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A Bit of History

Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882)

Precisely two hundred years ago this month (July 4, 1807) Giuseppe Garibaldi was born in Nice. The city of Nice (Nizza) during the last few centuries, has been alternately either Italian or French.

In 1814 Nice reverted back to Italy and became once more part of the Italian Riviera under the Kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont, with great pleasure of Garibaldi whose Patriotism and Italianism were always the strongest motivating forces of his life.

Italy, briefly united under Napoleon, was partitioned again after Napoleon's defeat. In 1816 the peninsula was divided in 8 separate states, the largest of which was the "Kingdom of the Two Sicilies", ruled by the Bourbons, originally imposed by Spain.

In the north-east, the area from Venice to Milan was occupied by the Austrians. In the west the only powerful Italian-run state was Piedmont that included the island of Sardinia. In the center there were the grand-dukedom of Tuscany and the Papal States which included Latium, Umbria and Marche.

In 1840 Garibaldi met Anita Ribeiro da Silva, a striking Creole beauty. Totally in love, the couple settled in Montevideo, Uruguay and for seven years led a tranquil family life. In short sequence they had four children. Born to be a military leader, Garibaldi soon became restless.

After purchasing at a rather reasonable price a lot of red material predestined for the slaughter industry of Buenos Aires, Garibaldi was able to provide each of his soldiers with a "Red Shirt", that became the symbol of all Garibaldi's volunteers.

Soon back into action, the general led Uruguayan troops in a fight for the independence of Uruguay against the tyrant Juan Manuel de Rosas, governor of Argentina. Then, once again overcome by nostalgia for his own country, Garibaldi convinced a few hundreds of his men to follow him to Europe and fight for the independence of Italy.

In 1849 the "Camicie Rosse" won a battle against the French at San Pancrazio and two months later they dispersed Bourbon troops at Palestrina and Velletri. Garibaldi led an extremely dynamic and adventurous life, always trying to help people everywhere in the world gain freedom and independence.

Unfortunately at times things didn't go as well as planned and Garibaldi's army came under attack by overwhelming combined forces of France, Austria, Spain and Naples. While on retreat through the woods of Ravenna, his beloved wife Anita died of exhaustion.

In history books Garibaldi is actually referred to as "The Hero of The Two Worlds" because he fought not only in Europe (Italy, Poland, Bulgaria) but in South America (Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil).

In 1850 he sailed to the United States, where he was hailed "The George Washington of Italy". The brave Italian General nearly became the leader of the Union Army in America's Civil War.

History reveals that had President Lincoln had his way, Garibaldi instead of Ulysses S. Grant would have led the Union Army during the American Civil War. Lincoln's advisors also pushed Garibaldi's candidacy; among them were William Henry Seward, secretary of state, James Quiggle, the U.S. consul in Belgium, George P. Marsh, the U.S. minister to Italy and Theodore Canisius, the U.S. consul in Vienna, Austria.

Giuseppe Garibaldi was Italy's greatest hero and patriot, but above all he was the supreme architect of Italy's independence and unification.

In May 1860, Garibaldi, having heard of a major uprising in Palermo, borrowed two steamers, "Piemonte" and "Lombardo" from the Rubattino shipyard and sailed from Quarto, (a port 2 miles east of Genoa) with 1,089 volunteers to free the Sicilians from the Neapolitan troops of Francis II.

Garibaldi landed at Marsala (Sbarco dei Mille) and defeated the 20,000 Bourbons of the King of Naples at Calatafimi, near the famous Greek temple of Segesta. After winning several battles, on May 25 Garibaldi entered Palermo in triumph, where he proclaimed himself, in King Victor Emmanuel's name, dictator of Sicily.

Over 3,000 Sicilians, mesmerized by the bravery and the gallantry of the great general entered the Garibaldi ranks that continued the liberation of the island chasing out the foreign oppressor. Completed the liberation of the island, the Camicie Rosse moved quickly through southern Italy.

On the mountains of Calabria, at Aspromonte our hero was seriously wounded at the right foot, but riding a cart was able to endure the battle still leading and motivating his volunteers. Continuing the victorious march northbound the Red Shirts, their contingent now 20,000 strong, brilliantly defeated 50,000 Bourbons at the Volturno river.

In the meantime Victor Emmanuel II, well aware that he, instead of Garibaldi, should liberate the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (Sicily, Apulia, Calabria, Campania, etc) and the rest of the peninsula, in order to be eventually recognized as king of a unified Italy, met with Garibaldi at Teano, near Naples, (October 26, 1860) and asked our hero to stop his victorious march in order to enable him, the king, to continue the liberation of the country.

Very magnanimously Garibaldi consented to disband his volunteers. A few days later the King and Garibaldi riding their horses entered the city of Naples, side by side, applauded enthusiastically by the population.

The following day Garibaldi gathered his Camicie Rosse, now over 30,000, thanked them for the great job they had done for the independence and the unification of Italy and instructed them to return to their homes.

Many of the volunteers, understandably very disappointed, refused to disband and eventually were dispersed by the royal army, killed or thrown in jail. Garibaldi broken hearted, went back to his home in Caprera, a small island between Sardinia and Corsica, where a few years earlier, with the help of his son Menotti, had built a four room house on the cliff by the sea.

Thanks to our great hero, Italy, from Sicily to the Alps, was finally free from foreign domination and united under an Italian king.

In 1867 Garibaldi decided to go to the aid of France, helping the new born republic in its struggle against Prussia. At the end of the Franco-Prussian War (1872), Garibaldi returned to his home on the island of Caprera where he spent the rest of his life. He remarried, raised a large family, tended his garden and received admiring visitors. He was the hero of united Italy.

Everywhere in the world, streets and squares were named after him and nearly every city erected a monument to him. Giuseppe Garibaldi died June 2, 1882 and was buried in Caprera: he was a month shy of his 75th birthday.

In 1888, the U.S. Senate voted overwhelmingly to honor Giuseppe Garibaldi as a "universal and fearless liberator" by placing his bust in the Capitol. New York City, erected a monument to him in Washington Square Park.

On June 2, 1946, on the 64th anniversary of his death, Italians held a national referendum that abolished the Savoy monarchy and established Italy as a republic. That day was officially proclaimed ITALIAN REPUBLIC DAY and since then all Italians in the world have been celebrating such memorable event.

In 1960, the United States Post Office issued the Garibaldi commemorative stamp to honor the Italian hero Lincoln once hoped would lead Union troops to victory.

Tony Ghezso