

FIRST GRADE 1941, SEPTEMBER

School always started the day after Labor Day, which was the first Monday in September, the end of summer. The year was 1941 and I was accepted into the first grade at St. Joseph Catholic School in Verona. Most notable of that day was I had new clothes and even wore a tie. I was to report at 8 AM and classes were scheduled for one-half day for the first graders. I had the usual breakfast of pancakes, Aunt Jamima, of course, and a cup of coffee. My hair was slicked back, but I had a cowlick in my hair. To keep it under control, mom would fill a glass with warm water and then add sugar and stir. She would then insert a comb in the water and proceed to comb my hair. When the water dried in my hair it would dry stiff and my hair stayed stiff and straight for hours. Pancakes, hair and tie and now I was ready to start a new and uncharted adventure.

My home was about 100 yards away from the school. I passed by many times but never entered the school yard. I had to walk past a row house of six apartments and the steps to the school yard were waiting for me. The school consisted of five wooden buildings and an outhouse. No indoor plumbing in 1941 but by the time I left St. Joe, the basement had indoor toilets. The church and the priest house and the house where the nuns lived were also on this guarded property.

The whole complex was surrounded by a four foot spiked picket fence. The buildings were gray with wooden floors and each class had a pot belly coal stove.

The nuns were scary creatures; dressed in black heavy robes with a white bib, a head covering that hid all the head except for the eyes, cheeks and chin. No feet were visible and when they walked, it appeared they were gliding, and barely talked when walking to the classroom from the Sister's house. They belonged to the order of the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

The new adventure began for me and my mother, who had not gone to school in the United States; a great new experience for the both of us. Little did I know on that first day, that I would become the student and the teacher. Mom walked me to the entrance of the school yard, my brother Ralph also walked along. He was only three years old.

Older students were there to direct me and others to the classrooms. In the room we were directed to sit on a three-tiered bench. We numbered 14 or 15. I did not know anyone. I did not say a word to these strangers. Some looked more anxious than me. All were dressed nice and neat. The girls all had new dresses.

Our room also had five short 2 foot tables with four chairs with them. The nun introduced herself as Sister Disadaria; what a strange name, but even stranger looking with all that black clothing and gold wire-rimmed glasses. She had a soft but commanding voice. We introduced

ourselves and talk about strange names. Listen to these family names; Swatchick, Rosepink, Pierro, Vasokalo, and Vanover. Thinking back now I realize that my name Francesco Santucci may have been the strangest name of all.

Besides the tables and chairs, there was an elevated sand box with sides. It was about shoulder high to me. Card board figures were in the sand standing up; figures of mailmen, steel workers, policemen, plumbers, nuns and priests. Being Labor Day week, this was the theme. Each holiday the figures would change. We got our school supplies that day, a pencil and a skinny ruler. Did not use them that first day, but they remained my constant companions on my 12 year journey.

The first school day was over at 11:30 AM signaled by the ringing of a hand rung brass bell by one of the 8th grade boys. They took turns, only the boys had this assignment.

Class was over, was I glad to get home and see someone I knew. All those strangers at one time was a harrowing experience. My mom had my lunch ready, white bread with butter and grape jelly sandwiches and a glass of milk. Mom was asking a lot of questions, but I had nothing new to say. As the short day passed, it became evident that I was not only a new student, but also a teacher. My mom, who had very little formal education, expected me to review my day and teach her. This process became second nature to me. Looking back I really enjoyed those St. Joe days.

The first day at St. Joe's is imbedded in my memory and in the first eight years of my formal school I didn't miss a day. That initial first day in September was the beginning of an adventure that continues 73 years later.

Frank W. Santucci, August 2014