

The Arrival of Frank Matty

Led Not By A Vision But Driven From the City By Declining Finances

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Introduction

Frank Matty's original interest in Salina property (1900) was for providing a place to house and train his stable of race horses. He added to his land holdings and started raising hogs when his friend Sim Dunfee arranged for four wagon loads of free city garbage per day to be delivered to those farms.¹

When Frank Matty eventually moved to his Salina farm, in about 1914, he didn't go there with a vision of founding a community or starting a residential development. First of all, the community was already there – founded decades earlier by the original settlers, of which Matty was not one. In the activity of residential development, Matty was a follower, not a leader. His farm was the fourth to go residential, two years after Hinsdale Farms led the way in 1920.

Matty retreated from the city of Syracuse for financial reasons. His political career was over and he no longer ran his profitable saloon, The Alderman's Cafe. Medical bills and a declining livery business presented a very different financial situation for Matty compared to the one he enjoyed during his Alderman days. He could no longer afford to maintain both his Salina farm and his residence at 515 E. Jefferson St., across from the Court House.

The approaching financial ruin finally forced the move to his Salina farm. The same farm whose title he had placed in his "housekeeper's" name for bankruptcy protection. It was from that pig farm that Frank Matty would create, nurture and polish the stories that developed into the founder of Mattydale legend that we know today.

The Tragic Event

On September 7, 1906 the newspaper reported on a runaway team, on the Cicero Plank Road, whose driver was thrown from the wagon and later died in the hospital.² This might seem like a rather ordinary article from that period, about just another highway death, but it is more than that. It involved an employee of Frank Matty and can be used as a reference point from which to examine Matty and his activities. Looking at this event in more detail will provide a window into the past. This unfortunate accident happened at the plateau of Frank Matty's business and political career in Syracuse and just before the beginning of his slide towards bankruptcy. Starting at this point in time we will follow Frank Matty's declining fortunes in the city, his arrival in Salina, his bankruptcy and his ultimate recovery to become the "Mayor" of Mattydale.

Edward Amidon was driving a wagon being pulled by a team of horses. Amidon was hauling garbage from the city to the Matty farm to feed Frank Matty's pigs. This road was originally an old Indian trail and it later became the Salt Road and then the Cicero

Plank Road. The plank road handled the heavy southbound traffic. Travelers could proceed north on the plank road but the custom was that northbound traffic yielded to the southbound traffic. Amidon had just gone under the Rail Road bridge that passed over the Cicero Plank Road. At the overpass Amidon met other Matty employees, heading south on the plank road to pick up some of Matty's trotters, at the freight station, that had returned from competing in an out of town race.

In a few minutes Amidon was approaching the Ley Creek bridge. As Amidon approached the bridge something spooked the team of horses, perhaps a passing automobile. For half a mile Amidon tried to regain control of the team. He was thrown from the wagon as they passed in front of the Skiff farm. Minutes after his accident, it was two men traveling south on the plank road, in an automobile, who found him by the side of the road. Their automobile had a malfunction so they had stopped to fix it in front of the Skiff farm. An ambulance was called and Amidon was taken to St. Joseph's Hospital where he later died around 11 PM. Ironically it was an automobile that had caused Amidon's wagon to malfunction and then it was an automobile malfunction that led to the discovery of his fatal condition.

Transportation was improving and this was causing problems. The newly arrived machines and the teams of horses that had traveled the plank roads for years were not compatible, as Amidon found out. The arrival of the automobile was also steadily reducing the need for horses and livery stables. This trend would come to have a negative impact on Matty's situation. The future was coming – the Plank Road was soon to be replaced with the modern Brewerton Road in 1914.

And What Was Frank Matty Doing?

In retrospect it can be seen that 1906 was the high point in both Matty's political career and his financial situation. There were signs that both were going to be downhill from there. Although Frank was aware of the existence of these signs he might not have fully understood their significance or perhaps he figured that he could avoid the coming events.

Frank Matty, age 56, was still running his Alderman's Café but he should have had a sense that his saloon days were coming to an end. Frank Matty was still an Alderman on the Common Council in the city of Syracuse and was probably still living at the Howlett Apartments at 210 James Street.³

Matty had finally bought the 131 acre Spring Farm, which he had been leasing since early 1902, from the George N. Crouse estate in April 1904.⁴ In December of 1905, Frank sold this same part of his Salina holdings, which had been Baum's old Spring Farm, to Peter Michels. Matty kept the 90 acre farm that was known as the old Zimmer farm. Before Zimmer it had been the old Adams farm. At the time of the sale to Michels, Matty said that he planned to build a house on the Zimmer farm and retire there someday.⁵ At the time of Amidon's death Matty was also keeping a stable of trotting horses as can be seen from the article. Frank wouldn't finally move to his farm until late 1913 or early 1914.

The Financial Dimensions of Frank Matty's Life

The catalyst for the political and financial success of Frank Matty was John "Sim" Dunfee. When it came to city contracts or franchises, Frank took care of his friend and Sim took care of Matty. Dunfee had been able to control, or at least influence, the other power brokers in the city to help Frank politically. Dunfee was also Matty's landlord at the Alderman's Café and Hotel, with a gambling establishment on the 2nd floor run by Matty's long time friend Chris Snyder. As the controlling interest in the Syracuse Reduction Company, Dunfee saw it that Matty got four free wagon loads of city garbage delivered to his Salina farms every day to feed his hogs. On December 24, 1904, Sim died unexpectedly.⁶ After the death of his good friend and supporter, Matty must have suspected that his fortunes, both political and financial, were about to change.

In September of 1906 Matty was still maintaining a stable of race horses, but his days of free city garbage were over. Amidon, one of his own employees, had been hauling the garbage to Matty's Salina farm to feed his hogs, probably from a private contract with a city hotel. In anticipation of this lose of free food for his hogs Matty had sold Baum's old Spring Farm to Peter Michels in December 1905.⁷

On the political side, winning was getting harder for Matty. His ward was getting larger and was filling with the new rush of Italians coming into the country. He had managed to win their votes in the last election but he had won by a very small margin. Matty's opponents were well aware of his use of floaters and had been determined to stop him in that 1905 election – they were not successful. Even though Matty had prevailed in 1905, another victory for the Alderman was uncertain at this point. The Republicans didn't want him as Alderman and neither party wanted him to run for Mayor.

The Alderman's Café, his main source of money, had been held under a lease from his friend, Sim Dunfee. Three years after his death, the Dunfee estate would sell the building containing Matty's café and his lease would not be renewed. In early 1907 Matty bought his way back into the livery business by leasing the Manhattan Stables and the Kingsley House Stables.⁸ At the end of June, Matty closed his café for the last time.⁹

Perhaps he didn't want to retire from politics by losing the office of Alderman at the polls, one that he had held for so long. For his last hurrah he would go for it all and run for Mayor. Matty had threatened to run for Mayor in the past, but this time he was serious. His performance at the convention, to secure the nomination, against the wishes of his party, was legendary. He won the nomination but in the end he lost the election to the incumbent. In discussing the election results Matty thanked his supporters and asked "all of them to remain loyal until my next contest two years hence."¹⁰ – but it never happened.

As 1908 began, Frank was out of political office, he no longer had a saloon (café), hotel or rent from Snyder's gambling operation to bring in money. His horse racing days were just about over. In reality, race horses were a hobby not a business. With no extra money

there would soon be no more out of town horse races.¹¹ Frank Matty was back in the livery business, where he had started, but the horse business was in decline.

The Move To Salina

On December 28, 1908, while driving his horse and carriage down E. Fayette St, a wheel broke on his carriage, in front of Bishop Ludden's residence. Matty fell from the carriage and into the street where he injured his left elbow. After all those many sermons about Matty's saloon, that den of iniquity, delivered from pulpits of all religions across the city, this might be seen as an act of God. Over the next three years this injury required hospital stays and multiple operations that prevented him from properly tending to his livery business, as the medical bills mounted. By late 1913 or early 1914 he moved from 515 E. Jefferson St., his city address, to his Salina farm and moved his livery operation from the stables at the rear of the Manhattan Hotel to the 800 block of Wolf Street. Immediately after losing a politically connected canal job he declared personal bankruptcy in March 1915.¹² At some point prior to the bankruptcy Frank had transferred the title for his Salina property to his "housekeeper," Minnie Mansfield. That transfer saved his Salina property from the bankruptcy action. The 1917 Onondaga County Directory showed Mansfield as the owner of the property and Frank as her tenant.¹³

The year 1917 was a banner one for the farm as Matty sold a group of hogs for \$15,000. In 1919 Frank was campaigning for an appointment to a high-level canal job, but at the last minute he withdrew his name in favor of a younger candidate.¹⁴ By 1920, several of the larger farmers around Matty were turning their farms into residential developments. As the population grew so did the number of school age children. The old wooden one-room schoolhouse, that had served the community since 1853,¹⁵ could not handle the rapid increase. Frank donated land in 1922 for a new school just east of the little wooden schoolhouse.

While this population growth was continuing, Frank was looking in a different direction. Together with a couple business partners, with Frank remaining silent, and that had to be difficult for him, they proposed to process all of the city's garbage on a huge hog farm outside the city limits.¹⁶ An actual location was not mentioned in the proposal but Matty's farm would seem the most likely location. So, even as the new brick schoolhouse was being built, Frank was planning on surrounding it with a huge garbage processing pig farm. In addition to Matty's lots, houses were being built on the farms both north and south of his land and this pig farm would come as a big surprise to those new residents. Matty had been raising pigs for years, but on a much smaller scale than what had been proposed to the city. Fortunately for all the new residents and the school children, the city passed on the offer.

Frank didn't let this little set back bother him, for earlier in the year, in the spring of 1922, he had opened up part of his farm for residential development under the name: Mattydale. The growth continued with four new tracts opening for residential development in 1923. The other farmers had sold their land and let the developers take over but Frank stayed and sold the property to the new residents. In 1943 his estate still held 20 lots in Mattydale.

Frank Matty Focuses on District Politics

The population would explode, which would mean a larger school would soon be needed and that would mean more taxes. Matty's double barn had been used for political meetings and social events for years. As strange as it might seem, up until this point Frank had not actively participated in the local politics of District #3. The District held meetings in his barn and he would sometimes act as the chairman of the meeting but he had not run for any district office. However, in this 3rd District of the town of Salina Frank Matty must have been able to see his old 3rd Ward – the way it used to be. They even did elections the old way with slips of paper and cardboard boxes – in Salina there were none of those voting machines that had made inroads into Syracuse elections. Matty even got to sit there and watch the ballot box just as he had done for years in the old Toll Gate Booth in the old 3rd Ward.¹⁷ Frank finally jumped in and in 1925 he was elected to the Board of Trustees for the School District.

As soon as Frank focused his attention on the politics of the rapidly growing District #3, the name Mattydale began to appear in the headlines of the Syracuse papers. It appeared along with the words Riots, State Troopers, Ballot Stuffing and law suits over election results. The rules for school district elections were very loose. They were so loose that despite obvious ballot stuffing the city DA didn't think it was possible to make any charges stick. According to the laws of that time the final authority on whether a person was qualified to cast a ballot in a school election rested in the person himself.¹⁸ In the case of more ballots being cast than there were people voting in the election, the overage were simply thrown away and those remaining were then opened and counted. At each election held in his barn, Matty would hand out the ballots, make a little last minute political pitch as he handed the ballot to the voter and then sit by the ballot box all night until the last ballot was counted.¹⁹ His years of experience in the city polling places had taught him that nothing good ever came out of an unattended ballot box.

In the earliest elections it was the new comers against the large land owners. As the residential development progressed the large landowners eventually dwindled in number and two new factions emerged. One faction was led by a school teacher, Trustee Kathie Malloy, who first joined the board in 1917 at age 29. Malloy was a descendant of one of the original settlers of the area. Patrick Malloy, her grandfather, owned the farm at E. Molloy and Town Line Roads as far back as 1860. Kathie lived with her sister Mary and father James, in the large stone Malloy homestead on the opposite end of Molloy Road from Matty. Frank Matty, who first became a Trustee in 1925, at age 75, led the other faction. Even before his election to the board, Frank Matty's presence at a meeting had an air of authority about it. Meetings became debates and these soon led to personal attacks, mostly verbal but sometimes physical, and then the troopers would step in to preserve order. Issues quickly gave way to personalities with Frank using all the political savvy he had acquired over the decades. Malloy and her backers knew the facts and details of the issues but Frank knew the emotions, he knew how to work the crowd.

The high point of the face offs on their differing visions for the future of the district took place in 1930, over the Union Free School (High School) issue. Armed State Troopers were on duty for both the Monday information meeting and the subsequent balloting on

that took place on Saturday, January 25.²⁰ The district had been riding the rocket of a decade of explosive residential growth - unknowingly headed into the Great Depression. Even though the great stock market crash had occurred the previous October there was no hint of that event or what it would mean in the future as they “debated” the High School issue. Matty and his followers successfully defeated the Union Free School movement 513 to 182.

The district had purchased land in 1931 for a second school, in the Richfield Farms development²¹, and by 1933 it was thought that the school would be needed. In September 1933 there were almost 1000 students registered at Mattydale school.²² However, it never happened - the Great Depression had finally settled in - the residential development boom was over. With the exception of the addition of a larger auditorium in 1936 and much later a gymnasium, there were never anymore additions made to Mattydale school. No new schools were built west of Brewerton Road until the late 1950s.²³

The end of the growth brought an end to the contentious school district meetings. Kathie Malloy was no longer a Trustee, her last term of office expired in May 1930. Frank Matty settled into his role as senior statesman. He eventually acquired the unofficial title of the Mayor of Mattydale as he directed school district politics and tried to influence the town of Salina politics.

The Past According to Matty

Every November, a reporter would come out to Mattydale to interview Frank for his annual birthday story. There were no really contentious issues coming before the board anymore and so Frank would ramble on about his past. Perhaps out of deference to the old man no one really fact checked his stories and as the years went on his memory would fade even further and he got sloppy with some of the dates and events. And of course he only remembered the stories that made him look good.

In late 1933, The Syracuse Herald paper published Frank Matty’s Memoirs in 30 installments. Unfortunately, this huge mound of material has allowed most historical research efforts about Matty to avoid pushing back much further, looking for original sources. It was easier to just take Frank’s word for it.²⁴ When viewed through the lens of those memoirs, the past became very homogenized, things in Mattydale had developed according to Frank Matty’s plan, or so the newspapers reported.²⁵

Frank Matty wasn’t a visionary. Frank Matty was a very practical man who displayed a remarkable talent for making the best of any opportunity that headed his way. Matty played defense, not offense. Frank didn’t create most of the situations that he found himself in, but he knew how to manage them to his advantage. He ran for Alderman the second time at the urging of some influential residents of the 3rd Ward. Matty got into the saloon business at the invitation, from his friend Sim Dunfee, to take over an established saloon in one of Dunfee’s buildings. When his political career came to an end Frank went back to the livery business but, with the coming of the automobile, the livery business was in a final decline. Nearly broke, Matty left the city to live on his Salina farm. Within

two years he was bankrupt. While recovering from financial failure, he was raising pigs on the Salina farm, that was in his "housekeeper's" name and in 1919 he was seeking a political appointment to a job with the State Canal System. After he saw several other farms open for residential development Frank Matty followed them. In addition, he was also seeking a city contract to turn his land into a pig farm for disposing of all of the city's garbage. If Frank was at all interested in residential development it was simply for the money. The population growth of the district gave rise to a growth in school district politics and Frank Matty was back in his element again. And just like he learned how to control the Common Council he showed that he knew how to control the local three-member school board.

Most of the original settlers had moved on and left the development of their farmland to others. The farmers that stayed, Kirsch and Wright, were still engaged in dairy farming, but on a smaller scale. Frank was different, he was retired, he had time on his hands, he stayed around and held mortgages on the residential lots on his former farmland. Matty spent his final years running the school district while he set about creating and polishing his legend.

The Syracuse Herald, Syracuse, NY, Sunday, October 22, 1933

"I'm Monarch of All I Survey . . ."



FOOTNOTES

- ¹ “Pigs Will Not Hunger – Garbage Still Drawn To Matty’s Farm,” *The Evening Herald*, Syracuse, NY, September 12, 1902.
- ² “Runaway Team Dashes Driver To His Death,” *Syracuse Post Standard*, Syracuse, NY, September 8, 1906.
- ³ Where did Frank Matty live? This was the question that Matty’s political opponents were always asking. During a court case, brought on by the 77 ballots that were needed to elect Matty as President of the Common Council, on Mar. 24, 1898, Matty gave his residence as the Howlett Apartments. During the run up to the 1905 elections there was a challenge to Matty’s residence. Matty had a residence at 208 W. Belden Ave. – this was also his residence for voter registration. There were several other men who were also registered at that address for voter registration purposes. One of these men was Matty’s nephew and saloon employee named George Kappesser. These persons that registered out of their districts were called “floaters.” In a contemporary court case, referred to as the Maloney Trial, Matty had claimed that he lived on his Salina farm. There were others who believed that Matty slept at his hotel above the Alderman’s Café. “New Hope For Matty’s Defeat,” *The Post Standard*, Syracuse, NY, October 23, 1905.
- ⁴ “Matty Now Owns The Farm Where He Raises His Pigs,” *Post Standard*, Syracuse, NY, April 3, 1904.
- ⁵ “He Will Improve Another He Owns and May Live There Later,” *The Syracuse Herald*, Syracuse, NY, December 30, 1905.
- ⁶ “John Dunfee Dies; Shock To The City,” *The Post Standard*, Syracuse, NY, December 26, 1904.
- ⁷ “He Will Improve Another He Owns and May Live There Later,” *The Syracuse Herald*, Syracuse, NY, December 30, 1905; “Sells His Farm,” *The Syracuse Journal*, Syracuse, NY, January 1, 1906.
- ⁸ “Leases the Manhattan Stables,” *Syracuse Post Standard*, Syracuse, NY, April 30, 1907. “Having Leased The Kingsley House Stables...,” *Syracuse Post Standard*, Syracuse, NY, March 29, 1907.
- ⁹ “Matty Ends Career,” *The Oswego Daily Times*, Oswego, NY, July 1, 1907.
- ¹⁰ “Fobes And Matty Talk Of Result,” *The Syracuse Journal*, Syracuse, NY, November 6, 1907.
- ¹¹ There was a report in the paper, that Matty had raced *Nancy Allen* at the Erie, PA race track. However, he had a co-owner named McMahon. “Sultry Racing At Erie Meet,” *The Syracuse Post Standard*, Syracuse, NY, August 7, 1908.

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- ¹² “Frank Matty A Bankrupt, Lists Debts At \$16,500,” Syracuse Herald, Syracuse, NY, March 30, 1915; “Matty’s Assets Valued At \$3,004,” The Syracuse Journal, Syracuse, NY, April 20, 1915;
- ¹³ Frank was living with Minnie at the 515 E. Jefferson St. address prior to moving to the Salina farm. Minnie moved with him to the farm and in the 1920 census she was listed as a “housekeeper.” By mid-1923 Minnie had become Mrs. Frank Matty but I have been unable to find any newspaper account of this most news worthy event. Frank could not have sold lots in his Mattydale development unless he owned the property. It’s possible that Minnie, the long time housekeeper, had learned some of Frank’s ways and marrying her was the price she placed on the title of the Salina farm.
- ¹⁴ “Frank Matty Out Of Fight On Canal Job,” The Syracuse Journal, Syracuse, NY, February 19, 1919.
- ¹⁵ The original wooden schoolhouse had burned down on January 24, 1902 and was replaced with a similar structure. The Evening Telegram, Syracuse, NY, January 25, 1902.
- ¹⁶ “City Gets Offer To Buy Garbage To Feed Hogs,” The Syracuse Herald, Syracuse, NY December 12, 1922. “Group Proposes To Raise Pigs On City Refuse,” The Syracuse Journal, Syracuse, NY, December 23, 1922.
- ¹⁷ “City’s Most Famous Polling Place Is Now Passing Out Of Existence,” The Syracuse Herald, Syracuse, NY, September 1, 1908.
- ¹⁸ “Ballot Stuffing In Mattydale To Grand Jury,” The Syracuse Herald, Syracuse, NY, June 21, 1925.
- ¹⁹ “Malpass Gets Poll Evidence,” The Syracuse Herald, Syracuse, NY, May 8, 1925.
- ²⁰ “Near Riot Marks Mattydale School District Meeting As Speakers Clash,” The Syracuse Journal, Syracuse, NY, January 21, 1930. “Armed Police Help Maintain Polling Peace,” The Syracuse American, Syracuse, NY, January 26, 1930.
- ²¹ The land in the Richfield Farms development, in the middle of the block, between Brookfield and Richfield, was never used for a school. In the 1950’s it was used for impromptu sporting events and in the winter an ice rink was constructed. Today it is known as Richfield Park. The newly purchased land was referenced in an article at the time. “School Filled At Mattydale,” The Syracuse Journal, NY, September 3, 1931. More than 1,000 students had been registered during the opening week of school.

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- ²² “Here’s Nation’s Largest Rural School With 992 Enrolled,” The Syracuse American, Syracuse, NY, September 24, 1933.
- ²³ St. Margaret’s Catholic School was opened on September 14, 1954 but this wasn’t built by the District. The Roxboro Road Elementary and Middle Schools were built in the late 1950s.
- ²⁴ “100th Anniversary Of Wright House Recalls Old Days,” Post Standard, Syracuse, NY, October 30, 1955. Even this article, written a mere 16 years after Matty’s death credits him with a vision he never had. “Frank Matty had a vision of residential growth, but it is doubtful that he would believe his eyes if he could return in 1955 and see what has occurred since his death...”
- ²⁵ Not everyone felt that Matty would deal fairly with the facts in his memoirs. Republican and former Matty political opponent John C. McLaughlin, contributed a letter to the editor on the matter. He warned others to “...accept many of his (Matty’s) claims to righteousness with a good deal of reserve.” In closing McLaughlin observed, “...Frank Matty always looked out for Frank Matty, first, last and all the while.” “Political Pot Pourri,” The Weekly Observer, Marcellus, NY, November 1, 1933.