

**The Revenge
of the E – I – E – I – Ohs
by Bill Russo**

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**THE REVENGE
OF THE
E-I-E-I-OHS**



BY BILL RUSSO

With the strong Cape Cod sun high overhead, two young boys with dark curly hair, sat on the front porch of the ancient Pleasant Lake General store, sipping birch beer from glass bottles. Dreamily, through slitted eyes, they glanced across the street, watching the gentle waves lap the shores of the lake and discussed all things summer.

The chatter was of fishing, swimming, bicycling, camping, and girls. Carmine, at 12, had two years on his brother Lucca, and thus was the expert in all such matters, especially since he was the better fisherman, the superior swimmer, and had actually kissed a girl. As the brothers reclined on the high-backed wooden bench on the left side of the entrance to the store, they laughed happily with no thought of the next school year. It was two months off and the tourist season was just beginning in the usually quiet town of Harwich.

"I wish we had brought our bikes," Lucca said as they watched hundreds of bicyclists passing before them on the Cape Cod Bike Trail, which claimed the route once paved with the wooden ties and rails of the Cape Cod Central Railroad. As of 2017 the bike trail runs almost half the length of Cape Cod from Dennis nearly into Wellfleet. An expansion is underway with the eventual hope of the trail running the entire 64 miles from the start of the island at Bourne to the 'end of the earth' at Provincetown.

"We got plenty of time," Carmine counseled, "We can bring our bikes tomorrow. The bike trail isn't going to go away between now and then!"



To their left, on the bench on the right side of the store's entrance sat a spry old man, also drinking birch beer from a glass bottle. His slick, bald head was covered by a wide brimmed black fedora with a white band. Very dark sunglasses with thick black frames shielded his eyes. The black shorts and colorful Hawaiian shirt he wore gave him a much younger look than was expected of a man in his 90s.

He looked over at the boys, his great grandsons, and recalled a time some eight decades prior, when as a young boy of ten he sat on the very same porch with his pal Rocco Accomando. The "Rock" was the fastest and strongest of all the fifth graders in Harwich and being his best friend came in mighty handy when the native Cape Cod boys decided to.....

"Hey G-Pop, can we go swimming now?" shouted Lucca, interrupting the old man's daydream.

"We can do anything we want fellas," smiled G-Pop. "It's summer, we're young, our time is our own, and we've got our whole lives ahead of us. Where do you want to go?"

There being three lakes within a mile of each other in East Harwich, they had plenty of choices.

"Well G-Pop, said 12 year old Carmine, I want to go to Jimmy Catfish Beach. I love that old tree that fell into the pond. We can walk on it to deep water and jump off it just as if it was a pier."



Photo copyright Bill Russo 2014 - from 'Jimmy Catfish', the prequel to 'Swamp Tales'.

"It's too scary Carmine," offered Lucca tentatively. "G-Pop told us about Jimmy Catfish and the man-eating catfish that live in that part of the water. I don't want to go anywhere near there."

"They're not there anymore Lucca," G-Pop said soothingly. "That all happened long ago. There's no more saw-toothed fish in the lake and almost nobody even knows about Jimmy Catfish except for you guys."

"That may be so but I still want to go to Seymour Pond. It's the best swimming place on all of Cape Cod," said Lucca.

"You're right about that son, and that's a secret that most of the tourists don't know. Millions of people come to Cape Cod for the saltwater beaches and they have no idea that right here in Harwich we've got Pleasant Lake, Long Pond, and Seymour Pond – the best fresh water lakes in the whole United States and we got them practically all to ourselves."

"I'm okay with Seymour Pond. We'll go to Jimmy Catfish beach some other time," said Carmine obligingly.

The three Fortunato males drained the last of their birch beer and returned the glass bottles to the store. They picked up their rolled up towels, held together by short lengths of rope, slung them over their shoulders and started off on foot for Seymour Pond. The twenty minute walk gave G-Pop just enough time to tell one of his stories of long ago Cape Cod.

"Your Dad will be along in four or five hours to pick us up. He knows that if we aren't at the store we'll be at one of the three lakes. We've got plenty of time for a great day. If you're in the mood, I'll tell you a story while we're walking - one that I've never told before."

"Let's hear it," both boys exclaimed. They loved their great grandfather and his stories. As a matter of fact the boys felt that somehow, in many ways he was the same age as them, though he was nearly ten times older.

"This tale starts back there on the porch of the Pleasant Lake General Store. It hasn't changed much since that morning some 80 years ago when my pal Rocco Accomando and I were sitting on the benches just like the three of us were today. And just like we did today, Rock and I were drinking birch beer.

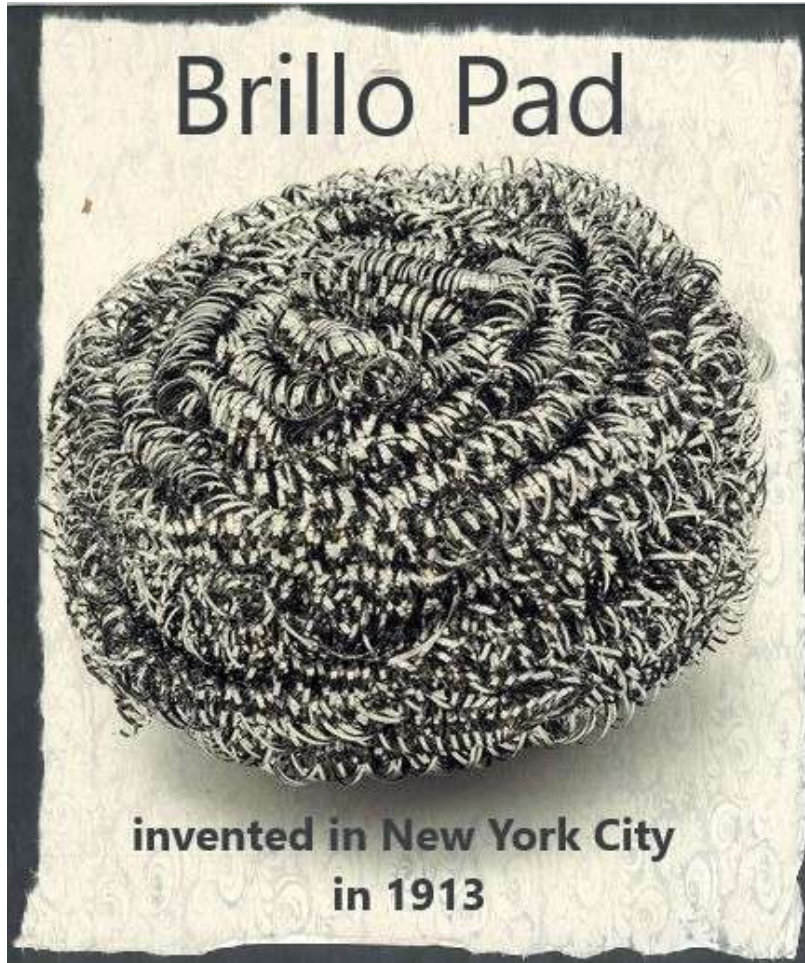
I guess the only real difference between now and that day back in 1935 is the trains. The bike trail that we ride on used to be the home of the Cape Cod Central Railroad. Every town in Cape Cod had a railroad station and the trains ran every hour all day long and most of the night. You could get a train in Harwich and ride the rails all the way to California. Course you'd have to change trains at Bourne, then again at Boston or New York before you finally got to Los Angeles.



Pleasant Lake RR Crossing in 1935

Rock and I had the bad luck to be kids during the 'Great Depression', a period of widespread poverty in the United States. We had it double tough because we were the children of immigrants. My folks, and Rock's too, came from Italy around 1910 and even during good times we weren't popular with some of the native Cape Codders.

Rock and I were the regular targets of the other kids at school. They called us 'Brillo heads' because of our dark curly hair. You guys probably don't know what 'Brillo' is. It's a scouring pad for cleaning pots and pans, made from curly strings of shaved steel wool.



We didn't much like being called Brillo heads, but we really hated it when they called us the 'Ohs' or when they starting singing the "E-I-E-I-O" song.

Every day was pretty much the same. When we walked in the school yard they'd start on us....

"Look here come the 'Ohs' - Accomando and Fortunato. Hey "Ohs, where are the E boys and the I boys?"

They called us the E-I-E-I-Os and made up a song about it using the melody of 'Old McDonald had a Farm'. They changed the words to.....

"All Italians should go home

E-I-E-I-O

Cause they smell like fish and garlic

E-I-E-I-O

All Italians please go back to Rome

E-I-E-I-O

And get out of Cape Cod real quick!

E-I-E-I-O!"

They called us the E-I-E-I-Os because almost all Italian names end in E, I, O, or sometimes A; like Amare, Gallanti, Russo, or Coppola. The native Cape Codders all had names like Crosby, Nickerson, Hatch, or Standish.

Because of this situation the Italian people lived in separate neighborhoods from the Cape Codders. Most everybody was a fisherman or earned their living selling things to fishermen. On the boats, our people had the lowest jobs. There were no rich sea captains among us. Our dads had to take the riskiest and worst paying jobs on the ships.

In Harwich we didn't have it quite as bad as people in some of the other towns, but still it was pretty rough. My only friend was Rock. He and I were the only Italians in our grade. We were best friends all through school.

Mr. Josiah Nickerson owned the Pleasant Lake General Store at the time and he was always good to Rock and me. He gave us jobs to do for him and he paid us fair wages for ten year old boys. We'd stack wood, help him unload stock, and sometimes make deliveries. He also helped us start a little business that allowed both of us keep our families fed after our fathers were lost at sea during a fierce storm.

We assembled a little stock of novelties and fruit from Mr. Nickerson and sold the items to the passengers on the train. Boarding at Pleasant Lake, we walked through the passenger cars selling apples, pears, newspapers, and even decks of cards and such. Luckily for us some of the train conductors were related to the legendary Italian boxing champ Primo Carnera and they allowed us to conduct our business.

At a time when the average man was five foot five inches tall and about 140 pounds, Primo was six foot seven and weighed almost three hundred! He was one of the most feared boxing champs in history. Primo spent much of the summer of 1935 rejuvenating himself on Cape Cod after losing a title fight to Joe Louis in June. During that season when Primo was in mid Cape Cod, there was a lot less 'E-I-E-I-O bashing' than usual; and Rock and I did pretty well with our little train vending enterprise.

Like I said, Rock and I were making out pretty good that season, what with all the goodwill created by having the great boxing king staying in our town. One Friday in July we loaded up our packs with extra supplies because we were pretty sure the Provincetown run was going to be jammed full of tourists. The train pulled into the Pleasant Lake Station at exactly 4:15 p.m. for a one minute stop.

"Hey Meo, nobody's getting off," worried Rock. He always called me Meo (pronounced Mayo) cause my real name's a mouthful to say - it's Bartolomeo.

“Don’t worry Rock. The train is full of tourists going to Provincetown. There are some big art shows and such this weekend. They probably haven’t had anything to eat or drink since leaving Boston. When we get on the train and tell ‘em there’s 13 more stops and 45 minutes to go before Provincetown, we’ll most likely sell everything we’ve got.”

We boarded Cape Cod Combination One and opened up our packs. I started off our spiel as soon as the train began moving on towards Brewster, the next station.....

“Hey folks try some of our wares, we got apples, bananas and pears. For two cents you can get a pickle, or try a slice of pie for a nickel?”

Well Carmine and Lucca, let me tell you those tourists couldn’t reach in their pockets fast enough. They were buying up our stock of goods so fast it looked like we’d be sold out before we got halfway to the end of the line. As the combination steamed into Wellfleet we had no idea that things were about to turn much worse.

Stationmaster Zip Willard was waiting on the platform. He greeted the conductor who quickly tossed him a few bundles of newspapers. The conductor hopped down the three steps from the train to the platform.

“Hello Zip, here’s the mail,” he said, handing the station-master a sack full of letters and postcards.”

“Thanks and here’s the Wellfleet outgoing mail,” Zip said, tossing a small parcel to the conductor. “Have you got any seats left on the train?”

“It’s standing room only. All three passenger cars are fully occupied this run Zip.”

“Well there’s only seven more stops to the end of the line, so I guess the young fella waiting for the train won’t mind standing up for a half hour or so.”

As the conductor yelled “All Aboard. Next stop, South Truro”, a tall, rugged looking teenager emerged from the Wellfleet waiting room and walked casually up the stairs and into the passenger car where Rock and I were selling our goods.

“Look who’s getting on the train Meo!”

“I see him. It’s Reggie Nickerson, the nephew of the owner of the Pleasant Lake General Store.”

“Just ignore him,” Rock said. “Business as usual. There’s only a handful of stops left to Provincetown.”

“Just to be safe,” I suggested, “Let’s go to another car.”

“But we haven’t finished working this one yet Meo. Let’s do the last few rows.”

We started walking to the half dozen sets of seats at the end of the first passenger car when Nickerson came at us. We were ten years old with a combined weight of about 150 pounds. He was 18 and

already over five ten and probably 180. Even Rock, as tough as he was for a ten year old, was intimidated.

“Gimme some of my uncle’s food,” said Nickerson, reaching into my pack and grabbing handfuls of candy and fruit, which he stuffed into his pockets.

“The price for what you just took is one dollar,” I told him. “Pay up now or I’ll go to the conductor.”

In answer the tall, sandy haired Nickerson unleashed his right hand and smashed a backhander across my face. I saw stars and barely heard Rock let out a war cry as he leaped on the bigger boy’s back. Rock managed to get a choke hold on Nickerson.

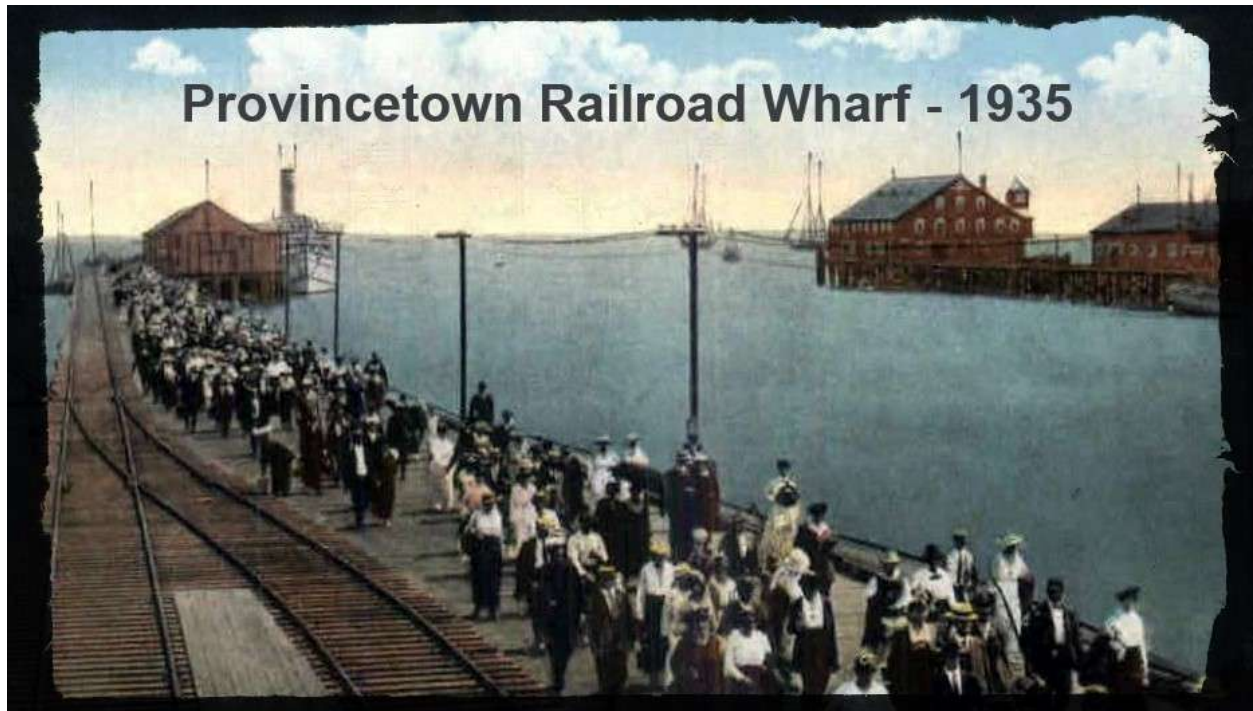
When my head cleared I realized that Nickerson had bunched his fists together and was smashing them behind him trying to break Rock’s ribs. Rock was bravely hanging on despite the pounding he was taking.

Dropping my pack, I dove for Nickerson’s ankles. When I connected he fell forward like a sack of potatoes and both Rock and I started boxing his ears. We raged on, totally out of control, beating him senseless. We probably would have killed him if the passengers hadn’t dragged us off.

The conductor soon arrived and questioned us and the passengers. Everyone who saw what happened agreed that Nickerson started the trouble. We figured we were in the clear, but when Nickerson got off the train a few stops later, through bloody lips he vowed that he’d pay us back a hundred times over for what we did to him.

We continued vending our merchandise and were completely sold out by the time we pulled into the South Truro Station. We lounged in the baggage car for the next four stops to the end of the line, courtesy of the conductor, Mr. Giovanni Mancini. Lying on sacks of mail we dozed off, waking up as we heard Mr. Mancini shout...

“Provincetown Wharf. Last stop everybody, Provincetown Wharf. Everybody off, end of the line!”



Rock and I ran towards the fishing boats moored at the end of the long wooden pier. We bought a quantity of quahogs, fluke, and oysters. Packing our purchases in ice, we took them back to Pleasant Lake to sell them to Mr. Nickerson and make a nice little extra profit for the day.

“Hey Meo,” Rock wondered, “Maybe Mr. Nickerson won’t want to do business with us anymore after what we did to his nephew.”

“I hadn’t thought about that Rock. Well, if he’s mad at us we’ll just take the train to Chatham and sell our stuff to Chatham Fish and Chips. They’ll be happy to have it.”

We got on the next run back towards the Upper Cape and by the time the train arrived at Pleasant Lake we were more than a little nervous about seeing Mr. Nickerson and having to tell him what happened.

Luckily for us the conductor, Mr. Mancini, had called Mr. Nickerson on the telephone and told him what happened. He explained that the brawl wasn’t our fault and Mr. Nickerson said we could still do business with him. He bought all of the fresh seafood that we had got at the P-town Pier. He warned us however, to steer clear of his nephew.

“Why don’t you boys switch your business from Provincetown to Hyannis for a while,” he suggested.

“We’ve done pretty well going to P-town,” Rock replied “I’m not sure we could make any money going in the other direction.”

“Hyannis is the capital of Cape Cod fellas,” Mr. Nickerson explained. “It has thousands of tourists and also has by far the largest year-round population on the whole peninsula.”

“To tell the truth, we’ve only been to Hyannis a couple times,” I admitted. “It seems like a big city.”

“There’s another thing to consider,” said the storekeeper. “The reason my nephew got on the train in Wellfleet is that he has a girlfriend there. So if you keep working the Eastbound Route you’re very likely to have another run-in with Reggie. There’s much less chance of encountering him if you’re on the Western Route. You’ll sell your goods just as well going through Dennis, Yarmouth, and Hyannis as you did on the P-town run.”

“You’re probably right,” I admitted. “And the trip is shorter too. We can get off the train in Hyannis and do some sidewalk selling while we’re waiting for the next train back to Harwich.”

So that’s what we did. Over the next few weeks we made more money than we ever had. Between Pleasant Lake and downtown Hyannis, there were two Harwich stops, two stations in Dennis, one in Yarmouth, and two more in Hyannis. The run to Hyannis was just a little over a half hour and the trains were almost always full.

“Hey Rock we’re going to have to figure a way to carry more stuff, we’re sold out already and we still got three stops to go,” I said after one of our best days – a Saturday at the end of July.

“We were able to give our Moms \$15.00 each this week. That’s more than a lot of grown men make!”

“That’s the truth,” Rock agreed, “and we’ve even got five bucks left over for ourselves. Since we’ve sold all our stock, why don’t we spend some time in Hyannis before we go back home?”

“Okay, what do you want to do?”

“I want to see the docks. I want to walk down Main Street. I’d like to sit down in one of those outdoor cafes and order a giant breakfast with eggs, toast, fried spuds, and slabs of ham. And I want to have a steaming cup of coffee!”

“Coffee? We’re ten years old Rock! Coffee? Do you think they’d sell us some?”

“Course they will Meo. It ain’t illegal for us to have coffee. We’re businessmen now. And businessmen drink coffee don’t they?”

“You’re right Rock. Let’s go to Main Street for Ham and Eggs and coffee!”



Cape Cod's biggest village, Hyannis (Circa 1930s)

Passing a dozen trendy sidewalk cafes on Main Street, we headed instead for the 'Five and Ten Cent Store' lunch counter. We had heard about the fabulous offerings at Woolworth's but had never before eaten there.

"Hey look at what's playing across the street at the Center Theater," Rock said as we arrived at the 'Five and Ten'.

"Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi together in the same picture!" I said. "The movie is called the Raven, written by Edgar Allen Poe."

"The first show is at two p.m., about an hour from now. It's too late for breakfast. Let's have lunch at Woolworth's and then take in the show."

Walking into the department store, our senses were stimulated by a thousand scents. As we headed toward the lunch room in the back of the building we first passed by the nut counter. Three huge glass cases were crammed full of trays of walnuts, pecans, peanuts, almonds and cashews. Counter top heating units kept the nuts toasty warm. The aroma of the steaming hot cashews was so delicious we almost forgot about having lunch.

Next we passed the perfume counter where an elderly woman with a painted face was spritzing an assortment of perfumes on her arms, face, neck, and just about everywhere else. One after another she picked up a bottle, sprayed some in the air and sniffed like a hound dog as the droplets fell to the

counter. If she approved of the smell, she'd spray some on her arm or wrist and sniff it a few more times. Rock and I rushed past that counter because the odor/aroma almost made us pass out.

Next was the toy counter. There's nothing like the smell of new toys to ten year old boys! We looked longingly at the selection.

"Hey Rock check this out. It's a wind up plane. You just twist the elastic band a couple dozen times and set the plane down. It takes off right from the ground! It's only 59 cents."

"Look at this wind up train set; an engine, a caboose, a coal car, and three passenger cars plus 50 feet of track for only \$2.89," said Rock. "They sure got some great toys here Meo, but I'm starving. Let's eat."

We went directly to the back of the building and took seats at the lunch counter. Everything on the menu looked so delicious it was hard to make a choice.

"Why don't you boys try the special," the middle aged, red-haired waitress suggested after she got impatient at our inability to make a selection.

"What is the special?" we asked.

"You will love it. Today's feature is Cubed Minute Steak, Hot Gravy, Sliced Buttered Beets, French Fried Potatoes, a drink, and a Hot Cloverleaf Roll with Butter."

"How much is all that going to cost?" I wondered.

"Twenty five cents," she told us.

"Okay, make it two specials please," Rock announced. "For our drink we will each have a cup of coffee with cream and sugar on the side."

"Listen honey, I think you're a little young for java," she protested.

"Well our money is pretty old m'am" I declared. "So just bring us the two specials and the coffee."

She gave us a kind of a funny look but when she saw me take a dollar from a plump little roll of cash, she probably figured we'd be good for a decent tip so she went off to put in our orders.

"Here's your lunch boys, enjoy it," she smiled, when she returned a few minutes later with steaming platters of steak, potatoes and all the fixings.

"I'll be right back with your coffee men," she said as she set down our plates.



Woolworth's Five and Ten Cent Store Lunch Counter - 1930s. Our waitress is on the far left.

Rock and I attacked that lunch like a couple of sharks in a feeding frenzy. We polished it off in about three minutes and gulped our coffee down just as fast.

"Care for another cup of coffee gentlemen?" the waitress asked.

"Yes m'am," I replied. "It was very good."

"I'm not m'am you guys," she said, brushing back a swath of red curls that had fallen over her eyes. "I'm Jane. But I like you two, so you can call me Janie," she said with a smile.

She was an older woman, perhaps thirty, but she had a girlish charm which was not lost on Rock and me. We began chatting with her as we drank our second coffee.

"Is this your first time in the big city?"

"No it's not, Janie," Rock replied. "We've been here a couple of times but we've never had the chance to look the town over before."

"We have a business," I added proudly.

"You do?" she asked, her green eyes widening into saucers, impressed that two ten year olds could actually be businessmen.

"We're train vendors. We have a line of food and novelties that we sell on the Provincetown train," I told her.

"Well not anymore," Rock corrected me. "We used to work between Harwich and P-town. But we decided to change our operation to the West-bound route. So now we work between Harwich and Hyannis."

"Janie," Rock said, "You've been nice to us and we like you. Can we ask you for some advice?"

"Sure guys, I've been around the block once or twice. Are you having girl troubles?"

"No Janie," I countered, "It's nothing like that. As you noticed, we're pretty young, but since both of us have no fathers we have to take care of our Moms. That's why we're in the selling business."

"And we think we'll do even better if we look a little older," Rock added. "Have you got any ideas on how we could do that?"

"Do what?" Janie questioned.

"Look older," we said in unison.

"Oh. Sure boys. Buy yourselves a couple of business suits. Get a couple of those new Fedora hats with colorful hatbands and feathers tucked into them. That will make you look like teenagers."

"Where can you buy those suits and hats?" I asked.

"Well you can get them brand new at Puritan Clothing but the suit alone will cost more than sixteen bucks and the hats could go as high as three or four. Have you got that kind of dough?"

"Not really," Rock said. "We gave our moms 15 dollars this week so we only have about nine dollars left over."

"Left over? That's the answer! Go to Left-over Main. You can get what you need for under a fin!"

"What's Left-over Main?" I questioned.

"It's the place where used things end up. Used cars, used clothing, and used people. It's a dreary quarter mile at the far end of Main Street where half the shops are thrift stores and consignment shops and the other half are seedy bars and flop-houses. Go to 'Nifty Thrifty'. They'll have some useable suits for you for a dollar or two."

"I just have one more question," I said.

"What is it honey?" Janie asked.

"What's a fin?"

"It's five bucks kid," she laughed. "I'm surprised you didn't know that. A fin is five dollars and a sawbuck is ten. Two bits is 25 cents and a half-bit is fifteen cents. Now you know all about money and where to go to get new duds; so run along and come back here anytime."

Our bill came to fifty cents but we plunked down six bits (75 cents) so that Janie could have a quarter tip. She smiled at us when she saw how much we paid and told us she'd remember us next time and would throw in a free ice cream for dessert. We couldn't wait to go back to the five and dime lunch counter. That meal and meeting with Janie had made us feel pretty grown up."

There was a line outside the Center Theater stretching about fifty yards beyond the front doors.

"Look at all the people waiting for the start of The Raven," I said.

"Kid stuff!" Rock disdained, "forget about Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi. We're men now. We've had coffee and we've flirted with an older woman."

"Did we really flirt with Janie?" I wondered.

"I'm not really sure if we did, but she flirted with us Meo."

"How do you know that?"

"It was the hair Meo. Remember how she kept brushing that bright red hair back from her eyes. She wanted us to notice her face. That's flirting for sure!"

"Now that I think about it, you're right Rock. That lady was flirting with us. That is very cool!"

The horror movie forgotten, we set off for Left-over Main, barely glancing at the elegant gift shops, department stores, specialty houses, and fine restaurants along the way. Despite the depression that had crippled most of the 48 states in the union, Cape Cod was doing fairly well. The arm-shaped peninsula jutting 40 miles out in the Atlantic Ocean, was a cheap getaway for folks from Boston and even as far away as New York City. The Cape Cod beaches were free, and yet they were, and still are, among the finest in the nation. For twenty five cents people could take the train from Boston to the heart of Cape Cod. It didn't cost a dime for the sand and the sea; and the seafood was plentiful and cheap at any of the dozens of clam shacks dotting the area.



Sunset on Cape Cod Bay



Typical Cape Cod Beach

At busy Hyannis Harbor we stopped and sat on a seaside bench. Ferry boats, fishing craft, and pleasure boats clogged the port in such numbers that they looked like clusters of white leaves on bushy maple trees in mid-summer.

We were curious when we saw a portly gentleman in a white suit standing on a nearby park bench. There were a dozen or more people crowded around him. He had a small notepad and was busily writing down things. After he finished writing on a page, he tore the paper from his pad and passed it to one of the crowd, who in turn handed some money to the old man in the suit.

"I'm pretty sure those are betting slips Rock," I said. "I think he's booking wagers. Let's go over and listen."

"Five cents folks! That's all it costs," said the white bearded man in the suit who looked like a southern plantation owner. "You give me five cents and four numbers. I'll write 'em down in the book and if your numbers match the last four numbers of the U.S. Treasury balance as printed in tonight's Cape Cod Times, you will win fifty dollars! Imagine it fifty big greenbacks for a mere five cents, the twentieth part of a single dollar."

Rock and I were fascinated by the patter of the fast talking man in the white suit. After a few more men in the crowd made their bets I was shocked when I saw Rock running towards the old fellow with the white beard....

"I got five cents. Here Mister. Here's my nickel. I want to win fifty dollars!" shouted Rock.

The smooth talking old gentleman took the money from Rock and said; "What are your numbers son?"

"Hold on," cried one of the men in the crowd. "He's just a kid. It's illegal for him to make a bet on the T-balance."

The rest of the crowd agreed and started grumbling that children shouldn't be allowed around a betting area.

"Hold on just a moment my friends," the bookie's booming voice silenced the group. Raising his arms high above his head, he said, "It is indeed illegal for the young lad to make a bet. Just as it is illegal for any you to make a wager - and yet you did it. We all believe that we have an inborn right to make a harmless little five cent gamble no matter what the law says. Would you deny this curly haired young man a chance to win fifty dollars? He probably wants to win the money so he can fill up his mama's coal bin for the winter. Am I correct son?"

"Actually you are right sir. If I win I'm going to split the money with my pal Meo Fortunato. I'm going to give my half to my Mom and I'm sure that Meo will also give his half to his Mom. Our fathers were fishermen. They got lost at sea so we have to take care of our mamas."

The crowd quickly became sympathetic, in fact they were so moved that they started giving dimes and nickels to the boys. A couple guys even gave dollar bills. Later, when the boys counted the cash, they were amazed to find that they had been given twelve dollars and fifty cents.

"Now my young friend, what's your name? Mine is simply 'The Colonel'. It is a pleasure to meet you young fellow."

"I'm Rocco Accomando and my pal is Meo Fortunato. We're E-I-E-I-Ohs. Can we still make a bet? "

"My good fellow," said the Colonel. "Some of my best friends have last names ending in 'O'. You are welcome to make your wager. What are your numbers?"

"Well Meo lives at 28 Pleasant Lake Road and I live at number 9. So I want to bet 289."

"I'm sorry Mr. Accomando," said the Colonel in a serious tone, "But the bet must consist of four numbers. If you don't have a fourth, let me make a suggestion."

"Sure," Rock agreed. "We'd be happy to have your advice."

"When people don't have a fourth number handy, I always recommend zero. It stands for nothing, which is really all a nickel is worth – pretty much nothing. So if you lose, you have lost nothing; and yet, if your numbers come in, you'll have fifty dollars and that ain't hay!"

"Okay," Rock agreed. "Make my bet 2890".

"Done, done and done!" said the Colonel, writing down Rock's numbers and the date on the top page in his note pad. After making a duplicate to keep for himself, he tore the top page off and gave it to Rock.

"Check the paper tonight. If the last four numbers of the Treasury Balance are 2890 you win the fifty dollars. You have up to six months to see me to claim your winnings. If for some reason you do not collect your cash within the aforementioned time frame, you forfeit your right to it."

After Rock put the betting slip in his shirt pocket we resumed the walk to Left-over Main - the home of the second hand shops and filthy flops. Once we passed the corner of Main and Camp Streets the neighborhood began to get seedy. After a few more blocks the street was shabby, filthy and scary. We knew then that we had arrived at Left-over Main.



Shops along Left-over Main. Hyannis, 1935

When we got to the Nifty Thrifty we walked inside and saw a pretty, red haired girl of 17 or 18 at the cash register. Introducing herself as Peggy, she asked us if we were looking for anything special. She didn't really take an interest in us until we told her about our train vending business and how we wanted to look a little older.

"So, you're two little budding businessmen who sell your goods on the trains. Well I think that fate has brought you here because I might have exactly what you want. Excuse me for a second," she said, walking quickly through a door leading to a backroom.

"She's talking to somebody Rock."

"Yes, it sounds like a guy. I wonder why she left us in the middle of a transaction to chat with some guy in the storage room?"

"Maybe it's her boyfriend and she's going to send him away because now she's got customers."

After about a minute the chatter stopped and a moment later the girl reappeared, taking up the conversation where we left off.

"As I said," I have precisely what you want, and here they are..."



Jazzy style 1930s suits and hats

“Wow those suits are just like the name of your store – nifty! They barely look used,” I said. “But won’t we look a little doggy in them?”

“Doggy?” she laughed. “No, nobody will think you’re putting on airs, these suits are the latest styles from last year and they’re even snazzier this year. You guys will look like you’re 15 or even 16 years old in these duds.”

“They’re great,” Rock proclaimed. “We love ‘em. But they look pretty expensive. How much?”

“Don’t worry about the price. I just talked to my boyfriend, I mean the manager, and he said to give you guys a good deal on one condition.”

“What’s the condition?” I wanted to know.

“It’s this. Each of you will get one of these first class suits for a very low price. Plus you will also receive a collared white shirt, a pair of silver cufflinks, a Fedora with a hat band, a handkerchief for your breast pocket, a matching necktie, and a pair of shoes.”

“We still want to know what the price is and what the condition is,” said a slightly agitated Rock.

“Okay. The price comes to a total of three dollars each!”

“We’ll take them no matter what the condition is!” I said excitedly.

“That’s fine. The condition is a very small one. When we sell an outfit like this, we require a trade-in. Right now I need a couple of boys’ shirts. So all you have to do is give me your old shirts along with the three dollars and you can walk out of here dressed even better than the owners of any of the clip joints on Left-over Main.

We strutted along Main Street towards the train station, stopping at a variety store to buy the evening edition of the Cape Cod Times. I opened the paper to the next to the last page and scanned it quickly looking for the daily listing of the Treasury Balance.

“We won Rock! We hit the number! We’re in the chips.”

“What a stroke of luck. Let’s go find the Colonel and get our cash.”

As fast as our young legs could carry us we dashed for the waterfront and found the Colonel sitting on his favorite bench by the ocean’s edge. As soon as he saw us coming he started laughing.”

“Hello my little pals,” he smiled. “You hit the numbers boys; and on your very first try. Here’s you money fellas,” he said as he counted out two twenties and two ‘Lincolns’. “Here’s 25 bucks apiece. Don’t be strangers. I’ll take your bets anytime.”

He had to shout his last words because Rock and I were joyfully skipping along the sidewalk on our way to catch the Eastbound train home.

“I’m going to give my share to my Mom so that she can fill up the coal bin right to the top and we’ll have heat for the whole winter,” I said.

“Me too,” Rock said. “This winter we won’t have to be running after the coal cars and delivery trucks picking up the few pieces that fall off.”

“It’s a cold job and we hardly ever get more than a few pounds.”

“That’s true Meo, but what we got was sometimes the only heat we had. Our mothers are going to be so happy when we give them the money. I just can’t wait to get home and spread the news.”

Arriving home about six thirty p.m. we went to Rock’s house and proudly showed off our new clothes.

“I bought this suit for business reasons Mom,” Rock said. “But I also have a little something for you,” he said, handing her the five dollar bill and the two twenties.”

Huge droplets of happy tears poured from Mrs. Accomando’s eyes. She quickly ran to the Rexall Drug Store to use the payphone to call the Cape Cod Coal Company to come and fill up the bin. But before

she left, his Mom laid out a nice meal for us consisting of number ten spaghetti, drowning in her home-made sauce, which was loaded with tender chicken pieces as well as meatballs.

Rock shoved a hunk of Romano in a grinder and he soon generated a fluffy, white mountain of cheese that we spread on top of our spaghetti. A fresh loaf of Italian bread and a dish of butter ensured that we'd have plenty of delicious sop bread to sponge up every last drop of sauce from our plates. On the side was a green salad with a copious abundance of black olives, green peppers, and yellow onions.

"I ordered the coal," said his Mom, beaming as she walked through the door just as we were finishing our meal. She set down a platter of honey coated dough-balls called "Gigis" and sat down at the table with us. "I got nine tons of anthracite coal boys. Nine tons! It's enough for the entire winter. The man said that it was \$3.00 a ton and would cost \$27.00. I said, "I've got cash and I'll pay 25 dollars up front." He agreed to let me have the nine tons and is going to deliver it tomorrow."

Next we went to my house where my Mom was disappointed that she did not get to feed us, but she forgave me for eating at Rock's when I handed her the 25 dollars. Like Mrs. Accomando, my Mom immediately ran to the payphone at Rexall to order the winter's supply of coal. We told her to demand the same deal as Rock's mom had struck.

Soon afterwards Rock went home and I found out later that just like me, he was so worn out by the day we had, that he went to sleep very early, even before our favorite radio program, Amos and Andy, on NBC at 8:30.

I woke up early in the morning and walked over to Rock's. I went around behind the house and tapped on his bedroom window. He raised the screen and I climbed through. We were both still on cloud nine from winning the fifty dollars! But since it was a regular work day for us, we decided to go to Mr. Nickerson's to buy some fresh stock for our train sales. When we entered the store we were greeted by Jim Adams, the Chief of the Harwich Police Department. He had a sour look on his face.

"You're under arrest boys. The store was robbed overnight. There was no forced entry. The thieves entered the store through the cellar. Mr. Nickerson said that the only people who knew there was a secret entrance to the shop through the cellar were his family and the two boys who ran the train vending business – and that's you two."

"We didn't do it Chief Adams. Mr. Nickerson has always been fair with us. We'd never steal from him," Rock protested.

Our fate was sealed a few minutes later when the Chief found two boys' size shirts on the floor behind the empty cash register.

These shirts certainly look like they are your size. I'm pretty sure that I can prove they are yours."

The sheriff locked us up in the regular jail, there being no facilities for juveniles. Later when the sheriff found out that we had given our mothers fifty dollars, he was one hundred per cent sure that we were guilty.

“Boys, the evidence proves your guilt. I found your shirts in the store and you had fifty dollars; exactly the amount that was stolen. You say you won that money from a bookie in Hyannis. Well even if there is such a man, he’s not going to admit that he took bets from two young boys. If he did that he’d be putting himself behind bars for ten years. And the woman who sold you your suits says that her store never takes items in trade. She swore that you walked out with your old shirts and that she never even touched them let alone kept them.”

They held us for two weeks until the circuit judge came to Harwich. In a quick trial we were convicted and sentenced to six months in reform school. We again protested that we had given our shirts to the red haired girl at Nifty Thrifty where we bought our suits. But Peggy Birch held fast to her lie and denied that she took the shirts in trade.

“We sell things, but we don’t trade for our merchandise. People can sell us clothing, but contrary to what those boys claim, we have never required people to give up their old clothing when buying something from us.”

She being a Birch, and us being E-I-E-I-Os, naturally the judge took her word over ours. We were sent to the nearest reformatory, located in a section of the Taunton State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

We worked hard in reform school and rapidly became favorites of the headmaster and at the same time we were popular with the other inmates, many of which were E-I-E-I-O kids just like us. We were put to work in the shoe shop, making footwear for the other boys in the juvenile unit as well as for the adult inmates.

The very day our time was up we headed straight for Nifty Thrifty on Left-over Main to find out why the red haired girl, Peggy Birch, lied and got us sent away. When we got there and confronted her she seemed terrified, but then a heavy set young man with sandy blond hair walked out of the back room and said.....

“I’m the spider and I’m going to swat two little flies.”

“Reggie Nickerson, what are you doing here?” I shouted.

“Well little E-I-E-I-O boy, didn’t you know that Peggy Birch is my girlfriend. She used to live in Wellfleet but moved to Hyannis when her father hired her to run his thrift shop. “

“Don’t tell them anything Reggie, they’ll tell the cops.”

Though we had beaten the broad shouldered teenager in the confines of the train, we had no hope in this battle. Reggie charged Rock and hit him so hard with a loping overhand right that he was knocked out cold. The force of the punch caromed Rock like a billiard ball into a nearby wall where his already injured head slammed against the plaster with a sickening thud.

I charged the young giant and peppered his face with a series of hard left and right hooks. Five times, six, and seven; I banged his face as hard as I could. It was literally like hitting a stone punching bag. My

strikes failed to put a dent in him and just got him madder. He brought his knee up and jabbed me hard in the stomach. I fell forward and ran into a right uppercut that almost put my lights out forever.

When I woke up later with no idea of how long I had been out, I found myself sitting in a wooden chair with my ankles tightly bound to the stout wooden legs and my arms tied behind my back. My head throbbed like I had been hit by the broad part of an axe. It hurt to move, so I slid my eyes a little bit to the left and then the right until I spotted Rock. He was tied up the same as me, in a chair. But he still hadn't come to. I was pretty sure that his skull had been cracked.

"They wouldn't leave well enough alone Peggy! If they had gotten out of jail and let me be, I wouldn't have gone after them. But they came here and I'm sure they've figured out that I'm the one who robbed my unde's store and planted their shirts on the floor."

Reggie ranted on, becoming more and more enraged. His face got red, he became almost incoherent as he revealed that he was going to take Rock and me to Monomoy Island and slaughter a few seals to get a shark fury going.

"When the sea begins to boil red blood with seal guts and Great Whites, I'll throw the two little E-I-E-I-Os in the middle of the frenzy. There'll be nothing left of them. Nothing!"

He was so out of control that he refused to listen when his girlfriend told him to quiet down. "Somebody might come in the store and hear you and figure out what's going on."

"If anybody comes in, I'll kill them too," fumed the out of control youth. "I'll kill anybody that stands in my way – even you Peggy if you get out of line."

Somebody did overhear him.

A potential customer named Luigi Giuseppe D'ambrosio had come to Nifty Thrifty because he had heard that the store had just gotten in a stock of nearly new, gym equipment. Luigi, was a slight man in his 20s. Barely five feet tall, he weighed 128 pounds. Though he looked frail; when he figured out what was going on he strode quickly into the back room and confronted Reggie....

"Turn around and clasp your hands behind your back. Do it now, before you get hurt!"

"What are you going to do little man?" derided the heavy set Reggie Nickerson. Flexing his muscles he rushed at the thin man with dark curly hair.

With the rapidity of a gymnast, Luigi sidestepped the rushing young bull, sticking out his foot as Reggie went by. Nickerson tripped and landed face first on the floor. The only thing hurt though was his pride. He quickly got up, still 100 per cent certain that he'd rip the tiny man apart with one solid thump.

He launched a massive overhand right, the same punch that nearly killed Rock. The little warrior saw it coming and countered with a blocking left that made the swipe miss its target by so much that the youth almost fell over again.

Luigi rocketed three quick lefts to Reggie's ear. The heavily muscled young man howled in pain - but not for long. The pint sized combatant followed up his hooks with a straight right hand that shattered the nose of the sandy haired demon. Reggie crumpled to the floor. All the fight was gone from him along with his consciousness.

"That was the most amazing thing I've ever seen", said Rock, who luckily had awakened to witness the entire battle, and who was not seriously hurt after all.

"Me too. Even the giant Primo Carnera couldn't have wiped up the floor with Reggie the way you did mister. Who are you anyway?"

"My name is Luigi Giuseppe d'Ambrosio," he said as he untied us.

"You're an E-I-E-I-O like us. I'm Meo Fortunato and my pal is Rocco Accamando.

Well boys I am an E-I-E-I-O but I'm not as brave as you guys. I've altered my name and hidden my heritage, but someday I promise you, I will change my name back to what it used to be.

The police came and hauled away Nickerson. Rock, Luigi, and I decided not to say anything about Peggy's involvement. Just the look of disgust in her eyes when she finally realized how bad a guy that Reggie was, was enough to convince us that she had learned a valuable lesson.

Luigi drove us home in his brand new 1935 Packard Super Eight limousine, with whitewall tires.



1935 Packard Super-Eight

“Hey Luigi, you must be awful rich to have a snazzy car like this,” I commented.

“I do pretty well for myself guys. We’re going to be great friends from now on, so I’ll tell you this much for now. I am a friend of Primo Carnera. It was he who told me about Cape Cod and convinced me to vacation here this summer.”

“You know Primo Carnera!” we both screamed. “The great Italian boxing champ. Do you really know him!”

“Yes I do know him and what’s more, I’ll even bring him here to meet you next week. How’s that?”

Well Rock and I were suddenly on top of the world. Primo Carnera did indeed come to Harwich for a community picnic and everybody knew that it was Rock and me who were his pals. Unexpectedly, the whole town loved us and nobody was calling us E-I-E-I-Os any more.

The guy that owned the houses where Rock and I lived, told our Moms that he was reducing the rent and he said he’d send crews in to repaint the buildings and fix anything that was broken.

A couple of weeks later we found out what our pal Luigi did for a living. As we suspected, he was a professional prize fighter. He wasn’t just an ordinary pug however - he was the undisputed champion of the 130 pound (lightweight) division.

Luigi gave us ringside seats for his title fight against the great Hall of Fame Boxing Champ Tony Canzoneri. He set us up with first class train tickets to New York City for the fight. He put us up in the heart of the city at the Hotel Pennsylvania across the street from the railroad station and right next to The Garden. We got to hang out with Primo Carnera and a whole raft of other great boxers.

The only sad part of our great vacation was that Luigi lost his lightweight title in a fifteen round decision to Canzoneri; who simultaneously held championship belts in three different weight divisions between 120 and 140 pounds.

Rock and I were dejected until, Luigi, who was unmarked after the battle, said, “Don’t worry. I had a rematch clause in the contract. I’ll fight him again in the summer of 36 and next time I will beat him.”

* * *

Well boys I’ve run out of story and just at the right time. Here we are at Seymour Pond,” said G-pop to his grandsons.

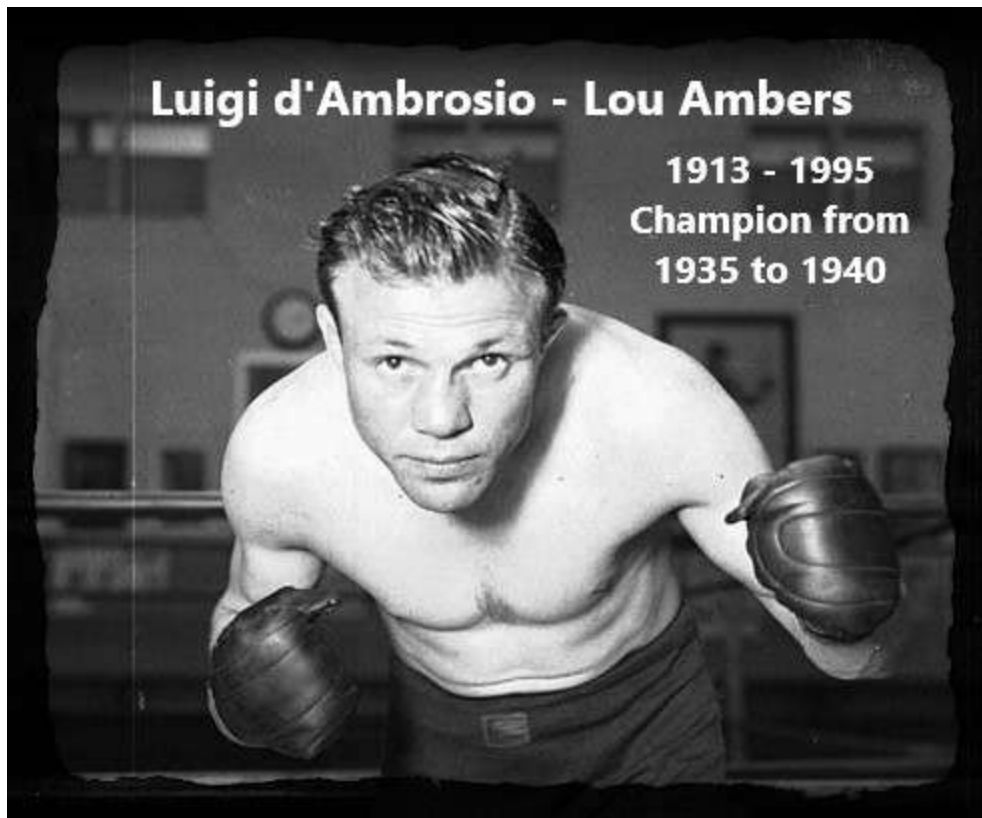
“Wait G-pop. Finish the story,” said 12 year old Carmine.

“Yes we want to know if he won back the championship,” added ten year old Lucca.

“Well boys. The next summer, in 1936, Rock and I got a letter from Luigi. Inside were two ringside tickets to the rematch at Madison Square Garden. There was also a carbon copy of the reservation he made for us at The Pennsylvania Hotel, as well as first class railroad tickets from Cape Cod to the Pennsylvania Station in New York City.”

“Please don’t keep us in suspense G-pop. Did Luigi win?”

“After that loss in 1935, he won 15 straight bouts leading up to that title fight and yes, he won! He gained back his title and he kept it until 1940. When he retired a while later he had a record of 88 wins and only eight defeats. Our pal Luigi was one of history’s greatest warriors. But to me and to Rock, his biggest fight was the one at Nifty Thrifty on Left-over Main in Hyannis when he saved our lives.”



“What happened to him after he quit boxing,” Carmine wondered.

“Well Carmine,” said G-pop. “You could look it up on Wikipedia and get the details of his great career. But if you look up Luigi d’Ambrosio you will not find anything. To search for our buddy, you’d have to look up ‘Lou Ambers’ – that was his ring name. He used it all through the 1920s and into the 1940s. But when he quit, just like he told us he would, he changed his name back to Luigi d’Ambrosio and he opened up Luigi’s Spaghetti House which he operated until his death in 1995 at the age of 81.”

“Why did he change his name G-pop?” asked Lucca. “Was he afraid that people would call him an E-I-E-I-O?”

“Nah! That wasn’t it,” said G-pop. “He did it for his mama. He wasn’t ashamed of being an Italian-American. He was ashamed of being a boxer. As soon as he started fighting he came up with the ring name Lou Ambers so that his Italian mother would never find what he was. He knew that it would have broken her heart to learn that he was a prize-fighter.”

* * *

The three Fortunato males, one very old and two very young, set their towels down on the sand at Seymour Beach. Though the sun was hot and the day was fair, there were no other towels or blankets in the sand. They had the place to themselves.

Far out in the lake something huge breached the quiet waters, its shiny underbelly flashed bright white in the sun. Its scale-less, black back was crowned by a spiny, poison dorsal fin, shaped like a sail. The thing fell back into the water. Just before it hit the surface, the creature seemed to look at the three Fortunatos - Camine, Lucca and old Meo.

It opened its flat, broad mouth revealing rows of sharp, dagger-teeth. On either side of its horizontal face were two long, sharp tendrils. There were four more whisker-like spikes under its mouth and another pair on top of its head. The fish, if fish it were, seemed to be at least five or six feet long.

“Look G pop - it’s a killer catfish. Do you think they’ve come back?”

“I hope the sun was just playing a trick on us. As far as I know, Jimmy Catfish is gone and so are his deadly playmates.”

“That may be so,” Lucca allowed, “but I think I want to go back to the store and call my dad and have him pick us up and take us to Race Point Beach in P-Town.”

“But there’s Great White Sharks there.” said his brother Carmine.

“Look Carmine, you’ve heard about Jimmy Catfish and his killer fish, from G-pop just like I have. I’ll take my chances with a shark any day rather than have to tangle with Jimmy Catfish and the killer catfish of Cape Cod.

The end.

Bill Russo, retired on Cape Cod, was educated in Boston at the Huntington School and at Graham College in Kenmore Square. He was editor of several newspapers in Massachusetts as well as a former disc jockey, news writer/presenter, and broadcaster for various outlets in New England.

His sighting of a swamp creature just before the turn of the century, led to appearances in the Bridgewater Triangle Documentary Film, America's Bermuda Triangle, and on Destination America's Monsters and Mysteries series.

In addition to his radio and newspaper work, he held management positions in logistics and warehousing as well as a stint as an ironworker and President of Boston Local 501 of the Shopmen's Ironworkers Union.

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Bill's Blog is called Adventures in Type and Space: <http://billrrrr.blogspot.com/>

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