

In America, the Bread is Soft

Gary R. Mormino

In 1979, the poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti saluted a generation that was passing before his eyes. “For years the old Italians have been dying,” he wrote. Let us now praise the not-so-famous children of the immigrants, who are also vanishing.

In 1900, Rosolino Mormino and his brothers left Sicily for Napoleonville, Louisiana. A part of one of the greatest mass migrations in history, Rosolino wrote his mother in Sicily: “In America, the bread is soft, but life is hard.” Rosolino and his brothers cut sugarcane until learning that John D. Rockefeller was building a refinery upriver.

The third of seven children, Ross Anthony Mormino was born in Wood River, Illinois, in 1920. The Morminos found the American Dream on the backside of the tracks in Little Italy. The town reeked of sulfur and petroleum, but when anyone complained, the old Italians would say, “It’s the smell of prosperity.”

A family legend holds that daily, as he was leaving the Standard Oil Refinery, Rosolino Mormino smuggled a single brick in his lunch pail. Once a guard inspected the pail and asked why a brick was resting upon crushed olives and garlic. Rosolino explained that he wished to show his sons what he—a mason—did for a living. Twenty-five years later, he had enough bricks to build a home. And provide a life lesson. The race is not to the swift or the strongest. That the Mormino home was built of wood is immaterial to the parable.

The five Mormino sons never much appreciated formal education. The Great Depression supplied ample instruction. In the fourth grade, Sister Eulalia asked “Barney”—no one called him Ross because of his likeness for the comic strip character Barney Google—to lead the class in the “Lord’s Prayer.” Barney began, “Our Father, Who works for the Standard Oil Refinery . . .” The nuns were not amused.

Like Huck Finn, Barney lit out for the territory. He worked as a cabin boy on Mississippi River barges, hopped trains, and learned to fix anything that moved.

War and Remembrance

Pearl Harbor altered the destiny of a generation of Barneys. One of 16 million servicemen, he enlisted in the 36th Seabees, a naval construction battalion. World War II swept him from a small town in the Midwest to the South Pacific, to places most Americans could not identify on a map: New Caledonia, Bougainville, and Okinawa.

World War II was the greatest experience of his life. He was not a man of letters and hated to talk on the phone, but he kept in touch with his beloved band of brothers. An eye witness to the best and worst of humanity, he wanted what most GI's wanted: to get married, find a job, and catch up for lost time.

On leave in 1943, he met Mabel Dingle. Born in the washed-out coal mining town of Tamaroa, Illinois, she, too, understood hard times and undanced dreams.

Mabel patiently wrapped and preserved letters my father wrote from the South Pacific. I never saw my parents embrace, never witnessed a kiss, and cannot ever remember them having a night out by themselves, but the letters revealed a touching affection and optimism. To my astonishment and delight, I also discovered love letters from other suitors!

The World According to Barney

What did Barney Mormino do? He worked, doing more with less than anyone I knew. A cure for life's afflictions, work was his calling. If he was not toiling in the refinery, he was working in his garden, fixing neighbors' cars or repairing a small home that somehow housed a family of eight.

Barney did what he had to do. He was a union man in a union town. In first grade at Saint Bernard's, Sister Eulalia asked students to tell what their fathers did. I replied, with pride, that my father was a black jack dealer! The nuns were not amused. But 1953 was the year of the strike, and dad was shuffling cards in the backroom of a notorious tavern. Fittingly, one of his daughters became a cloistered nun, a Poor Clare.

Saint Benedict preached, "To work is to pray." Dad was a true believer. Feeling depressed? Work harder. Lacking self esteem? Work harder. He never quite understood why one needed a college degree. To him, writing was not work. When I saw him in January, he asked, once again, "Did you ever get a real job?"

To Barney Mormino, a real job represented something concrete and tangible. In the early 1950s, I recall being taken to my Uncle Sammy's shoe repair shop. As I inhaled the intoxicating smells of burnished leather and hot glue, Dad philosophized that I needed to start thinking about my future. Americans would always need someone to repair their shoes, he explained.

His view of the world was simple. Life is hard. Get used to it. Never expect anyone to rescue you, especially your father. The world is a cruel place. Highways are lined with gyp joints. Politicians and bankers are crooks. Find a good woman, avoid debt, and learn a trade.

Ross Mormino was a man's man in a vanishing world of tough men. As a mechanic, he frequently smashed his thumbs. In the evenings, he would patiently

and stoically bore into the purplish nail with his corkscrew knife to relieve the pressure. I can only remember him express disappointment twice in his life. He was bowling with friends in 1954 when the announcement came across the radio that his beloved St. Louis Browns were leaving St. Louis for Baltimore. In 1944, the Brownies won the American League pennant. Alas, Barney Mormino had to read about it in “Stars and Stripes.”

I was a senior in high school in 1965. My father thought only two paths made sense to 18-year-old males in Wood River: the factories or the military. But if an 18-year-old wished to diddle his life away at college, he should not expect to waste Ross Mormino’s dime. He did, however, walk me to the home of “Big John,” the rotund city councilman and ward heeler. Big John got me a job with the road crew of the Illinois Highway Dept, where I earned enough that summer to finance my first year of college.

Giants on the Earth

Ross Mormino died in March 2009. He managed to avoid spending a single night in a nursing home. He did not expect his children to pay for his funeral. My brother found several envelopes of crisp \$20 bills in his closet. He had earned the money by retrieving thousands of “lost” golf balls, cleaning them, and reselling them as “new.” In tribute, the family placed a freshly scrubbed golf ball in his coffin.

“Behold, for a race of giants stalked the earth in those days.” The Book of Genesis aptly described millions of men and women who survived the Great Depression, never shirked their duty, who understood the importance of sacrifice, pain, and denial.

For a long time, I thought my father was harsh, coarse, and unsentimental. Judged from the vantage point of 2009, from the ruins of a society that demanded, even expected, instant gratification and unearned riches, Barney Mormino looks more and more like a giant that stalked the earth.

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