

HOBOKEN HISTORY

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Courtesy of George Kirchgessner

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Issue No. 17 - 1997



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MS. BALDWIN

GRADE 6

ROW 1: KATE LYN SHEIL, JULIA SOROKIN, SARAH KAFKA, NILMARIE MERCADO, LAURA CATLAW, COURTNEY WILLIAMS, MONIKA KELLER ROW 2: BEN CASE, MICHAEL MONDANARO, GABE HOPKINS, LIZA ROBLES, ALEX VAN SCHAIK, TOM BRENNAN, JULIA KUBECK, MARINA SOLODUKHO ROW 3: MS. BALDWIN, ROSE LIPPMAN, ANIKA SCHWARZWALD, JOAN MARRACHE, PETRA SURIC, GEORGE MC GUILKIN, DORA LISBDA

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Letter from the President

*Dear members, members soon-to-renew,
and members to be:*

*I know you will enjoy issue No. 17 of
Hoboken History. I would like to welcome
Nicholas Acocella as our editor and thank
Barbara Lippman, who started the
magazine with her late husband Paul.
Barbara and Paul created something very
special when they started this publication
for the museum in the fall of 1991, and we
hope to continue this fine tradition.*

*In addition, I would like to thank the New
Jersey State Council on the Arts State/
County Partnership Program for the Arts
administered by the Hudson County
Division of Cultural & Heritage Affairs —
Robert C. Janiszewski, County Executive
and the Board of Chosen Freeholders for
supporting this publication.*

Enjoy the read,

Robert Foster
President/Director
Hoboken Historical Museum

On The Cover

*Record crowds gather in front of Hoboken
City Hall for Inauguration Day in 1947.*

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*This issue funded in part by a block grant from the New Jersey State Council
on the Arts State/County Partnership Program for the Arts administered by
the Hudson County Division of Cultural & Heritage Affairs — Robert C.
Janiszewski, County Executive and the Board of Chosen Freeholders.*

THE 1947 ELECTION

By JOHN P. FITZPATRICK

**THIS IS A STORY ABOUT
A HOBOKEN COP, WHO,
ONCE UPON A TIME, BEAT
CITY HALL.**

He fought his battle nearly half a century ago in the days of bossism, when there were no voting machines and no Civil Service protection—when corruption was a way of political life. All this in the face of a political machine in power for over 30 years.

AND YET HE WON.

His fight, and the results of the May 13, 1947 election that stunned the city and state, made headlines across the country, wiped out the local boss and set up the later demise of one of the most powerful political bosses in the United States, a boss whose influence reached into the White House—Jersey City's Mayor Frank Hague.

★ ★ ★ ★ CITY GOVERNMENT ★ ★ ★ ★

When Hoboken was incorporated in 1855, it set up a government consisting of a mayor elected for a two-year term and two legislative councilmen elected from each of five wards for two-year terms. In 1911, Governor Woodrow Wilson signed the Walsh Act, allowing municipalities the alternative of the commission form of government, which would consist of five commissioners elected at-large. Hoboken voted in commission government in 1915. The local Democratic machine, supported by the working class wards, used commission government to solidify its domination of local affairs.

In fact, according to Bridgid Cahalan's 1983 research for her Queens College master's degree, "Bossism reigned

for the next 32 years, most notably in the persona of Mayor Bernard N. (Barney) McFeely, whose notorious rule lasted from 1925 until 1947." As Cahalan put it, "corruption, intimidation, and nepotism seem to have been the basis of his governing technique." McFeely's role in the fortunes of the Democratic party had begun in 1906 when he was elected a committeeman from the fourth ward. He succeeded to party leadership in 1925 and was elected mayor in 1930.

Under McFeely's administration, graft was so much a part of politics that it became a source of local jokes. How much does it cost to make the cops? About \$200, but it costs \$300 for firemen because they get to sleep a lot. However, it was gambling that brought the media atten-

tion and outside authorities down on the administration.

While the city was not exactly wide open, gambling was widespread and well known even to us teenagers. I was aware of a gambling tent just south of the viaduct set up in a plot of ground cut into the hillside. (I used to walk there with my .22 rifle to shoot at tin cans and bottles found along the tracks). In the back of a luncheonette (now a street level apartment at 332 Hudson Street), just south of Saints Peter and Paul Church, a wire room (an illegal form of off-track betting) operated for several years before it was closed in a raid by county law enforcement officials. A barber on 12th and Washington had someone taking bets over the phone in the back room. The phone would sometimes disrupt a haircut if the person handling the phone took a break, because one of the barbers had to pick up the call. Even the kids on their way home from Saints Peter and Paul School could hop on boxes and peer through a window between Fifth and Sixth on Court Street and watch the card players in action—and the stacks of bills on the table. While perhaps not wide open, gambling was not hard to find. Of course, the press loved it when a bust made the news. This was particularly true of Republican oriented papers like the old Newark *Evening News* and the New York *Herald Tribune*.

Gambling was not the only practice the press was happy to expose. The *Trib*, for example, in its August 2, 1939 edition, reported on the awarding of a one-bid \$96,000 contract by the City for the removal of ashes (coal was a source of energy and heat in many homes and businesses) and garbage. The bid was accepted by the City Commission and signed on behalf of the City by Mayor McFeely. Miss Mary McFeely, his sister, signed the \$25,000 certified check accompanying the bid to guarantee performance of the contract, as treasurer of James J. McFeely, Inc. Joseph B. McFeely, nephew of the mayor and president of the company, signed the bid on

behalf of the company. "The telephone number of the McFeely corporation offices and the mayor's residence are identical," the paper noted. This company had been awarded these contracts for 16 years and this was the second one-bid award.



GEORGE J. FITZPATRICK

Warming to its attack on the administration, the paper then hit on another practice, also well known to the locals—nepotism—and went on to list some of the family members and relatives scattered "all over" the administration: Edward J. McFeely, the mayor's brother was chief of police; three nephews, Captain Bernard J. McFeely, Lieutenant Dennis McFeely, and Lieutenant Edward McFeely were also ranking members of the Police Department. Later Captain Edward Scott, the brother-in-law of nephew Bernard N., would surface, as would Thomas F. McFeely, another relative, as Superintendent of Schools. As the article concluded, "There are other McFeely's in minor capacities in other branches of the city administration."

This was Hoboken in the 1930's and 1940's. Like many other cities in the state and around the county, Hoboken operated under a bossism that ruled through a political machine that hand picked its elected officials, who, in turn, appointed the faithful to all the patronage jobs it controlled. But times were changing, and a great many voters were fed up. The continual and increasingly bad publicity was having an effect. The town had become a joke. However, the outcome of new political fights was about to change the political scene and the political control of the life of a city. One event was the arrival on the scene of George J. Fitzpatrick (no relation to the author).

★ ★ FITZPATRICK ★ ★

Remembering back and reading the papers and magazines of the day, the lighted fuse that led to the explosion that blew away the McFeely administration was Fitzpatrick, who had joined the Police Department in 1941. He must have struck his fellow officers as something special, because he was eventually elected



Collection of Leonard Luizzi, Sr.

★ president of the local PBA. He was indeed something special, because he went after City Hall and began publicly agitating for better working conditions and Civil Service status. In 1946, that protection was granted in the second of two four-year terms of a Republican governor, who pushed a state Civil Service referendum. City Hall had lost its clout in Trenton. Fitzpatrick had worked hard in support of the referendum, which carried Hoboken by an 8 to 5 majority. He paid a price, however.

★ It was not uncommon for police departments to find ways to discipline members who "offended" the leadership. Having an uncle and three cousins (I'm Irish, you know) as members of the New York police and corrections departments, I heard a few stories. The favorite, often mentioned, was assignment in Staten Island when the officer's home might be in Queens, or the reverse. However, the job done on Fitzpatrick by City Hall was classic.

★ The son of one Hoboken policeman recently told me a story of one beaut. On Clinton Street, there were police call boxes, as there were on other beats, so that those on duty could call in to headquarters at assigned times to report as they made their rounds. The Clinton Street beat and the locations of the boxes were a little different, though. In order to meet the schedule of calls at the assigned times on this beat, a patrolman was forced to run from box to box. In headquarters, another officer would note the time of each call. Superiors would ignore late calls by a patrolman who was allied with them but would use similar late calls to downgrade the fitness of a cop who was an anti. As Fitzpatrick continued to fight for Civil Service and better working conditions, he came in for his share of punishment beats as well as other, more serious harassing tactics.

★ *The New York Times*, along with other media, covered Fitzpatrick's activities for some time, and a review of some of the articles is interesting. Brought up on department charges (One claimed he failed to report the whereabouts of a patrolman accused of assault and battery, another accused him of neglect of duty) he was twice dismissed from the police force and twice restored in Common Pleas Court. He was first dismissed in May of 1945 but

restored with full pay on October of that year. After he was dismissed the second time, on September 14, 1946. Common Pleas Court again reinstated him, on February 1, 1947, finding the charges to be without foundation. By this time, the first restoration had reached the New Jersey Supreme Court where it was upheld.

Defending Fitzpatrick, attorney Earl J. Oxfeld characterized the dismissal actions of City officials as part of an "alleged conspiracy" to oppress rebel cops who sought change in working conditions. The Hudson County Grand Jury eventually voted to indict Mayor McFeely and 10 other municipal and police officials and scheduled a trial for February 1947, subsequently postponed to May 19, after the election.

There were other forms of harassment by Department brass, but the one that brought Fitzpatrick additional coverage in the press was his assignment to direct traffic at First and Newark Streets in front of City Hall, possibly the busiest spot in the City. The mayor is reported to have said he wanted to be able to see Fitzpatrick when he looked out of his office. Tough duty—and for eight hours without a break. When the press learned that the cop's wife was bringing him lunch to eat in the middle of the intersection, while the traffic whizzed by, a picture of the couple made the papers.

Something else of great significance came to pass in 1946, something that helped cripple the administration's control of Hoboken. For the first time, the 1947 votes would be cast by voting machine. The old paper ballots could disappear or, as many were convinced, could be read by political cronies. There were stories about the list kept to punish those who did not vote the "right" way. It was probably in 1946 that Fitzpatrick was planning seriously to run for public office and oppose the regular Democratic party. The arrogance of McFeely and his administration and its disregard of public opinion had become too much even for the blasé citizens who had accommodated themselves to a corrupt political system but who now had to admit it had gone too far.

"32 Years is Long Enough to Suffer Under Barney"

Civil Service was in as were voting machines. The press, even the local papers which had always been careful with their coverage of the Democrats, was running negative stories, while hailing Fitzpatrick and his rebel cops. He had become famous. On the other hand, McFeely, drunk with power, had provoked the police into rebellion, turned the public against him (including many young World War II veterans) by loading the city's payroll with relatives, and protected the gamblers. The mayor was unable to read the signs that should have told him it was all over for him and his cronies. The time was right, and Fitzpatrick made his move.

★ ★ THE CAMPAIGN ★ ★

Tony Cilento remembers well his association with the rebel cop. Tony is a retired businessman and had been the president of The Grocery and Delicatessen Owners Association as well as a Republican Party leader. He was disgusted with City Hall and his unhappiness is apparent to this day.

He remembers in particular one common practice of City Hall in dealing with those on welfare. They were told their checks had to be cashed at favored stores where, presumably, some of the money would be spent. It was this sort of thing that decided him to help Fitzpatrick in getting out the vote in favor of Civil Service and to help him with selecting a fusion Democratic/Republican slate to oppose McFeely's slate in the upcoming 1947 municipal election. Cilento also hoped that at least one member of his party might finally get elected.

As Cilento recounts the campaign, it was Fitzpatrick who was the prime mover behind the fusion ticket. The initial plan was to select two candidates with Irish names, two with Italian names, and one with a German name, a balance that represented the demographics of the city at that time. However, while that made sense on one level, it did not on another. The Italian leaders realized, although the Irish would not, that the era of Irish political power was in its twilight and that a new ethnic group was on the scene. Now, naturally, they were ready to seek that power. In order to keep the solid Italian vote the fifth candidate, a Republican, was to be of Italian descent.

"Your Sons and Brothers Did It With Bullets, You Can Do It With Ballots"

And this was the newly named "Citizens Good Government" slate: John J. Grogan, George J. Fitzpatrick, Michael M. Borelli, Fred M. DeSapio and Republican Stephen E. Mongello. The Democratic candidates were led by the mayor followed by Edward J. Murnane, Thomas J. McAleer, Frank P. Romano and Andrew G. Iervolino—three Irish names and two Italian.

I must say it was exciting for those of us who took an interest in politics. Many parents of my friends worked for the city as elected officials and in appointed positions. Others were property owners dependent on the administration for services as well as for inspection approval governing various city-mandated regulations. Financial support was expected by City Hall, and, in those days, you might join the Chamber of Commerce but you damn well had better also be a dues-paying member of one of the political clubs that represented the local politicians or at least a contributor to the party and its leaders. Those of us in high school, along with the general public and the press, followed the campaign that was for once a real contest and not a rubber stamp for a picked ticket that always won. We even had a new paper to read. Frances Dohn, a Seton Hall University teacher and returned veteran, began publishing a small tabloid-size newspaper supporting the fusion ticket. It was an immediate success. What appealed

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TUESDAY, MAY 13th

 Michael M. Borelli 8A	 Fred M. DeSapio 9A	 George J. Fitzpatrick 10A	 John J. Grogan 11A	 Stephen E. Mongello 12A
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32 Years is Long Enough
to Suffer Under Barney

Your Sons and Brothers
Did It With Bullets, You
Can Do It With Ballots

*The "Fusion" Party Candidates
From a political leaflet in the collection of Leonard Luizzi, Sr.*



Election night May 13, 1947. A jubilant crowd of well-wishers gathers outside the "Fusion Party" headquarters. Photo from the Newark Sunday News issue of December 28, 1947. (Courtesy of the Michael M. Borelli scrapbook)

to us was the names and activities of many of those who were active in the party as well as on both sides in the election. I wore a McFeely button since my father was a property owner who had several friends with jobs and ties to City Hall. We, as did most, had no reason to believe that the regular Democratic slate would not win.

★ ★ THE ELECTION ★ ★

Except for our block committeeman ringing the door bell to make sure my mother voted before the polls closed, I have no memory of election day. I was as surprised as everyone else to read in *The Jersey Observer* the next day of "5,000 citizens" who had gathered in a "wild holiday scene staged before the Hoboken Municipal Building" (City Hall) on election night after it became known that Fitzpatrick and the fusion ticket had won. The results were picked up by all the New York papers and were carried by the news wires across the county. It was a stunning upset. Mayor Hague in Jersey City was reading the papers, too. Within a month, on June 4, in a surprise move he announced his retirement, handing over the official rule of the city to his nephew Frank Hague Eggers in hopes of continuing his control of the party and his machine. However, in 1949, in another stunner, a local Democratic leader named John V. Kenny led a fusion ticket that won three out of the five commission seats up for election and assumed control of that city's Democratic party. The demise of Hague and his machine turned out to be a completely unexpected fallout of Fitzpatrick's success in his fight with Hoboken's boss.

When the votes were counted, (in a commission elec-

tion, each voter may cast a ballot for up to five candidates) the insurgents won by a margin of 65,096 to 44,589. Fitzpatrick came in second on the fusion ticket, one vote behind Grogan: 13,476 to 13,477, DeSapio was third with 12,937 followed by Borelli with 12,804 and Mongiello with 12,402.

In something of a surprise, McAleer led the Democratic slate with 9,372 to the mayor's 9,312 votes. Murnane was third with 9,102, Iervalino fourth with 8,511, with Romano running last with 8,292.

When the national media ran its articles it had much to say. *Life* headlined its May 26 story, "End of a Boss," saying, "For the last twenty-two years Hoboken, N.J., a once-prosperous industrial city, has been a one-mile square tract of civic corruption completely surrounded by McFeelys."

In its coverage in the May 25 edition, *Newsweek* said, "Under old Barney's heavy whip hand, Hoboken had wilted. ... Only its 250 taverns, one for every 120 adults, prospered."

ELECTION TALLY

GROGAN	13,477
FITZPATRICK	13,476
DESAPIO	12,937
BORELLI	12,804
MONGIELLO	12,402
MCALER	9,372
MCFEELEY	9,312
MURNANE	9,102
IERVALINO	8,511
ROMANO	8,292

Time reported on May 26 on the mayor's downfall that "His city became a hangout for Prohibition-era gangsters."

At the inaugural, a week after the election, emotions were still high. The *Jersey Journal* said that 10,000 witnessed the ceremonies as the new commissioners were sworn in. Despite the vote count, Fred M. DeSapio took office as Hoboken's 27th mayor. (Three of the new commissioners had decided it was time for the Italian vote to exert its new-found power). The popular Fitzpatrick was named Public Safety Director and commissioner of Police, something the paper called "spectacular," a beat cop one day and head of the department the next. Fitzpatrick and his supporters were delighted. The evening before, amid cheers, he had been honored by the Leonard (Sonny) Luizzi-George J. Fitzpatrick Independent Democratic Club, of which he had been a member.

Hoboken celebrated all day with parades and parties. The *Jersey Journal* said that one of the "largest outdoor celebration was a block dance held under hundreds of gaily colored lights on Jefferson, between Fifth and Sixth Streets." Here, said the paper "throngs of merry-makers carried out the revelry that began early in the day when Hoboken citizens, thousands strong, ushered in an obviously popular, new era. A new era, true, and many things changed. But many remained the same. But that is another story.

The Ups and Downs of "Fighting Fitz"

Hudson Dispatch, Nov. 25, 1947 (from the Michael Borelli scrapbook).



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A NOTE ON POLITICAL CLUBS

It had long been a custom in local politics for a budding politician, or one already in office, to become associated with political clubs or associations. The club was one way to become known to the local party leadership as a supporter. For those aspiring to the political life it was a way to work for the party in hopes of jobs and, ultimately, backing for political office.

Fitzpatrick was a member of the Leonard (Sonny) Luizzi-George J. Fitzpatrick Independent Democratic Association. The membership of this club backed him and helped his campaign when he ran for office in 1947. Once he was elected, a new organization, the George J. Fitzpatrick Association, was formed with Fitzpatrick as standard bearer.

Members paid dues to finance the activities of the club, ran dinners and other social events to raise money in support of its leader's election campaigns, and helped organize and manage the campaigns.

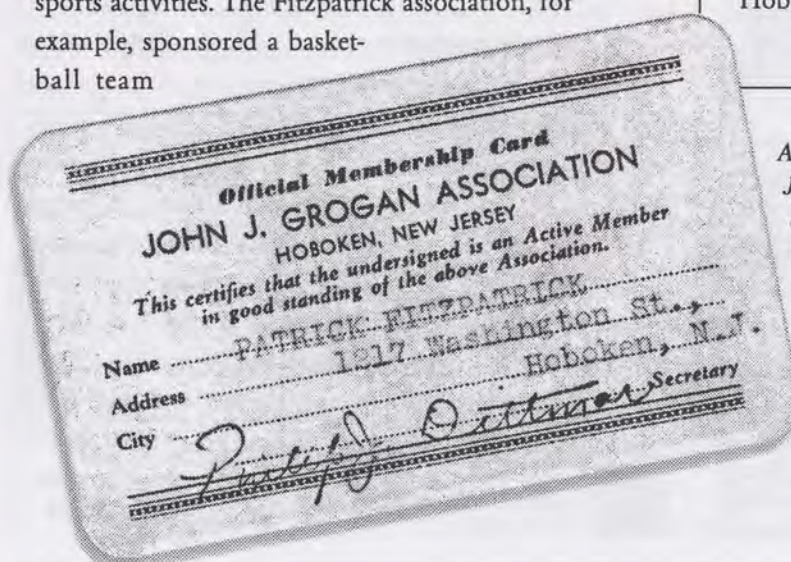
In addition, many of the associations supported local sports activities. The Fitzpatrick association, for example, sponsored a basketball team



that participated in various leagues and, in the process, generated name recognition for the politician in the media. Team members also were welcome to activities at the Association's headquarters on the corner of 6th and Garden Streets, now Lepore's Homemade Chocolates.

Author's Note: The author is indebted for help in research for this article to the New Jersey Rooms of the Hoboken and Newark Public Libraries, the staff of the New Jersey Historical Society library, and especially to Charles Markey of the New Jersey Room of the Jersey City Public Library and to Lenny A. Luizzi of the Hoboken Historical Museum, who seems to know more about the history of the city's political life than the politicians themselves.

Now retired, John P. Fitzpatrick is a former resident of Hoboken.



Above: Bill Cunnane addresses a meeting of the George J. Fitzpatrick Association. Cunnane helped organize the club and became its president. Fitzpatrick is seated to his right and the author's father to his left.

Right: John J. Grogan was elected a commissioner on the fusion ticket in 1947 and later served as mayor from 1953 to 1965. This membership card was issued in 1952 to Patrick J. Fitzpatrick, the author's father. At the time, annual dues were just \$3.00.



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Ding, Ding, Ding, went the TROLLEY

by Joseph Finnerty

Many Hoboken residents prior to World War II never owned a car. There was little incentive to own one because the city was blessed with a great public transportation system, perhaps unmatched by any other nearby community. Think of the choices that existed: You could ride the PATH, then called the Hudson Tubes, to Manhattan or Newark; or take a pleasurable ferry boat jaunt to various piers in Manhattan with departures from either 1st or 14th Streets; move up and down Washington Street by bus or trolley; if your destination was Palisades Amusement Park, you could hop aboard a Public Service No. 22 bus at 14th and Washington and be on your way; trains

from the Erie-Lackawanna station went to incredibly far away places such as Morristown and Point Pleasant.

The most romantic and spectacular transportation system that served Hoboken was its streetcar lines. The terminal was located above the Hudson Tubes depot at the ferry building. One route went along Washington Street to 14th, another along Willow Avenue. These lines were not connected, thus no loop system existed.

Another line carried passengers up an elevated trestle to Jersey City's famous Journal Square area, home to four movie theaters the equal of any in New York. On a few occasions, I walked home from

Above: Trolley Car No. 1787 at Terminal East (Lackawanna Terminal) Loading Platform. Right: Skylight view of the Hoboken Trolley Terminal. The Lackawanna RR Terminal, and clocktower are in the background. Photos from 1910 courtesy of the North Jersey Electric Railway Historical Society. (Photos available for purchase at United Decorating Co., 421 Washington Street in Hoboken.)

Jersey City, with teenage friends, atop the trestle. Conductors were unable to stop the cars on the steep incline. It was a dumb and dangerous thing to do, but so exciting.

But not as exciting as actually riding in the trolley car down that structure. The breaks would squeal, chatter, and emit frightening sounds as the car first approached the descent, a really steep grade, perhaps a hundred feet or more above ground level. Then the brakes would be released, and the car would hurtle down the hill at breathtaking speed, rocking and swaying. It was better than a roller coaster.

Sometime around 1936 or 1937, the WPA tore up the trolley tracks around Hoboken to allow electrified buses to operate instead. Washington Street, between 8th and 9th, was blocked off for weeks while the cobblestone road bed was dismantled and paved over. After the work crews left for the day, the street was transformed into a magical playground. The new asphalt paving made the best possible roller skating surface imaginable. Kids otherwise spent their time climbing over the road-paving machin-

ery, playing Johnny-ride-the-pony, kick the can, and other street games.

Later on, buses powered by internal combustion engines replaced the electrified ones, but most people seemed to prefer riding along Washington Street in distinctive "Jitney" buses. There were about 20 of these privately-owned, nondescript vehicles that looked as if they were right out of a Third World economy. The jitneys were cheaper than the Public Service buses and had undeniable charm. No two were alike, all were in general disrepair, but, the longer you rode them, the more you enjoyed their broken down appearance and condition. Most rides lasted only ten minutes at most, so comfort was not a great concern.

When the Lincoln Tunnel was opened, Public Service buses were capable of whisking me from the corner of 9th and Washington to Times Square in about 20 minutes at a cost of two bits. Of course, time is the enemy of public transportation. God forbid you should miss that last bus back to Hoboken from New York. You could still get back home, but the journey involved taking the Tubes out

to Newark then back to Jersey City, then, hoping to catch the trolley. Instead of 20 minutes, you could spend several hours wending your way home.

My parents never owned a car. My first automobile ride was in one owned by my sister's boyfriend. My mother and I sat in the rumble seat. I nearly froze. Cars never appealed to me after that experience, especially convertibles. Until 1943. Then, some young man arrived in Hoboken driving a red Cadillac with white upholstery. Every teenage girl in town got to ride in it. I began to think that maybe





Me and my girl on prom night, 1944

public transportation had some drawbacks.

A 16-year-old pal gave me my first driving opportunity. He allowed me to drive down the viaduct from Union City. He must have been nuts. I was petrified and drove accordingly. But we survived, and I felt the glow of accomplishment.

I was beginning to understand the limitations of public transportation. My girl friend attended

school in Union City. I had to take that old No. 22 up and down the viaduct to see her. If I missed that bus, there were no alternatives. I had to hoof it down that hill. Many a winter night I wound up in the Willow Avenue Diner, frozen solid.

The occasion of my senior prom changed my mind about the desirability of private cars. I had to ride that bus in my tux, and my date had to ride in her evening gown. We were lucky, because a classmate drove us to New York to dance to the music of Harry James atop the Hotel Astor. I was embarrassed by the stares of other passengers when I took her home on that same old No. 22.

I purchased my first car in 1949. It was a used wreck. I needed it because my summer job was in a resort area that had no public transportation. My first new car came in 1951, while I was working in lower Manhattan. At first, I kept hoping my old girlfriend from Union City might want to date me again. This time we'd ride in style. She never called.

In retrospect, riding the bus in one's formal outfit wasn't all that bad. I should have continued to support public transportation, despite the problems I encountered from time to time. Now it's too late. The trestle has been dismantled. The trolley service is out of business. So is Palisades Park. The Lincoln Tunnel buses still operate, but they cost more than a quarter and take longer than 20 minutes to reach the Big Apple. I didn't know how good I had it. Dang, dang, dang it. ❖



Photo: Bob Foster

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Two LONGSHOREMEN:



Nunzio Malfetti & Bart Reilly



With the recent demolition of the buildings along the Hoboken waterfront piers, it seemed appropriate that Hoboken History listen to a couple of retired longshoremen talk about "the piers," what they meant to Hoboken, and the significance of their passing.

Nunzio Malfetti was born at 522 Monroe, worked as a longshoreman from 1946 until 1983, and served as a member of the city council between 1975 and 1983; he currently resides in Fox Hill. Bart Reilly was also born and raised in Hoboken, at 512 Park. He worked on the waterfront from 1957 until 1989 and has lived at 628 Bloomfield since 1959.

NM: The impression a lot of people have about the docks is all wrong. They think we were all a bunch of tough guys.

BR: There were a lot of hard working men over there.

NM: Of course, we used to hold our own. If you came there and tried to start trouble well, that wasn't a good idea.

A Conversation

BR: Most guys just went to work every day. See, I started there in 1957, after the Waterfront Commission stepped in and took the personal element out of the hiring. Before that, you had to shape up and you were at the mercy of the people doing the hiring. If they didn't like you, you were out.

NM: Later, we had a strict seniority system. Everybody had an A card, a B card, or a C card. The ones with the A card were first in line, then the B's, then the C's. And it was all done by seniority. I had an A card. I was also the dock boss on Pier C for a few years. I hired the checkers and assigned them. I didn't want the job though. I made a few more dollars, but I really didn't want the job. I was a good boss. If a guy needed a break, I'd give it to him.

BR: When the Waterfront Commission came in, it was the greatest thing in the world for the working man on the docks. Before that, it was favoritism. They picked one man or another man they might like and not pick another man they might not like. But when you had seniority rules and a C man could not work before a B man or an A man. They'd call out "A Cards," and you'd hold your card up. If you passed a job by, you got what was called a debit. And if you got three debits, you were knocked off the list for a guaranteed wage. There were 21 guys to a gang and seven gangs, so there were at least 127 men in the gangs, plus there were hi-low drivers, dock men — at least 200 men at a time on a pier.

NM: If you were a hi-low driver, you always worked with the same gang.

BR: Just before I came on, around 1956, American Export Lines rebuilt the piers. It was right around the time the Waterfront Commission came in. When I started, there would be up to 200 trucks a day loaded with freight. At that time there was no container freight, so it was all hand-pushed, hand-held, crane-operated.

NM: And we shipped everything in and out of there. You never knew what you were handling. If it said "Handle with Care," you'd be careful because it



The Holland-America Line at the 5th Street Piers, September 15, 1948. Photo courtesy of Leonard Luizzi, Sr.

might be glass or something like that. That's all we looked for. Mostly it was back-breaking work. I still remember moving rubber, big son of a guns. We'd put them on a hand truck and push them down a chute. Sometimes it would go right into the truck.

BR: Actually, I wasn't outside most of the time. I was a checker, working in the office. If I worked outside one year, the year after American Export Lines left, it would be a lot. Pier A, where I was, everything went out. We were the export pier. Pier C was a discharge pier. Everything came into this country on Pier C. Pier B, the one with the long ramp, was in between. B used to get these ships with maybe 12 passengers.

NM: Those ships were still mostly freight. The Holland America Line ships were on the Fifth Street pier. They had cargo, but they also had passengers and lots of celebrities came through. We had Phil Rizzuto come in there, the Andrews Sisters, William Powell. Eisenhower came in there once. Remember Victor McLaughlin, the actor, he came in there once too. He was a big guy, a fighter before he was an actor.

BR: Every once in a while we would get passenger ships on A. I remember seeing Jimmy Cagney and Ralph Bellamy and their wives get out of a cab.

NM: Everything at Holland America was crane as far as loading the ships.

BR: They would open up a list for each pier. That's the way they still work it today. They would ask for, say, 30 men for a pier on a given day. And that was the pier you worked on for the day, and if there was work every day, you worked every day, sometimes for five years or

ten years, unless they had no ships and they were real slow with the truck line. If you weren't checking a ship with cargo going into it, then you worked the truck line. And, if there were guys on the end who would be checking a truck, they'd have to get laid off, because these men were hired with seniority. Sometimes they would even move a guy with an A card from one pier to another.

NM: Everything changed when American Export moved out in 1971. That was a shocker. People left work on a Friday, and when they came back on Monday, they had no jobs. People were asking, "What do you mean,

"They left?" "Whatever ships were there sailed over the weekend.

BR: There wasn't a ship left. We worked our cans off that last Friday because they wanted to get these ships out. We worked until about 10 or 11 o'clock that night. And then I came in that Monday morning and it was like Pearl Harbor. I always started routing at 7 o'clock, because we would have a line of trucks at Pier A, which is at First Street, all the way around the back roads to Maxwell House. No cars were allowed on River Road because of the trucks. Just imagine a truck line from Pier A all the way down to Maxwell's. And then when the ferries used to come in, the lines went all the way down to the ferry. I'd get there at 7 o'clock in the morning and see those lines and feel like going back home. Well, that Monday morning, after I routed about 14 or 15 trucks, a guy came in and told me to get out of my seat because Exports had moved out. Well, there was so much joking and kidding down there that I just didn't believe him. "Yeah, sure," I said to him. So I kept routing the trucks, writing down their license numbers. And he said, "I'm not kidding you. This is the truth. They moved out. They're over in Brooklyn. They left the pier." When five or six longshoremen came in and asked if this was true, I knew it had to be. We were all flabbergasted. We couldn't believe it.

NM: They were gone like that. And they never said a word. That was such a big secret to keep I don't know how they did it. When the Speranza Line moved in after American Export moved out, I worked for them. Before you know it they picked me for the boss. I didn't want to be boss. Who wanted to boss these guys? I grew up with them. Remember Frankie Donofrio. He told me

better take the job, because I had the seniority. So, I took it for about two years. I was a good boss though. I gave everybody a break. If a guy wanted to get a cup of coffee, I always told him, "Go on, go ahead." Then, there were all the bars across the street.

BR: Before that, though, it was a waiting game. I forget how many months it was. Everybody was laid off at first. But Exports had a contract with McGrath, the stevedore, and McGrath had a contract with the union. These deals guaranteed a certain number of people on that pier whether there was work there or not. So, some people kept their jobs even though there was nothing to do. I know I worked. I was there when there was hardly anyone there. I just sat there seven, eight hours a day. Then we got rumors that Concordia Line was interested. They sent different representatives over. They liked the operation we had and stayed four years. At the end of the four years, they told McGrath, the stevedore, that they could get it cheaper. When they left, we spread out. Hoboken had some other garbage lines, like China Merchant and Irish Lines, come in for a while too, but they were just once-a-month operations. None of them was worth anything. I went off to Seatrain, first for a day at a time, but they kept me on for a few months. I was lucky that way. Then, Pittston came into Hoboken for a short while. It was a lousy operation. All they had was bales of rags that they shipped over to Israel. Shiploads of rags that they must have recycled over there. When they opened their list, I went out to Seatrain. They were one of the first ones in the container business.

NM: The best line was Holland America. Once that moved out in 1962, that was it. Everybody made money down there because of the passengers. When the passengers came in, everybody made money what with all the tips.

BR: Sometimes over on A, we would have three ships at a time: one on the north side, one on the south side, and one on the east side. Pier C could hold the same number, and Pier B was too narrow to take a ship on the east side, so it held only two.

NM: The day would start when the dock boss blew the whistle, just like in the movies, and everybody would go in —first gang, second gang, and so on down the line. Everybody knew where they had to go. The first gang had the number one hold, the second gang the number two hold, and so on.

BR: Each gang worked for a hatch boss, who had 21 men under him.

NM: There were dock men, deck men, and hold

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The Holland-America Oceanliner docked in Hoboken September 15, 1948. Photo courtesy of Leonard Luizzi, Sr.

men, depending on where they worked.

BR: The ships had seven hatches, and all the men knew where they had to go.

NM: It all started with the cargo laid out on the string piece, the walkway where we picked up the cargo that had to be loaded into the ship.

BR: It was like a wide sidewalk. Before that, the checkers had to measure everything. You had to have the number of cubic feet and the weight. They used long tons. That was 2240, not the regular 2000 pounds. So you had to have these figures every night and send in the totals and have all the papers set up so the stevedores each day would know how much tonnage and how many cubic feet would be on the ship. That's how they balanced it out. The stevedores would know if they had cargo before they came in to us. The paperwork was staggering. I would be there until 10, 11 o'clock at night, sometimes one o'clock in the morning. You had 150 trucks, thousands and thousands of pounds of cargo. I would set up lists for each of the seven hatches.

NM: Then the guys would come over and take it away to put it in the hull.

BR: As they filled one deck, they would put a floor down. Then they would work on another one. There might be as many as six, seven floors. Every once in a while you would see a ship listing to one side. Then you knew you had a problem. I've seen it like that. Then they would have to equalize the weight.

NM: One time, a guy had an acetylene hose break on him. He was stuck in there and couldn't get out. I had to go in and get him out. I shut everything off and went in and got him out. He still thanks me to this day.

BR: When you had a heavy load, all seven hatches would be loading, and most of it was manual. When they went down in the hold, you couldn't just drop the stuff where you were and you couldn't always work it in. I used to watch them sometimes on their bellies stocking the ship because they knew they had a heavy load and they wanted to get it all in the ship. I've seen them in there pushing the cargo in by hand.

NM: They worked hard, those guys, they had to. And the guys down below were the ones who worked the hardest.

BR: In the summer it was hotter than hell down there.

NM: I felt sorry for those guys. There was no air down there at all. And in the winter it was freezing down there.

BR: The coldest job was the crane operators, up on the ship, with the wind blowing all around them. When I was chief clerk, I had to go up to the captain with some papers sometimes, and I would go over and look down the hatch. The toughest job I ever saw was when we were sending thousands of tons of oil pipe and water pipe to Iran. That was when the shah was still there. Some of that pipe was 50 feet long. The pipe was lashed on both ends, but sometimes they would have to tilt it to get it through the hatch. More than once that stuff would fall.

NM: Yeah, and the hold men would go running up the side of the ship to get out of the way. I remember that pipe stacked up out on the farm, which was the area outside where they stacked everything up before it was loaded. They were good men. The piers sent two of us to the city council, Francis Leahy and myself, and Leo McLaughlin, one of the hiring agents, was elected to the Board of Education.

BR: The piers brought a lot of money into the city too. Some ships would stay three or four days. We worked on a system called ship's time, the amount of time a ship was in the dock.

NM: And the sailors would spend money.

BR: Some ships would head out without a full load and go down to South Carolina or Florida to take on more cargo. They worked to load a ship. They made money on the cargo. Then they would head off for the Mediterranean or the Black Sea or one of the Arab countries or Calcutta or Bombay.

NM: China too. Almost anywhere you can think of. And coming in, you would get just about everything too. A lot of food. I remember loads and loads of olives from Greece or Spain and cheap cooking oil.

BR: We exported a lot of flour. But the worst was the hides. The smell was so bad I had to leave the office.

NM: And a million flies.

BR: Handling the raw hides was awful. Some of them you could see the blood on them they were so fresh. Most of them went to Italy where they made leather products.

NM: Nobody ever asked for volunteers for that. The men would put on an apron, like a rubber sheet to handle that and rubber gloves. The guys down in the hold got the worst of it. It wasn't so bad on the dock.

BR: It all changed though.

NM: The containers changed it.

BR: In Hoboken, we had an average of seven hatches. When I worked at Seatrain, there were 14 hatches. In 24 hours work or 48 hours work, they would move six times the amount of freight. In two days they would move what it would take us two weeks to do.

NM: I went to the MOT in Bayonne, but I left after just a few years, retired when I was 62. A lot of guys got out. And I never went down to watch them tear it down.

BR: I saw it once or twice when they were starting to bang that Pier C down.

NM: The platform of the Holland America line is still there though. *[Ed. note: between this interview and press time, the platform has been removed.]*

BR: I still visualize all these men coming out at 5 o'clock, hundreds of men all coming out of all the piers and going home from work. Well, some of them may have stopped in one of the bars—240 of them we had in one square mile—on the way. Now the middle pier is gone, Pier C is half sunk in the water.

NM: The floor on Pier A is still there though.

BR: That's where they're going to build the big hotel. If somebody had told me in 1971 that there would be a high-rise luxury hotel sitting on that pier, I would've told him he had lost his mind.

NM: Everybody worked every day down there, every day. It's really sad when you think about it.

A whole way of life. Just gone.

BR: It kind of tore my heart out.



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Dear Hoboken Historical Museum:

You are to be commended for your history of Hoboken, to which my daughter and I are subscribers. I have a few stories to tell about my parents, who were born in Hoboken. Their names were Peters and McKeon. Their families moved to Hoboken from New York City around 1880. My mother was born in 1900 on June 25. Her father worked on the docks. A few days after she was born, the Hoboken docks caught fire. She was the fourth child and my grandfather was out of a job. He later got another job at the railroad station.

When my mother was around ten, she used to spend a lot of time at the baths along the Hudson in Hoboken. She became an expert swimmer. She told me that she used to sneak out the back door of the baths and dive into the Hudson. Tourists used to throw money to the swimmers and they would dive for it.

In 1915, my mother's father died in a tragic accident at the railroad yards in Hoboken. (This is the story she tells us, but I have not verified it in my research.) She said he was cleaning out the boiler with a chemical and fell into the boiler and inhaled the chemical. This happened in April 1915. He died on July 28, three days after my mother's fifteenth birthday. Her older brothers and sister were out of the house with families of their own. Times were hard, and my mother had to leave school and support two younger brothers. She worked for the telephone company. When she was 17, she met the love of her life. Her mother had a fit because she was the support of the family. At the age of 18, she eloped to New York and got married, using her sister's address as her home. She lived with her mother until 1920 as single (according to the 1920 Census). When she did move out of the house is unknown. My oldest brother was born in 1921.

My father, Arthur J. McKeon, was a policeman in Hoboken and used to ride his motorcycle along Bloomfield Avenue—with a tennis racket in his sidepack. My mother played tennis, so I assume they met there and played tennis together. My father used to coach a baseball team. He loved sports. He died of TB at age 39 in 1931. I was four years old, so my information is gathered from research and word of mouth. I never knew any of the McKeons until I started my research in 1990. I have since found all the McKeon cousins and have traced the family back to my great-great-great grandparents on both sides.

Dear Hoboken Historical Museum:

I lived in Hoboken from 1918 to 1952 and am pleased to be a member of your organization. Having the New York Yankees win the World Series reminded me of the years before World War II (and before television), when the *Jersey Observer* displayed a large painted replica of a baseball diamond on the Newark Street side of the Observer building. On it they showed the play-by-play action of World Series games. Figures representing the batters and runners would be moved from inside the window, and the scores and statistics would be shown as they were received. Many people would gather in the street at the corner of Newark and Bloomfield. This was almost as exciting as being at the ballpark.

Sincerely,
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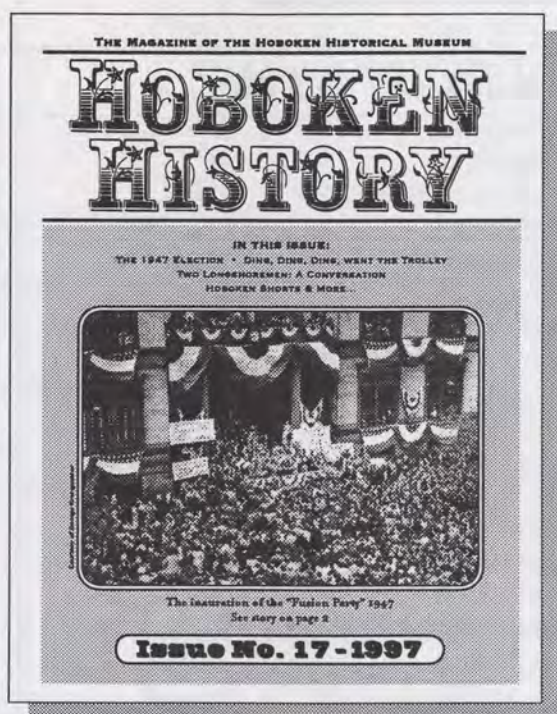
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