

## The Parent Trap

### *Overcoming a Roadblock to Discovering Family History*



**Giuseppe and Emanuela  
Montanaro at their shoe  
repair shop.**

In the 1913 *Webster's Dictionary*, one of the multiple definitions of the word “family” was “those who descend from one common progenitor.” As the generations cascade down from our earliest ancestors our family tree grows ever broader. As it sprouts new branches, a diverse clan evolves representing all aspects of the human character and condition: success and failure, poverty and prosperity, honor and dishonor, fame and infamy, to name just a few. The possibility of unearthing a shocking or disappointing family skeleton deters some people from pursuing genealogical research. Sometimes, though, it is not the unknown but a more recent family-related disappointment, injury or estrangement that serves as a powerful deterrent to the search for family history. I refer to that situation as the “parent trap” and I know it well from personal experience.

In my case, the parent trap related to my father who, after nearly twenty years of marriage, left my mother, brother and me and made a new life (and family) for himself. It was traumatic for my mother and no picnic for me or my brother. Reconciliation never came for any of us. Nevertheless, my interest and pride in my father’s Italian family heritage was undiminished. The reason? I had the advantage of knowing and loving his parents, my Italian immigrant grandparents, a devoted hardworking couple who, like immigrants before and after them, left the homeland and family they knew and loved to seek a better future for their child, my father, who was born in Italy in 1927. No “parent trap” disappointment could be stronger than the bond of affection and respect I felt for my grandparents. Avoiding that trap brought the rewards of discovering my grandparents’ family stories and a trip to their ancestral Italian village I will never forget.

My grandparents, Giuseppe and Emanuela (Raimondo) Montanaro, were born to families living on the same narrow cobblestone street in Montorio Nei Frentani, Molise, Italy as the 19<sup>th</sup> century gave way to the 20<sup>th</sup>. (Two decades later, my father would also be born on that same street.) Montorio is a small mountaintop village situated just above the “spur” of the Italian “boot” near the Adriatic coast. Driving up the narrow, winding road to get to Montorio takes you past groves of olive trees and panoramic views of open countryside largely unchanged since the days when Giuseppe and Emanuela grew up there. Emanuela was

one of four children born to Pasquale and Filomena (Greco) Raimondo. Giuseppe, the son of Antonio and Carmela (DiMaulo) Montanaro, had the distinction of being the last-born of 19 children, a brood that included three sets of twins!



**Giuseppe Montanaro (seated left) with some Italian Army buddies, c. 1920**



**Emanuela Raimondo, Italy c. 1920-25**

Giuseppe began training to become a shoemaker in 1904, at the age of six. He would employ that skill during his World War I service in the Italian army from 1917 to 1921. In 1922, after returning home, he married his beloved Emanuela. Just months later, Giuseppe parted with his new bride to take advantage of an opportunity offered to Italian army veterans to travel to the United States. He arrived in New York on the SS *Colombo* traveling in steerage class and was processed at Ellis Island. He then went to live with Emanuela's older sister and brother-in-law who had immigrated earlier and settled in Jersey City.

Whatever the original plan for his trip to America and expected return to Italy, Giuseppe would not get back to Montorio and Emanuela for over three years. Despite his tradesman training, he worked as a construction laborer and ditch digger in New York and New Jersey, sending money home and hoping to convince Emanuela to emigrate as two of her siblings had done. Giuseppe returned to Montorio in 1926, staying there for several months before sailing from Naples to New York on the *Duilio*. During his return to Montorio, Emanuela became pregnant. After Giuseppe's departure back to America, she gave birth to a son. About a year later, in late 1928, Emanuela and the baby sailed from Naples to New York on the SS *Roma* and reunited with Giuseppe in Jersey City.

When the census-taker visited in 1930, my grandparents were living at 84 Coles Street in Jersey City. My grandfather gave his occupation as "general contracting laborer." Their neighborhood, formerly an Irish immigrant enclave in the second half of the 1800s, had transitioned and become home to newly-arrived Italians who replaced the Irish on those Downtown cobblestone streets. By 1935, the family had moved to a nearby apartment at 325 Third Street near the corner of Monmouth Street. Giuseppe's hard work paid off and when the census-taker returned in April of 1940, he indicated (with pride I am sure) that he was the "private business" owner of a shoemaker shop. That shop, Montanaro Shoe Rebuilding, was located in a nearby storefront at 404 Monmouth Street (near Newark Avenue). Somehow, in the depths of the Great Depression that struck

our nation in 1929 just months after my grandparents were reunited in Jersey City, they managed to adjust to a new life and save enough money to launch a local business. By the way, my grandfather told the census-taker that he had worked *62 hours* the prior week.

By the time the census-taker would return again in 1950, my grandparents had saved enough to purchase their first home, half of a four-family house on Linden Avenue in the Greenville section of Jersey City. Sadly, my grandparents' life together would end in the mid-1950s when my grandfather was stricken down by what was believed to be a cerebral hemorrhage. He was making his way to the front door to leave for work at the shoe repair shop when he suddenly fell to floor and died almost instantly. He had lived to see and delight in the births of his two young grandchildren, one his namesake. Many years after his early death, in the last years of my grandmother's long life, I realized how much she missed her home in Italy and how hard it must have been for her to leave despite her love for my grandfather. Never able to return to Italy in her lifetime, I don't think she ever completely got over the separation from her homeland and in spite of the love of her son and grandchildren, the loss of my grandfather left an unfillable void in the remaining thirty years of her life.

In 2007, I began making plans to go to Italy and visit my grandparents' village. A town of several thousand residents into the early 1950s, I found that the population was now just several hundred as the result of continuing emigration and relocation by new generations. I wrote a letter (in Italian—with the help of an on-line free translation site) to the mayor of Montorio explaining that I was planning a visit and providing information about my grandparents including copies of family photos from the early 1920s. The mayor kindly responded with a color postcard of views of Montorio and said he would try to help figure out if I might have any relations still living there.

About three months later, a letter arrived, not from the Italian mayor but instead from the kindest of gentlemen, Joseph DiStaulo, who offered his personal assistance with my visit to Montorio. Joseph, a very successful New Jersey businessman, was born in Montorio and had emigrated from there to America as a young man. A frequent visitor to the village of his birth, the mayor had told Joseph about my letter explaining that he was not having any success connecting my family to current residents of Montorio. In keeping with the thread of serendipity that is so often woven into genealogy



**Emanuela Raimondo  
Montanaro and Anthony  
Montanaro, 1927**

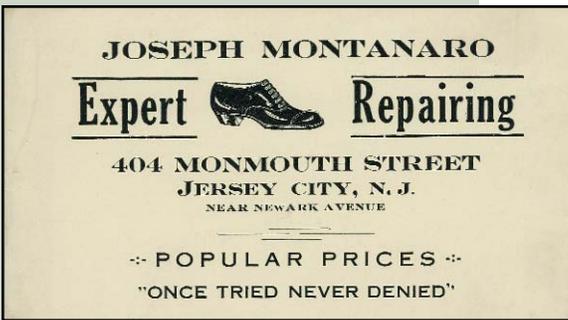


**Giuseppe Peppino  
Montanaro, c. 1925**

quests, we soon discovered that Joseph’s mother and my grandmother Emanuela were both cousins of the Montorio-born flamenco dancer, José Greco. (As a child, I once visited the dancer with my parents at his Miami hotel. Joseph himself had been a long-time close friend of José.) In June 2008, my husband and I traveled to Montorio, accepting Joseph’s offer to guide us around the village and nearby locales. When I knocked on the front door of Joseph’s Montorio row house and he warmly greeted us, it was our first actual meeting as we had only connected via letter and phone calls before that day. His companionship and generosity greatly enriched our time in Montorio.



**Giuseppe Montanaro at his shoe repair shop**



**Trade Card - Montanaro Shoe Repair Shop, 404 Monmouth St., Jersey City, NJ.**

My visit “home” to Montorio came 80 years after my grandmother Emanuela’s departure carrying my father in her arms. A young country girl, I cannot imagine how scared and emotional she must have felt as she made her way to the Port of Naples and then boarded the Roma for the voyage to America. Did she expect that she would never return to her family and the place of her birth? How painful that would have been. I believe she would have been thrilled to know that while she did not return to Montorio, I went there with a heart full of memories of her and my grandfather and a burning desire to walk on the streets where they walked, laughed and loved so long ago. During the trip, I wore an antique brooch that displayed my grandmother’s 1920s passport photo and, in my poor “broken” Italian, explained my Montorio roots to the residents I met there. That news was routinely met with a big smile and follow-up questions my weak Italian struggled to understand. I carried my camera with me



**Postcard Montorio panorama c. 1950**



**Montorio panorama 2008**

and politely asked for permission to photograph them. That too elicited smiles that I captured to remind me of a trip that closed the open loop of my Italian family journey and honored my grandparents' lives. That same year, my grandfather Giuseppe Montanaro's name was added to The American Immigrant Wall of Honor at Ellis Island. His name and the thousands of others inscribed there represent the millions that looked up in awe at Lady Liberty from the crowded decks of ships entering New York Harbor. As they stepped onto American soil for the first time at Ellis Island, their bags were few and tattered but their hopes and dreams were not.

Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw once said: "If you can't get rid of the family skeleton, you'd best teach it to dance." Genealogical research is about discovering our ancestors' lives and recognizing that whether saints or sinners, their courage and perseverance resulted in our very own lives. Connecting ourselves to the continuum of the generations that preceded us brings (sometimes "colorful") context to our own lives. Yes, you may rattle a skeleton you had not anticipated or have to get by a "parent trap" to get started but the potential of what you can learn and understand makes a powerful argument for trying just the same.



*"Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains  
as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge  
hidden in every cell of our bodies."*

*— Shirley Abbott*

# Maureen Wlodarczyk

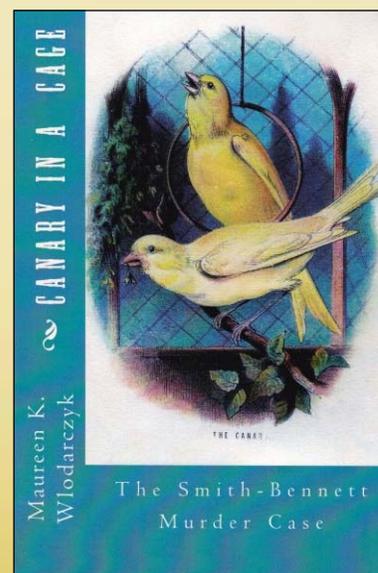
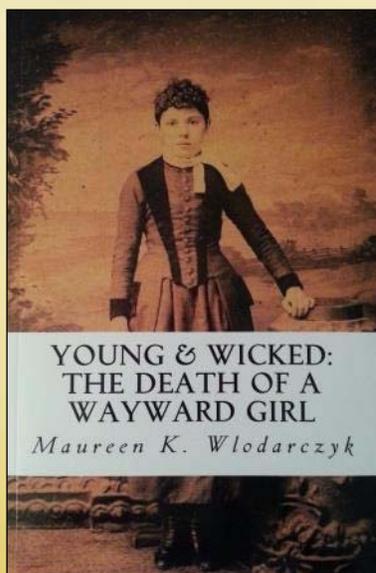
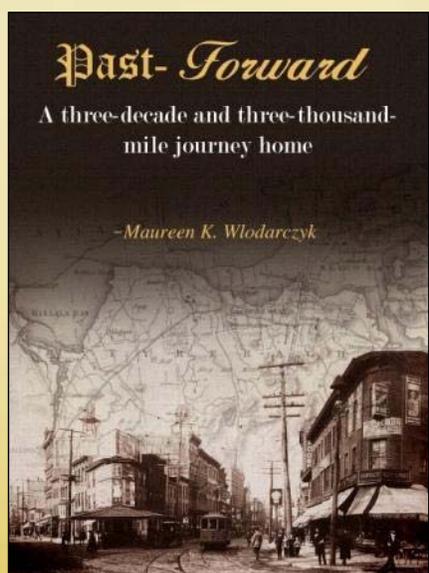
Genealogist, Speaker/Instructor & Author

## Genealogy Research Services

No-Charge Preliminary  
Consultation Search  
Reasonable Hourly Rates

## Programs & Classes

Genealogy How-To  
Writing Your Family Story  
Self-Publishing How-To



**Contact: [maureenwlodarczyk@gmail.com](mailto:maureenwlodarczyk@gmail.com) or 732-238-5555**  
**Find out more about Maureen at [www.past-forward.com](http://www.past-forward.com)**