

One Life in Lodi: Charles Vintaloro

by Artie Maglionico (posted November 2012)

At age 92, Lodi's lifelong resident Mr. Charles Vintaloro can reach into his memory bank and withdraw for us the highlights of his meaningful past and of the people he met along the way. All of which played an important role in the play that is his life ...One Life In Lodi.

Charles Vintaloro was born on East Place in Lodi on October 4, 1919. His parents, Thomas and Theresa, arrived in the USA from Sicily at different times during the early 1900s. "My mother came here when she was twelve," says Charles. "My dad arrived with his brother when he was in his late teens. Their families settled in NY which is where they eventually met and got married."

It was in the big city of New York where Charles's brother and sister, Benny and Beatrice, were born. Later, after moving to Jersey City, siblings Albina and Rose were born. In 1917, the growing Vintaloro family made their way to East Place in the prospering town of Lodi NJ. "My grandfather owned the property," says Charles. That's where me and my brother Lou were born."

Charles's father was employed as a barber on Lodi's busy main street. Shortly after Charles was born, the breadwinner left the barber shop and went to work for the United Piece Dye Works. At the time, the UPDW was the largest textile mill in the country and was the source of income to no less than three thousand workers, many of whom were Italian immigrants living in Lodi. "My Mom worked in a cigar factory. Her dad was the foreman."

Charles attended the Wilson Grammar School on Union Street. Like so many other youngsters whose families were caught in the throes of the great depression, Charles was forced to quit school and go to work. "I went to work for my uncle Charles Indelicato as a plumber's helper," recalls Charles. "Sometimes he couldn't afford to pay me and I'd be working for nothing!" Charles admits that his family ate a lot of macaroni during the depression years. A pound of pasta sold for 10 cents and a little had to go a long way especially with seven mouths to feed. "My dad brought home twenty-five bucks a week" remembers Charles. "Eventually we lost our house and the bank rented it back to us for twenty five bucks a month. Bread lines were a common sight in those days and families were going hungry."

As a child, Charles remembers playing baseball in the open fields along Garibaldi Avenue. A boy by the name of George Woody, whose family had a candy store on Union Street, owned the only bat and glove in the neighborhood. "The kid wasn't too talented," recalls Charles. "Since he owned the equipment, we had no recourse but to let him play."

The town of Lodi, back then, had a main street that was surrounded by open fields and lush cow pastures which were even then being sold to the Borough by the local farmers. One such field located on North Main Street was Pop May's Farm which was used as the community picnic ground. Near the center of town along the banks of the Saddle River near Keasler Avenue was the Lodi Park and public pool owned and operated by the Tucci Family. "It was like Palisades Park only smaller," says Charles.

“A guy in a Panama hat used to sell ice cream there. Years later that same guy opened up a store over on North Main Street called Panama’s.”

Admission to the pool was 35 cents which was too expensive for most kids. Charles and his friends saw fit to swim in the Saddle River which was still in its pristine stages. “It wasn’t as much fun as the pool” recalls Charles, “ but the price was right.” Charles says that even during the dark days of the depression he still had his share of good times. “Our Mayor at the time was a stout fellow by the name of Packy Cavallo,” recalls Charles. “He used to give out food and blankets which were paid for out of his own pocket.”

At the age of seventeen. Charles went to work for a piano factory located in New York on West 52nd St. named Hoffman and Peck. At age twenty two , after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Charles was drafted into the Air force. In March of 1942, after a cold and dreary six weeks of basic training at Fort Dix, Charles, he was transferred to Fort Augusta, GA. where he joined the ranks of the 61st Troop Carrier Division. He was later moved to the 434th Troop Division, 71ST Squadron. In the summer of 1943, Charles and his fellow GIs boarded the Queen Mary: destination Europe and WWII. “The Queen Mary , at twenty knots, was too fast for the German subs which at best could do 10,” says Charles. “But this was no pleasure cruise and we were still afraid of getting sunk.”

The 71st landed in Scotland, then took the train into war-ravaged England. No sooner did Charles get settled then he found himself on board a C-47 cargo plane on its way to France delivering much needed gasoline to General Patton’s 3rd Army Tank Division. “We arrived in France two months after the invasion. We stayed well behind enemy lines to protect our war planes. We still felt the earth shake from the never ending impact of the bombs. The cities, both in France and in England, became suddenly unfamiliar to me since they were bombed beyond recognition. I remember getting lost in areas where only moments before I knew like the back of my hand.”

In France, Charles served as a medic in charge of sick call. “There weren’t any war casualties since we were basically out of harm’s way. I did remove shrapnel from a guy’s leg but that was because he hid a few bullets too close to his stove and they blew up.”

Charles remembers the time he saw none other than the famous actor Jimmy Stewart walk into his barracks for a cup of coffee after a bombing mission. “He was a fighter pilot,” says Charles. “ By the time I realized who I was looking at, he was gone.” Three years later on October 18, 1945 Charles was on his way stateside. After a short but anxious stay in Fort Wayne Indiana, Charles was mustered out of the military and on his way home. Once safe at home, he opened up a tailor shop called, appropriately enough, Charles’s Cleaners. During that time, in August of 1945, Charles married Lodi resident Jenny Mandino. Five years later, he sold his business and went to work for Unique Cleaners in Saddle Brook NJ.

“I managed that shop for 30 years. It allowed me to purchase my home on South Main St. in 1951. It was at their Lodi home where Charles and wife Jenny, now deceased, raised daughters Cheryl, Linda and Kathy. Charles has one granddaughter and two great grandsons.

“Lodi was and still is a nice town,” says Charles. “A nice place to live and raise a family.”