

My Father's Sons

By Mark Morelli, *Northern Ohio Live*, 1995

I grew up in a small town, but I moved away. My eldest brother stayed. He is a pillar of the community. I always had wanderlust. He never did, or at least never succumbed to it.

I've had nearly twenty addresses. I can easily remember only the one I have now and the one where I grew up, where my parents still live. I've watched seals flop around in the icy, salty Piscataqua River that separates Maine from New Hampshire. I've watched the sun rise over the East River from a rooftop on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. I've sold fireworks and gotten a boss tan from the back of a truck in Fort Lauderdale. I've strummed guitar and yodeled into great hillsides along Route 17 at the bottom of New York state, caring not a whit that it was 3am and my alternator was dead.

My brother, on the other hand, lives two blocks from our parents and his children are blessed with grandparents they know intimately. He is active in the parish we grew up in and has been the Water Board Commissioner for the past ten years. Diligently, he has spearheaded the necessary changes to bring the community's water system up to standard while the systems in neighboring towns remain antiquated and costly to operate. He plays cards with friends he has known since kindergarten.

When I'm in town, we take long walks together. People nod and give him a nonchalant hello. To me, they react with surprise. I'm a visitor now, not a resident. I am, so to speak, news. Of course, the out-of-towner no longer brings in tales from the outside. What I bring is not information; instead, I am the embodiment of perspective. I've been away. "Hey, where have you been?" they ask. "Where are you living now? Damn, it's good to see you, don't be a stranger."

I treasure their friendliness, but honestly, I don't deserve it heaped so high. If anyone does, it's my brother. What have I done to shape their lives? It is he who has done nothing less than ensure their children safe drinking water. Hail not the conquering hero, but the one who stayed.

The allure lies in what's just over the horizon. In *Winesburg, Ohio*, George Willard, the young man who writes the town's newspaper, burns with desire to see the world, write great things, love beautiful women. He seeks the fountain

of aspirations where he might hold his empty decanter. He has not yet reached the age that Cleveland poet Stanley Niemiec depicts in "Old Men":

*Unlike the young they have learned
That life is not always sweet,
That ambition and accomplishment
Seldom meet.*

Winesburg, Ohio concludes on a railroad platform, with George Willard heading off the big city, looking at his hometown as a background on which to hang the dreams of his manhood. We don't know what becomes of George Willard. He might've returned home, living the words of George Moore: "A man travels the world over in search of what he needs, and returns home to find it." After all, only a fool persists in thinking he can get close enough to the horizon to plant a flag in it.

Small town people forget that city dwellers are often more provincial because they are in awe of no one and no place. Big cities are nothing but compartmentalized neighborhoods. E.B. White wrote that "people from villages and small towns, people accustomed to the convenience and friendliness of neighborhood over-the-fence living, are unaware that life in New York follows the neighborhood pattern."

New York has changed since E.B. White's day, but his observations on urban life ring true enough. When the May Company announced last year that it would close its huge downtown Cleveland store, Richard Osborne, editor of *Corporate Cleveland* magazine, lamented the passing of other business, some born locally, such as Hinge's, Halle's, Sterling's, Richman's, Sohio, Hough Bakeries and the old Cleveland Trust. "Businesses are truly successful not merely when they make money, but when they make memories, too," Osborne wrote. "And then they expand the community's definition of itself. The names belonged to us uniquely--which of course may be one of the reasons they are gone. But while we had them, they gave our town a flavor and texture all its own. And they made us proud."

I feel a pang when I pass the corner building that was a candy store when I was growing up. It was run by an old English couple named Burgess who sold penny root beer barrels and Popsicles. Shopping there between 5 and 6 pm meant you interrupted their dinner. This contributed to the flavor and texture of my neighborhood in a way in which a Dairy Mart never could.

So no matter where we go, we will always be somewhere else unless we come

to fully know that flavor and texture that is the town's very own. Transients, despite whatever worldliness they gain, will never know a town so well.

When my nephew was ten, I showed him an old doorstep in the one-block business district of our little hometown. In the early 1900s, this stoop led into an ice cream parlor. Long ago, a mason had laid the colored tile on the stoops to read "Ice Cream and Candy." My nephew hadn't noticed the words before. Few people do anymore. The ice cream and candy store had been replaced seventy years before. On our next walk, he stopped and showed the tiled words of the long ago confection store to one of his buddies. Together they shared a slice of history about their town and I put no small value on that knowledge.

That nephew is part of the fourth generation to live in our hometown since his great-grandfather came from Italy around 1900. He is the fourth to carry our surname. So when our name is mentioned, it resounds with local history. My nephew is part of a continuing chain, a continuity. His immigrant great-grandfather, his grandfather and his father treaded the sidewalk he treads. And now, him. He might feel good, being part of something, a link in the chain. On the other hand, he might feel the sentiment of Paul Simon: "In my little town, I never meant nothing, I was just my father's son," and a desire to break the chain. After all, his great-grandfather broke a much longer chain.

Shortly after graduating from college, I just up and quit my radio job in Youngstown to move to New England, not for another job or school, but just to go, to live near the sea. It was my first time living outside of Ohio. But now I realize that it wasn't by any means my first journey. I had already been traveling a long time. As a boy, nestled in my bedroom, I would read, book after book. The railroad trains roared through the village at night, but it was the quiet turning of the page that sent me far afield. To commune with authors across a vast space has turned out to be even more important than actual travel because it taught me to venture always and everywhere, to make a journey of watching a bird feed its young or a spider spin its web or showing an old stoop to a young boy.