

# Childhood Memories of Little Italy

by Jim Bregante

My memories of childhood play in Little Italy are vivid. My friends and I rode our tricycles around the courtyard of the little cottages at India and Hawthorne Streets. Games like Hide and Seek and Kick the Can could entertain us for hours. The girls living near us joined the boys in playing these games. The girls also spent much of their time jumping ropes.



Our first wheels. L to R - Phil Balestrieri, Jim Bregante, Richard Bregante, and Sal Balestrieri, 1941

It wasn't long before we transitioned from tricycles to scooters and coasters. Scrap wood, old wooden crates, hammer, nails, saw, and old skates provided us materials to fashion our own skate boards called scooters. The scooters were constructed with a 2x4 bottom, containing the front and back wheels of a roller skate which were nailed to the bottom. An upright piece of 2x4 was nailed to the bottom piece and then a handlebar was nailed to the top of the upright piece. A compartment was built to reinforce the bottom and upright pieces of the scooter. This compartment also provided a place to hold bubble gum, cookies and empty soda bottles. The empty soda bottles were returned to the Ivy Street Market for refunds, to purchase more soda. The scooters provided us with transportation all over the neighborhood.

Coasters resembling soap box derby racers were the next rage. They were a little more

sophisticated than the scooters. I searched the trash bins in auto repair shops and junk yards for used roller bearings. The roller bearings would then be mounted on two axles made of wood. The rear axle would be secured to the bed of the coaster and the front axle would be attached so it could swivel and steer the coaster by use of a rope. We needed hills to operate the coasters and there were plenty in the neighborhood as all the side streets sloped to the waterfront. Automobile traffic was light in those days and a playmate would be standing by at the bottom of the hill to give us the all clear signal. Occasionally our lookout waved us off, do to an approaching car and evasive action was taken such as applying the wooden brake, dragging our feet or crashing into a trash barrel. We spent countless hours on the coasters.

One imaginative friend attached a tin can to each side of his front axle and filled the cans with flour. As he coasted down a steep hill, a vapor trail was created by the flour and his friends were cheering him on. Another friend decided to wash and clean his roller bearings with gasoline prior to coasting down Kalmia Street hill, one of the steepest hills in the neighborhood. Needless to say, I witnessed the first run of "Hot Wheels." A spark ignited a fire in the wheels. Never a dull moment in those days!

An empty lot at the corner of Columbia and Hawthorne provided us a great play area, with plenty of dirt available, to dig holes, play marbles, cowboys and fly kites. This was a great place to launch kites. Again, our creativity would be expressed with our homemade kites made from newspapers or tissue paper. Occasionally, I saved enough change to purchase a store model kite. After Christmas, people would burn their Christmas trees in that lot. Wow, how times have changed.



The empty lot. Euphemia Parisi at left and Augie Bregante (standing), 1945

Eventually, I could venture further out to spend many hours at my Cousin Richard Bregante's home on Columbia Street, just a few houses away from the cottages on India Street. Richard had a basketball hoop, horse shoe pit and a front porch where many hours were spent playing cards and board games. Richard's Grandmother's home, next door to him, had an open storage area below the house leading to the cellar. Growing up during WWII, that storage area was a great place to fight war battles. Many imaginary battles were fought by us in the Pacific and European theaters and, of course, we always won the battles. Movies and news reels downtown kept us abreast as to the battles during the war. Again, toy guns and other equipment were crafted from scrap wood.

Automobile traffic was very light in those days so we played many uninterrupted football games on Columbia Street, between Hawthorne and Ivy. I enjoyed playing with the older guys: Tony Bregante, Tom, Cosmo, Mario Busalacchi and Jimmy Nigro. The games could get pretty rough, and I'll never forget on fourth downs the big guys always sent me in to block the kick. Nice guys!

A tackle football game began when a patch of grass was located. Grass provided play areas at the cottages on Hawthorne and India and also in front of Foster and Klieser Sign Company at the corner of India and Juniper. These games usually

included all the kids in our neighborhood. To name a few, Richard Bregante, my brother Augie, Phil and Sal Balestrieri, Jim and Tom Marino, Andy Asaro, Vince Parisi, Raul Martinez, Richard and Alfonso Romero, Mario Di Cola and Nick Ingrande.

Eventually, this same group of friends would venture to Balboa Park to play some real rough tackle games. Many of us at times would limp home. As ten year olds, we began to venture all over San Diego and the Waterfront. Often playing baseball on the west side of the County Operations Center on Harbor Drive. Thanks to Andy Asaro and his movie camera, I now have cherished movies of those baseball games.

Once in a while, kids lived up to the image of "Boys will be boys." One such occasion occurred when a small group of us, who will remain nameless, had a smoking club in a backyard shed. Cigarettes were obtained from undisclosed sources. This smoking came to a screeching halt one day when my father noticed the odor of cigarette smoke on me. My Dad was angry and said, "Children smoking cigarettes is against the law and I'm going to call the Police." I was scared and said, "Don't call and I won't smoke ever again." That ended my smoking venture. Our parents did a great job of keeping us on a straight course. God bless them!

During the latter part of WWII, Cousin Richard, my brother Augie, and I began to build model airplanes in the cellar below Richards's house. This cellar became our club, and dues were collected to purchase model airplane kits. A few planes were built and eventually The Club was disbanded as we grew older.

The kids in the neighborhood kept busy observing the activities of people working. I watched laborers dig trenches in the streets with jack hammers. This was prior to mechanical trenching being perfected. As the workers went home, the kids would jump into the trenches and played war games.

Mooresteen Furniture Manufacturing, on the corner of India and Ivy, kept their windows open so I sat on the window sill and watched the upholsterers tack fabric onto the frames. I watched them fill their mouths with tacks, place their magnetic hammers to their mouth, catch a tack onto

the hammer, and tack the fabric to the furniture. Not a very safe practice.

I spent time watching house moving trucks, move homes onto empty lots in our neighborhood. There were plenty of vacant lots in the area and I don't remember seeing new homes being built from the ground up. What a sight to see a huge house moving down the street with a worker straddling the peak of the roof, moving power lines to clear the house.

I enjoyed watching the older men playing Bocce Ball, an Italian version of lawn bowling, in the empty lot next to what is now the Mona Lisa Restaurant property. The men would yell and cuss as they played. I would go home and tell Mom I learned some new Italian words. Needless to say, I was in big trouble. She said, "James, Don't you ever use those words again." I got the message!

I spent many hours playing at my Grandparents Agostino and Chiara Ghio's home on the corner of Kettner and Hawthorne. Their cellar was full of equipment including a wine press and fishing equipment such as nets, bamboo poles, jigs, cork, weights and other fishing gear. I pulled the nets out to the backyard and tried to sew the nets like my grandfather. I eventually made the right moves with the needle, thanks to my Grandfather, and patched some holes.



Me sewing nets, 1941

My Grandparents Gerolamo and Palmira Bregante lived in a large home on Kettner Boulevard, between Date and Fir Streets. A large

yard and a two-car garage containing tools, ladders and boots that kept me very occupied. The house had a cellar with wine-making equipment such as a vat, grinding machine and a wine press. The cellar also housed a stove and a large table to accommodate family parties.

My Grandfather liked to sit in his leather rocking chair with me sitting on his leg, rocking me to an Italian tune. He loved music in the house so a Victrola was located in the dining room. I climbed onto a chair to open the lid, then placed a record on the turn table, turned the crank to wind it up and put the playing arm onto the record. He had a large collection of Enrico Caruso records that were played a lot. In addition, I had fun with the player piano in the living room. I learned how to change the rolls of music and then pump the foot pedals to make the music. Needless to say, none of that exposure helped with my music skills today.

Our group of friends from India and Columbia Streets played for hours at Washington School playground. This became our home. The facility had an athletic field occupying over half a city block and a gymnasium under the main school building which I used during the days and at night. I played a game called Big League, using the school's back drop. This game helped develop our batting skills by pitching tennis balls at close range. The game usually required three players per team.

I played over the line, baseball, football and paddle ball for countless hours on the school's larger field. My friends and I spent the entire day at the field. The VFW sponsored a baseball team at the playground which traveled to other playgrounds in the vicinity. It was exciting to play at other schools. This type of activity began to sharpen our athletic skills for future challenges.

Washington School produced outstanding baseball players such as Andy Stagnaro and Pete Corona who both went on to play for the University of California at Berkley. The era also produced another outstanding baseball player in Frank Sanfilippo. In later years, another group of outstanding baseball players emerged: Tony Asaro went on to play in the New York Yankee organization, Pete Gumina went on to play at the University of Oregon and Rudy Venzor signed a professional contract with the San Diego Padres.

While many of us kids played, we also prayed. Some of my friends, and myself included became altar boys at our Lady of the Rosary Church. This phase of our life became a rite of passage. I spent many hours at the church serving at Masses, weddings, funerals and feast days. I relished our first opportunity to give service and it became a good foundation in preparing me to help others. The Church and Washington School had a good rapport and during school days, Altar Boys were dismissed from school in order to serve funeral Masses.

The nuns at the Bayside Social Center prepared us to become altar boys. The second floor of the Social Center contained a Chapel where we practiced. Since the entire Mass was in Latin, the Sisters instructed us in reading Latin. I still remember some of the Latin prayers today.



Altar boys. L to R John Canepa, Angelo Canepa, Jim Bregante, Mario Busalacchi, 1945

Many of my friends provided a service for Washington School by performing the duties of Junior Traffic Patrol. What an honor to be selected for the patrol and to wear the red and white uniform. I learned to march and to control automobile traffic at school intersections. Periodically, all the patrol boys in the city would meet on the front lawn of San Diego High School and then march down B Street to the Fox Theatre for a movie treat. Patrol Boys also attended an annual barbeque at the police pistol range and a free summer camp in the sixth grade. It was a great experience.



Patrol boys, Paul Quinci, Phil Balestrieri, Andy Asaro and two unidentified, 1948

My friends and I enjoyed watching the San Diego Padres of the Pacific Coast League play at Lane Field. Twenty cents would get us into the ballpark during the summer time. If our pockets were empty, American Cleaners at India and Kalmia, a dry cleaning business, would give us free passes for the Padre games. When passes were not available my friends and I would stand outside of the ball park and wait for foul balls and then exchange them for tickets to enter the ball park. There was free admittance after seven innings. That was too long to wait so we sometimes found an opening in the fence that would “allow” admittance. We were very persistent and good Padre Fans.

Eventually, many of us took part-time jobs in the neighborhood selling newspapers, delivering papers, mowing lawns and gathering empty soda bottles for a refund. Anything for a buck!

What a wonderful opportunity to have grown up with such an industrious and creative group of kids. As I reflect on our activities during childhood, I know there was time to sleep, but the awakening hours were full of excitement. What wonderful memories!

This essay is the third of future articles to be written by Jim Bregante, a native San Diegan, on growing up near the waterfront and the Little Italy area. He volunteers as a docent at the Maritime Museum of San Diego and narrates a historical journey of the waterfront and vicinity from the 1930's to the 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](mailto:info@italianhistory.org).