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Lemon Drops

Geoffrey Dunn recalls his colorful great-aunt Josie and the varied secrets that surrounded her life.

By Geoffrey Dunn

When my cousins and I were young, my great-aunt Josie would chase us with an old broom to keep us from her garden. With her arms cocked high above her head and her body shaking with anger, she would curse us in Italian and broken English, calling us little shits and devils. Though she was tiny and seemed terribly old, her eyes were still fierce and her hands were still strong enough so that we did not stop to laugh at her until we had found safe refuge a block or so away.

As Josie scuttled back to working in the soil, we would shout taunts at her, giggling and laughing, though no doubt secretly terrified by the fierceness of her attack. We called her a witch, and worse. Sometimes we made her cry.

My great-aunt's full name was Jo-

sephina Angelina Loero. Born to Italian immigrant parents in San Francisco's North Beach at the turn of the century, she and her family moved down the coast to Santa Cruz following the 1906 Earthquake and Fire. Her father (my great grandfather, Giobatta Loero) worked as a fisherman and her mother (my great grandmother, Celestina) as a net maker in the thriving Italian fishing colony that overlooked the Santa Cruz waterfront. In the early 1960s, when extended

families had all but disappeared from the American landscape, all but one of Josie's five brothers and sisters lived within a block of her, along with many of their children

(Top) The ill-fated wedding of Josephina Loero, 1925.



and grandchildren, myself included.

Josie spent a good deal of time in the cellar of her home, which she had inherited following the death of my great grandmother, who died peacefully there at the age of 94. It was always dark in the cellar and filled with the smells of garlic, onions, sweet basil, rosemary and other herbs drying from the rafters. There were old family portraits hanging on the walls, and Josie's garden tools and baskets filled with beans and tomatoes. I remember always being a little scared going in there and never liked going alone. I was certain it was haunted, and feared that bats might be living in there as well. Once, I was sure I saw the ghost of my great-grandmother lurking in the shadows.

It was an eerie place, alright, but its one salvation was a stash of lemon drop candy that Josie always kept there, and which she distributed regularly and generously, so long as we stayed out of her garden.

I loved those little candies. I relished the roughness of their texture when you first placed them in your mouth, the rush of sweetness from the sugar coating, and the bitter bite of the hard yellow candy that followed. Whenever I was in the mood for one, I would gather my courage and venture over to Josie's, waiting for her offer. She rarely let me down.

Although you will not read about my great aunt — or women like her, for that matter — in any of the formal history texts written about the region or state, nor find her honored by historical societies and trusts, she was certainly a remarkable woman, a strong and fiercely independent woman, whose life certainly belongs somewhere in the pages of California history.

It seems, among other things, that my great-aunt was known throughout the region for her onions. Once, a few years ago, as I was tending my own crop of Ital-



Josephina Loero, Santa Cruz, 1936.

ian reds, an older cousin of mine politely reminded me that they would never be as big as Josie's. "She once grew a 13-and-a-half pounder," he said rather smugly. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I recalled this legend and was forced to face up to the fact that my onions would never match up to hers.

Now hyperbole is something of an Italian tradition (one particularly well cultivated by my family, I might add), and, after retelling this story about Josie's onions one afternoon, a farmer friend of mine politely explained to me that a 13-and-a-half pound onion would be close to an impossibility, unless it were the size of a rather large watermelon. Nonetheless, several months later, as I was rummaging through some family photos in my grandmother's attic, I came across a faded newspaper clipping that had been carefully mounted inside a picture frame. Lo and behold, the article grandly heralded the miracle of Josie's onions.

"Giant Onions Are Harvested in Santa Cruz," the article was headlined. It went on to note that "vegetables grow big and luscious in the garden of Josephina Loero. Her success formula is simple. She keeps the ground free of weeds and loose around the plants. She waters the vegetables once a week, letting the water run slowly into the deep ditches between the rows, so that it will soak down to the roots."

There was also a photo of Josie that accompanied the article. She was kneeled down in her garden and smiling, wearing what must have been her best cotton dress. And the onion she was holding was very big indeed. Not quite the size of a large watermelon, mind you, but two or three pounds at least.

In addition to her gardening exploits, my great aunt was also something of a notorious wine drinker. This I can confirm without benefit of a newspaper clipping, as I vividly recall the bitter, musty smell of her breath and her frequent visits to the demijohn of red wine in her cellar.

One of my uncles liked to tell the story of the time Josie was missing for dinner during World

War II. "Where's Josie?" everyone kept asking, but she wasn't to be found. The family looked all over for her, until someone decided to search the wine cellar — it was Josie, after all. There she lay, according to my uncle, her head resting just below the spigot from the wine barrel, looking quite content in the dark red puddle.

We all laughed then, but it seems sad to me now, almost tragic. What a great pain she must have carried all those years.

Long after Josie died, I discovered that she had been married once, though only, apparently, for a day. The marriage had been arranged, which was a common Italian practice of the time, and a date set, though Josie didn't have a whole lot of say in the matter. The prospective groom, an Italian butcher from San Francisco and a distant cousin of our family, came to Santa Cruz for the wedding. He and Josie were to make their home in North Beach.

Their wedding photo, which I also

Santa Cruz Is in the Heart at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History

Santa Cruz is more than a geographical location. For many, like fourth-generation Santa Cruzan Geoffrey Dunn, it is home to fascinating people whose lives capture one's heart and soul. An award-winning historian, Dunn shares a historical perspective of his hometown in a new book and an exhibit at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History (MAH) at the McPherson Center.

Dunn grew up with a large extended family in Santa Cruz, providing him with a wealth of stories. The writer and documentary filmmaker shared some of those engaging personal tales in his 1989 book, *"Santa Cruz is in the Heart."* A second volume of the book, to be released in October, features new stories that focus on contested and counter histories of the region, the diversity of Santa Cruz history and the nobility of living a simple life. The new stories also are featured in the interactive exhibit at the MAH, Aug. 30 through Nov. 24.

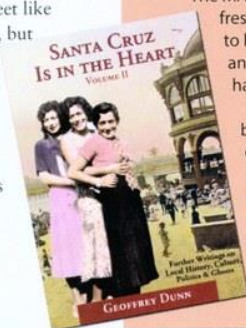
"We're thrilled about the upcoming exhibit," said Nina Simon, executive director at the museum. "Dunn writes in a way that's colorful, personal and story-rich. Santa Cruz is a place where he's so intimately connected with the people."

Rather than focus on celebrities and high-profile events, the book and the exhibit highlight the people who may not be well-known, but whose rich lives illustrate the power of the human spirit. Dunn tells stories about people who were personally relevant to him, people whose history and memories are carried in his heart and will likely touch the souls of museum visitors. Working on the exhibit has been a labor of love for him.

"The MAH has a completely new and fresh approach, and it forced me to look at my material in a new and fresh way," Dunn said. "It has been an absolute joy."

Three books by Dunn will be released this fall: *"Santa Cruz is in the Heart, Volume II,"* a pictorial sports history of Santa Cruz and a book about the Bargetto Winery in Soquel.

— Terri Morgan



found, wrapped in newspaper in my grandmother's attic, is a marvelous portrait of gloom, particularly Josie's. She looks anything but happy. There she is in her white gown and veil, her constricted body language revealing her distaste for the whole affair.

When the wedding was over, she and her new husband walked down to the Union Pacific Depot to await the train that would take them to San Francisco. The children of the Italian neighborhood, many of them Josie's nieces and nephews, followed the couple along the way, teasing Josie and singing songs, much like we would 40 years later. According to legend, one of her wedding shoes was lost in a gopher hole on the trail to the station, so she had to make the remainder of the journey with one bare foot.

My mother, who was a flower girl in the wedding (and who can be seen smirking in the photo), recalls that Josie returned to Santa Cruz shortly thereafter. It seems as though there were a few details about married life that no one had explained to Josie, particularly pertaining to a certain part of the male anatomy, and she did not take favorably to them. Upon her return, Josie was sullen but unbowed, and she resumed her life of gardening, mending fishing nets with her mother, and working seasonally in the canneries. No one ever arranged for her to marry again.

By the time my generation rolled around, Josie appeared to be decidedly out of place in a world of spaceships, TV dinners, electric can openers and sports cars. She never seemed to be part of the modern world. In fact, she was mostly oblivious to it, and she went about her daily routine as the women in Italy 8,000 miles away had done for centuries. There is no doubt in my mind that she would have been more at home there.

My last memory of Josie is driving her and my grandmother and aunt to the old Italian cemetery in Colma. I was in high school at the time, with a beat-up 1960 Ford Falcon, equipped with surf racks and filled with sand. In all honesty, I remember being a little embarrassed about having

these three rather odd old ladies in the car and was worried what my friends would think if they saw me with them, on our way to the cemetery, no less. Such a fool. What I wouldn't give to have the three of them back with me now.

In spite of these reservations, however, once we got out of town, I actually enjoyed having the three gals in the car and listening to them banter and argue in the old Italian dialect. It was rich and warm and musical. I'd tell them to be quiet, and my grandmother would shake her fist at me and tap me on the chin, while Josie would slap the back of my head. Then I'd turn up the radio and make them listen to the Rolling Stones.

When we arrived at the cemetery, with its marbled mausoleums and cold gray tombstones, they would go through a ritual of discarding the old flowers and water from the brass vases, wipe them clean, arrange the fresh flowers, and then fill them to the brim with clean water. Always, the women would cry loudly and endlessly, but this time I noticed that Josie seemed quieter than usual, sullen, reserved. Perhaps she saw her own death in the distorted reflections of the white marble. Maybe she even wished for it and the quiet peace it would bring.

When I left them all off back in Santa Cruz and suffered through their hugs and kisses, Josie reached into her pocket and handed me a lemon drop. She rapped me on the head and told me to be good. It was the last time I would ever see her. I put the candy in my mouth and sucked hard on it. As always, it was bittersweet — bittersweet like Josie's life, often lonely and sad, but with enough good wine and big red onions to make it all seem bearable. ♣

Lemon Drops is an excerpt from Geoffrey Dunn's forthcoming book, *Santa Cruz Is in the Heart: Volume II*

