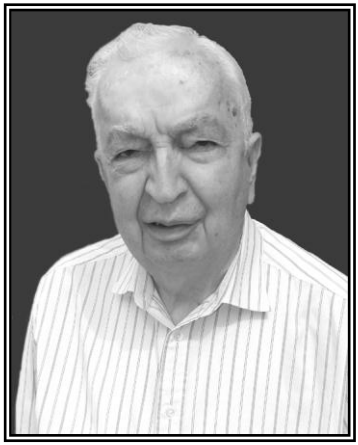
CHAPTER 4

LOOKING BACK WITH
BOB PETRIELLO



Bob Petriello, 2010

If you are curious about anything having to do with daily life in Brownsville over the past eight decades, you couldn't go wrong by talking with Brownsville native Bob Petriello. Born in Brownsville in 1921, Bob was a writer for the Brownsville *Telegraph* for forty-seven years until that newspaper closed in 1988. For the past thirty-nine years, Bob has served as Brownsville's tax collector.

Bob (Pat) Petriello is a gold mine of information about Brownsville and its people. Since growing up during the Depression and landing his first reporting job at the *Telegraph* in 1941, Bob has been on a first-name basis with several generations of movers and shakers who have shepherded Brownsville through good and bad times.

He knows most of the town's ordinary citizens too. Bob played a pivotal role in organizing the Brownsville Little League and Brownsville Biddy League in the 1950s. He watched hundreds of Brownsville youngsters play sports and reported their athletic achievements on the sports pages of the *Telegraph*. Now, years after reading Bob's articles about their childhood exploits on the gridiron, hard court, or baseball diamond, these formerly youthful athletes visit his tax office in Brownsville's municipal building and fill him in on the latest news about their own children and grandchildren.

Nearly half a century of reporting for the local newspaper and four decades as the town tax collector have combined to make Bob Petriello one of the most recognized and beloved citizens in the community. I visited Bob in his historic Water Street home, where we had an enjoyable

conversation that ranged from his own upbringing to his years at the *Telegraph* and in the tax collector's office. Beginning with this column, I am pleased to bring you the highlights of my conversation with this delightful gentleman.

As we were making ourselves comfortable on his sofa, I commented to Bob, "I recall seeing a newspaper reprint of a photograph of the laying of the cornerstone for the inter-county bridge [which was dedicated in September 1914]. I noticed that the caption identified one of the men in the cornerstone-laying ceremony as Robert Petriello. Was that your father?"

"That was my uncle," Bob said. "His name was Robert, and his nickname was Pat. I was named for him. He and my dad, whose name was Sylvester, worked on the construction of the piers for the Brownsville Bridge."

"Were your dad and your uncle originally from Brownsville?"

"No, they were from the Philadelphia area. They worked for the Crossan Construction Company, and when that company got the contract to do some railroad construction in West Brownsville, they came here as workers and lived in a house in West Brownsville. After completing the job, they stayed here and lived for a while in a place on Second Street in South Brownsville. Then in 1919, my dad and uncle bought this house on Water Street from a family named Newcomer."

"Your dad was single at that time?"

"His first wife had died in 1916. Dad had a brother in Italy named Achille, who wrote to him that there was a nice unmarried girl named Jenny Magna living in their village. Jenny and my dad began to correspond. In 1920, she came to America and married my dad, who went to New York to meet her.

"He brought her to this house, which they shared with my uncle Pat and his wife Ella. Pat and Ella had a bedroom, Sylvester and Jenny had a bedroom, and they shared the rest of the ten-room house, eating meals together as an extended family."

"This house is much bigger than it appears to be from the street," I remarked, "and the individual rooms are also large with high ceilings. I imagine the house has an interesting history."

"I understand this house was either associated with timber or was part of a distillery," Bob said, "because there is a tunnel that begins in our cellar, goes under the railroad tracks, and leads down to the river [a stone's throw away from the house]. The tunnel has partially caved in. When my dad and uncle bought this house, they cemented the basement entrance to the tunnel. I have had people tell me they rolled whiskey barrels down there, and other people have told me they dropped timber

down there. I never did find out which was true."

(When I returned home after our conversation, I examined an 1883 drawing of Brownsville that shows Bob's house looking much as it does today and depicts a lumberyard on the opposite corner from Bob's house, across Cherry Alley, where the Pennsylvania Hotel once stood. Perhaps this lends more credence to the whiskey barrel scenario.)

"The tunnel is still there?"

Bob nodded. "About twenty years ago when the municipal authority put a sewer line in, they ran into it. They called me at the *Telegraph*, and I came over to see it. It was an arch-shaped tunnel about five feet high. They ended up running the sewer line right through it."

"So there is quite a bit of history to this home," I said. "Now, Jenny Magno, who became your mother, arrived in Brownsville in 1920. When did you come along?"

"I was born in this house in 1921, and I've lived here ever since. I was born upstairs with our family doctor, Dr. [Lewis N.] Reichard, taking care of my mother. Dr. Reichard was the late Loise White's father."

"Any brothers or sisters?"

"I am an only child. Now for years, everybody in Brownsville thought I had a sister named Marie. The fact is that my uncle Pat and aunt Ella, who lived here with my dad and mother, had an adopted daughter, Marie, who was really their niece. Everybody presumed she was my sister, but she was really my cousin, and we all lived here in this house."

"So your dad and uncle were business partners?"

"Right. They were in the business of paving roads, building walls, that type of work. My uncle Pat was the go-getter for the contracts, because he knew everybody. My dad's role in the business was to direct the actual construction work.

"In those years, Water Street here [in front of the house] was all brick. Some of the town's old-timers, such as the late Earl Storey, once told me that years ago, my dad and uncle had the paving contract to lay brick on this street. After they had completed the job, the borough didn't come up with the money to pay them."

Bob laughed, "According to Earl Storey, my uncle went down to the beginning of the street where the National City Bank is today, put up a barricade, stood there, and wouldn't let anyone use the road until the borough finally came up with some money!

"I also remember as a kid going up to watch them cement what they called Sandy Hollow in those days. It is now called Union Street. It had been a dirt road, and they cemented it from the top of the street down to

its intersection with Lynn Road. They did a lot of contracting jobs all over the area. But that all ended when my uncle Pat got killed."

"What happened?"

"He was killed in 1929 when they were working on the road from Vestaburg to Fredericktown. His own cement truck backed up into him and ran over him. He died at Brownsville General Hospital. That's when my dad got out of the contracting business."

"You were about eight years old when that happened. What did your dad do after that?"

"He worked as a foreman on road projects for O. C. Cluss. They built a road at Fayette City, and I know he stayed at Burgettstown for one particular project and came home on weekends. After that, he ended up at the WPA [Works Progress Administration, a Depression-era federal work program created in 1935]. He helped build the wall down at the Bank Street wharf, and he also helped build a retaining wall on Hollow Road. The wharf wall was only about three feet above the water, but the wharf was big, nearly down to where Dunlap Creek comes out."

"So while your dad was employed as a construction worker on roads and public works projects, you were growing up here in this house. Where did you attend school?"

"I started at St. Peter's Catholic school [on the North Side in old Brownsville Borough]. I went there for five years. All of my friends were going to Prospect Street School [in old South Brownsville Borough and just a few blocks from the Petriello home]. I coaxed my parents to let me go to Prospect Street School. They didn't want me to, but I won out and went there in sixth grade.

"I attended seventh and eighth grades at the old South Brownsville High School building on High Street [which was still part of the South Brownsville Borough school system]. Then in 1934, when I was in ninth grade, old Brownsville Borough and South Brownsville Borough consolidated into the present-day Brownsville Borough and the school systems consolidated too. I went to ninth grade at Front Street, which had become Brownsville Junior High School. Then for grades ten through twelve, I went back to the High Street building, which had become Brownsville High School. I graduated in 1938."

Bob was an avid young sports fan while in high school, and in the summer he frequented Sam's News Stand at the end of the inter-county bridge in Brownsville, where he could check on the latest major league baseball scores as they were updated.

"They had a big blackboard at Sam's with the inning-by-inning baseball scores on it," Bob said. One summer day, the proprietor asked young Bob to run over to Casper's Pool Room, located under the Plaza

Theater. Casper's had a Western Union ticker, which was how the inning-by-inning baseball scores became available.

"I'd go over to Casper's several times a day," Bob recalled, "get the scores by innings, and come back and chalk it up on the board at the news stand. I loved to do it. I thought it was a big deal."

Little did Bob suspect that this youthful summer pastime of reporting the latest baseball scores would evolve into a career as a sports reporter.

Next Bob will describe how he, on the verge of earning a California State Teachers College degree in secondary education, turned down an opportunity to teach geography at Brownsville High School so that he could continue with his fledgling career -- writing sports at the Brownsville *Telegraph*.

CAREER PATH TOOK AN UNEXPECTED TURN FOR BOB PETRIELLO

Longtime Brownsville *Telegraph* sports writer and current borough tax collector Bob Petriello has seen plenty of changes in Brownsville during the eight-plus decades he has lived in town. In the opening article of the series, Bob explained how his parents came to Brownsville, and he described his upbringing and schooling in South Brownsville.

As a boy, Bob spent a lot of time at Sam's News Stand near the end of the Brownsville inter-county bridge. On summer afternoons, he would run across town several times a day to Casper's Pool Room, which was under the Plaza Theater. There he would retrieve the latest inning-by-inning baseball scores hot off Casper's Western Union ticker, sprint back to Sam's, and post the updated ball scores on a chalkboard.

"I loved to do it," Bob told me. "I thought it was a big deal."

While he was hanging out at his favorite haunt one summer afternoon, Bob was roped into his first paying job.

"I believe it was the summer after my sophomore year in high school," Bob said. "Next to Sam's News Stand was a store called Gerecter's Furniture. It stood where the National City Bank parking lot is today. One afternoon Mr. Gerecter saw me standing on the sidewalk outside Sam's News Stand. I can still picture him, a husky guy with a round face. He knew my family, since we had bought furniture from him. Mr. Gerecter came up to me and said, 'Bobby, what are you doing?'

"I said, 'I'm looking at the ball scores.'

"'Come with me,' he said, so I went with him. 'I want you to polish

this furniture.' So I polished furniture all afternoon. In fact, I didn't get home until about 5:30. My mother said, 'Where have you been all afternoon?' and I told her.

"Later, Mr. Gerecter told me, 'Bob, I want you to come back a couple days a week.' I did, and he paid me by the hour. Within a year or so, he moved his store from that building to the four-story building that is still standing at the foot of High Street across from the municipal building. He moved because he did not need all of the space he had in the building where he had been, and he was hoping to cut his rental costs.

"The first floor of the building into which he moved became Gerecter's Furniture Store. I still went over and worked for him there, polishing furniture, washing the windows. In other words, I was a janitor. I did that through my senior year in high school."

"Were you still relaying the baseball scores from Casper's Pool Room to the chalkboard at Sam's News Stand?"

"Oh, yes, I was still doing that."

"What did you do after you graduated from Brownsville High School in 1938?"

"Right after my senior year, my dad died. He, my mother Jenny, my uncle Robert (Pat), and his wife Ella are all buried in a family lot at Redstone Cemetery, right off the National Pike near the cemetery entrance. My aunt Ella passed away in 1943, about four years after my dad died. Their adopted daughter Marie, who was actually their niece, married and moved to Monessen. That left just my mother and me living here in this big house.

"There were four rooms and a bath downstairs and four more rooms and a bath upstairs, so we lived downstairs and rented out the upstairs. Our first renter, who rented from us for a long time, was Howard Mills, a piano teacher who also worked at the post office. He taught piano upstairs, and the kids would come in the front door. My mother and I always used the back entrance. I remember that one of Howard's piano students who came here for lessons was Cheryl Hardwick [who went on to become the longtime musical director of NBC's *Saturday Night Live*]."

"So your mom was able to earn some income by renting the upstairs, and you were living with her and helping out too. Tell me what you did following your father's death."

"When my dad died, I was eighteen years old. George Cox, who had an important position with the railroad and was on the school board, came here to pay his respects. They had the viewing here in this house. At that time, most people were viewed in the home, not at a funeral home. Anyway, while Mr. Cox was paying his respects, he said to me,

'Bob, what are you doing now?'

"I said, 'I'm planning to go to California State Teacher's College.'

"He said, 'This summer, you come and see me. You've got a job if you want it.'"

"So if you had taken him up on his offer, you could have worked for the railroad," I commented, "and perhaps your life would have turned out differently. Did you go to California State Teacher's College as you had planned?"

"Yes, I did. I majored in secondary education. In my freshman year, George Roadman was the sports editor of the college newspaper, *Hammer and Tongs*. He was a junior, two years ahead of me. I saw a notice on a bulletin board down at the campus. It said they were looking for anybody interested in working on the college newspaper. I went over and talked to George, who was from Merrittstown. He said, 'Would you like to write sports?'

"I said, 'Yeah, I'd love to!'

"He said, 'Well, you're my assistant.' Just like that!"

"And your sports writing career was born!" I said.

Bob nodded. "So I worked under him that year. The following year, he moved up from sports editor to managing editor of *Hammer and Tongs*, and I became sports editor. Then during my junior and senior year (1941 and 1942), I was managing editor of *Hammer and Tongs*."

"I guess the obvious question," I said, "is if you were majoring in secondary education at California, how did you end up working for the Brownsville *Telegraph* for forty-seven years?"

"I used to go to the *Telegraph* a lot," Bob replied. "At that time I played mushball, and I would bring in scores to be printed in the paper. Don McCann was the sports editor, so I got to know him. During my senior year at California, the *Telegraph* needed a reporter, and I was asked if I wanted to be a reporter for the paper.

"I said, 'But I'm going to college right now.'

"They said, 'How about working at night?'

"I agreed to do that, so in the autumn of 1941, I started working nights at the *Telegraph* and going to college during the day. Because I didn't have any classes on Tuesday, I worked all day every Tuesday. I earned ten dollars a week, and I loved it!"

Inevitably, the day came when Bob faced the toughest decision of his young life. His mother was not at all pleased with the choice he made.

"In the second semester of my senior year at California, I was scheduled to do my student teaching under Bill Watkins, who was the basketball coach at California High School. But the problem was I

couldn't work at the *Telegraph* on Tuesdays and be a student teacher too.

"My mother was upset when I informed her, 'I don't want to do student teaching. I want to be a newspaperman.' Instead of student teaching that semester, I took additional classes at the college and continued working at the *Telegraph* on Tuesdays and every night. With all the credits I accumulated, I ended up with three majors in Geography, History and English. When my senior year was over, I began working at the *Telegraph* full time."

"But because you had not done your student teaching, you didn't receive your college degree, did you?"

"Right. Soon after that, Ray Barner, who was the principal up here at the high school, needed a geography teacher. It was wartime, and there was a teacher shortage. I knew Mr. Barner, because he often came into the *Telegraph*.

"Everybody at the *Telegraph* knew that I hadn't done my student teaching. John Matta, Jr., who was the *Telegraph's* editor and my boss, mentioned me to Mr. Barner. Mr. Barner and Mr. Matta devised a plan that if I would help Mr. Barner out by teaching geography at Brownsville High School, he would count that as fulfilling my student teaching requirement, and I would receive my college degree. I turned it down. I wanted to be a newspaperman."

"So you began working full time at the newspaper. And you were only writing sports . . . ?"

"No," laughed Bob, "I did everything but sweep the floor. Wrote church news. Went to the police station every day. I was on the police beat and wrote up every accident in town."

"Bob, many people remember your sports column entitled 'Red Peppers.' When did you start writing that column?"

"I took over the Red Peppers column when I replaced Lew Hayes as sports editor in 1943. Lew, who had been writing Red Peppers, moved up to city editor, replacing Don Renn, who got a job elsewhere. Of course, John Matta, Jr. was still the managing editor."

"Did Lew Hayes create the Red Peppers column?"

"No, John Matta, Jr. started Red Peppers back in 1928. He claimed it was 'red hot' sports news, so he named it that. When he became managing editor in 1930 or 1931, Don McCann took over the column for four or five years. Then Don Renn had it, then Lew Hayes. I officially took over as the fifth person to write that column in 1943, and I had it from then until the *Telegraph* closed in 1988."

Bob's 1943 promotion to the lofty position of Brownsville *Telegraph* sports editor did not relieve him of his non-sports reporting duties. Next Bob will look back on the highlights of his forty-seven-year

career at the *Telegraph* and provide insight into his 1966 decision to toss his hat into the political arena.

TO BROWNSVILLE SPORTS FANS, PETRIELLO IS A HOUSEHOLD NAME

In 1941, Brownsville's Bob Petriello spurned a teaching career and embraced an occupation that truly fascinated him.

"I don't want to do student teaching. I want to be a newspaper reporter," he declared to his dubious mother, who worried that her boy would waste the four years he had spent as a secondary education major at California State Teachers College. In 1941, while still a college senior, Bob began working part time at the Brownsville *Telegraph.* Upon finishing his senior year, he became a full time employee at the newspaper. When sports editor Lew Hayes moved up to city editor in 1943, twenty-two-year-old Bob Petriello was named sports editor of the Brownsville *Telegraph.* It was a position he would hold for forty-five years.

"Bob," I said to him during a recent conversation at his home, "when you became sports editor, did that relieve you of your non-sports reporting responsibilities?"

"No," Bob shook his head. "On a big city paper, a reporter usually does just one particular job all the time. But when you work on a small town newspaper like the *Telegraph*, you really get an education. In the entire time I worked at the *Telegraph*, I always had other duties to perform in addition to being sports editor.

"I would finish up the sports page at ten-thirty or eleven in the morning. Then I would go to the police station [around the corner from the *Telegraph* office]. I was on the police beat, so anybody that was in jail, I wrote 'em up. I reported on fires and traffic accidents, and on Fridays, I did the church page."

"How many days a week did you work?"

"I worked six days a week, all but Sunday. Saturday was a half-day. We left as soon as the paper came out. But I lived a block away from the *Telegraph* office, so I would often go in at night. I enjoyed what I was doing, so it wasn't really work.

"Sports writing was eighty per cent of my work, but I also covered council meetings, school board meetings, sewage authority meetings, banquets, anything that came up. Right up until the paper closed in 1988, I was still filling in at meetings if someone couldn't make it. Everybody at the *Telegraph* did that, a little bit of everything."

"Bob," I said, "some sports writers nowadays will occasionally write a negative column, hoping to stir up controversy and keep the readers coming back. I don't recall seeing that sort of writing on the *Telegraph* sports pages."

"In forty-seven years at the newspaper, I never wrote anything bad about anybody except one time," Bob said. "There was one particular athlete whose family lived right behind my house, and I knew him and his parents well. He was a talented football and baseball player at Brownsville High School, but when he was leaving for training camp with the Chicago Cubs as a rookie, I wrote, 'He ought to take Dale Carnegie's book, 'How to Win Friends And Influence People,' with him.'

"I wrote that because he would often get mad at his teammates on the field. If he was pitching and they'd make an error, he'd jump all over them. He was a good athlete, but he had a ten-cent head. His mother would often tell me he was that way because his dad spoiled him, and his dad would tell me it was the other way around.

"It was the only time I ever wrote anything derogatory about anybody. This fellow was actually a good friend of mine, but when I wrote that, he didn't speak to me for three or four months. Eventually though, he got over it and sent a nice gift when they had a testimonial banquet for me a few years ago.

"Other than that one time, if I couldn't say something good about a guy, I wouldn't knock him. I felt they were not professional athletes, they were all amateurs giving their best, so I just never did knock a player."

"That's an interesting philosophy to live by as a sports writer," I commented. "Now, if someone is being paid to be an athlete . . ."

"If you're getting paid, that's a different story," Bob said. "That's your job. But these kids that I covered played for the love of it, and I felt that they were doing the best they could, so I just never did knock them for how they played."

"You knew a lot of these players from the time they were youngsters?"

"I enjoyed watching a lot of these kids come through our youth sports programs," Bob said. "In 1950, we started the Little League program in town. Then in 1959, the year I got married, I started the Biddy League basketball program. I had the manager of Brownsville Hardware order one hundred uniforms for the different teams at $4.25 apiece. I had to give him $425 in cash, which my new wife wasn't terribly pleased about, but that's how we got the Biddy League started up there in the Front Street gym."

"When you would write a story," I said, "such as a write-up of a Brownsville High School football game, would you go from the stadium back downtown to the *Telegraph* office to write it?"

"Yes, I would go down to the office after the game was over. It was usually around ten o'clock or so. There would always be a few guys who would come down with me, and we'd be talking while I was trying to write the story. The following morning, I also had to write up all the other games – Beth-Center, California, Frazier, Jefferson – I wrote them all. People would call me in the morning with the details of those other games."

"Do any of the athletes you covered during your forty-seven years at the *Telegraph* stand out in your mind?"

"One of the nicest boys I ever covered, a fantastic athlete, was [Robert] 'Red' Worrell of Centerville High School. I couldn't tell you how far that boy would have gone in football, but during his freshman year at Penn State [1957], he was electrocuted while helping to put up an antenna at his family's home in Denbo.

"He played for Pete Daley at Centerville. You know, Glenn, you don't have too many athletes come up to you and thank you and say, 'Bob, don't put my name in all the time. Give the other guys some write-up too.' I'd laugh and say, 'Hey, Red, you're scoring three touchdowns and running over people, what do you want me to do?'

"He played baseball in our Little League, and when he was twelve years old, he had the body of a fifteen-year-old. In fact, people questioned his eligibility because he was so muscular and well built, but he was the nicest kid you'd ever meet."

"Who was the greatest athlete you ever saw perform for Brownsville High School?"

"Brownsville High School had a lot of great athletes, but I believe the best I ever saw play for Brownsville was Henry 'Ace' Groom. He performed in the late forties, but in his senior year, the WPIAL would not let him play because he was too old, so he went to Massillon High School in Ohio that year. Ace went into the Army and won the Army's heavyweight boxing championship. He was such a natural athlete that if he had tried golf, he'd probably have been shooting par golf within a week!"

"I recall that every autumn the *Telegraph* published a thick pre-season football tabloid," I commented. "Putting that together must have been quite a task."

"I've always been proud of the football edition that we put out every year," Bob nodded. "Some newspapers assign three or four writers, several photographers, and the advertising department staff to assemble

those special football editions. At the *Telegraph*, no one worked on that football edition except me and one photographer. I'd make a schedule, and the photographer and I would go all over the area, take the team photos, and talk to the coaches.

"I would not just put a caption under a photograph that said 'Brownsville High School football team.' I would name every player in every team photo, row by row, left to right, because those kids liked to see their names in the paper. I would take the pictures home, and my wife Patty and I would go over that copy two or three times, working on it in the evenings, because if you missed one name, that would throw off the whole caption from left to right.

"I also arranged for all of the advertising in the football edition. In the summer, before I'd start putting the edition together, I would call the potential advertisers and line up the ads. I would then make up the copy for the ads by mid-August, because that was when I would have to start writing the stories and I wouldn't have time to do the ads. It was nothing to come home from the *Telegraph* at three a.m. and go back at seven a.m. while I was working on that, but I enjoyed it."

"Didn't you also play a role in getting the Mon Valley Sportswriters Association started?"

"Yes, we started that in 1950, when we had our first banquet at Paci's. Bob Prince was our first toastmaster, and we even had the Heisman trophy winner, Vic Janowicz, in attendance. The following year we moved the banquet to Twin Coaches, which was more centrally located for the Mon Valley writers. Over one thousand people attended every year until Twin Coaches burned down [in 1977].

"They still have the banquet at California University, but they have a different format now. They do not bring in celebrities like we did back then. They induct guys into the Hall of Fame, which is displayed at the Holiday Inn at Belle Vernon in a special showcase with pictures, trophies and other memorabilia."

In 1959, Bob married Patty Wasil, who worked in the advertising department at the *Telegraph.* It wasn't long before the couple had two daughters and a strained budget.

"I had to do something to bring in more money," Bob said. "My income from the *Telegraph* wasn't sufficient to maintain this big house and support my family."

And so it was that Bob began considering running for the office of borough tax collector. Next Bob will describe his "other" career as Brownsville Borough tax collector, a public office he has held for thirty-nine years.

BOB PETRIELLO'S "SECOND CAREER" ENTERS ITS FIFTH DECADE

Brownsville's Bob Petriello, sports writer for the Brownsville *Telegraph* for forty-seven years, had what he thought was the perfect job – almost.

"I enjoyed it," Bob told me during our recent conversation at his Water Street home, "but there was just one problem. You didn't make much money!

"In my early career, I wasn't married. I was living here with my mother, who passed away in 1960, and I could get along. My mother kept telling me, 'You're getting up in age. You're going to be by yourself. Who's going to take care of you?' But of course, I didn't pay any attention."

Bob can't resist a good story and tells this one on himself.

"When I was twenty," Bob said, "my mother said to me, 'You've got to marry a beautiful, rich Italian girl.'

"When I was twenty-five, she told me, 'You've got to marry a rich Italian girl.'

"When I was thirty, she said, 'Marry an Italian girl.'

Bob laughed as he concluded, "When I was thirty-five, she said, 'Marry anybody!'"

"You and your wife Patty were married for forty years," I observed, "so your patience paid off."

"I met Patty Wasil at the *Telegraph*. She lived in Maxwell and had been working for several years in the *Telegraph* advertising department. One day she needed a ride to Centerville so she could visit her sister, Elaine Milich. I gave her a ride, and we got to talking. I started dating her, and eventually we got married in 1959."

It was around that time that Bob began entertaining the idea of entering politics.

"Fred Lebder and I have been friends since I went to California State Teachers College," Bob said. "During my first two years at college, I rode to school with Jim Norman, Howard (Snooky) Elliot, and Eddie Addis, whom I paid to ride me to California. I was a freshman, and they were all juniors.

"In my junior year, I had to find a new ride to California. Fred Lebder, who came from Fairchance, was in many of my classes. Fred had two other riders in his car, so I arranged to pay him every week to pick me up at Sam's News Stand at the end of the inter-county bridge. That's how we became close friends. Later on, he and Paul Thomas, Jr. were influential in getting me involved in politics."

"They suggested that you run for Brownsville Borough tax collector in 1965?"

"Not at first. In 1961, Billy Long [longtime Fayette County Democratic leader from Brownsville] and Paul Thomas asked me to consider running for mayor. I didn't really know what to do, and I didn't run. In that election, Sam Williams lost to Marion C. (Slugger) Klingensmith, the incumbent.

"In 1965, they asked me again. Slugger and I were real good friends. He and his wife were here at our home a lot, and we would often go to their house.

"Marion said to me, 'I hear you're going to run against me, Slugger.' That was how he talked.

"I said, 'Oh, I don't know what I'm going to do.'

"He said, 'Why don't you run against Mrs. Hatfield, the tax collector?'

"Mrs. [Alice] Hatfield was a fine lady, an elderly woman who had been elected to that job after her late husband had previously held it. I joked to Marion, 'I could beat you quicker than I could beat her!'

"I didn't know what to do, so I asked my boss at the *Telegraph*, Mr. [Charles] McKinley, what he thought. Most newspapers frown on their reporters running for public office. They claim it could lead to a conflict of interest.

"I said to Mr. McKinley, 'Chas, they asked me again to run. I have to do something. You know what you're paying me. I have two little kids.'

"He said, 'I'd rather you run for tax collector. It's pretty cut and dried. There are no political decisions to be made in that job.'

"I told him, 'Well, okay . . .'"

Bob began laughing, "'. . . but I can't beat that woman!'

"Mrs. Hatfield, who was a Republican, had won at least four elections in a row. There was a rally at the Sons of Italy, and they introduced me as the Democratic candidate for tax collector.

"I got up and said, 'You know, I feel like a rookie going to bat against Bob Feller. Here I am trying to get a hit off Bob Feller. That's how I feel going up against Mrs. Hatfield. She is a terrific woman. She's like a mother to everybody in town. I admire her and respect her to high heaven. But anyhow, I'm going to give it a try.'

"After the rally, Alfred Riley grabbed me by the arm and said, "Man, what are you doin'? We're trying to get you elected, and you're telling everybody how good that woman is!"

"I said, 'Hey, Alfred, you know I'm not going to knock anybody.'

"I managed to beat Mrs. Hatfield by about ten votes; that's how

close it was. I took office in 1966, and I've been tax collector for thirty-nine years now, re-elected every four years. I had opposition three times, but the other times, nobody else ran."

Not surprisingly, Bob compares running for office to a sports competition. His refreshing philosophy is found all too infrequently in politics today.

"Politics is like a ball game," Bob explained. "I run, you run, we're friends. Just like in a ball game, I'm going in to win, and you're going in to win. But when it's over, we're still friends."

"Bob, you've been tax collector for nearly four decades. Do you still like the job?"

"I love the work," Bob answered. "I enjoy going in to the office every day. [Fayette County Commissioner] Vince Vicites called me a while back to tell me they cut the commission. I told him, 'Vince, I'm happy to be here. Not that I don't like money, but I'm happy. I'm happy to get up in the morning, shave, and go to work. If I had to stay home, I don't know what I'd do with myself.'"

"What are your duties as tax collector?"

"I cover real estate and per capita taxes for the county, borough and school district. I go in to the tax office every morning. From noon 'til one, I have lunch at Fiddle's with six other guys. We call ourselves the 'coffee club.' Then I go back to the office in the afternoon. If someone can't make it to the office during regular hours, I will go over at night. I'm only a block away. I've even gone to people's homes if someone is disabled or doesn't have a way to get to the office."

"You know," I said, "you've been lucky that your jobs at Gerecter's Furniture, the *Telegraph*, and the tax office were all just a block or so from your house."

"One hundred eighty-seven steps to the *Telegraph*!" Bob laughed. "I knew where I was in the dark. I did it every morning.

"I met a fellow from Long Island while on vacation, and he asked how long it took me to get to work. I replied, 'How long does it take you?' He told me he drove to Shea Stadium for half an hour, paid to park there, took mass transit to Times Square, then walked a block and a half to his office.

"I listened, then I said, 'One hundred eighty-seven steps.'

"He said, 'I don't mean from where you park your car.'

Bob chuckled. "I said, 'No, that's from my own front door to the door of my office!"

For years, Bob's wife Patty helped him handle the challenge of holding two jobs at the same time.

"After I became tax collector in 1966, Patty gave up her job at the

Telegraph and worked at the tax office during the day. At three-thirty, I'd leave the *Telegraph* and go over to the tax office, and she'd go home. I would check out every night and do the final payoffs to the county, school district, etc.

"Nowadays it's all computerized, but at one time, it wasn't. If you paid early, you got a discount of two per cent that had to be calculated by hand."

Bob began to laugh as he said, "Patty was doing somebody's calculation one day, and who should walk in but Charlie Slick, who was her math teacher in school. There were two people ahead of Charlie, so he leaned up against the wall, propped his foot back against the wall, and was watching Patty figure the discount with pencil and paper.

"Patty told me later, 'Pretty soon I could just feel the sweat rolling down my face and everything went blank! I put my pencil down and said, 'Mr. Slick, I'm a nervous wreck. I can't do this with you standing there watching me!' Charlie and I laughed about that many times afterward.

"Patty had a lot of personality, and that's important. Everybody who comes into the office has a story to tell. Sometimes you're like a priest listening to people's troubles. I've been around so long I've known a lot of these folks since they played Biddy League or Little League."

Bob Petriello is a familiar sight each afternoon as he leaves the borough building and energetically navigates the three-minute walk to his home. Bob's wife Patty passed away in 1999, and his two daughters, Lisa Petriello Eisenberg and Bobbi Rae Petriello Bosak, are married and raising Bob's four grandchildren in El Paso, Texas, and Woodbridge, Virginia, respectively.

After the first two articles in this series appeared, Bobbi Rae emailed me. "My kids are really enjoying reading about my dad," she wrote. "They think their grandfather is the best."

"If it were up to my kids," added Lisa, "we would live at Pappy's house and have lunch at Fiddle's with the coffee gang everyday. They love coming to Brownsville."

What kid wouldn't love visiting his doting grandfather, eating hot dogs at Fiddle's, and listening wide-eyed as the fellows in the coffee club spin true story after true story, each more colorful than any fictional tale?

Bob Petriello is Brownsville personified. Born, raised and employed all of his working life within the same two-block area of Brownsville, he is the rarest of breeds: a public officeholder whose honesty and work ethic is unquestioned by anyone, and a gentle man who is genuinely loved and respected by all. What a rich treasury of

Brownsville experiences this man carries in his amazing memory.

Thanks, Bob, for sharing some of those memories with us.