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The Old Neighborhood: A Family Remembers West Holmes Avenue

NANCY ROHR

Just one block west of the focus of Eugenia Pitsinger's memories, the Blake and the Bryant families were acquiring their own memories of the West Holmes Avenue neighborhood. In an interview for the Quarterly, three members of the Bryant family—Martha Moore Bryant, Sarah Bryant Batson, her daughter, and Hall Blake Bryant, Jr., her son—recalled with fondness their life on West Holmes Avenue.¹ The houses and the people formed a wonderful environment for raising three generations of Blakes and Bryants. For a time the Bryants and Pitsingers lived next door to each other. They shared lively days then and fond memories now.

Martha Moore Bryant's roots go way back in Madison County history, as did those of her husband, Hall (Buddy) Blake Bryant, Sr. The Blake family had arrived in Huntsville perhaps as early as the 1840s. Mrs. Bryant was born in 1916 in her grandfather's house on East Clinton Street. Her parents were Olivia B. Humphrey and Andrew Jackson Moore. Her grandfather Humphrey, the first principal of an early school on Clinton Street, lived with them to the age of 89, and Mrs. Bryant was raised on his stories of Yankee raids at the plantation north of town. In 1937, Martha Moore married Hall Blake Bryant.² They and their six children—five girls and one boy—lived on West Holmes Avenue in the third house from Pinhook Creek, next door to Grandmother Sarah Bryant.

The Fannings, Blantons, Burwells, Joneses, Johnsons and Harrises come to mind when Mrs. Bryant remembers her family's West Holmes area neighbors. The Fannings were an elderly couple who also owned acreage where the present University Drive and Memorial Parkway meet. Mr. Fanning, a gentleman with a fine head of coal-black hair, used to walk or ride on a white horse out to the farm. His wife churned butter on the front porch, perhaps to enjoy the breezes of summer.

According to Mrs. Bryant, the Blanton house was originally on West Clinton Street. A man from Athens relocated the house, using a team of mules and rollers to move

it through a field and onto West Holmes Avenue. He set the house in the middle of perhaps five acres, leaving room for the horse and a shed in the back. Mrs. Blanton then restored the interior of the house beautifully. The mantels were particularly fine. While her husband, Judge William Blanton, spent his day at the courthouse, Mrs. Blanton, who was quite progressive for her time, was also busy. Having arranged to move a house from one street to another, she then contracted to build a concrete block apartment house behind her home and managed the rental units herself.

In the neighborhood all the children, black and white, played together, and everybody knew everybody else. Mrs. Bryant recalled PeeWee, the five Woody children, Mickey Payne, and Tommy and Buddy. No child EVER sat around bored with nothing to do.

The five acres behind the Bryant house allowed plenty of room to keep the horse they all rode.

Mr. Bryant set up iron poles in the back with chains for swings, action bars, and a jungle gym. He built a fishpond, and they had one of the earliest swimming pools. Many neighbors went to watch the semi-professional black baseball team play in a nearby field. At the end of the professional baseball season, the children got out of school early to come home and watch the World Series on television.

Neighborhood children walked to Mr. Thomas Womack's store, across the railroad tracks at the corner, to turn in Coke bottles for the refund and buy penny candy to eat on the way home. Along the way, the children played at the bridge, around the tempting waters of Pinhook Creek. The railroad bed produced an endless supply of rocks just the right size, and occasionally there were rock battles. But no one went



Sarah Blake house, 421 West Holmes Avenue, ca. 1950

home and tattled or told tales to their parents. Mama never knew.

Sometimes Big Spring Park lured some of the children to play and swim in the water at the lagoon or to haul out buckets of crawfish. Here also were the pick-up football games for the older boys. When the train whistle announced the arrival of the Joe Wheeler, the children stopped what they were doing to meet it at the depot just a block or so away. After that, they might go to the Greyhound bus station where the older kids played the pin ball machine.

Some neighborhood children attended Saturday morning's Kiddie Club, sponsored by radio station WFIX at the Lyric Theatre downtown. This local talent show encouraged everyone to enter and compete for the prizes. The main movie feature followed. Afterwards, the boys and girls lingered downtown and then walked the quarter mile home along the street lined by small markets.

Some vendors came right to the doorstep. The iceman, for example, was a regular feature. Salesmen from the Jewel Tea Company or the Tetley Tea Company came around with premiums. The milkman delivered glass bottles of milk (with cream on the top) to the family's front porch. In the summer some children sold blackberries by the bucket.

As the children grew older, shopping downtown at Kress and Woolworth for Christmas gifts became more serious. And Mama always sincerely thanked the thoughtful child who gave her Evening in Paris perfume every year. No one ever missed the rummage sale in the basement of Belk's or the sale at Mangle's, even though a shopper knew there would be dresses just like hers all over town.

Mrs. Exie Blanton and her daughter Mary Ann helped the children produce skits and plays on a makeshift stage in Grandmother Bryant's back yard. They had "real" shows with the neighborhood children. Costumes made of crepe paper added an elegant touch to their theatricals.

The neighborhood's lovely trees, so admired for their shade by adults, were perfect

for climbing and building tree houses from scraps of lumber. In the back fields, youngsters helped the poorer boys trap ‘possum and rabbits for the stewpot. They seined for fish and crawfish in Pinhook Creek. Using large sheets of cardboard, they often slid down to the creek from the top of the slope near the road. Just about everyone had roller skates and could use the sidewalk along the street, even though the road was a main thoroughfare. As they grew up they skated up to the Coca-Cola plant to use the concrete surface there. On rainy days the children already had an indoor skating rink: the Bryant’s basement floor was concrete, and they could skate inside around the metal support posts. At the back end of the room, Mr. Bryant had a space for a coal heater that also doubled as a smoke room for hams and bacon from the farm.



After World War II, Americans had time to consider the many things they had been fighting for. The need to spend time, energy and money on the war effort was over, and it looked as if the quality of life for everybody, white and black, rich or poor, could now be improved. There was a sense of urgency about raising living standards in Huntsville, or at least the appearance of the poorer neighborhoods surrounding the city. Many residents, black and white, were living in unsanitary shanties that lacked running water and were crowded with children and infested with vermin. And they were living like this around the very heart of a town that wanted to be seen as a city.

There was even a shabby look about some of the dwellings on Franklin and Adams Streets. Many houses then had boarders, and there were often unsightly fire escape stairs extending into front yards from the second and third floors. Meanwhile, the city was expanding out to newer residential neighborhoods. Mayfair, for example, with its neat and orderly brick homes, looked very appealing.

The Space Age had landed in Huntsville and progress would come whether everyone was ready for it or not. It was time to project a modern image, and under the leadership of men like Senator John Sparkman and others, it happened.

Like others, the Bryants thought urban renewal was “a needed thing” at the time, and they still do. They remembered that the Housing Authority of the City of Huntsville bought the houses slated for demolition and reimbursed the homeowners, but not for what houses and their contents were really worth. In the eagerness for a crisp new look, local historic landmarks fell to the bulldozer. If progress has a price tag, perhaps taxpayers bought more than they realized.

A SWEET NEIGHBORHOOD

Martha Moore Bryant counts sixty-three descendants, at least fifty of whom still live in Huntsville and are proud of the heritage that earlier served them well on West Holmes Avenue. Mrs. Bryant remembers a sweet neighborhood of family and friends who cared for one another and took care of each other. She sums up her memories this way: “What else would you want?”

When the houses of West Holmes Avenue were vacated, the housing authority stripped the interiors of architectural features such as mantels, windows, staircases and newel posts. Finishing touches so lovingly treasured were removed before the houses were torn down. According to the Bryants, the homeowners were not allowed to take with them any of these things, nor were they allowed to

purchase them from the housing authority. The materials were removed and taken to be stored, but somehow they later appeared in other settings throughout town. For the displaced residents, the unfairness of this action was the most distressing part of leaving and looking back.

Notes

- 1 Interview, August 25, 2003.
- 2 Hall Clarence Blake started the family’s hardware business. H.C.’s sister Sarah married William Bryant, who eventually took over the business. Sarah and William’s son Hall Blake Bryant married Martha Moore. Sarah Bryant Batson and Hall Blake Bryant, Jr., are two of their children.

