

No Longer a Gentleman's Business

Mary Ellen Rooney

My father was about five foot three, very graceful and more often than not his capable hand held a large cigar, which he often twirled with a George C. Burns flourish. The youngest of an immigrant family from northern Germany, he was the only one born in the U. S. The Thiele's were quite a group. Four brothers and two sisters had come to America with many others around the turn of the century. Although without formal education, they were entrepreneurial and quite talented. My father and his sister had won many ballroom dancing contests. My grand father initially ran a Merry Go Round in the German settlement of Lindenhurst, Long Island. He had brought the family over one at a time. The only thing I know about him is that he left Germany to avoid conscription with the Kaiser. I have often thought this could account for some of my own independent spirit. Then too, the Irish side left before the famine, because they had refused to be serfs.

The Thiele family had lived in Lindenhurst and in Brooklyn. Being light and graceful, my father had been a jockey, a welterweight boxer and a chauffeur. There is a story of my Uncle Heine, also a welterweight boxer, escaping reform school by swimming the east river of New York with a peach basket over his head. At one point I believe my grandfather ran a butcher shop in Brooklyn but I am not certain about that. I know my father as a kid exercised horses at a racetrack and eventually became a jockey. He was always good with animals and often told me stories of owning former polo horses that he rode in the Montauk hills. He was an excellent skeet shooter and had once shot with Gary Cooper. He also held the bowling record at a local alley for having bowled a perfect game.

Eventually, with the lucrative attraction of boot legging, members of the family moved out to the east end of Long Island. They located in Bridgehampton and Southampton where my aunts and one uncle ran speakeasies and owned whippet dogs that raced in Miami. It was told that in early evenings the clan would gather at my aunt Liddy's where a hired ship-to-shore radio operator would contact ships coming down from Canada to wait within the limits off Montauk for bootleggers to pick up the booze.

As the youngest, it was my father who often made the sea runs. I have no idea whether they sold booze as well but it would seem their own speakeasies could have used most of the supply they brought in.

I was born in 1934 shortly after Prohibition ended and by then my aunts and uncles owned legal restaurants and nightclubs in the area. Aunt Liddy and Aunt Annie were tiny women and to me quite glamorous in that they sported huge diamond rings and lavalier necklaces. The dressing table chair at Aunt Liddy's was piled high with copies of *Police Gazette* magazines, she owned bantam chickens and could read tealeaves. She also wore size two high-heeled shoes that fit me just fine. She had copious amounts of jewelry in a velvet-lined

drawer of her dressing table that she willingly allowed me to wear when visiting. Much of the jewelry was real diamonds.

I have often imagined the family gathered around her kitchen table listening to the dit dit dot of the ship-to-shore radio. Then, once the contact had been established, the plan made, the brothers would head for Montauk Point. The destination was the rum line, twelve miles off shore where boats from Nova Scotia awaited bootleggers pickup. A “gentleman’s business” to many east end Long Islanders during that time...until, as my father stated, twirling his cigar for emphasis, “it got so you couldn’t have a game of craps on the Montauk docks without some Greek from New York pulling a gun on you. That’s when I got out. It was no longer a gentleman’s business!”

This all came back in full relief while watching *Boardwalk Empire* because my son, a Broadway actor, has a role in the show. Unfortunately the role is rather short lived since he gets killed off along with so many others. Showbiz! Still I don’t know where he will appear so I am watching the entire show. It has elicited colorful memories of my own roots and insights into who I am.

We lived in a rather marvelous stucco Berwyn bungalow (styled after the elegant Montauk Tudors) that my father built during the depression before he got married. That was pretty unique at the time. I can only imagine it was built with bootlegging and later slot machine money. In a way my background resembles that of the Kennedy family except my family never went into politics. Uneducated immigrants with entrepreneurial spirits commonly sought livelihood in the rackets, particularly if they were not given to mundane trades like plumbing and carpentry, which members of my family were not.

It is fertile ground, though, for producing a writer. I loved the stories they provided. My father went into the pinball machine business after prohibition ended and I can remember our cellar filled with well over 20 pinball machines. Later, the coup de resistance: *slot machines*. First they took nickels and later quarters. The pinball machines were moved out and the far corner of the cellar became a machine shop for repairing slot machines and, I later learned, arranging them to pay 60/40...40 for the customers and 60 for the house.

I hadn’t begun school yet so I was free to travel the east end of Long Island with my father. He had machines on Shelter Island and Greenport from which he needed to collect to support the family. I was very adept at counting and packing quarters and nickels into paper packets and placing them neatly into Philadelphia Cigar boxes. I worked in marvelous smelling kitchens of German restaurants while my father entertained at the bar or played a few hands of Pinochle. I was good at arithmetic and also had inherited the German mechanical ability to handle tools. I wasn’t bad at fixing machines and to this day I adore well-balanced tools. This has morphed into a love of precision work like calligraphy and typography. As a reward for my efforts I was often shown off at the bar while being given a Shirley Temple (ginger ale with a cherry). Quite a time but what I loved most was the early evening trip back home with my father in the old wood paneled station wagon. I still hear the ferry hit the

pier in the darkening evening, while anticipating a good supper and perhaps a fireplace afterwards. Some nights my father and I would walk up street in Bridgehampton to Tiffany's drug store to buy chocolate-covered Brazil nuts. You could smell burning leaves in those days.

As I said, life was such in the small town of Bridgehampton that it never occurred to me that I was participating in an illegal business. We did have State Troopers and their families as dinner guests fairly often though. At one point during rounds on the Ferry, my father said, "You never want to get too big in this business, honey." I didn't question what that meant at the time. Still, we lived well. The food was always delicious. There was plenty of fresh seafood and German restaurant owners often sent dishes home with my father because he was so enthusiastic about their cooking. Mealtimes were most important in our household. Dinner table talk usually centered around food and how to mix alcoholic cocktails.

The house was quite large but, except for a tiny barely finished bedroom upstairs that I would eventually inhabit, the attic was open. I liked that attic. The floor was covered with an enormous canvas sail from my father's boat... presumably used to recover rum from Canadian ships. That sail was eventually converted into a sizable tent for me in the back yard. It was blown away in the hurricane of 1938. I see it flying into the air along with some cherry trees that lined the back yard next to potato fields. That was quite a night, the hurricane of 1938, because the news had come in that the Shelter Island Ferry had sunk and that's where my father was on his way to make a collection. He returned the next day though with a small kitten in his overcoat pocket for me. I lost my tent but gained a white kitten that I named 'Snowball.'

Our attic contained remnants of bootlegging days as well as my father's chaps from his WW1 uniform, shades from speakeasy lamps, photos of German draft horses, odd things from another time. There were German hand-carved meerschaum pipes packed away and lots of dead wasps that had perished in the summer heat. There were trophies from dance contests. He was very active in local musical presentations, some of which were minstrel shows. It was that time.

The pull of Montauk and the docks there remained with my father after he resigned from ungentlemanly business, however. A Sunday afternoon family outing was a ride in the La Salle over the Montauk hills to visit some friends and relatives who had remained there. That tan La Salle with white walled tires was his pride and joy. "I like a massive car," he expressed.

One particular stop on Sunday Montauk outings was "Millie's Inn," a famous lobster house owned by my Aunt Millie and Uncle Frank. I still see my Uncle Frank behind the chrome panels to the kitchen with three or four enormous red lobsters in front of him waiting to be served. Aunt Millie made the most marvelous Butterscotch Pudding from scratch and served the family green mint drinks.

The only time I remember my father at a real job was during the Second World War when he worked at Muller's store delivering groceries to the rich folks along Ocean Road. Again, I often accompanied him. I later learned his activity, as a store clerk was to overcut the hardships of rationing. By working for the store he was able to get more meat, sugar and butter than other folks who needed ration books to purchase these items.

I was a very busy bee myself during wartime with a secret livelihood I was about nine years old and it was the first time I had been able to earn money for myself. I did this by returning aluminum wrappers from my parents Lucky Strike packages to the local store for refunds. I had a second-hand English Bike with a straw basket where rode my Scottie dog, Lassie. I also got money for returning cooking fat. Since we had French fries almost every night there was plenty. Thus I zoomed about making money. It was during that time when, by accident, I discovered free market capitalism. I had poured my money into the king of candy bars, the Milky Way, at five cents each thus providing a supply for times when they were no longer available in the stores. One day a student offered me a dime for one. It didn't feel quite right but I took the dime and before long I was storing Milky Ways in abundance to be pulled out during shortages. It was a very secret life that I only shared with Lassie, my go-along accomplice. Today I would have used her as a tax deduction. We were supporting the war effort and the candy was so easy to sell at a profit with constant scarcities. Looking back I see a pretty direct connection to the bootlegger's daughter as the context that produced me. I never got "too big in that business" either so the secret was secure.

At a recent writer's group I listened to a contemporary writer who had grown up in Scotland during World War 11. She described her life of hardship and doing without. It made me realize I had taken the hardship of the War to quite another level. In my small and very American way it became a time of opportunity. I was making money and creating my own small black market. These things were not discussed, mind you; all business activity took place whilst viewing long lines of military convoy trucks drive along Montauk Highway to the Point. We were on the Atlantic Ocean and accessible by sea should the Germans decided to land. And, in fact, a few of them did land as documented in the history annuals of eastern Long Island.

It was a good time to grow up on eastern Long Island. It was a land of farmers and seafarers then. Everywhere you looked there were farmlands and we were close to the Atlantic. I think the best smell I ever knew was the mix of salt from the Atlantic mixed with newly plowed Bridgehampton loam in planting season. It was exceptional and defined my essence. My spirit will forever exist on a dune held within that experience. The rest is just what happened. What is there today (all the signs on the beach of what not to do) don't count. Neither do the horns blowing on those roads that I know so well (one is *always* in someone's way. No, my spirit is still atop those dunes in Sagaponack at planting time, and so it shall be.