

To My Children's Children

by Mary Santos

Mary Santos
2416 Homewood Drive
San Jose, CA 95128
(408) 296-7011

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INTRODUCTION

Growing up, I didn't know much about my family's history.
This is for my grandchildren...

Katie
Daniel
Summer
Sabrina
Hannah
Tanner
Isaac
Marcella
Tyler
and
Christopher

...that you may learn about my life growing up in
the Santa Clara Valley. You will see that life was
much different back then!

OUR ANCESTORS

Your Great Great Grandmother

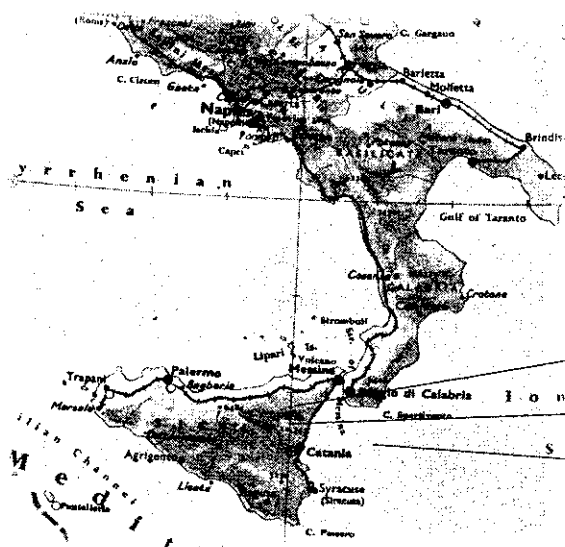
My Grandmother's name was Salvatrice Stagno. She was my mother's mom. Grandma was from Sicily. Her father (your great great great grandfather) died in a mine fire before she was born.



Your Great Grandparents

My parents (your Great-Grandparents) were both from the island of Sicily, Italy. Mama was from Villa Rosa in the province of Catania. Papa was from Adrano, which is also in the Catania province.

Papa didn't speak English very well. When asked where he was from, Papa would say "Adrano", which always sounded like "I don't know!"



Mount Etna

Adrano

Catania

The island of Sicily, is at the tip of the "boot" where Italy is. Adrano is near the base of a volcano called Mount Etna. We still have relatives in Sicily who live near the volcano.

Our family came across the country during The Depression. We traveled on a train from Lawrence, Massachusetts to California in 1929. I was about two years old. (We still have family back east).

I grew up here in San Jose with my brother, two sisters, mama and papa. When I was a little girl, our family spoke Italian. We lived in several different homes in the "Italian part" of San Jose, formerly known as Goosetown. The first house we lived in was at 1328 Plum Street. We also lived on Sherman, Sanborn, Locust and Humbolt streets. These were rental homes. The rent was always ten dollars a month. We bought our first home on 114 Alma Avenue. Our house payment was fifteen dollars a month.

Your Great Grandfather

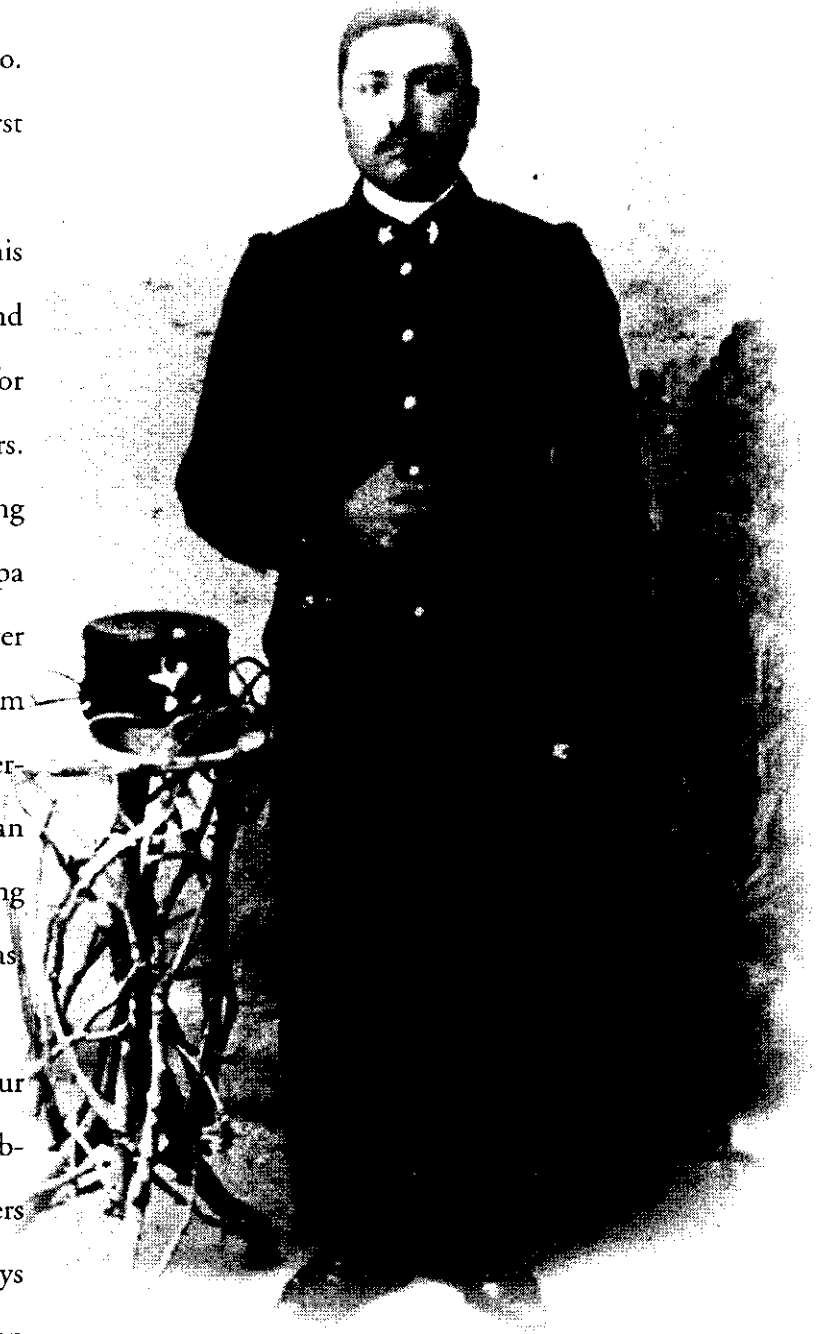
My papa's name was Giuseppe Petronio. Papa was a bugler in the U.S. Army in the first World War, 1917.

Every year, Papa made two barrels of his own wine. To do this, he bought the grapes and rented a winepress. He dug his own garden for vegetables and helped our neighbors with theirs.

Papa was a happy man - always singing Italian arias. Whenever we were at a party, Papa was always asked to sing - and he did! I've never been to the opera, but I learned the tunes from hearing Papa. He taught me to appreciate operatic music. To me, he sounded better than Luciano Pavarotti! To this day, I enjoy listening to Pavarotti, Placido Domingo, Antonio Carreras, Enrico Caruso and Mario Lanza.

Papa took good care of us. He fixed our shoes using big sheets of leather and an iron cobbler shoe form. He also cooked our pasta dinners when Mama worked in the cannery. He always took us with him when he visited old Italian friends. He used to play with us kids and give us horsy rides, bouncing us on his foot. I don't remember him ever raising a hand to me or spanking me. Papa was a very gentle, loving, kind and generous man. I loved him dearly.

Papa gave me a penny everyday to buy candy at the corner grocery store. The grocer must have gotten real tired of my little sister, Carmela, and me taking ten to fifteen minutes to pick out our penny worth of candy!



I remember the very first time I ever told my Papa a lie - I'll never forget it! He gave me a penny and I ran to the corner store to get my candy and gobbled it all up. By the time I got home, I really wanted more candy! So, I asked him for another penny. Papa asked, "What did you do with the penny I just gave you?" I told him, "I lost it." So he gave me another penny and I went and got another piece of candy. I'll never forget how guilty I felt about telling my papa a lie!

Your Great Grandmother

Mama's name was Antoinette. Before she married Papa, her last name was Stagno. Mama made all our clothes: dresses, panties, underwear - she also cut our hair for us. Mama never used a store bought pattern - just measured us and made our clothes! She took us to church every Sunday and on Holy Days. Mama was the neighborhood interpreter. She could read and write in English and Italian - a lot of the older Italians couldn't. Mama read and wrote their letters for them.

Your Great Grandma was an excellent cook. We had pasta every night, always with something different. She baked her own bread in an adobe oven in the back yard. Her baking pans were made from one gallon olive oil cans cut long ways. She also canned her own peaches, pears, tomato sauce and tomato paste. Mama made the biggest cream puffs with custard filling. She shared them with all the neighbors. She also made fig filled cookies called cuccidadies (pronounced koo chee dah dees). We always had fruit for desert.

One of our chores we had everyday was feeding the chickens and collecting the eggs. We raised our own chickens - ate our own fresh chicken and eggs every Sunday. We also raised rabbits. At Easter, I remember my brother trying to fool me into believing rabbits had brought the Easter eggs. I knew rabbits didn't lay eggs - only chickens!

Summer Camp

When I was about nine years old, I had the opportunity to go to the YWCA Summer Camp for two weeks. To get there, I sold pies. I took orders from my neighbors and sold about eight pies. They came from Greenlee's Bakery on Second Street, across the street from the YWCA. We never had a car, so I carried four pies home at a time (two trips on the bus). It was a real job getting the pies home, but it was worth it! Big Basin was so much fun! I got to see all the big trees and make a lot of friends.



This is the only picture I have of me as a child. It was photographed in a studio. I was about five years old.

WE WORKED HARD

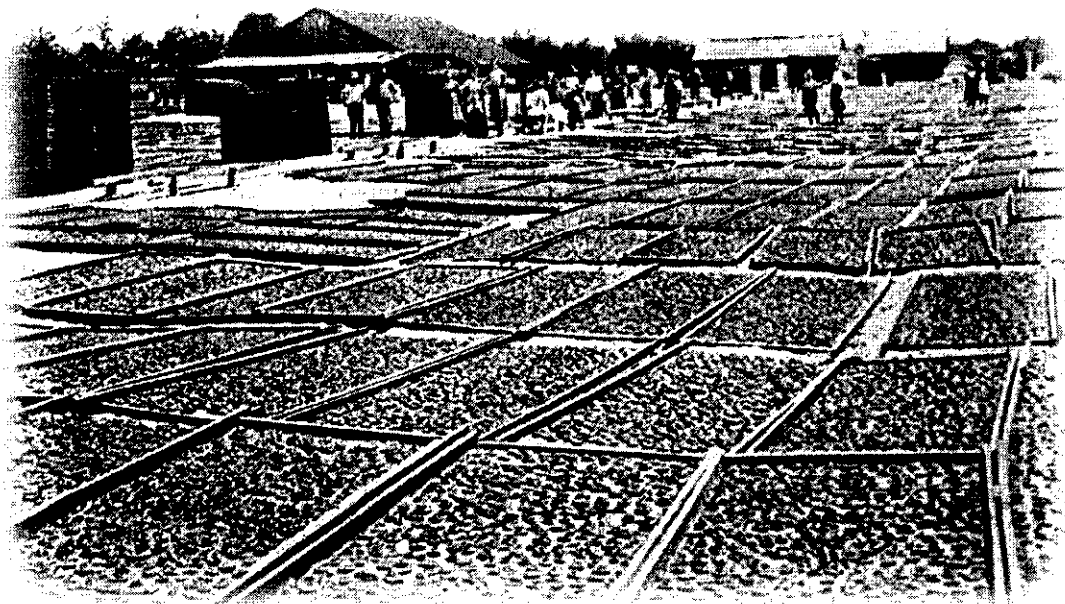
Working in the Orchards

This valley was all fruit orchards. Instead of “Silicon Valley”, we were called “The Garden City” and “The Valley of Hearts Delight”. Back then, everyone in the family worked. My mother processed fruit in the canneries. My brother, sisters and I worked in dryers (also called dry yards) cutting apricots.

The first job I remember was picking prunes. I was about three and a half years old. Too little to carry a regular bucket of prunes, I had a little bucket to fill. I'd fill my little bucket and dump it into the big boxes. The prunes were picked off of the ground. It was a dirty job. We wore pads tied to our knees made out of burlap sacks as we knelt on the ground to pick the prunes. We also cut apricots.

We cut and laid out the apricots onto wooden trays. The trays were about three feet wide and nine feet long. Older boys and men brought the boxes of fruit and dumped them into the trays to be cut. When we filled the tray we'd yell “tray”. A boy would bring an empty tray and place it on top of the filled tray. As the trays got higher, we stood on a box to reach them.

When enough trays were filled, they were taken away to be put into a sulfur burning smoker room. The apricots were smoked with the sulfur for about a day, then brought out onto the field to dry some more.



There were hundreds of trays!

It took about an hour to cut a box of fruit. We were paid only three cents a box. As we got faster we'd finish in half an hour. Working ten hours we'd make about sixty cents a day. Seven days times sixty cents was four dollars and twenty cents a week.

One of our neighbors had a truck. He would contract with the owners of the dryer and bring a truck full of people to the orchard. Everybody "cut cots".

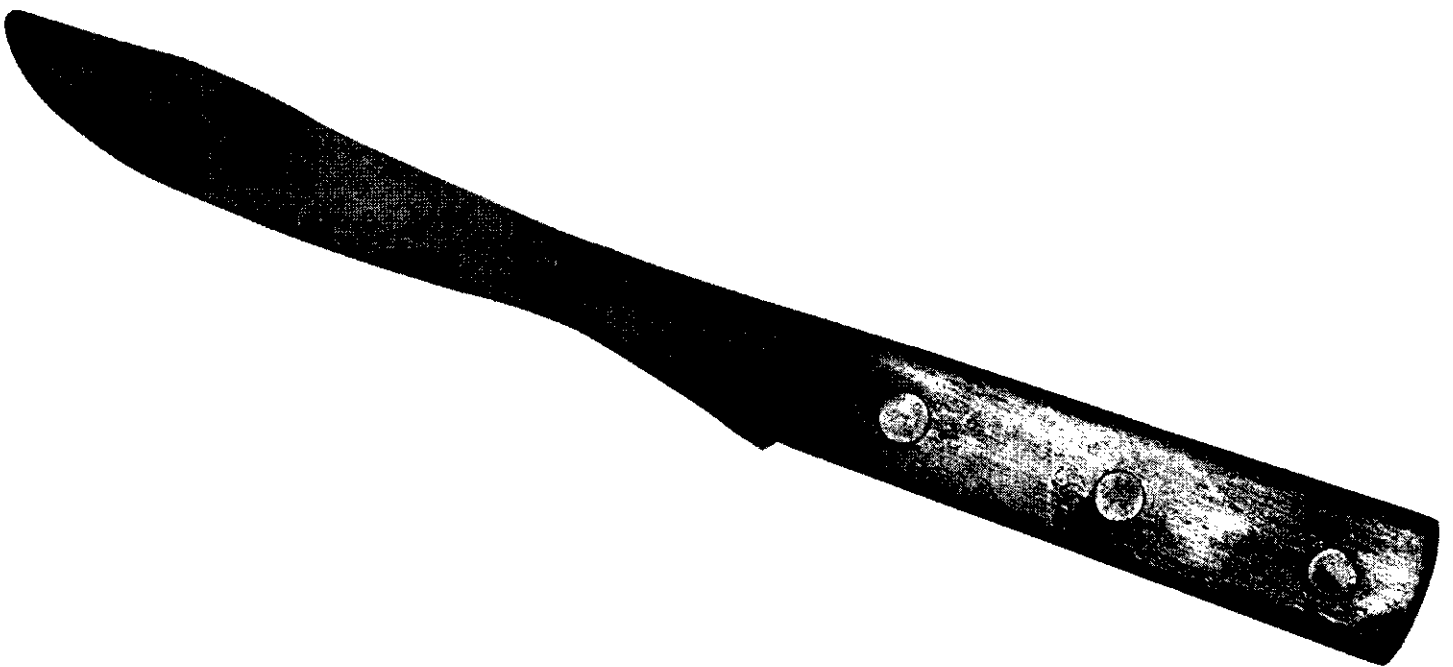
The fruit went from the trays on the fields and into the grocery stores through a processing plant such as Sunsweet. There were many canneries in our valley. Ladies worked in the canneries cutting peaches, pears, and apricots and making fruit cocktail. Men picked the fruit.

Working in the Canneries

San Jose Cannery

When I was twelve years old, I got a job at the San Jose Cannery on Lick Avenue, where I worked canning string beans. I wasn't supposed to work there until I was sixteen, but got a work permit at school and changed mine to say that I was eighteen!

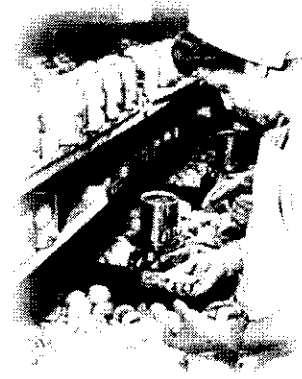
To can the string beans, first, we'd pull them apart. Next, we'd fill our hands with beans until they all laid in the same direction. We then placed the beans in a mold and each end was cut off with a big knife. I still have the knife I used to cut the beans!



After the ends were cut, we put the mold over a real can and pushed the beans into it by the way of a machine with a lever. These were the very best whole beans. All the same size and very neatly placed in the can. The filled can was placed on a conveyor belt where a lid was placed by a machine. Finally, the cans were conveyed to a cooker room and labeled.

CPC Cannery

When I was thirteen, I got a job on the night shift at the CPC (California Packing Corporation). I didn't need a work permit (I told them I was twenty-one!). I cut apricots again, but these were for canning instead of drying. We had to cover our head with a net cap and wear a blue dress uniform.



Since these "cots" went into cans, there was always a woman (floor lady) looking over our shoulder making sure we did a good job. Anything that was too soft was called "slop". We had to make sure the worms were cut out of the slop. I never knew what became of the slop. It may have been used to make jam! The pits were used to make medicine. Nothing was wasted.

The cannery is still there, parallel to the train tracks, between San Carlos Street and Auzerais Avenue. Instead of CPC, it's now called Del Monte.

U.S. Products

Next, I went to U.S. Products on Race Street. Not only did I process fruit cocktail, I tasted a marachino cherry for the first time. After that, I learned how the cherries are processed.

Marachino cherries are first bleached until white. Next, the cherries are soaked in formaldehyde (the embalming fluid that is put into corpses). Finally, the cherries are put into a red color bath with sweetener. They taste terrible without the sweetener!

Barron-Gray Packing Company

Around the early 40's, I worked at the Barron-Gray Packing Company. Barron-Gray was located on Martha Street, between Fourth and Fifth. I worked on a belt that made fruit cocktail. I either put five cherries, ten grapes, or ten pieces of pineapple into each can that went by me.



This is what it looked like inside the Barron-Gray Packing Company. Today the building is used as both a warehouse for canned foods and as studio space for local artists.

I was at Barron-Gray in 1944, when the end of World War II was announced. I'll never forget it! Everyone went crazy and threw fruit cocktail at each other and all over the cannery. We quit work early that day. It was fun to leave work with everybody and go downtown to celebrate!



This is downtown San Jose as I remember it in the 1940's. It was the place to be!

The Mission Theater

Another job I had was as an usherette at the Mission movie theater. I worked at the theater with my little sister, your Great Aunt Carmela.

At the theater, we carried a flashlight and escorted people to their seats in the dark theater (movie ushers don't do that anymore!). We worked a split shift, from noon to midnight (noon to three, then six to midnight). If our shift was shorter, we'd go out dancing!

While working at the Mission, a movie star named Barbara Hale came to the theater for a movie opening. I got her autograph and the newspaper photographers took her picture with me in it! I was given a copy of the photo standing next to the beautiful movie star. She was in all the Perry Mason mystery movies as Raymond Burr's secretary.



This is the photograph that was in the newspaper of Barbara Hale signing autographs. I'm standing next to her in the checkered jacket. Your Great Aunt Carmela is on the far right.

Dancing to the Big Bands

Dancing was our main recreation. The big bands all came to San Jose. My sisters and I loved to dance and we went every chance we'd get! We did a lot of "jitter bugging". There were so many dance halls in San Jose: the Balconades, the Majestic, the Palomar, the Civic Auditorium, and the U.S.O. (United Service Organization). I saw and danced to a lot of the big bands. There was Harry James and his trumpet, Tommy Dorsey and his trombone, Jimmie Dorsey played the saxophone, Benny Goodman played his clarinet, Artie Shaw, Frank Sinatra, Glenn Miller. They all came to the Civic Auditorium.

The biggest crowd ever was when over eight thousand people came to see Harry James and his orchestra. He had married Betty Grable, the pin up girl with the most beautiful legs. Everybody wanted to get a glimpse of the beautiful movie star. All the GI's (service men) had her poster in their lockers or barracks. It was a really famous picture! The place was so packed that we were squeezed in like sardines. If you were on the dance floor, you didn't get to sit down. If you had a seat, you couldn't squeeze onto the dance floor!

ON MY OWN

Graduation

I graduated from San Jose High School when I was seventeen, in June, 1944. Mama died right after that. She had been very sick with cancer and was in the hospital for a long time. She died two days after Easter. Papa had died a few years before her when I was only thirteen.

After graduation, instead of working in the canneries, I had office jobs. I had taken commercial courses in high school such as typing, shorthand, bookkeeping and office machines.



Rosecrucian Museum

My first job out of high school was as a Private Secretary to the Controller at the Rosecrucian Egyptian Museum and Planetarium. I did typing and took dictation in shorthand. My boss dictated letters to me, which I took down in shorthand. Every letter was almost always the same (they should have had a form letter). I typed up the letters so that Mr. Emminger could sign them at the end of the day.

As a Secretary, I made \$22.50 a week. I got paid in cash in an envelope every week. A twenty-dollar bill, a two-dollar bill, and fifty cents in change.

At first, I thought getting a job as a private secretary was pretty good! Down the hall, there was a room full of people who did nothing but type all day long. However, I became disenchanted when I realized that you had to belong to the Rosecrucian Order to get a decent salary. I went back to the Unemployment Office on Santa Clara Street and looked for a different job.

County Welfare Office

My next job was with the County Welfare Office. My job entailed reading the newspaper from cover to cover, checking out all the births, deaths, marriages and divorces with our files. If any of the articles were about our clients or welfare recipients, I cut them out of the paper and sent them to their social workers. I worked in the Social Service Exchange (SSX).

The Welfare Office was a big place with almost one hundred employees. The building was like a big warehouse. We were freezing in the winter and roasting in the summer. I couldn't understand why all the social workers, with their college degrees, would put up with working in such a lousy building at such a low paying job. And why did they want to be social workers? We were treated worse than the welfare recipients, working in such deplorable conditions.

I earned a much better salary, however, was only paid once a month. There were days I walked to work, all the way from my home on Alma Avenue to the County Welfare Office on Saint James Street. Bus fare was only five cents, but I didn't know how to budget my money. By the end of the month, I was always broke!

How I Met Your Grandpa

Grandpa and I met in 1945 at one of those dances I was always going to. That's where I first say him. He was very shy, but I kept watching him until he finally noticed me. I had already decided that I was very interested in him, but he took a real long time to realize that I was. He was always with a bunch of guys who would ask me to dance with them, but he would never ask me.



Grandpa sitting in his black 1940 Ford

Finally, there was a Halloween Dance. I was dressed like a hobo with overalls and patches on them and really looking bad. When there was a ladies tag dance, I went up to him and asked him to dance so that he couldn't say "no". I probably embarrassed him, but he danced with me the rest of the night!

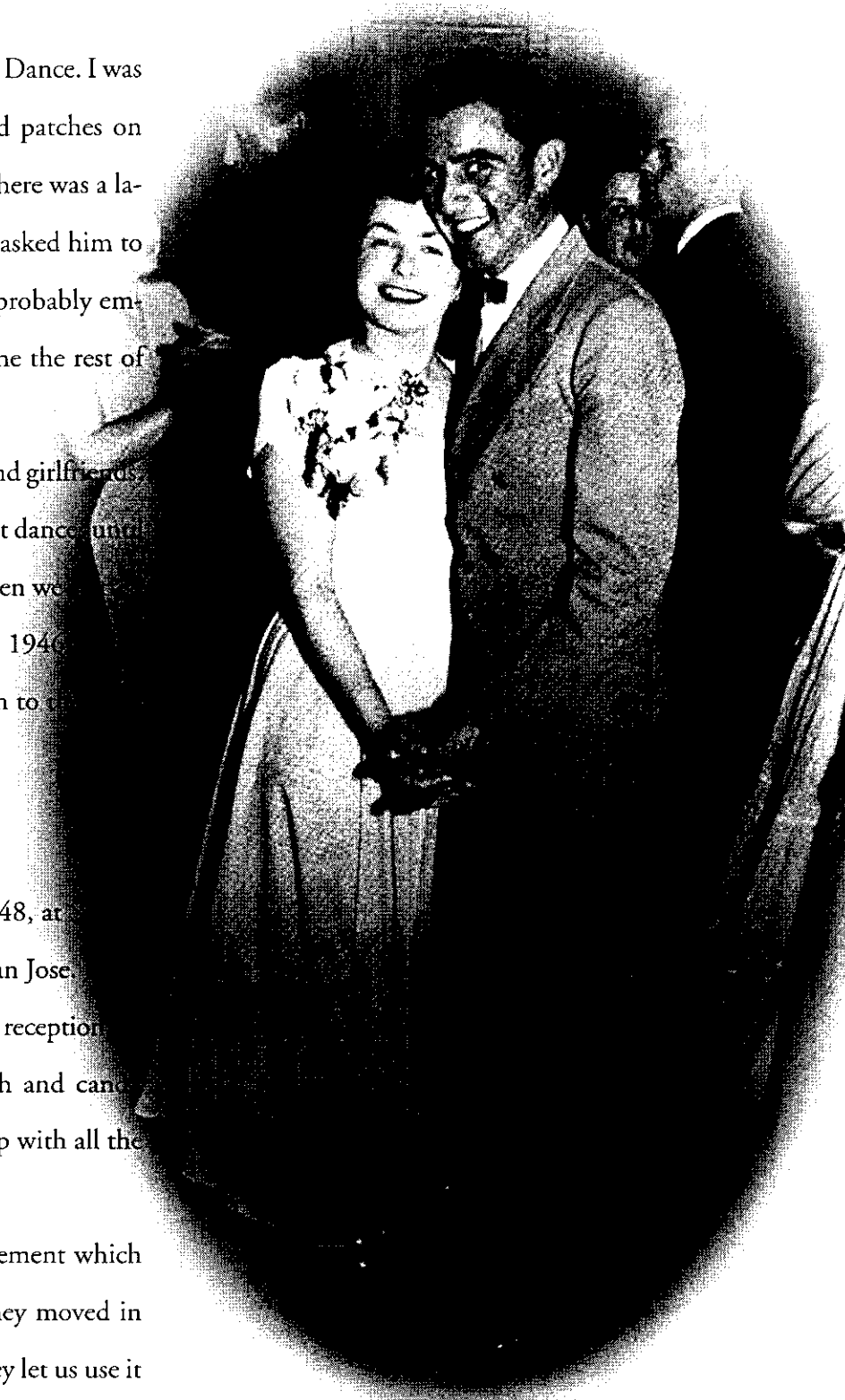
I went home with my sisters and girlfriends, but your grandpa and I kept meeting at dance until he finally asked to take me home. Then we started dating "steady". We were engaged in 1946. It took two years before I could get him to propose.

Our Wedding

We were married in June, 1948, at Heart Church on Willow Street in San Jose. I planned a very simple wedding. At the reception we were just going to have cake, punch and candy mints. I ended up having a lot of help with all the arrangements.

The neighbors had a big basement which used to be a speakeasy hall before they moved in (back in the days of prohibition). They let us use it for the reception. A friend, whose father had a nursery, donated all the flowers and decorated the church and reception hall. All of the pews had ribbons and flowers tied on them. There were big baskets of flowers everywhere.

The best man (your Great Uncle Joe) said it was "Spanish tradition" for him to buy the wedding cake. He ordered a tall tiered layer cake. It was something that I could never have afforded!



ighbors came to the wedding and a lot of relatives there. My brother, (great Uncle) gave me away and supplements, music and dancing. We had beer instead of hors d'oeuvres and but we had a lot of fun!



Our Wedding Party: George Ferreira (grandpa's cousin), Frances Pratico, Sam Pertonio (your great uncle), me, Grandpa, Betty Santos (your great aunt), Joe Pena (your great uncle), Josephine Panzica and Joe Pereira.

Married Life

I was lucky enough to have a husband with a full-time job. Grandpa worked at a wood mill called the PM Mill (Pacific Manufacturing Company). He worked on a machine called a “sticker”. The sticker made moldings for homes and buildings. Almost all of the moldings for doors, windows and baseboards in the Santa Clara Valley came from sticker machines at the mill. It was the biggest industry in the city of Santa Clara at that time. Grandpa worked there for nineteen and a half years - just six months short of being able to get a pension from them.

A lot of men lost their jobs when the mill closed down. Some of them went into their own cabinet making businesses. Grandpa found work as a truck driver for Glaser Brothers Wholesale Distributors. He delivered candy and tobacco to stores from Gilroy to San Francisco. His route was mostly in Santa Clara County. He retired in 1985 when he was sixty-two.

Hall of Records

I kept taking tests to better myself and got my next job at the Hall of Records (next to the County Courthouse). I worked for the County Recorder, Charles A. Payne. What a difference it was, going to the big, imposing building on First Street. The Records Office paid a little better, but there were all “old ladies” working there! I was twenty years old, the youngest person in the office.

I recorded legal papers all day long - what they called “the specials”. I typed up birth certificates, marriage licenses, declaration of homesteads, trust deeds and all kinds of legal papers. I worked there until I had my first child, Robert. While I was pregnant, I got all my doctor visits off. My boss, Mr. Payne, would excuse me to go to the doctor and not count it against my sick leave. When I got sick with toxemia and had to go home, I got paid right up to the day my first child was born. Every time Mr. Payne let me off to go for my doctor visits, he always said to me, “have fun while you’re young!”

Working for the County Records office was okay. We got time off for fifteen-minute breaks, mornings and afternoons. We would go to the lunch counter at Aiassa’s Market for coffee. It was on the corner of Market Street and St. James. The breaks always lasted longer than fifteen minutes! The judges and lawyers went there, too. The County Records office was the last paying job I had until I became a full-time mom.

Starting a Family

When my children were little, we used to go for Sunday rides in the car. We'd look at the blossoming trees around our valley and under the trees were all these beautiful yellow flowers. I explained to the kids these were mustard greens and that mustard came from these flowers. It must have impressed my two year old, Sherryl. The following week when we went riding in the car, she saw the flowers again and said, "Look at all the mayonaise!"

Our family has it's own Christmas tradition. We've had a party on Christmas Eve for all the relatives ever since we've lived on Homewood Drive. All our relatives gather here. We visit, exchange gifts, and go to midnight mass. Cousin Jack drives all the way from Oregon every year to come to our party. This year, cousin Jim came from Washington with his new wife Dona. We've been doing this for so long that I don't even send out invitations! It's a standing yearly invitation and all are welcome.

The American Legion

When Grandpa and I moved to Homewood Drive, he joined the American Legion Post 419 in Santa Clara. I joined the Legion Auxiliary. I've held almost every office there is in the Auxiliary. I was the president in 1965-66.

The Legion became nearly all of our social life! We went to monthly dances and Friday night dinners. Grandpa joined the bingo group and helped run the bingo games. I played bingo on Tuesdays and Thursday nights. Once a year, we go to go to Reno or Tahoe for a weekend.

We've cut down on our activities with the Legion. I still attend meetings. Grandpa's social life has become watching his grandson, Tanner, play baseball!



Our Own Orchard

We were blessed with five children. Robert and Steven became firefighters. Sherryl works for the county as a bookkeeper for the county school department. Douglas lives in Montana and is employed by the University of Montana at Missoula. Christie is at San Jose State University taking up photography and teaching computers, which have now taken over our valley.



Grandpa and I have lived in the same house for almost fifty years. When we moved into our home in April, 1951, the lot had previously been a pear orchard. After the track was built, there were still five pear trees on our property. I made delicious pear jam until the last tree died. We still have a Santa Rosa plum tree, which was planted in 1951 for our first son Robert. Since then, we've had peach, pear, apricot and tangerine trees. I've made jam from all of our trees, except for the tangerine. These trees were gifts from Grandpa's mother, your Great Grandma Santos-Bellamy.

This valley has changed dramatically, but our backyard is still a lovely garden. You can sit in back and enjoy the many birds that come to visit. The hummingbirds are the smallest and the cutest. They dart from plant to plant getting nectar from the lemon tree and the tangerine tree blossoms. Hummingbirds seem to like our fuchsia flowers best. We've had doves, mockingbirds, bluebirds, robins, sparrows and all kinds of birds come to visit us. Today, Grandpa told me we have a dove nest in the tangerine tree with two baby doves in it. We also have an apricot tree, and the original plum tree we planted forty seven years ago. We have our own little orchard!



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