

[#TBT](#). “Our Woods”

October 6, 2022

One day back in the early 1950s, big yellow trucks and bulldozers and excavators and lots and lots of men showed up on Washington Avenue by Orchard Road. The same scene was playing out over on Orchard Road by Lincoln Avenue, but we couldn't see it because of the woods. It didn't take them long to carve out dirt roads into the big woods; those same woods three of the Tower boys—Bobby, Jimmy, and Tommy—called “Our Woods” because...well, the woods were literally an extension of their backyard on Lincoln Avenue.

The woods were bordered by Chatham Street on the north, Washington Avenue on the east, Watchung Avenue on the south, and a couple of houses and Lincoln Avenue on the west. It was going to become the site of the Washington Avenue Elementary School. The men and their big machines chopped down almost all the trees, pulled out the stumps, bulldozed the dirt into huge mounds and graded the area to start construction of the new building. I can't help but wonder if the men operating the equipment had the same sense of loss that we kids did watching our woods disappear.

Big piles of dirt became great places to play. When it was muddy, we went home looking like those creepy Clay Men on Mars that Flash Gordon had to fight off. One time, according to Bob Tower, he and his brothers arrived home covered in so much mud that their mom made them strip down to their underwear in the backyard and sprayed them off with a garden hose!

There was just one more detail the workers had to deal with; the meandering brook running through the woods from Watchung Avenue to Chatham Street. During dry weather, it wasn't much more than a trickle of water, just enough to build small dams, look for mudbugs, and catch bullfrogs. But when it rained, oh boy, everything changed in an instant as water rushed through the woods tumbling small branches, leaves, and rocks along the way.

One day, Bruce/Bob, Reece, Biff, Dave, and I were watching from Washington Avenue while Bobby, Jimmy, and Tommy were watching from their backyard as tons of reinforced concrete culvert pipes were being laid down on the bare ground stretching the length of the property. Each section of pipe was about 4 feet in diameter and 6 to 8 feet long. They were like magnets drawing us to climb on them and crawl through them.

When all that pipe was buried underground, it created one long culvert carrying the water all the way into Lynn Reynolds' side yard where the brook continued above ground. It didn't take long before we discovered that opening and made like trolls walking bent over in a dark tunnel with candles, planting our feet on either side of the trickle of water. We were young but still too smart to go into the culvert during a rainstorm for obvious reasons.

One time when we were midway inside the culvert with hot candle wax dripping down on our fingers, we heard a rumbling noise, which our imaginations convinced us was a bowling ball careening down toward us from who knows where. Older kids? We turned around and did our version of a troll run, bent over to avoid scraping our heads on the concrete above us, until we were safely outside. Only then did we start laughing when no bowling ball came crashing out and we decided the noise had been nothing more than a large truck rolling along Chatham Street.

Eventually, we lost interest in the culvert. The school construction was completed, a driveway and parking lot were paved, and there were big grassy areas all around. Some of us from the newly formed school zone found ourselves inside the new classrooms, looking

[#TBT](#). “Our Woods”

October 6, 2022

out the windows...daydreaming about the woods and the brook that were no more, and wondering if there were other woods with brooks to explore.

Additional info about the brook:

From Lynn Reynolds’s yard, the brook continued to Cherry Lane close to where Linda Van Wert lived. There was a wooden foot bridge over the water from one side of Cherry Lane to the other where Bruce Day and I often climbed trees...just because they were there.

The water continued to flow down to the railroad tracks built on a man-made berm and followed a path to Lafayette Avenue where it entered a concrete box culvert under the railroad tracks. It eventually came out on the other side of Lafayette Avenue where it flowed along an open concrete culvert, which went under Main Street. From there it continued north as a brook on land that would in 1957 or 1958 become the new borough high school.

