

[A Stonecutter's Holiday]

Mari Tomasi Recorded in Writers' Section Files

DATE: AUG [?] 1940

A STONECUTTER'S HOLIDAY

On the other side of the lake, cottage after cottage lined the beach. [There?] were only ledges, grey and jagged. A man sat on one of the smoother boulders, in a tangle of reels and lines. He wore a khaki shirt, and cotton pants tucked into knee length boots. There was no sun but he wore a battered, wide-brimmed felt hat — a stonecutter out for a holiday.

“My camp?” His lips moved around the stem of a corncob pipe. “Over there, see? By the spruces. That woman is my wife. The girls are my kids. They're both married now. This is the first time they come to camp this summer, to 'open it up' they say. They like the water only when it's warm. But me, even in the winter I come. For hunting. Good hunting in those hill' back there. Rabbit, partridge, deer. Mostly two men from the shed come with me. They like the sport, too. In winter we sleep downstair', near the stove. My wife, she get mad. She think I will catch cold. That is what happen to a neighbor-friend. Already his lungs are pretty full of dust; the cold, it just finish' him.

“Many stonecutter' come to this pond, it take just half-hour to ride here from Barre. I like it because always it is cool. The girls complain the only time they can swim is on the real hot day, an' those are few. Me, I don't care. I live' near a lake in the old country, an' I never learn to swim. I guess maybe I don't learn now.

Library of Congress

“I am at camp now in the middle of the week because the stoneshed where I work was burn' down Monday. So I get ready my fishpole to have fun for a few day, then next week I look for work. Mostly I come here just on the Saturday an' Sunday. Never I stay more than one week, an' then only when I get the lay-off. Our camp' are not good like a real home. We don't care. No different they are from the other camp' here. Very rich people don't build here, only people like us who got to work hard to live. Most of us we build our own camp. That small place next to mine belong to Italo Frangio. Well, one year he buy the land. Next year he buy the lumber. Then, one Saturday an' Sunday, an' every time there is no work at the shed, he come up here an' build. Me. I do the same thing, but I got a cousin to help me so the camp go up in one summer.

“Hah, that fire Monday! Only ashes left. An' the shed next to it is two-third' gone. Together they put 65 men out of work. Some, they won't find work right away. The stone business is slow now for a month an' a half. Me, I don't worry for work. All the shed bosses, they know me. They know the good work I do.

“Not much granite is lost in that fire. The insurance is enough to cover it. 'Bout \$50,000 for each shed. Lucky for the boss that business is slow right now, he got only a little unfinish' work in the shed. When business is good he got 'bout \$200,000 worth of granite. If the fire come then, well —too bad. Fire will spoil granite so it is good for nothing. The blocks of stone get crack', they chip. A square stone will look almost round.

3

“In this shed the profit is split three way'. Three bosses. Two of them I am good friends with. The old boss an' his boy. The boy is married to a fine girl, but the old boss is plenty mad when he get married to her. Because she is French an' poor, an' her old man a drunk bum.

“They will build again. With \$50,000 you can start a damn good shed. When this fire happen', we are line' up for three month' work. Three month' work, but not-too-fast work.

Library of Congress

Me, I feel bad 'bout the fire. Almost finish' I am on a fine memorial, one of the best I ever make. The old boss is after me all month to hurry up. But I task it easy. Slow, good work. I know there is no rush. An' I figure I am worth more than what they pay, anyway. All us good workers, we figure that way... This memorial, it is a rough tree trunk, with a scroll an' lilies. The order come from Texas.

“The fire alarm begin to ring Monday night 'bout nine o'clock. Right away I know it is a shed fire. I get there fast, but one shed is already half burn'. The fire light up the sky. You can see the hill' an' the river just like in the daytime. This shed is like a shell, dry old wood. When it start to burn you might as well let it go. The firemen work' hard, but what they can do?

“Three, four or us, we try to save some pieces of granite that are in the yard. We go so near the fire as the firemen will let us. We try, but we save nothing. The old boss is there. He say, 'Never mind, never mind. Go on home, all of you.' Well, I am hot an' wet an' tired, an' I go up the hill to sit in the grass an' watch that good granite get lick' by 4 the fire. A bunch of Montpelier office men are stand' behind me. They don't sit in the grass. Oh, no. They don't want to dirty the summer stripe' pants. All the time they talk an' talk. You think they say how sorry they are, that so many men are out of work, that so much good work is lost? Oh, no. All the time, I bet, they hope the next shed will catch fire, an' the next one. They like to see the whole row of shed' burn up. They want something to talk 'bout in the office tomorrow.

“I been here in Barre 'bout fifteen year. Before that I am in Quincy, in the stonished', too. I am lay' off when work is slack, so I come up here an' find work. Here I like it better. It is smaller, you make more friend'.

“Viuggi, Italy, in the Como district, is where I am born. A good granite center, Viuggi. I am raise' to feel granite, to smell an' know it. My father an' his brother, they work' the stone, too. Plenty of shed' there, but small ones. In the open, the men work, under a roof. There

Library of Congress

is fresh air around you all the time you work, so there is less sickness for the stonecutter. An' the owner, he make more profit, he don't have to buy the expensive dust remove' equipment. Sure, sometime' it is cold to work out, but when it is too cold, well — you don't work. I learn the granite trade in Viuggi. I am already a good cutter when I come to Quincy. Funny, here in Barre we got 'bout couple dozen people from my town of Viuggi. Over there in the north if a father has made money from stone he will send his son to Milan where they got the school' for artist' an' sculptor'. Myself, no, I don't got there. I carve only little, like a flower or letter. Never have I touch' a 5 statue. I am artist enough for that.

“Now after Memorial Day the stone business will be quiet. This year the best memorial' we make are put in Hope Cemetery. Memorial Day is the end of the year for the granite business. All the shed' look back through the year an' make the list of the best memorial' they have made. This year we got less fine work than last year. Less carve' work. Each year the Barre shed', they get together an' offer a prize for the best original design. That's good. It keep up interest for the worker'; everybody, they do their best. The prize winner this year is carve' into a memorial an' is bought by a Barre woman. I forget if it is in the Hope Cemetery or the Elmwood. To me it seem' that Barre people are not so interest' in good carving today. If they have a lot of money to spend on a memorial they like better to buy a good, plain mausoleum. This year we put up one sarcophagus an' two mausoleum' in town. One mausoleum, it's got eight crypt'; the other, two.

“We got plenty Frenchmen in our shed. Good work, they do. They come to Barre to break the strike in '21, an' they been work in the shed ever since. I'm not here then, but I hear the same from everybody. I get along good with them. Why not”? The Scotch, Irish an' Italian' who are here at the time of the strike get along with them now. But just so soon there is talk of maybe another strike, then right away everything is different. They don't trust the French.”