

THE BATTLING BALANOFFS

Social consciousness is South Side family's tradition

Chicago Sun-Times-June 4, 1989

Author: Tom McNamee

"My father always said you should
remember the people at the bottom.

If you raise the bottom, everything rises."

James Balanoff Jr.

When the Good Lord made the Balanoff boys, he sprinkled in a rebel gene.

From a day in the early 1920s, when the first Balanoff walked onto South Chicago's political stage - entering from stage left - three generations of Chicago Balanoffs have been stirring folks up and ticking folks off and catching hell in return.

They fought for unions when unions were reviled. They fought for racial desegregation in the schools when other South Side whites abhorred desegregation. They backed Harold Washington for mayor when few whites - especially in the old ethnic neighborhoods - dared.

Today the Balanoffs remain the conscience of Steeltown, unapologetic liberals in an instinctively conservative world.

State Rep. Clem Balanoff is the family's rebel pride of the moment. The betting is heavy Clem will run for 10th Ward alderman in 1991, challenging either the Hulk Hogan of South Chicago, former Ald. Edward R. Vrdolyak, or more likely his sidekick brother, incumbent Ald. Victor Vrdolyak.

Balanoff opposed Ed Vrdolyak for alderman in 1987 and lost, just as his mother, Miriam Balanoff, was trounced by Vrdolyak in 1983. But Vrdolyak's failures at the polls of late lead some observers to predict that Balanoff stands a fighting chance in 1991.

Clem and Miriam, now a Circuit Court judge, are probably the best known Balanoffs outside South Chicago. They are celebrated thorns in Vrdolyak's side. But the Balanoff family story neither begins nor ends there. Chicago is full of talkative, battling, insurgent Balanoffs, most of them deeply committed to the causes of unions and grass-roots politics.

"There is a strong social consciousness among most Balanoffs," said Tom Balanoff, Clem's first cousin and research director for the Service Employees International Union. "It has not only survived but grown stronger over three generations."

The Balanoff story in Chicago begins with the family patriarch, James Balanoff, a Bulgarian immigrant who ran a live chicken shop on Commercial Avenue. James, fluent in five languages, loved to talk and usually did, mostly about the rights of working men and little guys and the evils of bosses and corporations. His poultry shop was something of a gathering place for men from the steel mills, especially men in need of a favor.

Could Jim write a friend's English-language letter to an immigration official? He could. Could Jim speak on another man's behalf at a steel mill grievance hearing? He could. Could Jim find out why a third man's disability checks had stopped? He could try.

Balanoff, who came out of an Eastern European intellectual tradition of left-leaning insurgency, believed firmly that mill workers had to develop a sense of European-style class solidarity that could transcend American-style racial and ethnic factionalism. The key to working class solidarity, he insisted, was militant trade unionism.

South Chicago was then, as now, a company town, and the company was steel - U.S. Steel, Republic Steel, Wisconsin Steel, Inland Steel - all of the big and small mills that forged much of the nation's basic steel from ore and coke and limestone.

Steelworkers lived, as they do now, virtually in the shadows of the mills, circling their wagons into ethnic and racial enclaves as balkanized as Europe itself.

What they had in common was the mills, where almost everybody worked. And what they had in the mills was the union.

James Balanoff, although never a millworker himself, raised money for the unions, distributed union leaflets and donated poultry to strikers. He

walked picket lines at times and stood with the strikers outside Republic Steel at the Memorial Day Massacre of 1937, when the police open fired and killed 10.

"My father always said you should remember the people at the bottom," said James Balanoff Jr. "If you raise the bottom, everything rises."

James Balanoff set a family standard of political commitment. You might disagree with his politics. You might doubt his ability. But you'd be nuts to question his sincerity.

Two subsequent generations of Balanoffs learned their politics at the patriarch's knee. His sons today recall with a touch of awe how the old man held forth on the day's events at the dinner table. His grandchildren recall how extraordinary it was, especially during the rebellious 1960s, to have a grandfather who was more radical than their most radical young friends.

"In about 1965, when I was 15 or 16, Grandpa took me and a couple of cousins to Washington for one of the first big anti-war demonstrations," marveled Tom Balanoff. "Here was our grandfather driving us to a protest."

James Balanoff and his Polish-born wife, Katherine, had five sons: James Jr., John, Clement, Theodore and William. The oldest three sons followed most closely in their father's footsteps, taking up the sword for progressive politics and unions.

James Jr., the oldest son, became South Chicago's resident Commie.

When in 1947, at the age of 25, he ran for alderman of the 10th Ward, critics called him a Communist. When he later ran for office in a steel union local, critics called him a Communist. And when he ran for alderman in Hammond, a few die-hard red-baiters still insisted he was pinko.

"In those days, and even today, if somebody don't like you, then that's what you are - a Communist," James Jr. said. "We went into the plants and tried to organize, and we asked for a 25-cent raise, so we were all Communists - you know."

Actually James Jr. was - for a brief while in the 1940s - a Communist. He said so himself, straight up, when the South Chicago Post of the American Legion voted him out of the organization in 1947. "I admit I'm a district organizer for the Communist Party," he said after the vote. "But when I went off to war no one asked me what party I favored. I don't think it should matter to the legion, either."

The label of Communist has been pinned on all Balanoffs since, although the label is unfair. The Balanoffs are more New Deal Democrats than anything else, and even that is a little unfair. "When we fight for clean air, is that a liberal or conservative issue?" Clem asked. "It's just a people issue."

James Jr. went on to success in the steelworkers union, becoming president of Local 1010 in East Chicago in 1976 and, one year later, director of the na-

tion's largest steelworkers district, District 31, representing some 100,000 unionized Chicago area steelworkers. As district director, he proved as irascible as ever: still pugnacious, distrustful of management and vaguely socialistic, calling for national health insurance and the nationalization of basic industry.

Ultimately, that kind of uncompromising stance got him bounced. Balanoff was defeated for re-election in 1981 by a more moderate union leader from Gary who had the backing of the national union's Pittsburgh hierarchy. The Pittsburgh boys were tired of all this Balanoff-style head-butting with management.

But Balanoff left his mark. In his four years as director he opened up the district political process, loosening restrictions on attending and speaking at district meetings and organizing civil rights, safety and women's conferences.

The patriarch's third oldest son, Clem Sr., turned out to be as much a firebrand as James Jr. After 19 years of working in the mills, Clem Sr. developed into one of Steeltown's most respected political organizers, managing campaigns - some successful, some not - on the city, state and local levels. He worked only for progressives and liberals and approached each race as a crusade, a battle of good vs. evil.

Clem Sr. directed his brother Jim's successful 1973 campaign for District 31 director and his losing 1981 bid for re-election. He managed all of his wife Miriam's campaigns, including her 1978 election to the Illinois House of Representatives, when she first defeated the Vrdolyak forces on their own turf.

Most notably, Clem Sr. was the man behind Steeltown dissident Ed Sadlowski, the veritable folk hero who came within inches of taking over the steel union's national offices. Clem managed Sadlowski's upset victory for the District 31 directorship in 1973 and his unsuccessful bid for the national presidency in 1976.

Clem Sr.'s wife, Miriam, remains perhaps the best known Balanoff politician. Tiny and talkative and possessed of enough energy to fill a room, she has been the family's leader in fights against Vrdolyak, on one front or another, for 25 years. She ran unsuccessfully against Vrdolyak twice: for alderman in 1983 and for Democratic ward committeeman the following year. On four occasions, as a candidate for state representative, she waged war against agents of Vrdolyak's machine. She stunned everybody by winning two of those elections - in 1978 and 1980.

Among third-generation Balanoffs are several who stick to the old rebel ways, an attitude toward life and politics they most commonly describe as "progressive." If you grew up a Balanoff, says Tom, James Jr.'s son, taking a stand was a way of life. The elders insisted.

When Tom was in the seventh or eighth grade, he recalls, his family participated in a nationwide boycott of the public schools to protest racial segregation in the South. Tom, his brothers Jim and Joe and his sister Kathy were the only white children in Gary to go to "freedom school" that day.

"Remarks were made," Tom recalled. "It was rough."

When Tom was in high school, his family worked the precincts for Richard Hatcher, who would be elected the first black mayor of Gary. To many whites in Gary, that virtually amounted to racial treason. It was time, a few of Tom's classmates decided, to beat him bloody.

"They were waiting outside the school to kick my butt," Tom said. "I went to this one teacher, and he took care of it, but I was looking over my shoulder for a while."

James Jr.'s wife, Elizabeth, is a historian who teaches a course in labor history at Roosevelt University. His daughter Kathy is married to an official in Steelworkers Local 1010. His oldest son, James III, is a Chicago lawyer who specializes in social security and worker disability law and represents unionized hospital workers. And James III's wife, Rebecca, is the daughter of Frank Rosen, district director of the United Electrical Workers.

Bob Balanoff, the younger Clem's brother, also is a lawyer, specializing in workers compensation and Social Security matters. He also was a charter director of the Citizens Utility Board, a utility watchdog. But his "real" job, he said, is running the Balanoff political organization. Bob and Clem, with almost daily help from Uncle Ted (the patriarch's fourth son), run the show.

"I work at the law because, unfortunately, most of the political causes we choose don't pay," Bob said. "We're constrained by the fact we are not the Kennedys."

On a recent Thursday this spring, Clem Jr. took a long drive around some of the old Balanoff neighborhoods. He drove past his grandfather's old poultry shop, now called George's Market, past the two-flat on Pill Hill where he grew up (directly across the street from Victor Vrdolyak's home) and past a community center on Jeffery Avenue where once he was kicked out for heckling Ed Vrdolyak.

Clem drove on past Bowen High School, where he and brother Bob and the uncles, as students, had ruffled feathers. As Bowen's senior class president in 1971, Clem gave a speech complaining about a "horse and buggy school administration in a jet age."

One year earlier, Bob was suspended twice for distributing anti-war pamphlets. He sued the Board of Education, charging that its rules infringed on his right to free speech. He won.

Clem pulled up next to a diner and parked. A precinct worker for Mayor Daley spotted him. "Hey, Clem," he shouted, "Vrdolyak's got some real problems. You know that? You could be the next king out here."

Clem laughed. He shook his head.

"I'm a Balanoff," he shouted back. "We don't like kings."

Judge Miriam Balanoff married into the powerful South Side family, but she already had the necessary fighting spirit. Two generations of Balanoffs: Theodore (clockwise from left), John, James Jr., Clement Sr., William, Katherine and; patriarch James Sr. Socio-political activism is a hallmark of the family.

Credit: Amanda Alcock
Edition: FIVE STAR SPORTS FINALSection: SECTION 2

FEATURESPage: 35
Index Terms: profiles;
CITY GOVERNMENT

;
LABORRecord Number: CHI357113Copyright 1989, 1996 Chicago Sun-Times, Inc.