Carmen Lerro
Interview Date: ?
Location of interview: 9th and League
Interview conducted by Michelle Ortiz

Carmen Lerro: My name is Carmen Lerro. How’s that?

Interviewer: Carmen, can you talk a little bit about how long have you been connected or your family been connected to this market?

Carmen Lerro: Believe it or not, since 1885. Right across the street there – well, now it’s a restaurant, was a butcher shop. My grandfather’s father came over and then it was my grandfather, my father, now me.

Interviewer: Can you tell me the names of your –

Carmen Lerro: Ancestors? My grandfather’s father was Joseph. My grandfather’s child, my father, was Pasquale, and I’m Carmen. I’ll go back to my grandfather.

Interviewer: So you’re great-grandparents came from where?

Carmen Lerro: What part of Italy? What was it? Offhand, I really don’t remember. I don’t remember.

Interviewer: Somewhere in Italy.

Carmen Lerro: Somewhere it Italy.

Interviewer: And do you have brothers and sisters?

Carmen Lerro: I got two sisters and two brothers.

Interviewer: Have they also been part of this?

Carmen Lerro: No, pretty much my brother, which would be my brothers, and pretty much my father. And my father passed and I took over. Then just pretty much me. My brothers stay in touch. They still come down.

Interviewer: So you say in that location it was another type of store?

Carmen Lerro: Yeah, it used to be a butcher shop there.
Interviewer: Could you talk a little bit about it, what you remember of that place? How long was it there?

Carmen Lerro: That butcher shop was there since 1885 until I closed it about ten years ago, which was 1990, something like that.

Interviewer: What are your memories?

Carmen Lerro: I’ll tell you what, the old-timers teaching you how to have fun with the customers. We wait on each customer. We actually had wine in the refrigerator. While we waited on each customer, we were giving them wine, you’re communicating, which, today, everything’s so fast, people just grab and go, where people got to know the meat cutter, got to know the produce guy. Back then, to me, it was more fun. Got to know a lot of people. Then it would be just learning from the old-timers how to deal with life, what life’s all about. Money and everything, you got to enjoy what you’re doing. I enjoy what I’m doing. That’s why I’m still here. Then there’s a lot more things.

Interviewer: Do you know anything about your great-grandparent’s history, in terms of them coming here, any of the struggles as immigrants coming to –

Carmen Lerro: As immigrants, my uncle used to tell me all the stories of how he used to pick up dirt, rags and everything else to make a buck. Anyway, no, my uncle would tell me about all the tough times they had when they came over, how they used to pick rags, do this, strawberry fields, produce fields, pick fields, and it was a lot tougher with the immigrants back then. He used to tell me it wasn’t just Italians --- Jewish or Irish, every nationality came over here had to really bust their hump to earn what they got. So that’s why I respect all the old-timers.

Interviewer: How important is it for you to still be here and be in this space?

Carmen Lerro: Like I said, I do it because – really, it ain’t the money. The money is not as big as it used to be down here. I do it for family. My Uncle Doc was here, [inaudible], which you know, the store, which is gonna be a steakhouse pretty soon again, and I just enjoy doing it, just enjoy keeping the family name going, and they, hopefully, maybe one of my sons or my grandkids would do it, but we’ll see what happens.
Interviewer: If you were to – you’ve been working here since you were a child, is that correct?

Carmen Lerro: Since 7.

Interviewer: Did you enjoy being here?

Carmen Lerro: I loved it. I loved it. I used to go in the butcher shop, my grandfather used to give me – back at 7, I used to get $20.00 a week. Back then, I only used to wrap the meat, bag the stuff up, things like that, little things. Then when I got in my teens, then it was a little bit with the knife, show me how to break down, and then I used to get up to $50.00 a week. When he passed away when I was 16, I asked for a raise. He said, you should be paying me, son. You’re learning a trade. I said, I can’t get $50.00 more? He said, nah, you should be paying me. So I said, all right. Then it wind up being – I said, you think it’s better I go elsewhere? He’s like, yeah, go. So I tried a butcher shop for a week, made me work my butt off. He said, here’s $150.00. But I had to work triple hard for that $150.00, so I came back. I said, I think I’ll stay with you, gramps. So I still had his advice for a while.

Interviewer: What do you think you learned, in terms of work ethic, in all of those years?

Carmen Lerro: You give your best. No matter what you do, you give your best. When I come to work, I give my best. When I play, give my best. When I go home with my family, give my best. So what they taught me was whatever you do, don’t do – I don’t know if you can say that – half-ass. Do it right or don’t do it at all. So that’s what I believe in.

Interviewer: How do you see the market now, compared to when you were younger?

Carmen Lerro: You can see that the big families aren’t existent no more, like when I was growing up, there used to be seven, eight kids in the family. Today’s generation, they have one or two and they don’t buy as much, so you got to be a little different in selling. They only want two lemons, you charge them for two lemons, where back in the day, it was ten lemons for $1.00. Nobody want to hear
none. That’s how it used to be. Got to get the ten lemons. So I would say just to buying and everything in general.

Interviewer: And what does – maybe you’ve answered this question already, but I know you talked about this stand belongs to the Messina family, right? And –

Carmen Lerro: And those stands belong to my Uncle Doc.

Interviewer: So when you grew up, was he – both of these families, your own and the Messina family, working together? Was there anything that you want to say about that?

Carmen Lerro: A lot different. They worked together. They worked together. A person would – how would you say it – respected each other. If you had potatoes on this side, they wouldn’t think about putting potatoes on that side. They respected. It’s called respect. Street respect. And then just the respect, in general. What I heard the stories were when these guys used to get done, there used to be a bar here, in this corner here, there used to be a nickel a beer. So they all used to go. The families would all be down here, so who would go here.

Back then, it was Giordano’s was a bar on the other side of Washington Avenue where Anastasi’s is. That was a bar. So everybody used to hit – everybody used to put in their families. Everybody was here, so that had to be a lot of fun. That I didn’t see. That I heard of.

Interviewer: So in a way, you are continuing this tradition, even though it has changed.

Carmen Lerro: Yeah, it’s changed, but I still like it. Until I don’t like it no more, until I feel like I don’t want to do it no more, then I’ll stop.

Interviewer: Do you have children?

Carmen Lerro: Uh-huh.

Interviewer: Do you involve them?

Carmen Lerro: I try to, but they don’t like to get up at 4:30 a.m. and go to a food center. I got Ozzie, that’s my adopted child right there. I got Ozzie to come down to the produce center with me.
Interviewer: And I know, from what Mary was saying, that Ozzie’s also working and helping a lot.

Carmen Lerro: Ozzie does a lot of everything. I call him an all-around athlete. You don’t want to know what else I call him, but that’s one of them.

Interviewer: About history, we were talking about immigrants, how do you see the market now? You were talking about that community of respect. What do you see now?

Carmen Lerro: I see, actually, the community itself. It’s different people living around here, which makes it all seem to be close. I have a different term for it, it’s like a yuppie crowd. Like I said, it’s just a different kind of crowd where they all stick together, though. They all do things. I see them all go to the park, so that’s a good sign. The market itself, getting better. We have to start – to me, I always say we have to start advertising and let people know we’re still here, stop going by the name and let people know what our prices are because a lot of competition out there, so we just have to go with the competition.

Interviewer: What else do you think needs to happen in order for –

Carmen Lerro: To get better?

Interviewer: Whether it’s you –

Carmen Lerro: Anybody, in general?

Interviewer: Just in general, the –

Carmen Lerro: I would think one is, I always said it, you need brighter lights at night, keep the street bright and clean. Cleanliness is a big thing. Parking is the other thing. And maybe change our hours a little bit where – I hate to say it, but if you stay open to 9:00 p.m. or 10:00 p.m. – back in the day, we used to stay open to 11:00 p.m. 9:30 p.m. or 10:00 p.m., the customers would die down, then 11:00 p.m. Now, as you see, it’s what time?

Interviewer: Five.
Carmen Lerro: Where years ago, that just would never be. So maybe stay open a little later, let people know we’re here. On the street itself, gotta hustle them down here again.

Interviewer: You’ve worked together mostly with Popeye?

Carmen Lerro: Yeah, my life with Popeye and my grandfather and my Uncle Doc.

Interviewer: And how would you describe Popeye?

Carmen Lerro: Unbelievable. Straight up shooter. He goes down to the market and he knows his stuff. He’d go down to the produce center, tell people, I don’t like those beans, I’ll give you this price. They didn’t want it, he’d walk out. No good. He would basically be honest. He was too honest. That’s how you gotta be when you’re buying produce. He used to go there, see you later. And he’d buy – and he knew how to buy. The man showed me how to buy. Day by day, keep it fresh, that way, at the end of the week, nothing left and nobody gets a bad product. That’s one good thing he taught me.

Interviewer: So in a way, he showed you how to take pride –

Carmen Lerro: I would say he’s like my grandfather. My grandfather and my Uncle Doc were the same way. So they all taught me different things, how to deal with life in general. Lot of them I can’t say on tape, but in general. They taught me, which was good. Street smart. All the college – what’s the one line? They said you can go to any college in the world, what you learn here, if you can deal with here, you can deal with anywhere in the world. And how true that saying was. I go anywhere, I can deal with people. I know who’s bullshitting me, who’s trying to give me the bullshit talk and all that stuff. So it’s all there and you see it. That was one great thing about the old-timers, taught you how to deal with people.

Interviewer: If I was to say three words that represent the market to you, what would they be?

Carmen Lerro: Talk like an accountant.

Interviewer: It doesn’t have to be three. We could bring it down to one, but why, why would you choose those words?
Carmen Lerro: I would say education by itself. It’s an education by itself. I think that’s good. Ninth Street education by itself.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Carmen Lerro: Because what you see here, you never see nowhere in this world. Some of these things you see down here you think you’ve seen, but you’ve never seen. Life experience, very much. And it’s a good one. It’s a good one because there shouldn’t be one stereotype or one person. I’ll give you another of my grandfather’s sayings. He said, everybody’s blank stinks. Nobody’s better than nobody. I’m no better than you and you’re not better than me. You treat people with respect. They don’t give it back, the hell with them. Don’t lose sleep over it. And that’s basically it. It’s the truth. Treat people with respect. They don’t like it, fine, you go on. And that was all big with me.

Then the other was – what was it, Ozzie? He used to go like this. One or two good friends. He would say, you find one good friend in your life – because when I was a kid, I used to always have all these kids and girls want to talk to me. He would go like this, you get the hell over here. He’s say, let me tell you something, son. He said, if you find one good friend in your lifetime, you do real well. If you find two, you did great. Pulls out a wad of money. He says, see this? This is your friend. If you don’t have this, you ain’t nothing in life. How true that saying is. So all different sayings.

Interviewer: And after speaking with Mary, she talked about – she would say, “Sweet potato pie.”

Carmen Lerro: Her lines.

Interviewer: She would go – so do you remember any of them, or do you even do any of them?

Carmen Lerro: Like I said, Mary – between – Paul used to do the, “Chicken, better than yesterday. Chicken ain’t nothing but a bird. Bird ain’t nothing but a chicken.” Then Mary would do the, “Sweet as honey, better than money.” So all those – the hustlers are gone. I’m it. Other than me, who else is there? There’s not really – nobody hustles no more. When I come out on a Saturday and I hustle sometimes, “Every bean with a bang, every bang with a bean, put it in a pot, let it get hot, put it on the grill, give it a thrill.”
I’ll just hustle, just have fun, people look at you like they haven’t seen that.

That’s what the Ninth Street used to be years ago. Everybody had a store stand, they hustled. If it was dungarees, I had Don’s – as a matter of fact, you might still know Don’s Dungarees. He’d be going, “9.99.” Bernie’d be going, “9.98.” They would hustle back and forth. That’s how it was. And nobody got hurt. Nobody got hurt. We all sell the same stuff, but nobody got hurt. We all made money. We all had fun doing it, and we made money.

Interviewer: Did you say anything?

Carmen Lerro: I told you a couple of them. I always say in my meat department, in the meat, it was, “Cheap, cheap, cheap, all the meat you want to eat. If you can beat it, I’ll eat it. Put it in a pot, let it get hot. Put it on the grill, give it a thrill.” See, I was doing rap before the rappers even came out, so I’ll be 50, so I was doing that in my teens. So rappers didn’t come out till what, 10 years, 20 years ago? So I think I was rapping before they came out.

Interviewer: You invented it.

Carmen Lerro: I invented it, yeah. Those rappers don’t know nothing.

Interviewer: Is there anything else you want to add? And if this video is, again, it’s about the supermarket, it’s – I think we talked about it in terms of –

Carmen Lerro: I’ll tell you, everybody’s down here, immigrants, they all work hard. You can’t say nothing bad about none of them. They come, they work hard, they do what they got to do. Even the other day I see these guys get a couple beers. It’s supposed to be fun. While you’re working, you’re supposed to have fun. That’s what it’s all about. So these guys do the same thing. Mr. B, I knew Mr. B – how long I know you, Mr. B? I taught him how to be football. Right, B? Who taught you? Who taught you football? I grew up with all these guys. Unbelievable. Unbelievable. Lot of fun.

Interviewer: Any last words that you would like to share on the video?

Carmen Lerro: No, I just wish more people would know to come down here, that it is cheaper than anywhere, and just come down and have fun. You could go eat, you can drink. Where could you go eat and
drink, go in the market and shop? Am I right? Where could you get that? You can’t go in the supermarket and do that. You can do that on Ninth Street, eat, drink, have fun, talk to the customers, talk to the people, have a good time.

[End of interview]