

CHILDREN OF ALIQUIPPA'S IMMIGRANT MILLWORKERS GATHER FOR REUNION

TIES AS STRONG AS STEEL

By Barbara Klein

The black-and-white photos are silent witnesses to a time — and place — long since past. They show the high school football team, kids playing in back yards and young men looking handsome in their new Army uniforms.

The time was the 1930s and '40s; the place, Aliquippa. Back then, this small Beaver County town was a vibrant community, thanks almost entirely to the Jones & Laughlin steel mill that stretched for about seven miles down the Ohio River. In its prime, the mill produced 3 million tons of raw steel and employed 15,000 people.

Many of those people were immigrants from Italy, Greece, Russia, Serbia, Croatia, Yugoslavia, Ireland, Poland and the Middle East. And as fate would have it, they were also neighbors living on Station Street, Highland Avenue, Kiehl Street, Elm Alley and the Wye. It was a part of the city called Plan 4.

In those days, J&L built planned communities dominated by specific ethnic groups. For example, Serbs and Croats lived in Plans 1 and 2; Slovaks, Ukrainians and Poles in 7 and Italians in Plan 11.

According to James Albert's count, 45 dif-

ferent nationalities called Aliquippa home. "That's more than the United Nations," the Beaver County commissioner and Station Street alum asserts.

On Sunday, the children of those mill workers — now in their 60s, 70s and 80s — gathered at The Fez restaurant in Aliquippa for what has become a tradition.

"This is our eighth reunion," says Lena Benedict Maruhnich, this year's chairwoman. "At the first, in 1972, 300 people attended."

It was months ago that the 2001 reunion committee started sending out 375 invitations — to the Andrewses and Dukovichs, the Ferezans and Vafeases. Around 6 p.m. Sunday, 170 guests began gathering in the reception hall, straining to read name tags and faces.

The numbers may be on the decline, but sentiment for the old neighborhood remains strong.

"We played there and worked there," says Sara Vincich Ingenito, who traveled from California for the event. "We laughed, cried and loved there. Most of all, we loved."

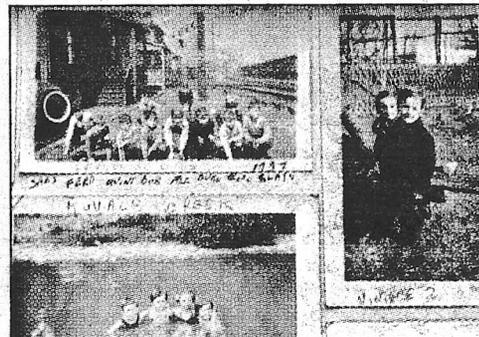
Ingenito's parents were from Serbia. Her dad worked in the mill and her mom worked at home taking care of six kids and several boards.

"We lived on Kiehl Street," she recalls, "and by some miracle our house is one of the few still standing."



Gabor Degre/Post-Gazette photos

ABOVE: Looking at photos of the old Fez restaurant are, foreground from left, James Albert, Donald Gutierrez, George Tselepis and Paul Mann.



LEFT: Photographs of family life spanning the heyday of the steel mills were on display at the reunion of the children of Station Street.

BELOW: The hulking furnaces and smokestacks of Jones & Laughlin dominated Aliquippa's riverscape in this 1983 photo.

Aliquippa memories tapped at reunion

REUNION FROM PAGE C-1

In the early '60s, progress — in the form of Constitution Boulevard — cleared a path through the Station Street area, taking most of the homes with it. Two decades later, all forward progress stopped as the once mighty mill (by then taken over by LTV Steel) ground to a deafening silence. When the last blast furnace shut down in 1985, it marked the first time in nearly 80 years that the plant's fiery plume no longer rained soot and dirt on its neighbors.

As the '90s approached, Aliquippa was officially declared a distressed community and was in serious jeopardy of defaulting on its electric bills. Not surprisingly, about half of its 26,000 residents had fled the region in search of job opportunities.

Today, most of Aliquippa's 12,000 citizens probably couldn't imagine a time when grocery stores, a car dealership, a brewery, roller rink, a bowling alley and movie theaters dotted the landscape. Now, most of the downtown storefronts are boarded up and debris litters the streets.

The houses that remain around Station Street show few signs of life. Curtains are drawn and kids are neither seen nor heard. It seems everyone's a stranger in this town.

Mamie Casoli Mitrovich remembers a different Aliquippa.

"People got along and helped one another," says the 88-year-old, who lives in nearby Hopewell. "We never locked our doors. I miss that."

"We had 10 children in our house," adds her sister, Eleanor Casoli Dimitrakis, "and our mother would still feed the hobos who rode the trains."

Helene Reilsono didn't live on Station Street, but she grew up hearing the stories from her mother and her 10 aunts and uncles, collectively known as the Tselepis family.

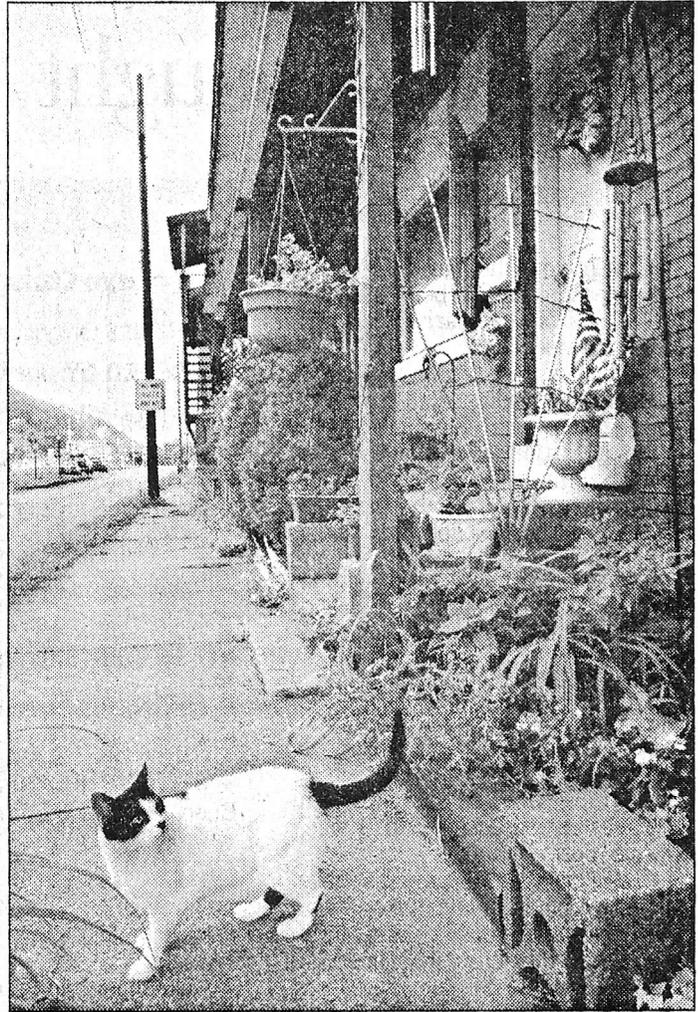
"It's a special bond they share," she says of the Station Street group. "Today, people are busy in their own lives. But these people took time for each other."

Her uncle, Steve "Lindy" Tselepis, agrees.

"Whenever my mother baked," he recalls, "everyone would smell the bread and she would feed the whole block."

Although Lindy Tselepis hasn't had an Aliquippa address for more than 50 years, Station Street will always be home.

"Remembering," says Hopewell Commissioner Steve Rodich, "that's the most important thing. My father was from Yugoslavia, my mother was from Duquesne, but everyone was the same. Everyone was working to feed



Gabor Degre/Post-Gazette

Station Street today has only a few houses left in the once bustling Aliquippa neighborhood.

their families and educate their children.

"When you remember where you came from," he says, "you can appreciate where you are."

For 2½-year-old Kaitlan Dorundo, the Station Street reunion was a party, a chance to eat cake and stay up past her bedtime. For her mother,

Cindy Dorundo, it was an opportunity to honor her grandparents. And for Cindy's mother, Anita Gutierrez D'Amico, who was also one of the organizers, it was about seeing old friends, telling old stories and, they hoped, passing on a new tradition.

Barbara Klein is a freelance writer.