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Broadway...from Indians to Commercial Center

Shopping for a new dress, suit hat, school supplies, household goods, or furniture? Putting money in the bank or looking to borrow some? Dining out or going to a movie? Where do you go? — to Broadway.

Today this avenue is the commercial heart of Bayonne. Shopping centers have been built in the vicinity of the city within easy reach of the local shoppers, however the quality merchandise, the personal service and the friendly atmosphere provided by the local merchants have kept the business in Bayonne.

But Broadway wasn't always a commercial district. In fact at one time it was nothing more than a mere path in a forest. In the early 1600s pirates anchored their ships in New York and Newark Bays and came ashore with their booty. After they divided the loot they had plundered, many buried their treasure along this path in the woods.

The pirates though, were not the only ones to use the little trail. Indians living in the area used it especially when escaping after their raids on neighboring farms. These Indians we are told weren't the peaceful pipe-smoking type who sat around selling blankets and trinkets. They were able warriors and brandished tomahawks when their anger was aroused.

A story is told of one Hendrik Van Dyck who owned a farm in 1655 extending from Broadway to the Hudson. It is said that Mr. Van Dyck was particularly fond of peaches and cultivated several of these fruit trees imported from Europe. It seems that the Indians had also suddenly developed a yen for the fruit and started to raid the Van Dyck orchard. Annoyed at the Indians because of the trouble he had to endure to obtain the trees, Van Dyck stationed himself one night beneath one of the trees.

Sure enough the peach-hungry Indians came to plunder the orchard, and one maurauder was taking the fruit from the tree under which Van Dyck was waiting. The Dutchman surprised the thief and shot him, discovering it to be an Indian maiden. The chiefs became furious and they chased Van Dyck down the trail that is now Broadway and succeeded in nicking him in the ear with an arrow. However, rescuers soon came and the Indians were driven back.

All these events took place on the site where now there stands a row of stores, neon lights, theaters, and banks.

As it became used more and more, the path gradually widened. The "Flying Machine" a stagecoach so named because of

its speed of reaching Philadelphia from Jersey City, mapped out a portion of Broadway as part of its route.

Broadway, south of 5th Street was once located west of where it is today. It was only some time after the 1800s that it was moved eastward to its present site. Again when Broadway was extended northward from 32nd Street to the Morris Canal, it was wider than the rest of the avenue. So the whole street from the canal to the Kill had to be widened eastward to a uniform width. This action necessitated the removal of the Reformed Church and several other landmarks.

Broadway was gradually becoming a street, maybe even beginning to look like an avenue. It was wide, extended the length of the city and was an aid to transportation. Stores began springing up here and there and gradually it was attracting some commercial trade.

But when it rained, Broadway was something else. It was mud, and holes, stuck carriages soiled dresses and buried shoes.

To solve the problem, old planks were put lengthwise across the road, hence it became known as "Old Plank Road." The planks served the purpose of keeping carriages and citizens from being stuck in the mud. But woe to the

pedestrian who stepped on the end of a plank that covered a hole. The poor chap was smacked smartly in the back of the head and probably sported a bump for some time.

Even if they avoided the mud, when it came to a parade, the people would march in it no matter what. An oldtimer who was a merchant on Broadway and watched it grow up once remarked, "They'd march even if the mud was up to their necks."

In 1882 Broadway received its first paving job. By virtue of the improvement its name was automatically changed to Avenue D. Broadway from 5th Street south was also called Avenue S. In 1884 letter carriers were given the job of numbering the houses along Broadway. This numbering process brought about a radical change in some streets (e.g. Broadway at 16th Street became Broadway at 8th Street.)

Several landmarks were located on Broadway. The first City Hall was at 22nd Street, a skating rink at 21st Street where Wigdor's Jewelry Store now stands, the old Strand Theater where William Jennings Bryant made a campaign speech and the LaTourette Hotel, showplace of the city and considered perhaps, the most beautiful building in the East, was visited by

people from throughout the world.

In 1907, the merchants along Avenue D petitioned the City Council to change the name of the street to Broadway. The resolution was adopted and passed.

Several merchants who were located on Avenue D are still operating successfully on modern Broadway.