THE CONQUEST OF MILLSBORO

by Terry A. Necciai

My great-grandfather, Agostino Necciai, was born March 29, 1861 amid circumstances I have only begun to understand. Until very recently, about all I knew of my great-grandfather’s family was that from about 1893 they had lived in mining towns along the Monongahela River in Western Pennsylvania, and that my great-grandmother and most of her children had died very young.

A year or two before my grandfather died, in the early 1970s, my grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, and a few cousins were inspired at the end of one of my Aunt Alberta’s wonderful Thanksgiving dinners to pack into a car and drive 45 minutes upriver to Millsboro, the little town where my grandfather, Primo Necciai, was born. We rode around the few streets there, past rows of old frame houses. My grandfather pointed out that his mother was buried under Route 88, which had been re-routed over the cemetery site. My father accidently backed his car into a fire hydrant, denting the chrome bumper on the old Ford LTD, and we all decided it was time to turn around and go home.

Well, there was also one other thing that I knew. My great-aunt, whom we called Zia Marlisa, was a sort of trinket collector, and in one of her trunks full of trophies from self-indulgent trips to the 5¢ & 10¢ was a faded copy of a booklet my great-grandfather had written, entitled La Conquista Di Tripoli (The Conquest of Tripoli). I was immensely curious about the content of this tiny volume of poetry by Agostino Necciai. I asked Zia several times if I could see it, and she went through the whole ritual of opening the blanket box where she kept it, shifting around some figurines and costume jewelry, and lifting out the tiny book. I asked her what it said, trying to get her to make good on an old promise she had made to teach me to speak Italian. But she always seemed to get out of telling me much of anything about the poem, thus heightening the mystery. One time, she studiously read through several lines, coming to the word “chiacchierone” and chuckling out loud. I asked what was funny, and she told me that the word means “chatterbox.” That was all. Chatterbox. Very funny.

Actually, it was a great point of irony. “Chatterbox” was the last word on earth you could use to describe a Necciai — at least before this one was born. Most of my Necciai cousins are very quiet, and it was difficult getting them to tell me much of anything, both because I am very talkative, and because they are not. I credit my mother with making me so inquisitive about family history and helping to mine out what little information I knew about these Italian immigrants who came here to work in the coal mines. She is a seventh generation Mon Valley “Johnny Bull” (the local term for WASP) whose family holds annual reunions just to tell long stories about flatboats, horses, cattle trains, and anything else that happened.

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Above: Early twentieth century Millsboro on the Monongahela River.
Tripoli. Many more details fell into place when I had the privilege to be the second descendant of Agostino’s to return to Italy since he had come here almost a century ago.

Agostino Necciai was born in Montecatini Alto, a castle-town on a small mountain peak in a section of Tuscany known as the Valdinievole (roughly: “valley of the foggy river”). The Nievole is a small river that flows out of the mountains into the Arno River about midway between Florence and Pisa. The Valdinievole is right about the dividing line between the provinces of Pistoia and Lucca, and for a very long time, it was contested territory. In medieval times, it was a walled fortress, barely able to defend itself from surrounding provinces, each of which wanted to conquer this little section and become more powerful. Cosimo Di Medici succeeded in conquering Montecatini Alto in 1554, and tore down the fortress walls and most of the castle’s 25 towers, and in the process, destroyed all the written records of the town’s prior history. It remained a quiet mountaintop town in Tuscany until the end of the eighteenth century. Montecatini had had thermal springs and even a few Roman bath houses. In the late eighteenth century, construction began on several large new bath houses at the foot of the mountains, where the new town of Montecatini Bagno, better known as Montecatini Terme, sprang up.

The famous mineral waters of Montecatini were very promising to people in failing health. The spas attracted not only many ordinary people with afflictions, but also a few very famous ones, such as Giuseppe Verdi, who made Montecatini his second
home. In the nineteenth century, the new town at the bottom of the hill was still a very small cluster of bath houses. Many of the visitors stayed high on the mountaintop at Montecatini Alto.

Another nineteenth century celebrity attracted to the waters of Montecatini was Giuseppe Giusti, a poet, born in nearby Monsummano in 1809. Giusti became the most famous of a school of satirical poets from the Pisa/Pistoia area. His poetry was irreverent and burlesque in character. He is still well-remembered there for his attacks against the church. He lived in a palazzo (mansion) next to the oldest church in Montecatini, and it is said that he consciously turned his head as he went in and out of the house, literally “turning his back” on the church. Giusti’s attitude toward his next door neighbor, the church, reflected an anti-church movement that had developed in the town by his time.

Enter Agostino Necciai. Born just 11 years after Giusti died, Agostino adopted many of the same passionate opinions as the famous satirist, including his style of poetry. Agostino actually lived in or near Vico, a word which means approximately the same as the English word “burg.” Vico is the name for a village just outside the castle wall, where late-comers to the community lived. Baptismal records at the church next to the Palazzo Giusti show that Necciai were baptizing their children there as far back as 1810.

The name Necciai has a long etymology that takes it back to lucca, a term used for acorn. Neccia refers to a cake (or bread) made from chestnuts. Until this century, the chestnut was the winter staple for poorer families in Tuscany. Farmers would grind dried chestnuts into a kind of flour called farina di neccia and then mix it with water and spices to make a grand reconstituted chestnut called la neccia. (Another word for this confection is castagnaccio, which comes from castagna, the standard Italian word for chestnut.) Necciaio means “one who makes neccia.” Necciai is the plural. (Tuscan names almost always have the masculine-plural “i” ending.) The name can be traced back to the 1300s, and according to the Heraldry Society of Florence, a Necciai went to France as a servant to Caterina Di Medici. If the old story is true that Caterina’s Tuscan chefs created much of what we now call French cooking, then it may also be true that she wanted to have someone in her household who could make chestnut bread when she got homesick!

The Necciai baptismal records indicate that the family was not lacking in rootedness. The first names, for instance, were repeated in every other generation, from 1810 to well after the emigration to America. Agostino’s father was Gaetano whose father was Agostino whose father was Gaetano; little wonder that my grandfather’s oldest brother was named Gaetano, and that there are several Auguts and Guys in Uncle Gaetano’s large family.

The family was very poor. Unlike Giuseppe Giusti, who was a nobleman, Agostino Necciai was a poor peasant who somehow managed to teach himself to read and write. In The Conquest of Tripoli, Agostino refers to himself as a carbonaio. This word could mean charcoal burner, coal miner, or coal dealer. I believe he was a charcoal burner before he left Italy, which means that he went out into wooded areas, gathered dead wood, made a mud enclosure around it, set the wood on fire, and then waited until the pile had turned to charcoal. This was a very dirty, menial and hard way to make a living.

Agostino had a nickname which was shared among his brothers, and is still used jokingly by his sister’s family members in Italy. The name was “Lo Sghello.”

My only relatives named Necciai still living in Montecatini are descendants of a cousin of Agostino’s who was a tenant farmer. This cousin’s grandson Giordano had a great story to tell that shows how “agitato” Agostino really was. Around 1893, Agostino was out of work and his cousin offered him a job on the farm, carrying a tank of water on his back, with a little pump handle on the one side and a short hose on the other. His job was to spray the grapes and the olives. (This photograph shows the same kind of machine, still in use today. The man is Signor Mancini, whom my cousin Massimiliano and I noticed working in a field while we were driving through the Montecatini countryside in 1989.) Anyway, as the story goes, every time he pulled on the little pump handle, he would say “Vo in Ameria! Vo in Ameria!” which is Montecatinesque dialect for “I’m going to go to America!” One day, the pump handle broke, and he walked to the storage shed and threw the machine down, saying “Adesso, vo in Ameria!” (“Now I’m going to America!”) That was the last they saw of Agostino Necciai. They knew he had gone to America, but they never so much as got a post card from him. They assumed he had gone there and died.

When I was in Italy, it was my first order of business to find out what “Lo Sghello” meant. I was unable to get a satisfactory answer, until I asked some of the family of Agostino’s sister. They offered several synonyms which I couldn’t understand, and then came
up with “agitato” (“agitated”). They kept saying it meant the one who starts a fight, and then gets out before becoming too heavily involved. After getting the message across to me, they pulled out a large unabridged dictionary, and we looked up the etymology together; we learned that the word dated from 1,000 years ago, when the Lombards invaded Tuscany. Sgherro was their word for captain. It can also mean coin, because of the image of the sgherro imprinted on Lombardic coins. (This may also explain the origin of my father’s nickname “Dindi,” which is Tuscan for “pocket change,” a name he has carried since he was small, tagging along with his father and grandfather on trips to the general store, where he was always asking for money.)

A few years before my visit to Italy, my cousin Ron (a former major league baseball pitcher) had made the trip. They were surprised to see him, and at first, didn’t believe this tall American could possibly be a grandson of their lost cousin Agostino. Little did they know that in America, Agostino had sired a large family, whose members, in Monongahela alone, number more than 100. In Italy, there appear to be less than three dozen people still named Necciai.

In fact, Agostino was part of a mass migration, specifically from the Italian hill towns surrounding Montecatini, to the Monongahela Valley, between 1890 and 1920. At least 50 families came. They settled mostly in small mining towns along the river. They brought with them some peculiar ideologies and traditions that set them apart from their neighbors. Many of them were non-believers who carried on a passionate war against the church. The men were often so strong in their anti-clerical stance that they forbade their wives taking the children to church, even once, to be baptized. When naming their children, they avoided saints’ names, so common among Italians. Instead, they used many names from classical literature, such as Giulio (Julius Caesar), Spartico, Arturo, America, and so forth. Sometimes, they used ordinal numbers to name their children — Primo, Secondo, Terzo, etc. (My grandfather was a twin — his name was Primo because he was the first of the two, and his twin was Arturo). They also liked very short names, using the same name more than once, in varying forms, to name siblings. Many families had a Lino and a Lina, a Bruno and a Bruna, a Nello and a Nella, etc. In some families, the surname was made into a first name, such as Lenzina Lenzi.

The Tuscan who came to the Mon Valley settled together in Millsboro, Stockdale, Dunlevy, Belle Vernon, Black Diamond, Gallatin, and New Eagle, among others. Most of these neighborhoods are still well-remembered as the places where the “atheistic” Italians settled. They socialized together, quietly, in unofficial anarchist clubs. These organizations seem to have become less and less visible as time went on, particularly after many of the immigrants were naturalized, swearing on their naturalization papers that they were not anarchists.

The relationship of these Mon Valley Tuscans to other Italian groups is a bit obscure. They seem to have stayed separate from others until the 1930s, when a blending with Italian groups became noticeable, most particularly with across-line marriages, marking the development of a new, merged Italian identity. In 1936, for example, three Italian clubs representing Italians of three different backgrounds (northern, southern, and military veterans) merged in Monongahela to form the Italian Citizens Club, making the Italians the city’s largest single block of voters. The Necciai and many other Tuscan families were part of the newly merged Italian identity. However, some organizations remained distinct, such as the Garibaldi Club in Dunlevy, of which Agostino and his two brothers were charter members.

Agostino settled first in Millsboro, a little mining town on the Washington/Greene County line. Millsboro and neighboring Fredericktown were villages with eighteenth century roots, but which had been very small until the coal boom in the late 1800s. About two years after his arrival, Agostino sent back for his wife Armida and their daughter Marfisa, born just before he had left. Soon afterward, his brother Luigi and his brother Angelino joined them. Together, the three brothers were known as “Glie Sgheli” (plural of Lo Sghello). Angelo settled in Clarksville, another village in the Fredericktown area (made famous in the 1960s by the United Mine Workers-Jablonsky murders). A shoemaker and a bachelor, he returned to Italy briefly, and
then upon his return here, took his own life in 1920.

Agostino's family lived in a company house, possibly at Newtown, a "coal patch" that straddles the imaginary line between Fredericktown and Millsboro (my family always called it Fredericktown, even though they technically lived in Millsboro). The family was beset with ailments and accidents. There is a tradition in the family that the fire company (which was located, at one point, next to Agostino's house) would blow the fire whistle every time an accident happened in the Necciai household, such as when my grandfather cut off the end of his finger with a pen knife, or when his 2-year-old sister drank cleaning fluid and almost died, or when Zia Marfisa, as a young woman, fell through the ice while skating on the river, passed out, and almost drowned. My grandfather's mother died in an epidemic when he was three, and of his eight siblings, three died as infants and three died young of pneumonia. When my great-uncle Gaetano contracted pneumonia, about 1910, my great-grandfather carried him on his back 34 miles to Monongahela Memorial Hospital, the nearest hospital at the time. (It was built to serve all the coal miners of the bituminous coal fields.) A very frustrated man who had lost half of his family in this country, Agostino moved from company house to company house, eventually relocating to Dunlevy, and a few years later, to Gallatin, three miles from Monongahela Memorial. Zia Marfisa said that her father had written a long, sad poem about his family's troubles, but somehow, it was lost.

But what of *The Conquest of Tripoli*? Essentially, it is a long satire about the Italian government's propaganda for a war with Tripoli in 1911, with the misguided goal of rebuilding ancient Rome by taking one province at a time. Italy was only three decades old as a unified nation, and the weakness of the Ottoman Empire by that time posed a tremendous temptation to Italian nationalists. Agostino Necciai bravely charted out his course to fight the Italian establishment and to dissuade the Italian commoners from going to war — a very brave thing for an Italian coal miner in an obscure village in Western Pennsylvania!

This story makes a lot more sense when one adds in a very important ingredient: most Italian coal miners who came to work in southwestern Pennsylvania at the turn of the century came here as single men to make money and had no intentions of staying. About half of them returned to Italy, where they faced difficult choices about political affiliations and military service. Agostino Necciai was not preaching to the lost heathens of another continent, but to young men who might one day be recruited as soldiers.

During the Renaissance, Tuscany had held an important cultural position in Italy. Famous Tuscan writers of that period, Dante and Petrarch, were among the first to write in the vernacular. With the Enlightenment, these classic writers were revived and the Tuscan dialect took on new importance which persisted; when an "official Italian" language began to develop, it was based heavily on the Tuscan dialect. By the late nineteenth century, any Italian who had had any exposure to the "official" language could...
I do not sing to you in epic verse
Of braveries of the past; nor here begin
A song of Medusa’s curse,
Nor of fratricides roaming cast.
And if someone is accusing me of gossip,
I’ll say I speak truth and clear:
No longer are these times to sing a line
Of di Brave and Achilles so devine.

In Tripoli is there a gold mine?...
Ah then let’s go there and take it;
Those Turks of such a depraved line,
Won’t fight or endanger us anyhow.
And if the slobbering Grand Turk resists,
We’ll fix that turkey with corn meal stuffing,’
So when we’ve taken Tripoli’s golden ore,
We can feast after our glorious chope.

Let our lords stay at home, and more
With their lovely ladies and sons.
We will run off to take that treasure,
And those inhospitable, vermillion lands.
And with the echoing roar of the cannons
We young men so fresh like lillies,
Go ever foward, advancing through the woods
Until a cannon ball meets our head.

But what an ugly idea is distressing you?!!
Courage! and foward and don’t think of it;
Who dies in war will rise in glory
Into paradise among a crowd of angels.
And there above with lance at rest
Will entertain those blessed souls.
Eleven thousand surely will applaud,
And “here’s a hero” all will say.

Young men of the age of twenty-one,
Of twenty-and twenty-two, go there and run,
Those of twenty-three will not be lacking.
The pots are ready; do you expect
To find it already served? But this year
My dears you must dish it out yourselves.
Go there with a face brave and proud
And take the Grand Turk prisoner.

No one will refuse to go, at least I hope,
The Italian is not faint-hearted,
And for Italy you will conquer a new empire
Even if it costs your dear life.
That will not be difficult for sure;
I’ve seen more beautiful girls getting married.
But don’t worry because that flock of Turks
Will cook in our Italian pot.

What do we care about taking Tirolo,
What do we care about Nizza and Savoia,
There is Corsica? oh! it’s just a peg
Sticking out of the water: see what a joy...
And there could also be Malta, but where am I going
With these thoughts?...I’m boring myself.
These are lands that have no value;
We want the Turkish land, it’s more savory.

We all must arm and act for honor;
We will slaughter the bedouins;
And enraged and full of fury,
Go to the ends of the earth.
As I said the lords and ladies
Can stay at home and guard it.
We, who do not care about our lives,
Will race to die for our country.

We’ll leave united at the fanfare sound
With loaded guns and cannons,
We are Romans (with a little stretching)
Real blood like Caesar and Scipio.
If they don’t put us in the coffin first
We’ll conquer Korea, China and Japan,
And make them colonies of Italy,
And our lords will enjoy them.

Mothers, rejoice: your sons are going
To get corn for your dinner,
You will see how much they’ll bring
And then sleep with a full stomach.
However, not everyone will arrive
At the warehouse they desire:
And those who get there will be in no hurry
To return to those anxiously awaiting.

Let’s expel that damned race
Out of the world, it bothers us too much:
Let’s evict them with our guns
And they will end up on the Moon.
By right that sphere belongs to them,
Perhaps up there they’ll have better luck.
The Grand Sultan wears it on his head you see,
So they can even walk up there.

Italy is populated by heros like Tancredi,
Orland, Camillo and Coriolano,
Aeace, Ettore, Achilles; and therefore with heirs
Of ancient Greece and Rome.
They held the great positions of the world
Because they could fight.
Early masters of civilization
They taught the people with a club.

Let’s look back at the pious Buglione
That celebrated crusading captain,
Famous general of a legion
Made up of people from France and Italy,
From Austria, Germany and Britain;
In total a good Catholic Christian.
And to liberate the Holy Sepulcher
He devasted half of Asia in passing.

But you must not compare
Your enterprise with such triflings;
Those are not even worth remembering:
And if they are recorded in the annals,
It is only by chance.
But even in that case there are reasons;
That it is so; it is to make you see
The examples of those great heros.

Look at Julius Caesar and his
Desires to rule and then you’ll see
How at the head of his armies he fought, and then
Always won as you know,
And Alexander, and he who vanquished Troy,
And Bonaparte don’t forget,
And Garibaldi leader of squadrions,
With the great defect of not being thieves.

Young men for whom Italy was mother
Go all to Tripoli in happiness,
Have the Pope bless you
Invulnerable you will be, otherwise
You will not see again those graceful
Lovers of yours that trembling
You leave now, to go far away
To take the Muslim corn.

Why do you argue, slowly please
You say to me, we need
You to come and rant such nonsense,
With chatterings as if you’re telling a dream.
It seems to you that you have Tripoli in hand,
But Tripoli is not an apple tree
That you can just shake
And have apples for your needs.

We want with only discipline
To change the color of those...Turquoise;”
To teach the doctrine of Christ,
And to lighten them of their coins.
And, in the grace of devine goodness,
They’ll go among the seraphim and cherubs,
Among the angels and archangels and among all those
That they will smell a little bit of saithood.
understand a Tuscan, and this could not be said of a Piedmontese speaking to a Calabrian, or a Bergamese to a Sicilian. Even the poorest, lowest classes of Tuscans who came to America were treated well by immigrants from the rural villages of Italy. Their language was the lingua franca (common language), and after immigrating, the Tuscans seemed to have used this fact to their advantage.

A large number of Tuscans in the Mon Valley got into small business, presumably because of their ability to communicate with all other kinds of Italians. Few of these businesses ever grew large. The Lenzi family had a grocery store, a small restaurant, and a gas station. The Nesti family had a gas station. The Giannini, Moncini, Biagini, and Filoni families were in the beer distributing business. The Battaglini family had a construction company, and the Moncini family had a hauling firm. The Luti family went into the sign-painting business. The Valiani family had a butcher shop, and the Vezzani family a bakery. The Bartoletti family had a bar and hotel. The Bandini family had a bar and a trailer court. The Giorgi family started a restaurant. The Lucchesi family ran a bar and restaurant.

Perhaps the two largest businesses started by families from in or near Montecatini were the Calistri Ice Cream Factory in Charleroi and the Marraccini grocery store chain in the Elizabeth/Clairton area. The Tambellini family of Pittsburgh restaurant fame was also from this part of Tuscany (Lucca). In many families, getting into business was a gradual move toward refinement; for example, Pittsburgh architects Albert Filoni and Tom Celli, and architectural engineer Raymond Meucci, are from families of Tuscan ancestry in the middle Monongahela Valley.

It also seems that the Tuscan mining families played a slightly larger than usual role in unionizing the mines. The exact details remain to be researched, but the unionization movement shared some philosophical roots with the anarchist/atheistic political agenda that the Tuscans brought to the mine patches of southwestern Pennsylvania.

The Conquest of Tripoli carried with it a very heavy political agenda, indeed. (My interpretation of the poem here relies principally on the earlier Puppo translation, which differs slightly from the translation accompanying this article.) The poem opens with a series of lofty allusions to classical themes in the Italian language. Presumably it is intended to make fun of Italian poetic...
formalities. Then, in the second stanza, it goes directly into the issue of Tripoli, with opening lines “At Tripoli, is there a cave of gold?...” Then one should go to Tripoli and take it! / That Turkish and depraved race / Doesn’t present us with any great danger to contend with.”

The next line introduces a satirical theme that runs through the entire poem. The Ottoman leader was “the Grand Turk,” a term which in Italian sounds like their word for corn. So, the Grand Turk, that great “slobbering” bedouin, is made into a polenta in the Italian cauldron and devoured. Stanza 3 opens with “Let the lords rest at home, and with them, / Their beautiful companions and the children.” Then the stanza builds to a rushing climax around the idea of going to war: “We will run to take the treasure, / And those inhospitable and vermillion lands, / And at the sonorous boom of the cannons / We young men, fresh as lilies, / Always advancing, will go forward into the forest / Until a bullet comes into the head.”

The climax of the poem is in the last three stanzas. First in stanza 19, the soldiers return, after the triumphant war, to the fathers’ thresholds, to make an end to the dolorous tears of the parents, brothers, sisters, wives. Some lost an arm or a leg; the tailor cannot cover his bottom, the shoemaker goes about without shoes, the artisans have lost their tools, the farmer can’t grow anything. Then in the next stanza, the poet writes: “O qui fine e termine l’arcano” (“Now I will make an end to this mystery”) / “Col dire al popolo, ma ti svelerai?” (“To say to the people, but will you wake up?”) / “Chi guerreggia per gli altri ha da sapere” (“He who fights for others has to know”) / “Che morirà di sete senza bere.” (“That he will die of a thirst without drinking.”)

This climactic moral is followed by a brief autobiographical stanza, which says: “Now if the people would like to have / My name, very well, I will tell it to them; / I used to be a charcoal burner, / Agostino Necciai, called Lo Sghello, / I am inspired, but I have no power, / Nor do I have an education, and my mind is weak. / I write verse for fun, but I wish, / That in the end, my friends, we might all understand one another.”

Accompanying the poem is a brief introduction that talks about expatriates, the Bank of Rome, the Savoyard bullets attacking the people of Tripoli, and of course, Victor Emmanuel III. The last two lines of the introduction are typeset as verse: “La guerra si deve fare si faccia alla borghesia / Che più terribile nemico non si può trovare!” (“The war that one should make is against the bourgeoisie / A more terrible enemy than them one can not find!”) The introduction is signed by Il Gruppo D’Alba (the Group of the Dawn), presumably an anarchist society, of Fredericktown. At the end of the pamphlet is a brief poem about war. It contains the line “O dalla religion madre di guai.” (“Oh, from religion, mother of troubles.”) At the end of this one page piece is essentially the same sentiment against the terrible bourgeois enemy found in the introduction.

On the back of the book is the name “Stamperia e Libreria ‘Victoria’/906 Webster Avenue/Pittsburgh, Pa.” (Stamperia e Libreria means “printer and bookstall.”) The Victoria bookstall was a shop in the Italian section of the Hill District at the turn of the century, run by the Frediani family, a Tuscan family who still have a printing business in Pittsburgh’s Strip District. Unfortunately they don’t have records that go back that far. I have a very hard time imagining my great-grandfather, a poor immigrant, making the 65 mile trek to Pittsburgh from Fredericktown to publish a pamphlet about the Italian drive to go to war.

Agostino Necciai died a rather poetic death on September 29, 1933. The mines in the Gallatin area, which had given him employment in the latter half of his life, did not make it through the violent 1927 coal strike and the Great Depression which came to the area in 1931. The younger generations were forced to seek employment in the steel industry, just as the steel industry was seeking its coal from larger and larger mines farther south than Millsboro. The automobile made it possible, but not necessarily practical, for the local men to commute up to an hour away to steel mills closer to Pittsburgh. One September day in 1933, Agostino, then an old but still fairly healthy man, went out to the road in front of my grandfather’s house, to get coal from the coal box. The old carbonato was carrying two buckets, one in each hand, which...
weighed him down. A steelworker, on his way home from a long night’s work, fell asleep at the wheel, striking the bent-over old man. The car’s door handle lodged in Agostino’s temple, dragging him some distance. In Monongahela Memorial Hospital, the coal miner’s last refuge, desperately struggling to heal, he contracted pneumonia and died.

My grandfather, Primo, and his brother, Attilio, took Agostino’s old trunk full of clothing and books from the old country and his manuscripts out into the backyard and made a bonfire of them. (Thank goodness Zia Marfisa and one copy of The Conquest of Tripoli were in New Jersey at the time.) The motives at work may have been the second generation’s drive to be thoroughly American, or maybe the fear that gripped the Italian community after the Sacco and Vanzetti trials. It is hard to say which would have played the bigger role.

Uncle Attilio worked at a local foundry, and he had a falling out with them over union involvement at about the same time that Agostino died. He tried his hand at business, but the business (a “beer garden”) failed, and he had to beg for his old job back. The company (Coshocton Iron Works) took him back on the condition that he take no time off for any reason, and then put him to work in the riverfront loading area. He caught a cold, and instead of staying home until he got over it, he kept working until he caught pneumonia and died, leaving a wife and four small children. My grandfather worked at the same foundry. He was entrusted with the job of lining furnaces made there with asbestos. He died of cancer the year it became public knowledge that asbestos causes cancer. (Government agencies and many private companies were aware of the danger but kept it quiet for three decades, a typical incubation period for asbestos-induced cancer.) My grandfather’s doctors advised the family to file a wrongful death suit. They did not, primarily because they felt that my grandfather would not have wanted to hurt his employer of 40 years. Nine years later, the company pulled out of the Monongahela area, leaving at least six descendants of Agostino Necciai without jobs. Nevertheless, 100 or so family members remain deeply rooted there, very quiet, and more than a little “agitati.”

Attilio Necciai, Agostino’s son who worked for the Coshocton Iron Works, caught a cold working on the riverfront and died of pneumonia in the late 1930s.