

Memories of West Lane Place

By: J. Spence Stephens

I grew up in West Lane Place in the late 1940's and 50's. For me, it was an exciting and wonderful neighborhood with many fun-filled experiences and warm, friendly people. It was new, remote, and offered countless opportunities for youthful adventure and occasional mischief.

We moved to #3 Hackberry Lane on January 4, 1948. We were a family of five – my mom and dad, Emma and Ted Stephens, my brother Dick age 13, my sister Anne age 8 and I, age 5. Before moving to West Lane Place we lived near St. Anne's Catholic Church. Everyone thought my Mom and Dad were crazy moving so far away, and to an area that, at the time, was only prairie. It was then common to refer to WLP as "the sticks" – and it was! Few imagined that this would develop into a beautiful, urban, tree-lined little neighborhood in the middle of one of the most glamorous commercial and shopping areas in all of Texas. But Mom and Dad saw the potential of growth in that area and thought it would be a good place to raise children. They were right on both counts.

In 1948 the Houston city limits stopped at the railroad tracks. The Highland Village neighborhood and Shopping Center had just been developed. The shopping center was a relatively new phenomenon on the commercial scene and it was much appreciated by the new arrivals to WLP. Westheimer Road, which was paved only to Post Oak Road was the main traffic artery to town and bus service stopped at Lamar High School. Richmond Road did not extend beyond the railroad tracks. What is now Afton Oaks was prairie with a smattering of huge oak trees. Pin Oak Horse Stable and a vacation bible school were located just behind the houses on the West side of Mid Lane. Grady Elementary, a simple one-room school, was located approximately where the 610 Loop now intersects Westheimer. An icehouse where some of the neighborhood men would gather for a beer after work was located on Westheimer just west of the railroad tracks. There were a few small churches scattered around the area, but very little else. The mayor of Houston at the time was Oscar Holcomb.

West Lane Place was developed and built by Jess Little, although he never lived there. Jess was a small, thin man with a tightly-drawn face. He always appeared to have a frown, maybe because I caused him so much trouble. I was his nemesis, falling through the roof of a newly-built house, playing with his workers' machinery and equipment, and once starting a brush fire in the neighborhood. Paul McConnell was an associate of Jess Little and he built a house for his family on the corner of Bas and Mid Lanes. Paul had a bright red face that always made me think of a firecracker. All the houses in WLP were "ranch style" which was typical of the housing being built in the boom following WWII. The houses ranged in price from \$10,000 to \$15,000. Most were between 1,200-1,500 square feet, single story, three bedrooms and one bath

homes with a screened-in back porch and a single-car garage. To my family, which had previously lived in a small two-bedroom house, this was spacious. Best of all – it was in a new, vibrant neighborhood and close friendships soon developed amongst the families of WLP.

Most of the original homeowners in WLP were couples with young children and growing families. Since it was common for the wives and mothers not to work outside the home, they were able to socialize during the day and develop close friendships. They had coffees, played cards, exercised together, car pooled and watched each others' kids. They planned barbeques and gatherings with neighborhood families. It was always a party atmosphere with a lot of fun, joking, laughing and of course, great food. Several families would get together at someone's house, and while the parents drank beer or bourbon on the patio, the kids played in the yard. The smell of oak or hickory smoke still brings me back to those good times. There was always plenty of food: brisket, ribs, steak, chicken. Vernon Swore, who lived on Hackberry Lane, made the best homemade peach ice cream in the neighborhood. To a youngster, it was comforting to know that there were so many warm and friendly neighbors around who were closely connected to our own family and were there to help when needed.

The original WLP extended south only to Hackberry Lane. Mid Lane ended just beyond Hackberry. At the end of Mid Lane was a sewer treatment facility for the neighborhood. The plant was a long rectangular building with tin siding and roof. Next to the building were the sewer processing tanks which were concrete cells built above the ground. We kids used to walk along the narrow sides of the cells that held the sewerage, daring each other not to fall off. Where the big concrete drainage ditch by the railroad tracks now exists, there was a shallower, unkempt and unsightly ditch that was full of snakes, turtles and assorted vermin. This, of course, was one of our favorite places to play. There we fished for minnows and crawfish, picked blackberries (with which Mom made great blackberry cobbler), and had many mud clod fights across the ditch. Behind the houses on Mid and Hackberry Lanes there were other much smaller drainage ditches which held small fish, minnows and crawfish. In our front yard ditch there lived a huge crawfish that we called "Big Red". He was at least six inches long and since he was so old and so big we never tried to catch him. He just roamed around the neighborhood and amazed everyone by his size.

Initially the streets were not paved; they were shell and quite bumpy. We had an old 1938 rust-colored (actually, I think it was orange) Buick four-door sedan that would jump out of third gear and Mom and Dad would have to hold it in gear as we went over the pot holes. Since there were no underground storm sewers, the drainage system was provided by front yard ditches that flooded frequently, making an ideal place for us children to swim and play. We had several big floods that came right up to the house, and we had to put towels under the front door to keep the water out.

Bash Street, which was not added to WLP until about 1951, was named for a very kindly and respected black worker named Bash who helped build homes in WLP. When I once locked myself in the bathroom it was Bash who was called upon to climb through the window and get me out. He and I were great friends and I spent a lot of time around him and the other workers, mostly getting in their way. But they were always patient with me and taught me a few words of exclamation that I had never heard before.

In about 1953, after the City of Houston had annexed a large section of land west of the railroad tracks including WLP, new streets, storm sewers and water mains were laid. The streets were lowered about four feet and the storm sewers replaced the old front yard ditches. The homeowners on Bash Street opted out of these improvements and consequently the grade of that street is different today.

WLP in the 1950's was probably quite typical of other similar middle-income neighborhoods across America. It was a good time to be living and a good place to live. Dog and cats were prolific and since most were not confined to the owner's house or yard, they tended to roam around the neighborhood freely. Everyone knew the name of everyone else's kids as well as their pets. Safety and security were not an issue. Few people ever locked their house or car doors. Since the neighborhood was virtually treeless when it was built, everyone felt duty-bound to plant as many trees as possible. My dad and some neighbors went to the woods and dug up a bunch of live oak trees and planted them in the front yards. Most of them remain today. Because the new trees being planted were small, most of the residents tended to over-plant and as the trees grew, some had to be cut down.

IN WLP in the 1950's legs and bikes were popular modes of transportation. Most walked for leisure and enjoyment rather than for exercise. Kids rode their bikes everywhere and frequently made trips to Highland Village Shopping Center to get a 25 cent hamburger and cherry coke or a supply of cinnamon toothpicks at Highland Village Drug Store. Another popular spot was Moses Melody Shop where we would listen to, and maybe buy, a 45 rpm record by Elvis or Jerry Lee Lewis. The girls and their moms liked to go to Meyer Brothers (where Tootsies is now) to shop for clothes. People walked to Highland Village to catch the bus. One of the most noticeable walkers in the neighborhood was Joey Schemick. Joey played the bagpipes and would stroll up and down the streets in the late afternoon in full highland regalia. He could be heard from blocks away.

Radio was still popular; programs like the *Lone Ranger*, *Dragnet*, *Blondie and Dagwood*, *Boston Blackie*, *the Great Gildersleeve*, *The Shadow* were listened to at night. We got our first TV set in 1952 – a nine-inch black and white set of course. Because we were used to spending most of our time outdoors and afternoon programming was very limited, we did not watch much TV. Our

favorite shows were *Milton Berle*, *Jackie Gleason*, *Jack Benny*, *I Love Lucy*, *Dragnet*, *Our Miss Brooks*, *Amos and Andy* and wrestling.

We kids played baseball, football and basketball in our front and back yards. Often the fathers in the neighborhood would play with us. "Kick the can", "chase", leg wrestling, arm wrestling, marbles and "split" (throwing a knife just outside each others' feet) were some of our favorite games. We built kites out of newspapers and flew them with long strips of torn sheets for tails. The trees and telephone lines were dripping with lost kites. Walking on stilts was another form of recreation. We built battle stilts and formed teams, each team composed on one boy on stilts and another boy on his shoulders. Every boy in the neighborhood had a BB gun and it was common to see one of us hiding behind a tree or the side of a house to get a bead on a mighty sparrow. We shot more of those harmless little birds than I care to admit. Before Afton Oaks was built we did a lot of hunting there with both guns and traps. We caught a lot of rabbits.

We went on frequent exploration trips, often to a small lake in the northern part of Afton Oaks. This lake was full of sunfish that we could catch with nets. We also hiked to the three water-holding tanks located about two miles south of the neighborhood. The tanks are still there and can be seen from the Southwest Freeway. Our most frequent adventure trip was to the railroad tracks where we climbed in, on, and around stalled railroad cars. We also climbed on slow-moving trains and rode them a few miles before getting off to buy some "Lick-um-Aid" at a small store located near the tracks. On one of our trips we visited the Channel 2 TV studio which was located in a Quonset hut on old Post Oak Road and we were interviewed on Dick Gottlieb's Matinee Show. I think he interviewed us just because we showed up.

Every January we built Christmas tree forts and had many mud clod battles defending our territory. The forts were either built on a vacant lot in the neighborhood or behind Bash Street where there was open prairie. After about three weeks the tree forts really became an eyesore. I don't know how they were disposed of; they just seemed to disappear. They must have been a terrible fire hazard.

My sister Ann had a friend named Bobby Swisher who had a horse that he was riding in the south part of what is now Afton Oaks. The horse stepped in an open manhole, broke its leg trying to climb out, and had to be shot. The fire department came and pulled him out.

One of my good friends, Bill "Winkie" Watts, who lived on Mid Lane, had a place in the back of his garage that was referred to as the "scout house". That's where we went when we needed to get away and do things that young boys do, like build things that never work. As we got older we went there to play poker and smoke cigarettes. Another good friend, Donald Swor, lived right behind us on Hackberry Lane. He and I used to make the rounds of the construction sites

after the workers left. It was great fun to start up the bulldozers and dump trucks. Don's dad worked for a Chevrolet dealership and he always brought home Cool cars, like an old English Crosley or a 1953 Corvette. Jim Perry was a friend of mine who lived on Bash Street. He and I built a go-cart that was so heavy it could hardly move.

There were some notable weather events that effected WLP in the 1950's. Floods were frequent and severe until the city installed storm sewers. Our first great flood, which I think occurred in the spring of 1949 or 1950, made the entire neighborhood look like a huge lake. Cars were stalled everywhere and my brother Dick helped many stranded motorists push their cars out of the high water. I remember having a grand time swimming in the floodwaters and watching several snakes swim casually by me not two feet away. Then there was the great ice and snowstorm that occurred about 1951. I had never seen snow before and was thrilled, even though it got really cold. Since we had no heat other than a small bathroom heater and the chimney fire, we kept warm around the hearth by putting our wet and frozen feet up on the chimney brick. Long icicles dripped from every tree and from the eaves of houses. A neighbor gave several of us kids a sled ride behind his car. Everyone, even parents, made snowmen and Mom made us some snow ice cream.

There was a polio epidemic in America in the early 1950's and rumor had it that a local boy caught the disease. I had a bicycle paper route for the old Houston Press and delivered papers to his house every day. I had an incredible fear that I would catch polio from being near an infected area. Fortunately, Jonas Salk soon came up with a polio vaccine and I forgot all about it.

I feel really privileged to have grown up in West Lane Place. My parents were great and I had wonderful friendships. The neighbors were like family and we always knew that we could count on them. Today (1999) Mom and Dad still live at #3 Hackberry Lane. They are 91 and 93 years old.