

DEMOLITION

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by James Collins

New York City in 1948 decided it needed public housing and elected under eminent domain, to acquire about 50 acres known as Brown's Hill in the Highbridge section of the West Bronx. The churches, the schools, and the businesses in the area all opposed this plan because all figured it would destroy the neighborhood, as it had existed for 40 years. After protests and marches, the politicians over ruled the inhabitants concerns and went ahead with the project. A dozen or so private homes, which had been on this property for generations were condemned, and the inhabitants forced to leave.

On a side street, there was one house with a circular driveway, on a steep hill, which had no immediate neighbors. Because of this, it was unattended and no one was guarding the property. The grammar school kids discovered this. To see if anyone inhabited the house, they arrived, off to the side of the house and threw rocks at the building. Glass broke, but nobody came. The kids became emboldened. The leaders, climbed up on the porch, broke the glass on the door, entered the house and started to explore. The first day or two, the damages were minor as only a handful of kids were involved. However, they told all the kids in a class about the new playground and unfortunately told their older brothers and sisters who were bigger, stronger and much more numerous. Now fun turned into vandalism.

Each day after school, the hordes would descend upon the hapless house. It looked like hyenas dissecting a downed hippopotamus. The victim was much bigger than the predators but there were many more of them and over time, they ground it down and chewed it up. Once a new group entered into the house, they searched it from basement to attic and made mental notes on which area they wanted to attack. The numbers of kids going in and out of the house made it look like an anthill on steroids. It was organized chaos. Actually, it was total chaos with subsets of organization. Little groups of from two to five associates worked together as a pack, dismantling anything of interest. The recognizable bathroom appliances were strewn over the side yard. The toilet, the sink, the remains of a mirror and the shower faucet lay on the ground directly below the upstairs bathroom window. Obviously, not carried out; they were thrown out. Walking around the outside of the house at times could be dangerous to your health.

The house, built about the time of the Civil War, disclosed many treasures from the attic and the basement. It looked like the house vomited out its innards. Old weather beaten sea chests, torn open with their contents long gone, lay scattered among newspapers, magazines, broken lamps, broken wooden chairs and most interesting of all a cannon ball. This ancient military device was about five inches in diameter and weighed about 25

pounds. It attracted a lot of attention particularly from the larger teenagers. The younger ones had trouble handling it because it was too heavy and the spherical surface made it difficult to hold. This did not bother the teenagers. They instituted a shotput contest using the sidewall of the house as the measure of how high you could throw the cannon ball. The siding of this house reacted as the siding of many houses in the Civil War. Holes appeared, siding splintered and the cannonball many times ended up inside the house surprising the kids who were walking by the inside wall when it collapsed. Walking around the inside of the house could also at times be dangerous to your health.

The amount of material littering the front yard was extensive, but the problem the police were concerned about was the amount of combustible material. Luckily, for two nights there was a heavy rain so that material was wet down and during this period, no fires started. However, the police at odd intervals would appear in pairs inside their squad car. They pulled into the circular driveway, scattered the kids and tried to grab one or two to take to their parents. I witnessed this a couple of times, as I used to sit on the side of the hill to observe the insanity of it all. Having an engineering bent even in those days I saw a problem and immediately concocted a solution. I went down and told some of the leaders that all they had to do was move stuff to the entrance of the circular driveway to stop the cops. At the time, I was about 5 foot tall while the gorillas I was talking with towered up to 5 foot 10. I was ignored, as was my idea. I always knew that you lead through example. I went down grabbed two mattress springs and dragged them over to the entranceway. I then threw a couple of cinderblocks on top and went back up the hill to watch the results. About a half-hour later, a different squad car came up with the lights flashing and came to a screeching halt as they tried to turn into the driveway. The barricade worked. Two hundred kids were jumping up and down laughing, screaming and definitely pleased. In addition, without further ado, they decided to improve the barricade and for the next hour, everything imaginable including the sea chests built this to a height of about 6 feet. That was the end of the police visits to the interior of the property.

One teenager with a tough reputation was Eddy Mudd. He arrived the first or second day and participated in much of the major demolition using tools he found in an old shed. He then spied one of the largest targets and mapped it out as his own. At the back of the house, a chimney going back to the time of the Civil War, rose over the two-story house and was approximately 30 feet tall. Eddie decided he wanted to take this down as his crowning accomplishment in demolishing the house. Each day he arrived with a hammer and a pry bar and started extracting bricks from the lower portion of the chimney. Each day the pile of bricks and the cavernous opening in the base of the chimney widened. On the fourth day of his self-imposed task, Eddie arrived to find that the chimney had fallen to the hands of a younger miscreant. Eddie was livid. He grabbed anyone as he sought to find out who was the person who took down his personal chimney. Luckily, no one identified the villain. Eddie stormed away mad. The crash of the chimney tore out a large section of the

house and generated a tremendous amount of noise, smoke and dust. That event attracted a lot of attention. For safety purposes and for fire prevention a demolition firm was hired. The house disappeared by the end of that week.

Twenty years later if you went into a local bar and came across Eddy Mudd in a drunken stupor, he forced you to hear the tale of the chimney he planned to drop. Employing many curse words, you would hear a description of the ancestry of the person who stole this achievement from him. Luckily, for that person, Eddie Mudd never learned his identity.

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