

# Tontitown Storia



*The Newsletter of the Tontitown Historical Museum*

*Spring 2006, Vol. 2, No. 1*

## ***Saluti from the Board***

We, the Board of Directors of Tontitown Historical Museum, wish to express many thanks to everyone who helped make 2005 a successful year for the museum.

As we continue to add photographs, documents, taped interviews, and artifacts to the museum collections, we have been amazed at your response. The documentation you continue to share will enable the Tontitown Historical Museum to provide an accurate history of our ancestors – their struggles, their victories, and the joys they shared in the founding of Tontitown. Their spirit and pride continue in each generation and have given Tontitown a respected place in Arkansas History.

In November we will celebrate Tontitown Historical Museum's 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. We wish to recognize all of the wonderful people who have contributed through the years to help the museum remain a vital part of our community. If you know anyone who has donated their time or talent, or if you have volunteered in the past, please contact a board member so that no one will be overlooked in our celebration.

May is Arkansas Heritage Month. Tontitown Historical Museum will join once again with other communities throughout our state to celebrate this event. The theme this year is **Arkansas Arts: Discover Our Treasures**.

Our celebration, **The Artistry of Tontitown**, will take place in Harry Sbanotto Park on May 21<sup>st</sup>, from 1:00 - 4:00 pm. Tontitown arts will be represented by Quilting, Needlework, Gardening, Photography, Woodworking, Painting, Dancing, Music, and many more artistic endeavors.



### ***Continuing the Quilting Arts of our Ancestors***

Helene Pianalto Newman and Edna Lou Morsani Zulpo, October 2004

*Photo courtesy Edna Lou Zulpo*

If you have not visited the museum recently, it will be open for your convenience. New artifacts and many new photographs will be on display. Museum board members Andy Franco, Roger Pianalto, and Riley Tessaro, and more friends will give bocce lessons, and there will be treats and drinks for everyone.

This event, along with our Polenta Smear in early November, is a great opportunity for us to come together as a community, enjoy good company, share ideas, and renew friendships. See you on May 21<sup>st</sup>!

### ***In This Issue***

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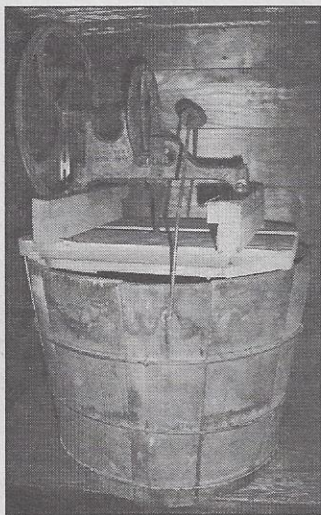
## Curator's Choice

*By Charlotte Piazza and Bev Cortiana*

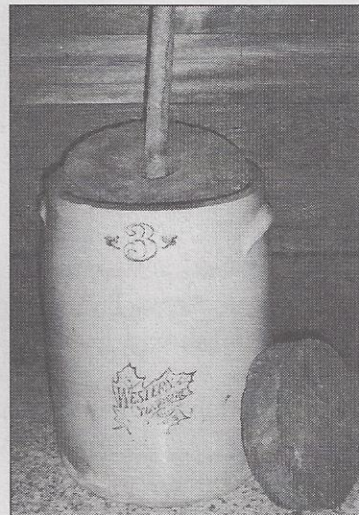
Our museum is fortunate to have many household items that tell the story of everyday life in the early days of Tontitown. Our settler families had amazing courage and spirit as they made Tontitown home.

The Leo Pianalto family, featured in this issue's Family Focus, donated several household and farm items, including two butter churns. One is glass and one is a wood bucket. Riley Tessaro's family donated another type of churn. It's a large ceramic crock.

There were many kinds of churns used to make butter in "the old days." All it took was some device to agitate cream long enough to have it separate into buttermilk and butter. The three churns at the museum give you a flavor of the early days. As you spring clean, keep the museum in mind for possible donations to further document our Italian settler histories.



Glass butter churn and wood bucket butter churn.  
*Donated by the Leo Pianalto family*



Crock butter churn.  
*Donated by Riley Tessaro*



## Grazie to Our Donors



**Many thanks for these 2006 museum donations.**

Pump organ; *by Rosie Finn's family.*

Tontitown Grapers baseball shirt, semi-pro team sponsored by Tontitown Mercantile in the early 1970's;  
*by Tommy Granata.*

Queen Concordia Gown, worn by Martha Granata in 1956 and Carolyn Granata in 1960;  
*by Martha Granata Pianalto.*



# ***Family Focus ... Leo & Lucy Ceola Pianalto***

## ***From Valli dei Signori (Valli del Pasubio) to Tontitown***

*By Brenda Pianalto, Granddaughter*

My name is Brenda Pianalto, and I am honored to bring you the storied past of my Nono (grandfather) Leo Pianalto and my Nona (grandmother) Lucy Ceola Pianalto. I remember Sunday afternoons when families gathered at Nono and Nona's big two-story house on Pianalto Road, located west of Tontitown. There was a big yard and a statue of Mary sitting on a tree stump. Nono always sat in his favorite chair, which had a cloth seat and iron frame. Grandchildren sat all around him. We heard stories of his childhood, and if we were lucky, we could even sit on his lap. We could feel Nono and Nona's love for us, and their faith and hope in God was the stronghold so obviously seen by all.

My story begins in the northern part of Italy between Vicenza and Lake Garda. Great grandfather Domenico Pianalto, Leo's father, was born on June 18, 1852 in a small valley known as Valli dei Signori, only a short distance from the majestic Alps. The valley, known in later years as Valli del Pasubio, was home to generations of Pianaltos.

Domenico worked primarily as a teacher, best in math and writing. He also served with the Italian Army and the police unit. Domenico's wife, Catterina (Catherine) Penzo, was born June 7, 1860 in the same valli. Catterina worked in the fields and cared for their five children: Leone Guiseppe, Rosalinda Catterina, who died of whopping cough at a very young age, Erlinda Marie, Iginia Carolina, and Giacinto Pio. Nono was the oldest son and had many chores at home. He carried water home from the well, tended cattle, helped in the fruit and vegetable gardens, climbed trees to pick grapes, and raised silk worms which he took to silk factories to earn cash.

Domenico and Catherine felt caught between City-States of newly forming Northern Italy and grew weary of promises not kept. They were



Sunday afternoon at Nono Leo Pianalto's with grandkids, Granddaughter Brenda on front row, far right, 1958.

*Photo courtesy Brenda Pianalto*

afraid excessive taxation would doom their future. Domenico heard the news of an American millionaire, Austin Corbin, who sought to bring Italian families to America to work on his large southern plantation. Domenico, given the strength that could come only from his maker, seized the opportunity to embark on a future of hopes and dreams for a better life. On a cold winter day, November 6, 1895, Domenico, his wife Catherine, and their four children boarded the vessel Chouteau Iquem in Genoa, Italy for the 19-day journey to America.

Nono, only six years old at the time, recalled the trip vividly. He often told his grandchildren how difficult it was for the Italians to understand each other because of different dialects. Many people suffered seasickness, but Nono was always proud to say, with a chuckle, that he wasn't one of them! The vessel, Chouteau, landed in New Orleans, Louisiana. On December 4, 1895, a steamboat carrying 562 persons traveled up the Mississippi River to land in Sunnyside, Arkansas, where the

*Continued next page  
Page 3*



## *Family Focus ... continued*

plantations were located. Domenico would have 20 acres of land, a home, food, clothing, and access to a company store. In return he was expected to repay the mortgage by raising sugar cane and cotton on a share crop basis.

Tragedy came to the Pianaltos in their new land. While clearing the land of very large trees, Domenico's Uncle Dionisio stopped for a second to light his pipe and was crushed by a falling tree. Mosquitoes bred in the marshes and stagnant lakes of the delta, causing malaria and yellow fever to hit every home in the community. Hope was being destroyed.

Catherine was destined to carry full term a child to be born in America. When her time to give birth arrived, her labor pains were severe, and evidence of complications for the frail lady were prominent. With no medical support, it was evident the passage to life was not possible. Domenico, in anguish and despair and with tears flowing from his eyes, held his youngest son in his arms at Catherine's bedside. There lay his wife in a pool of blood to her death, along with her two unborn infants.

More tragedy came to the already apprehensive community in June of 1896 when Austin Corbin was killed by a team of runaway horses. With his death, the dream of Sunnyside ended.

Stronghold in faith, prayers were answered when Father Pietro Bandini arrived in Sunnyside. He brought not only spiritual leadership, but his desperately needed understanding of material things and familiarity with the English language. Father Bandini sounded the call to depart Sunnyside to a better land. Respectful to God, stronghold to faith, silent in prayer, Domenico, with his four surviving children committed themselves to follow Father Bandini to a new beginning in Tontitown, Arkansas, located in the high plateau of the Ozarks.

Domenico homed his family in a small cabin with a loft. Nono remembered well the seasons of change. He told us the first winter in Tontitown was the hardest. "We would not have survived if we hadn't killed rabbits and slept by

the mud fireplace," he said. Spring brought tornados. While a weary young man was resting in the loft of Domenico's cabin, the fierce winds ripped away the roof and caused extensive damage to the house. The young man was twirled by the wind to his death. The family was huddled together in a corner that was untouched by the storm. Mass had been said in the same cabin and later, beneath the debris, was found a small, unbroken bottle of holy water which had been used for Mass.

Destruction came once again when a band of people rode into Tontitown from Indian Territory and set fire to the church-school. Father Bandini saw the flames and was able to extinguish them before the building was destroyed. A statue of St. Joseph was left untouched on the scorched back wall, so the church was named for this Saint.

The Italians had many struggles. Outsiders looked on us as just that, and the feeling of being unwanted was everywhere. But the Italians were destined to prevail. There came a time when Domenico explained to his children his desire to return to Italy in search of a companion. Domenico made the journey to his homeland, leaving the children behind with relatives. He visited his friend, a priest, and made known his desire and intent to return to Tontitown. Word had already traveled back about the hardships and struggles Domenico had endured. His search for a wife was difficult, and he became discouraged and weary. Through prayer and hope, he met 23-year old Rosa Taldo, and on February 11, 1899, middle-aged Domenico married her. Then he returned with Rosa to the promised land to reunite with his children.

Challenges faced the young children of Catherine. Leo, the oldest, longed for the nurturing of his birth mother as did the other children. The young children of Catherine bonded together. Leo was a very good student in school. We were told stories of his first teacher, Miss Bernadette Brady, a stern, devoted and wonderful teacher. Nono looked forward to late summer when all families came together to celebrate and give thanks for the harvest.



## *Family Focus ... continued*

Domenico and Rosa continued a second family beginning with Catherine, then Dave, Joe, Ignazio, Lena, Frank, Pia, and Mary Louise.

Leo went to school through the eighth grade when he chose to quit school and begin employment. Leo moved to Fayetteville and found work at the Ozark Grocery. He bought a plot of land with a home on it. One day he set his eyes on Lucy Ceola, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Lucy, daughter of Dominic and Mary (Zulpo) Ceola also worked in Fayetteville. After a couple of years, Leo traded the Fayetteville property for a home site in Tontitown. On May 25, 1915, Leo and Lucy were married.

Leo and Lucy knew the blessings of children when their first son, Eugene, was born in 1916. Eugene was followed by Lawrence and Olivia Lillian, who died of diphtheria at age 4. Nono remembered well when Olivia Lillian took her last breath in his arms. Then came Gabriel, my dad, on April 24, 1921, followed by Oliver, Francis, Leo Alfred, Olivia Catherine, Leonard, Lillian Marie, Edward, Juanita, and Raymond, who died at age 21. Their family of thirteen was the same number as Lucy's family and Domenico's family. Nono told us that when children were born, both sides of the family would help by caring for the younger children while Nono worked on the farm, coming in when the sun went down. The closeness of the families was an integral part of everyone's survival.

Life on the farm was work, work, work, and giving thanks to God for all the blessings bestowed on them. Cheese-making, a community activity, also kept Nono busy. Everybody pooled their milk to make a 20-pound cheese. The milk would be weighed and the cheese divided proportionally. The children were growing and going to school in Tontitown. Eugene, the oldest, was in charge of carrying the gallon bucket of sandwiches for lunch. Their specialty was peanut butter. When the children came home from school, they did their chores before dark. After supper was served, Nona



Leo and Lucy's Wedding – May 25, 1915

*Photo courtesy Pianalto family*

would light a lamp in the middle of the table for homework to be done.

In the early 1940's Eugene, Lawrence, Oliver, Gabriel, and Francis departed to serve their country. Letters were the means of communication until all five sons came home and thanked the Lord for their safe return. The family lived in an empty chicken house on the Pianalto farm while Leo was building their new home. Finished in 1942, it was a mighty fine home for this family of twelve.

Music reigned high for the Pianalto family. They were musically talented and their music was enjoyed by everyone. I remember Nono telling me they would go to visit his sister, Iginia, or go to the Mantegani's where they would clear the room and start playing their instruments and people would dance. Leo continued to be very active in the St. Joseph's Choir, and well remembered being asked to go to the radio

*Continued next page  
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## Family Focus ... continued

station to sing on the air with Virgil Verucchi and John Mollar. I still hear that recording today.

In Nono's older years the farm was taken care of by his sons Edward and Junior. Nono's older children were ready to carry on the Pianalto way of strong faith and strong work ethics. Domenico, after a life-long journey for a better life for himself and his family, was laid to rest March 18, 1921.

My dad, Gabriel, married his sweetheart, Elsie Mae Fiori, daughter of Pietro B. and Mary Cortiana Fiori, on January 3, 1951. Gabe and Elsie spent their honeymoon in their newly built home, which was built from lumber Leo purchased when the Smith School was destroyed by fire.

Gabe, Lawrence, and Eugene worked together at the Pianalto Garage in Tontitown. They could fix anything. I heard my dad say, "I can fix anything but a broken heart." My mom and dad, Gabe and Elsie, had 7 children and all lived within 7 miles of home. Lucy passed away on Mother's Day in 1976, and Leo passed in November of 1983.

Other than Nono's stories, the research of my family has been collected from newspapers, books, aunts, uncles, and cousins. I thank you

all for sharing such a rich history with us. I am very proud to be a Catholic Italian and to have grandparents from both sides of the family who came to America for a better life.

In 1997, I had the opportunity with my cousin, Martha Smith, to visit Italy. When we arrived at the train station in Vicenza, we were met with open arms by family Floriano Freschi and Anna Pianalto. They welcomed us to their home and during dinner Floriano put on a tape of songs sung by my Nono. On Sunday we traveled north, higher into the Dolomites, and attended Mass in Valli del Pasubio, the Catholic Church of Santa Maria. We walked through the cemetery a few feet from the church and as I read the names on the tombstones, I felt I was back in Tontitown. The bell began to toll and I stopped in my tracks to listen as the echo rang throughout the valli. I walked into the beautiful church and the choir was singing beautifully. After Mass, Floriano brought us to the baptismal font where Nono was baptized. We walked through a contra, and went into the home of a family member that had been empty for some time. I followed Anna and Floriano to the top of the stairs and stopped again. Tears were flowing freely and before my eyes was a photo of Nono, Nona, and their twelve children, one of whom was my dad. I felt how proud I am to be a part of this most beautiful, faith-filled family. The bond of love is strong across thousands of miles.



I hope you enjoyed this story as much as I enjoyed remembering those days listening to Nono as he sat in his favorite chair next to the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Leo & Lucy Pianalto family, 1946.  
Top row, l-r: Oliver (small photo),  
Olivia, Gabriel, Lawrence,  
Eugene, Leonard, Francis, Lillian  
Bottom row, l-r: Edward, Juanita,  
Leo, Lucy, Raymond, Junior

*Photo courtesy Pianalto family*



## ✓ Mark Your Calendar ...

## 2006 Tontitown Historical Museum Events

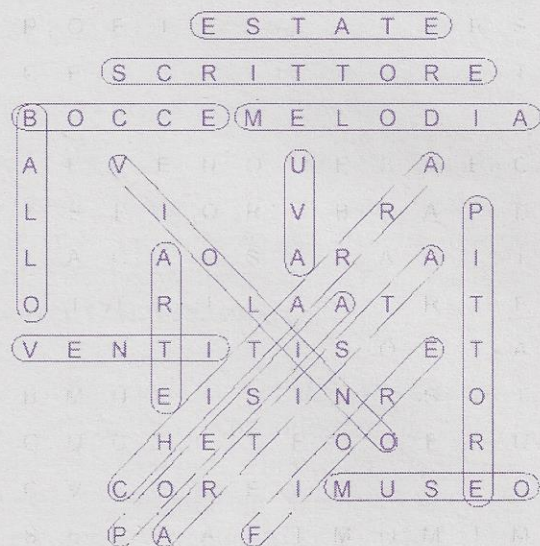
<i><b>Date</b></i>	<i><b>Event</b></i>
Sunday, May 21	<b>“The Artistry of Tontitown”</b> Tontitown Historical Museum and Harry Sbanotto Park, 1 – 4 p.m. This is an Arkansas Heritage Month special event.
June – October	Regular Season Hours Open Saturday’s and Sunday’s, 1 – 4 p.m. or by special appointment.
August 8-12	108 <sup>th</sup> Tontitown Grape Festival, Special Museum Hours Thursday, August 10      1 – 4 p.m. Friday, August 11      10 a.m. – 7 p.m. Saturday, August 12      10 a.m. – 7 p.m.
Sunday, November 5	5 <sup>th</sup> Annual Tontitown Reunion and Polenta Smear, and celebrate the 20 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Tontitown Historical Museum! St. Joseph’s Parish Hall, 1 – 5 p.m.

## Memorable Words

*The South has Italian skies and Italian soil and is an ideal place for my countrymen.*

Baron des Planches, Italian Ambassador to the U.S.  
*Reprinted in The Springdale News, May 26, 1905*

## *il Cercaparole – Answers*



*Tontitown Historical Museum,  
2006 Board of Directors*

A big welcome to three new board members – Roger Pianalto, Vanessa Sbanotto, and Riley Tessaro. We're so glad to have you! And, many thanks to retired board member, Lynda Cross. We appreciate all your hard work and great ideas, Lynda.

Charlotte Piazza, Curator, 479-361-2498  
Frank Maestri, President, 479-751-7393  
Andy Franco, Vice President, 479-361-2422  
Brenda Pianalto, Secretary, 479-756-5221  
Bev Cortiana, Treasurer, 479-361-2609  
Karen Ardernagni Collins, 479-756-6023  
Denise Pellin, 479-751-5771  
Roger Pianalto, 479-361-2207  
Kathy Pianalto Miller, 479-361-2472  
Joyce Penzo, 479-361-2544  
Ruth Ann Roso Ritchie, 479-751-6347  
Vanessa Sbanotto, 479-361-9075  
James Riley Tessaro, 479-361-2607  
Mary Frances Maestri Vaughan, 479-751-6536

*Tontitown Storia* is published in the Spring and Fall by the Tontitown Historical Museum Board. We welcome your input. Please submit comments to newsletter editor, Bev Cortiana at 479-361-2609.



## il Cercaparole di Tontitown

Try this Cercaparole (Word Search) and learn some Italian words that you can share at "The Artistry of Tontitown" museum event on May 21<sup>st</sup>. We found the first word for you – **Arte** (Art). Look in all directions: vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. Have fun! Need some help? See the answers on page 7. ☺

<b>Estate</b> (Summer)	<b>Scrittore</b> (Writer)
<b>Artista</b> (Artist)	<b>Venti</b> (20)
<b>Museo</b> (Museum)	<b>Violino</b> (Violin)
<b>Uva</b> (Grape)	<b>Melodia</b> (Melody)
<b>Ballo</b> (Dance/Ball)	<b>Fiore</b> (Flower)
<b>Chitarra</b> (Guitar)	<b>Pittore</b> (Painter)
<b>Poesia</b> (Poem)	<b>Bocce</b> (Bocce)

P	O	E	I	E	S	T	A	T	E	R	S
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S	E	P	A	A	F	T	M	O	M	T	M



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*Tontitown Storia*  
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insert follows



# The Tontitown Historical Museum Presents

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## The Artistry of Tontitown

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An Event Celebrating Arkansas Heritage Month  
*Arkansas Arts: Discover Our Treasures*



Eda Tomiello Piazza crochets one of her many lovely afghans, while husband Ben reads the paper, 1979.

*Photo courtesy Tontitown Historical Museum*

Live Music

*Photography*      *Cookies & Grapette*

Bocce Demonstrations

*drawing and painting*

*Farming and  
Horticulture*

*Quilting - Crocheting*

Watch a Tarantella Dance  
at 2:00 or 3:00 pm

**Purchase Items from Local Artists**

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*Be Sure to Visit the Museum for a Chance  
to Win a Fabulous Door Prize!*

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**Sunday, May 21, 2006  
1:00 - 4:00 pm  
Harry Sbanotto Park in Tontitown**