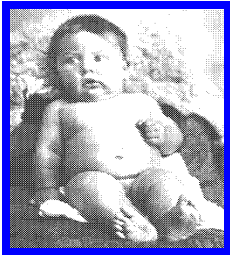
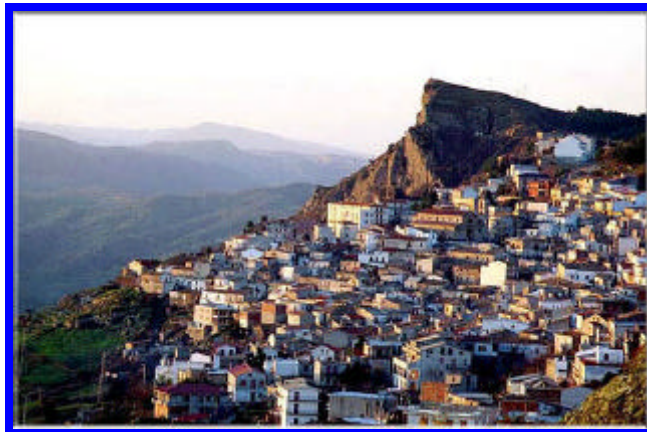


The Son Of An Immigrant



Eggidio



San Nicola Dell'Alto (Parent's Home)



By Eugene (Eggidio) M. Durso Sr.

Prologue:

The Introduction

It all started on day when my dad and I were talking and my dad started telling me about what it was like when he was growing up in New York. I was very impressed with how good my father's memory was of the events that took place in the early 1900's when he was just a boy growing up in a new country. His family had only just arrived from Italy. They arrived from a very small town called San Nicola Dell'Alto in a province of Catanzaro, Calabria, Italy. Here I was hearing these stories of my dad's experiences in New York but it certainly didn't sound like the New York with which I was familiar. It sounded so remote to think of empty streets, horse and wagons, markets, etc. I was very interested in hearing more. So interested that I said. "Wouldn't it be nice to put some of your thoughts to paper!"

It was soon after that that my father embarked on his writing of a book describing his experiences in America as a young boy growing into manhood and beyond. Unfortunately my dad did not live long enough to complete the book. But I have continued to edit his work and carry out research in order to try and complete the book as best I can. The following is my best attempt to finish what my father started back in the 1980's and did not complete before he passed away on July 22, 1994. My father always seemed to be somewhat disappointed in the way things had changed over the years. In reading his book it helped me to understand what exactly he was missing. These were simple times but yet very special times when things were difficult but people seemed to know who they were and new how to enjoy life.

Just recently a fellow Italian-American just shared a letter he came across. Author unknown. But we both felt this really captured the essence of growing up as an Italian-American. It was entitled:

"The Joy Of Growing Up Italian

I was well into adulthood before I realized that I was an American. Of course I had been born in America and had lived in New York all of my life, but somehow it never occurred to me that just being a citizen of the United States meant I was an American. Americans were people who ate peanut butter and jelly on mushy white bread that came out

of plastic packages. Me? I ate pepper and egg sandwiches on an Italian roll. I was Italian.

For me, as I am sure for most second generation Italian-American children who grew up in the 40's and 50's, there was a definite distinction drawn between "us and "them. We were Italian. Everybody else -- the Irish, German, Polish, Jewish, they were the "Med-e-gones. There was no animosity involved in that distinction, no prejudice, no hard feelings, just, well, we were sure ours was the better way. For instance, we had a bread man, a milkman, a coal and ice man, a fish man, a fruit and vegetable man, a watermelon man, an egg and cheese man, and we even had a man who sharpened our knives and scissors and came to our homes, or at least our neighborhoods. We would wait for their call, their yell, their individual sound. We knew them all, and they knew us. Americans went to the store for most of their food. What a waste!

Truly, I pitied their loss. They never knew the pleasure of waking up every morning to find a hot crisp loaf of Italian bread waiting behind the screen door. And instead of being able to climb up on the back of the peddlers truck a couple of times a week just to hitch a ride, most of my "Med-e-gone friends had to be satisfied going to the A&P. When it came to food, it always amazed me that my American friends or classmates only ate turkey on Thanksgiving or Christmas. Or, rather that they only ate turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce. Now, we Italians - we also had turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce, but only after we had finished the antipasto, soup, lasagna, meatballs, salad and whatever else Mama thought might be appropriate for that particular holiday. The turkey was usually accompanied by a roast of some kind (just in case somebody walked in who didn't like turkey), and was followed by an assortment of fruits, nuts, pastries, cakes and, of course, homemade cookies. No holiday was complete without some home baking, none of that store-bought stuff for us! This is where you learned to eat a seven course meal between noon and seven PM, how to handle hot chestnuts and put tangerine wedges in red wine. I truly believe Italians live a romance with food.

Speaking of food, Sunday was truly the big day of the week! That was the day you'd wake up to the smell of garlic and onions frying in olive oil. As you lay in bed, you could hear the hiss as tomatoes were dropped into a pan. Sunday we always had macaroni and sauce, the "Med-e-gones called it "pasta and "gravy. Sunday would not be Sunday without going

to mass. Of course, you couldn't eat before mass because you had to fast before receiving communion. But the good part was we knew when we got home, we'd find hot meatballs frying, and nothing tastes better than newly fried meatballs and crisp bread dipped into a pot of sauce.

There was another difference between "us and "them. We had gardens. Not just flower gardens, but huge gardens where we grew tomatoes, tomatoes, and more tomatoes. We ate them, cooked them, and jarred them. Of course, we also grew peppers, basil, lettuce and squash. Everybody had a grapevine and a fig tree, and in the fall, everybody made homemade wine, lots of it. Of course, those gardens thrived so because we also had something else it seemed our American friends didn't seem to have. We had a grandfather! It's not that they didn't have grandfathers, its just that they didn't live in the same house or on the same block. They visited their grandfathers. We ate with ours and God forbid we didn't see him at least once a day. I can still remember my grandfather telling me about how he came to America as a "young man on a boat. How the family lived in rented apartments and took in boarders in order to help make ends meet, how he decided that he didn't want his children, five sons and two daughters, to grow up in that environment. All of this, of course, in his own version of Italian-English, which I soon learned to understand quite well.

So, when he saved enough (and I could never figure out how), he bought a house. That house served as the family headquarters for the next 40 years. Of course, he had to add his own touch of himself to that house by building a porch on, and then deciding to "add another on to that, and another on to that one until he had added about four porches on to the original. Then of course he and my grandmother had to "paint the kitchen and use enamel, high gloss paint. They painted everything in sight including all the fixtures, screws and all. If anything needed to be taken apart, it was next to impossible to "unscrew it because of all the paint, and forget about trying to open the windows! I remember how he hated to leave that house, and would rather sit on the back porch and watch his garden grow, and when he did leave for some special occasion, he had to return as quickly as possible. After all, "nobody's watching the house.

I also remember the holidays when all the relatives would gather at my grandparent's house and there would be tables full of food and homemade wine and music. Women in the kitchen and men in the living room, and kids, kids

everywhere. I must have half a million cousins, first and second and some who aren't even related, but what did it matter. And my grandfather, with his gallon jug of wine beside his chair, sitting there smoking his cigar in the middle of it all, grinning his mischievous smile, his eyes twinkling, surveying his domain, proud of his family and how well his children had done. One was a barber, one had his fathers trade, one was a policeman and of course there was always the rogue. And the girls, they had all married well and had fine husbands and healthy children that everyone knew and respected.

He had achieved his goal in coming to America and to Brooklyn and now his children and their children were achieving the same goals that were available to them in this great country, because they were Americans. When my grandfather died years ago, things began to change. Slowly at first, but then uncles and aunts eventually began to cut down on their visits. Family gatherings were fewer and something seemed to be missing, although when we did get together, usually at my mother's house now, I always had the feeling that they were there. It was understandable, of course. Everyone had their own families now, and their own grandchildren. Today they visit once or twice a year. Today we meet at weddings and wakes.

Lots of other things have changed too. The old house my grandfather bought is now covered with aluminum siding, and the garden is gone. The last of the homemade wine has long since been drunk and nobody covers the fig tree in the fall anymore. For a while we would make the rounds on the holidays visiting family. Now, we occasionally visit the cemetery. A lot of them are there, grandparents, aunts and uncles, a few cousins and even my own mother and father.

The holidays have changed too. The quantity of food we once consumed without any ill effect is not good for us anymore. Too much starch, too many calories, too much cholesterol and nobody bothers to bake anymore...too busy and it is easier to buy now. Too much is no good for you. We meet at the same house now, at least my family does, but it's not the same anymore.

The differences between "us and "them" aren't so easily defined anymore and I guess that's good. My grandparents were Italian-Italians, my parents were Italian-Americans, and I am American-Italian, and my children are American- Americans. Oh, and I'm an American all right, and proud of it, just as my grandfather would want me to be. We are all Americans now-Irish, Poles, Germans, and Jews.

United States citizens all -- but somehow I still feel Italian. Call it culture, call it tradition, call it roots. I'm not sure what it is, all I do know is that my children have been cheated out of a wonderful piece of heritage. They never knew my grandparents."

This letter moved me so that I quickly felt I needed to share it with some of my Italian relatives. So I quickly distributed the letter. I was quite taken by some of the responses that I received and I list some of them here.

"I absolutely loved this. Thank-you. If I could write. I would have wrote this. Because this essay has been in my head exactly. This was my life . I often think no matter what God throws at me I've already had a perfect childhood. I only feel bad my kids won't understand and know how that upbringing was. Love your sweet Italian cousin. We've shared many of those memories and big dinners, haven't we? ...Diane"

"We really enjoyed reading this email! How very true it was right down to the 7 course dinners!! We were all very fortunate to grow up in this environment. Unfortunately my grandparents passed away when I was about 2 years old, but I really felt like I knew them through all the stories told by my mom, aunts and uncles. Thanks for sharing this with me. It truly brought back some wonderful memories! ...Linda & Mike"

"As the tears flow as this writing brought back my childhood - that has to be the best thing I've ever read. I felt like I could have written it. Living next door to my grandparents (Zito) growing up - I can't tell you of all the memories - and traditions I try to keep going just to save a little part of that time. The last line is so true. I am often sad that my children

as well as some of my younger Zito cousins missed out on knowing my grandparents. I wish at times I had the same relationship with the Durso's, but unfortunately I did not. Grandpa had died the year I was born and Grandma lived far away and of course there was the language barrier. Everything it said about the grandfather was the epitome of my grandfather - from the wine to the tomatoes, even the porch. And we were never, ever able to open their windows because of the paint. What an absolute riot. I think the only thing missing from this writing was the plastic on the couch.

I have to tell you Gene, this was great. And as far as the tomatoes go - I spent so many years helping my grandfather with his tomato garden I cannot purchase tomatoes at a grocery store - THEY MUST BE FROM a farm stand - grocery ones will not do. If they do not smell as sweet as grandpa's from the garden I'll do without. And I'm hooked - I go through at least 10-15 a week - and the "tomato" man thinks I sell them. What he doesn't know is with every bite I see my grandfather along side of me. Thanks for the memories. This was really enjoyable... Deb.

It was interesting that we all seemed to be able to relate in so many of the same ways to this letter.

Well I hope if you are not Italian that this book will help you understand what it was like to be an Italian-American. For those of us that lived some of the experiences I hope it brings back a lot of great memories. It certainly also helped me understand what it was like for my dad and others like him when they entered this country as immigrants.