

Memory Lane: The '50s, Sewing, and Politics

BY PEGGY TANNER

THE IRISH IN NEW YORK DURING THE FIFTIES

Having lunch in Reidy's, an Irish restaurant on the south side of 54th Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues, I mused on how few of the Irish we encounter in New York today. How rarely we hear the lilt of the brogue. It wasn't so in the early fifties, when I came here. The Irish were gainfully employed all over Manhattan then.

After a nine-day transatlantic crossing aboard the *Maasdam*, I arrived in Hoboken on November 21, 1953, a bleak foggy morning, with no glimpse of the Statue of Liberty or the New York skyline. Because I had been born in New York, I did not have to go through immigration, but customs was another story. I had been less than five years old when I'd left and was returning after nineteen years overseas. The customs officials asked the routine question, "What purchases did you make while abroad?" "Everything I've got," was my reply. They squared it away after consulting with a supervisor, and I was whisked off to Manhattan by my friends who had come to meet me.

They had a small apartment on 82nd between Second and Third Avenues. It was a walk-up on the fourth floor. A toilet down the hall was shared with the other tenants on the floor, and a bathtub in the kitchen was covered by a porcelain tabletop when not in use. To me it was a place to stay until I found work and alternative accommodations, and it was generous of them to share it with me.

Paddy Sheehan's Bar, around the corner on Third Avenue, was my introduction to the pub scene. It seemed like everyone who left the village where I grew up was there to greet me on my first Saturday night in New York. I met a dear friend

who escorted me for a job interview the following week. Since there was a tremendous shortage of nurses at that time, I became employed almost immediately at Columbus Hospital on East 19th Street, which is now the Cabrini Medical Center. The hospital provided living accommodations in an adjoining building. I can't remember what the salary was; I think it was about \$250 a month.



*Illustration:
Old telephone
company poster of a
smiling telephone
switchboard operator.*

The major employers for the Irish immigrants were the hospitals, the New York Telephone Company, the Daily News, Schrafft's and Childs restaurants, and the subways and buses. Michael Quill was the fearless labor leader. He had been a close personal friend of my father's and godfather to my brother. His office was on the corner of 50th Street and Broadway, just around the corner from Jack Dempsey's, the world famous champion boxer, who greeted all his guests upon entering his eatery. In sharp contrast to the days of "No Irish need apply," Michael welcomed his compatriots and found them jobs. They, in turn, swelled the ranks of the Transport Workers Union. Michael treated me to my first restaurant meal in New

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York. It was at Mrs. J's Sacred Cow, in the West seventies. We'd still had meat rationing in post-war London when I'd left. Such a selection on the menu I had never seen. I followed Michael's lead in ordering and settled for the shrimp cocktail, rack of loin lamb chops, and strawberries and cream for dessert. Luscious strawberries in December: a miracle! I ate so much my stomach could not tolerate the overload. I have never forgotten that meal.

Many of us did not have high school diplomas when we arrived in New York, secondary education being only for the privileged few in Ireland at that time. Frank O'Connor, a native of Kenmare, and a lawyer and columnist for the *Irish Echo*, conducted a weekly education class in a hotel room on West 23rd Street, introducing us to American history and brushing up on our basic reading, writing, and math. He encouraged us to take the high-school equivalency test, which most of us passed. Many went on to college and were very successful in their careers. They might even be considered the "Yuppies" of that period, moving to the suburbs and beyond.

Dances were great places for meeting. Every county had its annual ball. The Kerryman's Ball was held at the Manhattan Center on West 34th Street, next door to the Hotel New Yorker, a popular hotel close to Penn Station. Travel by rail was the way to go back then. The first time I took my husband, who was then my boyfriend, to a Kerryman's Ball he was astounded. How did I, a



newcomer to New York, know so many people? He, who had lived there all his life, did not have nearly such a vast number of acquaintances.

Wakes were also a source for meeting. *The Journal American* would come out in the afternoon, and the obituary column was always the number one item to read. Kerry people are great for attending wakes; it's a traditional pastime. The wake could be in outermost reaches of the North Bronx or Queens or Brooklyn. If you knew the person or any of his relations, you attended the wake, and so did everyone else from that particular area in Ireland; and there was always a bar nearby to adjourn to.

Walking on the beach recently at Island State Park, New Jersey, on President's Day, I encountered an Irish couple and their three sons. He was from Dublin, she from Limerick, and they lived in Cortland, New York. They were looking for a campsite along the Jersey Shore, planning for their summer vacation. It was so nice to hear the lilt of the brogue, so sadly missing from the streets of New York these days. YUPPIES!! Definitely.

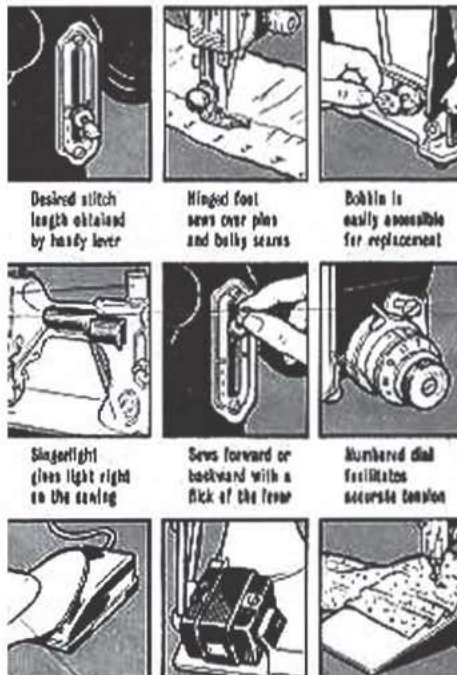
MY SEWING MACHINE

"My Sewing Machine, My Sewing Machine" was a popular song back in England, when I lived there during the post-war years. It was frequently requested on BBC radio; I believe the show was called "Music While You Work." It used to be on weekday mornings and had a large listening audience among housewives of that period.

Last month, I received a card from my London-based niece with a picture of "A Sewing Machine." The Brits must have a thing for glorifying them. This card I received reminds me of my grandmother's sewing machine, a hand-cranked one, a Singer, black, with lots of gold embellishment. Auntie Bea introduced me to the wonders of this machine. She would take two pieces of fabric, put them under the pressure foot, let me turn the handle, and they would come out as one: magic!

Much later and by degrees, I learned the more complicated workings of the Machine — winding its bobbin, threading the needle, and adjusting the tension and pressure. I supplemented my wardrobe as a teenager making skirts and blouses. Once, during the war, when

a few of the many special features



Desired stitch length obtained by handy lever

Hinged foot sews over pins and bulky seams

Bobbin is easily accessible for replacement

Singerlight gives light right on the sewing

Sews forward or backward with a flick of the lever

Numbered dial facilitates accurate tension

fabric was unobtainable, I unpicked a faded burgundy jacket and reassembled it wrong-side-out, bright as new.

During my student days in New York, when money was scarce, I needed a jacket for evening wear. I picked a complicated Vogue pattern and, with the assistance of my landlady, we turned out a very classy black mohair jacket, fully lined. It had dolman sleeves and a shawl collar, and could still be worn today and not look outdated.

Shortly after I was married, a sewing machine became number one item on my wish list. Singer's advertised a Spartan Model for \$49. It could sew forward and back but had none of the extra attachments, not even a light. That was all I wanted, nothing complicated. I went to Singer's on Main Street in New Rochelle, Singer's on Fordham Road in the Bronx, and Singer's in the Cross County Shopping Center. None of the salesmen would comply with my request for the Spartan Model. All they wanted was to make their commission on the DeLuxe Model. I had saved my \$49, and that was all I could afford.

One day, on Fifth Avenue in New York, I spotted it. A plain black machine just like my grandmother's, only it was electric. The salesman

was only too happy to sell it to me, and it was delivered tax-free to New Rochelle.

I was in my glory, making curtains and cushions and slipcovers. I even made a snazzy black cocktail dress for a special occasion. My husband was surprised and delighted. When our daughter was in need of a red velvet dress for her first Christmas, I whipped one up from a half yard of material. I made lots of dresses for her on my faithful machine.

One day, just before Halloween, she and her brother came home from school for lunch wanting Halloween costumes. "We'll pop down to Woolworth's and get them after school," I suggested.



Illustrations: Singer sewing-related advertising materials and trade-manual illustrations from the 1950s.

221

**The Singer Featherweight*
— makes light work
of everything you sew!**

An all-electric model, the Singer Featherweight 221 really does make light work of everything you sew, and like the bigger machines in the Singer range, the free fashion aids supplied with it help to give all your sewing a really finished, expert look.

A wonderfully light machine (it weighs only 11 1/2 lbs.), the Singer 221 is supplied in a compact carrying-case—which also holds the foot control, attachments, bobbins and tools.

* A Division of the Singer Sewing Machine Company.

"Oh, no Mom, all the other kids are going to be wearing ones their mothers made," was their reply. They knew how to string me along.

Not being one to resist a bargain in the remnant department of any fabric store, I had, just the day before, picked up about five yards of material for a dollar. It was very colorful and had a Batman design. I got their approval to make

two down costumes, which turned out remarkably well, and they were happy.

When our house was burglarized, several years ago, many of our possessions were taken, but the item I missed most was my old Spartan sewing machine. Although I now have a more up-to-date model, with all sorts of attachments that I have not yet learned to use, it will never be the friend that old model was, so many miles of stitching did we together.

“My Sewing Machine, My Sewing Machine.”
I wish I could remember the words to that song.

POLITICS AND I

From earliest childhood, I recall my father's involvement in politics on a local and national level, and it became second nature to be involved introducing candidates in the community, handing out literature, and posting billboards. People came to our house looking for favors, housing grants, government jobs, pensions, land improvement grants, whatever. As a district leader, my father was very well known in the community where we lived as well as to the elected representatives.

When former Mayor Frank Garito ran for election in 1970, I became involved for the first time in local politics in New Rochelle. On election night, when his two opponents conceded, it was a singularly-memorable victorious moment at headquarters. Champagne flowed; we all rejoiced.

Prior to becoming involved in politics, I had lived quietly in New Rochelle, having a limited circle of friends and acquaintances. Political involvement was my introduction to the whole city and beyond. I was a natural meeter and greeter, introducing candidates to their constituents. I loved every minute of it.

The apathy of voters, especially in local elections, is appalling to me — and yet it is the local election which matters most in each community. The district leader has gone the way of the Edsel; few voters are aware of which district they live in, let alone who the leader is. During my four years as a district leader, I circulated petitions, introduced the candidates to my constituents, checked the polls, encouraged voter turnout, and participated in fundraising. When community needs arose, it was to me the constituents came, to fight

unfair rent increases, maintain bus service, save Hudson Park. I was a link in communicating the needs of the people, and the needs were met.

People who never become actively involved in politics miss out on half the fun of living in a democratic society.

“All politics is local,” was what Tip O’Neill, the late speaker of the house said. I met him once at Molly Darcy’s in Killarney, while we were waiting to be seated for dinner. A big, blustery, charming man, he wanted to know all about New Rochelle when he heard that I was from there.

Ed. Note: The previous three excerpts that touch on work (outside and inside the home) are from Peggy Tanner's memoir, Tales of Two Cities (Blackstone Press, 1997). In the book, she relates interesting experiences in Kerry, London, Manhattan, New Rochelle, and New Jersey. More experiences are covered in her latest volume, The Joy of the Journey (Xlibris, 1999).