



# Vince Raffeo:

## COLLEGEVILLE HISTORY THROUGH HIS EYES

BY JENNIFER HETRICK, CONTENT COORDINATOR

**Some people** might call 87-year-old Vince Raffeo, known to many locally simply as Uncle Vince, an accidental historian when it comes to the Collegeville area's evolution and how it's changed from the last century into this one.

While Vince has never been an official member of local historical societies, born in 1931, he's often seen as a valuable resource of walking facts.

"They've picked my brain throughout the years," Vince says.

In his lifetime, Vince played a part in owning a number of businesses as well as volunteering and supporting vital local nonprofits.

Because of this and due to his congenial personality and willingness to push positives forward in conversations and his time spent with others, in April 2018, he received the Marvin J. Lewis Community Service Award through the Perkiomen Valley Chamber of Commerce.

"'Everybody voted for you on the board,' they told me, after I said, 'You didn't have anybody else to give the award to?'" Vince notes with a laugh.

Vince grew up at 759 Sandy Street in Norristown near Plymouth Meeting.

"In first grade," Vince says, "I only spoke Italian."

"My parents came here from Sicily in Italy in 1910 on their honeymoon," he recalls. "We were all born here, me and my siblings."

His mother, Lena, and his father, Gus, were married by a Justice of the Peace in their home country; they were born in 1890 and 1887, respectively.

Sponsored by a man named Mr. Laura in helping them to have work, they labored as farmers by day, but Gus also served as a steel worker at night.

"My mother died of leukemia when I was 10," he explains. "She had green eyes and red hair—the most beautiful woman in the world. We hired Jane Matthews, a black woman, and she took care of us. Her kids sat with us at our table to eat meals. We cried more at Jane's funeral, my brothers and me, because she raised us, and we had more time with her than with my mother. My father wore a black tie and a white shirt for 10

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years without seeing anyone after my mother passed away."

One particular story of his mother's good, humble heart stays with him.

"During the Depression, two doors down lived a wife and husband with five kids, and they couldn't afford to pay the rent," Vince says. "'Your mother paid our rent and brought food to us every day,' the couple later told me. Some people didn't work for a number of years and had families to support."

Several of his brothers served in World War II, and the family worked together, too.

"We started the huckster trucks business in the 1930s," Vince says.

For those who aren't familiar with this term, a huckster is someone who would sell goods, often food, off of a truck, traveling through towns on specific routes.

"We had a little produce field but bought most of our fruits and vegetables from 9th Street vendors by the docks in Philadelphia," Vince adds. "We'd rent an orchard for the season when the apples were ready to be harvested and paid the owner for letting us use his orchard. We'd sell our own produce and what we bought from the docks."



Vince drove one of their trucks at an early age to help out. They had his family's last name painted on the sides.

"Years ago, you were allowed to drive if you were 12," he says. "It helped when you were a farmer."

He and his brothers drove up directly to houses to do their selling; they had routes to Norristown, Limerick, Schwenksville, Spring City, and Royersford, and throughout Collegeville.

Otherwise, people walked to the store to buy their groceries.

"Most people left their doors open [or unlocked], with money set on the table," Vince points out about those who weren't

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home. "You put the food in the ice box or refrigerator, leave them the change due, and that's how it was."

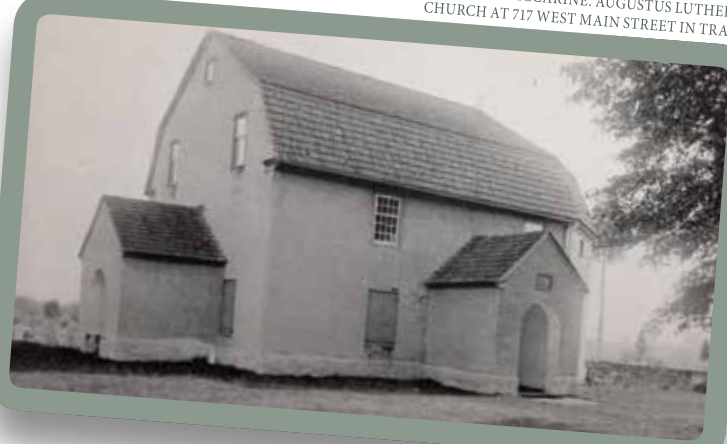
While refrigerators did exist then, they weren't a norm yet in most homes.

By 1947, Vince's family opened a small rented mom & pop shop in Collegetown.

In 1950, they purchased the building at 468 East Main Street and opened Raffeo's Supermarket, which they later added onto three times as the town grew. This included 454 East Main Street, formerly the Freeland House (as Collegetown's old name had been Freeland, in the past), which back then had been known as the State Police Barracks where officers lived but without their wives allowed to reside there with them, Vince remembers.

Collegetown first described as Freeland began in the 1800s, according to [www.historictrappe.org](http://www.historictrappe.org), which notes that, "the town is named after several early colleges, including Freeland Seminary, founded in 1848 by Reverend Abraham Hunsicker, and the Pennsylvania Female College, founded in 1851 as Montgomery Female Seminary and chartered in 1853."

COURTESY OF PAUL CHICCARINE. AUGUSTUS LUTHERAN CHURCH AT 717 WEST MAIN STREET IN TRAPPE



When we had the store," Vince elaborates, "chips and pretzels were loose, and people put them into cellophane bags to buy them. Everything was loose. People didn't have much storage then. They bought fresh food almost everyday. Even cereal came loose. You didn't have plastic bags back then."

Today, it houses a Benjamin Moore paint shop.

The Rotary Club of Collegetown formed in 1949. Vince joined in the early 1960s and is still an active member in volunteering for community causes.

David Kaplan is a good friend of Vince and joined the club because of him.

"Instead of simply saying, 'Come to meetings,' he actually took me to other Rotary Club meetings and district meetings where I saw the totality of what the organization really is," David recalls. "It was a vibrant organization doing incredible stuff all over the world, people of all ages, colors, and religions. He exposed me to that the right way. He took me to varied meetings so I could see what Rotary really was."

Kaplan appreciates the magic behind how well Vince means for those he meets.

"He brilliantly got me involved," David says. "He told me what exactly it was that I should do. I learned a lot from him. Vince is incredible. I don't know if he realized how much he was doing for me, at the time. Sometimes Vince does things, and he does it because he knows it's the right thing, and he hasn't totally thought it through other than knowing that this is right."

In his earlier days, Vince opened a beer distributor and later a tavern called Pen & Ink, in addition to becoming a landlord of several apartments. In fact, he's still working but now in the banking industry.

The local Halloween parade still starts annually in October in



COURTESY OF PAUL CHICCARINE



the parking lot where the Pen & Ink once stood at 454 East Main Street and is organized by the Rotary Club of Collegetown.

Vince mentions a former all-girls hockey camp not far from Providence Town Center, owned by Martin 'Peanut' Pollock who died in 2008 at the age of 90.

Martin and his wife, Sherry, owned Camp Shalom for many years. Long ago, it had been known as Brith Shalomville.

The property is a part of the 2013 documentary called *50 Children: The Rescue Mission of Mr. & Mrs. Kraus* by Steven Pressman. In June of 1939, a few months before World War II began, the husband and wife from Philadelphia brought 50 Jewish children, 25 boys and 25 girls, to the camp from Vienna, Austria, to protect them from the Nazis.

"They studied English, played American games, and wrote letters to their families back in Europe," explains the website for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Some never saw their families again, but the camp meant their lives were saved.

Vince also appreciates seeing how the police force in Collegetown has grown since the 1940s and 1950s.

The borough's website notes early history in that, "The Collegetown Police Department began life in 1940 when George Moyer was appointed [as] the borough's first police officer."

Hired for \$25 per week, he served until 1954.

"George didn't have a gun, and he'd stop all the local trucks coming through in the 1940s," Vince says. "He went to a borough meeting and said, 'I have to have a gun. They said, 'We'll give you a gun with no bullets.'"

Vince is one for savoring what it is to combine history and humor.

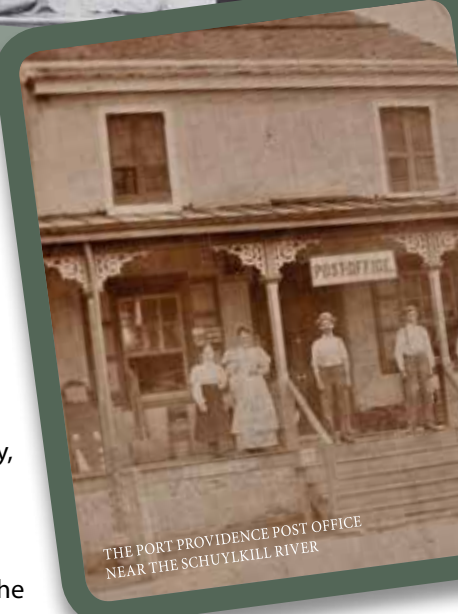
Today, the Collegetown Police Department has a chief, sergeant, detective, and five officers.

Vince is still the man of the community he's been for years, serving on a number of different boards of directors and

committees while supporting local nonprofits like the Collegetown Fire Company, where he's been a member for more than 55 years ("But I never went to a fire in my life," he makes known), but he also now enjoys time with his daughter Sherri and her family, as well as his partner, Joan Batman, 86.

"I think people should know the way towns were before and have a history of the town to understand," Vince says about the importance of interest in local history and seeing the roots of what came before us into today. "Collegetown has changed so much that it's unbelievable."

Vince also encourages others to be kind to one another, with those you know and with strangers who might eventually become friends like in the old days of when most locals knew each other and were there for each other, a lesson he's happy to be a part of sharing and often seeing in the community in 2019.



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## REFLECTIONS FROM SHERRI LYNN, VINCE'S DAUGHTER

**In 1950, my father met my mother, Jean Derecola, while attending a dance at the Limerick schoolhouse. They married three years later. For over 20 years, my mother worked alongside my father, assisting him with Collegetown's Pen & Ink Tavern while raising me as their only daughter. From the beginning, my mother embraced the small-town atmosphere and people of Collegetown. "Everyone adored her!" my father says. "Jean was my partner in life and a savvy business person as well, making most decisions leading with her heart." But the most significant aspect of their 65 years together was the shared love for their two grandchildren, Jamie and Lindsay. "She adored them more than life itself," my father recalls.**