

Emigration to La Merica

Twenty-seven-year-old Giuseppe T **** had come to the *La pիրrera*, a rocky ridge, and highest place overlooking Vallelunga Pratameno. Like most of the *vallelunghesi*, Giuseppe didn't care much for the addition of the appellation, "Pratameno" given to his native town. Though he just a toddler when the name was added, it served as a reminder of the feudal past when the barons of Nortabartolo ruled the region, and the Duke of Pratameno founded Vallelunga. As the Sicilian writer Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa had written in his seminal work of life in Sicily, *Il Gattopardo*: the more things change, the more they stay the same. But now things were truly about to change. The year was 1890.

From time immemorial, Sicily had been conquered and captured, invaded and intruded upon by seemingly every civilization: Greek, Roman, Arab, Phoenician, Spanish, French, and Norman. The list tumbles on from era to epoch to include Teutonic knights and Longobard barons. Sicily was governed by different forms of feudal administrations, under the subjugation of the Norman Kingdom, the Hohenstaufen Kingdom, Angovin, Aragon, Spanish and Bourbon kings, and then somewhat liberated by Napoleon in 1812. Yes, there were still serfs in Sicily in the nineteenth century, and what historians called feudalism took a long time dying out, hanging on even till the 1890s when the *Fasci Siciliani* took place, as a yearning for better living conditions and freedoms took hold in Sicily.

Giuseppe Trabona lived in a time where privileges such as the exclusive rights to water, timber and minerals, and the control of 'common' areas on their fiefs were curtailed by the landowners, including pastures, roads, and rivers. "Feudalism meant that these smallholders [called *coloni*] did not enjoy the broader rights that went with being a feudal freeholder (count, baron, etc.). For example, while a man might own some land on a fief, he could not drill a well or mine sulphur without the feudatory's permission. He could not hold a fair or breed certain livestock without the lord's license. He might own part of a forest, but the right to hunt the deer, boar and wild cats that dwelled there belonged exclusively to the lord; even cutting down a tree might be permitted only with the lord's consent. The smallholder might raise certain crops, but only the lord could issue him a permit to sell these. In any event, the lord might forbid the destruction of olive and almond trees" as well as milling rights, olive pressing rights and local fishing rights."¹ This limitation of the liberties had been the way of life for the T**** family for many centuries, although there is strong evidence that in the 1600s, the T**** family had been important notaries in the Sicilian capital of Palermo. But at the time Giuseppe prepared to leave Vallelunga, he and his family were *contadini*, or peasant farmers.

On the back of an *asinello*, no one really paid attention to the young man dressed like his *paesani*: yellow trousers, light blue vest over a white shirt with ample sleeves. A long, red stocking cap topped off his attire. Vallelunga, meaning 'long valley' was a town of a little more than 6000 inhabitants.² It straddled a 1200-foot high plateau surrounded by the Madonie Mountains. Nearby (and often rival) villages were: Villalbo, also in the province of Caltanissetta, Cammarata in the province of Agrigento, and Valledolmo, Castronovo di Sicilia, Polizzi Generosa, Sclafani Bagni, all in the province of Palermo. From his vantage point, Giuseppe could see Vallelunga's beautiful piazza and its neo-gothic church, built in 1634 with its glistening, pink facade.

The outlook had been a favorite place since he was a boy. But that was a lifetime ago. Had he ever really been a boy? A few short weeks before his fifteenth birthday, his father, Rosario had died, leaving him head of the household. He was born during the early years of the Unification of Italy, a radical event that continued through 1870 when Giuseppe was seven. He had been born at a time when Sicily had helped overthrow one feudal master for another, in Count Cavour's and General Garibaldi's quest to unify politically, by force, if necessary, the geographical expression known as Italy. Those historical events were the outer-etching of his life. Giuseppe had long been a man, doing a man's work.

¹<http://www.bestofsicily.com/mag/art341.htm>

²The Vallelunga number of inhabitants went from 6,107 in 1881 to 5,494 in 1901. From 1889 up to 1912 the emigrates were 3,831 on a total population of 5,494 (taken from the 1901 census). On an average every year 60 people left, but about ten came back. Usually one half of them reached the Americas (meaning either North or South America). Today (2016) the population is about 3400.