

What's in a Name?

by Jari Chiodo Sinnwell

As far as surnames go, the Italians have the rest of the world beat, hands down. Italy has the distinction of having the largest number of surnames of any ethnicity, with well over 350,000. This is due in part to the number of regions and dialects, each separate and distinct from the other.

In the cultural history of Italy, there were strong customs determining how children were named. As a rule, the first male was named after the paternal grandfather, the second male was named after the maternal grandfather, the first female was named after the paternal grandmother and the second female was named after the maternal grandmother. This led to family scenarios like the scene from "My Big Fat Greek Wedding", where Gus Portokalos is introducing his daughter's future in-laws to his family: "This is Nick, Nick, Nick, Nick, and Nikki." Where such plurality was the case, the children frequently were given nicknames to help cut down on the confusion. What names run in your Italian family? Was there more than one Natale? Frank? Angelo? Joseph?

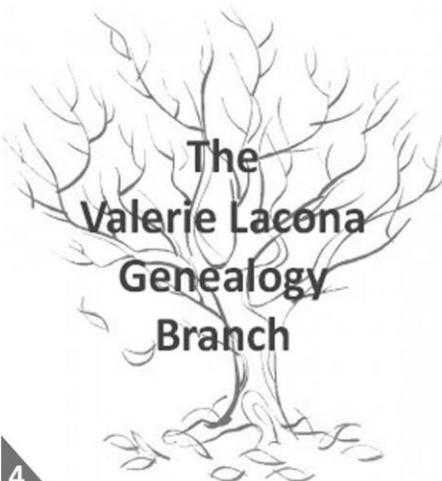
While these naming patterns are helpful in genealogy, they should never be assumed. There were a variety of situations in which the naming patterns were not followed. For instance, a child might be named for a beloved relative who had died. Perhaps the parents had a falling out with their family or were orphaned and did not know the names of their parents. Another common scenario was where a child did not survive into adulthood. If "Little Luigi" - the namesake of his grandfather - died, there would not be an heir to preserve the family name and heritage. In that case, a subsequent son would receive the "recycled" name in honor of the grandfather.

Some families believed the sex of the child had nothing to do with the naming practices. In their opinion, the firstborn daughter could be named for her grandfather. Thus, she would be named Giuseppa for her grandfather, Giuseppe. In fact, practically every male Italian name has a female equivalent. Many families gave preference to a deceased family member over a living family member. Thus, a dead maternal grandfather might be honored over a living paternal grandfather.

If the child was born on a feast day for a saint who was important to the town or province, the child might be named for the saint. Also, if the prayers of the couple were answered, they might name the next child after the saint to whom they had prayed.

The practice of giving your child a random name simply because you liked it was unheard of.

These naming practices grew out of a deep respect for family. They were a way of honoring their history and a means by which they remembered from whence they came. These naming patterns ensured the name and memory of their ancestors would live on in the generations to come. These were names with a cherished history. They conveyed the knowledge of a lineage: you belonged to a tribe larger than yourself. They were anchors in the sea of life.



Want To Learn More?

If you want to learn more about your Italian family tree, there will be a genealogy workshop at:

The Italian-American Cultural Center of Iowa

9:30 AM

Saturday, October 28, 2018

Email: foggia@iaccofia.org to register.