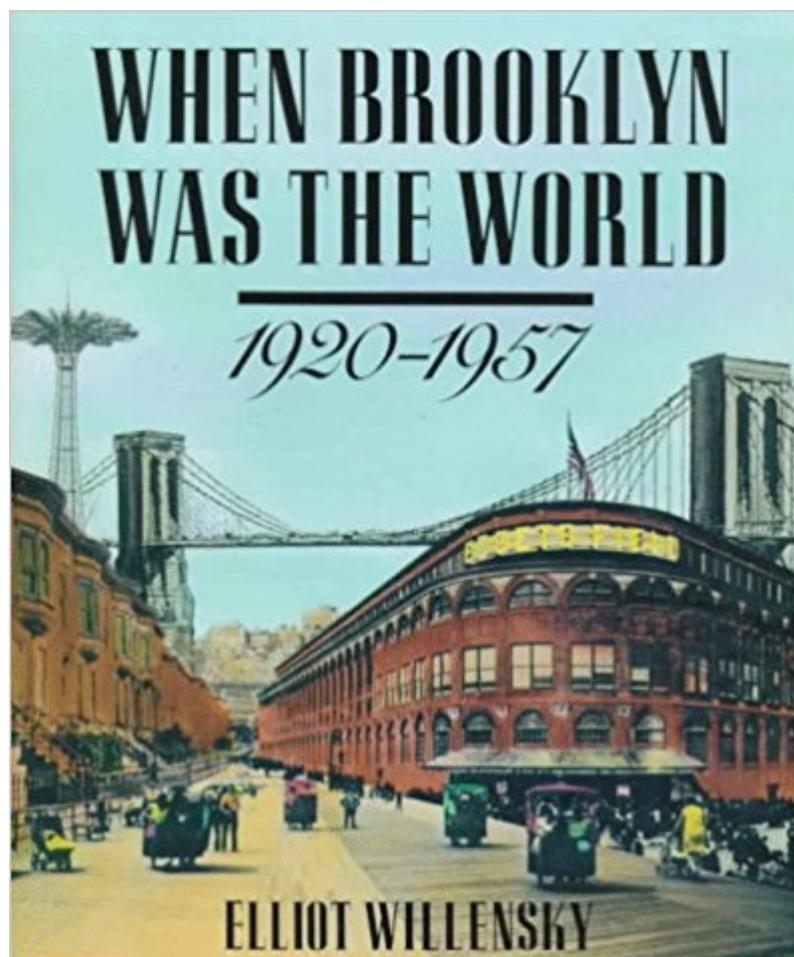


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# When Brooklyn Was The World, 1920-1957



## Synopsis

Around the corner. The next block. Across the At the end of the line. Borough Park. Gowanus. Flatbush. Canarsie. Ridgewood. Greenpoint. Brownsville. Bay Ridge. Bensonhurst. City Line. What was the place called Brooklyn really like back then... when Brooklyn was the world? Elliot Willensky, born in Brooklyn and now official Borough Historian, takes us back to a sweeter time when a trip on the new BMT subway was a delightful adventure, when summer days were a picnic on the sand and evenings were Nathan's hotdogs at Coney Island and a whirl of lights, spills, and chills at dazzling Luna Park. Remembering Brooklyn, it's the neighborhoods you think of first -- or maybe it's your own block, the one you were raised on. In those days, the street was a more animated, more colorful place. Jacks and jump rope, hit-the-stick, double-dutch and skelly or potsy (hopscotch to you) were played everywhere. The street was a natural amphitheater, and the stoop was the perfect place for grown-ups to sit and watch and visit with neighbors. Stores-on-wheels selling fruit, baked goods, and the old standby, seltzer, rolled right down the block, and the Fuller Brush man and Electrolux vacuum-cleaner salesmen worked door to door, saving housewives countless shopping trips. For many, a big night out was dinner at a Chinese restaurant, where 99 percent of the patrons were non-Chinese, and you could get mysterious-sounding dishes like moo goo gai pan and subgum chow mein -- "One from column A, two from column B." If you could afford to go somewhere really classy, the Marine Roof of the Bossert Hotel was one of the hottest nightspots. A hot date on Saturday night featured big bands at the clubs on The Strip (Flatbush Avenue below Prospect Park) -- the Patio, the Parakeet Club, the Circus Lounge -- or gala stage shows at the Brooklyn Academy of Music or the enormous Paramount Theatre. Still, for family entertainment you couldn't beat a day at the beach and a night on Surf Avenue, taking in the sideshows and the penny arcades. For Brooklyn, the years between 1920 and 1957 were a special time. It was in 1920 that the subway system reached to Brooklyn's outer edge -- linking the entire borough with Manhattan and making it an ideal spot for millions of new families to build their homes. The end of the era came in 1957 -- the last year that Brooklyn's beloved Dodgers played at Ebbets Field before moving to sunny California. For many loyal fans the fate of "Dem Bums" represents the fate of Brooklyn. With a brilliant, entertaining text and hundreds of exciting, nostalgic photographs (many never before published), When Brooklyn Was the World recovers the history of this lively city, as remembered by the millions of people who knew Brooklyn in its golden era.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 239 pages

Publisher: Harmony; 1 edition (April 13, 1986)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0517558580

ISBN-13: 978-0517558584

Product Dimensions: 1 x 8.2 x 9.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars 21 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #393,560 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #197 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Automotive > History #732 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Transportation > History #6640 in Books > History > Americas > United States > State & Local

## Customer Reviews

Elliot Willensky, who now lives in the community of Brooklyn Heights, serves as the officially appointed Borough Historian of Brooklyn and as Vice-Chairman of the Landmarks Preservation Commission of the City of New York. A consulting architect and exhibition designer who frequently writes and lectures on urban themes, he has taught at Brooklyn College, Cornell University, and Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture and Planning. He is a member of the board of directors of the Municipal Art Society of New York, the Brooklyn Historical Society, and the Frederick Law Olmsted Association. He is coauthor of *The AIA Guide to New York City*, widely regarded as the most comprehensive architectural guidebook to New York City's five boroughs.

This is a wonderful book. The only problem with it is that it's just not long enough. *WHEN BROOKLYN WAS THE WORLD 1920-1957* is a history and reminiscence of life in Brooklyn, New York, during its heyday years between the completion of the Subway line to New Lots, in 1920, and the departure of the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1957. Elliot Willensky is uniquely qualified to have written this book. As official Borough Historian and the co-author of the singular *AIA GUIDE TO NEW YORK CITY* (which lists and describes every architectural point of interest in the Five Boroughs) he is intimately aware of the streets of New York, but more so, as a Brooklyn boy, he also has the heartbeat of Brooklyn beating in his own chest. Brooklyn was its own city before Greater New York swallowed it whole in 1898 (by only a few hundred "yea" votes out of 70,000 cast). As a Borough, it was "big [and] klutzy," the unshaven bigger, younger blue-collar brother of chi-chi Beau Brummell Manhattan. Brooklyn's population has always exceeded that of any other Borough, and in its own way, Brooklyn has been far more diverse and interesting than even "the City". In the early twentieth

century, Brooklyn grew at a fantastic rate as immigrants and the children of immigrants streamed, (as they still do), into its hundred square miles seeking relief from the overcrowding of Manhattan's Lower East Side. As Willensky says, this history of Brooklyn is divided, de facto, into three portions, before The War (1920-1941), During The War (1941-1945), and After The War (1945-1957). Each era is different. Brooklyn is different now. And yet . . . The immigrants developed their own patois that reflected a mixture of their varying accents newly-leavened with the day-to-day details of Brooklyn life. For example: "Oil" is a British lord. "Earl" is what you'd put in your car. A "stoop" is where you'd sit when you were "downstairs". "Tar Beach" up on the roof is where you'd spend your summers. "The Country" is where you'd go in the summer if you were lucky. Maybe you'd "get a bungalow" at "a bungalow colony" near Monticello or Loch Sheldrake or Ellenville in the Catskills, but if you "had money" you could always stay at The Homowack, The Tamarack, Brown's, Grossinger's or the Neville ("da Neva-lee"). An egg cream was (and is) a tasty drinkable concoction containing neither eggs nor cream, but containing a species of carbonated water (which no one in their right mind ever called Club Soda) that was brought to you weekly courtesy of The Seltzer Man. The Seltzer Man "worked like a horse" hefting cases of the stuff onto his shoulder in heavy blue or green or clear siphon bottles and climbing however many flights of stairs there were in order to service his customers. And why? So his kid could go to College, maybe be a doctor or a lawyer. To make an egg cream, Seltzer was mixed with Fox's U-bet chocolate syrup and milk (with unhomogenized cream on top) from Sheffield Dairy or Borden's (Borden's was the preferred product in my house growing up, since it had a smiling Elsie the Cow on the bottle). Thus was this quintessentially Brooklyn vin ordinaire brought into existence. Pickles could be bought on the street straight out of an open pickle barrel, and nobody spit or threw their cigarette butts into these community treasures. The subway was a nickel, then it was a dime. A comfortable apartment was \$60 a month. Bargains galore were available from the pushcarts on Blake Avenue. Ruby the Knish Man called his wares from a pushcart there (and everywhere else in Brooklyn, and in The Country). After I grew up and learned about cloning it solved the mystery of how Ruby managed to be in Canarsie, on Livonia Avenue, and upstate at Moonlight Cottages all at the same time. The Dodgers ("Dem Bums") wuz always in contention but never managed to get past the Yankees, except once, in 1955. Gil Hodges lived down the block. But things were changing. In '57 they were gone, courtesy of Walter (boo, hiss) O'Malley. The people from the old neighborhoods went too, to Levittown, or Bellmore, to Massapequa. We went, last of all, in 1970. "And that's how Brooklyn ended for most of us," Willensky writes sadly. "It's true," my mother nodded as I read it to her. The great New York Jewish migration from Delancey Street to Pitkin Avenue, from Pitkin Avenue to Syosset, and from

Syosset to Boca Raton was paralleled by our Italian and Irish and German neighbors. And still, we all remember Brooklyn. Although I missed Wilensky's era by a scant 36 months, Brooklyn was the World to me too. As late as 1963, a horse-drawn vegetable wagon would clop down my street selling its wares. Nearby Hegeman Avenue had an unpaved lane---a dirt road---in East New York. Schaefer and Rheingold were the beers of choice, both brewed locally. Budweiser was some unheard-of crap that that guy, he never talks to nobody, bought at that place nobody shops at, y'know the one I mean, right? Wetson's was much better than McDonald's, if you could even find a McDonald's---why bother? We had Wetson's. Chicken Delight, yes. Kentucky Fried Chicken, uh, where's Kentucky, ma? Growing up, I knew there had been three baseball teams---The Yankees far away up in The Bronx, those forgotten guys from the Polo Grounds (i.e., the Giants), and The Brooklyn Bums, who were now known as the Los Angeles Traitors. For years, I thought that was the new name of the team. What I never knew was how much my family loved baseball. As an adult, I asked my Dad why he had never kept his annual promise to take me to Yankee Stadium (over time, it became the only promise he never kept to me). He looked far away and said, "After the Dodgers. After Ebbets Field. What was the point?" Gotcha.

Good quality used book. Was interested in seeing what Brooklyn was like back when I lived there but was too young to remember. Brought back memories of stories my parents told.

I got this as a present for someone who grew up in Brooklyn during the 40's/50's. They absolutely love going over all the places and things from that time, reminiscing and using the book as a tool to share stories with the younger generation. I definitely recommend this book for an accurate picture of life at this time.

Purchased as a gift for my aunt who grew up in Brooklyn during this time, as one of 12 children. She is very much looking forward to reading the book and seeing all the pictures. She was thrilled to receive it and I was very impressed with the quick delivery time.

Enjoyed the photos and descriptions of neighborhoods since I was there in the later years. It was a good memory jogger..

Loved this book! I grew up in Brooklyn - learned a lot about my surroundings. Brought back lots of good memories. Thank you.

Oh boy, what a ride. It was the cyclone at Coney Island. It was Giant Step, Giant Step. It was playing Ringo Levio at 9 pm around the corner. I have just completed my novel As Long As You Can See the Clock, You're Okay (the Williamsburgh Bank clock tower) and I can thank Elliot Willensky for bringing me "back" home. The photos are wonderful, the writing engaging. Great book.

Bought it for an ex pat, living in Israel. She spent her first decades in Bklyn, and she was grateful to read about the places so dear to her years ago.

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