

*We Were
Downtown*



*Recollections of
Marie Tofano*

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A chapbook from the "Vanishing Hoboken" series
of the Hoboken Oral History Project

Vanishing Hoboken

The Hoboken Oral History Project

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

This oral history chapbook was made possible
with support from John Wiley & Sons.



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COVER PHOTO: Marie (2nd row, right) on the steps
with friends, ca. 1938. TITLE PHOTO (l to r): Lucille
Laino, Marie, and Lucille Damone, ca. 1947, both
courtesy Marie Totaro. Contemporary photos
of Marie Totaro by Robert Foster, 2009.
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collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

We were downtown. You know what I mean?

*I went to Castle Point when I was in high
school. That's when I saw Castle Point.*

*I went sleigh riding there. That was another
world to us. See, we kept downtown. It wasn't
that, because we were downtown, we weren't
educated. We just did everything there.*

—MARIE TOTARO, JULY 9, 2008



Introduction

Marie Totaro is best known in Hoboken for her talent as a baker—the cheesecake she used to make for her dessert café, Le Jardin, is the stuff of legend—and for the equally spectacular skills she demonstrated during her tenure as chairwoman of the annual Feast of St. Ann.

Marie opened Le Jardin in the 1980s, when Hoboken had no coffee bars, and, as she put it, most Hobokenites “didn’t even know about decaf.” She decorated the Fourth and Garden Street storefront with curtains of tiny white lights and hung classic green-and-white striped awnings over its windows. She made cakes and served cappuccino. And though there were naysayers—Marie recalled some saying “Do you think you’ll ever make it on coffee and cake?”—she persisted with her vision. Le Jardin bustled with guests for twenty-one years.

For many of those years Marie was also chairwoman of St. Ann’s Feast, hosted by her parish. Under Marie’s direction, the Feast was transformed from a small, mostly local celebration, into a multi-day-and-evening festival, with food, crafts, and entertainment drawing visitors from across the state and beyond.

And so the editor of the Oral History Project’s chapbooks series had thought the transcripts of the three interviews with Marie would focus primarily on these aspects of her public life. The transcripts did include detailed histories of Le Jardin and the development of the Feast, but they also yielded lovingly evoked memories of a now-vanished way of life, in a downtown community that has now scattered. They are the kind of moments that disappear if they are not captured in family photos and in stories. This chapbook is rich in both.

Marie Totaro was interviewed by Pat Samperi on June 11, July 9, and October 8, 2008, in Marie’s Marine View Plaza apartment in Hoboken. The transcripts of the interviews, from which this chapbook is derived, have been deposited in the collections of the Hoboken Public Library and the Hoboken Historical Museum.



Macaluso family (clockwise) Marie's mother Fannie, Frank, Grandfather Joseph, Josie, Grandmother Lucia, Adolf. Photo courtesy Marie Totaro.

The Macaluso Come to Jackson Street

My maternal grandparents were born in Sicily. Joseph and Lucy, or Lucia, Macaluso. Her maiden name was Gallini. (Do you know what that means, *gallini*? [It means] “chicken.”)

Now [they came] from Italy to New York and got married. What year did they come over? Let's see. My mom was born in 1907. So they had to come in—1906?—because she was born right away, they were so much in love!

But I don't think my grandfather wanted to stay in New York. So he went on the ferry and he took a trip over here, to Hoboken. He cased everything, he looked, and he went down to Jackson Street. Now going down Jackson Street, he thought he was going on a farm, because from Fifth to Sixth Streets were “the lots.” We called them “the lots.” It was empty space, but not flat like a playground (though we thought it was a playground!)

He saw this, and he saw all the goats [people had there.] He went back to my grandmother and he said, “Oh, Lucia, this place is beautiful! Oh, let's go there with Fannie.” (That's my mother, whose name was Alfonsina. A Jewish woman, one of their neighbors, named her “Fannie.”)

Okay. Now he says, “All right, Lucia, I want to show you this place.” So Grandfather Joseph showed Grandmother Lucia the area, and they just loved it. They took their three-year-old daughter, and that's how that began.

And then *he* bought goats, too. He used to bring them to graze up on the hill, though he [kept them] in the yard. That's where they would milk them. (My mother would tell me this. And

she would tell me, "I would *never* drink that milk." And, oh, they used to get so annoyed with her! "Oh," she said, "it was terrible. I'd see all those hairs!")

But they loved it on Jackson Street. They loved it, and that's why they settled in Hoboken.

They were very talented. Grandmother Lucia was a seamstress. My mother would see a dress, and my grandmother would ask, "Fannie, you like that?" And my mother would say, "Oh, yes, Mama." My grandmother would make a pattern out of newspaper, sew it, and there was her dress. And my grandfather was a tailor. He used to make suits for big men who couldn't purchase [their suits] in a store. [They didn't have stores with clothing just for big men, like we have now.]

They had four children. My mother was the oldest, and she had two brothers and a sister. [They were very joyful people.] Grandma Lucy loved to sing. She was the greatest whistler. My grandfather, when they went to parties or weddings, he would say to her, "*Lucia, 'canta, canta.'*" That means "sing."

They were so much in love. But then Joseph died, at the age of thirty-five. Five years later, Lucy died, at forty. She was so heartbroken. That story was somebody so much in love.

Marie Luongo, Businesswoman

On the paternal side, this was an arranged marriage. They were from Monte San Giacomo, Italy. I think she was here, and they sent for him. She never knew who she was going to marry. She was just told, "Maria, you're gonna marry Francesco, and that's it." [So the two marriages were so different.]

I never knew my paternal grandfather. All I had was my grandmother, Grandma Marie Luongo. (Her maiden name was Lisa.)

Marie had like sixteen to eighteen children (with twins), but only eight lived. And she delivered her own. I thought that was something. And then she'd go out and get the coal! When the [coal] trains would pass downtown—they're still there, the trains—what the people used to do was [pick up] all the coal that fell off. They would go and pick it up and bring it home. That's what she used to do.

[But she] wasn't a homemaker. The oldest [kids] took care of the young ones. She was a businesswoman. She had a candy and grocery store, 523 Jackson Street. It was called "Marie's."

["Marie's" was on a block with several scrap dealers and other industrial businesses, mixed in with houses.] There was Damone's [on the corner of Sixth Street.] That was my friend Lucille's family. The Damone's house was in the rear, and in the front was a building where they had mostly rags. They would be bundled. Then we had Mike's Barrel Company next to my grandmother's store. [Next to that was another



ABOVE LEFT: Tommy Luongo and his mother, Marie, on Jackson Street, Hoboken, circa 1940s. Photo courtesy Marie Totaro.

ABOVE RIGHT: Tommy Luongo and Steven Mongiello, in front of Marie's store, 523 Jackson Street, Hoboken, circa 1930s. Photo courtesy Marie Totaro.

scrap dealer.] That was Mongiello, the lawyer's cousin. And then the other [scrap dealer] on the block sold scrap iron. So on that little block there was quite a bit of business. They did very well.

Marie's candy and grocery store was in a basement, a lower level. She lived upstairs. And in the cellar, that's where she would make the wine. Well, it was my father who would make it. I remember those huge barrels, and I especially remember the press. You had to put a large rod into it and you would have to go back and forth, and back and forth. It was pretty difficult. I was maybe eight years old, and she used to say to me, "Maria, Maria, come, come. You try." "Oh, Ma!" (I used to call her Ma.) "I can't." But I used to try.

And she sold this wine. To anybody who wanted to buy it. She used to charge, I think, fifteen cents a glass. It had to be in the '30s. I remember her—the men used to come into the candy store-grocery store. [Behind that room] was a kitchen.

Now my grandmother made sure every *drop* of juice came out of that press. She would have gotten juice out of the vine if she could have! I mean it. But her wine was delicious. She'd sell it by the glass or the gallon. She had the gallons all ready. She made the red wine, and the white.

[She got the grapes] from the market. I remember them coming in, in September—oh, crates and crates of different grapes, because that's what made the different wine—the zinfandel grape, and the muscatel grape, for the white wine. [And she kept on making it, for years.]

My Dad, Thomas Luongo

Now my dad. He was born in Hoboken, 1905. He was loving, compassionate—every positive adjective you can think of was my dad. He was small in stature, but a bigger heart you couldn't find.

[Here's one example. My mother was eighteen when she married my father. Her father had died two years earlier, and she'd been living with her mother and her siblings.] My grandmother didn't have any money, and my dad—the man that he was—said to my mother, "Fannie, why should your mother be paying that rent? We could bring them all in with us." He was twenty-one. He said, "We'll bring them all in." She said, "Tommy, are you *sure*?" My mother was very wise. "Are you sure you want this?" He said, "Why? You don't want your mother living with you?"

Okay. Long story short: They came in and they lived with my father—the grandmother and the kids.

He helped everyone. He was a hard-worker. That was his passion—helping, helping, helping. He was a plumber, and I remember like 3:00 in the morning this woman coming, "Tommy, Tommy, please. The pipes are all broken." He dressed right away, like a doctor would, and he'd go take care of it. He was really a remarkable man.

[My father's work made a big difference in our everyday lives. For one thing,] we had a beautiful bathroom. [That stands out in my mind] because everyone else had the bathroom in the hall. Back then, it didn't dawn on me to think, "You've got—"No. I thought that was how it had to be. We had the bath, we had the shower. My father was a plumber, so that's why.

We even had steam heat—which, woo! [Other people had coal stoves.] But he did that for us, so we had [that] luxury.

“I Just Loved Your Father”

Now my mother, Fannie—like I told you, she was married at eighteen and my dad at twenty-one. That was 1926.

[How did my parents meet? They’d known each other as children.] They lived on the same block, on Jackson Street. “Hello.” “Hello.” My mother always told me, “I used to see him,” and her heart would go pitter-patter. She said, “I just loved your father.”

[But] my mother was born in New York, so she had all her people in New York. Her aunts and cousins—they were all professionals. Whereas on my father’s side, they weren’t. Her aunts thought she should marry an executive. My mother was beautiful, fashionable. Very classy. So they used to bring gentlemen from New York to meet my mother. Now my mother didn’t care for them. There was *not* going to be an arranged marriage. No way. After

BELOW: Fannie and Tommy Luongo, circa 1960s. Photo courtesy Marie Totaro.



U.S. News & World Report

her mother and father were so in love? No way. She wanted my father—the plumber.

She worked very hard in the home. [Three months after I was born, we moved into] my grandmother’s house—the paternal grandmother, Marie—at 523 Jackson Street. Now my mother not only cared for *her* family, she cared for and took care of my father’s. There was a niece and nephew downstairs. She would cook; they would come up. This was the type woman my mother was. My dad used to come home for lunch, and she used to cook—and then cook at night. *And* go shopping. She would cook for everybody—and bake, too! She did it all.

We always had a beautiful home. My mother, being so neat and clean—I remember this—she would change the kitchen curtains every week! And as a little girl, I would help, on the washboard [washing clothes. Then we hung them out on a clothesline.] If it was cold, the clothes would come in like *bacala*. You know what *bacala* is, right? That stiff fish? They would come in like that.

Brother “Tippy” And How He Got His Name

My mother gave birth to my brother at nineteen. [He’s the first-born.] His name is Thomas but they call him “Tippy.” I would say 90% of people call him Tippy (I don’t think anyone calls him Tommy), and there are a few who call him “Brother.” I call him Brother, and my children, my girls, call him “Uncle Brother.”

Now the one who named him “Tippy” was a black man who used to come into my grandmother’s store. He used to go to different stores, and [sometimes] there were toys in these stores they didn’t want. He used to bring them to us, my brother and myself. Maybe I was three, but I remember him. I remember his face. He would always hold me and sing to me, “Sweet Marie, I love thee.” And to my brother, he said,



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ABOVE LEFT: Thomas
"Tippy" Luongo as a ring
bearer, ca. 1933.
ABOVE RIGHT: Marie
Totaro, circa 1931-32.
Photos courtesy of
Marie Totaro.
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Born on Jackson Street

I was born at 313 Jackson Street. Midwife. I was eleven pounds when I was born. I was born in [the home of my] *Cuma* Sarah. (You would become a *cuma* if you were my maid-of-honor; if he was my best man—*cuma* and a *cumpa*. We had a load of them.) That's where we lived, first, 313 Jackson.

Now let me tell you what my mother ate for nine months. She ate a bunch of bananas. Do you know how many are in a bunch? Twenty-five. Yeah. And sometimes, when the peddler passed, and the bunch was bigger, sometimes there were thirty. She ate that and three, thick ice-cream sandwiches [every day.]

The peddler used to pass with the bananas, and she used to tell her friend—who ended up being my godmother—"Mary, go get the bananas. Here comes the peddler." For nine months he knew, just get those bananas ready.

"The Lots"

As I said,] when I was three months old, we moved to 523 Jackson Street, from 313. Up the street. It was a wonderful neighborhood. Across the street, that was empty. We thought we were really in the country. We had that open space. From Fifth to Sixth Street was all open. [And] when it snowed, that lot was so picturesque. It was just a blanket of white with the hill as a backdrop. That was Jersey City.

[That neighborhood lot was used by a lot of people for different purposes.] The neighbors used to build shacks [there.] My father used to leave all his pipes out there. That was storage. Nobody ever took anything. The boys built clubhouses. Even us girls tried to build a girls' house. So it really was our playground. It was really nice for us—building the shacks, and doing all those things. My dad even made a *bocce* alley, in the lots across the street.

[The train tracks were right there. We could see the freight trains passing where we lived.] I loved the sound. I loved that clack and the whistle blowing. But—little that we knew—way back by the tracks, they used to dump the garbage! Seventh Street is where the dumps were. (And we thought we were in the country! All the kids used to play there.)

Years and years ago the garbage was drawn by horses. I mostly remember the garbage *trucks*, but I know there were horses, because my brother told me that the boys, when it snowed, they'd hook up their sleighs onto the garbage truck, and the horses used to take them for a ride!

The boys used to play cowboys and Indians on the lots, too. Now we didn't have that many goats [on the lots anymore], but there was this

woman who had goats. My brother lassoed one. He was little. He was maybe about nine years old, and the goat was too big for him so it knocked him down. That woman came out, screaming, when she saw the rope around the goat's neck. She said, "Oh, somebody is trying to milk my goat!" I thought that was pretty funny.

[By the time I was a teenager,] no more goats. The goats were when I was little. My brother is three years older than me, so he remembers the goats even more than I do. But I remember the goats, running back and forth. [The housing projects were later built on the lots.] I would say '50s, maybe late '50s.



Tippy and Marie Luongo in front of their home on Jackson Street—across from “the Lots,” circa 1938. Courtesy Marie Totaro.

“We Were Downtown”

My neighborhood] was mainly Italian, [from all over Italy.] My grandmother spoke Italian. When she spoke to me, I would understand her a little bit. [But I never learned Italian.] We didn't hear it, because our parents spoke English.

The Irish and Germans were [mostly] uptown; the Italians were downtown. Some Irish were downtown. The blacks were on First Street, and they never bothered anyone. It was just like “their section.”

The Irish and the Italians weren't getting along too well at that time [when I was a child.] I don't have any recollection of [the mayor during that period, Bernard] McFeeley, except that he was a tough man and kind of mean—especially to the Italians. He was mean to them. They couldn't get anywhere.

We never had that – not my block anyway. We never had that discrimination—for anyone. I never did and I never will. But I know, like, we were downtown—the Italians—and the Irish were uptown. I was Jackson Street. I couldn't get any “downer.”

[And downtown—the far west side of Hoboken—was different from uptown. Downtown, for example, we had certain street vendors who only worked in our area.] You didn't have these people uptown. No. Uptown was after Willow Avenue. That was the dividing [line], as far as I know. We were downtown. You know what I mean? I went to Castle Point when I was in high school. That's when I saw Castle Point. I went sleigh riding there. That was another world to us. See, we kept downtown. It wasn't that, because we were downtown, we

weren't educated. We just did everything there.

I'm telling you, the neighborhood... You know what we did? We used to go to the St. Anthony's novena [at St. Ann's Church] on Tuesday evening. This is the kind of people who were on that block. It was so calm, and so beautiful, and all my girlfriends, and even the boys went to church.

[We might go for a walk and go east to Washington Street, to "The Avenue," to entertain ourselves.] Like from Jackson Street, we would go on The Avenue. Why we called it "The Avenue" I'll never know, because it was Washington Street. Maybe we'd go into Kielman's for a soda. We'd take a walk. [And then we'd come back to the neighborhood.]



ABOVE: In the backyard at Jackson Street.
(Left to right) Lucille Laino, Marie Luongo, and Lucille Damone.
RIGHT: Marie up at Castle Point, "uptown" Hoboken, 1947.
Photos courtesy of Marie Totaro.



Downtown Street Peddlers

We had all the street peddlers downtown. So many kinds. [The fruits and vegetables. One guy, Frank, started with horses. Later on, he had a truck, I believe, not just the wagon. Then there was Sam. He had the finer fruits and vegetables. He's the one who had the bananas [my mother wanted during her pregnancy.] The tripe man was named Zazzarini. He's the one who sold the tripe and cabazella. (Cabazella is a goat's head; we didn't buy that.) My mother bought the tripe.

Everything was [communicated by] yelling. Nobody came ringing bells. You'd hear the peddlers. [They'd yell in Italian.] And then the people would come out, and go to his truck, and buy. The back was open. My mother used to go down. Everything was on ice. You'd see the liver, the kidneys, whatever. Ich! I did like the tripe, but my mother didn't. She bought that for my father. He loved it. *Atripa*. (I don't know if it's correct—if it's slang. It would always be a dialect. It's never going to be the perfect Italian. Because who spoke that perfect Italian language? No one. No one on our block, I know. They murdered the language.)

Now the other [vendor] that used to come.... We had the apple-on-a-stick man, now called jelly-apples. We'd have Charlotte Russe. Oh, that was delicious. Do you know what a Charlotte Russe is? It's a small piece of yellow cake. Then you have about that much whipped cream [indicates about three inches] and it's in a cup that's shaped like a crown. The cake's set in, the whipped cream on top—and oh, was that delicious.

We also had John, the hot-dog man. He would have fresh orangeade. Nothing else [in it.]

Oh, so pure. And he was so clean. That's what my mother always looked for, because some of them weren't.

What else did we have? The man who used to come and sharpen our scissors and knives. We had that, too. Let me see. Another man, a Jewish man—he came from New York, and he used to come with two bundles called “dry goods.” Dry goods are sheets, towels... Covers they used on the mantelpieces or the dining-room table. I think he even had men's underwear. Now he carried, on his shoulders, two huge bundles—all these dry goods, wrapped in brown paper with cord. In every home he went, he would open that up, and after opening [it], maybe nobody bought. And if they did buy, they would pay him maybe fifty cents a week.

Communication

Not everyone had telephones. We didn't. My friend, her parents had a phone. So when, say, my mother would get a call—maybe from her family in New York—they would open a window and they would call out her name. “Fannie! Telephone!” She would go out and go answer the phone, and that was the way to communicate.

[But it was rare, then, to get a phone call.] It's not like now—you keep getting calls, calls. Once in a while you'd get a phone call. That was it. This was our way to communicate—from our windows. If my mother wanted her neighbor, she would open the window and use the broomstick, to bang on *her* window—because our houses were connected. And her neighbor would do the same thing, if she wanted my mother. They'd get the broomstick, and then you'd talk.

My mother used to put a pillow on the windowsill, and look out the window when she wanted to call us. [They all did.] That was the way our mothers would call us—you would hear



Calling from Jackson Street, 1940s. Courtesy Marie Totaro.

names, all different names. All the mothers would open the window. “Come up and eat!” And then everybody, all the kids—we'd just go. We'd be out playing. And when our mothers would call, you didn't say, “Not now,” or, “No.” You went. Because dinner, at my house, was at 5:00 and we always ate together.

How old was I when my family got a telephone? I was still on Jackson Street, I know. Could it be like twelve, thirteen? [And it was a big thing in the building.] Of course. [My dad got it for business. But] it wasn't the way we are now, with the phone and everything. We were still calling out the window.

And on snow days—you know how we learned there was no school? Loudspeakers, throughout the city. Maybe about 8:00 in the morning, 7:30. [If there was a prediction of snow, we'd wake up in the morning,] waiting to hear. Then you'll hear, “No school!” Oh, boy! Everybody got dressed and ran out and played in that snow! And if you didn't hear that loudspeaker, honey, your mother's getting you ready, and you're going.

In School—and Out

I went to No. 8 School, which was Sadie Leinkauf. On Adams. We were there until the sixth-grade. That was mixed: Irish, German, Italian. Then from the seventh- to the ninth-, I went to Joseph F. Brandt. From there, from the ninth- to the twelfth-, was Demarest High School.

And during the summer vacations? Summer in the city was pretty rough—because we didn't have any air-conditioning. Some of the people used to even sleep on their fire escapes.

[Sometimes there were events and entertainments downtown.] In the early '40s, there was a carnival on Sixth and Madison Street with rides. I remember a greased pole, and a man would try to climb up this pole.

I remember a long, long ladder, where the man stayed on top—there was a platform—and he would dive into a very small area of water. That was thrilling!

[We made up our own games, too.] Kick-the-can, stickball, marbles. And the girls—we'd sit on my grandmother's bench, that my father made, and we would sing. That was our entertainment. If it was a rainy day, we'd go in my hall and get my mother's old curtains and play dress-up.

Working

After I graduated from high school, I went to work for my dad. I was [the company] secretary—[first at] 208 Adams Street and then we went to 206 Adams Street. [At first my father worked on his own, then he and Tom Pascale formed] Pascale & Luongo, Plumbing & Heating Contractors. My dad was the worker; he was on

the outside. I was in the office with his partner, so he was more my boss, not my father. We got along wonderful.

Dad was just a crackerjack plumber, he really was. [And that's all he wanted to do—work hard, do his job. During Mayor Bernard McFeely's administration especially, in the 1930s and '40s, city officials demanded payoffs in exchange for permits. But my father] would *never*, *never ever* do it. He wanted nothing to do with it. He would say to his partner, "Tom, don't you ever—"

He still got his permits, yes. He just wouldn't have anything to do with it. My father was so honest. He wouldn't even buy—you know how people used to come around with "swag?" ("Swag" is stolen goods.) No matter how much of a buy it was.

[I kept working there after I got married,] until I became pregnant with my daughter, [Rosemarie.] Then I stayed home. I stayed home and had my other daughter, Francine. When Francine went to school, I went back to work again. I worked for another nineteen years.

BELOW LEFT: Marie (2nd row, right) on the steps with friends, ca. 1938.

BELOW RIGHT: Tom Pascale and Marie Totaro, in front of Pascale & Luongo Heating & Plumbing, circa 1960.

Photos courtesy of Marie Totaro.



My Husband Nickie

Nickie [told me—after we were together—that he first] fell in love with me when I was five. Five! He said, “I saw you. I was on the corner selling junk.” He was eleven years old. “I saw you and you were so cute, and I just loved you.”

And he said, [later,] he used to watch me go to school. He lived on Jefferson Street and I was [on] Jackson Street. So I’d be walking up to school, going back after lunch, and he would see me. [When I was fifteen,] he told this guy, “See her? I’m going to marry her.” And he did. He did marry me.

So how did I meet him? Oh, that’s a story! I went on a blind double date with my girlfriend. She says, “Please Marie, come with me. I want this guy. I want to go with him. Oh, please come.” Now she introduces me to [my date.] We really didn’t have any [chemistry] but I [continued seeing him anyway.] Stupid. I’m like, what? Seventeen? So I kept going.

Then there was this boat ride. Michael Borelli was running for councilman [and the boat ride was part of his campaign.] I said to the guy, “You want to go?” and he said, “All right,” but he never showed up.

I went [anyway, with a friend from down the block.] Now at night, we’re in the ballroom of the boat, and across the room, this guy—Nickie Totaro—looks at me, and I looked at him. And he gestured, *Want to dance?* And that was it. Love at first sight. That was *it*.

So now what do I do? I wanted to be with him. I’d thought the *other* thing was love. But when I met Nickie, that chemistry...

[But still, I don’t leave, and I don’t date Nickie.] *I’m with this other guy.* Then this other



ABOVE LEFT:
Nickie Totaro and
Marie Luongo, courting,
circa 1952.

ABOVE RIGHT:
“He swept me off my
feet!” Nickie and Marie
Totaro, 1953.
Photos courtesy of
Marie Totaro.



guy goes into the Army. And he didn’t write for four months! [When he gets back, he tells me he wants to marry me.] I said, “No way! You didn’t write to me. Tell me why.” He said, “I can’t. I don’t know why.” I said, “I do!” My prayers were answered! [Then I got to be with Nickie.]

So then I was in heaven. Nickie and I were married in January of ‘53.

But a little hell came after that. He was a gambler; then he started drinking. But [even after I knew that,] I never stopped loving him. When I divorced him, we were still in love—only I just couldn’t take it. No more, after twenty years. I couldn’t. And the girls were grown then.

So after the divorce, who did I have the love affair with? *Him*. Until he died. About three weeks before he passed away, he called me. He said, “Marie, I have to tell you something. I will love you until the day I die.” It was just so unfortunate he was afflicted, because we did have that strong, *strong* love for each other.

St. Ann's Feast, Part One: Cheesecake for Reagan

Now I've been involved with church activities at St. Ann's for] close to fifty years. [Baking, entertaining, organizing parties.] I did priest jubilees. I don't know how many. I started the St. Ann Shrine. I started the St. Joseph Table.

[In 1984, then President Ronald Reagan, running for a second term, came to St. Ann's Feast with Frank Sinatra.] I knew [they were coming.] I got a phone call from my friend Pat, who did the cooking. "Marie," she says, "you have to make your cheesecake for Reagan." So I said, "Oh. All right."



Two St. Ann's guests:
opposite right,
President Reagan with
Father Vincent Liuzzo;
opposite left, Frank
Sinatra with Father
Lucio Mazzola.

From what I understand, someone in the choir wrote a letter to Reagan—and he answered. I mean, *he* didn't answer, *they* answered—his people—and said yes. And *he* asked Sinatra to come with him, because it was Sinatra's hometown.

So I made the cheesecake for Reagan, and I brought it. I said, "Look, don't you destroy this cake." Because, you know, somebody would have to taste it before he did. "It was so pretty. My chocolate-dip strawberry cheesecake! [I've made that for so many people.]

How did I feel about Sinatra coming back to Hoboken? I was so mad! Because I was inside [the high school auditorium where they had a special dinner for Reagan] and I couldn't get out. I wanted to go see Sinatra! [But] once you were in, you were in. He left, and I didn't get to see him.

Meeting—and Feeding—Sinatra

But I did get to meet Sinatra once, after years of loving him.] I was eleven years old when I fell in love with Frank Sinatra. My mother took me and my brother to the Paramount to see him. We waited six hours on line!

As I got older, and even married, I always went to see him at the Copa, wherever he was. A friend of mine, John, wound up working for him. [So one time, John arranged it so I could be waiting when Sinatra was getting into his limo.] John was next to him and he says, "Frank, say hello to Marie." I froze. His blue eyes went right through my gray eyes. I tell you—they were *sooo* blue, and *piercing*. I couldn't say hello, I couldn't move, like a little kid! I thought I was still eleven years old.

He didn't talk and I didn't [either. But later I was able to send him one of my famous cheesecakes]—through John. Oh yeah, he got one.

St. Ann's Feast, Part Two: The Cape

Like I said, I've been] really, really involved in the church, for years. [In 1989, the church was preparing to replace the cape on the statue of St. Ann—the statue that's carried in the



OPPOSITE: Early photo
of the statue of St. Ann,
on display in front of
St. Ann's Church,
Hoboken, circa 1930.

procession on her feast day.] There was her old cape and they were going to destroy it [and get her a new shawl.] So I said, "Why don't we cut it up, put a medal in there, put it in a little cellophane bag, and we could give it to all these devotees?"

So we did that. We cut it up. I said, "Don't anyone charge. It's all donations." We made about \$4,000. Somebody would give \$100, and I would give them the piece of cloth with the medal.

So many prayers on that cape! Prayers when the people in the procession touched it. [If you had an intention or a prayer] you would want to touch the cape. [And during the novena, people would pin money on it.] (More recently, during the Feast, there would be a big bag, and there would be the men from the Holy Name Society, collecting money. But years ago, the money was pinned on the saint when you processed. She'd have so much money on her, because the people, then, actually wanted to pin the money on. That would take forever!)

[Pinning it on] was their devotion. Their vow. That's why I said I didn't want the cape just put away, or destroyed, or not. I said, "Cut it up. These devotees would just love it," and they did. Oh, they were so happy. I still have pieces of it.

[Now we have a new shawl on her.] People donate jewelry, and it gets put on the shawl. The Feast is the only time they put the shawl, with the jewelry, on her. People will give you jewelry; then they sew it on, for their prayers.

St. Ann's Feast, Part Three: Chairwoman

I became the first woman, in 1990, to chair the Italian Feast [for St. Ann's Church.] I was the first in eighty years. [The priest just asked me,] "Marie, when are you having your first meeting?" I said, "For what?" And he said, "For the Feast."

Now I always did something for the Feast, but not *that* involved. One year we did the cooking; then another year we did all the desserts. [When I was growing up, the Feast always had a lot of food.]

[And on the Feast of St. Ann, on the day, the statue of St. Ann was always carried in a procession,] always by the women. One year I brought her up on Washington Street. I brought her all the way up. Feast Day—the devotees would always be there. There would always be a crowd. Always.

But I made it a festival—a Feast and festival. When I started in 1990, I brought in a whole new Feast. [The old Feast had been just for the neighborhood and the parish.] I made it big, I made it very big, I had billboards. I expanded it.

[For the first Feast I organized, I added vendors.] I said, "Instead of just food, why don't we put some vendors, like the crafts?" (Always ahead of my time!) "Have them come in with different things—jewelry, frames." And I did do that. I had maybe ten vendors. There were some people who said, "What's this? This isn't a feast. Why would she have that?" Then there were others who thought it was beautiful.

We couldn't have gambling anymore—the money wheel. [The priest had told me that we



Connie Francis, after performing at St. Ann's Feast, Hoboken, 1991.

Photo by Deborah Bornstein Gichan, courtesy Marie Totaro.

wouldn't be doing that anymore,] so I never did. But that year we grossed \$100,000—without gambling, which was terrific.

When I started, there was no entertainment. They used to have the band, and maybe an opera singer on the day [of the Feast.] All the feasts around here [did it that way. In 1990, for my first year,] the priest already had a DJ [lined up.] Now that wasn't what I would want to do.

So the next year I said, "All right. We'll have the entertainment. We'll always have a headliner." I got Connie Francis in '91. No one believed me. "No way is she coming!" And I said, "But she will. I mean it."

How about I get a call? Connie Francis says, "Marie, I love you.... But I'm not coming." I said, "Why?" Well, she had an argument with the one who was our contact. So now she doesn't want to come. Maurice Fitzgibbons [a County Freeholder and public relations man for St. Ann's] and I spoke to her at like 2:00 in the morning. You know, she's a little difficult.

And she *did* come, after we talked. I was crying. I said, "You can't do this to me! People don't believe me as it is..." So she came, and she loved it so much that she said to one of her people, "Go get me a blue dress," in honor of St. Ann. And she had a blue flower in her hair.

Carrying St. Ann's statue through the streets of Hoboken, circa 1950.



Then Father Andrew came [to the parish] in 1992, and we really turned the corner. Because he was—oh, he was so into it! I worked with him just great. He is a great, great friend.

[We started planning for the next feast a year in advance. At the current Feast] I was thinking who I wanted the next year, to come in. I'm thinking about who would draw a crowd! What do the people want! What do they like! And as the years went by, I knew.

[How much time over a year would I devote to planning the Feast?] I didn't take vacations. I closed my business one week before the Feast, one week during, and one week after, to recoup. Lots of work. [So you wonder why I did it?] Who knows? Something inside of me. I felt like "this is what I have to do."

I did the Feast from 1990 until 2000. Then I didn't do [it for three years. I came back and did the next four. Now] I'm taking a break.

[Has the church had complaints?]

Oh, have we ever! I had to go to meetings with Father Andrew. We went to the Citadel [the condominiums across the street from the church, built in the old No. 8 School.] They were okay. And then the Mews [other condominium buildings.] The letters! They did not want us there. But we told them, "We'll clean the street. We won't put any food vendors on your sidewalk, and we'll steam-clean it after"—which we did. We said, "It's only once a year." A lot of them went on vacation that week.

[But] that's how the Feast went. Every year it grew, and grew, and grew. Before that, they had like four strings of lights [hung across the street.] When I left, there were twenty-two arches. I went up to like seventy-five vendors.

[How many people go to the Feast?] I know they used to say we had 50-100,000 people, maybe for five days. You know? There were thousands. There was one night I'll never forget. I tried to get through the crowd—I was picked up. Me! I was actually—my feet were off the ground, that's how crowded it was.

Bringing The Community Together

When asked why I wanted to take on this big endeavor, I said, "I want everyone to know who St. Ann is." There are many people who never knew that her daughter was our Blessed Mary, and her grandson is Jesus. Well, I accomplished this, because whenever an article is written in the newspaper [about the Feast, St. Ann] is always included in it.

I'm very devoted to her. And she has so many devotees. This goes back [in Hoboken], now, almost a hundred years. See, St. Ann's Day—this is a *holiday* for us—especially for the people who come from San Giacomo.

It's St. Ann, it's *her*. [St. Ann is] the patroness of mothers, and girls who want to

become mothers. [They] pray to her.

Now I'll tell you a story about a reporter. Jewish. She wanted a child. I said to her (a Jewish girl!), "You pray to St. Ann. Pray to her. You *will* become pregnant." You know, she became pregnant, and she named her daughter Ann.

That's why the people are so devoted to St. Ann. [And] not only to become pregnant. It's just a comfort. I can't explain it. Every year, when she comes out of the church, and everyone's just standing there.... Just tears. And you could see it *every* year. *Every* year the emotion is exactly the same. You'd say, "After so many years—?" Soon as she comes out and you see that statue—I've got the chills now—you just get so filled with emotion. And there are so many, who come from all over that day, to come back to honor her. People who have left. They went to other towns. [And] they come back.

The celebration to honor St. Ann brings the community together in Hoboken. It's a great opportunity for people who have moved from Hoboken to come back, and reunite with family and friends. And for the people who are new to our city, to develop new friendships.

What Matters Most Is Love

When did I notice Hoboken was changing? In the seventies. It just started to change. Like, neighborhoods. See, now, we don't have neighborhoods. They're gone. That's what I remember—neighborhoods. Togetherness. Caring. Now everyone, it seems, is on their own and for themselves. That's how I feel.

I have my two daughters—Rose [Rosemarie] and Francine. And I have my two wonderful grandchildren, Santi and Sasha, and a "grand-dog," Gypsy. They're my everything, really. In my family, we're like Velcro. We are so, so close. What matters most [is] love. That's how I feel about love, anyway.

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 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. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, the Hoboken Oral History Project transcribed and edited several oral histories to produce a series of "Vanishing Hoboken" chapbooks.

Since 2002, nineteen chapbooks have been published in the series, with the support of the Historical Commission, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and, more recently, John Wiley & Sons.

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.



Standing in front of *Le Jardin* dessert café, Fourth and Garden Streets, Hoboken, ca. 1986 (Left to right) Marie's mother Fannie, her daughter Roe with her arm around grandson Santi, Marie holding baby granddaughter Sasha, and Marie's daughter Francine. Photo courtesy Marie Totaro.





*A project of the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library
and the Hoboken Historical Museum*