



Onofrio Guerrera was born in Belmonte Mezzagno, Sicily, immigrated to the US in 1906 at the age of 18 and traveled to Rockford, Illinois. Not long after his arrival he found work with a railroad construction crew that took him to Montana to lay tracks. From there he moved to Racine, WI where he was employed in a piano stool factory. He later returned to Rockford and joined with John Leggio to open a billiard room on E. State Street next to the Newstower building. From this venture they moved to form a wholesale fruit and vegetable business. At some point in the mid twenties they separated and continued in the same business but focusing on different market segments. Onofrio concentrated on the small, Italian owned family grocers in South Rockford.

Rockford in those days was home to many single Italian men. Our father, who was an early enthusiast of the automobile, had a convertible and often drove his pals to Ravinia Park to take in Italian opera, once meeting the famed Italian tenor, Giovanni Martinelli. He and his friends also loved boxing and were fans of Sammy Mandell, Rockford's World Lightweight Champion from 1926 to 1930. Sammy's birth name was Salvatore as is mine and I believe the reason I was always called Sammy, later Sam, was because of my father's admiration of the boxer.

In 1928, Onofrio returned to Sicily to reunite with his family who had moved to Santa Cristina prior to his emigration to the US. Accompanying him aboard the ship were a father and daughter who were close friends from his days in Racine, WI. At the Palermo port waiting to greet the Racine twosome was the Alessandro Priolo family from Palermo. My mother, Giuseppina (Josephine) Priolo, who was home during her summer break from teaching in Palazzolo Sul Olio, Lombardia, was with her parents and as a result met my father.

In December 1928, my father at age 40 and my mother at 28 were wed in the Palermo Cathedral. In April of 1929, they crossed the Atlantic on their way to Rockford, my mother pregnant with me. Upon their arrival in Rockford they were hosted in the home of John and Lena Leggio on Montague Street. Before I was born in September 1929, they rented a house around the corner on Rosa Avenue. They remained there for less than a year and moved to Church Street as renters in an apartment owned by Angelo and Rose Zammuto. While there my brother Alessandro (Al) was born just 11 months and 28 days after my birth. This short interval proved to have some longer term negative health consequences for our mother since as a child she had experienced rheumatic fever that had left her with an enlarged heart; a condition she was unaware of until years later.

The Great Depression set in shortly after my birth and faced with having to sell one of two homes our father had purchased before leaving for Italy, they decided to move to Adams Street on the east side of Rockford. It was a two family flat that could provide rental income from one unit while they lived in the other. When I started attending Jackson School my mother capitalized on this as an opportunity to study English with me. She ultimately became quite proficient but retained an accent. She would have done justice to promoting a “sugo” commercial! My dad, on the other hand, had been in America for years and spoke with minimal accent.

Both became members of St James Church and also involved with the Sons of Italy and the Aragona Club during these years. But mother had developed health problems and began to miss her family and teaching. So, in 1935, the plan was for our mother accompanied by Al and me to move to Italy and our father was to follow one year later. She applied to return to her teaching position and had been accepted so the plan was to live in Lombardia. However, Mussolini decided to invade Ethiopia and her mother wrote that she would not advise moving because Fascism had changed. Once that decision had been resolved, our mother rededicated herself to becoming an American. She actively participated in PTA, added memberships in the Verdi Club, the Foresters; the Catholic Women’s League and formed a host of American and Italian friends while also becoming a citizen. In 1944, as our family’s wherewithal improved, the Adams Street home was sold and we moved to a single family home on Crosby Street.

World War II was difficult for both our parents since all our relatives were in Italy. Their parents died during this period and shortly after our mother’s only sister died resulting from war injuries. This void left our mother without the desire of ever returning to Italy. This period, though, is memorable because of our mother’s learning of Italian POWs in Savannah Illinois. For the next two plus years until repatriation she led an effort that brought a busload of Italian POWs to Rockford each Sunday and then dispersed them among Italian families for the day. It was an enormous undertaking that resulted in goodwill that carried over to their postwar lives as evidenced by the many letters of gratitude she received and by the return of many to the US. During this time she also taught Italian language to a small group of children of Italian families. Among them was Michael Lamendola who later became a noted fashion designer in Rome, Italy.

Dad’s favorite truck was the red Diamond-T with a custom-made flat bed. Children that grew up in South Rockford and hung around the grocery stores all knew “Nofi’s” red truck. It was hard work though and in 1948, hoping to enter into a business less physically demanding than hauling fruit and vegetables, our parents acquired The Cottage Restaurant near East High School on

Charles Street. Under our mother's management the business grew and when she added lunch service, she hired a Norwegian and a German immigrant, both ladies with distinctive accents complimenting our mother's decided Italian accent. Lunch business flourished and we credit the blend of the three foreign accents as one of the attractions that possibly enamored clientele with the restaurant.

Our father had continued with his wholesale business but despite the restaurant's success, its demands took its toll on our mother so they decided to sell it in 1950. Al and I in January-February 1951 entered military service and ended up near each other in Germany. In December 1951 we traveled to Sicily where we met our mother's family in Palermo and our father's in Santa Cristina. Our parents were overjoyed and it gave us a sense of connection with their early lives. In June of 1952 I returned to Italy visiting mother's school in Palazzolo Sul Olio where I met a teaching colleague of hers with whom she had remained in touch and that added to my knowledge of her earlier years.

Mother's health deteriorated in the following years and, finally, at her doctor's suggestion in January 1962, I drove her to Arizona, a warmer and drier climate, where she was to spend the winter in Tucson. I returned to Rockford and a short time later she died of congestive heart failure. Our father finally quit work at 75 and at age 84 joined a tour of Italy followed with a visit to Santa Cristina where a brother and sister were still living. He enjoyed his visit but complained that none of his early acquaintances was still alive.

After experiencing a series of heart attacks he moved to the Fairhaven Nursing Home. Following his death at age 88 in 1976, we were gratified to see Marvin Johnson, Fairhaven Director and former E. High basketball star, and several staff members attend his funeral. I think we are both grateful for the richness of having grown up in an Italian family that instilled in us a pride in our cultural heritage, gave us good values, a work ethic, an appreciation of the importance of family and friendships and much love.

Sent February __, 2014 by Sam Guerrera for the Geneology Project for Culture and Education Committee of GRIAA "Immigration Histories of Rockford Italian Families"