

“A WALK THROUGH VERONA”

In the 1940's and even before, many fraternal organizations came into vogue in the small towns of Pennsylvania. Many of them are still around, the Moose, Eagles, Slovenian National, ISDA (Italian Sons and Daughters of America), Elks, Lions, Rotary and others. Verona was no different in that respect, we had our share of these organizations. The clubs had their own unique set of rules and rituals. One thing for sure, all were benevolent groups.

The Verona Eagles stood out because of its large membership and its expansive building. The Eagles in Pittsburgh was the only one that surpassed the Verona Eagles membership. One of the obscure members of the Pittsburgh Eagles was John Deni. He was an Olympic participant in the 1948 games in London. He represented Pittsburgh and United States in a little known event - the heel and toe walk. He had placed in the medal event. He was a worker for the Pennsylvania Railroad in Pittsburgh and on weekends he would walk around the reservoir in Highland Park. His home was in the Bloomfield area of Pittsburgh. He was a Navy veteran and recently inducted into the Italian Sports Hall of Fame of Pittsburgh.

Sunday, June 22, 1952, the F.O.E. (Federal Order of Eagles) of Pittsburgh in conjunction with the Verona Eagles sponsored a heel and toe event from Pittsburgh to Verona. The distance of the race was to be 21.8 miles to begin at 10AM. The route was from downtown Pittsburgh through the Oakland section down 5th Avenue to Washington Boulevard to Allegheny River Boulevard to Verona. In order to get the correct distance, the races had to go to Oakmont and three returns to Verona and back. The race ended at the Verona Eagles with a huge elaborately decorated Finish Line. There were fourteen world class walkers from across the United States. Some had been Olympic contestants in London. I had been standing at the Verona Police Station as the walkers came through Verona. It had taken them about four hours to reach our area. James Street was in a festive mood, all the Eagles members were there at the finish line. Hot dogs and drinks were being sold to the public. John Deni was a slight man and did not give the appearance of an athlete. One of the walkers was a huge man compared to the other walkers, at least six feet six inches or so and his gait was much exaggerated. Be aware, heel and toe walking is an unorthodox method of racing, the front of the foot on one leg and the back of the foot on the other leg are simultaneously touching the ground. This event made national news and John Deni of Pittsburgh placed third. He was the oldest of the walkers. When the race ended, a large group gathered on James Street in Verona. I was there for a short period after the final runner came in. All the racers went into the Eagles for a good meal, I'm sure.

This big day came to a close in Verona and now it was time to head up the hill to my home. I walked up Center Avenue making sure to be home by 5PM for the great Sunday dinner waiting for me. The weather was warm and walking up Center Avenue was just my normal stroll as I am not a toe and heel kind of guy.