10-4-1979

The Landmarks of Federal Hill: The Pushcart Struggle 1930-1942 (Conclusion)

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The Pushcart Struggle
1930-1942

In the writing of these articles, in some instances, the names of the people involved, have not been used so as to protect the identity of the families who, in some instances still survive them.

However, these articles have been thoroughly researched and are the result of examinations of articles appearing in the Providence Journal, the Evening Bulletin and the Star Tribune from 1937 to 1941, and much of the pictures and material are from the private library and collection of the author.

Conclusion

Vendors return to Balbo Ave.
Mayor loses election
Alderman receives months jail sentence.

Jan. 1, 1938 arrived and the order to remove the vendors from Balbo Ave. arrived. The order was to be enforced as no extension had been given by anyone.

Jan. 2 was a dismal day on Federal Hill. It was a bitter, cold, snowy day and for the first time in 40 years Balbo Avenue was minus its vendors' stands. This made Balbo Avenue look like a hospital zone and Federal Hill look like a deserted area.

Policemen were on hand, "just in case."

In a Federal Hill grocery store, people asked, "Where is everybody?"

One of the customers asked, "Is one of the vendors dead or something? Why is everything so quiet?"

"No one is dead, but if it keeps up, we'll all be dead," a clerk answered.

In the meantime, six vendors who dared to go on Spruce Street, to attempt to sell their wares, were driven off the street.

The police ordered them to keep moving when they were unable to produce licenses to show spaces assigned to them.

The police, striking on the busiest day of the week, ordered the vendors off Spruce Street.

Six vendors, who braved the snow drifts and the narrow highway, had to move.

Acting under orders of Capt. Joseph L. Burns, of Precinct I, Patrolman Patrick Hannon approached the vendors as they were making sales on Spruce Street and ordered the vendors to keep moving when they were unable to produce licenses.

It was learned, that the Bureau of Police and Fire had received no applications from Commissioner of Public Works Charles A. McGuire, to whom the vendors had to apply for spaces.

Accompanying the application had to be the signatures of abutting property owners or tenants showing that they did not disapprove of having the vendors in front of their property.

Marianno Adolfo of 13 Merrill St., a vendor who was ordered off the street, later visited Comm. McGuire's office, to learn why he had to be moved from the street.

The result of his conference was not learned, nor could McGuire be reached. Everyone was told that he was busy at the sewerage disposal plant.

After Comm. McGuire received the application for spaces on the street and approved it, the application had to be for-
warded to the Bureau of Police and Fire for its approval. The bureau was to study the location, with a view of avoiding fire and traffic hazards and then, approve or disapprove the application.

Imagine the procedures and the red tape that these poor vendors were subjected to, in order that they could obtain an eight foot space, where they might park a stand to be able to sell their wares to support themselves and their families during the depth of a depression.

Capt. Burns said the vendors would be allowed to drudge through the snow-filled Federal Hill streets to sell their wares and would be allowed a reasonable time to make sales.

He was emphatic that the vendors would not be allowed to park on any street in the section, as had been the vendor's custom for more than 40 years, until they obtained their licenses.

As a result of the ouster of the vendors from Spruce Street and Balbo Avenue, the streets were clogged with automobiles parked on both sides and in some instances double parked, making the streets practically impassible by any other vehicle.

So a condition that might have been bad, became worse on both major streets. However, from this time on, the vendors became extremely active.

It was learned that one night one of their leaders, Lawrence Pagella, while parking his car in his garage, was attacked by at least four men and severely beaten nearly to death. Unfortunately, he claimed he normally carried a pistol, but for some reason did not have it with him that night, "only that he might have been able to wound one of them to learn who they were."

The next day after the police made a report, it appeared that Pagella was a victim of mistaken identity.

Because of his size and fragility, it was abundantly clear that someone else was intended to be the victim of four men to beat, as two men could comfortably have succumbed Pagella who was about 5 feet 2 inches tall, and weighed less than 125 pounds.

The vendors now appealed to Governor Quinn, asking if there was anything he could do to assist them in their struggle.

The vendors picketed at the State House with signs and in great numbers.

The governor, after discussion with the group, assured the people that he would do all in his power to assist the, and would not approve any bill brought before him that would change or enforce the vendor's regulations.

The vendors made a very forceful demonstration at the house gallery.

However, before they had a conference with the governor, they had contacted every senator and representative that each one of them knew to explain their plight and obtain from them assurance that they would not enact any legislation that would become an enabling act that would give permission to the alderman of the 13th Ward, to make his request more legal or binding.

The vendors now turned their attention to all of the alderman and councilmen of the city of Providence.

Each of them took the name of the alderman that he knew best and they divided the work amongst them.

All of them promised to visit the alderman and councilmen personally, to explain the severity of the enforcement of the ordinance, and to request them to introduce a resolution in the Aldermen's Chambers which would allow the vendors to return to their original positions.

After the vendors were satisfied that they and their friends had done their homework and that everyone had been reached that could possibly be reached who had any influence or concern with the alderman, they requested several of the aldermen to introduce a resolution ending the ban and providing that the vendors be allowed to go back, not only to Balbo Avenue and Acorn Street, but to the spaces that they had in the past.

At the next council meeting, several aldermen rose to be recognized.

Alderman Hubert E. H. Humes of the 9th Ward, a Republican, and the alderman from the 13th Ward, a Democrat, both with the identical resolutions in hand, rose to be recognized.

Both spoke at the same time and a dispute arose as to who had the floor.

Alderman Humes yielded the floor inasmuch as the resolution being presented was a matter that concerned the alderman of the 13th Ward.

The 13th Ward alderman, who for the past months had been involved in one vendors' battle after another, said, that the return of the vendors to their stands, "should be as soon as possible," "And that we are working on a plan now, and hope we will be able to give the vendors a permanent market building or place."

Asked what compelled the 13th Ward alderman to reverse his stand, he said, "It came after a meeting of the businessmen, not Federal Hill businessmen, businessmen in general. We discussed the whole thing and decided it would be better to let them go back."

A large delegation of the vendors, their families, their friends, and of the general community were at City Hall when the resolution was introduced.

When the resolution was read the 13th Ward alderman moved for "its immediate consideration," adding briefly that, "he approved of it after hearing the advice given him by merchants on Federal Hill."

Alderman Frank Reo seconded the motion, saying, "I am glad we can see the folly of referring the original resolution banning the vendors from Balbo Avenue to the Police Commission."

Alderman John F. Dugan asked, "Why the about face alderman?"

The alderman of the 13th Ward jumped to his feet and told alderman Dugan "not to worry about wards other than his own."

Alderman James H. Lynch, Jr., said he was glad that the alderman of the 13th Ward had yielded to the advice of the Federal Hill merchants and "that he was clever enough to change his stand."

When the resolution was read in the Common Council, Councilman William Cole, Republi-
I sympathize with the reply, he said, “I am in favor of vendors.”

At this same election, because of the tremendous, glaring the alderman of the 13th Ward and one of his closest Lieut’s, both received eight month’s sentence.

The court assailed them for their influence at the polls.

Judge Frost said, “These practices served to undermine our form of government.”

The alderman and one of his close associates, who acted as moderator, were convicted of “conspiring to prevent a free election at the Knight Street School polling place in the 13th Ward during the 1938 election.”

Judge Frost in sentencing each declared “that when anyone conspires to deprive the electors of the exercise of their free choice of candidates, he is dealing heavy blows to the process of Democrat government.”

Judge Frost before imposing sentence said, “Testimony of the trial indicated that the alderman and his moderator exercised a decided influence in the 1938 election at the Knight Street polling place.

“There was considerable testimony, that both the alderman and the moderator worked hand in hand under a prearranged plan to obtain a definite result, which could not have been obtained if it had been a free election.”

Judge Frost said further, “In other countries there have been tremendous blows struck against democracy, but I know of nothing more serious to a Democrat government such as ours, than a conspiracy to deprive men and women of the vote which they possess.”

Prosecutor James O. Watts, moving for sentence recited the evidence, indicating “that a large number of votes were cast illegally with only the councilman’s officials going into the machine booths with others.”

He said, “the state produced positive evidence that the councilman and the moderator offered opposition workers inducements, if they would leave the polling places.

“In other words,” said Watts, “they were asking the other poll workers to shut their eyes to what was going on.”

The prosecutor said the climax of the irregularities came when the alderman himself in the presence of the moderator voted more than once, whether the councilman did this in order to bring on a larger vote, or from a spirit of “braggadocio.”

This eight months sentence was never served!

The outcome of the elections, both in the loss of the governorship, the mayor’s position and the outcome of the 13th Ward struggle many believe was the beginning of the realization, on a statewide basis, that the ethnic vote in Rhode Island was a definite force.

Thereafter it appeared all public office seekers began to appeal to the Italian vote throughout Rhode Island.

It was apparent that the Italo-American vote in Rhode Island was a force to be contended with and it was through a humble struggle for survival by a group of one hundred men who carried on such a vigorous campaign, not only publically, but with city and state officials, that the Italo-American vote throughout the state made their displeasure known at the polls.

I hope you have enjoyed this brief series on the Struggle of the Push Cart vendors.

Many have thought that the vendors merely stopped placing their stands on Balbo Avenue and Spruce Street not realizing the great struggle suffered to remain there. However, after the vendors were allowed to return to their former stands, a few were old men and never returned.

Some became discouraged and looked for work elsewhere, those that remained until 1962 slowly died and no one replaced them.

Those who were familiar with the history of the stands became discouraged in their attempting to establish vending positions on Balbo Avenue and Spruce Street.

However, it appears that history will again repeat itself and in the not too distant future.

Perhaps the colorful vendors stands will again appear on Federal Hill.

Pushcart Row at its best. With the return of the vendors’ stands, this scene again became common to Balbo Avenue. Shown, is a young man picking fruit for a customer; the abundance, the selection, the competitive prices, the atmosphere of an open market, a tradition so well-known throughout the world, was common on Federal Hill, and now it has passed on, only as a memory to those, who in the past, made purchases on Pushcart Row.

can floor leader, asked if the vendors would be in the same status as they were before the ouster order. Receiving an affirmative reply, he said, “I am in favor of it. I sympathize with the vendors.”

The resolution passed without one dissenting vote.

It might all have been coincidental however, at the following election, Mayor James E. Dunn was defeated, Governor Robert E. Quinn was defeated and it was the first time in many years that in the state of Rhode Island and city of Providence Democrat leaders were defeated and Republicans replaced them.

Vanderbuilt was elected governor and John F. Collins, a Republican, was elected mayor for the city of Providence.

Many attributed their defeat to the long, protracted and intensely active campaign carried on by the vendors, which spread to the entire Italian community on Federal Hill and throughout the state of Rhode Island.

It appeared that it was time for a change and that everyone had had enough.

However, Mayor James E. Collins, during his brief term as mayor, fired the police and fire commissioners, and appointed himself chairman of the bureau of police and fire.

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