Risking It All
In the Blizzard of ’78
by Karen Kallio Orlando and Tom Brancaleone
Giuseppe Brancaleone brought his family from Sicily to America in 1938, a few years after he arrived in America alone to establish himself in the fishing industry. He built his first boat in 1937, the Jennie & Lucia. But soon, the war in Europe became America’s war, and the U.S. Navy conscripted the Jennie & Lucia for service. Despite the setback, by May 1944, Giuseppe built another boat at the Lyman James Shipyard in Essex, Massachusetts, the original Joseph & Lucia. In itself, this was a challenging project during WWII. Labor and supply shortages delayed the process, and the vessel’s completion was contingent on both. But even before the war was officially over, the brand-new Joseph & Lucia began fishing. She quickly became one of the most successful boats in Gloucester harbor, breaking haul records and paying for itself within months.

Giuseppe retired from fishing in the early 1950s and instead ran onshore operations while his four sons took over offshore operations. The Brancaleones purchased the St. Victoria in 1957, but sadly she sank in 1961 due to an engine fire. In 1964 the Joseph & Lucia II was built from steel in Somerset, MA at Gladding - Hearn Shipbuilding. The Brancaleone family ran their boats for decades, setting records yearly. The family became known as modern “Highliners,” a term used by fishermen to describe the crews who brought in the biggest catches.

In 1968 a third vessel was added, the Joseph & Lucia III; a state-of-the-art steel-hulled dragger and paragon of the fleet. It had gleaming Formica counters, a fully equipped modern galley, and roomy, comfortable berths below. On deck, she had the
best electronic equipment and gear. This vessel was the pride of the family and the pinnacle of capability for the job. It was built with the strength, durability, and engine power to withstand the harshest offshore weather. And it certainly seemed to pay off for the family as the new boat continued to gross record stocks of haddock, cod, pollack, redfish, and grey sole.

“Any crew member would be very comfortable fishing on the Joseph & Lucia III,” said Tom Brancaleone, son of ship engineer Antonio “The Chief” Brancaleone. “Together, the three boats were a force of the offshore fleet.”

A Storm Brewing

In early February 1978, the Joseph & Lucia III had been fishing for about a week. Despite storm warnings, Captain Gaetano “Tom” Brancaleone decided to continue fishing. His crew of seven included his brother and Engineer, Antonio “The Chief” Brancaleone; First Mate Frank D’Amico; Cook Gil Roderrick; Fish Hold Man Gaspar Palazola; Deckhand Joe Charlie Brancaleone; and Deckhand Santo Aloi.

“My uncle decided to keep fishing because he had tremendous faith in his crew and the Joseph & Lucia III had demonstrated years of strategic fishing in rough weather,” said Tom. “And, it was a financial decision as well. Fewer boats bringing in fish meant higher profits.”

In Gloucester, the maritime forecast had delivered warnings of the oncoming storm. Most boats headed back to the harbor. But, no one knew that this storm would soon be one of the worst winter storms in modern history, earning its name, the “Blizzard of ’78”. Some even later called it “The Storm of the Century.”

“My family’s boat was fishing out of Gloucester and usually unloaded its catch at the Boston Fish Pier,” said Tom. “I believe the only other fishing boat to stay out during the storm was the stern trawler La Regina, which took out fish in Gloucester.”
The storm’s ferocity and impact caught many citizens off-guard both on land and at sea. Cars were stranded on the highways, and their occupants had to be rescued by the National Guard. Sadly, some drivers died from the exhaust of their idling vehicles. Many households weren’t prepared for the extended power outages, so more died from exposure.

The Nor’easter began forming on February 5 and spun until the evening of February 7, 1978. Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts were hit the hardest with 20 to 27 inches of snowfall, massive power outages, tree damage, and coastal flooding. Hurricane-force winds were recorded from 80 up to 111 mph. The snow and sustained 83 mph wind continued for 33 hours and caused over 100 deaths, 4,500 injuries, and millions of dollars in property damage. At some points, the snow turned to icy rain and caused even more weight upon roofs, tree limbs, and power lines.¹

The Trek from Gloucester to Boston

“My father was Antonio ‘The Chief’ Brancaleone, the Engineer on the Joseph & Lucia,” said Tom. “I was just a 20-year-old college student during the Blizzard of ’78. I remember it clearly.”

Tom was living at home in Gloucester while commuting to school. He recalled his family staying glued to the marine radio, worrying about their father and the crew, not knowing what hardships they could face in the open ocean during a blizzard.

¹ Whitfill, Mary. “It’s been 44 years since the Blizzard of ’78,” The Patriot Ledger (Quincy, MA). Feb. 5, 2022.
“Being in a fishing family, we know all about risks and rewards . . . and worry,” said Tom. “We weren’t just worried about our own family, but the extended family of fishermen who may have been out there. We could just look out the window to see the wind whipping up snow drifts 7 or 8 feet high.”

At the tail end of the blizzard, Tom’s family finally received a call on the radio. The Joseph & Lucia III had made it! Tom now needed to get to the Boston Fish Pier to help lump (unload) the boat.

The trip from Gloucester to Boston was in itself an ordeal. First, over two feet of snow needed to be shoveled from the driveway just to get the car out! The roads were nearly impassable, a driving ban was in place, and a State of Emergency had been declared.

“Getting to Boston took me at least 3.5 hours,” said Tom. “The Army Corps of Engineers and National Guard were doing their best to clear out one lane on the highway, and I followed behind them. I probably should not have done that, but no one stopped me.”

Tom finally made it to the Pier. Of course, the Pier was closed, and the snow was not cleared, so young Tom had to leave the car at the gate, trudging and carving his way to the exchange building through chest-high snowdrifts. The building had lost power, and a watchman was on duty. The watchman greeted Tom and must have wondered what he was doing there? Of course, he could not believe there was a boat out fishing, and it was on its way in with a catch.

“Your father is out in this?” he exclaimed. Tom explained that, yes indeed, the boat was due in soon, and he was there to unload. And so, they waited and watched the harbor for the Joseph & Lucia III to appear.

“It was still snowing when the boat came into view, and I could not believe my eyes! The entire boat was white. She was covered in ice. I mean, everything, even the green hull, was white. She was also sitting very low in the water. We went out to catch the lines and had a hard time finding the chalks to tie her up.”

The crew was exhausted. The return trip had been horrendous, having to stop every couple of
hours to break inches of ice off the equipment, lights, and the pilot house windows. They did this work by hand in frigid blizzard conditions on a churning ocean. Offshore, the gusts had reached over 120 mph—strong enough to break the wind gauge, which aimlessly spun in helpless confusion. No one had slept much, and the demanding physical work had taken its toll. When Tom saw the crew he was shocked; the round-the-clock labor left them no time to eat, sleep or shave.

“The crew looked like death; scraggly beards, sunken eyeballs . . . they couldn’t even open their mouths,” said Tom.

Tom asked the crew how much fish was aboard, but he got no response. No matter. They couldn’t unload anyway; the snow on the Pier still had to be cleared, and the frozen machinery needed to thaw.

“Everything was a solid block of ice,” said Tom.

Tom and the crew slept aboard that night, and the guys got some rest and cleaned up. The next day, February 8, they were able to unload the catch and bring it to the auction. With power restored at the fish exchange, the buyers and lumpers in the smoky room waited eagerly for the auction to start. Only one boat in port! Everyone scrambled for the only fish to come into Boston that day.

In those days, the names of the boats and the amounts of fish were written on a large chalkboard. Tom remembers the auction unfolding:

“First to be bid on was haddock. The man with the chalk wrote 80,000 lbs. The gentlemen in the room gasped in amazement. Next scrod haddock: 40,000 lbs., and on it went. 35,000 lbs. more mixed fish! A bonanza! I will never forget the looks on people’s faces and the pride I felt that day. What a trip and what a feat of endurance by that crew!”
After the blizzard, the fleet enjoyed a long tenure as the “all-time modern-day Gloucester highliners.” Today, the endurance of the Joseph & Lucia III continues under a new name, the Donnie C., having been sold in 1988 to become a scalloper out of New Bedford, MA. No doubt she powers on and rewards her crews with great catches, even in the worst New England weather.

“My Dad Antonio is not here to tell you the story himself,” said Tom. “Even if he was, he and his crew rarely talked about it. They neither bragged nor complained; it was their work.”

A PEEK AT THE BRANCALEONE FAMILY TREE

Giuseppe & Lucia Brancaleone
Emigrated from Sicily in the mid-1930s and had four sons...

Gaetano “Tom”
(Captain of the Joseph & Lucia III during the Blizzard of ’78)

Antonio “The Chief”
(Engineer during the Blizzard of ’78)

Antonino
Joseph

Tom Brancaleone
(Co-author of this story)

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