

Colorado Centenarian

Cento Anni (100 Years) with Sara Palumbo Wilson

by Jenna Peccia

On July 16, 1918, Sara Palumbo Wilson was born to Italian immigrants, Domenico Palumbo and Maria Capone. Both were from San Pietro Avellana, in the region of Molise. Her father, came to America in 1905 and settled in Dawson, New Mexico; and her mother joined him there in 1912. Together, they had nine children: Joseph, Arthur, Michael, Laura, Sara, Josephine, Emily, Lilly, and Angelo, who died at birth. At the time, Dawson was a booming mining town run by the Phelps Dodge Corporation.

Life was simple back then. As Sara recalls, "We had a house with 2 bedrooms, a kitchen, a sitting room, and a cellar...There was no indoor plumbing...During the winter, we would heat bricks or blocks on the stove and put them in the bed at night to keep us warm." Everyone helped out with the household chores such as feeding the chickens and rabbits, tending the garden, doing laundry, and even stomping grapes for Domenico's homemade wine. Once a year, they would make sausage and hang it dry in the girls' bedroom. "They hung on a rope draped across the room and we had to sleep in there like that for a long time," Sara laughs.

Living through the Depression wasn't very difficult for the Palumbo's. Domenico always had a job in Dawson. Nonetheless, it's during the simple times that families are the closest. As a child, she spent a great deal of time outdoors, exploring the hills surrounding the town. When her father had time off, he would play baseball with his kids. Sara also remembers how her father would add an extra sole to their brand new shoes so they would last longer or how they would go into the mountains to collect pinon nuts.

Yet, some of Sara's fondest memories are rooted in her Italian heritage. Like many other immigrants, Sara's parents did their best to assimilate to American culture. Sara remembers her father attending night classes to learn English. He did not allow anyone to speak Italian. "My parents told us that we were Americans and we would speak English. So, though they often spoke to us in Italian, we could only answer in English," she says.

Domenico and Maria didn't talk much about the old country either; however, their Italian spirit remained. Sara's mother often made homemade pasta and meatballs and "*pasta fazool*", which was always delicious, according to Sara.

Around the holidays, her father somehow acquired *baccalà* – difficult to come by, but absolutely necessary for an Italian Christmas. Sara can still remember her father serenading her mother with a passionate rendition of "O Sole Mio."

Above all, she learned the value of family. "Throughout my life, family and friends have gathered for no reason – in the kitchen, for outside barbecues, for Christmas and holidays, for weddings...Family and friends have been there to help with the projects, to come when you call...and be there for each other in times of sorrow, need, or joy."

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Sara returned to Dawson to take care of her father, who was sick with Black Lung Disease. He died shortly thereafter. While in Dawson, Sara reconnected with an old classmate – Frank Wilson. Frank was a first generation Scottish American and WWII veteran. They married on January 11, 1947 and had two children together – Robert and Nancy. In 1950, the Dawson mine closed, prompting them to come back to Denver. "It was hard to leave Dawson," she says. "There will never be another town like it." Dawson was a town of immigrants from all over the world. Those who grew up there didn't trouble themselves about different cultures; that's just how it was. In fact, Sara's daughter Nancy recalls how ethnic groups would adopt the traditions of other ethnic groups. "My dad used to play *Morra* with his Italian coworker. That's how it was in Dawson. It was nothing like the rest of the co

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When Sara was 17, her mother tragically died of pneumonia. After graduating high school, she moved to Denver to find work. Not long after, the United States entered World War II and she got a job at the Remington Arms Munitions Plant loading incendiary powder into bullet casings. During this time, Sara met her first husband, Buck Rodda, a U.S. Marine. They were married five days before Buck shipped overseas and two months later, Sara received a telegram that he had been killed in action.

in Dawson, Sara reconnected with an old classmate – Frank Wilson. Frank was a first generation Scottish American and WWII veteran. They married on January 11, 1947 and had two children together – Robert and Nancy. In 1950, the Dawson mine closed, prompting them to come back to Denver. "It was hard to leave Dawson," she says. "There will never be another town like it." Dawson was a town of immigrants from all over the world. Those who grew up there didn't trouble themselves about different cultures; that's just how it was. In fact, Sara's daughter Nancy recalls how ethnic groups would adopt the traditions of other ethnic groups. "My dad used to play *Morra* with his Italian coworker. That's how it was in Dawson. It was nothing like the rest of the co

When they came back to Denver, they rented Vallejo from Mrs. Smaldone. It wasn't long at home in Arvada off of 55th and Marshall. At that time, there were large stretches of farmland and dirt roads. Sara lives in that home to this day.

Sara celebrated her 100th birthday this year. "I keep up my house, pay my bills, make meals, and work as I still can," she says. Sara only just started attending yoga classes regularly. She's certainly embracing new events, technological advancements, and embracing each passing year accompanied by change, or rather, growth. Whether through her childhood memories or her current life, Sara always finds joy in the closeness of her family.



Left: Sara's parents, Domenico & Maria
Center: (left to right) Sara, Josephine, Maria (mother) holding baby Michael, & Maria
Right: Sara at home, 2018.



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Sara Palumbo Wilson

She was born to Italian immigrants, Domenico and Rosa, from San Pietro Avellana, in the region of Campania in 1905 and settled in Dawson, New Mexico; in 1912. Together, they had nine children: Josephine, Emily, Lilly, and Angelo, who lived in a booming mining town run by the Phelps

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Life was very difficult for the Palumbo’s. Domenico was a miner. Even though it was difficult, it’s during the simple times that families spend a great deal of time outdoors, exploring the area. When her father had time off, he would play baseball and when her father would add an extra sole to their

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When they came back to Denver, they rented a converted garage on 29th and Vallejo from Mrs. Smaldone. It wasn’t long after that they would buy their first home in Arvada off of 55th and Marshall. At the time, Arvada was nothing more than large stretches of farmland and dirt roads. They paid \$38 a month for the home that Sara lives in to this day.

Sara celebrated her 100th birthday this year, on July 16th, and she still does it all. “I keep up my house, pay my bills, make meals, do laundry, and do as much yard work as I still can,” she says. Sara only just stopped driving five years ago and attends yoga classes regularly. She’s certainly lived through it all – major historical events, technological advancements, and breakthroughs in medicine. With each passing year accompanied by change, one thing stayed the same: *famiglia*. Whether through her childhood memories or the new memories created each day, Sara always finds joy in the closeness of her family. ■



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