

FIORELLO LAGUARDIA

Prescott's Hometown Boy

By Elisabeth Ruffner

Known as "The Napoleon of New York", LaGuardia asserted many times in his colorful life that Prescott was his hometown. With his father Achille, his mother and two siblings, he arrived in Prescott in 1892 at Whipple Barracks, a US Army post. He was quoted as saying "Prescott was really my hometown. It was there that I grew up", by biographer Lowell Limpus in 1937.

His father, Achille LaGuardia, as bandmaster for the Army, schooled his children in music vigorously, and each of the three played a different instrument.

Fiorello's was the cornet, and he was expected to become the second John Philip Sousa, a noted bandmaster and performer of the day. Fiorello played the cornet with the Fort Whipple Band, led by his father, in the Yavapai County Courthouse Plaza Bandstand. The Fort Whipple band also played in many places in the town for dances, in parades and in various ceremonies on the Plaza.

As a school boy, Fiorello learned to stand up for his slight stature and was championed by children of Prescott families whom he never forgot. Even his high voice was a handicap in schoolyard battles, but he never gave up to bullies and came back for more until



Mayor of New York, Fiorello LaGuardia (center), in front of the Yavapai County Courthouse with unknown man, Grace M. Sparkes, Secretary of the Yavapai County Chamber of Commerce and Mayor of Prescott Charles Robb and Mrs. Robb.

respect and forbearance was gained from his foes.

He lived at the fort and walked to school in town a mile away, over a dirt path which he sought to revisit on his ceremonial trip to Prescott and the Grand Canyon in 1938. He lived, with his family in Prescott for his grade school years, gaining a certificate of graduation from grammar school in January 1898. Prophetically, his graduation speech was titled "The Office Seeker's Platform".

His grammar school years in Prescott were the extent of LaGuardia's formal education, but in pondering his possible career opportunities, he had turned to using his knack for language, and began to write columns for the local newspaper on news from Fort Whipple. To sharpen his skills he read big city newspapers which were available to him in Prescott,

by then a cultured town served by a public library and stores which carried national magazines and newspapers.

He read about the injustices of Spanish rule over the Cubans by the light of an oil lamp in the LaGuardia residence on the military post. Being denied the privilege of enlisting in the Spanish-American War because of his small stature, La Guardia became a newspaper reporter. Captain William Owen "Buckey" O'Neill, whom, as Mayor of Prescott in 1897, had heard

declare that the United States had an obligation to drive Spain out of the Western Hemisphere, became his hero as men of Prescott enlisted in "Roosevelt's Rough Riders" and were shipped to Cuba.

In his later career as an elected official, LaGuardia was reported to have stated that he learned about self-reliance in taking care of himself as a boy in Arizona. He indeed returned to his "hometown" when, as Mayor of New York, he paid visits to the Grand Canyon and Prescott, declaring that his early years in his home town of Prescott proved that education teaches youth to reason and to think. He stated to the Prescott High School class he addressed on that visit, "The educational facilities of today are the one big gift of the elder generation to the younger".