



The Story of Giuseppe Ippolito

Editor's Note:

This moving story and ancestor tribute was submitted by Robbie Morrison of Houston, TX for the purpose of sharing her Great Grandfather's story with the many descendants of Poggioreale because he was one of the original immigrants who bravely took a chance on creating a new life in America. Robbie has been studying her family's history, the history of Poggioreale, and reading about Sicily for many years. She was a generous inspiration to me early in my own family search efforts. I know she has been an inspiration and friend to many. - Tina Anderson, February 2021



The Ippolito Family of Poggioreale

My maternal Great Grandfather was Giuseppe Ippolito. He was born in Poggioreale, Sicily in 1865, the son of Nicolo and Antonina Rizzuta Ippolito



He left Poggioreale in the Fall of 1882 when he was 17 years old, leaving behind his his parents and friends. Giuseppe sailed out of Palermo with a sister and brother-in-law, Antonina and Giocchino Strangi and their infant son. They sailed to America aboard the Scottish steamship S.S. Scandinavia and landed in New Orleans, Louisiana on November 6, 1882.

The Ippolitos and Strangis spent more than 30 years in Louisiana, working in the sugar cane fields south of New Orleans. Giuseppe married Filippa Salvato from Poggioreale, and together they had five children. Filippa died in childbirth sometime in 1899, and in 1901 Giuseppe married Mary Agatha (Tina) Spitale from Alia, Sicily.



In 1913, Giuseppe and Tina brought their family to Central Texas, joining the growing Italian community of Highbank in an area known as the Brazos River Bottom. When Giuseppe arrived in Texas, he went by the name George Polito, a name he acquired when he was in Louisiana. George and Tina Polito lived peacefully on their 50-acre farm in Highbank for almost 50 years and were well respected members of the community. Giuseppe died in 1959, and Tina followed him in death a few years later.

Pictured above is my great grandfather, Giuseppe Ippolito, and below him is a picture of my grandparents, Nicolo and Dorothea Aloisio Ippolito. The picture to the right is my Ippolito cousins who still live in Poggioreale and who welcomed me into their home on one of my visits to Poggioreale.



Giuseppe's oldest son was Nicolo Ippolito, my beloved grandfather. He married Dorothea Aloisio, the daughter of Giuseppe and Lougia Loria Aloisio from Poggioreale. They had four children, and their oldest daughter was my mother, Filippa. My grandparents and great grandparents were wonderful, loving, hard-working people. The family was large, fun-loving and devoted to each other. The Sicilians from the *Old Country* carried on the Sicilian traditions which they brought with them when they crossed the Atlantic, and their children did so as well. They are all gone now and I miss them every day.

It took me years of research before I discovered my great grandfather's family name, the names of his parents, and the story of his immigration to America. I would put the puzzle of his life together one piece at a time, over a time span of more than 35 years. The information in this narrative is but a small portion of the knowledge I've acquired over the years about my great grandfather's journey, the places he lived, and the culture of his people.

I discovered the beautiful island of Sicily for the first time in 1992 on a trip to Italy with my husband. I knew little about the town other than it was a small dot on the map of Sicily. I only knew what my Grandpa Nick had told me, that his father was born in the town of Poggioreale, Sicily and that he had left home to come to America when he was 17 years old.

After visiting Florence, Rome and other places in Italy, we flew from Naples into Palermo. When we inquired about Poggioreale, everyone seemed to know about the town as it had become one of the celebrated "ghost towns" of Sicily. We had no trouble finding a cab driver who would take us there and the next morning began our drive to Poggioreale with a delightful Sicilian named Carmelo. He drove on the highway for a number of miles, then left the highway and continued on a bumpy road that took us through the rolling hills of the Belice Valley. The hills were lush with spring grasses and vineyards that were just budding out. Fields of Fava beans started at the road and went high up onto the sides of the hills. At one point, we had to stop as a shepherd on horseback led his sheep across the road. It took us about 45 minutes to reach Poggioreale. At the time, the bell tower of the Matrice was still standing and we saw it long before we drove up the winding road that took us into the central piazza of Old Poggioreale.

As the car came to a stop in a large piazza, what I saw before me took my breath away. It had been a dream of mine since I first found out about my great grandfather's birthplace that one day I would visit it. And here I was in the middle of the town where he lived. It was an emotional experience that is difficult to explain, much less write down on paper. As I write this story, the feelings return and my eyes have begun to water. I was in the place of my ancestors, the people who gave me my heritage, and it was moving. A sign at the corner of one of the buildings in the cobblestoned plaza said "Piazza Elimo." I found out later that I had been standing in the main gathering place for the people of Poggioreale, and I knew that my great grandfather had most likely played in this place as a child.

I got out of the car and stood still for a few minutes, turning around and looking in all directions, my eyes taking in the old stone houses that seemed to hug each other side by side, and the narrow streets that led from the Piazza. Many of the streets were now filled with stones and rubble that had spilled down during the 1968 earthquake that rocked the valley and left Poggioreale uninhabitable. We were able to walk through some of the streets and the interiors of many houses were clearly visible through the rubble. I could see that many of them were decorated with painted ceilings and murals and had stone columns in their rooms and stairs leading up to a second floor. Intricate iron or metal balconies stubbornly clung to the upper windows facing the streets.

At one end of the piazza, an enormous set of stone steps led up to the remains of the church and bell tower. An arch at the top of the stairs must have been part of the entryway of the church, and it clung fast across the opening. The old bell tower stood to the left of the arched opening, defying its age and the elements that had pelted it for more than 300 years. I climbed up the old steps, taking note that the middle of each step was worn away with age and the shuffling of thousands of feet over the years. As I turned around to look out across the Old Town, a soft breeze blew across the valley and I felt the tug of my ancestors whispering in my ear.

It is this first memory of Old Poggioreale that has remained in my heart since I first laid eyes on it. From what others have shared with me, their first encounter with the Old Town affected them as deeply and emotionally as it affected me. "How could they leave this beautiful place, we ask?" But when we see the beauty of Sicily today, we are not seeing it through the eyes of those who lived there during the turmoil of the 1800s. We cannot know the hardships they had

faced for centuries, and the difficult decisions they made in deciding to leave their homes for places unknown.

I remember reading a quote from someone who lived in Sicily and left for America during the mass migrations that began in the mid 1800s. In answer to the question “why did you leave, it is such a beautiful place,” he said simply, “ah, but you saw it with a full stomach.”

Over the years of my research, I have read many books about Italy and the mass migrations out of southern Italy that occurred between 1880 and 1920. These migrations took place following years of conquests, foreign rulers, wars, infighting, high taxes and a myriad of other problems that continued the starving people of southern Italy and Sicily. This mass migration is called by many historians as one of the greatest mass movements of a people from a single country.

My great grandfather made the courageous decision to leave the only home he had ever known, and it is possible he had never traveled beyond its borders. It took courage and tenacity to make that decision, and I applaud him and his fellow countrymen who left home to find a better life for themselves and their families. Their new country served them well.

My great grandfather is my hero, and I owe my heritage to him and to all the brave Sicilians who crossed the Atlantic during those tumultuous years. Their heritage can still be seen in all the Little Italy's across the country, in the Italian American Associations, the churches, the Heritage Societies, and the children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of these brave and resourceful Italians.

Robbie Morrison
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