

“IT WAS THE SUMMERTIME FOR US”

My thirty-nine year old son Eric recently sent me an e-mail asking me several questions about how life really was back in the old neighborhood. He lives and works in Virginia and receives the JJ by e-mail. I have tried to portray life as it was then by writing stories and embellishing incidents that happened in the old neighborhood. However, to really know what it was like then, one would've had to live it first-hand. Hopefully, the following will give a better idea of what life was really like.

There were distinct smells that accompanied the dawning of each new day in Swampoodle. The most significant of those different smells I remember occurred during the summer season. Perhaps because there was more opportunity to smell everything with all the windows open. There were only a few home air-conditioners found in a 100 city block radius.

Summer Friday circa 1960: I walk across the street about thirty-five feet from the door of Uncle Al's tailor shop to Jules Grocery Store, located in front of our house on the corner of Judson & Indiana, more commonly known as J&I.

“Hey Jules, do you want your car washed today?”

“Okay Aron, but I want a top notch job inside and out. Wax the dash and use chrome polish on the bumpers and hubcaps!”

It was the combination of the Italian frying peppers, the Jersey corn, the red ripe Jersey tomatoes and the sweet red onion aroma that would make anyone hungry. All of them delivered directly from the farms earlier this morning have been strategically placed on display in baskets outside of Jules Capriotti's grocery store. I don't care that it is only nine-o'clock in the morning and I just finished breakfast. As I see and smell the fresh fruits and vegetables, my appetite is stimulated. I proceed to negotiate my

fee which includes two sandwiches, one for now and one for lunch.

John Giargiari is walking down Indiana Avenue throwing a baseball up in the air and catching it in his new leather baseball mitt. “Aron have you asked Jules if he'll sponsor our baseball team in the summer league at Whittier's yet?”

“Not yet Giar!” Giar must have just got his brush haircut, because he smells of Wildroot hair tonic that the barber always puts on your hair after a haircut. I proceed with my conversation, “Jules listen--the guys want me to ask you if you'll sponsor our baseball team in the summer league.”

“The guys want to know. Who are the guys?”

“You know Petchie, Giar, Squid, Jimmy Yearn, Horn, Ernie Barbells, Rodger, Livin, Umberto, Lavanga, No-Neck, Ron Tucci, Trains, Oxygen, Potato Chip Ears, Bobby Risnychock, and all the other guys on the corner.” After a little bit of haggling, Jules agreed to provide the funds to us for shirts, caps, balls and a few bats.

After breaking the news to the guys Giar, Petchie and I proceed to Whittier's playground to register our new team “VOS”. The name was decided on by me and since I took Latin in school for the last two years I choose this name because it means ‘you’ plural--or more loosely translated it means “Us!” The guys didn't seem to mind the slight drizzle that began to fall as we walked the five blocks to the playground, because they, like me, are excited about entering our baseball team from J&I into an organized competition. Walking by Scuzzi's house just after 24th Street on Indiana Avenue I can smell the peppers that his wife Nancy must be frying and somehow the mixture of the peppers frying and the smell of the fresh meat being unloaded from the Cross Meat Packers Truck outside of Joe the Butchers shop a few doors north at the corner of

Ringgold Street, create a very inviting and unique fragrance. Across Indiana Avenue at the corner of 25th Street the smell of Italian gravy simmering on the stove of the Riccutti's house makes me salivate even more. Across the street Bob's Seafood Shop must be preparing deviled crab cakes for tonight's rush; knowing that all us Catholics must refrain from eating meat on Friday. A huckster is calling from a very large wagon pulled by two large horses, “Watermelon Red and Ripe!” As we approach Stillman Street, I wave to Edith and Joe Salvia standing outside of Joe's Barber Shop. Delores Vianello and her mother Mary are pulling empty shopping carts behind them, as they walk down Indiana Avenue probably heading to 22nd Street. Sammy Vassallo is cleaning the inside windows of his family's Lunch Meat store. Our journey continues and when we reach 29th street the smell of chlorine coming from the Swimmies, (its girls only day), mixed with the cinder dust from the playground and the refreshing smell of the (acid free) rain, gives me a comforting and reassuring feeling that all is well in our summer world of Swampoodle.

The summer seasons then and now pass so quickly and at this stage of life the memory of each season all seem to meld together. But that season was particularly memorable, because we were proud to compete for the first time in an organized league. To appreciate how our world was in Swampoodle one has to understand that everything we did occurred within a mile or so from our homes. Within that very small world we managed to never get tired of doing things together. After all we had everything we wanted, caring families, good friends, concerned neighbors and great food. There was a sense about our lives that was safe and secure and it definitely was a summer season for “Us.” Hope you have a memorable summer!!