

# **NEIGHBORHOODS SOUTHEAST SEATTLE COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECT**

Whatever Happened to "Garlic Gulch?"

Southeast Seattle's Italian Community Since World War II

By Mikala Woodward

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The history of Southeast Seattle’s Italian community before World War Two is well-documented. But what happened to “Garlic Gulch” during and after WWII? What traces of the old Italian community remain in Southeast Seattle? And what connection can be made between the old neighborhood and today’s Italian community?

### **Old Neighborhood, 1890 – 1940**

The first Italians arrived in the Rainier Valley in the 1880s; many were unskilled laborers -- “pick and shovel” was the phrase they used to describe their jobs building roads, railroads, and sewers. Others took up farming; several of these families were instrumental in establishing the Pike Place Market downtown.

In those years Seattle’s Italian community centered around Mt. Virgin church on Massachusetts Street, with a business district stretching along Rainier Avenue from Atlantic Street to McClellan. The business district was made up of Italian bakeries and groceries, a pharmacy, several barbershops, and a social hall. The Atlantic Street Center, a settlement house founded in 1910, offered assistance to recent arrivals.

Families were large and close-knit, as was the community. Vaccas married Isernios. Merlinos married Arganos. Children attended Mt. Virgin School, where they were taught by nuns who spoke Italian and could assist students – and parents – who didn’t speak English. A 1976 *Seattle Times* article quotes Sister Manette, who taught at Mt. Virgin in the 1920s and ’30s: “The immigrant parents were poor and had to take what jobs they could get because of the language barrier, so they saw education as a doorway for their children and would sacrifice anything to get it for them.” But even though many parents were eager to see their children succeed as “Americans,” they also valued the connection to their heritage at Mt. Virgin. Elizabeth Yorio, a

student in the 1920s, told the *Times* reporter that Father Carmello also “taught Italian-language classes because he dreaded to see us children getting Americanized so quickly.”

Gardens were large and prolific – small farms, in many cases, with chickens, goats, even a cow or two. Fathers played bocce on weekends and made wine in their basements. Mothers left their doors open when they went out, in case a neighbor wanted to borrow a cup of sugar. The community was served by an Italian-language newspaper, the *Gazzetta Italiana*, published by pharmacist Nick Paolella. Paolella also hosted a weekly “Italian Hour” on the radio sponsored by the Mission Macaroni Company, and featuring lots of opera.

The area along Rainier was known as “Garlic Gulch,” but there were other Italian neighborhoods in South Park and Georgetown, on Beacon Hill around St. Peter’s Church, and at the southern end of the Rainier Valley, where the Isernios and the Desimones, among others, had their farms. Joe Desimone, one of the founders of the Pike Place Market, played a crucial, if indirect, role in the city’s aerospace industry, according to a 1989 article by Eric Scigliano: “In 1936 [Desimone] gave Boeing several acres on West Marginal Way – for a token \$1 – so it could erect its Building 2.” Desimone’s generosity paid off – Boeing stayed in Seattle and increased production in the years that followed. But Scigliano points out the irony that “by keeping Boeing in Seattle, Desimone [the quintessential truck farmer] ensured the industrial growth that would doom Duwamish truck farming.”

## **Wartime**

World War Two spurred much of that industrial growth, of course – and created thousands of jobs for Italian Americans and others. Italian parents sent their sons off to fight overseas just as other American families did. But the war affected the Italian community in unique ways as well. As “enemy aliens,” the Italian-born residents of Garlic Gulch and other neighborhoods were subjected to curfews, travel and employment restrictions, and other controls. The Italian social hall shut down during the war because anyone born in Italy had to be home by 8 pm. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Nick Paolella, pharmacist, publisher and radio host, was detained by federal agents, along with dozens of other Italian newspaper and radio men in other

cities on the West Coast. The newspaper, radio show, and the community's Italian language school all ceased operation during the war years.

Toward the end of the war, Italian POWs captured by U.S. troops in North Africa were shipped to Seattle. The presence of their countrymen in these circumstances was a complicated situation for many Italian immigrants. Local Italians certainly didn't want to identify with the thousand hard-core fascist prisoners who rioted at Fort Lawton in June of 1944. But many of the Italian prisoners had been reluctant soldiers with no love for Mussolini: Ralph Vacca's uncle, who served overseas, told him that "a lot of them, they'd see the Americans coming, and they'd run up to them and say, 'Hey, take me with you!'" These prisoners were allowed to join the Army's Italian Service Unit (ISU) and given special privileges and freedoms, including supervised visits to local bars and sightseeing tours of the city. Andy Bevilacqua remembers his father taking him to visit one of the POW camps when he was a child: "There were guys there from Tuscany, like he was" – reason enough to form a bond. ISU soldiers could get passes to go have dinner the homes of local families – often Italian families, naturally. Ralph Vacca recalls:

They weren't the hard line fascist Black Shirts or whatever, and so on weekends, the Italian prisoners would get passes to go out to Italian families. They couldn't speak English—but I remember they would go over to my mother's, and my mother had nine brothers and sisters in her family. So every Sunday everyone went over there. And they would play bocce ball and my God, at dinnertime, the table was from here to there – twenty or thirty people. And they would talk Italian and have spaghetti and whatever else was on the table.

Ralph's aunt, Mary Vacca, wound up falling in love with one of these gentlemen, Miguel Prontera – and this certainly wasn't the only friendship or romance that developed between young people on opposite sides of the POW camp fence.

When one of the ISU prisoners was lynched at Fort Lawton in August 1944, 28 African American GIs were convicted of the murder, ostensibly motivated by resentment of the privileges enjoyed by the POWs. (These privileges would have been particularly galling to African American soldiers, who were after all not welcome in some of the bars and businesses patronized by these enemy prisoners.) The African American GIs have since been exonerated,

but the publicity at the time may well have affected attitudes in the Italian community toward blacks in the years to come.

### **Postwar, New Wave, Success**

At the end of the war, Miguel Prontera and the rest of the POWs were sent back to Italy. But Mary Vacca went to Italy, tracked him down, married him, and brought him back to Seattle. Prontera opened a barber shop on McClelland Street, where for more than 60 years he cut the hair of (as Dominick Driano told Danny Westneat) “anyone with a vowel at the end of his name.” He retired in 2008 at the age of 90.

Prontera was part of a new wave of Italian immigrants that arrived in Seattle in the 1950s. Many of these new arrivals merged seamlessly into the established community of Garlic Gulch. The Pizzutos, who arrived in the mid-50s, were from a rural village in southern Italy where opportunities were extremely limited, and had been even before the war. Back in Italy, Lauro Pizzuto later told his grandson Cory, “I played soccer and shot pool in pubs – that was it!” Lauro and his father came to Seattle for the ultimate “pick and shovel” job: tunneling under their own neighborhood around Mount Virgin Church as part of the approach to the original Lake Washington Floating Bridge. The Mottolas, who arrived about the same time, were city people – from Naples – and felt less connected to the rural crowd. Vince Mottola worked for more established Italians – the Gai family, of bakery fame – before opening his own restaurant in 1957.

So many Italians arrived in Seattle in the 1950s that the Italian-born population of SE Seattle (as measured by the U.S. Census) nearly tripled: from 929 in 1950 to 2555 in 1960. Southeast Seattle’s population as a whole rose sharply during this period as well, but nothing like as fast: the Italian percentage doubled, from 2% in 1950 to 4% in 1960. The highest concentration of Italians still clustered around Mt. Virgin Church, but with many Italians living on Beacon Hill and elsewhere, “Garlic Gulch” was less of a residential focal point than before the war.

By the late 1950s Seattle's Italian community had reached a fairly comfortable place. The first generation of immigrants who had arrived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were now growing old, and many of them could look back on their lives and accomplishments with some satisfaction. Several of these gentlemen were profiled in a 1956 Seattle Times article by Erle Howell. They were businessmen, musicians, professors, patriarchs. And their children had, as Sister Manette put it: "turned out very well, a credit to themselves and the city."

Leonardo Patricelli, "The Ditch Digger" profiled in Angelo Pellegrini's *Americans by Choice*, had arrived in Seattle in 1911, willing to work hard in order to give his children a chance at a better life. Forty years later he and his wife Giovannina had worked hard indeed – but they now had land of their own, a fine house built by Leonardo himself, and four sons, the eldest of whom was a doctor. Leonardo had come to the U.S. hoping his children would have opportunities he had lacked in Italy, and indeed they did. More recent arrivals like the Pizzutos and Mottolas could see a similar path unfolding for their own children in their newly adopted country.

In 1956 Albert Rosellini was elected governor of Washington – the first Italian American governor west of the Mississippi. Rosellini's family was originally from Tacoma, but he grew up in Southeast Seattle, went to UW law school in the 1930s, and had represented the 33<sup>rd</sup> District – including "Garlic Gulch" – in the state legislature for nearly 20 years. With one of "their own" in the governor's mansion, the Italians of Southeast Seattle could feel with some justification that they had "arrived."

### **"Goodbye Garlic Gulch"**

That sense of comfort, security, and success meant that many Italians – and especially their children – did not need the support of an Italian neighborhood to survive, and many were starting to drift away from the old neighborhood. Howell's article identifies Louis Medica as the oldest living Italian immigrant in Seattle. "In America a man's a king in his own right," Medica says. "When I came to Seattle seeking work... No one had money but we were glad to be in America, because we were free." Medica still lived near Mt. Virgin church, but many of his countrymen had moved out of the neighborhood. Nick Paolella, whose newspaper resumed publication after

WWII, and who had been knighted by the Italian government for service to his expatriate countrymen, now lived on Mercer Island. When the reporter asked him for “his evaluation of American citizenship, Paoella said significantly, ‘I’ve been here 50 years and have not been back to the Old Country.’” (Was the reporter aware that Paoella had been detained under suspicion of espionage during WWII? Was there a little flicker of defiance in his answer? It’s hard to say.)

In the 1960s and ‘70s this trend accelerated... Lauro Pizzuto’s grandson Cory grew up in Kirkland, visiting his grandparents at their house in Rainier Beach on weekends. “Hearing Italian spoken was very common. It was not foreign to us. But,” says Cory, “we were not allowed to speak it. ‘Don’t learn it,’ they said, ‘Stay in America.’ They wanted us to be Americans.”

Joe Fugere’s mother came from an Italian-Irish family on Beacon Hill. He recalls that during the 1960s “A lot of the Italians moved to Mercer Island, or Bellevue. We all thought ‘Well, that’s so far away!’ But the floating bridge had given more access to the East Side. It was like the new cool thing – if you could afford to move to Bellevue, you had arrived.” Joe’s family stayed in the neighborhood: “My grandmother was here. Maybe we couldn’t afford it. But lots of my friends [left the neighborhood] – it was like, “Wait, you’re moving too?”

This natural diaspora of the Italian community's descendants coincided with a fairly dramatic demographic shift in the Rainier Valley, to which the Open Housing ordinance, the Boeing Bust, the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and many other factors also contributed. For a variety of reasons, Census Tract 95 (around Mount Virgin Church) lost more than half its white population between 1960 and 1980, while the African American population increased five-fold and the Asian population more than doubled. No doubt this contributed to Garlic Gulch's loss of identity as an Italian neighborhood.

Local perceptions certainly exaggerated the extent of the shift – a 1978 *Seattle Sun* article describes the neighborhood as “almost entirely black,” for instance, while the African American population in Tract 95 peaked at 41% in 1980 and never exceeded the white population. But people’s impressions of change may be just as significant as the actual numbers when it comes to

fueling “white flight.” The presence of more African Americans was linked in many people’s minds to an increase in crime. From the *Sun* article: “‘We’ve been broken into four different times,’ said Mrs. Chicketti. ‘We have dope rings in the neighborhood.’ She explained that there are very few white people in the area anymore. ‘We get stared at.’”

Some white families, including Italians, were alarmed by the threat of racial violence in the 1960s. Joe Fugere remembers “those were rough times for Seattle. I remember my Dad came home from work one day, and he had driven through a riot on Rainier Avenue. His ’65 Impala was all dented up.”

Another Italian woman interviewed in 2002 was distressed by what her son called the “tremendous cultural change” in the neighborhood. Once she lived in a neighborhood full of people she could relate to, with children her boys played with every day “just like brothers.” Then “the blacks started to move in... Oh, I felt terrible.” One afternoon “I found this “For Sale” sign on the neighbor’s yard. Before that he had told me, ‘As long as you stay here, I’ll stay here.’ So then I came home and here was a sign on his front law, ‘For Sale.’ I told him, ‘Good God, I thought you were gonna stay and not put up a sign.’ He sold it to a black lady. The day she moved in I cried my heart out.” Despite her fears, this woman remained in the neighborhood. Thirty-five years later, she was able to say of her African American neighbor, “She turned out to be a very, very nice neighbor.”

### **“An Italian Miracle”: the transformation of Mount Virgin**

The transformation of Mt. Virgin church and school during the 1970s and ‘80s mirrored the changes in the neighborhood, and also serves as a reminder that it wasn’t just African Americans moving into the neighborhood after WWII.

“The Church of Our Lady of Mount Virgin dominates the valley that was once the home of working class Italian immigrants and now shelters many poor blacks,” the *Seattle Sun* reported in 1978. “The Italians have moved on, mainly to greater prosperity. But at least for the time being, their loyalty to the old church in the old neighborhood is a real boon to their successors.” The

church school that had welcomed Desimones and Vaccas and LaSalles and Pizzutos for generations was, at that time, serving a largely black, non-Catholic population. With the support of its aging Italian alumni, it survived another year before closing its doors. The building is now a preschool, independent of the church.

The church itself nearly expired along with the school, according to a 1991 parish history: “By the 1980’s the parish didn’t seem viable to the archdiocese. Mass attendance had shrunk to less than 150 on a Sunday. The average age of the congregation climbed to between 65 and 70 years... There were almost no baptisms, nor any new families joining the parish. Priests found it a hard place to come to.” The African Americans who were moving into the neighborhood might have been sending their kids to Mt. Virgin School, but they had churches of their own, and were not replacing the ebbing supply of Italian parishioners at Mt. Virgin.

Mt. Virgin parish was saved by an influx of new immigrants from what might seem like an unlikely quarter: Laos. In 1979 Kmhmu tribespeople, fleeing the war that had spilled over into Laos from neighboring Vietnam, came to Seattle as refugees. Due to a fluke of history these tribespeople were Catholics, and they “appeared at [Mt. Virgin’s] door, frightened, lost and confused on so many levels.” The parish took them in; the sisters set up a refugee center that provided emergency services, along with a youth program. In 1985 the Kmhmu were joined by the Hmong, also from Laos. And in 1988 a third group of Laotian refugees also joined Mt. Virgin church. By 1991, the year Mt. Virgin celebrated its 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary, “the Lao, Hmong, and Kmhmu refugee community... numbers more than 300. Last Easter 12 adults and 12 children were baptized, and this spring 48 received first communion.” The parish also had a “small Chinese community (which has since grown much larger) served by a monsignor from Taiwan. As Father Jack Morris put it, “Another spring-time seems to be coming to the parish.”

While the new refugees certainly represented a major cultural shift for the historically Italian church, there was also a recognizable connection stemming from a common experience: “These devout, honest and hard working illiterate people were not terribly different from so many of those who came here 80 years ago.” Not only that, the Laotians had originally been converted to

Catholicism by Italian missionaries in the 1930s – a fact that led Father Morris to describe their arrival at Mt. Virgin – and the “spring-time” they engendered -- as “an Italian miracle.”

### **“An Onslaught of Concrete Spaghetti”**

The Sun’s 1978 declaration that “Garlic Gulch is Dead” may have been premature, but it highlighted the demographic changes afoot in the neighborhood at that time. By the time *The Weekly* published Eric Scigliano’s article “Goodbye, Garlic Gulch” in 1991, it was pretty clear that neither the area around Mt. Virgin nor the business district along Rainier Avenue “felt” like an Italian neighborhood anymore.

Scigliano identifies what was probably the most significant factor in Garlic Gulch’s demise. In the late 1910s, Empire Way (now Martin Luther King Way) had cut through the neighborhood, passing right in front of Mt. Virgin church. This was only the beginning of what Scigliano described as an “onslaught of concrete spaghetti” that eventually strangled the Italian neighborhood. Lake Washington’s first floating bridge opened in 1940, and its approach (Lake Way) cut through the heart of Garlic Gulch. According to second-generation Italian John Croce, quoted in Scigliano’s article: “that really screwed up the neighborhood.” When the I-90 tunnel replaced the old US-10 route, it was déjà vu all over again for many residents. Don Vey’s grandmother’s house was torn down in 1938 to make room for the original Lake Way. “They moved across the street – and then the tunnel took *that* house.” Scigliano says the successive construction of freeways, overpasses, and tunnels “swept out the old community with what seems almost a mischievous malevolence.”

Vincent LaSalle, whose uncle owned a grocery store on Atlantic Street, recalled that “the store was there until they built that bridge, and they had the highway come through. The highway



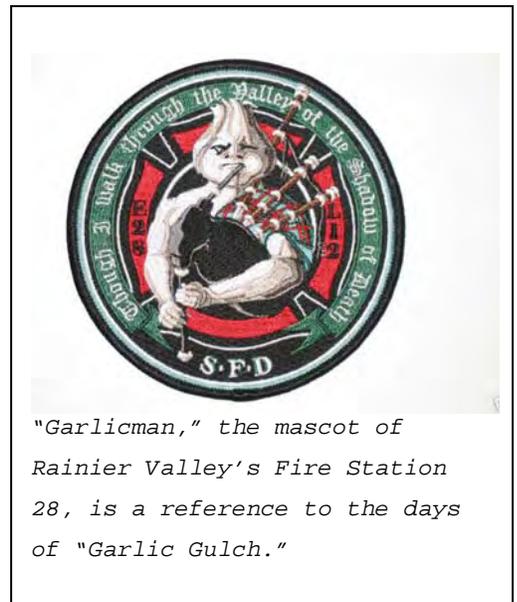
took all the stores around there.” Other families had similar stories. The Atlantic Street Center was left facing a 40-foot tall concrete wall instead of the neighborhood it once served.

Even non-existent freeways could wreck havoc on a neighborhood: the R.H. Thomson Expressway, which was never built, would have run down Empire Way, through the residential neighborhood around Mount Virgin Church, then right through Mike Prontera’s barbershop, on its way south to connect with I-405. According to the *Seattle Sun*, “many Garlic Gulch neighbors sold their houses to the state” to make way for the R.H. Thompson and the I-90 tunnel. “Many of the houses were demolished, while the inhabitants left for the suburbs.” As Al Bianchi told the *Sun*: “The whole damned neighborhood panicked.”

There were rumors that the state was buying up houses in Montlake in anticipation of the R.H. Thomson, and then letting them rot, creating “pocket slums” that drove more people out. True or not, stories like this certainly did nothing to slow the process of neighborhood decay further fueled by Seattle’s infamous Boeing Bust, which emptied many houses even in neighborhoods not under the threat of “concrete spaghetti.”

### **Italian Community: Present and Future**

Traces of the old Italian community can still be found in Southeast Seattle today. The Atlantic Street Center still stands, as noted above, though now instead of Italian immigrants, it serves the diverse array of disadvantaged families among Southeast Seattle’s residents. And Mt. Virgin church still proudly displays a print of Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper near the altar, an overt reminder of the church’s origins. Mt Virgin still holds Italian mass at 8 am each Sunday, for the “faithful remnant” of the old Italian parishioners, many of whom are driven in from other parts of town by children and grandchildren.



Many of these children and grandchildren have moved out of the neighborhood themselves, if they ever lived there at all. But a few second, third, and even fourth generation descendents have maintained a (public) presence in Southeast Seattle. Martin Patricelli, who owns the Patricelli Tile Company started by his father Joe, is a great-nephew of Leonardo Patricelli, “The Ditch Digger.” Other descendants of Garlic Gulch continue to operate family businesses – Remo Borracchini and his daughter still stand behind the counter at the bakery his father started in their home eight blocks north in 1923. (Remo claims the foundations of the original brick ovens are still there, though the house was recently torn down. (This reporter was unable to confirm this assertion due to the presence of waist-high blackberries and a surfeit of large, juicy-looking spiders at the site, but she did find an ancient fig tree, which she is prepared to defend as a trace of the old Italian neighborhood...) Across the street from the site of the old Borracchini home, the Oberto Sausage Company still churns out spicy beef jerky. Gai’s baked goods and Isernio sausages are available in supermarkets across the city (Frank Isernio started marketing his mother’s recipe in the 1980s, according to author Vincenza Scarpaci).



Lauro Pizzuto’s grandson Cory owns Pizzuto’s Italian Café in the Seward Park neighborhood. Cory’s uncle Frank opened the restaurant in 1984 after learning the trade working at Italo’s, a popular Seattle restaurant owned by a chef from Rome. Frank’s mother helped out in the early days of Pizzuto’s, making the ravioli fresh in her kitchen and delivering it to the restaurant each day. Cory worked there during high school and college, managed it after graduating, and formally took it over in 2003. Pizzuto’s serves spaghetti and meatballs to a largely local, racially diverse crowd. It’s the kind of neighborhood place where kids run into their teachers, local teens bus tables, and families bring their grandparents for milestone celebrations. In the winter of 2007 when a windstorm cut electricity off to much of the neighborhood for several days, Pizzuto’s was one of the only places that still had power. “Normally we close at nine, but during the power

outage we stayed open 'til midnight. People came in and hung out for hours – just to get warm, some of them, or to plug in their cell phones to recharge them. They didn't have to order anything, we were just glad to be able to serve the neighborhood. That was one of my favorite nights at the restaurant.”

Vince Mottola's Italian restaurant in Rainier Beach closed in 2011, after more than five decades. But his son, Vince, Jr., opened a new restaurant in 2010, in a historic building just south of Rainier Beach that was once home to the general store for Taylor's Mill. The new place, Pizzeria Pulcinella, serves authentic Neapolitan pizza, a tribute to the Mottolas' roots in Naples. Vince, Jr.'s connection to the Old Country was cemented in his youth, when the family spent two years living there. Vince speaks fluent Italian, and leads tours to Italy every summer. The Mottolas have, with the help of the building's owners, lovingly restored the old Lakeside Tavern (a former dive bar) and created a warm, classy atmosphere where certified Neapolitan pizza is accompanied by classic Italian espresso, along with crowd-pleasing innovations like tiramisu pizza.

In Columbia City another descendant of Napoli is serving authentic Neapolitan pizza to appreciative throngs. Joe Fugere's heritage includes a French-Canadian father and an Irish grandfather, but it is his Italian-American grandmother and her parents, Pietro and Filomena Costanza, whose photos hang above the pizza ovens at Tutta Bella. Joe brings years of corporate hospitality experience to his thriving restaurant chain, which started in Columbia City and now has locations in Wallingford, Eastlake, downtown Seattle, and Issaquah. Joe's grandmother lived long enough to see the opening of the Columbia City restaurant, but died two months later. As Joe's mother Mary tells him, “She's up there helping you, Joe!”

These second and third generation restaurateurs may not feel deep connection to the old Italian institutions – Mt. Virgin Church, or the Sons of Italy – but they are proud of their Italian heritage, actively passing it on to their children, and committed to sharing it with Southeast Seattle neighbors of every ethnic background.

Italians continue to arrive in Seattle, of course. During the recent World Cup tournament, Italian immigrants formed a large and vocal group in local bars and cafes, where soccer games blared on big-screen TVs. And they can frequently be found at Tutta Bella in the morning, drinking espresso and chatting with the barista, 22-year old Giovanni, who hails from Rome. When Cory Pizutto's sister (who lives in Italy) brought her Sicilian fiancé in for a morning espresso, Giovanni asked how long he'd be in town, then scoffed at the answer. "Two weeks? That's what I said. It's been four years."

*Photographs by Mikala Woodward*

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**Online Resources:**

Atlantic Street Center web site: [www.atlanticstreet.org/](http://www.atlanticstreet.org/)

Seattle Municipal Archives Photos [www.seattle.gov/cityarchives/](http://www.seattle.gov/cityarchives/)