Growing Up in Dunmore

By Joseph Brunetti

I was born Giuseppe Giovanni Brunetti in Calitri, Italy, on the night of March 31, 1921. My father, Canio, was the son of Giuseppe Brunetti and Giuseppina Tartaglia. My mother, Lucia, was the daughter of Pasquale Codella and Mariantonia DiGuglielmo. At the time of my birth, my father had returned to the USA to find work and a place in Dunmore, Pennsylvania for us to live. My mother and I arrived on the SS *Patria* on November 22, 1921 just before Thanksgiving. My five siblings began arriving in short order following my parents' reunion, two sisters as little as 14 months apart.

About the time I was finishing second grade on June 11, 1929, all four of us kids -- me at age eight, Antoinette at six, Marie at five and Pat at two – were sent to Zio Willie's house. It was an awfully long day for me, boring because I didn't know anyone in their new neighborhood on the corner of Dudley and Fifth Streets. I recall the delicious minestrone soup and my first taste of chocolate cake that I had that day. When we finally got home, we had a new member of the family, our brother, Mike.

With five children, my mother couldn't do everything; I had to start earning my keep. Being the oldest, I was drafted into doing the supper dishes. I remember my indoctrination – me at the sink, washing, and my father standing alongside, checking them. If any were not clean, I would get them ALL back again.

There was still plenty of time for recreation too. I remember roller skating on Willow Street after they paved it, so nice and smooth. Before that, I had to watch out for cracks, and even earlier our streets had been dirt. The borough would send crews out in the late spring to spray oil. After the first few days it would dry into a real hard surface that would keep the dust from flying as the cars would travel over them. We played marbles a lot, but we don't even hear of that game anymore. I also liked pitching horseshoes.

After school, we played a lot of baseball or football in season on vacant lots in the neighborhood. When we were small and couldn't hit a ball so far, we had one lot near the school where we could play with a real baseball. If we played on a smaller lot where houses were too close, we would roll strips of rags into a ball shape. We tied it off into a real softball that worked well because not many of us owned baseball gloves. When we became good enough or big enough (whichever came first), we became members of the neighborhood team and would play other neighborhoods on Saturdays at Memorial Park.

In the Fall when we would start playing football on the empty lot, we played in a field of ragweed up to our waists. Eventually, the ragweed got trampled down and served as a cushion when we were tackled. If we didn't have enough players to form teams, someone would throw the

ball up into the air. Whoever caught it was the runner, and everyone else was a tackler. Boy, what fun that was! There was no fear. We didn't have any helmets or shoulder pads. We played as we were, but I don't ever remember being hurt.

At night in the Fall, we would build a campfire in one of the fields. Each of us would bring a potato that we would place directly into the fire. By the time the fire died down, the potatoes were done. The skin would be charred and would blacken our hands and faces, but the potato was delicious.

I was getting bigger and stronger. My mother baked about 15 loaves of bread once each week. The night before she baked it, we had to prepare the bread dough. There was a lot of flour in that pan, and it got heavy. I had the hard job of helping to knead the dough. After it was ready, she would cover it to let it rise. The next day she would make loaves, put them into bread tins, let it rise again and then bake it. When I was real young, she would bake three or four loaves at a time in the coal stove oven. We were not among the more affluent Italian families that had large stone ovens outside or a summer kitchen in the basement. Baking one shelf of tins at a time on a hot summer day, really heated up the house for hours, but the bread smelled so good when we came home from school that no one would complain.

Our refrigeration system was an ice box. It had a compartment at the top for a block of ice. The cold air circulating to the food below would keep perishables from spoiling for a day or two.

Saturday afternoons were special. Most of the neighborhood kids would go to the movies if they had managed to earn enough pennies during the week for the nickel admission. If not, we would look for junk we could sell – rags, brass, iron or lead. When we would find electric wire, we would burn the covering off to get to the copper. Whatever it took, we had to get to the theater each Saturday with its full-length cowboy show, a short comedy, news clips and an adventure serial that would run in "chapters" for eight to twelve weeks.

If some of us had still not acquired the needed money, we would go to either of the fire exit doors. One of our friends would push the door open. We would dash in and grab any seat we could. I did that once. It was a scary experience. I was full of guilt. I wouldn't want to get caught; my father wouldn't have liked it. If we had money to spare, however, we would go into Russell's Ice Cream Store next to the theater. We would get a double dip cone for another nickel – enough to share with our friends who didn't have enough money for their own cone.

When we moved to Pine Street, the landlady was a widow with grown children. The property had a huge back yard. She and both tenants had a plot for a garden. One of our jobs during the summer was to carry water out to the rows of plants before supper. On Sundays, we had our dinner at noon as our main meal.

The addition of my sister, Ann, on July 24, 1933, completed our family and made our four-room apartment too small for our family of eight. In 1934, in the middle of the depression, we

moved for the last time as a family. There were a lot of homes for sale, and selling prices were really low. My father was able to get a loan. He started making payments instead of paying rent. His home was his pride and joy and remained in our family until its sale in 2020.

Before our eighth-grade graduation from Jefferson School, our class took a trip to New York. The girls went to Radio City Music Hall, and the boys to the Polo Grounds, where we watched the Giants play the Chicago Cubs. It was the first major league game I had ever seen. What a thrill!

Afterward, we walked from a subway station to a hotel where we had a sit-down dinner with linen tablecloths and napkins. It was an exciting event for a thirteen-year-old immigrant. I don't believe I ever had a meal away from family prior to that time. I was like a country bumpkin, unable to take in enough of the big city.

After two years of overcrowded conditions in a high school on Apple Street that had split days and still overflowed classes onto the stage and the balcony, we moved into our brand new high school. More than a million dollars was a lot of money in 1937. People were having trouble putting food on their tables and clothes on their backs. But a new high school was such a necessity. We began to have study periods. We had a good library and well-equipped labs. We also had a gym and an athletic field. One of the big changes was that we had an hour and a half off for lunch. I have estimated that we were walking about 8 miles a day – two miles, four times a day so we could tread back and forth across town for lunch.

By the time I was in my junior year, there still wasn't a lot of money around. The economy had improved some, but only because President Franklin D. Roosevelt had made work for those who wanted to work. His first act was to stabilize the banks with the National Recovery Act. The Public Works Administration put a lot of men back to work, repairing highways and building bridges and walls. He also started the Civilian Conservation Corps for young men without families. In return for working in forests and other rural areas, they received a dollar a day, plus room and board at a camp.

Even though the economy had improved some, there were still a lot of people "on relief." For the short time that we received some commodities from the government, one of the foods we received were grapefruit. Boy were they bitter! My mother cut them in half and let the sugar soak in overnight. We kids didn't even realize we were poor. Our family always had enough food and shoes. Our clothes might be patched, but they were always clean. All the other kids in the neighborhood were in the same boat, with nothing to speak of. There were a few years when my father could not buy grapes to make wine. Those summers we went out to pick elderberries. One year he made wine out of raisins. The paddle he used for crushing the fruit is still being used in our family today.

About this time in the late 1930's I must have come of age for the draft in Italy. It was pre-World War II. I received a formal letter directing me to report to Italy to serve my military duty. I was still in high school, and we completely ignored the correspondence. I understand how they

got my name, but how did they get my address? I also wondered if I ever went back to Italy, would I be treated as a draft dodger.

The last years of high school on Friday and Saturday nights, I worked in the kitchen at Mancini's Bar from 6:00 p.m. until 2:00 a.m. Before we went home every night, Yak Caterella, the bar tender, and I had a dish of spaghetti with the homemade sauce that we strained at the beginning of our shifts. After I graduated in June of 1939, I continued to work at Mancini's, only then it was six nights a week. I was getting paid $5.00 a week. I had another job days caring for one of the neighborhood properties. I mowed lawns, put out their ashes and trash, cleaned their cars and shoveled their walks in the winter. I kept the one or two dollars for this work and gave my mother the $5.00 from my work at the bar. I felt like a rich kid with up to $2.00 in my pocket every week.

We sometimes went to dances on Sunday nights at St. Cyril's Hall in Olyphant. One of our older neighborhood friends had a Ford Model A. Whenever we had to go anywhere, we would each give him a nickel or a dime for gas. Fuel was really cheap then. They used to advertise seven gallons for a dollar. It isn't any wonder that we got only a dollar for eight hours of work. Thinking about it in a different way, gas was real expensive; it cost about one hour's work for a gallon of gas.

I feel that the 1930's, the depression years, was a good time to grow up. We were all like peas in a pod. No one had anything, and whatever we did have, we shared. We had a lot of freedom within certain limits. We had our curfew and our chores. Then we were free to do whatever we wanted to. Most of what we wanted we were able to do in the neighborhood. There was a lot of camaraderie. We always went in groups. There were never any bullies or anyone who tried to be in control of the group. We were true friends, and we loved each other. I think we were innocent, naïve and very trusting of everyone, before the world went nuts and we had to go off to war to try to kill each other.