

24 Years Parks Dept.  
(1922)

VINCENT COLANTONIO INTERVIEW

Interviewer: Louise Ditmars

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Q: Mr. Colantonio worked for the Municipality of Saanich for twenty-four years before he retired in 1987. His entire career was spent in the Parks Department. During his time there he learned a great deal and contributed a great deal to the parks that we see today. My first question is when were you born?

A: May 19, 1922.

Q: Could you tell me where and when you went to school?

A: I went to school in my home town, Campo Di Giove; that's the only elementary school; there was no high school there at that time.

Q: When did you first come to Canada?

A: October 24th, 1948.

Q: And where did you live when you first came here?

A: I lived at Caledonia Avenue, 955 Caledonia, almost opposite the trailer park there, for seven years; then where I live now.

Q: And you got married a few years later?

A: Yes, we got married by proxy. You know, she was in Italy. I was here and she was there, and my cousin represented me in the ceremony there.

Q: And when Anita came to Canada, did you get married again?

A: No, it was not necessary.

Q: Now I hope this isn't too personal, but how long did you know each other before you got married?

A: Oh, we knew each other since we were kids. She was fourteen, I was seventeen.

Q: And how long have you been married now?

A: We've been married now for forty years.

Q: When you first came to Victoria, you probably found it difficult to get established in some ways. Did you know anybody here?

A: I didn't find it very difficult because I had my sister here, Maria Carmela Di Iorio and her husband. They made application for me to come out here.

Q: How does that work exactly?

A: Well I was working in Rome, and I received a letter from my sister, and she said "we just made application for you to come" and I just got out of the army, and I thought "oh God, not again" and things were not that good after the war but I said I would try to come.

Q: Are you saying that you weren't quite enthusiastic about coming?

A: No I wasn't.

Q: What did you find different about Canada?

A: Well I miss the social life. In Italy, living in a small village, everybody know everybody know everybody else. When you come out in the morning everybody say "good morning." Then you go for lunch and somebody ask you to go to the bar, and it was very, very nice. When I come to Canada I find it real hard. People say "good morning" and "good night" then everybody to their own.

Q: What were some of the things that you worked at when you came to Canada?

A: The first job I took...that's real nice, I'm glad you asked me that. When I got the letter from my sister, everybody said to me "oh you're going to Canada--over there everything push-button." And I thought, oh boy, maybe I get the chance to work as a mechanic or something. I came over here and they had a big party for me, and my brother-in-law introduced me to a big man, Mr. Ed Reinaldi, and he say this is the man you gonna work for. And he say to me "did you ever use pick and shovel?" And I say yeah. And I say to myself, oh my God I travel 9000 miles to use a pick and shovel! I went to bed that night and I couldn't sleep all night, thinking what am I doing here. Anyway I went to work and the job was lousy. You know Colville Road down by the Naval Base, well I worked on every one of those houses. We had to lift them up, take out the cedar posts and put a concrete base on. We used jacks, and one man on each side of the house and one man in the middle. We raised it a little at a time on railroad ties. I worked there for two years and then I thought, this is no future for me. Then I went to the brickyard, the Baker Brick and Tile Company which is now Ocean Cement. I work there about thirteen years. It was not bad, I started as a labourer then I got on as a machine operator, and my dream started coming true. First I was helper to the machine operator and then he

A: retired and I got the job. The machine was making tiles and bricks and all that stuff. Construction materials and flower pots all out of clay. After five or six years I was made charge hand or foreman, and directed twenty-six men. Then things started to slow down a little bit and they reduced to eighteen men. When I was foreman I had to work on a machine and also watch the men.

Q: Were there ever any accidents?

A: Yes, one guy lost a finger in <sup>the flowerpot</sup> machine, another guy lost a finger in the belts of another machine, so it could happen. We just used to tell them to be careful. They used to send a safety man from Vancouver around once in a while to see how we did things. I Don't really agree with the system they have for safety today. If there is a sack of cement, it is too heavy for one man to lift, but it is not enough for two men, and it costs the employer way more to get two men to do it. There was Workmen's Compensation too. But I don't care how many rules you got, when things are going to happen, they're going to happen.

Q: Tell me about your children.

A: Well we had our first child in 1953 and that's when I decide to stay. I always thought I want to go back to Italy because I don't like it. But when we have our first child I think Oh boy I need a roof for our family, and I made a decision, we're going to stay right here for the children. They were born here and that's where they're going to stay. I could have taken them to Italy, but sometimes there is a problem coming back. And I thought they would have a better chance in life here, which they have had. Albert came on in 1953, Ida the girl was born the first baby of the year in 1956 and Mario the youngest in 1964. Albert has two children, Ida has no family right now, and Mario is still single.

Q: Do your children live in Saanich?

A: Yes, they all do. Mario still lives with us. Ida's married name is Trozzo.

Q: Now you had a wife and children, and in those days people didn't just buy a house, what did you do?

A: Well, at that time we weren't like the kids that just want to buy a new house, we always tried to make the shoes, the boots the size of our feet. So we went looking for an older house, maybe spend four thousand dollars at that time and then fix it a little bit, pay that one and then...buy another one better. But the trouble is I just happen to buy this land and I had three thousand dollars and I bought the land at 25 hundred dollars.

Q: In what year?

A: 1953. And I thought well, might as well I start a house, and I start it with 740 dollars, and I thought that was going sky high, but then I borrowed a little money and we completed the basement and then I paid all my debts and when all my debts were free, everytime I made a hundred dollars I put in the house. And I come to work here in the night.

Q: So you would work in the daytime at your regular job and work on the house at night. So you built your own house, but not all at once.

A: No. We moved in the basement, I didn't even fill the gyproc, we just moved in, I said to her, if somebody come just play dumb, we don't speak English; just in case they want to kick us out.<sup>1</sup> (Laughter)

Q: But of course in those days, many people built their house that way.

A: We were just in time to get in, they change the law after that. In '55, '56 they change the law, you have to finish the house before you move in. So we were lucky in that way.

Q: Well it's a beautiful house. How many bedrooms do you have?

A: Three bedrooms, and a kitchen and dining room and rumpus room downstairs, and a bedroom that is not quite a bedroom, its been almost a library, but because our son lives there, we make a combination library and bedroom for him. I'm happy with it. One thing is, I built it myself and I know what's in. A lot of people ask me why I don't build the living room on the roadside. I told them I like to sit here. [It faces the back garden and a wooded hill.] The spring is just beautiful, the blooms come out yellow and green and the wild flowers are just beautiful. The best feeling I have, I look there and I say that's mine.

Q: This was all built by your own hands.

A: My friends help me. I remember I went out to dig the foundation, that time I was working down at the brickyard, I got the company bulldozer to

<sup>1</sup>A family could apply to the Zoning Board for a permit to live in a basement or garage while completing the house.

A: come here, but it got stuck. He said you got to wait till the ground dries out, he had to put a cable to the tree to pull himself out. I say I can't wait all that time. Her [Anita's] brother was working on the railroad up at Cowichan Lake (Tony Zavarelli) and we had a few friends that came from the same town. So it was a long weekend, and we were living on Caledonia Avenue, like I say, and Friday night somebody knock on the door and I saw these guys, and I say what the heck you guys doing here? They said well we hear you're stuck for the building so here we are, and we came here and work two days by hand. It cost me about three gallons of wine. We were work and drink, work and drink. It was real hard work with the wheelbarrow.

Q: And I imagine that you would help friends out too.

A: It was a funny thing, I had to go for about five or six years after that, to repay what they did for me. If we hadn't done that, we wouldn't be half what we are now.

Q: What kind of jobs did you do for them?

A: My cousin he was living on McKenzie and wanted to raise the house up, so he asked the Farmer Construction and they wanted \$1500.00 which was a lot of money. I said forget. So we rent the timbers and the blocks for about \$200.00 or something and I had lots of experience in that, so we lift the house up, and altogether cost him about \$500.00 for the foundation and the floor and did it all ourselves. That was the only way we could go ahead really.

Q: Now I'd like to hear a bit about when you started to work for the Corporation of Saanich.

A: I start in Saanich in 1963, November '63 with the Winter Works Program. I think it was meant more or less for the welfare people and then somebody like me that out of a job. You got in there was no promises. You going to stay steady, you could work one week, two weeks, all depends on the... I went to the yard and the foreman got five, six of us and he took us up Mount Tolmie and introduced us to the man in charge and I never forget that, the guy Hans Derkes a hell of a nice guy, a typical German, he

(sp?)

A: say at eight o'clock when I get out of the car to go to work, you go to work. Ten o'clock coffee time when I blow the whistle you going to get coffee. We couldn't make a move before him. So that's fine. So we start work there...landscape a little bit here and there, it's real beautiful. I remember I was working with rocks and my gloves were so shabby, all holes. It was hard on my hands. Most of the time I don't like to [work] with gloves, but with rocks you have to use gloves. I remember the head foreman came up and I said I need a pair of gloves, and he said we are only allowed two pairs of gloves a year. I said yeah but I work with rocks and they don't last long. He say that's tough luck. One time I asked for a sack of cement to fix some stone steps and I couldn't get it. At that time the tax revenue was not very big, the budget was not a heck of a lot. So you have to say take from Peter, Paul, give to Peter, machinery, everything. Eighty percent of the job we were doing all by hand. I remember, from the Winter Works I was tranferred to steady. I had been working for a paving company, O.K. Paving, now Island Paving, and I didn't want to go back there. So I ask the superintendant Bert Richmond, and say what chance I have to stay steady. He say Vince I like to keep you, but it all depends on the money. If we have the money I keep you, otherwise you go back, and in the fall I get you back here. So I went to O.K. Paving and I told what that's all about, and Banzi Sanca, the manger he said don't worry about it. You work there as long as they keep you and when you are off you come here and then you can come back the other one. So I was lucky. But then a young kid quit and I was lucky to stay here. At that time I was forty-two. And that was something that put me off. Here I was doing everything, building rock walls, landscaping and I have trouble to get steady and this young man, he come from nowhere...but it worked out, he quit and went to Nanaimo and I got in. One time we clipped all the trees in a park with hand clippers, and that was hard on the back, and towards two o'clock in the afternoon we were laying down. If it had been a couple of hours it

A: wouldn't be too bad but all day long. The days were eight hours. Then they ask me if I want to go up to Mount Tolmie to clean up the garden, so I stayed there all summer by myself and I had to work hard to clean. I used to spend about one hour every day on my own to keep it up and when the fall came they said well Vincent the park is nice and clean you can go and give the crew a hand, the Capital Development Crew which was doing construction, fences, buildings, all that kind of stuff. They are still there. But now they are way more organized, they have a carpenter, a painter, a plumber, they have all the tradesmen they need. At that time we didn't have nothing and a handy man was O.K. to do the job. So in the winter I worked with the construction crew and in the summer I went back up Mount Tolmie. It was real nice there, and McKenzie said to me one day boy you guys keep this up and one of these days Mount Tolmie gonna make Beacon Hill Park look sick. But later they let it go. We built fences, tennis courts, block buildings. Down at Reynolds I built a scoreboard with a cement roof on top and another one down at Ambassador but I think they took it off now. I helped to build a rock wall at the bottom of Mount Tolmie, that's how I learned to do it. Down at the Gorge I built rock wells for the trees, and the superintendent didn't want any cement to show in the front, and that was difficult, because you got to fit the rocks right in. I'll never forget the first drinking fountain I built--it looked like the Tower of Pisa! (laughter) They took them out because the kids used to do a lot of damage to them. Now they just use plastic. I used to go down when I was foreman and the buildings were all sprayed. There's nothing you can do--it used to go in waves, at one time they would hit so many parks and then you'd go for so many years and then they would lay off. I think that the kids had grown up. I remember in Ambassador Park we painted a building shutter green or forest green so the kids wouldn't vandalize it. It was looking so ugly they didn't bother it.

Q: Now tell us how you rose through the ranks. You started on a temporary project and didn't know if you'd be permanent or not.

A: I think it was the end of October, the first year they run out of money but they didn't lay me off, they switch me to the Waterworks and I worked there for a couple months, laying water pipe. I didn't have any experience then the superintendent Harry \_\_\_\_\_ he wanted me to stay there and I didn't like it very much. Sometimes you had water from the bottom, water from the top, rain and it was not very healthy.

Q: You wanted to be back in your park.

A: Yes, but I didn't want to say that. I said that's up to Bert Richman and he asked Bert and I think he said you get lost, I want him back. From that time on, I never was laid off. After Mount Tolmie \_\_\_\_\_ said our bricklayer quit, would you like to lay bricks for us? Sure I say, but I am not a real bricklayer. I stayed there about four years on the construction crew doing any kind of a job, a fence, drainage. I went from a Gardener I to a Gardener II and the pay was a little bit better. After 1968 I went to the maintenance crew and I was still classed as Gardener II. We marked the soccer fields, painting. Then I was reclassified as Foreman I, I had two, three men. In the summertime the maintenance crew spread out two men here and two men there. In the winter the crew get all together to rake leaves, edging, painting the buildings. About 1976 I was reclassified as Foreman II because the job I was doing at that time was for Foreman II and I should get paid for it. 1982 I was classified as Foreman III. My responsibility changed a bit. I had to do more paperwork, organize the job. Your superior they don't tell you much you got to scratch your own head, how you going to organize the job. That was quite a challenge. I liked it because I always had a sport mind and I was never really a gardener, I liked construction. We were involved with the parks programs for kids, getting the fields ready for baseball and soccer. I had to make sure the jobs were all finished on time, and if you ever got behind there would be a big squack about why the field is not ready and there was no excuse.

So by the time I retired I was real proud of myself. And I was real close with the boys like a big family, whenever they needed a favour I could help them. They might have to go ten minutes early. I do believe in that, takes and give. And they would help me out too. Most of the



A: time it was just beautiful. A matter of fact I still go and see them in the Hall and in the Yard. They miss me and I miss them.

Q: Was there certain parts of the work that you liked better than others?

A: The paperwork was harder because of the language. Even I went to the night school at Vic High for three years, but still for me the paperwork was a little bit harder to do. I made time cards and schedules, all that stuff. We had to make schedules for two weeks ahead, and in the summer it is very very hard to make a schedule, you can't make a schedule, but I had to make the head man understand these things.

Q: The higher up you go the more paperwork there is.

A: Yes. My foreman ask me a few time to be Foreman IV, and I was doing the job of Foreman IV. That was fine as far as the field was concerned, but when it comes to the paperwork I couldn't do it. I say it is better I stay where I am. For people who didn't do the job before it seems easy, more or less a small job. But it was a real hard job because your brains going piece-cross all the time. You have eight, six, seven crews all around the place: one is a carpenter, one is a painter and others cut the grass and others doing different jobs and oh boy, you go there, and say what doing that? It's a real challenge, yet I like that.

Q: What kind of advice would you give to young people coming into that kind of work today?

A: The job can get in the wintertime very disagreeable because of the weather, and you get down. The best advice I give them to, not let that get them down but challenge the job. Get it done no matter how bad it is. I remember one time a young kid and I were down Douglas Street, we had to cut grass and I said Bruce, pick up paper before you cut grass, where the I.C.B.C. building is now there was a park. And he said I'm not going to pick up the paper with all the cars passing by here and they'll see me picking up paper. I said, Bruce you know what, I'll tell you one thing, all those cars that pass by there, sixty percent of those cars they wish they had your job. So pick up the paper and forget about the cars. And if you think it's a bad job you might as well quit. He didn't quit but he went in the service after that.

Q: So you retired in 1987. Were you given a going away party?

A: Yes, that was real nice. I was very happy because the boys really showed me how much they like me. They really put a beautiful lunch for me, and my family was invited, it was real, real nice. Kelly, a girl worked very very hard to put a beautiful sign, a real big sign "Happy Retirement Vincent".

Q: Could you tell me the difference in your wages between when you started and when you retired?

A: When I started I was getting...hm...\$1.91 [per hour] I think. 1963. I retired with \$14 and something. Prices went up, you just getting the same thing, you not gaining anything by it.

Q: Is there anything you'd like to say about how things have changed in Saanich over the years?

A: When I started there, we didn't have much equipment, now they have lots of machinery, and they need it because the parks have been very expanded. No way we could do the work the way we were going before. I think there's too many parks now. It's O.K. to expand, but then to maintain which is the problem. Maintenance always been a problem, costs way more than to expand. We were lucky when I was there, around 1982 for two, three years, we didn't have much budget for capital development and we concentrate on the maintenance and we catch up a little bit... Now the budget is more. I think in Saanich lots of money coming in and they can afford a better budget. One thing I always used to find, they had a temporary crew, just in the summer, but they are not jobs they need to be done in the winter because you only got time to do the work in the summer. Then everything piles up, with everything growing. They should have more men in the winter to do what they can't do in the summer. Otherwise they will always be behind. Pavement, fences have to be done in the winter.

Q: I know that the grounds around the Municipal Hall are always beautifully kept. Thanks for talking with me today.

A: Its been a pleasure.