

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 Barresi, who settled in Syracuse more than a century ago.

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

Eric is renowned for "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" and other classics. For years, he'd puzzled over a mystery dating to 1932: He had a photograph that showed him, as a 3-year-old, embracing a little girl in a white dress in his native Syracuse. All he remembered is that she came from a family of Italian immigrants.

Last year, he released a new book, "Friends," that involved an imaginative journey built around the day the girl moved away.

Eric cherished his early childhood in Syracuse — in large part because he left, at age six, for harsher years in Germany. As "Friends" link 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 Gregg Tripoli of the Onondaga Historical Association, mentioning the quest. He looked through some old city directories and responded:

Between 1929 and 1935, Eric's family had at least four different North Side addresses. To track down the girl, we'd need to trace an unidentified child, after more than



Lila and Antonio Barresi: Their John Street home in Syracuse provided the 1932 link between author Eric Carle and the photo of "the girl in the white dress." Solving the mystery of her identity was the "Easter Miracle" that columnist Sean Kirst wrote about on Tuesday.

80 years, who might have a different name by marriage — if she were alive.

Still, I've researched enough of 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 between two apartment houses during that time: 305 John St. and 111 Seward St.

I reasoned the photo would most likely involve another child living at one of those homes. I went through the tenants on Seward Street. None worked out. One option gone.

So I turned to John Street. The landlords were Antonio and Lila Barresi, whose Italian heritage made them a possibility. I enlisted the help of Johnathan Croyle, our fine Post-Standard archivist, and we checked available records and clippings. Nothing came up under "Barresi."

That made little sense. I wondered about a misspelling. I began playing with the name, adding and subtracting letters.

I discovered there had been families named "Barresi" in Syracuse, but I could find nothing about Antonio or Lila. I decided to take one last shot, a digital "Hail Mary" pass.

I did a Google search on "Antonio Barresi and Syracuse."

Up popped the note Angela had written on Ancestry.com. Whatever elation 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 Barresi had a daughter born in 1929.

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

Angela's mother, their granddaughter, Florence Ciani Trovato.

She explained that her mom, born in 1928 in Syracuse and very much alive, often mentioned childhood visits to see Antonio and Lila, on John Street. I emailed a copy of Eric's photograph to Angela. She sent it on to Florence, 85, a retired school secretary in Florida.

Before long, Angela called back.

"The little girl in the picture?" she said. "My mom says that it's her."

Excited, but still cautious, I called Florence. She said she'd had a copy of that photo for years, and wasn't sure where she put it. She said older relatives used to mention "a German boy" who'd been her friend.

Most important: She felt sure she was the girl in the photo.

Geoff Herbert, a colleague, had an email address for Eric. Before making that contact, I wanted to cement the case. Late Friday, I drove to John Street. In the 1932 photo, behind the children, a garage is visible by the sidewalk, near a house with a small lawn. Only one spot matched that description: It is across the street, at an angle, from 305 John St. and 300 Carbon St.

The next day, research specialist Sarah Kozma was on duty at the OHA. The 1931

city directory was missing from the racks. Sarah found it online. The records showed Florence and her parents had moved that year from North McBride Street to a new address:

They went to 300 Carbon St., two doors from the Carles — across the street from where the photo was taken.

Incredible. Everything fit. On Easter, I sent Eric an email. I told him I was 99 percent sure I'd found the girl in the white dress. He called back, elated. He remembered the Barresi 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 Eric on a stoop, the John Street hill behind them.

That's when I started shouting.

Three days after I wrote a column on the search, the sense of awe remains fresh. All of this happened only because Angela — while looking for something entirely unrelated, in 2002 — made an Internet mention of Antonio Barresi and Syracuse, leaving behind that digital fingerprint.

"I feel like it was a chain," Angela said, "and every link had to be exactly right, or the whole thing would have fallen apart."

Those moments of wonder have yet to end. Tuesday, I noticed that a reader on Syracuse.com offered this comment about Florence:

"I love that her last name is TROVATO. In Italian, that means FOUND."

