

Antonietta Lanni nee
Venditti
Italian Immigrant
Homeland
December 1953



An excerpt from the memoirs of Antonietta Venditti:

Cassino, Italy, 1950.

Antonio Lanni wanted his family to have a better future and to pursue opportunities that he never had. To achieve his dream, he had to find work that paid better than just bread on the table. Antonio would have to emigrate, but where? Antonio decided that he wanted to go to Canada. He met a man who said he would help him. Antonio only had a fifty-fifty chance of being able to obtain the necessary papers to apply for his immigration. In those days an immigrant could sponsor a relative and friend. The limit of people allowed per immigrant was quite low and it was difficult at times to bring into the country your immediate family, never mind a stranger. He couldn't offer him any guarantee. It was a gamble.

Finally some tranquility when news arrived that the call to emigrate had come. We all accompanied Antonio to Roma for his physical examination and once to Napoli, as well. We then had to wait and see if we were the lucky ones. After more hard times, the news came that my husband could leave. At once, happiness for a dream come true and yet sadness and worry for the departure. Where would Antonio go, and how would he fare, in a strange land? And, what about me? I would be left alone with my two young children. It was a bizarre feeling -- we were happy and sad at the same time.

In September of 1951, I saw my husband leave. He left with Angelo Meta and Amabile Valente. Both were "paesani" from Cassino. Paesani literally means from the same town.

The three young men boarded the ship in Napoli and eventually arrived in Montreal. A couple of weeks later I received a letter from Antonio letting me know that all was well and that he liked the new country.

It would take more than two weeks for a letter to arrive then. In it there were twenty Canadian dollars. The first Canadian dollars I saw. I cried and cried for joy. Antonio was working and earning sixty dollars a week.

He wrote that he would keep sending us money and that we not worry about him. "We will reunite soon", he promised.

Antonio had it harder than he let know in his letters. In a foreign land, where they spoke a foreign language and ate foreign food, he felt so alone. The bitterly cold and dark nights of his first winter in Canada would bring a heavy blanket of sadness over him, as thick as the snow outside and no one was there to console him.

He had heard of a job that paid well but it was far away and dangerous. He thought that he would get ahead quicker if he could get that job. He got a job setting mines for the road construction in the bitter cold of winter in Labrador. I had heard that the work killed many immigrants -- that daily someone would die on the job -- and it worried me. The cold, the mines, and the fires in the small tents they lived in, took many young lives.

The immigration documents arrived for my sister in-law Carmela Lanni, the children Filippo and Elisa, and me. During those two years of labour camp conditions, Antonio was able to repay his debts, send his father five hundred dollars to buy some cows and pay the trip for the four of us. Most reassuring of all, he was able to leave Labrador and move to Toronto.

Once in Toronto, he met many of his old friends that had also immigrated from Cassino and its nearby towns. They also had left their homes in search of a brighter future. Antonio lived with other borders for a while, but soon after rented a small apartment with two rooms, a kitchen and bathroom. Having repaid his debts, his attention turned to reuniting with his family. This time, in Canada.

Now it would be my turn to leave.

It was December of 1953 when Filippo, Elisa, Antonio's sister Carmela and I boarded the ship called "Homeland". The goodbyes at the port in Naples were heart wrenching. My dear mother and the rest of the family came to see us off. It was just before Christmas and this added to the sadness of the moment. I kept thinking that in a few days I would embrace my husband and my children would have their father back. But still, the painful tears of goodbyes again. I will never forget seeing the coast of Napoli, one of the most beautiful places in the world. The Homeland sailed from that ancient coast of my ancestors to another.

We arrived at the Port of Halifax, after what seemed like an eternity. Carmela and I were seasick the whole trip. The children were resilient and were fine. Not surprisingly, we felt much better the moment we set

foot on firm land. Quickly, we made our way from the harbour to board our train to Toronto. We were terrified of the cold land and the large amount of snow, where people were different and spoke a foreign language.

After two days by train we arrived in Toronto. Antonio was at the station to meet me. Immediately, I put my arms around my husband and we cried with joy as he held his children and me once again. It was wonderful. Antonio's friend Basilio also came to greet us. He had a car and drove us home...to the tiny flat on Osler Street. For the next few weeks the five of us were so happy in our new home.

"Homeland" was an appropriate name for that ship.