

## A Lifetime in Old Beechwold

Patty Donnally is returning to Old Beechwold, the place where she moved at age 6 and where she has spent almost her entire life.

Her roots in Old Beechwold go back to 1933, when the Rector family moved into 35 West Royal Forest. After marrying and living in an apartment for seven years, she and her husband, Bill, moved into 177 Rustic Pl. After 59 years, they moved to a retirement community.

Sadly, Bill died in July and Mrs. Donnally decided her heart is in Old Beechwold. She is returning in January to live in her former house on Rustic Place with son Mike and daughter-in-law Becca.

“Considering how many years Old Beechwold has been home to me, it will be nice to be back,” she says.

Mrs. Donnally has lived a lot of Old Beechwold’s history, and some of her recollections are below.

### *The Early Years*

Old Beechwold was far out when her family moved here.

“I remember the day we moved in. There were eight houses in this first block and nothing after that on Royal Forest except the original Jeffrey summer house and a house at the Northeast corner of Royal Forest and Beechwold Blvd. This really was the boonies.” The entrance to the Jeffrey summer house was on Royal Forest at the time.

### *Outdoor Fun*

Children had a lot of freedom back then. “As soon as we moved, I was immediately free to roam with neighborhood buddies through vacant lots and the ravine. Louise Helms (Smith) lived next door and she returned to that house as an adult.”

“It was all grassy vacant lots with five or six yucca plants in each lot. They made wonderful swords. It was magical - being outside all day in the summer with all the empty space. We followed each other, crawling on the ground to make paths through the tall grass.”

When building began here in the middle 1930s, the scrap lumber became several tree houses, which were accessed via ladders. “No girls were allowed,” she noted.

She recalls seeing the two or three old monkey cages near the present day 150 W Beechwold Blvd. They held firewood at that time, and were off the ground. “The cages were not very big and the Dupre boys liked to knock them over at Halloween.”

Naturally, the river provided childhood fun. “My brother was the river rat. He made friends with an old man, who said he was an Indian, and who lived in a shack on the other side of the river. We never swam in the river but you could ice skate on it back then. The water wasn’t regulated by Delaware Dam like it is now, so the depth varied a lot. During the flood of in 1937, I remember walking down Royal Forest and seeing that the river had backed up into the ravine. Old Beechwold was never flooded, though.”

The winter had its own charms. “Lots of times, Donald Dupre came up to play inside games, and mom would pop some corn.”

Favorite sledding places were around the bridge and at the bottom of West Royal Forest just before the current John Alexander house, where you had to be able to make the a crucial turn to avoid the water. There were some rules: "No hanging onto bumpers of cars while sledding."

#### *July Fourth*

Rathbone road went to Indianola during the 30s. About two weeks before July 4<sup>th</sup>, tents went up along High Street to sell fireworks. She and other Beechwold children used to go up and look at them. Then they would go with their fathers when it was time to buy.

"One year, Mr. Wing, who lived across the street, blew off three fingers with fireworks and the fire department came to help him." His wife used to save the Sunday Dispatch for Mrs. Donnally and her sister so that they could have the paper dolls in it.

#### *The Sewer Pipe*

"It was a big deal in the mid-30s when the five foot sewer pipe was buried in the upper ravine. We got up early to watch them dig way down."

Mothers forbade their children from going into the pipe because of sewer gas and rats. "Of course we did. I would go into it a few hundred feet but stop where it turns, because after that you could not see the light at the entrance. Some kids went farther. Louise Helms went all the way to High Street."

"By the end of summer, the pipe was covered over and grass was planted. From that time on, we called it 'the gulch.'"

#### *The All-Electric House*

An exciting event occurred in 1936, when the Price house was built at the Northwest corner of West Royal Forest and Royal Place. It was one of the first four or five all-electric homes in the US and featured in Better Homes and Gardens and the Columbus newspapers.

"It had an electric dishwasher, disposal, and air conditioning, but what we liked was the electric garage opener. We would ride our bikes there and watch Mr. Price go into his driveway, put a key in a column, and the garage door would go up."

The day of the Price's open house, the kids sat on the curb and watched a steady stream of cars going to see the wonders within the all-electric house.

#### *School Days*

From the bus stop at West Royal Forest and High, Mrs. Donnally rode to Clinton School on High Street on an open air bus. It had long benches along the sides and canvas flaps that could be lowered if weather conditions warranted. By the late 1930s, it was replaced by a regular school bus.

The junior high was Crestview and the high school was Columbus North. At the time, there was no Watterson or Our Lady of Peace schools. There were many professors from OSU living here, and their children went to University school.

#### *Old Beechwold Association*

Mrs. Donnally recalls the Old Beechwold Association as a men's group that started in the 30s or 40s. "They would have a meeting and then talk and play poker. A woman who moved to W. Jeffrey Pl. in the 1940s wasn't having any of that exclusion. She started going to the meetings and it almost broke up over that. She opened it to women."

### *Early Development*

In Mrs. Donnally's early years, Old Beechwold was largely empty, except along High Street and by the River. Her friend Donald Dupre lived at 209 W. Beechwold Blvd., a house that sat alone at the time. The only other house in view from the Dupre property was the former Jeffrey summer home. Mrs. Donnally recalls that Mrs. Dupre, "a nifty lady," was sad when a house was built across the street.

The service road along High Street was there with three houses along the north end. The south end had only one house

"When I used to ride my bike, Rustic Place was an orchard." Much later, in 1956, she would have two of these apple trees in her yard when she and her husband moved to 177 Rustic Place. That house, like many others on the street, was built in 1937. Jimmy Campbell, an architect, built their house and lived in it, and built three others on the street. The house at 185 Rustic Place (currently the Palmer house) had been there, alone, before that. Building then paused for World War II.

The surrounding area was very different then. Mozart's across High Street was a BBQ in the 30s, became a cafeteria, and was later rented out for parties. At one point in the early 40s, Saturday morning "manners" lessons were given there. "Mom signed my brother up for them. The boys had to wear gloves. He went twice before escaping through a bathroom window with a friend and never going back."

The area East of High St. had streets but was mostly empty until after World War II. "That is where I learned to drive, because the streets had little traffic."

"Rite Rug was originally four businesses – a beauty shop, realtor, gift shop, and something else." In a brick building on High Street just South of Sheffield were two businesses: a drugstore on the north side and Buck's Grocery on the south side. Beechwold Hardware was built a few years later at the back.

Buck's was the site of her first job in high school. "I was in charge of ration stamps and phone orders. When you think of the size – they were narrow businesses that went way back."

### *Neighborhood Relationships*

The neighborhood was loaded with children and with moms at home. Many of the men were professors at Ohio State. Mothers got together at Twig meetings, raising a lot of money for Children's Hospital, socializing, and creating an illustrated cookbook.

"There was a lovely sense of neighborliness. At one time, Old Beechwold used to have a summer picnic at the park at the bottom of W. Jeffrey Pl. Bob and Becky Weisenberger had a celebration for my parent's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary at their house on W. Royal Forest."

The neighborhood was peaceful and off the beaten path. "Life was a bit gentler. There were no crime incidents, and we didn't lock our doors."

“There is a pull to live here that continues today. A lot of the children who lived here came back as adults. I can think of six who grew up in Old Beechwold and moved into the home originally owned by their parents, and seven who bought another house here. I also know of eight families who have moved from one house to another within Old Beechwold.”

### *Nature*

“The ravine used to be full of wildflowers, and was gorgeous in the Spring. There was always a sense of how unique it was, and still is, with the Beech trees concentrated near the river. We put a beech tree in our backyard to celebrate living here.”

Nature was different in another way. “The number of deer now! I never saw a deer when we lived on Royal Forest. About 8 or 10 years ago, I saw my first deer on Rustic Pl.”

She recalls an invasion by crows. “When 315 went through, crows came from the corn fields on the other side of the river. The first few years, it was really noticeable.”

Mrs. Donnally has a minor in geology and took an interest in the ravine. “The concretions are huge in the Olentangy shale. You can see them in the hillside, and falling out of the shale down into the ravine. In the shale, there are also little iron pyrite concretions, about the size of a marble. We would take cub scouts down there with a geology hammer and find them. The ravine is magical, a special place.”

She likes recent efforts to take care of the surroundings. “Gregg Peace has really made a difference in planting trees and clearing what shouldn’t be there.”

### *Politics*

Mrs. Donnally lived through many local political upheavals. Old Beechwold had a number of residents who were well-connected to the city, and this served the neighborhood well over the years.

Their first introduction to politics was around 1950, when Columbus wanted a Ford plant on 400 acres at Sinclair and Morse. Old Beechwold and families living east of High Street opposed the idea and how it would change the neighborhood. “A referendum petition drive was being organized to stop the rezoning. In response, the city, not wanting to jeopardize a big bond issue they hoped would pass, backed off the zoning change – no Ford plant in our future.”

“The biggie was in 1968 with the Morse Rd. extension across the river. We really girded up for that, along with others in the area. Lots of neighbors were circulating referendum petitions all over Columbus. When the vote was tallied, the referendum lost. Fourteen years later, a second attempt flopped when Beechwold lawyers pointed out at the very last minute that the petitions were printed on the wrong form and the issue could not go on the ballot.

During this time, volunteers worked toward getting a historic designation. “Henry Hunker and the Old Beechwold association worked toward getting Old Beechwold listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the list of Columbus Historic Neighborhoods. It turned out to be an added bonus that being on the National Register would make getting federal money for Morse Road extension difficult.”

In the early 1980s, the state proposed moving the fairground to the area West of Olentangy River Road, North of W. North Broadway, and perhaps as far north as Henderson Road. “The uproar was huge. If

that had gone through, there would be no Riverside Hospital and no Knolls. Old Beechwold got involved in this too.”

Around 1990, a group bought a house at W. Jeffrey and High to be home to mentally disabled adults. “It was not politically correct to oppose it, and the publicity was going to be awful if we did. After discussions with the city officials and social service groups, the city decided to pull the permission and the house was sold.”

### *Notable Residents*

Some notable residents she recalls:

The Spanish style house at 44 W. Jeffrey was owned by a Mr. Parker, who invented ice cream drumsticks.

Carl Rogers, the psychologist, lived at 4857 Rustic Bridge and worked at OSU in the early 1940s. “His son Dave was a friend and just as nice as can be.”

Erwin Frey, a noted sculptor and professor at OSU, lived at 4837 Olentangy Blvd. “He was the nicest kind of man.”

When Colo the gorilla was born at the zoo, she was the first captive birth, and a man came to study her for a few years. He bought the house at 121 Riverview Park and brought so many books that he had to shore up the second floor of the house.

Myron Gessaman, mayor of Columbus from 1936-1939, built the house at 147 Rustic Pl.

Harold Nielson, a world famous physicist and head of the Physics department at OSU, lived at 199 Rustic Place.

A cat hoarder with 37 cats lived at 4827 Olentangy Blvd.

There were countless others of note: judges, political office holders, lawyers.

So that is Old Beechwold, way back when, in the memory of a long-time member of the community.

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