

Adventures in McCloudland

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Chapter 47

November 1996

Jerry Fabiano

In November of 1996, when we had been opened for 1½ years, Jerry Fabiano, his wife, Susan, and Lee and I sat in front of the fire after dinner and chatted. This was his first trip back to the area in many years. He'd been raised in Mt. Shasta, and had lots of family in McCloud with whom he often visited. He shared some of his memories as well as stories told to him by his grandmother.

Jerry Fabiano had vivid recollections of an extremely contented childhood in this protected mill-town. He'd walk from Tucci Camp and know everyone in every house. He felt welcome in anyone's home in his small world. He recalls an old man early every morning walking through the Camp singing Italian love songs with great gusto followed by many admirers. The followers were dozens of cats. "He looked just like a piper with the cats bunched up around his feet as he walked," Jerry remembered.

He also recalls Frank Belotti a milkman running milk, wine, and "other" services. His truck often stayed parked in front of certain houses for long periods of time.

He remembers making scooters out of any buggy wheel they could get and drinking Kool-Aid.

As he spoke of the wonderful meals of freshly made tomato sauces with vegetables picked just that day from their garden, I could see on his face that special look of recalling a childhood memory that was pure pleasure.

Jerry doesn't remember feeling different because he was Italian. His world was Italian. His grandmother's friends as well as his mother's friends and all his playmate's families spoke Italian. "Some women," he shared, "never learned English well enough to be

comfortable with it. "He continued, "They had a deep love for this country, though, and my mother told me this story many times about a friend of hers becoming a citizen."

In 1977 Katherine Mello, who had arrived in the Mt. Shasta area direct from Italy and Ellis Island in 1947, sought to fulfill her 30 year dream of becoming a U.S. citizen. She could not read or write and spoke very broken English. She studied hard for several months with the help of Jerry's mother.

Jerry continued, "The big day arrived and she made the trip to Yreka to be questioned by the Judge. The small woman sat before an imposing figure of a man as he reviewed her file. He raised up slightly, looked down at Katherine and commented, 'Katherine, you have been in this country for 30 years, raised 8 children 5 of whom served in our Second World War?'"

"Yes, Your Honor," she said.

He stood fully up from his chair, rounded the bench and approached the terrified woman. "Please allow me to hug you, Katherine, and thank you for what you have done for the United States. Of course you may be a citizen."

She began to cry.

When he asked why she was crying, she replied in her heavy accent, "Your Honor, I have studied for months and worked very hard to learn all about this country, but you do not ask even one question."

"All right," he replied, "Who was the first President of the United States?"

A huge smile flashed across her face as she responded, "Oh, Your Honor, Papa George Washington was the first President of these United States."

Later, she and her tutor and their families went to church to light a special candle in thanks for the wonderful blessing of citizenship. She was very proud. And the son of her tutor friend, Jerry Fabiano, recalls that day when he was a young boy and, "a warm glow about her filled the room and their hearts."

By this time we had all teared-up. I know why Jerry had tears in his eyes recalling something so special and so private that he was privy to. But I'm still not sure why the rest of us felt so emotional. I'd never known anyone so touched by such a profound, personal relationship with this country. This was turning into a very special evening.

We settled back hoping Jerry wasn't finished with his stories. He wasn't.

Ralph Fabiano, Jerry's uncle, was a tailor in Mt. Shasta. Ralph sent many letters to his brother, Mario, Urging him to come west from New York. He promised Mario that he

and his family could make lots of money in California. The young New York couple came with two-month old Jerry, and settled into one room above the tailor shop with Ralph and his wife. An intense feud developed between the brothers and Jerry's parents moved out of his uncle's place.

Once when Jerry was in the second grade, he asked about the uncle in the tailor shop. His father replied simply, "That man is nothing to you." The two brothers didn't speak or acknowledge each other for over 30 years.

At age 80 Mario entered the tailor shop and made peace with his brother. They saw each other a few times after that but the relationship was never close. Jerry has a picture taken the day of the reconciliation. Two parts of the same family had totally severed a relationship from the only family they had in a strange country for 30 years. Jerry never knew what prompted the feud.

In another story, Mario Fabiano "was a young husband with a beautiful wife when he and some friends (Jerry called them Paisianes) "took a trip to Reno where he became smitten with a lovely young woman." To the amazement of his friends he set up housekeeping with the woman for two months. He was then visited by a man who informed Mario that the woman's husband, the local barber, had hired him to do away with the interloper. The hired hit-man was giving Mario a chance to get out of town.

But Mario would not be deterred. He vowed to stay. His friends, however, wisely conspired to spirit Mario out of harm's way. That night they got him very drunk and whisked him out of town and didn't stop until they had him safely back in Mt. Shasta.

Jerry continued, "Several years later in a classical scene of submission, Mario returned to Reno and presented himself to the barber for a shavewith a straight edge. The barber ceremoniously sharpened and scraped, sharpened and scraped until it was finished. Mario returned to Mt. Shasta and never spoke of the incident again."

It all seemed so dramatic to me; feuds and vendettas.

Of course as he grew older he realized some of the stories he had here were intensely painful.

"A dear friend of my mother's was sent for from Italy to become bride of a local rancher. The 16-year-old young woman made the long difficult trip from Italy, to Ellis Island and then by train to Mt. Shasta where she was met by her husband-to-be. He met her and placed her in his buckboard and traveled to the ranch where she stayed without benefit of marriage rites for several years. The priest eventually visited and performed the ceremony, but the young woman was deeply hurt and humiliated at her perceived sins. She was badly treated by her husband and isolated on their ranch for many years.

Upon his death bed, her husband wished her to promise she would never marry. She refused his wishes, but never married.”

We then switched topics slightly and talked about the 1906 Italian strike in McCloud. I’ve seen pictures of the original McCloud Hotel with women and their parasols and tightly cinched waists gathered on the picturesque veranda. They are looking down at a mob of men in the street in front of the hotel. Only when you look closely can you see that some of them were carrying clubs. We found one when we were tearing out walls here. For a long time I didn’t know what the roughly carved, 16” long and 6” wide piece of wood would be used for. At one end the broad part was carved into an easy to grip handle.

Jerry said it was called a Bastoni.

I asked how such a group of recent immigrants so isolated from their own country and mores could band together to forge such a single minded body demanding better conditions.

He explained that most of the Italians had immigrated from an area known as Calabria in Southern Italy. Their rural homestead is very different from Northern Italy. Their language is markedly different as well. It’s not just an accent that makes it different, but almost a separate language. “And Calabrizi’s,” he continued, “are known to be hard headed.” “Italians are like cats,” he added, “quick to anarchy.” “They are small by other’s standards, and often have had to scrap and fight for their share. They are quick to question authority and it’s not surprising to me at all that there was an Italian uprising.”

I’m so glad Jerry Fabiano decided to return to McCloud for a visit. I’m especially pleased he chose to stay here.