

## A Wife's Tale

## The sad story of Angelina

Long-buried drama of the Sault Ste. Marie mother who raised an axe and killed her abusive husband in 1911 is finally being told in new film

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In the morning cool of Easter Sunday 1911, she stood over his sleeping form, splayed in the bed they shared. Her husband. The father of her unborn child. Her tormenter.

The axe was heavy, no doubt, as she drew it up above her head. But it fell easily enough, cleaving his skull, and severing her from the torture her life here in the frozen hinterland of Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., had become.

In her three-hour trial, Angelina Napolitano, a 28-year-old immigrant mother of four from Southern Italy, was sentenced to be hanged immediately after she gave birth. She told the court that her abusive husband, Pietro, was once a good man. When did he stop being good? she was asked.

"When we came here," she said, according to Alessandra Piccione, who, if anyone, would know. With her producer partner Sergio Navaretta, Piccione has been one of many stewards on Angelina's long journey from obscurity back to the public eye.

Together, they translated the story into a screenplay, and finally, a feature film. The finished product, the modestly budgeted \$250,000 Italian-language film *Looking for Angelina*, debuts in Toronto on Friday.

It was a sensational case. Pietro, breaking under the strain of poverty in the new world, threatened to kill their unborn child if his wife wouldn't prostitute herself to bring in money. His wife saw only one way out.

In the words of playwright Frank Canino, it had "all the elements for a bad docu-melodrama, complete with helpless heroine and snarling villain." Canino's play, *The Angelina Project*, would become the film's basis.

And sensational enough, surely, to have lodged permanently in the minds of Sault Ste. Marie's Italian community. Or so Piccione thought.

"Nobody knew anything about it. It had been buried," she said. "They were trying so hard to move forward, they just tried to keep it quiet."

Ray Stortini, 70, was a superior court judge in the Sault for almost 30 years. He grew up in the Italian neighbourhood where the murder took place. One of his closest friends was the grandson of Angelina's landlord.

"I knew nothing of this growing up. None of my friends did, either," Stortini said. "It was like it never happened."

Stortini was not surprised the case had been ushered into oblivion. "It was always drummed into me by my parents — don't do anything to disgrace yourself, because you'll disgrace the whole Italian race," he said.



Lina Giornofelice stars as Angelina Napolitano and Alvaro D' Antonio as her abusive husband Pietro in the new film *Looking for Angelina*, based on a true story.

Indeed, the murder came at a critical juncture. The Sault's Italian ghetto was brimming with new arrivals looking for work in its rapidly developing industrial zone.

The community, marginalized by the Anglo ruling class, had started to demand such basic necessities as sewer systems, roads and schools.

But the Angelina case became a quick, easy I-told-you-so for the Anglo establishment. "This murder case enraged them," said Franca Iacovetta, a University of Toronto historian, who, with Queen's University historian Karen Durbinsky, wrote the first paper on the case in 1991.

Response to the murder had potent racist undertones. "The tone was very much 'This is what happens when you let too many of these people in,'" Iacovetta said. "The editor of the *Sault Star* wrote constantly about how horrendous this woman was — 'Why are so many people trying to defend her? She's one of these hot-blooded Italians.'"

The community, fearing a backlash, simply withdrew. "The people felt vulnerable, I

think, and didn't rise to her defence," Stortini said.

The case lay deep in the National Archives in Ottawa for decades. Durbinsky came across it during research on violence and family history. She and Iacovetta managed to piece the story together in vivid detail.

The case file held petitions containing thousands of names from all over the world, pleading for clemency.

Ava Belmont, a Vanderbilt, started a petition campaign by placing newspaper ads that people could sign and send to the minister of justice in Ottawa.

Angelina was an international *cause célèbre*.

"We found a petition or two with signatures from the Italian community in Sault Ste. Marie," Iacovetta said. "That's it. They're not active much at all in this, and I think it was humiliation. This brought a lot of attention to their little community, and it was entirely negative."

Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier eventually commuted Angelina's sentence to life imprisonment.

The unborn child, who had prolonged her life long enough

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ALESSANDRA PICCIONE, FILMMAKER

to save it, died in childbirth. After 11 years in Kingston Penitentiary, she was released into the care of a reform-minded MP for whom she worked as a maid. From there, Angelina vanishes; no further records of her or her children exist.

Angelina's long nightmare, it seems, finally met a merciful end. But Piccione wonders just how many other such horrors are still tucked away.

"You don't hear the stories, they aren't passed down through the generations. But they reverberate just the same," she said. "It's a real disservice that people don't understand what a lot of people who made this country went through."

