



A Moment on the Boulevard
with Captain Johnny Parisi, 1987

by Paul McGeary

400 STORIES PROJECT

GLOUCESTERMA400.ORG

Photo Courtesy of the Gloucester Daily Times

GLOUCESTER
400⁺

OUR PEOPLE, OUR STORIES

1623 | 2023

A Moment on the Boulevard

with Captain Johnny Parisi, 1987

BY PAUL McGEARY

I took a walk down by the harbor to the Man at the Wheel and the Cut. The colors were extraordinary, primal, the grass deep green, flecked with butter-yellow dandelions; the sea a pale sapphire sprinkled with diamonds of sunlight. The land and sea rushed into each other at a collision of gray and sand granite.

In front of me, the Western Harbor stretched away, surrounded by the mainland on the right and the longer, finger peninsula of East Gloucester on the left. Together the two lands form a welcoming embrace to returning vessels.

Off to the right, Stage Fort Park, named because it was where the fishermen erected the fish flakes or stages used to dry the freshly caught fish, and for an old earthwork fort built during the war of 1812. But the guns of the fort have never been fired in anger. In the park, a tiny beach, crescent-shaped and called Half Moon. It's where the city kids walk to swim.

There is a bandstand where groups perform on Sunday nights in the summer - some rock, some folk, some swing, and once every summer an appearance by the Air Force Band in full martial glory.

Beyond the park lie West Gloucester and Magnolia. From the Boulevard, I could see the reef called Norman's Woe. Half hidden in the tide, it claimed many ships and inspired Longfellow's poem "The Wreck of the Hesperus."

On the hill is Hammond Castle, built by John Hays Hammond to house his collection of Mediaevalia. And down from the Castle is Point Radio, his granite tower, from where he watched the coming and going of the vessels through the Western Harbor.

Behind me is "Joe Hot Dog" setting up for the day. He is docking his pickup and restaurant-trailer with the curb, readying for another onslaught of tourists and workers on mug-up from the fish

plants around the corner. The trailer is new; he used to have just a pushcart. "Joe's Hot Dog," it says proudly. "Since 1973. No restrooms."

His real name is "Wojietowicz," but the Italians found that totally unpronounceable, so he quickly became Joe Hot Dog, and Joe Hot Dog he has remained since 1973.

To my left stands "The Fort" (not to be confused with Stage Fort Park), a small neighborhood of fish plants and the people who work in them. Its narrow, crooked streets and last-legs processing plants cast darkening shadows even on a bright day like today. The white tower of the O'Donnell-Usen plant stands, its paint peeling in the sun behind Pavilion Beach. It's been closed for two years, 200 jobs gone. A plaque on the wall notes that it is the place where Clarence Birdseye perfected the process of flash-freezing food.



Johnny Parisi taking part in the Fiesta. Circa 1970s.

Beyond the Fort lies the Inner Harbor, where the fishing boats tie up. It's a nice day but windy, so the small boats are hunkered down at the pier, waiting for more advantageous conditions.

The larger boats have larger payrolls and larger mortgages. I watch the *Joseph & Lucia* make for sea, setting out on the long, overnight trip to Georges Bank. The crewmen secure the deck gear and then settle on the forecastle to drink in the sun. It will be hours before they set their nets.

Johnny Parisi comes walking down the Boulevard to where I stand. Johnny must be close to 80 now, but he is the captain of the group of men who carry the statue of St. Peter in the Fiesta, the feast of St. Peter at the end of June. He's getting back into shape for the procession.

The procession starts at the St. Peter's Club and winds its way through the streets of the city, stopping at the churches, St. Ann's, the Italian church, Our Lady of Good Voyage, the Portuguese church, and then back to the altar that is the centerpiece of Fiesta, set oddly or perhaps not so oddly amidst the carny and the sideshow. The Italian Colonial Band from Lynn always shows up to provide the musical accompaniment, looking like security guards in uniforms that once fit but are now at least one size too small. Children pin ones and fives to ribbons streaming from the statue of San Pedro as it is carried through the city. It's a long walk, and Johnny wants to be in shape.

He sees me, and I nod. Usually that's the extent of it, but today Captain Johnny wants to talk; maybe he needs a break, perhaps he just needs to talk. He stands beside me, and we look out over the harbor together. He still has a full shock of long white hair, and today it's blowing behind him in the breeze. His face is tanned already, and though lined, it doesn't sag. It still looks carved of Cape Ann granite. I call him Captain Johnny, but the truth is he operates a one-man lobster boat called *The Babe*. It's *The Babe* he wants to talk about today.

He sold *The Babe* 10 years ago when he retired. They had fished together for 45 years, he told me. He bought her for two hundred dollars in 1932 from the widow of another lobsterman. The lobsterman had disappeared one day, snagged by a pot line and pulled over, so it was assumed. *The Babe* was found adrift. It was his only estate. The widow would have sold it for \$100, but Johnny knew *The Babe* was worth more and had paid it, though it was the deepest part of the Depression.

Captain Johnny recalled that in the 1930s, President Roosevelt arrived in Gloucester on his yacht, coming back from Campobello. *The Babe* had joined a small flotilla that went out to greet the vessel, flags flying, horns sounding.



President Roosevelt visits Gloucester Harbor in the 1930s.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CAPE ANN MUSEUM

Roosevelt had come up on deck and waved to them, Johnny remembered. "Waving at me," he said, "waving at *The Babe*."

He paused a moment, reflecting, remembering. "I sold her to a fella' in Camden," he said, "Lobsterman, like me. I hope he took good care of her."

We stood there a moment longer, looking out the Western Harbor past the breakwater at the Dog Bar. Out to the sea. Then he raised his head and took his hands from the rail. He nodded and resumed his walk.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul McGeary is a retired journalist, technologist, city official and most of all a father and grandfather (known to his grandsons as "Pop-Pop"). He lived in Gloucester for 40 years and now resides in Clovis, California.



Author Paul McGeary at the Gloucester Fisherman's Memorial.