

**The Saga of Michele (Michael) Chiappetta**  
**by His Daughter, Annette Chiappetta Rovello**  
**April, 2021**

My father was Michele Chiappetta (Michael). He was born in Poggioreale in March 1922, the eldest son of Giuseppe Chiappetta and Antonia Vella.

Historical events play a large part in my father's immigration story. So here's a bit of historical context...

My grandfather Giuseppe was one of 10 children - 9 boys and 1 girl! Except for my nonno, ALL came to the US in the early 20th century after the untimely death of their father at the age of 42. My nonno stayed in Poggioreale to take care of the lands and his mother, Carmela Zinnanti. My nonno's siblings experienced many difficult years in America from 1910 - 1940s. But ultimately they all managed to be pillars of the community in both Kansas City and St. Louis, Missouri.

At that time in American history, many large cities were controlled by, what political scientists call, political machines. These political machines are known for their cronyism and unjust practices. In Kansas City, Missouri we had the [Pendergast Machine](#).

Thomas Pendergast and my great-uncle, Vincenzo Chiappetta, were friends and collaborators. There was someone else who was friends with them...the future President, Harry S Truman! The Pendergast Organization helped launch the political career of Harry Truman.

Harry Truman would return to the KC area after his presidential term. He was a regular figure in the community and it was not uncommon to see him on walks around town.

So what does Truman have to do with my dad's immigration story? Please continue reading.

My father, Michele (Michael) and his father were working in the fields of "Kautali lu granne" in Sicily when warplanes flew overhead. My grandfather, a veteran himself, recognized the signs of impending war. He told my dad, "Figghiu me, mi scantu che la guerra ti vene a trovare fra pocu. Speriamu a lu Signore che nun ti succede." (Son, I am afraid that war will come to find you soon. Let's hope that the Lord doesn't allow that to happen to you.") He was absolutely correct to be concerned as the shadows of the World War began to spread across Europe.

By the age of 17, my father Michele was drafted into Mussolini's army and was sent to Orvieto, Italy for training (c. 1938/1939)

While waiting for his unit to be assigned, he happened across a doctor from Gibellina...a town close enough to be a "paesano". It was a relief to see a familiar face, my dad once told me. The doctor told my dad that he had heard that his unit was going to be sent to the Russian front! (c. 1940/1941) This was the worst news! By then everyone knew that the casualty rate at the Russian front was horrifying. The distance, the extreme weather, and lack of supplies meant either freezing, starving or being a target with no ammunition.

The "paesano" doctor and my dad hatched a plan. The doctor snuck some type of plant to my dad and told him to rub it all over his skin before his unit set out. The plant would give him a rash and therefore he would be unable to be sent to the Russian front. My dad did as was advised. He was sent to the infirmary. After a week, he was attached to a new unit and was sent to the North African front, in Tunisia near Susa.

While in North Africa, he saw major action. He was wounded and was later captured by the British (c. 1942/1943) He was held in a makeshift camp as a prisoner where he contracted malaria. For 22 months he was forced to do manual labor in the hot African sun and sleep on a thin blanket in cold desert nights. He used to tell me stories of how they were treated and of the sometimes violent struggles against their captors; of their lack of food; and being made to "wash" their clothes in gasoline to kill the lice and sand fleas and of having to wear those same gasoline-sodden uniforms which would chafe and irritate their skin.

In 1945 when WW 2 ended in Europe, my dad was released from the camp. With Italy in shambles, he had to make his own way back to Poggioreale. By now he was 23 years old. He'd lost much of his youth, was suffering from PTSD and he realized that options for establishing his future were limited.

Like so many others after the War, he was unsettled & dour and only thought of a young lady he had fallen in love with during his basic training in Orvieto. Her name was Rafaella. Her father owned a grocery store. With no sons of his own, he promised to give my father the store upon his marriage to Rafaella after the war.

But this love story would never materialize. Upon his return to Poggioreale, my nonna Antonia realized he was going to move north to Orvieto and marry Rafaella! My nonna was beside herself! Her first-born had returned to her safely after the war only to lose him again !!! In those days, northern Italy may well have been like going to the moon. It was far away and Northerners were different. Nonna felt she was going to lose him for good.

So she began to intercept Rafaella's letters hoping that he would forget about her and remain in Poggioreale. My dad was initially hurt and confused. Why did she stop responding to his letters? When my dad realized what my nonna had been doing, he became furious.

Out of anger, my dad wrote to his uncles in Kansas City, Missouri expressing an interest in going to America. My great-uncle, Vincenzo called up his ol' friend - Harry Truman! Former President Truman made a few phone calls. My father's paperwork and entry in the US were expedited ASAP.

He arrived in Kansas City, Missouri in 1950. Initially he worked for his uncle and a toy factory but soon decided he wanted more. He attended English classes at a local church where he met my mother. My mother was a recent arrival from Camporeale, Sicily. Despite my dad's plan to return to Poggioreale, he and my mom married in 1955 and settled in Kansas City.

My dad went on to work for Washington National Insurance Company as a staff manager for more than 25 years. He was very successful and was often asked to be the keynote speaker at annual conventions. He turned them down. He was too humble. He was a hard worker who sought to provide the best for us. He worked 6 days a week and did paperwork on Sundays.

After an absence of about 10 years from Poggioreale, we returned regularly. Through his memories and our trips to Poggioreale to visit the family (all of his siblings remained there), he instilled in me a love for Poggioreale - its history and traditions. The time I spent there while growing up are some of the most precious memories I have. In fact, as I sit here writing this, above my desk hangs a map of "lu paisi vecchiu" (old Poggioreale) and framed bronze crest of the city given to my father by then-mayor Giovanni Maniscalco.

My father always loved "lu paisi" Poggioreale and the lands nearby where he hunted and hung out with friends in his youth. Once on a trip to Poggio, I collected some dirt in a small box. When he passed away in 2004, I emptied the dirt at his feet. Sending him off with a bit of Poggioreale was the least I could do.

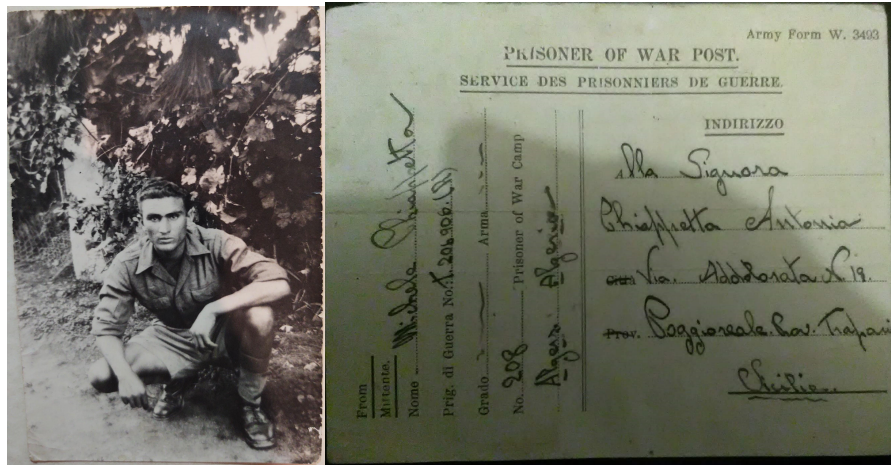
Michael Chiappetta - with his hunting dog and rifle c. 1935



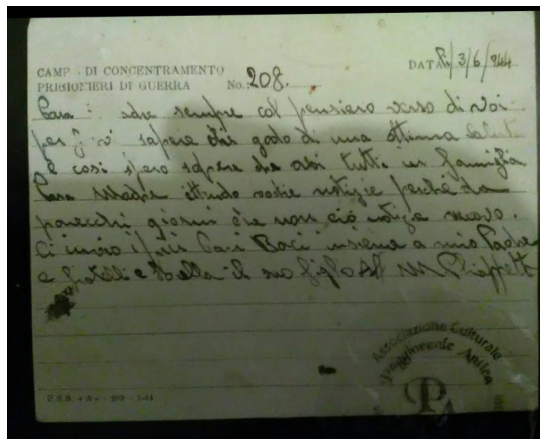
Michael Chiappetta when drafted into army c. 1939



Michael Chiappetta in North Africa WW2 c. 1943



Letter written while Prisoner of War 1944



Michael Chiappetta in Kansas City, Mo c. 1954



Michael Chiappetta c. 2000

