

U MAFIUSU

BOSTON 1890 -1918

BY V.A. DIGANGI



Don Francesco-Calogero DiGangi with his wife Serafina Abbate in Boston @ 1902.

They came by the tens of thousands, Italian immigrants escaping the *miseria* (poverty and misery) of Southern Italy at the turn of the 20th century. The flow began around 1880 and reached a peak at Ellis Island in New York and at Castle Island in Boston around 1910.

Among the many thousands seeking a better life came a few who already had a good life in Italy but were seeking adventure or an opportunity to make more money. And then there were those who were leaving for personal reasons, sometimes sad and often times tragic. Such was the case of Calogero DiGangi born in 1872 in Villa Nociazzi, the former convent situated above the village of Nociazzi about 4,000 feet up on the southern slope of Mount Salvatore in the Madonie Mountains, the birthplace of *mafia*.

The convent was 'taken' at auction in 1860 by Calogero's father, Don Alfonzo

DiGangi, who "made his own price" when no one else showed up at the auction to bid against him. This was not an uncommon injustice that took place in Sicily during Italy's attempt to redistribute church lands to the peasants through the auction process. It was just one of many misfires in applying Italian laws to the Sicilians after the *Risorgimento* (Uprising) and the unification of Italy which now included the islands of Sicily and Sardinia.

The brutal hardships of life borne by the peasants of Sicily under the rule of the baron nobility caused the evolution of a breed of men so unique and so special that the outside world to this day has yet to understand their mentality and way of life. On the island of Sicily they are referred to as *uomini d'onori* (Men of Honor) or *uomini di rispetto* (Men of Respect). Don Alfonzo DiGangi was such a man.

Don Alfonzo, born in 1826, was one of

twenty-four children (eight with each of three wives) of Don Giuseppe "Malerba" DiGangi of Petralia Sottana, of which Nociazzi was just a tiny village of about 300 inhabitants. *Malerba* in Italian means 'the bad grass' or 'weed' that spreads through the soil. In this case, it was used to describe a man whose power spread through the middle area of the Madonie Mountains: west as far as Caltavuturo, including Polizzi Generosa; north to Castelbuono; east to Geraci Siculo and Gangi, including Petralia Sottana and Petralia Soprana; and south to Resuttano and Alimena, a radius of about 15 miles from Nociazzi. This power caused noble families of this Madonie region to retain Don Giuseppe as a *gabelloto* to administer their *feudi* (feudal estates) and provide protection for each baron's family and lands. The don's brothers, sons, nephews, cousins, and *compari* were part of a small army of extended family that spread across the mountains and valleys to do his bidding. Family members acted as *campieri* (armed guards) who preferred to ride on white horses with their shotguns strapped across their backs as they patrolled the estates of the barons. In the winter, they wore dark blue capes with a hood that went over the head and extended down to the knees, a foreboding mountain visage.

Sometime before his passing, Don Giuseppe had anointed his son Alfonzo *capo della famiglia* (head of the extended DiGangi family). Don Alfonzo was not the oldest son but must have demonstrated to his father and to the rest of the family his intellect, bravery, cunning, and leadership abilities long before the death of his father, "Malerba."

Don Alfonzo ruled his domain for over 60 years until his death in 1921 at the age of 95. Like his father, he was a *gabelloto*. He administered the large *feudi* of the barons while they frolicked in Palermo and Paris. It was also his responsibility to protect them and their families from the *brig-*

anti (highwaymen/robbers) who plied their trade throughout the rural mountain roads of the island.

During this period, Don Alfonzo was among the most powerful Men of Honor on the island of Sicily. In his part of the Madonie he was the final arbiter of justice, a position the barons eventually and reluctantly recognized. Unwittingly, the nobility by retaining them had helped create a new strata of men who in fact became the true rulers of Sicily. Nothing happened without their approval. Although not an organized group, the Men of Honor usually knew one another and frequently exchanged information and assisted one another in controlling the thievery of the *briganti*. Their justice was swift and final: death.

With his wife, Vincenza Troina, who died in 1905, Don Alfonzo enjoyed a family of five boys and five girls, most of whom remained in Villa Nociazzi, or Nociazzi Superiore as it later became known, even after they were married and had families of their own. The former Catholic convent was about 200 feet long, made up of two two-story stone structures with hand-hewn wooden beams used to support the roof. A ten-foot wide walkway separated the two buildings each of which was approximately thirty feet wide and probably dated back to the Middle Ages. Their skeletal remains stood abandoned through the 1980s as a reminder of the regal life of its former owner.

The island of Sicily and its harsh way of life produced Don Alfonzo and other men like him. Exactly who and what were these legendary Men of Honor? And what does their way of life mean and denote vis-a-vis the island of Sicily?

Men of Honor are *mafiosi*. A Man of Honor is a *mafiusu*. He acts in a *mafiusu* manner. This means that he acts according to a specific code of behavior; a code of behavior with definite ideas of right and wrong. Ideas passed down for generations; concepts of life that apply the golden rule of "Do unto others..."

There is a trinity of *mafia* behavior: honor, respect, and family. A Man of Honor must always act in an honorable manner; to do otherwise is to dishonor his family and discredit them in the eyes of the community. He must adhere to the age-old principles of correct behavior common to his family; he



Sicilian don Alfonzo DiGangi with wife, three daughters, and two youngest sons, Antonio (rear right) and Giuseppe (front left) — all Men of Honor. (circa 1900)

cannot deviate. It is required of him to set the standard for correct behavior in the community and he must enforce it. Agreements are honored at all costs. A Man of Honor does not require the ordinary laws needed to guide ordinary men because his code is far more demanding and less forgiving. His code of behavior should act as an example for the law.

A Man of Honor must respect everyone. Regardless of social position - doctor, lawyer, peasant farmer, or cobbler - all deserve equal respect. And respect must be demanded in return. A person's wealth does not determine respect; a person's correct behavior creates respect. Sometimes Men of Honor are referred to as Men of Respect.

The third part of the *mafia* trinity is family. It is the center of everything. A Man of Honor must be faithful to the family legacy. The family unit must be respected; this includes the extended family. Family women are placed on a pedestal. A Man of Honor should love his family and generate love within the family. And he must be willing to defend his family even at the cost of his own life. One must never embarrass one's *mafia* family. Its prestige and power are sacred. If a *mafiusu* man abides by the trinity of *mafia* and carries himself in the proper manner, he will be a respected man. This is true *mafia*.

The word *mafia* can also be used to

describe something beautiful: "That proud, prancing Arabian stallion carries himself in a *mafiusu* way." Or to describe a beautiful woman of strong character with a fiery personality: "Be careful with Maria, she is *mafiusu*."

To use the word *mafia* to describe criminals or a criminal organization such as the Irish Mafia, Colombian Mafia, or Jewish Mafia is not only incorrect but it betrays the original meaning which is to describe something positive or someone to be admired, male or female. In addition, it does a disservice to the men of *mafia*, and to the women of *mafia*, who adhere to a wonderful tradition and a strict code of behavior based on honor, respect, and love of family --the holy trinity of *mafia*.

Calogero DiGangi, already a Man of Honor, arrived in America in 1892 according to the U.S. Census of 1910. His Sicilian nephews in Nociazzi say he left the village for the United States when he was eighteen years old in 1890; a two-year discrepancy. An American grandchild was told that his point of entry into this country could not be determined.

Calogero left his privileged life in Nociazzi because it would not be possible for him to marry the girl he loved who lived in the even smaller hamlet of Catalani that sits just below Nociazzi on Mt. Salvatore. Her background did not include his tradi-

tion and her family was very poor. Don Alfonzo would never give his blessing to this union. Before love and passion could possibly cause embarrassment for his father, Calogero departed for America along with his cousin Giuseppe DiGangi and his future brother-in-law, Giuseppe Abbate. Later he would send Abbate back to Sicily to escort his sister, Serafina, back to Boston. Calogero and Serafina, his second choice, would marry on February 25, 1900, in Boston, Massachusetts.

Francesco-Calogero, as he was called in Nociazzi to differentiate him from his oldest brother, Giuseppe-Calogero, became Francesco or Don Francesco to his *paesani* from Nociazzi who came over to Boston after he was settled here. Francesco found employment as a laborer with one of the largest construction companies of that period - Holbrook, Cabot, and Rollins. The company built Storrow Drive, the MBTA train viaduct to Lechmere Station, The South Boston Dry Dock, and other projects of that magnitude and scope. Eventually, Francesco was put in charge of all the laborers, a large group of tough men. This was a delicate job because the workforce was made up of Irish, Polish, Blacks, and Italians, all of whom looked down on the Sicilians. Frank, as his bosses now called him, did the job.

Soon more *paesani* from Nociazzi immigrated to Boston; of course, Francesco gave each of them a job working for him. He protected them from the other sometimes resentful workers. He provided food and shelter until his *paesani* could find a permanent residence. When the company worked on a project far from Boston, Francesco provided everything for his Sicilian workers. In time, he had a crew of 15 to 20 men from his *paese*, Nociazzi; he was their leader, on and off the job. This was a cohesive group of men who, if necessary, would risk their lives for one another in the tradition of *mafia*.

Francesco, like his father in Sicily and his grandfather before him, was responsible for the well-being of all of his *paesani* and relatives: his Family. He guided their lives gently but firmly. He kept them together, assured their livelihood and their safety, and resolved their differences and their disputes. In this strange and unfamiliar land, he was their safety net.

Every Sunday morning as noon

approached, all of the men of Nociazzi would gather at the home of Don Francesco, first at 9 Hull Street and later at 195 Salem Street. Large meals were prepared by Signora DiGangi and her daughters; the men would eat all afternoon, drink wine, and play cards. This was their day to relax, to enjoy each other's company, to joke and have fun.

The men worked Monday through Saturday for \$12 per week. Don Francesco earned \$18 per week. As the Sunday get-togethers came to a close, each man, if he could, would leave 25 cents or whatever he could afford with his Don. This was a token of appreciation; it was never demanded or required. It was a normal part of life for these Sicilians. This was *mafia* in its purest form. Both sides giving, both sides receiving. For these men of Sicily, *mafia* was beautiful.

Publisher's statement:

I have decided to commit this legacy to the written word in order to dispell the erroneous connotation of the word *mafia* which has been disseminated for decades by the American and international media in newspapers, magazines, radio, and especially on television in many documentaries and movies.

Keep in mind that *mafia* is a beautiful tradition; a way of life, a way of thinking—*mafia* has nothing to do with crime. More importantly, *mafia* is not la Cosa Nostra. La Cosa Nostra is a secret society of men of Italian extraction who network among themselves for economic gain. Mafia, with a capital M, has been used interchangeably with La Cosa Nostra or to denote La Cosa Nostra. This is a misuse of the word *mafia*.

For most of the readers of this article, the information contained herein is surprisingly new and, therefore, difficult to digest, assimilate, and accept on first contact. To assist in this clarification, keep in mind: A Man of Honor or *mafiusu* may become a member of La Cosa Nostra, but not every member of La Cosa Nostra is *mafiusu*. ■



Don Alfonzo DiGangi in customary suit and vest attire that included boots along with a tassled beret that signified his social rank as Capo. (circa 1890)



Don Francesco-Calogero at his 195 Salem Street residence admiring his two sons as they pose for a photo @ 1915.

