



Shirley Erwood Miller (L) and Marie Erwood Kingsbury (R), in a late 1940s view of Plymouth Ave. looking toward Pennsylvania St. Marie is standing in front of 44 Plymouth; 46, 50 and 54 are visible to the right. The porch columns at 44 and 46 Plymouth Ave. are similar; the porches were likely built in the 1880s. Shirley and Marie are wearing Easter outfits that were made by a seamstress in her shop on the corner of Plymouth at Pennsylvania.



Shirley Erwood, Marie Erwood of 44 Plymouth and Augustus Sodaro of 42 Plymouth during a late winter scene of Plymouth Avenue during the 1940s. The finely detailed wrap-around porch can be seen behind at 35 Plymouth Avenue and 33 Plymouth Avenue is next door to the right.



“Woody” Dwinell was born while his family lived at 44 Plymouth Ave. in 1949. This photo, circa 1951, shows Woody with his tricycle. Behind him, the third building from the right, is an old barn that was part of the Wickser estate. By the 1940s, boys in the neighborhood used it to play handball and bounce balls off its surface. It is now demolished.



Circa 1945 photograph of (L-R) Shirley Erwood, Betty Shane and Marie Erwood of 44 Plymouth Avenue. 39 and 35 Plymouth Ave. can be seen in the background and show the original architectural detailing built into these homes. *Marie Erwood.*



1950s view of neighborhood children standing in front of 42 Plymouth Avenue with Pennsylvania Street in background. *Gina Potpan.*



Another 1950s view of neighborhood children standing in front of 42 Plymouth Avenue with Pennsylvania Street in background. *Gina Potpan.*



The northeast corner of Plymouth Avenue at Hudson Street is anchored by the turreted Queen Anne style house at 314 Hudson Street.

History of Plymouth Ave. from Pennsylvania St. to Jersey St. and Porter Ave.

Plymouth Ave. between Pennsylvania St. and Jersey St. and the very short block between Jersey St. and Porter Ave. is home to several historically and architecturally significant structures. Porter Ave. is the natural demarcation point of this book because the early history of the street is linked among the first three blocks. The street north of Porter Ave., has its own separate, later history. While the section of Plymouth Ave. between Hudson St. and Porter Ave. was opened by 1837, the section between York and Connecticut Sts. was not opened until the late 1850s. Beyond that, the street was not opened until the 1870s, and even later, what is now the very long street of Plymouth Ave. was actually formed when several smaller separate streets were combined and renamed for simplicity.

In addition, Plymouth Avenue's namesake, the Plymouth Methodist Church, is found within in the boundaries of Historic Plymouth Avenue on the short stretch of Plymouth Avenue between Jersey Street and Porter Avenue. The block on the east side of Plymouth Avenue, bounded by Pennsylvania St., Plymouth Ave., Jersey Street and Normal Avenue is known as block 90. The west side of the block, bounded by Pennsylvania Street, Plymouth Avenue, Jersey Street and West Avenue is known as block 91.

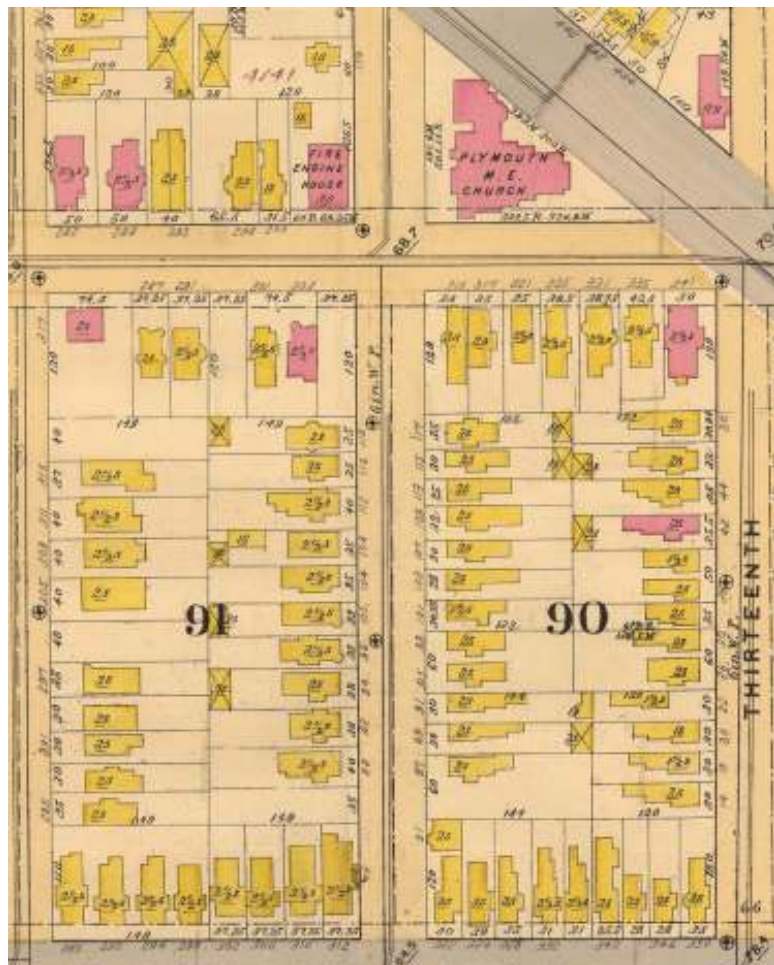
On the section of Plymouth Avenue between Pennsylvania Street and Jersey Street, the homes on the east side of the block are older (those houses directly west of Normal Avenue) than those on the west side of the street. Most of the homes on the east side of the street were built from the late 1870s through the early 1880s.

The land on the west side of the block belonged to the William G. Fargo estate. Fargo, founder of the famed Wells-Fargo and the American Express companies, was mayor of Buffalo (1862-63 and 1864-65) during the Civil War. The fortune that Fargo made from these companies allowed him to build a towering mansard-roofed mansion during the years 1867-1872 facing Jersey St., on an entire block bounded by Fargo Ave., Pennsylvania St. and West Ave. The mansion featured a center pavilion that rose to five stories and occupied a park-like area complete with fountains and gardens. In 1872, when the mansion was completed, it was called the most elaborate and costly private mansion in the state outside of New York City.

The house contained the finest wood from all the states of the Union as well as imported wood from Australia and the Pacific Islands. It was the first home in Buffalo to contain an elevator and was even said to have had gold doorknobs.

Fargo didn't stop at the impressive feat of building such a superlative mansion; he also purchased the entire adjoining block 91 bounded by Jersey St., West Ave., Pennsylvania St. and Plymouth Ave. to keep it from being built up during his lifetime. He brought a professional landscape gardener to Buffalo to lay out and manage his home and block 91. On the block he constructed one of the country's finest private conservatories where tropical plants of the rarest kinds were cultivated.⁵⁰ In the conservatory Fargo produced the first hothouse grapes in Buffalo, and it was virtually impossible to obtain any comparable to them for many years.

Outside the confines of the Fargo estate, the area's popularity exploded between the years 1880 and 1885 when several streetcar lines were opened in the vicinity. These railway lines allowed people easy and convenient commutes between the downtown/canal districts and the Historic Plymouth Avenue neighborhood. As a result, both the east and west side of Plymouth Avenue between Pennsylvania Street and Jersey Street became developed mostly during the period between 1878-1890.



Block of Plymouth Avenue from Pennsylvania Street to Porter Avenue, from an 1894 Atlas. Block 91, on the left, was reserved for use by the Fargo estate until the late 1880s.

The height of the area's popularity seemed to occur during the early 1890s, when social changes caused a migration from Swan Street and other prosperous streets on Buffalo's east side. In an issue of the *Buffalo Morning Express* from 1891, the house design of **81 Plymouth Avenue** was heralded as an ideal modern home for Buffalonians. Among the virtues of the Buffalo's west side neighborhood, the newspaper article identified the following benefits compared to Buffalo's east side:

- *Air is clear and the breezes which are wafted across the Niagara from Lake Erie and the Canadian fields are not laden with smoke, soot and noxious odors;*
- *Nearly all the streets are paved with sheet asphalt and lined with thrifty shade trees;*
- *Sidewalks are kept in good repair;*
- *Nearly all the houses are built on large lots, with yards in which children can find ample room to play;*
- *The school-houses are in good condition and the school surroundings more healthful than on the east side;*
- *Churches are more numerous;*
- *The horse-cars are more elegant and make better time;*
- *The great park and a dozen smaller parks are in this part of the city;*
- *The social atmosphere is more congenial to people of cultivated tastes and a sense of refinement.*⁵¹

East Side of Plymouth Avenue

The east side of Plymouth Avenue from Pennsylvania Street to Jersey Street began to be eyed for residential development during the late 1870s due to its proximity to Symphony Circle and to the substantial infrastructure development occurring nearby (Firehouse #2 at the corner of Plymouth Avenue and Jersey Street and the building of the Plymouth Methodist Church across Plymouth Avenue, between Jersey Street and Porter Avenue). As an added benefit, the houses that were to be built on the east side of Plymouth Avenue had a picturesque sight to behold outside their windows: the Fargo mansion and its immense and beautiful gardens. So it was no surprise that in 1880 real estate firm C. J. & S. P. Hastings wrote: "We offer for sale several desirable lots on Plymouth Avenue between Pennsylvania and Jersey Streets. Will sell on easy terms."⁵² The majority of the homes on the east side of the block were built between 1880-1885. There were only two houses on the block before 1880: **91 Plymouth Avenue**, built in 1878 and a house at **322 Pennsylvania Street**.

The house currently on the corner Plymouth Avenue at **322 Pennsylvania Street** is a handsome house designed and built by Richard Caudell in 1882. Thomas Robinson was the first owner/occupant and his business was called the Thomas Robinson & Co., a lumber company located at Ganson Street near Mills Dry Dock. Although the house currently at **322 Pennsylvania St.** dates from 1882, there were several houses previously located on the site. It is one of the earliest continually occupied home sites in the neighborhood.

322 Pennsylvania St. was originally surrounded by a wrought iron fence that was removed in 1998. In 1889 Joseph Desbecker, a merchant, lived there with his wife Minnie Levyn Desbecker (an 1885 graduate of Buffalo High School) and their young daughter. The house was advertised for sale in 1890 and was described as: "No. **322 PENNSYLVANIA ST.**, a substantially built modern residence, requiring a veranda only to make it one of the most eligible houses on the street. Double parlors, hall, dining room, kitchen, pantry, china closet, and store room on first floor. Five chambers and bath room on second floor. Natural gas, hot and cold water, furnace, electric bells, hardwood mantels, double windows upstairs, fine gas fixtures, etc. Newly decorated. Stone walks."⁵³ Architect James H. Marling lived at **322 Pennsylvania St.** in 1893.

The beautiful Queen Anne style home at **81 Plymouth Ave.** was built in 1887 on the rear of the corner lot belonging to **322 Pennsylvania St.** No. **81 Plymouth Ave.** was advertised for sale (along with **322 Pennsylvania St.**) in 1890 and the advertisement revealed the following features: "These two desirable west-side residences occupy the lot on the northeast corner of Pennsylvania St. and Plymouth, two blocks from The Circle, opposite the Fargo estate. Lot 30 x 120." "No. **81 PLYMOUTH AVE.**, is a handsome modern square-built house, only three years old. First floor contains reception room, hall, parlor, dining room, kitchen and pantry. On the second floor are four large chambers and bath room. Floored attic with stairway above. Hot and cold water, marble basins, Boynton furnace, two cellars, stationary tubs, hardwood mantel and open grate. Handsome decorations throughout. Natural gas in street."⁵⁴ The advertisement was written by the home's owner, Lewis Davis Coffrain. He worked for several newspapers in the city including the *Express* and *Courier*. He was later advertising manager and "expert" for J. N. Adam & Co. and left Buffalo in 1899 for St. Louis. He was one of the most widely known advertising men in the country.⁵⁵

No. **87 Plymouth Avenue** was built in 1880 and the home's original owner, Chester C. McClure, Jr., owned

a company called McClure, Bloesser and Eggert, manufacturer of fine shoes along with his partners Jacob Bloesser and Edwin B. Eggert. Eggertsville was named after Eggert's grandfather, Christian Eggert. McClure lived in **87 Plymouth Avenue** with his wife, Lora and their son Harry T., who was born in 1880 and as a young adult worked in a law office.

No. **89 and 91 Plymouth Avenue** are homes that are similar in appearance, although they were built several years apart. They are both two-story frame houses with gable roofs. The decorative features of the homes vary slightly.

No. **89 Plymouth Avenue** was designed and built in 1883 by J. William Byers. The home's architectural features include a wood-paneled double front entrance door, similar to the one at **337 Pennsylvania St.**, also built by Byers. On the second story of **89 Plymouth Ave.**, the windows are decorated with cornice heads, carved ancones and trefoil molding. Crowning the house's front gable is a decorative verge board. Stephen B. Couch, a hair plaster manufacturer, was the home's first owner. Couch, with his wife Lydia J. and sons Arthur S. and Bayard T. and daughter Mary were natives of Elmira New York. The family owned several businesses: the L. J. Couch



19th century advertisement for the Couch Company.

(hog and cattle) Hair Company of Buffalo and Elmira, the Buffalo Glue Factory, the New York Glue Company of Elmira, the B. T. Couch Hair & Bristle Works of Cleveland and East Buffalo, and the Buffalo Wholesale Bottle Company. The Couch family moved to Buffalo in the early 1880s and lived for a year at 97 Prospect Avenue before moving to **89 Plymouth Avenue**, where the family lived for nearly three decades. After the turn of the twentieth century, members of the Couch family were instrumental in the development of South Buffalo. In one example, Bayard Couch, with his neighbor Edward Smith of **96 Plymouth Avenue**, prevailed upon the Lackawanna Railroad to build overhead bridges on Elk and Seneca Streets. Early in the twentieth century most of the Couches' hair and bristle interests were sold and about 1915, the family sold the Buffalo Glue Factory, located on South Park Avenue near Seneca Street.⁵⁶ Some of the Couches were members of the Plymouth M. E. Church.

No. **91 Plymouth Avenue** has a connection to the first block of Plymouth Avenue. Its original owners, Adolph and his wife Eva Leuze, first moved to the Plymouth Avenue in 1872. That year, they built a home at **47 Plymouth Avenue**. In 1878, they built **91 Plymouth Avenue**, the oldest house on the second block of the street still on its original site. The Leuzes moved from **47 Plymouth Avenue** to **91 Plymouth Avenue** at that time. The house, a typical wood-frame gable-roofed dwelling from the period, features a double entrance door, a full front porch and original carved window hoods.

No. **95 Plymouth Avenue** is a lovely Second Empire style cottage featuring a flat roofed square turret arising from a tall mansard roof with wood shingles. The dormers have pedimented heads with a foliate cutout pattern and brackets under its eaves. The entrance retains its original wood paneled double doors. The front porch is especially attractive with its turned and fluted posts and spindles in the balustrade. The house has a number of charming features: its house number is carved into the porch pediment; the front yard is surrounded by Victorian wrought-iron fencing and iron cresting outlines the roof's turret. No. **99 Plymouth Avenue** is a near twin to **95 Plymouth Avenue** and is representative of a common occurrence in Buffalo where two houses, nearly identical, are built side-by-side. No. **95 and 99 Plymouth Avenue** were constructed in 1881 by Francis Shadrake, who lived behind the houses on 13th Street (now Normal Avenue). Shadrake owned the lot that ran through from Plymouth Avenue to Normal Avenue and at one time there were two homes located on Normal Avenue similar in appearance to **95-99 Plymouth Avenue**. Francis Shadrake was the son of Frederick Shadrake whose homestead was located at **46 Plymouth Avenue**. For most of the 1880s, the houses at **95-99 Plymouth Avenue** were rented out, but by 1890, Shadrake and his family moved to **95 Plymouth Avenue**. Some of the tenants who lived in the house before Shadrake moved in included Charles H. Arthur, who moved to **95 Plymouth Avenue** about 1883 from **202 Prospect Avenue**. He was a partner in Arthur and Waters, commercial merchants. By 1887, the home was occupied by Frank E. Drullard. He, along with business partner Fred Owen, owned the Empire Manufacturing Company. He was also associated with Drullard and Hayes, working as a machinist.

Sometime between 1900-1910, Francis Shadrake passed away and his widow Eliza continued to live in **95 Plymouth Avenue** with their daughter Una F. Shadrake, who had married William H. Carter, a mason contractor. Their daughter, Margaret Haskell Carter, remained in the house until her death on April 4, 1984. Carter was a cousin of Arthur Godfrey the popular 1950s-era television host.⁵⁷

A minor scandal occurred at **99 Plymouth Avenue** at the turn of the twentieth century. Its long-term resident, John W. Neff, rose to a position of power that proved to be an irresistible temptation to corruption. Born in Buffalo in 1862, Neff, while a young man, worked as a messenger boy for the Western Union Telegraph Company. He later worked for the Red Line fast-freight company where he became an expert in mileage record computation and auditing. At the age of 29, he entered the world of politics. A Republican, he was elected Erie County's Seventh Ward Supervisor in 1891 and he was then re-elected in 1893. Neff served upon the county's purchasing and auditing committee of the board of supervisors. In 1895, the committee was abolished and the position of county auditor was created. The Republican county convention unanimously nominated Neff for the position and he was elected by a majority of 15,000 votes. Neff lived at **99 Plymouth Avenue** before 1900 until 1906, during the period when the scandal arose. It started about 1900, when with the



99 Plymouth Avenue and its twin at 95 Plymouth were built in 1881 in the Second Empire style. Illustration by Don Mayer.

construction of the 65th Regiment Armory between East North and Best Streets at Masten Avenue began. The site of the armory was on an old cemetery (known as the East North Street Cemetery) and Erie County was responsible for relocating the bodies buried there to Lakeside Cemetery in Hamburg, New York. It appears as though Neff masterminded a scheme in 1901 to invoice the county for fictitious bodies moved to the Lakeside cemetery from the East North Street Cemetery. Through this falsified billing process, Neff was accused of stealing over \$115,000 from Erie County, a huge sum in those days. Neff's crime was discovered in 1906 when he was arrested from **99 Plymouth Avenue**, found guilty and sentenced to jail.⁵⁸

The house at **101 Plymouth Avenue** has also had an interesting, if less scandalous, history. The house is technically the oldest house on the block, although it has been modified considerably from its original appearance and has been moved from its original site. The cottage once had Italianate-style architectural finish features and sat directly on Symphony Circle from the 1860s until the early 1880s. At that time its address was **83 Wadsworth St.** where today the Grace Manor Nursing Home stands. The house was built in 1865 by carpenter Robert Pallister. The house is a 1½ story wood-frame home that originally had arch-topped windows on the first and second



Ross (Rosario) Joseph Drago, an artist who lived at 101 Plymouth Avenue, seated in his back yard. He built his art studio in the rear of his home. Courtesy of Ross G. Drago.

floors. This dwelling served as the Pallister family home for nearly ten years. By the late 1870s, John O. Smith, a sewer builder and contractor, had a tile yard at **90 Wadsworth Street** and operated his business out of the house when it was at **83 Wadsworth Street**. About 1879 or 1880, Smith left the house and moved to **365 Pennsylvania Street**. In 1882 Charles Ahaart moved the house presently at **101 Plymouth Avenue** from **83 Wadsworth Street** to its current location.⁵⁹

No. **101 Plymouth Avenue** had several owners through the years, including Percy Blake, an engineer who lived there in 1887 and Alex Mehwalt, a mechanical engineer with the Star Machine Company, who lived there from about 1890 until 1910. After that the house was owned by Arthur R. Martin, a foreman. After passing through several more owners, by the late 1940s, it became the home of Ross (Rosario) Joseph Drago (August 15, 1907, Fredonia, NY - January 2, 1996) and his wife Francesca Iannuzzo, later changed to Frances Annis (February 15, 1910, Dunkirk, NY - August 30, 1976). Both Ross and Francesca were born in New York State, but their parents were from the same town in Sicily called Valedomo. They were farmers - "la ragginaro," grape growers. Their ultimate goal in life, passed down from generation to generation, was to own their own land, to grow grapes and food for their family and to be their own bosses.

Ross's sister, May, was living in Buffalo on Hudson Street in 1931, and Frances Annis (Fran) was her dear friend back in Jamestown. May told Fran there were good job opportunities in Buffalo, and invited Fran to come to Buffalo and share her apartment. Fran did, and found a job in a laundry. May talked glowingly of her brother, Ross, who was away studying at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, and wanted Fran to meet him. Somehow, at the age of 21, Fran contracted chicken pox - and that was the time that Ross came to Buffalo and met Fran. Still, love blossomed and they were married in Jamestown on June 24, 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression. After starting a family and living in the Lakeview municipal housing project, the Dragos purchased **101 Plymouth Avenue** and lived there with their children Ross G., Carol and Patricia.

According to Pat Vine, daughter of Ross J. Drago, he discovered **101 Plymouth Avenue** for sale in the want ads and seeing the house was love at first sight. He saw it as an opportunity to leave the projects, own property and provide a dream home for his family. He was confident that he could fix, repair or remodel anything.

Pat remembers her father's excitement when he told the children about it. She remembers standing in front of **101 Plymouth Avenue** with her family and seeing a charming little house with rounded windows, a sun porch and a very dark second floor. The house, surrounded by tall grass, appeared to be definitely haunted! There was a small flag in the window with one gold star indicating that someone from the family was in the armed services and had died. The Dragos met the lonely, old woman who lived there, Mrs. Catherine A. Dolan. She was happy that a family would once again occupy the house. She had closed up the second floor bedrooms after her nephew, PFC Edward G. Miller, whom she had raised as her son, died in the service during World War II. Two other servicemen who lived on Plymouth Avenue died during service in World War II: Charles G. Monte of **33 Plymouth Avenue** and Clifford J. Taber of **50 Plymouth Avenue**.

When the Dragos purchased **101 Plymouth Ave.** for \$1,200, they attained the Italian-American dream of owning their own home. There was a beautiful lilac tree in the backyard. There was enough room to plant a vegetable garden with green beans, tomatoes, mint, lettuce, carrots and pumpkins. A flower garden was created with all of Fran Drago's favorite flowers: Seven Sister climbing roses on the fence, peonies, daffodils and forget-me-nots.

The upstairs bathroom had a large platform that the toilet was perched on, with a tank and chain above it for flushing. Drago and his father changed the plumbing and also installed a shower (which they didn't have in their former home at Lakeview), thinking it was a wonderful addition. They installed black and yellow vinyl tiles on the floor and the Dragos gave their daughter Carol, a mathematical genius, the job of designing the floor pattern.

The family loved their new home and neighborhood. Mrs. Drago loved her sunny, bright kitchen, where she sang Italian songs and enjoyed making the family something delicious for breakfast. She loved mornings. Every Saturday the children would help Mr. Drago with a project on the house.

Ross J. Drago was both an artist and inventor. Drago's paintings and other art were well loved in Buffalo. On one occasion, at an exhibition of his paintings at the former Howard Johnson's Restaurant on Delaware Avenue at North Street, an art patron purchased the entire exhibit. Drago greatly admired the artistry of Norman Rockwell, and in 1953 the family had the opportunity to visit Rockwell at his studio in Arlington, Vermont. Drago had a successful art career and sold many paintings every year at the Allentown Art Festival. Drago and his family participated in the very first festival (1958) along with so many of Drago's friends from the Albright Art School.

Drago was also a brilliant inventor. One of Drago's inventions include the Mag Board (electronic symbols on magnets), that allowed Bell Aircraft to act as if they had a computer years before computers came out. Bell Aircraft could get bids for electronic books in a matter of a couple of hours using Drago's invention instead of weeks

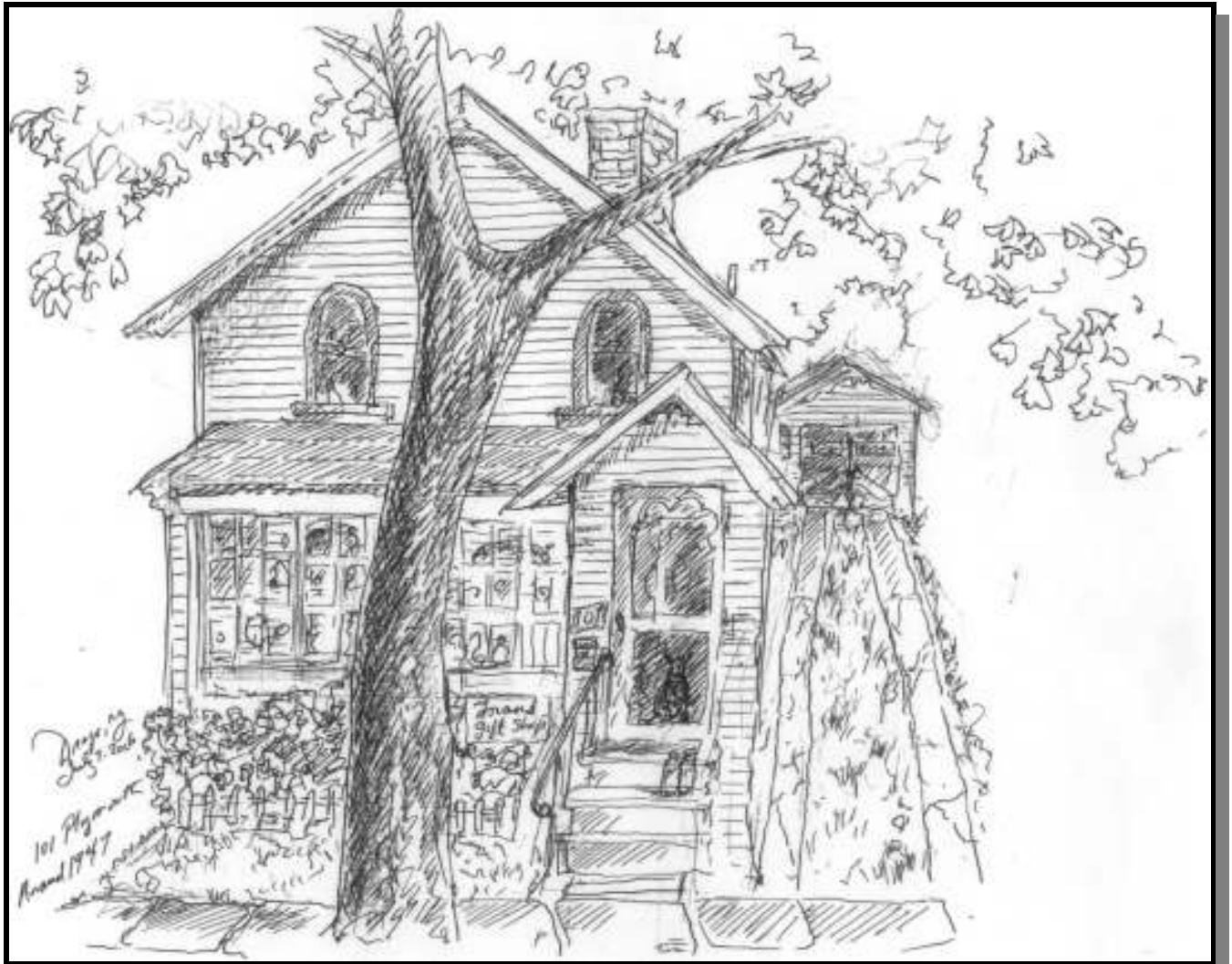
of artists drawing each individual electronic symbol.

Fran Drago operated a small gift store in the glass enclosed sun porch at **101 Plymouth Avenue** which she called Fran's Gift Shop. In the gift shop she sold ceramic bric-a-brac such as large apple-shaped cookie jars and creamers shaped like cows.

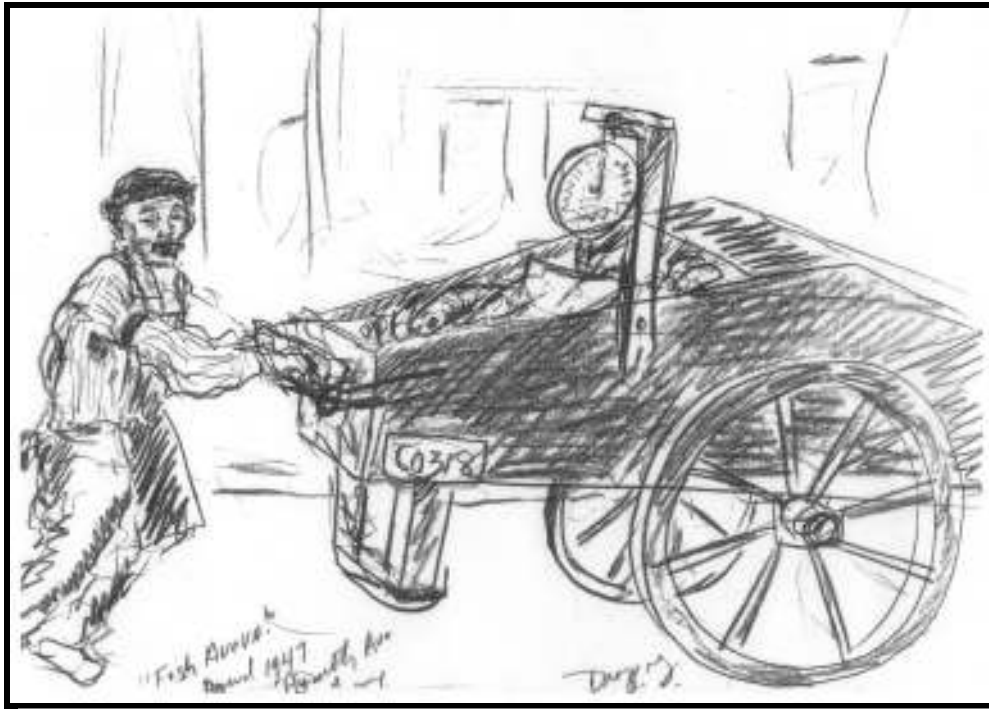
On one very special weekend in 1959, Drago and his son Ross began the deconstruction of the dark shed that was attached to the kitchen, in order to begin building Drago's art studio. When completed, it had large windows that provided ideal light for painting. This is where he painted for hours and taught his son to paint.

At some point, a modernization took place at **101 Plymouth Avenue** that replaced the original first-floor arched windows with a picture window and removed the porch. Green siding was installed and then later, vinyl siding. However, the original wooden features are preserved in their original form under the siding.

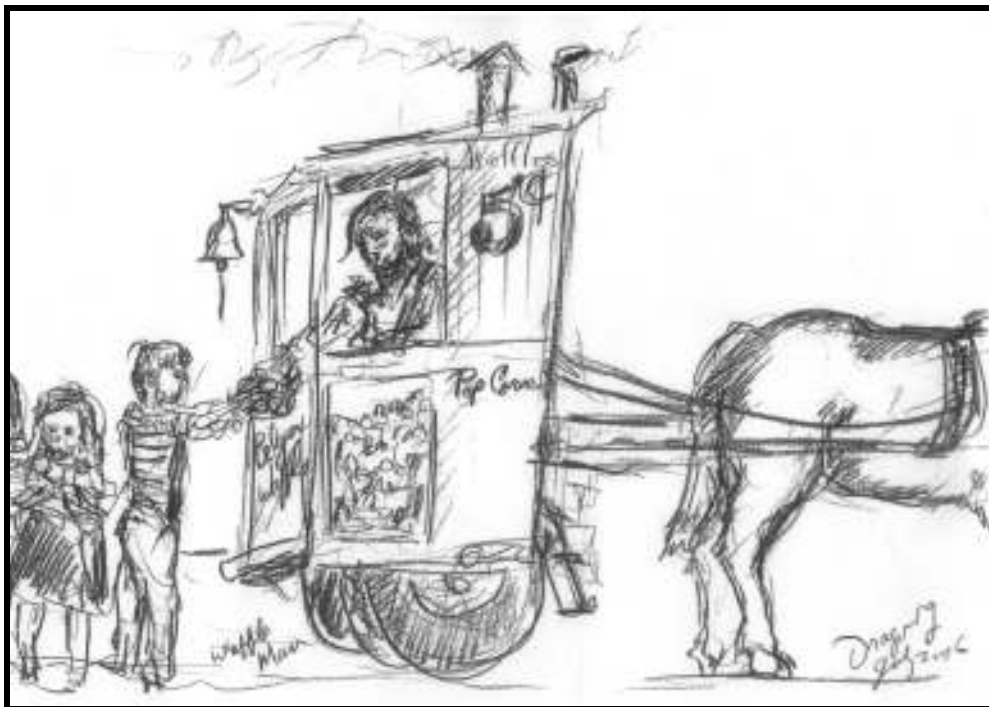
Ross G. Drago, Drago's son, who grew up at **101 Plymouth Avenue**, is a writer, painter and inventor who teaches Energy Consciousness and is creator of the Energy Symbol Language, and director and operator of the Energy Art Studio in Oakland, California that is dedicated to his father, Ross J. Drago. Drago is also the writer of several books, including *Buffalo Boy*, a collection of stories about his youth that includes several experiences about the Plymouth Avenue neighborhood during the 1950s. Drago maintains a website for his art studio and books at www.energyart.com. Drago also maintains an exhibit of his father's paintings on the website under a page entitled "Memorial Exhibits."



101 Plymouth Avenue, as it appeared in 1947 when it was the home of Ross Drago, the artist, his wife Frances and their children. Frances operated a gift shop from the sun porch. Protecting the house was the family dog, Tuffy, a terrier. On the steps are milk bottles that were delivered every three days.
Illustration by Ross G. Drago, 2006.



In the 1940s, the Fish Seller, a very tiny four foot tall Italian man, pushed his enormous 10-15 foot long solid wooden cart down Plymouth Avenue. The cart was painted grey and was filled with ice chips and fish for sale. He would scream something that sounded like “f-i-i-i-s-h avevie,” (fresh fish). *Illustration by Ross G. Drago, 2006.*



Another figure from the 1950s on Plymouth Avenue was the “Belgian waffle man,” with his great white horse. He made deep, tall waffles covered with white powdered sugar on the spot to the delight of neighborhood children. The smell of the waffles, the sugar and the horse as well as hot popping corn by a propane fire in the cart is one that is indelibly carved into the memory of those who lived in the neighborhood at that time. *Illustration by Ross G. Drago, 2006.*