

Fond memories of an Oak Ridge childhood



Relma Koffman Sharp

By Relma Koffman Sharp

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ATLANTA —

Our house sat on Chatham Lane near the top of California Avenue. My father, mother, brother and I moved in during the summer of 1947.

It was a cementso "C" house with no sidewalks, a patchy grass yard, a gravel driveway/parking area, a couple of oak trees struggling to survive the recent building boom, a drainage ditch and a back yard that was called a "greenbelt." (How forward looking were the city designers in creating such spaces 50 years before it became a buzzword for present-day builders?) Perhaps the greenbelts were for strategic or security reasons rather than aesthetics, but to my brother and me, it was our own personal play area.

The hill fell steeply away from the house to a small creek at the bottom. An equally steep hill climbed the opposite side and backed onto houses on Cedar Lane. All the children on the lane claimed the woods; and we became adept at avoiding poison ivy, playing Tarzan (swinging on the huge grape vines) and catching turtles, tadpoles and salamanders. When the blackberries came in, we slathered on 6-12, dressed in long sleeves, pants and hats to keep from getting chiggers, and we picked buckets full for cobblers and for "puttin' up."

The greenbelt adjacent to Elm Grove Elementary School was the area where we marched single file across the playground, entered the woods and assumed the "bomb protection" position -- curled in a ball over our knees with our hands locked together over the backs of our heads.

Those bomb drills and sirens were so frightening to me that I still feel uneasy when I hear a high-pitched

wailing sound.

Across our lane, there was a path that led to a cliff area devoid of any vegetation. The houses perched at the very top of California backed on to this desolate area. Erosion had eaten large fissures through the red dirt, and huge rocks were exposed on the face of the cliff. It was the perfect spot to ride our horses (imaginary) down slippery gravel slopes, climb into the eroded gullies to hide, and then pop out to shoot at each other.

We thought we were real cowboys.

I'm sure my mother despaired at getting the red dust out of our hair, skin and clothes. By the time I was in middle school, a wonderful erosion control plant from Japan was planted at the top of the cliff that was creeping relentlessly toward the houses -- kudzu. I came home from college years later and walked to the cliff with my younger brothers; but no cliff remained -- just kudzu.

Oak Ridge was created because of World War II. An almost instant town was built, and the majority of people who came to live there were young families. Because it was new and because the houses were similar, we -- as children -- weren't aware of social distinctions. Your house might be bigger or smaller, but it looked the same as everybody else's. Margaret Mead came to Oak Ridge in the late '60s and gave a wonderful lecture on our Great Social Experiment and the feeling of equality that emerged as a result of our city's unusual circumstances. I'm not sure the founders had that intent, but it happened.

As the population leveled off near 30,000, the town began to make permanent changes. In 1949, the guard gates -- always so intriguing to my brother and me -- came down. We got streets with curbs and a sidewalk in front of our house.

In the 1950s, the houses were made available for sale. People bought them and created facades that made them different from the other houses. It began to look like a regular town, but it seemed more like a big city because it had a symphony, a playhouse, an art guild and an incredible library. These organizations existed, in part, because our citizens were people from all over the world. It wasn't until I left that I realized how the blending of all the different cultures enhanced the quality of life for every person in our town.

How fortunate we were to have grown up and lived in such a creative and diverse environment. The class of 1959 is coming together to celebrate the 50-year graduation anniversary of our school lives in a wonderful and unique town.

Hello again, Oak Ridge.

Relma Koffman Sharp attended Oak Ridge schools from first through 12th grade. She graduated from UT in 1963, worked at the Library of Congress for two years, then worked for the Department of the Army for two years. Her life as an Army wife began in 1968, and her daughter and son were raised at numerous army posts around the United States. Visits to Oak Ridge at Christmas and in the summer provided an essential stability to their roving lives. The Sharp family retired to the Atlanta area in the 1980s, where Relma, her husband, her daughter and her mother reside today.