

Goat Hill by the River

Goat Hill by the River: A Confluence of Community By Dean Frankmore (Grandson of Sylvia Greco)

"Goat Hill was a little bit of heaven to us." Angelo Patti

Petey Rubs, Smicks, Yacco, Stubby Stork, Whiskers, Beak, Bacon, Mingocho, Hazz, Flogger, Blackie, Brick, Bull, Tubbs, Chazz, Polar, Slip, Stacker, Legs, Trigger, Balls, Hot Shot... Imagine walking into a neighborhood filled with these guys! Have you just entered a Mario Puzo novel or the pages of a wacky new cartoon?

"Everybody in Sicily had a nickname. My father was Papuzanll, which is the bug that's found in horse beans." Tony Bacino

Charge the atmosphere with the smell of homemade bread and goat cheese, line the hillside with shanty shacks, yards of vegetable gardens and buried bootleg whiskey. Fill the streets with boys playing stickball and porches of chattering neighbors. Now pile on mountains of pasta cu lu sugo. Certainly you are on the set of a Martin Scorsese film.

Nope, you've just traveled a mere 40 miles south to Pueblo, hopped off the interdi-mensional highway two generations ago, and landed in a small Italian community called Goat Hill.

"In the winter we ate a lot of spaghetti. "Every year we would can 12 bushels of tomatoes." Sylvia Greco

This is a story of Goat Hill. It is not a novel or a Hollywood screenplay. It is a story of real life, a story of ancestors old and alive. It is a story of human spirit and its intimate connection to the land. A story of people having the best of times in the worst of times, of building abundant lives while in the grips of poverty.

Yes, it is a personal story, a story of a small Italian community, simple but passionate. But it is really the story of community everywhere, about people striving to make the best of a hard life, while building a better one for their children. It is a story of how life was and, in a way, how life should be again.

"They started raising goats there; they had several little herds. My great grandmother lived by the railroad tracks and I remember they had goats when I was a little kid." Joe Frankmore

Goat Hill and Manitou Springs. Two very different communities. Yet, two communities with much in common. Most of my ancestors, from great-great grandparents to grandparents, lived on Goat Hill. Though I now live in Manitou Springs and never lived on Goat Hill, I still feel very connected to that old community. My grandparents spent their honeymoon in Manitou Springs. I can't help but wonder if during their stay, they may have dreamed, even silently, of someday living in Manitou (for the record, they will celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary next year—very impressive!—their effort to summit Pikes Peak in a Model-T hinted at their tenacity.) But the connection between Goat Hill and Manitou Springs must dig deeper than that! And, as the Earth attests, what digs deeper and more eloquently than a river? So before we arrive at Goat Hill, I will tell a story about the river. Ah yes, the river! I think Mark Twain would agree, the best stories start with a river.

Our story, in the here and now of Manitou, begins at the headwaters of Fountain Creek, or as the French missionaries of the 19th century called it, Fontaine qui Bouille, the "boiling fountain." The Native Americans knew it best as the Medicine Fountain and considered it the abode of the Great Spirit. Who could ask for a better river from which to depart?

So onward! From its headwaters in Manitou, we follow Fountain Creek south towards Pueblo along a 40-mile stretch of the Great Plain's western edge. Just before the river ends, as it joins the great Arkansas River, we approach our destination. There she blows mate, starboard!

That large sandstone knoll on the right is Goat Hill. We have arrived! Manitou Springs at one end, Goat Hill at the other, two communities united by the Medicine Fountain. By the blood of the land we are joined.

But this story is not of land alone. It is also of people. For their story, we begin somewhere in the mists of civilization, in the heart of the Old World. As well as Italy, many were from Sicily, an ancient land occupied by many peoples through the ages, from Phoenicians and Greeks to Byzantines, Arabs, Normans and others. Blending people from lands around the Mediterranean and beyond,

Sicily became the original "melting pot." One can only guess at the very old and mixed bloodlines of those who would come to occupy Goat Hill.

"There was a pipeline from Sicily to Pueblo. If you wanted a job you came here because there were five smelters. You put in 11 hours a day and you get 10 cents an hour." Tony Bacino

One might also imagine their voyage from the Old World. Their feelings of excitement and fear as they traveled across the Atlantic in a late 19th century steamer. Arriving in the United States, not at Ellis Island but at the Port of New Orleans, their story in the New World also begins with a river, the mouth of the legendary Mississippi.

Here they entered customs, tired, disoriented and unfamiliar with the language. It may have been at the immigration offices, or later on in schools, when some of the surnames were changed. Frangiamore became Frankmore, Marcovecchio became Marco.

"When the 1880s immigrants came here they couldn't speak the language; many were illiterate even in Italian. They left because they -were starving. The government was fighting a civil war and they wanted to conscript the children. The moms said to hell with that, we're sending our kids away." Kathy Bacino

"My grandma was an orphan from Naples. My understanding is that she came here in 1888 with the clothes on her back, a knap sack and a Jig tree." Joe Frankmore

Many of the Italians worked in Louisiana for a while. But eventually, like so many before them, they were lured by the promise of a better life in a quickly developing Western frontier. There were jobs out West, especially in Pueblo, where ore smelters, mines and other industries were booming. There was also rich farmland in the Arkansas Valley. So they boarded trains, as did other immigrant populations, and headed "upstream" to the hardworking town of Pueblo.

Upon their arrival in Pueblo, some of the Italians immediately settled on what was to be called Goat Hill, a piece of high ground where the Arkansas River and Fountain Creek come together. Other Italians went there after the Pueblo flood of 1921. In many ways, Goat Hill was a place of confluence. Before the Italians came along, Mexicans occupied the land and it was known as Mexican Town. Previously, traders and trappers gathered there and called it Tenderfoot Hill. But foremost, much like Manitou Springs, it was a gathering and resting place for the Plains Indians.

So as is often the case, where two great bodies of water merge, so too do humans gather. The patterns of nature reflect the patterns of our own lives, often very subtly. The confluence of Fountain Creek with the Arkansas River marks the confluence of many peoples through the ages, and of those peoples with the Earth.

Thus we arrive at the end of one story, one journey. The "here and now" of Manitou Springs meets the "there and then" of Goat Hill. From Manitou, our journey takes us 40 miles and a century down Fountain Creek. For the residents of Goat Hill, the journey stretches from ancient civilization and courses thousands of miles from the Mediterranean. Like so many salmon finding their spawning grounds, ancient spirits transmigrate over the land to birth a new generation.

So begins another story, another journey that Manitou Springs and Goat Hill share in common...a journey of community.



The DeNiro family in 1908 Though you would never guess by this photo, they lived in a cave when first settling on Goat Hill (Photo courtesy of Sylvia Greco)

Goat Hill marks the juncture of a foreign people with a foreign land. Most had little formal education and couldn't speak English. Many had been farmers and laborers. They came to this world for jobs in the smelters and mines and to work the land. They were a bold people but at the same time their lives were uncertain. How would they survive and build a future for their children? They would do it the only way they knew how, the way they had always done. They would do it together.

"At the turn of the century there were something like 12 Italian clubs. They loaned each other money and took care of each other. That's how they made it." Kathy Bacino

"If a woman nursing a baby didn't have enough milk, and there was another woman nursing a kid, she could just bring it over. Many a kid on Goat Hill grew up on another mothers milk. It didn't make any difference," Angela Patti



The Potestio neighborhood store, formerly owned by the Decinos, was a popular hangout, (photo courtesy of Joanle Potestio)

They say it takes a community to raise a child. The residents of Goat Hill lived this philosophy in the most literal sense. Mothers would care not just for their own large families but for entire packs of neighborhood kids. One car, one meal, might serve an entire block. One tub of bath water might serve an entire family.



"My mother had babies every two years. There wasn't any birth control. I had eight sisters. Sometimes I had to stay home from school to help take care of my younger sisters. Every Saturday night all my sisters would take a bath using the same bathwater." Sylvia Greco

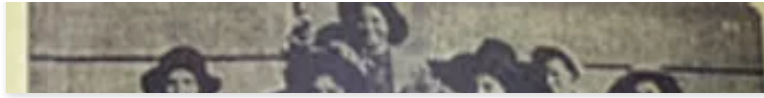
"A doctor came into the neighborhood and asked some kids where the Buccomusso house was. They wouldn't tell him. He told them, 'Hey I'm not a cop; I'm here to deliver a baby.' So they showed him the way." Tony Bacino

By today's standards, the people of Goat Hill were as poor as it gets. But children never had a better environment. Everyone looked out for each other. Shady characters wouldn't last long here. Every street -was a safe playground. Bullets, whether from guns or in the form of racing automobiles, weren't an issue. They had dirt roads and only a few people had cars. And for most of their era, there were no televisions. Little kids were playing together, big kids were playing together and everyone else was sitting around "shooting the breeze."

"We played a lot of baseball. The baseball was string wrapped around some kind of ball and a sock sewn around it. And the bat was a broomstick. If pro scouts had visited Goat Hill, we would have had some major leaguers." Angelo Patti

"At night the men would get together and play a game called bocce. The side that lost had to buy drinks for the winners and candy for the kids." Sylvia Greco "We called Tony Langoni 'Stooge.' He would watch for the cops when they were gambling." Tony Bacino

One can imagine the bustle of activity on warm summer evenings, bellies full of pasta and homemade wine. The evening fun and relaxation was well deserved. But the next day it was back to work. Men labored long and hard at dirty and dangerous jobs for little pay .



Polar, Blams, Smicks, Ange Patti and others do their thing to peddle vegetables, (photo courtesy of Tony Bacino

"My grandfather worked at the smelter. My father worked in a brickyard seven days a "week for 25 cents an hour." Sylvia Greco

"My dad made \$2.72 a day working for the railroad. That was big money man but he had eight kids." Angelo Patti

"When I was eight years old I was selling newspapers. I bought three papers for a nickel and sold each one for three cents." Tony Bacino

Women had more than their share of work too. The majority of it .was domestic, some was in the fields, and some had their own businesses. But in those days, work was work. Outside the home or inside, there wasn't any glamour to it or some higher purpose work had to fulfill other than life's practicalities. They did it because they had to. Yet they often worked together with a style and rhythm that made the community pulse with life.

"Monday was wash day. Everybody in the neighborhood washed clothes on Monday. They used to put their clothes in a tub of water in a fire outside and boil the clothes to get them clean. Then they had another tub with clear water to rinse them and then hang them up. Tuesday was ironing day. And Wednesday was for baking. That's when they had the outdoor ovens; they looked like an igloo. They would get up about three in the morning, build a fire in the oven, and let the wood burn down to ashes. Then they would scrape out the ashes, use a wet flour sack to mop out the dust, and put the bread in the oven. So you go around the neighborhood on Wednesday and smell all that good bread." Angelo Patti

"My dad would climb the train when it passed by and he would throw pieces of coal down to us girls." Sylvia Greco

"A local farmer, Bruce Maroni, would give me overripe tomatoes. They make the best sauce. Then seven or eight ladies from around the neighborhood would sit around the backyard with big pots of tomatoes on the fire." Joe Frankmore

Families worked together because it made life easier and a lot more fun. And they cooperated in other ways too. Neighbors might trade homemade goat cheese for homemade wine. Small neighborhood grocers, like the Potestios, would help families during especially tough times. And times were tough. These people had little money and no modern conveniences. In the early days there was no running water or sewer system.

"We had outhouses for toilets. The poor ones had a one-holer while the rich ones had a two-holer. . .they were big time. There were no modern conveniences like hot water. Our water for bathing was heated on a coal stove." Angela Patti

"My dad once lent a farmer some money and instead of paying interest they would slaughter a whole pig for us. We would cook every bit of it, the head, the feet, the ears. . .we used the guts to make sausage, the fat to make lard and the blood to make pudding." Sylvia Greco

>Poor as it was, Goat Hill was the very definition of a robust community. They made the most of what they had. They worked hard while maintaining healthy social interaction. They cooperated and shared with each other. And foremost, they grew as much of their own food as possible.

"Everybody there had a garden. We had a great big garden in front and my dad used to plant everything. In the summertime we used to eat everything out of the garden. We had chickens, rabbits, and pigeons. We would kill one chicken every Sunday." Sylvia Greco

"They bought everything in bulk—flour and potatoes by the 100 lb. bag, spaghetti by the 20 lb. box and peaches by the box. Everybody saved the sacks from the flour. They would use them for towels, make bed sheets out of them, and some of the girls made bloomers out of them." Angelo Patti

Tradition was also important for the people of Goat Hill, whether it was the foods they made, the holidays they celebrated or the rituals they performed. Children played the accordion, tomatoes were canned by the ton, and homemade wine flowed freely. Goat Hill even had one of the first riding academies in the state, where one could rent a donkey for 10 cents per hour or 25 cents per day.

"There "was an old lady that was a mid-wife and we would call her for deliveries. She would get five dollars, a lot of money for the time. When a woman had a baby they made pigeon soup. They thought that helped them produce milk." Sylvia Greco

"They had chickens and they had a rooster. Thanksgiving Day ◆was lu chickena day.' When the roosters time was up it became 'nee matsuammo lu gaddo' which means 'for Thanksgiving we kill the rooster.'" Angelo Patti

One tradition that wasn't well preserved was the language. As with many immigrant populations, discrimination was a problem. And some Italians wanted their children to be more American.

"If you had an Italian name, you weren't allowed in a lot of public places. Dance halls were strictly American. When we were kids we were ashamed to admit we were Italian because you couldn't get in places." Angelo Patti

"You often couldn't get a job if you had an Italian name. Many families changed their names because of that." Tony Bacino

"As I got older and started speaking Italian my parents were kind of against it. They wanted us to be Americanized. Plus my mom and dad would speak Italian when they didn't want me to know what they were saying." Joe Frankmore

It was a wholesome life they had. But Goat Hill also had its share of mystery and intrigue. There are rumors of underground passages used to elude police officers; stories of buried treasures (they didn't trust banks), dice games and bookies.

"Some claim there were a lot of tunnels on Goat Hill. But us kids, we knew everything about the Hill and I can't remember any tunnels. There were a few bootleggers though. They had what they called the 'plant,' which was a bottle of whiskey buried in the ground. A lot of kids would find where the plant was and they would steal a bottle now and then." Angelo Patti

"I didn't know of any tunnels. But when I was a little girl, my grandparents lived up the Hill in a cave. They had a bed in there. Later they built a three-room house, just a kitchen and two bedrooms for 3 boys and 2 girls. So my grandfather dug into the side of a hill by the house to make the boys a bedroom." Sylvia Greco

"My brothers had a bootleg joint on the corner... everybody would come over. ..the cops would come over, take off their caps and jackets, have a few drinks and go back to work. A guy from back East once came here to carry out a contract. He came into the joint and was telling my brother Blackie that Pueblo wasn't such a tough place. He went back to his car and found his machine gun -was stolen. A fourteen-year-old kid had taken it." Tony Bacino



The "little rascals" of Goat Hill attended Riverside School, many walking there along the railroad tracks, (photo courtesy of Tony Bacino)

And yes, there was the mafia. There are stories of money collections, paid-off officials and finks in exploding cars. But this wasn't exactly Hollywood. Much of this activity was based on the old values of la cosa nostra, about family looking after itself and protecting itself against corruptive and hostile forces.

"They didn't jack around...we were clannish and we tried to help each other." Tony Bacino

The people of Goat Hill were people of faith, as all people facing extreme adversity have to be. Many attended Mt. Carmel Catholic Church. Yet, like the Church itself, they incorporated many of the "old ways" into their everyday lives. Folk beliefs and practices persisted. The saints, many of whom have pagan roots, were widely celebrated for answering prayers



Dirt-filled washtubs, with flowers growing from them, helped to hold parts of the hill together. (Photo from Pueblo Chieftain)

"If you had a really bad headache, they would say may be you had the malocchio (a curse known as the "evil eye"). You would go to this lady and she would get a plate with water, paper and oil. Then she would put the plate on your head and light the paper. Then she would say prayers. They had a lot of that; everybody had their own thing." Sylvia Greco

"Religious days were very important to Italians, especially St. Joseph's Day on March 19, with all those delicious foods so beautifully displayed—really a work of art." Angela Patti

Many Sicilians are farmers and traditionally known as people of the land. It is no accident that St. Joseph's Day, the day before the vernal equinox, would hold such prominence. Long before Christianity, this day was a festival for the goddess Athena, where rituals, as with the foods on a St. Joseph's Table, were offerings of goodwill for the planting season.

"They had a lot of their own customs they lived by." Angelo Patti

Goat Hill's heyday lasted from the turn of the 19th century through the 1930s. As children reached adulthood many moved on. A few remained in the neighborhood and spent the rest of their lives there. The children of Goat Hill became successful teachers, businesspeople and prominent citizens of Pueblo. They became Americans, yet ever proud of their Italian heritage.

"I've had guys tell me if they could do it over again, they would live on Goat Hill." Tony Bacino

It is so easy to glorify the past. Very often it's the best of times that stick in the memory while the worst of times fade somewhere in the ether. Life for the people of Goat Hill was not easy. They worked long hours at difficult jobs, they had very little money and no modern conveniences. Yet even today, former residents consider that wondrous neighborhood reason for celebration.

On Friday, September 13, 2002, a capacity crowd of over 500 former Goat Hill residents and descendants reunited with their old friends and neighbors. They traveled from as far as California, Oregon and Minnesota to attend the weekend festivities. It was a unique celebration filled with laughter, dance, fond memories and of course, pasta. Few communities could boast such strong and lasting ties. The rare tribute attests that Goat Hill was indeed a very special community.

"You know the most important thing in this life?... friends." Angelo Patti

For modern generations, Goat Hill offers more than a collection of fond memories and intriguing stories. These people show us the true riches of life. The ancestors of Goat Hill teach us the fundamentals of building strong, self-reliant communities. They remind us what living was like before the television was turned on and the rush of modern technology cluttered and corrupted our quiet neighborhoods.

Goat Hill offers Manitou Springs, and community everywhere, something we don't have to relearn so much as remember. Goat Hill reminds us of life's greatest riches: the happy sounds of children playing, the warm aroma of baking bread, the rich taste of foods plucked fresh from the garden, the exhilarating sight of pretty girls walking past the corner store, and the pleasant touch of Love's embrace. In terms of life's real wealth, Goat Hill has buried treasures after all.

"People figure, who the hell wants to live on Goat Hill? I do!" Tony Bacino

The Storytellers

Long before television, long before books, long before recorded history... there were storytellers. For the vast majority of human history storytelling was the primary way people learned from and bonded with each other. Storytelling formed not just ties among living individuals but also between many, perhaps dozens of more, generations. These shared stories and the bonds they form provide the continuity necessary to create rich tradition and culture.

In recording the interviews about Goat Hill, I was reminded of the simpler things that make for a strong community and a good life. But I also experienced first hand the pleasure and the power of hearing one's ancestral history. It is something that must be experienced to be understood.

The storytellers of Goat Hill lived in the community at various times. Angelo "Ange" Patti lived there from 1921-1939. Sylvia Greco was born there in 1913 and left after marrying John Greco in 1934 and Joe "Flea" Frankmore spent a good part of his life there from the 1930s through the 1970s. Tony "Tubbs" Bacino's family moved there in 1921, when he was three years old* and he still lives there (a survivor of 654 days of combat in World War II and a recipient of the Purple Heart* it won't be the last we hear of Tubbs.) Tubbs' wife, Kathy Bacino, is working on an oral history of Goat Hill and was very helpful. Thank you to all these great storytellers whose memories of their lives enrich our own.

Meeting these special storytellers brought extra gifts. By the completion of the interviews I had a fig tree, a bottle of wine and cookies. Ange Patti, a master storyteller whose recollections of Goat Hill inspired this article, also introduced me to Ralph Montera. Ralph is an old-time master gardener who grows enough food on a small plot of land to feed an entire block. I left his place with sacks of chili peppers, tomatoes and plums that I could share with neighbors in Manitou. He attributes his gardening success to an old trick that allows him equal success as a fisherman—he talks to the plants as he does to the fish. Friendly, playful and giving, it was a special treat to meet this true country dweller.

In learning the stories of ancestors* friends and neighbors, the status of celebrity so honored in American culture begins to fade. One then finds the best teachers and heroes are exactly where we need them most.. in our own backyards.