

Growing Up On Westervelt Place

By Art Maglionico (2013)

It seems that the older I get, the more I find myself reminiscing about those carefree, magical days of my youth. Each time I see a bunch of kids playing ball in the street, a rarity nowadays when most kids are locked in front of a computer screen, I am immediately taken back to my days on Westervelt Place. In the small town of Lodi, New Jersey where I grew up, the neighborhood kids spent those long summer days playing hotly contested street games.

After being constantly bombarded with these childhood memories, I decided to give in and pay a visit to the old neighborhood and re-live, if only in my mind, the most treasured period of my life. The moment I mentally set foot on the corner of Arnot Street and Westervelt Place, I felt like I had stepped into a time machine. There I was, a 12 year-old kid, sitting on the stoop in front of the corner store with my pals. We were passing around a 10 cent bag of Wise potato chips that the delivery man gave us, for free no less.

For a kid in those days--I'm talking around 1959 or so-- a dime did not come easy. That's why we were always looking for something for nothing. Sometimes you got lucky. More times than not, you did without. Many were the times when a 10 cent bag of chips had to feed 6 of us not counting Rocco. His family owned the store, and Rocco, no doubt, had his own bag stashed away under the counter or behind the cash register. We never actually saw Rocco with a bag of chips. That's why no one ever grubbed off him. He never grubbed off us either out of consideration: he always played fair.

The unwritten law on free samples was that the kid who did the asking got the most for the taking. That rule, made up by the older kids like my cousin Johnny or Davey "Beans" Whitkowski, was not without its loopholes. If the older kids happened to be around, then everyone got less, including the kid who did the asking. That poor kid might end up with an empty bag for his troubles. Stuff like that was always happening on Westervelt Place. For better or worse, each kid got his share of whatever was being passed around. I don't recall going home feeling cheated, even when I was. For that reason, we all got along well.

Westervelt Place had the bunchiness of a Bronx side street with front steps facing the sidewalk and fenced in gardens. On Sunday mornings, the old Italian men on the block gathered on the corner across from the store. Speaking in their native language, the old timers were always involved in heated conversation. They paused only long enough to say "Good morning," to the women on their way to church, or to take another drag on their stogies.

My grandfather, John Maglionico, lived with his wife Angelina upstairs from my cousins Johnny and his kid brother Anthony, with their parents Armando and Josephine. At least one Sunday morning a month was set aside for a visit from grandfather's friend, Goomba Vincent, better known as "Goombada Vincenzo." Following close behind Vincenzo was his son, the ever smiling Martine. Like his dad, Martin, {Martine if you were speaking in dialect} was never without his cap, his stogie and that ever present

smile which, also like his father, was minus a few teeth. Martine looked 50 but he was probably no more than 30. He reminded me of Curly from the Three Stooges. He had that same round face and bewildered expression. It would shift to blank when someone asked him a question, any question. He never gave you an answer. All you got was a nod, a shrug, and that smile. Martine was content to spend the entire morning sitting on the front steps smiling and chewing on his crooked cigar. He'd be wearing black high-top shoes and gray pants with a thick black belt buckled high and tight over a protruding stomach. Good old Martine. He looked just like his father, which wasn't good.

Two flights up, my grandfather and Vincenzo were meeting head on in a card game. They'd be shooting hand gestures and profanities at each other in Italian, of course. One thing for certain, they weren't playing Go Fish! They'd slam the cards down on the table with the heel of their fists so hard they rattled the Arnot Street manhole cover half a block away. That's when Angelina broke up the game.

Next thing my grandfather and Vincenzo knew, they were sitting on the front steps with Martine, taking aggravated puffs on their cigars. Much to the amazement of Anthony, Johnny and myself, grandfather would put the lit end of his stogie in his mouth. According to Johnny, he did this to get away with smoking in the house, which was forbidden by Angelina. Grandfather would tell her that the stogie wasn't lit. Meanwhile, his tongue was smoldering like a yule log in a toasty fireplace. Grandfather wound up in the backyard enjoying his cigar in peace, with the lit end out.

Now that I look back, I was a pretty lucky kid. I had all of my grandparents within arms' reach. There was always enough love to go around and everyone got their share. Those were magical times and, like all magical things, they eventually disappeared.