

One Boy's Childhood in Arlington Village

A Narrative of Fred Lillis by his
sister Virginia Lillis Smith (Fig. 1)

*Excerpted from an Oral History interview prepared for
The Center for Local History by Virginia Lillis Smith*

I came to Arlington Village after birth, directly after a very pleasant stay in Columbia Hospital for Women. I came in January of '41 to apartment 458 in H Court [1415 S. Edgewood St.]. We lived there about twelve years in a two-bedroom apartment facing the creek. Then we moved to a three-bedroom apartment. For the move, we had Pinky, the fellow who worked at Arlington Village for a thousand years. A lot of our stuff was in cardboard boxes, but a lot of it was on what we call a railroad dray without a burro. It probably had four wheels, none of which went in the same direction. It was a vehicle of burden.

Unit 458 was a small apartment. I think we had one bathroom and it was indoors and so we were all delighted with that. We used to shoot

Fig. 1: Fred Lillis and sister Virginia Lillis



Courtesy of Virginia Lillis Smith

my arrows in the living room. There was a target on the wall up the stairs, and it bordered, of course, our neighbors, and I would shoot this target for hours. I was into the Native Americans. We played with Lincoln logs on the floor and built forts with them. We spent a lot of time on the floor because we had no other space.

Outdoors was great. Outdoors was the creek. The apartment faced the ravine, and there was a grass lawn that went down to the creek (Fig. 2). Across the creek were huge trees and a rocky ravine and we just played there for years in the creek. The creek, we could dam it, there were minnows, there were crawfish, there were amphibians [and], reptiles, and we had a great time playing there. Of course, I think it was verboten. The homeowner's association would admonish us, but they couldn't be there all the time.

H Court was a great place. We played football. Of course, there was just enough space for a long punt. It was good for that. And nobody objected, even though footballs were not always aimed or directed in the right direction. We also camped out there in pup tents. And not on our front lawn or our back necessarily, but wherever there was better grass. And we camped in the winter, just buttoned it up and put in a candle, not realizing that carbon dioxide could be a problem, not with the global warming, but with acute asphyxiation. We had ball-bearing roller skates, they were called, with a key to adjust the size. And we'd oil them. We wore brogans, and they were good shoes, because you had to have a sole that could be gripped by the teeth of them, and we would

Fig. 2: Arlington Village at Bridge Across H-Court Hill



Courtesy of Virginia Lillis Smith

fly. I'm not sure that others were safe, I'm sure we weren't. We'd start at the top of the hill at 13th Street. You could get some momentum going there, but then you could end up in the creek too.

Ah war, we had acorn battles. This was when war was noble. Everybody was assigned fifty acorns, or a certain number of acorns, and when you had discharged those, you were gone. I also believe there were girls who served as Red Cross nurses to the wounded. On the west side of Edgewood Street there was a small hillock, with a lot of underbrush which provided cover for maneuvering, which we took advantage of.

A bird died near the creek, and as we grew up not far from Arlington Cemetery, the ceremony for this bird rivaled that of a head of state. We had music, we had pallbearers and mourners, keeners, and, we had management who objected to this. [They] had no sense of the moment.

We started going to Walter Reed playground "the field" sometime in sixth grade. It had a big green field. We played football, baseball, just run around type of thing. We didn't have soccer—that was for the English. And they had a dirt basketball court with two backboards, so you could play forecourt on dirt. After a while it went to asphalt, and it became famous. There were games there for years. I claim I was there seven days a week. We would shovel snow, build a fire, and play basketball. We would play when it was 110 degrees court side, and then go to High's before a shower, to get something to drink, practically shutting down High's for public health reasons. At the field, we were playing

Fig. 3: Arlington village playground



Courtesy of Virginia Lillis Smith

with some black kids, about our only interaction with blacks. The game was broken up by the police, because at the time it was illegal to even play together. They had their playground in Green Valley, and we had ours. They broke up the games and sent the guys home. We also went [to the field] once after the junior prom in high school. Since we were new to these social events that included women, we got rid of them after probably a pizza at Gusti's and met at the field for the basketball, white tux, pink carnation, and a basketball.

We also played in the village playground, a great playground (Fig. 3). It had a huge sandbox. They had a great swing set and the idea was to swing high and leap at the apex, at the apogee, and just see how far you could go without crashing your head into the concrete. That was fun. They had two big slides, which were made more dangerous by wax paper. We'd sit on wax paper and fly down the slides. And then an innocent follower would come down thinking it could be safe.

Just to the west of the engineer's office on 13th and Cleveland Streets, there was a big open lot and we played football there. And then actually Pop and some other man put up a basketball net there. So, we played basketball and football until they sold the land off.

Every Saturday, I used to get up and go out and play. And one Saturday, I got up to go out to play and Pop said, "Before you go, I want you to scrub the floors."

I looked at him and I thought, "Do you know who you're talking to?"

But I think there must have been a conspiracy among the parents, so after that day every kid had chores that he had never seen before. And so, with a bar of yellow soap, which would take the barnacles off a galleon, and a scrub brush, I washed the linoleum. It was much like the galley of a small sailboat [with a] gas stove, [and] small refrigerator.

We used the golf course at the Army Navy Country Club. Oh, we avoided the Army Navy Country Club main gate. If you went under the creek, you would come on the other side. We were not far from the first fairway which was great for sleigh riding. [There was a] huge hill, mammoth hill, even now by today's measure. So, we would sleigh ride and ski there later, sleigh ride primarily. Later, we swam there in their pool and played tennis. And we were outed when one of our members started signing for meals. But this was a great place, because there was some wilderness there. [And behind,] at the top of the hill there was an

old Civil War fort within Army Navy Country Club. The outlines are still apparent.

There's also something called the clay cliff, which was a hillside that had probably fallen away exposing forty feet of a sheer clay face. We just went there because we didn't have Yellowstone or Yosemite. This was our first outdoor experience.

On Columbia Pike, I remember the Donut Dinette, a kind of a chrome or stainless-steel building that was just for those donuts. It was a little bit east of Barton Street. Near the Village office there was a pharmacy, Dr. Moore's Pharmacy. There was the Arlington Village office, which housed the Arlington Village Telephone and Telegraph back in the days when you had to go through a switchboard operator to call within the Village or to get an outside line.

There was a dentist there too, Dr. Spitler. He was before Novocain, I think. Then there was the gas station, the Esso Station. And then the vet. Great aroma. He had a great smell in the reception area. Actually, a great smell back at the Arlington Village Tel & Tel too. For some reason, I remember that. Downstairs there was a school of dance. Skeeter Riehms could teach anything. She knew every dance, but she knew only two steps. She had Miss Rose play the piano. The twelve talented fingers of Miss Rose. In the afternoons, after school, there was toe, tap, ballet, all the same. And then on Friday nights, Skeeter Riehms' school of ballroom dancing, the Cotillion, and the Grand March. It was something you'd see at West Point. She taught us the box step which was forward side, forward side, and the rumba, which was side forward, side forward. It was just one, two.

I remember a tinker. A guy would come by slinging a bell with a peculiar cadence and he had his own grindstone, a honing wheel. He sharpened knives and scissors and things like that. Of course, people used those over and over. I guess the metal was better. Then there was the milk delivery from Chestnut Farms. Chestnut Farms provided each apartment a metal box that would stay there so the women would

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get milk and cream and I'll say butter and maybe eggs. And the Good Humor ice cream truck came by.

I remember "The Senate," following a great tradition. Apparently, an age of Greece and apparently an age of Arlington Village. People [got] together outdoors after dinner to have a cigarette, pipe, glass of beer, coffee, whatever, and talk. Greatest institution.

There were two men, Mr. Potter and Mr. Arnston, who had outboard motors. And these guys had two 55-gallon drums which they filled with water and somehow fixed the outboard motors so they could be submerged and tested them. And they'd run these outboard motors in H Court for what would seem like hours. And then go down to the Bay on some kind of skiff, probably had nothing more than a skiff, and go out fishing. But they tested them first. I remember the smoke and the noise. Another man, Mr. Mason, had a motorcycle, and we all were very interested in the motorcycle. And we thought, [the story was,] he took it to Florida. But in those days a motorcycle was like a ship from outer space. Of course, he would park it in H Court for security reasons, and we'd just look at it. That was more than enough.

The great technological advance, television, finally got to H Court. It had been elsewhere for years. We would go down to Steve Munster's. They would be having dinner and the neighborhood kids would be watching the television because we didn't have one. One of the big shows was the review of the Cleveland Browns football game during the week, and they showed just the plays. They would not show the time outs or the half-time. In an hour, you got the entire game.

The Boy Scouts had paper drives. We would dutifully collect newspapers from wherever we could and store them in our parent's bedroom. For a couple of weeks, they didn't stop at our place and the papers grew and took over much of the usable space. So, finally, we got rid of them. All was right in our world.

About the Author

This interview was one of many done as part of an Oral History program at the Center for Local History in preparation for the book *The Village and the Pike*. Transcripts and audio recordings are housed at the Center for Local History, Arlington Public Library.