

Biography of Magdalena Elizabeth
Anselmi Huntley

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It was a beautiful and sunny early winter afternoon when I met with Mrs. Lena Huntley. I had known Mrs. Huntley's daughter, Pat LeFaive, for many years, and had met Mrs. Huntley through her. Upon hearing we were required to do an oral history for this class, Mrs. Huntley was the first person I thought of. Having just exchanged a few amenities with her over the years, I had drawn the conclusion that this was one classy lady who definitely had her act together; and even more importantly, someone who would "do" a great interview. She did.

Madeline Elizabeth Anselmi was born into this world in the town of Rock Springs, Wyoming in June, 1907. The house she was born in was in the Italian section and a local midwife, Mrs. Fred Magogna, attended the birth. She was the fourth child, the family already had two sons and a daughter, who died earlier on. Three more children would come along to the Anselmi household as the years passed.

Lena, as she came to be called, never had the opportunity to know her grandparents because they lived in Tyral, Austria (now Italy), where her parents had immigrated from at a very early age. Her father "came over" when he was only eighteen, along with many of the village lads'. They had come to seek their fortune in a new country; the opportunity had presented itself to them in the form of a

big railroad company that needed men to work in its coal mines. That company was the Union Pacific.

Her father had come over and worked in the coal mines in Cambrial and then in Rock Springs. After several months he had gotten a position delivering merchandise in a horse and buggy for the UP stores. His young girlfriend from his homeland had joined him when he sent for her. They were married in Our Lady of Sorrows Cathelic Church in Rock Springs as were subsequent generations.

Lena's fathers store, The Miners Mercantile, was central to many of her childhood memories. Speaking of the depression Mrs. Huntley said ". . . there's so many kids that didn't have as much as we did because during the depression we never knew there was such a thing because my Dad always had the store. What we needed we got at the store." and "A lot of people during the depression were really hard hit and if it wasn't for my Dad allowing the people to charge, they would have been hungry, but he got every bit of that money back. They were all good people at that time. . ."

When we spoke of prohibition Mrs. Huntley let me know of her fathers role in the local families wine making. My Dad brought in carloads (trains), and carloads for the store. And they sold the grapes, not the wine, but sold the grapes."

During Mrs. Huntleys brief career as a clerk in her fathers store she came into contact with some of the local

residents she wouldn't have met in church. "We had them in a building across the street from the Miner's Mercantile. . . . These gals that use to come over were the most polite people your've waited on . They would buy nightgowns and groceries. . . and the gals were really, really nice. And they always tipped you. They were the only people that ever tipped in Rock Springs. Very nice people."

Mrs. Huntleys mother died at the age of 45 and left a young, growing family for her oldest daughter to assume the role of mother to. Mrs. Huntley said of her mother, "My mother didn't talk English very well. And, by the time we were grown we never talked Italian at home, we always talked English. Sometimes we would redicule my mother, and my sister, who was just two years younger than I was. We would kinda laugh if she said something a little different and she remembered, many times she would remind us that she talked better English than we talked Italian. Which was true, which was true. Because my mother never talked English very much. She was just, you know, in her group and all the women were the same." Mrs. Anselmi had traveled a long way to settle in Rock Springs with her new husband. He had provided well for his family. They lived in a six room house, had an indoor bathroom added on before most of their neighbors, bought an automobile, one of the first in Rock Springs. He even managed to send their two oldest sons off to the University of Wyoming for a higher education and this was before 1930. But still Mrs. Anselmi enjoyed her Italian

neighbors, her Catholic church, although often unable to attend regularly, but always for the Holy Days. When the merchant class families were often inconvenienced by the isolation of the coal camp communities they lived in. "But we didn't always have fresh fruit, my mother always made apple pies and apricot pies, but with dried fruit." And the idea that Salt Lake doctors provide better or more specialized care is not a recent development. ". . . and if you doctored about anything you went to Salt Lake. . . because the doctors here, I don't know whether they didn't know what to do for us or what, but my parents were not satisfied."

Fortunately for the Anselmis, they did not have to rely upon making their living directly from the Union Pacific. Lena Huntleys recollection of the UP's influence was not very favorable, "The people that worked for the UP were in that same fix all the time, all their lives. And they never had money but they got what they were allowed from the UP store. They were allowed just so much and that's what they lived on. When I asked Mrs. Huntley if her parents home was ever owned by the UP she answered, "Never. We didn't owe our souls to the UP like most people did." Mrs. Huntley reminisced, as school children. She and her friends would have to leave home to cross the train tracks before the train came through town or it would make them late.

But the UP obviously influenced the town in positive ways, building the Old Timers building which provided a

meeting place, a community social hall. Influences of the UP's coal mines were great, Mrs. Huntley always refers to parts of the town being in #1, 2, 4, 5 or whatever. Meaning the housing areas close to their respective coal mines.

The UP also greatly influenced the entertainment in Mrs. Huntleys teenage and early married years. "We had formal dances, we had big bands and they would come through Rock Springs on kind of like a circuit. They were like Benny Goodman and all read name bands. . . From East to West. . . the railroad being in Rock Springs, this would be their stop."

Miss Lena Anselmi even met a young man who played in a big band whenever he could but was working full time for the highway department. This man would later become her husband and the father of her two children, Jim and Pat. They were married in Our Lady of Sorrow's Church and set up house-keeping in a house behind the Anselmi home. This allowed Lena to continue in her role of nurturer to her young brothers and sisters who had lost their father, at the age of 54, after their mother died. She and the oldest brother, Rudy had taken over the role of parents. Lena in the household, and Rudy taking over at the store. The two managed to nurture and financially care for their sibling until they were grown.

The ethnic divisions in Rock Springs were pretty clear. There was a healthy respect and an obvious enjoyment between the ethnic groups. Mrs. Huntley mentioned, "Rudy didn't

speak a word of English. But when he went to the first grade there were Greek boys and girls, there were Italian boys and girls, there were Finnish people. But anyhow, none of these kids learned to talk English until they went to school. What do you suppose that first grade teacher; how did she ever manage?"

Mrs. Huntley believed there were no class distinctions among the different ethnic groups and gave an example, ". . . this sister . . . she walked to school every day . . . with a little black girl . . . and a little Finn girl . . . and there was my sister in the middle." She spoke of the Chinese and her concerns about falling into an opium den. It seems the citizens of Rock springs enjoyed good customs and traditions even if they weren't a member of the ethnic group that brought it to Sweetwater County. She spoke of everyone enjoying the polka, that was brought here by the Slavish people. Many of the young married couples, especially in the 1930's, enjoyed the Scottish custom of "First Footing" on New Years Eve.

It was obvious that the important elements of Mrs. Huntley's life revolved around her belief in higher education, her love and concern for her family, her dedication, and commitment to her church. She spent many years of her life raising her parents children, then her own. Her involvement with her church has spanned many decades and continues to this day. At present she belongs to three groups at her church. She is still baking cookies

and delivering them, along with good cheer, to the elderly and the home bound.

She was greatly disappointed when she could not go away to college. "I stayed at home. And I didn't get to go to college and I felt bad. Because I wanted to go. But anyway, I didn't get to go away to school because my Dad didn't think that I needed to. My brothers got to go to college, but not I." She didn't feel her father was harsh for not allowing her to go to UW. . . that was just their belief. You know the old timers, thats the foreign people, they don't think that women that is they're supplied with everything in the home, that's where they are supposed to be."

Magdelina Anselmi Huntley has lived in an era of great social and technological advances. She has stayed current. This has great relegious significance!