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From Tenement to Trendy

-John Friia

Sitting on a green recliner in her Queens home with a walker by her side, Sandra Boffa holds a 4-by-6 photo of an apartment building in Hell's Kitchen on West 44th Street. The five-story prewar building with a bright green door was where she was born and grew up nearly 100 years ago.

"It was called Hell's Kitchen, but to be fancy we called it the Theater District when we were children," Boffa, 99, said. "Growing up we were known as city kids."

Located on the West Side of Manhattan, Hell's Kitchen is bounded by 34th and 59th streets between Eighth Avenue and the Hudson River. The now affluent neighborhood was once home to tenements, murderous gangs and speakeasies. Luxury apartment complexes and high-end restaurants are reshaping the identity of the once working-class neighborhood.

While there are no definite answers as to why the area was coined "Hell's Kitchen," the first time the term was mentioned was in an 1881 article in The New York Times.

"A collection of buildings of the same unprepossessing appearance known to the police as Hell's Kitchen," the article states. "The entire locality is probably the lowest and filthiest in the city."

Boffa's childhood was full of seeing movies, Broadway shows, visiting speakeasies and watching the Zeppelin fly across her four-story tenement building, but one thing she looked forward to was Paddy's Market. The weekly bazaar, located under the Ninth Avenue El from 38th to 42nd streets, gave New Yorkers the opportunity to purchase clothes, vegetables, fish and meat from merchants across the city.

Dating back to the 1870s, the market was a Hell's Kitchen institution attracting both rich and poor. "We used to see the Cadillacs and the chauffeured cars come down to Paddy's Market," she said. "It's really amazing. You saw the poor class and you saw all the Cadillacs lined up on Ninth Avenue to shop."

When the Great Depression hit, Paddy's Market was at a standstill. Boffa, then a teenager, tried to sell oranges with two of her friends. Standing on the corner, she competed with adults trying to sell pencils and apples. "We got a big carton of oranges and tried to sale them for a penny," she said. "We couldn't even sell them and just gave them away for free."

Paddy's Market was forced to close in 1937 because of construction of the Lincoln Tunnel. The idea of another Ninth Avenue market did not come to fruition until 1973. During this time, the city faced a rise in crime and a fiscal crisis. According to NYPD statistics, there were 1,691 murders in 1972, a 62 percent increase from 1969.

Times Square was one of the epicenters of prostitution and seedy activity in Manhattan. Most of those movie theaters Boffa frequented, including the Ideal Theater on Eighth Avenue, converted into pornographic cinema houses or were demolished. "The proliferation of pornographic book stores with peep shows and prostitutes were beginning to ply their trade openly on Eighth and Ninth avenues," James Kaplan, a Hell's Kitchen historian, said.

Businesses in Hell's Kitchen struggled. "People did not want to cross Eighth Avenue to come to Ninth Avenue," Lily Fable, lifelong resident and baker at Poseidon Bakery on Ninth Avenue, said. "It didn't matter we were selling some of the best spices and meats at the cheapest prices."

Trying to find a solution, Fable worked with community leaders to start the Ninth Avenue International Festival. The two-day annual festival now draws over 750,000 people to Hell's Kitchen and features local eateries and merchants. "It was primarily to show people in the city know there was still butchers, bakers and spice stores," she said.

Hell's Kitchen was considered a dangerous neighborhood and home to prostitutes, peep shows and the Westies. The Irish-American gang were active from the 1960s to the late 1980s and responsible for at least 30 murders. While older gangs dealt with racketeering and loan sharking, the Westies focused on extortion, murder for hire and dealt drugs.

"Like the rest of the city, the neighborhood was in decline," T.J. English, author of "The Westies: Inside New York's Irish Mob," said. "The West Side was hit pretty hard, all of the commercial businesses that had sustained pretty much died out completely."

The epicenter of the gang was located on 44th Street and 10th Avenue at 596 Club. Owned by gang leader Jimmy Coonan, the bar was known for spontaneous murders. "If you frequented one of their bar there was a chance something could happen to you," English said. The group of no more than 15 active members at a time was known to dismember bodies and dump them in the river, according to English.

The downfall of the Westies began when Mickey Featherstone, the No. 2 in the gang's hierarchy, cooperated with the police. Featherstone believed he was framed and convicted for a murder because he was seen as a threat of taking control from Coonan. "Ironically, he had gotten away with murders that he had gotten away with murders he had done," English said. "He was

deliberately set up to be convicted by the other gang members.” The gang was arrested and convicted in 1988 under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act.

The New York Post reported a Westies reemergence in 2012, but English said such accounts are nonsense. When an Irish gangster is arrested, prosecutors throw the Westies name around, English explain. “During the 1980s, the neighborhood went through this whole dramatic evolutionary process,” he said. “The idea of an old-school Irish gang died out, so the underpinnings that would make this possible no longer existed.”

As the neighborhood struggled and dealt with the Westies, local political power still rested with one of New York City’s longest running political clubs. The McManus Midtown Democratic Club replaced the infamous Tammany Hall boss George Washington Plunkitt in 1892 and had been run by a McManus family members since then.

Its leader, James McManus, now 83, solved issues for residents with the city and found them job opportunities. McManus is credited for providing housing for the acting community in 1977 at Manhattan Plaza, located on 43rd Street between Ninth and 10th avenues. The construction of the luxury building concerned residents who worried that the lower middle class would be wiped out by high rents in new developments in the area, which the real estate industry was rebranding as Clinton. “The representatives of the community sought to have the city enact a Clinton Special District, in which no building of more than seven stories could be built,” James Kaplan, Hell’s Kitchen historian, said.

Manhattan Plaza received a \$95 million Mitchell Lama loan from taxpayers. The idea was the luxurious apartments would help bring change to the neighborhood, but Kaplan said the developers could not find tenants and filed for bankruptcy. McManus and other community figures suggested to Mayor Abe Beame a majority of the units be reserved for low-income artists and actors. “The McManus club strongly supported this proposal,” he said. “Jimmy McManus was the logical person to sell this idea to the Beame administration.”

The final decision was that Manhattan Plaza would be reserved for Section 8 residents with 70 percent of whom worked in the arts and theater, 20 percent from the community and 10 percent elderly.

McManus served as the longest running district leader—an unpaid post—for 53 years before stepping down in 2016 and endorsing his nephew Mickey Spillane Jr. as his successor.

The McManus Democratic Association finally lost its standing in Hell’s Kitchen during the 2017 primary season. The Hell’s Kitchen Democrats won control of the district leadership with the

help of Marti Gould Cummings, 29, the club's president. Formed in 2016 after the presidential election, the group has around 500 members and prides itself as being open, diverse and inclusive for all residents.

"Part of what makes politics works is that you work for all the constituents," Cummings, a professional drag queen, said. "They were set in their own ways."

While Cummings credited the McManus group for helping the residents in the past, he said they did not push to help the new demographics of the neighborhood. There was a shift from a large Irish immigrant working-class population to young professional, LGBT residents and middle to upper class incomes. Cummings moved to the neighborhood in 2012 and did not become active in local politics until after President Donald Trump's win. "I knew had to do something," he said.

Unaware of the McManus group, Cummings searched for political organizations online and did not find one. He said he eventually found out about the club and his options were to join or start his own, so he started the Hell's Kitchen Democrats. Cummings plans to bridge the gap between longtime residents and new younger ones. "Be in the 21st century," he said. "Engage young people and go outside your comfort zone."

As Hell's Kitchen has changed, its link to the theater world has remained constant.

"The proximity to so many of the theaters, casting offices, rehearsal spaces mean that Hell's Kitchen is a desirable place for artists to live," Jennifer Ashley Tepper, theater historian and author of "The Untold Stories of Broadway," said.

Prior to calling the area near Hell's Kitchen home, the theaters were located near Union Square and Herald Square. "The Theater District migrated to Hell's Kitchen around the 1880s," Tepper said. "Many of the Broadway theaters in use have been in existence in the area for about 100 years."

While most of the theaters are in the boundaries of Times Square, the Al Hirschfeld Theater is the only Broadway theater still located in Hell's Kitchen proper. Home to the Tony Award-winning musical "Kinky Boots," the theater was originally named the Martin Beck Theater.

Most of the 26 movie and stage theaters that had been in Hell's Kitchen since the early 1910s were demolished or repurposed starting in the 1950s. The Ideal Theater, located on Eighth Avenue between 43rd and 44th streets, opened in 1916 before changing owners and names

throughout the years. Following the path of other theaters in Hell's Kitchen, the Ideal converted into the Playpen Theater, an adult cinema, in the 1960s.

When John Lindsay ended his two terms as mayor in 1973, the city was struggling financially. "The Hell's Kitchen neighborhood was in much worse shape than it was 10 years earlier," Kaplan said. "The exodus of the white middle-class residents from the city and the influx of welfare recipients were straining the city budget."

The area began to see a rise of peep show, adult theaters and prostitution which put the theaters at risk, Tepper said. "Thus many were endangered and set on the path to demolition."

Tourist and theater patrons were hesitant to see shows. "Eighth Avenue was so infested with aggressive prostitutes that increasing numbers of theater patrons became reluctant to go," Kaplan said. "There arose a serious question as to whether the Broadway theater could survive."

While Hell's Kitchen began to turn around, people with Broadway aspirations kept moving into the neighborhood. Louise Phillips Forbes, 55, moved into a studio apartment on West 46th Street and Ninth Avenue in 1988. "I came to the city with just \$800," the Tennessee native and dancer said. "It was the only place I could afford." Her dancing career did not unfold the way she expected, so Forbes became a real estate agent in 1989. Currently living on the Upper West Side, she vividly remembers her life on West 46th Street.

"Like so many aspiring artists I worked in a restaurant," she said. "When I came home around 2 a.m. I walked by transvestites and where they did their work on Ninth Avenue."

Even though the neighborhood started to be redeveloped, there were still porn theaters, strip clubs and drug dealers on the streets. She remembers hearing about a mother selling eight balls of cocaine. "She would drop it out her window," Forbes said. "And her son would come down to get the money."

The turning point for Hell's Kitchen was in the 1980s, when new luxury apartment buildings were built on 42nd Street stretching to 11th Avenue. The completion of Manhattan Plaza encouraged more artists to move into the neighborhood, replacing the prostitutes and drug dealers who littered the streets. "It was hailed as one of the most successful low income projects in the history of the Federal Housing program," Kaplan said. "And a tremendous boon to the surrounding area's economic development."

Potential renters need to prove they receive half of their income from the performing by submitting three years of tax returns and Playbill credits. Among its past residents, Manhattan

Plaza was the home to comedian Larry David and playwright Tennessee Williams. According to the documentary, “Miracle on 42nd Street,” David got the idea of famous Seinfeld character Cosmo Kramer from his neighbor Kenny Kramer. As of 2017, there are 8,000 people on a waitlist for an apartment in the complex, and the wait can take around 12 years.

The stigma associated with Hell’s Kitchen remained and deterred some future Broadway actors. Moving from Buffalo to New York City in 1999, Joey Pero attended The Juilliard School and lived on the Upper West Side. “At orientation for Juilliard we were told not to walk in Hell’s Kitchen alone,” he said. “From out of the gate my idea was to be scared.”

Pero, a trumpet player and actor, moved to Hell’s Kitchen in 2014 after starring in various Broadway and Off-Broadway shows, including “Cagney,” “An American in Paris” and his latest role in “Bandstand.” To his surprise, the neighborhood was completely different. “It was a busy world with all these restaurants and being a gay mecca in the city,” he said. “I immediately felt comfortable.”

Now, the far West Side of Manhattan is in the middle of a luxury real estate boom. In recent years, there has been the construction of MiMA and Sky on 42nd Street, The Westport on 56th Street and Via 57West on 57th Street. The average starting price for a one-bedroom apartment in these buildings is \$3,800, which is 31 percent higher than the average rental cost in New York City, according to Zumper’s National Rent Report for December 2017.

Joey Pero does not live in one of the new luxury apartments, but is content with his home on West 54th Street. As he walks along the sidewalk, he greets neighbors and fellow actors living in his community. “It is nice to see the same faces,” he said. “Hear the conversations about theater and restaurants.”

Lily Fable feels the same way. For more than 40 years, Fable has called the apartment above Poseidon Bakery her home. Despite all of the new nearby developments, Ninth Avenue is protected by zoning laws credited to Jimmy McManus, and Fable said those restrictions create a communal atmosphere.

“You will never see a building taller than five stories along Ninth Avenue between 42nd Street and 52nd Street,” she said. “This is what keeps our part special.”