

GROWING UP ON THE NORTH SIDE,
A CONVERSATION WITH MATTHEW J. DIRISIO, JR.
First of three columns

By the turn of the 20th century, Fairport village had become home to a number of families whose members had emigrated from Italy. Between 1890 and 1910 approximately 9 million people arrived on American shores seeking new opportunities in a new land. Many, if not most, of them came from southern and eastern Europe. The DiRisio family came from the area of Abruzzi in Italy and settled on Railroad Street in the village of Fairport, joining other Italian families already here. Joseph (Matthew's paternal grandfather) came in 1909, and married Jenny Polito shortly after his arrival. Jenny, born in the United States in 1896, was 13 years old at the time of her arranged marriage.

Joseph and Jenny had 10 children, 7 boys and 3 girls. Sadly, Jenny died at age 29 during the birth of her last son, John. Albert (Hawk), Anthony (Dixie), and Charles, salutatorian of the Class of 1935, graduated from Fairport High School. Matthew and Marco finished 8th grade and went to work in East Rochester's car shops. Matthew worked for 51 years, never missing a day of work. He worked at a time when there were no sick days and no benefits – a missed day resulted in lost pay – and was grateful to have the job. Brother Floyd was an East Rochester cop and Anthony worked at Kodak. John, the only brother to leave the area, settled in New Mexico and was on the staff of the Manhattan Project. Daughter Virginia did factory work at Rochester Products, Josephine (Pip) and her husband, James Porta, owned the “Par 3 Bar and Grill” on Route 31. Sarah and Tito Tiberio had five children. Her grandson Bill is known as Fairport High School's “Music Man.” Six of the sons (but not Matthew) fought in World War II. Of the 10 siblings, Anthony, John, and Pip are still living.

Joseph and Jenny's oldest son Matthew and his wife Antoinette Rose had two sons: Matthew and Larry. The boys grew up on Railroad and Frank Streets where they developed a strong sense of family and community. Known by all the neighbors, they had a sense of belonging wherever they went. While discrimination was very real, it also fostered an intense desire to do well and succeed. Everyone was expected to work hard and to volunteer in the community. The boys had jobs by the time they were 10 or 11, usually paper routes. Young Matthew later worked at Steffen's Greenhouse making \$1 per hour (double what full-time African-American workers were making – a stark learning experience.) Antoinette worked at The American Can Company and Qualitrol until she retired. Matthew Sr. and his brother Marco both worked in the East Rochester car shops from the time they were 14 years old.

The second installment of the conversation will appear in next week's *Post*.