A Bronx Thanksgiving

By G. Murphy Donovan

“Bloom where you are planted.” – Francis de Sales

Margaret Hickey lived on the edge.

Her house was the last on the right, at the top of Rhinelander Avenue where it ends, the site of a horse racing tower in colonial days when the Bronx was Dutch. Her neighbors on three sides were the NY Central RR yards, the Bronx Zoo, and a slice of the borough called Van Nest.

In those days, and surely today, the east Bronx made the south Bronx look like a destination resort.

After all, the south Bronx had Cardinal Hayes High School and Yankee Stadium. For most of the boys of Van Nest, Hayes High was as good as it would ever get.

Our Lady of Solace parish may have produced Regis Philbin, but it didn’t produce Rhodes scholars.

The streets that radiated from the junction of White Plains Road and Morris Park Avenue were a study in blue collar; cops, firemen, sanitation workers, mom-and-pop shops and an assortment of characters to which the accolade “gainfully employed” would never apply.

Marge Hickey married one of New York’s finest.

In fact, she married two law officers and outlived them both; Edward Varley and John Hickey. Ed was a dashing Irish cop on Central Park mounted patrol. He was killed in the line of duty by an obstreperous horse.

Ever the pragmatist, Margie used her small insurance policy

and line-of-duty benefits to buy the two-story house at the top of Rhinelander Ave. After appropriate mourning, she married another police officer, John Hickey.

Between two husbands, Marge had three kids, all boys.

Just owning a house in the Van Nest neighborhood would have made Mrs. Hickey unique. Then as now, the vast majority of residents were renters, cliff-dwelling lease captives or tenement wards.

To be sure, public parks and rail yards in big cities are not the best of neighbors either, but a cop in residence often created a *zone sanitaire.*Such was the case with the Hickey home and adjacent properties.

My Aunt's place was a sanctuary and magnet for any number of reasons.

The Hickey house was flanked by a half-finished commercial building which neighborhood kids had christened the "Founds," short for foundation, because all that remained were sturdy, and then weathered concrete walls; an urban edifice which could have passed for Roman ruins had it been sited someplace other than the Bronx.

Needless to say, the Founds was a favorite *ad hoc* playground.

Running the walls became a rite of passage for local kids. The idea was to climb to the top of the wall and run the perimeter of the Founds on an 18 inch shelf ten feet above the ground. A circuit around the walls was usually accompanied by a chorus of taunts and obscene threats from a chorus of urchins safely below.

When the daredevils got too raucous or too unsafe, Mrs. Hickey would appear on her porch at eye level with the top of the Founds and put an end to the funambulism.

If admonitions didn't work, a threat to ring in her husband

would do the trick.

The other side of the Hickey house was a vacant lot, also a playground of sorts. Maggie's nephew, Tommy, firstborn son to sister Frances, a few doors down Rhinelander Ave, kept a pigeon coup there. Nephew Tommy's flock was adept at pirating birds from other coops.

The idea was to send up comely birds when a rival flock was aloft. If your hens show the right stuff over Bronx Park, some of a rival's birds might return to your coop.

All birds were banded so ownership was never in question, but returns of pricey pigeons could always be facilitated by ransom. The Rhinelander coop became so successful, that vigilante rooftop bird owners from Fordham Road crept through the park one night and burned Tommy's coop to the ground, birds and all.

The virtues of a stand-alone pigeon coop were not lost on Marge Hickey, but husband and lawman Jack thought a moratorium on all livestock at the top of his little Van Nest hill was a better idea.

And Jack Hickey lost few arguments on such matters. Size and respect are constant companions. Jack was a large man, even for a cop.

A New York policeman would never be assigned to patrol the neighborhood where he lived, a policy that was lost on neighbors who tended to think that a cop on the block was also a neighborhood social worker.

Such was the case on Rhinelander Avenue.

Many local misdemeanors were brought to the Hickey doorstep. That, which might be known today as counseling, was then called a "tune up." When asked to have a few words, with let's say little Johnny Lucifora, Officer Hickey would embrace the

kid’s neck with a meaty left hand and take his charge for a little “walk and talk.”

All the while, big Jack would deftly twirl his nightstick in his right hand and punctuated the chat with a baton bounce. The nightstick bounce was a maneuver mastered by all uniforms back in a time when cops actually walked a beat and carried a club.

The idea was to throw the stick to the pavement, have it strike on the blunt end, and bounce back to the hand. An accomplished flatfoot could bounce and catch the club without looking.

And back then, all uniforms wore an intimidating shade of midnight blue.

Imagine how any kid might react to the specter of a big man in near-black, wearing a pistol, and bouncing his nightstick. One minor “tune up” might be all that was required to put any young miscreant back on the straight and narrow. For hard cases, there was always a major “tune up”; the details of which you could easily imagine. A pragmatic Bronx parent would rather have kid with a temporary limp than a permanent police record.

There was a time in New York City when cops were the good guys.

In any case, if Officer Jack Hickey knew your child by his given name; it was not necessarily a good thing.

Unfortunately, not all crimes in the Bronx, then as now, were just misdemeanors.

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If you pass through the unlit tunnel under the rail tracks behind the Hickey house you emerge into the west woods of Bronx Park. The little used dirt track there was a shortcut,

by foot, over to Fordham Road.

Long before Fordham Road and the Zoo entrance appear, a hiker would have to navigate a steep woody hill. This was a favorite sledding spot for Van Nest youngsters when there was snow.

Of course, Rhinelander Avenue was an excellent paved sledding hill too, but the kid traffic on that slope had to compete with Buicks and buses where Flexible Flyers met automobiles crossing on White Plains Road.

A few runs down Rhinelander after a snow would inspire shrieks from window and porch: “You kids get out of the street, take your sleds to the park!”

Bronx Park was not without hazards either, mainly distances and trees. And many a hazard was cultivated, like snow moguls on the steepest parts of the hill.

A short flight off a mogul was a bonus.

On one occasion, a well-used mogul yielded a frozen hand which in turn was attached to a larger frozen body.

The frozen corpse sent the neighborhood child-pack scurrying back to the Hickeys, not because it was the closest house, but because it was the logical house. The body turned out to be a bookmaker’s acolyte who apparently died from sticky fingers – aggravated by a .45 caliber bullet.

The latter was confirmed by the spring thaw when the same neighborhood kids found a nickel plated, pearl handled, Colt semi-automatic hand gun in the leaf litter. Unlike the dead man, the beautiful semi-automatic was ceremoniously brought to Officer Hickey’s house.

Thereafter, the sledding slope behind the Hickey residence was known as “Dead Man’s Hill,” by Bronx standards a landmark designation.

That Colt was a star attraction for several years in officer Jack's small arsenal of "pickups," weapons that a cop might acquire from searches or periodic evidence room purges. Blackjacks, switchblades, straight razors, brass knuckles, and handguns were featured.

The rationale behind a pick-up collection was the possibility that an officer might need a "throw down" one day.

When Officer Hickey retired, a curious nephew asked him about exciting moments "on the job." Without hesitation, Jack Hickey responded that it was that very day, his day of his retirement, when he realized that he had never fired his gun in the line of duty – or in anger.

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Many a summer evening, a gaggle of kids would parade up Rhinelander Avenue on their way to that shortcut through the woods to the Bronx Zoo. On those warm nights, the entrance to the zoo on Fordham Road was flanked by at least two Good Humor ice cream trucks.

The Hickey porch would be a roost for chatting moms in the days before air conditioning; maybe Maggie, her sister Frankie, Adeline Collins, Rosa Biaggi, and Goldie West; the latter the proprietor of Sam's Grocery at the bottom of the street, corner of Rhinelander Avenue and White Plains Road.

Kids going by would usually belong to one or more of the women on the porch. Some mom would invariably query the group, "Where are you kids going at this hour?"

Some urchin would usually respond: "Dead Man's Hill, mom, whaja think?" To which Mrs. Hickey would reply: "Good, then you will be back long before dark."

The kids would disappear behind the Founds with a tailwind of nervous laughter and collective shudders.

Many a neighborhood summer porch seemed to have a stellar wit, a master of retort or one-liners. Marge Hickey and Goldie West were the fastest lips on their block. Humor was never cruel or spiteful, but always a release in a world where lives were pockmarked by, what was for some, a litany of disasters large and small.

Goldie West was a Holocaust survivor.

Marge Hickey's sister, Frances, was a more prosaic domestic casualty.

The later was a quiet waif who married a loud drunk at a time before selfishness was euphemized as illness. Strong drink was the curse of the Irish long before 'science' elevated Seagram's to sickness. Frankie Donovan's four kids spent much of their time up the hill at their cousin's house because the parenting and food was better there.

Everyone was welcome and well-fed in the Hickey orbit.

That hilltop house was more than a little crowded on holidays. At Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas; all of four O'Grady girls, husbands and kids, would descend on the Hickeys. The total was usually seven or eight adults and thirteen kids; dinner for twenty in a two-bedroom apartment.

Marge Hickey's second floor was a rental.

The dining table had an infinite set of leaves and would extend well into the parlor. This literal groaning board had to be braced with folding chairs in the middle.

Sister Ronnie hailed from Andover, Massachusetts and Rita lived in Scarsdale, north of the city, but the Bronx was still ground zero for any gathering of the four O'Grady girls. Shorn of their maiden names, the O'Grady family galaxy eventually included Varleys, Hickeys, Donovans, Olmsteads, and Watkinsons.

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All family gatherings in the Bronx were special, but Thanksgiving was legendary. Holidays bring out the best and worst in families. Alas, there's always some in-law who doesn't fit in, some relation with an ax to grind.

Such was the case with Jack Hickey and his brother-in-law, Everett Olmstead. Jack and Everett were like oil and water. Hickey was the taciturn NYC cop with few pretensions and Olmstead was a lout of a car salesman from Scarsdale who thought any trip to the Bronx was slumming. Olmstead never made a secret of his condescension; a foible that the O'Grady women tried to ignore but never failed to annoy the sheriff of Rhinelander Avenue.

Blue collars in the Bronx do not suffer snobs gladly, especially poseurs north or south, from Westchester or Manhattan.

On one ominous and frigid Thanksgiving, Mr. Olmstead of Scarsdale, sitting opposite Officer Hickey at dinner, made an intemperate remark about "dumb cops." Uncle Everett had gotten a speeding ticket on the Bronx River Parkway on his way to the Bronx turkey fest.

Hickey rose to the bait like a trout to a mayfly; up from his chair, followed by a foolish Everett.

The two, fueled no doubt by several holiday highballs, leaned in across the festive table. Jack's balled fist came up in a low arc and caught Olmstead under the chin. The uppercut propelled Uncle Everett to the wall opposite where he rebounded, spun and collapsed like a human fulcrum in the middle of the festive table.

Food became airborne in two directions; string beans and slivered almonds passed sweet potatoes and turkey dressing in mid-air. An excellent mushroom and sausage gravy dripped from

Marge Hickey’s Art Deco chandelier on the prone refuge from Westchester.

Blood and cranberry mingled in confusing rivulets of red. The entire family, now standing, was struck dumb by the spectacle. Silence is cacophonous at such moments.

Marge Hickey, busy in the kitchen, had not witnessed the blow.

Shortly, she stood in the doorway, apron at the ready, calmly surveying the wreckage. A quick study, Maggie didn’t have to ask what had happened. She knew the nature of the beef.

Aunt Marge broke the silence, addressing her sisters: “Well girls, fortunately, we left the pies on the kitchen table.”

The children were excused from the dining room, and the house. The Scarsdale snob was mended and bundled off to Westchester, alone.

The O’Grady sisters restored Maggie’s dining room.

The diminished feast, minus two, resumed for dessert – for those who could still swallow – an hour later. Jack Hickey sat by the parlor window in his favorite chair, reading. Officer Hickey loved history, any book about the past.

Not all dining on Rhinelander Avenue was that dramatic. Yet,

for those thirteen cousins who had witnessed the cranberry rumble, all subsequent Thanksgivings had an anticipation index that no other holiday would ever match.

The O'Grady sisters preferred not to discuss the brouhaha. Yet, there always seemed to be a quiet consensus; a belief that poetic justice must on some special occasions yield to the kinetic.

Fortunately, the Hickey house continued to be the center of family gravity.

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Other Thanksgivings were more congenial.

Margaret O'Grady Hickey might have been a success at anything. Intelligence, wit, and patience are fungible virtues. Yet food and cooking were the best stages, the venues for her humor and hospitality. Maggie knew that family dining was the push and pull that kept her nuclear and satellite family in orbit.

The Hickey house and kitchen was cleared of cousins on most Thanksgiving mornings by high school football, the annual Catholic high school match between Cardinal Hayes and Mount Saint Michael, a kind of grit versus twit bowl. The Mount was located in a nice neighborhood and Hayes was located in, well, another part of the Bronx.

Sean Combs graduated from the Mount and George Carlin didn't come close to graduation at Hayes. The Hayes/Mount rivalry was as much about class as bragging rights.

Father Edward Reynolds escorted the kids at the Hickey house to the big game when the cousins were young.

There was a time when nearly every Irish Catholic family had a priest or nun somewhere in their wood pile. The O'Gradys had Father Ed, a priest that came to his vocation by way of war.

Father Ed's older brother had served in WWII. As the war ended in Europe, the elder Reynolds made a vinyl 45 rpm record of a holiday song that Bing Crosby had made famous the year before; "I'll Be Home for Christmas."

The amateur recording made it back to the States; but Ed's older brother never did. He was killed by a sniper – and irony – two days after the war in Europe had formally ended.

Thus did Edward Reynolds become Father Ed; a career he started as an English teacher at Cardinal Hayes High and then as a parish priest in the Bronx. Eventually, Father Ed became Monsignor Reynolds and ended his priestly labors as the pastor of Saint Peter's, the Catholic outpost in the financial district, near Wall Street.

Long before Wall Street, Father Ed ministered to the extended Hickey family. He baptized, married, or buried three generations of Hickeys, Varleys, Donovans, Olmsteads, and Watkinsons.

Monsignor Renolds managed to outlive all four O'Grady sisters.

One of his chores in the early days was to escort the assembled cousins at the Hickey house on Thanksgiving morning to that annual Hayes/Mount football game.

The AM football game would occupy the youngsters while Marge Hickey orchestrated her sisters as they prepared a feast for twenty or more. Priest and children would usually return before 3 PM, half frozen and totally famished.

The interval after dinner, but before dessert, was filled by several rituals; street football or televised football, if the weather was inclement – and the ubiquitous "Pope's nose" ceremony.

The Pope's nose is the hindmost part of the turkey; that muscular, fat- infused bulb that anchors the bird's tail

feathers. Back in the day, the Pope was predictably an Italian cardinal, hence the name; a kind of rhetorical revenge from the Pontiff deprived Irish.

For the assembled male cousins, that appendage was a cherished delicacy, a kind of poultry bacon, bird buttocks, if you will. Unfortunately, unlike the hams on pigs, the turkey has only one buttock. Thus, Marge Hickey always made a ceremony out of the Pope's nose, an award for dubious distinctions.

One year, the turkey buttock was given for consistency; to a cousin who had managed to get a mid-term report card of straight C's from the good sisters at Our Lady of Solace.

On another snowy occasion, Marge Hickey stood in the kitchen door surveying the prone males napping or watching football. She broke the digestive reverie by loudly complaining that it was unfair that women slaved in the kitchen all morning and then got no help from the men with the clean-up.

Without missing a beat, her eldest replied: "Come on Mom, you cook it, we eat it – that's fifty-fifty."

Love has its own logic. The O'Grady sisters convulsed with laughter.

Cousin Eddie got the Pope's nose that year.

If the truth were told, the O'Grady women did not want any men or kids in that small kitchen before or after dinner. Those holiday rituals of preparing an eclectic feast and setting a festive table were an echo of a childhood when the O'Grady girls took care of each other – because they had to.

Alas, as we get older we tend to live imaginatively in the past.

Holidays are opportunities to capture the vagaries and values of family and tribe. As adults, sisters Maggie, Frankie, Ronnie, and Rita clung to the belief that a well set table was

culinary love; a culture of kitchens, the stuff that binds generations.

The O’Grady girls could never have lived long enough to know how much nourishment came from that tiny Hickey kitchen and crowded dining room at the top of Rhinelander Avenue in the east Bronx.

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The author is a graduate of Cardinal Hayes High School (’59) and the second son of Frances O’Grady Donovan and nephew of Margaret O’Grady Hickey.

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