

# Yesterday's Little Italy

By Jim Bregante

All the happiness, wonderful times and warm people could be found in the community of San Diego's Little Italy. This area east of our beautiful waterfront provided a home and an opportunity for the Italian immigrants to pursue their dream of a good life.

Growing up among these families and in the Italian neighborhood was a cherished experience. What a gift to have grown up in such pleasant and simple surroundings among so many warm and friendly people. This lovely community provided residence for the families engaged in the fishing industry, canneries and neighborhood stores providing goods and services to the families.

The Italian community, located in proximity to the waterfront, placed residents close to their work. Fishermen walking to and from the waterfront were a familiar sight. My family lived in the cottages located at the corner of India and Hawthorne streets. Occasionally friends would stop and share the catch of the day with my Mother. The good-hearted fishermen of that era shared their bounty. Living at the corner of India and Hawthorne also provided us with the opportunity to interact with many people on their way to stores on India, Kettner, and State Streets.

The businesses in Little Italy consisted of grocery stores, meat markets, bakeries, drug stores, barber shops, pasta factories and a laundry. Other businesses included dry cleaners, shoe repair shops, a movie theatre, gas stations, auto repair shops and marine hardware stores. A tortilla factory was located on India Street and it is known today as El Indio and, yes, only one restaurant, Ortega's Fine Mexican Food! There was no need for restaurants in those days, when Grandma and Mom were the best cooks in town.

Little Italy was a close knit community. I don't recall ever being introduced to a person until I went to high school and into the work

force. We just knew all the parents and children in the neighborhood. While walking down Kettner, India, Columbia, and State Streets, I encountered people I knew, be it parents or children. The parents always said hello and would ask, "How are your Mama and Daddy?" This was the typical warmth and caring from people who lived in the neighborhood.

I grew up with a wonderful group of friends and developed a life long relationship with them. These fellows and I, who have known each other for over sixty years, meet regularly to break bread and rekindle memories. We refer to this group as "That Old Gang of Mine." Our paths continue to cross while attending weddings, funerals, and other events at Our Lady of the Rosary Church, as well as activities on India Street.

Walking was our mode of transportation as children. We used buses and street cars to get to Roosevelt Junior High School and San Diego High School. Many days we also walked to these two schools. Whether on foot or riding public transportation, we accomplished it with fun and laughter. We walked all over San Diego, from Balboa Park to downtown San Diego, and to the waterfront.

People in the community did not move very far from their families. As an example, my Mother was born on Ivy Street, west of Kettner Boulevard near the railroad tracks. She moved as an eight-year old to a new home on the corner of Kettner and Hawthorne, a total of one block. The next move brought her to the cottages on India and Hawthorne after my parent's marriage, - a block from Mom's first move. The next move was to my parent's new home in Mission Hills. It was my Mother's pride and joy!

Most of my family and relatives lived within a four block area of our community. Grandparents Ghio lived on the corner of Kettner and Hawthorne Streets. Grandparents Bregante

lived on Kettner, two blocks south of Grandparents Ghio. All of my aunts and uncles from both Bregante and Ghio families at one time or another lived in the cottages at India and Hawthorne. In time, all of the aunts and uncles moved to other areas of San Diego.

Family members developed a special relationship by living so close together. I remember on Christmas morning, after opening presents, my Dad and I, and eventually my Brother, "made the rounds" to our grandparent's homes to wish them a Merry Christmas. I enjoyed the trays of cookies on the dining room tables. The grownups would have a Christmas toast with one of their favorite liqueurs. I received a dollar bill. Mom was busy preparing the Christmas luncheon and caught up with visiting friends and relatives in the afternoon.

After visiting grandparents, our walk continued to Dad's Aunt and Uncle Andrea and Susie Castagnola on the corner of Kettner and Juniper. Normally, some of our cousins were present and, of course, the dining table contained platters of delicious Italian cookies. The next stop was on the west side of Kettner and Juniper, to visit a close friend of our family, Clara Zuanich. We returned home after that visit. During the day other friends and relatives would drop by for a visit. In later years, as relatives moved from the area, the Christmas rounds were made in our 1936 Plymouth.

Grocery stores dominated the businesses in Little Italy. Safeway built a store on the corner of India and Laurel Streets. Prior to that, my Mother bought groceries from DeFalco's Grocery store at the corner of India and Date. My Mother shopped often and her vegetables, fruits, bread and meats had to be fresh. She was a great cook.

Quite often my Mother sent me to the store for an item she had missed. This would take me south on India Street, passing stores such as El Indio Tortilla Shop, DeRocco Pasta Factory, the Avalon Movie Theatre, Bay City Drug Store (more on the drug store later), Nick's Shoe Repair, the Roma Inn, San Diego Importing

Goods, Maytag Washing Machine shop, the Busy Bee Market and, finally, DeFalcos. There were stores on the west side of India Street, including Bernardino's Grocery, a meat market and Adamo's Barbershop.

State Street, just two blocks east of India had little mom and pop stores. We patronized the Ivy Street Market on the corner of State and Date Streets. A barbershop owned by Jack Gilbert and his son Matt sat next to the market. Jack the Barber gave me my first haircut and his son Matt gave my son his first haircut.

Just a few feet south on State Street from Hawthorne, the Balestrieri family owned a home and a large garage store front. We called it the Garage Store. As a convenience store, it sold a limited amount of groceries. The Georggin Brothers Market was located on the corner of State and Grape Streets. We referred to it as the Greek Store. The proprietors were great folks and would banter with us kids. West of the Georggin Brothers Market at the corner of Grape and State sat Miss Green's, a tiny convenience store.

The corner store across from Washington School at Union, Albatross and Fir provided us with all the goodies. We called it the Yellow Store. It occupied the entire corner due to the angle of Union and Albatross streets. This convenience store sold candies, sundry items, model airplanes, kites, tops, marbles, comic books, soda and ice cream. The array of candy made it a popular store. Mouth watering licorices, Tootsie Rolls, little wax bottles with juice and jawbreakers were my favorites.

Talking about fun and interesting stores, the Bay City Drug Store at India and Fir was one such place. The drug store had all the typical conveniences of a drug store of the 30s-40s eras. The store sold medicine, candies, magazines, stationary, postage stamps, board games, cameras and much more. I bought my first Kodak Camera there, a Donald Duck camera for \$1.98 which I still have today. I took many pictures of activities at the cottages where I lived. The standard sized films measured two

inches square while the jumbos measured four inches square. I had to pay for the developing so I have lots of the two inch photos. Later on I increased the size as I saved more money for film developing.

The drug store had a long soda fountain with a marble top and stools. They made malts, sundaes, banana splits and great ice cream cones. The ice cream cones sold for a nickel and I liked vanilla the best. Each cone contained a piece of paper in the bottom which read, "You win" or "Try again." I broke the bottom of the cone immediately to see if I won a free ice cream cone.

I remember taking an empty milk bottle to the drugstore to have it filled with a milk shake for my Dad. He was ill and could have only milk shakes for a while. The clerk would fill the bottle and there would be some remaining for me. Great shakes! During the 30s and 40s, the drug store became the hangout for all the neighborhood boys. The boys gathered around a mail box on the corner. My generation did not gather there. We hung out at drive-ins such as Oscar's and Glenn's.

According to my Mother and my Aunt, the girls in the neighborhood avoided the drug store and walked down Columbia or Kettner Boulevard. My Aunt said the boys were respectful but the girls were bashful. The fellows were referred to as "Drug Store Cowboys" by the girls. Over the years, many of the neighborhood girls eventually married those drug store cowboys.

My most traveled streets as a youth became India Street for shopping, Columbia Street to attend services at Our Lady of the Rosary Church and State Street to attend Washington Grammar School. What a warm and upbeat experience to walk those streets. I could smell the aroma of sauces cooking, fish barbecuing, and bread baking in outdoor earthen ovens. Many families in the neighborhood had earthen ovens in their backyards, typical to the type used in their home towns in Italy. I can

attest to the fact that this baking method produced the best bread!

I passed vegetable gardens, heard chickens and ducks, saw lobster traps being built and stored in yards, and fishermen mending nets. Every yard had a fig tree growing. Fishermen cured fish eggs and abalone on the clothes lines. This drying process produced a type of jerky. The fish eggs when cured would be cut fine, mixed with olive oil and vinegar and used in a salad. I called the dried abalone an Italian jaw breaker. It was tough but tasty. A one inch cube piece lasted at least two hours in my mouth.

We lived across the street from a Signal gas station at the west corner of India and Hawthorne streets. A very nice couple, Mr. and Mrs. Simpson, owned the station. They let us kids hangout at the station and when the fuel pumps were empty we were allowed to pump gas into the glass bowl on the pump. The gasoline was gravity fed into the gas tanks of the cars. Gasoline was twenty cents a gallon at that time! I purchased soda from the station for our Sunday dinner and in winter we bought kerosene for our coal oil heater.

I remember the familiar sounds emerging from the neighborhood such as train whistles as they crossed the Hawthorne Street intersection. I lived in the flight path of Lindberg Field and experienced the sound of B-24 Liberators flying over during WWII. Following the war we began to hear the sound of jet aircraft. As I lay in bed at night, I could hear the sounds of taps from the Marine Corp Recruit Depot. With the right atmospheric conditions I could hear the roar of the crowd at Lane Field. I remember the sound of the whistle from the San Diego Gas and Electric Building on Broadway and Kettner. The whistle blew at noon for lunch break, five o'clock for end of shift and at 10:00 PM signaling curfew time. While walking through the residential areas of Little Italy, I could hear the sounds of accordions as children practiced the "Italian" national instrument.

I enjoyed wine season in Little Italy. The fishermen rinsed their barrels and poured the

sediment onto the curb and it flowed to the gutters. There was always an aroma of wine at that stage of preparation. The growers delivered wooden crates containing grapes to the curb of the homes. My friends and I helped ourselves to grapes as we walked down the streets. After the grapes were pressed, the pulp was placed back into the crates and stored curbside for pick-up. At that time every fly in Little Italy would alight onto the pulp. The grower picked up the crates and pulp and used the pulp for mulch in the vineyard. Both of my Grandfathers made their own wine. I vaguely remember the process. I did fill the wine bottle occasionally for my Grandfather Agostino. His barrels didn't have spigots, so I used a siphon hose requiring priming. The priming required me to take a few sips of wine from the hose in order to get the wine to flow through the hose into the bottle. That was a fun task, however, the wine was potent!

Growing up during WWII, I became aware of a serious war effort reflected in the community. I was five years old when the war started and nine at its conclusion. I saw warships in the bay and I witnessed Uncle Fortunato leaving in a convoy heading to Hawaii. My Uncle was in the Navy and stationed aboard a converted tuna boat. Tuna fishermen made ideal crewmen due to their familiarity with the vessels. The government pressed many tuna boats into service during the war. My Grandfather Agostino's boat, the *North America*, was ordered to conduct patrols off the Mexican Coast in early 1942. That duty lasted for three months and then the boat was allowed to return to fishing.

There were military parades on Broadway and scrap metal drives at Horton Plaza. The Bay City Drug Store had photos on display of local boys in military service. Families with service men on duty displayed a silk pendant containing an embossed star in their window, indicating a family member was in the service of our country.

My parents and my Grandfather Agostino entertained many of Uncle Fortunato's buddies and delighted in having those men for dinner

who had recently served on duty with Uncle Fortunato. My Uncle informed his buddies to contact his Sister Angie, at 2119 India, for a good home cooked meal when their ship arrived in San Diego. Mom cooked some great Italian dinners. My Grandfather Agostino was always happy to meet sailors who had recently served with his son. My Mother's cooking became popular among the fleet and sailors arrived at our home who did not serve with my uncle. All were welcomed!

I remember the camouflage netting over Consolidated Vultee Aircraft Manufacturing Plant located north of Laurel Street on Pacific Highway. There was a huge concrete wall protecting the factory along Pacific Highway. Anti-aircraft gun emplacements were located in South Mission Hills as well as Barrage balloons in other parts of the city. Army barracks were built in an empty lot next door to my Aunt Katie and Uncle Steve Stagnaro's home. The barracks housed the soldiers who manned guns across the street. My Aunt Katie cooked a Sunday meal for the soldiers, consisting of pasta and all the trimmings. This act of sharing with our soldiers was typical of that era.

I have never forgotten VJ Day, victory over Japan, in our little community. There was an above average noise level at India and Hawthorne that day, at which time our parents told us the war with Japan had ended. My friends and I knew that the end of the war was an important event because of the exposure we had during the past four years and all the military activity in San Diego. Being spirited kids, we could not be left out of the excitement. I also suspected there would be lots of activity at Horton Plaza that day. A group of us went to the home of Mr. Joe Busalacchi, the air raid warden on the block, and borrowed a portable hand powered foghorn which we mounted onto a wagon. We then pulled the wagon to the center of the intersection of India and Hawthorne and began pumping the foghorn, jumping up and down while cheering. Motorists stopped near us,

honked their horns and cheered with us. It was a great moment!

I periodically walk through the wonderful area that provided me with so many fine memories and prepared me for adulthood. What a blessing to have grown up among such a warm and caring group of people in the community of San Diego's Little Italy.

This essay is the fourth 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 is a Board Member of the Convivio Society for Italian Humanities. He 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).