

## Golden Days in Fredericksburg by Julie Knapp Ditzler

A little while ago, I had the pleasurable experience of spending a long, unhurried afternoon with a couple of my friends who grew up with me in Fredericksburg. After we caught up with what was current in our lives, the day gave way to reminiscing about how much fun it was to grow up during the time and in the place we found ourselves as kids.

Fredericksburg in those days was big enough to provide plenty of adventures, yet small enough to remain familiar and safe. We remembered the days when we could name everyone who lived along each street in town; in addition, we often recognized their dogs as they wandered around town. We could predict the good-natured teasing that would always accompany the meeting of fans of different baseball teams. It was common to see people on their porches listening to a ball game on the radio in the evening. Fredericksburg has always been a baseball town.

And, oh, how we loved to play baseball, too. Our games would go for hours on the school grounds. We didn't have organized teams for kids, then; we structured our own games and we played as long as we could. Do you remember how to throw a bat and use different grips to reach the top for first picks for teams? Depending how many kids were present, we had to set other rules, like an automatic out for hitting to right field, so that we could cover the positions. If we weren't playing ball somewhere, we were at someone's house flipping baseball cards.

There were lots of neighborhood adventures, too. Killer croquet was popular, as everyone wanted to send someone as far away as possible. Kick the can games spanned large areas, including some lower rooftops, as kids planned strategies to get to the can first and avoid being "it." During the long summer nights in my neighborhood, we were even allowed to bring our board games outside and play under the street lights until bedtime. Sidewalk games like "Mother, May I?" were popular, and rolls of bang caps and sharp stones were ever present.

Of course, summer found most of us up at Lions' Park, either at the playground in the morning or the pool in the afternoon. We had a legendary playground experience, thanks to the kind hearts of our director, Joe Jandrositz, and his assistant/daughter, Joann. We couldn't wait to get to the park each day to play box hockey, to see what plaster of paris molds were available to paint, and to sign up for our awesome field trips. Joe and Joann would take whole busloads of us to see a ball game at Connie Mack Stadium, or to swim in a fancy pool called Happy Holiday. In these litigious days, it's hard to imagine how trusting everyone was at that time.

Summer afternoons, and many times, summer evenings were spent at the Fredericksburg Lions' Pool. Long before anyone came up with the idea of adult swims, we kids ruled the action at the pool. We dove for pennies, lined up for "jump or dive" at the diving board, and were always disappointed when one of our parents appeared at the entrance to come and pick us up. As we got older, the juke box there became a fun pastime. It was always fun to watch the teenagers dance on the cement in front of the speakers for the juke box. There were no lockers or private

areas available; we quickly threw our towels and spending money in numbered boxes in an open hallway and made our way to the water as fast as we could! Those were the days when a quarter would buy a cup of soda and a bag of barbecued chips – a personal favorite snack of mine!

While we wanted to squeeze every moment of fun out of each summer day, we also had lots to look forward to throughout other seasons of the year. In addition to the start of school in September, fall brought all the anticipation of Halloween and the activities we loved. I can remember combing local fields for dried ears of corn to peel off, so we would be ready for “tic-tacking” throughout town around Halloween. Going trick-or-treating with friends was something you did on your own schedule, and we never visited houses where people lived who couldn’t guess who we were under those masks. One time, though, a friend of mine and I made a grave mistake when we attempted to trick or treat at our friend’s house – the home of the local funeral director – on the night of a viewing. We were sent scurrying away (thankfully, anonymously until now!) That ended our revelry for that night.

The highlight of the season was the Halloween Parade, held on the Wednesday closest to Halloween. Bags of confetti were available on the square, and it was great fun to throw confetti at your friends. After the parade, the square remained blocked off, there was a wagon set up with a juke box, and kids could continue the fun with dancing. At a certain point, the festivities would end, neighbors in the square would come out and sweep up, and the evening would come to a peaceful end. We loved it!

Winter brought the Christmas Party at the school, where we would watch a movie, and then be visited by none other than Santa himself! He would give each of us a white bag with some candy and an orange in it. I learned later that the Lions Club sponsored this program for the children of the community. It was a great way to celebrate the holiday together.

Of course, the hope of most kids around Fredericksburg during the winter was for a good sledding snow. We had several favorite places to go, with the hill in front of the old college being the most challenging in town. I was lucky enough to live on North Center Street, where you could start at the top of the street, and go down two hills with the right kind of snow. Luckily, no one was interested in plowing all the snow away in those days, so we did a lot of sledding in town, and found some great places outside town, like Pigs’ Hill. I can remember times when our sledding parties included as many adults as kids, including my grandma!

Winter gave way to spring, and soon it would be time for the Easter Egg Hunt. That was always a pretty sight – Lions’ Park all decked out with bright, colorful eggs – and a fun event. What made it more interesting in our day was the fact that it also included a guinea hen chase for the older kids. I can remember watching kids chase that guinea hen all around the field in back of the pool. Whoever caught the guinea hen could keep it. I guess that wouldn’t be politically correct nowadays, but it added some adventure to the Egg Hunt for the older kids in town.

Memorial Day was always a proud day as we prepared to take part in the Memorial Day Parade and the ceremony at Cedar Hill Cemetery. As young children, we marched with our Sunday School classes in white shirts and dark slacks/skirts as we carried American flags. Mrs. Mohn

always made sure the children were organized and outfitted properly. I remember standing and watching as the former soldiers in the American Legion formed a firing squad and participated in the ceremony, along with trumpeters from the band playing "Taps". Those observances made quite an impression on me, and many others, too, I'm sure.

Sunday School was always fun because it was like a double one throughout my early years. Because my church shared a building with the St. John's Lutheran congregation, we held Sunday School classes together. We had large, fun picnics with lots of games and activities like pie-eating contests. We celebrated everyone's birthday by having them stand by the piano and put pennies into the plastic birthday cake as we sang to them. Because of that, I still to this day remember the birthdays of a lot of my Fredericksburg pals!

Going into one of the local stores was always fun, too. Each store had its own specialty items available, but all of them had kind and patient owners who did not mind having kids visit. Many times I left with a bag full of penny candy that was greater than the amount of pennies I had. I also remember walking in the evening to get a bottle of cream soda out of the machine in front of the store. Being able to manipulate that machine by myself was a rite of passage for me.

The only thing I can remember regularly having to do in Fredericksburg that I dreaded was visiting Dr. Reed. He was always very kind to me, but his size and the sound of that door opening when it was my turn were enough to turn my knees to jelly. When I think back on it now, I realize how lucky we were to have such a dedicated physician available to us all those years ago.

In fact, I count myself very fortunate to have experienced so many positive and life-affirming situations throughout my years of growing up; I am certain they have contributed greatly to the person I have become. I know that memory tends to emphasize the positive and jettison the negative, so I'm sure my memory is biased toward the good things I remember. There were certainly sad and difficult times along with all the good times. I also have not included specific names except for a couple of souls who, I feel, were shared and loved by all of us who grew up in Fredericksburg. I did that deliberately so that I would not leave anyone out or hurt anyone's feelings.

My intention here was to recall a time and a place that will always be special to me, and in my recalling, offer a chance for you to rekindle some of those memories as well. I've concentrated on my memories from the early and mid-1960's in Fredericksburg. I continued to live in the area, although a bit west on Windy Hill, throughout my teen years, but that's a different story for another day. I hope that my ruminations will bring a smile to my Fredericksburg friends, who will live forever in my heart.

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