HOBOKEN
CIRCUS MAXIMUS AT ALL TIMES



Recollections of

JUDGE CHARLES DEFAZIO, JR.

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THE HOBOKEN
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

VANISHING HOBOKEN

The Hoboken Oral History Project

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The Friends of the Hoboken Public Library
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Hoboken was circus maximus at all times. We always had a circus going in Hoboken. Don't forget, we're a waterfront town. We're only a mile long and square. It's very controllable. And there was always something going on here.

JUDGE CHARLES DEFAZIO, JR.
May 27, 1992

INTRODUCTION

JUDGE CHARLES DEFAZIO, JR. (1905-1996)

Lifelong Hoboken resident Charles DeFazio, Jr. was known as "judge" by many in our mile square city, possibly because he had heard rent control cases in Trenton at one time. Others say he earned the title by reputation, temperament, and longevity. An attorney since 1927, DeFazio helped Hobokenites with advice or low-cost legal assistance for over six decades. He was also deeply involved in civic and political issues for many years, including the famous 1947 defeat of "Boss" Mayor Bernard McFeely by Fred A. DeSapio, the event that initiated the transfer of power in the city from Irish Americans to Italian Americans. In addition to maintaining his own law firm for more than 60 years, Charles DeFazio, Jr. was a past president of the Hudson County Bar Association, former assistant attorney for the City of Hoboken for 25 years, former assistant counsel to Hudson County in the 1960s, an attorney for the Alcohol Beverage Control Board, and member or past president of numerous civic groups including Unico International, Hoboken Elks, and Knights of Columbus. He was actively involved as a friend and confidante in the successful mayoral campaign of reformer Thomas Vezzetti, the self-described "wackiest mayor in America," who died in office in 1988 and who was waked in City Hall.

This chapbook contains quotes from two interviews with Judge

DeFazio—the first on October 25, 1988, at his office at 929 Washington Street, and the second on May 27, 1992, at the former River and Second Street location of the World War I American Expeditionary Forces Memorial, dedicated in 1925 by the Knights of Columbus to honor the three million A.E.F. troops that passed through Hoboken, the port of embarkation/debarkation during World War I. The interviews were conducted by filmmaker Nora Jacobson as background for her 1992 documentary film on the gentrification of Hoboken, *Delivered Vacant*. The interview tapes have been donated to the Hoboken Historical Museum.



1888: THE DEFAZIOS AND THE MALZONES COME TO AMERICA

I was born on December 7, 1905. So that makes me eighty-two and will make me eighty-three on December the seventh coming.

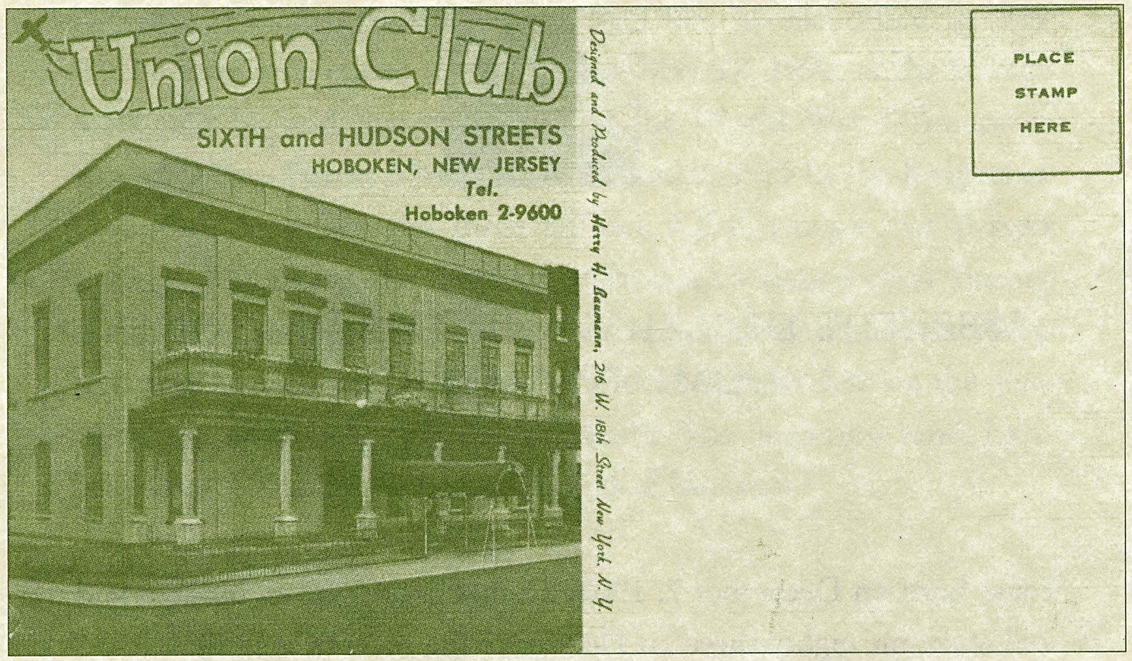
I'm of Italian descent, if you put it that way, but born here. Yeah, I'm the first, I'm the first generation American-born. And now we have two more after me, so we're five generations in Hoboken. My grandfather settled here, DeFazio. And my pop of course. That was in 1888, that's a whole hundred years.

The trickling of Italians started coming in then. They must have heard from their German *paisano* there, their landsman over there, that it was a good town, so they started coming over, in the early eighties, I guess.

Immigrants, in those days, they went right into walk-up apartments. Because the rents were very cheap. They always had relatives and *paisanos*, so called, working as liaisons. And they would get habitation.

My grandfather—both grandfathers—were dock wallops. That was what they called stevedores and dock hands. Grandpa Malzone, that was my mother's father, worked for the New York Central. He settled in Bayonne, and then up to West New York. And I have a load of relatives, very active up in West New York, the Malzone family.

My DeFazio family settled in Hoboken. Directly from the ship?



The Union Club was founded in 1864 as the Deutscher Club von Hoboken social club. The name was changed during World War I.

Jeez, now you've got a good question there. I don't know, they might have come into New York. I know my mother's family settled in New York, down at Mulberry Street, the ghettos and so on and so forth. That's where she had her start.

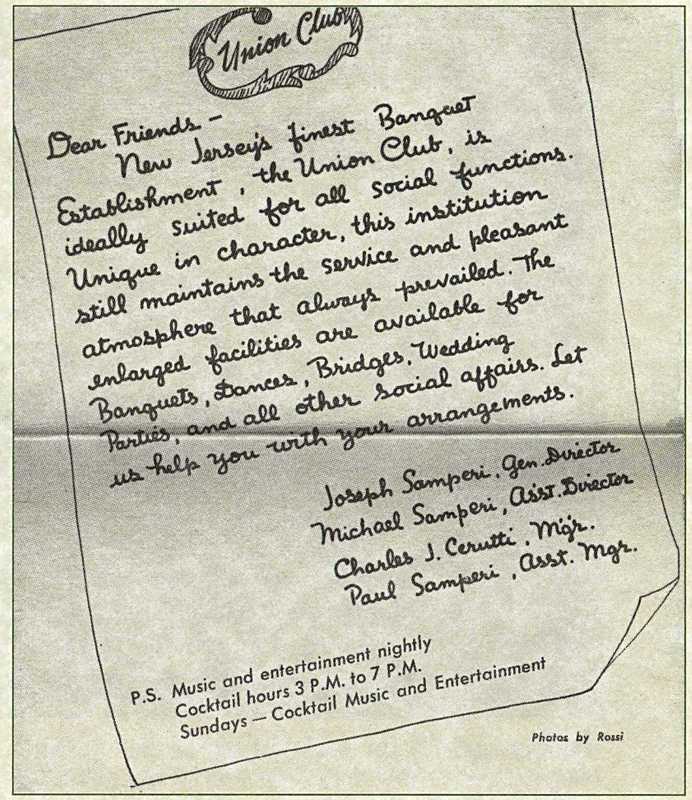
My mother was very brilliant. She had some head. Valedictorian in her class, backed by her sister, who was also valedictorian—the only two Italian-American girls in the whole school. Their school was somewhere along Christopher, maybe Hudson Street.

The immigrants came in on our ships and [some] landed in Hoboken, and were processed from here. There were "immigrant agents" and they put the immigrants in their hotels. One of them was Joseph Samperi, who later on became the owner of the Continental and the big restaurant on Sixth and Hudson, the Union Club, one of our best-catered places in the city. Samperi, translated to good grammatical Italian, it means "Saint Peter."

Anyway, Sampieri was an agent. When they didn't have any housing

to go to, he would arrange to put them in the local hotels, so that at least they might get breathers as to where their ultimate destination was.

He had the good fortune of speaking German besides Italian. He got a lot of German immigrants out of German ships because we had the Hamburg-American Line and the North German Lloyd, where the present Port Authority piers are.


Union Club

Dear Friends –
New Jersey's finest Banquet Establishment, the Union Club, is ideally suited for all social functions. Unique in character, this institution still maintains the service and pleasant atmosphere that always prevailed. The enlarged facilities are available for Banquets, Dances, Bridges, Wedding Parties, and all other social affairs. Let us help you with your arrangements.

Joseph Samperi, Gen. Director
Michael Samperi, Asst. Director
Charles J. Cerutti, Mgr.
Paul Samperi, Asst. Mgr.

P.S. Music and entertainment nightly
Cocktail hours 3 P.M. to 7 P.M.
Sundays — Cocktail Music and Entertainment

Photos by Rossi

Portion of an advertisement for the Union Club, circa 1950s.

Holland America Line was [another] great, great steamship company that brought many people to Hoboken. Especially the Dutch and the Belgians. And the Netherlanders, you know. They all came on the Holland America Line. And others who wanted to purchase a ticket.

My people didn't have the opportunity to make a choice after how they come. They went steerage. In their days they were lucky. Steerage is the equivalent to cattle boats.

ITALIANS AS SECOND CLASS CITIZENS IN A "TOUGH PLACE"

They were maltreated in that they were discriminated against. There was no real quality of life. If you were a friend of the boss, you could



Hamburg-Amerika's ocean liners provided elegant trans-Atlantic accommodations and steerage. Postcard circa 1900.

get anything you wanted. If you were not his friend, and he didn't like you, you're out on a line. No matter which way you turned. And when the time came and he felt up to it, and he thought he had a chance for you, then you could be reckoned with.

I had to fight for everything I had, but I was a fighter. That's how I was able to sustain myself. If you were a fighter, you could live.

Hoboken was a tough place. You couldn't be a Pollyanna and live here. You had to be able to hold your ground. And meet a challenge. You had to be up to it. But you could only go so far because they had the strength, they had the resources, they had the police, the fire department, the majority of favor. So you had to go carefully. See what I mean? If you tried to fight them physically, it was unfair competition. You didn't stand a chance. You know? But nothing like this terrorism we have today. It never came to that, this worldwide terrorism. Bomb throwing and weapons and things like that.

But we were always what you call a lively community. That's why I think a lot of people like the place, because it was always lively. And friendly. Lively and friendly. And people understood one another. People didn't get angry with one another to the extent, you know what I mean, some areas do. You know what I mean. We always had things going, in our community.

IMMIGRANT LIFE BEFORE AND DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Most of the people, the immigrants, were coming over family-wise. I think that was one of the accepted conditions. That was life, that they come over all together. You must remember, in those days, we didn't have any elevatored apartments, we didn't have anything called deluxe. The deluxe part of it would be the one-family houses; they were up in the Silk Stocking district of Castle Point and upper Hudson Street and down maybe to Fourth Street, Saints Peter and Paul's Church.

During World War I, there were at least seventy thousand people here. There was a very terrible housing crisis, but they made it.

I'll give you an example, right in my own family. We lived on Garden Street, I think it was 95 Garden Street. The place was condemned. It was so old and decrepit, the department of public safety, the police department, I think, put a condemnation on it. Said it's too dangerous to live here; you better find other quarters.

So Mom did most of the legwork. Went around looking for apartments—and you couldn't get them! We had four children. [I was the] oldest of the four. They wouldn't take you with children. The First World War was brutal. They wouldn't take you. Because they were profiteering. They were taking all kinds of fancy prices and they were afraid you couldn't match it, young family with four children. Father



World War I troops returning to the Hoboken waterfront.

was a barber and didn't make much money. Made a living, but not much money.

What Daddy had to do, as an alternate, was to buy a house. And who gave him that opportunity, but his customer. One of his customers was a lawyer, Edward Stover, brother to one of our Demarest High School principals. Arthur Stover's brother.

I eventually was put in Stover's office. Through the contacting of my father and Mr. Stover. What my father says to Mr. Stover was: "Keep my son off the streets. You don't have to pay him anything, just keep him off the streets"—inferring that I'd get in with the wrong crowd, you know. That was an example of good parents, they're always interested in the future for their family. I was employed. I think I got a couple of weeks out of it one summer.

Some of those houses would rise to five stories. And a lot of people didn't like to go to the top floor. Nor the next to the top. So that left for a margin of rentabilities, because some people didn't care if they had to climb a mile! The only thing is that they had a good roof and good shelter.

Now, if you didn't measure up and get an apartment, at the time I'm talking to you about, the last resort would be what we called "the flophouse." They'd have some big buildings down near the tunnel, near the PATH, cross the street from there, where those restaurants are. They were what we call "flophouses." For twenty-five cents a

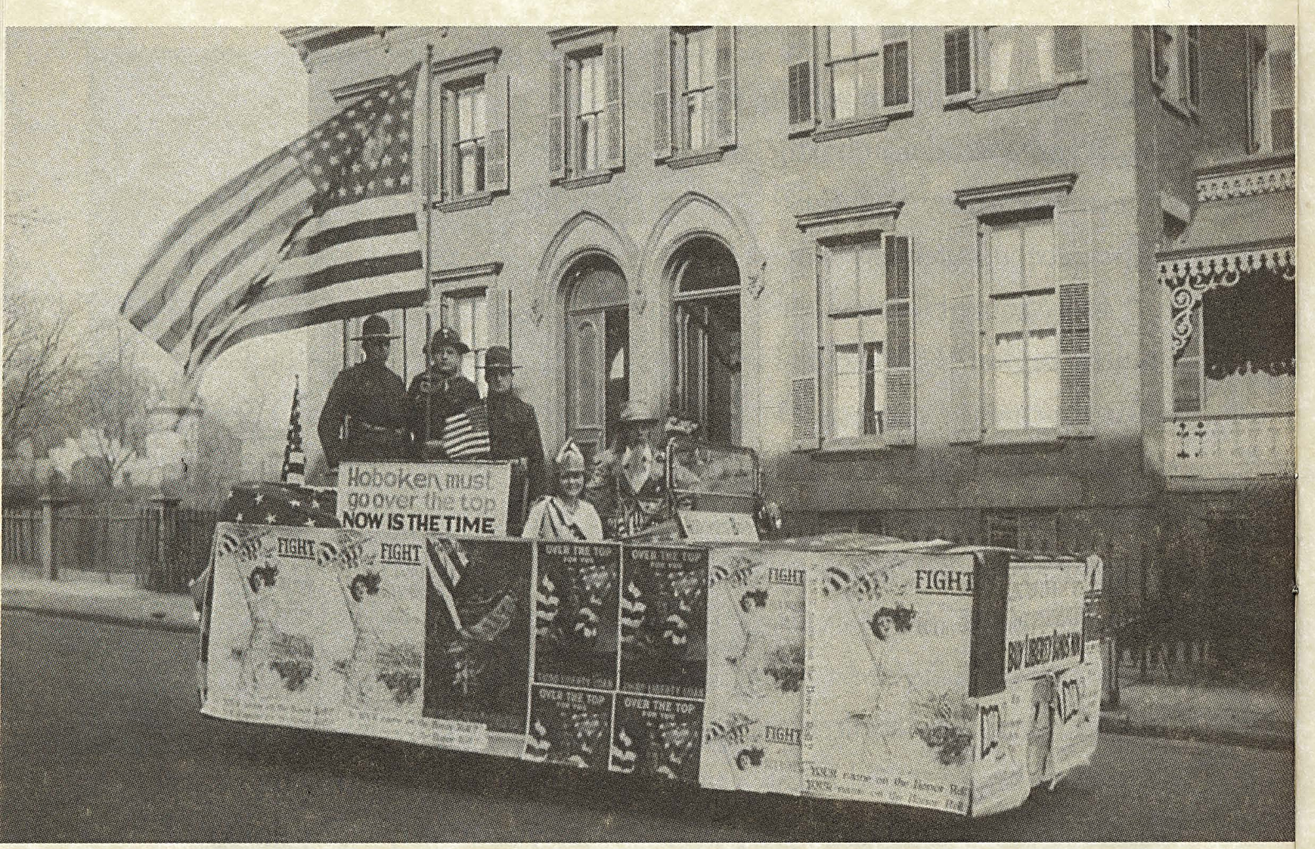
night, you could get a little pen. And on top of this pen, there was built some chicken netting, so they wouldn't steal from one another, I guess. Twenty-five cents a night. We had half-a-dozen of those. They accommodated quite a lot of people.

The Victor Hotel I wouldn't put in that category. I think that was a little higher. The Victor Hotel was like the Madison Hotel, like our former mayor's place, 14th Street. [Hoboken Mayor Thomas Vezzetti had inherited the Madison Hotel after the death of his father.] It was not a flophouse; it was what you might call a modest way of living, but it was kept clean—dependent upon the owners, of course—kept clean and neat. And in there, they would feed you. Like our mayor, used to have about 28 tenants. And he was like the godfather to the whole bunch of them. Saw that they kept well. Well fed, well housed, and many a time, gave them a little shot when they need that, for medicinal purposes. For maybe twenty-eight dollars a week, up to three or four, five years ago.

HOBOKEN: PORT OF EMBARKATION/DEBARKATION IN WORLD WAR ONE

Hoboken was known as one of the Ports of Embarkation and Debarkation. They embarked from here and debarked from here. See? And Hoboken played a big, big part in the First World War. They commissioned St. Mary's Hospital, that's where all of the wounded, the sick, were nursed. Lots of them died there, of course. We went through this whole period of Spanish Influenza epidemic.

We had over a million and a half men, young boys, from all over the nation, that paid the honor to land in our city, via the West Shore banks of the West Shore Railroad. The railroad came down our west bank. That's the division line between Jersey City Heights and Hoboken. That



World War I-era float on Hudson Street with Uncle Sam in the driver's seat.

was a main line that connected to Jersey City depot, which would ship all the way to Chicago. You could come all the way from Chicago and back.

These troops were, you would say, the cream of the youth of America. Probably boys from seventeen on upwards. And they would get off at temporary stoppages down at the West Shore and assemble, then march up our second main street, First Street, and walk from West to the East, because the destination was to get to the waterfront piers.

They'd all line up, the soldiers would parade up First Street and get their greetings and everything. The people were so kind to them and they were so nice to people. And they'd walk up, that's a stretch, that's about 14 blocks, 12 or 14 blocks. All the way up to the river. Get on to the pier site. And that's where they'd enter the ships eventually. That's where the Army transports came into these piers to take

those boys across the ocean to the warfront, in France. And I well remember, it was 1917 or thereabouts.

That gave we youngsters in Hoboken, especially the boys, an opportunity to voluntarily serve these troops. We kids that were high school age. We loved the troops and the troops loved us. And on the counterpart, of course, the Navy. We had a big piece of the Navy that used to come in here. Our transports were all converted from the North German Lloyd and Hamburg-American Line. Those were their piers. They were known as German piers, years ago. And all converted into American boats, then. There was confiscation, because war is war. Everything goes in war. And we used to serve the sailors, too. They'd have knapsacks [which we'd carry and get some money.] Old-fashioned knapsacks. We were an ambitious lot. There were a number that saw the wisdom of putting your time to use.

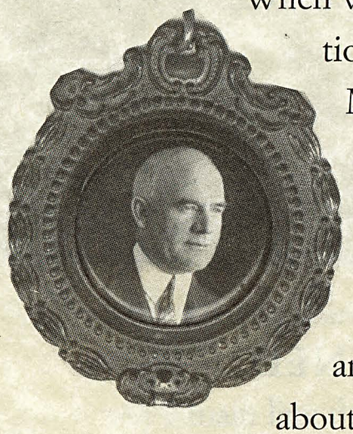
PROHIBITION IN A CITY LINED WITH TAVERNS

We all went through Prohibition. And we didn't go through as saints. Not me—nobody in my family participated in the craft—but I understand, from what I could hear and observe, and come into contact with in my practice, people thought nothing of Prohibition except that it was a nuisance. It wasn't a crime, in violation of the law. Never heard of it. It was a chance, a golden opportunity to make a dollar, and they thought, in their own opinion, it was an honest dollar.

There were raids going on where they were breaking up the barrels, and the equipment and everything. They had to come in once in a while, you know what I mean, to look good. The agents had to come in and make grades. They padlocked a lot of places here. You know what the padlock was? The padlock would go on a place that was raided and it would stay closed for a year. And they would arrest

one person, as [the one] in charge. They never got the proprietor. It was always somebody for a buck and a vacation, willing to be a stand-in, a surrogate. That was it!

MAYOR BERNARD MCFEELY (1930-1947), THE "NEPOTISTIC REPUBLIC," AND THE ELECTION OF MAYOR FRED M. DESAPIO (1947-1953)



When we were out, as reformers, to get a new administration, we couldn't get ten lines against a million for McFeeley, in the local papers, which were—they had no *Reporter* then—the *Jersey Journal* and the *Hudson Dispatch*.

I'm going back to '47 now. The DeSapio administration. DeSapio, Grogan, Fitzpatrick, Mongiello, and Barelli. Oh, we had a beautiful platform. We had about ten planks on it. We felt that there wasn't equal opportunity, to start off with. You just couldn't have a job in the school system or in public life for the asking. There was no, what you call, civil service test. You know? They had no civil service. That's one good thing civil service brought in; anybody can take a test and you can't be excluded! If you're excluded, you've got a cause for action. Right away.

[Our big issue was] patronage. And cronyism. And what's the other one, that's in the family? Nepotism. We had the best nepotistic republic in the country! Mayor McFeely had about eighty relatives on his pad. He had, from the mayor, then came the chief of police, deputy chief of police, lieutenant of police, all the way down the line like that. Superintendent of schools. All McFeelys. And if they didn't bear the name McFeely, they bore the inter-marriage names, and friends.

There was no harmony and there was no quality of life to speak about. Everything had to be done through "the hall." Everything! City Hall. The administration. That's how he ran his organization. Giving favors, favors, favors. You had to go in and see the mayor. Sit down and tell him your sad story, you know. And there were a lot of people who knew how to tell sad stories. I was one who wouldn't tell a sad story.

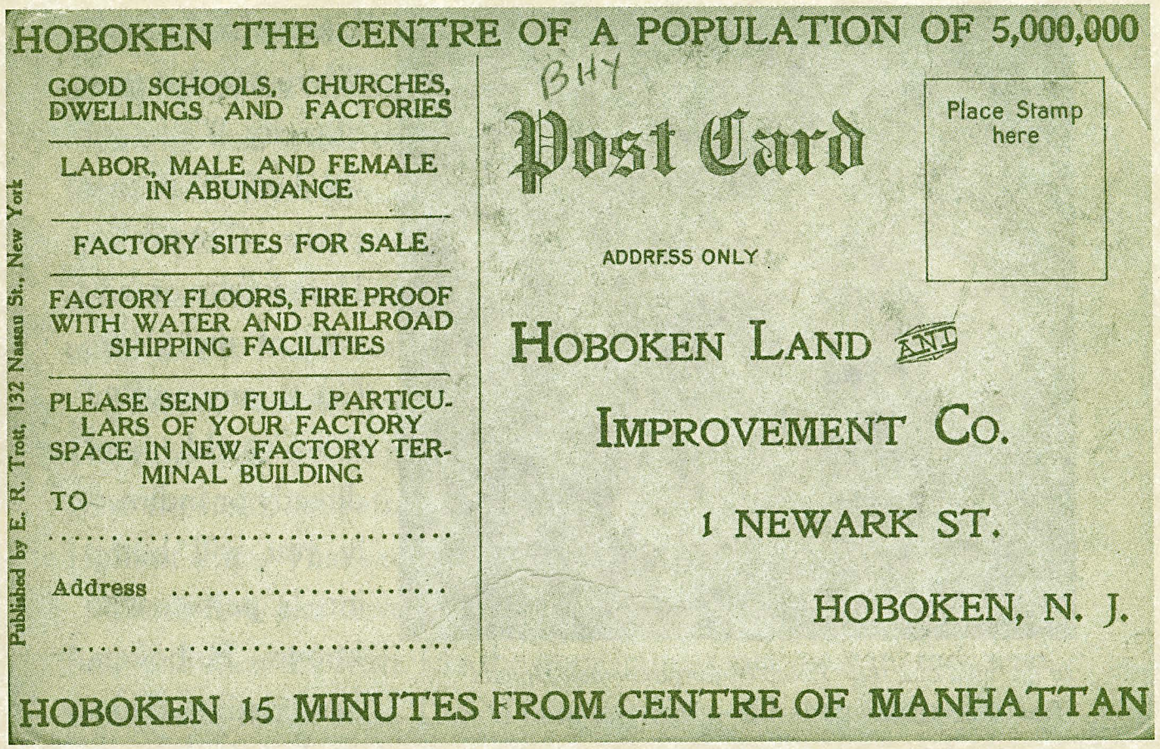
And you had to contribute to the campaign. Campaign funds, sure. I don't know anything about the way it was done, but I had some taste of public life. I had some 27 years serving the public, part time. Jobs. I never sacrificed my law career. Even if I only practiced an hour a day. Five hours a week. I always wanted to maintain my independence. And I made good with it. And that's why I tell my family: Don't ever take a full-time job. You're really excluding a good part of your life. You can't maintain independence if you've got a full-time job. And you're subject to your master, subject to your boss. Subject to your superior. If you don't strike him right, and your eyes don't meet with his fascination, you're out! I would never put myself in that position. I had a firm. I had several firms. Sixty years long.

THE BAD OLD DAYS: THE POOR MASTER

We never had a slum. The private people who owned their properties, they did everything they could to maintain—at least the interiors—for habitation. You can't say we had slums. We had poor people, yes. Unemployed. It would be like the unemployable class, you know. Being up against it. We did have a big, big, exceptionally big welfare problem, dealt with by what we used to call "the poor master's office." Our welfare director at one time was constitutionally called "the poor master."



Early postcard of industrial building, 15th and Garden Streets, circa 1905.



Hoboken advertised itself as an industrial center early. Postcard back, circa 1905.

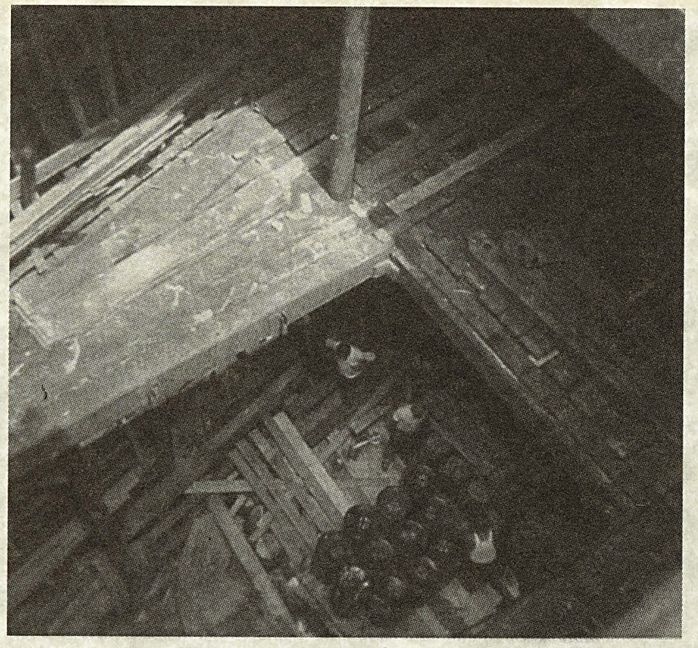
I don't know if you heard this story. One of our poor masters was killed on his job because he insulted a client. A little woman went in, a pretty girl, of course, but that didn't give this old man privilege to start making bad remarks. You come in to me and I'm going to start making bad remarks? He tells her: "You don't look like a lady who needs any relief! Go out and wave your little hand bag," or something like that. Tells her: "Play the streets." And the husband got wind of it. He went down there and he wanted a reckoning. He wanted to know if it was as related to him. And if so, what's the explanation. Before the interview was over, the poor master was lurching over his—what do you call that thing, where you put your used files, where they put their papers and so on—a pick, where you pile your papers. The old-timers used to do that. And it was in his heart.

The man said that he fell over it. Stumbled over it. Had to go to trial, had a big trial over it.

HOBOKEN IN THE 1950S

I always got along, got better as I went along. It's a question of do or dare, I guess. You have to be robust in your efforts. There was always work! For those who wanted to work. Don't forget [in the 1950s] we had 200 industries in Hoboken. The best. Manufacturing, coffee manufacturing, Chase & Sanborn was here, we had two dry docks, and we had the railroads and shipping. We had plenty of work. People used to come in from outside! They didn't all settle here. They used to commute.

And they moved away for various reasons. They had a right to move. Like the children get big, they graduated from their schools and colleges. We educate them, brought them up in Hoboken, but when it came time to get married, they were marrying spouses from other communities. Not that we had many substitutes for them. You



In the hold of a ship. Photo by longshoreman Donald "Red" Barrett, circa 1961.

know what I mean? We're not that type of a city. We've got the benefit of that plane. There's a Hobokenite on any part of the globe. Go to any part of the world and directly or indirectly you will bump into a person who knows Hoboken, has relatives there, or has had some business there, and is very familiar with the city. Especially now, it's getting bigger and bigger. Because our new class of people, they bring all their new contacts, and they've got kin and kith and they haven't all come over, I'm sure of that. See what I mean? Maybe some of them have come over as scouts, to see what they can find. See how they like it and then report back.

1960S: CHANGES ON THE DOCKS AND LOSS OF INDUSTRY

We had great shipping there at one time. We had the American Export Line, we had the Four Aces, we had the *Independence*, we had the *Constitution*, we had beautiful ships coming in there.

You know what started it all? Containerization. That's the thing! When we didn't have the uplands. By uplands we mean the land adjacent to the main buildings, see? You didn't have any storage

space. You needed a lot of storage room for containerization. You've got to have a lot of acreage. And that's why we starting losing out. To Newark! See? And other ports, I guess, but most of it went to Newark. Don't forget, we had plenty of work for the longshoremen. And anybody who wanted to pay his way could become a longshoreman. You needed brute force, you know what I mean. You had to be able to handle cargo.

That was a great thing. First the Germans used to go to the hold. Then the Irish would go to the hold. Then finally the Italians would go to the hold. And after the Italians, the Slavs would go to the hold. Hold of ships. That's tough work down in the pit.

That's how the developments come in. The Germans were here first, and then the Irish. [As the poor immigrants came in, they were sent down] to the hold. They'd take anything. What the hell did they know? So long as they got a job! And to them, laboring is laboring! They wouldn't put them in prison, but they wouldn't give them much comfort. If they'd do their job, they'd let 'em up after a while. They'd make nice money. They developed that beautifully. The truckers and the longshoremen have two of the strongest, most powerful, profitable unions in America.

There was always a good work market. There was a market for work. And the whole principle of life is you've got to have a job, you've got to work for your money. And there was availability, that's why a lot of people came to Hoboken, why they were magnetically brought to this community. The ability to get work! Hoboken always had a good workable market.

But circumstances changed. The location was beautiful, but the surroundings were limited. They were mostly all vertical buildings. They weren't the horizontal type that you have today, with a lot of land. They'd have a big, 15-story building, like Lipton's, at the other end of the town, 15th Street. And they were coming to the point, where they had to expand horizontally, not vertically. They needed

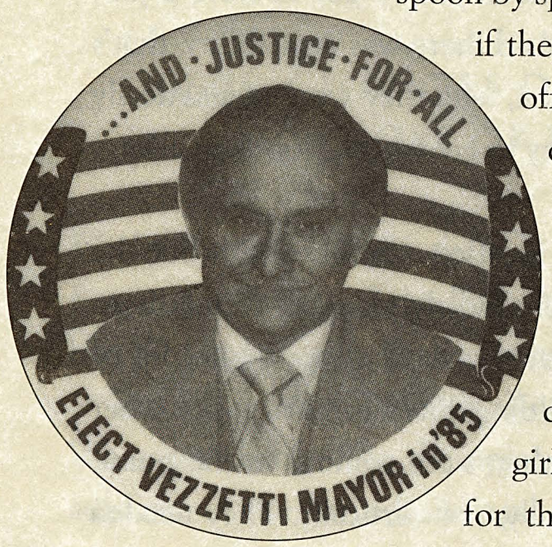
land. Lots of land. And that's why they started, one by one, leaving. And several of them went up to Englewood Cliffs. If you go along that 9W, you'll see Lipton, the beautiful place they have there. They probably have ten times what they had down here. They needed land, they needed space, they needed modernity, and they needed accessibility.

You should look at what Hoboken's future is. Look at how many places are being converted into residences. And what they're building—office buildings.

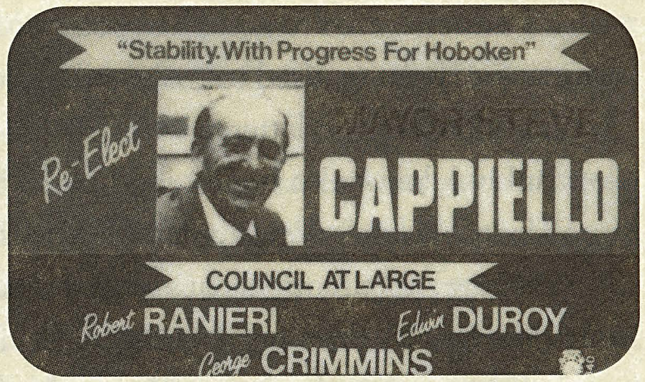
MAYOR THOMAS VEZZETTI (SERVED 1985-1988), THE MAN, THE ELECTION

I was very close to the mayor, sure. I was close to his father and mother. We were neighbors. We were friends. We were neighbors and church people together. We all came out of St. Francis Roman Catholic Church, down Third and Jefferson Street. The father had a place down there.

He had one of his businesses down in Third and Madison. And Tommy'd feed 'em. Sometimes he had to force feed them. Take it spoon by spoon or force it into them. And then, if they couldn't walk and they felt a little off-beam, it was nothing for him to carry them up to their rooms.



He sort of became the manager of all that inheritance. Yes. And he did a good job. While he was doing all that, he didn't drink himself, he didn't smoke. He didn't chase the girls much either; he didn't have time for that. He was going to school. You



know, it took him about 12 years to finish a master's degree, but he got it! And he wasn't satisfied, he was still going for the PhD. But God willed otherwise, huh? He was a good boy. A good man. He had a good heart. Honest. And decent. And he never forgot the hard parts of his life. Because all of the burdens in the family went to Tom, rested on his shoulders.

We used to work together, we were what you used to call "gadflies." We used to go to the County Board of Freeholders and to the City Council and the city agencies and make speeches! We were like ombudsman. And Tom, of course, realizing my experience and age and background, he relied on me a lot. He used to hold me up as a god, and they'd ask him, "Where'd you get this one?" DeFazio. Tom always told me: "He was my inspiration. He was my godfather." And my wife he loved just as much. Oh, he was crazy about my wife. Called her "mother." Yeah. So we became very attached. Very attached. Never took advantage of him.

I think they elected him because he struck them as being very down-to-earth, common, ordinary citizen, who wasn't over pompous, who was plain. He dressed plain, and he acted—he had some eccentricities, but we all do. And there's nothing the matter with that man's mind, except it was acute and good and wholesome.

I imagine he drew a lot of his following because he was advocating "Don't put people out." Human rights are always paramount to property rights. Condominiums are secondary, right? They come as property rights. We're talking about first human rights. The right to have shelter. The right to live. And the right to exist.

I never knew Tommy had ambitions to be in politics, you know

what I mean? I used to go up to spend a little time with him, when I was active. I always used to make a stop at Tom's to see how he was getting along in the latter part of the evening. From my study of humankind, he was an honest guy.

[When Mayor Steve Cappiello lost to Tom Vezzetti], it was time for a change, apparently. That's what it was. People were fed up with one-man rule by this time. It went on too long. It was more or less a sort of dynasty, the leader and leadership did very much what they wanted to do. Making placements. Not all was for merit. Many times, kinship or friendship, or for money, even, I don't know.

Knowing Steve, I think his egotism got the best of him. He thought he was "it" you know. And what was he, a little crum bum. He wasn't an educated man. And when you're educated, you see things a lot different. You know what I mean, if you've had anything beyond high school. People in Hoboken, many of them didn't have high school even, see? The type of people you had. Today it's much different. Well, that was the system. It was a system. It followed New York, the greats over there, you know, not an easy way of life.

Politics in the state of New Jersey is not an easy way of life. You've got to work very hard, you've got to be able to give and take. If you're a little sissy boy, you're out. You'll get thrown in the pond in no time. You've got to be able to have a thick skin. And if you can't do those things, and do them with perfection, you're lost, you're scratched, as we say in the vernacular, you're scratched. You don't even get a chance to start participating.

He was a rough and tough guy, this Cappiello. He come up the hard way. Learned all the gimmicks. Long shoring. That encompasses an awful lot, takes in the whole orbit of things, that sometimes it's best to stay away from. Because it opens up some terrible enterprises.

But he wasn't as strong and powerful as Barney N. McFeely. You know the fellow that really followed that New York system. Yeah, he was the king. Next to [Jersey City Mayor and notorious political

"boss"] Frank Hague, our mayor Bernard McFeely was a super duper. But Hague was tops. He was a perfect boss. And they respected them as such.

McFeely was everything that his boss was. He was a good student. He followed Hague literally. But then he out-Hagued Hague, because he was over-zealous in his love for his kinship and his family. He put them all on the payroll. Anytime he had to pay off an obligation, it had to come out of the public funds. He gave these jobs out like it was running out of style. In a small community, we had some payroll.

Hoboken was a circus maximus at all times. We always had a circus going in Hoboken. Don't forget, we're a waterfront town. We're only a mile long and square. And it's very controllable. And there was always something going on here. And there was always a feast. The Italian people had so many feasts every year. Religious feasts for instance. It wasn't all piety and praying. It was having fun, too. Eating, drinking, and being merry, for tomorrow who knows where you're going to be. They weren't stupid. The Roman people had some background, too, you know. And they weren't all illiterate. We had a lot of literate people from the ranks. And in spite of sometimes very harsh government. If we can get along to a certain extent, to the fullest extent, under restraint, how much nicer it would be if we had more favor and less restraint. That's what they were looking for. They weren't dumb.

[When Tom Vezzetti won] the people just reacted naturally. Sure, they were happy. Sure, they were proud. There was a lot taken off their shoulders. They felt a new deal, the New Dealers had won. And a common man. It wasn't a man that bought the job. A man who started from scratch. No interloper! He wasn't put in here by command, by command performance. He was put in here because he had ambition and he was willing to work hard for it. And went to the fundamentals. I think I might have been the last before Tom to go to the people like that, you know. To talk with them on the public street,

create a little crowd and start telling them what it was all about. That's teaching.

[Vezzetti went on the street with] a bullhorn. That was part of his make-up. He wanted to come over loud and clear. And he looked like an honest man. And I guess people were looking for a little taste of decency.

I don't remember any other mayor, and it seems to me Tom is the first to be laid out in state in City Hall. I don't know any one else who died in office and I can go back to 1915, from commission government, on. Yeah, 1915. The first mayor on the commission government was Honorable Patrick R. Griffin.

[But Vezetti,] he had a good escort of honor. They were all there, right in the rotunda there, in the main entrance, as you go up the steps on Washington Street. He was laid out and there was a crowd around him. Nothing concealed, from head to foot; he was stretched out beautifully. He made a wonderful impression. There was a good crowd. The sister was there in the background, with Della Fave and Cunning and some of the friends. A lot of people, it kept on going, as far as I was concerned. I was there about twenty minutes. It was crowded.

Some of them were shedding tears. You could see them with their handkerchiefs and all. It was a lodge of sorrow, there was no doubt about it. They felt bad. I felt bad myself. Gee whiz. I couldn't believe it. But I had a notion something might come out of it when he fell off that platform and hit his head and they saw some marks on his head. I says: "Tommy's hurt." Maybe they got him up too fast. And then that shock on election day. That really set it off. When Helen, when he learned that Helen lost. [Helen Manogue had challenged incumbent Fifth Ward councilman E. Norman Wilson.] He thought that was going to be a win. They had all hepped him up, too. They all thought Helen was going to win, believe me.

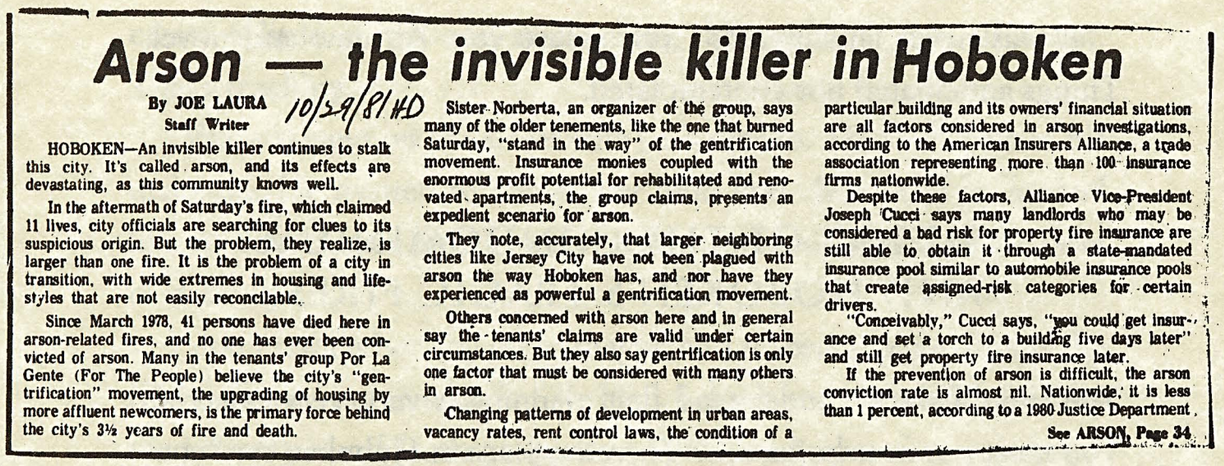
It was never anticipated, I can assure you. All new and novel. Things anticipated nor contemplated.

"THE ART OF THE CONDOMINIUM" AND HOBOKEN'S TRAGIC FIRES

You should always understand that planning is very, very essential. You must not over-build, see? There's a place in Hoboken for "condominia." We've got a lot of them. We've got over a thousand today. Ten years ago we didn't have any. It was never conceived in Hoboken, about the art of condominium. Never knew it. Even the lawyers didn't know! The ministers didn't know! Nobody knew! But out-of-towners, people that saw a way of making a dollar—they're entitled to make it their own way if it's legitimate, you know what I mean. They invest. They take risks, and they're entitled to succeed if it's on the level.

But you mustn't sacrifice the human rights of people. Put them right out. Where are they going to go? Where are these people going to go? And where did they go? I know of 28 of them, went to their maker. Died in fires, that should never have occurred. I don't think we should have had those series of fires, a few years back. You know what I mean?

Most of them I did not know, except by reputation. Because most of them were what you call immigrants. They came from other places. They were Indians, they were Puerto Ricanas, and so on and so forth. No, I cannot say that I had close friends, or even far friends, near or far. It touched me. It made me feel very, very bad, that 28 people should perish. Innocent people. Now they never had a probe on it. They suspected arson in several of the cases, but they never ran it down. Nobody ever paid the price. Nobody was ever prosecuted.



Arson — the invisible killer in Hoboken

By JOE LAURA
Staff Writer

10/29/81 HD

HOBOKEN—An invisible killer continues to stalk this city. It's called arson, and its effects are devastating, as this community knows well.

In the aftermath of Saturday's fire, which claimed 11 lives, city officials are searching for clues to its suspicious origin. But the problem, they realize, is larger than one fire. It is the problem of a city in transition, with wide extremes in housing and lifestyles that are not easily reconcilable.

Since March 1978, 41 persons have died here in arson-related fires, and no one has ever been convicted of arson. Many in the tenants' group Por La Gente (For The People) believe the city's "gentrification" movement, the upgrading of housing by more affluent newcomers, is the primary force behind the city's 3½ years of fire and death.

Sister Norberta, an organizer of the group, says many of the older tenements, like the one that burned Saturday, "stand in the way" of the gentrification movement. Insurance monies coupled with the enormous profit potential for rehabilitated and renovated apartments, the group claims, presents an expedient scenario for arson.

They note, accurately, that larger neighboring cities like Jersey City have not been plagued with arson the way Hoboken has, and nor have they experienced as powerful a gentrification movement.

Others concerned with arson here and in general say the tenants' claims are valid under certain circumstances. But they also say gentrification is only one factor that must be considered with many others in arson.

Changing patterns of development in urban areas, vacancy rates, rent control laws, the condition of a particular building and its owners' financial situation are all factors considered in arson investigations, according to the American Insurers Alliance, a trade association representing more than 100 insurance firms nationwide.

Despite these factors, Alliance Vice-President Joseph Cucci says many landlords who may be considered a bad risk for property fire insurance are still able to obtain it through a state-mandated insurance pool similar to automobile insurance pools that create assigned-risk categories for certain drivers.

"Conceivably," Cucci says, "you could get insurance and set a torch to a building five days later" and still get property fire insurance later.

If the prevention of arson is difficult, the arson conviction rate is almost nil. Nationwide, it is less than 1 percent, according to a 1980 Justice Department

See ARSON, Page 34

The Hudson Dispatch reported 41 arson-related deaths in Hoboken between 1978 and October 1981.

I don't know what happened to rent control. Really. I'm a landlord of many years standing. And I never, never saw anything like what happened in these last few years. We had rent control once or twice before, but it was real rent control. There was enforcement; there was prosecution. And, there was cooperation with the tenants and the authorities to make their complaints. We had rent control boards on a city level, on a county level, and even on a state level. As a matter of fact, one of my public pursuits was a hearer on the state rent control. I used to be a special judge in rent control hearings from Trenton.

That warehousing, as much as I know about it – I've had no experience, haven't had a case on it – but fundamentally, that's a means of forcing people out of their apartments so that they might convert it to condominiums. And why do they want to go condo? They want to get away from rent control and hike their rents to the level that people can't even afford to pay. Get the point? Get all they can. Turn a profit, yes, but it should be reasonable. It shouldn't make you a profiteer. You know what a profiteer is? Like a racketeer. Squeezing and squeezing and squeezing every ounce of energy out of a person. Plus that flesh, you want his blood.

It's all a matter of supply and demand. It all comes down to necessity. Always remember this, that I'm – from law school days, and this goes on for 64 years—I've always championed civil rights. And the biggest one in there is personal rights, civil rights come ahead of property. Property comes secondary. You get the point? And you'll never be able to convert me to say that property rights come first. And I've tasted all phases. I have property. I have assets. I have resources. But I've worked hard for them. It's no sin to have something. But the sin comes when you're cheating, when you're hurting other people. See what I mean?

How they ever got around these things here, I tell you, it's phenomenal. I used to have some property, my God, myself. I never paid more than $100 for a nice five-room heated apartment if you please. And the church was my master. Well, that would be the big difference. It depends on who the landlords are. But, today, everybody's doing what the other guy does. See what I mean? And then, I don't know who's responsible for it, but they talk about inflation I think the prices in properties have gone too far out. See? I used to have an assessment here on this house of $18,500. Today, it's near $300,000.

I offered to sell it once down in the public address. In front of City Hall. I said, "Look what they done to me with the re-evaluation. $385,200." I said, "I'll sell it for $100,000 cheaper. Do I have any takers here? I'll take a deposit right here." I had them screaming. Because they didn't know whether I was telling the truth or not, but I was. And I'm known to tell the truth, so I left quite a piece there.

YUPPIES

That's the new avant garde. They're called yuppies. I don't know what yuppies are myself, but they give them a title.

They were coming in to improve themselves, economically, I

guess. Because the things in New York went so badly, they couldn't stand it anymore. And they said they were paying too much. It was real profiteering over there. So they sought another arena. And Hoboken, being so close, they had heard stories, and transportation being so good, accessibility was nice. They were satisfied they were going to get a better break. They compared.

Instead of using the word "carpetbagger," maybe, they come up with this "yuppie." Which would you prefer? I like "yuppie." Carpetbagger is a fellow that takes his carpet and goes wherever he wants to and settles down for the best. That's a carpetbagger. That expression came from post-Civil War. When our northerners, after the northerners won the war, they had a carpet bag—carpetbagger—and they were going to go south to make their fortune, at the expense of the vanquished.

There were people who lived in Hoboken and commuted to New York. Plenty. And had big jobs over there. They were lucrative jobs. [People didn't say bad things about them] because they were native. You know, second generation and on, I suppose.

You don't see any native Hobokenites going for condominium. They don't. They just avoid it. Unless they build them themselves, you know what I mean? They would rather go for individual ownership. Two family, three family, four family, you know what I mean.

I don't know where the good comes. The more money they take in, the more taxes they collect. Do you want a little comparison? And here I use it as a good selling point. When we had our contest with Mr. McFeely, Bernard McFeely, the boss, in 1947, May, he had a budget that year of a little over 5 million dollars. And I used to say: "That's a terrible budget." I mean, I'd compare it with other communities. I made a study; you know, a lawyer will try to be prepared when he's going to a court trial, and that was like a court. Today, the last budget is near to 30 million dollars, honey! In those days, you had ten thousand in our public school system! Today, we only have

four! Expenses for the Board of Ed may be five times more! Now how do you justify this? Is that the people's fault? What is it? The politicans' fault? Where are these moneys going? With all these assessments. The higher the tax, the more money that comes into the treasury. But where's the accounting for it?

I tell you, if we didn't have what we called the low cost housing, we'd have had anarchy here. Where would those people go? How could they pay these fantastic prices demanded here, on the outside?

The low-cost housing was built by our Hoboken Housing Authority and Urban Redevelopment, and of course, in parenthesis, my brother Edward, a lawyer and teacher, was executive secretary for 25 years and he knows all about accumulating that land and contracting with the developers and building these units. I think there was 1,700 built under Edward.

For a long time, there was no developments. There was no housing development. It was dead. It was dead. Most of this property in Hoboken, is over 60 years, so in between that there was very little development. You had an isolated case of building a house, the Mazarra house, up in 9th and Castle, I think, that was built 25 years ago. I think the banking industry must have put an onus sign on the city, that it's not a safe place to invest. See what I mean? We had a depression. And the depression losses were a thousand foreclosures. And most of the mortgages were held by banks, and so they wrote it off. They didn't want to take any more chances. And that's when the prices were nothing. So small. A thousand people lost their houses, starting around '32, when Roosevelt came in.

[Until] comparatively recently, they wouldn't give a mortgage. They wouldn't even take an application, or go past Park Avenue, for instance. They put a mark on it. Don't bother us.

A STARTING POINT FOR HOBOKEN'S HISTORY

Oh, I think the starting point was the trip up the Hudson of the *Half Moon* by Henry Hudson in 1609. That's when he saw the Indians. We didn't have any Indians at this stage of the game. I haven't seen one of the descendants of my 82 years in Hoboken. There's not a one left. American Indians. Are you talking about American Indians? Yeah, we've got a lot of Gandhi Indians. I don't mean gandy dancers, either. I mean followers of Gandhi.

He was a great man. And Tom [Vezzetti] strikes me of having a lot of the qualities of Gandhi. Peace. He wanted peace. And he wanted people to be happy. And he hated, you know, the sharpshooter. And he didn't want to get pushed around, and he didn't want people to get pushed around. But Tommy started very late in life in his political business. Mind you. He was age 58 when he died, 55 when he decided to take a shot. But lots of people didn't know who Tom was until he went out there to tell them. And he had a wonderful military record. So what are you going to do? The good die young. So look out now, Nora [interviewer].

THE HOBOKEN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

"Vanishing Hoboken," an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library and the Hoboken Historical Museum in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding 20 years, and to the consequent "vanishing" of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; and factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken's industrial base relocated during the 1970s and '80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992. In the go-go economy of the 1980s, Hoboken's row houses, just across the river from Manhattan, were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy com-

mute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, where affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as anonymous, modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated in the summer of 2000 with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, "Vanishing Hoboken"—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. The Project focuses on collecting the oral histories of residents who can evoke Hoboken's vanished industries through their recollections of employment in the city's many factories and on the waterfront, and those who can capture for present and future generations the ways in which Hoboken's rich ethnic and cultural diversity was once evident in the everyday life of the city: in traditional businesses and small Mom & Pop shops; in leisure and cultural activities; and political and civic activities (election campaigns, and political/social clubs). In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of Cultural Affairs in the Department of State, the Hoboken Oral History Project transcribed and edited seven oral histories to produce a series of "Vanishing Hoboken" chapbooks. A year later, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities, provided support for the publication of two chapbooks.

VANISHING HOBOKEN CHAPBOOKS

The editor of this series choses to call these small booklets "chapbooks," a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, is a "small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapmen, in western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5"x 4" inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legend and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times."

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the "Vanishing Hoboken" series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a read-

er-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the "manners and morals" of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.