



Trenches, Trombones, and a Trilogy of Family Musicians

JOURNAL ENTRY, near the Rouge Bouquet Wood in France near Baccarat, Meurthe-et-Moselle:

“March 7, 1918: Sun. Went to the 3rd line trenches to play for Lieutenant Jordan’s funeral. Afterwards, able to take shower, first in 4 weeks.”

In the previous edition of *Quintessential Barrington*, I mentioned my maternal grandfather, Frank (Gorassi) Forte. While my grandfather and I only shared a short chapter of our inherited history, I believe much of who I am is attributed to him and to the generations who preceded me. I can explain.

My childhood memories of Frank have faded, but I remember all the basic facts. He came from Italy, an only son, with his mother when he was five or six-years-old. They traveled from the small town of Albanelli, southwest of Venice. Nothing was ever said of his father, so that part of the family tree remains a mystery. He grew up in a two-flat, which now is located a block west of Illinois Circle Campus in Chicago, an area still known by some as “Little Italy.”

Frank left formal schooling after sixth-grade, probably to support a poor immigrant family. In

the midst of his challenging childhood, he found his way to Hull House, the famous settlement started by Jane Addams where immigrants would go for assistance. Its mission was “to provide social and educational opportunities for working class people in the surrounding neighborhood.”

For my grandfather, Hull House was his place to explore a passion that became a talent, and then a lifelong career: music. Frank learned to play brass instruments, focusing mainly on the trom-

bone and the French horn.

By 1917, he was a highly-regarded young musician. The United States had entered into World War I and Frank, alongside several of his buddies from the neighborhood, enlisted in the 42nd Infantry, which was known as the “Rainbow Division” because its members came from all over the U.S.

About two months ago, for the first time, I started reading the journal Frank kept during those war years. The diary chronicles him leaving Chicago by train, New York by boat, arriving in France then traveling to the front lines, where he was introduced to combat in the trenches. He was a passionate patriot and a resolute musician, literally fighting with a rifle on one shoulder and a trombone on the other.

Reading his journal almost 100 years later is astounding. Imagining the trauma and the sights a very young man faced so far from home, in what history books depict as an extremely brutal war, is vividly possible through my grandfather’s scribbled handwriting.

After the war, my grandfather used his tuneful talents to make a living as a professional musician. During the Great Depression, he survived again and earned a wage simply by playing his trombone. Somehow, with a limited education, he was still able to successfully purchase a home and raise three daughters, all of whom would graduate from college. Interestingly enough, when he was older, he volunteered to teach music at Hull House, where my mother also learned to play piano.



Left photo: Dr. Leonard’s father is seen playing the saxophone. Right photo: Frank (Gorassi) Forte was Dr. Leonard’s grandfather, who played the trombone.



Rouge Bouquet Fighting 69th Memorial Service WWI; March 1918.

The holiday season always seems to conjure memories of an earlier time. For me, music is a constant in those family recollections: My grandfather and his trombone; my father, who due to economic challenges was unable to complete school, excelled playing jazz saxophone in “gigs” across Chicago for years; and my mom, who worked her way through college, playing piano and singing the great American standards.

With a modicum of musical talent, I try to carry on some of that tradition in a limited way, having grown up playing saxophone and currently studying piano. The essence of music is imprinted somewhere in my DNA.

I am so proud of Barrington 220 students who have the opportunity to explore music at many levels. Some will go on to be professional musicians – like my grandfather – or simply an amateur aficionado – like me, who gains personal pleasure from tinkering on the keyboard. Music has a way of enhancing everyone’s life.

Whether singing at a holiday party at The White House, or marching in the upcoming 2014 New Year’s Day Parade in London, we can be proud as a community that our bands, orchestra, and choral ensembles all represent Barrington 220 with distinction. Even just performing in one of our school concerts, as our children find their voices in music, they strengthen their minds, deepen their understanding, create memories, and bring songs to our hearts.

I hope during this nostalgic season you’ll be able to listen to some sentimental melodies or even share a song with family members. For me, I will listen to the melancholy “I’ll Be Seeing You” and think of my grandfather. The jazz standard “Night Train” reminds me of my dad. And I will play “Deep Purple” on the piano, which was one of my mom’s favorite songs.

Music and memories go hand in hand like great harmony during the holidays. With some favorite songs as your soundtrack, I hope this is an enjoyable time of year for you and those you love. 



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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