

Once Upon a Piazza

Anthony J. Tamburri (October 18, 2008)



In 1970 in Settefrati, a small town in Lazio, the piazza was a meeting place for the town's citizens, a shopping center, a playground, a resting spot, a political forum. And it still is...

My first experience with an Italian piazza was, to my surprise, the only piazza in the town that I had visited back in 1970. Then, that small town in Lazio, [Settefrati](#), [2] at the top of the mountains in the [Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo](#) [3], had a winter population of a few hundred people. Fortunately, I got there in July.

That piazza became, for me, a meeting place of the town's citizens, from contadini (yes, there were still genuine contadini at that time) to the town's pezzi da novanta, which included, first and foremost, the priest, someone I remember as a middle-aged man named Don Antonio. (He took a liking to me because, I guess, we shared the same moniker.) Also included in this group was, naturally, the mayor. (Yes, this little mountain town is its own comune and has its own mayor, as well as a few frazioni!). Then there were a few members of the town, such as a prominent family or two,

the barber who, at that time, had the only public phone in town (one of the very few phones at all in those years...), and a relative or two of mine from my home town here in the States. And, of course, my grandfather, who had spent close to two decades, at that time, traveling to and fro because he had retired from Con. Ed. in the 1950s.

That piazza was basically the town's central nerve system. The only bar/caffè was there; the only alimentare was there; the post office was there; the barbershop/centralino was there; and the municipio and pro loco were also located there. As a consequence, if you needed to take care of business, you could basically go to city hall and get the documents you needed, then proceed to the post office for a stamp, and ultimately mail them. Once that series of tasks was completed, you could then proceed to the barbershop to call whoever was to receive your letter. In the meantime, if so desired, you could even get a coffee for that morning or afternoon pick-me-up. Or, if there were some special event going on, you might get a trim either before or after your phone call, in order to look ever the more dapper for later on.

Yet, that piazza was, and remains, more than just the functional nervous system of the paese. It was where just about everyone ended up after dinner, somewhere between 8 and 9 PM, dressed well, though not necessarily to the nines; that was reserved for those special Sunday events. During these evening promenades, all sorts of other town business took place. Chats were held, for example, about what to do with the laundry fountain, located literally underneath the piazza. Yes, there was still, at that time, a functional public laundry fountain, where the proverbial lavandaie engaged their craft: cleaning clothes and, some would say gossiping, as they shared town news! Depending on the time of year, discussions on the annual feast of the Madonna di Canneto took place; a feast that lasts from the 14th to the 29th of August. Actually, two Madonnas inhabit the area: one ceramic, which spends most of the year in a sort of tabernacle in the church in town that overlooks the piazza; the other, a black Madonna that resides higher up the mountain in the Sanctuary of Canneto. And, more important, over the years, what to do with the elementary school, whose population changed significantly from time to time, due to all sorts of reasons, most of which were tied to family economics and possible relocation.

I remember so vividly my first time in that piazza. I had traveled close to twenty hours, from New York, to visit my grandfather. From JFK to Fiumicino; then to Roma Termini; then, to my chagrin, a failed attempt to get a train ticket to Settefrati. "Quale linea?", the ticket man asked. "Boh!", I replied, thinking, "What the heck did the paesanos back in Stamford mean when they said Settefrati was near Rome?" It took some research, as I dragged my suitcase all over Rome's train station, but I did make it... I took a third-class train to Cassino, and then a taxi to Settefrati. The piazza, at my arrival, was empty! Well, almost. There was this young boy, sitting idly on a small wall, fiddling. I approached and asked him, in Italian, if he could direct to "la casa di Michele d'Egidio". "You American?", he blurted out loud, almost with relief. "Yes," I replied. And after some introductory conversation, from which I learned he was there for the summer with his family, from a town in Connecticut only a few miles from mine, he knew exactly who my grandfather was and where he was staying. That teenager, who barely knew my grandfather personally, knew exactly where he lived; he habitually hung out in that piazza, even when everyone else was resting after a huge afternoon meal, soaking up not only the sun but, indeed, information about everyone and everything. (Yes, lunch-time meals were still abundant: a mountain of spaghetti al sugo, followed by a roasted piccione, followed by salad, and then either fruit or cheese).

This past August I returned to that piazza after twenty-two years. It was the same square, significantly redone, with the newly remodeled church still overlooking the piazza. Smack in the middle was a bandstand, where the nightly entertainment played for the few hundred that strolled in and out of that piazza after dinner, during this fortnight of celebrating the "festa della Madonna"! I returned, partly, because my cousins Theresa and Al were there on summer vacation, and we wanted to see their new house; partly, also, because, Italo, another dear cousin of 88 years, wanted once more, as he put it, "dopo più di trent'anni camminare con te a braccetto in piazza ancora una volta." Yes, in that square he wanted, once more, to walk arm in arm, discussing with me—once more, after more than three decades—so many things, including my grandfather's escapades over the years, as we had often done since 1971 in his sartoria, in Florence, in Piazza Santa Croce.

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