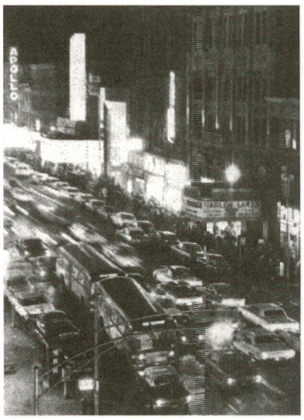

Growing Up Adventist In Gotham

Two Adventist leaders remember Brooklyn and Harlem.

Adventist in Brooklyn's Coney Island

by James J. Londis

I was born on Coney Island, borough of Brooklyn, city of New York, on October 7, 1938, the oldest of what would become three brothers in the family. My mother had just turned 18 and my father worked at odd jobs. We lived in an upstairs tenement over Hal and Gertie's candy store at 532 Neptune Avenue, one block from the Van Siclen elevated train station and right on the MacDonald Avenue Trolley Line. My small, two-bedroom apartment was a five-block walk from the city's most popular beach and what had to be at the time the largest amusement park in the United States. On any July 4 weekend, one million people dotted the white sands looking out on the ocean. Now I realize that Coney Island was an unusual place to be born, to grow up, and to discover the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

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Close to Coney Island is Sheepshead Bay, where my step-grandfather kept his fishing boat dubbed *The Ruptured Duck*. Inside Coney Island was another amusement center known as Steeplechase Park, which boasted swimming pools, saunas, handball courts, punching bags, ping pong, and world-famous rides and amusements, including the one that blew the dresses of unsuspecting young women up over their heads. Virtually anytime I wanted to go to Steeplechase Park I bypassed the admission ticket by climbing over the fence behind the handball courts. Some of my Greek relatives worked the rides, concessions, and hot dog stands in the park.

Brooklyn was then a borough larger than most of the cities in the United States, including Chicago. It was also the home of the Dodger "bums," who could never beat the hated "Bronx Bombers" Yankees in the World Series. And hate them we did. It is a matter of honor for me that I never attended a baseball game in Yankee Stadium. As a boy I went regularly to Ebbets Field because my mother was a rabid fan of the Dodgers. Waiting after the games for autographs, I met Jackie Robinson, "Preacher Roe," and Carl Furillo. I was there for Carl Erskine's no-hitter and for Gil Hodges' four home runs in one game.

Like many New Yorkers, I rarely traveled outside the city limits. I limited my wandering to what the city provided through public transportation. What reason did I have to go anywhere? Everything I needed was right there. As the cultural, entertainment, and financial center of the country, New York gave any child the sense that he or she could do anything.

On my father's side, a strange religious accommodation had occurred. His mother (my *yatya*) brought her devotion to the Greek Orthodox faith with her from Greece to the United States, and she raised her children accordingly. Somewhere along the way, my grandfather (*papou*) abandoned his Orthodox heritage and was ordained a lay preacher in the Pentecostal mission, just downstairs from their apartment on Stillwell Avenue (two blocks from the beach). The rest of the family saw this as an eccentric departure from the Orthodox faith, but were forced to indulge him. After all, he was their Greek family's patriarch.

On my mother's side, my grandma Henrichsen looms large in my religious upbringing. She saw to it that I either went to her Lutheran church or to my papou's Pentecostal mission. My mother and father (separated when I was seven or eight years old) were not at all religious. She and my father were both "secular," though he was more intellectual about it and called himself an agnostic.

After my father and mother separated, Mom applied for welfare, so she could stay home and care for us. With fairly regular help from her mother and stepfather ("Uncle Rudy"), she managed to keep food on the table and pay the rent in a relatively timely fashion. I do recall a number of occasions when our credit at the local grocer was canceled and our landlord received his rent many weeks after the due date.

At Public School 100, my neighborhood friends were also poor (some more so than I), while my friends from Brighton Beach (largely Jewish) were distinctly lower middle-class. I attended their Bar-Mitzvahs and very much enjoyed Jewish culture, New York-style—especially the food: bagels, matzos, and pickles.

At that time, Coney Island was a breeding ground for hoodlums and mobsters. It had already become infamous in the late forties for the mysterious death of a star witness against the mob. Shortly before the trial was to begin, while he was being guarded by the police, someone threw him out of an upper-story window of the Half Moon Hotel.

Friends of mine in elementary school were often sent to reform school for theft, gang fights, truancy, and stealing. Arthur Kelly reportedly became a hit man for the Brooklyn mob run by the Bonnano family. Before he reached 30, he was killed gangland-style. Tommy Grossman was convicted of selling drugs and stabbing someone in a Coney Island hotel. I bumped into Herbie Ross on the train one evening. He had hijacked a truckload of radios and television sets with two other guys and then decided to doublecross them. So, to hide effectively, he was riding the subway non-stop for one week. It is impossible to find somebody constantly on the move like that. Both Herbie and Tommy eventually made the headlines of the *Daily News*.

My early adolescence also involved my witnessing a terrible episode of physical and sexual abuse of younger boys by older ones. Equally pathetic was the heterosexual prostitution available. Across the street from my tenement was a men's social club, where the neighborhood enjoyed illegal off-track betting through bookies. Even Henry Hench, a handsome, local detective who was a good friend of my mother's, ignored the activity. My mother enjoyed betting. Just before my elementary school graduation, she won the "triple." With her $400 winnings, she bought me a new suit, a stereo, and a tape recorder as presents for my graduation.

During the summers, I played baseball in the Police Athletic League system, went swimming in the Lincoln High School pool, and enjoyed the beach and amusements of Coney Island. As I got older, the subway afforded me the chance to travel anywhere in the city I wanted to go. Times Square was only an hour by train from Coney Island. I remember when I was 10 years old, Kenny Rose stole $20 from his mother and took several of us to Times Square. We saw the movie *Eagle Squadron* starring Robert Stack. We ate pizza and ice cream until we were glutted. I also got used to stealing bread from the bakery and watermelons off the fruit truck that came through our neighborhood.

From Milton Berle to Baptism

That all began to change one fateful Friday night. I showed up at my grandmother's apartment to watch the Milton Berle television show. Then in its infancy, television was a special treat for my generation. Since my mother did not own a television (forbidden if you were on welfare) and my grandmother did, once a week we walked the five blocks to my grandmother's. This particular night, a middle-aged Bible worker representing *Faith for Today* visited my grandparents. They had watched the program and signed up for the Bible course. Clearly annoyed at this disruption of my plans, I started to leave. My grandmother then placated my brother and me by promising us that she would leave shortly and we could still watch some television.

This pattern continued for a number of Friday nights, until a young pastor named John Stevens began to visit. At that point, I took more interest in the Bible studies and started attending the city-wide Carnegie Hall evangelistic meetings being conducted by Elder Roy Allan Anderson. The moderator for each meeting was a youthful J. R. Spangler. E. L. Branson was the conference president at this time. I also began attending church with my grandparents. Dr. Frederick E. J. Harder baptized my grandparents and me in the Washington Avenue Seventh-day Adventist Church in March of 1952. Nine months later, a close friend, Ron Halvorsen, was also baptized. Together, the two "Coney Island boys" would enjoy an exciting three and one-half years as Adventist young people in Brooklyn. What we were about to discover was the way in which the Seventh-day Adventist Church would expand our horizons far beyond even those provided by the exciting city of New York.

At that time, the Greater New York Conference may have been the most culturally diverse in the North American Division. Post World War II immigrants filled pews. I attended and preached in the Danish-Norwegian, Swedish, Yugoslavian, Italian (two of them), Estonian, German, and Spanish churches. In Harlem, there was the very large, dynamic Ephesus church, which boasted numerous choirs. As small as it was (80 students), the Greater New York Academy reflected this diversity.

Teenage Evangelists

In the fall following my baptism, I attended Greater New York Academy. Ron entered the school second semester (January of 1953) right after his baptism in December 1952. Our Bible teacher was Kenneth Vine, who later became president of Middle East College and dean of the Division of Religion at Loma Linda University. Interestingly enough, a high percentage of our teachers at the academy either had master's degrees or were working on them at places like Columbia and New York University.

As new converts, we were "on fire" with our newfound faith. Our passion for the church and for preaching the Adventist message was intense, more so than many of the academy students raised as Adventists. Ron and I got our first taste for witnessing by joining some of the young married couples from the Washington Avenue congregation. They preached on street corners in downtown Brooklyn, usually around Pacific Street. On a weekly basis, people like Artie Campbell and Harry Marcellino, supported by a revered Bible worker named "Sister Ferguson," rolled out the prophecies, the Sabbath, the mark of the beast, the state of the dead, and the second coming of Christ. Since Ron and I lived in the city and were not dependent on our parents to transport us even as early teens, we went anywhere in the city public transportation could take us. Many Sabbath afternoons we handed out literature and knocked on doors.

During that time, things seemed to be exploding in New York for Adventists. *Faith for Today* was becoming a nationally recognized religious television program, its stations increasing almost daily around the country. A number of us in the academy actually acted on live television for those early programs. We knew the Fagals and the *Faith for Today* quartet personally. Even though our numbers were tiny in comparison to the millions who lived in New York City, we all felt a growing sense of pride about the Adventist Church.

Our families and friends got interested in this new religion we had embraced, so they asked Ron and me to share what we knew through Bible studies. We eventually had so many appointments during the week that it was affecting our schoolwork. We mentioned our dilemma to Elder Vine, who half-jokingly suggested that we hold public meetings in our neighborhood so we would have only one night a week to worry about. That week, we brought the subject up with my grandparents. My "Uncle Rudy" offered to pay the rental fee for a hall if we could find one.

My mother suggested we talk with the men's club directly across the street from our apartment. I did. I offered them $5 a night rent, once a week, and they accepted (only later did I learn they would have done it for $2, so desperate were they for cash). The hall was quite small, with a potbellied stove to heat it. When we announced that we had procured a hall, we suggested that either Elder Vine or one of the young pastors in the conference do the preaching. That idea was vetoed immediately. They told us that we were the only ones who would be able to attract people from that neighborhood to the meetings. So, with that unique excitement that comes from rising to an unexpected challenge, we practiced our sermons in front of our Bible teacher and other young pastors.

We signed an agreement with the men's club, and, with the help of academy friends and others, we cleaned out beer cans, dust, and dirt, and set up chairs borrowed from the local churches. We advertised the meetings throughout the neighborhood. Students acted as organists, ushers, and audio-visual assistants. The first night, 62 people showed up. By the fourth week of the meetings, the conference had alerted the media. They indicated they would send out a reporter. That fourth week, we had arranged for the Faith for Today quartet to sing, and Ron was scheduled to preach. Eighty people (including a reporter from the prestigious *New York Herald Tribune*) showed up that night, more than the little hall could handle. For our Coney Island neighborhood, this was a glamorous event. A quartet that sang on television and a newspaper reporter asking them for their views of the meetings!

The following Sunday, in the religion section of the paper, the headlines read: "Teenage Gangsters Turn Evangelists." Gangsters? While this appellation possessed a modicum of truth (more for Ron than for me), it naturally struck our mothers as degrading. Fortuitously, Virginia Graham, then the most famous talk show interviewer on television with her program *Food for Thought*, read the article in the paper and arranged for us to be interviewed on her program. What started out as a simple attempt to witness to our neighborhood had become a major media event. From preaching in a Coney Island storefront, we went to preaching in Adventist churches throughout the Atlantic Union, talking with news reporters and now appearing on a major television program to tell our "story." It was a dizzying expansion of our horizons.

When we arrived at the Manhattan studio (by subway, of course), we were ushered into Ms. Graham's dressing room during her hair styling and make-up preparation. She urged us to relax, look into the camera, and speak naturally. Spread in front of her was the news article about us (last-minute "boning up," I decided). While much of the program looked into our personal lives, at the end we were invited to say a word to the "youth" who might be watching. We testified to the Adventist message about the soon-coming Jesus and the need for young people to get serious about life. On that note, the program ended. Rather than wash off the make-up we had been wearing, we wore it all the way home on the subway.

In the early spring, at the close of a church service in upstate New York where we had just told our story during the sermon, conference president E. L. Branson and youth leader Joseph Barnes made a startling announcement. The Pan-American Youth Congress, scheduled for San Francisco in early June, planned to devote Thursday evening to youth witnessing in the North American Division. The planning committee had decided to select two examples out of the many dozens submitted. Even though the teens involved had to be at least 16 (we were only 15) someone had submitted our story for consideration. Elder Branson informed the congregation that in spite of our ages, the story of the Coney Island boys was one of the two to be featured that Thursday evening at the youth congress. The Greater New York Conference was paying our way to San Francisco. We would be interviewed in front of 10,000 Adventists from the Americas. Neither Ron nor I had ever been farther from New York City than New Jersey or Pennsylvania. Elder Kenneth Vine, his wife Betty, and her aunt drove us across the country to the congress. On the way, we saw Niagara Falls, corn and wheat fields in the Midwest, the Rocky Mountains, including Garden of the Gods, Pikes Peak, Glacier, Zion, Grand Canyon, Yosemite, and Bryce National Parks. Our pictures appeared in the special edition of the San Francisco newspapers published for the youth congress. We had tasted celebrity Adventist-style. It was delicious.

In subsequent years, Ron and I continued to preach in local churches, as well as in other conferences. I also sang in a quartet that traveled a lot. We often practiced on the subway going home, always an interesting experience for us and the passengers. Years later, while attending a family wedding, my wife, children and I were eating breakfast in a diner when a quartet broke into song. My son quipped: "Only in New York."

Courier for Christ

Working is an integral part of an Adventist education and philosophy. While many students did not work during the school year (after all, two hours travel round-trip and a school day that ended at 3:30 p.m. did not leave much time), a number did. Some worked for teachers at the academy. However, I did work for more than a year as the person who picked up the mail for *Faith for Today* from their lower Manhattan Post Office Box 8. Even though the ministry was located in Forest Hills, Queens, it advertised a New York City mailing address. Coming from Coney Island, I passed right by that train stop in lower Manhattan. My job was to leave 40 minutes earlier than usual (5:45-6:00 a.m.), pick up the mail, which was stuffed into large mailbags weighing 25 pounds apiece (two or three bags on Mondays, one the other days), and take them to the Forest Hills office before school started. Then I got back on the train and went to the academy for the 8:00 a.m. class. Needless to say, I was late so often I almost flunked that first-period typing class.

I took the responsibility of picking up the mail very seriously. To begin with, the names in those bags were "precious souls" whose salvation might depend on *Faith for Today* being able to enroll them in the Bible course or answer their questions. Also, the offerings to support the program were in those envelopes, most of which came in cash during that era. In my naïveté, I assumed that the cash I was carrying might be in the hundreds of dollars, so thought no more about it. One day, someone mentioned to me that more than $10,000 had come in that Monday, most of it in cash. I felt a stiffening of the hair on the back of my neck, and my knees began to shake. This was not information I wanted anyone to have. I had already been mugged on the subway and was not interested in anyone knowing that kind of cash was in those mailbags.

Shortly after this discovery, I had a harrowing experience picking up the mail that forced a policy and procedural change. It is hard for those who do not dwell in cities to imagine the pandemonium on the subway at rush hour. People literally run to catch an open door and push with all their might to squeeze in, even when the car is too full. Carrying two bags, one in front and one behind, I ran for the train. I got there just as the door was closing and pushed my way in. However, when the rubber-edged door closed around my back wrist, I could not get the mailbag in the car. Since the door was closed, the engineer started the train. I had to hold that mailbag until the next stop as it bounced wildly in the wind just outside the car door. Obviously, dropping the mailbag was simply not an option.

Jackie Robinson steals home.

That was it. I had had it. I decided to skip class that morning and raised a ruckus at *Faith for Today.* I told them that with so much money and the responsibility of those names, sending a teenager by train to pick up the mail bordered on insanity. They needed to send a courier by car and improve their security. They agreed, and I lost my job. I began spending afternoons at *Faith for Today* painting and cleaning.

Never Bored in the Lord

At this same time, Oliver Beltz was in New York to assist with the Carnegie Hall evangelistic meetings. He organized a city-wide choir. With the assistance of Robert McQuade, a fine young organist pursuing advanced organ studies, Beltz began to make an impact on Adventism in the city. Ron and I joined that choir, as well as the church choir McQuade conducted at the Washington Avenue congregation in Brooklyn. Almost overnight, Ron and I went from Jo Stafford, Frank Sinatra, Perry Como, Nat King Cole, and the early stages of rock 'n' roll to the classical religious repertoire, including Ralph Vaughn Williams, the *Messiah,* and Mendelssohn's *Elijah.* We performed not only in Adventist churches, but also at Grand Central Station, Times Square, and other well-known venues in the city. That was also a time when Herbert Blomstedt, later conductor of the Dresden Philharmonic and the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, was studying at the Juilliard School of Music. The talent pool in the city, whether in graduate school or in the ministry, was immense.

Ingathering meant walking door-to-door in cold weather. A car followed, whose loudspeakers played Christmas carols sung by the King's Heralds, the Faith for Today quarter, Del Delker, and Mario Lanza. New Yorkers decorate their homes for Christmas in spectacular ways, so people are in the mood to give. We sang at Rockefeller Plaza and Times Square until our throats were hoarse. Not even apartment houses could stop us. We laid a sheet on the lawn. When people opened their windows to investigate the source of the carols, we shouted that they could throw money down to us. June Croft was the best (and shrewdest) solicitor of all. She would go to the Waldorf Astoria Hotel and stop wealthy patrons coming in and out of their limousines. Catching a crowd at the end of a Broadway show was also a big money-getter. Unhappily, we also solicited in bars (with our girls) and thought we were doing God's work when half-drunk, leering sailors and soldiers gave $10 bills.

All Adventist boarding schools were (and most still are) located in rural areas. It was assumed that cities corrupted and natural surroundings civilized. I readily admit that there is some validity in this assumption. However, from my own experience, let me share with you the positives of an Adventist education in the city.

First, we stayed at home with our parents and in local churches filled with the people who knew us best and who cared intensely for us. In my local church at Washington Avenue, young married couples and older "mothers in Israel" nurtured and prayed for Ron and me. We were in their homes for meals and in so many ways made to feel special. Our academy teachers were also very generous with their time.

Second, we were never bored. Bored in New York City? Bored in the Lord? While the academy was the center of our social lives on Saturday night (there was always something going on), we often did things after the social either downtown or at someone's apartment. Because we often accompanied the women to their homes on the subway, we men often ended up getting home well after midnight. On "day" dates in groups or as a couple, there were so many acceptable things to do by Adventist standards, that Ron and I never felt cheated out of fun.

Academically, we were stimulated and challenged. Besides the quality of the teachers at the academy, we would do our research papers at the New York Public Library or, like Roy Branson, write an article for the *Youth's Instructor* based on attending an open orchestra rehearsal conducted by Arturo Toscanini. During my teens I attended concerts at Carnegie Hall, and heard soprano Lily Pons sing in a theater, which broadcast her voice over radio to the nation. On Sundays, several of us would go uptown to hear Norman Vincent Peale, Ralph Sockman, or Harry Emerson Fosdick preach in their nationally famous pulpits. A city has the tacky and seamy. It also exposes young people to excellence and greatness.

There is no doubt that growing up in New York City, and spending my teen years there as an Adventist, definitively shaped my interests, convictions, and personality. To this day, when I meet an Adventist teenager from New York, there is a certain self-assurance ("street-smarts"), love for the local church, and insouciance I find engaging. Granted, some of them are outspoken, blunt, "loud," and "in-your-face." Look beyond all that, and you will find that the city breeds intensity, passion, zest for life, loyalty, toughness, creativity, and confidence. The city and the city church still expand an Adventist young person's horizons.

Not bad.

My Harlem Renaissance

by Henry E. Felder

The Harlem of the 1950s was an exciting place for a 12-year-old. My life–family, school, Adventist church–reverberated to the sights and sounds of Harlem's streets. The streets of Harlem were alive with the sights and sounds of a dynamic and growing part of New York City.

The Family

I was the third of 10 children who grew up in a financially challenged household. My father worked at the Brooklyn Navy yard as a welder, while my mother worked in a clothing factory. In addition to siblings, there was an extended family that included grandparents, a favorite uncle, Nathan, aunts, and numerous cousins who lived in Harlem, or nearby in New Jersey. My maternal grandfather owned a small farm in northern New Jersey and was the patriarch of the family. Sometimes during the Christmas season, Grandfather Mitchell would come with Uncle Nathan bringing turkey, money, toys, and gifts to the small apartment where we lived. My mother had a warm and comfortable relationship with her father and brother. My father participated somewhat grudgingly in this seasonal ritual, disturbed no doubt that he was not able to afford the material things that made Christmas such an important part of a child's life.

My mother was the driving force in the lives of her children. As a teenager, she was introduced to

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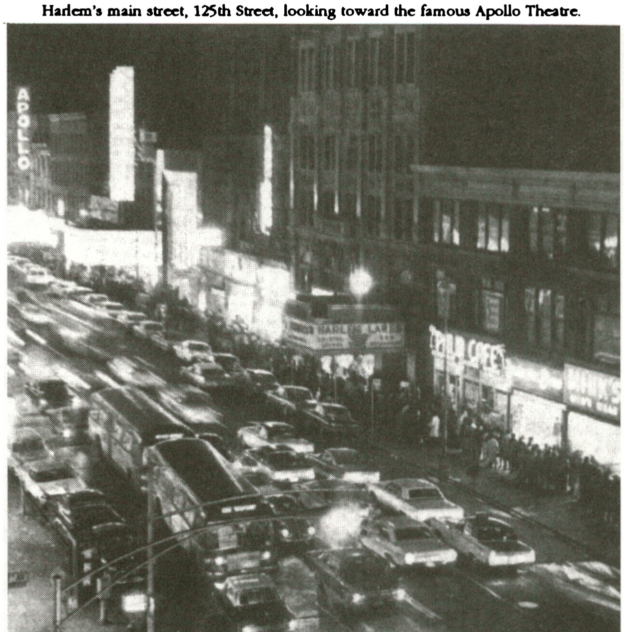
and joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Later, when she and my father married and started their family, he consented to the children being raised as Adventist.

The School

My mother and father shared the idea that education was essential, if as black Americans, we were to escape poverty. Although neither of my parents completed high school, all of their children not only completed high school, but seven completed college and five went on to postgraduate degrees, including doctorates in medicine and economics. Through prayer, sacrifice, and the support of members of the Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist Church, most of my siblings and I started out at the Manhattan Adventist Elementary School. The school was located on 150th Street in Manhattan, on the upper floors of the City Tabernacle Adventist Church. The school was small and frequently cold in the winter. What the school lacked in amenities, it made up for in the dedication of its teachers. My fourth-grade teacher, Miss Riley, taught for more than 40 years, most of it at Manhattan Elementary. The school principal, who was also my second-grade teacher, Dorothy Young, was a disciplinarian who was unstinting in her determination that her charges would grow up to become noble citizens of this world and the next. At Manhattan Elementary, the Bible and the writings of Ellen White were as essential as the English and math textbooks. That small school instilled in me the moral and academic values that later helped propel me to college, graduate school at Stanford, and a senior appointed position in the administration of President Ronald Reagan.

Harlem's main street, 125th Street, looking toward the famous Apollo Theatre.



The Church

The Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist Church was another critically important institution in my 12-year old life. Ephesus was located on 123rd Street and Lenox Avenue. In 1955, Ephesus had a membership of about 1,500, which made it the largest black church in the denomination, indeed one of the larger churches in Harlem. Community events were held there, as Sunday night speakers included many delegates to the United Nations. The Sabbath morning service was formal, predictable, and in the best tradition of a nearly Methodist liturgy. The church seated more than 1,000 people, in a rectangular shape with a balcony on three sides, and a set of beautiful angels over the rostrum.

The church elders seemed always dressed in black or a subdued blue. These were men whose lives as black Americans were frequently drab and depressing as doormen, elevator operators, and janitors. On Sabbath morning they came alive. Sabbath work was white-collar work. Here at church, they were allowed to be in charge, to preside, to intone the Malachi injunction, ". . . Freely you have received, freely give, . . . For the Lord loveth a cheerful giver." These men were constants in my life.

The elders could always be counted on to be at church Sabbath morning, to make the service memorable, even if sometimes painfully long. The deacons patrolled the church, maintaining law and order. The young were banished to their parents, or to an assigned seating section in the balcony where we could be collectively watched. During the church service, the deacons could cut your conversations short with just a look!

At Ephesus, church was an all-day affair. Sabbath school moved into the morning service, followed by lunch in the church basement, and then three or four afternoon meetings that took in all age groups. Sabbath school, for me, was notable because of John Matthews, who would spend some of the time having each of us read the Bible until we made a mistake of any kind. Then he would interpret what we had read in the context of the Sabbath school lessons. The morning worship service started at

11:15 a.m. and could be counted on to last until 1:30 p.m. or later.

Some families began Sabbath afternoon fellowship with the lunches they had brought. By mid-afternoon, the programs began. One program was for the older members, then junior and senior Missionary Volunteer meetings. Even though, at age 12, I was expected to participate in the JMV, the MV programs were too compelling. The day was concluded with games at night. There was a social at least once a month that featured a special type of Adventist dancing–the march!

On the street where we lived, there were about 50 families, with well over 100 children. Few on that street went on to college–many of its youth never made it past adolescence. How was it possible that my family was able to send so many of its children to college, with seven completing? The major variables were the church and my mother's determination to send her children to church school. The Ephesus church was the embodiment of all that the Adventist church stood for. Its sermons and ceremonies were reinforcing and nurturing, and its theology was certain. Few controversies intruded on the preparation of its youth to take their places in society. If anything could overcome the disadvantages of growing up in Harlem, it was growing up in the Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist Church.

The Neighborhood

I enjoyed the usual relationship with my siblings that one could expect with two adults and nine children [at that time] in a three-bedroom apartment. Space was at a premium, and in order to gain some of my own, I often took to the streets. This meant taking the subway wherever I wanted to go, but mostly I walked around Harlem.

Harlem is a six-square-mile enclave in the upper end of Manhattan Island. Manhattan, the smallest of the five boroughs making up New York City, runs approximately 13 miles from north to south and two miles from east to west. Manhattan is surrounded by the Harlem River to the northeast and north, the East River to the east, the Hudson River to the west, and New York Bay to the south. Manhattan is the site of virtually all of the skyscrapers that are the symbol of New York City, and is the business and financial heart of the United States. It is what most of the world thinks of when New York City is invoked. In 1955, Manhattan had a population of nearly two million people. While the exact population of Harlem was not known, it was estimated at nearly 300,000 people. In 1955, it was the largest community of African-Americans in the United States.

Harlem stretches loosely from 103rd Street in the south at the start of Central Park to 155th Street in the north, and from the East River to the Hudson River. Within its boundaries are famous institutions, such as Columbia University, New York City College, Grant's Tomb, and the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine. Harlem was still enjoying the results of the "Renaissance" that elevated the arts and black American society to one of its highest pre-World War II cultural levels.

Bisecting Harlem is 125th Street, a commercial strip that ran in an east-west direction. Each of the approximately 15 avenues that run north and south and crossed 125th Street had its own character. Seventh Avenue was home to the beauty parlors, nightclubs, and brownstones that provided one of the many middle-class enclaves to the community. During its trek through Harlem, one of the most famous addresses in the rest of Manhattan, Fifth Avenue, was home to many middle-class enclaves.

The Heritage

Harlem did not start out as a slum or as a ghetto. In its early days, around the turn of the century, it was a suburb for whites. In 1904, several black families moved into Harlem, seeking an escape from decaying conditions in lower Manhattan. In 1910, various black realtors and a church group bought up large blocks along 135th Street and Fifth Avenue. These purchases precipitated "white flight" in neighborhoods above 125th, and led to speculative increases in real estate prices. In the years that followed, large numbers of blacks joined a mass movement of African-Americans who fled from the oppression of the Southern states and settled in the major Northern cities. Many ended their sojourn in Harlem.

In New York City, a confluence of events led to the start of the Harlem Renaissance in 1925. At the center were black intellectuals, such as the W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, with doctorates from Harvard, and poets and writers such as Contee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Jessie Fauset, Zora Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, and Arna Bontemps, who would later teach at Oakwood College. They were joined by wealthy black patrons, such as Madame Walker, who founded a hair treatment company and was at one time one of the wealthiest women in America. Graceful brownstone houses lined 136th Street–its owners, patrons of the arts. African-American life was highlighted in poetry, literary societies, and all of the arts. For example, Paul Green's play of southern Negro life, *In Abraham's Bosom*, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1927. Harlem became the intellectual center of African-American life and looked disdainfully down on such pretenders as Washington, D.C. and Atlanta.

At its height, however, the Renaissance touched only a tiny fraction of the black community in Harlem. Du Bois has spoken of the "talented tenth," but the percent who actually participated was far less. Even as the Harlem Renaissance flourished, the seeds of the shift of Harlem, from enclave to ghetto to slum, were very much present. The Great Depression took its toll on Harlem, as it did in all other parts of the country. By the mid-1930s, almost 50 percent of its adult population was unemployed. Harlem was served by a single public medical facility, with only 273 beds. The social and health indicators, which were never good, became even more devastating for African-Americans.

Finally, on March 19, 1935, in retaliation for the mistreatment of a black youth at the hands of white store clerks, thousands of angry Harlem residents swept down Lenox Avenue, destroying white-owned commercial property. Hundreds were arrested, several blacks were killed, and the Harlem Renaissance was over. By 1955, the slow descent into an urban nightmare was well on its way. While there remained many areas of superb housing and a vibrancy and intellectualism that continues to this day, Harlem was only a shadow of its prior glories.

The Street—125th

Christmas was a special time for exploring Harlem. My Christmas walks began at my house on 128th Street, between Second and Third Avenues. From there I proceeded to 125th Street, and then west toward Eighth Avenue. The first stop was at the office of the Salvation Army, which made sure that any child who wanted one would receive a toy during the Christmas season. (To this day, I try always to drop a dollar in the bell ringers during the season). Then, on to Park Avenue for the best 15-cent hot dogs in New York, at the New York Central train station. Christmas lights decorated 125th Street starting at Madison Avenue and continuing on to Eighth Avenue. The stores were festive and crowded. It was during this time that Blumstein's Department store, Harlem's largest and made notable by a giant Santa Claus that towered over 125th Street like an overseer, started hiring black clerks.

My journey took me past the storefronts that started at Fifth Avenue and continued unbroken to Amsterdam Avenue. At Lenox Avenue it was two short blocks to the Ephesus church. But on these trips it was the city that I wanted to see. I peeped into the lobby of the Theresa Hotel when I reached Seventh Avenue. At one time, the Theresa Hotel did not admit blacks, and, in a twist of irony, was made famous in 1960 when Fidel Castro stayed there. Other hotels did not want a Communist in their midst. Seventh Avenue and 125th Street was also the corner on which Muslims under Elijah Muhammed and his most famous disciple, Malcolm X, would rail against racism and white devils. Father Divine had a famous temple on Eighth Avenue. During the depression, Father Divine was one of the few able to feed large groups of hungry Harlem residents. For these acts, he was rewarded by the faithful with adoration bordering on fanaticism. He had grown rich and extravagant, but remained a hero to the locals.

There were many things that made Harlem especially joyous to a 12-year-old. Long before drugs, decay, and death became hallmarks of Harlem, it was an exciting part of New York City. In the 1950s, there was a sense of accomplishment and the energy from a solid middle class in the heart of New York. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks of Montgomery, Alabama, decided that she did not want to move to the back of the bus. Her defiance spawned the start of the last phase of the civil rights movement that, ironically, may have been part of the reason for Harlem's decline. With the civil rights movement, blacks gained access to the suburbs and moved away from the city. Harlem lost many of its middle class and possibly its soul.

After 1955, Harlem continued a slow decline that would only stop when massive funds were used to revive 125th Street. By that time, it was too late. The Harlem of the Renaissance period and of my youth was no more. But, during those shining days in the mid-50s Harlem was a pretty neat place for a 12-year old boy.

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