

Kid



Recollections of
PATSY LOUIS FRED A



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A chapbook from the "Vanishing Hoboken" series
of the Hoboken Oral History Project

Vanishing Hoboken

The Hoboken Oral History Project

A Project of
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and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library



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HOBOKEN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:
Holly Metz (Chapbooks Editor)
Melanie Best, Ruth Charnes

DESIGNER: Ann Marie Manca
PROOFREADER: Paul Neshamkin

Contemporary photo of Patsy Louis Freda holding a painting based on a 50th wedding anniversary photo of himself with "Kid," 2012 by Robert Foster. Unless otherwise noted, all photographs and letters reproduced in this chapbook are courtesy of the Freda family.

[WHAT CAN I TELL YOU?]
JUST THAT I MET AND MARRIED MY GIRL,
EDNA MARGARET McLAUGHLIN.

I called her "Kid."

I FELL IN LOVE WITH THAT WOMAN
THE FIRST DAY I LAID EYES ON HER.

—Patsy Louis Freda, April 2, 2012



Contemporary portrait of Edward and Frances, looking at each other, painted by a 50-year-old woman, a friend of Edward's, with "Ed" and "Fran" by Robert Farnham, a friend of Edward's, at the age of 10 and 11, respectively, in the 1950s, and a portrait of the couple by the artist.

INTRODUCTION

Although this chapbook contains the recollections of one interviewee, at its heart it conveys the story of two lives, intertwined—of Patsy Louis Freda and his “bride and best friend,” Edna (McLaughlin) Freda—and the lives they created and touched during their many years together.

Their courtship, begun in the late 1940s, was unusual in that they went forward knowing their different ethnic backgrounds—the Irish and the Italians were then at loggerheads in Hoboken—and the bout of childhood polio that had made walking difficult for Edna, could become obstacles, if they let them. They did not. The muscled dockworker and truck driver from 302 Madison Street married the petite blue-eyed city secretary from 1 Willow Terrace, the woman he called “Kid.” The two settled at 11 Willow Terrace, down the block from Edna’s parents.

Despite doctors’ pronouncements that Edna would not have children, they did, bringing Bill into the world in 1959 and Scott in 1966. And the Fredas opened their home to two more: neighborhood boys, Ben and Felix, became “unofficial adopted sons”—watched over and fed and loved by Edna and Patsy. Their family photo albums are filled with images of longtime friends and relatives laughing together, arms entwined, growing and aging over the years.

Edna Freda died on July 26, 2008. Four years later, when members of the Hoboken Oral History Project came to interview Patsy, he was still bereft—and also profoundly grateful for the “good life I had with her.”

Patsy Freda was interviewed on February 3 and April 2, 2012, by Holly Metz, with assistance by Robert Foster, at the Freda family home. Copies of the transcripts from which this chapbook was derived have been deposited in the Historical Collection of the Hoboken Public Library and in the archives of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

September 20, 1951

Dearest Pat:

I guess you know just about how much I love you and how much I want to marry you. But we will have to wait a while just so that we can make everything about as perfect as possible. I know that you want that as much as I do.

I never had anyone who I felt as close to as I do you and never had I had someone to confide in so freely as I do with you. I guess that is the beginning of mutual trust that is so important.

In saying I love you to you it is said so freely with the knowledge that you also feel the same way. What more could a girl ask for.

I have you and that's all I need to make my life happy and I can honestly say, right from the bottom of my heart, I love you.

Edna

Opposite top: John M. Freda, circa 1924; Rose Freda, circa 1930s.



From Italy to Hoboken

My mother [Rose] came from Italy, along with one sister. [And she ended up being] married twice. [My mother's] first husband got killed. He was run over by a train. He worked for the railroad. From what I understand, as it's told, there was a curve, and he tried to jump off the train. He fell under the train, and got cut by the wheels. She had two [boys] and two [girls when he died.]

She married my father and had a son and three daughters. My father [John] worked for New York Central, too, until he retired. [He] came from a town outside of Naples called Santa Nicola. [In the United States, he] was a track man on the railroad. He kept the rails connected. Him and three other guys. It was a tough job.

[How did they meet? I don't know. But I know] he met my mother up in Port Jervis, [New York,] after her husband died. The two got together.

Growing up on Madison Street

I was born at 308 Madison Street, July 13, 1929. Then my grandmother bought 302 Madison Street, and that's where we grew up. It's now a park. They tore down 300, 302, and 304.

[The neighborhood was mostly] Italian, and Yugoslav. On the next block—the whole block was all Yugoslav. On our side it was mostly Italians.

[What do I remember about the neighborhood?] You could sit outside anytime, man or woman, and nobody would bother you. They didn't touch anybody in the neighborhood. There was a garage around the corner—no openings. All four sides were closed in. Double walls. You got into the place from underneath. There were no openings. Not even a skylight. [Were people aware of this? Yes.] We all knew. You don't ask questions.

[A lot of neighbors were on relief during the Depression.] My mother went down many times to the city to get us shoes. The guy who was [in charge]—they called him the poormaster. If you got shoes that were two sizes too big, you'd grow into them. By the time they fit you, they were worn out.

My mother died when I was ten years old. She had a hard life. Eight kids. It's too bad that she never lived long enough to see any of her children get married, and her grandchildren.

But we all got along pretty good. The family stuck together. In a tenement, we each had our own job. In the wintertime, pipes would freeze and we'd get called out of bed at 1:00 in the morning, given a blow torch, get underneath the house, and free up the pipes. [Three of us kids] were the gofers. My aunt was the super. You did what she told you to do, when she told you to do it. You had to be careful. You had to keep moving [with



*Patsy Louis Freda on Madison Street,
Hoboken, 1930.*

the torch] or you'd get the beams on fire. [But you had] to get the water to run again. You'd freeze your tootsies off. You'd get out of bed in the morning, and you'd run like a rabbit to the kitchen stove, to keep warm.

We were on the top floor, four flights up. The only thing good about that was that in the summertime you would get the first breeze.

Starting Work at Twelve

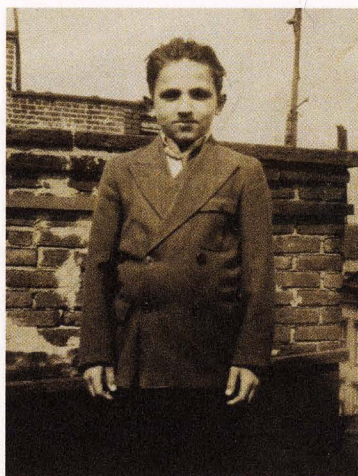
I used to work. I used to get any job I could find. [I started] when I was twelve years old. [One job was] delivering newspapers. You'd go down by the ferry, and the New York news [deliverymen] would roll up, and you would buy as many papers as you had money for, and [re-sell them.] That's how I made money.

I worked for a peddler [on our street,] selling vegetables, fruits. [The peddler, Mike Ferrante, and his brother, worked out of a] horse and wagon.

Corbisero's has a bakery down in the basement, and I worked for him. [I was a] gofer. I also worked for Carlos Bakery. Same thing. You washed pans, you set them up for the next baker. There would be a wedding coming up, and they'd make these cakes. He'd show you how to make a tray.

I worked for a butcher [on Madison Street, too.] I learned a lot from him—how to handle meat, cut meat, skin a calf. I used to skin a calf in twelve minutes.

I did a lot. I shined shoes. Any place, every place. I carried the box with me. [I would go to bars and shine shoes.] At that time, bars used to sell food. It was family oriented. You'd play pool, or play cards. Women went into the bars, but they went in through the back. Some bars you went through the front, some you went through the back. This bar around the corner—you went into the hallway, into the back of the bar. [But women usually] didn't stay that long.



Having Fun.

[We had fun, too. On Madison Street, we played a lot of street games.] Kickball. You would toss pennies, or caps. [Kids usually invented their own games] because you had no money. You would find rubber bands on the street, get a piece of cardboard, and keep wrapping rubber bands, and you have a ball. But you've got to watch that thing. You get hit with that, and you get hurt.

You played in the street. And you went to the Rivoli Theatre. It was right next to the Washington Savings Bank. That's a parking lot now. You went there because they had a double feature, and cartoons. [At the Rivoli,] they used to sell hot dogs—everything. They'd go up and down the aisle.

Then you had the Fabian, the U.S., the Rialto [theatres.] We had a couple of them. The Rialto was an Italian theatre. They would hold Italian plays. At the Fabian you would have a stage performance every so often, and after a while they would have bingo.

[On Sunday, our parents] would say: Go to the theatre. Go to the movies. Get lost. [After I had a family of my own, I did the same.] I used to tell my kids, "Take a hike. Go."

No. 1 School

[What was school like?] I had a schoolteacher at No. 1 School, and [we] didn't get along—I used to get bad marks. I wasn't a good student. [And if you weren't a good student, they] didn't pay attention to you. Some kids got along. I never got along with the schools. In fact, I met one of the schoolteachers later on in life, and she said to me, "I suppose you're a truck driver or a mechanic. That's the only job you could get." I said, "I'll bet I'm making four times what you make!"

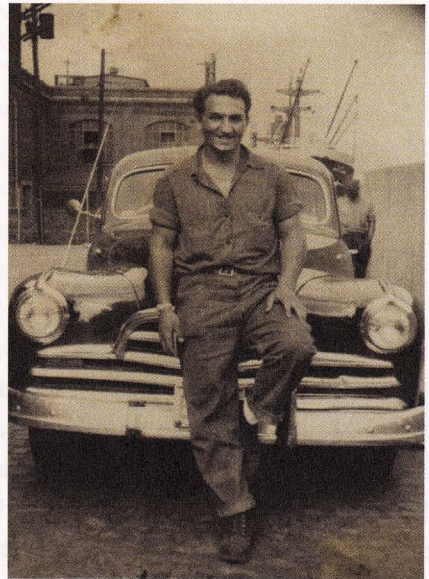
[But there were a few teachers I really liked. One was] Miss Gonzales. She was fantastic. She was tough, but she was a good teacher. And Miss Faulkner was another one. Miss Faulkner had to be 6'1", 6'2". I saw her years and years later. She lived at one of the two towers on Hudson Street, [Marine View Towers.] I'm coming up River Street and I knew her right away. [And she remembered me, too.] My middle name is Louis, and she said, "How are you, Louis? Are you married?" She was a good teacher.

Leaving School

[I left school] in 1945. My sister, [Grace], who was a little younger than me —[she] and my father never got along, and every time he got a head of steam, he would swing [at her] and I'd get hit. [I was trying to protect her.] I said, "Every time he gets mad at you I'm the one that gets it." "You're supposed to get it. You're my older brother." I said, "Let me get out of the house before I get killed." I went to the post office [in Hoboken], upstairs. There was a recruiting office up there and I joined the Army. [I was]

seventeen. [Then I went to the Army Building in downtown Manhattan.] I went from 39 Whitehall Street right to Fort Dix. I didn't even go home. I went right to Fort Dix.

We took training, and I wound up getting sick. I had to take the training all over again. [But] I never took a leave, so I got out of the Army forty-five days ahead of time.



[When I came back,] I found a job [on the Hoboken piers. To work,] you had to be in a city gang. Like Bob would have his own group, and when they called Bob, his group would go with him. They had six or seven gangs. My uncle had one.

[I worked for Holland America.] I worked on the long dock—Eighth Street. The long dock is the only one that goes along the waterfront this way, sticking out into the water.

Meeting Edna McLaughlin

And then I met Edna.

At first, she didn't like me. [We met outside of the Blue Point Lounge.] The Blue Point was at Eighth and Willow, and in [the] front you had a bar-restaurant, and in the back you had this huge room where the kids showed up for pizza, clams, mussels, and everything else. That's where we were heading, [my friends and I.] I parked the car on Eighth and Park, and



*Edna McLaughlin,
April 1951.*

I heard something hit the street. What it was, was [Edna] in her wheelchair, and two girls were pushing her around. The old wheelchair she had—she had an old wicker. It had big wheels

on it. They weren't careful. They were banging on this curb, off this curb, and I remember yelling at them, and saying something to the effect, "Hey, lady, do you need a chauffeur?" I don't remember what she answered.

Anyway, we went into the Blue Point, into the front end, and there she was, sitting in the booth. I slid into the seat in front of her in the booth, and she politely told me she was with her girlfriends. [But] I took one look at that face and those blue eyes, and I was hooked.

[I had to find out who she was.] I found those two girls, found [out] her name [from them], her phone number, where she worked, how old [she was.] Margie Morley and Mary McLaughlin. They're the ones that gave me the push.

But it took me six months to get a date with her.

Well, every time I'd call up, she wasn't there. And when I wasn't working, I used to pay her mother a visit [at 1 Willow Terrace.] I said, "I'm interested in your daughter but she's never here." "Do you know what's wrong?" "Yes, I know what's wrong with your daughter—polio." I said, "I met her that way. I'm interested in your daughter. I want to get to know her." I said, "Every time I call here, she's not there." She said, "You call—she'll be here."

And next time I called, [her mother says] "Hey Pat." I heard Edna in the background [*imitates a stage whisper*] "I don't want to talk..." [*Laughs.*]



*Postcard, Blue Point Lounge, 727 Willow Avenue, Hoboken.
Courtesy Hoboken Historical Museum.*

[But] we went out. I don't know what I would have done if she'd said no. I know one thing: I wasn't leavin.' I wasn't going any place.

I found out later on, the fact that she was handicapped was a big reason [she was hesitant.] But that didn't matter to me. I fell in love with that face the first moment I laid eyes on it. And I wasn't leaving. I was here for the long haul.

I Would Be Her Legs

[She got polio] at the age of eleven months. She got that polio, and one of her brothers got polio. But her brother pulled out of it; she didn't. They didn't know how to treat anybody with polio because the muscles would tighten up. Her mother would wrap her in hot blankets, to keep her limber. [Edna] had polio in different quadrants of her body. Like her left leg, the only thing she could move on her left leg was the toes down. She couldn't pick [it] up, because her leg was dead. Her right leg—they took the shinbone out and put it in both ankles, because she had “dropsies.”

When we started going out together, I found out that when you're going with somebody [in a wheelchair], you become her legs. I'd walk you up to the theatre. [But with Edna,] I'd bring her up [in the car,] drop her off, park the car, and then go back. [At the end, I'd do it in reverse and] pick her up. She couldn't do it. I would be her legs. I learned early on what my priorities were.



Edna (third from left) with friends (left to right) Margie, Mary, Lorraine, and Jen, ca. 1940s.

But... She Was Irish and I Was Italian

[The Italian kids and the Irish kids didn't get along for a time. As an Italian kid,] you couldn't get past Willow Avenue. You had to stay west of Willow Avenue. The Irish kids [were] east of Willow Avenue. They'd have fights.

[Where did the animosity come from?] The parents. My own parents. The Irish. When [Edna and I] were getting married, my father was the only one I thought I'd have problems with. Because my wife came in as the only Irish one in the family.

[My parents and I] had to go visit her parents. She lived down at number 1 [Willow Terrace.] I said [to Edna], "If my father throws a cold towel on us, expect it. You're an Irishman." So we went in, and it turned out, my father seeing her father—they were drinking buddies! "Hey, John!" "Hey, Mac." That's over.

[And that's what happened in the city, too—eventually.] After a while, you got along. You had to get along.

It Took A Hurricane

[What can I tell you?] Just that I met and married my girl. Edna will be forever and a day my girl. I fell in love with that woman the first day I laid eyes on her.

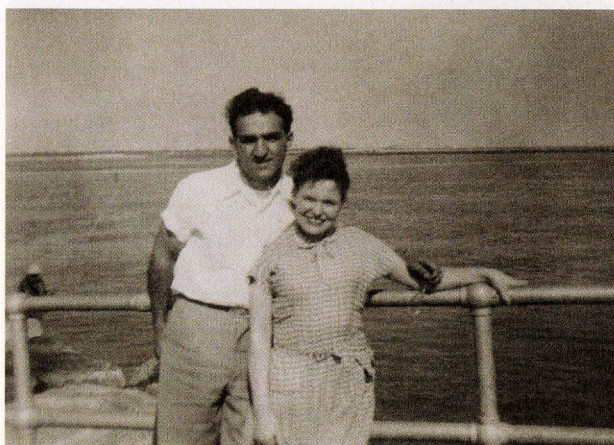
I did walk away one time—I wanted to break up—and I was stupid. I went home and said, "What the hell did I do?!" I said, "I've got to find some way to get back there."

And it took a hurricane. The city was blacked out. The only light was the moon in the sky. [I walked through the hurricane.] I walked from my house to her house. By the time I got there I was soaking wet. Before I go any further—my wife was the only person I know who could give an ice cube a cold. I knocked on the side door, and she says to me, “What do you want?” Oooh! That’s when I apologized. I said, “I am not leaving here until you forgive me. You can call half the cops, I’m not leaving.”

[And she did forgive me.] I never did it again. As God is my judge, I don’t know why I did it. I should never have left that spot.

In Between Shifts, A Honeymoon

I **[was working on] Pier #1 or #2**. I worked on the dock. I drove a forklift. I drove a crane. [And] I was also a relief driver for Continental Baking—Wonder Bread. (They made Wonder Bread here. Brooklyn made the rye and whole wheat bread.) Sunday night I would go to the depots, both Asbury and Trenton. Monday I went to Trenton. Tuesday I went to Asbury. Wednesday afternoon I went to Brooklyn. Thursday and Saturday I was off.



Newlyweds, Patsy and Edna Freda, September 1953.



*Top and bottom: Patsy and Edna at the McLaughlin family home, December 1951;
Edna at the Street Department office, Hoboken City Hall, ca. 1950s.*

[So when Edna and I got married,] we had a four-day honeymoon. Atlantic City. I couldn't get any more than four days [from Continental.] When I came back, they said, "What the heck are you doing here?" I said, "Well, you only gave me four days." He said, "Get outta here! Go home."

[But Edna was working, too.] She was a secretary at City Hall. The Street Department. Hughie McGuire was her boss; Johnny Grogan was the mayor at the time. [He was Irish American, too, like Edna. He liked to needle her:] "How could you change from McLaughlin to Freda?!"

11 Willow Terrace

[When did we move to 11 Willow Terrace?] The house became available about 1949. You needed \$1,500 as a down payment, and that was like asking for \$15 million. My mother-in-law's friend was from the Bronx. She said, "What do you need it for?" We told her, and she said, "I'll give you \$1,500." So my wife—big shot—says, "We'll pay you back in a year." And we did. I got hurt on the docks and I got a settlement. The check I got was for \$1,500. I paid the lawyer off [and we paid my mother-in-law's friend from the Bronx.]

[We didn't have much to start. When] we moved in it looked like a doctor's office. We had a card table and two chairs. We had jelly jars as glasses. We had a stove [but] we had no refrigerator. We bought just enough food for dinner [because we] couldn't keep it. [Eventually we got a refrigerator.]



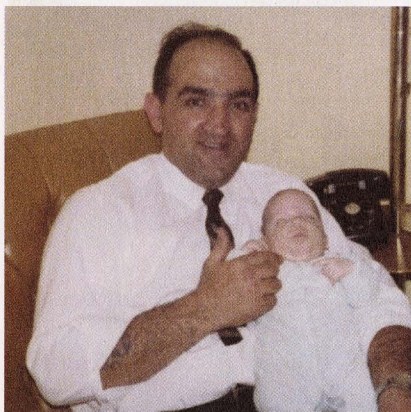
Patsy's car in Willow Terrace, circa 1953.

“Kid, you’re pregnant”

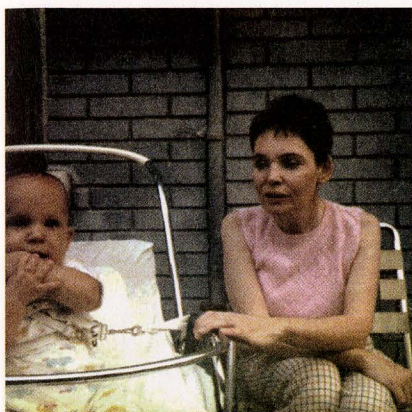
They told us early on there would be no children. That’ll show you how much doctors know. I was looking at her across the dinner table—she’s sitting over there. I called her “Kid.” I said, “Kid, you’re pregnant.” And she says to me, “You’re out of your mind.” I said, “Take it from me, you’re pregnant.” She was pregnant. When you think about it, in hindsight, it was kind of dangerous. Because she walked with crutches. But she held together.

Right from the beginning they knew, right away, it was going to be a Caesarean section. The only problem we had was when Bill was born and I went down to the hospital. I knew when we parked, I was going to carry my son in. I’d never handled a baby before! I was a wreck. My wife said, “He’s not going to break!” I had him like this [*tentatively holding the baby with arms outstretched.*] One week later, I tucked him under my arm. [*Carrying the baby like a football.*] “Let’s go!”

And six years later, I said the same thing [to Edna. “Kid, you’re pregnant.”] That’s when Scott was born. Two healthy boys.



Left to right: Patsy and second son Scott, 1966; eldest son Bill in Willow Terrace, 1964.



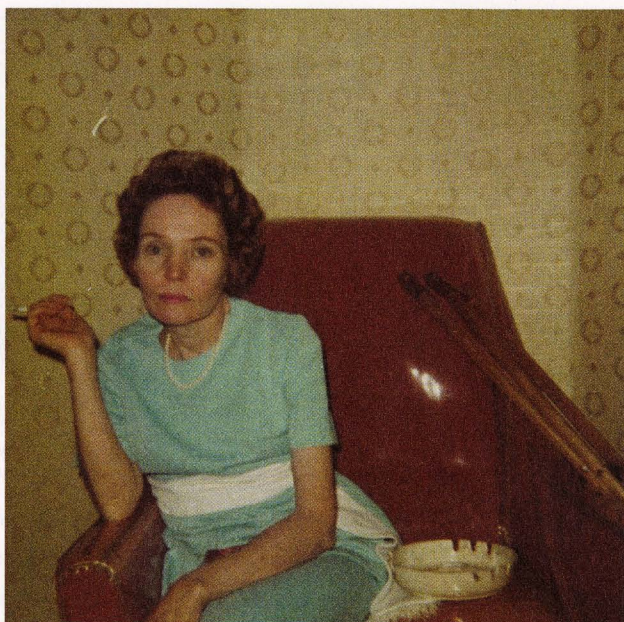
Left to right: Edna and Bill, 1961; Patsy, Edna, Bill and Scott in the Terrace, 1972.

Unofficial Adopted Sons

[We also had two unofficial, adopted sons.] Felix was the first guy who got a key to this place. He] went to school with Bill [my eldest son.] The other one was Ben. Ben was one year behind Bill in school. When Bill graduated, they were all going out for the party and Ben couldn't go simply because he didn't have a jacket. And [Ben] looked at me. . . . I knew what that meant. I took the jacket off right on Clinton Street here, gave him my jacket. And he brought it back to me. Ben, you give him a dime, he'll give you ten dollars in return..

I never met his mother and father. He started coming when he was 15 years old and by that time his mother and father were dead. The only one he had left was his sister, and she was more interested in who the heck the Fredas were. So my wife said: "Don't tell her anything, just tell her to come over any time. Don't call, just come over, any time." She gets here at 5:30 and we're going to sit down for supper. She showed up. And she seen what kind of people we were, that we were looking out for his interests. And from that time on, he's been in and out of here. We wanted to officially adopt him. He said, "How much more of a son could I be than I am right now?"

*Edna Freda
at home, 1972.*



A Fighter

The kids are all good. They always stuck close to home, and did what they were told to do. Edna would help them with their homework [and] I would go to the PTA meetings. [*Raises his eyebrows.*]

Originally, we belonged to OLG [Our Lady of Grace Church]. At that time, St. Ann's School was a better school than OLG, so we went down to St. Ann's, to see the pastor. We had to make a donation. The donation was made—agreed upon—and then he said, "When it comes time for the PTA meetings. . . ." He didn't expect my wife to show up, he expected *me* to show up. I explained the hours I was working, that there was a possibility that I wouldn't be able to have supper before I got to him. And he said, "You can miss a couple of meals." At which point, Edna stood up, poked him in the stomach, and said, "You oughta miss a couple of meals!" [*Laughter.*] "Well, you work it out between you," [the priest said.] "I expect him to show."

[When we got out,] I said, "Do you realize he could've thrown us out of there?" [And the very] next time she saw him, she locked horns with

him again! [I joked:] “No wonder you’re Irish. You keep fighting with them.” [But] the kids got a good education.

[Yes, Edna was strong willed. Her mother encouraged her to be that way. Before I married Edna,] my mother-in-law said, “Do not do for my daughter. Let my daughter do for herself. Do not help her.”

I went along with that. And it scared the hell out of me. [After we were married,] I came in one night and the wheel chair was sitting in the middle of the doorway there, and nobody [was] in it. Edna was on the floor. She had two buckets of water. One bucket of water, one bucket of soap. [She’s washing the floor! I said,] “Are you out of your mind? How do you expect to get back up in your chair?” “You’re going to pick—” “Oh, no. You’re going to stay there.” She wouldn’t get up. [She kept doing what she set out to do.] But you expected that from her.

[She wanted her independence.] She walked with crutches first, [as long as she could.] And she drove [our] car, [pushing] the gas pedal from her hip. After work, at night, to clear her head, [she] used to take a drive.

Getting a Route

[After I stopped working on the piers,] I worked for Automotive [car carrier] up here on top of Gorge Road. I got a job driving, hauling cars. [But that] was seasonal. Your cars ran out. If they were going to come up with a new car, then you had like a month where there’s no work, because there’s no cars. Then you started driving cars again. I said, “I can’t do it. I got to get me a [steady] job.”

I went from Automotive to hauling freight—first Anchor, then DC International. A friend of mine got me the job, that’s why I stayed there. [The truck drivers were unionized. This was in the fifties.] I was a teamster. I was at the bottom of the list, and I worked my way up. [At first],



Pat (far left) with fellow workers at DC International, ca. 1964.

you worked sometimes,[and sometimes] you didn't work. As each guy retired, you'd start moving up the list, or they expanded the list.

After a while I got a route. [We'd start] where the bus barn is at, on the curve, on Route #3. The barn used to be there. There were eighty-nine doors. They used to send me into New York City. I saw downtown. Eventually I wound up going up to Riverdale. You have your own route that you do. You know your customers. They knew you. From 260th Street, coming this way toward the bridge, I'd cover all across the bridge at night.

[Did we socialize?] You got friendly with the guys you were working with. You were in the same category. We used to have Christmas parties, or barbecues in the summertime. They would find someplace. You'd get eighty or ninety guys going.

"Big Tough Truck Driver"

[Looking at photo album, pauses before a photo of himself, back from work, playing with one of his sons. He taps the photo and laughs.] Big tough truck driver.

I stayed there [at DC International], and I retired from there. I retired because my legs gave way at the age of fifty-six, fifty-seven. In the wintertime, because it would get so cold, I would rub my legs, to keep them warm. [I thought:] "I've got to get out of this." I talked to my wife. I could retire. And I did.

[Some people have trouble when they retire.] I was more interested in coming home to my wife and my family. I remember [Edna's] mother, two weeks before we got married, she called me down to [her house.] "Do you love my daughter?" [Begins to get emotional.] "Yes. You know I love your daughter." "Promise me two things: Love her and take care of her."



Edna and Patsy on their wedding day, Our Lady of Grace Church, Hoboken, September 20, 1953.

Dear Pat:

9/20/83

This is our thirtieth anniversary! I know that you feel, as I do, our love has grown deeper over the years. We understand each other perfectly, we are patient with each other, considerate. I do think the Good Lord (and my mother) planned it that way with infinite wisdom.

I would never exchange what we have for anyone else's riches, for we have it all.

You've been an ideal husband and father. I've been a good wife too! Perhaps it would have been easier for you to have someone more responsible to your dreams, but would they have been as lovable as me for all these years, or would you have been so contented.

Truthfully, I love you more today than I did thirty years ago. Our sons are a tribute to that love, and dear Barbara fits in our dreams so well. She is so much a part of our lives.

And what of our adopted sons. We must have done something right. They love us, as we do them. They too know, that whatever they are or want to be, they are part of us.

We have always had the best. We never had to look for it, it was there.

I love you very much - much more than thirty years ago.

Kiddo

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 twenty 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 over 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 commute 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 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 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. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, the Hoboken Oral History Project transcribed and edited several oral histories to produce a series of "Vanishing Hoboken" chapbooks. Since 2002, twenty-four chapbooks have been published in the series, with the

support of the Historical Commission, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and, more recently, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Vanishing Hoboken Chapbooks

The editor of this series chose 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 *Encyclopedia 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, legends 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 reader-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.

*A Project of
The Friends of the Hoboken Library and
The Hoboken Historical Museum*