

V.F. NORTH BEACH

## Nostalgia

PAMPHLET FILE BR. 28

# Father Trink And His Boys

By Clarice Minot

*Eugene Semenza was born August 13, 1904, in a house on Filbert Street between Stockton and Grant Avenue. He has lived in San Francisco all his life, and has resided at 25th and Alabama since 1939. He has one son and three grandchildren. The following events from his childhood are described in his own words to his niece, Clarice Minot.*

■ From the minute Father "Trink" arrived in town, August 1, 1914, everything started to change. Such was the power of one man with a dedicated purpose.

Until then, we were "The Union Street Gang," so named for the North Beach street where we lived. When the members of our brotherhood were not basking on the steps of Fidichiero's Grocery on Union and Varennes, we busied ourselves with various methods of peaceful plundering — some of which had all the ingenuity of a Brink's million dollar payroll heist.

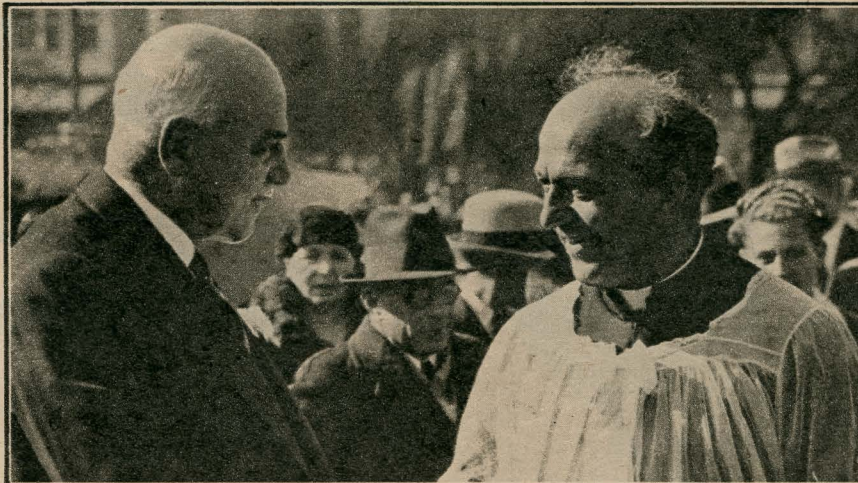
Our leader was Jakey. Being eleven and older than the rest of us, his head teemed with wonderful plans and clever tricks. I still laugh thinking about our motley bunch and Jakey's "Pie Truck Caper."

Every Saturday seemed to have a pattern. At 11 in the morning, a horse-drawn wagon with doors in the middle would appear on Union Street just below Kearny. Its delectable cargo of "fresh from the oven" pies drew us like bees to honey.

Everyone knew the horse's limitations and everyone knew the driver would be carrying his pies on foot up Telegraph Hill in order to reach the stores at the top.

I can still visualize Varennes and Union, on those lovely mornings, humming with activity: the pie wagon parked alongside the curb, its driver placing pies into a basket and in the foreground, Jakey, Skiver, Tut and I playing Bat the Wicket. Pork and Beans, who were cousins, pitched baseball in the alley while against a side-wall, Cocky, Michigan, Junky and Whitey played a fast-moving game of handball.

We'd wait for the driver to fill his basket and walk halfway up the hill. Then Jakey gave



Father Oreste Trinchieri (right) with Mayor Angelo Rossi, 1935.

the signal and everyone would charge in. When the truck door was slid open and we climbed inside, the mouth-watering aroma, the delicious array of pies — each baked until golden, each as big as the sun — hit us with a heady intoxication that was like soaring to heaven in a balloon. Never was there a more glorious sight.

Next followed a searching study of all the flavors, interspersed with little arguments about apple as opposed to cherry and peach versus the apricot. "How about blackberry?" someone would suggest. "Nah," retorted Jakey, looking the pies over seriously. "We had that last week."

We decide on two of the apple and jump off the truck, racing up Varennes, down the back steps of Tut's house and into the safety of his basement. Our families were desperately poor and we never had enough to eat. So after cutting the pies, the ten of us would agree that something more was needed to round out the menu.

Because Whitey's father worked in a bakery, he was sent out to appropriate a loaf of bread. If someone had a nickel (a rare prize given only by visiting relatives) the rest of us would then troop down Grant Avenue to the delicatessen between Union and Filbert. Armed with our nickel, we'd order five cents worth of olives.

While the proprietor busied himself scooping the olives from their barrel, traysful of fresh, beautifully stacked cold meats were left unguarded. At that golden moment, we went into action — feverishly filling our pockets and having the time of our lives.

And finally something to drink. With milk being delivered daily to each doorstep, piracy in North Beach flourished. A quart bottle brought in by one of our gang was auspiciously called a "general." A pint ranked "captain."

How I remember those beautiful Saturdays in Tut's basement — eating our way through unbelievably delicious sandwiches, milk that was topped with real cream and great slices of pie to end all pies. When the last crumb disappeared and the last drop was drained and we started for home, nothing of the "Pie Truck Caper" remained except a row of empty captains and generals, lined up solemnly on the basement floor.

But then Father "Trink" arrived in town. And everything started to change.

It was 1914. The Boy Scout Movement began sweeping the nation and Father Trinchieri (affectionately called Father "Trink") was the archetypal Salesian priest from Italy, devoted to helping underprivileged boys. By organizing the first Boy Scout troops in North Beach, he sounded the death knell for our gang's favorite activities.

Before we knew it, our infamous members were standing in Roos Bros. Department Store being outfitted with khaki colored shirts and breeches, wide brimmed felt hats, shin guards, canteens and axes. Each outfit cost \$5 and was paid for by Father Trink. In place of sleeping bags we were given large army blankets marked U.S., leftovers from the 1906 earthquake and fire. My unit was Troop 42 and consisted of boys under twelve. Youngsters from twelve to fourteen were in Troop 43, while Troop 44 included boys fourteen and older. Father Trink had enlisted, easily, 300 scouts.

Looking back, it's hard to believe. If the police department (officers McDonald and O'Conner) held our gang in perpetual suspicion, they were staggered to see us marching in parades, selling Liberty Bonds and boarding the night ferry to Marin for fourteen mile hikes to Camp Taylor.

I can still remember those night treks, with a hundred of us singing on the trail — songs like "It's a Long Way to Tipperary" and "There's a Long, Long Trail A'Winding." When we arrived at camp, Sam Fugazi, who brought cooking utensils and a chef, would serve unforgettable dinners of stew or pasta from giant, simmering pots. Then at 2 a.m. there was always a campfire with everyone singing. People in nearby houses listened from their windows, calling out for more choruses of "Down by the Old Millstream," "Row Your Boat," and "Home on the Range." And our golden days in Tut's basement began to fade slowly into the past.

From hikes and camporees, we swung into helping America win World War I. Everywhere people were buying bonds and stamps — "Lick a Stamp and Lick the Kaiser!" Sam Fugazi, who ran a travel agency, offered a silk American flag to whichever scout troop sold the most Liberty Bonds. Because our members were only twelve years old, Montgomery Street bankers and office workers eagerly bought bonds from us. We took in a flood of dollars and won the flag.

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## Nostalgia *continued*

1918 marked the end of the war. Scouting, the great American institution, began to slow down. Suddenly, our gang was left with nothing to do. Jakey had a new idea that was decidedly clever but short-lived. By collecting discarded bits of copper from the copper plant on Sansome and Broadway and rounding up lead scraps from PG&E repair jobs, we could put together an impressive pile of junk in Tut's basement.

When the junkman's familiar call, "Rags, bottles, sacks," was heard through the streets, we eagerly invited him in to appraise our treasure. Two cents for each milk bottle and potato sack, a dime for everything. While he tallied our price, his junk wagon outside was being lawlessly separated from some of its merchandise. This found its way into Skiver's basement, next door. After the junkman bought back his own wares from Skiver, more scrap off the wagon awaited his visit to the next house. And on up the line. Our gang was never out of things to sell.

But then Father Trink appeared on the scene again and this time we found ourselves digging ground for a new gymnasium.

With the 300 boy scouts, Father Trink started a club in the old SS Peter and Paul's parish house on Grant Avenue. I remember getting my first basketball uniform as a member of the Salesians. From the minute I put it on, life became something special. I was suddenly a pro like Henry "Dutch" Dehnert or Nat Holman, and our gang members were no longer just kids in sweatshirts playing on an empty lot. The green and white suits, which we bought by selling over a thousand raffle tickets, were the pride of our existence.

Father Trink divided everyone into five weight groups: the 95 pound class, the 110, 125, 145 and an unlimited weight group. Coach Tom DeMike, who was enlisted from Galileo High, put us with the 110 pound class, and in two years our team became one of the glories of North Beach.

Our secret was speed. Though small, we beat the 130 pound San Francisco Boys' Club. Our victories against Tamalpais High's 145 pound class caused a citywide stir, and when we won the California State Championship by defeating the Oakland All Comers (Athens Club), our fame was unprecedented. San Francisco lionized us, and sportswriters named Father Trink "The Priest of Basketball."

It was a short time later that baseball came into our lives. I remem-

*continued*



Father Trinchieri with SS Peter and Paul's altar boys, 1917.

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*"I remember getting my first basketball uniform as a member of the Salesian Boys' Club."*



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**"Father Trink was a folk hero. Everyone knew and loved him, from 'Sunny Jim' Rolph to Mayor Rossi."**

ber that the empty lot next to the church was our playing field, that Pork and Beans, who always wanted to pitch, had terrible fights in the dressing room, and that the rest of our gang would shout with glee, "Hey look, Pork and Beans are fighting again!"

Once in awhile a window would be broken across the street. That ended the game; we'd all disappear. When news reached Father Trink, he'd go over and have the glass repaired, paying for it himself. "That's okay. You didn't do it on purpose," he told us. "It just happened. You come back and play — I want you there to play." No matter what damage you did, he always forgave you.

I am at a loss, today, to describe the variety of activities Father Trink brought to our generation. There were picnics with games and prizes, a club house that had pool and billiards. We put on scores of theatrical shows and our newspaper was published by kids of every size assisting the makeup man, Father Trink. For our band, fifty musical instruments ranged from clarinets to French horns, with free lessons for everyone from Bert Paraneli. There was a leader with a baton and gold braid uniforms and silver drums, and everything was paid for by Father Trink.

Father Trink was a folk hero. Everyone knew and loved him, from "Sunny Jim" Rolph to Mayor Rossi. A.P. Giannini, long before he pioneered the Bank of Italy into the present Bank of America, gave the priest unlimited financial support. Each day the North Beach police department welcomed his visits and released their most notorious, case-hardened boys into his care. At night, you were bound to encounter him pacing the alleys and saloons, a striking figure in those dark back streets, heading off trouble.

But invariably there were boys who hung out on Broadway and fell into a rough deal. They conducted their streetcorner business in the most fashionable clothes, made easy money selling drugs, and cruised with airs in "The Big Shot's" Cadillac. You saw them with the prettiest girls in town. But often enough, they were picked up by the men in blue.

Occasionally one sauntered into Marco's Barbershop, on Green, arrayed like a lily. "Hey, where you going all dressed up?" Marco would ask. "Oh," the answer came proudly, "I'm goin' to college. Yeah, I'm goin' to college next week." Marco would eye the customer as he was leaving and shake his head. "You know what college he's going to, don't you! It's San Quentin," he would say.

It seems incredible, now, looking back, that Father Trink worked so hard and with such patience to insure the happy future of his flock. Some of the boys were to become nationally famous, like Joe and Dom DiMaggio, Hank Luisetti, Gino Cimoli and Fred Scolari. From the band, Al and Ray Cicerone and Angelo Grosso went on the play with big name bands.

As the years passed and The Union Street Gang got older, some of our members who continued playing baseball were considered by sportswriters to be very good. And they were — being booked by the *Examiner* and *Call Bulletin* to compete in the inter-city games held every Sunday. I'll never forget the trauma we shared at one of the games scheduled for San Quentin — when we heard Cocky's name called (no one knew our nicknames) and saw Jakey waving from the screened section for inmates. Until three years ago, most of us would still meet, now and then, at Marco's old barbershop, but that Sunday at San Quentin was the last time we saw Jakey.

On January 15, 1936, Father Orreste Trinchieri, founder of the Salesian Boys' Club in America, died of a heart attack at age fifty-one in the Palace Hotel, while he attended a Victory Dinner for Mayor Rossi. Crowds jammed SS Peter and Paul's Church where his body lay in state — filing past the altar in a procession which never seemed to slacken.

As mourners paid their last respects, a veteran Salesian turned to his companion and said, "We'll all miss him so much." Sitting nearby, a *Chronicle* sportswriter added, "It's not going to be the same without him."

And for the man who gave thousands of boys a new lease on life, the church bells tolled out their final tribute. □



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