

Reflections of Richland

By Dolores Comparri, Special Events Chairwoman

There's been a lot said about Richland Village and I am saddened by the negativity we've been hearing about the project that began some years ago. Someone told me they didn't like the 'new' Richland and wanted it back to the way it was. So I would like to give you my thoughts and reflections of Richland.

I am a life long resident of Richland and lived on Main Avenue in Richland for the past 39 years. I remember as a little girl looking forward to visiting my grandparents. They lived right on Route 40 in Richland directly across from a clothing factory which is now the Patcong Building. During the summer months, my mother would pack up all six kids and we'd go spend hot, lazy days in Richland.

It was a bustling town right through the early 70's and it was most busy during the week. The R & L Food Market boasted customers who could select fine cuts of meat from the butcher or fill their carts with groceries from the stocked shelves. Richland General Store was also busy serving customers from near and far with a large inventory of items.

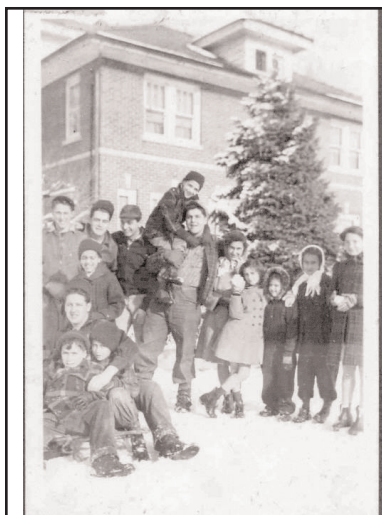
Tank's Bar was usually quiet during the day but when the sun went down it was a gathering place for young and old. Occasionally, my grandmother gave me the privilege of visiting Tank's to purchase an ice cold jug of homemade root beer...wow...what a treat that was!!

Carlo's Gas Station was right down the road and everyone stopped to gas up, get a cold soda or a frozen treat and maybe just sit and visit with Charlie and Carlo Merighi. Visitors and patrons were always welcome at the station.

The two clothing factories in town were filled with the sounds of whirling sewing machines. There were rows and rows of them and, at each one sat a woman with her head bent to the task at hand. Friends and family were employed at the factories and I especially loved when the whistle blew to signal the noon hour. Both sides of Route 40 were lined with cars and the ladies came pouring out of the factory to get in their

cars and rush home for lunch. My siblings and I would stand at the picket fence in my grandparents' yard and wave to everyone. Occasionally one or two would stop to chat with my mother or my grandmother but most of them hurried home to catch a bite to eat and get back to their sewing machines.

Foster's Gas Station and Gift Shop's storefront sparkled with colored dishes and glasses. It was a real treat to go in to visit Mr. and Mrs. Foster. You could buy an ice cream cone, admire the beautiful array of glass gifts and google at her bulldogs who were permanent fixtures in the shop.



The Richland Hotel was an intimidating place. It was so big; it was the biggest building in town. The owners occupied part of the building and there was an apartment in the center of the hotel. There was a small Army/Navy store but in later years I remember the fancy dress shop in the corner store. The owner made up the huge store window to fit every season. She would dress mannequins in the latest fashions and it became every woman's dream to own one of the dresses, shoes and hats on display. Of course, the price tags were way out of our league but we were still able to dream about wearing high fashion some day. A barber shop occupied the other end of the hotel where you could get a hair cut and the local news on any given day.

The post office was in a tiny house on

the corner of Main Avenue and Route 40. Everyone had a post office box so it was a place to meet friends and family. Matt was the postmaster and I can still remember the smell of his cigar that filled the air of the place. He had penny candy on hand for any child that had loose change in their pockets to spend. It was a real treat to get a handful of sweets for just a penny!

The feed mill along the railroad tracks was closed but it had been a busy place in its heyday. Trains used to bring in grain, feed and other items for the local farmers. The growth of the trucking industry brought it to a standstill.

Farmers worked in the fields throughout the area, growing a large variety of fruits and vegetables. My grandfather and uncles worked a huge chicken farm. The farm, in the center of town, boasted three 3-story chicken houses that stood majestically behind my grandparents' house. Thousands of chickens produced eggs that were picked, sorted, boxed and sent out throughout the area and other states on a daily basis. My uncles also ran a hatchery producing chicks that were shipped all over the United States. At any time you could hear baby chicks by the thousands peeping in symphony.

All of these things were going on day after day. The town flourished and the people were proud to be residents of Richland. Eventually the stores closed or changed hands. The sewing machines fell silent and the factories closed. Chickens were removed from the chicken houses so there were no more eggs to pick and the hatcheries stopped hatching chicks.

Living in the middle of town, my husband and I literally watched the town age before our eyes. The R & L Food Market changed hands a few times and finally the place was permanently closed. The roof caved in and the cellar filled with water so snakes, rats and other varmints were the only dwellers of the once busy market.

Reflections of Richland Continued...

Reflections of Richland Continued from other side...

The hotel fell into disrepair. Even though my sister and I had a chocolate shop in the corner store for more than seven years, it was a tired, old building and the owners only made repairs when absolutely necessary. I remember one time a patron came into the shop and made a comment that I will never forget.

She said "Coming over the railroad tracks, I felt like I was going back in time to the 1950's." I know she didn't mean it as a derogatory remark but it certainly wasn't a compliment and I was saddened by the truth of it. Our town had aged over time and no one seemed to care if it all fell down around us.

Hope dawned when we heard about the possibility of revitalizing Richland. We were invited by Mayor Chuck Chiarello, Deputy Mayor Teresa Kelly and members of the Township Committee to hear about plans for the town. We attended each meeting faithfully. It all seemed like a great idea and we looked forward to the beginning of the renovation to our beloved town.

Well, since that time, the sidewalks were laid, trees were planted and streetlights were installed. They have made a wonderful addition to the town and there have been many compliments about how great Richland looks. Living right off Route 40, we have the opportunity to enjoy the changes and take advantage of walking through the town and stopping by the beautiful Saw Mill Park to admire the stately tree that is it's centerpiece. Not long ago it was an overgrown piece of property that the tree stood on and no one even knew it was there.

The township purchased some of the properties that had fallen to disrepair and with a bit of elbow grease, skilled carpenters and a few coats of paint, they have been revitalized.

The old sewing factory is now the Patcong building. It not only houses a welcome center but is home to the Patcong Model Railroad Club. Since opening its doors, thousands of visitors have gone through to admire the incredible miniature train displays that

have been painstakingly created by its members. Businesses such as It's A Toy Store and the Richland Deli are open and doing business with much success.

Revitalizing Richland hasn't only been the Township's job. The Rail on the corner of Route 40 and Cedar Avenue has been completely renovated and welcomes visitors from near and far. FAC Collectibles, next to the Patcong building, recently opened its doors and has had great success already.

Embracing the enthusiasm of the project, my husband placed a small shed on our property and opened Cowboy Cupboard Country Store. In my opinion, it is a welcome addition to the town and adds a bit of quaintness to the area.

Let's not forget the established businesses that are the anchors of the town. The Richland General Store is a mainstay of the community; The Richland House is a great place to eat; Richland Carpet is still going strong and continues to be a vital part of the town as is Orlandini Tile. And how about Buena Family Practice? It is a very busy doctor's office where not one, not two, but three doctors administer medical attention to patients every day.

At the railroad tracks, the small guard house and train station catch the curiosity of those in transit. There have been countless visits to the guard house to pick up an assortment of brochures and flyers with information about what the town has to offer. And when the Cape May Seashore Lines vintage train pulls into the station, there is usually a bevy of old and young alike anxiously waiting to board for a leisurely trip through the countryside.

The revitalization of Richland has been a slow process but as that old saying goes "Rome wasn't built in a day" thus "Richland is a work in progress and has many more transformations to go."

Most importantly, Richland is coming back. It isn't an old, tired town anymore. It's starting to show its roots again and will become a place for people to stop, shop, visit and gather with friends and family. It is my belief that we will see the hustle and bustle that once was; a

place that is revitalized and where businesses prosper again. I hope that my depiction of what Richland once was is clear in your mind and you have the same vision that the Township Committee had when they took on this venture to help Richland return to its glory.

Buena Vista Township residents should be proud of what's been accomplished so far in Richland. Being on one of the busiest highways in Atlantic County and gateway to Atlantic City, it is the perfect place to showcase what Buena Vista Township has to offer to the public. By revitalizing Richland, all other areas of the township benefit.

I am sure most of you take vacations and pick up tourist brochures. Most of what is offered is usually within a 10 mile radius. So, why can't Buena Vista Township be a tourist destination? One could visit Richland Village, check out the shops and take a ride on the vintage train. Afterwards, they could take in the rural sites of farms and orchards that dot our landscape. What a treat to stop and sample the local fruits and vegetables that are offered at the numerous stands scattered along our country roads. A visit to the African-American Museum in Newtonville could be an enlightening experience. Or what about the New Cuban Historic Museum on Weymouth Road where one could view artifacts of the Russian Cossack culture? If they were avid campers, they could set up an RV or camper at the Buena Vista Camp Grounds. Diners could have a bite to eat in one of our restaurants, bars or taverns and simply enjoy the rural life of Buena Vista Township.

So, there you have it. I know how much I love living in Richland and how proud I am to be a resident of Buena Vista Township. Are you?