

The Public Market Of Panama

By Panama Vieja Escuela, April 24, 2015

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To speak of the Public Market of San Felipe is to speak of a place full of history. From its beginning, a few years after Panama had gained its independence from Colombia, until its demise, it was a principal center of commerce for the residents of the capital.

The beginning of the market dates to 1914, year in which this important food supply center was built in the city of Panama. It was located on North Avenue, now called Eloy Alfaro Avenue, between 12th and 13th ("Salsipuedes") Streets East, next to the Muelle Fiscal (Fiscal Pier), in the old section of Panama known as the San Felipe area. Going up 13th Street would take one to Central Ave, a few feet from Plaza Santa Ana.

Comment by Louie: *I remember, when learning to drive, this was a spot where my uncle would take me to drive up, learning to hold the car at the STOP sign ready to enter Central Avenue without going backwards when releasing the brake pedal and the clutch. These were manual transmission cars then.*



The Public Market on Avenida Norte (North Avenue).

Back on North Avenue running in front of the Market, continuing South, one would drive up to a little plaza with an acacia tree and either turn left to continue on North Avenue or turn right into 9th Street to enter Central Avenue behind La Merced Church. At the Market, if one did not go up North Avenue, one would take an alley to the left and end up in La Rampa (The Ramp)

going down to "La Marina" beach where one would find some fruit vendors selling directly from their boats. (*My parents would go there looking for fresh pineapples from Taboga, Louie.*) Otherwise, in the water around the Market, one would see all sorts of sailing/fishing boats that had arrived during the night with either produce or seafood to supply the Market.



Inside the Market showing vendors getting their stalls ready (left) and vendors outside.

The produce boats would be coming from such coastal ports as Puerto Armuelles, Pedregal and Remedios in Chiriqui Province; Pilon in the Province of Veraguas; Santa Ana Arriba in the Province of Los Santos; Chitre in the Province of Herrera; Aguadulce in the Province Cocolé; Puerto Caimito, Vacamonte, Taboga and the Pearl Islands in the Province of Panama; and several docking places on the Gulf of San Miguel in the Province of Darien.



Another front view of the Mercado (left) and the stores across the street including "La Villa De Caracas".

The fishing boats, full of several varieties of fish, many types of shrimp, lobster, squid and octopus to supply the local vendors, would arrive from the Bay of Panama mostly. Refrigeration not a part of their equipment limited their range.

In addition to the "fleet" of boats, trucks furnished fresh meat every morning from the abattoir located somewhere on the Avenida De Los Poetas (Avenue of the Poets) on the shore across from Fort Amador.



Another inside view of El Mercado and the fishing boats and produce boats that supplied the market beached at La Marina next to the market.

The Market itself was a place where everything was fresh. There were no canned goods, nor frozen foods. About the only foods not available at the Market were milk, bread and butter. The Market was comprised of numerous small stands rented by individuals, may they butchers, sea food merchants or produce vendors. They would begin their day soon after midnight dealing with the wholesalers and arranging their stands. Customers would start arriving by 5 AM in order to get the best of the available stuff and, normally, by 9 everything would be sold and the cleaning of the stalls and Market in general would take place in preparation for the next day. I am assuming that Sunday the Market was closed, but I do not remember.



13th Street, also known as "Salsipuedes" (Get out if you can), when cars still ran on it.

Comment by Louie: *I recall that during the time I lived at home, my mother would go to the Market two or three times a week as our Frigidaire refrigerator did not have a freezing compartment, besides all meat was bought fresh. She would purchase what was needed for the next two to three days, be it meat, produce, greens, etc. I would go with her once in a great while, because she would leave the house around 5 AM and I had school to attend. We lived at Via Belisario Porras, a block from Via España not too far from Punta Paitilla, so it would take*

her around 30 minutes or more to get to the Market by "chiva". I remember her buying 5 cents worth of "Recao Verde". This was a little bundle consisting of two stalks of green onions, three leaves of Cilantro, a slice of garlic and two or three small stalks of parsley. All these were used to season the meat when prepared as steaks. Mmm. . . good!



Aerial view showing relative position of Market to the San Felipe area of the City.

Across the street from the Market were several stores selling dry goods and a bakery. One of the stores was one selling material (cloth) by the yard, patterns and other accessories for making garments with the name "Villa de Caracas". My mother did a lot of sewing, including making our clothes as kids, frequenting the store to acquire supplies or just to visit with the owners, members of the Dominguez family, who also owned a similar store, "Villa de Santa Ana", on Central Avenue in front of Santa Ana Plaza. I did not enjoy being surrounded by tons of yards of cloth while my mother shopped and visited.

In 1961, the government of the municipality of the City of Panama decided to take over the administration of the Public Market. Then, in 2006, the city opened a new Public Market with the name of San Felipe Neri, at a cost of \$1.8 million, located on B Avenue between 15th Street East and Balboa Avenue where the old train (second) station used to be. We used to call the building there "The Freight House".

Comment by Louie: *The old Public Market disappeared and I know not what has been done at that location. But the unique smells created by the unbelievable diversity of fresh foodstuff; the noise, like a constant thunder, produced by the voices of a thousand customers, sellers and peddlers . . . these are things that will remain in my memory until that last day on this earth.*