

JOHN B. MARCHISI

By Jon J. Landers

Few local people would know who John B. Marchisi was or what his connection to Utica, N. Y. was, even though he was a prominent early citizen of this city. This man lived to be 95 years old, is credited with being the first person of Italian heritage to settle in Utica, served in Napoleon's Army and would come to invent a patent medicine that would be sold throughout the United States and Canada, thus spreading Utica's name along with his medicine. The chronicles of his upbringing and early experiences make an interesting and colorful story; and one that is worth conveying.

On August 6, 1879 Jean Baptiste Marchisi was born in Piedmont Italy one of ten children born to a man that was a music teacher. At the young age of 14 Marchisi was apprenticed as an apothecary for an Arthur Mueller and carried on for 4 years. About the time Marchisi was 18 years old, Napoleon conquered Italy and Marchisi was drafted into the French Army and served with them for four years. Napoleon is considered by many to have been the greatest military leader that ever lived.

While working as an apprentice for Mueller, Marchisi learned how to compound a special piles ointment which he later used in Italy, Russia, and Canada and later would manufacture and advertise in Utica.

Marchisi accompanied Napoleon on some of his campaigns through Europe, the Alps and the St. Bernard Pass where many of the soldiers perished from the cold. According to people who knew him later in life, Marchisi was proud of his service with Napoleon and had a great admiration for him. He referred to Napoleon as "the greatest and the kindest general of them all."

In 1809, when Marchisi was serving aboard a French ship, they encountered a severe storm and had to put into the British port of Messina in the Isle of Sicily. Their Captain had to surrender the ship and crew to the British to prevent their demise. After some time Marchisi was offered his freedom if he agreed to serve with the British which he did because he felt he had no other choice to salvage his life.

Soon after this he was sent to Canada and was stationed at Fort George near Kingston. The long and difficult journey took 32 days. Because Marchisi knew how to speak seven languages he had never had to bear arms when he was in Napoleon's army. He had served as a quartermaster and at times a hospital steward. He was given the rank of sergeant with the British which was the same rank he had held in the French Army and again with the British served as a quartermaster and at times a paymaster.

While at Fort George Marchisi fell in love with a girl named Catherine Forbis who was of German descent and with permission from his superiors married her on December 18, 1813. A while after their marriage he escaped from the British with his young bride and came by stage to Utica in 1815. Because of his background he found employment at the office of one of Utica's earliest surgeons a man named Dr. Amos G. Hull who had an office on 15 Main Street.

Marchisi compounded prescriptions for Dr. Hull and assisted him in surgical operations. He worked for Dr. Hull for 10 years and gained the knowledge of the medical practice. At the time it was legal for an apothecary or druggist to prescribe medicine at the request of customers. He became known as Dr. Marchisi although he never received a degree as a doctor of medicine. In 1817 which was the first year a city directory was issued for the Village of Utica, Marchisi was listed as Dr. Marchisi.

In addition to being a surgeon Dr. Hull was a specialist in the manufacture and sale of hernial trusses. He first advertised these devices in 1817. In later years Marchisi would also advertise and engage in this business in addition to his apothecary business. Without a doubt his expertise came from his association with Dr. Hull.

In 1825 Dr. Hull had to relocate to New York City because his brother had been dealt some misfortune and Marchisi had to find other employment and went to work for an apothecary named A. Hitchcock who had his business at 83 Genesee Street.

It was here while working for Hitchcock that Marchisi started advertising his Italian Piles Ointment that he learned to compound as an apprentice apothecary and had used while serving with Napoleon's Army. Evidently sitting on the cold rocks in the Alps raised havoc with the French troops. (See Figure 8 - Advertisement for Marchisi's Piles Ointment). He stayed here for 2 or 3 years and then went to work for the druggist firm of Hunt and Bristol which was located at 109 Genesee Street.

Marchisi became well known and respected in Utica and had many prominent friends including John C. Devereux who was the founder of the Utica Savings Bank and who had served two terms as mayor of Utica. With his help in 1829 Marchisi opened his own drug store the "Drug Emporium" at 136 Genesee Street in Utica (See Figure 3 – advertisement for Dr. Marchisi's Drug Store).

John B. Marchisi and his wife Catherine had a large family but my research reveals a dispute in regard to just how many children they had. According to a story that appeared the day after his death on February 2, 1885 in the *Utica Daily Press*, Marchisi was the father of 12 children (although the newspaper only listed 3 survivors). In the book *Americans by Choice*, 1940 the author George Schiro wrote that the Marchisi's had only seven children and his book contains a diagram of the family tree listing the seven children. The family is buried in the Forest Hill Cemetery in Utica.

Two of Marchisi's sons (Henry and Darius) and his brother Joseph M. Marchisi served in the Civil War. Henry was a hospital steward and served from 1862 until the end of the war. Joseph served only one year and was discharged because of a disability and later was in business with his brother J. B. Marchisi as a watch repairer. Unfortunately, Darius never came back from the war because he died of disease in Virginia and was buried there. A tombstone with his name on it is in the family plot in Forest Hill Cemetery even though his body was never returned after his death in the Civil War.

Old Utica City Directories show that Marchisi moved his business to several different locations through the years. From 1847 – 1850 Marchisi's store was located at 167 Genesee Street and his son Henry was in charge of the soda fountain. In 1851 the address was 183 Genesee Street and continued there until 1855. Two of his other sons Darius and Frank worked in the business. Henry and Darius were clerks in the store and Frank was a watch repairer. By 1860 Marchisi and Son had their business at 171 Genesee Street.

In 1850 Dr. Marchisi decided to devote much of his time and interest to the manufacture and marketing of a female remedy that would result in him becoming a wealthy and successful businessman. Dr. Marchisi's Uterine Catholicon was sold throughout the United States and Canada. His nostrum was advertised in over 1300 newspapers. **The story of his Catholicon appears on the next page of this newsletter as a separate article.**

Marchisi lived to be 95 years old and was healthy up until a few days before his death. On February 1, 1885 the man who had served in Napoleon's Army; the man who was Utica's first Italian resident; the one who carried Utica's name throughout the United States and Canada with the sale of his patent medicine passed away ending what was quite a happy and extraordinary life. It was a common belief that he was universally respected by all his acquaintances. Today, as bottle collectors we are grateful that he left behind some bottles for us to collect.

