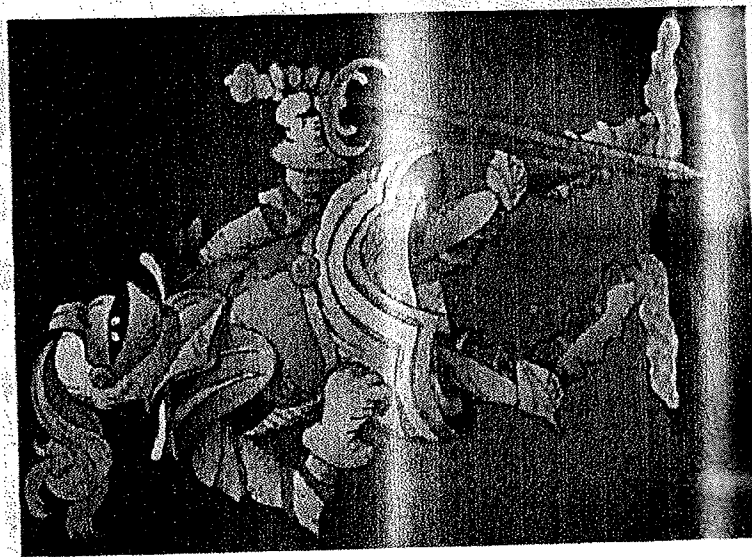


It takes Guts to write this!



Is there a Windmill around
here I can slay?

*My Life Has Just Been
a Mole Hill Compared
to the Great Mountains
of My Time.*

By: John J. La Russa

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS JOHN

As you read this autobiography, I know you will understand a complete record is impossible. Therefore, I will relate the highlights of my childhood, adolescence, young adult life and Middle years.

There are many significant people who have shared and been a part of my life. I hope that I can give them recognition in a special section of this project called "who's who".

As my life unfolds, I request no comparison be made with anyone living or dead. I am no George Washington, Mark Twain, Joey Brown or Al Capone. Well maybe a little like Al Capone. I'm just one of the billions of historical characters who tread the mill. I have my own roots and my own life experiences. My achievements should be compared to no one. The importance of my life is I did reach a small part of my potential. If I were to compare my life with any one, it would be Stuart Little. Get the VCR.

As I began living life, my response to personal care was minimal. I needed someone to feed me, bath me, care for me and love me. Many years later I am still deficient in many ways. I have grown though in my desire to be more sensitive to others needs. I truly hoped that through life's journey I have touched a few fellow human beings in a special way. I trust that I was nurturing and supportive to my family and friends. My greatest pleasure in life was anticipating and helping people realize their needs.

I have made many decisions, some good and some not so good. I believe a poor decision is better than no decision. Much of my growth and development has resulted from many of my decisions. Yes, I became wiser because of having made decisions and not hesitating while the world passed by me. Some one did say, "he who hesitates is lost".

If I were asked to score my life on a scale of achievement, I wouldn't know how to do it. I do know I like myself. I am comfortable with who I am. If I were to fault myself in any way I would say that I should've acquired a formal education sooner. To this task I put my shoulder at the age of 54, in the hope of acquiring an education to go along with the experience of life. I did not need a degree for the world to see but rather one for my own satisfaction. I feel at any station life goal setting is important. I think that with the college experience I was more able to help my fellow men and women more fully. It all started in a prior learning class at City College. The students were a cross-section of people of all ages. I intermingled with the young, old, the bright and not so bright, poor and rich. I know now that as we sat together, we were given the opportunity of learning from each other. I am certain as I look back my fellow classmates taught me much. I was the old man in the group, they may have learned a bit from me also.

Andrew Greely wrote that "life was not tried and found hard, what people thought was that life was hard so they never tried". I have a hunger for knowledge and a hunger for a fuller life, no matter how trying. May all who read this share in that hunger for life each day.

I was born March 15, 1928 at Columbus Hospital, Terry Avenue and Madison Street in Seattle, Washington. My father was an Italian immigrant. He was born in Piano degli Albanesi, a small village twenty-three miles from Palermo, Italy. Fighting for the U. S. Army in World War I, entitled him to an American Citizenship. He coveted that honor all the days of his life. He had a fourth grade education. He could neither read nor write English, all though at one time he spoke a bit of five languages, English, French, German, Italian and Albanesi.

My mother was born in the New York City, of Italian parents. When she graduated from Franklin High School she was able to speak fluent English and Italian, and write in both languages.

She was 18 when she married my father, he was 40. My sister, Mary Anne was born the following year. I joined the family two years later. At birth, I weighed thirteen pounds, fourteen ounces. One of my friends claimed that Dr. Silverberg presented the placenta to my mother and threw out the baby. The results of this delivery were many. My mother at the age of eighty-two still complained of the pains and pangs of childbirth.

As an infant, I was baptized a Catholic. I received Holy Communion in early adolescence. At the tender age of 6, I was enrolled at Our Lady of Mt. Virgin Catholic School. The first day, I experienced the somber expression, the black habit, and the ever-threatening yard stick of the nun who greeted me. I immediately resigned from school crying so loud they were glad to be rid of me. The following day I graced Rainier Public School #4 with my presence. My class-mates were African Americans, Asian, Hebrew, Caucasians, and even some Irish. At that time, I did not recognize any racial, creed or color distinction. It was only in later years that I discovered, through my white middle class friends, that I had attended school with a group of inferior persons. I did not believe that then and still don't.

After kindergarten and six years at Rainier, my education continued at Washington Junior high. The year was 1941, and that year had an ominous date. December 7th. Japan declared war on us by attacking Pearl Harbor. Within a few days I experienced the loss of many Japanese friends. They were sent to concentration camps for confinement. My government ignored the fact that they were U.S. Citizens. It had classified them as enemies. It seems their ancestry was more threatening to our government than mine. I was an Italian and at that time Italy was Germany's bedfellow. Bad things do happen to good people.

I continued my education at Franklin High School during the hectic war years. Curriculum included such meaningful classes as Pre-flight aeronautics and commando Gym. Pre-flight aeronautics consisted of carving black model airplanes for the U.S. Navy for their airplane recognition classes. Commando gym consisted of jumping high walls and climbing ropes. I graduated in 1946 knowing how to jump and whistle. My class schedule throughout my high school experience was from 8:00 A.M. until 12:20 pm daily. During my freshman and sophomore years I worked at Casser's Men's Shop from 1:00 P.M. until 5:00 PM six days a week. During my junior year I worked at National Steel Construction Company making water heaters. During my senior year I was employed by Wesix Electric Heater Company. Besides building water heaters, I became knowledgeable in electricity and plumbing. I was soon appointed Shop Foreman at the tender age of eighteen. In May of 1947, at age nineteen, I was offered an opportunity to go into business for myself.

Benja Service Company was initiated into the Seattle business scene in that same year. The first years were lean and hungry, but very happy for me, because I was my own boss.

In order to make ends meet, and keep the business viable, my partner Tony Benvenuti and I drove a taxicab part time. It became very clear I had a talent for meeting the public, and was blessed with a gift of gab. In less than one year we owned two cabs. I was partners in two thriving businesses and life seemed very promising. At this time it would be appropriate to mention my illustrious military career. I registered for the draft at eighteen, after a physical the following year I was classified I-A. Two months later, with the war now over the draft ended. It seemed the Army decided, all things being equal; it was wiser to lose a war than to induct this fine physical specimen. When the Korean War flared, I promptly joined the U.S. Naval Reserve. I soon became one of the Remington Raiders. I was stationed at the Thirteenth Naval Station Armory at the end of Lake Union, Seattle, Washington. There I spent several glorious years pounding on my Remington Rand typewriter one night a week. Five years later to the day, I was honorably discharged.

My affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church in my youth and adolescence was minimal. In 1950 romance entered my life. At twenty three I met the dream of my life, Gloria. She was a staunch Roman Catholic and quizzed me to no end about my lack of faith. I now could share with someone. This was a new experience for a selfish young man who, until recently, had no room in his life for God or love. Gloria Romeo was beautiful and brainy. She was 5' 3", 98 pounds and had earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing from Seattle University. I fell victim to Cupid's arrow. But even greater, through this loved one, my search for the "hound of Heaven" was intensified.

On June 2, 1951, at St. Mary's Church, we joined hands before God and Community to pledge our troth, 'till death do us part". At this point in time, the only thing we had in common was our Italian heritage. I was uneducated, I knew little about God, and was self centered. Five years before, I had shot my way out of Franklin High School. Now I was married to a devout Catholic with a promising future in the nursing profession. But alas, it was all for naught. She became the victim of a dreaded disease. It was called pregnancy. Eleven times she was bedridden because of this recurring malady. Six girls and five boys were the side effects that linger on. That many children taught us Life is now a total sharing experience. Every moment is spent doing with or for someone. The joy of sharing is sometimes disguised, but nevertheless always present in every action of giving to others. I began questioning the meaning of life. Serious study and continued research revealed the validity of Christian principles. My encounter with God initiated at baptism was kindled.

"Life's givens" through my many years of marriage became pluses. Experiencing those "givens" may have seemed negative at the time, but bitter becomes sweet. 'Life's givens' are unexpected events over which we have no control.

Events like the death of our son John Joseph, a fused back forcing me on a Foster Frame for forty-two endless days and nights. The building of a family home of my own design with much sweat and muscle and the help of George Eckhoff. The recurring mental anguish of my sister.

The broken body of a 120 pound teenager smashed by a 4000 pound automobile. My father suffering a stroke and unable to communicate in any language. My sister pulling her own strings and deciding when she would die. The changing of what seemed like a million and one diapers at 3:00 A.M in the morning. My life's partner Gloria, suffering for fifty years off and on with depression. All this and more made me stronger, wiser and more deeply in love with God and human kind.

With the needs of my ever growing family came other needs. The larger community needs were recognized. A new church and school had to be built. Fund drives, social gatherings, chairmanships were experienced. Finance Chairmen, Athletic Director, Holy Names President, Auction Organizer, Italian Dinner Chairmen and cook. New experiences unfolded: Developer of Parish Council, Building and Maintenance Leader. Soon the church was too small. A new church was needed. So be it. The old one became a gymnasium when a roomier house of the Lord was realized. These were a few of the challenges I met.

Then a chance to be part of Church Liturgy materialized. This included Lector and Eucharistic Minister. It seemed God was all around me, calling from every place in many different voices. The question from me is "What else is left, Lord"? His answer. Ordination. After three years of study I was ordained a Deacon in the Roman Catholic Church on April 1st, 1978. April Fools day. The Lord does have a sense of humor.

My question to the Lord changes from "How" to "Where"? Again voices speak. What is heard is this: From Cabrini Hospital: 'I am scared. Surgery frightens me.' "Please pray with my dad. He's dying." "Where do I go from here. I'm 89, alone and lonely." From Pioneer Square on Skid Road: "I have not eaten for days" "I slept in a doorway with newspaper for a blanket." "I need a drink". "I am gay and condemned to hell".

From Harborview Emergency Room:

"We deloused him and destroyed his clothes. Can you find him lodging"? "Would you talk to my nephew, he's psychotic and refuses help." "Light my cigarette. I can't see because of the blood in my eyes".

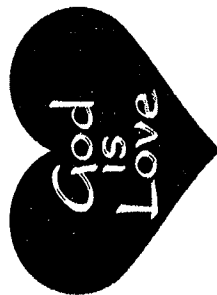
From a church pew:

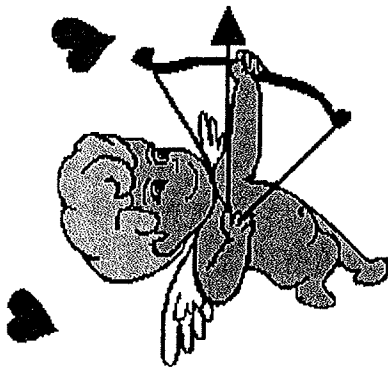
"The mass is meaningless to my kids". "What has happened to the ten commandments"? "Don't talk social issues, I came to pray." "Are you going to be at the Ladies' Tea this afternoon?" "Where did God go? The tabernacle is moved".

I shall spend the rest of my Life serving God through my Brothers and Sisters in Christ. Amen.

"On the seventh day He rested", and so am I. If your still with me read the next chapter or two.

And always remember





Who Asked You to Fly In?

HOW DID I MEET GLORIA? LET ME TELL YOU Page 9

I was at home with a headache. My mother invited Mary Romeo and her daughter, a newly graduated Registered Nurse up to the house. The Daughter's name was Gloria; she was a short, skinny Italian, and a practicing Roman Catholic. She did have one redeeming feature though, she had good looking legs. The kind of legs a Frederick and Nelson elevator operator was required to have. She had them and did work there for a while. Who was behind this scheme to arrange for us to meet like this? Was it my mother who was looking to get rid of a mouth that ate too much? Or her mother trying to rid her self of a dependent and finally have an empty nest? Was it her dad who was afraid she would become an old maid? Maybe my dad who wanted an RN to care for him in late years? It matters naught now fifty years later. The plot was executed and I fell for it like a dumb stump. Her mother asked "Could you drive Gloria to Swedish hospital where she worked being that you are going that way every morning anyway"? Well, what could I say? That was before I knew that "NO" was a Holy word.

After that it was mornings and then evenings and then "Johnny could you teach me to drive"? "Heck yes" said I "I was like the hero in shining armour mounted on a white horse. The white horse was a brand new 1950 Green Ford coupe. This teaching Gloria to drive has been a life long chore. Only the cars have been changed to protect the innocent.

This going to work back and forth began to grow into serious social dating. I met her S.U. and Nursing friends. What a drinking crowd that was. Was, I say because most are dead now Friends like Noreen, our maid of honor, Joey, one of Gloria's closest friends, Tom, Noreen's husband, who never held a regular job just to name a few.












On one of our dates we went to the Puyallup Fair. We had a great time and all Gloria wanted was a Scone. 35 cents later, had made up my mind about this woman. I was going to capture her heart and spirit her away. She insisted this was not a courtship it was a brother and sister thing.

I made up my mind right there and then about this woman. I was going to capture her heart and spirit her away. I asked her "what kind of a husband are you looking for"? She said, "He must be a practicing Catholic, non-Italian, and a University graduate". Take me out to the ball game where one strike, two strikes, three strikes you're out! When it came my turn to bat I wasn't even in the same ball park.

Not being able to impress her much with all my talents and money I informed her that I owned two horses. "Now you're talking Johnny, I love to ride". Many times after that we headed out to a farm on the Green River and rode the horses. Just a note or two about who owned the farm. It was the dad of a girl I had been dating long before Gloria and a little after this Gloria thing started. My date schedule was Gloria up until 9 pm and Delores after 9 pm. Well one night at a New Years Eve party in the West Seattle Legionnaires' Hall, I popped the question. That should have been spelled Pooped the question, because that is just the way it turned out. She turned me down flat out. I am not sure but I suspicion at the time she was holding out for a shoemaker. He was a practicing Catholic and a good friend of the family. He owned his own shoe shop and had a better car than I did. Well Gloria was too old for me anyhow. She was three years my senior and was quickly becoming what her dad had feared an O.M. for a daughter. (see above) Well enough of this. I was never going to see her again and dropped her like a hot potato.

Our breakup lasted the most part of 24 hours. I knocked on her door the next day and offered to take her to work. There she was, standing in the middle of the kitchen in a white slip while her mother stood over a hot ironing board doing her uniform. Here before stood a woman who could not iron, cook, drive, etc. etc. and all she had going for her was, remember I mentioned it several paragraphs back, nice looking legs. What was I to do? This driving and seeing each other lasted until March of 1951. We went walking in the rain one night. Yes, we were in Seattle. From her home at 29th and Charles we hiked down to the Lake Washington Bridge tunnel and headed East. That was a mistake.

Mae West, long ago had said 'Go West Young Man, Go West'. I had no compass so we went East instead. About fifty feet inside the tunnel, Gloria said, "let's go buy an engagement ring". I was in shock and she took that to be "YES". Then she laid down the restrictions. We would buy the ring at the most expensive place in town. She would wear it in secret until my mother's birthday which was the 29th of March, and I had to buy her a Mink stole. Why a Mink Stole? What had happened on one of our dates I had made some small talk as walked past a Furrer store. I giddily said, "I will buy you that if you marry me". She has a memory like an elephant. Well we announced the engagement on my mother's birthday to the surprise of no one except me. The rest of the story is in a later chapter. I'll bet you just can't wait!

MONICA	5/19/51	5/14/53	7/19/54	9/13/55
TERESA				
MIKE				
JJ	2/24/58	5/24/59	5/25/60	11/08/62
ANN				
JOAN				
MARK				
PAUL	3/27/64	6/11/65	7/09/66	
TONY				
CATHY				

Birdy, Birdy, Fly Away Now!

Bringing up the Wee Ones.

Gloria and I did not raise children, they raised us. We set examples for them. Hoping and praying, they would imitate us long enough to learn values and then go out and get some values of their own. It worked, some of our good values became theirs, and some of their good values became ours. Because of my children, I went from a die hard Red Neck to a crying slobbering Liberal. If I were to write a book on raising children it would never get done.

The raising of a family means there will be change each day. The best advice I can give you is free. Be flexible. Be flexible. Be flexible. The most important thing is to teach each child self worth. In order to teach self worth I had to feel worthy my self. Start with yourself and you will have a head start on all the other parents of children. Self worth has nothing to do with mistakes. Self worth has every thing to do with the fact that God doesn't make junk. I am not junk and our children are not junk. We are all human beings created in the likeness of God. We all have a high degree of potential built into us. It is our job to teach children and encouraged them to reach their potential. Our goals should not be imposed on them. Just set guide lines that are clear, easily followed and intelligent. Modeling is much better than telling. By this method they will learn. It has proven to be the best way to teach.

Skiing instructors use this method with great success. They don't give lengthy instructions. They tell the class to "follow me and do what I do". It works; the children imitate their instructors as they ski down the hill. They learn by watching and doing. Encourage always. Love always. Failure may come too, but this will pass.

The joys of raising children have been great and the rewards for those 30 years has been an overwhelming time of love.

Gloria and I are still in the process of experiencing the growth up of our children. Process means just that, ever changing.

Monica our oldest is 50 years of age, an excellent writer, wife and a mother herself of four talented and unique children.

Jennifer, Jacob, Elisabeth and Emily.

Theresa. Terry being a teacher made all the mistakes we did. So she is doing just fine. She can play the piano, guitar, organ, and even spoons I think. She has one child, wily Christina.

Mike is a Master skipper, fisherman and has graduated to yachts. He is the father of two beautiful girls Maryse and Domini that he shares his life with. They sing, dance and make noise like healthy children do.

Mary has two children, Nate and Anna. She is a poet and she knows it, as well as an RN. The problem here is that she makes everyone listen while she recites her poetry.

Ann has two children Walker and Zane. She has a bit of me in her, she is an actor and can cry and smile at the sign of a dollar bill.

Joan is our caretaker and RN. Homemaker and gardener supreme. When I die I want Joan to be holding my hand.

Mark has two children Amanda and Josh. He is still trying to prove the world is round and has almost fallen off a couple of time. He wears a parachute just in case and has had to use it a couple of times.

Paul has twins, Elise and Peter. He knows the world is round because he has unscrewed it, nailed it, wired it, plumbed it, glued it and can fix it anytime it goes wacky.

Tony is the fisherman in the family. Sorry about that Mike but Tony is a fisherman 24 hours a day. Using rod, reel or commercial with net or pot. On occasion just skipping government guys around on research projects.

Cathy is 33 years of age and quickly becoming a mature woman and mother. She has two children Jacob and Julia. She too will face the challenges of pre-teen motherhood.

A word or two about **John J.** He was off to see the Lord on his 10th day of life. I guess the Lord knew we would need someone up there to pray for us continually. Years have passed by since he left us and we know J.J. does pray for us well.

Now I have to count to make sure they are all here and accounted for. Yep, eleven all accounted for.

What are they like now that they have matured? They are like good wine. They fill my head with good thoughts and warm my heart every time I think of them. They are like us in so many ways. They can laugh, cry, smile, sneer, and cheer. Some of them are smart and others are just intelligent. Each unique and different, yet so much alike. What do they do that mimics Gloria and I? Everything you want them to do and everything you don't want them to do. You say that is not consistent. Right on, but that's the every day truth of it. Happily through the trying and the doing they have established values of their own. I did, you did, why should they be different. I have given up preaching religion to my children. I now try to live it for them. When the first four came along Ole Doc Codling kept me out of the delivery room. Finally, I had the good fortune to see the last six of my children born into the world. I also was in the labor room when my eldest daughter gave birth to her son.

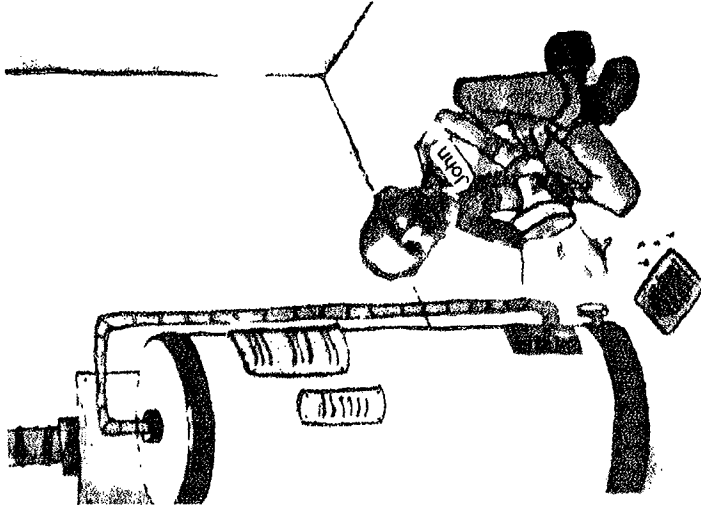
I will never forget those moments of truth. Birthing is an awakening and a dying at the same time. Leave your mothers womb child. The world is ripe for a new leader. Christ is born in you. You are his hope eternal.

Grow in wisdom as Jesus did. Know yourself and then your fellow men and women. Then and only then will you know God. As a parent my responsibilities were many. I fed them, clothed them, and housed them. Yet without unconditional love I would have failed them. They have turned out great, all of them, in spite of me because I loved them all so much. If they need any changing that is now their job.

Did I mention that I know how to cook? It became a necessity because of those little rascals I have just talked about. I cooked breakfast every morning of those years for 10 hungry children. Correct that to read and their friends on many an occasion. My wife and I had an agreement. If she would get up and make ten beds, start the washing, fix ten lunches, pick up the house, and fourteen other things, I would cook breakfast each morning. Breakfast was not routine. Each day a different menu, if possible and it usually was. Pancakes, boiled eggs, toast, mush, baked rolls, French toast, cereal, bananas, you name it we had it. I calculate the sum total looks like this. 31,000 eggs, 52,000 slices of bread, 10,000 pancakes, 2800 bananas cut in half, 1,620 quarts of milk, 84 lbs. of sugar, 2100 large boxes of cereal, 58 gallons of home made syrup, 2100 jars of peanut butter and jam, etc. etc.

We have been married over 50 years now and I cooked breakfast most every morning for the first 40 years of that marriage and beyond. Let's face it, I would rather eat than cook, but cooking is next best. Now if you think being head cook around the house at breakfast time is great wait till you read my chapter on Thanksgiving with all the relatives and all families together at one setting. But, that's another story.

WORK, WORK, WORK



Benla and Etc. 1946-1977

32 YEARS WORK EXPERIENCE

The business license read Benvenuti and La Russa." It was dated May 15, 1947. My exposure to the world of business began that day. I had now entered the realm of the self employed. This new business venture was the sales and servicing of electric water heaters.

No more regular paychecks. And no more time clocks to punch, and best of all, no one to tell me what to do. I had just celebrated my 19th birthday. I was about as prepared for this adventure as a cat on a Hot Tin Roof that had just gotten into the Ex Lax. We quickly found a garage at 2903 Estelle Street and settled down to wait for the world to beat a path to our doorstep. Our only means of transportation was a 1940 Plymouth sedan, and that quickly became our truck.

You ask, "how come you started this kind of business"? I will tell you. I was the foreman for the Wesix Electric heater Company. All was fine. Then they decided to consolidate their plants. The Seattle plant was the first to go. Their main office was in San Francisco, and that's where we would have to move or else you know what. I decided to take else. Wesix then offered me a chance to take over the repair end of their business at no cost to me. This part of the business could not be moved. Do you know what you get for nothing? Don't answer that - a headache. They informed me that I would need a partner, preferably one big and strong, because water heaters are heavy. I got one small and strong and with \$35.00 in his pocket, and not much more. Our new business meant we were now overworked and under paid, and we were doing it to ourselves.

The next best thing to starving is to eat, so we got part time jobs driving Taxi cabs at night to make ends meet. From 7:30 A.M. until 6:00 P.M. we were at the shop, and from 7:00 P.M. to 3:30 A.M. we were driving a cab. Two could starve as cheaply as one, so with the extra money we didn't have, we bought a 1930 Model A truck. The business was still limited to the sales and repair of water heaters. We decided we would have to diversify.

We found another location at 34th and Union Street. We opened up with a line of small electric appliances and a new partner. Armondo Martino. We started to repair dryers and disposals as well as water heaters. We sold the Model A and bought a 1934 pickup. It was a Dodge, and instead of being better, it just used more gas and oil. Things went from worse to terrible in a short time. Three cannot live as cheaply as one, so the new boy was going to have to go. Between us we had about \$400.00 and we gave that to our partner number three and said goodbye. It was easily done. He was not going to starve to death and we surely would. Our 1934 Dodge truck was on the blink, and our present shop was too small. We were broke and didn't know it. We decided what we needed was a bigger shop, a new truck and some more money. We drove up to the bank. Don't jump to conclusions; we didn't intend to rob it. We were going for a loan that would allow us to get the business off its original shoestring and back into its shoes. Our friendly banker had ear trouble that day. Off we went, to Seattle Trust and Savings bank. They had good ears and a big heart. We got our money for a new truck and a new shop at 1641 15th Avenue West. We also had enough left over to keep doing business for a while. We didn't even have to show the bankers our guns. Advertisement was what we needed and that's what we got. Yellow Pages of the telephone book did not have a listing for Water Heater Repairing. We put an add in and held the sole position for a number of years. Things started to move in the right direction in spite of us.

In 1948 my partner and I decided to join the Navy Reserve so we could have something to do the one night we weren't working. Beside that they gave you clothes to wear and we needed that. This decision was going to come back and haunt us soon. In 1951, the 2nd of June, I decided to get married. Water heaters, taxi driving, the Navy and now a new wife. I soon had no time for my wife and children who came along every 9 months and two days. The cab business was good so we quit driving and bought the cabs.

The Korean War started in 1949, and guess who got called back into Active Service. Wrong, not me, but my partner Tony. His brother Peter was handy with tools and money so we took him into the business. My wife Gloria took over the task of running the office and Peter and I were off and running in our now large fleet of two trucks. We also had part time help from Peter and Tony's dad as well as free labor from my dad. All the time, up to 1953, Peter and I were attending Naval Reserve meetings at the Armory Reserve Center on Lake Union.

We hired a transient named Bill Williams to help us on the trucks. Bill Williams is a story in its self. Next door to our building was a junk shop. The name of this junk shop was Olympic Iron & Metals. It was still there, by the way until about three years ago. Well one day we were looking out of the window and there was Bill Williams picking junk. Picking junk is a process of separating the different metals into piles so that each will bring the highest price.

Now Art Grashin, the owner's son, was working there also, so we asked Art who his new help was. Art explained that Bill Williams shows up every Fall after the apple harvest in Wenatchee. He would work for them on and off depending on Bill's whims. I mentioned we needed help once in a while and Art said, "Fine, maybe we can share Bill if the need arises". Several days later we needed help on one of the trucks and Bill joined us. He was a willing and able worker so we used him more and more. Bill lived down on Skid row and we would pick him up as Peter lived in the south end and this was convenient. Each night Pete would drop Bill off again. Bill would say "Goodbye, see you in the morning" and off he would go.

Alas, one morning, no Bill. We mentioned this to Art. "Oh, that's nothing", said Art. "Bill always left at harvest time, but don't worry he will be back in a couple of months. A few months later, guess who showed up for work one morning — right you are it was Bill. Without so much as a "howdy doody" he walks into our shop and starts to work as if he had left yesterday. Well no matter, we needed him and it was very evident he didn't need us. After he retired he came to see us every week.

Tony came home after the Korean War, and by this time was married. We now had three trucks and were driving them ourselves. We hired an office helper named Ethel Swenk to keep things running when we were not there. She could do the books and answer the telephone and was so efficient. We were no longer needed at the shop. She could also furnish us with cigarettes when we were out of them, so we listed her as one of the company assets. In 1956 we were able to purchase some new property at 3011 15th Avenue West. We hired Oliver Olson, an architect to draw up some plans for a new and bigger Benla Building. We hired a contractor, the CB Construction Company, to build it. It was going to be built with concrete and steel. This was to be a permanent monument to our now thriving company.

The year 1956 was also the year we incorporated our company. We would now be known as the BENLA SERVICE CO. INC. A new company, a new building and now eight employees. During this construction I was suffering from a back injury caused by an auto accident many years before. Therefore, I was busy running the office with Ethel and doing quite a bit of contracting on the side. A side note here: While we were hanging the door in our new building, when a man from the City Survey Crew put an X on it. I asked him why and he said some thing like, "This is where the new Street is going to be". Ha, Ha, very funny.

Gloria and I had purchased a lot at 21st West in Interbay. Tony and Peter joined us in the building of an office for the Saybolt Company during the year of 1958. I also built a new home for our family during that same year. By this time business was so good we were no longer doing dryers and garbage disposals, and specializing in water heaters only.

Now check your memory. Remember the funny man from the City Survey Crew who put the 'X' on our door? Well, he was back this time and without the "X". This time he brought a bulldozer to remove the "X". He also removed the cement and steel monument built in honor of our business. We had just been had by the City of Seattle.

They condemned the one year old building for a street widening at Dravus and 15th. After a short court case they paid us \$62,000.00 American dollars for the building, and property.

Back to the drawing boards and a new architect named Lyons. Property was purchased at 3008 16th Avenue West. A new building was built this time out of building blocks. The neighbors say we put wheels under it, so we could move it if need be. The new building was a two story structure and we leased out the back upper half and used the top front half for our office. The first floor was our warehouse and repair facility.

Now another opportunity to built came along. We had some more property over on 20th Avenue West, and a baker wanted us to build him a bakery building. The lease was signed and a new building was soon built there and we acted as the contractor. I do mean by us, just us and some hired help. We had already built the Saybolt building by acting as contractors and this new block building, went up like duck soup.

The business continued to grow. We owned eleven trucks, some old and some new. We also owned a new Suburban Van, a new Buick Sedan and a fairly new Cadillac. Our employee's number 15 now and received some benefits. By now I am spending much time away from the business with my Deaconate duties. We had a great office force and good employees. My job at that time was Secretary Treasurer. I did some of the purchasing. I handled the accounts, both receivable and payable. I spend some time with the accountants and partners at meetings. We hired an outside firm to do the P&L. We did State tax work and journal entering, as well as our own payroll. I designed some of the bookkeeping procedures and things were going smoothly. Interested in new ways of business, my partners and I took courses offered by Seattle First Federal and learned many tricks of the trade. I myself took courses in Mediation, Collaboration, Leadership and Accounting. Another course was How to handle Change and it turned out to be the most valuable. It now seemed the time to go off to College. It was so long to two wonderful partners and over thirty years to Benla Service Co. Inc.

Quo Vadis Lord.

WHO'S WHO IN THE LIFE OF JOHN

All are a part of me and have helped form me.

My Wife: Gloria Anne Romeo.. Lover, Mother, Ski Patrol Person, Motorcycle Rider, Student of the Arts, Nurse and Matchmaker.

My Mother: Mary Josephine Terrizzi
Homemaker Supreme, Piano player and World's Greatest Cream Puff Maker.

My Father: Anthony La Russa
Lovable, Hard working, Hard Headed, can do anything with pipe or iron — and did.

Monica Mary La Russa—Wooton
Wife, Mother, Master Gardner, Journalist, always good for a laugh and an argument, no matter which side.

Theresa Ann La Russa-Banton
Teacher of Special Education children 9 long years, Camp Counselor and Musician, still teaching, plays Piano, Guitar, Banjo etc. etc.

Mary Katherine La Russa-Houk
Beautiful, RN, CYO Nurse & Director, Voice of an Angel, Poet, Mother

John Joseph La Russa
RIP" Hurry up Dad". You have had ten days with me, accept the Lord's decision.

Anne Marie La Russa-Moses
Pretty, Actress, ham like her Dad, Drama Student, best sport's car driver in the family.

Joan Marie La Russa
Tall, dark, and beautiful, lover of children, Camp Counselor, very independent, RN, I want her around when I die.

Mark Joseph La Russa
Brainy, Curly Hair, Lovable, too daring, too ready.

Paul Joseph La Russa

Not Brainy, just plenty smart, can fix and build anything, a doer.

Anthony Joseph La Russa
Bright, Handsome Ladies Man, Excellent Athlete, Great Fishermen, a bit of Mark in him.

Catharine Ann La Russa-Lacy
The Caboose, she has the beauty of all her sisters combined. A perfect example that last is not least, mother, semi business women in her own right.

Rev. Emery Blanchard RIP
My first Mentor. I found it easy to find Christ in him.

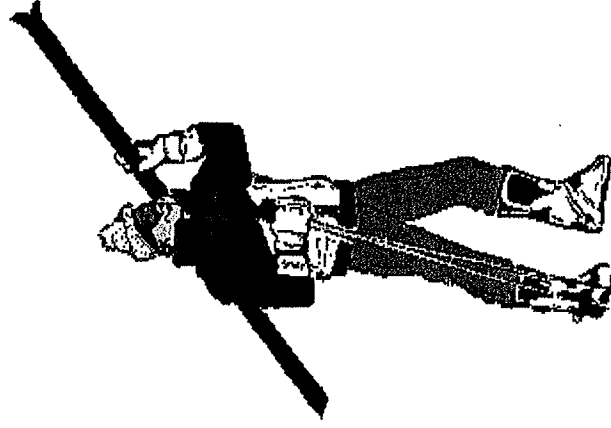
Rev. Jan Larson
My Norwegian brother, my personal Professor, and much like me — always right, my full time Mentor, thank God for Jan.

Jack McNamara
Trustworthy always, my Right Hand, head on straight.

M.C. Chambers
Private Chambers to those who know her, my Secretary for years, she never uttered a harsh word to a boss that was unbearable, all the time, and she was my Right Hand.

Walt Shields
My #3 Mentor, he has everything I lack, calm, cool and collected, I love Walt because he walks close to God and me on Night Watch.

Willie Morris Shields
Bluegrass and Country Music, Proper Lady, her weakness is she invites me to her parties.



SNOQUALMIE SUMMIT SKI PATROL

Seattle, Washington

THE SNOQUALMIE SKI PATROL

When you get old and gray you sometimes do things because you don't know any better. At age 48 I decided I wanted to do something that was hard work, semi-dangerous, and certainly did not pay well. I tried out for Ski Patrol. Now this is not all fun and games. You go out to Bellevue Community College for four days and refresh yourself on First Aid and C.P.R. and mountain rescue. But first you must complete a sixty hour course in Advanced First Aid and Emergency Care with nine more hours of Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation. Then, it's up to the mountain for "on the hill rescue" and more first aid. They throw in Avalanche Rescue and Probe and also Chair Evacuation. After this grueling week end and if you are still alive, they throw a written test at you. Remember now, not a flake of snow has fallen yet.

A month or two later there is enough snow to ski, so up the hill you go. The catch here is you don't come down where the public comes down. Oh no, you come down the hill where the public wouldn't be caught dead — and is usually found dead here. Up and down, up and down, and when it is just about time to call it quits, they say, "Heh! You!" Take a sled up to Thunderbird and ski down with it. "Now you carry the 75 lb. sled to the chair, and if you are lucky the chair operator will help you lift it on. But of course you are not lucky. Up you go, right to the top. At the top you drag the sled off the chair, Grab the two handles and down you go. Well now, that's over, let's go home. "Who said that?" You there, what's your name? Take a sled up again and this time bring it down the East Face. Not only two times, but several times. And sooner than later they put a real live body in it for you." Wow" My luck is holding out, all bad.

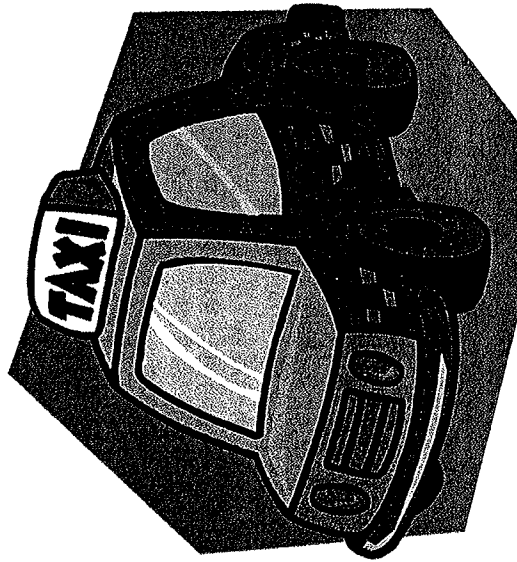
Down the hill you come again and again, with sled and extra body to boot. Four more weekends of this fun, Did I say fun? This goes on for nine hours day and every day until the Ski Season really starts. Finally, a comprehensive written test. More heavily weighted this time with Medical and Bone structure questions. Then an on the Hill Practical Rescue with make believe victims. You do finish and hopefully are ready for the real thing. Is it worth? You bet your buns it is. This training will not only help you on the hill skiing but in real life back in the real City.

A short fill in here as an example of good training and how it pays off.

One Sunday after mass I was in the Sanctuary of the Church. Father Michael came running in very excited. I asked "What is the problem"? He said, "Marie Rhodes just died after she got into her car. I need the oils to anoint her". I rushed out, took Marie out of her car and laid her down on the hard Asphalt of the parking lot. I started one person CPR on Marie. Soon, Sheila Magnano came over and asked if she could help. She took the chest and I did the mouth breathing. Three minutes later Marie started to breath on her own and her heart had started beating again. When the Aid Car arrived they hooked Marie up to their machines and carried her off to the hospital. Marie lived four more years after that ordeal. Practice, practice, practice made CPR a part of my life and saved Marie Rhodes.

I was lucky enough to have my wife Gloria and son Mike join me as ski Patrollers soon after I joined. It was now a family thing.

Twelve years later it was time to retire. I will never forget the training and the experience of being a people helper. This Ski Patrol time has given me rewards that I will continue to cherish the rest of my life.



Heh! You, Follow that
cab.

Taxi, Taxi, Get the Green One
They are Radio Controlled.

It was a part time job. My Godfather Dan Vivolo owned one and drove it and seemed to be a happy go lucky Guy. I did not realize at that time that a Happy Go Luck Guy was an Italian, with little brains, little motivation, lovable, likeable, with a gift of gab and little else. I could be one those and make money too. I started as a part time driver for two owners, Peter and Maude Caso. A couple of nights riding around with them and I learned how to say, "Number 16" OKO on the radio. I was soon driving on my own. We had parking stands at certain places that were assigned to us. The Yellow Cab Company had all the good ones and we got everything else. For instance they had the Olympic Hotel, now called the Four Seasons. We had the Knickerbocker Flop House. They had the SeaTac Airfield and we had the Black and Tan at 23rd and Madison. They had the Meany Hotel in the U district and we had the Zero Tavern Stand at 3rd and Yesler. What we did have though and they didn't was Radio Dispatched Cabs. Our call number was the number of the cab. My number was 16. It was hard to get to the dispatcher sometimes because of the radio traffic. When I really wanted to get his attention I would use the call name of "Apple Wine". That really got him going.

I did know the city and soon became one of the "High Sheet" men during the Evenings and Midnight shifts. The Sheet was a list of pickups and trip endings with the time of pickup and drop off recorded for each trip and the amount of the trip which was recorded on the Cab meter. This trip sheet had to be updated after each call and proved to be the cabbie's best friend. Knowing where a passenger was picked up and left off was a clue in case of a robbery or other crime. We had our license and our pictures mounted so that the passenger could read them as well as the price per mile and minute as set by the City Of Seattle.

Districts had names like Med Hill, Yesler Hill, Garlic Gulch, Maggies Bluff, etc. It wasn't long before Tony, Pete and I bought our own cabs. I actually was in partnership with By Hook, although he seldom drove. Tony had #31 and Pete had #18. We were quite a team as we worked the off times of our drivers and that was mostly nights. We would meet for food and coffee and were comrades, helping each other in so many ways and that lasted forever.

During the Korean War, some of the drivers would fill the trunks with booze and park near Pier 91. Remember now, you could only buy booze from a State run Liquor store and they closed early. The ships would come in loaded with sailors and army personnel and cabbies would sell the trunk load of booze before ever turning a wheel. This could be disastrous, if they were caught. The cab was confiscated and the cabbie went to jail. I had an agreement with my drivers that no booze would be sold or they would lose their jobs.

My reputation grew as I came to know customers as friends. This included passengers who needed a regular run to work or to the doctors each day. I would be their waiting for them before and after and they appreciated the service. I also became known as "Seattle's most secretive driver". Some of the local Madams of the day used me to transport money to the Cash Deposit faults down at 3rd and James Street which was open all night. I knew them on a first name basis and they called for me whenever a cab was needed for them or one of their customers or Johns, that is. A side light about that. An African American Madam used me exclusively as her Taxi driver. She bragged that she had a stable (Girls that is) from 12 different countries. When she called me to come up and pick her up at her place of business, she would often sit me down in the living room and serve me coffee while she got ready to go. She would laugh and joke with me all the way to the bank (night vault that is).

One night as I parked to let her out she said in a very loud voice, "Johnny, when I get ready to give "it" away, you get "it" free. (I let you the reader decide what "it" was)

At times this was a dangerous profession, especially late at night. Many of our cabbies were robbed and worse beaten up. One of my drivers had his teeth kicked out by a robber after peacefully giving the robber all his money. I soon had a permit to carry a gun and did that when I drove. Thank God I never had to use it. I did have one close call. I picked up a guy at 3rd and Jackson and he wanted to go to 6th South and Fidalgo Street. As I drove out there I realized that there was nothing at Fidalgo Street. No businesses, no bars, no traffic at 3 am in the morning. The passenger was in the back leaning over the seat and making small talk and seemed quite nervous to me. My gun was strapped to the steering column and I slowly reached down and got it out of the holster and quietly as possible put a bullet in the chamber. The guy in the back must have seen me as he said excitedly, "This is as far as I want to go driver". I stopped right there in the middle of nowhere, he jumped out and ran down the street as fast as he could. I was so relieved I took the rest of the night off.

I also had a passenger who ordered me to go to the CT which was the Bus Central Terminal as he was to meet his girl friend. When we got there he said "driver wait for me and I will get her and be right back". By this time I had been driving cab for four years. I was street wise and knew all the tricks of the trade. So when he got out, I drove around to the back of the terminal. Sure enough there he was coming out the back door hoping to get away without paying me. I jumped out of the cab and grabbed him. He shouted "I don't have any money". I grabbed his nice new leather jacket and took it off him. I told him that when he did get some money to come on down to the Farwest Cab Company and pickup his jacket. He never did and I gave the nice jacket to Peter Benvenuti as it fit him and he probably has it even now.

On a different occasion I picked up a guy late at night. He had me drive him around town until the Meter of the Cab read \$14.00. At a stop light he quickly opened the door ran out, without paying me. I knew where his house was because the dumb cluck had me pick him up there.

I figured he owed me and I was going to collect. I went up to his house that afternoon. I knocked on the door and then closed the storm door and put my foot against it so he would not be able to come out. He was dumb shocked to see me standing there. In my hand was a 25 caliber automatic pointing right where his manhood was hiding. He looked at me as I told him that if he was not at the cab office by 4 pm the next day, I would come up to his home and make a girl out of him. He understood quite well. The next day the radio in my cab blurted out, "hey! Number 16, there is a guy here with \$14.00. He said he owed you the money". End of story.

Just in case any reader thinks I was one brave lad back there when driving a cab think again. I was just bigger and dumber then.

One quite foggy night I was out driving when most drivers gave up on the fog and turned in their cabs for the night. Not me, or Tony, or Pete. We were out to make money in spite of the fog. I got a call to go over to West Seattle and pick up a fare. Off I went, down Alaskan way and over to Harbor Island. Going about 15 to 20 miles an hour because I could not see 10 feet in front of me. I soon noticed that my car was going over some very bumpy road. After about 5 minutes of this I decided to stop and look around and see what was wrong. Getting out of my cab I stumbled and fell. What had I stumbled over I wondered as I picked my self up. I soon found out, I had driven down a railroad crossing out unto the railroad tracks. With a hasty move backwards I was soon off the tracks. It was back to the barn for me and a scary lesson learned. Don't drive in the Seattle fog unless you have to.

That same year I was stopped at a light and another car driven by a drunk hit me in the back bumper. My cab shot out into the intersection about 30 feet. I was knocked into the rear seat and my passenger sitting in the rear seat was knocked forward over my seat and into the dash board. As a result of this accident I suffered a crushed vertebra and seven years later had to have my back fused. This took place at Providence Hospital. As soon as the operation was over I spent 42 days strapped to a Foster Frame which is like an Iron cot.

I was unable to move, turn or itch as a result of this operation. Every four hours the nurse would come in and strap another frame over me like a clam shell and turn me over. Like a pig on a BBQ. If I had to relieve myself I would ring the bell for a nurse. They would come in and release a section of the bed with just enough opening for me to let it all out. I shared the embarrassment of my body with all who dared to help me. When I finally was sent home I had to learn to walk again and even how to use the toilet all over again. Many years later I was able to take up skiing as my back troubles were over. It was worth the time on the frame.

I quit driving in 1953 and never looked back. Except in the rear view mirror at times.



ITALY 1975

In the summer of 1974, my wife and I were having dinner with three other couples. Someone asked if we were interested in going to Rome for the Jubilee Year. We all laughed at the suggestion. A year later, Gloria and I found ourselves in Rome.

The date was September, 1975. The other couples agreed to meet us in Rome and again in Florence. The plan was to cross the threshold of the Bronze door in St. Peter's together.

After that it was to be a tour of the museums and art galleries of not only Rome, but also Florence. We read the book, Europe on \$10.00 a day, but by the time we got there it was Europe on \$50.00 Day.

Gloria and I opted to travel only in Italy as we had roots there and wished to explore them as much as possible. We decided early in the game to go to Europe and buy a car. We bought a Fiat Automobile. It was a Four-Door Sedan and Piped Red. The Fiat needed no mechanical changes in order to be shipped back to meet American standards. This was due to the fact that it had a good well engineered emissions system, which did not require a catalytic converter. U.S. features included safety glass, seat belts, good emission controls and hazard lights. Cost of the car delivered in Italy was \$3600.00. The arrangements were made through Beach Imports in Bremerton, Washington. The car was to be picked up at the Turin Fiat factory and after our tour it was to be shipped to Seattle. Turin, Italy was close to the start and the finish of our trip.

In a few weeks we said good-bye to our children and took off for England at 2:00 P.M. Seattle time, the 14th of September, 1975. The plane was a 747 and we had window seats in the non-smoking section. We arrived in England long enough to change planes and head for Milan, Italy which was our first night in Italy. I might add that at Heathrow Airport there were no electronic metal detectors so they hand searched you. It was there that I received my first Christmas goose by a male guard.

Arriving in Rome we taxied to the Rental Car Agency and picked up a rental car. We would use this car until we picked up our new car in Turin. We drove our battered and bruised rental into Milan and found our hotel. First class in Italy is not the same as first class in America. Our hotel was adequate but that is about all you could say for it. Not too clean and not in the best part of town. So be it. One night would not kill us, and we were tired. A short rest and we were off walking the surrounding sights. It suddenly started to thunder and rain down 'Cane and Catto' We found shelter in the domed railroad station. We noticed another couple standing there. We smiled and they responded by speaking English. They were from New Jersey and a bit bewildered by Italy. They joined us for a bite to eat that night and soon said "good-bye 'till we meet again" somewhere in this wide world.

We also went to the Scala Opera House, supposedly full of theatrical mementos. The Opera House was closed and this was Gloria's first disappointment in the land of opera and art. We wandered into the Galleria, which was one of the city's large shopping centers. Glass enclosed, it gave shoppers protection against the elements. The city was old and dirty so the once beautiful building was gray with the dirt of the ages. No one seemed to care that they were once beautiful and clean.

The next day we were off to Turin to pick up our new car. The Michelin map is good and we found the Tourist Fiat Center quickly. Guess what? The car was ready and waiting for us. We were even offered free drinks and refreshments.

Our car was shiny red and smelled so new. I climbed in and felt the rich upholstery. I started the motor and it worked. I even tried the horn. It honked in English. Gloria climbed in and we were on our way back to Milan for another night at the San Carlo which was the name of the dingy first-class hotel we were staying in.

We stopped at the Maria Della Grazia Church and visited. I stood before the Last Supper painted by Leonardo Da Vinci. I was awed by the sight.

Never had I experienced a feeling of God like presence. I had seen Charles Heston portray the story of this man. I was enthralled with the fact that I was actually viewing Da Vinci's painting. I could hardly tear myself away. I will always remember that moment of wonderment. Leave we must, so we did. We spent a pleasant night in Milan.

The next morning we were off to St. Moritz. On the way we passed Lake Como, which reminds me of Lake Chelan in Eastern Washington. The roads were narrow and very curvy but our small car handled them well. Through small villages we traveled. Children played along the road and the older people sat near the streets chatting and passing the time of day, unmindful of the traffic. We arrived in St. Moritz and there was no snow covering the dry grass. It was hard to visualize that this is a busy winter resort six months of the year. We moved down from St. Moritz to a town called Silvaplana and spent the night covered with a mountain of feathers held together with sheets of cotton. Up early and on our way after a breakfast of hot chocolate and croissants. The next stop was Verona. On the way we stopped and purchased gas coupons, sold only to tourists. These coupons cut the price of petrol to one-half the normal cost and these coupons would last us throughout Italy.

The Hotel Milano in Verona is a first-class Hotel. It came with cold and hot running bugs. During one of our walks that afternoon we stumbled upon the balcony used by Juliet and some guy named Romeo. Wow! My wife Gloria was a Romeo before she met me but did not know this family. We'll that's how it goes when you finally make good the peasants are soon forgotten. We ate dinner that night in a local cafe catering to the clientele of the neighborhood. The food was native and I tasted most of it. Gloria found it lacked eye appeal and she preferred to eat the pasta dishes and salads.

The Piazza Bar was located nearby our cafe. It was in a large section of town which held a huge arena for plays and opera. The arena has acoustics which are remarkable.

The next day we traveled to Venezia. Venice to you. There is a large parking garage on the mainland and we parked there. We boarded a bus like boat called a Vaporetto. It dropped us off three blocks from our hotel, the Hotel Flora. We were surrounded by water, and all travel here is done via boats. We walked three blocks to our hotel and found it to be excellent. Our mutual friends, the Fellow's had arrived a day sooner and were there to greet us with open arms. We had partied in England and really missed them as much as they missed being with us.

It was a short walk from our hotel to San Marco Square, and that was where we were headed. The local pastime in the square is to stroll around the square ducking pigeons and pigeon poop. While watching the tourists who are strolling around the square, we spotted St. Mark's Church. It dominates the square. The building of the church started in 1063. Over the large doorway are the famous bronze horses brought there by the ruler, Dandolo in 1202. They were removed by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1797 and finally returned. The canals are beautiful at first view, but on closer examination garbage of all kinds floats in the water. It seems that environmental concerns had not reached Venice.

The next day Gloria and I continued to explore the island. There are many small glass shops off the main drag. Many were open and we visited them. Glass blowing is very popular. The craftsmen compete for the Yankee dollar. Larger glass factories are on islands reached only by boats. The canal gondola traffic is ever moving back and forth. It reminds one of the freeways back in the U. S. You see fruits and produce, as well as other products, moving quickly and efficiently in this way. Even funeral processions move from place to place by gondolas. Well, we are getting wet and moldy behind the ears so it is time to move on to Florence. The drive through the mountain pass is beautiful and we stop frequently to visit small cafes along the way. The rest and the coffee refresh us. The coffee is thick and dark. I enjoy it but Gloria preferred cold pop or a glass of wine. The favorite snack is bread with cheese and ham toasted to perfection. It is called a Toastie. Cost was about fifty cents, the best buy in town.

Entering the City of Florence we located our hotel. The Mona Lisa was its name. It was as beautiful as its name. Old? Yes. Quaint? Yes. Clean? Ah! I got you there - it was. That evening we took a short stroll to the Cathedral of Santa Marie Del More. The Baptistery doors are golden and the bell Tower magnificent. Walking is the only way to travel in Florence. Everywhere you look there is something of interest. The shops and restaurants alone will keep you going for a week. The art of Florence is every where. It is not only in the museums, but hanging from every building. It is present in every fountain, courtyard sidewalk, and in every nook and cranny.

We soon were off to visit the Uffizi museum, which housed the Renaissance Palace. It would take more then two days to see all the art in this museum. We settled for the paintings by Raphael and Michelangelo. Nowhere can you see so many paintings and sculptures by the great artists of the world housed in one building. Rembrandt and Canaletto are here just to name a few. You must tear yourself away, or give yourself to Florence for the rest of your life. My mind became an art merry go round. I was unable to keep things clear as to who did what and when. It was then that I found myself standing in front of David. He was housed in the Accademia. Michelangelo outdid himself with this masterpiece. It seemed impossible that a man created this work of art. Though God does work through men and women. That is why the Michelangelo's and the Da Vinci's of the world are placed here on earth to do their creating. I took a picture of this statue, but that is not enough. You have to see and then you are drawn back to see it again and again. Many times I found myself wandering back to it, and to this day I say "I must return to Florence". Once again to gaze at the statue of David. Created by God through the masterpiece of Michelangelo.

Rome was as not far off, but as I looked at David I found it hard to conceive what there could be in Rome that could equal this. However, it was off to Rome.

Now we are in the company of the McNamara's. They joined us and would accompany us in our car throughout the rest of Italy. Good friends, good wine and good times were ahead. I have been a taxi driver, a truck driver and motorcycle rider. I've driven in every situation possible, but never had driven in Rome. Here I found many crazy Italian drivers who were hell bent on destroying my body. I did not accept the challenge. The solution became clear. Park the car and walk or bus wherever we needed to go and we did. That afternoon we stayed close to home and mingled with the local people. They seemed unaware that we were strangers in their land. When it was time to eat and order food, no problem. Most of them spoke English better than I did. No where in Rome was it difficult to find people who could not understand us. Directions were easily explained and we were able to locate places with ease. The next day we visited the Vatican. Our other friends the Shields were already here in Rome. They arrived in Rome two days prior to our arrival and they knew how to get around and where to go. Walt and Willie knew which bus to take and where to find it.

The very next morning we caught the local bus and soon stood in front of St. Peter's Square. A disappointment for me. I had seen pictures of the square and in the specially filtered pictures it showed up as more colorful. Actually, St. Peter's is drab with age and the weather has turned it into a dull gray. There were no vivid colors here. The structures were impressive, but I had visualized colorful marble and bright tones. In the square it self were thousands of people waiting in anticipation of seeing the Pope. Hoping he would wander out on the balcony. In the morning he was to say Mass as the celebrant. We overheard this from the guides of the many tour groups. All had come because of the Jubilee year.

The Vatican is a separate independent country. It has its own Post Office and issues its own stamps. It mints its own coins and has its own radio station. Now being a Roman Catholic myself, my faith had its roots here. But here at the home of Catholicism those in charge are not quick to change. Confessors are thinking with middle age brains. No updating in theology was evident. But still the Church does breathe in the world around them. Maybe this place and people would be the last to change. The people are of simple faith and not eager to learn of the humanness of Christ. They do have faith, deep in emotion and not well educated in Church history. They know they are supposed to love God, or St. Anthony or the Virgin Mary and they do. In other places of the world, the Netherlands, German, and Switzerland and even in America are the modern theologians of the church. They think, they reason and they search. Finally this information will be given to those here who hinder any form of education to change. Again, I say, the church does breathe, it is alive, and maybe the reason it is, is because the people of Italy carry the faith around in their hearts, so all can see. Emotion is another word for Italian. They laugh, they cry, they dance, they complain about their government and mine. They also survived nineteen different governments in ten years. They all seem to work, or play, or rest, without a sign of fear for what tomorrow brings. And each of these crazy kin of mind knows how to make the Sign of the Cross. Alleluia, Alleluia!

Now back to the group of Americans who were out to conquer Rome. Through the door of St. Peters we went, arm in arm. We stepped into the world of Bernini and Michelangelo and other artists of great renown. The Pieta is here, guarded now, for some one tried to destroy it by pounding on it with a hammer. Behind glass it now stands. The most copied piece of sculpture around. Who could ever capture it again? It was conceived in the brain of one man. It sprang from the womb of marble. It now belongs to you and to me and to the world.

It is our Masterpiece, our sculpture of love. To love it is to own it. Beautiful things are easily loved. Loving the Pieta is much too easy. I hear the reader say, how can you love a cold piece of marble? Stand before it yourself. Look at it closely. Is it not warm? Is it not breathing? Did I not see it move? They come from all parts of the world, all religions and those who believe in no one or anything. They, too, stand in awe. What is it they see? If they see nothing, they are dead already, and don't know it. We must keep moving along to another place and another time. As a consequence of this trip we did see the Pope in the square. He was just a red hat moving among the throngs who crowded the square that next morning. Yes, he was there, and they loved him.

We leave Rome with sad hearts. Here to, one must spend more time. We are off to find the family roots. It is a curvy drive along the coast of Italy to Reggio and then a short ferry ride to Messina. We are soon on the island of Sicily. A short stay with friends at Catania and then we are off to Palermo on the other side of the island. We spend an anxious night there in the heart of Mafia land. Early the next morning we travel 23 miles up into the foothills.

We arrive in the small village of Piana del Albanese. A crowd gathers around our new red car. Information is gathered but no one knows where my dad's relatives live, or seemed to even recognize the name of La Russa. I ask if anyone knows the Borgia's which is the name of my dad's step father. There back in the crowd a little old man says, "Me Borgia, Me Borgia." We turned and looked into this withered smiling face. I had found my dad's brother in law who is married to my dad's sister. At the noise of the shouting, a young stranger pokes his head out of the window. He offers assistance in perfect English. His name is Alex. He turns out to be a cousin, somewhat removed, but nevertheless a cousin.

We walk up to the home where my dad was born and there we meet my cousin, Francesca. She was so excited she ran up and changed into her best dress. We talked and had a glass of wine. Alex said we should go and visit our other cousins while Francesca prepared food for us.

We did visit them and the church where my dad was baptized. We returned to the house of Francesca and had a grand meal. Chickens wandered in and out the doorway. The house is still the same as when my dad was born. The bed my dad was born in is still in use. The fountain he used as a boy to draw water is still being used daily by the town people. Little has changed. They are still poor, but also proud of what they have and they should be. They have done so much living with so little. Farming is still a way of life. Politics and church are all mixed up, but somehow this does not matter. They are happy and friendly and only God knows why. No time is left now as the boat to Naples will be leaving soon and we are to be on it. Pictures are taken of family, friends, chickens and all. Hugs and kisses are exchanged and then it is good bye roots until another time. There is feeling of loss as you leave, for somehow you know you will probably never see those people again.

What did I learn about those people? They are disillusioned with government and church. They have a fantastic attitude and somehow they will get by. They are interested in Communism because they don't understand it as we do. Theirs is a different kind of communism. They strike, they march and they fight at the drop of a hat. When they work it is not with the dedication of those in Germany or Switzerland. They are skeptical of leadership or authority of any kind. They do like the Yankee Dollar, but not out of respect for us. We have not earned that, and therefore don't deserve their respect. Too many ugly Americans have come through this country before we did. What did we do to change this attitude? Very little. We smiled and tried to be good examples but even this was not enough. Maybe our attitudes will have to change. I did not find the people as happy go lucky as I had heard they were. I found them in many ways a troubled people. I was caught in a mass march one night in Rome. The Reds were marching in protest that night over an incident in a completely different country.

They come down the streets, pounding their clubs on the pavement. The banners were being carried about every twenty feet apart. It soon became very frightening. Tear gas was thrown and our eyes smarted from its affect. Cars were being overturned and set on fire. We ran back to our hotel through this chaos and claimed the Spanish stairs up to our hotel and watched it from the safety of our balcony.

"What did this march prove? Nothing it seemed. The next morning it did not even make the papers. Frustrated, angry and bewildered life still went on. Tomorrow will be better or will it. I find no easy solution to their problem of poverty, lack of work and goals for the future. My country has its problems also, maybe we have to share more of our abundance. Maybe we have to give in order to receive. Maybe we are really brothers and sister to all people. Maybe their problems are to be shared by us. I know this, we are one. If they suffer I suffer, if they smile I smile. And if I smile is it because I have personally helped them in some little way.

Sign Up

The Seventh Inning Stretch

Our Lady Of Fatima

O.L.F, PLAYERS NEVER DIE THEY FADE AWAY

Here they be, 40 year olds acting like teens. The crowds came and laughed, some actually cheered. They were all wearing red tee shirts with OLF embossed across their chests. All numbered of course, and one. The "Ole Boss" had 707 as his number. He actually did not play much but did pray much. The team surly needed those prayers.

Who were these characters you asked? Well, I'm gonna to tell you. They were players on three slow pitch teams called the Bumpers, Mumbler and Fumblers. All sponsored by Our Lady of Fatima Church. They challenged the nearby churches and started a league. Churches who took up the challenge were Lutherans. Methodist, Presbyterian, and Mormons. Initially only churches were invited. This did not last and we were soon playing, the Army team at Fort Lawton, and a team with pro athletes from the Sonics and Totems.

On the Roster were "Ole Boss Fr. Blanchard, Jack McNamara, Henry Van Hout, Kevin O'Donnell. Werner Hanni, Owen Greenough, George Anderson, John Guinasso, Bill Marino. Fr. John Mitchell, John La Russa, Nick Mirante, Bob Snow, Ivan Wong, John Ditori. Noel Piccard, Al Loucks, Tom Tomlin, Tommy Wells and singer Al Small who played one game. We did win the final playoff tournament. It was a modern day miracle. Sure and it was!

Eventually a younger generation took over and the Old Gang was no more. A few, Doc, Henry, Werner, Owen, La Russa and Greenough went on to bigger and better things. First it was tennis. That ended when the back and knees would not cooperate.

The highlight of the Tennis playing was one night when a group of teens decided to hassle the old timers. On to the court they came full of Vim, Vinegar and throwing pumpkins. The fight lasted about two minutes. One teen down on the court, two running up 34th, and one lying on the grass with his shirt all torn, screaming, I'm going to call my dad. But alas, his dad used much wisdom and did not show up.

Weeks after that skirmish, tennis ended and the game of the day or night, became Ping Pong. One night while Ping Pong was going on, Ole Doc went backwards very fast, in order to hit a hard return. He fell through the window of Henry's basement. Up to Cabrini we went and after many stitches, Ole Doc smiled and said, "Let's play again sometime". This ended when the players could no longer bend over and pick up the Ping Pong ball.

Thirty years have passed. Now we get our exercise acting as Pall Bearers at friend's funerals. Saying "so long brothers and sisters" and we pray, "Into the Holiest thou Goest". R/P.

Oh to be young again.



The Dark Stranger in our midst.

He was there again this morning, on the same familiar corner, dressed totally in black as usual. His posture, erect and alert—seemingly aware of his surroundings, yet a bit aloof to all that was going on. Many had observed him there other mornings but ignored him. This morning, the heavy traffic passed him by with little notice, the screeching of brakes and the honking of horns fell on deaf ears. The loud talking of those sitting outside drinking their morning coffee went unnoticed. Persons walking close to him received a nervous look before he turned away.

This day was no different than all the rest. As he sat on the edge of his present world and looked deep down in thought, it was the constant worry that always haunted him—the needs of this day. There were problems that needed solving—this is what consumed all his energy. Sometimes, he circled the problem as if this would bring him the solution. Sometimes, a defiant stare, a blinking wonderment, a silent surveying of the closeness of an unopened answer to his life moved him. But, this day was no different then all the rest.

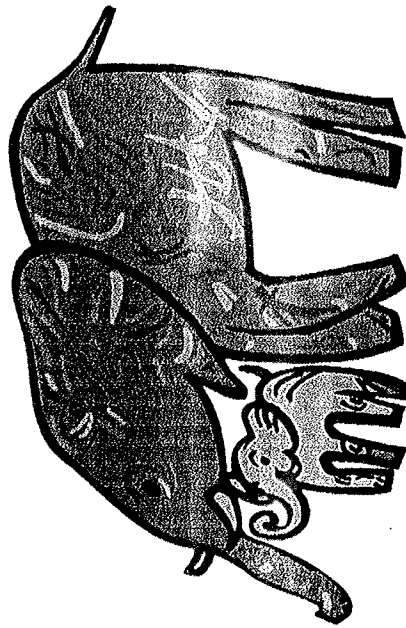
Since he left the comfortable nest of childhood, one constant problem haunted him, now as an adult, he hungered for a solution to stop his endless search for survival. It seemed that no one would give him a daily handout. He was on the brink of his very existence.

How could he obtain some essence of life for this day and the others that would follow?

As he sought today's nourishment, a familiar question began to form once again in his mind. The garbage can he circled contained leftover liquids of every kind; plastic sacks held the remains of partially consumed foods. The question he asked himself so many times during the days and nights came back and haunted him again. "Why me Lord? Why?" "Why am I a Crow and not a human? Why must I open the sacks of partially eaten foods? I have neither arms nor hands I cannot tip the plastic cups to my bill and drink freely as humans do. Why must I sit on the brink of my very existence? Why must I circle this garbage can and try to figure out how to get the liquid into my throat.

Again, this day, he answered his own question. "Still, Lord, I will not give up. I will eventually figure out how to get the liquid into my throat. I will open the sacks partially to get a bit of food, and I will continue to exist."

In reflection, he gave thanks. "Lord, You made me this way. You give me the wisdom and patience to keep on trying and flying. This is a gift that some humans do not possess and I pity them. There is one thing I can do that they cannot—I can fly freely in the sky of Your making, whether it be blue or gray. Your warm winds uplift me ever closer to the heaven that awaits us all. What more can I a mere Crow ask of You?"



Bonding Moment

A Bonding Moment
By:JLR

Mother and Child at the Park

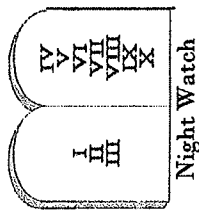
She stood in the hot sun swaying back and forth—not a breath of fresh air or warm rain for relief. Nervously, she eyed the toddler hanging close to her. Every so often, a gentle prod from this one-year-old reminded her that he was still a baby. He looked just like her—large ears and a dark complexion. His legs looked almost too large for his small body. She admired the fact that this apple did not fall far from the tree. She truly loved him.

They had eaten at the usual time that morning and then went out to play. On this particularly hot morning, the park was quiet; too early for much activity. A few old-timers were strolling here and there along the path. Most of them carried umbrellas just in case the off-chance shower emerged. The weather of Seattle, usually wet and gray, had shriveled them in a natural way. The occasional jogger also shared the path—ears of padded plastic listening to swaying CD players at their sides.

As she and her young one slowly moved along, you could not help but notice how heavy the trunk she carried seemed to be. His trunk, of course, was not nearly as big as hers was, but he handled it well for such a youngster. They progressed along in no particular hurry. They knew that the day was just beginning and there was more fun ahead; Splashing in the pool; the big ball to kick around; and a tire to roll and push. Furthermore, they looked forward to an afternoon meal of melons and carrots prepared specially for them. The time of play was great and ended all too soon.

Jim called them in about two hours later. He was kind to them and they liked to please him. A meal and an afternoon nap welcomed. Tomorrow would soon be upon them. Inside the large house they went, anticipating the shower and food that awaited them. The other elephants had already returned and the comfortable routine of Zoo life continued. Baby Shana and her mother were content.

Written by John La Russa 4/03/2002



Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying,

"Whom shall I send?"

Who will go for us?" "Here I am," I said; "send me."

The costume for the night is black shirts and white Roman Collars. The Collar was protection against the evils of the few street wise who would do harm for drink, money or food. My partner was Walt Shields and we also did the Broadway district at times. Never once was there a dull night. We checked in at the Seattle Service Center about 8 pm. Information was available about rooms for the night and other referrals to Overnight Centers that might be open. It was time to pick up our Bell Boys and start the nightly walk that covered the skid row of Seattle.

The usual routine was to talk to anyone and everyone who would stop and chat. Like Bears to a Honey Bee hive, the Roman Collar attracted them all. "Hi, Father, can you help me get bus money?" "I need a drink". "Would you like a date sweetheart?" "Are you a Priest or a cop in disguise?" "I can't get in the shelter as they are full, can you get me someplace to sleep?" "I was a Catholic, would you hear my confession?" "Can you give me money for cab fare?" "Could we have a cup of coffee and a donut at the First Ave Donut Shop and talk?" "Can I have your sweater, I am really cold?" "Please call the Welcome Van and have them take me to the Alky Center for the night".

At the emergency room of Harborview, were different voices. "Do you know this guy? He has no identification on him". "We can delouse this one and give him some soup but he cannot stay here for long, we are so crowded?" "Would you talk to her family, they are in shock". "Take this one back to First Ave and let him sleep it off".

As we looked over the benches at Pioneer Square we found them sleeping under news papers, old canvas, sleeping bags and nothing at all. The empty Wine and Vanilla bottles littered the area. Fast food bags and litter blow in the wind. Rats run from one place to another looking for scraps of food. Loud talk and whispered talk and the sound of after midnight traffic fill the air. On wet and snowy nights we were on the lookout for anyone close to freezing because of lack of shelter.

We walked each night up to the Central Bus Terminal to see the action there. Countless cabbies were in cars of Yellow, Green and Gray. All hoped to get a Fare somewhere. The novice taxi driver waited patiently for his fair to come out of the CT with his girlfriend to pay him. They had left by the back door and were blocks away before he wised up. Sleeping people, made up of families, singles, teens, they were always there waiting for another bus or just for morning to come. They carried bags of every kind. Food bags, back packs, fine luggage and shopping bags. There are many good bys and hellos as relatives and friends gathered around loved ones. The beggars look for a hand out with the all familiar, Hey, buddy, I need to get to Tacoma to see a sick relative and I am four dollars short. Can you lend me money? This interprets into "I need money for a bottle of cheap Thundervine" most of the time.

There were clubs on our walk such as the Women's Gay Dance Hall. We wandered in and sit watching the dancing and hugging. We did our best to look nonchalant yet felt uneasy with our presence there. Some came up and talked to us. At first we were bewildered but came to understand this as just another life style. They would talk about many things. About their days at Notre Dame, their Catholic upbringing, or what does the Bible say about gays and what do you think as a Catholic clergy about Gay's and Lesbians?

The Gay men's bar where over enthused drinkers would come up and hug you and try to kiss you at times. I had uneasy feeling of trying to be friendly and talkative and still ducking the hug and the attempt to kiss as much as possible. My partner became the fall guy as I kept behind him and avoided close contact. Some bars catered to the Leather Crowd of Gays. Here we encountered the stares and the voices that said "what the hell are you doing in our place, go on down the street and leave us alone". "Why are you in this Gay Bar? Are you Gay to"? "Hey, Man you don't belong here, this is a Leather and Spike Bar and your kind are not welcomed, so get lost"! And we did at times, frightened and unsure about the whole thing.

It is soon 2 am or later. Many times as the walk ends, we are wet with rain or sweat from fear of the street life. It is now home to a welcome shower and a clean bed. More thankful that for the grace of God I have food, shelter and loved ones waiting for my return.

A World is Hugged

