

We left Newark International airport on Wednesday October 5th, destination Palermo Sicily. It was the beginning of a 14 day tour of Southern Italy and Sicily. Accompanying the Di Leo's were Bob and Ursula Mangano, Jack and Sue Gullo and Tom and Claire Woodside. We arrived in Palermo late in the day on Thursday, a little tired but excited at the thought of what laid ahead.

Like most of us, I always had a desire to travel to the birthplace of my parents. Both of my parents immigrated to the United States from Sicily. My mother from Montedoro and my father from Burgio. Although a child when she left, mom never forgot her extended family in Sicily, often sending money and goods back to her home town. When she was living she related stories to her children about her life in the old country, the journey over and relatives left behind.

I should mention that my wife Toni's mom is also from Montedoro and we were also going to try to connect with her family.

In anticipation of this journey I gathered up all the information stored in my mind from the stories told to me by my mother. I quizzed my sister, looked through old papers and letters. I remember my mother writing to a cousin who was studying to become a priest, his name was Faustino Licata. I put this information together and gave it to a friend of my son who was going to visit his grandmother in Montedoro this past summer. He would research my information and hopefully return with good news. The pieces of the puzzle were laid out.

He returned with good news. Yes there is family remaining in Montedoro, descendents of my grandfather's brothers. He obtained their names, addresses and paid them a visit on my behalf. He also confirmed that one of my cousins is a Jesuit priest stationed in Palermo. His name is Faustino Licata. With this information in hand I made contact with Padre Faustino, explaining our relationship and desiring to meet him on arrival in Palermo. We exchanged emails, breaking the ice in establishing a rela-

tionship. Faustino is my age, we were born one day apart in 1940, and he indeed remembered corresponding with my mother. We made arrangements to meet on arrival in Palermo. The puzzle was coming together.

On Friday October 7 we met my cousin Faustino. He arrived at the lobby of the hotel where we exchanged greetings. We presented gifts and spent sometime talking. No problem communicating, he knew some English and I knew some Italian. His English was better than my Italian. He graciously reserved Friday and Saturday from his busy schedule for us. He took us on a walking tour of Palermo on the way to view his beautiful church the "La Chiesa Del Gesu A Casa Proffessa". The 45 minute walk from the hotel traveled through neighborhoods that would not be seen on the tour. The church was nestled in a neighborhood that could be considered inner city. It's staffed by the Jesuits and had been nearly destroyed by bombs during World War II. It has been fully restored to its original beauty. Once inside you became in awe of its brilliance. Totally encased in marble, a site to be seen.

Later that afternoon we traveled to the top of Mount Pellegrino to visit the Shrine of St Rosalia, the patron Saint of Sicily. The shrine is carved into a mountain overlooking the city of Palermo. An amazing site and wonderful view of Palermo. The next day was reserved for Montedoro.

Saturday morning at 9:00. Faustino arrived to pick us up. We loaded the car with gifts from Buffalo and departed for Montedoro. We took the Autostrada for about an hour and then veered off onto country roads towards our destination. I began to get excited, my dream was coming true. It was a glorious sunny day, the Sicilian countryside was beautiful and the colors breathtaking. The road signs listed all the names that I had heard but never thought to see, Caltanissetta, Serradifalco, Agrigento etc.. On the way we stopped in Milena to visit cousins of Padre Faustino. They owned a small Macellaio, (butcher shop), and I mean small. The only items in the store

*(Continued on page 11)*

*(Continued from page 10)*

was the selection of meats in the small cooler. Later on Faustino explained that all the meat is freshly killed and then displayed. No processing of any kind. We said our goodbyes and were on our way to Montedoro.

Montedoro is a small town in the center of Sicily in the region of Caltanissetta. It sits on a hill called "Monte Octavio" and is 500 meters above sea level. Montedoro means "golden mountain" because in springtime little yellow daisies grow in its hilltop and on sunny days they shine like gold. The town's main products are wheat, grapes, olives and almonds. They also produce many dairy products from sheep farming. The streets are cobble stoned, hilly and narrow. A typical Sicilian town

Faustino is a native of Montedoro and he had pre informed the relatives that we were coming. As we approached the town my mind was racing, I was not sure how to react. He parked the car in front of his brother and our cousin Cologero's house. As I departed the car and my feet touched the cobblestone street I looked around at my surroundings and became overwhelmed with the sensation that I was back home. I don't know why but I got a lump in my throat. Out of the house came cousin's Cologero Licata and his wife Maria Monteone. They greeted us warmly in traditional Sicilian fashion, lots of hugs and kisses.

The houses are typical; on the outside they look old, it is if time has stood still. But once stepping in side, through the strings of beads that hang from each entrance, you are in for a surprise. Ceramic tile and marble grace the insides. No clutter and clean as a whistle. The bathrooms are as modern as ours. To the Sicilian his home is his castle. Many have belonged to the family for generations. Additions are vertical and not horizontal.

Inside we sat at a table and began getting acquainted. Most of the conversation was in Italian as they

did not speak English. Surprisingly my Italian held up pretty well. Faustino could speak and understand some English, so if I got stuck understanding, I would say "Faustino, Che si dice?" what did they say. He would then translate. I had been studying Italian for a year and was determined to use it as much as possible. We presented our gift, a beautiful blanket embodied with designs of Buffalo NY. They in turn gave us a plaque of the island of Sicily.

Next we were off for a stroll through the town, stopping to visit our 85 year old cousin Faustino and his wife Giuseppa Alaimo. Again we presented gifts and stayed to chat awhile. I brought out my mother's old family pictures and the diagram of the family tree that I designed showing the linkage between us. We made a few more visits in the town and then back to Cologero's house for lunch. This was not your typical American lunch. It was mezzogiorno, the meal of the day. Just when you thought you were finished and could not eat anymore, out came another course. Poor Toni, she tried hard but could not make it through all of the courses.

After lunch we all took a walking tour of the town. It is really beautiful and I could see us spending time here. The women walked in front of the men. Just like the old days they walked arm in arm. Toni went right along with it. They took me to the house that my mother was born in and lived until departing for America. To think over a 100 years ago and still there. After viewing the town we returned to the house as more cousins came to greet us. They came with wife and children. We sat, talked and reminisced. They brought out their memories and compared them to mine. The pieces of the puzzle were now in place.

As the day drew to a close and it became time to leave, I realized that this was an experience of a lifetime. All of the stories my mother told me, all the names of people that I had never seen, all the scenes that played in my mind came together for me on this day. It was an emotional experience. My mother always talked about returning for a visit but never had the opportunity. I am sure she was with me today.