

My Dad was born on October 10, 1910  
(some friends called him “ten-ten-ten”).  
Today would be his 107<sup>th</sup> birthday.  
He was a storyteller; so, let’s tell some of HIS stories.  
— DRS

This is best read on a large screen or in PDF  
<https://convivio-online.net/not-so-long-ago/>

## Origin of a Storyteller — Not So Long Ago

by Dan Sapone

A coal-miner’s son, he was hauled from West Virginia as an infant to the vineyards and prune yards of California’s Santa Clara Valley. He was fourteen when this photo was taken on Dec 4, 1924 — the third son of illiterate immigrants from Reggio di Calabria, in southern Italy — when he was pulled out of the 8th grade to work with his brothers on “share-cropper” farm land in Morgan Hill to survive the hard times.



By the time Umberto, known as Al, turned sixteen in 1926, he took a 30-mile train ride with his brothers to Pittsburg, California, to lie about his age and get a job in the steel mill. He and his older brothers Giovanni (John) and Giuseppe (Joe) supplemented their income as singing waiters at Cippolini’s restaurant down by the river. According to the story, they sang “Italian opera.” Just where and how they learned anything about Italian opera is a mystery.

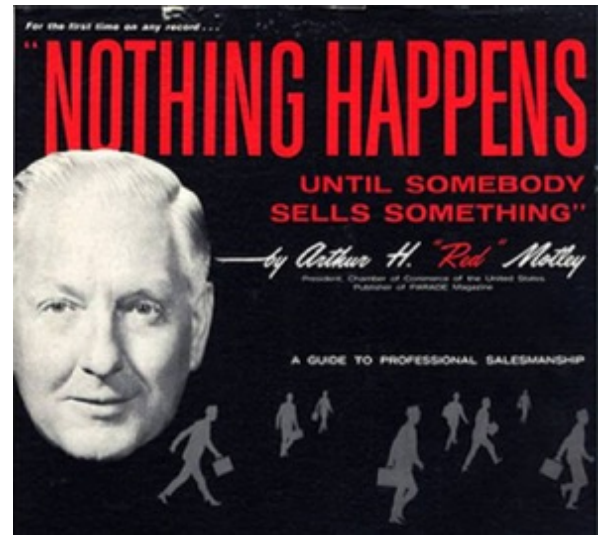


By the age of twenty, Al had taken a shine to a 16-year-old beauty named Domenica (known as Memi). Her family was from Isola delle Femmine, Sicily (the same town that gave us their cousins of the baseball-famous DiMaggio family). In the fall of 1931, she was kicked out of her house by her abusive father and, with nowhere else to go, went to Al’s house and told him her story. He immediately did the obvious thing (to him): borrowed a car and \$50, drove them to Reno, got married, rolled the car down a hill on the way back, and took a bus home.



And, so it began.

Al and Mae welcomed their first child in the fall of 1932 — Anita Mae, known as Bunny. As war production began in the 1940s, Al, now known as A.J., went to night school to resurrect his aborted 8th-grade education and became a mill foreman. When steel production began to decline with the end of the war, he studied the insurance business at night and discovered that he had a talent for salesmanship. He bought a record player and some 78-rpm Cole Porter records; but he quickly focused on recordings made by Dale Carnegie, “How To Win Friends and Influence People,” and, later, his favorite, “Nothing Happens Until Somebody Sells Something,” by Arthur “Red” Motley.



With the promise of a new prosperity at the beginning of the 1950s, Al applied his persuasive skills to the task of convincing his friends and neighbors that they needed to leave something for the next generation. The result was a lucrative second job selling life insurance. By the time his second child, Danny, arrived in 1950, a sign went up at 616 Black Diamond Street that said, “A.J. Sapone Insurance.” He said goodbye to the steel mill and never looked back.



From his salesmanship recordings, he learned about the key role of advertising and developing a storytelling “hook” on which to build a business that would attract “the most important people in the world: customers.” He decided that his “hook” would be the immigrant legacy of his town in his effort to become “the man to see” about the various types of insurance policies that were quickly becoming the foundation of life in the second half of the 20th century. So, once again, he did the obvious thing (to him): he joined the Pittsburg Historical Society, became its president, and began a collaboration with Milton and Claudia Killough to write the history of Pittsburg. By the Spring of 1961, Al had collected some stories to tell and began writing a short newspaper column in the local newspaper (OK, so it was an advertisement). He called it, “Not So Long Ago.” He found ways to connect those stories to the need to be “covered” in all the ways the fledgling “modern world” would require. His goal was to make enough money to do three unthinkable things for an uneducated son of immigrants – buy his wife a mink, buy himself a Cadillac, and send his son to an expensive college. (Since you asked, oh yes, he did those things.)

So, a new chapter began — this time it was about storytelling.



Al's newspaper advertisements were approximately 3.5 x 5.25 inches on the page and appeared about once a week. Here are a few examples, enlarged here so you can read them, if you like.

On May 19, 1961, Al published a story about the founding of Pittsburg, dropping the names of well-known local families and emphasizing the importance of this little industrial town. The story went on to praise the enduring work of the town's founders in its first decade.

5-19-61

## Not So Long Ago

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By AL SAPONE

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1903, OUR town, then called Black Diamond, was incorporated and was dignified by city government under the capable hands of a board of trustees. W. J. Buchanan was chairman of this board. Sitting with him were David Israel, J. A. Junta, Vincent DiMaggio and W. G. H. Croxon who guided the destiny of the town that was to become the industrial center of the West.

Dave Gatto served as treasurer, T. M. Donavon, city clerk, H. O. Beatty, city attorney, and a board of health consisted of Dr. J. N. DeWitt, J. R. Nichols, B. Sanderson, W. Bede and James Fitzgerald who later served as town clerk for 28 years. This was not so long ago.

In 1900 W. J. Buchanan ran for supervisor and was defeated by Paul De Martini of Clayton. In 1904 the Pittsburg pioneer again ran and was elected to the post of supervisor, an office he held for 46 years. He passed away in the middle of his 12th term; his son, Warren, was appointed supervisor after his father's death and served for 10 years and served well.

Our General Continuous Homeowners policy will serve you well. Come in at your leisure and let us tell you of this outstanding policy that will save you money and give you the best coverage. Next week we will go into the colorful fishing era of not so long ago.


Research by Greater Pittsburg Historical Society



### A. J. SAPONE

#### INSURANCE

616 Black Diamond St. HE 2-7343



*This was not so long ago.*

Each story would end the all-important message: that the right insurance policies are essential to ensure the future prosperity of his friends and neighbors. This one said:

*Our General Continuous Homeowners policy will serve you well. Come in at your leisure and let us tell you of this outstanding policy that will save you money and give you the best coverage.*


*Next week we will go into the colorful fishing era of **not so long ago**.*



In another story, Al described the event that eventually gave the town one of its names and put the town “on the map” — the discovery of coal in 1855. The story went on to praise the abundance of coal produced in this mine’s 42 years of operation and looked back with nostalgia at the remnants of their coal-mining legacy.

# Not So Long Ago

By AL SAPONE



**WILLIAM C. Israel** and his brother, **George**, discovered a vein of coal while cleaning a spring just three miles south of **Pittsburg** in 1855. This vein was later sold to **James T. Watkins** and a **Mr. Hayes** who abandoned the mine for lack of funds. At about the same time just a short distance from the original discovery, **Francis Somers** and **James T. Cruikshank** found a rich vein of coal, developed it and called it the **Manhattan-Eureka Coal Mine**. Other people responsible for the development of coal mining in this area were, **George and William Henderson**, **Noah Norton**, **C. T. Cutter** and many others who later combined their efforts and formed the **Black Diamond Mines**. This combined mining industry created four towns, **Nortonville**, **Somersville**, **New York Landing** and **Antioch**. No So Long Ago.

The mines produced an abundance of coal during their 42 years of active production ending in 1992 producing 20 million dollars of coal sales. At the present time all that remains of this colorful and exciting era is the old mine shafts, a great mound of cinders and the cemetery that tells many stories if you would but read the epitaphs upon the stone markers still standing there.

**GENERAL OF AMERICA** and **SAFECO** will make a lasting impression in your insurance history — stop in and let us tell you about this **NEW** and **EXCITING HOMEOWNER INSURANCE COVERAGE**.

Research by Greater Pittsburg Historical Society



## A. J. SAPONE

### INSURANCE

616 Black Diamond St. HE 2-7343



*Not so long ago.*

AND, it ended with the usual punchline:


*“General of America and Safeco will make a lasting impression in your insurance history — stop in and let us tell you about this NEW and EXCITING HOMEOWNERS INSURANCE COVERAGE.”*



In yet another story, he reached further back to the 1830s to recount the origins of Pittsburg, sixteen years before the discovery of coal put the town "on the map."

# Not So Long Ago

By AL SAPONE



IN 1839 MIGUEL Jose Garcia and Jose Antonio Mesa received a Mexican Land Grant of 9000 acres and named it Rancho Los Medanos, (now known as the greater Pittsburg area). In 1849 Col. J. D. Stevenson of New York came to California to build a city and chose this community, hired a young Lt. Sherman, (later became General Sherman of Civil War fame), to survey and W. W. Smith and his brother Joseph to build our city and called it THE NEW YORK OF THE PACIFIC, not so long ago.

Charles N. Wight came from New York and was the first American to settle in Contra Costa County in 1847. His house still stands just off the Port Chicago road near Knox Park. Whether you are an old or new resident of this colorful community it will pay you to stop by our office and let us tell you of our NEW AND MODERN GENERAL OF AMERICA continuous Homeowners policy. All in one policy and one policy for all your insurance coverages, and at a savings. Next week we will tell about our Coal Mine Era, not so long ago.



**A. J. SAPONE**  
**INSURANCE**  
616 Black Diamond St. HE 2-7343



→ The advertisement flowed (mostly) from the story:


*Whether you are an old or new resident of this colorful community, it will pay you to stop by our office and let us tell you of our NEW AND MODERN GENERAL OF AMERICA continuous Homeowners policy. All in one policy and one policy for all your insurance coverages, and at a savings. Next week we will tell you about the Coal Mine Era, **not so long ago.**"*



Before the turn of the century, saloonkeepers establish for themselves a place of prominence in the community as the town is renamed "Black Diamond."

# Not So Long Ago

By AL SAPONE





AT ABOUT 1860 to 1900 Nortonville, just 3 miles south of Pittsburg, became a thriving town boasting a candy shop, general store, drug store, post office and many saloons. The proprietor of the saloon always dressed for his roll complete with handle bar mustache, white shirt and black arm bands, a gold watch and chain and a place that would display this chain to its best advantage. The chain would be large enough to keep our house dog from wandering. His hair, well oiled, combed across his forehead with a devil may care curl over his left eye.

Because of the continued coal production the town prospered and was renamed "Black Diamond" by the townspeople. H. C.H. Cronin's place, next to the railroad was the only public building in the 1880's. It was post office, telegraph office and coal office combined. This was the busiest place in town next to the saloons. After the discovery of coal in Oregon, the Black Diamond coal being of lower grade, was unable to compete and was closed in 1902. Not so long ago.

You too will discover the wealth of insurance coverages in our new General-Safeco continuous Homeowners policy — protecting your home, personal effects, liability and boat at a saving.

Next week we will tell you of the people who made and were a part of our colorful past, not so long ago.

Research by Greater Pittsburg Historical Society



## A. J. SAPONE

### INSURANCE

616 Black Diamond St. HE 2-7343

4-14-61

*Not so long ago."*

And then ... the punchline:

*"You too will discover the wealth of insurance coverages in our new General Safeco Continuous Homeowners policy, protecting your home, personal effects, liability and boat at a saving."*


*Next week, we will tell you of the people who made and were part of our colorful past, **not so long ago.**"*



Then, one week later, as promised, we learned about some of the early characters who were ancestors of the current citizens who read these stories in April of 1961:

# Not So Long Ago

By AL SAPONE





IN 1867 William James "Billy" Buchanan was born in the family home on 2nd & Railroad Avenue in our colorful and exciting community of the past. His grandfather homesteaded a ranch in 1868 (still owned and occupied by Warren G. "Bud" Buchanan, a respected citizen of the present).

Young Billy rode to school on horseback to Nortonville until a school was built in New York Landing, (Pittsburg) on 5th & Railroad Avenue, present site of our post office today. Billy Buchanan lived through many phases of our city's growth and contributed much to its present development. He later married Nora Carroll and together purchased and operated the Rainey General Store, then located at 1st & York Street. This became the gathering place of the community. In winter they sat around the pot belly stove and in summer sat outside on a large porch and exchanged gossip and ideas. This was one of the few entertainments of the era of not so long ago. Nora Buchanan was the first postmistress and telephone operator of the community, a post she maintained for 53 years in this colorful past.

Research by Greater Pittsburg Historical Society

**A. J. SAPONE**  
**INSURANCE**  
616 Black Diamond St. HE 2-7343



4-21-61

*Not so long ago."*



Let's skip ahead to the early 20th century — 1911 — a time when local businesses began to compete with the coal mine as a source of prosperity. Some of the same local names from the previous century continued to be part of the story.

# Not So Long Ago

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By **AL SAPONE**

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**1911:**

On Friday evening, Aug. 25, 1911, a number of citizens of Pittsburg met for the purpose of forming a permanent organization to promote the general welfare of Pittsburg and vicinity. Joe McAvoy was chairman pro tem.

A motion was duly made and seconded that the organization be known as Pittsburg Chamber of Commerce and was carried unanimously.

Officers elected were: Dr. F. S. Gregory, president; Otis Loveridge, vice-president; George P. Keller, secretary, and W. J. Buchanan, treasurer. At this meeting and the following meeting over 50 citizens signed the roll as members of the Pittsburg Chamber of Commerce and thus was formed the organization that has been active in the promotion and general welfare of our city for the past 50 years.

This year our Greater Pittsburg Chamber of Commerce will celebrate its 50th Anniversary under the able guidance of Alfred Affinito and his staff, aided by our able Chamber of Commerce manager, F. L. McIlhargey.

You too, can celebrate by stopping by our office and letting us tell you how our new General Homeowners policy will cover your home, personal effects, liability, robbery and many other coverages in one policy, and at a saving to you.

## A. J. SAPONE

### INSURANCE



616 Black Diamond  
Phone HE 2-7343



*Not so long ago."*

Then came the advertisement:

*You too can celebrate by stopping by our office and letting us tell you how our new General Homeowners policy will cover you home your personal effects, liability, robbery, and other coverages at a saving to you."*



One more — this one looks back to 1941:

**NOT SO LONG AGO**


by **AL SAPONE**

*Let's* On June 30th, 1941, a raging grass fire swept over the Clayton-Norotnville hill area southwest of Antioch, burning thousands of acres of farm and pasture, and menacing homes in the area. All available fire fighting equipment was called out from Pittsburg, Concord, Avon, and Walnut Creek in response to an all-county emergency call from the sheriff's office. The fire started on Bailey Hill and had burned over a large area by the middle of the afternoon of the 30th, and was roaring through tall grass threatening thousands of more acres.

The Bailey home was cut off by the flames and herds of cattle in the area fled in panic before the onrushing flames.

Before the fire was finally put out over 15,000 acres of land were burnt. Thanks to the quick work of the combined fire departments no homes were destroyed. But there could have been. Only a careful fire prevention program carried out by everyone can another such fire be prevented. This is the time of year for grass fires and it behooves of us to be careful.

Be certain that your home is adequately insured for any eventuality, ask A. J. Sapone to explain to you **GENERAL'S, HOME OWNERS POLICY** today, to be sure of tomorrow.

 **A. J. SAPONE Insurance**  
616 Black Diamond HE 2-7343  
**SAVES YOU MONEY** Home Office—Seattle, Wash.

*Not so long ago."*

→And then the commercial:

*Be certain that your home is adequately insured for any eventuality, ask A.J. Sapone to explain to you GENERAL'S HOME OWNERS POLICY today, to be sure of tomorrow.*



As the stories progressed, those who are familiar with Pittsburg (I know there are a couple of you out there) will notice that the names of many of the founding characters are immortalized on street signs throughout the town as it exists today. Here's an example (it was named for my uncle John after he passed away in 1935):



One more thing — if you had walked into the office at 616 Black Diamond Street back in the Spring of 1962, you would have seen this full-sized magazine on the desk:



**A. J. Sapone in 1970 on his 60th birthday**

The articles in A.J. Sapone's Magazine praised the productivity of the women of the early 1960s, offered advice to promote neatness, suggested some "Winter Rules for Golf" (he never played golf), and, of course, reminded us to make sure we were properly "covered."

So, this is the story of how an uneducated son of illiterate immigrants from the toe of the boot of Italy — a coal-miner's son — built a life on a foundation of storytelling. It turned out that there was more storytelling where that came from (perhaps, for another time); and it all started with a simple idea: "Nothing happens until somebody sells something."