

Video preserves memories of Elkhart's Italian-American community



Photo Supplied Behind the Lucchese home on Mason Street, members of the Italian-American community in Elkhart build a fire during a get-together around 1950. The Mason and Harrison street neighborhood just west of downtown became a community of Italian expatriates in the early 1900s. Members kept their old country traditions while proudly adopting American identities. |120773 Photo Supplied

The Italian-American Relief Association, Michael's restaurant and a slew of houses past their prime are almost all that's left of the Italian-American community that thrived for three generations in downtown Elkhart's near-south side. One of its members was the Lucchese family. Frank Lucchese Jr. moved out of his parents' house on Mason Street 45 years ago. But the memories of his first 20

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ELKHART -- The Italian-American Relief Association, Michael's restaurant and a slew of houses past their prime are

almost all that's left of the Italian-American community that thrived for three generations in downtown Elkhart's near-south side.

One of its members was the Lucchese family. Frank Lucchese Jr. moved out of his parents' house on Mason Street 45 years ago. But the memories of his first 20 years there have stayed with him his whole life.

At the suggestion of a friend, Lucchese decided to record those so that the family's grandchildren could share in them. He contacted videographer Larry App, who eventually recorded five of the seven Lucchese brothers and sisters telling their stories of the Mason Street days.

During the process Frank and App became friends. App also realized that the Luccheses weren't the only close-knit, Italian family still living in Elkhart after their immigrant parents settled here 80 years ago.

"They dispersed around Elkhart County, but they all know each other and they keep track of each other. They still get together sometimes," App discovered.

He felt compelled to tell the story of the old community.

"I wanted to find out what allowed these people to succeed like they have. They came with nothing. Jim Strati talks about going through Ellis Island with a duffel bag -- just a duffel bag -- of his stuff when he was a child. They faced discrimination against them, and they were poor. They came here and settled together. But they were happy people, then and now."

The project became known as "Stories Retold: Growing Up Italian in Elkhart, Ind."

Among local residents who contributed their memories are Ron Minichillo, Mafalda Montagano Klose, Mary Jane Bilancio Borrelli, Nick Russo, Sr., Josephine Pugliese Papandrea Araneo, Michael Iavagnilio, Louis Marino and Dick Treckelo.

WNIT public television is working with App to prepare the documentary for broadcast sometime next spring.

"It's a story worth telling," said Angel Hernandez, WNIT's vice president of production. "People are fascinated by their forefathers, what they did and how they set themselves up."

A wave of Italian immigrants washed up in Elkhart between 1905 and the 1930s. Most had been neighbors in the town of Volturara Appula, near the east coast of Italy.

When they came to the states, they were drawn to the enclave of friends and family who had settled in Elkhart. The men found work with the railroad, Lucchese said. The women tended large backyard gardens and kept neat-as-a-pin homes.

In short order, a familiar-feeling micro-community grew up. On Harrison and Mason streets, the paisanos cooked tomato sauce with garlic on Sundays, built bonfires on St. Anthony's feast day and stomped grapes into wine in the fall.

Wine was present at the dinner table and everywhere else that Italians got together.

"Milk was the commodity. There was a lot of wine," remembered Danny DelPrete. "You had to be sick to get to drink milk. But we always had wine. We had it with supper, even when we were 12, 13 years old."

DelPrete remembers how they'd go to the Bucklen Opera House on Saturdays to see movies. During the week, he and his friends played whatever sport was in season on the lots and in the streets.

"Football, basketball, hockey in the street in the winter. We played it all. There was even a pole vault and a high jump in one of the lots," he said.

As filming continued, App became impressed by his subjects' opinion that they are Americans first. "But they have this Italian identity that they've maintained," he said.

Lucchese brought those feelings and customs he'd learned in the old neighborhood with him when he moved and started his own family.

"I've gotten used to this. We keep the same traditions. I never knocked on a door, we always just went right in. So I started that tradition in my neighborhood," he said.