

Giovanni Battista (1885-1984) and Annunziata (Sisti) Palombi (1888-1973)



Giovanni Battista [John the Baptist] and Annunziata [Nancy] (Sisti) Palombi were married in Ferentino, Italy on February 27, 1908. Giovanni had already been once to America, working on the railroads and living in a rail car with two young uncles. After the marriage he returned to America to work. In Ferentino his father rented the bishop's land beneath the cathedral, raising garden crops. With three other brothers, there would be little work in Ferentino. In his absence, their little son Emilio was born, dying shortly after birth. Brother Pietro/Peter working in the bishop's garden with their dad remembered hearing the church bells ring and knew instantly that little Emilio had died.

Annunziata did not come to America until 1911, coming through the port of Boston. She gave birth to Onorina the same year who died at age three months. My dad, Frank, was the next child (1913-2005), followed by Mary (1915-2002), Louis (1917-1997), Howard (1919-2014), and Helen (1921-1999). In 1924 Annunziata gave birth to another daughter. She was named Onorina/Norene to carry on the life of the first Onorina who did not survive. In 1926 Annunziata reached to take a fork out of her two year old daughter's hand. Onorina backed into a pot of drained gnocchi water that had been mistakenly left out in the open kitchen that night. Onorina died of severe burns to her torso and legs a few days later. My dad remembered that a band accompanied the mourners from St. Anthony Church to St. Mary's Cemetery. Annunziata could not be brought to the grave for years as in her grief she would kneel at the site and dig at the turf.

Two children completed the family: Arjane Palombi Hilton (born (1927) and Peter Palombi (born 1930), both still living.

They built their house at 1201 Cunningham St. in 1917 at the intersection of Bianca Court, stacking the bricks at night to be mortared by bricklayers the next day. Giovanni worked at J. I. Case in the foundry. Besides being a housekeeper and gardener, Annunziata rented rooms in their house to male boarders from Italy, cooking their meals and doing their laundry all for \$5 per month.

One garden job my dad detested was the preservation of tomatoes. It was the children's job to keep the flies off the tomatoes as they dried for a few days in the sun. Then Annunziata wrapped them in olive oil and placed them in crocks to be used for the rest of the year.

Annunziata achieved a second grade education in Italy. Giovanni did not attend school in Ferentino as he had to work with his dad in the garden. His dad did pay for an evening tutor to educate Giovanni but found out he was not attending the sessions. Brother Pietro was assigned to follow him and found him going into a bar to play cards instead! Giovanni never learned to read or write, but could calculate figures amazingly while using his own finger method. At that time one had to be able to sign one's name to enter America. I remember my grandfather practicing that bit of knowledge into his 90's, writing his name over and over again.

Annunziata's sister and two brothers all came to Rockford. Her father came here for about fourteen years to work (1900-1914), returning to Italy only for Annunziata's wedding there in 1908. Annunziata and siblings sent money for the mother to relocate here but she was "afraid of the waves". Annunziata's father saw only one grandchild, my dad, Frank, and proudly told everyone in Ferentino about "his Frankie". Her mother saw none of her grandchildren. At one point she sent her granddaughters pairs of earrings of which I have one set. Both parents died in Ferentino.

Giovanni had three brothers. Pietro/Peter moved to Rockford in 1913 and stayed here until his death. Giuseppe worked in the Gary, Indiana steel mills twice. After World War II, his wife was willing to relocate. But he had voted for Mussolini as all Italians had to and was not allowed in. The fourth brother remained in Italy. After WW II the relatives there had tragic needs of clothing, medicines, etc. which the families here tried to supply despite their own poverty.

My grandparents had no desire to return to Italy even to visit. My grandmother said in her limited English, "There is no dirt like the dirt in America you can trade for." For some reason citizenship wasn't achieved quickly. My grandmother Annunziata did not receive hers until 1943 and my grandfather only a few years before.

During WW II my grandparents had two sons in uniform, Louis in the US Air Force in North Africa and Howard in the US Coast Guard. When my grandmother wanted to visit her son Howard in Delaware, she was required to submit a form entitled "APPLICATION FOR TRAVEL OF ALIENS OF ENEMY NATIONS" (!)

In the photographs are Giovanni Battista and Annunziata Palombi taken in 1908, and Mary, Annunziata holding Louis, and Frank Palombi taken in 1918.

Submitted on October 26, 2016 by Roberto Palombi for the Genealogy Project for Culture and Education Committee of GRIAA "Immigration Histories of Rockford Italian Families"