

# One Life in Lodi: Raffaella Morena

By Artie Maglionico

*Originally printed in the Weekly News on 2-9-2001. It's an in-depth look into Lodi's past and one of my best interviews.*

The exuberance in Raffaella's eyes and the youthfulness of her smile have a calming effect on those around her. One has only to be in her presence for a moment before being drawn to her like a moth to a street light. Light in fact is Raffaella's gift to those Lodi residents who wonder what their town was like when the screen door was always open and there was always enough food on the table for a neighbor who was experiencing difficult times. Readers who are new to our community or are too young to remember the "good old days", can view the past through Raffaella's eyes and in her light find a path into the future.

Her parents , Leonardo Capabianca and Maria Mella, hailed from the village of Greci, Italy. After settling in New York City Leonardo took his family west to the thriving borough of Lodi NJ and took up residence on the hill section of town on a street called Westminster Place. There Raffaella, her brother Michael, and sisters Amby, Sue, Mildred and Josephine were soon woven into the fabric of Lodi. "My grandparents owned a candy store a few doors down from Columbus School," recalls Raffaella. "The children used to buy penny candy."

Raffaella and her family later took up residence in a house located near St. Mary's Cemetery. The house was moved from its original location in the middle of what became Route 46. Years later, the Capabianca home on the corner of Rte. 46 and Westminster Place would be transformed into an animal hospital. "The Stadium wasn't there yet," says Raffaella. "My father used to plant tomatoes there."

Westminster Place was mostly farmland back then with only a scattering of homes located on a hill just west of the Columbus School.

Among the families living there were the Pesentis ,Scibettas ,The Mottorrellas, Cardinales, Sassos, Letos and the Varas. At the base of the hill on Hamilton Avenue, was a neighborhood grocery store which was owned by a Lodi original named Josephine Castellano. "Most of the kids from the hill went to Columbus School," says Raffaella. "Mrs. Manfred, who later became Mrs. Matthews, was our Principal."

Raffaella's parents were employed by the second largest dye mill in the world, Lodi's United Piece Dye works. Because they both worked long hours, Raffaella was often called home from

school to take care of her younger brothers and sisters. "I didn't mind," says Raffaella. "At least it got me out of school."

Among the games played by Lodi girls in the early 1900's was jump rope, hide and seek, patsy and swimming in the Saddle River. "If my mother ever found out I was swimming in the river, she'd have gotten very angry," confides Raffaella. "In those days, it was behave or else."

Childhood friends included Anthony Reffy and the Pesenti girls: Lena, Clara, Louise and Laura. "Millie Polito was my best friend," says Raffaella. "It was a wonderful time to be growing up."

In the hill section, around what was known as the North Pole district in the Arnot street area, lived the families who came from the Italian province of Avellino in the town of Greci di Puglio. Those families were the Capabiancas, the Mellas, Varas, DiMinnos, Puccis, the Di Chiaros, Lombardis, Bonettis, Delres, Foffas, the Tozzis, Grassos, D'Amicos, Sasso's, Di Stefanos, Marinos and the Di Rosas. "At Christmas time we'd all celebrate together," recalls Raffaella.

"Sometimes 40 of us would be at one household."

Raffaella received both her communion and confirmation at St. Joseph Church in Lodi. She remembers shopping at Albano's Meat Market on the corner of Arnot St. and Westervelt Place, as well as at Cottones Pharmacy, D'Anna's Pastry Shop, and Angelo's Chicken Market. The popular restaurants were the Pink Elephant, Barcellona's and Kmetz on Westervelt Place which would later become the North Pole Café owned by the Mastrofilipo family. The Saturday afternoon haunt was the Lodi American Theater where dinner plates were often the door prize. Many were the times, according to Raffaella, when the plates were heard crashing to the floor during a Vilma Banky movie.

At the tender age of sweet 16, Raffaella married a 21 year old immigrant from Greci, Italy by the name of Matt Morena. Matt, who was a boarder at the Capabianca home, arrived in Lodi at the age of 16 after living in Ohio where he worked at a brick yard. He decided to travel east to find a new life. "He worked in a brick yard in Greci as well," says Raffaella. "He wanted to find something other than that in the USA."

The couple eloped one summer night only to wind up back in Ohio. The blushing bride's mom was furious and wouldn't allow her daughter back in the house. "Mike Mella was the mediator," recalls Raffaella. "He talked my mom into letting me back home." The couple were married again by Judge Gallanti and moved back into the house.

The next year, the couple moved to Harrison Avenue where their daughter Marie was born. A few months later, the Morenos moved into a home located at the corner of Arnot Street and Burns Avenue owned by Charles Roosma. Living in adjacent cold water flats were the Santonas,

the Mattolas and the Varas. "We all watched out for one another," says Raffaella. "On Saturday nights we'd hire an accordion player and enjoy good food, wine, and dance.

Raffaella remembers feasting on lambs' head while the children enjoyed homemade pizza and lupine beans which they ate like peanuts. During the day, Mr. Finale came around with a push cart selling lemon ice and roasted chickpeas. A mailman nicknamed "Chick" not only delivered mail twice a day, but he'd also run errands for the people on his route including picking up prescriptions for the sick.

The death of her husband on January 27, 1944, forced Raffaella into becoming sole bread winner for her children Mark and Marie. At first, she worked as a seamstress for a Passaic dress company, until she found permanent work at Dursee's Bakery on Lodi's Main Street.

"Everyone stopped there on their way home from church," says Raffaella. "The Mayor was Packy Cavallo and later Joe Luna."

Rafaella has two children, Marie Edone (age 67) and Mark (age 70). She has 4 grandchildren and as many great grandchildren.

"True, it's not the same Lodi I remember as a young child," says Raffaella. " But it's still the town that I love."