

## Part 1: Life in St. Albans, Queens



My earliest useful memories are of the six of us – four children, plus my two parents – living in this one-bedroom apartment over that delicatessen on Linden Boulevard.

I was 6. It was 1938 and the long years of the Great Depression

had given my (very Catholic) parents four little mouths to feed.

In fact, my older brother Jim was born precisely one month after the Stock Market Crash of 1929.

By 1930, my father's very modest real estate business had been crushed, along with his spirit. (It would be several years before he'd work again.)

In the meantime, my sister Patricia was born in 1931, followed by me in '32, and our baby sister Mary arrived in 1935.



(Jim & me. My First Communion.)

When my parents tied the knot, just one year before the Crash, America was in a building boom. My mother no doubt thought she was marrying a promising real estate broker. Afterall, his



brother-in-law, Anthony, was a successful builder around St. Albans and my father's little office would, if nothing else, make all of those listings.

(My father, James Rupert Menendez in front of his real estate business at 122-10 Farmers Blvd.)

My father must have also felt he was marrying well, to the niece of a State Rep. from Connecticut.

It wouldn't be long before they'd both discover what poverty was all about.

(My mother, Mary Cecilia McNamee, pictured here at 19. It would be 12 more years before she'd marry.)

And my father was 42 before the Monsignor at St. Catherine's Parish suggested to him (over a card game) that "his two older, unmarried congregants should become better acquainted."



It would be fair to say that my father was an extremely holy man. His rosary was well worn, and he'd raise his hands over his head in church. He could walk by a portrait of Saint Thérèse and swear she was smiling down on him.

But he also had a hard time trusting people, not least of all doctors. Shortly after my parents began courting, a careless dentist broke my father's jaw. His food had to be boiled down and eaten through a straw for the better part of a year. My mother cared for him, which endeared them to each other.

They were married on April 10, 1928, at St. Catherine of Sienna, which would become the center of our spiritual and social lives for many years to come. My mother's favorite uncle, Peter Fitzhenry, gave the bride away. Later, he too would have a profound impact on our family's fortunes.



Stories of my father singing at all the weddings must have all been before that (and the broken jaw).

He didn't sing that day. And certainly, we never saw that part of him.

This photo was taken by my mother, on their honeymoon in Chestnut Hill, upstate New York.

When they returned, she gave up her position working at Helena Rubinstein's cosmetics counter at Macy's to start her family. She received a warm send off with letters of congratulations.

All but one of her children were delivered at home by Dr. Smith in an earlier second-floor apartment across from my father's (soon to be defunct) real estate office.

**James Peter** - November 29, 1929

**Patricia Marie Cecilia** - March 28, 1931

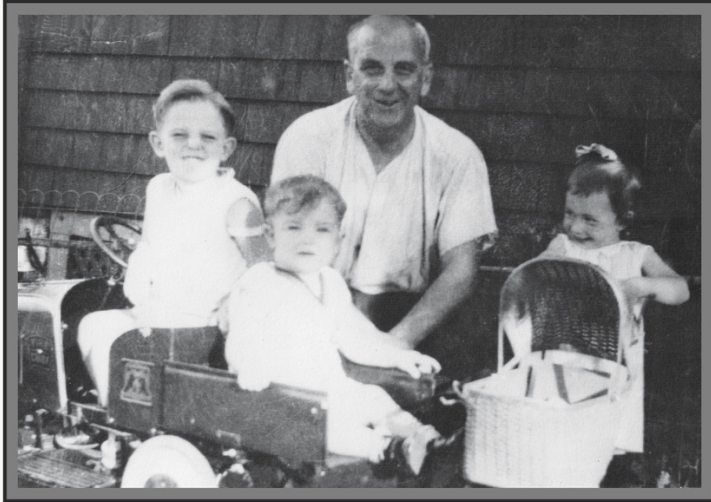
**Bernard Edward** - April 24, 1932

**Mary Jermina** - April 20, 1935

Although my mother, the nuns, and practically everybody else called me "Eddie," my father had insisted my name be Bernard. And never once in his life did he call me anything but "Barney."



Dr. Smith would have to wait nearly eighteen years for payment. When my mother was finally in a position to erase her debts, she tracked down Dr. Smith's widow and without further delay or ceremony paid in-full for the delivery of her babies.



(Jim, me, my Father, and sister Patricia, before Mary was born.)

I mentioned at the beginning my earliest “useful” (or at least continuous) memories. There are fragments from earlier, for sure. At 3, I can still see the morning they brought Mary home from the hospital and all the company showing up. Looking out the second story window and seeing my mother and father step out of a big car with their new baby. Until then, I didn’t even know we were expecting a baby. That memory’s very clear.

And maybe I was four when my brother Jim pulled down the fire alarm on the pole at the end of the block and the whole Fire Department came. I remember that!



Or the time the horse-drawn fruit wagon was making a delivery to us and Jim jumped up into the driver’s seat and took the reins. The horses shot off, full speed ahead. Everyone was running after the cart!

My brother was a handful. I wouldn't exactly say we were friends. Let's put it this way, if he had nothing to do, he'd take a punch at me.

My older sister Pat and I were almost identical in age and attitude.

We looked out for each other, not that we had any enemies. And together we looked out for Mary.

I don't remember an unkind word between us all. Though sometimes Pat and Mary spoke Pig Latin so that none of us would know what they were saying.



Come to think of it, I don't recall a single memory of my parents ever arguing. In that respect alone, it was a luxurious childhood.



Of course, everyone knew that my father loved Mary the most. Or at least he gave her most of his attention. If we had three bananas, he'd hide one in a drawer and later make sure that Mary got it.

During most of the ten-or-so years that we lived above the delicatessen, we qualified for “Home Relief” which provided \$13 per month towards our \$50 rent. When I was old enough, I’d deliver our cash payment a few doors down to the butcher, Mr. Zobel, who owned the building.

We also received consistent help from the St. Vincent de Paul Society which brought us milk, eggs, cheese and cod liver oil. At Thanksgiving and/or Christmas, we’d also receive a turkey.



Not knowing any better, I always felt the apartment was comfortable for all of us. We certainly didn’t own a large amount of anything.

My father and Jim slept in the one small bedroom. My sister Mary and I slept in the “living” room (which doubled as a dining area) and through a pair of French doors was the “front room” which belonged to my mother and sister Pat.

And anyway, life wasn’t all bad, we had a radio and a wooden icebox, very much like these ones.

In cold weather, we stored extra food outside one of the windows.



If we needed to use the telephone, we just went downstairs to the delicatessen. We were all quite familiar, as part of our “arrangement” included my father going down to light the furnace every morning at 5 a.m.

In later years, my mother worked there part-time peeling all of the red potatoes for their very popular German potato salad.

Some of our neighbors had birthday parties or toys. We had nothing like that. But on Sunday evenings my sisters and I would sing-along to a musical variety show on Radio NBC called “Manhattan Merry-Go-Round.”



They would play down their “Top 8 Songs of the Week” while we dressed up with the props and costumes we could assemble from our mother’s hope chest.

On occasion, our cousins, Mary Rose and Catherine, would bring over their props and costumes and we’d invite all the neighbors in to watch!

My sister Pat  
still enjoys  
reminding me  
about my  
Carmen Miranda  
impersonation.



Very much adding to the festivities – and to my life as a whole – was our introduction to the neighbors who owned the sweets and ice cream shop a couple doors down from the delicatessen. They also lived above it.

They had a son exactly my age, Nicholas Moriates. Nick and his mother would always attend our radio parties and bring ice cream, which was a particular treat in those days.

Needless to say, Teddy's Sweet Shop (as it was called) became our new hangout and Nick became my new best friend, for life. Besides the usual trouble we caused, and our explorations of the neighborhood, we loved to go down to see the shows at the theatre on our street (whenever pocket change found us).

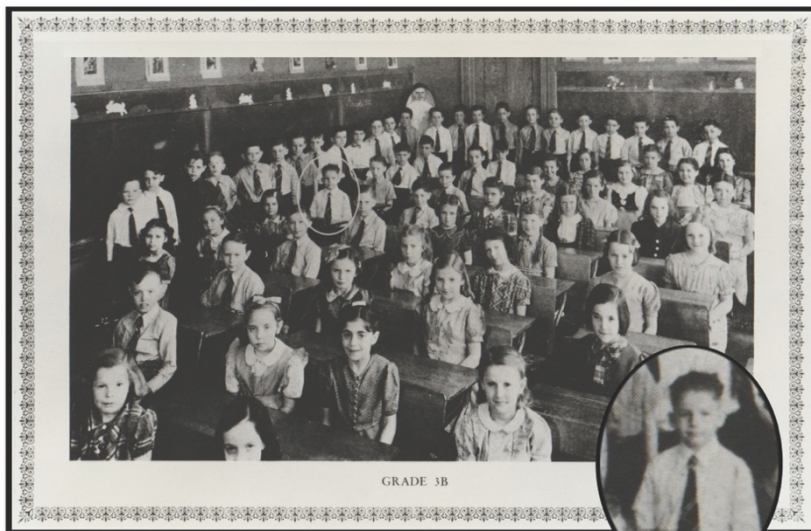
We could see a double feature plus a Vaudeville show for 10 cents!

My older sister Pat often joined us. She loved the musicals, Judy Garland and Van Johnson mostly.



But the parts I always found to be most interesting were the News Reels, particularly in the lead-up to the war in Europe (and of course everything after that). I must have also learned some Al Jolson songs along the way since they remained in my repertoire through most of my adulthood.

Nick and I had to go to different schools. His family was Greek Orthodox, and we were exceedingly Catholic. There was a grammar school at Saint Catherine's which all of us Menendez children attended.



3<sup>rd</sup> Grade

That was one class – all in one room – with one nun as our schoolteacher. It was very typical of Catholic schools to have sixty students together, whereas P.S. 36 maintained classes closer to twenty students. I frequently had the thought that if I'd been going to the public school (which was only half the distance away) I might be achieving higher marks.

In 1941, America  
joined the war  
and at the age  
of nine, I joined  
Cub Scout Pack #44.



My mother explained that I was allowed to join however they couldn't afford the official uniform. The question was put to me, "Could you be happy if you only had the Cub cap?"

I told my mother, "It would be just fine."

But then that Christmas, I received a surprise present from my Uncle Al and Aunt Catherine, a complete Cub Scout's uniform including the matching blue socks!

I loved being a Cub Scout! Our Den Father and Den Mother, Mr. and Mrs. Forman, provided a wonderful learning environment for us. Mr. Forman was an immigration officer at Ellis Island. One of the many daytrips we enjoyed was an adventure to the Battery Park Coast Guard Pier. I vividly remember all of it, even the bus ride to Jamaica Station and the subway ride there!

We all boarded a small Coast Guard Cutter from Battery Park to Ellis Island.

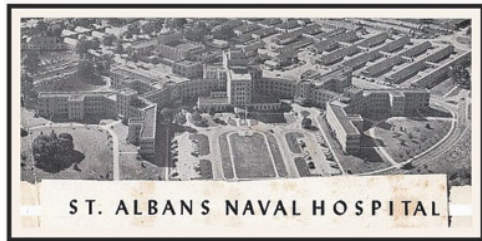


This was now 1942. Ellis Island was no longer the required destination for all immigrant arrivals, though it was still being used to house immigrants who couldn't pass either their health or document screenings. Many of the temporary residents had been waylaid for breathing problems which, it was explained to us, could be a symptom of more serious health issues or infectious diseases and so they were being quarantined, even from one another.

Meanwhile, the members of Pack #44 were being treated like visiting dignitaries and we were each awarded an ice cream cup and a flat wooden spoon. The memories of my crisp, new Cub's uniform and this trip to Ellis Island have never left my memory banks, through all of these eighty years!

With the war, came rationing. Particularly hard to get (or very expensive) were my father's cigarettes so he started rolling his own. He had a little machine and he taught us all how to make them with the special papers. I remember how we'd all fight over making his cigarettes for him.

Another way the war was felt was when the federal government seized the St. Albans Golf & Country Club and began construction on a four-thousand bed Naval Hospital, a block from our apartment.



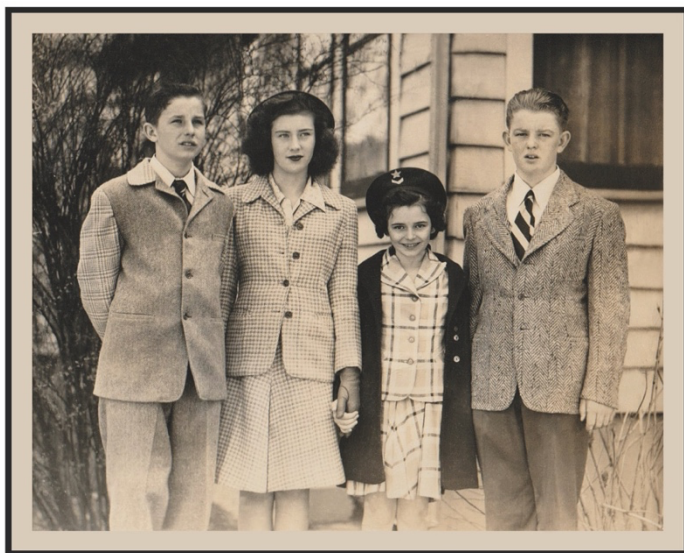
Business at Teddy's Sweet Shop boomed as visitors stopped in to buy gifts for patients, or the sailors came in for an ice cream cone. A USO Canteen Hall was opened directly across the street from our place, in what had been a car dealership. Girls from the surrounding neighborhoods would volunteer to dance or play cards with the fellas. Nick and I would go around back and stand on a pail so we could peer into the window of the girls' bathroom. The effects of the war were being felt everywhere!

But we weren't just hanging around. By this time, I had secured my first employment working for Jimmy the Greek. Several kids from our neighborhood including my brother all worked for Jimmy. On the weekends we sold pretzels at assigned traffic lights along the Sunrise Highway. "Five cent each! Six for a quarter!"

Then, during the Jewish High Holy Days some of us were assigned to work the parking field across from Montefiore Cemetery on Springfield Boulevard. We sold bottles of cold soda, ice cream and Hershey's Bars.

My brother Jim and the older kids ushered the cars into spots near our snack stands and we closed the sales. Jimmy the Greek rented that field every year, but it proved so profitable that he eventually bought it. At that point, my brother just pretended to own the empty field next to it, parked cars, and kept all the profit for himself. I always wondered why he wasn't more concerned with the owner of the lot finding out, but then Jim could always talk his way out of any situation.

I worked for Jimmy the Greek until I was 13. He treated me very well. He paid us on time and in cash. And once he even took me to Gertz's Department Store on Jamaica Avenue and bought me a new suit for Easter Sunday, 1944.



(I was almost 12, Pat was 13, Mary 9 and Jim was 14 ½.)

It was an Easter tradition that everything we wore, from our underwear out, should be new. “New persons in Christ,” was the phrase my mother used. What was remarkable is how she managed to keep us in clean, pressed, and properly fitting clothes all the rest of the year too!

Her only tools were a washboard, a galvanized basin, and a hand-drawn ringer to remove the excess water before hanging all the items on a clothesline, either in the bathroom or in the narrow space between the buildings.

My father and older sister Pat would help to accomplish this.



In later years, my sisters and I would look back with absolute astonishment at how my parents managed it all. It was a simple lifestyle, and we received assistance as I’ve said, but somehow we always seemed to eat well. My father would make the most delicious French Fries (five pounds of potatoes at a time) which would become the whole meal. On the weekends, he’d make the best French Toast in the world! (A tradition I later kept up with my own children.) There was also something called “Bacon Fried Bread” which was just bread, fried in all the leftover bacon grease. It doesn’t sound like much, but it was fantastic.

As I’ve said, adding to our perception of well-being, even in the most difficult of circumstances, was the fact that our parents never fought. I can’t recall a single instance where they argued over a stressful decision, of which there must have been many!

Unfortunately, I can’t say the same for my father and me.

The first time we went to war, it was a war he would not win.

My little sister Mary had bitten him on the rear end and quickly hid under the dining table so that when my father turned around, all he saw was me. Well, he came after me with the strap, chasing me around the apartment until I slid under my mother's bed. He tried to use the broom to pry me loose. The whole time, I'm yelling, "Mary did it, not me!" And though Mary had played similar tricks on him before, she was like a treasured doll to my father and his ire remained with me. Particularly after he came home the following day to find his broom broken in half.

This time, he and his belt caught up with me! So that night I retrieved it from his closet and sliced it up into ten small pieces which I showed to him while explaining that this was his punishment for not apologizing to me. "And now you don't have a belt or a broom."

Well, he ran into the bathroom and pulled out the leather 'strop' he used for sharpening his straight razor which had a buckle at each end, and he whipped me with it.



Needless to say, the next morning he discovered that I'd used his own straight razor to slice up the strop into several pieces. And the following day, when he still hadn't acknowledged his wrongdoing, I went into the drawer where he kept his maps and his expired notary public seal, and I just threw them out. That's when the war ended. And when it was over, it was over. He just knew he didn't have a belt or a broom or a strop or a map.

When I turned 13, I finally qualified for my working papers and immediately became the Delivery Boy for the Farm Fresh Fruit Market located on our corner.

I loved this job!  
It came with a  
company bike!

(Just like this one.)

I had mobility and  
I had money. \$13  
per week plus tips!



When I wasn't out delivering groceries to the neighbors or to the restaurants I stacked shelves, waited on customers, and ran the cash register. But it was rolling around all the neighborhoods and meeting the different people that I enjoyed the most.

Occasionally, I'd stop by one of the yards where my best friends, Jack, Ray and Nick were invariably playing stickball (or something with a ball) and rather than be jealous, all I could remember thinking was, "You guys aren't making any money!"

Ray Mullen lived 4 blocks in one direction and Jack Eschmann lived 4 blocks in the other. Along with Jack's two brothers, my brother (on occasion), and Nick of course, we formed a pretty tight group which remained throughout all the years into and after high school.

But there was no doubt that my world was becoming larger. The realities of the war, on display in the News Reels and at the hospital, along with my newfound mobility and interactions with customers of every background had greatly expanded my awareness of where we stood in the bigger picture.

When Roosevelt created the WPA in 1935 to put Americans back to work, my father was wanting to get one of those jobs but the vast majority of them were in big infrastructure projects and he wasn't the sort of person who could dig a ditch.



There was also the question of losing our Home Relief if he returned to the work force. The perfect job came along in the role of "Timekeeper." My father could wear his navy-blue suit, carry his prized, Longines pocket watch and merely blow the whistle whenever it was time for the men to put down their axes and shovels and take a break. They were cutting through the woods to build new roads in town. He did that for a year or two.

Another role that he was well suited for during the later years of the Depression was Translator. He worked with Immigration Services to help Spanish and German speaking immigrants navigate the social programs and citizenship process. As a boy he had learned German from his sister's nannies and Spanish from the boys who tended the horses on their Long Island farm. I can remember him doing that for a couple of years as well.

He was a very proud and fastidious man. He had tight, tiny – but very excellent – handwriting. Perhaps from completing the crossword puzzle in the Herald-Tribune every day.

This is how he dressed whenever he left the house.  
Always with a vest, a pocket watch, and a hat.



He took work very seriously, when he had it. He was always on time. Ultimately, Aunt Catherine's neighbor found him a job inside the vault at the Bank of Manhattan on Jamaica Boulevard.

Mostly, he'd let people into their strongboxes so they could "clip" their bond coupons and cash them in upstairs for the interest.

They gave him a gun to carry. He brought it home and showed it to us one time. He wasn't supposed to.



(James Rupert Menendez on the right.)

He stayed there for ten years until he retired.