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# The Old Neighborhood

Lynn Jones

“You really never leave a place you love. Part of it you take with you, leaving a part of you behind.”

*Author unknown*

For most of us growing up in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s—when families tended to move less often—memories of the house and neighborhood where we grew up are deeply etched in our minds. We can close our eyes and remember the scents, the sounds, the coolness of grass on bare feet, the faces of friends and neighbors. We could draw a floor plan of the rooms in our house and see each tree in its place in the yard. We knew our small world intimately.

A part of what is now commonly referred to as the “Five Points” neighborhood holds such memories for Sarah Huff Fisk, Henry Lee Hilson, and Edgar (Ed) Mitchell, all of whom grew up there. Sarah Fisk is an author, illustrator, and researcher. She was the bookkeeper and historian for the Huntsville Manufacturing Company for many years. Sarah was just 4 years old when her family (mother, father, sister, grandmother, and aunt) moved to 700 (now 701) Ward Avenue in 1919. The one-and-one-half story frame Victorian house, built by Charles N. Vaught in 1900, was one of the earliest homes built in the newly platted (1892) East Huntsville Addition, the town’s first modern subdivision, now known as Five Points (Huntsville Planning Dept). The family lived in the home until 1938.

In the 1980s Sarah and her sister, Martha Lee Huff Pinkerton, collaborated to record their memories of growing up at 700 Ward. *In the Style of our Childhood: A Story of Remembrance*, illustrated by Sarah, describes a time “when life seemed far less complex and infinitely more secure” (Fisk & Pinkerton). In the preface they write, “In spite of hardships, fortunes which ranged from affluence to poverty, and the almost complete lack of labor-saving devices, we led an enjoyable and creative life in a caring and supportive atmosphere. Our family encouraged creativity and generously recognized each



*Vaughn-Huff-Nicholson home, 1911—700 Ward Avenue (now 701) was built in 1900. This view illustrates the more Victorian elements of the wood frame home such as the porch frieze of spindles and brackets and a baulastrade of spindle work rectangles of Eastlake ornament. Note the electric pole and unpaved road. Courtesy H/MCPL.*

other's talents. This being before the days of artificial entertainment, we created our own and took joy in it" (Fisk & Pinkerton).

They continue, "During our growing-up years, the lives of most families revolved around the church, community affairs, and the schools, where dedicated teachers were both admired and respected. Friends regularly visited each other, conversation was an art appreciated and enjoyed. These were times when people were courteous and respectful, helped each other, shared sorrow and joys, endured and persevered, neither expecting nor receiving assistance from the government, regardless of their plight" (Fisk & Pinkerton).

In an interview with Sarah, she reminisced about those years. She recalled when electricity was installed in the house, along with indoor plumbing. The family continued to use water from the backyard well house for washing and kept the gas light fixtures "just in case." Ice was delivered by the ice man, Mr. Moore, and stored in an ice box on

the back porch. Mr. Darwin came in a horse and buggy to pick up mail from the mailbox on the corner. The dirt street was regularly sprinkled by the city until it was paved in the 1920s. With no sewer system in place, the city's sanitary wagon came down the alley regularly to empty the privies. Groceries were delivered to the door. Sarah's father, O. C. Huff, planted five peach trees in the back yard, built a playhouse under the pecan tree, and a hen house where the family raised their own chickens.

Children played hopscotch and jacks, roller skated and jumped rope. Sarah and Martha Lee played for endless hours with their dolls and toy animals, often on the big porch. When they needed to go downtown, the family caught the trolley one block from their house at Ward and what was then Sixth Street. From Sixth St. the tracks proceeded one block, "then they made a wide right-hand curve into Pratt Avenue. The tracks went on down Holmes Street into town and then out to Merrimack Village where the cars turned around" (Fisk & Pinkerton). In spite of the public transportation, Sarah's father drove a 1924 Dodge touring car to work.



There were picnics at the Big Spring and memorable circus parades downtown complete with marching band, elephants, circus wagons carrying wild animals, and a noisy steam calliope. The New York Chautauqua was an annual event eagerly anticipated, with a full week of well-known lecturers, music of all kinds, magic shows, drama, craft demonstrations, and children's entertainment that once included Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy.

***"Memories" Corner of Ward and 6th, 1923—An illustration of the trolley that connected Five Points, the mill villages and downtown Huntsville by Sarah Huff Fisk.***  
*Courtesy Linda Riley.*

It was at Chautauqua that Sarah and Martha Lee learned about puppets and marionettes and soon were making their own. They wrote plays and, with other children in the neighborhood, gave performances in



*700 Ward Avenue, 1962—The ornament of the porch has been replaced by columns, a solid frieze, and a railing of rectangular baulusters. The brick foundation piers have been filled in, and the spindlework of the upper floor balcony is gone. The changes reflect a Colonial Revival style. However, the pediments contain flat decorations that, along with the massing and irregular planes of roof, suggest the late Victorian original. Courtesy Sarah Huff Fisk.*

their side yard.  
 Admission was 5¢,  
 and proud parents  
 were the audience.  
 Sarah attended the old  
 East Clinton School,  
 West Clinton Jr. High,  
 and Huntsville High  
 School (now the  
 Merts Center) the first  
 year it opened. The  
 class “trip” consisted  
 of hiking up the  
 mountain to Fagan’s  
 Hollow.



*701 Ward Avenue, 2001— The restoration done in 1979-80 by architect Harvie Jones consisted mainly of repair and painting for emphasis of Victorian detail. Photo Susan Bridges.*

While the Depression loomed and harder times were to follow, Sarah treasures the golden days of her youth in the old neighborhood of Five Points. Many of the stately houses that once stood where what is now the Five Points commercial district are gone. Sarah’s former home, modified several times through the years—restored as an art gallery for Evelyn and Tom Wright in 1980 and now lived in by their daughter, Linda Riley, and her husband Ken—still stands. According to local history, “A number of imposing homes were erected in this suburb at the turn of the century, but the Vaught house is the finest of these to survive” (Jones). The house was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1981.

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Henry Lee Hilson worked as an industrial engineer for the Army, NASA, and the Walter Reed Army Medical Center before his retirement. Henry’s eyes sparkle as he begins to talk about growing up in the Five Points neighborhood. The house where he spent most of his growing-up years, 306 Fifth St. (now Andrew Jackson), was demolished some years ago for commercial development. He and his buddies swam at the YMCA, played baseball and football at Wellman Park, and kick-the-can on warm summer nights. Inspired by their favorite movie serial—“Thunder Mountain” at the Lyric Theatre—



***703 Ward Avenue**—The house where Henry Hilson's family moved when he was sixteen. This simple two-story Victorian was one of the styles typical of Five Points in the early 1900s. The home does not exist today, but sat across the street from the Fisk house. Photo courtesy Henry Hilson.*

depicting cowboys riding out of a cave to do good deeds, they formed the Thunder Mountain Riding Club. Their “cave” was a clubhouse upstairs in the Hilson family’s garage, and their steeds were bicycles. Donning cloaks and rattling pieces of tin to make “thunder,” they rode fearlessly through the neighborhood. Henry didn’t recall the good deeds.

Henry lived next door to the Wellman family. Margaret and Jess Young shared the home with Mrs. Young’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. Willard Wellman who built the imposing house which stood on a large lot at the corner of Pratt and what is now Andrew Jackson. The Youngs’ son, Willard, was one of Henry’s good friends. Henry recalls that the Youngs sometimes ate breakfast on their screened porch and often had warm salt-rising bread. One whiff of the bewitching scent of that bread drew Henry like a magnet across the lawn on some pretext, and the Youngs always had an extra slice waiting for him.

Late in the afternoon on hot summer days the Young’s handyman and cook, Ellie, would often load up the family car with kids and take them to a small creek several blocks west of the Big Spring, where they would splash and jump around in the water until their teeth chattered.

The Youngs kept a beautiful sleigh in their barn. When it snowed Ellie would hitch that sleigh up to the car and pull the children around in the snow. This same Ellie also dug a deep trench from the back of the Wellman's barn to the Hilson's property line, covered it with boards and then dirt, making a perfect hide-away tunnel where the boys played and had "rubber gun" battles.

Churches were a big part of the community's life at that time. Henry's family belonged to the old First Baptist Church which once stood across from the Russel Erskine Hotel. He recalls the church as similar in its architecture to the Central Presbyterian Church. When the congregation grew too large, Sunday School classes were held in the Blue Room of the Russel Erskine as well as at the old West Clinton Grammar School, which was about a block and a half west of where the Jeremiah Clemens House now stands.

Miss Bessie Russell was one of Henry's favorite teachers at East Clinton School, but he "loved all [his] teachers." He rode his bike to East Clinton as well as Huntsville Jr. High and rode home for lunch every day. Tom Cornell, a director at the YMCA and scoutmaster at the Methodist Church, led hikes to Fagan Spring and Monte Sano.

During high school most socializing was in people's homes, although girls' social clubs like the "J.U.G."s and "Sub Debs" had big Christmas dances at the Russel Erskine. One center of teenage activity that would be the envy of young people today was Broadway's, a block south of Huntsville Hospital on Madison St. Mr. Broadway opened a sandwich shop there with tables, booths, and a dance floor for Friday and Saturday night dancing.

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Ed Mitchell—long-time chairman of the Airport Authority, chief organizer of the Alabama Development Office, City Councilman, Co-chairman of the Appalachian Regional Commission in Washington D.C., and the visionary force behind the Huntsville/Madison County Airport and the subsequent International Inter-modal Transportation Center—uses a yellow legal pad and pencil to map, diagram and illustrate as he reminisces about growing up in Five Points.



Ed was about two years old when his father, a master mechanic and machinist, built the family's two-story home which still stands at 903 Pratt Avenue. Ed quickly sketches the floor plan, the details crystal clear in his mind. The house had a basement with a furnace that piped heat into the house and a gas hot water heater. He carefully draws each room and the stairs to the two upstairs bedrooms. There was a garage, a porte-cochere, and a nice front porch. Ed remembers it as a comfortable house, in a close-knit neighborhood: "All up and down the streets families were friends." Like Sarah and Henry, Ed can recite the names, and the names prompt stories.

In those days children invented their own entertainment. Ed recalls the elaborate plan devised by him and a group of his friends, including Willard Young, to build a "trolley" which would run from the top of the Young's tall two-story garage to a large oak tree beside

the house. After much scrounging for the necessary materials, a wooden box (about 3' by 3') was built, then suspended from a long rope spanning the considerable distance. Arguing over who would get to ride first, they finally agreed Willard should go first because it was on his property. Launched from the garage loft, Willard and the box gained momentum quickly. The boys watched Willard's expression turn quickly from glee to horror as he—and then they—realized almost at the same time that no provision had been made for stopping the



**903 Pratt, mid-1920s**—Notice the bungalow roofline, the under-eave brackets, and the vine-covered trellis porte-cochere. This photo also illustrates the light density of Five Points development at this time. Photo courtesy Ed Mitchell.

trolley. Willard and the trolley slammed into the tree and Willard came flying down, miraculously unhurt. It proved to be both the first and last trolley ride.

Ed, too, attended the old East Clinton Elementary school. He will never forget one particular day there. When Ed was in first or second grade, Charles Lindbergh flew his plane over Huntsville. The principal turned the whole school out to watch as Lindbergh flew no more than 100 feet over the school, and the words "Spirit of St. Louis" on the plane's side were clearly visible. That unforgettable moment possibly triggered Ed's lifelong keen interest in the field of aviation.

Sarah, Henry and Ed all remembered the snaking tubular fire escape at East Clinton School. Apparently there were no fire drills, because Sarah said that she was never inside it. Henry said the children were not *allowed* to go in it. Ed gleefully recalled the times he and his friends climbed from the open end at ground level all the way to the top and slid down on waxed paper.

When we begin to talk about high school, Ed goes upstairs to get his 1937 HHS *Pierian* yearbook, with illustrations by Clarence Watts and Ed Monroe, both of whom already showed the talent that would later make them well-known local artists. Ed lettered in baseball, basketball, and football; was voted most athletic; and was vice-president of the senior class. He also joined the National Guard in high school.

The years of the Great Depression were tough for everyone. The Five Points neighborhood was no exception. Hungry people knocked on doors and begged for food. Ed's mother always managed to feed them something. A poignant example of these hard times occurred one year in the 1930s when Ed's HHS basketball team was scheduled to play Phillips High School in Birmingham. There was one problem. Parents always drove the team to their out-of-town games, and, at this particular time, none of them had money to buy gas. Ed's father had a set of very fine measuring instruments which Ed said "he loved more than anything." His father took them downtown and hocked them to pay for the gas. The team won their game.

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The stories continue. We step back in time together, as one recollection brings to mind yet another. We are reluctant to stop, even after several hours. What a wonderful gift that we retain these images from our past. The friends we played with, the secret hiding places, and houses around us almost as familiar as our own. The houses, the people, and their stories. The old neighborhood.

*Lynn Jones, former chairman of HHF and assistant editor of the Quarterly from 1980-1983, currently serves on the Publications Committee. Ms. Jones would like to thank each of the three persons she interviewed for the time they spent with her, and their willingness to share their memories, photographs, and stories.*

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