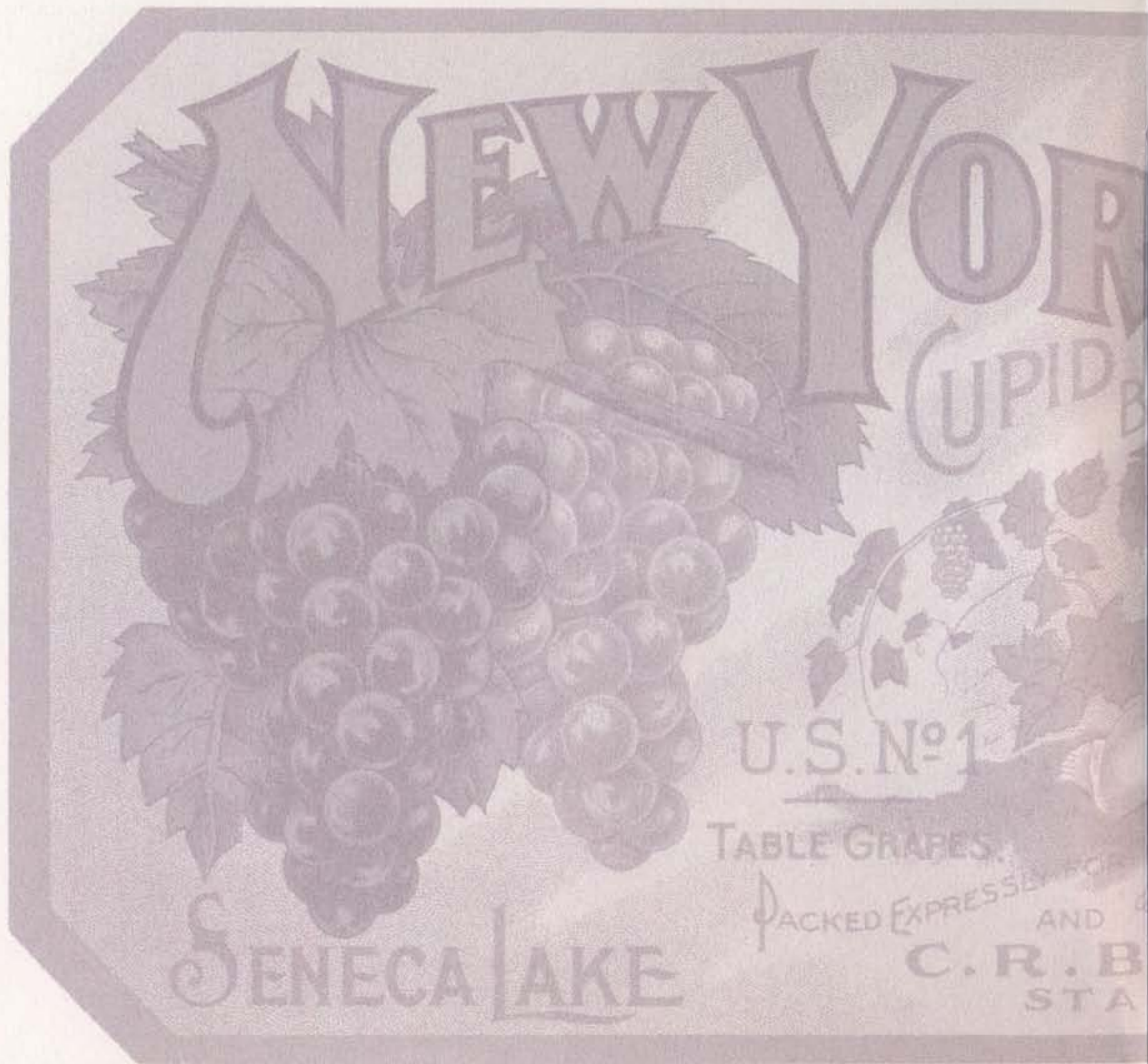
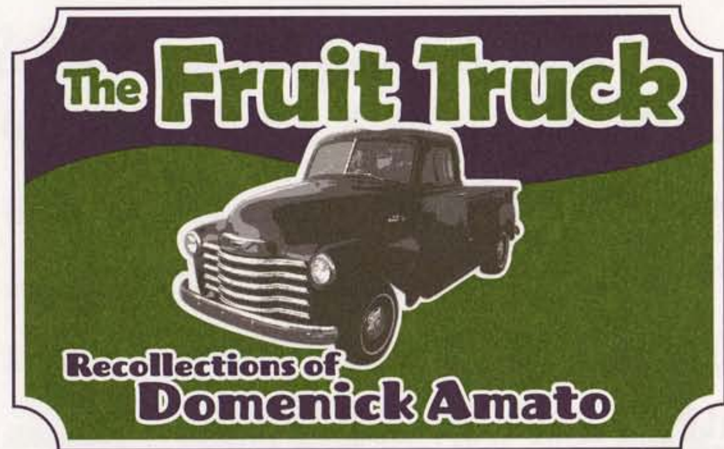
The Fruit Truck

Recollections of
Domenick Amato





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

Vanishing Hoboken
The Hoboken Oral History Project

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

This oral history chapbook was made possible through
the support of John Wiley & Sons.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the views of the interviewers, the Hoboken Oral History Project and its coordinators, the Hoboken Historical Museum, or the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library.

©2008 Hoboken Historical Museum and Friends of the Hoboken Public Library. (Hoboken Historical Museum, PO Box 3296, 1301 Hudson Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Friends of the Hoboken Public Library, 500 Park Avenue, Hoboken, NJ 07030.)

Hoboken Oral History Project Coordinators:
Melanie Best, Ruth Charnes,
Holly Metz (Chapbooks Editor)

Designer: Ann Marie Manca
Proofreader: Paul Neshamkin

COVER: *Unidentified fruit peddler, Fourth and Washington Streets, ca. 1972. Photo by Caroline Carlson, courtesy of the photographer.*
CONTEMPORARY PHOTO: *Domenick Amato and his mother, Carmela, on their roof in Hoboken, 2008, by Robert Foster..*

Unless otherwise noted, all photographs reproduced in this chapbook are from the collections of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

When I came here from Italy at age 10, I spoke no English, but I learned within three or four months. And I started to work on a fruit truck, probably that summer, in '58, for Mike Ferrante. He was selling apples, peaches, grapes. He'd been in the business probably since the Depression. He'd started with a cart and wagon.

—Domenick Amato
September 28, 2007

Domenick Amato (right) and his mother, Carmela, on the roof of their Hoboken home, May 2008.

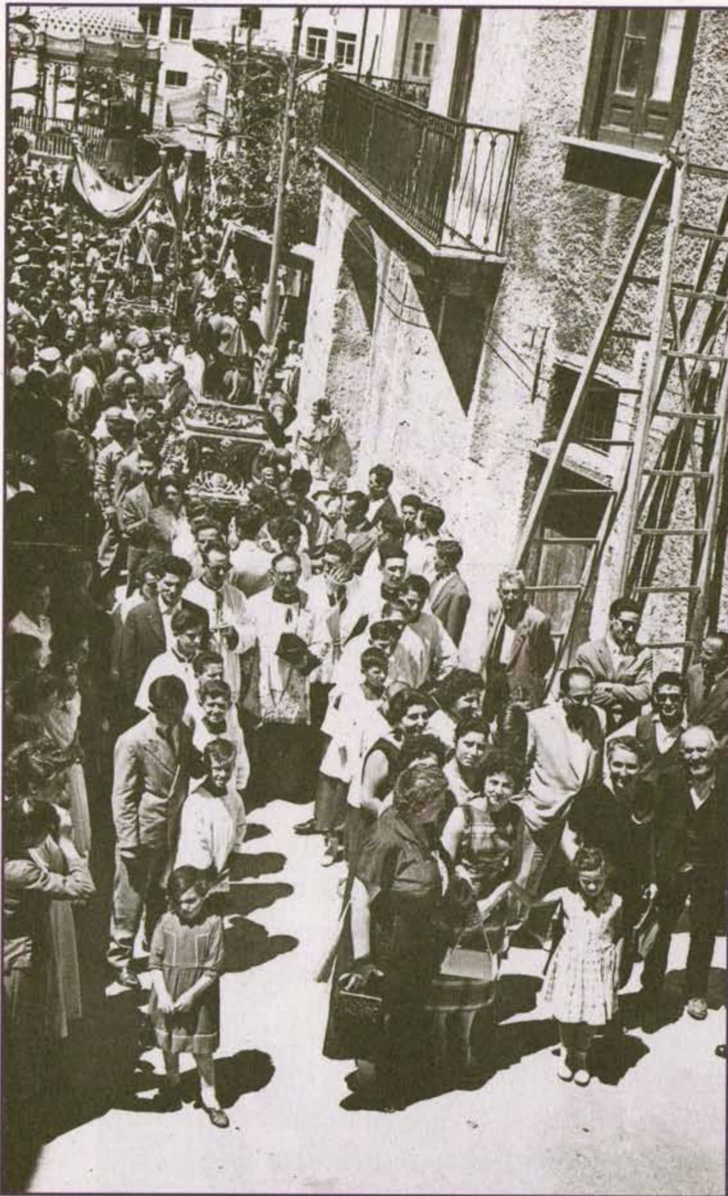
INTRODUCTION

Longtime residents of Hoboken may know Domenick Amato as the proud harvester of sweet, seedless grapes that cluster and ripen every August on an old grapevine that twines along the south side of his Eighth Street apartment building. The two-storey-tall vine has been producing for over thirty years, ever since Domenick's father planted a donated cutting. Now Domenick gives away bags of sun-warmed grapes to neighbors and friends—"a treat," he says, "for everybody."

And Domenick knows quite a bit about fruit. Although trained as a civil engineer at Rutgers University, he proudly proclaims that the best and most fulfilling years of his life were the ten years he worked on the streets of Hoboken selling fruit (and vegetables) from a truck owned by Mike Ferrante. Domenick started working with Mike when he was ten years old.

This chapbook describes the street-based fruit business that was once common in Hoboken—Domenick recalls at least a dozen trucks on the streets in the late 50s and throughout the 60s—but it also celebrates an enduring friendship. Although they were more than 50 years apart in age, Domenick and Mike were well-matched co-workers, each recognizing the special skills of the other: Domenick, "the kid," was quick with numbers and fast with orders; Mike was wise about customers and character, and a man of unfailing generosity.

Domenick Amato was interviewed by Holly Metz and Robert Foster on September 28, 2007 at the Hoboken Historical Museum. A copy of the transcript, from which this chapbook is derived, has been deposited in the Historical Collection of the Hoboken Public Library.



ABOVE: *Postcard of the feast of St. Ann and St. James the Apostle, celebrated on a street in Monte San Giacomo, Italy, ca. 1960.*

LEFT: *Members of the Amato family in Monte San Giacomo, Italy, ca. 1957. Clockwise from left: siblings Rose, Domenick, Antoinette; their mother, Carmela, holding Pasquale, who did not survive infancy; siblings Marie and Francesca. Domenick's sister Anna, who was born in the United States, is not pictured. Photo courtesy Domenick Amato.*

STARTING in the FRUIT BUSINESS: AGE TEN

I was born on September 9th, 1948, in Salerno, Italy. It's a small town called Monte San Giacomo, in the hills. There's a club [in Hoboken with this name, too. And there are other clubs with origins in Italy.] The two main contingencies in Hoboken are San Giacomo and Molfetese. That's been since the '50s and '60s, to the present day. And you have the two feasts. You have St. Ann's Feast, which is [celebrated in] Monte San Giacomo and in Hoboken in late July, and then you have the Molfetese Feast [in honor of] the Madonna di Martiri, [celebrated around] Labor Day.

I came to Hoboken at the end of January, 1958. I was nine years old. We lived on Second and Clinton at the time, 227 Clinton Street. We lived there for a year or two—my mother, Carmela, my father, Frank, and five sisters. There was Antoinette, Rose, Marie, Francesca, and Anna—she was the one that was born over here. [Everyone else was] born in Italy. [I was the third-born, between Rose and Marie.]

[When I came here, I spoke no English, but] I learned within three or four months. And I started to work on a fruit truck, probably that summer, in '58, for Mike Ferrante. He was selling apples, peaches, grapes. He'd been in the business probably since the Depression. He'd started with a cart and wagon.

A friend of the family introduced me. I had just finished school [for the summer], so I had to do something. This lady who knew him—her name was Michelina *La Sagunda**—she was a good

* *In Italian dialect*

Domenick Amato, 4th grade, 1958, the year he began working with Mike Ferrante. Courtesy Domenick Amato.

friend of my mother's. (It's not her real last name, by the way. It means "a sergeant." That's the Italian culture. Even in Hoboken, they have a name—everybody has their own call card.)

[So *La Sagunda*,] she tells Mike, "I have this kid. Would you like to meet him? He's ten years old." She brought me to him. She always helped my mother, because there were five of us at the time and she was telling my mother how to get acclimated to this country. I spoke enough English already by the summer, so she took me up there. And he said, "All right." [I started working right away.] He said, "Take this bag up to this lady, up to the third floor. We have a good customer on Seventh and Willow, a great, good customer. They'll give you a tip, maybe twenty-five cents."

The first week, Mike Ferrante gave me $3.00 for the week and all the food I could eat. [And] in that summer I earned $200. I opened a bank account with that money, and that account is still open today. [The banks were changing, but I still have the book — the original book with the same numbers.]

I worked for Mike until probably '69, so it was about ten years. [Until] I left high school in 1967, I worked every day, [except] Sundays. Three o'clock, I'd be out of school—bang—and I'd work until 6:00-6:30, until it got dark, almost every day, day-in and day-out. In the summers, 8:00 in the morning until 7:00 at night. [And when I went to college] I worked a couple of summers, too.

HE LIKED the KID

[What did Mike look like?] He was about my height [as I am today—5 feet 7 inches], maybe a little bit shorter. He was pretty heavy-set. He had a good-natured face. His hair was white. They used to call him "*Biangini*.*" *Biangini* means white. Everybody used to say his name was *Biangini*—the people who knew him in this town.

When I knew him he always wore a hat [and] had a sweater on. He was up in years. He didn't look it—he was strong from lifting packages. We're talking about 50-60 packages [a day], 40-50 pounds [each]. And we didn't ask each other [about age.] We just assumed. It wasn't a society where you asked questions.

Mike was from Foggia, Italy. [Our people weren't from the same parts of Italy.] We're on one side of the country, and he's on another. That didn't have anything to do with [why we got along so quickly and so well.] He liked the kid. He took a liking to me. It was exceptional. He started me when I was nine or ten years old, and I had thousands of dollars [entrusted to me.]

You had to be honest. That's what he expected. Because I'm dealing with a lot of money. I had money in my pockets at all times, from the first day I started. He's got to be able to trust me with the money, because everything was cash. You couldn't take advantage of him like that, believe me. You couldn't. I couldn't see anybody having the heart.

And I was quick, I was fast, I could do things that he could not, because he was getting up

* *In Italian dialect*

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

ORIGINAL
TO BE GIVEN TO
THE PERSON NATURALIZED

No. 5752952

CERTIFICATE OF NATURALIZATION

Petition No. 85639

Personal description of holder as of date of naturalization: Age 45 years; sex Male; color White; complexion Dark; color of eyes Brown; color of hair Gr-Brown; height 5 feet 3 inches; weight 175 pounds; visible distinctive marks None
Marital status Married; former nationality Italian
I certify that the description above given is true, and that the photograph affixed hereto is a likeness of me.

Michele Ferrante
(Complete and true signature of holder)

STATE OF NEW JERSEY
COUNTY OF HUDSON } ss:

Be it known, that at a term of the Common Pleas Court of Hudson County held pursuant to law at Jersey City on June 26th, 1944 the Court having found that MICHELE FERRA N TE then residing at 419 Monroe St, Hoboken, N.J. intends to reside permanently in the United States (when so required by the Naturalization Laws of the United States), had in all other respects complied with the applicable provisions of such naturalization laws, and was entitled to be admitted to citizenship, thereupon ordered that such person be and (s)he was admitted as a citizen of the United States of America.

In testimony whereof the seal of the court is hereunto affixed this 3rd day of August in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and Forty Four and of our Independence the one hundred and 69th. Year

Seal

It is a violation of the U.S. Code (and punishable as such) to copy, print, photograph, or otherwise illegally use this certificate.

Clerk of the Common Pleas Court.
By Deputy Clerk.

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

Naturalization papers for Michael (Michele, in Italian) Ferrante, 1944, courtesy of the Ferrante family.

in years. I was quick with the customers. I could hold two or three different accounts in my head, simultaneously. He would say, "Okay. Fifty cents for this, a dollar for that," so he'd be adding it up, and I'd be adding up my customer. I would put my stuff in the bag—$1.50-$2.50—and then at the end, he's figuring how much his is, and I'd say, "Mike, that's $3.50." Everything was a quarter or fifty cents—it's automatic. He'd be going through it, and I'm counting my customer at the same time I'm listening to him.

The WORK DAY STARTS at 2 a.m.

[When I first started] the [wholesale] market was right down [where they built] the World Trade Center, on West Street. You came out of the Holland Tunnel, and you were right there. (The market was not at Hunt's Point [in the Bronx] at this time. That wasn't until about the mid-'60s.)

Mike would go there every morning. He would go to market at 2:00, 3:00, 4:00 in the morning. I didn't go with him [that often], maybe once a week.

You'd load it up, the flatbed [truck]—it was a '48 Chevy at the time. Ten boxes of grapes, ten boxes of apples, peaches, whatever. Oranges, nectarines, plums. Mostly fruits and vegetables—lettuce, celery, potatoes, onion escarole, mushrooms, depending on the time and the season. [For the Italians] there would also be fennel, *finocchio*. When Thanksgiving came around, there would be chestnuts. But basically, we sold fruit.

Mike would be back by 8:00-9:00 in the morning, bring the truck [back to Hoboken]. Then you'd take all the stuff off [because you have to slant the truck bed when selling it on the street. We needed a place to unload all the produce. We started out with a garage between 1st and Madison, on the west side.] It was just a long [space], where we could put all our stuff in there overnight. [Then they sold it] and it became Cordt's Furniture, so we went over to Gugliemelli's, which was between 4th and 5th Street on Jefferson Street. That garage is still there. By that time,

Bobby Ferrante, Mike's son, had started working with us, and we could put two trucks in there.

And we had a retail store at 3rd and Madison, a fruit store. Right next to it was John's Butcher Shop. That's where the [Madison Street] park is right now. It would be one or two houses off the park. So we had two trucks, a fruit store, and a garage, in the heyday. [We could set up a stand on the street], and Nick, Mike's brother, would be working in the fruit store.

[In the winter, we wouldn't go out in the trucks so much.] Mostly it would be in the store. You might have two days when the cold would break. And as long as it was over 30-35 [degrees], we would go out, even though it was wintertime. It was tough in the wintertime, yeah, but still we went out. Definitely for Thanksgiving. You might not be able to start early in the morning, but by noontime... And then you'd come home early, because the days were short. By 4:00 or 5:00 [p.m.] it gets dark, and your day is done because you can't work in the dark.

Making a Nice Display

[We set up the truck with boxes on display at an angle.] It showed you everything. [The truck bed would be slanted up.] What you do is you put something at the end, so [nothing would fall off.] You'd put a two-by-four on the front and on the bottom. Then you make an overhang over the flatbed. You'd put a stick there, then you'd put another two-by-four under the board, and nail on [so] it would hang off the truck. It would make it a little lower, [too,] because the truck would be high. By putting an overhang of three or four feet, it would go down lower, and you can get stuff.

Then you have a sawhorse in the back. You'd take a couple of pieces of four-by-eight or four-by-tens of plywood, and you make it hang off the back of the truck by two or three feet. You had about five or six "lines." You would have eggplants, cucumbers, etc., in bushels. The bushel is round and it would cause stress, so you took a grape box, you'd gut it out, and you'd put the bushel in a box. You'd get four or five of them, about five deep, five high. [And] on the truck bed, you would have the basic fruits—apples, oranges, peaches, pears. We had certain things—the grapes—we would put on one end. Pretty much, it would hang over and you had the scale there.

[And writing the signs?] That was my job. We would take the bags, the paper bags, and put it right over it. You'd print on that. You'd just slip it right over, and change it [as needed.]

OPPOSITE: *Fruit peddlers, creating produce signs, ca. 1972. Photo by Caroline Carlson, courtesy of the photographer.*

Finding a Good Location

Mostly what drove the fruit business was the coat factories. When we first started, [we parked at] 12th and Willow. [Business would start up] after 3:00 in the afternoon, because all the factories would come out. Coat factories. They would all be on the west side of town, west of Willow at Clinton Street, in that whole area. There were a whole bunch of coat factories, from about 9th Street and Clinton, going west, going up to maybe 12th or 14th Street.

Then we came down to 9th Street, 9th and Willow. Why? Well, [that was] Mike's decision. It's his call. I'm just a kid. I didn't question it. I guess, to find the right spot, where we could do the most business.

[Ninth and Willow] didn't work out, so we went to 8th and Willow. [That was the location for] the Blue Point. They had weddings and stuff over there, and there used to be the Grand Bakery right across the street. It wasn't a bread place; it was more cakes and stuff at that time.

[But that wasn't the best spot, either, so Mike moved us down one more block, to 7th and Willow.] Well, the mother lode was 7th and Willow. That's where we stood. That became our corner, let's say '62-'63. We stood there through all the '60s, and [Mike's son] Bobby took it over into the '70s, '80s, and '90s. Bobby was there until the '90s.

Why did that become our spot? [Sure, it's the geographical center of the town,] but what it was—there would be waves of people coming out of the factories—the Yugoslavians, the Italians.

Bobby Ferrante at "the best spot," 6th and Willow, ca. 1980. Courtesy of the Ferrante family.

They would come out of the factories; they would buy their stuff, and go home. There was Ralph's Candy Store there, and also the A&P on Clinton Street. (Well, it wasn't A&P at that time, but there was always a supermarket there.)

[The supermarket came] in the '60s. The whole thing with us, in the fruit business, was that we could undersell them by a wide margin. So they helped us. Because people would go into the supermarket, and then come and get their fruit from us. That was the whole beauty of it. Our prices were going to be half of what theirs was. If we were selling three pounds for half a dollar, then they were selling three pounds for a dollar. Something like that. Peaches would be five pounds for half a dollar. This is in the '60s now. Grapes would be three pounds for half a dollar. Tomatoes would be four pounds for half a dollar. Oranges would be seven for a quarter. And there was volume there, because everybody had four or five kids.

Carmine Iannacone, at Newark and Hudson Streets in later years, ca. 1976.
Photo by John Conn, courtesy of the photographer.

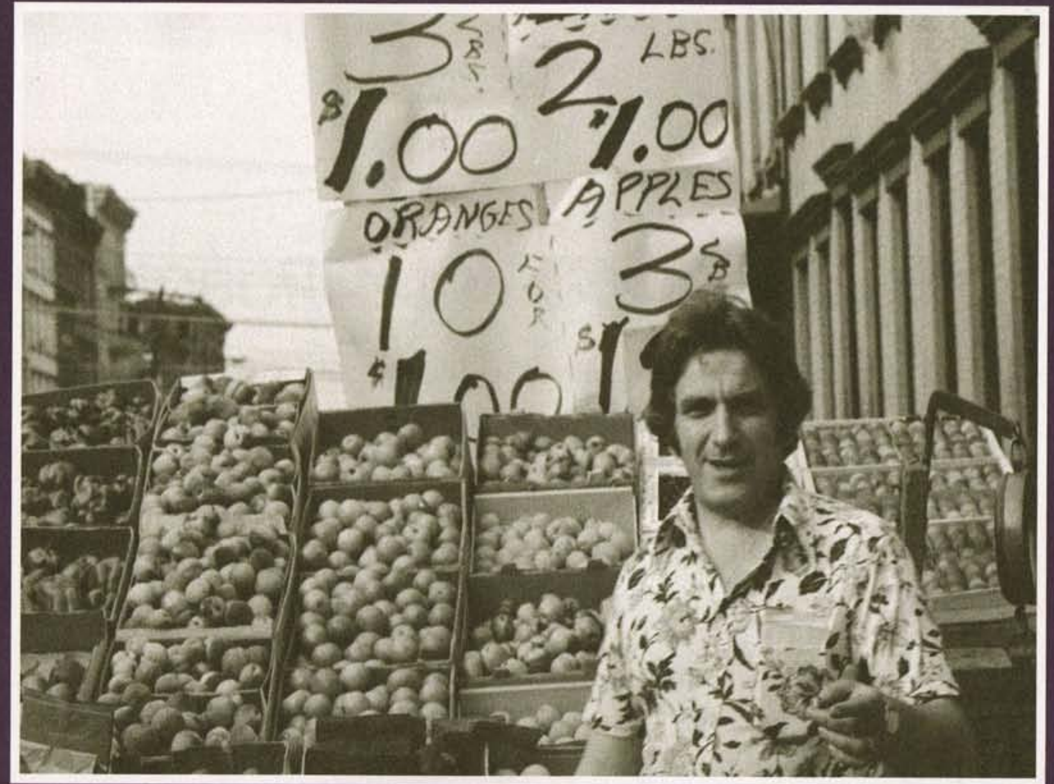
SHARING the CORNER

[As I said,] we wound up on 7th and Willow. We had been there for a couple of years, usually [arriving by] 3:00 in the afternoon. That's when we got there, because we wanted to get the wave of the people coming out of the factories—the women coming out of the coat factories. We were parking there for a number of years already [when] Carmine Iannacone, another fruit truck, [suddenly] parked on the other corner. Right next to each other.

Now instead of Mike making a fuss about it—no problem. That wasn't his thing. I always remembered that. Carmine Iannacone had his customers, we had ours. We were able, on the same corner, and basically with the same kind of stuff, to live peaceably and work peaceably together. Mike said, "Let them eat. There's enough for you and for me." He could have said, "Look, you've got to find someplace else." No. It was okay. "As long as everybody's eating, there's no problem."

[Plus,] there were customers who would only come and buy off of our truck—[from] Mike Ferrante. They wouldn't go to Carmine. [And] if they *did* go to Carmine, Carmine would tell them, "You have to go over there." And this is a competitor. That's how much respect there was. "You have to go buy from Mike. If Mike isn't there, then I'll give it to you. " There was no animosity whatsoever, and we both made a living. So back-to-back, we were on the same corner, and it all worked out fine.

ABOVE: *Unidentified fruit peddler, ca. 1970.*
Photo by Benedict J. Fernandez, courtesy of the photographer.
BELOW: *Fruit peddler on 6th Street between Washington and Bloomfield Streets, ca. 1972. Photo by Caroline Carlson, courtesy of the photographer.*



ABOVE: *Unidentified fruit peddler, ca. 1972.*
Photo by Caroline Carlson, courtesy of the photographer.
BELOW: *Fruit peddler on 6th Street between Washington and Bloomfield Streets, ca. 1972. Photo by Caroline Carlson, courtesy of the photographer.*

He Could Size You Up

Mike Ferrante, I tell you without reservation—he was good as they come, as far as I've met in my lifetime, and I've been with governors, deans—but in my estimation he could judge character. He could size you up. He could tell you right then and there. He knew how to deal with people. That's what he did all his life. He probably had maybe a fourth- or fifth-grade education, at the most, the same as my father, but he could judge people. He had the capacity to give you $100—which was worth $10,000 to you—because he knew when to give it to you. He had that capacity. It's an innate capacity that he had. And I seen it. I seen it. Because I would deal with him day in and day out.

I would go to work—I wasn't going to work. I was learning something else about people's nature. That's what he taught. He'd say, "Well, this guy is going to do this and that." He would tell you what the flaw was going to be in this guy's character. It wasn't work [for me;] it was, "I'm going to learn something else about human nature. About people." Because I grew up in his hands. That was the thing.

"Hoboken Is a Good Town"

He would tell me stories, but things were done by example every day. Oh, yes, there was storytelling by him, and I would tell stories, as well. He would teach you about life.

He would tell me all about Hoboken. He told me, in the '60s, that Hoboken was a good town. I trusted those words, and I never left Hoboken because of that. He said that Hoboken was a good town, because of the people.

In his day—he was probably talking about the '50s, more or less, after the war—he would load up the truck, not in the morning, but the night before, so the next morning he could start it right up and go to work. He'd leave it there, and nobody would touch nothing. (Years ago, yeah. Right now, they would rob you blind if you left the truck alone for fifteen minutes.) But that's how much they respected him.

In those [early] days, everybody knew each other. It was a different world. You can't picture it—to leave a fruit truck overnight—on Madison Street. Madison Street! At that time, it had become real tough. But there was respect. Everybody looked out for each other. Because they all knew each other, in every neighborhood.

You wouldn't [steal from him.] You would be harming yourself if you did something like that. It was a different kind of town. There was a lot of trust. Everybody looked out for each other. If your neighbor was getting hurt, you were getting hurt. That's how it was.

A DOZEN FRUIT TRUCKS on the STREETS

[There were at least a dozen fruit trucks in Hoboken at that time, in the 1960s.] Sonny Martella was at 9th Street. The Sillettis [who have had a store on Adams Street for many years, learned the trade from him.] They came through Sonny Martella. John is about my age. He came out of those people.

They all had fruit trucks. There was us and Carmine Iannacone at one time, [like I said,] on 7th and Willow. And Sammy Iannacone had a truck. His brother, Mike Iannacone. It's a whole family there. All brothers. There were about five or six. There's one left, but was never in the fruit business, this one. But Sammy Iannacone—he was a really hard worker. He was a hustler. He could sell a lot of fruit. He was good.

[The Sacco family,] they had a few [trucks]. There's a son, Joe Junior, who had a truck, and the father had a truck. The father, Joe Sacco, was a good friend of Mike's, also. Carlo Sacco—he did it for a while, too. Not too much. And Sandy Sacco—later on he had the fruit store on 15th and Willow.

Originally, we used to go down to where I said—West Street [to get our fruit.] But then that changed. [The wholesale market moved to Hunt's Point, in the Bronx.] That broke Mike's heart when that happened, because he couldn't go up to Hunt's Point. You had to go over the George Washington Bridge, [and] it takes you a day just to go up there and get the fruit.

So what he had was, a buyer—this guy Anthony, [who had a fruit store] between 2nd and

Unidentified fruit peddler, ca. 1972.
Photo by Caroline Carlson, courtesy of the photographer.

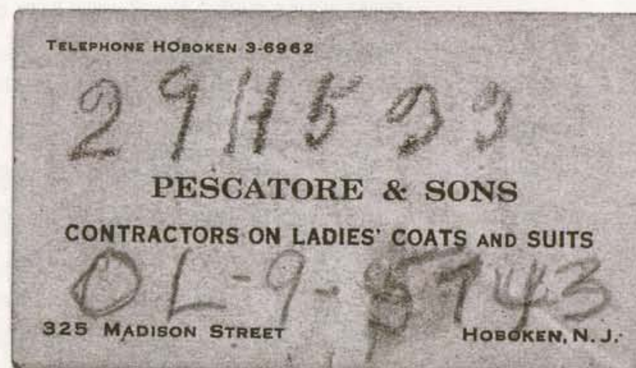
3rd on Willow Avenue. [The buyer] would go to Hunt's Point a couple times a week. He would go there with a big truck and he would buy for everybody. Then we would buy off of him, at least half a dozen of us—all fruit trucks. [But we could carry different items, have our own line.] You can differentiate that way. It worked out for us.

SELLING on the STREET

[Sometimes, people would call down to us and I'd go to the customers' apartment to take the order.] The lady would be up on the third floor. I would tell her what we had. She'd say, "Well, give me three pounds of apples, four pounds of bananas, four pounds of escarole." Then I would go downstairs, put it in a bag, and bring it up to her.

Or people would go to the truck and they couldn't carry it or whatever, and that was my job—to bring it up to people's house. I would go up three or four stories with an old lady [carrying her groceries. And sometimes people lowered baskets from their windows to the street.]

Not only did we stand on the corner, but we also worked the streets. We started on Madison Street [and ended up at Willow Avenue by 3:00 p.m.] But in the meantime, we worked the streets before that. We would holler, "Peaches! Tomatoes!" or whatever. Bobby and Mike, [mostly, but] I used to do it a little, too. [*In a seller's singsong voice*] "Pea-ches! Oran-ges! Strawberries. Strawberries." Mike has his own call, in Italian, and it sounded good. Bobby would do it in English. But Mike .... [*Laughs.*] He had his own song, and it was melodious.



Business card from Pescatore & Sons, 325 Madison Street, Hoboken, ca. 1940.

SELLING in the FACTORY

[The Ferrantes' fruit store was just down the block from Biggie's Clam Bar on Jefferson Street.] And there used to be a factory across the street from Biggie's, a coat factory [owned by the Pescatores.]

What I would do was, I would go in there [to the coat factory.] It would have to be before 12:00 p.m., because at 12:00 they would all come out [from all the factories.] You wanted to free yourself up, because they'd only have an hour [to shop.] I would try to get in [to Pescatore's factory] about 11:00. I would walk in. [The foreman would let me in] because they knew I worked for Mike Ferrante.

The ladies would be working, sewing or whatever, and I would walk in and say, "*Signora*, do you need anything?" "Yeah, what you got?" "I got peaches, cucumbers, whatever." "Okay. Give me three pounds of peaches." I would take that information. I would get six or seven different orders. They'd be working. No problem. I wouldn't bother them. Because as they're working, I would tell them what they could have. "Okay. Give me this. Give me a head of lettuce. Give me three pounds of tomatoes." I would take six or seven orders. I would go outside wherever Mike was parked at the time, and I'd get a bag for each order, and I would take them back.

[That way] we'd get a double shift, because I'm doing this before 12:00, and we've got those customers already taken care of. [Others would come out of factories at noon, but the first group,] they didn't have to buy off of us, because they already got theirs.

STORIES on the STREET

[Did we hear all the gossip being out on the street?] We would hear the stories, yes. Not that I remember. But yeah, sure. They would tell him all their problems, and he listened to them. Like I said before, a lady with four or five kids would come over—and Mike would know. She would say, "Well, my husband just got laid off, and we're havin' a hard time." She would tell him the story, and Mike would say, "Well, what do you need? Take whatever you need." He'd give her four pounds of apples, or give them whatever, until she had the money to pay it back.

My job was to recall this, because he wouldn't have the courage to tell the lady, "Listen, you owe me $5.50 from a couple of weeks ago." This was all in my head. I would recall, "Mike, do you remember the lady—"Yeah, yeah. I know." "Do you want me to go see her?" "Yeah, yeah. Okay." So I would go upstairs, (and it could be in Italian) and say, "You owe Mike..." whatever it was. And they would say, "Yeah. Sure. No problem."

There wasn't one that I missed. And not one can I ever recall who said, "No, I'm not going to pay you." They all would say, "I've got $5.00." These were all good customers. There was not one who would say no. They wouldn't even think of stiffing him.

BOBBY COMES into the BUSINESS

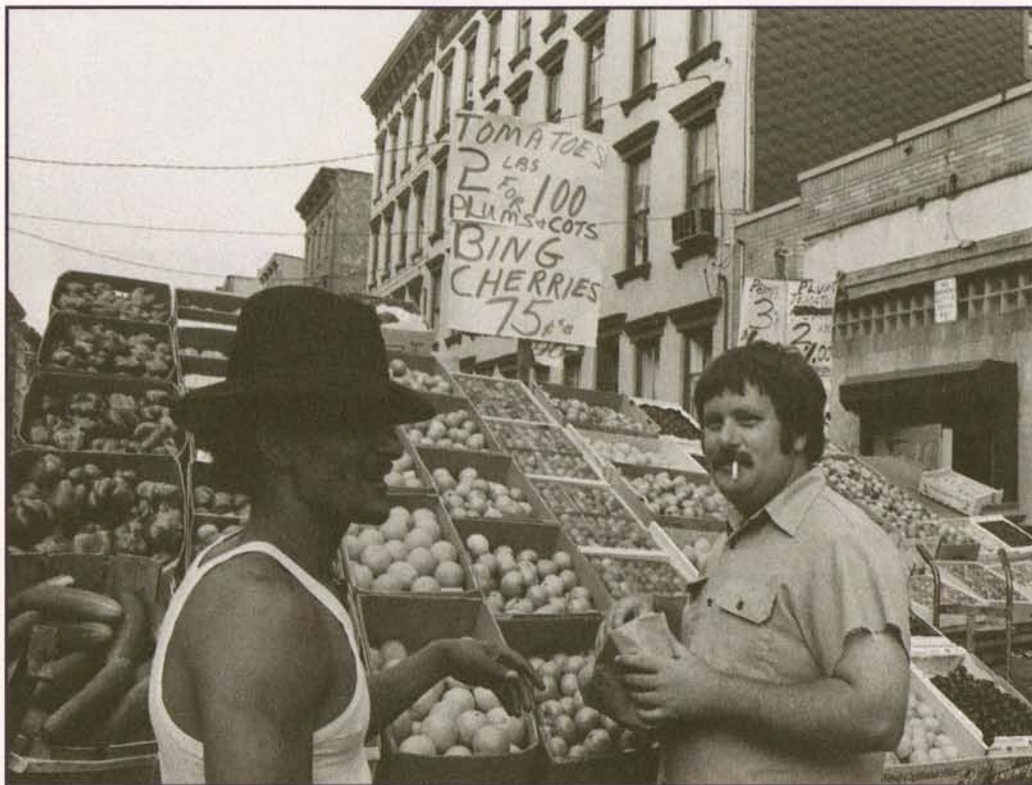
[When did Bobby Ferrante come into the business?] That was '63-'64, something like that. I was probably fourteen years old. [Before that, well,] it's a father-and-son thing. The son is going to think differently from the father. So, probably, Bobby would wish to work on the docks, at the piers [rather than work with his father.]

What happened was—Mike had gone to the market. It was still down on West Street. He came back, and at that time we [would just be] loading up. It was just before Thanksgiving. I go there at 8:00 in the morning, and nothing has been done. The truck has come from the market, but it's still stacked up. The boards haven't been started, the stuff hasn't been taken off, and the son, Bobby, is there.

Mike wasn't there. He was supposed to be there, and he wasn't. Bobby said, "You're going to have to come with me." He took me to the house at 419 Monroe Street. I go there, and the old man is in bed, laid out. His back went out.

So Mike goes, "Listen. Take Bobby with you. Let him drive the truck." Because I was fourteen years old, I couldn't drive. He said, "Tell him where all the stops are." Mike couldn't get out of bed. He says, "Go to all the customers we have, and try to sell—" Because for Thanksgiving, you load up. You put on extra mushrooms, extra celery, because it's a holiday. You load up, and he had. That's probably why his back went out.

He said, "You know all the customers—" I knew all the stops we had, because I used to



ABOVE: *Bobby Ferrante (right) with a customer, around 8th and Clinton Streets, ca. 1972. Photo by Caroline Carlson, courtesy of the photographer.*

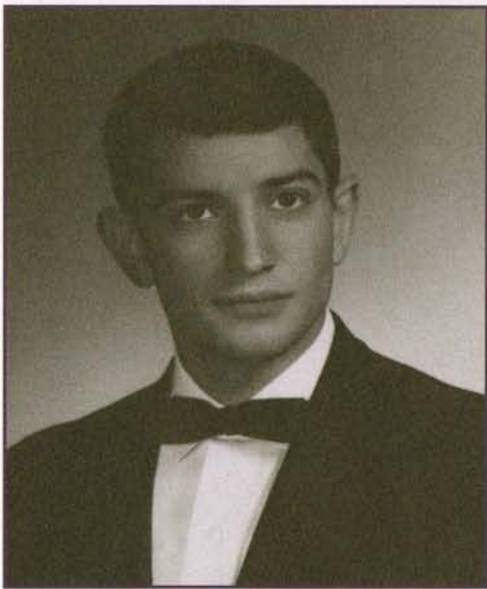
BELOW: *Bobby Ferrante (far right) with other fruit peddlers, loading up around 8th and Clinton Streets, ca. 1972. Photo by Caroline Carlson, courtesy of the photographer.*

work them—1st and Madison down to about 4th and Madison. On a Saturday we would clean out a whole truckload, in just those four blocks. Because people would just buy from Mike Ferrante, nobody else. (Furthermore, there were certain customers who could only be waited on by Mike Ferrante. If I tried to wait on that customer—"No. I have to be waited on by Mike Ferrante." That's the special touch there. They had to be waited on by Mike, because he had a special relationship with them. Also, he treated them a certain way. A lady would come over there and say, "Mike, I don't have any money. I can't do this right now." And he'd say, "No problem. Take whatever you need. Take the whole truck," and he *meant* take the whole truck.)

But let me get back to Bobby [and how he started in the business.] Mike goes, "Tell Bobby where to drive," because Bobby never had anything to do with the business until that point. Mike said, "Sell whatever you can. You've got extra chestnuts," all the stuff—apples, pears, everything was a little extra for the holiday, because that was a big holiday, Thanksgiving, for us. People used to cook at home at that time. They went to restaurants very little. It was totally different. It's a blue-collar town at this point in time; it was not what it is today.

He said, "Sell whatever you can, because it's a long week." After Thursday is Friday and people have a day off, and the stuff is going to go bad. So we loaded up, and I tell Bobby the different stops. I'm going to the customers. And they say, "Well, where's Mike?" They would ask about him.

We sold most of the stuff. And the next Monday I go back to school, [and] Mike was still [on his back.] That's how Bobby worked his first day.



LEFT: *Domenick Amato, Hoboken High School senior photo, 1967. Courtesy of Domenick Amato.*

BELOW: *Ferrante family, Mike Ferrante in the center seated 4th from left and Bobby seated 3rd from left. ca 1960s Courtesy of the Ferrante family.*

The next week [and for a number of weeks], Bobby took out his father's truck—until his father got back and could go to the market again. Then when Mike came back and got better, Bobby got his own truck. We sold most of the stuff, and he could see what was coming in, what money he could make, and everything else. It was a good business. And we enjoyed what we did. There were no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

TRUST

When Bobby got married, I had already worked for [Mike] for six or seven years. [Bobby] got married at the Holiday Inn by the Holland Tunnel. I was maybe sixteen years old.

[Mike's] got to pay the bill at the end of the night, [and] everything was cash-on-the-barrelhead, [for] a couple hundred people. So what did he do? Here's the trust and faith he had in me. Before the wedding he says, "Domenick, come over here." He took me over and says, "Okay—" He took a roll of cash, and says, "I want you to take this money." He pinned it into my suit jacket, and he said, "You give this to me tonight, after the wedding." That was to pay for the whole wedding. He gave it to me because he thought those were the safest hands he could put it in, including his son and two daughters.

People would know he was going to be carrying money, and he's got all different kinds of characters. He was very smart. So rather than him having the money in his pocket—because they knew he would be carrying it—he gave it to me, because nobody would think he would give the money to a kid. I'm sixteen-seventeen years old.

[And] it was in safe hands. There was complete trust between the two of us, such as I don't think I've experienced since. He would trust me with his life and I would trust him with my life.

He Gave Me Half the Business

In my senior year in high school, I had the highest grade of anybody in mathematics, all four years. I was going to go to college, to Rutgers. At [that] point, [Mike was paying me] so much a week. [But] he comes up to me, at the beginning of the summer. He says, "You're going to go to college, come September." I said, "Yeah, Mike. I got accepted and everything."

So he goes to me, "Okay, here's what we do." His business, he'd been at it since the Depression. [His brother, Nick,] took care of the store. His son, Bobby, had a truck at that time. We had a couple of trucks. So he goes, "Okay. Here's what we do. We pay the bills; we pay the garage; we pay the bags." He had credit at the fruit market, because he could get all the credit he wanted. At the end of the week he would pay everybody and everybody knew him. He was respected.

He says, "We'll pay the bills at the end of the week, and every Saturday we'll split everything 50-50." *He gave me half the business.* That's what he thought of me. A partnership. And I didn't have to put nothing up. It's *his* business. Where are you going to find that?

And that's how I went to college, with this [money from the fruit business.] *And he asked me.* I didn't ask him. I was making as much then as I did as a civil engineer, four years later. I didn't have to take any loans over the four years.

That's the kind of man he was. He had a heart of gold. That's the only way I can describe it. I have gold in my hands, thinking about it.

We Did Good for People

Mike passed away in January of '72. Here I am, years later, and I can't find anybody who has his judgment.

He knew how to give. He knew *when* to give. He had that judgment. He listened to people, and people would talk to him. Yeah. You could tell your story to him.

He taught me principles and ideas and how to deal with people. You're in the business, and sometimes you have time, just sitting around, and you'd start up a conversation and talk about things. He would talk about the characteristics of people, the way human nature is. He would explain to you why we do certain things. Every day I went in there, he told me something else about people—the good qualities that we have, okay? Because he'd deal with you—you're in the middle of the street, on the streets of Hoboken—but he'd be able to pick it up.

And we did good for people. They benefited, because he did good for people. And that's not an easy thing to do. But he did. There was not a person who could run into him who could say a bad word about him. To this day—the esteem—people remember him today. They only have the best to say about him. [Because] you wouldn't just buy your fruit off of him. It was also the relationship you had with the man, because you wanted to talk to him. You would also tell your life to him. [And] he would know you after a while. He would know his customers.

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, seventeen 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.

Vanishing Hoboken Chapbooks

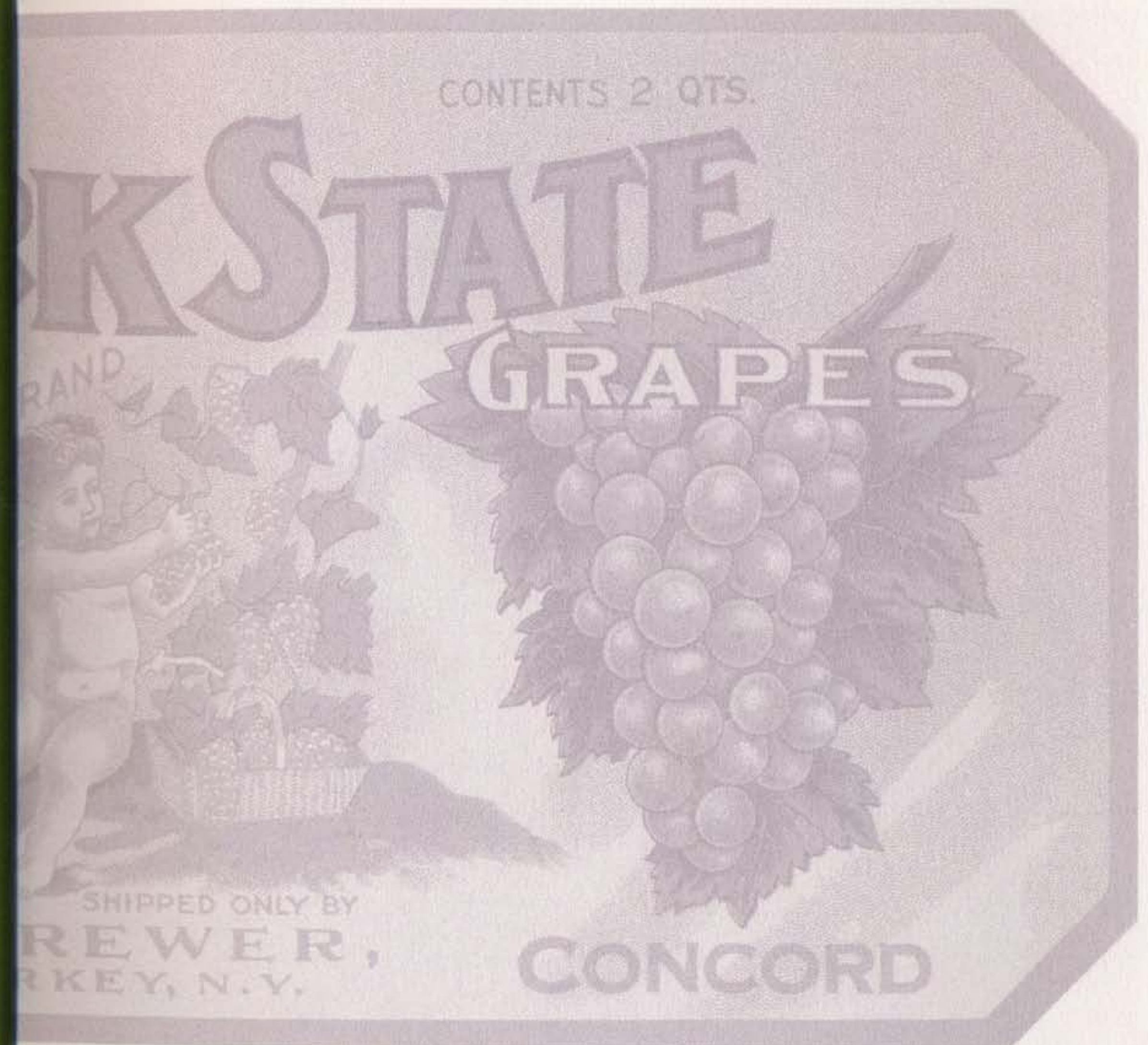
The editor of this series chose to call these small booklets "chapbooks," a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a

> ...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.

Bobby Ferrante's truck, with the names of his children on the front, ca. 1980. Courtesy of the Ferrante family.



A project of the Friends of the Hoboken Library and the Hoboken Historical Museum