

'Point's Prime Characters-I Baleful Dantini Conjured With Old World Dignity

By Mark Walker

Marketing Analyst, Puppeteer, Conjuror

My most memorable Fell's Pointer was Dantini the Magnificent. Born in 1906 on Thames Street as Vincent Cierkes, he was the son of Polish immigrants. Seeing his first magician at age 9 sealed his fate; Vincent wanted to be a conjurer. His mother, however, thought magic was the work of the devil and asked a priest to pray for her son. As his interest in magic progressed he adopted his stage moniker, Dantini, by combining the names of two famous illusionists: Dante and Houdini.

At 15 the apprentice wizard left home for Philadelphia, where he performed in vaudeville for \$3 a show, then traveled to New York to work in a sideshow at Coney Island. One day Dantini met the great illusionist Harry Houdini, who lent him \$7. Before the sum could be repaid, Houdini died. Years later Dantini paid homage to the escape artist by imprinting his own aluminum souvenir tokens with the inscription, "Dantini--He Knew Houdini." I have two dozen in my magic collection.

While in New York, Dantini worked briefly for movie producer Sam Goldwyn as an aide and extra in a film called "Subway Sadie." Many years later he had a cameo scene in John Waters' "Desperate Living." At 22, he returned to Fell's Point. He found employment at a freak museum on The Block and also assisted a popular stage mind reader and crystal gazer, Rajah Raboid.

In 1946, Dantini appeared with Orson Welles in the Broadway stage production of "Around the World in 80 Days." The critics panned the show terribly. One wrote, "It has everything in it but the kitchen sink." The show had a short run and on closing night Welles rolled out a sink mounted on casters and said, "That's for you lousy critics." Dantini returned to Baltimore.

From 1952 and until the '60s, Dantini teamed up with McCarl Roberts--a friend of mine and an excellent conjuror--for shows at movie theaters throughout Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania. The magicians presented spooky conjuring tricks before extinguishing the lights in the cinema. Phantoms and eerie floating entities appeared. Then the lights came up and a horror film began. Among Dantini & Roberts' venues was the Broadway, where the Latin Palace is today. Most of these engagements were booked by the team's friend and agent Robert Marhenke (See Old Movies I, May Fell's Pointer).

When I was a teenager in the 1960s I saw Dantini in Fell's Point. I had no clue who he was but he definitely stood out with his Moses-like beard and pawnshop attire. Although some people assumed he was a rabbi, he filled my image of poet Walt Whitman. My first meeting occurred in 1973 at Marhenke's Cinema & Poster Shop at 428 S. Wolfe Street. Since Dantini lived just up the street, at 312, the movie memorabilia store was his second home.



Top Volunteer Jacquie Greff Wins 9-11 Service Award

Jacqueline Greff, author and compiler of the just released photo history Fell's Point in the Images of America series, has won the 9-11 award for selfless community service. The initiator of the award, town crier Jack Trautwein, will make the presentation at a ceremony on Sunday, Sept. 11, at 7PM in the Square.

Greff is in charge of the volunteer crew that distributes The Fell's Pointer monthly. A resident of Lancaster St., she has held posts in the Homeowners' Association and the Development Corp., and she created and maintains a free and much acclaimed website at fells-point.us. She and her husband Kraig operate multiple web-based operations including music at TonalVision.com.

Trautwein arranged with the Preservation Society to maintain a plaque listing award winners in the Visitor Center. The first winner, two years ago, was The Fell's Pointer's founder, Nancy Conrad.

Greff's book has been welcomed by residents as wide-ranging account in caption and photo of the various epochs of Fell's Point. Earlier she did a video disk, Fell's Point Out of Time," also well received. She has supplied copies of both the book and video to benefit the Preservation Society and the Maritime Museum of the Maryland Historical Society on Thames St.

Anonymous Donor Gives Fell's Point \$10,000 Pickup

An Anonymous benefactor has provided contribution of \$10,000 to Fell's Point projects as diverse as 10-couple dinners for prize-winning roof gardeners to \$500 for The Fell's Pointer's annual printing expenses. Working as intermediary for the donors is Jay Armstrong of Fountain Street, who also seeks to stay out of the limelight but who has consulted closely with groups that need funds to carry out programs with potential benefits for the community.

Armstrong is working principally with Matt Haag of Fells Prospect Neighborhood Association. Typical of the social engineering is "the General Wolfe Elementary School grant of \$4,000." In response to problems including a sun-baked playground, the grant allots "\$500 for principal's wish list, \$1,500 for supplies to teach English as second language" and "\$2,000 for four shade trees, 12 xeriscape planters, benches and playground equipment. Until shade trees mature, plan for blue tarp canopies hung via grommets.

The donor focuses considerable attention on xeriscape planting, which involves deck and rooftop plantings that require minimal watering. Hence "the \$500 Tiara Prize-for the best night-lighted flowering rooftop decks (dinner for winning 10 couples at one seating in a restaurant in 21231, especially in Fells Prospect) for watered plantings. Separate prizes for night-lighted xeriscaped decks; best year-round lighting design visible to public from street; best holiday lighting in color (traditional in Fells Prospect); best holiday lighting in white lights, etc. \$1,000 in start-up costs to be awarded in 2005. Prizes in this category awarded in 2006."

Another \$2,000 is 'for soirees, open-house and garden events, fundraisers and similar, as planned jointly by Haag and the donors" and \$500 to artist and Fell's Pointer cartoonist "Maria Cavacos and the Corner Theater to devise an educational outreach program including students of General Wolfe Elementary."

The outline assures "flexibility to make the proposals work" and states, "All grantees agree to market these proposals under the umbrella logo 'Volunteers Helping Other Volunteers Get Things Done.' All participants agree to respect fully the donors' privacy requirements."

Happenings

Can You Spare a Room For Flooded-Out Student?

Then comes current lede item. But let's make all of the heads at least 2-3 pts bigger. With all that, we probably will have to bump "Funds for Cleaner Water" to pg 2--or maybe it won't make it there but let's see. What we really need is the cartoon.

With Eyes on New Orleans, Baleful Anniversary at Hand

As the Federal Emergency Management Agency attempts to deal with devastation of the Gulf Coast's titanic losing battle with Hurricane Katrina last month, Fell's Pointers victim of Tropical Storm Isabel can look back with slowly receding anger to their trial by flood on Sept. 17-18 two years ago. While even the Point's lowest point, Lancaster and Durham Streets, is marginally above normal water level, that storm surge wreaked havoc which only now has been corrected. Nearby commercial properties were hollowed out but mostly recovered quicker.

While those consulted were quick to stress the overwhelming contrast of what they endured, injury-free, compared to the Gulf disaster, they offered cautionary tales on their dealings with FEMA. As one resident resident said, "They came and asked a lot of questions but then we never heard from them again." Pressed on the question, though, all acknowledged having received funds to help in their restoration--just nowhere near enough. Several were badly served by a contractor deemed predatory, and they pointed out that FEMA had been of little help on that front.

Lend an Ear to Secrets Of Trautwein's Seaport

Town Crier Jack Trautwein will instruct classes for The Preservation Society's walking tour, "Secrets of a Seaport--Fell's Point" beginning Monday, Oct. 10 at 7:30PM in the Conference Center, 808 S. Ann St. Five sessions will follow on successive Mondays. The charge is \$10 to cover written materials but that will be refunded to those becoming certified guides at the Society. Enroll by Sept. 29 with Barbara Cromwell at the Visitor Center, bcromwell@preservationsociety.com or phone 410.675.6750, Ext. 12.

Back to Boards on Zoning

In what occasionally threatened to become a summer-long stew on proposed rationalization of the Point's venerable zoning map, Councilman Jim Kraft, City officials and members of a citizens' task force sought in numerous meetings the opinions of chary residents and business owners of suggested updates.

The planners say now is the time because the often overlapping strictures of the 1970s Urban Renewal Ordinance may be legislated out of existence even as much of the area seeks collateral protections from the city's Commission for Historical and Architectural Protection.

The neighborhood's gumbo of residences, first-floor commercial and upstairs residential structures--with bars, restaurants and cabarets occasionally grandfathered in--triggered repeated arguments over the attributes of B1, B2 or B3, the arcane argot of zoners. Their ace in the hole mostly seemed to prevail, the assurance that all legal existing practices could continue under a new map even as it more carefully delineates primary uses along aged residential and commercial streets. Kraft, looking a bit wound down as the last rash of meetings subsided, said legislation could come this fall after the zoners serve up an omelet of their findings.

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Photo by Lew Diuguid.

Ethnic Poles are fewer but some attend at Holy Cross

Churches of Broadway-VII Born of Schism, Polish National Endures

About 100 years ago, when Poles were as thick as Belgian blocks on the streets of Fell's Point and most attended St. Stanislaus Kostka Church on Ann Street, a falling out among parishioners from diverse sections of Poland carried their dispute into schism. The separatists set up their own service, and soon turned to an alternative Catholic entity headquartered in Scranton, Pa., the Polish National Church. Its affiliates tended to appear in industrial cities where Polish immigrants found work. The local group built the Holy Cross Polish National Church at 210 S. Broadway, whose spire still dominates that block today.

Dan Koc of Fleet Street recounted the history of that congregation, one of his relatives having been a member. Koc led an ultimately failing effort to have St. Stans, after it closed in 2000, become a museum church. Its diminished congregation already had been twinned with St. Kasimir's in Canton. The building now is to be expanded for the Mother Seton School next door. That building in turn would come down to make way for townhouses.

The Holy Cross congregation also is diminished and indeed it put the church on the real estate market two years ago. The church leader did not respond to an effort to discuss the situation. But the agent who had attempted to sell the building said the church took it off the market a year ago following a decision to keep the congregation going. Small numbers continue to meet there.

Dantini's Dignity Was Contagious, Even Magical

About this time my college colleagues started frequenting the old Peabody Book Shop & Beer Stube, a musty, cluttered second-hand bookstore at 913 N. Charles St. In better times it was a speakeasy and hang-out of H.L. Mencken, Baltimore's acerbic sage. Dantini performed at the Peabody several times a night, seven nights a week, with a 15-minute magic act that never changed during his nearly 15-year run. Many who frequented the Peabody could recite every word from his act; I was one of those.

The show always started with Dantini making a lit cigarette vanish in a handkerchief. Following this was a series of sleight-of-hand manipulations with a golf ball. Next, Dantini presented a popular conjuring effect known as the "Miser's Dream," whereby an endless stream of coins—his own tokens—appeared and vanished at his fingertips.

Dantini thoroughly entertained the crowd with his

\$3 Million Props Rec Pier Project

Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. and Comptroller William D. Schaefer brought \$3 million in state historic tax credits for redevelopment of Rec Pier to a waterside press conference last month that underlined public support for a private effort to convert much of the venerable building into a boutique hotel. J.J. Clarke, leading the development team, had said the state funds were critical to the project even though they are a small portion of the investment needed in the multi-million-dollar undertaking.

Restrictions on the historic credits program imposed by the last legislature limited the total amount available to city projects to \$10 million and Rec Pier was one of two to receive the individual maximum allowable, \$3 million. Ehrlich and Schaefer criticized this blunting of what they said was a broadly successful development tool for the city. Ehrlich invoked an earlier waterfront performance by then-Mayor Schaefer, who as part of his successful pursuit of the Aquarium two decades ago took a dive into the Inner Harbor. This time, without a splash, Ehrlich handed sometime Fell's Point resident Schaefer a commemorative rubber duck on Thames Street.

Clarke has indicated that the initial phase of the project, rebuilding the deteriorated underpinnings of the pier, could begin this fall. Restoration of the ballroom above the pier's massive ground-level arch would follow. The 145-room Kimpton Hotel is to use the ballroom but also to make it available for community activities. During much of the reconstruction phase, Moran tugs are to relocate.

Cardin's Bills to Provide Funds for Cleaner Harbor

Congressman Ben Cardin announced passage of legislation to improve the quality of Chesapeake Bay waters, including the harbor. He cited \$6 million for a regional pilot program to help in removing nutrients such as fertilizer runoff. Also included was his request for additional funds for the Environmental Protection Agency's provision of grants to local organizations to build citizen-based stewardship of the bay, such as the Baltimore Harbor Watershed Association.

Last year, 93 projects received from \$5,000 to \$50,000. "Finally, I am also pleased that the Parks & People Foundation will receive \$197,000 in additional funding to help restore the Baltimore urban watershed," said the Third District Democrat.

The BHWA is working with the City to establish a pilot trash interception project at Harris Creek, where it flows into the harbor below Boston Street. Trash entering the underground creek from storm drains will be captured in netting at the outlet and hauled away by truck. Construction is to begin this fall at City expense and the Association is to assume maintenance expense after the first year.

card sleights and flourishes. Just before the close of his act he invited a young lady from the audience and seemingly pulled a scarf through her neck. He finished with the classic Chinese Linking Rings, which mysteriously connected and disconnected. After a polite round of applause, the gentle-faced magician proceeded around the room, collecting tips in a small pan. Usually he retired to a small table in a dark corner for something to eat and drink while waiting for another performance later that evening.

The Peabody drew legions of college students, businessmen and traveling celebrities. Local artists found in Dantini's baleful expression a source of inspiration and he was immortalized on canvas by students of the Maryland Institute. His portraits by prominent Baltimore artist Joe Sheppard hang in Los Angeles and Washington. In March of 1976 the Fell's Point Gallery featured a showing of Dantini portraits

Schedules

Trash

Place trash outside in cans or, after 6AM on collection day, in plastic bags. Mondays and Thursdays but no holidays.

Recycling

Place outside by 7AM on collection day. Glass, metal and plastic in blue plastic bags. Mondays, Sept. 12,19,26.

Paper and cardboard in paper bags, cardboard boxes or tied with string. Fridays, Sept. 9,16,23,30.

Neighborhood Meetings

Douglass Place: Third Wednesday of every other month at the Polish National Alliance, 1637 Eastern Avenue, 410.563.1297.

Fell's Point Antique Dealers' Association: Call 410.675.4776.

Fell's Point Community Organization: Second Mondays, 7PM, Fell's Point Visitor Center, 410.276.5471.

Fell's Point Development Corp.: 9AM every Tuesday, Max's on Broadway. Open to all. 410.675.8900.

Fell's Point Homeowners' Association: First Wednesdays, 7PM, Bertha's 2nd Floor.

Greenspace Action Partnership: Second Tuesdays, 6PM, Visitor Center, 410.675.6750 ext 10.

Society for the Preservation of Fell's Point and Federal Hill: Call 410.675.6750.

The Fell's Pointer is published monthly by volunteers of Fell's Point Citizens on Patrol, Inc. Questions, input and participation in patrols and this newsletter are welcome.

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