

Gino's Story

by Gino Corte
As told to Tina Anderson
of Poggioreale in America
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My mother's name was Nunzia Falsone, my dad was Francesco (Frank) or Ciccio, Corte, both born in Poggioreale. They were married in 1937 in Poggioreale and they had 3 sons. The oldest son was Giuseppe (Joe) born in 1941, then me, Giovanni (Gino) born in 1947, and my younger brother Pietro (Peter) born in 1951.

My parents had a store in Poggioreale on Corso Umberto Primo, the first street in Poggioreale when you enter where the gates are today. My family was actually doing fine; we had a family grocery store, but people simply couldn't pay their bills because of hard times. Many of our customers were farmers who worked only certain times of the year, and they would promise to pay after the harvest. As a result, the store wasn't making much profit.

When I worked at my parents' grocery store in Poggioreale when my father was gone, I was too short to see over the counter to see people come in the store, so I stood on a stool with my apron on. Customers would come in, for example, to buy two scoops of tomato paste; I would put it in aluminum foil for them along with the other items they needed for that day. People came to the grocery store every day for what they needed. The store was very much a general store. We sold a little bit of everything for cooking and cleaning. We sold wedding merchandise like the almond confetti, and even the wedding cookies.

The store was on Corso Umberto Primo where all the butchers were, the school, the pharmacy, and us. Corso Umberto was the main street that started where the gates are today. Things were so different from what we know today! The butchers hung their meat on large hooks outside of the shop with no refrigeration; they would hope to sell it all before the end of the day. One butcher, Signor Pace, would give me 2 steaks, no more than 10 ounces each. Nobody paid cash, the amount owed was written in a book, credit only. The only store that required cash was the pharmacist, or sometimes he would take grain or eggs. We would help our customers, we would write in the books what they owed, and sometimes we would loan them money for the pharmacist. It was a simple life, but no **one** worried much because they had what they needed for the day.

During that period of time, the storeowners suffered financially the most because they had to pay cash for their goods when the sellers from Alcamo, or Palermo, would come to deliver pasta, sugar, olive oil and other things. These men selling their goods would gather on Thursdays to show what they had to sell to the people of the town. The peddlers would call out what they had to offer! I remember one man who sold sugar and other things. We gave him a nickname and would ask him, “ Hey, CuPeppe, what do you have today?” Even today, peddlers come to Poggioreale, now in trucks with microphones, on Thursdays to sell their items.

There was another grocery store that was in the Piazza owned by Giuseppe Messina; he also had gas pumps there for the automobiles to fill their tanks. I remember walking to the post office right next to city hall, about 3 or 4 blocks. There were only 2 people working there, the mailman and a helper. Across the street there were 2 people working in the city hall. I would go there once a week for six years to see if my dad had sent a letter. Of course, the mailman would go by horse and wagon to get the mail in nearby Salaparuta where the train stopped. I would take a little walk down Corso Umberto Primo, at that time there were 3000 people in Poggioreale, and only 2 people worked in the post office and only 2 people worked in city hall! Today the new town of Poggioreale has only 900 people living there, but there are many people working in the city hall!

Church was very important to the people of Poggioreale. I went mostly to St Antonio church because it was close to my house. The Madrice, the mother church, was at the top of the stairs that started at the piazza. There weddings and larger events were held; the older churches were no longer used. We all dressed up for church in our white pants, white dresses, then we would come home for a meal. The priest there was Padre Corte during my time there. I also remember having fun as a boy in the streets of Poggioreale where I would play with my friends on the steps to the church. Also, there would be exciting horse races right down the main street of Corso Umberto Primo! People would come out on their balconies to watch the races ,or they would stand on the narrow sidewalks which were roped off from the street so no one would be injured by the racing horses. After the races we would go to the bars for gelato, granita or pastry sweets.

And so, in 1955 my dad decided to visit his brother Pietro in Vicksburg, Mississippi to see about making money in America. His plan was to return to Sicily after he worked and earned a good living. My Uncle Pietro had left Poggioreale when he was in his 30s and never returned to Sicily. Somehow my uncle settled in Vicksburg, I don't know the story of how or why he chose Vicksburg. Knowing what I do today, I would have expected that he would have gone to New York, New Orleans or Texas, not Vicksburg since he was the only

Italian there at the time. He was a barber and raised his family in Mississippi; he is buried in Vicksburg. My dad went to visit and took his oldest son, Giuseppe, with him to see about the possibility of work and to see if life was better in America. My father and brother stayed in Vicksburg about a year, but he found that he hated the life there. My dad was a shoemaker and a barber; my uncle was also a barber. They were the only Italians in Vicksburg. My dad said he felt there was nothing there for him. Uncle Pietro, however, stayed for the rest of his life. He raised his kids to become Americanized. He became a citizen, and he also raised his children to speak English. When I talk to my nieces and nephews today, they love to hear about Poggioreale, but we talk only in English.

Dad then called his compare, Mariano Cangelosi, who was living in New Orleans: he was a barber, too. He encouraged my father to come there and assured him that there was a job for him. And so my father worked in New Orleans for about two years. Some of his Chiappetta and Salvato paisani, and other cousins, had moved to Kansas City, Missouri to make their lives there. By that time my brother Joe had turned 21 and did not want to go back to Sicily, so my father and brother decided to become America citizens. They made arrangements for my mother, my younger brother and me to come to Kansas City. By then we had been a separated from 1955 to 1961. I was almost 13 years old when we boarded the ship in Palermo in 1961. It sailed to New York; my poor mother was sick for the entire 15 day journey. I remember that the first I saw of America was the Statue of Liberty. We three survived the trip, and my dad came from Kansas City to New York by train to pick us up. We had a cousin in Brooklyn, NY named Giacomo Falsone, and we stayed with him for a few days. My dad was very happy to see us, and we traveled by train together to Kansas City, Missouri to start our life as a complete family. It was January when we arrived in Kansas City and I remember getting off the train and being greeted by 12 inches of snow and freezing cold! I had never seen snow before and I wondered what kind of place my father had brought us to!

Having left home in Sicily for America when I was only 13, I still remember Poggioreale very well. I remember all my friends in school. Grade school in Sicily, back in those days, was very different than in America. Grade school there is like 8-9th grade here in America. The schools didn't waste any time there; you learned history, science, and mathematics. No time was spent on athletics or extra curricular activities as in America. It was a very intense education, and the young Italians became very smart very quickly; they studied hard. We all attended 2-3 years of agriculture school. I wasn't really interested in farming work, but I attended just to get out of the house! I also helped my mother at the grocery store.

The earthquake of 1968 occurred after my family left Poggioreale. Our friends and relatives were moved to barracks that were set up by the Italian government; they had a kitchen, a place to sleep. It was tough to live there, and yet people were all smiling, eating well. The government took care of them for 10 years, no gas bills, no water bills, no light bill, nothing like that. They were able to survive, save a few dollars, keep working at their jobs, and some walked the streets like they always did. Somehow the whole family survived and even the kids helped out. Finally, the government came back to the project and starting building new houses, one for every family, even my father who was living in America but still owned a house in old Poggioreale, got a new house from the government. It cost the government a lot of money, and the government even borrowed money from the United States. During the 10 years that it took to build the new town, there was a lot of work for everyone. Some even improved their situation and made a lot of money during this time. There was a lot of work for architects in the town because of all the homes and businesses being built. Building material businesses also profited greatly and several of these businesses opened in Poggioreale due to the building boom. However, many Poggiorealesi became disheartened at the length of time it was taking to build the new town and homes, and many immigrated to Australia, Some even moved to Germany for work there. The population of Poggioreale continued to decline as it does to this day.

I miss Poggioreale, and if I didn't have a daughter and grandkids here, I would return home for the fresh air and good life in Sicily.