Growing Up In Lowell XIV
Edward Harley

[In October 1985, Paul Page interviewed Edward Harley as part of the Oral History Collection created as a joint project between the University of Massachusetts Lowell, and the Lowell National Historical Park. The following article represents a small segment of the information on Edward Harley as edited by Cliff Hoyt. The full text is on the website for the Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts (http://library.uml.edu/clh). It can be found under “Oral History” then “Working People of Lowell.”]

Father’s parents were both born in Ireland. Grandfather came to America in the 1880’s. He got a job with the street railway and remained with them for 54 years. He drove one of the last horse-drawn trolley’s in Lowell, and one of the first of the electric cars. He remained with the electric cars until the buses came in. There’s an old saying that ”There's no sense in being Irish, if you can't be thick.” My grandfather was certainly Irish. He was a very good man to me, but he was thick. He was opinionated, stubborn, and if he did something wrong, he’d refuse to admit it. He considered himself right in all things. He drove a bus the same way he drove a trolley, right down the middle of the street as if there were tracks on the road. This was not the way it was meant to be. So he then worked in the maintenance barn, and stayed there for another six or seven years, until he broke his hip and had to retire.

Mother’s parents were both mill people. My grandfather on my mother’s side was three quarters French while my grandmother was Irish. They both came to work in the mills in Lowell. My grandfather became an overseer at the Boott Mill. Mother and most of her family followed him into the mill. She went in at fourteen. My grandfather remained there until he died two weeks after I was born. And it's interesting to see in the newspaper accounts that the management of the Boott attended his funeral which was kind of rare, but he had been with them for a good many years at that time.

My parents had two children, my sister and myself. I was born in 1927. I went to parochial schools. These schools are a big influence on the children who attend them. This is where the mind is molded and the training received is retained by almost all parochial school graduates to the end of their days.

Mother (and father when he was in Lowell), sister, and I lived with my father’s folks until I was nine. My grandfather always worked, even at the worst of times, and made fairly decent money for the times. Additionally there were usually others in the house working. So we always ate extremely well in that house. My father still has that attitude, that the only things important in life are having a roof over your head, and having something to eat. Everything else is just extra.

Work was very hard to get for my father. At the time of his marriage he had obtained a job with Drake's cake franchise in Brooklyn. He drove a horse and wagon to stores, and sold them cakes. When the depression really hit, that job folded and he came back to Lowell but periodically he left home to find work. Once in awhile he would work for the W.P.A. When things got better he went to work for the city of Lowell and also as a bartender in a bar on Whipple Street off back Central.

My neighborhood was very mixed. It was basically Irish and Portuguese, but there were Italians, Scotch, French, and a couple of Swedes, all on the same street, and all as part of the neighborhood. It was a very cohesive neighborhood, and a very, very neighborly neighborhood with absolutely no types of antagonism towards one another. Each person looking out for the other person’s interest at all times. Every mother, every woman on the street was my mother. If I was doing something wrong I'd get wacked by anybody that was there. It was considered the thing to do. A kid had a place in the world: it was keep his mouth shut and be good. Your parents expected anybody else that caught you doing something wrong to give you a little bit of a whack. In the adult world of my childhood there was no apparent feeling of distrust, or uneasiness between
different ethnic groups in the neighborhood.

I played baseball on an Irish team but still you always had friends on the other teams. I mean, we were friendly off the field with a lot of the Greeks and French fellows. On the field there would be fights but it was a matter of conflict about the game, not nationality.

Walking was a fairly big occupation, at the time. In days where cars were not as available and there was nothing else to do at night, you went walking. While walking, conflict would come from an invasion of turf. If you were going in any part of the city, and you saw a large group of fellows who you thought might be residents of that particular corner, you'd get out of your way perhaps to get around them, especially if you're alone. It happened all the time. I mean you tried to avoid it, or else get through fast.

In every neighborhood there was an amazing number of small variety stores. Almost every corner would have one. I lived on Crosby Street. At the top of the street there was a little variety store run by, by Margaret Finnegar. Right across the street there was the same type of store, run by Minnie Clancy. At the bottom of Crosby Street there was a store run by Mr. & Mrs. Shaw. One block away from that there was a store run by Mr. Blair, a blind man. All of these little places would sell bread, small can goods and things of that nature. Most everybody had one of these stores as their favorite. The people that run these of course, would live in one room behind it. They would open at 6:00 in the morning till 10:00 at night, hard life. Especially after kids with 2 pennies worth of candy, rubbing their dirty noses all over the candy counter.

If you wanted to buy meat or get the food for the week, you went to a larger market. I worked in one for many years, and it was very different from the markets we know today. In the market we would receive plywood boxes containing an enormous amount of tea. The box would be curled and breaking apart from having been wet, on the trip. My job would be to put the tea in paper bags. I would tear off the plywood and inside there was this very heavy foil. While tearing off the foil, your nostrils would be assailed by the fantastic smell of this fresh tea. I would take a scoop and measure out either a half pound or a pound of tea using a set of balanced scales. I would then pour that into a small brown bag. We would do the same with sugar.

I also had to clean chickens. They came from local farms often barely plucked. I'd have to chop the head and feet off. Then I removed all the insides and replace the giblets into the bird. It was a most distasteful job.

During the hot summer, it was a really, really odorous job. In the winter, when they were frozen, your fingers just went numb while handling the icy, slushy stuff. On Thanksgiving and at Christmas we would have turkeys which came in that same way. Additionally, you had to break the legs off the turkeys. You didn’t chop them, you broke them off. I think, next to the material that’s used on space ships, the toughest thing in the world is a turkey leg. We used a metal gadget hooked on the wall. When you put the turkey's leg in the gadget, some tines held the turkey in place and made sort of a fulcrum. When you put some weight on that turkey, that fulcrum was supposed to help break that leg leaving the end you traditionally see in pictures. But if you came in when I was doing that job, you’d probably find a sixty-pound kid in a dirty white apron swinging like hell on the end of a turkey and not being able to snap that thing. I’d finally get it, but it was difficult. It was a hard, hard job.

All that activity went on behind the scenes. At that time, when a customer come in to get an order, they came to a counter. Very little was placed where a customer could pick it up. Instead they would stand in line, and wait until they got to the counter. They would tell one of the clerks what they wanted individually. The clerk would then walk back and forth filling your order. When the entire order was complete, including the meats and everything, he would then turn over one of the bags over and write down the price of everything, add it up, and tell you the total. He would then either charge it to your account, or take the money. The clerk would then allow this person to take the order or put it in a box to be delivered later on. Every person that bought anything was treated very very individually, and with a great deal of personal service.

We ate extremely well while living at grandmother's house. After we left that house, my mother and I, and my sister, it wasn’t always true. In 1936, my mother got a bit of a job, and decided to go on her own, because it wasn't her house. We were treated very well at grandmother’s, and mother was extremely fond of everybody. Still she wanted her own home. We moved into a tenement owned by my uncle. The rent was three dollars a week at that time, for four rooms. The four rooms had pine floors that had no under flooring, just pine planking, over a dirt cellar. Absolutely no insulation, no storm windows and no hot water. The heat came from a coal stove in the kitchen. We did have a toilet and a tub, but in the draftiest bathroom in the world. This was a very hard place.
The focal point in our house was the kitchen and dining room. This is where you lived. The dining room was large, and after supper everybody would sit at the large table, drink tea and talk. The radio would be turned on, and I would be underneath it listening to programs like Jack Armstrong and Little Orphan Annie. My head would be near the speaker at the bottom of the radio, so I could hear it over the other’s talking. We’d stay there until 7, 8, or 9 o’clock, until people starting going out or going to bed. Till this day I still am a kitchen person.

I fondly remember the events around the Fourth of July. Many of the small stores would build an outdoor stand two or three weeks before the Fourth of July, and cover them with red, white and blue crape paper buntings. From these stands they would sell a large assortment of fireworks: salutes, lady fingers, and cherry bombs, and all sorts of great things that would blow your fingers off. Although I know it is safer for children now that they’ve been outlawed, I miss it. There was a great deal of excitement about lighting fireworks off. Another thing was being allowed to stay up late at night to witness the fireworks on the South Common. There was also an extremely large carnival, during the annual Fourth of July celebration. It would usually go on for a week, with rides, free acts, and things of that nature.

Although times were hard, all in all I had a good life, growing up in Lowell.