

Dear Nancy and John:

This is being written for the grandchildren, great grandchildren, and great great grandchildren of Rocco and Dorothy Celebrezze.

I know that many of you bear a different surname, yet genetically, part of your being stems from Rocco and Dorothy Celebrezze. I thought you would be interested in learning something of that part of your ancestral make-up inherited from Rocco and Dorothy Celebrezze, who henceforth will be referred to as Grandpa and Grandma.

They were born in the village of Anzi, of the province of Potenza, Italy. (Potenza can be located on a map of Italy somewhere near the "ankle".) The village was a very poor farming community; the terrain was very rocky and hilly, somewhat like southeastern Ohio and northwestern West Virginia.

Since the only school was operated by the local church and charged a tuition, neither of their parents could afford to send the children to school. Although Grandpa and Grandma were not formally educated, they were highly intelligent. As you know, education is a means of broadening the intelligence one is born with.

Grandpa and Grandma had thirteen children, 10 boys (3 of whom died before the age of one year) and three girls.

GRANDPA

Rocco Vincenzo Cilibrizzi (Celebrezze is the English spelling) was born on June 1, 1871. He was one of three children born to Francesco and Rosa Cilibrizzi (pronounced "Chell-e-brit-zee").

In his youth he worked with his father and brother in the fields and farm. The farm was owned by a "Patroni" meaning the land owner. At the age of eighteen he was conscripted into the Italian Army. He served the mandatory three years. Fortunately there was no war during his term of service.

In 1895, at the age of twenty-four, he married. He and Grandma emigrated to our country in 1898. They settled in Cleveland; their first residence was in the old "Hay Market District" which is now the area of the Lorain-Carnegie Bridge. The Hay Market District was the haven for many immigrants of all nationalities. Each ethnic group had its own settlement and usually its own church and stores. In those days, as it still is today in the small communities, the church (Synagogue, Temple or Mosque) was the social center for the community.

Grandpa's first job was as a ditch digger for sewer construction. He was paid 10¢ an hour and he worked a 12 hour day. He was paid at the end of each day. In order to be able to work the next day, he had to give his boss two hours pay (20¢) each day. In addition to having to kick back part of his pay, he was also subjected to much verbal abuse, such as being called guinea, dago, wop, etc. etc. (All new immigrants were subject to this verbal abuse and sometimes much worse. Which just proves that cruel and bigotted persons have been around a long time.)

Regardless of the abuse and hardships he faced, Grandpa knew his family was so much better off in the "new world", and that the opportunities for his children were almost limitless in comparison to what his native land had to offer.

The Depression of 1908 left him without a job. With five children to feed, shelter and clothe, he decided that he should go back to Anzi where he could at least give his family the bare necessities to exist. In 1908 there were no relief programs or welfare in our country. But he was determined to return to our country, after all, his five children were U. S. citizens.

In 1912 he again emigrated to our country, only this time instead of two persons there were eight. The family again settled in Cleveland, this time in a house on Webster Avenue, which was not too far from the old "Hay Market" district.

He went to work for the Wheeling and Lake Erie Railroad. Wheeling was primarily a freight carrier. It was later absorbed by the Big Four, which was absorbed by the New York Central, which merged with the Pennsylvania, which is now ConRail and Amtrack.

He worked for the railroad for twenty-six years, until his retirement in 1938. In all those years he never had a vacation, and only missed two weeks work due to an illness. Of course, he received no pay--sick leave was not for the working man in those days.

He was a track walker (sometimes called a gandy dancer); it was all very heavy labor. He had to replace the tracks which were damaged and to replace the railroad ties that held the tracks in place. Many a night he was called to work to take care of train wrecks that had just happened. Also, when heavy rains or snows clogged the track switches. He worked in the most inclement weather.

The fact that Grandpa worked all through the great depression of the thirties is a tribute to his work ability. His superiors knew he could be relied on to perform the most difficult of tasks. He prided himself that his family never had to be put on welfare or stand in soup lines. He took great pride in the fact that he and Grandma were able to put a down payment on their very first house. It was in 1918 and the house was located on East 29th Street. It is now gone and the Cuyahoga Community College campus is there.

Grandpa's diligence exemplifies the type of person who made our country the greatest known to man. Today, technology has taken over, but in his day it was all back breaking labor that built our nation. His daily routine began at 5:00 A.M. and usually ended at 9:00 P.M. when he went to bed. In the evening and on Sunday he did the many chores needed to maintain a house and home. He did all of his own repairs, painting, and the plumbing etc. etc. with the boys help, of course.

He was also the family barber (boys only) and he was the cobbler too. I can assure you, haircut time was traumatic for me, and I couldn't wait until I was old enough to pay for my own haircuts at a regular barbershop! My first haircut cost me 25¢.

Another chore he had the boys work on was sawing lumber for the wood shed. The lumber was old and used railroad ties that Grandpa's bosses let him have, and used construction lumber the two sons-in-law were able to get from the completed construction jobs they worked on.

Filling the woodshed was an annual event, it usually began in August and ended about the first of October. There was no central heating in our home. The house was heated by the wood and coal burning "pot-bellied" stove in the dining room and a small gas room heater in the living room. In the kitchen was a large wood and coal and gas range. In the winter Grandma took advantage of the heat from the wood and coal to cook many of her meals. I used to think that it was the wood-coal stove that made the meals so good, however, as I grew older I realized it was Grandma's cooking!

Grandpa's relaxation came in the form of a pipe and drinking wine. His pipe gave off an odor due to the very strong tobacco he smoked. Grandpa made his own wine, and we kids looked forward to September, for that was the time the grapes would be delivered by the farmer Grandpa dealt with. We used to help him make the wine in a large wine press. We loved to drink the fresh juice as it flowed from the press to a container, which was then emptied into large barrels. Somehow, Grandma always was able to get a few baskets of Grandpa's grapes to make jelly for the children.

GRANDMA

Donata Lucia Marcoguiseppe was born on September 13, 1876. She was one of four children born to Vincenzo (Vincent) and Domenica (Margaret) Marcoguiseppe.

Her intellect was amazing, in fact she was the smartest "un-educated" person I have ever known. She had more philosophy in her little finger than some PHD's have in their whole body. If common sense told her something was right, you had better believe it was right! If her common sense told her it was wrong, believe it, for it was wrong!

Grandpa worked very hard to bring in the money necessary to maintain a house full of kids. Grandma worked a lot harder to make it stretch to cover the absolute needs of the family. She was the Purchasing Agent, Treasurer and Comptroller.

This was Grandma's theory:

The cost of clothing was held at a minimum: (a) making as many clothes as possible. (b) using the "hand me down" method. (c) constant mending and repairing. When all that failed, then go out and buy bargains by waiting for sales.

The cost of meals were held to a minimum: (a) grow as many vegetables as possible in the backyard garden. (b) buy in bulk lots and can as much as possible. (c) do all of your own baking from scratch, including making your own noodles and macaroni (called pasta).. An example: Flour was bought in 100 pound bags, not only because it cost less, but because the bags could be boiled and soaked until they became soft enough to become bed sheets or pillow cases. In the winter time your overcoat could act as an extra blanket. (There was no heat upstairs in the boys' dorm.)

Grandma wanted all of her children to have a good primary education, and saw to it that they got to school on time and that their appearance was always very neat. The clothes may have had patches on them, but no other student in the school had clothes more clean. She sure did believe in cleanliness. When she scrubbed you, you gleamed. She could never understand how the boys got so dirty in such a short time. I can remember her saying that there was enough dirt in my ears to grow cabbages.

Grandma was a pretty good disciplinarian, you never sassed twice. Once was enough for you. Also, if she found out that you had started a fight, she'd become upset and would admonish you properly. However, if she found out that you ran away from a tormentor, she'd be more upset. She believed one must eventually stand up for one's rights. Heaven help you if you brought a note home from the teacher which stated that you were "bad". She would not tolerate that for one moment. She used to tell us the Teacher was her replacement while we were in school, and that you had better act accordingly. Although the discipline was occasional, the LOVE she gave was constant and warm. As far as we kids were concerned she WAS the greatest Mom in the world. (I hope you feel this way towards your mom also, for that is as it should be.)

Our religious obligations had to be met every Sunday and Holy Day. She dearly believed in God and the Trinity. Her favorite expression was "God will provide if we work hard enough." She was right. She told us that no single nation, no single religion and no single color of people is solely good. All have their good and bad among them. She was right.

There is so much more I could relate about her wisdom and philosophy, but then this would turn into a complete biography.

Now that I am older, I realize the great sacrifices she and Grandpa made to insure we children were afforded opportunities they never had. I also am more appreciative of the great courage they displayed in emigrating to this country, just so their children could gain a primary education they never had or could afford. They were amazed and happy that the children could get a primary education without the parents paying a tuition.

Consider this:

They had no formal education, could not read or write any language. Yet they took a ship and for three weeks were cooped up in the steerage (the bottom of the boat). The men and the women and children were separated at night into dormitories; the families could not sleep together. They had to bring enough food to feed the family for the three week voyage. That's right, they had to pack a three week lunch!

They landed on Ellis Island, shunted from one examiner to another. Finally they were told they were acceptable to the United States. They ferried to New York City, found their way to the Railroad Depot and boarded a train for Cleveland.

Here were two persons who had a language barrier, could not understand what the Americans were shouting at them, let alone read the signs they passed. Yet, they were determined to make a new life for themselves and their children. They thought that if common sense and hard work could do it, they had it made!

Imagine for one moment, that you are in the same situation, you could not read or write any language, and could only speak one, would you have the courage to go to a strange land and make it your home?

I stand in awe of the millions of other Grandpas and Grandmas that experienced the same ordeal your grandparents did. I regard them all as the true "makers" of our country. They made things so much easier and nicer for all their future descendents.

There are so many good things I learned from Grandpa and Grandma, and I do hope that I have been able to pass along at least a few of them to my children.

God and family were foremost. They taught us not to be envious of anyone, particularly our own family members. We were taught to help one another. An example: When the eldest son went off to college, the brothers and sisters who were old enough, operated a chicken stand (a stall where live chickens were sold to the public) in the market place. Some of the profits they made went towards paying his tuition and keep at Notre Dame.

We were a family in the true sense of the word, and it didn't stop at the brothers and sisters, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law were included.

Grandma and Grandpa had four sons and two grandsons in World War II, and Grandma wore out a rosary praying for their safe return. The prayers worked, they all returned.

Many of their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren have successful careers in many professions and occupations. However, it was the legacy and heritage of honesty, courage, kindness and determination that Grandma and Grandpa instilled into each of their children that has made our family the good citizens we have become. Those of us that follow them may add to or detract from that legacy or heritage, but none can lay claim of having begun the legacy or heritage. The credit belongs solely to Grandma and Grandpa Celebrezze.

Grandma went to heaven on April 29, 1951; Grandpa followed her on November 16, 1954.

I do hope that some of you have found this very brief biography about two wonderful human beings enlightening and interesting.

My love to each of you,



Joseph A. Celebrezze

P.S. I am fortunate in that I married a woman that has the same moral character, wisdom and kindness that Grandma had.