

## **The Stretar (Stritar) Family Story**

The following stories and anecdotes about Frank and Theresa Stretar were related by Jennie Fresl and Peppy Brown to Janice, Jennie's daughter, as it was told to them by their beloved father and mother. For their first-born grandchildren, who were enriched by knowing this lovely couple, and for those of us who knew only Grandma Stretar, we leave the present and return to the past to enlighten us all.

*Janice Antonutti Nelson, March, 1999*

Francia Stritar {Frank Stretar} was born February 2, 1869, in Trieste, Austria, which today is a part of Italy. He was the eldest of four children born to Mitza (Mary) and Francia Stritar. There were two brothers, Domina and Anton, and a sister who died at an early age. As this story continues, young Francia will be referred to as Frank, so as not to confuse him with his father, Francia.

Frank's parents were not from the usual peasant family. His mother Mitza came from a wealthy farm family and, upon her marriage to Francia, was given a "grunt", or dowry. This consisted of a house and land. Frank's father, Francia, came from a worthy and conscientious educational background. Francia and his two brothers were educated in the priesthood, but Francia dropped out to pursue a family life. As a young husband and father, he was away from his family a great deal. He worked on the private railroad of Franz Joseph, Emperor of Austria. Unfortunately, Francia's great desire to gamble was overpowering. It would soon lead to great hardship for his family.

Mitza looked to her eldest son, Frank, to help aid her in the responsibility of the family while his father was away. One day, young Frank and his mother discovered their home was no longer theirs. His father's gambling habit had now jeopardized their home, and it was taken from them.

Packing up their possessions, they moved to a small dwelling. Here Mitza and her sons worked together and started a home bakery. Mitza would make and bake the bread with the help of young Frank. Upon finishing, they would package the bread in large baskets and carry them to Ljubljana, where they were sold at the markets. Their routine was the same each day. Soon their efforts brought in enough money to buy back their home. However, the hard work soon took its toll on Mitza. Young Frank summoned the village doctor to his mother's side. After being bedridden for a year, a crippled Mitza passed away. Her bones had to be broken in order to put her in her casket, her final resting place.

Possessing no industrial skill or experience, only a burning desire to work, young Frank turned to his uncle, Joseph Stritar, for help. Professor Joseph Stritar was known as the first Slovene writer of poetry and short stories for children, as well as a writer supporting reform of social issues of that time. Professor Stritar taught at the University of Vienna. Well educated and well-traveled, he was a great influence on his young nephew. He encouraged Frank to learn the trade of stone masonry, which was a widespread trade

throughout Europe. Frank served an apprenticeship in Italy as a young lad of eleven. With a thirst for learning and eager to make a good living, he later traveled to Germany for work. One can't imagine what life must have been like in those early years, working and traveling from one village to the next, even from one province to another. Wherever work could be had, Frank could be found. Little did Frank know how his chosen profession would one day become the life's work of his five sons and many of his grandsons.

At that time, Frank's ability to build stone walls was in great demand. In his late teens or early 20's, he found himself in a village called Mali Vas (Little Villa), in Slovenia, Yugoslavia. Still in contact with his brothers, Frank summoned them to assist him. For Frank, this visit to Yugoslavia turned out to be longer than he imagined, for there he met his future wife, Theresa Zubukovic.

Theresa Zubukovic was born on May 14, 1875, in Videm, Slovenia. She was the eldest of five children born to Theresa Erchul Zubukovic and Francia Zubukovic. Theresa had three sisters, Johanna, Mitza, and Josephine; and one brother, Francia, who was the youngest.

Theresa's mother, Theresa Erchul Zubukovic, a petite, slight built woman less than five feet tall, kept very busy as the village seamstress. With the help of her daughters, Theresa and Johanna, they worked together fitting and sewing clothes for the people in the village. Their payment came in the form of food, clothing, and bedding. Most anything was acceptable toward maintaining the household.

Theresa's father, Francia Zubukovic, was not the most ambitious man in the village. Picking up odd jobs and working as little as possible seemed to be what he liked best. Theresa's brother Francia would follow in his father's footsteps as an itinerant who lived off and on in the bowery area of Duluth until his death. His love for playing the concertina and entertaining at the local pub seemed most enjoyable to him. He was a self-taught musician who entertained around the village, playing at weddings, parties and gatherings. His musical talent was to pass down to his children's and grandchildren's love of music, singing and playing a variety of musical instruments.

Mother Zubukovic (Theresa Erchul) had a great influence on who her eldest daughter would marry. Because of her close acquaintance and great fondness for young Frank Stritar, she encouraged her daughter Theresa to marry him. However, Theresa had eyes for Frank's brother, Domina. He was handsome, charming, and had a way with the ladies. Somehow, Mother Zubukovic was able to sway her daughter's thinking in Frank's direction. He was the eldest and a responsible man she felt would be a good provider, husband, and someday, a good father. With a high regard for her mother's wishes, Theresa Zubukovic and Frank Stritar were married in October of 1895.

They settled in the village of Videm Dobropolje, Slovenia, where their first child, Angela (Alice) was born on August 27, 1896. While working at his trade, he found time to build his own dwelling for his young wife and baby daughter. A short way from the village, overlooking a meadow, he began building a house. It was to be a small, three-room house

of solid stone and cement. Theresa helped her husband by saving Frank steps back and forth to the well. With a tightly braided cloth "pond" (doughnut like) on top of her head for protection, she would carry tubs of water to Frank to mix the mortar. The walls, as thick as a fortress, were to guard against the cold in the winter and the heat of the summer. The house was completed, with a stone fireplace and outhouse attached to the outside of the house. Away from the house, Frank built a barn with a thatched straw roof. There was a certain character about this house that made it quaint and warm, leaving one with a heart full of pride. It was "king of the hill", a painted structure with a background of thick foliage and buttercups growing wildly in the meadow around the house. (In May of 1967, much to my pleasure, I saw and photographed the home of Frank Stritar. It has since been torn down to make room for a larger house.)

Great joy and excitement fell upon their home on April 4, 1898, when their first son arrived. They named him Francia (Frank). Having sons to Frank Sr. was of great importance.

He was delighted and proud to have a son to carry on his name, but before he could contain his excitement, eleven months later on February 23, 1899, a daughter Mitza (Mary) was born. At the turn of the century, widespread news was being heard throughout Europe of another country of great progress, freedom, and wealth. Many men were leaving for this new world, with and without their families, to seek a new life. It was America, the land of opportunity. Again, the overpowering desire to improve himself and serve his growing family to a greater degree was on Frank's mind. To save extra money, he saved empty cement sacks. When he had accumulated a large amount, he would sell them. The money earned would buy him passage to America, Frank decided. Frank said goodbye to his wife and three small children and left the village of Videm for America. The year was 1900.

Theresa, now alone and lonely, faced days and nights and long cold winters that must have seemed endless. Tending her chores and caring for her children was the natural course to take. Still working with her mother as a seamstress, she would earn food, clothing, and whatever else to provide for her family. Carrying her laundry to the frozen pond in the village, she would chip through the ice to wash clothes. (When I questioned her on how she did this, Grandma Stritar [Theresa] told me, "What you tink? I cheep with knife in ice like Joey, when he go [ice] fishing!" Seeing this pond in 1967, my eyes filled with tears, hearing her voice in my head.)

The almost three-year separation from his family soon came to an end. The year was 1903 when Frank returned to his family. He brought home a dream of someday returning to America with his family. Reuniting with his wife brought a new addition into the household. On March 27<sup>th</sup>, 1903, their second son, Anton (Tony) was born. The joy of another son filled Frank's heart. No one could have been prouder of their sons than Frank Stritar. His girls were just girls, but, oh, his sons were something else!

Frank resumed his work as a stone mason in the village. At times the work there was slow and not plentiful. Frank would leave home and work in nearby villages, doing whatever

he could to earn a living. His craving for his trade and the knowledge of his rapidly growing family was always first in his mind. Soon his Theresa would be bearing him another child, or so she thought!

Upon returning home to Videm from work, he heard the news of the birth of the new baby. It turned out to be a double shock for Frank. Twin daughters, Theresa and Johanna, were born July 20, 1904. "Oh, God's punishing me, just because I want boys instead of girls," he said. But soon the identical little faces won his approval, and with one in each arm, he proudly strolled through the village showing off his little girls. Now with six children, the eldest eight years old, Frank was faced with a decision that would affect the future of his family.

Knowing this was not the country where he wanted to raise his children, his thoughts once again turned to America. Having the knowledge of the advantages which could be had, there was only one thing to do. His mind clear and his decision firm, he would venture once more to America.

The day arrived when Frank was to leave his family again. Angela (Alice) remembered it well and told this story to her sisters. She was perched on a ledge connected to the fireplace, keeping warm. In her hand was a long string which was attached to the twin's cradle. Daydreaming, as she pulled the string that rocked the cradle to keep the babies quiet, she pulled the rocking cradle over, spilling the babies face down on the floor with the cradle over them. With the babies crying and Theresa rushing to them, fearing they were hurt, the scared children ran. Frank, hearing the commotion and fearing the twins might be injured, grabbed Angela. "If I wasn't leaving today, you'd get the spanking of your life," he shouted. Angela, frightened but relieved, was saved only by her father's impending departure. Frank bid them farewell, determined to earn the money to send for them as soon as possible.

Theresa resumed the duties she had become accustomed to, now left alone once again. Her ability to withstand hardship was being tested. Keeping her mind busy with her large family would ease the pain of another separation from her husband. The letters from Frank were not as plentiful as she would have liked, but she understood and prayed the next letter would bring good news-and finally it came!

A letter and tickets arrived for Theresa and the children. With mixed emotions, both happy and sad, she knew it would be time to say goodbye to her family forever. Packing a trunk of clothes and dressing the children in their best and warmest attire, they boarded the French liner, La Gascoyne, out of Havre, France, in 1906. Leaving behind her mother and family, her childhood memories and the only life she knew at the Stritar homestead, must have been painful. Many thoughts and fears passed through her mind at such a time, as she wondered what trials and tribulations she would encounter on the ocean. The fear of not seeing land, or even the fear of never reaching her husband, was on her mind. She had to keep a watchful eye on four active children as they scampered about the deck. Angela was not yet 10, Francia 8, Mitza 7, and 3 year old Anton toddled around the deck

wearing a dress made by his mother. The twins, about 20 months, were being carried about by Theresa, as they were unable to walk around well on their own.

A near tragedy occurred on board involving the three oldest children. While Theresa was confined to one place with the three youngest, the three older children ran free on the deck, chasing each other on the slippery platform. Mitza fell and was sliding through an opening of the bottom rail towards the ocean. Francia following behind, lunged after her and grabbed part of her dress. With part of her body hanging overboard, Francia held on and Angela pulled her back to safety. It scared them so, thinking of what almost happened. Frightened, they quickly returned to their mother's side. Seeing their mother so very seasick, they would never again burden her on the remainder of the voyage. Finally, they reached the safety of land.

It was late April or early May of 1906 when they reached Ellis Island in New York harbor. Clearing immigration and customs would be another new experience they would undergo.

Being reunited as a family was a joyous moment for all of them. Frank had their train tickets in order, for their final destination to Lorain, Ohio. For Theresa, there were no drastic changes she could see in her husband. His vigor and energy were still a very large part of his character. Running down the train platform, waving his arms and shouting back at them, "Come on, come on!" As usual, Theresa and the children were trailing far behind. After boarding the train and settling everyone in their place, they could now relax and talk. Soon the porter came by with a large basket of fruit to pass around. One of the Stritar children was given a banana. Not knowing what it was or how to eat it, they proceeded to bite into the fruit, peeling and all. Seeing this, the porter stopped to show the child it must be peeled first before it can be eaten.

Reaching Lorain, Ohio, Frank had made arrangements for his family to live in a boarding house. Knowing his family would need a home of their own, he already had a new dwelling in progress. The house was a story-and-a-half, constructed of red brick. The main floor consisted of a kitchen, dining room, and bedroom with two bedrooms upstairs. The toilet facilities were outdoors. In the children's eyes, it was as big as a palace! Theresa was especially proud of her new home. It was to be the place where their first American child would be born.

In less than a year, Theresa was now ready to deliver her seventh child. Put to bed while awaiting the birth, Frank rushed out to get a doctor, but returned home, unable to find him. Theresa was now in her final moments of labor and without the aid of a doctor. Frank, with nowhere to turn for help, took instructions from his wife as to what he needed to do to assist the impending birth. His nervousness soon left him when he helped deliver his third son. The first American baby was born on February 19, 1907. Admiring his 12-pound son and glowing over himself for aiding in the delivery of their latest child, Frank was overwhelmed. He named him Joseph, after his famous uncle, Professor Joseph Stritar. As to what was to come. Joey turned out to be quite a storyteller himself!

Frank was working occasionally in the steel mill during the winter months. He anxiously awaited the spring thaw and the time when he could work outdoors in his trade. It was what he liked best. To help with expenses, and against her better judgement, it was Frank's idea for Theresa to take in boarders. Theresa went along with Frank's wishes but disapproved of strange men around her children. Frank's big-hearted gesture of opening his home to anyone sometimes proved to be unprofitable, as well.

One day, an inspiration to earn extra money struck Frank. Possessing two cows that were over productive milkers and with plenty for his family, he decided the extra milk would sell well. He was determined to pursue a new profession as a milkman. Through a friend, he was able to acquire a small horse, a "cabala", that was no longer of any use to his friend. The cabala had been a racehorse at one time but now its legs and knees were too crippled to run any distance. Frank, delighted with his new venture, took the cabala home and built him a cart to carry his milk cans. Hitching up the cart to the horse and with two filled milk cans, he trotted down the road. Soon, the horse's front legs buckled under him and fell to the ground. Frank jumped off the cart to help the horse get back on its feet.

The following two years for the Stretar's brought an increase in the family and another work opportunity for Frank. Josephine (Peppy) was born September 12, 1908, followed by another joy of a son Louis, born June 17, 1910. Frank's work took him throughout Lorain, Ohio. His friends were many and his work well known. It was through his trade that he met a very wealthy gentleman.

O.C. Barber was the owner of a large and prosperous farm, located in Barberton, Ohio. He and his wife were childless and lived in a large and beautiful home on the property. The farm had a large orchard of cherry trees, which was worked by many farm hands. Frank began working on the farm building a stone wall around the Barber property during the week, and then would return home on the weekend. Upon returning to work, Frank decided to take his three-year-old son, Joey, to the farm. Joey was big for his age, healthy, strong, and bright, with big blue eyes. He won the hearts of Mr. & Mrs. Barber in an instant. Mr. Barber, without hesitation, asked Frank to leave the boy with them. They would raise him as their own and would provide Joey with all their possessions. "Frankia, you have been blessed with many sons," he said. With this thought in mind, Frank knew he would never be able to provide such a rich life for any of his children. His only obstacle was to convince his wife Theresa to take advantage of this generous offer. "No, no shame on you! How dare you think I would give any of our children away!" With such protest from Theresa, the subject was closed.

Mr. Barber then asked Frank to move to Barberton to continue his work on the farm, and to complete the stone wall. He would supply Frank with many years of work. The opportunity was too great to pass up. Frank then moved his family by horse and wagon, supplied to him by O.C. Barber, to Barberton, Ohio. Mr. Barber had an unoccupied house that he owned. This was the home Mr. Barber sold to Frank for his family at a very reasonable price.

The naturalization papers came in 1912. A life-long dream and determination to be called "Americans" finally came to Frank and Theresa Stretar and Family.

In the early part of 1913, a rumor was heard of a steel mill being built in Duluth, Minnesota. An entire new community located on the banks of the St. Louis River was in the making. The area would include housing, church, variety store, grocery store, hospital, and the plan included many other promises. In the latter part of 1913, Frank's desire was to be part of this new frontier and take advantage of the opportunity to use his skills as a stone mason once again.

Uprooting his family with nine children, the Stretar's left Barberton, Ohio to seek their fortune and plant their roots in Minnesota. Upon reaching Superior, Wisconsin for a short stay, news reached them that the unfinished steel mill was not operating yet. So, they continued their journey to the Iron Range, where Frank Stretar worked in the iron mines.

They settled in Sparta, Minnesota, a small community near Gilbert; a new location, a new adventure, and soon to have a new baby. It had been six years since Theresa was pregnant. She always believed that the doctor had tipped her womb after Louie was born, because he thought she had too many children. April 2, 1916, brought another son, Fred, the tenth child of Frank and Theresa Stretar. He grew up to be everyone's favorite concertina player. He loved to entertain, as did all the Stretar children, with their musical and singing ability. The beautiful harmony with their voices and the instruments of piano, concertina, accordion, harmonica, ukelele, and a piccolo-like instrument that had been whittled from a willow branch by Theresa's brother, Frank Zubukovic, have been cherished memories for all who knew them.

Frank and Theresa had become a friend of Frank Koshar. He was an ambitious young man with a kind heart and a mind for business. He frequented the Stretar home and soon became interested in their daughter Mary, who at the time was 15 years old. Frank Koshar asked for her hand in marriage, and Frank and Theresa agreed that Koshar would be a good provider and would take good care of their daughter Mary. In 1914 Mary, at the age of 15, married Frank Koshar; they were wed for over 50 years.

Our memories of Auntie Mary and Uncle Frank were always filled with fun and much love. Auntie Mary had a wonderful sense of humor and some unique sayings. She always made the remark that Frank married an angel, because of her young age. Shopping in Duluth with her two sisters, Peppy and Jennie, with every dress she'd put on, she'd call it a rag and say they had better clothes in Gilbert. And yet she always called Gilbert a "one horse town." When passing a mirror, she would stop and admire herself and say "not bad for an old lady." She had beautiful facial skin and Dolly and I would tell her so. We loved when she visited our home on House Street. She sat around like a queen and our mother Jennie would wait on her hand and foot.

Our mom loved her company. They would sing and talk about their other siblings and, of course, always of Ma and Pa. It's our treasure to be part of these precious times.

Another story I heard many times from their years on the range was about Auntie Peppy. Joesphine (Peppy) was around 6 or 7 years old and as cute as ever. She had a beautiful voice and knew a lot of songs, as ll the Stretar's did. To earn some money for their family household, the older children would take Peppy down a path and into one of many Gilbert taverns. "Do you want to hear our little sister sing for a few coins?" They stood her on a box and Peppy would sing like a little bird. When they clapped for more, she would break into another tune. It wasn't a long singing career for her, for when their mother found out, she put a stop to it.

For the Stretar's, it was time to move again. It was the latter part of 1916, and once again, they moved back to Duluth where the steel plant was in operation.