

Marie Coady Daily Times Chronicle



Weekly Column Page



... my work

Daily Times Chronicle, Friday, January 12, 2007.

“HAND OF GOD”
by Marie Coady

The story begins slowly, introducing you to the members of an Italian-Catholic family that, whether you are Italian or not, reminds you very much of your own. Like the Cultrera family, many of us were raised in communities where ethnicity and religion were so intertwined they ruled your life. Children were seen and not heard and you never questioned an adult, and that went triple for a priest. God was everywhere and if you were caught doing anything wrong you went straight to hell.

So it was in that environment that Maria, Paul and Joseph Cultrera were raised. Always doing what they were told and always respecting the adults that ruled their life. And why not? The Cultrera family was above reproach. They lived by the rules of God and man and passed that respectful attitude on to their children, never thinking that the thing they had to fear most would be the church they were so devoted to. After all, they were devout and active members of St. Mary's Italian Catholic Church in Salem, MA, one of the parishes recently closed by the Archdiocese of Boston.

“Hand of God” (<http://www.handofgodfilm.com/words.html>) is a modest documentary film with the potential to completely blow you away. And it does just that, step by step, without rage or antagonism or the desire for retaliation. The story unfolds with humble determination and healing humor, leading slowly but surely to a kind of proud acceptance that hits home with almost any right thinking person.

As you are invited into a home that still holds the symbols of an era when religious images passed as interior decorating, you come to understand why Paul Cultrera never told anyone he had been molested by a priest. Besides thinking he was the only one, he blamed himself for what happened, and that's what Father Birmingham was counting on. That, and some help from his friends in the Chancery in Boston. It was that lethal combination that kept his sins from being revealed to his potential prey and allowed him to move from parish to parish molesting up to 100 boys before he died, never having to answer for his sins.

It was early in June of last year when, through friend and ex-nun Pauline Salvucci, Hand of God producer Joe Cultrera, in his own humble way invited me to meet with him in person and talk about the screening of his film, Hand of God, at the Boston Film Festival.

“I'm contacting you because I plan to be in the Boston/North Shore area from tomorrow night thru Monday night to do some pre-interviews before our June screenings,” he wrote. “If you want to meet personally this would be the best time as I will not be back there until the day of the Salem screening.”

And to my regret, I could not follow through on his offer to introduce his compelling film to my readers. But as it turns out it's not too late and you won't even have to travel to Salem or Boston to see it, because Joe Cultrera's compelling documentary film will be making its national debut on Frontline (www.pbs.org/frontline/handofgod) next Tuesday, January 16, 2007, and I urge you to watch it.

Joe's film chronicles how an entire family was impacted by one child's horrific experience and the heroic manner in which that child grew into manhood coping with the trauma. It's the story of Joe's brother Paul, and Joe has done his brother proud in the magnificent manner in which he has told his story.

The abuse began in 1964 when Paul was an altar boy at St. James Church (recently closed) and a student at St. James Parochial School, within walking distance of the Cultrera home in Salem. Paul was singled out by the then Fr. Joseph Birmingham for special counseling sessions in the rectory. Paul was almost 15 when those so-called “counseling sessions” took to the road.

As Paul explains, “And then one weekend, I remember he took me away – to go golfing theoretically - down to the Cape. I remember this motel that he took me to, and it was like over night. And Mom and Dad just thought it was normal. They never would have imagined that this was going on. It just never would have entered their consciousness.”

The trips continued as well as late night rides in Birmingham's shiny, black Ford Galaxie with the striking red upholstery, one cool car meant to impress the young teens that he was targeting.

“He'd take groups of us for rides” Paul explains, “and he was immediately very friendly and gathering us all around and saying, “Let's go to Hampton Beach,” and “Let's go to the movies,” and “Let's go to Boston.” That's the way Birmingham picked his targets and got control over them.

When Paul finally rebelled and refused to submit to anymore of Birmingham's molestations, like most abuse victims, he didn't confront the issue by blowing the whistle on him. Priests were held in such high esteem back then no one would have believed him even if he did speak out. So he buried the hurt and humiliation deep inside and built a wall around that part of his life. That's what you did in 1964. And Paul was so good at it he managed to keep all that pain buried for almost 30 years.

Finally, in 1992, he was drawn out when his ex-wife, puzzled, by the break-up of their marriage, asked him outright if he had been sexually abused. That became the opening he'd been waiting for almost 30 years and when he told her it was by a priest she was very sympathetic and that surprised Paul.

"What really surprised me was how understanding she was. She didn't start screaming and yelling at me. She understood and was sympathetic and said, 'That's a horrible thing to have happened to you.' "

That's when Paul began thinking, "Okay, I've just told this deep dark secret to somebody. I feel actually better about it. The heavens didn't open up; there was no earthquake, my life didn't end. All those years when I lived in silence, I believed I was the only one. And let me tell you, that was a very lonely feeling."

But it wasn't long before he found out that, not only wasn't he the only one, he was one of nearly 100 boys that Joseph Birmingham had molested. What is even more shocking is that when Fr. John B. McCormack, who had served with Birmingham at St. James in Salem, became head of personnel for the Archdiocese of Boston he moved Birmingham from parish to parish keeping him from ever having to face up to his sins. And he did this in spite of the fact that he was personally aware of Birmingham's penchant for pedophilia.

Most despicable of all is that McCormack went on to be appointed the Bishop of Manchester, NH and in spite of numerous demonstrations to have him removed, he still holds that position. But I guarantee that after watching Hand of God next Tuesday night on Frontline, you will not have any trouble understanding why the people of Manchester are so determined to have him removed.

What is most disturbing about this film is the arrogance of the clergy. They seem to want to chalk it all up to a one-time anomaly and hope that if they sweep it under the rug long enough we will all get over it. Well, I'm here to tell you that when it comes to child sexual abuse, it doesn't work that way. As one person protesting in Manchester said, "If I don't physically align myself with the victims, then I don't know what to do with the pain of their stories."

Daily Times Chronicle, Friday, January 5, 2007

MY MEMORIES OF 2006
by Marie Coady

Since I am a columnist and not a news reporter, I get to choose what I write about each week and that sometimes presents what can only be described as a "Sophie's Choice".

In fact, there are some weeks when I have to choose between several stories of equal interest and other weeks when I have already turned in my column and I receive a call telling me of a story that would have been of interest to my readers. Unfortunately, the opportunity to write that story has passed and it's never told.

Overall, my readers seem to enjoy the columns I write about local history, especially the little stories that slipped by with little notice until I resurrected them. To me those stories are a window on the past that illustrates how little human nature has changed and that history does indeed repeat itself.

The first little story I resurrected in 2006 was about sledding accidents that occurred in January of 1912, a year when Woburn and Winchester had more than their share of injury and death as a result. In this case we did learn from history and no longer allow sledders to tempt fate by careening down Warren Avenue only to run head-on into the traffic that passes along Main Street.

And to keep readers from experiencing February-itis, I felt it was time to remind them that one of Woburn's Civil War soldier, Cpl. George Pollard, although listed on the Civil War monument in Woburn Center as being killed at the Battle of Laurel Hill in 1864, is actually MIA. After taking a closer look, it appears that records of that day do not verify his death.

In fact, those records indicate that no one actually saw him fall on the battlefield and his body was never recovered. What I didn't tell you is that since it was more than likely, that if injured, he would have been brought to field hospitals in Alexandria and Fairfax, VA, I spent some time in the archives of both libraries there looking into old records, newspaper reports, etc., and could find no mention of Pollard as either a patient or a prisoner in any of the hospitals in the area.

In March of 2006, I resurrected a workplace feud that unfolded at the Woburn Pumping Station in 1890 and continued for more than a year. Like most workplace unpleasantness, there were no winners. In April, I reprinted an article that I'd done earlier about Woburn's part in the "Shot Heard Round the World". My aim was to remind my readers, and especially the young people of the community, of Woburn's contribution to the Battle of Lexington and Concord.

Then, in May, I discovered that an ancestor of another of Woburn's Civil War soldiers, Private George Perkins, not only had published a book containing his great-grandfather's Civil War diaries, but that he lived around the block from where I was staying in Alexandria. As a result I got to meet Richard Griffin, author of "Three Years a Soldier" in person and discuss his book. I then e-mailed the results of that interview home just in time to appear in the May 12, 2006 edition of the Times.

In June, I filled in some of the details concerning the suspicious drowning of James Daily in Horn Pond in 1877 and how, 12 years later, his son John was instrumental in saving another young man from drowning at almost the exact same spot. All of which allowed me to conclude that fate does indeed play a role in our lives. Then in July, I felt it was time to remember Tilton Villa, a mansion that once stood regally on a hill off Mishawum Road between Clinton and Eaton Streets in Woburn.

Heat wave history seemed appropriate for the retelling in August, and what better time to tell of the labor troubles at the tanneries than in September; Woburn farming history in October and World War II veterans' stories in November. And although Christmas seemed hardly the time to revisit burglaries that occurred in Woburn and Winchester in 1859, in the spirit of the season I let the cat out of the bag anyway.

Writing history columns is fun, but the most memorable columns are the ones that allow me to meet and get to know interesting people. In February, I got to meet Mary Brine O'Connor, a longtime Woburn resident who at age 90 made me feel young. Mary's memories of Woburn as a farming community and the beginnings of St. Anthony's Church were all enlightening, but what was most surprising is that after years of living here in Woburn she is now living in a log cabin in a remote section of New Hampshire and loving every minute of it.

Later that month I got to spend time with Danny Breegi. Before that I only knew him through his parents Wisam and Sada so I was eager to hear what Danny remembered of his family's escape from Iraq when he was only a toddler, and I wasn't disappointed. Like most of us Danny is 100 percent American, but he also takes care to remember his roots and tries to share his good fortune with those less fortunate than he. All of which points to the fact that his parents did a great job raising him.