

Finding Family – August 2018

Against All Odds

By Denise Ratterman Jackson

My research into my great-grandfather began in 2003. In U.S. Census records, I learned he came to the United States via Boston. In the 1900 census he was listed as Luke Biele, fisherman, from Dalmatia, Austria. I then joined an Austrian message board. Within a couple of days someone on that message board referred me to a Croatian message board telling me the Dalmatian Coast was in Croatia. I learned that Dalmatia is the southern part of the Croatian Adriatic Sea coast and that the preserved records go back several centuries. I was informed of a genealogist named Niko Kapetanic who had done research into Konavle, a region in Dalmatia. My great-grandfather's name in Croatia would have been Luka. Austria had been reported on the 1900 census because Dalmatia, Croatia, was under Austrian administration in the 19th century. Luka's surname in Croatian was Bjele, pronounced the same as Biele. Bjele means "white" in Croatian. This surname was changed to Bianchi when Croatia was under Italian rule.

In the 1920 census, my great-grandfather was listed as Louis Beale, age 24, lodger, residing on Wood Street, Oakland, CA with his daughter Alice, my grandmother, and Chris, my great uncle (all are listed as lodgers to the head of household). Louis was divorced. He was naturalized in 1890 in Pennsylvania; he was native to Dalmatia; his mother tongue was Slavonian. His occupation was retail fishmonger. I continued my research and, eventually, with the help of Kapetanic, learned there was a restaurant, Leut, in a small fishing village named Cavtat. He believed the restaurant owners were from a Bianchi Family and offered to go to the restaurant. Coincidentally, my yet unknown cousin's son was working on construction at the restaurant. When asked if his mother belonged to the same family as my great-grandfather, he replied yes. Once I knew the name of the the restaurant, I found an address and sent off all of my family information.

Sometime in November 2004 my cousin called me to say that she had taken all of my information to the local parish, where records have been kept for hundreds of years. In the margin of the page in the book about my family, it was written that in 1895 my great-grandfather had gone to America. The records indicated he was born Luca Bianchi in October 1875. Family lore indicated he came to America when he was 16, but these records proved otherwise. It is possible that he came with a John "Bianchi" to the United States. He changed his name to Biele, and then later to Beal, when he married a Portuguese woman who wanted to Americanize the name.

I had never been to Europe, but when I saw a picture of Cavtat, I was determined to go. This little fishing village is 12 miles south of Dubrovnik, just on the border of Croatia and Montenegro. When I found evidence of a Croatian Society in San Francisco, I learned that both my great-grandfather and a man named John, both from Cavtat, Croatia, were members of this society. I learned a little information about them and came across a book from which I learned that his father's name was Kristo.

Wondering why the Croatian immigrants never spoke about their original homeland, I wrote to someone who specialized in Croatian genealogy. In reply, she said, "Maybe it was too painful.

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Their mom and dad would never see them again. Friends, uncles, aunts, all vanished. There were no telephones to hear their voice, no cameras to get their picture, and certainly no money to go and visit them. And, believe me, even with the current ready phone emails, the distance still could be painful.”

Genealogists often discover that their relatives may have gone by many names. In the California Death Index, my great-grandfather is listed as Luca Christopher Biele; in the 1890 census, he was Luke Biel; in the 1910 census he was Louis Beal. His tombstone reads Louis Biele.

By the end of 2004, I was in disbelief about all I had learned in only a year of researching my great-grandfather. After the help of people on the internet, I received phone calls from other distant relatives. By 2006, I was finally planning my dream vacation to Cavtat with my parents. I drafted a letter to the church in Cavtat and let them know I would be coming that fall to look at records. I also contacted my newfound cousin to let her know we would be there.

We were welcomed with open arms by numerous relatives. We were taken to special destinations, including a 500-year-old monastery (where we stayed) and the house where my great-grandfather had lived. I even got to meet the genealogist, Niko Kapetanic! I made many lifelong friends who, along with relatives, I remain in regular contact with. I traveled to Croatia again by myself in 2007 and in 2009. A new diagnosis of multiple sclerosis prevents me from ever going back, but the sights and sounds are with me forever.

After my visits, a gentleman I met, whose father was born in Croatia, asked me to try and find family in the same fishing village! This man worried because he only knew his grandfather’s name and birthplace. I assured him I could find information for him, and with my contacts now in Cavtat, we were able to find his relatives.

One of my cousins is a tour guide in Cavtat and in Dubrovnik. She has since toured several of my friends. I would encourage anyone to do the same! Contact me at dprsjacksn@aol.com.