

Growing up in Oakland in the 1950s

By Cal Bickford

THE MOVE TO OAKLAND

We moved into town during the fall of 1948. Up to that time we had lived in a new home that our parents built during 1940 in (cramped) suburban Fair Lawn. My parents needed room. Both of them were avid gardeners as you will see below. Also, the houses were so close together that you could talk to your next door neighbor through the bedroom windows. We had looked for homes in the western part of Bergen County, primarily Mahwah, Oakland and Franklin Lakes, settling on an old 1800's farmhouse that was to become a beautiful, updated and property at 155 Allerman Road.

ALLERMAN ROAD

Following the moving van, turning south from Franklin Ave. onto Oakland Ave. (Page's Corner), we passed the the Van Allen and Stream houses. As we turned the corner onto Allerman Road we passed a large field of grass that comprised the north corner and a small patch of woods on the south corner. This was the "old" Allerman Road, now buried under I-287. It was sparsely populated with only six homes on the paved portion up to the quite old, steel-framed, wooden planked bridge over Allerman Creek.

Some of Dad's motivation to purchase the property on Allerman Road was based on speculation. He'd heard that a new four-lane highway, S-4B, was planned to pass along our road. Visions of skyrocketing property values vv. commercial construction similar to the intersection of Routes 4 and 17 appeared in his mind. Although such commercialization never happened, the purchase, first and foremost, still proved to be a great place to raise a family.

Traveling down Allerman Road that first day, there were three buildings on the left. First, there was an old, two-story home with a driveway leading down behind it to two very old, unpainted houses. I suspect that these may have been old Allerman Farm slave quarters. On the other side of the driveway, about midway to the bridge, was the first Oakland schoolhouse, uninhabited at the time. It would later be purchased, converted and expanded into a residence. Last on the left was the Latus home. Only undeveloped woods sat between the Latus property and Allerman Creek. The creek is the

same one that meandered around to go behind these homes. At one time it provided power for the Page saw mill further downstream. It still passes under Pages Corner and eventually feeds into Crystal Lake. On the south side of our road was a large field with wild grapes growing along the roadside. Next was the home of Les Merrion, then Chief of Police, directly across from the Latus property. That house later succumbed to fire. Then there was residence where a close friend lived. The last house before the bridge was ours. The Susquehanna, New York and Western Railroad ran behind these three homes, paralleling Allerman Road. A right-of-way existed between the our friend's residence and ours to permit access to Mr. Schorr's Oakland Coal and Lumber Company, on the other side of the tracks. That right-of-way is now part of Shelter Lane.

Allerman Road beyond the bridge was a sandy, dirt road that was never paved. As it curved north uphill to terminate on Franklin Ave. atop Pages hill, it became very rocky and impassable to motor vehicles. The land on the north side was Pages Hill, a cleared, grassy, steep, high hill bordered by woods. That hill proved to be a terrific tobogan and sleigh ride area during our early winters in Oakland. Directly across "the brook", as we called Allerman Creek was the home of James J. Hodgson, veteran of the Spanish-American War and Grand Marshall of all of our July 4th parades. He lived alone with his wife and drove an early 1930's or late 1920's Plymouth sedan. Even in his old age he maintained an immaculate acre or more of property complete with a large vegetable garden, trimmed shrubbery and a beautiful home that he built himself. The next house was and remained vacant. Next and last was a two-story house occupied by two women that we hardly socialized with.

All the homes on Allerman Road were condemned to provide for the construction of I-287, except for the residence next door which is now an animal shelter and Les Merrion's home, the earlier demise of which is mentioned above. My Parent's home was needlessly destroyed due to the misalignment of I-287. Forced to leave their beloved Pond's Church and long-term friends, they moved to build a more affordable home in South Jersey retirement community. The huge old apple trees that were in front of our home are all that are visible from I-287 on the land in front of 84 Lumber to mark the location of the home of my youth. The property now lies fallow and overgrown, never used since the construction of the interstate.

OUR NEW HOME

Our parents had purchased a wonderful piece of property. It is partially visible in an old picture of the Allerman farm taken looking south from the top of Pages hill looking south. Visible are the roofs of both sections of our house, apple trees in our front yard, a freight train passing behind the houses, another home, unpaved Allerman Road and the Allerman creek bridge. This picture is included in your book entitled Images of America - OAKLAND on the top of page 19. Our quite spacious living room contained a brick fireplace with hearth. We enjoyed many marshmallow roasts using thin sticks cut from the woods across the street. There was the knotty pine-walled den which served as a library and TV room off of the living room. The kitchen was long and spacious with a breakfast area at the south end. Mom prepared delicious dinners via a modern gas stove and oven. Our relatively new refrigerator was in stark contrast with the Hodgson's icebox that required frequent deliveries by the "iceman". We had a washing machine but no clothes dryer or dishwasher. These were welcomed additions later. Mom hung clothes to dry on lines in the backyard. The dining room was sufficiently large to seat thirteen people around the table as well as space for a 4'X8' table for our American Flyer electric train set and a few large pieces of furniture. Thirteen loud, wooden stairs, later carpeted, led to the master bedroom to the left of the landing and two large bed rooms and the bathroom off a hallway to the right. Mom was an efficient organizer and interior decorator. On the front of the house was a screened-in porch on which Dad enjoyed a big cigar while reading books on lazy summer weekends. Over time, our parents made improvements that would be envied in many modern homes.

Life was really easy and casual in those days. Automobile traffic was light. Also, there was no requirement for an adult, 18 or over, to supervise minors. We could be left at home by ourselves and became quite self-sufficient. We were free to do and go whatever and wherever we wished. Neighbors and adult friends were always around if we needed them. Mom later commented that she really never knew exactly where we were. She trusted us. One night when, my bedroom being in front, squirrels nesting one particular apple tree fought and screeched all night. I didn't get any sleep the entire evening. The next morning I borrowed a friend's BB air gun. An excellent shot, I got at least seven squirrels without missing one. We'd come home from school while our parents were still at work. Dad took the train to Passaic where he worked as an accountant. Mom had stayed

home until all of us were able to fend for ourselves. Sometime later, Mom taught school in another town. We were unsupervised a lot of the time, but rules had been laid down. Basically, we needed to be home by suppertime (homework was done after supper). At one point during elementary school I had a paper route along Oakland Ave, including certain side streets, to the top of Long Hill Road and down to Pleasureland. The route took three hours to complete.

Most of the time we simply roamed around town on our bikes visiting friends, swimming in our brook or the Ramapo River, playing ball in the "Rec field". The Recreation Department had constructed a wooden plank float, located a little south of the trestle. The river was deep enough to enable diving off the float. On Saturdays we might bike to the movies at the Colonial theater in Pompton Lakes via Colfax Ave. Admission was only a quarter. Candy, popcorn and soda ate up the rest of our dollar movie allowance. We left our bikes parked unlocked behind the theater, never worrying about theft. We even rode our bikes to visit our old friends in Fair Lawn. Automobile traffic was light. On a whim, I once rode my bike alone along Colfax Ave., to Pompton Lakes, picking up Ringwood Ave. from Wanaque Ave. and onto Skyline drive. Coming up over the top of Skyline Drive by Camp Tamarack, I took my feet off the pedals, Flying past Joe Woods' house, I didn't brake until I had reached West Oakland Ave.

Three quarters of an acre provided enough land for Dad's huge garden on the south side of the house and for Mom's rather large garden behind an ample grape barber in the rear of the house. In addition to the many types of vegetables grown, there were wild blueberries and blackberries growing on the property. Huge, thick (ancient?) fruit trees in front of the house provided green apples for Mom's delicious apple pies and strudel. We used Dad's apple picker, a wire basket with hooks on a long pole, to harvest the lower apples. To get to the higher ones, we'd either climb a tree and use the picker which was handed up to us from the ground, or wait until they fell. Apples began falling in numbers toward the end of the season. One needed to get them raked up before bees got to them or they'd be quite difficult to gather. Mom used a part of the basement to store canned goods from her garden. There was also rhubarb growing in the rearmost "rough" section of the property from which Mom made delicious rhubarb pies. The wild berries, rhubarb, grapes and apples were probably remnants of (gifts from?) the Allerman Farm.

Very quickly we learned to swim and to "shallow dive" into Allerman Creek

(the brook) which was four feet deep and twenty-five feet wide. Catfish and black snakes lived in and around the Creek. It flowed south behind the Hodgson property from the dam at Caille's Pond, parallel to and just below the railroad tracks. It turned west to mark the boundary between our property and Jim Hodgson's. A rock dam just before the water flowed under the bridge provided depth for swimming. The dam also slowed the flow of water as it came around the bend upstream, preventing 1) the water from cutting into the outside of the turn and 2) keeping the water from cutting into the soil at the base of a magnificent Tulip tree next to the steps from our yard into the swimming area. We enjoyed many family picnics with friends next to that brook and in the spacious backyard. Construction of Rte. 208 during 1961/1962 destroyed the dam and thus our "swimming hole". It also caused the base of the Tulip tree to be undermined by swiftly flowing water during heavy rains, causing the tree to slowly lean and to eventually fall across the brook. Oakland's architectural heritage, described in your book, wasn't the only thing partially ruined by "progress".

Mom prided herself in keeping an immaculate clean house. She really had a thing about anyone tracking it up with wet, muddy feet. Thus, the old two-hole outhouse behind the house, far from being filled up, was put to good use while we were swimming with our many friends. For some reason, Dad had the facility removed prior to the 1957 imposition of the annual \$5 outhouse tax.

Although we had city water, most of the houses on Allerman Road also had old wells. Our well, next to one of the two rear doors was simply covered with loose boards. This posed a very real hazard for young kids and their friends running about. The first of many improvements made was to place a rather attractive permanent slate and concrete cover over the well.

The home was heated by a coal-fired steam system. There was a cast iron radiator, painted bright aluminum, in each room and one in the downstairs hallway. One of my first tasks was to shake down the ashes after school and to stoke the furnace with two shovel fulls from the coal bin. Lord help me if I forgot and let the fire go out! Mr. Schorr, proprietor of Oakland Coal and Lumber across the tracks and directly behind our house was a very kind, caring man. He provided Dad with a sort of budget plan, permitting him to catch up with his winter coal purchases during the less expensive summer months. He said that he wasn't about to let a family with three growing boys freeze. Winters were cold during those years and the snows were deep.

THE WOODS BEHIND THE LUMBER COMPANY

There was a huge sand pit behind the lumber company that I used for practice with my .22 caliber bolt-action Mossberg rifle. This was prior to Chief Joe Woods' ban on firing a gun and hunting of any sort on the east side of the Ramapo river. The deep, mature woods beyond provided great camping and hiking experiences. They also provided a shortcut to my buddy's house on East Oakland (Yawpo) Ave. A spring in those woods provided a small, trickling stream which fed his concrete swimming pool and goldfish pond. Prior to Chief Woods' ban, we were cautious to wear red hats and other bright clothes during hunting season while in the woods.

A bit uphill on Yawpo Ave. was an enormous, very tall pine tree located on the Storch property on the south side of Yawpo Ave. One could view the beauty across the Ramapo Valley to the river and the mountains beyond (Mc Evoy's tower) from the top of that tree.

OAKLAND GRAMMAR SCHOOL

I began Oakland Grammar School, second grade, soon after we moved in. Mom, a primary grade teacher, didn't begin teaching in the Waldwick schools until a few years later. By that time we were old enough to cook our own breakfasts and get out of the house in time for school.

Third grade (1949 - 1950) was actually half third and half fourth grade as Oakland's population was starting to increase.

We watched the new wing being built outside our classroom. There was a lot of noise.

Our teachers were wonderful. Friendly, dedicated, informative, attentive, very helpful, hard working and caring are all apt descriptions. Oh, and let me add strict! Especially one teacher who will remain anonymous. We loved her. I never had her for a teacher but during eighth grade I was a member of the Junior Patrol which she supervised. We served as crossing guards before and after school and assisted the teacher on playground duty to monitor safety during lunchtime. I was also a member of the Student Council.

It seems that one day, while on my newspaper route, the following incident occurred just south of the teacher's home. According to her daughter, who had turned south out of the school's driveway, I allegedly shot out from a

customer's driveway, crossing Oakland Ave. in front of her and didn't look before proceeding across Oakland Ave., making her brake hard to avoid hitting me. (She must have accelerated very quickly.) Being very annoyed, she stopped at her mother's home to report me. I only found out about the incident at the next day's Junior Patrol meeting. The teacher summarily kicked me off of the patrol, preventing me from participating in a trip to Yankee Stadium. When I appeared seated on the bus for the trip a few days later, she asked, "What are you doing here?" I answered, "Student Council". She simply turned and walked away, saying nothing.

Graduation in June 1955 was held in the Ponds Memorial Building next to the school. That building also served as a Teen Canteen that showed movies and had a two-lane bowling alley downstairs. Elementary School graduations were also held there. Your book mentions a firing range also located in the basement. There was none in the area next to the bowling alley. If it existed, it must have been under the police headquarters.

BOY SCOUTS

There were no Boy or Girl Scout organizations in Oakland in 1948. I forget the year, but very early on Mom wrote a letter to headquarters, then in Hackensack, and got the wheels moving. Ponds Church sponsored the Cub Scout Pack, Boy Scout Troop and Explorer Post, all numbered 52. Weekly cub den meetings were held in Den Mother's homes. Troop meetings were held weekly in the church basement. Jack Lavin was our first Scoutmaster, with Russ Seedyk and John Cottell successors. Mom (Helen P. Bickford) served as Den Mother for quite a while. I became Leader of the Apache Patrol upon transferring to the Scout Troop from Cub Scouts. All of my patrol members lived on Pawnee Ave. I bicycled a mile and a half each way up Hiawatha Boulevard each week to lead meetings. Rain, snow, etc.

Our adult leaders were very knowledgeable and dedicated. We enjoyed summers at Camp NoBeBoSo, Blirstown, a summer Jamboree at Glen Gray, many "ad hoc" campouts in the mountains and several canoe trips including rapids. on the Delaware River in New York State.

PONDS CHURCH

Old habits die hard. Initially, we retained our membership in the church we had attended while living in Fair Lawn -Broadway Baptist Church in Paterson. The Bickford extended family enjoyed a long history of membership, service and very active participation in that religious

community. However, continued participation proved extremely time consuming. Dad and Mom were members of the choir and other groups. These met on evenings during the week. Also, Sunday mornings involved getting three young boys ready for church, driving at least one half hour to Sunday School and services and then driving the half hour back to Oakland. On certain Sundays we'd visit Dad's father's house in Ridgewood for dinner.

We decided to visit Pond's Church, "The Workhouse of God" mentioned in your books. A good decision. The church had an excellent Sunday School program that offered services designed for kids and religious instruction (Bible Study). Sunday School services and Bible study were held in the Ponds Memorial Building during adult services which were held in the church. We joined our parents back at the church building afterwards for a time of fellowship held in the basement. Dad (Harold T. Bickford) served as Sunday School Superintendent for a few years besides being a member of the choir and serving as a Deacon on the Consistory. I served as President of Youth Fellowship during my senior high school year.

The Pastor, Reverend Clinton E. Stoneton, was very active in children's and youth programs. He was always available to discuss things with us and was a valuable source of information. He was just a good friend to have. I was saddened but happy for him when I returned home from college one day to learn that he'd retired to Cape Cod.

THE COLONY

There was a group of summer bungalows in West Oakland called "The Colony". We accessed it by riding our bikes south on West Oakland Ave, turning left downhill onto West Street just across from the West Oakland train station. The Colony should not be confused with the Pleasureland section of Oakland as it was a separate Jewish community of summer vacationers that owned or rented bungalows. Also, its location was far upriver from Pleasureland on the other side of and across the river from Sandy Beach. It was a commuting village. During the summer, the men would commute to work in the city via the train which would make special summer stops at the West Oakland Station. It was complete with a handball court, Riemer's snack bar and store and a building that served as a civic center and Synagogue. A detailed description of summer life in the Colony is available at <http://thefranklinlakesjournal.com/odds-ends/west-oaklandmemories/> and <http://triptaker9.com/oakland/index.com>.

We enjoyed visiting our friends in the Colony. They taught us how to play stick ball and told us many things about living in the city, basically the Bronx.

HIGH SCHOOL

Oakland students attended Pompton Lakes High School (PLHS). I attended PLHS during the school year 1955 - 1956. The closest school bus stop was at Seel's on the corner of East Oakland (Yawpo) and Oakland (Ramapo Valley Road) Aves. There was a beautiful, huge maple tree in front of Seel's building that was removed (sacrificed) to accommodate the parking lot for the strip mall. That year was the last that PLHS took Oakland students. Pompton Lakes was having its own growth problems and advised Oakland that it could no longer serve our town.

Ramapo Regional High School, Franklin Lakes was not completed until midway through the school year 1956 -1957.

In the interim, arrangements were made to hold classes after normal hours at Eastern Christian High School in Haledon. Those eight o'clock (PM) buses were a drag. Sports practice was held in the morning in Franklin Lakes. Homework was squeezed in somewhere. Somehow it got done. My grades didn't suffer.

Starting a new High School was a challenge and a real blast! We chose the school colors and mascot, named the newspaper and elected class officers and the executive committee. The first day in the new school building went extremely smooth. There was no trouble finding home rooms, lockers and classes. The late David T. Ross, then Principal, and his entire staff are to be commended.

OAKLAND'S BEACHES

Oakland's tourist "beaches" along the Ramapo River, as I remember, were mostly either closed or had very little business when we moved into town. Sandy Beach and Mullers Park were the only ones going full blast. I often visited a friend that lived next to Oakland Beach. The rope used to swing out over the river was still there. We enjoyed it immensely. The beach had a very high wooden slide into the water that was in disrepair and unuseable. Pleasureland was also in disrepair. The pools were empty and rusting. There was a bait and tackle shop, in additon to beaches, that rented rowboats on

West Oakland Ave. across from the Riverside Rest. That establishment saw its demise when Wilkin's dam finally collapsed in the late '50's.

SANDY BEACH

High School summers were spent working at Sandy Beach which was accessed at the end of Spruce Street. Local kids (our friends) often sneaked in from the bottom of Hemlock Street or from the Colony by traversing the dam across the river.

The swimming area was a huge, semicircular dugout pond about ten feet at the deep end. The entire beach was thickly covered with trucked-in imported sand. The dam was originally built to provide water power for the Wilkins Brush Factory. Several industries in Oakland had all depended on water power prior to electrification in 1916. A long trench, dug from north to south, began just above the dam. The trench fed the waterwheel house that powered the brush company. The rusted remains of the wheel house, waterwheel and the huge brush factory barn were still intact when I worked at the beach from 1956 to 1960. Sometime after 1916, probably after prohibition in the mid -1930's, the trench was expanded eastward to form the pond, with gradual grading to form a shallow approach around the entire semicircle. A straight concrete supporting wall was erected along the west side of the trench to keep the earth from eroding into the deep end of the pond. Two eight-foot high lifeguard chairs and three diving boards were emplaced on the sand beach along the wall.

Concrete tables with attached benches and grills anchored in the ground amply provided customers facilities for picnicking among the plentiful groves of trees throughout the park. Two refreshment stands offered ice cream, hot dogs, hamburgers and soda. One was located far behind the deep end of the pond. There was a covered concrete dancing area next to it, complete with a juke box and two pin ball machines. The other stand was attached to the outside of the old Wilkins barn. It was used only on weekends to accommodate the large crowds. "The Barn" as we called it, had itself been converted into a large beer hall with a bar across the north end. All the wood on the buildings, stands, lifeguard shack and etc. was painted a medium green with a bright orange trim. The beech also ran an old 1920's dump truck painted in similar colors. The truck, not registered, was used for garbage collection and brush removal. Picnic tables were left unpainted. I worked in the stands during my first summer at Sandy Beach grilling hot dogs and hamburgers, serving ice cream and drinks and keeping the stand

clean in general. The staff helped themselves to whatever food we desired. Mrs. Stutz, one of the owners, said we'd get used to helping ourselves and would not abuse the privilege. In addition, the owners provided generous meals at noon and suppertime.

I served as lifeguard for my remaining three seasons at Sandy Beach. Upon my return to school at the end of each summer, I was so dark complexioned that I was dubbed names that would be racially inappropriate today.

Depending on the volume of business, there were anywhere from one to four guards on duty, all Red Cross certified. We were very diligent, aware that many guests were from the city and probably couldn't swim. A great number were not fully knowledgeable of safety precautions and hazards as evidenced by their actions on the beach and in the water. Most of our frustration was parents not watching their small children. Small kids can get into trouble very fast and require constant supervision. On one occasion, I actually rescued a lad about ten years old that had somehow fallen or jumped off of the foot bridge over the inlet to the pond. That was quite a scare for everyone.

There were other miscellaneous tasks. These included cutting up fallen trees, gathering fallen branches, collecting garbage, cleaning rest rooms and other general maintenance. These jobs were performed by all of the staff, including lifeguards on slow days during the week. Weekends were very busy and kept everyone on the ball. We made certain that our guests' needs were met.

During my last summer at Sandy Beach, the demeanor of patrons diminished. This was due in part, I was told, by more convenient access to the Jersey Shore by the new New Jersey Parkway. The owners raised admission to discourage the riffraf, but to no avail. On one particularly rough Sunday, a fight broke out in the Barn. Mobs of people stormed out of the large doors along the side of the building as we watched from our lifeguard towers. The police were called and, with reinforcements from other towns and State Police, surrounded the mob, letting them fight it out to exhaustion. I'm unaware of the outcome, but I'm certain that the increasingly unruly clientel was a factor in the owners' decision to sell and retire a few years later.

SUMMARY

It was a privilege to have spent my youth in Oakland as the town grew from a semi-rural village to its maturity in the early 60's. My parents, teachers, and my participation in church and township activities gave me an appreciation of the hard work and dedication necessary for this successful process. Yet I sometimes long for the Oakland of my youth. I trust that

wisdom and foresight will include a respect for and preservation of its remaining history.

MULLERS PARK SHOOTOUT

I should include a postscript to clear a misunderstanding of an event that occurred about twenty-five years after I had finished college, married and moved to Wayne, N. J.

The location of where this event took place is often confused. FRG had actually purchased Mullers Park, not Pleasureland. I was in the Wayne Fire Company #5 (Packanack Lake) firehouse when the request for assistance was radioed from Oakland's Police Department. We listened as the incident evolved. Refer to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oakland,_New_Jersey. As I understand, the confusion about where the incident took place arose from the proximity of the two resorts and because some of the shooting drifted from Mullers Park onto the Pleasureland property. Also, we heard that certain participants were arrested on Spruce Street, the access road to Sandy Beach, as they tried to escape the scene.

The article mentions that Pleasureland (the Park) was reopened for a short time after the shootout. Actually, Pleasureland was closed sometime in the late '50s when I delivered newspapers there. It was Muller's Park that reopened for a short time. Since Frank R. Gallo (FRG Properties) was refused his 300 homes, he left Oakland, leaving the park to lie fallow.