

## BUSH'S CONFECTIONERY AND AN IMMIGRANT ITALIAN FAMILY

By W. M. Baillie

As happens often, a donor's gift to the Society has brought with it a bucket of questions and led down unsuspected paths. We recently received by mail from California, unannounced, a box of more than 300 photos—most of them of unidentified people and places. The photos, after investigation, have much to say about a variety of topics: a favorite Bloomsburg confectionery, an early aerial photo service, a loyal pet dog, the building of the Bloomsburg and Sullivan Railroad, and the story of Italian immigration to America.



*Odd Fellow Headquarters, Lodge Hall.*  
*Bush's Confectionery (112 E. Main St.) at the left, under the awning; bunting is for an Odd Fellows convention*

For four decades beginning in the gay 90's, **Bush's Quality Shop** in Bloomsburg was "the place" for candy and ice cream. Downtown workers on lunch breaks, high-schoolers after classes let out, and evening strollers all gathered at Bush's shop for tasty delights. The proprietors were married couple John and Mary Bush (born Giovanni Bucci and Maria Cesira Malfaiera, both in Italy). John came to the ice cream business after work in quite a different line—building railroads.

While most Italian immigrants were peasant farmers unable to scrape a decent living from thin south-Italy soil, Giovanni Bucci was from a well-to-do family (his father held various official posts in Abruzzi), and he had three years of college. When he landed in New York City in 1874, he immediately was hired in a supervisory position on the West Shore Railroad along the Hudson River in New York.

After seven years, John Bush, as he had become known, and his brother Nicola won a contract to build part of the Beech Creek Railroad running out of Lock Haven in Clinton County, PA. When that contract ended, in 1886 he moved to Bloomsburg, where he and brothers Nicola and

Saverio were contracted to build the Bloomsburg and Sullivan Railroad from the Fifth Street station up along Fishing Creek to Jamison City.

Supervising the “B&S” construction embroiled the Bush brothers in the heated conflicts of the era between low-paid Italian immigrant workers and native-born laborers eager for steady work. On August 3, 1886 forty-nine Italian laborers arrived in Bloomsburg and were housed in four hastily-built shanties near the Light Street paper mill. They set to work the next day grading the roadbed, toiling six days a week from dawn to dusk.

These workers, through no fault of their own, got involved in a nasty anti-immigrant dispute. Philadelphian Colonel John Jameson, a member of the syndicate which supplied the money for the railroad, had arranged for the hard-working Italian laborers to come as a group from their previous jobs at Audenried, PA. The railroad Superintendent, however, Bloomsburg merchant F. M. Leader, had recruited a group of local farmers who wanted jobs with the railroad. In a letter of 27 March 1888, Leader alleged that there was ill feeling the previous year between Leader’s men and the Italian immigrants, and there was constant fear of one party injuring the other.



*John and Mary Bush*

In the end, the two groups managed to work side-by-side and complete the track-laying without major incident. By July 4<sup>th</sup> of 1887 track was completed to Orangeville, and excursion trains ran on that holiday from Bloomsburg along the new track. On September 30<sup>th</sup> the first train left Benton with forty passengers. The road was completed to Jamison City in November of 1888. (The plan for an extension up onto North Mountain beyond La Porte was abandoned for lack of money.)

When work on the railroad was completed, John Bush moved to booming Jamison City, bought a two-acre lot, and built a two-story house, attached saloon 20’ x 30’, two out-kitchens, a warehouse, and a 24’ x 106’ fish pond. The business was successful, but in 1894 he sold his property and moved back to Bloomsburg.

For a decade or more he worked at the silk mill of fellow Italian immigrant Joseph Ratti, but on the side he and his family opened a confectionery. At first they operated from a trailer along East Fifth Street, then from a frame house there, then for some years in the Exchange Block on Main Street west of Center Street. Finally, in 1919 he purchased the building at 112 East Main, moved the confectionery into a long, narrow space on the street floor, and moved his family into an apartment above the store. Due to the popularity of the confectionery, John Bush was one of Bloomsburg’s best-known figures when he died on 25 August 1928 at age 73.

His marriage and children’s births reflected his work odyssey. He married Maria Cesira Malfiera on 23 December 1883 at Howard, Centre County, and their first two children, Pietro

and Matilda, were born at Beech Creek in Clinton County in 1884 and 1886. The next child, a girl named Artemisia, was born at Bloomsburg on 3 October 1888; then another Matilda (the first had died at age 3) was born at Jamison City on 26 September 1890, and the last child, Nazzareno Giovanni, at Bloomsburg on 17 March 1892.

Maria (Mary) Malfaiera, whom John apparently met while working at Beech Creek, was born in the city of Fabriano in the province of Ancona, Italy. Her father was a famous railroad engineer and tunnel builder, having driven some of the prime tunnels of the Italian state railroad. Her mother, Artemisia Bartocci, was the daughter of the superintendent of a large tannery at Fabriano. How Maria came to central Pennsylvania is unknown.

John and Mary's family represent a common American immigrant story of hard work leading to acceptance and economic success. Their first two children died young, but the other three were graduates of Bloomsburg State Normal School. Daughters Matilda and Artemisia became school teachers in New Jersey cities. Youngest son Reno's story is somewhat more dramatic.

Nazzareno "Reno" Bucci was named for his mother's father, the Fabriano railroad tunneller. At just age fourteen, he achieved some fame in the Bloomsburg area—or rather, his dog did. The Mount Carmel *Daily News* featured the story on 5 January 1906:

#### CANINE DEVOTION SEEN AT HOSPITAL

Visitors at the Joseph Ratti hospital at Bloomsburg the last few days have all noticed a bushy shepherd dog with bangs persistently about the place. An interesting story of devotion on the part of a brute animal for his master is connected therewith.

Little Reno Bush, 14-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. John Bush, of East Race Street, Bloomsburg, lies at the hospital recovering from an operation for appendicitis. One of the lad's closest companions was a shepherd dog, "Fido." When the lad was taken to the hospital the dog did not take long in locating him, and every day he goes to the hospital to see his young master. The dog goes home to sleep and eat, but promptly returns to the hospital, where he stays all day, and is so persistent that he has to be admitted. When the dog arrives in the morning he will tap on the front window until someone comes to open the door.



Reno himself, two years later at age 16, was managing a 5- and 10-cent store in Muncy. In World War I he served for two years as an Army Corporal, fighting through many famous battles in France with the 47<sup>th</sup> Infantry: on the Marne, the St. Mihiel drive, the Meuse-Argonne campaign.

After the War he returned to Bloomsburg to become manager of his family's confectionery business. On the side, he developed his fascination with photography into a separate business, **Bush Photo Services**. He opened a

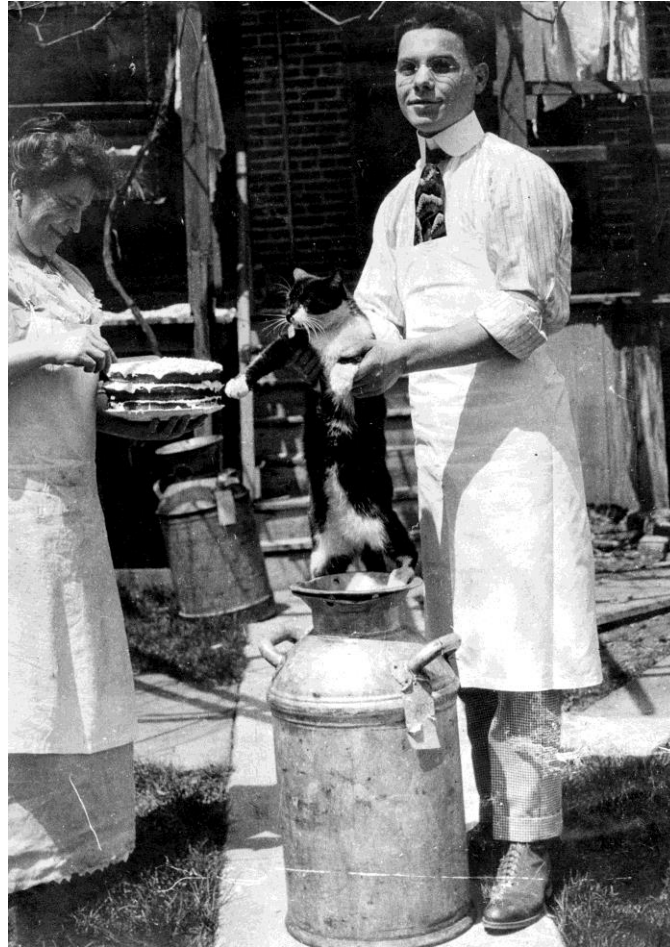


*Reno in uniform, WWI*

photo-supply shop and also took photos for sale. His specialty was aerial photography; he flew over towns from State College to Scranton to New York City, snapping photos for later sale (over fifty of his aerial shots came in the donor's box). It isn't clear whether he learned to fly airplanes himself; various photos in the collection show him standing beside or sitting in the back seat of a single-engine biplane which was based at the then-new Bloomsburg airport.

Unfortunately, Reno died of a heart attack in 1936 at age 43; he had never married. His photo business died with him. The confectionery business continued, however, with his brother Herman as proprietor. When Herman went off to serve in World War II, the shop closed in 1941.

The Bush family and the related White family—originally Bucci and Bianco—were part of the huge immigration wave from Italy to America. Between 1880 and 1924, more than four million Italians came to the United States, most of them to escape grinding rural poverty in southern Italy. Over a thousand of these immigrants settled in Berwick, PA, mainly to work in the car factory that became ACF. Relatively few settled in nearby Bloomsburg, but they too found “the good life.” The page-long Bucci family history in the Beers *Historical and Biographical Annals of Columbia and Montour Counties, Pennsylvania* (1915) concludes by noting that “Mr. and Mrs. [John] Bush are received in the best circles of the town [Bloomsburg].”



*Reno and his mother Mary*