

PART 1

Introduction: “What Did You Do in the War, Pop?”

My father, Philip L. Aquila, died on December 2, 1994. A few weeks later, I was talking long-distance to my mother when she dropped a bombshell right in the middle of the conversation: “Your Uncle Frank called the other day. He said Aunt Mary told him that she had some letters Dad had written to his family during World War II and that we could have them if we wanted them.”

Naturally, I said we should jump at the chance, but I was curious how many letters there were. “Uncle Frank just said there were lots,” came the reply.

All sorts of possibilities rushed into my head. For personal reasons I was anxious to read about what my Dad had to say. He, my older brother, and I always used to talk about politics and other things, and in a way, it would be like Dad was still around. But I also hoped that these letters could be more than just one last visit with my Dad. Perhaps they could be published as a book. My Dad would have loved that. Although he earned his living as a bricklayer with the Bethlehem Steel Company, his real interests were always history, politics, and geography. His enthusiasm for history rubbed off on me, and he was extremely proud when I later became a professional historian and writer. He always insisted that someday he, too, would write a history book.

That is why when I first heard about the letters I thought how ironic it would be if Dad had already written his book, but none of us had ever realized it. Given my Dad’s interests, I suspected that his letters could be a treasure trove of information about World War II.

My biggest concern, though, was whether there would be enough letters to make a book. Exactly how many letters were “lots?” Were we talking ten letters? Twenty letters? Fifty? Since I had barely seen or talked to my father’s sister or brother since I had moved away from



Fig. 1.1. Portrait of Philip L. Aquila taken in May 1943, at McChord Field in Washington State. (Philip L. Aquila Collection)

Buffalo to become a history professor almost twenty-five years ago, I didn't feel comfortable enough to ask them directly. So I decided to just wait patiently until the letters arrived. Well, almost patiently. I did nag my mother every week to get my Uncle Frank to drop off the letters, before he forgot or before something happened to the letters.

Eventually the persistence paid off. Several weeks later my mother told me over the phone, "Well, Uncle Frank finally gave me the letters."

"Great," I replied, "how many are there?"

"Lots," she said, "a really big pile."

Not only was I no closer to knowing how many letters "lots" was, but now I also found myself wondering about how big "a really big pile" was. The answers came a few months later when I visited my mother in Buffalo, New York. She handed me a large shopping bag with handles. Inside were approximately five hundred letters that my Dad had written to his family between 1944 and 1946. Included were a few letters that he had received during the war from his brothers who were also in the service. In addition my mother gave me eleven other letters, as well as several poems, that my father had written during the war and then saved in his locked tool chest down in the basement.

Given my father's love of politics and history, I expected detailed accounts of the war effort. But, as I quickly skimmed through the pile, I found very few in-depth descriptions of the war. At first my heart sank with disappointment, because I knew that although I would certainly get personal satisfaction from reading the letters, the correspondence probably did not have enough historical significance to be published as a book. It was not until several weeks later, after I got the letters back to my office and began arranging them chronologically, that I realized what I actually had.

The collection of letters turned out to be very different from what I had expected, but, nonetheless, just as important. Rather than a first-hand account of the war itself, the letters offered a revealing look at a soldier and his family during the war.

THE CORRESPONDENCE OF SGT. PHILIP L. AQUILA

The first thing I noticed about the letters was their vastness and completeness. Hardly a day passed without Phil Aquila writing at least one letter to his family back home in Buffalo. Although he was drafted in February 1943, the letters he wrote throughout 1943 and early 1944 were either destroyed or are missing. The surviving letters cover approximately the last two years of World War II. The first entry is dated August 7, 1944, the last February 4, 1946.

Sunday April 22, 1945
Wendover, Utah

Dear Mary,

Today is Sunday and every thing is going well. The sun is shining brightly and its nice & warm. I sure wish I could be where I could see Spring come. Out here there aren't any flowers or trees or grass. Just snow capped mountains on one side, dry rocky mountains on the other and a big desert on another side. No trees what so ever, except maybe a couple off the base. If pa was out here, he'd feel lost because there's not even dandelions.

I had a picture taken in front of Ralph's barracks on Easter morning & I just got it back. I sent one to my wife & one to you. It didn't come out so very good, but I'm sending it any way so that you can slap it in the album.

I hope ma is feeling alright today. Each day I can't help wondering how she actually

Fig. 1.3. First page of a letter that Phil Aquila wrote to his sister Mary, on April 22, 1945. (Philip L. Aquila Collection)

Most of the letters are addressed to his older sister, Mary, but they were really being written to his entire family. "The reason he was writing to me was actually very simple," explained his sister in a recent interview, "neither Ma nor Pa could read or write, so Phil would write to me, and I would read the letters to everybody. Then I would place his letters on the table, with any other letters we got from my other brothers in the service, and they would stay there for a few days. Anybody who came into the house could read them."¹

Even though Mary had two older brothers at home, she was the one who was responsible for maintaining communications with the boys in the service. The Aquilas, like most Italian American families, assumed that the oldest daughter should be in charge of all domestic matters, including the family's correspondence. Occasionally Phil sent personal letters to his older brother, Tony, who was still living at home, or to a younger sibling. But over 95 percent of the letters were sent to Mary, and, therefore, meant to be shared by the entire family.

In addition to the letters home, Phil Aquila was also writing to other people. He wrote regularly to his three brothers, two cousins, and several neighborhood friends who were in the service. Those letters, however, did not survive the war. Most of Phil's correspondence was with his wife, the former Mary Cavarella. Sometimes he wrote her up to seven letters a day, frequently including love poems or poems he wrote for special occasions. It was in these very personal letters that Phil revealed his deepest thoughts and emotions. With the exception of one letter and several poems (some of which are included in this book), none of the letters to his wife now exist. After the war the couple decided to destroy them because the letters were too personal.

Obviously, Phil Aquila was a dedicated letter writer. Usually every evening after dinner (and sometimes during the day), he would settle into his bunk, pen and paper in hand, and begin writing anywhere from two to ten letters a day. During his three years in the Army Air Force, he probably wrote at least 2,500 letters, of which over 500 still survive.

Why did he write so much? The most obvious answer is because he wanted his family and friends to know that he was doing fine. He explained the reason for his numerous, but brief, letters to his sister on November 3, 1944: "Just another little letter short and snappy and to the point as usual. I never make my letters long because I have hardly nothing to say. Just so you hear from me, right?"² Six days later, he began another letter as follows: "Just my daily letter again. You see as I told you when I was there [home on furlough], I hardly have nothing at all to say except that everything out here is going along okay, and that I hope it's the same out there. But I figure a letter each day helps Ma stay a little happy."³

There were also more complicated reasons why Phil was writing so often. For one thing, he was a very private man who would rather spend his free time with his family than socializing with strangers. Writing letters everyday during the war also may have given him a sense of security, making him think that he was in control of his life and his family's destiny. He believed that his constant letters would help the morale of his family and friends. In addition, the frequent correspondence enabled him to have a continuing say in family matters, and it guaranteed that loved ones would not forget him. The daily letters might also be the result of Phil's sense of history: he was determined to leave a record of where he was and what he was doing during the war.

Sgt. Aquila's letters are written in an informal, conversational style. The basic form and structure of the letters follow the accepted style of the day, which Phil had learned in school just like millions of other working-class students.⁴ His strict adherence to the format reveals a deliberate attention to detail and a need to follow established rules.

The similar structure and repetitive phrases of the letters served as literary devices. The sameness of the daily mail undoubtedly assured readers that Phil was doing fine and that nothing had changed. The top of each letter records the exact date and place where Phil was stationed. The salutation follows. Although usually addressed to his sister, Mary, the letter was actually being written for the entire family, especially his mother, Calogera.

The first paragraph of each letter gets right to the point. Frequently he uses a sentence such as this: "October 7 [1944] and all is well out here, and I hope it stays that way." Or, like this one he wrote three days later: "Everything is going okay out here and I hope it's the same out there."⁵

The body of each letter then discusses particular concerns or news of the day. Most often, Phil ends the text with some variation of the phrase, "So long and God bless you all" (e.g. see letter of September 22, 1944).

Every letter uses the same closing: "Love to: Ma, Pa, Mary, Tony, Francie, and Carlo. X X X X X X [i.e. kisses]. Phil." Significantly, his mother, to whom he was devoted, is always mentioned first. Out of respect, his father is mentioned second; then comes his sister Mary, to whom he is writing the letter; next is Tony (who was one year older than Mary); followed by Francie (who was in high school); and last in the pecking order is Carlo, who was still in elementary school.

Though the letters are usually brief, their form, frequency, and sheer numbers imbue them with power. The repetition in the letters' structure and content provides order in a world surrounded by chaos, and the

astonishing regularity of the correspondence results in a vast collection of primary-source materials relating to daily life in America during World War II.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE LETTERS

As I began reading the letters one after another in the order in which they were written, I was drawn into Philip Aquila's world of 1944–45. It is a world at war, yet still a world of hope for the future. Like a daily soap opera, fascinating characters appear and disappear, with their story lines always going forward but never quite ending. The main plot revolves around Sgt. Aquila, stationed at Army Air Force bases in Kansas and Utah, and his concern for his family back home. But numerous subplots also unfold in the daily drama: concerns about his new wife, aging parents, brothers, sisters, birth, death, illness, family problems, neighborhood friends, as well as occasional commentary about the war effort and military life.

The narrative's major and minor plots illustrate many of the important issues and themes in American social history of the World War II era. These letters offer valuable insights about family history of the late 1930s and early '40s. They demonstrate that soldiers, especially those stationed at home, often retained close contacts with family and friends. By 1943, the average GI was receiving fourteen letters a week. Sgt. Aquila's correspondence underscores how important this communication with loved ones was to a soldier.⁶

Writing letters back and forth within the United States was relatively easy and inexpensive (free for the soldiers). Mail delivery normally took two to four days from the moment it was mailed to the time it arrived. So soldiers not only could stay in touch with friends and family back home, but they could remain an integral part of the family's daily activities. Phil Aquila, for example, was able to give family members advice about the family car, furniture, finances, health concerns, and personal matters. Rapid mail delivery also enabled him to share other things with his family: he often sent them gum, cigarettes, birthday cards, gifts, and even palms for Palm Sunday. In effect, the rapid and efficient postal service enabled soldiers to play continuing roles in daily family matters even though they were thousands of miles away from home.

Sgt. Aquila's letters constitute an excellent case study of how one American family—with four sons in the war—struggled for its very survival. The correspondence allows us to experience first-hand the rhythms of family life during World War II. We share the family's joy in

new marriages, reunions, and births, as well as their sorrow when faced with disappointment, death, and serious illness.

By recording the early years of marriage between Phil and Mary (Cavarella) Aquila, these letters offer fascinating glimpses of GI marriages during World War II. By the spring of 1943, approximately 30 percent of all American soldiers were married.⁷ Sgt. Aquila's letters help us understand why so many young couples decided to get married and have babies even though the world was at war. They reflect the hopes and fears, successes and failures of young couples who were trying to establish marriages and new lives during wartime.

The letters capture the sense of helplessness and despair that resulted from soldiers being away from their wives and babies back home. They also demonstrate vividly how in-law problems, misunderstandings, and other marital stresses were exacerbated by both the war and the great distances that separated husbands and wives. The letters illustrate, for example, the concerns—whether warranted or not—that many young soldiers had about unfaithful wives and girlfriends. “Even in the normal person there appears to be considerable apprehension about the fidelity of the soldier's wife or sweetheart,” explains one psychiatrist. “Most often in the ‘normal’ the entire conflict is repressed. But if the question is ever raised, as during a ‘bull session,’ the conversation becomes charged with considerable feeling.”⁸

Since the Aquilas were Italian Americans, their story provides us with details about immigrants and ethnic history. The letters reveal the inner dynamics of an Italian American family. Scholars have written extensively about the “familistic” loyalties of southern Italian peasants, maintaining that the nuclear or extended family took precedence over the individual or even the community.⁹ The letters of Philip L. Aquila demonstrate that familism was still important to Italian Americans of the 1940s. The letters show repeatedly that each of the Aquilas viewed his or her primary social role within the context of the family. For example, when Phil's mother becomes ill, his sister Mary willingly forsakes her job in a box factory to care for her mother and keep the family and household functioning. In numerous other cases, Phil and his brothers make it clear that even though they are married and in the military they still want to do their part in helping out the family at home.¹⁰

The letters provide solid evidence that the Aquila family—like Italian Americans in general—believed in the traditional notion of “onore di famiglia” (family honor). In one letter, Phil strongly encourages his sister to confront a farmer who apparently has cheated the family out of some of their earnings. We can almost see Phil shake his head in frustration as he writes: “Maybe that [farmer] thinks that just because most of us [boys] are in the army, there's no one to take an interest out there.”

Perhaps the best example of Phil's dedication to preserving family honor is his response to an individual who threatened not only his life, but also his wife's reputation and safety. Writing to a police officer investigating the case, Sgt. Aquila comes right to the point: "Frankly, Sir, I'd just as soon put a bullet through this person as I would a Nazi or Jap soldier, but fortunately my mind isn't as stupid as this person's. . . . [But] I'll never rest until this [guilty] person is apprehended."¹¹

Sgt. Aquila's letters offer insights into the role of women in Italian American families. Contrary to popular myth, many Italian American women were not passive or dependent upon males. Although marriages in the old country supposedly were patriarchal, women often dominated their husbands. "Such a wife would rarely contradict her husband in the presence of strangers," explain historians Jere Mangione and Ben Morreale, "but once left alone with her eldest children, she would drop the mask of docile wife and 'speak her mind openly and eloquently.'" Sociologist Constance Cronin insists that such Italian American women became, in effect, family managers.¹²

The women spotlighted in Sgt. Aquila's letters are clearly independent and dominant personalities. Phil's mother, Calogera, assumes center stage, while the father, Francesco, remains in the shadows. Unlike those Italian American families where the male was dominant, the mother emerged as the honored and cherished head of the Aquila household. The father, though loved, lacked authority. While Phil's letters only occasionally inquire about "Pa," they provide numerous examples of his devotion to "Ma."

Significantly, Calogera was not the only strong-willed woman in Phil Aquila's life. His sister, Mary Aquila, and his wife, Mary (Cavarella) Aquila, also had strong opinions and considerable influence in family discussions. The Aquila letters offer solid evidence that Italian American women frequently played important and active leadership roles in family matters.

Sgt. Aquila's letters provide a detailed account of how one Italian American family responded to the social and cultural crises stemming from the Great Depression and World War II. By demonstrating the stability of the Aquila family, as well as its ability to cope with social change, the letters call into question the work of scholars who stress the disorganization of immigrant families, the importance of cultural continuity for immigrant families, or new family functions that emerged in industrial America. The letters support historian Virginia Yans-McLaughlin's belief that there was "a dynamic process of give and take between new conditions and old social forms as the immigrant families made their transition from Europe to America."¹³ Detailed evidence found in these letters suggests that the stability of Italian American fam-

ilies actually facilitated their members' adjustments to social change.

The letters transport us back in time to an Italian American neighborhood in Buffalo, New York, where we are introduced to renters, friends, uncles, aunts, cousins, *compari*, and *paesani*.¹⁴ We observe how this immigrant family works, plays, and lives. We read about the father doing blue-collar work, while the mother takes in day work and leads the children out to the farms where they pick beans and fruits during the summer and early fall.

We can almost smell the salami, sausage, fried peppers, and other foods that are described as we come to understand the cultural importance of food in Italian families. We also come to realize the importance of religion in the Italian American family's daily activities, not necessarily the organized Catholic Church variety, but a more basic everyday faith that God will get them through hard times and crises. We learn about Italian American superstitions and the southern Italians' traditional suspicion of authority figures and institutions. In the Aquilas' case in the 1940s, this included mistrust of doctors, hospitals, and, of course, army officers and politicians.

Phil Aquila's letters demonstrate the impact that public education had on immigrant families. Although their mother and father could not read or write, the Aquila children became fluent in English and were schooled enough in grammar and sentence structure to write legible, coherent letters. At the same time, the letters offer evidence that at least some Italian American and working-class expressions survived Phil's success in learning to write clear, standard English. His letter of May 30, 1945, for example, combined the two: "I didn't go no place, though, just stood on the base and loafed around." That double negative is typical of working-class speech, while the use of the verb "to stand" instead of "to stay" is a literal translation into English of Italian American idiom.¹⁵

The letters reveal that the Aquila children also acquired a practical education: the boys had the ability to tackle jobs involving mechanical and physical skills, while sister Mary was able to cook, clean, and keep the house functioning.

Some of the brothers demonstrated an interest in reading and world events. Phil, in particular, thoroughly absorbed the lessons and values taught at school. He believed in America as a land of freedom and opportunity, and was convinced that he—a common man—was equal, if not superior, to anybody regardless of their wealth, power, or position in life. A firm believer in the American dream, Phil was determined to accomplish his goals.

Phil's love of education often caused him to try and improve other family members. For example, in one letter he encourages his brother Tony to brief their mother about the war and politics: "You'd be surprised how

interested Ma is in geography, history, and world events." In another, he tells his sister, "As for reading, we should've taught [Ma] long ago. It's never too late to learn, you know." In still other letters, he admonishes the two youngest children to attend school and do their homework.¹⁶

The Aquila letters demonstrate the primary importance of family loyalties and obligations among Italian Americans. The sons were expected to protect family members, take care of home repairs, and contribute money to the household, while the daughters, particularly the eldest, Mary, were supposed to handle domestic chores and provide support for other family members. The close-knit family supported one another as much as possible throughout the war. A network of letters kept family members in constant contact, enabling them to reassure one another and solve any family problems that might arise.

Despite the family's attempts to hold together, World War II still had a devastating impact. Having four sons in the armed forces altered patterns of daily life. Everything seemed to revolve around the boys' safety and whereabouts. Family members at home even stopped celebrating Christmas and other holidays while the boys were at war. The constant worrying eventually drained the mother's strength, endurance, and vitality. Very likely this stress contributed to her illness, a crisis that eventually threatened the family's very existence. Yet, through it all, this Italian American family remained loyal to the United States, even though it was fighting against enemies that included Italy, the Aquilas' original homeland.

While the correspondence of Sgt. Philip L. Aquila teaches us about Italian American families, it also provides us with fascinating glimpses of everyday life in the United States during World War II. Historians frequently write about the upsurge in American patriotism during the war. These letters qualify that interpretation. They show that the Aquila family strongly supported their nation's fight against the Axis powers, but they were not overzealous patriots eager to give their lives for the cause. None of the sons rushed out to enlist; none volunteered for combat; and all retained a strong sense of skepticism about the army and politicians in general. The Aquilas were probably no better or worse than most families of the day. They were willing to contribute their fair share to the war effort, but reluctant to follow their nation blindly.

The letters enable us to experience the rhythms of everyday life. We see people learning to live with war-related shortages of gas, cigarettes, gum, food, and other desirable items. We catch glimpses of life going on as usual in cities and towns across the country. And we learn about Americans' expectations for the future: their faith that the United States would triumph, their hope that the future would be better, and their fear that the Depression might return.

All too often, the story of World War II is told through the lives and actions of famous people, politicians, and military commanders. Sgt. Aquila's correspondence provides us with snapshots of the war from the vantage point of "ordinary soldiers." We learn about GIs' attitudes toward the war. We see how they respond to news about the death of President Roosevelt, the rise of Harry Truman, and other important events. And we see firsthand what daily life was like on military bases in the United States. Phil describes the friendly citizens of Pratt, Kansas, who invited GIs into their homes to share holiday dinners. He also gives us a fascinating insider's view of Wendover Field, the isolated base in Utah where the crew of the *Enola Gay* trained secretly.

Sgt. Aquila fills in gaps in our knowledge about soldiers stationed in the United States. He captures the daily monotony of military life. He explains what GIs did in their spare time: popular activities included movies, gambling, drinking, carousing, socializing at service clubs, reading newspapers and books, writing letters back home, and worrying about the future and loved ones. He explains how wonderful, but also how difficult and expensive it was, to place long-distance phone calls to people back home. He also helps us understand the highs and lows of furloughs. Soldiers were desperate for leaves that would enable them to go home. Yet getting there and back was often time consuming and expensive. Travel by train was extremely difficult, and parting was indeed sweet sorrow for soldiers and loved ones alike. Sometimes the great expectations that soldiers and family members had for furloughs resulted in disappointment.

The letters are full of surprises. For example, Sgt. Aquila often praises both the quality and quantity of army meals, particularly on holidays. "It just burns me up," he complains to his sister, "when people squawk about the army food."¹⁷ Phil's fondness for military cooking probably says more about his family's particular circumstances than the excellence of army cuisine. Very likely his family, which included two parents and nine children, had difficulty putting enough food, especially meat, on the table during the Depression. *Pasta fagioli*—macaroni and beans—was a common dinner in the Aquila household.

At the same time, there were numerous other soldiers stationed at U.S. bases who, like Phil, appreciated the quantity, if not quality, of army food. American GIs were the best-fed soldiers in the world. "The Army's standard garrison ration, the one found in stateside training camps, provided about 4,300 calories daily," writes historian Lee Kennett. That would explain why the average soldier gained six to nine pounds during his first few months in the military.¹⁸

Other interesting tidbits about soldiers on the home front abound. For instance, Sgt. Aquila explains that soldiers often had their own cars:

“At every base I’ve been at there’s hundreds of guys with cars from every state. They drive all over with them.”¹⁹ Phil also describes the emotional letdown that many Americans felt following Japan’s surrender. “Now that the war is over,” he writes, “I really don’t see any reason to continue writing as much as I have. I’m really pretty tired of it after 2½ years of doing it.” Other soldiers felt the same way, as evidenced by Phil’s brother, Frankie, who was stationed in the South Pacific and was “just plain tired of writing letters.”²⁰ The end of the war affected family relationships in other ways. Once the euphoria of peace wore off, reality reasserted itself. Like many families, the Aquilas found that mundane matters involving marriages, babies, in-laws, and other domestic concerns, which had been relegated to a back burner during the war, boiled over in the weeks following V-J Day.

Aquila’s descriptive letters reveal additional insights about GIs on the home front. Most soldiers, he explains, did not want to be in the army; few wanted to go into battle; but all were prepared to fight if necessary. He also expresses the soldiers’ ambivalence about being stationed at home. They felt guilty about not going overseas and believed they were not doing enough to defeat the Axis powers. At the same time, though, they knew they were doing their best in important support roles, and they resented anyone who questioned their bravery or contributions to the war effort.

Sgt. Aquila’s letters enable us to understand more clearly the unique problems of soldiers stationed at home. We feel the monotony of Phil’s everyday existence; we wonder with him whether he will be shipped into battle; we hold our breath alongside him as he waits anxiously for furloughs; we share his daily worries about births, deaths, illnesses, and family problems; we feel his despair when he cannot be with his ailing mother; we understand his longing for his new wife; and we share his regret that he cannot experience his baby growing up.

This collection of letters contains fascinating glimpses of marriage and family history, information about ethnic and immigration history, and a look at the home front “from the bottom up.” But, significantly, the letters are not just a mere reflection of the times. They provide fresh evidence about everyday life in World War II America, demonstrating the daily heroism of both soldiers and private citizens on the home front. They offer first-hand accounts of daily tensions, hopes, and fears. They provide insights into how immigrant families coped with adversity and poverty in the midst of world war. And they contribute to our understanding of the role played by GIs on the home front by revealing the soldiers’ dreams, anxieties, nightmares, guilt, and frustrations.

Obviously, it is possible to argue that the correspondence could have been more valuable if it contained additional details about the war

itself. But that was not Phil Aquila's purpose in writing. He wrote for private reasons, for family reasons. That was his main concern. And he succeeded brilliantly.

The letters of Sgt. Aquila offer a richly textured story that operates on numerous levels. This collection constitutes an extremely important and unique source for studying American society and culture during World War II. Its unrelenting dailiness gives it drama, continuity, and significance. As Philip L. Aquila writes home, he reveals not only himself, but also everyday life and ordinary people of another time and another place.

THE AQUILA FAMILY HISTORY

Since Sgt. Phil Aquila's story is primarily a family history of World War II, it is important to understand the background of his parents—Francesco and Calogera Aquila—as well as that of Phil and his six brothers and two sisters.²¹

Francesco was born in 1881 to peasant parents in Naso, Sicily, a tiny mountain village in Messina Province. In late 1907 or early 1908, his parents arranged for him to marry a local girl. When the girl backed out of the wedding at the last minute, her younger, nineteen-year-old sister, Calogera Ferrato, agreed to marry Francesco, perhaps because he had plans to emigrate to the United States. Their eight-year age difference was nearly perfect for marriage, according to a Sicilian proverb: "L'uomo di ventotto; la donna diciotto" ("The man at twenty-eight, the woman at eighteen").²² Following the wedding, Francesco said goodbye to his new bride and set out for *LaMerica*. Like many other Italian immigrants, he planned to find work in the United States before sending for his wife.

Francesco Aquila was twenty-seven years old when he left Sicily for the United States in 1908. Given the location of his hometown, he probably embarked from either Palermo or Naples. Like other poor, southern Italian emigrants, Francesco had little money to finance his trip to *LaMerica*. So, he probably purchased a steam ship ticket for "steerage class," the least expensive way to travel. Steerage provided emigrants with cramped quarters down in the bowels of the ship right next to the steering equipment. Sometimes up to three hundred people were packed into tiny berths and were allowed up on deck only in shifts. Down below, steerage passengers had to cope with overcrowded conditions, sea-sickness, storms, and stale air that reeked with body odors and human waste, mixed in with the smells of salami, cheeses, wine, and other provisions carried by travelers.²³

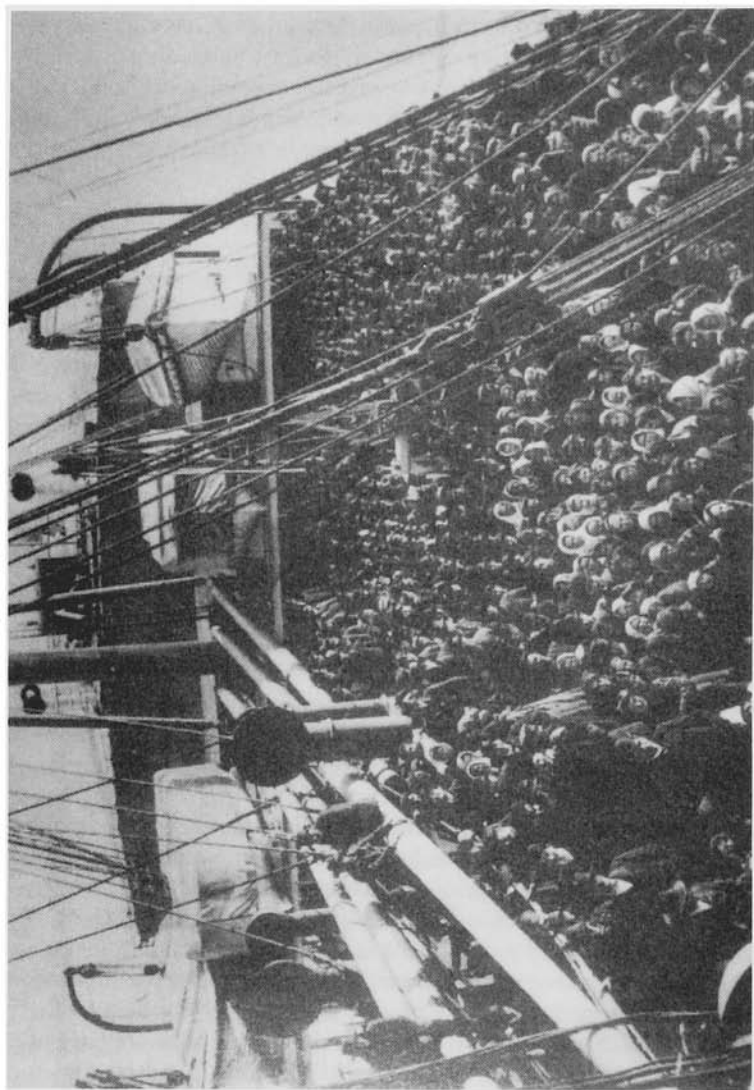


Fig. 1.4. The "boat" that Francesco Aquila came to America on probably looked like this vessel that brought European immigrants to America in 1906. (Library of Congress)

When Francesco's ship finally arrived in New York harbor, he may have missed seeing the Statue of Liberty if he, like other immigrants, was more intent on viewing the debarkation point, Ellis Island. The closer they got to America, the more they worried about Ellis Island immigration officials. Immigrants had heard terrifying rumors about hostile government inspectors who would treat them like animals; they feared questions they would have to answer about their backgrounds and plans; and they cringed in anticipation of the medical exams awaiting them. One wrong response or physical ailment could result in deportation back to Italy.²⁴

Francesco and his fellow Italians probably feared the worst by the time they arrived at the castlelike federal building on Ellis Island. They were herded into a large "Registry Room," which, according to one American observer, looked like the Chicago stockyards. There they were given medical examinations, which usually took one to four hours to complete. Inspectors also asked a series of questions, including name, sex, last residence, and destination, as well as whether they were planning to stay in the United States, whether they had jobs already lined up, and how much money were they bringing into the country.²⁵

Undoubtedly, Francesco was relieved when the officials granted him admission into the United States. Possibly he was even grateful to the inspector who anglicized his first name to "Frank."

Stepping off the Ellis Island ferry at Battery Park in Manhattan, Frank Aquila soon realized that he was indeed embarking on a new life in a new world. The peasant immigrant was astounded at every turn by the sights and sounds of New York City: buildings that scraped the sky, crowded and bustling city streets, and, of course, the ever-present automobiles and streetcars.

In all likelihood, Frank Aquila was greeted in New York by *paesani* (acquaintances from his small town of Naso). These friends or relatives probably had been the ones who encouraged him to join them in *LaMerica*. Frank followed his *paesani* to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, where he found work as a laborer.

Six years passed before Frank sent for his wife. The long separation was fairly typical of Italian immigrants in the early 1900s. A local reporter in Buffalo in 1905 found that it took Italian immigrants five to ten years to save enough money to send for their wives and families. Historians suggest that the average Italian American family probably took three and a half to four years to reunite.²⁶

In 1914, Calogera made the passage to *LaMerica* and joined Frank in Johnstown, where the immigrant couple settled into their new lives. Less than a year later, Calogera gave birth to their first child. The baby boy was named Joseph, in keeping with the Italian tradition of naming

the first son in honor of the paternal grandfather. In 1916, the couple had another boy, Anthony, who, if the Aquilas continued to follow tradition, was named after his mother's father.

In late 1916 or early 1917, the immigrant couple and their two sons moved northward to Buffalo, New York, in search of better employment opportunities. Like most Italian immigrants, Frank Aquila was a "general laborer." Although he occasionally found work in factories, he was usually employed in various seasonal jobs involving railroads, construction projects, or other outdoor employment. The lyrics to a popular folk song in the Aquilas' neighborhood not only poke fun at the immigrants' broken English, but they suggest that many Buffalo Italians found unskilled jobs working for the local Lackawanna railroad: "Where de you worka John?/ On the Delaware Lackawan/ And whatta you do-a, John?/ I poosh, I poosh, I poosh."²⁷

Immigrants such as Frank Aquila sometimes worked only five or six months a year. One Italian American immigrant vividly recalls how difficult it was to find employment in Buffalo in the early 1900s: "I helped build roads. To find work you carried your shovel around and went from one place to another seeking work. I would work for a month or two. World War I made it possible for me to obtain more steady work. The steel mills needed workers. After the war, the Italians got fired first."²⁸

The Aquila family settled into their rented home in Buffalo and quickly grew in size if not wealth. Over the next several years, while Frank worked hard at manual labor, Calogera gave birth to seven more children: Mary (1917), Sam (1919), Philip (1922), Frank (1924), Carmen (1925), Francie (1928), and Carlo (1935). The large size of their family was not unusual. Statistics show that back in the old country typical southern Italian families had six to ten children. Buffalo newspaper accounts from the early 1900s note that the average Italian mother over forty-five years of age had eleven children.²⁹

Given Buffalo's cost of living and the low wages paid to general laborers, Italian immigrant families often lived close to what one social worker called "the ragged edge."³⁰ When economic times were good in the 1920s, the Aquila family struggled to make ends meet. When the Great Depression hit, their life became even harder. Pa worked at a series of low-paying, menial jobs, while Ma took in laundry and other day work to supplement the family income. The two oldest boys, Joe and Tony, found work as soon as they could. The younger Aquilas played equally important roles earning money for the family. Every summer, Calogera and her children were employed as migrant workers, picking beans and fruits on farms in western New York.

By the 1920s, Italian immigrants in the Buffalo area had become a



Fig. 1.5. Portrait of Aquila family taken in 1931. *Bottom row, left to right:* Carmen, Calogera (mother), Frankie, Mary, Frankie. *Top row, left to right:* Phil, Joe, Francesco (father is standing on two pillows), Tony, Sam. The only person missing from the photo is Carlo, who was born in 1935. (Philip L. Aquila Collection)

valuable source of labor for local farmers. For example, farmers from North Collins, an agricultural community about forty miles south of Buffalo, would dispatch their trucks to the city's Italian neighborhoods to pick up families and transport them to the farms, where they would spend the summer and early fall tending and harvesting crops.³¹

The Cavarella family was one of the Italian American families that the Aquilas knew from the farms in North Collins. Mary Cavarella, who later became the wife of Phil Aquila, was seven or eight years old when her family first went out to the farm. She still remembers the annual routine:

We usually left one or two weeks before school let out in June, and stayed all summer until about the second week in September. That meant we would always miss the first week of school. Everybody in my family except my father was out there. But that wasn't unusual. There were hardly any adult males there, because they would stay in the city where they had jobs. My father usually came out on weekends to see us and bring us food for the week.³²

Although the farmer provided living quarters, each family had to bring along whatever furnishings they wanted, including a table, chairs, and mattresses, as well as eating utensils, pots, pans, and food.

The ride out to the farm took about an hour. As the truck approached the farm on a bumpy, unpaved road, the migrant workers would peer out the sides at the rural countryside. When they reached the farm, they got a good look at their summer home. Four wooden buildings resembling barracks had been constructed for the migrant workers. The buildings (which Mary Cavarella and Phil Aquila always called "the shacks") were arranged in a large square, facing inward, with a community well and cookhouse in the center.

Each building contained five or six units. Each one-room unit had one window and housed one family. Until the late 1930s, the shacks lacked electricity and gas, so the families had to use kerosene lamps for light and woodburning stoves to cook on. Although most of the cooking was done in individual shacks, the residents could also use the ovens in the central cookhouse to prepare big meals or bake bread in large quantities. The units did not have running water or indoor plumbing, so the twenty families shared a community well and outhouses.

Mary Cavarella vividly recalls what it was like to live in the shacks:

Our shack had only one room, about twelve feet by sixteen feet. We would hang up a clothesline for privacy. I would sleep with my mother, while my three brothers [Mike was three years older than Mary, Nickie was a year younger, and Jimmie, two years younger] would sleep in another double bed. We always tried to avoid using the outhouse in the middle of the night, because of the spiders and snakes.³³