

Jump Cut

By George T. Marshall

(February 2007) What makes up a community? That's a question that sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists and academics in general have pondered. Many a dissertation has been written on the subject and many a government program has been based on such work. Is a community a specific geographic location? Is it the people? Is it the concrete period of time? Is there something more; perhaps amorphous and fluid, but very much part of the human dynamic?

Jon Raben decided to answer this very question and took a snapshot of one well-known community in Rhode Island: Federal Hill. From this he created a stunning documentary that captured the flavor and feel of a unique environment that while very Rhode Island, is also a place that stands apart.

Federal Hill is an Italian American enclave on the West side of Providence. Its history is rich and full; reflecting the immigration of Italians to Rhode Island and their settlement into a community was that distinctly theirs.

BACKSTORY ON JON RABEN:

Jonathan D. Raben was born in New York City in 1950. He received a BA from Temple University in 1974 and attended Graduate School for Geology at Boston University. Having a parallel interest in gemology, Jon received his Graduate Gemologist (GG) degree in 1996 from the Gemological Institute of America. With several published works on Rhode Island and Massachusetts geology, Jon taught senior level geology courses involving the mineralogy of gemstones at the University of Rhode Island.

As a percussionist and songwriter, Jon has performed with a number of musicians over the years. His interests in music, film and cultural diversity inspired the project documenting the evolution of Italian American culture in Rhode Island's "Little Italy," Federal Hill. Work began in 2001 and completion took place in 2006.

When it premiered, it created so much local buzz that all screenings were sold out and there's a demand for more. For a documentary this is an unusual reaction. Obviously, Jon Raben touched the right zeitgeist.

So what was it like putting together a documentary that had such a long gestation? What was learned and how did that impact on the final work that was produced?

I sat down with Jon recently for what turned out to be an entertaining and educational session: one that I thought would be inspiring for young and future filmmakers alike.

THE INTERVIEW:

GTM: Tell us why you decided to make the documentary film with the topics Italian Americans and Federal Hill and what you had hoped to achieve?

Jon Raben: I did not grow up in Rhode Island and didn't live here full time until the mid nineties, so everything about Rhode Island was somewhat new to me.

In 2000 when I started this project it was with a fellow filmmaker, Max Votolato. Max had attended film school in London and had made a couple of small independent films. I was a novice when I started, and still consider myself to be an inexperienced filmmaker with a lot to learn, even though I produced, directed and completed the film and it has been a relative success. Max and I parted ways within a fairly short period of time when he moved to Hollywood and a job with one of the major film companies. He is the associate producer for this film. We did, however, film several of the earliest interviews that I used in the final cut, and accumulated some footage of the Federal Hill neighborhood while we were still working together. I continued the project with two other camera operators, in turn, for the remaining footage. I filmed small amounts of the footage included in the final cut.

Although I conducted interviews on various subjects early on, I quickly decided that the focus of the film was going to be the Italian American experience in the Federal Hill neighborhood. It was a very interesting place with, to me, a lot of unanswered questions that begged to be explored. Federal Hill had a mystique, was controversial and appeared to have a culture (the Italian Americans) that would, I thought, be hard to penetrate. It looked like the kind of challenge that would be adventurous and interesting.

In the first half of the twentieth century the Federal Hill population was mostly of Italian ancestry, maybe eighty percent or more. Now it is an upscale destination for Italian restaurants, markets, bakeries and specialty stores. During a three decade period from the mid-fifties, Federal Hill had a reputation for being the host to Raymond L. S. Patriarca, the reputed head of New England organized crime. Because of this, Federal Hill had an infamous reputation (that hurt the 99+ percent of the Italian American population that had nothing to do with it). This reputation remains as a stereotype perpetuated by television shows, film and print that collectively take a distorted and unfair look at Italian American culture.

But when I started to interview people who grew up in or had an extended relationship with the Federal Hill neighborhood it was eye opening to discover the real story of the rich culture and history of the population going back to their journey from Italy around the turn of the nineteenth century. Hard work, religion, tradition, family and education were the operative facets of Italian American culture. The "mob" was nothing but a sideshow to the vast majority of Italian Americans in the Federal Hill Neighborhood.

Early on in the process of filming interviews I had no definite idea about the form of the final product. Possibly a short film that could be shown at a film festival. I

was getting satisfaction from the process and a wealth of information, a research project. I had no deadlines and the process was not expensive at that point in time. My aim was to be sensitive and factually accurate in gathering material about the subject population (Italian Americans in the Federal Hill neighborhood). It wasn't until expenses started to pile up, during postproduction, that I started to become concerned about the end product. I continued to concentrate on the content of the film and avoided any deadline that might affect its integrity. The editor, John Gulino, who had a slightly unconventional but excellent artistic nature, provided a good balance for the process.

The ultimate goal, and what I tried to achieve, was an accurate look at the essence of the Italian American experience (a sensitive yet sound, defensible reality) during their history in the Federal Hill neighborhood of Providence, Rhode Island. The naming of the film, "Italian Americans and Federal Hill" believe it or not, took a long time to accomplish.

GTM: You have such a diverse background: You are a gemologist, have a BA from Temple U. plus did graduate work in geology at Boston University. You worked as a geologist, coauthored several papers relating to New England geology and taught geology courses for several years at the Providence campus of the University of Rhode Island. How did you get involved in film?

Jon Raben: I just decided to make a movie. I bought an older sony broadcast camera in a pawnshop and started filming. I began by filming street scenes in various urban neighborhoods and started to conduct interviews. Subsequently, I chose the project that resulted in "Italian Americans and Federal Hill."

I have always been interested in film but had never planned a film project. It just happened. I have a rather academic nature and curiosity which contributed; and I've always been interested in various aspects of cultural diversity. My specific professional background doesn't really relate to filmmaking. I'm sure that boredom and curiosity played a roll.

GTM: You said that you started this project in 2000; why did it take you so long to realize its completion?

Jon Raben: Yes, I started the project in 2000 and completed it in the summer of 2006. Out of those six years the amount of full time work for me probably amounted to about three and a half years. I didn't set any deadlines and didn't have to accommodate anyone else's schedule. The first time that I was forced to proceed with full time speed (eight hours a day+, five to six days a week) was in the last two years of the project when I employed a fulltime editor, John Gulino, and subsequently had to deal with a number of other postproduction and marketing issues. Most of the filming took place between 2000 and 2002. In 2003 I did very little other than look at footage and think about editing the film, essentially nothing.

In the fall of 2004 I started working with my principal editor, and it wasn't until the early spring of 2005 that I started to screen various cuts of the film for content, mostly with Italian Americans from Rhode Island. The screening process lasted until the final cut and was essential to fine tuning the content. I conducted about 60 to 70 screenings. Accurate content was the top priority. In September 2005 John Gulino left the state and I continued to edit with several individuals focusing on sound and other corrective endeavors. Concurrently I started work on the promotional, marketing and packaging of the film for the premiere and distribution. This process was also extremely time consuming and took me into uncharted waters.

There is a lot to be said for taking one's time and avoiding deadlines until it is absolutely necessary. The filmmaking process suffers if the deadline affects the quality of any aspect of the project in any way.

GTM: Could you tell us some of the things you learned about the filmmaking process during your six year journey to complete your project?

Jon Raben: Your question about what I learned during the six-year journey to complete the project could be an entire book. I essentially knew nothing about filmmaking when I started, had not attended film school or worked on any film projects, so I would say that everything I now know I learned "hands on" during the project. The things that I consider the most significant learning experiences are probably aspects of filmmaking that most filmmakers would have learned in film school. I definitely learned the hard way, trial and error. Here are some of my naïve revelations:

First: The quality of the final cut is directly related to the quality of the filming. Sound and visual problems plagued the postproduction process and to a moderate extent the problems still exist in the final cut.

Second: I shot a large amount of interviews and eventually figured that I had captured the content that I needed to make the film. It turned out that we needed to conduct several more interviews to fill in gaps during post. It also turned out that having completed most of the filming; I found that I was only five to ten percent on the way to making the movie. Editing, soundtrack production and extensive decision making concerning all aspects of the postproduction process turned out to be extremely challenging, time consuming and often straight out gut wrenching.

When studying an ethnic population one cannot accurately predict the eventual scope of the content. It was an evolving and moving target. Over time we inadvertently documented an evolutionary process of change. There couldn't be a script as new information, ideas and discoveries constantly altered the content. People died, businesses closed and the need to improve invited new interviews. In a couple of cases we were even drawn to recreations for the purpose of visual demonstration. The bottom line; postproduction

overwhelmingly represents the bulk of the work and effort in the filmmaking process. At least in this case.

Third: When studying an ethnic population, in this case Italian Americans, it is most important to be accurate and sensitive to that population. If one misses the boat on these points their film will not be good. And on this point I can say that the issues can become so complex that they can account for weeks or even months of very difficult decision making. It isn't possible to do the subject of this question justice in the space allotted for the article. For example, the subject of organized crime in the Federal Hill neighborhood became a nightmare in terms of how to handle a reality where there are many different viewpoints. At one end of the spectrum some people believe that to mention organized crime in a film about Italian Americans perpetuates a stereotype. Something I wanted to avoid. An inordinate amount of time was consumed in the process of depicting the facts about the presence of organized crime while at the same being sensitive enough to not sensationalize the subject. The film was not about the "mob" which constituted only one of many subjects mentioned in the film. We conducted a series of screenings and discussions to help with this process. They were a great help.

Fourth: We had to be realistic about what people remembered from the past or from what they were told in the past by others. Nostalgia can alter remembrances during interviews that tend to cloud history in a predictable way. People will usually go on and on about things that they enjoy and their impressions are more often favorable when they recount stories about family, traditions and "the old neighborhood." It is very difficult to keep a balance that is realistic. There are also forces that are very compelling pushing the directorial aspects of the film towards the positive rather than the negative. I believe that, although we tried to keep an objective balance, we erred towards the positive as the overwhelming slant of the information we received from the interviewees was of a positive nature, in terms of what they remembered from the past. Human nature! I'm sure that some aspects of my answers to your questions include my own nostalgic thoughts about the filmmaking process for "Italian Americans and Federal hill."

Fifth: "Talking head" type documentaries are often boring. It became obvious during postproduction that personality and emotion had to be important components in the film's final cut. Of the over fifty interviews conducted we selected about twenty five for the film. It was a difficult process because I had to cut several good interviewees from the film. On the other hand limiting the subjects allowed me to develop the personalities of many the interviewees remaining; this in turn livened up the film. I think that in a way the audience sort of "bonded" with some of the interviewees and felt a "relationship" to them. I also felt that if I could have the audience react on a personal, emotional level it would take the curse off of some of the dryer aspects of the "talking head" format. Humor, nostalgia, loss, candid and personal reflections and thoughts in a way, really carried the film. People left the theater with a smile on their faces. We also used old photos, street scenes and a lot of footage that was shown while

people discussed the various topics in the film. The viewer doesn't just watch "talking heads."

Sixth: Retrieving ones costs in the making of an independent documentary film is, I believe, near impossible, unless you are somehow funded for the project from outside sources and don't have to pay them back. From what I can gather, far less than one percent of independent filmmakers will retrieve their costs. Of course, financial return is not the motivating factor for making an independent film in most cases. It wasn't in my case. That is, until the costs went through the roof during post production. My fault.

The costs were low during the filming. There was usually just a camera operator and myself and digital film was inexpensive. At that time I had the luxury of being able to concentrate on content in a sort of journalistic way. I didn't really have an agenda to create a slant in the information, or to find something that was sensational or shocking. I wanted the straight story. It was important to concentrate on the filming and the interview process without regard to future commercial value. Getting the correct and accurate information was the top priority. I can only speak from my experience with the documentary. I believe that by concentrating on the content and being sensitive to the subject population, one can make a film that will stand the test of time (this is also a partial answer to your question number 8, regarding the resonance of the film and how it was received.)

Seventh: I would advise anyone considering a soundtrack to think about it very early on in the process. We recorded most of the soundtrack live, using mostly traditional folk and classical Italian music. If the music is original or public domain then you don't have to deal with ownership or music publishing issues; but if the rights of the music are owned by others then the world of music publishing issues can be extremely frustrating, expensive and time consuming. There are many surprises and nuances in the music publishing business and one might require professional help. The time it takes to research and clear the music publishing issues on a single piece can take months. And if you come up against an unreasonable agent you might be asked for several thousand dollars just for a festival license on an unknown piece of music. So definitely plan ahead. The other soundtrack learning experience was that it is most advantageous to work with the soundtrack as early as possible in the editing process. It was difficult as the unscripted documentary format lent itself to numerous changes in the film, but one is definitely at a disadvantage if the soundtrack is an afterthought.

George, I could keep going. But I'll stop here on this one.

GTM: You had a spectacular premiere with great reviews and large crowds, what was it like to see your work on a large screen with a capacity house?

Jon Raben: The premiere event was planned for close to six months and a tremendous amount of time was devoted to the event's promotion. Movie posters were distributed to businesses in neighborhoods with large Italian

American populations, areas in a broad radius of Federal Hill and to individuals and organizations that were thought to be appropriate. Several publications ran stories and announcements about the film and advertisements were placed in various print media. Within a couple of months of the premiere over 20,000 postcards were handed out in neighborhoods and to businesses in key areas and press releases were sent to local media and national news services. The movie posters and postcards were particularly effective in the areas surrounding and within the Federal Hill neighborhood. I also conducted a telemarketing campaign using information from phonebooks and other public sources, to get the word out.

The premiere was planned to be a multifaceted event with free Italian Pastries and wine, courtesy of local Federal Hill vendors, a concert preceding and following the screening featuring Italian music from a Mandolin trio that had contributed to the sound track, and a strolling troubadour to greet the arriving audience who had also contributed to the soundtrack. Notable Italian Americans were invited to be guest speakers in a short prescreening speaking segment at each of the screenings. All the ticket sales for the three day event were handled at my home through the mail and at the door. A small amount of tickets remained and were sold at the door.

We sold about 2300 tickets for the three day event at the Columbus Theater, which is conveniently located in the Federal Hill neighborhood. I arranged for a staff of about eighteen people to work each event and brought in an industrial cleaning crew for a few hours before the first screening. I also arranged for the production of DVDs and wrote and published a book about Federal Hill that included a history, maps and figures, film credits, pictures of the interviewees, a playbill and sponsor pages, and planned the book and DVD release to coincide with the premiere event. Additional time consuming projects.

I arranged for a company to bring in a high quality digital projector and four sets of speakers for sound enhancement. About one and a half hours before the first screening (Friday night) I was told by the technician that the film would not play as the company that sent the projector had sent the wrong lense and they were closed for the weekend. The technician arranged for a different projector to be rushed in from his company so that the film could be screened. It was an inferior product but did the job, and in any case I couldn't tell the difference as I never saw the film on anything bigger than a television set.

The bottom line is that there were so many issues leading up to and during the premiere, some that came out of the blue to broadside me, that I was very happy when the thing ended. Most of my thoughts were consumed with logistics.

The audience response was great and quite vocal; especially laughter and the exiting crowds had compliments and smiles on their faces. I knew that it had gone well. I was also quite surprised at the consistently positive reviews (four stars from the Journal and five stars from the Gazette for example) preceding the

premiere, and the lack of any unfavorable press. I remain the most negative critic and consider the final cut to be a film with good content but technical shortcomings. I do, however, think that we broke new ground, in a way, with the soundtrack. We brought the soundtrack musicians into view in the film in several places. It was kind of a novel idea. People did, however, enjoy the sound track very much. Except for one song and the instrumentals, all the music with vocal components were in Italian (I don't speak any Italian). I've had quite a few requests for a sound track CD.

GTM: Could you share with our readers some stories about the folks you interviewed and what you found surprising, unforgettable and amusing?

Jon Raben: I spent a lot of time preparing interviews which lasted from less than one hour to over four hours. I was pleased that they all went pretty well. A lot of time and research went into each interview and each interview became more complex and extensive as information from previous interviews and additional research was added to the process. The earliest interviews conducted were minimally organized and researched. Additional changes during the evolving process were introduced into the style and substance of the interviews, and they improved accordingly.

It was important to relax the interviewees with questions that made them comfortable before getting into more difficult subjects. Emotion wasn't easy to illicit in a somewhat formal interview format but it became easier with time and experience. One's feelings for their family, culture and beliefs can become passionate and I tried to bring out those feelings during the process. Several of the interviewees actually broke down while recalling their parents in the context of a probing discussion of subjects that they probably hadn't thought about for years. In one case it became overwhelming and we stopped the interview so that the subject could compose before starting again. Although it might have made for a more sensational film, I decided not to use the footage of these events as I believed it would have had the effect of exploiting the individuals in terms of their privacy. A difficult decision.

There were some people that were more difficult to handle and less cooperative than others. But even they tended to loosen up during the process. It was surprising how forthcoming people were during the interview. I was very pleased and rather taken by this. I think I was able to establish a trust with the style and line of questioning used.

Some of the interviews were conducted to gather specific information although a good portion of all the interviews contained similar questions. Some targeted success, food, history, culture, family, tradition, occupations, religion, politics or any subject that we wanted information on. In the future I would include more significant others (wives and husbands) in the process. We also had difficulty getting older women in the Italian American community to interview. This was not case for older men who usually agreed to interview.

The physical filming was conducted without much planning in that we didn't know exactly where they were going to take place until the last minute. We would make an appointment, show up at the location and set up the lights and cameras after checking out the situation. Often, technical problems, especially ambient sound problems resulted from this process. People were interviewed in their homes, place of business, in halls and churches, on the street, walking down the street, in noisy public places, with refrigerators, air conditioners, cash registers and all sorts of white noise plaguing the sound. The telephone would ring and people would interrupt the process. I wanted to redo a couple of interviews but only had that luxury once. It turned out not to be an improvement. We used the camera mikes plus one shotgun mike for sound. On the upcoming project I'll try lapel mikes. I will also try to arrange less ambient noise in advance. When we interviewed Vincent A. "Buddy" Cianci Jr., then the mayor of providence and a big promoter of Federal Hill, we were allotted a half hour window, where told where to set up by his advance agent, and waited for him to show between appointments. The interview took place in the jewelry district of downtown Providence, on the sidewalk of a busy street, under a route 195 overpass with cars and trucks roaring by overhead. Talk about sound problems! But we made the best of it and used, I believe, six or seven clips from the interview in the final cut.

In thinking about this question: much of what went on during the interview process was surprising and unforgettable.

GTM: Why do you think your work has such resonance and was so well received?

Jon Raben: Close to twenty percent of Rhode Island's population is Italian American. It has the largest Italian American per capita population of any state in the US. The vast majority of Italian immigrants arrived in the US around the turn of and into the early twentieth century from southern Italy where they worked the land and were essentially destitute. When they arrived they often clustered and chose to live with other Italians who shared the culture and language in areas such as Federal Hill where housing and work was available. They took the lowest paying jobs, looked and dressed different and had a different culture and language than the Irish and Yankee populations they were displacing.

The Italians suffered marked discrimination; stereotypes developed, were perpetuated in the mainstream media and continue today. Think about it; The Sopranos, Goodfellas, The Godfather and many films and television shows about Italian Americans depict them as lowlife gangsters and want to be gangsters that can't pronounce words with more than two or three syllables. Novels and even newspapers tend to focus on the most sensational stereotypes and romanticize the derogatory aspects of their culture.

A major focus of the two largest Italian American organizations in the US is to heighten public awareness about the unfair depiction of Italian Americans in the media. Italian Americans are now among the mainstream and elite of society and deserve better. When I would mention to people that I was making a film

about Italian Americans, they would often have the knee-jerk reaction; "you're making a film about the Mob?"

I decided early on to make a film that was accurate and sensitive to the above issues, although there were pressures to perpetuate the stereotypes, like I might sell a lot of movies if the film was about gangsters. But it turned out, I think, that people were actually waiting for and eager to see a film that depicted the culture with respect. Additionally, in Rhode Island, many people are curious about Federal Hill because it had been steeped in folklore and stereotypes depicting Italian Americans from the neighborhood as mobsters. The film "Italian Americans and Federal Hill" had a ready and waiting market.

The marketing of the premiere event and the DVD accentuated the positive aspects of the film and I think was quite effective. I believe that any documentary that is accurate and sensitive to a population, content wise, will stand the test of time. Throw in some personality, humor, emotion, promotion and some luck and you might end up with a successful film. This is what seems to have happened with "Italian Americans and Federal Hill."

GTM: What's next on your plate?

Jon Raben: My plan is to start another documentary film in the near future (probably within the next two months) on subjects relating to Rhode Island. It will be a very different process and I hope a much better film because of the trial by fire experience I have already endured during of the making of "Italian Americans and Federal Hill." The "guerilla" style filming process that I have been using with minimal personnel involvement will continue. I feel that I've only encountered the tip of the iceberg and consider myself to be a student of the filmmaking process. I expect the next film will take a long time and be a much improved product. I'm not setting up any deadlines.

GTM: Anything else you'd like to share with our readers?

Jon Raben: The filmmaker has amazing control over the content and slant of his or her film. After the interviews are "in the can" and all the releases are signed, the film can be cut in any way that the people involved in that process decide. This power creates a responsibility rife with ethical pitfalls and decisions that can be overwhelming. The filmmaker can make people look good or bad, edit sentences out of context and skew the content in the direction of his or her own agenda if they so choose, or inadvertently.

In a lengthy interview people often loosen up, get emotional or fatigued and act in ways that they wouldn't act normally or say things that they wouldn't say if they had time to think about it ahead of time. It's like leaving a message on someone's answering machine and then realizing that you didn't really say what you meant to say, but it is too late. Editing has to be a sensitive and a very well thought out process that considers many aspects of the individuals interviewed and also the nature of the context regarding what they say. In taking fifty hours

of footage and editing it down to eighty-nine minutes, as in the case of "Italian Americans and Federal Hill," it was difficult to keep track of the original context of every remaining clip.

Inherent in the editing process is the propensity to slant the truth as the different pieces of footage are combined from different interviews and cut down to a minimum to fit the final cut. It doesn't have to be premeditated and is often the result of the process itself.

I think that difficult aspects of making "Italian Americans and Federal Hill" were these technical and ethical considerations that affect the content of the film. In a different type of documentary, possibly an expose, a purposeful slant of the content might be the norm, like in some of Michael Moore's documentary films.

Most of the subjects interviewed for the film were invited to screen it in the later stages of postproduction. In a couple cases individuals asked that particular footage be deleted as it might embarrass or harm them or be inaccurate in some way (real or imagined) and I would usually make the cut. It drove the editor crazy. One of those times we completely rearranged and changed the focus of a nine-minute segment as we were nearing the final cut to accommodate what I perceived to be a legitimate request from an interviewee.

In several cases invited screeners alerted me to inaccuracies or innuendo within the film that I had not considered to exist. After I reviewed the footage, and understood the screener's point of view, often very subtle, I would make the appropriate corrections. Extensive screenings are absolutely essential to the process!

CONTACT INFORMATION:

To learn more about Jon's current work, please go to:

www.italianamericansandfederalhill.com. You can email him directly at: fedhilldoc@yahoo.com. The film is currently available at stores in Rhode Island, through the website, and at Amazon.com.

About the Author:

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