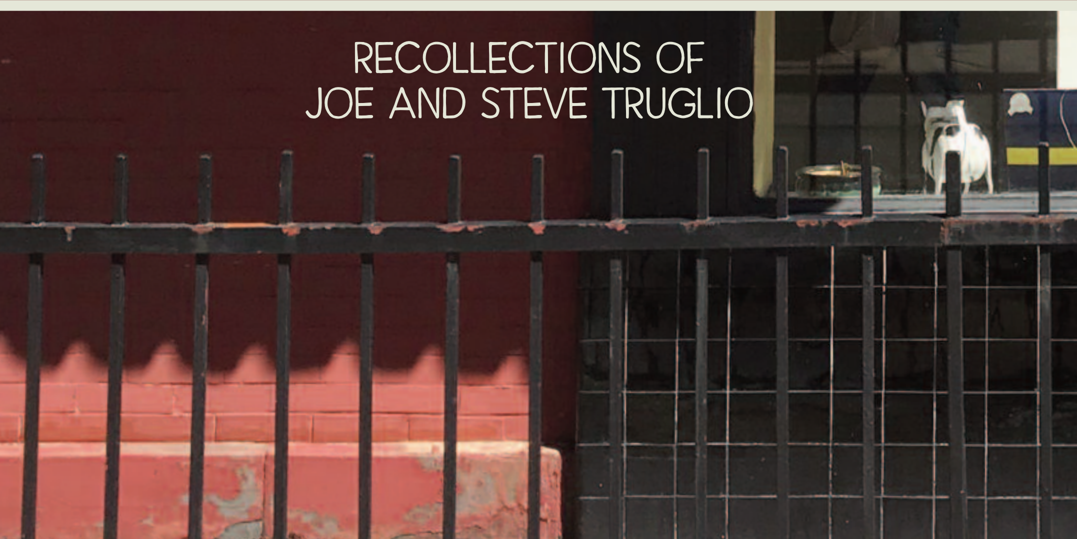
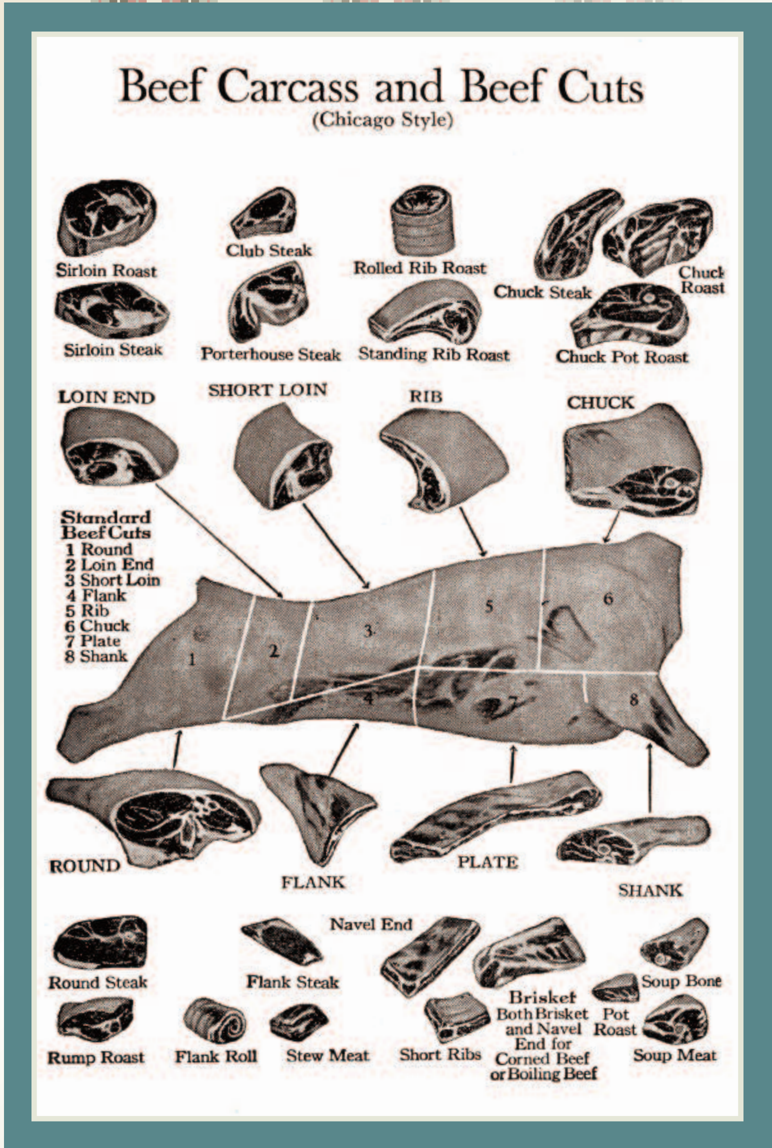
Whatever Goes on My Table, Goes on Your Table



Recollections of
Joe and Steve Truglio



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Recollections of Joe and Steve Truglio

A chapbook from the "Vanishing Hoboken" series
of the Hoboken Oral History Project

Vanishing Hoboken

The Hoboken Oral History Project

A Project of the Hoboken Historical Museum

The views expressed in this publication are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the views of the interviewers, the Hoboken Oral History Project and its coordinators, or the Hoboken Historical Museum.

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Cover and contemporary photographs of Joe and Steve Truglio by Robert Foster, 2018. Unless otherwise noted, all photographs reproduced in this chapbook are courtesy of the Truglio family.

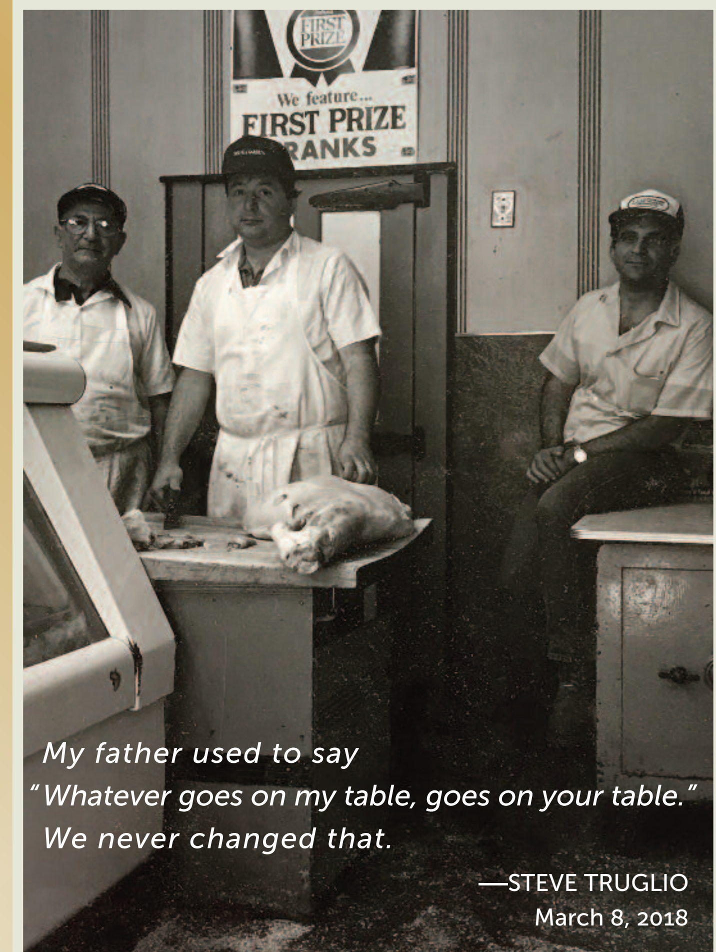
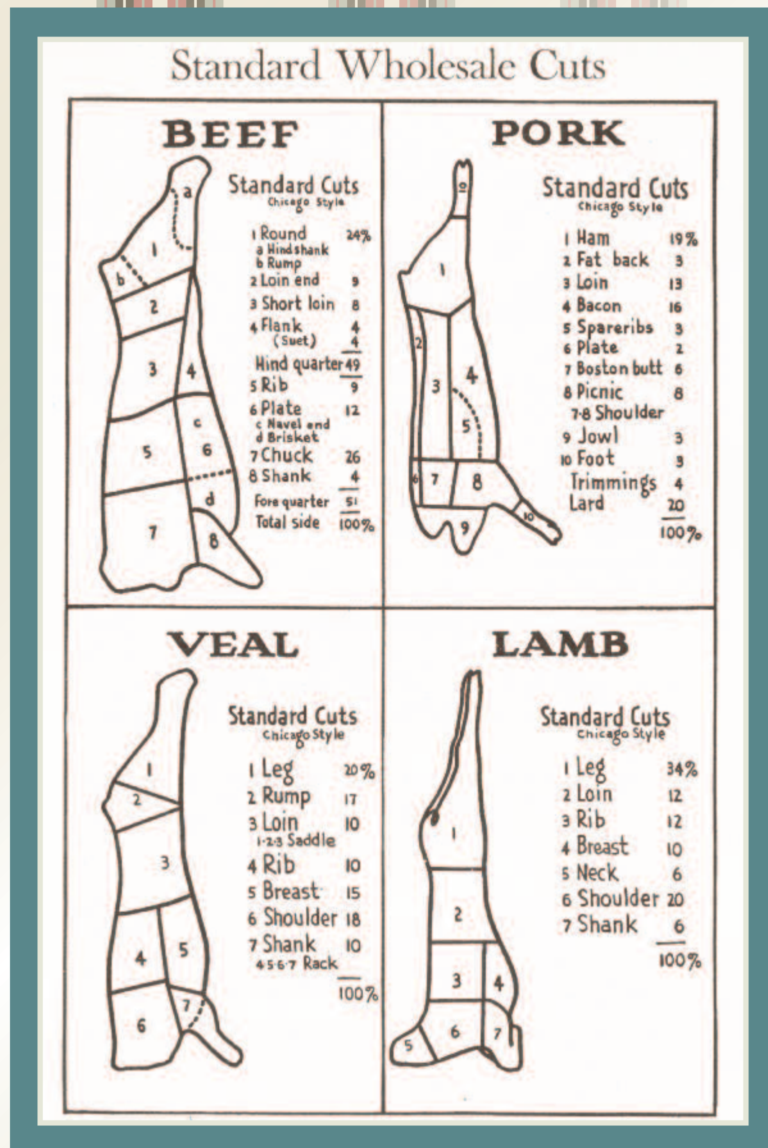


Photo by Michael Flanagan, ca. 1975.



Joe and Steve Truglio first learned about the meat business when they were still in grade school. Over the years, their father, Al, (who learned from his brother-in-law John), taught them how to choose and cut meat, to make sausage, and to give the customer the freshest cuts, the kind they would want to eat themselves.

Joe and Steve now run the family business, and every day they serve their customers the way their father did: they buy the meat they sell daily, and they cut the customers' orders individually, in front of them. Working in the store he handed down to them, the brothers are always reminded of their father—in the work they do, and in the photographs and objects that line the interior of the store. In the small room at the back of the store hang a row of Al's hats, just as he left them. The butcher blocks he and his brother-in-law used at John's Madison Street store—along with blocks from other, closed butcher shops—are now in the Truglios' market on Park Avenue.

Born only three years apart, the brothers have worked together for decades, with a few gaps when Steve went to work for Crown Industrial and Maxwell House Coffee in Hoboken. But even then, Steve returned to the store after his shifts, to help Joe; and when Maxwell House closed, he came back to work with his brother, to provide their neighbors with the personal service and quality meats they have come to expect from the store that bears their family name.

It seemed only fitting that Steve and Joe Truglio be interviewed together. Robert Foster and Holly Metz conducted the interview at Truglio's Meat Market, 1000 Park Avenue, Hoboken, on March 8, 2018; a copy of the transcript has been deposited in the collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

COMING TO HOBOKEN

JOE TRUGLIO: On the Truglio side, my grandfather immigrated from Italy to San Paulo, Brazil, because there was a quota and he couldn't come to the United States. So, his family went to Brazil [first]. They finally got a chance to come to the United States and then they came. From San Paulo, he came to Hoboken.

My grandmother came from Monte San Giacomo, in Italy. She immigrated to the United States in 1888. She was six months old, and they carried her here. She came in the year of the Great Snowfall in '88.

My grandfather was twenty-one when he came from Brazil. [My grandparents] met in Hoboken, and they were married here, in St. Ann's Church, in 1908. Their first child was born in 1909—my Uncle Dominick. There was another brother, Peter, [then] Jeanette, Victoria, my father, in 1920, and then my uncle Jackie, who was the youngest. He was born in 1942.

My grandparents on my mother's side immigrated from a small town outside of Naples, near Caserta, Italy. They were married in October 1912.

Opposite top, from left to right: Lucy Truglio (Momma); Little Lucy Truglio (granddaughter); Al Truglio (Joe and Steve's father).

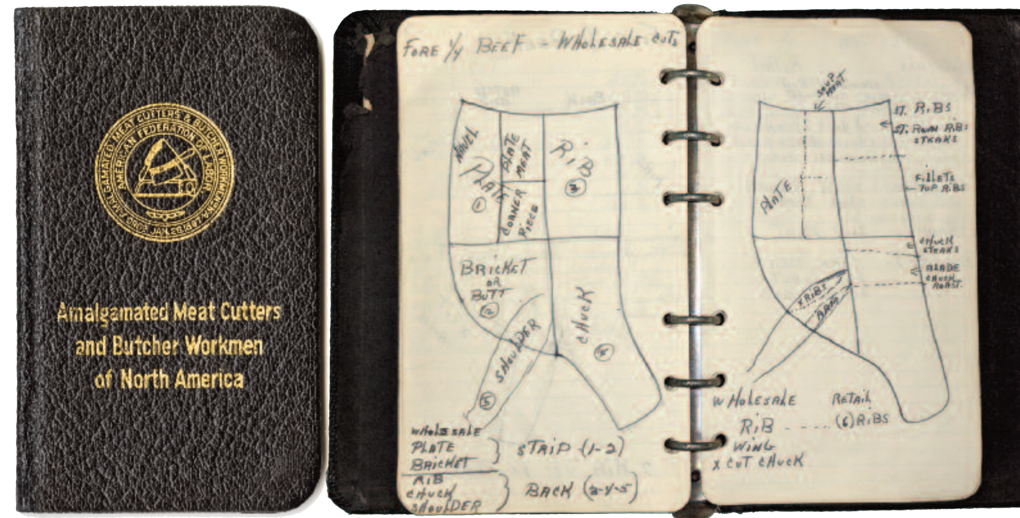
Opposite bottom, from left to right: Steve Truglio, Al Truglio, and Joe Truglio.

HOW WE GOT INTO THE MEAT BUSINESS

JOE: My grandfather, on the Truglio side, he always worked in a grocery store, a butcher shop. But how we got into the meat business was on my mother's side. My father, he went into the war, World War II, [and] when he came out, he met my mom [and they married]. My mother's sister's husband, my Uncle John Dell'Aquila, had a store at 302 Madison, and he was in the meat business.

After the war, my father, with the G.I. Bill, went to butchers' school [in Manhattan]. It was a regular school; I still have his books, upstairs. All these books, and he must have had tests. That's where he learned how to be a butcher. And then he learned the trade, [on Madison Street,] with my Uncle John. He went to work for him. That's where he really learned how to run the business—from him.

He stayed there, I don't know how many years, and



Above: Al Truglio's notebook from butcher school, ca. 1945
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Opposite page, left: Uncle John Dell'Aquila, no date.
Opposite page, right: Joe and Steve's parents, Al and Lucy Truglio, no date.

then he went to the A&P. He worked there for a couple of years and then he bought the business at 252 [Tenth Street]. It's part of the building at 1000 Park, [which is our address now]. My other uncle, Nick, my mother's other sister's [husband], had a business, on 252 Tenth Street. He [bought] the business in 1946, and in 1952, he sold it to my father.

In 1955, the building came up for sale. [My father] had no lease. He came to work one day and there was a sign on the building: the landlord was going to sell the property. My father didn't have the finances to buy the building at the time; he had just bought the business. So, he had a cousin in town who was a real estate lawyer (he also became a judge in Hoboken: Pete Giordano). He called him up and told him what was going on, and my father's cousin went and put down $500 of his own money, [telling the seller] that he wanted to buy the building. Like a binder, until my father got the finances. That's how my father bought the building in 1955, and that's when we moved here.

Just to think, at that time, $500 held a building. That's how we're here.

ALWAYS AT THE STORE

JOE: I actually started working in the store when I was nine. Nine years old, delivering orders. We were always here, always part of it. Even when I was in high school, I used to come home for lunch and I'd have to deliver orders. And then eat my lunch and go back to school.

[During high school,] I started going to the market with my father. My father used to go, where Newport is now, there was Armor down there, Swift was there, all these meat purveyors. That's where the market was. The train used to bring the meat into Jersey City.

After high school, I went into the service, and after I came out, I was working. Even though we had other jobs, we always worked in the store, too. On weekends.

[Then] my father was getting a little older. He needed more help. When I came out of the service, I started working here fulltime.

Joe Truglio with his father Al in front of the original store, ca. 1958.

STEVE TRUGLIO: I had a job, and after my job, I came and helped my brother, Joey, to run the business. I worked for Crown Industrial for a while, a warehouse, and a few months at Maxwell House Coffee, and then from there—they closed down—I came into the business with my brother and my father.

JOE: [How many hours do we put in now?] At least twelve hours a day. Six days a week. He opens up the store and I go to the market every day.

TRUGLIOS EXPANDS

JOE: I got married in 1980, and I started working here full-time. We were still in the back store. There was a deli [in the front, at 1000 Park Avenue], a German deli. Fred Nieson, [who ran the deli,] had optioned to buy the building. But he was married, and he had no children. He turned to my father and said, "You buy the building." So, because he did that, my father always felt that if it wasn't for [Fred], he wouldn't have had the building. So he never touched him. [He wouldn't ask him to move.] They had a handshake agreement. And as long as Fred wanted to stay here...

When he got sick, he had the help of Norman "Hank" Parry; he came in to help Fred and he took care of Fred until he passed away. My father felt an obligation to Hank Parry, and my father left him here. So, when Hank passed away, that's when my father turned to Stevie and I and said, "Before we rent the store to someone else, what do you want to do?" And that's when we decided, in 1989, to break through, and we moved to the front store.

STEVE: [The original store was very small, maybe 450 square feet.] We worked on top of each other.

JOE: There were three of us working there.

STEVE: [How did the business change when we moved into the front store?] We do some restaurant work [now]. But we still do personal, hands-on. You come in, you want this, or a pound of chop meat, we don't do no pre-cut. We take everybody one by one and we serve them like my father used to serve them. We never changed. You come in, you want steak, ground beef... We do everything fresh. We don't do no pre-cutting and we take care of everybody like family. We don't do packaging, nothing like that. We take care of everybody as soon as they come in.

JOE: Like Stevie said, we do a little wholesale. We do some restaurants. The business changed that way. [The restaurants are] mostly in Hoboken. We have a few outside of Hoboken, but mostly Hoboken. Delfino's gets chop meat from us—

STEVE: —and the pork chops. We've got Gigi's on Washington Street; we serve them every day. Otto Strada. They got their famous meatballs. [Customers] come in and say, "I want an Otto Strada meatball." Here it is. You've got to make it!

Now there's a new pizzeria they opened up. They use our sausage. Tenth Street Pizzeria.

JOE: [When we go out to eat, we go to restaurants] that support us. We do Leo's; he takes a lot of our sausage. We eat hamburgers at places where we serve. Zach's, they make hamburgers. And the bar on Tenth. Biggie's is a big customer of ours.

STEVE: We serve them daily.

JOE: We're there every day. They've been customers for years.

(Left to right) Part of the Truglio extended family: Steve, Geraldine, Lucy, Joe, Donna, little Lucy, Al, no date.

STEVE: As a matter of fact, my Uncle John used to serve Biggie's.

JOE: When they just had the one [clam bar], on Madison Street.

IF DAD WAS HERE NOW...

JOE: [Do I think about my father, now that we've taken over the market?] Oh, every day!

STEVE: Every day.

JOE: His hats are still hanging on the back wall there [in the original store.] We feel that he's here every day.

STEVE: Sometimes we'll say: "If dad was here now." Forget about it! The business changed so much since he was... He had mostly families [as customers]. Now we've got these younger people and I don't think he would have had the patience for them. You know, how they buy... People come in, and everything's on their cell phone. They walk in the store and say, "I want this!"

Inside Truglios, 2018. Photo by Robert Foster.

JOE: Or a book. [And sometimes they ask for cooking instructions, too.] We help them, yeah. That's why they come in to the small store, too. That's one of the things… first of all, we cut it like they want it, and they ask how to cook it. You can't do that in a supermarket.

STEVE: Now, years ago, this was a big industrial town. You had the piers and everything. So, the ladies used to go out—they had to cook twice. They had to cook for lunch; the kids came home from school. Then the kids went back and the husband went back to the piers. Then they shopped again for dinner.

JOE: In the back here, on Clinton Street, it was all coat factories, the garment industry. And a lot of the women, they used to leave work about four o'clock, and they used to come in. It was daily shopping, like in Europe. They used to come and buy just for the day. That started to change then, too.

STEVE: They had a deli, they had a food store across the street. They went to the deli, they went to the butcher, they went to the food store, and around the corner was a fish store.

JOE: It was really neighborhood. And every neighborhood in Hoboken had a butcher shop. Just right here, there was the Pleasant Meat Market, Pierro on Ninth and Willow; Mr. Miller was on Tenth and Bloomfield, and when he passed away, Pierro moved to Tenth and Bloomfield; the Boyles, Boyle's Meat Market; between Eleventh and Twelfth on Washington, there was Peter's Meat Market; Joe's Prime Meat, he was on Ninth and Washington, and his original store was between Eighth and Ninth and he moved to the middle of Ninth and Tenth. So just in this neighborhood…

Top row, left to right: Joe Truglio, Lucy Truglio, Ann Dell'Aquila, Steve Truglio and Al Truglio. Bottom row, left to right: Janice Pini, Michael Pini and Rosemarie Truglio.

STEVE: Then you had downtown.

JOE: Downtown you had plenty of places. One by one they all started to close. Now we're the only ones left. The supermarkets [changed things], and the town started to change.

STEVE: People moved out.

JOE: [Have we seen changes in our customer base over the years?] Oh yeah. Most of our clients were Italian immigrants, and over the years, that changed completely. [Butchers served the people in their neighborhood.] Ethnic, ethnic. Yeah. Back in the early days, it was primarily German. And then Irish, and then Italian. Most of our [customers], in the early years, were Italian customers. They still [are]. But that started to dwindle, too. They all started to get better jobs and they left town. That's how the town changed. They all started to move up. Like I said, a lot of my old loyal customers, even though they moved out of town, they'll come back. And they still do come back. We have some families over thirty years coming to the store.

WE GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT

STEVE: [My father taught us everything.] How to cut, how to prepare, how to help work in the store, how to handle customers.

JOE: He said that whoever came in to the store and they're hungry, we give them something to eat.

STEVE: That's right.

JOE: He always said that. If they're hungry, you give them something. That was his policy.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

JOE: [The tools we use haven't changed much over the years.] What we added is, we finally got a band saw. When we were in the back store, we had no band saw. Everything was hand-sawed.

STEVE: And then we got an answering machine. We never had an answering machine! [*All laugh.*] We got an answering machine because we started dealing with some restaurants. So, when they had to call in—

JOE: —when they called during the night.

STEVE: When we get here in the morning, we know what to buy.

Joe prepares a crown roast, 2018. Photo by Robert Foster.

JOE: We've rented knives, though, because the sharpener, he picks up a set every week, and he brings a set.

STEVE: And we still have the same guy. He's third generation knife-sharpener.

JOE: The grandfather started, went to the son, and now the grandson. Fairview Grinding. He does a lot of restaurants now. [For us,] he brings a set. But we still have some tools my father used. You have to have sharp tools.

STEVE: And we cut it right in front of you. Like I said before, we don't do no pre-cutting. You come in, you want a steak, I cut the steak right in front of you.

JOE: Once [closing up our store] happens, you're not going to see that no more. Labor comes in as a factor. Less people. You know, these supermarkets, everything comes pre-packed now. They don't even have the labor.

THE MEAT MARKETS

JOE: There were so many [meat purveyors] in Hoboken. Like I said, late '50s, early '60s, everything just started to go away. Elk's Market...

STEVE: Then you had Deile's. Deile's used to make bologna, ham...

JOE: Diamond Meats... There was a lot of places. But when [meat purveyors] started to close [in Jersey City and Hoboken], we started to go to New York and the meat-packing district. My Uncle John was still in business, and he

started going to New York first. And then he brought my father and I to New York and he introduced us to all of the purveyors that he used in Manhattan, the meatpacking district, on Fourteenth Street. It's still there, but dwindling, too, because the area got so hot now. There's only a section that's left.

But the ones we've been dealing with over the years, all are still in business, so that's where we go. I still go, every day. We get everything fresh, every day. We get some stuff delivered, but I'm still going to the market every day. I even go in on Saturday. There's only one man, there's one purveyor open on Saturday, until eight o'clock. So, I go in on Saturday and I pick something up, whatever we need on Saturday.

We buy hinds. A quarter. A lot of the meat is cut up there and Cryovaced, in Manhattan—[put] into plastic. Hanging beef, swinging beef, coming into town. That's something that will fade away, too. There's very little, there's only a few places that still cut meat. Labor, comes into it. That's a factor.

[At the meatpacking place,] I'm like one of the last ones. I actually go into the cooler and pick out the stuff. I've been shopping there for so long that he lets me in. I'm his oldest customer, so he lets me go in and I pick out my stuff. That's going to go by the wayside, too. Once he's gone... I won't be able to do that with anyone else. [And] that's the object of going to New York. I see what I buy.

STEVE: My father used to say "Whatever goes on my table, goes on your table." We never changed that.

JOE: So, you try to pick out something that's good. I shop in the same place where Peter Luger buys beef. I shop at Weichsel's in New York; it's one of the places that they buy from. They only buy hanging beef, too. So, most of what I buy is prime.

Meat grinder at the store, 2018. Photo by Robert Foster.

[What makes for a good piece of meat?] Aging makes it more tender. The longer you age it, it breaks down. And if you buy prime, it's the marbling in the meat. The less grain in the meat, the tougher.

STEVE: [How do we cook our steaks?] I put it on the broiler. Medium rare.

JOE: I like mine medium well.

EAT YOUR HAMBURGER AT HOME

JOE: [We do have a lot of customers.] They come in, they want something good. [And the new people in town have been good to us.] The new trend of people are very good. [Sometimes there's a learning curve.] Usually when they see the grinder, they say: "Oh, that's how chopped meat is made?" They never saw it made before.

STEVE: Growing up, we never ate a hamburger out. Never. That's one thing my father… "Can't eat a hamburger out." Eat a hamburger at home. You can't eat a hamburger out. Years ago, they used to grind everything together. [Everything we make is fresh, with nothing added.]

JOE and STEVE, in unison: [Do we make our own sausage?] Yes, we do!

STEVE: It's just pork, salt, a little pepper, some fennel seeds; we grind it up and [put] it in a casing, and that's it. We don't put no preserves in it or nothing. Sometimes we make it three times a week.

JOE: We have the restaurants, they take some; and in the summer, we make the thin sausage, when we put the cheese and parsley in it, for the grill.

BUTCHER BLOCKS, FAT AND BONES

JOE: Years ago, the blocks used to come from the waste company. That company, they used to pay us for the fat, and they used to give us gifts. The gifts were the butcher blocks. But over the years, they stopped paying us, they stopped giving us gifts, and now, we pay them to come and pick up the waste. So that's changed. There's no big market for it. Now that's a big change.

STEVE: [What happens to what they pick up? It's turned into] car grease, soap.

JOE: Fertilizer. They grind up the bones for fertilizer. But I gotta pay them now. I pay them $75 a pick-up. It costs me $300 a month now, just to pick up the waste. The most we

ever got [from the waste company] was six cents a pound, but back then, it used to pay for gas and electric. Back then, for my father, that check was [important].

STEVE: It used to go overseas a lot. They render it. They melt it down. They used to use it for soap and then the market fell. And then they don't ship overseas any more.

JOE: There's nobody else that I could turn to. There's like one or two guys who do [the pick-up now].

STEVE: Years ago, you had the butchers, you had the slaughterhouse. There was a lot of waste. Now there's no market for it. I mean, he only comes to Hoboken for us and the Acme.

JOE: [The butcher blocks we have in the store are from Hoboken shops that have closed.] Some of the blocks were from my Uncle John's butcher shop on Madison Street. [We have them from] Pierro's Meat Market on Tenth and Bloomfield [they were on Ninth and Willow and then they moved to Tenth and Bloomfield. When they retired, they gave us a couple of blocks]. And [we have them] from the Hoboken Pork Store on Washington Street. That big block in the middle is from there. [Now] we use them.

CLOSING UP SHOP

JOE: Some of these places, like the Pierro brothers, they had nobody to take a place over. My father grew up with the Pierros. They were children together. They took it over from their father. Anthony took it over from his father. He had other brothers, too, to help. [Then, when they got older, there was no one else to take over.] So, time, and age, was

a factor, too. A lot of their children, they weren't coming into the meat business. To work so hard like that. They went to college, they were educated, and they wound up doing other things. They didn't come back into the family business.

My Uncle John, he had two daughters, so his business went. He was 67. He was on Madison Street, and he closed up. But he taught us a lot. He taught my father a lot and my father always said, "You've got to do it Uncle John's way." He had a way to do things. He taught us how to buy the meat, and stuff. He was the patriarch of the meat business in the family. He taught, not only my father, my other uncle.

[Will other family members run Truglios Meat Market after we retire?] There's no more interest. [We're the last butcher shop in town.] A shop like this. Outside of the supermarket. We're the last ones. It's amazing. I still can't believe it, that we're the last one. There were so many.

Our good friend, Ernie Rezzonico, he had John's Meat Market, next to Apicella's. Ernie took over from his father. He was one of the last ones to go. His age was there and he didn't live in Hoboken. And our other good friends, the Saccis. That was Johnny's Meat Market. Anthony was a good friend of ours. He packed it up. Those were the last few. And Joe's Prime Meats on Washington. Joseph took it over for a while, Joe's son, Joe Junior. He took it over for a while, and he was a good friend of ours, too.

[We're the last one. Are we thinking of retiring?] It's going to happen soon. I'm going to turn 66. Stevie is 63. So, it's closer to retiring than going the other way.

The Hoboken Oral History Project

"Vanishing Hoboken," an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Hoboken Historical Museum and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to consequent "vanishing" of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico—found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken's industrial base relocated over the 1970s and '80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992.

In the go-go economy of the 1980s, Hoboken's row houses, just across the river from Manhattan, were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy commute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, in which affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, "Vanishing Hoboken"—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, the Oral History Project transcribed and edited several oral histories to produce a series of "Vanishing Hoboken" chapbooks. Since 2002, thirty-two chapbooks—including this one—have been published, with the support of the Historical Commission, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities; and John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Vanishing Hoboken Chapbooks

The editor of this series chose to call these small booklets "chapbooks," a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a

> …small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapman, in Western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the "Vanishing Hoboken" series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the "manners and morals" of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.

Joseph Truglio (Joe and Steve's grandfather) third from left, with members of the Lupo family, in front of their store at Fifth and Grand Streets, ca. 1920.

A Project of the Hoboken Historical Museum