

Italian mason was an Artist with local stone



*Nunzio Grasso, who immigrated from Italy, built several distinctive local stone buildings, including Redlands Community Center, the Catholic Church in Fruita and the golf clubhouse at Lincoln Park. Loyd Files Research Library Museum of Western Colorado
Al Grasso photo collection*

By Kathy Jordan

Nunzio Grasso. The name has an artistic ring to it.

The name was a good fit for Stonemason Nunzio Grasso, who first came to America in 1881, to live with an uncle in Altoona, Pa.

Al Grasso of Grand Junction said that his grandfather, Nunzio, told him that the first order of business when he came to America was to learn to read and write English, so that no one could fool him.

He returned to Italy for several years, coming back to America in 1901 with his first wife, Concetta, and their one-year-old daughter, Nina. The three came through Ellis Island on Sept. 11, 1901.

Nunzio came to Grand Junction because he had contracted a job, the Schiesswohl building, which still stands at 131 S. Sixth Street. This building was the first of many Western Slope projects built by Nunzio, along with bridge abutments and highways. Their construction would make Nunzio Grasso one of the best-known masons in Grand Junction.

In 1903 Nunzio's wife, Concetta, became ill and wanted to go back to Italy, so he took her back to their village. After she died he married her sister, Annuziatta, in 1908. Annuziatta was Al's grandmother. Al said that Nunzio had promised Concetta on her deathbed that he would marry Annuziatta.

The Grasso family never lived in Little Italy, which was located from First Street on the West, Fifth Street on the East, (except for Whitman Park). Colorado Avenue. on the North and South Avenue on the South.

The first home Nunzio built was at 924 N. First Street, on the route for the Little Bookcliff Railroad. This was a convenient location for a family whose stone quarried from the Bookcliffs was the most important thing in their business.

The stone was brought down from the Bookcliffs on the Little Bookcliff Railroad, to be unloaded in front of the Grasso house. The Grasso family would take their stone to the field across from their house, and the train would go on its way. The family would then deliver the stone, at first by horse and wagon and later a model T, to whatever project was being built. .

After Nunzio and Annuziatta divorced in 1928, he sold the North First Street house and purchased 726 North Seventh Street from William Buthorn, owner of the La Court Hotel. Nunzio built a fence and garage covered in rock both of which remain there today, enabling those passing by a chance to enjoy a great example of his work.

Nunzio later built a home at 838 N. First Street where his grandson, Al, was raised.

Al said that a couple of years after Nunzio and Annuziatta were divorced, Carl Stranges asked her to marry him. However, before the wedding took place Carl drove to the Vail Pass area where Nunzio was working on the road to tell Nunzio that he was going to marry his ex-wife.

Even though Nunzio and his family never lived in Little Italy, other members of the Grasso family did, and Al and his grandfather were frequent visitors to the area.

Al and Nunzio would walk to Little Italy every Saturday to do their grocery shopping at Longo's Grocery store. Every Sunday they would return to the store, where the men played bocce ball and drank wine.

His Aunt Nina was married to Jim Petrafesso in the house in Little Italy that the Italians used as their church. The church had its own priest.

Among projects constructed by Nunzio and his three sons, Vince, Louie and Mike, were the Catholic Church in Fruita; retaining walls on the Million Dollar Highway; gates for Calvary, Masonic, Municipal, Odd Fellows, and Veterans Cemeteries, all on Orchard Mesa; the caretaker's house and golf club house at Lincoln Park; and the Stranges Grocery store.

Another project was the original St. Joseph's School, which was destroyed in a fire several years ago. Coincidentally, Al's father, Louie, was a member of the first class to attend the school.

Nunzio also built the Redlands Country Club (now the Redlands Community Center) and many houses in the area .

Nunzio and Al's father, Louie, dismantled and the reconstructed the Gate House from the Osgood Mansion at Redstone, shipped it to Grand Junction and rebuilt the house on North First Street near Patterson Avenue.

The Redstone Castle Gate House was Nunzio's last job. He retired after he and his sons completed the reconstruction, ending the career of an artist with stone.