

WHAT IS MANCHESTER TODAY?

By Joe Camposeo, Heritage Day, June 13, 2015, at Cheney Hall

Introduction, by Susan Barlow, co-chair of Heritage Day:

Our keynote speaker for Heritage Day is our Town Clerk, Joseph V. Camposeo. He was elected Town Clerk and has served since 1996, before which he served on the Board of Directors (1991-1996) and the Board of Education (1978-1988). Joe has been named to various committees for legislation, technology, education, elections, and historic preservation. Joe has been a member of the Manchester Rotary, UNICO, Army & Navy Club, President of the Manchester Sports Hall of Fame, and President of the Manchester Scholarship Foundation. Joe's family came here from Italy, and brought their customs, language, music, and food, as have many before and since. Joe's office, at Town Hall, works with Manchester's diverse population, and he's the perfect speaker to kick off today's Heritage Day, celebrating what Manchester is today.

It was about sixty years ago, I stood here in this storied building called Cheney Hall. I was here delivering *The Manchester Evening Herald* with a neighborhood "buddy" who I helped with his paper route. We began at the fire station next door, where the "Herald" delivery truck left off the newspapers. From here we delivered to the mansions and then the apartments and the small businesses along Main Street. Our deliveries ended at the Army & Navy Club where each day the bar keeper would give us a free "Coke."

The pleasant memories of that paper route have become a reminder to me of how little Manchester has changed.

At the time – the early 1950s – the Cheney Mills were still a productive entity of post-War America. The schools and the homes, as well as the many stores on Main Street, were symbols of Manchester as a haven of opportunity. Whether you were like myself, a product of immigrant heritage recruited to work in the silk mills, or a teacher summoned to help us learn, or a captain of industry committed to the creation of productive jobs, Manchester was truly a place to work, to learn, and to share and be connected to the many customs of this very diverse community.

Opportunities prevailed in many different ways. From farming to manufacturing and now the age of technology, we have not wavered from the potential this great town has to offer its citizens. First there was fertile land to plant crops, creating the opportunity to live off the land. Next we had the shift to manufacturing that helped create jobs and build the infrastructure, along with roads and homes. And finally today, we have seen Manchester become a first responder to the shift from manufacturing to entrepreneurships.

Let's look at some data that shows the growth of small business in Manchester. Our records at the town clerk's office show that in 1956 there were 104 business registrations. In 1976, there were about 200. In 2014, there were 319, and there are more than 400 over the past twelve months. Some examples: Restaurants, nail salons, variety and convenience stores as well as small cultural centric grocery stores.

Joe Camposeo speaking at
Cheney Hall 6/13/2015
During Pride in
Manchester Week
Photo by Peter Polomski



In 1936, my Father opened the Walnut Barbershop (just about five blocks north of this very building). The opportunity he saw was to cut and style hair for the many that worked at Cheney Brothers and their families. In 2015, that same opportunity exists for the many shops owners who aspire to provide quality service and products. Like my Father, many of the entrepreneurs we see have come here for a chance to grow a business and to provide for their families. Clearly, the entrepreneurial spirit of the past is back once again in Manchester.

So, in many ways the opportunities here in Manchester are the same, yet the cast is different. Between 1900 and 1920, the number of Italian-born working at the Cheney silk mills grew to nearly 10% of its workforce. Although there is no recruiting of Italians, Swedes, German and Irish as there was by Cheneys, there is an attraction to Manchester by those from different parts of the world who seek to achieve success. Since January of this year, there have been 312 births to Manchester residents. The number born to families that originated in another country was 120 or 38% of all Manchester births. The families are from thirty different countries, none of which are Italy, Sweden, Germany or Ireland.

Diversity and change sometimes do not come without consequences. My father would sometimes talk about the negativity he personally experienced. As first-grade students, he and other children of Italian immigrants were often harassed on the way to school by other students, who sometimes would hurl rocks at them and taunt them verbally. To their credit, my father and many others soon put this negativity to rest by showing that they were proud of this country and that being here in the U.S. meant a lot to their families.

Not unlike those from other countries, Italian-Americans assimilated into American society, but kept an appreciation for their traditions, and of course their food and their music.

To some extent, many years later we would still see a sense of discrimination. I personally, encountered this as a college student in Kentucky in the 1960s. I remember going into a restaurant with two friends – one from Mexico and the other a Black American. To my surprise, this same restaurant I once went to alone would not serve us. Ironically the entire wait staff was Black.

Although we may still see some examples of this regrettable behavior, I truly believe that Manchester is in a position to be a “partner to positive change.” We have many programs, places to go, and things to do for people of all ages. Our Senior Center, our recreation programs, and our outreach to help others are all making a positive impact on Manchester.

Take for example these publications: *“How Do You Spend Your (Out of School) Time”* and the *“A Better Manchester”* magazine with page upon page of activities for our young people. There of course are many programs for adults and senior citizens, as well as for families. What about events such the Fourth of July fireworks, the concerts in the park, the “Manchester Road Race” and the classic car show.

It is this kind of undertaking that will help Manchester move forward in a positive way. As a town of opportunity, the table has been set. Now it is up to all of us to work together and become “a partner with change.”