

Memories and Musings--I loved Wheeling (1956-1983)

Submitted By: Pat Knowles

We moved to Wheeling from Evanston in mid-year of 1956 when I was nine years old. My parents, Kenneth (Ken) and Elaine Knowles had purchased a home in the Dunhurst Heights subdivision at 266 George Road, in a block between East Wayne Street and Bridget Place. I remember coming into Wheeling from Evanston for the first time. Dundee Road was then a narrow two lane country highway leading into town which was marked with a sign that read, "Wheeling, Pop 600". As we drove west on Dundee Road I saw a big sign on the left "Dunhurst Heights". As we made our way down George to our home site I was struck by the starkness of the place. No trees, no grass, no sidewalks, just unfinished homes surrounded by huge pond-like puddles and big hills of dirt. The mud was deep, everywhere and, it seemed, permanent. During our first years there the area flooded every time it rained and when it did the mud would get so deep that it sometimes pulled the boots off of children coming home from school. In fact, one year the floods were bad enough that the Army brought in some floating transport vehicles (DUKWs) to get the kids home. It was only later that we learned there were no storm sewers in Dunhurst. That situation did get remedied!

Getting around in Wheeling in those early years, especially during the morning and evening commutes, was a tedious experience requiring a lot of patience, a lot of time and plenty of gas. This was in a large part due to the fact that not only Dundee Road, but also Elmhurst Road, were two lanes with no left hand turn lanes. The intersection of these two main roads in and out of town was controlled by a four way stop sign. The result? Traffic was backed up in a way that it seemed it could never clear!

Our block had twelve houses on it. The owners busily planted trees and gardens and yards, the latter with the hope that the kids playing ball in the street wouldn't trample the new grass to death. This, as it turned out, was sometimes a vain hope. We had 31 children of various ages living on our block and it was inevitable that footballs or baseballs were going to wind up smack in the middle of a neighbor's newly sown lawn. It all worked out somehow, though as the kids played and the yards flourished.

A large number of the children who came into the Dunhurst area, including me and my brothers and sisters, came from Catholic schools in their former communities but found no Catholic school in Wheeling as St. Joseph the Worker had not yet been established and St. Mary's, in Buffalo Grove, had no room at the time. We went to Wheeling School for the second half of 1956 and then to St. Mary's until 1959 when St. Joe's school opened. Father George Mulcahey and Father Ray Nugent along with Sisters Claude, Dionetta, Lourdetta and Pearce made up the "plankholders" or first team at the parish.

My father was a sign painter and my mother took care of the home. Dad did a lot of sign work for a number of Wheeling businesses and organizations such as Horcher's Texaco station, the Wheeling Fire Department, the Jaycees, St. Mary's and St. Joe's. He

seemed to know everybody in town! I had (and still do have) two brothers and two sisters and we were all into music and sports and hanging out with myriad friends. Three of us left home in the late 1960s to begin our adult lives but my family maintained a presence in Wheeling until 1983. My father passed away in 1981 and by that time we were all established in our own lives and living in other communities. My mother sold the home on George Road and moved out of town by early in 1983.

As I muse about my life in Wheeling I remember many places where we worked, played, did business and hung out. The Dunhurst Park 'n Shop at the southwest corner of Dundee and Elmhurst Roads opened, as I recall, sometime in 1957 or 1958. Among it's several original stores was a National Foods which closed at 6:00 and was not open on Sundays. I made many a quick dash there for my mother who would remind me, "They close at 6!" I used to buy model airplanes at the Ben Franklin 5 and 10 and comic books and pens and colored ink at Kutza Bros. Rexall drug store. Dad painted signs for Seymour at the Currency Exchange. We patronized Dan Horcher's Texaco station which was on the northwest corner of Milwaukee Avenue and Dundee Road, where dad would often letter trucks or paint signs in exchange for maintenance work on our cars. When we were there we would often say hello to Cy Horcher, the Wheeling Police Chief. A little later on the father and son team of Gordy and Bill Hein opened their Mobil station on the southeast corner of Dundee and George Roads, right up the street from our home. We would ride up there on summer days to put air in our bike tires and get a cold Coke from the machine. As we got into sports we became good customers of Mr. Welflin at his sporting goods store where we would buy our baseball gloves and shoes, and when our TV would malfunction we were always grateful that the local TV repairman, whose name I cannot remember but who, like Mr. Welflin, had his shop on Milwaukee Avenue, made house calls. We would see his truck pull up to the house and know that all would soon be well again!

One of my favorite places was Muns' little store. It was out by itself in the field on the south side of Dundee Road west of the Soo Line tracks and on Sunday mornings after church people were lined up for several yards outside the building to pick up bread, milk and the Sunday paper. It was just a cabin-sized little place owned by Mr. and Mrs. Muns—two of the sweetest people one could ever want to meet. (I won a brownie from Mrs. Muns on a World Series game bet!) Sometimes on Sunday afternoon dad would take me with him to Harry Davis' Package Goods store on the north side of Milwaukee Avenue just east of Dundee Road. Mr. Davis had a "Quickie Bar" at the rear of the store where dad and his friends would have one or two. I stayed up front and occasionally Dorothy, the bartender, would bring me a cold bottle of Pepsi as well as any cigar boxes she had saved for me. Joe's Pizza was already a fixture in Wheeling by the time we moved there. I still say that was the best pizza around! Jeffrey Lanes was next to Joe's on Wolf Road. The owner was an officer in the Wheeling Volunteer Fire Department and I remember him responding to many calls. It was always a treat to dine in the Union Hotel restaurant on Milwaukee Avenue. As I recall, the food was delicious and I would sometimes take a date there who I particularly wanted to impress. I worked

at Televiso Company on Wheeling Road for several summers and bought radio parts and supplies from Mykroy which was nearby. Wheeling Road at that time was little more than a gravel cow path but it led to one of my absolute favorite places to visit—the old Soo Line depot. I had made friends with Dean, the railroad station agent and telegrapher, and he invited me over many times. The station was heated by an old wood stove and had all sorts of functional old telegraph and phone wiring along the walls. I often heard the clicking of the old telegraph, probably 75 years old, which was still used to send train orders from the Chicago terminal. Half of the wooden building was station where Dean worked and sold tickets to the folks who rode the Soo Line passenger trains which were still running at the time, and the other half was the Railway Express Agency (REA) warehouse. Dean still pulled the old REA wagon, green with red spoke wheels, whenever he had freight to load onto a train.

One of my favorite memories is playing Little League and then Pony League baseball games at Amvets Field and at Chamber of Commerce Park. Many of us played in those leagues with teams sponsored by such places as Hi Lo Heating, Police Reserves, the Lions' Club, the Chamber of Commerce, Herzog Realty, the Amvets and Henry's Drive Inn, and we all loved to see our names and athletic exploits chronicled in the Wheeling Independent newspaper. It came out once a week and cost ten cents. We would wait for Thursday afternoon when it would be delivered to the news sellers, then we would grab our dimes and hope they didn't run out before we got our copy. But perhaps the most savory recollection of all when I was a young boy in Wheeling is the memory of the neighborhood and how the adults would gather on each other's front porches for coffee and conversation on warm evenings or have parties in their homes with lots of laughter and good friendship and how safe and content and snugly I felt in my bed as I listened to the merriment. It made me feel like all was right with the world and more than made up for the not so good times. Yes, I loved Wheeling and I often find myself reflecting on that time and on that place where I grew up. I will miss that always!

As a sidebar—I note that Mr. Bill Hein is the Vice President of the Historical Society. My brother, Dan, and I were the altar boys at his wedding at St. Joe's. How about that!

Thank you for the opportunity to share some of my Wheeling life with you. I hope I didn't digress too far from what you are looking for. Please feel free to use any or all of what I've written here and please let me know when your book is available.