

THE NATION By MARTIN F. NOLAN

'Southie' against the world

"... But they'll never forsake you" is one of the more tender lines in "Southie Is My Home Town," perhaps the only national anthem singing the praises of a city neighborhood.

South Boston is a place of pride, loyalty and warmth. Peninsular in geography, it is insular in thought. Jane Jacobs and other urban theorists have praised the "street life" of ethnic values as the apex of civilization.

But South Boston's pride, loyalty and warmth were not summoned up in the past few weeks and months, only its fear. The result casts doubt on the Jane Jacobs theory.

A tightly-knit ethnic community can be charming, safe and happy. It can also be a cockpit of hate.

Ethnocentricity—as the suburban sociologists describe devotion to blue-collar chic—can find outlets for hate if other ethnic emotions of pride and self-confidence are not summoned up. In South Boston, particularly, warmth and loyalty have been reserved for one's own. Lithuanians, Poles and other Nordic types were more welcome than Italians, Greeks and others.

Even when Southie was all Irish, the ethnic rivalries were fierce. The worst epithet was "herrin'choker" or "two-boater," meaning one had emigrated from Nova Scotia or elsewhere in Canada, had not emerged Hibernian-pure from Ireland and thus was tainted with British rule.

And even before the Canadian issue, immigrant culture was enlivened with regular donnybrooks between those from Cork and the sons of Galway. Ethnocentricity nearly always needs something to fight about.

These intra-ethnic rivalries resemble the quarrels within Roxbury's black community between West Indian immigrants and indigenous blacks from the South.

The facts of life about Southie and Roxbury were well-known to many in Boston's political leadership, but only dimly perceived by the assimilated, sophisticated technocrats of ethnocentricity who actually drew up the desegregation plan.

Southie never had a chance. The parents knew that their schools were as bad as those in Roxbury. The yellow buses only meant that the schools were now losing their one virtue, proximity.

Southie never had a chance to conquer the hate and fear that drifted like fog from Dorchester Bay, suffused the saloons and rustled the lace curtains of anxious conversations in the parlor.

The cheapjack demagogues on the Boston School Committee said busing would never happen. The worst demagogues—those perpetually in pursuit of higher office—knew that the flames of resistance would not touch them, but would singe the buses themselves and the black children inside.

Mayor Kevin H. White and the media barons who worked with him in implementing the plan also made a mistake, though out of nobler motivation. White thought that appealing to law and order might save the day. So he emphasized the law and so did the TV commercials of sports stars urging everyone to cool it.

This appeal underestimated the intelligence of the anti-busing parents. If law and order didn't work for Richard Nixon, why would it work for Kevin White, Jim Plunkett, Bobby Orr and Dave Cowens?

No appeal was made for the positive side of busing, perhaps because such an appeal might seem ludicrous when backed by a battalion of cops in helmets.

But the effort was not made. The appeal to Southie to cool it was a self-fulfilling prophecy, a veiled prediction of violence. Southie's warmth, loyalty and pride were never given a chance.

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