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Winner of a Midwest
Independent Publishers
Association (MIPA)
Book Award, 2nd
Place, Regional, 2002.

Near West Side Stories Struggles For Community in Chicago's Maxwell Street Neighborhood

By Carolyn Eastwood

Harold, Florence, Nate, and Hilda: Dragon Slayers at Halsted & Roosevelt

"You could be St. George and you couldn't slay that dragon," said Florence Scala. She was referring to her epic fight to preserve the Italian Taylor Street community from Mayor Richard J. Daley's plan to redevelop it for the University of Illinois. Yet, Scala and other ordinary citizens in Chicago's port-of-entry Near West Side neighborhood persisted in their extraordinary battles against some of the biggest power players in a city of clout.

Near West Side Stories: Struggles For Community in Chicago's Maxwell Street Neighborhood is an ongoing story of unequal power in Chicago. Four representatives of immigrant and migrant groups that have had a distinct territorial presence in the area—one Jewish, one Italian, one African-American, and one Mexican—reminisce fondly on life in the old neighborhood and tell of their struggles to save it and the 120-year-old Maxwell Street Market that was at its core.

Near West Side Stories brings this saga of community strife up to date, while giving a voice to the everyday people who were routinely discounted or ignored in the big decisions that affected their world. Though *slaying that dragon*—fending off the encroachments of those wielding great power—was nearly impossible, we see in the details of their lives the love for a place that compelled Harold, Florence, Nate, and Hilda to make the quest.

Meet Four *Extraordinary Ordinary* People

Harold Fox, born in the Jewish ghetto in 1910, had three different relatives with shops on Maxwell Street. He experienced the transition of Jewish immigrants moving out of the neighborhood, but sticking around as businessmen. As a flamboyant clothing designer (he created the zoot suit), and as a musician, he had world-wide celebrity contacts who were his clients and came to his store.

Florence Scala has rich memories of her childhood in the Italian sector of the neighborhood. Her account of Hull House is an insider's view, from her first introduction as a child until her young adulthood when she began to question its elitist tendencies. From this ordinary background emerges the woman who is still known for the fight she led against Mayor Richard J. Daley when he selected her neighborhood for destruction to acquire land for a university.

Nate Duncan, an African-American whose family was part of the Great Migration, spent his after-school time working in a matzo factory and in a deli on Maxwell Street owned by a Jewish couple. Later he bought the deli and, until its destruction due to university expansion in the 1990s, it was a mixed-ethnic gathering place for people from all over the city. His account of growing up in "Black Bottom" is a new look at a little-known part of Chicago.

Hilda Portillo relates how she came from Mexico to Chicago as a teenager, and St. Francis of Assisi became her community and her "home." The church's years of moral support throughout her personal traumas provided Hilda with the faith and will to fight to save St. Francis from demolition when the Archdiocese decided to close the church. Her story also makes clear the more subtle aspects of prejudice as it is directed against Latino immigrants in Chicago.

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