

Emilio Carmelo Rossi

1921 - 2018

BRICK MASON, CONTRACTOR

WRITTEN BY CONNIE ROSSI RAINS, WITH HELP FROM "PAPA'S" CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN



Our dad, Emilio Rossi, had several opportunities to stay in Italy and work at his craft. Had he stayed, his business would have flourished quickly, and he would have become very successful in his trade as a brick mason and a builder. Instead, he chose to bring his wife, Rosa, and infant son, Antonio, to America to chase the "American dream." It was thanks to his father-in-law, James Orlando, that he came to Salinas; however, his road to success was not an easy one. Many times, he told us he was extremely discouraged and often wondered what it would have been like had he stayed in the Old Country. His continued drive to do well and work hard made him the person he became--a dreamer, a hard worker, an excellent brick mason and contractor, a man of faith, and especially, a kind and caring person who gave other Italian immigrants the opportunities that he struggled to attain. When "Papa" left us on May 10, 2018, he left a hole in our family and a hole in our hearts, but left a legacy in the Salinas Valley and Monterey Peninsula. Proudly, we would like to tell his story of how he became the person he was and the impact he had on our lives.

His Early Years

Emilio's life began in the small town of Piane Crati in the province of Calabria in southern Italy. He was born on June 20, 1921 (or thereabouts, because in their small

town, he could have been born one day and the birth may have been registered days later). He was the fourth and youngest child of Nicolo Rossi and Concetta Aiello Rossi. Before Emilio's birth his father went to Chicago, because work was inconsistent in Piane Crati. Concetta was the town mid-wife and delivered many children in the town. Money was scarce, so often she worked for eggs, milk, or bread. Nicolo sent money back to the family, as many fathers did in those times, with hopes of someday bringing his family to America with him. He returned to Italy in 1930 with enough money to purchase a piece of property in Piane Crati to build a family home. Nicolo, with his eldest son, Angelino, began to build the house. Young Emilio grew up in a humble household with a strong mother, who raised her children to be strong as well. He attended school, but at the age of 10 had to quit in order to work with Angelino and help support his family. This was during the Great Depression and Nicolo, still in Chicago, was unable to continue sending money to help his family in Italy. Without funds Angelino had to cease the work on the family house, and he and Emilio worked with their *zio* (uncle) Amadeo, who was a building contractor. Angelino was an architect and mason, and Emilio, at the age of 10, became a laborer, carrying water, supplies and blocks to the brick masons. As the amount of work increased, there was a need for more workers, and eventually Papa learned the trade by observing and then finally, by doing. Little by little, the skilled brothers, Angelino and Papa, were able to complete the family home in 1935. The house still stands today with family living in it.

During his early teens, he fell in love with Rosa, who was delivered by Concetta in 1927 and lived across the street. On the day she was born Emilio was invited to kiss her on the cheek. As the Italian custom goes, you will marry the first one you kiss, and twenty years later that is exactly what happened! He often teased her and tried to talk to her, though she had little interest in him. In the evening he and his friends would serenade her from the street, as she stood on her balcony on the second floor. They continued singing those same songs to us and to their grandchildren throughout the years.

World War II

In 1941, during World War II, Papa was drafted into the Italian Army. He was part of the 81st Regimento Infantry and was stationed in Rome for one month. He travelled to Gaeta, then Terracina, then Verona, and finally to the front line in Russia in October 1942. His trip to Russia was long and grueling and the German soldiers were not always kind to the Italian soldiers. The weather was cold, and each day became more frigid. He would tell us stories about the war, the soldiers, the people, the potatoes he ate and the Vodka he tasted for the first time. Interestingly, potatoes were always his favorite food, and a vodka martini was his cocktail of choice!

He stayed on the Russian front until December 16, 1942. While at the Novena Mass, the enemy attacked the Italian soldiers. Papa remembered total chaos and trying to assemble his machine gun, but the parts were frozen, and he was unable to shoot it. He remembered his friend getting shot in the mouth and then a hot burning sensation in his own shoulder as blood began penetrating the layers of his uniform. His friend was wounded, and instinctively Papa grabbed him and tried to help him to safety. Fortunately, the combination of the cold air and layered clothing had helped to stop his own bleeding wound as he carried his friend to safety and eventually boarded one of the medic trucks that had come to rescue them. Papa, along with several wounded soldiers, were carried to a nearby infantry camp, where they faced another chaotic attack. Sadly, he never



Emilio fought in World War II and miraculously survived the Russian front lines.

saw his wounded friend again and never knew if he had survived or not. He told us often that it was truly a miracle that he escaped and that, no doubt, God had other plans for him. Papa was taken to Kiev, where he stayed for a week, including Christmas Day, in 1942. He was then taken to a hospital in Poland and after many stops along the way finally back to his beloved home. "It was a good feeling," he would tell us, "when I got to the edge of Piane Crati!" Papa treasured Christmas traditions with his entire family, because he knew what could have been and the gift of continued life that he was given.

Working After the War

In Papa's absence Rosa had matured and realized she had strong feelings for him. When he returned, they began seeing each other, but always with a chaperone. Papa returned to work with Zio Amadeo, who was contracted to repair and rebuild many structures that had been damaged during the war in the nearby city of Cosenza. The repairs went on for years, and Papa strengthened his building skills and especially his masonry skills. He eventually became a foreman as their restorations transitioned to building new houses and even dams. His brother, Angelino, also worked with Zio Amadeo and together they supported Papa and encouraged him to get his own contractor's license, which he did in 1946. Papa had good memories of barbecuing bacon and eating tomato salad on the job sites. Until the day Papa left us, those continued to be two of his favorite things he shared with family and friends!



Papa's business prospered and his life thrived as well. He married his beloved "Rosetta" on April 13, 1947, and his first son, Antonio, was delivered by Concetta on April 22, 1948. He did very well in Italy, however, he still dreamed of taking his family to America for a "better life." This meant leaving his mother, family, the house he helped

Emilio and Rosa Orlando Rossi shared a lifelong love and were married for 74 years.

build, and the town he loved, but in his heart he knew it was right.

Coming to America

Papa's father-in-law, now living in Salinas, handled the paperwork needed to bring Rosa, Emilio and six-month-old Tony to America in October 1948. The trip across the Atlantic was 11 days long, and far from luxurious. Papa stayed with the men on one level and Rosa stayed with the women and children on another. They were both seasick most of the time, and Tony cried constantly. Other immigrant women helped, but the days were long and the nights even longer. When they finally arrived in New York, Papa remembered seeing the Statue of Liberty and thinking, "*Finalmente, America!*" With \$34 in Papa's pocket and no language to communicate, the three of them boarded a train to Chicago, where they stayed with Nicolo for a week. Nicolo had never returned to Italy, because his son, Frank, had come to Chicago, married, and was raising his own family there. When they said goodbye at the train station, it would be the last time Papa ever saw his father alive.

The train trip to Salinas was one they would never forget. Papa and Rosa were both anxious to see their new land, new home and Rosa's family, who had left weeks before them. They arrived in Salinas a day later than expected but were greeted by family and the next day by many *paisanos* who had travelled to Salinas before them. At Rosa's father's house, they were "home" with people they could communicate with, share stories with and share meals with.

From Struggles to "Rossi Masonry"

The next few years were difficult. The three of them lived with Rosa's family, and work was very inconsistent. Papa worked many odd jobs for less than minimum wage and was even let go by one employer because he could not speak English. Encouraged to succeed, he attended night school to learn the language and become an American citizen. During this time, he also went to San Francisco to take the exam for his contractor's license and passed it on his first try--a very happy day for him! With a second child coming, Papa knew it was time to make a home for his own family. Papa's uncle, Zio Vincenzo, who was Zio Amadeo's brother, trusted

his nephew's work ethics and loaned him enough money to purchase a small lot in east Salinas. On weeknights and weekends, he pushed himself to build their first family home for the soon-to-be family of four. He built with passion, pride and drive, and when they moved into their new home, it was a day of huge celebration. This was the first of five family homes he would build, his favorite being his last on Sierra Madre Drive in south Salinas.

In 1950--the year of the birth of his second child, Concetta--Papa was employed by a cement contractor. There he met a hard-working hod carrier named Jessie James. Deciding this was the time to venture out on his own, he partnered with Jessie and created Rossi Masonry. Papa and Jessie worked together building planters, fireplaces, chimneys, and barbecue pits. They produced quality work, and through some advertising and word of mouth, Rossi Masonry began to grow. He sponsored and employed many young Italian men who either knew the trade or were eager to learn. Papa always told us how grateful he was for those craftsmen who helped build his business and his reputation as a contractor. He purchased one truck, then another and another, and in time his signature red trucks bearing the Rossi Masonry signs were seen everywhere. Proudly, he became one of the most sought-after masonry contractors in the area and state. In Monterey County a key selling point when purchasing a home was a Rossi fireplace, because they were known to function properly and last a long, long time.



In 1980 Emilio designed and built The Rossi Building and modeled it around Italian architecture and the home he and his brother built in Piane Crati. The building sits near the courthouse in Salinas and was his pride and joy.

Over the next sixty years Papa would continue to leave his mark in the Salinas Valley and Monterey Peninsula. His many accomplishments include buildings at Fort Ord, Hunter Liggett, The Presidio of Monterey, Naval Postgraduate School, Northridge Mall, Hartnell College, and his Crocker Bank and Wells Fargo buildings on West Alisal Street in Salinas.



Many beautiful and landmark structures in Salinas were built by Rossi Masonry. Two were Hartnell College and the Wells Fargo building.

Being a man of faith and so grateful to God for miraculously allowing him to survive World War II, he donated his time to build and remodel several church facilities, including St. Mary's of the Nativity, St. Joseph's, Sacred Heart and the Temple Beth El. In addition, he regularly helped to support the repairs of the Church of Santa Barbara in Piane Crati.

True to his Italian heritage, he was a charter member of the Sons of Italy in Salinas, held several state offices for the lodge and dedicated his time to the Italian Catholic Federation as well. When he was honored by the Italian Heritage Society in 2007, he was extremely proud to share the honor with others he had looked up to.



Grateful for his survival in World War II, Emilio donated time and energy in the building of several churches, including St. Joseph's in Spreckels and Temple Beth El in Salinas.

Emilio Rossi, Our Dad

Our dad taught us so many things. He taught us the importance of hard work and dedication, the gift of giving, love of family and pride for our Italian heritage. He had six children--Tony, Connie, Frank, Robert, Jimmy, and Barbara--who all graduated from college to ensure that each had the education he was never able to complete. He continued and will continue to help his grandchildren and great grandchildren with the same. We still do all the things he taught us--making sausage, soprasatta, copa and tarali; drying oregano; laying blocks; building barbecue pits; gardening, and so much more. He has thirteen grandchildren, and presently, seven great grandchildren, who continue to enjoy listening to the stories of their Papa and his struggles, drive and success. Our mom, Rosa, loves to tell us stories of their courtship, their travels, their struggles and their 74 years together.



In his later years he used his hands in his garden.

His past surely made him the man he became and gave us the futures we have. We miss him every day and are grateful and proud of all that he did before he left this world. He will forever be in our hearts, and each time we see a structure that he built (and there are so many), we will be reminded of who he was and who we are because of him.

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