

The Shoemaker`s Last

By Don Morrill



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Don Morrill



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First Edition

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For my grandfather,
Herbert Horace Weld

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Vincent Ferrini, the Poet of Gloucester, author of *No Smoke, Sea Sprung, Know Fish, Sea Root, Undersea Bread*, and *Telling of the North Star*. (See: *Encyclopedia of American Literature of the Sea and Great Lakes*, edited by Jiel B. Gidmark.)

My editor Shirley Campbell, author of *The Editing Book; Our Fair, The Interior Provincial Exhibition; and Talking about Writing*.

Foreword

The Shoemaker's Last is also a first story of a man who found his humanity in people and his art-trade as a world travelling Potter dedicated to his belief in the grandeur of communal possibilities inherent in the Love of Life.

Who with his Japanese wife raised two brilliant sons gifted in their being true to their international natures.

An outstanding example of following the Voice inside the ONE. A successful family in deeds.

Vincent Ferrini

3/1/2002

Introduction

To write of one's beginnings is a formidable task. We surely are trapped between what we truly recall from the dim past and all of those memories which have been reinforced in the telling and re-telling, by ourselves as well as by our parents, friends, relatives, and passing strangers. Any remembrance must be a rationalization. No remembrance can be truly 'true.' There are bits and pieces we cannot recall as well as bits and pieces we prefer not to recall. There are old wounds we would not open, wounds to ourselves as well as to old friends.

The past has a way of softening one's memories of dedicated enemies. Age may also bring with it a softening, a forgetting, or at least an ignoring of ideas once firmly held in our youth. I believe we must guard against this tendency, else we simply continue our past mistakes and the past mistakes of contemporaries. A rejection of one's ideas ... never—of actions, yes.

My belief is that in early youth (given great good luck) all the universe is revealed to us. The germ of our best ideas, therefore, comes to us very early in life. They are the most mature of human attitudes arrived at by an unbiased experience. With great good fortune we may expand on them and bring them to fruition, discarding in the dustbin of history those ideas that do not contribute to maturity.

Can anyone believe that my hometown of Lynn, Massachusetts, a small city of fewer than 100,000 persons, housed ten movie theatres and three legitimate theatres?

One was a Theatre Comique supported by Italian immigrants treading the boards after working in the shoe factories for ten hours per day.

As I was writing this sentence, I heard that Sterling Holloway had died. He, Ed Wynn, and Andy Devine were film actors from my youth. Several years ago I felt badly that 'Hoot' Gibson was in Palms Hospital and I did not send him a 'Get Well' card. All of them gave me great pleasure as a child. When Henry Fonda, Charles Laughton, and Elsa Lanchester died, a part of my early childhood passed away with them. Surely, this is a part of growing up before the invention of television, when Mr. Edison's flickering machine was in its infancy and our radio required thirty pounds of wet battery to function for a few hours.

A few words about a shoemaker's last:

A 'last' is that hard wood sculpture of a foot upon which the various parts of a shoe are formed. The leather and the templated design come to the laster from the shoe designer. It is then carefully cut to fit the pre-designed pattern and pinned in place on the last. Finally, the formed shoe is removed and stitched, after which the sole is cut and stitched to the 'upper' forming the completed shoe.

Of all of the bench workers in the shoe factory, the 'laster' is most highly skilled but even he is not alone. The shoe is formed and made by many persons, each having his own special skill and contributing to the final shoe. As my grandfather, Herbert Horace Weld, was a laster, so his father was a shoemaker. Both of them worked in a period when craftsmen/workers were highly respected for their abilities. Lasters as well as other skilled persons went to work dressed in three-piece suits and wore detachable collars on their shirts.

The end of the nineteenth century was nearly the end of the period when individual workers owned their own tools. When they "downed tools," the factory closed its doors.

On into the twentieth century, however, although a few independent craftsmen still worked in the factory, (for example, typographers often had aprons in half-a-dozen print shops in Boston and often circulated among shops), the introduction of mass production and the interchangeability of parts replaced workers who owned their own tools. The laster and his last in their original form became extinct.

{However, the general loss of the ownership of tools ('the means of production') was the most important loss every American worker sustained. Although these features may first have been introduced by 'Colt Arms,' they rapidly spread and became the basis of the success of the automobile and wage slavery}.

1

The Beginning

One must make a beginning somehow. I was conceived at the end of World War One, almost immediately upon my mother's marriage to my father, who almost as immediately took off for parts unknown.

I was born in the small wooden lying-in house known as the White Cottage of the Lynn Hospital, where girls of suspicious wedlock (or no wedlock) were birthed. Apparently I was a scrawny child of no special account and was bottle-fed cow's milk. Although I have maintained no great interest in milk, the female breast has always been of interest. Almost at once I became a ward of the state of Massachusetts. Just as quickly we moved to a small gray house just behind the corner of Washington Street and Western Avenue.

At what age does memory truly begin? True though it may be, I do not remember directly loosening the rope which tied me to the porch bannister. I am told that I untied myself and trotted off down Washington Street wearing my little brown 'teddy bear' winter suit, and continued on down Washington street, crossing busy Essex Street by the Washington Street Baptist Church (our church at that time). I continued my trot all the way to Olympia Square which, years later, would be one of my haunts. The place where I bought my first pint of 4 Roses whisky at the age of sixteen.

Passing the Olympia Theatre, Andrew Street, home of both the Auditorium Theatre and the 'Garlic Opera,' a five cent movie inhabited by boys accompanied by older

brothers. “Brudda, i gudda pee,pee.” Don’t bother me, Tom Mix is just coming into sight.” Aisles running with piss and often the clank and crash of whisky bottles.

Oxford Street, Monroe Street. Washington becomes Central Avenue and Central Square. ‘Dad’ Berryman’s horses haul the great wagons over the cobbled streets as I trudge through the piss puddles and beneath the Boston & Maine railroad overpass. Down Union Street, crossing Washington Street again and finally entering the small restaurant owned by my grandmother and grandfather. “Grammy, I come to visit you and I’m tired.”

The foregoing is more than literary licence. I was three years old and the journey was two miles long. Not so. After consulting a map to refresh my memory, I realize the journey was perhaps slightly less than one mile. Can I believe even this?

We moved to Essex Avenue, Swampscott, during 1924 to the house of Miss Myra Chapman, school teacher. In those days teachers were always ‘Miss.’ They had no suspicious relationships with men and went to the grave intact. (Another myth).

My mother had dressed me in clean clothes from head to foot and gone inside the house leaving me with strict instructions “not to get dirtied because I have to get ready for work.”

I got all muddy but decided I’d best make up a story. “I was kidnapped by two big boys, taken to the beach and thrown in the ocean.” The story must have been convincing. Undressed, washed, sent to bed. Sleeping, only to be awakened by a very large Swampscott policeman. I feigned sleep until he went away.

I cannot possibly vouch for having measles as a baby and being spirited away from Asbury Grove, a bible camp where my mother and Aunt Lillian worked during several summer months as waitresses. Yet I do recall being held against Seretha Halliday’s bosom and driving away from the camp. There are other ... slighter memories. Of my Aunt Lillian and me walking through a swamp-like area and

Lillian threatening to push me from the path into the quicksand.

At five, my 'real' life began. A life of which I have vivid memories. My first trip to Nova Scotia, Canada, my grandmother's birth place, happened when I was five. We drove in my Aunt Bessie Robert's Vinson motorcar. Bessie, her daughter Barbara Lewis, my grandmother, and myself. Barbara and I in the back seat of this older model Vinson which carried several tires on the rear end. In those days blowouts and flat tires were a common occurrence for motor travellers. Barbara and I snuggled down under a monstrous buffalo robe, our hands wandering about as we experimented with kissing. Barbara was an older woman, nearly ten years old to my five and willing years.

Another true memory at five when Bobby Judkins, Billy Thompson, Frankie Marsh and I, hiding in our clubhouse beneath the porch, pissed in an old funerary urn and equally divided the contents, swearing lifelong friendship. Another true memory of the time: undressing with a local neighbor girl and examining her as she examined us.

I spent considerable time at my grandparents' restaurant while my mother was off at work. Not far away was the Lynn Fire and Notification Company, one of those private organizations where heavy canvas and rubber blankets were placed over goods during a fire as required by their insurers. I walked to the fire hall, where the fireman on duty took me upstairs. He paid me ten cents to watch him masturbate, and I was to tell my grandparents I received the money for carrying wood into the firehouse. The fireman allowed me to slide down the shiny brass pole. Just like a real fire laddie. All innocent adventures of youth that included running away from home only to return before dark knowing that I would get a whack if I were late for supper.

At age six, and just before I was slated to attend grade one, I had my head split open because I would not share my bread, butter and sugar with the older boy living just over the fence on the next street. Because of the intimidation suffered by small children, I cannot be certain but that Aunt

Lillian, taking care of me, may have struck me and made up the story. She DID bring a basin of water and a rag to clean my wounds. I do not expect Lillian disliked me as much as she disliked a child interfering with her teen-age plans.

Life began to be more mine and less that of other, bigger persons. When I was seven we moved to Lynnfield, where my grandfather and a distant relative named Herbert E. from Beverly, Massachusetts, had in 1926 purchased a rather large commercial property on Pillings Pond. It was called 'Shoreside' and included a gas station, restaurant, soda fountain, general store, and boat livery. These were the days when opportunities seemed propitious for small businessmen. Common workers were investing in stocks and bonds, perhaps for the first time in American history. We were moving up in the world.

At that time Lynnfield was a small community only a mile or so up Walnut Street from the bus stop where one caught the bus to Lynn, ten miles away. Wonder of wonders, Gramps bought an automobile, the first that the family had ever had, a Ford. It was about the cheapest car at that time. My mother received her licence and we drove around the countryside as well as all the way to Lynn to visit with friends and relatives. Ten miles to Lynnfield was a considerable distance when in 1928 sixteen miles from home was about as far as many travelled during a lifetime.

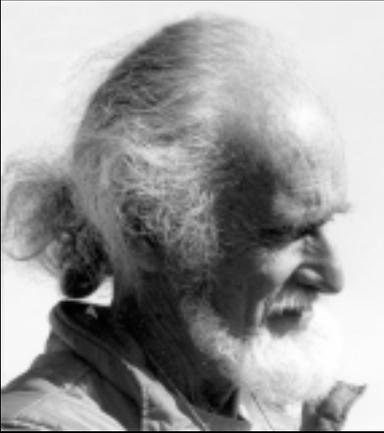
I enjoyed Lynnfield. We had Pillings pond and, just down the street from the house where we lived, another pond, a small mill pond, dark and mysterious where reputedly many persons had disappeared, never to be seen again ... or so we were warned. Just across the street from our house, at the end of Pillings Pond, stood the vast and chilly ice-house. Through the winter local men would work out on the frozen lake, sawing great strips of ice, as much as fifty feet long, out of the lake, pushing them with long poles through an open canal to the ice-conveyor, where the ice would be sawn into blocks and carried up into the ice-house. There, men inside the building would pack the blocks in sawdust to await spring and summer when the ice would

be moved and sold to fill the ice chests of Lynnfield and Lynn.

Soon I began my studies in the small wooden schoolhouse at Lynnfield Center. A little weird, but I recall nothing about the school except that it was on a slight hill above a small brook where I picked water iris to take home to my mother. I also contracted pneumonia that quickly turned into an infection of the lungs. Lobar pneumonia was a far more serious matter in those distant times sans antibiotics. Within hours I had a raging temperature and was shipped off to the Melrose Children's Hospital where I languished in bed for three weeks with a tube in the pleura of my left lung that drained pus into a large, stinking container beneath the bed.

Ah, well, it was not ALL misery. I was in the children's ward and, since we could not move from bed to bed, we found solace and games by throwing dart-notes to each other. My grandmother brought us several ears of corn, which the staff boiled for us and we devoured. What to do with the cobs but throw them at each other, just as the head nurse entered and caught several cobs on her bosom. From the little girl in the next bed, I learned my first French word, "Merde," of value many times over the years.

After weeks of recuperation at home, I was once more thrust upon a waiting world and allowed to roam through the Lynnfield area around the ponds and fields. Although I learned to skate on my weak ankles and enjoyed the winter sports of the local people, I never really became a sportsman.



From dishwasher to Harvard physicist, ceramics engineer and organic gardener, these pages provide a glimpse into the life of an exceptional human being.

Poet and potter from Lynn, Mass., Don Morrill is an activist in extraordinary times. Growing up in the 1920s and 30s, Don writes about his childhood experiences with vivid clarity. We travel with him through life from Pillings Pond in the 20s to Canada, Africa, and beyond.

A family history, a Lynn guidebook, a kiln manual. This is an honest recording of the passage of time; the humor, the struggle, and the gardens.

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