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Oasis

OCTOBER 1976



The way we were. . .

DOWN BY

THE WATERFRONT



By Frances French

THE COUNTRY was still deep in the Depression when hundreds of us from all over the United States came to Baltimore to help set up the social security program. Washington was already filled with other New Deal programs, so the records for social security were to be maintained here, on about four floors of an old warehouse called the Candler Building.

It was an ugly, battered building (no carpets on any of the floors) down on the waterfront. There were small, cheap saloons across Market Street where we could get our paychecks cashed for nothing (the banks charged 10 cents if you did not have an account). Small boats, with lovely fresh fruits and vegetables from the Eastern Shore, docked at the wharves across Pratt Street. Best of all times there on Pratt Street was when the watermelons from Maryland's Eastern Shore were unloaded and a bunch of us would chip in a nickle apiece to buy the sweetest, juiciest, most wonderful finish to our sandwich and coffee

lunch. There is nothing as good as a vine-ripened, whole, 35 cent Eastern Shore watermelon.

About 2,000 people worked in accounting operations in 1937 as compared to the over 11,000 in BDP now. Everyone knew everyone else. The Employees' Activities Association sponsored musicals, boat rides to Tolchester, dances, and other affairs.

There wasn't anything special or unusual about the Candler Building, but people who work in the modern office buildings at headquarters and in the field today would find Candler unbelievable. For instance, there was only one phone and that was on the south side of the seventh floor. Those of us who had to use the telephone had to wait our turn, with the personnel office having first priority. Then, too, the Candler Building had only natural air-conditioning. On a muggy 90-degree summer day, we simply opened all the windows and let the cooler air reduce our room temperature to 95. If it didn't, we had a chance of getting a couple of

SHARE YOUR MEMORIES

"Have you folks ever considered the idea of having a regular column in which 'oldtimers' would write their memories of things that happened many years ago?" asked retiree Frances French in a recent letter to OASIS. We told Frances that we hadn't, but that we liked the idea and would she care to come up with an article to kick-off the series. Her offering is printed here.

Other employees are invited to contribute articles for future issues. The articles should be about the "human events" in SSA's history. For example, employees or retirees might want to write about such things as what it was like to operate the PBX board in the Equitable Building, their first day in a field office or area office (maybe the one in New Orleans),

the cruises on Baltimore's Tolchester lines, or how their office celebrated V-E or V-J Day-to name just a few.

Each writer should include a photograph of himself or herself, a brief biographical sketch for use in preparing an "about the author" blurb, and, if possible, photographs of the places or events being discussed. Articles should be sent to: Editor, OASIS, Room G-59, East Building, Baltimore, Md. 21235.

Those who have questions about their choice of a topic or about what to include in an article may either write to OASIS or call 8-934-9123 (if using FTS) or 301-594-9123 (if using commercial lines).

hours of heat leave.

And that wasn't all our open windows let in. Our Pratt Street wharves accommodated dead fish as well as those Shore fruits and vegetables. Have you ever enjoyed working with the aroma of dead fish pouring into your windows on a hot summer day? Somewhere on one of the lower floors was a drug manufacturing company flinging up strange, heavy odors through our open windows, odors that made even dead fish smell good. As if that weren't enough, McCormick and Co. over on Light Street found a way to mix their coffee and spices with our fish and drugs. Just a little breeze, and no one felt that he'd ever want to eat again.

We had our own brand of excitement, too. In those days,

elevators didn't just run themselves with the push of a button. A human being started them and stopped them to let us workers on or off. Some of the elevators weren't in a corridor; they just opened right in our work areas. Normally, we didn't pay any attention to the stopping and starting elevator during work hours. But there was one time when our whole floor was filled with shrieks. Our elevator had stopped in our work area and let off its only passenger—a huge Pratt Street wharf rat. Apparently, the rat did not think too much of us; it went scurrying away as fast as its legs would carry it. We never did find out why it wanted off on our floor. All we were doing was just routine filing, typing, and composing letters to the public. Surely that isn't enough to coax a

wharf rat into a day's work.

By the end of January 1960, everybody had moved out of the Candler Building and into the new headquarters building in Woodlawn. "And what happened to our old home on the waterfront?" you ask. It's still there, occupied by printing firms, clothing manufacturers, ink and paper companies, and other businesses, and so far unaffected by the facelifting efforts underway in Baltimore's inner harbor area. □

About the Author



FRANCES FRENCH, Social Insurance Research Analyst (Ret.), Office of Program Evaluation and Planning joined Social Security in the Candler Building in November 1936 . . . transferred to what is now OPEP in 1944 and took part in the work on the 1950 and 1952 amendments . . . moved to the San Francisco Payment Center in 1952, working first as a claims examiner, later as a reconsideration reviewer . . . in 1960, returned to OPEP . . . joined what she terms "the delightful world of retirement" in May 1971 . . . does volunteer work for the Social Security Alumni Association and the SSA Union-Management Blood Assurance Program. "During my leisure time," says Frances, "I am walked all over Woodlawn by my 11-year-old Pekinese, who does not consider either of us a senior citizen."