

Louis Rossi 12-14-15: b. 1950

The interview takes place in the Rossi family paint store on Main Street in Orange; Louis and the store were both mentioned in the Karen Wells Main Street Walk interview. Chris Matthews introduces the topic of interview: The impact that the construction of 280 and other factors had on the business, what its history was like before then, and what has happened since.

The participants of the Main Street walk spoke highly of Louis, and this observer would guess that he has spent decades giving his customers a fair deal: He comes across on the tape as a very fair person, wanting to share both sides of any dubious cases. He is slow-spoken, and maintains a low key, responding to questions as carefully and precisely as he can; hesitations and unfinished sentences seem to mark places where he is thinking about clarifications the interviewer may require. He does not seem eager to push any deep resentments into the conversation, and is careful to be respectful toward any group he finds it necessary to talk about.

The relocation of the business

The 280-related relocation was mentioned before the tape starts, so the first question is about the previous location. Louis states that they were at 52 South Center Street, and that the former property, taken by eminent domain, now holds a storage facility. He adds that "there were some businesses there,...on the north side of the highway." [The storage place must be the facility mentioned by Gordon Roberts on 12/13/15 in connection with the brewery.]

The family business had existed on South Center since around 1944; Louis is not sure when they had to leave, but finally decides "around '75 '76 we had to get out of there." Thus, since the highway was already open at that point, its construction was not the proximate cause of the removal: The business was taken by eminent domain based on a plan "for urban renewal for the corridor alongside the highway." Chris comments that he hadn't heard about that, and finds it interesting.

Louis agrees that the Center Street establishment was pretty much the same thing as the newer one: "a paint and wallpaper store;[but] kind of a more family friendly (?) legacy....(?) [Sounds like 'legancy av' (1:53)] and it made more than the modern facilities I run today." The family had expanded the original store "numerous" times, even putting on two additions, one of approximately 25 by 100 feet, the other smaller. "But it was—we didn't have to pay the high rents, and taxes, on Main Street. Ahm, now we do, but as things developed, ah, because we're easy on and off of 280, not that we weren't there and we ended up being more easy, even more room now, than was available there at that time."

The Rossis moved into the current location directly from the old one, and Chris comments on the attractiveness of the building. Louis agrees, but adds, "Well, it's an old building; it's really not livable on the upper levels."

The Rossi family arrival in the US

After leaving Italy, Louis' great grandfather Arturo lived "here" for six months by himself. Then his son, Louis' grandfather Luigi, along with his mother and younger brothers, joined him. That all took place in 1906. The grandfather was about twelve when he arrived, and was already doing painting, since "children worked young in those days."

Louis' father grew up in Orange, on Snyder Street, and also grew up in the city, starting out ("for me") at 443 Park Avenue.

"It always was a nice, diversified community. Always diverse....Orange had, at that time, a lot of, a fair amount of industry. There was Bates, there was, M— that made the staple guns and the like, Monroe, there was Harvard Press, there was Rheingold Beer, there was, ah, *numerous* bakeries, a good half-a-dozen bakeries at least, probably more, and, small personalized shops that did everything from repair your shoes to— [inaudible], the kind of shop you don't see around anymore. And they used to joke that there was a, uh, in Orange,...you couldn't walk a block without hitting a church, a bank, or a bar."

Expanding on a question about the original emigration, Louis reveals that his great-grandmother "was supposed to be sent for, I guess she didn't get a call quick enough, but she came dragging—her six little boys." They were from Luccera, which is Puglia, and the county would be Foggia. They came straight to Orange "because somebody in, ahm— A lot of the people that settled in Orange were from that area, more specifically Verona, but, ahm, close to there in Italy." He mentions the two world wars and points out that the greatest Italian migration began in the late 1800s, early 1900s. He then mentions the Irish potato famine and feels sure that other groups had their reasons for coming at the times they did.

The great grandfather worked at a bank in New York. His oldest son Luigi, Louis' grandfather, "was to be a fine artist, he drew, but when the Depression came, there was no money for people to do this; with his younger brothers he said, 'Come on,' and he started painting, and eventually they all went out on their own, to West Orange, to Livingston,...wherever they moved, although many of them stayed in Orange for years."

The disappearance of old Orange and businesses like Stetson Hats

"Then when I grew up, Orange was still, ah, a very nice small city. But, ahm, the riots that existed throughout the country, ahm, when they had ended, a lot of cities had scary neighborhoods, ahm, scary neighborhoods for people, both white and black, going, being in the wrong neighborhood, could be life-threatening, so a lot of people moved away, they spread out all over to go to more rural areas. With that happening, new highways came in, small businesses didn't exist. Ahm. Why, exactly? Tax rates, I guess, went up, and they chased out the rateables. There were, ah, Orange was a famous hattery, many years ago, and we had bra factories, and other clothing plants that existed, and now the Berg building, I think on Nassau Street, was a bra factory; when you talk of hat famous, the Stetson hat factory started in Orange, hence we have

Stetson Street. That produces Cajun food now, that building."

Chris says he knows the establishment, but did not realize it was the former Stetson factory. Louis says, "Tommy Dowd is a friend of mine who owns that line of foods." [Lagniappe Foods]

[Stetson Street is very short, and probably not related to the factory except for the name. The original No Name Hat Company building, which became Stetson, is located in the Valley, at 534-539 Mitchell Street, on the corner of South Jefferson, and is adjacent to the former Harvard Printing Co., which faces Central Avenue. The very large building has been modernized from its previous burnt-out condition, and the attractive but plain exterior does not reveal what goes on inside.]

Family members

- Arturo Rossi, the great-grandfather, sailed out of Naples in 1906, on the Sicilian Prince. At that time he already had a wife and six sons. His daughter Constance, at the end of the top-level list below, was born in the US.
- Luigi, the grandfather (twelve when he came to the US in 1906). Louis was named after this grandfather, according to a typical naming tradition that called for the oldest son to be named after the [paternal] grandfather. Thus Louis' father, Joseph, had an older brother Arthur, plus two sisters, Constance [after her aunt] and Emma. [This naming pattern was also practiced by the ancient Greeks who settled southern Italy and Sicily.]
 - Arthur
 - Joseph, father of Louis, m. Annamarie [Memorial: <http://www.ippolitofuneralhomes.com/memsol.cgi?user_id=1450613>
 - Louis (the paint store proprietor) [m. Amelia]
 - Bernard, his brother, proprietor of Little Falls store, lives in Cedar Grove
 - Joann [m. John Petroccia], "sold the home in Orange, but now resides in Randolph"
 - [Annmari] [m. Jeffrey Lorine] "went to college in Pennsylvania and stayed there...."
 - Joseph [m. Jill], became a veterinarian, went to school in Pennsylvania, set up a practice there
 - Constance [Cuccinello]
 - Emma [Iannone]
- Arturo
- Roberto
- Alfredo
- Eduardo
- Antonio
- Constance [the elder, first Rossi born in US]

The grandfather, Luigi, the artist who became a painter, made his brothers painters after him. He opened a business making paints, and was helped by his daughter Constance,

because "the boys [Arthur and Joseph] were off at war." When the boys came back, Arthur went into business with the grandfather (Luigi) painting churches and banks and big commercial things, while Constance, who had an asthmatic son, took a doctor's suggestion and moved to the shore. As a result, Luigi's son Joseph, Louis' father, ended up taking her place in the paint business.

"And I swore when I graduated college that this is not what I was doing, and now I find myself passing the business to my son, and today we have five stores, and there'll probably be more before I retire." Louis does have a brother that was in the business, but he chose to create a venture of his own, and now owns a paint and wallpaper store in Little Falls.

In response to a question about the Little Falls paint store on Route 23, Louis says that he himself opened that one, but it closed and his brother "reopened the business on Main Street in Little Falls, for those customers."

Chris now comments on photos of the great-grandfather, grandfather and father, and Louis encourages a chuckle about the amount of hair his father had "many years ago."

To explain the relationship between making paint and putting it on buildings, Louis says that the grandfather, Luigi, "was painting houses, churches, schools—" and "his one son went with him, and stayed in painting; my father became the paint seller."

"They joked: When he helped my grandfather, he stuck him in the closet [to paint], so he'd rather be selling, the paint."

Louis

Louis was born in St. Mary's Hospital, Orange, in 1950. His first home was on Park Avenue, at 443, but the family moved to Nutman Place in West Orange, on the border with Orange, and he went to High School in Livingston.

The Rossi apartment on Park Avenue, part of a house, had only one bedroom. Louis and his brother [Berard] slept in the dining room, his sister [Joann] slept in with her parents, and his mother was expecting a fourth child [Annmarie], so "it seemed wise to get a little bigger place."

As a result of the move, Louis went from St. John's in Orange, where he went through the first three grades, to Our Lady of the Valley, another parochial school. He was the only one of his siblings who went all the way through parochial schools until high school. The family moved to Livingston in the mid-sixties. Why move to Livingston? Laughing: "More kids! Bigger house!"

The Park Avenue community

Louis remembers the neighborhood very well: "We went to Baldwin Place; there were many large families. The Callahans had about ten too, I just remember — everybody had brothers and sisters back then. There was one guy Rexie (?)Hine(?) that didn't

have any brothers and sisters, and that was very unusual."

"In those days...I guess in the fifties and early sixties, if I needed a pair of shoes, my father would give me ten dollars and say, 'Go get shoes!' I'd walk from Park Avenue to — I might go to Cameron Field in South Orange to play. And have to watch my little brother! And make sure we got home...for dinner."

He started accordion lessons when he was about eight and used to take the bus, once ending up in Irvington when he took the bus in the wrong direction:

"But I walked in, and just walked into a store and told the guy, 'I'm lost. I was supposed to go here. Can I use your phone? And he had to give me thirty cents or a quarter or something to get back."

Asked about Baldwin Place, where Louis used to go to play, he says, "it cuts in Mount Vernon Avenue and dumps out on Lakeside Avenue, here in Orange....Because, ...you couldn't play in the street on Park Avenue, there was a divider and the trolley came and took you down to Newark..."

[Louis must be referring to Baldwin Terrace, which cuts in from Mount Vernon a block away from the corner of Park Avenue and Mount Vernon, makes a right angle turn without changing name, and, today at least, ends on Parkside Terrace, where it is blocked off by mature trees and houses that are likely to have been present in the sixties too. Thus it makes an ideal play street.]

To confirm that he was free to go around town, Louis asserts that "There wasn't a worry in the world; it was a different world."

Asked about the type of work his friends' parents did, Louis says that back before the seventies, before he went off to college, "People got a job, and they just did it — for life. And, ah you — people, families were a lot more local, because transportation prior to me wasn't so prevalent that everybody had a car, you know,...a car per family, and, they stayed close, and, whole families lived together, and like when you went to a new neighborhood, you met twenty people, five of them were cousins, and if they came to your neighborhood, it was a similar situation." He had cousins "all over Orange."

"And with big families, my cousins at Jay Street had six boys and girls, and the ones that ended up going down the shore, had seven boys and a girl, so there was — and then we had one, uncle, that only had a daughter."

That uncle, Dominic Cuccinello, was a WW II vet with a prosthesis who "goes to war, loses his leg, comes back, becomes coach, history teacher, after years p— vice-principal, principal, and eventually Superintendent of Schools." He was Louis' godfather, and his wife was Louis' father's sister Constance [the younger].

[According to <<http://nj-pensions.findthedata.com//243545/Cuccinello-Dominic-S>>,

accessed on 2/10/15, "Dominic S Cuccinello was born in 1920 and retired from Orange City Bd of Ed on 09/81 after serving 32 years." He apparently took something called a veteran's retirement. He also earned a silver star for his service in the war: <<http://valor.militarytimes.com/recipient.php?recipientid=43964>>]

Children's activities and pastimes

"There were places where you could just go get — you had to walk up the hill in West Orange, and **Rock Spring Water** just came out of the mountain. People go there with jugs, just to get fresh mountain water. A piece of cardboard, in the nice weather, was a sled on a steep hill, anywhere around."

"Not everybody had a baseball glove; when you went to play baseball, who had, had, and if half the kids had 'em, you just switched the glove when you were in the outfield or you were up. So when my children grew up, they had catcher's gloves, a regular glove, a bat. I think every generation wanted to provide, a little more for their children than *they* got."

As a child, he never felt poor, or poorer than his peers, "because it was a blue collar town, the rich people lived in East Orange when I was *very* young," and in South Orange, where wealthy homes are still noticeable today. His brief residence in West Orange was so close to Orange that "it was practically the same thing. When I moved to Livingston, I realized, 'Wow! These people have a lot of stuff! And bigger homes.' But, when the winter came, and it was snowing, those kids were in bed. I was happy to be the first one to go out there, and be shoveling walks and making money."

When they lived in Orange, "we" also collected bottles and newspapers. The newspapers would be taken down to a place that paid for them by the pound and turned them into corrugated board. He remembers one time his dad was "furious" when he saw how much newspaper had been collected and saved in the garage because he didn't know how he and Louis were both going to fit in the truck after all the paper was put in.

After the 'trouble' in Newark

Louis was already living in Livingston by the time troubles erupted in Newark, but "I've always had an association with Orange, because, when I moved there [Livingston], thirteen and ready to go to high school," his father would expect him at the store on Saturdays. When he would complain that he'd made arrangements to play ball with his friends, he would get 35 cents for the bus so he could come in later. Then, after the ball game, he'd run all the way to the store in Orange (mostly downhill) to save the 35 cents.

"That could get me two movies and shorts at the Embassy Theater on Saturday." Louis now points out that the chandelier from the theater "hangs proudly in the Highlawn Pavilion."

Louis also mentions that his father's first accident [apparently when quite young] involved stopping his car on the trolley tracks and getting hit by a trolley. "I'm sure his father was real happy." He points out that his father grew up on Snyder, near Main,

where the trolleys used to run.

College and early employment

Louis graduated from high school in 1968. He attended West Virginia University, drawn there by "a little—they gave me an incentive...." He started at a smaller place, Salem College, and transferred. He did not graduate until 1974 "because I broke my back in the middle of my college career." This was the result of a fall while climbing, and he subsequently took a year off and went to California.

When he came back to Livingston, he was "working on a — I thought I was going to pick up a PhD in clinical psychology, met a girl, things changed with schooling, [I] got married, and had three children." He was "in the corporate world for a short stint, three or four years. When I was switching jobs in the corporate world, my brother wanted to go away, and he said, 'You're not working, why don't you cover for me?' and my father made me an offer that was more generous than he normally was, and I said, 'Okay.'"

Since then, he's been working at the store in Orange.

Work at the store

As a kid he started out putting turpentine into the many and various containers people would bring in: "a half pint whisky bottle, a gallon wine jug, a bleach — a plastic bleach jug, a milk container, metal can from something else, whatever was." He also weighed out things like tri-sodium phosphate and nails.

In response to a question, Louis explains that the turpentine he distributed was of a type called 'sub-turpentine,' a lower grade of turpentine that is used to clean brushes, and that most paints were also thinned with turpentine at that time. He adds that more thinner was needed in colder weather, because the paint became more viscous in the cold.

He was able to run the register by the time he was about twelve, and his father also taught him to deal with broken windows that people would bring in, starting with removal of the broken glass and the old putty (using a special iron), and including the measuring and cutting and setting of the new glass and points, and (after a coat of paint to make it stick) the new putty.

Louis thinks today's kids don't do that sort of thing at that age, and Chris agrees, with a chuckle, that his own kids certainly don't.

Impact of 280 on Louis' life

[Probably because his family home was then in Livingston, and he himself was away at college or in California,] Louis was insulated from the immediate effects of the early buy-ups from ~1964 on, or the actual construction that took place until the highway opened in 1973. The paint store did not have to move until after that; he is not sure when it had to move, but thinks it might have been in the eighties.

Asked about the 'before and after,' and what changed in Orange as a result of the freeway, Louis' immediate reaction is to state that "All the small businesses and rateables went away," clarifying by saying that by 'rateables' he means Rheingold Beer, Monroe, Bates Manufacturing, Barton Press, and other large places, although Harvard Press did not close until later:

"When they went away, taxes go up, taxes go up, people don't want to live here, people move away, they — people that own property begin renting it; they're not living next to it, they're not taking care of it, it becomes downtrodden, and, there's been some places, made...attempts to do better, and there's still a lot of good places, in Orange, that, restaurants, like three or four come to mind that people are full, packed, jam packed every weekend:, with Berenice, Appian Way, Villa Italia, Eppis Essen, a famous Jewish deli, that's now in Livingston. Orange Shade moved, I think, to Caldwell, but um, and — [rather sadly] I don't know, that's the rest of the story."

[In the Karen Wells interview, participants comment favorably on the way Louis' store is maintained so as to add to the general tone of Main Street.]

Louis own aim from the first, when he agreed to work in the store, was to manage it and expand, and "I didn't realize I'd gotten stagnant until my son was done with college." The son agreed to work there if he, in his turn, could continue to expand it. "And here we go again, from one, two stores, we had, now we have, five, and my brother has one."

The interview ends as Chris gets ready to take snapshots of the family portraits visible in the store.