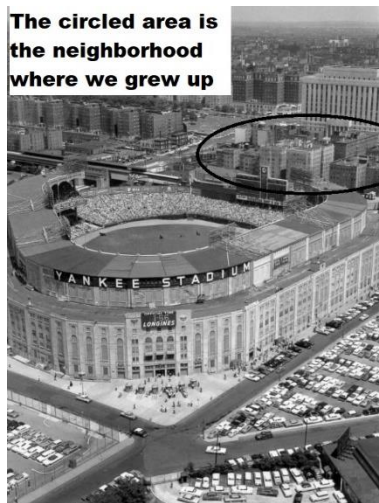


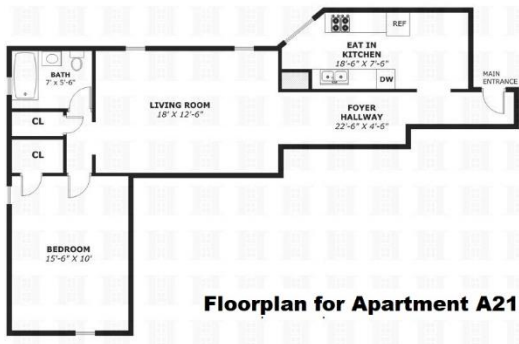
## Chapter One: Lee – The Early Years

I spent the first 22 years of my life in the neighborhood just one block east of Yankee Stadium. The neighborhood was a fabulous place to grow up, and what my friends and I had was very special. Where else can you find a neighborhood with over two dozen children in the same age group who grew up together, and who are still in touch more than 60 years later!



From birth through the age of 13, I lived in an apartment in the Yankee Arms building, located at 811 Walton Avenue. My family moved to the building before I was born. Back in those days, it was very difficult to get an apartment in a good neighborhood in New York City. Often times, it was necessary for people to pay off the superintendent (known as the “Super”) to get an apartment. It wasn’t considered a bribe at the time, just the normal way of doing business. In my family’s case, we got the apartment from my father’s sister and her family. I don’t know whether my parents had to pay the Super to get the apartment.

We lived in Apartment A21. It was a one bedroom apartment, but back in those days, it was called a three room apartment – a kitchen, living room, and bedroom, along with a bathroom. It was a “walk-through” apartment, with the kitchen to the right of the entrance, and a long hallway that went through the living room and dead-ended just past the living room, with the bathroom on the right and the bedroom on the left.



Because the hallway was long and narrow, my twin brother and I used it to bowl, using a softball and ten empty cans of O&C Potato Sticks, much to the chagrin of Mr. and Mrs. Krasner, an elderly couple who lived on the other side of the wall that the pins (tin cans) splattered against.

Even though there were five of us living in the apartment – my parents, my two brothers and me – we didn't feel at all crowded.

After my Mom gave birth to my older brother, she was told by a doctor that she could not have any more children. My Mom always like to brag that she fooled the doctors by having, not one but two more children!

Until I was 10 years old, my twin brother Chuck and I shared the bedroom with my parents,

Miriam and Milton; after that, my older brother Harvey, who was 10 years my senior, moved from the living room to the bedroom, and my parents moved to the living room.



**This 1952 photo of me, my mother and two brothers, was taken in front of 810 Gerard Ave. I'm on the right.**

As far as I am aware, my brother and I were the only twins in the neighborhood. Twins were much rarer back in those days, partly because fertility treatments didn't exist at the time. Rarer still was the fact that my brother and I were identical twins. Currently, the birth rate for all twins is about 33 in 1,000, whereas the odds of having identical twins is about one in 350 to 400 births.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Information obtained from <https://www.babycentre.co.uk/a539828/how-common-are-twins>, although <http://www.twinstwice.com/twins.html> puts the odds at 1 in 285 births.

When we were very young, my brother and I were so identical that my parents once mixed us up, and while they thought they correctly identified us, they weren't entirely sure, so I may actually not be who I think I am.



**In front of Franz Sigel Park. I'm on the left, on my cousin Barbara's lap.**



**This photo was taken in front of 811 Walton I'm on left.**

My twin brother's real name was Charles, but he liked to be known as Chuck. Later on, our friends would tease us by calling us Chester and Lester Nester.

The Yankee Arms was built in 1927, and was considered an upper class building through the 1930s. I was told that in its heyday, the building's lobby had red velvet carpeting and elevator operators on both sides of the building. When I was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, the building was past its heyday, but it was still a very nice building and the neighborhood was still very stable and very Jewish – so Jewish, in fact, that I naively grew up thinking that most people were Jewish.

In the early 1950s, some Yankees players still lived in the building, and many players could be seen walking to and from the Stadium. Some of the players stayed at the Concourse Plaza Hotel, which was two blocks away on the Grand Concourse at 161<sup>st</sup> Street.



## **Concourse Plaza Hotel**

Jerry Coleman, a former Yankees second baseman and broadcaster, lived in our building at one time and once bought my older brother an ice cream cone and got him into Yankee Stadium to see a Yankees game for free. My mother was once stopped on the street by Yogi Berra's wife, who came over to "admire the twins."

I really don't remember much about my first few years of life, but my parents told me stories of how mischievous my twin brother and I were. We would work together pushing chairs around the apartment. On one occasion, after my mother had finished doing the laundry – which was no small

feat in those days – my brother and I took the laundry and threw it out of our bedroom window and it landed on Gerard Avenue. One of the porters of the building, known simply as “Cotton,” who lived in the basement, collected the laundry and brought it up to our first floor apartment, which was actually the second floor since the basement was at street level.

I still remember another occasion, when I was about three or four years old, when I climbed up onto one of the two keystones that adorned the entrance to the courtyard of the Yankee Arms building facing Gerard Avenue (the building had two entrances, one on Gerard – 810 Gerard – and one on Walton Avenue – 811 Walton). Once up on the keystone, I was afraid to climb back down, so Cotton again came to the rescue, climbing up to help me down from the keystone.





It wasn't until three years ago that I learned Mr. Cotton's first name – Al. These days, it would be unthinkable and disrespectful for someone to be called only by their last name, but in those days, no one even thought twice about it. The last time I visited the building in 1974, I saw Mr. Cotton, who had retired and had taken an apartment on the first floor of the building.

**Photo of Mr. Cotton in front of incinerator, near his Apt. in 1974**



The Yankee Arms was a large building. Standing six stories, it contained apartments for 145 families. When I was very young, my brother and I rarely ventured beyond the block on which the building was located, so we didn't know many of the other children in the neighborhood; we were mostly limited to associating with children who lived in our building. There was a girl about my age named Janie who lived across the street on Gerard Avenue that we used to play with sometimes. We knew Janie because my parents knew Janie's parents and my older brother was friends with Janie's older brother, Bobby. Other than that, though, I didn't get to know most of the other children in the neighborhood until the age of five, when I started elementary school. At that point, my brother and I were old enough to play outside unsupervised and got to know some of the other kids who lived across the street.

Living at the Yankee Arms, Halloween was very easy since there were so many families living in the building that I never had to leave the building to go trick or treating. While trick or treating, word quickly spread through the building about who was giving out money, good snacks, etc.

Growing up in my neighborhood afforded me a level of autonomy and independence that no longer exists in today's world. Not only was I able to go out unsupervised as a youngster, but I was also able to walk everywhere I needed to go. There were two candy stores, Weissman's and Gaynor's, George's Luncheonette, Semrick's Delicatessen (which later became the Stenmark Deli), Singer's kosher butcher, two doctors, Dr. Barsham and Dr. Tischler, several dentists, Izzy's drugstore, Harold the tailor, Charlie the barber, Nick the shoemaker, and Rendelstein's grocery store, all on the street where I lived or across the street.

There was also a horse drawn wagon that passed through the neighborhood on Gerard Avenue that sold fruit to the neighborhood's residents. The owner of the wagon was Louie, and his horse was named Nellie. I can still remember seeing the horse's droppings in the middle of the street outside my bedroom window. Louie would eventually open a fruit stand on 157<sup>th</sup> Street between Gerard and Walton Avenues.

I have two recollections of Louie from my early childhood. The first was when he still had the horse drawn fruit wagon. As a young child, after I cruelly shot Nellie with a pea shooter, she broke into a trot. Once Louie got control of Nellie, he ran after me, and I fled through the basement of the building where I awaited the elevator that would take me to my first floor apartment and safety. The elevator arrived just as I saw Louie approach me, and I can't swear to it, but I think I saw the glint of a knife in his hand as I entered the elevator and the doors closed just before he caught up to me.

My second encounter with Louie occurred when he had a fruit stand on 157<sup>th</sup> Street several years later. I delivered for him one day, and when delivering a watermelon to 675 Walton Avenue, I dropped the melon but delivered it anyway. While the woman I delivered it to was very nice, by the time I got back to the fruit stand, Louie already knew about my mishap, and I never worked for him again.

Another recollection I have from my early childhood is of a man who walked through the neighborhood bellowing, "Buy," who could be

heard from more than a city block away; he was known simply as the “I cash clothes” guy, an old clothes peddler who canvassed the streets of the neighborhood in his horse drawn carriage, looking for old clothing to buy.

The store owners who occupied the shops within a block of where I grew up were larger than life personalities. Izzy, the front man of the drug store, had a brother Max, who was a pharmacist. They both commuted more than two hours a day from their residence in Coney Island. Izzy always had a cigarette dangling from his mouth, with the ashes from the cigarette falling whenever they got too long. Years later, when I brought in a prescription to be filled, Izzy refilled it without contacting the doctor, even though there weren't any refills left.

Then there was George, the proprietor of George's Luncheonette, who cooked hamburgers with a cigar in his mouth. George's wife, Rose, waited tables and handled the cash register. One of the favorite orders was a hamburger and French fries. When two people ordered a burger and fries, Rose would call out, “Hamburger and French; make it a pair.”

Mr. Gaynor, the owner of the candy store on Gerard Avenue near 158<sup>th</sup> Street, was a Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe. He later sold the store to a Jewish couple, Mr. and Mrs. Winchell, who were also Eastern European immigrants with thick Jewish accents. Mr. Winchell's first name was Jerry. When someone ordered a cherry coke, Mrs. Winchell would utter in a thick accent, "Jerruh, gimmie a cherruh coke."

Nick the shoemaker had several booths in his shop for customers to wait while he fixed their shoes. Nick even fixed my baseball glove on one occasion.

Charlie the barber, a short, stout man with a heavy Italian accent and with one leg shorter than the other, had two other barbers working with him at his shop, on 157<sup>th</sup> Street between Gerard and River Avenues: Tony, who constantly smoked cigarettes and blew cigarette smoke at the back of my neck to get rid of the stray hairs, and a woman named Adele.

The neighborhood had two synagogues within a one-block radius of my family's residence, Congregation Hope of Israel, where I had my Bar

Mitzvah in 1961, and where Mel Allen, the Yankees broadcaster, could be seen attending services during the high holidays. It was an orthodox temple where the women had to sit in the balcony.

Directly behind Congregation Hope of Israel, on Gerard Avenue, was a much smaller congregation headed by Rabbi Zion. The congregation was so small that Rabbi Zion was known for taking to the streets looking for enough people to form a minyan, which required at least 10 adult males (defined by the Jewish faith as those age 13 and over). When the kids saw Rabbi Zion coming, they ducked into their buildings, although I didn't mind helping him out on occasion.

It was a very safe neighborhood, so safe that I was able to walk to little league games, go sleigh riding (at either "Dead Man's Hill" in Franz Sigel Park, or at the treacherous Bert's Lot, which was between Gerard and River Avenues, where I once chipped my teeth when I slipped on the ice and fell while attempting to climb the hill with my sled), to the dentist, or to the movies by myself. Back then, for 25 cents, I was able to see a double feature at the

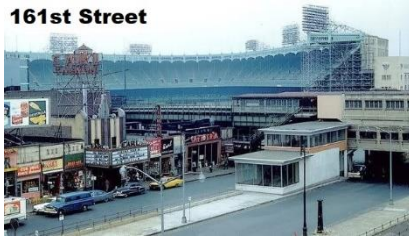
Earl Theater on 161<sup>st</sup> Street, and for another five cents, I could purchase a candy bar.

Just a block and a half to our north (for some reason, there was no 159<sup>th</sup> Street or 160<sup>th</sup> Street), 161<sup>st</sup> Street had a multitude of shops and restaurants, including two additional deli's, Court Hebrew National and The Roxy, the G & R Bakery, which offered delicious baked goods, a cafeteria, two pizza joints, two bars, an Italian restaurant, a Chinese restaurant (where my family would eat dinner every Sunday) and several other restaurants, including Addie Vallins, which featured ice cream sodas, and where my father once worked as a short order cook.

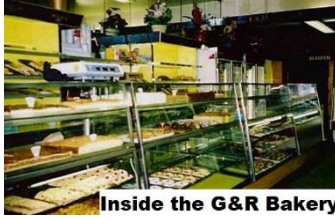
There was even a bowling alley, Yankee Lanes, located on the northeast corner of River Avenue and 161<sup>st</sup> Street, with the entrance – a flight of stairs leading down to the below-level establishment – about 30 yards north of the corner on River Avenue. Yankee Lanes had not been updated with the latest equipment and still used pin setters. (Stadium Lanes, a new, two-story structure one block west of us on River Avenue, opened in 1960.)



**161st Street**



**David (left)  
and Ashley**



In my early years, my Dad drove a cab in the evenings in addition to his day job as a storekeeper with the New York City Department of Health, and for extra money, my Mom sold clothing to people who lived in the neighborhood.

My parents were friends with a couple that owned a clothing store, and they introduced my Mom to the wholesalers in downtown Manhattan, where she would buy the clothing, then haul it uptown via the subway. Years later, my Mom would talk of how her hands were cut after holding the string securing the packages for so long. Our living room, in addition to being a bedroom for my older brother, served as a warehouse for the clothing until it could be delivered to my Mom's customers.

As I mentioned earlier, for the first five years of my life I didn't associate with many people other than my immediate family. My brother and I

didn't really have any friends our age in the building, although we sometimes played with the Super's son, Bobby, who was a little older than us and was very big for his age – so big, in fact, that he terrorized us years later when his father received complaints from neighbors about us playing in the lobby. Rather than send up one of the porters to chase us, he sent Bobby.

There were two younger girls, Barbara and Marilyn, who lived on the other side of our building who liked to tease my brother and me. And our next door neighbors, Gloria and Danny, had a daughter, Susan, who was a few years younger than us that we used to play with sometimes. There was also an older girl, Rose Marie, who lived above us, who we used to play with and who taught us the Lindy.

Being an identical twin, my brother and I were never apart in our early years. Because of this, we had developed a method of communication that did not require words. Sometimes all it would take was a look in the eyes or a facial expression for us to communicate. My parents told me that we even developed our own language that only my brother and I knew.

That began to change when I was five years old and was enrolled in kindergarten. Halfway through the school year, because my brother and I weren't associating with the other children in the class, I was removed from Miss Magner's kindergarten class and placed in Miss Lane's class. For the rest of my education, I was never in the same class as my twin brother.