

*Boston's North End: An Italian American Story.*

By John Balcom and Maureen McNamara.

North End Historical Society, 2016.

71 minutes. DVD format, color.

In *Boston's North End: An Italian American Story*, John Balcom and Maureen McNamara demonstrate what effective community-rooted scholarship can look like. With its modest visual production quality and conventional format for a work dealing with an ethnic neighborhood (the early history of the neighborhood, the arrival of immigrants, the development of the ethnic community, social life, foodways, pastimes, religious and cultural practices, etc.), it is not so much a novel approach or a fresh analysis that makes this film work. Rather, it is a clear and deep commitment by the people involved in making it, many of whom have neighborhood connections, to produce a film that celebrates yet also carefully investigates neighborhood life. While it relies heavily on personal narratives and oral histories provided by residents, the film successfully mitigates the nostalgia that sometimes pervades works on the "old neighborhood" in order to present a solidly grounded historical and cultural picture of life in the North End from the early twentieth century until the present.

A production of the North End Historical Society, *Boston's North End* was developed by a group of individuals that includes historical documentarians like Alex Goldfield and the co-director Maureen McNamara, scholars like James Pasto (a North End native), and local civic leaders like Stephen Passacantilli, who narrates and appears in the film. The coming together of history professionals, scholars, and local residents that characterizes the film's production also plays out in the film itself, which presents interview excerpts from both historians like William M. DeMarco and Stephen Puleo and many current and past North End residents. While the former certainly lend historical depth to the film, it is the scope and diversity of the latter that are most helpful in giving the film its grounded sensibility.

The North End people who appear, both men and women, come from a wide range of ages and backgrounds and therefore effectively show the diversity of life within the neighborhood. This is an important feature: Too often ethnic neighborhoods like the North End are presented as homogenous communities frozen in an idealized past. Instead, in this documentary we see hard-working Italian immigrants coming to the neighborhood in the early twentieth century for "a better life" and also newer Italian immigrants in the second half of the twentieth century who are moving into the community as the earlier generations are departing. The filmmakers illustrate not only the tightly bound system of reciprocal aid among residents but also the roots of that system in poverty, exploitation, and overcrowding. We hear stories of men and women in a range

of situations in the working world, seeking education, playing leadership roles in families or in the community, and pushing against some of the social issues faced by residents in a historically underprivileged neighborhood. The filmmakers interview a ninety-five-year-old woman who still sleeps in the same bed where she was born and a little girl who likes living in the neighborhood because it has good ice cream shops. Balcom and McNamara also present more extensive background on some well-known individuals in the community. There too we find a nice range, from North End native and former world welterweight champion Tony DeMarco to longtime youth baseball coach Dom Campochiaro, shown at one point with members of a family three generations of whom he coached. Perhaps most strikingly, the film offers a range of views on the presence of “newcomers” in the neighborhood after 1980: To some they are a sign of the disintegration of neighborhood culture, whereas others note that newcomers who respect the history of the neighborhood have become a vital part of contemporary community life. Yet, in either case, the film nicely demonstrates, it is the general economic processes of gentrification that have created problems for older residents, rather than the presence of specific newcomers.

Although it’s a small moment in the film, I want to mention one point that strikes me as consistent with *Boston’s North End’s* careful attention to the interpretation of neighborhood history and culture. One section of the film contains an extended discussion of nicknaming, a practice widely noted in memoirs and works of local history produced by residents in many of Boston’s neighborhoods. But the filmmakers are again careful to historicize this practice by showing interviews with residents of many different ages talking about nicknaming among their friend groups. Moreover, they take care to present this practice not just as a funny or charming feature among residents of a tightly bound neighborhood community but as, in this case, a practical response to a feature of Italian American culture, the use of identical personal names across multiple generations of the same family. Thus, as the film explains, nicknames in the North End serve as a practical way for locals to distinguish between people who have otherwise identical names.

In short, *Boston’s North End* is an entertaining, sensitive, and informative portrait of an urban neighborhood. It may not be a theoretically or visually complex work of ethnographic filmmaking, but that is not its intended purpose or value. Instead, this is a film that could be as easily enjoyed by North End residents as by scholars of Italian American history and culture. It also would serve well as a teaching tool and could be effectively used in a variety of pedagogical contexts, including as a complement to classic works of urban sociology such as William Foote Whyte’s *Street Corner Society* (1943), discussed in the film, or Herbert Gans’s *The Urban Villagers* (1962), or classic historical ethnographies of Italian American enclaves such as Robert Orsi’s *The Madonna of 115th*

*Street* (1985). It could also be useful to view *Boston's North End* alongside Katherine Gulla's 1986 documentary *My Town/Mio Paese*, which depicts the transnational historical, social, and religious connections between the Italian American community in nearby Hingham, Massachusetts, and the village of Palermiti, Italy. While both films are rooted in Italian American communities in Massachusetts, Gulla's explores several points that are not extensively treated in *Boston's North End*, such as the back-and-forth migration that has often been a characteristic practice among Italian migrants, and the deep role of public religious practices in creating and sustaining place-specific sociocultural relationships among Italian Americans. But, however it may be used, *Boston's North End* should definitely be of interest to anyone who wishes to explore the history and culture of Italian Americans, of Boston, or of urban neighborhoods more generally.

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