

The New York Times

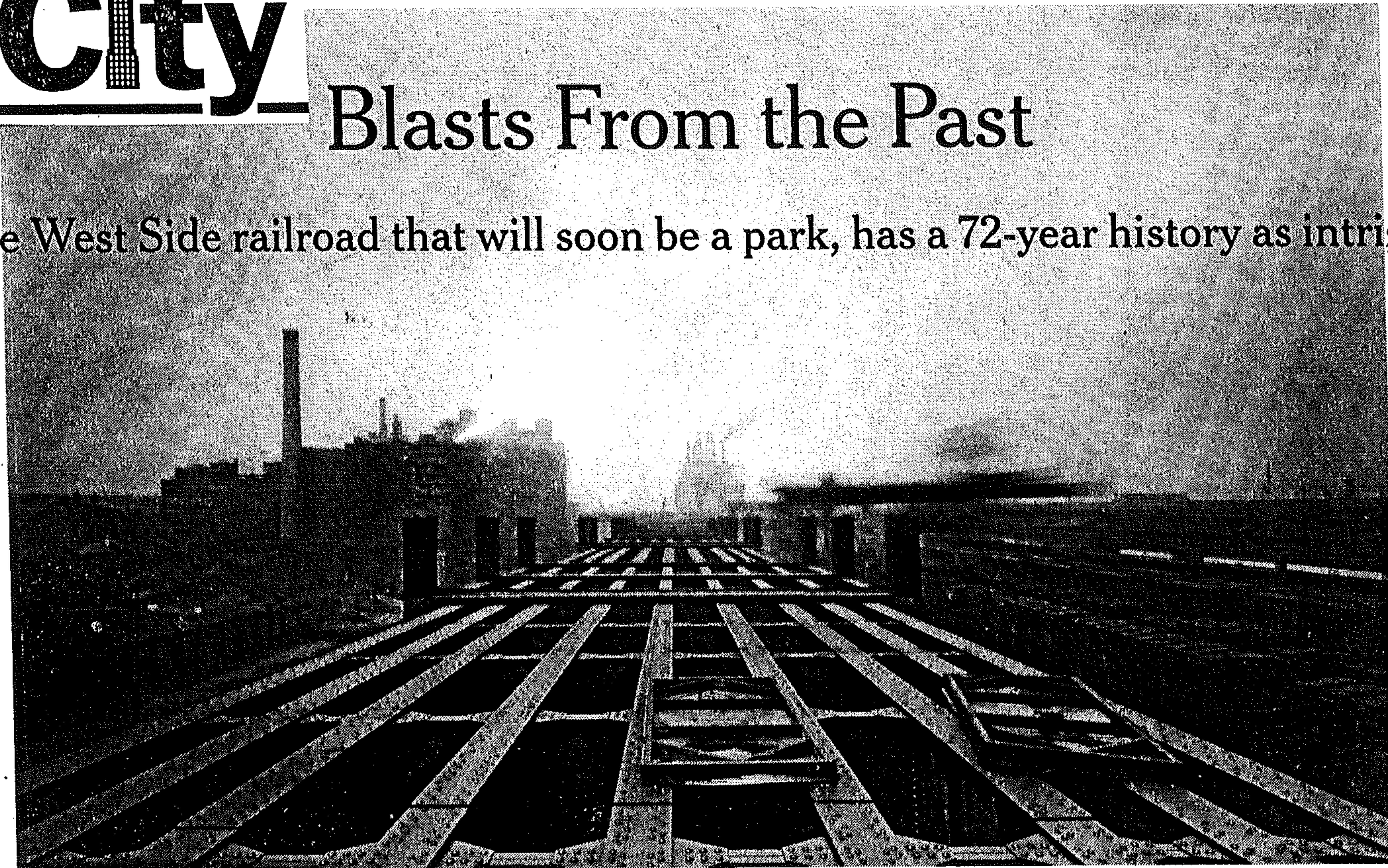
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CITY LORE

The City

Blasts From the Past

The High Line, the West Side railroad that will soon be a park, has a 72-year history as intriguing as its future.



IF you walk out the back door of the Chelsea Market, housed in the old Nabisco Building, and onto Tenth Avenue, you will be standing in the shadow of history. Any sunlight will be eclipsed by the rusted relic of an improbable railroad track that spans the street 30 feet overhead. While the scent of fresh-baked Oreo cookies and the screech of train brakes have vanished, the massive elevated rail tracks known as the High Line still snake north to the deserted 30th Street Rail Yards and south to Gansevoort Street.

But change is coming around the bend. Though the elevated structure will remain, by the end of this month the 1.5-mile High Line will conclude its 72 years as a busy and then an idle track and begin its transformation to a public park. By 2008, New Yorkers could be meandering above the meatpacking district amid the grasslands, wild petunias and hazelnut trees.

The battle to transform the High Line into a park has been waged for years. But hidden in the shadows of that struggle is the rail line's long and colorful history, a tale that is as compelling as the fight for its new life.

The defunct, weed-ridden High Line is a vestige of a century when trains were the city's lifeline. Along with ships, the trains brought in lumber and bricks for the buildings rising on every corner; meat, fruit and vegetables to feed the city's residents; and coal to provide power.

The Hudson River Line, opened in 1849, was a grand track that ran from New York City up the Hudson River to Albany, built at a cost of \$45,316 per mile of track. Below 30th Street, railroad cars drawn by horses funneled goods from the West Side railyards to Spring Street, with stops that today's subway riders will recognize: 23rd Street, 14th, Christopher.

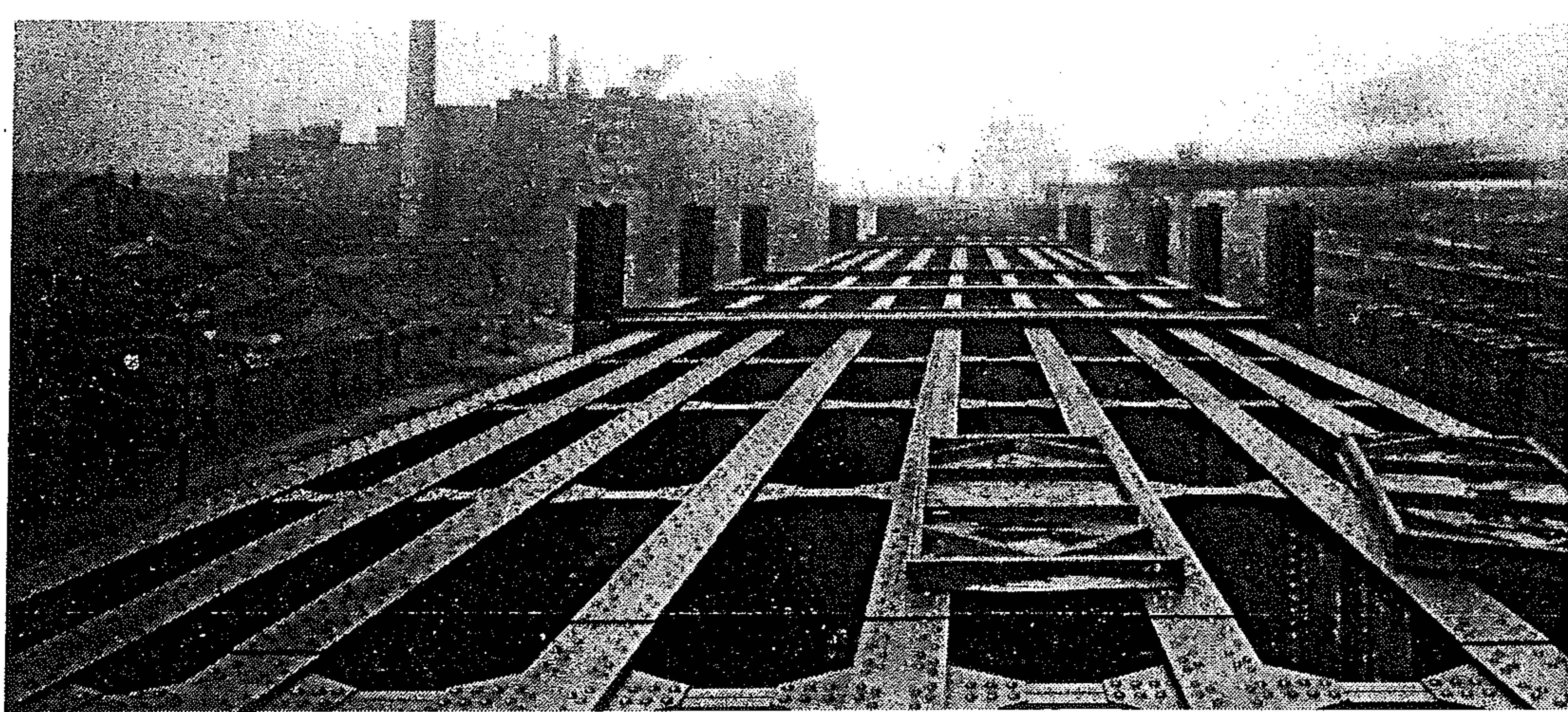
In 1867, when the horses were replaced by steam engines, both traffic and speed increased. So did the inevitable conflicts arising from a street-level railroad operating in a crowded neighborhood. This lethal mix of industry and humanity earned Tenth Avenue the nickname Death Avenue.

"The traction of freight and passenger trains by ordinary locomotives in the surface of the streets is an evil which has already been endured too long," a state senator said in 1866, "and must be speedily abated."

The speedy abatement took half a century. Finally, a deadline was set: If the tracks were not raised above the street by May 1, 1908, the city would seize them. The date came and went, with neither elevation nor condemnation.

The only concession to safety that had ever been made was the recruitment of young men to ride horses one block in front of the trains, waving a red flag by day and a red light by night. These men, a total of 12 often recruited from the countryside, rode the two-mile stretch for more than 80 years starting in 1850.

A 1934 newsletter from a local apartment house wrote effusively about the West Side Cowboys, as the group was known. "The horses used in this unusual service are tried and true, and are perfectly aware of their important mission in life," the newsletter



AN EL, OF SORTS Raised 30 feet, the High Line, seen during construction in 1933, top and above, replaced street tracks that led to many pedestrian deaths. Opened in 1934, the line could bear four loaded freight trains, but was ultimately felled by trucks.

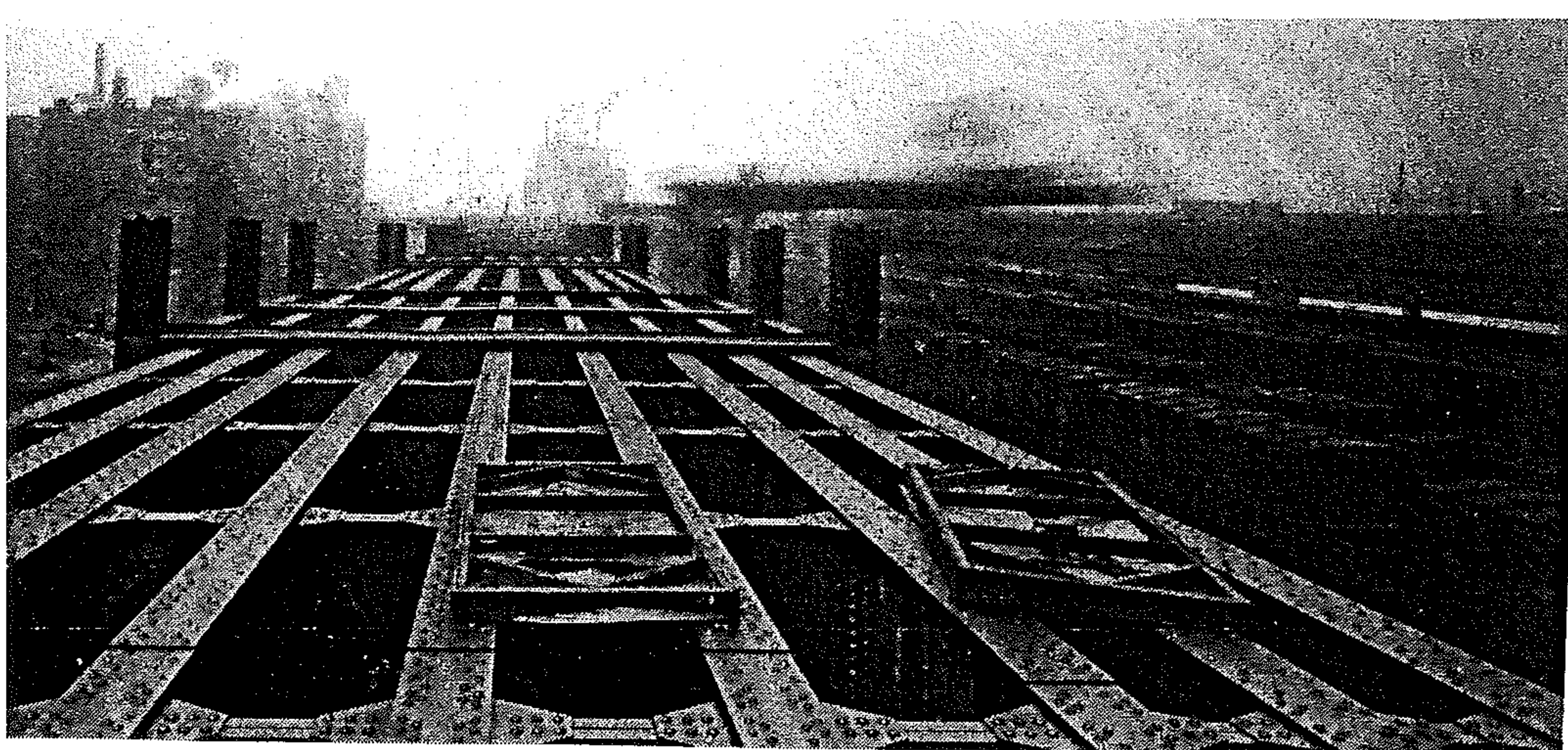


observes, noting that the horses "move surely and serenely," allowing their riders "to amuse the passerby with amazing variation of the routine waving the lanterns."

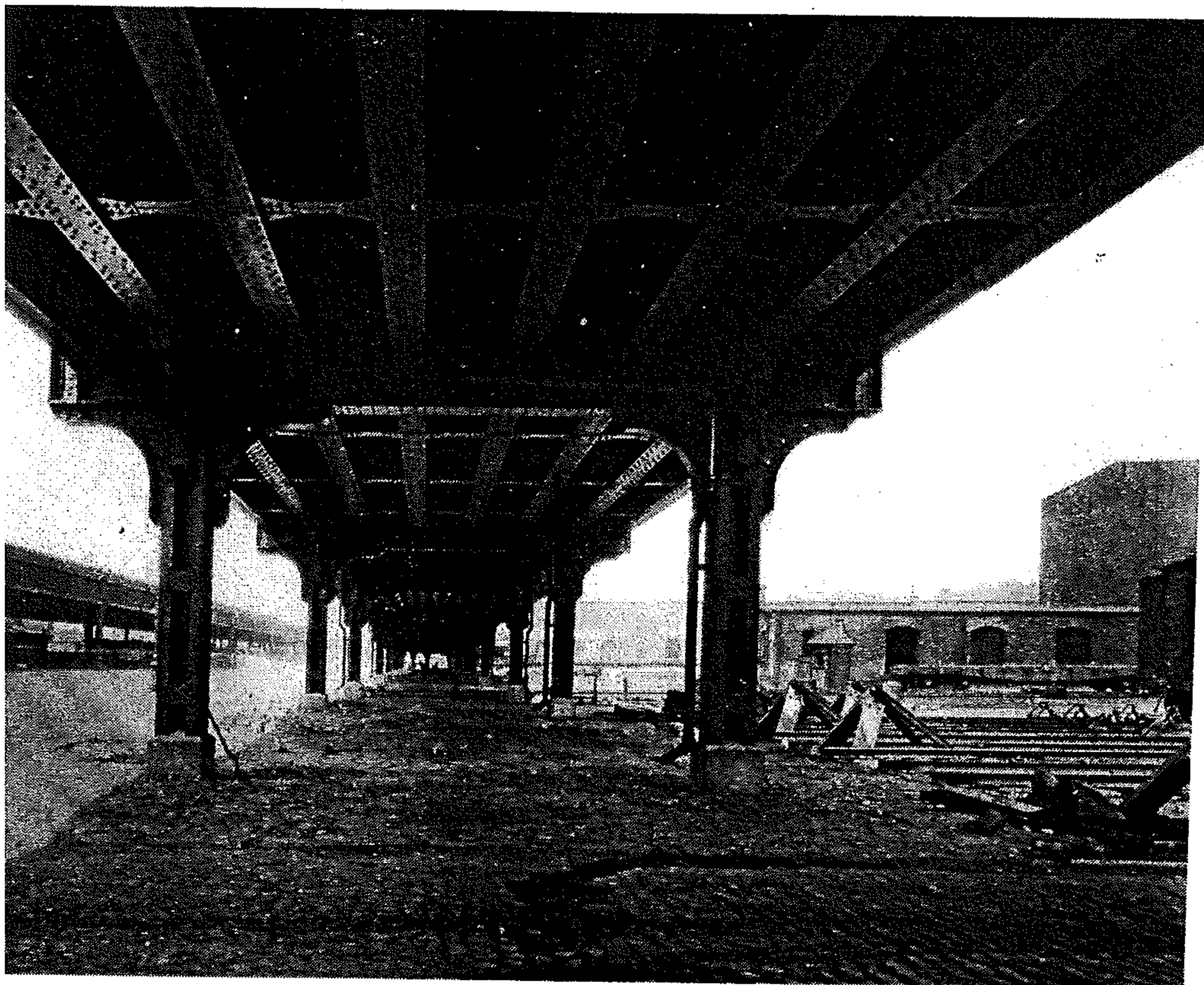
Apparently, citizens weren't impressed enough. They organized under the name The League to End Death Avenue, but nothing was done beyond the cowboys.

Five months after the 1908 deadline had passed, 7-year-old Seth Low Hascamp, dressed in a shirt and overalls, left his home at 544 West 44th Street and headed to school at St. Ambrose, on 54th Street. The train that killed him reportedly ripped his small body apart. Seth was one of hundreds who had died since the tracks had been laid. His family, neighbors and classmates held a silent funeral procession through the streets.

Another 20 years would pass before Mayor Jimmy Walker and Gov. Al Smith stepped in with public money to elevate the



GIDDYAP Before the High Line, the West Side Cowboys used red flags to warn people away from the street-level trains.



Top and above, George A. Fuller

he High Line, seen during construction in 1933, top and above, replaced pedestrian deaths. Opened in 1934, the line could bear four loaded freight trucks.

tracks. By 1933, 1,000 men had eliminated 105 street-level rail crossings, and when the elevated track was christened in June 1934, The New York Times reported, "The West Side is coming into its own."

With its danger removed, the trains became something new. "It was very magical," said Ruth Olsen, a teacher at P.S./I.S. 123 in the Soundview neighborhood of the Bronx. She and her twin sister, Judith Courtney, peered down at them from the 20th-floor apartment on 20th Street and Ninth Avenue where they grew up in the 50's.

"They were so big, riding above ground, and terribly noisy," said Ms. Olsen, who still lives in Chelsea. "Those massive black trains — and they were all black back then — would screech and squeal. It would go on forever."

Ms. Courtney, who is moving back to the city after 30 years in San Francisco, can't

shake the fantasy that she always saw the trains disappearing into the buildings — but never coming out.

"I think they went into an alternate universe, like Harry Potter," she said. For both sisters, the trains ranked with the smell of Nabisco cookies and the Maxwell House sign, "Good to the last drop," that blinked at them from across the Hudson River as neighborhood landmarks. "It's all gone," Ms. Courtney said. "It's terrible."

BUT even by the sisters' time, the trains were dying. The High Line had been built to last — it can support four fully loaded freight trains — but gradually it was replaced by trucks and an interstate highway system.

One part of the High Line, from Gansevoort Street to its southern terminus, was demolished in sections in 1963 and 1991. The line carried its last load in 1980: three box-cars of frozen turkeys. Then the line just sat. Passers-by ignored the forsaken mass overhead as it slowly went native. The only ones who saw possibilities there were advertisers and graffiti artists. Today, a billboard for the Jennifer Aniston movie "Rumor Has It" hovers over signs for auto repair shops and parking lots.

But seeds drifting through the Manhattan air found a home there, and irises, grape hyacinth and ailanthus trees sprouted. Neighbors helped nature. One resident slid a gang-plank out his window and strung Christmas lights on a pine sapling; another planted a clump of daffodil bulbs.

As the High Line becomes something new, it will not entirely lose what it was. The jagged edge of the concrete at Gansevoort Street, for example, will be incorporated into the new entrance. In that way, the park will resemble another local landmark, the Chelsea Market. Now, a visitor there walks past fresh flowers and fresh bread, but at the back, scribbled on the wall, are some mysterious words: "One brick every block, two bricks every block. . . ." They are the instructions for mixing mortar, and they testify to a time when the West Side of Manhattan was laying the foundations for an industrial future, and the smell of cookies and the screech of train wheels still filled the Chelsea air.