

CALL ME PASQUALE

Reclaiming a Name in the Hills of Abruzzo

BY MILES RYAN FISHER

The name Pasquale is derived from the Latin ‘pascha’ (Italian ‘pasqua’) — or Easter — symbolizing the renewal and rebirth.

“Pasquale gets lost in translation,” Pasquale DiDonato explains. “In the United States, I became Pat or Patsy. No one ever called me Pasquale.”

True to Italian tradition, Pasquale was named for his grandfather, who was born in 1877 in the Abruzzo region. Grandfather Pasquale and his wife, Maria Ciabbatoni, arrived at Ellis Island in 1907. They had four children—Rosa, Nicola, James, and Amadeo—before tragedy struck. Grandfather Pasquale, a railroad laborer, was struck and killed by a train just 11 years after immigrating to the United States, leaving Maria to raise the four children in a foreign country.



Pasquale posing for a Hollywood-style shot in his car on the airstrip.

After that fatal accident, the ties to family back in Italy were all but severed. The only real link that remained lay in the name that was passed down.

Pasquale DiDonato was born in Norristown, Pennsylvania, in 1939—21 years after his grandfather had died. He grew up without knowing much about where he came from. His father, James, never spoke about the family’s history. In 1958, eighteen-year-old Pasquale enlisted in the U.S. Air Force and worked as a machinist. He was based in Fort Worth, Texas with the USAF Strategic Air Command before being transferred to Ramstein Air Base with USAF Air Defense Command in western Germany, an hour west of Heidelberg. When he looked at a map to see exactly where that was in relation to the rest of Europe, he saw that Italy wasn’t too far away. And he thought of a family he knew nothing about.

“Dad, where are we from?” he asked one time during a call home to his parents.



Pasquale in his Air Force uniform stands proud besides his mother, Maria.

“Abruzzo,” his father replied. But that was all his father could offer. There were no letters from family. There were no names of relatives. There was nothing but a region, one much larger than Pasquale realized.

Armed only with this tiny piece of information, Pasquale was still determined to spend his month of military leave on a trip to Italy in order to find his extended family. He then persuaded three other GIs—who were also of Italian descent—to make the journey with him.

They bought an old Nash Ambassador for the trip since the seat in it folded down into a bed, and that way, two could sleep in the car while two slept outside in a sleeping bag. They made their roundabout way to Italy, driving south through Germany and Switzerland before reaching Nice, France, and the Mediterranean Sea.



The older man—also named Pasquale DiDonato—that Pasquale miraculously met in Petacciato, Italy.



Pasquale towering over his relatives on his original trip to find them in Abruzzo.

They headed east, entering Italy along the Ligurian coast. They continued along the Mediterranean and eventually made it to Naples. From there, they tried to figure out the direction they would have to drive in order to reach Abruzzo.

East, they were told. Across the Apennine Mountains.

So they weaved their way through the Apennines, making it all the way to the Adriatic Sea without finding any evidence of Pasquale's family. By the time they'd arrived at the sea, they were already three weeks into their month of military leave. So they decided to make their way back, heading north toward Venice.

As they began their return trip, they soon stopped to purchase some food for a quick lunch along the side of the road. A little meat. A loaf of bread. A bottle of wine. As they were buying the provisions, an Italian soldier approached them.

"Who are you?" he asked in broken English.

"We're Americans," they told him.

"Well I already know that because you're so tall," he said. "But what's your name? And what are you doing here?"

"I'm Patsy Dee-din-nata," Pasquale said in his American accent. "I'm looking for my family."

"Dee-din-ata?" the soldier asked and shook his head. "I know some Doe-nah-toe," he said. "Up there in Petacciato." He pointed to a sign right in front of them. "Just stay here and wait." With that, the soldier walked off.

Before long, a Lambretta scooter appeared heading in their direction, the Italian soldier on it with another, older man, his fedora flapping in the breeze. It pulled up to them, and the older man jumped off, running toward Pasquale and his comrades.

"*Come ti chiami?*" the older man asked. "*Sei molto alto.*"

"What is your name?" the Italian soldier translated. "You are so tall."

"Patsy," Pasquale said. "Pasty Dee-din-nata."



A Nash Ambassador, the make and model of car that Pasquale and his comrades drove through Italy.

The older man replied, and once again the Italian soldier translated. "That's too bad. He was hoping you were a relative from America." Then the soldier thought. "Wait a minute, don't you have an Italian name?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Pasquale. Pasquale is my first name."

The older man leapt at Pasquale, embracing him in a big hug, he started crying and kissing him on the cheeks. "*Non credo! Non credo!*" I don't believe it! I don't believe it!

Pasquale reached into his pocket, taking out his wallet and the military ID card inside that had his name "Pasquale DiDonato" printed on it.

Pasquale DiDonato, USAF, 8th Air Force Fighter Squadron

Once the older man saw it, he began kissing Pasquale's wallet and his military card. He then took out his own wallet and opened it to reveal *his* name: Pasquale DiDonato.

"Andiamo! Andiamo!" the older man shouted. He jumped in the Nash Ambassador, and the Italian soldier jumped on the Lambretta.



Many years after meeting, the Pasquales who were named after the same man.

“He wants to take you to his home,” the Italian soldier said.

So Pasquale and his comrades piled in their car with the older man and began driving up a crater-filled road that grew narrower and narrower, so narrow that the tires of the wide Nash Ambassador bounced off steps leading to houses along the street. They arrived at a house that had no doors, no windows, only part of a roof. *Bambini* appeared and began jumping on the car, never having seen one before. As Pasquale and the men climbed out, the children climbed in. They hung out the windows and pressed the car horn.

Pasquale and his comrades followed the older man into his house. Before long, DiDonatos started arriving in droves. Vincenzo DiDonato. Giovanni DiDonato. Nunzio DiDonato. Nicola DiDonato. Zia Michelina and many others. One even arrived on a donkey for what transformed into a true *festa*. Spaghetti. Meatballs. Sausage. Wine. Lots and lots of wine.

The family brought out several family photos and, through them,



Pasquale with his immediate and extended family standing beneath the location of the original sign (since replaced) where he first encountered the man who shared his name, his first cousin once removed.

began tracing their lineage. What they soon discovered was that not only were both Pasquales related: they were both named for the same man. As it turned out, the older man's father and Pasquale's grandfather were brothers. The two Pasquale's were first cousins once removed. While the younger Pasquale was named for his grandfather out of Italian tradition, the older Pasquale was named for him in his memory—to honor the tragic death of his father's brother.

After a couple days, it was time for Pasquale and his comrades to depart for Germany. They thanked the family, and true to Italian hospitality, they left the house without having spent a single cent.

Once Pasquale's tour of duty ended, he returned stateside. He began working for Eaton & Yale Manufacturing, in Philadelphia. He then moved to Annapolis, where he met his wife, Angelina, who was born in Sicily. He told her his tale about what had happened in Abruzzo and took Angelina to meet his newly discovered family. When they visited, she had to act as his translator, something that embarrassed him because he still didn't speak Italian. He didn't even go by his Italian name, still referring to himself as “Pat” or “Patsy.”

When he returned from that second visit, he did so adamant about learning Italian—and about being called by his Italian name: Pasquale. He was named after his grandfather, a man who died a tragic death trying to make a better life for his family, and he would carry on that exact name. He never again introduced himself as Pat.

Since that time, he has visited his family in Italy more than 20 times, each time doing so as “Pasquale,” and many of the DiDonato family visited him and his family at his home in Mary-



Pasquale in a North American F-100 Super Sabre.

land. He's even brought yet another Pasquale to visit the family—his own grandson, who was named for him.

“My Pop-pop's name is Pasquale,” his grandson would tell people when he was little. “And that's my name, too.”

“Don't you have a nickname?” people would ask him.

“If you had a name like Pasquale, why would you want a nickname?” he would reply.

Miles Ryan Fisher (mfisher@osia.org) is the Editor-in-Chief of *Italian America* magazine.



Pasquale DiDonato founded the Annapolis Sons and Daughters of Italy Lodge #2225 of Annapolis, Maryland, on June 15, 1970.