

Cuccio 816

By Artie Maglionico

I RECENTLY had the honor of speaking with Mr. James J Cuccio. At 97 years of age the lifelong Lodi resident stepped out the borough history book ,wearing a suit and tie, and suddenly there before my eyes the past caught up with the present and the present was better because of it.

James , born on August 21, 1919, comes from a time when the borough of Lodi was comparable to the Roman Empire...a smaller version. The town was surrounded by an imaginary wall and those who dwelled within its borders lived with one another and for one another. Lodi was all they had, all they needed and for the most part all they knew. Seldom did these loyal residents venture too far beyond the reaches of their safe haven if only for the reason that they didn't have to. Their town was a world within a world and if they did leave it wasn't for long and even at that they took Lodi with them. Indeed theirs was on big neighborhood. Everyone knew one another on various levels yet well enough to get invited for a cup of coffee at a moment's notice. Yes folks the borough of Lodi was, in its own way a miniature Roman Empire. It was so protected by that imaginary wall that some say that it had its own weather. Legend has it that it could be raining in Garfield while at the same time be sunny and pleasant in Lodi. It had that kind of uniqueness, that kind of power. The people would not have it any other way.

James J Cuccio remembers those days well and was happy to sit down with your Artful Thinker and talk about the Lodi that was. His Father, Antonio, arrived here from Sicily in 1896 at 14 years old. He married Gennie Gasalbertie, who also arrived here from Sicily in 1896 at 3 years old, in 1913.

" My dad was the supervisor at a sewer company in Hackensack." Recalls James. " He could speak English so they made him Foreman. My Mother was a homemaker." In 1925 James Grand father became a goat farmer who made and sold goat cheese to surrounding communities. " The goats grazed along St Joseph Blvd ." says James " Back then the Ettz family owned a farm that stretched from Hasbrouck Heights to our family home on Boyd Street." Antonio and wife Gennie eventually built a home on Church Street and it was there that James and siblings Frank , Marty, and Santa were born and raised.

James attended Washington school until 7th grade and completed 8th grade at Columbus school in 1934. Principal at that time was Miss Ethel Manfred. "My freshman year oh high school was at Columbus school." Says James " Lodi High school wasn't completed yet. I graduated from Lodi High in 1937." Lodi Highs principal at that time was Mr.Marinus Gallanti who was known for his superb oratory skills. He eventually moved to London England to serve as Dean at a local College. "Mayor Cavallo patterned his speaking performances after Mr. Gallanti "says James.

James's dad began losing his eye sight in 1932 at the age of 43 thus forcing the 13 year old to work as a delivery boy for Oliveri's market which was located at the corner of Main and Arnot streets. " I delivered with a wagon." Remembers James " I made a dollar per week." At 18 James became employed at Calvacca's butcher shop located at the time on Main street between Liberty and Union streets. His wages escalated to five dollars per week.

As did most of the children growing up in the 30s James spent many a Saturday afternoon watching cowboy flicks at the American theater which was owned and operated by the Basile family. James recalls watching movie idols such as Butch Jones, Hoot Gibson and Tom Mix as they thwarted out laws and rescued damsels in distress all for 15 cents.

James was drafted into the Army in 1943. After receiving basic training at Fort Robinson in Little Rock Arkansas he was sent to Springfield Missouri to train as a medical technician. Afterwards it was off to O Reilly Hospital in Denver Co. for schooling in insect control. In mid-1944 James, now with the rank of Sergeant was shipped to Guadal Canal where he and his 11 man outfit became attached to a Marine division. " We administered an antibiotic called Atta brine to ward of malaria ." says James. "We also sprayed the area to kill off any disease carrying mosquitos." In his search for deadly mosquitos James discovered a new stain of the pest which the Army named The " Cucciola" mosquito.

Meanwhile, on June 6,1944 , James' brother Marty was parachuting with the 82nd airborne division under Major General Matthew Ridgeway into the war ravaged Ste –mere Eglise France. There among the German trenches and thick hedge rows Marty administered aid to wounded soldiers until he himself was wounded by an 88mm blast from a German tank. Marty was rescued and brought to safety by fellow soldier Chris Perry who commandeered a jeep under heavy fire and drove him to the nearest aid station.

James was discharged in December of 1945 and opened up a butcher shop in Lyndhurst NJ . In 1947 James married a Wallington girl by the name of Joan Tomczyk. The couple has 3 children...Jimmy, Edward and Joan. In 1949 James became a member of the Lodi Board of Ed. In 1950 he served as a member of council under Mayor Joseph Luna. James, who ran with the Fusion ticket, became Mayor in the early 50s. His affiliations include...Chairman of the Sicilian relief fund, Head start, VFW Commander, President of the Lions Club, and President of the NJ Music and Operator Association.

In 1960 James started a music and vending business and retired in 1987. He and wife Joan, who passed away {deceased}, have 3 grandchildren...Travis Fragala, who passed away in 2004, Mario and Sophia.

" Lodi was a great town to grow up and raise a family in." says MR Cuccio " It remains a marvelous community where different nationalities blend well together and make it the wonderful town that it is. I have great pride in the town of Lodi."