

Lowell's Little Acre

For centuries, one neighborhood has served as the gateway for immigrants

By ANN BLACKMAN LOWELL

ACROSS FROM A SMALL, grassy park dedicated to Greek and Irish immigrants, Joe Cogliano, whose grandparents were Italian, sells mangoes to Hispanic customers from the back of his truck. Children play tag while chattering in Spanish on O'Brien Terrace, part of a housing project built in 1939 for Irish laborers. The pungent odor of Vietnamese fish sauce fills a Southeast Asian restaurant where Giavis' Greek grocery once thrived for more than 70 years.

In Lowell they call it the Acre. Less than one-seventh of the current 105,000 citizens of this Massachusetts mill town call it home. But tens of thousands of working-class immigrants going back a century and a half before them have left marks as vivid as the archaeological artifacts uncovered in successive layers of limestone. In few places are the textures and tensions of ethnic urban history as legible as they are here.

Francis Cabot Lowell built the country's first water-powered cotton mill on farmland near Pawtucket Falls in northeastern Massachusetts in 1814. Within two decades the area had become one of the foremost industrial centers in America. As more mills were built, their owners recruited young, single New England farm girls as laborers. When the "mill girls," as they were called, rebelled against the long hours and low wages, they were replaced by Irishmen fleeing the potato famine of the 1840s. In a scheme to rid downtown Lowell of the unwanted Irish workers, the Yankee mill owners donated an acre of land southwest of the city's center. The neighborhood became a gateway for generations of immigrants who went to Lowell in search of work and a better life. On wages of 75¢ a day, the early laborers crowded into a shantytown of mud huts and shacks. "I learned to speak French just hanging out on my street," says Nicholas Georgoulis, 76, who grew up in the Acre with Greek Orthodox parents and French-



PAWTUCKET CANAL: 1923



THE ACRE: 1993

Canadian neighbors. The Irish were followed by Greeks, Poles, Scots, Portuguese, French Canadians and Italians, all escaping economic and political chaos in their native land. Today Hispanics, mostly from Puerto Rico, make up 35% of the Acre's 15,000 population. Vietnamese and Cambodians who fled their war-torn countries and moved to Lowell in the mid-1980s constitute another 30%. While Lowell's overall unemployment stands at 8%, in the Acre it is close to 50%.

Although chronically plagued by crime and violence, the gateway still beckons. Family by family, block by block, each ethnic group adds its own restaurants, markets and schools to the Acre's evolving mosaic. St. Patrick's Catholic Church, built for Irish immigrants in 1831, and the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church, circa 1906, remain firm spiritual landmarks for each generation of new workers. "At midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, *Silent Night* is now sung in Vietnamese," says David McKean, 40, a third-generation Acre-ite of Scottish and Irish descent. "For some it's a sign of unity. For others it hurts."

Age-old tensions between old-timers and new arrivals remain. George Karafilidis, a tailor whose Greek family has owned a business in Lowell for 35 years, complains that newcomers are ruining his neighborhood. When a reporter reminds

him that his relatives were immigrants, Karafilidis flies into a rage and bellows, "Don't come in here and talk to me about immigrants!"

Tarsy Poullos, 67, grew up on the third floor of a crowded cold-water tenement around the corner from 29 Bowers Street, where he lives today. When Poullos was a child, his neighbors were predominantly Irish and French Canadian. Now a Cambodian family lives on one side of his turquoise-shingled house, a Lebanese family on the other. His father, who spoke only a few words of English, worked for three decades as a spinner in the Merrimack textile mill. Poullos, a city mailman for 34 years, has served six years on the city council.

Today he is Lowell's mayor. "The Acre is the bottom of the social ladder," he says. "The last group that comes in is always on the bottom rung. But you can climb that ladder. You just have to prove your worth to the group ahead of you to be accepted."

As Irish, Greek and French-Canadian merchants have proved their worth and moved to better neighborhoods, energetic Southeast Asians have opened their doors for business. Dien Tran, 43, and his wife Buu Ma came to Lowell in 1980 speaking little English. Six years later, both graduated from the local branch of the University of Massachusetts. Now they own an apartment building in the Acre as well as two Vietnamese restaurants. Each works more than 80 hours a week. "We're not successful yet," says Tran. "Success will be a big income and paying off my debt."

Gradually, each ethnic group has found that hard work pays. Poullos is Lowell's third Greek mayor. The superintendent of schools is Greek American. The city chief is of French-Canadian ancestry. The police chief's grandparents were Irish. And Lowell native Paul Tsongas, whose parents were Greek, served as Massachusetts' Congressman and Senator for 10 years before running for President. History suggests that a Vietnamese-American boy or girl may someday run Lowell—and who knows what else after that? ■