

Fence-hopping WWII soldiers danced the night away at YMCA



*Julie and Ray Wasielewski soon after they were married stand in front of the YMCA building at Fifth Street and Rood Ave., where Alpine Bank is now.
Julie Mendicelli Wasielewski photo collection*

By Kathy Jordan

Julie Mendicelli Wasielewski grew up at 346 Pitkin Avenue in Little Italy, a neighborhood bordered by First and Fifth Streets, Colorado Avenue and Fourth Street.

When she was growing up there she was unaware it was called Little Italy. It was simply where several of Grand Junction's Italian families lived.

Julie said it was a great neighborhood where the kids all played together, although even then Whitman Park was off-limits because "hobos" lived there.

One of the neighborhood kids' favorite places to play was around the D&RGW Depot.

When there were no trains in the yard, Julie, her sister Virginia (who later married Dante Raso), and other neighborhood kids would play in the depot waiting area. Sometimes they would push each other around in cane wheel chairs which were available there. The woman who took care of the bathrooms knew them all by name and let them play until it was time for a train to arrive. Then they would scatter for home.

The Strand Theatre was another favorite. Julie's mother was friendly with John and Florence Gollenstein who owned the theatre at 349 at Main Street. Julie and Virginia became friends of the Gollenstein children and were allowed to go to the movies for free.

Julie said that when Florence was a young lady she had toured with a carnival using the stage name of Pretty Kitty Kelly. Julie said she wasn't sure if Florence danced or did acrobatics, but she had several trunks filled with costumes, which she stored in the small living quarters at the back of the theatre. When Julie, Virginia and their friends tired of watching a movie they would go to the back and play "dress-up" with Florence's boas, sparkling shoes and costumes.

After the Gollensteins sold the theatre it was renamed the Mission and continued to operate for many years,

Julie graduated from high school in spring 1940, then attended the new Mesa Junior College on North Avenue for one year. Concerned with how much money her father was spending on her education. Julie did not return a second year. Instead she got a job at H. S. Kress store on Main Street, where she worked her way up to the position of window dresser. She enjoyed decorating windows because she could go to any department and select merchandise for them. Then one day the manager told her that she had to draw a picture each time she changed the window and send it to the corporate office. That took the fun out of it, and she changed careers.

She went to work at Garings Jewelry store on Main Street and was owned by Harold Grant. A couple of years ago the building was demolished to make a walkway to the parking garage on Rood Avenue.

And that is where Julie was working that fateful day in October 1942 when a troop train rolled into town and the soldiers marched from the depot down Main Street to the Civilian Conservation Corps buildings located where the Veterans Hospital is now.

Julie joined the crowd on Main Street as they waved and cheered at the soldiers marching by. As she put it "I saw this handsome man there and he waved at me and I waved back and didn't think anything of it. The next week the Catholic Church on White Avenue had a dance for the soldiers and lo and behold the soldier was there, and I got to dance with him. To make the story short we were married for almost 63 years when my husband, Ray Wasielewski, passed away almost three years ago."

The soldiers were confined to the CCC area but they could climb the fence and go into town. Julie said "As I tell the girls (her daughters Maryann Wasielewski Benoit and Pat Wasielewski) I think Ray and I danced a million miles at the old YMCA, which was at Fifth and Rood and was a USO during the war."

After the war Julie and Ray lived in the cottage in back of her childhood home where her father's bakery had been. They moved to the north part of town in 1958.

There are still a few houses and stores left to stir the memories of what was once "Little Italy." If you happen to be there, maybe--just maybe-- with a little imagination, you might get a whiff of freshly baked bread or hear the children's laughter as they play in the depot.

