

BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

Vol. XXIII - Number 3, June, 2008



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McBride Memories

by Jean Henderson

Over the last few years, your BAAHA Board members have been archiving oral histories by interviewing local residents. We're grateful to the Avon Club Foundation for financial grants which allow us to pay for paper transcriptions of these taped interviews. All the interviews are filed at our BAAHA office on Camp Horne Road.

On September 21, 2006, I had the pleasure of conducting an oral history interview with John Lawrence (Laurie) and Gene McBride at their Dickson Avenue home before their move to Masonic Village and Laurie's death in the summer of 2007.

I hope you enjoy reading some of their memories as much as I enjoyed hearing them speak about their lives together in the Ben Avon area...one memory recalling another...

Laurie's mother, Ethel Sedden Hamilton, settled at 305 Breeding at the age of 4 in 1892. Their property was a small farm with chickens, dogs, cats, and a pony. She graduated from Cornell and came back to Ben Avon to teach. She later served on the school board and for 24 years was Tax Collector in Ben Avon, winning her first election with 2 negative votes.

His father, John Leaming McBride, was born in 1880 in Washington County and grew up in Emsworth. After graduating from Westminster and University of Pennsylvania Medical School, he returned to the area, practicing medicine from a home in Emsworth across from the fire department. After his marriage to Ethel Hamilton, they purchased a home at 6901 Prospect.

Laurie's sister Elizabeth and his grandfather Robert Hamilton both died in the Flu Epidemic of 1919.

In the 1920s there were no public kindergartens. Laurie attended a private kindergarten on Perrysville Avenue run by Mrs. Golding. After his father's death when Laurie was just 13, his mother,

brother Robert and he moved to 305 Breeding with the Hamilton family. Laurie and Robert grew up with two Hamilton cousins, William Lawrence (Larry) and Letitia. A few years later, the McBride family moved to a duplex across the street at 316 Breeding.

The elementary school Laurie attended on Dickson was on the site of their recently built home where we did the interview! He remembered the words he had to memorize in the McGuffey reader: mother, father, boy, girl, find the tree house, saw a little bird, one, two, three away.

His teachers were Miss Logan for third grade, Miss Lohr for fourth and Mrs. Dorothy Warren for fifth, who lived on Ridge Avenue.

In the winter, the smaller children sledded down the gentle slope on Prospect from Ridge down to Dickson; they would collect ashes from coal furnaces to form a high barrier so they'd not enter Dickson.

The children also sledded from Church down Ridge to the lumber company with Sturgeon blocked off by the police for safety reasons. The older kids would ride on Forest from Church Avenue down to the river.

Laurie's classmates in his high school class of 1941 included Judge Eunice Latshaw Ross, Reverend Charles Bezdek and Reverend William Lytle.

Laurie's class photo read: "Popular Laurie set many a girl's heart aflutter with his blue eyes." So true!

Laurie entered Pitt in 1941, sometimes riding to class in Oakland with

Bill Webber in Bill's convertible. His education was interrupted when his ROTC group was called into service and sent back to Pitt as part of the Army Specialized Training Program. They returned to Pitt in uniform and were barracked in the Cathedral of Learning. Eventually they went to Ft. Benning for Officers' Training.

Laurie lived his whole life in the Ben Avon area except for four years in the Army where he became a Captain in the Infantry, serving his last year in Japan on occupation duty.

Laurie met Alice Gene Larson at Pitt with an amazing pick-up line: "I'm doing an interview for Pitt News about what students think about having soldiers on campus...and I need your phone number and address so the editor can confirm your comments!!!" [Is it any wonder Laurie was a sharp lawyer??]

On Sept 1, 1945, they married in Ozark Alabama, where Laurie was stationed in the Army. Gene took the train from Pittsburgh to meet Laurie for their marriage. After his return from service, they lived at 316 Breeding in his mother's duplex. Later they built their first home at 7 Kingsford.

Laurie and Gene raised two daughters: Laurie Gene (Jerry Malarkey), born 1953; and Barbara Elin (Joe Hudson), born 1957. They enjoy four grandchildren.

World travelers, Gene and Laurie toured over 25 countries.

Laurie recalled the Depression as being the worst part of his growing up; the men in the CCC camps set up by President Roosevelt worked in the boroughs.

The former Ben Avon United Presbyterian Church (renamed Woodland), and later the consolidated congregation, named Community PC of BA, benefited from Laurie's active faith, musical skills, and leadership.

Laurie's mother would send him to the three groceries in Ben Avon – to Volpe's for meat, the A&P for coffee and W.H. Elste's for vegetables. Volpe's was on Church at the southwest corner of Dalzell and Church; A&P was on Church near the current fire hall; Elste's was on the southeast corner of Church and Breeding next to the Espy Drug Store. By the early 1940s and because of competition from the larger chain grocers, only Elste's and Espy's Drug Store remained. Other local stores included Schramms Dry Cleaners, a fix-it shop, and two beauty shops.

Laurie worked at the Hamilton Motor Company on Church, at that time the oldest Plymouth Dodge dealer in Allegheny County, where a Plymouth was sold for \$200, along with free driving lessons! The motor company began in the building which is now a real estate office, then moved across the street to the present fire hall building. It was established by his grandfather Robert Hamilton and run by his Uncle W. Lawrence Hamilton.

Laurie served 12 years on the school board in the 60s and 70s. He remembers that Sam Duff won the contest to name the new district - Avonworth.

He recalled a horse drawn wagon delivering ice to his home. Families would put a sign in their window – 25, 50, 75, or 100 – to let the iceman know how many pounds they needed. The iceman would then carve it and place it in the family's icebox.

In the summer, the 22 or so kids on Prospect enjoyed playing 'Kick the Can' and 'Red Rover.'

His childhood neighborhood celebrated 'Twelfth Night' by burning Christmas trees in an abandoned home foundation across the street from Laurie's home at 6901 Prospect.

As a young teen, Laurie worked as a janitor at the apartment house on the northwest corner of Church and Dalzell (still standing) for \$25. a month, firing the furnace, cutting grass, washing down walls and steps, polishing brass, removing snow, and changing light bulbs, to earn money for college.

After graduating from Pitt School of Law in 1950, Laurie joined the firm of Dickey, McCamey, and Chilcote, retiring in 1992 after a long and distinguished career.

Here's a quote from Laurie's interview that sums up his affection for Ben Avon:

"I think Ben Avon is a great community, very attractive, always had good schools and good churches. I think young families have come in to some of the older homes, have renovated them, brought them up to code, done a lot of plantings and generally have kept the properties in very good order."

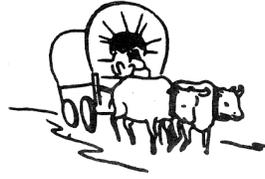
J. Lawrence McBride (1923-2007), his life and service, are woven into our community and will never be forgotten. Thank you, Laurie.

Although "oral history" sounds a bit formal the process is simply sharing memories with an interviewer. The stories may be old and plain to you but often turn out to be interesting to others. Contact us to participate – or to nominate some one else.

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