

NEWBURGH: A SON REMEMBERS

By Alfonse Ciaccio

For the first fourteen years of my life, my world revolved around the immediate area surrounding my home at 105 William Street. Our two story, two family home was sandwiched between the Duchess Beauty Salon, and the ever-lively Angus Tavern. The Duchess Beauty Salon was owned and operated by Mrs. Irene DiCere, mother of Paul Dicere my boyhood best friend. The Angus Tavern, owned by Jimmy Manescalco the local tax preparer who had his office just three doors down, was the local “watering hole.” The brother of one of my Dad’s coworkers ran the Angus. His name was “Sugar Chivatone.” “Sugar” did his best to make sure that the Angus was a place you could bring your mother to; that is if your mother had a taste for scotch. In that last little happy time, six people were crammed into our little six-room apartment on the second floor of our house owned by my Grandmother. My twin brother Anthony and I shared a room and a bed during this period. My mother and father shared another. Our Grandmother, an Italian immigrant of the early 1900’s had another bedroom, while my bachelor Uncle Sal bivouacked in his jungle of a bedroom just off the living room. Why would my parents allow these “non-immediate” relatives to invade our private, personal space? You see in those days, the extended family had not yet been replaced by the morally bankrupt, more hip nuclear family. I knew no other way of living from the very first time I woke to existence. It was difficult on my mother at times. There were frequent arguments about living conditions that would result in tension for days on end. But for all of its faults, I have never known any peace as peaceful or security as secure as those first days of my life on William Street. I miss it and them.

On our block we had the old, time honored traditional institution of the “corner store,” run by Frank and Millie Scordamaglia. I remember Millie as being one of the kindest people ever to grace the face of the earth. Her husband, Frank, was a no nonsense businessman who believed in hard work and responsibility. Frank was a man’s man whose matter of fact attitude reverberated throughout the neighborhood. Thanks to Frank’s reputation, ours was a safe neighborhood. My mother used to send me there almost every day for the essentials of the Italian working class neighborhood

cuisine, namely a half-gallon of milk and a half-pound of bologna that Frank would cut fresh me. There was another “corner store” on the other end of the block. It was run by Fran and Nick Donofrio. My dad used to park his car on the street near their store and would stop in after working at West Point to shoot the breeze with them. What I remember most about them and their store was their ice cream sandwiches in the summer and candy apples in the fall. It was one of the ways we had of telling what season was upon us. Nick also had the neatest sign hanging up in his store. It was a Porky Pig sign, which had the inscription “we give credit,” followed by an arrow pointing to this animal’s rear end. One day I asked Nick what that meant and he told me “it means we give credit in the pig’s ass.” I laughed then as I stood there and laugh now as I write this almost forty years later with the only difference being the tears in my eyes.

Across the street there was a bakery owned and ran by a Jewish gentleman whose name has been lost to the years. I used to love his jelly and glazed doughnuts. I remember one summer night that a burglar broke in to this store. My father saw this and called the police. There was also an Italian bakery outlet store at the corner. The bakery was called “the Luna Bakery” and had been started by my Uncle Rudy and a couple of other fellow Sicilians. They, without a doubt, had the finest Italian bread in the city, with their homemade pasta that would make Francesco Rinaldi turn in his passport and go straight back to Italy. Now let me tell you that a bona fide Italian bakery, not the bread section of the local super center market, is the ONLY place to get your bread for Sunday spaghetti and meatballs. My Uncle Sal used to run it with my inefficient assistance. We would get up early on Sunday mornings to go get the bread for sale at the store. I remember the great treatment I got from the guys at the bakery as they filled my cart with my own rolls and lots of smiles for the “bambino.” I learned to make change while waiting on customers in that store. I remember waiting on this beautiful girl. I was so struck by her looks and so self conscious of my gawky ones, that I did not give her any change! What can I say; women have always been a distraction to me.

Also across the street was Phil’s Barbershop, owned and operated by Phil Talerico. Short and stubby as the cigar in his mouth Phil was a real character of distinction. Hard working and friendly, Phil’s was a hangout for all the local older

Italian men on our street and the surrounding area. A place where the guys could spend time choking on Phil's cigar smoke and trying not to slip due to the hair on the floor courtesy of his newly "beautified" patrons.

Next to the bakery there was a fruit stand. Although I do not remember the name of the proprietor, what I do remember of this establishment is the smell of fresh fruits and vegetables. Everything from peaches and pears to onions and scallions this place had them all. The other thing I remember about this establishment, is that the floor was always wet so that undesirable vermin and insects would not congregate there after business hours, like the older guys at Phil's Barbershop next door.

This was my street, my world. This is both sides of William Street on my block as best I can remember. It was a wonderful place to grow up. I miss all the people I have described here. Or maybe I miss the world as it used to be. Or maybe, I just want to go home again. You decide. Perhaps next time I can write of Frank and Isabel, Jimmy and Mary, Gumba Nick and Aunt Fran, Mrs. Sevaro, Tess and her mom, Mrs. Didio, Ike Drobner and his store, the music shop next to the Angus and perhaps help us all to remember how good it was. God bless all.