

## Lafayette Native Angelo Rossi Tells of Life in Reliez Valley

By Jean Follmer



Angelo &amp; Gloria Rossi

Photo Jean Follmer

Angelo Rossi was born in Lafayette in 1920 to Serafino and Mary Rossi. Both were from the Savona Province of Liguria, Italy. At 17, Serafino came to Lafayette to work in Upper Happy Valley. In 1907 the Serafino Rossis moved to Green Valley Road in the Reliez Valley. In 1918, they built a house further down Reliez Valley Road. The youngest of three brothers, Angelo grew up in Reliez Valley and resides there today. Angelo's first house had no running water or electricity. A windmill pumped water to a tank which was connected to a pipe that ran down the hill across the street and brought water to the house.

The Rossi family business was farming. Their crops included pears, peaches, tomatoes and grapes. Ed Rowland gave Serafino the initial seed and kept 50% of the profits. In time, Serafino bought 158 acres in Reliez Valley. Angelo said his father "took his produce to the 2nd & Franklin Market in Oakland by horse drawn carriage." There was no tunnel, so he would take Fish Ranch Road. It was a 5 hour trip and there was a trough on top of the hill where they'd stop to water the horses. The Rossi's eventually bought a truck and Angelo often accompanied his father to market.

Angelo said, "Lafayette pears were full of sugar." Trucks started coming to Lafayette to get them at the current site of Stanley Middle School. "The trucks would pick them up and bring them to the cannery in Gilroy," but they still had to take the peaches to market. They grew strawberry

peaches, now called white peaches. Serafino taught the boys to pick the peaches at a certain firmness. They couldn't squeeze them because their fingerprints would show as brown spots. Angelo said "you can't get a good peach today unless it's from a tree. Now they pick them too green." The brothers walked to school at Lafayette Elementary. Brothers Frank and Serafino went to the old school (now the Lafayette United Methodist Church) and Angelo attended the new (current) school. Angelo was part of the first graduating class of 1941 at Acalanes High School. Prior to that, he attended Diablo Valley High School.

Angelo met his wife, Gloria, at a wedding reception in Lafayette. He asked for her phone number and she obliged by writing it with a match stick on a match book. He put her number in his pocket, but it was lost because his mother washed the shirt the next day. He finally saw Gloria 1 ½ years later at a Frank Sinatra show at Sweets Ballroom in Oakland. She was a senior in high school and he'd just received his draft notice for World War II. They courted for 15 days before he left for the War. As part of the 27th Infantry Division, he was sent to Schofield Barracks in Oahu. He received a Bronze Star for bravery and 2 Purple Hearts for wounds he sustained in Saipan and Okinawa.

Angelo and Gloria corresponded during his 3 ½ year deployment and were married upon his return. Gloria says "It was meant to be" and they've been married for 62 years. They have a son, Jim, and 2 grandchildren and have lived in the same house 56 years. During his deployment, Angelo's mother was very upset and she refused to make her famous Italian raviolis. Upon his return, she made the raviolis and Angelo wonders if his brothers were happier to see him or to eat the raviolis again!

After his marriage, Angelo worked for his father-in-law in the produce business in San Leandro. Serafino eventually stopped farming and opened Rossi Brothers Furniture Store in Lafayette for his sons. For almost 30 years, they built and refinished furniture. In the 1950s, Serafino gradually started selling the family land to developers. The Rossi home on Reliez Valley Road and a subsequent one on Hilltop are still occupied, though no longer by the Rossi family. Nearby, you'll find Angelo and Rossi streets.