

October 20, 1972

Dear cousin,

I'm sorry I haven't written to you for so long, but I've been so busy with my life. Now that I am older, I am taking it a little easier now and sometimes look back at everything that has happened since I left our Catanzaro province of Calabria so long ago. As you remember, I came to America to be with my brother Antonio. I came to Cortland in 1905. I then went to Syracuse when the railroad sent my brother to work there. I learned about a wonderful Italian band, and I wanted to be part of it although I only knew how to play the guitar, which is not a band instrument. I learned how to play the clarinet so I could be in the band, which I enjoyed very much. I came back to Cortland and got a job at the Wickwire Brothers Factory about 1909-1910.

I missed being in the band and wanted to start one in Cortland. I started the Mascagni Band, named after my favorite Italian composer, but I realized that since I was not a trained conductor, I could use the help of a real "maestro." I got in touch with Maestro Di Orsi, who was conducting the Italian band in Syracuse. He was kind enough to come from Syracuse to our band rehearsals, which took place in a building on the corner of Hyatt and Port Watson Street. Now it is the Eagles' building. I stood next to Di Orsi while he conducted and imitated his moves. Gradually I learned how to conduct as well as I needed to, and eventually I took over the conducting completely.

Finally in 1917, the Italians got their own parish. In honor of the new church, I renamed the band, the St. Anthony's Band. I held rehearsals at the St. Anthony's Church. Maestro Di Orsi still came every once in awhile to watch. Even though I kept working at the factory during the day, I taught music to the boys in the parish. The boys started when they were about ten to eleven years old. I gave them lessons on any instrument for about fifty cents an hour. The parents were happy with the lessons.

As the years went by, the band became more and more well known. We were asked to play at many of the Italian celebrations in other cities and towns. In 1932, it was at one such celebration in Solvay for the Madonna Assunta that my little son Ray made his trumpet solo debut at age eleven. You can imagine how proud I was. In 1937, the St. Anthony's Band became the Civic Band and played until World War II when it disbanded because of the war. Then the band began again after the war and went on until 1958. However, in 1967, at the insistence of Phil Natoli, I came out of my musical retirement when the Old Timers' Band was formed. You could say it was the descendent of the Mascagni, St. Anthony's, and Civic Bands. Even

though I was in my mid-eighties, I enjoyed being back in the harness, so to speak, until it was just too much for me and I passed my baton to Sam Forcucci, a worthy successor.

Recently I had one of the happiest days of my life. One of the little boys I used to teach, now Col. Arnald Gabriel, called me up and asked me if I would conduct his Air Force Band at a concert he planned to give at the Cortland College when his parents, Ferdinando and Filomena Gabriele, had their fiftieth wedding anniversary. I humbly accepted. At the concert, when the moment came for me to step up to lead the United States Air Force Band, I realized what a long way I had come. There I was, a working man with not a lot of formal education, leading this world famous band.

I have even more to be grateful for. My son Ray has become a very famous trumpet player. He even played first chair trumpet with the renowned maestro Arturo Toscanini. Yes, America has been good to me. I have been able to share my love of music with many people over the years. I had my band play everything from Italian and American marches and songs to opera music. If I have made a few generations of people begin to love music, I will leave this world a happy man.

Tuo cugino,

Frank Crisara

(By Team 3 English Student, Cortland Jr. Sr. High School -- 2001)

Bibliography

Stevens, John. Interview. March 12, 2001.