

UP FRONT



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

Bartolacci Brothers Tailor Shop, New Kensington, Pa.

The streets in downtown New Kensington are quieter than in the days when it was known worldwide as the Aluminum City. You can hear your own footsteps on Barnes Street as you approach the rear entrance of Bartolacci Brothers tailor shop. The sewing machines, seen through the shop's large windows, are asleep under their covers. Heavy velvet drapes shut off the store's front section, closed for many years, but Guido Bartolacci comes in and does a little work each day, maybe an alteration.

On this visit, the Bartolacci brothers, Gaspare and Guido, sitting in the workshop, recall a time when customers came from near and far to wear the Bartolacci label.

Mafrino, the eldest brother, who has passed on, was born in Arnold, Pa., after his parents arrived in the United States from Colonnella, in Italy's Abruzzo region. His father, Giuseppe, worked for Alcoa, but the family returned to Italy, on the advice of a physician, in the hope that their mother's health would improve there. The mother, Francesca, died shortly after Gaspare was born. Guido was part of the second family raised by Guiseppe and his second wife. "Mama Teresa raised all eight of the children, and was never looked upon as a stepmother," says Gaspare.



Gaspare (holding iron) and apprentices in his shop in Colonella, Italy.

The brothers' lives, like the lives of all Europeans at that time, were defined by World War II. Mafrino returned to the New

Kensington area in 1935, when Mussolini invaded Africa. His father had urged him to leave Italy to avoid the war and exercise his options as an American citizen.

Guiseppe gave his three sons a choice: they could become farmers or tailors. They all chose tailoring and at age 11 apprenticed with a master tailor for five years, with three meals a day but no salary. The brothers went from farm to farm with a sewing machine on their shoulders, making clothing for farmers' families, turning the machine's wheel by hand. They also learned fine tailoring, design patterns, and hand sewing.

At the mention of hand sewing, Gaspare and Guido both hold up and crook the middle finger of their right hands. "This finger was tied back, so we would learn to use the thimble only on this finger!" Gaspare said.



Murphy (Mafrino) Bartolacci in his tailor shop in Arnold, Pa., late 1940s.

Both courtesy Francine Costello.

The thimble had an opening on both ends, and the side of the finger pushed the needle through the cloth.

Because of their age differences, the brothers followed different paths in those early years. Mafrino, known as “Murphy” in the United States, opened a tailor shop in Arnold. The U.S. Army rejected him due to a perforated eardrum, but he made army uniforms in Philadelphia to contribute to the war effort.

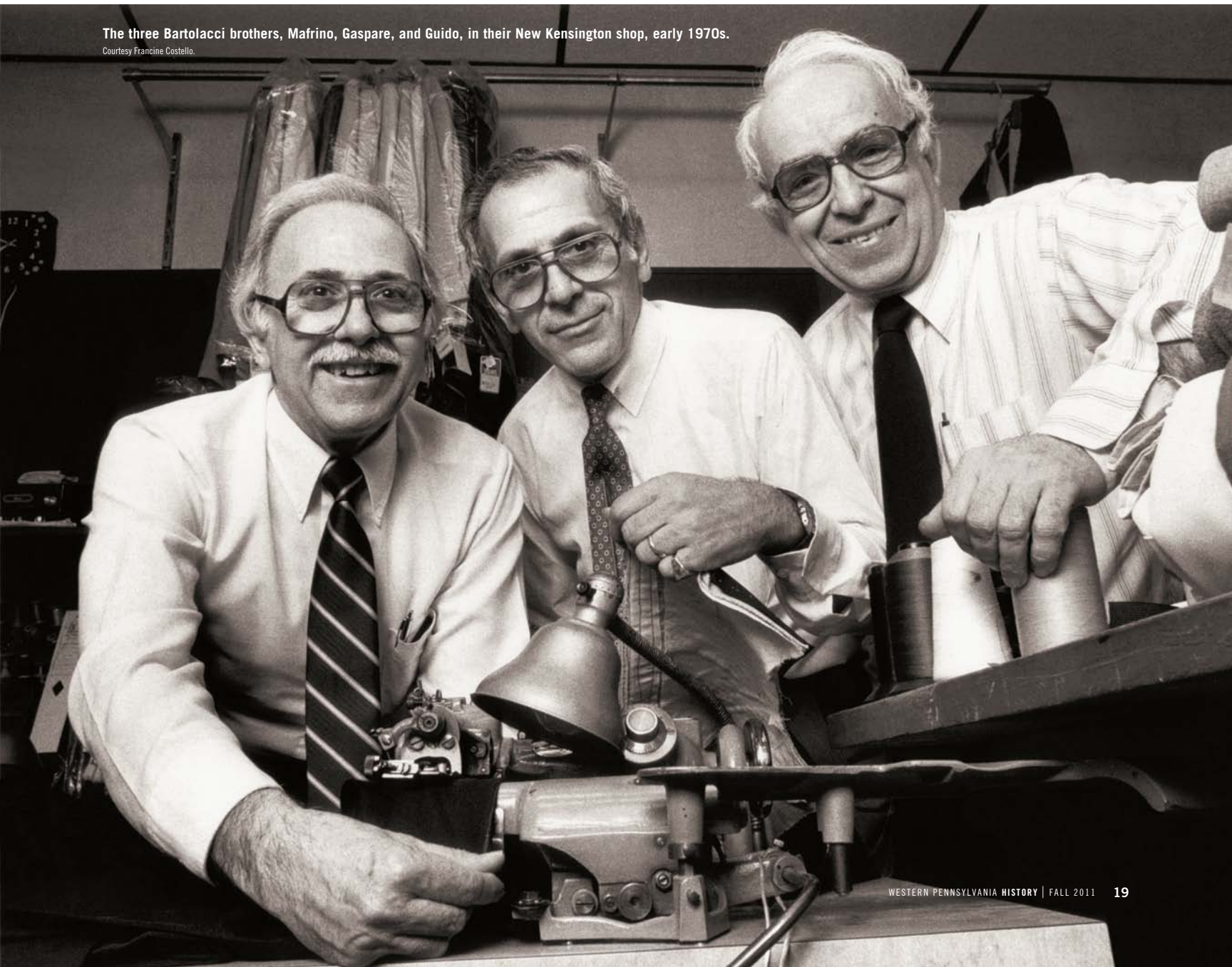
Guido worked as a designer in high-end shops in Milan, and Gaspare opened a tailor shop in Colonnella. There remains a tradition of fine tailoring in the area: the well-known Brioni hand-tailored suits are made one hour away. It is not a common skill in this country. “Everything made today is junk,” says Gaspare, and no one in the room disagrees.

Gaspare came to Pittsburgh after the war, when Italy’s economy was in tatters, and worked for Trout and Trout in the Oliver

Building in the city. He went back to Italy but returned to Pittsburgh to stay in 1955. “Things were not looking so good there in Hungary and the rest of the Eastern Europe,” he recalls.

Mafrino and Gaspare opened Bartolacci Tailors on Fourth Avenue, moving then to Constitution Boulevard, then Tenth Street, and then the present location on Fifth Avenue. In 1961, Guido came with his wife Adriana, and son Pino, supposedly just for a visit.

The three Bartolacci brothers, Mafrino, Gaspare, and Guido, in their New Kensington shop, early 1970s.
Courtesy Francine Costello.



Gaspare and Guido Bartolacci in their New Kensington Shop, 2011.

Photo by Bette McDevitt.



But they stayed, and in 1965, the three brothers took a decisive step: Bartolacci Brothers became a corporation, and they were together, just as their father had wished.

“It was not always easy, working together,” says Guido. “Three strong minded men, or *testa duras*—hardheads.” But the result was a successful business, well remembered in New Kensington.

Some of their more colorful customers were from New Kensington’s organized crime family. “They were good customers,” says Gaspare. “They ordered tailored suits that cost two or three thousand dollars, and they always paid cash.” People in the area say that “The Boys,” as they were called, kept everything under control. “It was not like it is now,” says Joan Bartolacci, Gaspare’s wife.

But that “control” came with a price. Francine Costello, who is Murphy’s (Mafrino’s) daughter, recalls that when the crime family was being investigated, they told the tailors to cut the labels out of their suits. The head of the family said, “They are questioning everyone. You don’t need to be involved in this.”

One day, some out-of-town guests of “The Boys” left their suits to be pressed. As Mafrino was pressing one jacket, he felt something in the pocket. It was a handful of loose diamonds. “He stopped pressing right then, and called them to come and pick up the suit, explaining that something important had been left in the jacket. The jacket was quickly collected and my dad was happy to be rid of it and its contents,” Francine says.

Their own best models, the brothers have always dressed impeccably. When Mafrino died, Francine said, her uncles chose his final outfit with loving care. One of Mafrino’s friends said he looked like a duke.

The Bartolacci family is still crossing the ocean. Pino Bartolacci, Guido’s son who was born in Italy and raised here, has a second home in Colonnella, keeping his family and their relatives close to one another.

Gaspare is retired, and visits with Guido when he’s working in the shop. “It’s what I know, it’s what I do,” Guido says with a shrug. His life “turned out better than I ever thought it could. But,” he says with a nod, “I’m the youngest, and I’ll be the one to close the door.”



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