

# BRADDOCK MEMORIES

BY JOE DEMARCO



I was born in 1952 and raised in Braddock on Moody (Moodie) Street up near the majestic old post office on Parker Avenue, along with my two older sisters, Dee Dee and Mary Kathryn. My dad, Joe “Peppy” DeMarco was born in Johnsonburg Pa., and moved to Braddock at age 4 with his entire family in 1926. He worked at the post office from 4 o’clock in the morning until 2 p.m. daily. He could walk to work in under a minute. It was an amazing time.

My dad passed away in 1989 and my sisters and I often try to piece together memories from our Braddock youth with the help of our mother, Katy Cognito DeMarco. Mom was born in 1926, the same year my dad came to Braddock. She spent her entire life in Braddock until my dad passed away. It’s sad to say we have never been able to find many photographs of Braddock taken during its glorious time of prosperity... a time that we recall so vividly and fondly. Oh, we have family photos galore but nary a one of Braddock Avenue itself. When we nostalgically reflect back on those happy times, we realize few people would have thought to photograph the Avenue because nobody would have thought it could change so dramatically or so quickly. So now, all we have are collective memories of a time that was so influential on our lives.

Looking back now, it is almost inconceivable at how quickly Braddock transitioned from the single greatest shopping community in Pennsylvania to the depths of decay and collapse. It’s almost inconceivable to understand why it happened or how it happened so fast.

As a child, my life was basically spent on Braddock Avenue in its stores and shops. The years 1959-1960 were probably the apex of my Braddock existence, a period of time when so many great things happened for me. I would have been about 8 years old and I recall some things like they happened just yesterday. It was a more innocent time; vastly more innocent and almost too innocent to comprehend. When I was 5-6 years old my mother would often give me a note and money and send me to the store. I’d simply hand the clerk the note and the cash and they’d fill the order and give me the change to take back home. It was amazing when you think back on it all.

I keenly remember my mother taking me Christmas shopping in December 1959. It was snowing very heavily and there was almost four inches of snow already on the ground. It was early evening under severe conditions, but there were so many people out shopping that we had to actually fight our way down the avenue. People were shoulder to shoulder and it difficult to move very far. Cars were crowding the streets. During that period, trolleys ran regular routes and, at peak times, they had to run extra routes to keep up with the Braddock demand. The hustle and bustle is etched in my mind forever. It was festive but chaotic. It looked like a scene from a movie. If you tell someone today what it was like then they don’t believe you. But believe me, you literally had to wrestle your way down Braddock Avenue to reach your destination. It is staggering to comprehend that a mere 5 or 6 years later, Braddock would be on a non-stop decline.

How can anyone from Braddock forget many of the things it presented and represented? I recall

parades down the streets with celebrities galore. There were many religious and nationality ceremonies on the streets. I recall one year when Bob Hope came to St Mary's Church and participated in a parade traveling up 6th street. We were awe struck!

I remember the Braddock High School football team's 56 game winning streak and especially Roland Mudd kicking a last second field goal to beat Scott High in 1958 to keep the winning streak going. There was the daily 10 o'clock curfew, churches on every corner and, comically, twice as many bars as there were churches. It seemed every nationality had its own church (and bar)... and they were all crowded. Braddock became known as "the city of churches" and everyone got dressed up on Sunday. Yes, everyone. And Sunday was not only church day... it was family day. Most every summer, Sunday was spent at Frick Park, Renzie, Idlewild, Kennywood or Rainbow Gardens with family, close friends and a picnic basket.

Who can forget the spontaneous celebrations when Bill Mazeroski's home run won the World Series in 1960? I remember going to Giant Eagle to get blue savings stamps and A&P to get green. With trepidation, I recall getting my first tooth pulled by Dr. Perella and my first childhood recollection of getting my tonsils and adenoids taken out by Dr. Huepler. He was a gentle giant of a man and would give out gigantic suckers after an office visit at 436 Library Street. I remember the suckers more than the office visits. I fondly remember going to breakfast at most drug stores as most all had a food counter. My Aunt Mary Cognito worked at Sun Drug and they truly had the best bacon and eggs in the world!

And we walked everywhere. Braddock was our playground and it was a happening place. It was our world, our universe.

The Paramount Theater was situated in the heart of the shopping area between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Streets. It was always a busy place. It was a classic theater with a large stage and ornamental décor. They ran first run movies and had a cool balcony. We would fight to get front row seats up there to watch cartoon festivals or many of the classic movies of the era. Of course we always stopped first at the United Candy Store (located right next to it on Braddock Avenue) to stock up on cheap goodies to bring in to the movie. Our favorites were chocolate dipped frozen bananas and Sugar Daddy's because they lasted such a long time. My cousin Frank took me to see "Seven Voyages of Sinbad," when I was around 5 years old. I was scared to death. It was in Cinemascope and it seemed the giant 3-headed chicken and the Cyclops was going to come right off the screen. I remember I cried... but I stayed and toughed it out. And who can forget the double "love" seats they had? I have never seen them anywhere else except the old Stanley Theater downtown. In the lobby they sold popcorn, rock candy, Raisinettes, Ju Ju Bees, Goobers, Boston Baked Beans, Sugar Daddies, candy bars galore and Non Pareils.

And who could forget the 5 and 10 cents stores? There were 3 basically in a row at the bottom of Library Street on Braddock Avenue between 8th and 9th street; Autenreith's, Kresge's and Neisner's. It seemed they all looked the same inside with wooden planking on the floor and all were red colored exteriors, or at least that's how I recall them. I think Neisner's had a basement floor, but Kresge's had the candy and chip counter when you first walked in the door. I can still smell the fresh roasted peanuts and home made heavily salted potato chips they sold there. I'd always come out with a greasy yet delectable bag full for a nickel. And speaking of nuts, who can forget Shubs down on Braddock Avenue between 6th and 7th Street? It was a small variety store and they sold the best cashews and pistachios in the world... and it was the first place in

Braddock I recall having soft serve ice cream. They had the nut machine always cranking in the front of the store churning away like a giant cement mixer. My mother had worked there before I was born and Mr. & Mrs. Shubs always remembered me. Every time I bought something, I got a little extra and a wink. It was sheer bliss.

Next to Shubs was Sadowsky Brothers and I can still recall looking in the window there and marveling at seeing the many televisions and noting the Syracuse football team and the jerseys were vivid orange. Yes, they had color televisions and some were almost 18 inches!!! Practically no one had a T.V. that big or in color in 1960. But Sadowsky did. It was the "Best Buy" of its time. And, we'd go there on Saturdays and stand in the outer walk-in path and watch football in color and no one ever shooed us away. Sols sporting goods was on the other side of Shubs next to Thompson's Furniture and always sold baseball gloves to be envied. Their window housed baseball uniforms, softballs, footballs and sports trinkets of all kinds. We would go there and stand like lost souls, gazing in the window, pining for a real softball or baseball bat to play with. I think they also had a second store at the other end of Braddock. That's how brisk business was in the glory days.

Remember the two Banks? Was anything more majestic than walking into the banks with the foliage growing above the teller's stations, all the impressive brick work and who can forget the spittoons? It was cavernous in there and the outside exterior was reminiscent of Roman Empire architecture.

Up a few blocks, Bell's Market was on the corner of 6th and Braddock Avenue and they sold fresh veggies, fruit and all kinds of meat. I think it is still there and it seems as if it's always been there... and in the exact same building too. It must be 100 years old now, maybe older. Only Alexander's down by the Paramount kept them from having a monopoly on the fresh food buying public. And caddy corner from Bell's on the far corner was the famed Coney Island. I remember how excited we all were when it first opened. Was it 1960-61 maybe? A hot dog and fries for 27 cents. Could life be any better?

Across the street from Coney Island was Cuda's Italian store. My mom shopped there a lot. It smelled pretty wicked around there as they had the salted fish in barrels outside the door along with fresh garlic olives and a bevy of Italian foods. But as bad as things smelled, they tasted great when mom cooked them up. Next to Coney Island in a tiny sliver of a store was Wong's Laundry. They were the only cleaners in Braddock that would clean and fold and bag shirts. It seems like they were there forever.

Braddock Avenue was awash with furniture stores and variety shops, Kwellers, Peoples, Ohringers, Kalabus, Levitt Brothers and Star Furniture. I find it ironic that the furniture store structures are some of the few still standing in Braddock today. I wonder why that is? We used to walk to Ohringers in the winter just to see the Christmas display with the animated Santa in the bay glass window that curved around the corner of 7th street and Braddock Avenue. If I remember correctly it had a Santa with elves tickling his feet with a feather. I swear it was the coolest building in Braddock and it seemed as tall as the Empire State Building when I was little. And remember the Christmas decorations? Every single pole on the Avenue had a Christmas bell or wreath, which lit up. Lights were strung across the Avenue on every pole. It was as holiday festive as anything could be.

But the granddaddy of all stores was the Famous. What a store! They had everything conceivable, all laid out on multi-level floors. They had clothes, toys and goods of all types. But my most vivid memory of the Famous was when you bought something and you paid, they packed your money up in a container and whisked it to a central office in these air tubes. On the return trip, your change would come back down in a rapid swoosh in the same tube in a little cylinder. It was the store of all stores and there was nothing you could not find there. My mind's eye can still see the awnings they had hanging out onto the sidewalk on Braddock Avenue and Library Street and the giant sized but simple lettering they had across the front of the store that simply said "THE FAMOUS." I still contend that when the Famous left it spelled the demise of the entire town and ushered in the period of decline, which has never ended.

Jewelry Shops? Braddock Avenue was home to a ton of them and many were graced with giant clocks in front. DeNardos, Schmidts, DeRoys, Brauns, Lincoffs and Pecks are a few of the stores that I recall. The clocks from DeNardo's and Schmidts were almost signature items in Braddock. They are landmarks that are no more.

But marquis stores were the exception. Braddock was more noted for their everyday shops. Is there a more vivid memory than that of the Ellis Hat shop? Remember the mannequin heads in the window all wearing different hats? How about my uncle Frank Tigano's variety store, F&C Discount on George Street; the skinny long store where we all bought our 45 RPM records? The store was a mainstay on Braddock Avenue for over 30 years. And Woolworth's (re-situated from right next to the bank) was the new high tech 5 and dime that replaced the old Capital Theater. I still remember they sold colored chicks, ducks and peeps in there at Easter time for a nickel and Marx dinosaur toys for 15 cents. You could buy a full meal at Ochs with all the trimmings for \$3. The Bluebird had hot dogs they served on a piece of folded toasted white bread that fit the hot dog like a baby in cradle. And they were simply awesome. Chick-N-Trim sold fresh BBQ chickens and Stambolis would sell them to you freshly slaughtered (Ugh!). Workingman's store sold Khaki's, the blue jeans of that era, and they also sold Chuck Taylor tennis shoes while Solomon's was for the dapper. My, how times have changed.

My parents always told me about the old Capital Theater (Times) that was located where Woolworth's was when I was growing up, but I only knew it from down on Braddock Avenue by George Street. It was a second movie show to go see. It was much smaller and moodier than the Paramount, but they always had great movie posters hanging behind the glass display cases and they played more second run "B" movies which, for a youngster, were the "in" movies. We saw "Dinosaurus" there and "Journey to the Center of the Earth"...and many Disney Films. I remember seeing Snow White there with my cousin Frank, who actually stayed to watch all 6 showings in one day. Aunt Josephine was panic riddled wondering where he was. There was a watch shop next to the theater on one side if I recall correctly. I can't remember its name, but I remember always looking at the watches in the window as we stood in line to get in. On the other side there was a storefront called the ABC Candy Shop, but I never recall it being open.

And drug stores.... how many could one town support? There was Sun, Rexall, Physicians Pharmacy, Thrift, Hollanders, Fetchko's East End, Millers and probably more than a few others I have forgotten. Likewise, there were shoe stores galore; Books, S&S, Craigs, Hilsmans, D.Ponsi, Forsythe, and Kramers.

Braddock had whatever you wanted, whenever you wanted it. There was business, industry, food, shopping and restaurants. It was the be all and end all and the greatest town in the world in that era. People came from hours away just to shop there, just to be there, just to be part of the Braddock experience. There was Pearlys, Jack n' Jill, Belle Shop, Star Upholstery, The Mill Shop, S&M Krause, Carltons, Tamers, Bernies, House of Cards, Stanley Studios, Sachs, Bluebird, Sunset, S&M Krause, Jaisons, Fashion Hosiery, Standard Sportwear, Sachs, Grinber's, Fashion Spear, J.C. Penney, Isaly's and their skyscraper cones, Solomons Men's Shop, Carltons, Comet News, Brandywine, Chick n' Trim, T&J Pizza, Lucarelli's, Ann's Pizza, Joe Pirozzi Hair shop, Mike's Barber Shop, Mike Tomaine's shoe repair on 6th Street, Nick Pasquales on Verona, M. Degrano Tailors on 6th, Gambinos Cleaners on Corey.

We used to walk to Hamilton School behind Maple Way where Gambino's was located. The challenge was to make it through the alley without getting drenched by the swooshing steam coming out of the Gambino steam pipes in the alley. Shorty's shoeshine shop was on 6<sup>th</sup> located in Dewey's Barber Shop. Was there anyone in Braddock who didn't know Shorty? Remember Tommy Hart Dance Studios located up from the Library? And let's not forget Carl's Corner Tavern (known to locals as Hammermeisters), The 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue Tavern and Nills and Guentert's Bakeries. Carl's had gigantic fish sandwiches and the Tavern had the best Rueben sandwiches in the universe. Do you recall Guentert's Bakery had chocolate glazed raised donuts? I have never seen them since. Likewise marshmallow cream filled donuts where the cream oozed out of the edge and they rolled the creamy edge in crushed almonds. It was pure bliss. I could go on and on and on and on.

I went to Hamilton School on Braddock Avenue between Corey and 5th. To this day, I can see that giant school bell they had situated at the top of the steps when you entered the building. I vividly remember crying my eyes out when mom left me there on the first day of kindergarten in 1958, but then going home in a joyous mood after having discovered dozens of new friends. But, my most memorable memory is not school related, but rather those 7 glorious days in October of 1960 when we didn't have to have class but all got hoarded into the auditorium to watch the World Series. Yes, they let us watch baseball while in school. Could life be better than that? I recall watching game 7 in a trance... and then the bell rang to let us out of school and it was only the 9th inning. It was probably the only time in our lives we wanted to stay in school. But we had to go and I had to run home to see the end of the game, but I didn't make it in time. Halfway up our steps I heard the roar. There was noise coming from every house on the street. I hurried in the house to see my dad hugging my mom and a smile that big I had never seen before from my dad. My mom was crying in joy. They told me Maz hit a home run to win the game and I immediately began to hear the uproar swelling out on Moody Street. We all ran outside and every single member of every house was on the street. It was like a New Year's Eve block party on a cool October afternoon. People were blowing horns just like New Years, they were celebrating, hollering, hugging and whooping it up and I really didn't know what to think. I just knew it was a special time and it was meant to be enjoyed. It was a day I'll never forget. It's hard to believe how big and important baseball was in those days, and to this day, I get teary eyed every time I think of it.

I forget the exact year, but I also vividly remember having to go to the high school to get our polio sugar cubes. God bless Jonas Salk. He saved us all such anxiety. It was a big thing and the entire town had to go in alphabetical order. I don't know how they arranged it, but I remember

for night upon night there was a stream of people going into and out of the school.

St Mary of Mt. Carmel Church would have an annual bazaar in the summer on the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and Lillie. It was one week of nothing but fun and games. My cousins and I would go nightly. We played every game there until we were broke. We rode the Ferris Wheel hundreds of times, played bingo and ring toss, and I'll never forget that game where you had to push the baseball bat past the pop bottle and knock the bottle down with the come back swing of the bat. It seemed impossible, but the guy who ran the booth could do it every single time. But we never saw a soul win. Never!!! We swore it was rigged somehow, but couldn't prove it. The bazaar was the highlight of every summer season.

Almost every side street in town had a family mom and pop store. My grandmother owned a penny candy store on the corner of 6th and Margaretta called DeMarco's Grocery. But to us it was Nunnies store. It was always crowded and we (the family) spent a good deal of our life there. My Aunt Tessie and Uncle John (Rabbits) DeNone with cousin Chi Chi and Buddy lived there with grandma. It was a gathering place for all my dad's brothers and sisters and most every holiday event was celebrated at Nunnies Store along with just about any friend of the family that wanted to join in the celebration. On Christmas Eve Uncle Patsy used to dress up as Santa Claus and Uncle Tony would parade us in to talk to him. Of course, back then, none of us realized it was Uncle Patsy. Christmas Eve was probably the biggest day of the year. It was a family reunion in Nunnie's house.

The store itself had the old glass penny candy counter and always had Lantz crackers and penny pretzel rods in tubs on top of the case. Inside were Mary Jane's, cherry balls, licorice records, and any candy bar or treat you could desire. She sold fresh cut lunch meats, giant fresh pickles that were housed in the glass jar on the counter, breads, canned goods, snow balls and dozens of different snack cakes and potato chips: Irwin, Wise and Snyders. It was an all in one stop and every regular that bought there had credit. And the soda pop!!!! It was an old fashioned water cooler that kept the water icy ice cold and the pop bottles just sat in the cold water and chilled like nothing you can get today. My dad would often take me to Bolners, Silbermans or Potter McCune to get the wholesale goods to stock the store. The wholesale houses always smelled like bubble gum. It was intoxicating. As my rewards for helping dad do the order, I could get an entire box of baseball cards there for .75 cents. That was the treat of the century for an 8 year old boy and well worth the work of helping dad. I would be the envy of the neighborhood and only my closet friends were allowed to help me open up the packs of cards. Nunnie's store seemed like such an expansive place in those days, and she sold so many different things. When they tore it down in 1978 we all wondered how so much was located in such a small space.

Behind Nunnie's store on Margaretta was Sacramento's Luncheonette. We called it Sachys. It was simply a house and they converted the kitchen into a small sandwich shop. But they had the best fish sandwiches I have ever tasted... and hot sausage to die for. It seemed every street had its own mom and pop store and their own food place. I'm not exaggerating.

And life, for the most part, was exuberant.

I recall my very first two friends when little Victor and Nelson. They moved away when I was around age 6, but they were quickly replaced by members of the Moody Street gang. Who can forget the Moody street gang? They were my life's blood, my playing partners and our baseball

and football teams. Besides my cousin Frank (known to family and closet pals as Hoot), there was also my cousin Rocky and the three of us were inseparable. We did almost everything together and we had a bevy of Moody Street friends; Freddy Singer, Richie Siciliano, Eddie Trasoline, Denny Miller, Danny Coleman, Howie and Kenny Rothrauff, Billy Oskin, Bobby and Johnny Ruffalo, Jimmy Morvay, Timmy Wackowski, the Cole Brothers, and so many others. Jimmy Morvay could really play baseball. I always thought he was going to make it to the pros and Eddie Trasoline could throw a football like very few! In later years we recruited Moses White and Jimmy Rawls. We spent most of our childhood together in some way, shape or form....but mostly playing sports of some sort. We played baseball almost 24/7 at E.T. and when we weren't on the ball field we were watching baseball in some way or listening to Bob Prince and the Pirates on our transistor radios. We watched and played Little League, Pony League and softball at E.T. field. St Mary's Mt. Carmel softball team played there, as did Willie's Pool Hall team from 9th Street.

If we weren't playing organized ball, pick up or watching baseball we were fantasizing at Braddock's battlefield, playing war stuff and looking for buried treasures. You could actually find them in those days; relics of the battle itself like arrowheads, shells and varied trinkets from the era. We played Release the Den, British Bulldog, Stretch, and 7 red bricks and when they got tired, we made up our own games like off-the-wall baseball, rundown, and Funget football. We had our own real football team and ran our own plays patterned after Geneva College where my cousin Joe "Buddy" DeNone was the star quarterback and our idol. Our home field was the Post Office Parking Lot. And we actually played teams from other streets like Center Street and John Street and Camp Avenue. Our team was the Moody Street Bombers and any team that came to our field not only had to play football, but also had to meet the ultimate challenge of walking around the post office facade on the thin 3-inch ledge, which circled the entire building 6-foot off the ground. It was like a high wire act as there was really nothing to grasp onto as the post office wall was glass smooth. We were only 6-feet up, but it seemed like miles down if you fell. We may have lost our share of football games, but we never lost the game of walking the post office ledge. We all mastered it. If you conquered the wall you could take the ultimate challenge of courage of climbing up to the post office roof. That was a feat very few could manage but Johnny Ruffalo did it routinely. He could climb like Spiderman. Once every two weeks or so we'd send him up there to get the many wiffle balls we'd hit onto the roof when playing baseball in the post office lot. He'd get up there and throw down sometimes 25-30 balls at a time and we'd start the entire process all over.

Many an hour and many a day were spent wasting time on my front porch at 24 Moody Street. Sometimes, we would play board games, flip trading cards or talk baseball for hours on end. But the most memorable of porch times was when my dad would come and sit with us all and tell stories of the war, of his time in Boot Camp, and his hair-raising days in combat during the Battle of the Bulge. The conversation was riveting, and sometimes humorous, and often times frightening. I will never forget looking into the faces of my friends as my dad spoke, seeing how their eyes went buggy and their faces went ashen, and how they were entranced by dad's every word-- totally silenced by the stories of war and all it entailed. It was probably the only times that the voices of my raucous playgroup were silenced.

The huckster would come daily and sell fresh fruit and vegetables on the street. Another guy named Frank would ride around in this big panel truck and the sides would open up to reveal an entire store embedded in his truck. Johnny Pop Bottle would come occasionally, as would the

"rag" man. We had an ice ball man, and Cook's Coffee Company would deliver food and beverages to your door on demand. The Goodie Bar man came two and sometimes three times a day. I remember they sold sherbet ice cream bars and as a treat, below the sherbet when you were done licking was a baseball player toy. What a gimmick!!! Of course we had to collect all 9 nine different player poses so we made sure we saved all of our extra money for that Goodie Bar.

And the fires! Man, the fires. The Fire station itself burned down. Who can forget that? Then Alexander's and John Groves and the gigantic paper company which threatened the very existence of Braddock. It was an enormous blaze. Then later on in life, St. Thomas Church burned down. How tragic!

Eastland Mall opened in 1964, and sadly, the floodgates of abandonment were opened. J.C. Penney was first to go and soon almost every viable business in Braddock followed. By 1970 Braddock was unbelievably in total disarray and glorious history of Braddock soon ended. It all ended so abruptly.

Eastland started the decline, then the expansion of business to Monroeville, and racial tension spelled a new era. Most every store from that era left, friends moved and houses became empty. I graduated from Braddock High as part of the very last class before the dreaded merger in 1970.

What happened? How could this nirvana disappear so quickly? The steel industry was faltering and with stores closing, Braddock was soon a shell of its former self. I always wondered what would have happened if only a few of the highlight businesses would have stayed the course and set an example of dedication and loyalty. What if the town itself pumped some money back into the old buildings to revitalize them and attract businesses? What if those that prospered by Braddock's boom stayed to persevere and survive the drought to repay the favor of their good fortune and wealth? But none did. None.

By 1966 the collapse was a runaway train. By 1970 the train had crashed. New stores came in and out but none were of the quality of its predecessors and they inherited buildings in dire need of repair and upgrade. Most were bargain markets or used clothes stores. Edifices aged and nothing was done for upkeep. Some were boarded, then more and more, like dominos. Many were eventually demolished due to negligence and decay.

Following the business decline, Braddock's residents and most of its native population moved out into the suburbs. I married in 1974 and moved to West Mifflin while others flocked away in droves. It was like a migration. But mom and dad persevered, so my connection to my hometown never wavered. Population probably peaked in 1960-61 at about 22,000. Today it's barely 2000. It's sad. It's heart breaking. It's depressing. It is incomprehensible to think back how it all changed in 10 short years. But I like to remember Braddock for what it was... it was my youth, my life and to this day, my hometown. It has framed what I am today and I swell with pride when talking about it. I shall never forget what it was, because in essence, it was me.