Using the Internet, what was lost is now found

The path to Eric Carle’s mystery friend

By Sean Kirst
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More than two years ago, Angela Trovato of New Jersey left a message on Ancestry.com. She was doing some family research involving her great-grandfather, Antonio Barreto, who settled in Syracuse more than a century ago.

That note was the key. It’s why I found myself journaling into my telephone on Easter Sunday, while Eric Carle—one of the great children’s authors in America—endured the noise in happy disbelief.

It’s property for “The Very Hungry Caterpillar” and other classics. For years, he’d pored over a mystery dating to 1932. He had a photograph that showed him, as a 3-year-old, holding a little girl in a white dress in his native Syracuse. All he remembered was that she came from a family of Italian immigrants.

Last year, he released a new book, “Frida,” that involved an imaginative journey back around the day the girl moved away. Eric cherished his early childhood in Syracuse—a large part because he left at age six, for harder years in Germany. As “Frida” was being published, he told USA Today that he hoped the book might help him locate the girl.

Like so many others, I was intrigued. I decided to try, and find an answer. I sent an email to Greg Tripoli, of the Onondaga Historical Association, mentioning the quest. He looked through some old city directories and responded:

Carle (1920 and 1935), Eric’s family had at least four different addresses.

To track down the girl, we’d need to trace an unacknowledged child, after more than 50 years, who might have a different name by marriage—

if she were alive.

Still, I was so touched by these tales to know they’re only impossible if you don’t try. Friday morning, I got started.

The photo was dated 1932. Based on OHA records, the Carles moved into two apartments between these dates.

For the first six months, the family lived at 30 John St. and 111 Howard St.

I assumed the photo would need help to involve another child being in or above the home.

I went through those addresses.

The OHA’s Susan Neve worked out. One option was:

So I turned to John Street.

The landlord was Antonio and Lila Barreto, whose Italian heritage made a possible. I outlined the help of Johnathan Capo, our file Post-Standard editor, and we checked available records and clippings. Nothing came up under “Barreto.”

That made little sense. I considered about a missing link.

I began playing with the name, adding and subtracting letters. I discovered there had been families named “Barreto” in Syracuse, but I could find nothing about Antonio or Lila.

I decided to take one last shot, a digital “Mary” pass.

I did a Google search on “Antonio Barreto and Syracuse.” Whatever proclamations I felt upon seeing it evaporated when I realized Angela gave no last name. Then I noticed the key that broke this open. She’d left an email address. Hoping it was still active, I wrote to her asking if Antonio Barreto had a daughter born in 1929.

That night, Angela called. While her great-grandparents didn’t have a child born in the 1920s, someone else qualified:

Angela’s mother, her grandmother, Florence Giani Torrisi.

She explained that her mother, born in 1928 in Syracuse and very much a child, had been a young woman.

I asked if she could find the girl in her memory.

She said yes.

Florence called back.

“The little girl in the picture,” she said. “My mother says it’s her.”

Excited, but still cautious, I called Florence. She said she’d had a copy of that photo for years, and wanted our help.

She said her mother was1 in room “74 ‘American by’ who’d been her friend.

Most surprising, she felt sure she was the girl in the photo.

Geoff Herbert, a colleague, had an email address for her.

I wanted to meet the saint. Later Friday, I drove to John Street. In the 1932 photo, behind the children, a garage to be visible by the sidewalk, near a house with a small lawn. Only one spot matched that description. It’s across the street, at an angle, from 205 John St. and 300 Carolina St.

The next day, research specialist Sarah Kercem was on duty at the OHA. The 1919 city directory was missing from the stacks. Sarah found it online. The records showed Florence and her parents had moved that year from South Middle Street to a new address:

They went to 300 Carolina St., two doors from the Carles—across the street from where the photo was taken. Incredible. Everything fits. On Easter, I sent five emails. I told Bel! was 79 percent sure I’d found the girl he was looking for, and she called back, claims. He remembered the date, the family.

While we were talking, my phone beeped. It was a text message from Angela, in New Jersey.

She’d found her mother’s copy of the original photo, with another one that showed Florence and Carles, so then the John Street hill behind them.

This was absolute proof. That’s when I turned stouting.

Three days after I wrote a column on the search, the story ran across the front. All of this happened only because Angel called me, looking for something, entirely matched, in 2002—made an internet friend of Antonio Barreto and Syracuse, leaving behind that seemingly insignificant image:

“I feel like it was a child,” Angela said, “and every word had to be exactly right, or the story would have fallen apart.”

Two generations of wonder have yet to end. Tuesday, I noticed that a reader on syracus.com offered this comment about Florence:

“I love her last name is TORNACHIO. In Italian, that means FOUND.”