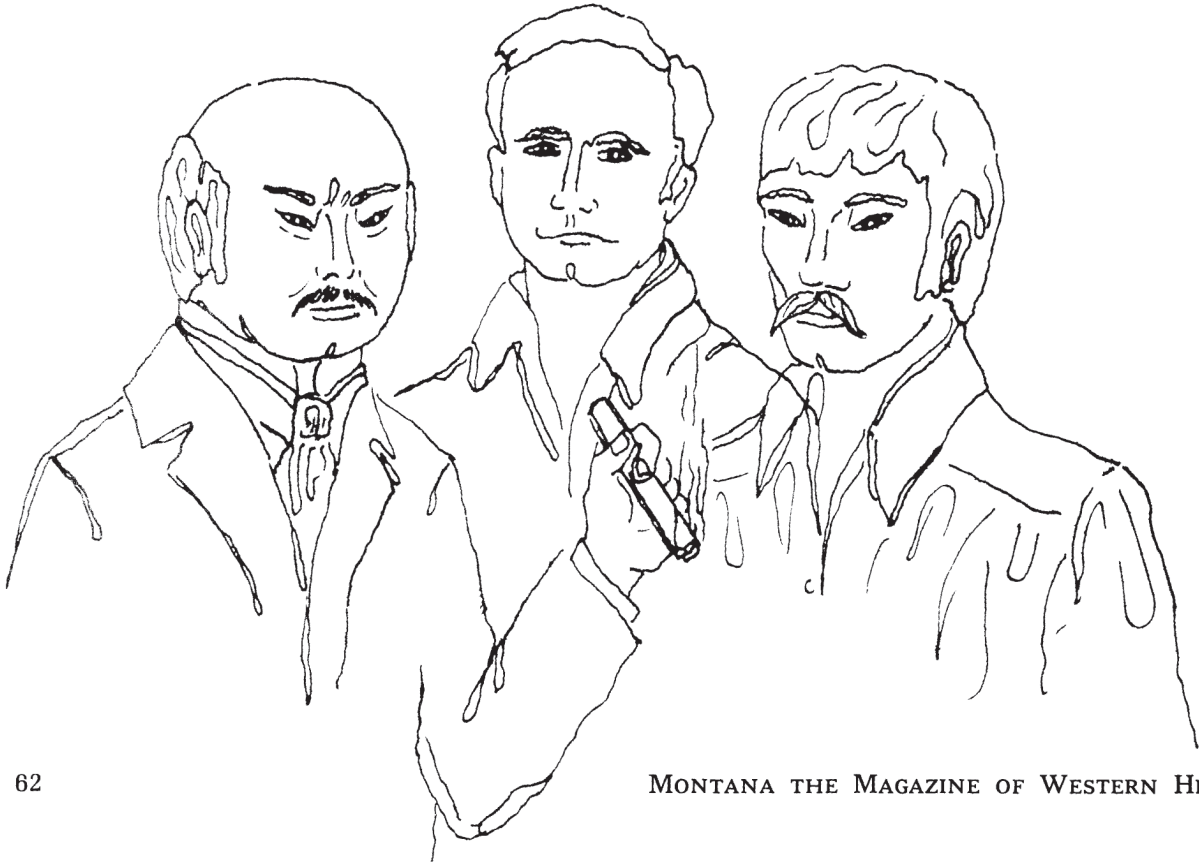


# The FOREI

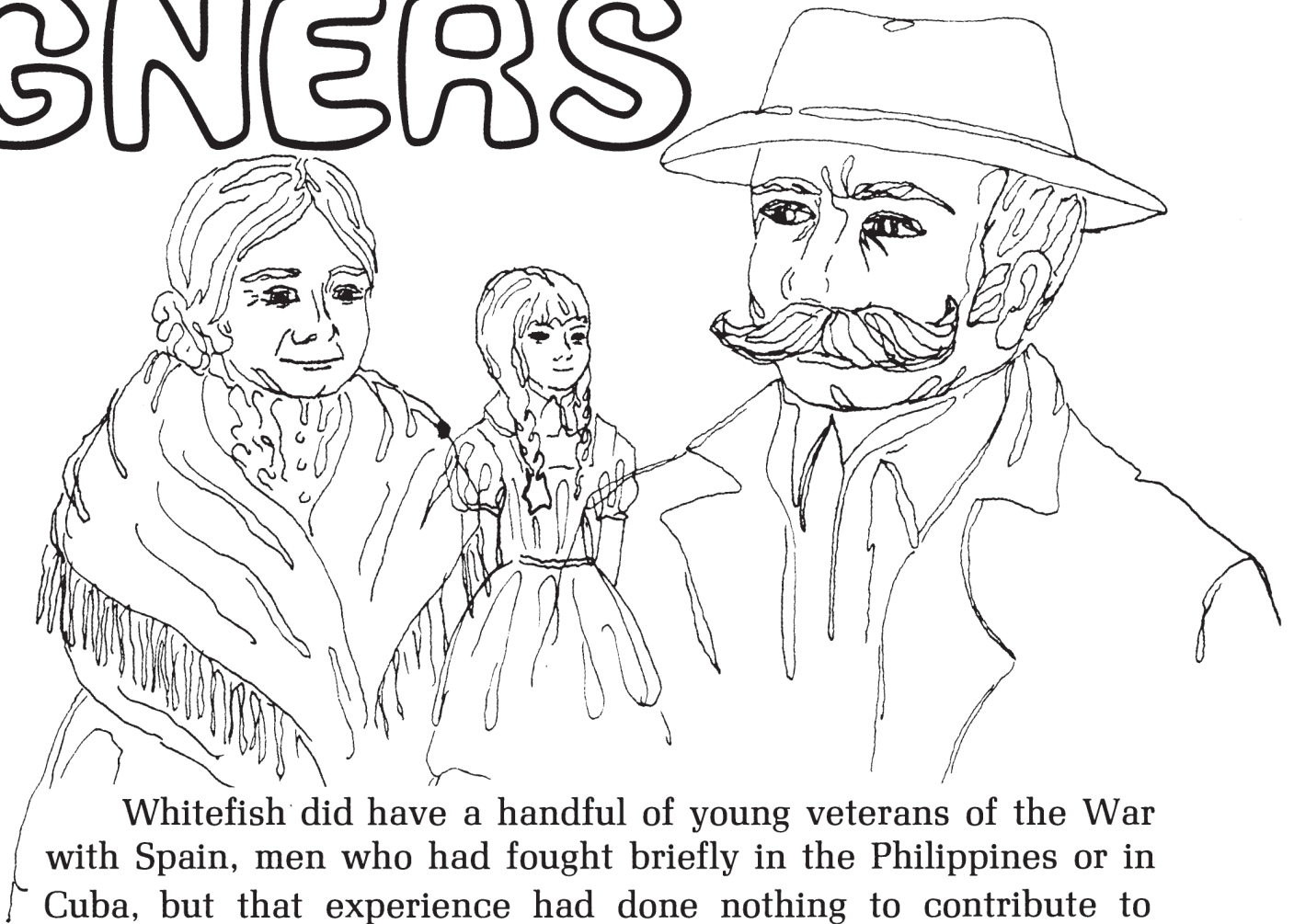
by DOROTHY M. JOHNSON

We were parochial in Whitefish. It was so new a town that almost nobody over the age of ten had been born there; we had all traveled to get there from wherever we lived before. But we had always lived in the United States. Foreign travel wasn't even an impossible dream. It was beyond comprehension. And so, of course, were foreigners. The fact that they spoke little English was, to us, a matter of acute embarrassment.

This was long before high school kids soared blithely off to spend a school term living with a family in, say, Sweden or South Africa and being foreigners. It was even before a lot of grown-up Americans traveled by ship to Europe to fight a war that was supposed to make the world safe for democracy and to discover that the French didn't even pronounce the name of their own capital city right — they called it “Paree.”



# GNEERS



Whitefish did have a handful of young veterans of the War with Spain, men who had fought briefly in the Philippines or in Cuba, but that experience had done nothing to contribute to international understanding. What we did in Whitefish when we encountered foreigners was to avoid them, if possible, after efforts to communicate in the only language we knew broke down.

There were many Japanese in town; we never knew them well because none of them lived near us. Everybody knew M. M. Hori, though; he was a big shot businessman who smoked a cigar, owned a prosperous truck farm, a hotel and restaurant, and lunched regularly with the bank president and other dignitaries, who nicknamed him "Swede." His pretty wife was known as "the last of the Japanese picture brides," and legend said he had imported her after marrying her picture. He got his start as a houseboy for a rich family in Kalispell, who gave him ten acres of land that he built into a fortune. He was out of our class.

**W**HEN A NEW family moved into the two-story log house down by the river, I was pleased because they had a little girl, Mary, about my age — eight — and it would be nice to have a little girl to play with for a change from the little boys with whom the neighborhood was infested. But when I went to see about this, Mary couldn't come out. Her mother needed her. We never did play together, because her mother always needed her, and I'm not aware that Mary ever complained about it. She smiled shyly and went right on doing whatever she was doing. It was useful, necessary, and expected.

The family's name was Franco, and they came from Italy, which was unimaginably far away. The father's name was Pasquale. Younger than Mary were Jimmie and Frankie and some others. Hard working Mrs. Franco needed more daughters, but she was a steady producer of boy babies. My mother and I called once to see the newest one, about three days old, and Mrs. Franco — who had picked up a little English by that time — boasted that the baby was saying "papa" already. He was sort of purring with his lips. Mrs. Franco loved them all, whether she needed any more or not. Frankie was a trial to her; she once told my mother he was "all same one little devil — one minute lick, next minute run — oh my God!" but she loved him, too, even while she chased him so she could swat him a good hard blow.

The Francos were not the first foreigners I ever knew. There had been a Finnish family next door to us in Great Falls, where we lived before — desperately poor people. I remember hearing my father say grimly, "That man could earn five dollars a day as a carpenter if he didn't drink!" and I understood that five dollars a day was untold riches. My father, well educated for his time and in such poor health that he had to give up farming in Iowa, was earning forty dollars a month heaving freight around at the railroad depot in Great Falls. One day my mother told my father, weeping, that the Finnish lady was so completely out of food that she didn't even have salt to put into the last of the oatmeal to feed the five children.

I never knew what became of the hungry Finns in Great Falls, who could have been so rich if the father hadn't been a drunkard. But I knew what poor was, from listening to my folks worry about them. We weren't poor; I

didn't know until years later that life was hard for my parents in Great Falls. I did understand that something was wrong, because I caught my mother wiping her eyes as she finished making my Christmas present, a new bonnet sewn from scraps for my favorite doll.

**T**HEN THINGS changed for us. My father got a job as timekeeper for the men who worked at the Montana Power Company's Rainbow Dam, and we moved out to Rainbow Falls and lived in a tarpaper-covered shack by the railroad. Drinking water was hauled from Great Falls in barrels with a team-drawn wagon, and the few times we went into town we sat on the platform of a railroad handcar operated by the muscle power of two men who pumped a heavy bar to move the wheels.

At Rainbow, where probably less than a hundred people lived, a surprising number were foreigners, because there were two railroad section crews, one bunch Japanese, the others Greek. The two crews lived separately and worked separately. The Greeks had nothing to do with anyone else, except once when they sent a man to our house on a desperate mission. What he said he wanted was "ingun," and when my mother finally understood that he needed an onion, both of them were pretty well worn out. We didn't know any of the Greeks.

The Japanese were different. They were, no doubt, just as homesick as the Greeks, just as frugal in saving money to send home, but they were friendly. Some of them spoke English well and the rest were learning it. They all had names. (If the Greeks did, we never learned them.)

John Kimura was six feet tall — a giant among his smaller companions. I remember him best because he saved my life once. I was watching the section crew work where the track went through a cut, and I began to play on their handcar. The big two-man handle that propelled it was so heavy that they didn't dream a six-year-old child could work it, but I got the vehicle to inch along and was having great fun.

Then, the men heard a train whistle — the fast mail, not far off around a bend; they were always alert for trains. John Kimura got to me first. He tossed me to safety onto the dirt a few

feet from the track, grabbed the underside of the handcar with both hands, flipped it over onto its back, and leaped out of the way. The train roared by, and he carried me home in his arms. I have never forgotten the look of horror on his face.

Another of the men, whose name we pronounced Hah-tah, visited our tarpaper shack one or two evenings a week, because my father tutored him in political economy.

My mother had two pupils at Rainbow. She had taught country school in Iowa for five years, starting at age sixteen. Now she taught English to the power plant manager's Swedish hired girl, and for two hours a day she taught me, because I had been removed from the first grade in Great Falls.

In this brisk intellectual atmosphere I tried to teach our cat to read, but he kept dozing off. So I read anything available; chiefly I recall *Freckles* and *The Girl of the Limberlost*, novels by Gene Stratton Porter. (I never thought of being lonely for other children; I had two imaginary playmates, Alice Syrup and Mabel MacNamara, and we got along fine.)

**W**HEN WE MOVED to Whitefish, it was no doubt my parents' experiences with foreigners in Rainbow that prompted them to reach out to the Francos, whom most of the neighbors ignored because they were different. The Francos were by no means poor. They were, in their own eyes, rich and prosperous. They had reached at least the anteroom of paradise. Whitefish was for them the promised land, flowing with milk and honey. All they had to do to enjoy it was to work.

Pasquale Franco, the father, was a short, stocky, proud-shouldered man with a wide mustache that curled up. Most men wore mustaches — my father did — but not so flourishing. Mr. Franco was a laborer on the Great Northern Railroad, as most foreign-born men in Whitefish were. He learned English faster than his wife did. Their little boys learned English swear words with the speed of light, and from them the other kids in the neighborhood learned some Italian words that we all treasured as being very, very bad, but we were never able to find out what they meant.

Their ways were not our ways. My mother baked our bread in the oven of a wood-burning range, baker's bread being for bachelors and the families of lazy women. She made three handsome brown loaves at a time, the tops shiny from being rubbed with saved-up butter wrappers. But Mrs. Franco baked up a fifty-pound sack of flour at a time, in round loaves, and her oven was out in the back yard, made of bricks or stones or concrete (I don't clearly remember) and shaped like a beehive. Once Mr. Franco, who often spoke in praise of his wife's skill, showed my father and me a great pile of new loaves stacked outside the back door, ready to store inside. Grinning happily, he picked one up and beat on it with his fist to show how substantial it was. The crust didn't crack.

"See?" he said, with pardonable pride. "Good bread!"

They must have had help in building that oven, perhaps from some of the other Italian families in town.

Mrs. Franco and little Mary made all the pasta for the household, none of this boughten stuff for them. They knew how it ought to be, and that's the way they made it — tons of it. I was there one time, probably hoping Mary could come out and play, and saw how they did it before they got their magic machine. The dough was mixed (and what a muscle-building job *that* must have been!) and they rolled it out in thin sheets on the floured table. Then, using an umbrella rib and a couple of expert twists of the wrists, Mary made a long tube of macaroni — anyway it was a tube after a knife deftly cut along it and quick hands slid it off the umbrella rib and hung it up to dry. Those singly-made tubes of pasta hung all over the house until they were dry — on clotheslines and stair rails and the backs of chairs.

When they got their magic machine, Mr. Franco was so proud that he came up to our house and invited us down to have a look. His wife was a good cook and he believed in giving her the best possible equipment, and in this wonderfully prosperous country he could afford it. The machine, he told us, cost forty dollars, although it wasn't very big.

It was a wonderful time saver. Just put the dough in a kind of hopper, force it down, turn the handle — and out through holes in the

bottom came a whole bunch of endless strands of *pasta*! No more umbrella rib! And with the magic machine they could have any size they wanted, from vermicelli up to big thick tubes. It all depended on a thing inside that governed the size. The Francos were as pleased with that machine as their grandchildren probably were with their first Buick.

**E**VEN BEFORE they attained the luxury of the *pasta* machine, the Francos reveled in the use of a lot of land that didn't seem to belong to anybody.

Anyway, nobody was using it, except that children like me played on it. There were a couple of city blocks of it, with some fire-blackened stumps and old rotting logs and wild roses and wild grasses that grew knee high. So from somewhere the Francos imported two goats, a nanny and a billy. Why let all that good grass go to waste? A goat was a more familiar animal to the Francos than a cow and didn't require such a huge investment of capital.

Mrs. Franco, with everything else she had to do, was always dragging a goat around at the end of a rope from one good grazing spot to another. She walked fast, whether the goat liked it or not, and as she pulled the balky animal along she looked dreamily contented. Such a good place to live! So many things free!

But she cannily kept the goats off some of the grassy places, and when the proper season came, she made hay. Mr. Franco cut it with a scythe, and they put it up in great thick braids. I have never seen braided hay anywhere else, but people in Italy may be making it to this day for all I know. Great twisted braids of it hung on the Francos' fence to cure before they put it in a shed for winter feed.

Coal was free, too. There were chunks of it along the railroad track, spilled out of coal cars, just going to waste, and Mr. Franco, that good provider, kept track of its location. Now and then he and his wife walked three or four miles in the cool of the evening carrying empty gunny sacks, into which they carefully dropped the waste coal. When they had a good load, they walked home, with Mr. Franco well ahead and his wife dragging the biggest sackful and both looking triumphant. Such a good country! So many things free!

And some things just being wasted. The Cookes lived near the Francos, and Mr. Cooke had a grocery store from which emanated a great many wooden boxes and banana crates and the like; this was before things were shipped in cartons. Those apple boxes and such were fine for kindling, and lots of people made temporary furniture from them, but when the pile got too high down at the store Mr. Cooke sent a load of boxes home in his delivery wagon to be burned. *Something* had to be done with them. There was no city dump. Nobody fretted about polluting the air with smoke. The air was already so full of smoke from forest fires that we had glorious sunsets.

Those boxes made grand bonfires for the Cooke boys and their friends, including me. We danced and howled and yelled while the flames leaped and the smoke rolled upward.

The first time Mrs. Franco saw one of these periodic conflagrations she couldn't stand it. She came running and shouting, trying to make us stop throwing boxes on the bonfire. Because of the language barrier, only minimal communication was achieved, but one thing was clear: the dreadful waste of all that wood upset her. Discussion on a higher level than ours (Mr. Cooke talked to Mr. Franco) established the rule that Mrs. Franco could have all the boxes she could use or store in her yard, but the rest of them we could burn because they had to be got out of the way.

Long later, George Stacey told me a story about the Francos' billy goat. George was a very little boy, a couple of blocks from home, when he had his awful adventure. He was with another boy, only a little older, who had a beebie gun, when they saw the billy goat grazing. The other kid took a shot at it with the beebie gun. The billy goat, enraged, charged with his head down. The kid with the toy gun ran and got over the fence. But Georgie's legs were too short — he couldn't get over the fence, and neither could he run very fast.

"Your mother," he told me, "came out and saved me and chased off the billy goat. That was one of the worst experiences of my life. And I wasn't the one who shot the beebie!"

Poor little Georgie. He was pretty young to start learning how cruel the world can be. He had remembered that terror and injustice for sixty years.

THESE WERE several Italian families in town, and they all went to the Catholic Church, but none of them lived near the Francos. My parents were as friendly as the language barrier would permit. Once the Francos even invited us over for supper. They must have fed their children earlier; none of them were at the table. I found the food very strange indeed, and asked for a glass of water with the meal. Mr. Franco thought that was pretty funny, but his wife brought me one.

And then came disaster. With flourishes, Mr. Franco poured a glass of wine — his best, no doubt — for each of my parents. They were strict prohibitionists. My mother didn't know what the liquid was. My father, more worldly, did. He classed it as the Demon Rum.

It is hard to explain for most modern readers how fierce was the hatred of those who fought alcoholic beverages. People addicted to drink had not yet been adjudged "sick." They were just plain sinners. One taste could set a person on the downward path to hell. Methodists were in the forefront of this battle. The miracle at the wedding in Cana, where Christ turned water into wine, was glossed over in our church and Sunday School. It wasn't really wine, but probably plain grape juice, such as we had on Communion Sunday, or else wine was different in New Testament times. It must have been, or Christ wouldn't have performed that miracle.

If this were a *Readers Digest* story, full of sweetness and light and human understanding, my father would have taken a sip of wine just to make Mr. Franco happy. But he didn't. He *couldn't*. In his youth he had signed the pledge, and he was a man of principle — the kind of principle that used to get people burned at the stake for their beliefs. He pushed back the glass, said, "No, thank you," and our host was completely bewildered.

Let it be said in my father's defense that he didn't preach to Mr. Franco about the evils of drink. He was as courteous as his rigid standards would permit. He knew that foreigners had strange customs.

And let it be said for Mr. Franco that wine was perfectly legal. The Volstead Act, the 18th Amendment, was some years in the future.

THAT DISASTROUS dinner took place when I was about eight years old. Remembering it still embarrasses me, still makes me pity those two well-meaning men of differing cultures who were trying hard to be friends.

The following summer my father was sick; I can't really remember him when he was well, but now he was very sick, in bed at home, and my mother was caring for him. Uncle George Tayler saw to getting our big garden ploughed and planted. Sometimes he hoed weeds. My mother hoed when my father slept fitfully; it was a chance to get outside. I split kindling and carried in stovewood; those were normal chores for children.

And sometimes Mr. and Mrs. Franco — both of them — came and hilled up our potatoes. They had a big garden of their own. I don't think Mr. Franco worked in it — that was not the proper work for the family head, who had a wife and children for such tasks. But he and Mrs. Franco toiled in *our* garden, shoulder to shoulder, to help us in our time of need.

My father died in December, a few days before I turned ten, and he was a few days short of forty-five. It must have been two weeks later that Mr. and Mrs. Franco came to our house, both crying. They did not, of course, read the paper; they did not talk to the neighbors because of the language barrier — and they had just found out (so late! so shamefully late!) about my father's death.

When they had gone, my mother sobbed, repeating, "I should have thought to tell them! They are such good friends."

A few years later, the Franco family moved to California. They were going to have a vineyard and raise grapes for making wine. And before very long, the making of wine was illegal. I wonder what happened to those people. Something good, I hope.

DOROTHY M. JOHNSON here ends her series of youthful reminiscences about Whitefish, but hopefully this is by no means the last of Johnson articles we will publish. Coming up: an article about the *Ninimbies*, the terrifying "little yellow men" known to Shoshone Indian legend. The author, who says her treatment of the subject will leave some questions unanswered, will contrast the *Ninimbies* with the Little People of the Crows, which "were powerful but benevolent if you treated them right."