

“Remembering the Cottages at India and Hawthorne Streets”

By Jim Bregante



The cottages today

Have you ever noticed seven yellow cottages as you drive west on Hawthorne Street towards the waterfront and the airport, or drive north on India Street? Throughout my youth, those cottages housed a community within the larger community of Little Italy.

These little houses became the first residence for many newly married fishermen and their wives as they journeyed to raising families and preparing for their eventual move into larger homes. The cottages kept them in close proximity to their work place near the waterfront. My mother called the cottages the “Honeymoon Cottages.”

The residents shared a common thread of camaraderie, bonding them throughout their lives. This close knit group of families had grown up as children in the Italian Community, attended school together, worshipped at Our Lady of the Rosary Church, and shared life experiences.

My Grandfather, Gerolamo Bregante, contracted to have the little houses built in 1922 shortly before he left to visit his home town of Riva Trigoso, Italy. He built those houses with the intention that someday his children would be living in them. His first child to live in one of the houses was my Aunt Katherine Bregante Stagnaro and Uncle Steve Stagnaro. Next came my parents, James and Angelina Ghio Bregante. Then my Aunt Edna Bregante Zuanich and Uncle Paul Zuanich moved into the corner house at India and Hawthorne. Uncle John Bregante also lived in the corner house. My Uncle Fortunato Ghio and Aunt

Laura Vinole Ghio lived in one of the houses on Hawthorne. Yes, my Grandfather Gerolamo had the very Italian trait of looking out for his children.



My Grandfather Gerolamo Bregante and me, 1937

The houses were comfortable, one story dwellings, surrounding a courtyard containing clothes lines (more about that later.) The houses had a very comfortable floor plan. They were 600 square feet with a living room, dining room, two bedrooms, bathroom, and kitchen and laundry room. As a child, I thought the home was quite large. A kerosene stove, electric heater, and the oven in the kitchen were used to heat the house. Thank God we survived those questionable practices.

My parents took care of the property. Dad painted the houses as tenants moved out and maintained the lawns. I mowed the lawns in time. That chore was fun, and I enjoyed meeting and visiting with people while mowing and watering the lawns.

Dad did not enjoy wash days. As women began to iron their clothes in the evening, the electrical circuits would overload, and fuses would blow out. Dad was not too happy tending to that chore of changing fuses. In time, the electrical circuits were upgraded.

The camaraderie and bonding of the tenants cannot be over-emphasized. With most of the residents being fishermen, there was always an absence of men. That provided the opportunity for deep bonding among the women.

There would always be the aroma of some terrific Italian food being prepared. All of the ladies were excellent cooks and they would share their specialties, especially during the holiday season. Tillie Balestrieri provided us with her special Easter Bread. She came to our kitchen door and said, "Angie, Buona Pasqua, enjoy this bread." The bread was shaped in a ring with colored hard boiled eggs imbedded in it. What a treat!

The residents could hear each other's short wave radios reporting news from the fishing boats at sea. They would listen while their husbands communicated amongst themselves. The ladies provided support for each other when the news was grim or in times of need. Social activities would increase as fishermen returned home from weeks at sea. I remember the fishermen hanging fish eggs and abalone on the clothes lines to dry. This was similar to curing beef jerky.

The courtyard provided an opportunity for a natural gathering area where people visited, laughed, had fun and enjoyed each other's company. The courtyard became the focal point of this little community and a playground for the very young children. Children's birthday parties were celebrated in the courtyard.

Hanging clothes was a routine activity providing the opportunity for residents to gather.



"Happy Ladies." L to R - Edna Zuanich, Dolly Zuanich, Mary Howard, Angie Bregante and Tillie Balestrieri, 1950

Each family had their respective day to wash and use the clothes lines. Good old sun-dried sheets and clothes! The residents gained a familiarity with each other's wash. A friend recently shared about the day she was ready to give birth to her first child. She told the doctor upon arrival at Mercy Hospital that perhaps the visit was premature. She said, "If so, I would like to go home because this was my wash day!" The doctor said, "Honey, you're delivering a baby today, not washing clothes."

As a child, I would seldom see men hanging out clothes. Uncle Fortunato would help Aunt Laura hang diapers and clothes, although he felt a little conspicuous. I vaguely recall helping my mother once or twice on her Monday washdays. Times have changed, and there are many good laughs over those wash days.



My Mother Angelina Bregante, 1947

There were many nice neighbors on the periphery of the property. The Lorenzo Canepa family lived behind our house. They had the largest fig tree in the neighborhood. Our bowl of figs was kept full as were many others.

Mrs. Dalfio, a neighbor at the corner of the property had an outdoor earthen oven and baked Italian bread. She would call my Mother, "Angelina, ecco un po' pane" and hand a loaf of bread over the fence. It was the best tasting bread in town!

The Parisi family lived next to us on the north side of the property adjacent to Moorsteen's Furniture Manufacturing. What a blessing to be surrounded by so many wonderful people! Former

residents have stated how warm, friendly, helpful, and secure they felt living in the little houses.

My Uncle Fortunato shared about the day, one of the neighbors burned steaks in the broiler and flames began to rise to the ceiling of the kitchen. Hearing the scream of the neighbor, my Uncle came to the rescue, dousing the fire, removing some overly cooked steaks and saved the day. What a hero! No wonder his sons grew up to be firemen for the City of San Diego.

The advent of television changed the dynamics of the close knit group of residents. While people continued to visit in the courtyard, neighbors spent more time indoors watching their favorite programs. Eventually, some residents purchased clothes dryers and the clothes lines did not receive the activity of the past. The technological advances did not change the warmth of our little community.

I would like to share the names of the families who made this little community such a great place to live. The list begins with my wonderful parents, James and Angelina Ghio Bregante, Steve and Katherine Bregante Stagnaro, Paul and Edna Bregante Zuanich, John Bregante, Fortunato and Laura Vinole Ghio, Andrew and Dolly Canepa Zuanich, Micheal and Gemma Stagnaro, Babe and June Fennel, Jim and Tillie Piranio Balestrieri, Don and Donna Romani, Joe and Mary Adamo Balestrieri, Tom and Jody Bozzo Balestrieri, Frank and Rose Sanfilippo D'Amato, Raymond and Mary Howard, Ross and Elizabeth Gigante, Tom and Evone Corona, Frank and Mae Corona, and Bartolo and Sarah Sardo.

What a blessing to have grown up among such warm families and in a little community within the larger community of Little Italy.

This essay is the second of future articles to be written by Jim Bregante, a native San Diegan, on growing up near the waterfront and Little Italy. He volunteers as a docent at the Maritime Museum of San Diego and on the Board for the Convivio Society for Italian Humanities. Jim narrates a historical journey of the waterfront and vicinity from the 1930s to present via a power point presentation featuring pictures from historical and family archives. These pictures depict his family's start in the fishing industry as well as his experiences on the waterfront and as a child in Little Italy. His presentation is offered as a community service to acquaint audiences with the rich history and romance of our beautiful waterfront and Little Italy. Groups interested in scheduling a presentation can call (888) 485-4825 toll free or e-mail: info@italianhistory.org.