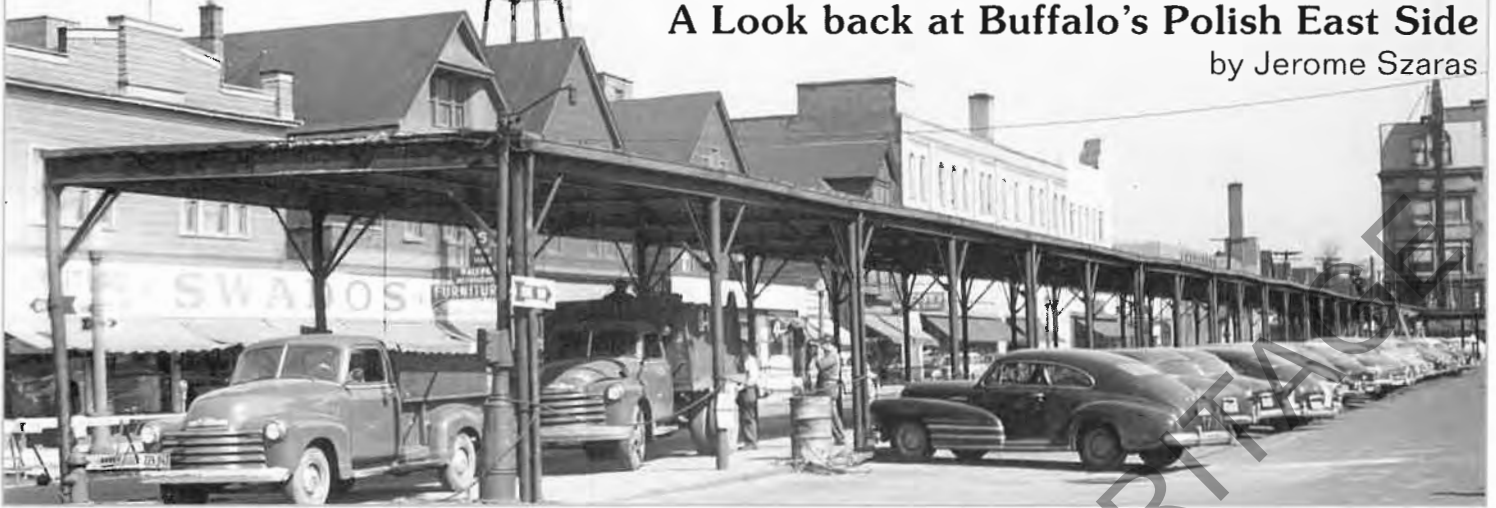


A Place for Lost Time

A Look back at Buffalo's Polish East Side

by Jerome Szaras



Broadway Market canopy on Gibson Street side, 1951.

As a former resident of Buffalo's East Side Broadway-Fillmore area, I belong to a unique generation. What makes my generation unique is a sense of permanence. Ironically this sense of permanence was appreciated only by the realization of its loss.

Born in 1938, I lived on Guilford Street in the same house for twenty years. Guilford was located four blocks west of the Broadway-Fillmore intersection, a Polish-German neighborhood. Looking toward Broadway from my front sidewalk I could see the Pempsell Bros. Garage on the left corner, Shell's Bar and Grill on the right corner, and Zawadski's Butcher Store directly across Broadway Street. Turning the corner and proceeding west

on Broadway, one would encounter the Lucki Urban Furniture Store, where you could pick up an elegant sofa or a sturdy wash machine for an affordable price; the Roosevelt Movie Theater, where on a Saturday afternoon for twelve cents you could watch two feature films, ten cartoons, a newsreel, and the current episode of a serial saga; the Western Auto Store, from where you could drive home the bicycle you purchased pre-assembled and for which there was no extra charge; and Sattler's, the East Side's premier department store.

When I moved away from the neighborhood in 1959, these places, along with many others, were still there, essentially unchanged. During the next twenty years these landmarks disappeared as accelerated

change, due to technological advances, suburban competition, and social dislocations transformed the East Side into an environment of uncertainty and fear, a political hot potato.

I am going back into time to recapture the flavor of the East Side from the post WWII era to the late fifties in the hope that fellow East Side residents who remember these years can say to their children, "Yes, that was what it was like."

First the outer boundaries of the East Side must be established. These were perimeters beyond which residents seldom needed to travel in order to meet their social needs.

Paderewski Street was a southern boundary with its string of taverns couched between Fillmore Avenue and



Guilford Street, north of Broadway, with a view of the Pempsell Brothers Garage at the Richfield Gas Station, 1954.

the Central Terminal, a major rail hub of the post WWII era. It also contained the VFW Adam Plewacki Post, named after the first Polish soldier killed in WWII.

Humboldt Park was the northern boundary with its sunken gardens, giant wading pool, and classical Museum of Science building. It was there we played our formal games of baseball on real diamonds, swam in the summer, and ice skated in the winter.

Bailey Avenue was the eastern boundary, and I remember driving to the Broadway-Bailey intersection in a convertible with my father in August of 1945 on V.J. Day with confetti falling, sirens wailing, church bells pealing, and horns honking away.

On Bailey Avenue between Broadway and Walden Avenue stood the Wildroot Cream Oil factory where many East Side residents found employment. It was the answer to a national radio network jingle: "You better get Wildroot Cream Oil, Charlie..."

The western boundary was Saint Ann's Catholic Church, back of which was a towering brick building that housed an auditorium for roller skating. On Saturday afternoons teenagers rented roller skates and glided across a spacious wooden floor to the music of a juke box set up on the stage. Those boys bold enough to team up with a girl will always remember the clutch of sweaty palms, the awkwardness of trying to move in synch with their partners, and the scent of perfumed hair as they got their first taste of female intimacy.

The East Side of my era experienced the last vestiges of horse and wagon service. Ice was delivered house to house by this means before electric refrigerators replaced the "ice box." A father and son team hauled cuts of ice down the street with their horse and wagon. The father held the reins, and the strapping young son used tongs to swing a block of ice onto his canvas-covered shoulder, and

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Fillmore Avenue and Broadway with a view of Liberty Bank and Sears, 1954.

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would climb two to three flights of stairs to service people in multi-family dwellings.

The “rag-man” used a horse drawn wagon to collect scrap for the junk yard. There were also fruit and vegetable vendors who worked the neighborhood in this way.

More modern service was provided by Hall’s Bakery, whose trucks delivered baked goods to your home, and the milkman, who stopped his truck in front of your house to leave your order on the front or back porch. The bright orange and white milk trucks were from the Hillcrest Dairy, which was owned by my uncle. It was located on Kilhoffer Street off Genesee.

A man who sold linen and curtains from his car made the rounds, and you could literally put a dollar down and a dollar a week on your drapes because the records were carefully kept and everyone’s credit was good.



Paderewski Drive and Smith Street, 1953.

I can’t leave out the popcorn man. His steam whistle would draw patrons from their homes to surround his two-wheeled push cart. Kernels of corn were popped in a big glass case, and the vendor would use a scoop to fill a box with popcorn to sell to you for a nickle. Before giving you the popcorn, he would pour fresh melted butter into the box from the spout of a

metal container heated by a jet of gas, a small perpetual flame, just another feature of his trade. This kind of personal door to door service will probably never be seen again in our society.

Incidentally, I have to number myself as one of the door to door vendors providing service to the neighborhood. I was a newspaper delivery boy for the *Buffalo Evening News*, one of my first jobs.

People on my street sought out each other for entertainment. One way they got together was with street dances. Entire blocks would be closed off to traffic so residents could listen and dance to music provided by live bands. When heavy rains came and flooded the street, it became a social event. We gathered on front porches to watch cars stall in the deep water and kids float by on inner tubes. Some people would travel house to house in rowboats. A neighbor with wading boots and a long metal pole would catch the manhole cover in the middle of the street and remove it to

drain off the water. He was roundly jeered by the crowd for bringing an untimely end to the celebration.

A favorite hang-out for young people was the Liberty Ice Cream Parlor on Broadway between Reed and Strauss Streets. You sat in rich mahogany booths sipping cherry cokes and sodas on marble table tops. You could select records to play

from the juke box (“Wheel of Fortune” by Kay Starr was an all time favorite), and check out your reflection in the mirrored walls.

There were special programs to entertain East Side youth. A union hall on Fillmore near Broadway was utilized to show Saturday afternoon movies which were free of charge. They were usually old Abbott and Costello films. The Polish Falcon Society on Sycamore near Fillmore featured gym and exercise programs for teens and sponsored athletic contests



Schrieber Brewing Company, Fillmore Avenue. 1951.

including foot races. My sister was a member of a girl choir sponsored by the Polish Singing Society. For a minority of older teens who craved less wholesome excitement there were gang rivalries. Polish gangs dominated the East Side. The Irish held South Buffalo. The West Side belonged to Italians and African-Americans ruled Jefferson Avenue and points west. Social contacts between East Side teens and African-Americans took place at the concrete swimming pools at Masten Park, but relationships were tentative. I learned how to swim at Masten when my buddies threw me into the twelve foot diving pool. “After you sink, you always float up to the surface,” they reassured me. When I was older, I upgraded my swimming skills at School #44 located on Broadway and Person Streets. School #44 had an indoor pool

with instructors and a program that offered certification for Beginner, Intermediate, First Class, and Lifeguard status.

Gang members identified themselves by emblems sewn on the backs of corduroy jackets. In retaliation for incursions into their territory, Polish gangs would cruise South Buffalo streets at night riding on the back of trucks, and when they spotted rival gang members, would jump off and beat up on them. Once, in the upstairs lobby of the Paramount Theater on Main Street in Buffalo, I found myself sitting quite by chance between some Polish and Italian guys who began trading punches. I found myself dodging bodies that were hurling over lounge sofas, and ash trays and chairs went flying through the air. Of course, the Italian and Irish guys that belonged to our neighborhoods and schools were "OK."

Some of the gang fights were highly publicized, but I can't recall a single fatality. Guys in East Side gang wars lived to fight another day.

There were less violent activities in movie theaters that would qualify as pranks. If you had a seat in the balcony of either the Roosevelt or Rivoli theaters, you would fire lighted matches at the screen for a "shooting star" effect. Essential equipment was an empty thread spool, an elastic band across one of the spool holes, and a wooden match. The match was placed in the uncovered spool hole and drawn back with the elastic band until only the match tip stuck out of the spool. The match was then lit by striking its tip on the floor and then aimed and released for effect from this make-shift sling shot.

Another favorite disturbance was created by kids in the theater who opened exit doors to let in their friends who didn't have the price of a ticket. A sudden shaft of light from the opened door would bring ushers thundering down the aisle with their flashlights to try and apprehend the shadowy figures sneaking into the show.

Television had been introduced but had not yet developed the power to keep young people glued to its screen. The only regularly watched show was "Friday Night Wrestling," and its sponsor was the Stein Brewery, which took up all the space between Shumway Street and Smith Street on Broadway Avenue. Those were the days when the



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North side of Broadway, east of Filmore, circa. 1952.

“good guys” fought clean and the “bad guys” fought dirty and there never was any confusion as to who was “good” and who was “bad.”

Mostly, though, kids met out of doors in order to play. You went to the side door or the back door to call out your friend, Tommy. “Oh Tommy,” you shouted, and if Tommy were home, he would pop out of his house to greet you.

A lot of amusement was improvised. Your scooter was home-made, built with an orange crate nailed to a base board to which roller skate wheels were attached, front and back. A couple of wood pieces nailed to the top of the orange crate served as handle grips, and off you would go, pumping furiously with one foot to get up coasting speed. Soda pop caps were used as decorative emblems.

A favorite week-end activity for the guys on Guilford Street was to swing on the flag pole of Seneca Vocational High School, which once stood on Guilford Street between Broadway and Sycamore Streets. The flag pole rope was untied, and the candidate stood on tall pipe rails to push off and swing out over the iron picket fence in front of the school. The farther your distance over the pointed pickets, the more daring the ride.

In the fall, leaves were raked up and disposed of by burning them at the curb side in front of your house. You and your friends would walk back and forth through the smoke, materializing and dematerializing like ghosts.

Another fall activity was to cook raw potatoes in tin cans. Two holes were punched at the top of the can so a wire handle could be attached. A nail was used to punch holes in the bottom of the can for ventilation. Sticks, twigs, and dry leaves were used to create a fire in the can and the potato was then placed into the can to cook. You swung the can back and forth to create puffs of smoke. It was a great effect. When the outside of the potato turned black, you knew it was ready to eat. No potato ever tasted as good as the one cooked in this way.

A symbol of Polish pride was the Chopin Singing Society. Located on Broadway and Kosciuszko Streets, it consisted basically of a large barroom connected to a party room and a pool-room, and upstairs were rooms to let.

A baby grand piano was in the bar-room to accompany the singers. Many concerts and dances took place there. My father was the Steward for Chopin’s and I often helped him stock the beer coolers

in preparation for celebrations. I also observed him and my mother dance a mean Polka at some of the parties.

Chopin’s also sponsored a Polish soccer team which competed where the Creekside Inn now stands at William Street and Union Road. At that time a soccer field stood behind the Creekside Tavern, and on Sunday afternoons I watched two teams butt heads in a bloody competition that would make you hesitate to call NFL football a contact sport.

Not far from the Chopin Singing Society was Al Cohen’s Bakery. It is still located at Broadway and Sobieski Streets, but in remodeled form. It was the bakery that never closed. Well, the front part of the bakery closed, the glass framed front where the baked goods were on display, but there was a little side door where at any hour of the evening or the dark hours of the morning, a customer could slip in and buy fresh rolls and bread from the night manager. I can tell you this from experience because I worked as a bread cutter and packer at the bakery when I was fifteen years old, sometimes on the day shift and sometimes on the night shift when I packed for the bakery trucks. There was French bread, Italian bread, twist bread, pumpernickle and rye, hard rolls, soft rolls, and sweet rolls with frosting and raisins. Could anyone resist



Broadway looking easterly with a view of the Shea's Roosevelt Theatre, 1954.

the smell and taste of bread and rolls hot from the baker's oven? All through the night as the moon waxed and waned, East Side residents slipped in and out of the little side door exchanging money for bread, the most basic transaction of civilized society.

The economic lynch pins of East Side society were the Broadway Market and Sattler's Department Store. The Broadway Market had an indoor section out front and an open parking area in the rear. In the summer months, the outdoor section was lined with vendors with colorful umbrellas over their stands to provide shade for themselves and their goods. Fruits and vegetables were the order of the day. When very young I accompanied my grandmother on afternoon shopping

trips and watched in awe as she bargained with the vendors. The initial price was never accepted. My grandmother was Polish, and the vendors were mostly Polish Jews. The bargaining took place in both Polish and English, and the heated exchange would frighten me. My grandmother would trash-talk his goods and after a futile attempt to defend his price, the vendor would throw his hands up in disgust. When my grandmother turned to walk away, the vendor would call her back to lower the price and the haggling would begin all over again. I was relieved they didn't resort to blows. Imagine my surprise when, after the sale was finally completed, the vendor would call her back to throw an extra orange or potato into her bag.

Sometimes customers would have their wagons with them to make it easier for them to carry their shopping bags back to their homes. Most of the houses in our neighborhood didn't have basements, and so there was a small door you opened on the side of the house so you could crawl under to thaw frozen water pipes in the winter. It was handy to keep your wagon behind this door. It was not unusual then to see men and women pulling wagons up and down Broadway Street on shopping days.

After Sattler's was rebuilt to usher in the East Side era of the modern department store, even Hollywood took note. The opening ceremony was hosted by Hildegaard, a veteran film comedienne, buxom and blond, and a large crowd was on hand to greet her. Sattler's was indeed a "one stop wonder store," where you could purchase anything from kielbasa to curtain rods. The basement was reserved for groceries. There you could find fresh meat, live poultry, fish, fruits, vegetables, nuts, canned goods, sugar, coffee, milk, butter, and cheese, salt, pepper, and spices. The upper floors featured clothing, housewares, furniture, sporting goods, toys, games, tools, jewelry, and all manner of work-saving gadgets which were demonstrated by professionals who were both informative and entertaining.

I remember a yo-yo expert who got all the kids on my street to buy Cheerio yo-yos, and we would compete with one



The Chopin Singing Society celebrating its 60th anniversary, 1959.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE HON. ANN MIKOLL

another to see who could best “walk the dog,” “rock the cradle,” and “spank the baby.”

I was mesmerized by a magician who made a tiny rubber mouse scoot across his palms as he deftly put one hand in front of the other to seemingly keep up with the rodent’s speed. He attributed the success of this trick to the power of the “gismo” that came with the purchase of the mouse. Naturally I bought this product and ran directly home with it to try it out. I was disappointed to discover that the “gismo” was a tacky piece of adhesive that attached the underside of the mouse to an almost invisible thread tied to the magician’s suit coat button. The mouse didn’t move at all. It was the magician’s skillful hands that moved to create the illusion of motion, but I never mastered the trick to make it look half as good as he did.

In the shoe department was an x-ray apparatus that looked like a weighing machine. You stuck your feet into slots at the bottom and dropped a penny into the coin slot. You looked down at a screen through a window at the top of the



854 Broadway, storefront signage reads: Broadway Tea Room. 1954

machine and, lo and behold, the bones of your feet became visible through your shoes. This became our favorite way to spend pennies. No one questioned what hazardous consequences might result from the repeated exposure of your feet to x-ray radiation.

When I graduated from high school I was looking for a summer job and...you guessed it...I got work at Sattler’s. I was hired as a stock boy in the grocery department. Together with a grammar school buddy who was already on the job when

I got hired, we proceeded to give the stock manager fits. We were supposed to display the products contained in certain boxes by cutting away the entire face of the carton with our razor tools. One of our favorite tricks was to carefully cut display windows which were only postage-stamp size. I guess we enjoyed watching the veins of his neck pop out while he chewed us out.

I didn’t suspect it then, but the care-free aspects of my youth were coming to a close. Soon major changes would shake up my life and finally cause me to leave my home. The image of the East Side I’d like to leave you with is my memory of the sidewalk benches on Broadway and Fillmore where people sat and talked to each other about news, about gossip, and their take on the events that were shaping their lives. Every one of us plays a role in the drama of unfolding time. If I had known I was making history, I would have paid more attention. ¶

Jerome Szaras was author of an article on Leon Czolgosz in the Fall 2001 issue of *WNY Heritage Magazine*.

FROM OUR READERS

(continued from page 2)

Dear Mr. Conlin:

I am overjoyed at finding WNY Heritage. It is the only place I can find memories of Buffalo older than I am...the article on skiing (remember when folks were trying to change it to “sheeing”?) brought back memories not of ski clubs but of going under the Delevan Avenue Forest Lawn fence and emerging on the Delaware side to ski down the hill next to the park refreshment center ending with a jump off the lake retaining wall onto the lake. (Frozen it was pretty clean!)

Thanks for the memories but I fear I shall frequently get lost when I return for the Lafayette High School Centennial when I cannot find some of the landmarks you have brought back.

Sincerely yours,
Robert E. Wurtz
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Dear Editors:

I hope you know just what a treasure Erie County has in its native son, the Honorable Sal Martoche, author of one of the feature articles in the Winter 2003 issue of *Heritage Magazine*. It was my good fortune to meet Justice Martoche last spring for an evening that he arranged at the Chautauqua Institute. I am a resident of “downstate” and learned from the Justice that we share an interest in General Donovan. I practice law in New York, where I am a partner in the law firm, LePatner & Associates, located at 101 East 52nd Street, New York City.

In the summer of 1998, my wife and I (both undergrads of Cornell) acquired the personal Nuremburg War Crimes papers (some 628 pounds, bound together in over 150 leather books) of General Donovan from the law firm founded by Donovan (Donovan Leisure Newton & Irvine). The Donovan firm was disbanding and closing up its office in New York City. We acquired

these valuable history records and donated them to Cornell where they currently are housed in the Cornell Law School Rare Book room and are being actively reviewed by scholars from all over the world...while at the Chautauqua Institute, I met a group of Western NYers who not only were interested in General Donovan but also were actively spearheading the Robert Jackson Center, to commemorate Jamestown’s favorite son, the late Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States and lead prosecutor for the United States at Nuremburg.

Justice Martoche does all of us a great service by documenting the accomplishments of Erie County’s native son...Justice Martoche’s “Lest We Forget...” feature article simply put is a gift. We can all look forward to the next article.

Thank you,
Henry H. Korn
New York, New York