

Reminiscences of Life in New York City

The Bronx: Fordham Road & The Grand Concourse, 1933-1940

The Grand Concourse, *'Park Avenue of the Bronx'*: *'Uptown, It's Alexander's'*; Yankee Stadium, *'the House that Ruth Built'*; Fordham College campus leading into *The Bronx Botanical Garden*, in turn, leading into *The Bronx Zoo*; *Krum's Soda Parlor* across the street from the world's most majestic *Loew's Paradise Theatre*; *P.S. 185*, another New York City school with no known name; *Poe Park* with its bandshell and whistling along as Edwin Franko Goldman's Band played John Philip Sousa marches on hot summer nights; Walt Disney's *Fantasia*; roller skates, mumbly peg, marbles, hop scotch, ring-a-levio, hide and seek, Olly-olly oxen-free, pea shooters, chestnuts on a string, zip guns, *London Bridge is Falling Down*; *East Side, West Side*, *Sweet Rosie O'Grady*; *'Pepsi Cola hits the spot, twelve full ounces, that's a lot. Twice as much for a nickel too. Pepsi Cola is the drink for you.'*; measles, mumps, tonsils; street and sidewalk games, opening hydrants; selling paper and scrap metal to the rag man on a horse-drawn carriage; pony rides, organ grinders, ..., black outs, air raid drills.

Hell's Kitchen, 543 West 49th Street, 1944-1955

Red points, rationing, merchant ships in the westside docks of Manhattan, the capsizing of the Normandy, ... the memories began returning.

I was about ten years old when my mother and I moved uptown from Chelsea, near the General Post Office, Pennsylvania Station, the New Yorker Hotel, and the 'Garment District', to our smaller, but still cheaper, rent-controlled apartment in Hell's Kitchen. Even at a modest rental of \$18 per month, our finances were a struggle, as they were for many of those living in New York's poor, working-class districts.

However, our income was even less than that of *'working class'*. We lived primarily on aperiodic alimony checks coaxed from my father, a post office mail sorter, as part of a court-decreed *'legal separation'* of a Catholic couple. Divorce was prohibited in the Catholic religion and, if I was correctly informed, also in the State of New York.

Our Hell's Kitchen walk-up apartment consisted of two rooms, a toilet, and a small storeroom. The apartment had no refrigerator, but an ice box. We purchased blocks of ice from the iceman, when necessary, by appropriately orienting a cardboard sign indicating 25 or 50 cents. Rarely did we have much to keep cool. One of my chores was to empty the melt water into the sink before the pan overflowed.

We also had no central heating. Each apartment in the five-story tenement was equipped with a pot-bellied coal stove so that, periodically, we purchased a scuttle of coal. Even during periods when we were without a fire, it seemed to me that the apartment stayed reasonably warm, perhaps, due to the insulation provided by adjacent apartments.

Of course, no one we knew had a shower or what we would, today, recognize as a bathtub. All apartments were equipped with a large tub adjacent to the kitchen sink. I don't recall bathing often, but when I did, the coal stove was used to heat batches of water to pour into the tub. It always seemed cold by the time one clambered up roughly three feet into the tub.

At my age, I was not bothered by New York City's summer (or winter) weather. Still, in warm weather, my mother would run the tap water continuously to 'cool' the apartment. Charges for water were included in the rent. (I didn't understand it at the time, but there were no individual

water meters.) In New York, water was considered to be free - and everyone seemed to take liberal advantage of the gift.

Electrical power was a different matter. Most residents would not answer the doorbell during the day for fear of bill collectors; in general, and the electric company collector, in particular. Many tenants were regularly served notices of impending service shutoffs. These generally materialized. Accordingly, everyone kept a clutch of candles. Candlelight dinners were not thought of as romantic as they are today.

It find it of historical interest to note that our neighborhood was served by the Edison Electric Company. As a result, every building was served by direct current so that we were limited in the electric appliances we could utilize. While many people had radios, as late as 1955, no one we knew owned a television set. As a gift to me after I gained admission to engineering school at The Cooper Union in 1950, my mother purchased a fluorescent lamp and had it converted to DC so I could perform drawing tasks at home at night.

All this might sound as if I am complaining '*woe is me*'. In truth, although I knew there were many rich people who lived in neighborhoods such as 'Sutton Place', etc., I generally assumed that most people lived in a similar fashion. This assumption was reinforced by having as neighbors a contingent of longshoremen who worked on a day-by-day basis; hired during the so-called '*shape-up*' as in '*On the Waterfront*'. We also interacted with a number of aspiring writers and performers who had come to New York to gain a foothold on Broadway. If there was a significant criminal element operating in our neighborhood, most of us seemed unaware of it. People in Hell's Kitchen were simply poor.

One of my fondest memories of Hell's Kitchen was the impressive Horn and Hardart '*pie factory*' located between 49th and 50th streets on the west side of 11th Avenue. (Because of the orientation of the Island, Manhattanites use the descriptors '*east*' and '*west*' deftly.) The strong fragrant odors from this large featureless building were delightful. Horn and Hardart also operated a day-old bakery outlet on the southwest corner of 49th and 11th, if I remember correctly. My mother would purchase day-old bread, rolls, and pies that we thought were superb.

Around midnight each evening, a gaggle of local residents would gather on the north side of the Horn and Hardart '*factory*' to await the delivery truck bringing '*whole milk*' to the bakery. We carried bags and, more often, pillow cases, to collect the discarded ice to take home to our ice boxes. It was only after coming to the Midwest that I encountered what appeared to be a widespread view that poor people remained poor largely because they were indolent. I was shocked. My experience indicated that it was very hard work to be poor. Life seems to become considerably easier after one has accumulated money and property. How many hours had these refrigerator owners spent waiting to pick up chunks of ice off the ground to put in their ice box?