

Little Italy filled with the aroma of baking bread



Gene and Carmella Mendicelli in front of the Italian Bakery sign painted by Virginia Mendicelli Raso circa 1938.

By Kathy Jordan

Julie Mendicelli Wasielewski grew up in Little Italy enjoying the aroma of freshly baked bread, some of which came from her father's bakery.

Daytimes, Eugene Mendicelli worked for the D&RGW Railroad as a stationery engineer, building fires in the old steam engines. Every other night he would bake bread in a little cottage behind the Mendicelli home at 342 Pitkin Ave., which he had turned into a bakery.

Julia said her father installed a long table on one side of the cottage and stored flour in the other corner. Nunzio Grasso built a large brick oven that held 30 loaves of bread, and Mendicelli built a large wooden container in which he mixed the dough.

Bread-baking was a family affair, which usually ended with a neighborhood gathering. Every other night Mendicelli would mix a batch of bread dough and let it rise. When he was ready to cut the dough he would go into the house and ask Julie and her sister Virginia to come out and weigh the loaves.

Julia said her father had scales and a cutter that was eight to 10 inches in length, with long wooden handles and a sharp blade on the bottom. Julie and Virginia's job was to chop a piece of dough off and put it on the scale. If it weighed a pound, they handed it to their father, and he put it on a breadboard, rolled it into loaf and placed it on the long table. When 30 loaves were rolled and in place he would cover them so they could rise again.

He would then say "Okay girls," and Julie and Virginia would go back in to the house and continue whatever they had been doing. While the loaves were rising again, he would start the fire, mop and scrape the oven. Later that evening when the bread was ready to go into the oven, one of "girls" would go back out and hand her father loaves of bread to be put on an 18-inch board and placed in the oven.

Julie said that if he had a little extra dough he would make "the best rolls that you have every tasted in your life."

About the time the bread was ready to come out of the oven, quite a few people would drop by the house. Julie said. Her mom would have the butter ready, and many nights family and friends would crunch on rolls oozing with butter.

Meanwhile her father would be in the bakery removing the loaves from the oven, placing them on the long table and covering them with a cloth.

It would be late at night when Mendicelli came in to visit with the company, and he would offer them liquid refreshment. Julie said that her dad was a good winemaker too. "The company mostly came for the wine, and the bread was an extra," she said.

Mendicelli wanted a sign for the bakery, so Virginia got a large piece of metal, baked a loaf of bread, fastened it on the metal plate and painted "Italian Bakery" on the sign. Then Mendicelli nailed the metal to two posts he had put in the front yard, and they were open for business.

The bread cost 25 cents for two loaves. The Mendicellis sold them from their house, and if her father didn't have time, Julie and Virginia would take the bread to Stranges Grocery, Longo Grocery, Raso Grocery and Pantuso's Grocery. Pantuso's Grocery, at the corner of First and Main streets, later became Momma Pantuso's Restaurant. The building was torn down several years ago to make way for the Sports Page and is now Weaver's Tavern.

Mendicelli baked bread for about three or four years, but he stopped when it became difficult to keep up the pace of working full time for the railroad and baking every other night.

(Next week growing up in Little Italy and meeting the love of Julie's life)