



The Hills Are Alive

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Pimmit Hills Keeps its
Small Town Flavor

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Small Town Flavor

By MARK STEINBERG

THE CONNECTION

When Jack and Shirley Barnes moved into their Pimmit Hills house in December 1950, it was easy to tell who was inside.

"You could tell who was home by the boots out front," says Jack Barnes, 65, recalling the pioneering days of the post-World War II neighborhood, before their quarter-acre lots had grass and Pimmit Drive was still dirt.

"You never went outside without your boots on," laughs Shirley, remembering the days when mud was the rule, a time before residents of "The Hills" had sidewalks or curbs.

Just a stone's throw from Vienna, across Leesburg Pike from Marshall High School, Pimmit Hills is a neighborhood of street after street of box-like bungalows which has retained much of its small-town flavor despite the pressures of development in the area.

The Barneses raised four children in their three-bedroom house—which still has a single bathroom—joining hundreds of other World War II and Korean War veterans in what became a model of community building and resident involvement.

And they did it for the same reason that many young professionals like Dave and Mary Jo Robertson and Marc Adkins are doing it four decades later. It's affordable.

"There was no place for non-commissioned officers and their families in Washington," says Jack, who was born in the District. "So we took the long trek over Chain Bridge, found the place and bought it."

For natives of then-rural Fairfax County, what was to become a 1,600-unit subdivision with over 6,000 residents was not exactly greeted with enthusiasm. But for Jack—an Army veteran—and Shirley, the neighborhood of street after street of simple, one-story A-frame bungalows was heaven. No down payment—and a monthly payment of \$62.18 on their new home, which cost them \$9,950.

"There was a rumor going



around that the houses would last 10 years," says Shirley. "And we were worried about being able to afford it," says Shirley, remembering the \$32 a month they were paying for an apartment in the city.

On the other side of two-lane Leesburg Pike was the Ahalt farm. Where Peach Tree Apartments now stands was the Hemsley Orchard, which grew peaches and apples. A Nike missile site, since dismantled, sat near Magarity Road.

When the Barneses were adding a basement to their home they discovered that one corner of their lot was a salt lick—part of the prehistory of Pimmit Hills. Farmers, on their way from farms further west to stockyards in Alexandria, stopped their cattle near Pimmit Run, where the cattle licked the salt blocks in the area and drank from the creek, adding some extra weight before moving on to their final destiny.

Cows from nearby farms used to wander through their frontyard. There was no call-waiting. In fact, the only phone service was a pay phone at a workshop on Leesburg Pike. Trash pick-up and the privately-owned sewer service often backed up. They had to drive to Falls Church to get their mail and shop—if they wanted a supermarket.

A Vienna man came by every Tuesday with a pick-up truck full of fresh vegetables. "He was our godsend," says Shirley, adding that he was so successful he started coming on Thursdays, with bread and a cooler filled with eggs, bacon and sausage.



PHOTOS BY STEVE HERPPICH/THE CONNECTION

Top: Jack Barnes in 1950. Shirley Barnes, with boots on, hangs out the wash. Above: Jack and Shirley Barnes in front of their home of 40 years.

Community Building

The tightly-knit community emerged for several reasons. One is that, being a new development, problems cropped up and needed to be solved. "We were all in this together," says Jack, who served

as a block head and a 3-year director on the Pimmit Hills Citizen's Association. "We didn't know anything about calling the county or the government," says Shirley, "so we had to depend on ourselves."

"It was just going to be a block group," Jack says of the initial meeting of what became a driving force in the community.

Say Pimmit, Not Primitive Hills, Please

When Pam Shipman went to Marshall High School, she found out how cruel people could be. "Some of the people there used to call it 'Primitive Hills,'" she says. "I'd say 'you have a garage?' and they would say 'you mean you don't?'"

"We always strove to correct that image," she says. "There never was a 'Primitive Hills.'"

Shirley Barnes agrees, but adds that she understands some people's feelings. "It must have been pretty hard to take. Living out in the country and then all of a sudden there were 1,000 knicky-knacky boxes down the road."

Barnes can quickly point to a house and name the children who grew up there and which child has a PhD or is a doctor.

"There were some rough kids, sure," says Elaine Aamodt, who raised four children in The Hills. "But they got blamed for a lot of trouble that they did not cause. I just don't buy it. Most of 'em were good kids," says the 32-year resident.

Part of what contributed to the image was the presence, during the 1970s, of the Pagans motorcycle gang. Gang members lived in a house on Pimmit Drive, a jump start from Leesburg Pike. Barnes remembers that the biggest problem was the large numbers of motorcycles parked on the street. "Whatever trouble they caused, they did it somewhere else," she remembers. And, according to Barnes, like other interested residents, they came to Citizens Association meetings on a regular basis.

Pagans aside, the box-like homes—combined with struggling middle-class families—might have caused residents from nearby Vienna and McLean form a negative image of Pimmit Hills.

"It was hard for people to understand. If your house didn't look like it cost \$200,000, then people thought you had nothing," says Shipman. "But it's the warmth inside that counts. It's not what you lived in, but what you learned in it that's important."

Getting curbs, gutters and sidewalks put in, a traffic light on Leesburg Pike, or the Tysons-Pimmit Regional Library built were not the only ties that bound residents together.

For the men, work—both in Washington and around the homestead—was one way they got together. Pre-dating the HOV lanes on I-66 by three decades,



Barnes remembers when four or five men would pool resources and buy a car for one purpose—getting to work. Because bus service was not available in the early days, women needed the family car during the day to shop.

Evenings and weekends were spent helping each other build the back porches, basements, garages, second-stories and family and recreation rooms that were to distinguish the look-a-like box houses.

Barnes began building his porch in 1954. "Six neighbors came by and helped me dig the foundation, pour the concrete and build the addition. When a neighbor across the street needed help on a utility room and recreation room, Barnes returned the favor.

Dave Robertson, who grew up in The Hills and has since returned, remembers a neighbor helping his father build a fireplace. He and his father helped the man build an addition to their house. That spirit continues today. In 1987, a plumber, recommended by a long-time resident and babysitter, put in a new hot water heater. "I am a resident here and I'm here to help," the plumber told Robertson.

For the women, the glue that brought them together were their children and the schools. Shirley Barnes helped organize the Lemon Road Elementary PTA and also served as a crossing guard. Children in The Hills initially went to the old Pimmit Hills school, now an adult education center. New schools, Lemon Road, Lewinsville and Westgate also educated the

many children who lived and played together.

Most families back then had four or five kids. Mothers took care of each other's children. A babysitting cooperative formed in the 1960s still operates.

"You knew people by the street you lived on and when your kids went to school," says Lois Schaben, a 33-year resident.

Schaben has been president of the Pimmit Hills Extension Homemakers Club for 25 years. "Nobody else will do it," she laughs—and about 25 of her cohorts agree. Each month they get together and make crafts—placemats, tree ornaments and the like—and catch up on their lives and their children's lives. "I don't know what I'd do without it," says Schaben.

Growing Up

Dave Robertson has fond memories of growing up in Pimmit Hills—memories strong enough that when his parents retired and moved, he bought their home and moved in with wife, Mary Jo.



STEVE HERPPICH/THE CONNECTION

Top: Pimmit Hills residents express their individuality in many ways. Above: Dave Robertson, Pam Shipman, and Don Palmer remembering life growing up. The trio in high school.



They are raising his sons, Philip, 5, and Garrett, 2, in the house he grew up in.

He knew Shirley Barnes as the crossing guard who gave him safe passage to Lemon Road school. He remembers "hordes of children" on the street, a circus that came to Magarity Road each summer and teen club dances at the Pimmit Hills school. "It was our own little world," says Robertson. "What was unique about growing up here is that it was safe. Everybody knew who you were. You could walk home after dark as a kid and not be afraid," said Robertson.

"It was like a Neighborhood Watch without knowing it," he says, adding that he still sees friends of his parents when he does his time on the community's Neighborhood Watch program.

"There were only two roads in and out, so we were all stuck together. Our parents were struggling middle class people trying to improve themselves," he says.

Robertson remembers playing with crayfish in Pimmit Run with other neighborhood children. So does his friend Don Palmer. But Pam Shipman remembers playing with "crawdads" in the same stream. Although they grew up in The Hills, they went to different elementary schools.

Their memories of growing up in Pimmit Hills are remarkably similar although the trio didn't meet until their high school days at Marshall. Shipman grew up on Griffin Road and went to Pimmit Hills school.

Palmer's mother taught Shipman's sister at Pimmit Hills. "Before I knew him, my mother thought his mother was a saint," says Shipman, relating a connec-

tion the three of them feel. "If you didn't know somebody personally, you knew their brother or sister or your brother knew theirs," adds Robertson.

The three, all 34, remember sledding at Lemon Road school. Kids at the different schools met there—as did their parents, to supervise, huddled around a 55-gallon drum with a fire inside to keep warm.

There was the soda foundation at a nearby drugstore at the Pimmit Hills Shopping Center, now Tysons Station, on Leesburg Pike. They remember lugging empty bottles back to High's to get the deposit back. And waiting in line to see TV celebrity Ranger Hal.

There was also the great fox scare, which had parents patrolling along Magarity Road because of rabid foxes reported in the area.

"You could walk through an open door, uninvited, sit down and watch cartoons. It was that kind of place," says Palmer. Laughing in agreement, Shipman adds, "This sounds too much like 'Mayberry RFD.'"

Starter Homes

People still move to Pimmit Hills because it's affordable. Homes that once sold for under \$10,000 now go for \$125,000 or more. Starter homes generations ago are, once again, first homes. But life in the Hills is different now.

Families are smaller, and both parents work. There are more renters—about 20 percent by some es-

The First Traffic Light

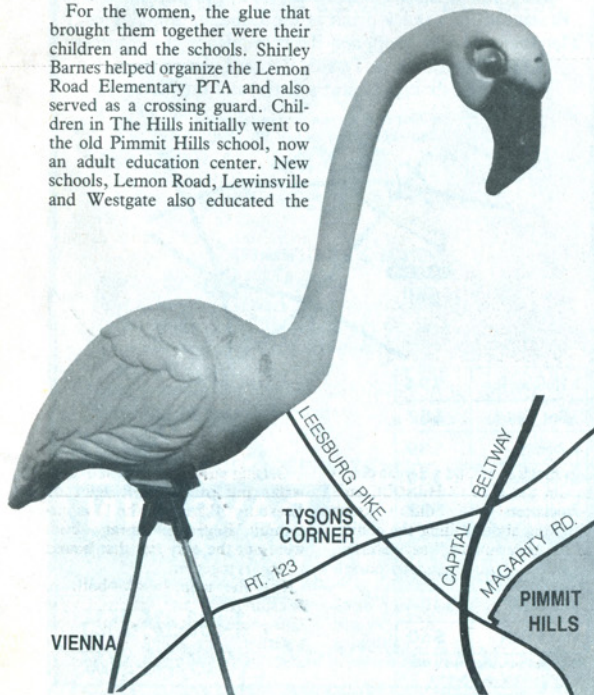
Shirley and Jack Barnes remember how Pimmit Hills got its first traffic light on Leesburg Pike. The neighborhood had been told there needed to be 350 cars per hour for two consecutive hours passing through the intersection before it was determined busy enough for a light.

"There are 1,500 cars in Pimmit Hills," says a Pimmit Hills newsletter from March 1955. "To warrant a light, half of the cars would have to use one entrance over a period of two hours. You figure the probabilities."

And so that's what they did.

Men called their wives from work in the morning after seeing counters setting up their folding chairs for the day. The women then hopped in their cars and drove in and out of the neighborhood—several times each.

Shirley laughs when she recalls the neighborhood action: "They didn't count which cars, just how many went by."



Pimmit Hills

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timates. Although there is still a strong sense of community—especially between people like himself who have moved back to the neighborhood and long-time residents like Jack and Shirley Barnes, there is less involvement.

"It was basically a blue-collar place. Now it's more white collar," says Shipman.

"Used to be a lot of Democrats here," says Shirley Barnes. "Now it's mostly Republican."

Robertson says a walk during the summer is telling. "During the summer, there was so much activity. Kids in the streets and in the neighbors' yard. Mothers talking across the fence and exchanging vegetables from their gardens."

"Now, it's a ghost town during the summer. The kids are in day care and parents work," he says.

"You used to have 10 kids in your yard. Now, there are not as many for my children to play with," he says. "People more often buy a house, fix it up and move. People are just more transient."

"It used to be, when people moved in you just had to know ... Who were they? What are they like? Now, people move more frequently ... and there are more renters, says Robertson."

Marc Adkins rented a house for nine months before buying a house there. "My only alternative was Loudoun County and I hate to drive," he says. Adkins, a recent



Lois Schaben has been Homemakers Club president for 25 years.

president and now a director, was responsible for re-starting the Neighborhood Watch program. Adkins acknowledges the difficulty in getting people involved now. "The association is not as important as it once was. But people just don't have the time anymore," he says.

Still the Same

Two generations ago, Pimmit Hills was on Fairfax's frontier. It's now smack in the middle of one of the most developed portions of the county. Tysons Corner is a stone's

throw away. Some residents walk to the West Falls Church Metro station. You can hear traffic from the Beltway. I-66 is nearby.

But despite the incredible changes, much in Pimmit Hills remains the same. Families are still moving there to raise children. They still turn to the Citizen's Association for help. There are still block parties in the summer.

"I still feel like I can walk down the street and, if something happened, I'd be able to knock on somebody's door and, most likely, people would still know I was one of the Robertson kids and help," says Dave Robertson.

Civic Group Works Hard for the Hills

When you talk to anybody who lives in Pimmit Hills, within the first minute of conversation, the words "Citizen's Association" are inevitably uttered.

Whether residents attend meetings regularly or not, they eagerly await each month's Pimmit Hills Dispatch to keep abreast of what the civic group is doing for them.

The association has been involved over the years in pressing the county to provide basic services like curbs and gutters, streetlights and other necessities the community lacked in the begin-

ning. It even produced one member of the Board of Supervisors, John Shachocis who served from 1975 to 1979.

After a mention of the association, residents usually bring up Carl Zimmer, called "Mr. Pimmit Hills" by some.

Zimmer, who moved to Pimmit Hills in 1961, has been actively involved in all aspects of the association since the early 1960s and was instrumental in bringing the Tysons-Pimmit Regional Library to Pimmit Hills.

The current president, Richard J. Kerch, gets several calls each day from residents, who look to the association to help solve problems in the neighborhood, ranging from litter to noisy neighbors.

Kersch spends many evenings writing letters to residents, usually renters, who don't take care of their property.

"We police ourselves," says Kerch, who calls the association a "true body politic."

"All people have to do is show up," he says.

—MARK STEINBERG



Richard J. Kerch

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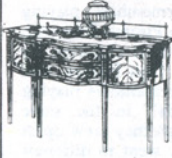
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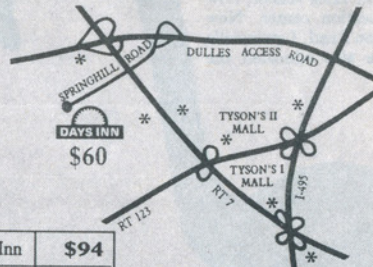
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