

MARIA TENNE DIFILIPPO

Maria Carmella Tenne was born in Montenero Val Cocchiaro, Italy in 1912. It is in a rural area of Italy in what is now the Isernia province. The area is generally referred to as Abruzzo. Calling the length of the Italian boot North-South, it is located in the middle of the country on an east west basis and almost midway between Rome and Naples on a north-south basis in the Apennine Mountains.

Life was not easy. There was no electricity, kerosene lamps provided light. No running water. Water was contained in cisterns for most uses and brought in by donkey from the town well for cooking and drinking. It was a rural area dominated by subsistence farming. Crops were grown and animals were raised to provide food for the family. There were no cash crops of significance. The only source of cash was occasional work in larger towns nearby and money sent from relatives in America.

Maria, my mother, was the second of the four children of Marco and Cecilia DiFiore Tenne. To provide cash for his family, Marco adopted a ritual common to many Italians of that era. He would come to the United States to work, in his case the steel mills of Chicago, for many months at a time and send money back to his family in Italy. During one of his times in Chicago, disaster struck. When Maria was twelve her mother died an accidental death. Marco, now a United States citizen, quickly returned home. His first concern was for his four children ages five to 16. He needed someone to care for them when he was back in Chicago, so he quickly remarried. He and his second wife, Ermenzina, had two male children, Maria's half-brothers. I cannot imagine the trauma for the twelve-year-old Maria. She lost a mother to accidental death at such a young age and then immediately got a stepmother with whom she had no close connection.

Maria's education was, at most, a primary education which was compulsory in Italy at that time. Perhaps it was because of her minimal education that she developed a fixation on education. This is one of the reasons she had a burning desire to come to America. Maybe there she should get an education. Through constant cajoling, frequent demands and stubborn persistence she persuaded Marco to bring her to America. So on in February of 1930, she and her father boarded the MS Augustus to sail to New York, arriving on February 18, 1930.

Unfortunately, her dreams of an education in America were not to be fulfilled. Shortly after she arrived, she was married to Giovanni DiFilippo in Chicago. He, too, was from Montenero, was eight years her senior and had come to America in 1921. It was an arranged marriage.

She and Giovanni began their life together in Lorain, Ohio, he working at the large steel mill in that city. They lived there for the remainder of their lives. They had three boys and two girls. From the moment each of them could understand it, the drumbeat of education began. High school was to be finished with honors. College was not a goal it was an expectation. Education was important for each of their children, important but

even more important, for the girls as the boys. This was at a time when higher education was not nearly as prevalent as it is now. When all was done her children had obtained five bachelor's degrees, three master's degrees and one Ph. D. Good job Maria!

To be able to afford to send their children to college in this pre-student-loan era, Mary (as she was called for most of her life in the USA) went to work outside the home in 1952 as nurse's aide at Saint Joseph Hospital. She worked, primarily in the pediatrics department, for 25 years until retirement. This was a time of great fulfillment for her. She was helping with the education of her children, contributing to society on her own and earning the respect of nurses, doctors and parents. She was rightfully proud of what she had accomplished in life.

Her obituary in the Lorain Journal included the following

"A resident of Lorain since 1930, Mary was employed by St. Joseph's Hospital for 25 years where she had been at nurse's assistant in Pediatrics. Second to her husband and family, Mary's real love in life was children. She cared for each child at the hospital as if each child was her own. When she retired in 1977, she was featured in the Journal holding a small child."

My mother's favorite novel was "A Tree Grows I Brooklyn" by Betty Smith. It is a tale of overcoming humble beginnings and cherishing education. I have read it twice once in high school and once later in life. I enjoyed it most the second time when I was mature enough to fully realize what wonderful person my mother was. I hope you will have time to read this novel.