

One Life in Lodi

A brief biography of Charles Nucifora

By Artie Maglionico

*This was the first installment of my **One Life in Lodi** series for the Weekly News March 3, 2000. The column was created by then Editor of the News Paper Catherine Brunetti. By the time the Weekly News closed its doors on in June of 2003 this column appeared at least 55 times and dealt mostly with WWII Veterans as is Charles who has since passed away.*

Charles Nucifora was born in New York City on April 25, 1914. His parents, Fred and Theresa, though born in San Frattelo, Sicily, met in the USA in the early 1900s. Fred arrived first in 1902 followed by his then future wife Theresa a year later. The couple married in 1909 and put down roots in East Harlem New York where Fred worked as a laborer for the city. In 1923, with seven children to provide for, Fred and Theresa pulled up stakes and headed west across the Hudson. Their destination was the friendly shores of Lodi New Jersey. "My dad went to work at the United Piece Dye Works," said Charles. "At the time, it was the biggest textile mill in the USA." With four girls and three boys to support, Fred worked many a long and arduous hour while Theresa took care of their James Street home. "I was the oldest of the boys and fourth overall," noted Charles. "My parents made sure that we were all taken care of."

Charles entered the Lodi school system as a 5 year old and graduated from Columbus School on Westervelt Place in June of 1929. "Lodi during my childhood was cozy little borough," recalled Charles. "The neighborhoods were friendly and the people were kind and caring." James Street, according to Charles, boasted a diverse cultural background which included Irish, Italian, Polish and Dutch. "Lodi was a close knit community," Charles remarked. "We were always there for one another."

In 1927, Charles founded the Grove Street Athletic and Civic Club. Similar to today's Boys and Girls Club, the Grove street facility offered neighborhood kids a chance to compete in organized sports i.e. football, baseball and basketball. The building, located on the corner of Grove and James Street, was donated by local business owner Earnest Fogge and served as a meeting place where residents discussed their problems and concerns with club officers. "We basically watched out for each other" said Charles. "We made sure that everyone was being kept out of trouble."

The Club thrived until the start of WWII when many of Lodi's young and able bodied men were called to service. By then Charles was finishing up a nine year run as president of the Second Ward Democratic Club. He had to make an early exit after being drafted into the Navy in 1943. "I was 30 years old with a child" explained Charles. "Most of the other guys were still in their teens."

On August 11, 1943, Charles said farewell to his loved ones and left for Newport, Rhode Island and the rigors of boot camp where he trained as an electricians mate. Afterwards Charles was assigned to the newly commissioned Carrier, the USS Hancock, upon which he served as an EM 3RD Class for the duration of the war. It was on board the mighty Carrier that Charles met fellow Lodian, 18 year old Tom

Turpak. "Being 12 years his senior, I sort of took him under my wing," recalled Charles. "I knew his family and used to caddy for his older brother." Tom and Charles spent much of their off duty hours talking about life back home and of the loved ones who were waiting there for their safe return. Those dreams were suddenly shattered when a Japanese Kamikaze pilot crashed his plane onto the flight deck, killing Tom Turpak along with other members of the crew who happened to be top side on that fateful day. Charles had, only moments before, finished his watch and was on his way below decks when he heard the explosion. "I heard the plane hit and ran up to find the entire area consumed by fire and smoke," said Charles. "I think of Tom till this day ."

Charles was discharged from the Navy on November 14, 1945. He returned from battle with the following honor: Navy-Unit Commendation, American Defense Medal, American Area Medal, and Asian Pacific Medal with seven stars, the Philippine Liberation Medal with two stars, the WWII Victory Award and the Good Conduct Medal.

Charles Nucifora remains a vital part of his community and has been married to his dream girl Frances Nicosia for 60 marvelous years. "We were married on December 10, 1939," boasted Charles. "We have two sons, one daughter and four loving grandchildren." After the war, Charles went to work for the Liberty Oil Company, where he retired as service manager 43 years later in 1976. Among his affiliations are the Lodi Knights of Columbus, VFW, UNICO and St Joseph Church where for the past 50 years he has served as Minister of Hospitality. Charles was among the Churches first Ushers.

At 86, Charles remained eager to serve both his town and his country at a moment's notice. Both he and Francis exude charm and youthful enthusiasm and are proud to be active members of their community. "The main reason why I'm enjoying such a fulfilling life," said Charles, " is that I married the most wonderful gal in the world."

So...embrace not the history of Lodi, rather the noble citizens who lived it. Charles Nucifora is one such citizen and so, by the way is his best friend Gino Camanini.