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Lena Novello  
Portrait by Edward Fish

# Lena Mary Parisi Novello

1917-2005

Lena Mary Parisi Novello, a front-page political activist, a buoyant businesswoman, an enthusiastic community leader, as well as wife, mother, and grandmother, was synonymous with fish and cooking. With ingenuity and her magical stove, she famously created recipes of underutilized fish species that fed street people as well as Presidents. Compassionate and tenacious, in every sliver of life's happenings that came her way, Lena found a vision and followed it. She personified generations of Italian women who stand as *il cuore*, the nurturing and passionate heart of their families and communities.



LENA AS GRAND MARSHALL

Born in Gloucester Lena began her career in the fishing industry as a young girl. Her immigrant parents, Salvatore and Grazia Parisi, from Terrasini did not have command of the English language. Lena, the oldest daughter of their nine children, served as interpreter. These experiences taught her to interact with people in a way that provided the best care for her family. When her father needed a new engine or something for his fishing boat, she accompanied him. She always bargained, saying "is that the best you can do?" It wasn't that she was trying to be cheap. She recognized her father worked hard for his money and had a large family to support. So, spending just what he had to was important. She left school in the seventh grade to help support her family by assisting her parents in both managing a fishing boat and running a household. By the time she was a teenager, she had learned to work with people in productive ways.



**YOUNG LENA WITH A RELATIVE**

Scattered in her memories growing up were stories of her father and brothers living the fishermen's adventure. Tightly woven into those stories were memories of her mother. Her father, a master of his craft, determined each trip's timing by tying a white handkerchief on their clothesline. Getting up in the dark hours of the morning he'd check on it. Playing in the wind the handkerchief told him what he needed to know: go fishing or stay home. If the decision was to go fishing, her brothers were roused out of bed, grumbling that they wanted to stay in their warm, cozy home and

not head into the bracing winds of the ocean. In preparation for longer seining fishing trips, those of two to three weeks, her mother had already prepared for their trip: packed clothes, cleaned and covered mattresses and pillows, stocked supplies. In between trips when nets needed to be repaired, the men worked diligently on the wharfs to repair them while the women cooked at home. Hot meals delivered by the wives meant the men didn't have to stop working and the needed repairs could be handled more quickly allowing for a return to sea and more fishing.

Safety on the seas and abundant catches weighed heavily. Turning to St. Peter, the Patron Saint of Fishermen, the fishing community prayed throughout the year. Then, continuing the tradition of their Sicilian homeland where Saints, as in all of Italy, have their own Feast Days, they celebrated St. Peter on June 29th. A ten-year-old Lena celebrated St. Peter's Fiesta at its inception in Gloucester and throughout her life. She recalled those early years. "We used to look forward for those three days. And it was all around The Fort section. The Fort was all decorated. We would get new clothes for each day. I was a girl; I would get three dresses. Everybody would dress up. It was something really big, but it was celebrated by all us local people and it was mostly religious."<sup>1</sup>

Lena's childhood memories also held the fun of a successful catch. When the fishing boats returned from seining mackerel, children ran to the wharf to greet their fishermen parents. With mackerel in their pockets, they'd dash off to get some wood to make their own fire. Finding a grate,

they'd place it over the fire creating their own barbeque grill. Lena reminisced, "you could get the fish easily." So, when other kids came along and asked, "what are you cooking? We'd say, mackerel." "I'll go get mine," was the response. Little fires soon lit up the neighborhood as different groups of kids barbequed their own mackerel. "It was really great," Lena said and "you just can't help the aroma,"<sup>2</sup> it was heavenly.

Interlaced with the happy memories were those that lay on the edge of tragedy. Playing on the hill, the highest point in the Fort area they called Skull Mountain, children could see returning fishing boats sailing into the harbor. A boat coming in at half-mast signaled a catastrophe had occurred on board. Frightened for their family, children ran home worried it meant an accident or death of their father, brother, or uncle. Perhaps the worst disaster Lena's family faced was the explosion of her father's borrowed fishing boat. Previously Lena's father and brothers fished on the same boat with her uncle and cousins. Togetherness, once a comfort, was now seen as terrifying. Should the boat meet disaster, devastation would hit two families. Lena's father, then, decided to have his own boat built and name it the St. Joseph. Her uncle continued with their original one.

While the St. Joseph was being built, Lena's father borrowed a gasoline powered boat.

He and his sons and one cousin went to sea. Lena best described the scene:

"While out fishing the engine caught fire and the boat exploded. The crew was left in the ocean holding on to pieces of debris from the explosion." A brother who was a strong swimmer said he was going to swim for help. But her father told him, "in the middle of the sea where can you get help?" Urging them all to stay together, Lena's father turned to prayer. "As he lifted his head to the sky he saw a vision of Saint Rosalie. As soon as he saw her a boat came by and rescued them." He considered this a miracle. Saint Rosalie, Patron Saint of their homeland Province of Palermo, now held a premier spot in their lives. He changed the name of his new boat from the St. Joseph to the St. Rosalie. The daughter born from his wife's pregnancy at the time was named

Rosalie. And, Lena's father made it clear that "when he died he wanted a statue of Saint Rosalie for his tombstone."<sup>2</sup>

Living the hard life of a fisherman's daughter and fishermen's sister, Lena was determined not to become a fisherman's wife. In 1938, she nonetheless married Joseph P. Novello, a fisherman with whom she had grown up in The Fort. How it happened that she did is obscured like the harbor blanketed in fog. In an oral history interview, with a laugh and likely a shrug, she said, "But the time came, I got engaged to a fisherman." Offering no further details yet implying acceptance, perhaps of an arranged marriage or at least an acknowledgement of their parents' wishes, she continued, "I don't know what made me think that I was never going to marry a fisherman. Where we lived everyone was the same."<sup>2</sup>



**LENA'S WEDDING PORTRAIT**

Lena shifted her fishing and family responsibilities from one household to another. She expanded the business acumen she developed as a teenager helping her father and now became Joe's shore agent. Coming in from a trip Joe would call with his needs for the next trip. No time to waste. If the boat needed repairs, Lena made the arrangements. If he needed ice, Lena ordered it. She even managed the books for the boat.

Lena and Joe had six children. Lena became the Boss, aptly named by Joe. With a husband away at sea for long stretches of time, Lena did everything. For her children, this meant she was the disciplinarian, attended school functions, and was the 'go-to' person when they needed help. She had high expectations for her children, and they did not want to disappoint her. They knew she

would climb mountains for them. For Lena it meant, that in addition to managing the household, she alone celebrated the joyful times. She alone made decisions and cared for their children in sickness. She recalled, "One time one of my boys had an appendix that ruptured. So my husband was fishing off of Nova Scotia. I couldn't get in touch with him."<sup>2</sup> Retelling the incident, her voice filled with stress as she recounted the terrifying memory.

Known as the Julia Child of Gloucester, her magical stove constantly bubbled over. Her children arrived home from school to the enticing smells of Lena's dish of the day. Friends tempted by those smells, children and adults alike, followed their noses to Lena's kitchen. A creation that became famous were her 'fish things.' Halloween arrived one year, and Lena ran out of candy. What to do? Young children knocked on her door. In a tizzy yet inhaling a deep concentrating breath, aha, she remembered. In her freezer sat frozen fish puffs. Quickly, she thawed them and cooked them for the children. Soon, more children came a-knocking. Calmly she explained she had no candy. But no, the children wanted those fish things, the treats of their friends that they had tasted. Lena kept cooking as new children arrived and others returned for seconds and thirds. Lena's Halloween tradition was set. Each year thereafter, she treated with fish things.

The recipe for those treats was highly confidential. Lena held on to it, knowing it was special and it needed an extraordinary occasion to be shared with the world. The perfect event presented itself. The year was 1973. Gloucester's 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. Finally, those 'fish things' were given a name. The Anniversary Puff. Her recipe, printed in the Gloucester Daily Times on Tuesday, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, brought her recipe into every home in Gloucester. Her fellow Gloucesterites, for the first time, were now able to cook their own 'fish things' to share with family and friends.

Sharing recipes for Gloucester's 350<sup>th</sup> celebration extended to a leaflet prepared by the National Marine Fisheries Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Titled 'Gloucester: Celebrating 350 years as a fishing port,' Lena directed the submissions and organized

the recipes representing both the Italian and Portuguese fishing fleets. Indeed, several of her recipes were featured. After the Northeast Fisheries Conference held in Gloucester that spring on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, during which lucky guests received this leaflet, the National Marine Fisheries Services sent to the rest of the country 100,000 copies.

By then, the Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association had been active for several years. Around the globe fishermen were under siege. The 3-mile fishing limit of the day was not enough to protect their catch from Soviet, Japanese and other fishing fleets. On October 15, 1966 President Johnson signed into law a Twelve-Mile Bill. Yet, by 1969 frequently up to 100 Soviet fishing vessels sat just off the horizon of Gloucester's fishing grounds.

Lena described the impact. "Our boats would go out there and complain. No fish out there. And you wait. You go out there, set your nets and everything. No fish. And come in. No fish and come in. We really wanted a 200-mile limit." Gloucester's fishermen, caught in a maelstrom, were powerless. Lena continued, "Our men are always at sea. So [many] things turn up but they're not around to go and see what's cooking. . . . So many things and these men, when they come home from fishing anyway, they're so tired. Once they come home, they don't want to hear anything."<sup>2</sup>

With the world caving in on Gloucester's fishing industry, the fishermen's wives felt its chokehold. Their families' livelihood was dying. Wives of the New Bedford fishing fleet paid a visit. Faced with the same dilemma, they suggested wives get involved in the industry, "stick our noses out," as Lena put it. She recalled thinking, "that's a good point. Fishermen aren't treated right. My father and brothers had problems too, different ones and they didn't have much done for them in their fishing days. I always thought it was because they were old, they didn't understand the language, they don't know what it's all about. But now I figure, a lot of us know a little of what's going on. If our parents went through this, why should we? It would be good to bring our voices together."<sup>2</sup>

Lena's voice boomed. With her Pied Piper ability, she and a group of fishermen's wives banded together. Briefly known as the Gloucester United Fishermen's Wives Organization, they formed the Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association (GFWA) in 1969.

Lena knew that preserving their fishing industry meant keeping the focus on its product: fish as a source of food for every person's table. She and the GFWA used that argument when they advocated for and a 200-mile limit was won under The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act in 1976. Believing it would ensure protection of their fishing grounds, they felt confident in this new legislation. But shortly thereafter, about 1979, started a multi-year battle against the drilling for oil on Georges Bank, a prolific fishing bank. Standing up to a congressional argument when testifying in Washington, DC that fishing and oil drilling could co-exist, Lena fought back with her famous quote. A quote that still rumbles through time: "Fish and oil go fine. But olive oil, not crude oil."<sup>3</sup>



**LENA SPEAKING AT A PUBLIC FORUM**

Lena had amazing charisma. She was the first speaker people wanted to hear on the topic of fishing. She captivated audiences from Gloucester City Hall to Beacon Hill to Washington, D.C. Lena, who often said she wasn't educated but held a "four generation degree in Fishing," hypnotized locals, politicians, dignitaries and Ph.Ds by speaking directly from the heart.

Congress or Madison Avenue, Lena accepted challenges and she gave them. The television playing in the background flipped to a commercial. A woman, greeted at the door by her daughter-in-law, walks into an impeccably clean house. Sniffing her way through the rooms to the kitchen she says, "Hmmm, fried fish." To the rescue, a sweet-smelling air freshener. Lena jumped. Her magical stove was ready for action. Defending the commercial fishing industry from an insidious attack by an air

freshener company, Lena wrote a letter to the ad's sponsor, explaining that fish – fresh fish – does not smell. She invited company executives to her house for dinner; a taste and smell experience for themselves.

Meanwhile, the Magnuson-Stevens Act, helpful in protecting the fishing grounds, also limited the catch of popular fish such as haddock, cod, and flounder. In this challenge, Lena knew the key to ensuring the continued success of their industry was underutilized species of fish. With a band of sisters, fishermen and non-fishermen wives, she fought back by shifting the focus on fish as a source of food to these unknown species. Cooking these fish was not new to Lena or other fishermen's wives. Fishermen's families had been eating hake, dogfish, and cusk all along. Lena explained: they brought less money at market. So the fisherman kept these fish for his family allowing him to make more money from his catch by selling the more customary species. In her kitchen turned laboratory, Lena experimented constantly with new recipes. Family and friends taste tested her creations. Connie Condon, friend and fellow GFWA member, remembered Lena saying chowder didn't always have to be made with milk or a fancy fish. Lena's magical stove bubbled over.



**LENA'S MAGICAL STOVE**

The creations of that stove and Lena's entrepreneurship led to "The Taste of Gloucester: A Fisherman's Wife Cooks." Jan Bell and Becky Bernie tell the story. During a meeting of the League of Women Voters (LWV) in the basement of Trinity Congregational Church, Lena walked in. Spiritedly she asked, "Do you wanna make some money?" She carried with her a box of recipes. The fishermen's wives could cook but didn't know how to organize or publish a cookbook. The two groups, GFWA and LWV, began cooking, tasting, and preparing the cookbook together. Gathered in Becky's home and sometimes Lena's, the fishermen's wives cooked, huddled in

the kitchen. Everyone tasted. The League women, ensconced at the dining room table in front of typewriters with notes, papers and pencils strewn around them, typed out the recipes. Lena orchestrated. Calling themselves The Gloucester Cookbook Committee, they brought *The Taste of Gloucester* to print in 1976.

The cookbook hit the presses through eight editions. Each version included more recipes for underutilized fish. The story here, though, isn't just a profitable cookbook that generated income for the GFWA and the League. Or the rising acceptance of underutilized fish species. Or that more than 300,000 copies sold and it is still available. Or that each President's wife starting with Rosalynn Carter and continuing for many years received a copy. The real story is friendship, love of Gloucester and collaboration that are the underpinnings of Lena's character.

Those beginnings of Lena's character shining through the *Taste of Gloucester* cookbook experience were evident throughout her life. They began in *The Fort*. They extend her image beyond fish and cooking and reveal the whole Lena. Return for a moment to the life of her parents.

Upon first arriving from Italy, her parents' generation struggled and survived only by helping each other. In Lena's words, "When they came from Italy everything they had, they had together. They would rent a big house. They had one kitchen and all bedrooms and they all lived together. Three families together. Two families together." When they bought something, they owned it together. "They owned a house, half each. They had a boat, half each. If they would buy a hammer, they owned it half each. An iron, electric iron to iron clothes, half each."<sup>1</sup>

Their lives further complicated with the men away at sea, the women were left to take care of each other, especially challenging as living at *The Fort* left them isolated from the City. Lena expounds, "we were away from everything, we just took care of our own things."<sup>1</sup> Their own things included raising each other's children. Sharing food and cooking for each other's families, sometimes

desperately needed when a family ran out of food and had to wait till a husband came in from fishing. They took care of each other's businesses and households by paying bills for one another or lending money. They were each other's social, mental and financial support.

When Lena left The Fort, married with children, she carried that spirit of collaboration and friendship with her along with her love for Gloucester. She expanded it to embrace all those who crossed her path, non-Italians and Italians alike; people she knew and those she didn't. Berny, Lena's daughter, explained, "she always took care of everyone. She believed in living out the motto, 'treat others as you want to be treated'." Lena's son, Sam, elaborated. "She believed there is good in everyone, you just have to bring it out."



**LENA AND CONNIE CONDON COOK**

Lena loved to encourage people, to treat others respectfully and to forge friendships. Her dear friends Connie and Becky tell the same story. At particularly poignant periods in their lives, Lena enfolded them and their families into her own. She appeared at Becky's front door with trays of cookies piled too high to neatly sit still. She invited Connie's family to her home for holiday dinners. Lena claimed their families as her own. To these 'adopted' families, Lena became known as their Gloucester mother, sister and

grandmother. Friends of Lena's children experienced the same. A safe place to stay or visit or learn how to cook, Lena's it was.

Lena's heart embraced even those she did not know. Almost daily a white-haired woman passed by her house. Carrying bags of all sorts – plastic, paper, trash – Lena would see them break dropping her belongings on the ground. A talented seamstress with a warehouse of sewing goods

in her basement, she crafted a cloth bag with strong handles. Greeting her one day, Lena delivered this treasure.

Enthusiasm for her community flowed along every sidewalk in Gloucester. Sam described his mother as “a true Gloucesterite. She loved this City and taught others to love it as well. She considered it part of her family.” Lena opened the gates to Gloucester’s heart through her invitations. She generously invited those she met to participate with her in novenas religiously celebrated in preparation for St. Joseph’s Day, St. Peter’s Fiesta, and the Mother of Grace Club’s novena to the Blessed Mother. It didn’t matter if a person was Catholic, Protestant, or non-believer. Lena invited these same people into her home. She nourished them with love and appreciation for family. She fed them her fish and Italian specialties. She fed people from The Fort to East Gloucester from Kennedys to Roman Catholic Cardinals. With her magical stove Lena introduced those from a “white bread culture” as Jan and Becky described it to an entirely new culture, that of the Italian family and its nourishing support. She connected families, uniting them across ethnic backgrounds, city neighborhoods, and socio-political beliefs.

Love for her City of Gloucester spread beyond its people and the fishing industry to the City’s economic development and the street people she’d never meet. Promoting underutilized fish in the 1990s, Lena demonstrated some of her delicious dishes at Wellspring House in Gloucester and Project Hope in Boston. These events were offered for shelter officials to learn about the ‘Fish to the People’ program. Designed to promote the low-cost yet high protein benefits of underutilized species, Lena treated participants to dogfish chowder, baked fish and her famous fish puffs made with the like of cusk, hake, and ocean pout. The brainchild of Jay Gustafarro, fisherman and Gloucester City Councilor, Wellspring purchased the underutilized fish locally at its going rate then sold it to nonprofit shelters and food kitchens at a cost far less than that of popular species. Homeless shelters such as Rosie’s Place, Pine Street Inn, St. Francis House and up to 20 others benefited while also aiding Gloucester’s fishing industry.

Lena's love for Gloucester was further evident in her willingness to help anyone who came knocking. Known for her delicious fundraising talents, Lena's magical stove cooked-a-plenty. Spaghetti dinners for the high school band, Thespians and Sawyer Free Library. Fish chowder for PeeWee football, Residential Group Homes, and Addison Gilbert Hospital. Mixed in were luncheons specializing in fried squid for the VNA and the Fisherman's and Seaman's Widows and Orphans Aid Society. And, of course, mounds of Italian cookies for every bake sale offered.

Then there's the tale of St. Ann. Lena, walking through the Tognazzi Monument factory one day, spotted a beautiful statue of St. Ann gathering dust in a corner. Her faith deeply grounded in her Sicilian roots where Saints are revered and her love for St. Ann, simply would not let her pass. She had to know why. The statue belonged on St. Ann's Parish grounds. She was sure of it. She envisioned it standing proudly near the tall gray-stoned Church with its silvery cross poised atop its steeple. Yet, insufficient funds blocked completion of its installation. Oh no, this would not do, she said to herself. A plan hatched. Lena orchestrated a fund-raising drive and a community effort that brought St. Ann to her rightful home in 1975. Every year following, Lena participated in the July 26<sup>th</sup> Crowning Ceremony for St. Ann's Feast Day.

Lena, acknowledged as the genesis behind the Fishermen's Wives Memorial, believed women needed to be celebrated for without them the men could not fish our oceans. Family and friends credit her with a vision that began long before she received a \$1 donation from Hyman Brenner of Lynn in 1980. Soon after and in testament to Lena's tenacity, she walked into the Mayor's Office. Mayor Leo Alper sat behind his desk. Lena recounted that visit. "Leo, we need money."<sup>4</sup> He replied that the City didn't have any money and as proof pointed to the desperately worn drapes hanging from his office windows. Undeterred, Lena returned the next day with her sewing basket and repaired the Mayor's drapes. Mayor Alper produced a donation.

Such was her commitment to erecting a Statue for fishermen's wives that even during a celebratory event in her honor, she diverted attention from herself. Labor Day weekend, 1999. Lena received The Helmsman Award. Quite prestigious, Representative Ann-Margaret Ferrante, Executive Director of the Gloucester Fisheries Forum at the time, explained, the Award is given "to a person considered a 'Helmsman' also known as a 'Captain of the Fishermen.' Mrs. Novello was selected as the founder of the Fishermen's Wives." Presented by Max Kennedy on behalf of his uncle Senator Ted Kennedy, Lena graciously accepted the Award. A humble person who never looked for any recognition, she moved seamlessly to fundraising for the Fishermen's Wives Memorial. Still standing at the podium she admonished everyone in the audience, to "help" erect the Statue.

The Fishermen's Wives Statue embodies Lena. It represents her work as wife, mother, and shore agent. It represents her waiting, hoping and praying during each of her husband's trips to sea. Conjuring the image of their 'good-byes' is effortless with Lena's description. "Down the Fort, I'd take the kids near Pavilion Beach to see their father leave on a fishing trip. When the boat passed, he would toot the horn, signaling the crew was all set. And we would go home. I always hoped then that they would have a safe return, and they would return with a big trip of fish."<sup>5</sup>

Lena's ultimate love letter to her community reads, "The wives, mothers, daughters and sisters of Gloucester fishermen honor the wives and families of fishermen and mariners everywhere for their faith, diligence, and fortitude." While not Lena's own words, this message surrounds The Fishermen's Wives Statue that stands on Stacy Boulevard looking out to sea. This memorial brought Lena the most joy and greatest pride.



**PORTRAIT OF LENA BY EDWARD FISH  
SYMBOLIZING HER LOVE OF THE FISHING INDUSTRY**

Lena's last crusade was to help save the Vincie N., the family fishing boat of more than 50 years. Lena and her family donated the Vincie N. in 2002 to Maritime Gloucester, Gloucester's Maritime Heritage Center. This safeguarded the family's fishing heritage and that of the fishing industry in general. Lena successfully spearheaded yet another fundraising effort, in conjunction with Maritime Gloucester, and raised \$40,000 to support that donation for repairs and a maintenance endowment. Shortly the expense of repairs rose to \$500,000, too much for Maritime Gloucester or additional fundraising. Lena's work, however, was not for naught. Just as the Boston Tea Party Colonist's defied taxation without representation, The Boston Tea Party Museum staff defied the demise of the Vincie N. Purchased for \$1 it was retrofitted as the Eleanor, one of the vessels boarded and offloaded of its tea into Boston Harbor. Today the Vincie N., aka the Eleanor, sits at Griffin's Wharf providing an interactive Boston Tea Party experience.

Lena's story ends as quietly and peacefully as her life. Stand on Stacy Boulevard facing the ocean, eyes closed or wide open, salt air rolling over and around. Feel Lena's spirit and love for Gloucester. Take a walking tour of Gloucester following in Lena's footprints and listen carefully. Lena's voice will echo in the breeze. "I helped." "I helped," Lena's response to the frequently asked question, "Why do you do what you do?" "When I walk by, I'd like to say I helped." In her daughter Berny's words, "Lena passed but she didn't go away. She is still here; she is still present and all around us."

-Submitted by Peter P. Novello and Laura M. Alberghini Ventimiglia

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Photos courtesy of the Novello Family

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