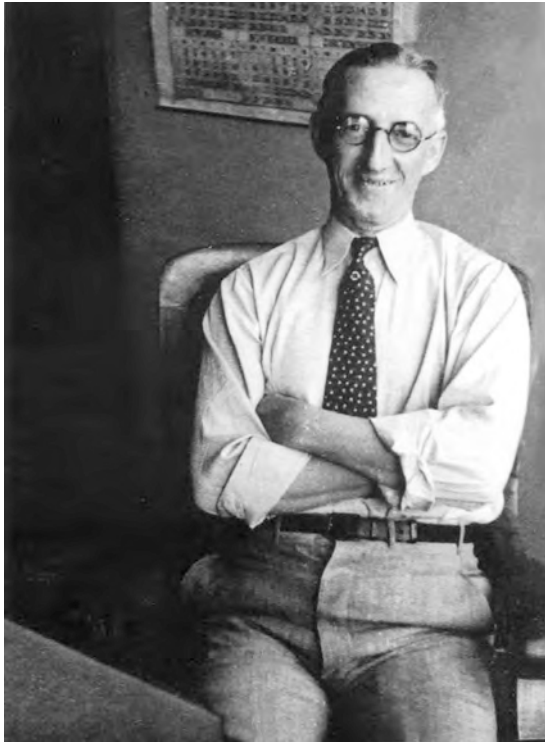


A Recollection

BY JOHN JEFFERSON REILLY



Ed. Note: Beginning in 1873, John Jefferson Reilly lived and worked for more than eighty years in New York City. In 1943 he wrote this memoir of the events, people, and places in his life. This document gives us a unique look at the lives of "ordinary" Irish New Yorkers who struggled for success in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Reilly's grandson, Edwin Bolitho, has contributed the memoir to New York Irish History. Mr. Bolitho's mother, Madeline, was the third of four children of John Jefferson Reilly and Anna Holthausen Reilly. His grandfather died in 1954. The writing here has, for the most part, been left in its original style

I was born July 6, 1873, the son of Annie McLean and John Reilly, and christened John Jefferson Reilly in the Church of the Immaculate Conception, the same edifice still located at Fourteenth Street and Avenue A, New York City. My birthplace was the southeast corner of Twelfth Street and First Avenue in the same city. There were five sisters and two brothers besides myself in the family and although I remember having a faint recollection of residing in the city, I understand my mother sent me to grandmother's, [in] Sunnyside on

Long Island, when I was about three years old to relieve her of some of the cares of my older brothers and sisters. In my short visits to my parents thereafter, I believe is the [earliest] time I remember the city.

After becoming of school age I was returned to my parents in New York City and attended the catholic school which was attached to the church above stated run by catholic brothers. The entrance at that time was on Fifteenth Street between Avenues A and B and the sessions were in a couple of three-story tenements converted into classrooms. My best recollection is I was a scholar here for a couple of years when the parents removed to Blissville, Long Island City, my father under sheriff at that time leasing a building at the corner of Bradley and Greenpoint Avenues in Blissville to carry on his hotel business which he had sold out at Twelfth Street and First Avenue where I was born. A short while after removal to our new home and on the day my youngest sister was born another sister (Rose), I understand, in some way fell out the window and was killed. I never remembered anything about this accident but was advised in years after that it had happened.

FIRST RECOLLECTION OF CHILDHOOD

My first recollection of my childhood was residing for a time with my mother and brothers and sisters in Hitter's house on Skillman Avenue and Hulst [now Thirty-seventh] Street, the location of what is known now as the Metropolitan Flats, in Sunnyside. At that time Sunnyside was all that section bounded by Jackson Avenue (now Northern Boulevard), Thompson Avenue, (now Queens Boulevard), Woodside Avenue and the remaining division was the three-track line of the Long Island Rail Road which carried freight and passengers at the time and was laid side by side.

About this time my mother being a widow and left with seven children with not too much of this world's goods had, I understand, a tough

Illustration: John Jefferson Reilly, in a photo probably taken in the early 1930s. Courtesy of Edwin Bolitho.

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time to provide for us all. She was very handy with the needle and took piecework making hand-made neckties and overalls while the oldest sister Annie procured a job which helped along. The oldest brother worked but from what I understand was not much help to the



household. The remainder of the flock attended school and was a great help around the house after school hours. When they grew older they worked and help reduce the worries of my mother considerably.

After school I had certain duties to perform such as procuring and chopping wood, picking cinders along the railroad track back of the pickle factory (Roniains cannery), now the site of the Chalet on the plaza, besides drawing water by the pail from the cistern for household use and clothes washing. There was not much time for play those days unless it be Saturday afternoons and Sundays, providing you kept up to the standards set by my mother during the other days of the week. When vacation time came around I was so convincing in my application for a job that Mr. Jarvis, who owned a big dairy on the next block, gave me a trial minding his forty-five cows at \$1.50 per week with a couple of quarts of milk thrown in. At this time there was no work attached to the job, for the grazing ground was miles square and a few scattered houses, and the hardest job was rounding the cows up in the evening in time for milking. At the time I speak of there were not more than seventy-five homes in this area so the cattle had lots of empty spaces to graze over. I must have been a good cowboy, for a short time after my engagement by Mr. Jarvis I acquired another dairyman's herd to look out for at an additional \$1 per week. This herd belonged to a Mr. Chadsey, another dairyman in the locality and was no additional work as far

as I was concerned as my only trouble was rounding them up at a given time and heading them home. On their way, although congregated and mixed up all day, they parted and journeyed home to their respective cowsheds without the least bit of trouble on my part. They may be considered dumb beasts but in my estimation they showed more sense than a lot of humans I know.

AT SCHOOL AND AFTER

For several vacations I did this kind of work until my graduation at 12 years of age from the old Second Ward public school which stood on School Street [now Thirty-first Place] near Skillman Avenue. The building, a two-story structure of wood construction, housed three classrooms and taught from sixty to seventy pupils under three teachers. The building was heated by big round-bellied coal stoves, one in each room, and on many occasions it was a special privilege for the big boys to haul the coal from the cellar to replenish the stoves.

Another special job was to be allowed to take the wooden pails to Ryan's spring which was a half mile away, fill them with the assistance of another boy, carry them back to school where it was used to quench the thirst of the other scholars. Upon our arrival back from these missions we were generally wet from the waist to the soles of the feet from water splashing from the pails in climbing the hills and uneven ground the rest of the return journey. The remaining water was placed on a wooden bench in the hall entrance and those partaking of the liquid all drank from a tin dipper the school authorities provided. There were no thoughts or talk of germs in those days and I really believe the kids of that time were more rugged and healthy than those of the present day.

Oh, what I would give to enjoy about two years of those school days over again with no thoughts or worries. It's a shame now to think that we as parents, no matter how hard we try, cannot impress to the youngsters growing up what a wonderful age they are living in and such conveniences with radio, airplanes, moving pictures, electric appliances, autos, running water and many other wonderful inventions which us older folks never heard or thought of in our youth.

Illustration:
A Dutch Kills/Newtown
Creek area residence at
the end of the 19th cen-
tury. Courtesy of The
Greater Astoria
Historical Society.

One of the pleasures which I thoroughly enjoyed in my youth and was very popular at that time was illustrated songs. This was carried on as follows: a large hall or ground space was arranged for and in the case of the latter it was enclosed with canvas generally, but, should finances stand it, with lumber at one end was spread a large white background of white cotton fabric about eight feet by ten feet. Electric lights were strung around the enclosure which brightened the place up as these shows mostly all took place at night for the best results. When the show was about to begin the place was darkened and a clear electric reflection was thrown upon the white screen.

Immediately after this a piano played some introduction and the show began. Through the reflection from the screen and standing close by was either a lady or gentleman singer and, as sentimental songs were the easiest ones to demonstrate, these were the ones

used. As the singer progressed a still picture in colors was thrown upon the screen and a line rendered changed the picture to apply until the completion of the song. For a nickel you heard and saw the rendition of a half dozen songs and the singers generally were worth the money, for the management fully understood if he was to make a success of his undertaking he had to procure the best singers available.

Another source of pleasure in my times was a picnic or ball. The picnics were you might say a whole day's affair, especially the church affairs. Usually the morning of the latter affair, proceedings for the same started about eight a.m. Some parishioner's horse and wagon would be donated to go from house to house to collect the eatables, everything being donated such as cooked hams, all kinds of bolognas, frankfurters, bread, rolls, mustard, pickles, etc. These having reached the [picnic] ground about eleven a.m. the committee in charge arranged the eatables on portable wooden tables and were ready for business about one

p.m. when the mothers and children with a few scattered men would start to arrive bringing the affair to a start. About this time the band musicians having set up their instruments started the affair and from then till two or three the following morn the guests would start straggling home a tired out but satisfied throng. During the afternoon, intermissions between dances were announced and athletic games were held between contestants from adjoining hamlets, such as five mile race, one mile race, tug of war, catch the greasy pig, etc. These events proved very interesting and caused much

friendly rivalry with monies changing hands on the results and the only consolations the losers had were to arrange similar meetings against the same men for the following year.

Another thing that brings back these affairs to me and causes a laugh...[are] the thoughts of the kids

around that red lemonade stand. This beverage concocted from a mystery liquid and selling to us kids for a penny a glass was the busiest stand at the affair and it took much vigilance on the part of the women attendants to keep the kids from falling into the tubs.

Another pleasure during my school years was in and along the narrow body of water then known as Dutch Kill Creek. This water arrived from the East River through Newtown Creek and extended north for about a mile and a half to the Long Island Rail Road tracks about at the rear of where the bridge plaza is now located at Northern Boulevard and Paynter [now Fortieth] Avenue. Besides all the swimming we had at Stone dock, off Skillman Avenue, Jeff's dock at the foot of Foster [now Forty-third] Avenue, Thomson [now Forty-fifth] Avenue Bridge and Centennial Bridge, we also had good fishing and crabbing until the oil works and other factories located along Newtown Creek began the outpouring of acids, oil, etc., which terminated these sports. As a



Illustration:

An engraving depicting the industrialized Newton Creek area's oil refineries and factories at the end of the 19th century. Courtesy of The Greater Astoria Historical Society.



*Illustration:
Looking west across the
plaza area for the
Queensboro Bridge.
From a photograph
published in 1913.
Courtesy of Queens
Borough Public
Library, Long Island
Division, Illustrations.*

kid it was my delight to take my boat, an old tub I purchased for \$3 after much saving, and row out to Newtown Creek gathering fire wood along the shore, my journeying taking me as far up the creek as Metropolitan Avenue if I was unfortunate enough not to load up before reaching that point. Don't think for a moment we lacked any pleasure in our times for there was baseball, shimmy, "follow your master," floating on ice cakes and coasting on tin pans, and many other games to play.

GRADUATION AND TO WORK

After graduation from public school having arrived at the age of about thirteen years, our next thoughts were to get a job. If your parents were in a financial position you had a chance to attend high school which was located in the upper part of Astoria on Lockwood [now Thirtieth] Street. This was the only high school in Long Island City and as it was several miles from my home and the finances were low, all thought of giving us kids in that neighborhood a high school education was out. My first job, outside that of herding cows, was obtained for me by my Uncle John Daly and was in "Jim" Robinson's hotel at #7 Borden Avenue. At that time Uncle Jim, as he was known in those days, was Coroner for many years, he being elected for many terms to succeed himself. My duties there were to keep clean the pool and billiard tables in a long room in the rear of the saloon, tidy up the room, and keep account of the

games played and collect the money for same. The hours were about nine to five, and with lots of leisure time in between. For this work I received \$3 per week and my dinner besides tips which amounted to between 25 and 50 cents per week. Adjoining Uncle Jim's place was Tony Miller's Hotel on the corner of Front [now Second] Street and Borden Avenue, known best as the place where politicians gather. On the other side was Matt Smith's Revere Hotel, and next Dresloff's Cigar Store followed by the McAneny Hotel, another Irishman's hotel whose name now skips my memory, then Tommy Hogan's Hotel, and a little further eastward on the same block the Long Island Star Building erected by the original Mr. Todd.

While working for "Uncle Jim" I became acquainted with all the politicians of that time as his back room was a great gathering place for all the shining lights of those days. In the rear of his building was a large room provided with the necessities for a quiet game of pinochle, and it was a regular thing for political lights to congregate each early afternoon and evening and play for drinks and money stakes. Among the regulars were Judge Delehanty, Judge Cavanagh, Chief Detective Owen Cavanagh, Alderman McCarthy, Dick Cooke, manager of Kid McCoy, Paddy Murphy the bookmaker, and many others prominent in sports.

One funny happening I must recite. It seems all the gang attended a cock fight held in what was then known as Carney's Hall, the building still standing on Jackson Avenue fronting the present bridge plaza. In the midst of the main combat the Bergh Society agents battered down the doors and placed all present under arrest. Among these was Little Judge Delehanty who by some means escaped and departed from the premises. They were all loaded into wagons and carried to the station house, their pedigree taken and held in bail. The Little Judge was located in Uncle Jim's place and he accepted the bail tendered for their release. Arraignment took place before himself the following morn in the court which was then held in what is now occupied as Kleifield's restaurant on Jackson Avenue at Court Square. As each culprit appeared he

was given a lecture and fined \$10 with a warning if he trespassed again there would be a prison term for the next offense. When court adjourned for the day they all retired to Uncle Jim's, and although the Little Judge came later before the evening was over, every one was in a jolly mood once again. (On several occasions I've seen bail bonds endorsed by the judges releasing some unfortunate human from spending a night in the police station, they having to hold up their pinochle game to execute the document.)

After working about a year in this atmosphere I was offered a job by Mr. George R. Crowley who was the Long Island Representative for the Associated Press. His office adjoined the building of Uncle Jim's and as it was an increase in salary I accepted. My salary was \$5 per week with a coupon book containing free passages on the Steinway horse car line at that time. It was afterwards electrified and I need not say now and here I felt like a king when I boarded the car and tendered a coupon from my book for a passage. My duties were to report at the office, 7 Borden Avenue, at nine a.m., sweep and dust the rooms and furniture daily and when cold weather came on light a fire in the little round parlor stove so that the place would be warm on my boss' arrival. A short time after I entered his service he gathered around him several men representing New York daily papers and formed what they called the Long Island News. Although writing for their own papers they would also write the stories and send them along to those papers that had no representative in this locality.

My job, besides those already mentioned, was to carry this news to the city editors of the newspaper offices and the next morning to purchase all papers not represented by the individuals and clip all the stories furnished by them. This was an easy matter for me as I was familiar with this work having read all the written copy before I delivered it. These clippings were pasted on a long blank sheet of paper and submitted weekly to the offices of the paper using same where they would be okayed and paid for by the inch or column rate.

About this time reaching the age of sixteen years it was decided I should learn a trade and

through a friend, Mr. Gray, I was recommended to a job in the Matthews Decorative Glass Co. on Twenty-sixth Street between First and Second Avenues, New York City. After spending five years and mastering the business the company decided to move to new quarters on the lower west side. This I believe was too great a distance to travel by foot for it must be remembered it was customary then to walk to and from work on account of the salaries received. From my house on Skillman Ave at Rawson [now Thirty-third] Street, Sunnyside, to the Thirty-fourth Street ferry at the foot of Borden Avenue in Long Island City was easily 2½ miles with another half mile from the ferry terminal in Manhattan to my place of employment, and I did this daily all that period I was employed there. The hours of work then was to begin at seven a.m. and quit at five-thirty, so that after walking to the job, standing all day at work and footing it in returning there was no need of some one rocking you to sleep.

After leaving this job I was engaged to drive a team carting asphalt from Sixth Street and West Avenue [now Fifth Street] in Long Island City to New York City for street repairs. This was a job that one morning you would be required to prepare your team and be ready to leave the stable on Borden Avenue at four a.m., the next day at four-thirty a.m., and then a half hour later each day until your time would come to repeat the performance. After this job slackened up I was advised there was a chance of a job at North Beach, as the latter place was about that time being established as a pleasure resort. The building of a shoot-the-chutes was started and I obtained a job under a Mr. Campbell, Superintendent during its construction, and after its finish spent the following summer in the employ of the North Beach Co., my job being the operation of the machinery



Illustration:

A shoot-the-chute ride early in the twentieth century. As a young man, John Jefferson Reilly operated machinery that pulled boats up after they had plummeted into the water. Courtesy of John H. Corcoran and Borough of Westville, N.J.



that pulled up the boats from the lake to the top of the chutes where they were placed on a turntable and headed back for the lake on the downward track. This work was one I considered a pleasure that I was being paid for as the company furnished all the sailor suits to the help employed there. At the end of the day's work, which was twelve or twelve-thirty a.m., all the help or as many as could crowd into one of the flat boats would climb aboard and away down the chute we went. Upon hitting the water the boat was immediately upset and everyone received a good cooling off after a warm summer day.

When this season's work ended I took a position with a cousin of mine, John J. Daly, who dealt in old iron and scrap. His yard was then located at Nott Avenue [now Forty-fourth Drive] and Hancock [now Tenth] Street, Long Island City. The hours worked at this time was seven a.m. to six p.m. Saturday included, while Sundays you were supposed to reach the stable at seven-thirty a.m. feed the stock and clean the stalls. The next feeding was about four-thirty or five in the afternoon when, after watering the horses and bedding them down, you were done for the day until you would start another week. I started this job at \$9 per week and at the time of my leaving some three years after I was receiving the magnificent sum of \$10 per week. At this time I was the superintendent of the yard and was in full control of the men, shipping and receiving and all also other duties that go with this line of business. This went

Illustration:
St. Patrick's Church in Long Island City, 1916. John Jefferson Reilly and Annie Holthausen were married in St. Patrick's some thirteen years earlier. Courtesy of the Archives, Diocese of Brooklyn.

along for about three years although there were many arguments with the boss's brother who I fear was a little jealous of my being placed in charge and eventually caused me to quit the old iron business.

The next position occupying my time after my departure from the iron business was with the A.H. Hews & Co. of Massachusetts. This concern manufactured flowerpots and other clay products and had a branch office and storehouse on the opposite corner from the iron yard. When Mr. Harris, Superintendent of this company, heard I had left the employ of Daly he sent for me and offered a job which I gladly accepted. My pay while in his employ, which was about eighteen months until they were slack, was \$10 per week. After leaving this company I obtained work with the Manhattan Rolling Mills at Twenty-third Street and Avenue A, New York City. My job here was to cut into lengths round and flat iron and rack the different sizes as soon as it was cool enough after coming through the rollers. I was paid a fixed price per ton and managed to draw as high as \$15 per week. Up to this time this was the toughest job I ever handled and the money was really earned. After the mill was well stocked and the plant shut down by our production I was given the job of driving a truck and delivering same.

ADVANCEMENT AND MARRIAGE

About this time my brother-in-law Joe McArdle approached me with an offer of a job which I gladly accepted it being nearer home with no expenses and shorter hours. I worked for him about three years driving and gathering fat from private houses in New York City during the winter while in summer we moved to Long Branch, N.J. and in addition to our fat business we gathered all kinds of bottles that we shipped to the N.Y. market. While still in his employ I became interested in politics and the outcome of this venture was that I was persuaded to file an application for a city job. Joe Cassidy, then being in power as Borough President, advised filing for a laborer's job, which I did. About a year after and still working for my brother-in-law I was notified to appear for an examination by the Civil Service Commission. I was advised a month later I had passed and my name was on the eligible

list for appointment. On June 12, 1902, I was appointed as laborer and assigned to the Topographical Bureau where I worked with the outside engineers driving stakes, cutting bushes and trees and clearing the paths so that surveys could be made. For this work I was paid \$2 per day and as we only worked a half day on Saturdays my weekly salary amounted to \$11 per week.

While working at this I found out there was to be an examination held for truckman and driver which paid \$15 per week. I put in an application and when the eligible list was published found my name as number one. I applied and was appointed to this position which was a steady job, and concluded that now that I had been keeping company with the nicest girl in the world I would ask her to share my joys. This young girl was then Annie Holthausen of Astoria, and after stating my case she decided to take me for better or worse. We were married the following Washington's Birthday (I think the year 1903) at St. Patrick's Church, Dutch Kills, and I will say that [for] the thirty-eight years of our married life we were the happiest persons on this globe.

After a period of a few years in this position and additions of a daughter and son having arrived in our house I concluded it would be necessary to increase my salary. Upon making inquiries I found out the next promotion, providing I could pass, was that of Foreman which paid \$4 per day. After a time this exam was scheduled and my application was filed. [I was]...also successful in this one and was appointed. Felt overjoyed this far in being successful and decided in the meantime that having lots of time on my hands, as I had become a home man, I would continue studying and if possible advance further.

About eighteen months in this position a messenger exam was scheduled paying \$1500 per annum. This I also passed successfully and as usual lucky me was appointed. I was now in my own opinion a real success and kept my studies up. About this time I decided to purchase from the International Correspondence School three books recommended to further my studies. They were the following: Mathematics, Spelling and Composition, letter

writing, and business practices. Being successful in all my other exams, it gave me the assurance that now whatever studies I put my mind to there was no such word as fail. In addition to the above books was a copy of the Greater New York Charter which I borrowed from the office for I fully realized that, if it was my intention to advance while in the employ of the City, I must study up on civics. Many nights at home, after the missus and kids had retired, would find me occupied until one or two o'clock next morning cramming knowledge for the next exam.

After about three years as a messenger I decided it would be nice if possible to get into the clerical group which had five grades. Awaited the opportunity and the first exam held in that class was for the second grade. My application for this was filed but returned, the authorities advising it was unnecessary for me to take it as my previous successful record in their offices qualified me, and my present title messenger being in the same grade, their only requirement was that my supervisor request a change of title. The powers that were in gladly did this so I was now on my way to my goal, the highest clerkship that was fifth grade. It was necessary then to serve two years in each grade before advancement and in the meantime my studies went right along as usual. To keep brushed up and wear the nervousness off which preceded an exam, I decided to take every exam held which I figured my chances of passing were good. Among these were bridge tender, bath attendant, watchman, court attendant in the City courts as well as in the big courts, and I received a passing mark for all.

I was certified for all the positions and declined for lack of salary as none of the jobs, with the exception of those in the courts, paid as well as the one I already had. I was offered an appointment in the Magistrate's Court at the salary then received but declined, not on account of salary, but because I was advised I would be required to be on duty every day in the year with the exception of my vacation period. [I would]...have gladly accepted a job in the big court and was certified to same, but the powers then in charge were anxious to land one of the favorite sons who was below me on

the list, and I was advised to decline as they would satisfy one of the big shots in the party. A short time after this I was certified from the same list to the Surrogates Court and, making a personal visit there, was advised by one whom I considered a friend in that office to decline as the position was on a per diem basis and was payable only 200 days of a year. Naturally I declined and about a month later a friend of mine below me on the list got the job at \$1800 per annum and held it about twenty years until his death a few years ago. So you see once in a while the politicians do pull a fast one.

CONTINUING ON

My next exam, that of third grade, was passed and salary was now \$1800. About three years after I was ready and passed the fourth at a salary of \$2400. Still giving all my spare time to study and having as a goal that fifth grade, I kept plugging and the time for this exam passed the slowest period of my life. I figured when it did come I was ready and if successful the study days would be over. There was no limit to the salary in this grade so I left nothing undone to pass. To say I was nervous the day of the exam was putting it mildly — in fact my brain was so crammed with matter, an explosion of the cranium would not have surprised me. However, after some two months wait my notification came stating I had been successful and my wife surely felt more elated I am sure than I was. Many times during the periods of my studies, if it were not for her friendly prodding and kindly expressions of assurance that I could and would surely succeed, there would have been no persevering on my part. My salary was now increased to \$3000 and from that time on it has eventually reached the present figure, \$3660 in the year 1942.

On January 8, 1941, my pal of so many years happiness was called by the Good Lord and since that time my interest in many things is null and void. A week before she departed from this earth we had made all arrangements for our usual vacation to Florida, but through her death all reservations had to be cancelled. This year on July 1, 1943, my resignation will be tendered as far as City employment is concerned for by that time I will have served forty years and eighteen days.

Having worked since I was thirteen years old, I concluded after fifty-five years toiling a long rest would do me no harm.

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