

Growing Up Italian in America, The Land of Opportunity and Hope.

I was in my 50's when I realized, and it dawned on me that I was a first generation American. The fact that I never realized that I was a first-generation American, was because nothing in my life give me any indication of anything else but being American. I was born in 1929 the son of Italian immigrants who came to America to find a better life. The neighborhood I lived in was made up of Jewish Italian and African-American people. Because of this diversification I had the good fortune to play with and become friends with other ethnic groups. I learned so much from them and how they lived. They learned how I lived. The fact that we are one half block from South Street which was a business district for clothing and other things. After moving to a few places my mother and father decided that the city of Philadelphia is where they would live and support their family. They opened a live poultry store right in the business district. The little side streets were residential. It was really great although I didn't think so at the time, because, while I had a good time playing with my friends I also had a responsibility to help in the store. Having a live poultry store, where we sold chickens, ducks, turkeys, etc. was a hard and difficult life for my mother and my father. My father would have to get up around 3 o'clock in the morning and go to the market called dock Street where storekeepers purchased their poultry. There were lots of mornings when we had to get out of bed to unload a truck load of poultry for our store. Still it was an exciting time in our life especially around the holidays of Thanksgiving and Christmas. We. Also sold Christmas trees. It was a festive time and I enjoyed doing something other than killing and cleaning poultry. Our regular customers were the

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Jewish kosher trade. Where we had a Jewish Rabbi who came to the store at least two times a week. We also had the Italian and African-American trade. In later years something new developed. They had what they called "cutup poultry." My father got involved with that concept in fact we were the second poultry business in the entire city of Philadelphia to have that type of poultry to sell. We are very proud of the fact that we were ahead of the curve. At that time. The kosher trade required that their poultry not be wet, and as a consequence it was a very difficult task removing the feathers without water. In later years there was a machine to do that. In the early years all we had to de feather the poultry was a large bucket of very hot water. It was a basic method of removing the feathers from poultry. That was not a good experience in my life. But that's how we made our living. We went to the James C Campbell grammar school which was one and one half city blocks from where I lived on south 8th street. My schoolmates were Bernie Greenberg, George Astroff, Robert Bell, Louis Jones, Sally Taloti and William Christinzio .We were Jewish, African-American and Italian children. I still remember some of my teachers like Mrs. Vernochio and Mrs. Farese. My favorite time of going to school was buying soft pretzels and lemonade at recess in the school yard. Across the street from the school was a little hoagie shop that was called Carrie Grimm, which was so nice to have so close to the school. I had a happy school time. I then attended Bartlett junior high school upon graduating from Bartlett junior high school I attended BOK Vocational school. My older brother being in the service left just my younger brother Albert and I to do all the work in the poultry store. Because my father needed us in the store we never had time to attend any football games or any other games for that matter. I eventually got in trouble with my school advisor because of so many school days I was not able to

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attend. My advisor called me down to her office and said I would never amount to anything and was very upset with me. What did I want to do about it? So as not to get my parents in trouble, I replied I want to transfer to South Philadelphia high for Boys. While I was attending South Philadelphia high for boys, I wrote and won an essay completion in my English class. The Competition which I won, gave me the opportunity to go back to the Bok Vocational School ,where a group of schools would speak at “the” junior town meeting of the air” which was broadcast over the radio. I had the occasion to say hello to my former school advisor at Bok who was sitting in audience. As she was sitting in the front row I had the opportunity to say hello.. I felt vindicated and really good about myself. Getting back to the different businesses that surrounded where I lived as a boy, they were as follows. At the corner of eighth and Bainbridge streets was Greenberg’s luncheonette alongside the luncheonette was Perrin’s furniture repair. Across the street on the corner was a clothing store called Mike Green. Diagonally across the street was an Exxon gas station. Going north on the east side of the street was a dentist office next door to that at 621 was a tuxedo rental store next to that at 619 was Albert’s beauty salon, hairstylists and barber shop. Next door 617 S. eighth was Pollocks drycleaners. I remember that that Mrs. Pollock and my mother Mary were very good friends. She would tell my mother to bring the baby there on her side in front of her store because it was sunny there. *Mrs. Pollock was sewing, her machine was right there in front of the big window where she could watch the baby. She was a wonderful woman. Her son Philip also helped my dad out many times to understand different legal matters. They were true neighbors. In later years when I got married, I lived on the second floor of Mrs. Pollock’s house for five years.

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The next store was a produce store. Then there was Kater Street. On Kater Street was a family that sold ice.. The family was called Fanell's, all the children like this next block of Kater Street because it was wide with a smooth surface and great for scooters. During the summer months all the kids were able to refresh themselves by grabbing a chip of ice from the ice wagon. Then going north on 8th street still on the east side of the street was a live poultry store at 613 called Suculla's then as I recall was a little Greek coffee shop called Pete's. And finally next door to Pete's luncheonette was a clothing store named "Bighearted Jim".. The street we are mainly speaking about is S. 8th St. namely the 600 block. Beginning from Bainbridge Street going north on S. 8th St. were the following stores and buildings. The southwest corner of eighth Street and Bainbridge was a furniture repair shop, next to that that 626 was Marincola's grocery store, next to that at 624 and 620 was the Church of the Crucifixion.. It was an African-American congregation. Started and 1847. Each Sunday a large congregation of families came to worship there. Living next door my family got to know a lot of the congregation. They were wonderful people. As I remember there were some Saturdays where the church of the crucifixion held dances for the congregation. Living next door to the church gave me a wonderful opportunity to listen to all the great music by live orchestras. When the World War II ended the custodian who resided there allowed me to pull on the church bell for it to ring in celebration. Next to the church is where the La Torre family lived and had our store called Sam La Torre's "reliable live poultry" store. The next little street was called Kater Street. On the southwest corner of Kater is where we had our live poultry store. On most weekends up Kater Street, there was always an air of enjoyment as dice games were held. Also there probably was someone out there

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cooking ribs on a large metal Drum. The police cars would drive up the street to break up the crap games. However as soon they were gone the crap games would start again. On the northwest corner of Kater Street was Florio's saloon, then a luncheonette next to the luncheonette was a dry cleaners shop and as I recall on the corner of eighth and South Street was a clothing shop called Lippi's. Around the corner at 802 South St. was Koolicks a Jewish delicatessen store at 802 then there was Izzy Koss an electrical supply store, then Deitz's hats, then a shoemaker repair store, then a toy store, at 818 South St. then Miller's hardware store at 820.. On the southeast corner of ninth and South Street was a drugstore. Diagonally across the street was a famous clothing store called "Krass Brothers" then. A few doors away going west on South Street was the original: "Cohens" Hardware store. Coming east on South Street on the north side of south street between 8th and 9th street was the awning shop at 821 South St. next was A little alley-like Street, to exit from the Rexy theater which had a ramp from the theater to the street level this was our sledding hill whenever it snowed.. It wasn't much but we loved it. A little further down the street was a store called Rubin's jewelers. The last store on the street on the northwest corner of eighth and South Street was a fine haberdashery called Jay Frailig's. Going north on eighth Street as I recall on the west side of the street was a parking garage owned by the "Father Devine" Church. The next street going north. was Lombard St. where on the southwest corner was a grocery store named" Cedone's" on the east side of eighth Street was the society hill theater which at that time was under another name.

Coming South on 8th street was a store that sold all types of sheet music by the name of "Di stefanos, and next a seafood restaurant called "Snockey's". Finally on the 700 block of South

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Street at the corner of eighth and South Street, was a pawn shop called the Lincoln Loan Pawn Shop. In those days we called it, a “hock” Shop. Going east on South Street on the north side was a man’s work clothing store called Altman’s. Next door to that was Kushner’s shoe store. Across the street was a Jewish bakery name beards next was a fine men’s clothing store called “Bill Diamonds”, next door to that was small gasoline station, believe it or not, out of a residential building. The name was Goldstein’s; they were wonderful people after many years it was a very sad time as I witnessed the South Street that I knew as a boy completely disappear. For many years those stores were empty and South Street was a ghost town. The Renaissance of South Street began when a few couples we referred to at that time as “hippies,” began making leather items and began to capture the interest of the public. Slowly, very slowly, stores began to return to south street and after many years the Renaissance of South Street progressed.

During the summer months the city provided swimming pools for our neighborhood to go to. The swimming pool which was, some reason we called it “Bucky’s” was on Lombard Street between seventh and eighth streets. There was a boy’s day and there was a girl’s day. Across the street from the pool was a library. It really was a wonderful place to go to. My mother would pack a lunch for me

.and off I would go to the Star garden library for a nature hike. It may such an impression on me. As I think about it and how they created a happy time in my life. Something I looked forward to, learning about nature. As poor children in the late 30s and early

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40s another reason I never thought about ourselves as "first generation Americans". We also had the "star garden" playground, which was a huge playground. Also right across the street from that

was the famous "original Levis hotdog" store. It's hard to realize when you think about it how happy we were yet being so poor. It was the love from my mother and father that allowed my brothers and myself to have a safe and happy life. Believe we also had the good fortune to have a Quaker mission group in our neighborhood that provided a recreation center for us to play basketball, pool and do arts and crafts in. And during the summer months they took us to summer camp near Lake Worth free of charge. The summer camp was near Clementon New Jersey. They transported us in a old convertible Packard it was quite large and being a convertible, we had a great time getting there. We had cabins to sleep in and in the morning we had hot oatmeal Cooked on an outside fire. This is where I learned to love oatmeal. As I think about it, I'm so happy and proud of my mother and father for allowing me and my brother Albert to go with the group from the neighborhood, under the supervision of the Quakers. We called it "the mission" that we went to, but what we didn't realize was, that the name denoted missionaries. They gave us a place to go to without getting in trouble and having a happy time. We never suffered any psychological problems because really we never realized that we were poor. During the Christmas holidays the Quakers from the mission took all children out to what we call the mainline. There we would have a Christmas party and receive Christmas gifts the Quakers were great and wonderful people.. However as poor as we were, as far as I'm concerned I was having a happy childhood. As Italian immigrants, our beverage for

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our meals was wine. Each year around the middle of September the California wines would be transported by railroad to the railroad yards. On Delaware Avenue. I remember going with my father to the railroad yards there. There on Delaware Avenue which we now know as Front Street Dad would go into each railroad car tasting the grapes.. When he found the right taste that he thought would make good wine, He would purchase them. In the early days when we didn't have a truck they would deliver to us for a price. We would put the boxes of grapes down the basement. They would stay there for three days or until the frost from the refrigeration had left the grapes. At that point we had barrels standing up with no **top** on it. There we would put the grape crusher so as we crushed okay grapes they went right into the barrel. After four or five days the grapes that were crushed began to ferment. At that point we had used whiskey barrels purchase from the distillery laid horizontally in a barrel cradle. We then began first to drill a hole in the vertical barrel where the grapes crushed were, to allow the juice from the grapes, to flow out of the barrel so we could put that juice into the horizontal former whiskey barrel. We then took the two grapes that we had crushed and began to put them in a press to get the juice from them. We always kept 3 or four gallons of grape juice because days before we would barrel, as the juice fermented in the barrel, it would bubble out of the top of the barrel to allow the impurities to leave the barrel. Which was the reason we left a hole on top of the barrel. However each morning and evening some juice was poured from the glass gallons into the horizontal barrel to top it off so. To boil out its impurities. In a truck regards to not having a truck, my father did finally improvise a truck with the help of the neighborhood mechanic, by using a Ford model a sedan with the rear part of the automobile cut off, thus making a space to build a

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truck Body on. I remember also being on the back of the truck with my grandfather who had his own comfortable chair.. I love going to my aunt and uncle and cousin who lived in Vineland New Jersey. Our route to get there would be a ferry ride on the Delaware River. When we reached Camden New Jersey we would take the road to route 47. Also known as the Delsea Drive. My brothers and I look forward to go crabbing and with my uncle Joe. My aunt Annie and our cousin Mildred. They were like having another mother and a sister. We were very lucky during the summer months my aunt from Vineland New Jersey would let us stay there and enjoy the countryside. We love it. Our neighborhood also had a wonderful food shopping area that was known as the Italian market. It was both a store entry inside market, or outside street stands selling vegetables, produce and fruit. From Thursday thru Sunday, winter or summer it made no difference, people came to save money and buy fresh products .We from the neighborhood called it Ninth Street. This wonderful neighborhood that we know now as Bella Vista as the book to one I can still remember that we had a butcher shop who was called "Mr. Nunzio" then we also had our bakery shop called" Villotti's". My parents Sam and Mary La Torre immigrated United States of America, my mother arrived here with her father John Vecchio of nine years old. My father arrived in America when he was around 22 years old. In order to come the United States you had to have a sponsor that would have a job waiting here for you. My father had a cousin who lived up in the northeast Pennsylvania area where he would work in a coal mine. The first day he was working there was a cave in at the coal mine he was working. He became so terrified that he left and never went back to work in the coal mines. He worked at a bakery for my uncle in Reading Pennsylvania. Unfortunately he got a hernia and could not lift the

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bags of flour anymore. He then worked for a short time at Campbell Soup Company as a butcher. In conclusion I remember my mother and father being so thankful for everything they had here in America. Anybody no matter how poor they are, if they're willing to work hard they have an opportunity to be successful and happy in this great land we call America. I am so lucky and proud to say I am a first-generation Italian-American. God bless America
John La Torre.