

Sam Marelli

SAM THE PEANUT MAN

My great grandfather was a humble man. He was one of the first Italians to establish an Italian presence in the City of Rockford. He came to this country from Bolladello, Varese, Lombardia, Italy, ca. 1882, following the Maffiolis to this city of opportunity. The Maffiolis were builders and contractors who helped build many important buildings and post offices in Rockford and the surrounding area. Yet, Sam Marelli was a humble man who remained true to his roots and established a small business at the corner of State and Main Sts. vending peanuts and fruit to those who visited his one man stand.

Sam Marelli was married with nine children. He married Giuseppa Teresa Marelli, the daughter of Giuseppe Antonio and Annunciata Saporiti Marelli, in Bolladello, on 22 Jan 1880. He preceded his family to this county and his wife Teresa and the two children born in Italy, Stefano and Tecla Marelli, followed arriving in Castle Garden, New York, on 22 Mar 1883, and they subsequently traveled to reunite with him in Rockford.

Sam Marelli supported his growing family by trudging daily to his one man stand at the corner of State and Main to sell his wares and neither rain, shine, snow or sleet, could deter him from his daily business of providing peanuts and fruit to the citizens of this city. Sam Marelli conducted his business on these busy thoroughfares for twenty-two years and became well known and well respected in the community.

In an article that appeared in the Rockford paper, the Republic, on Friday, April 26, 1907, announcing the retirement of another peanut vendor Mr. Warren Cushman, several years after Sam's death, it stated "Competition never worried Mr. Cushman and he always had a kindly regard for his near competitor, Sam Marelli, who started in at the corner where the Trust building now stands, fourteen years ago. Sam has gained quite a reputation for the manner in which he puts street corner loafers to flight. Whenever one of this specie stops in front of Sam's place of business, he starts blowing into the fire and soon the loafer's clothes would be covered with ashes. Sam, of course, with eyes intent upon his fire, would never see the discomfiture of the unlucky man."

This story, rather humorous in nature, seems quite a contradiction to what appeared in articles at the time of Sam's death depicting Sam as a humble, caring, and generous person and businessman.

Sam (Innocente) Marelli was born in Bolladello ca. 1853 and died in Rockford on 14 May 1903 leaving his widow Teresa and eight children, Stefano, Tecla (Noé) Guidi, John Giacomo (Catherine Cherichetti), Lena (Joseph) Castiglioni, Paul (Mallie Ford), Victor (Aurelia Mazzucchelli), Mary (Ambrose) Cherichetti, and George. He was preceded in death by an infant son Samuel Ambrose Marelli on 23 Feb 1897.

The following tribute appeared in the Rockford Morning Star two days following his death.

Rockford Morning Star, Sun., May 17, 1903

"SAM MARELLI WAS A MODEST HERO

Yesterday morning the Italian colony of the city followed to his last resting place one of their countrymen, who in his capacity as a small merchant, will be missed by many people. "Sam" Marelli for twenty-two years was a peanut vendor in Rockford. He came to America unable to speak the language of his adopted country, and in the time he lived here, made sufficient money to care for his wife and ten children and leave them a home and a small competency.

He established a name for integrity and a deserved reputation for charity. He was easily the most highly esteemed of the members of Rockford's "Little Italy." Those who were in trouble, those who were overtaken by financial disaster or were improvident, went to "Sam" who never turned a deaf ear to their pleadings. He gave away what to him were considerable sums. He did so without thought of reward, for, in his humble station, political reward was never to be considered.

To his patrons he was ever affable, ever complacent and ready to serve. No amount of rivalry disturbed him nor changed the even tenor of his way. He was an example of a man who chose to get much out of little, to build a competency from the odd change which in many cases was tossed to him in return for his uniform civility and good temper, as much for the peanuts he sold. If he had some faults they were those which came from his genial nature being imposed upon by thoughtless compassions and are not to be weighed against the steady trend of his overshadowing virtues.

His life discloses what success may be wrought even in the humblest walks of life. It also shows that virtue lingers in the lap of small opportunities and shines resplendently in the clod as well as in the diadem. "Sam" Marelli in a modest way was a hero."

My great grandfather Sam was a hero in my eyes too and I am extremely proud of my humble beginnings and my heritage.

His widow Teresa sold the peanut stand to Charles Corati on 24 Jul 1903 and Sam's legacy lived on.

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