

The Window Watchers (from Riva to Santa Cruz with love)

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When you read the list of Italian fishing family surnames and study in amazement the photographs of these Riviera sailors turned fishermen who worked on the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf years ago, still there's another hidden story. It creates legends both stoic in character and unyielding in strength. It continues to live daily with a strength of values from mother to daughter and son, applied with skilled determination and tact. This portrait is about the women of the Santa Cruz Italian Fishing Colony, their lives in Italy and America: about how the dominant matriarchal spirit of sailor wives, left to fend for themselves in the old country village of Riva Trigoso, Italy, continues to flourish on the California Coast in its New World setting.

"Fresh fish!" cries the fishmonger up to the rooftops of five-story apartment buildings. Her voice breaks the peaceful morning like a crack of thunder. Pigeons scatter in fright. Inhabitants on the narrow street of accordion-stacked apartment shake their sleepy skulls. In Riva Trigoso, the past still winks at the modern world.

From around the corner appears a lone, rotund woman pushing a fish cart. Her short body is clothed in a black dress. This genuine old time "Rivana" will soon be engulfed in a morning tide of cars, mopeds, and trucks. The cart and dress are now definitely out of place in modern Italy. Early morning: the sunrise breaks and she puts her cart down in the middle of the street. The stage is now set for her performance. No one will compete with her. She alone is the star. Proudly she cries out to sell her product once again: "Fresh fish!"

This woman's determination to sell her goods and go about her daily business never fails. The tradition has taught her to live this way goes far beyond her own experience. Only death will stop her from living, from being a part of her community in a full, robust, uninhibited, and cordial manner. Italy to this woman has provided a setting of self-pride, a feeling of personal dignity, and a life where the integrity of the person begins in the heart.

"Fresh fish!" The heart is nudged by the stomach. Each day, seven days a week, at the same time, her voice tolls out the beginning of a new workday with the punctuality of local church bells. Sleeping workers resist her incantations. Some curse her. The *pescatrice* arms hover through the air, her hands eager to weigh fish for any wanting customer. Like many people who live and work by the sea, this woman's face is no different: bearing a ruddy complexion, it has been leathered by the sun, the sea and the wind. Her age and toil have engraved a life story on her once soft face. Quick to smile, she is not scared by strangers, but they arouse a sincere curiosity. Her slow, powerful steps pause and the cart stops. Late sleepers brace themselves, hearing her voice again and "Fresh fish!"

Edith Canepa Castagnola of Santa Cruz can envision only too well this fishmonger's world. Edith was born on the banks of Capitola in 1899. Her mother, Nicoletta Canepa, would tell you "Maiolin" Pedemonte was by her side. The first matriarch of Santa Cruz's Italian fishing families, Maiolin served faithfully wherever there was need. Her midwifery skills have been credited to many American births.

Recalls Edith: "I was in Capitola. There was a bunch of fishermen in those days from my mother's home town. The day I was born in 1899, we were supposed to move to Santa Cruz. My mother at the time used to sell the fish my father'd catch. I always cried when my mother'd leave me to go peddle fish to the Portugese as far as Boulder Creek in the horse and wagon. So because I cried, we'd always be together".

As a fish seller in Italy, "Coletin" (Nicolett's nickname) would put baskets containing the day's catch of fish on her head and join the other women. They'd walk throughout the nearby villages and towns to sell heir product. When anchovies schooled in the surf, a "paesano" would gather available village women together, and hire them to "pull his seine". The owner would row out beyond the surf, lay his net, and extend the open net's wing ropes to the women ashore. All would have, tug the net closed, and pull the catch onto the beach. Each woman received an equal share, but it was the net owner who took the largest amount.

A common Santa Cruz sight, contrary to Riva Trigoso, was immigrant men pulling in the seine net. When Coletin arrived in Capitola, she was one of the few women in the fishing village. Women were simply not plentiful in California 75 years ago ("When I came to California in 1911", recalled Pietro Schenini of Capitola, "I had a dairy ranch at Oakdale in San Joaquin Valley. There were twenty-seven guys in that town, mostly Portuguese, and one girl"). Coletin had no problem in adjusting to the luxury of a horse-drawn wagon and not having to carry fish on her head.

"We'd go along to Felton", says Edith, "and she'd blow on this long horn and yell, 'Fresha fishie!' You know I can remember it like it was today!"

In Riva Trigoso, the *pescatrice* has taken her place among the town's morning street life. By now, rubbed-eye husbands and knap sacked children have disappeared from their flats. Motor scooters and masses of rat-race paraphernalia quickly crowd the narrow avenues. Women dot the side walls of the "palazzi", sit at their kitchen windows, and watch the action. Strangers entering the streets are spotted immediately. Impressions are then formed, options given, and convictions made of all by passers. Life, like a spider web, is interwoven. These wives of sailors and fishermen, looking out to sea, accept their role as silent witnesses to the men and sails which cross the horizon. Riva Trigoso and the sea have been forever inseparable.

The sea has had a profound influence on the lives of "Rivani" –men and women of Riva. The sea was where young boys would stand aboard their patriarch's boat, sail at his side, and mature before the mast. It is also where our secret story begins. If the sea was ruled by men, then land has been largely a woman's domain. "La terra" –the exclusive territory of women arranging a life among themselves and developing self-reliant skills. A seaman's wife often found herself pregnant upon her husband's departure. Babies were born, nurtured, and sent off to school, only to return one afternoon and be introduced to a rugged, leather-skin stranger, called "Papa".

As husbands moved to the New World, wives followed. Transplanting their established traditions, "window watchers" from Riva soon become window watchers of Santa Cruz. Daughters, mothers, sisters, and cousins, who lived in the same "palazzi" soon lived next door to each other in Santa Cruz's Italian Fishing Colony, which consisted of two sections: the "Flats" of Myrtle and West Sycamore Streets, where the Canepa, Gibelli, Ollivieri, and Giacomo Stagnaro women had established a distinct community; and in "La Baranca" on the bluff above the Municipal Wharf, where Cottardo Stagnaro's three sisters (Celestrina, Vittorina, and Maria) had established themselves as cornerstones in the families of Bregante, Ghio, Loero, and Carniglia. Later the Bassanos and Castagnolas joined the hill community developed a distinct and identifiable network of immediate and extended family ties. Constantly gathering in each other's homes, sharing daily chores or forming a "production line" to produce enough fresh ravioli for all their families, the same system of mutual support and cooperation prevailed as if they were in Riva.

"My father", states Mary Carniglia, Giovanni Bregante's daughter, age 82, "wanted room to stretch out his nets. We were all pretty crowded down there on Laurel Street. My father decided to move up here to what the old town people called "La Baranca" (the hill) where there lived just a few Spanish and Indian people. This way we wouldn't be a bother to nobody".

As Sicilian fishermen started to establish themselves in San Francisco, additional Riva Trigoso families joined the colony. Later another group of Olivieri and Stagnaro families formed a third community immediately on the bluff at the foot of the wharf. "La Baranca", because of the migrations following the San Francisco earthquake and fire, had strong San Francisco roots.

The *pescatrice* eyes the rows of windows above the street. From a third floor balcony a woman speaks in dialect (Another element identified with "old" Italy, the dialect surprisingly survives in isolated pockets which still use turn-of-the-century expressions and colloquialisms. One such pocket is Santa Cruz. The youth speak the national Italian Language taught at school). The phrase of what the buyer asks the seller is universally understood.

The seller responds and the buyer replies.

"That's too expensive!"

"I have to earn a living", shrugs the seller.

"Okay", concedes the buyer. "I'll take half a kilo".

Fish glow in the sun; assorted colors and sizes lie in boxes on her cart. The woman from above descends to the street and fish are piled onto a scale. The buyer and seller greet each other. Money and product change hands. The fish monger pushes ahead and disappears down another street. Calling back and forth to each other, two women talk, crochet, and sip their morning espresso. Passersby listen in on their casual strolls. Another woman opens her window and throws the shutters wide open. She joins in and the conversation goes 'round and round'.

In listening to these women, one cannot help but think what has transpired over the ages between these windows. Many conversations between matriarchs have sealed the fate of young Rivana, the local post office acting as the transatlantic agent. Rosa Vatuone was one such young woman standing on Riva's beach in 1922. She was going to America to marry a man named Joe Loero, whom she had never met. Soon enough, she boarded the steamer *Conte Rosso* which took her away. She never

returned, not even for a visit. In Santa Cruz, half way around the world, Joe Loero received a telegram: "SEND AFFIDAVIT IN TRIPLICATE SHOWING BUSINESS FINANCIAL ABILITY WHETHER YOU WILL MARRY ME IMMEDIATELY UPON ARRIVAL. ROSA VATUONE. 824A JUL 3"

Evidently, Joe responded quickly. Rosa arrived a few days afterward on the train. Joe got just a glimpse of Rosa when she got off, but immediately the colony's women swept her away to have a wedding dress made. Before the week ended, Rosa, a mail-order bride from Riva Trigoso, was married. Behind the scenes must have been Celestrina Loero (Joe's mother) and her two sisters Vittorina Ghio and Maria Stagnaro. Once window watchers in Riva Trigoso, they immigrated to Santa Cruz with their husbands, bringing with them their window watching and conversational skills.

Early Italian immigrant men were motivated towards marriage because they would be better respected in their American communities. A sailor's mother would often make the necessary arrangements upon receiving her son's letter. Later, he would arrive, be married and leave shortly after, never to return. Benedetta Castagnola, upon her marriage to Giacomo Stagnaro, arrived in Santa Cruz in 1912: "He said we were going to San Diego where I could be by my sister. Instead we came here. I cried for three year because I wanted to be near my sister".

Matriarchs, once established in Santa Cruz, like the Stagnaro sisters of *La Baranca*, quickly went to work in bridging the gap between the predominately female population of Riva Trigoso and fishermen of Santa Cruz. Arranging marriages for these women was not light-hearted fun but a very careful and calculated social practice which reinforced their position in the family and community. In this way, each neighborhood of the Santa Cruz Italian Colony retained the identity of respective kinship systems in the homeland. Males might have decided to marry someone of their own choosing, but matriarchs would quickly volunteer information about who they thought would "make a good wife". Giovanni Bregante, a clear product of this tradition demonstrated the importance of this loyalty when he called his daughter Maria "Placida" into his room while he lay on his deathbed on National Street in Santa Cruz.

Recalls Mary: "First my father told my mother not to make plans for me to marry any of the relations (cousins). 'The man who marries Mary is one that I'm going to pick out!' Then when Marco asked him, he called me to his bedside and said, 'Placida, I am your father and you don't know how the world is made. I will not love much longer and there is a youth that has come to ask for you. This youth's grandfather made boats for my father and his uncles would transfer wine and cheese in the Mediterranean. We are old and God calls. If you marry him, he will be a father to your two younger sisters. When you have finished school, you will marry. This is a command. Between all the young men that have asked for you in marriage, I have chosen him because I knew his parents. This way your mother and I will die happy". Mary and Marco were married soon thereafter.

But the Old World spirit of honor, duty, loyalty, and self-sacrifice was also capable of giving way. Mary's younger sister Alma expressed her independence with the same passionate determination of Placida to fulfill her father's wishes: "I wasn't going to let him tell me who I was going to marry. I could pick for myself who I did or did not want. I'm not like my sister, you know!"

The three Stagnaro sisters and fellow "baranchiere" must have been overjoyed as Joe and Rosa Loero settled into their new house with all the other fishing families of Lighthouse Avenue. After such stunning success, one can imagine the sisters arranging another affair from start to finish. Matriarchs acted within the interest of their immediate family communities and made sacrifices in order to be a unifying force, as well as the center of attention.

"My mother died when I was two", recalls Tony Ghio. "So my father had my step-mother come from Italy and live with us. Well, when I got older I wanted to get married. But with that woman at the helm I wasn't too sure if any girl would have me because of my stepmother. So we talked about it and decided I'd go to Riva and get one of her kind to tangle with. So my stepmother set the deal up and I went back to Italy and got married in 1930".

At the outbreak of the Depression, it was not a good time for a twenty-one year old man from a Santa Cruz Italian fishing family to be raveling to Riva Trigoso. The initial plan would be for him to marry the youngest daughter of his stepmother's brother. But upon his arrival, the chosen Emma Ceccini wouldn't even greet him.

"I got off the boat there in Genova and I see this family there. I figured they were waiting for me. So I walked up and introduced myself and that was them. Well the young one, Emma, she wouldn't even look at me. But then she caught a look at the pair of white shoes I was carrying for a present in my hand. She took 'em and that was that. The older one though, boy, she took a liking to me right off!"

Keeping to the arrangement, Tony was to marry Emma. Later, if all went according to plan, his brother "Lefty" would come and marry the other. But the bureaucracy of the Italian government changed the plan. Tony had to stay in Italy for one year before he finally obtained the necessary permission to bring Emma to Santa Cruz.

"I'd help out and fish and the women there had never seen a man mend nets before. Every morning I'd go my way and she'd (Emma) go hers. I lived right in the house with the family there in Riva. Well, the morning it came for me to leave, I got up and went to the station. Emma just stayed there in bed and that older one, boy she liked me, she followed me to the station. Well it worked out in the end –when Emma arrived later in Santa Cruz.

No telephone existed in homes of Santa Cruz Italian fishing families. Windows functioned nonetheless as a medium of communication. A conversation, while thought to be private by participants, was usually common knowledge. "They'd always be calling back and forth to each other", points out Nino Giudici.

The Old Country pattern duplicated itself. Women would mend nets, cultivate the fresh vegetables necessary for daily meals, or converge on another house, knives and pots in hand, to prepare their respective family meals together. But this isolated Santa Cruz pocket of Ligurian culture had become somewhat more social than the traditional quiet and private lifestyle of Riva Trigoso. Interdependence and certain needs had intertwined a day's toil and hardship into a teaming experience of cooperation and intense closeness. A luxurious economic standard simply did not exist. It's as if the world had achieved a high level of human integrity in this poor California fishing village. Life rendered few material rewards, but the survival spirit of the colony's women sustained their men to prevail. Everywhere children played in the streets.

Fishermen's wives usually took care of family finances and worked outside. They never really just stood by and watched their men sail into the sunset. Certainly myths of gold, from Argentina, Peru, California to New York, had charmed their young innocents eyes in Riva Trigoso about America. They know little until they arrived that California really was a new land in the developing West. A young country bears all the hardships and toil of a young woman giving birth for the first time. But these women were well accustomed to a rugged working life. Poverty and long hours of physical labor were constant in both places.

"We had no welfare", Gilda Stagnaro points out. "We were very poor. But whenever there was need, all the families would help each other and share what they had. Whenever there was an emergency, or someone got married, you could always be sure that there was someone to help you".

The economic situation shared commonly by all immigrant fishing families caused a greater change for the women than for their husbands. Women became a mobile workforce, doing many different jobs. The Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf and a walk home was the man's world.

"When my Uncle Giobatta Loero died", relates Mary Carniglia, "Aunt Celestrina got up one morning and picked up her hoe and went to work. Everyday after that she'd walk to the fields to work. When she'd come home, her and the six children (my cousins) would mend nets for the fishermen. My mother thought it was not right for her to leave her home and work. But what could my aunt do, what with no husband and all those children to feed!"

Colony women did mostly seasonal work picking brussels sprouts on the Coast Road, cutting sardines in the canneries from Monterey to Santa Cruz or harvesting beans in Soquel. Their tradition was not based on the fishing industry, but on their families and greater community. As a mobile work force, women established a wide variety of contacts with people of varying life experiences and they became active participants in Santa Cruz daily life.

In the 1930s the Municipal Wharf gradually became more commercialized. New fish markets, restaurants, and tourist-oriented businesses established themselves. The scene no longer belonged exclusively to the commercial fishing industry. Nella Olivieri established a snack bar named the Miramar. In 1940 Mary Carniglia bought it while in the hospital with back trouble. "I told my husband Marco, 'I'm going to buy this place. I don't care what you think because you got your boats and I'm going to buy this restaurant with my own money'".

In 1942, Parma Castagnola Marcenaro bought the Miramar. Now it has been a family-owned and operated business for over thirty-five years.

The entrance of Ligurian women into business is no surprise. They'd always acted as business managers, watching over the general affairs of family, for centuries while the men were at sea. To move their daily operation to the wharf expressed their age-old independent and self-enterprising tradition. Having had to keep their families afloat with a fisherman's income, the women with Ligurian roots have mastered the modern challenge.