

Immigrants

I knew a man some years ago who managed an oil distribution company and I asked him why so many gas stations were run by (pick a nationality, but one with dark, swarthy skin.) He said that the major oil companies had approached families in these countries and offered them deals that Americans wouldn't take. Americans didn't want to have their entire family work almost 24 hours a day, sometimes sleep in the gas station, for the small returns offered by companies like Exxon or Mobil. The gas station franchise business, he said, wasn't like I remembered in the old days back in Utica when Mike Cuda and Don Stemmer ran a station next to the Uptown Theater that supported two families rather well. For an immigrant, a gas station was a chance to come to America and get a start, if they were willing to completely devote their every waking minute to the job. Therefore, when I told him I saw a turban headed old guy with sleep in his eyes crawl out from under a counter one afternoon in a nearby gas station, he said it was not

unusual. Or a mother and her two young girls sharing a dinner from a pot as they sat cramped in a small gas station kiosk one evening.

Back home, the family had gotten together as much money as they could from everyone in their town to come to America and buy a business with a small down payment. Almost every single dime of profit went to pay back their benefactors, and sometimes to help bring more townspeople to our shores.

Meanwhile, my friend said, the business would prosper and accrue value. After 6 or 7 years, the family might sell the gas station at a hefty profit, having taken very little out of the business, and buy a nice house somewhere. If possible, they would send the kids to college. Slowly the family would be on their way to build what most of us remember as The American Dream that we thought was no longer available. I guess it is, with hard work.

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The Press At
Windswept Farm

Saugerties, NY

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