

Letters To The Editor

THOUGHTS ON MCKOWNVILLE PAST AND PRESENT

To the Editor:

The McKownville News and Comment columns by Lindsay Childs and the articles by Fred Abele containing bits of McKownville history often brings back old memories to me. While I often disagree with Mr. Childs' viewpoints, and feel that he uses his columnist's position as a soapbox to air his personal opinions, I also enjoy the more factual reporting when it occurs.

My mother and father settled in McKownville in 1916. I was born in the house at 14 Knowles Terrace in 1925 and was raised there with my five brothers and sisters. I lived there until my marriage in 1950. My mother lived there until 1975, and my oldest daughter lives there now. Our house bordered on the old Albany Country Club, now the SUNY campus.

Recent comments and pictures about the McKownville Fire Department were of particular interest to me. I remember the 1930 Brockway fire truck, which had a body built by the now defunct A. J. Ronan Truck Body Builders of Albany, and when it was converted to a pumper with a front mounted pump in the mid-'30s. It was kept in Wendell Oliver Holmes' Country Club Garage, in a basement stall off Hillcrest Ave.

When the new firehouse was built on Arcadia Ave., the railroad engine tire alarm was hung in front of it as a backup alarm for the new, sophisticated electro-mechanical system incorporated in the new fire house. There was an alarm box on every corner, each with its own code. All the firemen had a list of code locations.

I can hear my father yet, warning us kids to keep quiet while he counted the rings of the siren. I think Knowles Terrace was 4-2.

George Garrison usually drove the truck. He was a World War I veteran who had been gassed. He lived with his father in the little house on Western Ave., the second door from the east corner of Knowles Terrace.

I could hardly wait to join the department and drive that fire truck. I got my wish in 1942 (I think) on a bitter cold winter's night. We had been called to help at a fire on State Farm Road.

Now, that truck not only had an open cab, it had no windshield. I drove that truck, at 50 mph all the way. By the time we got there, my face was a mass of frozen tears.

Getting back to Wendell O. Holmes and the Country Club Garage. He was a fine mechanic. He had, during the '30s, the largest tow truck in the Capital District. It was a Mack with chain-driven tandem wheels. He was a good

neighbor, living next door to us for a time, and especially good to a young boy whose major interest in life was the automobile.

His garage was bought by Pete Lampman, who gave me my first real job. I spent many hours in that garage and learned a lot from him. He also was a very good friend, and I miss him to this day.

During this time, Western Ave. was still a two-lane road, the Great Western Turnpike. It was widened in 1940, and that is a whole 'nother story.

The streets in "older" McKownville were still unpaved. Only the newer streets, (Glenwood, Elmwood and Parkwood) had paving. Fuller Road was barely a single track wide through the Pine Bush. Traversing it end to end usually resulted in a broken spring.

There were no Warren, Providence or Mercer Sts. Westlyn Court was a street with no houses.

I delivered newspapers in McKownville for several years. At one time I had the morning, evening and Sunday paper routes, the latter taken over from Ted Warner, recently deceased, and a much respected McKownvillite. I think I knew virtually every resident at that time.

Recent comments about saving or preserving the old McKownville Reservoir also interest me. I wonder if Mr. Childs can remember how horrible that water was. My mother used to tie cloth flour sacks over the faucets in an attempt to filter it. The sacks would soon be muddy yellow and so would the clothes she washed.

Whole generations of McKownville grew up never tasting water. It was truly foul. Spring water peddlers had a field day. The best thing that ever happened to McKownville was losing that water supply. It doesn't even make a good political argument.

McKownville is certainly different today than it was when I grew up there. People in Albany thought it was out in the country.

The "business block" is gone, and somehow what replaced it does not seem better to me. Seeing pictures of the Country Club Garage brought those old business to mind. There was Finnegan's Drug Store, the A and P, Bangert's Meat Market, the Country Club Garage, Rosenstock's Arrowhead Market (later Hack Vincent's Tavern, shown in the picture mentioned) and Ozzie Gephart's gas station (later Tony Keller's Garage, then Chet King's first station). The Mobil station at the corner of Brookwood St. was Tommy Cornell's Socony Station. He and his son had a battery "factory" behind their house, just east of the present firehouse.

Now even the country club is gone. No offense intended; SUNY, but that probably had the largest impact on the McKownville I knew than anything else that happened or is apt to happen. And that also is a whole 'nother story.

I could relate a lot more about people and places in the life of McKownville. It was a good place to grow up in, with good times and good people.

Thanks, Lindsay and Fred, for bringing some of these thoughts back to me.

Newton T. Ronan
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