



Text Version of Audio Story: Hector

The year was 1915. President Wilson was getting remarried. The president's first wife had passed away a little over a year earlier. A sitting president getting married was quite a big deal, but the ceremony was relatively small and private. The reception, however, was another thing.

When you get married, and you're the president of the United States, you can't help but have a bit of a blow-out. The famed Greenbrier Resort in West Virginia would be the setting. But management at the resort felt it was too much for them to take on; and, heaven forbid, if it were to go wrong, it could sully their reputation.

Eighteen-year-old Hector, who had been working in the kitchen at the resort, stepped up and said (and I'm paraphrasing): *"But we must take this on. For heaven sakes, it's the president."*

Hector was an immigrant from northern Italy. He and his brother, Paul, had arrived in America just two years earlier; they got off the boat in New York City. Paul quickly found a job as a maitre de in the world-renowned Plaza Hotel. Hector found work in the kitchen of the hotel. Sometime later, he would find himself in the employ of the Greenbrier. Hector was gutsy and bold, always up for a challenge. To him, the thought of turning down the president's request for a dinner party was just, well, un-American.

"I will be in charge," he said.

The force of his personality was so strong that no one could say no. Eighteen-year-old Hector pulled the event off like a season pro. The president's wedding reception was a success.

Hector left the Greenbrier for bigger and better things. He became a chef in the Cleveland area and, before long, opened his own Italian restaurant there. The eastern cities like Boston, Philadelphia and New York had its share of Italian restaurants; but, inland cities — such as Cleveland — had yet to experience Italian food, generally speaking.

Hector's restaurant was a hit. Soon his customers were asking for sauce to take home. Hector would oblige and send them home with sauce in milk bottles. But then they wanted more. They wanted the pasta and the cheeses. They wanted everything necessary to make a spaghetti dinner at home. Hector opened a small plant next door to keep up with the demand.

Back in New York, Hector's brother, Paul, had a chance encounter with the president of the A&P Supermarket chain. Paul pitched the idea of placing Hector's prepackaged spaghetti fixings on the shelves of A&P so folks all over the country could make spaghetti at home. Hector had another hit on his hands. The product line grew, and Hector started to can his Italian selections. He found an old abandoned silk mill in Milton, Pennsylvania, and set up shop there. He talked a group of farmers in Pennsylvania into growing tomatoes instead of corn, and Hector bought them by the truckload.

By this time, Hector was becoming a household name. The boy who dared the high-seas adventure to come to America, the boy who got off the boat in New York with nothing but his wits, the boy chef who catered the president's wedding reception was as big as any rock star of today. Not only did Americans know his name, his picture was on the can, too. Chef Hector Boiardi (Chef Boyardee) was next in line to become an American legend.

Hector Boiardi built a magnificent business model, and his products went all over the country. A time would come when Hector would again be called on by a United States president: World War II — and feeding the troops was a big job. The United States military turned to Hector and his model for canning food. They were not disappointed.

Chef Hector Boiardi helped to free the world. Hector lived a long life and died in the mid-1980s.

From somewhere behind the radio with the music of Johnny X, I'm the American Storyteller.