

The Gebbia Family in Rockford



Standing (L to R): Ferdinando “Fred”, Stefana “Fanny”, Audenzia “Helen”, and Leonardo Gebbia.

Seated: their mother, Francesca Lamanno.

Based on their apparent ages, we think this photo was taken about 1919 - shortly after my grandfather’s 18th birthday. This would place it near the date when he took his first step toward citizenship and filed his Declaration of Intention. It would take another 6 years, but in January of 1925 my grandfather took his Oath of Citizenship, legally changed his name to “Fred”, and officially became an American Citizen.

An older sister, Calogera “Lillian”, never made it to America. In August of 1914, almost exactly nine months after her marriage, she died during childbirth. No record has been found of her child, so it is assumed that it was stillborn.

Francesca’s husband, my gt-grandfather Stefano Gebbia, also died in Sicily. In the spring of 1903, Francesca was just a few weeks from delivering her fifth child and became deathly ill. Stefano walked nearly 25 miles to Palermo to get the medicine she needed. Traveling over rugged mountains and through lush valleys, he was able to obtain the needed medicine and his wife recovered. But the journey was too much for him and he became ill himself on the way home - most likely having contracted pneumonia or influenza. He died just 12 days before the birth of his daughter. She was named Stefana in his honor. Francesca loved Stefano very much and mourned him the rest of her days.

Francesca despised the living conditions in Brooklyn. Less than a year after her arrival, on 20 February 1915, she moved the family to Rockford, IL. Not only did they have cousins there, but many families from her village had settled there. Their first home in Rockford was on Loomis St.

Soon after their arrival in Rockford, they went to visit Signore Palmeri who would teach them all English. It was here that my grandfather, Ferdinando, first met the woman he would marry: Frances Palmeri, the eldest child of Luciano Palmeri and Rosalia Cannova. The Palmeris were from the same town in Sicily.

As a teenager in Rockford, Ferdinando brought water to the men building the new

highway. He also would tend the smudge pots at Camp Grant. Later, he worked as a knitter, then as a mechanic. But he spent most of his working life as a machinist and then as a set-up man for Borg Warner. My grandmother, Frances Palmeri, was a seamstress for Shanhouse.

Fred and Frances raised their two children, Frances Claudia and Stephen, in Rockford. But not without some setbacks. He had contracted to have a house built on West St. and construction was well underway when the stock market crashed in 1929. With the banks closed, the workers feared they wouldn't get paid and walked off the job. My grandfather borrowed money from family and friends and the house was completed nearly on time. Of course, he promptly repaid those loans.

As a teenager, Stephen (my dad), had several jobs in Rockford. His first was at a truck farm, others included: delivering newspapers, caddying, working at a grocery store, the Times Theater, J.C.Penny, and J.L.Clark.

His sister, Frances, worked at National Lock and later at Montgomery Ward. She stayed in Rockford and raised 5 children there.

Once his army service was up, my parents married and settled in Chicago. They raised their eight children through many moves in and around the Chicago area.

It's been over a hundred years since our family first set foot in America. Rockford gave them a solid foundation to build upon. Although we've scattered far and wide, many still live in Rockford, Chicago, and the surrounding area. But no matter where we may live we still call that area home.

- Submitted by: Stephen Gebbia for the Genealogy Project for the Cultural and Education Committee of GRIAA. "Immigration Histories of Rockford Italian Families." -