

## DAYS WITHOUT LIGHT

The Great War caused monumental changes in the world economy, culture and land boundaries, but the aftermath of the war effected many individuals to a new way of living.

Farm boys from the combatants got to see the great metropolis of the world, the towns they only read or heard of, Rome, Paris, London, Naples, Frenchmen, Italian, Germans and English boys. They were boys 18, 19 and 20 year-olders, who were pushed to an alien way of life. The war years penetrated the young minds and made these jewels of their respective countries dissenters and killers. War was never glamorous but these boys were passionate and patriotic with their role in protecting their individual country.

One of these men in the Italian Army was my father, Guglielmo Santucci, an insignificant private, foot soldier in the Italian infantry, after three years in the front lines being wounded, recovered, and then sent back to the front line fighting, was returning to his home village. Greeted by his family was a great thrill, but no time to rejoice longer than one week. Farm work takes no days off. The thrill of being home only lasted one summer. He had been all over northern Italy, visited the big cities of Rome, Naples, Milan and the farm work of Abruzzo seemed so mundane. The world for him had expanded beyond the three little villages in the Province of Aquila.

He had seen advertisements for a boat trip to America, where the streets were paved in gold, jobs for all and money to be made. How could an Italian goat herder resist these opportunities? With a small amount of money and a so-called leather suitcase, he embarked on the Ship Duke of Abruzzo with a friend, many days on the ship, maybe two weeks at sea, left Italy and Naples, never to return again. He arrived at Ellis Island in the AM, eager to see the streets of gold. When he finally left Ellis Island, he did not see the streets of gold, but dirty cobble stone paved roads. Men were there to meet him and others and wanted them to sign a contract to go to Wyoming to work in the coal mines. Wanted no part of that, he wanted outside work.

Plans had been made in advance for him to go to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and then to Slickville, Pennsylvania, all by train. He had an aunt who had a boarding house where he was to stay. He had no idea that the job waiting for him was in a coal mine. Here was a farm boy in his 20's who knew nothing about mining, but in his own words, "I have to eat".

He was a short man of 5 feet 4 inches 130 pounds with a slight build. His disposition was somewhat aggressive, but with no command of the English language, he had to restrain his emotions. He was a flirtatious person and had no reservation encountering women, his new environment was not friendly to him. He was now a coal miner and with this life changing

occupation, he also changed. Not much socialization in a coal mine, a farm boy who worked under the sun and slept under the stars, now going into a cave to work.

Gone were the hills of Abruzzo where he would chase the goats and till the land. He now would be up from sun up to sun down. Also his musical talents were no longer an escape. The sunlight was no longer a given. He would enter the mine at 5AM, the sun was still sleeping and work for 10 to 12 hours digging with a short pick, sometimes on his knees, but most of the time stooping over. The only light was from his carbide lamp that was a gas producing flame. The air in the mine was damp and dank. It appeared as if all the miners were vying for the air. The coal dust was damp and dirty. When the miners finally walked out of the mine, they were as dirty as the road on which they walked back to the boarding house. Cold or warm days meant nothing now. The outside water pump had a barrel next to it. This is where they would wash before entering the house. The smell of food cooking was the delight of the day. Mostly macaroni with tomato sauce and little meat, bread was home baked. By the time wash up time and dinner were over it was late and dark. At times there was card playing for a short time. Most of the residents were of Italian descent and the card games were scopa, briscola, or tressette.

The mine straw bosses were very demanding of the coal miners. The owners of the mines were affluent men and had little contact with the miners. They had a culture of their own and formed a band from the miners, Guglielmo Santucci had learned to play a coronet and was asked to play in the band that entertained the families of the owners and other owners. These concerts were in the evening and the miners band would play late in the night. The miners still had to get up and work the next day. After a short period of time, my dad told the bosses he could not continue work all day and play some nights and then up early and back in the forsaken cave that made big money for some, but for the miners, it was like a sentence of imprisonment.

His complaint was accepted, he was given a job outside of the mine counting the full cars that came out. He started later in the AM and no back-breaking digging. Evidently he must have been a pretty talented coronet player to make this change. The company had no unions to contend with during the early 1920's. Prior to unions, working conditions were poor and unsafe, but the company made big money. Because of these conditions, the unions were starting to make a play across the country and finally the advance party of the miners' union came to Slickville, papers with information were passed around. The owners naturally fought vigorously to keep the unions out. The local leaders called for a total coal strike. The miners and their families were looking for a way out of the dire with no future life. The strike came and with the strike came the Iron and Coal Police from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. According to my father these men were as mean as he had ever seen. Remember he had been in the Italian

Army in the Great War. The miners were not allowed to congregate in public, only two at a time. At St. Sylvester, a catholic church, the priest told the men that this money they were asking for was from the devil. The company put out information saying that the organizers were communists and socialists and warned the miners that they would be evicted from their company provided housing if they continued the strike. True to their word, on an early rainy day the owner's ruffians began to take out the furniture and threw it out on the roads. Rained all day and the families were stranded in the wet wake-up. The police kept watch over family members and the miners.

A friendly farmer told the miners and their families that his barn was available for shelter. Many took his offer. They had no money, little food, but the farmer accepted whatever they offered. Some of the miners became violent and stole dynamite to bomb the tracks and trucks, very trying times.

As I look back on this history of these tragic times in the mine, it was a God sent event. My father said he was fed up with this life in a hole with no daylight. It was time to move on. He came to South Verona Hill and boarded with another aunt, Mrs. Rinaldi. This devastating strike and aftermath brought him to Verona. His life continued for another 75 years in the sun and open air.

Frank W. Santucci, October 2014