

Those were the Days

Remembering small-town America

The highlight of all of my childhood summers, something I thought about all year long, was our family's two-week vacation at the Jersey Shore. The quickest way from Staten Island was to drive across the Outerbridge Crossing, but we would importune our father to take the Perth Amboy Ferry, a small vessel that took a few cars, had a strolling accordionist, and was the nearest we ever got to a summer cruise. He almost always conceded.

Taking the ferry meant driving down Tottenville's Main Street, thence to Bentley Street and the boat dock. Tottenville, a small community on the southernmost corner of Staten Island, had old-fashioned stores and Victorian houses. I loved the picturesque ferry terminal almost as much as the boat ride.

That remote outpost of New York City was (and perhaps still is) famous as the graveyard beat for policemen who incurred their boss's wrath. They were exiled to a place where enforcing traffic regulations was the most exciting thing that ever happened.

Though within the boundaries of the city, the ambience was that of a rural Mayberry.

When I reached my teens, I attended a high school at the very opposite end of Staten Island, facing New York Bay. A number of boys in my class traveled the hour ride by train from Tottenville and, ironically, were the only students who were never late. But they took some kidding.

We sophisticates from the North Shore called Tottenville "Toonerville" and the Staten Island Rapid Transit, the train the boys took to get to school, the "Toonerville Trolley." "Do they wear shoes in Toonerville?" we would ask.

By the 1950s, while other Staten Island communities had embraced supermarkets

and fast food emporiums, Tottenville still retained its early 1900s character.

I had a good deal of experience working in an A&P supermarket during my high-school years so it was not surprising when the company asked me to fill in for vacationing employees at various stores during my summer break from college. I worked first at supermarkets in Stapleton and New Dorp, thriving, busy business districts. That was easy.

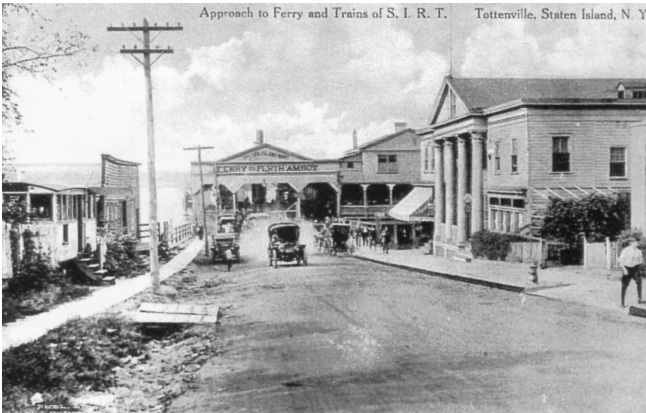
Then I was asked to fill in for two weeks at the small A&P Grocery Store, a relic of bygone days, on Main Street in Tottenville.

What an experience! From eight in the morning to six at night, save for the hour the store closed from noon to 1 p.m. (remember those days?), I stood behind a counter waiting on customers -- happy ones, friendly ones, crabby ones, indecisive ones. Some knew what they wanted, others didn't. Some had a list, others didn't. I do believe some came in just to exchange gossip. ("I haven't seen you here before." "Do you live in Tottenville?" "Do you know my daughter Mary?" "Did you see the movie at the Stadium?")

Behind me, the groceries were stacked on shelves reaching up to the pressed-tin ceiling. Much of it was too high to reach by hand and had to be retrieved with gripping tongs on a long pole with a control mechanism at the bottom. You lifted the pole up to the high shelf, used the tongs to grab an item like a can of tomatoes, then pulled it down. To save time, the practice was to let the can drop and catch it as it descended, being careful not to get beamed. The clerk (me) was responsible for finding the product, weighing it if called for, bagging it, adding up the cost, taking the money, and often, carrying out the or-



Main Street, Tottenville, in a photo taken around 1935. The A&P Store next to the movie house (arrow) is where the author worked in 1949, when little had changed.



This is the approach on Bentley Avenue to the Perth Amboy Ferry Terminal and the Staten Island Rapid Transit Terminal. Photo is from around 1910.

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For my twice-daily 15-minute coffee breaks --- and how I needed them --- I went to a little dining room across the street operated by two elderly ladies who gave you coffee and a home-made bun for 25 cents.

I had done just about every supermarket job, from

cutting and wrapping wheels of cheese to unloading giant tractor-trailer trucks. It was all a piece of cake compared to working in a small store where you waited individually on every customer. After work, I was too bushed to do anything but eat and go to bed, sleeping the sleep of the just.

It was, nonetheless, a memorable experience of small-town America -- meeting so many good people, eating lunch in the little diner, and strolling around town and to the ferry terminal during lunch break.

—Gene Horan



Dave and Helen Hawke with grandsons and as kids growing up in Tottenville.

Rossmoorites Dave and Helen Hawke have deep roots in Tottenville. Dave's grandfather, F. Ferdinand Peterson, was the long-time editor of *The Staten Island Transcript*, published from the Transcript Building in town from around 1900 to 1969.

Dave and Helen grew up in the heart of town and attended Tottenville High School. They both agree that it was great place to live and that they had lots of fun growing up there. They went roller skating and sleigh riding on Barnard Avenue, swam to the diving tower at Life Save Beach, and, foolishly, walked along the electrified railroad tracks of the Staten Island Rapid Transit.