

# Growing Up in Woodside: The Mets at Mid-Century

AN INTERVIEW WITH B. J. LEDDY

**Q.** What does “Mets” mean?

**BJL:** It stands for the Metropolitan Apartments in Woodside, Queens. In our neighborhood there were twenty-eight buildings with eleven hundred apartments. When I grew up there from the 1940s into the 1960s that meant housing for about four thousand people. For these people the buildings were simply “the Mets.”

**Q.** Were there really many Irish there?

**BJL:** Let me answer this way. A classmate at Manhattan College in 1961 claimed I grew up in an Irish ghetto. When he asked me to name my friends from the Mets, it seemed he was right. My friends’ names were Egan, Dolly, Sullivan, Scanlon, Martin, Connolly, Diskin, Owens, and Fanning. I also had friends named Herman and Gerardi, and Fanning was half-Italian. Lucas was Hungarian. But my experience was that 70 to 80 percent of people in the Mets were Irish. Most of my friends were third-generation Irish Americans.

**Q.** How did the Mets get started?

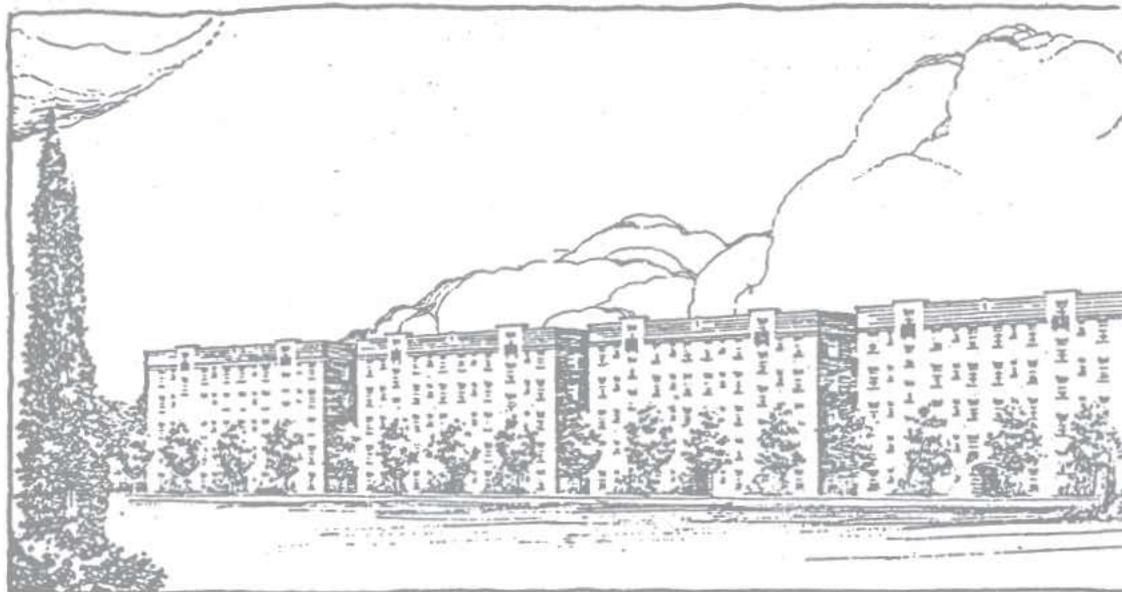
**BJL:** It was through some creative proposals

from the State’s Lockwood Committee in the early 1920s to get more housing for the working poor in New York City. One approach was to develop land outside Manhattan. Another was to improve housing styles, because tenement-style meant middle rooms with no light or air. Insurance companies were offered incentives to enter the real-estate market. So the Metropolitan Insurance Company accepted the State’s offer and built the Mets (and later Parkchester and Stuyvesant Town). In its prospectus the Company emphasized that every room would have a window, sunlight, and air. As a result, buildings in the Mets were constructed in a C-shape with rooms only two deep, which also provided for courtyards.

These were apartments for the working poor who had a history of being devastated by tuberculosis. And a lot of company employees were encouraged to become residents. So the Mets were completed in 1926 for families with lower incomes.

Affordable prices were important. At the Mets opening rent was \$9.00 a room while Manhattan prices were \$20 a room. People

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*Illustration: A drawing of the Mets from a description issued, probably in the late 1920s, by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Courtesy of B.J. Leddy.*

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*Photos:  
Celebrations  
during the 1950s  
in the Mets  
where there were  
"tons of kids."  
Opposite page:  
B.J. Leddy  
appears at right  
rear, with smile  
and pompadour.  
Courtesy of B.J.  
Leddy.*

thought this was a good deal. And Metropolitan Life continued to keep the place to high standards. The company staked its reputation on the Mets. There was a uniformed watchman for the building, for example, who patrolled and clocked in. Everything was kept clean and swept. I remember Mr. Black, our building's super in the 1950s, hosing the courtyard in the mornings just to get rid of dust.

By the 1940s and for some time after, the Mets remained desirable housing because there were few affordable alternatives. The Depression and World War II had displaced people and curtailed development of good inexpensive housing,

#### **Q. What was Woodside like?**

*BJL:* I guess you would say it was crowded, which to us was normal. For instance, if you calculated population for our block alone by number of apartments and average family size, there were 390 families or about 1400 neighbors—including tons of kids.

The City must have coordinated development of services to the Woodside area in the

1920s. Somebody foresaw a population concentrating there, and developers were willing to make investments. The subway, Public School 125, and St. Teresa's grammar school had been built and opened in the mid-1920s.

We also had movie theaters, and for kids movies were really important. In the 1950s we had television problems—we lived right in the flight path for LaGuardia Airport and had interference every ten minutes so we went to the movies all the time. There were three movie houses. The Bliss had 1920s ornate carvings and plush carpets typical of that period. Another Hollywood palace was the Sunnyside theater. Later in the 1940s the Center theater was opened.

The Church had strong influence in the area. On one occasion, Father Morrow, the pastor at St. Teresa's, told everyone that we should not go to the Center because they showed "Peyton Place." So everyone stopped going, and the theater got in financial trouble until they showed "Song of Bernadette" and invited our entire school to attend. We all went during school hours—which was great!

You can see we didn't think in terms of Woodside or Sunnyside. Our real mindset was the parish. That's what we thought of. My family lived on 48th Street, the western border of Woodside. Across the street was Sunnyside. But the Woodside-Sunnyside distinction was only for postal addresses. Everything was by parish. You would not know kids from another parish, and you would not even closely know kids who went to public school. There were real divides.

And of course the parish emphasized kids should not go to public school. Father Morrow, speaking from St. Teresa's pulpit (we all went to Sunday mass) told parents they must send their kids to Catholic schools. And our parents did not trust the public school system. So the parish and school shaped our identities. For a kid the sword of Damocles was being expelled to public school, and staying in Catholic school and being successful there seemed tied in with saving your soul. The guys in my crowd went through St. Teresa's school together, and later to different Catholic high schools. But we went to the same dances at high schools like St. Jean's, Power Memorial, and St. Agnes. We started playing stoopball together in the Mets, we went to St. Teresa's, and we wound up at each other's weddings.

When I had to go to Bryant High, a public school, I thought I might lose my soul. I later found the idea was nonsense but nevertheless I transferred to Catholic high school in June 1957.

Of course a neighborhood is not buildings and services, it's the people. And the people there, at least people in the Mets, didn't change much. The adults had come through the Depression and didn't have a lot of money. In my case our parents had to support my three sis-

ters and me. And right after World War II there was a severe housing shortage with the result that there was no place to go. So as a kid you got to know a lot of people because few people moved away.

**Q. Can you say more about the people?**

**BJL:** The people were good. I don't remember problems like broken families or divorces. The adults had been through a great deal in the thirties and forties. Men in the Mets held mostly blue-collar jobs – they were deliverymen, house painters, customs inspectors, firemen, mechanics. Many of the men and women were smart but they belonged to a generation side-tracked by the Depression in the 1930s. Many spent their teenage years in the Depression. And because of that they had never gotten a lot of education. My mother, for example, graduated from St. Jean's in Manhattan and won a college scholarship but she couldn't go because her family needed her salary. She was the oldest in her family, and she didn't have the freedom to continue in school. My dad couldn't afford college during the Depression, but in the 1950s he also won a college scholarship through the Fire



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Department. There were a lot of experiences like these.

Some apartments had large families—as I said, tons of kids. Most women didn’t work—it was sort of looked down upon. There was a real bias against a man not being able to support his family. My father was a fireman, so he got benefits—but money was always tight.

Other apartments had older people who didn’t have kids or whose kids had already grown up. For example, Mr. Cleary and his wife moved in during the 1920s. My sisters were jealous because the Clearys took a shine to me and invited me for orange juice and Ritz crackers. They didn’t have kids, and they sort of adopted me. Mr. Cleary would tell me stories about the neighborhood right after the Mets were built. Back then he was able to see to Long Island City from his kitchen window! At eight or nine I remember wishing they had never put up all those buildings – there would be more room to play. Mr. Cleary was a grandfather figure for me. We would go for walks, and he would tell me stories about the neighborhood years ago. I heard some nice stories.

Like the Clearys, most people stayed on in the Mets and consequently everybody seemed to know and watch out for each other. Some of the women who were nurses helped people out voluntarily. Mrs. Power and Maryellen Brennan were neighborhood nurses, informally and gratis. Maryellen nursed several people who had cancer in the Mets, just from a sense of the right thing to do. She was a special person but that’s the sort of neighborhood it was.

There was also a common understanding that you shared what was needed. For instance when my sister got polio and was in the hospital, we needed a car to visit her. My Dad would yell to our neighbor Mr. Fanning—who was called Mulligan—“Hey Mulligan, I need your car!” Without a question, the car keys were thrown out the fourth-floor window to him. Maybe it came from the Depression. People just understood common difficulty. They were much closer than in the suburbs.

And everybody walked, so they met each other regularly. They walked to the subway, to the A&P, to Kimbel’s candy store, to church, to

school. Also, everybody was out because apartments were small. My mother would tell us to go out—if you stayed home it meant doing homework. So kids would be out all the time, doing something on the streets.

Of course, kids in the Mets never talked back to adults. We were told by adults—even those who weren’t our parents—how to behave. And you were very respectful. There was no defense for avoiding that. A kid named Billy in a temper once threw a model plane at Mrs. Connor, and that went down as one of the most extreme actions.

**Q. So everybody was supportive?**

**BJL:** Well, we had our problems. There was no crime but for kids in the Mets there was a 1950s-style gang. This was a group of guys who hung out in front of Scarlet’s candy store. They were dropouts. They called themselves the Diablos, but they were Irish just like us—with names like Buckley, Crimmins, and Fogarty. They were a typical gang with black-leather jackets, garrison belts, and boots. These guys could be really nasty. There were maybe twenty of them, maybe seven or eight of them hanging out together at any one time. After a certain time in the afternoon, they announced their presence and they owned the schoolyard. They would drink beer there and leave broken bottles around. They were about three years my senior, and by age twelve I learned you didn’t mess with them. They were kids from homes with real problems who didn’t live in the Mets or hadn’t gone to St. Teresa’s school.

But the duration of the Diablos got limited. The police were interested in getting boys into sports, so they formed PAL teams. Consequently we played a lot of baseball and we practiced all the time. The cops kept us busy and they didn’t bother us. But the Diablos didn’t play sports. And eventually the cops got after them when I was about fourteen. A patrol car would pick up a gang member. We heard he would be taken to a deserted area by the Cemetery and smacked around. And that was the end of them, slowly but surely. In many ways, they were very sad. They lasted only a few years and never amounted to much. Some would die violently



or disappear into alcohol and drugs. And, of course, most parents apparently didn't know anything about them. The Diablos were a part of kids' lives.

**Q. Why did your family move into the Mets?**

*BJL:* I was born in 1942. We were living in Parkchester in the Bronx in 1943, and one night my dad came home around one a.m. from his late shift in the Fire Department. He smelled gas in the hallway. The woman next door to us was committing suicide. My dad emptied the floor of our building and called Con Edison. No one was hurt—but before Con Ed arrived there was an explosion that blew a common wall into our apartment. My mother wanted to move to someplace where she could be more comfortable. The Metropolitan Insurance Company offered my parents an apartment in their Woodside development—the Mets—and we moved in.

There was another factor. My Aunt Eileen told me that my dad's family used to go to Woodside from Manhattan to visit my grandfather's grave. My grandfather, who had emigrated from County Cavan, died in 1925 when my father was eleven. Shortly before he died he bought graves in Calvary. My grandmother said this was the only smart investment he made—his tavern didn't do well during Prohibition. So there was no money, and she held the family together by taking boarders into their apartment. Calvary planted a bush on his unmarked grave. When they visited the grave my grandmother would tend the bush with kitchen shears. She would also cry, and yell at the kids for running over the graves and for not praying. However, on the way home she would mellow and promise things would get better. So in their minds the area became associated with better, sunnier times. When she died in 1938 her four children—now young adults—moved there but

*Photo: Children in front of a courtyard in the Metropolitan Apartments during the 1950s. The buildings were designed by architect Andrew Thomas to allow light and air into all rooms. Courtesy of B.J. Ledy.*

stayed only briefly, because their friends were back in Manhattan. But when another opportunity to move there came in 1943 my dad was agreeable.

**Q. How did others get to be in the Mets?**

*BJL:* I don't know much about that. I know there was an application process to ensure that apartments went to the working poor. And, as I said, the Metropolitan encouraged their workers—many of whom were Irish—to become tenants. Calvary Cemetery and Celtic Park had drawn Irish to the area for many years, and some of these people probably saw the Mets being constructed. Word must have spread among the Irish in New York.

**Q. You must have learned a lot about being Irish?**

*BJL:* It's funny but while there were a lot of Irish people in the Mets we didn't hear much about being Irish. When someone spoke with an authentic brogue we paid attention to it. Our neighbors, the Sullivans, were from Kerry and used to play Irish records with music that I thought was heroic. But most of us as third generation Americans didn't get much else. We didn't learn a lot about Irish culture. My parents were second-generation. The Sullivan's parents were first generation. They had emigrated and they had Irish attitudes.

St. Patrick's Day was special in school – but beyond that the parish didn't really develop much interest in Ireland or the Irish. Our teachers at St. Teresa's were the Dominicans of Sparkill, New York. And this grammar school was tough. St. Teresa's gave us a commonality—an expectation of excellence and obedience. But we had no sense of being aggrieved. We didn't learn about a past that was Irish—and we didn't know that we were victims historically. We didn't hear about Ireland. We just knew that we were supposed to stay orderly.

I don't think any of my friends had an appreciation of what Ireland really was like. Ireland to us was songs and merry wars, and beautiful shades of green. We knew nothing about the culture or what happened in Ireland. There was a vacuum. Only at the Sullivans' apartment would you hear Irish records, but

you wouldn't understand what was behind the music. There were some stories of Ireland around, like the one about a neighbor, a man in the Mets, who was from Ireland. Supposedly he had picked the short straw and therefore was supposed to kill somebody in the Troubles. The story went that he immediately had left Ireland, so as not to have to do the killing. But maybe that story was fictional.

So we really knew little or nothing—even in high school and college, Ireland wasn't mentioned. Students learned world history, American history, and European history—but Ireland never came into it. It was strange. You're taught about all sorts of historical processes and happenings, but then you learn nothing at all about your family and where they came from. It just didn't make sense, and what happened over there became a burning question for me.

We had to go to Ireland to find out some facts...that we were descended from the second son, who was one of several immigrants, and that he had to leave at age eighteen. That was a revelation for us. I was the first one to go back there; I made that connection.

I remembered that my father used to say to us, over and over, "You're from Drumadannan, Killeshandra, County Cavan, Ireland. Repeat that. Where are you from?" And we would repeat to him all those words. That's what he gave us—maybe a postal address that his mother used for sending packages. But when I was getting married, I said to Maureen, my future wife—let's go to Ireland, I want to fill in some blanks. I had a sense there was a story over there. And she was agreeable. Most of her family is from Cork. So we went over, and I found two cousins, much older than me. And I was able to learn more about the story of my grandfather and grandmother, and about Ireland.

**Q. Why did people leave the Mets? How did the Leddys leave?**

*BJL:* People left the Mets only as their lives changed. The Mets were a good deal. Apartments were small but good at rent-controlled prices, and this was important for the generation that went through the Depression.

So as I was growing up few people left. I can think of just one family that moved to a

Levittown-type house when I was a kid. We visited them, and when we came back my father said he wasn't going to eat baloney so he could pay a mortgage. We later understood he was fearful of another Depression. And of course there was a real bias among the Irish there that you had to put a good piece of meat on the table.

But as my generation got older, after school and after we got married, nearly everyone left. We wouldn't move back to the Mets because in the 1960s we were all fairly well educated and upwardly mobile. And the military contributed to breaking us up. But the break-up had started anyway, with college and the required discipline of studying. I moved out when I got married in 1968, and so did two of my sisters, Maureen and Barbara, when they got married. Like a lot of others we wound up in the suburbs. After my father died in 1965 my other sister, Susan, and my mother stayed. Soon after my mother died in 1973 Susan moved out—it was thirty-three years after we first moved in from Parkchester.

Of course, it was unthinkable that my mother would ever move. You would never ask my mother to leave the Mets. We used to call her "The Mayor of Woodside" because she knew so many people. She wouldn't remember names, but she would say hello to everybody on the street on the way to the A & P. As I said, she felt comfortable there. In fact, we all felt comfortable there.

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