

## The Bells of Agnone

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*In this week's #NIAFblog, our guest blogger, Jenifer Landor – founder of [Live and Learn Italian](#), offers a fascinating look into the heritage of a small Italian town in the Apennine hills – where for centuries, the Marinelli family has been making bells.*



The third oldest continuously family-owned business in the world is in Molise – in the small town of Agnone – where my grandfather's cousins have been making bells for over 1,000 years. Bell-making is a proud part of our heritage that has been passed down from father to son in a town famous for its artisans – gold, silver, copper, stone and ironwork among the most important.

At one time, there were six families making bells in Agnone – today, only the Marinelli family continues the craft, creating bells that are sent all around the world.

As a child growing up in America, my mother used a small Marinelli bell to call us to dinner – it could be heard throughout the entire neighborhood. We knew a little bit of our family's story, and acknowledged some pride in being related to the “oldest bell-makers in the world.” Our family visit to Agnone one summer left a deep and lasting impression on all of us.

But it is really only now, having spent considerable time in this unique town, that I begin to understand the enormity of this heritage.

Today, **La Fonderia Pontificia Marinelli** continues to use the original 'lost wax' technique of its founders. Artisans first imprint a wax form of the bell design onto a brick structure covered in clay, which is then overlaid with a second layer of clay to form a “false bell.” When the wax inside is melted, it leaves the design imprint on the inside of the false bell.



Using an ancient wood-burning furnace, the molten bronze is then heated to a temperature of 1200 Celsius (2200 Fahrenheit) and poured into the gap between to form the bell.

The process of creating a bell this way, entirely by hand, takes a minimum of 3 months and requires enormous strength, courage and concentration. The mold is placed in a deep pit, where it is buried in sand and soil that has been carefully patted down to prevent the slightest movement.

When molten bronze flows into the space between the 'soul' and the 'false' bells, a priest says a blessing and the



workers come together to offer prayers. As the bell begins to cool, good wishes are exchanged. Later it is sanded and polished, and the clapper is added to produce the correct sound.

In 1924 Pope Pius XI granted Papal status to the foundry – hence, its official name, ***Pontificia Fonderia Marinelli***. 30 years later, the Italian President honored the Marinelli Family with a gold medal for their prestigious work and status as the oldest family business in Europe.



The Marinelli Bell Foundry just after WWII

*Some of the famous bells created at the Marinelli Foundry include:*

- 1923: Pompeii –restoration of the Mariano Sanctuary
- 1950: Monte Cassino – reconstruction of the Church of San Benedetto, destroyed during the battle of Monte Cassino in WWII
- 1961: Rome – commemoration of 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Italy
- 1992: Washington DC – to commemorate 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s discovery of America
- 1995: NYC – for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Nations
- 2000: Rome – Jubilee Bell for St Peter’s Square, inaugurated by John Paul II
- 2004: Pisa – Leaning Tower, a 600k replica of the 17<sup>th</sup> century bell damaged in the bombing of 1944

Agnone is a simple and modest place, and its inhabitants are fiercely proud of their heritage and the traditions of their ancestors. Want to learn more and get an inside look at the foundry? Check out this video [here](#).



The Marinelli brothers today, Armando and Pasquale

***LIVE AND LEARN ITALIAN*** invites you to combine Italian study with exploring the traditions and everyday life of the region, mixing with the community and engaging in local activities. Of course, a visit to the Foundry is high on the list of special events.

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