Local History Department

Growing up poor in Red Hook

by John Burkard

Let me take you back a few years to 1945, the final year of WW II. This was a time in Red Hook Village when it was virtually impossible to find a parking place. Even more startling, hardly anyone in Red Hook owned an automobile.

These cars belonged to the hundreds of dockworkers that entered Red Hook to work in the ship repair yards that sprung up along the waterfront. Don't confuse these workers with the locals who workded on the piers. Our locals were hardworking union members who were the heart on soul of our Red Hook community. Most walked to work, not many owned automobiles.

The car owners came from elsewhere, drawn to the Red Hook to work on the shipyards that were busy filling government orders to replace ships that were destroyed fighting the enemy overseas.

Many of us kids were a little mischievious when it came to these cars. We played a game with them that I called "Shuffle the Cars." What we did was to take a car parked on one street and relocating it. When the owner returned ready to drive home, of course he couldn't find his car. The police would locate the reparked vehicle and advise the owner where he could find it. Many times the owner's anger was calmed when he discovered someone had replaced his worn out tire with a brand new tire taken from another poor unsuspecting motorist. While one motorist was calmed, another would be incensed.

Quite a few of these offenders were caught in the act, for as the car shuffling increased, so did the police surveillance. The offenders were taken to Juvenile Court, processed and served one to two years at West Coxackie Reform School in upstate New York. They inherited a criminal record for life for a stupid senseless act. My older brother served 18 months at there. When the Korean War broke out, he and I were drafted, but at examining time, he was quickly rejected because of that blot on his record when he was 15 years old. He was devastated.

Poor and hungry

I recall as a youngster being always hungry, as were many of my friends. Most of us did not have the luxury of an electric refrigerator, instead we still had the old fashioned ice-box. These ice boxes usually served no purpose because much of the time we couldn't afford the ice that was needed to keep any perishables cool enough to prevent spoiling.

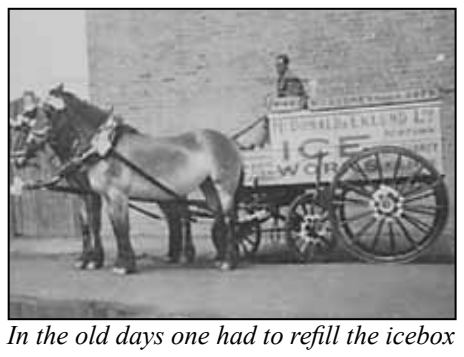
We would take turns swiping mickeys from local supermarkets. Mickeys were what we called potatoes, of course you can see the Irish connection there. Then we would gather at a place called the Trees, two huge vacant lots loaded with trees and foliage. There, we built fires to cook the potatoes. How we ate them I'll never know; usually they ended up burned to a crisp.

We needed something to wash down these succulent delicacies. This involved an evening jaunt over to Morgan Beverages. We would boost one another through a window and come out with a few cases of Sarsaparilla, return to our campfire and often stay the night, stoking the fire to remain warm through the chilly evenings.

It wasn't all that easy as a youngster growing up in Red Hook, but we knew where to find the vittles when we were hungry. One evening while stocking up on our soft drinks for a Friday night cookout, we were caught red handed by a rough looking man who turned out to be Morgan's General Manager. We all thought for sure he would call the police. Instead, he surprised us by asking if we wanted to work Saturday on the four to twelve shift. All hands replied with a resounding "YES!!!" He told us to come by at 3:30 the next day and he would put us to work.

We were unwitting scabs

Little did we know we were strikebreakers. The union refused to work the extra shift, so unintentionally we became scabs. The following week, we were kept on the four to twelve permanently. We started to receive threats from the regular workers. We were told they were going to wait outside at midnight and waylay us. Most of the guys who had started work decided it wasn't worth the trouble. All except one—I always was a glutton for punishment.



In the old days one had to refill the icebox with ice from the ice man, but only when you could afford it.

I called my brother who just got out of reform school. He arrived at midnight with five or six other toughs that hung out in the 13 Corners Bar. The threatening workers never showed up, and I was good for the entire summer.

We also had variety in our sparse diet on Coffey Street where Valentino Park is now. The big grassy area just before the entrance was a storage location for huge hogsheads. We soon discovered they were full of green olives. It didn't take us long for us to add these yummies to our cookouts in the trees.

All in all, we didn't do bad for a bunch of kids brought up in the slums of Red Hook.