

Arden as I Knew It

By John A. Munroe

Perhaps it is my earliest memory. I was a very small boy in a stroller and my mother was pushing me up Harvey Road toward Arden. She might have been coming from the B&O Railroad stop on Harvey Road, but I think on this occasion she had much farther to walk--from the trolley car line across the Philadelphia Pike.

It was easy to board the trolley. It ran right in front of our house at 3031 Market Street but it ran east of the pike that was an extension of Wilmington's Market Street, not west where Arden lay and where my grandmother Dettling lived every summer.

What brought Grandmother to Arden had nothing to do with the political philosophy, the Single Tax, that had led to Arden's foundation in 1900. Grandmother had a weak heart and it seemed wise for her to be in a one-story bungalow instead of the two-story house she and her four unmarried children--Mena, Katie, Andy, and Pauline--had on 22nd Street in Wilmington.

With the girls all employed and making money the family could afford a summer rental. First, they chose Gordon Heights, connected by trolley to the city. Very soon they began renting in Arden. Probably it appealed to the girls (Andy seemed to have little part in this) as being a bit sophisticated, culturally somewhat advanced, and Katie and Pauline were eager for some enrichment of their lives. Perhaps their German heritage led them to appreciate a community with an outdoor theatre and a guild hall where Shakespeare's plays and musical concerts were frequently offered by talented townspeople.

For Grandmother, Arden's appeal rose from its resemblance to the Germany of her youth, where people planted flowers and perhaps also vegetables around their houses. For the Single Tax theories of Henry George that had led the first Arden settlers to found the town, Grandmother, as far as I know, cared nothing. She liked the garden aspects of Arden. People strolled down lanes or down dirt roads and stopped to chat. The Dettling girls brought friends to Arden, and if the friends were men Grandmother recruited them to help in planting her garden.

For that very reason my father was unenthusiastic. He worked hard as an ironmolder at Lobdell's foundry for five and a half days each week. He would rather rest, read the paper, watch a sandlot baseball game, or go to a movie than be put to work in the garden of his mother-in-law. Her only son, Andy, spent his free time at a clubhouse in Wilmington, the Democratic League, and so Grandmother would claim some work from her son-in-law if he was available.

And so it was that my mother, seeking relief from her housework and the pleasure of joining her sisters and their friends, was alone as she pushed me up Harvey Road toward Grandmother's cottage.

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I can remember three cottages the Dettlings had in Arden. Two of them are vague in my mind, a small one-story structure with two rectangles connected by an open but covered middle, situated alone on a lane that led from Miller Road to the swimming pool on the creek; and a larger, probably two-story house not far from this pool on Miller Road, next to a house of a Philadelphia widow named Weiss and her two daughters, Madeleine and Angela. The girls were of about the age of my aunts and became close friends.

Madeleine was married to Percy Cole, a chemist and the son of Timothy Cole, America's most famous wood carver of his generation. Percy had been educated abroad, where his father had gone on assignment as an illustrator to prepare wood engravings of some of the most cherished paintings in the western world. Percy had a doctorate, I was told, but in chemistry, not medicine, and this was a revelation to me, for Percy was my first example of a Ph.D., or whatever French equivalent he possessed.

The younger Weiss sister, Angela, was a student of languages. When she applied for a position at the Women's College of the University of Delaware, its dean, Winifred Robinson, interviewed her at the Wilmington home of my grandmother, 507 West 22nd Street. Angela was a quiet girl and probably not a great success as a professor. She left Delaware after two or three years and subsequently married a French businessman who was frequently in the United States to promote the sale of French wines.
[Ribaud/Roland?]

I believe that Mrs. Weiss spoke German, which strengthened her tie to my grandmother, so that it outlasted the brief period when they were next-door neighbors in Arden. The connection with the worlds of art and learning, which this family represented, is a sample of the cultural awakening Arden provided for me.

Finding summer residence in Arden gemütlich on several scores, my grandmother soon bought a cottage of her own at the corner of Miller Road and Little Lane, a house that I remember very well for it stayed in the family for perhaps thirty years, long after Grandmother's death.

On the Little Lane, or west side, of the house, were two bedrooms separated by a short hall that led to an entrance on a small porch and a path that was bordered on either side by beds of flowers and led through a hedge to the road. Another similar entrance with a porch was on the north side of the house. Inside was what seemed to me a large living room that featured a padded window seat where a visitor could sleep, as I did at least once when I was in college. On this side, between the cottage and Miller Road, was a grove of trees and large rocks that I liked to climb on and included one apple tree with limbs low enough for me. The hedge beside Miller Road was rather scraggly because of the trees, but it was a busy way for residents walking toward the swimming pool on the west of Arden Green and an open-air theatre on the east.

Next door on Miller Road was a larger house that was bought by the Wilmington chapter of the Business and Professional Women's Club. My two Dettling aunts (Mena had by this time married and moved to California) were members of this club and so the connections with these neighbors were very close. The clubwoman I remember best (probably she spent the most time in Arden) was Jane Scipp, a mannish, friendly woman who, I was told, had driven a taxi during World War I but was now girls gym teacher at the Tower Hill School.

I believe I heard she sometimes smoked a pipe, but I know she met a sad death. It occurred years after the Arden clubhouse had been sold and Miss Scipp spent summers at a small cottage on the Jersey shore. She was drowned there, engulfed by a giant storm wave, when she neglected to flee to safety.

On the other side of Grandmother's cottage was a wide field that Aunt Pauline bought, and beyond it was Woolery's store, kept by a man who excited my interest after I was told he had been a professional boxer.

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Intriguing footpaths ran through Arden. One started between Woolery's store and Aunt Pauline's lot and led toward the Arden Green. Another began on Harvey Road as one walked up from the railroad station, and it too led to the Green.

Baseball teams played on the Green. I remember being at one game between teams of women. This would have been when I was very young, maybe six or seven, because one team was the Topkis Bloomer Girls. This team was probably made up of employees of Topkis's Market Street store (predecessor of the Wilmington Dry Goods), for two of my aunts worked there though neither one was on the team.

Another aunt, Pauline, then in her twenties, was the only athlete among Grandmother's children. She played golf at the Du Pont Country Club (she worked for Du Pont) and swam in the Arden pool. The three unmarried aunts attracted some single men on weekends when Grandmother could put them to work in her flower garden and vegetable patch.

Arden itself attracted many interesting characters. Dude Johnson, for instance, was a Wilmington carpenter who dressed in the latest fashion. Estelle [?] Hillernon [?] was a resident violinist who was a friend of my aunts. Burgess Meredith, the actor, spent time in Arden, though I did not know it then.

But the great figure in Arden, its founder and the inspirer of much of its cultural life, was Frank Stephens. His house, with a carved quotation from Shakespeare on the wooden frame of its facade, faced the Arden Green and was beside an open-air Woodland Theatre. Stephens [Stevens?] was a confirmed Single Taxer, whose other enthusiasms included crafts (he had been a metal worker), world peace, Esperanto (an international language), poetry, and the theatre (especially Shakespeare and Gilbert and Sullivan). The

first Shakespeare I saw was *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the Woodland Theatre. Another outdoor theatre adjoined the Gild Hall, on the other side of Harvey Road, which bisected Arden. This theatre had an open stage with a balcony that seemed made for *Romeo and Juliet*. The audience sat on the grassy turf that formed a small amphitheater. My memories of productions there are confined to *Twelfth Night*. I never saw *Romeo and Juliet* or any of the tragedies there.

Vesper services were held inside the Gild Hall on Sunday nights. These services would have had little attraction for me, though I heard that my cousin Rita Krapf, a voice teacher, frequently sang, and I know that Frank Stephens dedicated a poem to her.

Rita and Dan Krapf (it was Dan who was my mother's second cousin) rented Aunt Pauline's property annually, starting in about 1929, several years after Grandmother's death. They moved a little house--I want to call it a shack--that had been on it but was never used to a new position, near the footpath and at the edge of a grove of trees.

I never had been in this structure before the Krapfs started using it, but I believe they added a semi-enclosed porch that stretched across two existing rooms, a kitchen and a bedroom. Of their two sons, Earl and Bob, the older one, Earl, was in my class in high school and college. His family spent a large part of the summer in Arden, and their presence furnished a new attraction for my parents and me. Dan and Rita were very hospitable, and those they entertained included many cousins of my mother, like Mary and Bernard Kleitz, who was a first cousin of my mother's father, and Bernard's sister Katharine Krapf (Dan's mother).

Several members of this family, especially Mary Kleitz, liked to play pinochle, and Earl and I were frequently allowed to enter as partners in this four-handed game. Pinochle was popular in German-American circles, but my father also played, as did Dan Krapf. In time Earl and I switched to bridge, as our favorite card game, but no other members of the family took it up except Aunt Pauline (and possibly Aunt Mame, my mother's aunt).