

# 'Lace curtain Irish' and Jackson Street roots

In the late 1970s *ex-Chronicle* editor James Malone recalled the chunks of city history that had been recently gobbled up by redevelopment. Being of Irish extraction, Malone mourned the passing of the city's historic Irish enclave, Jackson Place.

Malone defined Jackson Place as an area that encompassed Lower Jackson Street, Jackson Place, Valley Street Extension and Milk Street. As the Irish climbed up the social ladder, they moved further up Jackson Street, built houses and became known as the "lace curtain Irish." Everything they needed was within reach: St. Joseph's Church, grocery stores, saloons and undertakers.

As the 19th century progressed, the Irish were joined by French Canadian and Polish immigrants, many of whom settled in the Chapman Street area. However, the area between Milk and Lower Jackson streets was so overwhelmingly Irish that it was called "Cork Alley." Malone believed that the name was somewhat of an anomaly though as most of the residents came from

County Kerry.

Jackson Place was often visited by the Irish physician Dr Owen O'Neill, who answered every call made upon him. The area was also the home to "Jerry Blue Bag," an Irish "tinker" who carried all his possessions in a blue denim bag tossed over his shoulder. He never spoke and there was a great mystique about him as he walked around the streets.

When the Irish-American men folk needed to get away from their families, they either visited the saloon at 17 Milk St. operated by Thomas D. Kelley and Delphis Boucher, or went down to the cabins of the New Haven railroad on the Main Street, Union Street and Milk Street crossings.

The cabins were manned 24 hours a day, seven days a week to raise and lower the gates when the trains were steaming in and out of Willimantic. Each cabin had a pot-bellied stove that was stoked to red heat in the winter months and the new arrivals from Ireland would sit around it and talk about Sinn Fein, the Black and Tans and a young rising Irish politician named Eamonn de Valera. Willimantic's Kerry-born Irish were



Tom  
Beardsley

also proud of the fact that they were from the same county as the famous politician Daniel O'Connell, a member of the British Parliament and a champion of home rule for Ireland.

By World War I, Jackson Place was becoming increasingly populated by Polish families. Frank Koslowski lived in the last house which bordered the railroad track siding. He was awakened one morning in 1915 by the cry of hungry circus animals in cages on rail cars parked in the siding over his back yard fence. The circus, Tom Mix's 101 Ranch, unloaded the animals, and erected its tents on Natchaug Street. After parading around the city, the performers began their first show at 2 p.m. and Frank and all the other Jackson Place kids, the Caisses, O'Connors, Wojicks, Flahertys,

Sheas, Moriaritys, Haddads, Valones, Sullivans and Sheens paid 25 cents to see it.

Frank was fortunate because he had free tickets for the circus. His father, Michael Koslowski, was the proprietor of a tailor's shop at 34 Jackson St. and the circus gave him free tickets in return for him displaying the posters in his shop windows. Young Frank could then afford peanuts and lemonade. He returned home after the circus, picked up the *Chronicles*, and completed his paper route around Jackson Place.

Jackson Place consisted mainly of private, multi-tenement housing, which was considered to be an eyesore by the 1960s. It was all destroyed by the demolition ball in 1973-74 and replaced by the Father Honan elderly housing complex.

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