



Her name was Angelina Pignone (nee Gianvito) and she was truly bigger than life. Angelina was imposing physically. She weighed about 250 pounds and most people thought she was close to 6 feet tall, but, in truth, she was only about 5'5". I think people were fooled by her penetrating blue eyes and her booming voice, always full of laughter and ready with a smile for one and all. She drove a big Chrysler, walked with a cane, and when she was working in the fields usually wore a big straw hat and the type of sunglasses that state troopers wear. Angelina had the biggest bosom in the entire universe. All the kids said so. She usually folded her arms and slept on her bosom after a long day, especially if she had been drinking some of the homemade wine she and her husband made annually, or if she had enjoyed a cold Simon Pure beer, which she liked almost as much. To say that she was flamboyant, colorful, fun-loving, and at times, profane, is accurate.

At the beginning of each picking season, Angelina began her recruitment activity. She used lists of workers from previous years who often suggested others to join the parade to North Collins. At the beginning of harvest season, Angelina arranged for a truck or two to pick up day workers for the Goldsmith and Litz Farms. She often acted as a human alarm clock when folks overslept, going to their homes and rousting them out of bed so they could get on the truck before it left. She always said that the older workers were more dependable than the kids, all of whom picked beans or berries, often under the blazing sun or the torrential rains. The older workers were the tortoises that beat the young hares! They were steady, dependable workers who didn't complain, said Angelina.

Angie, as most people called her, was generous to a fault and a sucker for a sad tale. Once a recently widowed woman and her five young children, were being evicted from their West Side tenement. The woman was beside herself with fear and trepidation. She was a recent immigrant from Italy and could not speak enough English to move anywhere but within the Italian enclave in "The Hooks." However, she had no money to move or for food and some said she was considering taking her children to Niagara Falls and jumping. When Angie heard about this, she offered the woman a life-saving deal. Angie arranged for this lady and her children to live in one of the shacks on the farm for two months and made sure that the woman and her family had food to eat. The older children could work in the fields with their

mother, while the younger ones would go to a daycare center nearby the farm, where Angie drove them every day and paid the \$.25 fee for each (and that included lunch).

This woman's attitude and outlook changed dramatically. She received love and assistance from many of the other Italian and Sicilian workers, who helped her with food and actually credited her with a small amount of the farm work they performed so she would have a little something more for her children. Angelina's act of kindness spurred many other people to emulate her. It must have been a beautiful thing to observe this transformation as the woman realized some joy in her life at her most difficult time.

Years later, the woman said that this was the summer that saved her life and spirit. It turned out to be one she would never forget. Through the years the family worked on the farms with Angie, and the woman's children grew and became more and more successful so that one day they were able to stop going to the farm in the summer and care for their mother. Wonderfully, happily this family never forgot Angie and her kindnesses to them in their time of need. They tried their best to continue to show love, gratitude and respect for Angie as she got older. When Angie passed away, the woman and every single one of her children, grandchildren and their spouses arrived at Angie's wake each night, dressed in their finest clothes, reminiscing about Angie with old friends and, oh yes, they were also at her funeral mass as well.

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Angie intervened with many mothers and fathers (mostly new arrivals from Italy) who did not want their daughters going out on dates, as was the American way. They thought it was disrespectful and dangerous. They wanted to pursue the old customs where the boy came to meet the family who would then decide whether the two love birds were actually a match. The fact is that many of the girls and boys who met on the farms would marry and most of those marriages worked out very well.

Angelina often drove the farm workers to medical appointments and church when they were too old or too sick to get there any other way. The most vivid memory most people have of her is playing the concertina or the hand-carved castanets made by her father and grandfather in Italy, around the fire after a long day in the fields. It was a scene to behold. The adults and the teenagers often got up to accompany her by singing an old Italian song or two, out of tune as it might be.

Angelina married a wonderful man, Carmine Pignone, who was quite a bit older than she was. She was, in fact, his third wife and he went back to Italy to bring her to



Angelina., Grace, Carmine and young Joe Pignone

America. His first two wives died tragically young, leaving small children who needed care. His first wife, Serafina, who had come with him from Italy with their eldest three children, died of a stroke and some said of loneliness and home sickness, yearning for the old country. She was only 42 at the time of her death. Carmine had to place his two youngest children in St. Mary's orphanage on the corner of Elmwood and Edward Streets, across the street from Immaculate Conception Church. It broke his heart

to do this, but they were too young to be left alone and there was no one to care for them. Maria Grazia was three years old and Joseph was only 11 months old. After about two years, he married Rose. Wife number two, who was a wonderful woman who had been widowed. She also died young as a result of a tragic accident. Carmine was a strong man, but this was almost too much for him. Finally he composed himself and decided he must marry again, for the sake of the children. At least now they were old enough to be left home long enough to allow him to return to Italy by ship and bring back a new wife.

He made all the inquiries and found there was a very nice young woman,

Angelina Gianvito, who lived in the town of Paduli, near the village of Apice where he had lived. Both towns were in the extremely poor province of Campagna. When Carmine returned with Angelina, he knew that he had met and married an extraordinary woman of courage and conviction, not to mention as strong as an ox. Angelina raised his younger children with complete love and concern as if they were her own. She worked along side him and as he got older, in place of

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him, not only in the workforce, but handling the chores around the house.

Although Angelina attended English classes taught by Rose Croglia at P S #3 a few days a week she never did learn to read, write or speak English. In addition, her grandson had the job of doing his best to teach her those skills for which he was paid \$1 a week. He didn't like doing it and was a lousy tutor. But Angelina loved him so much she let him drive her big cars as he grew into his teenage years when no one else ever had that privilege. He later became her chauffeur. He learned, though her English was limited, she was one of the shrewdest and most resource-



Millie Pascal Pignone, Angelina Pignone, unknown

Grace Pignone Martoche, Maria Pignone Muscariel

ful people he had ever met. Angelina was a whiz, an Einstein with numbers. No one could pull one over on her when it came to bartering or bargaining; and if they tried, they would rue the day! It was she whom the grandson went to when he needed money for something his parents wouldn't provide. It was she who staunchly supported him in every disagreement he would have with his family, big or small.

Family and friends still remember her making a party out of the "making of the wine." She supplied not only beer, wine, and pop to those who were helping, but she also put out a spread of meats and cheeses, olives and fresh bread that was to die for. She brought out her famous concertina and played a song or two when people took a break and then she was right back in there helping all the men grind and squeeze the grapes. She

bought old whisky barrels at the Bailey Avenue Market, inspecting them carefully before making each purchase.

Msgr. David M. Gallivan, now the pastor at Holy Cross Church, who, along with Fr. Rick Reina, presided at her funeral mass as young priests and told the story of visiting her. She wore a huge button on her nightgown supporting her beloved grandson who was running for office and she wore an even bigger smile on her face. It is not an exaggeration to say that Angelina Pignone was a force of nature, a force for good. By the way, if you are wondering how this woman who could not read or write English was able to get her driver's license . . . it's amazing what a good cooked Italian meal and two or three jugs of good homemade wine could get you in those days.



Charles Martoche, Carmine & Angelina Pignone,
Grace Pignone Martoche