

Post Daily Magazine

The Old Neighborhood



A number of Post reporters went back in recent months to the blocks where they grew up. Their reports continue today.

ARTICLE IV: Greenwich Village.

BY ROBERTA BRANDES GRAZT

MY APARTMENT HOUSE is long gone, replaced by a grotesque monument otherwise known as the NYU (New York University) building in a state of bulimic exuberance, a renovation promising some grand, improved design of the park that none of us thought needed improvement. Nathans is coming to 8th St. Miroples is already on the corner of MacDougal and Bleecker, and Himm's—the once famed coffee house—is now a boutique.

If there is anything remaining of the Greenwich Village as I grew up in the '40s and '50s, it is elusive. Many of the brownstone-lined streets remain, their West Village quality intact, but the hostiles abound of intruding apartment houses is never far off the horizon.

Gone is the spirit of the small community, separate and distinct from the rest of New York and the nation. Gone is the feeling that whatever was off limit in the Village—the people, the dress, the symbols, the issues—was at least its own and not imported.

Gone too is the predominance of small shopkeepers—more craftsmen than businessmen—concentrated in the low rent store fronts or cold-water flats. It is difficult to assess change in Greenwich Village. On the most personal level, nothing is the same. Yet in a larger sense there is still something special about the Village. It is still a progressive area unique to this city in architectural diversity, with a personality all its own. It is still the hub of news-newsmen, new dress, new life styles—even if all these are immediately commercialized. And it is still politically aware, the first to take politics out of the hands of the professionals, the leader in social fights and landmark preservation.

Life for me started in the Village and remained there until the early 1950s, when I was in my teens, my parents summoned to the suburban South. My father, like so many Village merchants, had been attracted to the area by the possibility of a low rent, small business opportunity. He started with one dry-cleaning store, expanded to four—in the Village—and until he sold out and moved to Westport, he was a one-man operation.

We lived first in a brownstone walk-up on Charles St. and then a small apartment on West 100. But the place I remember best was the spacious six rooms we had for about eight years after that on Washington Square South, overlooking the park. When NYU took over our building to tear it down, we headed for Connecticut. Even then, NYU was already an intruder. Bit by bit the university had land had been taking over prime Village real estate to reconvert a campus.

The heart of Greenwich Village, 8th St. where MacDougal road sets in, as it was in the late 1930s, with a hawker's article were immediately recognizable as such to a couple of years before the book. The author of today's article, the photograph, as it happens, shares the storefront with L. Brady, Cleaner, Tailor, her father's shop.

It was an ideal location for a child. The park was my backyard and there were few park regulars we didn't know. Except for the university students, park people were Villagers and their friends. Strangers were immediately recognizable as such to a crowd. Crowds were unusual even on warm weekends, tourists were few and obviously out of place. Yolk-encrusted, stuffed Washington fish to turn around and start back up 8th St. but that never stopped the ball games, roller skating, or the biggest sport of all—seeing who could throw the ball to the top of the Arch.

So the park was a very intimate place. The Good Humor man knew us all, and even extended credit. Everyone knew to whom each dog belonged. And the year's special treat was carding on Christmas Eve at the tree under the Arch.

Our mothers let us play in the park, unwatched, confident that should a fall or a fight occur some grown-up would take care of it. There was little mischief you could get away with without your parents hearing about it. The safety of their children when elsewhere in the Village was also something our parents were fairly sure about. This was already changing by the time my family left, but in the years that I attended the famed progressive Little Red Schoolhouse, walking five or six blocks to school each morning—alone or with my older who was eight years older—was nothing to be concerned about. It was a routine we maintained day in and day out without incident.

Certainly the Village had its share of teenage-day disturbances, but the degree of violence and fear didn't compare with today. Bloody noses and scratched faces were merely thought of as part of growing up. Ethnic clashes with the Italian-American kids of the South Village were not uncommon, but weapons were rarely more dangerous than sticks.

Retracing my daily school walk—west on 8th St. south on MacDougal to Bleecker—in a diverse experience today. None of the good feeling of friendly, unworded streets remains. Signs for "Artists Wanted" at the petting-painting stands, open-front food stands,phony bookies, all irritate the sensibilities.

One of the few surviving phenomena is the cheap syndicated night spots on West 12 between MacDougal St. and Sixth St. They were always there, offering the latest titillating sex shows. Over the years they have simply adjusted to the current fads—front strippers in gown gowns to the implicit artists of today. They were never, even back then, being ranked, along with, as it were, the

Our after-school habits were in keeping with all the rest. The then still uncommercialized coffee-houses—where the espresso was brewed by the elderly Italian proprietor—were our equivalent to today's coffee-drugstore soul fountain.

There were also the Italian grocers, bakeries,

vegetable stands, push carts with flavored ices. As a matter of fact, the South Village Italians and the bohemian community coexisted peacefully until the encroachment by the Beasts in the 1950s, and later the Hippies.

Some of the South Villagers were pushed out by these newcomers, others departed seeking upward mobility. Today the Italian community is still very much in existence but it is also very much smaller. Rumor has been the Village's worst enemy.

Most obviously hurt were the small entrepreneurs—the ones who slumped together jewelry, crafted hand-woven shawls and bags, or created other "Village" merchandise. The handiworks jumped their rents and drove them out of business. Then, too, anxious not to lose their customers to the less personal but more lucrative world of Upper West, the small stores were the heart of the Village's life style, one of the things that kept it a community within a city. Their demise has only accelerated the destruction of the neighborhood's character.

The number of stores that remain as they were on 8th St. can be counted on one hand. Everything new is offensive: open-front hot-dog stands that are a cheap reflection of Times Square, chain-link clothing stores offering the newest in ugliness and slandering their styles after the Village. And one stretch of small stores is enclosed in a most incongruous imitation of a suburban shopping center, with the pointed roof, red-brick front, white columns.

If the new stores throughout the area aren't part of citywide chains, they look like they might as well be, and this intrusion is perhaps the most distasteful of all. For whatever reason, it is in the Village—good or bad—was at least its own.

Greenwich Village, for example, used to be a rich source of used and rare book shops. Only a few remain. Says Nathan Pine of Dunbar & Pine, who has been at his Fifth St. and 8th St. location since the 1920s: "One old brownstone is better for me than a 20-story apartment house. The brownstones had libraries, roomier bookshelves. Their apartment books are read, but they have no space. All they want is paperback."

Signages and addresses are everywhere, and only what is left of the old Village spirit and pride has kept the lines of William Zeckendorf from completely transforming the Village into another Upper East Side. With each new high-rise there is another loss of the people who flourished in low-cost apartments. And then there goes a little more of the rich variety of economic levels that was a part of the old Village. If it isn't already, the Village is swiftly becoming one of the highest rent districts in the city.

The Village was, after all, a microcosm not only of the city but of the world—with its interracial couples, its rich and poor, young marrieds and aging isolates, artists and nerds, and all not only living side by side but mingling in the streets and making common cause in many a stand against outside invaders.

Those battles were not easy won, and while I was still living there I saw the high-rise, No. 2 Fifth St. replace the beautiful Henry James houses on Washington Square North. The Strimling houses on Washington Square South in which, for so many years, so many artists lived virtually rent-free, were bulldozed to make way for the imitation Federal-style NYU Law School.

But then there was the long-fought and ultimately triumphant struggle to bring Robert Moses' road "out of the ditch" from Lincoln to Park. The victory was successful, to get the Fifth St. lanes out of the Park zone and for all the potential battle of nationwide significance which brought about the demise of Carmine DeNapoli as a reigning power, and the long fight that is finally being won this year to obtain the West Village Co-operative Housing Federation's new five-story buildings.

Other changes, too subtle for someone who left the Village as long ago as I, have been afoot at the neighborhood.

One veteran Village newcomer: "Everyone and their friends about their lives. This was a great coming-together of intellectuals, particularly after World War II. Many of them were not remembered, but it was 'turned on' to the best meaning of the word. You came to be with friends or to buy things; now it's just a place. If I want to be the center of the unattached individuals, and the center for experimental schools like City & Country, Bank Street, Little Red, etc."

In the 1950s, unfortunately, the Village started to join the rest of New York and it really changed. The Beasts took over MacDougal and Washington Square changed from a community to a metropolitan park. The Village still is a place with a character but it's fighting to survive.

IN THE WEEK-END MAGAZINE: Park Avenue