

## *Growing Up In Gaithersburg*

By Marien Helz

### **Moving to Gaithersburg**



Although my father worked at the Bureau of Standards long before it was called NIST and long before it moved to Gaithersburg, he moved to town in the early 1940's. Even though he would have a long commute to work for that time, he wanted to live in Gaithersburg because he felt that a very small country town was the best setting in which to raise children. As he was driving his young family into the town, he noticed the sign that proclaimed the population to be 530 and quipped, "Now, the population is 534." None of the town's residents could have imagined how the population would explode in the next four decades, and few who have moved in within the last twenty years can imagine what this farming village was like then.

We moved to a brick house on Maryland Avenue in 1944 on the day that I turned one year old. Maryland Avenue ended where it joined with Russell Avenue, and the *Old Folks' Home*, as we called Asbury Home, was only one building with barns behind it.

Lake Forest Mall was fields and woods. There was one house between us and pastures with horses in them.



One day, my mother glanced out of the window of our house and saw a cow in our front yard. Our house was built on what was then a standard lot and a half, so beside our house was what we called, uncreatively, *the big yard*. By the time I was ten, we played touch football there. Now a house stands on *the big yard* which was built after my father sold the property.

Montgomery Village didn't exist when I was growing up in Gaithersburg; the Holiday Inn and Montgomery Village Avenue

was land that was a small family business called Deppa's Nursery. All the buildings between there and the bridge were houses and fields.

I suspect that the main reason that my father wanted to move to this small town was that it would be easier to keep his children on a short leash—and we were on a very short leash. We were among the last families to get a television set, and one of the rules was that we could only watch it on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. The show that all the children wanted to watch then was *The Howdy-Doody Show*, and it was a serial. That meant that we always had to try to figure out what had happened on the day that we weren't allowed to watch and try to fill in on what was happening as a result of what happened the day before we could watch. Most frustrating.



I recall my father's saying when I was in high school that when you have children, it's important to live among people who have values similar to your own because children are more influenced by their peers than by their parents. While this may be debatable as a psychological or behavioristic truism, there is enough in the annals of early American literature including the writings of Benjamin Franklin and John Woolman to suggest that "falling into bad company" was the danger that young people faced then just as getting into drugs is the greatest danger now—but then getting into drugs generally follows from falling into bad company, so perhaps we could learn more from our forebears than we realize.

In retrospect, I think that my father, who as a physicist studied the laws of the universe and understood its rules, felt that successful child-rearing was a matter of meditating on its laws and learning and applying the rules. He felt that the small farming community that Gaithersburg was at the time was an ideal place for children. Obviously, as a PhD, he had great respect for formal education, but he also had great respect for the knowledge and wisdom that good farmers with no higher education glean from observations of the land and sky and the interactions of animals, and it was with the children of farmers and villagers that we went to school.



After I left for college, large buildings rose from the fields. Ten years later, many of those buildings were torn down to build bigger buildings. Yet as I walk around Gaithersburg and the new communities here, I still feel the presence of the fields and the woods and the sky full of songbirds. I still know the children of farmers and other villagers.