

"A WOMAN'S JOURNEY: From Sicily to Indianapolis"

Vincenza Pusateri was born in 1888 in Sicily, an island near the toe of boot-shaped Italy. Her home town, Termini Imerese, is on the northern coast in an agricultural area that at the turn of the century, was depressed and heavily taxed. In 1910 she married thirty-four-year-old Nicola Bondi. He was a produce vendor in Indianapolis and had returned to Sicily to find a wife. They sailed from the city of Palermo on the "S.S. Martha Washington," a difficult one week voyage across the Atlantic. Vincenza and Nicola arrived at Ellis Island on May 17, 1910. Vincenza was twenty-three.

A European woman traditionally filled a hope chest with her trousseau of bedding and clothing. It was intended to last her entire life. The trousseau was also considered portable wealth as well as proof of her sewing skills. Vincenza's skills with a needle was formidable and creative. She often sketched her motifs freehand and chose filler stitches as she worked.

Vincenza's wedding registry shows that she brought to the marriage a dowry of 1,097 lire, some pieces of furniture, clothing, and a few gold objects. Some of the items given to the Museum, like the undergarments and bedding, were certainly made in Italy, especially pieces embroidered with Vincenza's maiden initials "V P". Other items, such as dresses and baby clothing, may have been made in Indiana.

Italians immigrated to America in great numbers between 1890 and 1920- some four million souls. Their desperate poverty, especially in the southern regions including Sicily, was the major reason so many left their homes. Eighty percent were farmers and sharecroppers, suffering under the rule of a few wealthy landlords. Political hardship was another factor, as the newly unified government of Italy cracked down on rising anarchism that threatened its stability.

America was the land of opportunity. When Vincenza and Nicola arrived, they joined nearly 7,000 other Italian immigrants living in Indiana. Many worked on railroads, in mines, stone quarries and factories, as well as food-related businesses such as grocery stores, restaurants and produce markets. While they tended to live in neighborhoods that came to be known as Little Italys, the pressure was mounting for them to assimilate into the American way of life, especially as World War I loomed and a second generation arrived. The Italian language and traditions evolved into today's Italian-American culture.

In Indianapolis many Italian immigrants sold produce. The city was a railroad hub, offering easy access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Vincenza operated her own produce stand at the Market House, which was the predecessor of today's City Market, and Nicola sold from a horse-drawn cart. They had four children: three daughters: Marianna, Santina, and Catherine. Their only son, Toney, died at age two. Tragedy struck the family again when Vincenza contracted tuberculosis and succumbed on January 28, 1921. She was only thirty-three years old. Vincenza and Nicola's descendants, however, continue to thrive in Indianapolis.

Vincenza's trousseau represents more than one woman's immigrant journey. The treasure that she left behind, and in the care of her granddaughter, is now on view for the public to enjoy. It is a legacy that honors the collective Italian heritage of all those who crossed the Atlantic with their hope chests full of dreams.