

Tom,

I fully understand your sensitivity. You see, I grew up in Bergenfield from 1951 to 1964 as one of 10 kids. My dad was very active in Bergenfield politics and was the head of the Planning Board for many years. And I must add that his long term tenure on the Planning Board was a very controversial as he regularly fought the Mayor and Council relative to their plans for the boro. He was excoriated and vilified publicly even in the newspapers by virtue of full page ads taken by his opponents. We, his kids, felt every arrow of the mud slinging. More to the point, we were often ostracized and called names. But that's OK and we could handle it because we were proud of our Dad. I got more than one black eye defending him, his honor and our family name.

My dad's mantra while being the head of the Planning Board was that a vision of the future must weigh very heavily upon any boro decision made today. He decried shortsightedness and fought it with every strength he had. While he won some and he lost some, I will tell you that Bergenfield is a better place today because of those he won, ie., those with a long vision beyond the expedient 'now'. It has been said that fruit does not fall far from the tree that produced it. I guess that it describes me.

As a kid in Bergenfield I witnessed the destruction of virtually every downtown area in the central/eastern part of the county. The northern and western parts of the county, like Oakland, were virtually immune to the devastation wrought by the advent of the major malls on Rt. 4 and Rt. 17 as they then were virtually rural at the time. Those towns developed home-grown solutions to provide shopping and services to their residents. Some of those solutions were elegant and well thought out with the future impact in mind. Others were far less so.

I tend to agree with your preference to not have a public debate about our disagreements even though the Irish in me might relish a public airing and letting the residents decide. Nonetheless, I will respect your preference to limit this discourse to you and I. With that said and relative to what follows here, I think that we will ultimately have to agree to disagree and go on from there.

First, please understand that my use of the phrase 'lack of vision of biblical proportions' in no way is or was intended at all to provoke anyone. Rather, it simply reflects my personal opinion honed by my dad's approach to boro planning in addition to what I view as the tragedy of the loss of so many Victorian homes in our downtown. I'm sorry that you view the phrase as a provocation albeit entirely unintended. Maybe I'll choose another set of words to express the same thing.

With regard to the cause of the demise of the Oakland Military Academy, I can tell you that the information came from a close relative of Captain Sarcka who lived in Oakland at the time. He is a person of the highest character and who in fact benefited greatly to this day when the OMA moved to Orange County. Hence, he has no ax to grind and no ulterior motivation or gain for sharing that information with me. The account that I reported in my article is precisely what he said to me. I continue to stand by what I wrote.

Also, I will tell you that what happened to the OMA is not unique in town affairs. I have very loosely heard that the FRG complex after the shoot out in 1984 effectively met the same fate in the same way, ie., 'coded to death'. But no one regretted its loss to this community and I will never write about that as I have neither first hand accounts nor factual information. Unlike the loss of the OMA, its loss was Oakland's gain and no one lamented its demise.

I also ask you to consider the times when the OMA event took place, ie, 1961-2. The population of Oakland was exploding and the Grand Union built in 1957-8, had already been expanded. It needed a larger store but could not do so at its current location. Additionally, it faced a competitive challenge with the advent of the new A&P. The question really was where could it go, grow and prosper. The short answer was across the street to the fields of the OMA with a new shopping mall.

One assertion in your comment to my article was that the Copper Tree Mall wasn't developed until the mid 1970s and therefore there could not have been a connection between its latter development and the demise of the OMA in 1961. Included in the 20 newspaper articles attached is one dated from 1961 wherein the plans for the OMA acreage were in fact to include a new shopping mall and 60-90 apartments. That article dates to the initial acquisition of the property even before the OMA buildings were demolished. Hence, building the mall was the reason for the purchase of the property and the demise of the Academy.

Simply said, the rise of the mall and the demise of the Academy makes for a very interesting set of dots perfectly ripe for connection.

With regard to the presentation made by Al Potash to the Ponds Church for moving to another location owned by Oakland, one is compelled to try to understand his agenda. Please remember that after Al's presentation, the church committee did meet and had discussions over the next few months. In the end, they elected to do precisely the opposite of what Al proposed. I tend to call that a rebuke. Additionally, the strip mall was started about one year later. The reasonable conclusion in the absence of any contravening facts is that there likely was a linkage between the removal of the church and the full development of the strip mall.

But before I continue, first please know that in no way do I disrespect the Ponds Church, your family's association and attachment to it or its role in this community.

If one were to pretend for a moment that the Ponds Church agreed and the 'smoking gun' sentence in the article cited were true that Oakland wanted the property for new municipal buildings, it just doesn't make sense. First, the paint on the new municipal building wasn't even dry at the time and why would Oakland want another one? Second, while the church is large, the property it sits upon isn't. Hence, there would be a requirement for extra space for parking, landscaping, etc. That consideration would require the town to use private property for parking which is effectively prohibited. And if the town truly wanted to build new offices, why could it not simply acquire a piece of

the property upon which the strip mall was to be built? Or why wouldn't it simply build a larger municipal building? It is also interesting to note that a decade later Al Potash criticized a proposal to build additional boro office space citing that the current inventory is quite adequate.

I also ask you to consider that through the 1950s and beyond, local newspapers were very often used as unofficial organs of local government. Again, I witnessed this via my experience in Bergenfield. The 'smoking gun' is one sentence in a larger article on somewhat related topic. Yet, there is no other reference anyplace to Oakland's desire to acquire the property for new offices. That is highly unusual particularly given the many articles about the concept, planning and development of the new boro hall during the identical time period.

If the town's desire to acquire the church property to build new public offices was public knowledge, there would have a lot written about it in the local papers. But no other reference exists and nor do Oakland old timers remember it. And finally, if the new municipal building was already inadequate at the time it was built and before it was even occupied, then why build it in the first place? My point is that because of the absence of any other allusion or reference to the 'It's no secret' statement in the article, my unprovable instinct is simply that it was an after the fact plant. I honestly do not think that the 'smoking gun' cited is an effective defense.

Tom, Al Potash, your grandfather, moved to Oakland in 1927 and first lived in one the boarding houses next to the RR tracks owned by the Sanders family. Since he came here he indeed has been completely immersed in the affairs and betterment of Oakland. He was Mr. Oakland and indeed mayor for 3 terms. But like any public official, he had both his supporters and detractors. I can tell you that I have spoken to both and his detractors paint a very unflattering picture, one of abuse and misuse of power and so forth. That said, I have no idea of their accuracy and I'm not interested in them at all. I have no doubt that Al Potash was a good man and a good father and I equally have no doubt that his intentions were pure. My interest is in the effects of the decisions made at the time and what I view as their lack of future consideration. Yes, I consider many of his decisions as disasters and simply expedient to solve an immediate problem perceived or otherwise.

I fully understand your rise to defend your grandfather and your family name. I certainly would do the same and I in fact did so as a kid. In a certain way, our disagreement might be viewed as a bit silly....My facts are bigger than your facts and I have more of them!!! So, it seems to me that we are left to agree to disagree. And as long as we are disagreeing, attached are no fewer than 20 newspaper articles from the period supporting the positions and deductive logic that I have taken here.

Kevin Heffernan

