

**VOICES OF OLD NORTH**  
by Dennis Corcoran  
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It is an unfinished tale ...

To some, one full of hope ... preserving the old ... beginning anew ...

To others – so many others – the ones who left so long ago ...?

It is the story of America, really ...

Native mounds giving ground in immigrants' hands ...  
Slavery and salvation sharing these common fields once peopled of Sioux,  
Menominee, Sax-Fox, Missouri ... their own long histories soon to vanish under  
tidal waves of human cargo, erasing nearly everything save their names ...

While thousands of miles off, in Europe ... war, revolution, famine and disease, eviction,  
disruption, lack of opportunity ... all of these were soon to cast their shadow, and create a  
new legacy, here, in these, the fields of Old North.

Listen to them ... their voices ... so many voices, from so many lands, each with a tale to  
tell ...

Germans ... Poles ... Irish and Jews ... Russians and Italians ... such a rich human stew, all  
seasoned to perfection with Africans, slave and free ... *[pause]* ... it is often that I think on  
these, the ones stolen from their homes so long ago, generations born into slavery ... what  
bitter root that must be ... knowing slavery, a sole legacy for those who come behind ...

yet all now gathered in Old North ... finding their way in a foreign place, in a foreign  
land, among foreign tongues ... each one making a stand ...

I imagine those were heady days ... of possibility and hope ...

Churches, schools, shops and factories, mills and playgrounds ... row upon row of  
densely packed brick homes springing up all around ... Old North's streets overflowing  
with horses, carts, street cars ... and more ...

What a sight that must have been ... the one that greeted John and Dan – oh, my grand  
uncles, the first to come from Mount Hillary in the far west of Ireland ... so many others  
of our name, God rest their souls, long since thrown into an unmarked grave ...

... they came to earn and save ... go back for the others, the ones who survived ... They got themselves a horse and cart ... bought vegetables at what was to be called Produce Row, and lent their voices to the chorus of vendors, all hawking their wares, a litany of riches filling the air:

Fruits – Vegetables! Fresh Vegetables here! Coal! ... Coal for sale! ... Shoes Repaired! Knives sharpened! ... Rags - Rags ... Milk - Ice ... on and on, morning til night ... seemingly every language under the sun, slowing melting, cooking down, into a uniquely “American” rue ...

My mother’s parents met in Old North - him from Prussia, her from here, of German and Irish stock. They met in 1919. She started work at 12 - a bar maid and kitchen help – illegal even then, or so I’m told – but you do what has to be done. Him, a returning Dough-Boy, got himself a car ... and a snoot full ... drove that car right through her tavern’s front wall ... what a way to meet ... three years later my mom was born.

Stories ... we all have them, then, don’t we?

John – my grandfather - was nicknamed “The Count” ... told everyone he was Polish royalty ... yeah, right. Aren’t we all ...? That’s why we came here – couldn’t abide the royal life anymore ... idling about the grand estate ...

When my mom was six, she won the city-wide marble shooting championship ... from Strodman Park she was ... 1929 ... made Old North proud, that pixie of a girl with the missing front teeth ... with a grin so big - you could only see a hole where her teeth used to be.

A lot has happened since ...

In college, in the 60s, I was the night clerk for the 5<sup>th</sup> District police ... I was on duty the night Martin Luther King died ... the desk sergeant, at shift change, stood on the rung of the booking desk stool and shouted, “King’s been killed in Memphis ...”

... must have been 20-30 officers milling about .. those coming in, those going out ... stone silence ...

I hadn’t heard ... I got home from school around 2 each day, ate dinner, then off to bed ... I slept until it was time to get ready for work around 10 ...

For a few seconds, you could hear a pin drop ... eyes darted, one to the other ... you could feel the fear in the air ... *[long pause]* ... then cheers ...

... yes, cheers ... one black officer ... the district’s sole black officer ... fired his riot gun into the air, ceiling plaster and dust flew ...

... cities burned ... tensions grew ... there but for the Grace of God no one here died that night ... there but for the grace of God ...

Old North had changed ... we all had changed ...

Long before, my parent's families had moved on ... hundreds more like them ... a post-war suburban sprawl giving face to the American landscape of today.

New people moved in, sure ... from out-state Missouri, Illinois, the rural South ... all looking for what everyone had sought before - opportunity, affordable housing, a chance to make a go ...

but shops and factories had closed ... houses, now neglected, some dilapidated, some abandoned ... crime made for tough streets, not so fit for kids any more ... churches had shuttered or were lost to highways ... schools closed ... gatherings on front stoops weren't always as friendly as they were before ...

But, you know ... in spite of that, in spite of it all ... people stayed ... others moved in, some came back ... and ... look ... look around you ...

We all have stories to tell ... of those who died ... of those who survive ... of searching, seeking ... it's the story of human kind ...

And yes, it's the story of Old North, too ... and of so many other places of so very far beyond ... voices of souls searching for a home ... or seeking to connect with something feared gone ... for something to raise up, or someone to hold dear ... or simply to live in a place without fear ...

What I see in these refurbished store fronts and houses ... in the faces of her residents, old and new ... in her community gardens and businesses ... is an Old North renewed. And no, the job is not done. It never is.

All of life is just a story in the making ... one which never ends ... it's as simple, as certain, and as noble as that ... listen to these voices ... hear what they have to say ... of a world now gone, of a world that is, of a world still at play ...

Listen ... to these, the voices of Old North ... and of so many other places ... from so very far beyond.