

Annapolis Stories-Fond memories on Melvin Road

Annapolis Stories:Fond memories on Melvin Road

By JANICE GARY, For The Capital

Published 11/12/07

All afternoon, Elizabeth "Betsey" Melvin had been waiting for a ride on Smokey.



Courtesy photo

Melvin Road children stand on the ice on Aberdeen Creek circa 1962. Elizabeth "Betsey" Melvin stands second from left.

The tall brown quarter horse belonged to a neighbor who had brought him to Elizabeth's aunt and uncle's house on Melvin Road as a treat for the neighborhood children. Elizabeth was last in line. She watched each child go down the road and back up again, hoping their rides would be over quickly.

Smokey was so docile that he didn't even have to be led by the reins. But by the time Elizabeth's turn came, Smokey had had enough of playing "horsey."

Before Elizabeth could even adjust herself in the saddle, the horse took off in a full gallop. As Smokey sped down the road, Elizabeth clung to his mane, screaming in terror, followed by a group of neighbors and friends trying to catch the runaway horse. When Smokey reached his horse pals grazing in the Langford's paddock, he came to an abrupt halt. Scared and shaken, Elizabeth opened her tear-streaked eyes and saw that she was surrounded by friends and neighbors.

"That's how I remember Melvin Road," she says. "As a close-knit community of

friends and family."

Melvin Road was family. It was no coincidence that eight-year-old Elizabeth lived on a road bearing her last name. In 1912, Elizabeth's grandfather, Ridgeley Prentiss Melvin, bought a parcel of 65 acres of farmland off Spa Road bordered to the east by Aberdeen Creek and to the south and the west by the South River. On the farthest point of land, Melvin - judge, state senator and owner of the hometown paper *The Capital* - built a stately four-square home overlooking the river. Locals eventually took to calling the land - Melvin Point, and the road leading to it, Melvin Road. (Melvin Avenue in West Annapolis was named for another family member, Elizabeth's great-grandfather, George Melvin, who was one of the original developers of Murray Hill).

For years, Ridgeley fished and farmed and raised a family who, in turn, began raising their families on that long road.

Almost half a century after Ridgeley Melvin bought the property, his son John brought baby Elizabeth home to a modest ranch house built across the street from the family homestead. Her home was surrounded not only by water, but by cousins, aunts and uncles. "There were maybe a dozen houses on the road," Elizabeth remembers. "And five of them belonged to Melvins."

Although the road bore the Melvin surname, the feeling of family extended to everyone living there. "We knew every inhabitant in every house and all the kids played with each other. Only one family, the Langfords, had a pool," she recalls, "but we'd all use it."

The pool came in handy when the jellyfish arrived in late July, but swimming usually took place in Aberdeen Creek and the South River, referred to simply as "the water." There was also tubing, waterskiing and boating (many members of the Melvin clan were world class sailors). During warm weather, the families on the road would gather on the point for large picnics. The Fourth of July was a particularly big celebration, complete with fireworks shot over the river. They could be seen for miles around.

Throughout the summer, the sound of laughing children rang up and down Melvin Road. A portion of the property had been set aside for use as a Girl Scout camp by Elizabeth's grandmother, who had been an active supporter of the organization. There were also plenty of children of all ages living literally next door. "I was so fortunate, really, because I really didn't have to leave the road to find friends. They were all there." A tangle of brush, trees and swinging vines on the South River created what the kids called the "hidden jungle."

"That's all completely gone, now," she says. Subsequent property owners cleared the "hidden jungle" on the South River as well as many of the fruit trees and wild shrubs along the waterfront, replacing it with grass seed and bulkheads to expose water views.

While the water was a highlight of the property, Ridgeley Melvin loved the land. To accommodate his hobby as a gentleman farmer, he built many farm structures including a chicken coop, a large hay barn, and an old stable. He also had a log cabin built by hand. There, the noted judge and state senator spent many hours practicing public speaking and hosting friendly poker games. By the time Elizabeth was born, her grandfather had passed on, and the cabin was used as a staging area for outdoor parties and as a real-live log cabin by Elizabeth and her friends, who pretended they were living in the wild frontier like Davy Crockett, hero of a popular television show at the time. "The barn, the stable, the hay loft, the log cabin, it was all a just little fantasy kingdom for us," Elizabeth says.

While Elizabeth spent much of her time outside, she also discovered the joys of an indoor activity. Her father had inherited a Chickering baby grand piano from his mother when Elizabeth was young, and she was the only child who gravitated to instrument. "I got hooked at three years of age, and by five, was taking lessons." Both parents influenced what would become a central force in her life. "My father still plays a mean harmonica," Elizabeth says proudly. Her mother, Mary Melvin, was, and is, an avid music aficionado and devoted advocate of the arts in Annapolis. "I was always surrounded by great music," she says. "It played an important role in my life."

There was much to enjoy on the road, no matter what the season. Fall brought a harvest of fruits from the trees on the property. During duck season, her father hunted in the blinds her grandfather had built at the head of Aberdeen Creek (one of them still remains on the South River just off Melvin Point at the entrance to Aberdeen Creek). Adults held parties throughout the year, and the holidays were particularly lively. "We'd begin Christmas by spending Christmas Eve at my aunt and uncle's," Elizabeth recalls. "Then, Christmas Day we'd move on to the 'big house' (her grandfather's original home). At 5 p.m., we'd go down the street to another aunt and uncle's house for Christmas dinner. And at 7 p.m., we'd leave for the Langford's house."

Every winter, Aberdeen Creek would freeze over with ice up to six inches thick - strong enough for all the kids to skate on at once. "I can't recall a year the creek didn't freeze in the winter," Elizabeth says. There was also a sledding hill on her grandfather's property that began at the log cabin and ended at the water. Kids would speed down the hill straight onto the frozen creek.

Nowadays, it's rare for the creeks off the South River to freeze. And the water has changed in many other ways. Pictures of young Elizabeth swimming and playing in Aberdeen Creek show crystal clear water. "You could stand in the creek and see your legs all the way down," Elizabeth remembers. "And the water was blue, a sparkling, pretty blue."

It was only in the late 1960's that Elizabeth recalls starting to see a "dirt mustache"

on her arms when she came out of the water, a dusting of what she assumes was silt.

As she got older, Elizabeth found herself on Melvin Road less and less. She went to college in Chapel Hill and lived as a young adult in Washington, D.C., and other parts of Annapolis. But she kept coming home, often staying for long periods of time. "It was so beautiful there, it was hard to leave." Her mother, Mary Melvin, sold the family home in 2003. Only three Melvin families remain on the road today.

The large acreage and mostly modest homes on Melvin Road have been parceled, sold, torn down and expanded into elegant waterfront properties. Ridgeley Melvin's home on the point was recently sold and demolished, along with most of the farm buildings that made up Elizabeth's fantasy kingdom. In its place stands this century's version of a waterfront showplace. "The homes on the road are much different now," Elizabeth says. "They're enormous and beautiful." But they have changed the character of the road.

"The beauty of the water has attracted people, as it will," she notes. And she acknowledges that change is to be expected. "The only thing that has been distressing is that many of the new owners of the waterfront properties don't seem to take into account the fragile ecosystem of the water. It's a great sorrow to me and to the people in my family."

Elizabeth went on to become an accomplished musician, known in Annapolis as one of the originators of the popular world music group "Mama Jama." She still performs throughout the region, playing marimba in "Jambulay" and "Caje," bands with a decidedly Caribbean flavor. She also teaches world music and drumming in area schools, including music classes at Aleph Bet Jewish Day School, a residency at St. Anne's Day School and an after-school program in Robinwood, all of which, she is quick to note, are right down the street from where she grew up.

Elizabeth Melvin can't help but smile when remembering a childhood spent on the property her grandfather nurtured and enjoyed. For her, it was more than just an address. "When I think back," she says, "I realize how special Melvin Road was. It was paradise."

Janice Gary is an award-winning writer of creative nonfiction. She teaches memoir at Annapolis Senior Center.

These stories are personal recollections and as such, are subject to time, memory and point of view.

Do you have an Annapolis story? Contact jangary22@hotmail.com.