



Special Edition

A Publication of the Lackawanna Historical Society

Vol. 1 No. 4

September - October 2018

Eating Scranton: Childhood Memories

Michael Ruhlman's *Grocery* opens with a sweet memoir of his father's joy of shopping in a supermarket. The recollections of his father's excited Saturday morning grocery compositions that led to the cherished excursions fed my own memories. Having been raised in the west side of Scranton, going shopping with my mother and enjoying some of the dishes our neighbors shared are memories I decided to explore just as Ruhlman did.



Catalano's

One afternoon this past summer, I walked several blocks to Catalano's for that sweet, brain-freeze known as an Italian Water Ice. Catalano's is a fragrant Italian Deli that opened in 1924. The present owner, Paul Catalano, has held court at the small table in the produce section since 1963. The table is typically reserved for men (a private detective whose office is over the store, local political figures and "cousins"). Paul told me I could be a cousin too if I came in every day and bought something. I sat amongst the men eating my water ice and smelling the cheeses that hung a few feet over my head. This store has not changed since I was a child. Paul answered questions about pasta, anti-pastas, imported items, recipes and family news. I spent one of the best hours of my life soaking in all the joy of being there. When I lived away as a young married, I brought one empty suitcase with me to fill with Catalano's treasures. That suitcase still smells of cheese. Catalano's is the only store on Main Avenue left from my childhood.

The Butcher

Hoban & Gerrity's, 131 So. Main Ave.

On Saturday's my mother would push the pram with my sister in it down to Main Avenue. If we turned left that meant we would be going to the bakery. If we turned right it meant Hoban & Gerrity's Butcher Shop. No free samples at the butcher. The case was at eye-level and I peered in at all the strange cold things inside. My mother would buy calves' hearts, liver, kidneys...cuts of meat I

wouldn't eat now if paid to. Just as other people in the neighborhood, we were poor and these cuts of meat were what we could afford and what my mother knew how to cook. William Gerrity founded the butcher shop about 125 years ago in West Scranton. Gerrity's is now a major local supermarket selling more than meat.

Woodlawn Dairy, 337 No. Main Ave.



For milk we depended on delivery. There were several local dairies that delivered quart bottles of non-homogenized milk in glass bottles. Oh, the cream under the little paper stopper was the joy of any child who could get to it first. But for ice cream, my father's addiction, we would drive to Burschel's or walk to Woodlawn Dairy, both in West Scranton. I used to think there were only two choices...chocolate or vanilla. When Dad discovered CMPs (chocolate,

marshmallow and peanut sundaes) we were into the caviar of ice cream. We'd pile into the green Buick and drive to Shadowbrook, which is near Clarks Summit, and ogle at all the different kinds of ice cream sundaes, milk shakes and flavors we never imagined. It was the first time I ever had chocolate Jimmies.

Bakery, 323 No. Main Ave.

Needing a birthday cake, bread, or hard rolls meant going to the National Bakery or Linden Bake Shop. The cakes that adorned the front windows were my idea of great art. One Saturday morning while we were in the store, my sister wandered over to the window when Mom was talking with the baker. Patti put her little fist right into the icing. We left the store, the crime going unrecognized, until my mother's forensic observations of Patti's icing-covered fingers and face, and the smushed cake in the window, led to a quick getaway. Both bakeries have moved, but National Bakery hard rolls are liked by everyone and a good cup of tea and a buttered hard roll make for a great Sunday morning breakfast...still.

Roy the Huckster

Fresh produce came by way of a converted school bus painted blue and parked in the alley way outside our house on Saturday afternoons. You entered from the front, walked down the aisle and where the seats had been tables of fresh vegetables and fruit had been arranged. Roy was a local farmer, probably from West Mountain, who drove his wares around Scranton. All the neighbors milled

around the bus talking in Italian, Welsh, Greek, Lebanese, Syrian or English. A special recipe, food, gossip and news was exchanged. Mrs. Scaramuzzo could make frog's legs. Mrs. Leon made flat bread in her basement earthen oven. Mrs. Gianacopolis made stuffed grape leaves. Mrs. Hazzouri made kubbeh (a meatball-like mixture of lamb and bulghur). I ate all those things and I thought they were much tastier than kidneys.

But the pièce de résistance for a Saturday was the huckleberry lady. She would spend Saturday morning hand-picking huckleberries on West Mountain and then carrying a bushel basket on her head, walk the length of Lafayette Street as if a regal Queen of Africa shouting, "hucklberrieeeeeeeeesssss!" If I were lucky I could scoop out a pint and we would eat them later with some cold Woodlawn Dairy milk.



The Ice Man

On hot summer days the ice man would bring a block of ice for my grandmother's ice box (she finally relinquished the brown wooden thing in 1955 and bought a refrigerator). The neighborhood kids would beg for a hunk of cooling ice and he would kindly chip off a few chunks and give us the chunks.



Grandmother's Ice Box

There were other purveyors of necessities and oddities in our neighborhood. The rag man who drove the white horse, the man who brought around a pony and we'd have our picture taken on it all dressed up in cowboy outfits, and the tinker who sharpened knives and scissors. All gone, of course.

The A&P, 341 N. Main Ave.

There were a myriad of small mom and pop groceries on Main Avenue, but I do not remember a one. They were likely not exciting enough places for a kid, but the A&P, now that was a big deal. It opened in 1952. The specialty shops that lined the West Side Business District began to disappear once the A&P opened.

Thursday night my Dad was paid and Friday when he came home from work, we'd

drive to the A&P. We could take home a watermelon, a treat my mother could not carry home in the pram. To me the store was huge. Row upon row of foods I had never seen. We could buy meat, dairy, fresh produce, but never ice cream...that was too sacred a purchase for a mere grocery store.

Going to Town



Scranton Railway Co. Trolley

Venturing out of West Scranton entailed taking the trolley into town. Riding past the Wholesale Block meant seeing warehouses and storefronts with fruits and vegetables on display. The Wholesale Block, which was a two-square block area fronting on Lackawanna Avenue across from what is now the Federal Building and the Lackawanna Transportation System station, received all the food that came into

Scranton on rail and then distributed by truck to stores in the area. On occasion we would walk past the storefronts and buy apples, or bananas from Hazzouri's Imports.



We had to dress up to go to town and eat at the Charl-Mont, a popular restaurant in the Globe Department Store at 100 Wyoming Avenue.



The Globe Store at Christmas

The upscale department store sadly closed more than 22 years ago. More recently the building has housed an annual nostalgic holiday shopping day (December 1st through 3rd of this year). The Charl-Mont was in the rear of the store, necessitating a walk past the shoe department, women's purses and jewelry. The pink interior sported booths and tables and in the front was a standing steamship round of beef

table where a toque-hatted chef would carve the meat for au jus sandwiches, which were served on National Bakery hard rolls. The Charl-Mont also served strawberry short cake, which I thought was the best dessert ever invented. It was a memorable and rare treat to eat in this big airy restaurant where women in hats and gloves drank coffee and visited with friends. Many out of town relatives spent a lunch hour there. I did the same after I married and left Scranton.

Also in town was the Woolworth Lunch counter on Lackawanna Avenue



Woolworth's

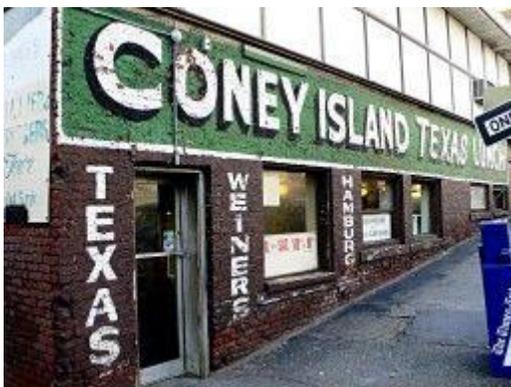
where grilled cheese or fried bologna sandwiches prevailed. If my mother was in the hospital having a baby, my dad would take us there. I guess he didn't cook.

My dad also took us to the Glider Diner, which still stands. An iconic diner,



it has been open since the early 50s. It is famous for their French fries with gravy. When I was a kid I loved their mashed potatoes and gravy and sometimes that was all I ordered. It still stands on Providence Road and is a great place for breakfast or after the bars close.

An equally iconic place is Coney Island Texas Lunch on Washington Ave.,



that has made the tastiest wieners since the early 30s. A hot dog cut in half lengthwise is grilled, placed on a warmed Kaiser roll, spread with mustard, sprinkled with raw onion, and a special aromatic chili sauce is spooned over the

whole thing. Every time my aunt came in for a visit she stopped there and picked up a dozen hot dogs before she came to my grandmother's. I knew she was in our kitchen by the smell of those wieners wafting up to my bedroom. I loved those wieners and my aunt. It still stands in the same place, although renovated recently. The black and white tile floor and the old wooden booths and photos on the walls are as familiar as their comfort food.

Ethnic Church Dishes

Welsh Cookies were a staple at our house since our Welsh grandmother lived next door. The cookies took all day to make and were made on the stove like a pancake, not in the oven like a regular cookie. Many churches made them for fundraisers and still do. The Welsh settled here as coal miners predominantly and brought this treat with them. The cookie is a simple dough made with currents, lard (must have lard, not shortening), nutmeg, sugar, eggs, flour and vanilla. They are terrific with tea.



Getty Images

Welsh Cookies

The Cornish Pasty, also a hit with coal miners because they could be easily carried in a lunch pail and be warm for lunch. Made with a pie crust, filled with a thick beef stew at one end and a sweet fruit filling at the other. It is a very hearty meal! A local church makes them occasionally, but they are hard to find.



Cornish Pasty

The Pierogi is a Polish ravioli-type food made by the women of the Polish or Slovak churches in Northeastern Pennsylvania. St. Michael's near me makes them almost weekly. The traditional filling is mashed potatoes and sauerkraut, or cheese, or onions. They can be meat-filled, savory or sweet, fried up in oodles of



Pierogi

butter and onions or boiled. Like the Welsh Cookie and Cornish Pasty mentioned above, they are labor-intensive to make, usually are made by the elderly ladies of

the church, are eaten up very quickly and symbolize some of the ethnic traditions in the area. Annually church-held food fests, such as Lebanese and Syrian festivals and a few Greek festivals, also feed the various ethnic tastes of the area. A few smaller festivals are growing in popularity, such as the Hispanic festival or Cinco de Mayo. However, the largest food festival is La Festa Italana, which held its 42nd festa last year. Pastas, pastries, pizzas and more are sold over a three-day period. Everyone in Scranton becomes Italian by digestion.



La Festa Italiana

Now

Pizzerias are ubiquitous in Scranton. We lack the variety of cuisines found in larger cities: there's a decent Thai restaurant, a vegan restaurant, many Chinese places, many more Italian restaurants, a Greek restaurant nearby, an Indian eatery and a few posh places and too many diners to count. Two years ago a farm-to-table restaurant opened in Scranton and the food is quite good. Restaurants are a difficult

business and some terrific ones have unfortunately closed, but if you are looking for comfort food you can find it here.

What I miss are the specialty shops that were part of my childhood. As a response to the large and impersonal stores I do see some boutique shops opening. A Polish butcher shop remains in Dickson City and Hispanic markets are opening in South Scranton. Last summer I visited a market that serves the Congolese population in South Scranton. The mom and pop stores are gone. However, on Main Avenue near my home is a Mannings' Ice Cream store where I can still walk to get a cone on a Saturday afternoon.

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Marion Beddoe-Iobst was born in Chelmsford, near London, England. The daughter of an American father and a British war-bride mother, she was raised in West Scranton. Most of her adult time was spent away from Scranton, which offered diverse life experiences.

Upon returning to Scranton, Ms, Beddoe-Iobst leads a busy life that includes ballroom dancing, church, family and student activities. As a student at Marywood University, she is pursuing a second Bachelor's in English with a writing minor. She is currently working on memoir writing. *Eating Scranton: Childhood Memories* is a paper that was written for an independent study class on food in history.

HIST: 499

Dr. Shprintzen

1 December 2017