

**Portrait of my parents, Esther (Casciato)
Sestili and Max Sestili, c. 1985.**

All photos courtesy of the author.



Photo of my brother-in-law, nephew, and brother, from left: Chuck Beck, Patrick Beck, Ron Sestili at Sestili Nursery, November 2018.



A Life Together

That Changed Pittsburgh's Landscape

By Mary Ann Sestili

Entrepreneurs are known risk takers. They are courageous, self-starters, and visionary. I am not an entrepreneur, but my parents, Max and Esther Sestili, were. In 1947, after World War II, they were young, smart, and hard-working. They were in love, parents of three of us children—with three more to come—and as Italian immigrants committed to family, community, and their church. Having just moved from Juliet to Dawson Street in Pittsburgh's South Oakland neighborhood, they made the leap to go it alone by launching the Max Sestili Landscape Contracting Company, a small one-man, one-woman business in the backyard of our home. Seventy years later, Sestili Nursery, Inc., continues to thrive, now managed by my brother Ron, brother-in-law Chuck Beck, and nephew Patrick Beck.

When I began to write my parents' story, I considered several approaches, but always returned to three questions: Who were these people? How did they accomplish what they did? What events impacted their lives? I learned that their story is rooted in Pittsburgh, my maternal grandfather, Nicola Casciato, and World War II.



I learned that their story is

Rooted in Pittsburgh

A Life-Changing Event

Most likely in his teens or early twenties, Dad worked at the University of Pittsburgh Print Shop. I say “most likely” because there is no record of when he began employment. He told us he loved his work. In the bindery, he learned how to cut and size paper, identify its quality and rag content, operate a small printing press, and learn the art of typesetting. This task appealed to his artistic sense, his eye for style and order, and his love of calligraphy that, I believe, is reflected in his unique handwriting—more print than cursive, perhaps a combination of the two. At one point, he may have even considered a career in typesetting. I know he appreciated the camaraderie of his colleagues and embraced their life-long friendship, but I know little about an accident that shaped his life.

Ironically, it was while Dad was operating a printing press that mechanically fed envelopes from the paper platform to the printer and collection tray, when his right foot became caught between a large moving clamp and the machine. Several of his toes were crushed and severed. I can only imagine the trauma and horror of that day but know few details because my parents rarely talked about this incident even when someone noticed his damaged foot. Was he compensated for this injury? I do not know, nor do I know whether Pitt released him or if he voluntarily resigned. My mother just said, “He needed a job.” I often wonder how different our lives would have been if the accident had not happened. What if his supervisor, Mr. Langdale, had sent him on an errand and he had not been in the print shop that day? Would his and our lives be different? That, I leave to speculation. Instead, I recount here how their lives unfolded. Theirs is a compelling and love-filled story.

ABOVE: Mom on left with sisters Mary (center) and Philomena, c. 1927.

Life's Union Begins in Panther Hollow

Max and Esther were not their baptismal names. Massimo (Max) Sestili, a dark-haired, brown-eyed, mischievous, two-year-old boy, immigrated to the United States in 1916 from Ascoli Piceno, Italy's Marche Region with his parents, Luigi and Teresa, and brothers Alex and Frank. His brother Anthony was born later in the United States.

Pasqua Casciato's name became Americanized to Esther Casciato by an immigration officer when she entered Ellis Island at the age of nine.¹ A petite, serious-minded, insightful girl, she arrived in the United States in 1922 with her mother, Antoinette, and sister Philomena from Pizzoferrato, a small town in Italy's Abruzzo region. Her sister Mary was born in the United States. My grandfather, Nicola Casciato, had immigrated in 1915 to work at Pittsburgh's Jones & Laughlin Steel Mill, where he joined the estimated "1.5 million foreign-born inhabitants" who settled in Pennsylvania.² He intended to later escort his family from Italy to the United States, but aborted his plans because of the outbreak of World War I.

Independently, the Casciato and Sestili families settled in Pittsburgh's Panther Hollow, a unique neighborhood located at the bottom of Jonaire Street in Central Oakland, established predominately by immigrants of Italy's Pizzoferrato and Gamberale regions.³ The families both moved into 43 Boundary Street: the Casciatos on the second floor and Sestilis on the third. Esther, age nine, met Max, age eight. They attended St. Paul's Chapel School (later changed to St. Regis) on Parkview Avenue in Oakland. Dad left school after the seventh grade; Mom completed and was awarded a high school diploma, with distinction, from Gladstone High School in Hazelwood.

Artist Ron Barrow identifies Panther

RIGHT: Dad with his Mom and brothers, from left: Frank, Max, Alex, and Anthony (baby) c. 1921.

BELOW: My maternal grandfather, Nicola Casciato, c. 1915.



Laying the cinderblock foundation at the nursery. Note the sign announcing the name of the business.

225, data from the 1900-1940 census show an accelerated growth in population to about 600 people. The census files also list residents' occupations that included laborer, gas company, steel furnace, railroad, and night watchman.⁷

Carlino Giampolo, Panther Hollow historian, reported to me that even by the early years, the Hollow had its own businesses, with two banks, a grocery store (selling meat, bread, and vegetables), a smaller grocery store, and a milk company.⁸ Life was not luxurious—homes were modest and streets were unpaved—but in time, the residents

Hollow as "a magical place,"⁴ and in a video produced by WQED, Panther Hollow is portrayed as a "community rich in history, family and community."⁵ While newcomers enjoy its proximity to universities, parks, and cultural institutions, current and former residents see this magical place as home for its history, neighborliness, self-sufficiency, and its unique Italo-English dialect (using English grammar and then inserting Italian in place of English words).⁶

The Hollow's population grew quickly. While the number of residences during the arrival years (1880-1898) was approximately

worked together to bolster their livelihoods and well-being. The infrastructure morphed into a community of a busy neighborhood with better housing, vegetable and flower gardens, and a park.

Courtship to Marriage

I call the years from the late 1920s to the early 1930s my parents' "early courtship" days. Since they were moving from preteen to early teenage years, they could not, as we might say, "date" but could be together as much as they desired as long as their lives revolved around family and the community. They traveled to church and school together, socialized in groups, and attended family gatherings, wedding receptions at San Lorenzo di Gamberale Society Men's Club on Bouquet Street,⁹ Saint Day celebrations on Joncaire

Street, dancing parties, picnics, skating on Panther Hollow's frozen lake, and walking to Isaly's for "mile high" ice cream cones.

They made lifelong friends whose names—Julia, Carl, Almarente, Chuck, Lena, Millie, Lena, Flora, Tony, and many others—are embedded in my memory. When I see photos, I remember them vividly. To understand how active and family centered their lives were, one only has to view the thousands of photos they took that show the vibrancy and closeness of families as they played, worked, and socialized.

While my parents told few stories of their courtship, social mores, as well as Italian customs and tradition, dictated how young people acted. Couples did not have the luxury of single dating until they were engaged or serious about marriage. There were no late-night outings, no leaving the neighborhood and near vicinity, and no car rides together (as few people had automobiles).

Once they moved from the Hollow to different parts of Oakland—my Dad to his family home on Bouquet Street and Mom to Juliet Street—their dates became more difficult to arrange. While family photos show them with friends at social gatherings, one stands out. They are alone and appear to be standing on a path probably in Schenley Park. Mom told us that they had the picture taken when they became engaged.

Did they become engaged in secret or with the knowledge of their family? I do not know, but in any event, they planned to marry. Nicola, my grandfather, forbade it. It wasn't that he didn't approve of their relationship, or because he didn't like my father. Traditionally, it was expected that an older sibling would marry first then the others could marry. "Your sister, Philomena, is older and should marry first," he announced. Even so, Aunt Phil, although proposed to several times, announced that she was not interested in marrying. My parents' solution? They would elope.



Mom and Dad's engagement photo, 1935.

Marriage

Fate intervened when another simultaneous event took place that changed the course of everyone's lives. A young husband from McKeesport, Pa., friends of my grandparents, asked the family for help. The young man's wife was ill. He needed assistance with the care of his children. Did my grandparents know anyone who could help? The young father also called his brother-in-law, Frank Barone, his wife's brother, who lived in New York, to come to McKeesport.

Aunt Philomena—beautiful, young, and unmarried—volunteered and arrived in McKeesport. Frank also arrived to help. So here they were, two people who didn't know one another, who lived in different cities, but who were thrust together by family circumstances. Their mutual attraction must have been instantaneous because after three weeks, Aunt Phil called my grandfather to express her wish to marry Frank. There was one condition: so as not to delay my parents' marriage, she requested that both couples marry on the same day.

On July 23, 1936, wearing matching dresses and holding matching bouquets, Esther Casciato (23) married Massimo Sestili (22), and Philomena Casciato (26) married Frank Barone (42) in a double wedding ceremony that took place at St. Peter the Apostle Church, the Italian ethnic parish on Fernando Street in the Lower Hill.¹⁰

My parents moved to the third floor of my grandparents' home at 3238 Juliet Street, Oakland. No longer employed at Pitt's print shop, and with a limited formal education, Dad accepted any job that he could find: a road checker during Governor George Earl III's administration, a chauffeur in the winter months for a prominent Pittsburgh physician, and part-time defense work for the Miller Printing and Machinery Company on Pittsburgh's North Side.¹¹

When he was not working at Miller, he assisted my grandfather who worked as a landscape gardener. The story is that after nine years of dangerous, dirty work at the J&L mill, Nicola decided to return to Italy. When Mr. Laughlin learned of my grandfather's intention, he enticed him to stay. Mr. Laughlin must have assumed that because my grandfather was Italian he knew how to garden and offered him a job as his private gardener.¹² Nicola changed his name to Nick Casch and began a gardening business, carrying his tools in a bushel basket on Pittsburgh's streetcars for years. He gardened at Mr. Laughlin's and eventually several other clients' homes. Dad and my grandfather became work partners. Mom served as the billing and accounts manager and would become the driving force defining Sestili Nursery's business practices.

Times were increasingly unstable. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, fearing that a war was imminent, was adamant that the United States would not engage in World War II.¹³ Once Hitler invaded Poland, FDR, wanting to be prepared in case the United States did enter the war, signed the Burke-Wadsworth Act (Selective Service and Training Act) on September 16, 1940, requiring all men between the ages of 26–35 (soon modified to 18–37) to register for the draft.¹⁴

Dad registered, but because of his foot injury, was classified as 4-F, unfit for military service.¹⁵ Mom was relieved, but it appears that Dad felt otherwise. Although I never heard him speak of his disappointment of not serving in the military, my brother, Ron, a Vietnam War veteran, said that Dad could not be consoled that he did not serve, even though two of his brothers, three sons, and two sons-in-law served in the military. Dad remained



TOP: Mom and Dad's marriage portrait, July 1936.

BOTTOM: Double wedding—Mom and Dad with Philomena (Casciato) and Frank Barone, July, 1936.

I don't know exactly when Dad's
love of nature began



ABOVE: Dad's first truck with the business name, c. 1946.

OPPOSITE PAGE
TOP: Dad's favorite *kunde* clipper.

MIDDLE: Dad in our Dawson Street backyard, c. 1946.

BOTTOM: Mom's Royal typewriter.

profoundly patriotic. Prior to every holiday, he would call to remind us, "Don't forget to fly the flag tomorrow."

Starting the Business

I don't know exactly when Dad's love of nature began. Was it when he worked with my grandfather or was his love of the Earth innate? Something between Dad and nature clicked because he was happiest when he was designing, cultivating, and trimming with his favorite *Kunde* clipper. After 10 years working with my grandfather, my parents founded their landscape business at our Dawson Street home where the previous owner, Dr. Owens, examined patients in what would become our dining room. I remember those early years when mounds of topsoil, mulch, large and small potted plants, and flowers were our backyard "companions." Many times, the soil hills became mountains for my brothers' stunts.

Dad drove off in his used Ford truck at dawn and returned late in the evenings. His arrival home was pre-announced by the truck puffing and squealing as it advanced along Bellgreen Place and then laboriously inched its way up our steep driveway. On cold winter mornings, he left in the middle of the night, with his shovels and a few laborers to clear walks and driveways before the residents awoke.

Mom fielded telephone calls, kept the business schedule, maintained the accounts, and typed the company's bills on her 1920 Royal typewriter. I vividly remember hearing her type. The keys danced, the carriage whizzed, the bell rang, and ribbons turned. The bills were typed, stacked, stamped, and readied for the post office. She worked efficiently because there was food to prepare, bread to make, and long-sleeved, white shirts to iron that my brothers wore daily to Central Catholic High School and Dad wore to church.

These were arduous, frugal days. Days when we did not buy things we didn't need.

Days when Dad fell asleep at the dinner table still holding his fork and spoon and always when he sat in a comfortable chair and we had to rouse him with, "Dad, please go to bed." But all the same, they were days when we basked in the security of our intact family.

Fun Abounds

I don't want to leave the impression that ours were lives of drudgery. We had unlimited fun. We were a ragtag family of four boys and two girls. Following me, the oldest, were Robert, Richard, Ronald, Theresa Annette, and Massimo (Max), Jr. In between Roland and Theresa, our sister, Mary Esther, was born. She died one day later, creating profound sadness in our house. We learned that her lungs had not properly developed.

We had our beloved grandparents, aunts, uncles, and mischievous cousins at the ready for, well, mischief. Our parents instructed us to respect our Italian heritage, never ever talk back to elders, and obey the Sisters of Mercy and Christian Brothers who taught us at school.

Oakland was our playground and provided a busy, secure, childhood. We benefited from the largesse of the industrial investors—Henry Phipps, Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, H.J. Heinz, Andrew Mellon, the Scaife family, and the Schenley family. We walked to the Carnegie Library and Museum, swam and played ball in Schenley Park, skated on Panther Hollow's frozen lake, and cheered on the Pittsburgh Pirates at Forbes Field. With a brown-bag lunch and the dollar Mom gladly paid, we attended Pirates' doubleheaders on Sundays as long as we older siblings agreed to watch out for the younger ones.

At Kennywood Park we rode the Pippin, Jack Rabbit, and Racer, and at Piney Fork Beach we swam and picnicked. We attended church functions, including parades, concerts, and school events. On summer evenings, neighbors, family, and friends joined us for backyard get-togethers when relatives and

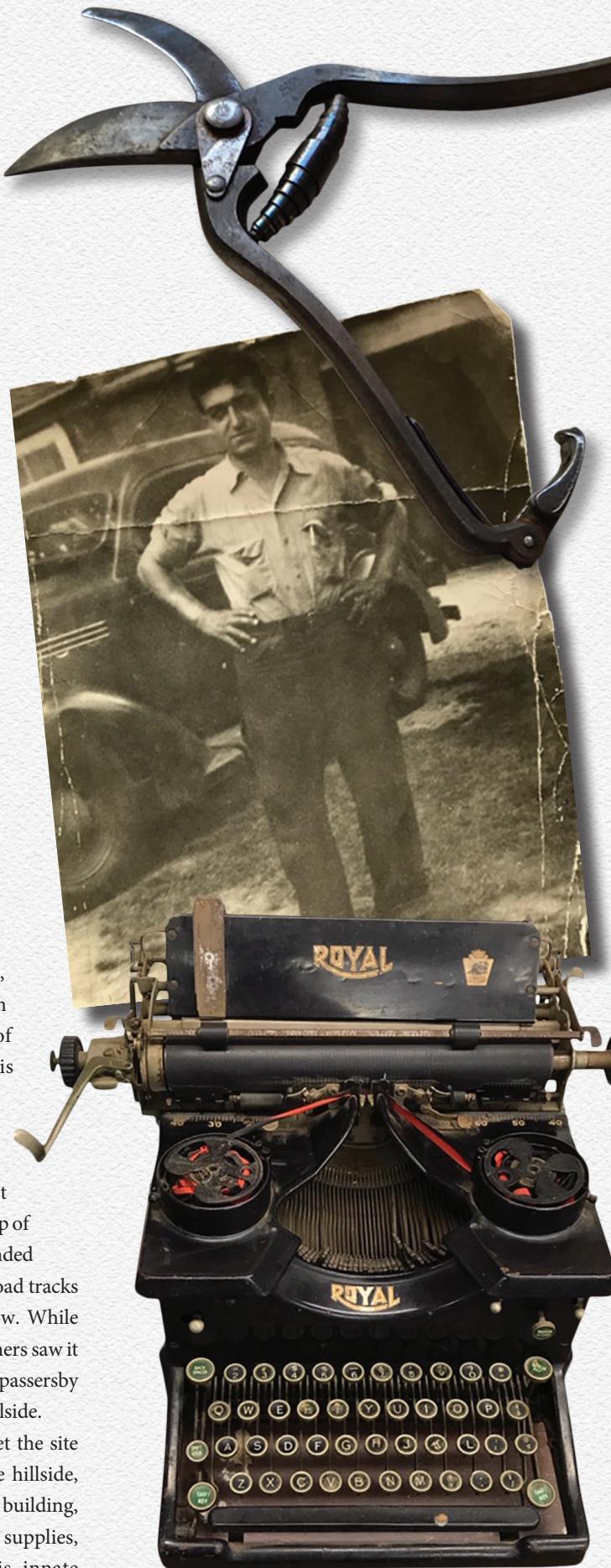
friends dropped in to say "hello" just because they were passing by. Mom set a table laden with food and drink where the adults told stories and shared jokes, while the children, well, created mischief.

And my parents danced! They danced at the San Lorenzo Men's Club, the Moose Club, parties, and weddings—where, amid music, clapping, singing, and whistles, they led the bridal dance, directing the newly married couple and their guests in a conga-line around the hall to the bridal cake. They carried on well after the bridal couple cut the cake and departed from the reception. As long as the music played, my parents danced.

Swinburne Street Nursery

In 1952, after five years of operating the landscape business from home, my parents purchased a lot on Swinburne Street from the City of Pittsburgh Public Works. This is where Dad, the master gardener, and Mom, the bookkeeper, set the future Sestili Nursery in motion. The condition and setting of the lot were less than desirable as its long strip of land bordered a steep hill that descended into Schenley Park abutting the railroad tracks on Joncaire Street in Panther Hollow. While my parents saw the lot's potential, others saw it as a dump where it was common for passersby to toss trash and garbage over the hillside.

They faced daunting tasks to get the site ready: fence the property, fill in the hillside, create level space, construct a sales building, reinvest capital for equipment and supplies, and hire laborers. Dad, using his innate





Family members and friends doing construction on the site of the nursery.

engineering skills, saw the need to shore up the hillside and invited Pittsburgh concrete contractors to deposit building material debris to serve as the hillside's foundation. By 1957, the business had a two-story sales building. Dominic Laprai was the building contractor and our grandfather and beloved uncles Frank Barone, Mario Palmieri, and Alex Sestili were the laborers.

Dad's idea for the nursery was utilitarian:

a place to store equipment and nursery stock as well as trucks and workers' autos. Mom's involvement elevated the nursery to a new level. It happened gradually but brilliantly. Each day, she walked to Swinburne Street to water and care for the plants. A gardener's daughter, she had an appreciation and affinity for the garden and its care, but more importantly, she recognized a business opportunity. "I loved the nursery from the

first day I saw it," she said. "I love plants and love taking care of them and didn't mind working from early morning to late in the afternoon when I went home to prepare dinner."

She recounted that passersby frequently stopped and asked to buy plants. Reluctant to sell what Dad stored for his jobs, she asked Dad to "buy more plants and I will sell them." She developed a friendly and loyal customer base just by being at the nursery every day.

From 1960 until the 1990s, the nursery invested in a sales/office building, greenhouses, and the Nick Casch equipment building.

The company was evolving from a small landscape company where Dad and crew maintained personal properties to more demanding jobs, beginning with the St. Anthony School in Oakmont and a residence in Squirrel Hill for Pittsburgh's Catholic Bishop John Francis Dearden, 1950–58, and Bishop John Joseph Wright, 1959–69.¹⁶

Mom's simple idea of selling plants to customers blossomed over time until it also required Chuck, cousins Frances Taylor and Kathleen Sestili, neighbor Irene Sparte, and family members to take turns selling vegetable plants, annuals, trees, shrubs, mulch, top soil, seeds, and everything needed for family gardens and yards. Business was so brisk that the nursery developed business contacts

with nurseries in the Ohio-Lake Erie region, annuals from local growers in the North Hills, and Christmas trees from farms in Hershey to supply their inventories.

Dad, Ron, my brothers, and helpers continued with their landscape jobs. I remember the hustle and bustle of those days on my visits to the nursery, and when I re-read my Mom's notes to me, I recognized that she, perhaps without knowingly doing so, chronicled that time: "The Nursery is busy, busy, busy," she wrote on April 4, 1979.

On February 11, 1980, she wrote, "We have been very busy since we must get everything ready for the Spring. Such as trucks, tools, and all the nursery supplies. Dad and the men are very busy."

On February 26, 1980, she wrote, "We are getting everything ready to get jobs started for Spring. We have plenty of work. What we need now is good help."

Finally, on May 21, 1980, she wrote, "Sorry dear, I didn't have a chance to write. I'm sure you understand. This year of all years we are extremely busy. Since Squirrel Hill Nursery closed, we picked up so many new customers. God blessed us with Fran and Kathy. They go along like they worked here for many years. Our customers love them both."

Dad hired laborers, many of whom were Italian immigrants. With my parents' support to help them assimilate into society, many formed their own Pittsburgh businesses.¹⁹ Some entered prominent fields such as Pittsburgh's recently deceased famous son and WWF Hall of Famer, Bruno Sammartino, who for a short time worked for the nursery. Dr. Ken Gormley, now President of Duquesne University, served as a member of the grass crew while in college for customers such as Fred Rogers, the beloved host of the TV program *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

In the 1990s, the company hired refugees who were displaced from the Bosnia-Herzegovina War to work as laborers. Three of those men, now American citizens, remain



The greenhouse stocked with colorful annuals. Mom is in the blue sweater in the far background.

with the company today.

Setbacks, Challenges, and Fire

As expected, the nursery met with challenges over time. They began with minor break-ins and robberies. At night, thieves catapulted over the fence, siphoned gasoline, stole tools, plants, and Christmas trees. Three events taxed my parents' resources, their resolve, and their future plans. Through their resiliency, family support, and strong Catholic faith, they continued to pursue their dream.

One instance was what I call the Lawn-boy Lawnmower Heist. By the early 1970s, landscape gardeners were eager to own Lawn-boy lawnmowers as they were lighter, easier to handle, and performed more efficiently. The company applied for and became certified as a Lawn-boy distributor and maintenance

center, with my brother Max as the head mechanic. Dad invested in the purchase of 30 lawnmowers. One day they all disappeared. Did someone move them without informing others? If stolen, who could have moved 30 lawnmowers off the property without detection? After searching, Dad found the still-boxed lawnmowers over the hillside hurriedly and clumsily camouflaged under piles of leaves, twigs, and debris. Several employees, recognizing the value of the lawnmowers and eager to make some money by selling them, hid them. The lawnmowers remained: the employees were fired.

Pittsburgh's spring weather of 1971 was brutal. Unusual fluctuations in the temperature created rapid freeze/thaw conditions leading to torrential rain and flash flooding. The nursery's hillside, built up in the 1950s, was reduced to a chasm from water runoff that took

everything in its path—soil, plants, and bolsters that shored up the hill. The gushing water destroyed the hill and created the potential for its collapse down into Panther Hollow.

Work was suspended while the site was cordoned off and the proper landfill material permits and safety inspections were secured. It took five years of slow, dangerous work to repair the devastation, and required thousands of tons of proper landfill material to finally secure the City's approval. As I walked down the hill on a recent visit to the nursery, Ron pointed out bricks and pieces of concrete, originally used to stabilize the hillside, now embedded in the side berms, reminding the onlooker of what could have happened to Sestili Nursery's property.

One of the scariest calls came at 2:00 a.m. on August 9, 1979. The caller, a neighbor screamed, "There's a fire at the nursery!" One of three Ford F-350 dump trucks, parked under the protective carport approximately 30 feet from the salesroom, was on fire. The Pittsburgh Fire Department and my parents arrived immediately. The firemen swiftly and efficiently put out the fire, estimated the cause, and evaluated potential for further damage.



“There’s a fire at the nursery!”

One of three Ford F-350 dump trucks, parked under the protective carport approximately 30 feet from the salesroom, was on fire.

Because each dump truck held approximately 95 gallons of gasoline, their concern was that the fire would jump to the other trucks and cause an explosion.

Questions and worry persisted. How did the truck catch fire? Did it happen spontaneously, or did someone set it? If so, who were the arsonists and how did they enter the property? The firemen inspected the surrounding area to certify that the fire was out and there was no evidence that the fire would rekindle.

Then came the news. The fire had been intentionally set. Someone soaked rags in gasoline and stuffed them in the truck's gas line so they would serve as a wick into the truck's gas tank. The arsonist's plan was that the first truck would burn and set off the others to potentially explode.

Unbeknownst to them, the perpetrators thwarted their own plan. The wick had not been pushed down far enough to contact the gas tank. Once the firemen extinguished the original gas-soaked rag, the danger was averted. Had this not been the case, the firemen believed that there most likely would have been a major fire resulting in serious

damage and potential property damage to the adjacent Parkview Avenue. No one suffered injury. The firemen told my parents how the fire started, but they could not tell them who set it. To this day it remains a mystery.¹⁷

The Changing Nursery

The nursery, more than 70 years old, has come full circle. It has steadied its focus on meeting the community's and customers' needs, but interestingly, that was not always the focus. In the 1940s and '50s, the focus was on the home, especially vegetable and flower gardens; customers were willing to pay to have their properties maintained, with plants trimmed and cultivated. During the 1980s and '90s, retail thrived when customers personally purchased everything for their gardens. Customer traffic was so heavy that during Memorial Day week, members of the Pittsburgh Police directed traffic at the Swinburne Street location. Inventory records show that the nursery sold up to 25,000 spring bulbs per year. Now, few are sold. What changed and how did the business meet those changes?

By 2010 and certainly by 2011, Ron, Chuck, and Patrick became aware of a steady

change in customer needs and requests and realized that unless they became proactive, they would have to close. They studied other business' decisions that did not "keep up with the times," did not focus on changing city demographics, and reduced "over the counter purchases" which ultimately resulted in their closures.

While customers continued to employ the nursery to maintain their properties, the number of those requests declined, only to be increased in requests to design outdoor rooms for entertainment. Younger clients presented changes in the priorities for their homes. No longer were they purchasing products for do-it-yourself landscape projects; rather, their focus shifted to projects that would bring the outdoors in and the indoors out. A cursory review of home and garden magazines tells the same story. While articles on how to maintain a garden and beautify a home are still featured, current issues, and occasionally entire issues, are devoted to outside living and entertaining; how to perk up your patio; how to create outdoor rooms; grills and outdoor fireplaces; and inspiring ideas for container gardens. Magazine photos often feature plant-enhanced ponds and waterfalls, courtyards transformed to an urban oasis, and creative uses of plants



LEFT: Dad preparing the site to plant the Scarlet Oak Tree on Oakland's Phipps Conservatory grounds. It is located near the Columbus statue.

BOTTOM: Mom and Dad, June 1994, one month before his death.



OPPOSITE PAGE:
This photo was taken by Fred Rogers when he happened to pass by the nursery with his camera. Fred was a beloved customer and the nursery still maintains Mrs. Rogers' property. A few were given to me by my brother, Bob, who when he was a volunteer at WQED, met Fred and kept in contact with him over the years.

and lighting.

To cater to this shift, Ron and Patrick now oversee landscape operations, which focuses on design and construction of patios, walkways, enhanced landscape lighting, and outdoor living space. Chuck Beck continues to handle landscape retail, fulfills green goods needs for landscape jobs, oversees inventory, and answers customers' questions. Customers still call or stop at the nursery, asking questions and for advice, but retail as it was known is minimal. Customers have more options for where to spend their money and frequently shift their purchase power to larger stores that carry nursery stock as well as other items.

Sestili Nursery has always been a family business. Beginning with my parents, each of us played some part. For some, the part has been major but mine has been minimal. Grandchildren, nieces, and nephews worked after school, in the summer, helping sell Christmas trees and all other jobs. As with many family businesses, the nursery business changed too. Family members moved on for school, jobs, families of their own, and new assignments. As a matter of fact, one of the last pictures taken of the Sestili Family was in 2007 when Patrick and Jill Beck married. Since then, we have grown in number and in

location, where at this time we live in nine states: Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, Maryland, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Texas.

Legacy

My parents remained active in the community, landscape/gardener professional societies, and as partners in the nursery until their deaths—Dad at age 80, Mom at 86. The city of Pittsburgh, the community, and their parish, St. Regis Church, recognized them as business entrepreneurs, supporters of social and community causes, and stalwart members of their parish.

Dad helped merge the Western Pennsylvania Nurserymen's Association (PNA) and the Greater Pittsburgh Landscapers Association, was recognized for his skill as a Pittsburgh expert landscape gardener, honored by the Knights of Columbus of which he was a member, and feted as Chair of the St. Regis Church Ushers Club.

On April 25, 1986, Earth Day, the PNA honored Dad for his leadership in the community, Arbor membership in PNA, and founder of Sestili Nursery by planting a Scarlet

Oak tree on the grounds of Oakland's Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens adjacent to the *Columbus* statue.

Esther, stalwart co-owner of Sestili Nursery, was known for her commitment to the community and church. In 1976, Oakland's community presented a Community Ambassador Award to Esther for her dedication to South Oakland. She was a leader of the St. Regis Rosary Society and Sodality Society as well as a member of the Oakland Harmony Club.

Remembrances

When I reminisce with my siblings and cousins about growing up in Oakland, we recount events and always remember Dad who taught us to "check the oil" in our cars, love Pittsburgh, be proud of our Italian heritage, eat hotdogs for Sunday breakfast after church, ride in his dump truck outfitted with benches so everyone could sit, laugh, and sing as he drove us to Latrobe for picnics, and marvel as we watched Santa in his sleigh on the roof of our house pulling 1, then 2, and eventually 20 reindeer, one for each of the 20 grandchildren.

We remember Mom as a woman of



Six siblings at Jill and Pat Beck's wedding, 2007.
From left: Theresa Annette, Max Jr., Ronald, Richard, Mary Ann, and Robert.

The last photo we took as a family in 2007 at Jill and Patrick Beck's wedding.



unconditional love, a bird and plant lover, an amazing cook, one who answered every one of our phone calls with “Yes, Dear,” a no-nonsense leader who cautioned us with her admonitions: “Never say I can’t; keep my family together; cultivate and cherish friends and treat people with respect.” We also remember her most fervently as Max’s companion for life.

In writing this article, I re-read every card, letter, and note that my parents sent me over the years. While Dad was not a prolific letter writer, his notes are witty, chatty, and filled with love, each beginning with “My Dear Daughter” and ending with “all my love forever and ever.” Mom’s letters, written in exquisite Palmer method cursive, told me who visited, family events, and how much she loved me and prayed that I was safe. She ended every card with a double Love-Love.

Their legacy lives on through Sestili Nursery Inc., and appreciation is extended to the many dedicated, loyal, and hard-working current and former company workers. There is also the Max and Esther Memorial Scholarship Fund, PA Foundation for Ornamental Horticulture, Penn State University, The Max and Esther Sestili Award for Excellence in Teaching at Carlow University, and their six children and our spouses plus 20 grandchildren and 26 great-grandchildren. ●

Mary Ann Sestili, a native of Pittsburgh, writes about growing up in her Italian American family. She has published in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and *The Washington Post* Sunday Magazine section. She is a graduate of Carlow University in Pittsburgh, and Catholic University in Washington, D.C., where she earned a Ph.D. in the biological sciences. She lives in Potomac, Md., with her husband, Anthony René.

¹ Sestili, Mary Ann. “Storytelling: Ellis Island could lead to a new name as well as a nation,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 22 Apr. 2011:2. I wrote this vignette based on the story my mother told of her voyage from Italy to the United States in steerage class on the ship, *Columbo*. I imagined her as a nine-year-old girl. <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/11112/1141102-294-0.stm>.

² My grandfather, Nicola Casciato, was among the immigrants who came to the United States for work with the Jones and Laughlin (J&L) Steel Mill. *Stories from PA History*, “The Peopling of Pennsylvania: The Creation of a Multicultural Society, Chapter 3: Huddled Masses 1865-1930,” at <http://explorephistory.com/story.php?storyId=1-9-23&chapter=3>.

³ Following many Italians who immigrated to Pittsburgh, the Sestili and Casciato families settled in Oakland’s Panther Hollow, where a plaque lists the names of the families whose culture established the character and personality of this neighborhood and whose hard work contributed to the growth and development of the city of Pittsburgh. While I never lived in Panther Hollow, my heritage and history are there as are the Sestili and Casciato names. <http://pantherhollow.us/plaque.php>.

⁴ *Panther Hollow, An artist's inspiration*. Producer, photographer, editor, Pierina Morelli. WQED, February 6, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBF7rISOnP8>.

⁵ WQED OnQ’s, *Hollow Heritage*, video produced by Tonia Caruso, <https://www.wqed.org/tv/watch/onq/panther-hollow>.

⁶ *Why Panther Hollow Has Its Own Dialect*, Margaret J. Krauss. July 31, 2015. <http://wesa.fm/post/why-panther-hollow-has-its-own-dialect#stream/0>.

⁷ Information from the arrival years, property purchases, and census data from 1900-1940 are listed. <http://pantherhollow.us/arrivals.php>.

⁸ Carlino Giampolo was born and raised in Panther Hollow and began to compile the history of his iconic neighborhood on the website www.PantherHollow.us. Thanks to Carlino for the following information (October 16, 2018). By the 1920s, there were two banks, owned by: Giuseppe Tortorelli 50 Boundary Street (Purchased the property in 1892), Domenic Pasquarelli (Next to 15 Boundary Street, also had a small grocery store). Grocery Stores that sold meats, milk, breads, vegetables etc., and owned by: Pete DelVecchio 6 Boundary, Innocenza DeOrio 51 Boundary. Smaller stores that sold candy, canned goods, ice cream, soap etc.: Sid Diulus 39 Boundary, Murphy (Related to Maffeo's) 46 Boundary, Samane 9 Boundary. Cows, 8-10 of them in the area of the present playground. Milk company owned by Charles Dandrea. Stayed in business until the government passed laws that milk had to be pasteurized.

⁹ Sestili, Mary Ann. “San Lorenzo Club prolonged memories of the old country.” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 23, January 2013:2. I wrote this vignette based on memories while attending wedding receptions at the San Lorenzo Club on Bouquet Street, Oakland that was located across the street from my Sestili grandparents’ home. <http://www.post-gazette.com/news/portfolio/2013/01/23/Storytelling-San-Lorenzo-Club-prolonged-memories-of-the-old-country/stories/201301230197>.

¹⁰ The church was razed in 1960. <http://www.post-gazette.com/news/faith-religion/2018/07/29/St-Peters-Lower-Hill-Church-of-the-Epiphaney-demolition-Pittsburgh-urban-renewal/stories/201807280002>. Governor George Howard Earle III served as Pennsylvania’s Governor from 1935-1939. During his administration, he actively pushed through legislation that became known as Pennsylvania’s New Deal.” <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/portal/communities/governors/1876-1951/george-earle.html>.

¹¹ The Miller Printing Machinery Company, which started operation in 1903, manufactured letterpresses, cutter and creaser machines, and lithographic printing machines. The Miller Printing Machinery Company Records contain booklets, brochures and operating manuals for the various machines the company manufactured. There are also photographs of the employees and the machines as well as advertisements. <http://historicpittsburgh.org/islandora/object/pitt%3AUS-QQS-ms2926/viewer>.

¹² *Stories from PA History*, “Making Steel” reports steel companies, needing laborers, directly recruited or had intermediaries recruit for European laborers. I do not know if my grandfather, Nicola, was one of those recruited or if he came through ‘word of mouth’ from contemporaries. <http://explorephistory.com/search.php?keywords=making+steel&category=9>.

¹³ Golway, Terry. *Together We Cannot Fail: FDR and the American Presidency in Years of Crisis* (Sourcebooks Media Fusion, Illinois, 2009). FDR expressed his adamant refusal to enter World War II during his September 3, 1939, Fireside Chat (Chapter 13, pp 129-135) when he said: “as long as it remains in my power to prevent it, there will be no blackout of peace in the United States.”

¹⁴ On September 16, 1940, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Selective Service and Training Act (Congress passed the Burke-Wadsworth Bill into law 10 days earlier) requiring all men between the ages of 26-35 to register for the draft. <http://www.history.com>this-day-in-history/franklin-roosevelt-approves-military-draft>.

¹⁵ The classification system used to determine who was eligible for military service, used a 4-F classification designating that the person was not qualified for military service. <https://www.sss.gov/Classifications>.

¹⁶ Bishop John Francis Dearden served as the Bishop of Pittsburgh from 1950-1958, served as the Archbishop of Detroit, and in 1969 Pope Paul VI installed him as a Cardinal. Dad was a devoted friend of Bishop Dearden and traveled to Detroit to celebrate the Bishop’s elevation to a Cardinal. Many of the original laborers were Italian immigrants who when they attended our parents’ funerals, reminded us, “Your parents were the only ones who would give me a job when I needed it to support my family.” <https://borgenproject.org/10-facts-about-bosnia-and-herzegovina-refugees/>.

¹⁷ My thanks to Todd Dahlen, Captain, Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service, Potomac Station #30, Potomac, Md., 20854 who helped me understand how firemen would have handled a fire of this nature in 1979 and how serious a fire it could have been; Sestili, Mary Ann. “Mine: So much of life is contained in such small things.” *The Washington Post Magazine*, 11 Oct. 2013. http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/mine-so-much-of-life-if-contained-in-such-small-things-what-holds-meaning-for-you/2013/10/10/412c8e68-13e4-11e3-a100-66fa8fd9a50c_story.html.