asked her, I said, "This stuff, what did you make?" "I made boereg." I said, "Oh, OK." And he was going to put it in the oven and she said, "Chris what do you think you're doing?" "Yes, I'm putting it in the oven." "Not without the newspaper on top." And he pulled it back out and he laid newspaper on top of that boereg and she timed it. And then when she said, "OK. Take it out." He took it out and removed the paper. The paper had scorched on top,

but it was the most beautiful golden brown you'd ever seen in your life. It was absolutely beautiful. Excellent.

NORMA ASADORIAN: That was to keep the pastry from burning?

MARY ASADORIAN: From burning.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And what kind of ovens did he have?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, those big bakery ovens, with the paddles that were so big that you could put a child in it and shove it in there.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So was it a stone oven or a brick oven?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, brick, I think. I think, it was brick.

NORMA ASADORIAN: You said his name was Chris?

MARY ASADORIAN: One was Chris and the other was...well, I hate to say it. They called him khambur, which means hunchback, you know, because he walked with a...But they both did good business and they someone even opened a diner, two blocks from, no, one block from the Depot, that made good, build up good, you know, business.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Do you think Lincoln Place has changed now?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: How is it different now?

MARY ASADORIAN: I don't think they're as friendly. I really don't.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Do the same type of people live there?

MARY ASADORIAN: No. I don't think so. But I will say this, they have bought homes cheap down there and they have built them up to where they are pretty homes. And I don't blame them, if they're young couples and can't afford to buy a $200,000 home and could afford to buy a $75,000 home and spend the $10,000 or $20,000 on it and fix it up they way they want. What's the difference where it is? As long as your next-door neighbor is as clean as you are. That's the catch: Is you next-door neighbor as clean as you are?

NORMA ASADORIAN: Um hm.

MARY ASADORIAN: See when we were growing up there, we were immaculate. I mean, I remember getting a licking from another woman because I walked into, broke into her basement with her daughter. And we ate and left a mess in the kitchen. And she walked right in, took a hold of me and whacked me on the buttocks. My mother didn't say one word. Nobody interferred.

NORMA ASADORIAN: How big were the homes, most of the homes?

MARY ASADORIAN: Well, usually, a four or five room home, one

bath and three or four kids.

NORMA ASADORIAN: That's what I was going to ask. Typically how many children?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: When did, when do you think Lincoln Place started changing? You said it's not the same anymore.

MARY ASADORIAN: That I couldn't tell you because you got to remember I moved out in 1947 when I got married and the only dealing I had with Lincoln Place then was going to church every Sunday.

NORMA ASADORIAN: An Armenian church?

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, yes. Definitely.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Can you describe that?

MARY ASADORIAN: It's beautiful service. It is similar to the Catholic church with like an open altar. The Catholics have an open altar. And yet it's similar to the Greek Orthodox Church, although the Greek Orthodox Church has the three arches. And our service is done in Armenian. Although the reverend we have now, born and raised here in this country does speak a lot of English in it, which he has to because we have a lot of intermarriages and I give credit to these young girls, who are learning the Armenian language and

the Armenian chants by the phonetics in the book. But the songs are strictly Armenian. And I've told him, I'm not anyone special, but I've told our reverend, "The first time you sing one of those songs in English, you'll never see my face in this church again." I'll tolerate a lot of it, but when you start doing that, it will ruin it, like it ruined the Catholic Church. I mean, I didn't understand Latin, and there's a lot of things in Armenian I don't understand, and yet my daughter thinks I'm one of the greatest there is. It loses. It becomes cold. There's no warmth there. And he says he never will. And I hope he doesn't. He's training ...By rights women are not allowed on our altar, but we are short of little boys, so he asked the archbishop permission, special permission, to use these little girls, from age of five to at least age of eleven to do the candles. And he got reprimanded by one of our former clergy, "What are you doing? Changing the rules? You know girls aren't allowed on the altar." How could those little girls do damage? What they mean by women on the altar is once that time period comes in. You know what I'm referring to.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Uh hm.

MARY ASADORIAN: And they become women. That's when they're not allowed on the altar. Now if you're past that, in menopause, you're dried up like a bone, you can get up on the altar in your stocking feet and clean it, cause your clean as

far as they're concerned. In between, you cannot get up on the altar. And so he's been training four of these little girls to be candlebearers on the altar and we are proud of that.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So are these traditions that go back into ...

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...into Armenian history?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What type of religion is the Armenian religion?

MARY ASADORIAN: Armenian Apostolic. Gregorian.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So is that a...

MARY ASADORIAN: The old Gregorian...You've heard of the old Gregorian calendar?

NORMA ASADORIAN: Um hm.

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. It goes back to those days.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So this is a Christian religion?

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes. Yes it is.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And it's called Armenian Orthodox?

MARY ASADORIAN: Armenian Apostolic.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Apostolic? And when did Armenia become...

MARY ASADORIAN: Wait. Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic. Yes. It could be either one, I think.

NORMA ASADORIAN: When did Armenians become Christian? Have they been Christian for a long time?

MARY ASADORIAN: Three hundred and five A.D. [A. D. 305]. Three hundred and one A. D. is when St. Gregory had his dream that if you build me a church here...He was thrown in a dungeon by King Trtad [King Tiridates], who was a pagan lover. And he gets sick. And nobody could cure him. And someone said, well, there is one man that could cure...

(Tape ran out in the middle of the interviewee's sentence. Tape was turned and interview resumed on Side B Tape 2.)

NORMA ASADORIAN: This is Side 2 of Tape 2, a continuation of the interview with Mary Asadorian on October 27, 2001. You were telling me about the Armenian religion...

MARY ASADORIAN: Yes.

NORMA ASADORIAN: ...and St. Gregory.

MARY ASADORIAN: And he says, "No. He's been in there fourteen years. He's dead by now." He said, "No. He's still alive." What he didn't know was that his sister used

to go and throw food down to Gregory. So they pulled him out of this dungeon and he told them he had had a dream and that if he saved his life that that's where they're going to build that church. And he saved the king's life and the king said that because of that all state of Armenia will be Christians as of today. So we are the first country, I should say, that accepted Christianity as a whole state. The whole state accepted it. And, of course, the church was built, and it still stands today. They use it today.

NORMA ASADORIAN: What role does the church play in the Armenian community?

MARY ASADORIAN: I think it plays a big role. It keeps the children together. It keeps the Armenians together and it doesn't stop us from bringing Americans in to see what it's like. Matter of fact, we as a small community, not only did we build a great hall. I think we did a wonderful job on that hall. We have built a new church. And by a handful of people that, of course, sometimes, I get angry because they are so chintzy, but that's the way, I guess it's going to be done, it's going to be done that way. But we've accomplished a lot.

NORMA ASADORIAN: So has the Armenian church held Armenians together in the countries they've lived in?

MARY ASADORIAN: I think so.

(Tape was stopped briefly. Interviewee needed a short break.)

(Tape is beginning again here.

NORMA ASADORIAN: We're continuing after a slight pause to switch the tape. Side 2 of Tape 2, interview with Mary Asadorian. If you had to sum up Lincoln Place, to tell your children and grandchildren about it, how, what, would you tell them?

MARY ASADORIAN: I would tell them personally, it was the best education I've had growing up with all of us foreigners. You want an education, live with the immigrants. They know more. They do more. And they help you. I'm not saying the Americans don't. We found out that we do. Come September 11th [2001], we found out. But, you realize, you saw the majority of them were immigrants. They help each other. They don't stand on the corner and watch this man go by hungry. They'll do something. They may not do much, but they do something. And I was against my son buying a home in Lincoln Place, because he was not born and raised in Lincoln Place. But there was something about it that he liked. And I don't know if it was stories I used to say or what. Now you got to remember, I was born there in '24 [1924]. My husband didn't move down there til '36 [1936]. So he was not a Lincoln Place. And then we got married eleven years later and we moved out. So my husband was only in Lincoln Place

eleven years. And he really didn't get that education that the rest of us got. And today, when we get together, it's like we've seen long-lost friends and we pick up right where we left off. Like a day has never gone by. And I wouldn't trade that. I don't know if anybody else would. I moved away for seven years to Florida and came back to my old Granite City. And some of us know what there is about Granite City I like. The smog, I guess, I don't know, the filth. [Laughter.] But I do love Granite City and I love my Lincoln Place, but it has changed tremendously. But everything changes. If you want an education, deal with the immigrants. That's all I've got to say.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Well, I thank you for this opportunity to interview you. It's been very interesting. I hope that it's brought back some good memories in your mind, too.

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, it has, it has. It really has.

NORMA ASADORIAN: Well, thank you very much.

MARY ASADORIAN: Oh, you're welcome.

NORMA ASADORIAN: And this concludes the interview with Mary Asadorian. Interviewer Norma Asadorian.