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Oral History: William Iannello

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Abstract

Research paper devoted to the life of my grandfather, William Iannello, a second-generation Italian American. His parents came to the United States during the first decade of the 1900s from Calabria, the southernmost region of the Italian mainland.

Keywords

Italian American History, Oral History

Disciplines

Cultural History | Ethnic Studies | European History | Italian Language and Literature | Oral History | United States History

Comments

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Andrew Dalton
Oral History Report
Professor Alan Perry
Fall 2015

William Iannello

Over the last several years I have taken a great deal of interest in recording and preserving the stories and events of my grandfather's life. Through my research and his excellent memory, I am grateful to have a better understanding of how and why my Italian ancestors came to the United States, how they adjusted to society, and what their daily lives were like as new Americans. Born September 16, 1927 to Italian immigrant parents in Berkeley Heights, New Jersey, William Iannello spent most of his early life immersed in Italian American culture. His story, and the stories of his parents and grandparents, will be presented here for posterity based on interviews and my own personal research.

On May 5, 1904, the first of my Italian ancestors arrived at Ellis Island in New York City. His name was Rocco Muzzopapa, a peasant laborer from Gioia Tauro (a coastal city in the Province of Reggio Calabria). According to Italian records, Rocco was born on November 26, 1873 in Rizziconi (a small town near Gioia Tauro) to Francesco Domenico Muzzopapa (born about 1838) and Vittoria Maccarone (born about 1840). Rocco married Giulia Messina on November 29, 1893. Her parents were listed as "unknown" on their marriage certificate.¹ By 1904, when Rocco left Italy, he and Giulia had five young children to feed.² Rocco's ship, the S.

¹ On Giulia's death certificate, her parents are listed as Francis Messina and Rose Tutturubello. The informant who provided this information was her husband Rocco Muzzopapa. It is possible that these were her adopted parents. She never spoke to my grandfather of her early life or marriage, so there is no way of knowing anything with certainty.

² The children were, from oldest to youngest (and with original spellings): Francesco (Frank) Muzzopapa (born April 4, 1894); Vittoria Muzzopapa (born August 16, 1896); Rosario (Ross) Muzzopapa (born November 24, 1898); Giuseppe (Joe) Muzzopapa (born April 9, 1901), and Rosaria (Rose) Muzzopapa (born April 22, 1903). All but Rosaria, the youngest, had been born in Gioia Tauro. She was born in Nicastro, Province of Catanzaro, Calabria.

S. Perugia, arrived in New York after a 15 day voyage. Rocco travelled alone in the steerage section of the ship, notorious for poor sanitary conditions. He carried with him what amounted to ten dollars in U.S. currency. His destination was a cousin's house at 120 Baxter Street, just one street west of the famous Italian community on Mulberry Street (where he would later live for a time).

Like many immigrants, Rocco traveled to America alone at first in order to establish himself before the rest of the family's arrival. Rocco went back to Italy at some point and returned January 15, 1907 aboard the S.S. Napolitan Prince with his eldest son Francesco (Frank). Giulia and the other four children arrived at Ellis Island on August 10, 1907 aboard the S.S. Europa. The youngest of these children was my grandfather's mother, Rosaria Muzzopapa, who was just four years old. According to my Great Aunt Carlotta Iannello, Rosaria (Rose) told her that the Muzzopapa children danced something similar to "Ring Around the Rosie" when they came into view of the Statue of Liberty. The address that both Rocco and Giulia gave as their destination in New York was 126 Mulberry Street. This tenement was bombed in 1910 by the Black Hand after extortion letters were ignored by a bar operator. It is not known if my ancestors were still living in the apartment in 1910. They moved to Brooklyn at some point before 1920 (as indicated by census records). Unfortunately, no family stories exist to my knowledge about the Black Hand or other bombing incidents in New York.

Rocco and Giulia had three more children during their time in Brooklyn, and sent the oldest four to school where their teachers were quite puzzled by the spelling and pronunciation

Perhaps by 1903 the family had moved further north toward Naples in preparation for the journey to the United States.

of the name Muzzopapa.³ Even in Italy, the spelling on records is not consistent—usually either Muzzopapa or Muzzupapa. In the United States, the Muzzopapa children adopted several new spellings of the name that had very little resemblance to the Italian spellings. Frank Muzzopapa changed the name to “Monsipapa,” Joseph Muzzopapa began spelling his name as “Munzipapa,” and Rosario decided on the spelling “Muzzipapa.” These spelling variations still exist within the family today. Records indicate that Rocco Muzzopapa (the family patriarch) was unable to sign his own name, which is perhaps an explanation for all of the confusion.

According to my grandfather, Rocco and Giulia Muzzopapa spoke very little English and rarely talked about the past with their grandchildren. My grandfather remembers only a few isolated instances when he was able to understand what the adults were talking about: “I remember they used to talk politics a lot, about Italy, Tunisia, Africa...Italy had holdings there, I always remember them talking, arguing about that...about some battles they had, and all that kind of stuff.” These discussions may have been related to the two Italo-Abyssinian Wars of 1895-1896 and 1935-1936. In Carlo Levi’s *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, these wars are frequently referenced and were clearly major topics of political discussion in Southern Italy. Perhaps news of this second military conflict generated discussion about having lived in Italy during the first conflict. My grandfather remembers only one other story from the “old country” that he heard from the adults. His grandmother said that her son Frank enjoyed jumping off of rocky cliffs into the Mediterranean Sea. The lack of stories about life in Italy is partially due to the language barrier between my grandfather and his grandparents. It was also uncommon for older relatives to speak to younger generations about the past. Perhaps they were ashamed of having been peasants in the hills of Calabria. My grandfather believes that his family left Italy because of

³ The youngest three children were: Carmela (May) Munzipapa (born May 5, 1908); Salvatore (Sam) Monsipapa (born June 5, 1909); and Angelina Beatrice Munzipapa (born July 4, 1910).

extreme poverty and the hope for a better life in the United States where, as they had heard, “the streets were lined with gold.”

My grandfather’s father, Rosario Iannello, was born on March 1, 1893 in Varapodio, Calabria to Domenicantonio Iannello (born in 1868) and Caterina Caminiti (born in 1871). Rosario was the first of eight children, and the first to immigrate to the United States.⁴ He sailed on the steerage section of the S.S. Lazio out of Naples, arriving at Ellis Island on May 7, 1909. Little is known about Rosario’s life in Italy. My grandfather remembers hearing that he picked olives for the gentry. His sister-in-law, in a past interview, remembered a conversation she had with him about why he left Italy for the United States: “He said ‘you don’t understand, you don’t understand how it was there. When I would walk down a flight of stairs, I ran into wealthy people and had to back into a corner and lower my head. I couldn’t even look them in the eyes.’” The class system in Italy made it virtually impossible to succeed for individuals who were born into poverty. Peasants were born as peasants and died as peasants. Perhaps Rosario’s parents realized this and wanted their son to have a better life somewhere else.

When Rosario’s ship docked at Ellis Island, the 16 year-old immigrant had with him what amounted to ten U.S. dollars. His destination was a cousin’s house at 193 Hester Street, Manhattan.⁵ According to my grandfather, Rosario had arranged to work for an American family before he left Italy. This family lived in Connecticut on a farm. He worked there for an unknown amount of time before returning to the city. According to a letter from my grandfather’s sister Julia (now deceased), “The first job [Rosario] had was putting rail road

⁴ Rosario’s younger brother Tony (Antonino) arrived on July 24, 1913. He was a baker and lived most of his life in the Bronx. No other siblings came to the United States. Tony’s family changed the spelling of their name to “Iannelli” because they were under the impression that this was the correct Italian spelling. Records clearly show that the name was spelled “Iannello” in Italy. Another common misspelling of the name is “Yannello,” which may reflect the way that the name was pronounced in Italy. Today, our family pronounces the name “Eye-uh-nello.”

⁵ This was probably a friend from his village or a distant cousin.

tracks down, after that he worked as a lamp lighter. He had to light all the gas lamps along the city blocks. One night he forgot to light the lamps and the whole area was completely dark, all this took place in Brooklyn, New York.” After this, Rosario delivered milk for the Borden Milk Company. His next job was as a grocer for the Violi Family, whom he lived with. My grandfather recalls that his father played guitar in the streets for extra money. In 1917, Rosario registered for the draft. World War One had begun and he enlisted quickly. He knew that if he served in the military, he would be granted full citizenship in the United States. By this time he had met young Rose Muzzopapa. They quickly fell in love, and corresponded through post cards during Rosario’s time at Camp Upton on Long Island. Military service records indicate that he was a teamster, delivering food and supplies to the troops.

On April 15, 1918, Rosario’s unit was traveling by train to Long Island City. Early in the morning, when many of the men were sleeping, the train hit a broken rail and Rosario’s car flew off the track. According to the *New York Times* of April 16, 1918, 3 soldiers were killed and 37 injured. Among the wounded listed in the newspaper was Rosario Iannello of Brooklyn. According to my grandfather, his father Rosario suffered minor injuries and a slight disfiguration of one of his ears. This accident kept Rosario from being deployed in Europe during the war. Unlike his brother, who was serving in the U.S. Army in France, Rosario would stay on Long Island for the rest of his military service. On July 17, 1918, Rosario was awarded U.S. citizenship for his service in the military. On February 18, 1919, he was discharged and returned to New York City. The following year, he married Rose Muzzopapa and the young couple moved to Berkeley Heights, New Jersey where they bought a house and began to raise children.⁶

⁶ The 1920 Census shows the Iannello/Muzzopapa family in Brooklyn, so the move to New Jersey must have taken place between late 1920 and mid-1922. Dominick Iannello, the first child of Rose and Rosario, was born in Berkeley Heights on September 16, 1922.

My grandfather, William Iannello, was the third of five children. He was born November 16, 1927 in a large white house on Plainfield Avenue in Berkeley Heights on the family farm. His older brother Dominick, sister Julia, and grandmother Giulia also lived in the house at the time of his birth.⁷ His earliest memories are of the Great Depression following the stock market crash of 1929. Because his family lived on a farm, they were able to avoid the extreme hunger and poverty that immigrants from the city faced. He remembers that his mother's brothers and sisters would come to stay for long periods of time during the depression because they could not afford to live in New York City. The house that he was raised in, known as "the big house," was a place for his aunts and uncles to bring their families when times were tough. His mother and grandmother worked hard to maintain the household, and his father worked as a pig farmer to earn money for paying the mortgage. In the spirit of charity, grandmother Giulia fed beggars and peddlers who traveled out to Berkeley Heights from New York City. My grandfather remembered that "there would be some stranger sitting at the table, because the railroad station was there and they would come in from New York, carrying a couple bundles, they had these wooden handles with a piece of wire and hook on them. [My grandmother] used to feed them, give them breakfast, or lunch. They would knock on the door, she'd let them in, you know, they probably were Italian, could speak Italian." During the Depression, my grandfather went with his family on several occasions into New York City to visit aunts, uncles, and cousins. He remembers seeing "a big dump with all these shacks made out of whatever they could find...and we called it Hovertown."⁸

⁷ Julia Iannello was born on March 15, 1924. She was responsible for choosing my grandfather's name. She told me several years ago that her parents wanted to name him Rocco after his grandfather. She thought the name "Rocco" was too harsh and she suggested William.

⁸ "Hooverilles," named after President Herbert Hoover, were tent communities in cities across the United States. President Hoover's handling of the widespread poverty during the Great Depression has been greatly criticized.

Another of my grandfather's early memories is watching his father plow the fields of their small farm: "when he was plowing, I would walk behind him and follow him around...I used to play in this spring right across from the [current] motel, and there were crayfish...I'd stick a long piece of hay down there and they'd catch onto it." Rosario always planted crops according to the position of the moon in the sky. Perhaps this was how he learned to cultivate in Italy. My grandfather helped his father, mother, and grandmother with chores from the day he could first walk. He regularly canned food and made sausages with his grandmother at the kitchen table. She spoke no English, but he was able to understand what she was telling him in her thick Calabrian dialect. She would say things like "fatta cosi" (do like this), and "menti mano qua" (put your hands here).

My grandfather remembers how kind and hardworking she was. She would joke with him by making her napkin into a little animal with ears and a face. She would keep the napkin in her arm, pet it, and then all of a sudden make it "jump" out at him. At the dinner table, however, maintaining seriousness was vitally important. If any of the children spoke at the table, she would give them a stern look as a warning to keep quiet: "when we were little kids, we didn't dare talk, no kids should talk at the table." Giulia spoke almost no English until the day she died on August 9, 1945.⁹ She was extremely religious, but, like many Italian immigrants, rarely attended church. Every night, according to my grandfather, she went to the window with her rosary beads and said the rosary over and over again. She had a religious shrine on the wall in her bedroom that my grandfather still has to this day on the wall next to his bed. The shrine still has a red wine stain from a small glass that she kept next to the beads.

⁹ My grandfather will always remember this day for another reason—it was the date that the United States dropped an atomic bomb on the city of Nagasaki, Japan. This was the second of two bombs that were dropped on Japan to end the war in the Pacific.

My grandfather also remembers many stories about his grandfather Rocco, a baker in New York City and Summit, New Jersey. Rocco did not live in the “big house” with his wife and daughter Rose Iannello. He drifted between the houses of his children and an apartment in the city near his bakery. Rocco was a heavy drinker, often seen sitting on the porch with a jug of wine by his feet. On at least one occasion, my grandfather and his cousins decided to play a prank on their grandfather: “we’d wait for him to use the old outhouse...when he was in there we’d throw rocks at it [and] he would come out yelling ‘you sommana bitch!’ and we’d run away.” When he wasn’t under the influence of alcohol, Rocco bought grapes and made wine in the basement of the “big house.” Apparently, Rocco was not a very talented wine maker because, as my grandfather said, “he made the best vinegar in town.” He also grew a fig tree and made a crude-looking structure out of tree branches tied together with string to protect the tree during the winter. My grandfather despised the fig tree because he had to keep a lamp inside the hut during the night so that it would not die. Perhaps these activities were reminiscent of Rocco’s life in Calabria decades earlier.

Another story about Rocco is that he would ride the train out to Berkeley Heights from New York City. He would drink all the way there, fall asleep, and my great-grandfather Rosario always knew to pick him up at the train’s very last stop. Despite his poor habits, Rocco lived into his nineties. Even my mother remembers him sitting on the family porch smoking a pipe. She and her brother, although a bit terrified, were forced to give the wrinkled old Italian a kiss “out of respect.” He had vision problems late in his life, which he called “Cadillacs” instead of “cataracts.” On one occasion, Rocco had to be taken by ambulance to the hospital. Apparently, he got tired of waiting for treatment and he returned home a few hours later in a taxi cab. Rocco

died in 1965 at the age of 92. My grandfather attributes his longevity to “pickled organs” because of all the wine he drank.

One major event of my grandfather’s childhood was the tragic death of his uncle Giuseppe Munzipapa. “Joe,” as he was called, was living in a small house very close to my grandfather’s home in Berkeley Heights. He had a wife and two young children in 1933 when he was hired at a local brickyard. Times were tough and the family needed any supplemental income possible. My grandfather remembers what happened on February 27, 1933, when Uncle Joe did not come home from work:

The brickyard was a pretty big operation.... I remember the fire whistle blew, and they called guys to go for a job. Uncle Vito was living with us then, and my Uncle Vito, Uncle Joe, and my father went there and they got hired, and this one day it was in the winter time, in February, and it was a hot water boiler system, and they fired up the boiler, and nobody was watching, I guess. You had to keep a certain amount of water in the boiler...and the pipes were frozen, and all the water that was in the head of the boiler got boiled out, and the cast iron of the boiler was hot, real hot, and the pipes thawed out, and a rush of cold water hit that hot [furnace] and it blew up, and a piece of it hit my uncle Joe and killed him, my uncle Vito got hit in the back and my father put both of them on a truck to go to the hospital.

According to newspaper articles, Joe died at the hospital later that day. His funeral took place in the living room of the “big house” on Plainfield Avenue. My grandfather remembers the open casket surrounded by hundreds of flowers. To this day, he hates the smell of roses because it reminds him of that day.

Rosario Iannello, my grandfather’s father, played a large role in uniting the family during times of hardship and sorrow. He arranged the funeral and burial of his mother-in-law Giulia in 1945. During her lifetime, he was extremely close to her, more than any of her other sons or daughters-in-law. He took Giulia to movies and Italian shows in nearby towns like Summit, New Jersey. Giulia understood almost no English, so Rosario would translate everything to her right

in the middle of the theater. My grandfather remembers trying to sit a few rows away because of how loud they were speaking to each other. Giulia must have respected her son-in-law for taking such good care of all of her children, especially during the Great Depression. Even before this, he dug cellars with a team of horses in Berkeley Heights to supplement the family income. During World War Two, he plowed local "Victory Gardens." He also took care of several houses in town that were owned by the Muzzopapa family. One source of income for Rosario was kickbacks he was paid during Prohibition when he rented out part of his barn to a group of men from Brooklyn who ran an alcohol still. Eventually, these men were caught and Rosario, along with his brother-in-law Frank, had to appear in court. As my grandfather remembers, "they couldn't find anybody who would talk." The prosecutor resorted to holding up a wine-stained shirt and trying to claim that it had been worn by Uncle Frank. Being a very large man, Frank laughed off the accusation by holding the shirt against his thigh and exclaiming "what do you think, I wore it on my leg?" Prohibition obviously made no sense to Italian families like my own. They felt no need to comply with the laws of the time. My grandfather remembers his father stopping at certain private residences in New Jersey to buy illegal alcoholic beverages.

Like many other Southern Italian families, my grandfather remembers certain superstitions that his parents had. His mother Rose and her sisters would sometimes sit around the table and discuss their dreams. They believed that dreams had some sort of power or truth that applied to the real world. Rose also told a story to family members that has been repeated frequently at family gatherings. I remember my mother telling it to me when I was a small boy. The story is that Rose was caring for her firstborn child Dominick (my grandfather's brother), who was resting in his crib. Rose claimed until the day she died that a little elf appeared at the edge of the crib and was smiling and grinning at her. My grandfather's sister Julia also told a

story about her father (Rosario) who died unexpectedly after a surgery in 1973. She claimed that as he was leaving the house for the surgery, he turned to his wife and said goodbye and that he would not be coming back home. As his daughter Julia was leaving the house, she saw him in the window with what appeared to be a halo over his head. Rosario died soon after at a hospital in Summit, New Jersey. In the later years of his life, he had been a founding member of the Berkeley Heights Fire Department. He had also involved himself in local politics, and was a staunch Democrat. The entire family greatly admired President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The family preserved much of its “Italianness” in relation to holidays and food. Large family gatherings during holidays were very common, and the “big house” in Berkeley Heights was usually the center of it all. My grandfather remembers all kinds of special foods, especially on Christmas Eve. Our family still makes manicotti with squid sauce for this holiday, an old family tradition that probably dates back to Italy. Holidays, as my grandfather has said many times, were not like they are today. Christmas was about food and family, not presents. Birthdays were the same. My grandfather remembers being out in the field working one day and realizing that his birthday had been the day before. He always stresses that his family felt fortunate to have food on their plates and a roof over their heads. They valued family more than anything money could buy.

For Italians in the Berkeley Heights area, the most important holiday was probably the 16th of July, a festival dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Parades, music, and fireworks were common, and my grandfather recalls marching near the saint’s statue. He remembers that people would run out into the street and pin dollar bills to banners that were being carried.

My grandfather attended school until the seventh grade. He dropped out because he lost interest, and he was needed to work on the farm. At school, he did not encounter much

discrimination because there were so many second-generation immigrants in the community. He does remember being called a “wap” on several occasions, but not in school. The Catholic Church in Berkeley Heights was near the school, so nuns would sometimes wait outside for the children and bring them to after-school classes. My grandfather remembers running through the woods to escape the nuns. Growing up, he believed very little of what the Catholic Church was preaching. His cousins, to this day, are far more religious than him. As a youth, he was mocked and called a “heathen” because he did not attend church and did not believe in God or an afterlife. His views about these topics have not changed over the course of his lifetime. He believes that we are just like any other living organism; that we die and are taken back into the ground from which everything grows. He attributes these beliefs to being a life-long farmer.

In terms of politics, my grandfather is far more liberal than most of his cousins. I have observed several reasons for this difference in ideals within our family. It actually stems back to the early years of being in the United States. My grandfather’s mother was only four years old when she came to the United States. Her siblings considered themselves American and did not have the immigrant mentality that my grandfather’s father had. He came to the United States alone at age sixteen. He recognized the need for assisting his fellow immigrants, and he most certainly saw the government as a force of good that could help those in need.

Another major factor that shaped the politics of the family was World War Two. My grandfather had several cousins on his mother’s side were in the service. One, “Rocky” Muzzipapa (who is still alive, age 90) was severely wounded in France in the weeks following the D-Day Invasion. Rocky’s father Ross (my grandfather’s uncle) blamed President Roosevelt for sending his son off to war and for the fact that he was badly wounded. Roosevelt became the villain to this part of the family. To my grandfather’s father, Roosevelt was a hero who helped

the country out of the Great Depression. Because of this dichotomy, the Iannello family remained Democrats and the Muzzopapa family (for the most part) became Republicans. If you ask my grandfather, he will say that everyone in the family started out as liberals until they gained a foothold in society and attained wealth. At this point, his cousins realized that they did not like the government interfering with their businesses, or raising their taxes, and they did not approve of new immigrant groups coming into the United States and taking away jobs. Because of my background (and my identity with the Iannello side), I share my grandfather's values. We come from poor, humble roots—the olive groves of Calabria. We are grateful for the help that this government has given us to achieve success, and we wish new immigrants the same opportunities that were afforded to our family over a century ago. They are no different from our ancestors, who merely sought a better life and a brighter future.

After seventh grade, my grandfather returned to the farm and delivered milk for his father. In 1945 he was drafted during the very last months of the Second World War. Because of a farm deferment, he was not actually inducted into service. Instead, he remained at home and assisted with daily activities like milking cows and tending to the crops. He enjoyed attending square dances in town, and actually avoided service in the military during the Korean Conflict because of a square dancing accident in which he broke his foot. At these dances, he met and soon fell in love with a young girl named Helen Morgan who lived a few miles down the road. They were married on October 13, 1951 in the Church of the Little Flower, Berkeley Heights.

In 1952, Helen and Bill Iannello became the parents of the first of two children—William Charles Iannello. Their second child, Kathleen (my mother) was born two years later in October of 1954. She was named after her great-grandmother Caterina Caminiti (apparently my grandparents thought that her name was Catalina). My mother remembers that her grandfather

Rosario gave her a dollar every time she correctly answered the question of who she had been named for. A few years after my mother was born, my grandfather decided to move his young family to a farm in Upstate New York. During my mother's childhood, they moved several times from one property to the next. My grandfather kept up a large farm, for a time with the help of his brothers Dominick and Ross ("Skippy"). After my mother and uncle were out of the house, my grandparents decided to move to Arizona. From there they moved back to New York and eventually settled in Port Charlotte, Florida. In the early 2000s, my mother (a professor of Political Science at Gettysburg College since 1990) asked my grandparents to move to Gettysburg so that she could care for them. By this time, my grandmother had been diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. After the move, my grandmother's health declined and she passed away in 2010. My grandfather moved in with us a few years ago and he spends most of his time cooking, working in our large tomato/eggplant garden, watching MSNBC, and helping with household projects. In addition to the beautiful garden he keeps, he is an excellent carpenter, plumber, painter, and electrician. He regularly visits my grandmother's grave with flowers and other plants. He misses her every day, as they had been married for nearly sixty years.

My grandfather's wide range of hobbies include listening to Italian opera, watching cooking shows on the Food Network, and visiting his brother's small farm in upstate New York where he can hunt deer. In the public sphere, his favorite figures are singers like Mario Lanza, Luciano Pavarotti, Dean Martin, and Perry Como. He also greatly admires President Barack Obama, as well as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who he plans on voting for next fall. It is an honor to be so close to my grandfather, and to learn about his past and the history of our Italian ancestors. This project has helped me to better understand where I come from, and to understand more about the origins of my core values and beliefs.

To see photographs of the Iannello and Muzzopapa families, visit the following links:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/129567251@N02/albums/72157650793935632>

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