

Fernway Memories

My family lived in Fernway for 50 years (Nov 1930 to June 1981) when my mother moved to an apartment elsewhere in Shaker Heights. In total my mother lived in Shaker 61 years. She and my father (Bernie and Clare Blake) were newlyweds for two years on Avalon, then built a home in Fernway and lived at 3396 Dorchester for 50 years. Then like many older widows my mother moved to an apartment until her death in December 1989.

My father wanted the convenience of the rapid to get downtown for all of us. Ironically he traveled over 50% of the time in his working life and did not use the rapid very much. Hence the rapid really was a convenience for my mother who frequently took the rapid to Higbee's in the Terminal complex for shopping. My siblings and I all started our adult working lives after college commuting to our jobs downtown on the rapid.

My brother ran track in college and often in his best Brooks Brother's suit would make a mad dash out the front door and down the street to get on the train for work just as the doors were closing.

Likewise shopping at Chagrin Lee and Avalon was within walking distance. Before 1953 you could call Heinen's, place an order and the store would deliver the order or the customer could pick it up. My brother recalls taking a wagon to the store and bringing the order home until they built the new store in 1953. Until that new store was built, Heinen's even had charge accounts for long time customers.

A&P had a store there as well but they did not deliver or take orders. Prior to 1950 they were the largest retailer in America and the first "super market chain" with over 15000 stores in 46 states. Our neighbor at 3392 Dorchester was D.F. Meier who was the Cleveland Division GM for A&P between 1936 and 1961. He died in 1977. In 1940 A&P sponsored the weekly radio program of singer Kate Smith. She came to Cleveland that year as part of a national tour of their stores in the area. She came to dinner at 3392 during the visit.

Kate Smith was the inspiration to the line "it aint over until the fat lady sings." She was a big lady with a magnificent voice and was renowned for her singing Irving Berlin's "God Bless America." The rights to the song were given to the Girl Scouts of America. Neither Berlin nor Kate Smith ever made any money from the performance of the song. She first performed this song on radio in November, 1938.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzG6vIE6BGc>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1rKQReqJZg>

Fernway sits almost at the center of Shaker Heights. It's bound by Lee Road on the west, Van Aken Boulevard on the south, Warrensville Center on the east and South Woodland on the north. It includes both Green Lake and the Shaker Heights Country Club. Hence it has a large area of green space and trees.

In the 1950s, many of the houses along Parkland had well manicured lawns using bent grass like one sees on a putting green. Bent grass is very weed resistant and looks like velvet but requires frequent mowing and watering. It was not unusual to see lawn services cutting them twice a week or the sprinkling systems watering them daily in the early morning or evening. Certainly good for full employment. Today, one does not see such high maintenance lawns very often in residential settings. Too much maintenance.

Between the years 1921 and 1923 Tramer Realty built 45 houses in Fernway. They bought the lots from the Van Sweringen Company and built houses to sell. These houses were often frame or shingle. There are 7 on Stockholm and 5 on Avalon alone.

The period was unusual for two reasons. There was a serious recession in 1921 and 1922 because of the sharp decline in government spending with the end of World War 1 in 1918. The Vans would have been eager to sell lots in a slow market and reduce debt. Likewise, electricity was not extended beyond Lee Road until 1922. The buyers who bought in 1921 or early 1922 lived in a house that had electrical wiring but no electricity. Of course the rapid began operating on Van Aken (South Moreland) in 1920 with direct access to Public Square via Kingsbury Run. Hence, the rapid offered an attraction that offset the temporary inconvenience of no electricity.

One of our neighbors Bessie Palmer Baumol (1880 to 1960)¹ remembered that these buyers used oil lamps for several months until electricity was activated. Of course ice trucks still delivered ice for refrigerators in the early 1920s. Some of these houses had an unheated room off the kitchen where an ice box could be stored and the ice man using a door for easy access to deliver ice for it. Of course, after 1923 with electricity available refrigerators soon replaced the ice boxes. Later remodeling of the kitchens to a more open format eliminated these walls and incorporated the space in a larger kitchen.

My mother recalled meeting unemployed men in the 1930s coming to the door seeking work for a meal or a few dollars. On one occasion she gave a man one of my father's overcoats. He was in the clothing business and always had clothes for every season and occasion. He had more clothes than my mother and used a cedar closet room in the attic to rotate them seasonally. Hence, the overcoat was probably surplus to requirements. On another occasion she had a roast leftover after a dinner party and placed it on the back porch one winter evening. The next morning the pan with the roast was gone. Presumably whoever took it needed more than we did.

An old friend shared a story about voting at Fernway in 1932. Her grandmother and aunts lived nearby. In 1932 the depression was fiercely destroying the economy. Three of them voted for Socialist Norman Thomas that year rather than Hoover or FDR. However, when the vote count was posted the next day there were no votes for Thomas. In those days Shaker Heights probably voted heavily for Hoover. Thomas was a step too far for the vote counters.

Of course most houses of that era had a milk hole where the dairy left milk and cream several days a week. My brothers and I all had at one time or another climbed through the hole if we forgot a key and no one was home. There was a fence nearby to climb on and then get through the space which was just wide enough if you were slim enough. Fortunately we were and the Shaker police never saw us. The milk hole was on the back of our house and only the lovely old lady who lived behind our house saw us. We loved "Grammy Bage" for her great cookies and sweet nature.

Because our house was close to the Avalon intersection it was hard not to see the Memorial Day parades in the 1950s and 1960s. In those days Memorial Day was always May 30. The parade would form at the intersection of Chagrin (Kinsman until the late 1950s) and Lee. It would have a fire truck, old cars, scout troops and the members of the Shaker Heights High School class observing its tenth anniversary. I recall at one parade there was a veteran of the Spanish American War riding in a Model T

¹ Her brother Carl Palmer was a member of Shaker City Council in the early days. Her niece was Ruth Brazie who worked for many years in the administration at the high school.

Ford. Likewise, there was a contingent from the 107th Armored Cavalry Regiment of the Ohio National Guard.

The route of the parade from Chagrin and Lee was east on Chagrin, then down Avalon across Van Aken and then down Daleford, to Holbrook and then Chalfant to the City Hall. Residents would line the streets as they do everywhere for a parade. At City Hall there would be a ceremony to honor those who served and someone would speak. It was very simple in many ways yet appropriate for the occasion.

There are three duplex houses at the intersection of Avalon and Van Aken plus Heights Christian Church. As children in the 1950s we would meet up most summer evenings on the lawn of the English Tudor duplex at Daleford and Avalon. We would play ball games, hide and seek, red rover or tag. There was a big tree on the corner of the lawn of the Petznick family home on Daleford that stands out. When we played hide and seek, this was the tree where the kid who was to look for the rest of us, would close his eyes and count to 50 and then search for the rest of us. This was always fun to do as dusk approached. It was harder to see the other kids in the bushes and other places we used.

One of the girls in the "gang" was Christine Adler. We went to Fernway School together. In kindergarten in 1951 I had my first experience of celebrity. Christine's grandfather was Harold H Burton, who had been Mayor of Cleveland and US Senator. In 1945 he was appointed a Justice of the Supreme Court. One day Christine's grandmother, Selma Burton, came to visit. Of course I was then only five and Mrs. Burton seemed so tall and regal. She was then known for a unique fashion statement. She always wore two earrings on one ear lobe.

In those days I walked to Fernway School with the other kids. On one snowy day my grandmother and her sister walked me to school. I still recall walking behind them. They seemed so tall in their dark fur coats and black hats. But I was only five.

For many years, the first grade teacher at Fernway was Miss Blue. My older brothers recalled that in the 1940s she drove a Model A Ford (1928-1931). She drove by the house and waved many times. Of course, many people drove cars a long time then because of the depression and the war time restrictions. Model As also were well known for their longevity.

In the early 1950s cars became longer and many garages had to be extended to accommodate the length. I recall my father had the garage extended three feet by moving the back wall back and adding siding and the roof. The garage floor had a new strip of concrete in which my friend Peter Palmer and I added our initials and palm prints for posterity like the stars in Hollywood. Our neighbor Mr. Meier also did the same because he had a 1952 green Fleetwood Cadillac that was notably long.

Fernway School had a play ground with a slide, climbing gym and sand box. These would have failed modern safety standards but somehow we spent many hours there with no major events. But the school building was a challenge for the boys. On the Dorchester side of the building, there was a very large bay window. The windows of the school were also very high to permit maximum light in the rooms. The kindergarten class was on the first floor and very large including the bay window and areas for play tables, easels for water colors and the like.

The building has a stone ledge about a foot or so from the ground and below the windows. The building then had large copper gutters. One of the challenges was to see how far you could move along the ledge and see in the windows. It was relatively easy to climb along the ledge and look into the kindergarten class where there was a multi-sided bay window. All you had to do was move from window to window. But beyond that the windows were farther apart. So only the clever climbers could move along the

ledge from window to window. The copper gutters were an advantage but it really helped being taller with longer legs to move along the ledge from the corner of the building until just beyond the big bay window. I am not sure I ever made it but recall trying many times.

Joseph G. Blake

Shaker Heights High School 1964.

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