



Fig. 1. Two workers (Remo De Carli on the right) install the mosaics below the dome of the Foster Memorial in Uxbridge, Ontario, in 1936. (Private collection)

Abstract

The authors identify the mosaic workers and companies responsible for the decoration of the Thomas Foster Memorial Temple in Uxbridge, Ontario and explain their roles. The study is based on new data found in old Italian-language newspapers, city directories, and archival records in North America and Italy and on interviews with the family members of the workers, who came to Canada from the Friuli region of Italy. Also included are photographs, provided by the family members, both of the craftsmen at work on the site and visiting it with friends and also of the company owners present at the time of the dedication of the building in 1936.

Olga Zorzi Pugliese is a faculty member in the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Toronto and has published mainly on Renaissance Italian literature and culture. Dr. Angelo Principe, a retired lecturer from the same Department at the Mississauga campus, is the author of studies on Italian immigration to Canada. Together they have written a book on the first years (1933-1941) of the only Italian association in Toronto that, having survived World War II, is still very active today.

JSSAC / JSÉAC 28, n° 1, 2 (2003) ; 25-30.

Olga Zorzi Pugliese
Angelo Principe

The Mosaic Workers of the Thomas Foster Memorial in Uxbridge

Mosaic works, and especially those that are integrated into architectural structures, are the result of the collaboration of the architect/artist who establishes the theme and designs the piece, on the one hand, and the craftsmen who prepare the work in the studio, at times modifying the design, and the installers who apply it on the building site, on the other. If the name of the specific artist is often forgotten, the role of the mosaicists is generally not recognized at all. Our ongoing work on mosaics in Canada is an attempt to fill in the lacunae as far as possible. The results that may be obtained by this type of research are evident in our findings relative to an Ontario landmark.

An architectural jewel in the Canadian landscape, the Thomas Foster Memorial Temple just north of Uxbridge has been listed as one of the "unusual things to see in Ontario." It was commissioned in 1935 by a former Mayor of Toronto, Thomas Foster (1852-1945), as a mausoleum for his daughter and wife, both of whom had died young, his daughter Ruby in 1904, his wife Elizabeth McCauley Foster in 1920, and eventually for himself. The Temple could also serve, he believed, as "a place of worship" or "a place for holding funeral services, if so desired."² It was after completing several terms as Mayor of Toronto (1925-27) that Foster travelled to Asia and the Middle East and, while in India, was inspired by the sight of the magnificent Taj Mahal to build something comparable for his own family in the area of Ontario where he had grown up before becoming a wealthy businessman (first as a butcher and then a real estate investor) and later a Toronto politician.

Begun in 1935 and completed in the fall of 1936, the Temple is set on an octagonal base. It is fifty-five feet wide, sixty feet long, and sixty feet high to the top of the permanently green-hued copper dome, the inside diameter of which is twenty-three feet; it is made completely of durable materials, wood and nails having been banned from the project. Byzantine in structure, it boasts a most luxurious interior. In addition to fine stained glass windows, it is richly decorated with sixteen marble columns that, on their mosaic capitals, display symbols representing the twelve apostles and four gospel writers. The terrazzo and mar-

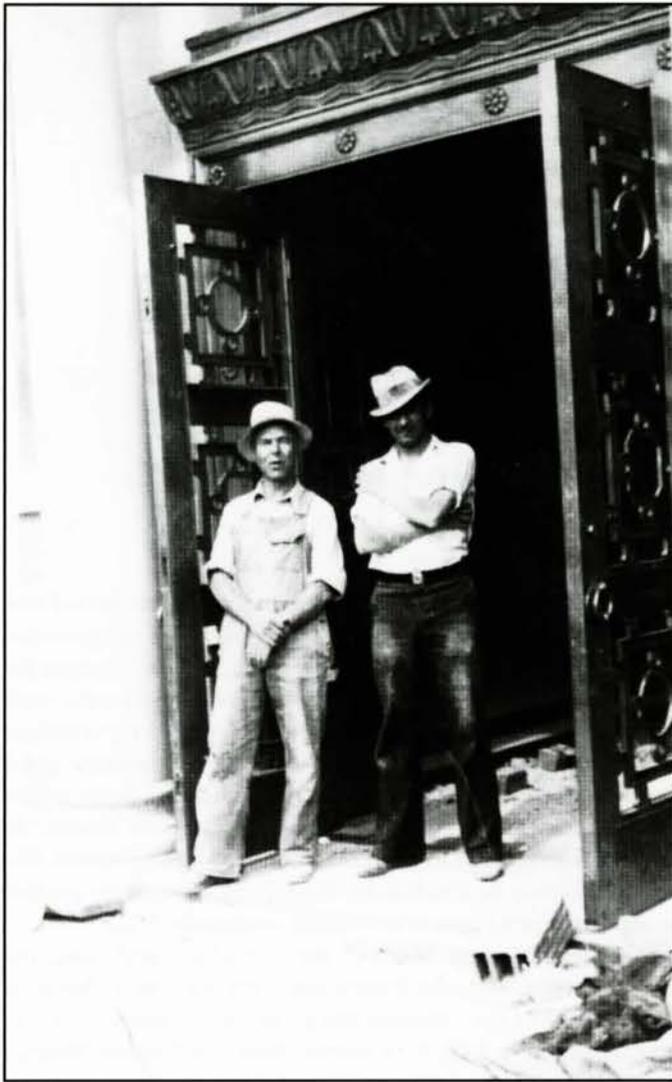


Fig. 2. Two workers (Remo De Carli on the right) at the main entrance of the Foster Memorial. (Private collection)

ble mosaics on the floors bear symbolic designs, such as the River Styx that visitors cross upon entering the building. Brightly coloured vitreous mosaics adorn the pendentives under the dome, and the soffits and returns of the great arches, in hues of orange and green.

The descriptive information that has come down to us in pamphlets and newspaper articles about the features of that unique landmark has been drawn repeatedly from a key article published in an architectural journal, in the year of its completion, by the architects Craig and Madill.³ The authors point out, for example, that “the perfect form of architecture, that of the pyramid, was the fundamental motif for the design.” A search for background information about the project in the archives of the Uxbridge-Scott Museum has produced the name of the construction company, Witchall and Son, General Contractors, but no details about the sub-contractors and certainly none about the workers responsible for the marble and mosaics. In fact, such information is nowhere to be found in any of the official English-language sources.

In our research on mosaics throughout Canada, we have had the good fortune of finding two reports on the Foster Memorial published in a rare Italian-language Toronto newspaper of the time. We have also located and interviewed several live witnesses (Olvino De Carli, Mary De Carli, and Elsa Bratti⁴), the first directly involved in, and the other two present at the time of the building of the Temple. From Mary De Carli and Anita De Carli Baker we have received precious photographs taken when the temple interior was under construction and soon after its completion.

On the basis of the new evidence, it is now possible to identify, first of all, two of the companies involved in the construction of what was termed “the most sumptuously Byzantine temple and mausoleum ever erected in Canada.”⁵ As one of the Italian-language newspaper articles, entitled “Il Memoriale di Thomas Foster a Uxbridge, Ontario” (*Il bollettino italo-canadese*, 27 November 1936) indicates, the extensive work in imported marble, including the columns, was executed by the Italian Mosaic and Marble Company of Canada Limited, then located at 60 Caledonia Rd.⁶ Run by Egidio (known as Gid or Giles) De Spirt, it was one of the first such companies in Canada, and began as a subsidiary of the parent company established earlier in the United States by Egidio’s father Giacomo, who had arrived in the United States from Friuli in the nineteenth century. In 1936, the newspaper article states, the company had branches in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, and Quebec City. As far as Toronto is concerned, we have been able to verify, by consulting the *Might’s* directories, that the manager in 1935-36 was indeed Egidio De Spirt (1894-1981), and that he had held this key position in the Italian Mosaic and Marble Company since 1924,⁷ although other members of his family had served in that capacity in the years immediately preceding. A non-family representative, Albino Pedron (1881-1946), another Friulian, had originally been sent to Canada to work for the United States-based De Spirt company earlier in the twentieth century, but soon set up his own companies.⁸

The artistic mosaic work in the Foster Memorial was contracted instead to the Connolly Marble, Mosaic and Tile Company. Although ex-Mayor Foster, a Presbyterian, was known for his frugality, he wanted nothing but the best for his family’s mausoleum. In fact, it should be noted that the project was termed “Foster’s Folly” by those local residents who felt that there was a greater need for a hospital in the area instead.⁹ Given Foster’s extravagance on the project, it is not surprising that he should have approved that the work be commissioned from Joseph P. Connolly, whose company had completed, just two years earlier in 1933, the much praised mosaic vaulted ceiling at the east

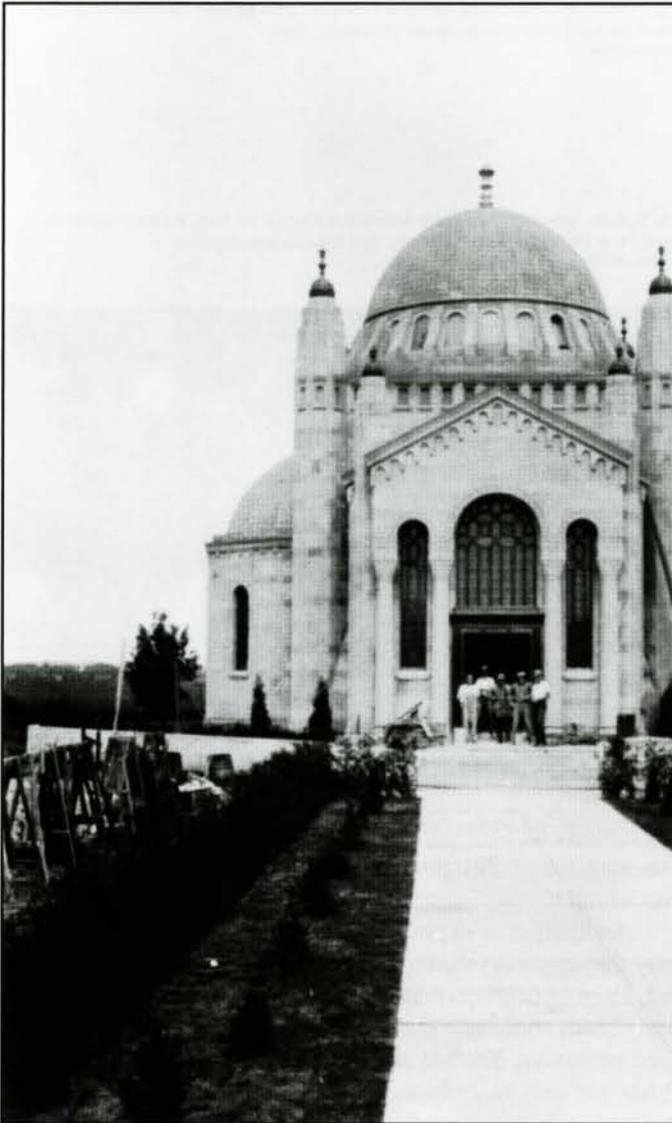
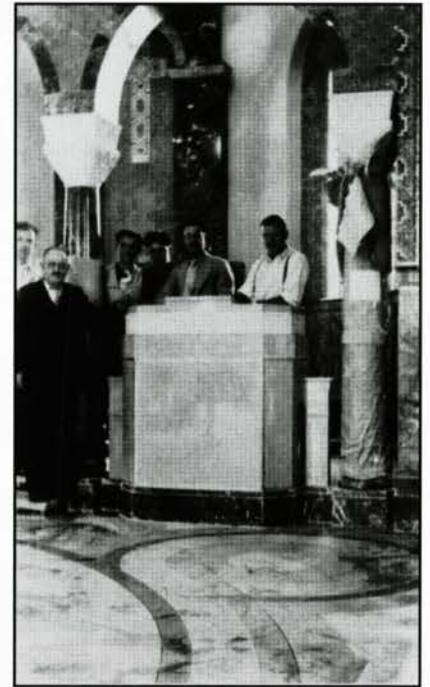


Fig. 3. Five workers (Remo De Carli at the far right) in front of the Foster Memorial. (Private collection)

Fig. 4. Some workers, their families and friends inside the Foster Memorial. From left to right: Bruno Bratti, Antonio Dell'Angela, Olivino De Carli, Andy Bortolotti, Victor Dell'Angela, and Wallace Chrysdale. (Private collection)



out the achievements of the company's expert mosaicist, *Ciro Mora*, who had worked, it is stated, not only on the Foster Memorial but also on the Museum mosaic.¹²

Indeed our research has brought to light more information on that craftsman. Born in the town of Sequals

in the Friuli region of Italy—a town that was the very centre of the tradition of mosaic art, even though the official mosaic school eventually set up in 1922 was located in the nearby town of Spilimbergo—,¹³ *Ciro Mora* (1889-1960) is listed as a mosaicist in a book based on records of Sequals.¹⁴ *Mora* had arrived in the United States in 1912 (as the Ellis Island records show). According to information provided by his hometown Mayor, he married in 1919 *Irene Carnera*, a townswoman from Sequals in Washington. The Toronto records indicate that he worked there in 1928-29 for the Italian Mosaic and Tile Co., before joining the *Connolly Company*. He is listed as a partner in the *Connolly Company of Toronto* from 1930 to 1939 (as Vice-President in the latter year, for example¹⁵), together with a fellow Friulian, *Antonio Bortuzzo* (1880-1966) of Spilimbergo.¹⁶ *Bortuzzo*, who had arrived in the United States in 1907 and was a *Connolly* partner for a brief period in 1930-32, as the records in *Might's* directories show, returned afterwards to his hometown in Italy. The partnerships demonstrate that the Anglo-Canadian entrepreneurs required the skills of the Italian Canadian craftsmen. Since *Ciro Mora* had been in Washington,¹⁷ together with his brother *Dante Mora*, also a mosaicist, who was born in Sequals in 1883 and died in Washington, one may speculate that they had a hand in some important mosaic works executed in the United States capital too. The November 1936 article already cited announces that *Ciro Mora*, who had served as a member of the executive of the association of Friulians in Toronto,¹⁸ was about to return to Italy (and that has been confirmed by those who knew him). He was to be replaced, it is stated, by the young *Connolly* employee, *Remo De Carli* (1908-72), another Friulian who had arrived in Canada in 1927 and who, together with his brother *Olivino* (1912-97), was eventually to become owner of the *Connolly Company* from the early 1950s on. The *Connolly Company*, under the *De Carli* directorship, it should be noted, went on to provide much

entrance to the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto with its comprehensive depiction of the various civilizations of the world. *Connolly* (1882-1943) had arrived in Toronto from Ireland in 1900 and was to become active in city politics.¹⁰ Before establishing his own mosaic and marble company—listed for the first time in the directories in 1930—he had gained experience in the field, having served as Manager of *De Spirt's* Italian Mosaic and Marble Company from 1917 to 1920 and as Vice-President of *Pedron's* Art Mosaic and Tile Co. Ltd. in 1927 and 1928, for example.¹¹ Clearly, an Anglo-Canadian associate was a necessity for these early Italian-Canadian enterprises.

Connolly's contribution to Toronto architecture and that of others too is confirmed in an article that appeared a week earlier in the same Italian-language newspaper, *Il bollettino italo-canadese*. Entitled "Aliti di arte italiana in Canada" or "Glimmers of Italian Art in Canada" (20 November 1936), it announces the completion of the Foster Memorial, names the *Connolly Company* of 316 Dupont St. as the one responsible for the mosaics, and speaks of the firm's excellent reputation. Furthermore, it singles



Fig. 5. From left to right, inside the Foster Memorial, Olvino De Carli, Julia Oliviero (fiancée of Remo De Carli), Mary Mariani (fiancée of Olvino De Carli). (Private collection)

Fig. 6. At the dedication of the Foster Memorial on October 25, 1936, standing from left to right, Remo De Carli, Joseph P. Connolly, Ciro Mora, Eugenio Oliviero. (Private collection)



standing, has made it possible to identify Remo De Carli only, on the far right.

Another series of photos, also from the summer of 1936, one may deduce, was taken in the interior this time and on a different, more festive occasion, when the workers and their families and friends attended a picnic at the site. Thomas Foster was very fond of picnics. The bequests that he left at his death included funds not only to promote cancer research at the University of Toronto and other causes, but also to sponsor an annual picnic for underprivileged children in the city.²² It is very likely that it was he who organized the event for the Temple workers. One person who attended the picnic but does not appear in the photos, Elsa (Dell'Angela) Bratti, has, however, identified all of the persons who do appear. In the group photo (No. 4) taken in the still incomplete temple (it may be observed that one of the columns is partially wrapped for protection as the work was proceeding²³), we find from left to right her husband (Bruno Bratti), her father (Antonio Dell'Angela, who had won a gold medal in Udine in 1911 for his accomplishments as a mosaicist), the young Olvino De Carli, Andy Bortolotti (a protégé of Dell'Angela who would later become founder of York Marble, Tile and Terrazzo), Elsa's brother Victor Dell'Angela (an artist²⁴ who, as the *Might's* directories show, had worked early on, e.g., in 1931, as a draftsman for De Spirt's Italian Mosaic and Marble Company), and finally Wallace Chrysdale, the fiancé of a friend, Olga Ruffino. Another photo (No. 5) includes the De Carli women too, Julia Oliviero, who married Remo De Carli in September of 1936, and Mary Mariani, fiancée at the time of Olvino, who also figures in the photograph.²⁵

significant embellishment of architectural sites in Canada. As far as their works in mosaic are concerned, the height of their production was in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁹

It is most fortunate that the De Carli family has preserved some photographs taken at the Foster Memorial on at least three separate occasions, all save one of small format. The first set shows the mosaic installers at work on the building site.²⁰ In photo No. 1 we recognize, on the right, Remo De Carli²¹ at work high up on a scaffold installing mosaics near the inscription that circles the building just below the dome. The last words of the gold lettering are clearly visible. In its entirety it reads: "Take this my body for it is done and I have gained a new life, **glorious and eternal**" [highlighting ours to indicate the letters seen in the photograph]. The snapshot must have been taken by fellow installers, in all likelihood positioned on other scaffolds at the same height from the ground. Photograph No. 2 shows the same Remo De Carli standing at the entrance of the building together with an unidentified worker. In photograph No. 3, taken on the same day as the previous photo (the workclothes of both men are identical in each), a larger group of five workers stand in front of the structure. An enlargement of a detail of the photo, where the men are

Fig. 7. Remo and Julia De Carli inside the Foster Memorial on the day of its dedication.
(Private collection)

And, finally, the last set of two photos, one large and one small, records a very special event, the official opening of the Foster Memorial and its dedication on Sunday, 25 October 1936.²⁶ In the larger photo (No. 6), taken in front of the cornerstone plaque, we find again on the left Remo De Carli, this time elegantly dressed. Next to him is the owner of the marble and mosaic company, Joseph P. Connolly, and then, third from the left, his chief mosaicist and partner, Ciro Mora. On the far right we find Eugenio Olivero, known as Eugene Oliver, chef at the King Edward Hotel, and Remo De Carli's father-in-law. The smaller photo (No. 7) shows Remo inside the Temple in the same fancy attire and accompanied by his wife Julia.

The evidence presented here—based on the consultation of Italian-language newspapers, old city directories, and contemporary photographic records, along with archival sources and mainstream newspapers—brings to light for the first time specific names for the companies and workers involved in preparing what are certainly the most lavish features of the Foster Memorial, its marble and mosaics. Our research now enables us to correct the belief on the part of some that “Workmen were brought from Italy to perform the intricate details of its tiling, mosaic and marble work.”²⁷ As we have seen, the workers did indeed come from the Friuli region of Italy, but they were already in Canada (some in the U.S. originally) working on other sites too. Some craftsmen returned to Italy, as in the case of Mora and Bortuzzo, although it was expected that the former at least would return, while others, like the De Carlis and Dell’Angelas, stayed.

On the basis of that new data, one can appreciate even more the statement found in a 1994 article in “Details” (18 June 1994, “The Back Page”) available at the Temple. It points out that nine years ago the mosaics and marble were in good condition and that the estimated cost to erect the building in that year would have been approximately five million dollars. But the writer adds the clause, “if the craftsmen could be found for the decorative work”—an important caveat, indeed. It highlights what the aim of our research and of this paper has been; namely, to recognize, even if with a single example, albeit an outstanding one, the indispensable contribution that Italian mosaic and terrazzo workers and early entrepreneurs have made to the be-tifying of Canadian architecture. Without them it could not have taken place.



Notes

1. Brown, Ron, 1993, rpt. 1999, « Ontario's Taj Mahal: The Thomas Foster Memorial », 50 *Even More Unusual Things to See in Ontario*, Erin, Ontario, Boston Mills Press, no. 30.
2. From his dedication speech, the text of which, along with other information on the Temple and on Foster, is available in the Archives of the Uxbridge-Scott Museum, HB. 80. 5.
3. Craig and Madill, 1936, *Journal*, Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, 13, p. 225-229.
4. The De Carlis were interviewed on 22 September 1996 and Elsa Dell'Angela Bratti on 4 June 2001.
5. A front-page article in *The Uxbridge Times Journal*, 29 October 1936.
6. Other works by the company listed in the article are the mosaic floors in the Toronto Old City Hall, the King Edward Hotel, and the provincial Parliament building in Toronto. In 1936 the company had just received contracts for similar works in the Parliament building in Quebec City, the Ministry of Justice (ex RCMP) build-

ing in Ottawa, the Gray Nuns' Monastery in Ottawa, and many others.

That article on the marble work appeared a week after the report featuring the Foster Memorial mosaics. There may well have been some rivalry between the individuals and the companies involved.

7. During WWII the company changed its name to De Spirt Mosaic and Marble Co., as the entries in Might's Toronto directories for the years from 1941 on indicate, although the Caledonia Rd. address remained the same. In the earlier years, e.g. 1929, the company was located on King St. West.

8. Zucchi, John, 1988, *Italians in Toronto: Development of a National Identity, 1875-1935*, Kingston and Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, p. 84 speaks of this. More specific data is found in the Toronto directories: they show that Pedron, who arrived in the U.S. in 1909 or even earlier in 1901 (see the Ellis Island records), was working in Toronto in 1914. For four years (1915-18) he was Manager of the Venetian Marble and Mosaic Company; from 1919 on he was Manager of the Italian Mosaic and Tile Co. Ltd (which moved from 429 Spadina Ave. to 250 Madison Ave. in 1924) and then President in 1923-26. At that point, he sold the company to its Vice-President, John Brooks. From 1927 to 1933, Pedron was President of the Art Mosaic Tile Co. Ltd. located at 619-621 King St. West.

9. See Bob Langmaid's article in the *Toronto Star*, 1 July 1986. The Temple was called "Foster's Folly" in the *Toronto Star*, 30 November 1995, p. OS 2. Recently too, on 20 November 2002, a letter to the editor was published in the same

newspaper stressing the need for a hospital in Uxbridge. Our thanks to Dario Brancato who looked up some of those and other newspaper articles.

10. See his death notice in *The Telegram*, 7 June 1943, bearing the following title: "Joseph Connolly Dies in Scarboro: Well Known as Constructor of Mosaics in Royal Ontario Museum."

11. See the Might's Toronto directory entries for those years.

12. "Recentemente è stata ultimata una rotonda, per un monumento funebre della famiglia Foster, in Uxbridge, dall'artista italiano Ciro Mora, un mosaicista provetto che tiene alto il nome dell'arte italiana dei mosaici in questa città. Il lavoro è uno dei molteplici eseguiti da questo artista. Tutti possono ammirare i mosaici del locale Museo. La rotonda ha il preg[i]o di essere un fine lavoro d'arte, forse uno dei migliori che ha eseguiti il Cira." (Recently a temple was completed in Uxbridge, as a mausoleum for the Foster family, by the expert mosaicist Ciro Mora, who does honour to the Italian art of mosaics in this city. This work is one of the many that have been executed by this artist. All may admire the mosaics in the local Museum. The Temple has the distinction of being a fine work of art, perhaps one of the best that Cira [sic] has produced.) *Il bollettino italo-canadese*, 20 November 1936.

13. From 14 December 2002 to 16 March 2003, the ROM (Royal Ontario Museum of Toronto) hosted an exhibit of mosaic works by the teachers and students of the school.

14. Colledani, Gianni, and Tullio Perfetti (eds.), 1994, *Dal sasso al mosaico: Storia dei terrazzieri e mosaicisti di Sequals* (Comune di

Sequals: Edizioni Biblioteca dell'immagine), p. 182 (the year of death is erroneously given as 1950). The book was a gift from *ingegnere* Gianpiero Blasarin, Mayor of Sequals.

15. Since the individual entries for Ciro Mora end in 1937, one may surmise that he was kept on as a partner, in the expectation that he might return. In fact, the Italian article states that he was going to return to Canada and bring with him new ideas about mosaics from Italy. ("Egli sta per partire per l'Italia ed è sua intenzione di portare qui il soffio delle nuove idee artistiche che pervade la penisola anche nel campo del mosaico.")

16. The registry office of the town of Spilimbergo has provided information on him.

17. He resided at 517 3rd St., NE, Washington, D.C., as one of the Ellis Island records for his brother indicates.

18. Principe, Angelo, and Olga Zorzi Pugliese, 1996, *Rekindling Faded Memories: The Founding of the Famee Furlane of Toronto and Its First Years (1933-1941)*, Toronto, Famee Furlane, p. 63.

19. The works of that period will be discussed in the central part of the book we are preparing on mosaics in Canada.

20. Special thanks go to Mrs. Mary (Mariani) De Carli and Mrs. Anita (De Carli) Baker for the photos.

21. The worker on the left has not been identified.

22. See the article "Mayor Foster's Legacy: Ice Cream in the Park," in the *Toronto Star*, 13 September 1976, p. C1, with a photo of then Toronto Mayor David Crombie. Recently an article by George Gamester, entitled "Eccentric Mayor was Honest and Rich," appeared in the *Toronto Star*, 19 January 2003, p. A16.

23. Thanks go to Ivano Bortolussi for the explanation of this detail.

24. Information on the Dell'Angelas may be found in Julius A. Molinaro's review of Angelo Principe, and Olga Zorzi Pugliese, 1997, *Rekindling Faded Memories* (cited above) in *Italian Canadiana*, 13, p. 142-144.

25. Olivino told us that he had worked on the Foster Memorial; Elsa reported that both her father and brother, Antonio and Victor Dell'Angela, had as well. The presence of the others can be accounted for, she stated, by the fact that Julia, Elsa, and Olga were best friends.

26. Both Elsa Dell'Angela Bratti, a close friend, and Anita De Carli Baker, the daughter of Remo De Carli, have confirmed the identities of the persons in the last set of photos.

27. From an article describing the opening and the dedication ceremony on the front page of *The Uxbridge Times Journal*, 29 October 1936. It also reports that 2,000 persons, only 375 of whom could be accommodated inside the temple, attended the event.