

Living in Lower East Side Manhattan in the 60s

Joanne and I moved to the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1965. We rented an apartment at 47 Delancey Street, next to a building that was once a synagogue. The area was a melting pot in every way and bordered on Greenwich Village, Chinatown and Little Italy. There were Hasidic Jews, Italians, Puerto Ricans, Chinese and many other ethnic types. Our apartment was rent controlled and cost us \$79 per month. The rent control law specified that the rent could not be increased until a new tenant rented the apartment.

Many shops were to be found along Delancey Street. One that I remember sold cut glass items imported from Europe. Several places sold food such as Pizza. Some vendors sold produce from horse-drawn wagons. Delicacies such as knishes (a traditional Ashkenazi Jewish snack consisting of a filling covered with dough that is baked or deep fried) were sold from push-carts for the price of 15 cents each. Orchard Street was an especially active area



for finding great bargains. Jewish merchants were always anxious to start the week off right with an early sale on Sunday morning. They enjoyed bargaining with me, and, on many occasions, gave me great deals on items I wanted. There were several bocce ball courts where men were constantly playing the game. I would sometimes watch in fascination, not really understanding what was going on!

On the first floor of our building was the Portnow Truss Company (a truss is a support garment), owned and operated by two brothers who were also our landlords. There were several interesting people who lived in the building. I remember Richard Ballantine, whose apartment was right across the hall from ours. He had a rather interesting pet, a jaguarundi named Pepe. This is a wild cat species native to the Americas. Richard gave us a key to his apartment so we could bring Pepe over anytime we wanted, something we did on many occasions. We subsequently learned that Richard's family founded and operated the Ballantine Book Company. On one occasion, Richard invited us his place in the Catskill Mountains of New York. Later, after we left New York, Richard became an expert on bicycling, and wrote the popular *Richard's Bicycle Book* (1972). Another person, living on the third floor, was writer Bill Marsano, who still lives in Manhattan. Teddy, the custodian, was a hard-working man who took care of any problem.

We made many friends in Manhattan. From time to time, they came to our Delancey Street apartment for various activities. I remember playing string quartets, meeting with our bird-watching friends and enjoying the game of bridge.

Things I especially remember include the Festival of San Gennaro in Little Italy, walking to Chinatown for a delicious inexpensive meal, and Sunday visits to Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village where people gathered to make



music, recite poetry and argue about the issues of the day. One unique event stands out, even now many years later. On a street near our apartment, a man wearing Jewish religious garments, approached, and, without saying a word, gestured for me to follow. Today, I would never do such a thing, but then, it was different, and I trusted him. We went into a building and then through several rooms. The last room appeared to be a meeting room which I took to be a synagogue. He pointed to a switch on the wall, and I got the message that he wanted me to throw the switch. I did this, and he seemed satisfied, I then left the building. When I asked some people later, they told me that he was not allowed on the Jewish Sabbath to do something like moving the switch. .and he needed someone else to do it for him. I will never forget this!

Some really big events stand out in my memory. Perhaps the greatest of these is the great blackout of November 9, 1965. I had attended a meeting of the Linnaean Society at the American Museum of Natural History. After leaving, I boarded a local subway train. I had just gotten off the local to catch the express, when all the lights went out in the underground station. The only light at all was from battery-powered emergency lights. There was of course no such thing as a cell phone in those days, and people began to queue up at phone booths, which still had power, to make important calls. I proceeded upstairs to the sidewalk and saw a remarkable scene – Manhattan and Brooklyn, as well as across the Hudson River in New Jersey, had no light whatsoever. It was so dark that you could not see people walking toward you on the sidewalk until they almost bumped into you! The only light was from passing cars and buses. People were desperate to find a way home. I saw buses pass by with people hanging on the outside because there was no room inside . I went into a bar near the museum where there were rumors of sabotage by foreign countries like China. I was able to call Joanne to tell her that I needed a ride. When we finally met, as I got into the car, people were begging us for a ride downtown. During our drive, I witnessed the remarkable scene of traffic trying to navigate streets with no functioning traffic lights. Pedestrians were trying to cross streets through moving traffic without the aid of traffic lights. Finally, we got home, went upstairs to our apartment and went to bed for the night. When the sun came up the next morning, we could see subway cars on the Williamsburg Bridge not moving. Passengers were afraid to exit onto the tracks because of the possibility that the electricity would come back on, and they would be in danger. They had spent the entire night on the train! Finally, electrical power came back on, and the business of the city came back to life.

So, these are some of my memories of life on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the 60s. It seems so long ago now, but, in those days, it was very exciting!