

Life in a New York City Fireman's Family, mid-Twentieth Century

BY MARIE WALSH



heard the man was sleeping, he said later he decided any job that paid you for sleeping was the job for him. He entered the New York City Fire Department the same year he became a citizen. However, his three later decorations for heroism proved sleeping was not the whole story.

One decoration, the James Gordon Bennett Medal, was awarded only once in three years for the greatest rescue during the period. The fire involved was one of the terrible factory fires of that era, with

Photo: The Walsh brothers from County Clare in New York City during 1917. From the left: Martin Walsh in police uniform; John Walsh in fire uniform; Neal Walsh in World War I military uniform. John Walsh joined the FDNY in 1907. Courtesy of Marie Walsh.

My father, John Walsh, was born in 1884 in Granatooha, a townland near Kilrush, County Clare. His early memories of Ireland included one as a five-year old, witnessing the Vandeleur evictions at Kilrush and his horror when the bailiff's men tore down the houses before they left so that the homeless could not creep back into them at nightfall. He immigrated to the United States in 1902, and became a citizen in 1907. His older sister, Ellen, preceded him and working as a seamstress, made a home for him in Greenwich Village, and later for his brothers, Martin and Connor. When all the boys were settled she joined the Sisters of Mercy and became an x-ray technician in the Midwest.

EARLY DAYS IN THE DEPARTMENT

My father's first American job was as a longshoreman, living in the Village as he did. Hearing that a friend from Clare was a fireman assigned there, he visited the firehouse on his day off. When he

workers trapped behind locked exits. A young woman, Ida Goldberg, had made it to an upper floor window shutter. My father's aerial ladder was too short so he climbed a small scaling ladder he hooked to a higher floor windowsill; still short, he told the girl to jump into his arms, which she did, and he was able to bring her to safety via the two ladders. My mother treasured the congratulatory telegram Ida sent him on the occasion of the award ceremony at City Hall, and Ida's invitation to her engagement party, which he attended. This occurred in 1916, two years before my father and my mother married.

We knew, as children, we had a hero fireman for a father—my mother saw to that—and that we had family in Clare and Cork (my mother, Julia, was an O'Leary). We also could have known from mail about the County Clare Association, *Clan na Gael*, the American Irish Historical Society, Fire Department organizations and—bringing up the rear—the Chippewa Democratic Club. Besides the mail from Ireland, of course. And books. By the time I finished ele-

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mentary school I had read, among others, John Devoy's *Recollections of an Irish Rebel* and John Kenlon's *Fourteen Years a Sailor*. Kenlon left Ireland at age fourteen, spent fourteen years at sea, and later served as

Chief of the New York Fire Department.

My father was a tall man (5'11") and cut a fine figure in uniform. (My mother was 5'9" so they were a striking pair.) Grooming was important in the department, and the uniforms of navy-blue wool had to be dry cleaned often; shoes were highly polished. A navy-blue hat was exchanged for a white one on attaining officer rank, i.e., lieutenant and up. Special occasions such as inspection days, parades and official funerals required white gloves, which were my mother's job.

That fine figure was maintained by constant exercise. If he found himself in a firehouse without exercise space indoors, after being promoted to officer my father arranged a handball court in the driveway against the building wall which the entire company was expected to use. He believed their job required it.

HIS MAIN CONCERNS

My father's main concerns were his family here and in Ireland, and the men in his command. He talked very little of the job, leaving it at the firehouse. One exception was the night a company in his battalion was summoned to a subway fire. As soon as it was extinguished he called the men up from the tracks. They had just reached the platform when their metal tools froze to the track; a transit employee had ordered power restored before my father gave the signal. He was still as angry when he arrived home next morning as I had ever seen him; his men had barely escaped electrocution. On retirement he was proudest of the record that neither he nor any man under him had ever been injured at a fire. (Incidentally, there were so many John Walshes in the department, they had to be numbered. For the thirty-seven years of his service, he was John Walsh No. 1.)

WORKING CONDITIONS

When my mother and father were married in 1918, firemen worked twenty-one hours a day with three hours off for meals, at an annual salary of \$1,800. They had to live near the firehouse in order to run home for a quick bite or have the families deliver their meals. They had one day off in ten. My mother was fearful of spending nights alone, so they settled into a brownstone apartment at 220 East Thirty-ninth Street, Manhattan, near her parents' similar apartment on East Thirty-sixth Street. Except for his one night off, she spent the nights on Thirty-sixth Street. When I arrived she brought me there, and when my sister Eleanor was born, she brought both of us. By the time Claire, John Jr., and Anne came, we had moved to the Bronx, a section called Edenwald, about as far north as you could go and remain in the city limits. By that time she must have been so busy, the need to sleep at night helped her make the adjustment to being alone.

By then, too, firemen had joined the American Federation of Labor, the only union on the scene. The AFL soon improved their wages and working conditions. They moved on to a two-platoon system, working two consecutive days from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., two consecutive



nights from 6 p.m. to 9 a.m., and had twenty-four hours off.

AT HOME

From 1920 on, my father drove a car, the first one a Model-A Ford. Before we started school and during vacations, we could go to the beach or the country. And his days off were often during the week, making us the envy of our neighbors. The downside came any time he was late coming home. Edenwald was served by the New York, Boston and Westchester Railroad, an offshoot of the New Haven and Hartford, which ran on a schedule. So any day he missed his usual train there was cause for worry. If he were working overtime at a fire or for any reason, he would

telephone my mother as soon as possible to let her know he was all right.

On one occasion, when I was a child of about three years, my mother and father brought my sister Eleanor and me to pick up something at the firehouse. One of the men, thinking no doubt he would give me a treat, placed me behind the wheel of a hook and ladder truck,



huge by any standards, but incredibly so to a three-year-old. He then activated the siren to my terror, since I thought that automatically set the truck to roll out the door with me in the driver's seat and everyone else back at the firehouse. The terror showed, and they quickly took me down.

My father's closest friends in the department were a fireman, Martin Sweeney, and a lieutenant, Jim Fitzpatrick. The friendships continued throughout any changes in rank. Martin Sweeney didn't own a car, so on his days off he would travel to our house from his home in upper Manhattan and borrow our Ford for his family excursions, returning it at night and traveling home again by train. I don't remember my father discussing Patrick Walsh (Chief of the Department and no relation) or any other superior officer except one. He admired a black man who had achieved Deputy Chief rank, the last step in career progression for Chief of the Department. He said this man (I don't remember his name) had not always been well treated on his way up, but when he reached the top he was scrupulously fair in his relations with the men.

My father could be stern, but he left most of the discipline to my mother. He was brought in as a last resort, a usual trait in Irish families, I gather. He was a lighthearted man, though, always singing as he worked. Like most firemen he was handy and took care of repairs around the house. The fact that he was tone deaf, a real Johnny-one-note, didn't bother him a bit; he sang anyway. One of his favorites was the old Harrigan and Hart song, "The Mulligan

Guards." It was years before I learned the actual tune of "The Mulligan Guards."

Although she probably didn't relish the role of disciplinarian, my mother reaped many benefits in the family. My father from the beginning of their marriage shared the housework; one of my early memories is of my father mopping a floor. And on his working days before he left at 7 a.m. he brought breakfast of tea and toast to her in bed. On cold winter mornings he didn't wake her but left it covered on the radiator. And since she didn't like to cook fish, on his 9-to-6 Fridays he would bring a fish dinner from a restaurant, telephoning home for orders before he left the firehouse. Weekends he brought the Loft candy special: three boxes for ninety-nine cents!

AN ACTIVE LIFE

Their department and Irish associations gave them an active social life. Besides parish social activities, they attended annual balls of the various organizations. We had a built-in babysitter: my grandmother O'Leary lived with us after my grandfather died. (They were our only set of grandparents to emigrate.) One of their favorite balls was an annual on New Year's Eve at either the McAlpin or Martinique, then elegant Herald Square hotels, in the 1930s and 1940s. The whole crowd trooped to St. Francis of Assisi Church up the block for 1 a.m. Mass on New Year's Day, and then back to the dance. They had great stamina in those days. My favorite was the County Clare ball at the Hotel Astor which I began attending as a child. The highlight was a victory march at midnight, at the end of which both anthems were sung. I longed to grow up and be part of that march, in a lovely gown, but by the time I did (in the 1930s) the Depression had arrived and the ball was just a memory.

The 1930s brought many problems. Fiorello La Guardia as Mayor refused to fill vacancies from municipal civil service promotional lists. When a position in a higher title needed to be filled, he did so on an acting basis from a lower rank at the lower salary. As a result my father spent years as an Acting Battalion Chief at a Captain's salary of \$4,500 annually. In addition,

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all firemen and policemen had to take a 10% salary cut and a month's payless furlough every year of the Depression. Although it was called a furlough, they were required to work all twelve months. Food and clothing costs were at rock bottom then, but mortgage payments and tuition remained the same. My mother, like many wives and mothers of the period, sometimes had a hard time making ends meet.

ENCOURAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

For me, the 1930s meant the beginning of my work life. During those years if you were Jewish or Catholic a career in private industry was not for you. Remembering the "No Irish Need Apply" signs he met in the linen houses downtown when he arrived in New York, and in line with his strong belief that one should earn all one acquired, my father encouraged us to go into public service. I decided to do so and found that the entrance and initial promotional opportunities for women came through stenography. A month before the entrance and first promotion exams, my father drove me to a typewriter rental shop where I selected a machine and practiced on it. He then brought it to the exam site—downtown Manhattan, West Bronx, wherever—waited the necessary three hours, and carried it back to the rental shop. Thanks to my father's encouragement and very practical support, I was able to move through the municipal career ranks without ever experiencing discrimination as a Catholic or as a woman. And there was a lot to be said for that in the 1930s and early 1940s.

My father didn't encourage my brother Jack to enter the Fire Department. The question was probably moot since Jack enlisted in the Navy at age seventeen during the War years to avoid being drafted at eighteen into a service not of his choice. When he was discharged in 1946, he immediately started college and later went to law school. The war years brought manpower shortages, and fighting fires was seriously undermanned. My father didn't complain at the time, but later said it was an impossible job with only

three men on an engine or a hook and ladder. Probably as a result of that stress and possibly because of his love for butter and meat, he suffered a stroke at home on March 17, 1944 while getting ready to march with the department in the parade. When he recovered he was offered a headquarters assignment, but light duty was not for him. He chose early retirement at age sixty, and enjoyed eighteen years of that retirement.

IN RETIREMENT

My father spent those years shuttling between the Bronx and Rockaway Beach where we spent summers. In the Bronx his time was occupied doing repairs, listening to the radio, and driving my mother and us about. We had a radio from the time of the early wet cell version, which he faithfully tended each day before leaving for work. During those years between 6:45 and 7 p.m. silence reigned at the dinner table during Lowell Thomas' nightly news broadcasts. He also enjoyed the many Irish programs of the time, particularly a weekly one from Boston featuring a baritone John McCormack (as distinguished from the tenor). I remember his "Dark Rosaleen" ringing through the house. My father was particularly impressed with a broadcast by the Chief Rabbi of Dublin during the war years, emphatically stating there was no anti-Semitism practiced in Ireland, contrary to British propaganda of the time, apparently in retaliation for Ireland's neutrality.

In Rockaway he loved to swim and was very good at it even in heavy surf. The nightly recreation—besides dancing at 103rd Street—was walking the crowded boardwalk. He was sure to run into many of his old co-workers; his big problem was remembering all their names in order to introduce them. The New York of that time enabled him to remain close to the people of his background and the people of his work life.

My father's funeral was a civilian one. My mother had always felt she didn't want the ceremony of an official one despite the honors. He was buried, from a Mass at our parish church in the Bronx, at Gate of Heaven Cemetery. His gravestone features his name and my mother's name (she joined him in 1991), with the only decoration a sprig of shamrock.