

First Person: The Story of Philomena Beffa

—Chris Beffa

In January 1848, after gold was discovered on property in the California foothills owned by Swiss-German settler John Sutter, many Asians and Europeans emigrated to California. The California Gold Rush was definitely an incentive to emigrate to northern California, but it was not the only reason the influx continued in the following years. A chance to purchase inexpensive land with rich soil, a long growing season, plentiful water, and a mild climate were also factors in the migration from the agricultural Ticino region in southern Switzerland to California.

Many Italian-speaking Swiss dairy farmers started migrating to California in the 1860s. Most of these Swiss dairy farmers came to settle in the areas around San Francisco, the Coast Ranges, or the Central Valley.

Philomena Beffa was born in the Ticino region of Switzerland on January 27, 1867. She was a young woman when she married her husband Frank. In the 1880s, they left their home in the Ticino town of Airolo, Switzerland and made the arduous trip by ship, from Genoa, Italy to Northern California. Frank's brother Joe Beffa had already come to California with his wife and had settled in Montara, where he leased land from the Silva family. When Philomena and Frank arrived on the Coastside, they joined in a partnership with Joe. They all worked together milking cows, running cattle, and farming the land that they leased, which was part of an original Spanish land grant.

Philomena and Frank had come to California seeking a better life in a new country. Yet, in those days dairy farming was a very hard life. They had eight children: Carrie, Mary, Annie, Lena, Henry (Rico), Frank, Charles (my grandfather), and Elvezia. They lived in a two-story house together with Joe, his wife, and their five children so conditions were very crowded and not the best.

My great-grandfather Frank died when he was still a relatively young man. My grandfather Charles was only about 5 years old when his father died. Philomena was left to raise her children alone. Unfortunately, she did not get along well with her brother-in-law Joe. After her husband Frank's death, she moved with her children out to the calf barn on the ranch. She made it as clean as possible for her family, papering the walls with newspapers and glue made of flour.

It must have been an extremely difficult time for Philomena, living in the barn on the ranch with her eight children. She and Joe soon dissolved their partnership and divided up the livestock and personal property. Philomena had met another farmer, Fred Whittwer, and they married. She and her children moved with him to a ranch in San Gregorio. However, life was no easier on the ranch in San Gregorio. There were no barns on this ranch. Philomena had five more children with Fred: Minnie, Madeleine, Evelyn, Rinaldo, and Richard.

It was said that Philomena was known to go out to the corral that was knee-deep in mud, carrying a baby in one arm while she milked a cow with the hand of her other arm. Nor was it unusual for her to hold a baby as she swung an axe to cut firewood. Living under these kinds of circumstances of hard work and poor conditions eventually were too much for Philomena's health and she died in 1908, at the age of 41 years.

Fred Wittwer, now a widower, must have been overwhelmed with his own five young children. Richard, the youngest, was only a little over a year old when his mother died. After her death, Philomena's children from her first marriage, who were still living on the ranch in San Gregorio, had to go out on their own. My grandfather Charles was about 15 years old when his mother died. He and Frank, his older brother, left the ranch in San Gregorio and went to work on



The grown children of Philomena and Frank Beffa—Back row, left to right: Carrie, Richard, Rico, Rinaldo, Madeline, Frank, Charles, and Minnie. Seated, left to right: Mary, Elvezia, Annie, Evelyn, and Lena.

their Uncle Joe's dairy farm. They were given the job of milking the "uncooperative cows"—in other words, the cows that kicked.

Charles started out working at an early age, and over the years became an extremely successful dairy farmer. He acquired a great deal of land on the Coastside and expanded his dairy farms into San Mateo, Pleasanton and Tracy as well as Half Moon Bay. I believe that his strong work ethic was in large part due to the example of his mother Philomena. She must have been a very determined woman and mother, who despite her difficult living circumstances, did what she needed to do for her family. Philomena was a true pioneer woman, who displayed fortitude and strength of character in her life.

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