

Mary Claire Wilt: A Remembrance  
By Bill Wilt

Danville, PA—Mary Claire Wilt (née Soranno), an almost-life-long resident of the Genesee Valley, NY, region, died peacefully at 1:15 Saturday afternoon in the home of her daughter and son-in-law, Dr. Elaine Maria Wilt Schwartz MD and Dr. Jan Arthur Schwartz MD, in Danville, Pennsylvania. Mary was 96 and the last surviving child of Vincenzia and Francesco Soranno's six children: Anne, Rose, Pauline, Rocco and Angelo ("Pete").

Mary and her late husband, Chet, and their three children, lived in Irondequoit most of their working lives. Sons Bill and John attended Seneca and Iroquois Schools, and Irondequoit High School. Chet was a Kodak employee for 39 years, a co-inventor of the Kodak X-O-Mat, rapid-process Xray developing machine, while Mary worked as nurse/secretary for the late surgeon, Dr. Edward Wood. A decade before Chet's retirement in 1975 the couple moved to Hemlock, and then Wayland.

Mary's father remarried and had two more daughters by his second wife, Angelica; they were Francis Fornaro (deceased) and Genevieve ("Jennie") Munson.

Mary was born on January 6, 1917, in Morristown, NJ, to Vincenzia (née Panico) and Frank Soranno. Her parents emigrated from Montescalioso, Italy, sailing on the Ancona from Napoli in March of 1913. Good thing they didn't go later, as the Ancona was torpedoed by an Austrian sub (Austrian?) 7 Nov 1915, laden with a dozen bbl.s of gold, a few silver ingots, etc. So far as I know, my grandfather, a gardner, knew nothing of the SS Ancona, the Merchant Royal, the Black Swan, the Mercedes, the Legend, HMS Victory, and HMS Sussex and their various ne- or non-farious, bouillon-bearing exploits. But these shipping vulnerabilities may be why many nations of the world started shipping it to the United States, which had to build Fort Knox to hold it. As I recall the tale, the "federal" "reserve" then issued receipts for the gold, in the form of "federal" "reserve" bonds (not their usual activity), in lots of veery fancy bags, pouches. [Something like that](#). I'll have to hunt back through notes and books

Mary's husband of 60 years, Chester, died in Dallas, Texas on June 14, 13 days after Chet and Mary's 60<sup>th</sup>



wedding anniversary. Mary then returned north to live with her daughter Elaine's family.

Mary is survived by her three children, Bill (AB, MS, JD), John (AB, Captain, AMR Corp.), and Dr. Elaine Maria Schwartz, MD (pediatric surgeon, ret.) (Dr. Jan Arthur Schwartz MD (Anæsthesiology); 11 grandchildren: Bill's children Sam (BA, MS) (Guy duT. Sliker, BA), Max C.F. Wilt (AB, August '13), Hannah and Zoë; John's son Billy (BS, June, '14) and sisters Mollie and Alison; Elaine and Jan's children Eben (MD) (Kate (BA)), Isaac (MD) (Elyse Michelle Leevan (BA) (wed June 9, 2013)), Mollie (BS, MS), and David (MME, Lt.) (Joni, BA); great-grandsons Paul and Henry (Sam's sons); and Eben's daughter and son, Margot and Asa.

Mary was proud to have cracked through the "olive barrier" at Columbia Presbyterian School of Nursing--that is, she was the first Italian to be admitted to the school, class of 1940, at a time when the school, according to Mary, was a stepping stone for NY City debutantes seeking a suitable spouse.

As she told us, she only voted for a member of the Democratic Party once, and the candidate was Franklin Delano Roosevelt. She was almost a life-long Republican, but as the party began to go nutzoo trying to control women's reproductive systems (or "find a useful 'wedge issue' with which to distract the already numbed up and dumbed down electorate") — a right of women clearly protected by the Ninth Amendment, she stopped supporting time and money to the party and gave away all her elephant statuettes.

My favorite quote of hers is: "If all these males want to prevent women from having abortions, there is a simple solution — castrate them all." I suggested that she temper her rage on the topic and take a stand for compulsory vasectomies at puberty, hopefully reversible, rather than out-and-out castration.) It is possible, of course, that Chet drafted that line for Mary, as he was her amanuensis, editor, political sounding board, ghost writer, chauffeur, imp of the perverse, and, of course, "love of my life," as she put it, or, in a heart-felt sigh, "Oh, those deep blue eyes and sandy hair!"

In her last days, at the hospital and in nursing care for a short time, she actually supported her elder son's ad hoc lectures on *The World's Most Successful False Flag Operation (9/11/2001)*, as well as on the criminalization of the US government over the recent past, and so on, telling staff and visitors whose faces registered disbelief, "He's right, you know." But to her son, she'd say, "I don't want to hear any more of this bad news. Shut up." The support was a surprise.

Perhaps it shouldn't have been, because throughout Mary's years as an RN, in supervisory capacities on night duty and otherwise, she saw the failures of medicine, the negligence of doctors and nurses, and the unhappy side of marriages that had morphed into the battery they "presented" in the emergency room. And the failures of the political system, and US society in general, to pay attention and provide meaningful solutions. For these and, no doubt, other reasons, she was instrumental, with the aid and cooperation of others (that would make it a conspiracy, by the way), in creating Shelters for Battered Women and Children in exurban Livingston County. She was sent as a Republican delegate to legislative hearings in Albany and Washington on that topic and the issues afflicting the Aged, and, one could say, was the quintessential "little old lady

in tennis sneakers.” That she was just barely over five feet tall, with silver hair, vouchsafed the first two adjectives. Her tennis shoes she left home.

Immigration records show that her father, Francesco Soranno, arrived at Ellis Island aboard the Ancona, sailing from Naples, on March 17, 1913. He was 21 years old, and married. He was Manifest Line Number 0004, his “ethnicity” was described as “Italy, Italian South,” his last place of residence, “Montescoglioto, Italy,” which on [maps.google.com](https://maps.google.com) appears as 75024 Montescoglioto, Matera, Italy, on a hill a few miles north of the Mediterranean coast, in the “arch” of the “boot.”

The “Italian South” reference reminded of the grilling my late first ex-mother-in-law (X1MIL), also “*echt Italien*” of emigre parents (Gardella), gave Mary at (X1’s) and my wedding. X1MIL was “a Northern Italian,” possessed of fairer skin than my olive-hued mom, sufficiently melanin-ized (melanized?) to be placed by Northern European Invaders among “the beige people” at least for the purpose of imposing prejudicial practices upon them.

Mary concealed the wooden blocks on her shoulder fairly well—fortunately, back in those days, women affected high, puffed shoulders, but not enough so’s she ever wanted to venture into the wheat-fields of her husband’s Ohio family, or ever return to Morristown. Or Italy, for that matter. And though we discovered that she could speak her mother’s tongue, she claimed not to understand it, and wouldn’t; and I swear that she hid garlic cloves **beneath** the vegetable drawer in the fridge. Of course, it might also have been that my father “didn’t like garlic” in the same sense that he couldn’t abide the smell of cooking shrimp. He’d go outside when mom was cooking them — but would reappear when it was time to consume them, cooked, exhibiting a flavor of the meme, “Call me anything you like, but don’t call me Late for Shrimp.” Which is to type that he may have liked the taste, but not the sight, of the culinarily essential savory corms (or are they bulbs?).

As I got one of the stories of mom’s early years, her mother died in 1925, which would put mom at eight years of age. As she was the eldest daughter, she became the “acting mom,” until Francesco made his recruiting trip back to Italy and returned with the-anything-but-angelic Angelina. There were the two new terrors but Francesco was employed as the gardener for a match company owner, name I forgot if ever I knew it) and spent something like one third of his time gardening at said CEO’s summer home in Maine, another third gardening at Said’s Winter Home in Florida, and another third gardening in Said’s spring/ autumn home in Morristown. It was only for that fraction of a year that he could see his wife and children.

Apparently, some Morristown social services department or other thought eight was too young to run a family of eventually seven children, and removed them from their home and distributed them hither and thither, from orphanage to foster care to ... I know not where, and Mary dodged the question. Apparently Francesco had to move at least Rhodes and Crete to reassemble his brood into a cohesive clutch of cohabitants. It would be interesting to find the records of those efforts, where an olive-complected man, no higher than 60 inches, if that, with

only a rudimentary handle of his daughter's tongue, has to take on the tender mercies of the denizens of the plank-railed, white-washed demesnes of the well-horsed, blood-of-blue croquetters. As Mary told us, "We were the only Italian family in Morristown, and until Polly joined me, I was the only Italian in my school."

Mary confided to at least one of her children that more than anything, she wanted a career in nursing and did not want to have children. But her hubby certainly did. Perhaps he was undaunted by the prospects of progeny as he came from a family of 15 (a brother died shortly after birth, and a sister succumbed to the 1917 influenza pandemic, whittling the early-life progeny count to 13).

Mary and Chet's first child, Guillermo, came along in April, a mere 11 months after their simple wedding (not that anyone was counting), Giovanni two years later, and Elaine three years after that. Though all of her births were by C-section (this in the mid-1940s, mind you), she said she would only stop after having a girl, if it killed her. Damned near did.

So Mary's "unencumbered" career lasted a mere 25 months, from her graduation in May of 1940 from Columbia Presbyterian School of Nursing to the birth of her first child. However, once the kids were old enough to be "home alone," Mary went back to her profession. Back in those days, some may remember, you could let young children ride their bicycles dawn to dusk with their pals and not worry about Extraordinary Rendition, water-boarding or even kidnapping. Or hydration, for that matter (when thirsty, kids could knock on virtually any door in the neighborhood and ask for a drinka, glassa, sippa wadder, ma'am. (Please?))

Mary used her nursing skills on her family, of course, and not one of us will forget the cool back of her hand she rested on our forehead for a quick analog temp check), but also on her patients at Strong Memorial Hospital, where she was a supervising night nurse, and at Harley Day School, where she was the school nurse, and for many years as the nurse-office manager for surgeon Dr. Edward Wood, MD, who was killed in the wreck of a high-speed German train while on a skiing vacation with his wife, Helen (who survived).

Thereafter, Mary focussed her attention on getting things done via political action in Wayland, Springwater, Geneseo and the rest of "her" Western New York state and federal legislative districts. (D'you remember how you could say "our district," and "our senator/representative/solon" without a cynical smirk? Can you remember how these men (mostly) actually *did* think of themselves as employees of the people? Do you remember how many of them could actually recite the Constitution? Today we can safely put the number of the last two questions at about zero.

Mary was also the corporate and manufacturing support, with Chet, of our nuclear family corporation, where everyone was a corporate executive, long before the Supreme Court got the idea that corporations are people, too. Of course the *Citizens United vs. the Federal Election Commission* decision is about the stupidest case law I've ever read, in that it 1) goes against common sense, 2)

logic, 3) precedent and 4) a fact-based world -- and certainly four out of four ain't bad when you're competing for the *Stupidest Legal Decision By An English-Speaking Appellate Court in 216 Years* Trophy.

But consider, on the other hand, that the decision has thus ratified the obvious corollary: **People are corporations, too.**

This could definitely cause some very exciting opportunities.

Though we didn't use this lexicon then, way back in Mary and Chet's nuclear household, (though actually non-nuclear, except perhaps for those little trips to Los Alamos), its five citizens *were* corporations, serving as subcontractors to meet the needs of the family-as-corporation, contracting with manufacturers to provide services and expertise in exchange for money, contracting as service-providers to perform mowing, weeding, pruning, cooking, washing, canning (or 'preserving' or 'putting up food' in the days of the Ball Jar with tinned cap, white glass insert, sealed with a red rubber ring), polishing the CEO's shoes every Sunday night for the week ahead, carrying snacks out to the den for *le parents* and cleaning up, as well as participating in corporate training, competition and advancement exercises and studies, such as Scrabble®, Monopoly®, Parcheesi®, checkers, chess, *1000 Questions About Animals* (What do you call a herd of lions? How many species of marsupials are there?)

Shortly after World War II, when food and automobiles were still rationed, Mary worked evenings at Strong Memorial Hospital, at the end of a bus line to the south of the city. When Mary and Chet decided their children might flourish in a private school environment, Mary took the job as school nurse at Harley School--which was just a soccer field away from the end of the small Rochester Subway system that was so small that one could "drown it in the bathtub," as some self-selected idiot has stated, but with the whole federal government as his context.

Chet would drive Mary and the kids to a subway stop that intersected with his route to Kodak Park and pick them up there at the end of the school day (which was longer than the public school day of the time (which itself was longer than today's public school days, the more's the pity)). Mary, in her starched white nurse's uniform, and her three children would walk through the weedy patch at the end of the subway's rail-end right-of-way, climb the sagging fence to the weedy patch at the end of the Harley soccer field, cross the field and enter the school. Bill enjoyed soccer--and also enjoyed that he could get out of extensive math classes by taking both the art elective (for boys) and in the sewing elective (for girls, with one exception: me). John and Elaine's experiences were perhaps less memorable, but Elaine continued on at Columbia School for girls (before it merged with Allendale School for boys in 1972 and morphed into Allendale-Columbia School for boys and girls) in the city proper, while John and Bill returned to public school in the 'burbs.

Mary and Chet were active in the Seneca (low school), Iroquois (middle school) and Irondequoit (high school) Parent-Teacher's Associations--they would come up with reasonably interesting "booths" for school fund-raising carnivals

(like shooting out floating candles with 1.13 Cal. squirt guns), or help the principal run the Saturday Cowboy Matinee movies (in 16mm). Mary would assist in sewing costumes for performances of Gilbert & Sullivan operettas--the Mikado and H.M.S. Pinafore come to mind--Chet would cut out the patterns ("I never liked to cut to the patterns, so I had Chet do it," she told us. She also didn't like to fuss with sewing zippers in the shorts she made the boys, so didn't. This was only *somewhat* embarrassing for 10- and 8-year-old sons, right? Addressing the urinal with a great need and a great lapse in the zipper department.)

In those days, almost the entire 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades ("middle school"?) were involved in every aspect of these productions. The only logistical problems we encountered were when, say, the 1<sup>st</sup> French Horn got a singing part, too. Otherwise, we rehearsed instrumental parts in band class, singing parts in chorus, made and painted flats and scrims in shop class. Had we been more competent parallel processors, we perhaps could have strapped painting sponges on our feet to paint the flats while practicing our choral or instrumental parts.

Parents were called upon for stage-hand chores, from setting up the seats, running the lights and scenery, to taking tickets. Nowadays, children are doing such things in Third Grade (or so I've heard from diminutive soccer moms speaking down from their mountainous, shock & awe-inspiring SUVs).

When Mary was doing her night RN duty at Strong Memorial, Bill and John would heat up and serve the meals she had prepared in advance for us (a lot of Spanish Rice, chili, dad's chopped-onion-and-hamburger hamburgers), and also make fresh butter (before dad got home) by pouring off the (un-homogenized) cream from a couple of quarts of milk--there was even a built-in indoor/outdoor milk box, with driver-delivered milk in those days-- into a one-quart Ball jar, shake it vigorously for a couple of minutes until it became butter, add some salt, and spread over Nabisco Saltines<sup>TM</sup>©SM®ATE?. It never ceased to amaze me how good that butter tasted, and how pale and white it looked. Or Chet would help us cook, as above--or punt, and take us to Don & Bobs, our favorite Sea Breeze fast food eatery. The Sea referred to was that giant, trans-international *Lake of Ontario*. We were living in Irondequoit then; Mary and Chet remained there until the three children had "left the nest" and flown until our arms got tired, and then moved to Hemlock, NY, the headwaters of Genesee Cream Ale. Elaine suffered the most from Mary's then somewhat unconventional Working Mother shifts -- she had to endure Chet's, Bill's and John's never quite perfected skills at braiding her long pigtails every school morning, with Bill, John and dad assigned his own clump of Elaine's long hair, and Elaine hanging on to it at the roots, tightly, with both hands, to prevent us now six-handed clod-polls from pulling her hair out by the roots. So to speak.

From Hemlock, Mary & Chet moved to an even more remote location, Giles Road in the Town of Springwater (but which was served by the Wayland post office. Go figure. Chet called the place *Journey's End*, but he never made up an

official sign, and after his agility was taxed by arthritis (he could no longer climb a ladder and prune offending branches from the trees in the woods with a chain saw--he fell off the ladder once with the saw still revving and was thereby convinced that perhaps this place should not yet be journey's end. Do picture a retired old gent, aluminum ladder in one hand and chain saw in the other, pruning a little 100-acre forest as you water your potted plants or weed your windowsill planters.

He plucked Mary out of her political hotbed and carted her cross-country to Albuquerque, where Bill (X2, Kelly Ford) and Max were living. Chet said he'd always hankered to live in New Mexico after his many trips to Los Alamos Labs, setting up and tinkering there with the Kadok X•O•mat he'd invented and helped develop. (The Kadok spelling was slipped into or onto official (but not too official) tchotchkes by slightly irreverent Kodakers.) But the the 'burb of Albuquerque NW was some 6,600 feet above sea level, and that didn't help his breathing. So Mary and Chet moved to Dallas, where John (X1 Kelly/X2 Stacy) and Billy (X2) were living while John continued to fly 747s and such for AMR Corp (aka American Airlines). BTW, while Denver calls its elf (or garden gnome) "The Mile-High City," it's false advertising. The surface of the very shallow Rio Grande is something like 5,340 feet above sea-level, and it climbs up the Sangre de Cristo to the west and Sandia Mountains to the east from that low point. Considering that there are supposedly 5,280 feet in a mile (though they would clearly shrink and wither if stored in the "federal" "reserve" banks or "system." -- which is neither "federal" nor has it a "reserve"--it's all "system").

Kind of like the point one funny PBS guy--ahh, Marshall Efron, in the Great American Dream Machine--my recall's not completely shot--made about Mrs. Morton's frozen Lemon Cream Pie: "There's no lemon; there's no cream. It's all *PIE!*" At any rate, Denver might fairly call itself A mile-high city, it is definitely not THE mile-high city. Such hubris. It probably would be more to the point, and more unusual (I think), if Denver took to calling itself "The Three-Mile Low (or Underground) City, home to one of our supposedly many DUMB, DUMB and DUMBER installations for folks like the Bilderbergers. DUMB in this reference standing for Deep Underground Military Brasses. DUMBER refers to Deep Underground Military Brasses, Echt Recidivists, i.e., criminals who keep committing their crimes against hominids.

But I digress.

By all accounts, Mary could fairly be said to have made a success of Having It All, or at least, Having Both-- a successful career *and* a family, well before the need developed to have discussions about whether it was necessary to choose one path and exclude the other. This was also a time, after World War II boosted the economy, when men (women, not so much) could support a family on one salary, and many women could and did stay at home, working on their United Citizens Corollary Corporate duties, like managing the cafeteria (kitchen), determining and maintaining appropriate uniforms (clothes), the office furniture (we never had much of that, ever), maintenance, upkeep and depreciation of the corporate

headquarters (also known as “home”) and finances (like providing child support for Chet’s two sons by his first marriage, double-checking all accounts, trapping forgers (I remember one afternoon mom coming into my room, and holding up a cancelled check to the failing winter light, muttering, “This isn’t Chet’s signature”--leading quickly to the discovery that a maintenance staff member had taken a check out of dad’s desk at work), tending a half-acre Victory Garden (we did use a duster in those days; don’t remember if the pesticides contained DDT or not. Probably did, but mom did make it to 96 ¼ and, while I have contracted severe late-onset writer’s block (or perhaps it’s logorrhea; I’m in a poor position to judge, given the forced proximity to my subject), have made it to 71, with some I hope not immodest prospect of continuing further).

Did I forget to mention that Mary got her BA degree from Empire University in 1987? Majoring in Women’s Studies? (Who’d have guessed?)

She was honored for being the University’s oldest diplomate. That is, not many, or rather, not any, graduates of Empire U. had received their degree at age 70. Mary’s success at “Having It All” was thus spread out over a longer time-span than it would occur to us to call conventional. In that, if Mary Wilt was **not** unique--meaning the only one in the world, a nonpareil, without parallel, beyond compare--she was certainly unusual. I will miss teasing her. Do already.

Services were private, but donations in lieu of flowers (or certainly in lieu of political donations to pols who don’t support women’s rights) may be made in Mary’s honor to her eponymous scholarship fund at:

The Mary C. Wilt ’87 Scholarship  
Empire State College Foundation  
Alumni House  
28 Union Ave  
Saratoga Springs, NY 12866-4390  
[www.esc.edu](http://www.esc.edu)

It is described by SUNY this way:

Established by alumna Mary Wilt ’87, this scholarship is available to an undergraduate student enrolled at the Genesee Valley Center of Empire University (NYState) who demonstrates academic excellence and community and civic involvement. The student must have an approved degree program at the time of application.

P.S.: Jennie (Genevieve/husband Harold) Munson, if you can “hear” me, I can now say definitively that mom nursed a life-long disgruntlement that you had expropriated, purloined, filched, made off with her two pet violins and her trousseau trunk.

She could not be moved to drop the topic adverted to in the antepenultimate paragraph, *supra*.

You can find me on Facebook. Otherwise, when you begin your own cross-over, as 'tis said, you may find Mary awaiting you with Charon, the ferryman, on the shore of the River Styx, to help you on your journey to the next world, or something like that.