Schnackenberg's Luncheonette

NEVER A PLAIN COKE

Recollections of

Betty Silvani

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THE HOBOKEN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

VANISHING HOBOKEN

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A Project of
The Friends of the Hoboken Public Library and
the Hoboken Historical Museum

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Cover photo of Betty Silvani,Dora Schnackenberg, and Helen Firebock by Robert Foster, ca. 1986.
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Mostly they came in just to have a coke. But never a plain coke. You had a vanilla coke, a chocolate coke, a cherry coke, a lemon coke. It was an unusual person who just had a plain coke.

BETTY SILVANI
January 25, 2001

Introduction

Schnackenberg's Luncheonette

Dora and Henry Schnackenberg founded Schnackenberg's Luncheonette, at 1110 Washington Street, in 1931. In early 2001, when one of the Schackenberg's daughters, Betty Silvani, was interviewed, the lunchonette still looked very much the same as it did when it was first opened. This Chapbook is derived from a taped interview with Mrs. Silvani, conducted by Arlene Silver.

Betty Silvani at the counter of the luncheonette.

Henry and Dora Schnackenberg, with their daughters Betty (seated) and Dorothy, in their luncheonette, circa 1940.
COURTESY SCHNACKENBERG'S LUNCHEONETTE

Since 1931

My mother and father, Dora and Henry Schnackenberg, opened up the luncheonette in 1931. They were from Germany, around Bremen, and they came here in the '20s. Twenty-four, '25, somewhere thereabouts.

My mother's aunt, who lived in Secaucus, sponsored her to come over. My mother worked as a mother's helper, then she met my father. They married in 1930. He was an apprentice at an ice cream parlor in Jersey City.

The opportunity came up for them, after they were married, for them to buy this place because it was in bankruptcy. So they bought it. And when they came and looked at the place—we always loved this story—there were nice tables and chairs and stuff. After they bought it and came, all the nice tables and chairs were gone. It was all broken stuff and they had to replace it all.

Everyone said, "Oh, you won't make a go of it," because the other people couldn't. You know: They bought it at bankruptcy. But they did. They didn't know my mother and father. They were happy if they just made it through a day. If they didn't lose money for the day, that was fine. They just worked and worked, and saved, and eventually they bought the building.

A Small German Community

By the '50s there weren't that many German families, specifically, that you hung around with or anything. People from church, St. Matthews, you would know them. There were a lot of Germans [in the 1930s]. When I was a child there was even a service in German.

[In our family, there were] my father's sister and my mother's brother. That's all. Everybody else stayed in Germany. My uncle lived in Secaucus and my aunt lived in Forest Hills, in Queens.

My stepfather, Fred Van Dyken, belonged to the Hoboken Soccer Club. I think he was even secretary or something. They were all German men, who went up to Scheutzen Park and played soccer on Sundays.

But when I went to school my classmates were Italian, Irish, and German, and there was a lot of mixed Irish and German.

Growing Up in the Luncheonette

I grew up in Hoboken, in the luncheonette. First we lived across the street. Then after they bought the building we lived upstairs.

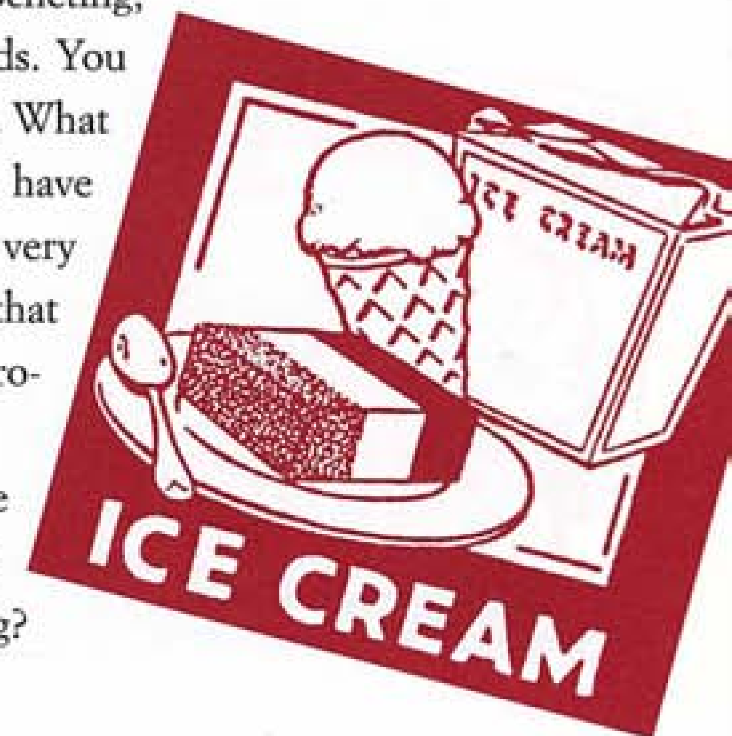
Before they renovated it, the soda fountain was on the other side, and there was a dumbwaiter that would bring stuff up from the basement. I can remember my father giving me rides on this dumbwaiter. I think it was around 1940 that they renovated, so I was really little. But that's the thing I remember most; him giving me rides on the dumbwaiter.

When we were in grammar school, it was during the war, and it was busy at lunchtime because there was a lot of industry around—the shipyards, Maxwell House. The industry that was here was in this neighborhood. My sister's [Dorothy's] job, when we were home for

lunch, was to do any frying that had to be done—fry the bacon or the eggs or whatever. And my job, I could not go back to school until I dried all the dishes. At lunchtime, in those years, it was very busy.

I always wanted to have a regular home life, like other people. You ate here; you did your homework here. You went upstairs to go to bed. Well, back then there was no TV or anything. You listened to the radio, but you had a radio down here. And I have to tell you something about my mother. When we listened to the radio, we were not allowed to be idle. We always had to have knitting, crocheting, embroidery or something in our hands. You couldn't just sit and listen to the radio. What good was that? You always had to have something in your hand. So I was a very good crocheter. Knitting, I never got that good, but I could crochet good. I crocheted a big tablecloth once.

I say that TV was the downfall of ice cream parlors, because before TV, what did you have to do in the evening?



Center: Henry Schnackenberg at the door of his luncheonette, circa 1940s.
COURTESY SCHNACKENBERG'S LUNCHEONETTE

All the young girls and young boys, they would go out and sit in the ice cream parlors. The girls were always dressed to the nines, in their nicest dresses and stuff, and they'd sit around and meet the boys. That was the teenagers. The older people, well, they would go out at night for ice cream. We were open until 11:00 at night, because there were people around. I say that TV was what did in ice cream parlors, because people had something to do in the evening.

There were always people coming in, and my sister and I used to take turns. This would be her side and that would be my side.

Helen Firehock worked for us then. She worked for us for sixty-five years, I think, until she got sick and couldn't work anymore. She worked split shifts. She was here for lunch, then she went home in the afternoon for a while, and came back at 8:30 for the nighttime crush.

When Helen wasn't here, my sister and I used to wait on people. But my sister was older than me, and she liked to sit with the boys instead of working. [She's two years older.] When you're teenagers, two years makes a big difference.

[When they were on dates, teenagers] mostly had cokes, and the big thing was that my mother decided that if they were sitting in the back and having a coke, it had to be fifteen cents instead of a dime. It took them a while to get used to that one; that their coke was going to cost a nickel more if they sat in the back.

They didn't come for ice cream sundaes. Mostly just to have a coke. But never a plain coke. You had a vanilla coke, a chocolate coke, a cherry coke, a lemon coke. You never had a plain coke. It was an unusual person who just had a plain coke.

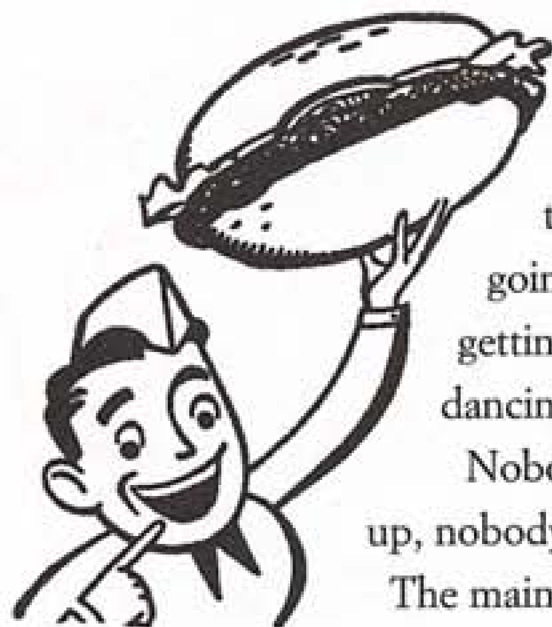
We made basically the same thing [then, that we do now] except we didn't make hamburgers. But that sign over there: That had to be displayed during the war. You set your prices and they had to stay

at those prices, by law. See, it says, "Our Ceiling Prices," and it was signed by whatever the name of the board was that was located in the "war office." It's from 1943, that sign. You could not raise your prices. A ham and cheese sandwich for thirty cents, that was the most expensive, and that even had tomato on it.

In the '50s, the prices were comparable to any other store you could go into. And in the '60s, when things started to deteriorate in Hoboken, my mother decided that she would keep her customers coming by keeping her prices lower; not raising them, like everyone else was. Somehow they've always been lower than everybody else's.

We're the only ice cream parlor left in Hoboken. There once was Umland's, Ables, Jeannettes, Kielmann's, Jackodines. And those were [only] the ones close to Washington Street, and downtown. On the back streets there might have been some but I didn't know them.

The Booths Where No One Sits



Well, the reason we have these booths in the middle is we had a jukebox in the back. This was all open and people would dance. But in those days (it might still be true) you needed a license if people were going to dance. My father was so frightened of getting in trouble and getting fined for people dancing in his store that he had those booths built. Nobody ever sits in them. Right after he put them up, nobody ever sat in them.

The main object of them was to close up the space so

people wouldn't dance. Because any chance they had they would get up and dance, and he had to yell at them, "No dancing. No dancing."

But he also was doing a nice thing, because he had some veterans just returned from the war, who were opening up a carpentry business. He had them build them for him. So he was giving work to a returning veteran.

The jukebox left as the business went down and there were less teenagers to play it. We had it on consignment, and when you're not making any money with the jukebox, they don't let you keep it.

A Candy-Making Tradition

My nephew and my son do the candy now. Mostly my nephew. He makes most of it—the molding and the dipping and all that.

You have to know what you're doing in order to do it. And somehow, by one watching the one who went before them, you get the knack. It takes a while to get the good knack, but it comes with time.

Well, I guess the present generation, most of them, [know] from watching my stepfather. My father died in 1950, and in 1952 my mother remarried Fred Van Dyken, and he eventually learned how to do everything, and helped her here.

Fred Van Dyken at Schnackenberg's Luncheonette, circa 1960s.
COURTESY SCHNACKENBERG'S LUNCHEONETTE

My father did it all on his own, when he was here. Then he had a heart attack in January, and Easter was coming up. A bunch of confectioners came, and one day they spent, but there must have been half a dozen of them working non-stop, and they made all our candy for that Easter, for us, because he was sick. I was just a kid, then, but they came and spent—I remember—one day. They made all this candy, and it was non-stop. There was so many of them working and everybody had their job.

We didn't do the amount that we do now, because back then there were at least half a dozen places in Hoboken where you could get that kind of candy. At least half a dozen. At Umland's they sold them, and at Kielmann's. But now we're practically the only people left to do it, so we do sell a lot more to people from the neighborhood.

And people who know of us come specifically to Hoboken to buy our homemade candy, at Easter time. Easter's the only holiday where they would come in droves. We make for other holidays, but there's not the call for candy as there is at Easter.

I think they just want the quality. Because you can't find candy like ours anywhere else. We still do the individual touches to it. Everything has a bow or a button. There's eyes in it. It's all individually made. When things are mass-produced they just don't look the same.

We do it all by hand. We don't have any machinery. Most places these days have machinery. We do it the same way my father did it when he started in 1931. That's how we still do it.

Working at Schnacky's

Well, the thing was I knew more boys than any other girl in my class. I went to "Brandt" School when it was all girls. Brandt was girls and Rue was boys. So the first day in high school the girls I knew couldn't get over how many boys I could say hello to, because I knew them

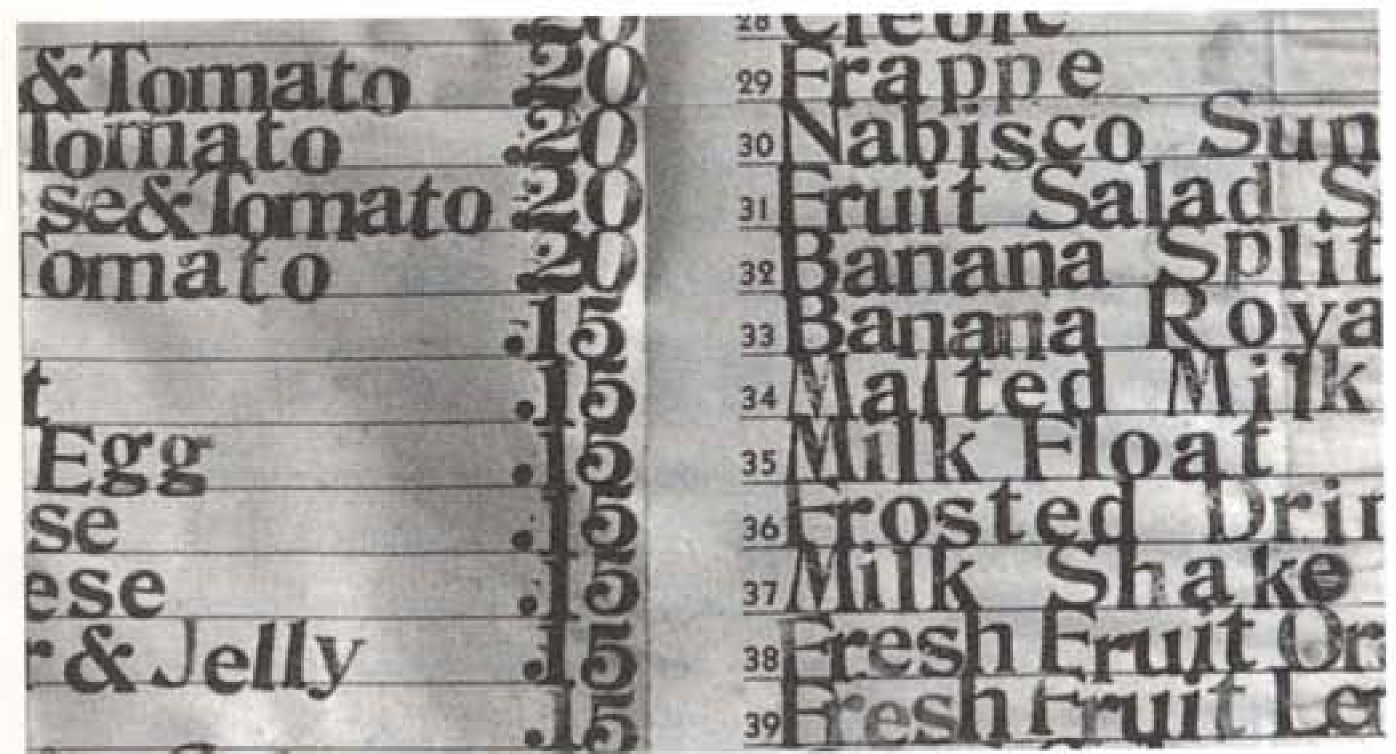
Heln Firebock (left) and Dora Schnackenberg in front of Schnacky's, circa 1986.
COURTESY SCHNACKENBERG'S LUNCHEONETTE

from here. But it was just that they were friends, to say hello. I didn't date them or anything like that. And I was a fat kid, so they weren't that envious. You know. You're around candy and ice cream and stuff, you can't expect to be thin.

I don't think I wanted to eat that much candy, and when I was—I'm trying to think—maybe from like ten to fifteen or sixteen, my New Year's resolution was to not eat any candy from New Year's until Easter, and I didn't. That was very difficult, when Easter came, because—marshmallow eggs and marshmallow chickens and that stuff, when they would come in, oh, they were so good. But I wouldn't eat them until Easter. I don't even know if my mother saved some special for me, that I would eventually get to eat one. That was sort of a sacrifice. From New Year's to Easter I did not eat any candy.

Return to the Luncheonette

[I came back to work here] when my mother needed me. It started out very gradually. She needed me to go to the store. Then she needed



me for something a little more, and a little more, and then eventually I was here every day. And then when she got sick it made it that much easier that I could take over full time, when she couldn't do it anymore.

Helen lived with her at the end, after Helen's mother died. See, Helen lived with her mother up the street. Because until she got sick and had to move in with her sister, she lived on this block, her whole life. So she moved from her mother's house, upstairs, to my mother.

My mother had a stroke at 89, and that was the end of it. They carried her out and I said, "That's probably how I'll go. They'll carry me out, and that's the end." But she never would have left of her own accord. As long as she could come down here and work in her store, she was happy.

Now my nephew is very interested in it. Whether he would even-

tually want to take it over completely, himself, I don't know. But he's involved; the most involved of the younger generation.

My sister and I will keep it going as long as we can. Because it's such a Hoboken institution. There are so many people who come in here. It's a place to go. Where would they go if they couldn't come here? I'm sure they would find somewhere, but for now we want to be here for them.

Gertrude. Gertrude's been coming in here for maybe twenty years, just about every day. And Vera, now she comes every day. I guess maybe it's ten years. She used to be an occasional customer, maybe a couple times a week. But now she comes every day. It breaks up the day for a lot of people. Well, I say when I was young, it was a teenage hangout. Now it's a senior citizen hangout.

But I love that, when they come in, and the whole counter is talking to each other, everybody knows each other and are interested in what's going on. You know. Where else can you go and have that? And even if you come in here a stranger, you're not a stranger very long.

The Hoboken Oral History Project

"Vanishing Hoboken," an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library and the Hoboken Historical Museum in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to the consequent "vanishing" of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; and factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken's industrial base relocated over the 1970s and '80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992. In the go-go economy of the 1980s, Hoboken's row houses, just across the river from Manhattan,

were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy commute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, where affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as anonymous, modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated in the summer of 2000 with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, "Vanishing Hoboken"—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. The Project focuses on collecting the oral histories of residents who can evoke Hoboken's vanished industries through their recollections of employment in the city's many factories and on the waterfront, and those who can capture for present and future generations the ways in which Hoboken's rich ethnic and cultural diversity was once evident in the everyday life of the city: in traditional businesses and small Mom & Pop shops; in leisure and cultural activities; and political and civic activities (election campaigns, political/social clubs). In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of Cultural Affairs in the Department of State, the Hoboken Oral History Project transcribed and edited seven oral histories to produce a series of "Vanishing Hoboken" chapbooks. During 2002 and 2004, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities, provided support for publication of three chapbooks.

Vanishing Hoboken Chapbooks

The editor of this series chose to call these small booklets "chapbooks," a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a

> . . . small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapmen, in western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 inches x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material

continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the "Vanishing Hoboken" series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the "manners and morals" of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.

A Project of The Friends of the Hoboken Public Library and the Hoboken Historical Museum