

From Valle Dolmo to Fredonia
By Douglas H. Shepard, 2000

The history of the pioneer families from Valledolmo has never been adequately told. The fullest account is the pamphlet, "Valledolmo Fredonia" issued by Dr. **Chazanof's** Social Studies class — SS 222, American Community Life — in May 1961. This 51-page outline history is based on 22 interviews done by the group of young students in February and March of that year. As good as their work was, it still leaves many questions unanswered. In general, their narrative seems to say that the first person from Valledolmo to reach western New York was the **Lograsso** family's "eldest son," who had found work in Buffalo and had then arranged for the family to follow him. They did so, apparently along with an unstated number of others from their village, perhaps including the Antonio **Lanza** family.

Because not enough work was available in Buffalo (it is not clear if the work in Buffalo involved the railroads, or the street railroad — trolley cars — or both), many families found work as field laborers and in the canning factory in Fredonia. Apparently presented as a typical case, the pamphlet describes the **Lanza** family arriving in New York City on 5 June 1887 and taking the train directly to Buffalo. The family consisted of "Antonio and Mary Grace **Lanza** and their four children, Peter, Horace, Rose, and Lucia." They did field work in Farnham, Batavia, Leroy and Orchard Park. Peter **Lanza** with others found work building "the Dunkirk and Fredonia Railway. Then, in the summer of 1887, the American Canning Company in Fredonia provided employment for the rest of the **Lanza** family. In this way, the **Lanza** family came to Fredonia."

There are a number of problems with this account. The original D & F Street Railroad Co. laid its tracks late in 1866. Prior to that the service was by horse-drawn omnibuses without rails. It was not until early in 1889 that new car barns were built on Center Street, as Dr. **Fenner**, the major stockholder, announced plans to change from horse to electric power. That occurred in 1891. It is more likely that work on the D & F R.R. was found in the 1889-1891 period, rather than in 1887.

Also, there was no American Canning Co. in 1887. This may be confusion with the U. S. Canning Co., which began here in 1900 on Eagle Street. In 1887, at that site, was Thomas **Yardley & Co.** There had been a Fredonia Canning Factory there since 1881. It failed and the property was sold at auction to **Thompson** and **Hubbard** on 15 April 1885. They leased it to a Mr. **Fisher**, who operated it in the 1885 harvest season. In April 1886 the factory again was up for sale and in March 1887 the sale finally went through. That was when **Yardley** moved here from Pennsylvania to take charge of the reopened facility. The *Censor* of 30 March 1887 said, "When the tomatoes and corn contracted for, begin to come in, it will require a very large force to work and there will be considerable labor required all through the season, beginning with July."

That must be when the **Lanzas** and others began working in Fredonia. However, the factory only ran for one year and, in the summer of 1889 it stood idle. Although the pamphlet's wording suggests that the **Lanzas** came to work here in 1887 and stayed on, that does not seem to be the case. The factory started up again, under new management, in 1891 and, although people from Valledolmo may have worked there again, there is no sign that they had yet moved into Fredonia. The 1891-92 Directory, for example, has no entries for any Italian families. The Population Census of 1892 for Pomfret is scrupulous about recording the birthplace of every individual. Not only is there no mention of a **Lanza**, **LoGrasso**, or any other familiar name, there is not one person of any name listed as from Italy. However, the records of the Pomfret School Districts for 1882-1908 show the earliest relevant entry to be for "Peter **Lanza**" in 1893. In 1894 there seem to be seven Italian families with children in the public school, and the numbers increase after that.

All of this suggests that the first folks from Valledolmo settled in Fredonia in 1893. They are recorded in the 1894 Directory. Calogero **Barone**, laborer, has a house on Gardner Street. There are a large number of Polish names in that vicinity as well. However, except for Philip **Cappetto**, who

boarded on Orchard Street, the others were all on Railroad Avenue, now known as Cleveland Avenue: Peter **Cappaellin**, Anthony **Lanz**, Peter **Lanz** (house), Anthony **LoGrasso** (house), and Frank **Ross (Rossa? Russo?)**. Except for the two noted, the others were all boarders and, obviously, wives and children were not listed. It should be noted that census-takers, directory-makers, and others obviously had a problem with Italian names, although nothing compared to their mis-handling of Polish surnames.

The story is often told of how the **Lanzas** came into Fredonia. Because no one would rent to them, they had to live in poor circumstances in Laona, walking to work from there. One day Antonio and his son Horace walked into the Village and stopped at **Griswold's** shoe store. **Griswold** talked to Horace and, when he learned why they had to walk so far, said that he had a house they could rent if they wanted it. The **Lanzas** rented the house and sent for the **LoGrassos**, who moved in with them. That home was *74 Cleveland Avenue*, at the time called *40 Railroad Avenue*. It was owned jointly, as rental property, by William B. **Barker** and Herman S. **Griswold**.

Griswold was born in Pennsylvania in 1862 and came to Fredonia in 1882 clerking in a dry goods store. He began clerking for H. P. **Perrin** in his boot and shoe store in 1885 and, in 1887, became a full partner. In 1891 he bought out **Perrin**, who retired. The store, at that time, was at *18 West Main Street*. The house that **Griswold** and **Barker** had on Railroad Avenue was purchased from Henry **Smith**. What all of the foregoing suggests is three main points: 1) We still do not have a clear, thorough account of the earliest Valledolmo arrivals — exactly who came in 1887, other than the **Lanzas**, on what ship(s), arriving when in New York City and when in Buffalo. 2) Where were the individuals and/or families between 1887 and 1893? 3) What was the sequence of settlement in Fredonia/Pomfret?

From just this brief analysis we can see that there are sources available to answer those questions. In addition to the individual and family accounts that the **Barker** Historical Museum has tried to gather over the years, there may be records from Dr. **Chazanof's** students' interviews in College Archives. There should be a check made of ship passenger records, once a ship's name or date of arrival has been determined. Since the Pomfret section of the 1892 Census shows no names, the entries for other Towns should be searched. An examination of the property deed indexes for the 1880s through 1900 could begin to sort out ownership patterns, and the same search through the assessment rolls for the period would show who was paying taxes as renters of property. That would fill in much of the gap between the 1892 and 1900 Federal Censuses. All of that could then be used as the factual skeleton onto which individual and family accounts could be put, fleshing out the important history that has not yet been told of those who came before us.