Remembering Mr. Okra: Street Vendors in New Orleans

by Megan Celona

Long before Winn Dixie and Rouses, families purchased groceries from the corner store and roving peddlers. On February 15, 2018, Arthur “Mr. Okra” Robinson, a New Orleans legend, passed away and left the city pondering the history of street vendors in New Orleans—as well as their future.

New Orleans has a long history of street vending; enslaved and free African American women would sell produce as a way to earn money for their families, particularly before the Civil War. When Italian immigrants came to New Orleans they turned to street vending as a way to earn money and as a stepping stone to opening their own corner grocery stores. The Uddo-Taormina family had tremendous success that began with a small, horse-drawn cart.

Giuseppe Uddo was born in the early 1880s and up in Salemi, Sicily. He worked as a venditore selling cheese and olives in the region. He met Giuseppe Taormina, a successful businessman with connections to New Orleans who introduced the young venditore to his daughter Eleanora. The two married and decided to try their luck in New Orleans. They arrived in the city in 1907.

Giuseppe and Eleanore settled in a tenement house in the French Quarter or Piccolo Palermo. He got a job with his brother in law, Francesco Taormina who had an importing business and worked their until Francesco closed the business in order to return to Italy to join the army. Giuseppe then went to work with Eleanora’s other cousins who were also food merchants. On Christmas Eve of 1909, Giuseppe lost his job when the cousins declared bankruptcy.

On his way home to his family, Giuseppe met Mr. Cusimano, a pasta shop owner. Cusimano offered Giuseppe goods to start his own business and promised him credit to buy more. Feeling optimistic and ready to set out on his own, Giuseppe purchased a horse named Sal from his former employers.

Giuseppe, who didn’t speak English, relied on the horse to know the sales route to Italian customers. Giuseppe and Sal would leave New Orleans before the crack of dawn and travel to Kenner, Harahan, and other Italian truck-farming communities outside New Orleans, returning after three days to pick up more wares.

As his successes grew, Giuseppe purchased a shop on Decatur Street in the French Quarter. Just before World War I, Giuseppe took a gamble; he took out a loan and purchased 3,000 cases of tomato paste. When an embargo closed Italian ports, Giuseppe’s sales skyrocketed. He used the money to bring the rest of his family to New Orleans.

After the war, Giuseppe purchased a factory in Riverdale, Calif., where he became the first U.S. manufacturer of tomato paste. They eventually...