

Joe Carlisi's memories (Joe died June 27, 2006)

When Dom Verso sent Jerry Grasso's memories of Buffalo's West Side to me, it started me thinking of what a great time and place that we were lucky enough to live. So I decided to start writing some random thoughts about my memories about the West Side.

My Neighbors: I was raised at 230 Prospect Avenue, between Virginia and Maryland. My parents...my father, Roy and mother, Fanny, and my two brothers, Chuckie and Butch (who became a fine lawyer by the name of Roy Carlisi) comprised my family. Next door to us lived the Panepinto family. Sally, Donny and Junior, commonly referred to as "Turtle". On the other side were the Carbone's, Sally, Victor and Francis. Across the street was the Burgio clan Number One...with "Big Louie" and "Little Louie". Next door to them lived Charley D'Auria, nicknamed by us as "Biffo" because he was so fat. Farther down the street, at 211, was the second Burgio clan...with the twins, Victor and Philly (my best friends), and their siblings Connie, Johnnie, Vinnie, and Charley. Next door to them was Carmen Marchese and Dicky LoTempio, who went on to become a podiatrist. Down about four doors from us lived the Timineri family, Bobby and "Joe Tilt", so named because he leaned to the left as he walked. Their basement, I heard, was a replica of Berger's Department store, complete with racks and racks of women's clothing...all top quality stuff. And up the street just past Maryland lived Vinnie Tringali. Those who knew him remembered him for his happy and sweet demeanor. Across the street from Vinny, near the corner lived the Rizzo family and their lovely daughter, Mary Rizzo. Heading North, lived the Scozzaro, Puma, Palmeri, LaPaglia, Grano, Biloni, Verso/Lodico, Tibollo and Morgante families, which took us up to Hudson St.

Neighborhood Businesses: At the corner of Prospect and Maryland was a grocery store but we never shopped there. We shopped at Pizzuto's Grocery Store and Meat Market which was at the corner of Prospect and Virginia. Russell Pizzuto was a big strapping guy who kept account of his customers' bills in a small notebook. It was depression and most people had to go on credit. Fortunately, we never had to.

But the magic place for me was Daniels. It was a very, very tiny store near the corner of Maryland and Niagara Street, next door to Charley Cassaro's bar, The Why Not and it's clam and crab stand. Daniels was a magazine, newspaper, cigarette, cigar, comic book, magazine, candy, ice cream, creamsicle, fudgesicle, pop, nickle pie, gum ball, red wax lips, racing form, numbers racket, bookmaking store along with a card game that you could see through the curtain behind the candy cases. Nothing like it before or since. I swore to myself that when I grew up, I would buy those nickle pies...apple, pineapple, lemon, cherry and blueberry, every day and eat them by the dozens. In the glass counter were dozens of penny candies. Presiding over this array of treasures was the rotund Joe Daniels with a stump of cigar between his teeth, and a miserable disposition.

Farther up on Hudson Street, at the corner of Whitney Place was our distant cousin, Jimmy Cordovano's store and next door to it his meat market, which his father operated. Jimmy worked there every day along with his wife Florence, who was Irish but spoke perfect Sicilian. They had a son, Charley, who had polio as a youth and eventually committed suicide.

Farther down Hudson Street near Trenton was the Siracuse chicken market. Few people today realize how sanitized and benign buying a chicken is today compared to when I was a kid. You walked into this slaughter house and it smelled putrid from chicken dung and entrails. There were cages of live chickens everywhere. Women would stick their hands in the cages checking them to see if they had any eggs. A guy behind the counter would reach into a cage, grab the chicken that you wanted by the legs, pull it out and place it upside down into a galvanized steel funnel so that the head and neck stuck out of the bottom. Then he would slice its neck and let it bleed out into a trough which had water running constantly, washing the blood away. There were about ten or twelve chickens lined up this way at any given time. Next, when the wiggling had stopped, he lifted the dead chicken out and dipped it into boiling water to make the stripping of feathers easier. Then he trussed up the bird by its feet and stripped all the feathers off with amazing speed. In fact, various chicken markets held contests to see who could dress a chicken faster. The feathers came off when the boiled chicken was held up to an electric propelled wheel full of pieces of rubber hose which knocked the feathers off as the chicken was held up to it. So much for the chicken market and a traumatized Joey Carlisi. But it made great fertilizer.

There was a Loblaws Market on Niagara near Maryland, across from the Shea's Niagara show. On Saturdays, many of the kids in the neighborhood would go there with their red wagons and haul groceries home for tips. Speaking of Shea's Niagara, every Sunday afternoon about one PM, after mass and the regular Sunday dinner of pasta sugo (spaghetti with red tomato sauce and meat balls), dozens of kids lined up on the sidewalk waiting to go into the show. You could tell the Italian kids by the orange ring around their mouths. On the corner of Virginia and Niagara was Vesos' Market. The wooden plank floors were covered with sawdust. The Greeks had barrels of olives...green in one barrel, black in another, slabs of baccala (dried cod fish) hanging from the ceiling, all kinds of imported cold cuts from Italy...cappacola, salami, prosciuto, mortadella...every variety imaginable. The place smelled like heaven. You could sample the olives, and we did. Going down Niagara Street near Virginia Street was a Chrysler/Dodge dealership, Montana Motors, owned by John Montana, a one time Buffalo "Man of the Year". He was a tall, aristocratic looking man who spoke the King's English, traveled in high society, and dressed like a banker. He also owned the Van Dyke Cab Company which was operated by "Black Charley" Montana, his nephew. This was to distinguish him from the other Charley Montana they called "Big Charley". It later developed that "Uncle John" may have had underworld ties. Who knew --- ?

There was a fruit and vegetable stand on Niagara Street near Hudson. They displayed their wares in bushel baskets and quart baskets right on the sidewalk. In the fall, they had grapes from California for making wine...Muscat, the basic white grape for Dago red, and Zinfandel or Alegante for a little red color. Speaking of Hudson Street, on the corner of Hudson and Efner was a saloon which Dom Verso mentioned in his piece...across the street from The City Barns, where the city drivers would park their horses and wagons, and later their trucks, and stop in for a refreshing cold beer or a glass of wine. There were always several tables where men were playing Pinochle. This place was called The Hudson Grill and was owned by my maternal grandfather, Zi Calo Romano, known to the "Mericanis" workers as "Charley". Julie Caputo had his flower shop on Niagara Street next door to the Shea's Niagara theater. He was a dapper guy, tall, thin and well spoken. Julie was also a powerhouse in the West Side Democratic party. Moving downtown, on Chippewa Street near Delaware Avenue, there was a little jewelry and pawn shop owned by a guy named Breezy. You could get things wholesale there. A little farther down Chippewa Street, near Elmwood, across the street from Hutch (Hutchinson Central High School) was Dewey's Diner (where you could also find, and sometimes order, merchandise at great prices). One day in the early '90's, I stopped there with my friend, the musician, Don Menza (known as "Red" to his childhood friends) as a nostalgic experience. As we sat at the counter, he noticed a tune on the juke box and played it. It was a Maynard Ferguson tune in which Don played a tenor sax solo. What a trip.

The little hot dog stand under the Peace Bridge was Ted's, which later moved to the suburbs and opened several locations. Foot longs...oh boy! Best hot dogs in the country! By the way, the park was known as The Front Park, or Centennial Park. The Thruway takes up most of that land now. What a dumb place to put that road...on the most lovely land in the city, next to the beautiful Niagara River. Another hot dog stand nearby was right in the middle of the park near Porter Avenue. It was a small, round stand owned by two Buffalo detectives, Angelo Fatta and his partner Zuccarelli. There was Garden Alley which ran off of Virginia Street near Niagara. Vic Burgio and I would roller skate up and down that alley all day until we finally took off our heavy metal skates which attached to our shoe soles, and when we walked our feet felt as light as feathers. Near there, on South Elmwood and Niagara, was my father's bar, the Club 97. The bartender was Nick Paternostro and a steady customer was Nick Santasiero. He was the manager of the Erlanger Theater, a legitimate theater on Delaware and Mohawk Street, across from the Statler Hotel. His claim to fame was that he dramatically trained Nicky Vanoff, who went on to produce the Perry Como show on national TV. Nick's chest swelled with pride each time that show went on. I tended bar on Sundays. Diagonally across the street was The Casablanca Bar, in front of which my brother, Roy (known to me as Butch), ran a clam stand.

Speaking of clams, our family owned and operated the C & C Market on Trenton Avenue near Maryland, which supplied all the clam stands and wholesale seafood markets in town for over 30 years. And I delivered every damned clam! The clam stands I remember best are Scotty's on Busti and Jersey. It was

run by Larry Muscoriel and his father, Mariano. Scotty's was a fabulous Italian soul-food restaurant...spaghetti, ravioli, fave in olive oil and garlic, tripe in tomato sauce...all deliciously cooked by Katie Pignataro, Scotty's wife. Across the street was The Turf Club owned by Christy Gugliuzza. The clam stand on the side was owned and run by Buddy Bender. Both Buddy and Larry were the best clam shuckers in Buffalo. Together, these two clam stands sold more clams than any other place in Buffalo by far. Then there were other clam stands like Darone's on Fargo and Niagara, Andy's on Niagara, Rosario's in front of Nick's Lounge on Busti and Hudson, 78 Sycamore Street, Andy's on Lower Terrace, Fundy's on Washington Street (owned by the Fundaro family), and there were countless others around the city. Nearby, behind City Hall, on the Lower Terrace, was St. Anthony's church where the Italian Festival, or "La festa" was held every summer. There were carnival rides and all the Italian food delicacies. In later years it would move to Connecticut Street and finally to Hertel Avenue.

It was a great time and place to grow up.