Tales of Penowa

by Anthony Muzopappa

Introducing Penowa . . .
By David Demarest and Eugene Levy

An old photograph, c. 1930, shows a pair of adults and a couple of kids lounging on the front porch of a rural general store. In the middle of the image, a small child — at first almost a bodiless face — peers out from behind the bench where the others sit. He is alert and watching, staring at the camera.

The place is Penowa, one of several coal patch-towns near the West Virginia border, west of Avella, Pa., that functioned from about 1905 to the late 1940s — for roughly two generations. Penobscot, Waverly, and Seldom Seen are totally gone, their structures dismantled, their sites stripped 50 years ago. A scattering of houses remains at Jefferson and Penowa. For half a century, Penowa was the last train station in Pennsylvania along the Wabash line, just before the rails disappeared into State Line tunnel. The tunnel is still there; the station is gone.

The store in the 1930 photo belonged to Clara and Frank Rotundo, the grandparents of Anthony Muzopappa, the 4-year-old face behind the bench. About 50 yards away from the Rotundos’ general store was the Penowa saloon (which still functions), owned and run back then by the boy’s parents, Jack and Adeline Muzopappa. Drafting his autobiography 60 years later, Anthony (also Tony or Murzy) recalled how well situated he was, growing up, to observe the manners and morals of a Western Pennsylvania patch-town. As son and grandson of the owners of Penowa’s two most important meeting places, “he enjoyed certain proprietary rights.... He could witness more sights than most of his playmates.”

The 100-page manuscript that Muzopappa drafted in the last years of his life — 13 episodic chapters with recurring characters — is an affectionate celebration of growing up as a male child in Penowa. The names, the people, the places are real, but Muzopappa’s language gives everything a slight exaggeration: these are tall “Tales of Penowa,” told in part for the fun of it, not just for instruction: “The author... will endeavor to show the reader that, despite all the harshness of life at that time, it was not always doom and gloom.”

The result is a bit Bunyonesque (or Runyonesque). Felix Dorisio, urging his “two huge Belgian horses” into the “chocolate maelstrom” of the flooded creek to save the country doctor stranded with his horse and buggy. Rosie Davis, the hermaphrodite from Seldom Seen, “flash[ing] the boys her most brilliant Bela Lugosi smile.” Mike Korpos, hit by a train in Virginville, “destined to spend a long time in his plaster carapace,” but to
survive — “because he was a fighter.” The narrator as a boy — “a mere stripling” — planting potato peelings his grandmother gave him and harvesting “the largest potatoes he’d ever seen in his life” while his grandfather clenched his teeth: “After all, gardening was his forte. Wasn’t his credo, ‘Nobody beata me?’”

Muzopappa’s ear for dialogue is cadenced and precise. On a hot Fourth of July evening, two young men challenge each other to race from the Penowa saloon to the top of Penobscot hill, a mile away, and back — before the sparkler one carries burns out.

“I tell ya, I c’n do it. I’ll betcha fifty Goddam cents I c’n do it.”
“The hell, you say! You’ll probably run down to Yurosko’s house and sit on your ass awhile and then come back.”
“You wanna bet?”
“Yeah, I’ll bet. How you gonna prove it?”
“Simple. You c’n follow me, if you’re man enough.”
“Man enough! Listen kiddo! Lemme tell ya somethin’. I c’n go anywhere you can, anytime, anyhow.”
“You’re on. I’ll even buy the sparkler but if I win you owe me fifty cents plus a dime for the sparkler.”

The stories Muzopappa tells are not all fun. He sketches the dangers of the workplace, the violence of play as well as work. He captures the claustrophobic threats of small town life, especially in his sympathetic portrait of his mother, destined to live most of her adult life all too close to her domineering mother.

Except for two years in the Navy during World War II, Muzopappa lived in Penowa until the early 1930s, when he and his wife (Dorothy McFarland, daughter of a mining family who lived near Eldersville) moved into a home in a country hollow a couple of miles north of Penowa. In the last 20 years of his life (he died in 1993), he worked as a rural mail carrier.

It was after he retired in 1989 that Muzopappa began to concentrate in earnest on local history. He drafted “Tales of Penowa” (which he regarded as unfinished), made detailed maps of nearby patch-towns (identifying residents during the 1920s and ’30s), and collected family photographs from people in the area. He had a darkroom and enlarger in the basement and made copy negatives of the images he borrowed, filing them with such identifying information as he could find. He displayed scores of the pictures at local school reunions and invited alumni to contribute their recollections.

The images published here are, of course, from Muzopappa’s collection; the identifications indicated are his. His negatives are printed “full-image,” including his marginal notes, to indicate that these are indeed images from copy negatives.

The excerpt from “Tales of Penowa” printed here is a selection from chapters one and two of his manuscript. Like the boy behind the bench in the 1930 photo, Muzopappa was still scrutinizing Penowa in the 1990s, still trying — as he says in the first chapter of his memoir — to give “an account of people and events as accurately as [he could] recall them, or as they were revealed to him.” — D.D. and E.L.
"Penobscot Tipple with three women and a boy," photographed by Philip Brower, a miner and resident of the "patch" town until about 1930. According to his niece, Ruth Havelka Petricca (of Slovan, Pa.), Brower was an avid photographer who "always had a camera with him." Mrs. Petricca lent prints of Brower's work to Muzopappa with the stipulation that he acknowledge the photographer.
Muzopappa identified the location as "Penobscot Heights" and the women as (from left), Ann Fodor, Jennie Rotundo, and Mary Youk. Date and photographer unknown. The Penobscot mine and patch were developed starting about 1905. According to Frank Muzopappa, Tony's brother, Penobscot Heights comprised two rows of small houses, or bungalows, near the top of the hill ridge. Right: Miners at Jefferson, Pa.: (from left) Steve Dryzoposky, Metro Wayko, Koltic [unsure of first name], and Charles Zedic. Date and photographer unknown.
was a wicked looking device. It consisted of a large, square wooden funnel with a drum located at the bottom inside. The drum was turned by a crank and on the drum were a large number of metal teeth which pulverized the grapes as it turned, depositing them into the barrel. When the barrels were filled they were each covered with a cloth towel and the waiting period began, during which the grapes were allowed to "work."

It was at this point where experience entered the picture. One has to know just when the fermentation process has peaked. Every day he would lift the cloth from the barrels and study the contents while clouds of gnats swirled about his head. The gnats were ever present and many eventually became part of the mix, but to a true oenophile that would be of no concern.

At the proper time, he would set up the wine press and begin the next stage but not until he'd put on a neckerchief. He was never in the working mode unless he wore a neckerchief. Pressing the grapes was his province; it was a chore he never delegated to others. One must not hurry the grapes.

Murzy would stand there admiring the beauteous purplish-red color of the elixir as it collected at the bottom of the crusher and poured through the cast iron sluice into a wooden tub. From there it was dipped up and carried to the charcoal barrels lying on their rack, waiting to receive the new wine and begin the aging process.

On one occasion, Murzy took a glass and dipped some wine from the wooden tub when his grandfather wasn't looking. He found it deliciously sweet and heady, so much so that, at every chance, he pilfered a little more. Sometime later, he emerged from the cellar and sat outside on an empty grape carton. Up overhead his mother, [tending her mother's] kitchen [as she often did], could hear him singing a song that was somewhat like "It ain't gonna rain no more no more," a popular song of the day. Stepping out on the kitchen porch to better hear him, she soon discovered that the lyrics were decidedly not the standard ones she was accustomed to hearing. What she heard from her young son was:

Oh, the night was dark and dreary,
The rain was falling fast,
The lightning struck a baldheaded Jew
And knocked him on his ass.
Penowa baseball field, 1924. According to Frank Muzopappa, Penowa had a baseball team during the 1920s and '30s that traveled by bus to play teams at other patches in Western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Ohio. He also notes that the building in the background to the left was Castrodale's store (where the Penowa post office was located), while Dorisio's store is to the right. Penowa had no company store. Right: These homes in Penobscot were "double houses" — two-story attached dwellings common in the region.
An outraged Adeline descended the stairs to administer a little discipline to her wayward son only to learn that he was hopelessly intoxicated. Without further ado, she stormed into the cellar and gave her perplexed father a severe tongue lashing for permitting Murzy to get looped. There never was a repetition of that particular scenario because, thereafter, he was on guard against anyone who was tempted to dip into the sauce.

The first floor of the building, the one directly above the basement, was below road level. It was divided into two large chambers. The smaller one in the rear, about 20 by 40 feet, served as a storage area for items like flour, scratch feed, corn, sugar and oats, much of it in gaily printed hundred-pound cotton sacks. The sacks, when empty, were washed and housewives made dresses from them. The chamber was also equipped with high racks where Clara hung her home-made macaroni to dry and her fiery hot sausage to cure. A cat was usually in residence there to protect the grain sacks against the depredations of mice.

The larger front chamber on that floor, which they referred to as the Hall, had many functions. In that hall, many weddings were celebrated. Weddings, then, sometimes lasted for days. Many households had outside bake ovens constructed of brick, in which they baked their weekly supply of bread. When a wedding was at hand, these would be fired up to roast a pig, lamb, calf or even a goat, which can be quite tasty. A band could be hired for very little money to play anything from fox trots to polkas, or in the case of an Italian wedding, the tarantella, which is a physically demanding dance that should only be attempted after certification by the family physician.

The oldsters sat around the perimeter on long wooden benches and reminisced while watching the dancers whirling past them. At some point in the festivities, the floor was cleared of dancers and two adults stepped forward, one holding a bowl of Jordan almonds, the other a hat filled with pennies. These they flung by the handful in all directions, while everyone laughed to see the mad scramble by the children as they rushed to scoop them up.
Tony and Frank Muzopappa arrived at the following identifications in this "Italian group." Kneeling to play cards was John Bianchi, and seated above him was Defelice (?). From right, the others are noted as Patsy Vulcano, Bob Bennett, Joe Bruno (?), Benny Volpe, Sam Paletta, and Frank Rotundo. (Question marks by the Muzopappas.) Several years younger than Tony, Frank lives in eastern Pennsylvania, where he was a biology professor before his retirement.
The hall was also used as the voting polls. In the early days the Penowa area had enough population to merit visits by both incumbent politicians and by those aspiring to office. These visits took place in Jack's saloon because it was the only saloon in Penowa. They would buy a few rounds of drinks, say a few words on their own behalf, pass out some literature and depart for the next port of call. However, with the passing of time, the mines gradually slowed, people began to move on, and the polls were eventually phased out.

[In the 1930s] union organizers used the hall to hold secret meetings. They would enter the darkened hall at night and drape heavy blankets over the windows before turning on any inside lights. At least one man remained outside as a lookout in case of impending violence. If the coal and iron police got wind of a meeting, they came on horses trained to trample anyone who failed to move quickly enough. They would even ride their horses up onto the porch if necessary. The coal and iron police were not true policemen. They were a private force of company goons who, through some political knavery, had acquired police powers throughout the state of Pennsylvania and they were ruthless.

Murzy used to sit in on these secret meetings. It excited him to listen to these men tell of their experiences and voice their complaints. Ordinarily a boy wouldn't have been permitted to attend such a function but since he was a grandson of the owners of the hall, he enjoyed certain proprietary rights. Sometimes a rickety movie projector was brought out to show a silent film depicting the hardships and dangers of working in the mines. Its purpose was to instill in the men a determination to keep fighting for a union. As the machine portrayed scenes of violence or abominable working conditions on the tiny screen, not a sound could be heard in the hall except the clacking of the projector, but to Murzy, it was a movie picture and he found it exciting.

For a long period of time, there was a soup kitchen operating in the hall. There, many children received their only meal of the day, if soup, per se, can be called a meal. In the evening, many of them would be going from door to door, begging for something, anything, to eat. Clara was a matriarch who ruled the family with an iron hand, but she never turned a hungry child away from her door despite opinions she may have had about the child's parents.

The soup kitchen was maintained by so-called communists who were among those trying to organize a union. They referred to themselves as "Save the union" but some called them Commies, Rooshans or Reds. They went out daily and foraged the countryside in search of any type of food to put into the pot. They visited area farms where they might get a bushel of withered potatoes here, beets there or perhaps some cabbage that was "right on the edge." They were not above "accommodating" a chicken or two. Or anything else that wasn't locked up.

Many of those who joined the Communist party did so without the faintest notion of what the Communist philosophy was all about. Nor did they care. They were simply following the dictates of their stomach. The acquisition of a bowl of soup was of much more concern to them than any doctrine.
The boy [now author of these chapters] was identified by various names like: Murph, Mootz, Murzy, Tony Baloney, Wop or Dago. Whatever the appellation, he responded. In those days it was common to use terms like: Pollock, Hunkie, Frog, Greaser, Crow [Croatian], or any other demeaning designation. Usually it was employed in a friendly fashion and, unlike today, no offense was taken. Thus, if one addressed another by using some such degrading term, he could well expect to be rebuffed in a similar or more derogatory way. People had thicker skins then. Only occasionally did someone take umbrage at a particular selection of terms. In such cases, retribution would be swift and severe . . . like a knuckle sandwich to the chops or a rap in the nose. So it behooved one to know the nature of the person who was being addressed in such a manner.

There were other social errors one could make. For instance, to mistake a Croatian for a Serbian or vice versa was an unforgivable faux pas because those two sects have been feuding since the beginning of time. Among Italians one wouldn't dare confuse a Calabrese for a Sicilian or a Sicilian for a Genoese, for example. Being more than somewhat provincial, they each considered themselves the true Italians and looked down with disdain upon the others who were unfortunate enough to be a cut or two beneath them. The reason for such behavior may have been that everyone had difficulty making ends meet and it damaged their pride. Therefore they resorted to a type of pecking order by which they assuaged their sense of inadequacy. To the author, it seems a logical explanation; to the reader, perhaps not. . .

Youngsters of those days are now today's oldsters, and they must certainly confess to a sense of guilt when they think back to those times, because they thought it was hilarious to hear those Pollocks, Wops or Magyars destroy the language. In their youthful ignorance they tended to associate lack of communication with inability but they couldn't have been more mistaken. Those stalwart people left their homelands in search of a better way of life. They dared to emigrate to a country separated from theirs by a vast ocean and whose language and customs were completely alien to them. That required a large measure of courage, no matter that they may have been driven to it. They were painfully aware that they would be low man on the totem pole and that they would be fully exploited, as indeed they were. Perhaps victimized is a more apt term. But they came and they toiled to eke out an existence while beseeching God to help them provide hope and opportunity for their children . . . Instinct dictated that they rise above adversity and head for the light. And they did. 

\[Image of a group of people\]

In Conclusion . . .
By David Demarest and Eugene Levy

Surprisingly perhaps, in addition to Muzopappas’s “Tales of Penowa,” three other excellent memoirs have been written about the Penowa area. A 10,000 word unpublished manuscript called “Pit Boss of Penowa, PA” (written c.1970), now in the archives of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, describes a male child’s family life in Penobscot from 1915 to 1920; the author, Andrew Bradley, died in California in 1981. In Icon of Spring (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), Sonya Jason presents the life of a girl in Jefferson patch in the 1930s. A nationally known book, I Went to Pit College (1934), an account by New York reporter Lauren Gilfillan of hard times in the mine fields during the Great Depression, focuses on Avella and the patches west of it.

\[Image of a group of people\]

Ruth Petricca has identified her uncle, Philip Brower, in the middle at the Penowa train station, left. Date and photographer are unknown. Above: Unlike baseball, football was a pick-up sport in Penowa. Muzopappa identified the backfield: Bill Foder, Ralph Dorisio, Al Ezarik; and line: Tom Fodor, Mike Korpos, Pete Rotundo, Joe Zick, Steve Chuburko; date and photographer unknown.

Photograph Credits

‘Come on to America’
Pages 100-112 Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania Archives

“Tales of Penowa”
Pages 114-125 All photographs courtesy of Dorothy Muzopappa

Guiseppe Moretti’s East End Bronzes
Pages 126-132 All photographs courtesy of the author

Gaining Gateway Center
Pages 134-142 Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania Archives