

STREET VISITORS

An essential and colorful part of the life of Fox Street was provided by the commerce that came through—on foot or on horse and wagon mostly; only rarely by truck.

The Iceman

He clip-clopped his horse to the front of the building and with his tongs reached in and pulled a block of ice toward the back ledge of the wagon. He scored the block with a point of his tongs, and with a pick made several stabs along the scored groove, separating off a piece neatly. With his tongs he flung the ice on his shoulder, which was covered with a rubber mat. He trudged up the stoop and into the building, leaving a fine trail of droplets behind him. He knew the size of every ice block for every customer—ranging from a fifteen to a thirty-five cent piece. He would open the top door of the double-tiered icebox, shove the remnant of the last piece aside and fling in the fresh block. You paid him then and there. Water from melted ice collected in a flat metal pan under the box. If you forgot to pull out and empty the pan (my chore) you would soon see a puddle on the floor around the box.

There were several reasons for interest in the iceman. His wagon was dark and cool. It had an unforgettable smell of wet wood and burlap. Besides, it was the source of a goodie. When the iceman was in the building, delivering, we would climb into the wagon and pick pieces of ice and scraps to suck and chew. It was a brave thing to do. One: you might get caught by the iceman. His curses in loud and Slurvian Italian were awesome. Two: your mother might catch you and slap the ice away. Three: you ran the risk of serious disease. We kids had a theory that since ice was

made with *ammonia*, sucking it might give you *pneumonia*. It was plausible to us; but we dared.

The Coal Man

Among the earliest motor trucks coming to the neighborhood were those driven by the coal men. Some buildings were so arranged that the coalman would run a chute from the back of his truck into the cellar. He would raise the front of the truck and the coal would come tumbling down the chute. If I remember right he used to stand at the rear of the truck with his hand on a lever. He would watch the coals spilling down and at a certain point would pull the lever, stopping the flow. Did he estimate the tonnage by eye? In other buildings the coal was delivered in hoppers made of heavy, wood-reinforced canvas. The men would dump the coal into the street, shovel it into these hoppers, hoist the hoppers on to their shoulders and plod in and out of the building.

The Milkman

Few people in our row of buildings used delivered bottle milk. We had ours ladled into our milk pails at Mr. Marshall's. He would pry off the cover of a large pail, plunge in his long, flat-bottomed dipper, stir the milk and ladle out a quart at a time. The milk would be cool and bubbly in your pail.

The milkman with the wagon did a good business in the newer buildings. You would see him only rarely—mostly in early mornings of mid-summer when you left your apartment to escape the stale, hot, damp air inside. Often the milkman's horse or a furtive cat were the only moving things on the block. Then you walked over to watch. The milkman was a hustler in a white cap and jacket. He would eye you suspiciously while flinging the cold bottles into compartments of a metal carrying tray or

juggling empty bottles into the tray. Meanwhile his horse, big, patient, fragrant with the smell that nothing on earth but a horse has, would stand, switching at flies with its tail, or dropping a heavy, steaming load of dung.

The Street Cleaner

This gentleman, always Italian, would come pushing a large, metal drum on wheels and wielding a push broom with stiff brown bristles. He would walk leisurely along the curb, pushing his broom until he collected a pile of dust, dung, paper scraps and old rags. Then he would pull a flat scoop shovel from his little wagon and shovel the debris into the metal drum. In his slow patient way he would move on until we were tired of watching him. Sometimes, however, he would bend to pick up and examine an object. When he did we rushed to see what he had found. He never told us or showed us. He was a non-communicator.

Other visitors were intermittent. They always came as a welcome surprise and always gave us something wonderful to watch or to do.

The Ices Man

The ices man had a small flat pushcart bearing a burlap-covered block of ice. Running the length of the cart was a tray of bottles with colored and flavored liquids. These had pointed nozzles. For a small amount (2¢, 3¢) he would scrape the ice block with a cup like scraper having a toothed bottom. The scrapings would rise in the cup and be dumped into a cone-shaped paper holder. You called out your color, or flavor, and he would shake some of the liquid out of a bottle on to the scrapings. Even though he invariably chose a shady spot in which to park and you tended to eat your ices near his cart it was not long before the cold shavings merged with the colored liquid and went down as a drink. Such is the power of legitimacy that we

never paused to wonder why ice from the iceman's wagon might give you pneumonia, but ice from the ices man's wagon would not.

The Merry-Go-Round

If we had visits from organ grinders I cannot recall any but one—with a small, red-capped monkey on a long chain. The little thing had pink-rimmed and pathetic eyes, grasped its tin cup in tiny hands and darted about nervously. It was sadder than the music. But the musical merry-go-round was a frequent visitor. This was a horse-drawn flat cart carrying a merry-go-round with a few frantic looking, paint-peeling horses and a pointed, multi-colored roof. Around the center were small benches for the very young or very timid. The horses did not rise and fall. You paid your few cents, mounted a step through an open gate and ran to your horse. Then you waited, and waited. It seemed forever. But it was not until the merry-go-round man had filled the wagon, or was sure there were no more customers, that the turning began. The gate would close, the man would give the merry-go-round a push with his hand and then grind you around by turning a large wheel (obviously geared underneath to the merry-go-round platform). The music played, clanging, raucous and out of tune, with many missing notes. But it was music to us. You banged your behind up and down on the horse to simulate an exciting ride. Almost, it seemed, as soon as you had started, the turning stopped, the gate opened and you were shoved off to make room for the next batch of waiting kids.

The Back-Yard Musicians

Suddenly you would hear, from the airshaft, a beery voice singing "*I'm forever blowing bubbles, Pretty bubbles in the air; They fly so high, Nearly reach the sky, Then like my dream, They fade and die...*" It was a back-

yard troubadour who bowed hat in hand when he had finished and waited for the coins to come down. Some considerate people wrapped their coins in twists of newspaper. Others merely tossed them, bouncing, on the pavement.

Or you would hear a scratch violin sobbing out "Moonlight and Roses" or "Humoresque" or a then popular Yiddish ballad, "Ich Bin a Boarder bei mein Weib..." the tale of the clever man who, observing how much better than he the boarder was treated, left home and moved back as a boarder. Or "Dee greene cuzzeene" (the greenhorn cousin).

Sometimes it would be a clarinet, most likely playing klezmer (working, low class, for hire) music such as a "fraylach" the kind of wild, whirling music to which the "kazatzkee" (the Cossack kneeling and leg-kicking dance) was danced at weddings. Or a saxophone sobbing out a popular hit like "Lena" (is the queen of Palestine) or "Oh, Katharina" (*to keep my love you must be leaner... Learn to swim. Join the gym. And... believe it or not—eat farina...*)

The Pony Picture

Somewhere between the service street people (the umbrella repair man, the knife grinder, the pot mender) and the amusements was the man with the camera and the pony. You ran upstairs, begged a quarter from your mother and fidgeted until your turn came to sit on the pony and be photographed. You sat still, smiled at the command and watched, bewitched, as the man's head disappeared under the black cloth hanging at the back of his camera and he fiddled with the cap over the lens. Then he appeared again, got you down from the pony, and while you watched, pulled the slide from somewhere in the camera, yanked out the oblong piece of tin, dipped it into a cup of liquid suspended under the camera,

fished it out, slapped it into a cardboard frame and handed you yourself gawking at the lens, head down. Upstairs you ran, unable to take your eyes from it. When the man was through he snapped together the legs of his wooden tripod, hoisted it to his shoulder and led his pony down a way, where he would set himself up again.

The "I Cash" Man

From time to time you would hear, coming from the back yard, the cry, "Ole cloes... I cash cloes... ole cloes... I cash cloes." And you would see a man with a big stuffed sack, jingling coins in his pocket, looking up and around, repeating his call. If you beckoned him, you would give him your apartment number. He would soon appear and, if you didn't have your clothes ready, would stand with hand on hip, waiting with the air of one whose precious time you were wasting. Whatever you brought out he would eye with contempt, as though you were insulting him. He would lift his pack and make a move toward the door. If you didn't stop him first with a "Noo?" he would pause and say, wearily, "So ahm upstehs awready, a qvudder fah de lot." If you gathered the clothes to take them back he would stretch a hand to you. "Zaytach! (look you) I em a poor men. I hef to mek a leeving. Varriyi tink I'm gadding fo a soot—efter I'm boining alt de eyes to fix it. So vat can I affudder?" He softened you and made you feel guilty if you insisted on fifty cents for a perfectly good, outgrown boy's suit.

The Turkish Candy Man

Except for a fat, shiny-faced man who came around with a tray of Turkish candies, most of the food vendors sold nourishment rather than sweets. The Turkish candy tray had three kinds of goodies. One was a sesame candy, obviously made from a syrupy preparation, poured onto waxed

paper and allowed to harden. Then strips were cut in it and diagonal cuts made across the strips, so that the piece you bought was diamond shaped. This was my favorite. Another candy on his tray was chunks of hard but chewy nougat, pink white and light blue, with pieces of almond in them. Another was a frosted candy (Turkish delight) like hardened gelatin, which it probably was, dusted with confectioner's sugar.

Everything on that tray stuck to your teeth. I lost at least three "first" teeth on Turkish candy.

While I am on the subject of teeth let me tell you about Dr. Bach, the local dentist. I had more cavities than teeth and was a frequent occupant of his chair. Invariably, after a quick poke of his mirror around my mouth he would shake his head sadly and warn me against sweets. And always as I left he gave me a lollipop.

The Real Food Men

A variety of ready-to-eat food vendors would come to the block.

Nehit: Nehit came in a large porcelainized metal pot pushed on baby carriage wheels and somehow kept hot. It contained boiled chickpeas, known in Yiddish as "arbisslahch" or "nehit," which, I believe is an Arabic word. I was constantly discovering Yiddish words imported from languages other than German, English or Hebrew. For example "pantufflin" (slippers) and serviette (napkin) from the French. Roumanian, Polish and Russian phrases were used wholesale by my father, usually prefaced with "Der goy zoogt a vertle..." (The peasant has a saying...).

The nehit was spooned on to a paper dish and before being handed to you was liberally sprinkled with salt and pepper.

Knishes: These were of two kinds, both sold hot. One was potatoes and onion, highly spiced, wrapped in flaky dough, wound into a coil and

baked. The other knish was the same mixture, flattened into a patty, breaded and deep fried. Each kind had its partisans. As far as I remember the same man never sold both.

Pretzels: While pretzel vendors were normally sedentary, sitting at busy places with their basket on a box, they sometimes came through Fox Street. The pretzels were shiny in those days, big, fat, underbaked, with their fat tops heavily crusted with black poppy seeds and large salt crystals. They were rubbery. They fought you back. But they were good. If you were superhygienic you refused to take one from the stock racked up on sticks set around the basket. You made the man lift up the white cloth and pull one out from underneath.

Sweet Potatoes: Sometimes a man came through pushing a vehicle that looked like a sheet metal chest of drawers with a bottom tray of glowing coals. It was the sweet potato man. When you came up he would ask, "Fahd hah mahtsh?" You would say, "two cents," "three cents," or "a nickel." He would open drawers, searching for a potato of the appropriate size at the price, and give it to you wrapped in a square of newspaper. His difficulty was mostly in finding one small enough at your price. Sometimes he would cross-examine you about how much money you had or asked to see the money in your hand. If he had to, he would grumblingly cut a piece from a whole potato.

Horseradish: I have not, since those days, seen another variety of sedentary vendor I watched with as great an interest as I watched the horseradish grinder. This was invariably a little old man or lady sitting at the curb on a busy shopping day. Set on a wheeled box was a little grinding machine. The machine had a perforated drum with sharp projections at each perforation and was turned by a crank. The horseradish (a long white root) was pushed against the turning wheel and the shredded grindings,

wet and fragrant with the characteristic sharp smell of horseradish, would collect and be poured into a small bottle.

Few Jews would eat their boiled beef (they rarely prepared it any other way) without a generous scoop of horseradish on the dish. Horseradish or "chrayn" came in two ways: plain white and purplish red. The red was made simply by adding beet juice. Horseradish spoiled very quickly, becoming discolored and tasting merely sour and rotten. So you bought small amounts and, when you bought from the little old grinder, you were sure you were getting it fresh.

Chewy Tar: Involuntary purveyors of an oral goodie were the men who came around to repair potholes in the street. They used two materials. One was coarse asphalt. This was dumped into the hole and smoothed over with heavy push irons on long handles. The irons were kept hot at a forced blower stove. In a drum over that stove was the *real* stuff. This was a shiny, smooth pitch, kept hot and viscous. When the hole was filled and smoothed this shiny stuff was ladled out and poured as a seal neatly around the edge of the repair. This crew always fascinated us. The smell was strong and pleasant. The forced flame made a steady roar, except when it began to flutter. Then a man would rush up and pump a compressor handle to revive the flame. And, most of all, the men would let you pick drippings of the shiny tar from the edge of the drum. This had a pleasant piney taste, a wonderful consistency, and was reputed to be the best tooth whitener you could get.

It had another use. One Saturday morning (while his butcher store was closed) my father walked to one of these drums and dug out a lump of tar. While I watched he modeled a stag—legs and horns and all. I thought it was beautiful. When it was done he tossed it back into the drum.

The Fruit Wagon: At times when the store south of the stoop at 744

Fox was empty (or not occupied as a fruit and vegetable store), the fruit wagon would stop in front of the building. It came down the block, rattle-rattle, the fruit man leading his horse, bawling out "Pitrayriss," "Binnenniss," "Owniawns," and repeating his call. If a customer called from a window on the block he would stop and wait for her to come down. His boxes were sloped so that you could see the merchandise, and prices were posted on large brown bags (apparently lettered with a cotton-tipped shoe polish dipper) draped over sticks. Often he would rest his horse in front of our building, fill a pail of water for it at Marshall's grocery, or put on its feedbag. We would watch the animal snuffle its way through the oats and, at the bottom of the bag, toss it to get the grain into its mouth.

Sometimes the fruit wagon man ran a fruit store, which would be tended by his wife while he led the horse around. The father of one of my early girl friends had such a store. The store and the wagon kept them in a comfortable well-furnished apartment, paid for expensive piano lessons for their daughter and, eventually, sent her to Barnard College.

Á
 Á
 U-Á@ *•Á@eÁ^aÁ[Á^ÁZÓ@á@[áÁ} Á[ÁÚd^^Á Á@ÁO[} Á
 ā Á@Áe|Á, ^} ā@Á^} ċ!^ÁFJFÎ ĚJGĤ DÓ^ Áæ@e ÁÖŠ[à^||Á
 Ú~ à|ā @āÁ^ Á[@Š[à^||ÁeÁYÁU!| á~ &ā } •ĚQ&È
 Ú~!&@e^ÁeÁe æ[} Á