

UP FRONT



ITALIAN AMERICAN COLLECTION

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The Preservation of a Patriot: Conserving Antonio Pontello's Uniform

Every time the History Center accepts new artifacts into its permanent collection, legal paperwork is created to document each donation. Called a “Deed of Gift,” this paper is what transfers ownership of the object from the donor to the Historical Society of Western

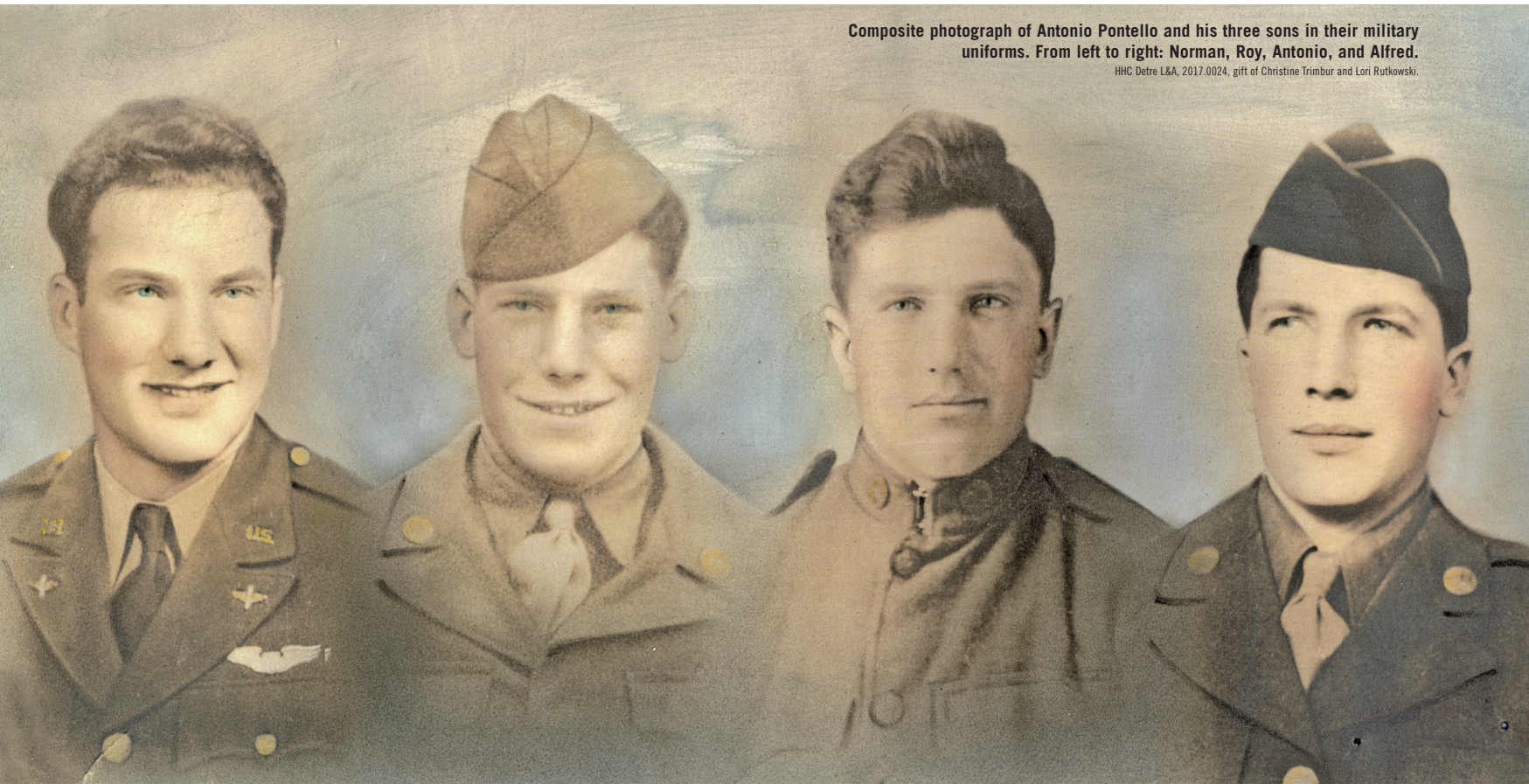
Pennsylvania. It also implies that the museum will care for items in perpetuity, providing acid-free storage, temperature and humidity controlled environments, and tending to conservation needs as necessary. This winter, the History Center’s Italian American Program financed the conservation of a jacket, leather belt, and gun holster from a collection documenting the men of the Pontello family of South Park, Pennsylvania.

Earlier in the year, sisters Barbara Pontello and Christine Trimbur had offered artifacts related to the military service of their grandfather, father, and uncles in both WWI and WWII. There is a lot of documentation about veterans of Italian descent serving in the United States military during World War II, but it’s key to note that Italian immigrants served in the U.S. Armed Forces in World War I as well. Italian immigrants living and working in the U.S. could serve in either country’s military if papers were filed demonstrating their intent to naturalize.

Antonio Pontello, the donors’ grandfather,

immigrated in 1909 from Musano in Northern Italy; he worked as a coal miner in the South Hills and fought in WWI for the United States, seeing combat at Argonne and Flanders. Antonio’s patriotism extended to his three sons, and each served in WWII: Norman was a pilot in the U.S. Army Air Force, Alfred was a paratrooper, and Roy was in the infantry. In 1943, Antonio was in his late forties and too old to serve; instead he did his civic duty securing the Homefront as an Auxiliary Military Police officer patrolling the Allegheny County Airport. The jacket, leather belt, and gun holster that were conserved are part of the uniform he wore.

There are many considerations when deciding whether an artifact should undergo conservation treatment. We determine whether altering the condition of an artifact helps or harms its provenance (there are cases where damage or dirt contributes to the story and removing it would eradicate an important part of the item’s history). We also consider the rate at which the condition



Composite photograph of Antonio Pontello and his three sons in their military uniforms. From left to right: Norman, Roy, Antonio, and Alfred.

HHC Detre L&A, 2017.0024, gift of Christine Trimbur and Lori Rutkowski.

may be deteriorating and if that may be halted or reversed. Antonio's uniform was stored in a footlocker in an environment susceptible to occasional flooding; even slight exposure to moisture in this situation can lead to the growth of mold spores. Mold on the fabric and leather pieces required our collections team to keep the uniform quarantined inside a plastic bag to prevent the multiplying of spores; more importantly, it inspired us to call textile conservator, Nancy Boomhower.

Antonio's jacket was vacuumed five times inside and out and a mixture of acetone and water was applied to kill the mold spores that the vacuum did not remove. The metal buttons were cleaned by removing rust, which developed from being exposed to a damp environment. Loose buttons were detached and securely reattached and small holes were repaired. After the initial treatment, the textile still held a musty smell; it was aired out, re-vacuumed, and steam pressed. A cotton ball with baking soda wrapped in tissue was added to the two inside pockets of the jacket to provide continual deodorization of the garment.¹

The treatment of the leather belt and gun holster was more extensive due to the material and how mold penetrates it. Like the jacket, the belt and holster were vacuumed and the same water and acetone mixture was used. Museum leather protector with mold inhibitor was applied and left on the belt for three days before it was wiped off. A second leather solution was applied and left to dry for three days, followed by a leather dressing that was left to soak for a week. The exposed rawhide was then brushed and wiped to remove wax and grime. Small cracks in the leather were repaired using Cellugel and the surface was polished to activate its original shine. Rust and corrosion was removed from metal pieces, taking care not to allow the



Antonio Pontello's jacket, leather belt, and gun holster after conservation.

HHC Collections, 2016.30.1, .2 a,b, gift of Barbara Pontello.


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Antonio Pontello in his auxiliary military police uniform that he wore to while on patrol at the Allegheny County Airport during WWII, 1944-45.

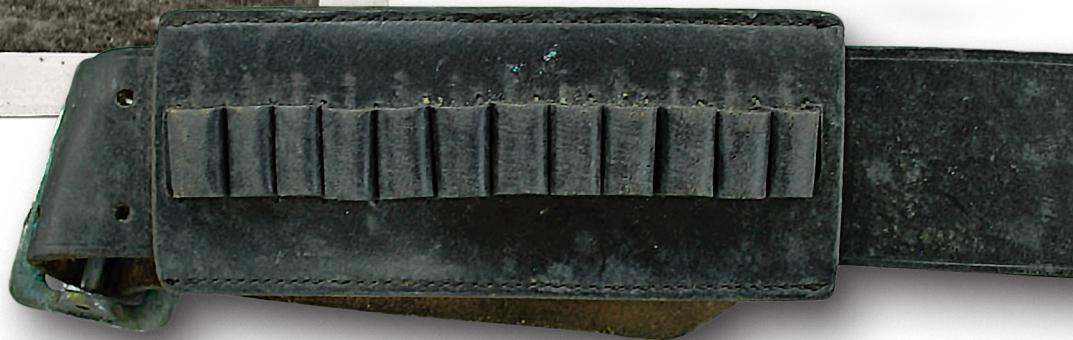
HHC Detre L&A, MSS 1101, gift of Christine Trimbur.

corrosive metal cleaner to touch the leather. Finally, the belt was laid flat and weighted to straighten out decades' worth of folds and bends.²

The Italian American Program is fortunate that due to the proceeds from our annual Bocce Fundraiser, we can finance special projects such as the conservation of Antonio Pontello's uniform. Having this flexibility means that we can better fulfill our mission as a repository for our region's history. It also is one of the many ways that our community's support of the History Center reveals itself in tangible results. 

¹ Report by Nancy Boomhower, 2017.

² Ibid.



A before photograph of the leather belt and holster from Antonio Pontello's auxiliary military police uniform. The white residue is active mold spores.

HHC Collections, 2016.30.2 a. Photo by Nicole Lauletta.