

Growing Up in Arlington, Virginia

BY CHARLES F. SUTER

Early Childhood

I was born at Columbia Hospital in Washington, DC at 12:15 A.M. on January 8, 1913. My parents, Frank and Eloise Carhart Suter, were then living at 1624 29th Street, NW in Georgetown, DC. I was their third child. My brother Merle was born Nov. 3, 1907. About two years later, a daughter was stillborn, so unnamed.

My earliest recollection is of standing just inside the wrought iron fence in the front yard of our home on 29th Street in Georgetown and waving good-bye to my brother, Merle, as he left for school. It seems unusual that I remember something that occurred when I was a little over a year old, but I do!

In May 1914 my parents bought the house now designated as 4903 N. Rock Spring Road in Arlington, which my mother named "Sunnyside." The house had been built a year or two earlier by Mrs. Mary Lyon F. Parham, from whom my parents bought it. Her husband, Edwin F. Parham, was the treasurer of the Southern Railway, having worked his way up from his start as a teenage office boy. One of the employees of the treasurer's department, Thomas Billingsley, lived with his two sisters a few doors away on the same side of the street, at the corner of Rock Spring Road and what is now Old Dominion Drive. It was then the right of way of the Washington & Old Dominion Railroad.

My earliest memory of life on Rock Spring Road was playing with a little black boy about my own age whose family lived in the small "tenant house" in our backyard. I forget the family's name. My friend's mother was our cook and maid. His father was employed elsewhere during the day but he helped my father with the chores on our place.

When I was quite young my mother and I discussed the fact that there were white people and black people in the world. She told me that when she was a child in Peekskill, NY she and her sisters had an English governess who once told my grandmother that she could understand her sending her children to school with black children but she could not understand how Mrs. Carhart would allow her children to go to school with the Irish!

The "Farm"

I don't recall it ever being called a farm but certainly our place was a small farm. We had a small barn approximately where 4911 Rock Spring

Road is now located. The barn had a box stall for our horse, "Prince," space to store the carriage, and stalls for three cows, one of which was "Cherry." My parents had owned Prince for several years before buying Sunnyside. I think they kept him at Berryville, VA, about 65 miles to the west, where my father had been born and where my parents used to stay at a boarding house for a couple of weeks each summer.

Prince was both a riding horse with several gaits and a buggy horse. I recall my mother taking me with her when she drove Prince down Glebe Road and across Chain Bridge to take my father to the streetcar line which operated at the top of the hill on the Maryland side of the river. He could take a streetcar from that point all the way across Washington to within a few blocks of where he taught, at Eastern High School, then on Pennsylvania Avenue, SE.

When we had only one cow, Cherry, and later her daughter "Patricia" or "Patty," my father milked the cow every morning and evening. On the few occasions that he was sick, I did the milking and learned that it isn't easy when your hand muscles aren't accustomed to it.

When we had several cows, the milking was done by our "hired man" who lived in the "little house" behind our home. All our cows were Jerseys and my parents were proud of the high butter fat content of their milk. I grew up on very rich milk and now drink only skim milk!

Our tenant house had a number of different occupants. The first tenants I remember were Mr. and Mrs. Roy. He was a Civil War veteran with a wooden leg. She was our housekeeper, seamstress, and my mother's kitchen helper. She stayed on for some years after Mr. Roy died. She was not treated as a servant and ate her meals with the family.

At another time the house was occupied by a rather odd, small red-haired man, Mr. Tucker. I believe that he had taught at an agricultural school in Kansas or Iowa. He was lame from a childhood accident and always wore white overalls. He took care of the garden and our three or four cows. In those days, we sold milk to our neighbors.

We also raised vegetables for our family use and for sale. Our best customer was the Washington Golf & Country Club. The club's dining room manager, then called the "steward," Clarence Washington Jones, would phone and say he needed two dozen ears of corn. By the time he arrived at our house in his open Cadillac touring car, we would have gone to the field, picked the corn, and have it waiting for him.

One of my chores was to pick raspberries and strawberries, some of which we sold but most of which we used ourselves. My mother would fill a cotton bag with fresh raspberries, then squeeze the bag so that the juice would drip into a large kettle. She then brought the juice to a boil. After it

cooled, she bottled it and we had the basic ingredient for a delightful summer drink, one half pure raspberry juice and one half water.

We raised potatoes, watermelons, squash, beets, carrots, string beans, lima beans, and okra as well as a lot of "Evergreen," "Country Gentleman," and "Golden Bantam" corn. One year we grew so much squash that we couldn't give it all away. Another year I raised a pretty good crop of peanuts, roasting them in the oven of our oil stove in the kitchen.

We had ten or fifteen chickens. Sometimes, when I was ten or twelve, I was told to catch a hen for cooking. Holding her legs with my left hand, I would place her head on the chopping block in the backyard and chop it off so that she could be plucked of her feathers and cooked. Often, I was sent to the chicken house to get eggs for cooking. When we had a surplus of eggs, they were stored in a large crock containing "water glass" in the "vegetable closet" in the cellar, where canned vegetable and fruits were also stored, all to be used in the winter months. The term "basement" had not come into common usage at that time.

We had a telephone, electricity and indoor plumbing. The house was heated by a coal furnace. Coal was shoveled from a stake-body truck down a chute into the coal bin in the cellar. Originally, my father bought an anthracite coal called "chestnut," which referred to the size of the chunks, but, when hard coal became very expensive, he switched to "lump" soft (bituminous) coal. Hot water was provided by a stove in the cellar which burned "pea" coal, which got its name from the small size of the chunks.

Food was refrigerated in an ice box on the kitchen porch and cooked on a four-burner kerosene stove in the kitchen. The laundry was done in double laundry tubs in the "laundry room" off the kitchen. In the twenties, a Frigidaire electric refrigerator, Hotpoint stove, and Thor electric washing machine replaced the old appliances.

Water came from a relatively shallow well, only twenty-six feet deep, which was covered by the screened kitchen porch. It was pumped by electricity to a large open storage tank in the attic. When the pump was operating, someone had to go up to the attic to see how nearly full the storage tank was. My father made this unnecessary by ingeniously hanging a cup containing mercury above the tank and installing a "hot" wire which hung down from above the tank. When the water level rose almost to the top of the tank, the wire would touch the mercury. This electrical contact caused a bell to ring in the downstairs hall. Whoever heard it would turn off the pump switch, which would stop the flow of water. We never had a tank overflow!

I think it was in about 1929 that Arlington County installed "city water" on Rock Spring Road. Merle and I dug a ditch for the water line from the

street to the front of our house, about seventy feet, in the heat of August. It was a mighty hot job. Neither the well nor the tank in the attic were needed after we connected to the county water system.

The property my parents bought from Mrs. Parham comprised about 2 3/4 acres. In about 1920, they bought another piece of land of about the same size, which extended from our east line to the Billingsley property at the corner of Rock Spring Road and the W&OD Railroad right of way. They also bought a bungalow manufactured and sold by Sears Roebuck and had it moved across Rock Spring Road to the lot immediately adjacent to our home. At the time, my mother hoped that her brother, Rev. Charles L. Carhart, would build a nice house on the site when he returned from China where he was serving as pastor of the Hankow Union Church. Instead, he bought a house in Chevy Chase, MD.

After several changes of ownership, extensive remodeling and numerous different occupants, the "Sears Roebuck house" was owned and occupied for many years by our good friends, Jim and Gene Davis. It was replaced in 2000 by a much larger new house.

Mail

When we moved to Arlington we were on a rural postal route: RFD#1, Rosslyn, Va. The mailman drove his own car and placed our mail in a mailbox at the end of our driveway. For many years we had two mail deliveries a day. I believe that our postman was a brother of the Arlington County Treasurer, Wade Ball, and of State Senator Frank L. Ball. (The Ball family has a long history in Arlington and the community of Ballston was named after it.) For a short time, our post office address was Alexandria, then Cherrydale. For many years our address was 934 Rock Spring Road, Clarendon, Va.

Groceries, Coal and Ice

When we first moved to Arlington, we bought our groceries at Minogue & Jones, whose store was at the southwest corner of Wisconsin Avenue and M Streets in Georgetown. There was a drug store on the southwest corner [sic]. Later, we got our groceries at the Ernest M. Shreve store in Cherrydale, about where the Cherrydale Hardware is now located. The W&OD trolley line ran right in front of Shreve's, parallel to Lee Highway.

Still later, in the 1920s and early '30s, we were customers of the Country Club Market on Glebe Road next to the John Marshall School. The store was operated by Charlie Puglisi and his wife, "Miss Marie," who lived in a few rooms behind the store with their three children. Sometime

around 1930 they replaced the small frame building with a two-story masonry building, which had an apartment for the Puglisi family on the second floor. Both the building on that site today and the former school building next to it are now medical office buildings. The Puglisis sold their store to the Cohen family who inaugurated delivery service and operated it for many years during the 1940s and '50s.

In those pre-supermarket days, ice and coal were delivered by Robert Shreve and his brother, who I think were brothers of Ernest Shreve, the grocer. It was an important daily event for me when the ice truck stopped near our kitchen door and I could get little pieces of ice from Mr. Shreve to suck on.

Vegetables were sold house to house from a truck by Mr. Robertson. His adopted son, Bob Robertson, later operated Robertson's 10 cent store on Buchanan Street near the intersection of Lee Highway and Glebe Road.

Neighborhood

Several of the housewives in our area got a little bored not seeing people other than members of their own families, so, in the 1920s, my mother organized a ladies club which she called the Neighbors Club. She was its first president. They took turns hosting the members for a monthly lunch. Years later the Neighbors Club was still thriving. It was considered an honor for a lady to be invited to join and prestigious to be a member. (My wife and sister-in-law were members for years, but when the club got to be very upscale "social" both dropped out.)

At the time that the present system of numerical and alphabetical street names was adopted, I think in the early 1930s, Rock Spring Road would have been 31st Street if my mother and other neighbors had not successfully petitioned the county to allow the name Rock Spring Road to continue in use. The name is derived from a spring at the rear of 4844 N. Rock Spring Road, located on property owned by Dr. and Mrs. Howard Fisher, whose home on 30th Street was demolished some years ago to make way for several houses.

From about 1912 to 1926, there was a store where Little Falls Road crossed the trolley line, now the intersection of Old Dominion Drive and Little Falls Road. The Vanderwerken Supply Company was a cooperative venture of some of the area residents. It sold groceries, coal, feed for chickens and livestock, hardware and harness items. There was a siding on which freight cars delivering merchandise could be unloaded. Large trucks and tractor trailers were unknown in those days.

One of my life's scariest moments was when I was playing around some railroad cars parked on the siding. I climbed up the ladder on the end of a box

car and started walking along the catwalk on the top of the car. Without thinking I stood up and my head touched the trolley wire. Fortunately, I was not grounded and therefore not electrocuted but it certainly scared me.

The store phone was on the same "party line" as those of nearby residents. Our number was 9C. To call someone, you cranked the handle on the right side of the phone instrument mounted on the wall. You used both long and short rings. To get the operator ("central") to call a phone not on your line, you gave the crank one long turn. Since several people were on the same line, you picked up the phone and listened to see if anyone was talking before you turned the crank handle. Each time the phone rang it rang in all the houses on the same line. You listened to the number of long and short rings to learn if you had a call. One neighbor, Miss Hattie Billingsley, was known for listening in on others' conversations. It was quite an event when we obtained a "semi-private" line which we shared with one other household, the Thomson family, who lived a few doors away.

Grade School

With several other boys in the neighborhood, I played all over North Arlington. There was little auto traffic so I was allowed to roam over quite a large area on foot and on my bicycle. I walked or rode as far south as Lee Highway and as far north as Walker's Chapel. To get to the homes of friends, I frequently walked the railroad tracks, which was a shorter distance than taking the roads. They weren't called streets until later.

Sometimes we took off all our clothes and played in Pimmitt Run where it ran through the back of the Weaver farm. We also played at the Saegmuller farm and in its hay barn. When a cow was about to be bred to their bull, we tried to see what was going on but one of the Saegmuller brothers always shooed us away from the bullpen.

After we moved to Virginia, Merle started attending the Carne School on the site in the 2400 block of N. Glebe Road where St. Mark's Church is now situated. Apparently, my parents became disenchanted with Arlington schools because, when I was ready for first grade, they sent us both to Sidwell Friends School in Washington. It was in the 1800 block of Eye Street, NW, next to the Friends Meeting House, which was used as the school auditorium. Later, Doctor's Hospital was built on that site.

When I first went to Friends School, Mr. J. Lee Saegmuller picked me up in front of our house and dropped me off at the school on his way to his office at 15th & G Streets. His daughter, Louisa, was also a passenger. His car was an open Cadillac and he provided a bearskin robe to keep us warm on cold winter mornings.

After a couple of years, Merle transferred to a public school, Columbia Junior High School. I stayed at Friends through the eighth grade, skipping the second grade because my mother had taught me at home before I started school. Both of us attended Eastern High School where our father taught chemistry. Merle graduated in 1926 and I in 1930. He was in the first class to graduate from Eastern's new building at 18th and East Capitol Streets. The faculty and student body marched from the old school on Pennsylvania Ave. SE to the new one.

To get to school in Washington, Merle and I either rode with our father or took the Washington and Old Dominion Railroad trolley car at Jewell Station, at the corner where Rock Spring Road and Old Dominion Drive now intersect. The station was named for Thomas Jewell, who owned much of the property in the area and had a summer home on what is now 30th Street.

On cold winter mornings, we would stand in our kitchen window looking toward Vanderwerken Station. When we saw blue sparks flying, caused by ice on the trolley wire, we knew the car was leaving Vanderwerken, dashed out the door and ran up the road, arriving at Jewell Station simultaneously with the trolley car.

In 1921 or 1922 I was sickly and kept out of school for most of the year. My teacher at the Friends School sent my lessons home and my mother supervised my studies. I don't know whether or not the doctor thought I might have tuberculosis but I was supposed to get lots of fresh air.

The home remedies my mother used were quite different from the many products now widely advertised. For chest congestion, a "mustard plaster" was wet and applied to the chest. I had a lot of earaches as a child. My mother had a small bag containing sawdust which she heated in the oven and then put against the aching ear. During the year I was kept home from school, I was given a tablespoon of cod liver oil once or twice a day. The first bottle, almond flavored, tasted so awful that my mother bought a different flavor the second time, peppermint, which was even worse tasting!

That Christmas my uncle, Charles Carhart, for whom I was named, sent me a check made out for "one pony." Soon my parents located a chestnut pony with silver mane and tail named "Twilight." She was very gentle and was willing to be ridden or to pull a two-wheeled cart. I thoroughly enjoyed riding her all over the neighborhood. I had four saddles, a Western saddle which I think came with Twilight, my father's English saddle, an Army officer's saddle, which I believe had belonged to my Uncle Norwood, who had been an Army doctor, and an Army enlisted man's saddle. The only difference between the two Army saddles was in the pommel, the officer's being fancier. There was also my mother's side saddle which I never used!

Transportation

Our first automobile was a used 1918 Ford sedan which my father bought in 1919. It had no self-starter. To start the engine, it had to be cranked by hand. Not long after we obtained the car, it stalled on the tracks of the streetcar line which ran from Georgetown, DC to Great Falls, VA. This occurred at what is now the intersection of Rock Spring Road and Old Dominion Drive, just a block from our home. The car with my father in it was hit by a streetcar. The streetcar's passenger step was knocked off and the Ford severely damaged. Fortunately, my father was not hurt. It was difficult for the driver to get out of the car quickly because there was only one door, in the middle of the right side. To get into the driver's seat, you had to squeeze between the two front seats, which were separated.

After this accident, my father vowed never to have another car that was so difficult to get out of, so the next car was a Ford "touring car." The tops of such cars could be folded back to make them completely open. This one had a "two-man top," which meant that it took two people, one standing on each side of the car, to put the top up or down. Later, there were "one-man tops," which could be handled by just one person. These cars had cloth "curtains," held by snap fasteners, which could be installed on the sides during bad weather. They also had transparent plastic windows on both sides and at the back.

Our third car was a 1926 Chevrolet two door sedan. It was stolen by one of my father's students and before it was retrieved he bought a used 1927 Buick four door sedan. After the Chevrolet was recovered, he decided to keep both cars. You had to remember which you were driving because, although both had stick shifts, the Chevrolet's gear positions were in different locations from those of the Buick. None of the autos owned by my parents had a heater. Therefore, you had to dress warmly in cold weather.

The first auto heater I recall was simply a pipe which allowed warm air from the engine to pass into the passenger compartment and out through a hole just above the passenger's feet. There was a slide cover that could be used to regulate the amount of warm air or to cut off the air completely, but no blower and no thermostat!

The fourth [sic] family car was my mother's Willys Overland coupe, a used car when she acquired it. It had only one seat which accommodated two people, three in a pinch. It had glass windows all around. It was unique in its day because you could take off an entire wheel with a special hub wrench while the other cars required unscrewing about six lug nuts around the wheel. Its ignition key was a plug about an inch and a half long, which my mother kept on a string. It had a regular key for the doors and trunk.

In the early 1920s, the Arnold Line began running buses from Georgetown to several locations in northern Virginia. The No. 1 line ran to Clarendon by way of Wilson Blvd. The #2 bus went to Ft. Myer via Ft. Myer Drive. The #3 came out Lee Highway to Glebe Road and then turned north on Glebe Road, the line ending at the intersection of Glebe Road, Dittmar Road and Little Falls Road. The sign on the front of the #3 buses said "WG&C CLUB." Later, the line was extended to Walker Chapel, further north on Glebe Road. The buses departed from Georgetown at Moskey's Drug Store in the 3500 block of M Street, NW.

Both Lee Highway and Glebe Road had concrete surfaces, barely wide enough for two buses to pass. The first buses were like large open touring cars, with about five rows of seats across the width of the bus. Later, conventional closed buses were used and the bus line extended downtown to 13th & D Streets, NW.

About 1923 the Francis Scott Key Memorial Bridge was constructed from Georgetown to Rosslyn, just east of the old Aqueduct Bridge, which it replaced. (My father told of ice skating from Alexandria to Georgetown on the canal which was carried across the river under the road surface of the original Aqueduct Bridge.)

After completion of the new bridge, the W&OD streetcars stopped crossing the river to Georgetown. A new terminal was built in Rosslyn where the Marriott hotel is now located. The D.C. streetcars came across Key Bridge to a turn-around at the south end of the bridge. The fare was ½ cent each way. You bought "bridge tickets" to ride across the river and used tokens to ride anywhere in Washington.

There were two street car companies, the Washington Railway & Electric Company and the Capital Traction Company. Both ran open-sided cars in the summer. The first buses to provide passenger service in Washington operated on routes not served by the street cars. A "transfer" obtained from the conductor on boarding a streetcar or bus entitled the passenger to change to the other type of transportation at transfer points where bus and streetcar lines met. Of course, eventually buses supplanted all the street car lines.

Church

Soon after moving to Arlington, my parents joined the Vanderwerken Congregational Church on Little Falls Road near its intersection with Rock Spring Road, about a block from our house. The church was organized in 1912. The Suter family were not charter members. The church took its name from the station on the trolley line where Little Falls Road crossed

the railroad tracks. The Vanderwerken family were large landowners nearby. I believe they were part owners of the street car company in Washington.

Being the son of an Episcopal minister, my father preferred the more traditional Episcopal service to the less formal Congregational service. Thus, for the rest of his life he attended the 9:00 o'clock service at St. John's Episcopal Church in McLean until St. Mary's was built in Arlington, and then the 11:00 service at the Congregational church.

He was clerk of the Rock Spring church for many years, later treasurer until his death in 1936. My mother was active in the ladies guild of the church. The name of the church was changed to Rock Spring Congregational Church after the streetcar line ceased operating and the name Vanderwerken had lost its significance as a place location. At the congregational meeting to consider the name change, I made the motion for the change of name.

Church services were held in Neighborhood House, a building which had many uses, including a library, auditorium where Sunday School and church services were held, and, on the lower level, a kitchen and meeting room where church dinners were held. [See the history of the Rock Spring Congregational Church.] There were plays put on by the ladies of the church and movies to which a small admission fee was charged. My favorites were Douglas Fairbanks in "The Mark of Zorro" and "The Three Musketeers." "The Ten Commandments" was also shown.

Every summer the Sunday School had a picnic at Great Falls Park, at the end of the trolley line, where there was a merry-go-round, baseball field where the men played the boys, picnic areas and music for dancing by the teens and young adults. There was hiking and rowing in flat-bottomed boats on the canal engineered by George Washington. After the picnic supper the men served everyone ice cream cones.

In the days before automobiles became common, and even afterwards, most of the men took the trolley car into Washington to go to work, so most of the church members lived within walking distance of the trolley line. On the Saturday of the annual church picnic, it was customary for mothers and their children to take the same trolley car to Great Falls, to be joined later by their husbands who came after work. On one picnic day I made my mother vary angry by stepping barefoot into fresh tar which was being applied to the road in front of our home. I think we missed the car we were supposed to take because the tar had to be removed with kerosene.

Family Activities

When I was quite young I used to play with a girl my age, Elise Buckman, who lived across the street in what my children will remember

as the Yoder house. I was not allowed to leave our yard on Sundays, so on Sundays we had to limit our playing to talking across the street.

During World War I each member of our family had a jar which contained a month's ration of sugar. If we used up ours before the end of the month, we did without until the first of the next month. I remember the jars lined up on the sideboard, each with a name on it, and the newspaper headlines about war casualties. I also remember our family's making contributions to the "starving Armenians" in the early 20s.

Soon after the Armistice was declared on Nov. 11, 1918, there was a parade on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington from the U.S. Capitol building to the White House. My father took Merle and me to see it. We stood on the sidewalk on the north side of Pennsylvania Avenue just at the foot of Capitol Hill. I remember having to go to the bathroom and my father taking me up the hill and into the bowels of the Capitol. Until after my marriage that was my only visit to the Capitol.

In January 1919 there was a big snowstorm. We worried for several hours about my father who didn't arrive home at the usual time. Finally, I think about 9 P.M., we heard him come up the front steps. He had walked all the way from the U.S. Capitol because the streetcars were not running in Washington. He was exhausted after trudging through snow about 10 inches deep for six miles. The next day we learned that the roof of the Knickerbocker Theatre in Washington had collapsed under the weight of the snow that evening, killing and injuring many people.

In May 1920 my parents took me to the dedication of the Arlington Amphitheater in Arlington National Cemetery. We stood on the grass to the west of the amphitheater and listened to the speech by President Woodrow Wilson.

On most nice Sunday afternoons my father's two sisters, my aunts Mary and Fanny, would come to visit, taking the streetcar from their home in Georgetown. Both aunts had a good sense of humor and they often told funny stories, especially Aunt Fanny. One story she told was that Merle had been overheard praying "Forgive our dentists for they know not what they do."

On Sundays the W&OD ran excursions from Rosslyn to Great Falls. We were impressed with how frequently the cars went by on the tracks about 400 feet behind our house. Sometimes there was a "train" of two cars! There were no trees between our yard and the tracks so we could see the cars clearly.

After my Uncle Charles returned from China in 1926(?) it was traditional for family Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years Day dinners to be held at either our house or that of Uncle Charles and Aunt Freda. There

would be our family of four, Uncle Charles and Aunt Freda, Aunt Mary and Aunt Fanny Suter, and in many years, my mother's sisters, Aunt Elizabeth and Aunt Anna Carhart. Some years Aunt Mabel, Uncle Alex, and their daughter Sylvia were included. We always had turkey, except when Aunt Freda served roast duck, with some kind of pie and plum pudding for dessert. My father bought the plum pudding every year from the ladies society of an Episcopal church in Southern Virginia. When dinner was at our house, it was my job to make the plum pudding by mixing butter and sugar and a little vanilla extract.

Charles F. Suter lived almost his entire life in Arlington. He was a charter member of the Arlington Historical Society and a member of the Arlington Chamber of Commerce and the Washington Golf and Country Club. He was a trustee and chair of the executive and building committees of the Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ before he moved to Charlottesville in 1994. He died there on December 3, 2001. This memoir, originally written for his children, duplicates to a large extent his oral history in the Virginia Room, Arlington Central Library. It is published by permission of his son, Dr. Charles F. Suter, Jr., who lives and practices in Culpeper, VA. The remainder of the memoir, covering the period of the 1920s and '30s, will be published in the next edition of the *Magazine*.
