

Horace Michael Ventimiglia

1944

FIREFIGHTER, INSTRUCTOR, CITY COUNCILMAN

WRITTEN BY MIKE VENTIMIGLIA

EARLY BEGINNINGS

I was born at Dormody Hospital in Monterey, CA, on September 18, 1944, the son of Michael and Florence (Iannotta) Ventimiglia. I was given the name Horace--the Americanized version of Orazio--after my paternal grandfather, who came to America from Isola delle Femmine, Sicily, but go by Mike. My father fished for his brother-in-law Mariano Torrente, and my mother was a stay-at-home housewife. Our family consisted of my sisters Mary Grace and Barbara Ann, me, and my younger brother, Joseph, who died in a golfing/drowning accident at the Naval Postgraduate School Monterey Pines Golf Club at the age of 52 on November 29, 2005.



**Florence & Mike
Oakland, CA, 1941.**

My childhood was a little different than that of most kids, because my parents did not drive or have a car; we either walked or took the bus. The reason was that when my father was 26 years old, he fell off the back of a moving flatbed truck at Jacks Ballpark while laying out fishing nets for inspection and repair. He was run over by the rear dual wheels, but he escaped injury because he tightened his muscles and prevented any serious harm from being done. He had a fear of vehicles after that and never drove. Dad was a skiff man on the *Vagabond* purse seiner. His job was to bring the net back to the boat after the sardines were encircled in the net.



Crew of the *Vagabond*. First row: Peter Rocha, John Grammatico, Mike Ventimiglia, Frank "Ike" Ventimiglia, and Mario San Paolo. Back row: Joe Cardinale, Sal Rombie, Captain Mariano Torrente and unidentified individual.

OUR HOME AND NANA'S HOME



Family home 204 John Street, Monterey, CA.



***Nana's* home in Oakland, CA.**

We lived in the Del Monte Grove area of Monterey. Most of my father's family lived in the downtown area of Monterey, so I never really got to know my relatives. A couple of times a year we would take the train to Oakland to visit my maternal grandmother and my mother's sisters who lived there. Those times bring back pleasant memories as *Nana* lived in a big two-story house with living quarters upstairs and a large basement downstairs equipped with a kitchen, bathroom, sofa, chairs, and television. The family would congregate around a large rectangular table, where we ate all our meals. We would occupy the downstairs all day. We dared not utilize the upstairs of the house; it was strictly for sleeping and was kept pristine. The basement area also had an old wine cellar where at one time wine vats were

stored for homemade grappa. The backyard was large enough for fruit trees, chickens, and a garden for fava beans and other vegetables. My memories of time spent there are still vivid.

Del Monte Grove, Monterey, was home to numerous children and provided a perfect playground for us all. There were several empty lots where we could play baseball, and the streets were unpaved, which was perfect for street football. When the sardine fishing came to a halt in the early 1950s, my father was no longer able to fish; he then dealt cards at the Assembly Cigar Store and other card rooms located on lower Alvarado Street. Mom took in laundry and ironing to help make ends meet. The Assembly Cigar Store run by Pops Bruno was my favorite place to go. Pops would give me an Orange Crush soda and sit me in the back room to watch my dad deal cards, while I played with the empty cigar boxes stored alongside the big wooden benches. When Dad was done dealing cards, we would venture off to see what was happening on both the Fisherman's Wharf and the commercial pier, Wharf II. When I was about eight years old on the wharf with my dad I heard him speaking a language that I did not understand. As I grew older, I realized he was speaking to his old fishing friends in Sicilian, which was not spoken in our house. I believe our English-only rule was a carryover from World War II when local Italians did not want to call attention to themselves.

EDUCATION

My education was in public schools. While I was attending the old Del Monte Elementary School, it had to be closed due to earthquake damage in the mid-1950s. While repairs were being made, we were sent to La Mesa School for half-day sessions. I remember receiving a dose of polio vaccine in school; we stood in line and



Local Sicilians gather behind the Assembly Cigar Store for lunch, usually a bucket of mackerel barbequed with French bread.

were given a sugar cube with a drop of vaccine and told to eat it. I went on to attend Walter Colton Junior High and Monterey High School. Later in life I attended Monterey Peninsula College night school and received my Associate Science Degree in Fire Science.

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY

When I graduated from high school, it was time to go to work. My uncle, who was a foreman in the California Department of Forestry, signed me up to work in Hollister, CA, as a seasonal firefighter.



Bear Valley Forestry Station, San Benito County, August 1963.

I worked out of Hollister for four seasons as a firefighter. I did not know at the time this position would launch my lifelong career, 54 years in the fire service. I worked 220 hours a week, no time off. At the end of my tour of duty, I would get two days off and return to work. I spent four years in the forestry unit until I was drafted into the Army. At boot camp at Fort Ord, CA, I turned down Officer Candidate School, because I did not want to

extend my two-year commitment with another year of service. The Lord was watching out for me, because the Army changed my occupation training from mechanics school to firefighter. The on-the-job training I received added to my previous experience. The Army assigned me to Colorado Springs, CO, where I spent six months before I was sent to Vietnam.

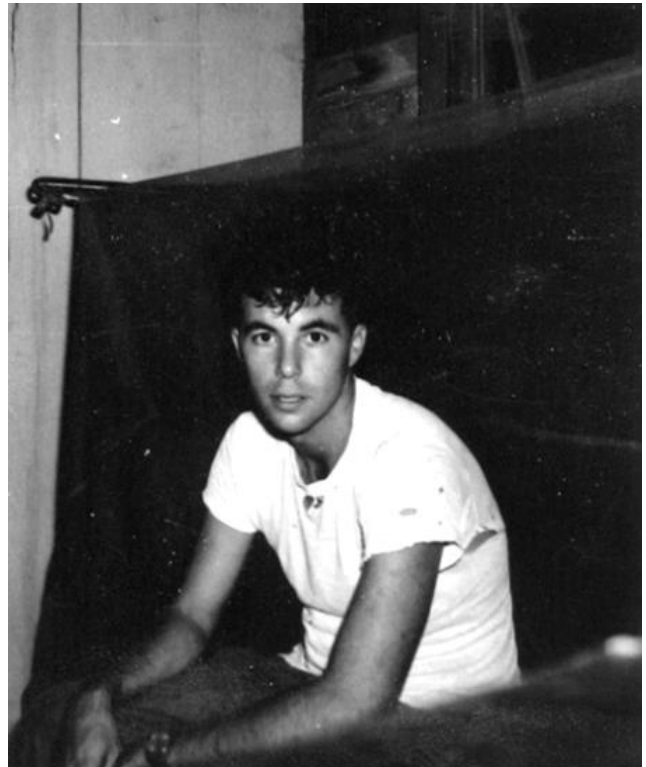
VIETNAM

In 1966 I was 22 years old when I embarked on my tour to Vietnam, where I spent one year exactly to the day serving my country. Needless to say, my mind was filled with fear of the unknown. I was a kid who never traveled further from home than Oakland, CA, and I did not realize at the time how this would influence my thinking

in the years to come. I was in an engineer detachment, consisting of about 12 firefighters assigned to protect the airstrip, fuel dock, fuel tank farm and tent city and to train 20 local Vietnamese to fight fires. I gained a vast amount of knowledge from my comrades in Vietnam. Most of all, I learned there is nothing that cannot be done if you put your mind to it and seek counsel from others. I was assigned to the 530th Engineer Detachment located at the Army airstrip at Cam Ranh Bay, a deep-water seaport. Our detachment was apart from the main group that was located at tent city. Our highest-ranking member was a corporal who was on his second tour of duty at Cam Ranh Bay; we had no officers with us. The corporal was inspirational and taught us how to use heavy equipment and spearheaded our projects. Building a fire station and working on other projects made the tour of duty go fast.



531-B fire crash engine.



Bunk with mosquito net.



We built a drive-through fire station, using salvaged material from the base dump. The metal was from bomb racks, and the wood was dunnage from cargo ship containers. We created our own septic tank system for showers and flushing toilets. When we entertained company officers at our fire station, they marveled at our ingenuity.

We built the fire station at Cam Ranh Bay and cleaned the reservoir for non-potable water.

FIRE DEPARTMENT EMPLOYMENT

When I came home from Vietnam, I applied for a position with the Pacific Grove Fire Department and was fortunate to be hired. I was excited! This opportunity came at the right time because I did not want to go back into forestry. I was back home on the peninsula, and it felt good helping people and saving their homes and belongings from fire. I started night school at Monterey Peninsula College for my Fire Science Degree. It would take me about four years of night school to achieve my Associate Science Degree. I worked at Pacific Grove Fire Department for two years, but there seemed to be no advancement on the horizon because all the officers were young. I made the decision to apply to the City of Monterey for both the police and fire departments and was fortunate that the fire department was hiring first. Having good mentors along the way allowed me to rise through the ranks quickly. Reaching the rank of Division Chief in 1976, I held that position for 28 years before retiring. I returned as a part-time Fire Inspector for an additional 12 years, completing my fire service time with a total of 54 years of service.

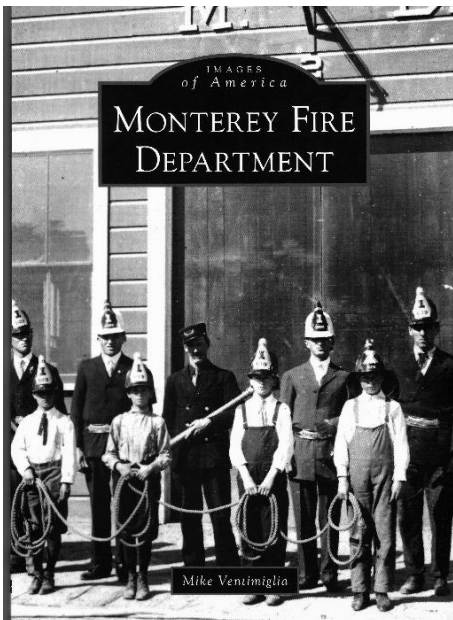


1969: Just out of the Army and mask training with Captain Roger Brown.



2003: My dress uniform, each star on the sleeve represents five years of service.

My time at the Monterey Fire Department gave me the opportunity to learn how to work with people and volunteers. I achieved my state certification for Fire Chief in just over one year. Through networking I became a published author of fire articles which were published in *Fire Engineering* magazine and other periodicals. Being responsible for the fire department's historical program inspired me to write and publish a book, *Monterey Fire Department*, in 2012, covering the people, the fire stations and the fires during the department's 129-year history.



My heart has always been in firefighting, and I was fortunate to be able to apply and share my skills with those who worked with me. Attaining my teaching certificate in Fire Science and imparting my knowledge to young cadets at the Monterey Peninsula College Fire Academy was a great experience!

Cover of *Monterey Fire Department*: Author Mike Ventimiglia captured 129-years of the fire department's history in 2012.

MONTEREY PONY BASEBALL/SOFTBALL, INC.

My schedule at the fire department of having consecutive days off allowed me to become involved with Monterey PONY Baseball/Softball, Inc., youth sports. Little did I know I would spend over 20 years with the organization! When they asked me to become the president, I was honored and accepted the position. We ran successful league tournaments, bringing money into our league. My vision was to give our players the opportunity to compete in a world-class event. I focused my energy on the administrative side of the program, because--sorry to say--I have never had a passion for sports like other members of my family. When the league tournament officials of PONY Baseball/Softball suggested that Monterey would be an excellent venue to host the PONY Bronco League World Series (a world-class event), it took some discussion to convince our PONY Board Members because of the huge financial obligation we would take on. The vote was not unanimous, but it passed, and we accepted the challenge, working together to give our players the opportunity to compete in a world-class event.



World Series teams line up on the base lines to kick off the World Series.



Grandstands behind home plate at Jacks Ball Park filled with cheering fans.

We had no idea that this would continue for 20 years, 1992 to 2012. During that time over 600 local players competed, playing teams from five regions of the United States and from Japan, Korea, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Mexico, and Taiwan.

All this brought another 3,760 players and their parents to Monterey. We developed a program with volunteers who came from all areas of the county to help launch the event, and they kept coming back. My faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and prayer allowed us to move this event forward. It was bigger than any one person; it was a real team effort!

On March 14, 2008, I was honored by Monterey Peninsula College and received the Distinguished Alumni Award in the fields of Fire Service, Public Policy, Education and Community Service.

DEL REY OAKS CITY COUNCIL

While working at the Monterey Fire Department, I became interested in local politics and city government. Part of my job was to attend city council meetings when fire department items were on the agenda and the Fire Chief could not go. I lived in the City of Del Rey Oaks, which has its own city government. A friend and I were among a group of citizens who were unhappy with the city council's lack of action on specific matters in the city. We ran for seats on the council and were both elected. Little did I know at that time I would spend 24 years as a city councilperson; it was an interesting time. One of my duties was to manage the city parks. Among my major accomplishments were drilling a non-potable water well at Work Memorial Park and running irrigation piping and a sprinkler system to both the park and the City Hall, enabling the city's irrigation to be taken off the California American Water System. Another project was the renovation of Work Memorial Park clearing out the willows, creating an extension to the picnic grounds and establishing a dog park. The position allowed me to network with other elected officials in Monterey County.



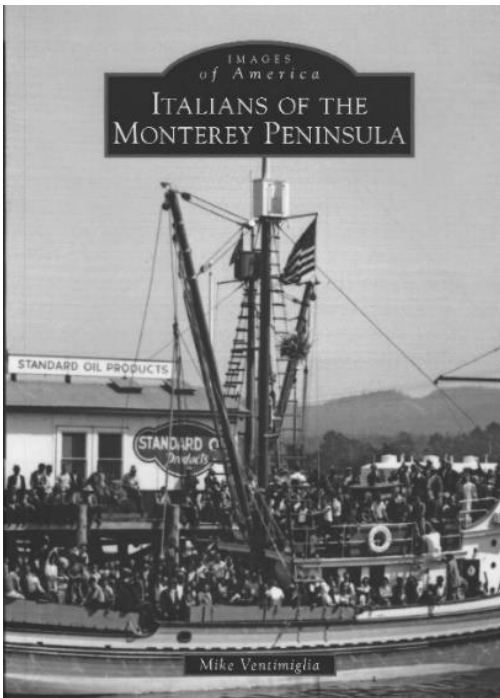
Original dog park: Low fence which dogs could jump over.



Renovation of dog park: Higher fence and water lines for dogs.

ITALIAN HERITAGE SOCIETY

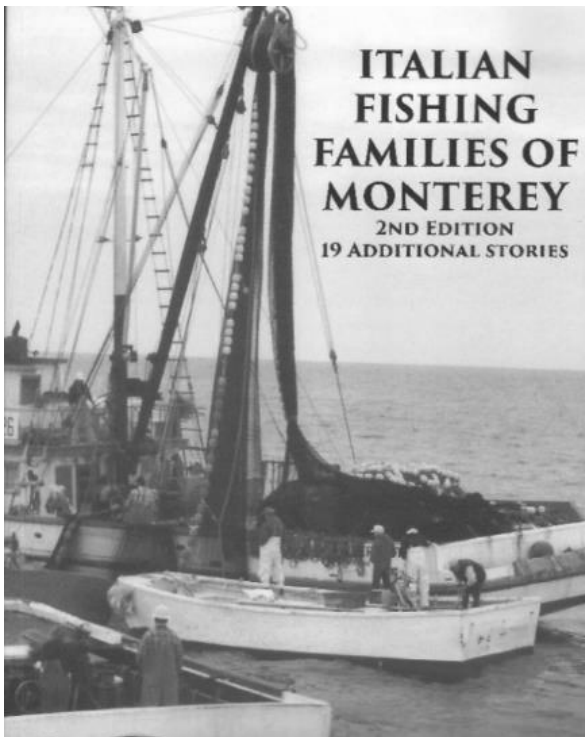
On April 17, 2015, I was honored by the Italian Heritage Society of the Monterey Peninsula AKA the Italian American Cultural Center Foundation and received an award for my work in the community. Being recognized as an Italian American was



special for me because I lived outside the Italian community and very seldom had the opportunity to meet my relatives. Through my work with the fire department and PONY Bronco World Series, I reconnected with my relatives. This made me more inquisitive about the history of my family, and I began researching my ancestry. My genealogy research inspired me to write and have published a book, *Italians of the Monterey Peninsula*, in 2015.

Cover of *Italians of the Monterey Peninsula*: Christening of the purse seiner *San Giovanni* on August 12, 1939.

I was asked to serve on the Board of Directors of the Italian Heritage Society of Monterey. I worked closely with Annamarie Della Sala Stanton, President of the Italian Heritage Society, on two editions of the book, *Italian Fishing Families of Monterey, Edition I (2015) and Edition II (2019)*. I contributed five Ventimiglia-family fishing stories, provided numerous photographs, and helped with the layout. I am doing the same for this book in which my story, above, appears.



**Cover of *Italian Fishing Families of Monterey*,
2nd Edition, 2019.**

ITALIAN HERITAGE SOCIETY HONOREE 2015