

A genealogy treasure trove: Translating an Italian midwife's records gives birth to history in Tampa

By John Barry, Times Staff Writer

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Angelo Lorenzo spread out 62 small notebooks, rubber-banded in packs, untouched for decades, freshly unearthed from a clothes closet. • **Lorenzo** wore white cotton gloves. He flipped the brittle pages with a letter opener. Each one recorded a birth in Tampa. Page one was Maria Ficarotta, born May 10, 1907. • He translated the page — handwritten in Sicilian a century ago by a Tampa midwife. The baby's parents were Antonio and Guiseppina, the midwife wrote in pencil. She was 23, he was 25. They lived on Main Street in West Tampa. • The translator had another 6,733 births to go.

The prolific midwife had birthed up to six babies a day from 1907 to 1939. On each page, she documented who the parents were, where they came from, how many other children they had, where they lived and how they earned their living.

As **Lorenzo** translated, the history of immigration and assimilation in Tampa — the first enclaves, the first meager jobs, then the intermarriages and new jobs and bigger homes — unfolded before him. He could almost hear the cry of a newborn Tampa.

Lorenzo and three helpers took two years to translate all 6,734 births, only finishing in the spring. **Lorenzo** was uniquely qualified. He had worked for Social Security in Tampa for 35 years. One of his jobs was translating Italian birth records.

He got to know the midwife by her notations. Her name was Maria Messina Greco. She began birthing Tampa babies when she was 25, fresh off a boat from Santo Stefano Quisquina, Sicily. She wrote mostly in pencil. She spelled English names in phonetic Italian. She spelled Chestnut Street *Cesinut* and Highland Avenue *Ailand*.

Her notebooks told **Lorenzo** something about each mother she assisted. One had 18 babies. Only nine lived. She helped mothers who were Spanish, Italian, German, Albanian and Greek. She helped some mothers who were widowed.

Her youngest mother was 14, her oldest was 48.

Her youngest father was 17, her oldest was 76.

One baby's name she recorded was Myrna Loy Modesto. Another was Franklin Roosevelt Lopez. Some had no names. Some were marked *nato morto* — born dead. Some were marked *aborto*.

The midwife charged as little as \$1, as much as \$25. She once took an IOU for \$7 and eight chickens.

Lorenzo got to the notebook for 1927. He reached Oct. 15. A girl was born that day.

He stopped. He stared at the name. He never expected to find this. He pictured the moment, 82 years ago. He framed an image of a baby girl, sucking in her first breath.

His mother.

Records at Ellis Island show Maria Messina arrived on Nov. 30, 1906. She was escorted from Sicily by Luigi Greco, a tobacconist from Tampa with a 20-year-old bachelor son. Some people believe Luigi saw dollar signs. Maria was not some peasant girl. Her family sent her to the University of Palermo for a degree in midwifery. She was said to have delivered as many as 2,000 babies before she came to the United States.

In two months, she was married to Luigi's son, Salvatore.

By 1908, she was birthing a population boom — 212 babies that year, 238 the next — the numbers steadily climbing to a peak year in 1915 — 417. One day she birthed six. Another day she birthed four.

She wasn't Tampa's only midwife. Translator **Lorenzo** found 18 more. Her main rival was Giuseppina Valenti, who also learned midwifery at the University of Palermo, had her own examination room, toted a rifle on her rounds, and once birthed the baby of a Gypsy princess. Valenti worked in Tampa from 1921 to 1948. **Lorenzo** believes Valenti may even have delivered more babies than Greco, but her records have been lost. In growing Tampa, there was plenty of work to go around. "Both were big stars," said Valenti's daughter, Stella Flynn. "They were the two who had reputation."

Maria Messina Greco had her own baby in 1913, a girl she named Delia. She had no more children.

Lorenzo loved a good mystery. He found all kinds of mysteries in the notebooks. In Sicilian, *aborto* has two meanings — miscarriage and abortion. Which did she mean? Was Delia Maria's own baby, or a foundling she took in?

But the greatest mystery he discovered about Maria Messina Greco was not all the lives she started, but the end of her own.

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The notebooks lay in a box in a Largo clothes closet until a few years ago. They had been passed to Maria's cousin-in-law. At one point, the cousin had allowed the Mormon church to copy them on microfilm. The microfilm was sent to the Mormons' Family History Center in Odessa. The notebooks went back in the closet.

Sometime later, amateur Tampa genealogist Dan Perez discovered the microfilm at the Family History Center. He was amazed. He sent a letter to the cousin. The cousin invited him to the house.

The cousin was 94. He didn't want to see the books go to waste. He gave them to Perez.

Perez tried to translate them. He wasn't fluent in Sicilian. Most entries were in smudged pencil. Some markings had bled through the pages. He tried for five months to translate them. It was more than he could handle.

So they passed hands again. Marilyn Figueredo, publisher of Tampa's *Cigar City* magazine, heard about his problem and offered to find translators. Perez gave her the notebooks. Shortly after, Figueredo died. Her magazine partner, Vienna Fuente, inherited them.

Fuente thumbed through the notebooks and discovered the name LoCicero — her own great-grandmother.

At a Sicilian language seminar, she ran into just the right person to help with translations — her brother's best friend, **Angelo Lorenzo**. He got two others to help — Vincent Collura and Jeannette Tamborello — whose grandmother had been a patient of the midwife.

They recruited a fourth — Rosemarie Chambers — to help sort the data onto a spreadsheet. Chambers found two grandparents in the notebooks.

They translated for two years.

They found more mysteries.

Tamborello discovered her grandmother had given birth to a boy she named Carlo. She never heard of him. The Tamborellos had never talked about an Uncle Carlo.

She got goose bumps.

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The translators wanted to know about Maria Messina Greco. They knew her husband had worked in a cigar factory, then later sold insurance. They knew she had a maid. They knew she made more money than most women and many men in Tampa.

Chambers documented her birth in Sicily. Tamborello found the record of her death in Redington Beach.

It was the final mystery.

One day in 1958, 18 years after delivering her last baby, Maria Messina Greco wrote a goodbye letter to her daughter. She then filled her apron pockets with rocks and crossed to the beach. The woman who brought thousands of Tampa babies into the world walked into the waves.

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