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Interviewee (print) Interviewer (print)

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Gadsden, Al

on the date(s) of March 16, 1996

for the oral history collection being compiled by Dr. Marshall.

Mildred E. Paglione  
Interviewee's Signature

Date: March 16, 1996

Address 1315 Coats St

Gadsden, Al

Phone 492-0253

Michelle A. Bein  
Interviewer's Signature

Date March 16, 1996

Address 1208 Quail Run Dr

Jacksonville, Al.

Phone 435-2454

INTERVIEWEE BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Name: *Mrs. Mildred Simonich Paglione*

Address: *1315 Coats Street, Gadsden, AL*

Phone number: *(205) 492-0253*

Approximate age or date of birth: *October 16, 1914 (81)*

Mother's name: *Mary Ann Simonich (Marija Annja Simonic)*

Father's name: *John Daniel Simonich (Ivan Dunic Simonic)*

Places lived/when: *Pueblo, Colorado (1914-1980), Anniston/Gadsden, Alabama (1980-present)*

Education: *Tenth Grade*

Religion: *Roman Catholic*

Business, political, social memberships (past/present): *St. Jacobs Lodge, Croatian Fraternal Union*

Present occupation: *Retired (16 years)*

Past occupation: *Nursing Aide (49 years)*

Special skills: *Accomplished seamstress, artist.*

Major accomplishments: *Raising three great children (her words, not mine)*

National events in which interviewee has participated: *Life*

Local events in which interviewee has participated:

National born U.S. citizen: *Yes*                      Naturalized citizen:

Country from which he/she emigrated:

Documents, photographs, artifacts which are in the possession of the interviewee: *Father's Naturalization Certificate, WWII ration stamps, Photographs dating back to the twenties.*

Michelle Bein

BIOGRAPHY OF MRS. MILDRED PAGLIONE

DAUGHTER OF IMMIGRANTS

[ACCOMPANIMENT TO ORAL INTERVIEW CONDUCTED FOR DR. MARSHALL'S  
AMERICAN HISTORY CLASS (202)]

This is an easy assignment for me because I have always thought that my mother had an interesting life, though she would probably dispute that. Born in 1914, in Pueblo, Colorado to immigrant parents, Mildred Simonich Paglione was the third of seven children. Her parents had made the journey from what is now Croatia, formerly Yugoslavia but then considered part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Though Croatia was a separate state, immigration officials did not make the distinction. All emigrants from the Balkans were grouped together and classed as coming from Austro-Hungary. Both were from the same poverty stricken village near Zagreb, but did not know each other there.

Born in 1890, her father, Ivan (John) Simonich came to America when he was 16 to join his father in Pueblo. Colorado was attractive to the new-comers not only because of its similarity to their homeland but also because of the burgeoning steel industry and its need for labor. At the turn of the century, Pueblo was a typical mill town and earning its nickname of Little Pittsburgh. The Colorado Fuel and Iron Company owned much of the housing, the Colorado Supply (a company store), the YMCA/YWCA and more.

In a population of approximately 20,000, the Croats were only one of many ethnic groups. Significant populations of Italians, Swedes, Irish, Slovenians, Greeks, Serbs as well as Blacks and Mexicans all found this town at the foot of the Rocky Mountains to their liking.

As is typical of Croatians, John was a well-built man over six feet tall. He had the advantage of being somewhat literate: reading and writing his native language and being adept in mathematics. It was not usual for peasants in this part of Europe to be educated, but the village priest was somewhat of a visionary and insisted that all the young men attend school to the fourth grade. In actuality, that grade was equivalent to a high school education in the United States in later years.

Both John and his father worked for the Colorado Fuel and Iron Corporation in the steel mill. He would work his way up to the position of puller in the rail department and retire as foreman in the shipping department. Though this production job paid well-John could make \$30.00 a day in the nineteen-twenties- it was also very dangerous. The men stood on either side of a machine that formed various rails. The rails would shoot out, red-hot, and the men would grab them with long handled tongs and set them on a conveyor to the temper bath. If the rail wasn't handled just right, it could wrap around a man, killing him.

Though a laborer all his life, John taught himself to speak, read and write English. As part of a large Croatian community in Pueblo, he and a friend, John Butkovich, founded the St. Jacob's Lodge of The Croatian Fraternal Union. John was, at various times, member, Secretary-Treasurer or President of the Lodge and as such was well

respected. The officers of the Lodge performed duties much like those of the Bosses of Tammany Hall. New arrivals were welcomed, housed, churched, employed, and incorporated into the community through contacts with the Lodge. As far back as I can remember, my grandparents' house was a meeting place for members. My grandfather had a huge roll-top desk where he would read, write checks, keep the lodge books. He had extraordinarily beautiful handwriting for a man and I loved to watch him write.

My mother's mother was named Marija (Mary) Simonich (her maiden name also). Mary was married at age 15 to Milan (also Simonich) and her husband left for the United States soon after the marriage, promising to send for her and their daughter as soon as he had made his fortune. Milan made his way to Seattle and found work in a mine. In 1905, at age 21, she was finally on her way to America. Because the trip was hard, and the conditions in their new home uncertain, she left her daughter behind in Croatia. When she arrived, she learned that Milan had been killed in a mine explosion. Rather than return home, she contacted cousins who lived in Colorado, and journeyed there.

On the train to St. Louis, a porter came around selling fruit. Mary had no experience with such exotic fruits as pomegranates and bananas. While trying to decide if she should spend the precious six cents, a man on the train bought her a banana. Grateful and hungry, she bit right into it. Too polite to spit it out, she bravely chewed and swallowed. When the man recovered from his amusement, he showed her how to peel the fruit. But Mary had her fill of the vile tasting thing and refused for the rest of her life to eat a banana or anything made with it.

When she reached her destination, after traveling by train, stage-coach and wagon, she was warmly received by the Croatian community which then numbered about 400 (Prpic, p.174). Sometime after her arrival, Mary's cousins arranged a sort of reception, inviting all the eligible young men. As the group was gathering to find places at the table, John said, "Mary, if you show me the man you want, I will make sure he marries you." To which she replied, "Why should I pick anyone else when I am sitting next to the one I want."

Mary and John were married in late 1910. Mary's brother emigrated this year also and came to live with them. Living in a three-room rented house, they began to plan for a better life for their children. At that time John was earning \$3.00 a week. The first of their children was born in 1910. In birth order, their children were Rosa (Rose), Marija Luisa (Mary Louise), Milka (Mildred), Annja (Emma), Ivan Jr. (John), Milan (Michael) and Josepha (Josephine).

John became a naturalized citizen in 1921 and so also conferred citizen status on the entire family. But Mary longed for her eldest daughter and about this time, John sent for Katja (Kate) who was now sixteen. After living a life of deprivation in her homeland, Kate was both fearful and in awe of this country. Her half-brothers and sisters contributed to the fear. Kate arrived shortly before Halloween in 1922. Thinking they would have some fun with this newest member of the family, the three oldest girls, my mother included, decided to play a practical joke on her. Dressing up in their uncle's clothes and wearing masks he had purchased for his own Halloween fun, they scared

poor Kate so badly that she tore up the masks. Once accustomed to this holiday, which was unknown in Europe, Kate joined in and had as much fun as anyone.

Kate had a harder time getting used to the bounty. In the first weeks after her arrival, she was amazed by the amount of food available. She would later say that on her first night, she watched her mother make Polenta (a yellow corn meal porridge) for supper and thought that as hungry as she was, she could eat every bit herself. When she got up from the table she was stuffed and all she could think was that this surely was a great country when one could at last have all they wanted to eat.

Though Croatian was spoken in the household, John made certain that all the children could speak English well. He would hold Sunday night lessons and have each child read from the paper. He discouraged mispronunciations and accents that would identify the speaker as someone other than a native born American. Education was a primary concern. John was adamant that all his children would finish high school and hoped that his son's would go on to college. Music lessons were provided for any child who was interested and even in this large family, each one's particular talent was recognized. Though Mary had no formal education, she had listened closely as her brothers did their lessons. Often in the evenings when her own children were doing their homework, Mary would sit and crochet. If anyone encountered a problem they could not solve, their mother often had the answer. She could do sums in her head and always knew how much change she had coming. She liked to pretend that she didn't know much English, that way she knew what others were saying when they thought she couldn't understand. Mary's ability to copy a pattern, or devise her own is unique, for

even after she had lost her eyesight, she could still produce beautiful pieces simply by counting her stitches. Once she knew a pattern, she never forgot it. Her intricate lacework had been passed on to second generation and many admire it in our homes.

By 1923, their fortunes had risen and Mary and John had saved enough to build a new home. They borrowed half of the \$15,000 the home would cost and moved into a large, seven-room brick home. It had a barn, a chicken coop and a yard, though no grass. (Grass was thought to be a nuisance and one of the children's chores was to go out and pull all the weeds that tried to establish residence. The dirt was swept clean every day with a wooden broom-type rake.) They were extremely frugal, and Mary even took in boarders to supplement the income. They made their last payment on the house in July 1929.

All the Croatians in the community were Roman Catholic and most were strongly involved in their parish. They brought with them an appreciation of fine arts and this was reflected in their churches. It is very easy to distinguish the predominant ethnic groups of different parishes in Pueblo simply by visiting the church buildings. St. Mary's (mostly Slovenian) and St. Francis Xavier (Croatian) were Gothic structures with lots of stained glass art, carved wood clerestory and beautifully painted statuary, all reflecting the physical appearance of the Slav. Our Lady of the Assumption (southern Italian) was a modest stucco building with high ceilings, functional windows and distinctly Italian saints in residence. St. Patrick's was, what else, mostly Irish. The church was Modern English in design with the largest pipe organ in the state. It had twin spires that could be seen



from most any part of the city. Next to the Cathedral, it was the most imposing of the Catholic churches.

Tragedy struck when Mary Louise contracted pneumonia and died at age 18. At age ten, Emma was stricken with Scarlet Fever and Diphtheria at the same time, leaving her with a severely damaged heart. Milan also suffered heart disease after a bout with St. Vitus Dance (Rheumatic Fever). He was about six or seven then.

By the time Mildred was fifteen, she had completed the tenth grade and against the wishes of her father, was forced by the onset of the depression to drop out of school. She had already had several domestic jobs, but now she was employed by the Corwin Hospital. Like many other things in Pueblo, the hospital was owned by the Colorado Fuel and Iron Corporation. She worked as a nursing aide, but always wished she could have become a nurse. However, nursing was a profession neither valued nor thought well of at that time. Mildred's mother did not like her working at the hospital, fearing the stigma of being thought a loose woman would attach to her. Mary's dislike of her daughter's job did not extend to the money earned. After the Crash, Mildred was the only one in the household working, and it was her paycheck that kept the family housed and fed.

The Depression meant hard times for everyone, but also it blurred the subtle lines of distinction between the layers of middle class Americans. Mildred says that fabric was hard to come by in those days and nearly everyone she knew made their own clothes. The government, for some reason, had a surplus of pink and white, and blue and white

materials which were distributed through the YWCA. She remembers that all the girls now looked alike, no matter if their families had previously been well-to-do, or poor.

Many of the Old Country taboos and customs were carried on. Old rivalries followed the immigrants to their new land. There were distinct divisions in neighborhoods. The Slovenians gathered to neighborhoods in The Grove area of Pueblo, while the Croatians inhabited nearby Bessemer. Serbs lived on the southern side of both of these but while the Slovenians and the Croatians were friendly, they mistrusted the Serbs. Young people were discouraged from associating with those outside their own nationality. To ensure this, the Croatian elders formed youth groups such as the Tamboritza (a folk dance and music troupe), choirs and glee clubs to occupy them. The other ethnic groups did the same in efforts to preserve the cultures and traditions of their homelands.

However, Mildred was not one to be a slave to traditions. Besides defying her mother to work in the hospital, she did not follow the expected path to an early marriage. Nor when she did decide to marry, did she choose a young man of Croatian descent.

In about nineteen-thirty-eight, Mildred and her younger sister Emma took their usual Sunday afternoon walk and ended up at the Candy Kitchen, a soda shop/candy store. As they entered, they noticed a couple of young men they did not know sitting at the soda fountain. One immediately caught her eye and she said to her sister, "That one's for me." The young men, silently invited by the flirtatious looks Emma cast their way, soon came over to their booth, and it was love at first sight for both Mildred and the

man. As the conversation of the afternoon deepened, it was evident that they would have some social obstacles to overcome: Mildred had fallen for an Italian.

Michel (Mike) Paglione was also a first generation American. His parents, Ricardo and Carmella had come to the US some years before his birth in 1914. Though no one in the family can give an exact year, it appears that it was in the very early 1900's. This estimate is based on documents deeding a farm to Ricardo in 1907 and it is known that he had worked in the foundry and blast mill of the CF&I to save money to buy the farm. Ricardo and Carmella were already in their forties by this time. Their life in the small mountain village of Campobasso, Italy (where most imported Olive Oil now comes from) had been very hard. They were farmers of the poor, rocky soil in this village high in the Apennines Mountains. Though the villagers were impoverished, they could trace their ancestry back to the Sforza dynasty of Milan. Their fifteenth century castle was a source of pride to them, and they maintained it as they did their own homes. Still, a new land called to many of the residents. It was a chance to make a better life, and so many undertook the journey to America.

The first Paglione arrivals settled in New Jersey and New York. They worked hard and saved to bring their relatives over. When Ricardo and Carmella and their eldest son Antonio reached Ellis Island, they were met by their sponsor who encouraged them to make their home in the area. But Ricardo wanted to farm, and not having a great liking for this branch of the family anyway, he stayed only long enough to repay the fare. Then he and Carmella set out for Kansas, where they had heard farm land was cheap and fertile. Somehow, though, they ended up in Colorado. A family legend has it that

while on the train to Missouri, Ricardo struck up a conversation with a man who promised him a farm in Colorado if he would come to Pueblo and work in the mill for five years. (Some think the man was John D. Rockefeller himself.) In any case, Ricardo did go to Pueblo, he did work at the steel mill, though for more than five years and he did have his farm, five years and one day after he arrived.

Ricardo and Carmella had buried nine children in Italy and now they were in their fifties and had only the one living son. Then, in 1911, a daughter, Maria, was born. Carmella suffered through two more miscarriages and a still-birth before Mike was born. There were thirty-three years difference in age between Antonio and Mike. Tony and his father worked the small farm and both held onto their mill jobs. In 1927, at age 69, Ricardo retired from both farming and mill work, sold the farm and moved into the city.

The depression caused the family to sink from a rising middle class status to near poverty. Savings and profits from the sale of the farm were lost as the banks failed. When Mike was fifteen he enrolled in the WPA and went to a Civilian Conservation Camp in what is now the Rocky Mountain National Park/Estes Park area. Working long hours for the \$25.00 a month paycheck, the young men built roads, ranger stations, fire breaks and campgrounds. He worked for three years, coming home only on holidays and during the worst winter months.

After leaving the WPA, he was fortunate to find a job at the mill. This is about 1933 and things were just beginning to gear up again. He started in the blast furnace, shoveling coal to feed the huge, intensely hot fires that melted the iron ore. In time his

diligent work ethic enabled him to move to the casting room. This is where he was working when he met his future bride.

After the initial resistance from the parents, Mike and Mildred had a relatively uneventful, if long, engagement. They understood almost from the first that they would marry, but it wasn't until 1942 that they were able to take that step. Mike was struggling to support his elderly parents, and Mildred was too independent to push in that direction. In fact, she had applied for a Civil Service job, thinking that she would be employed as a seamstress in the growing war industry. Instead, her scores on the test were such that she was sent to radio repair school in Greeley, Colorado. She says now that she wasn't very good at this school and probably would not have finished even if she hadn't married, but papers she had kept for years, tell a different story. They reveal the work of a diligent student: accurate schematic drawings and high grades.

Finally, in October of 1942, they took the plunge. Three months later, Mike was drafted into the Army, and shipped to France after training. It would be nearly three years before they would be reunited.

World War II affected the two families in many ways. John and Milan Simonich were both serving in overseas areas, John in Guadalcanal and Tulagi and Milan in Italy. This was John's second tour in the Marines. His unit, Carlson's Raiders, was one of the most highly decorated of the War, and John himself would garner a number of medals including the Purple Heart, the Soldiers Medal and the Silver Star.

While on Guadalcanal, he and seven other Marines were separated from their troop and found themselves behind enemy lines. For twenty-one days they lived on

leaves, larvae, rats and anything else edible while trying to make their way back to the Raiders. John had been wounded and by the time he rejoined the unit, the wound had festered and he was shipped out to a hospital in New Zealand. There he overheard doctors discussing his case say that his leg would have to be amputated. That night he went AWOL. A woman found him some eighty miles from the hospital, took him home and nursed him back to health. As soon as he was able, John returned to the hospital expecting to be thrown in the brig. Instead, he was promoted to Master Sergeant and shipped back to the States to be stationed at Camp Pendleton, CA. Though he was fifty percent disabled, he wanted to stay in until the War was over and so he was assigned to instruct new inductees. While in California, a movie of the exploits of the Carlson Raiders was made and John had a small speaking part. Then, on December 9, 1944, John and six other Marines were killed in a training accident. He was twenty-four.

News from Croatia was now sporadic and not very good. Mary's mother died and her only remaining brother was eluding capture by the Chetniks, a pro-Nazi, quasi-military group of Croats. No one knows what became of him.

The Pagliones were suffering their own trials. Mike was in France as a radio operator with the 94th Infantry. His nephews, James and Richard were in the Navy and the fascist government if Italy had cut off all communications with the US, so the fate of relatives in Campobasso was unknown until after the war.

While Mike was off at war, Mildred continued to work, even though pregnant. She lived now with her in-laws who were in their eighties. Though old, blind and crippled, Ricardo and Carmella resisted being cared for. Carmella would fix breakfast and supper

every day and Ricardo still tried to garden and make wine. In January 1945, Carmella fell ill and died. Exactly one month to the day later, Ricardo died in his sleep. She was eighty-four and he, eighty-eight. Mike returned home in February 1945, just after his father's death. The war was over and a new life was beginning.

Mike's job at the mill was waiting for him and soon life settled into a comfortable groove. By 1952 they had three children, Mary Louise, Michelle and Michael. Mildred was still working and would now be considered a Super-Mom for her involvement in Church, school and community related activities. In 1960, they sold their home and bought a new one in a more middle class, non-descript suburb.

Nineteen-sixty was also the year that Mildred's father died at age seventy. In nineteen-sixty-eight, Mike died of lung cancer. Mildred's mother, Mary died in 1978 at age 94 of pneumonia. To the end, this feisty woman was an original. She loved the Oakland 'A's baseball team, and faithfully tuned in any coverage of a space shot. During the Apollo 13 crisis, Mary prayed her rosary and did not turn the TV off until the astronauts were safely home. Woe be unto anyone who interrupted. Ever an adventurer, Mary would often say that there were only two things that she had not done, fly in an airplane and ride a motorcycle.

Mildred never remarried and continued as a single mother to raise her youngest child. She finally retired in 1980 and moved to Alabama seeking a milder climate. She is now eighty-one, looks not a day over sixty, lives alone and can work rings around any younger person. Mildred speaks proudly of her seven grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Her interests still are many and she often sews for her great-

grandchildren. She crochets (though with a pattern as she will be quick to tell you), bakes the traditional Potica and Strudel for holidays. Her still nimble mind is exercised by her passion for any kind of puzzle and reading is the most sedentary thing she does.

Best paper.  
I hope you do something  
with your writing talent  
I made a copy of  
this for the files

A+