

Not long ago, I drove down what I call "My West Side," just as I have a thousand times before since I moved away from the old neighborhood in the 60s. I'm not sure exactly what it is that draws me back, especially because things have changed dramatically. Vacant lots have become a staple of the landscape; gone are the many mom and pop grocery stores that seemed to be on every corner, like Bertola's, Bova's, Rotundo's, Mattliano's (and that was one block!); and gone are the wonderful bakeries like Cristiano's, Luigi's, Costanza's, Balistreri's and Amoia's that filled the air of my youth with the aroma of fresh bread baking. It wasn't just any bread, it was NOT what we kids referred to as "American bread." It was bread that we purchased for pennies; fresh, hot out of the oven, crispy and breathing smoke as we cut into it to fill it with freshly picked tomatoes from our grandfathers' gardens, along with a little fresh basil and drizzled with some olive oil and a pinch of salt and pepper, to enjoy the best sandwiches ever, outside under the grape arbors that seemed to be in every West Side backyard.

We kids talked and played cards and told jokes for hours, laughing and exaggerating until the strong voices of our mothers declared that it was time to come inside for dinner. We were all seven to ten years old, so when Mom called, we hustled. It was time for homework and then dinner - or was it dinner and homework? I forget, but it was certainly time for famiglia.

The vacant lots make it obvious just how small these two-story, two-family flats really were, but they never seemed small to us and we never felt particularly cramped or disadvantaged at least not until we watched Ozzie and Harriet. David and Rickey each had their own bedrooms. Few of these houses had garages or even driveways. I recall the great pride these mostly blue-

collar folks derived from getting a new car, not usually a brand-new car, mind you, but a newer car, and how they paraded it around for the whole neighborhood to oooh and ahhh over.

Mostly I remember the meals in our house. We all sat down together at the same time and ate the same meal. It was both simple and delicious and usually predictable as well. Unlike many of our neighbors who had

pasta every single night, we had it only twice a week: on Sundays and Wednesdays. My mother made the best meatballs and she got up early on Sunday morning to make them. I would wake up to that smell - that smell was so special. She always set aside some of the freshly cooked meatballs before putting the rest into the sauce with the beef, pork and sausage. Those meatballs that had been set aside were my Sunday treat. Mom would fry some dough ("pizza frita" as she called it) that had been purchased from the bakery the day before and I delighted in smashing up the meatball onto the fresh dough, fried perfectly. Few things ever tasted that good, then or now. Of course, the memory of my beautiful mother enhances the sweetness of the memories and makes

me yearn for her tender touch.

My West Side home was on the border between Holy Angels parish and Holy Cross parish. It's amusing to say this now, but when I was five or six years old, I thought that the entire world was made up of Sicilians, Italians or Americans. I place Sicilians first because, in my neighborhood, they were dominant in numbers, outnumbering the Italians by 5-1 and the "Americans" by 15 or 20-1. I later discovered that Italy was actually the country and Sicily the province and that Americans were usually half Italian if they lived in our neighborhood. Much later I discovered that there was a whole world out



1944 photo front porch at 497 Seventh St.  
Carmine Pignone and Salvatore Martoche

there of different people from different cultures (at that time and that place, that is not how it was). But in those days, the more established families - the ones who had civil service jobs or had risen out of the ranks of laborers, were, for the most part, members of Holy Angels parish and the poorer, later arrivals joined Msgr. Gambino at Holy Cross parish. Still, I thought everybody was Catholic, though I knew some didn't go to church as regularly as they should. There was the occasional Protestant or Evangelical church in the neighborhood and some people I knew would even worship at those churches - but we could not go into a Protestant church for fear of committing a mortal sin.

As soon as we were old enough, we went to the neighborhood "kid sitter," Shea's Niagara Theater. (My big sister took me but luckily she ditched me to be with her friends. My mother would have really let her have it if she knew about it.) Oh my gosh, those Saturday afternoons - two movies, five cartoons, a serial, often involving somebody falling off a cliff to obvious death only to miraculously be saved in the following edition of the serial on the next Saturday. We feasted on popcorn and ice-cream sandwiches, all for 25 cents, and there was often a pie-eating contest where you could win free tickets to go to future performances at the theater.

A really holy family lived right across the street from me. There were two sons who were priests. In those days that was a really big deal. At Holy Cross school, there was always a push to get the boys to consider entering the "Little Sem." Msgr. Gambino liked the idea of leading the diocese in the number of seminarians. Of course, he had to compete with the Polish and

Irish parishes who also had substantial numbers at the seminary.

I recall George Salemi who owned the Escort Shop and Charlie Buffamonti at Superior Mens Shop - they would provide stylish clothing to most of the older boys who often spent all their money from part-time jobs to look cool. I remember wanting a pair of Italian silk tailor-made pants when I got bigger and, sure enough, I got them one day. Those were the best pants I ever owned.

On warm summer evenings we would go for family walks at Front Park or LaSalle Park. We might stop at Ted's under the Peace Bridge for a hot dog or drop off the girls and I might go with my father to the Turf Club or Scotty's, which were across the street from one another on Jersey and Busti Avenue. Oh, did I love those roast beef sandwiches and fava beans. What a treat. I learned to love clams on the half shell at those joints!

The old neighborhood may look different than it used to, but the memories still linger. When I look back 60 or 65 years, I realize it was a poor neighborhood, even then. But all the people who lived there were generally in the same economic boat and they all took great pride in keeping their homes looking

good - it was a special place. I hope and pray that the folks that have moved into my "West Side" will have a chance to realize the fullness and promise of America through their children and grandchildren in the years ahead, just as so many of us have.



**Charles Martoche, at 497 Seventh St.  
with children Teresa and Salvatore  
1942**