

On the Streets of Park Slope

BY WILLIAM GEOGHAN

New York Centennial



Brooklyn

Bill Geoghan is a Brooklyn native who grew up in Park Slope, attending St. Saviour's grammar school and St. Augustines' High School both in the neighborhood. He later received a Masters Degree from the City University of New York and retired from Chase Manhattan Bank. Three of his grandparents were natives of Bantry in Cork and Carrick-on-Shannon in Leitrim, coming to New York at the turn of the century, while his Geoghan ancestor arrived in Brooklyn around 1855.

Photo: Bill Geoghan, age 10, in front of No. 514 Seventh Street in Park Slope. Photo collage by John Cavanagh, from two photographs courtesy of William Geoghan (1943) and M.R. Casey (1998).

Early in the 1870s, about ten years out of Ireland, my great-great grandfather, for reasons unknown, decided to trade one canal for another, moving his family from the environs of the Erie Canal to the banks of the Gowanus in Brooklyn. There they settled in an Irish enclave, Red Hook, living in close proximity, often in the same house or next door to uncles, cousins and assorted relatives. They worked as longshoremen, laborers, porters, sand hogs and later policemen. In 1927, at 15, my father got his first and last job, one that lasted 50 years. Then finally, after nearly sixty years, they moved up the hill to Park Slope where I was born on New Year's Eve, 1933. We lived at number 514 a brownstone, on Seventh Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues in St. Saviour's Parish.

It was predominately an Irish neighborhood. Seventh Avenue was the commercial avenue with the usual dairy, green grocer, butchershop, as well as a candy store, Ebinger's Bakery, a Roulston Market, a diner called Mom's and nearby four bars, Fitzgeralds (Tenth Street), Sullivans and Diamonds (both Ninth Street), and McGroartys (Eighth Street) Only the last remains. Up the hill was Ninth Avenue, later called Prospect Park West, and of course the Park. Not all shopping was done in stores. Horse drawn wagons still enhanced the smell and sounds of our neighborhood. There were the fruit and vegetable peddlers with their unique calls of "Bannano" or "Watermellone," the tinkly bell

of the guy who sharpened knives and scissors, and the most colorful of all was the junkman who had a string of clanging cow bells across the top of his wagon. I remember him well—Emil Smaldone—a short fat gnome of a man who looked like Akim Tamiroff. In between his calls of "money for your junk" he would curse at us kids who followed after mocking him. In summer we followed after the ice man, who delivered 15 or 20 cent blocks of ice for the "ice box." When he left, we'd grab slivers of ice and shavings to make a sort of sno-cone in our hands.

The back of the Methodist Episcopal

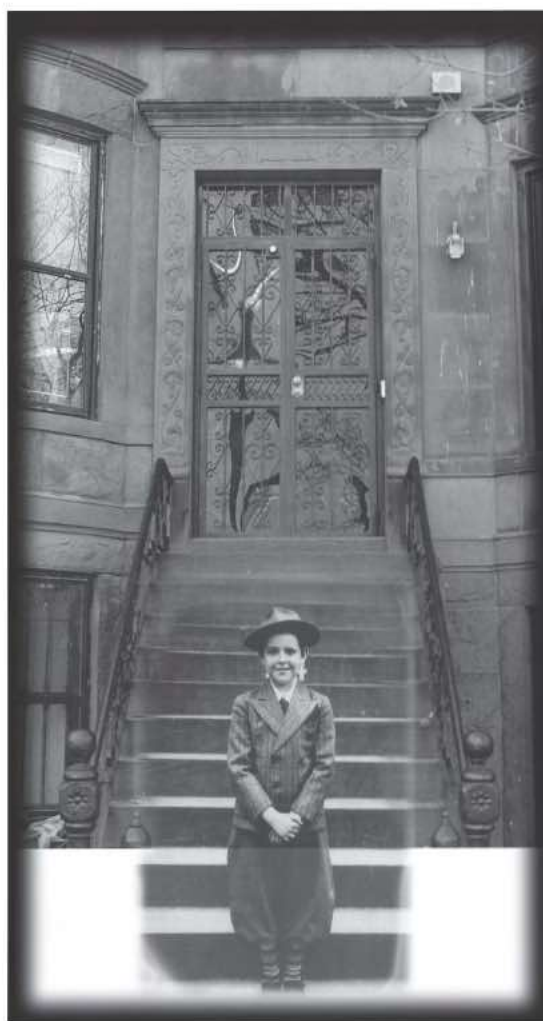
Hospital (later they dropped "Episcopal"), took up one side of our street, occupying the entire block between Sixth and Seventh Streets.

Though enclosed by high wrought iron fences about a third of the area was green including clay tennis courts for the staff.

The hospital was composed of about seven or eight buildings of various sizes connected by arcades. Many of the older buildings were dark grey stone with pitched roofs and gables which gave them a gothic appearance increasing our curiosity to one day explore them. The emergency entrance (then) with its high gates was directly across from our house.

On a summer evening

we would sit on my stoop and watch the dark green boxy ambulances and police cars with sirens wailing come up the block to disgorge the ill and



injured. Later on we would climb the fences and sneak into the morgue to see, ostensibly, sheet-covered cadavers and specimen jars with God-knows-what in them. It became a rite of passage for the younger kids to emulate us and great fun to tease the girls and dare them to follow.

The upper part of Seventh Street toward Eighth Avenue was lined with old trees and high brownstones while below and set back were white-stone flats. All had airy ways, at least that's what we called them. That was an enclosed entrance space with room for hedges or a small garden and a cellar board. The cellar board covered an opening into the cellar. On delivery days when the big coal trucks came, a metal chute was laid down the opening. Then the men would fill great barrels from the truck, roll them into the airy way and dump the coal down the chute. All was accompanied with a great roar and a cloud of dust.

Our brownstone like most was three stories with a high stone stoop (stairs) to the second story or Parlour floor, the main entrance. Under the stoop behind an iron gate was an entrance to the basement floor. They were originally designed for use by one family, but now as many as three families occupied them, one for each floor. We lived on the parlor floor and my grandmother, whose name was Bridget, though everyone called her Delia, lived with my two aunts in the basement. I had hardly known my grandfather who was ill and died when I was six. He was waked in our house which while it should have been sad turned out for the most part to be great fun. They put a great big black wreath and crepe outside our Parlour door and so I came to learn what "hanging the crepe" meant. My grandfather was laid out in our parlor amid flowers that filled up the room. The whole house smelled of flowers. During the day ladies from the neighborhood continually stopped by. They'd pause in the parlor and then come down to the big kitchen in the basement for tea and pastries. I got plenty of attention and a lot of pastries. At night all the relatives arrived. In the basement my father and some other men rolled in a barrel of beer and engaged in what must have been a complicated task called "tapping the keg." With a stream of foam and a string of profanities the task was completed but not till after everyone got wet and wound up laughing. Now my grandmother was against

drinking but the one exception was if there were Irish music and song. So they sang, and there were sandwiches, soda and beer for all and I think everybody, except me, stayed up all night. The day of the funeral we got to ride in a black limousine. I remember thinking the driver must have gotten lost. Our Church, St. Saviour's, was one block away at Sixth Street and Eighth Avenue, but we kept driving around and around the block obviously looking for the source of the Bells that were ringing. After Mass and the cemetery we all returned to our house for a luncheon, and clean-up and one last round.

My brother's birth a short time earlier had been upstaged by a great storm, the hurricane of 1938 which brought down tree limbs and turned our backyard into a small pond. The debris provided us kids with a great playground site, climbing about the downed foliage. I first became aware of him when he was christened Robert Emmet. Everyone called him by both names, a habit that remained with him the rest of his life. I, on the other hand, was named after my father and called "Little Billy" which took well into my teens to lose.



On the top floor of our house lived Mrs. Mead, a widow, with one son my age, also Billy, actually there were quite a few "Billies" in the neighborhood. Just down from us lived the McPartlands, Sheas, the O'Malleys with three children and then the Sullivans and Slatterys with two children each. Up the block were the Bakers and the O'Donnells each with four children. Living in an Irish neighborhood meant having lots of kids to play with! Our mothers pushed our carriages with their friends in the Park and as soon as we climbed out of them we

Photo: Methodist Hospital and St. Saviour's Church, from the corner of Seventh Street and Eighth Avenue in Park Slope, 1998. Courtesy of M.R. Casey.

had scores of kids to play with. There was no need for preschool then! Occasionally you might have to "call for" a special friend. "Calling for someone" meant ringing their doorbell not their phone. In fact, we had no phone, few did. To some it seems impossible how we did without one.

More than thirty kids lived on our block, with never any adult supervision, games were just passed on by one generation of kids to another. Initially the boys and girls played games together—chalk games, across the street games like "Red Rover" and Statues, games against the hospital wall like "Russia" and "Point Ball." I was particularly valuable for games like "I Declare War" since I was one of few kids who knew the names of more than six countries. I'm not ashamed to say I learned to "jump rope" and to this day remember some of the rhymes we jumped to like "your old Man is a dirty Old Man," etc. Of course in the spring and fall roller skates came out. All of us wore skate keys on strings around our necks to tighten the clamps which characteristically loosened causing dire results. Then shoe and skate would separate sending skaters into falls and crashes. I can remember hobbling along with one skate on and my foot dragging the other skate strapped to my ankle behind me. When the skates wore out or turned into "Skellys" (which were wheels worn so thin that holes emerged), we took the good skate, separated it into two parts and made "pushos." This was a kind of homemade scooter, but very personal. The "sole" of the skate and its wheels were nailed to the front of a long sturdy board and the "heel" to the rear. A box was nailed on the Board to the front and all was

painted in colors and designs, studded with bottle caps or tin cans - a regular work of art. Some were painted with "tiger Stripes" or Streaks or Stars. Pusho's provided not only hours of fun but identification of oneself as well. No father ever helped with a Pusho for that would have ruined a rite of passage.

In the fall and winter, Saturdays were movie matinee days. We had four theaters in our neighborhood - the Prospect, the Sanders, the Avon and the Minerva, the latter two being "itches." We usually went to the Prospect down Ninth Street below the YMCA. Starting at 10 o'clock they would have two features, a Western and a Gangster or Mystery movie, about six cartoons and one or two "serials" like "Flash Gordon" or the "Phantom." My favorite was "Don Winslow" of the Coast Guard or Navy (he evidently served in both!). Despite the theater's policy of no food in the movie our mothers would pack us lunches which we sneaked by an eagle-eyed "matron." Unfortunately she, as well as everyone else, would smell the transgressions. As she shined her flashlight up and down the rows, we would hide the food and sit motionlessly with a mouth full of sandwich. Sounding like Margaret Hamilton, she'd threaten us "I'll get you my pretty." I never knew her to catch anyone.

The only time we ever went to the Minerva, a bug house on Seventh Avenue, was during Lent when they supplied St. Saviour's with passes to an ancient silent movie called "The King of Kings." We felt we had to go as part of our Easter duty though our conduct there was anything but respectful.

At a certain age there was a natural segregation of the sexes and the boys took to playing ball games and "guns." "Guns" was our generic term for war games. In this endeavor we had a fantastic advantage during the late 1940's. The Army turned Prospect Park, one block away, into the defensive HQ for Brooklyn, an armed encampment with underground bunkers, anti-aircraft batteries, observation towers, sandbagged redoubts, barbed-wire and barracks buildings. In late 1945 when the Army left, all they removed was the guns, equipment and barbed-wire. For the next couple of years we had a war-game theme park. Armed with realistic toy guns we used army surplus jackets, belts, knapsacks, helmet-liners and whatever. We usually divided into groups, one took possession of the park and the



other invaded across Ninth Avenue (Prospect Park West). A mock D-day would stop traffic on the avenue and send mothers scurrying with their carriages along the park side, while we terrorized mothers and kids as we fought from the Sheep Meadow to the Swan Boat Lake.

There were many ball games played in the streets like Handball, Punch ball, Boxes, but of course the big game, the self-defining game, was stickball. It was more organized than any other game and the players became friends through adolescence and most of our early adulthood. In our neighborhood group there was a nucleus of which I was a member. Of eight or nine, we had names like Flaherty, Fallon, Fleming, Musgrove, O'Donnell, Mead and Plant (his mother's name was Fogarty) and on the periphery, maybe a dozen more kids like Dineen, Sullivan, Kneafsey, McKenzie, Dunne and others.

The group or "gang" was usually identified with a block (street) though some members could come from elsewhere.

With us it was Seventh Street, and that was our home court. It was a weird one. Sewer to sewer (i.e., manhole covers) was the standard distance from home to second base. In our case second base was just below Seventh Avenue which meant playing second was a dangerous proposition, not only was there traffic on the avenue but trolleys as well! I guess all Brooklyn became trolley dodgers! No one ever got run over - but of course it

was a home court advantage! Real games against other blocks were always played for money averaging about \$1 to \$1.50 per man, except for the big games. The gambling aspect notwithstanding, we always had the impression that stickball must somehow be illegal—for the cops always chased us. Two people were assigned to watch for them—one on the street and the other on the avenue. On the shout "chicky" we all ran, though one person threw all of our bats (broom handles) underneath parked cars, except one. That was so cops wouldn't have to go looking

for them (a sort of offering). They got a big kick out of sticking one end of the bat into the hole of a sewer cover and snapping it in two. From a distance we gave a mock cheer.

Most teams (or gangs) had names but to have a name you had to have something to display it on, e.g., team jackets, etc.

Invariably, the money for the team jackets was raised by selling "chances." Actually, we were pretty organized. We pooled the few dollars needed to print up chance books. On the chance book no sponsoring organization was identified and only vaguely were some valuable prizes promised like a "basket of cheer," though none of us was old enough to buy liquor. We never thought of soliciting a prize from some merchant. It turned out to be easier just to make one up. After selling several books I was chagrined (being slightly younger and more naive than the rest) to find out that nobody ever won a prize as we never intended to provide one. "Isn't that dishonest?" "Naw," they

explained, "everyone who bought a chance knew there was no prize, besides it would be illegal for us to buy a 'basket of cheer' or even get one." I found out later that it was the truth about those buying chances and I understood their queer look and smile but they were all neighborhood people, relatives and local merchants who knew us. Then came the big day when we bought our shiny jackets with the team logo and our nicknames on it - as one of the skinnier kids, I

was "Spider," though I hardly look like a spider today. Later on we got collegiate type sweaters with just an initial on it - a big S that stood for Seventh Street, unfortunately we didn't anticipate all the other things the S might stand for.

While we sold "chances" to get our jackets there were some others, sort of selling "chances" in the neighborhood or at least in the hospital. These were the "numbers"—a small wager that you might be able to guess the last three or four numbers in the total handle (\$) of the seventh race at a New York race track—there were

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*Photos: (left and above)
Neighborhood children
pose for the camera and
little Billy Geoghan, age 5,
on Seventh Street in Park
Slope, both 1938. Courtesy
of William Geoghan.*

Brooklyn and New York systems—for a big reward. Because of our knowledge of the neighborhood and access to the Hospital, where there were many clients in the kitchens, laundry, morgue, garage and service areas, we were hired as “spotters” and “runners.” “Runners” would sneak throughout the hospital picking up slips and money while the “spotters” would check the neighborhood for undercover police activity like looking for strange cars, those with an unusually long aerial or a City plate. Another give away, back then, were two strangers on a corner wearing baseball caps (cops were supposed to wear cover). Who realized then that, for a few bucks, we were working for organized crime—oh well, it was Brooklyn!

During the summer none of us ever went to “camp,” Coney Island was our camp! Though it was a two-trolley ride it only cost a dime. The main attractions were the Cyclone, the Wonder Wheel and the Parachute Jump. Steeplechase was the favorite place to spend all day. Luna Park had very few attractions but it still had the water chute. Side shows had the usual bearded lady, dog-faced boy, half-man, half-alligator as well as others. Nathan’s was just becoming famous mostly for its crinkle-cut fries served in a paper cone and Feltman’s still had an open air beer garden where they played German music. Stillman’s had the largest carousel.

By adolescence our attention turned to things social and of course, girls. Then the focus in Coney Island turned to the time-honored Bath House or Beach Club. Usually all the boys and girls in a neighborhood went to the same place. That way it was safe, comfortable, friendly and of course, private. Ours was a big rambling place made of wood and wire called Oceantide. We either earned the money or our parents underwrote a season pass. It had a big outdoor pool, private showers and lockers so we could dress our best—a lounge area with a sagging wooden floor and juke box for dancing or just socializing. There was a grille where you could get burgers and sodas. Oceantide was located on the boardwalk with all its amusements while the access to the beach was under the boardwalk and its amusements, which of course, led to the song!

As a freshman at St. Augustine’s H. S., I worked after school as a messenger in Manhattan for the Mark Matthews messenger service. They operated under a number of names. Out of one dispatching office it might be “Elite” or “Swift.” I don’t know why, but we did have a motley crew. Our pick-ups and deliveries were usually with receptionists and we just announced the name of the service. One day I was helping another kid on a pick up. As the receptionist returned to her desk,

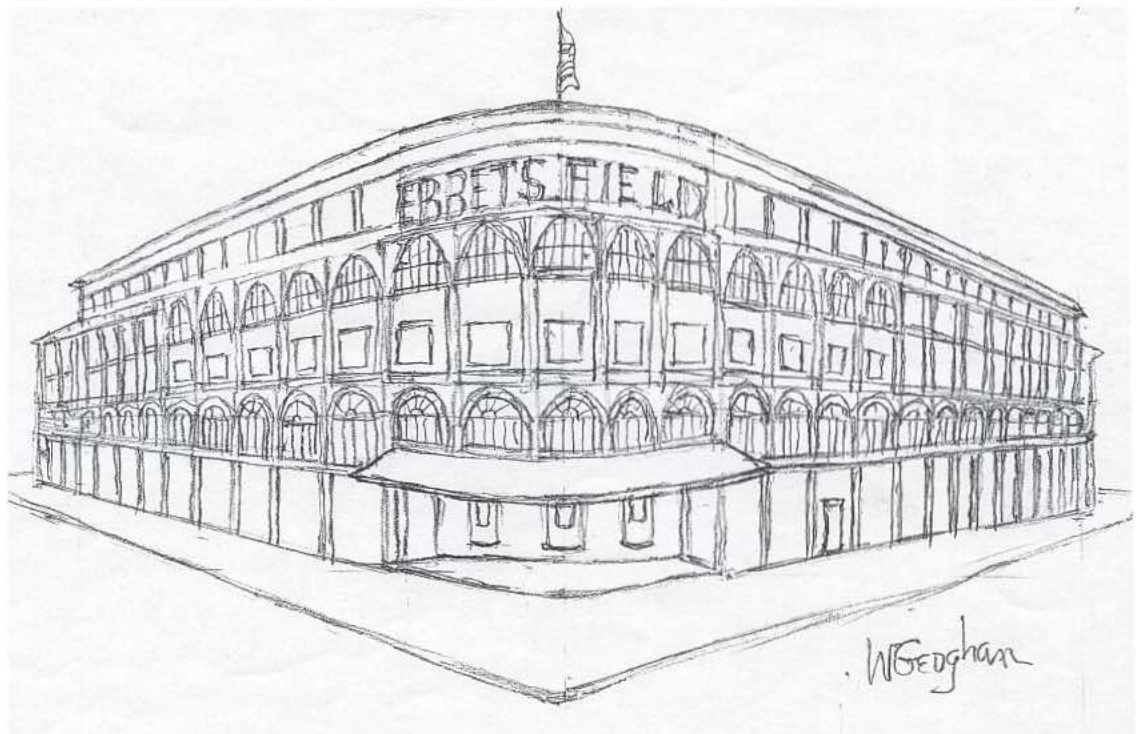


Illustration: Ebbets Field, circa 1940. Original drawing by William Geoghan, 1998.

the kid announced in a loud voice "Rabbit." The receptionist just stared at him then at me saying nothing. I turned to the kid and explained, "It's Rapid, Rapid Messenger, not Rabbit!" The kid looked incredulous. "Really, I thought ..." "Yeah, yeah, just get the package." At least I learned the New York City transit system well!

The following summer myself and some friends got a job at Ebbets Field as hustlers for Harry M. Stevens, the concessionaire for the ball park. Since we were all Dodger fans it was a thrill! We had to join a union and we got picked to work on the morning of each game day at a shape-up. At about 10 o'clock in the morning we would all assemble on Sullivan Place outside the ball park. For a game with a big crowd like the Giants or Cardinals they'd need a lot of hustlers but for the poorer crowds with lesser teams like the Reds or Cubs they'd need fewer. The shop steward did the picking and assignments. It paid, of course, to "tip" the steward to insure your pick and assignment - the balance took their chances or went home early. Aside from the cost of dues and tips we made a straight 11% of sales.

Your assignment included areas like "third base lower stands" or "left field and bleachers." Right field upper deck was a tough tour. Back then a hot dog cost 20 cents and a basket came with 60 hot dogs in a metal container of hot water along with rolls, napkins, and a mustard dispenser. We made \$1.32 on each basket sold. A can of beer sold for 35 cents. A tray held 25 cans and cups, and we had to return all the cans so none turned into missiles!! There were no pop-top cans so a good "church key" was an indispensable tool. A tray of beer netted less than a dollar. Ice cream was good if there were a lot of kids, like in the bleachers, but it melted fast. For peanuts you had to have a good arm and aim! Only the old men got score cards. The worst was the "gum, nuts and butts" basket—a punishment assignment, but the most bizarre assignment was called the "flame thrower." This was a tank contraption strapped to your back with a spigot on the bottom near your right hip (whether you were right-handed or left-handed) from which you sold hot chocolate at night games in the spring or an iced orange soda later in the season. Only idiots got that assignment more than once.

We had to buy "brass" with our own

money to pay for our items at the service areas and still have cash left to make change. They supplied us with white pants, white tunics, a white peaked cap like the French Foreign Legion to which we affixed a big plastic sign indicating what we were selling and the price. After getting ready we sat in the empty stands for the next two hours watching the teams practice and bantering with the players. With a game lasting only two to three hours, time was of the essence when you returned to one of the three service areas for refills. So I also learned to "tip" the service workers so they would take you first and get you out faster than anyone else. At a good game selling hot dogs I could make \$25.00, or at a poor game, maybe \$8 or \$10. A double header (they still had them then) would be a bonanza especially between games! Just working there I got to be a celebrity in the neighborhood and got to see two World Series!

With money in our pockets we could lay aside the concept of "group purchases" like team jackets, for a wild and flamboyant individualism in dress. While white tee shirts were standard, the styles in pants or trousers really took off. We got pants in real colors like peach, cinnamon, canary yellow, cardinal red and even electric blue. The cuffs were "pegged" (a 12 peg was 12 inches around) which was the standard. The knees were "bagged," the waists raised, the loop line dropped and saddle stitching down the side. Lastly, the sure sign we were all going to hell or at least the reformatory, were the "pistol pockets." It was the days of the "Amboy Dukes," the "City Across the River" and the "Lords of Flatbush."

Years later I attended City College and when I joined the Newman Club there I was sort of an oddity coming from Brooklyn. Most of the people came from the Bronx or Manhattan. I remember my first day there I wore a suit, albeit an old suit, and they eyed me cautiously. It was a sharkskin suit. The pants had a conservative peg—maybe 14—and the waist was just slightly raised, but I think it was the jacket that put them off. It was single-breasted jacket with double-breasted lapels. Everyone gave me a lot of room. That night I folded up that suit and put it away for good, and began my transition to a world bigger, but not better, than Brooklyn and Park Slope.

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