

1969 Recollections of William J. Embler of McKownville

editorial additions of transcriber are in italics

(handwritten letter and manuscript in the archive of William D. Mohr; held by the Albany Pine Bush Preserve)

Opening letter to Bill Mohr:

Dear Bill:

I am enclosing my notes on McKownville and also Jack King's comments [*shown by arial font*]. On the phone Jack told me of a point which may clear up something on the old Witbeck Hotel. After it burned (Jack doesn't remember the date), a man names Charles "Oak" Ebel operated a grill in a smaller building which stood [approximate] on the site of the Aunt Jemima Pancake House (which apparently is being remodeled). Ebel's grill also burned about 1940. He kept his supply of beverages in his hen house.

I've already told you about the place where the tickets for the numbers game were printed.

I hope you will find the material of some use.

I suggest you or Fred [*Abele*] go over the old minutes of the McKownville Improvement Association.

Best regards, Bill Embler

June 13, 1969

[ps] John Holt-Harris seems to have some interest in local history and might be helpful.

[manuscript]

Recollections of McKownville 1942-1969

We moved to McKownville in January 1942 (1447 Western Avenue) and moved in November 1943 to 18 Glenwood Street where we resided until 1960 when we moved to 119 Birchwood Drive near McCormick's Corners.

When we came to McKownville most of the houses were in the area north of Western Avenue between it and the Albany County Club and on Providence, Warren and Mercer Streets west of Fuller Road [adjoining the new NYS campus].

South of Western Avenue from the City line were three or four houses, the Helme farm [Dr. Helme, first physician], a produce stand operated in summer by Jennie Helme, the Finegan drug store, Schnurr's Market [originally Bangert's], a tavern and the Country Club garage with a gas station on the corner of Arcadia and Western. Much of this block is now occupied by housing on the Helme farm, the Silo restaurant, the Dunkin Donuts and the Travelodge Motel. Very few changes have taken place on Hillcrest and Arcadia except that the former firehouse and meeting place of community organizations is now the Bryn Mawr Club bookstore.

The New Yorker beauty shop at the southwest corner of Arcadia and Western is comparatively new from a dwelling converted about 12 years ago and the new firehouse occupies the site of two former dwellings at the easterly corner of Brookwood.

The development of Westlyn Court took place in the late 1940s. Dr. Esmay's place is new but Dr. Macomber's is unchanged except for an addition and the fence. The stores and gas station between it and McKown Road are new (about 1950?). The old house which now stands on McKown Road back of the gas station once stood on Western Avenue and was occupied by the elderly McKown sisters. The Knowles farm was not developed. In 1943 we had a garden along the north bank of the outlet from the McKownville reservoir and east of McKown Road.

The present site of the Tom Sawyer (1952?) Motel was an open field where wild strawberries could be found and was used at times for sandlot baseball. The next building on the south side of Western Avenue to the west was a gas station operated by Frank Miller but owned, I believe, by the Witbecks. Benjamin Witbeck lived on the easterly corner of Glenwood Street and Western. The Social Services

building west of the Tom Sawyer was completed in 1968 and the Pancake House about 3 years earlier. The major changes from the City line on the northerly side of Western Avenue were Hannan's drug store; the development of 30-odd acres of the LaGrange property between the Witbeck development (late 1920s) and the Albany Country Club; and the discontinuance of the United Traction bus stop at the easterly corner of Fuller Road.

The LaGrange tract was partly wooded, partly abandoned orchard and partly open sandlot. When we moved to 18 Glenwood Street in November 1943 there was a sand road, used by delivery trucks, which connected the upper ends of Glenwood and Parkwood Streets. A brook began on the LaGrange property and ran behind what are now houses on upper Parkwood, crossed what is now upper Glenwood and flowed into an underground pipe at the then end of Norwood Street. This continued underground to cross under Western Avenue at Arcadia and then into the open Krumkill near a branch which was the outlet for the Country Club pond.

Fuller Road was a two-lane blacktop road. One of the pastimes of that period and for several years was to drive over the New York Central at grade (two persons were later killed there before the grade separation) and watch New York Central passenger trains in the evening - the 20th Century, Ohio State etc as they went west.

The Thruway had not been built, of course, and Washington Avenue ended at Fuller Road where Washington Avenue buses turned. There was a small refreshment stand on the southwest corner [Mossman's]. The northwest corner of Fuller Road and Western Avenue where Stuyvesant Plaza is situated was a tangle of brush and rather marshy. Our sons Bill and Bob trapped muskrats there. Much of the opposite side of Western Avenue where Dr. Wesley Van Loan's dentist office is and the site of the Lutheran Church were vacant.

The "Little Red Schoolhouse," actually painted yellow at that time, was operated as a school until about 1951 when the central district was formed. In addition to those attending it, pupils from the district went to 20 other public and private schools in the Capital District.

One of the disadvantages of McKownville during [*this time*] was the "water system." Unfiltered water was piped to houses in the Witbeck development (Country Club Highlands on the real estate map). The only treatment was by dragging a bag of copper sulfate through the pond behind a small rowboat. This was done by Frank Miller who operated the gas station at the end of Fuller Road.

At the end of the war, the McKownville Improvement Association determined to do something to remedy the conditions. A water committee was appointed, headed by Don Wilson and William J. Embler [*author of these recollections*] as co-chairmen. Because several previous efforts had come to nothing after consultation with the engineering firm of Barker and Wheeler they were not interested, and the committee engaged the services of Benjamin Smith and Associates. All of the necessary legal steps were taken, petitions were circulated by volunteers, permission was received from the State Comptroller's office and the water system was completed in about 1948 with hydrants for fire protection. At the same time an effort was made toward consolidation of a sewer system but the petition for this was rejected by the State Comptroller on the ground that the cost, when added to that of the water system, would be an undue burden on the proposed district. The original system of outlets to septic tanks is still in use. One outlet is into the Krumkill back of the old firehouse and another tile reputedly follows the course of a one-time brook from Elmwood Street across Western Avenue and goes under the dam at McKown Grove to empty into that branch of the Krumkill.

During the war years the need for zoning in Guilderland was discussed by the McKownville Improvement Association and this finally got underway with a committee headed, I believe, by Fred Cross. Its recommendations were adopted by the Town Board in time, fortunately, to avoid some of the unfortunate developments in towns without zoning.

The cost of bus transportation has increased greatly since 1942 when it was approximately seven cents to a now proposed 30 cents. At one time, around 1950, the United Traction Company proposed to end the line inside the City limits and a hearing was held in the State Office Building. The attendance was

so great and the protests so effective that nothing more was heard of the proposal. After Stuyvesant Plaza was completed, the line was extended to it and the former turn-around on the easterly side of Fuller Road became doctors' offices.

The two greatest influences for change in McKownville in this period (1942-1969) have been the building of the New York State Thruway and the Northway and the selection of the former site of the Albany Country Club for the campus of the Albany branch of the State University of New York.

Other sources of information on the history of McKownville:

Records in the Town Clerk's office; minutes of the Improvement Association, and the Fire Department.

Jack King's handwritten notes on two separate sheets:

Bill - my only thought is just a word of background for each area and name you mention in your recollections - without dialogue

Jack

ps - your recollections are exact & good

pps - there are two frozen trout in your freezer - fresh caught - "for Bill"

rose for Mabel

Events & structures that came to pass from 1942-1969 in McKownville

Dr. Helme farm eliminated, the Silo restaurant & Travel Lodge taking its place

"Tom Sawyer Motel" "Witbecks"

Stuyvesant Plaza - swamp area

New McK Methodist church

McKownville in my years of residence changed from a hamlet of semi-country living to a suburbia of business plazas and finally a college campus area -

without detriment

the wholesome structure remains

Crouse homestead - now Huckleberry Finn