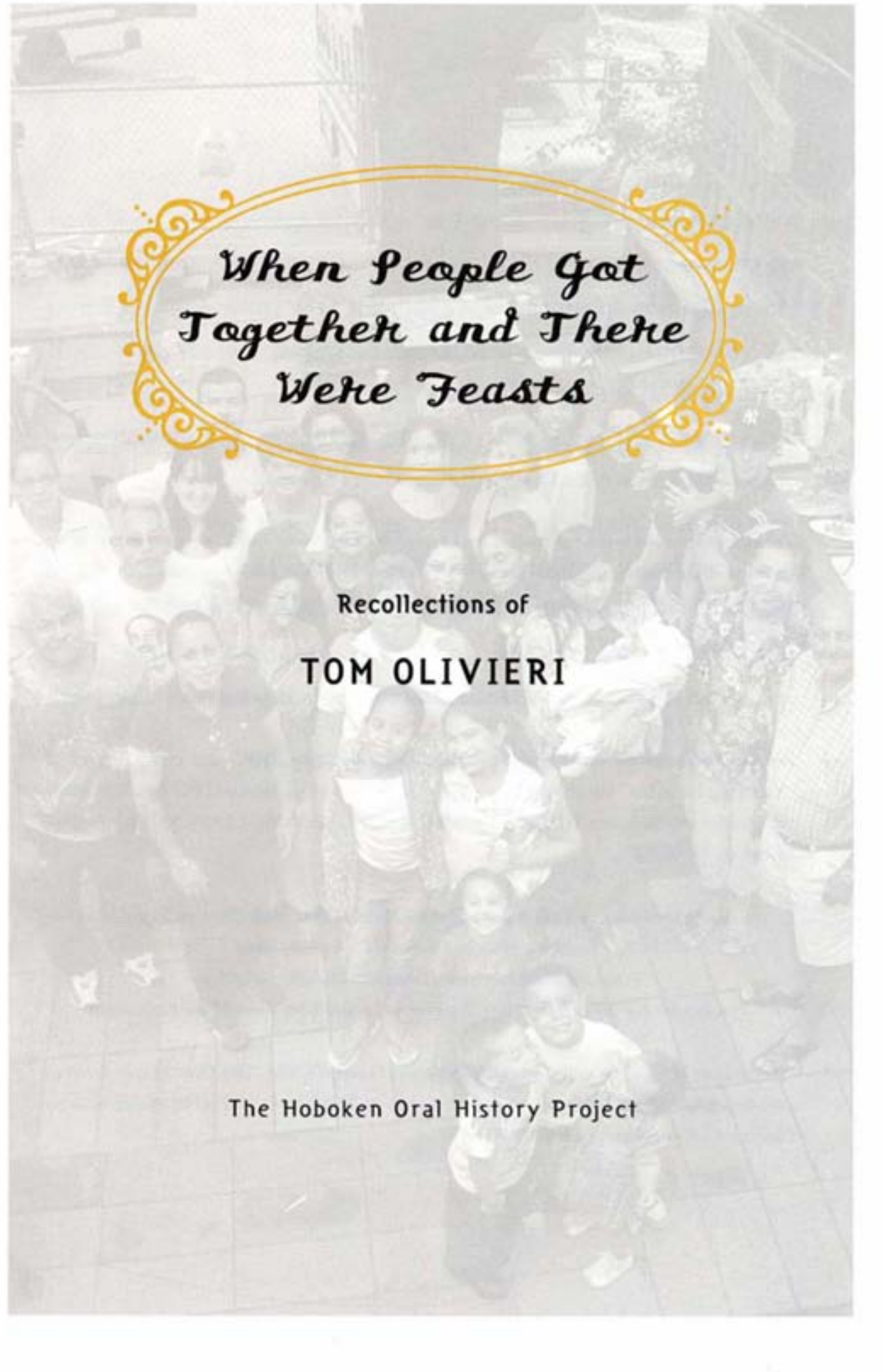


*When People Got  
Together and There  
Were Feasts*

Recollections of  
**TOM OLIVIERI**



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The Hoboken Oral History Project

VANISHING HOBOKEN  
*The Hoboken Oral History Project*

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

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Cover photo of Olivieri family gathering by Robert Foster, © 2005. Tom Olivieri is in the back row, upper left. Other family photographs courtesy of Tom Olivieri. All other images courtesy Caroline Carlson, photographer © 1975.

Back then, the customs of the island were more vibrant and more prevalent than they are now. You were talking about first-generation people, coming over, who still had those memories and still share. Now, when you use the term "Puerto Rican," and you apply it to the general public here, a lot of people have pride, and the pride is shown at the parades and the festivals. But on a day-to-day basis, they're more American. They've become more assimilated. They've lost a lot of their customs. Back then those customs were, as I say, vibrant. So when people got together and there were feasts, there was that island music and that island flavor. You didn't think about ordering pizza, or about having catering, or having rap music. You know what I'm saying? It was different. Those are good memories for me.

—Tom Olivieri, May 11, 2001





## Introduction

### *Tom Olivieri*

Tom Olivieri's family was one of the first Puerto Rican families to move on to his Willow Avenue block. A tenant's rights activist, and later, a cultural affairs official for the city, Mr. Olivieri has long been at the center of cultural and civic activities in Hoboken's broad-ranging Hispanic community, including fighting the widespread displacement of poor residents during the 1970s. He retired in 2001 and at this writing divides his time between his Hoboken home and a home in Puerto Rico.

This chapbook contains quotes from an interview conducted by Alisa Del Tufo at the Olivieri home in Hoboken on May 11, 2001. The transcript of the interview has been deposited in the collection of the Hoboken Public Library.

### *From Puerto Rico*

I'm the oldest of four children. My mother and father are from Puerto Rico. I have a last name that is considered to be Italian here—Olivieri—but the truth is, my grandfather was from Corsica, which is an island off the coast of Sicily. In fact, that's where



Tom's parents—Teofilio and Isabel (bottom right) Olivieri, in Puerto Rico, circa 1940s. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY TOM OLIVIERI

Napoleon was born. My grandfather was born in Corsica, and for one reason or another he wound up in Puerto Rico in the early 1800s. I've always wondered what path he took, or how he got there.

My father said it had to do with political turmoil there, and he and his brother left. They wound up in Puerto Rico. They spoke French. At that time, Corsica was a French possession, and it's gone back and forth between France and Italy. I always wanted to visit there. Maybe someday I'll go.

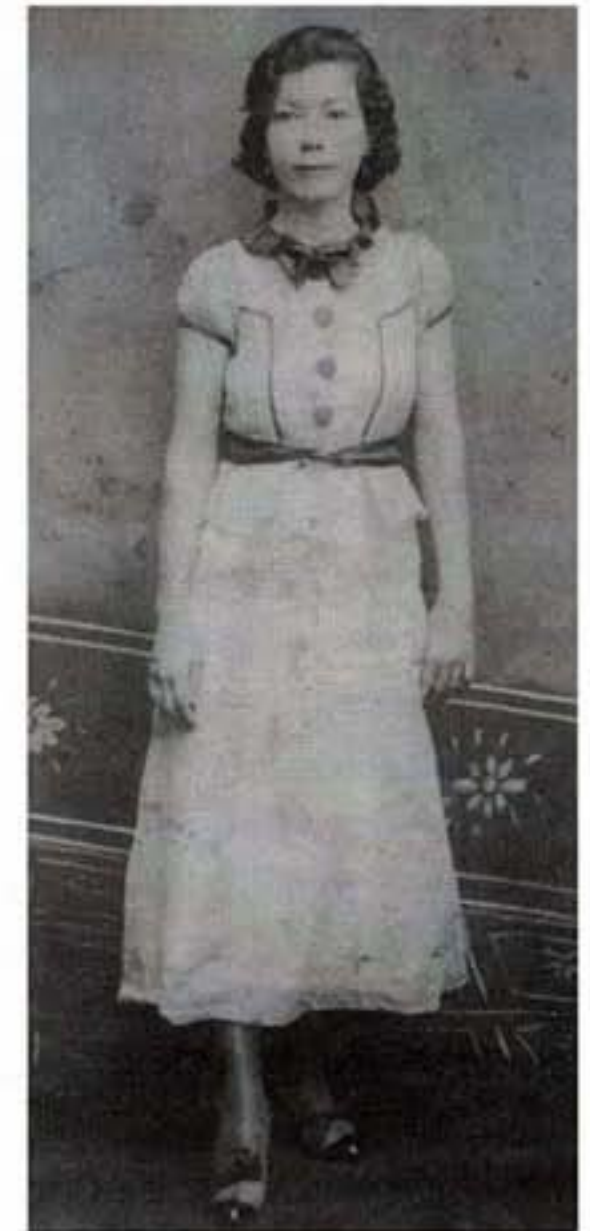
We came to Hoboken in the early '50s, and one of the first

experiences I had here was meeting a kid in Wallace School, in the fifth grade, who had the same last name as me—a boy by the name of Joseph Olivieri. I remember going up to him, because of the same last name (thinking he was Puerto Rican), and asking him if he spoke Spanish, and him giving me a blank look. He was Italian.

Back in the late '40s and early '50s the economy in Puerto Rico wasn't what it is today. They were harder times. It was right after the Second World War. My father had been in the Army. In fact, my father was working for the U.S. Government when we came to the United States. We always lived near army camps in Puerto Rico, and most army camps are near the beach. So I've always had a memory of Puerto Rico, of the beach. I was ten years old back then, when we came here.

We lived near San Juan, but at that time, the town we lived in last, Catano—a town right on San Juan Bay, across from the city of San Juan—was not part of the metropolitan area. It was more rural, even though it was only a ferryboat ride away from San Juan. Just like New York.

It was a similar situation, between Hoboken and New York. San Juan Bay is probably as wide as the Hudson at this point—about a mile wide—and it was a very pleasant experience. I've always had those imprints in me of the beach, the beach scene, the beauty of the blue and the green, and I've never forgotten that. So what was imprinted in me back then and what was taught to my family here, has always stayed with me. We've kept our basic customs—the language, the music, the food—our general culture, to the extent that when I go to Puerto Rico, even though we've been here fifty-two years (we came here in 1949), even though when we came here I was ten years old, those memories, those imprints I've always had with me. In fact, I used to have a recurring dream, for a long time after we came from Puerto Rico, where I walked the route from my school to our house. My mother used to bring us lunch at school, and used to walk us to school in the morning and pick us up at 3 o'clock. In my dream I was walking that route, always. Basically, every night I used to dream that. It was nostalgia.





*Just before coming to the United States, circa 1947. From left to right: Olivieri family dog, Jackie, Tom, sister Socorro (standing), brother Edwin, and cousin Miguel, who stayed in Puerto Rico. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY TOM OLIVIERI*

We came here in October. Right now, for you or I, who have been here so long, October's not really a cold month. But when you come from a tropical place like that, when you come from that beach scene, where you have green and you have clear water and blue skies, and you come to a place where the trees have no leaves... Everything looks gray.

We lived in New York three months prior to coming to Hoboken, with family. It was my mother and father and the three children, and we came to my aunt's house until my father got a job. So we were there basically three months, in what is now known as Washington Heights, 166th Street and Amsterdam Avenue.

And I did go to school in New York for those three months. A totally different experience. It was like culture shock, not so much

because of the language. I don't remember not knowing the language. My father spoke English. He worked for the government. Very smart man. He was truly bi-lingual. He liked to show us off, and he would teach me English and whenever his friends would come, or somebody from the family, he would ask me questions in English and it was my duty to answer him in English. He was thrilled by that. So I don't remember not talking English, not understanding, but it was culture shock in the sense that, when you were coming from that beautiful scenery to a barren place, as far as I was concerned—big buildings, huge buildings—everything looked gray to me. And leafless trees. So to me, in my mind, I see those days as sort of gray, as if I was watching a black and white movie.

## *Moving to Hoboken*

After living in New York for three months, we moved to New Jersey. Around the beginning of January of the following year, '50, we came here to Hoboken. I was raised right here on Willow Avenue, in what used to be known then as the "Tootsie Roll Flats." There are nine buildings there with fifteen apartments in each building, so there were 135 apartments. Currently, those buildings are the property of Applied Housing.

Most of the people who lived there worked for the Sweets Company of America—Tootsie Roll—which was right on Fifteenth & Willow—1500 Willow Avenue—where Macy's now [builds] their floats. My father didn't work for Tootsie Roll. We were one of the families who didn't work for Tootsie Roll.

It was a Hoboken atmosphere that was totally different from the way Hoboken is now. Totally different. We were the second Puerto Rican family on that block, actually. We got an apartment there through my cousin, Eddie Torres, who's now in California. Eddie's

got to be in his eighties now. I haven't seen him in a while. He had just been discharged from the army, and he got an apartment here. He used to work for the Ford Motor Company. At that time they were in Edgewater, where that mall is, a big plant here.

Eddie lived here. He told my father about Hoboken. He had just moved in. It's not that he had lived here a long time. He was a New Yorker. They had been here since the early '40s. A big family. That's a nice story, too. Fourteen children. My aunt became widowed at an early age, after her last son was born. So, basically, she had to raise all these kids, and she raised them well. No problems. Nothing dysfunctional. An excellent family. She had a whole bunch of boys and a whole bunch of girls, the oldest kids pitched in, and everything worked out for them. She passed away a couple years ago. She was ninety-seven.

So Eddie got an apartment for us here. Prior to that, my father had come here, and he got a job in a factory right around the corner here, 1023 Clinton Street. They used to make rubber sandals. Well, I think they were actually canvas sandals—the top was canvas, the sole was rubber, and his job was to glue them together. He got a job there. That was his first job in this country. Then we moved here.

Eventually, my father was able to obtain what they call a "stationery fireman's license." A stationery fireman is the person who takes care of the heating system in a building, and back then it was coal. So he was in charge of six buildings—1000 Clinton Street, 1006 Clinton (there was a big factory building there), 1015 Grand, 1009 Grand, 1015 Clinton Street (there used to be a toy factory there), and 1023. Now that's all been converted to condos. For a while there were lofts there.

My father became a stationery fireman, and he was a combination fireman there and handyman. So he took care of the elevators, he did the windows. They were all owned by a man whose name was Philip Greenberg. Mr. Greenberg, a Jewish man, was very good to

my father. They became very close friends, so it was more than an employer/employee relationship. Mr. Greenberg sold those buildings in the early '70s. I remember he gave my father a \$25,000 bonus. And my father was the kind of guy who was so responsible. He would work Sundays—anytime anything was needed, he was there. He had a place there where he would sleep, sometimes. He worked there, basically, until he retired. My father passed away in 1974. He was eighty years old.

Hoboken at that time was a very industrial town. It had a lot of factories that dealt with garments, principally, women's clothes. That was a big thing. [And there was] big industry here, where a lot of the people who lived here, worked here. Not only garments. You



*A partial aerial view of Hoboken industries and its working waterfront, 15th and Washington Streets, looking northwest, 1951, Fairchild Aerial Surveys. The foreground shows Todd Shipyards. The large structure is the Standard Brands building (Lipton Tea). COURTESY OF THE NEW JERSEY STATE ARCHIVES, DEPARTMENT OF STATE*

had Lipton Tea. You had Standard Brands—you know, the people who make the cereals and that. You had Tootsie Roll. You had a huge factory right here on Eighth and Monroe (there's an empty lot there, now), called Rego Electric. They employed a lot of people. One Thousand Clinton Street was a building that had a big lamp factory, there. Levelor Blinds, on Eighth and Monroe. You also had Hostess Cake, and you had Wonder Bread. Do you know where the high school is, on Eighth and Clinton? Between Eighth and Ninth. The building right across from the high school, on that side, where they have the Spanish warehouse? That was Wonder Bread. Then you had Hostess Cake, on 14th Street. And Mighty Fine, by Van Leer's [chocolate].

You had Bethlehem Steel, Maxwell House, and the waterfront where Eleventh Street now goes into Sinatra Drive. All that area was fully active. That was not an area to stroll. It was not an area for pedestrians to walk down or ride bikes, or anything like that. At that time it was all cobblestones. It was a depressing area, because it was all work. There was no view to Manhattan from there, unless you actually got on the other side of the buildings. I remember the Holland American Lines had their docks at Fifth Street, by the river.

You can catch a glimpse of that if you look at the movie, *On the Waterfront*, with Marlon Brando. A lot of the movie concerning the docks was filmed right there. And I remember that's where they filmed that final scene, where Marlon Brando fights Johnny Friendly, played by Lee J. Cobb. I was there. I watched when they filmed a lot of that. We used to come out of school—in 1954—while they were doing that movie, and we used to rush to be in the area. I'll always remember clearly, vividly, Fourteenth and Garden, where Frankie & Johnnie's on the Waterfront is. That bar was owned by a man I remember—Benny. I don't know his last name.

Hoboken was the Mecca for Puerto Ricans in New Jersey. When we moved here, like I said, we were one of the first families here in



*Gathering to watch the Puerto Rican parade, 134 Washington Street, June 1975.*  
PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLINE CARLSON. COURTESY THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Hoboken. I know we were the second family here, like I said before, but there were other Puerto Ricans who settled in different parts, most notably Fifth and Monroe. Just by word of mouth; people telling their relatives and their families back there that this was a nice place. To the extent that in 1955, there was a huge migration of people from Puerto Rico to here. That was the biggest year, historically. At one point the Puerto Ricans numbered, here, close to one-fourth of the population of Hoboken.

[When we moved here] the ethnic makeup of the town at that time—I think we were at the tail end of the German and Irish, so when we moved here, actually, the mayor, I think, was probably the first Italian mayor here. His name was Fred De Sapio. Then we had a mayor by the name of John Grogan. After that came De Pascale. But at that time, this area here, Fourth and Willow, there were more German and Irish people than there were Italians. The families were concentrated downtown; in what they called “downtown.”



Traditionally in Hoboken, “downtown,” is west of Clinton, basically. That’s where more Italian people lived. I remember the rivalry between the Italians and the Puerto Ricans back then. At first, when we came here to Fourth & Willow—I’m not talking about our neighborhood—I think they saw us as “cute.” We were not black. We spoke a different language. And, frankly, we were not a threat to employment or to housing at that time.

I’ve always used that, as an example of how ghettos are created. Because I think ghettos are created through prejudice or through ignorance or resentment of a certain ethnic group moving into a neighborhood. What happens is, the people who are in place start moving out. And that saying, “There goes the neighborhood?” They do that, for whatever reason, and as one Irish or German or Italian family moved out, a Puerto Rican family would move in, and then it just ballooned—to the extent that, by the late ’50s or even the mid-’50s—I’m going to say between 1949 and 1955, this block was totally Puerto Rican. Totally. I want to say every single apartment there, by the mid-’50s, was probably occupied by a Puerto Rican family. And most of those people had paying work at the Tootsie Roll company. So at 7 o’clock in the evening, when they had their lunch break—they had three shifts, Tootsie Roll; that was a big company that employed a lot of people—at 7 o’clock, when they came out for their meal, you would see all these uniforms walking through here, they’d come to eat. Very rarely did anybody bring lunch over there. You did see workers sitting on the fire escapes or outside on the sidewalk, eating. But most people came home to eat. Then you would see them march—I remember they had gray uniforms, very light, regular overhauls with the caps, men and women. In a lot of cases the husband and wife both worked, if they had an adult to take care of the children within the house. At that time there wasn’t too much babysitting. [It had to be] somebody of your confidence.



*Saints procession, Puerto Rican parade, Washington Street, June 1975. PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLINE CARLSON. COURTESY THE PHOTOGRAPHER*

My mother had a lot of adopted grandchildren, in that sense. When my mother passed away, you wouldn’t believe the people who showed up to see her. She had raised them. These are kids who see me as a brother or an uncle. And during those days it was really a family-oriented neighborhood.

In the summer people were very happy for the warm weather. Hispanic people in general are very gregarious. They like to socialize and talk. Back then, the customs of the island were more vibrant and more prevalent than they are now. You were talking about first-generation people, coming over, who still had those memories and still share. Now, when you use the term Puerto Rican, and you apply it to the general public here, a lot of people really have pride and the pride is shown at the parades and the festivals. But on a day-to-day basis, they’re more American. They’ve become more assimilated. They’ve lost a lot of their customs. Back then those customs were, as

I say, vibrant. So when people got together and there were feasts, there was that island music and that island flavor. You didn't think about ordering pizza, or about having catering, or having rap music. You know what I'm saying? It was different. Those are good memories for me.

And at the time, the city was different. You didn't have the traffic congestion problems that we have now. So every Thursday, on Willow Avenue here, between 12th and 11th, would be shut down, and was used as a play area, so kids could roller skate. At that time you didn't have that angle parking, like you have today. If you saw, in the '50s, if you saw six or eight cars parked in a block, it was a lot.

## Schooling

I went to the old Wallace School, for fifth grade. I had great teachers. I have nothing but the best memories of it. I remember them all. I remember my English teacher, Marie O'Brien, who was a beautiful inspiration to me. Miss Cudahy, who was the math teacher. Back then we didn't call it math; we called it arithmetic. My history teacher, Miss Heath—a tough old lady, but beautiful. My geography teacher, Miss Driesen, a beautiful lady, too. My literature and spelling teacher was Mr. Hydell, and the gym teacher was Tom Shirley. Those were the people. Really good.

None of the teachers were Latin, but those teachers were great. Back then, like I say, at the beginning, we were seen as "cute," in that sense. But as the composition of the area began to change, ethnically, then you would hear certain remarks like—I'll always remember this woman whom I used to do errands for. Nice lady. But she always made the remark—She used to say, "Tommy, what's wrong with these Puerto Ricans?" Or whatever it was. "Not your family." And I used to say, "Why is she saying this?" But to me it wasn't anything—the

racial thing never entered. Because when you're young, when you're a kid, you don't think about that. In fact, there was a point in my life where I really felt that I truly belonged here. By the way, that changed later on. Later on I ran into some experiences that affected my way of thinking. I saw it in the service, and I saw it after I came out of the service, here.

But back then I don't remember—I remember the clashes between Italians—I'm going to say this, because it's what I feel: Italians are the people who most resemble Hispanics in so many ways. Because Italian people traditionally have something about their family—the place

for the mother; the father; our religion [Roman Catholic]; our language. Our language is so similar. We have those traditions—deep family traditions. We'll kill for our family. But here in Hoboken, the Italians were the most prejudiced against the Hispanics. I don't know why. I've never figured that out. Maybe the Italians were more honest about it—more open, more up front about it. But I never got it so much from the Irish or German people. There were few Jewish people, but more from Italians, to the extent that the clashes here were among youth; among Puerto Rican and Italian kids.



*At 1213 Willow Avenue in Hoboken. Left to right: Socorro, Edwin and Tom, circa 1952. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY TOM OLIVIERI*



Carmen, a cousin who came to live with the Olivieri family. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OLIVIERI FAMILY

Real fighting, yes. If you went to areas like Fifth and Monroe, back then, it was like you were looking for trouble. Because you would get beat up. I got into many fights there. We had a swimming pool, right here on Washington Park, right up the hill, going toward Union City. We used to call it the North Street pool, and we used to go up there. I got beat up a lot of times. These were kid things. We got into so many fights. But you didn't think of that as a racial thing, even though the slurs were there—"You're a spic," or the Puerto Rican kids calling

the other ones "guineas." I didn't see it as something malicious or racial. I saw malicious, racial prejudice later on in life.

I went to Wallace, graduated from the eighth grade, and went to Demarest High School. Demarest was a nice school, too. I never graduated. I quit school in tenth grade to go into the service, to help my family out. Things were tough then. By that time we had a fourth child, Carmen, who is my cousin on my mother's side. Her mother and father had died in Puerto Rico in the mid-'50s. There were six kids, and the family took the kids in. We wound up with Carmen. It's weird, because to this day she's my sister, but her brothers and sisters are my cousins! You know what I'm saying? Beautiful.

## Meeting and Marrying Margie

I went into the service in 1956, came out in '59, and I met Margie in 1960. I had a friend of mine who was getting married, in Brooklyn, to a girl who was a friend of her sister. Now we didn't know each other. This was right around Halloween. I always remember the date, October 29, 1960. I was going to go, with a few friends of mine, to a costume party here in Hoboken, at the Spanish American Catholic Center on Washington Street. But my mother had a gift for him, and I wound up being forced to go to Brooklyn. I had never been to that area—I had been to New York and Brooklyn but I had never been to East New York, where she was from—to his apartment in the projects.

It was a family thing, in the apartment. I went there. I dragged a couple of friends of mine who were going to go to the party with me. I said, "We'll go there. We'll drop this off, come back, and go to the party." Well, we got there and we never made it back, because there were so many girls. And that's where I met Margie. Margie's four years younger than me. She was still in high school.

So the deal was, "You cannot have a boyfriend until you finish high school." My father had that with my sisters. Very strict. If I tell you what you had to go through to ask for somebody's hand, in the Puerto Rican culture back then... Now that's all down the drain. Now my daughters come in, "Pa, this is Danny." Or, "This is Luisa." "How are you. Hey, Tom. How're you doin'?" And they call me Tom. I couldn't hear myself calling her father by his first name. It was always Don. Don Vicente, right? I would never say to Margie's father, "Hey, Vicente. *Como esta?*" No, no, no. I could tell you what I went through. Like I say, she was in high school. We went for about a period of a year and a half, before she graduated, before I was able to talk to the father. I saw her on the sneak.

Her mother knew about it. Mothers are traditionally the buffers. Her father was a guy I was definitely afraid of. You have that respect, and you're actually scared of them. You see this guy as somebody who's tough.

Well, in 1962 I finally got to talk to Margie's father. I remember taking the train; she lived in Brooklyn, and it was twenty-three stops. I used to do that trip every weekend, when we were seeing each other on the sneak, once a week. She lived in the projects in Brooklyn, in East New York—tough neighborhood; really tough neighborhood—and I used to go there. But I'll always remember, the night I went there for the first time. She had told the father that somebody was coming to talk to him. He had never laid eyes on me. She's the youngest of four sisters, four girls, and at the time two sisters were married, one sister had a boyfriend who had the "in;" he had already gone there, and he had the right to visit. The rule was that, even though he had the "in," they could never go out by themselves, with the boyfriend, even though the boyfriend was known. You needed a chaperone, always. Always. So I used to go there and wait downstairs, in the cold, in the heat. I'm looking there at the seventh floor. I'm here. You've got the elevator subway, I'm standing there. Finally it would come down, and we would go to the movies, a group of us. I would come back, say goodbye, get on the train, and come back home, here. I did that for a while.

Finally the day came when I had to meet him. It was on a Saturday. I went there, I was in the hallway—scared—I finally knocked on the door, Margie opened the door, she brought me inside. Her father was there (God bless him), her mother was there (God bless her). Her aunt was there. And I remember her father sitting in the little kitchen, at the table, and he had a couple shots of rum. He prepared himself for me. I remember Margie introducing me, and then just leaving and going to her room.

And he grilled me. He asked me, "Who are you? What are you

doing here?" I had to say, "Well, I know your daughter and I would like permission to know her better, and to know your family." "To what end, do you want to know my family?" "Well, you know, perhaps in the future we could—" "Perhaps could be never," he said. He almost had me set the date, basically. That was the only thing that was missing. "Who's your family? I want to meet your family."

All I wanted was permission to go up there, to visit. I didn't want to stand in the cold no more. So he sat there, listened to me. He told me he wanted to meet my family. I had to go up there, I think maybe the fol-

lowing week. I brought my mother and father up there, and my sister, Soco. That's the way things were then.

But listen to this. It's not that everything was cool, then. Like I said, even though I had the permission, the rule was "you're never alone with your intended. Never." Never at all. So I used to go there Saturdays, and we used to go to the movies. Or maybe dancing. We did a lot of dancing. We used to go to clubs in New York with her sister, who was married, or the other sister. Always with chaperones. We would go to the Broadway Casino. We went there a lot, where



*Wedding Photo. Margarita and Tom, 1963.*  
PHOTO COURTESY OLIVIERI FAMILY

they had live bands and dancing. Sundays, we may go to movies in the afternoon—maybe—or we just hung out in the house there. Radio City. But Sunday evening, a typical Sunday evening would find us sitting on the couch. I'm sitting there, she's sitting there, and her mother and father would be there, in a rocking chair, rocking, rocking. And what are we watching? We're watching the circus. Then after the circus, what comes? Ed Sullivan. *The Ed Sullivan Show*. My cue was the moment that the credits came on for the Ed Sullivan show, at 9 o'clock, I had to get up, say "Goodnight" and all that.

Now in the meantime, we're there; never had a moment alone; couldn't kiss, nothing. So what did we do? So maybe once a month I used to say, "I'll see you tomorrow morning." And I used to travel out there in the morning. At the time I was working in New York for a typewriter company, on Canal Street, and Margie, she had graduated, and she was working for the Book-of-the-Month Club, on Spring Street, by Prince Street. I used to go down there, by the train, wait at the train station. We would come into Manhattan together. She would call my job and say she was my sister or something and that I was sick. And I would call her job. We would go to the park, or the movies, or something. And that's because we were not allowed... we still had to sneak around. And even when we were looking for an apartment, when we set the date for the marriage and everything, we never saw an apartment by ourselves. Her father was always with us. I remember we saw an apartment on Nostrand Avenue, around there, and her father said, "No, this is too far." So we wound up moving. The first apartment was maybe about—Astoria, Rockaway—How many stops away? Six stops away [from them].

We lived on Lincoln Place, between Classen and Franklin, right off Eastern Parkway. Do you know where the Brooklyn Museum is? Right there. In front of Grand Army Plaza. Right there, right near the entrance—There's an entrance to the Botanical Gardens there,

too. Nice neighborhood. When we moved there there were a lot of Jewish people. Five-forty-one Lincoln Place. I'll always remember. That was our first apartment.

Here, you get a lot of railroad flats. Over there you have box rooms, so you do have windows. The long hallway, and you have marble in the actual, exterior hallway, you have marble. You had an interior hallway toward the foyer. It was really nice.

Then I got laid off from work. Things were rough, then, and we wound up moving back to Hoboken. We moved in with my family for a while, with my Mom, on Ninth and Garden.

Then I got a job here. I became a billing clerk for a garment company right here on Park Avenue and Thirteenth, which doesn't exist anymore. Then after that I got a job with Bali Bra, a big company here in Jersey City. I was a shipping clerk for them.

## *Finding An Apartment—and Prejudice—in Hoboken*

We moved back to Hoboken in 1964. In '64 my daughter was born, and in '65 my son was born. We had two, one after the other. So Vicky just turned thirty-seven, and Tommy turned thirty-six. We moved back to Hoboken, and in 1965 it was a big, rude awakening for me, when I was looking for an apartment to move in. When I say "rude awakening," that's when I really became conscious of the prejudice—became witness to personal incidents of prejudice.

At that time we were living at 1312 Bloomfield. It was a one-bedroom apartment owned by a Jewish man. His name was also Greenberg, like my father's old boss. A good man. We lived there, in a one-bedroom apartment. Applied Housing also has that building,

now. When Tommy was born the apartment was just too small for us. All we had was one bedroom to begin with, and Vicky, my oldest daughter was there in her crib. But it would have been too much with two children, so we started looking around. That's when prejudice began to hit home; when we were looking for an apartment. We got turned down for so many reasons. I remember going down Washington Street with Margie. There's a candy store on Sixth and Washington (it's still there now, called Davis Candy Store, and at that time it was owned by a guy by the name of Davis. It kept the name, but I think some Indian people own that candy store, now.)

I remember going into Davis's to make a phone call, after I saw an ad in the *Jersey Journal Observer*, and there was an ad that said, "Apartments for Rent; two-three bedrooms; convenient to all buses. Heat included." And the rent wasn't bad. The rent was maybe \$80. Something like that. I remember calling the number that was there, and the apartments actually were on Twelfth and Washington, between Twelfth and Thirteenth, what they called the "Yellow Flats." I called the number, and the guy answered the phone. His last name was Alberti; I'll always remember. He answers the phone. He says, "How can I help you?" I said, "I'm calling about the ad in the paper." "What's your name?" I said, "Olivieri." So he says, "Are you related to the Olivieris from 14th Street?"

Remember that boy I mentioned, Joe? Their father and uncle owned the pool parlor on 14th Street, between Washington and Hudson. That was the place that all the people from the docks, when Bethlehem was there, they used to come in there to eat, because he had sandwiches. So he says to me, "Are you related to the Olivieris on 14th Street?" I said, "No, I'm not related, but I know Gus, and I know Nick, I know Tony and Joe and Peter." I knew the whole family. I rattled them off. I said, "They're my friends." So he says to me, "Mr. Olivier—" This was on the phone. I was twenty-six years old. He says to me, "Mr. Olivier, I don't have

anything right now, but I'll keep you in mind. If anything comes up, I'll let you know. *Wait a minute.*"

"Wait a minute," he whispers into the phone. He says, "*Wait a minute.*" So I stayed on the phone. I don't know what's going on. He comes back on the phone, and he says to me, "Mr. Olivieri, I've got a beautiful apartment for you. You're going to love it. It's going to be nice for you and your family." Because I told him I had two children. He says, "I'm sorry I couldn't say anything before, but I had some Puerto Ricans in the office, and you know how it is." Would you believe that? You know what happened to me? It really gave me chills. My hair stood on end. It gave me chills. I still get chills, to this day. But all I said to him was—I was shocked. I said, "I know how it is." But what came into my head was, "I've got to see this guy." That's what came—"I've got to know who this is."

I said, "I know how it is. When can I see the apartment?" So we made an appointment for the next day. This was on a Saturday. The next day—Sunday—at 2 o'clock, I put on a suit I had, I combed my hair to the side, I went up there and rang his bell. He lived at 59 Thirteenth Street, right across from the Y. I saw his name, I rang the bell, and he rang back down.

Now I'm going up the stairs. Now the stairs are those that are broken into landings—like you go half a landing, then you have to go another half floor, and he lived like on the third floor. When I got to the landing just before, he was standing right there, and to me he was an old man. I was twenty-six, he was probably in his fifties, but to me he looked so old. He was younger than what I am now. To me he looked like an old guy.

He says to me, "Did you ring my bell?" I said, "Yes. Are you Mr. Alberti?" "Yes," he said. "I'm Olivieri," I said. And his face fell. He knew right away. I walked right up to him, up the stairs, and I said, "Listen, you dirty bastard pig." I said a whole bunch of stuff. I said, "I don't want your apartment. I just wanted to see who the hell you



(From Left to right) Tom Olivieri and a tenant he was helping to relocate under the Model Cities Program, Mr. Romero, at 919 Willow Avenue, January 1975. Model Cities, initially enacted in 1966, was a centerpiece of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" program. A response to the urban riots of the 1960s, Model Cities was meant to address inner city problems of crime, poor housing, deficiencies in education, and high unemployment through coordinated government assistance to selected urban areas. Hoboken was one of the low-income cities selected for the Model Cities Program. In one of its stages residents were relocated (with compensation) from dilapidated buildings, which were then rehabilitated. Tom Olivieri worked with the Program and Hoboken photographer Caroline Carlson documented some of its accomplishments, including the relocation of Mr. Romero.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLINE CARLSON. COURTESY THE PHOTOGRAPHER

were. I'm going to report you," and I left him standing there. He said nothing. He said nothing. To me, like I said, he was an old man. I really felt like lashing out at him.

So I walk out of there. At that time, that was the beginning of Civil Rights, and there was an agency in Jersey City called "Can Do" that dealt with civil rights problems with blacks. At that time I was working at Bali Bra, and a kid I worked with—I told him what happened, and he said, "You shouldn't put up with that, you should go—" So he took me there. As I remember, it was near Garfield Avenue. I remember going out there and explaining everything. He sounded very interested, but what he did was, he put me in touch with a reporter from the *Jersey Journal*, for a story. I spoke to the reporter and he wasn't even interested. He said, "Look, it's your word against his. And that's it. It's not going to stand up."

So he wasn't interested, and that thing died out there. But, during that period of time when I was looking for an apartment, I had a series of run-ins with people concerning apartments, people who were blatantly prejudiced, and some who tried to be more subtle about it, but you could see the reason why I wasn't getting the apartments. I really took offense to that, because I had lived here all those years already; I felt myself a part of this community. And to me it was something really alien. I never thought I would encounter stuff like that.

Another time, right around that time, there was a real estate agency. I don't remember what they charged then. But there was a real estate agency across from City Hall that was called McQueen Realty, and I went there to ask them to help me find an apartment. They sent me to an apartment here on Eleventh and Hudson. I think the house was, maybe, 1110-1112 Hudson, across from Maxwell House. I remember going there. I went to McQueen and they gave me a sheet of paper, "Show Mr. Olivieri the apartment," [to give to] the super of the building. I rang the bell, and they buzzed me in.

Now the super's apartment was on the first floor, on the left. I

walk to the rear of the hallway and a lady comes out, a blonde lady (I don't know what nationality she was). She said, "Yes?" and I said, "They sent me here for the apartment, to show me the apartment." And she says to me, "They sent *you*?" Like that. "They sent *you*?" I said, "Yes, they sent me." I got pissed right away. I said, "Yes, they sent me. Are you the super?" She said, "My sister is." I said, "Well, get her out here. I want to talk to her." So her sister comes out, I showed her the [note]. She says, "Okay, wait a minute." She goes inside, and she gets the keys.

The apartment was on the fourth floor. We're walking up the hallway. All the way up, she's haranguing me: "You got children?" "Yes." "I don't want any children running in the hallways here." One of those. Tommy was newborn and Vicky was like one year old, right? This was in '65. I said, "My kids are babies." And she says "I don't want any wild parties." We didn't even have a record player! We didn't. We had a radio. I said, "We're not going to have any wild parties." I think I told her, "We don't even have a record player." Then, we were in the apartment and she says, "And another thing. I don't want more than one family living here." And I said something about—I think it was racist for me to say it—I said, "Wait a minute, lady. You're mistaking me. I'm not a gypsy. I'm Puerto Rican." I remember telling her that. Because back then Hoboken had gypsies.

Yes, we had gypsies here. I remember gypsies on 14th Street, and everybody was leery of them. They were doing fortune telling and stuff like that. The buildings from 203 14th to 213 14th. There were storefronts in all those buildings, on the bottom floors, and in one of those storefronts, at one point, there was a gypsy family there. And there were other families around Hoboken. So the word was, "A whole bunch of people live there."

So I said that to her. Anyway, I liked the apartment. It was a fourth-floor railroad flat, windows—I liked it. I said, "I like the apartment. I'd like for my wife to see it. When can she see it?" So

she says, "Well, tomorrow morning, at this time." So I came home, I told Margie, and the next day I'm at work and Margie calls me. I went to work, she calls me, crying, that the woman refused to show her the apartment. "What?"

So I left. I was a shipping clerk and my supervisor's name was Meyer. I said, "Meyer, I've got an emergency at home. I've got to leave." "What happened?" "I'll be back in a little while."

I took the #5 bus, I went to the real estate agency, and I told them off. I didn't go up there because I felt I could have killed that woman. I said, "How dare you send people to places where they're going to be treated like that?" That was the end of that apartment. That was the end. You know the excuse they gave her? The excuse they gave Margie was that it was too high a floor to walk up with two children.

I finally got an apartment, by the way, but not before going through stuff like that. I'll always remember 940 Willow. I remember seeing a sign at that building, then, that said, "Apartment for Rent." I rang the bell, a woman came out, and she says, "Yes?" An Italian woman, with a heavy accent. I said, "I'd like to see the apartment." She says to me, "The boss is not here now." The "boss." I said, "When will he be back?" "Oh, he's on vacation," she said to me. "On vacation." She's got the sign out, but "I can't show the apartment, because he's on vacation." So I took the sign—The sign is dangling right by us. I said (because I knew what she was telling me), "Listen, why don't you put the sign in, so people don't make the same mistake?" "Oh, thank you." So she goes in. I come back. I pass by there an hour later, the sign is out again. You know what I did? I took it, and I took it home. I just got so pissed.

What I didn't want to fall into was a situation where a building—I saw the deterioration that was happening here. I had grown up on this block. By the time I got married my mother had moved away from here, and the deterioration here for a while, in this block, was





*Playing house in a Hoboken lot, Observer Highway between Bloomfield and Garden Streets, 1975. PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLINE CARLSON. COURTESY THE PHOTOGRAPHER*

blamed on the residents. But the truth of the matter was, it was a combination of factors. When you have a building or you have an area, and you rent to people without doing any background check, without really checking out the tenant who's coming in, you're going to have problems. And when you allow the building to deteriorate, where violations exist but there is a need for people to rent an apartment, some people will go in there. Nothing is done, but people are willing to go in there because the rents are cheap. But then you may get a tenant who may not be a good tenant. So it's a combination of the landlord allowing the building to deteriorate, not doing a background check, so, of course the neighborhood is run down and everything is ultimately blamed on the resident. The landlord is also to blame. As a tenant advocate in later years, I saw that even more. To this day, three months ago, I saw that on Washington Street, in

buildings there where the owner just basically let it go, then blames the tenants. Then wants to have it both ways; wants to have huge rent increases, but doesn't want to do anything about the building. Then, when he's called to do something about it, he always puts the blame on the tenant.

Over the years, you get that experience. Back then I knew enough that I didn't want to move into a neighborhood where the landlord wasn't going to take care of a building.

## *Hoboken Politics*

Margie's father used to say, about politics—Margie's father and mother moved here, in the '80s—her father always used to say he never saw politics like the politics here. How dirty, and how vindictive people were. There's an old joke that you've got to break the word down, the word "politics." "Poli," from the Greek for "many;" and "ticks," for little, bloodsucking parasites.

If you saw the fliers that were put out at this time, at the projects. . . . The one side—the side that lost—put up these fliers (of course, anonymously) claiming racism, things like, "Ask David Roberts why he doesn't want you eating in East L.A." I saw those fliers yesterday. Yesterday. One of the women from the projects showed me one. They asked people from the projects—kids from the projects—to distribute them, \$50 to put these fliers onto people's doors. She's black, this woman who spoke to me and showed me the flier. Her grandson was home from college, and he said, "Grandma, I'm going to get \$50 for distributing these fliers, for this group." And she said, "Don't do it, because you don't know what's going to be on those fliers." He said, "Well, I need the money." Well, she said he met the guy on Washington Street. The deal was, "Here's a bunch of fliers."

I don't know what they gave him for them. "Distribute them, come back here, and when you come back we'll give you the \$50." Then they would give him more.

Well, she says he came home, she said, "Where are the fliers?" and he said, "I threw them in the incinerator." She said, "What did they say?" but he would not tell her. He said, "I'm going back to get my money." He went back, got his money, and they gave him more fliers. He came back and dumped them in the incinerator. But, in her building, from the other people who were distributing them, she got one of them. It said things like that, really aimed at making a distinction between black and white, and between Hispanic and black.

## *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 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 provided support for the publication of three chapbooks; three more were published in 2004 and 2005 with New Jersey Historical Commission support.

## *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 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

