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Prof. Presnell

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### **Figuring Out Francis Ferri**

My childhood was a blissful time in my life; I have no reason to complain. My parents were always supportive and loving, as were my siblings, even if they never would admit it. I also was blessed to have four grandparents there to show up to sporting events, dance recitals, and school plays with flowers in hand. I always knew I was lucky when it came to my grandparents because many of my friends did not have the pleasure of knowing or meeting theirs. I grew up thinking fondly of both sides of grandparents: Grandpop and Grandma on my dad's side, and Grandma Hickey and Grandpa Bill on my mom's. I never assumed that my Grandpa Bill was not my biological grandfather. The thought never passed my mind until about age ten.

### **Curious Little Kid, Prying College Student**

In Mrs. McAddam's fifth grade, we did a family tree project. I quickly filled out my name, my brothers, sister, parents and grandparents. I hit a wall once I got to that point; I never met my great grandparents or asked my parents about my great grandparents. So, I proceeded to take the project home and talk to my parents about it. When I was talking to my mom, I showed her my family tree and asked her to fill in the missing slots. She filled in the missing names and changed one. She changed my

grandfather on her side from “Bill Hickey”, to “Rick Ferri”. I was so thoroughly confused. Immediately, I began to ask questions about this Rick Ferri character. Who was he? Why did not I know of him? My mom just explained that when she was nine, her parents had gotten a divorce. Her mom had been remarried to the man who I had grown up thinking was my biological grandfather. It all started to make sense. I knew that my mom’s maiden name was Ferri and not Hickey. But being a child, I just took it for how it was and did not pay any more attention to it. Finally knowing that I had another grandparent, I asked to meet this mystery man as soon as possible. My mom then told me that I did once when I was one, but that I could not again. She then quickly turned on the radio and started to make dinner, signifying that our conversation was over. My curiosity did not end with that conversation. Instead of asking my mom more questions, I turned to my older brother. I pestered him with questions about Rick Ferri and why I did not know about him until now. My brother answered with short answers, gave little detail, and tried to change topics. I just kept persisting for my answers. My brother alluded to the idea that he was in prison because of his involvement with the mafia and that was all. Finally, my brother snapped, and yelled that I should just drop it and be quiet. I sensed the severity in his tone and realized that he meant business. I stopped snooping into it and just left it as it was. Although I stopped talking about it, my mind would sometimes wonder about this Rick Ferri. My curiosity was silenced until college.

The first day of class in my second semester of my first year at college, Professor Presnell described our big research assignment. I left that class clueless about what to research. At first, I was trying to think of family mysteries, there was not much there. I did not even consider my biological grandpa on my mom’s side as a mystery. I guess it

did not seem like a mystery because people in my family knew a lot about it; I just was not one of them. However, by the second class, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I realized that this was my opportunity to answer the provocative questions that I have had about my grandpa. It hit me that my family was not going to tell me anymore about him, so I decided to take matters into my own hands.

### **Rick Ferri Doesn't Exist**

I began my research by doing what any student in the 21<sup>st</sup> century does: Googling “Rick Ferri.” I hoped something interesting would pop up, and nothing did. I just got a long list of books and blogs written by an author with the same name as my mystery grandpa. I ruled this Rick Ferri out right away because he was too young. I then refined my search to “Richard Ferri”, assuming that Rick was just a nickname. Again, my search was fruitless. I was feeling hopeless at this point. How was I supposed to learn anything about my grandfather if I cannot even find him on Google, everyone is on Google. I was grasping at straws when I decided to Google “Rick Ferri Pittsburgh”. I knew that my mom grew up in Pittsburgh and it was my last hope of finding anything. Finally, something useful popped up. I quickly learned that his name was actually Francis Ferri, but he went by the nickname Rick. I was so ecstatic to finally get some concrete evidence that this guy existed, but what I learned following that was chilling.

### **Chilling Truth**

I knew that Francis “Rick” Ferri was not going to be a cuddly, sunshine-filled old man. One of the only facts I knew about him was that he was in prison. Nevertheless, what I learned still hit me like a bus. The first link I clicked on was a newspaper article

with the header “Jury sentences Ferri to Life Term in Slaying of Drug Dealer”. I was shocked. My grandfather killed a man and got life in prison because of it. This led me to so many questions: Who is the man he killed? Why did he kill him? Did he commit any other crimes? Was he actually in the mafia? I could not end my research here; I had to find more. I began to look into the crime that landed him in prison.

### **My Grandfather: a Murderer and a Mafia Member**

After finding out that he got life in prison for murder, I had to look more into the topic. I began to search more into Francis “Rick” Ferri and the murder he committed. It was easy to find sources and articles once I knew what I was looking for. Soon I started to piece the puzzle together. From an article in the Pittsburgh Press called “Drug Dealer Testifies, Denies Killing Partner”, I learned Francis Ferri killed a man named John “Jocko” Heatherington. The crime was not mindless cruelty; it was committed because Ferri feared that Heatherington would rat him out to the police. He feared this because Heatherington was about to start a federal trial. Previously, Jocko was caught selling \$19,000 worth of cocaine to undercover cops. Because they worked together in the cocaine/drug trafficking business, Ferri became worried that his name and other details would be released along with the trial. His solution to this problem was to kill Heatherington. Thus, causing Ferri and a friend, Anthony “Rocky” LaRocca, to meet up with Heatherington at a hotel where they proceeded to shoot him seven times in the head. Surprisingly, Heatherington lived for a month after the attack. Now that I knew who and why he killed a man, my new mission was to find out if Francis Ferri was in the mafia and if this motivated his crime.

The first clue in figuring out if Ferri was involved with the mafia was his partner in crime, Anthony “Rocky” LaRocca. I began to research LaRocca and found out that he is the nephew of the famous mob boss Sebastian John LaRocca. S. John LaRocca was the head of the LaRocca/Genovese section of the La Cosa Nostra, a well-known mafia family in western Pennsylvania and in parts of Ohio and West Virginia. I knew that this is not solid proof stating that they both were in the mafia, but it was a start. I took this piece of information and ran with it. By looking more into the LaRocca/Genovese section of the La Cosa Nostra, I found a report that discussed the mafia and my grandfather. This was the proof I was looking for. It directly came out and related the crime that Francis Ferri committed to the mafia. This report, *Organized Crime in Pennsylvania: A Decade of Change*, explained that Anthony LaRocca and Francis Ferri were the heads of an extensive cocaine network in western Pennsylvania. The crime that Ferri committed was all starting to make sense. He and LaRocca killed Heatherington to avoid any possible investigation into the cocaine network they were running for revenue for the mafia family, which they were members of. They had to decide to either kill Heatherington or be killed by the mafia. While looking into whether or not Ferri was a member of the mafia, I found out that he had committed other crimes as well.

### **Never Ending Rap Sheet**

Once I found the solid proof that he was a mafia member, my next question to answer was: what other crimes did he commit? I began to revisit old articles and sources to see what else I could pull from them. Soon I was creating a long list of all the crimes that Ferri had committed. On this list, there were two cases of arson, mail fraud, witness tampering, and drug trafficking. These charges had sent him to prison several times. In

addition, he was in prison serving a 25-year sentence for arson while on trial for the murder of Heatherington. Ferri was caught doing several crimes; I can only imagine the number of crimes that he got away with. After finding out more about the crimes he committed, it only made it clearer to me that Ferri was an active member of the mafia.

### **Who really is Francis Ferri?**

Once I thought I was done with my research, I had a realization. I realized that I did not know much about Francis Ferri. I knew his crimes and his criminal record, but not him as a person. I did not know who his parents were, when his birthday is, or even if he was alive. So I began by solving the question: is Francis Ferri alive? I looked up different prisons and was able to find out that Ferri is alive. According to an inmate locator, run by the state of Pennsylvania, he is alive and still in prison. He currently is in the state correctional institution in Dallas, Pennsylvania. After learning this, I became interested in his childhood and background. Most people turn to their parents to find out answers about their relatives, but this was not the case for me. This whole project was kept silent because I knew that it would only bring pain to my mom. Therefore, instead of calling up my mom, I decide to create an account on Ancestry.com. Through this website, I was able to answer some of my questions. I found out that he had lived in Glasport, PA and around the Pittsburgh area for his whole life and his parents were Concetta and Luigi Ferri. I could not figure out his birthday though. In a 1940 census, it stated that his birthday was about 1929. However, other sources said that his birthday was in 1928 or in 1933. I was stuck, how could one man have a five-year range for his birthday. Then, the missing piece appeared; Francis Ferri was adopted. I came to this conclusion with the help of Donna Gunter, a librarian at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte who

specializes in genealogy and family research. Because he was adopted, his parents never knew his real birthday so they just gave him one. The most common date for his birth is January 1, 1933. I am assuming that this is either the date that his parents adopted him, or one that they chose. Either way, no one will know that exact age of Francis Ferri but we can assume that he is about 82 years old. I learned more about his life as well as his childhood. I knew from previous knowledge from my mother that he married Lorraine Cecilia Mularski, my grandmother, and had three children with her. The eldest child is Lynda, my mother, the middle is Jeff, and the youngest is Richard. Lorraine and Francis ended up getting a divorce, probably because of his involvement with the mafia. It helped knowing a little bit more about his life than just his rap sheet.

### **Innocence**

One of the most interesting things I found out from my search into Francis Ferri was that he never pleaded guilty to murdering Heatherington. He pleaded not guilty and testified in his trial that he and Heatherington were friends. They actually were long-term friends, knowing each other since high school. Ferri has been quoted calling Heatherington a brother, in the article "Drug Dealer Testifies, Denies Killing Partner". Heatherington even attended my parent's wedding. However, the proof is against Ferri's words. Police found copper fragments and gunpowder residue on his clothes, putting him at the scene of the crime. The jury also found him guilty. This means that Ferri was either wrongfully convicted to a crime he did not commit, or that he killed a longtime friend.

## **Now What?**

After spending hours on researching one man, now what do I do with all of this information and why is this important? I know that my biological grandfather is a convicted criminal, killer and mafia member. But, that conclusion is far from comforting. No one should want to be related to a mafia member or murderer. I also face the problem of contacting him. I know that he is alive and just a phone call away. If I really wanted to, I could even visit him and get the whole story from his side. I was pondering this when I realized that I do not want to communicate with a killer even if we share the same DNA. I especially do not want to talk to a man who killed one of his friends. I had made up my mind about him; he is a criminal and a murderer, even if he pleaded not guilty.

Something positive that I did learn from this whole project is that I am related to two very strong women. This whole process made me realize how hard it must have been for my mom to be the daughter of a murderer. I felt slightly ashamed to be the granddaughter of Francis Ferri, so I cannot even imagine what it must feel like to be his daughter. I understand now why she wanted to keep this a secret from me and why she never wanted to bring it up. In addition, this was a very large, drawn out trial. It was published in newspapers, was on the news and was one of the biggest arrests that the Pittsburgh police had made that year. My mom had to deal with the struggle of having a criminal father, having it published everywhere, and having people judge her for her father's actions. This makes me even prouder to have her be my mother. It just shows how strong she is, because she never let this hold her back. My uncles had to deal with the same thing as my mother and they are resilient people as well. They both are successful and I am happy to say that they did not follow their father's footsteps. This



project made me realize how strong my Grandma Hickey is as well. She got divorced during a time when jobs for women were limited and salaries were low. She had to work long, hard hours to keep the lights on and food on the table. Overall, it is a shame that my biological grandfather is a criminal. However, through this process, I finally got my questions answered and have realized the strength of my family.

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