

Retired Barber Recalls Beard Work In Early Part of Long 74-year Career

By HELEN MYERS

"I was the oldest barber in Poughkeepsie when I retired right after the holidays," Andrew Gusmano of 7 Grant street said. "I had four generations coming to me. I had customers from Hyde Park, Pleasant Valley and all over Poughkeepsie, and I taught a lot of the barbers working here now."

No one is likely to challenge Mr. Gusmano's claim of being Poughkeepsie's oldest barber. He worked here for 55 years. Before that he was a New York City barber for 15 years, and before that in Italy for six years. That adds up to 74 years.

MR. GUSMANO isn't young, but he isn't as old as a 74-year working career implies. He'll be 83 on Aug. 24. He began work in his uncle's barbershop in Palermo, Sicily, when he was nine years old. What can a nine-year-old boy do?

"We began by putting soap on the faces of customers the adult barbers were going to shave," he said. "Then we started shaving necks. We'd do a little more, and a little more, and pretty soon we could finish. Sometimes we nicked them a



ANDREW GUSMANO HAD WORKED as a barber for 74 years when he retired in January. In that three-quarters of a century he trimmed beards, gave men "butterfly" haircuts, and cut and marcelled the hair of the daring young women who were among the first to "bob" their hair.

little," he added with a grin, "but everyone does that occasionally, even the old barbers."

"FATHER WAS A teacher first, then a wholesale wine merchant. He and my mother were born in the same place, Palermo. That's a big city, a nice city. At least, it was. I haven't seen it in so long I hardly remember. I haven't any relatives there now, not that I know of, anyway."

In 1893 one of his sisters and her husband went to New York City. Two years later the entire family followed them, the parents; young Andrew Gusmano; his brother, Jacob; and two sisters. They landed in New York in late September, 1895.

"WE HAD A ROUGH TRIP," Mr. Gusmano recalls. "It was up and down, up and down, around the Strait of Gibraltar. The ocean was very rough. I decided right then that I'd never go on a ship again, and I never did — yes I did. I went to Florida once on the Clyde line. Just once."

The family lived on the lower East side, and 15-year-old Andrew soon had a job in an Italian barbershop, where he was paid \$1.50 a week. He had to work in an Italian shop, he said, because he couldn't speak English.

Three members of his family worked in the garment trade. His mother sewed at home. His brother, Jacob, worked on a machine in a dress factory, and one of his sisters was a dress model.

"She was a very beautiful girl, a very good church girl," her brother remembers. "She died when she was 22. She went out in deep snow and got pneumonia. Five or six days later she was dead."

THE FIRST YEARS HERE were tough. There were hard times in 1895 and '96, he recalls, right up to 1898 when William McKinley was President.

In those days a shave was 10 cents, and a haircut was 15, and many customers would have just a "line up," a trim of the edges of the hair line for 10 cents to put off a regular haircut as long as possible.

"WHEN I FIRST arrived in New York City," he said, "there used to be a barbershop at the corner of Stanton street and the Bowery. It had about seven chairs. In back there was a room where you could have a bath, for 25 cents, as I remember it."

About as soon as young Andrew Gusmano could say "Shave?" and "Haircut?" he moved on to English-speaking shops, where the pay was better. The first of these was in Orchard street, the second in Forsythe street, both "way down on the East side." Then he moved to an "uptown" shop, in 14th street.

In 1901 he opened his own shop back in the old neighborhood, at 28 Second avenue, between First and Second streets. While he was there the state began to license barbers, and he still has his 1903 license, one of the first group ever issued.

IN 1905 HE OPENED his own "uptown" shop, in Avenue A near 14th street. That was a four-chair shop, and he had it for three years, until he sold out to come to Poughkeepsie.

His first shop here was in Tulip street, but he soon moved to 98 Union street. He had his shop and his home there for a half century, until he had to sell the property to the state because it was in the path of the planned arterial highway. He moved to Grant street in November of 1961.

"I was young," he explained his move to Poughkeepsie in 1906. "I liked to go hunting and fishing. My brother, Jacob — he's dead now — was living in Highland. When I visited him, he asked me why I didn't open a shop in Poughkeepsie. Then I could go hunting and fishing every Sunday."

THERE WERE A LOT of beards when he worked in New York City and in his first years in Poughkeepsie, he said, "and you weren't a man if you didn't have a mustache. I had a mustache when I was 22 or 23. When I was 28 I took it off."

There were several styles of beards, including the Russian style, which "went around like a bandage;" the German style, which was parted in the middle; and the French style, which was narrower, and ended in a little point. Younger barbers would know how to trim such beards today, he said.

ANOTHER LONG-GONE masculine fashion, dating from straight-razor days when only a few men dared shave themselves, was the shaving cup or mug. When he was working in New York City and in his early years in Poughkeepsie, Mr. Gusmano said, every regular customer had his own mug which he left right in the shop.

"Each mug had the customer's name on it, usually in gold," he said, "and some of them were pretty fancy, with red, green and gold decorations. One of those

fancy ones cost 35 cents, a lot of money in those days. I used to order them from a barber's supply house."

"I HAD MORE THAN 200 cups in my shop in New York City. I kept them in a big cabinet with compartments, something like the place where they put letters in a postoffice. Some had their own brushes, combs and razors, that they kept with their cups."

"Why the individual mugs? Because they were afraid they'd get diseases if they were shaved from a cup used for everyone. When a man moved, he'd come in and take his cup."

"Then the barber supply houses began selling glass cups, with just enough soap in one for one shave. The barber broke the seal when he used it. Now there aren't any shaving cups. Barbers use cream and stuff."

THERE HAVE BEEN many changes in masculine fashions of haircuts, too, but some of the modern ones favored by teenagers aren't as new as they probably believe.

Take the pompadour. That was popular for a long time. It was like today's flat-top cut, Mr. Gusmano says, except that a flat-top is closer to the scalp.

"Some men used to part their hair in the middle," he said, "from the forehead down to the back of their necks. Then they wanted it long on the sides, like today's ducktail."

SOME MEN WANTED a butterfly haircut. That was the one with a scallop on either side of the part. "Some wanted their hair cut short," he said, "and some wanted it cut long, just as they do today."

Around 1920 or a little earlier "bobbed" hair for women became fashionable, so he began cutting women's hair in his Poughkeepsie barbershop. Some wanted it curly, so he waved it with a heavy marcel curling iron, heated in a little gas fixture made for that purpose.

"That was before permanent waves," he said. "I never went into that. I had enough men's trade. There's more money in work for women, and there's a lot of work, but you have to have a lot of patience when you work with women. With some men, too. Now women go to beauty parlors. I wouldn't work a beauty parlor."

ONE WOMAN CAME in for a cut. We weren't busy. No one else was in the shop, so I went uptown on business and let my helper take care of her. I was away about an hour. When I came back, the same woman was in the chair, and people were waiting all over the shop. I had three chairs then.

"I asked what was wrong. Nothing was wrong. First this woman wanted a trim. After she had it, she decided that she'd have a shingle instead," a shorter, layered cut. "After she had that, she decided she really wanted a boyish bob, almost like a man's cut. Some of them are hard to please."

SOME MEN ARE, too. They want you to "Take a little off." You do it, and it's "Now take a little more." They want it a little more off "Here," then "Here." But if you take off too much . . .

"Women are all right, but men are better."

Aside from the problem of pleasing the women, Mr. Gusmano found that his feminine customers were an annoyance to the men. He told of one man who came to his shop three times in one day to get a shave. Each time he found women getting haircuts. The third time he really slammed out of the shop.

THEN THERE WAS THE man who came in and asked,

"Has my wife been in here?" Mr. Gusmano said that she had.

"Did you cut her hair?" was the next question. The barber said that he did.

"Then I'm going to kill you," the man told him. "I said I'd kill the first man who cut her hair."

Obviously he didn't. That may have been due to Mr. Gusmano's calming words, or to the great size of a visiting nephew who appeared from a back room and assured the man that he wasn't going to kill anyone.

"I CUT MY WIFE'S HAIR," Mr. Gusmano said. "She asked me to. When she sat down I took the scissors and slash, cut it right off here," the nape of the neck. She said,

"Oh-h. I didn't think you would."

Mr. Gusmano continued his work as barber after he moved uptown to 7 Grant street until early this year. Then he found that the standing necessary to do his work was too much for his legs.

"You should have seen me a few years ago," he said. "I was running up and down steep banks to fish when I was 78. I never had an operation in my life. I've got everything. It's just my legs."