

## *Reminiscences by Emil A. Press: “Growing Up In Swampoodle”*

EMIL A. PRESS

About a year ago the Columbia Historical Society was treated to Frank Taylor's presentation of life on Capitol Hill at the turn of the century.<sup>1</sup> Many favorable comments indicated that the subject was of unusual interest to our members and your program committee concluded that similar dissertations should be presented from time to time for other areas of the city. It was your program committee's idea that Brother Bill and I jointly recall the scene where we grew up in Swampoodle and adjoining areas.

The generally accepted limits of Swampoodle were the City Post Office and Union Station on the south, tracks of the Washington Terminal on the east, Florida Avenue on the north, and North Capitol Street on the west.

Actually, I was not born in Swampoodle, as was Bill. My birthplace was 47 Q Street, N.W., a building that is still standing. There are no markers of any sort to commemorate the big “goings on” of August 26, 1904. I was totally unaware of another important event that took place a little later and, as the crow flies, within 100 yards of number 47—the birth of Eleanor, my wife.

A little background concerning our family. Mom and Pop were immigrants from Denmark. They met each other in Washington and married. They spoke Danish at home and, when I was about 4½ years of age, I spoke it as well as any brat of that age in Copenhagen. At that point, they suddenly switched to English to prepare me for school. They became very proficient and in 1910 enrolled me in the Twining School on 3rd Street, N.W.

Shortly after my birth, the family moved into Swampoodle, in which, during daylight hours, streets were subjected to heavy traffic

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Delivered before the Columbia Historical Society on December 17, 1974.

<sup>1</sup> Frank A. Taylor spoke before the Society on April 16, 1974. The editor hopes to obtain a manuscript from him for publication in a future volume of the *Records*.

(for that time) in the form of heavy horse-drawn vans hauling goods generated by the B & O Freight Yards, the Chapin-Saks ice cream plant at 1st and M Streets, N.E., the coal yards along 1st Street, N.E., with such familiar names as Griffith, Chapman, Marlow and Agnew and, upon its completion, the City Post Office. At the close of business each afternoon and on Sundays and holidays, with automobiles practically non-existent, the streets became playgrounds.

I recall vividly how, during snows, rags and burlap sacks were wrapped around horses hoofs to prevent slipping and enable the animals to haul their heavy loads. In about 1911, we saw the first chain-drive solid-tire truck in operation.

Environmentalists would have had a field day with the conditions that residents then considered normal. In those days all railroad locomotives to Union Station, including the many Washington Terminal switchers, were coal fired and constantly contributing to the pall of smoke over the area. In addition, the District of Columbia manufactured asphalt for street paving in a plant that occupied the width of New York Avenue, at a point just north of Florida Avenue, and was a worse offender than the railroad. Only our mother's dogged Scandinavian insistence on cleanliness made conditions tolerable.

During the Society's recent walking tour of the Pension Office and Judiciary Square,<sup>2</sup> one of our members mentioned the snow storm during the inauguration of President Taft. My earliest recollection as a child was of troops marching from the B & O Freight Yards to the inaugural parade in the heavy snow. Later in the day they returned. Actually, the distance traveled was approximately three present day parades, every inch on foot—no busses or trucks as used by modern troops.

That inauguration also gave me my first insight on intoxication when, shortly after the parade, four soldiers passed our house, one on each corner of a stable door carried horizontally. A fifth man was on the door with two scrub buckets of beer. I couldn't understand why they staggered all over the street until my mother explained that the men were "full" and the beer "had gone to their toes."

Old Swampoodle was well supplied with "open-air" summer movies. Rio Grande Park, on the corner of North Capitol Street and New York Avenue, was the start of the Crandall movie empire. At the time, Mr. Crandall operated a livery stable on adjoining alley property.

Standard Park was on North Capitol Street between O and P

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<sup>2</sup> The Society's seventh walking tour was conducted on Sunday, September 22, 1974.

Streets. It moved to Bates Street when the Liberty theatre was constructed on North Capitol Street and soon closed permanently. At Truxton Circle, which was at North Capitol Street and Florida Avenue, we had a park and theatre operated by Coblentz, the druggist. He named both Truxton, and when it rained shows were moved indoors to the theatre.

The Liberty was a neighborhood moving picture house patronized by residents of Swampoodle as well as Eckington, High View, and Bloomingdale. Every Saturday morning we were in the mob seeking to deliver weekly programs to these areas. It was a door-to-door operation that paid seven movie tickets for placing about 300 programs. It was a most wonderful opportunity, to one in a family of limited means, to enjoy pictures starring Francis X. Bushman, Beverly Bain, William Farnum, Wallis Reid, Fatty Arbuckle and others of that era.

Does the name Leo Rocca mean anything to any of you? Some of you may recall him as having a Dodge Agency on Connecticut Avenue opposite the old Bureau of Standards. As a young man, in about 1919, he operated a gasoline filling station and accessory shop on a triangular lot formed by New York Avenue and N Street, just east of North Capitol Street. He also had a row of about six tin garages, one of which was rented by my father for, I believe, \$3.00 a month. Rocca expanded and for many years operated the Triangle Ford Agency in an enlarged plant on the site formerly occupied by the Rio Grande Park.

Persons born in the early years of the Twentieth Century have witnessed developments in science and engineering far exceeding accomplishments in any other similar period. Among these was the telephone, of which there were relatively few in Swampoodle and none in any residences in our section. The corner grocer had a pay phone that was used by the neighborhood to make and receive calls. On incoming calls the grocer, a most patient and cooperative individual, would dispatch a messenger to summon our folks to the phone. I don't know why the phone number has stayed with me all these years—North 2404.

Another new fangled contraption was the radio, or wireless. In about 1913, we made a trip on three nights each week to Hasselbusch's bakery on P Street, west of North Capitol, to buy black German rye bread as it came out of the oven at 10 p.m. The oven was an old-time one from which the coals were removed so that the bread might bake on the hot brick. On one occasion, we were permitted to hear the 10 o'clock time signal from Arlington as received on a United States

Army receiving set. This really gave us something to talk about to our envious playmates, some of whom began accompanying us to the bakery so they might hear the signal.

With the entry of the United States in World War I, war fever was rampant in Swampoodle and other areas of the city. A group of high school cadets under the leadership of Vincent Callahan organized a marching team of some 75 youngsters in the 10 to 15 year age group. They were drilled in the "school of the soldier" as well as squad and platoon movements. The outfit became quite proficient and at the end of each evening would march, everyone counting one, two, three, four, past the New York Apartments (New York Avenue west of 1st Street) where Callahan's best girl lived. I have no recollection of anything being done to promote the war effort and the whole thing disintegrated after several weeks. Callahan became a Vice President of the National Broadcasting Company.

Incidental to the construction of Union Station, Florida Avenue in the vicinity of 4th Street, N.E. was lowered to pass through the viaduct beneath the terminal tracks. Subsequently, in 1908, the Capital Traction Company began service on its new tracks on Florida Avenue and 8th Street, between New Jersey Avenue, N.W. and Pennsylvania Avenue, S. E. Each unit of equipment was comprised of two four-wheel cars painted green. Open cars with running boards were used in summer, closed cars in winter.

This car line was a big asset in keeping up with the Washington Baseball Club. We would sit on the curb waiting for the cars carrying those who had attended the game and would learn the score, the batteries for the day and particularly what about Walter Johnson. I believe it was more fun though not as convenient as tuning in to today's radio or television.



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