

Norma, Where are You?

By Chris Sanders

Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked? Well, if you're like me, you weren't even born yet. However, your parents or grandparents, if still alive, would surely remember, just as we remember where we were when JFK was assassinated or when 9/11 happened. It's one of those events seared into the brain.

Around six years ago my dad, who was 82 at the time, was going through his, "Wonder what happened to?" phase. He was mentally going through his long list of old friends from "way back when." Knowing how I liked to dabble with genealogy, he would ask me during our phone conversations between Pennsylvania and Virginia, "By the way, can you see if you can find something on.....", and he would give me a name of a long-lost pal from his past. To his delight, I was usually able to dig up and provide him with the information.

On one occasion however, I was unable to help him, to my—and his—disappointment. He provided me with two small pictures, one of which was of a lovely young lady wearing a rather large hat and checkered dress, and flashing a huge wonderful smile. The other, a school picture of the same girl—definitely Italian—with beautiful dark hair and eyes. This was, I was to find out, his "first love," Norma Longo. He then went on to describe the memorable day that he and Miss Longo had walked the two-mile distance from Berwick, Pennsylvania, to St. Mary's Cemetery to visit her dad's grave. I didn't find this to be entirely strange and thought how close they must have been to share this moment together. What I found "strange" (or surprising) however, as I did the math, was that my dad was only 14! Laughingly, I said, "Weren't you a little young to have a girlfriend! But he reminded me he would be 15 in January! (She was to turn 15 in March.) Forgetting this little point, I could picture them standing there in the



quietness of the cemetery, perhaps holding hands, staring at her father's grave on a cold gray December day – December 7, 1941, to be exact. Pearl Harbor Day.

Trekking back to Berwick, he recalled people running up and down the streets yelling "Pearl Harbor has been attacked, Pearl Harbor has been attacked!!!" He and Norma looked at each other and said, "What's Pearl Harbor?" They were soon to find out. Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor, Honolulu, Hawaii, and President Roosevelt had declared war. The lives of our parents and grandparents would be forever altered.

You thought this was the end of the story, didn't you? Oh, no. There's more. I spent months, perhaps a year trying to find information on Miss Longo. I wanted so much to please my dad. Checking the census, I found her dad, Paul, was born in Italy and had a furniture store. Norma had two sisters, Eleanor and Jennifer. Yes, my dad remembered the sisters and said, "they were very nice." A trip to the Berwick library easily provided their pictures in the 1944 year book. Sadly, a review



of the CCH&GS website showed that the dad, Paul, as noted in a newspaper obituary, had committed suicide by hanging in 1939. I was very saddened to hear this and wondered what events had led to this ending. I was to find out a possible reason.

Another trip around town located Norma's home on Monroe Street and the garage behind her dad's furniture store on LaSalle Street where he ended his life. "Find a Grave" provided me with his burial place, where my dad and Norma spent a moment in time. My last stop was to the cemetery. Something was pulling me on. It was easily found. Driving up the dirt road which circled up a small hill, my eyes beheld a vast array of monuments all sizes and shapes, as far as the eye could see! What struck me most however were the names on the stones! It looked as if all "your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" were buried here in this very spot! My jaw dropped! I told my chauffeur (my husband) "OMG. How am I EVER gonna find this stone? Where do I begin?!"

Taking a deep breath, I said, "Just keep going and circle around—I "might get lucky." My eyes perused all the stones, so close together there wasn't an inch of empty space anywhere. More beautiful and exquisite stones I had never seen. "Paul, where ARE YOU?" In a matter of seconds (no lie) my eyes fell on a modest marker in a far off corner labeled, "Paul Longo." I was stunned. Was it really this EASY?!

Reverently, getting out of the car, I walked slowly to the spot—the spot where my dad and Norma quietly stood over 74 years ago. Hallowed ground. What immediately caught my attention was a pot of very old dead flowers perched in front of the stone. Well, that told me someone at least had been there within the last six months or more. Who, I wondered? Norma, perhaps?

Now the big one. The marker showed that Paul Longo, the immigrant from Naples, Italy, had been a medic in WWI. It showed he was a Private in the Medical Department. What horrid sights and sounds had the son of Italy experienced in the "War to End all Wars" while fighting for his adopted country? Did his memories finally catch up with him?

A moment of peace. I tried to picture my dad and Norma standing here. Two young people just beginning their lives. I felt sure I could find Norma for my dad. He only wanted to know "what happened to her."

Being confident I started searching the internet; however, without a married name, I could not come up with anything. I then went to the Bloomsburg University and began checking the microfilm for class reunions, searching for Norma and hopefully a married name—nothing. Come on, Norma. Talk to me! I was sure my psychic abilities would mysteriously find her—no luck. My bubble was beginning to burst, as my dad would ask me periodically, "Find anything on Norma"? She remained silent.

After digging and digging and following false leads, which included a phone call to a couple of New Jersey newspapers (where my dad said some of her family lived), I finally had to admit defeat. My psychic powers weren't working! Sorry, Daddy. Secretly though, Norma never left my mind. Where ARE you, Norma? My dad wants to know. My dad passed away in 2013.

Well, as genealogy would have it, Norma was not through with me yet! While recently visiting the CCH&GS, I casually mentioned to "Dani with the Magic Touch" who has been ever helpful in the past, "I've been trying to find.....I told her the story." She fiddled around for a while and Norma was as elusive as ever. I was hopeful but not surprised. I said, "I guess Norma doesn't want to be found," and left to go home.

No sooner had I walked in the door than my husband said, “You got a call from Dani at the Society.” My heart leaped! Did she.....FIND NORMA???!” I quickly called back. Dani said, “You left five minutes too soon! Yes, I found Norma’s obituary!” Norma was married twice, had had two children, and lived in Des Moines, Iowa, when she passed away in 2011. It was uncanny, as 2009 was the year my dad started questioning Norma’s whereabouts. He always said that when he thought of someone he would either see them, or their obituary. ESP, I believe! The obituary stated that, “Norma was known for her generosity, caring concern, fun-loving ways, friendliness, and humor. She was a strong woman with spirit, who had a smile for everyone.” Perhaps if my dad hadn’t moved to a different school district and in a few years soon gone to war... hmm.



I was glad and sad. Sad that my dad wasn’t alive for me to impart this information to him; but glad that Norma was finally found. Norma with the beautiful smile. Somehow, I think he knows. I just wished I hadn’t given up so soon. Perhaps they could have talked.

Pearl Harbor forever reminds me of the moment in time my dad and Norma stood at her father’s grave while all HELL was breaking loose in the world. I would like to think that Norma too remembered that time and place—and my dad.

As with all genealogy, there’s still more. Being the digger that I am, I am never satisfied until I find out “the rest of the story,” as Paul Harvey, the radio commentator used to say!

Further research on the CCHGS site revealed that Norma’s mother, Mary Zardetto, had her early share of heartache. Her family immigrated from Venetto, Italy in 1913, but her mother, Jennie (Mary named one of her daughters Jennie) died five years later in the 1918 flu epidemic. Mary’s father died in 1926 at the early age of 44. Mary then married her husband Paul three months later at age 18. After Paul took his life in 1939, the 1940 census shows Mary running a confectionary store and raising her three daughters. In 1944 she remarried and lived in Catawissa.

Now that Norma finally decided to speak (thank you), I felt the need to visit her Dad’s grave again—the spot where this story began. It’s October, the sun is bright, but there is a cool breeze in the air as I stand there alone looking at the lonely grave tucked in the corner, getting a better picture in my mind of the events of over 74 years ago. Hard to believe my dad and Norma were at this very spot so isolated and forlorn. All the family is gone now and probably no one knows of or will ever visit this spot again (his obituary stated his parents and brothers and sisters were all in Italy). Norma’s family is scattered across the United States. Paul, an Italian-American soldier, will be forgotten but not by me. I have put flowers on his grave and will be sure to return. It’s a thing I have.

I now have a better concept of why my Dad was so patriotic, why he treasured his old army uniform so much, why he loved John Phillip Sousa (the famous march composer) and his stirring themes, why he was so compassionate towards young and old alike, and why he loved the American flag. Being of the Viet Nam generation, I fully agree.

Perhaps as December 7th approaches, we all need to take a moment to reflect on the freedoms we hold so dear. Once again genealogy has opened a door to our ancestors’ place in history. So do you know where your ancestor was on Pearl Harbor Day?

I silently turned to view the cemetery and was overcome by the number of American flags fluttering over the graves of names such as Petruzzelli, Dellegrotto, Cipriani, Gialanella, Marsciano—immigrants from the Old Country. Soldiers and patriots all. The trees were red and gold, a beautiful backdrop to peaceful rest.

A footnote, I did try to contact Norma's daughter listed in the obituary; however, the number found on the internet was "no longer in service." I will try again to reach her or another family member. Daddy, you kept Norma's pictures in your "Treasure Box" (as he called it) all your life. Now it's time to return them to her loving family. Norma with the laughing smile—you finally spoke!

As I end this article, I have to mention a funny thing that happened. I just received a Halloween card from my cousin who retired from the Navy and lived in Honolulu, advising that he "just moved and live on Hickam Air Force Base right next to Pearl Harbor." Now how strange is that?!