

Spring 2004

My Grandfather

Anna Hendrey
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai>

Recommended Citation

Hendrey, Anna (2004) "My Grandfather," *ESSAI*: Vol. 2, Article 15.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol2/iss1/15>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in ESSAI by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact koteles@cod.edu.

My Grandfather

by Anna Hendrey

(English 101)

The Assignment: Assignment is based on a reading by N. Scott Momaday (“The Way to Rainy Mountain”) in which the author describes his grandmother, who serves as a link between him and family traditions. The student is asked to describe her own grandparents and use details that show a connection to her family’s cultural identity. (Descriptive paper)

Growing up I never really got to know my grandfather. This was not because I didn’t spend enough time with him. Even though we lived two states away, I spent many weeks with him every year throughout my childhood. My grandfather never seemed at ease around children, not even his grandchildren. He wasn’t the kind of man that would let anyone close to him. Even though he did not show emotion or share his thoughts and feelings with me, I knew my grandfather loved me. It was never spoken, but I knew it was there. Maybe it was in the expression on his face when we arrived for our yearly visits. Somewhere in his face I could see that he was very happy to see us. Or maybe it was in the small showing of emotion in the tense hug he would give us when we were leaving after our visit to go back home till next year. I never could pinpoint it, but I knew somehow that he did love me.

My Grandpa was not the kind of grandpa that took his grandchildren fishing or to the park to play. My grandfather did not believe in children playing. This was a waste of one’s energy. He believed that a person had only so much energy in their life and it should not be wasted on play. He was a man who believed in hard work. Even with his small stature he was a strong man and did physical labor all his life. He was full of pride and believed in the traditional Italian ways. These traditions held true in my grandparents marriage. My grandfather ruled the home and supported the family. My grandmother tended the children, garden, animals and all household chores. I never knew when I was young of the hardships this strong prideful man had been through. Until I became an adult I never understood what had shaped him into the man he became.

In 1904, Antonio, my grandfather, was born in a small coal mining town called Cambridge in West Virginia. He was the firstborn child of Italian immigrants that had only been in America a very short time. Seven more children would follow after him making him the oldest child of eight, which would put enormous responsibility on him at a very young age. In Italy his parents had been farmers and lived in poverty. They left their home, family, and everything they knew to come to America in hopes of a better life and a brighter future.

When they arrived in America Antonio’s father found work in the coal mines of West Virginia. His father spent long hours every day but Sunday doing the strenuous physical labor of a coal miner. Antonio’s father worked in the coal mines till 1906, when Antonio turned two. He then decided that America was not where he wanted to stay. He missed Italy, and the hardships here along with the language barrier were too much for him. He moved his wife and my grandfather back to Italy.

My grandfather would live in Italy until 1914 when the beginnings of WWI would force my grandfather’s family to relocate again. His father feared he would be drafted into the war and would have to leave his family that was already struggling to survive. He would not take this chance and again they left everything they owned and came back to America. Once again they settled in the mountains of West Virginia and his father went back to working in the mines.

My grandfather’s life was full of hard work and hardships. He grew up in poverty having only the barest of necessities available to him. At the age of eleven my grandfather wanted to quit school to help out the family by going to work in the coal mines with his father. His parents did not want this life

for him but my grandfather begged his parents to let him work and help the family. They finally gave into his will and gave my grandfather permission to quit school after the fifth grade and work full time as a coal miner.

Children that worked in the mines did the same work as adults. My grandfather would take his pick and shovel and go deep under the ground into the cold dark mines to mine the coal. He was paid by how many cars of coal he would fill. He would swing his pick into the mine walls knocking the coal loose and then shovel it by hand into the rail cars. He would then push the cars up the tracks by hand to the processing area. The cars would then be inspected before the men were paid. Money would be deducted if there were any mud or dirt in the cars. He would be paid a small amount for each car he filled. This money would be brought home to his mother who would give him a small portion of it for himself and the rest would be used to support the family. My grandfather lost his childhood in the coal mines and the hardships he faced as a child molded him into a man that could not take joy in life like other men could. He was constantly driven to keep ahead for fear he would not make it in a harsh world if he slowed down.

When my grandfather was twenty years of age he met the woman he would marry, Julia. She was also the child of Italian immigrants and the oldest of her many siblings. Against her parents' wishes not to marry at such a young age she married my grandfather when she was sixteen. My grandfather began his life with his young bride in 1925. They made their home on a piece of property he shared with his father in a small town in West Virginia named Lumberport. On this piece of land, up the path from his father's home, my grandfather built the house that they would live in their entire life. The home consisted of two rooms and a coal burning stove in the middle of the rooms to provide heat. My grandfather built an outhouse and dug a well so they would have fresh water. Electricity was not installed for many years. The land provided them enough room to raise chickens, pigs and a cow for milk. They also had a large garden to provide fresh vegetables. Together in this small home they began their family.

My grandfather's first child was born in 1928. He was a strong and healthy son. In the following years he would have eight more sons. Only three of those would survive after birth leaving him with four healthy sons. Financially they were doing well on my grandfather's pay from the mines. My grandfather was a hard worker and never wasted his money. He scrimped and saved eight hundred dollars, which he kept in a savings account in the Lumberport bank. In the 1920's eight hundred dollars could buy a new house in Lumberport. To save such a large sum of money was quite an achievement for my grandfather. In 1929 the stock market crashed and the Lumberport Bank went under. My grandfather lost all the money he had spent years saving. This experience would keep him from ever trusting a bank again.

The Great Depression came and once again my grandfather was faced with poverty. He was laid off from his job in the mines and he did not know how he would feed his family. He found work here and there, but this was not enough to keep his family from starving. He made a decision to look for work in the Midwest. Leaving his wife and children behind he traveled to Chicago in hopes of finding work. He found a job working in a factory in the city. This job provided him with enough money to send home to take care of his wife and children.

Things were going so well with his job he decided to move his family from their home in West Virginia to Chicago. As his wife packed up the family and made arrangements to move, the factory he worked for closed its doors in financial ruin. He went home to tell his wife and children the bad news. They would not be moving and again he was without means to support the family. He found odd jobs here and there, barely keeping his family fed. Finally with the start of WWII the Depression came to an end and the work resumed in the mines. My grandfather kept his family out of the bread lines and they never accepted charity through those harsh times. This he would be very proud of.

During the 1940's my grandfather was doing well financially and his family was thriving. This was partly because he was promoted to a foreman in the mines. This new position provided higher pay and easier work with less physical labor. It took hard work and determination for my grandfather to qualify for this job. He went back to school and had to pass many classes before he could even be considered for the position. He worked hard at the studies and even though he only had a fifth grade education he passed the exam and became a foreman.

With higher pay and more money to spare it was time to make improvements to the little two room house. The depression had put permanent scars on my grandfather and he was reluctant to part with any of his money to get help with the projects. Instead he would do all the work on the house himself. After working all day in the mines he came home and worked on improvements to the house. He and his sons added on two more rooms, hand dug a basement under the home and brought in plumbing and electric. The two room house was now double in size and had many conveniences for his family. No longer would they have to pump water from outside and carry it in the house or light their way with candles and lanterns at night.

As his sons came of age the war in Korea began. The first year his two oldest sons were drafted into the war. My grandfather was afraid that his younger two sons were also going to be drafted. Instead they enlisted. Within twelve months all of his sons would leave home for the war. This devastated my grandmother and the worry and heartache took its toll on my grandfather as well. They waited at home for their boys to come home. Their prayers were answered when all of their sons returned.

They were all men now and one by one they started families of their own. Only one of their sons would stay in West Virginia to raise his family. The rest would move on to different cities and raise their families there.

My grandfather retired from the mines at the age of sixty five. He lived out the rest of his years with my grandmother in the house they began their life in. Even though my grandfather was elderly he still was strong and had no fear of physical labor. His last day of life on this earth was proof of this.

On my grandfather's plot of land sat a beautiful hemlock tree. My grandmother's father had planted this tree when it was just a twig many years before. It stood fifty feet tall and although it was beautiful, some of its branches threatened the buildings surrounding it. My grandfather had trimmed many large trees on his property. He was experienced in this and this unseasonably warm February day was the perfect opportunity to get this job done. He climbed the tree with his saw in hand and spent the day sawing limb after limb down by hand until he had it just right. Coming into the house exhausted he went into the basement and rested in his favorite rocker. He gently passed away as he comfortably napped in his rocker on that warm February day in 1976 at the age of seventy four.

He can now finally rest from the hard labor and hardships of his life. Now he will have enough energy to waste on play.