

## “THE DAYS OF RICCARDI’S GARAGE”

The “Past and Present” section of this edition of the Journal is sadly filled with several death notices of former friends from the old neighborhood. I also have one more notice to add to the list. Joe Riccardi who owned and operated Riccardi’s Auto Body on the 2900 block of Croskey Street, until his death a few months ago. This story is dedicated in memory of Joe.

**Autumn circa 1962:** I have waited for this day to arrive since I passed my drivers test almost a year ago. I will be picking up Uncle Al’s 1957 two-ten Chevy from Joe Riccardi’s garage on Croskey Street this afternoon. I actually met Joe only a year ago, even though he lived on the 3000 block of Hemberger Street long before I was even thought of. I had often heard his name mentioned by my brother-in-law Angelo Juliani. I never had the opportunity to meet Joe until I mentioned to Ang that I wanted to have Uncle Al’s car painted. When the car was new it was a very spiffy looking two-tone car with a canyon coral pink body and a white roof, but through the years the colors have become faded and chalky in appearance. Uncle Al is happy with the way it looks, but for me a teenager I need to have sharp looking wheels to drive my chick around. Uncle Al gave me permission to get it painted as long as I pay for it. Ang suggested I see Joe and work out the arrangements with him. I remember this is how our first encounter unfolded.

“Joe my name is A ron, I’m Ang’s brother-in law!” Joe quickly says, “What kind of a name is A ron? I think your name is pronounced Aaron! So that’s what you will be called around this garage.” Before I could say anything else I here a voice coming from a small room from the side of the garage. “Did I hear you say Aaron?” Well that makes him the newest member of our round table Sir Aaron of Locksley. This I found out was Joe’s brother Johnny the electrician.

Entering the room with Joe in front of me I saw this beautiful oak round table with two other guys sitting around it with Johnny. Joe offers me a cup of coffee and a donut and I sit down with Johnny. Frank Borgioni, the carpenter, who I know, because he is my former classmate Steven’s dad and a guy name Spatac. I enjoy my donut and Joe tells me whenever I’m ready to have the car painted he will work out payment arrangements with me. Just like that I have found myself some new friends!

It’s a year later and today I pick up the car. I walk hastily from my house on the corner of J&I over to Croskey Street making my quick hellos to Nancy Gangi who is sitting on her porch on Indiana Avenue and Maryann Vitale also sitting on her porch a few doors away. The car is out on Joe’s lot and the black body with the white roof is sparkling in the sunlight. Joe is very proud of his work and gives me advice on how to care for the new paint job. I ask Joe to put the finishing touches on it for me by adding white porta-walls to the black tires that I bought from Pep Boys at 32<sup>nd</sup> and Allegheny and a set of cone hub caps that I bought from Barbell’s. Within the hour I pull out of the lot and I am on my way. Later that night I pick up my chick Pat Gallagher and after eating at the Hot Shoppe we drove to a parking area on the East River Drive we call it ‘*The Rendezvous*’ and to Patti’s distain I sat on a bench and gazed at the car for the entire evening.

My relationship with Joe and his garage and all the guys that hung out there became a part of my life for many years to come.

In 1963 we had a bowling team sponsored by Joe and we bowled at Glennwood bowling alley in a money league. We were fortunate to win the championship that year. I remember the team of Meatball Mialetti, Domenic Straneri, Ralph Loshivavo, Angelo Juliani, Joe Riccardi and I. We were all mediocre bowlers but we had the

drive to win. We would often wind up at Linton’s at 22<sup>nd</sup> & HuntingPark for coffee and dessert after bowling. My most favorite memories of hanging out at Joe’s garage were the poker games in the office on Frank Borgioni’s round oak table that he made from scratch.

It is a cool November evening circa 1967, but not cold enough to have the door to the office at Joe’s garage closed. The game is seven card bet or drop \$3 all the way. The evening has been progressing very delightfully for me since I am winning. Angelo who is known as Sir Angel is dealing the cards and says, “Dooner the bet is to you.” Dooner who takes a long time to squeeze his cards is getting on Spatac’s nerves. “Yo Dooner make the bet”, Spatac says impatiently. Dooner brings his hand to his face and draws it over his forehead to his jaw in a fanning motion then throws his \$3 into the pot. Al Vassallo follows with his bet and Johnny Riccardi who has been donating all night folds his cards and throws them in the center of the table. Joe Riccardi, who has always used the term ‘*doll cutter*’ to describe people who never drop seems to be doing exactly that tonight, lays his bet down and raises \$3. This continues with all of us in until the seventh card is dealt. At this point the bet is to Spatac who is sitting there unlike himself, quietly staring into space and Dooner finally shouts at him. “Spatac what are you going to do. Let’s make it before dawn!” Spatac begins to take each card in his hand and proceeds to eat every single card. He chews each card completely and without a sound devours each card while the rest of us are literally in hysterics. After several minutes of wild hysterics we all decide that we should continue the hand, but we could not contain ourselves, Joe split the pot between all of us. We had to discontinue, because we did not have a full deck!