Leo Andreoli (1896-1967)

“He never told me he worked at that age, but I remember that every once in a while, he would talk to some of the older people, and they would talk about the old days in the mills and how they were treated. He worked his whole life in the mills. But he used to repair shoes on the side. In those days, everybody used to do something else to make a little buck here and a little buck there.” – Leo’s son, Raymond

On November 25, 1903, Alfredo Andreoli, 32 years old, landed at Ellis Island in New York. He headed to Lawrence, picked up a job as a laborer, and moved into an apartment at 66 Elm Street, a two-story brick duplex that had been built in 1900. It still stands. He returned to Italy in 1904, and brought back his family on June 10, 1905. When they landed in Boston, wife Sarah was six months pregnant with their seventh child. One of the other children was Leopoldo (called Leo), born on May 15, 1896. Alfredo and Sarah had married in 1894.

The family moved into a unit at 136 Common Street. The address is now an empty lot. By 1910, the family had moved to 183 Elm Street, where Plainsman Park is now located. Alfredo was a carder at the Ayer Mill, which was built in 1909 by the notorious William Wool, owner of the Wool Mill. When the Bread & Roses Strike broke out in 1911, the family had recently moved to 208 Elm Street (also Plainsman Park now). Son Leo was also working at the Ayer Mill.

By 1920, Alfredo (now simply Alfred) and Sarah had moved to Providence, Rhode Island, and had three additional children. But Leo stayed in Lawrence and married Elvira Montifusco, in 1919. Leo continued to work in the mills. Over the years, he and Elvira lived in several locations in Lawrence. In 1930, Elvira was working in a print works, and there were four children in the home. They would have four more in the 1930s. Leo Andreoli died in Lawrence in June of 1967. He was 71 years old. Elvira died in 1980.

I interviewed their son Raymond, who was born in 1933. He was surprised to see the Lewis Hine photos of his father:

“When I was little, we lived in a four-story building on Lincoln Street. I could remember looking down through a hole in the floor and talking to my friend in the apartment beneath us. I was number seven of eight children. My youngest brother died when he was three years old and I was four. We both had polo, but he didn’t make it and I did. I’m the only child left.”

“I never went to high school. I went to work so I could help my family with the rent and other stuff. I was about 14 or 15 then. My father was a disabled veteran. In 1946, he was out of work. In those days, you could go to work when you were young if you could show that you needed to help your family. I worked as a furniture strapper. I made 16 cents an hour. I went into the service in 1950, and got out in 1956. After that, I worked mostly for companies that manufactured goods for the military. At one point, I traveled all over the world repairing things and teaching GIs how to use the products.

“My parents spoke Italian at home, but when I started school, my mother said, ‘You were born in this country, you’re an American, and you speak American.’ In the area that I lived in, the only time you heard a foreign language spoken was at somebody’s house. Out in the street, everybody spoke English, whether you were in the German section or the Italian section.

“My father was always more in touch with my older brothers and sisters, so I didn’t see him that much. He would come home from work late, and we didn’t do much together. But my mother was an angel. She did everything she could for me and the family.”

“I asked Mr. Andreoli if his father ever mentioned the Bread & Roses Strike:

‘Not that I remember. But it’s funny. When he got old, he didn’t like the unions anymore. He used to say to me: ‘Unions were good when they first came out. They helped the people. But today, unions are nothing but a bunch of crooks.’