

Ron MacLean  
*Forks of Buffalo*

No knives at the table. Only the occasional spoon. We were fork people. Buffalonians. And to my sweetly peculiar father, that meant something. My mother, who had the wisdom to pick her battles, embraced this quirk and the challenge to cook around it. Meat was ground, sauces scarce, veggies diced, soups and stews saved for special occasions. We did not suffer want: we had civic pride, plenty to eat, and a knick-knack shop that made us known around our little hamlet 40 miles due north of the Nickel City.

“The fork,” my father would say around the family dinner table, the seven of us gathered, Dad’s tines raised in toast, “is to Buffalo what the Golden Gate Bridge is to San Francisco.” My brother would groan, head in hands. My oldest sister would close her eyes and pine for the City by the Bay, first in a string of places to which she would dream of escape. I would sit in agonized limbo: relishing my father’s enthusiasm while wishing its focus was something — anything — else. From a young age, I couldn’t tune out an awareness that Dad, and by extension each of us, was regarded at best as an endearing eccentricity, at worst a running joke.

### **Rust Belt Irony**

The fork was the last of the now-standard cutlery trio to gain acceptance in Western cultures. Introduced to Europe in the 1540s, it was widely adopted in Europe only in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, and only early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century came into common use in the US. By 1926, fork production had gotten so out of hand here that Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce to President Calvin Coolidge (for whom I am named), imposed restrictions on manufacture in an effort to manage the silver supply.

A gray market developed, and Buffalo became its unofficial hub—fork hoarding, shadow manufacture, and a cult zeal for esoteric specialty forks. It’s an irony for this working-class rustbelt city that, if you wanted an outlawed asparagus fork in the ‘20s, or a vintage ‘40s pickle fork today, you’d come to Buffalo.

“Damn that Hoobert Hoover,” Mom would say, more often than you might expect. My older sister Beatrice would react by correcting her mispronunciation; I by wondering why the disdain for our 31<sup>st</sup> President.

Later I would learn that Mom blamed Hoover for the husks that were her own parents in the Depression's wake. Beatrice never seemed to understand that Mom's Hoobert was intentional, for her own pleasure and to tweak her first-born daughter for being so easily ashamed of the family.



Pickle Fork, circa 1947

### Knick-Knack

A small brick building with a simple wood sign next to Nine Mile Creek in Harold, the family shop was part thrift store, part specialty antiques emporium, part museum. Like the notorious popcorn fork from the '50s (effective at pickup but with a tendency to stab users in the mouth), our family enterprise was esoteric, endearing, and ultimately unnecessary. But Dad kept it going for more than thirty years. All us kids put in our time working summers, a pleasant enough way to pass the hot months. For most of us.

Situated on a lonely stretch of road between county seat Lockport and Lake Ontario, the shop drew as many curious as customers. The name drew them in, with apparent promise of exoticism, mystery, or at least metaphor.

The end of the frickin' earth, my brother Dez called the shop, bemoaning, "We're hardly even a dot on the *county* map." Dez, the youngest, suffered through every shift.

Summer. Call it a Thursday. Say I was twelve. A young couple emerged from their Nissan Pulsar, approaching the shop with what I had only begun to recognize as sardonic smiles. Technically it was Dez's shift, but I often lingered past mine: I've never done well in humid heat, and the shop's air conditioner was powerful. Whenever I'd stay, Dez would first complain — "If you're here, why do *I* have to be?" — then plant himself on the squeaky old office chair and angrily thumb back issues of *Motor Sports* magazine. Okay with me; there were only ever enough customers to provide an occasional break from my own reading of Great Americans biographies, cool and quiet among the fork display cases, each labeled with a Sharpied index card taped to the glass: the Early Years; the Oneida Collections; and the one Dad had named Specialty Forks and that Beatrice had successfully re-labeled A Tine to Every Purpose Under Heaven. That

day, the Pulsar couple moved among the cases, whispering like they were the first ever to mock my father's passion.

Finally, they approached me at the counter.

"We have a bet about the name," said she from under a floppy hat. "Are you at the confluence of two forks of the Buffalo River?" The office chair squeaked. I imagined Dez pushing himself against the back wall as if he could escape through it.

I shook my head much as I'd done every time I'd had this conversation, conflicted over how much I shared the couple's irony, my brother's humiliation, my father's pride. "There is no Buffalo River," I said. I was willing to endure a lot for that air conditioner.

She raised her eyebrows. Made eye contact with her mustachioed man. You couldn't work in the shop, or be part of our family, and fail to recognize condescension. "What is the deal, then?" she wanted to know.

I played my role, the dutiful son. "We sell forks. Made in, or associated with, Buffalo."

Dez's groan, the cry of a wounded animal, echoed around the room.

Laughter behind hands. "For real?" she said.

I pasted on a smile. "For real." I hated my brother for his over-the-top display. I hated the couple for thinking they were better than us. For their amusement at our expense. What I didn't see at the time: I hated them all because part of me felt all of it.

The shop was never the family's sole source of income. A beloved novelty to many and somehow a break-even business, it could never support a family of seven, so Dad sold insurance on the side. Anyone who came in to purchase a policy or pay an installment left knowing more than they wanted to about Buffalo's proud connection to the disdained utensil, often buying one or two, either in pleasure or pity.

Dez's mortification drove him to move a week after high school graduation to Charlotte, North Carolina, where he hoped to drive in the NASCAR circuit. After a couple years he caught on with a pit crew and found his niche. While he made his peace with the parents after a few years, and still visits every 4<sup>th</sup> of July and Christmas, he never stopped bristling at the quirkiness and smallness he believed marked their lives.

Last Christmas at Marcy's. Over a chestnut soufflé Beatrice (in from Chicago) had insisted on serving, and with the full Oxford Hall silver pattern adorning the table, Dez regaled us with tales of his work in the pit

crew for Denny Davidson, third-place finisher in the Tucker Rentals 200. Dez went on at length about the achievement. My chest burned. Dez had once accused Dad — and, by extension, all of us who stayed — of living a “minor-league life.” More than once as Dez droned on I swallowed the urge to cut him off and disparage his success in what is a low-profile race even by junior circuit standards. Instead I waited until he finished and led a toast to his “*monumental* triumph.” I felt awful. For being so petty, so sensitive still to the implicit hometown slight. I felt only a tad less awful as I realized the snark was lost on Dez, whose returning-hero grin lit up Marcy’s table.

### Status Silver

Many early Americans considered forks to be a European affectation until the Rockefellers, Carnegies, and other icons of privilege popularized them. Soon those who sought status in the states strove for fancy dinner sets. Implements became increasingly specialized, even fanciful. There were forks for raw and fried oysters; for fried chicken and for lemon slices; for poached eggs and buckwheat griddle cakes. Specialty forks included those designed exclusively for lobster, lettuce, sardines, trout, and, yes, even buffalo.

A compete dinner pattern could have as many as 145 discrete utensils. We had five patterns, including the everyday Gorham Studio, the playful Oxford Hall Fashion Wear, and the fancy Oneida Spanish Court. Seventeen varieties, including pickle and olive forks, an ice-cream fork, and yes, even the once-outlawed asparagus fork. Each of them, no matter how rare, no matter how valuable, were in service. To my father, the highest honor he could pay a fork was to put it to use. His favorite was a pickle fork from the Oneida Scotia Series, circa 1915. He was so smitten he left detailed instructions about how he was to be buried with it, grasped in his right hand and positioned so the fork stood straight and tall: the star, as it were, of Dad’s final act.

### Tarnished Oneida

The Oneida Flatware Company — my father’s favorite road trip destination — is not your average silver producer. It’s got curious history.

The company grew out of the Oneida Community, a Christian commune founded in 1848 by John Humphrey Noyes, which had an unusual knack for business, specifically manufacturing — in the 1860s, for example, the commune was the nation’s largest producer of animal

traps. Noyes and his followers believed Jesus had returned to earth, to enable them to attain perfection in this life. That path to perfection included a proto-eugenics program which controlled who was allowed to reproduce, and with whom. Founder Noyes mostly used his own judgment to determine these procreational partnerships; he reportedly fathered children with at least nine women.

Late one night in June 1879, learning of an imminent warrant for his arrest for statutory rape, Noyes fled. By the following winter, the community broke apart; some members reorganized to protect the various business and manufacturing assets. Flatware production began that winter. In less than 20 years, it became the company's sole focus: the animal trap business was sold in 1912; a silk thread business in 1916; and canning in 1915.

I was in college and aflame with virtue when I stumbled on this bit of history.

"Did you know?" I asked Dad.

"Of course."

"A cult company with a fortune fueled by abuse. And you fawn."

He held up a hand. "An ugly chapter. What institution isn't tarnished?"

I boiled. "If you ignore context you can embrace anything. This *hobby* of yours is just another escape. You might as well watch *Melrose Place*."

He didn't see it that way. To his dying day he delighted in the designs as distinct from the ugly aspects of origin. In time, I came off my high horse, but I still can't look at an Oneida fork without seeing, in addition to exquisite craftsmanship, the taint of a corrupt pastor and the legacy of suffering that has fueled so many American fortunes.

## The Marcy Phenomenon

Tuesday nights were Historical Society meeting nights, the central artery of Dad's marathon campaign to document, and ultimately showcase, Buffalo's unique relationship with the fork. Tuesday nights were also "forget Marcy" nights.

Marcy was the middle child, compliant, somehow magically indifferent to — even unaffected by — the family stigma, and yes, easy to forget. She was the peacemaker around the dinner table when the rest of us would gang up on young Dez or play on poor Trina's gullibility. Marcy was the

negotiator when Dad would come up with one of his outing ideas, like wanting to pile us in the car for yet another tour of Oneida, and Beatrice, the eldest, the rebel (such as there was in our temperate household) would rail against it.

Marcy belonged to every club our school offered and thus took the late bus home. Except on Tuesdays there was no late bus. Dad was tasked with pickup so we could have family dinner before he went to the Historical Society.

Every week the same routine: six o'clock sharp, five of us gathered at table, Mom's latest concoction in a covered casserole at its center. Six-oh-three, dad's car tires crunched over the driveway gravel. Six-oh-four, one car door—and only one—would open and close, one set of footsteps make its way up from the basement. Looks of amusement and disbelief passed around the table. Six-oh-five, Dad's hand on the doorknob, then his voice—*Shit*—followed by his receding footsteps, the car door, and the crunch of gravel as he drove to the unified school district complex to collect Marcy.

Over nineteen years of Tuesday nights, Dad never lost heart in his crusade to establish The Buffalo Fork Museum. While he never attained that lofty goal, he did manage to win approval for, and staging of, a show at Buffalo's Albright-Knox Museum (named, like the shop, Forks of Buffalo), and a nook in the Historical Society's permanent collection room devoted to the gray market on forks, its cultural and economic repercussions.

### **A (Celebrity) Fork in the Road**

Headshots and press bios were not Dad's customary perusal material. "I don't see why we need these celebrities," he said, pacing the kitchen.

Dad's idea for a show at the Albright-Knox had materialized, with only one caveat — commemorative forks for Buffalonians of note.

Mom ran skirt steak through the meat grinder. "You've been working at this how many years?" A bowl of peeled potatoes waited on the table. With her left hand, she guided the ground beef into a yellow pyrex bowl. "If these forks can get it done, where's the harm? Have fun with it."

Dad fingered the promotional brochure. "Just so they don't turn it into a sideshow."

Miles away, Beatrice rolled her eyes and Dez let out an animal groan. By then, Beatrice had been in Chicago a decade, after stints in San Francisco and Denver; Dez long established in his pit crew; I was newly enough married that I didn't see the split coming.

## The Glamazon

Designed by—and in honor of—World Wrestling Entertainment Diva Beth Phoenix, a two-time women’s champion through the No Mercy Pay-Per-View Event®. Phoenix gained notoriety with a particularly aggressive, attacking style. During a Raw match in June 2006, she won despite a badly broken jaw. Even after several surgeries, a portion of her face was permanently numb.

The Glamazon fork’s design features an amethyst-encrusted handle with five solitaires, making it unwieldy as a utensil, and a unique curled tine pattern. When they met, Dad told her he found her bejeweled fork handle uncomfortable to hold. The wrestling diva-cum-cutlery designer smiled and said, “Beauty is pain.”



The Glamazon, © 2017 Diva Beth Phoenix

## The Pie Queen

Binni Hackett, unknown beyond Western New York, was a legend across Niagara and Erie Counties for her pies, in particular her banana cream (generously flavored with dark rum). What began as a gift for friends’ special occasions became a thriving business, as her Olcott pie shop became a fixture in the area until her death in 2001. Her fork, a triumph of simplicity, was commissioned by her devoted husband Buddy Hanson and features a diamond solitaire in honor of Hackett’s July birth date. Buddy, an insurance customer of Dad’s who paid monthly installments in cash, claimed to be the originator of Buffalo wing sauce, a contention that, though theoretically possible, was not widely accepted.



The Pie Queen, ©1997, Binni’s



It was easy to laugh, to dismiss these as a gaudy provincial joke. But you could also celebrate how a big deal was being made about something Dad had set in motion.

The world remained a fascination to him. In his years as unofficial forkmeister of Buffalo, when he had occasion to meet a local celebrity at some function, it gave him a big charge, not because he knew who they were but because he didn't. He even formed a friendship with "Glamazon" Beth Phoenix, though he eventually let it fade out of concern Mom might worry about marital misconduct. "Worry?" Mom said. "I wish you luck."

### Polar Wednesdays

Diabetic and skinny as a rail, Mom was the captain of our home. She kept us all grounded, and more or less in line. Except on Wednesdays. If you wanted to pull some mischief, you saved it for Wednesday. Because on Wednesdays, Mom was a polar bear.

The Olcott Polar Bears consisted of Mom and six other local women, some friends from high school and some who went back almost that far. They swam every Wednesday, all year, every year, an hour before sunset. What began as a winter-only endeavor quickly became year-round; what had been a swim-only event became swim-dinner-and-cards at the aspirationally named Olcott Beach Hotel, a dive bar with a few food specials.

An autumn Wednesday. Beatrice was maybe 15, so it would be three years before she moved away for good. Mom, in her black satin Polar Bears jacket, looking for her keys. Beatrice had begun to worry that family quirks reflected badly on her. "Mom, you guys should do a charity swim, like Groundhog Day or New Year's."

"It's not like that. It's just our Wednesday."

"But it doesn't *have* to be. You could plan and publicize it."

"Why on *earth* would we do that?"

"People would come watch. You'd be celebrities. Get on the news." Celebrities, in Beatrice's mind, were allowed to have quirks.

Mom made the face she usually reserved for beets and shook her head. "I'll have my own fun, not someone else's, thank you."



## Gala

February 2008. Opening night of the Albright-Knox show. Dad in the charcoal-gray suit he bought for the occasion. “I don’t know if this is a good idea,” he said.

“Which?” I asked, suited out myself. “Because the suit looks great, and it’s a little late to be wondering if you want to do this event.”

I was happy to be there with Mom and Trina and Marcy. It was a big night for Dad, up there with the time he got to interview a surviving member of the Oneida Community. Neither Beatrice nor Dez made it. Dez used work as an excuse. Beatrice was honest.

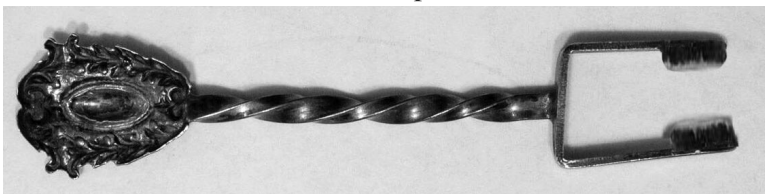
“It’s kitsch,” she said. “Dad’s like the only one who doesn’t get the joke.”

“I don’t think that’s fully accurate,” I said. I did not tell Beatrice about the banner hung over the entrance, which Dad was mercifully too distracted to notice — “Fork Over a Few Bucks and Have a Great Time.” Fact is, people turned out for it, this thing that, apart from his family, Dad loved best.

He reveled in the evening, even managed to enjoy the A-listers despite the attention they stole from the forks. Only Wolf Blitzer left him cold, for making sport of the utensil cast in his honor and treating the entire event as the joke Beatrice had concluded it was.

## The Tootie

Arthur “Tootie” Medaglia’s two-tine coke fork (nixed from the Albright-Knox exhibit, to Dad’s chagrin), commissioned by Medaglia himself and worn on a chain around his neck, served as a double coke spoon, the tines separated to the exact width of Medaglia’s nostrils (7.2 millimeters). The longtime host of *Duckpins for Dollars*, a bowling show wildly popular in the region from the early ‘70s through October 1987 when Medaglia, long-known for his love of both cocaine and recreational nitroglycerine, lost his composure on the air one Saturday morning, stripping down to his underwear and screaming hyperbolic obscenities into the microphone when Steve Villanueva hit a rare triple-strike.



The  
Tootie,  
© 1997  
Arthur  
Medaglia

## New Frontiers

A summer Monday, 1990. Seven of us piled in the Impala for an outing. Like Charlie Brown, I was ever hopeful. Like anyone jaded by experience, Beatrice was ever-wary.

“Where we going, Dad?” Not quite a demand, more than a question.

“Oneida.” If there’s such a thing as fervent confession, that was Dad’s tone.

Beatrice opened her door and got out. “Nope.” She was sixteen, with recently discovered self-empowerment. “Not again.”

Marcy immediately went into negotiation mode, for which I was grateful. All us kids could see it play out in our heads: the tour, Dad’s humiliating enthusiasm, pressing up to the front like a child, asking the same questions and reveling anew in the same answers.

“Ice cream stop,” Marcy said. “On the way *there*.”

Beatrice chimed in before Dad could agree or argue. “Not good enough.”

“The lake,” Marcy said, adding when Beatrice still wasn’t convinced, “Equal time.”

“Nope,” Beatrice said, “I’m done.”

Not even control of the radio could sway her. She stood planted on the macadam, arms folded across her chest in full defiance. I felt invigorated, like the world contained new possibilities. Still, while I had no love for Oneida, at least it was a trip.

Dad accepted her exercise of personal freedom. We drove away. I turned to watch my oldest sister fade in the rear windshield, a metallic funk on my tongue—the taste of loss, a now-familiar part of the mix that, for me, defines our fractured family.

## Last Wishes

When his time finally came, not three years after the Albright-Knox show, Dad would have been impressed with, and a little embarrassed by, his wake. The crowd ran large and luminary, at least by our standards. Buddy Hanson, age 92, was there with a jar of his wing sauce for each living family member. As was Town Supervisor Larry Bayh. Flower arrangements from insurance customers, even a few fork enthusiasts. The Bellbrook Silversmiths, a group of collectors in Ohio, sent a thoughtful if garish arrangement of ferns and purple lilies shooting like fireworks from a red-and-white rose core. Apparently even “Glamazon” Beth Phoenix was there in a modest black dress, which Mom told me later; I had failed to recognize her.

Preparing for said wake caused dissension in the family ranks when Mom reminded us about our father's demand to be buried with his Scotia Series Pickle Fork.

"You're not serious," Beatrice said. "He's dead. He won't know."

Mom's back stiffened. "It was your father's wish."

Dez didn't miss a beat. "Closed casket."

I had no desire to see the smirks or hear the derision, but I was with Mom, who delivered the final verdict: "I didn't apologize for him when he was alive, I'm not going to start now." Dad was viewed as he had envisioned, pickle fork proudly in hand.

In the receiving line, Dez and Beatrice stood one body width apart from the rest of us, as if leaving room for a missing sibling, or creating just enough space to suggest a different—more distant—ring of relation.

## Enough

Beatrice has maintained since her teen years that to continue to live in Niagara County is less a choice to stay than a failure to leave.

My first wife was from Chicago. Provided Beatrice with her first connections there. The two of them are still close.

The marriage was brief. Humiliating. In my mid-twenties, when I thought I wanted—needed—more than this cluster of small towns and the Nickel City. She was my vehicle. She had prospects—serious prospects—in Chicago, and I was eager to follow her. Until it got real—time to sign a lease and schedule movers. I'd get queasy, I'd stall, not willing to tell her. I'd beg off. *Give me three months.* She delayed her start date—twice. By the third round of this, she was done. Said she could smell my reticence, like something rotting. I'd frame it differently. I was ashamed to call this, my home, enough. I thought I *should* want more.

## Life-Size

Marcy manages the town's independent pharmacy. Dez works his pit crew. Beatrice runs a massage therapy practice in Chicago. There's a kind of inherent condescension when they visit, as if they've earned some merit badge by moving away. I feel paltry and provincial for a few days after they leave, but only then. Trina raised three boys here and tried to do the same with her congenitally immature husband. Me, I'm Harold's town historian, curating and archiving the lives of my

neighbors in the space that once housed the family shop, now named for him.

What constitutes success, achievement? Making a life in a place bigger than, or at least different from, where you grew up? Prestige, awards, the acclaim of others—a trophy case of one sort or other that we can visit for reassurance in vulnerable moments? I've found quiet happiness in a second marriage, where Dee's greatest joy is to be of use. I can appreciate that. I try to celebrate her—us—often.

Country lawyer Calvin Coolidge, 26, wrote to his father, "I am amazed at all you do. My life is small in so many ways."

My fork-crazed father left a legacy. I guess we all do. The lives we touch. The things we choose to care about. Each spring, when I address the sixth graders at Harold Elementary School for their unit on local history, I find myself grinning. I describe Buffalo's curious relationship with the junior utensil. To the delight of the assembled children, I stab into a gherkin jar then raise the 1940s pickle fork in the air. "The fork is to Buffalo," I say, "what the Golden Gate Bridge is to San Francisco."