

Title: My Dad, Through Thick and Thin

Subject: Philip Conte

By Linda Conte John



As a seventeen-year-old travelling alone with borrowed money from his uncle, my father, Philip Conte, came to this country in 1921 from Minturno, Italy. With sponsors in New York, he set out on a monumental adventure from Naples arriving in New York Harbor on a cold February day. In his telling of the story, it was an unpleasant journey. Many people became sick and got lice. He recounted the story many times of how he helped others on the ship. When it came time to dock, he cleaned himself up as best he could because if the authorities found a lice infestation, he would be deported back to Italy. However, because there were precarious health issues on Ellis Island due in part to overcrowding, his ship, the *SS Canada*, was diverted to Philadelphia where he was examined and passed inspection. One hurdle passed! An immigration officer took pity on this young man and told him to take off the yellow tag that designated him as an immigrant. He then guided my dad to the train station and told the conductor to watch over him and see that he got to Utica, New York in good condition --- which he did.

When my father arrived, he was met by two men who inquired if he was Philip Conte. When he replied that he was, they told him that they were sent by his sponsor and they would walk him to the sponsor's house. Now this was a freezing cold winter night and, as one man walked in front of him and another behind, all my dad could think about was that these men were up to no good. He had heard stories of immigrants coming to America having their money taken, being beaten up or even killed. As they walked along that cold night with snow drifts piled as high as six feet, he thought, "Well, if they throw me in the canal, I am good swimmer and I can save myself." As it turned out, the two men were telling the truth and delivered him to the house of his sponsor.

What happened next was something my father was not expecting. When the sponsor opened the door, he said, "What on earth are you doing here? Don't you know things are very hard in this town right now? I can't keep you here. You can stay overnight and then you will have to find another place to live." You can imagine his disappointment. So, in the morning he set out to find housing. Someone told him to go to the DeFilippis' house because they took in boarders. He knocked at the door at 1701 Catherine Street and a fifteen-year-old girl, named Rose Mary opened it. My dad asked for Emilia DeFilippis. Rose Mary told him that her mother wasn't home and that he would have to come back later. When Emilia learned that my father was from her hometown of Minturno, she realized that she knew many in his family and so she agreed to rent him a room.

My father thought he could find work right away but couldn't. He soon ran out of money and as he put it, "I went hungry for three days, but I did not beg borrow or steal." When asked how he survived, he replied, "I went to the corner bar and ate the lupini beans that were set out on the table. I got a pretty bad stomach ache. The bar owner, Nick Poccia, asked what was wrong. When I told him my story, he handed me ten dollars and told me he would inquire about a job. The next day, he referred me to a friend, Eliseo Rossi, who needed men for road construction." As my father

explained, “I worked for the next fifty-six days eating beans, sleeping in tents and digging ditches for the road to Endicott, New York.”

While living in the house as a boarder, he became smitten with Rose Mary. He asked her parents for their daughter’s hand in marriage, and they agreed. However, because of social mores prevalent at the time, once they were engaged, he wasn’t permitted to live in the same house. So, my grandmother asked her sister, Nancy, if she would take him in. My father lived with Aunt Nancy and Uncle Carmen and their family for about a year and a half. My parents married on June 20, 1925.

Meanwhile, my dad’s cousins had been trailblazers to California and sent word to my parents that they would love it there because it reminded them of the “old country”. So, exactly one year later, in 1926, they moved to a small town about ten miles from the heart of downtown Los Angeles to start a new life and a family. Indeed, his cousins were right. My dad always said how much California reminded him of his homeland. His old neighborhood, Scauri in Minturno and Laguna Beach in Orange County do look so much alike except that the Mediterranean Sea is much calmer than the Pacific Ocean.

Daddy became an upholsterer and Mother worked for Betty Brooks Company making gym clothes. On February 2, 1929, their first child, a son named Frank Philip, was born. Mother stayed home to raise him. During the Depression, Daddy began work for Angelus Furniture Manufacturing Company in Los Angeles. Mother had to return to work because the couple had lost \$1500 in a local bank failure and were down to their last five dollars. Mother worked for four years and then became a homemaker for the rest of their marriage. Fourteen years later, they had another child, Linda Phyllis, born on July 21, 1942. Daddy built an apartment building in Southwest Los Angeles and in 1949, the family moved to Overhill Drive and 59<sup>th</sup> Place. This was to be their residence until 1964 when they sold the property and moved back to Huntington Park. They resided there until my father’s death at seventy-eight on December 21, 1981. Mother then moved in with her brother Albert DePhillips in San Dimas. She remained there until she went to live in a convalescent hospital in West Covina. She died on July 26, 2002, just one month shy of her 97<sup>th</sup> birthday. Both are buried at Resurrection Cemetery in Montebello, California.

My parents led extraordinary lives. My father, especially, persevered through good times as well as bad. He bravely left the world he knew to seek a new life in a new country.



Wedding day photo of Rose Mary DeFilippis, daughter of Giuseppe and Emilia Coraccio DeFilippis and Philip Conte, son of Francesco and Arcangela Coppola Conte.

