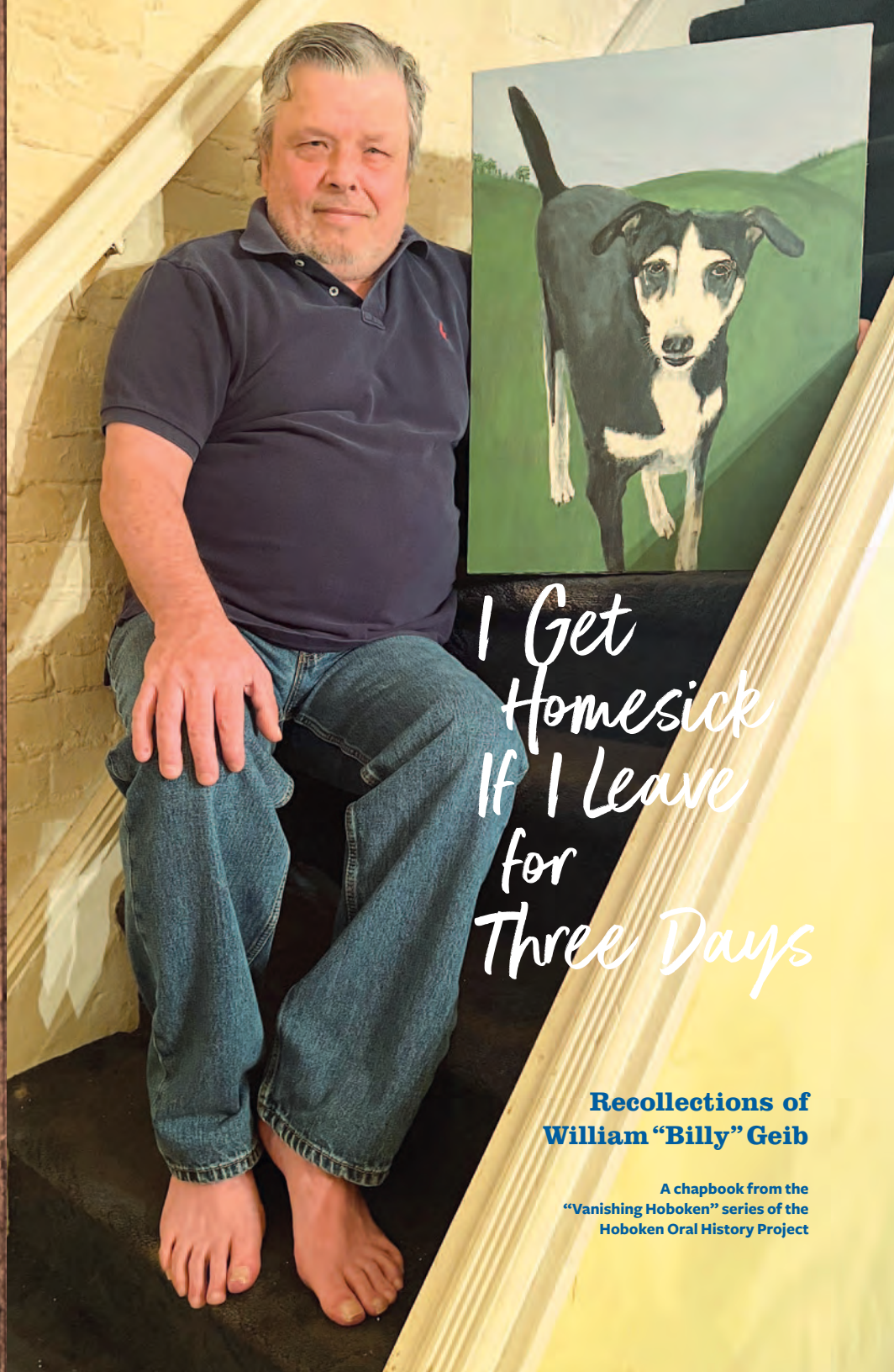


I Get
Homesick
If I Leave
for
Three Days



JUNE 11, 2000

Recollections of
William "Billy" Geib



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William "Billy" Geib**

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 Hoboken Public Library

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COVER: Polaroid of Billy with his dog Weisse on right and the Master's
Voice dog a/k/a RCA Victor dog on left, taken in 2000.

CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPH: Billy by Robert Foster, 2022.

Painting of Weisse by David Ribyat.

BACK COVER: Tommy Boy, one of Billy's rescue cats, 2021.

*Years ago, it would take me an hour
to get to the PATH train. Janice
used to say, "Oh, don't walk on
Washington Street. Let's walk to
Court Street, because you say hi to
everybody." But can I imagine living
any place else? Oh no, no. I get
homesick if I leave for three days.*

—Billy Geib
May 2, 2022

Introduction

William Geib—everyone calls him Billy—loves to tell stories, true stories about growing up in Hoboken, about the places he worked, the people he knew, the animals he found in the city; stories that span generations, that begin and end in Hoboken, picking up people along the way, like a train. A story about his maternal grandfather John Murphy, for example, might travel from his time with the U.S. Army on the trail of Pancho Villa (the Army never captured him), to his service in the Great War, to his work on the Holland America piers in Hoboken, to his first meeting with his bride-to-be on 9th and Willow, to his residence in Willow Terrace—the final stop at the very neighborhood where Billy now lives with Janice Reed and their rescue cat Tommy Boy.

Billy was interviewed twice by Robert Foster and Holly Metz, on May 2 and May 25, 2002, at the Hoboken Historical Museum. Although the interviews covered his work from the mid-1990s to 2001 at ARF & Co., a Hoboken production company, and his later training as an electrician and work for New Jersey Transit, this chapbook mostly features earlier tales: Billy's adventures with kids from 8th and Park, and the fun—and sometimes danger—they found in every corner of the city, the animals he encountered, and the work he picked up as a kid before, and just after, Hoboken changed dramatically in the middle of the 20th century.

Copies of the transcripts from which this chapbook was derived have been deposited in the archives of the Hoboken Historical Museum.



PAGE 2 FAMILY PHOTOS:

TOP ROW: Billy at age seven or eight;
Aunt Mary (left) and Aunt Lillian (right).

SECOND ROW: Billy escorts cousin Linda Larson;
Billy welcomes the millennium.

BOTTOM ROW: Billy with Little Craig (son of brother Craig and Lydia),
brother Craig and Craig's wife Lydia.

Eighth and Park

I was born in 1962 at Margaret Hague [Hospital] in Jersey City. I'm in the middle: I have two older brothers and two younger sisters. My oldest brother is Eugene, and my other brother is Craig, and then my younger sisters are Margie and Diane. Diane is the baby.

I grew up on 8th and Park, but my mom did move around a little bit. We actually lived on the block where the viaduct is, 14th Street, between Clinton and Grand. I was there until I was two. And then we moved to 6th and Jefferson. I was there until I was four. That was another two years. And then we moved to 8th and Park in '66.

My mom was a waitress. She worked nights, which was crazy. She worked at The Colonial first —[a diner] between 3rd and 4th on Washington. When she was working, we had a babysitter, Patrick Green. A real nice guy. A black guy. And he would never take money from my mom. My mom would pay him in pork chops. (*Laughs.*) Pork chops and mashed potatoes. Because she was a good cook. And he just wanted a homecooked meal. That was his pay. He was, I would say, eighteen—but young. We were all crazy. And he wasn't strict at all.

Five kids in a railroad [apartment]. You would walk into the kitchen and the bathroom was straight towards the back. And then to the right there was a bedroom, with my two sisters. Then, the second room was my brother Craig and I, and the last room was the couch where my brother Eugene used to sleep. My mom also slept on the couch, [but she slept during the day].

My dad kind of left us when I was seven. He used to visit us, and he would always get drunk. I'd have to go to Sewanee's [Bar] to go get him. Sewanee's was on 8th and Willow, catty-corner from Grand Bakery.

Below and throughout the book: Photos and descriptions of the animals that Billy rescued and took care of, as shared by text message.



This is a picture of Roscoe. He was my buddy. He was the peacemaker and such a great cat. He was bullied 'cause he was blind, but he was the leader of the colony. He passed away in September 2021. I'm glad I was able to get him to the emergency vet. I'm glad I was there to help. I would have been devastated if I wasn't able to get there...and have him suffer from me not being there...

He was a heavy equipment rigger. Actually, his father owned Geib & Sons Moving Company, but my dad got into rigging and mechanic work, working in junkyards. Maybe operating the crane or whatever the junkyard uses. But he was also very handy. He could fix anything. [Maybe I got that from him.] I think so. But he was...I never saw him sober until he had the stroke, and my mom took him back in. His whole left side was paralyzed.

He was an MP in World War Two and Korea, he said. He did 12 years in the military, so he was entitled to a pension. It was like \$240 a month. I couldn't believe it. That didn't pay for his cigarettes. But my mom took care of him. He gave up drinking—he had to. And then, when he passed away, I forgave him.



This cat here is Bo and I used to feed him. But after my stroke, my friend Kevin [feeds all the cats] every other day. He does the new hay and the houses and preps them for the winter. He was a volunteer at a shelter and I met him in the Dunkin' Donuts lot when he was feeding them. Bo is a little kitty from Storm Sandy.

If you look at this shelter I set up there're two tiers 'cause the cats would sometimes fight. Bo used to pick on Roscoe and Roscoe was blind. So Roscoe wouldn't eat 'cause he didn't know when the next paw hit on his head was coming.

School Days

I never went to kindergarten, I went right to first grade. I burned my hand on a stove. We had gas-on-gas heat and [my mom] would turn the oven on, and then open the door to get the heat in the room. I put my hand on it, and I burned my whole hand. So I skipped kindergarten because of that.

And then I went to Brandt School. I never really liked school, but it's amazing, I would skip all week, and on Friday the teacher would be smart and think she would get at me, and give me a test, and I would ace it.

[When I was playing hooky], I just hung out [with friends]. We would go hide somewhere. Back then we would go underneath the Doric [the apartment complex up the hill]. We would all chip in for a pack of smokes, even though they were only 50 cents. [My mother] didn't find out. Sometimes I would steal a cigarette from her though. She had a lot going on, so she didn't notice much.

A Deaf Person in the Family

My brother went to school in Trenton, to a school for the deaf, and he left for [almost] the whole week, so we didn't see him. My Uncle Ron would drive him to the bus on Sunday and we'd pick him up again on Friday. He probably started at seven years old. Every week during the school year, we only saw my brother on Saturday. But during the summer, we'd hang out. Eugene taught us all American Sign Language and the basics. When we were kids, we concentrated more on playing, but as we got into our teenage years, we started to learn. When you have a deaf person in your family, each family has its own language, [a kind of shorthand].

First Job

[We grew up poor.] And we knew it. That's why I started working, doing little jobs. My cousin, Joe Murphy, he got a paper route. I was eight years old, and he hired me to work for him instead of doing all his own deliveries for *The Dispatch*. He made me do all the [walk-ups] in the projects. I had to run up and down the stairs, and he took the elevator building. (*Laughs.*) He paid me \$3 a week. I heard he was making eight! He would get five, I'd get three.

[Some days,] it was too cold. We used to put our feet in Wonder Bread bags to keep them dry, and then the boots. There's a couple of times I dumped all the papers because I couldn't walk anymore. I was afraid of frostbite, but at that young age you don't really know [enough about] that.

[It happened later,] when I had my own paper route. My feet were numb. [I dumped the papers.] And then, the next day you get all these calls. At that point, I was on Hudson Street, and it was all the old ladies that called.

But they also were generous. Some of them gave me a 50-cent tip instead of a quarter, and that was a lot of money back then, 50 years ago. [I noticed the difference between houses on Hudson Street and Park, where I lived, too.] I figured they were very wealthy up there.

Cats and Everything Else

The paper route—that's how I bought food for the cats in my yard and [seeing them], that's how I fell in love with cats. But then, getting better jobs and better skills, I made a little bit more money. I found cats everywhere. Everywhere I go, I would run into a cat or some animal that needed help. When I worked for New Jersey Transit, I was feed-

ing [a lot of animals]. We had a woodchuck [near where I worked]. A groundhog, cats, a possum. They all coexisted. It was so nice. I found out they followed the railroad tracks. Raccoons and possum.

I love birds, cats, and everything else. [Growing up,] we had a lot of [feral] cats, which was very sad. They had their eyes closed. I didn't know what to do, I was a young kid. In those days, you bought the box of dry cat food. We used to give them eggs, too, thinking the eggs would help them. We tried. And we named them. Snowball was the toughest. And Smokey used to come around. You had to see these fights. Smokey had no ears. Snowball had one eye. It was crazy. They were crazy cats.

[They hung out in the backyards] between Eighth and Park. Some of them went over the fence to Garden Street. And then some of the basement doors would have a hole underneath, and they would go in the basement when the Yugoslavians were making wine. I guess it kept the cats warm. [Otherwise,] the cats were out there in the snow. There was probably about twenty cats altogether.

My friend John killed some baby kittens. He would drown them because he said, "They'll have a terrible life." I was crying, but I was too young [to do anything about it]. I was mad at him too. Of course, we fix them now. You know the TNR group [Trap-Neuter-Release for feral cats]? I'm certified.



This is Lucy (the black and white cat) and Peewee (the all-black cat). I used to feed them at my sister's house. But my sister took care of them for a long time. They both passed. My sister was devastated but they're in a better place now, not suffering anymore. Lucy had a heart condition and Peewee had leukemia. So she had to put them to sleep so they wouldn't suffer anymore.

The Street Dogs of Hoboken

I had a dog, Lucky, who was a collie/hot dog mix. He was this long dog, but short, and he would get into fights with [the street dogs]. To protect me. A lot of times I made him go in the hall when they were coming. Because I would sit at the top of the step [and] see them coming [down the street in a pack]. They were funny, almost like a cartoon, right? They were characters. I think they came from the junkyard on Jackson and 6th. Like nine dogs. That was probably '73, '74. They weren't really wild. Some of them, they barked coming down the street. I think they were probably alerting the people that fed them, [maybe] a person on 8th and Park was feeding them, somebody who loved animals.



The Cuccis

Eighth and Park, where we lived, was a five-story walk-up. We grew up on the fourth floor, Apartment 8. It was crazy. The Cuccis were in Apartment 10 right above us. Seven kids and a monkey. They had a monkey, a duck. They used to come down to our apartment and grab our milk. We used to fight sometimes—they had seven kids, we had five.

The monkey they had, it was little. I think it was a squirrel monkey. They were crazy. But the Cuccis, in a way, were a good thing because everybody thought I was a Cucci. So nobody messed with me. Because they were a very tough family.

A few of them have died. Chuckie, Bobby, and I'm not sure where Johnny Boy is. Steve moved to California. George is in Moonachie, and Marie is right up the hill in Jersey City. She almost wrote me a ticket one time. (*Laughs.*) And then I stopped her. She works for the Parking Authority. And Tina, I'm not sure where she wound up.

Their father was a longshoreman, and their mom was a stay-at-home mom. But they were just a crazy family, and very tough. Chuckie was a fifth degree black belt. Johnny Boy was a kickboxer naturally, but he didn't study. We used to study a little taekwondo. I studied a bit, too, but we couldn't really afford it, you know.

LEFT: Photo by Benedict J. Fernandez, Stray Dogs on Observer Highway, circa 1972.

PAGE 12: Photo by Carol Halebian, group of Hoboken shoeshine kids, circa 1975. Collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

PAGE 13: Photo by Anita Heimbruch, Clam Broth House, circa 1970. Collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

Shoe-Shining

[After the paper route,] I did some shoe-shining with Chuckie and Bobby. We'd go down to the train station, and [the shoeshine guy in the station waiting room] would chase us away, because he said we were taking customers. [He was the professional,] but we would get sympathy from people and get money anyway.

We would do the bars too. We'd even do the Clam Broth House, which, in those days, they threw the clams behind their shoulder, and there was sawdust on the floor, and all the longshoremen had boots. They used to really drink the clam broth, which I guess that's how they got the name. Even they would give us money, like a quarter or ten cents. But they said, "You can't



shine our shoes in here." (*Laughs.*) They wouldn't accept it—the longshoremen. We couldn't shine their shoes. They would have boots on. And there was sawdust.

But then we had the American Hotel, which was right across from the PATH, Hudson Place and River Street. The bartender didn't mind, [and] we didn't give him a cut either. We would go in and business guys would be there and we would get a shine there. And we'd put the coasters in their shoes, [the kind] that were on the bar, as blocking. Not to hit the socks [with polish]. The left and right ankle. They were thinner back then, I guess, and they fit.

The shoe-shining lasted a couple of years. It was hard. And Bobby, because I have a deaf brother, would make believe he was deaf to get a tip. I used to say, "Bobby, don't do that, please. You know? Because somebody is gonna tap you on the shoulder and you're gonna say, 'What's up?' and they'll know." But he was very greedy, I guess. Looking at him as a kid, it was a stupid thing to do.



"The Clothesline Kid"

I started [putting up clotheslines], I think I was 11, 12. The [neighborhood] parents would ask me to put their clothesline up, and I would go on this skinny pole all the way to the top. I was the smallest kid. But my mom got mad, because they wouldn't ask their kids to do it. It was like a favor, but they gave me a couple of dollars. It wasn't like a job.

The poles were there, but some of them were warped like a boomerang. Some of them had spikes, and some of them I just climbed. Yeah, it was very dangerous. And I know some of the parents called me "The Clothesline Kid," but I don't think my friends called me that. Some of them were very appreciative, because their sons were afraid to do it and they needed that clothesline.

The other funny thing was the stuff you would see hanging on the line. (*Laughs.*) We would play Wiffle ball, and sometimes you hit a ball and it'd wind up in somebody's underwear. (*Laughs.*) And then we'd have to climb up the fire escape, take some clothes off, reel it in, take the ball out, put the clothes back, push them back out if the clothes were wet. Then some of the kids would say, "Mom, take the clothes in. Don't put them out there when my friends are out here!"

OPPOSITE: Photo by Benedict J. Fernandez, Clotheslines, circa 1972.



Here are the two houses for the cats. The one on the left is what my sister gave me and the one on the right was the one my friend Carmine gave me.



flights. She would yell, “Go to Aunt Rita’s!” and throw it... I knew what it meant. That’s when she didn’t have a good week in tips.

And that’s why I’m a big tipper. Like, when the Torna’s [pizza] guy brings me a pie, I give him five bucks. The Willow Pharmacy guys bring me my medicine, I give him five bucks. There’s been times when my lunch was \$8, I would leave \$20; I don’t want the change. And I owe that to my mom. She said, “Never blame the waitress if the chef messes up.” (*Laughs.*)

OPPOSITE LEFT: Billy’s mom, Margaret, with Billy, Christmas, 1991.

OPPOSITE RIGHT: Margaret with Annie, relaxing at last.

Mom

Back then she cooked, did laundry—everything—cleaned the house. And she would go to the store to get us cold cuts on the way home. She painted for the holidays. She’d push a dresser around. That was her ladder. She’d go from the chair to the dresser. And she painted with a brush. Then I became a painter and told her “I’ll do it.”

[She had her sisters in town, and they helped her, too.] My Aunt Mary lived on 12th and Washington. My Aunt Rita lived on 3rd and Park and my Aunt Catherine lived on 9th and Garden. In those days my mother used to give me a note to run to my Aunt Rita’s house to get \$10, for food. It would be a note folded on a clothes pin. I’d have to give it to my aunt, she’d read it, and give me the money. I’d run back. And then sometimes I would have to run to my Aunt Mary’s house to get \$10, another \$10, because things were tight. And Aunt Mary would read the note and give me the money. My mother threw it out the window, from the third floor, instead of her walking down four

Waitressing is Hard Work

My mom worked at the Spa [Diner, near the Hoboken train station and PATH]. When my sister Margie was right out of high school, my mom said, “Hey, you know, check it out. Help me out with the waitressing.” So Margie went over to the diner to work. She had a notepad and everything. It was her first day. She didn’t have experience at all. The trains go down and people bombard the Spa, you know, bum-rush the place. And she’s trying to keep up, and she finally said, “Sorry, Mom, I’m leaving. This is too much.” (*Laughs.*) She put the pad down and the boss was yelling at her as she was leaving. She never went back again.

[But my mom did that job] until she was probably 60. Sixty she started getting sick, with the cancer. She probably did it for 30 years. And that’s hard. I remember she had a lot of problems with her feet. And then, living up four flights.

Camp Tamaqua

I should mention Leo Genese, because he's the one who got us to Camp Tamaqua, [outside of Sloatsburg, New York,] to give us some sense of nature, because we were all city kids. Leo was the director.

We got there through the YMCA. We were like juvenile delinquents. But Leo was so nice to get us out of town, and we would go for two weeks straight. I would go with my two brothers and my sister Margie. My sister Diane was too young. I was ten, '72. It was kids from Hoboken, a lot of kids from the projects. I'm so glad I had that relationship, growing up with my friends from the projects, because I still see them until this day, and we all bring up Camp Tamaqua.

[What was my reaction to going to the country?] I loved it. Yeah. But we couldn't sleep—*(Laughs.)*—because of the silence. We cried leaving Hoboken, and then we cried leaving Tamaqua.



This cat here was Blackie. She was so respectful to the other cats and she would wait 'til they were finished eating and then come and eat herself. But she got hit by a car. I used to feed her and she was so sweet. I picked her up and gave her a decent burial where I used to feed her. And all those little houses you see were makeshift. And I had the plywood over the house so that food wouldn't get wet from the rain and the snow. I just wanted them to be comfortable and well-fed!



Columbus Park, Murder Hill

We hung out in Columbus Park, which was a big favorite. The park and maintenance guys hated us because they made piles of leaves and we would go diving into them. *(Laughs.)* We played craps—dice—in the sun house. For nickels. That sun house was our hangout. We would hang out on the ledges and lean up against the post. You had the water fountain going sometimes. In those days they put fish in it.

[And we played stickball there.] We had a home plate we made with chalk, between the fountain and the stairs. And then you hit toward the back of the Columbus statue. We'd hit towards Clinton Street. We loved that statue. I was so worried they were going to remove it. Not to get political. *(Laughs.)* That was our foul line. *(Laughs.)*

That's what we did in the summer, but in the winter, we had "Murder Hill." We went down on it on a sled. That's on 9th Street coming down from the yellow brick road [up by Stevens. It's steep, and] there's a little hump, almost two-thirds up. We'd have a kid blocking Hudson Street. Chuckie was the biggest one of us, so he would block traffic. We'd still get horn-blowing and get yelled at, but those days there weren't as many cars as there are now.

Sometimes you'd hit a parked car with your head. That might explain a lot. *(Laughs.)* I've hit a car a few times with my head, a few times, the bumper. We had old rickety sleds, hand-me-downs. American Flyer. We found them in the garbage. But we had so much fun.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Photo by Caroline Carlson. Columbus Park pavilion with neighborhood children taking a break from play, early 1970s. Collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

TOP RIGHT: Photo of Thirteenth and Madison Streets with rail car in the background, circa 1975. Collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.



This shelter here is a cat house with the ramp and some nice comfortable blankets that I got from a girl that donated them to my friend, Sergio. She gave us some nice blankets that were waterproof and kept their bodies warm. I guess when they see and generate their own heat, cats are resilient. They're like big-time survivors. Even Roscoe being blind, he was so tough but such a sweetheart.



Mischief on the West Side

[We'd go to the west side of town, to where the freight trains were. My friends] would hit the pins that would knock the air out of the train. When you have no air, the break locks, and it would stop the train. Then we'd throw the cases—not me, my friends—they'd throw the cases in the bushes. And I guess the cops and the train crew didn't have time to look in the bushes, [because] we would get it later at night. Some of the cases were food. Some of them were VCRs or electronics. [You'd think the trains would be locked, but] sometimes they were open.

I hitched a train a couple of times. I just went maybe a thousand feet. I didn't want to go too far from home. I would go from 8th Street to Observer Highway. *(Laughs.)* It was fun. And the train was going maybe five or ten miles an hour, and rocking. Mostly I went with the Cuccis, and Craig [my brother], Giovanni Rossini, and his brother, Sergio. Giovanni lived across the street from us, in a private house. They had money.

Some of the other guys [who lived in the neighborhood] came with us, but they were afraid to leave 8th and Park. And not many people wanted to hang out with the Cuccis. *(Laughs.)* But that's why nobody messed with me. I was always small, but people thought I was a Cucci. And I never said I wasn't! *(Laughs.)*

Back to Base

We had a nice clique. [If we went to the far west side or to the river,] mostly we only played for a few hours and we came back to base. That's where I got my soda and potato chips, and sat on the stoop. [There were a lot of kids on that block.] Eighty families, mostly Yugoslavian at the time, now Croatian. But we played bottlecaps, stickball, flies up—when you hit the ball on the stoop and it goes up—automatic Wiffle ball, which the first floor was a base hit, the second floor was a double. [We would play in the backyard]—ice hockey, football, Wiffle ball, stick ball, everything. And [in winter,] it really became a skating rink, the yard. Eight buildings connected, thirty-foot-long buildings, so that's almost a football field.



Here's a bunch of cats that were kind of by the old Siperstein paint store and kind of like on Grand Street and by the mall there, by Monmouth and Grand.



This is the same place. These cats are by Grand and Monmouth in Jersey City. There were like 12 or 15 of them. Some of the ambulance corps nearby was taking care of them. Some of the ambulance people have big hearts and they not only help people but animals.

Maxwell House

My uncle, Bill Larsen, worked at Maxwell House Coffee, and they dumped the coffee grinds in the back, near the end of Elysian Park. Maybe 500 feet towards the end of the gate, they dumped the grinds. And there [would be] steam coming out. Sometimes, when we were cold, we would go in there to warm up. And my mom would yell, "You were in the coffee grinds again! I just did laundry!" Grinds in the socks, sneakers, stained our pants. It would be me, my brother Craig, Chuckie, Johnny Boy, Bobby, Georgie. All the Cuccis. I was always with them.

Bare Ass Beach

[We'd swim in the river, always starting in one place.] That was "Bare Ass Beach." Bare Ass Beach was not so much a beach, it was like, quicksand. We had a fear of getting stuck, but we always had a long stick to make sure [we could get out]. None of us got stuck, but it was basically mud and sand mixed.

We called it Bare Ass Beach—not because we were really bare ass, but we were in our underwear, that was always falling. *(Laughs.)* We were in our Fruit of the Looms. [It was mostly guys, but a few girls hung out there.] Maria Cucci, Tina Cucci, my sister from time to time, but she would never go in her underwear. She'd be afraid I'd yell at her.

[But the big spot to dive] was the tee. This was '81, '82. These guys could swim. Johnny Boy swam across the river. So did Bobby Cucci, Louie Crespo, Kevin Watson. But Bobby and Johnny Boy were like fish. I don't know how they got so good at it. I didn't know how to swim. I only learned how to doggie paddle in Camp Tamaqua.



The tee was by the Union Dry Dock. It was a big steel—almost like a crane, that picked up containers. That's what it was there for, but it was just decaying at that point. They had a ladder. I've been up to the top and it was high—I'm talking maybe eight stories. It might have been less, but I was a kid. But Bobby would go halfway up the stairs and do a swan dive. If it was low tide, you could get stuck in the mud, so he only did it during high tide. And he went under to check, to make sure nothing was down there.

[It was dangerous.] A couple of guys died. They got their heads caught in milk crates or something stuck in the mud. I remember Walter Helming's brother got stuck. His brother was really tall, and he dove in, he forgot it was low tide, and his hands were in the mud and his feet were [moving]. Bobby saved his life. He was always ready; he was like the lifeguard of the crazy kids.

ABOVE: Beach area near Maxwell House Coffee Plant, near Eleventh Street, circa 2000. Collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

TOP RIGHT: Grand Bakery corner of Willow and Eighth Streets. Photograph by John A. Dryzga, 2012.



Grand Bakery

When I was 16, I started working in Grand Bakery. I was a bread baker. We supplied a lot of supermarkets. Back then it was Foodtown, C-Town. We had conveyor belts. The bread would come out in long loaves. We'd put four in a pan, put it back in, let it proof. And then we'd cut them into rolls. And they were great, the rolls. I used to get them and bring them home hot.

John the baker, John Castellitto, ran it. But I worked nights with Vito Lanza, and my Uncle Bob Murphy. And then, Joey Castellitto. My brother worked there as well. He was a cake decorator. My friend Willie was, too. I would work eleven to seven, and my brother Craig would work there early morning, during the day. The bakery played Sinatra constantly, which is how I learned all the songs. I worked there at 16, for the summer, to try it out, and I kind of liked it. But I wasn't making enough money, so I got into construction.

Demolition for Construction Companies

[Construction work in Hudson County at that time?] We were crazed. They called us “animals.” We did demolition. I threw bathtubs five stories out of a window—but I cleared the yard first. I had a guy on the ground floor to make sure nobody goes out to the yard. Instead of lugging this cast iron bathtub down five flights of stairs, I said, “We’re just gonna lift it up to the window.” Some of them would stick in the mud or the dirt. Sometimes I’d break them in half with a sledgehammer. And the double sinks were the worst. You couldn’t even break them or grab them. We would put that on the windowsill. Zoom, five stories. We did some of the radiators right out the window. But then we had a big iron mess in the yard and we had to get it to the truck. Those days, 100 pounds of cast iron got you a dollar-fifty. [We’d take it to the Jersey City scrapyards.] We’d have a lot of weight, but it was backbreaking to make twenty bucks.

We worked for Eugene Ferrante. His buddy Bernard worked with us, and he had the pick-up truck for the iron. I think Bernard got to keep all the money.

[Did we get injured sometimes?] I did, yeah. One time, I stepped on a piece of glass. It went through the boot. It was sticking out of the instep of my foot. Eugene told me to lay down and put my foot up. And then all the guys were upset that I was sitting down. I was like, are you kidding me? I took the boot off and took the glass out. [No trip to the hospital.] No stitches or nothing. Just put your foot up until you feel better, I guess. We were tough. And I had the adrenaline going.

[We were emptying out old apartments to make] condos. It started in '79. A lot of times they made us keep the hallway walls up. We’d gut everything else. One time in Jersey City, we gutted all these



walls. And back then we weren't too bright, and we didn't know they were weight-bearing. We went down the next flight, and all of a sudden, we heard ba-boom! All the ceilings came down. Because we started on the top floor. Eugene's son was there and he was in shock. He said, "Thank god nobody got killed." We would have gotten killed. And he should have known better, because he was a foreman.

After the demo was over, we became general laborers. We would set the carpenters up with two-by-fours. We'd unload the sheetrock truck. We'd set the plumbers up with the new bathtubs. And the electricians did their own thing. [When I drive or walk around the city now,] I feel like I did probably 50 percent of Hoboken.

PREVIOUS PAGE: A series of details from buildings under renovation on or near First and Clinton Streets. Photographs by Bruce Tamberelli, ca. 1983-84. Collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

TOP RIGHT: Billy's Mobilator business card.

The Mobilator

I was working for Eugene doing demolition, but he also had me moving elderly people in town. My brother Craig and I could move anything. Dan Acker, who had the Mobilator [moving company] was at one of those jobs and was trying to carry down a cast iron stove. I showed Dan how to move it. He had the strap on the top, and I said, "Hey, I hope you don't mind me telling you what to do. You should put the strap on the bottom so the guy on top has something to grab." And he was like, "Oh, wow. Can I get your number?" And that's how I became "The Mobilator." (Laughs.)

Dan started out as a bass player. Some of the bands asked him to help move them. That's how it all started. Like a roadie kind of thing. And then he says, "Hey, you know, I'm moving all these bands for nothing. I might as well start a van service."

We had trucks—we called them "Little Mo" and "Big Mo." (Laughs.) I have some of the cards with the logo. We hired the guy who did the cartoons at *The Star Ledger* to do the logo. [And we moved a lot of famous people over the years.] We moved Cindy Crawford. Bridget Fonda. Ally Sheedy. You would deal with their decorators.

[I helped my mom move, too.] She lived at 817 Park. These people had a nicer place in 819 and when they moved, my mom wanted it. So rather than take all her furniture down, we went up. We went up a flight-and-a-half, walked across the roof, and dropped everything down. To move her.



Here are some geese. I used to feed them breakfast. The snow covered the grass and they had nothing to eat so bread was the next best thing.

Unfortunately my phone canceled the raccoon pictures but I was feeding 14 of them and one possum and two skunks. It was amazing how they coexisted.

I forgot to mention 10 sparrows and 15 pigeons and two or three squirrels.



Fabian's

In 1980, I turned 18, and [I had trouble with I.D. to go to the bars]. I didn't have a driver's license. Because who needs a car in Hoboken? So I registered for the draft, and I got a letter from the military that I could be drafted. And that's what I used for my I.D. Fabian's Bar [at Bloomfield and 1st] was the only one that accepted it, because Steve [the owner] was a Marine. He said, "Hey, if you can get drafted, you can drink." That's why I became such a big Fabian's fan.

I would go to the Fabian every night, except maybe Sunday. It was social, but I really like the Weisse beer [they served]. It was almost like a meal. I named my dog after Weisse beer. And there was a great jukebox there. "The A Train" was on the jukebox, but Steve had new music, too. And a back room, where the writers had their meetings. A lot of writers from *The Dispatch* came in there.

ABOVE: Billy and his dog, Weisse, circa 2000.

TOP RIGHT: Billy and Janice on the ferry to Delaware, undated.



Meeting Janice

[I think] we met in Fabian's 1983, but I may have met her at The Beaten Path first. That's what she said. I liked her, and I asked her out, and she said she didn't have time. *(Laughs.)* I was like, "Oh, yeah?" *(Laughs.)* She was at FIT [Fashion Institute of Technology]. She just moved to town, and she was working, and going to FIT for fashion, as a designer. So I thought she was cool. And then, years later, [when we met again,] we still had each other's number. She bought the house [in Willow Terrace] in 1995 [and we live there together].



Here we have two robins. I thought one was a pigeon. But even pigeons used to come into the cat house, plus sparrows and all kinds of birds 'cause they know where the food is. Sometimes with the pandemic in 2020, there were a lot of hungry animals. I saw a fox where I fed the cats. He walked right through the area never looking at me or anything. He must have been lost. So sad.



ABOVE: Saverio "Sam" Sciancalepore. Photograph by Robert Foster, 2021.

Remembering Saverio "Sam" Sciancalepore

I met Sam in 1995, when Janice bought the house. [He was our neighbor.] He had a dog just like Lassie, a beautiful collie. I said, "You know, if you ever need me, I could walk her." A couple of times he was home, he gave me the leash. The dog came out, I walked her. Her name was Samantha.

He was a big animal lover, just like me. That was our connection. He saw [an injured] bird in his yard, put it in a little cage, tried to nurse it back. He would feed them. He told me bread's not really good for them, but he said, "At least you feed them. At least they get something in their stomach."

[Sam was very quiet—subdued.] Oh, boy, he didn't say boo. Every morning we'd drive to work at five in the morning. [He was going to do his work for the city as a street sweeper and I was going to Transit.] He would say, "Oh, I just saw the news. It's gonna snow." And that was it. I said, "Well, Sam, it's gonna snow. Are you gonna push the cart around in the snow?" And he said, "Washington Street, they shovel, right?" He was always positive.

He moved to Hoboken when he was six or seven. He was a Vietnam veteran and never talked about it. Sam always said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." If I complained to him, he would say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." (*Laughs.*)

"You Say 'Hi' to Everybody"

I love the fact that [in Hoboken], you can walk to a good restaurant, a good bar. [And I know so many people here.] Years ago, it would take me an hour to get to the PATH train. Janice used to say, "Oh, don't walk on Washington Street. Let's walk to Court Street, because you say hi to everybody." [But can I imagine living any place else?] Oh no, no. I get homesick if I leave for three days.



This is my friend Sergio's cat, Sophia. She fell five stories and broke her jaw. We brought her to AMC in Manhattan, 62nd and York, and the doctors did a wonderful job of putting her jaw back together.



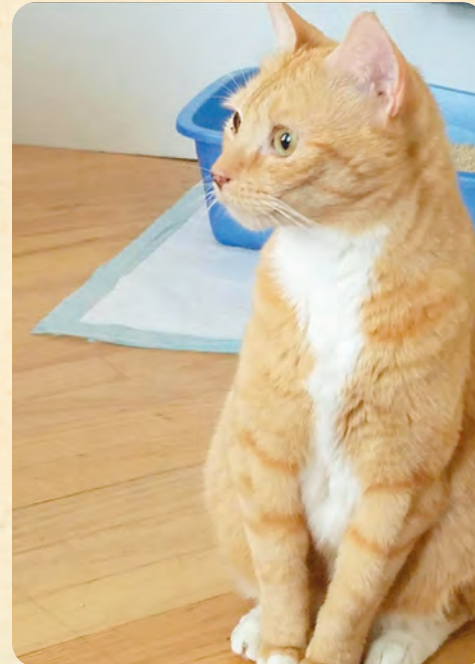
Sophia again. She has such a funny personality. I love her so much.



And here is my Tommy Boy. He's my cat. I found him with his brother Joey and sister Peanut when I was working in Paterson. I found them in a 12-pack box of Snapple, which was empty except for the three kittens in the box. We had to bottle feed them and now Tommy Boy's a big boy. I named him Tommy Boy in memory of Chris Farley, one of my favorite comedians.



Whiskers here, 2019.



Whiskers May, 2020.

The Hoboken Oral History Project

“Vanishing Hoboken,” an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Hoboken Historical Museum and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to 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; 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, in which 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 Oral History Project transcribed and edited several oral histories to produce a series of “Vanishing Hoboken”

chapbooks. Since 2002, thirty-seven chapbooks—including this one—have been published, 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 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 chapman, 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.



Billy at Rogo's bar by Tim Heinz, 2001.



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