

SICILIAN LOVES

CHAPTER 1: Goodbye, Santa Flavia

Cielo! Cielo! Once I was awakened, the word whispered over and over again; yet oddly, I had no earthly idea what it meant. Other times my afternoon nap was interrupted by the heavenly aromas of simmering sauces and baking bread. I remember stretching out on the grass next to the bean, basil and tomato plants, my view of the sky framed by times past and long-remembered loves, and the clouds became a backdrop to review all the loves I ever had: family and friends, events and places, fun times and fearful ones, exaggerated deeds and purified misdeeds, indeed!

Most brilliant of all were the memories of the restaurant, the two-room, brick and neon world that welcomed friends and strangers, Sicilians and Italians – even the Albanians – and the Mediterranean Irish, that is, everyone else. It sparkled like a gem; its facets were people, culture, attitudes, personalities and, of course, foods; Di Salvo's Spaghetti House was the culmination of a young man's dream and the stern wish of his father.

Cosimo (his birth name) Di Salvo was born in Bagheria, Sicily, on December 30, 1904 to Vincenza Tralongo and Benedetto Di Salvo. Three years after his birth, Benedetto left for America to prepare a new home in a foreign, yet promising, country. Raising a new family in Sicily was predictably difficult because opportunities were limited, but rumors of good fortune in the United States gave Benedetto the courage to leave Sicily, and his wife and son the strength to stay until called. When Benedetto left, Vincenza returned to her home in Santa Flavia with Cosimo and waited for news from America. For the next few years, Vincenza and his Grandmother, Carmela Giangrasso, raised Cosimo.

Cosimo remembers:

“I was born in Bagheria in 1904, a walking distance of several miles to Palermo. Mother was a native of Santa Flavia and my Father was from Bagheria. I remember going to a house, several buildings away from where we lived, to receive my schooling from an elderly person -- elderly to me, me being about six years old. Being a "mother's boy", I cried even before my Mother left the room. I resented being left there along with six or



seven others my age. After several days of this I finally took interest and would go by myself.

"I remember playing on a gravel street that led to Grandpa Salvatore's house, very close to Santa Flavia. At times while playing "ciampede" (flat stones) with my friends and others, we would follow the man with the cows, who peddled milk, or the man who sold carciofi (artichokes)."

Ciampede? Well, Dad didn't remember much except that the stones were flat, small pieces of unpolished slate, and you chased each other's stones. To hit another stone was to win. Marbles would have been a more interesting game and surely requiring greater skill, but then no one in Santa Flavia knew what marbles were.

"I remember some Sunday mornings after Mass, Mother would take me (walking, that is) to Bagheria, showing me off. Grandpa seemed short alongside my Mother. His hair was grey; he had a goatee and wore his ordinary pants and a sort of reddish flannel shirt. I don't remember my Father's Mother. My grandparents lived a few houses away from the piazza, a wide street with an ever-flowing water fountain. The gate to Bagheria was a stone archway with statues of saints and devils on top of the stone arch. The wall that circled the town was not to keep anybody in or out, but to look nice and be a place for the children to play. I remember very little else of Bagheria.

"I knew Dad was in America, somewhere. Santa Flavia is where we, Mother and I, lived. My Mother's family lived on the same street. "Family" means Grandpa, Grandma, uncles and aunts. My uncles were stonecutters and they intended that I should follow their trade. They provided me, as young as I was, with a tool. Of course I was also a water boy.

"I remember going exploring away from the limits of the village, together with my cousins and friends. I can still see prickly pears (fichi d'india) growing along the sides of the road and grape vineyards, and lemon and fig trees.

"Grandpa Salvatore owned a mule that he sheltered in a space separated from the living quarters by a half door. The mule was his transportation to and from work. He was a "capo mastro", the head boss of the stonecutter crew. He had several crews, some on one side of the quarry, some on the other side."

When I visited Santa Flavia there were unexpected changes – no longer was it a quiet village.

But the gravel street did have a few more layers of scrap slate from the quarry, and the children still play games – probably not ciampede – but they still scrape their knees. The old men will forever play cards outside each other's houses.

In Bagheria I took pictures of the house in which Cosimo was born. Today it is home to another generation of another Sicilian family.

No longer can you see the farmer leading his cows through the streets, calling "latte, latte" but Cosimo remembered the mothers or their children rushing to get in line to wait for the farmer to milk the cows. Sometimes one cow would stray and the others would follow, straight to a front entrance of a house, and they would peer over the half door as if looking for a pile of straw. Everyone helped the farmer round up the cows and then took their same place in line, once again to wait for the farmer to fill their tin or ceramic containers with sweet, warm milk.

Villagers still scream for quiet and dream for changes in their lives, or for different lives. But Santa Flavia has lost much of its charm because the charmers were lost to America.

At the end of the summer of 1910, life changed for Cosimo, and the change brought knee-buckling grief that would never let him forget his departure from Sicily or his love for the Grandmother, Grandfather, aunts and uncles he left behind.

Cosimo awakened early every morning, at his request, to have breakfast with his Mother and uncles. Breakfast consisted of leftover homemade bread soaking in a bowl of strong coffee enriched with a dab of butter, fresh milk and sugar. In America, this would come to be known as "Sicilian Wheaties." His uncle Pietro would peel an apple or an orange with one continuous motion and end up with one long peel, perfectly intact and seemingly unbreakable. Cosimo was always fascinated by Pietro's surgical skill. Upon completion of the feat Cosimo would shout, "Bravo, Tio Pietro, bravo! Encore, encore!" Then Cosimo would beg for the peel so as to add yet another peel to a hook jutting from the sun-bleached side of the cupboard. The peels made the room smell "nizee-nizee" when Mamma wasn't cooking.

Today's early morning was like any other. After a second cup of coffee for the uncles – they were off to the quarry. Cosimo's second cup, a third if he wanted, was cocoa but he would not go to the quarry this morning. He would not proudly carry water to the crews nor would he show off his quarrying tool. His Mother told him he had little time to play with his friends and cousins; he must help her today. Cosimo heard the ominous tenderness in her voice and frowned. "Sure, Mamma, sure."

“Mother told me that we were going to America to live with my Father who was settled in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I cried and cried. I did not want to leave Grandma Rosalia, nor my uncles Pietro, Giovano, Antonio and Salvatore Tralongo. They were my fathers. I was too young to live with a stranger. Mother had a hectic time trying to persuade me. I was just six years old.”

Vincenza told Cosimo today was to be a day of preparation for a celebration – a feast – with the finest and most expensive foods in Santa Flavia because the news had come from America that Benedetto Di Salvo had readied their new home in Milwaukee, and had made the necessary arrangements for his wife and son to join him. Soon it would be time to plan for the trip. Soon Cosimo would say good-bye and fully realize the pain of leaving Santa Flavia. Soon he would cry again.

Cosimo thought, "What about me in the quarry? And what will happen to my friends and cousins? And Grandma?" He received no answers because he was afraid to ask the questions aloud. He sensed that the celebration was to conceal these questions and distract people from thinking too much about the future that was only as distant as the feast. This day would be one of activity – running errands for his Mother would help Cosimo avoid conversations that might increase his anxiety. And for Vincenza, Cosimo's presence would dull her awareness that leaving Santa Flavia was only for the sake of her husband.

Cosimo, his hands pressed deeply in his jacket pockets, shuffled into the street to play with his friends. He watched them more closely than was comfortable, but he had to imprint their faces in his memory – to remember their shapes, the way they stood or walked, the colors of their hair and eyes, how they looked and smiled at him. He saw familiarity and friendship, and he sensed that if he looked closely at one of the girls, he might see her face transformed into the face of a future sister or a newfound friend in America.



"Basta, Cosimo, enough! Come here!" his Mother called from the balcony. He heard her voice, loving yet forceful, above the children's playful shrieks and the impatient urging of those waiting in line for milk, and the curses of an old man who had just lost a game of "briscola" – a Sicilian card game. There was no more time for Cosimo to play. Mother needed him to get the groceries and supplies to her by midday while she waited in line for milk and told her friends about the move to America and the upcoming feast.

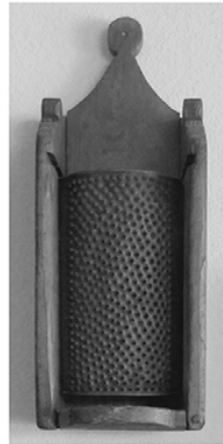
Lunch today would be fairly typical; an assortment of cold cuts (mortadella, prosciutto and capocollo), pieces of caciocavallo – nice and sharp – and fresh fruit (figs, apples and peaches); except she would prepare an added treat to welcome her brother's friends who would come for lunch. They would pay their respects to Senora Di Salvo and congratulate her on her good fortune. She, in turn, would show her appreciation by serving their favorite dish. She knew it well; it was time to cook a favorite – veal stew over spaghetti. (*Now called "Cosmo's Veal Stew with Spaghetti or 'Spezzatello.'"*)

The more Vincenza thought about leaving her brothers and missing the respect that she had instilled in their friends, the warmer she felt and the longer the menu became – and just for lunch. She decided to give them a few slices of "Eggplant Marinade in Garlic and Oil" and a dish of "Green Olive Salad" which had been soaking in garlic water for months and, of course, her light, golden-crust bread to trap any juices that might escape a spoon.

If heaven could be sliced and put in a jar, it would be slices of eggplant marinated in garlic and oil. It's best eaten in a sandwich with Vincenza's bread "Vincenza's Sicilian Bread" because its light texture absorbs the marinade and cradles the firm succulent slices of eggplant which bear absolutely no resemblance to the originally bitter plant.

It's best to wait a few weeks before eating because it gives the marinade flavors time to become one with the eggplant. Willpower is not the way to get through the next few months; you must have some jars that were put away last year or, if you have none, maybe you know somebody that does.

The green, firm and plump olives are very tasty by themselves or in a salad. But first you must rinse and soak the olives to remove much of the salt and bitterness they have when purchased from the store. (Since olives and olive oil have finally been recognized as good for you, this salad has got to be great for you.)



Cheese graters handmade by Benedetto

As Vincenza added oil and salt to the water for the pasta, her mind moved to the supper menu for that night. She knew precisely what to make. It was Tuesday, and she was not quick to take menu changes from her brothers. The decisions were hers; she ruled the kitchen. Her brothers were more than happy to comply because they knew that any arguments would result in vengefully smaller servings. Tonight's meal would be simple and light, a supper that would tease her brothers' appetites and lure their palates to the next day's feast.

The table was set for lunch. The pasta was almost done and ready for a topping of olive oil and grated cheese but Cosimo was not back from running errands. Her strategy was working.

Senora Di Salvo heard her brothers approach the house, laughing with their friends Vigilio, Vitorio and Pasquale. Laughter was supposed to be a cure-all, but it wasn't. And it hid nothing. No one could conceal deep regret and pain of imminent separation. The greeting was jovial with sincere embraces and kisses, not of congratulation, but of good-bye. Talk of "only for a while" or "soon we'll be a family under one roof, again" became litanies of hope too often unanswered. Pasquale's understanding smile bridged the awkward silences that settled over the kitchen when no one could think of another reason why going to America was such a wonderful event that only the luckiest of Sicilians would experience. How they all loved each other!

But where was Cosimo? "Cosimo, where are you? Come here, I've got something for you!" Uncle Pietro sang out as he reached inside his shirt for Cosimo's gift. It was a simple piece of slate that one of the crewmembers had chiseled to resemble the outline of the United States of America – as best he knew.

They sat down to eat even though Cosimo was still not home. Senora Di Salvo explained, "I gave him a list of groceries so he couldn't possibly get back in time for lunch. It's been a difficult morning for Cosimo." She gestured with a wide sweep of her arms from one end of the table to the other. "I'm so glad you are here, but it might have been too much for Cosimo and it would have upset him even more." Each one, uncle or friend, looked down at their plate. Vigilio reached for the bridge of his nose and gently squeezed the tear ducts of his eyes. They understood. Vincenza appreciated them more than ever before.

Cosimo had sensed her concern and was aware of her strategy. He had waited, perched atop a stone wall, for his uncles and their friends to leave for the quarry. As he entered the house, his Mother helped him carry the groceries to the kitchen and he helped put them away until they

both burst into tears. Cosimo tried, as only a six-year-old can when he hears his Mother cry, to wipe her tears with the corner of his bleached cotton jacket. She hugged him like a fragile treasure and smiled, then laughed when she discovered that Cosimo had forgotten to take all the eggs out of his jacket pocket. When the cracking stopped and the oozing started, his eyes widened and he laughed, too.

Cosimo ate his lunch and talked about the heavy load of groceries that had caused the wheels of his wagon to squeak. The storekeepers, aware of the upcoming move to America, had given him generous portions of vegetables and meats. Leaving Santa Flavia made Cosimo the object of kindness and Vincenza the envy of many villagers whose purpose in life alternated between celebrating births, feast days, marriages, good wine and the good fortune of others; and grieving deaths, departures, hard times, sour grapes and the good fortune of others. “Bono Fortuna” – how did they mean that?

After lunch his Mother asked if he wanted to go outside and play with his friends. He shook his head. He preferred to stay and watch her cook, subconsciously taking notes. She was so graceful and deliberate, as if she had many hands, all working together, effortlessly. Grandpa Salvatore, capo maestro, surely wished his crew were as efficient as his Vincenza.

Throughout the next few hours, Cosimo washed the vegetables, fruit and dishes, stretching his abilities and dexterity – peeling, slicing and grating. Mother watched and guided him by chanting, “be careful...not too thick...not so close...take your time...not that way, this way,” and she wiped her hands on the striped apron tied tightly as a corset, then showed him how to clean the snap beans.

What a wonderful place to be, the kitchen; the aromas, a knife rhythmically tapping the cutting board; a wooden spoon making figure eights in the cast iron sauce pan; the piles of red, green and yellow vegetables waiting to be washed and sliced; the spongy texture of bread dough; and the silkiness of crisp lettuce. Soon his tiny hands, scrubbed clean by his Mother, reached for the bottom of the wooden salad bowl and he was up to his elbows... a mess, a legitimate and exhilarating mess! Cosimo thought, "If all this food was not supposed to be eaten, what wonderful toys it would make."

Senora Di Salvo probably didn't agree. She continued with the preparation, and observed the evidence that perhaps her brothers and friends might have forgotten some of the sadness if their appetite was any indication. The jar of eggplant was empty – drained of all marinade except for a few breadcrumbs stuck to the side of the jar. The green olive salad was reduced to

nothing but pits piled on the side of their plates, and both loaves of bread were eaten. That is one of the problems faced when the marinade is too good...you have to make bread more often. "*Vincenza's Sicilian Bread*" was another item on the list of foods to prepare. She would make the dough, then Cosimo would take it to the bakery and they would bake it. The village kitchens had no ovens.

Cosimo's attempt to help knead the bread was a matter of making a playful series of palm prints, finger holes and stretched lumps of dough that silently snapped as he extended his arm. Helping Mother was one thing, ruining the dough was quite another. In desperation she promised to fry some of the dough and then sprinkle it with sugar and cinnamon – just for him, him alone, that is, if he wouldn't mind greasing the bowl so she could finish the kneading in peace. That's a tough decision for Cosimo: To play with dough or eat it.

When Senora Di Salvo discovered equal numbers of stems and beans in the garbage as were in the salad bowl, there was no question that Cosimo would be more help playing outside than "helping" inside. Apparently Cosimo preferred the sound of beans being snapped in half rather than at the end. Cosimo, satisfied with his day's work, stood back, wiped his hands and elbows on his Mother's apron, smiled, and with one clean movement, yanked her apron string which turned the bow into a knot, and ran out the door. He skidded to a halt, not because she yelled at him, but because he forgot the bribe. Vincenza held her breath and stiffened her lips throughout his apology, to keep from laughing. Before he dashed out the door for the second time, he stuffed a few pieces of fried dough into his jacket pocket, now lined with dried egg. He was out the door and Vincenza could hold back her laughter no longer.

She turned toward the counters filled with the foods that would require hours of preparation, sighed, and began again – this time without the help of Cosimo.

Before you start the "*Green Beans and Potatoes Salad*" be sure to just wash and scrub the skins of the potatoes instead of peeling them.

She commented to herself that many foods always tasted better the next day. Benedetto used to say that leftovers have a bad reputation except when it's Sicilian food. The trouble was one of appetites – there were too many hard-working family members to have any leftovers.

Many of Vincenza's friends came to visit her while she was preparing supper. They came to congratulate her and, of course, to offer to bring something for the feast. She welcomed them with kisses and cookies, with an intensity of feeling that she had inherited from her mother,

and which Cosimo would one day give to his children. The women decided which senora would make which meat dishes and pasta sauces, and which ones would prepare the desserts. Each planned to bring one of her favorite dishes – a trademark of her skill as a cook. Usually these special recipes were guarded until the daughters-in-law proved themselves worthy recipients, or the sons-in-law demonstrated they were caring and generous husbands. Senora Di Salvo soon realized that her job was not so much to cook, as it was to organize. To her friends, she assigned different times to begin their food preparations, times to bring their dishes to the feast, a list of utensils to bring with the food, and listed their responsibilities during the feast.

In Sicily, good news was celebrated immediately. There was no reason to plan the celebration weeks ahead because all the good stories would have been told many times over and gossip would become old news. They said, “Feast while the news is fresh!” Every family member and friend was able and happy to drop everything for the celebration out of love, respect and loyalty for the family involved.

Toward the end of the day, the blue of the afternoon sky deepened, and the clouds over the mountains were swept toward the sea by a wind favorable to fishermen and stargazers, alike. Another workday for the men ended, but not for the women. For the second time that day, Vincenza heard a harmony of voices accompanying her brothers, as if voices and spirits walked arm in arm. More guests, but she was prepared.

Dinner was fit for the royalty in Bagheria, and the conversation was reassuring, especially to Cosimo, who relaxed as he listened to the entire family predict wealth in America, a large family with lots of sisters and brothers for him, and his role in helping not only his Mother, but his Father, too. Uncle Pietro waited until all the guests were looking at Cosimo's reactions to the conversation, and then he gave Cosimo the piece of slate that resembled America. The young boy exclaimed, "This will make me the ciampede champion! Now I can hit all the stones at once!"

The night with friends ended in anticipation of the earlier-than-usual wake up time. Even before the roosters crowed, Vincenza's brothers would move two long tables into the street that would be the cornerstone of the feast. Other friends would bring smaller tables and stands. Without a script or technical directions, the celebration would fall neatly into place, as though it had been rehearsed a dozen times. But there were no rehearsals, just performances by other people, at other houses, for other occasions.

The next day the brothers went to the quarry. Cosimo played in the street before his Mother sent him to the stores to fill yet another grocery list. Senora Di Salvo greeted a few of her friends at the door and had coffee with them outside the front door, sitting on folding chairs, careful not to scratch the legs of the chairs on the gravel. While sipping anisette, she anticipated the noise level – the simultaneous and multiple conversations and "scusa" (excuse me) repeated hundreds of times as friend avoided major collision with friend, and she smiled...maybe going to America wouldn't be so bad after all. She thanked Saint Joseph and the Blessed Virgin for answering her prayer that there would be just one celebration. After coffee and one more sip of anisette, Vincenza and her friends went to the kitchen to make spaghetti sauce – *Bagheria Style no meat*. (Now known as "Cosmo's Bagheria Spaghetti Sauce – no meat.")

Cosimo returned with the meat. Rabbit and lamb were used most often because beef and pork were not readily available. However... Signora Di Salvo was able to get them because she occasionally cooked for the royalty of Palermo. These festival foods, like this spaghetti sauce – *Bagheria Style with beef or pork* would be fit for royalty. (Now known as "Cosmo's Bagheria Spaghetti Sauce – with meat.")

If time permitted, but more importantly if there was sufficient amount of spaghetti sauce, one of Vincenza's friends would cook "Pig Skin (and other parts) in (Cosmo's) Sauce" – an old world delicacy. Vincenza's friend, Gabriella, made the "Spidini" but that was alright because it was Vincenza's Mother who taught them both how to prepare this delicacy. They wouldn't be Vincenza's spidini but they would be close enough.

Two huge pots of sauce simmered on the three-burner, wood-burning, cast iron stove which was directly outside the door – one pot for the plain sauce and the other for the meat and for what Cosimo called "big spidini with string" – he couldn't pronounce *brucioluni*. (The recipe is "Bracioluni.")

Salvatore preferred chicken so there would be "Chicken with Lemon, Garlic and Olive Oil Marinade" for him and others. He was one of the very few who got his way – and his drumsticks, too. Heaven was but a marinade away.

The only uncluttered surface that remained inside was a portable kitchen table that soon overflowed with foods and served as core to a flurry of activity that became too much for one kitchen – so it spilled over into the next house. Besides, Vincenza needed another stove to make "Sicilian Squash, Onions and Tinirumi over Pasta."

That was enough for the time being. Next is lunch at Anna's house and dessert at Claudia's. After the salads were made, all were entitled to a little vino – friends were among friends and it was their territory!

After lunch, and a little vino, Vincenza and her friends made “Tomato, Onions and Cucumber Salad” and “Moroccan Olives with Anchovies (or Mosocca).”

By late afternoon, the tables were covered with linen cloths and, like an artist's canvas, would soon be a masterpiece! The food was arranged in order of delectability and difficulty of preparation, in descending order. The center of the tables held the meats, the ends of the table had the salads, pasta and sauces, cheese, breads and desserts. Everyone knew the layout, so the line of adults formed in the middle and the line of children at the ends.

The desserts included: “Honey Rock Cookies,” “Almond Slices Cookies,” and “Sesame Seed Cookies.” And of course, “Ricotta Sfinge.”

Chairs were unfolded everywhere, and so were the stories, jokes and songs – especially "Cenna Luna," because they were drinking wine from Senor Ventimiglia's best barrel. What a celebration!

Later, the din diminished, the men moved the tables and chairs back into the houses, the women took the dishes back to their homes and some returned – only the closest of friends drawn into a small, secure group, so small that each one could touch the other. They closed ranks to give each other strength. Vincenza's brothers and friends spoke quietly because they were tired and full. So much food and too much wine had changed the mood from festive to pensive, but there was room for a little something extra...sliced peaches, skinned and soaking in a glass of red wine. A sip or two, then, with the blade of a pocket knife (which all the men carried along with money, tobacco and a Saint Joseph Medal) Pietro lifted a slice of peach from the heavy, wide-mouth glass. The women used a fork; no one used a spoon. You can't nibble at a peach using a spoon.

Heavy eyes and full stomachs, slower responses to emotions and gestures that earlier were animated and energetic, became flicks of fingers or a shrug of the shoulders. The celebration was over.

Everyone left and Vincenza's brothers went to bed. She sat where she was, alone, wondering

when she should prepare for their move to America. When would the suffering of uncertainty and separation reach its greatest intensity? And when would the crying, once begun, stop?

Vincenza Tralongo Di Salvo had not seen her husband in over three years. She had spent most of her married life with people she had known since she was a small child – the same people who loved her for her generosity, character, beauty and ability to love them in return. All of them were living in Santa Flavia, Bagheria, Chiusa or other smaller villages. All except for one, Benedetto, who was in America. She was family to everyone except him. She was married to him and therefore her duty was to be with him even at the expense of her family ties and bonds of friendship.

She said to herself,

"Do I say good bye now? But then I must grieve for the next four months. Or do I pretend that nothing has changed, that the next four months will feel like eternity? Did this celebration seal my fate? After all, there will be many more celebrations for many other reasons and maybe this one will lose its significance and people will forget the reason for the event. Maybe that will lessen my obligation to go to America and I can stay here, with Cosimo, and my family. I would be very happy staying. I could tell the neighbors that things are not as good as first described and now it's necessary to stay in Sicily for a while longer. Everybody knows the streets in America are not paved with gold; they would understand. But maybe not. Maybe that statement would bring shame to the Di Salvo name. But what if it's true? What if there's been a change for the worse in Milwaukee and what if Benedetto really wants to come back to Santa Flavia? He is much too proud, no



matter what it's really like, to come home. If I could only stay a while longer, live my life in a place I call 'home.'”

Vincenza spoke out loud, trying to give herself strength, and to remove her doubts and fears.

"I should be ashamed of these thoughts, but I cannot look forward to a place that will be different, with no family except for Cosimo. A place that will change my life and not understand me while I'm trying to adjust to it. It will take more than getting used to it. And how much has changed? Does he still love me? Cosimo loves me. Others will, too."

It didn't work. Her bold and determined voice quickly quieted, just like the celebration, and she spoke only to her desperate self. "Maybe he does not love me after these three years. Maybe I'll be alone forever. There is no choice – I cannot help myself. Maybe this is how you feel before you die."

As she wiped her eyes and straightened her back, pressing firmly against the chair, she told herself that because this day had been long and she was very tired, tomorrow none of these thoughts would trouble her. She would not let them take any space or energy that should be dedicated to Cosimo and preparation for their departure. They would take a journey not knowing what the destination or future would be like. Would they find happiness or nothing at all? Yes, it was like dying, wasn't it?

Vincenza lifted her body from the chair as though she was another person helping herself to her feet. The feeling was unnerving, yet very comforting. It was as if somebody were guiding her. The bedroom seemed farther away than ever before and the room smaller. Once in bed, she waited for the next day. And she dreaded the day when they must go to her husband in America.

Seventy-five years later, Cosimo recalled the September of 1910:

“We left Santa Flavia in a cart, riding to Palermo to board the ship. I stayed close to Grandma Rosario, tugging at her dress and sobbing all along the way. My Mother finally got me aboard the ship saying that Grandma would be along soon. (She did follow but it was years later.) I remember the ship beginning to move away from the dock and I could see Grandma and others waving good-bye and I was crying – crying for Grandma and my uncles. I remember very little about the trip except for being very sick and becoming sick

in my stomach. At Naples, the ship docked for a transfer to a larger ship, the S.S. Romania. Smaller boats came close to the ship, selling fruit and other things. Of course I asked for Grandma and kept asking till we sailed for America.

“I remember Mother taking me for a walk on the deck of the ship. She conversed with other Sicilian women who were, no doubt, going through the same experience.

“I remember it being winter and dressing or undressing, getting close to the heat (a stove) before changing.

“Very little do I remember about disembarking. I was told later that I was tagged with my father's name and address (should I be separated from my mother). I don't know if it was days or hours. I know we landed in Boston on September 12, 1911. We arrived in Milwaukee a few days later, to a stranger.”

The welcome by United States customs was not warm or friendly. This was the first of many barriers that intensified Cosimo's fear of the new country. He held on to his mother's full length coat, his brow wrinkled and the corners of his tightened lips turned downward – he was desperately fighting back tears of loneliness, of missing Santa Flavia and his sad-eyed grandmother and uncles. Their animated waves of good-bye were meant to be soothing and comforting but their eyes betrayed them. If they really didn't want to say good-bye, then why did they let Cosimo and his mother leave? Or why didn't they come to America with them? Or miraculously appear in Boston and with their arms waving greetings in broad sweeps, wiping away all the fears and pain. If his Grandma and uncles were here, they could lead Cosimo and his mother through the maze of inspectors, doctors, translators and other grumpy people who spoke an unfamiliar and ugly language. If my Grandma and uncles were here, all this would be worth it.

Cosimo's mind kept questioning while his mother was busy trying to keep her wits and heritage intact. She knew that if she could control the first few hours in America, then she would prove herself to be strong, dutiful and worthy of her husband's respect, and the respect of her new country.

Customs, in Boston, changed the little boy's name from "Cosimo" to "Cosmo," who was tired and distressed. He wanted to go to sleep in his Mother's arms and awake to the soft kisses of his Grandmother, but these would be a long time in coming.

Cosimo and his mother left Boston on a train, destination Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The heart ache of a little boy feeling abandoned was worsened when he thought that he must have left the piece of slate that Uncle Pietro had given him in Santa Flavia. When he started to cry, his mother asked, "Now what, my son?" Her patience was thinning. "What is it that makes you cry, now?" He looked lost and bewildered. He had left another treasure behind in Santa Flavia. Speaking softly and holding his breath, as if to make a wish and hope for a miracle, he hesitantly asked, "My stone, my America stone, it is back home!"

No it wasn't, she had put it in her bag before they left, and had forgotten that it was there. She gave it to him now.

"Oh, Mamma..."

Cosimo looked at the stone and tried to imagine where Milwaukee could be. If only the train could move as fast across the country as his finger crossed the piece of slate.

The noises, bumps and swaying of the train put them to sleep at different times, which meant neither slept well. This train was so unlike the train in Sicily; once they rode from Bagheria to the strait that separated it from Italy. The train was slower but a lot more fun; the windows were bigger, there was room to run up and down the corridors, and the children played under the watchful eyes of their elders. There, the sun was warm, the ride short and everybody had a good time.

On this train the elders didn't have to watch the children because there was no place to play. No one wanted to, Cosimo guessed. Why did the people have such blank stares? Did all these people leave families behind? Is this what you have to do to get a better place? Is it worth it?

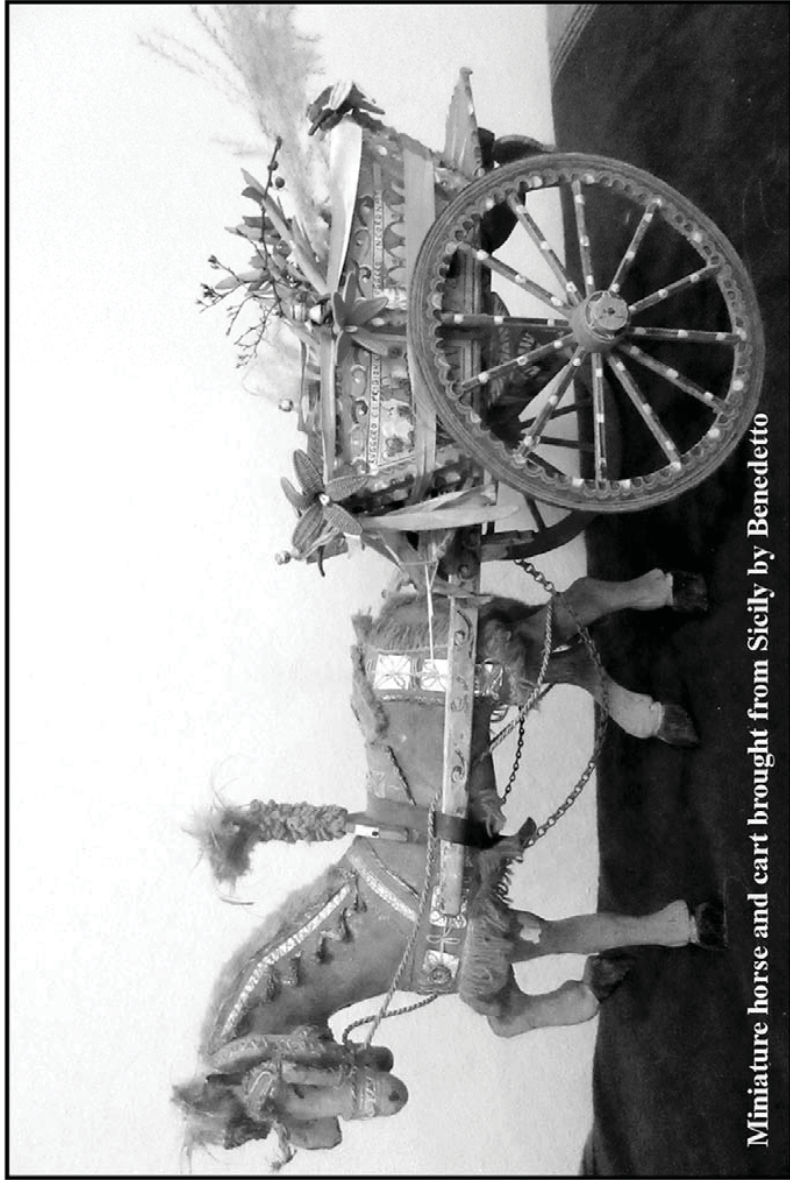
He thought that since his mamma didn't know anybody, they must be Polish and Germans, maybe Irish, but he couldn't tell from looking at them. Would all these people be friends if, magically, the train became a long banquet or kitchen table, or even an outdoor cafe? If they could eat together, they would like each other and be friends. Once, at a cafe, Cosimo had stared and stared at some men who were drinking espresso and eating pastries, and he stared until they would either swear at him or give him a pastry. They gave him a pastry.

"Where we are now, Mamma?" Cosimo said as he tried to hand the slate to his mother.

"Here, this part of the stone." Her gloved finger jabbed the slate that he held so tightly. He felt

the anxiety and frustration in her touch – even through the slate – he hoped it was not his fault. She wasn't much help in locating the spot because her finger covered so much of the stone.

He guessed they still had a long way to go.



Miniature horse and cart brought from Sicily by Benedetto

Remember When . . .



. . . religious celebrations included parades!



Benedetto Di Salvo, President

