The Landmarks of Federal Hill: History of "The Echo"

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By Comm. Joseph R. Muratore (C) 1979

To appreciate the present Echo, we must understand what transpired to arrive at the present, voluminous, expressive voice of our community. It all started in an old house on Spruce Street, "L'Aurora," the first Italian weekly newspaper in New York, begun in publication of "L'Eco Del Rhode Island." This weekly publication has survived all of the tribulations which were common and accompanied the first and second generations of Italian Americans of Rhode Island. It has now become the only Italian oriented newspaper in Rhode Island.

Louis M. Picerno became the owner of this newspaper. Under his ownership Picerno guided many of the functions of the newspaper. He was in charge of the printing department. Vincent DeOrchis as the Italian editor and maintained general supervision, both editorially and for other duties. Carlo Constantin was in charge of circulation.

During all of the time that Picerno owned this newspaper, Joseph Mancuso operated all of the presses and printed thousands of copies of The Italian Echo over the 23 years that this newspaper was owned by Picerno. On Jan. 15, 1940, Vincent Sorrentino, one of the world's largest ring managers, became the owner of this old monthly Italian-American newspaper. He moved the operation of this newspaper next to his plant at 633 Atwells Ave., and changed the name from The Italian Echo to The Rhode Island Echo. He appointed Franco Lalli of New York City as the managing editor and Alexander Bevilacqua (Drinkwater) as editor of the English section of the newspaper. It still remained a monthly four-page newspaper. The printing of this newspaper was temporarily discontinued in 1942.

The notice which appeared in the Providence Journal on Saturday, May 2, 1942 read as follows:

ITALIAN - LANGUAGE PAPER IS DROPPED

"American Echo," Weekly Published Here, Discontinued Voluntarily

"L'Eco D'AMERICA, THE AMERICAN ECHO," known as New England's "oldest Italian language newspaper," has been discontinued voluntarily with the issue which appeared on Thursday, according to an announcement by Vincent Sorrentino, editor of this paper, printed in the final issue. Citing increased costs of operation and the difficulty of securing skilled labor and of competing with daily papers in these times, "when Americans are seeing the fortune of this country with great anxiety," the announcement continued: "L'Eco is convinced that a newspaper printed in whole or in part in a foreign language has outlived its usefulness in the State of Rhode Island, where it mostly circulates. In former days, when immigration was rampant and war did not cloud our skies, it was desirable to keep our immigrants informed of what was taking place in the world through the medium of a foreign language. But now no such condition exists."

The announcement stated that "it is not unreasonable for L'Eco to assume that a newspaper printed in a foreign language is bound to be misunderstood, at least by some members of the communities in which it circulates, no matter how loyal and sincere its purpose and mission may be.

The publisher thanked the public and the citizens of Italian descent particularly for their support in the past. This newspaper was not a profitable endeavor in all those years. In 1945, it was again acquired by Picerno and it slowly began to grow in circulation.

The operation was moved to Broadway at the corner of Palm Street. In mid 1945, the paper went from a monthly publication to a weekly publication. It was again moved and located for a short time at the corner of Ringgold Street and Broadway.

Later it was moved to 178 Broadway to a store which has since been torn down and a professional building has been erected at this location. It remained at 178 Broadway, for the longest period of its publication, until 1970 when it was again sold.

During this time the major and varied functions required to produce a newspaper were carried on for a short time by Francis DeLo, the editor, Picerno and his young son, John B. Picerno. John Picerno helped in many ways. He was the set-up man; the typist operator; the Ludlow type set-up man for headlines and bold printing.

John helped his father fold the newspapers by hand. Then his father would address them, they would be put into bundles and delivered to the post office every Thursday for delivery.

During these years until the Echo was sold in 1970, Joseph Leonelli was a writer for the newspaper, and Alex Bevilacqua (Drinkwater) was a regular writer in English.

Italian news items of interest to the readers would be cut out of New York and other newspapers many local readers would contribute articles written in Italian.

The General Editor was Ermanno J. Leonelli and Maria Leonelli was the proofreader for the Italian section of the newspaper.

Many will remember the annual drive which was carried on by The Italian Echo in 1950 and 1960 for summer camp funds for children of the community. This was referred to as The Italian Echo Summer Camp Fund. It was instrumental in bringing many underprivileged Federal Hill children for vacations to the Beach Pond Camp in East Providence for a week which they would enjoy a two week vacation as guests of the fund. This fund was made possible by small contributions of the community.

Individuals and organizations which contributed included the Order Sons of Italy, Comm. Luigi Sciala and the Federal Hill Businessmen's Association.

Many years ago there were few national advertisers who would advertise in local, Italian orientated newspapers.

There were no automatic folder machines, no speedy addressing systems and no offset printing (which is a faster, less tedious system of putting newspapers together). Profits were small, if any, and an editor/publisher filled all the duties and many details required to produce the end result - a four page newspaper.

In 1970, the newspaper was sold to John Picerno who has many years of experience as a radio announcer having been one of the pioneers with Italian radio programs in Rhode Island.

During the period of the Picerno ownership, it remained at the location of Broadway and, with the assistance of his son,
The location where The Italian Echo was printed during the period it was owned by Mr. Vincent J. Sorrentino. This small building is adjacent to the Uncas Mfg. Co. on Atwells Ave. and still exists.

178 Broadway, the former location of The Echo, where it was published for the longest period of its existence. The original building has been demolished.

243 Atwells Avenue, the present location of The Italian Echo, from which it has been published since 1973.

Youngsters from our community who were selected for Camp visit from the 14th Annual Appeal of The Italian Echo Summer Camp Fund. Shown boarding the bus for the trip to the Beach Pond Camp in Escoheag, to enjoy the two-week vacations as guests of the Fund. Shown in photo, in addition to the children, at extreme right is Mr. Louis M. Picerno, Publisher, and extreme left, Ermano J. Leonelli, Editor. This is from a photo which appeared in The Italian Echo on August 16, 1963.

Harold A. Pace, this newspaper took on new life and began to grow in size, coverage and scope of material. In the mid-30s, Pace was also the publisher of the Italian-American Tribune which was published both in English and in Italian.

Pace died in 1977 at the age of 78.

In 1971, this newspaper, which had taken on a very formative size and voice in our community, was purchased by "Bert" Roberti (Emilio Roberti) and its operation was moved from Broadway to 242 Taunton Ave., East Providence.

In 1973, it was again moved to its present location at 243 Atwells Ave.

During the time that Roberti owned this newspaper, it again grew in size and prominence.

During this period the name was again changed to The Echo.

In 1977, The Echo was purchased by Joseph A. Agostinelli whose acquisition of the paper was solely for the motive of dedicating it "to the hard work and sacrifices of his grandparents and parents, who were typical of all the immigrants who came to this country in the early 1900s."

During Agostinelli's ownership of this newspaper, the staff expanded and its structure became a professional one. Today, its staff has again been expanded as seen in the masthead.

In 1979, during the publication of its annual "El Paesan" edition, it contained three sections with 72 pages, making it one of the largest newspapers in Rhode Island and one of the largest bi-lingual newspapers in America.