

Of Jack McNulty and the Niskayuna - Green Island Connection

by Edwin D. Reilly, Jr.
for the Sunday Gazette

"Skeffington's funeral was the largest ever held in the city. It followed a three-day wake which had seen thousands of mourners file into the big house on the Boulevard. Now, this morning, the church was filled, and the crowd bulged into the street and out along the sidewalks on both sides. It was not a favorable day for the funeral. The sky was dull, and shortly after dawn snow had begun to fall.... The wind was sharp and from the sea; the mourners who stood outside the church did so in some discomfort. But no one left."

-Edwin O'Connor, "The Last Hurrah," 1956

"The Last Hurrah" remains, after 54 years, my favorite political novel. The story inevitably comes to mind whenever we lose a beloved "old pol," so certainly it did when we lost Jack McNulty of Green Island shortly after Christmas Day.

O'Connor's Frank Skeffington was nothing like Jack McNulty. The author's disclaimer that "All characters and situations in this novel are fictional, and any resemblance to any persons living or dead is purely coincidental" was a white lie, a legal necessity to avoid static from the infamous James Michael Curley (1874-1958), mayor of Boston both before and after a term as governor of Massachusetts. Curley, still living at the time of publication, was a rogue, though a popular one, served time as a felon, was pardoned by President Truman, and lived for two years after publication of the book based on his life.

Neither Curley's actual life and theater of operations nor Skeffington's fictional ones bear any resemblance to that of Jack McNulty's. Both the size and population of the McNulty power base, the Town and Village of Green Island, are tiny fractions of that of Boston. Its 2000 population was 2,278, about a tenth that of Niskayuna, and its land area of 0.7 square miles makes it the smallest of New York State's 932 towns.

I write "Town and Village" because though the entities are legally separate, they have coterminous boundaries, one of only five such municipalities in our state. I had always thought that this was a fairly modern arrangement, concocted to maximize state aid. But Green Island was incorporated as a village as far back as 1853 and the Town of Green Island was formed in 1896, so I'll have to search the historical records for a possibly different motive.

Green Island is a link between my native Troy and Watervliet, the home town of the Jean Marie Sayers who has been Jean Reilly since 1954. Not only is there a Wikipedia article called "Green Island, NY," there is also one called "Green Island Bridge." The bridge of that name now, built in 1981, is its fourth incarnation. But it is the steel bridge of 1884, one that replaced wooden bridges of 1832 and 1862, over which I rode my bicycle countless times to visit Jean during our high school years.

There was a time when Jack was mayor of the Village of Green Island and his son Michael, our future Congressman, was the Town Supervisor. And the current mayor, Ellen Ryan McNulty, is the current mayor and proprietor of the McNulty Funeral Home on Hudson Avenue where Jean and I and a cast of thousands lined up to attend Jack's wake on Thursday, December 31. We arrived a half hour earlier than the announced time but, not surprisingly, the waiting

mourners formed a line two blocks long, the closest away we could find to park on a side street. Conditions were very much as described in the opening O'Connor quote about the Saturday funeral. But no one left.

There were propane warmers along the route, a nice McNulty touch. Jim Conroy, a veteran of both Schenectady and Troy politics, was a few cubic feet of people in front of me in line. When we reached the inside of the funeral parlor, the lines were routed in meanders through the rooms of the building, so we kept passing and repassing friends we knew. At the first encounter, I said to Jim "Come back to Schenectady." He just smiled and said, "Ed, that ship sailed some time ago."

A man behind me spotted someone he knew that was twenty feet or so ahead of him, raised his hand, and shouted "Hello, Judge." Five people turned and waved back.

The most recent bond formed between Green Island and Niskayuna is that, two years ago, we elected Jack's grandson (and hence Mike's nephew), Stephen Swinton, as one of our two town justices. And there he stood, with Mike and the prolific McNulty clan as we paid our last respects to Jack.

Michael McNulty and I were elected Supervisors of our respective towns on the same day, November 4, 1969, he a youth of 22 and I a wizened 37. My best guess as to when we met is that we were introduced, one to another, by Peter Zeltins, our late Highway Superintendent, in the early 1970s. Peter, who died in 2001 on the operating table for what was supposed to be a minor operation, had at one time run a highway garage in Green Island and knew all McNultys very well. But I distinctly remember that Mike was with Jean and me and Brian Stratton and Bob Carney, both in their 20s, as we watched President Carter's inaugural parade from the warmth of Sam Stratton's Washington office on January 20, 1977. Jack, 55 at the time, must have been there too, but of that I am not as sure.

Jack and Mike were not the first Green Island mayors whom I met. Jean and I had a high school classmate, Frank Judge, whose father was, or had been, mayor there. Frank and his wife Linda, neighbors in Latham at the time, were out dining with us on the day in about 1960 when Frank received a call that his Dad had died, the first time that I was stunned by hearing of the death of a mayor of Green Island.

I began my research for this piece by delving into Paul Grondahl's 1997 biography of Albany Mayor Erastus Corning. Surely, I thought, the book, which lay on my shelf for some 13 years without my having read it thoroughly, would have a lot to say about the interaction between Corning and Jack McNulty. Disappointingly, the index has but one citation, "McNulty, Sheriff John J. (Jack), 289." That page tells of the Ryan brothers, Charlie and Jimmy, "preparing a grab for some of Corning's control. Sheriff John J. McNulty and his Green Island gang also were looking to carve away at Corning's base of support."

I found that word "gang" rather jarring. If the word was used in the sense of the song, "That old gang of mine," then fine. But the modern connotation of "gang" is so inappropriate that I wish the author had not used it.

Jack did force a primary to become Albany County Sheriff in 1973 and ultimately reached at least detente if not rapport with Mayor Corning. But after one term, the mayor broke his heart by telling him that he would not support him for a second one.

I concur with the tenor of all local stories about the career of Jack McNulty. It was over the last couple of decades that I got to know him best. Yes, he, along with Congressman Mike when he was able to get away from Washington, attended every Democratic event in every nook and cranny of the 23rd Congressional District. He was genuinely loved by all, possessing a sense of benign command to the end. When asked how he was, he invariably answered "tiptop."

Permit me to close with another excerpt, the last hurrah of "The Last Hurrah":

Skeffington was motionless on his bed; he gave no sign of life. "Well, no matter what some of us may have thought in the past," [an in-law] said, "I think we can say this: that knowing what he knows now, if he had it to do all over again, there's not the slightest doubt but that that he'd do it all very, very differently!"

[But] the figure on the bed stirred, raised himself slightly, and, taking charge now for the last time he gave his answer: "*The hell I would!*".....

[A few minutes later] Skeffington smiled again and spoke his last words: "See you around," he whispered.

Forever more when I attend a political gathering, I'll look around for Jack. He won't be there, of course. But I'll see him. And he'll be in tiptop form.

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