

# McKownville celebrates decades of small-town life

By Molly Belmont

**GUILDERLAND** — McKownville began in 1790 when a tavern was built on a small dirt road, far from the hustle of Albany. Anticipating the completion of the Great Western Turnpike, William "Billy" McKown bought the land on what would become the intersection of Western Avenue and Fuller Road, and built a tavern that would serve weary merchants bringing their wares to city markets.

## Small-town feel

Jane Ryan, 80, lived in McKownville for 50 years before she moved to the Stonehenge Apartments. Saturday, she jumped up to greet her friends, Mary Ann Leto, 76, and Marge Walsh, 77. "There's hardly any of us left," said Ryan.

She sat talking like old friends, eating ice cream, and laughing over some of their memories.

As part of the celebration, Ruth Abele gave a talk about the

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**'We like to keep things the way they were.'**

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Now situated on the city line at the edge of the town of Guilderland, the hamlet of McKownville has become the crossroads around which many of the area's most well-known suburban landmarks have been erected. The University at Albany, Crossgates Mall, and Stuyvesant Plaza are all located in McKownville.

The Thruway made its way past McKownville in the 1950's. Later, the Northway was constructed. Extending all the way to the Adirondacks, it begins on Western Avenue, just west of Fuller Road in McKownville.

The area is a mecca for development; the hamlet's earliest history is marked with the expectation — even the yearning — for growth, so maybe it's no wonder.

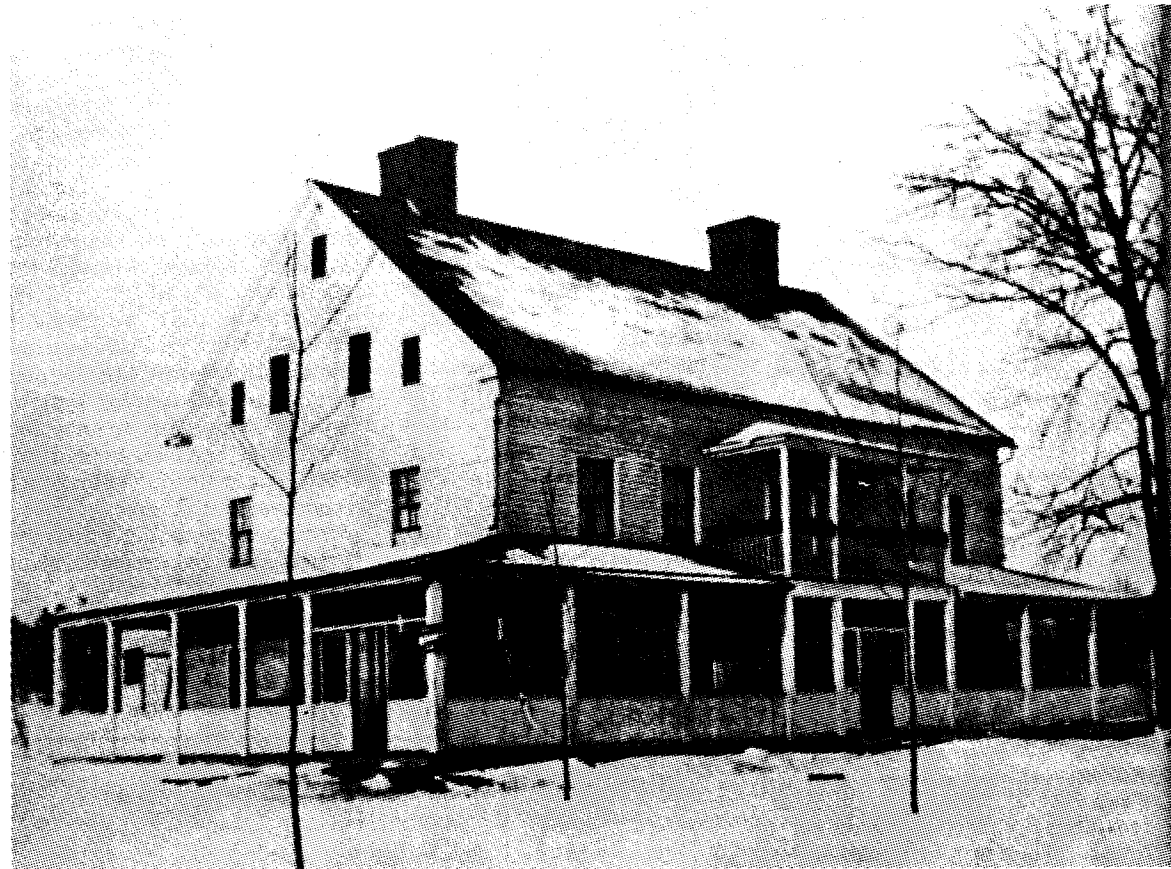
But, somehow, residents say, McKownville has managed to preserve its sense of small-town life.

McKownville residents — old and new — and its prodigal sons were honored as part of the town's bicentennial celebration

and presented over 30 photographic slides, historical pictures ranging from the hamlet's one-room schoolhouse to the Albany Country Club Clubhouse. Much of the information and most of the photographs were collected by her husband, Fred B. Abele, who died in 1986.

Mrs. Abele described her husband as a "compulsive researcher." He started his historical research work when he was asked to put together a project for the 50th anniversary of the McKownville Fire Department, she said. What started as a small project grew into a passion; Mr. Abele's 3,000 photographs and catalogue became the basis for the Guilderland Historical Society, an organization he formed in 1971.

To the untrained eye, it appears that McKownville has been overrun by progress. It seems as though the city has invaded the small hamlet, that commerce has intruded upon what was once an idyllic spot — the baseball team



*The tavern at the crossroads of Fuller Road and Western Avenue was one of the first structures built in McKownville. Operated by William "Billy" McKown, the tavern was replaced by a post office in 1884. When a fire destroyed the historical building in 1917, a King Shell Station was constructed on the site. These days, the site is home to a Burger King fast-food restaurant.*

everyone knows everybody else, she said.

"We like to keep things the way they were," Blessing said. "That sounds strange with all the construction that's gone on."

When Mrs. Abele talks about the changes to the hamlet, she provides concrete — and bricks and mortar — details, buildings

## "Ever-lovin' firehouse"

Saturday's event was sponsored by two of the oldest organizations in the Capital District — the fire department, established in 1918, and the improvement association, established in 1926. When people ask Donald Reeb, president of the McKownville Improvement Association, if he's

The key to community is involvement, said James White, assistant chief of the McKownville Fire Department. People think they are too busy to join community organizations, but, he said, "No one is busier than me." In addition to being a member of the fire department, White also works with the improvement as-

anniversary, Saturday afternoon at the McKownville firehouse. The party was an opportunity for old friends and neighbors to get together around ice cream and a barbecue to discuss history — recent and long-forgotten. Balloons and photo albums greeted residents and visitors as they walked through the firehouse doors.

was named the Arcadians but if you ask residents what's changed about McKownville, they give the same answer.

"There's a lot more traffic," said Dorothy Blessing, 70. She's lived in the hamlet her whole life. And there's also less recreation area, she said. "Our ballfield is now an express hotel," she said.

Still, McKownville has a small-town feel to it, Blessing said. Ev-

long gone and dirt roads now paved. A Burger King sits where the McKown tavern once stood. The firehouse moved from its location on Arcadia Road to a new building on Western Avenue in 1968. And Fuller Road used to be a couple of lanes wide, a "country road" that Mrs. Abele remembers walking along with a baby carriage, she said. The open spaces are gone.

sure that McKownville has the oldest community organizations, he said he tells them, that he's "not sure," but that "it's never been challenged." The event was also sponsored by the Guilderland Bicentennial Committee.

The fire department was the one of the centers of community life for the Abeles, said Mrs. Abele.

Mr. Abele was a member of the company until he died in 1986, and, she said, "he was in his ever-lovin' firehouse more than he was home." Mrs. Abele was a member of the McKownville Women's Auxiliary, and the couple's son was a member of the department until he got married and moved to Latham, she said.

sociation and coaches Little League baseball. These organizations represent opportunities for people to meet their neighbors, he said.

#### "Kind of a dream"

Darron Leddick, 16, is a "firehouse rat," he said. His dad, Robert, is on the board of commissioners, and for as long Leddick can remember, he's hung out at the firehouse, helping out and "poking around," he said.

A Class D member, or social member, Leddick is not allowed to go to fires, but he talks knowledgeably about the intricacies of truck equipment, protocol, and the district. Leddick spends his time at the firehouse, cleaning



The Enterprise — Molly Belmont

**Shhhhhh!** Marge Walsh, 77, quiets Jane Ryan, 80, as Mary Ann Leto, 76, looks on. Walsh and Leto have been neighbors in McKownville for 40 years. Ryan moved away from McKownville some 30 years ago, but returned for the bicentennial celebration held Saturday afternoon at the McKownville firehouse on Western Avenue. The group of friends enjoyed ice cream sundaes and a talk given by Ruth B. Abele on the hamlet's history.

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#### 'There's hardly any of us left.'

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Mr. Abele was "a doer," Mrs. Abele said. She and her husband both grew up in Albany, "where you can't fight city hall," she said. But then the couple moved to McKownville, she said, "and out here, if you're a doer, you can."

Mr. Abele was a "great joiner," she said. In the course of his life, he belonged to a number of community groups, including the fire department, the library association, and the improvement association.

It is this work, maybe more than the place that fosters a sense of community — a sense that has thinned out as the area has built up, she said.

"It thins out because new people come in," Mrs. Abele said. The faculty from the university area have moved into the area, she said. And people who live in apartments don't volunteer, she said.

This changes a community, but it would take someone more articulate than she, Mrs. Abele said, to describe how.

lockers and checking the trucks and helping out with events, events like Saturday's ice-cream social, he said.

Next year, when he's 17-and-a-half, he can begin training to be a firefighter, he said. It's been "kind of a dream" to become a firefighter, he said. He's watched these men with awe since he was a kid, he said. He wants to be a person who helps people, he said. "Just by doing one thing," he said, "it can change their whole day."

Robert Perry, 73, was born in McKownville and lived his whole life in this hamlet, "except for the time in the Army," he said.

Perry was a member of the fire department for 53 years, and chief for 17 years. Saturday, he sat out in back of the firehouse with other members of the fire department. The group was gathered around a grill, talking of people they knew, and changes they had seen.

A lifelong firefighter, Perry (Continued on next page)

# ... Next to big-city growth

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talked of life in terms of the district he's served; there used to be grass fires, but with no open spaces left, "Most of the calls you get now are for alarms going off," he said.

Perry misses the open spaces. As a child, the Pine Bush began near Fuller Road and was Perry's "playland."

Perry doesn't know that McKownville has a center for community life anymore, he said. It used to be the improvement association, but people don't belong to that the way they used to, he said. There's the fire department, he allows, but a third of the members don't live in McKownville. The district is smaller, too, he said.

The fire department has given Thomas Glenn, 70, who's lived in McKownville since 1958, "a sense of belonging to the area," he said. Glenn, still an active member, has belonged to the fire department since 1961. The weekly drills would bring men from different neighborhoods together, and give them an opportunity to discuss local news and issues, he said.

In addition, the fire department is about "the only thing left with McKownville in its name," said Glenn.

No, the group around the grill said, there's the church, too. The McKownville United Methodist Church is located on Western Avenue, next to Crossgates.

"That's in Westmere," Glenn said, speaking like a firefighter.

You're thinking of the fire district, one responds — the church is in the Westmere Fire District.

"That's what I go by," Glenn said.

Near the end of his life, Mrs. Abele's husband became increasingly worried that the McKown name would disappear, she said, because the last members of the family had died.

When Mr. Abele died, Kevin Moss, who was then Guilderland's supervisor, called Mrs. Abele to tell her that a park was being dedicated to her husband's memory, and, in light of his concerns, the park would pay homage to both the historian and the history. "He said, 'We're going to go Fred, one better,'" Mrs. Abele recalled. Located on off

Strawberry Lane, the park is called the Fred B. Abele McKownville Park. Quite an honor, she said, "Unfortunately, you have to die to get an honor like that."

## A new generation

As McKownville was developed to its hilt, many families that started there couldn't find room to stay, Mrs. Abele said. The hamlet has "built as far as it can build," Mrs. Abele said. "The old-timers are gone, and there's

children and grandchildren, she said.

Sweeney's husband grew up in McKownville and the couple decided to stay close to his family — with young kids, Sweeney said, it's nice to have the kids' grandmother and aunt living nearby.

The Sweeneys rented apartments in the immediate area, "circling closer" to the hamlet until finally a house came up for sale on, she said.

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## 'Unfortunately, you have to die to get an honor like that.'

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no place for young people to build and stretch out."

Rosella Slauson, 75, and her husband, Edward, bought a house on Mercer Street in 1949. The houses were "well-constructed" and "the rooms were roomy," said Mrs. Slauson. "And it was medium-priced — not upper-class, not lower-class — and we liked that."

The couple belonged to the fire department for a number of years, but otherwise, she said, the Slausons "kind of stick to their neighborhoods," she said.

In fact, the couple's two daughters, Corrie and Lynn, met their husbands in the very neighborhood where they grew up. Corrie was out for a walk, cutting across the university campus to get home, when she met Jeff, out walking his dog on Western Avenue. Lynn grew up on the same neighborhood as her husband — she lived at 46 Mercer Street and he lived at 36 Mercer Street, Mrs. Slauson said.

Both couples were married in 1987 and both bought houses in McKownville; one lives on Mercer Street and one on Schoolhouse Road, Mrs. Slauson said.

For Kris Sweeney and her husband, Paul, a young couple with children, finding a house in McKownville was a challenge. Families try to stay in this area, she said, and houses are sold to

## That "it" quality

Reeb, said he doesn't know why the community has prospered in the way that it has, and how it still managed to preserve its sense of community.

Around 900 families live in the hamlet, Reeb said. A few are seniors who have lived in the neighborhoods of McKownville their whole lives, he said. There are also a number of people who were born there, grew up there, but left to go to school, and then came back — something Reeb thinks is "maybe even more amazing," he said.

People were "very much involved in discussion" surrounding the construction of Crossgates and the university, Reeb said. There was, he said, "lots of controversy." But the controversy "did not destroy 'it,'" he said, "Whatever 'it' is."

Reed puzzles over McKownville's "it" quality often, he said, but he's no closer to an answer.

"It" is "not a parish-based thing," Reeb said, because there are a number of churches in the hamlet.

Maybe "it" is fostered by the dead-end streets, he said.

How? There's less traffic on these streets and people get to know one another better, he posited. "I don't know," he said. "It's quite curious."