My Dad was born on October 10, 1910 (some friends called him “ten-ten-ten”). Today would be his 107th 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.

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.

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.”

† 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 our 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.”

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:

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

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.

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.

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:

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.”