

NEIGHBORHOOD LIVING – PART 1

Growing up in the 50s and 60s, “The Bronx” was our neighborhood. It provided us with housing, education, and recreation. This small area of a few square blocks gave us something tangible, comprehensive and something very intimate and familiar by which to measure the larger world. Despite the changes going on all around us in those days, the presence of family and friends in the neighborhood made the world seem peaceful, stable and unchanging.

All the neighborhoods shared the same characteristics, but most were unique in their own way, making that neighborhood definable and slightly different from another location perhaps only a few blocks away. Sometimes the ethnic group, which gave its own cast to a neighborhood, could cause the difference; in other cases, it might be caused by the accident of geography, the economic standing of the inhabitants, or the architecture of the buildings.

Mott Haven, for instance, had a large Irish population living in apartment houses built at the turn of the century standing amid still older frame or brick houses, hugging each other as they faced the ever more crowded sidewalks. They were not the only ethnic group in the area; there was a mixture in population. In St. Mary’s Park, the children of Jews, Germans, Italians, Greeks, Poles, Afro-Americans and other ethnic groups would mingle laughter as they played together and enjoyed each other’s company.

Similar scenes would be witnessed on the streets of Highbridge. Here the Irish were also the dominant ethnic group, but a walk along Ogden Avenue, the main street of the neighborhood, would reveal sights rarely seen in Ireland.

A Lutheran Church near 161st Street on the slope of Ogden Avenue as it descended from the heights of the ridge along which it ran bespoke of the few Scandinavians in the neighborhood. At the other end of the Avenue, near the Washington Bridge an occasional kosher butcher shop revealed the presence of a Jewish population. However, it was such sights as the Noonan Towers Apartments, the vast Noonan Plaza Apartments, and people dressed in bright green on St. Patrick’s Day, which told the visitor that the neighborhood was largely inhabited by the Sons of Erin.

However, it was not the ethnic character of Highbridge, which set it off from the neighbors as much as it was the geography. Located on a high bluff at the edge of the Harlem River, which separated The Bronx from Manhattan. Most of the east-west streets abruptly ended at the bluff’s eastern end. This was a cliff, which almost formed a wall ending at Jerome Avenue below. Only at the northern end of Highbridge was

this sheer drop made better by the gentler slope of Boscobel Avenue, which connected the Washington Bridge with 167th Street.

Beyond the Highbridge bluff, extending eastward from Jerome Avenue up to another crest of a hill and sloping down farther eastward from that was the area called the Grand Concourse. It took its name from the wide boulevard, which meandered along the crest of the hill. Here, on either side of the Grand Concourse, the vast majority of the people were Jewish. This was shown by the large number of synagogues, which could be seen in the neighborhood. Along 169th Street, west of the great thoroughfare, for instance, there were three in a row. The one on the corner was the elegant Adath Israel, and it was the largest of the three.

However, the Concourse neighborhood was set off not only because of its Jewishness, but also by the economic status of its inhabitants. They were rather well-to-do families, and their status was evident in the uniformed doormen who stood in front of their upscale apartment houses.

Of course, the Jewish population of Hunts Point, a few miles away, would also attend High Holy Day services dressed in the best they could afford. They were not as affluent as the Jews who lived along the Grand Concourse. Most of them worked hard for a living in a factory, or in a sweatshop as they were called. Many of them made their living in the needle trades and were strong union men. However, even here, the population was not completely Jewish. There were Irish and Italians in the neighborhood, later to be joined by Hispanics. Although the Jews were the majority of the population of the area, St. Athanasius Church on Tiffany Street still stood and flourished in the heart of the locality.

Just across the river from Hunts Point was Clason Point. Although it was simply the other bank of the narrow river, it could have easily been another world. Clason Point was a broad, flat, sandy peninsula that was just about as empty as Hunts Point was crowded. People who lived in the Academy Apartments, or the brick two-family homes built along the flat streets, shared the neighborhood with farmers, most of whom were Italian. It was not uncommon to see cows grazing along Soundview Avenue near the point where Commonwealth Avenue crossed it, while people hurried to the trolley, which stopped at that intersection to get to work from the attached two-family brick homes along Commonwealth.

A far different sight would greet a visitor to the Belmont area. Hemmed in by Third Avenue, Fordham Road, Southern Boulevard and Tremont Avenue, this compact neighborhood was almost solidly Italian. Very much like Mott Haven, there were turn-of-the-century apartment houses and older frame houses, although some of the apartments were more modern. However, the flavor of the neighborhood was set by

the market strung along Arthur Avenue. Here, produce was not only sold in the stores, but it could be purchased right on the sidewalk. The fresh fruit and vegetables, the salami and sausages, and the pastries gave the street a pungent aroma that made the mouth water. All along, the street shoppers would be haggling with the proprietors of the stands, sometimes speaking their native Sicilian or Calabrese.