

Francis, Immigrant Son



Francis with his one and only bike at 5 years old. *Circa 1923.*

Agazio, *eseguire al giardino e prendere 2 cavoli per cena*” (Run to the garden and pick 2 cabbages for dinner).

Ma relied heavily on her eldest son, Agazio, to help run the household. Exhausted after standing all day at the knitting mill, she started supper for her six children. No time for whining or collapsing in a chair. In 1930, the Great Depression hit, causing severe poverty in many American households. It was especially hard on immigrants who were usually the last hired and the first laid off from their jobs. Ma felt lucky to find a factory job three blocks from her home. Her husband, convalescing from a cave-in at a construction site, received money for the accident but it was running out.

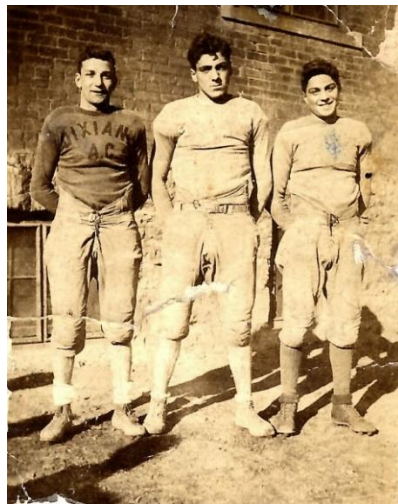
Cabbage soup and bread again for dinner. Agazio ran to the garden and brushed the heaped snow off the cabbages. Ma had a green thumb and grew tomatoes, beans, onions, cabbages, and garlic on a small strip of land behind her house. They were canned in the fall except for the cabbages, which remained in the ground during the winter.

Fetching cabbages was an easy task for Agazio. After school, he took care of his baby brother Sammy and five younger siblings, shoveled coal into the furnace, scrubbed floors when needed, and even helped sew clothing for his siblings. His friends called him “Francis”, a name his teacher gave him. She renamed immigrant children to help them with the Americanization process, or maybe because she struggled with pronouncing the various Italian, Polish, and German names. Ma mocked this renaming of her son Francis by dubbing him “Fudz-e-ootz.” Family members liked this third name and started calling him “Fudz” for short.

After his chores, Francis faithfully practiced his violin. He loved music and playing in the school band. The violin was handed down to him by his uncle, then Francis handed it down to his younger sister, Kay. The gymnastics coach preferred that he focus on practicing his front and back handsprings, cartwheels, and dive rolls instead. Quite athletic, Francis learned gymnastics, football, and baseball easily, and when not in school, he played ball in the street with his buddies.

Gathered friends on Francis's front porch knocked on the door beckoning him to play catch with a ragged football abandoned on the playground. The early adolescents were also sons of Italian immigrants. Some were renamed by their teachers as well. Some were nicknamed to distinguish them from their grandfathers or fathers -Whitey, Ruddy, Greenie, Mooney, Joe-Joe, Soupy, Cheech, and Spear. Oftentimes, the names reflected a physical or personal trait and followed them into adulthood. The nickname mercifully dropped if the boy moved away.

Since Pa was not yet home that early evening, Ma nodded her head, allowing Francis to play, but for "*justa few minoots.*" He jumped up and headed into the street to grab the opportunity to play ball. A few months earlier Francis played for a football team named the Wyandots. His Uncle Ralph, only a year older, played against him on the Boosters. The fierce competition between the two boys saw a dramatic ending to their last football game. The players had only a few seconds left in the fourth quarter, and the game was tied 0-0. The Boosters' quarterback threw the ball to Ralph, but just as he was about to catch it, Francis jumped over his head and intercepted the ball. Heading toward the goal posts like a gazelle, he scored a touchdown, winning the game at 6-0. Ralph was in disbelief! He eventually got over the fact that his team lost and talked about this amazing feat for many years to come.



Ralph, Cousin Johnny Spina, Francis, on Wetmore School's football team. *Circa 1933*

Scattered in the snowy street, the boys threw the pigskin to one another, learning to spin it in a spiral. Darkness descended, and the streetlights switched on. Shouts came from the boys unwinding from the school day, adolescent voices cracking, “Good catch!” “Rag arm!” “Put a spin on it!” “Throw it here!” “It’s my turn.”

Suddenly a voice hollered, “Look out, Francis!”

Too late. A Ford Model T locked its brakes on the icy, slushy street in an attempt to avoid the boys and swerved. The moment that Francis turned around, he was hit.

Ma heard the screams of the kids from the house and ran to the scene. She collapsed when she saw blood gushing from her son’s face. Francis lay in the street shivering until an ambulance came. His friend, Greenie, stared down at him in disbelief, not knowing what to say. He fought back tears while he watched Ma wail and carry on about her oldest son.

In the emergency room, the doctors examined the gash in the middle of his forehead. They pinched the skin between his eyes to sew several stitches. A crooked scar resulted, serving as a reminder of the accident for the rest of his life.

“Ow-w-w, ow, ow!” Throbbing head pain, along with pricks of the doctor’s needle weaving in and out, made Francis squirm. He tried to forget the stinging pain when told to hold his head still. He tried to think of something pleasant but recalled another bad incident instead.

At five years old, Francis rode his tricycle in the same street one summer day, unaware of any danger. Another driver didn’t spot him until the last minute, managing to avoid crashing into the little boy. The enraged driver flew out of the car and yelled to Pa on the sidewalk, who witnessed the near collision.

After determining that the boy was all right, the driver demanded, “*Egli deve essere insegnato una lezione*” (He must be taught a lesson).

Pa agreed. He opened the cover to a nearby manhole while the driver shoved the trike through the storm drain below. Hysterical, Francis ran in the house, not really understanding what horrible thing he did wrong. He never owned another bicycle again.

It was typical to be hard on children in the early twentieth century. Many adults adhered to the “spare-the-rod-spoil-the-child” adage. As the firstborn son, Francis bore the brunt of much physical abuse and punishment for what we call today “just being a kid.” His uneducated father, Guiseppe (Joseph), whose parents died when he was ten years old, knew little about childrearing. He came to America with his two brothers, youngsters themselves, from the tiny hamlet of Cutro in Calabria, Italy. They knew only Old-World discipline.