

## THE HUSTLERS

Ya got trouble (oh, we've got trouble)  
Right here in River City!  
(Right here in River City!)  
With a capital T and that rhymes with P  
And that stands for pool.  
(That stands for pool.)

--Harold Hill and chorus, The Music Man

Poolroom. The very mention of the word conjures up images of seedy, shadowy, smoke-filled spaces where small-time sharks with cigarettes dangling from their lips play straight pool, French, eight ball, and nine ball for bragging rights and a little cash.

Morgan Pompili's poolroom, Renovo's own, was all that and more. It had three top-of-the-line Brunswick tables, ample seating for spectators, reasonable prices (e.g., 25 cents for a 25-point game of straight), and enough goodies to spoil your appetite for supper.

But the main thing that drew us to Pompili's was a movie. We had seen *The Hustler*, Robert Rossen's acclaimed 1961 black-and-white Cinemascope film, and thrilled to Paul Newman's breakthrough role as Fast Eddie Felson, a talented Oakland upstart with a cue and an attitude who was looking to dethrone the legendary Minnesota Fats (played by Jackie Gleason), the dapper and rotund king of pocket billiards. The epic straight-pool games depicted in *The Hustler*, combined with Fast Eddie's brash, rebel-with-a-cause personality and ultimate triumph over Minnesota Fats and sleazy gambler Bert Gordon (George C. Scott), were enough to make any card-carrying kid want to shoot pool.

Indeed, we were so taken with Newman's portrayal of Fast Eddie that we used to recite his most memorable lines as we swaggered around the tables chalking our cues:

"I don't rattle, kid. Just for that, I'll beat you flat."

"You don't leave much when you miss, do ya, Fat Man?"

"Get on me, Bert. I can't lose."

Occasionally, a knowledgeable kibitzer would interject a prompt or two as Bert Gordon ("Eddie, you're a born loser" or "Where do you think you're going, Eddie? You owe me MONEY!") or as Minnesota Fats ("Shoot pool, Fast Eddie"), and whoever was shooting would launch into an over-the-top response:

"I'm shootin' pool, Fats. When I miss, you can shoot. You know, I got a hunch, Fat Man. I got a hunch that it's me from here on in. Six ball, corner pocket. I mean, that ever happen to you? You know--all of a sudden you feel like you just can't miss? 'Cause I dreamed about this game, Fat Man. I dreamed about it every night on the road. Five ball. This is my table, man. I own it.

"It's a great feeling, boy, a great feeling when you're right and you

know you're right. Like, all of a sudden, I got oil in my arm. Pool cue's part of me. It's a piece of wood; it's got nerves in it. You can feel the roll of the balls. You don't have to look--you just know. You make shots nobody's ever made before. And you play the game the way nobody's ever played it before.

"How should I play this one, Bert? Play it safe? That's the way you always told me to play it--safe. Play the percentage. Well here we go--fast and loose. One ball, side pocket. Yeah, percentage players die broke too, don't they, Bert? How can I lose? Twelve ball. How can I lose?"

Of course, Fast Eddie wasn't munching a frozen Milky Way (a Morgan Pompili specialty) when he said all that. It certainly would have improved our image as hustlers if we had forgone those Milky Ways.