

Oldest police building in city: Maxwell St. station ages gracefully

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Maxwell St. station ages gracefully

By Patricia Leeds

THE MAXWELL Street marketplace is only a shadow of the bustling, colorful bazaar it used to be. Most the gypsies are gone and the notorious hoods of the 42 Gang and the Valley Gang have long since passed on. But the Maxwell Street station still stands sturdy and rugged as ever.

It is now the oldest police building still in use. Built in 1899 with walls a foot thick, the fortress-like building barely shows its age.

If there is anything on the face of the station to give its age away, it's the inscription above the entrance which says "7th District."

THERE'S NOBODY around who can remember when it was the 7th District and nobody seems to be quite sure when it became the 22d District, also known as Maxwell.

But there are some who recall the stormy days of prohibition and the gang wars. Most of the gang chieftains were involuntary guests of the dungeon-like lockup at one time or another. Sam "Momo" Giancana was a graduate of the area.

The Maxwell market was a Tower of Babel of immigrant voices from all over Europe. Carts lined the streets for blocks and all the way down Maxwell Street right up to the station.

YOU COULD BUY everything from fur coats to live chickens, from shoes piled high on the stand to tables and chairs. The peddlers were there every Sunday—that was the biggest day—rain or shine, 10 below zero or 90 in the shade. The haggling was done in many tongues and the aroma of hot dogs, pickles, soda pop, and coffee drew the shoppers to stands dispensing the food.

Gypsies in their colorful dress—the women with long, black braids and the men with their twirled mustaches—sat in storefront windows. Now and then some women would entice passersby to come in and have their fortunes told.

Most of that's gone now. There are a few gypsies, the Maxwell market still extends a few blocks, but it's decline started in the late '50s and its been getting

smaller and shabbier ever since. No respectable hood would be found in the area, though lesser type thieves, purse snatchers, and stickup men have replaced them.

The accents heard now are mostly Latino and southern.

THE STATION'S still there, though. Ramshackle buildings once surrounded it, but now it stands almost alone. Most of the decrepit buildings have been demolished and the University of Illinois Circle Campus has spread close to the station. A row of new townhouses stand across the street to the west of the station.

The station itself has changed. Not outwardly, but inside.

The lockup is still in the basement, though years have passed since it held a prisoner. The walls still bear the legend of many visitors who were incarcerated there. Scratched into the walls are names and dates going back 30, even 40 years.

THE BARE CELLS with rotting benches are there, but the heavy barred doors are gone, having been sold for scrap or moved to other stations. The garage still has hooks suspended from the high ceiling where saddles and harnesses once hung in readiness to be placed on horses. The hayloft has been removed.

And in some of the offices you can still find a gas jet which once illuminated the Maxwell Street Station—or was it the 7th District then?

The South Chicago police station at 2938 E. 89th St., is also a rugged old structure, built in 1893. "They don't build them that way anymore," a policeman commented. The South Side station was a relatively quiet district. A predominantly Polish residential area, it did however include the steel mills.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD was known as "The Bush," but not too many people can recall how it came by this designation.

Sgt. William Boreczky, of Burnside homicide, who was born and raised in the South Chicago District, said, "Most of the residents of the district worked in the steel mills. I worked for U. S. Steel before joining the police department.

"My father and my grandfather worked for the steel mills, too. The people in the district were all hard-

working, church going residents. The only crime was an occasional fight at the neighborhood saloon on payday when some of the steelworkers had a beer too many. They were hard-working, hard-drinking men."

THE NEIGHBORHOOD'S all changed now, they say. Only 5 elderly Poles remain. It is now 75 per cent Mexican. And the station is too small for the amount of crime it has to handle.

You can still see the cobblestones in the garage where the horses and wagons were kept. The third floor barracks where the men occasionally slept overnight are now used to store records.

"Ah, if only these walls could talk," the men at the two stations sigh. "What stories they could tell!"