

Personal Memories of Life in South River Park

In 2019, long-time residents were invited to share personal memories about life in South River Park over the years. The following collections were from some of our residents. We hope to add more stories as time goes on!

South River Park Memories

By Ed McAleer

My earliest memories from “back in the day” begin in the late 1950s. Most folks know that this neighborhood was primarily a weekend and summer getaway from the heat of DC and Baltimore. Houses had no air conditioning (or insulation for that matter). More on that later.

My great grandparents on my father’s side of the family built one of the first houses in the ‘hood in 1922. Their legacy lived on with my paternal grandparents with regular neighborhood cocktail gatherings in what we call the front yard, facing Warehouse Creek. Lester (one of the three Briggs brothers of the Briggs meat and dairy dynasty) and his wife Marion Briggs, Rose and Lee Beall (Lee was a postal carrier), next door neighbors Ed and Dottie Jones, the Argents (sorry I never knew their first names), and occasionally a few others like Bill Warner would come over in the afternoons around 5pm and do their best to drink my grandfather’s alcohol and beer. Not a great selection, and definitely not top shelf choices, I remember being tasked with making drinks. Gin and tonics, Scotch and water or soda, beer and old fashioned were the usual fare.

Marion (Mrs.) Briggs, and sometimes my grandmother (Mildred), would ask for a piece of ice in their glass of beer, which they believed reduced gas.

The accepted signal for refills was the suggestive, and sometimes violent rattling of ice in their otherwise empty glasses, which was my cue to go to work.

Those of us who were too young to enjoy adult beverages (when we were under parental scrutiny) had our choice of coke, root beer, and a wonderful orange drink called Tru-Ade. All the soft drinks came in glass bottles, and most beer was in cans.

While gathered in the front yard, often we would wave to the pilots coming in for a landing at Lee Airport as they flew over. Back then there wasn’t a 500 -foot ceiling, and they flew in so low that we could usually see their faces well enough to recognize them. Of course, once in a great while one of them would miscalculate their approach and end up in the creek.

Fourth of July celebrations were held at the Briggs' house (now owned by Fred and Casey Hunt). Lester Briggs provided some of the most wonderful fireworks that he would shoot over the creek, using a piece of rain gutter as a launching ramp for the rockets. Kids would set off firecrackers under the chairs of the adults, we'd all wave sparklers with a carelessness that would terrify parents today, and while nobody ever got seriously hurt, everybody had a terrific time.

The bathing beach (as it was called back then) was the usual hang out for kids and mothers during the weekdays as we tried to escape the heat. Although they're mostly gone now, there were some huge shade trees, one of which had a bench built around it, and the shade was welcome. The area in the water was ringed with pilings (still there) that supported nets in the summer that were intended to keep out jellyfish. Not very effective, and a fairly big job to install, but it gave folks a false sense of comfort against the stinging critters. My grandfather and Lester Briggs took turns replenishing the sand at the beach, and pretty much each year they would contract for a dump truck or two of fresh sand to be delivered. Of course, back then we had a concrete block retaining wall that kept the land where it belonged, and gave us a nice place to sit as well. The sand extended well out into the water and provided a really nice place to play. It was a very functional beach that got a lot of use.

The houses back then were what we might call bungaloes today, and were modest shacks for the most part that served to provide some weather protection and privacy for sleeping and eating. Electricity was here when I was a kid, as well as individual water wells. The earliest source of fresh water was a community well somewhere on what is now the South River Landing property. Most folks had septic systems, which replaced the original drain pipes that allowed waste water to drain directly into the creek. The "modern" public sewer system came along about forty years ago. Sadly, they didn't think it would make sense to make any provision for city water to go in the same excavation.

The community roads back then were mostly clam and oyster shells, and were paved around the time of the sewer if I remember correctly. Maybe earlier.

The houses weren't built to any modern building codes, but were minimalist, to be polite. The roof over my own dining room was made from 2x4s, about 24 inches on center, and the roof sheathing was 1/2" plywood. It's amazing that it lasted as long as it did.

The houses had no insulation, of course, no heat and no air conditioning, and so the houses got pretty hot in the summer and cold in winter. Most houses had windows on all four sides to allow some air to circulate, and that was often helped by big fans. It was a feeble attempt and not very effective. I remember lots of sleepless nights lying in a pool of sweat when I came down to visit my grandparents.

Lee Beall was the neighborhood grass cutter, and in my lifetime my grandfather never mowed his own grass. Lee would come over once a week or whenever needed, and he'd use one of his collection of mowers to attack the crop of weeds that covered the sandy soil. I think one of his favorite mowers was an old Cub Cadet riding mower, and at some point, he, Lester Briggs and Bill Warner got into a competition to see whose was faster. I heard stories about races between them, probably fueled by Carling Black Label or Schlitz beer, around the neighborhood.

Lester Briggs was comfortable, as we might say today, and had a lot of nice toys. He always had a fast powerboat, the earliest of which that I can remember was a beautiful wooden boat named the Barracuda. Lester also had his own unique boat house, with railroad tracks leading from the water up into the house to store his boat during the winter. The last boat I remember him having was a 35-foot Bertram, with twin Chrysler 440s. He claimed that boat would do 60mph, but in retrospect I tend to think that might have been an exaggeration. Lester was known for a certain flexibility in some things. As one of the owners of the Briggs dynasty, he always had ice cream treats in his freezers that he loved to give out to us kids whenever he got the chance. He and Marion were very generous that way. They also had a sort of clubhouse on top of the boathouse, that contained an old pump organ and ping pong table, and I'm told it had an ice cream soda fountain at one point.

Lester and my grandfather loved to play practical jokes on each other, and anyone else they might be able to sucker in. It wasn't unusual for them to tie ripe tomatoes and other fruit onto the other's plants.

The clubhouse back then was the center of social activity, and there were clam bakes and lobster fests in my time, and dances back before I was born. Although it looked pretty much like it does today on the outside, the only thing inside that looks the same is the wood floor and the support posts.

The far corner of the clubhouse property where the mulch pit used to be had a softball backstop back in the day, or so I'm told.

Something that really defined this neighborhood back in the day was a universal friendliness and neighborliness that was lost until recently. Whenever there was a major storm, folks got their saws out and worked to clear each other's properties. As a kid in elementary school, I remember being down here in at least one hurricane that brought a lot of big trees down, and although I was too small to be of much help, men all worked together to clear the roads.

Bill Warner was the neighborhood carpenter and handyman, and he was responsible for a lot of the buildings and improvements in the neighborhood. My grandparents and parents credited him with building the addition on my old

house that evolved into a kitchen. The floor was so uneven that anything round on the floor would race to the lowest corner. Even the living room floor was a bit uneven. At night in the dark, it was possible to navigate through the room by feeling the topography with bare feet. Nothing in my old house was plumb or square, and that was a lot of its charm.

Disclaimer: My memory isn't great, and a lot of the information provided is from stories told by my ancestors and relatives. Take it all with a grain of salt!

South River Park Rambling

By Francis Jaques

Fred Hunt got me into this, so you can credit him or blame him for his interest in community history. With the interest shown in his historic remembrances and facts that were printed in the Newsletter, he suggested that some of us "old-timers" might be willing to share their experiences in living here in its earlier days.

My time here begins in 1958, when I moved with my husband, Milton, and three-year-old daughter, Cynthia or Cindy as she was known. We were living in an apartment in Silver Spring and looking for a place to settle down. Our move here was an experiment, suggested by a college friend of Milt's and began as a rental of the Smith home while that family was in living in Holland. After that first year we decided to stay in this friendly place and I am still living in that house, built in 1959 on Maryland Way then Maryland Avenue.

Initially enticed by the water location, we soon found that the neighbors were most welcoming. To us accustomed to small-town or suburban living, this community was nothing but a hodge-podge of summer cottages some of which had been updated for year-round use but still basically cottages. The roads were paved but those in the bluff were still pretty rough. The location of the elementary school within walking distance was a big attraction. The athletic field was a farm with the farmhouse set on a plot of land across from the intersection of Park Road. One lone cow, named Linda, was living in the farmyard. The Leitch family who owned the farm sold the

land to the county for development as an athletic field and community park. All of us residents breathed a sigh of relief that it didn't go to a developer.

Another attraction was the beach, which was sandy with a large roped off area for swimming. Truckloads of new sand were brought in every summer generously donated by a few of the summer resident families. The swimming team was also a major attraction and the competition among communities such as Selby, Cape Loch Haven, Edgewater Beach and Southdown Shores was intense. On summer weekends, meets were held at all of these communities. This team photo was taken in 1962.



Originally the beach had one platform or float. The second one was built 25 yards distance which was needed for swim meets and training. A sliding board was added to the platform that is still standing and it was a big attraction. In late summer the sea nettles settled in. The nets kept some at bay but they were still a nuisance for swimming as well as boating and crabbing.

The creek also provided wintertime fun with ice skating and sledding during the 1970s through the mid-1990s. The water froze solidly up to the South River and I remember one year, around 1973, when the entire South River froze and we could skate easily up to Edgewater Beach and on to Riva.

We usually got on the ice at the boat ramp and often times would have a bonfire at the bottom of the road to help us warm-up. There were hockey games on the ice and snow sledding on the road-way that leads to the upper pier. We often kept a fire going up there when sledding.

By the late 1970s and into the 1980s, South River Park took on the appearance of a year-round community with new homes being built and tearing down of existing cottages. The tobacco field across from the school became a nursing home, now the South River Rehabilitation Center. The roads, which had been maintained by the community, were turned over to the county and sewage was brought in, a huge relief.