

Big Jim Alfano

This family history tells the story of one of Surry County's first immigrant families. As such, it offers an interesting view of the County in the early 20th Century, as well as a glimpse of how the County was affected by world conditions during those years.

Our story begins in Lanzara, Italy, which is a village near Naples in the province of Salerno. In 1884, Anthony Alfano fathered a son he named Vincenzo, who was later known in Surry County as "Big Jim." This is the story of Vincenzo "Big Jim" Alfano, as told by his son Ugo, who lives today in Flat Rock in the house in which he was born.

When he was 10 or 11 years old, Vincenzo began his apprenticeship as a stone carver in Lanzara. He trained under local artisans who did carving and repair work for various churches and cathedrals throughout Italy. After completing his apprenticeship in 1905, he went to Egypt to work on a dam. For two years he cut and dressed stone for this dam, but did not do any carving. He came to the United States from Egypt in 1907, settling initially in White Plains, New York. Here he did stone carving for monument shops, working in marble, sandstone, building stone, and granite.

In 1908 Vincenzo returned to ^{Lanzara}~~Lanzara~~ to marry Martha Avella, whom he had not seen in at least three years. He was 24 and she was 20 years old when they were united in a big formal wedding. Unlike many marriages at that time, this marriage was not arranged by their families, but rather was forged in the devotion and sacrifice required by their long separation.

Though not well-to-do, Vincenzo was considered prosperous by Italian

standards of the time. Employment prospects were not good in Italy, which had been suffering from a depressed economy for years with no hope for improvement. By comparison, America had begun to industrialize and offered a bright future for those who were willing to work, regardless of where they came from.

So Vincenzo returned to America late in 1908, leaving Martha behind, who by that time was carrying their first child Edward, who was born in ~~Lanzara~~^{Lanzara} in 1909. He first went back to White Plains, but soon moved to Philadelphia to look for better opportunities. Martha came to America with Edward in 1910, where she was reunited with her husband at Ellis Island.

In the five years of their romance since Vincenzo left for Egypt, Martha had only been with him for some six months, and had had to leave family, home, and country when she must have known she would never see them again. Such was the promise of America in those years, and such was the quality and strength of the people who were attracted to it!

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In 1915 the North Carolina Granite Corporation began expanding its operations, and Vincenzo, Martha, and Edward moved to Flat Rock, where they would live and work the rest of their lives. The Quarry's expansion began to attract other immigrant families to the area, also. These families included the Miglories and D'Amicos from Italy, the Emeterios from Spain, the MacKenzies

and Burtons from Scotland, and the Thompsons from England. The Thompsons ran a boarding house for the newly-arrived immigrants. This house is near the Quarry on E. Pine Street and remains in the hands of the Thompson heirs.

The Alfanos first lived in a tenant's house on the old Merritt Farm. Vincenzo, now known as Big Jim, bought the present-day Alfano house and later expanded it. His second son Ugo was born in this house (where he lives today) on January 6, 1919. The house cost \$665 and had two heated rooms, the kitchen and one bedroom. Water was initially provided from a well supplied with a hand-operated windlass. Electric power was not available until the mid-1920's, at which time indoor plumbing was added, as well as a very welcome refrigerator.

Big Jim's Italian training stood him in good stead. Even during the Depression, when men considered themselves lucky to make 10-15¢ per hour, as an artisan Big Jim was paid \$1.00 per hour, and was one of the most highly paid workmen in the Quarry. For the rest of his life, he would do the fine carving ~~for~~ ~~which the Quarry men~~ while other workmen cut and dressed the stone.

Many of his works can be seen today. The decorative lintel work on the U.S. Post Office in Mount Airy was hand-carved by Big Jim. Other works include the stone lions on the Washington Memorial Bridge in the District of Columbia; selected carvings on the Wright Brothers Memorial at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina; and the U.S. Treasury Building at Fort Knox, Kentucky.

Big Jim worked without safety glasses, and one day was blinded in one eye from flying rock chips. This happened when he was fairly young--before 1920--when Workmen's Compensation did not exist. Thus, he produced his best work when he had vision in only one eye and hence lacked the depth perception that comes with stereoscopic vision.

He once compared working in Italian marble with working in Mt. Airy granite. He said that our local granite is the world's hardest building stone. By comparison, marble is much softer and easier to work. Also, its grain is finer and will take much more delicate carving. His basic tools were a 5-pound hammer, a chisel, and a "bushhammer."

Big Jim and Martha were never wealthy, but all in all they found a good life in Surry County. He loved classical music, particularly the opera of the Italian masters. He had an extensive record collection, and spent Sunday afternoons listening to the opera on his short-wave radio, possibly one of the first short-wave radios in Surry County. He cultivated an extensive vineyard from which he produced a quite good wine. Fine Italian sausages and cheeses were imported from New York City, and guests at the Alfano table had their first introduction to spaghetti, pizza, pepperoni, and other elements of great Italian cuisine.

While Martha learned very little English, Big Jim was quite resourceful in dealing with language barriers. When trying to buy window screens at the hardware store, he asked for a "fly-fence", and got what he wanted! When shopping for a colander, he informed the sales clerk that he needed a "spaghetti-stay, water go!"

Martha died in 1939, but Big Jim lived to hold his first grandchild, Geraldine Martha, born in 1947. Big Jim died later that year. However, he and his descendants have left several works in Surry County as a remembrance. In addition to the granite carvings at his house and on the Post Office, he and Martha sleep under a fine carving in the Mt. Airy City Cemetery. This carving was executed in granite by his son Edward who also became

a competent carver. The artistic Alfano legacy lives today in the person of his second grandchild, Mrs. Rebecca Alfano Matthews, who is the Art Teacher at North Surry High School.

Submitted by John W. Belchee, September 1982