

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 29
Number 3 *Preservation: Progress and Setbacks*

Article 3

9-22-2003

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Recommended Citation

Castellano, Donna (2003) "Memories of West Holmes Avenue: An Interview with Eugenia Millen Pitsinger," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*. Vol. 29: No. 3, Article 3.
Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol29/iss3/3>

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Memories of West Holmes Avenue: An Interview with Eugenia Millen Pitsinger

DONNA CASTELLANO

There are no indications today that the portion of West Holmes Avenue that runs from North Jefferson Street to Woodson Street was once a tree-lined residential area graced by some of the prettiest antebellum and Victorian homes in Huntsville. Instead, most Huntsville residents associate this stretch of Holmes Avenue with parking garages, banks and businesses and professional offices in modern buildings.

But folks who lived here before urban development led to the demise of the street's historic houses in the 1960s hold memories of a very different place. During a recent interview for the Quarterly, a former West Holmes Avenue resident, Eugenia Millen Pitsinger, shared her recollections of what life was like on West Holmes in an earlier time.¹

Mrs. Pitsinger lived on West Holmes as a young woman, from 1928-1932. She moved to the neighborhood at the age of 14 with her widowed mother and her brother Bill. Her father, William W. Millen, had died in 1918. The Millens rented the upstairs of the old "Spragins" house, located in the 300 block of West Holmes Avenue between Mill and Monroe Streets.² In Mrs. Pitsinger's day, the 100 block of West Holmes Avenue was a business district and the residential area began in the 200 block of the street. One of her most vivid memories is of old oak trees lining West Holmes with canopies so thick that they blocked the light cast by the street lamps. Mrs. Pitsinger's mother, Carrie Millen, provided admirably for the family, working in the office of Huntsville Steam Laundry at 303 West Clinton Avenue—a quick walk through the alley that connected West Holmes and West Clinton. The Millen family shared the house with Mrs. Leona Grider, also a widow, who rented the first floor.

According to Mrs. Pitsinger, the north side of the block was filled with old homes—some larger and more elaborate than others. In addition to the Spragins home, there was the Rison house next door, occupied by R. S. Harrison and his family, and

residences owned by James S. Wall, Emmett Woodall, and Mrs. Fanning.

Mrs. Pitsinger described the Rison house “as one of the most beautiful houses in Huntsville.” She has clear memories of the home’s impressive exterior. The large brick two-story residence dominated the lot and sat a good distance back from the road. She remembers the house’s wraparound porch and the distinctive turret on its east side, as well as an ornamental iron fence that ran along the sidewalk in front of the property. There was also a horse hitching post in the front yard next to the sidewalk. Mr. and Mrs. R. S. Harrison and their children lived in the Rison house for the four years that Mrs. Pitsinger lived on West Holmes. Although they frequently conversed with the Harrison family, Mrs. Pitsinger regrets that she never saw the interior of the Rison house. She recalls Mrs. Harrison as being ill at this time and not receiving many visitors. She remembers hearing about the house’s beautiful interior and its elaborate staircase.

Mrs. Pitsinger’s block appears to have included houses of varying sizes and degrees of elaborateness. The Rison house’s architectural distinctiveness contrasted with the house rented by the Millen and Grider families. Mrs. Pitsinger remembers her house as being a two-story brick structure with a very simple wrap-around porch that ran along the front and east side of the house. The house sat very close to the street. She doesn’t remember that the house had any distinguished architectural details or trim.



Adcock house, 409 West Holmes Avenue. The simple massing combined with awkward tower suggests that this house initially was constructed before the Queen Anne period and was later remodeled by the addition of the small non-functional tower, bracketed entry hoods, and bay window to bring it into line with more ornate Queen Anne tastes. It sat on the south side of West Holmes opposite the Rison house.

In fact, the front porch didn't have a banister. The front-porch steps were simple blocks of stone, so worn they had indentations.

The simplicity of the interior rooms echoed the simplicity of the house's exterior. Mrs. Pitsinger recalls that the house had very large rooms with fireplaces in every room. She describes the woodwork and trim in the house as "crude" and believes that the house had been built before the Civil War.³ She speculated that it must have been built by slave labor. In 1928, the house had indoor bathrooms and running cold—but not hot—water. Mrs. Pitsinger remembers heating water on a "modern" kerosene stove to take a bath in what she called the coldest bathroom in the world.

Differences between the footprint of the house recorded in the 1894 Sanborn Fire Insurance maps and Mrs. Pitsinger's memories suggest that the house was altered between 1894 and 1928 from a single-family residence into a residence divided into two separate apartments. During this alteration, the small front porch depicted on the 1894 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map was extended into the wraparound porch, and changes were made to increase the size of the second story. A second entrance door was added to provide a private entry to the apartment. One entered from this door directly into the living room of Mrs. Grider, who had a large dining room, two bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, and a long back porch. The original entry was used by the Millen family and provided access to a small foyer that led to the upstairs rooms they shared. Their apartment consisted of a living room, a dining room, a bedroom, and a glassed-in sleeping porch. Mrs. Pitsinger recalls that her mother paid \$15 per month to rent the upstairs apartment, while utilities ran around \$2.50 per month.

As the contrast between the grandness of the Rison house and simplicity of the Spragins house suggests, West Holmes Avenue contained a diverse collection of residences. Immediately adjacent to the Spragins/Millen home sat the residence of James S. Wall. Mrs. Pitsinger remembers this house as a lovely two-story Victorian. The house had a small porch with beautiful gingerbread trim and a distinctive front door. Farther down the street was a residence owned by the Fanning sisters,

which Mrs. Pitsinger describes as a “cottage” with double-entry doors. One block up, the 200 block of Holmes Avenue also presented beautiful examples of antebellum and Victorian architecture. Mrs. Pitsinger recalls the home of Dr. Marion R. Moorman. She remembers that it was brick. The house is described in *Medicine Bags and Bumpy Roads* as a “lovely antebellum home.”²⁴ These blocks of West Holmes attracted families from various income levels, but the residents mixed with egalitarian ease. Mrs. Pitsinger repeated a phrase expressed in a note she had recently received from John Rison Jones: “everyone was respectable who lived in our area.”



Blanton house, 415 West Holmes Avenue. The majority of the Victorian houses on West Holmes were of frame construction, a material made affordable by the mechanical milling of lumber that was more suitable than brick for the creation of the complex floor plans, rooflines, and fantastic ornamentation favored by those who could afford a stylish Queen Anne home.

Respectable was also a characteristic Mrs. Pitsinger used to describe the black families who lived near them on adjacent streets. She remarked that visitors to the area were often surprised by the closeness with which white and black families lived on Huntsville’s downtown streets. She said most black families lived in old, but well-maintained cottages. She recalled Charlie, the black postman, who lived around the corner from her. Blacks moved easily throughout these neighborhoods as they made their way to their jobs. Aside from polite greetings, Mrs. Pitsinger recalls very limited social interaction between black and white residents. The dictates of a segregated society were observed even in those close quarters.

Through her memories, Mrs. Pitsinger fashions a lovely backdrop for the activities that animated life on West Holmes. In these recollections, porches were not areas decorated to look appealing from the street but were used by residents as a necessary retreat from the stifling heat of southern summers. She remembers sitting out on the front porch at night with her mother, both in their nightgowns, their privacy preserved by the thick limbs and full leaves of trees. To cool down, they lightly sprinkled water over their necks and arms. A great deal of activity centered on the arrival of the iceman, who delivered the ice for the iceboxes in his truck. Young children followed him along his journey and scooped up ice chips left in the bed of the truck where he scored and cut blocks of ice for his customers. Children fished in Pinhook Creek that cut across West Holmes at the end of their block. Mrs. Pitsinger recalled that the creek got its name because the children who fished there did not

have fishing hooks, so they bent straight pins to make their own.

Like tree-lined West Holmes Avenue and the houses that sat along it, these activities are part of Huntsville's heritage. Mrs. Pitsinger mourns the changes that a desire for progress brought to this neighborhood in the middle 1960s. She states that it is difficult to go down those streets today, because she knows what the area looked like before. She still has strong feelings regarding the loss of the Rison house, the Moorman house, the Wall house, and the neat, well-maintained cottages of Huntsville's black



Fanning house, 400 West Holmes Avenue. This Victorian cottage, which stood on the north side of Holmes near Pinhook Creek, displays numerous characteristics of the period, including a wraparound porch, a multi-gabled roof with fanciful bargeboards, and a rounded corner tower with uncommon vertical siding and a slender finial extending its conical roof.

residents, all pushed aside in the desire for urban renewal. Fortunately, the demolition of these structures did not occur entirely without good effect. Their destruction awakened the activism of other Huntsville residents whose blueprint for the future included a place for Huntsville's past.

Notes

- 1 Interview with Mrs. Eugenia Pitsinger, July 18, 2003.
- 2 Mrs. Pitsinger stated that her home would have been in the approximate area of where the public housing units [Searcy Homes] are located.
- 3 This seems a reasonable assumption. The 1861 City of Huntsville map shows a house fitting Mrs. Pitsinger's description in this location.
- 4 Jewell S. Goldsmith and Helen D. Fulton, *Medicine Bags and Bumpy Roads: A Heritage of Healing in Madison County, Town and Country* (Huntsville: Valley Publishing Company, 1985), 223-224.



North side West Holmes Avenue, 2003



*Blake house, 1890s. From left to right: Eva Copeland
Blake, Hall Blake, Jean Hall, Jim W. Blake, Grandma
Sarah Hall Blake, and B.W. Blake*

Photographs courtesy of the Bryant family