

By Joe Giambra.

Time, as Saint Augustine says, rushes from the past, which no longer exists, into a present, with no duration, and into a future unknown. In eternity there is no time. Endless love mirrors eternity. Before World War II, Buffalo was a place mirrored by love. Then, the world though filled with ambivalence and ambiguity seemed unaware of the impending and irrevocable harm that would change so many lives, in so many ways, and in so many places.

The Italians who arrived here in the early 1900's lived in a waterfront area called "The Hooks." It was a tenement ghetto where time, people and space were feared, sacred and revered. To escape stigmatic welfare men shoveled snow and concrete or dug ditches. They ate bread and onions, pasta and lentils, drank, played bocce, got old and waited to die.

The streets were filled with urchins in corduroy welfare knickers who never expected to have a destiny. After school at PS number 2, they shined shoes. They brought pennies to church and to the movies.

Amid the watery scent of a warm river that merged with a lake, they climbed wooden lamp-posts to watch and envy strangers boarding a ferry to a Canadian beach. Rusted tugs, foghorns, sirens and whistles were in their sensory reach. It was a polyglot symphony of drunks and mugs pinched in paddy wagons and off to the city jugs. There were religious street feasts like that of the Crucifix in May, the feast of the Rosary in October and the Feast of Saint Joseph in March.

From The Hooks people walked to Shelton Square where others came by bus to shop in colorful stores and to gaze at those in restaurants near old blue collar citadels of free lunch and nickel beers that brought endless crowds on a street where once Italians were never allowed.

On Evans Street where Lunghino's Bank at one time endured, men shouted numbers and thrust their hands forward in a game played with fingers after a shower at the Public Bath House. Mandolins, accordions and guitars were endemic on Canal Street's open spaces and on Dante Place near Costanzo's bakery, Scaduto's store and The Peacock Grill. At the Tivoli Gardens men in big hats with suit jackets draped over their shoulders ate roasted lamb heads and tripe.

At The Anchor Bar on lower Main boys scrubbed moss from clams and crabs. Frank and Teresa fed them pasta fazool till there was no more.

On Fly Street, Our Lady of Mount Carmel church was a refuge. But The Hooks was old, ghostly and dilapidated and would soon perish. Politicians promised renewal but none came. As the Depression was ending, businesses closed or moved, as did many families.

For them, life in The Hooks could never again be truly cherished. They left for the wooden flats and small tree-lined streets of the lower West Side.

There, green metal light standards impossible to climb lit streets that had a different smell and sound. They were paved with asphalt upon which traveled modern cars, all different, all colorful, all with great allure – and all American. Unlike the manured cobblestone and wooden sidewalks of the Hooks, the sidewalks there were of concrete and the air was pure and fine. Saint Anthony's replaced Mount Carmel Church.

When this migration occurred Buffalo was a colossal of dynamics, galvanized by great wealth, architecture, energy and comforts but diminished by the terror of poverty. But we had the Feast of Saint Anthony.

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It happened in summer in the Terrace Playground across from Andy's café on earth corralled by chain-link fence. People came from everywhere to savor the aromas of Italian sausage whose char-broiled drippings created black billowing smoke that soared above a revolving multi-colored Ferris wheel.

Women played bingo. Men threw baseballs to win dolls and ceramic Persian cats. Wooden-stands displayed trays of warm Sicilian pizza. Nuns sprinkled sugar on cannoli as fireworks lit up the sky. In that long ago, in the hot rays of the August sun on Busti Avenue, hundreds of people watched a parade, the final hours of the Feast of Saint Anthony. A marching band played to great applause, no emotional restraint, Sicilian veneration.

In shocking contrast to the soaring temperature snow-like confetti, thrown by the cheering throng was reflective, drifting motionless. Men, women and children: Americans of the first generation

carried banners and a huge statue of the Saint past woodenframe homes. Multi-colored lanterns adorned windows and front porches that were enhanced by the smell of fresh paint. They were transformed into stunning candle-lit altars. Hanging in a backdrop of embroidered linen were the flags of America and Italy.

At last in the shadow of an art deco city hall, a fire station, and tenements the band made its way to Saint Anthony's. There, where people ad-journed, a smaller statue of the Saint was reposing in a red, pink and gold sidewalk chapel, spiritually unified people knelt in prayer. Devotion was the rule, the highest example.

Later, fireworks again lit up the sky. They burst overhead, screaming from the innards of large multi-colored-wooden horses, donkeys and mules. They lit up the sky, a pyrotechnic blizzard, the last night of the feast, the final goodbye. Welcome.

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Andy's Café on the Lower Terrace circa 1930. The editors Uncle Andy is 1st on the left and his father Frank is 3rd from the left.

