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Brick Foundations: Continuity and Change in an Italian Working-Class Rural Community

Vincent Serravallo

Italian immigrants in the United States at the turn of the century did not all live and work in the big cities. For instance, some lived in southern Kansas and mined coal, and some lived in Louisiana and labored on sugar plantations. The Italians from whom I descend settled in upstate New York about 100 miles north of New York City in a small rural community along the west shore of the Hudson River. They came to this area on the outskirts of the small City of Kingston in the first decade of the 1900s from the southern villages of Paterno, Belsito, and Caivano, near Cosenza. The men came to work in New York's booming and arduous brickmaking industry. They labored tirelessly in the twenty modern-age brickyards that dominated the community, but they found that their new environment accommodated much of their past agrarian way of life. They grew tremendous vegetable gardens and fruit trees, raised pigs and chickens, and hunted and fished on the land and in the water adjacent to their homes. The women cooked and preserved the garden's bounty,

baked their own bread in backyard brick ovens, made sausage, and sewed much of their own family's clothes and bed sheets from flour and seed sacks.

Most of their sons, like my father, followed their father's footsteps into the brickyards for a while before they moved into unskilled or semi-skilled construction work, and many of their daughters, like my mother, became seamstresses. They attained but grammar school education, and remained in or very close to the community. And they dreamed that their children, my generation, would move up higher than they and transcend their blue-collar world. I remember watching my father come home from his brickyard job in the early 1960s and listening to his exhortations. Sitting exhausted at the kitchen table and covered with red brick dust, he would say, "Kid, you better get that education. Work with a pencil, not your back. Don't be like me."

Whether or not we met our parents' dreams and to what extent we are "like them" are things I have pondered since my father made his sermons. I am now formally pursuing these questions in my study of the two immediate generations who descend from the original brickworker community of the early 1900s. I found in fact that most of my generation has become college educated, and most of us are nurses, teachers, and low-level office managers. I also found, however, that the more I learned about the earlier community our grandparents formed, the more continuities I saw between their way of life and ours.

I use the name "Brickerland" to refer to the community the first immigrant generation formed. More than twenty brickyards were crammed into the community's shore line by Jewish owners during the first two decades of the 1900s. The area's great supply of clay and its direct water route to New York City, and brickmaking's comparatively cheap investment needs made Brickerland one of the State's largest producers. In 1925, eight out of ten family heads of the 340 families worked at the yards. The children and wives of the brickworkers knew much of the work as well, for they often helped the men out with certain tasks better suited for shorter backs or thinner wrists. Girls made their own dolls out of brick bats; boys played with some of the equipment on the yards. It was the type of brutal labor that other Italian immigrants and other immigrant groups at this time had to perform. But the rural setting and other technical and social aspects of brickmaking helped to make the experience of these families much less typical than the better-known lives of their urban counterparts.

The brickyards closed down during the winter months, and except for a small number who worked as ice harvesters, the families had no steady income until the following spring when work resumed. Thus, like the general condition of the immigrants at this time, Brickerland was marked by poverty. But the second-generation descendants point out quickly, "We had nothing, yet we had everything." They "had everything" because unlike the suspicion and familialism characterizing other Italians, these families shared food, labor and other goods with each other. And they had this food, labor and other goods because their paternal yard owners loaned them—and often later sold them cheaply—land on which they raised their tremendous vegetable gardens, fruit trees and small livestock. The owners also gave the families credit at the company store over the winter, which was later deducted from the first paychecks. The family's efforts were fruitful because they worked extraordinarily hard and maintained a strong self-sufficiency undoubtedly transported from the old country. The men did most of the main gardening tasks, but the children had to weed and get rid of the insects before and after school. Their payoff was that during the winter their root cellars were packed with hundreds of jars of tomatoes and pears, many pounds of potatoes, cabbage and dried sausage, and the countless gallons of home-made wine and beer. "It looked just like an aisle in Grand Union," one descendant told me of these hand-dug outdoor pantries. The community charity that accompanied this self-sufficiency is expressed well in the following childhood recollections of a small group of descendants:

Lena: We were a closeknit community.

VS: How were you closeknit?

Rose: We were close because we knew what every family ate for that day and what they were going to do the next day. It was just like one big family. We all knew from morning to night what everybody was going to do.

Lena: If your mother got sick and was laid up, well, you'd have a neighbor come in and do your wash.

Sal: That's the best way to describe it: the brickyard community was like one big family.

Lena: You knew everybody's business, even how much money they had. When Papa had pneumonia, my God the people that came to our house!

Rose: When the pigs were butchered, they all used to come over

and make sausage together. This week it was our house, next week it was someone else's. When Papa died, [our neighbor] took us all to Kingston and bought us all black clothes for the funeral. Another thing was that whoever butchered their pig first, you'd have to make up a plate with the best pieces of every part of that pig and give it to this family and that family. Then when they killed their pig we got one of these plates right back.

Lena: And when you made wine, you'd have everybody come over and taste it when it was ready.

Rose: And before you made your wine you made up a big bowl of grapes and took it around to the other families. They were very giving. They had nothing, but whatever they had they gave. Whenever [our other neighbor] had an operation, the husband came to Mama and said, "Do me a favor. You have to bake bread for me." So poor Mama used to bake our bread and bake bread for them so they had bread to eat. So, for weeks Mama made their bread. That meant two days every week she had to make bread: one day for us and one day for [our neighbors].

Clearly, as these descendants describe it, trust and charity were salient features of the first generation. Of course, Brickerland was not free of neighborhood conflict. But the material conditions of the families, like their land, secure work, and winter credit, no doubt inhibited the suspicion and cynicism that characterized the urban Italians.

These families embraced hard work, and were proud of their accomplishments, as this second-generation descendant explained:

Well, I'll tell you. The way it was, the work was hard, but people, I don't know if they enjoyed it or they liked it because they used to start there 5 o'clock in the morning, you know. Then 10:30 they were done—on the stint that they had to do. Well, after you got used to it, people really fell in love with it.

Another second-generation woman recalls that "the older men would sit and talk about how proud they were to be living and working like they were." Work was so important for them that she added,

Work was a power word to them, I guess that's how to put it. It was next to God. They used to be proud of what they had here. Other people saw us as poor. But not them. You never heard them complain about their work. . . . All they did was talk about Italy when they got together.

The second generation, in fact, often see their fathers as perfectionists either on the brickyard or around the house and garden, setting standards they seldom met. To the yardowners and brickworkers alike, the people of nearby Kingston and even the area's farmers couldn't handle the physical demands of the work like the first-generation Italians did. The brunt of the work was tossing and wheeling thousands of bricks each day. Imagine tossing bricks, four at a time, to masons six feet above you, about six hours a day for six days, and that is what the "tossers" did as they threw the bricks up to the "setters" who caught them that way to construct the huge one-million-brick kiln that baked the blocks to their everlasting sturdiness and color. After a two-week burning and cooling period the bricks were taken down by hand, and the "wheelers" loaded them via steel-wheeled wheelbarrows onto the brick barge that hauled the bricks to New York City. Each trip carried 120 bricks, almost 500 pounds, and during high tide when the ramp to the barge got steep, the wheelers tried to "make plank" by running their load up to the barge without the assistance of the boat worker who would help pull the wheelbarrow the last few feet of the incline. Aside from such work games, brickworkers had the incentive to labor at breakneck speed because of stint work: as soon as the allotted work for the day was completed, they were finished. Their workday ended about one or two in the afternoon, and some went to the taverns, some went hunting or fishing on the land and water that surrounded them, and others just gathered under a big shade tree and talked. Given the stint work and the benevolence of the owners—like granting land and a big variety of personal favors—the first generation was unsurprisingly very obedient. They never unionized and they never missed a day of work. There was an occasional "strike" for higher pay, but these were usually directed against the abusive and powerful foremen—typically Irish or German. There was rarely a harsh word for the owners.

With what little time remained for the men and women after the brickyard work, gardening, sewing, baking, and food preserving, the families got their recreation in two main ways: weekend neighborly get-togethers and the feasts and minstrels of the Catholic Church. Here is how one second-generation descendant, Cosmo, described the backyard get-togethers:

The Sunday afternoon recreation usually was that three or four families used to congregate at one guy's house. We'd sit outside. We all had outside tables. The men used to take the table over. The

boys would find some kind of game, and the women would gossip. The men would play brisk. The fun part was that the owner of the house used to supply the wine, and the trick was to try like hell to make "boss" and don't let him drink. Meanwhile, everybody else is drinking his wine and leaving him dry. And the following Sunday, they used to go to another house.

But by far the most long-awaited events were the two summertime outdoor church feasts put on by the benevolent societies that were formed in honor of saints. Membership of the societies was exclusively male and Italian, but the feasts were for all in Brickerland to enjoy. The feasts would begin with the procession of the statue through the streets. After mass, the Society would serve a spaghetti and meatball supper. And later there would be fireworks and dancing in the baseball field. Cosmo recalls:

It was usually a two-day affair. The older men, you'd hear them having loud conversations and drinking beer. The younger men were chasing women and dancing. I used to be walking down the road and everybody'd say, "Don't forget, I'll see you down the Feast."

The money collected from the feasts, such as from the procession, the ten-cent dances, and the fried bread dough, helped the societies maintain a band and provide some medical and education benefits for its members. The role they played in maintaining strong community ties was immeasurable.

The first-generation Italians dominated Brickerland beginning in the first decades of the 1900s, but they shared the community with Hungarian, Irish, German, and black families. The Irish and Germans came to the area first and worked in the limestone quarries in the mid-1800s. The small number who did not move out of the community by the early 1900s held Brickerland's authority positions as the Italians and Hungarians arrived. Most of the brickyard foremen and superintendents were Irish and German, and the school teachers and constables were Irish. The second generation is unanimous in their claim that racial and ethnic relations were very good in Brickerland on the whole as they grew up, but they also cite examples of discrimination by the Irish, especially in the school and along neighborhood boundary lines. Some recall that the grammar school teachers inhibited the Italians, and they give the popular example of one Italian boy who, despite his principal's struggles to keep him from taking the high school entrance exams and claims that his future was on the

brickyards, managed to resist and eventually became Brickerland's first Italian medical doctor. Despite this, today's descendants fondly look back at their old community and claim none of today's ethnic and racial problems existed. "Discrimination was a word we didn't know," many repeated. Several Italian families, including my maternal relatives, shared their brickyard company houses with Hungarian families, and after talking with families from both countries I learned that they formed very close friendships. My mother's Hungarian neighbors, in fact, helped support her family when her father died young.

The second-generation Italians also felt they had close relations with the black families when they were growing up. Black workers from Virginia and North Carolina were conscripted by the yardowners. Most lived only seasonally in the flimsiest company shacks built adjacent to the yards and at a distance from the white ethnics. Although the Italian descendants reveal their prejudices as they recall that the "blacks never caused any trouble," or that "they naturally stayed to themselves," there is good evidence that relations were warm during Brickerland's early years. One black man recalls that it was common for him to walk down the road and be invited in for lunch or dinner by the Italian families he passed on his way. His father, he added, spoke Italian better than some of the second-generation Italians. That sword cut both ways, in fact, for when one listens to the language of those Italians who grew up physically closer to the blacks, one hears the voice of a rural southerner. As children, they spoke fluent Italian at home. But at school and the brickyards most of the English they heard was that of the southern blacks. One descendant told me how his father shared the pig with some black families:

When my father killed pigs, it was like a national holiday. The colored people used to come and my father gave them the skins and the head 'cause that's what they liked. They were welcomed in the house just like everybody else. My mother would be frying pork chops and the blood by then, and if they didn't come into the house and have a glass of wine with whatever she was cooking, he wouldn't give them the stuff. And they would come in.

By the start of World War II Brickerland was beset by social change ensuing from changes in the local and national economy. By that time builders replaced bricks with other materials, and the brickmaking industry was virtually finished. Three or four yards

kept producing for the post war housing boom, employing many second-generation workers, like my father, but by the early 1960s they closed for good. Only clusters of brickbats along the shore remain to mark where the yards once were.

With the closing of the yards went the closing of Brickerland's many lively taverns and small grocery stores. Most of the second generation moved to the small village of Saugerties to the north, or to the small city of Kingston just to the west. They continued to grow gardens, can tomatoes and make wine, but this was only a leisure time affair, and the number of those who kept it up grew smaller and smaller. They got full time jobs in construction or, more commonly, they worked on assembly lines or in maintenance for the new dominant employer that came to the area just as the brickyards shut down: IBM. Even more of the next generation left Brickerland, though the majority are within twenty minutes of the original community. Brickerland is now essentially a retirement village of the second generation.

Much of Brickerland, however, persists in the descendants. But what persists seems to be more of the class-based ways of life rather than the ethnic. Certainly, the food remains, and so do many Italian words, gestures, and rituals for the major Christian holidays. One third-generation husband, in fact, approached his aunt for her recipe for the fried and honey-dipped pastry we call "scaweelies"—a vulgarized version of the word *scalie* or *scalille*, for their stairway-like shape. He now makes his own because his wife cannot, and he could not enjoy Christmas Eve without them. But deeper in our lives are views toward work and community charity that are rooted in the material needs of our ancestors. Consider the following attitudes toward work that the second and third generation internalized and passed on:

Question:

Did your parents ever say anything to you when you were growing up about how to behave as a worker, regardless of what kind of job it was?

Answers:

Second generation, retired secretary:

Oh, he always told us to be early and to be on time. He would be working at the clay bank—and that wasn't too far from the house—and he would come over to see if we were up, ready to go to work. Make sure that we were up.

Father and son:

Son: [My father] was always tough on me, so whenever I went on a job they said I was a good worker. I could never satisfy him, but I could satisfy everybody else [laughs]. He was always on my case making sure I did things right, so when I worked for somebody else, it was never a problem. I worked. I was used to working. I never sat around. I never missed a day in my life, and I was never late. Anybody I ever worked for have complimented me on my work. My father never did, though. And it's because of him. That's why—he always pushed.

Father: I was always in production, and you can't have any lost time in production. Manufacturing 200,000 brick a day, there was no idle time. You had to keep on your toes, you had to keep everything in line. You didn't dare let up. And, you didn't dare show up on the job a half hour late or anything. (. . .) It aggravates the hell out of me when I see a person wasting time. I just can't see that.

Third generation, computer programmer:

Yes. And I can recall doing it explicitly. I think that I'm over serious with my job. I'm over committed. And, my kids know this. They know that I might not come home from work at five o'clock because there might be a problem and I won't come home until I solve it. And, I think my twenty-four-year-old son is the same way. He's very, very serious about his responsibilities to his job, and over responsible.

Third generation, secretary:

I was raised with that work ethic. I can remember from when I first started working my very first job waiting tables at a summer resort. Before I went for the first time my father said to me, "Don't forget, they're paying you to work. So, you don't stand around. You give them a day's work for a day's pay. Otherwise, don't go." I grew up with that, and that's the way I feel. (. . .) I think work is an implied contract for loyalty. If he needs someone, and he thinks I fill the bill, then I owe this person beyond the normal workday pencil and paper operation. I owe you a certain amount of heart.

As parents, in turn, the third generation sees itself as "struggling" to keep these values strong in their children, as this truck driver explains:

I'm so worried . . . I'll look at the value systems of the youth today, and I am not happy. I brought my kids up to be self sufficient. I think my kids have the same kind of work ethic that I have, but it's a struggle to get it across. I'm struggling right now to get it into them.

And, some are successful in these attempts, like the programmer:

When my daughter got out of college she could have worked for Estee Lauder starting at \$30,000, but she would rather help people. And my son is the same way. My son is very conscious of and very dedicated to his friends and to his family, and I think that they would compromise [moving away to good-paying jobs] in their minds and money wouldn't be as important to them. (. . .) They are very conscientious of family and what it means to be a part of [an extended] family, and they have been influenced and hurt by death [of their uncles and grandparents] in the last three years.

Unsurprisingly, those like the woman above of the third generation who regularly brought their children to visit relatives and friends in Brickerland, and who had their children spend weekends or summers there with grandparents, find that their children are a lot like them.

As the older relatives in Brickerland die or move into the nursing homes, fewer of us return, other than to show our children where their great-grandparents lived as we drive by. But notice the main kinds of jobs we took: teaching and nursing. It is true that these are among the fastest growing jobs our economy is making available to us, but Brickerland's third generation has taken these jobs at rates much higher than the national average. These are caring and nurturing jobs. When asked what they like most about their work, the nurses and teachers unanimously mentioned their ability to help people. Teachers, especially, spoke of the great pleasure they felt from teaching students to learn. Teaching and jobs in health care were also the most common ambitions the men and women of the second generation had. I understand the popularity of these jobs by looking at the community charity and reciprocity of the first generation passed on by word and deed over the generations. The importance of family seems also to remain strong. If it was the case that these jobs were selected mainly because there were no other options, why then did they not move and search elsewhere? The majority did not, and their main reasons for staying nearby were to keep in contact with family and friends. Another important force of the first generation on our decisions to become teachers had much to do with the reverence they had for teachers. The teachers were always right, the second generation told me. The first generation admired the educated. If the teacher ever reprimanded them, they got a "double header," because they would be punished a second time at home with no chance to explain.

The other main job, office work at IBM, which is not human service work, has attracted most of the men and a lot of the

women. To the second generation IBM always represented true success: the work is clean, the wages and benefits are very good, and the work is (or rather, it once was) secure. The third generation knew they were satisfying their parents' dreams when they took work there, and they could achieve this without leaving their family and friends because the firm is in Kingston.

Sociologists are unable to specify the precise ways we decide on and attain our careers. The influence of one's parents and grandparents is just one important component. It is clear, however, that we descendants of Brickerland are shaped by a class culture of hard and obedient work, community charity, and gregariousness formed and transmitted by our grandparents. It emerged and evolved from the interplay between their past peasant way of life and the outdoor rural factory life of upstate New York. We were not passive recipients of this class culture, but much of what we do is rooted in it. We did make our parents proud of our accomplishments, yet we are still a lot like them, though in the ways they like.