

This quiet great grandmother was once the defendant in sensational 1906 double murder trial

By Jean Bartlett

(Written for the family of Josephine Terranova and Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma.)



TERRANOVA, JOSEPHINE (1889-1981)

(Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma, CA. Section 5, Row 10, Grave 99)

Born in Sicily, Josephine arrived in New York when she was 8, and went to live with her aunt and uncle. In 1906, she stabbed and killed her aunt and uncle, Concetta and Gaetano Riggio, with a butcher knife.

In court she offered a harrowing account of the continual sexual and physical abuse they subjected her to. She was charged with murder in the first degree and a guilty verdict would have meant death by electric chair. Medical experts for the defense testified Josephine was insane. The trial was a sensation and led to widespread public debate on psychiatric expertise in the courtroom. Her lawyer, John Palmieri, was successful with his client's insanity plea and Josephine went free.

Allegedly with the financial assistance of William Randolph Hearst, Josephine and her husband Giuseppe (she was married at 17), moved to San Francisco where they lived quietly and raised their five children. Her great granddaughter, who lives in the Bay Area, and who knew her great grandmother, didn't know anything about the circumstances that befell Josephine in New York. In fact none of Josephine's children, grandchildren, or great grandchildren knew about it until after Josephine's death when they all found out about it together.



Giuseppe and Josephine with their children, l to r:
Joseph, May, Lulu and Anthony, 1916.



Clockwise from top left: Lulu, May, Joseph and Anthony II, 1923.



Giuseppe and Josephine, 1923.

"For me, my grandmother was a wonderful woman who taught me how to cook Italian food," her great granddaughter said. "She would tell stories of her youth, and her years living in San Francisco with my great grandfather, and about raising her children."

This particular biography can be found in Jean Bartlett's 2012-released book, "[Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma: 125 Years of History, Ministry & Service.](#)" There are more than 370,000 interred at Holy Cross. This book offers both the history behind the founding of the Cemetery, as well as more than 70 deeply researched biographical narratives on some of those at rest. The book is available at Holy Cross, www.holycrosscemeteries.com.

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