

I IMAGINE MY TOWN BEING THE  
**TOWN INSIDE**

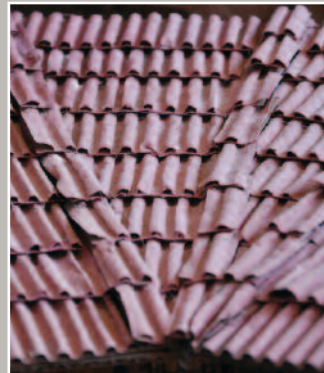
*Recollections of Carmine Percontino*





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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

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this chapbook are courtesy of the Percontino family.

When I got good at it, I was about seventeen or eight-  
een. I was getting more involved, and definitely  
wanted to make a *presepio* and see it in the house.  
[My mother] made such a fuss. I would make a mess,  
but it would look great after it was done. [I'd wanted  
the inside of the *presepio* to look like Monte San  
Giacomo.] In my town, there is what we call "*atafesa*."  
It's like a mountain hillside. That's what you see. That  
was the inspiration. I imagine my town being the  
town inside.

—Carmine Percontino  
November 23, 2015



*Postcard of Monte San Giacomo, ca 1970.*

## INTRODUCTION

Nearly every Christmas since 1996, Hobokenites walking by 827 Willow Avenue have been stopped in their tracks by the sight of an elaborate *presepio* (or Christmas crèche) created by the building's owner, Carmine Percontino, in celebration of the season, his heritage, and the small village where he was born, Monte San Giacomo.

Located in the province of Salerno, in the Campania region of Italy, Monte San Giacomo (“mountain of St. James the Apostle”) was for centuries home to sheep farmers who sustained a traditional, rugged way of life. In the late 19th century, they began to migrate to the United States. Most settled in Hoboken, New Jersey, where jobs were plentiful. The San Giacomese found their adopted city’s small scale convivial, and set about re-creating the cultural and religious anchors of their homeland, including, on Jefferson Street, the Church of St. Ann (in honor of their town’s patroness Saint’Anna), and the nearby Monte San Giacomo Club (for men born in the village and their male descendants). The migration of San Giacomese to Hoboken continued throughout much of the 20th century.

Carmine learned how to build a *presepio*—a tradition that began in churches, but was well established in Italian homes by the 17th century—from a member of his large, extended family. In addition to creating different versions for his own home, he has created several others for relatives and friends—including, in late 2015 to early 2016, one designed expressly for the Hoboken Historical Museum, and featured on the cover and endpapers of this chapbook.

Traditionally, *presepi* include a manger scene and figures of attending angels, but they also portray a panorama of ordinary village life, with replicas of the region’s animals

and figurines of people involved in everyday tasks. Although Carmine's landscapes mostly evoke the mountain view of his native village, he has also created visual tributes to Hoboken, by re-creating our riverfront walkway in one *presepio*, and by including the plastic toys of local children in another.

Building and installing the *presepio* fits into a calendar of traditions followed by Carmine and his family; the customs often involve specific foods, tied to holidays and the seasons. And sometimes there are new traditions: In addition to serving as president of the Monte San Giacomo Club on Adams Street, Carmine cooks there every Monday during football season.

Carmine Percontino was interviewed in his basement workshop on Willow Avenue and Seventh Street, Hoboken, on November 23, 2015, by Holly Metz and Robert Foster. Copies of the transcript from which this chapbook was derived have been deposited in the archives of the Hoboken Historical Museum and in the Historical Collection of the Hoboken Public Library.

A final note, about some of the Percontino family photographs reproduced in these pages: They were stored in Carmine's workshop when Hurricane Sandy hit Hoboken in October of 2012. His workshop was flooded, and most of his collection was destroyed. The photographs he was able to recover are mostly torn and water-stained; we have included a few in this chapbook because they visually represent a partial record of his family's history, and also the recent history of our city.

## FROM MONTE SAN GIACOMO TO HOBOKEN

I was born in a small town in the Province of Salerno, in Italy. It's called Monte San Giacomo. [My mother, Rosa, my siblings, and I came to Hoboken] in 1965. I was nine months old when I got here. My brother, Luigi, was the oldest; [then] my sisters, Rosa and Concetta [Connie], and then Carmine. I was an afterthought—I was like six years after Connie.



*The Percontino family in Monte Giacomo, Italy, prior to Carmine's birth, ca. 1957. Carmine's mother, Rosa, holds baby Concetta (Connie); his sister Rosa stands next to his brother Luigi; his father, Angelo stands behind Luigi.*



ABOVE LEFT: *Some of Carmine's mother's family in Monte San Giacomo, Italy, ca. 1950s. From left to right: Concetta Cammarano, standing next to Carmela Lisa; Giovanna Pasquale with her husband Giacomo; Rosaria Cammarano, Anna Lisa.*

ABOVE RIGHT: *Carmine's aunts Josephine and Anna, maternal grandparents Concetta and Matteo, and aunt Rosaria, reunited in the United States, 1951. Matteo died in 1959.*

My father had passed away, so it was a rough trip for my mother. We were all supposed to come to the USA, but he never made it, because it took years before you could get approved—six and a half years or something, to get the paperwork. My mother's younger sisters—when my grandmother came, they were underage, so they were allowed to come with her. But because my mother and the other sisters were older, they were not. [Like today, they needed a sponsor.] I don't think that much has changed. You still have to assure that you have a place for them to live; that you have a job.

[My family has stories about arriving in the United States]—how hard it was, especially for my mother. She was traveling by herself, with four kids. To arrive by ship back then was, I want to say, a good two weeks to get here. We came on the *Leonardo da Vinci*. There was another ship called the *Raphaela*, which was the twin ship. One was named after a man, and one after a woman. They were like little cruise lines.



ONE OF THE FEW PHOTOS of the Percontinos in their Hoboken apartment to survive Hurricane Sandy. Luigi stands behind Carmine and their mother, Rosa; sisters Rosa and Connie stand to the right. "There's so many Luigis in my family, so many Matteos, and so many Rosas, because they all took the first names of the grandmothers and grandfathers," Carmine explains. "The four dominant names of my parents are Luigi, Matteo (Matthew), Connie (Concetta), and Rosa. I should have been a Matthew, but because I was born on July 16th, the saints superseded. So, no more Matthews. That was it."

But when we got here, my mother's family—a lot of them were already here. [My grandfather had died, but] my grandmother was here with all my mother's sisters, who came before her, and had everything set up.

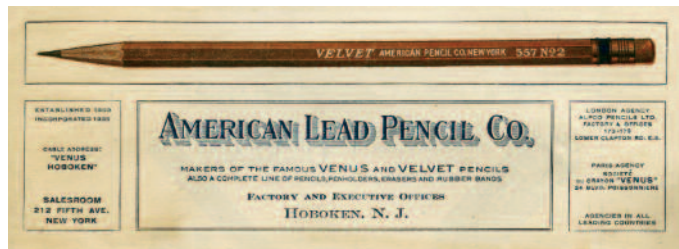
The first place we lived was at Seventh and Willow: 708 and 710, 712 and 714—those buildings were completely occupied by every one of my townspeople, I want to say. We literally inhabited those two buildings [four addresses], all the floors. We all had big families. Six kids, some people had. And the apartments—they were decent-sized apartments in that building, but still—for five, six people living together, it was really tough. But we made do. [I always had a lot of other kids to play with.] Always. The same friends I grew up with—still, today, we hang out, we still talk, and we're still close.

## MAKING HOBOKEN “LIKE A PIECE OF THEIR TOWN IN ITALY”

For my people, from my town, there was a huge number who came here. I think anybody who knew anybody said, “Hey, come here, because it’s good. We can do something here.” The first of us who came—from what I’ve been told, from other ancestors—it was the first town they settled in. [They’d] wanted to settle in Brooklyn; Brooklyn never took. The majority stayed here. Because even back then, [there] was easy transport to New York. Anybody who wanted to [could go in, to work in] New York. But there were so many factories here in Hoboken. You had Tootsie Roll, you had the pencil factory, you had United Testing. I could go on and on and on.



*A gathering at Seventh and Willow Avenue, Hoboken, ca. 1970. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, BACK ROW: Rosa, Luigi, and Matteo Percontino; Antonietta Aluotto, Francesca Ruzzi, Rosa Romano, Connie and Rosa Percontino. Front row: Rosina Cardillo, Angelina and Luigi Percontino, Guisepppe Cardillo, Nicola Percontino, Pietro Romano, Rosa Percontino, Concetta Cammarano. This photo, like several others included in this chapbook, was retrieved from Carmine’s flooded basement after Hurricane Sandy hit Hoboken in October 2009.*



*Letterhead of the American Lead Pencil Co., Hoboken, N.J., 1928. From the collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.*



*San Giacomo gathering in Hoboken, probably behind the Monte San Giacomo Club, with tables set up on the bocce court, ca. 1940. Courtesy of the Monte San Giacomo Club.*



*The building of St. Ann's Church in Hoboken, 1926. From the collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.*

And they'd come from a small town. *This* was a small town. They just kind of knew they could be more dominant for themselves, here. They got used to that. They just couldn't get used to the fact of being in such a big mix. I think it just brought them closer together, and it was easier. They weren't so apart from each other. They stayed in the same building, in the same neighborhood: Willow Avenue, Grand Street, Jefferson Street.

So anybody that kind of settled, started buying properties. The ancestors who came here tried to make Hoboken like a piece of their town in Italy. They bought Seventh and Jefferson, where St. Ann's church stands today. I was told it was some kind of a candy store. They bought the land, and they started St. Ann's Church; that's where they held services. Then they donated it to the diocese, and the diocese helped them build [the church building you see today].



*A procession in Monte San Giacomo, Italy, part of a celebration of St. Ann and St. Giacomo, ca. 1930s. St. Ann's Feast in Hoboken, including the church parishioners' procession through the city's streets, arises from this tradition.*

It was built in the same form as our church in Italy. St. Ann's church sits on the highest point in my town. There are [maybe] seventy steps to go up there. It's a lot smaller than this church. The altar is identical [in appearance], except [here] it's much bigger. The way the saints sit inside the little nooks—the niches—is the same. That's what we wanted in return for the land we donated to the diocese. For us, it's our church.

[The parish goes back to the 1900s. The church we have now opened in 1927.] These were people who couldn't scrape two nickels together when they first arrived, but they pretty much got together and did all that.



## LEAVING A SIMPLE LIFE, KEEPING A LANGUAGE

There wasn't an opportunity in Italy for us to advance. So when we had the opportunity, we all came here. I imagine it was the same thing for everybody [who emigrates]. It's the American dream.

When we came here, we wanted to step up right away. We wanted to get more than what we needed, more than what we were used to in Italy. We came from a town that had no running water. There was a lot of stuff that was pretty rural in our town [and it stayed like that through the 1970s].



*Giacomo Pasquale, father of one of Carmine's uncles, in Monte San Giacomo, ca. 1950s. Courtesy of the Monte San Giacomo Club.*

But back then, [in Monte San Giacomo, it was] a simple life. You knew what you had to do every day. You had to go to work, and that was it. You either worked in the fields, or you took the sheep to the meadows to graze.

My father had what they called *massaria*. He had 350 sheep—and it was him, his brother, his father, and his other



*Carmine and his mother, Rosa, ca. 1970s.*

brother—and this is what they did: They made cheese. Back then, it was more of a barter system in Italy. It was, “You give me the sheep’s wool,” and “I’ll give you what you don’t have.” You give me this; I’ll give you that.

[It was a different way of life.] It was incredible. They knew so much. They could tell you what time it was just by looking at the sun. They never needed their watches. They knew when it was time to go home, no matter what month it was. They knew, “Okay, let’s go. We’ve got to get up today.” Or, “We’ve got to get up earlier tomorrow, because we’ve got to come back earlier tomorrow.” It was simple, but they understood everything.

[And] it was rough, too. Sometimes they’d have these little shanties they would build in the mountains, on [their] property, and [they’d have to stay there when they were grazing the sheep], at night, because it was cold. It was very rough.

[But it was hard going from that simple way of life to the one here.] My mother, for the first six months she was here, she cried every day. I can’t imagine. For her, it was hard.

To this day she won’t speak English. She trips and says things, but basically she couldn’t hold a conversation with

you if you tried. We always laugh about it. I think she did it more so we would speak Italian. So we never lost our language.

And I'm grateful, because, because of her I can speak Italian. I don't speak it in the perfect manner, but I took Italian in school. So I can get by. If I speak to a truly educated Italian person, I'll know everything he's saying, and I can kind of fake it. But if I had to speak the true Italian, it's a little difficult for me.

My mother—I'm sure, had she been forced to learn, she would have. But she always had her sisters around ... [and] there was always my siblings and me [to translate for her].



*A gathering on Willow Avenue, ca. 1970. FROM RIGHT TO LEFT, BACK ROW: Cousin Matteo Percontino and brother Luigi, Francesca Rizzi, Antonietta Aluotto, cousin Luigi Percontino. FRONT ROW: Antonietta Cardillo, sister Rosa, cousin Connie Percontino, aunt Cleonice Totaro, cousin Rosa Percontino.*

## “BROTHER COUSINS”

The house I live in at 827 Willow—[I own it now]—we moved in there when I was just about five years old. My uncle had bought it from another uncle of mine. He took it over, and we moved in with him. They kind of looked out for us.

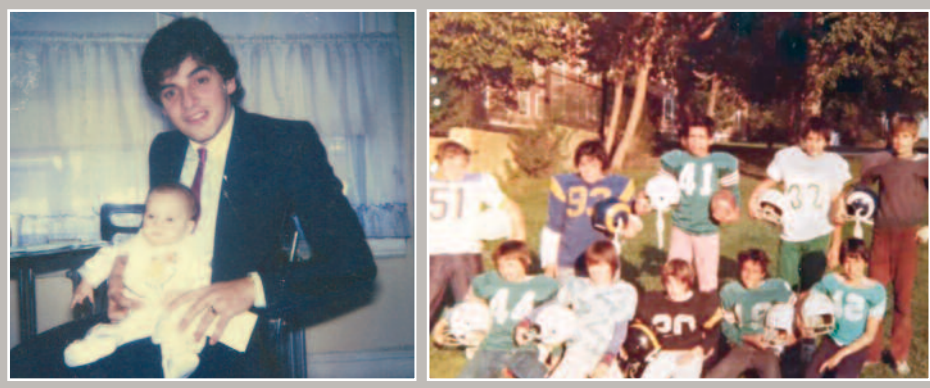
You know, I never really missed having a father because there were so many people to take his place. My mother comes from a family of twelve. My father was [from] a family of nine. Strangely enough, two sisters and a brother married two brothers and a sister, from the same families. This [uncle at 827 Willow] was my father's brother, and his wife was my mother's sister. [Among my cousins, we say] we're not just cousins but “brother cousins”—*fratti cugini*.

We stayed on the top floor: There were like six of us living upstairs: my grandmother, me, my brother, my mother, my two sisters. [My uncle and his family,] they all lived downstairs. They had a very big family, too. They had a family of seven. So we [kids] dominated the whole house. And like I say, it was crazy. It was so much fun.

We never really wanted to be inside. She couldn't keep me in the house. We were always with our friends. Then, as you got a little bit older, girls would come around. You were never home—except for dinner. Every night, we ate together.

[Today, kids' activities are all organized for them.] It's nice to have organized teams and city leagues, but [when we were growing up,] if you couldn't be part of that, hey — you went out and played. You made your own team. We had street teams all the time. There was baseball, football, two-touch, kickball. We made our own fun. Everything we did was like that.

Luckily, if you had good friends, [everyone could play. The cost of equipment wouldn't prevent anyone from playing.]



ABOVE LEFT: *A teenaged Carmine Percontino, ca. 1980*

We had football leagues, and friends [would say], “Carmine doesn’t have... Why don’t we chip in and help him buy a helmet.” That’s the kind of friends [we were]. Who does that?

I have the *paisans*. There’s Mike Rizzo. I slept in the same crib with him. His cousin, Jerry Rizzo. Michael Capuano and Mike’s brother, Peter Capuano. My cousin Nicky Brando, and my cousins Frank Castella and Anthony Castella. Then there were other guys I grew up with in the neighborhood, like Alex Dunn, Leo Genese, Mike DiBari, John Ratto, Mike Finamore, Joe Ratto, Frank Gigante. Mike Belessis, my friend since we were five years old. And younger guys I know from childhood: John Finamore and Mike Castella. So many of them.

You have such fond memories, and such togetherness—from all the years, and all the crazy things we did. Like growing up on the streets, every summer you’d go through different phases, something else. Like one year, we all had go-carts. I’ll never forget. We took the garbage cans, and we’d literally cut the garbage can in half. It looked like the hood of a car, right? And we’d screw it into the boards, and bolt the wheels from the carriages into it.

Some of the silliest games we would play. [One was] a game we always called “Assies.” Everybody threw the ball

LEFT: *Carmine with his childhood friends, Hoboken, ca. 1970s*. TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: *Mike Rizzo, Anthony Feliciano, Alex Dunn, Nicky Cicoletta, Nicky Brando*. BOTTOM ROW: *Mike Belessis, George Cucci, David Carney, Robert Rivera, Carmine Percontino*.

against the wall, they’d call out your name and you’d have to catch the ball. Then you’d do the same thing right after, and you’d call somebody else’s name. So there would be six or seven of you or whatever. The first person who missed the ball three times, well, your ass is up against the wall, and they were throwing shots at you. Everybody would have three shots at your butt, so you didn’t want to lose.

I tell the kids we used to play this thing called “Johnny on the Pony,” and they’re like, “What the hell is that?” And I say, “Well, you line up against the wall, and you have one guy on your team who’s your cushion, and everybody else has to kind of lean forward, over the other guy, and then the other team has to jump on you. And if they get on, and you say ‘Johnny on the Pony—go, one, two, three times,’ they get to go again. So we’d put the tallest guy in the back, give them the biggest hurdle for them to jump over. And one big, fat guy [*laughs*] just crashes into them and knocks him down.” It got so crazy, we would actually compete with other kids’ teams. Stupid, but it was fun. Just the silliest things you did.

We try to all get together [now]. Most of the time we’d all participate. Even in between, four or five of us [would] get together and meet at Houlihan’s, or watch the game here. But once you get married and have kids—obviously I never did, but they all did, so—I’ve got to watch this, I’ve got to watch that. For me it was always easier, but for them it was hard.

[When we would get together,] it was always fun. It was just like being together when you were kids. [We know each other so well.] I know that, to this day, if I ever called anyone for anything, or if they ever called me for anything, we’d be there for one another.

## CRAZY FIGHTERS AND HARD WORKERS

[Did we experience discrimination in Hoboken, as Italians?] No. Personally, I never experienced any of that, because there were so many of us. When I went to school, I had so many friends who were my *paisans*—they weren't even just friends, they were relatives—[I wasn't] even being bullied too much in school. We had crazy fighters in my family. They liked to fight you on the dime. They didn't care. "You touch me, I'll get my cousin after you." "Oh. Okay." They knew who they were, so they would back off.

Again, it was a very small town, and there were so many of us around. I was always extremely shy. I was skinny and I would never fight, because I was afraid to fight. But I got to say, I was always able to talk myself out of stuff.

[So, as for discrimination,] I heard more stories about it from the older guys. People told me stories about the docks, and how it was, and things you did.... People made a living any way they could. If it wasn't law-abiding, it wasn't law-abiding. It was just the way it was. It was a sign of the times back then. Anybody hostile to them, they did what they had to do. A lot of the older guys had probably—I shouldn't say *a lot*. There were a few you heard about. It was like, "Hey, pick up the box and leave it over there."

And then there's the flipside. There's the hard-working class of Italians. That's the majority of it. My whole family, we sacrificed so much. To this day, we still have that same work ethic. That's, unfortunately, not told enough.

## WORKING IN HOBOKEN: ROSA

[My mother was like many of the women who came here from Monte San Giacomo]—most didn't really have an education. Like I said, they didn't have any special trades. [But] some of them, [including my mother], learned to sew. That's what they did: They were seamstresses.

For men, I think it was the same thing. A lot of them wound up at the coat factory because there was no other work. It was cheap labor, but back then you really didn't need much. When we would go shopping, we would fill a grocery carriage for 30 bucks. That was pretty much her paycheck—\$38.00, I remember. My brother had to chip in [to help the family], carrying bags [at the grocery store]—for a nickel, a dime. Back then, that was money. My mother got paid maybe \$2.00 an hour. Not even. Maybe like a dollar. [The factory was not unionized]—not then, no. I think they started the union later on.

[And there wasn't always work.] I remember going to unemployment with my mother when I was nine years old, to translate for her. "You have to come."

Back then, too, they used to have so many languages [in Hoboken]. Now it's only English and Spanish. When I used to go to the unemployment office, there was Croatian, English, Italian, Spanish, Yugoslavian, German. There were people who only spoke German. It was crazy.

There was always a diversity of nationalities [here]—the Italians from Madison Street to Willow Avenue, and the Irish up on Garden Street, to the Germans up on Washington Street. It was very segregated, even then, but it didn't feel that way. I think it was just who got here first, and stepped up a little bit quicker.



*Contemporary photograph of the old section of Monte San Giacomo.*

OPPOSITE: *Members of the extended Percontino family on a dock in New York, ca. 1966. During the 1960s and early 1970s, Carmine and his family would travel by ship, from the U.S. to Italy, to visit relatives.*

## TRAVELING BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

My [maternal] grandfather came here the first time in 1906. That was the first time he came to the United States, for work, with the idea to just make a little money, go back, buy land in Italy, and raise his family in Italy. I guess that's the way they did things back then. My grandfather on my father's side, he was a little bit more established in Italy. He had land already. That's what it was all about: If you had land, you're good. You work the land, you live.

[After we moved to Hoboken, we would return to Monte San Giacomo] to see family. The first time I went back to Italy after I came here, was 1970. [I was five years old.] We went back on a different ship—on the *Michelangelo*.





Being here for five years and then going back to Italy was like, oh my God, what's—? But we would go back for like three months. My mother would stop working. She would get laid off from the coat factory, and we had from the end of June to early September. So the kids there became your friends. It was like a two-month vacation. You got to know somebody. You really got close.

My brother, at that time, was eighteen, nineteen. He—and my sister—got engaged [to people in Monte San Giacomo], at the same time. You went to that little town—she liked him, he liked her—they called that *ammaciata*—the whisperer. Like, “Hey—my son, your daughter—” There would be whispering in the room, in the living room. But [a match happened] only if they showed an interest in one another—that's how it was, even then.

[When we went to Italy, we would stay in our family home. We still do.] We never did get rid of the house that we were born in. It's in the old town, over 500 years old. [There are not as many people there now, as there once were.] Everybody built bigger houses, more modern houses, at the beginnings of the outskirts of town. But I couldn't back away from the old house.

## A CALENDAR OF TRADITIONS

Easter is a good holiday for us—especially back then, because we'd actually buy live animals. It wouldn't be the first time, when I was like eight years old, that they had a baby goat. It was my pet for like a month. They made me feed it, we would play with it in the back yard, me and my cousins.

But then—on Sunday morning, I hear, “Whah, whah,” I look out the window, and my grandfather has him upside down, tied up, and I'm like, “What are you doing?!” I run downstairs, and “Noooo.” By the time I got downstairs, he was already dead. He did it with a little pocketknife. And in the midst of crying and yelling—he was like, “Ah, shut up. What do you know? Be quiet.”

I'm watching him do these things to this poor animal, and I'll never forget—he stuck this big tube, like a straw, where he cut him, and he blew him up like a balloon. “What're you doing?!” He just peeled him. These guys were masters at doing things with animals. They blew them up so [it] would just fall right off—the fur.

I was like, “What are you doing this for? What are you doing?” Of course, I wouldn't eat him. And I wouldn't eat lamb [either], forever. Now I love it, but—[Laughs.]

I was always skittish with food. I didn't like this and I didn't like that. It's funny how your tastes change as you get older. The smell of tripe—now I can't wait to make it. It's one of those things, how it changes, and how you develop an understanding. I think everybody went through that.

OPPOSITE TOP: *In Monte San Giacomo, Italy, 1974, with unnamed family friends. Members of Carmine's extended family: Second from left, brother-in-law Mike, sister and mother (both named Rosa); Carmine is on the far right.*



*San Giacomese gather in their Hoboken club, ca. 1940s. Carmine believes the photo was taken during the Feast of St. Ann, as the club*

*has a tradition of providing Italian roast beef sandwiches to those who take part in the procession.*

*Carmine's maternal grandmother, Concetta Cammarano, in Hoboken, ca. 1960s.*



Probably my grandfather, the first time he saw an animal killed, was probably the same way. But it was just a common way of life.

[Like] the pig roast—[it's] something that normally you do in December and January in Italy, when you bring the pigs to slaughter. That's when you make the homemade sausage, like the dry sausage and the salamis. In February and March is when they're going to cure correctly, because you can't do it before.

My uncle still makes his homemade sausage, and I buy it. He makes it for the family. We bought forty, fifty, to a hundred pounds, sometimes. A hundred pounds goes a long way. It's a lot of sausage, let me tell you. "Can't I give you some?" On the holidays you slice it up. There's nothing like the taste of homemade sausage. There are so many people who do it, and they all spice it just a little bit differently.

And Christmastime, Christmas Eve—you have to have seven different fish. You had mussels, you had clams. Scallops. And you have to have thirteen different foods, from soup to nuts.

Back then, when you celebrated Christmas, it was like a never-ending party. You started Christmas-Eve-day, and you didn't end it until Christmas night. People slept all over the floor. My grandmother lived with us, so everybody came to her. That's what made it nice.



*A photo of a gathering at 827 Willow Avenue, Hoboken, ca. 1970s, damaged during Hurricane Sandy. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, BACK ROW: Cousin Rosa Percontino, aunt and cousin Rosaria and James Pasquale, cousin Peter Lisa, cousin Joann Pasquale, Carmine, aunt Antoniette Romano. FRONT ROW: Aunts Anna and Maria and grandmother Concetta Cammarano.*

We were never allowed to open up our presents until midnight. We had to come to midnight mass; then we would come home and, literally, the tree was covered in gifts. So it was like crazy, because there were so many of us to get together. Give this, give that. It would take two or three hours to give all the gifts. But you were so excited, you never wanted to sleep. And the older guys, they would sit down and play cards. The ladies would play bingo on the other side.

Hoboken, when I was growing up — people say, "How do you remember that?" I do. I remember things from when I was four years old. It's there. I remember all those houses we lived in—especially at Christmastime, everybody had lights in the windows. No matter how poor you were, you went on any street, and they were all lit up.



## YOU WANNA EAT? YOU GOTTA WORK

You know Torno's Pizzeria [on Ninth Street]? It was opened originally in 1960 by my grandmother's brother-in-law. He didn't want it, because he had another pizzeria, La Scalinata. (That was by the park, on Fourth Street. You actually had to go down steps, and that's why it was called "*la scalinata*.") [So he gave Torno's] to my uncle, Antonio, another brother of my mother. He held onto it [until] my uncle Nicola came—he came in 1966, the year after we did. Right away he needed something to do, and [Antonio] says, "Listen. Why don't you take over the pizzeria?" It's been in our family now forever.

That pizzeria hired everybody. I worked there for I don't know how many years. Even as a little kid, six-seven years old—they'd bring the mussels. The mussels used to come in these big, wet sacks, and the guy used to come with the fish truck. "Okay, you've got to clean the mussels." Argh! They made you work. This is like forever. You wanna eat? You gotta work. Then they'd feed us pizza or whatever we wanted. They would have fed us anyway; it was just the idea that you had to work.

## WORKING IN HOBOKEN: CARMINE

I graduated [high school] in 1982. In 1982, you didn't really need college to get a job. Like a lot of friends of mine at the time—"I'm going to become a cop," "I'm going to become a fireman." I had thought about becoming a police officer; then I said, "No, I'm just not cut out for that. I don't have that personality, to deal with confrontation all the time. I'd have to deal with bad guys."

And I was always a hustler. I always worked on the streets. If it wasn't the little pizzeria, I was doing something else. I was making money. My brother and my two sisters were married by the time I graduated high school, so it was just me and my mother, and I kind of took care of her after that.

My brother got me to Levolor, [the blinds manufacturer, which had a factory in Hoboken on Monroe Street between Eighth and Ninth Streets]. I was maybe nineteen. I started working at Levolor, and they were paying pretty good.

In school, I was an A/B student. I wasn't super-smart, but I got around. So the first time I went to work, the guy was going to put me in packing. You don't need a brain to do that. [But he] saw I was really good at geometry. Then he said, "So, kid, do you want to go to the specialty department?" I was like, "Well, yeah." It was all about shapes, shaped blinds, circular blinds—the arts department, specialty shades. We did all kinds of shapes, different kinds of metal blinds, and the more you produced, the more you got paid. It was good. The company was a great company to work for.

And it had a creative aspect to it. That's what kept me more interested. If I had taken a job packing blinds, I probably would have been bored out of my mind.

So from there I learned how to do blinds. I learned a trade, and people were asking me, "Carmine, can you get me

a set of blinds?” They would allow you to sell a certain amount from the company, and every time I would take the opportunity. I made a lot of money doing this.

Then the company closed down, so now what do you do? I did a couple of other things. [But I realized] I can't work for anybody else. I've got to do something for myself. So I went into the blinds business, [on Seventh and Willow Avenue].



*A presepio made by Carmine's Uncle Vinny in his home on Bloomfield Street, Hoboken, date unknown. Presepi are commonly installed under the Christmas tree.*

## BUILDING A *Presepio* IN HOBOKEN

The way I got started in all this—when I was a little kid I would go to my uncle's house, and I was always fascinated by the way they did the little things. Everybody had the *presepio*, the Christ, the baby, and it was just such a big tradition around town. So just from loving the way they would do it—they were kind of like toys when I was a kid. “Look at the little sheep!” You wanted to play with them.

But the meaning was always there. They were always, “Hey, don't play—that's not a toy.” And no matter whose house I went to, whether it would be one uncle or another uncle, [they would have a *presepio*]. They all did it nice, but [my brother-in-law's father, Angelo Accetta], he would just have paper bags, and he would make these mountains, just like that. I was like, “How did you do that?” It was fascinating to me. He would go and find moss, and put moss, for grass—really creative. And he says, “Oh, but you know, in Italy—this is what they used to do in Italy. This is nothing.”

So one day I said, “Show me how to do it.” I was maybe twelve, thirteen. I would do what he told me, and I got better and better at it, and more creative about it. I was like, “How can I get that to look like that on top?” Give it more of a path, or a rock, or a rocky feeling. So I tried and that didn't work. When I really got into it, I would put stuff behind it. I would find aluminum things, and just bend it and form it, and it became better—pretty cool.

When I got good at it, I was about seventeen or eighteen. I was getting more involved, and definitely wanted to make a *presepio* and see it in the house. [My mother] made such a fuss. I would make a mess, but it would look great after it was done. [I'd wanted the inside of the *presepio* to look like Monte San Giacomo.] In my town, there is what



*Families viewing Carmine Percontino's presepio at 827 Willow Avenue, Hoboken, January 2016.*

we call “*atafesa*.” It’s like a mountain hillside. That’s what you see. That was the inspiration. I imagine my town being the town inside.

Then I thought, what’s the point? Nobody even sees it. Only the family sees it. So [around 1996-1997,] I came up with this idea, “I’m going to put this outside. I’m going to make this big box—” The first time it was only four feet high and eight feet long. And I made these cardboard brick houses. It took forever.

I started way ahead of time, because I didn’t know how long it was going to take. It’s like trial and error. But from the first time, it came up pretty cool, and everybody was like, “What are you doing in there?” People would walk by, and

finally, it was, “My God, I saw that yesterday, and it didn’t look like that.” Every day there was more progress, more progress. “Boy, what are you doing now?” It kind of made it fun for me—the attention; that people would ask. So many people would compliment it.

There were people who would stop and take pictures of it. Then I’d say, “You know what? I’m going to see if I can get some donations for it.” So I thought about making a sign, I put a podium up, and people started giving food. That was cool. So I got to give to the homeless shelter for a long time.

It stayed that way—four-by-eight—and then I thought, “I’ve got to make it bigger.” It didn’t look deep enough. I thought the length was good, so I kept the eight-foot side, but I made it five and a half foot deep—because the depth is what you need, to put stuff in the front. Then it just stayed there, because it was getting too big for the gate. [*Laughs.*] It covered the whole front.

In the beginning, I would take it apart. I would rip everything out. It was heartbreaking, almost, because every year it came out so nice, and I thought, “Oh, man, I’ve got to destroy this thing?” Literally, I would just have to destroy the whole thing every year—take it apart piece by piece; separate the boxes, everything. Everything. Because I had nowhere to store it.

So once we bought this place [the building where I had the blinds business], I thought, “Carmine, you can store that thing in the back.” By that time, let me tell you, my knees were shot. It didn’t feel like too much in the beginning. When I was younger, in my early thirties, even, it was okay. But man, by the time I hit the forties, I was like, “Oh, man, my knees are killing me. I can’t stay in here anymore.” It was

getting really hard to do. Because you're literally on your knees for hours [working inside the box]. Even today, I'm like, "Oh, man [what I'm doing], for this thing!" But it was just like a self-sacrifice. You wanted to do it. People looked forward to it every year.

Then I did it, but I just [changed little things]. Every year, if something needed to be fixed, I fixed it. If something needed to be changed, I changed it. All those little trees have to come out every year; all that stuff has to be done—like the water pond. If it isn't good, because you mess it up, you re-do it. If I wanted to, I would add a character here and another character there, making a little house there because now it needed something else.

Then one year I said, "Oh, I want to make a different one," so I put the one with the train—you remember the train that used to go around? I put that one on top of [the first one]. But that one got a little bit messed up with Sandy [and the flooding from that storm]. I kind of fixed it last year, but I didn't have the time to put it out. And for a long time, unfortunately, after my brother passed, in 2008, it really wasn't out there—because my mother—she didn't feel that festive, so I didn't want to do that.

But then things get better. I made three or four little ones. I started doing things for other people. My uncle said, "Oh, Carmine, this is so beautiful. Can you make a small one for me?" That one was kind of destroyed, too, [in the storm. I made him another one.] I made it different than it originally was. It wasn't that I didn't like it; it was like, "Eh, I can do better." He came in here the other day, and he was like, "Oh, my God, it's so beautiful!" [He lives] in Moonachie. He puts it out there. And people there love it, and he's so happy.

[*Points to another presepio in his workshop.*] Now this one here, I used to put at 1032 Park Avenue, in the gate, and the pane of glass that goes over it this way, so you can look right into it. I wanted to make a waterfront scene, like Hoboken, so I put all the rocks in. It took forever to glue all these rocks in. I'll have to do it again, now. It's going to look real nice when it's all done again.

[Have they ever been vandalized?] Never. You know, that was always one of the things I worried about, actually. But I think because of the religious meaning of it.... It was never, ever, ever touched. People make stupid comments, like, "there's a swimming pool"—it's a lake—[*laughs*], but it's just kind of like people don't get it, they don't know it, or they don't even understand what it is. For the most part, everybody knows. Everybody understands what the meaning of it is.

My mother says, "Oh, tonight I was worried, there is so much noise outside, I thought somebody was doing something." But [the drunk people] they'll just sit there and stare at it.

It's so obvious that so much work has gone into it. And the kids are funny. It happens quite a few times—there was this kid one time, "Oh, mommy, I wish I was small." So she says, "But you *are* small." She goes, "No, I want to be little, so I can go inside that."

It was fun. There are a couple of families on the block—this one kid, Nicky—he's grown up now. He's thirty-something years old, maybe close to thirty. When he was a little kid, they came out one day, and he goes, "Can I put these little animals in there?" So he gave me this pig and [another animal, and] I put them in. They're still there, today.

## COOKING FOR THE MONTE SAN GIACOMO CLUB

[We had our club] at Fourth and Jefferson. That's where the first club was formed, [in the 1900s]—the Monte San Giacomo Club. They took the name of the town. That's where they would gather, all the men. [And we still do, today at 531 Adams Street. Now, at the club,] I cook every Monday night. Monday night football season.

[Did someone teach me how to cook?] You just watch over the years, dabbling and doing things. Most of the guys in my family can pretty much cook. My brother-in-law Mike doesn't, but my one brother-in-law, Ralph, is a really good cook.

I don't think it's really traditional [for men to cook]. I just think it's that you have a taste for cooking—you need to like it. And I like that people like my food. And it's good. People have a good time, you have a good time doing it. Cooking is a lot of fun. I never believed that, when I was younger. But when I got into my late twenties and early thirties, I thought this was pretty cool that I could make a sauce. [And food...] It's love, I think. [There are so many memories around food. In Hoboken,] the guy would come with his little red van (I remember this like it was yesterday), and he'd be yelling, "Tripe!" I remember it from the '70s into the '80s. But I tell you, the guy would literally wrap stuff up on newspaper for you, and that's how you took it home. It was liver, it was a heart, the lungs, and the stomach. Tripe. Now it's like a delicacy. Some places, they don't even want to sell it to you anymore. But we still do it. We still get it from the farm, if we want it. We called it *sufrito*. *Sufrito* was the heart, the lungs, and the liver. When I was a kid, of course, I couldn't stand liver. I couldn't stand the smell of it. And tripe! But now, as a matter of fact, I'm going to make tripe for the club.



*Members of the Monte San Giacomo Club, 531 Adams Street, Hoboken, ca. 2000. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, BACK ROW: Michele Casetta, Michele Fiorino, Vincenzo Pesola, Demenico Pizzo, Franco Pasquale, Frank Spina, Patrick Bartole, Mike Rizzo, Angelo Accetta, Frank Castella, Mike Spina, Giuseppe Cardillo, Raffaele Accetta, Domenic Lisa, Carmine Percontino, Peter Lisa. FRONT ROW: Joe Sari, Raffaele Lisa, Tony Pasquale, Frank Spina, Frank Castella, Jr. Photo by Robert Foster.*

[The food our families ate,] it's more peasant food. [It used to be] only the poor people ate polenta. It was cheap. It's the corn meal. You just made it into a big bowl, and everybody ate from the same dish. [And now, it's] a delicacy! So many things—when I first started going out, when I was sixteen, seventeen, I said to my mother, “We had potato skins.” And she said, “You had *what?* *Potato skins?* That's what you feed the pigs.” [*Laughs.*] She said, “You people are crazy.”



*Angelo Accetta making polenta at the Monte San Giacomo Club, ca. 2014. Angelo taught Carmine how to build a presepio and to make wine. Photo courtesy of the Monte San Giacomo Club.*

## HOMEMADE WINE AND STORIES

[Do we make wine, too?] Me, my brother, and my brother-in-law, we used to make wine all the time. We used to do it in Jersey City, because he had a big garage. We used to make a lot of wine! My brother and I would make about 600 liters, alone. My brother-in-law's father [Angelo Accetta], who taught me how to do [the *presepio*], he also taught me to make wine. He just passed, not too long ago, in May. He is sorely missed.

He was such a great guy, like the life of the party. [Whenever you got together, he was] someone who was so much fun to be around. And he was still strong for his age. He'd grab your hand and squeeze it, and he'd break it.

He always used to tell me stories about [how he] and my dad used to hang out when they were young. They'd chop wood together. They used to call them “the two beasts,” because no one could chop wood faster than the two of them. He always told me stories. Back then what they did for fun—they'd come home and somebody would start playing music, and they go on and sing. That's what they did. People would give them food. There were so many parties in my house! Oh my God, the stories that they told. Beautiful, beautiful stories. I would like to go back in time, and see what their life was really like, and experience it.

## The Hoboken Oral History Project

“Vanishing Hoboken,” an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Hoboken Historical Museum and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to 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; 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, in which 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 Oral History Project transcribed and edited several oral histories to produce a series of “Vanishing Hoboken” chapbooks. Since 2002, twenty-

eight chapbooks—including this one—have been published, 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 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

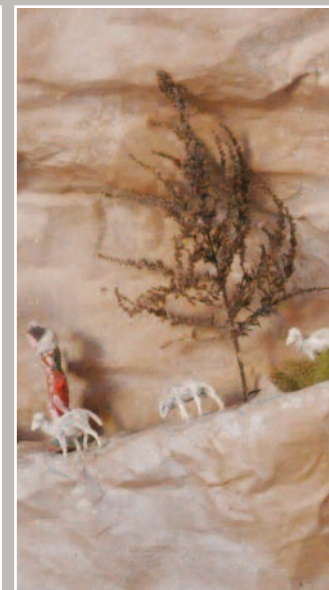
...small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapman, in Western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and 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.



*From December 2015 to January 2016, with support from Angela Pepe, Luigi Stefano, and Billy Kron, Carmine Percontino designed and built a new presepio in the walkway adjoining the Hoboken Historical Museum. In prior years he has installed presepi with the assistance of his cousins Matteo Cammarano and Frank Romano, and friends Frank Fasanella, Martino Sessa, and Raffaele Sessa.*







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

Monte S. Giacomo  
Panorama