

Anthony Varacalli

Another more than coincidental similarity between Bedford Falls in the movie *It's A Wonderful Life* and Seneca Falls is the story of Antonio Varacalli. On April 12, 1917, Antonio Varacalli drowned while successfully rescuing a young woman from the Seneca-Cayuga Branch of the Barge Canal a young woman who was apparently trying to commit suicide. Antonio, who was a Barge Canal worker, was walking in the vicinity of the bridge when he heard someone scream. He ran to the canal bank and saw a young woman struggling in the water. Without hesitation, he jumped into the canal to save the young woman, although he could not swim. He managed to get the girl to the canal bank before he sank into the water, and drowned. The death certificate states that he was pronounced dead at 11 A.M. and that he "drowned while attempting to rescue another person." Antonio was age 17 at the time of his death and had been living at 16 Rumsey Street in the village. The young woman's name was Ruth Dunham. (Apparently, Antonio had lied about his age so that he would be able to get a job. Using the age he had given at the time he was first employed, he would have been 22 at the time of his death. The death certificate apparently incorrectly lists 1895 as the year of his birth.)

Dominick Cafora of East River Road recalled the incident vividly in a 1987 interview with Seneca County Historian Betty Auten. In 1917, Cafora was a young man working for the town of Seneca Falls. On that April 12th day, working with Cafora was Dominick Varacalli, father on Antonio. They were clearing up along the highway near the Seneca Falls Machine Co., when a call came from the village to say that Varacalli was needed. When Dominick Varacalli reached the bridge, he was notified his son had drowned.

Dominick Varacalli and his young son Antonio left Italy about 1907, intending to find work and save money to bring the rest of the family to the United States. It took a while for this dream of Dominick's to be fulfilled.

On June 10, 1921, there was a benefit for Antonio. A fund had been started to provide a memorial. A plaque was made and is now set into the side of the Bridge Street Bridge. When the fund was started, it was hoped that more could be raised through the Carnegie Hero Fund, enough money to bring the family from Italy, which had been Antonio's plan from the beginning. The Carnegie Fund did send a medal, but no money. The Elks Club took over the project to raise money to bring Mrs. Dominick Varacalli, her two living daughters, and a grandson to Seneca Falls. (The grandson was the child of another daughter and her husband, both of whom had been killed in World War One.). The Elks Club was able to raise \$200 which was not quite enough to bring them all here. Dominick Romeo, owner of a store on Rumsey Street, advanced the remainder, so the family could all come at the same time.

When the money arrived, the family went immediately to Naples where they would get aboard the ship. They were told by the American Consulate that they must each have \$20 in addition to the passage money or they would not be able to leave Ellis Island. They had only \$15 total. Mrs. Varacalli recalled a man in their village. He was a wealthy importer. Twenty years before, she

had taken care of his son when his wife died. She went to him with her problem. He cheerfully provided the 1,700 lira needed in exchange for the \$100 in American money.

The family reached New York City and was put on a train. Not being able to understand the language, they did not know when the conductor called out Seneca Falls. Railroad employees neglected to tell them when to get off and they went all the way to Niagara Falls. Dominick Varacalli waited all day at the station for his family, knowing they were supposed to arrive that day. Anxiety took over and he collapsed at 9 p.m. Meantime, everything was straightened out at the other end and the next train brought the family back from the west. On July 28, 1922, the family was reunited for the first time in 15 years.

The photo below was taken by Walter Gable, current Seneca County Historian. The plaque is on the Bridge Street Bridge.

