

Recollections of Life and Catonsville, Maryland from the 1920s - 1940s.

References to CHARLES are to Charles Rickard Conner (1919-2001)

References to CATHERINE are to Catherine (Ament) Conner (1872-1947)

The house on 25 Bloomsbury was on a spot of land about 3 times the area of the house itself. Flowers, lilac bushes, fruit trees and a grape arbor covered the yard. In the summer the air was fragrant and bees were everywhere. His grandmother would even make her own wine.

Chickens were kept in the yard until 1936. Every spring, fertilized eggs were placed under the stove and “peepers” would soon hatch. They grew to adults and provided a daily fresh source of eggs throughout the summer and into the fall. Before it got too cold, the chickens would be eaten and Catherine would have to buy eggs until spring.

The firehouse was directly across the street at 22 Bloomsbury until the mid 1920's. It seemed that the fire wagon/trucks would leave frequently with much commotion. Charles grew up with it and as such he was not bothered by the noise. He has an early memory of horses pulling the fire wagon.

ICE BOX

The house at Bloomsbury had an oak, porcelain lined icebox. A block of ice would be purchased periodically and put in the icebox. This would keep food below room temperature until the ice melted. Charles' father was tired of changing the drip pan, so he drilled a hole in the floor of the kitchen and had a drip tube going to the stationary tub in the basement. To eat a premium item such as ice cream, you would have to buy that from a bakery because the icebox was not cold enough. An electric refrigerator came to Bloomsbury after 1947.

PLUMBING

Around Christmas of 1925 Charles remembers coming down with a terrible flu. He only remembers that he came conscious again around February of the following year. He believes it was this incident that the family decided to install furnace heating. The only source of water was a cold water faucet in the kitchen. To have a hot bath before 1926 one had to heat water from the stove and pour it into a bathtub. At this same time, an indoor bathroom was installed. Until this time, waste was transferred from a night pot to an

outhouse in the northeast corner of the yard. The sewer line ran from the back of the house to school property. The high school adjoining their backyard was higher than their house and on some rainy days the sewer would back up.

RADIOS

In the 1920's they would listen to the radio on crystal sets. Charles strung an antenna from his house the garage at 28 Bloomsbury (The Rapponiers). Shortly afterwards they upgraded to a model Atwater-Kent that had a speaker shaped like a question mark. In 1936 they bought a Stromberg-Carlson for \$49. It was a console and had 8-9 channels for short wave to AM radio. The first TV that Charles saw was when he visited Charlie and Clara Kistner in 1948. They saw the Ed Sullivan show on WMAR TV that came on line in 1947. In 1951 when Andrew and John went into the army during the Korean War, they told Charles to borrow their TV set.

TELEPHONES

Charles always remembers a telephone being in the house. At first they had an upright phone with the hearing piece hanging on the side. It had no dial. To call out you would pick up the earpiece and an operator would be on the line to assist you. The operators for Catonsville occupied the second floor of the Union Trust Company Bank on the northeast corner of Bloomsbury and Old Frederick Road. There was operator assistance of this sort in Catonsville until around 1947, when the Telephone Company Building was built on Bloomsbury Avenue.

Their first phone was on a “party line” that was shared with two other individuals. The individuals that you shared the party line could be anywhere in Catonsville—not necessarily next door. If you wanted to call out, you would pick up the handset and if there was no one talking then an operator could assist you. For someone to call you they would tell the operator your phone number with an alphabetical suffix. Only your phone would ring – not the other phones on your party line. The Conner phone number was “Catonsville 157M”. It cost about \$1.00 per month.

By the time Charles went to High School in 1934, the family switched to a private line. It was about \$2.00 a month and looked like the old phone except it had a dial. The number was “Catonsville 4440”. However, at the time of Charles’ father’s death, Catherine decided to go back to a party line to save

money. In the 1936/1937 Catonsville phone book there is a listing for Jno R. Conner with a number of 157 M.

AUTOS

Charles' father, John, drove Uncle Ben's Model T Ford for a few years after he died in 1925. This was the same auto that John R. Conner had his auto accident in and left him unable to work as a plumber. By 1930, John worked for his brother, Andrew, at United Auto Sales. He would have use of a wide variety of cars. Charles remembers a Studebaker and a Pierce-Arrow that had the headlights coming out of the fender. It seemed that everytime you would take the car out for the weekend, it would get a flat tire. Tires were made of rubber before World War II. To fix the tire you had to replace the inner tube. At the time of his father's death in 1936 they had a Chrysler coupe with a rumble seat in the back. There were no cars at the Bloomsbury house until about 1952. Charles bought a demonstrator model 1950 gray 4 door Plymouth for \$1,250.

ROLMONICA

Charles remembers having a Rolmonica around the time he was 13. It was a combination harmonica and player-piano. You would load it with music paper that had holes cut out and you would blow through a mouthpiece while turning the rolls. He remembers loaning it to a friend for the opportunity to shoot his B-B gun.

SATURDAYS

Catherine would fix Charles a raw ground beef sandwich with a big onion on it. Before Supermarkets came to Catonsville around 1933, Catherine would go to Lexington Market on the trolley and buy food for the entire week. Charles would accompany her so as to help carry food back home.

ODD FELLOW HALL

"Nickelodeon" movies would be shown at the Odd Fellows hall on Ingleside Avenue in Catonsville. In the late 1920's Charles' father, John, would take him there and for the admission of a nickel they would see a silent movie operated by a hand-cranked projector.

NEW YEARS

Catherine had a superstition about New Year's (it might be a "Irish thing" from her second husband). It was good fortune to have a fair-haired man as

your first visitor for the New Year. She would ask her grandson, Charles, to go over to the McDonald's house and be the first male to enter. They would reciprocate and Mr. McDonald would come to their house.

HALLOWEEN

Halloween was not celebrated the way it is today. Adults would go to parties and visit friends. Charles does not remember ever going door-to-door doing "Trick or Treats." On one Halloween, about 1926, Charles' father put on one of his wife's old dresses and floppy hat and took Charles with him as he drove around Catonsville in the Model-T Ford, waving to friends and neighbors as he smoked his cigars.

PROHIBITION AND THE FREE STATE

In the 1920s, Charles remembers going with his grandfather to a local saloon. During nice weather you would enter through double swinging doors. Ed Petzold on Frederick Avenue at Newburg owned it. It was part of a house and Charles remembers that it was later donated to the Lutheran Church next door.

Charles also remembers walking with his father, when he would go to the local tavern for a beer. This was before prohibition was repealed. There was no secret phrase to get in.

The State of Maryland was given the nickname "The Free State" in 1923 by Baltimore Sun editor Hamilton Owens. He used it in a number of editorials supporting the state for not passing enforcement acts. It was up to the Feds to do that.

THE HIPPODROME THEATRE

In the mid 1930's to the mid 1940's Charles and his friend, Abe Scop, would go to the Hippodrome theatre in downtown Baltimore on Saturdays. The Hippodrome could hold about 2,300 people. It had a stage and projection screen. If you got there before 9:00 AM, you could pay 15 cents to get in. After 9:00 you paid 25 cents. The show did not start until 10:00. So, for 15 cents you had to wait but you got to sit in good seats. At 10:00 there was a children's show such as "Uncle Jack's kiddy show." Jack was a fifty-ish guy with a black moustache, a peaked decorated nautical cap and white pants. He was a master of ceremonies for various acts. One of these acts was a tap dancer, Pepper Asner, who later was a comedian in Las Vegas and made a

brief stint in Hollywood movies before disappearing into oblivion. He could tap dance on roller skates. More adults than kids showed up for the "kiddy" shows, probably because they wanted to get good seats for the main movie presentation.

At about 11 A.M. the serials and "First Run" movie would be shown. Around 1 P.M. or 1:30, a stage show comprising 4 or 5 acts would take place. The main "Headliner" might do a number followed by tap dancers, followed by several 10 minute acts such as "Think-A-Drink Hoffman", His gimmick would be to carry huge cocktail shaker and have someone from the audience think of a drink and Hoffman would guess it. A skimpily dressed girl would deliver it to the winner much to the amazement of the audience, who did not know the concept of a "stooge". Another act was the Step Brothers, who were three black tap dancers. Another act was Karl the Magician. He later went on to play a small part in the play South Pacific and the 1960's T.V. show "McHale's Navy".

At the end of the hour a big band of the likes of Glenn Miller or Harry James would play. At this point it is 2:00 P.M. and the show is over. One did not have to leave the theatre. The shows would then repeat. It was possible to have four shows per day.

One of the performing acts at the Hippodrome was a dance couple consisting of Winston's Churchill's daughter, Sarah, and her husband Vic Oliver. They would dance around to music, while smiling at the audience. Charles' friend Abe remembers sitting in the third row and remarking how "beat-up" each of them looked. They had black eyes and bruises on their faces as if they had been fighting the night before.

OTHER THEATRES

The Stanley Theater held over 3000 and was across from greyhound bus terminal. It was later sold to Morris A. Mechanic in the late 1950s. In the 1960s he tore it down. He was concerned that it might eventually take business away from his new Mechanic Theatre.

The Century Theater still did movie and stage shows until the 1950's.

NEW YORK

Around 1943, Baltimore Institute founder, B. Herbert Brown, told Charles to

see a friend of his at WBAL. He received an admission pass for NBC's "Hit Parade" in New York City. It looked more like a greeting card. Charles paid his own way. It was \$6.69 round trip on the B&O Royal Blue. The train stopped in New Jersey and Charles took a ferry past the Statue of Liberty to get to Manhattan. The B&O was "zoned-out" from entering Manhattan by the Pennsylvania and New York Central RR. From South Manhattan there were two bus routes. He chose the one to the Barbazon Hotel near 59th street, where he stayed. He saw Nat King Cole perform in New York and he got his autograph on the admission pass.

Charles remembers seeing Frank Sinatra in New York right after Sinatra left Tommy Dorsey and joined Harry James' Band. His style was unique. Singers would usually sit in chairs facing the audience, while the orchestra played. When it was their cue, they would stand, approach the microphone and sing their part, then sit down. In most cases these performances were broadcast over the radio so a "stage presence" was not necessary. Frank Sinatra, on the other hand, would remain offstage, while the orchestra played. When his cue would approach, he would stroll on to the stage smoking a pipe. He would place the pipe down on the piano just in time for him to sing his part. After that, he would pick up his pipe and stroll back off stage.