

The Luciano Palmeri Family
circa 1932
Luciano Palmeri, Rosalia Cannova, and their children.



Standing (L to R): Anthony Joseph “Tony”, Samuel Peter “Sam”, Frances, Rose, Joachim Joseph “Jack”, John Joseph “Joe”
Seated (L to R): Benedict James “Benny”, Luciano, Rosalia, Peter Francis “Pete”.

The second photo was taken in July of 2013 at a family reunion in Rockford. About 80 descendants of Luciano Palmeri and Rosalia Cannova attended. Many of the younger generation were thrilled to meet their cousins and learn about their large extended family.

Luciano Palmeri and Rosalia Cannova were married in their village of Roccamena, Sicily in October of 1905 and made their crossing in December of the same year. He was fond of saying that their journey to America was their honeymoon. Both of them were educated - having attended University in Palermo.

Upon their passage through the Port of New York, Ellis Island, they boarded a train and traveled to Rockford, IL. After their daughter Frances was born, they moved to Gretna, LA. where they had distant relatives. Their son Tony was born there in 1910, but they did not remain long. They were back in Rockford in less than two years. Louisiana, and the New Orleans area in particular, was not a very hospitable place for Southern Italians in the early 1900s.

Their first home in Rockford was on Grant St. Later, they lived on Kent St. where they raised their eight children. They remained there for most of their lives. Times were hard and once they were out of grade school, most of the children had to work. The younger ones, however, were able to go to high school. Luciano was the secretary of an Italian American social club. When he felt it was time to resign, they asked him to stay on because of his exquisite handwriting.

All six of their sons served their country proudly during World War II. Pete was a machinist mate with the Seabees and served on Guadalcanal helping keep Henderson Field operational. His older brother Joe was also a Seabee, he was stationed in England. The youngest, Ben, was a deck officer aboard a US Navy Destroyer and fought in every major naval battle in the Pacific. He survived having his boat blown out from under him.

Frances, the eldest, was a seamstress for Shanhouse. She married Fred Gebbia, who was

from her parents' hometown of Roccamena. He had arrived with his mother, an older brother and three sisters in 1914. After a short stay in Brooklyn, they moved to Rockford in early 1915. Frances' sister Rose was a doctor's receptionist. She married Roy Rosella and they raised their family in Colorado. Most of their descendants are still in the Denver area.

Luciano and Rosalia's sons had widely varied but successful careers in Rockford. Tony was a shoe repairman who opened his own shop on W. State St.. Jack was a shipping supervisor at Eclipse. Joe was a machinist. Sam was a "self-made man" who worked at Zuck & Eaton (a small pharmaceutical supply house) on Wyman St. and ended up as sole owner. Pete was an electrician for Barber-Coleman and later started his own electrical repair service which he later expanded to include HVAC. The youngest, Ben, worked for J.I. Case. During a prolonged strike, he left them and joined the Rockford Police Department. There he worked his way up and earned the rank of Captain. For 22 years, he led the Rockford detective squad ... our very own "Barney Miller". Two of this sons, and at least one of his nephews, also had their own careers in law enforcement. For many years the Palmeri family reunion was held at the old police range out by the airport.

Rockford provided the solid working environment and strong sense of community that allowed the Palmeri family to not just survive, but to thrive. While most of their descendants remained in Northern Illinois or Southern Wisconsin, some moved to the Denver area where they can still be found. Yet many still come "home" to Rockford to visit family.

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