

## Reminiscences of Life in New York City

### 1. 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. #85*, another New York City school with a number rather than a 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.

### 2. 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 (New York 1, New York), 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 has 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?

### **3. Stuyvesant High School: 1946-1950**

I didn't know it at the time, but the all-boy Stuyvesant High School was the college preparatory school for the Borough of Manhattan. Students were led to believe that Stuyvesant had a sister school, Julia Richmond, to accommodate girls, but most of us never even discovered where that treasure trove was located.

Large classes assembled in a huge monolithic building just south of an apartment entryway marked with a brass plaque identifying it as the one-time NYC residence of

Antonin Dvorak. (I didn't know who he was and had never heard of the '*New World Symphony*').)

Enrollment at Stuyvesant was such that thousands attended an afternoon session for the first two years and a morning session for the last two. However, Stuyvesant's selection of courses was seemingly endless, particularly in the sciences and mathematics. Between incessantly playing handball and stickball, first, in the mornings, then, in the afternoons, I ended up taking ten mathematics courses, including calculus. (In my imagination, I planned to design a building akin to an Empire State Building. In reality, I spent the greatest part of my time playing ball games in and on the street outside of SHS.)

Stuyvesant students seemed to execute an endless series of State Regency exams. Before I could celebrate scoring 93 on such an exam, I would learn that most of my classmates had scored in the range of 95 to 98. Also, the underlying significance of these exams escaped me. Whereas my classmates planned to attend Harvard, MIT, Cornell or, if it came down to that, CCNY, I had no plan to attend college. It was simply unaffordable.

If there were '*guidance counselors*' at Stuyvesant in the 1950s, their availability and utility were unknown to me. Instead, students seemed to both give and receive guidance from one another via rumor, mythology and guesswork. In this regard, I recall that, during an overcrowded physical education class one afternoon, I stood idly next to a casual acquaintance who asked where I was going to college. (He might have well have asked if I planned to go the moon.) Surprised by my answer, he undertook to become my advisor. "*There's a free college called Cooper Union. I think it is in Brooklyn.*", he confided. (*Free?* Reporting this rumor galvanized my mother who was more than eager to make any sacrifice to see me continue my education. She was ambitious on my behalf and provided incentive.)

I sent a '*penny postcard*' requesting an application form to '*Cooper Union, Brooklyn, New York*'. Sometime later, I received an application packet. It turns out, The Cooper Union is located in the east village of Manhattan on 8th Street, only a short walk south of Stuyvesant High School. Some thoughtful postal employee had done me an important service by properly routing my postcard.

Subsequently, I would take College Entrance Exams and undergo a personal interview by a Cooper alumna, during which I was asked about baseball (I was an avid New York Giants fan. *Mel Ott. 'Trinkle, Trinkle, little star ...'*) and girls (I was sure I would like them if I ever met any.). Along with 119 other new freshmen in 1950, I was admitted to the College of Engineering to study Civil Engineering. (There may have been one female in this larger-than-usual entering engineering class. Cooper's *admissions officer* was reportedly anticipating attrition due to the military draft.)

#### **4. The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art: 1950-1955**

There was an Art School at The Cooper Union. It appeared that half of its enrollment was female. Engineering freshmen, laboring in class 30 contact hours per week, would see very little of them. And we found little time for handball, either.

For the first year, students in Cooper's four basic engineering disciplines (Civil, Chemical, Electrical, Mechanical) were blended alphabetically into five sections, designated 'one' through 'five'. These mixed groups occasionally participated in intramural sports. Despite the fact that there were neither cheerleaders nor spectators at our contests, I wrote a '*cheer*' for my section's basketball team: '*D-R-I-B-B-L-E, dribble, dribble, Section Three!*'

Notwithstanding my lack of cheer-writing skills, I later became editor of the student paper, *The Pioneer*, '*All the news that fits, we print.*' We 'covered' the McCarthy hearings held in NYC when they interrogated a Russian-born electrical engineering instructor who taught at the Cooper Union. There, we saw a huge TV camera for the first time while a spectator, outraged at the brutal unfairness of the questioning (*Does Cooper Union hire Communists like Harvard does?*) was dragged by plainclothes security men from the hearing room. I seem to recall that his photograph, wild-eyed and being forcibly restrained, later appeared in a New York tabloid.

The Cooper Union was reportedly very selective in choosing from among thousands of highly qualified applicants. However, one's pedigree and the selection process didn't deter professors from flunking students that didn't live up to their expectations. As a freshman, I came across several upperclassmen checking the bulletin board for posted grades. '*Did you flunk anything?*' one quizzed. (I had never met anyone that had ever flunked anything.) Soon, I would realize that, in a tuition free college, it cost the institution nothing to dispatch any underperforming student. One failed course and one

immediately became a *'five-year man'* since coursework taken elsewhere was not transferable to The Cooper Union. Math medalist at Stuyvesant, I flunked math at Cooper and became a *'five-year man'*. (Still other classmates, flunked out.)

Characteristically, all of Cooper Union's engineering students became excellent draftsmen as well as competent surveyors. The College operated ***Green Camp*** in Ringwood New Jersey where the full complement of engineering students were assigned to surveying camp the summer following their freshman year. Oddly, this helped provide subsequent summer employment for all but the Civil Engineering cadre. The latter group continued to labor in advanced surveying camps in the middle of each summer to *'find north'*, *'practice route surveying'*, and *'learn cadastral surveying'*.

Even so, Green Camp was a revelation to those of us who had spent our youth largely confined to the City's streets and tenements. The sale of Green Camp to finance Cooper Union's growing deficits was a blow to most alumni who, often in retrospect, viewed it as an irreplaceable escape from our concrete urban desert.

Some months ago, my contemporary Cooper colleagues weighed in (via e-mail) on what, in their undergraduate experience, was most memorable and valuable. Some cited our backgrounds in math and physics; others, our immersive introductions to art, music, and the humanities. Perhaps oddly, I cited the graduation requirement that we *'learn how to swim'*. What occurred to me was that someone had decided that the young - and helpless - Cooper graduate should not be condemned to drowning.

### **Upon the Deaths of Some of our Cohort**

We will not forget Art or Larry.

We will rendezvous with them in the dappled shadows of the Third Avenue El.

A group of us will cross the Avenue for a laboratory class in the Hewitt Building.

I will greet Art as we pass on the stairwell to Peter Cooper's Free Public Library

- and I will visit with Larry as he labors within the street-side office of The Pioneer.

Late some Friday afternoon, sitting at a table in McSorley's, we will beckon them to join us.