

A. P. Giannini: The San Jose and Alviso Years

And the Oneto Family

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Preface

What a great man, A.P. Giannini. The builder of the banking empire that became the Bank of America. He forever changed the banking world and made opportunities for all regardless of status in life. And helped the economic growth of his beloved California and the rest of our country.

One of the first things I learned when I married into the Joseph Oneto family, was that all his children had worked for Giannini, that my in-laws had met at one of the branches in San Francisco. And I learned that San Jose was in the picture but I didn't hear from them in what way.

Writing this short paper has lead me to learn the connections and to understand why the family devoted their careers working for A.P. Giannini and the Bank of America. This is just a small touch on the greatness of the man.

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A.P. GIANNINI: THE SAN JOSE AND ALVISO YEARS

And the Oneto Family

The founder of the greatest bank of the world, The Bank of America, A. P. Giannini, is best known as a San Franciscan because that is where he started his bank as the Bank of Italy. But he actually was from the Santa Clara Valley. He was born in San Jose on May 18, 1870 just seven months after his parents had arrived in California from Northern Italy. He was christened Amadeo Pietro¹ and he lived the first twelve years of his life in San Jose and Alviso.

His parents were twenty-two year old Luigi Giannini and fifteen year-old Virginia De Martini who came from a well off farm family near Genoa, Italy. How he romanced her in Italy after his return from California makes for a interesting story, in another narrative. They booked passage to America and were pioneer travelers from New York to California in the just completed transcontinental railroad. They arrived in late September of 1869. Luigi used the last of his savings to lease a twenty-two room hotel and that was where Amadeo Pietro was born.²

San Jose had been the capital of California, but had declined in importance and glamour since the legislators moved the capital to Sacramento. And the gold rush was over. But a railroad had come in connecting San Jose to San Francisco. Suddenly, San Jose became a busy market center for the scores of smaller farm communities scatered throughout the rich and fertile Santa Clara Valley.³

On the outskirts of town, smoke billowed from a half-dozen or so flour mills, lumberyards, and meat-packing firms. San Jose's

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economy was expanding and generating opportunities. The Gianninis had arrived at a good time. Luigi leased the Swiss Hotel which was located at 248-250 Market Street¹, a dusty, crowded main throughfare of San Jose, now having a population of about 13,000.²

Soon it became a busy boarding house and hub for the other Italians of the area, mostly young single men who worked as sharecroppers, day laborers, and migrant workers. Like Luigi, they had first traveled to California hoping to strike it rich in the mines. But they continued to come after the gold was gone, because it seemed to be a good place for ambitious, hard-working men to find success.³

According to several accounts, Luigi Giannini was something of a conspicuous figure among the thousands of transplanted, largely midwestern farmers who swarmed into San Jose. Tall, handsome, broad-shouldered, with pale blue eyes and a dark handlebar mustache, he was remembered by many neighbors many years later as a quiet man of few opinions and even fewer words. These traits undoubtedly had something to do with the racial prejudices of San Jose's Anglo-American residents. Many of them objected to the presence of foreigners. The Chinese were the town's most racially despised group and frequent victims of punitive legislation and savage mob violence. But Italians also faced a good deal of hostility. The local press went so far as to warn city officials about too large an increase in their numbers. Luigi undoubtedly knew better than to risk more than a brief conversation with anyone besides his Italian boarders at the Swiss Hotel.⁴

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The Gianninis prospered for two years there, and then sold their lease to the hotel to buy forty acres of orchard land in Alviso, a hamlet just eight miles from San Jose. A second son was born there, Attilo Henry, in July 1874. Luigi continued to prosper for another two years, raising his own fruits and vegetables and selling them to the growing number of commission firms in San Francisco. He began preparations to clear more land and plant more trees.!

Then tragedy struck. On August 14, 1876, Luigi was shot and killed by a transient farm worker over a dispute of wages of one or two dollars. The facts of the disagreement were related to the police by Luigi himself, who regained consciousness long enough to name his assailant. The culprit was apprehended a few days later, convicted of murder and sent to prison.² Little Amadeo Pietro Giannini was six years old, Attilo was two. How would they fare now without a father to guide them?

The young widow, Virginia Giannini, began some grim years. She was twenty-two and living in an isolated and not always hospitable community. She had to assume total daily responsibility for those forty acres. To add to her hardship, she would soon have to give birth, for she was pregnant at the time of Luigi's death. It was another son, George, born in February 1877. Through strenuous efforts she survived the tragedy. Neighbors were impressed by her courage and genial disposition in the face of adversity. One of those neighbors remembers "a remarkable woman, unafraid and

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intelligent." Young Amadeo, Attilo, and George Giannini were in good hands.

It was then that she introduced young Giannini to the commission houses on the San Francisco waterfront. She made periodic boat trips navigating through precarious rocky shoals of the peninsula coast to sell their fruits and vegetables.

Many years later, John Leale, a captain of the bay steamer, REFORM, would remember the two Gianninis: a pleasant, attractive widowed woman and her small son sitting quietly together on the crowded deck of his boat, as it moved through the cold predawn darkness of the bay.²

It was on one of those trips that Virginia met Lorenzo Scatena, who was working at a commission firm at the San Francisco waterfront at the time. The summer of 1880, when they were married, the family's prospects improved. Lorenzo Scatena, too, was from Northern Italy, a native of Genoa and had come to San Jose when he was twelve. He had found work hauling produce for the local farmers and then at a commission firm in San Francisco. He was nearly thirty, still looking to find his niche. Stocky, barrel-chested, with luminous large eyes and a ready smile, Lorenzo was a gentle, soft-spoken man who soon became the focus of immense admiration by Virginia's children. "Pretty soon we were calling him 'Pop' or 'Boss,'" Giannini would recall, "bestowing on him a nickname which his friends used until the end of his days."³

Virginia believed in education, and as soon as Giannini was

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old enough, she sent him to the one-room schoolhouse in Alviso. His classmates were the children of the town's polygot of immigration population. He remembered the experience with pleasure in later years. "I studied with children of many nationalities," he said, "Portuguese, French, German, Armenian, Spanish, Japanese, and Americans. Unable to pronounce my Italian name, they called me 'Amador Jennings.' I had a good time at school learning as quickly as any of the pupils and establishing friendships which endured throughout life."¹

Maybe Tom Foon, son of Chinese immigrant, Sai Yin Chew, was one of those longtime friends. In 1890, Chew had established Precita Canning Co., a tomato cannery which was demolished during the disastrous earthquake of 1906 which happened in April. He rebuilt it in Alviso in time for the 1906 crop later that year. The new cannery was called the Bayside Canning Company. It was that same year of 1906 that Sai Yin's son, Tom Foon, joined the firm. He quickly began expanding the business. Foon was a personal friend of A.P. Giannini who extended money to Foon to expand the firm. By 1924, the cannery was a three million dollar operation, with two additional plants.²

But back to the story of the Scatenas. Lorenzo was successful with the farm; but for some reason his success didn't last. He decided to move the family back to San Jose and he resumed the kind of work he knew best: hauling produce.

Virginia had other ideas. She had bright plans for the family. Having observed the commission business in San Francisco, she knew

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more money could be earned there than by farming. She encouraged Lorenzo to seek commission work and in 1882, he finally did. He found a job with the A.Galli Company, one of the largest and influential on the San Francisco waterfront.¹

The family settled in North Beach and Lorenzo continued at the Galli Company until he started his own company, L. Scatena and Company, a year or two later. Virginia, again, had given him the encouragement to venture on his own.²

Giannini continued his schooling. He was remembered as a friendly and serious-minded boy with a conspicuous streak of stubborn independence. He was a good student and excelled in spelling and writing. He started using those talents to solicit business from growers for the Scatena company unbeknownst to Lorenzo, who discovered it when he started getting orders he hadn't solicited. Twelve year old Giannini had been spending his afternoons away from school hunched over his step-father's desk on the docks writing his letters. Growers within a wide radius of San Francisco had received letters promising "honest prices on the barrelhead and quick service" if you dealt with the firm of L. Scatena and Company. It was the first time anyone had solicited their business directly by mail, and they responded to the novelty.³

Soon after, Giannini started escaping to the waterfront at night despite his mother's desire for him to concentrate on schooling. In the spring of 1885, at fifteen, he announced he was quitting school. To soften the blow, he promised his mother he

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would enroll in a three-month course in accounting at Heald's Business School in downtown San Francisco. He became impatient and petitioned for an early exam after six weeks. He passed it and joined his step-father's commission firm on the waterfront. There, with the help of the firm's bookkeeper, he continued to learn about keeping books.¹

The commission trade was no place for those unable to withstand the daily struggle of fierce competition and quick decision making, but Giannini thrived on it. He was so successful even in those early years of 15 through 19, that he earned the reputation as a bright, savvy, enormously aggressive young man who could more than hold his own. His competitors called him "Young Scatena" but more commonly "A.P.," a nickname that stayed with him the rest of his life.²

His efforts for the family business resulted in great prosperity for L.Scatena and Company. Lorenzo was forced to move the company to larger quarters a couple of times. Giannini spent several years "on the road" soliciting new customers for the firm. He drove himself mercilessly, starting at sunrise and ending into the night, staying at various boarding homes. There were no cars in those days of the 1880s. He criss-crossed the Sacramento Valley on horseback in pursuit of the produce commissions.³

During all of his trips, he took time to learn from the farmers. Their success or failure in cultivating their vast acres of fruits and vegetables was closely related to his firm's profits. On his horse, he traveled from farmhouse to farmhouse

throughout the countryside to talk with growers about their plans for the upcoming season, about the soil and weather conditions, or just about anything else they thought might affect the market."His curiosity about local conditions was insatiable," an associate later commented. "He never tired of stopping strangers in remote farm towns to ask them question after question, until satisfied he knew almost as much about the economic life of the community as they did." /

Giannini did similar activities years later around 1916 when he was opening bank branches in the San Joaquin Valley. By that time automobiles had been invented, and he travelled in a touring black Packard with a driver. Together they covered the vast San Joaquin Valley going from farm to farm through the long dusty country roads. This time he was seeking depositors, selling bank stock, and encouraging the farmers to use the bank, his bank. Even the family outings were sometimes used to visit the farms and towns. He must have gotten to know a vast majority of the farmers and the small business people of the whole state as his branching empire grew. And indeed, it grew . By 1953 there were 538 branches in California in 317 California cities and towns, and nine branches overseas.²

It must have been on one of those excursions that Mr. Giannini made the acquaintance of my husband's family, The Joseph "Guiseppe" Oneto family from Merced. They farmed 131 acres on McSwain Road two miles north of Merced which Joseph had bought in

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1898. Giannini and Joseph would have found out that they had much in common. Both came from Northern Italian families and both had a Cuneo in the family. Joseph's sister, Catarina, married a Cuneo in Italy, and Giannini's wife was a Cuneo, Clorinda Agnes, from the large Cuneo family of San Francisco. Imagine the discovery! Or maybe they knew of each other before. My husband, Jack, and his cousins don't know how or when the two met. Whichever way it was, Joseph Oneto's family became lifelong friends and almost all of Joseph's children were part of the success of the Bank of Italy and the Bank of America.

Frank Oneto, the oldest son, worked in the Madera branch, at the head office in San Francisco, helped open the branch in 1934 in Sebastopol, and then finished the rest of his twenty-five years at the branch in Fresno.¹

Daughter Josephine and her husband, Doug Hartsough, met at the Merced branch. Married women weren't allowed to work in the bank, so Josephine had to quit. Sister Adeline used to tease her by calling her "Giannini's right-hand man." She used to do so much for the bank. Adeline's daughter, Barbara, later worked at a branch in San Francisco.²

Second son, Frank, retired in 1967 as assistant vice president after serving 47 years at the branch in Merced. That branch opened on June 7, 1916 and in 1917 when Frank was 15 and in high school he was trusted with the job of transferring money and bullion between the courthouse and the branch office. This little known fact Frank related to son-in-law Gary Honeycutt of Fresno.³

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Third son, Laurence Oneto, met his wife, Emma Papina, when they both worked at the Day and Night branch in San Francisco. He served the bank about fifteen years, finishing at the Temescal Branch in Oakland in the late 1940s..¹

Now, back to Giannini's story. Because farmers had little control over the marketing of their goods, they were often exploited. The commission trade had more than its share of con men, and swindlers who either refused to honor their contracts or to send farmers all the money their crops had earned in San Francisco..²

In contrast to these practices, Giannini quickly established a remarkable reputation for personal integrity and honest business practices. He was up front with the farmers about his prices which were firm and reflected fair market value. Plus, he paid his farmers in cash and on time..³

Besides his integrity, Giannini was also famous for his remarkable memory for names, dates, and faces, even after the passage of many years. He had a similar talent with numbers. This astonishing ability for nearly total recall convinced many who came in contact with him that Giannini was a genius..⁴

Because of his extraordinary memory, he could digest huge amounts of technical and financial information at breakneck speed. figure swiftly and keep totals and percentages in his recollection, and remember the balance sheet figures of scores of banks from year to year..⁵ With such ability, how could he not be success-

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ful in expanding the Bank of Italy which he started in 1904 in San Francisco and whose first branch expansion was in 1909 in San Jose where he was born. The bank that became the Bank of America in 1930 and has stayed as one of the largest in the world.

His aim was to help the common man. As Clyde Arbuckle states in HISTORY OF SAN JOSE: "As a growing boy and mature man, one thing that consistently angered him--the big banks slighting the little farmer and small businessman. To him, any man who made a small patch of ground more productive or intelligently conducted a hole-in-the-wall store was entitled to unstinted banking service something theretofore reserved for big landowners and merchant princes....." /

For forty-five years he guided his bank. Most of the time his ideas and practices were against the established way of banking. They created great opposition especially by Washington, big titans of Wall Street like JP Morgan, and many local banks. But he never shied away from the challenges and was able to reform the banking practices of the world for the good of all.

We should remember him with this quote from BIOGRAPHY OF A BANK: "As to prestige, that was something Giannini enjoyed as well as the next one. The local renown that had come as a result of the Bank of Italy's small but noteworthy triumphs was dear to him. He was ambitious to perpetuate and enhance that renown, though not by making money for himself. The more A.P.Giannini saw of rich men the less he wanted to be one. The more he saw of other banks the less he wanted his bank to be like them." 2

FOOTNOTES

Page One

1. Bonadio, Felice A. A.P. GIANNINI, BANKER OF AMERICA, University of California Press. 1994, p. 3
2. Ibid. p. 2
3. Ibid.

Page Two

1. Arbuckle, Clyde. HISTORY OF SAN JOSE, Memorabilia of San Jose, 1986, p. 236
2. Bonadio, Op.cit. p. 3
3. Ibid. p. 3
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1. Bonadio, Op. cit. p. 9
2. Ibid. p. 10
3. Ibid. p. 12-13

PAGE EIGHT

1. Bonadio, Op.cit., p. 11
2. Ibid., p. 63

PAGE NINE

1. Phone interview with Frank Oneto's family
2. Phone interview with Josephine Oneto's Family and with Adeline Oneto's Family
3. Phone interview Paul Oneto's Family

PAGE TEN

1. Interview with Laurence Oneto's family
2. Bonadio, Op. cit., p. 14
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid, xxi and xxii

PAGE ELEVEN

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2. James, Marquis and James, Bessie R., BIOGRAPHY OF A BANK: THE STORY OF THE BANK OF AMERICA N.T. & S. A., Harper & Brothers, 1954

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Conversions by telephone with the Oneto Cousins:

Mr. Bruce Oneto, Boulder Creek, CA

Mrs. Maralou Ellis, Smith River, CA

Mrs. Jane Irwin , Fresno, CA

Mr. Roland Hartsough, Healdsburg, CA

Mrs. Barbara Wood, Anderson, CA

Mrs. Pauline Youd, Modesto CA

Mrs. Nancy Wamhoff, Fresno, CA

Mrs. Toni Honeycutt and Gary Honeycutt

Mr. John Oneto, Campbell CA

Mr. Art Oneto, Bethel Island, CA

Mr. and Mrs. Tom Oneto, Danville, CA



Oneto Family Merced Ranch. 1910



Joseph Oneto Family 1910 ±
 Guiseppe, Giovanna, Josephine
 Frank, Adeline, Laurence, Paul
 Merced