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Percoco, Dan, Oral history interview conducted by **Michelle Freitas, Spring, 2009**,
2009 East Cambridge Childhoods Oral History Project, Cambridge Historical Society



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Dan Percoco, Oral history interview conducted by **Michelle Freitas, Spring, 2009**, 2009 East Cambridge Childhoods Oral History Project; Cambridge Historical Society.

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Oral History Interview with **Dan Percoco**

2009 East Cambridge Childhoods Oral History Project

Interview conducted by Michelle Freitas in **Spring, 2009**

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MF: Were you born here?

DP: I was born at the Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge on September 10, 1942. And when I first came out of the hospital I moved over to Ninth Street, which is now called Fulkerson Street. Both my mom and my dad were born here also in Cambridge. So my grandparents came from Italy. When they moved from Italy their first residence was here in East Cambridge. So my roots are here all my life. I'm going to be 67 years old. So I've lived here for all 66 years and plus.

So your whole family grew up here in East Cambridge then.

My parents also grew up here in East Cambridge. My dad's family for a while lived in Lexington. Then they took the land what's called eminent domain and they put Route 2. So the family came back to East Cambridge. At the time my grandmother was a widow. She couldn't support her family by staying in Lexington. She got herself a business in East Cambridge. It was a grocery store. It was called Percoco. When I was growing up, on every corner of the street there were grocery stores. We didn't have the Shaw's supermarket in those days. We did have a store called the First National, which was located on Cambridge Street. It was a big store but it was not like these superstores that we have today.

How was your grandmother's store like?

My grandmother sold all kinds of things like canned goods and pasta and cigarettes and toiletries.

Did you spend a lot of time in the store growing up?

Actually my dad opened up a store for his brother. My dad was a musician. He taught music. My dad helped his brother establish a business. My dad was also in real estate. So he did a lot. I was 7 years old when I moved here to Thorndike Street. I have been living on the street ever since. When I got married I did not want to leave the street so I bought a house on the same street. I didn't even go in it because I just wanted to live on Thorndike Street. I didn't care what it looked like. Like I said my roots are here.

Do you have any siblings?

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Well I had a sister. She passed away last year. She also grew up in East Cambridge. Her family is still here in East Cambridge. They live just a block away. There is something very interesting about my life. When I was growing up my mother's two sisters married my father's two brothers. All my family lived on this very same street including my mother's parents and my father's parents.

What did the neighborhood look like when you were growing up?

It doesn't look like it does now because it certainly feels like I moved to another location. Across the street [from the O'Connell library] was a grammar school and a high school and there was a parochial school, the Sacred Heart School. In those days we did not take a bus to school, we walked. All the schools were zoned. Because I lived at 118 Thorndike Street I was zoned to go to the Putnam School, which is now an elderly home. Then the people on this block [of the O'Connell library] were zoned for the Thorndike School, which is now called the Kennedy/Longfellow School. Across the street was the Sacred Heart School where I went for religious study. When I was growing up we used to have grades K-8. Because I went to the Putnam School on Thursdays in the morning all the boys would go to the Thorndike School where we would take woodworking. All the girls would go to the Thorndike school and take cooking. Then in the afternoon we would go from the public school to the parochial school for religious education. We didn't have Sunday school like today.

Do you have any memories of the Putnam school like favorite subjects or favorite teachers?

My favorite teacher was in the 6th grade. Her name was Anne Marie Rinn. I remember her vividly. She was so pretty. She used to dress like my mother. Whatever dress mom had, she would have the same dress. My favorite subject I think was history and geography. I say that because I ended up working for an airline. I was always interested in travel. My fondest memories were in the 2nd grade. Every morning my teacher, Francis Curry, would ask what we did the previous night. At the time my grandmother used to live in Somerville. I remember my mother after school would take us to see my grandmother. We would walk all the way to Somerville to visit her. It was from here all the way up to the Somerville High School. Down at the end of the street here there was a barn. It was a stable with horses. It was a big barn; it took up the whole block.

Besides visiting your grandmother, what else did you do after school?

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After school all my cousins would be at my grandmother's. We would play in her yard. She had a garden of tomatoes. We used to take the tomatoes and throw them in a neighbor's yard. He would get mad at my grandfather for letting us throw tomatoes into his yard.

Did you play any sports?

I was so shy growing up. No I did not play sports. I belonged to the Boys Scouts Troop 99, which was located down where the Boston Woven Hose used to be. The whole area has changed. I remember Sixth Street as being one long street. There was a bridge for this area had water that is now filled in. The kids used to go swimming there in the summertime.

Do you remember any other factories?

I remember Budweiser Beer being down here with the Clydesdale horses. On Binney St there was Carr Fastener factory. There was Squire's. They would kill the pigs. Then on Cambridge Street there was a live poultry place where we would buy our chickens and eggs. They would kill the chickens in front of us. We would buy our butter and coffee at a place called Kennedy's. It had a nice aroma when you walked in. There were bakeries around here. When I was growing up there were a lot of Italian bakeries and pastry shops but now there is now none here. We used to go to different shops to get what we needed. I remember on the corner of Fifth and Cambridge there was a vegetable store. At Christmas time, he used to sell Christmas trees outside. In those days we would buy our Christmas trees like two days before Christmas. We would set it up Christmas Eve. I remember walking to the store with my mother and we would carry the Christmas tree home. The tree cost about a \$1. I remember a bag of potato chips was 5 cents, 5 cents for a pickle. We had penny candy in those days; 10 cents for an ice cream. I remember the movie theaters such as the Lechmere theater, the Inman Square theater, the Harvard Square theater. My mother would give me a dollar. I would take the bus for a nickel into Harvard Square with my friends, go to the movie, go for Chinese food, and come home and still have some change left.

When you had all those Italian stores, was there more of a community?

There were a lot of Italians and Irish. Sacred Heart has always been my parish, even though I'm of Italian descent. Sacred Heart was Irish. The Italian church was on Cambridge Street. It's still there but it

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may close once the priest is gone. We used to a Polish church on Otis Street and that's gone. There was a Lithuanian church. Down by the King Open School there was St. Patrick's church. There were a lot of churches in those days. A lot more people went to church in those days. On Sundays I remember hearing all the bells from all the churches, which you don't hear anymore. I see a big difference in my life. I went to Sacred Heart because my father played the organ and was good friends with the priest. My mother and father were never like the traditional Italian people. They were very Americanized. A lot of people think I'm Irish because I go to Sacred Heart. I volunteer my time there. I've been teaching CCD there for thirty years. For the past 4-5 years, I've been the cantor for children's mass.

Did you help out at your uncle and father's store?

I was 8-9 years old and I was selling penny candy. What was popular back then was this popcorn square with a chocolate mint. We used to squish the chocolate mint on top of the popcorn. It was delicious. We had the square walnuts and Baby Ruth. What you would pay for a nickel back then would be what you pay a dollar today. It was bigger back then than what you pay for a dollar today. The Squirrel Nut factory down the street and the Necco candy too. There was a tool and dye factory down on Binney Street closer to Third Street.

What was your first job?

My first job was down at Nantasket Beach [Hull, MA]. We used to spend our summers there. My mother's uncle owned an Italian restaurant called Angelo's Spaghetti House. My first job was selling hot dogs and hamburgers at a hot dog stand. It was located across from the beach. It was a fun job.

What other kinds of things did you do when there was no school?

Because the three sisters married the three brothers, I chummed around with all my cousins. We used to play card games. In those days, all the local kids played together. My four children growing up didn't know the kids in the neighborhood because they were bussed out to other schools. There used to be a prison down by the courthouse and we used to race our bikes down there. We would look under the gate and see all the prisoners' feet walking around the yard. We would play out in the street. We played hopscotch, tag, the color game, marbles, badminton, and stuff like that. In those days there weren't a lot of cars around. The streets were empty and when you did see a car, it was a big thing. I used to

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spend a lot of time at the [O'Connell] library. One side was the children's section. You stayed over there until 8th grade and you could not cross over to the adult section until you went to high school. I couldn't wait to cross over. When I had my children, I volunteered my time at the library. I would read for the children's hour. I spent a lot of time there. In those days it was open every night. We would do our homework there.

Growing up, did a lot of people move out of the neighborhood?

Quite a few people moved out of the neighborhood. I remember being in grammar school we were all like brothers and sisters. We were so close. That was the best thing about growing up around here because we all went to the same school. We all chummed around with each other after school. Today I meet every month with some of my high school friends. I went to Cambridge High and Latin.

In the area there is Thorndike School, Putnam School, Sacred Heart School, St. Hedwig School, St. Francis School. There are a lot of schools in the area. There are some rivalries, mostly with basketball, baseball, the sports.

Do you remember any more stores your family frequented?

The store that my dad had was on the corner of Fifth and Thorndike. He sold canned goods, ice cream, cold cuts, potato chips, and pickles. In those days the pickles were in this big barrel. The pickles were so big. I don't know why they are not grown like that anymore. He sold cigarettes. In those days you know we didn't have a charge card. My father would take the cartons from the cigarettes. He would break up the cartons and each person would have their name on a card. If they didn't have the money, he would "cuff" it. Say if you came into my father's store and you didn't have the money, I would write down your name, date, and the amount you owed. Then you would come in and pay your bill by the end of week. You could trust people years ago but you probably can't trust them as much today. Why I don't know. We never had locks on the doors. I remember growing up the houses didn't have private bathrooms. They were out in the hallway. It was shared by everyone. When I moved to Thorndike, it was like a castle since it had its own private bath. My mother and father fixed it up. That was a luxury in those days.

What are some of the best things you remember about your parents?

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My parents did a lot of things with us. They took us on vacation every year. We used to go to the White Mountains every year. They would take us to the circus, the ice capades. They were good to us.

Your grandparents were here as well.

Yes. I remember going to my grandfather's every day after school. I would play cards with him. My grandfather had a wooden leg. I would go over there in the morning and I would help him put on his wooden leg. I used to tell him to stay in bed until I got there. I was about 12 years old when my grandfather died. I thought I was going to die because I was with him every day. My grandmother was more like my mother to me than anything. She spoke English but it was more of a broken English. I can speak Italian because of my grandmother. I speak more Italian than my mother. Like I said, my mother was so Americanized. Out of like 25 cousins, I'm really the only one who can speak Italian.

Did you have any favorite places you liked to visit in the neighborhood?

I love the [O'Connell] library. There was a time they were going to close this library I attended meetings to save this place. I was very vocal to keep this place open. It worked. The director Susan Flannery at this library is awesome. She is one of the nicest people. All my children worked here.

Did your family or the community do anything for major holidays?

The church would run a little carnival here on Sixth Street. Every year the Italians celebrate St Cosmo and Damien. They still do that today every year in September. They make a big thing out of it here in East Cambridge. That was one of my favorite things growing up.

Did you have a first girlfriend?

My first girlfriend was Patricia Reed. It was in the 7th grade. My first date was to the Museum of Science. It was a grammar school thing.

Would you describe East Cambridge as a unique place to grow up in?

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Yes, very unique. It's changed a lot but there are a lot of remnants still left. What I mean by remnants is that there are still people like myself around the neighborhood. We're still here. I can name a lot of the families that have lived here all their lives.

When did the neighborhood start changing?

I was in the service from 1964-1967. After I got back, I noticed change. There were more Portuguese while the Irish and Italians moved out. I noticed a change in the 70's. I noticed a huge change when they put up the Galleria Mall. That changed the neighborhood totally. That used to Lechmere. And there was a casket company. Down on Landmark Boulevard there used to diners. It was so nice.

If it wasn't for people like you, do you think East Cambridge would have that sense of community?

I think East Cambridge is the way it is because of the expansion of MIT and Harvard. This is more of a student area. I used to go to Harvard Square all the times and go to the movies. Next door to the movies was Brigham's Ice Cream Parlor. Believe it or not, the Honk Kong is still there. We used to go there all the time. I remember going to the Honk Kong and getting egg rolls for a quarter and pork strips for a quarter.

Do you think the level of crime has changed?

Yes, immensely. We never had crime here. I blame the crime on the Galleria Mall. There are a lot of people who never had exposure to East Cambridge but now they come off the Green Line from Boston. Just like there is a tremendous change in Boston with Jordan Marsh gone, Filene's gone. I remember going to the rodeo and seeing Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, and all those famous people. We don't have rodeos anymore. They don't exist here in Massachusetts. It's so sad. I remember my parents at Christmas time taking us into Boston and going to the theater. There was a yearly trip to New York City to see Radio City Music Hall and the Rockettes. It was affordable in those days to take a family to do those things. You can't do that today. I have fond memories of things like that. I remember my parents taking me and my sister to New York for the day. Years ago I remember on Bunker Hill day there was a huge parade in Charlestown. We used to walk over the bridge, which is now called the Gilmore Bridge. It was called the Prison Point Bridge because there was a prison in that area. There were a lot of fruit and vegetable stores on Cambridge St. The food tasted better in those days.

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How do you think East Cambridge is different from other parts of Cambridge?

I think East Cambridge is unique compared to other parts of Cambridge. I think it's more of a community. There is more of a closeness. People might move out of East Cambridge but always come back to do things. I think the people of East Cambridge are special. When I go to church on Sundays, I still see people I knew as a kid. They don't live in Cambridge anymore. They bring their children back here to go to this church. I think they always come back because of the people of East Cambridge.

(2nd Recording)

When I was in high school, I was very active with the Red Cross. I was the president of the Red Cross. We used to attend our meetings at some of the houses that Harvard owned on Brattle St.

Our campus joined Harvard campus at the school we would always go to Harvard Sq and get an ice cream or a soda and hang around Harvard Sq. Today you can't hang around Harvard Sq and do things. It's not for young people anymore. It used to be years ago when I was a kid. It was more Cambridge people. It's now more of a tourist trap, an attraction.

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