

# UP FRONT



## ITALIAN AMERICAN COLLECTION

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### The Enterprising Antonucci Brothers

If you grew up in Pittsburgh during the first half of the 20th century, you may remember when hucksters and peddlers visited your neighborhood, carting their goods and offering inexpensive services. Many may recall *l'arrotino*, or the blade-sharpener, who would ring his bell to announce that he had arrived with his grinding machine, ready to sharpen scissors and knives with his stone wheel. When the Italian American Program began building a collection in the early 1990s, one of the first donations received was a hand-made grinding machine (called an *ammolaforbice* in Italian) and hand bell from the Antonucci family. These items belonged to the patriarch of their family, Francesco Antonucci, an Italian immigrant from the village of Ginestra degli Schiavoni in the province of Benevento in Campania.

Francesco emigrated from Italy in 1912 to meet his younger brother, Antonio, who had immigrated to St. Louis, Missouri, the year prior. They lived in a boarding house with other immigrants and labored in a candy factory. It was in this boarding house that the Antonucci brothers got the idea from a fellow tenant named Mike Taranova to construct portable grinding machines and start their



**Antonio and Francesco Antonucci's grinding machines, built c. 1917.**

HHC Collections, gift of Anthony, Jr., and Elizabeth Antonucci in honor of Antonio Antonucci, 2013.44.1. HHC Collections, gift of the Antonucci family, 1994.170.1.

own business. Carried like a backpack, the lightweight design allowed the brothers to have a mobile trade with an expansive client base. The brothers took this newly acquired knowledge with them to Pittsburgh, first to the Hill District where they settled in 1917, and later to the Italian section of East Liberty near Larimer Avenue. They peddled their grinding machines around Pittsburgh's neighborhoods and boroughs, sometimes travelling as far as New Kensington, McKeesport, and Braddock. Roaming the region by foot and by street car, the Antonucci brothers covered a radius of 50 miles with their grinding machines strapped to their backs.

This past spring, the Italian American Collection received a donation of a second grinding machine and hand bell from Antonio's son and daughter-in-law, Anthony and Elizabeth Antonucci. The History Center is fortunate to reunite the machines after

decades of separation. Additional images and genealogical information provided by the donors add to what we already knew about the enterprising Antonucci brothers, creating a more complete picture of their lives. Previously unknown to the History Center was that Antonio served in United States Armed Forces from 1917 to 1919, joining the military just six years after his immigration to the United States. It was not uncommon for Italian immigrants to aid their adopted nation in this manner during wartime. Antonio served in France and Germany during World






War I and suffered shrapnel wounds from two separate attacks. He was honorably discharged from the army in September 1919 and returned to America, where he went back to peddling his *ammolatorbice* until 1950, when he retired from sharpening scissors and began working for the United States Postal Service.

The Antonucci brothers' grinding machines are nearly identical. They stand upright at a little over two and a half feet tall and are fabricated with a wooden A-frame construction. A circular grinding stone sits on the top plane of each machine and is operated by pumping a foot pedal. Both machines have a storage compartment for small hand tools; it is in the placement of this detail where we see a major difference between Francesco and Antonio's machines. When we opened the storage door on Antonio's machine, we were surprised to find a small hammer and flathead screwdriver, presumably used to mend umbrellas. Another visible difference is that Antonio's machine, unlike Francesco's, still has the well-worn leather straps attached.

For the Antonucci brothers, the profits generated by their grinding machines allowed them to support large families. Francesco's grandson, John Antonucci, recalls how hard his grandfather worked to provide for his family: "This machine was his livelihood... He'd hand you a quarter, you didn't know what he had to do for that quarter. To us, it was just a quarter, but I wish I would have kept some of the quarters he gave me. To me, it represents someone coming from another country and creating a life here with ten children, raising those ten children, and having made a place in history for the rest of my generation."<sup>1</sup>

The industry and ingenuity of Francesco and Antonio Antonucci is representative of the ethos possessed by many of the Italian immigrants that settled in Western Pennsylvania. The Italian American Collection is truly pleased to help preserve their grinding machines and their story. 

<sup>1</sup>Quote from *Echoes of the Past*.  
Dir. Peter Argentine. Argentine Productions, 1994. Film.



**LEFT: Antonio Antonucci and his grinding machine in *The Bulletin Index*, c. 1930.**

HHC Detre L&A, 2013.0073.

**BOTTOM LEFT: John Antonucci with his grandfather Francesco's grinding machine from the History Center's 1994 film *Echoes of the Past*.**

HHC Detre L&A, 1996.1158.

**BELOW: Francesco Antonucci with his grinding machine, c. 1920.**

HHC Detre L&A, 1994.0272.

