



Crachese Life in NY 1911-1920

This decade was marked by unrest and the reform of social problems in the US. Labor unions grew as people sought protection from poor working conditions. Underscored by the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and child labor in factories, mills, and mines, states passed minimum age laws. Women striving for equality held the first Suffrage parade in 1910 and the passage of the 19th amendment in 1919 gave them voting rights. The decade ended with two major events that impacted the rest of the century, World War I and the Spanish Influenza.

While America became the most industrialized country in the world during this period creating both nationwide prosperity and profound social changes, Italian immigrants were still a despised minority, suffering discrimination in housing and employment. Stereotypes about poverty, clannishness, illiteracy, high disease rates, and alleged proclivity toward criminal activities underscored a view among some in this era that Southern Italians were a degenerate "race."

World War I became a "pivot point" for immigrants in America. Italy's alliance with the US and immigrants' service in the US military provided them some acceptance. The war also produced nationalism among Italian immigrants promoting assimilation at a faster rate.

During this decade the Crachesi in America concentrated on getting ahead. There were many marriages creating new families. Working hard to make gains for their families some started out on their own to seek greater opportunities rather than continue as employed laborers.

In 1910 John A. Sarubbi, who was born in Craco in 1887 and arrived as a 12 year old, started a general contracting company that would grow into a large family business.

"During this decade the Crachesi in America concentrated on getting ahead."

On January 11, 1911 Antonio Camberlengo, a future boxing champion started his boxing career as "Italian Joe Gans." Others were integrating into American ways but still maintaining their Italian cultural identity.

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Antonio Camberlengo - "Italian" Joe Gans fought Boxing Hall of Famers Ted "Kid" Lewis and Jack Delaney. He mostly fought welterweights and middleweights. Known as a great exponent of fitness, he fought 204 bouts until 1931.

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On April 2, 1913 several Cracotans, Leonardo Rubertone, Vitantonio Mastronardi, Nicola Grieco, Leonardo Loporchio, Antonio Lorubbio, Domenico Ferrante, and Donato Viggiano and 53 other Italians formed the Dante Lodge No. 936 of the Sons of Italy in Manhattan.

The Società di San Vincenzo Martire di Craco, flourished as families grew. In 1917 during WWI, a Royal Italian Commission visited New York City. On June 24th the Società headed a parade to honor the dignitaries led by its president Giuseppe Rinaldi. This was the same Joseph Rinaldi who signed the 1899 charter; he had given up barbering and now owned a café on Worth Street.

“WWI impacted the Crachesi on two continents.”

WWI impacted the Crachesi on two continents. In America they gained economically by the demand for material from the warring European nations. The Waste Reclamation Service, established by the US government to increase material, benefitted those Crachesi in the paper stock business. By 1917 there were several who had ventured into business on their own and were established as owners in the paper and rag recycling business. These businessmen also provided employment and income for family members and other paesani. The entrepreneurs included familiar Cracotan surnames like: Benedetto, Camperlengo, Cantasano, Colabella, Donadio, Episcopia, Francavilla, Grieco, Mastronardi, Mormando, Ragone, Tocci, and Viverito.

However, there were great losses too as loved ones on both continents were drawn into the fighting. And after the war came an unexpected consequence - the Spanish Influenza, that caused great havoc in the tenements inhabited by the immigrants in New York. ■



***Making ends meet** - This 1911 photograph shows a family at 302 Mott St., making artificial flowers. The school aged children would work late into the evening and all together they might earn fifty cents a day.*

The Crachesi in WWI

“Military service was the last thing most immigrants sought. ... When there were not enough volunteers, they were forced to serve under the draft, some without having been fully integrated into the US.”

When WWI broke out, America took a position of neutrality but immigrants here were torn by loyalty to their old country and some felt a need to return home. When Italy entered the war on the Allied side in 1915 about 90,000 men returned to Italy to join the army.

Military service was the last thing most immigrants sought. Before the war the US, unlike the European countries they came from, did not have a draft. Many immigrated to avoid being forced to serve in their native land's military.

But in 1917, with the US entry into the war, they were first asked by the government and then when there were not enough volunteers, forced to serve under the draft, some without having been fully integrated into the US.

We know the full stories about four men with a Crachese connection who served in the US Army. All were living in Manhattan's Little Italy neighborhood and there is no doubt they knew each other. Each was drafted and served in 77th Division, what became known as the “Metropolitan Division” because it was made up of men from NYC.

They all participated in the Muse-Argonne battle, the largest fought by the US, where there were 1.2 million American soldiers, 22 infantry divisions, 840 planes, 324 tanks, and 2,400 pieces of artillery laying down 4 million shells in the action. That came weeks before the end of WWI on Nov. 11, 1918.

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Sgt. Peter P. Benedetto



Peter P. Benedetto was born Sept 5, 1895 in Craco the son of Domenico and Maria Teresa Paduano. After immigrating in 1899 and attending school he joined his father's paper stock business and obtained his citizenship. He was the business' general manager when drafted. He reported to Camp Upton for training in September 1917, ultimately reaching the rank of Sargent. The extract of his company's report tells of his bravery in his last battle: *"On Sept. 7, 1918, this soldier led his section across the plateau at Vauxcère, France through a heavy enemy barrage and in plain view of the enemy. When his men became scattered, he remained under shell fire without a thought of personal safety, in order to collect them and place them in their positions. This soldier was known among his comrades for his extraordinary courage, cheerfulness, leadership and devotion to duty."*

He is interred in France at the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery in Belleau, France. In 1930 the US Government organized the WWI Mothers' Pilgrimage and offered to send them to their loved one's final resting place in Europe. Sgt. Benedetto's mother Teresa made the voyage to visit the gravesite.

Nicola Francavilla

Nicola Francavilla was born in Craco on May 15, 1894 to Carlo and Lucia Viggiano. He arrived in New York with his family in 1905 and after completing his schooling joined his father in the family's paper stock business until being drafted in September 1917. He was still an Italian citizen but had filed his papers declaring his intention for US citizenship. He went to Camp Upton for training and was made a Corporal. Arriving in France his unit was moved to the Argonne Forest.

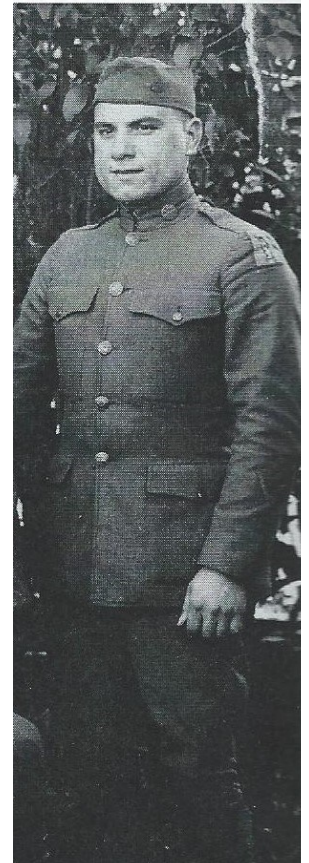
On September 28, 1918 orders arrived for them to advance into thick woods where they encountered savage machine gun fire. It was during this day that Corporal Nicola Francavilla went missing in action. His body was never recovered and his sacrifice is marked by a Tablet of the Missing at the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery at Romagne, France.



*Nicola Francavilla
Camp Upton, New York - 1917*

Frank Muzio

Francesco Muzio was born in Manhattan on Feb. 28, 1891 to Nicola and Maria Caterina Santalucia. After the death of his father, Frank left school at age 12 and was apprenticed to a blacksmith. Like others in the area he came in contact with Mother Cabrini while she was assigned to St. Joachim's Church and became an acquaintance of hers. But it was the skills he acquired as a blacksmith that served him well when he was drafted. He was made a "Wagoner," a position responsible for the horses and their equipment that was vital in the pre-mechanized Army of the era. He entered the Army on Jan. 25, 1918 and after returning from France at the end of the war he opened a cafeteria in downtown Manhattan. He died in 1958 but his life was documented in the book, "Buddy Remembers Then and Now" written by his son Joseph Muzio. Frank would never know that his grandson, David O. Russell would be an Academy Award winning movie director.



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Antonio Spera

Antonio Spera was born in Craco July 25, 1888 to Giovanni and Isabella Forgione. He arrived in the US in 1902 at age 14 where he lived with his brother Donato and worked with him in their barber shop. Antonio was inducted on February 25, 1918 and like the others trained at Camp Upton. He was still an Italian citizen but had filed the papers to become a US citizen. After training he became a private in Company B, 308th Infantry, which would gain fame as the "Lost Battalion." On Oct. 2, 1918 his unit advanced into Argonne Forest. Over the next six days they were cut off and isolated. Of the 554 that entered the battle only 194 were able to walk out when they were relieved by Allied troops. While under constant attack Antonio distinguished himself by choosing to run up and down the line of his fellow soldiers without a mask alerting them to a gas attack.



Antonio Spera's Meritorious Service Certificate

Antonio's heroism earned him the Meritorious Service Citation Certificate, which was the predecessor to the Purple Heart. In 1921 he married Camilla Camperlengo in New York and they had three daughters. But the damage to his lungs from his heroic effort led to his early death in 1939.

Other Losses

Other WWI losses of Italian - American immigrants from Little Italy in New York City are memorialized on a plaque at the Church of the Transfiguration, 29 Mott St. Manhattan. It includes Peter Benedetto and Nicola Francavilla along with 18 others.



Plaque at the Church of the Transfiguration

Craco

Meanwhile, in Craco the war also took a toll. *Note Storiche sul Comune di Craco*, the history of the town, tells us about conditions there:

"As the first months of 1915 passed, Basilicata was on the fringe of a great dispute between interventionists and neutralists. Craco joined in echoing ... in the aversion to the war From all over Basilicata they left for the front. ... They received, in exchange for promises of reform, more than three thousand dead and many more crippled and wounded. In every Lucano town center there is a Monument to the Fallen (constructed under Fascism). Every town had their dead; from perhaps fifteen in small villages to hundreds in the more populated towns. ... Craco had eighteen. ..."

In the war of 1915-1918 the following Crachesi died: Soldier Nicola Marisco, Soldier Rocco Mastronardi, Corporal Major Placido Montemurro, Soldier Giuseppe Mormando, Soldier Paolo Ragone; Soldier Andrea Sanecchia, Corporal Francesco Spera, Soldier Vincenzo Torracco, Soldier Pietro Vaccaro, Sergeant Pietro Benedetto, Soldier Francesco Constantino, Soldier Antonio D'Ambrosio, Soldier Giovanni De Giorgio, Soldier Leonardo Francavilla, Soldier Nicola Francavilla, Soldier Vincenzo Grieco, Lieutenant Medico Leonardo Grossi, and Soldier Francesco Libonati.

The war caused even more economic hardships. The departure of so many young men left the fields abandoned. ...

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A Visit to Craco

By Andrew Colabella

My great-grandfather, Domenico Colabella, wrote in his autobiography "... I left Craco ... for Napoli. I traveled alone by slow boat ... it took 29 days to New York". That was his immigration journey to America. It feels like a poetic circular story that I, his great-grandson, traveled to Craco via Naples to see the town where he was born and the ancestral lands of the Colabella family.

Our car ventured into Basilicata. The horizon unfurled with undulating hills and rugged mountains. The land is a vast emerald patchwork quilt. Picturesque villages, something one might describe in a fantasy novel, are fused to the top of isolated mountain ridges. Whispers of ancient civilizations bear testament to the passage of centuries. After a long while climbing farmland hills, our car turned a bend. Suddenly, in the distance stood Craco. The outline of the town and especially the Norman tower give it a powerful presence. As we got closer, the views became more breathtaking. Its dramatic silhouette protrudes against the sky.

At the town's museum, Alfredo Colabella and his family greeted us. His grandfather Alfredo was the younger brother of my great-grandfather. Finally, two branches of the Colabella family, separated by time and distance, reunited. We communicated with the people of Craco with our very basic Italian. But it was very evident that the dialect they spoke was different. The sounds and words spoken were a reminder of the distinct culture and history of the town and region.

The tour of the town showcased its haunting and incredible history. The remaining buildings still stand in their crumbling beauty. You can envision the daily life and ongoings of the town as you walk down its cobblestone streets. Alfredo pointed out the old homes of family members and described what the homes were like back in the day. I stood in front of the piece of land where my great-grandfather's childhood home would have stood. My great-grandfather's home would have been two stories. At the top level he lived with his family. At the bottom level, livestock.

The Norman Tower was a reminder of centuries of conflict. The Chiesa Madre was a reminder of the religious tradition that permeates Crachese culture. Both stand as important landmarks with deep history. Near the Chiesa Madre, we were treated to serene views of the landscape that Craco looks over.

In the evening, we gathered at Alfredo Colabella's home in Craco Peschiera for a large dinner. We shared stories and learned about the differences between life in Craco and life for us descendants living abroad. Sharing delicious food, pastries, and of course, Amaro Lucano, was an amazing culmination to the trip. The journey was an important pilgrimage for someone with Craco in their blood. It is something that I'll never forget.

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On the road to Craco — Andrew Colabella traveled through Basilicata from Naples to arrive at Craco, the Colabella family's hometown.



Colabella Meeting — Andrew Colabella (left to right) meets his relatives Alfredo Colabella, Gianluca Magnante, Giuseppina Colabella, Giulia Lavaia, Antonio Rinaldi.



Colabella Homestead — Visiting Craco Vecchio, Andrew sees where his ancestors came from.

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Andrew Colabella's experience traveling to Craco touches all of us. Our ancestors' daring decisions to emigrate here made us beneficiaries of their hard work and provided opportunities that extend through several generations since the early 1900s.



Surprise Meeting - While in Craco Vecchio, Andrew crossed paths with an inhabitant enjoying the hillside vegetation.



A Happy Reunion — Andrew shared stories and learned about the differences between life in Craco and life of descendants living abroad. Top row left to right are: Alfredo Colabella, Giulia Lavaia, Joe Piccirillo, 2nd row: Franco Lavaia, Maria Lavaia (hidden), Pasqualina LoFranco, Antonio Rinaldi, 1st row: Nicola Lavaia, Andrew Colabella.

Andrew also shared that his aunt, Diane Colabella-Lass, owner of "[La Piazza Café](#)" restaurant in Palm Coast, Florida, is so proud of her ancestry that she is framing the photo of Craco and hanging the Society's Newsletter article story of Domenico Colabella's immigration at the restaurant.

The website of La Piazza Café at the European Village in Palm Coast, says, "you begin a journey in to the heart of Italy. With the owners raised on the essence of Italian food and learning the art of it from their grandmothers, prepare yourself for a dining experience. However it's a mix of old world and new world cuisine at La Piazza. The old world comes from the owners and their love of family and traditions. The new comes from Chef Josh a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, and a longtime New York chef. ... Owner Diane Colabella-Lass, Larry Lass Sr and Larry Lass Junior owned restaurants in New Jersey and longed for a warmer climate. They moved to Flagler county seven years ago to open La Piazza Café. They went as far as importing their cousin from Italy to help launch La Piazza. ... They grow most of their herbs including basil, parsley, rosemary and oregano during the summer and spring months for the restaurant, as well as making their own sauces to order. ... They are a pairing of the best wines with La Piazza Café's outstanding menu selection." ■



La Piazza Café is an award winning restaurant in Palm Coast, Florida. They offer good food and hospitality learned from generations of Cracotan ancestors.

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In the first months of 1919 the wounded soldiers came back, some with permanent disabilities. The dead soldiers would never again see their native land. Some of those returning

didn't find their dear ones. To various other maladies was added the Spanish flu. The epidemic that claimed so many victims between 1918 and 1919 had also arrived in Craco." ■

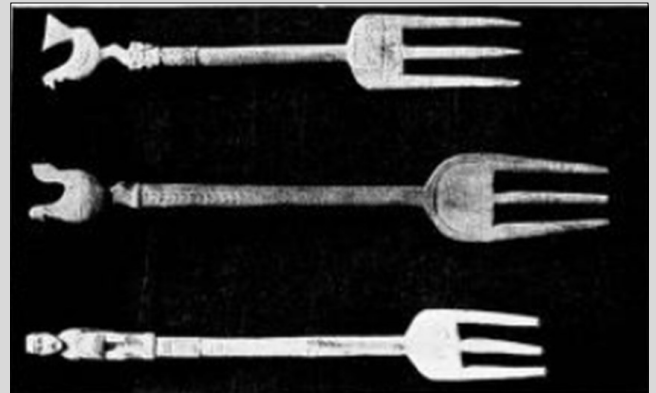


Craco Vecchio's WWI Memorial Park from a postcard image. With the abandonment of the town, the obelisk was moved to Craco Peschiera where it stands today.

Basilicata Focus: Traditional Dress

In 1913 a British firm published "[Peasant Art in Italy](#)" a 264 page book highlighting traditional Italian arts and crafts. These included clothing, lace, macramé, embroidery, textile fabrics, carpets, jewelry, wood carving, and pottery typical of the various Italian regions. Description of the artwork and culture are supplemented with color and monotone photographs.

Several dresses from Basilicata were included without identifying the towns they were associated with. They are shown on the following page. The only other craft from Basilicata were carved forks shown to the right.



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Basilicata Focus: Traditional Dress *continued from page 7*



PEASANT ART IN ITALY



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CHARLES HOLME

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The 122st Celebration of the Feast of San Vincenzo in Manhattan

Sunday, October 22, 2023 • 11:30 a.m.

The Shrine Church of the Most Precious Blood, 113 Baxter Street, New York, NY

Save the Date!
**122nd Celebration
of the Feast of
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