

Yeah, he's my dad!

My Irish ancestors came from Dublin back in the 1840's. They were three brothers and their families, my great-great grandparents bringing with them eight children ranging from nineteen to two years of age. I was born in 1928; eighty years after their arrival and so became their fourth generation. There have been about three generations since then - a total of seven. On the other hand, my mother's ancestors (actually her parents) came from the Adriatic coast of Italy in 1905. Now I can't account for how my Irish ancestors blended into the population of 1840's Philadelphia, although an old cousin tells me the children retained their Irish vocabulary, calling a shoe a brogue – while also continuing to speak with a brogue (same spelling, different meaning). But I'm very much aware of how my mother quite deliberately intended to become immediately as American as her schoolmates – relating to her Italian background at home but otherwise becoming immersed in the play and interests and opportunities of the only birthplace she would acknowledge. She was determined to be as “American” (or as her parents would say “Amedigon”) as her neighborhood friends.

Consequently, she was very active at school, completed elementary school and went to work. She aspired to independence. She went to matinees, danced the Charleston, wore short skirts, adopted a Louise Brooks hair style, became the life of the party and married my mesmerized Irish dad at nineteen. Then the market crashed and “fun” was put on hold. But I have always said, she remained a flapper into her nineties - always ready to party, to conform to Hollywood's image of the American woman.

The reason I bring this up is: since I moved here in 1979 the Sonoma Valley has been experiencing a rapid settlement of Latino and specifically Mexican residents – raising their percentages in schools, businesses, labor, agriculture. (This is so evident in our parish of St. Leo.) And let's admit it: such a change requires adjustments among old timers who may wonder: “Am I and the world I have known becoming past history?” And then there arrives at my house recently a young man, age about 18 -19, in a pick-up truck. He pulls into my driveway. I don't recognize him. I have had a middle-aged landscape person serving my home for the past twenty-five years, a native of Michoacán. Has there been a mistake? Has the young man begun work at the wrong address? I watch as he uses the blower around the property but as he lifts a lawnmower from the truck I step outside and call out: “Are you connected with (and I named my usual landscaper)?” And the young man calls back: “Yeah, he's my dad!”

Why did I immediately feel a flip flop in my soul, a kind of release? That's how I would have spoken to any pal of mine when I was nineteen! It was the tone, the familiarity of the expression, a way of responding that placed him within my life long range of experience. Interiorly I expressed my reaction as: “That kid is an American!” So simple! I had been drawn out of my sense of being old and left behind and here I was still being “at home” after all. Often we speak of waves of immigration arriving among us and fail to think of the alternate side of that wave as also the arrival of a new generations of fellow citizens come to contribute their labor, talents, hopes, cultural heritages to our collective – indeed family future.

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