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The Landmarks of Federal Hill: The Pushcart Struggle 1930-1942 (Part VII) - Vendors Stage Strike in Mayor's Office

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had occupied for so long, and where they made a meager living for their families; to be moved to an area where there would be less space, less traffic, and less opportunity for them to continue making a living during the depths of a depression.

At the meeting that the Alderman was invited to, remarks were made that the Alderman was "wrecking their lives, and the business of the 13th Ward," and that people came to Balbo Avenue from all over the City, because the vendors were a tradition, and they came in summer, and they came in winter, to see them lined along the streets, loaded with beautiful fruits.

The discussion became so heated, and so loud, that neither side could understand each other any longer, and parting remarks made by leaders of the vendors were, "The Alderman says that in five, ten, or fifteen years, we will have a nice market for ourselves. After we are all dead, it will serve as a nice cemetery for us." Consequently, the Alderman's visit, and the correspondence carried on with the Alderman, failed to effect a truce on Balbo Avenue.

The vendors, realizing that the time was nearing when their removal would become a reality, promised to take a leaf out of the book of Mahatma Gandhi, in their fight against the order which denied them their usual stands. "Passive resistance" would be the weapon that the vendors would use.

Some threatened to chain themselves to their stands at their old position, and defied the police to arrest them. Others refused to make sales, and suggested that their lack of conducting business would cause harm to the other businesses on Federal Hill, and would bring greater pressure on the City fathers to resolve their problem of being removed from longstanding locations.

On January 2nd, it was a sad day on Balbo Avenue, a sadder day on Spruce Street, and, throughout Federal Hill and it appeared that the consensus of opinion among the merchants that, in view of what had transpired, they had experienced a sharp slump in their business, due to the removal of the pushcarts.

Out on the street, automobiles were parked, which took up more room than the vendors did. Spruce Street, being a narrow street, created a greater traffic hazard, due to the narrowness of the street and the sidewalk. The vendors, again finding themselves with no legal location to re-establish themselves; with limited space; and with having to look for new locations to be relocated to, again requested a meeting with Mayor Dunne.

When the meeting was arranged, a group of the vendors, numbering 16, met in the reception room of Mayor Dunne. He refused to see more than three of the 16 who were present. The Mayor, ignoring the suggestion that he see a delegation of the three, put on his hat, and went to lunch shortly after noon.

The Pushcart Struggle
1930-1942

In the writing of these articles, in some instances, the names of the persons 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.

Part VIII

"Vendors Stage Strike In Mayor's Office"
The vendors remained, pretty well filling the available benches, and said that they would stay until Mayor Dunne saw a delegation. As the lunch hour wore on, some of the men left for lunch, and others remained. However, they left word with the Mayor's office, that they would continue this sit-down, and that it would be increased by their wives and children, until such time as the Mayor would allow a delegation to see him in order to discuss an immediate solution to their problem, which was causing many of them financial disaster, as they had no other means of income. The Mayor still refused to see the 16 who had called to visit and discuss the matter.

The vendors, through their leaders, made clear that this conference was too important for one man in their number to accept the responsibility, and that the Mayor should see a committee of at least three men. They claimed that three men would understand him better than one, and there could be no misunderstanding of what was said later on.

The vendors, prior to calling on the Mayor, visited Mr. Maguire, the Chairman of the Public Works Commission, on the possibility of returning to Balbo Avenue, to the locations they had previously occupied. However, Mr. Maguire "passed the buck." He talked about laws enacted a long time previous, and some new laws that would be passed to protect the vendors. That was the reason they insisted on seeing the Mayor.

Mayor Dunne was presented with two petitions, one was signed by residents and taxpayers of Acorn Street and Balbo Avenue, who not only did object to having the vendors there, but requested that the vendors be allowed to use those streets. The other petition was signed by 14 tenants and property owners on Spruce Street, who wanted the vendors on the street.

School committeeman Luigi Capasso, of 150 Acorn Street, and Secretary of State Louis Capelli, acting for their fathers and Antonio F. Capelli, owner of the property from 66 to 74 Balbo Avenue, were among those signing the petition requesting that the vendors be allowed to remain on Balbo Avenue.

Also, the manager of the Woolworth Store at Balbo Avenue and Atwells Avenue, Benny Caricuolo, was among those siding with the vendors.

Others, whose signatures appeared on the petition requesting the vendors be allowed on Balbo Avenue, were:

- Ennio Perrotti, of 156 Acorn Street, Vincent G. Pantaloni, of 140 Acorn Street, Samuel Mazick, 62 and 64 Balbo Avenue, Domenic Cifelli, of 140½ Acorn Street, Domenico Paglia, of 140 Acorn Street, Anthony Pendalloni, of 56-60 Balbo Avenue, Pasquale Toglichta, of 64 Balbo Avenue, and Pasquale Rendine, 140-141½ Acorn Street.

It was abundantly evident that everyone who fronted Balbo Avenue, or anywhere around Balbo Avenue, was in favor of keeping the vendors at their present location.

Those who went into the conference with the Mayor were:

- Anthony G. Maratore, Joseph DeCostanzo, and Antonio Zabatta. Before meeting with the committee of vendors, the Mayor had conferred with leaders of Federal Hill Businessmen and told them he could not change the 1926 Law, which prohibits vending on Balbo Avenue.

The committee, together with the public display of the sit-in at the Mayor's reception room, and the sit-in of the wives, families, friends, and children on the steps of City Hall, was sensationalized Italian and American newspapers from near, and out of state, came, took pictures, and began to write human interest stories. The Mayor, on learning of what was going on within City Hall, became alarmed, and promised that he would attempt to find a solution to their problem, and attempt to cut the red tape and cost necessary for them to relocate at their former location. However, he emphasized that he could not change the laws. He said that they were established and were on the books, and that he had to have the laws to work with.

These were excuses that everyone was finding, as the city fathers, the city officials, the fire and police department heads, police bureau, and the members of the Board of Police and Fire Bureau, the Mayor, and various other Councilmen, all became embarrassed and alarmed at the proportions that this dispute had grown to, and the great interest that the public had shown, and the displeasure that they had demonstrated by the petitions, the sit-ins, the open-air protest rally, and the strong campaign which was being carried on against the order for removal of the vendors from Balbo Avenue.

The Mayor further stated that he had gone over the situation, and had told the vendors that he had obtained two extensions for them already, and that really, under the law, they were not allowed at their location, and that Commissioner Maguire and the Bureau of Police and Fire had allowed these extensions at his request, and that the Mayor did not feel he should be called on to ask them to do it again. It was concluded by everyone that the meeting was futile, it was fruitless, and it would have no results.

NEXT WEEK: Peddlers Protest License Fee And Picket State House.
Waiting for An Audience

Members of the Federal Hill Vendors' Association, are shown as they waited outside the Mayor's office for a conference with him. When Mayor Dunne learned of their number, he refused to see them, requesting that only a committee of one meet with him. When vendors asked that at least three see him, the Mayor went out the back door, and went to lunch.

Wives, children, friends, and neighbors began to increase the sit-down, while the vendors sought help from the City in obtaining relief from their removal from Balbo Avenue.

When the Mayor Walked Out, They Sat In

Mayor James E. Dunne left his office and went to lunch, refusing to see the 16 members. This incensed the vendors, and they declared a sit-down. When the Mayor returned, and saw the number of men, women, and children increasing, he agreed to see three members of the Vendor's group.