Tontitown Storia



The Newsletter of the Tontitown Historical Museum (THM)

2019 Year-in-Review, Vol. 14, No. 2

Saluti from the Board

Ciao from the Tontitown Historical Museum Board members! We had a short hiatus in the *Tontitown Storia* publication, but we're back and have so many wonderful things from 2019 to share and celebrate.

First though, we want to address the current situation with COVID-19. The coronavirus pandemic has impacted life around the globe and we are no exception here in Tontitown. Sadly our ancestor families in Italy were among the hardest hit before the virus made its way to America. It is a very difficult and scary time, and our hearts, thoughts, and prayers go out to all those affected by this pandemic. On March 14th, the Board temporarily closed the Tontitown Historical Museum to protect the health and safety of guests and staff. We will continue to reassess the situation, following our state and city guidance, to determine the museum's reopening date.

Back in 2019, our Tontitown Heritage Day in May, the 121st Annual Tontitown Grape Festival *Tontitown Faces and Voices* exhibit at the Old School in August, and the 18th Annual Tontitown Reunion and Old Fashioned Polenta Smear in October were wonderful events. Thank you to all who made those events so successful.

Additionally, the Tontitown Historical Museum, together with the City of Tontitown and Davis Videos, received the 2019 Excellence in Heritage Preservation award from Preserve Arkansas for the Tontitown Oral History Video Project of 2018. Scott Davis and Bev Cortiana-McEuen proudly accepted this prestigious award at the Awards Banquet held at the beautiful Arkansas Governor's Mansion in January 2020. Preserve Arkansas is the only statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to saving Arkansas's architectural and cultural heritage. Read about the award-winning project on page 2.

To share other good news, last October the THM Board had the pleasure of hosting Paolo Battaglia as he traveled around the United States sharing his new book, *Italian American Country, Finding Italy in Small-Town America*. We were so excited to have Paolo back in Tontitown! He spoke about his experience writing the book and shared excerpts from his documentaries. Read more on page 3.



Author Paolo Battaglia Returned to Tontitown

Front row: Brenda Pianalto, Caroline Franco-Ceola, Heather Ranalli-Peachee, Jennifer De Martino, Pam Herron

Back Row: Katherine McDaniel, Emily Pianalto-Beshears, Paolo Battaglia, Bev Cortiana-McEuen, Roger Pianalto, Kyle Young

December 2019 included a special celebration for our city leader and THM co-founder, Henry Piazza, who retired from city service after 47 years! There are not enough words to thank Henry for all he has done for the city and for THM. Enjoy a tribute to Henry on pages 4-5.

Finally, in an effort to be more eco-friendly, we are moving to predominantly email delivery of the *Tontitown Storia* newsletter. If you prefer a printed newsletter, we will be happy to mail you one. Please call us at 479-361-9800 or drop a note to Tontitown Historical Museum, PO Box 144, Tontitown, AR 72770. Grazie Mille, Many Thanks for your continued support!

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Tontitown Oral History Video Project of 2018

By Rachel Bellamy

Tontitown Mayor Paul Colvin, Jr. was enjoying casual conversation with Mayor Sonny Hudson of Prairie Grove when he was presented with a fine idea—filmed videos of town residents sharing their lifetime memories. "It is important to preserve history through the eyes of those who lived it. This idea appealed to me because while photos are nice, actually *hearing* the stories of people who have lived in Tontitown all of their lives is of great value," he explained.

After consulting with videographer, Scott Davis, and in collaboration with Tontitown Historical Museum board members, the *Tontitown Oral History Video Project of 2018* began. As a result, over thirty first-person video accounts are now available for viewing on You Tube by searching the Tontitown Historial Museum channel.

Undoubtedly Tontitown's books, "So Big, This Little Place" The Founding of Tontitown, Arkansas 1898-1917 and the autobiographical Memories I Can't Let Go Of by author Susan Young, are important works that continue to be treasured. Both have contributed to Tontitown Historical Museum's earnest goals of "documenting, preserving, protecting and sharing Tontitown's rich history." In more recent years, the internet, and widespread availability of such, has opened an additional avenue of sharing the special history of the Northwest Arkansas 122-year-old Italian settlement. As a result, now both voice and face accompany the storytellers.

Former *Morning News* newspaper reporter, and present high school teacher of journalism and IT-related courses, Scott Davis, was already well acquainted with Tontitown. Twenty years previously, Davis was on assignment when he became acquainted with the history-rich Italian community during which he recalled enjoying his visits with "the always-feisty and knowledgeable city clerk, Frances Franco."

Explaining his style when interviewing, Davis shared, "I just try to make people feel relaxed so they feel free to tell their stories. That requires not getting in a hurry or rushing people." *Tontitown's Oral History Video Project* was Davis' fifth completed project. His daughter, Kelly, often accompanies him in his work. "I've always loved hearing the life stories of my elders," shared Davis. Having especially enjoyed his time with Tontitown residents Davis remarked, "We've been treated with kindness and friendship during this project. I don't want to just say we've met a lot of nice people. I feel we've made a whole new group of friends."



The project was met with enthusiasm by Tontitown residents who happily contributed their cherished memories as they experienced them, spanning from childhood to adulthood years. After-school chores, first jobs, raising children, and managing businesses are some of the memories shared by interviewees.

Happy times as well as hardships are highlighted in each account. Among the hilarious are those such as J.C. Mantegani's confessions of mischievous schoolboy antics, tipping outhouses at night, and more.

Nova Jean Fiori Watson recalled having lunch beneath the schoolyard trees, hitching a ride home from football games on Ernie Piazza's bicycle, and evening dances on the Mantegani family's porch. "Some of the girls from Elm Springs who married guys from here said they liked to come to Tontitown because that's where the goodlooking boys were," she remembered.

And of course, the storytellers recall the town's tasty eateries. Mary Frances Maestri Vaughan remembered her Aunt Mary Maestri's restaurant in the very early days when she served eager diners in her overflowing house, placing card tables in different rooms to accommodate as many guests as possible while her husband, Aldo, poured complimentary wine.

These first-person accounts will warm the hearts of those who shared similar experiences and enlighten future generations. They will also beckon out-of-towners to visit and perhaps move some to take up permanent residence themselves! The *Tontitown Oral History Video Project of 2018* was made possible in part by a grant from the Department of Arkansas Heritage, funded by the 1/8 cent conservation tax, Amendment 75.

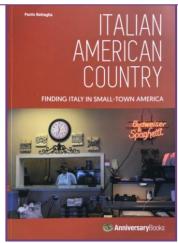
Paolo Battaglia Returned to Tontitown

While doing research for his comprehensive pictorial book on the history of Italian Americans, *Trovare l'America* (*Finding America*), author Paolo Battaglia discovered a little-known book by the Italian ambassador Baron Edmondo Mayor Des Planches, entitled *Attraverso gli Stti Uniti* (*Across the United States*). Published in 1913, this book chronicled the ambassador's travels across America in the early 1900's with goals to understand and improve the Italian emigration experience. The ambassador went beyond large northeastern cities to rural communities in the south and west. We have celebratory photos documenting Ambassador Des Blanches' visit to Tontitown in 1905.

That book fueled an interest in Paolo to further investigate Italian American settlements across the country. How much of their Italian roots would still be visible today? Over a century later, Paolo made two road-trip tours, driving over 20,000 miles, covering the ambassador's routes and more. He interviewed hundreds of people to understand the Italian American experience then and now. He interviewed many Tontitown natives in 2014, and then returned in 2019 to share the fruit of his labor: his book and documentaries – *Italian American Country*, *Finding Italy in Small-Town* America. Last October at the Tontitown Winery event space, Paolo and colleagues Alessandro Quarta and Sara DeSantis, presented excerpts from his book and video documentary interviews. It was a captivating presentation, leaving us with an intense feeling of oneness with many Italian communities across the country. We are very grateful to Paolo for including Tontitown in his travels.

There are a limited number of Paolo's books to purchase at the museum for \$30, or you can order online at **www.anniversarybooks.it**. Three video documentaries are included with a book purchase or can be purchased stand alone. Plans are for Paolo to return to America to speak at the **125th Anniversary Celebration of Sunnyside**, **Arkansas** (see insert). We look forward to seeing him at that special event!





2019 Arkansas Preservation Awards

On January 17, 2020, Preserve Arkansas hosted its annual Arkansas Preservation Awards dinner and program to honor individuals and organizations for projects focused on historic preservation, education, and advocacy throughout the state. Honorees and guests celebrated with a reception and banquet at the Arkansas Governor's Mansion in Little Rock, followed by a program recognizing the award-winning projects.

The award for Excellence in Heritage Preservation was presented to the Tontitown Historical Museum, City of Tontitown, and Davis Videos for the *Tontitown Oral History Video Project*. Many thanks to Preserve Arkansas for honoring us with the special award. Preserve Arkansas works diligently to promote preservation efforts across the state, from saving historic buildings to promoting preservation-friendly legislation at all levels of government.



for the Tontitown Oral History Video Project L-R: Mason Ellis, Preserve Arkansas Board President; Bev Cortiana-McEuen, Tontitown Historical Museum; Scott Davis, Davis Videos; and Rachel Patton,

> Preserve Arkansas Executive Director Photo by Stephanie Dunn King Photography

"A person should do all he can to help others while he is living," expresses the kind-hearted 84-year-old gentleman as he unfolds the top layers of a large sack of fresh vegetables. With a generous hand he presses the recipient of his homegrown goodness to accept a few more tomatoes, while asking, "Do you need some cucumbers?"

Such is the generous nature of Tontitown's beloved, Henry Piazza, and just one of the reasons why city employees will miss seeing him after his recent retirement from a nearly 47-year stint on the town's City Council.

Henry learned the practice of selfless giving from his father, first-generation descendent of Tontitown's original settlers, Domenico (Dick) Piazza. Like other hopeful Italian families, Domenico's parents left northern Italy in the late 1800's with the goal of raising their children on their own land. They initially went to Lake Village, Arkansas, and then eventually settled in what later became the city of Tontitown.

Henry Piazza speaks his native tongue fluently, treasures his heritage, and believes in hard work. His second-favorite motto is "I might give out, but I won't give up!" Raised in a farming family, he enjoys cultivating the earth and enjoying its rich yields. During the summer months, Henry can be found selling (and sharing) his produce at the Rogers Farmers Market in Frisco Station. His darkgray, double-cab truck can also be found at Tontitown's own seasonal market in Harry Sbanotto Park, established largely through his efforts. In its May 8, 2017 Ozarks at Large program, KUAF Radio captured the hardworking farmer's sentiments on working the soil and joining his fellow vendors in the park. "I like growing things and I like going to the market. You make a lot of friends," he expressed to reporter Antoinette Grajeda.

True to his Italian heritage, Henry also knows the ins-andouts of grape growing and recalls that his father kept barrels of homemade wine in their family's basement. Along with Charlotte, his high school sweetheart and wife of 64 years, Henry enjoys making delicious, sweet jelly using local Tontitown grapes.

Born January 1, 1936 on the west side of the road bearing his ancestors' namesake, Henry raised his own family on the east side of Piazza Road. Henry remembers his hometown when its streets including Highway 412 were still narrow and unpaved. Memories of his youth include his first job stocking shelves and hauling feed for Richard Ardemagni's Tontitown Mercantile store and earlier days when the Grape Festival was a simple town picnic with 25-cent ice cream cones and tent picture shows.



Henry and Charlotte Piazza at the Tontitown Centennial Celebration, 2009

Henry and Charlotte spearheaded the founding of Tontitown Historical Museum, which opened in 1986.

Photo by Brenda Pianalto

The Museum: Coupled with Henry's love of his hometown's history is a fear of its being lost. "The kids aren't going to know where they came from, and the Italian language isn't spoken here much anymore," he laments. These feelings moved Henry to do all he possibly could to preserve his heritage for future generations. While visiting Charlotte's family in Kansas, the Piazzas noticed that each small town along the way had a museum. This led the couple to conclude that their town should have one, too. A year-and-a-half later, after much negotiation and labor by willing volunteers, the former home of original Tontitown settlers, Zelinda and Mary Bastianelli, was renovated and made ready for use. The result? The Tontitown Historical Museum, a beautifully arranged collection of objects and mementos depicting the lives of Tontitown's early settler families and their descendants.

Henry is optimistic about efforts to expand the small gallery in which his ancestors' corn grinder and copper tea kettle are housed. "We have more that could be displayed. We just need more space to do it," he comments hopefully.

Former board member, Carol Walker, recognizes Henry and Charlotte as having worked especially hard to initiate the preservation of Tontitown's special history. In addition, Carol states, "I am proud to say I consider him a dear friend. Thank you, Henry, for everything."

Henry Piazza ... continued

The Bell: Henry received his first eight years of education at the Tontitown School, the structure of which still stands on the north side of Highway 412 facing the grounds of Tontitown City Hall. After noting that the school's bell sat unused and in disrepair in the building's attic, Henry and Felix Pozza took measures to restore and display it. "We tied straps onto it and with one of us on each side we got it downstairs," Henry explains. After a much-needed sandblasting, Henry and Art Penzo worked to hoist the bell onto the town's bicentennial memorial base and the antique school relic was given a new home just steps away from the museum.

The Statue: When asked which of his many community endeavors brought him the most satisfaction, Henry responds with strong feeling, "The statue. It made me happy." He was referring to the Italian Immigrant statue placed on Tontitown City Hall grounds on August 8, 1998, one hundred years after Tontitown's first settlers arrived. As in the case of the museum, a vacation provided the inspiration for Henry's favorite undertaking.

In 1992 while exploring his ancestors homeland in Valli del Pasubio, Italy, Henry observed a newly erected sculpture of a journey-bound young man clutching a single suitcase. The figure had been placed as a representation of the many Italians who had left that region to relocate to other parts of the world. This led Henry to reason that there should be a sculpture depicting the Tontitown settlers whose journeys had indeed proved successful. Using photographs of the statue, Henry met and consulted with Prairie Grove sculptor, Keith Black, and work got underway to produce a similar figure. With a few modifications to clothing and facial characteristics, the statue was produced and now gracefully stands on the north side of City Hall. The bronzed immigrant's suitcase bears the name "Antonio" given him by Black's wife, Dorris.

A derby-shaped cap had originally been intended for the Italian traveler. However, a more fitting style of head covering was chosen for the journeyman after Henry pulled from a closet his own father Domenico's hat which he wore every Sunday. As a result, a neatly mustached Antonio holds a gentleman's fedora across the chest of his vested suit coat, as if offering a quiet, dignified greeting. Beneath his feet lies a commemorative pedestal on which the names of Tontitown's first settlers, their wives, and children are recorded.



Henry Piazza with Tontitown School Bell and Antonio Immigrant Statue, both in front of Tontitown City Hall

Photos by Rachel Bellamy



Aside from his many good works, a kind and gentle nature endear Henry to all who know him. Despite his retirement from Tontitown's City Council, employees and friends (*in truth*, *they are all the latter*) can count on seeing him often around his hometown. Even so, in his native Italian tongue, he is bid by all a very earnest ...

Grazie e Auguri, Signor Henry!!
Thank You and Best Wishes, Henry!!



Grazie Mille to Annette Pianalto Drake for creating this beautiful flower basket on our front porch. We appreciate you, Annette! Happy Spring!

Tontitown Historical Museum 2020 Board of Directors

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Tontitown Storia is published by the Tontitown Historical Museum Board, usually in the Spring and Fall. Please submit story ideas or comments to Katherine McDaniel at TontitownHistoricalMuseum@gmail.com.

~ Donations in Memory and in Honor ~

It is with gratitude and pride that we display Memorial and Honorarium (H) donation plaques in the Tontitown Historical Museum.

Beato & Violet Haney Ardemagni Cathy Ardemagni Cecil Ardemagni Gene & Irma Taldo Ardemagni Mike & Loyce Ardemagni Gene Baker Leo Baudino Don & Philomene Ardemagni Begnel Kathleen Brock Kenneth Brock Cel & Mary Ceola Cortiana Gilbert & Lucia "Shortie" Cortiana Gordon & Imogene Ardemagni Cortiana Rudy Costa Candida Morsani Crane Lynda Cross Albina Ranalli Dalla Rosa Angelo & Irene Gaiche Dalla Rosa James & Dominica Dalla Rosa Bill & Fern Haney Fiori Pete & Mary Cortiana Fiori Joseph Angelo "Andy" Franco Chuck & Mary Fucci Emelio & Caterina Piazza Gaiche Rita Taldo Gillis Lillian Cortiana Granata Tommy Granata (H) Russell Greenlee Phyllis Brunetti Hale Clementine Morsani Haney Betty Hinshaw (H)

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✓ Mark Your Calendar ...

2020 Museum Events

Date	Event			
Event Canceled	2020 Tontitown Heritage Day Canceled this year due to COVID-19. Extra celebrations next year!!:-)			
Date To Be Announced	125 th Anniversary Celebration ~ Italians of Sunnyside, 1895-2020 Due to COVID-19, this celebration will be rescheduled. See the newsletter flyer for details, and watch social media for the new date. Facebook: Italians of Sunnyside or www.Italiansofsunnyside.com			
Festival Canceled	To ensure the safety of all volunteers and guests, this special 5-day festival was sadly canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We look forward to seeing you at the 123 rd Tontitown Grape Festival next year!!:-)			
September 19, 2020	5 th Annual Bocce Tournament, sponsored by the City of Tontitown Harry Sbanotto Park, 8 a.m. – 5 p.m.			
October 25, 2020	19 th Annual Tontitown Reunion and Old-fashioned Polenta Smear St. Joseph's Parish Hall, 11:00 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.			



"So Big, This Little Museum"

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Volunteers are the backbone of Tontitown Historical Museum. May we call on you to volunteer?

Yes!

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#tontitownstayhome ~ Stay Safe & Stay Healthy!



It is with great disappointment that we cancel the 2020 Tontitown Heritage Day event scheduled for May 3rd. Due to the uncertainty and gravity of the COVID-19 pandemic, the safe decision for all is to cancel this vear and look forward to extra fun times at the 2021 Tontitown Heritage Day next year! In the meantime, enjoy these photos from last year's event. Stay home, stay safe, and stay healthy! And, be sure to check out the Tontitown Historical Museum Facebook page for updates and the latest on our reopening.

> 2019 Tontitown Heritage Day Photos by Brenda Pianalto



Tontitown Storia
2019 Year-in-Review, Vol. 14, No. 2
insert follows

Italians of Sunnyside ~ 1895-2020 125th Anniversary Celebration Save the Date



Join us!!

In Lake Village, Arkansas

Where it all began

Due to COVID-19 Pandemic, New Date to be Announced

For more information:

Follow us on FaceBook: Italians of Sunnyside Website: italiansofsunnyside.org

Email: <u>italiansofsunnyside@gmail.com</u>

Who are the Italians of Sunnyside?

by Anthony and Gina Borgognoni

The history of Tontitown starts in Sunnyside. Nearly every family of Italian descent in Tontitown today has ancestors buried in that Delta soil.

Everyone is cordially invited to join our fellow Sunnyside Italians in Lake Village, Arkansas for the 125th Anniversary Celebration. Originally scheduled for Memorial Day weekend, the date is being rescheduled due to the novel coronavirus pandemic. Go to <u>italiansofsunnyside.org</u> or to the Facebook page, Italians of Sunnyside, for more information. Register and make plans to attend because this is where is all began!

The Italians of Sunnyside is an extensive group of Italians, including Tontitown Italians, whose roots trace back to the 1895 Italian colony established as farm laborers for the Sunnyside Plantation in Lake Village, Arkansas. The establishment of this Italian colony was the gateway event and catalyst that brought thousands of Italian families to the South and to many communities throughout the United States. After this initial group of Italian settlers arrived, scores of Italians followed from 1895 to 1923 and became the principal labor force for the majority of plantations and farmlands in the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta.

From the original Italian colony in Lake Village, groups of Italian families migrated to other communities across the South, the Midwest, and even into the North. These offshoot Italian communities sprang up in Tontitown, Arkansas; Cincinnati, Ohio; Colorado Springs, Colorado; Irondale, Alabama; Knobview, Missouri (this town name was changed to Rosati in 1931); and many small towns along the Mississippi River from Greenville, Mississippi to Memphis, Tennessee.

While our Tontitown ancestors worked at Sunnyside, a great number of Italian families bypassed the plantation and directly settled in these offshoot communities. Even though some Italians may not have been at the original Sunnyside Plantation, this Italian colony at Sunnyside was the catalyst event that brought a large wave of our ancestors to America.

Today more than one million Italian Americans can trace their roots back to the original Italian colony established at the Sunnyside plantation!



Grazie Mille to 2019-2020 Amici (Friends) Members



Thank you, Amici members! Your support means the world to us, and your tax-deductible memberships continue to grow our Building Fund for future expansion. Please use the membership form on page 7 to renew your membership or to become a new member. Grazie Mille, Amici!

Heritaae

Family of Frank Maestri

Concordia

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