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# Life on Kentucky Street, 1930

by Gilbert Gia, as told by Minnie Molinaro

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I was eleven when a hobo knocked on our back screen door. We hadn't been in Bakersfield very long.

In 1928 Pa packed us up in the truck and we left Redding for good. He had tried to manage with us three kids – me and my little brothers Pete and Paul-- but our mother was gone, her doctor bills were high, and Pa had broken his leg. It was too much.

On the way down to Bakersfield he told us to watch out the back window. He wasn't speeding, and it was years later that I figured out why he was worried. At the east end of Roberts Lane we turned onto Chester, crossed over the River bridge, and he pulling into a trailer park to call my mother's brother Eduardo Battini and his wife, Attilia. We had to find the 1500 block of Monterey Street on the east of town.

Times were hard then, but I didn't know it. It wasn't until 1933 when Joe and I got married that I had to manage family finances. Joe and his brother Frank filled in at their father's janitor job at the Professional Building, the one that used to be across the alley from the Padre, but then Joe got a clerking job at the A&P. After they made him the store manager he was bringing home a good paycheck, \$200 a month. Our rent was \$40, and groceries were \$25. Our family grew to three children. In 1943 Joe went into the Merchant Marine, and that \$200 A&P check turned into a \$110 a month Government allotment. It wasn't much, but we managed.

Well, Pa drove us out to Zio and Zia Battini's. They had three bedrooms and five of their own kids-- Stella, Henry, Josephine, Ernestine, and Louie. With Ezio Gia's family there were eleven in the house. Pa still couldn't work, but Zio had his job at the shops, and my aunt's kids sold flowers from her garden and some things Henry made, like bamboo rakes.

My aunt had a table in her front room and served lunch to the Italians that worked at the SP shop across Kentucky. They never gave her the money. After they left we picked up quarters from underneath their plates. People said my aunt could put two pennies together and make a dime, but she was generous in her own way, and she always had something to give the hobos who knocked at our back screen door. That was a good thing she did.

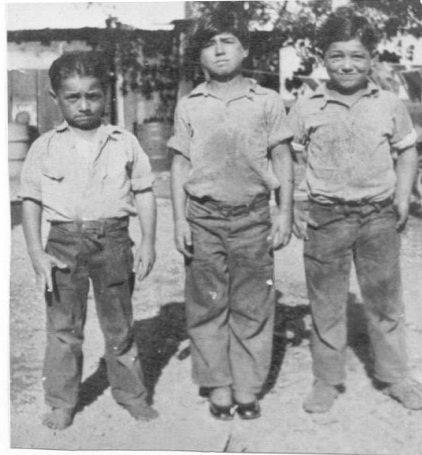
Zia knew those men were around, but she never hooked the back screen. We'd hear a knock, and the first words were "Do you have any work I can do for food?" There was work. We had a garden, and some of our neighbors needed wood split for their backyard brick ovens. Everybody gave the hobos coffee or whatever they could spare from the kitchen. A few men stayed an afternoon, a few a day or two. But they always washed and drank at the yard hose and ate in the back yard out of tin pie plates. We never had any trouble. I learned things from Zia while we lived there.



Zia Battini and Minnie Molinero, about 1991

In the first months we were on Kentucky Street a horse-drawn cart came by selling vegetables, but our regular groceries were delivered by a car or pickup. Another thing I remember is those families who set up little grocery stores in their front rooms, but we never got our groceries that way. We could have traded with any of the four Italian grocery stores in town--the two Fanucchi stores and the Paccini & Maloni's Grocery on 19th, but we always did our business with Pete Belluomini's City Grocery on 19th by the Rex Theater. In the morning three days a week Mr. Belluomini came out Kentucky Street to take orders, and by afternoon one of

his boys had a box of groceries on our kitchen table. I'm sure Pa paid for our food, but I never heard him say anything about it to me. I didn't know how to manage money then.



Pete, Minnie, and Paul Gia

Once a week the iceman brought ice for the icebox. He never came inside. He only came when Pa was home. Then there was Fontana's on Sumner Street. We got our pies from them, 25 cents a pie, and I remember the women who delivered them. The pies were on the back seat of her car. Larson's brought us milk, and Gueydan's French Bakery delivered bread to us

After the Depression, a lot of single men were on the road. I never saw this myself, but they told me that boxcars would roll by with their doors wide open, and they'd be full of men. My aunt's house was at the end of the railroad yard fence just east of the SP dormitory at Haley and Kentucky, so across from our house there wasn't any fence at all, just the cattle pens backing up to the tracks. Hobos jumped off there.

In 1930 I started at KCHS [Bakersfield High School], but I quit going after a few weeks. Nobody came around looking for me, and anyway I was needed at the new house that Pa had rented. By then he was working three part-time jobs -- the SP shops, the Eastside Bottling Works, and fieldwork he did for the Del Papas. With money coming in, Pa got a house for us closer to Baker Street than my aunt's at 1420 Kentucky. The new place belonged to the Pitalliers, and Margaret Banducci lived next door.

Today everybody locks their doors, but in those days we never did. A family could go off for a month and leave their doors unlocked. I wasn't afraid of being by myself all day long because there were always

people around. Most of our neighbors didn't have cars, and the mothers were home working, or they were visiting their next door neighbors. Some SP shift men slept in the daytime, old people were here and there, and deliverymen came and went. I think neighborhoods were busier than today.

The high-backed SP fence separated us from the tracks, so we didn't see too many hobos at our back door. But if one did come by, I was the 13 year-old girl handing out a cup of coffee, or a sandwich, or some bread and cheese, just like Zia Battini.

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