

An Oral History of Hugh Rossolo

4th Street | Prater Way History Project

Interviewed: November 20, 2013

Published: 2014

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HUGH ROSSOLO

November 20, 2013
Alicia Barber, Interviewer

Hugh Rossolo was born in Elko and moved to Reno in 1958. In the mid-1920s, his grandparents, Ralph and Marie Galletti, ran a small tamale factory in the Coney Island neighborhood located between Reno and Sparks. Eventually, it became the Coney Island Bar, still operated by the Galletti family. Rossolo, who became a teacher, shares family memories of the popular establishment and how the restaurant and its surroundings have changed through the years.

Barber: I'm here at Bishop Manogue High School with Hugh Rossolo, and the date is November 20, 2013.

I want to go back and get a little bit of your genealogical history. Can you tell me how far back your family arrived in Nevada, which generation it was?

Rossolo: My grandparents.

Barber: What were their names?

Rossolo: Ralph Galletti and Marie Gallo, I want to say. I believe Grandma's name was Marie. Last name was Gallo, for sure.

Barber: So those are your grandparents. Then what were your parents' names?

Rossolo: Hugh Rossolo, same as mine, and Mom's is Pearl Galletti.

Barber: When were you born and where were you born?

Rossolo: I was born in 1950 in Elko.

Barber: What was your family doing there?

Rossolo: Dad worked for the Soil Conservation Service, so he was stationed in Elko at the time. They had just moved there in '48.

Barber: They had lived in Reno or Sparks before that?

Rossolo: They had lived in Reno, but he and Mom got married in '48, and right after they got married, they moved to Elko.

Barber: Then how long did the family live there?

Rossolo: We lived there till '58, and then moved back to Reno.

Barber: And moved back why?

Rossolo: Again, the job. Basically, his job in Elko ended. It was flood control, and they built several diversion dams in Elko, and then he came to Reno and supervised some of the building of the diversion dams in Northwest Reno.

Barber: Do you know anything about how your parents met and where they lived before they got married?

Rossolo: Well, my dad was best friends and best man at my mom's first wedding, and I'm not exactly sure when that was; somewhere in the late thirties. Then her husband went into World War II and he was killed in World War II. Then when Dad got out of the service—he was in World War II also—about '46 or something, anyway, my assumption is there was a great courtship there, and then they got married in '48.

Barber: Do you have any siblings?

Rossolo: My sister, who was born in '42, her dad was my mom's first husband.

Barber: Would you say that you grew up in an Italian community?

Rossolo: Yes. Well, did I grow up in an Italian community? [laughs] I don't know if I grew up in one, but my families were certainly Italian. My dad's family is Italian also, and my grandparents there also came over. So both grandparents arrived from Italy, from different sections, and really couldn't understand each other much because of the dialects, but had pretty heavy Italian customs, anyway.

Barber: Was there a lot of Italian spoken in the household, or dialects?

Rossolo: There was amongst the older generations because they didn't speak much English, but they did not allow the kids to speak Italian. So my dad could speak, and my mom could speak enough to her mother, but for the most part, they spoke English because that's what you did here. You didn't speak Italian.

Barber: I was just wondering about that Italian community, because obviously there are so many Italians in this area, and a lot of them are interrelated, and there were a lot of community areas that actually had a larger number of Italian residents or residents of Italian heritage in them. I'm wondering if you lived in any areas like that or were aware of any areas like that growing up.

Rossolo: Well, the answer to both of those is no. In the area when we moved to Reno, they were fairly newer houses, and so there was no Italian community around that. So, no, I really didn't.

Barber: We were talking about Fourth Street and Prater Way and, in particular, Coney Island because you have a family relationship to the Coney Island Bar and Grill. Can you talk about that a little bit, just explain what the relationship is?

Rossolo: Well, my mom is the oldest of the four siblings. She had three other siblings, all of Ralph Galletti and Marie's children. So she's directly connected. And she did work down at the Coney when she was young, because everybody in the family worked down there. I mean, how they made a go of it initially was that everybody just worked.

Barber: What were the names of those four siblings, do you know?

Rossolo: Pearl's the oldest; that's my mom. Then Annette, her sister, they were about two years apart. She went through life as Nettie, if you heard about her, and she worked down at the Coney her entire life and retired from the Coney. She was pretty darn close to eighty when she finally retired down there. Then John Galletti. There was quite a distance between Nettie and John, probably eight years or something. Then the youngest one is Gerald, who's still living, and there were fifteen years between my mom and Gerald. So there was quite a span in there.

Barber: So tell me your understanding of how the Coney got founded and what the Gallettis were doing before that. The family who founded it operated the Sugar Plum?

Rossolo: Yes, Nick Galletti. My grandfather, Ralph, came over, and I believe he was going to work in the bank in San Francisco. His uncle or his distant relative, but not that distant, was Giovanni with the Bank of America in that time period. He got there and wanted him to fund a shoe store in San Francisco for him, because that's kind of what Italians did in San Francisco. Anyway, the money didn't come, he got kind of upset and he went back on the train and, for some reason, got off in Sparks.

Grandfather worked at—I think it was called the Nevada Bar or something, and it was on B Street maybe just east of where the Nugget is now, but on the other side of the street down there. He ended up working there and, I think, buying part of that. Then when Prohibition came, he went up and bought the Sugar Plum in Reno, and then that didn't do so well. Then they came down and got involved in the Coney.

My mom's family lived right behind the Coney, and they were farming. My great-grandfather, my mom's grandfather, was a stonemason and did a lot of the stonework around town that you see, and worked on some of that stuff.

Barber: And that was John Gallo, is that right?

Rossolo: Yes.

Barber: So he already lived there in that area?

Rossolo: That's my understanding.

Barber: In a building that's no longer there?

Rossolo: Right. It was right where the freeway is, right behind the bar. There was an alley right behind the Coney Island, and my grandparents were just on the other side of that alley where they connected to the parking lot of the Coney. That was my great-grandparents, and my grandparents just lived down the alley towards Field Street. Field Street's still there but it's cut off from the Coney by the freeway.

Barber: So do you remember those houses?

Rossolo: Oh, yeah, very distinctly.

Barber: You spent time in them?

Rossolo: Yes.

Barber: Could you just describe them a little bit? You were describing the layout, but I had read somewhere that they had had a chicken coop, maybe, or rabbits. What was that whole area like?

Rossolo: As far as I remember, they had all of that. My great-grandfather had passed away. I think he was picking fruit or something and fell off the ladder and got hurt pretty badly, and he was laid up for almost a year in the house and then never—you know, in those days, you just never recovered. The house had cement floors and it was stone, and I just remember with my great-grandmother, it was always cold. It was just a cold house. I'm not sure if it even had central heating. I don't think any of them had central heating, but I think she ended up with an oil stove, and she had a big fireplace, but a very cold house. It was surrounded by orchards and they had a huge garden and chickens. Both houses had chickens and rabbits. Great-Grandma had rabbits.

Barber: Were these all used for food eventually?

Rossolo: As far as I know. As a kid, I didn't ask too much, but I believe they were, yes. And if nothing else, at least eggs from the chickens. We had a lot of chicken eggs.

Barber: Were there other houses relatively close by, or were they surrounded by their own land, and so there really weren't close neighbors?

Rossolo: On one side of the alley going between my grandparents and my great-grandparents, there were a couple of houses in there, but there wasn't anything on the other side of the alley that I remember, towards B Street as you went down that way, but maybe it was torn down or something during the time.

Barber: We know that that building that houses the restaurant now was built in the thirties, that brick building. What are your earliest memories of that building or that business? Was that a place that you went in often with the family?

Rossolo: We went in often, but not as a business. When we were in Reno for Thanksgiving or Christmas, particularly Thanksgiving, not much Christmas but Thanksgiving or Easter, we would have the family dinners down there because of the space, because the homes were pretty small. They were pretty small to have a big crowd in. Those are probably my first memories of the place.

I don't know if they ever took you downstairs, but it still has kind of a dirt floor in it and a basement. We used to play down there in that area. It was just fun. You know it was remodeled in—I think it was probably the early, early sixties, and they added the current kitchen on. If you go in there now, you can see how the old kitchen used to be back in that dining room, what's now the dining room part in the back.

Barber: So the only tables that were for the restaurant were in what's now the bar area?

Rossolo: The bar and then a long narrow hall that came down the west side of the building.

Barber: That's interesting. So they added on. Do you get the sense that they did that because there was so much business?

Rossolo: Yeah, they just expanded the business, and I think they had to do some modernization to the kitchen, so they just expanded it and made the big kitchen in the back.

Barber: So were you ever around the cooking when it was happening in there?

Rossolo: I bussed tables down there for a couple summers in the mid-sixties, so I spent my summers down there at lunchtime doing the tables and that kind of stuff.

Barber: Was the front door facing 4th Street open for business at that time?

Rossolo: Yes, yes. I have to think about that. It was open, and there was a jukebox, the old-fashioned jukeboxes, that lasted down there longer I think than almost any place else in the world. [laughs] But it was at the front end, too.

Barber: Did they always get a real mix of people in there of different ages and different backgrounds?

Rossolo: As far as I know, yes. I was talking with my uncle Joe the other day just because I just remember when we were in high school, when I was in high school, high school sports were really big, and there was only Reno High, Sparks High. I went to Wooster when it was new. So there were only three or four schools.

After the big games, the coaches and the refs all went down to the Coney Island. That was the big deal on Friday and Saturday night, and after the UNR games they would go down there. It was just kind of a meeting place for all those folks. So it's always kind of had that real local draw, but pulling from all walks of life down there.

Barber: And they always served lunch and dinner, to your memory?

Rossolo: No, just lunch. It wasn't till my cousin Lorri decided she would like to do a dinner down there that they began dinner.

Barber: So that is relatively recent, then.

Rossolo: I think she said the other night she's been doing it twenty years now, which really shocked me.

Barber: And not every night.

Rossolo: Just Wednesdays. She started Wednesdays and Saturdays, but now it's just Wednesdays. On rare occasions she does a Friday night dinner.

Barber: Now, you remember that place before the interstate went in.

Rossolo: Yes.

Barber: So can you remember anything about that time period? Did you live in Reno at the time? Did you live in Reno-Sparks area at the time when the interstate was going in?

Rossolo: Yes.

Barber: Do you remember the impact that it had on the Coney during the time or how your family felt about it? What a huge thing to happen in the backyard of the restaurant.

Rossolo: I don't know that they felt too bad about it, because the actual business was pretty well preserved. I don't remember how much interruption there was in terms of when they were actually building the thing on the side, you know, trying to go over 4th Street and all. That must have clogged that area in there, but I never remembered them complaining too much about that. My Aunt Nettie was thrilled because they actually got a new house out of the deal down in Sparks, that they were able to move down there from the settlement of my great-grandparents' house and their house.

Barber: So prior to that, they had all still lived in those houses?

Rossolo: Pretty much, yes. I'm not sure what happened to my great-grandparents' house, because they passed away in the early sixties, and I just don't remember what they did with that house. My Uncle Gerald and my Aunt Nettie were still living in that house, and my grandfather was still alive then. So they were still living in the original family home when the freeway came through.

Barber: Were there still gardens and animals at that point, do you think, that you recall?

Rossolo: I don't think there were any animals. I could be wrong. And the gardens were gone. The gardens were only at my great-grandparents' house, that I remember, so they were gone, too.

I do remember this now. The original Coney Island before the brick house, they moved that from where it was and moved it down the alley to where my grandparents' house was, and they set it down kind of like in the backyard by the chicken coops, as I remember.

Barber: You're saying the original place where they had sold the tamales?

Rossolo: Yes.

Barber: What did that look like? Was it just made of wood?

Rossolo: Yeah, it was just an old wood house. As a kid, I thought it was pretty big, and it was just all bunches of junk in there. It had a counter, more than a bar, where you would eat at, and the rest of it was just an open structure, maybe somewhat as big as this room [a classroom], maybe a little bigger.

Barber: We were talking before about when Ralph owned the Sugar Plum and then moved to his wife's family property. Do you know if they built that structure that you were just talking about, or do you think that it already existed?

Rossolo: I believe it already existed, because I think whoever had that was operating it as a tamale factory, and then my grandfather just bought it, and, hence, the cook came along with it, which is how we got into the tamale business as an Italian. [laughs]

Barber: I was just looking around in the ads. Tamales were very popular at that time. There were a number of different tamale places around town, so it seems like the trendy thing was to have tamales. Someone at some point had mentioned tamales. I'm trying to remember who said this to me, but tamales, which were Spanish, I think, Spanish or Mexican, run by an Italian place, but someone had mentioned a German cook.

Rossolo: Yes.

Barber: Do you remember a German cook?

Rossolo: Yes. Uncle Joe was telling the story the other night. When they bought the place, it was a German cook that was running the place, that showed them how to make these tamales that were based on the Spanish variety and not the Mexican variety. I'm not sure what the difference in the two is, because the entire time I've been alive, that I know of, they've never sold the tamales. They always had enchiladas.

Barber: Another non-Italian dish.

Rossolo: Another non-Italian dish, with beans. [laughs] It was very popular.

Barber: Do you have any idea why they would have gotten out of the tamale business?

Rossolo: I'm just thinking it was easier to make the enchiladas than it was the tamales in the long run, because you didn't have to do all the corn. I don't know how you make tamales, really, but you must have to do the corn and then wrap them in the husks. And enchiladas, you just kind of use the tortillas, do it that way.

Barber: What kind of food beside enchiladas would you say that they grew to specialize in or that the menu consisted of, that you remember?

Rossolo: Exactly the same as today, minus we didn't have steak sandwiches. They did corned beef and cabbage on Thursdays and spaghetti with roast beef on Tuesdays. Now they've added pesto, which they didn't before. But they've always had ham, beef, corned beef sandwiches, the sandwiches during the day. So the menu hasn't changed much as far as I know.

When we lived here, they were open at night as a bar and that kind of stuff, but now they close pretty early, as far as I know, but they have lots of private parties on Friday and Saturday nights, so that's what they moved toward instead of just being open for the general public. These private parties are extremely popular.

Barber: Do you remember, as far back as you could remember, other businesses being in that local area that aren't there now?

Rossolo: The one I do remember hasn't changed much, except catty-corner across 4th Street, I guess, because it's toward Reno, there used to be—I think it was called Stop and Shop grocery store. It used to be a fair-sized market for the era, I guess, because we didn't have large supermarkets too much back then. It was right on the corner of Coney Island and 4th Street. I want to say it was called Stop and Shop or something like that. They used to send me over there if they'd run out of lettuce, a couple heads of lettuce.

Barber: So if there was a grocery store there, it seems that there must have been other residences in that area, too?

Rossolo: I just don't remember any. But as you go up 4th Street, at least in those days, there were more motels in that area, and then where the freeway is, there were homes back in that area, because those were all taken out when the freeway went through. What's left of Field Street kind of dead ends up there, if I'm right, but those were all homes, back that way. I don't remember much of what was up where the DMV is now. I'm not sure what was on that side, although I used to ride down that road all the time.

Barber: Do you remember the Copenhagen Bar being in its original location there?

Rossolo: Now that you say that, yeah, it was just down on the next corner.

Barber: Was there a street between it and the Coney? I'm trying to place it.

Rossolo: I'm thinking there was. I'm thinking that's where Field Street came into 4th, and they were on the Sparks side of that street.

Barber: Did you know the family who ran it? That was the Quilicis.

Rossolo: Oh, yeah, well, I know that name. I didn't pay much attention to that. Yeah, that would have been taken during the freeway, wouldn't it?

Barber: They demolished that and then the family built a new one down in their current location.

Rossolo: To be honest, I heard of them [the Gallettis] doing more with that bar than with Halfway. There was more love for that bar than the other one.

Barber: From the Galletti side?

Rossolo: From the Gallettis. I don't know why that is, but maybe it's the Sparks connection actually, because they were there in Sparks.

Barber: Right. And the Copenhagen Bar never served food so much, but Casale's and Coney would serve food, so they might have been competing for the same people. I'm thinking about when the Coney had the door opening on to 4th Street, and I'm wondering if there seemed to be more walk-in traffic, of people walking into the restaurant, or if people were mostly driving even then, from other places.

Rossolo: The only people that I knew of that used the front door were ones that parked on that street, because you could park along the curb out there, and they would come in the front. But I don't remember any walk-in traffic like that, because the parking lot was nowhere near as big as it is now because of the apartments.

Barber: The Star Apartments next door?

Rossolo: No. My great-grandfather had built four stone apartments. If you take the current parking lot and you kind of divide it in half, the apartments were on the Reno side. They weren't in Reno, but they were on that side of the property, on the west side of the property.

Barber: He constructed those? He'd had those built?

Rossolo: Yes. They tore those down. Gosh, I don't remember when those were torn down, maybe in the seventies, maybe even the eighties. My mom lived in one of those with my sister for a while. I think there were four of them, four separate apartments, because as a kid, they were pretty tall apartments. They were right in that parking lot, so the only parking lot you really had was the little strip between the apartments and the Coney itself.

Barber: I didn't know about that. So then as you remember, were there a lot of family members who worked at the restaurant? And I'm wondering if they did, who did what?

Rossolo: According to my mom, originally, when they were kids, they all worked down there, but like I said, Mom went to business college and then she got a job outside of there. Then Uncle Joe went to the railroad. But my Uncle John and Aunt Nettie worked there their whole lives. Then, of course, John took over the business, and Nettie was part owner of the business, too. When my grandfather left, he left it to both of them, and so she worked, like I said, until she was eighty-something.

Barber: Did they cook and tend bar, or did they hire people to do that, do you think?

Rossolo: Initially, they did it all, you know. My Uncle John would do the cooking, Aunt Nettie did waiting. They did—it was a big deal—they hired a bartender. That was kind of a big deal, you know. And then they hired someone to help out. Well, actually, Uncle Johnny would do the kitchen, Nettie would serve, and they'd have a bartender out front. It really was a very small operation. Then they just over the years got bigger where they couldn't physically handle it as much.

Barber: You were saying that Nettie brought in business herself, just by the force of her personality. I wonder if you could just describe her.

Rossolo: Well, she was absolutely full of life, and she loved a good time and she loved people having a good time, and I think that was almost infectious, that she just had a personality that just made you like her, and she liked everybody. So I think she just made you feel welcome, and you just kind of wanted to party with her in a way, because that was her personality.

Barber: She was the front of the house for decades.

Rossolo: Oh, yes, absolutely, yes, for decades. Very thin, kind of short, but just full of life, and she would run a million miles an hour, and she could carry dishes like—just amazing.

Barber: Did she work there up until the end, or had she retired?

Rossolo: Pretty much. Well, she had retired. I think she was in her very early eighties when she retired, maybe a little before that.

Barber: Did you ever get a sense of what kind of youth she had or what she was like when she was younger?

Rossolo: Very fun-loving, my mother used to say. Yes, she liked a good time, she liked to party a lot. Never married, and neither did Uncle Gerald, so they were both home all the time. They never lived anywhere else.

Barber: Did they live with their parents?

Rossolo: Yes, they were still living there when the highway took the house.

Barber: So this really was just a family compound, really.

Rossolo: Yes, it really was, yes, all in that same area.

Barber: When you go into the Coney today, does it still seem very much like the place that you grew up in?

Rossolo: Oh, it's exactly the same. The only major difference inside is that they moved the bathrooms. So other than that, it's exactly the same, yes. And moving the bathrooms was a big deal.

Barber: Where were they before?

Rossolo: You know where you go down the hall—I guess I shouldn't say "hall." But you go by the bar to go to the bathrooms now, they were right there on the right, that little hall you go down. So they kind of went into the serving area back in the kitchen, back towards the kitchen, not in the kitchen, but in there. So they ripped those out. You look at the ceiling, you can kind of see where maybe the walls were, and if you look in the dining room, you can see a pipe coming out up to the ceiling now. That's where the stove was originally, along that wall, when it was just the two rooms, before they added the back addition.

Barber: That's very helpful, thank you. You'd never know that. It's hard to trace that kind of thing.

It just seems like there are just a handful of places in the area that seem to have endured for so long, especially in the same family. Are there other places that you can think of that you feel are kind of like that, the way the Coney is? Are there any other places that seem to have that same lineage?

Rossolo: That's a good question. None that I know of exactly. None that I know of, except I do think that the John Ascuaga's Nugget started out that way when they bought it and took it over and the whole family was running it, and particularly during its heyday. And there was a great connection between them and the Gallettis.

Barber: What's that connection?

Rossolo: John Ascuaga still goes down to the Coney for lunch on occasion. It's Sparks. I think that's the key in there. I just don't know enough of those other businesses. I'm not real sure which other ones would be.

Barber: What do you attribute its longevity to, the fact that it seems to be so singular in the kind of business that it is, how successful it's been?

Rossolo: Well, I think there are a couple of things. They've maintained the atmosphere and the quality over the years, but I think with the successive generations, particularly when Greg took over, and when he took over, he was pretty young and he brought a whole younger crowd in with him, which I think kept it going, because I think that's just vital to keep your business. And they switched a little bit. They went to doing these parties so you could bring a group of your friends down, and they would cook you anything you want. So they switched a little bit, and I think it kept the people coming down there. That's kind of what I attribute it to.

I don't know Greg's kids very well, and they're still fairly young, so I don't know if there's someone lurking there to keep that going when he retires, which I'm sure he's a long way away from. I'm not intimating that at all. But I think that's what keeps it going. You have to get the young crowd in there, because everyone else dies off.

Barber: When they have the dinners, are they always family style, that you know of?

Rossolo: As far as I know, except on Wednesday nights I think you can ask for a served dinner if you want it served, but the ones I know are all family style.

Barber: It's such a neat thing to serve family style, there and at places like Louis' Basque Corner. There aren't a lot of places that do that. It's very warm.

Rossolo: See, I think it's that atmosphere. I don't know the last time you were in there, but they painted it. She just had a fit over it because it's not the same color as it used to be, although they admitted they needed painting. They changed the color.

Barber: The interior or exterior?

Rossolo: Interior. I had to look twice before I could really tell—I don't think it's something you'd go in there and say, "Oh, my gosh, you just painted this." They didn't make it a drastic thing, but spruced it up a little.

Barber: Does your family still get together there at all as family?

Rossolo: Well, they might. I mean, honestly, we just haven't been a part of it. My wife and I lived in Elko for forty-some years. We just moved back to Reno a couple years ago, or moved to Reno, so we've really been out of sync with the group down there, because we just haven't been around at all. So we're back now.

Barber: Do you have any other stories you'd like to share, anything that comes to mind?

Rossolo: We were talking about those parties and stuff. For years they've done something special—I can't remember what they call it now, but people can bring all their chukkars and their birds down there and they'll cook them and make them into spaghetti

sauce, and they'll serve them for everybody, the wild game feeds, just different things that you can have. They'll work with you to do it, and I think that's one thing that's kept them going, too, in terms of popularity.

Barber: It's really personal, kind of catered to what you need.

Rossolo: Yes, you can kind of make it what you want, that kind of stuff. I think they're doing great. Everybody knows about the Coney. Whether they go there or not, they kind of know about it.

Barber: One way or another, even though the interstate might have seemed kind of invasive coming in right there, it does make it very easy to explain how to get there, take the exit and turn the corner. [laughs]

Rossolo: Absolutely, absolutely. They used to talk a lot about the streetcar that went down there. Somehow I ran across that. It was only in operation for a few years, but it was sure a big deal. They used to talk about doing the streetcar. They took it to school. I can remember my mom saying that, that they used to take it down to Sparks High and that area.

Barber: That's interesting to think of it as for students. We got some pictures of it down there. Everybody wants to get a trolley or a streetcar back, because everyone wants to do those kind of touristy things.

Rossolo: How unique would it be, yes. I'd spruce up that area of town a little bit before you put a streetcar in there. [laughs]

Barber: This has been incredibly helpful. I want to thank you so much for talking to me.

Rossolo: Well, I'm glad.

Barber: That is all illuminating personal information that I wouldn't have had any other way, so thank you so much.

Rossolo: Well, good. You're more than welcome.