

## GROWING UP WITHIN THE SOUND AND SHADOW OF BETHLEHEM STEEL, 1930 TO 1955

by Susan W. Clemens-Bruder

Sounds of the blast furnace, whirring machinery, and shift whistles filled the ears of children living and playing in the shadow of Bethlehem Steel's massive buildings that stretched through South Bethlehem and looped around to nearby Hellertown. Children watched trains move through the city and saw the steel products that their fathers (and during World War II, their mothers) produced. They watched their fathers walk to work or take the Bethlehem Steel bus from the farther neighborhoods and looked west toward the massive buildings of Lehigh University. Soot and red smoke choked the air, but as people quipped, "smoke in the air means food in the bellies."

Except for the very diverse neighborhood of Northampton Heights, children of steelworkers tended to live in ethnically defined enclaves. South Bethlehem's ethnic groups included Russians, Slovaks, Slovenes, the Wyndish, Hungarians or Magyars, Sicilians, Neapolitans, Pennsylvania Germans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Portuguese. Their parents or grandparents mostly came from the rural areas of their respective countries and had to adjust to urban, industrial life in Bethlehem, though they kept many of the traditions of their homelands. They continued to grow vegetables in fairly limited space, and some in the more rural regions of Bethlehem Township cultivated massive gardens and small orchards. Neighbors looked after one another's children as they played and often opened their doors to them. Children knew that their parents would find out if they were naughty—sometimes before they got home that day.

Each prominent religious denomination and ethnic group built its own church, and if a child stood at the top of Nanny Goat Hill, she could look out at all the church steeples rising above the houses, including Russian Orthodox, Slovak Catholic, Hungarian Catholic and Lutheran, Irish Catholic, and German Reformed. Family social life often centered on church activities. Church picnics and festivals provided a yearly highpoint and left children, who dressed in their native costumes, with lasting memories. The Hungarian Lutherans had a picnic grove and building, which they decorated with vines and flowers for summer events. Parishioners played games, danced, and celebrated with traditional foods and drink.

Once a week most children of the 1930s and '40s shopped at the Bethlehem Market with their families



*Bethlehem boys, Sons of the American Legion, photograph by Walker Evans, 1935. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, [LC-DIG-fsa-8a19592].*

for farm produce and meat. Families could pick out a live chicken at the market that would be butchered while they shopped, allowing them to take home the "freshest, best-tasting chicken ever" for "Saturday supper." During the week, people shopped at the small grocery stores that dotted the neighborhoods of South Bethlehem. Mothers would send children to the store to pick up items on credit, until payday. During the Great Depression,

neighborhood storekeepers extended credit during the downturns in steel production.

Children's days began early with chores such as feeding the geese, getting water from the cistern for washing clothes, wiping the steel-plant soot off window ledges, or helping in the kitchen. Then they would meet their friends and walk to their local schools, such as Washington Elementary, St. Johns Parochial, or Holy Infancy. In the summer and after school, they completed more chores. Girls may have learned how to make lace, mend clothes, pluck chickens, or help in the kitchen. Boys often learned mechanical skills from their fathers, tended the gardens, and helped with heavy chores. In the summers children had many hours of free time to play. Popular games included kick-the-can, pick-up-sticks, tiddlywinks, marbles, red light-green light, stick ball, and baseball. If children asked, they could usually use any vacant lot for baseball.

Many children took advantage of various entrepreneurial opportunities. They had paper routes, ran for the steelworkers' lunch sandwiches at the mom-and-pop stores for tips, shined steelworkers shoes as they left the plant, and collected bottles for refunds. Some older children worked as produce pickers at large local farms. At the neighborhood stores money-making children could buy soda, penny candy, wax lips or bottles filled with liquid, sugar cigarettes, small inexpensive toys such as wooden bats with a rubber string and ball attached, and baseball cards. Lucky children with bicycles enjoyed more opportunity to make and spend money.

Today, the now-grown children of Bethlehem steelworkers describe their childhoods as happy and secure and filled with a sense of freedom. These are the values that they passed to their children and grandchildren. ❖

Sue Clemens-Bruder is a lecturer at Muhlenberg College in Allentown and is currently researching the history of Bethlehem Steel families from 1947 to 1976.