

RAMSEY COUNTY  
**History**  
*A Publication of the Ramsey County Historical Society*

*Growing Up  
in St. Paul  
My Family and La Nuova Vita*

*Eugene A. Rancone*  
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**Fall 2013**

Volume 48, Number 3

*Five Firemen Buried Under Falling Walls*

Remembering Heroes: The Midway Transfer Fire of 1900

*Patrick L. Shannon*

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*The Firefighters' Memorial, Oakland Cemetery, St. Paul, on a cloudy October day. This is where three of the five firefighters who died in the Midway fire of 1900 are buried. In 1868 the Firemen's Association purchased six lots at Oakland Cemetery for the burial of members who were killed while fighting fires. Later more lots were added. Then in 1890 identical bronze memorials designed by William A. Van Slyke were installed at Oakland and Calvary cemeteries to honor these heroes. For more on the Midway fire and the men who died fighting it, see page 3. Photo courtesy of Patrick L. Shannon.*

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# RAMSEY COUNTY History

Volume 48, Number 3

Fall 2013

THE MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON DECEMBER 20, 2007:

The Ramsey County Historical Society inspires current and future generations  
to learn from and value their history by engaging in a diverse program  
of presenting, publishing and preserving.

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and by a contribution from the late Reuel D. Harmon*

## A Message from the Editorial Board

Sometimes, history reminds us that we are fortunate to live in a later age. In this issue, Patrick Shannon's story of the great Midway fire of 1900 recounts how five firemen perished in the blaze that consumed the wooden interior of the McCormick Harvester Building. No smoke alarms or sprinkler systems were present, and the ill-placed hydrants lacked enough water to adequately supply the horse-drawn hose wagons. On the other hand, some stories are timeless. Gene Rancone's tale of growing up in St. Paul in a strong Italian family stresses the hard work and family bonds that can still strengthen the resolve of a young person finding his way in the world. And, of course, politics is always with us. Ruby Hunt, an articulate former St. Paul City Council member, gives us an insider's view of the infamous Rosalie Butler–Milton Rosen feud that made newspaper headlines in the 1960s and '70s. Maybe those times were not "the thrilling days of yesteryear," as the Lone Ranger might have it, but their stories make for a lively read today.

If you value *Ramsey County History* and want to ensure it continues to publish interesting and colorful stories of the people and events that have shaped our community's history, then please make a contribution to the Ramsey County Historical Society's Annual Appeal. You can either send your gift to RCHS at 323 Landmark Center, 75 Fifth Street West, St. Paul, MN 55102 or call RCHS at (651) 222-0701. We appreciate your help.

*Anne Cowie,*  
Chair, Editorial Board

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# Growing Up in St. Paul

## My Family and *La Nuova Vita*

*Eugene A. Rancone*

**B**eginning in 1978 Eugene (Gene) A. Rancone began compiling notes for a memoir in which he planned to “leave a trail” of his life that would describe the importance of his parents, his Italian heritage, the world of St. Paul, and his Catholic religion had for him and how they shaped his later career as a commercial land developer. What follows are some excerpts from the book that Gene eventually wrote in 2010 with short comments added by the editor that provide information on parts of Gene’s story that have been omitted.

### **The Rancone Side**

Granpa Rancone, Salvatore, and my grandmother, Anna Maria Pompei both came from L’Aquila area in Italy. Their relationship was tenuous and it all started like this.

Granpa was a machinist by trade and worked for the railroad in Italy. He decided to move to America and start a new life, “La Nuova Vita” (more on this later). He came through Ellis Island on to Pennsylvania and then to Chicago, and finally to St. Paul where he got a good job with the railroad at the Omaha Shops off West Seventh Street.

When he had enough money saved, he sent for his fiancée, and went to Ellis Island to pick her up. He inquired at the staging area, and looked through the manifest and found the name of Pompei, but the first name was not that of his fiancée, but rather her older sister, Anna Maria. He found her in the crowd and had to decide whether to sign for her, send her back, or leave her on her own in New York. He said, “What was I to do?” He claimed her, and brought her back to St. Paul. They married and raised their family. You see, the folks in Italy felt the oldest sister should marry first. Granpa didn’t love Anna Maria and it was evident in the marriage and the family was raised in that atmosphere. Granma was an impeccable housekeeper and excellent cook. My sister, Lorraine, is a clone of Granma. She looks and is built like

her—a wiry, strong, little lady at five feet and 100 pounds. Granma was a tough taskmaster. Although less emotional, she was just as passionate in her love for we children. There were lots of hugs and kisses for us and especially pinches. She thought the harder she pinched, it meant the more she loved us. God, it hurt.

Granpa Salvatore was a quiet man. He smoked a pipe and would walk around the block, hands folded behind his back. Sometimes he would take me walking with him, stop at the corner saloon and buy me a Nut Goodie. He was a detail-oriented man and kept things in a very neat order. Besides his work on the railroad, he sharpened lawnmowers in the shed garage behind the house. Everything was kept in order and each tool had its place. Lawnmower wheels hung in a neat row on the rafters, and his notebook showing his customers’ addresses was neatly kept. I wish I had kept his notes and book, but somehow they were lost. I believe I inherited some of his traits.

He had a Model T that had an open back, kind of like a pickup, and we would take delight when he would let us sit in the back. Once we were going down Seventh Street and the police stopped us. The policeman told Granpa he was speeding and Granpa was thrilled.

During the course of his work Gram and Granpa moved with the railroad to Livingston, Montana to work in the main-



*Gene Rancone, age 4. Photo courtesy of Eugene A. Rancone.*

tenance shops [of the Northern Pacific Railway]. My dad, Tony, was born there. Upon moving back to St. Paul, Granpa built a wonderful brick house on the corner of Bay and James, and it’s still there. And so they raised their family with four boys and one girl. The girl drowned in a bucket in the backyard, and one little boy was shot by a pellet gun by the neighbor boy and died. Dad had two brothers, Leonard and Ed. Each of them was a character.

The boys grew up under some tough rules and if they didn’t come home at the required time, they were locked out and therefore spent quite a bit of time on their own. All three barely finished grade school. My dad was the oldest and he sold newspapers on the corners in downtown St. Paul, as well as delivering them to the shops and to Nina Clifford’s brothel on Washington Street. Ed became a small-time boxer and went under the name of Eddie Rogan. He became mixed up with the “Kid Cann” (Isadore Blumenfeld)

mob in Minneapolis and lived on the edge of the law. Our family name was really spelled RONCONE, but when Ed ran into gang trouble, my dad changed the spelling to RANCONE. Leonard was a car mechanic and an all-around handyman, and was always good to me.

As time went on, Granpa passed away and on the night of his death, I remember very clearly sitting in Granma's dining room. She got up, did a little jig, and said "Finally—I'm free!"

A few years later, Granma was in the Little Sisters of the Poor nursing home and in a coma. I received a call from McKees Rocks, Pennsylvania, and the caller asked if I was related to Anna Maria Pompei Rancone. "Yes, that's my grandmother," I replied. The caller asked if she was living because her younger sister wanted to talk with her. I told him of Granma's condition and advised him that if she came out of the coma, I would call him. I asked why the family waited so long to call. He replied that his dad just died and wouldn't let his wife call because she was the one who was Granpa's fiancée. Granma died the next day.

Shortly thereafter, I had to go on a business trip to New York and stopped in Pennsylvania to see the family. It was a scene out of *Archie Bunker* in a tough suburb. When I arrived at their home, the whole family was there including the parish priest. A big meal of pasta, wine and all the trimmings was served. During the meal, I talked to Granma Rancone's younger sister and she told me, "There were two difficult marriages for the Pompei sisters. One was McKee's Rocks; the other in St. Paul."

## The Palumbo Side

This side by far had the most influence in my life.

Granpa and Granma Palumbo—Anthony and Filamina both came from the Campobasso region, which is about 150 miles southeast of Rome.

Granpa Tony came to the U.S. with his father in about 1895.

Here again they wanted to start a new life—*La Nuova Vita*. Granpa was about twelve years old and he and his dad worked for the railroad, Granpa, as a water boy. They had come through Ellis



*Gramp and Gran Palumbo. Photo courtesy of Eugene A. Rancone.*

Island and started with the railroad in Pennsylvania.

One day an Italian friend, who was also working with the railroad, asked, "Tony, how much do you make a month?" Tony answered, "\$20.00 a month." The friend asked, "And how about your son? What does he make?" Tony told him \$2.00 a month. The Italian said, "Antonio, that Irish foreman is taking half of your pay each month, and I am going to have a little talk with him and get you your full pay." Granpa said, "Please don't. I don't want to start any trouble for me and my son." The Italian told him not to worry. He went to the Irishman and explained to him that if he didn't stop taking Palumbo's money, he might have a tragic accident. From then on, Tony and his son got their full pay. Tony went to his friend and thanked him and asked how he could repay him. The fellow answered Tony, "Not now, but someday I will ask you to repay me in some way." It was a matter of honor to repay (Mafia influence).

Shortly thereafter, Tony, my great-grandfather, contracted pneumonia, and as he was in the construction shack dying, he said, "Son, I am dying. Please go to the farmer and ask him if you can bury me in his field." Granpa said, "But how will I know when you are dead?" Tony said, "When I am stiff, I am dead."

And so Granpa buried his father in a field in Pennsylvania. He then moved with the construction gang along the route to Chicago. Great Granpa's relatives were there, and Granpa moved in with them. By this time, Granpa's mother had come to the U.S. and lived in Chicago with family. Granpa's sister and husband also lived with them.

Granpa met my grandmother while in Chicago; she was fourteen and Granpa was twenty. Granpa married Filamina, and with his sister, they moved to St. Paul.

Granpa rented a house at 290 Chestnut Street (Chestnut and Exchange) and worked for the Water Department of St. Paul. This is the little house that became such an important part of my life. Granpa and Granpa raised their family in this little house, my mother Minnie (Carmella), Aunts Flem and Eve, and Uncles Joe, Pat, Louie, Danny, and Chuck.

Danny also worked for the Water Department, but had taken some time off to pursue his main interest, playing the drums. The foreman of the Water Department called Danny and asked him if he would like some extra work, maybe he could use the extra money for Christmas. Danny was delighted. There was a main waterline break in the street in downtown St. Paul, and Danny took the job, so he could buy presents for his daughter for Christmas, which was one week away. That afternoon Granma heard a siren from the ambulance going by and felt something terrible had happened. Granpa came home and shortly thereafter the police came to the house to ask Granpa to go up to the morgue to identify the workman that had been killed in a cave-in where a water main had broken. Granpa went to the morgue and saw a body. He saw the black curly hair and recognized that of his son Danny. He was not aware that Danny had taken the job. From that time on, Granpa's hands began to tremble and that stayed with him the rest of his life. The funeral was held during Christmas week. Granpa had witnessed three tragic deaths in his family: his father, his mother, and his son. These events impacted him for life.

Since then a memorial Mass is said for Danny the first Saturday of December and has been attended for the past 90 years. At the last Mass, there were 120

extended family members in attendance. We also get together the third week in June each year for dinner at Mancini's. We are so pleased the younger people want to perpetuate these functions.

About the extended family of my mother, in which I was raised, I can't emphasize enough the profound affect they had on my being. We spent almost every Thursday night (spaghetti night) and Sunday at the little house. If you couldn't stay for dinner on Thursday, you brought a pan to take the spaghetti home for your family.

### **My Parents— Tony and Minnie**

Minnie—My mother was a beautiful woman with flowing white hair at an early age, which enhanced her olive smooth complexion and her brown eyes. She was the “glue” in her family with her brothers and sisters after Gram and Granpa passed on.

While she was in grade school her first name was Carmella, but there were three other Carmella's in the class. She somehow came to be called “Minnie.”

As she grew into her teen years she got a job at the “Racket Store,” a place that carried fancy dishware, linens, etc. The store was owned by two really nice Jewish fellows. One of them, Abe Fridland, took a shine to mom and who knows? I might have been part Jewish if Mom hadn't met my Dad.

Tony, by then was establishing himself in the clothing business, and he had a natural talent for design and was good at sketching. He was a dapper dresser and that appealed to Mom. In due course, they were married and moved into a small apartment, which now houses Forepaugh's Restaurant. Shortly thereafter, they moved directly across from 290 Chestnut on the second-floor apartment owned by Patsy and Marie Capache. Here they had Lorraine, Jean, and me. Jeannie died, we believe, from meningitis when she was about four years old. When they had me about five years later, they chose Eugene as my name in memory of Jean.

Jeannie's death was a severe shock and had a lasting effect on Mom and Dad's relationship. Both came from



*Tony and Minnie, Gene's parents, in 1940.  
Photo courtesy of Eugene A. Rancone.*

strong, volatile family backgrounds and they displayed the temperament of both families. Dad was volatile with a temper. Mom could respond in kind because of growing up from a volatile Palumbo family. Lorraine and I therefore grew up in that atmosphere and I'm afraid we inherited some of these tendencies. I have thought many times the greatest flaw in my character was my temper and it negatively affected relationships. My impatience didn't help either.

As you can well imagine, the 1929 crash and the Thirties were tough. Our family went through some difficult times and we moved twelve times. Dad had the best of intentions and he was great in his craft, but for a while he didn't have a job. Finally he did get one with the Highway Department standing in the cold, counting cars as they crossed the Marshall Avenue Bridge. As time went on, he was able to start a little tailor shop on Seven Corners. There actually were seven corners and the shop was where the Xcel Energy Center is now. He called the shop The Triangle Tailors. He designed tailor-made suits and was beginning to do well. He did

enjoy having a drink and always seemed to locate next to a saloon. In this case, he was next to Chickett's Bar. As things progressed, he moved across the street and started Master Cleaners, still designing and making tailor-made suits, as well as having ready-made suits in stock. He also took in clothes to be dry cleaned. He had a true entrepreneurial spirit.

He would go to Chicago to buy ready-made clothes. On one occasion, he took in a partner so he could get enough money to buy more clothes. He took the backseat out of his car, went to Chicago and filled up the backseat with clothes. He arrived in St. Paul about midnight and unloaded the clothes at the shop. About 3 o'clock in the morning he got a call from the police department telling him that someone broke into the shop and stole all the clothes. He could never prove it, but he was sure his partner was the culprit. Dad was out of business and had to start over. He limped along and made a living until the war years came. He started a new shop called Cardinal Tailors. It was on Seventh Street, just off of St. Peter Street, and again Dad started to do well. Mom and I worked at the shop and finally Ma and Dad were able to buy their home at 1662 Juno. There were ups and downs, and stress in the family, but by and large, things were better than they had been for a long time.

Dad became very active in the Holy Redeemer Church [located at 68 West College Avenue, near where the Minnesota History Center now stands; demolished in the 1960s] and had quite a relationship with Monsignor [Louis F.] Pioletti. Dad was the force behind starting the spaghetti dinners at the church and helped get the church out of debt. He was enterprising.

During the war years, Dad's shop did very well. After the war, he moved the shop over on St. Peter Street off of Seventh Street. He really started a haberdashery and that went well. As time passed his smoking of two packs of Pall Malls a day took its toll and Dad really suffered from emphysema—to the point he had to quit smoking and go on oxygen. Ma would call me and say, “Bud, Dad is going to blow us up.” Dad would carry his oxygen tank, go into the kitchen, roll



up a piece of paper, and light it on the stove so he could smell the smoke.

Finally Dad became senile and Mom couldn't handle him anymore. We finally had to decide to put him in a home. So one day I went to the house and Ma had packed a little overnight bag. When I arrived Dad said, "Where are we going?" I told him we were going for a little ride. "Bud," he said, "No good is going to come of this ride." He was in the home a short time and continued to deteriorate. He finally died in 1973, at the age of 72—much too young. Mom continued on for another four years and finally died at the age of 76 of cancer. And so the inevitable cycle of life closed this chapter.

### Eugene Anthony Rancone

I was sometimes called as "Bud," "Eugene," "Geno," "Bus," or just plain "Gene."

I was born on February 13, 1929 to Minnie and Tony on the second floor of Patsy Capache's house at 289 Chestnut Street. Dr. Rodgers was in attendance along with a mid-wife. I was born about four and a half years after my sister Jean died, and I believe I somewhat filled a void.

My first recollection of early childhood was at about four years old.

Next to the Palumbo house were two houses on Chestnut Street and two in back of them. The Turittos were next to Granpa's house with another Italian family next to them. Behind them in the other two houses were two African American families. I remember sitting on Miss Sister's lap on a hot summer evening. Miss Sister was a large black woman with a very large bosom. Perspiration ran down my forehead from her warm body and my dark curly hair was in ringlets, and she was humming an old lullaby.

At about the same age, at Christmas time, all the ladies (my aunts) were at Granma's cooking and preparing the food for Christmas—homemade pasta, tomato sauce, meatballs, sautéed pork in the spaghetti sauce, pies, pizza and homemade bread. Wow! A wonderful aroma filled the air.

My sister, Lorraine, was grinding some meat for sausage. There was a little hole in the side of the grinder and I stuck my finger into it and off came the tip!



When this photo was taken of St. Paul's Seven Corners in the mid-1930s, Tony Rancone's tailor shop was in this area. Here multiple streets (Third, Fourth, Seventh, Eagle, and Main Street) all converged. Adding to the jumble at the intersection were two streetcar routes, pedestrians, and lots of automobiles. The large building in the center right of the photo is the Defiel Block, between Third (now Kellogg Boulevard) and Fourth at Seventh, where the Xcel Energy Center stands today. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

The ladies in the kitchen were in a panic. My mother grabbed a towel and wrapped my finger. Uncle Sal was the only man there and he had his car. So he took me up to Ancker Hospital [demolished in the 1960s and replaced by Regions Hospital] on Seventh Street to the emergency room to have my finger sewn up. My mother had fainted and when I returned she was resting on the bed, and I began to play on the floor. She was in more pain than me.

Just before Easter, Ma bought me a little live duck and as it grew, we would let it swim in a shallow pan of water. My two aunts from Chicago, Aunt Mary and Aunt Carrie, were visiting. I went outside to play and the aunts put the duck in a pan of water, but this time the water was deep. When I came in from outside and looked for the duck, it was lying in the bottom of the pan. Aunt Mary took the duck over to the store, to warm it up. She rubbed its stomach to see if any water would come up. The little duck moved its head and Aunt Mary took an eye dropper with a little whiskey, opened the duck's bill, and gave it a couple of squirts. The duck shook its head and began to stagger around. An Easter miracle!

About two months before Easter,

Granpa brought home a young lamb and put it in the yard to graze and grow. I played with the lamb every day and wherever I would go, the lamb followed. We would rest together in the yard, and we became inseparable.

Easter Sunday came and I returned from Mass with my mother and dad and ran in the yard to play with the lamb before lunch—no lamb. I went into the house and asked "Where is the lamb?" I looked on the table and there it was—head and all. In a panic, I ruined Easter dinner for the family.

I started grade school at the Cathedral [of Saint Paul]. We lived at 336 Pleasant Avenue, about four or five blocks from school. About the fifth grade, Sister would choose two boys to walk up to St. Joe's Academy to pick up fresh baked rolls. On the way back we would stop in the Cathedral church to warm up. This started my love affair with the Cathedral. I would sit inside and gaze at the dome, the altar, the statues and I decided someday I wanted to be an architect so I could build something like it. I have been fortunate to see many cathedrals in Europe, and our Cathedral ranks with any of them.

While at the Cathedral school I would



*This is the area of the Upper Levee flats known as "Little Italy" as seen from St. Paul's Smith Avenue High Bridge looking north shortly after the record Mississippi River flood of 1952. Although the city cleared all these homes by June 1960 and then built Shepard Road, which would run along the bank of the river parallel to the unpaved Spring Street on the right of the photo, it subsequently turned the area over to a scrap dealer. In the very top right-hand corner of the photo is the Farmers' Union (later Harvest States) grain elevator, which was located at the foot of Chestnut Street. St. Paul Dispatch-Pioneer Press photo. Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.*

walk down the hill to Seventh Street where Dad had his shop, The Master Cleaners. He would take me next door to Nardi's Deli and I would have a sandwich and a chocolate soda, not bad.

About the sixth grade, we moved in with Granma Rancone after Granpa died, and I went to school at St. James. We lived about two blocks from St. James, so it was easy to come home for lunch. Everyday Ma would have Campbell's chicken soup, a Spam sandwich and a coconut cream Paramount Pie. We would sit in the dining room, eat and listen to *Life*

*Can Be Beautiful* with Papa David and CiCi Conrad. It was a soap opera. Then on the way back to school Ma would give me two cents to buy a little square of chocolate at Dannecker's store and that was the routine, day in and day out.

Summers were spent on Chestnut Street playing Kick the Can, Rover, Rover, Come Over, and lots of Monopoly. In the back of Granpa's house was a large vacant lot with very high weeds, at least they looked high to us. It was our private jungle. We played Cowboy and Indians and built a shack. Also there were large

piles of sand on the lot and we would dig trenches and foxholes, and it was our desert in which to play Foreign Legion.

Granma would give us some potatoes and we would build a fire and roast them along with the pigeons we caught under the High Bridge. We didn't tell my mother and grandmother about the pigeons.

Winter nights we would lay on the couch with Ma and listen to *Intersanctum*, *Gang Busters*, or *The Little Theatre off Times Square*. On Saturday night without fail, we listened to the *Hit Parade* and *Kay Kaiser and His Kollege of Musical Knowledge*. They would play the hit songs of the week. We thought we were great singers as we sang along. We had popcorn and pop.

This sounds a little weird, but for entertainment, we snuggled on the couch and would take some of Ma's old silk stockings and take turns seeing who could make the longest run in the stocking. Crazy, but my sister, my mom, and I had fun.

In the seventh grade I began to work at the tailor shop and learned how to press clothes and run the sewing machine.

Ma wanted me to go to Cretin and so we went down to see the principal, Brother Berchman.

Ma said to him, "How do we go about getting Gene into Cretin?"

Brother Berchman said, "Well, Mrs. Rancone, first he has to pass the entrance test."

Ma said, "Fine. Now let's talk about the cost."

Brother said, "The tuition is \$75.00 a year."

Mom said, "I can't afford that."

He replied, "How much can you afford?"

Ma told him, "I will have Gene bring \$1.00 every Monday morning to your office." Brother Berchman gulped and said, "Okay, and if he passes the test and if he maintains a passing grade, he can come."

And so it was, and that is why I am so supportive of Cretin. It made a huge impact on my life.

*When Gene Rancone enrolled at Cretin High School in 1943, in his words, he felt like "a fish out of water." That soon changed because the ROTC program at*

*Cretin helped him to do well, especially since his uniform was always pressed and neat, thanks to his dad's tailor shop. While he was at Cretin, Gene's dad taught him how to box, a skill that he found helpful when dealing with bigger schoolmates. In his account for the Cretin years, he recalled the following episode.*

Mom and Dad went to Chicago over the weekend and the guys and I were playing cards and one of them mentioned how much he liked my mother's chicken soup, and how he could really go for some. I said, "I know how to make chicken soup. Let's go get a chicken." And so all of us got in my Nash [automobile] and went for a ride in the country. We stopped at a farm and bought a chicken. On the way back we stopped at Somerset Golf Club. Bob Dunst's dad was the general manager of the club and we spent a lot of time there. One of the guys opened the trunk to get a beer and the chicken jumped out and began to run on to the golf course. We were able to recapture the chicken, but we caught a lot of hell from Bob's dad.

Once back at the house, we knew someone needed to kill the chicken. If you can believe it, no one wanted to do it, so there we were with a live chicken. In order to get rid of it I put it in a small bag and we all went downtown to the Paramount Theatres with the chicken. We sat in the balcony right under the projection booth and during a scary part of the movie I took out the chicken and threw it up into the path of the light from the booth. Panic! The chicken began to squawk and it was bigger than life on the screen. We left by the side door with the ushers and managers close behind.

*While he was in ROTC, Gene signed up for the Minnesota Air National Guard, which involved attending regular drills one weekend a month and every Thursday evening. This was his introduction to flying. Following graduation in 1947, Gene enrolled at the University of Minnesota to study in the School of Engineering. He wanted to pursue his interest in architecture, but he found he "wasn't a very good student." Consequently he applied to the Aviation Cadet program in the U.S. Air Force, passed all the tests, and decided to become a pilot.*



*Gene Rancone's Cretin High School graduation photo from 1947. Photo courtesy of Eugene A. Rancone.*

*Gene began training in Texas in 1949. Despite the rigors of the aviation program, he did well and graduated in May 1950 and went on to Advanced Training in Oklahoma. He learned to fly C-119 twin-engine air transports. Following the outbreak of the Korean War, Gene's unit was deployed to Ashiya, Japan, where he was assigned to a Troop Carrier Squadron, which provided aerial supply to ground forces along the front lines on the Korean mainland. Twice planes that Gene was piloting went through incidents that could have killed him and his air crew. One assignment Gene received required him to fly a C-119 to Georgia for repairs. Once there, he took leave and went to St. Paul. During that break from flying, he met Bernadette (Bernie) Halloran, a young nurse at St. Joseph's Hospital. They fell in love and married in June 1952. By the time Gene had completed his four-year military obligation, he held the rank of first lieutenant and he and Bernie were the parents of a baby boy, Mark. The Air Force wanted Gene to stay in the service, but in 1953 he chose instead to return to civilian life and St. Paul.*

## **Starting My Business Career**

When we moved back from the service, my sister, Lorraine, and her husband, Dick, were gracious enough to let us live with them while I got my feet on the ground. Their home was on West Minnehaha and we had wonderful times together.

Well, here I was back to square one. The only credentials I had entering the market were that of a pilot. So I did the obvious thing, I applied at Northwest, Republic, and North Central Airlines. I had about 2,500 hours of multi-engine time, which was quite good. However, the airlines had an abundance of pilot applications of fellows who were in the recent wars. So, I had to wait it out. Dad encouraged me to work with him in the interim, and so I did. I was able to apply for two kinds of help from the G.I. Bill. One was a small subsidy for "on-the-job training." The second was for financial help to go back to school. I applied at the University of Minnesota and was given credit for my service classes and added to my first year at the U, I had about one and a half years credit. I wanted to acquire a two-year certificate in architecture and engineering. Actually, I was doing quite well at night school—a different time and motivation. As time progressed, we moved from St. Paul to Milwaukee and I didn't pursue finishing the courses—a mistake.

I also rejoined the Air Guard and all in all, with what little Dad paid me, the on-the-job subsidy and the Guard income, I was making about \$500 a month. In the Air Force with my flight pay, I made about \$800 a month.

At any rate, with my income and the ability to secure a G.I. loan at 4.5%, I bought a new house at 3712 Hazel Street—just off County Road E and White Bear Avenue. Dad wondered how I was going to afford \$110 per month payment plus all of the other living expenses. I wondered too, but went ahead.

Within a year the house was finished and we moved. I was working, going to the Guard one night a week and one weekend a month, going to night school, had a new house, and was raising a family.

I just didn't see a future at the tailor shop, especially having been exposed to all the things in service life, so I went to



an employment agency with a resumé. After about three months, I had an interview with a company called Flexicore. It was a national company that manufactured pre-cast, pre-stressed concrete products. They agreed to pay me \$500 a month to start and if it worked out after three months, I would get a raise to \$650 a month plus mileage and \$60 a day when I was on the road.

My job was to call on all the architects and large contractors in a three state area: Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. The goal was to get them to specify our product in their plans.

My flying came in handy. When I normally would have to drive to Fargo, Grand Forks, Rapid City, etc., I would go down to the Guard, get a T-6 airplane, and do a cross-county training flight. This way I could save part of the \$60 and also get reimbursed for the road miles. On some of the car trips I would sleep in the car, go to the YMCA, wash up and shave, and save the costs of a motel room.

As I grew in the job and after four or five years of attending the Flexicore national convention, I began to be known in the industry. George Harker, a fellow who had a Flexicore plant in Beloit, Wisconsin, approached me to take over the Wisconsin area. This was a much bigger market area. He said he would pay me \$1,200 a month plus expenses to start. I would have to move to Milwaukee. This was big money, so we sold the house in White Bear.

Mike was born while in the White Bear house, so it was Bernie, Mark, Mike, and I who moved to Milwaukee in 1957. Greg, our third son, was born in Milwaukee.

### **Durox**

In about 1961, I was aware of a group that was introducing a new concrete product to the St. Paul area. It was called Durox. Durox, a Swedish product, was cellular gas concrete made up of Portland cement, gypsum, silica, sand, and lime. In the process, aluminum powder was added as a catalyst to release hydrogen gas. By adjusting the amount of aluminum, one could change the density of the product from 25 lbs. per cubic foot to 45 lbs. per cubic foot. At 45 lbs. per cubic foot, pre-cast slabs varying in thickness



*Following his graduation from aviation cadet training at Connally Air Force Base in Waco, Texas, Gene's mother, Minnie, pinned on his wings. In the background is a B-25 Mitchell bomber. Photo courtesy of Eugene A. Rancone.*

could carry good floor loads. Regular concrete slabs weighed 150 lbs. per cubic foot. It was evident that a great deal of weight could be saved by using the gas concrete. At the lighter density the product could be cut with a handsaw and one could also nail into it. The product also had excellent insulation quality due to the cellular structure. The reason for this explanation is that the unions began to fight as to which union would have jurisdiction of the manufacturing and installation of the product. A little later on in the story the unions shot themselves in the foot and it led to the demise of the company. I do believe that this product with its versatility could have developed into a major

building product in the U.S. It was being successfully used in other countries in the world, and still is today.

At any rate, there were architects and contractors that had put money in the stock of the company and were aware of my experience in pre-cast concrete. Two of the principals of the group contacted me in Milwaukee and offered me a sales job at \$2,000 a month. Gene Kraut, the operations manager, and Ken Merrill, the business manager, were the ones who contacted me (Gene Kraut later became the head of the St. Paul Port Authority and Ken Merrill who was with the First National Bank, later founded the very successful Merrill Company).

When we moved back to St. Paul, we rented for a little while and finally bought a home at 2192 Fairmount Avenue, just west of Cretin Avenue. It was a four bedroom, two-story house that needed to be upgraded. We bought it for \$17,500. I began to remodel the house. I tore out the back wall and extended the kitchen. I took out the plastered walls down to the studs and put in new electrical and plumbing. When I ran into a plumbing problem, Uncle Chuck came over to help. I had all new kitchen cabinets, made and I installed them. I would come home from work in the Durox office in the Pioneer Building developing handbooks, advertising material, etc. about 5:30 and work on that house until about 1:00 a.m. And so it went for about four months, then the plant opened.

A new house and then a new kid, John, was born. About one and a half years later, a little girl was born and died in childbirth. We named her Mary and put her to rest at National Cemetery.

With the four boys and the passing of one little girl, our moving and the uncertainty of our livelihood, things were taking a toll on Bernie (and me too).

My job again was to call on the architects, engineers and contractors—the same ones I had called on before. After a year, I became the sales manager with a raise, and I also was in charge of bringing the product to Fire Underwriters Laboratory at Northbrook, Illinois, to establish a fire rating on the product. The fire tests were successful and we received our fire rating.

The largest and most known architectural firm in the Twin Cities was Ellerbe and Company. Their head engineer was a crusty old fellow, Elsa Gardner. He had been an officer in the Navy and we hit it off pretty well, but not at first. On one of my first calls to his office to introduce him to the product he asked a number of detailed questions. I didn't have the exact answers. He told me not to bother him again until I knew what the hell I was selling. Over the next week I interfaced with our Swedish chemist, Len Johnsson, and really went into the chemical analysis of the product. The following week I went back to Gardner and satisfied him with answers to his



*Gene Rancone in Korea standing next to a C-119, a twin-engine and twin-boomed cargo plane designed to carry troops or cargo. Gene piloted C-119s during his service in the Korean War in 1951–1952. Photo courtesy of Eugene A. Rancone.*

questions. From then on we established a friendship. If I could get Gardner at Ellerbe's to specify our product, we would really have our foot in the door. I was successful in having him specify our product as a roof deck on a building for Smeed Manufacturing, about 40,000 square feet of material—a substantial order. About this time we were having union problems at the plant and the union threatened a strike. Gardner was aware of the problem and said, "Gene, I'm going to specify your product, and I know your plant may go on strike. I don't care what you have to do, but don't disappoint me on delivery. If you do, I'll never specify the product again."

Let me go back a step. After I was made sales manager, the plant did go on strike and the investors decided they

were not going to put in any more money, and decided to try to sell the company. Contact was made with Union Carbide out of New York and Kraut, Merrill, and I made an initial trip to New York. The Union Carbide people were aware of "gas concrete" and interested in coming to the plant to look things over. At the end of about three months, they decided to give it a try and to work things out with the unions. They moved in and made me General Manager and President at a nice salary as I recall—about \$3,500 a month.

Now going back to Ellerbe. All of the above took about a year with Union Carbide and things seemed to be working out and yet another strike was in the offing and that's the one Gardner was worried about on specifying the product. Smeed Manufacturing was about ready for delivery of the product and the plant went on strike. I went to the workers and told them if we didn't manufacture the product for the Smeed project, we never would be able to have our product used again. Further, the unions would still be in business, but all of us would be out of a job. The workers went against their union rules and produced the product. The plant was on strike and Union Carbide said they had about enough and were not going to pay the workers for producing the product. I told Union Carbide I had promised the workers they would be paid and the Carbide manager did not agree.

I went to a highly respected and capable attorney, Jim Kelly, and told him what had occurred. It was on a Friday. On Monday morning there was an injunction delivered to Union Carbide Headquarters in New York. Things really hit the fan, and the Union Carbide man who issued the order not to pay the workers was reprimanded and the workers were paid. This is not the end of the story.

The material was loaded on the trucks ready to deliver, but the drivers belonged to another union and refused to move the product out of the plant. After a lot of dissuasion I told them I'd drive the trucks through the gate. I got in the cab of the first truck and went through the gate. As I made a turn, someone from across the street in the weeds shot out the front tire. Now there was dissension between the workers and the drivers. I called the police,

we changed the tire and some of the workers, not the drivers, delivered the product. We delivered as promised, but about four months later, Union Carbide pulled out. This was in late 1964 or early 1965.

Our company filed for bankruptcy and tried to reorganize and find new investors. The Swedish chemist and I kept on during this process, but to no avail. The company was finally totally closed down. I was back to square one. While I was still employed at Union Carbide, I did save some money each month because I, of course, didn't know if Union Carbide would totally take over; so I had a little cushion.

I began to look for a new position, but nothing was available. So as not to dissipate my savings, I took a job packing rubber stamps at Hoff Stamp Company at \$500 per month. Here is where not having a college degree limited me.

The two lowest and depressing times of my life were when I was very ill in the hospital when my mother died and I couldn't go to her funeral. The second time is when I was packing rubber stamps and felt with all my different experiences I could not support my family.

During my involvement with Durox I, of course, met many of the investors, one of whom was Les Melroe, the inventor of the "Melroe Bobcat," a front-end loader and very versatile machine. He approached me one day and asked me if I would be interested in developing a piece of land on 494 and France Avenue [in Bloomington, Minn.]. I, of course, said I would. He made me an offer of \$1,500 per month, an office, and the use of his secretary, plus 5% of the land if and when we sold it. Also, he had a Beach Bonanza Aircraft and asked if I would agree to fly him up to his factory periodically at Gwinner, North Dakota. I said it sounded really good to me, but I wondered if he would consider two changes. One, the reduction of my salary to \$1,000.00 a month and two, give me 10% of the land. He knew I had a family and needed the money, but said okay. He said the 10% wasn't right if I was taking a reduction in salary. He thought I should have 15% of the land. Quite a guy!

The land was zoned agriculture. My first objective was to get it rezoned to commercial as it would take on a

much different value. The land is in Bloomington, a community with strict guidelines. It took me about a year before finally getting the rezoning.



*The wedding photo of First Lieutenant Gene and Bernie Halloran Rancone. Photo courtesy of Eugene A. Rancone.*

During this time I set up a little company for myself called *Engineering Finance*. My concept was based on the idea that many people wanting to build something needed to find a real estate agent, get an architect, find a contractor, and financing, and pay a commission to all. I wanted to consolidate all the activities and charge just one commission.

Dick Cunningham, my brother-in-law, was in the restaurant equipment business and knew of a Chinese fellow from Sioux Falls that wanted to start a restaurant in Bloomington or Edina. Dick introduced me to Howard Wong and I put together all of the disciplines necessary to accomplish the mission. We built Howard Wong's restaurant in Bloomington on 494. This all took about another two years.

At the same time another friend of mine, Stan Slocum, was in a partnership with a fellow from Ashland, Wisconsin, Dean Roffers. Stan and Dean had a piece of land on Grand and Fairview Avenues and

had negotiated a lease with SuperValue for a store to go on their land. They asked me to be the project manager, develop the plans, find a contractor, and get the building built. All of this took about year, and was going on at the same time as Melroe's project and Howard Wong's.

I had just put my sign on the Melroe property with my telephone number and had a number of calls. One day a fellow called and said, "My name is George Ablah and I want to buy that property on 494 and France Avenue. Can you come over to the hotel? And we will fill out the contract." The guy had a Kansas twang in his voice, and was from Wichita. I thought, "Boy, this is some kind of con-artist." I said, "George. Is it possible for you to come over to the Melroe office? I have all of the pertinent information here." He said that was okay and came over to the office. When he walked in, I thought, "Oh, boy." He was a little guy like me, wearing a white Banlon golf shirt, black pants, and cowboy boots. He carried a black briefcase. Wow! He said, "I've got a contract ready to be signed along with earnest money in the amount of \$40,000, and your price for the land is fair."

I told him "George, I have to think about this and check with my principal, and is there some way to verify this check?" He said, "Don't you trust me?" I told him it was not a matter of trust, but that I didn't even know him. He gave me a card and told me to call the person on it—his banker in Wichita. So, I called the banker and he said, "Oh, yes. Mr. Ablah is a valued customer and we will guarantee any amount up to \$500,000." As we were going over the contract, George said, "Wait a minute here. I've got a super idea. I have some land in Phoenix and we can make a trade and save a hell of a lot of taxes." What did I know? He was way ahead of me. I said I would discuss it with Mr. Melroe and I went into the other room, called Les and explained the deal the best I could. Les said, "Go take a look at the property in Phoenix. I always wanted to raise sorghum and haven't been able to grow it well in Dakota and I understand it grows well in Arizona." So that afternoon Bernie met us at the airport with some travel necessities and George and I left for Phoenix. All the way down he was



*The twenty-five story Amhoist (now Landmark) Tower in 1983, located at Fourth and St. Peter streets, looking southeast across Rice Park. The St. Paul Hotel is on the left. Photo courtesy of Eugene A. Rancone.*

telling me how great the property was, how it could be sub-divided into ranchettes, and how we would be able to make a lot of money. He had a certified appraisal of the land at \$3,500 an acre. The way he explained it, I thought Gene Autry would be riding his horse on the property.

The next morning we rented a car and went north out of the city and after quite a ways, I couldn't see Phoenix in the rearview mirror. We got up to Bell Road and George told me where to turn. We went west for about twenty minutes. We were in the middle of nowhere. There were tumble weeds and acres of cotton. George said, "Stop the car. Here we are." I looked at him and thought I was right—

this guy is a nut. He began to go on about how fortunate we were to have one of the largest water wells in all of Maricopa County.

He said, "Gene, I know what you're thinking, but take some time to research what's being done out here. Dell Webb is just finishing Sun City up the road." Honestly, I was a neophyte and knew nothing. I thought about what I would need to know if I were going to buy this land. I told him, "George, this is going to take me about three or four days to get the information I need." His appraisal really was a help and had a lot of detailed information. He said, "Okay. I have to go to Las Vegas and I'll be back in three days."

So I started my research and checked with the following:

- The state of Arizona
- Maricopa County
- The city of Phoenix Development Department
- Dell Webb
- Indian Affairs
- Real estate agents

I was a little more upbeat after analyzing the information and felt, based on real estate values in the area, that farmland was valued at \$1,800 to \$2,000 an acre. If one had a development in mind and could subdivide into lots, it probably was worth \$2,500 or more an acre.

I called Melroe and went over the information. I suggested we offer \$1,800 an acre knowing a counter offer would probably be closer to \$2,200 to \$2,500 an acre. Melroe said that was fine.

George returned and after a lot of discussion I told him the amount we were willing to pay was \$2,000 an acre.

He said, "Gene, I got an appraisal as to the value and it is \$3,500 an acre."

I said, "George, no offense, but maybe you ought to develop it or sell it to the appraiser." He said, "I'll tell you what. Are you a gambling man?"

I told him, "No," and asked why.

"Well, let's flip this silver dollar," he said. "And if you win I'll sell it to you for \$2,000 an acre. If I win, you give me \$2,500 an acre."

I went into the other room, called Melroe, and he said, "Fine. Flip the coin."

I thought that I was dealing with two crazies.

George asked "Heads or tails?"

I said, "Heads."

He told me to flip the coin, but I told him to do it (I was too nervous). He flipped the coin and it came down heads. We won!

George and I got on the airplane back to Minneapolis. On the way he told me we should work together. "I like the way you analyze things," he said. He asked me what I thought. "George," I told him, "if you structure things I will implement them." He said, "Okay." There was no contract between us, just our word. I said, "Fine." I must tell you this was a changing point in my life and we went on to

do some super things together. We also struck out a few times, but we had many more pluses than minuses.

After all things were settled on the aforementioned trade and taxes, my share came to \$37,000+. I couldn't believe it.

Bernie was working as a nurse at Macalester College Health Clinic. After the above deal, I walked into the clinic and asked Bernie if she could visit with me for a minute.

She said, "I'm really busy, can it wait until we get home?"

"No, I think you'll be interested in this," I told her.

I gave her the check and she said, "My God, a check for \$3,700!"

"You better look again," I said. She then realized it was \$37,000. It's a good thing we were at the health clinic!

From then on, George Ablah and I began to expand our relationship.

*Gene Rancone and his associates became very successful as commercial real estate developers in the Twin Cities and elsewhere. One of his last projects, which became a signature development for him, was the Amhoist (now Landmark) Tower, named for the American Hoist and Derrick Company that for many years was a major employer and contributor to St. Paul's industrial base. When he embarked on this complex project in the early 1980s, interest rates on loans were about 12%. Despite the high interest rates, Rancone and his other investors worked with the St. Paul Port Authority to build a 25-story, mixed-use office and residential condominium complex on Fourth Street in the city. After dealing with a multitude of problems in construction, in 1983 the time to dedicate the building was in sight. Consequently Gene Rancone commissioned a sculpture dedicated to La Nuova Vita, the New Life, for the building. Here is Gene's account.*

From the onset of the design of the building it was always in my mind to express a lasting tribute to those humble and determined immigrants who faced an unexplored future to forge a "New Life, Nuova Vita."

I had interviewed two local sculptors, Paul Granlund and another whose name escapes me. What I was attempting to ex-

press and depict was that the foundation of our society is the family structure. They were not able to satisfactorily express the feeling I had in mind. I then thought of my friend Juan Munguia, the architect of our Manzanllo [Mexico] house, and felt that with the Mexican love of family, he might be able to suggest someone that could convey the image I had in mind. He introduced me to Estanulos Contrares, who immediately grasped what I was trying to express.

His mind conjured the image of the sculpture emanating from the earth; thrusting it up as if mother earth was birthing new life to the foundation of society, a family.

The base of the sculpture grew into three separate figures, a man holding a pick and other tools, a mother holding a loaf of bread, and a boy holding his books.

And so the immigrants came, not knowing the language, no money but the indomitable spirit to persevere and build "La Nuova Vita."

The sculptor had captured the essence of what I had in mind and it was an emotional exchange between us.

This sculpture was as important to me as was the building itself. While it was dedicated to all immigrants, it was especially dedicated to Gramps and Grams Palumbo and Salvatore and Anna Maria Rancone.

The sculptor sent me a model to approve and I showed it to Father John Forliti and explained what it was to express. He immediately identified with the concept because of his family's similar experience. He further enhanced its meaning by expressing his wonderful, "Poised with Purpose," pronouncement, and it was read at the dedication.

When you read what he wrote, you will understand more fully the meaning.

Under the major streets in downtown St. Paul there are tunnels that have been carved out of the limestone under the city streets.

These tunnels hold many of the electric, water and sewer lines. These tunnels were dug by workers such as Gramps Palumbo and are paraphrased by Father Forliti's reference of "tunneling toward fulfillment of desire." "Work is a blessing, not a curse" and this is what built our wonderful country.

## Poised With Purpose

*From the depths of the earth came Power,  
Spirit-driven, spewing forth formations,  
Mirrors of divine desires.*

*I will make a universe,  
for work is a blessing, not a curse.  
With infinite variety Divinity forged  
finiteness without end,  
reflections of an Architect's soul.*

*From the depths of the earth came  
creativity.  
Laborers, Babel-like in their ethnic  
distinctiveness,  
and Spirit-driven,  
tunneled toward fulfillment of desire.*

*We will build a city,  
for work is a blessing, not a curse.  
With amazing giftedness humanity formed  
futures  
for generations to follow,  
reflections of their Creator's love, designing  
La Nuova Vita.*

*Whether plow, pyramid, or computer, it  
matters not.*

*One generation builds upon another,  
mother and father birthing family,  
sustaining  
The New Life.*

*Work is a blessing, family a privilege.  
Poised with purpose, AMHOIST towers-  
emerging in three,  
reflecting Trinity father, mother and child.  
Image of a Worker-God, mirror of familial  
bonds, it stands  
as a developer's dream, speaking gently  
to endless generations:*

*Productivity and progeny are blessings,  
for we are made in the Image.*

John E. Forliti (October 1, 1983)

*Throughout his long career, Eugene A. Rancone has been a civic leader in St. Paul. He has served on the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce, the Building Owners and Managers Association, and the St. Paul Sister City Program with Modena, Italy. Gene's other major projects included the Northern Federal building in St. Paul (1974-1977) and the Yorktown development in Edina (1971-1974). He is now retired. This is his first article for Ramsey County History.*



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*The sculpture La Nuova Vita (the New Life) by Estanulos Contrares stands outside the entrance to the Amhoist (now Landmark) Tower at the corner of Fourth and St. Peter streets. Gene Rancone led the development of this mixed-use office and residential building in the early 1980s and commissioned this statue to honor the legacy of his grandparents, who came to St. Paul from Italy to begin a new life in America. For more on Gene Rancone, see page 10. Photo courtesy of Eugene A. Rancone.*