

Fred H. McGrath and Fred H. McGrath & Son
By Raymond Geselbracht

The Olphert House was a tavern, located on the north side of Swain Street (now Pondfield Road West), just on the other side of the Bronx River in Yonkers. The bartender in the early years of the twentieth century was Fred H. McGrath, whose grandfather, John Olphert, started the business in 1860. McGrath's aunt, Kate Hopkins, ran the tavern for many years and McGrath worked for her. In 1911, she retired and turned the business over to him.



*Fred H. McGrath, tending bar at the Olphert House, c. 1900.
Bronxville History Center.*

Fred H. McGrath, who was the eldest of the seven children, was born in Yonkers in 1880. Perhaps because of the large number of children in the McGrath household, he was given to his Aunt Kate and raised primarily by her. The Olphert House was probably as much his home as anywhere else during his childhood. His father died when he was twelve and he had to go to work to help support his mother and brothers and sisters. He may have taken a few jobs in nearby restaurants, but before long he was working at Olphert House, doing whatever tasks a boy could do, including the job he remembered with loathing the rest of his life—cleaning out the spittoons. When he was old enough, he became a bartender.

He was perfectly suited to his new job—in every respect except one. He had a big, winning smile and an honest good-nature, he liked just about everyone and everyone liked him, and he worked hard. His one shortcoming was that he had no care for money and was unfailingly generous to anyone who told him a sad story. Aunt Kate saw that this trait might be bad for business, and she only turned things over to him after he got married, maybe thinking—as proved to be the case—that his young wife, Katherine, might steady him and help manage the financial side of the business. Kate’s hunch was spectacularly right. Katherine McGrath was quiet and competent, preferring to be in the background and let Fred do all the talking. She took hold of her husband’s finances and ran them with firmness and great skill and common sense for the next fifty years. She ran them so well that Fred McGrath didn’t have to change a bit, he never had to turn anyone away who came to him for help.



*Fred H. McGrath
(front) with some
friends at the Olphert
House, c. 1910.
Bronxville History
Center.*

One day in 1916 or 1917, two men came into Olphert House and went up to the bar. McGrath greeted them and, since they were new customers, bought them a drink. Quite a bit of time went by and nothing happened beyond friendly talk. Then the men got up and grabbed McGrath and said angrily, “Where’s McGrath?” “I’m McGrath,” he responded. “Look,” the men said, “we were sent up here to rough you up. If you don’t buy your liquor from us, we’ll have to come back and do a better job of beating you

up.” This is how in later years McGrath told the story to his family. The New York mob had given him its ultimatum. McGrath thought it over. But not for long, he knew what he had to do. He wasn’t going to do business with the mob. He closed Olphert House down that night and never reopened.

McGrath knew he would have to close his business down soon anyway, because the Bronx Parkway Commission was going to buy his property, and he had bought a new site for his business on the south side of Swain Street, just west of the Bronx River Parkway land. This new business he was planning was different, though, and wouldn’t take all his time; it was to be primarily a residence hotel. Besides, he needed to make more money. He was now supporting, in addition to his mother and several siblings, his Aunt Kate and his wife and two children.



Katherine McGrath, the perfect counterpart to her husband in running their business. Courtesy Bob and Bumpy McGrath.

Fred and Katherine McGrath decided to take a big gamble, one which would move the McGrath family to Bronxville, where it would make for itself an important place in village life.

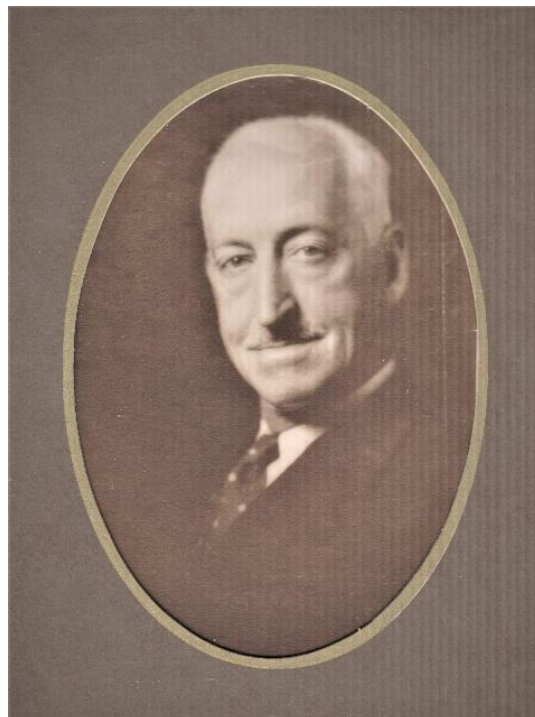
One of McGrath’s customers at Olphert House was Clarence Benedict, son of Charles Augustus Benedict, a prominent funeral director in New York City who had directed the funeral of President James A. Garfield and had assisted at the funeral of Ulysses S. Grant. Clarence Benedict had moved to Yonkers and was probably

commuting to New York City to work in the family business. He may have been looking for an opportunity to establish a funeral parlor of his own in Westchester County. McGrath needed a new line of work, and he and Benedict started talking about going into business together.

McGrath later claimed he had been interested in funerals ever since he was a boy, when he and his friends would follow funeral processions into the cemetery and wait in the bushes to see if anyone would leave a chicken at the gravesite. Some people did that, and when the boys came away with a chicken they took home the best dinner ever! This is at least what McGrath told his son Robert many years later. Another of his sons, Fred, called Junior, remembered that his father had great respect for the dead, including dead animals. “Whenever he found a dead bird, he always buried it in a cigar box,” Junior remembered in later years. It’s possible too that McGrath’s experience at Olphert House had persuaded him that a funeral director is not very different from a bar tender. Both jobs require a good smile, a kindly, sympathetic personality, an ability to listen and a desire to be helpful.

The two men decided to become partners in the firm of “Benedict and McGrath.” Benedict brought to the partnership the crucial New York funeral director’s license — McGrath did not have one — and McGrath brought substantial capital to invest in the business. Benedict and McGrath opened in 1918 in a storefront on Palmer Avenue, immediately to the right of the Bronxville Garage.

*Clarence Benedict,
McGrath’s partner in
his funeral business
from 1918 to about
1928. Courtesy Al
and Maria Benedict.*





The partnership lasted for about ten years. Benedict may have continued working at his family's firm in New York City, and he may have been largely a silent partner, taking a percentage of the profits but leaving most of the work to McGrath. McGrath went to night school and probably earned his funeral director's license in two or three years, but the partnership continued for quite a few years after that, perhaps suggesting that the partners had an agreement regarding how long their business together would last. The last mentions of Benedict and McGrath in the *Bronxville Review* and the *Bronxville Press* are from 1928. An advertisement in a Bronxville city director for 1929-1930 drops Benedict from the firm name, which is now "Fred H. McGrath," but it also says the firm was "established [in] 1832," which is the year that Benedict's grandfather opened his funeral business in New York City.

Besides his capital, Fred McGrath brought something more important to his new business, his wife Katherine, whose care of the finances allowed the firm to survive and succeed. McGrath's son Robert remembered how important Katherine McGrath was to the business. "...My mom solved all the problems. Problems with the business never affected my dad. He said, 'I grew up and I didn't have a cent in my pocket and it doesn't make any difference to me whether I have it or not.'"

Benedict and McGrath grew slowly in its early years. In 1924, when it was still not doing as many funerals as the partners hoped for, McGrath saw an opportunity to improve things. He had to act quickly. On December 13, 1924, Samuel Gompers, one of the most famous labor leaders in American history, died while traveling in Texas. McGrath discovered that he was to be buried in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, and he called a representative of the Gompers family and offered to direct Gompers' funeral. His son Robert remembered how his father told the story: "And then the guy said, 'How much?' And my dad said, 'No charge.' Pop always felt that [doing this funeral] helped his business." Gompers funeral procession in Washington, DC was a media spectacle, and the little-known funeral director from Bronxville gained a small measure of fame for his role in it.

In 1924 or 1925, McGrath bought a house on the southeast corner of Kraft Avenue and Park Place. Benedict and McGrath now became truly a funeral home. It was well-placed in its new location, directly across the street from the first site of St. Joseph's Church. McGrath was very active in this church, and he apparently thought being right across the street from it would bring him some business from Bronxville's

Catholics, which meant, at this time in the village's history, primarily Irish and Italian servants and workers. St. Joseph's moved to a new building on the southeast corner of Kraft Avenue and Cedar Street in 1928. McGrath sold his property on Kraft and Park Place in 1932 and bought a fine old house, for many years the home of William F. Kraft, on the northeast corner of Kraft and Cedar. He had positioned his funeral home once again directly across the street from St. Joseph's.

Another important change came in 1932. McGrath's oldest son, Fred O. McGrath, joined his father in the business, which was renamed, "Fred H. McGrath & Son." This is still the name of the business, even though Fred H. McGrath died almost seventy years ago and his business is now run, not by a son, but by a grandson. The old name has been kept partly to maintain the fiction that Fred H. McGrath is still guiding the business. And this may be mostly true. When you enter the Fred H. McGrath & Son funeral home, you immediately encounter a large portrait of old Fred McGrath, still, it seems, on the job and ready to help you. His spirit is certainly still present in the McGrath family members and others on the funeral home staff who believe that he knew how to run the place and that they should mostly stick to his ways. When McGrath's son Robert, who was with the family business for more than fifty years, was asked recently how he ran Fred H. McGrath & Son when he was in charge, he said, "I have primarily always looked to my father and the way he did business. Even to this day I consider Fred H. McGrath & Son to be his business."

The Fred H. McGrath & Son funeral home building dominates the corner of Kraft Avenue and Cedar Street. It's a Bronxville landmark and probably one of the most memorable structures in the village. It continues a family business that has been providing its services to Bronxville and beyond for over a hundred years.



There is more, though, to the story of Fred H. McGrath than Fred H. McGrath & Son. He devoted his energy and force of personality in other areas too. Most important was probably his work on behalf of St. Joseph's Church. In 1905 or 1906, when the pastor of Immaculate Conception Church in Tuckahoe was giving Sunday services in the ballroom of the Hotel Gramatan in Bronxville, McGrath became involved in raising money to buy for the nascent St. Joseph's congregation the old Bronxville School building. He also may have persuaded Frederick W. Kraft—"by wiling old Mr. Kraft with a number of amusing stories," as a 1957 article in the *Bronxville Review Press and Reporter* put it—to give to the church a parcel of land on the northeast corner of Kraft Avenue and Park Place. The money was raised, due in significant part to McGrath's efforts, and the building was purchased and remodeled into a home for the new St. Joseph's Church.



About twenty years later, McGrath apparently persuaded another member of the Kraft family, this time Frederick's son William F. Kraft, to donate a parcel of land on the southeast corner of Kraft Avenue and Cedar Street to St. Joseph's Church as the site for its new building. He accomplished this, as he told his family, by pointing out to Kraft that his rival in village philanthropy, Frank Ross Chambers, had recently given land to the Board of Education for the new Bronxville School buildings, and that it would probably be a good thing if he, Kraft, gave land for the new St. Joseph's Church building.

McGrath was also instrumental in acquiring the land and putting up the building for the Bronxville station of the Eastchester Fire Department, on Midland Avenue near Village Hall. At about this same time, he was elected to serve a ten-year term on the Eastchester Board of Fire Commissioners. He was preparing to run for another term when he died in 1954. The McGrath family tells the story that McGrath used to park in



front of Bellis's Drug Store on Pondfield Road every afternoon so he could buy his newspaper and cigars at the nearby stationery store. He always chose to park right in front of a fire hydrant, and when he would come out of the store, as the story is told, a policeman, young and inexperienced, would be writing up a ticket. He didn't know that this particular spot, in front of the fire hydrant, was, as the family calls it, "Freddie's parking lot." McGrath would come up to

the officer and say, “You know who I am? I’m the fire commissioner. I’m here inspecting that fire hydrant and you’re giving me a ticket!”

McGrath was also interested in Bronxville School, particularly the football program. He admired the athletes for all the hard work they did to get in shape and play their best possible game. In 1943, he decided he wanted to give a dinner for the team. It had won only one game that year and he wanted to let them know their effort was important and admired despite their losses. He tried to get financial support for the dinner from village organizations, but no one would help him put on a dinner for a losing team. He decided to do it by himself, and the McGrath dinner became an annual event in village life for the next seventy-six years.

Fred H. McGrath & Son is important to Bronxville because it has provided an essential service in the village for over one hundred years, and it is a key part of the village look too, a landmark in the village’s suburban landscape. Fred H. McGrath—through his works and deeds and the force of his unique, charming, generous, quirky, irrepressible personality—has become a permanent part of Bronxville’s historical memory. He joins a relatively small number of men and women who step forward for us out of the deep years of Bronxville’s past to represent all that the village means.



The McGrath family at their home at 6 Lee Place, c. 1937. L to R: Fred H., Fred O., John, Robert, Eleanor, Katherine. Courtesy Bob and Bumpty McGrath.

The author thanks Bob, Bumpty and Buzz McGrath and Al and Maria Benedict for helping with this article.