

Poppy's Was the Hub of Activity

Staten Island vacationers flocked to his hardware store in the 1940s.

By Hazel Lee, as told to her son,
Lawrence W. Lee Jr., Staten Island, New York

OUR FAMILY has lived in South Beach, Staten Island, New York for decades. My grandparents Frances and Frank Marrone owned the hardware store on the corner of Sand Lane and Robin Road.

“Poppy” had a rolltop desk in the hardware store where he kept all his paperwork. The store itself carried everything from kitchen utensils to roofing material. My grandparents lived in an apartment behind the store.

One wall in the store had drawers that held all sorts of screws and nails. A ladder with wheels ran along this wall, and we would ride back and forth on it all day.

The floor was covered with sawdust, and there were large fans on the ceiling. Poppy loved to sit at the counter and talk to customers. He called the men “goombah” and the women “dolly bella.”

If a customer was short of money or needed credit, Poppy would say, “No problem,” and he often bartered.

It was always fun to rummage through the store. Poppy patiently answered all questions in detail. He would tell us stories about the old country, Italy, and when no one else was around, gave us all a quarter for doing any small task.

Next to the property was a “bungalow town” where people from New York City came to spend the summer. This was Poppy's main

source of hardware business, and the store was open from 8 a.m. until past 10 p.m.

People always needed screening for their porches. To cut it, the screening was placed on the sidewalk. Whatever kids were around stood on one end, holding it down, while it was measured, cut and then rolled up and tied with a string.

In those days, paint came in one color—white—and was sold in 1-gallon cans. If you wanted another color, Poppy sold tubes of pigment that you added to the paint. For dinners with extended family, the kids were told to get paint cans to sit on.

Grandma grew her own herbs and had chickens, rabbits and sometimes a lamb or a goat. Once she had a piglet, probably no more than 10 pounds. My uncles quickly built the pig a pen, and “Stinky” had a new home. We fed him all our leftovers, and he grew to over 200 pounds.

Poppy had a friend take Stinky away to be butchered. It was sad for us kids, but we got through it and learned where pork chops came from.

Like many others then, Poppy made his own wine. Every fall, he bought crates of grapes and kept six barrels in the store’s basement to store and age his wine.

When a barrel was opened, the whole family had to be there to taste it, even us children. We would get a shot glass half full of wine and, even if we just tasted it with our tongues, Poppy was satisfied.

As we got older, Mom mixed the wine with lemonade or ginger ale.

Many of the old-timers would have wine tastings, and each insisted his or her wine was the best.