



## HISTORIC BELLE GROVE SQUARE NEIGHBORHOOD

VOLUME 2 ~ ISSUE 8 ~ 2009 AUGUST



### Reflections On My Life In Westminster

Inside this issue, long-time Westminster resident Charles O. Fisher, Sr. takes a look back at how the city has changed over the course of a lifetime well spent.

### Westminster Municipal Band

### Free Concert In The Park

### Historic Belle Grove Square

Sunday, August 23rd at 6:00pm

Bring a lawn chair and don't miss it!

# George Would Be Proud

by Mitchell Edmondson

In 1866 a man named George Matthews purchased a parcel of land just off Main Street with the dream of developing a neighborhood that would be the envy of Westminster. He carefully plotted out all the lots so that everyone would have a front row seat to the beautiful square located in the middle of the neighborhood. Eventually houses would be built around the square and in 1877 the square originally known as Lafayette's Park would be donated to the city with the stipulation that the park was to be used for the enjoyment of all the citizens of Westminster.

I can't help but think that if George was alive today, he would be very proud of his little neighborhood now known as Historic Belle Grove Square. In the last year our neighborhood has had several big accomplishments. Our neighborhood has been honored by the city with an official proclamation, our park has some

new sidewalks and cherry trees, Bond street is getting repaved, and our newsletter is celebrating its one year anniversary.

Even with all these accomplishments, the thing I am most proud of is how nearly fifty of us gathered around our fountain in the park for our first annual picnic. Somehow the rain stopped and we were treated to an evening filled with great food and conversation. As I looked around at all of us I couldn't help but think that other groups like us have gathered in this park. Neighbors throughout the years have surely used the space for similar purposes. We had folks in attendance that ranged in age from three weeks to eighty nine years young. I saw many smiles and heard lots of laughter as we shook hands and introduced ourselves to each other. It was so nice to see folks who casually wave at each other actually learn names and get to know each other better. I met many wonderful neighbors at our picnic and thanks to Marty and his name tags, I now have

names to go with addresses. I have learned that we not only have a new neighbor on Bond Street, we also have a great gardener who has a beautiful backyard. I got to learn more about the very nice woman who plays the harp on Chase street and her daughter who shares the same talent. I met the youngest of our neighbors as she woke from her nap and I learned of another who has dedicated a room in her house to a resident of the past. I also learned that there are others like myself who are also struggling with remodeling. While we were enjoying tasty dishes prepared by our neighbors, laughter rang out as kids ran around and played in our beautiful park. It was truly a special evening that I hope becomes an annual tradition.

Much thanks to all those who helped make our first picnic a success. A special thanks to Wayne for grilling the hamburgers and hot dogs, the board members of Historic Belle Grove Square, and to all those who came and shared an enchanted evening in our park.

# Reflections On My Life In Westminster

by Charles O. Fisher, Sr.

It would be fitting if I could preface my remarks with "four score and seven years ago" but I would have to have done so last year. Four score and eight years ago is when my parents brought me to Westminster from Washington, DC, where I was born. It was in 1921, and I was four years old. Old enough to remember where I had lived in Washington and certainly old enough to remember the trip through the back roads of Maryland in a 1921 Model T to the land of hope and promise for the Charles N. Fisher family. My dad came here to found the first automobile agency in Carroll County.

## Main Street

Main Street was a grand thoroughfare of stone and chip, the road to the west, and lined with brick sidewalks raised about a foot and a half above street level with earthen curbs inlaid with limestone blocks. There were a few automobiles in Westminster when

I arrived, but many horses and wagons and hoses and carriages.

The railroad tracks of the Western Maryland Railroad were a dividing line between east and west Main Street like it is today, except that there were attended railway gates which stopped traffic a number of times a day as both passenger and freight trains clamored up Parr's Ridge.

## Main and Bond

My first home was at Main and Bond Streets, the present site of BB&T. This site was the office, showroom, and garage of the Fisher Motor Company. Later, in 1926, my father razed a boarding house at Main and Anchor Streets and built a new showroom and garage, which until this last year was occupied by Rexall Drug Store. Where you now see a monument to those who served in the several wars located at the junction of West Main Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, was a dry goods store known as Grumbines, and beyond it on the Main Street

side, was the Cassell Home for the Aged, a Methodist institution.

## College Hill

Western Maryland College was founded as a Methodist institution in the nineteenth century and has always exercised a prominent position in the community. In my early days, it was also the site of the Westminster Theological Seminary. My earliest recollection as of Dr. Norman Ward, its president, and Dr. Elderdice, the president of the Seminary, both eminent educators. In latter years, the seminary moved to American University in Washington, and the college became a secular institution.

## At the Movies

In my youngest days, there was only one movie house in Westminster. It was the Star Theater in the block across from my dad's first place of business. In those days, before sound, I can remember seeing Jackie Coogan in "The Kid," and "Peck's Bad Boy,"

Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and all the old cowboy stars. Saturday matinees were a great occasion for us kids. The pianist, who was a necessity with silent movies, would fill the theater with excitement with the chords of the William Tell Overture. The Star Theater was segregated. The "colored," as they were called, then had to sit in the balcony. Tommy Dixon, our State Treasurer's father, was the projectionist, in a small booth above the balcony, which was hot and noisy with its carbon arc lamps. I persuaded him to take me into the projection booth during a showing which was a mesmerizing experience for a kid. We kids could hardly hold ourselves as the conflicts between the cowboys and Indians unfolded. The hero and heroine were always in dire straits until next week's episode.

When sound made its debut in 1928, another theater opened in the section of what is now Johansson's Restaurant. The opening film I recall was "Ramona," featuring that beautiful Mexican actress Delores Del Rio and Raymond Navarro. The theater was appropriately named after this first picture, The Ramona. Following the coming of sound, the Opera House at East Main and Lincoln Road began to show movies on Friday and Saturday nights. Also, there were Saturday night showings in the Westminster Armory. I can still remember vividly seeing "Lilac Time" with Colleen Moore, "The Patent Leather Kid" with Richard Barthemas, and "Wings" with Gary Cooper, all World War I movies.

## Green Street

West Green Street, from Bond Street to New Windsor Road, in my youth, was a cow pasture without houses or paved roads. Westmoreland Street was the same. Most of this land was owned by Charles King, a local horse and cattle dealer whose farm



On a snowy, blustery day in 1926, a group of Westminster residents paused for a photograph on Park Avenue at Belle Grove Square to commemorate the gift of the Ford Motor car to the local postal service, the first rural free delivery in the country, replacing their several horses and bicycles. The child on the right, in profile, is the author, Charles O. Fisher, standing in front of the Stoner house. His father, Charles Nohe Fisher, the local Ford dealer, is shown center - the tallest man in glasses.

dominated this area on both sides of Green Street.

That part of Kings Meadow behind my father's garage and running east toward Bond Street was the site of circuses, medicine shows and year after year, Chataqua. Chataqua was an extremely popular tent show which visited Westminster each summer for a two-week period. Tickets would be sold for the subscription series which consisted of all types of entertainment. I can recall seeing Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy as young entertainers in one of the Chataqua programs. The only part of the King property which is still with us is the Kings Park off Westmoreland Street.

## Court Street

In 1924 my father purchased the property in which I now live opposite the Court House. I remember when we moved in there was a barn behind the house, a chicken house, and corn was planted up to the front sidewalk. The property had been, in the late 90's, an iron foundry manufacturing farm equipment.

The entire county government, with the exception of the Sheriff, was housed in the Court House. This included the Circuit Court, the Judge's chambers, the Orphan's Court, the Clerk of the Court, the Office of the County Commissioners (and they were all in one room), the County Treasurer, the School Superintendent, the School Board and the Roads Department.

The Sheriff lived in what is now Granite House on Court Street and next to the Detention Center, which was the jail. The Sheriff's wife cooked for her family and also for the prisoners, and in many cases, they all ate together. Those of us who played with the Sheriff's children would have free access to the barred cells where we would talk to the prisoners. We would

play ball with those prisoners who were considered "Trustees," on the side lawn. The jail had a barn and a large vegetable garden. Sterling Fowble, one of the Sheriff's sons, later became a baseball and basketball star at Western Maryland College and a renowned coach in Baltimore. We played basketball with peach baskets in the jail barn.

## The "Model T"

As you can see, I was raised in the shadow of my father's business and worked around the garage all through my school days. When Dad came to town, his customers had never owned an automobile and part of the sale of the vehicles was teaching the buyers how to drive.

You have probably seen pictures of Henry Ford's first production line with cars driven off the end. However, that is not the way they came across the country to my father's dealership. They would be shipped by rail. My father and I would go down to the Western Maryland freight yard on Railroad Avenue with a crew of mechanics and open the freight cars which contained the automobiles. The chassis frame would be secured to the freight car's walls. The differential and motor would be against the other wall, the wheels were separate with no tires, and the body would be secured separately to the floor.

The crew would then assemble the Model T using pliers, screwdrivers and wrenches. We would then push the automobile up the cobbled Main Street to Anchor, there being wheels but no tires, and the car would be completely assembled in my father's garage, the engine hooked up and ready to operate.

## Telephone Service

It is difficult today to realize how simple life was in the 30's, 40's, and 50's. Take the telephone. These



Charles Fisher (center) with his family in Westminster, 1929.

were the days before electronic switching when your telephone operator was a real person. The telephone numbers were three-digits. The operator not only knew you personally, but knew most of your business too. However, it also had its pleasant side. I can recall for instance, calling my home from my office following World War II, and after the ring, the operator would come on the phone and say, "Mr. Fisher, your wife has just been talking to Mather's and has gone down to pick up some things." On the other hand, my wife would call me, and not getting an answer, the operator would interfere and tell her that she knew I was there because I was just talking to someone a few minutes ago. It was a nice, cozy relationship.

fully open to the changes that were to come. As I recall, there were just a dozen of us from Westminster who attended the historic march on Washington where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I Have A Dream" speech. When I was still quite young, the Ku Klux Klan was very powerful in Westminster. I can remember how terrified I was when hooded and robed, the Klan marched in impressive numbers past my parents' house on Court Street headed for Reservoir Hill, and that night, burned a cross overlooking the city. I learned that many of Westminster's prominent citizens were in that group. Thankfully, those days are gone forever.

## Lawyers

Living as I did opposite the Court House, I was naturally attracted to the law. I could attend trials and became friendly with the lawyers and the judge. I assisted in maintaining the lawyers' tennis court, which was on the site of what is now the Court House Annex beside my house.

Estate auction sales in those days were principally advertised with big handbills measuring 3 x 5 feet. They were posted on community bulletin boards, in barber shops, garages, and feed stores. It was my job as a kid to distribute these

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posters for the attorneys.

Carroll County always had a reputation for outstanding lawyers statewide, and at an early age, I knew that this was the profession I would follow. The County had only a single Circuit Court Judge. He was also a member of the Court of Appeals of Maryland. Judge Francis Neal Parke held that position in the 20's, 30's, and 40's and is still today considered to have been one of Maryland's preeminent jurists. Following his mandatory retirement at age 70, he continued to practice law until 1955 and was a role model for me.

The lower court at that time was the Trial Magistrate. Although in my career there were several lawyers who held that job, most were non-lawyers and justice was, to say the least, sometimes erratic. During the past thirty years, the Trial Magistrate system was abandoned and replaced by the District Court system which is statewide and is a model for the country.

When I began to practice my profession in 1946, I became the eleventh practicing attorney in Carroll County, all except one residing in Westminster and practicing within blocks of the Court House. When last I counted the lawyers who claim to be members of the Carroll County Bar, they numbered 185. I would estimate that there are in actual practice approximately 125.

## Transportation

Across from my dad's first place of business was an enterprise known as Herr & Babylon which manufactured horse-drawn carriages and wagons. There were at least three blacksmiths in town, and these were essential business in the days of the horse. It was great sport for me to visit the blacksmiths shop in the alley behind my father's business and watch him pull the red hot shoes from the glowing embers. DeWitt

Shunk had a saddle shop on main street where the Locust Mall is now located. I can still remember the delightful odor of leather and oil that permeated the shop. I suppose the coming of the Model T foretold the demise of these once necessary businesses.

Soon after Fisher Motor dealerships sprouted in Westminster. Erskine and Rudy opened a Chevrolet dealership on Green Street. Harbaugh's opened an Oldsmobile dealership in the former livery stable next to the fire department. Soon there was a Chrysler, Hupmobile, Essex, and Durant and Buick Agency in the community. Ford then introduced the Fordson Tractor, which was sold through my dad's dealership and agriculture would never be the same.

## Schools

Westminster had four schools when I was a student. West End Elementary between West Main Street and Pennsylvania Avenue and below Union Street in an alley; Westminster High School at Center and Green, now the Westminster Inn; the Robert Moton School on South Center, segregated; and St. John's Parochial School. There were no busses, no cafeterias. You walked to school and sometimes walked home for lunch.

## The Railroad

One of the outstanding architectural structures was the railway station. It was not only uniquely attractive, it was the commercial heart of the community. Its train service, both passenger and freight, connected us with the east and the west. It brought us mail and newspapers at 6 a.m. each morning and carried our citizens to work in Baltimore each weekday morning at 7 a.m. returning them at 6 p.m.

As a student at St. John's school overlooking the railway station, I well remember the classes stopping each day due to the noise of 35 to 40

loaded coal cars pulled and pushed by two steam locomotives over the ridge on Main Street for the descent to Baltimore.

## Downtown Westminster, Then and Now

When I look at Main Street now commercially quiet, I can't help recall what an exciting, vibrant place it was in the 20's, 30's, and 40's. It was the "big apple" of Carroll County. Friday and Saturday evenings were "go to town nights" for the farming community. Starting at 4 o'clock in the afternoon, they would seek the best parking spaces from Longwell Avenue to John Street and dress for the occasion. Mom and Dad, the youngsters, and teenagers would start their great weekly adventure. Every business on Main Street would be open until 10:30 or 11:00 p.m. There were three department stores, one general store, a shoe store, a men's clothing store, two restaurants, two drug stores, two butcher shops, an ice-cream shop, two pharmacies, three grocery stores, a bakery, a hardware store, a lumber yard, a 5 & 10, a shoe shine parlor, a pool hall, and most important, a movie theater. This was a concentration of business to meet every need. The stores would be packed and the sidewalks crowded shoulder to shoulder. I can see even today Tony Christopher, 220 pounds, the proprietor of the shoe shine emporium with his roasted peanut and popcorn machines on the sidewalk. Across the street was George Richall with his summer week-end homemade candy concession that always drew a crowd. This was small town America at its finest.

As the evening waned, moms and dads would retreat to their cars and watch the crowd go by while awaiting the return of their children as curfew approached.

These have been a few of my reflections on my life in Westminster, where I have lived for more than eighty years. I can truly

say that of all the places I have visited in this country and abroad, historic, serene or spectacular, Westminster is the place I would chose to call home.

*Editor's note: this article is adapted from a speech originally given at Rotary of Bonds Meadow, June 12, 2001.*

*Charles O. Fisher Sr. turned 92 on June 15th of this last year. He was born in Washington, DC in 1917, and moved to Westminster in 1921 when his father was assigned the central Maryland region by Ford Motor Co.*

*Fisher has participated in every Memorial Day parade since the 1920s, with the exception of World War II, when he served as a Captain in the Army from 1939 to 1945. He moved to 51 North Court Street age 7, and has lived there ever since.*

*He joined the law firm of Walsh & Fisher in 1946, which has been at 179 E Main Street for over 100 years. He is the only living Founder of the Carroll Hospital Center, which has named the new medical office building the Charles O. Fisher Medical Center in his honor, to be dedicated on November 19th, 2009.*

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