

# UP FRONT



## ITALIAN AMERICAN COLLECTION

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### A Cut Above the Rest: Joseph Guy Esposito & Parkway Landscaping

During the period of New Immigration to the United States (1880–1924), most Italian migrants who came to Western Pennsylvania didn't arrive with training in a specific trade or profession. Instead, they were recruited as cheap labor to support growing industries, especially the railroads, coal mines, and coke mills. Few were able to apply the skills they acquired in Italy, and even fewer were able to make a living wage applying those talents. One recently acquired collection that challenges this notion comes from a family of professional landscapers.

Joseph Guy Esposito Sr. was born in 1915 in Savuci, Italy; he immigrated to Pittsburgh in 1929 with his father and brother. The Esposito men found work with a relative from Calabria who established a landscaping business in 1907 called English Lane Nursery, which was named for the street in Squirrel Hill where the company was located. Esposito's son, Joseph Jr. recounted in an oral history how his father, grandfather, and uncle transitioned into the business, noting that their ability to work as landscapers came from their agricultural background, especially their knowledge of grafting olive trees in Italy. He said, "My dad's

father had a lot of knowledge in grafting trees because that was sort of his hobby when he did stay in Italy because they had olive trees, they had lemon [trees], they had all kinds of trees, and he would be the one that knew how to graft, and he would do that for other people in the area."

Esposito worked for English Lane Nursery through the Great Depression. He was drafted for World War II under the regimental campaign in Hawaii and, after his service, he

returned to work at English Lane and married the owner's daughter, Rose Mary Esposito.\* In 1949, he left English Lane and established his own company with his brother Anthony, which

Joseph Esposito Sr. (left) with his company truck at Magnotti Stone in 1963. The signage on the truck was hand painted by his brother-in-law, Anthony C. Esposito. The combination of the truck parked outside a client's home and a job well-done led to word-of-mouth advertising.

HHC Detre L&A, Esposito Family Papers, gift of Joseph Esposito and Rosemarie Waechter, 2016.0029.



Because they were located in Squirrel Hill, many of Parkway Landscaping's clients were Jewish. This image shows a project in process at Tree of Life in 1963. They also did work at New Light Synagogue.

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Joseph Esposito, Sr., makes a final adjustment.

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they named Parkway Landscaping in a nod to the highway that was under construction in the area. His new business included basic lawn maintenance such as grass cutting, caring for trees and shrubbery, and constructing stone walls and walkways.

Prior to the development of motorized landscaping tools, landscapers used sickles to cut down vegetation and wool shears to trim lawn edges and define walkways by hand. Joseph Jr. recalled that the process was labor intensive: "You had no power machinery. You had a lawn mower with two wheels and blades attached to it and you just pushed it and the blades turned [to] cut the grass.... The only thing that you had to trim and make [the grass] presentable along the walkways and to redefine the bed line was sheep shears.... If you had 10 or 20 clients and their lawns were fairly large, you would almost spend maybe a quarter of your day on just one place cutting

the grass and doing the manicuring of it to make it look nice."

In the 1950s and '60s, Esposito was one of many Italian immigrants working as a professional landscaper in the Pittsburgh metro area. An examination of the Greater Pittsburgh Landscapers Association's membership roster reveals surnames primarily of Italian origin, such as Curto, Rocco, Cardillo, Sestili, Tedesco, Parente, DiBello, Cua, Pampena, Kimicata, Stagno, and Zottola. According to Esposito's son, one of the first commercial landscapers to work on residential homes in Pittsburgh was Mayor Richard Caliguri's maternal grandfather, another Squirrel Hill resident. Besides Squirrel Hill other landscaping companies owned by Italian immigrants were clustered in area: with post-war Italian enclaves like East Liberty, Verona, and Penn Hills. One of the reasons why the ethnic group was so highly

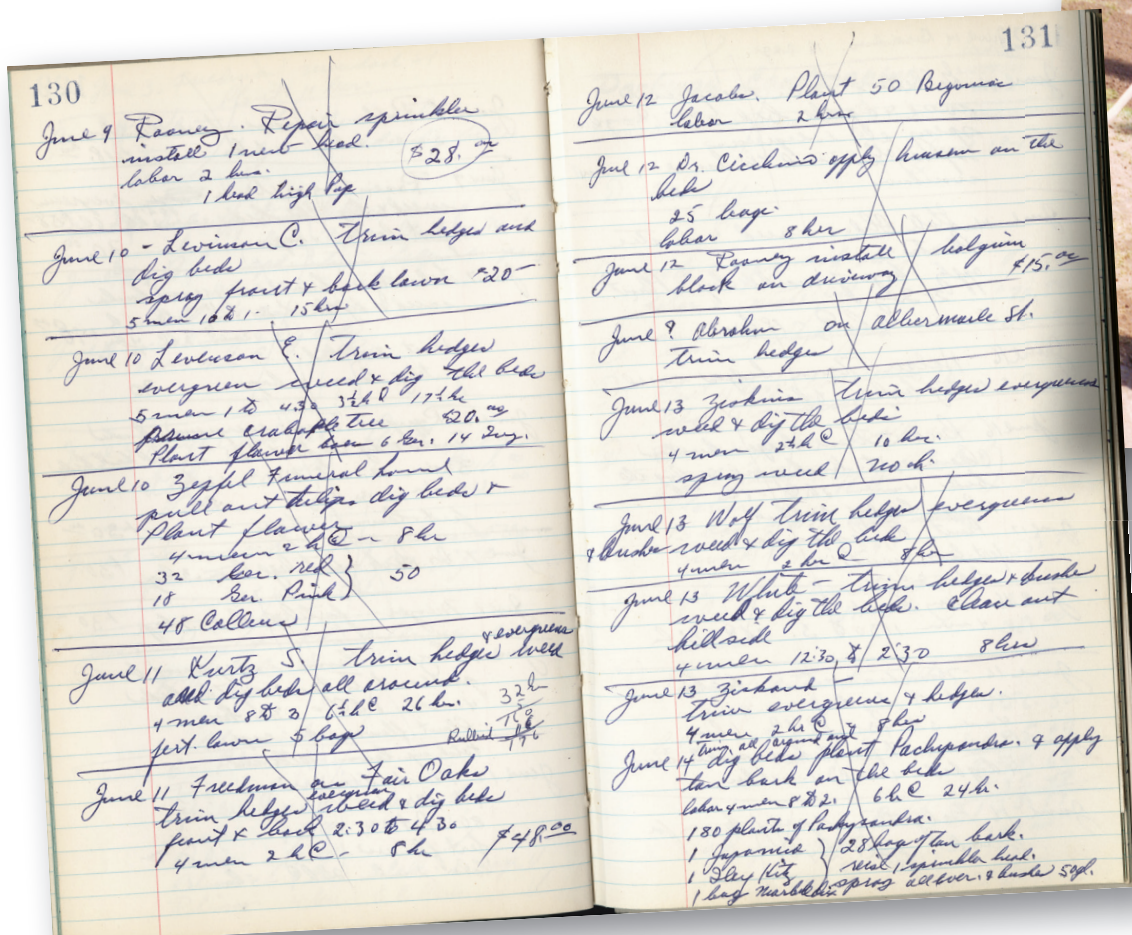
represented in this industry was due to the phenomenon of chain migration. When kin or townsfolk immigrated, they needed jobs, and landscaping companies were always in need of seasonal help; in many cases, workers branched off to form their own businesses, much like Esposito did.

Like all industries, technological advancements impacted the landscaping business, and the modernization of equipment affected how landscapers approached their daily tasks. By the mid-1950s, motorized lawn mowers replaced rotary push mowers; the demand for rigorous manual handiwork



Joseph Esposito Sr. and Joseph Esposito Jr. late 1980s.

Image courtesy of Barb Esposito.



Esposito kept meticulously detailed records, which included plans for lawn maintenance, records of labor, and lists of supplies used.

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decreased, and Parkway Landscaping was able to work faster and take on more clients. In 1969, Esposito's son, Joseph Jr. joined the family business as a summer laborer on the grass-cutting crew; by the time he became full-time staff in the late 1970s, even more efficient lawncare equipment like weed whackers, edgers, and backpack leaf blowers came on the market.

Another major change impacting the industry was the rise of safety guidelines and the U.S. government's regulation of chemicals in response to environmental concerns.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania began to license pesticides and required landscapers to complete mandatory annual training and testing. Today, prevention is the preferred course of action. Joseph Jr. noted, "There's a lot more consumer awareness. Before it was 'I need the perfect lawn with no regard to anything....' You now try to give the right environment so that there are less weeds, are less diseases, are less insects. But don't apply something unless the insect is present, and [if it is] then try to pick the least toxic." Most recently, landscapers are sensitive to the declining bee

population and have adjusted their methods to accommodate new guidelines.

In 1985, Joseph Sr. dissolved Parkway Landscaping to form J. Esposito & Son Landscaping with his son, Joseph Jr., who continues to run the company and train the next generation. After Joseph Sr.'s death in 2015 at age 100, the Esposito family donated artifacts and archives related to Parkway Landscaping to the museum, including tools, photographs of notable projects, record books, landscaping plans, and correspondences. The collection is a fantastic assortment documenting both the company and the evolution of an industry over time. ✪

\* An interesting aside about the surname Esposito: the literal translation of the name is "exposure" and it was frequently given to children who were adopted or abandoned. If you see the name Esposito in your family tree, the odds are high that someone in your family was an orphaned child prior to Italy's Unification.

**This measuring tape and shrub guide are some of the tools Joseph Esposito Sr. used for his landscaping design projects.**

HHC Collections, gift of Joseph Esposito and Rosemarie Waechter, 2016.1.3, .6. Photos by Liz Simpson.

Wool cutting shears were a common tool used in early commercial landscaping. Joseph Esposito Jr. remembers, "One guy would go around and trim everything by hand ... very labor intensive, very time consuming. And you're always on your knees or you're always bent over."

HHC Collections, gift of Joseph Esposito and Rosemarie Waechter, 2016.1.2. Photo by Liz Simpson.

