

Down Memory Lane

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South San Francisco's Irish Town Grand Reunion November 1, 1997 - Elks Lodge, SSF

On a sunny spring day, as I was driving along Hillside Boulevard, my mind drifted back recalling how things used to be. Driving due east on the "Old Snake Road," as Hillside was called then, I remembered that the area just south of me was where the old Reichhart Duck Farm used to be. As the road started to curve around Sign Hill, I recalled the Quicksilver Mercury Mine Shaft by the water tank, on the east slope of the Hill. Descending into Paradise Valley--kept green by the Paradise Valley Creek, which provided water for the old "T-Bar-X Ranch" and the Martin School Irrigation Pond--I reminisced about the dairy cows grazing along the south side of San Bruno Mountain and how, in the spring, the Valley would be ablaze with colorful wild flowers.

Approaching Linden Avenue, I recollected that this was where Demarci had his horse corral. The creek flowed under Linden to provide moisture for a large area, which we called "The Willows". For the brave amongst us, the tunnel under Linden (dark, dank, dirty and full of bugs and spiders) provided a formidable challenge. Right on Linden, left on Armour, down to the Bayshore Highway-- there stood the immaculate White Spot Truck Stop. Crossing Linden, we come upon the sea cave and, looking upon the hill, we notice the Heinz 57 sign and kids selling bunches of blue irises, which they picked from San Bruno Mountain.

After driving down Butler Road to the train stop, across the train tracks, and onto the beach and the dumps, I headed back, thinking about the shops that employed many Irish Town people: the Fontana Noodle Factory; Edwards Wire Rope Company; Western Pipe and Steel; Bethlehem Steel; and the Enterprise Foundry. Down the frontage road to Grand Avenue and up town--there was Oliver's, Alphonso's Bar; Bull Moose's Pool Hall; the Naughty Pine Motel; the Hotel Norman, with its pool table; the Oxford Hotel; the great family dinners at the Industrial Hotel; the Golden Eagle Hotel; and Herman's Pump House. On Juniper Avenue, we come upon the Gellepis Laundry and Bakery. We pass in front of the Fischer Estate, with its beautiful formal gardens, the lawn swing tied between two large pepper trees, the fish pond with exotic fishes and rock gardens. Next door to the Fischer's stands the original farm house, from whose acreage the Buckingham Subdivision was created. Suddenly, the fragrance of freshly baked bread reminds you that this is Wednesday, and every Wednesday is bread baking day at the Maschiovecchio's outdoor bread oven. Up the street, the First Assembly of God Church moves into the old Joe Fredoz Grocery Store Building. And, next in line, the Pacific Coast Food Store-- affectionately known as the "Greek" Store. Across the street lived Mrs. Mercks, in her gingerbread house with the leaded glass windows and the hand-turned door bell--right in the middle of the door.

Juniper was the main street of Irish Town, and it evokes many memories: the horse drawn junk wagon coming down the street early on a Saturday morning with the driver softly calling out, "Rags, Bottles, Sacks;" the fish peddler with his brass horn; George Roccasalva the fruit peddler, with his phonograph blaring. Finally we reach the corner of Juniper and Linden, anchored by the Liberty Market. There goes Carolina Bottini hauling a side of beef into the store! We cross Linden to find Cavassa's Drug Store in the Baratteri Building, with the Baratteri Grocery on the corner of Linden and Aspen. As we move down Linden, we pass Galiano's Shoe Repair; the Prandi Bakery; the original site of All Souls' Church, on the corner of California and Linden; the Lux and Linden Avenue "Pond."

I head downtown and circle around to come up Grand Avenue. Do you remember the El Dorado, the Lone Ranger Club, Sil's Smoke Shop, the Tasty Good Shop, the Tasty Sweet Shop, Three Owls, Robinson's Pharmacy, the American Legion Hall atop the Bank of America Building (known from WWII as the "Hospitality House", the old Bernard MacCaffrey Post #355), the Bombay Club, Pete's Restaurant (under two different Petes: Pete Dress and Peter Sargent), Jennings' Pharmacy, Welte's, Santini and Rocucci's Family Clothing

Store (with the machine that X-rayed your foot), Baldassaroni's Jewelers, Nieri Funeral Home (which now houses St. Vincent De Paul), Spuri's Photo Shop (when Mr. Spuri himself would come to take your class picture at school, he always wore a beret and whistled like a bird), the Steel Bowling Alley (which was formerly the Chevrolet dealership), Don Vowel's Creamery on Grand Avenue in the 30's--and how all the dogs in town would howl when they shot the cannon off each year during the Portuguese Chamarita--and do you remember how you could spend at least half an hour selecting five cents worth of penny candies from Jack Riordan's Candy Store? And what about "Black Jack" Chewing Gum? And Milk Duds at the State Theater? And the "Hub" on Grand Avenue was certainly a hub of activity for the ladies as they met to shop and exchange the gossip of the day. And do you remember shopping at Arndt's Department Store?

And then there was All Souls' Baseball Field, Boido's Bakery, Grand Avenue Street Car Line, the Market Street Railway, the Leipsig, the original Enterprise Journal Newspaper, Fraternal Hall, the "Redman," the "Eagles," the "Rams Men's Club" (colors red and white with block sweaters), Fat Boy Bar-B-Q, the 12-Mile House, Molloy's, Lyles, the Big Western Night Street Dance (when they closed down the intersection of Linden and Grand), Chamaritas Portuguese Fiestas, the Greyhound Dog Track (now Mayfair Village), the Baden Kennel Club, the State Theater (with Les Immerman), the Royal Supply Hardware Store (with A. J. Eschelbach), the Royal Theater, Cook's Mortuary, the 40 Line from San Mateo, rubber gun fights, push races, kick-the-can, steal-the-flag, Borba's Explorer Scout Drum Corps, the water cress tank at the end of East Grand Avenue.

...Let's focus on the early days and the colorful personalities of Irish Town and other parts of our city. First of all, we know that the early day Irish Towners loved a good baseball game and there was always a boisterous celebration when they beat the French Town residents. Unlike Irish Town, French Town did not survive. Some of the early French families in our City included: Fourcans, Fouries, and Dayans.

Of course, the first to settle in Irish Town were the Irish butchers and workers who followed Augustus Swift and Company to South San Francisco. The first man to serve as Chief of Police in our city was Clyde Conrad, an Irishman. Another Irishman, M. F. Healy, had a hay, grain, wood and coal business on Linden Avenue between Armour and Juniper. Also on Linden was the Carmody Store and the Foley sisters lived nearby. Lolita Kelly was the only kindergarten teacher in town, while Dan McSweeney was City Clerk. "Doc" McGovern was the local dentist and a county health officer. Another Irishman, Bill Hickey, was the only plumber in town and his brother, Tom, was a civic leader and an early day San Mateo County Supervisor. Joseph Quinlan served as both an early day mayor and postmaster, while the town prankster, Patrick Bowler, gleefully taunted civic leaders. Bowler was annoyed with all politicians when he returned from World War I to discover prohibition had closed all local saloons. And, of course, all the youth in the 20's, 30's and early 40's still remember Officer Henry "Skinny" McGraw, a legend in the South San Francisco Police Department. Captain Augie Terragno recalled he was one of many who were impressed with the power of Officer McGraw's size 13 shoes. Augie said he was coming out of the old Royal Theater, after a Sunday matinee. He admitted he might have been a little too cocky. All of a sudden, Officer McGraw took aim with his size 13 shoe and made direct contact with Augie's caboose and Augie was airborne. Augie said, "That taught me a lesson."

Mame McGovern McGraw, Skinny's wife, was an early day teacher at Baden Avenue School. A neighbor of Mame's, who had nine children, was complaining to Mame that she was always tired each morning as she prepared breakfast and sent the children off to school. Mame gave her some practical advice: "Jennie," she said, "you should start off each day with two straight shots of Irish Whiskey."

After the Irish, the Germans settled in Irish Town. Families included Fischer, Bildhauer, and Lautze. Other Germans in town were Welte, Schmidt, Kauffman, Eschelbach, Gerdes, Gatenbein and Snyder. The Germans raised big families. Old time politicians used to say, "never mind the rest of the town, just get all the votes in the Welte, Fischer, Gatenbein and Schmidt families and you'll be elected."

Following the Germans were the Italians with such names as Uccelli, Galli, Vincenzini, Santini, Roccucci, Rodondi, Penna, Bollazzi, Bottini, Curti, Tognetti, Tacchi, and Belloni. There was the Cavassa Pharmacy and, at Liberty Market, Mrs. Bottini did the work of two men. You could find anything from a cheese grater to a washboard at Giffra's or Marioocha's on Grand Avenue. Tom Galli and Frank Vincenzini gave kids free hot dogs at the Palace Market, and when the Palace Meat Market first opened, there was a party in the basement of the establishment for the entire town. One prolific lady did her best to increase the Italian population in town...according to the Enterprise Journal, in 1921, a Mrs. Piva welcomed her 17th child. Then came the Greeks. There was the Gellepis Bakery, Xerogeanes Grocery and the Nicolopulos Superior Steam Laundry and Oxford Hotel. Two young boys, Tom and Gus, tended bar at the hotel and peeled hundreds of potatoes to feed the boarders. Other Greek families included Balopulos, Marefos, Dress, Yeatrakis, Gonis, and Dilles. And we should mention that a Greek boy, James Dilles, wrote a wonderfully descriptive book entitled "The Good Thief" which told all about growing up in Irish Town in the Depression years. Sad to say that James passed on this past year, but his best seller book remains in print.

Spaniards were the next nationality to settle in Irish Town. Families included Garcia, Herrero, Ruiz, Villanueva, Perez, Bilbao, Ron and Ygleisas. The various Spanish fraternal societies held their annual parades, marching up Grand Avenue. Spanish girls from Irish Town marched in the parade wearing colorful costumes of various provinces as they clicked their castanets, and after the parades, there were Spanish picnics. No one ever went home hungry. Don't forget that in addition to Irish, German, Italian, Greek and Spanish, there were other nationalities in Irish Town. The Bernard family originated in Portugal, the Hussars and Petroffs from Bulgaria, and the Cortez family from Mexico.

Remember...variety, the spice of life, has given life to Irish Town.

In conclusion, what has Irish Town come to mean in today's world? It is true that none of the original Irish are left, and we must acknowledge that Irish Town was more of a melting pot, a state of mind, and a way of life, than a specific ethnic thing. For in this area, the original Irish were joined by the Italians, Greeks, Portuguese, Mexicans, Spanish and a handful of Germans, Frenchmen, Scotsmen, and Black Africans. You might say the original rainbow coalition that worked hard and played hard...all in peaceful coexistence...all in their quest for a new life in America.

Reissued for the December 2011 SSF Historical Society Newsletter