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An Irish journey, from County Donegal to Hazleton's South Side

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Turning onto South Poplar Street from Broad, the driver passes densely packed blocks of half-double and single homes. Elevated porches line the street, but the neighborhood's general incongruence breaks their uniformity. For each porch is its own unique living space, either sleepily shielding its residents as they gaze onto the street, or renovated as added indoor "parlor" space. Gambrel, pitched, and hipped roofs tower over these porches, their many angles coated with tan, grey, or green shingles.

Aluminum siding protects each structure; macadam sidewalks break the monotony of cracked concrete. Ascending the hill, the stairs leading to each porch get higher. St. Mary's Byzantine Catholic Church suddenly appears, bursting behind the homes with its commanding copper dome. The dome glistens in the sunlight, and the glow from its orange-toned bricks distracts the driver with all its beauty. Reaching the hill's peak, the driver enters the Heights, a more spacious neighborhood with many postwar homes.

Poplar Street becomes a small scale downtown market on the Heights, with Italian restaurants, bars, banks, and other merchants. Holy Rosary Church, a more modern edifice attended by the Italian families who live on the South Side, serves as the last spiritual outpost before the driver enters this little commercial stretch. But one patch of real estate on this street pre-dates the restaurants, businesses, and homes. It's the driver's call to label this patch a deplorable mess or potential movie set for a Halloween film. However the driver views it, St. Gabriel's Cemetery endures as hallowed ground, one of the most important cultural monuments in the city.

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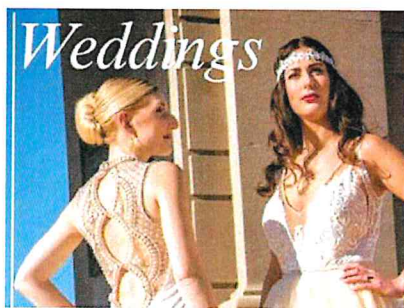
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It's difficult to find a cemetery like St. Gabriel's, for its eclectic layout and eerily uncommon tombstones are an unopened time capsule that Hazletonians too often overlook. In the 2000s, a series of unfortunate events desecrated and damaged the cemetery. Vandals toppled dozens of tombstones and the grounds became a market for drug dealers. An ice storm uprooted valuable chestnut trees and the church removed the ornate iron fence that guarded the graves. The cemetery also succumbed to inevitable natural disruptions, like uprooted and tilting tombstones, along with epitaphs worn away by years of volatile weather.

So it's easy for the driver to continue past this cemetery with little curiosity about the reason for its existence and the souls who inhabit it. He wouldn't know that this cemetery has a section packed with 1918 flu victims. He wouldn't believe that the Church once cruelly designated troubled souls to an "unsanctified" parcel. He wouldn't realize that so many epitaphs on the cemetery's mossy grounds were written in Gaelic, an ancient language already dying by the time its speakers settled in Hazleton. Faded pictures of these immigrants are commonly encased on tombstones throughout the grounds. Their Celtic-slanted eyes and fair skin exude good health and stoicism, but then again, their faces wouldn't be memorialized on tombstones if death overlooked such traits. But their stories shouldn't be lost in the shuffle of Hazleton's kaleidoscopic history. After all, they comprised one of Hazleton's largest ethnic groups. They were the Irish of Donegal Hill, and they culturally dominated the South Side for generations.

The Forgotten County

County Donegal lies at the northwestern tip of Ireland, culturally orphaned by the Republic and the North. Located in the province of Ulster, Donegal was among the last counties partitioned into the Irish Free State in 1921. Although the second-largest county in the Republic, Donegal has always been the "forgotten county," ignored and neglected by its government and fellow countrymen. A recent instance emerged in 2010, when the government's emergency response headquarters mapped out a crisis management plan for every county but Donegal. Such a blatant omission defines Donegal's place in Ireland. It was always an isolated county, and the people who lived there struggled to preserve an ancient and distinct culture. Unfortunately, poverty and famine, along with a virulently anti-Catholic English regime, threatened to destroy this little pocket of magical isolation.

Amidst this brew of unfortunate factors, County Donegal was further divided by its own disparate regions. Its eastern portion enjoyed fertile soil and wealth, and the southern section was also prosperous. Then there was West Donegal, where most of Hazleton's future Irish population resided during the 1840s and 1850s.

The Irish peasants of West Donegal lived in a bleak and desolate region. The rocky coastline and rugged mountains made the area undesirable. The poor soil made farming difficult, and they struggled to survive in a land overrun with Protestant

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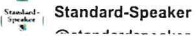
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landlords who dictated their lives. The peasants lived among more Protestants than any other part of Ireland, and such close proximity only perpetuated their poverty.

In addition to age-old anti-Catholic subjugation, the Catholic Church did these poor peasants the favor of cleansing their unusual religious practices through a "devotional revolution." This revolution consisted of "Romanizing" rural areas like West Donegal. Although devoutly Catholic, the Irish of West Donegal did not attend Mass with the regularity of other worshippers. Instead, they incorporated their beautiful folklore and ancient customs into established Catholic doctrine. Through "Romanization," the Church imposed regular religious practices and eliminated age-old traditions such as fairies, curses, cures, holy wells, and wakes. Now these peasants were disenfranchised not only by the English hierarchy that hated them, but also by their own Church.

This tragic culmination succeeded centuries of England's violent oppression. Ireland's fate was sealed in the twelfth century, when the English Pope Adrian IV gave the island to Henry II. The originally Catholic English never liked their fellow Catholics in Ireland. England's departure from the Church under Henry VIII only gave the kingdom one more reason to despise the Irish people.

Beginning in the mid-1600s, the Penal Laws introduced by Queen Elizabeth were reinforced under Oliver Cromwell, the military despot who overthrew the Stuart monarchy and instituted an English Commonwealth. The Penal Laws accompanied a culture of death under Cromwell, who was responsible for killing one-third of Ireland's population during his vicious invasion. The laws essentially stripped the Irish of their Catholicism, language, and culture, while empowering England's Anglican brethren under the Church of Ireland. Edmund Burke wrote that the Penal Laws were "a machine of wise and elaborate contrivance, as well fitted for the oppression, impoverishment and degradation of a people and the debasement in them of human nature itself, as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man." The "perverted ingenuity" of the penal code prevailed. By the mid-1800s, most Irish had been successfully anglicized through England's cultural meat grinder.

To make matters worse, a sudden blight destroyed Ireland's potato crop. Over one million Irish died of starvation and disease, and once again the English hierarchy watched with indifference, if not contempt. Donegal was particularly devastated in Ulster, and its peasants had few options but to evacuate. Most Irish fled to the United States, and many Donegal peasants found employment in Pennsylvania. They were especially attracted to the anthracite mines rapidly opening in what was once known as St. Anthony's Wilderness. The Gaelic-speaking immigrants particularly settled in northern Schuylkill County, western Carbon County, and southern Luzerne County-home to the Mountain City.

An Isolated People Become More Isolated

When the Irish immigrants arrived in Hazleton during the 1840s and 1850s, they settled in a region stunningly similar to County Donegal. County Donegal was located in the most isolated region of Ireland, and by choosing Hazleton they faced more isolation. They bid farewell to Ireland's most neglected county, and placed themselves in the most ignored section of Luzerne County. They left behind Ireland's most mountainous region, only to live in the Coal Region's most rugged mountain. They fled an oppressive and anti-Catholic Anglo Protestant culture in Ulster, only to find themselves at the mercy of an Anglo Protestant plutocracy. They delivered themselves from the misery of famine, hunger, and unfair farming practices, but in Hazleton they struggled to survive in a medieval economic system driven by some jagged black rock. But if it weren't for anthracite coal, this overgrown forest that became Hazleton would have remained the "Great Swamp" that Indians feared to tread. So the Irish-like the English, Welsh, and Germans before them-came to Hazleton because of anthracite, but how were their lives shaped by this rapidly growing settlement on Spring Mountain?

They needed to endure living in an industrial town that damaged the flesh and impoverished the soul. Of course, the English and the Church already diluted their culture, and they did their part to make these people submissive. But the Irish were totally unprepared to cope with the challenges that awaited them in their new home. Most Donegal Irish in the Coal Region were illiterate and still spoke Gaelic. They were pitifully poor and delegated to the bottom of an economic caste system. At the time, Hazleton was nothing but an unincorporated area of scattered shanty villages. It was dominated by English and Welsh industrialists, and teeming with German immigrants. None of these groups liked the Irish or their religion. The new arrivals settled in shanties on Mine Street, but as their numbers swelled, families moved southward. Their neighborhood stretched to what became South Church, Laurel, Wyoming, Pine, Cedar, and Poplar Streets. Their homes were constructed above mines, with entrances to this occupational netherworld conveniently located near the neighborhood. The Irish found themselves in a capitalist society on steroids, and they quickly learned that the coal industry would control every facet of their battered lives.

The Irish were once again at the mercy of Anglo Protestant landlords. Hazleton's founding families controlled the mines, and to them the Irish were simply dispensable economic commodities. Mining positions were reserved for experienced laborers, so the Irish earned the worst jobs. No regulations existed, and they descended the mine each day fully aware that the return to the surface was not a good bet. The barons were aloof to their needs and they basically owned the immigrants' lives. From the tattered clothing and deplorable food, to the shoddily built homes, everything was sold by the mining companies at inflated prices. The Irish lived in squalor-infested by disease, rats, and a general air of sadness. The weather added to their misery. Hazleton was endowed with terribly unpredictable storms, and the unforgiving winters only made life more unbearable.

Amidst this socio-economic gloom, the Irish remained loyal to the Church. They would walk four miles to St. Mary's Church in Beaver Meadows, which was then the wild and populous center of the region. St. Mary's, a simple yet elegant structure polished in white, was the mother church of the Middle Coal Field. It was established for Irish immigrants in 1841 by Jesuit missionaries. As Hazleton's Irish population exploded in the 1850s, a mission church became necessary. A future saint carried out the task.

A Cultural Command Post

In 1852, a slight, timid-looking man from the Austro-Hungarian Empire became Bishop of Philadelphia. John Neumann's elevation occurred at the peak of America's wave of anti-Catholicism, but the hateful trend only accelerated his campaign to serve the seemingly endless wave of vulnerable immigrants. He built churches at a frantic pace and established the country's first parochial school system. Bishop Neumann paid particular attention to the Coal Region, and his miraculous knack for knowing languages served the area's needs. He eventually conceived establishing a Diocese of Pottsville, which would allow him to serve as its bishop, but the idea was short-lived. But Bishop Neumann regularly travelled to the region, and when Hazleton's Catholic immigrants needed a church, he delivered.

When Bishop Neumann arrived in 1855, Hazleton was rapidly replacing Beaver Meadows as the region's commercial and population epicenter. Most of Hazleton's Catholics were Irish, but there were a number of Germans who shared their faith. After meeting with a committee of local Catholics, Bishop Neumann agreed to construct a 70 by 40 church at the corner of South Wyoming and Chapel Street. They named the wooden church St. Gabriel the Archangel. Most of the parishioners were Irish, but St. Gabriel's served all immigrants. Eventually a single Catholic church became unable to serve several languages and conflicting cultural needs, and the Germans became the first group to branch off and establish their own church, Holy Trinity. The Slovaks followed with St. Joseph's, and St. Gabriel's became the Irish church, centrally located on the Irish South Side. The small structure couldn't accommodate its ever-increasing Irish congregation, and it was decided in 1868 to build a larger church.

The second St. Gabriel's Church, completed in 1869, was magnificent. It was designed in the Baroque style by Philadelphia architects. The church's elaborate bell tower, brilliantly white and almost Rococo in its detail, towered over Donegal Hill. The bell tower was buttressed by a colonial façade—the windows encased by bright red bricks and ornamentation more typical of 19th century churches. Chestnut trees were planted for shade and continue to stand today. As the headquarters for Irish culture, St. Gabriel's soon became the educational guardian for its young parishioners. The church opened southern Luzerne County's first parochial school in 1874, and a night school was also established for those who worked in the mines. St. Gabriel's functioned the way St. John Neumann envisioned: to serve the poor immigrants who struggled to adapt to

their new home. Unfortunately, no spiritual remedy could protect them from the economic inequities that threatened their temporal lives.

A Hierarchy No Prayer Could Dissolve

For the remainder of the nineteenth century, there was no end in sight to Hazleton's explosive growth. As long as immigrants continued to seek mining jobs, there was no need for the coal barons to worry about the serfs already underground. The town's founding families continued to amass wealth by exploiting the miners in the Middle Coal Field.

The Irish had nowhere to go. They submitted to the powerful families' vulgar majesty and numbing absolutism. The barons' abusive oversight throughout the Coal Region finally precipitated a violent response in 1862. Rumors of the Molly Maguires were beginning to emerge. The Mollies were a secret organization of Irish miners accused of kidnapping and murdering mining officials throughout the region. It was that year, three miles south of Hazleton in Audenried, when Jack Kehoe allegedly carried out the first assassination attributed to the Mollies. In an alleged dispute over his Civil War sentiments with a mine foreman, Kehoe was accused of murdering him. Kehoe was subsequently labeled the Mollies' ringleader, and a succession of murders throughout the decade paralyzed the Coal Region's upper class.

The violence was in response to the medieval conditions of the mines and patch towns. The president of the omnipotent Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, Frank Gowen, responded by retaining the Pinkerton Detective Agency. The agency hired James McParlan-aka James McKenna-to infiltrate the Mollies. McParlan did this with ease since he was also Donegal Irish. In an odd and most unfortunate alliance, the Church collaborated with Gowen. Philadelphia Archbishop James Wood, raised in a wealthy English Protestant family, complied with Gowen's requests and condemned the Mollies.

Archbishop Wood's complicity helped crush the Molly Maguires. Twenty Irish Catholics were subsequently tried in the region's county courts. Their fates were decided by juries packed with German Protestants. The juries understood limited English and they easily convicted the accused Mollies. No appeals, no stays; just a hurried trip to the gallows and a noose. All twenty men were hanged between 1877 and 1879.

During this tumultuous period, many of Hazleton's Irish laborers were members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, which was the perpetually disputed cover organization for the Mollies. None of the Mollies were from Hazleton, but the incident only heightened the perception that Irish immigrants lacked moral clarity. This argument was difficult to make in Hazleton because the Irish generally didn't challenge their Anglo Protestant overseers. But they did join fraternal organizations like the A.O.H. to form some cultural structure for their community. They actively followed Ireland's political happenings through the Irish National Association and Irish Land League. They also formed social

clubs like the Young Men's Social and Beneficial Society. Outside their social structure, however, the Irish remained outsiders. They were beginning to resign themselves to this fate. An Irish Protestant from the Midwest changed their outlook.

Birth Pangs of the Labor Movement

John Mitchell now stands as a solemn monument at the Courthouse Square in downtown Scranton. Grand and bulking trees once provided shade for this altar to labor rights, but the square is now a barren patch of mostly grass and sidewalks. Mitchell lost his shade, but he got to see another day, his molded figure and surrounding structure designed by the South Side's own Peter Sheridan, relative of revered Civil War General Philip Henry Sheridan.

"Johnny" Mitchell saved the entire region from the coal barons' asphyxiating economic policies. For decades, his picture enjoyed wall space next to the Sacred Heart in most Irish homes. Scranton's miners definitely owe their deliverance from "Medieval" to Mitchell. But it's just Hazleton's luck that a monument designed by the city's own is missing from the very place where Mitchell set up shop. (Of course, it never helps when the city tears down such a historical site.) It was in the Mountain City where this son of Illinois coal miners made his stand. Mitchell's efforts were supported by Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, who rallied, hollered, and battled for basic human rights.

While Mother Jones was branded by her passion and maternal demeanor, Mitchell was marked by his youth. He first joined the union movement through the Knights of Labor, but following its collapse he moved up the ranks of the United Mine Workers (UMW). In a mix of luck and good timing, Mitchell became UMW president in 1898. He travelled across many mine fields, but found his greatest audience in the Anthracite Region.

By the turn of the century, the region's miners were punch drunk, but they kept fighting. Round after round, they demanded minimum rights. They kept losing. In 1897, miners throughout the Hazleton area walked off their jobs and went on strike. Their hopes were extinguished in Lattimer, a small village outside the city, where Luzerne County Sheriff James Martin and his deputies massacred nineteen unarmed strikers. The sheriff and his henchmen were arrested and tried. In spite of all the evidence against them, they were easily acquitted. The massacre and its aftermath left miners once again sedated. They remained subjected to some of the most anti-union rules of the region. To work in a mine run by the local barons, immigrants agreed to not join unions and strike-or face unemployment. This was the setting for Mitchell's arrival.

Hazleton's miners were like the chunks of anthracite waiting to be mined. And like anthracite, they required patience when attempting to ignite. Mitchell provided the right match. Once ignited under his watch, they furiously burned.

From his headquarters on Broad Street in Hazleton, Mitchell recruited miners to join the UMW, organized conventions, pressured operators, and sought compromise after

compromise. Membership exploded and interest kept growing. The embers were scalding and the cultural divide exploited by operators narrowed. He united the Irish, Italian, and Slavic miners under the labor movement's banner. When the operators refused to meet, the UMW issued a strike. Mitchell opposed violence; he wanted peaceable results. The first mass strike of 1900 did not deliver the victory Mitchell wanted, for operators still refused to recognize the UMW or even hint at negotiations. The operators' unshakeable disregard for miners backfired.

In May 1902, the miners walked off their jobs and demanded increased wages, an eight-hour work day, and UMW recognition. The coal operators still refused to cooperate. Their stubborn refusal shut down the region and almost caused a national economic meltdown. As winter approached and a coal shortage appeared imminent, President Theodore Roosevelt intervened. After both sides repeatedly refused to negotiate, Roosevelt threatened to send military forces to take over the mines. Facing this scenario, the operators and miners had no choice but to meet.

The operators and miners began arbitration through a presidential-appointed commission. In October, the miners went back to work with a ten percent wage increase and reduced hours. The operators still refused to recognize the UMW, but were forced to agree to an arbitration board made of labor and operator representatives. They essentially had no choice but to acknowledge the UMW. Mitchell delivered this victory with the region's passionate support. Labor rights were no longer considered a worthless cause pushed by a fringe movement. The labor movement finally prevailed and its roots were found in Hazleton. The South Side rapidly emerged from its employer-approved squalor.

The South Side

Decades of economic oppression didn't stop the Irish from creating a neighborhood with its own distinct character, an urban enigma. Decades of isolation allowed a culture to gather dust and build upon its historical debris. The South Side Irish were no longer just peasant miners devoted to an odd religion. Donegal Hill was their base. They were now established in a city enjoying an economic boom and suffering a nervous breakdown. Immigrants densely packed the streets with confusing languages and dialects. Hazleton was experiencing a cultural transformation. The South Side wasn't insulated from this change, for an influx of Southern Italian families settled within its boundaries and established Holy Rosary Church. Their Northern cousins, Tyroleans, built their spiritual base on South Church Street with Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the only Tyrolean Catholic Church in the nation. But the neighborhood retained its Celtic flavor, and St. Gabriel's remained the commanding church. The South Side played a special role for Hazleton because its crowded streets were arteries that provided life for downtown.

The South Side's tree-lined streets painted an urban patina chronicled in places like New Orleans. Canopied bars were structural umbrellas lining South Wyoming Street. The bars provided a refuge, a place where every man, usually alcohol-induced, could be what he wanted to be. A laborer could become a miner; a miner could become a foreman; and a foreman could become an operator. The bars were mahogany altars to John Barleycorn, but also stadiums for boxing matches. Men would congregate around the bars' radios. The bars filled with anxiety as boxers like James "The Cinderella Man" Braddock fought to retain his exalted status as a great heavyweight and revered Irish American. Amidst the palpable anti-Irish Catholicism that lingered and festered, these boxers knocked out their opponents the way any Irishman wanted to destroy the enduring prejudice. Braddock challenged prejudice with his talent. There was Catholicism and there was boxing. Boxers' pictures were hung in homes next to the Sacred Heart and Johnny Mitchell. The Irish lived vicariously through boxers and many entered the ring in downtown's Feeley Theatre. Braddock would later merge boxing with religion when he spoke at St. Gabriel's High School. His presence in Hazleton testified to the sport's sacred power on the South Side. But St. Gabriel's still remained the neighborhood's social and religious center. It stood taller than all the bars, bakeries, pharmacies, delicatessens, and butcher shops. The church determined the neighborhood's cultural and spiritual compass.

South Laurel Street's Peter Sheridan—who also designed Scranton's Johnny Mitchell monument—designed St. Gabriel's opulent new church. The original church succumbed to mine subsidence and the parish's only option was demolition. Sheridan modeled the new church after St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan, and his vision delivered breathtaking results. St. Gabriel's aged copper spires tower over the South Side, piercing the sky with reflected sunlight when approaching Hazleton on north 309. The church stands far away from the street, and its daunting and symmetrical façade places a protecting shadow over the immediate block. The crystalline rose window branches out from the main door, which is gilded in an almost Celtic design. Although built for a Celtic people, the church would blend in any medieval French village. Sheridan trimmed the church's Indiana limestone with rock-faced pink granite. The granite is carved in large square-cut stones that darken the structure. It is the city's most beautiful church and greatest monument to the Irish.

Sheridan's masterpiece was completed in 1925, only a few years before the Depression. The nation's economic devastation didn't affect Hazleton during those years. Most of the city's residents were already impoverished. The societal comforts expected by many American families were fantasies for most Hazletonians. Religion attempted to heal the wounds inflicted by life. Education also endured during the Depression, and St. Gabriel's School was the largest parochial alternative to Hazleton High School.

The school's newest building was still located at the corner of Wyoming and Birch Streets. The classically elegant edifice was designed and constructed by Hugh Campbell

in 1912, and he crowned the brick building with a stately cupola. Students were educated by the Sisters of Mercy, an Irish order from Buffalo, New York. The school produced doctors, lawyers, artists, writers, and politicians. It was a structural rolodex for all of Hazleton's Irish families, and the school provided the societal confidence and educational prowess lacking in the city's mines.

Hazleton was slowly transitioning away from an anthracite-based economy, and the thirties marked a watershed for the South Side's Irish. In spite of poverty, the neighborhood was booming with energy. Its population continued to increase, and St. Gabriel's majestic block of buildings appropriately signified its strength. It was an eclectic block, shaded by chestnut trees and flanked by a modern school building on one end, and a rectory with antebellum charm toward downtown. It was the city's largest parish and its parishioners helped break a political barrier during the decade.

In 1938, James P. Costello became Hazleton's first Irish Catholic mayor. The Irish were now the city's majority voting bloc and they finally found political representation in Costello. It marked a dramatic departure from the 1928 election, when anti-Catholic Klan members burned crosses in the Conyngham Valley to protest New York Governor Al Smith's presidential campaign. Costello instituted many municipal reforms and altered the political dynamics of Hazleton. The Irish were now a force to be reckoned with. They didn't have to be liked, but they could no longer be ignored.

Ambiguous Transition

World War II and 1960s urban reforms cataclysmically changed the South Side. St. Gabriel's remained the epicenter of all neighborhood activity and the school thrived. When America declared war against Japan and Germany, the South Side shifted its focus to military service. Large numbers of St. Gabriel's young Irishmen had already served in World War I, and now the next generation was about to redefine itself. Families were broken. Brothers parted ways by entering different theatres, some miraculously returning home and others cursed with tragically rotten luck. The South Side entered a cloudy period of robust patriotism and somber prayer. Caskets draped in American flags entered St. Gabriel's doors; the tombstones tallied up and the neighborhood developed a grievous atmosphere unseen since the mining industry's darkest days. When the war ended, the anguish lifted and scores of Irishmen returned home as veterans and celebrated native sons.

Their homecoming wasn't permanent. The war resulted in the gradual departure of many veterans. The draft disrupted their lives, but the return home brought unexpected benefits. Many of the South Side's veterans, benefitting from the G.I. Bill, attended college. They didn't return home after graduating, seeking jobs elsewhere and launching Hazleton's first diaspora. They were genetically linked to a restless culture that was consistently and forcibly relocated by calamity. Their grandparents fled starvation and bigotry in Ireland and found Hazleton out of desperation. In Hazleton they endured

decades of prejudice and poverty before labor rights and political representation altered this repulsive course. The South Side survived the Depression, triumphed after two World Wars, and the neighborhood had a lifeline that made it distinctly Hazletonian but also separate from the city. Now these grandchildren, still young but scarred with shrapnel, decorated with medals, and honored with degrees, were beginning to leave.

It was a trickling, yet noticeable exodus. Memorial Day weekend became an annual homecoming celebration. Veterans would march down Broad Street and through St. Gabriel's Cemetery as members of the parish's Catholic War Veterans. Their return home was temporary but the South Side still bustled and the bars still hopped after Sunday Mass. Men now congregated around televisions instead of radios to watch boxing matches. Trolleys no longer travelled on South Wyoming Street, but the neighborhood remained crowded with pedestrians and urban aromas. Entering the 1960s, they were politically represented not only by an Irish mayor, Joe Conahan, but also an Irish president. John F. Kennedy visited Hazleton on the campaign trail and rallied thousands of Catholics in front of the Altamont Hotel. There was energy and tranquility on the South Side. It remained an ethnic neighborhood and sustained the downtown with its homes, shops, and bars. Then the wrecking ball came.

Downtown South

The story isn't unique to Hazleton. An experimental urban planner loaded with government grants acquires a grand vision. He decides to redevelop a city neighborhood, hoping to economically renew the city and improve urban life. He ends up falling flat on his face, destroying the city, but at least he made money trying. Hazleton was a magnet for urban planners during the 1960s, and their plans for the South Side ended up destroying a healthy neighborhood and killing downtown. When learning how "redevelopment" affected Hazleton, it's hard to turn down the emotional thermostat. In an effort to improve Hazleton, redevelopment vanquished a culture, vandalized a neighborhood, and the city never fully recovered.

When the Hazleton Redevelopment Authority (HRA) formed in 1960, the city was enjoying a resurgence after a series of economic setbacks. In 1954 and 1955, Hurricanes Hazel and Diane struck the city. The hurricanes flooded Hazleton's mines with water, destroying the industry. The city's unemployment rate almost reached twenty-five percent. In 1956, the Chamber of Commerce confronted this crisis, establishing an independent, non-profit organization called the Community Area New Development Organization (CAN DO). The Chamber purchased an industrial park, erected shell buildings, and recruited new firms to lease or purchase these buildings. By adding industrial firms and employing thousands of workers, the Chamber and CAN DO saved Hazleton from complete economic collapse.

The HRA rode this economic high and held "urban renewal" discussions. The South Side was their target. "Downtown South" razed entire city blocks with a lifeline of HUD and

state grants. The Majestic Hotel, the Bachman boarding house, the countless stores and bakeries: everything had to go. The opulent train station: Tear it down, something better will come. The homes: Move the families to the houses we'll tear down later. They'll still come downtown. Don't worry. The cost: We'll get back to you. The plan: there wasn't a plan.

No historian or reporter has detailed this unforgivable act as courageously as L.A. Tarone. Chronicling the destruction in *We Were Here Once*, Tarone wrote that the HRA "went wild, taking and demolishing buildings at a blistering pace. Within five years, the area covered by Downtown South had been decimated. Virtually nothing was left standing." Through eminent domain, Tarone reported that the city demolished 225 buildings in a 16-block area, on 42 acres of center city land. Macadam replaced the rubble.

Throughout the 1970s, proposals were made to restore the South Side, but the vacant lots remained mostly undeveloped. A convenience store, a senior citizens high rise, and a parking garage eventually replaced the neighborhood. The convenience store has been robbed by gang members, the senior citizens stay inside out of fear, and the parking garage rarely sees parked cars. The absence of a residential neighborhood accelerated urban decay and left the downtown with empty buildings. In the name of progress, the city was placed on life support.

Today

The South Side has become less a cultural boundary than an ominous connotation. The alleys, or courts, are criminal hallways. Drugs are exchanged and bullets are sprayed by gangs attracted to a city on the ropes. "For Sale" and "For Rent" signs are ubiquitous, and the value of each home depreciates with every crime. The streets are devolving into their original state, the potholes and macadam debris more fitting for a patch town than a city. In the wake of this tumult, Dominican and Puerto Rican families have settled on the South Side, seeking what their Irish predecessors sought: a better life.

The neighborhood remains beautiful. South Laurel Street maintains its elegance with a canvas of structurally unique homes. Craftsman and Tudor bungalows sit atop flights of porch stairs overlooking the downtown. Their structures are layered with the dark bricks of Hugh Campbell's brick plant. Most of these homes were built by Protestants and later inhabited by the Irish. St. Gabriel's School was only a block away for the neighborhood's children. Most of these children pursued their dreams elsewhere, and new immigrants began to fill their void.

The South Side now expresses a Latin flavor, with meringue music playing through cars and windows, quinceañeras celebrated in the homes, and televisions carrying Spanish-language channels from their native countries. The Dominican and Puerto Rican families largely migrated from New York City and northern New Jersey, and the reason for their

arrival is simple, yet agonizingly debated. For why wouldn't they settle in Hazleton? It provides the cultural amenities of any New York borough without the hyperactivity, anonymity, and traffic. St. Gabriel's welcomed the Hispanic population and the parish became their cultural and spiritual center. Hispanic priests celebrate Spanish-speaking Masses and cultural feast days. Their saints are celebrated and Our Lady of Guadalupe warmly gazes at the heavenly marble altar near the baptismal fountain.

The church is as stunning today as it was when Peter Sheridan looked up at the spires from his backyard. Sadly, the rectory is rapidly decaying and in desperate need of fresh paint. The convent no longer houses nuns, but lives on as apartments and Hazleton's United Way headquarters. The school is a parking lot, torn down in the late 1990s after the Diocese closed its doors. The bricks, hardwood floors, and cupola-nothing was spared. The high school's glorious Anthracite League basketball years are just memories for the players and their fans. There is no gym to see where Digger Phelps put shamrocks on the High School boys' uniforms and Jack Cryan coached their way to the 1967 PCIAA State Championship victory. So much is forgotten, or is it?

But look closer. The Irish are no longer the dominant influence in St. Gabriel's, but they can still be felt in the pews. Listen to the hissing furnace and spiritual silence. Every Irish baby was spared limbo in its baptismal fountain. The school's children received their first Holy Communion and later married before its altar. Their children were baptized and later tasked with the sadness of placing their parents' caskets within this cultural memorial. They were buried among those Gaelic tombstones. They once heard the guns fire as veterans paid tribute to the rows of copper grave markers. Now they are among the departed.

And walk up and down South Wyoming or Laurel Street. A few old Irish biddies still conceal themselves behind green awnings with their cynical glares. Enter the Battered Mug and feel the ghosts of Irish miners spending their Sundays forgetting their lives in a pilsner. It's Hazleton's McSorley's, a museum to the city's Irish past.

Hazleton's Irish have moved on. But their cultural footprint remains on the streets of the South Side. They opened the door for all successive immigrant groups in Hazleton. They suffered the blows of discrimination long before such action was prohibited by law. They were sustained and abused by the Church, which served a dual role of both protector and oppressor. And yet they succeeded, driven by the hope that tomorrow may be a better day, and comforted by their natural wit and sense of irony that tomorrow may never deliver on its promises.

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