Our Ocean Backyard

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The Italian Community and the War in Santa Cruz

About 95% of us in Santa Cruz today were either not living here during the World War II years, or more likely, weren’t born yet. Following my last two columns, I received a number of emails from some of the other 5% who lived here during the war, regarding their families and what life was like during those times. Much of the city was appropriated for the war effort. An infantry group stayed at Grant Elementary School, the Casa Del Rey Hotel was a Navy convalescent hospital, and the 963rd Amphibious Brigade stayed at De Laveaga Park and trained at the Boardwalk’s plunge.

I was recently given a book (*La Nostra Costa – Our Coast*) by a friend and life-long Santa Cruz resident, Marvin Del Chiaro, which was written by one of his close friends, Ivano Franco Comelli. Ivano’s parents, Bronco and Valentina migrated to Santa Cruz from the Friuli region of Italy. Bronco’s real name was Gervasio, but after arriving here from Italy he was given a nickname as co-workers here had trouble pronouncing his real name. Bronco arrived in 1923, and after a long-distance courtship, Valentina and Bronco were married and she arrived in 1933. *La Nostra Costa* is a personal account of Ivano’s family’s life on the north coast of Santa Cruz County in the 60 years between 1923 and 1983.

Ivano, his brother, mother, and father lived for many years on what was known as the Gulch Ranch, about three miles north of Santa Cruz, about the location of Dimeo Lane that goes up to the city’s sanitary landfill. Bronco worked the sprout fields and Valentina, in addition to keeping the family and household fed and clean, typically worked in the barns where the sprouts were sorted, cleaned and packed.

Being immigrants from Italy without yet having received U.S. citizenship – and with Italy being allied with the Axis powers of Germany and Japan – Bronco and Valentina were declared to be enemy aliens, as were many other Italians and Japanese residents. As a result, they were restricted from being on the western or coastal side of Highway 1. The U.S. government had fears of enemy aliens getting too close to the Pacific Ocean and signaling to hostile ships off the coast or perhaps helping enemy soldiers land on the shore. The areas west of the Coast Road and Highway 1 from Laguna Creek in Santa Cruz County to the Carmel River in Monterey County were to be cleared of all enemy aliens by February 24,1942. Italian immigrants who were in the process of becoming citizens could not go to the county courthouse to get their citizenship papers, or even downtown, as this was part of the restricted area. Life was very different for them.

Part of the restrictions forbid enemy aliens (including Bronco and Valentina) from traveling beyond a five-mile radius of their homes without a travel permit, and also from possessing any guns, short-wave radios, cameras or “signaling devices”, including flashlights. All of those designated as enemy aliens were also confined to their homes between 8:00 in the evening until 6:00 in the morning.

After being classified as an enemy alien, Bronco could not work anywhere west of the Coast Road. Because this is where most of the Gulch Ranch sprout fields were located, Bronco had little to do, so with some luck, was able to find work at the Salz Tannery on River Street. He was happy to have found work, but Ivano remembers his father coming home from the tannery smelling of all of the tannery chemicals, and Valentina making him take all of his clothes off outside before gaining entry. Fortunately, the restrictions against Italians were lifted on October 12, 1942, and in 1943, when Italy surrendered and became an American ally, Bronco and Valentina were accepted as friendly aliens.

Ivano and his brother, Giovanni, have memories of the U.S. military using the Coast Road during the war years and seeing long rows of tanks and other military vehicles heading north from time to time. As the tanks rumbled and clanked past their house on the Gulch Ranch, they could see soldiers, with their helmets, standing in their turrets looking out into the darkness ahead. Ivano also recalls once seeing cavalry troops, including horses, heading up the highway.

The military had built a number of small sheds out on the coastal bluffs of the north coast as lookout stations. Every evening at dusk, Ivano and Giovanni would watch through their windows as a U.S. Coast Guard truck pulled up, and two sailors and one German Shepard dog would emerge from the vehicle. With their uniforms, rifles and pistols, they would walk down the dirt farm road towards the ocean, where they took up positions in the small shed, watching through the night for any signs of the enemy.

Like all Santa Cruz residents, the Comellis had to observe the nightly blackout with blankets over their windows and just a single dim lightbulb inside the house. It was during one of these blackout events, while Bronco was still designated as an enemy alien, that he came very close to being arrested as a spy.

The family raised chickens and rabbits, with the chicken house and rabbit hutches in their back yard on the Gulch Ranch. Bronco had come home from work after dark and the chickens and rabbits weren’t happy at not having been fed yet. Bronco could feed the chickens easily without any light as he just needed to throw a few handfuls of grain into their coop. The rabbits were more difficult to feed as he needed light to find and then open the latches on each of the individual hutches. Bronco had stuck a flashlight under his arm as he needed both hands to accomplish the task. But each time he opened a latch to feed a rabbit the light from his flashlight briefly shot into the dark night sky. It just so happened that the warden who patrolled the coast was passing by the Comelli home at precisely this time, and was certain that he had finally found a spy communicating with the enemy.

Bronco had to do some quick explaining in his broken English, pointing excitedly at the rabbit hutches and what he was trying to do. Fortunately, Ivano’s father didn’t go to jail that night. The warden turned out to be a nice guy and accepted Bronco’s story. He also showed him how to make a dim light by tying a bandana over the lens of the flashlight and suggested that during wartime he feed the animals in the morning.