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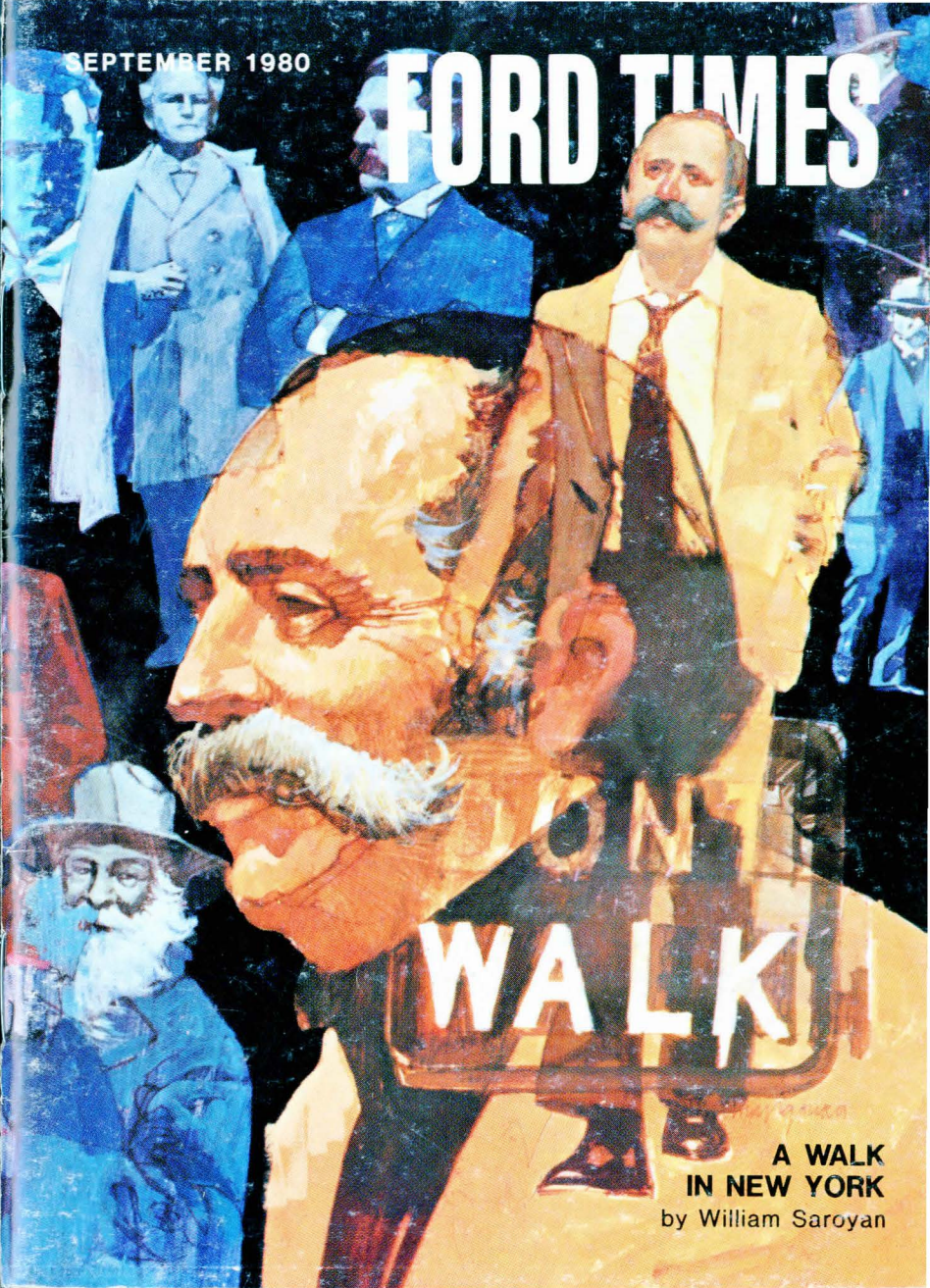

A WALK IN NEW YORK
by William Saroyan

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illustrations by Thomas Sgouros

"In California I heard the talk, and there was never any doubt where I wanted to go: New York where the immigrants first walked in America"

THERE ARE TIMES during long walks in the streets of a great city when the walker feels he is walking with the dead, or rather with the deathless, for aren't the streets always full of people?

The walker feels he is walking through the everlasting world itself, made of light and night, secret and riddle.

To walk anywhere is both a pleasure and a privilege, but a walk in New York constitutes for me a kind of inexplicable if unimportant achievement of personal immortality.

To begin with, New York was where the Europeans stepped off the boat, where my father did in 1905, and all the other immigrants of my family, from the highlands of Armenia. They had lived in Bitlis far back in time, beyond memory, but now they were in New York. Whenever they met in the streets *the word* was a look, rather than anything spoken. The Bowery was where they found their first American rooms, and there that they walked, along with the immigrants from Spain, Italy, Serbia, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Lithuania and all the other places of Europe.

They were kids, most of them, when they reached New York. They

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William Saroyan, a contributor to Ford Times *for nearly 30 years, is one of the most highly regarded American authors of this century and has produced a wealth of plays, novels, short stories and memoirs.*

found work and sent money home so that other members of a family might make the long voyage away from home, too. A man and his wife and kids were re-united in New York after a separation of a year or two, and then they considered where to settle for good. Many stayed in New York as if the first place was the best, too. But others went up to the industrial cities of New England, down to Pittsburgh, or over to Detroit, Chicago, and on and on to the cities of the Far West. But wherever they went, New York was always in their memories. They never stopped talking about it.

In California I heard the talk, and there was never any doubt in my mind where I wanted to go: New York, where the immigrants first walked in America.

I finally reached New York from California in 1928, a few days before I was 20 years old. I saw the streets my father saw in 1905 when he was 31.

At the New York Hotel, not far from the Bowery, I took a room for which the rent was $3 a week. Nearby was the famous Woolworth Building, the wholesale produce district, the Hudson River and the docks.

At the Public Library on Fifth Avenue I examined a directory for the address of the widow of the man after whom I had been named, William, and one afternoon, after work at the Postal Telegraph office on Warren Street in the wholesale produce district, I knocked at the door of a house on a quiet street in Brooklyn. The door was opened by a handsome woman of 60 or 70 who said very quietly, "You are Armenak Saroyan's son. Please come in."

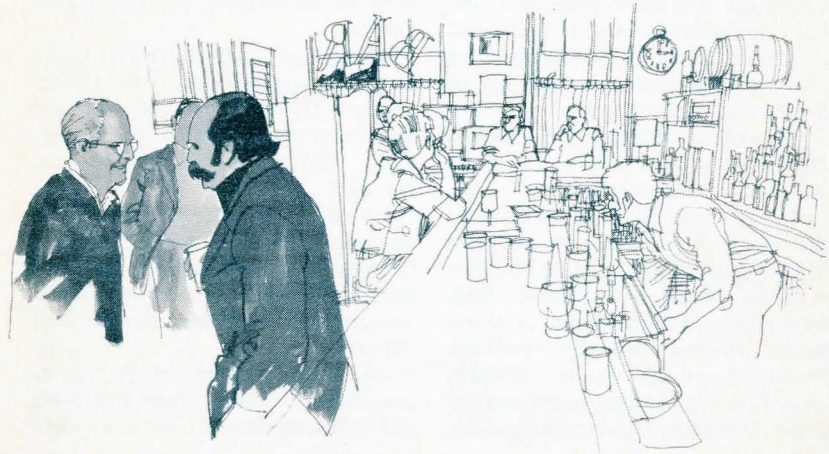
She told me about my father's life in New York, and she mentioned a Church of All Nations, where my father had been employed as a janitor, but where all the same he gave a number of sermons in English. She also mentioned that he had written for *The Christian Herald,* and had been her husband's assistant in his work of finding rooms and employment for newly-arrived immigrants from Europe.

The following day I found the Church of All Nations in the Bowery and spent some time there, a poor churchman myself, a disbeliever in fact, a writer seeking out and studying his material, but I could not feel anything but respect and affection for that little church and for the man who had befriended my father and thousands of other immigrants: William Stonehill, D.D.S.

To this day any time I am in New York I walk to the Bowery, aware that my father walked there long ago, and that I first walked there in 1928, and that my son and daughter walked with me there 20 years later.

A walk in a big city should have no time limit, but that doesn't mean that the walker might not choose to walk swiftly. The fact is that after the first half hour I tend to pick up a swift pace which is maintained until I reach a place I want to study carefully.

A walk may have style no less than a work of writing. A lucky walk can be unforgettable, as if it were in fact a story, play, piece of music or series of paintings, drawings, lithographs or photographs.



A long swift walk can carry the walker into an area near sleep. There are few walkers who, at one time or another during a long walk, do not get near one order or another of dream-like experience — as when suddenly the walker comes face to face with somebody he hadn't seen in years, a person, an instant earlier, he *knew* he would see in a moment.

He will feel that this accidental meeting happened precisely this way before.

But where? Was it in sleep? If so, sleep of long ago, or sleep of an instant ago, while he walked? Is sleep continuous in a man from the time he draws his first breath to the time he breathes his last?

On my walks in the Bowery I like to step into one or another of the bars for a glass of draft beer and the company of the drinkers there, and I have never felt that I have been slumming. I have felt as much at home as I have felt anywhere else, and I have found the conversation of the drinkers as true and reasonable as the talk of drinkers in other places.

To walk at all is to live. To walk in New York is to be immortal with the world and the deathless-dead.

What young ghosts of other walkers the walker greets as he goes: Washington, Franklin, Lincoln, Poe, Stephen Foster, O. Henry, Walt Whitman, Jack Johnson, Caruso, Knut Hamsun, George Bellows, Sousa, Ty Cobb, J. P. Morgan, Gorky, William Jennings Bryan, Eugene O'Neill, Christy Mathewson, John Barrymore, Billy Sunday, Theodore Dreiser, George Gershwin, Babe Ruth.

What proud times and places the walker reaches one by one, each with its own indestructible family and lore: Carnegie, Mecca, Palace, Metropolitan, Greenwich, the Bowery, the Battery.

Best of all, what earnest and mirthful light and truth the walker sees and hears in the faces and voices of the children of the world at play in the streets: Little Annie Rooney and her Joe; Mamie O'Rourke; Rose of Washington Square; the kids of song and fable still alive and still in tender love with time, world and promise.

What sweet sorrow and shy dignity the walker sees in the eyes of lonely old men and old women at their park games, or gathered together under park trees to chat.

What eagerness and hope he notices in the eyes of the new immigrants.

What smells of cheese and bread and wine and garlic from the Italian grocer's. Of roast pork and duck and tea from the Chinese restaurant. Pizza, sukiyaki, paella, hamburgers, hot dogs.

What scents of fresh-caught fish, roasting coffee, baking bread, oranges from Florida, apples from Oregon, grapes from California, figs and raisins and dates and dried peaches and apricots.

What sweet fruit in the air to breathe, the whole world still alive and still hungry. □