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ORAL HISTORY
When one thinks of the twenties, they are often entertained with thoughts of flappers, a prosperous economy, and a decadent lifestyle possessed by the spirit of youth. However, there are other stories to be told that exist outside the realms of make-up and new cars that also mark the time. Many immigrant children grew up in a 1920's America of poverty and struggle, where the most important things in life took place within their home, not within the stock market. The images which today have come to represent youth culture of the twenties, seem more to be a legacy of the middle class elite, born out of an experience quite in contrast to those growing up with the perils of struggle. However, this often overlooked existence of the poor was rich in many ways that the other affluent members of society would know little of.

Hanging on the wall in 89 years-old Marty Guly's family room in Rochester, New York is a large framed painting. It is the same picture that hangs in the homes of her four remaining sisters, Santina, Mary, Amy and Loretta, and her one remaining brother, John. They are all descendants of Italian immigrants Marco and Filomina Iachini, who came to the U.S. in 1910 in search of a better life. (Originally a family of nine children, excluding one still born, they have lost along the way Terry, Rose, and Enrique.) The painting exhibits a broken down bedroom furnished meekly with one tattered bed, dangling window shutters, and a bucket on the floor collecting drops of rain leaking from the ceiling. In the bed are a man, a woman, and eight children, all crammed and snuggled on top of one another. A dog lies peacefully at the foot of the collapsing bed held steady by a book. The man sleeps with an upright umbrella in his hand to shelter the family from rain, yet through the window a subtle glow of sunlight casts itself upon the bed and its occupants. At close glance, it is evident that each person, barefoot and skimpily clothed, is smiling and content. In 1995, Marty stumbled upon the painting and was fondly reminded of the duality of her childhood. Upon sharing with her siblings the sentiment inspired in her by the painting, the five remaining Iachini children all purchased a print to represent the abundance they felt growing up, despite the outward symbols of fortune they were deprived of.

The family lived together in a small house, where seven girls slept in one bed, and two parents, an uncle, and a boy slept in another. It was all they could afford, but it seemed to be plenty. Marty never knew how it felt to be celebrated as a young, prosperous American by society. Rather, she grew acquainted with the feeling of being devalued as a poor Italian immigrant. She and her siblings were ridiculed for being different, as they spoke very little English. They were looked down upon by their more privileged American peers whose time was
spent indulging in an artificially suspended fantasy of youth. Attending Holy Cross, a Catholic school, the siblings received little sympathy from the nuns who taught them. They spent less time playing and more time knocking coal off pausing trains on the tracks near their house to take home to their parents, where they would help to slaughter the animals and tend to the garden, their main source of subsistence. The work ethic instilled in Marty at such a young age would prove to be valuable when she was forced to leave school at the age of fifteen.

After attending only one year of high school, Marty graduated in order to come to the aid of her mother, who had experienced a nervous breakdown when Marty’s father lost his job. With the absence of her father’s $20 a week, generated from his job at a local disposable plant gone, Marty began working at St. Theresa’s Hall, a local convalescent hospital, for $10.80 a week. Though the majority of her earnings went to the family, she was allowed to keep .25¢ for herself. Focused on survival, she knew very little of the prominent high school lifestyle of extracurricular activities many others had the luxury of enjoying.

School did leave Marty and her siblings with one lasting legacy. Just as the family was forced to abandon their Italian last name of Iachini for a more American sounding “Tachin”, all but the youngest two of the children had their first names westernized by the nuns at Holy Cross. “Erika” became Marty, “Rosina” became Rose, “Asunta” became Terry, “Emilia” became Amy, and “Maria” became Mary. Santina’s name was also changed to Mary, but she managed to retain her original identity throughout the years. Name changing, an attempt by the dominant class to rid these people of the taint of their foreign culture, was not unusual for many immigrants. While so many other young Americans were celebrating their young “identity”, immigrant children were forced to abandon theirs.

For poor immigrant children, there was much more than their names to be sacrificed. While other youths spent their time cruising in their own cars or going on dates, Marty spent most of her “leisure” time helping at home. With eight children in the house, Marty and Santina were expected to forego many frivolities in order to aid in childcare, as they were the oldest. They were learning to sew and crochet clothes for the other children by age six, and were baking bread by the age of eight. They were expected to grow up fast and take on adult responsibilities in a time when the more affluent society was intoxicated with the illustrious idea of remaining young.
Movies like Charlie Chaplin’s “The Kid” revealed society’s value placed on the spirit of youth. Fashions also displayed the people’s desire to embrace a young essence. The popular flapper style dress with the drop waist, adopted by many girls, displayed a type of asexual look, avoiding the accentuation of the female curves, and thus maintaining a pre-teen image. Girls also wore heavy make-up, aiding in preserving a very childlike, baby-doll look. Symbols of masculinity lost their luster in the male fashion scene just as women’s styles rejected the look of the developing (and consequently aging) female. Facial hair began to disappear, as did meaty, muscular male exteriors. The thin, pre-pubescent look represented by the sheik was as popular a look for males as the flapper was for females. Both looks attempted to again preserve a youthful image. The styles even gained popularity among many adults, revealing society’s deeper hunger for an internally young existence. This love affair with feeling young and alive transcended age, but not so much class and race.

When an individual was free of the worries inflicted by poverty, it was easy to pursue such a frivolous existence. However, those more burdened by deprivation had little time or interest to invest in such ideals. For Marty and most in her predicament, the flighty ideas of decadence and freedom gave way to the realities of poor immigrant life. Growing up in a community of other Italian immigrants, Marty had very little exposure to the flapper phenomenon. Her childhood world revolved around her family and seldom extended beyond the confines of her block. Her focus was not on fashion and makeup, but on curing the meats and changing the diapers. The often unnoticed contrast of such a 1920’s childhood with that of popular depictions stands as evidence of how often times history (or people’s interpretations of it) is painted much by the experience of the affluent. The portrayed culture of a time can often in this way be less representative of society as a whole, and more representative of the experience of the elite.

“We never had any money!” was Marty’s explanation of the majority of her experiences growing up. She never wore make-up, nor went shopping for the latest styles. No visits were made to the barbershop for expensive bob cuts. Because the family simply could not afford such things, they became unimportant. Their mother cut their hair at home, and fashioned their dresses out of chicken feed bags with pretty daisy prints. Without much exposure to anything different, Marty was fond of such outfits. Upon turning sixteen, she was allowed to wear face powder, which she bought for herself with her work savings. She would never purchase lipstick.
while living at home, however, as her “mother would have killed me if she saw me with that stuff on my face! I’d look like one of those flappers!”

In her memory, flappers were the kind of girls who got pregnant. The Tachin girls, like many of their young female friends, were raised Catholic and expected to remain virgins until their wedding night. (Of course, the same was never expected of their brother John.) In a time when a sexual revolution seemed to be taking place among females, the Tachin girls were subject to a more traditional Victorian ideology. While Marty was learning to crochet, many other young girls were exploring their own sexuality. Contraceptives had become more readily available and many females were expressing a more casual sexual attitude. Petting and necking were gaining acceptance among young people, while still inspiring fear in most parents. The courting ritual itself was moving drastically from the strict home-based meetings between a boy and a girl to unchaperoned nights out on the town. Yet, these again were luxuries Marty experienced little of. If a young man wished to court her, he was required to visit the house for a family dinner. In this way, the Tachin family clung much more tightly to the dating customs of the previous decade, in which a prospective husband would court a girl on the family’s front porch with everyone present. By contrast to Marty’s romantic experiences, many girls were dating several boys at a time and expected to do so outside of the restricting walls of their homes. Young people’s (including girl’s) possession of their own cars made this easy to do. As cars were luxuries enjoyed by the more prominent members of society, poor immigrant girls did not often participate in the dating rituals that so often come to represent the youth experience of the 20’s.

In contrast to many other girls who were challenging traditional sexual norms, Marty remained fairly obedient to her parent’s expectations. However, she reveled in her own share of tiny rebellions. During the “wholesome” courting dinners at the Tachin home, Marty would “steal smooches from the fellas” she liked when her mother would go to the kitchen. She found other little ways to converse with boys outside of the home. The convalescent home she worked at was near a beach where she and male coworkers could spend their breaks together. By far the most rebellious thing she ever did was stay out for three nights in protest to her father’s decision to prohibit her from going on a date alone. Knowing that she was really camping out at work each night, her parents simply waited for her return when her fury had passed. Other families experienced greater difficulties when faced with a daughter’s raging new demand for freedom.
Some parents were still making use of the states ability to “control” the disorderly, immoral conduct of young girls. Even as late as 1923, “New York passed the Wayward Minor Act, giving formal recognition to the legal rights of upstate parents”struggling with their daughters unacceptable behavior (Alexander, 283). “Incorrigible” girls were still being sent to reformatories like Bedford Hills and Albion in order to calm their rebellious drive. Though no one in the Tachin family experienced such extremes, Marty does remember a few “bad girls, you know-flappers” being sent away because they got pregnant. No one knew where exactly they went, and it was assumed that their families sent them away to other relatives until they had their babies in order to protect the families from public shame.

When Marty finally went on her first date, in 1927, she was sixteen. She and Don Guly, whom she eventually married, were allowed to attend a movie together, chaperoned of course by her sister Rose. (Don’s original name was Dominique, though his name too was Americanized at an early age and changed to Donald. He received so much ridicule growing up for his Italian name that today in the year 2001 he becomes enraged if anyone refers to him as Dominique.) Though movies were a popular form of entertainment for young people, Marty was rarely allowed or able to afford the luxury of attending. When she did attend, she would pay .25 at a theatre where she got to see two cartoons, the weather, the news, and a film. If she attended a Friday show, each person received a dish, by far the highlight of the escapade. She remembers fondly how movies carried such romantic themes and frowns in disgust at the “garbage kids watch today, (with) all that sex and violent stuff.” However, she fails to recognize that the content of the “respectable” films she reminisces about most likely had the same disturbing effect on her parents generation that modern day films have on her now aging generation.

When Marty was a teenager, the image of the wholesome female actress was no longer desired in film, and was replaced by more sultry, risqué types. In addition, patriotic themes were falling in film as a result of an unpopular war.

Movies were not the only forms of entertainment available to young people. Occasionally Marty was able to attend the beach dance hall for .10¢ where she could converse with boys without her parents’ supervision, although they were still chaperoned by adults. Many parents and reformers viewed the dance halls as breeding grounds for corruption where kids were lured into illicit behaviors with the opposite sex. Some believed that the only type of girl a boy could meet at such a place was a prostitute. They considered much of the music vulgar and the
styles of dance inappropriate. Marty simply went to hear the many different sounds, as the only time she got to hear music was at home on the family's Victrola, a type of record player. The majority of her social activities were community based. As neither her family nor most of the others in the neighborhood had cars, they created their own entertainment instead of going off in search of adventure. They had many block parties and community picnics with neighbors, all of whom were very close and dependent on one another. Many social reformers would have been pleased to see such "wholesome" environments being provided for young people to meet and frolic. Indeed, such a picnic is where Marty first met Don. For Marty, the most exciting of all diversions was the carnival. She got to go on ferris wheels, hit tall balls, and always looked forward with gruesome anticipation to LuLu and her forty babies, which was a woman with forty snakes coming off of her. Marty reminisces about the days of "clean fun" as opposed to what people seek today. Her arguments echo the same concerns that reformers of the 20's voiced against her idea of "clean fun." She does admit, however, to going with her fiancé to a burlesque show where girls would dance half nude, while she constantly insisted that they had to drive to Buffalo to see it, as no such thing would ever have taken place in her town.

The absence of cars and disposable income not only contributed to alternative forms of entertainment, but also helped to create a strong sense of togetherness. "No one had a car. Everyone walked everywhere. You always saw everyone and they always invited you in to offer you something, even if they didn't have anything. Not today." Today Marty lives two blocks away from her 57 Flemming Street childhood home, where her brother John still lives, yet she laments the loss of comraderie and community that used to warm the streets. She attributes the change to the eventual rise of wealth in the area and the acculturation of the immigrant neighborhoods. Though the heavy Italian influence can still be seen in the storefronts and heard through the stories of many of the remaining residents, the social climate born out of the struggle and simplicity of her childhood has disappeared. "People used to lend each other baby clothes for their baby's doctor appointments so that they'd look real nice, and you'd always give your neighbors food if they were hungry. Now all you get is a 'hi and bye.' That's it."

Perhaps the main thing that Marty's family shared equally with the wealthier members of society was a lack of political awareness. They were living in a time when people in general had almost no contact with the government, as television had not yet intruded the nation. Politics and government did not become a significant part of Americans' lives until the presidency of
Franklin D. Roosevelt during the depression in 1933. American people during the 1920’s were more concerned with enjoyment and personal indulgence than politics. Immigrants were particularly removed from the sphere of political thinking. They were too concerned with their own family’s survival to pay much attention to politics. In addition, without the ability to even understand the very language the politicians spoke, Marty’s family could hardly relate to electoral candidates. However, whenever candidates passed through the town, families would humbly pamper them with jarred fruits and other foods. Marty had little feeling toward them either way, and simply saw them as doing what they needed to do in order to survive, just as she and her family were doing. This was something she understood, not laws and governmental jargon. Because their father held a job through the Democrat party, each family member eventually was encouraged to become a registered Democrat, though they understood little of what the title meant.

It is common for people to reflect on their youth through rose-colored glasses, and for the wounds begotten during times of great struggle to fade into forgotten scars with time. Life as a poor, female Italian immigrant growing up in the 20’s was by no means easy. However, there is an elusive richness to such an experience that challenges the value of the more traditional material wealth associated with the decade. Though Marty and her family did not experience the pleasures of the decadent lifestyle so often associated with the 20’s, they were prosperous in many ways. “We didn’t know anything different, so we didn’t miss it. We didn’t really want for anything. We were happy kids.” While many of society’s “fortunate” members were jumping out of windows with the eruption of the Great Depression of 1929, the Tachin family, like many poor families, continued much as they always had. The blow was felt harder by middle to upper class families because they had so much further to fall, as opposed to the poorer families whose lives were already burdened by poverty.

Marty’s experience growing up in the 20’s was in contrast to many of the prevailing notions of the decade’s privileged youth existence. The internal wealth she possessed far outweighed the values of the material objects she lived without. She prospers today from the strong sense of humanity and simplicity that her impoverished immigrant childhood furnished her with.