Woodley Park Community: A Sketch of Our Past
Chapter 3. Diverse City Neighborhood: 1950-1975

After World War II with the growth of new communities altering the landscape in the Washington metropolitan region, long-established city neighborhoods such as Woodley Park faced a different type of change. The buildings -- rowhouses, single family houses, hotels and apartments -- were transformed by new residents and new functions. A rowhouse on Connecticut Avenue, formerly a residence for an upper middle class family, changed into a ballet school or into an elegant restaurant. The serene Woodley mansion rang with youthful voices after a private school bought Woodley Park's most famous house.

The population of the community reached 7,658 in 1950, with women continuing to outnumber men, and 88 per cent of the residents above the age of 21.[1] However, the character of this population changed. A former resident described the character of Woodley Park in the 1960's as a "diversified city neighborhood," in contrast to the more elite community of pre-World War II. "Here rich and poor, young children and retired people, blue collar workers and Senators, businessmen and craftsmen, families and single people" resided.[2] In 1950, the largest proportion of Woodley Park inhabitants worked in sales and clerical occupations.[3]

As the community's population grew more diversified, Woodley Park's two landmark hotels underwent similar transformations. The Sheraton Corporation purchased the Wardman Park Hotel in 1953 and changed the name to the Sheraton-Park Hotel. Although upholding a tradition of elegance, the hotel expanded its range of social facilities. The management added new and luxurious ballrooms and continued to attract Washington's high-ranking officialdom as residents. In the mid-1960's Pearl Mesta, Washington's "hostess with the mostest," took up residence at the Sheraton, and the Arthur Murray Dance Program was produced there for nation-wide television distribution.[4]

By 1950 the neighboring Shoreham Hotel was catering almost exclusively to hotel guests, asking its permanent residents to relocate. This was the era of Harry Truman's private poker games in room D-406, and in the late 1950's of John Kennedy's courting of Jacqueline Bouvier in the Blue Room.[5] A former Shoreham manager fondly remembers the hotel of the 1950's and 1960's. "Rooms rented for $6 a night in the early 1950's. The hotel was a self-contained village, with furniture and drapery workshops and a huge bakery right in the hotel."[6]

The two neighborhood churches changed in character during this period as well. Congregations of each church grew substantially, acquiring more central status in the community. In 1951 St. Thomas Apostle dedicated a new church building, in a modernized English Georgian style. In 1964, the parochial school building and convent, which replaced the original rowhouses, opened on the corner of Woodley Road and 27th Street. All Souls Memorial Church, under the leadership of The Reverend Francis Blackwelder from 1948 to 1974, "gained a reputation as a conservative institution which found itself at odds with the Episcopal Diocese of Washington on numerous social issues."[7]

Several foreign governments also established a more permanent presence in Woodley Park after World War II. Both Panama and Lebanon constructed embassies in the immediate vicinity of the Shoreham Hotel. The Lebanese embassy at 2560 28th Street opened in 1967 and the Panamanian embassy moved into a new building at 2862 McGill Terrace in 1971, adjacent to the ambassador's residence built in 1941.

Cathedral Avenue, one of the earliest established and most attractive residential streets in the community, changed its character as well. The government of the West African Republic of Benin moved into 2737 Cathedral Avenue in 1970, where it remains. Previously this property had been occupied by the Mauritanian embassy. The government of Switzerland in 1959 constructed its present embassy, designed by Geneva-born William Lescaze, at 2900 Cathedral Avenue. It was situated adjacent to the ambassador's residence which had been purchased in 1941.[8]

A complete transformation of the 2900 block of Cathedral Avenue had taken place by 1952 when the Maret School bought the former Woodley estate. The school, founded in 1911 by Louise Maret, a Swiss teacher from Geneva, was originally a French language school for girls. Boys were admitted shortly after Maret moved to Woodley Park, and the school today with a student body of 500 offers instruction to children from kindergarten through twelfth grade.[9]

During the 1950's and 1960's Oyster, the public school, and St. Thomas Apostle, the parochial school, continued to educate Woodley Park's youngest residents. City-wide school desegregation in 1954 did not alter the racial composition of Oyster school; nonwhite population of Woodley Park comprised only 2 to 3 per cent of the total. However, by the late 1960's the number of children residing in the community had dwindled and Oyster was underpopulated.[10] The Board of Education voted in 1971 to transform Oyster into a bilingual demonstration school, appointing a Spanish teacher Mr. Marcelo R. Fernandez-Zayas as temporary director.[11] The school's neighborhood was extended across the Ellington bridge to encompass Spanish-speaking residents in the Adams Morgan neighborhood.

The commercial district of Woodley Park, along one block of Connecticut Avenue and sections of Calvert Street, reflected the active life style of the community. In 1949 the American Security and Trust Company opened a "state of the art," fully air-conditioned branch on Calvert Street, with the only drive-in banking window in the District of Columbia.[12] Several clothing stores for men and women, a toy shop, and a hat shop lined Connecticut Avenue, and photography studios, tailor, hair dressing salons, barbers, a supermarket and a driving school provided neighborhood services.[13] One resident remembers, "There was a lovely delicatessen, where you could sit at the counter, and the Shoreham had a marvelous terrace for dancing in the summer evenings. "[14]

Even though change was in the air during the 1950's and 1960's, the various sections of the neighborhood continued to relate to each other as one commu¬nity. The choir from St. Thomas Apostle School crossed the street "to give a fine performance in the lobby of The Sheraton-Park Hotel on

December 22, 1958."[15] Apartment residents met as members of the hotel swimming pools. In 1965, "a group of interested and concerned neighbors who liked living in the city and wanted to improve and maintain a sense of community life" organized the Woodley Park Community Association.[16] They constructed a playground on Cortland Place and established a plot of land for allotment gardens on Cathedral Avenue.

Notes

1. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Tract Summaries for the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C., 1950.

2. Charles Szoradi, City Options' Woodley Park Neighborhood Planning Project, (Washington, D.C.: Woodley Park Community Association, July 4, 1976), p. 1. Woodley Park file, Historical Society of Washington.

3. In 1950, 1,855 persons worked in sales or clerical jobs; 1,748 worked in professional or management positions; and 460 were employed as laborers or in household service. Bureau of the Census, *op. cit.*

4. Sheraton Washington Hotel promotional brochure, 1992.

5. Omni Shoreham Hotel promotional brochure, 1992.

6. Personal interview with Phil Hollywood, November 17, 1992. Students at Oyster School took part in the interview.

7. Parish Profile (Washington, D.C.: All Souls Memorial Episcopal Church, 1989), p. 5.

8. Embassy of Switzerland, press clippings, Vertical Files, Washingtoniana Room, Martin Luther King Memorial Library.

9. Maret School Catalogue, Washington, D.C., 1992.

10. In 1960 there were 400 children aged 5-14, and in 1970 there were only 206. Bureau of the Census, *op. cit.*

11. Annual Report of the Board of Education of the District of Columbia 1970-71 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), Enclosure 1.

12. Press clippings, American Security and Trust Company, Washington, D.C.

13. Polk's Washington City Directory 1956 Dart II. pink pages, pp. 130, 144.

14. Personal interview with Mary Frances Merz, November 1992.

15. Letter to Sister Agnes Marie, St. Thomas The Apostle School from Barbara Norton, director of public relations, The Sheraton-Park Hotel, December 29, 1958.

16. Woodley Park, Woodley Park Community Association brochure, 1972. Woodley Park file, Historical Society of Washington.

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