

PETER WOERNER

December 10, 2018

Water, The Fonte and a Stalk of Grass

When I first went to see Le Tanelle, I was by myself on foot as the dirt road up was impassible. I came over a rise and the branches of chestnuts, oaks and willows draped over the road to form an enveloping tunnel. Below me the trees broke on one side to a sunlit meadow. On the other side the sun filtered to reveal a stream several feet across and just a few inches deep. It came from a small natural pool set against a series of moss-covered boulders. This led up the steep hillside ravine, intertwined with the roots and trunks of trees so dense that no sunlight came through. The pool was so clear that I could see all the pebbles and rocks at its bottom, and it was hard to tell its depth. At the edge of the pool was soft moist earth and there, pressed into the damp soil like an etching, were the three-toed imprints of a bird, the footprints of a fox, the cloven print of a small deer and larger prints of a wild boar.

I became aware of two intermingled sounds. One was the gurgle of the stream as it flowed over the road and dropped a few feet to rocks below and then on down the ravine. The other sound of water came from a simple "fonte", a

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fountain of stone built into the hillside next to the pool.

Above one of the basins was a small lead pipe which water flowed into the "fonte", the overflow slipping down into the pool. Surrounded by a bed of ferns that almost hid it, the "fonte" was weathered and parts of it were crumbling. This was the source of the gentle sound.

I leaned over and cupped my hands under the pipe. I brought them up to my mouth and tasted the water, this source of life. Pure and cool; it came directly from the hillside.

Seven years later, in 1994, I had gotten Tanelle closed in with doors and windows. It was barely habitable; I did have electricity, but we had no water. The architecture students working with me had to make constant water runs in the car with five-gallon plastic containers down to the old "fonte" to get water for cement, cooking and our solar showers. For a toilet, I had built a "plein aire" outhouse tucked into the ruins of the old barn, complete with a toilet seat brought from the States. We called it "Club Merde".

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To get to Tanelle from the main road, there is a simple dirt road over which I had a right of way. The fonte was on this right of way. The peasants who lived at Tanelle had always taken their water from the fonte far down the hill.

My neighbors Karl and Gabriella had heard of a hydrologist; a friend of Achille, the old owner of a masonry supply place in Volterra. I tracked down the hydrologist and arranged for him to come to Tanelle with Achille and his son.

They came in a low-slung late model jet-black Maserati, now covered with the dust of the rough road leading up to Le Tanelle. I had heard the car before I saw it, scraping and bottoming out. I set my masonry trowel down, rubbed my hands on the front of my workpants and went out to meet them.

Achilles's son was driving with the hydrologist, Dottore Gozzi, in the front, Achille was in the back, his head barely showing above the seat.

The son and the hydrologist, both pushing fifty, pudgy and pale, extricated themselves slowly from the car. They

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were dressed in dark suits, ties and expensive shoes.

Before they were out, the old man Achilles was already in front of me, lithe and spry in clean simple pants and an open shirt. His sleeves were rolled up. His forearms and hands were disproportionally large, heavily muscled and sinewy. In his seventies, he was handsome with a silvery head of hair, an aquiline nose, and blue-green eyes that looked right into mine. As he offered his hand, I felt the years of physical work.

I spoke briefly to them of the situation - that in spite of rumors, there seemed to never have been any water up at Le Tanelle. The only water was at the "vecchia fonte" - the simple old trough-like fountain nestled in a grotto-like area with two compartments fed by a natural spring coming directly from a fissure in the rock. It was over three hundred feet away, and one hundred sixty-five feet lower in elevation from Tanelle. I wanted to see if perhaps there was a chance of finding water closer to the house.

As the hydrologist and his son started off behind the house to begin their search, the old man turned to me.

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"Come with me, Pietro."

Mi ricordo, mi ricordo bene," "I remember, I remember well," the old man said almost as if he were talking to himself. "The water always came from the fonte. We carried it up, me and the animals".

As we walked down the road toward the fonte, he began to talk.

"After the war, when I was a very young man, I stayed here at Le Tanelle. Work was hard to find, and they were putting in the aquaduct – the water line. The water comes from right above here, and as you know it goes right by here and all the way to Volterra, where I'm from. I was part of a crew that dug the trench for the water line. Much of it we had to dig by hand. We spent the nights here at Le Tanelle. There were two families living there. We had a good time all together, and sometimes we would gather around the big fireplace after eating and we would sing. That was over fifty years ago."

He stopped, reflecting for a moment, lost in the memory.

"Pietro, you see this grass?"

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He bent down and with a small knife cut the stem of a thick stalk of blue-green grass about three feet tall.

"Wherever you see this grass, there will be water. I don't think the Dottore knows this, but here, you see." He parted the clump of grass and I could see the moist earth.

"There is not enough water here for Le Tanelle, but you see, there is water. This grass is very strong. We would use it to tie things together, to bind stalks of hay for the animals. All of us were very poor in those days. We didn't even have money to buy string, so we used the grass."

He looked up at me.

"My son doesn't understand these things, but I sense that perhaps you do."

I knew a little about Achille from my mason, Gerardo, who had taught me so much about working with stone. After digging ditches, Achille had started working as a mason's helper. He was quick, adept, and "furbo", clever. He began delivering materials to the masons, and built up a masonry business. In time, it became the largest in the region. Achille was now a wealthy man.

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He took the stalk of grass.

"Make a fist."

I closed my hand. I looked down at his hands, arthritic but still strong. I felt the roughness of his fingers as he took the grass and twice circled my fist, then tied it off with a double square knot.

"Now try and break it."

I opened my fist slightly as the slack in the knots grew tighter. The grass was very strong; I couldn't break it.

"Ti vedi," You see.

It was impressive, the strength of the grass, but what was startling to me was how resourceful Achille was. He had experienced the change from essentially a medieval life to success in a modern world. There are few like him left.

We went back up to Le Tanelle. The hydrologist said, "I am afraid there is no water up here by the house." The only solution was to pump the water up from the fonte; a lot of work and digging.

They started toward the car. Achille stayed back and turned to me.

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"Pietro, you are doing a good thing here, bringing life back to this house. Keep going. When you need more material, I want you to come to me."

As I took his hand in mine, I felt a kindred spirit.

"Molte grazie, Achille, molte grazie."

I watched the car wind down the road, past the place where Achille had found the grass, then down further, past the old fonte, and then out of sight. I turned and looked out over the valley to Volterra twenty miles away. Then I turned again and looked up into the hills behind Le Tanelle where the source for the water for the aquaduct to Volterra lay, high up in the hills. I thought of Achille as a very young man down in the trench with the others working under the hot sun.

The right of way and the fonte were on the land that Michelino had bought and abandoned, which had ended up in the hands of Roman developers. The developers had shown up by chance when I was at Le Tanelle. I talked with them, and they gave me permission to take water from the pool at the fonte and pump it up to Le Tanelle with a water line above ground. They wouldn't let me bury it. This involved

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taking my generator in the car down to the fonte with a powerful pump, cranking up the generator, and pumping the water up into a 275-gallon plastic tank. One person at the fonte, another at the house communicating with hand signals. It was annoying, time-consuming and primitive, but at least we had water.

A little later I contacted the developers and set up a meeting at their office in Rome. I met with them and again asked permission to bury the water line, offering to pay for the permission. They were cordial, but I came away with nothing. I drove the three hours back to Tanelle, angry and discouraged.

I felt up against it. In some ways I felt I didn't have a choice. If I buried a water line and the heavy electrical line for a powerful deep well pump and ran it up to Tanelle I would have water. The down side was that the developers could sue me and make me dig up the work. By the time I got back to Tanelle I had decided to do it. I don't gamble, but I am a risk taker, a calculated risk taker.

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I sought out Amadeo, who now kept an eye on the Romans' property and had permission to graze his flocks on the land just below Tanelle. The sheep would drink from the overflow of the fonte that flowed into a small pool below. I told Amadeo that I wanted to do but the Romans wouldn't let me do it. He put his arm around my shoulder and in a low voice, as if the Romans were right there, said, "Do it, do it."

Then he took the forefinger from his other hand and first touched his chest and then brought it upright to his lips, indicating he would never say anything.

It took three days with the excavator to bury the water and electric lines in the ditch next to the road. You could hardly tell anything had changed. When it was done, I went to the best meat store in Siena and bought the most expensive prosciutto they had. It cost over \$150.00. Later that evening, I drove up to Amadeo's house. When I got out of the car his wild boar-hunting dogs went crazy barking, pulling at their chains. The light above the door came on and a large body stepped out into the light. "Who is it?" Amadeo yelled.

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"Pietro."

I walked up to him and handed him the proscuitto.

"Amadeo, Molte grazie."

The next day, I left for the States. Amadeo and I never spoke again about the water line, and I never heard from the Romans. Five years later, Amadeo bought the land from the Romans for much less than they had paid for it. Now, over twenty years later, I have the legal right to the water line.