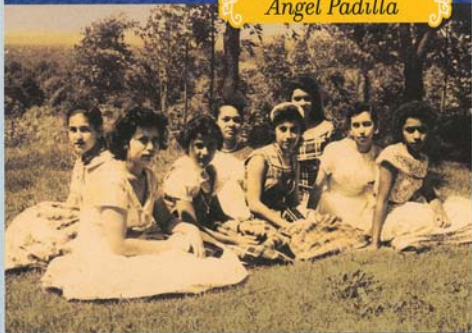


# WE WERE NOT AS THEY THOUGHT

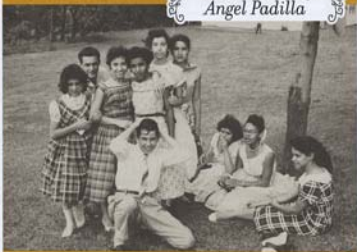
*Recollections of  
Angel Padilla*





# WE WERE NOT AS THEY THOUGHT

*Recollections of  
Angel Padilla*



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

Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños at Hunter College  
provided support for the collection of this oral history  
and its transcription.

The views expressed in this publication are those of  
the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the views  
of the interviewer, the Hoboken Oral History Project  
and its coordinators, the Hoboken Historical Museum,  
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Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños.

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For more information or to purchase copies of  
Hoboken Oral History Project chapbooks, contact:  
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PHOTO CREDITS: Unless otherwise noted, all photos  
are courtesy Padilla family scrapbooks.

Contemporary photos of Padilla family at

St. Joseph Church, Robert Foster 2010.

Angel Padilla photographed the weddings of many  
friends from the Catholic Center. Several of these  
portraits have been reprinted as endpapers, inside  
the chapbook's covers.

*When we start[ed] working, I guess  
people realize[d] that we were  
not as they thought. You know, that  
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somebody. You meet this other  
person. Sometimes people judge you  
by the way you look until they  
speak to you and learn about you,  
and say, "Jeez, I was mistaken,  
[this] person is the most lovely  
person that [I've] ever met."  
Because I have friends, even Puerto  
Rican friends, that when I first  
came, I see one with a slash maybe  
here [indicating scar on cheek]  
and I say, "maybe this guy's  
tough." But [after] I talk[ed] to him,  
we became friends. These things  
happen all over, no matter where  
you go.*

—ANGEL PADILLA,  
JANUARY 26, 2010



parishioners at St. Joseph Church for decades, and had a close relationship with Father Eugene Zwahl, a Franciscan Conventual priest based at St. Joseph's from the 1950s through the early 1980s, and the first priest in Hoboken to do outreach to the Puerto Rican community. Angel and Gloria Padilla were both born in Puerto Rico and met at "St. Joe's," which remains their parish to this day. Not long before the interview was conducted, Angel was invited to join the parish council. Married in 1960, the Padillas have three sons and seven grandchildren, and are now retired—Angel, from managing warehouses for various New Jersey companies, and Gloria from her position as an ESL teacher's aide for the Hoboken Board of Education.

The interview from which this edited text is derived offers specific details of past activities of one church parish; like many of the stories included in our "Vanishing Hoboken" series of chapbooks, it furthers our understanding of specific Hoboken institutions during a set period. But it also offers a larger story, a tale of migration that will also be familiar to the descendants of immigrant families—of new arrivals, of the struggle to gain acceptance and to preserve one's heritage, of efforts to find and to sustain community.

OPPOSITE LEFT TO RIGHT: Jose Padilla, Angel's father, at Hoboken's St. Mary Hospital, where he worked, circa 1954; Angel Padilla, age 14, 1955.  
Photos courtesy Padilla family.

## Getting to Hoboken from Puerto Rico— via Brooklyn



**I WAS BORN IN SANTURCE, PUERTO RICO,** [on] November 25, 1940, [and moved to Hoboken in 1955.] My whole family didn't move [to Hoboken with me.] My father came here first, [in] 1954, from Puerto Rico, [and] moved to 217 Clinton Street.

My father and mother were divorced. He used to send us clothes from a store, Mickey Finn, in Hoboken, where you could buy a pair of shoes for 99 cents at that time. One day I saw one of the checks that he used to send us,





the lady, that we had a fire in the house, that we had lost everything, and the lady was ready [to rent to us] but the husband didn't want us, because no Spanish people [were] living in the building at that time. I said, "Look, we need an apartment bad." They had a first floor apartment empty, one bedroom with a small kitchen. [And they still said no.]

So I went to get Father Eugene Zwahl, who was [a Franciscan Conventual priest who was working with] the Hispanic community at the time. He used to help everybody at St. Joseph's [Church on Monroe Street.] I explain[ed] the situation, [and] I said, "Father, do you think you could go with us and talk to the lady and maybe she can give us the apartment?" So we went there and after the lady listened to the priest, Father Eugene, they gave us the apartment. Everybody was paying \$25 at the time there. They raise[d] the apartment [rent] to \$48. [My father] couldn't afford it, but it was lucky that I was working part-time in a liquor store—I used to make deliveries after school—so I helped my father out [and] when the rent came, we had the money to pay for the rent.

## St. Joseph's Had Father Eugene

[BEFORE I CAME TO HOBOKEN, I didn't attend church.] I was a rascal in Puerto Rico, a little rascal, and I didn't go often. The church was only two blocks away from my house, but then, I was ignorant. I didn't have

the mentality [I had] when I came here, that my mind was more developed. [When I got to Hoboken I started to go to church, to St. Joseph's on Monroe Street. And that's where] I met [Gloria.] She was [in] the Daughters of Mary, [*Hijas de Maria*], an organization in the church [that offered social activities and religious instruction to girls.]

At the time, [St. Joseph's] was where most of the Hispanic[s] from all over town used to gather. The church used to be packed on Sundays, because it had Father Eugene. He was the organizer of the Hispanic community in Hoboken. [He] was a German priest, but he spoke Spanish, because he lived a long time in Costa Rica. So he was the one that organized the Hispanic community back in the Fifties and Sixties. He helped the Hispanic community a lot, organized the Holy Name Society, Daughters of Mary, [and *Madres Christian*, or] Christian Mothers [another social/religious group, but for adult women.]

While he was the pastor of the church, some of the funds he [raised were] used to help people [who] couldn't pay the rent, people who couldn't pay their electric bill. The Holy Name Society members, we used to get together. We knew the families that were in need. We used to go and bring food, or if a lady had a baby and they didn't have clothes, we used to go their houses and give them clothes.

Also, [Father Eugene] used to set up trips for the community, going to Rye Beach, Bear Mountain, museums all over. He really opened eyes for the community and he helped us a lot.



San Juan Fiesta, Randall's Island, N.Y.



Paseo, St. Joseph's Shrine, Stirling, N.J.



La Gran Jira, Rye Beach, N.Y.



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Fiesta de Reyes, Seis de Enero



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[Even after 1965, when the masses were given in Spanish, it did not fully resolve things.] No, it's still work. It's never going to be, no matter what you do, the same, but things got a little better. When we start[ed] working, I guess people realize[d] that we were not as they thought. You know, that happens when you don't know somebody. You meet this other person. Sometimes people judge you by the way you look until they speak to you and learn about you, and say, "Jeez, I was mistaken, [this] person is the most lovely person that [I've] ever met." Because I have friends, even Puerto Rican friends, that when I first came, I see one with a slash maybe here *[indicating scar on cheek]* and I say, "maybe this guy's tough." But *[after]* I talk[ed] to him, we became friends. These things happen all over, no matter where you go.

## The Spanish American Catholic Center

### THE SPANISH AMERICAN CATHOLIC CENTER

[was at] 227 Washington Street, in Hoboken, on the 2nd floor. [Below it] was a paint [store,] City Paint. [The Center] used to help people [who came here] from Puerto Rico and from all different parts of South America and Central America and the Caribbean, [who] didn't know about the community. They used to go there, and Father Eugene and other [people would] get [the new arrivals] established in the community, help them out with jobs if they could, or [help them] look for apartments. That was













## 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, twenty-one 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, Inc.

## 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.

## Photo Pages



PAGE 12—Angel Padilla documented many events attended by Hoboken's Spanish-speaking Catholic community, including the participation of the Daughters of St. Mary in the San Juan Fiesta on Randall's Island, New York, June 21, 1959. Photos courtesy of the Padilla family.

PAGE 13—From the Padilla family scrapbooks: A visit to St. Joseph's Shrine, Stirling, New Jersey, July 20, 1958. TOP PHOTO, LEFT TO RIGHT: Juan Caraballo, Providencia Vargas, Ana Crespo. BOTTOM PHOTO: Mr. Crespo (playing the guitar), Jose Rivera, Virgilio Martinez, Ivan Caraballo, Lucy Crespo, Norma Ortiz.

PAGE 14—A visit to Bye Beach, New York, August 30, 1958. TOP PHOTO: Angel Padilla, Jose Ruiz; at right: Aurea Cabrera. MIDDLE PHOTO (left to right, as identified in the Padilla family scrapbook) Carmen Classen, Elizabeth, Gloria Padilla, Arilda, Hilda Perez, Virginia Villafane, Lucy Prieto. BOTTOM PHOTO: Estella and Ortiz family.

PAGE 15—Three Kings Feast, January 6th, 1959, at St. Joseph School, Hoboken. From the Padilla family scrapbooks.

PAGE 19—All kinds of events were held at the Spanish Center. TOP PHOTO: Easter Party, April 12, 1958. MIDDLE PHOTO: Children's party, December 15, 1957. BOTTOM PHOTO: First Communion, May 25, 1958.



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