



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

MEMORIES PROJECT: Gaetano Merola, founding director

Featuring: Alessandro Baccari (father was Alessandro Baccari Sr., photographer for the Company in the 1920-30s) in conversation with Ann Farris (former SF Opera administrative and archives staff, 1969-1971 and 2014-17) and Richard Sparks (former SF Opera box office and subscription manager, 1974-1993)

(transcript read time ~ 30 minutes)

SF Opera Archives: Memories Project

The San Francisco Opera Archives has, since 2009, been interviewing leading participants in, or well-placed witnesses to, major events in the development of the San Francisco Opera Association.

In 2009, Ann Farris, former administrative staff, began typing notes as former staff and others shared their experiences with SF Opera and/or its affiliates. In 2013, Richard Sparks, former season ticket manager, joined the Archives volunteer team and has accompanied Farris as they interview former staff, artists and others. Later, they began audio recording interviews. Beginning in 2017, interview questions are included in subsequent Memories, as part of the interview reports. Most recently, Mary Seastrand, Marianne Welmers, Stan Dufford, and Richard Balthazar joined the Archives volunteer team assisting in the editing and electronic organization of these materials.

Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is held by the Archives of the San Francisco Opera Association for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

Interview conducted on: 10/21/2014

[BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION]

ALESSANDRO BACCARI [AB]: Hello.

ANN FARRIS [AF]: Hi, Mr. Baccari. I'm glad that we have connected.

AB: Okay, can you hold on while I sit down so I don't fall? (laughs) Thank you so much.

AF: Oh, you're welcome. I have with me my colleague, Richard Sparks, and he's working with me on this project of the archives, and we're delighted. I'm taping you, also. I want you to know that so that –

AB: All right, dear.

AF: So, now, let's start with the beginning, and to me the beginning is: what can you tell us about your father?

AB: Well, my father [Alessandro Baccari, Sr.] and [Gaetano Merola, founding director of SF Opera, 1923] were dear friends. I mean, really close friends. And one of the saddest times for me is when he died at Sigmund Stern Grove, 'cause I was there. And I remember -- I don't know why I did it, but he was conducting, and I rushed to the stage area, and I remember holding his hand. (crying) I don't want to cry. Give me a moment, please.

AF: Yes, certainly.

AB: But my dad took us. My dad also graduated from the same academy of music in Naples that he did, and, well my dad painted and photographed. He did all the photographs of some of the greatest stars of the opera, and I'm talking about Martinelli, Pinza ... Pinza was constantly in our house. He was a handsome, beautiful, wonderful man, although he was mischievous with the ladies. (laughter) But I got to meet 'em all, and even the great tenors that came, all of 'em. I met them.

And, of course, the happiest memory as a little boy -- my nickname is Skooney, S-K-O-O-N-E-Y, so I used to have that for my fax, and then AB, and then aol.com. But how I got that name, Merola and his French [correction, Rosa Duce Merola was born near Vienna] wife were at our house, and we were (inaudible) as a little boy, and he came with Dr. [Giordano?] and his wife, and they were both from Naples. And I don't know why it possessed me: I was close to three years of age, and I was running between their legs. And Merola turned to Dr. Giordano and he said, "[Gualdo?]," he says, "look, *ecco scugnizzo*. He's like a little street urchin of Naples, a *scugnizzo*." (laughter) And then he put me on a table later on, and he said, "I'm going to teach him a poem." And so they taught me how to put my hand over my heart, and I would recite, "*Tutti mi chiamano scugnizzo*." Everyone calls me Skooney. "*Questo dice papà*." This is what my father says. "*Non sono vagabondo*." I'm not a vagabond. "*Sono figlio di società*." I'm a son of society. And Merola would go, "Bravo, Skooney, bravo, bravo."

AF: (laughter) That's very cute.

AB: And I remember that vividly. And then, of course, as time went on, Merola invited me to come ... I was like a child for them, he and his wife. So at three years old I'm invited to the opera, and I remember going with my mother, and my dad was ... It was a glorious venture. Then he would take me to rehearsals. Many of the times I sat in a little chair on the side, watching his fingers perform.

AF: Was your father photographing rehearsals and performances?

AB: Oh. Yes, I wish I had all those negatives, but I don't. But I'm talking about great stars, great singers, you know, bassos. There was a little, fat, round basso. I can't think of his name right now, but boy, could he sing. And then there was a tenor, a great tenor, that came. They were comparing him at the time to Caruso. And this was in the '30s and '40s. And, of course, I knew Hans, and then, of course, the other tenor, the English tenor. But Dad took pictures of all of 'em. I had glorious photographs.

AF: And do you have any idea where they might be?

AB: No, but I can try to search afterwards. I have some of Dad's negatives. I had just an exhibit recently of my artwork and his artwork at the Museo [Museo Italo Americano], and the show was traveling the world, which I got very excited about, and the Italian government was excited about it. I just had a fantastic experience. The President of Italy came to the United States. He went to Washington, and then he decided to come to California, and they arranged for him to come to the chapel that I built at Fisherman's Wharf, and I got to spend 45 minutes with the President of Italy.

AF: Oh, how lovely.

AB: It was. But all these great singers ... And then, as years went by, I remember even up to the time of his death ... And I continued to make friends with some of the stars, but my dad was very close to all of these people. I mean, very close. There wasn't a star in the '30s or '40s that my dad wasn't close to.

The funny part of the story is most of the tenors and the basses were great singers, but they were mischievous as hell. (laughter) I used to laugh, and my dad says, "Comedians, they're [strategians?]. Singers, they're lovers. They can't help it. It's a sickness." (laughter) And I used to laugh.

AF: When we talked briefly before, you described your father as a Renaissance man who spoke 11 –

AB: Oh, he was. My dad not only was a beautiful composer in the academy in Naples, but he also had talent as a painter and an artist. So he also won a scholarship to go to Bologna, and there he was in the academy to paint, and while in Italy he also learned how to photograph. And then his work became so good at that, as well, that Stieglitz and Steichen recommended him to Eastman Kodak, and Kodak for 30 years used samples of my father's work to sell their products.

AF: A-ha. So now can we get some sort of clarity on when he was born and when did he come to the United States?

AB: I'll get you all of that and the dates he came. And then, when he came here ... His elder brother was also a great musician, and he was kind of, like, taking care of him in Italy while he was continuing going to school, because his parents immigrated to the United States, and they went to Fall River, Massachusetts. But when he came to the United States he got accepted into Harvard.

AF: Right. And so describe: what was he studying there?

AB: Well, there he was studying commerce and fine art, but the beautiful part of it was he then won a scholarship to the University of Athens. My dad spoke 11 languages fluently. And then there's a marvelous story about him, and everyone used to tell it. He had a friend of his in the Jewish theater, and he was a great movie actor, as well, and I'm trying to think of his name –

AF: Was his name Paul Muni?

AB: That's it, Paul Muni. And they really bonded. They had a bond. And my dad told him, he said, "I can't spend weekends with you." He said, "You're always performing in the theater." So my dad, to be with

him, learned Yiddish, and he was so good at it that he became a non-Jew prompter in the Jewish theater. (laughter)

AF: Good for him.

AB: That's how he got to stay with his buddy. And then there's a great story that my dad ... The man owned the Geary and the Curran Theatre, and he invited us ... He also -- great property owner in the city, Jewish gentleman. And he invited us to see [a theater?] which Joel Grey's father's comedy performing in. While we're in the theater, Dad's laughing. My mother says, "Please don't ridicule them like that. You know, you don't understand what they're saying." But my mother never knew that he spoke Yiddish. And so while he's enjoying, later on we went backstage, and Joel Grey's father saw him in the mirror while he's taking off his makeup, and he got up, and they hugged each other and kissed each other, and the only thing they spoke was Yiddish. And my mother turned to me and said, "My God, he does speak Yiddish!" (laughter)

But Merola would spend a lot of time at our house, oh my God. And also those, in the early beginning, Dad helped a lot of them in the beginning when he first came here. Well, Merola, his first board of directors were Italians. They're the one who put the money up so they could have the operas at Stanford. I did a big thing on that at the opera house with [Giuseppe] Brucia, big luncheon, and there's a plaque on the wall listing the names of those people. And I'm gonna have an anniversary event. I'm putting together people for that. I want to make sure that they recognize and thank all the other great people who served on the board. But in the beginning, he needed that money for his dream. And Merola would play cards at Farina's house. I got to meet Mr. Farina, and -- wonderful man.

AF: What was Mr. Farina's role in San Francisco?

AB: Farina was the manager of the Crab Boats (inaudible) Owners Association. And then later he also administered and helped Joe DiMaggio run his restaurant. He was a brilliant businessman. But any event, he ... And then for years I used to represent the Wharf, and then I did a history, a book on the Wharf, and I mention him in my book. But Farina would have a group of people at the house. They would eat. Then they'd play cards. Mrs. Brucia, his wife, used to get very upset because Mrs. Merola would have her dog on her lap, and the dog would eat out of the same dish as her what they were eating, (laughter) and that would upset Farina's wife, and ... But my mother, it didn't bother my mother. My mother, she loved that dog, God bless her, because a dog to her was like a child.

AF: Where did your father and Merola meet originally?

AB: Originally, back East.

AF: And how would that have been?

AB: I don't know that story, but I do know that they knew each other from New York.

And then during the hard times, there were three people that I got to know well. One was Merola, [Casilia?], [Musilli?], and there was one more, who were all conductors of the opera. One created the 25-cents opera in taverns. That's what started the first singers singing opera in taverns, and we had a

lot of 'em in San Francisco at one time. And ... My piano teacher, I even had Merola teach me piano for a while.

AF: Wow. When did your dad arrive here, in San Francisco?

AB: Oh, it would be '26 here. He met my mother in '27, and then I was born in 1928.

AF: And so did he originally photograph at the beginning when he came the opera, or was he –

AB: Oh, yeah, he even photographed them when they were performing at the Civic Auditorium for a while.

AF: Wow, okay. And –

AB: And then he did the opera house.

AF: Right. So once we moved into the War Memorial, he was photographing also.

I have one who performed in his first operas, and that was Martinelli. And I remember that Dad always told me, he says, "They paid him \$5,000, and he performed three operas." But he had a golden voice, my dad said.

And then -- and I can't think of the other man's name right now, but he was a great tenor. He came in the '30s.

AF: Was that Ezio Pinza?

AB: Oh, no, Pinza and Dad were buddies. I mean real buddies. Pinza would tell my father everything. (laughs)

AF: Okay, 'cause I'm just trying to find a name for you. Gigli a tenor?

AB: No, no, this was a tenor.

RICHARD SPARKS [RS]: Tito Schipa?

AB: Tito Schipa? Yes.

AF: Okay.

AB: But this was even stronger than Schipa. And Tito Schipa I remember serving mass, and I remember serving mass and he sang at St. Peter's and Paul's. He had a golden voice.

AF: Okay, and a couple of other names that you've mentioned in the past are Baccaloni and Malatesta.

AB: Oh, Baccalo ... Oh, God, yes. That was a dear friend of my father's.

AF: Which one, Baccaloni?

AB: Yes. And, of course, women opera singers, and there were several of those. (laughter)

AF: Oh, the old days, eh? And Malatesta, what do you remember of him?

AB: Oh my God, there was a man with kindness, full of love.

AF: Really?

AB: Unbelievable love. Unbelievable. And he would love to come to the house, and my mother had a grand piano, and he loved to say, "I have to earn my meal." (laughter) And he'd do a little few tunes. But he would also tell my mother, "Now you have to spoil me. I want pasta aglio e olio." And he loved to eat pasta aglio e olio, which is olive oil, red peppers, and you use the water that you're boiling the pasta in, and that's how you make the sauce, and he loved that with peas, *piselli*.

AF: Mm, sounds delicious.

AB: (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) why I would remember stupid things like that. (laughter)

AF: No, it's not, actually. It's because it hit your tummy and you made you remember. Let me ask you something –

AB: And I still have a funny little toy that he gave me as a child. And I kept that, and I don't know why.

AF: Well, but it's because it has a remembrance for you.

AB: But they had kindness and love. You know, as much as they were doing well, there were hard times. I'm talking about Depression times.

AF: Yes, the '30s.

AB: But I'm lucky I can remember back that period of time, but I think about it all the time, when I'm looking at Dad's photographs.

AF: So the photographs that you have at the moment that went into the exhibit, did –

AB: Yeah, I'm going to go into those, but I'm going to send somebody and see what they can get for me at the plant, and then I'm gonna have ... I have a box, only a few negatives, because the studio was flooded and we lost all of Dad's negatives, and that was a great loss, because we had a lot of San Francisco history, photographs of ... You have to understand, Dad not only did the Opera, but he did the Symphony, and the Ballet. And a very dear friend of our family was Adolph Bolm, and he made me go to ballet school when I was a child.

AB: And it made me a great fencer because of that. (laughter)

AB: I used to go out to Geary Street and take my ballet lessons. Merola brought Adolph Bolm here. He wanted to create ... He said, "I need rhythm. I need choreography." And it was Adolph Bolm, by the way, who started the San Francisco Ballet. The Christensen brothers came after him.

AF: Right. Now, the San Francisco Ballet was actually integrated with the San Francisco Opera initially, so -- yes.

AB: But Adolph Bolm ... You've got to remember, Adolph Bolm was as great as Nijinsky. I mean, we're talking about a legend.

AF: Yeah, beautiful photographs, too.

AB: And Dad did pictures of the Ballet, and he photographed a lot of those in the chorus of the Opera. For some reason Merola said, "When you're kind enough, take some of the pictures for them."

AF: Now, what I understand is that there were chorus rehearsals at Fugazi Hall. What can you tell us about that?

AB: I'm trying to think of the man who took over the Opera afterwards. He used to handle the chorus –

AF: [Kurt Herbert] Adler.

AB: Adler. Oh, he was a fun man. And we had a little additional studio there for Dad, and I used to fence there, and Casilia used to put his operas on. Casilia was an assistant director at one time in the beginning, and then he had his own little I used to call them dollar operas. He'd go to Stockton and bring opera all over. But the rehearsals were at the Fugazi.

AF: So only chorus rehearsals, or were also principal rehearsals?

AB: Well, he had principal rehearsals there at the beginning. I remember several of those.

And that was one of the roles of Casilia. Casilia was with the opera company in the beginning.

AF: Okay. Now, at one point you mentioned a woman's name, Anita Fantozi, as a chorister, and we can't find her name. Could it have been Anita Pierce or Anita Olmstead, or did Ms. Fantozi become one of those people when she married?

AB: Well, that's probably when they married.

But Anita Fantozi -- my grandfather named everybody after an opera. My mother is Aida, which is Edith, and she had a golden voice. But all the girls could sing, and ... But Anita was a great dancer.

AF: Anita Fantozi?

AB: That was my mother's sister. She was a dancer. She was in, oh, two, three operas I remember. *Carmen* she performed in. She had a flair, you know. Wherever they wanted dancers, she was there.

AF: Okay, so now one of the things that I remember you mentioning is that your Italian family and the Merola Italian family bonded together during the hard times, and that –

AB: Oh, yes, that's true.

AF: -- and that music was the way you used to get through those hard times.

AB: You have to understand one thing: in the beginning, for Merola, when he was starting everything, you know, they didn't have money to keep it going, and that's when they had -- the new board started to come in. But everybody loved the concept of the opera, and the operas of Stanford proved a point: I want to create something there at Stanford, whether it's to duplicate some of the arias, some of the three operas that were performed there, or something. And I think that's important. But Merola, it wasn't easy. You know, he started an opera company but the money wasn't there, so he had to teach piano. And for a while he taught piano.

AF: Okay. So once he started the company here, he basically made his home here? Would that be --

AB: That's correct.

AF: Okay, and then he would go to Europe and to Italy to cast his performances and come back. Is that correct?

AB: Correct.

And Dad met him in New York because even though he was here before he even started the opera, he would spend time in New York.

AF: Right. Before he would come back from his trip in Europe.

AB: And that's how Dad and he bonded.

AF: So now, when did Stern Grove become important? Do you remember that?

AB: Well, they started to have performances there, and then they said, well, if we're putting classical music on, let's put opera. And Merola felt that he had to direct this one. But that's ... It really broke my heart.

Merola believed in promoting operas. Wherever he could do it, he would do it.

And then he did something beautiful. I remember [Condoncini?], they had a beautiful mansion in San Mateo County, and we were all there, and he would go to the piano and say, "Listen to the music of Puccini. It's as beautiful without words as it is with words." And he would do Verdi, and oh my God. He wanted people to understand the beauty of the music of opera, not just the gorgeous lyrics that come out with the songs. He really had a vision. And of course, his vision was simple: when he started, he said, "We have several things we could do. The opera singers that come here, like Caruso and others, don't have to bring their costumes. They don't have to bring their stage settings. We have it all here. We'll have it for them." And he worked it out with Goldstein, a costume house, and then he worked out props and had them made in advance so they didn't have to bring their things in anymore. And he was a visionary, but if you had listened to him, you wanted to support his dream. He had a beautiful vision, and unbelievable mind, and he loved what he was doing.

AF: So what is your first memory of the San Francisco Opera?

AB: My first memory? Of going to the opera? I was three years old.

AF: And you remember that?

AB: Oh, God, do I remember that. (laughter)

AF: Okay, tell us about it.

AB: Well, first of all, the outfit that I wore, the great inventor, Guglielmo Marconi, he was here, and Dad did his portrait, and his wife's portrait -- that would be his second wife -- and they were traveling the globe in a converted -- it's a yacht, but it was a destroyer, an Italian destroyer. (laughter) And Marconi wanted to bring my father back to Italy. And for a while all those portraits -- because Marconi lost one eye, and so he did a beautiful profile. I have the photographs of Marconi and Mrs. Marconi.

AF: Can I ask one question? Marconi is the one who invented? Is the --

AB: Yeah, he was the great inventor, Guglielmo Marconi. They still have royalties from the phone company. (laughter) And his second wife was much younger than him. He's here, and they take the pictures and everything, but Mrs. Marconi, for some reason, took a liking to me as a little boy, and they took me to the White House. It doesn't exist anymore, but it was a gorgeous store selling English goods. And they bought me a velvet suit, short pants, and I had little patent leather shoes (laughter) and little black socks. And then they bought me an English shirt, which means a white collar. I remember I had a velvet suit and they put an [Orders?] tie on me. Many of the [orders?] used to wear Orders ties. I don't know if you know that or not, but...

AF: No, I didn't.

AB: But they wore Orders ties. So I'm wearing this Orders tie, (laughs) and that's how I looked to go to the opera.

AF: Wow. So do you remember the opera you saw?

AB: *La bohème*.

But the opera that I really enjoyed -- and Merola, he adopted me, and he'd pick me up, and then we'd go to rehearsals, but the opera I fell in love with was *Madama Butterfly*. And to have him tell me the story, you know, and he'd whisper, and he said, "Well, you have to sit in silence now. *Va bravo*," be good. And he said, "But you'll walk away, and you'll be carried by the melody. And he was so right. And then I got to see so many operas, and then I was puzzled by *Pagliacci*. And then I saw Mascagni's operas. Oh, boy. He opened the door for me to a lot of things. And I enjoyed ... And he was like a second papà, a second father, because -- he and his wife took me into their lives and treated me as if I were one of the family. You can't get more out of that, love like that.

AF: No. No.

AB: And then he loved my godfather, Frank Brocato. Oh, there was an opera singer that he discovered here, and she went on to glory. I can't think of her name right now, damn it.

RS: Licia Albanese?

AB: Albanese, yes, that's it. And when she would come out here, 'cause she really loved my godfather, Frank Brocato, I would go to the cemetery with her. She'd take me up and then we'd go in the car. Oh, I remember that vividly.

AF: So you were going to Merola's grave?

AB: No, we were going to Frank Brocato's grave.

AF: Oh!

AB: And then we'd go to Merola.

AF: Oh, (laughter) okay.

AB: But she was in love with my godfather.

AF: Oh, I see.

AB: She really loved him. That was a great love story. And then, of course, I made friends afterwards. She gave me one of her costumes, and I became buddies, and I raised a lot of money for Italy and the earthquake, and he came here -- he was performing at the Opera -- Pavarotti, and I became buddies with him. And I have one of his costumes. It's quite large. (laughter)

AF: I can imagine.

AB: And I got to see him in Italy when I was still there. Oh.

AF: So now, tell me about Dr. Modesto Giordano.

AB: Dr. Giordano was a sweet man, a great doctor. He had two sons, had a wonderful wife. But he loved the community, the Italian community. He was a giver, not a taker, and he did a lot of charity work, but he was good friends with the Maestro [Merola]. And why? Because both of them were born in Naples. Both were born in Naples.

And remember I told you about getting my nickname?

AF: Yes.

AB: They came to the house together, same car, the Maestro and Dr. Giordano, with their wives. And he was there when Merola gave me my nickname.

AF: A-ha. Now, where did the Merolas live? What part of San Francisco?

AB: Well, for a while, in the early part, they had an apartment in the Marina. Then later they went to Pacific Heights, and when he died he was still there, but the death ... That was a horrible blow to the city.

It wasn't easy, because the opera company hadn't discovered itself. You know, people don't realize that Merola had a personality, and he flowed with dreams. He was constantly thinking of seasons, and he would talk about it, and he would bring alive in his mind performers that he says, "I will go to Italy and get this performer," but he always ... He was very, very partial in the beginning to Italian singers, because, to him, singers of (inaudible) Naples. You know, this is a man who accompanied on the piano in rehearsals Caruso, when he ... So this is the beauty of this man, and it convinced people that didn't have much to mortgage their homes in his dream. That's what he did when he was playing cards with Farina's house. And all these people said, "We'll put the money up," and they lost everything. But -

AF: Why would they have -

AB: The dream was too strong. What's that, dear?

AF: Well, they lost everything. What are you meaning by that?

AB: Oh, if I mortgage my home and we make no profit -

AF: So basically it was a donation, is what you're saying.

AB: Oh, all of it was a donation.

AF: Okay. But they had anticipated that they would make something back on it?

AB: Absolutely, all of 'em. These were humble people. They did not have a lot of money. Whatever money they had, they believed in Merola's dreams. And one man said, "I don't care if I lost the money. I needed it, but I experienced something that'll always be in my mind and heart: the beauty of the operas." That was one of the people that invested. And most of them were Neapolitans.

AF: Would you say that was probably in the 1925-26, or earlier?

AB: Oh, no, no, much earlier.

AF: Oh.

AB: You've got to remember the first opera was done in '22.

AF: Yes, so you're going back that far on this. Okay.

AB: And then there was a 16-year-old girl named [Louise] Dana, and she never got paid by Merola, but she handled singlehanded all of the transportation, all of the ticket selling to go to the operas at Stanford. She arranged with Southern Pacific so you go down there and ba-da-boom, ba-da-bing, ba-da-bang. Sixteen years old. She was his secretary for a year and a half, never got paid, but she never regretted it.

AF: No, so this was in 1922-23.

AB: Correct. This would even be earlier.

AF: Yeah, 1921, actually, probably.

AB: Correct. Her grandson, [Don] Dana, and I helped Brucia put on, to honor the original board at the opera house, and I arranged for Brucia to put the money up to have the first open air screening at Civic Center so that you could see on the screen opera.

AF: Oh, are you talking about the one that happened in about 2004?

AB: Correct.

AF: So you worked with David Gockley on that.

AB: Correct.

AF: A-ha. I was in the audience and being very happy that you had arranged this but I didn't know you were involved in it. So did you come to David with the idea?

AB: The idea at that time, I had to convince Brucia to put the money up. The luncheon we put on for 400 people at the opera house was \$250,000, and I said, "Brucia, [it's gonna call?]," and he said, "Let's do it."

AF: So that was a fundraiser?

AB: And I put the plaque deliberately on the opposite side of the Merola plaque in the foyer. The plaque lists all the members who were the original board. I have her [Louise Dana] listed as one of the original members of the board. So the only name that's not really one of the real donors, I put her down, but to me she was a donor because she worked for Merola for a year and a half for nothing.

And if you go the foyer in the opera house, you'll see that plaque.

AF: I just want to ask you one clarification of Mr. Brocato, Frank. What –

AB: Oh, you would have loved him. That was my godfather.

AF: Right.

AB: He owned [West Coast?] Vineyards.

AF: Oh, that's what I wanted to know: what was his business? He had vineyards?

AB: Yeah, and he was on, I think, Sansome and Broadway. he had a beautiful plant there. And every Friday he'd have luncheons, and all the great politicians, the mayor, A.P. Giannini, they'd all come

there to eat. And he would have spaghetti in a barrel. (laughter) And they'd serve fish, and Joe Alioto's father would bring the fish -- oh, God -- and they'd cook, and had good times.

AF: So that was roughly in the '30s and '40s?

AB: Correct, yeah. And that's when this great opera singer, she gets discovered by Merola, but she falls in love with Frank.

AF: Ms. Albanese. She could sing. Boy, could she sing. Merola, he was so proud of her. He had a right to be. He knew talent. Oh, God, he knew talent. And you know what? The opera singers thought the world of him. Pinza absolutely adored Merola. So I had fun with Pinza. Oh, he was a good man. Handsome, tall, powerful. God, he was powerful.

RS: Going back to Mr. Brocato, were his vineyards in the San Jose, Saratoga area?

AB: I don't know. I really don't know that. I'm 91 and I'm getting near of time. (laughter)

AF: So now, Mr. Baccari, when we were last talking you talked about somebody who fell off a cable car. Who was that?

AB: That was my father.

AF: Oh, and what happened?

AB: Well, that was a tragedy, because he was a great artist, composer, painter, everything, Renaissance man. Falls off a cable car, damages his head. They couldn't do surgery relieving the blood from the brain, and so here's a man -- and this is the beauty of my mother: she would put a drawing pattern in front of him, and she says, "Draw me a picture then tell me about it," knowing he couldn't draw, but his mind and imagination was there, but he couldn't use his hands anymore. Then she would put him to the piano and she says, "Write me a melody then hum it to me," and he'd sit at the piano, and she'd put his hands on keys, the blacks and the whites, but he couldn't play. And then he would hum to her.

AF: Wow.

AB: At my mother's funeral, we played only the music that my father wrote for her.

AF: What year did he die?

AB: Oh, she died now, let's see, ten years ago.

AF: Your mother?

AB: Yes, she lived to be 96.

AF: Okay. And how old was your father when he died?

AB: Oh, he died too young, 77. That was a great loss for me.

AF: Tell me something: where are the costumes of Albanese and Pavarotti stored?

AB: I think I have them at the warehouse.

AF: A-ha, okay. Are you thinking of –

AB: When Pavarotti -- I had a museum in North Beach. It was called the North Beach Museum. And he would go to [Bonbuso?], and he loved to go to the deli and eat like a horse, (laughter) and then he came over to the museum, and I didn't know who in the hell he was, (laughs) and he came upstairs, wandering around, and he was glorious, just glorious. And we bonded. And then we went and had an espresso together. And then I arranged for him to be honored at Sigmund Stern in Golden Gate Park, where he sang the melody at that gorgeous place there. And Joe Alioto sits [in awe of him?]. And then we bonded, and then later came the earthquake to raise money, and he came. And then they did a film on him, and that's when he sang at the Civic Auditorium for us, and that's in the movie that he did then. And I have a bottle downstairs of a winery, [Wenti?] and [Rothschild?], (inaudible) Pavarotti.

RS: Were you involved in the concert that Mr. Pavarotti and Ms. Albanese sang in Golden Gate Park in 1971 or so?

AB: Absolutely, yes.

AF: Tell us about it.

AB: Oh, that was beautiful. That's when John Brocato and I had the honor of having the plaque made to honor them from Joe. And it was a glorious experience.

AF: It was the only time that –

AB: [It was both the?] stars I got to know well. Through my godfather I got to know Albanese well, and through Frank's brother, John ... It just all flowed. They did a beautiful concert, oh my God. The voices, they just carried like ... As if you could close your eyes and watch melodies float into the heavens.

RS: (laughs) I think it was the only time they ever sang together.

AB: Yep.

RS: And I was there, and I remember how solicitous he was of her, and how he was just like a little boy singing with an idol of his, and it was my favorite experience with Mr. Pavarotti. I remember it like it was yesterday.

AB: Well, you know what people don't understand about this wonderful tenor: his love affair with humanity. He loved people. If someone said, "Describe Pavarotti," this was a man really of integrity, love, compassion, forgiveness. And he loved sports. He was a lot of fun to be with. He loved the water. Oh, how he loved the water. I used to swim with him.

AF: In the Bay here?

AB: (inaudible) Park.

AF: Oh.

AB: And then I'd take him to the Olympic Club and we'd swim there. But he loved nature. He loved nature. And he loved fruit, oh my God. (laughter) I'd take him to the produce market and he was in seventh heaven.

You know, what made Pavarotti Pavarotti: he was like a child. And I got to know his wife, his family, and I got to know the second woman that he had a child with. But he was so honest, everything above board, nothing hypocritical about him. No. And he was a man of his word. And when you go to [Mandala?], and he says, "Please come and visit," it was with open arms. And when he made a friend, he bonded. Nothing phony about that man. And could he sing. And oh, and he loved his father. So that's the Pavarotti I got to know.

AF: How precious.

AB: And Albanese, I learned to love her. And why did I love her? Because she never forgot my godfather. That made me happy.

AB: Now, I knew his set designer well. They were very close, both Neapolitans. You had Merola. Then came –

AF: What was his name?

AB: He was a great designer. He did the sets –

AF: [Armando] Agnini. Was it Agnini?

AB: Correct. And they were close. They were buddies. And Agnini and my father were inseparable.

AF: Huh. Well, he was here for years and years and years. We have some wonderful pictures of him in the original technical space in the opera house where they were building scenery.

AB: Well, Agnini and Merola were close, because he would interpret those dreams.

AF: So he bought into the same ideas.

AB: Absolutely. And he was from Italy, like him.

AF: (laughter) Well, now, Mr. Baccari, you have been absolutely wonderful.

AB: I tried.

AF: Well, you have. Please know that both Richard and I are so grateful to you, because you have opened our hearts to a whole era that we didn't know that much about.

AB: Well, I think it's vitally important that if you're telling the story of the history of the Opera, you have to tell of its birth. You must tell of the sacrifices, the tears. (crying) He had a dream.

AF: And he realized it.

AB: Oh, yeah.

AF: And that's the beautiful story.

AB: And wherever he went, he told that dream over and over, even years later. He wanted to convince everybody that this is a gift to the city.

AF: Well, it certainly has been, and we're almost a hundred years old because of him.

AB: He never thought of anything selfishly. He said culture belongs here, and he knew about every opera company. And I wrote an article about that, and he got a kick out of it. (laughter) And he said, "Skooney, what did you learn?" Oh, I remember him telling me one story, but I never put it in print, and he says, "I'm gonna give you one that you would have for your history." I said, "What is it?" And he says, "It's the following, very important." He says, "Enrico Caruso," and he says, "a great basso. We're in the Palace Hotel." And Caruso was worried about his costumes and the props, so he left (inaudible) with his beaver coat and his underwear on underneath, no clothes. (laughter) But his buddy, the opera singer, the basso, stayed at the hotel, and they said, "You've got to leave," the fire and earthquake. And he says, "I have two women in bed. I don't dare leave until I finish my assignment." (laughter) Oh, and he was laughing. I said, "Where do you come up with things like that?" And so ... But he encouraged me to write about the history of opera, and I'm glad that I did, and the first thing is [Disinelli?] and all the others. No ... What made Merola special for me, and my father said, "Don't forget it: He's not only given us a gift of love of music, an appreciation of something special, but *scugnizzo*, he's giving you love. Don't ever forget it." (crying) And I won't.

AF: And thank you very, very much for just allowing us to have some time with you.

AB: You're welcome. Bye-bye, dear.

AF: (laughs) Bye-bye.