

Peasant

My father, Matt, was born on a farm among the forested hills near the border of Croatia and Slovenia. Before the age of eighteen, Matt had planted tree seedlings on their logged-over Croatian hillside. About 75 years later, in 1973, our family of four visited the area. We walked through a huge, magnificent canopy of trees—known locally as Matt's Forest. We felt spiritually imbued while walking through that green, cloistered edifice.

As a youth, Matt decided that some day he would possess his own farm. Learning that the United States was the land of golden opportunity, he was swept into USA's immigrant tsunami wave of the early 1900s.

Millions of young adults from Eastern and Southern Europe flooded specific cities, plus mining and lumbering communities. It was the time of creating ethnic communities, primarily in cities of the North. Cleveland and Pittsburgh attracted large numbers to work in industry. Hundreds of Yugoslavs found jobs within the steel mills and coal mines. Matt first settled in Steubenville, Ohio. That steel-making region, on the Ohio River, included Weirton in West Virginia and a neighboring small city, Mingo Junction. Coal mines opened up throughout the hills of Southern Ohio and Northern West Virginia.

Matt's first job was at a coal mine near Steubenville. After three years in America, he married my mother, Frances, a recent immigrant from an area in Slovenia near Matt's birthplace in Croatia. They soon moved to a farm above the town of Yorkville [Ohio], located about twenty miles downriver from Steubenville. There, Matt made progress toward his dream of farmland ownership.

Our family rented a farm of approximately thirty acres. For ten years, Matt worked in a nearby mine, saving money to eventually buy his own land. Gradually, my parents acquired all necessary accoutrements to operate a farm. They obtained livestock—about 25 chickens, a cow for our total supply of milk, one or two piglets each spring for butchering in the fall, a huge dark brown quarter horse named Joe, and a light brown, shaggy shepherd-type dog named Buster. We also had a plow, a sod-busting disk harrow, one wagon, and a saddle for riding Joe. Matt loved that horse. He treated it gently, even while plowing and disking the soil. At times, I rode on Joe while sitting in front of my father. I was one of four children born on the farm and we lived there until I was six or seven. Matt would ride Joe long distances over the local hills. He consistently looked for available farmlands. But there was a major roadblock to his path of dream fulfillment—his wife, Frances!

When they first married, Frances subscribed to the traditional European doctrine of patriarchal domination in family affairs. She went wherever Matt decided to live. He could spend his earnings as he pleased, or go to the local saloon in Steubenville as many nights as he wanted. During the ten years of life on the farm, a personality transformation dramatically changed the Matt-Frances relationship. The combination of raising small children and providing room and board services for three Yugoslav miners living with us, plus taking care of farm animals and related chores, eventually engendered a feminist

revolution. Frances assumed control of family finances and began countermanding Matt's decisions. So, instead of buying a farm, we bought a duplex home in the neighboring town of Tiltonsville. That was merely the first significant family decision under Frances' newly acquired *modus operandi*.

While living in Tiltonsville for one decade, Matt did his farming in our backyard. He maintained a large garden, two fruit trees, plus a dozen or so chickens. On days off from the local steel mill, he walked among the hills nearby—probably wishing for a major relocation.

When four sisters and I approached adulthood, Frances made another drastic family decision. We moved to Cleveland in order to access more job opportunities for the children—despite the reluctance of Matt.

We then moved to a suburb of Cleveland, so that Matt could walk to his factory job. Again, Matt sustained his peasant hunger for farming by cultivating a large garden and two fruit trees.

After retiring from the factory job at age 65, Matt loved drives into the countryside. When I bought my first car, a 1937 Plymouth, I'd ask him "Where would you like to go?" Repeatedly, he requested visiting various farming areas beyond our suburb. Upon seeing a land or lot for sale sign, he asked to stop there. At times he would walk onto the land, check its slope, look for holes and rocks, then pull out a clump of weeds, feel the attached soil and smell it. At those times I didn't respond to his mood or feelings. Later, after he died, my sisters and I realized that Matt was our family's tragic character. His courageous venture into America, seeking farmland within "the land of golden opportunity," failed to fulfill his lifelong dream. Even hard labor, under life-shortening conditions, failed to provide the sublime goal of that peasant.

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