Cedar-Lee Musings and Memories

A loose-knit compendium of reminiscences from a former Cleveland Heights resident with great powers of recall

By Andrew W. Grossman

Each neighborhood in Cleveland Heights has a character all its own—continuously shaped by its events, structures and, most importantly, its inhabitants. After all, it is people's experiences and memories that nourish our attachment to houses, buildings, streets and neighborhoods (we are generally comfortable with what we know but we revere what we knew). My experiences in the Cedar-Lee neighborhood are a great example. During the winter of 1952, my family moved to Edgewood Road, a block away from the Cedar-Lee intersection.

Many of the buildings that housed businesses at and near the confluence of those roads were utilitarian, but they had a classic beauty nevertheless.

The original Fairfax school was a pillar of the neighborhood (Figure 1, next page). The building vaguely resembled a castle or fort. Its utilitarian style was relieved by a hint of the Victorian in the two towers on either side. Built in 1916, the building had brick and concrete piping across the exterior and around the windows. It featured large classrooms. The floors were yellow oak.

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Dark wood veneer was used for the storage and closet areas. Each classroom had at least two large black chalkboards.

Fairfax was torn down in the mid 1970s to make way for a “better” building. But it was in the original facility during the 1950s that my classmates and I sat along the walls with our heads between our legs when the siren atop the building screamed out an air raid drill. Our teachers and administrators—as well as much of the country—were afraid the Russians would bomb us at any moment. However, no-one made it clear what the Russians would do with us after they dropped the bomb, or how “duck and cover” would protect us. After all, Japanese citizens thousands of yards from their own “Ground Zero” had been vaporized barely ten years earlier.

As children, we had the opportunity to meet and hear one of former President Herbert Hoover’s sons speak in the school’s auditorium about the importance of an education. US Representative Francis P. Bolton also was a periodic visitor to Fairfax’s classrooms. The school was important to the community for other less-event-driven reasons: For better or for worse, the teachers taught us manners, dancing, art and music. They civilized us—or tried. It was a building filled with genteel adults and boisterous pre-hormonal boys and girls.

A fireman from the Silsby Road Fire Station (which has since been reborn as several short-lived restaurants and a pharmacy) visited the school and talked to the children. That same year, the children took a trip to the fire station. Several of the boys and girls even got to slide down the fire pole. Some time later, a local police officer brought his miniature stoplight to the school auditorium and we subsequently toured the city jail and police
department, along with the adjacent City Hall on Mayfield Road. Today, a visit to the same location would net us a Honda.

At the southwest corner of Cedar and Lee (2150 Lee Rd.), a particularly ornate, whitewashed building now houses a interior furnishings shop. Immediately to the south was a crush of two and three story masonry buildings. One such structure, “The Callaghan Building,” housed the Meyer Miller Shoe Company (Figure 2, below). Miller and his partner, Cuppy Cohen, boasted of having a million pairs of shoes. Inventory must have been a nightmare. I remember being hauled there by my mother, with little choice as to what shoe style I could have. The place also had a wonderful “shoey” smell that is lacking in today’s giant stores. The building still stands, looking more or less the way it looked in the 1950s. Built out of brick, its masonry stone façade seems vaguely Italianate. It currently houses Cleveland Heights’ own Funny Times newspaper and, until recently, the Mirage Studio Art Gallery.

Figure 2: The old Meyer Miller Shoe Company at 2174 Lee Rd. The door at the right with the triangular pediment above it leads to the second floor where the Masons once had an office and temple. Photo courtesy of the City of Cleveland Heights.

Haute Couture

Every Saturday afternoon, around 12:30, a sacred ritual took place in front of the Cedar Lee Theatre (Figure 3, above). Practically every child in the neighborhood gathered in front to see anything from two hours of non-stop cartoons to Disney’s “Son of Flubber.” The kids were lined up by an usher; they then purchased tickets, scuttled inside to buy tons of candy (Milk Duds, Sweethearts, Red Hots, tiny candies stuck to a roll of paper), pop, popcorn and occasionally those revolting little wax bottles filled with some sort of overly sweet liquid. Then everyone settled down to the fantasies and joy of cinema. This was our “television before television.”

The Cedar Lee Theatre is a sprawling two-story brick building that, from an inside-architecture viewpoint, has far less to

Figure 3: The Cedar-Lee Theater at 2163 Lee Road, c., 1968, seems to have been here forever. It now has expanded all the way to the corner at Cedar. Photo courtesy of the City of Cleveland Heights.

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recommend it now than 50 years ago, when it had a single screen. Small theatres cannot possibly offer the magical, chaotic experience shared by 1,000 kids on a weekend afternoon (what’s not to like about endless noise, sticky floors and short-tempered, underpaid 16-year-old ushers?). Memories of the screen personalities are also intact: The Three Stooges, Laurel and Hardy, and Abbott and Costello. Every weekend, the Cedar Lee was a palace of wonder for a few short hours.

The same building contained the Cedar Lee Bowling Alley, which was housed in the basement. There were about a dozen lanes at the alley. It had a high concrete riser behind the lanes for spectators to sit and watch the games—like the bleachers at the old Municipal Stadium. Several adult and children’s bowling leagues helped make it an exciting place to be. But even more exciting—most certainly because of its illicit allure—was the forbidden world of Wally’s Pool Hall. This was considered the most dangerous place in the neighborhood. Under glaring lights over old pool tables, young men spit, cussed and shot pool. It felt almost as if Humphrey Bogart stepped off the screen and joined us for a round or two. To get to the bowling alley you had to go down what seemed like dozens of steep steps. Wally’s opened into two rooms on a landing above the alley.

**Mean Cuisine**

Many restaurants operated at or near the corners of Cedar and Lee. Part of the theatre building was Clark’s Restaurant. This later became Inman’s (“all the spaghetti you can eat!”) and later still, one of the area’s first counter-culture, vegetarian restaurants: Earth by April. Clark’s, however, was considered the high end of local cuisine for its time. Alternatively, if you wanted a good, slippery meal (indigestion, no extra charge), there were few better places than Mawby’s (Figure 4, at right). Located where Lemon
Grass Restaurant now stands, at the former corner of Cedarbrook and Lee Roads (now the corner of Lee Road and the Heights Minipark), a block south of Cedar and Lee. Mawby’s was the quintessential “greasy spoon”—not significantly different from Michael’s around the corner on Cedar (Figure 5, below). Still, there was nothing better than Mawby’s hot dogs, hamburgers, french fries and hash browns (with plenty of onions, of course). The interior was green and yellow and the dining area was long, with the counter running the full length of the restaurant. To the left, eight or ten tables rested along the wall. The kitchen on the other side of the counter was probably the noisiest section. It was always worth it to sit at the counter and watch the antics of the cooks and prep people as they went about the business of feeding the world.

Royal Castle was yet another popular hamburger joint—a mainstay on the northwest corner of Cedar and Lee Roads in the Douglas Building (Figure 6, next page). What made Royal Castle popular was its white cleanliness, good tasting (albeit phenomenally greasy) burgers, french fries and its immensely popular Birch Beer. I can still taste those burgers many decades later (although it could be reminiscent belching from the grease.)

During school hours, some boys and girls would sneak out to the Castle for a burger and fries. Heights High School officials were not amused. What made this a real adventure was continued on page 6

Figure 4: Mawby’s menu.

Figure 5. In the history of photography, has there ever been a better illustration of “the generation gap?” (Photo from The Cauldron, Cleveland Heights High School, 1971.)
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the rule that students were not permitted to leave school grounds during school hours (this changed for a brief time in the late 1960s). If you were caught, you faced the wrath of a unit principal—believed by many to be the Devil in a three-piece suit. The seriousness with which school officials took this matter was once bluntly illustrated. During school hours, an irate administrator from the high school spotted a young man sitting at a stool in the Castle eating a hamburger and drinking a birch beer. He entered the place, raised a ruckus and insisted that the boy accompany him across the street to the high school. This administrator would not take no for an answer. He took the boy to the main office and asked him who his principal was. As patiently as possible, the boy (who, incidentally, was me) explained that he had graduated from Heights the previous year. I left, with the apologies of an embarrassed administrator.

If the time ever came that you tired of burgers (when does a kid ever tire of hamburgers?), you could always visit the Orient. Chin’s Pagoda (Figure 7, below), with its cute little Chinese gift shop in the front, resided for decades on the west side of Lee near East Derbyshire, across from the Heights High football field. Further down Lee was Jason’s Steakhouse, one of the neighborhood’s gastronomic class acts. There also was the...
Blue Moon restaurant on Cedar—a step east of the Clark’s/Inmans space.

**Miscellaneous Memories**

Just south of Clark’s on Cedar-Lee’s southeast corner was Skall’s Store for Men and Boys. Sometime in the 1950s, the Skall family moved up to Cedar Center. A jeweler’s store sat immediately to the south of Skall’s. There also was everyone’s favorite bookstore, Burrow’s, which always managed to have the latest Hardy Boys book available for $1. Immediately south of the theater, bowling alley and Wally’s was a local barber shop.

Another revered establishment was Dick Lurie’s Guitar Studio in the Douglas Building, facing Cedar Road. Dick was one of the most popular parents in the area. He made friends through music and taught classes in guitar and other instruments. His store was one of the mainstays of the community. Down Lee Road in the Douglas Building was Cedar-Lee Radio and Television, where everyone bought their “vinyl.” The building also housed a little convenience store—the Heights Confectionary—which would sell cigarettes to anyone.

Also among the backbones of the area was the old Ohio Bell Telephone Company building, still owned by AT&T (Ohio Bell no longer exists as a corporation). One could stand on Edgewood Road and literally watch someone dial a call as the large switches of the “panel” central office moved up and down, made the connection and released the call when it was completed. Every Halloween, the telephone workers came out onto the building’s front porch and passed out candy to the neighborhood kids.

Further down Lee, at the southwest corner of Lee and Meadowbrook, was another neighborhood mainstay: Franklin’s Ice Cream, which later became United Dairy Farmers and then Subway. Franklin’s was one of the hits of the neighborhood. Of course, ice cream was the most important product they sold, but you could also get milk, butter, eggs, cottage cheese and an assortment of candies. The fact that Franklin’s had air conditioning was yet another reason for adults and children to congregate there during the summer.

There is, and was, much more to the Cedar-Lee community than there is space to tell about. Bonn Drugs—employer of an endless stream of Heights High kids—sat on the southeast corner of Silsby and Lee Roads. Wood and Company was an old-fashioned garden shop with nothing of interest to a typical high schooler. A Gulf Oil station stood at the northeast corner of Lee and Meadowbrook. A Milt’s Fleet Wing gas station occupied the northwest corner of Meadowbrook and Lee. Marshal Ford and Ron Stallings Ford (on the site of what is now a CVS and its parking lot) were squeezed into what seemed like an impossibly tight showroom across from the Cedar Lee Theatre. And above it all was the most imposing structure around: Like a giant, four-sided vice principle—superseded in height only by the gigantic broadcast beacon of radio station WRSR (later WCUY) across the street—the Heights High clock tower oversaw everything (see cover). It was, and still is, a potent symbol of this most-important intersection, regardless of which generation’s memories are attached to it.

Andrew Grossman is a technical writer and writer of short fiction and non-fiction. He also worked at Ohio Bell (later, Ameritech) for 24 years and is now semi-retired from Tremco Incorporated.
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