

RECOLLECTIONS OF A NON-NATIVE-BORN GLENCARLYNITE*

By

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When I first met Bill Backus, more formally known as William Alden Backus, at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, I immediately envisioned him living, because he came from Virginia, in a stately white mansion with dignified columns set on a spacious rolling lawn. Later, when I visited his family in Glencarlyn, I found the rolling lawn but instead of the stately mansion, there was a modest rustic ranch house. The architecture was far from the traditional white pillars. Set back from Fifth Street South and conveniently numbered 5432, it was unusual because it had been built from two little houses.

The house to the west stretched lengthwise east to west with a porch. The older house on the east faced north and had two stories. Between them, after one of them had been moved, was an open space fifteen feet across. Bill's father, also an engineer from Cornell, had joined the two houses with an entry-way, stairs and upstairs hall. The father of his wife, Margaret Plant Backus, was an architect. This helped her in suggesting the design of the connecting link. This consisted of an overhanging second story to protect the entry from rain, and to form a strong connection between the houses. Later the back roof of the one-story house was raised to form two bedrooms.

In addition to this unexpected architecture there was another surprise — a tennis court owned by Bill's aunts, Hadassah and Constance Backus. This was across Fifth Street South on the northwest corner of South Illinois and Fifth Streets, and was open to those willing to work as well as play on it. For years interested neighbors and friends laboriously rolled the court and even lined it with a do-it-yourself contraption. The squeaky creak of the big heavy roller was one of the telltale sounds of early spring. The roller also was owned by Bill's aunts, but was used by any would-be player as part of his or her contribution to keeping the court playable.

In the days when Bill's father and aunts and an uncle, Curtis Beall Backus, were growing up in the big house at 5500 Fifth Street South their father, William Mansfield Backus, was a horse and buggy doctor. He attended the sick in and around Glencarlyn, carrying his own prescriptions at a time then there were no local drug stores.

Aunt Constance became an elementary school teacher and civic leader, and Aunt Hadassah was employed by the Department of the Interior. Though both played tennis, Aunt Hadassah, with her jovial spirit, was the most enthusiastic player. In those days of long skirts, chasing the ball must have been a hazardous undertaking. And age was no deterrent. Charles Hilder,

who lived in the Village, played until he was past eighty. His serve wasn't as strong as his enthusiasm, but he was always ready for a doubles match. The tennis court is just a memory now. Because of decreased use during World War II and increased problems with maintenance, it was sold and several houses were built on its conveniently clear surface.

Both Hadassah and Constance were devoted members of St. John's Episcopal Chapel, which at that time was a small building on the southeast corner of Fourth and South Lexington Streets. The students from the Episcopal seminary in Alexandria used to bike or hike over to preach on Sunday mornings. They were a great source of social delight as well as spiritual enlightenment.

Marriage to Bill and a wartime assignment in Washington brought me to this area in 1941. Since housing was scarce, Bill's mother generously offered to let us live with her and her daughter as long as necessary. I remember being surprised, when we moved into Glencarlynn, to find a real old-time country store. This was a small wooden building on the western end of Fourth Street South, run by Pop Besley. Old-timers liked to sit around the pot-bellied stove trading yarns by the light of kerosene lamps. Another store, which stood where the 7-11 store is now, on Carlin Springs Road, was run by Mr. and Mrs. Shepherd. The Post Office was in this store, and the mailing address at that time, was just "Glencarlynn." Mr. Shepherd went twice a day at 7:30 A.M. and 5:00 P.M. to pick up the mail bag from the train. He then sorted it and put it in the proper boxes. No home delivery then!

Mr. MacDonald, a later proprietor of the store, still lives at 5610 Fourth Street South. Besides being gentle and kindly, he acted as a community conscience, not permitting children to buy cigarettes. He would not even sell them matches without a note from their parents.

A serious health threat to Mr. MacDonald brought a new storekeeper, Mr. Hamilton, who had no such scruples. The citizens' association finally involved itself in the fight against the sale of pornographic materials in the store, which was especially objectionable because the store was so close to Kenmore Junior High School. The association's action was effective and the one-man local store was replaced by the 7-11 convenience store.

Education in Glencarlynn

School was first held in the Hilder home, then in a building near Glencarlynn Park, before moving into the present Carlin Hall. However, some parents felt that Virginia schools were not as advanced as those in the District of Columbia and arranged to have their children enrolled at Western High School instead of Washington-Lee. Bill's mother shared this viewpoint, becoming a teacher herself in Washington, as well as enrolling her children there.

When our son, Billy, was ready for school, Carlin Hall was still the place for grades one through six. The school superintendent, Mr. Kemp, a man of modest education and little vision, vowed that the population surge, which had begun after World War II, was only temporary and therefore, it would be foolish to build new schools.

Fortunately, the new citizens were education oriented. They banded together to form the Citizens for School Improvement Association. Partly as a result of their pressure and political success, an ambitious far-seeing school board was elected. Glencarlyn was the location of one of the several new schools built — at South Carlin Springs Road between Third and Second Streets.

Excitedly the pupils of Carlin Hall marched up Fourth Street to their new school. Within only a few years this school was enlarged and was renamed Kenmore Junior High School. Glencarlyn Elementary School was built farther south on Carlin Springs Road and still serves area children.

Thrills and Chills

Early in my married life I discovered that I was expected to be able to walk across the railroad trestle where it crossed Lubber Run about thirty feet above the ground and water. I did learn to do it, but still had a scary time one night as Bill's sister, Peggy, and I returned from a show in town and had to hike home from the bus stop in Arlington Forest, walking the trestle at 11:30 P.M.!

Our boys, too, became trestle walkers, and also found another source of thrills. They discovered a sturdy old cable securely attached to a big old oak tree which leaned out over Four Mile Run. Launching themselves from the high bank and clinging to the cable as it swung high and far over the creek gave them a real thrill.

Fording the Creek

One of Glencarlyn's most distinctive claims to fame used to be fording Long Branch. Where Carlin Springs Road now crosses the creek near Glencarlyn School the road used to dip down and go through the water before ascending the hill on the other side. There was a foot bridge for pedestrians, but during storms and their high-water aftermath fording the creek by automobile was a daring and exciting endeavor.

The Incredible Eagles

Glencarlyn made *Life* magazine around 1943 with the incident of The Great Stone Eagles. Apparently the resident of the large corner house at

South Lexington Street and Arlington Boulevard had attended a government auction and facetiously bid on a pair of thirty foot stone eagles. These had been commissioned for a government project, possibly Memorial Bridge, but had been rejected by the Fine Arts Commission. With no other bidders, he suddenly found himself the surprised and dismayed owner of two imposing stone eagles, legally bound to take them home!

He did manage to get them moved to his backyard, where they were clearly visible to startled drivers on Arlington Boulevard. Eventually the family wished to move and the over-whelming sculptures had to be put to the hammer. But they will be long remembered in Glencarlyn's growing collection of stories.

History Preserved

At the junction of Long Branch and Four Mile Run still stands a marker showing the location of a tree that George Washington used as a survey tree. A section of the tree itself, is in the Glencarlyn Library. The marker had a hard life, however. The swift waters of the two streams during a storm tended to lift it off its pedestal, and vandals repeatedly defaced it. Finally, the D.A.R. was instrumental in having it firmly set on its pedestal with a high picket fence around it. Miss Constance Backus spoke at the dedication, hoping the boys and girls of Arlington would value the historical significance of this spot.

Opportunities for Sports

Several inviting pools lured the young and not-so-young to the stream. One, near the rocks of the old Carlin Springs, was especially popular, although within it was reputed to lurk a giant snapping turtle.

A small waterfall, near the present Nature Center, formed a pool that provided a refreshing, cool dip on hot summer days. Then, too, there was always the challenge of dam building, and the pleasure of watching the water skippers, or catching some of the little fish. Spring brought the cheerful sound of the peepers, and the search for tadpoles was on!

Winter sports opportunities were no less inviting. The steep slope of the ravine above the present Nature Center challenged sledders to ride to the bottom without ending up in the blackberry bushes, or on an especially slick day, in the stream. A longer and more exciting sled ride was through the park from the South Jefferson Street entrance at Third Street. On one day when the sledding path had treacherously iced over, my son, David, came walking down South Illinois Street with blood streaming down his face from a cut on his forehead. As I was treating him his younger brother, Alan, came in as white as a sheet. Recognizing the symptoms of possible internal

bleeding, I summoned an ambulance which took Alan to the hospital where it was learned that he had a ruptured spleen. He had crashed into a pole picnic stove at the bottom of the hill. Several others were injured on that slope that same day, which made the parents realize that the weather and slope conditions should be carefully checked before permission was given for sledding.

Holiday Times

Christmas has always been a favorite season in Glencarlyn. My first remembrance dates back to the time when St. John's Chapel still stood picturesquely on the corner of Fourth and South Lexington Streets. A tall evergreen in front of the chapel was just right for the community Christmas lights. Standing on top of our old station wagon to string the lights was always part of the thrill of the season for Bill and our boys.

As neighbors gathered around the tree singing carols, candy was given out by Santa Claus from the steps of the chapel. Santa was delightedly and delightfully impersonated by Mr. Adler, a well-known Jewish engraver. Mr. Adler was married but childless. He was a well-known figure as he walked through the community with his long white hair flowing behind him, and a distinguished-looking cane clicking in front of him. Children came flocking to see him because he could mysteriously pluck quarters or candy from behind their ears. He insisted on paying for all the candy distributed at Christmas and made the holiday a highlight for young and old.

At one time, residents dropped their trees in the field next to Kenmore for a Twelfth Night tree burning ceremony. A king and queen were chosen, but the Fire Department discouraged such festivities. Another time, lights were put on the tree in front of Carlin Hall, but vandals stole many of them and this practice was stopped. However, new Christmas traditions are being introduced as new residents apply their creativity and ideas to old customs.

So the Village continues to develop its own traditions, stories, even characters. One can hope that with this rich heritage, "The more things change, the more they are the same."

*The title was chosen to mark this as a sequel to *Recollections of a Native-Born Glencarlynite* written by Hadassah Backus in 1952.

Glencarlyn is celebrating its Centennial Anniversary — One Hundred Years since its founding in 1887 as the first planned subdivision in Arlington.