

## ***One Life in Lodi Weekly News July 28, 2000***

### ***John W. Di Maria by Artie Maglionico, Lodi Borough Historian***

John W. Di Maria was born in Lodi on August 19, 1913. His parents, Fernando and Antonina, arrived in New York City from Sicily in 1895 and were married two years later in the spring of 1897. Fernando worked as a Laborer while his wife found employment as a seamstress at a nearby clothing manufacturer. In 1908 the Di Maria family; which now included five children... Twin sisters Carmela and Sarah and sons Anthony, Charles and Sal... packed their bags and ventured across the Hudson River and on to the peaceful shores of Lodi, New Jersey. "They moved to 29 Spring Street at first." says John "My dad went to work at the United piece Dye works while mom stayed home and raised the children. "During that time Antonina gave birth to two more children: Joseph who was born in 1910 and John born in 1913. With seven children to care for Ferdinando had no recourse but to seek bigger lodgings. In 1917 he purchased a home at 38 James Street. "Lodi was mostly dirt and cobble stone roads." recalls John. "there was a trolley car that transported residents up and down Arnot Street."

In 1927 John graduated from the Roosevelt Grammar School and immediately began working for his brother Sal who had opened up a business on 28 Main Street called Sal's Sugar Bowl. "It was a family business" remembers John, "a candy store with a pool table in the back room." His childhood friends included Charles Nucifora, Steve Cannizzaro and the Tuscano family. Together they would spend those long summer days playing marbles, stick and sheeny ball, ring a llario and, of course hide and seek. "We had a lot of room to play" recalls John, "We used to manufacture many of our own games."

At 18 years of age, John left the family business to join the work force at the United Piece Dye Works. There he was trained as a textile screen engraver. In 1943 John was drafted into the Armed Forces and served in the US Army as a supply Sergeant at the Woodrow Wilson General Hospital in Virginia. He remained there for the duration of WWII and was discharged in the winter of 1945. Upon returning to Lodi John began his professional career as an insurance agent for Metropolitan Life. He retired in 1978.

In 1948 John married Frances Franco {deceased} and has two daughters; Melinda and Carol. He has 6 grand children by the names of Jason, Erin, Jenny, Ryan, Kara and Brett. John was also married to the late Mary Donatuccio. John's community affiliations include over 67 years of service at St. Joseph's R.C. Church in Lodi as a Minister of Hospitality.

"In the early years I used to sing in the choir with Fran Nicosia and Russ Di Piasa." recalls John. Later he joined the Planning Board for the new church and was instrumental in its construction. John was past president of the Parish Council from 1977 to 1979 and is currently serving as the churches finance officer. In 1981 he and Dan Melfi rebuilt the entire church plaza. Also with the help of Tony Amato he built the new rooms in the rear of the church. "Tony died shortly after its completion" says John.

"He was a dear friend of mine."

John has worked on the St. Joseph Feast Committee since its inception. "Forty years ago Ralph Orsini, under the direction of Father Gabriel, suggested that our committee take over the running of the Feast," says John. "In 1978 we dedicated the Feast to Mr. Orsini." John remembers serving as an usher during the first mass at the new church on December 17, 1976. "The ritual was to have a small flame burning at the altar" says John. "I had a small grill burning at the altar and Father Hector was staring at the ceiling praying that the church wouldn't burn down." John recalls having a wet towel at his side just in case.

John became a member of the AARP Lodi Chapter # 2015 in 1972 and chaired the nominating committee from 1994 to 1995. In 1990 he joined the Senior Citizens Club and is currently serving as the club's president. {printed in 2000} John's earliest recollections of Lodi is a section of town located along Prospect Street once referred to as 'Dutch Hill. "My family was among the first Italians to move into that section," remembers John "at the time it was all Hollanders and it took a while for the two cultures to get to know one another." John remembers their church on Washington Street which was built long before St. Joseph's. "In those days" says John, "Italian families used to have mass at a factory on Main Street owned by the Macrone Family." (Macarones Barber Shop)

John's dedication to the welfare of the community is an inspiration to all who have their place in Lodi history. From helping his mother clean house while she cooked and raised a family, to the building of the monument that houses the bell that once rung in the old church, John's impact on his town will be felt for generations to come.

"All in all, I feel that I've had a pretty good life" says John, "Even though I have had my setbacks, I remained close to my community and am very close to the Seniors... just like the old days.