

Life in Toluca, 1908 to present
an Oral History

Louis Divan, Interviewee
Of Toluca, Illinois

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Narrator's Name: LOUIS DIVAN
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Name of Interviewer: MYNA SWANSON
For: STARVED ROCK LIBRARY SYSTEM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Q: I'm Myna Swanson and I'm interviewing Louis Divan of Toluca, Illinois.

A: I was born in Toluca in 1902. When I was six years old I remember when there were tearing up the old board walks here in Toluca. And we had no sidewalks then -- cinder roads and wood sidewalks. When I was around ten years old -- and all the other boys around here -- we all learned to swim in the coal company's pond which would be southwest of Toluca. And none of us knew what a bathing suit was, but we all learned how to swim and I don't know of any drowning down there. And on all our streets we had awful lot of hitching racks, all over. Nobody cared for a little bit of manure pile on the streets and plenty of dust from the wagon wheels and the horses' feet. We had several livery stables in Toluca, Richard Holland, Taylor, and J. P. Mathis. Then we also had a lot of people driving horses, picking up freight from the depot, to the stores, coal from the coal mine to the coal miners and town people. We had Rich Baker, Charlie Hupprick, Steve Deladto, Julius DeRubeis, Billyng Goodfellow, Pete Peters, Albert Seghetti, Primo Marchesi, all trying to make a living hauling coal and whatever they could with a team of horses. Now my old school days -- we all walked to school in them days and when the weather was cold we'd take a little dinner pail with us and we'd eat dinner there at the schoolhouse. In the summertime we all went barefooted to school. My first teacher was Sarah Drain. My second teacher, Katie Scullans,

A: my third teacher was Mrs. David, my fourth teacher was Mrs. Gannon, my fifth teacher was Mrs. Kelley, that's as far as I went to school. Never had no brains, just a good back. Another thing we had in this town was awful lot of saloons when I was a kid. We had between 25 and 27 saloons. And on Saturdays they always had free lunch, birds and cats and pretzels, free. There wasn't hardly a cat left around here for a good many years. WHISPERED WORDS PAUSE Well, we were a little older we used to play chalk-the-corners, we'd be two gangs and we'd take a chalk and mark the arrow and we'd run around all over town till they'd catch up with us and then we'd play steal-the-cap on the corners, we didn't have very good light, but we'd run around anyhow. And the worst thing we did, we used to do in them days, we'd steal apples and cherries and grapes. On Halloween we loved it, we always dumped them toilets over, everybody had a toilet out in the back, was none in the house. So we thought that was lot of fun. As I got a little older I did a lot of hunting, back around back of the coal mine and stuff there, we had rabbits for "who laid the rails". When I was fifteen and a half years old I lied on my age and worked in the Toluca coal mine. My uncle found it out, he lived in Iddiana, he run a blacksmith shop. So he wrote us a letter and he said if I'd go and work for him he'd give me a dollar a day and board and as I got better he'd raise my wages, as he did. I was there three years, came back to Toluca, times were tough, I worked for a dollar a day from Axel Petersen and John Petersen -- a dollar a day and no board. But I wanted to learn a little more of blacksmithing. And I guess I did for I'm still in it, it will be 58 years in July. Oh yes, and on the corner of my -- on the south side of my house -- was a big hotel, a three story building and when the coal

A: mine was running it had an awful lot of coal miners lived at the hotel, and that was just a block from the mine shaft. But when the mine shut down the hotel also shut down, there was no more business for them, so Barney Vallasano, Louis Dettori, and Pete Bofelli helped tear it all down, saved the lumber and stuff and they got out of it what they could. And then in later years I bought the ground, which I live right by it, I bought the ground of the old hotel. It was owned by Faye, Faye was the owner. Now let's see what else. PAUSE At the time that I was working for Axel and John Petersen, the works got awful slow and Depression was hitting. And I went and worked in Toluca coal mine, digging coal for about four or five weeks with my brother-in-law, Julio Odorizzi, and in the meantime my poor mother passed away. Dad was blacksmithing on Number Two bottom in the coal mine and he heard the mine was going to shut down so he says I ain't going back down there anymore. He was sharpening picks and fixing chains and bars and so forth, so the company boss come and got me -- I was digging coal -- he come and got me, he knew I was a blacksmith, so he put me in my Dad's place and I stayed there about six more weeks and the mine shut down. I think it was in 1923 if I ain't mistaken. And on May 26, 1924 I went to work for Rufus Monk in Wenona. I worked for him one year exactly. Then I came back and worked for my old boss, his brother passed away and he needed a helper, so I came back and worked for Axel Petersen. And I stayed with him until 1932. Then went into business for myself and I'm still blacksmithing right in the back alley of Calnin Brothers and Capponi's Tavern, Cap's Tavern. PAUSE I bought the blacksmith shop, which was a tavern in Prohibition, from Roy Bayless for \$265, the bar,

A: the back bar, two tables and a few chairs, a heating stove, a great big toilet and a coal house outside, lot and all. Now what else, that will be enough for tonight. PAUSE I told you I bought the building from Roy Bayless -- I started in 1932, till 1955 in the old tavern. Glen Fenocchi worked with me all the way through till 1969, which then he passed away. In the new shop we opened up in 1955, Father Tony Divan and us all built a new shop, out of blocks, just south of the old one, four feet. That's enough of that there now. Now I'm going to tell you a little bit how we cooled the stuff off in our houses years ago. The Toluca Coal Company used to cut ice out of the pond there and a few oldtimers had some ice houses here in town. And we'd buy ice off of them, they'd put it in our icebox. They'd come around with a team of horses and delivered ice to the people. And we also -- I also helped the teamsters haul ice to the stores, which we had no electric refrigeration. We'd put the ice in a walk-in cooler up above and that's the way they cooled their meat. They didn't keep it but very -- a week at the most cause it didn't keep very good. The storekeepers them days went out and butchered a baby beef from the farmers, maybe it weighed 400-500 pounds, they'd take him in and skin him, they'd cut him the next day, cause they couldn't keep him too long in them coolers, they wouldn't keep that good. And they also bought awful lot of veal calves from the local people here in town -- in every block there was a few people that had cows for their own milk and some sold it for 5-6¢ a quart them days. And they'd sell the veals to the storekeepers. And we had quite a few stores here in town that handled meat. There was Gerardo's, there was L. D. Cassell, Fred Bernardi, Louis Capponi, Silvestri, Frank Scullans,

A: and there was also my brother-in-law, Geno Fenocchi. Wait a minute now. PAUSE And also our people here in town, awful lot of people, raised a hog or two for their self and they butchered -- everyone butchered at their own house, and scald them and clean them the old time way. Cured the bacons, and cured the hams, and were they ever good. And they made a lot of good sausage. Now back to the coal mine chutes -- the trains, awful lot of trains used to come through here and they'd stop for coal, coal and water, and we had a big chute here where the train would stop there and they'd pull a rope and doors would open down and the coal would fall on the back of the engine, so the engineers could scoop the coal right into the boilers. And what would fall on the ground a bunch of us kids then and women and all were over there and we'd gather up what we could and we'd put it in a sack or a bucket and we'd bring it home. Now I'll tell you, that here in town, very few people had a telephone and when we'd get sick, we'd have to send somebody to the doctor to come to the house and he'd come with a horse and buggy. In them days the most these coal miners' wives when they'd have babies, they'd always call a midwife, they always had their babies at home. The doctor I remember of was Dr. Potts, an old coal company doctor. Dr. Smith and I think Dr. Petersen came in after. Then when we'd have a bad case of operation they'd have to get the person, the people, on the train and either go to Streator or to Chicago. My sister, Marina, they took her clean to Chicago for an operation. Now I want to tell you a little bit about my family. I married Angelina Comincioli, born and raised in Toluca, and so was I. I have one daughter, Rosemary Litchfield, one daughter Virginia Webster, one son Louis Junior Divan, one son Father Tony Divan

A: which is a priest over to Marseilles. He's really the one that put the blacksmith up for me, blacksmith shop up for me. Now I'll tell you what all my children do. Rosemary works at the bank, Virginia is a nurse over in Menona, Junior works in the blacksmith shop with me, and Tony is a priest. And I think my wife is still the best cook on South Main Street. And now I would like to tell you about our shows that we had in town. We had two shows on South Main Street, Louis Grove and the Pearl White Theatre. And the picture they showed was awful lot of cowboys and Indians and stuff like that and part of the show would be moving picture like you got today, but no talkies, they'd be all written == they'd show a picture and then you'd read a little bit, they'd show a picture again, or two or three, and then you'd read again a little bit. After that part of the show was over they'd show you a standing picture, a picture of maybe some ships or soldiers or one thing or another, but no movies in it, just standing still, everything still. Then the other shows would be always continued, one week to another. Then we always had music in the show. We had a piano, a lady playing the piano, which was Irene Jensen, Katie Mariotti, and I think Irene Gerardo too, a piano player. I want to tell you a little bit about my hunting life. I hunted lots all my life and years ago here there was hedge fences all over, the rabbits and quail was plenty of them. Now the fences are all pulled over, the rabbits about all gone, quail you don't hear none whistle anymore -- you could hear them from my house when I was a kid, till I got grown up. And we used to do awful lot of duck hunting in the Toluca coal pond. Every year we had some pretty good duck shooting. Now we ain't got nothing left down there. So in later years I took up coon

A: hunting and I still go up and down them hills for being 73 years old. Me and my son-in-law went practically every night after coon season opens up. And I also do a little deer hunting, which I have killed eight already in my lifetime and the boys killed more that I did. Years ago we used to shoot a lot of birds with slingshots and BB guns, they had nests in all them hedge fences. Now the poor birds ain't got a place to build a nest, they gotta come to town and everybody is hollering they're eating their cherries, they're eating their strawberries -- poor birds don't know where the hell to go no more. PAUSE Oh yes, I forgot to tell you, Red Reece was a mule caretaker at the coal mine and he told me there was a little over 90 mules down there, they never came up unless the coal mine was on a strike, or repairs of some kind and stay off a month or so. And coal miners, there was 800-900 coal miners working down there at one time. And when the coal miners went down to work in the morning they had a little place where Joe Viana, they'd give you out a check with your number on it and you'd go down the coal mine, you had your little brass check and when you came up, you give it to the cager. I think his name was Jack Gallagher. And you'd give him the check and then when they'd come out after quitting hours and the last one come up, they'd put the checks all up on the boards and if one check was missing, then they'd know they lost a miner down the coal mine, but they always came up okay.

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END OF TAPE

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PLACE Jolusa, Ill

DATE 10/17/75

Louis A Divan

(Interviewee)

Myna J. Swanson
(for Starved Rock Library System)

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