

— Servant —

# “Up on the Hill”

## My Italian American Grandmother

By Tina Calabro



Pasquale and Agostina Calabro with children  
Domenico (rear), Carmella, and Bruno (on mother's  
lap), McDowell County, West Virginia, 1923.

All photos courtesy of Tina Calabro.



Calabro grocery, located on a hill in the west end of Washington, Pa. 1959.

People often associate warmth and color with Italian American family life—comforting food, generous affection. Certainly, these associations ring true for many. But the life my paternal grandparents made in Western Pennsylvania a century ago doesn't quite fit that image. Their experiences were rather cheerless and my thoughts have always glanced off the rough surfaces of their lives—especially the seemingly loveless relationship between my inexpressive grandfather and the all-but-invisible woman who was his wife.



The author's father, Bruno Calabro, with his mother Agostina in May 1943, just days before her death.

My grandfather lived to an old age, but I never met my grandmother, for whom I'm named. Worn to the bone, she died suddenly at age 59 from a cerebral hemorrhage, aged much beyond her years, inside a house bleak and tired-looking, and now erased from its site. In family memory, she abides as an emblem of how unfavorable life could be for an immigrant woman of her time, place, and station. Her name was Agostina Di Leonora Deviola Calabro. In contrast to the impressive length of her name, the amount known about her is very little. Only a handful of people who remember her are still alive today, but all of them say the same, simple thing: "She had a hard life." She left little trace of her thoughts, feelings, or beliefs. Now, as I surpass her age at the time of her death, I find myself wanting to look closely at her, wanting to add warmth and color to her memory, if any can be found, and understand how her life informs mine, even today.

A photo taken "up on the hill," as my family still refers to our Washington, Pennsylvania, homestead, in May 1943, just a few days before my grandmother's stroke, is a testament to the conditions of her life. She is standing with my father, who wears a formal army uniform (dark olive-brown, badges and brass buttons). He is Private First Class Bruno Calabro, fresh out of basic training, Italian dark and handsome, and about to be sent into war. In his open smile and bright eyes, there is self-confidence and pride. In my grandmother's thin white hair, closed-lipped smile, and eyes burrowed deep under her brow is the toil of her years.

Mother and son each have an arm around the other. His free arm ends in the slender young hand of a 20-year-old. Her bare arm is dough-white and unadorned against her patterned housedress. Arthritic knuckles bulge in lateral relief across her hand.

I long to hold that hand and hear her stories.

## A White Widow

Family members recall only a few facts about Agostina. Born in 1883 in the village of Sant'Elia in Reggio Calabria (the "toe" of the Italian peninsula) and poor, she was given away at age 11 to work in the household of another family. We know nothing about her family of origin.

In 1909, at age 26, she married Pasquale Calabro, from the nearby town of Saline, who appears to have been as taciturn and emotionally distant as a young husband as he was later as a father and grandfather. Perhaps she was considered long overdue for marriage; perhaps she was considered unmarriageable. My cousin Sue recalls stories told by her mother and the other women of the family during her childhood in the 1950s and 1960s. It was a marriage of convenience, she heard. "I don't think it was love. I think it was, he needed someone and she needed someone."

"The family she worked for in Italy tormented her," Sue heard. "She was a used woman from very young, worn out before she even got started. She was a servant and that's all she knew. She didn't have a chance in the world."

By 1913, the couple had two sons and Pasquale was on his way to America, alone. Like many Italian women of her day, Agostina would follow her husband to America once he was established. Historians of Italian American immigration gave these women a name: "white widows," meaning that left alone in Italy, often with children, they fended for themselves, much like actual Italian widows who traditionally dressed in black. As one historian put it, these women "scrimped, saved, and struggled to hold their families together." With their husbands pursuing work in America, the wives held on to the expectation of a better life.

Pasquale Calabro in front of the family grocery with some of his adult children, their spouses, and grandchildren, early 1950s.



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Statistically, my grandparents were among the four million Italians who left their homeland between 1880 to 1930 for the United States. During that period, more immigrants came from Italy than from any other country. The majority came from southern Italy and Sicily—the “mezzogiorno” (literally, “midday”)—where peasants struggled with challenges that threatened their survival, including floods and mudslides on deforested hillsides, a devastating earthquake in 1908, and diseased and pest-infested agricultural lands. An unstable political climate created even more incentive to leave. The year my grandfather arrived in Pensacola, Florida, perhaps as a stowaway on an Italian ship—1913—was a peak year of legal Italian

immigration through teeming east coast ports.

Work was not difficult to find, but it was hard, dirty work. America’s cities were growing, creating great demand for unskilled laborers. The coal mines that fueled industry, the railroads that transported goods, and all manner of public works projects employed hundreds of thousands of Italian immigrants. The pay was low and the working conditions were harsh and dangerous, but these jobs provided the traction for starting new lives. Discrimination kept Italians out of better jobs. “They were at the bottom of the immigrant labor hierarchy,” notes historian Donna Gabaccia in the 2015 documentary *The Italian Americans*. “They were human steam shovels.”

My grandfather was one of them. He came north and found work in the coal mines of McDowell County, West Virginia, the gritty center of the coal mining industry that fueled legions of steel mills in Pittsburgh and the Ohio River Valley. A seven-year separation such as my grandparents had was not uncommon. Although many Italian immigrant men traveled back and forth across the ocean at intervals to see their wives and families (historians dubbed these men “birds of passage”), my grandfather did not.

When the time came for the family to reunite, my grandmother began the voyage from Naples, the most common port of departure for southern Italians, with only one of their sons, seven-year-old Domenico. Their



older son, Bruno, had died in an accident at the age of six when he fell on a sharp rock that punctured his abdomen. In family memory, Agostina's aloneness in her grief over his death is a shared understanding.

In my mind's eye, I see Agostina as a young mother in a rocky southern Italian landscape. She is with her two little boys. One of the boys is hurt and she is stricken by fear and helplessness. The boy disappears and her anguish is as deep and dark as the mines she imagines her husband entering each day in West Virginia. How does she find the words to tell him? She soldiers on without anyone to comfort her. And when she reunites with her husband four years later, she realizes that he cannot feel the same grief. The child was just a baby when he left for America. It was his firstborn, a son, and that means something, but he does not feel the pain and guilt that she does.

Like most Italian immigrants, Agostina and her young son crossed the ocean over 14 days in the least expensive manner—steerage—described by historian Nicholas P. Ciotola as “the dank, dreary quarters in the lower levels of the ships, where engine noise and heat, lack of adequate comfort facilities,

## She soldiers on without anyone to comfort her.



and poor ventilation made the journey one of unpleasantness and difficulty.” When they arrived in Boston on January 6, 1920, and continued on to West Virginia, they encountered biting cold weather, far unlike the fair climate they had left.

By the end of that year, Agostina and Pasquale would have a daughter, Carmella. By 1922, another son (my late father, the second “Bruno”) and then another daughter, Josephine, in 1924. Family life in coal mining towns, or “patches,” was unappealing to say the least. People strategized to get out if they could. They would find a way out by learning a skill or trade or, like my grandparents, by opening a neighborhood

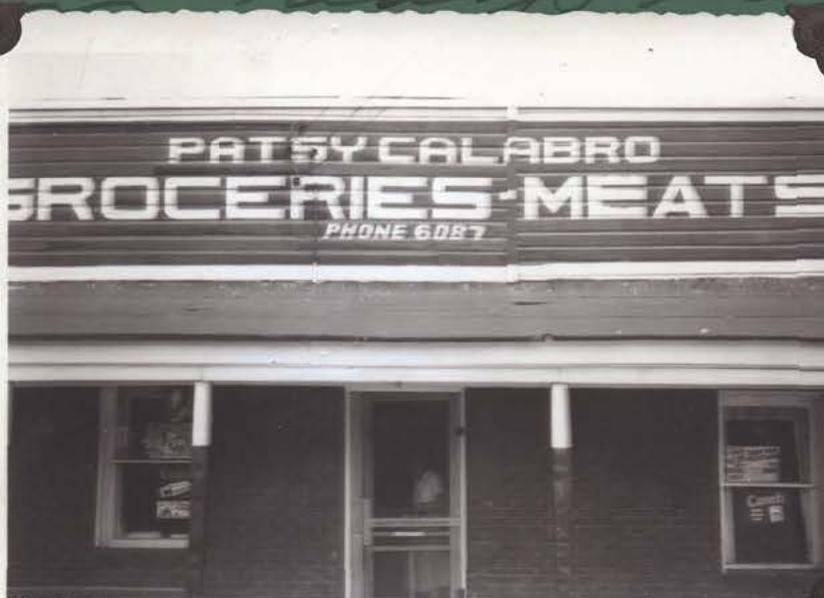
grocery store. Self-employment was a viable option for Italian immigrants, especially due to discrimination that kept them out of competitive jobs.

And so, in 1925, my grandparents and their four children moved 250 miles north to a wood frame house on Altamont Avenue in the densely populated west end of Washington, Pennsylvania, and opened a “mom and pop” grocery on its first floor. (Pasquale later built a separate structure for the store adjacent to the house).

By then in her mid-40s, Agostina would give birth to two more children—a daughter, Antoinette, and a son, Armenio. When the youngest was 15, Agostina fell dead.

Sisters Mickey and Sue Steuernagel,  
daughters of Antoinette Calabro Steuernagel,  
on a 1949 Plymouth Deluxe.

The family grocery.





The author with her grandfather, 1954.

**We older grandchildren  
recall our grandfather as a  
constant builder, pick and  
shovel in hand.**

## The Store

Never once as a child in the 1950s and '60s did I ask to see the inside of the old wooden Calabro house, although there was no reason I could not. The house seemed to emit depression—weathered, sad-looking, lacking any welcome or attraction. I would regard it from a distance, puzzled by its gloom.

My cousin Faith, who lived nearby, recalls a large, flat tree stump with hatchet marks between the old house and the store. She heard that was where our grandmother chopped the heads off chickens. Mickey—a cousin whose family lived in the house for a couple of years in the 1960s when she was a teenager—recalls the coal furnace and coldness of the basement toilet, often broken. Cousin Sue remembers a large rose bush out front, perhaps the only spot of beauty. Today, standing on the bare hilltop where the house once stood, a panorama of the town (little changed since the 1920s) unfolds before one's eyes. This was the Calabro family's perch.

The Calabro grocery store served the neighborhood for four decades. Every inch of the store is vivid today in the memories of the grandchildren, all of us now in our 50s, 60s, and 70s. From the street, the distinctive white script of the "Salada Tea" sign in the window was a focal point. A big thermometer on a metal sign hung high on a pole. Inside the entrance, to the left, was a large candy case with a glass front. Cousin Faith remembers the satisfaction of tending candy sales as a child. "Even today," she says, "I could probably name every type of candy in that wonderful old case."

To the right of the candy case was a counter with a gumball machine, a cash register, and a note pad where customers' "tabs" were written down. During the Depression, credit was extended to anyone to who needed it. Like their neighbors, the Calabros were also poor. Census records from 1930 and 1940 list the family income as "0." My late father often said that he dropped out of high school because he was

ashamed to wear his older sister's shoes. His teeth were so rotten when he entered the army that he had them all extracted.

Other memories of the store include two waist-high, refrigerated, red Coca-Cola "pop" cases with glass bottles standing inside and the opener for their metal caps incorporated into the case itself. A long refrigerated meat case sat directly opposite the front entrance. Against the wall behind the case was a rough-hewn butcher block on four thick legs upon which sat a slicer for lunchmeat and cheese, and a hefty meat cleaver. Milk, butter, and other items were also kept in the case. The top of a white porcelain scale peeked over the top of the case.

A well-worn accordion door led from the store to a back room, where our grandfather once held poker games. The hum of refrigeration, the smell of processed meat and cheese, and the creak of footsteps on old wood floors permeated the store. From spring until fall, Pittsburgh Pirates baseball came through the tinny speaker of a portable radio.

Nearing the 1950s, our widowed grandfather's finances improved, perhaps in part because of the gambling parlor and pool hall he ran in a room below the Kroger's supermarket on Chestnut Street, one of the town's main drags. He partnered with his oldest son, the Italian-born Domenico (by then a successful construction contractor with the American name "Don") to purchase properties adjacent to the house and store, turning the top of the "hill" into a crazy quilt of hand-made structures. We older grandchildren recall our grandfather as a constant builder, pick and shovel in hand.

To the left of the store and house, on a triangular lot, he built a two-story red brick house for his oldest daughter Carmella and her husband. To the right of the store, he converted the former Bellevue Elementary School—a rectangular building that all the

The author with her grandfather, 1959.



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Calabro children attended—into a duplex to rent. He also built a tiny red brick house on the jutting corner of Altamont and Bellevue Avenues.

The last house he built was wedged behind the store—a small, buff-colored brick house on Bellevue Avenue, where he lived with his daughter Josephine, who took care of him until his death in 1959. Unmarried and without children of her own, Aunt Jo doted

on her nieces and nephews, each of us certain of being her favorite. At the same time, Aunt Jo's designation as her father's caregiver spoke clearly of the deep-rooted gender roles our grandparents brought with them from Italy.

"Grandpap made sure Aunt Jo didn't get married," said my cousin Mickey. She had a serious boyfriend when she was younger. They were in love, serious. They wanted to get married. But Grandpap wanted her to

take care of *him*. Men didn't take care of themselves. They needed a woman for that. He was alone, there was no woman. Aunt Jo had to be that woman.

"He told her that if she married her boyfriend, she would be out of his life forever. This was old school. Parents had the last say."

After our grandfather died, Aunt Jo, nearing age 40, belatedly started her life. She left the store in the hands of her siblings and eloped to California with Frank, a salesman of questionable character. Two years later, divorced, she returned home and closed the store. Within a few years, she married Ray, a gruff, decades-older bachelor farmer. "Aunt Jo went from taking care of Grandpap to having a fling to settling down with a guy she had to take care of," said Mickey. "It's what she knew."



The grocery served the neighborhood from 1925 until the late 1960s. After Pasquale's death in 1959, his adult children kept the store open for another decade.

## Gender Roles

By all accounts, our grandfather was hard to know, and autocratic. He took care of his wife and family in practical ways, but offered little of himself. Our grandmother was uncomplaining and compliant, left to run the store and raise their brood of American-born children with little involvement from her husband.

"Our grandmother knew her place and believed that was what she was here for," said Mickey.

Sociologists studying first-generation Italian Americans have noted the strict adherence to traditional gender roles within these families. Husbands worked and ensured the family's economic health; wives cared for the family. Restrictive as they were, these gender roles complemented each other and contributed to the Italian family's survival in America, notes anthropologist Colleen L. Johnson. "The authority system the Italians brought with them can only be described as patriarchal," she writes. "The immigrant father stood above the other family members as the ultimate source of social control, his superior position maintained by the enforcement of respect for his role as a provider and protector of the family. Most importantly, despite the highest possible odds, he rarely failed in this role. Few Italians can recount a father who deserted them."

Within this family structure and hardships of daily life, it's not surprising that immigrant women like my grandmother left little record of their lives for future generations. Lack of literacy is another factor, writes historian Emiliana P. Noether. These women were "truly silent," Noether writes, not only because they lived in a society controlled by men, but also because, "being illiterate, [they were] unable to leave any expression of [their] innermost feelings for posterity."

At the same time, their contribution to the stability of their families is unmistakable.

Nicholas Ciotola writes,

The patriarchal structure should not minimize the importance of women in the Italian family. Numerous scholars refer to the Italian-American family as father-dominated and mother-centered, rather than strictly patriarchal. In other words the father, as the head of the family, maintained unquestioned authority over the household, but the mother provided the emotional focus of all family life.

As important as my grandmother was to her children, it's unlikely she felt valued by her husband. It was common knowledge that he was unfaithful. "He had a few women," said Cousin Sue. "He did what he wanted to do, when he wanted to do it. But he made sure *she* was a good girl."

My father's simmering resentment of Pasquale's behavior is evident in an incident from 1946, three years after Agostina's death. The occasion was my parents' wedding. My father refused to let his father into the reception because he was accompanied by one of his girlfriends.

"I don't know where she came from," my mother, now 92, recalls. "She was a big woman, big busted, red hair, like a floozy. It was a big scene. Bruno was furious, 'How dare you come in here with a woman.' His father embarrassed him."

Even so, my father's bond with his father never wavered. Like all his siblings, he was devoted to both parents. As a 16-year-old, he drove his father east to Philadelphia for treatment of his lung disease. Also as a teenager, he drove his mother south to West Virginia to see a healer for her arthritis. "There were lots of healers in those days," my mother explained. Neither grandparent spoke English; their children translated.

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our 50s, 60s,  
and 70s.**



Grocery cash register.



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Cousins gather at the family grocery, Easter Sunday, 1958. The author is at front left.

**She survived separation from her family of origin, the loss of a child, a hollow marriage, endless work—and created a legacy of love.**



Agostina's health was not "up to par," Sue said. "She was ill, ill, and more ill. She had bad arthritis, got it very young." Sue's mother, Antoinette, told her that she and her sisters would knead bread dough for their mother because the arthritis in her hands was so severe. Antoinette also spoke of massaging her mother's feet. The youngest child, Armenio, was 15 when his mother dropped dead in their house. "My dad didn't talk much about his growing up," said his son Michael. "From what he did say, I gathered they did not have the best life."

As soon as he was old enough, Armenio joined the army. Antoinette, the second youngest, age 17 when her mother died, stole some of her older sisters' clothes and ran off to Pittsburgh. She found a job in a nightclub, taking pictures. "She felt she had

to get out," said her daughter, Mickey. "In order for girls to do what they wanted to do, they had to run away. They couldn't stay and do what they wanted. Look at Aunt Jo. Grandpap told her, 'You are going to be who I want you to be.'"

The oldest sibling, Italian-born Domenico, was 30 years old, married, and had three children at the time his mother died. Soon afterward, he moved his family from the west end of Washington to the neighboring town of Canonsburg. "It was like a divorce from the family," his son Robert said. "We lived seven miles away, but it could have been 700. Both our grandparents' personalities were subdued, but there was always lots of arguing and loud talking in the store," he recalled from those days. "Who was getting money for

dances? Whose hand was in the till? After our grandmother died, the family fell apart."

That our grandmother was not simply good, but saintly, is without question. But my father once called her "chickenhearted," an old-fashioned term meaning "timid" and "cowardly." His pronouncement bothered me; it still does. It seemed so unfair to her memory, after all she did and endured. She worked herself to death for her family.

Within that unflattering word—so diminishing—I hear Pasquale's precept: Women are less than men. *You are who I say you are.*

And Agostina's acquiescence: *She knew her place and believed that was what she was here for.*

Two generations later, those beliefs reside deep inside me, a crumbling foundation I can't seem to sweep away. When I am afraid to act on my own behalf, when I accept less than I deserve, I stumble on those stones.

"Your grandmother was like the mother hen in her barnyard," observed a friend, also

descended from Italian immigrants. “Those were complex social hierarchies. There was a pecking order.”

However, in at least one situation we know about, Agostina thwarted the order. In the months leading up to her death, she regularly protected her high-spirited daughters from their father’s wrath. Although in ill health, she descended “the hill” in every kind of weather to intercept the girls when they returned from social outings late at night. By walking into the house with them, she defused her husband’s anger, silently facing him down.

That sounds like courage.

## Cousins

Like the proverbial roads leading to Rome, family memories about Agostina Di Leonora Deviola Calabro all seem to point to the same place: a large, soft heart of maternal love.

“She might not have been a kingpin, but she was well-loved,” said my cousin Robert, who says he can still feel her comforting presence from his early childhood. “I remember her making bread in the outdoor oven. She would cut the hot loaf in two and top it with butter. It was really good.”

Robert once got a spanking from his parents for setting out alone from their house, about a mile away, to his grandparents’ house “up on the hill.” “I wanted to see my grandmother,” he says.

In another instance, our grandmother saved his life. He and his older brother got themselves locked into a refrigerator that was left outside. Agostina discovered them. Robert was six years old when his beloved grandmother died. He recalls her casket in the front room of the old wood frame house. “She was loyal, frail,” he said. “I did not know what love was at the time, but she did.”

Thanks to my family’s memories, I now see my grandmother and her undeniably

“hard life” more clearly. She survived separation from her family of origin, the loss of a child, a hollow marriage, endless work—and created a legacy of love. I honor her womanhood and feel her strength within me.

A new intimacy grew between my cousins and me as we talked about our grandmother’s life and acknowledged the value she was denied in her own time. Through many long phone calls and visits, we cradled her overworked hands, felt the warmth of her generous heart, and marveled at her unwavering commitment to her family. We are her legacy. We are our grandfather’s legacy too. As I put words together to try to say what’s in my mind, I think of my grandfather building the store and the houses “up on the hill,” one brick at a time, leaving indisputable evidence of himself in his new country. ❖

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**Tina Calabro** is a Pittsburgh-based writer. This essay had its genesis at a Heinz History Center workshop on Italian American memoir taught by Joseph Bathanti in January 2014. Mr. Bathanti, an East Liberty native, professor of creative writing at Appalachian State University, and former North Carolina Poet Laureate, was the first Scholar-in-Residence for the History Center’s Italian American Collection.

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The original stone marker for Altamont Avenue is still in place. Behind the marker is one of the houses built by Pasquale Calabro “up on the hill” in the 1950s.