

View from The Overlook

THE JOURNAL OF THE CLEVELAND HEIGHTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



NO. 12 • WINTER 2007

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Local People and Local Memories:

The Cleveland Heights Oral History Project

By Sven Dubie and Kara Hamley O'Donnell

Longtime residents of Cleveland Heights may remember that in conjunction with the second annual Heights Heritage Tour in 1978, a booklet titled *In My Day* was published by the tour's sponsor, Heights Community Congress. What made this early foray into the history of Cleveland Heights unique was that it was based largely on a series of oral history interviews conducted by local volunteers. At the time, oral history as a historical method was just coming into vogue, reflecting the nascent interest in grassroots and community history. In the case of *In My Day* the desire was to tell the story of Cleveland Heights through the eyes and experiences of "a select few of its longtime, active, interesting colorful, outspoken, articulate, prominent, notorious, sprightly older residents." The ultimate goal, as noted in the introduction to the volume, was to convey what that great practitioner of oral history, Studs Terkel, called the "'truths of history as people tell it' rather than by the 'facts of recorded history.'"

Since then oral history has become much more widely practiced and is an important tool in the repertoire of those interested in capturing local



Superior school kids, c. 1900.

history. And fortunately, there has been a commensurate increase in the interest of Cleveland Heights residents in sharing their recollections about the history of our community. In the late 1990s, the Superior Schoolhouse was renovated and, in 2000, the site was designated for use as the city's historical center. Its stated mission was to present and preserve the city's history and architecture through documentation, exhibits and special events. Charged with overseeing the city's collection of historical documents and serving as historical liaison to the public,

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The Cleveland Heights Historical Society



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Our Mission

The Cleveland Heights Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting the diverse character and traditions of Cleveland Heights.

As a community-based historic organization, the Society encourages and facilitates greater knowledge, understanding and awareness of the heritage of Cleveland Heights.

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New Look, New Features, New Capabilities

Faster than DSL. More powerful than a search engine. Able to leap through cyberspace at a single bound. Yes, it's the new www.chhistory.org—the Cleveland Heights Historical Society's heroic portal into local history.

Since last fall, CHHS and mild-mannered web guru Lisa McCampbell have been working on a complete update and redesign of www.chhistory.org—and it's now ready to go. On the one

hand, there's a whole new look, with extensive graphic enhancements and dynamic displays. We've also added significant amounts of new content. There's an entirely new section dedicated to Coventry Village and Coventry Neighbors—our city's best-known and most influential civic-betterment organization. This new destination on www.chhistory.org contains background on Coventry Neighbors, a photo gallery of Coventry Road and complete digitized versions of more than 100 issues of "Coventry Village News"—CN's official newspaper from 1973 to 2002.

Another significant enhancement is the Heritage Tour section—complete profiles and photos of the 225+ homes featured on Heights Community Congress' "Heritage Home Tour" since 1977. This section of www.chhistory.org is now searchable by Tour Year and Date of Construction, as well as by Street Name.

New look, new features, new capabilities; but no secret identity! Check out www.chhistory.org soon!



The new "Coventry Neighbors" section at www.chhistory.org

Local People and Local Memories: *The Cleveland Heights Oral History Project*

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the city's Historic Preservation Planner, Kara Hamley O'Donnell, would often meet people interested in sharing their recollections about a particular place or event in Cleveland Heights. After a while, O'Donnell recognized that there were a lot of valuable stories about the community that ought to be collected and preserved. In 2001, with the support of the city, she began to develop an oral history program as the first major initiative of the Cleveland Heights Historical Center. In the summer of 2001, O'Donnell attended the first Ohio Oral History Institute held at Youngstown State University, where she was trained in the basics of conducting oral histories and establishing local oral history projects. She then began recruiting volunteers to conduct and transcribe the oral history interviews. Shortly thereafter, she launched "This is My Neighborhood: The Cleveland Heights Oral History Project." The undertaking was conceived in the spirit of *In My Day* in an attempt to capture as many of the stories of Cleveland Heights' residents and from as diverse a cross-section of the city as possible. To give the project a sharper focus and to better capture the local history of the Heights, O'Donnell decided to concentrate primarily on the impressions and memories that residents had of people, places, and events in their respective neighborhoods. Provisions were also made, however, to consider the impact of broader national and international developments, such as the Great Depression,

World War II, and racial integration, on the local community.

In the fall of 2001, more than a dozen volunteers, all of whom had received basic training in conducting oral history interviews, began to sit down with local residents to collect and record their memories of local history. In the ensuing three years, nearly fifty interviews with

The Cleveland Heights Oral History Project was conceived to capture as many of the stories of Cleveland Heights' residents and from as diverse a cross-section of the city as possible.

residents from all corners of Cleveland Heights were conducted and transcribed, and the stories that were captured reflect the rich, eclectic and vibrant history of our community. For instance, one of the earliest memories of Cleveland Heights came from Stanley Adelstein, who recalled that his parents moved from Cleveland up to the Heights in the 1920s so

they could "have their own home...in a lovely residential community" surrounded by "wide open spaces." He added that "in 1924, that's exactly what Cleveland Heights was." Adelstein fondly remembered his Washington Boulevard neighborhood "when the [streetcar] tracks were being taken out... and the trees being planted on the center strip" of the boulevard. Adelstein's wife, Hope, thought back to the darker days of the Great Depression, when times were tough all around. As she recalled, "the banks closed, and that left an impression upon me that I will never forget. It was very difficult for my father and my mother and a couple of brothers and sisters, but we took in boarders and our house was jammed. I slept in the sunroom, which was cold in the winter and very hot in the summer. But we managed and we saved our home." Even in the midst of hardship, some of the young folk managed to

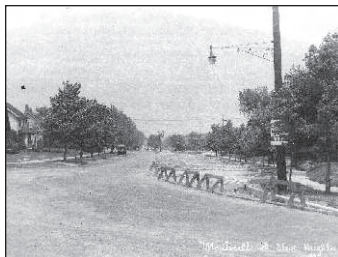
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have fun. Catherine Black Aldrich remembered “when the Works Progress Administration was building Monticello Boulevard... there weren’t houses in Forest Hills



Monticello Construction, c. 1935

except the Tudor-style [Rockefeller] homes. And they [the city] would block off Monticello and we were allowed to go down there and roller-skate on Monticello Road.”

Later, during World War II, Aldrich remembered when “Oakwood Country Club turned their facility over to the U.S. Army, and so we had a Military Police base there. We had a USO a couple of doors from Center Mayfield [Theater], so there were a lot of soldiers there, all the time.” Many residents also recalled the rationing that went on during the war. As John McDonald related, “we had drives to collect various kinds of metals...I can remember people coming to the door saying, ‘Do you have any pots and pans, or anything metal, that you’d like to contribute to the effort?’ And, of course, there were always war bonds that people were trying to sell.”

In the years after the Depression and war, life in the Heights seemed idyllic. Norton London reminisced: “When I was growing up in Cleveland Heights in the 1950s, we always had a safe feeling, walking everywhere. We spent our summers playing sports at Forest Hill Park, Cain Park, and swimming at Cumberland Pool.

In junior high I played football for Roosevelt and our rival school was Monticello. Then, when we all got to Heights, we were friends and our football rival was Shaker.” Another resident, James Yasinow, had similar memories about the neighborhood in which he grew up: “Well, we didn’t need cars. I walked to Boulevard, I walked to Roosevelt Junior High School. I took a bicycle to Heights High School. I graduated from Cleveland Heights High School in 1949. Sometimes I hitchhiked to school. In those days, kids did that sort of thing. But I remember when we lived on Preyer. Right where the street cuts off. It doesn’t extend down to Mayfield near Superior. They closed it off. You could walk over to the corner of Mayfield and Superior near where the Cleveland Heights City Hall used to be. I remember a New York bakery there. I’d walk in there and my eyes were big looking at those coconut bars. I think they were only selling for two for a nickel, maybe a nickel a piece. But



Cumberland Pool, c. 1930’s

I thought that the greatest thing since sliced bread was having a coconut bar. They were delicious.”

Dr. Herbert Jakob fondly recalled the conviviality of his community off South Taylor Road: “These streets—we call them the “B” streets—there’s Blanche, Berkeley, Bainbridge, down all the way down to Severance. At one time each street had their own block party. This particular section of Blanche was so friendly when we first moved here that everybody...we could name everybody. I could name the people that lived in [each] house...We played together, we went to school together.” Dr. Jakob also recalled the dramatic changes that residents of the Coventry neighborhood experienced in the 1960s: “In 1964 [Coventry] was changing quite a bit. A lot of the stores disappeared. The butcher shops were gone. The bakeries, I think they were gone. The meat markets persisted for awhile. Weiss was still there. There was a...

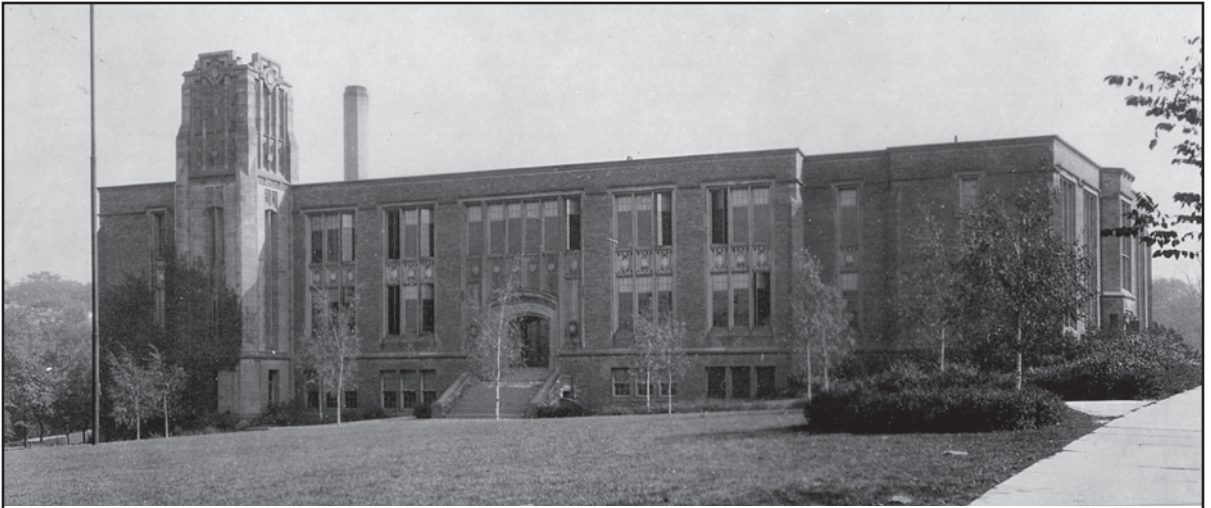


oh, I remember the vegetable stores, you remember those? Greenburg, Englis. You know where that steak house [Hyde Park Grille] is on Coventry? That used to be Newmark’s bakery. Englis’ Fruit Store and Weiss Meat Market....Coventry was beginning to change already into a typical sixties street with a lot of people hanging out on the streets, dressed almost like a miniature Haight [San Francisco] district.”

Many residents, like Adele Mendel, fondly remembered some of their favorite eateries: “I remember getting twenty-five cents a week for an allowance. I remember Mawby’s, the first Mawby’s. It was on Cedarbrook and Lee. We used to go there and get a hamburger for fifteen cents. And there was a Chinese restaurant. We could eat lunch there for twenty-five cents if we didn’t want to eat the cafeteria food at Heights [High]. We’d run over there and eat. New Moon Café. At night they would charge a dollar for your meal. Once in a while my parents would go there and have dinner. But lunch, twenty-five cents.”

Of course, there were also those who could recount the changing ethnic and racial composition of the neighborhoods in the Heights. Dr. Herbert Jakob noted that, “on Coventry, going toward East Cleveland, there were a number of German Jews who moved in there. Those German Jews who lived in that area formed the first congregation...which ultimately became what they call Shara Tikvah. That used to be Rabbi Shtul’s synagogue. He lived around there somewhere...The first services were held in a house right opposite Coventry school, the lower part of the school, which was adjacent to a street called Rock Road [Rock Court]. And Robert and Leatrice Madison, who were among the first African-American families

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Coventry Elementary Memories Needed

In early 1917, the Cleveland Heights Board of Education announced plans to build a new elementary school at the intersection of Coventry Road and Washington and Euclid Heights Boulevards. As Coventry PTA prepares to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the birth of Coventry Elementary School, we are asking Coventry alumni of all ages to share their memories of their time at Coventry. We're looking for stories, reminiscences, photos, yearbooks, scrapbooks — anything that will help us record the history of this great school. What was your favorite school memory? Is there a particular teacher who stands out as you look back? What did the first Coventry School look like? What was the most important thing that you learned here? What sorts of games did you play at recess? What constituted a great lunch? A terrible lunch? Who were the pranksters? What did you do for fun after school? Tell us!

The school's history, alumni memories and old photos will be collected into a booklet that will be available online at the end of the school year. Beginning in January, students will work with their teachers and KultureKids to celebrate

Coventry's history. Memories collected by students, past and present, will be worked into a year-end student play celebrating both the school and neighborhood's history. Alumni are also needed to come speak to students about their time at Coventry.

Submit your recollections and/or photos, along with your name, years you were at Coventry and contact information, to:

Coventry School PTA
attn.: Heritage Committee
2843 Washington Blvd.
Cleveland Heights, OH 44118,

or to coventrymemories@yahoo.com.

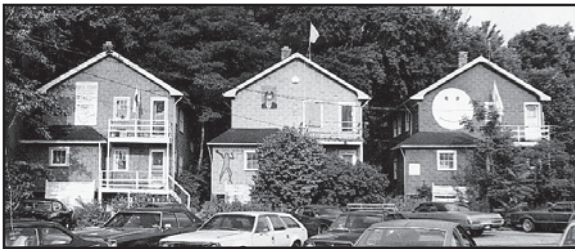
We would be happy to borrow your priceless photos, yearbooks or scrapbooks, copy them and quickly return them to you. If you have any questions or are interested in serving on the Celebrate Coventry committee or speaking to a classroom, call PTA Co-President, Patrick Mullen, at 216-397-3324.

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to settle in the Heights in the 1960s, recalled that they were motivated to come here for the same reason as countless others before them: "We've got to find [a better place] for our kids to live. We've got to find...a place that we can send our kids to school. And we looked at Cleveland Heights." But it was more than the just the good environment in which to raise kids. As Robert Madison put it, "Cleveland Heights was our choice [because] it had a great diversity of people. I mean, you got all kinds... you had the hippies, you had poor people, you had rich people, you had a lot."



The Coventry Area's Rock Court, 1979

Gathering such personal accounts of the history of Cleveland Heights has enabled the Cleveland Heights Oral History Project to significantly enhance our understanding and appreciation of the development of the local community over the course of the 20th century. Not surprisingly, the oral histories have subsequently been used in numerous projects that have sought to enhance community awareness of the unique history of Cleveland Heights. The Oral History Project has created educational exhibits that have been displayed at the Main Library, the Alcazar and other locations. The interviews were also integrated into several historical dramatizations, including in 2003 "From Here:

A Century of Voices from Ohio," an oral-history-centered celebration of Ohio's bicentennial.

Today, the interview transcripts, as well as various related historical artifacts and pictures, collected as part of the Oral History Project are on deposit at the Cleveland Heights Historical Center at Superior Schoolhouse. They are available as a resource for people interested in learning more about the history of our community from the perspective of those who lived it. It is also hoped that they will serve as inspiration for Cleveland Heights residents to continue sharing their memories of the people, places and events that have helped to shape the vibrant history of Cleveland Heights.

If you, or someone you know, might be interested in being interviewed or might like to help with interview-transcribing, please contact Kara Hamley O'Donnell at 291-4885 or kodonnell@clvhts.com.

Oral History Interviewees To Date

Stanley & Hope Adelstein	Dr. Herbert Jakob
Catherine B. Aldrich	James Kuth, Sr.
Catherine Ballew	Nancy A. Lally
Virginia Becker	Jean (Miller) Latimer
Nathalie & Donna Boswell	Merle Lewis
Grace Bregenzer	Rose Lovinger
Ralph Brody	Jeanne Madison
Barrett (Barry) Brown	Robert and Leatrice Madison
Ronald Brown	John McDonald
Virginia & Karl Bruch	Adele R. Mendel
Betty (Dean) Calhoun	William Moses & Thelma Lee Pierce
Bess Comber	William Muth
Jean L.Cox	Michael Neimeier
Jerry Crawford	James Price
Eleanor Hinig Davis	Albert Ratner
Arthur L. Dougan	Anita Rogoff
Dr. Harvey Dworken	Oliver Schroeder
Joseph Michael Foley	David Stashower
Edward Frost	Henry Tanaka
Norma Glad	Robert Taylor
Miriam Greene	Howard & Judith VanKleef
Sadie Hatcher	Edward L. Viets
Beatrice Heard	Loren Weiss
Katherine (Kay) Heylman	Marjorie & Robert Wright
Nathan Norman Hoffman	James Yasinow

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