Scorched Earth:
The Catastrophic Twelve Corners Fire of 1974

Hundreds of firemen battle 30-foot flames and heavy smoke at Twelve Corners.

$1 Million Loss

Fire Sweeps 12 Corners
Fifty years ago one of the largest fires in Brighton history ravaged the plaza adjacent to Howard Johnson’s. It contained Fox’s Delicatessen and Restaurant, Tierney’s Eagle Super Duper, Cerame’s Italian Villa, Hoss German Sausage Shop and Peter Samuel Hair Stylists.

The fire erupted on Friday night, February 1st, and the bitter cold and snow complicated the response by the Brighton Fire Department. According to meteorological records the temperature was 17 degrees with stiff winds that translated into an even more frigid wind chill. The plaza was totally engulfed in a giant fireball coming through the roof of my father’s supermarket (Super Duper) by the time I arrived about 10:00 PM. With the help of people who were there that night we can go back and relive the scenario in detail.

It has not been commonly known or discussed, but prior to the fire there was a motor vehicle accident in front of Fox’s deli. A police report filed by Brighton Police officers Haines and Peck showed that they responded to a car accident in front of the building at 7:30 PM. It seems that the incident was never considered when the fire was investigated. As a matter of fact, no one, including Shelly Fox, remembers the accident. Jeff Haines seemed amazed that the car incident was never linked to the fire. The above is corroborated in the Times Union on 2/4/1974. It reads: “Brighton Police Lieutenant Ed Pevear said the alarm was called in by Officer Brian Peck who was investigating a traffic accident in front of Fox’s about 8:50 PM”.

Future Brighton Police Chief Tom Voekel, a patrolman at the time, was assigned to control the traffic on Elmwood Avenue. He described the scene as a tremendous challenge for all the emergency services. He remembers vividly the difficulty controlling both vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Those demanding duties were relatively easy compared to what was happening on the Monroe Avenue side of the fire.

About 10:00 PM tragedy struck as a very inebriated civilian climbed into a fire vehicle and in the process of moving it, struck two East Rochester fire volunteers sending them to the hospital. One of the men was severely injured. The culprit was charged with several felony counts and eventually served time in prison. Interestingly, another over-served driver proceeded to try to drive over the fire hoses that covered Monroe Avenue. According to officer Jeff Haines, he stopped right in the middle of the tangled hoses cutting off some of the vital water supply. He was quickly removed from the car and charged with operating a vehicle under the influence of alcohol.

As the night wore on, over 100 firefighters (career and volunteers) and 20 trucks from Pittsford, East Rochester, Penfield, West Brighton, Henrietta and the City of Rochester answered the mutual aid call that went out almost immediately by Brighton Fire Chief Larry Howk. As recorded in the Brighton Pittsford Post he stated: “We’re right around the corner from there - we were there within seconds but even then the fire had a good jump on us.” He recalled being tipped off by a firefighter who was evacuated from Fox’s that there was a lot more going on than meets the eye. He was right as the fire was rapidly spreading through the numerous false ceilings on its way to the far side of the plaza. The terminus of the blaze was my father’s supermarket.

Dave Sloman, who was the store manager that night, recalled smelling smoke and then witnessing a swiftly moving cloud of acrid smoke. Dave had begun working at Super Duper on his 16th birthday. Having completed a tour in the Air Force, Dave was working part time as he completed college. He was in charge on the usually busy Friday night when the smoke
began billowing in. He immediately evacuated all customers and employees and recalled how he went back through the entire building before exiting on the Monroe Avenue side of the building. He then proceeded to call my father and alert him to the event. By the time my father arrived it was very apparent that the building wouldn’t survive.

At Fox’s a similar scene played out as the busy Friday night crowd had to be ushered to safety. Shelly Fox remembers being alerted while he was working in the kitchen. His most vivid memory of that night 50 years ago was seeing his distraught mother and father standing in the snow and rapidly rising water. Irving Fox was witnessing his lifelong dream go up in a cloud of smoke. He had opened his first deli in New York City in 1929 before moving to Joseph Avenue in 1943 and ultimately to the Brighton location in 1962. It was disappearing before his eyes.

The Cerame family was experiencing similar emotions at the same time. Bob Cerame watched his dad’s business (Cerame’s Italian Villa) as it slipped away in a torrent of fire. After the fire, Michael Cerame was quoted saying that he was most likely underinsured and had lost all. That included jobs lost as Michael’s wife Betty, and sons Richard and Bob along with sister-in-law Marilyn all worked at the restaurant. Despite all the hurtful memories, Bob remembered an act of kindness on that
terrible night. A Brighton firefighter, as he was leaving the restaurant, grabbed a picture off the wall and sought out Bob’s father. That picture and a mixing bowl is all that is left from that night.

Dreams were also lost at Peter Samuel Hair Stylists and Hoss German Sausage Shop as they bordered Fox’s. The Clinton Drugs and Wolk Appliance stores were spared the flames but were damaged by smoke and water.

The back of the building on the Elmwood Ave side of the plaza was where I was situated. I did not arrive until almost 10:00 PM as I was in Greece when I got the call sometime around 9:30 PM. My father, in addition to being emotionally upset that his business was burning out of control, was very concerned that firefighters were in great danger as they fought the fire from the roof of the building.

My father eventually decided to go home as the scene was too overwhelming and left me to spend the night. I had hoped to eventually be able to enter the rubble and retrieve what I could from the devastation. That happened sometime before morning and I was left to sift through the areas of the office and service area. I was only able to retrieve some rolled coins and charred bills as all records and personal efforts were destroyed. I have a couple rolls of nickels that I recovered that morning and have always wondered why I kept them. I think I now know!

The plaza was owned by a group headed by Robert Miller. His son, Michael, told me about the difficult phone call that he made to his father who was in Florida at the time of the fire. By the time he reached him the plaza was totally engulfed and feared a complete loss. Michael did remind me that the western end of the plaza that housed Clinton Drugs was saved due to the fire department and a fire-resistant wall that had been a condition of the original lease signed by A&P in 1941. Because A&P was a much larger chain, they were required to follow a much more stringent set of leasing conditions that including having a fire-resistant wall between their stores and any adjacent tenants. That fire wall remained when A&P moved out and Clinton Drugs moved in.

Michael Miller, who at that time was a recently elected Brighton Town Councilman, was quoted in the Brighton-Pittsford Post as stating: “I ran on promising to preserve open space and it looks like I’ve sadly delivered.” The plaza group decided to accept an offer to sell the property shortly after the fire. This was very disappointing to my father as he had a close relationship with the Millers. From the ashes, the Home Leasing Corporation led by Norman and Nelson Leenhouts developed Brighton Commons Plaza. The new Super Duper and several other stores opened in August of 1975. Interestingly, only one original tenant has survived these past 50 years, Tony Gaitor and his Elegant Gent Hair Salon still occupy the lower level of the new portion of the plaza.

The most interesting and rewarding interview that I conducted was with four Brighton firefighters at Station #1 on East Avenue. These four have over 125 years service to the community. John McNamara (54 yrs), Fred McCarthy (53yrs) Larry Howk (68yrs) and Jay Jeffries (51yrs) shared
their memories of that night. According to Fred McCarthy, the grocery store was free of flames when he arrived with the initial response at 9:05 PM. John McNamara recalled it as the largest fire he responded to in his career. Jay Jeffries, a newly sworn volunteer, remembered entering Cerami’s Italian Villa with the intention of throwing water up into the multi layered ceiling to thwart the fires progress. As the smoke was overwhelming, he was abruptly ordered out of the building and then remembered a scene in front of Fox’s that haunts him to this day. It seems that he and others were attempting to vent the fire by breaking the front windows. As they were pounding the glass with their metal helmets, a frantic call came for them to step back as the windows were in danger of blowing out. Lucky for them that they were out of harm’s way when the large panes exploded outward shortly after they retreated. John McNamara recounted the enormity of the response as every department on east side of the county was involved as either a respondent or served as a backup to the responding departments. Larry Howk, who was a newly sworn chief of the Brighton Fire Department, commented that the magnitude of the event was even being felt 5 years later as he was still being deposed in one of the numerous lawsuits that followed the tragedy.

On a lighter note, Don Jeffries recounted his experience that night as one of “being fired for fighting a fire.” It seems that Don, who was a part time bartender while he attended St. John Fisher College (it became a university later), went home for his lunch hour. He had just arrived home when the call came in about the fire. He answered immediately, and being caught up in the magnitude of the event, failed to inform his boss that he wouldn’t be returning to work that night. When he arrived at Thirsty’s the next day he was met with: “You’re fired, what are you doing here.” Instead of leaving he took his place behind the bar and began to work. His boss, who would become a life-long friend, reflected upon the reason for his absence and just smiled as he walked away. I also learned that firefighter Fritz Geen remembered a large stream of suds rolling out of the building into the parking lot. Super Duper must have been featuring soap products that week.

Before I end this article I need to share something special that unfolded during my research. While there was tragedy impacting the five family businesses in the plaza, there was a certain irony surfacing as well. It seems that the entire Jeffries family was there fighting the relentless fire and ultimately helping to stop its spread. Ed Jeffries, owner of Jeff’s Texaco on Monroe Avenue, was the Battalion Chief. His wife, Betty, was there as part of the Brighton Women’s Auxiliary. All four sons, Ed, Don, Jay and Dick were present as Brighton Fire Department volunteers. It’s safe to say that Brighton was fortunate to have
had such a dedicated civic-minded family within its community that night.

I would also like to recall some bright spots from that night. In carrying on the tradition of Don Barbato, the new owners of Don and Bob’s supplied food and a place to get warm that night. Max and Barbara Springut had recently taken over the restaurant and were especially gracious to me. I remember Barbara offered me something to eat and encouraged me that everything would work out fine. As the fire raged, the Brighton Ladies Auxiliary had stationed themselves on Monroe Avenue to support the responders. Two of those women were listed as witnesses on the police report documenting the tragic accident that had sent two East Rochester firefighters to the hospital. Audrey Wiles, who was Brighton Supervisor Richard Wiles’ wife, and the aforementioned Mrs. Edwin Jeffries were part of that group. I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention my experience at Altier’s Shoes. I had recently purchased a new pair of dress boots and after wearing them that night I feared that they were damaged beyond repair. My mother took one look at them and said why don’t you take them back to Altier’s and see if they can clean them up. Following her advice, I returned to the iconic shoe store situated in the Twelve Corners Plaza to be met by the manager. I explained my problem and asked if there was anything he could do to “shine these up a bit.” He promptly told me to take a seat and within a few minutes he returned with a brand new pair of boots. Note: read about Altier’s in HB Newsletter Volume 22 No. 3 at www.historicbrighton.org.

In closing, it would be a long year and a half until the plaza could be rebuilt and that found both Fox’s and Cerame’s Italian Villa resettled in Todd Mart Plaza. Both businesses survive today in the renamed Winton Place Plaza. Jason and Alex Rheinwald carry on the 95 year tradition of Fox’s after recently taking over from Shelly and Amy Fox. They were most gracious when I visited showing me photos and mementos that are included with this article. Both Norman Schmidt of Hoss German Sausage and Peter Drake of Peter Samuel Hair Stylist expressed a concern that it might be problematic to relocate in the destroyed plaza as the rebuilding would certainly take months if not years. My father was quoted in the Brighton-Pittsford Post saying that: “he looks forward to rebuilding with a different utilization of space appropriately designed with the high standards of Brighton in mind.”

Tierney’s Super Duper would reopen in the new Brighton Commons and would spend the next twenty years truly grateful for the valiant efforts of the Brighton Fire and Police Departments that cold, snowy and dark night fifty years ago.

I have many people to thank as this edition exceeded my expectations. First, I want to thank my sisters, Debbie, Patty, Lizabeth and Rosemary for their help in this endeavor. They all remember that night, and especially the effect it had on our family. I’m sure those same feelings were streaming through the Fox, Cerame, Drake and Schmidt families.

Additionally, I’d like to express special thanks to Town Historian Mary Jo Lanphear (What would I do without her help in writing this series?) and Brighton Police Chief David Catholdi for helping me research town records. It goes without saying that I couldn’t have done this without Jay Jeffries. I also appreciate Irwin Goldberg’s assistance during my research. This installment of the Merchants of Monroe, while tragic in nature, truly captures much of what makes the Town of Brighton a special place.

From the ashes! Grand opening of the new Super Duper grocery store on 15 August 1975. Left to right: Robert Miller, Ray Tierney Sr., Norm Leenhouts, Ray Tierney Jr., Ray Tierney III, Mihael Miller, and Brighton Supervisor Richard Wiles. Photo provided by Ray Tierney III.
The latest installment of the Merchants of Monroe series includes an interview with Michael Miller. A friend, colleague and mentor for over 50 years, Michael graciously chatted with me despite going through a very difficult time. Hinda, his wife of 59 years, died shortly after that interview. And sadly, on July 3rd of 2024 Michael passed on and left a legacy that places him firmly as one of Brighton’s most influential persons of the past half century.

I first met Michael through his father, Robert Miller, who led an ownership group of the plaza that included my father’s Super Duper market. Through the years Michael helped instill in me a deep sense of community. As the first elected Democrat to the Brighton Town Council, he quickly and quietly helped forge compromise despite being outnumbered politically. It came as no surprise to anyone when I chose him to swear me into office as one of his successors 1992. Upon leaving the council he broadened his contributions to the community. After serving as the Chair of the Monroe County Democratic Party, he was elected a Monroe County Family Court Judge. By all accounts, Judge Michael Miller truly excelled in serving the most vulnerable in our society with wisdom and compassion.

I, and many others, will miss his gentle demeanor and thoughtful wisdom. It’s with sadness of his passing and appreciation of his friendship that I dedicate this chapter in my series. The “Merchants of Monroe” has highlighted many Brightonians, but few like the Honorable Michael Miller.

Portrait of Michael Miller

Left: Brighton Fire Department firefighters battling the flames over Fox’s Kosher Delicatessen and Huss German Sausage Shop, image courtesy of Fox’s
This series, highlighting the unique history of homes and their owners within our community, continues with a look at the stately neo-Italianate-style home at 61 Pelham Road. Designed in 1918 by prolific Rochester architect Leon Stern, this home has seen few changes since it was built over 100 years ago, and embodies the detail and high quality that is found in the Houston Barnard Subdivision and Tract neighborhoods of Brighton.

The exterior treatment of 61 Pelham is “Tapestry Brick”, a patented material manufactured by Fiske & Company, Inc., and a common choice during this era. Internationally known architect Louis Sullivan helped popularize “Tapestry Brick” by using it in his designs around the turn of the 19th century. It is made of multi-colored clays and then given a rough cut to give the brick face a rich texture.

Research indicates that this home was built between 1918-1922 for Gordon Baird, but its first owner-occupant was actually Malcolm Gillis who came to Rochester from Chicago to become a manager at Michaels-Stern and Co. He and his wife, Cora E. Gillis lived here from 1922-1937.

The next owners were Alfred G. and Marion M. Sproat and their family (1939-1971). Mr. Sproat was listed in the Suburban Directory as “Assistant Vice-President.” No further information has been found about this family as is the case for the next two owners; Maynard B. Allen (1971-1981) and Arney (Flipper) – (1981-1982). We are interested in learning more about them. Please email us at info@historicbrighton.org if you have information or leads.

Historic Brighton wishes to thank the current homeowners of 61 Pelham, Erin and Michael Wayne, who contacted us with information and resources about their home.
Suzanne and Gérard Gouvernet, owners of #61 Pelham Road from 1982-2012, were the essence of generosity, culture and kindness according to their many friends and colleagues. Their imprint on our local arts community will go on well into the future and we all have and will continue to benefit, thanks to the Gouvernet Arts Fund at the Rochester Area Community Foundation.

They not only donated much-needed capital to various arts organizations and individuals, but Suzanne was an active part of many of them; serving on boards, committees, leading volunteers and fundraisers, she was out there participating throughout her life, not even a broken neck suffered when she was hit by a car while handing out flyers for the Finger Lakes Opera in Canandaigua could stop her. She soldiered on for months wearing her complicated apparatus as she slowly healed.

Suzanne d’Autremont Gouvernet was a former actress, dancer, and singer. Her local contributions to the arts included the Arts and Cultural Council, Finger Lakes Opera, the Junior League of Rochester, Rochester Area Community Foundation, the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, Downstairs Cabaret Theatre, Geva Theatre, Memorial Art Gallery, and Eastman Opera, among others.

The Gouvernets came to Rochester in 1982 when Gérard accepted an Assistant Professorship of French at SUNY Geneseo. Gérard had received a Licence ès-Lettres in Spanish and in Portuguese from the Université de Montpellier, France and completed M.A. (1970) and Ph.D. (1978) degrees in French Literature at Harvard University. He was known as a superb professor, a terrific colleague, and a most noble and kind human being. “Gouvie,” as he was fondly referred to by his students, served as Acting Chair of the department in 1991 and then became Chair from 1992 to 2001. In 2002, he was promoted to full Professor.

Among his numerous contributions to the College were the establishment of the Montpellier, France, Study Abroad Program and advisor to Geneseo’s Alpha Phi Chapter of Phi Sigma Iota, the International Foreign Language Honor Society.

During his tenure at Geneseo, Gérard received numerous awards, including the President’s Award for Excellence in Academic Advisement (2001) for his legendary mentorship of his students. The Gouvernet Ambassadorship at SUNY Geneseo was established in his memory of when he passed away in 2008.

Suzanne and Gérard maintained their love and loyalty to both France and their home in America throughout their lives; dividing their time between their Brighton home and one in the southern part of France.
Leon Stern was born in Rochester and educated in Rochester Public Schools. He was the son of Abram Stern, who immigrated from Germany at an early age.

Leon graduated from Cornell University in 1889. While there, he was a member of the Glee Club, Banjo Club, Theta Delta Chi fraternity, Bench & Board, and other campus organizations. He continued to be service minded throughout his life, becoming a 32nd degree Mason and a Shriner. He was a member of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and the Rochester Society of Architects (RSA) and was secretary-treasurer of the New York State Association of Architects. He was greatly admired by his friends and colleagues. He was a member of the Rochester Club, Whist Club, Eureka Club and the Rochester Athletic Club. Between 1892 and 1894 Leon was appointed to serve as a commissioner to formulate uniform building laws for the State of New York, by Governor Roswell Pettibone Flower. In 1926 he published a book of his work. At this time he even rivaled J. Foster Warner for commissions.

Leon Stern’s home, now demolished, was located at the corner of East Avenue and Clover Street in Brighton.
The Mysterious Obelisk of Roselawn
By Matt Bashore, Historic Brighton Member

It stands at the corner of St. Regis Drive South and Antlers Drive, in view of the grassy expanse of Rose Park, the center of Brighton’s Roselawn neighborhood. 53 inches tall, its four sloped sides capped with a pyramid; a small obelisk made of pebbled concrete. Its weathered surface is punctuated by two rust-filled holes, and impressed into the concrete at the top is a set of numbers: 1951.

As a resident of Brighton’s Roselawn neighborhood and its quasi-official historian, I have been asked multiple times about the obelisk’s purpose, or its former one. People have suggested various possibilities. A hitching post: with a ring attached it would make a fine one, but the neighborhood really didn’t get going until the mid-1920’s when the horse was well on its way out as a form of transportation. Besides, with only homes nearby, what were these riders visiting and who’d leave their horse on a busy corner? A lamp: a possibility, but why only one, why there, and why so low? Also, there are no wires visible, and there are streetlamps nearby.

Though too short for a traffic sign, I had always guessed a signpost of some capacity. Perhaps declaring a prohibition less significant to modern life: No Peddlers, No Roller Skating, No Jalopies Driven after 8 pm. Or perhaps a declaration of something once of faddish importance, but not so now: Keep and Enforce Prohibition, Support the New Deal, Buy War Bonds. Whatever its purpose, we all kept guessing.

However, this February, Town Historian Mary Jo Lanphear received an email from Tom Castelein, a Roselawn resident enquiring if the post was perhaps some type of memorial to the Brighton Gas Explosions. This seemed a reasonable possibility, as the date embossed on one side is significant to the neighborhood, like 1871 to Chicago or 1906 to San Francisco. Though no apocalyptic conflagration or earthquake, 1951 is when Brighton, and the neighborhood, suffered its worst disaster, the Brighton Gas Explosions. In the September 21st, 1951 catastrophe, 19 homes were destroyed, 25 houses badly damaged, and three people died, including a woman on Antlers Drive.

Mary Jo asked me, and I thought it might be a possibility. Oddly, I had never connected the date on the post to the Gas Explosions. So, it very well could be a memorial. But it would be an oddly minimalist memorial on its own, although perhaps the two screw holes had held a missing plaque. It is also an odd location for a memorial. Though nearby to one of the worst scenes of the disaster, where two houses were destroyed on opposite sides of Antlers Drive, it wasn’t right where it happened. Why wouldn’t they have put it near the scene, or better yet, across the street from where it stands, in Rose Park?
Mary Jo contacted long-time Roselawn resident and former Town Councilwoman, Louise Novoros. Louise vaguely recalled a mailbox on that corner when they moved to the neighborhood in the 1980’s. She remembered it not as the big stereotypical metal box, but as something smaller. I began an online search for something similar and found the solution.

As Louise remembered, the post had held a U.S. Post Office letter box. The U.S. Postal Service website on the history of mail collection boxes shows a Style B letter box on a similar post, as do several other sites and photos online. According to the USPS, the Style B began service in 1912 and “the last post-mounted collection boxes were purchased by the Post Office Department in August 1955. In 1962, 109,263 post-mounted boxes were still in service. By 2016, the number had dwindled to 169.” The website “Forgotten New York” has a page on “Ancient Mailboxes” which shows similar poles, and suggests the numbers stamped on them were the date of erection.

The mysterious obelisk of Roselawn is a mystery no more. But as the post was probably erected in the spring or summer of 1951, prior to the chaos and clean-up that entailed after September 21st, it likely witnessed the devastation and horror of that day. So, in its odd way, perhaps it does serve as a type of memorial. At least it does now to me.

Additional information available at:
https://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/mail-collection-boxes.pdf (pg. 6)
https://forgotten-ny.com/1999/12/ancient-mailboxes

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