

## **“DON'T KNOCK, JUST COME IN”**

Second Street in Verona is where I grew up. It was special because it was on the top flat park of Verona and ran perpendicular to the main street which was about one-half mile away. What made it special, besides the topography, was the activity that went on.

As youngsters, we had put up a basketball back board and net on the street light pole right in front on the family house. The street light provided night light for night ball. We played all day and at night. The boys came from all over to play. All I had to provide was a ball and water. The cars on the road at times waited until a play was over; never had a problem with any of the drivers. At times, the drivers would park their car and come and play.

Everybody of the 800 block of Second Street knew all the residents. The weekends were fantastic, a little noisy, but no problems. We all took our turns playing. In the winter, we played some weird form of hockey, using a tin can for the puck. Our hockey sticks were tree branches that had another branch at the end. It looked like a letter L with a long handle. The can, or puck, never went in the direction that we aimed.

The youth claimed the streets and parents and neighbors claimed the porches. This porch was their heaven and offered no instruction to us noisy young cocky brats. There was little dialogue when we were playing; no need, we all knew what they were thinking. No swearing, no smoking and be home when the street lights came on. Now don't think that this great block belonged to just a bunch of noisy kids and teens. Now if anyone would be observing this special block in this magical 40's and 50's, they would observe a daily migration of about 6 or 7 women, not young, but not old. I had no idea of the ages of these women, and I didn't give it a thought.

They were being drawn to 845 Second Street almost daily at 2 PM. The smell of coffee was evident as the draw. If you had been there you would have seen quite a collection of women. There was Sue from across the street, Louis from the corner house, Rose from three houses down, Jean, I think lived next to Sue. Ollie who was big, but beautiful and then there was Rose, who had all the answers. Periodically a new face or two showed up. This group met almost daily for an undetermined amount of years. Hearing the conversation was always confusing and sounded like they were fighting over a cup of coffee, but in reality were glorifying the wonderful taste of coffee, the afternoon libration. These women loved each other. None of them worked outside of their home. The husbands did and for sure when the men came home from work, the wives would be back at home. Boy, if they only knew what went on and what was coming. By 4 PM, they were all gone and all the cups were washed and put away. Don't think that coffee was the only draw. My mother, loved to bake and the ladies had their fill of pizzelles, pizza and homemade bread and butter.

A change was coming, none had seen it, but it was being brewed. Another woman who was more educated than any of the other others had her eye on them. Mrs. E wrote for the local paper a little gossip column. The paper was called The Verona Leader. She became somewhat of a visionary after seeing these women meeting daily. Mrs. E had connections with the bus company and with tour companies. The price was right. Mrs. E would just come into the house even without even knocking, just as the others would. One day, she suggested to the women, a bus trip to a macaroni company about eleven miles away, Vimco Mac Company for \$5 per person. My mother never went anywhere without my dad. Now this was truly an alien suggestion. The group pondered about a week and to my surprise, they all agreed to go. About 35 women from Verona had signed up. The bus would pick them up at the St. Joseph Church parking lot on Second Street at 10 AM. One thing had to be guaranteed was that the bus would return by 4 PM to Verona. That was very important, back home in time to prepare supper at 5 PM for the returning unknowing husbands from their work days.

These women were like little school children boarding the bus. Most of them had never been in a large group outside of their family gatherings, weddings, funerals, baptisms, etc. We can only imagine what went on during the ride. They had a prepared lunch and a tour of the macaroni plant. They brought home a group picture of about 100 ladies, all with their hats on. This tour was an epiphany for the coffee group. Mrs. E now planned trips to other various small companies that summer and next. After this initial excursion into the unknown world, and it was a success; time now to broaden the scope, as stated by Mrs. E. One new plan was to go to the St. Vincent's College for a play, a stage play! Surprisingly, my mother didn't hesitate to make a commitment to go. Now here is this housewife, who wears house dresses and aprons on a daily basis, transforming herself to an afternoon traveler. Her best dress was making another trip, that dress was usually saved for weddings. Now that dress was being worn in the middle of the week heading for St. Vincent College. This is an unheard of situation.

The trip a little longer, the play a little longer, meaning, heaven forbid; no 5 o'clock meal at the Santucci household. Oh, oh, what has happened? This may have been the trigger that ended the bus tours.

All I remember is that the ladies were again having coffee at the house on a regular basis, afternoon daily. I cannot say how long in years this went on, but one by one the ladies left the scene. Two moved away, one got gravely ill and one had to get a small job. Sadly it disbanded. This group didn't make history, only memories for themselves. But for 3 or 4 years, glorious years, these Second Street beauties had a purpose other than cooking and cleaning.

All that was left was the sweet smell of coffee and homemade bread.

Frank W. Santucci, September 2014