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News and Comment

A FRIEND from New Jersey writes:

In the summer of 1950, Washington Avenue was one of those streets that seemed, in the eyes of a ten-year-old, as big as the yet to be built Garden State Parkway. I mean, it was a street that actually went somewhere. It connected downtown Chatham, New Jersey – the center of civilization as we kids knew it – with Chatham Township, the frontier. It was a treelined street – dogwoods and oaks, as I recall – of two-story houses from which commuters caught the 7:46 or 8:17 to New York each weekday morning. The Lackawanna station was just a mile from out house, which was on Greenwood Avenue, at the foot of Washington. From there the world opened up, you could get anywhere from the foot of Washington Avenue.

Strictly speaking, Washington ended just beyond Greenwood, at Longwood, a half-paved, half-dirt road. Beyond Longwood were large stretches of fields and woods, with paths here and there. One of the paths led to an abandoned farmhouse that we all knew was haunted. We made several trips to the farmhouse that summer – my sister and I and any number of our neighborhood friends. Sometimes we'd take out lunch, and canteens of water, all of us knowing that we might never return.

Probably a couple of dozen kids lived on that last block before Longwood, and the summers were filled with the adventures and games that kids back then created for themselves. The summer days were divided into three parts by compulsory breaks for lunch and supper. Everybody had supper back then – not dinner, except on holidays. We would play all morning, or canvass the neighborhood on out bikes to see who might have good ideas for what to do that day. At noon, when the siren went off at the firehouse downtown, everybody rode home for lunch. As we pedalled (sic) into our driveways, we'd yell to our friends, "See you this after!" "This after" was the start of the day's real activity, sometimes the result of careful planning during the morning. Ove the summer, there were ballgames, circuses, rodeos, was games, cowboys and Indians, house-under-construction explorations, expeditions into the trans-Longwood wilderness, and, occasionally, dog shows. Everybody had a dog, so the list of entries was always extensive. That summer, we had a dog show in our back yard. Signs were made and nailed to the telephone poles on Washington. Ribbons were made for best in show, biggest, smallest, cutest, and shortest legs. This las prize was created tor teddy Gleichmann's dog, Tippy, because we all knew Tippy would never make it as a show dog. There were no losers at our dog shows.

Out dads got home at 6:09 or, if late, at 6:28 or 6:46. We kids would ride down to the station with our mothers to pick up our dads, and would crowd the railing to watch the train come around the curve into the station. The train was always on time and always stopped at precisely the same spot on the platform, and my father – like, I'm sure, everybody else's father – always came out the same door of the same car. Probably all the fathers always say in the same seats. This was a marvel that I didn't really appreciate at the time' later, I decided that it had something to do with male territoriality.

When supper was over, the neighborhood kids would congregate in the dusk at Gleichmanns' mound, on the corner of Washington and Greenwood. The Gleichmanns' mound rose about two fee higher than the rest of the Gleichmanns' lawn. It was about ten feet wide and about fifteen feet long, and was flanked by two enormous oaks. We would tell ghost stories on the mound until it got dark and the streetlight at the corner came on and we were called home – first by our moms and then, ten minutes later, by our dads. Great stories were often ruined by hastily fabricated endings.

The best of the ghost-story tellers was Jack shepherd, who lived just three houses from Longwood. He was a few years older that I was, and was the acknowledged leader of most of the neighborhood activities, but in my mind, he was, above everything else, a great athlete. Jack had much to do with

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organizing the neighborhood boys into a “hardball” team. He would arrange games with teams from other parts o town, and we’d all bike down Washington to the high school for out big games. Jack even had real canvas-covered bases. Nobody knew just where this equipment came from, but everybody knew that when you played out team you go to play with real bases.

I you turned right on Longwood and went about a quarter of a mile, you came to Mr. Cole’s farm, on the right. The property stretched way back from the road. None of us really knew a lot about Mr. Cole. He was not a commuter; he was a farmer. You didn’t see him much, and if we cut across his land on any of out expeditions, we did it stealthily. I remember that my friend Skipper Johnsen and his sister go a chick for Easter that year and named it Henrietta. Over time Henrietta grew rather large, and used to run around their yard pecking at everyone. She really was much of a per. One day, Skipper’s dad took Henrietta up to Mr. Cole’s farm, because Mr. Cold had chickens. Whatever Mr. Cole did with Henrietta, the Johnsen’s ate chicken that night. Word got around that we had a neighborhood ball team, and, and the next thing you knew, Old Mr. Cole offered us part of a field off Longwood for a diamond. One Saturday morning, the neighborhood dads were mustered by Mr. Cole with the threat that if you didn’t help out, your kid couldn’t play. The thought of their son’ being ostracized, and perhaps even missing at baseball immortality, was more than any of them could handle. A corps of dads armed with steel rakes, and Mr. Cole with his tractor, descended on that field like the invasion of Normandy, raking and levelling until every rock down to the size of a pea had been removed. A backstop was make of chicken wire, a plywood home plate was nailed down, the baselines were drawn, and Jack Shepherd’s bases were put in place. It was two o’clock, and game time. Our fathers were proud, and we were ecstatic. Mr. Cole said that if any of us broke one of his windows he’d give that boy a quarter. We never did and I don’t think DiMaggio could have, either.

The field is gone now – probably serving as rock-free back yards for a couple of the half-million-dollar, three-bedroom ranches in the development that sprang up a few years later. In 1953. The Little League arrived in Chatham. We all played, but the home-field advantage was lost forever.

By Job. Lippincott