

HOBOKEN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: TOMMY VERNAGLIA

INTERVIEWER: MICHAEL SILVER

LOCATION: TOMMY'S HOME: 1251 BLOOMFIELD STREET

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SIDE A

MS: Tommy, How old are you?

TV: 79. I'll be 80 in August.

MS: Congratulations.

TV: Thank you.

MS: That's a long time. Tell me about...Were you born in Hoboken?

TV: I was born in Hoboken. Yes.

MS: And where? Tell me about that.

TV: I was born in Hoboken at 612 Jefferson Street. I remember very clearly...it was in the back house. My birthday was August the 6th 1921.

MS: And what was it like growing up back on Jefferson Street...in that area? What were some of the games you played? Who were your friends?

TV: My recollection is that it was wonderful. It was like a neighborhood of people together. Very friendly.

We had our mothers and our aunts...most sitting on a bench. They were working with vegetables...cleaning the peas...and we were playing in the street. At that time you could play in the street...there was no cars...and the streets were two ways. No more one way. They were two ways. That's how much room we had.

We were a good gang. About six or seven of us together and we played every night. We played such games as Johnny-on-the-pony, ring-alevio, kicking-the-can and hide-and-seek. We got along wonderfully. We didn't fight...there were a few scraps, but very minor, never nothing serious.

I recall in those days...we didn't smoke. We were fourteen, fifteen years old and we didn't smoke.

I remember we had two cops on our beat...one was named John and one was named Frank. And we respected these cops so much that ...once in awhile we might play a little crap game...you know, for pennies...and we had to have a watchman on the corner and when the cop was coming he would yell out: "Chickee the cop!" and boy did we run! We respected those cops. We were afraid of them. It was very important that we respect them.

MS: When was this? This was before World War Two right?

TV: Yes. I was fifteen so you could figure.

MS: We're talking the thirties? The forties?

TV: Yeah...between thirty and forty. I was fourteen so it was '35.

MS: So what kind of town was Hoboken then? What did it rely on?

TV: Well, what I remember was that we were very poor. Most of our gang...or fellas...we all had part-time jobs to help our families because...like I said...we were poor. I shined shoes...I delivered papers...and if you didn't do that...some of the fellas worked on a milk wagon helping the milkman deliver the milk. At that time we had ice boxes...the ice wagon would come along and give you a 25-cent piece of ice or a 10-cent piece of ice and he would usually have a helper...the one that owned the wagon...so we used to carry the ice up three or four flights and put it in the ice box.

We were very poor. I remember when my mother used to go shopping, we couldn't worry about every little thing, you couldn't buy everything you wanted. But it was clean...it was beautiful...not many disruptions.

MS: But Hoboken...was it a port town then? Was it a cargo town? I mean...was there longshoremen and stuff at that time?

TV: Yes...as I got older I started to get interested in such things and noticed that we had longshoremen on River Street...the docks...and how the ships used to come in...the docks...they used to unload everything on the street and the pier and the longshoremen were busy working loading the ships.

I remember we had so many theatres in Hoboken...and you could get in the theatre for five cents and ten cents...in them days you could see two pictures and a comedy and the news. And sometimes they gave you a bar of chocolate when you went in. But the better movies were uptown they were called the Fabian and the US. They were a little more. They were 15 cents and the Fabian was 25 cents because if you went at night to the Fabian you'd get two feature pictures and a comedy and then they would show you five or ten live stage acts.

MS: I've heard you say something about "uptown." So there was an uptown and a downtown. What was the difference?

TV: Well...Willow avenue divided Hoboken that time. We used to go from Jackson Street, which was the farthest part of the west part of Hoboken up toward the east part. When you hit Willow Avenue, that ended the poorer section, and from Willow Avenue up which is Garden, Park, Bloomfield and then Washington Street ...that was the up...

MS: What was the difference between the two parts of the town?

TV: Well...downtown we were laborers. Uptown we had most of the Irish people and the Dutch people. They were lawyers, they were doctors they were more like the upper crust...and they could afford the better rents.

MS: So it was like a class distinction?

TV: Yes, yes. It was. It certainly was.

MS: Was Hoboken a tough town in those days? Was it a rough town?
What was the reputation at that time?

TV: Well, in my recollection...the docks were the only place that I could remember that there might have been some mafia or some dealings going on because a lot of rough people worked there, but aside from that, there was nothing I could remember that happened in Hoboken that was bad.

MS: But you used to be ashamed of being from Hoboken?

TV: At one time, yes, at one time. Because Hoboken...when you walked in the streets...you pass some of these houses...you have an odor from the house there... they weren't well kept. Downtown anyway. A lot of them were empty and they had

rats...they weren't too clean. There was garbage thrown all over in front of the houses.

Not too many people took care of them that well.

But I remember my mother...and her relatives...we were all very clean. I remember I had to scrub floors. They were wooden floors in them days. We didn't have no carpet. We kept a pretty clean place.

MS: When you told people where you were from what did you used to say?

TV: Well yes. It was so bad...sometimes we'd travel ...my mother and I... some people would stop us and ask us where we were from. Or if I had to fill out an application or something, I would lie and tell them I was from Jersey City. That's how bad it was. Hoboken was really bad.

MS: It's changed a lot hasn't it?

TV: Yes, It's changed a lot.

MS: So you grew up in the western part of town. There were Italian families in the western part?

TV: Yes. Mostly Italian. Maybe a few Polacks...and the colored people...they were separated from us. The colored people...all I remember is they were on Newark Street. That's the southern part of the city...and they occupied Newark Street and maybe First Street. I don't think I ever saw anybody past Second Street because Hoboken goes all the way from Newark Street all the way to Fourteenth Street. It's just a mile long.

MS: Well, at one point... When did you open your business? You had a business. In which part of town?

TV: Yes. I opened up a luncheonette. I had three previous luncheonettes before this one, and finally I came to Hoboken. I was ready to give up on luncheonettes and go to work because it was hard work. I finally found a place here. It was eighth and Jefferson...and a crippled man owned it. He got word out to me that he wanted to see me. He knew that I was in the luncheonette business and when I went to see him, he was in pretty bad shape. He was shaking and he told me, he said...he practically gave me the key. He said: "Here...here's the key and you can have the place for two thousand dollars."

Well, then, I looked around and saw all stainless steel background and the stoves and everything. As much as I wanted to get out, I said to myself: "I'll take this because I can build it up and get good money back." And I took it and that's how I got this luncheonette.

MS: What was it called?

TV: Tommy's Luncheonette. Of all the luncheonettes I had, I didn't make nothing at all, but this place on Jefferson Street...it was a gold mine for me. It was one of the best things that could happen in my life. Because the location was two blocks away from the Demarest High School and I used to have all the kids from the high school...I was always busy. You know, I made a good dollar there. That's how I could afford to buy my house.

MS: This house?

TV: This house. That's right. Because I never owned anything before that, except a luncheonette. But then I saw the money coming in and I got a real estate and he took me around and took me to this place at 12th and Bloomfield. I liked it and I bought the house...for 16 thousand dollars.

MS: It's worth a lot more than that now.

TV: Yes. You better believe it.

MS: Hoboken's changed a lot. What do you think of the changes?

TV: Well...I like and I don't like. When I was younger there were so many things that could be done to Hoboken...and eventually, when we did get it. I remember when you bought a house for six or eight, ten or twelve thousand dollars you could get triple the amount...and as the years went by it got better and better. It seemed like a new wave of people come in. Because as we grew up...when we were kids and we grew up...most of us that grew up...the schools weren't so good in Hoboken at that time. As the younger people got older and they got married and they had families, they moved out of Hoboken. And there was a time when Hoboken was practically empty. And that's when we started getting these what they call yuppies started to come in to town. And hippies...whatever they were. A little at a time they started to come in and that's when it started to change.

MS: Yeah, but Tommy... a lot of people moved out at that time. You didn't.

TV: No, I didn't.

MS: Why not?

TV: Well, I had my business here, for one. And I had my mother-in-law and father-in-law here...both my parents had passed away...and we bought a house on first and Jefferson...an eight family house ...and we were partners and we were settled there and that's why I never moved.

MS: But here you are in uptown Hoboken...it's the fancier section of Hoboken...

TV: Well the reason I'm here is that where I was on Jefferson Street. I had four railroad rooms and I had a daughter and two sons and they were occupying the same room, so I told my wife: "We gotta do something about this." Especially my daughter...I wanted to get her a room. And that's why I moved from Jefferson Street and I found this place.

MS: Yeah...but you never moved out of Hoboken.

TV: Oh no. No, I never did.

MS: Why? Tell me why you didn't go to Paramus like everybody else or some other place.

TV: I imagine, like everybody knows, you gotta travel the whole United States to find a place like Hoboken because...you have everything at your fingertips.. Matter of fact for me...I gotta go to my chiropractor, I walk one block. I gotta go for my foot doctor, I walk two blocks. I gotta go to my regular physician, I go right down one block down on Bloomfield Street. And if you want to go to the post office, it's two blocks away. We have a beautiful hospital in Hoboken. I'm only about eight blocks from

there. You have the library. Everything is at your fingertips. It's a wonderful place for people, especially if you don't drive. You don't have to drive in Hoboken. You can go anyplace you want. We have buses on Washington Street. We have a good senior citizens program. Unless you have reasons whether you want to better yourself or get a bigger house or something like that, there's no reason why you should leave Hoboken if you're satisfied with it.

MS: That's very smart. Tell me something...We're right across the river from Manhattan...from New York City...known as the capital city of the world. Do you ever go over there? And look at it?

TV: Yes (pause). I got married in Paris. I was a G.I. and I was married in Paris...

MS: World War Two?

TV: In World War Two. And that's when I got her mother and father and everybody here and we were together and we bought the house. Of course we went to New York. My wife...they were crazy about it. Many a time I used to take them to the Empire State Building. Almost every year we used to go to Rockefeller Center. We went to the statue of liberty. We went to the zoo at Central Park. And I had to show them all these points and it used to be my joy. But now I'm getting old and my legs don't carry me no more, so we haven't been to New York for two years, and I miss it.

MS: It's still there.

TV: It's still there and I hoping my legs get better and I'm going to see the doctor.

MS: Great. Apparently you went overseas to war right? In World War Two. Then you came back to Hoboken.

TV: Right. I was very fortunate. I was a cook in the army and I cooked for the 95th technical intelligence outfit. I was with the ordinance.

To show you how lucky I was...when you work in the kitchen, you have 24 hours on and 24 off so I was off every other day. And I had plenty of time...I have an album of pictures if you want to see.

One day as I was going...walking along the street...and I went into a dentist. I wanted him to check my teeth. And there's this man, he's doing some cement work on the floor, and the dentist was Greek, and I said: "*Tu parla Italiano?*" I said: "Do you talk Italian?" And boy! This man doing the ...this contractor....jumped up and he said : "Are you Italian?" He wouldn't let me go. He forced me. He said: "Come to my house for a nice spaghetti supper." So I couldn't refuse that. And when I went there...there was my future wife. She was sitting at a machine, sewing, making pants. And to make a long story short, that's how we met. I used to go there every Sunday for dinner and one thing led to another and....I fell in love.

But I'll tell you one thing. When I was there, that family was so tight that my father-in-law made me promise that if I married his daughter, I'd have to get them here, too. And that was a sweat to get them here at that time. But I finally did it and I got her sister here and her mother and her father.

And they loved Hoboken. They met Italian people. They never thought there were Italian people in Hob...America, you know?

MS: Talk about your family a little bit. Talk about your son.

TV: Once we got here we were very happy. My son had his own room, I had my room and my daughter had her own room. Besides that, my son had a studio on the top floor. He was an artist and he did a lot of work for these big companies. He did for *Time* magazine. He did a poster for the Knicks. The thing I'm most proud of is...He made the baseball logo for Hoboken...which you could see near the city hall. It was a great accomplishment for him and he got big honors from... at that time Governor Florio was here...when we had the event I think...June the 20th they have the baseball event. We all gathered up at Stevens and they honored my son for such a great job he did. The logo still exists if you want to see it...it's right in front of city hall.

MS: Talk a little bit about...you know...some people...the only thing they know about Hoboken is the movie *On the Waterfront*. Was that what Hoboken was like in those days? In the '50s and the '60s? Was it that tough a town? Do you know?

TV: Let me think... Like I said...yeah, but it was a town where we had so much industry...such places as Maxwell House and Lipton Tea...we had the Ferguson Furniture factory. We had Hindian (sp?) Box...the corrugated box factory...we had the piers...we had the ferryboats. I remember, when we were younger, we used to take...for five cents you could get on the ferryboat and go to New York. A lot of times we wouldn't even get off. We'd come up and we'd ride up and back for five cents. Them days were unbelievable. Them ferries kept working all the time and they were a great thing for Hoboken, until everything disappeared as time went on.

MS: Why was that? What happened? What made it disappear, do you think?

TV: I really have no idea why. The only thing I can think of is maybe the PATH began to get popular. Put more trains on and get people to New York.

MS: Yeah, but this is no longer a cargo port. No longer ships coming in here.

TV: Nothing at all. Nothing at all. They all go to New York.

MS: They all go to Bayonne too. What was it like... Were the people friendly here? Did everybody know everybody?

TV: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, I remember when somebody passed away in a family...our mothers would all get together and go to that family and do all the housework. There was a lot of togetherness in them days...really. If there was anything that was lousy going on, I didn't see too much of it. It wasn't too visible you know?

As far as I'm concerned, Hoboken is one of a kind.

MS: You really like it here.

TV: Yes I do...but no more now. No more now. Now...to me it's too congested. A lot of things that I'd say are wrong with the city...you want me to talk about these?

MS: Sure. Go ahead.

TV: The biggest problem I have here in Hoboken is the parking. Not for myself because I was fortunate enough to get a handicapped...But when I drive a car, the cars are parked too close to the corners. It's very dangerous. When I drive, you gotta put your head out to see if a car is coming. In the old days, it used to be where a car couldn't park at least 25 feet from the corner...and today, that's lacking. It's a horrible situation here in Hoboken. It makes me afraid to drive.

MS: Whatever happened to the gang that you grew up with? The kids that you were talking about...that you hung together with? Are some still around?

TV: Well, for the most part, yes. But don't forget I'm hitting 80, and they're all pretty old by now. Right now I feel pretty lucky because the ones that were closest to me have gone...have passed away. There's only one left besides me and he lives in Bayonne. I haven't contacted him in years. I don't know what he's doing.

MS: But, say 20 or 30 years ago...around in the '70s...did you guys maintain contact? Hang out together? Tell me about that.

TV: Yes...yes. The only time we separated was after we got married (Tommy's wife emphasizes this in the background). The gang split up because the women didn't go for that. Once you're married you got to stay with your wife. That was, let's see, she came here in 1947, I think,...so after we were married, we saw each other occasionally but not socially too much.

MS: I see. I was wondering about that...if there were people that were close friends of yours when you were living over in the Jefferson Street area. What were your customers like at Tommy's Luncheonette?

TV. Oh it was wonderful...it was wonderful. We had so much respect from them. Well at that time, my wife worked with me, my sister-in-law worked with me, and I had a waitress named Ellie and we all worked together wonderfully. It was a great thing that we put together. We had so many customers and we took care of them.

We'd make good sandwiches. As a matter of fact I had people coming from far away just to come and sit down at the luncheonette. When I bought that place, it was dying. After I had it one year, I had it blooming. It was great.

MS: Did you have a lot of customers come from the factories around?

TV: Oh yes. We had the Levelor factory there. Every morning they'd pass for their coffee. There was another factory a couple blocks down...they made instruments and I used to deliver. We had all the schools...all the children would come in. That was a big headache, but you made money. I even had the mayor's brother come in. And the mayor used to come in once in a while too. Mayor Cappiello, at that time, he used to come in to my place and we were very friendly. It was a friendly atmosphere.

MS: Did you ever get involved in politics?

TV: Yes, I did.

MS: Tell me about it.

TV: Well...I don't recall how many years ago, but we had a wonderful fellow that came to Hoboken, his name was Mr. Vezzetti. I don't know if anybody knows him, but he was a character. He was a wonderful man but he was a character and he ran for mayor. I forget who he opposed. I guess it was Cappiello. And he won.

He used to walk around the street with a bullhorn, saying what he had to say. Everybody thought he was crazy...but when the votes came and they had the election, he won. He had his place a block away from my house...a saloon here...and he knew me very well. As he became mayor, he approached me to get on the rent board as he was a strict advocate for rent control. He was for the poor people.

So he came to my house and he offered me a letter. He said: "Will you take this (it was signed by the mayor) and become a member of the rent board?" so I accepted it. That's how I got to be on the rent stabilization board.

I was there for three years and we had a lot of work...a lot of work ...because as Hoboken started to get better. And these yuppies used to come in like I told you.. These landlords used to charge them triple the rent ...they weren't fair with these young kids. They saw a chance to make money and they used to overcharge them. A lot of times they'd come to city hall and complain...we had the rent board...and they'd complain about it.

We had a strict ordinance on rent control in Hoboken. That's one thing I think we're proud of anyway...and we kept a lot of our people here that way. Otherwise, if we didn't have the rent control, everybody would be gone. We had the ordinance where your rent was frozen, unless there was a water surcharge or things like that. And if the landlord didn't make a profit on the building he could claim...and get a higher rent.

My three years on the rent board were very educational. I learned a lot about how people act and how they are and I liked it a lot. Up till today we have the rent control... otherwise we wouldn't have no poor people in Hoboken here.

MS: And that's important to you? To keep the poor people as well as the richer, to keep a balance.

TV: Right...right. The ordinance...a lot of people don't read it, but the ordinance has got a lot of protection for the tenant and for the landlord too. It's a just thing. It's just that it prevents a lot of these landlords... mongers... like they want to take, take, take and take and rent control controls that. And a lot of people are very thankful for that in Hoboken today, otherwise none of them would be here. No affordable housing.

MS: Tommy, talk to me about what life was like walking on Washington Street.

TV: Oh, you're bringing back beautiful memories, let me tell you. It was really a blessing. In them days...like I say, we didn't have too much money. A few stores stand out in my memory. Places like, we had a Kramer's. They sold jewelry and radios and such. And we had an Abelson. They were both opposite each other. Those were the two places that stick out in my memory. Besides another place my wife and I used to go and buy all our needs for bedding and pillows and stuff like that.

I remember when I was younger, I used to walk the avenue and see in the window a phonograph, like, or a radio...and I would go in there and talk with the salesman. Then, in them days, hardly anybody paid cash because we didn't have it. I remember I bought a Victrola set, must have been about 59 dollars. I remember putting two dollars down and

every week I used to bring 25 cents to pay it off and that's the way they operated in them days. They took the 25 cents until the item got paid off.

They were wonderful people...more like a family ...togetherness. Then you would walk along the street and we had ice cream parlors. We had Umlands. You go in there and get a banana split for 35 cents, get a coke for a nickel. And you'd always meet somebody you knew. As long as you were walking that avenue, you knew almost everybody that was walking along there. It was friendly. You stop to chat and sometimes the chats would last an hour...talking about this and talking about that.

I remember my wife and I would go to this place called the Economy Store. They had all blankets and pillows and sheets They were the two people that stick out the most on that avenue, for me and my wife. They would treat us like we were their son and daughter. They couldn't do enough for us. Whatever my wife wanted, we got. And they didn't even worry about how to make the payments. They said: "When you could make a payment you could come and pay it off." That's exactly the way it was. Hard to believe...believe you me...because you don't see that today. But it was in existence. I'm telling the truth. I'm not lying. That's one of the things that stick out in my memory.

As we walked along, you see more and more friends and you chatted, and you felt good about it.