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Discover Chestnut Hill: remembrances of Chestnut Hill Past... (Part 1 Of 2)

Posted on August 20, 2020 (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2020/08/20/discover-chestnut-hill-remembrances-of-chestnut-hill-past-part-1-of-2/>), updated on August 20, 2020 (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2020/08/20/discover-chestnut-hill-remembrances-of-chestnut-hill-past-part-1-of-2/>) by Pete Mazzaccaro (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/author/pete/>)



This April 1940 photograph shows Alessandra Cartelli's mother and sister, Rose and Louise Cartelli, before boarding the ship to Philadelphia to join Pietro Cartelli.

dressed in smart tweeds, looking like he just came in from a walk through the Irish countryside. He was born in Wyndmoor in 1924 and, other than his time away as a radio navigator in WWII, has lived here his whole life.

By Molly Murphy

Anyone who knows me will tell you that I can pour over old photographs of this area for hours. My husband will joke, "Don't get her started talking about the history of our house! You'll never escape!" As I do errands on Germantown Avenue or walk through the Wissahickon, I like to imagine the people who have done the very same in years past, generations past. Who has enjoyed this very same view? Or opened this same shop door? We live in a community with such a rich history. It's been a pleasure to have the opportunity to interview longtime residents for the Chestnut Hill Conservancy's Oral History Project about their experiences. From members of old Philadelphia families to descendants of Irish and Italian immigrants, these are some of their remembrances of growing up here.

"My grandfather lived in Chestnut Hill. He was the only long living grandparent. He lived to be 100! And he lived at 30 East Willow Grove Avenue. And my aunt Mary, she lived there with him. And my aunt Alice and my aunt Dorothy before they married, they lived there."

Dr. Tom Fitzpatrick greets me at his door

"My father had a grocery store. It was on Queen Street, just below Willow Grove Avenue. He serviced all the big estates back then. And it was the only grocery store for miles around, except Chestnut Hill. Originally, he delivered with a horse and wagon. I have pictures. And he had a mare named Dolly. But then he moved up to a Ford. I used to ride with him to all these estates [like] Stotesbury — we used to swim in the fountains! And the domestics, they knew my parents and they'd take you in and give you cake and milk and that sort of thing. It was a crime what happened to that place. They used to call it the Versailles of America. And they used to have parties there. And we commoners would gather at the big gate on Willow Grove Avenue to watch the hoi polloi come in for these three- or four-day parties. Doris Duke and her gold Cadillac and General McArthur — they named a couple roads after them over there."

I think it's safe to say that the expansive 300-acre Stotesbury Estate in Wyndmoor left an impression on all who experienced it. Marjorie Pearson rode her horse there as a young girl.

"I had a very close friend who lived across Willow Grove Avenue and we were allowed to ride through the Stotesbury Estate. My mother and father, I remember, went to a dinner party there once. There was a wonderful little pond on their place where we used to ride our horses. Just go into the water and the horses would swim. We'd get soaking wet. It was amazing and they didn't mind people on their land. They were very accommodating if they were there."

Born in 1928, Pearson grew up in Wyndmoor at Laverock Farm, the Norman-Revival manor house reimagined for her parents by Mellor, Meigs and Howe. It was awarded the 1925 Gold Medal for Excellence in Design by the Architectural League of New York.

"It just was a charmed life, it seems to me. We had this big house. We had maids. I had a nanny. We had horses and cows and pigs and chickens. I had my own little white pony called Napoleon. There are pictures of me riding with my father before school in the morning over all the fields, which are now covered with houses."

When Pearson's father died unexpectedly in 1946, the family sold Laverock Farm. But subsequent owners didn't maintain it. Like Whitemarsh Hall on the Stotesbury Estate, it was eventually just abandoned.

"It lay empty for a couple of years and I remember going over there with my husband, just to show him, and the front door was open and there was SNOW in the hallway. And that just made me so sad that nobody cared. Some college kids lived there for a while. And then finally they tore it down, this beautiful place. You know there's a whole book [about it] called An American Country Home."

Chestnut Hill resident Alessandra Cartelli has a deep appreciation of area buildings and the craftsmanship that went into them. Her father, Pietro Cartelli, moved here in the early 1920s from the village of Poffabro in the Friuli region of Italy. He was a stonemason.

"Working as a stonemason at that time was seasonal. They did not have the cement and things they have now that they can work all year round because it froze. So, during the winter, you did not work. So you had to work summer, spring, fall — all the nice weather — and save for when you couldn't work. The Friulani women took in boarders, or they took in laundry, they went to clean houses... they were very frugal and made ends meet that way. Really, the dream of the Italians was to come here and work and then go back and live in Italy."

Cartelli's father traveled back and forth from Italy a number of times before the family finally moved to Chestnut Hill.

"He sent money back and they had built a house where he planned to live in Maniago. It's still there. My sister was born there. But because of the war they had to leave. In 1940 when the war was really breaking out, [my mother] was able to come on the ship the Conte di Savoia.

She left from Naples and she just barely made it because there was a delay with the train! And she was, I think, the last one to board the ship [ever] because it was the last voyage it was making as a passenger ship. Then it was commissioned as a military hospital ship."

The passage to America was arduous. It took almost two weeks just to navigate the Strait of Gibraltar as the war erupted. Cartelli's mother spoke no English and knew no one, other than her husband, when she arrived in Chestnut Hill.

"They first lived with Louigi and Vittoria Roman. They had a house on Willow Grove Avenue and they took in boarders. Vittoria was one of the ones who worked very hard to bring the Italians over and she would find places for them to live. They lived there for a month or two. And then there was a lady, Mrs. Gervasini, who was from the Piemonte region and they boarded with her for a while until they bought a house on Ardleigh Street in front of the tennis courts. My second sister Rita and I were born here. But my grandparents, everyone, remained in Italy. Which was really hard because there wasn't a correspondence. Because Italy was an enemy, basically, allied with Germany and Japan. So my mother said that they came in and they took the radio — the authorities — they came in and took any type of communication devices."

Cartelli's father was one of the founders of the Venetian Club, which was established in Chestnut Hill in 1924 and remains a venue for "fun, friendship, and fellowship" for its members today. The substantial Italian community here formed tight-knit networks.

"Of course, there was prejudice against the Italians, even before the war. I mean, it's interesting because I don't look Italian, stereotypical Italian, from southern Italy with dark hair and dark complexion. The north was really populated by the Celts and the Germans. So growing up, because I did not "look Italian," I heard a lot of things. They would forget that I was, or didn't know that I was, so you heard all the stupid jokes and all the rest of the prejudice. The Italians really were not accepted."

While the Italians in Chestnut Hill were largely involved in construction, specializing in stone, tile and ironwork, the Irish served many of the wealthy families as chauffeurs, gardeners and maids. Dr. Tom Fitzpatrick reflected on the economic disparity he observed here during his youth.

"The 'haves and have-nots'... you know, the 'haves and the people that work for the haves'! (laughs) Yeah, there was some animosity, but the wealthy people were 'noblesse oblige' back then. They sent some kids to college or they took care if there were illness in the house. You know they financed a lot of things that the people who worked for them couldn't afford. And they were generally very good. They were the old wealthy families. And they felt an obligation for taking care of their people. So we didn't mind. In fact there was sort of, at least in my case, it was sort of "I want to be like that." I think that was one of the things that probably propelled me to finally become a doctor."

Stay tuned for Part 2 of Remembrances of Chestnut Hill Past. And please know that it's the varied patchwork of personal experiences that form the community quilt! We want to hear and document YOUR experiences. If you or someone you know would be a good candidate for an interview, please contact the Conservancy at info@chconservancy.org. And mark your calendars — we will be sharing and collecting more stories as part of this year's Night of Lights Exhibition along Germantown Avenue Oct 9 – 25.

Molly Murphy is an award-winning producer who worked for National Public Radio and the National Endowment for the Arts. She lives in Wyndmoor and conducts oral history interviews for the Chestnut Hill Conservancy.

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