

Open House *Journal*

Telling Their Story

I set out to create an exhibit about everyone who had ever lived at 470 Hopkins Street—generations of German, Italian, and Hmong residents—but the first inkling I got of the treasure trove I’d found came in a low-slung cinderblock community center on St. Paul’s East Side, six blocks up the hill from the house. Since 1908, Merrick Community Services (originally, the Christ Child Community Center) has been, at various locations, a gathering point for residents of the Railroad Island neighborhood that surrounds 470 Hopkins. Merrick’s current director, Donna Legato Hirte, spent countless hours as a child visiting her grandmother in the neighborhood, so she is well familiar with the area’s Italian period. I’d read to her the names of people who, according to city directories, had lived in the Hopkins Street house in the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s: Annunziata, Tinucci, Cocchiarella, D’Aloia, Frascone. “Oh, Michelina Frascone!” she interjected. “I see her every week!” She invited me to meet a group of Italian women who gather on Tuesdays at the center to sew and, mostly, chat.

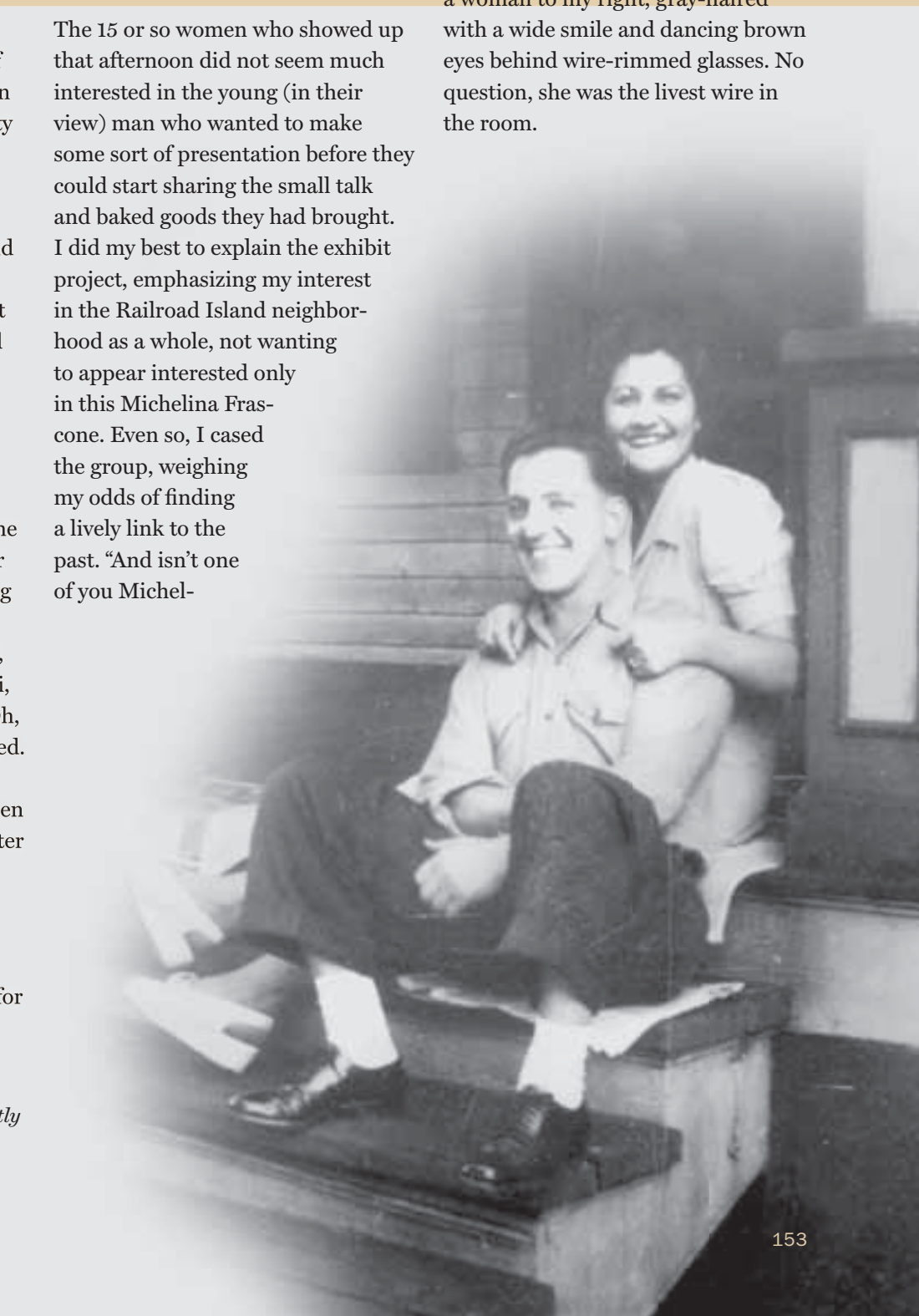
By the spring of 2001 when associate exhibits developer Ayesha Shariff and I visited, the Handi-Crafters Group had been meeting for more than 60 years, and the group contained some charter members.

Michelina and Russell Frascone, recently married, on the steps of 470 Hopkins Street, 1943

BENJAMIN FILENE

The 15 or so women who showed up that afternoon did not seem much interested in the young (in their view) man who wanted to make some sort of presentation before they could start sharing the small talk and baked goods they had brought. I did my best to explain the exhibit project, emphasizing my interest in the Railroad Island neighborhood as a whole, not wanting to appear interested only in this Michelina Frascone. Even so, I cased the group, weighing my odds of finding a lively link to the past. “And isn’t one of you Michel-

ina Frascone?” I ventured at last. “I’m Michelina Frascone!” rang out a woman to my right, gray-haired with a wide smile and dancing brown eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses. No question, she was the livest wire in the room.





Michelina and Russell Frascone, 2002

THERE FOLLOWED A RUSH of exclamations as Michelina and the group identified people in the 1925 photo of 470 Hopkins I had brought. We soon arranged a follow-up meeting, and within a week I was sitting at Michelina's kitchen table with her husband, brother, sister-in-law, and daughter. All were friendly and charismatic, but without a doubt the leader of the clan is Michelina. Like an Italian grandmother cooked up by Central Casting, she seems pulled from another era. Although she came to America 70 years before, at age 11 ("on George Washington's birthday," she emphasizes), her Italian accent remains strong. She is ebullient, eager to feed, and talks—recounts—nonstop. At the table, she tells well-burnished family tales and cues others to tell nuggets they have retained claim to over the years. At one point, she prompts her husband, Russell: "I want my husband to tell you the story of the Mafia in the neighborhood. He remembers this story. It was the Fourth of July," she begins for him. Russell, pleased, takes center stage for the moment: "Years ago, it was on the Fourth of July night. My sister lived on the corner of Edgerton and Beaumont." Immediately, Michelina interrupts: "Russell, I don't want to contradict you, but weren't you going over to your sister's house?"

"No, we were there."

"Oh, you were there. You were at your sister's house. OK." And so the storytelling goes, zigzagging through the tale of a murder that took place in an alley down the street from 470 Hopkins in 1928 or so—several years before Michelina, for one, arrived in this country. "In between the duplex and this Jenó's Café was a space only about that wide that separated them. . . . He was leaning his chair back like this," Russell demonstrates, "between the two openings there and, all of a sudden, someone came along and shot his head off. He was sprawled on the sidewalk and blood all around. Mrs. DeFeo ran and she jumped on top of that person thinking it was her husband. It wasn't!" Much laughter all around. "So then, this Peter Feso . . . What did you call him at that time?" Russell looks around the table for help, but finding none charges on: "He went ahead and he picked up the brains and put it back down."

"It was the Fourth of July," Michelina adds with finality, "so nobody realized that this shooting was for real"—as if this statement somehow clarifies all that has preceded it.

What is the point of this ghoulish tale? Hard to say. Are the Frascones authenticating their Italian-ness for

me by conjuring up a scene straight from *The Godfather*? It doesn't feel that way, and I'm sure they would have a good laugh at the notion. More, the point seems to be the storytelling itself—the sharing of a memory or, for most of the people around the table, the memory of someone else's memory from another such story-swapping session when the same tale was dusted off.

I SIT AT THE FRASCONI kitchen table, feeling like my own head is spinning down a narrow alley, and let story after story fly by, grasping what I can. What begins to emerge from the tales that Michelina and her family tell is a sense of Railroad Island as a self-contained Italian village. "At that time," says Russell with pride, "the East Side was a little Italy." "Oh, yes," echoes Michelina. "The name was that," says Russell. St. Paul a Little Italy? New York, certainly; Chicago, OK; but St. Paul? Indeed, in the early decades of the twentieth century, the vast majority of people in the neighborhood, including Michelina, her parents, and Russell's, hailed from the Benevento region of Italy, near Naples. Most, like Michelina's father, came to work for

470 Hopkins Street in about 1925, when it was a duplex



the railroad, taking the lowest-paying jobs in the yard: track repairman, car cleaner, section hand, gandy dancer. To make do they relied, by necessity and habit, on each other. In a period when they couldn't afford a garden hose—"It would all go out by buckets," recalls Michelina's brother, Jerry D'Aloia—neighborhood residents shared what they grew in their backyard gardens. "It was as good a community as you can get with people helping each other," Michelina recalls. Indeed, community resourcefulness, trains, and food are at the core of most of the Frascone stories I hear that morning, including:

The Wine Press

Michelina: My uncle and my father made a wine press [in the basement]. . . . They used to make over 200 gallons of wine a year.

Jerry: That press was again as big as this table. You could throw three or four barrels of grapes in there at one time.

Russell: All cement.

Jerry: And railroad ties for the bases.

Russell: Railroad ties coming up and the press coming down.

Jerry: They used ten-ton house jacks to squeeze the grapes out. It was really something.

The Isinglass Stove

Jerry: That was a big old potbelly stove and it sat right in the . . . center of the house. . . . Wood was cheap because we would burn railroad ties. My dad was a tough old guy. He would come home with a block of ice on one day on his shoulder for the refrigerator, the icebox. It would be about maybe a 25-, 30-pound, maybe a 40-pound block of ice. On the opposite days, he'd come home with a railroad tie on his shoulder.



Dominick D'Aloia (Michelina's father) dressed for work on the railroad, 1930s

The Wedding Chickens

Jerry: During World War II, you know, meat was rationed. I was selling papers downtown and right across from the post office, there was a poultry house. . . . [Michelina] was getting married and we were trying to figure out how we were going to feed the people for the wedding. . . . I walked by there and I see those chicks. . . . I think I bought 150. A lot of them died. We took the chicks home and we had them in a big old cardboard box . . . in the basement. . . . Going down Seventh Street, there was a flourmill there. They would unload boxcars and there was always grain on the ground. . . . After I sold papers, I'd go down there . . . I had a sack of papers and I'd fill it up with grain, as much as I could gather and we fed the chicks. . . . They were getting big, so . . . Russell and I . . . built a chicken coop out of old refrigerator doors that he got from the railroad.

. . . The day before the wedding, we had a big process where we butchered all the chickens. . . . We took all these chickens in pots and pans, all we could get our hands on. We took them down there and put them in the icehouse until the next morning so they could be chilled.

The next day, we got up early in the morning. . . . We had pots and pans from all over the neighborhood to cook all these chickens then, see? In the meantime, I went over and started a good fire in Lena Fellace's garage, which is two houses down, a big outdoor oven in the garage, outside oven, a brick oven. . . . Put the chickens in there and then we went to the wedding. . . . We had enough to feed the whole wedding party, all the family, and all the friends and relatives that were invited to the wedding.

THE WINE PRESS, the stove, the chickens—they tell it all with such gusto and glee. But a sense of loss comes through, as well. The family endured a trauma in 1945 when Michelina's uncle Filomeno Cocchiarella, a track repairman who lived on the other side of the duplex from Michelina and Russell, was struck by a train and killed during a Thanksgiving-night snowstorm: "He was called to go to work," Michelina recalls. "I just begged him not to go. . . . Well, he insisted. He thought he had to go when he was called. . . . He was sideswiped from the train. There was not a sore on him, but he was unconscious. . . . He lasted about a week or so."

Michelina's parents died two years apart in the late 1940s, her mother of cancer, her dear father of a stroke. One day I visit the Frascones with some copies of surveys taken by Minnesota's nefarious Commission of



*Filomeno and Rose Cocchiarella,
about 1925*

Public Safety during World War I. In a frenzied effort to root out potential “subversives,” the commission registered all foreign-born residents and assessed their loyalty to America. Although forms from several of Michelina’s relatives appear, what she wants most of all is record of her father, who does not show up. “My father,” she exclaims. “Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh.”

The Frascones also coped with feelings of loss when they moved out of the Hopkins Street house. Drawn by the allure of a new building with more space, they joined the big Italian migration from Railroad Island in the 1950s, moving to the suburb of Hazel Park in 1957. Michelina says quite frankly that she fell apart. It was only four miles from Hopkins Street, and she and her brother, Jerry, built houses side-by-side. Yet to Michelina it felt like she had left behind everything she had known.

Michelina: I almost had a nervous breakdown.

Russell: She almost had a heart attack.

Michelina: A nervous breakdown, for sure. . . . Moving up here, I thought you’d have to put on, you know, the dog and I didn’t have any dogs to put on. . . . I thought I had to [keep] up with the people, that these people up here were more wealthier than I was and I was a poor lady. . . . The kids used to come home from school and they’d . . . ask Russell how I was. . . . “Oh, she’s the same.” I felt sorry for those kids. . . . Then, I made up my mind. “Oh, what the heck? I’ve got to live in that house. I’ll do whatever I can with it.” That’s it. I got out of it. But, you go through transitions, you know?

Even though the Frascones left the neighborhood almost 50 years ago, they lament some of the changes it has undergone. In 1998 the Catholic church, citing declining enrollment, abandoned the neighborhood’s St. Ambrose Church, moving the parish to the suburb of Woodbury. The Frascones no longer attended St. Ambrose, but the move still rankles them:

Michelina: We built this new church. . . . The whole neighborhood contributed and nobody was that rich at the time, you know. Now, when they sold it, it hurt a lot of us people to think that that brand new church—it’s only 45 years old—was sold with air conditioning and everything and the money [went] to the rich people.

Jerry: There was a fellow there by the name of Pangell. He had won a \$35,000 home and he donated the whole \$35,000 to the church to build a new church. He worked on the railroad too.

Michelina: Yes, he worked with Papa.

The Frascones have lost people; they have lost buildings. A centrifugal force has dissipated their neighbor-

hood, a fact that they are not fully willing to register. On several occasions Michelina, Russell, and Jerry mention the wine press. They’ve been meaning to go down to Hopkins Street, they say, to see if it’s still there—which, of course, it isn’t; which, of course, at some level, they well know. Even 200-pound cement structures are no match for the last half-century of change 470 Hopkins has seen.

AND YET, HAS THE Frascones’ world crumbled? I think of the centrifugal forces at work in my own life. As a public historian, I’ve become essentially rootless: raised in North Carolina and educated in New England, I followed jobs to Wisconsin and now Minnesota, where my wife and I have no family within a thousand miles. Michelina and her brother still live within five minutes of each other. In the course of this exhibit project, I’ve met several retiree groups of Railroad Islanders: 80-year-old women who have known each other for 75 years and have weekly lunches together; retired brewery workers who meet monthly for breakfast. They gather eagerly around old copies of the *Chatterbox*, the neigh-



470 Hopkins Street in 2002, now a triplex

neighborhood newspaper issued by homefronters during World War II, and pick out pictures of themselves and their buddies, most of whom are still in the room and still their buddies. More than most communities I have encountered, these Railroad Islanders are themselves in the memory-making business. People come to reunion lunches with scrapbooks of old photos and clippings, maps on which they mark who lived in which house, and stories, stories, stories. Few of these people spend much time in the neighborhood itself and almost none live there, but when they are together it is as if they never left.

SEVERAL MONTHS AFTER my initial meeting with Michelina, I see an ad for St. Paul's annual Festival of Nations. I recall Michelina saying that she has spearheaded its Italian programming for decades. The festival dates to the 1930s and feels just as dated in its "It's a small world" approach to ethnicity. People come in their "traditional" dress and sample each others' deep-fried food. Kids can have "passports" stamped and get their names written in foreign languages.

To touch base with Michelina again, I decide to attend for the first time, bringing my daughter Eliza, age six. This year the festival is held in the RiverCentre convention complex that abuts St. Paul's new downtown hockey stadium. All of two miles from Railroad Island, I'm struck by the feeling that Michelina's Italian village has been repackaged for consumption in a place that could be anywhere in the world but feels like nowhere in particular. Eliza and I almost immediately get lost in the sea of souvenirs and snacks. Gradually, though, I have to let my



Jerry D'Aloia on Hopkins Street, early 1950s

ironic distance on the event slip. Eliza loves it, eagerly accumulating passport stamps, oohing and ahing at a display of dolls from around the world. Eventually we get to the dance program, where a Czech-American troupe is finishing a traditional number. I spy Michelina. She's sitting in a chair in a darkened area to the side of the stage, wearing a bright red skirt and an elaborately embroidered white shirt. I take Eliza by the hand and go over to greet her. I touch her on the shoulder to say hello, but immediately realize I have woken her up. She comes to quickly. "Oh, Benjamin! I was just drifting off there." Seeing Eliza, she lights up: "And who is this?" I introduce and Eliza shyly waves. As the young Italian dancers bound onstage, Michelina reaches out and gives her a hug.

THE FRASCONES AND their friends may feel they have lost their neighborhood, but I am struck by what they have held onto. Their memories are living ones—tales that can be told and retold, often with the main characters in the room to add details. Their sense of neighborhood has

transcended its geographic roots and become a moveable feast: Railroad Island takes shape when the Railroad Islanders show up, whether at the Merrick Center or the Old Country Buffet. Lastly, their sense of community has remained surprisingly elastic: they'll make room for newcomers at the table. I'll never be Italian; I'll never be a Railroad Islander, an East Sider, or even, likely, a real Minnesotan. But as I watch Michelina hug my daughter, I am suddenly overwhelmed by the generosity of what the Frascones have offered me—the chance, in my own halting way, to join them as a family storyteller. □

Benjamin Filene is senior exhibit developer at the Minnesota Historical Society. This is the third in a series of essays about the exhibit Open House, which will open at the Minnesota History Center in January 2006.

The photo on p. 154 (bottom) is in MHS collections; p. 154 (top) is by the author; p. 153, 155, 156 (top) and 157 are courtesy Michelina and Russell Frascone; p. 156 (bottom) is by Eric Mortenson/MHS.



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