

## **A Father-in-Law's Gift**

by

Glenn J. Beech

October 4, 2001

This story begins four years ago as a search for a meaningful birthday gift for my father-in-law Tony. He was a very giving and vivacious man who loved his family and life itself! I can remember how proud he was of his heritage. His voice still resonates in my ears, "There is nothing better than being Italian." The problem I encountered was, what do you get a man who needs nothing but you want to give a meaningful gift to demonstrate your appreciation of him? After much reflection I remembered he was impressed with a project on which I was working, my family tree. I had been successful in retrieving information on my relatives from here in Pittsburgh as well as those from the Cadore region of Italy. Knowing Tony still had sisters and cousins in the Pittsburgh area, I began to telephone all of the members of the Picciafuoco and Mastromonaco families in the local telephone directory. I was attempting to gain as much information on Tony's family in Pittsburgh, in Ancona, and anywhere else it would lead. The telephone conversations were not easy because although the people, with whom I spoke, knew Tony they did not know me. Some of the conversations were very abrupt but most were very congenial and led me to other family members who were able to provide a wealth of information. My wife Marion was excited about the project I had started. I would inform her of each telephone conversation and as I would bring up names from her past it would trigger many pleasant memories of Christmas gatherings at her grandfather Attilio's house. Of course there were many new names she did not recognize and the hope was we would be able to have a family gathering so she could learn more about them.

It was three weeks before Tony's 68<sup>th</sup> birthday; the project was going well and was nearing completion. I was excited, thinking about the look on his face when he would see his family tree unfold in front of him! Then in the middle of the night the telephone rang with the news that Tony was being rushed to the hospital. The family member told Marion to get to the emergency room as soon as possible because the situation did not look good. A few hours later Marion called with the distressing news. Tony died a mere two weeks before his birthday. Over the next several days those individuals with whom I had recently spoken, on the telephone, I was now meeting face to face. The family had gathered to visit with Tony, not to celebrate but to mourn. Instead of presenting him with the gift of a family tree I was asked to eulogize my father-in-law. This was certainly not the gift I wanted to present him!

After the funeral the family tree project was placed in my desk. The thought of resuming the project left me feeling sad and wondering what information he would have divulged. Would he answer the rumors on whether his father Attilio was involved with the Italian resistance and a bombing at a railway station in Bologna, during the war? Was this why Nonno Attilio departed Italy and arrived in the United States? These were conversations and answers to questions I, and other members of the family, would never know.

I continued to work on and make additions to my family tree. I would write to cousins in Italy and gain new information, adding new family members who were married or born into the family, and unfortunately updating the *vecchini* who departed. Then one day I thought my son and daughter deserve to know as much about their mother's side of the family as much as they know of their father's side. I also thought Marion and her five sisters should have the opportunity to know what I learned about their family. After thirteen months of dormancy I pulled Tony's gift from the drawer and renewed my search. But this time I had the idea of using the Internet as a tool. From the information I had previously gathered I knew Tony's father, Attilio, had been born in or around the city of Ancona. He had been the only one from his family to emigrate from Italy leaving behind four siblings. I decided to use the new technology to locate any Picciafuocos living in Ancona. In the flash of a computer screen 35 names and addresses of Picciafuocos appeared before me. I composed a letter, which included a computer generated photograph of Nonno Attilio and Nonna Angeline, to each individual asking if his name or the names of any of his siblings were familiar to them. I requested that if any of the names were familiar, if they would be willing to share information regarding the family in Italy. I did not tell my wife Marion of this new project because if I had no responses to my inquiry there would be no great disappointments. Additionally, I did not want her telling me I had misspelled her maiden name! In prior conversations with Tony I remember him telling me the family name was actually Picciafuoco not what the officials of Ellis Island had recorded and they now used, Picciafoco.

As the weeks passed I anxiously awaited any response from either electronic mail (e-mail) or from the postman depositing, in the mailbox, the telltale red, white and green envelope, signifying a letter from Italy. But nothing arrived. About three weeks later I received an e-mail from a young man indicating he received my letter but was sad to report that, although his last name was Picciafuoco he and his father could not establish a link to the family here in the United States. Several days passed and I received an e-mail from another young man indicating, the names were not familiar to him but he knew another family, by the name Picciafuoco, who lived in Falconara, outside Ancona, who may be distant relatives. He stated he would be in contact with them to see if there was a connection. A letter even arrived from the Sindaco of the Comune di Ancona, indicating citizens were making inquiries on my behalf and offering his assistance. After several unsuccessful responses an e-mail arrived from a gentleman by the name of Pierpaolo Trillini. Pierpaolo stated his mother, Sylvana, was the daughter of Enrico Picciafuoco whose brother, Attilio, went to America in 1918, settling in Pittsburgh. He continued that Attilio kept in contact with the family until the late 1960's, at which time communications stopped. It appeared I now had a direct link between the families. I notified my wife and told her she still had blood relatives in Italy and they were hoping communications could be re-established.

Over the next several months Pierpaolo and I continued to correspond via e-mail exchanging greetings and photographs. I indicated I was planning to make a trip to Italy to visit my relatives in the Cadore region and I was hoping Marion and I would be able to visit the family in Ancona. Needless to say the response was positive and the next question was, "When are you arriving?" Marion and I began to make plans to tour Italy

but as the time grew closer she had reservations and decided because of her fear of flying and not wanting to leave our younger children for an extended period of time she would not be making the trip. But her sister Angela decided this would be a great opportunity for her and her husband, Andy, to go to Italy for the first time. Since I had visited Italy three times before and was the only one of the three who could read, write and speak Italian Angel and Andy thought I would be an experienced travel guide. I e-mailed Pierpaolo to state if the family's invitation was still open an entourage would be arriving in Italy at the end of May.

Preparations were made, the dates arranged and finally the day came when we met in Philadelphia to begin our adventure to Italy to meet long lost relatives. Ironically, the day we departed would have been Tony's seventy-first birthday! Upon our arrival, at the airport, we were greeted not only by Pierpaolo and his mother and father, Silvana and Franco, but also by Silvana's sister, Gabriella and her husband Franco! It was a wonderful reception and an overwhelming experience. We were transported to our hotel, given a brief tour of Rome and then whisked off to the Roman suburbs for a fantastic luncheon at the home of Gabriella and Carlo. The afternoon was spent sharing stories, looking at photographs and making a family connection that had not existed for over thirty years. Silvana showed us the many letters Zio Attilio had sent to her father, the letters seeing the light of day after so many years. She also told us of the many packages he sent to the family, after the war. These packages contained sugar, coffee, flour and articles of clothing and they explained how these items helped the family so much during a time of need. It was truly an emotional experience for all of us. Over the next several days it was a time to get acquainted and being taken on personally guided tours of Rome. After several days in Rome it was off to Ancona to visit more relatives. Gabi and Silvana indicated the family in Ancona were anxiously awaiting our arrival and were looking forward to meet us. Upon our arrival in Ancona it was reception I will never forget. Family members from the age of four to ninety four were there to greet us on our arrival at cousin Mariella's house. The dinner that night was wonderful! To paraphrase Tony, "There is nothing better than Italian food!" The reception from family was overwhelming warm, gracious and lively! We shared stories, sang Italian songs and viewed family photographs. They wanted to know about life in America, the family in America, what Zio Attilio did for a living, why he went to Florida during the winter and a hundred other questions. At the same time we had very similar questions about them and the family in Italy. In almost every conversation, with the elderly cousins, we heard how their parents received letters from Zio Attilio, which would contain photographs or money but they all remembered and spoke of those packages after the war. Over the next several days our time was filled with tours of the city of Ancona and to Loreto, Sirolo, Monte Cornero, Monte Siculo and other lovely towns in the beautiful region of the Marche. But the most touching time was when we went to the childhood home of Attilio in Sappanico and had a family dinner in the house in which he grew up. The family had gathered to have a wonderful dinner for us but more importantly there were cousins who attended this dinner who had not seen each other in years. We, from America, had truly brought the family together. The next day we were taken to the small cemetery on the top of the hill to pay our respects to the patriarchs of the family Bisnonno Enrico and Bisnonna Emilia and many other family members who were laid to rest. Those five days in Ancona were some of the most emotionally charged days I have experienced, filled with tears, laughter, warm

embraces, songs, and the feeling of belonging and having re-established a long lost connection to family. The time for departure was also emotionally charged knowing that although the desire to return is strong, during the time of absence, some of the family members may not be there upon our return.

On my return to the United States I recounted the wonderful experiences I had and distributed the many gifts, given by the family, to my wife and other members of her family. Several days after my arrival was Father's Day. Our family made the trip to the cemetery to plant flowers and to pay respects to my father-in-law, Tony, and his father, Attilio, who are laid to rest next to each other. While at the graveside I expressed my gratitude to both of these men. Although, I initially intended to give a gift to Tony, while standing at the gravesite, I realized it was he who had given a gift to us, those who made the journey to Ancona. It was the gift of family and the re-establishment of family ties!