

Wood Acres Stories!

A new and occasional feature from Matthew Maury of Stuart and Maury Realtors

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In November, Charlie and Dorothy piled into the car and went looking for houses. They were told by a co-worker to check out a new home development in Maryland. They had been looking for houses for a few months and had checked out a few homes in Chevy Chase and also behind BCC High School. When they arrived at the model house, a sturdy colonial on Massachusetts Ave., an eager builder representative named Alan Sherwin greeted them. Soon after they met the builder. His name was Albert Walker and the year was 1939.

Charlie and Dorothy Kocher are the longest living residents in the Wood Acres community. Of the hundreds of homes built by Walker before World War II, the Kochers are the only residents still living in their Walker built Wood Acres home. They have lived on Wynnwood Rd. for 63 years.

“The entire community was woods and the streets were not in yet, “ said Charlie when I sat down to interview the couple in their home in June of this year. “We looked at the model, which was an all-stone front (now 6105 Mass. Ave.). Alan took us around the corner to look at an available lot at the top of the hill on Wynnwood Rd.” Dorothy chimed in to say, “The Petersons had already put down a deposit on the best lot at the very top of the hill next door!”

Charlie was very impressed with the quality of construction and the apparent integrity of the builder. “Mr. Walker was a very affable man. He was very honest and helpful. We met him early on a Saturday morning and went over details about the houses and the neighborhood. He was probably in his early to mid ‘40’s at this time.”

Charlie remembers that the workmen once forgot to install a window and Walker came along and made them tear out the brickwork and start over. The Kochers were so enamored with Wood Acres they actually considered buying a second home for investment. Mr. Walker turned down that idea immediately, explaining that the homes were only for sale to “owner occupants.”

The Kochers produced a treasured house file and showed me the hand written “estimated cost” sheet written up by their salesman, Mr. Sherwin. The sheet reveals a base sales price of \$7950.00. The list of extras and their costs seems astounding by today’s standards.

1) Venetian blinds:	\$51.50
2) Rear basement entrance staircase & door	\$75.00
3) Front door brass sill	\$10.00
4) Towel bars	\$7.00
5) Chair rail in Dining room	\$10.00
6) Hood on back door	\$15.00
7) Hose bib	\$5.00
8) “Silent” electrical switches	\$14.00

The entire price with extras came to \$8035.00. Total closing costs were calculated to be about \$100.00, including \$5.00 for an appraisal of the property and \$10.00 for a survey. There was no central air conditioning in those days but the home did come with a GE gas furnace. Charlie remembers that Walker was also very interested in correcting defects in the workmanship of his homes.

“The builder sent us a letter right when we moved in, inviting us to contact them during the first year if any defects turned up,” said Charlie. “I made a list after being in the home just about a year and Mr. Walker sent by workmen who took care of most of the issues.”

I asked the Kochers a question I had long wondered about. Why are there switches on the wall to the basement that say “Winter” and “Summer”? Charlie laughed and explained that the switch would turn on the furnace fan in the summer to cycle cooler air from the basement into the rest of the home. Now you know!

“For the most part, our neighbors were also young couples just starting out,” said Dorothy. “The Sweeneys were around the corner on Harwick and they were a little older than the rest of us, as most of us were in our twenties. The birth rate in Wood Acres in those early years was quite high and pretty soon there were lots of kids everywhere.”

Between November 1939 and May 1940, the Kochers home was built. Each weekend, they came out to check on the progress of the construction. “The first homes built were on upper Mass. Ave. and the South side of the block on Wynnwood Rd. and the West side of the block on Harwick. Across the street from us was nothing but woods, and then construction,” said Charlie. “Mr. Walker tried to keep every big tree he possibly could. When we moved in, we had five big oaks. Today, there is one left.”

I asked the Kochers what it was like to drive out from the City of Washington to the Wood Acres area in 1939. They remember that Mass. Ave. was a two-lane road and that the trolley cars formerly ran along it, veering left at Walhonding Rd. right before the lot that would become the Glen Echo Fire Dept. The trolley went down Walhonding Rd. through sleepy, rugged and individualistic Glen Echo Heights. It terminated at MacArthur and Walhonding at the famous Sycamore Store.

“That big open piece of land on MacArthur near the Sycamore Store was a turn-around for the trolley,” said Charlie. “There was no bus service past 49th St. near Westmoreland Circle,” Charlie remembers. “Mr. Walker eventually paid for and ran a bus service himself for several years, transporting residents and their help in a small green bus from the Circle to Wood Acres.” There was no cost for Wood Acres residents.

The Kochers also fondly remember the Glen Echo Amusement Park and how close to Wood Acres it actually was. “We could hear the screams of the roller coaster and the music of the calliope on many warm summer evenings,” said Dorothy. “It wasn’t an unpleasant sound at all. It was exciting.”

The Kochers told me that mail service originally came from the post office on Wisconsin Ave. in Friendship Heights near what is now the Fannie Mae building. Their mailing address was “Washington D.C.” There was trash service right away. The closest elementary school was Westbrook, down Mass. Ave. The Middle School was Leland, as best as the Kochers can remember and the high school was BCC. Charlie recalls that many kids still went to high school in the District. The Kochers were unclear as to whether Westbrook might have housed grades all the way up to 8th grade in 1940.

“It was difficult to get to the center of Bethesda in those days. The only East-West street was Goldsboro Rd.,” said Charlie. “There was no Little Falls Pkwy, no Westbard Ave. Sangamore Rd. was nothing more than a dirt path through woods. A few brave souls would try to drive their car down there, but it was an adventure.” Charlie remembers that when war broke out, the government put up a few “temporary” buildings on MacArthur to house the Defense Mapping branch of the service. Those buildings, one of which is named the “Ruth Building,” still stand today. Charlie also vividly recalls hearing the sounds of gunshots on a Saturday morning when visiting the construction site in early 1940. “There were hunters shooting at rabbits,” said Charlie, “but they didn’t get ‘em all. We still had plenty of rabbits when we moved in!”

Grocery shopping took place mostly at the A&P at Spring Valley in DC. The Kochers also remember that the Sycamore Store would deliver the groceries to your home. The Apex Theater at Spring Valley was the closest movie theater. The theater was located on the ground that now houses the AU Law School. They also fondly recall that Wagshal's Deli was there, even all the way back in the early '40's!

When the War started in late 1941, construction ground to a halt in Wood Acres. Charlie remembers that Mr. Walker finished up building the homes he had in process. No homes were left unfinished. The upper section of the community along Wynnwood, Gloster, Upper Harwick and Mass. Ave. around Ardmore Ct. were completed. Pieces of Welborn and lower Harwick and Cobalt were completed as well.

"Mr. Walker turned his attention to the Hillandale apartments during the War," said Charlie. Today, those apartments have become the popular and sought after Kenwood Forest townhouses, renovated into their current appearance in 1981. Walker had also been busy building many homes in Westhaven and Westmoreland Hills farther up Mass. Ave. Later Walker would also build a slightly less expensive version of Wood Acres just off River Rd, called Green Acres.

Charlie joined the Glen Echo Fire Department during the war and spent 26 years in service to the community fighting fires. "The first fire house was located in the Town of Glen Echo on University Ave.," said Charlie. "The building was built with funds from the Works Progress Administration (WPA), created by Franklin Roosevelt during the Depression. The fire department had come into possession of the land at Mass. Ave. and Sangamore, but a fire house was not built there until 1954."

One of Charlie's more interesting recollections involves the original furnaces installed in Wood Acres. "There were a number of homeowners experiencing small electrical fires in their furnaces, continued Charlie. "The contact points on the motor would get too much oil on them during servicing and cause the motor to overheat. I wrote a letter to all of Wood Acres trying to educate them on how to avoid the problem. The company that had installed the furnaces didn't much like my letter, but I think it helped a lot of people."

I asked Charlie and Dorothy about community events in the early days. "The neighborhood really wasn't that organized yet," said Dorothy, "there was no school and there was no park. Mr. Walker ran the covenant enforcement and the community association took years to get up and running."

It's a little known fact that the Wood Acres Park is officially named "Grady S. Putnam Field." I asked the Kochers if they knew Mr. Putnam. "Oh sure, he lived up on Harwick Rd. He was the manager of the S&W cafeteria at 14th and New York Ave," said Dorothy, whose memory for the details of events that took place more than six decades ago seems remarkable.

Mr. Putnam led a dedicated group of community activists and they eventually succeeded in getting a small portion of the Park cleared and play equipment installed and the Park opened, to great fanfare, in 1947. Tennis courts, basketball courts and the ball fields came a little later. "We used to cut Christmas trees in the area that now is the Park. It was a hilly, densely wooded area," recalls Dorothy.

"The Park area was nothing but a forest and on more than a few occasions, Charlie had to fight brush fires back in there," said Dorothy. Charlie remembers a raging brush fire behind what is now the home of John and Cabell Schoenfeld on Gloster at Welborn. In those days, it was common to burn leaves and the Kochers recall that there was a law that you could not burn until after 4:00 pm."

Wood Acres Elementary was built in 1952, right next to the Park. Springfield was in large part still a forest too, although part of it used to be the "back nine" at Kenwood Country Club. "It was wonderful for our children to be able to walk to the new school," said Dorothy. The Kocher's oldest son David, attended Wood Acres Elementary in the very first year it opened. Robbie, the youngest of three Kocher children, was eventually part of one of the very first graduating classes at

he new Walt Whitman High School in 1964. Robbie was one of the “older” kids in Wood Acres that we used to look up to when I was growing up in Wood Acres from 1956 to 1970.

The Glen Echo Fire Department moved to their current location on Sangamore and Mass. Ave. in 1954. “I helped clear that lot and I can tell you there was plenty of junk and old tires burned on that lot,” said Charlie. “We cut down the trees and burned them.” The new location for the Fire Department turned out to be fortuitous just a few years later. Many long time Wood Acres residents will remember the famous fire of 1960. I was an eight-year old boy living on Newburn Dr. and I can vividly recall the smell of smoke in the air for weeks and the conversation on the tip of every parents tongue.

The fire started when five elevated (now illegal) cylindrical gas tanks on steel frames caught fire near the creek along what is now Little Falls Pkwy near the intersection of River Rd. “That industrial area behind the Shell station along Butler Rd. is where it started,” said Charlie. Mr. Kocher was on the first piece of equipment to arrive at the fire. The gasoline eventually flowed out of the tanks and into the creek, igniting the creek and working its way towards Mass. Ave.

“We set up a protective perimeter,” remembers Charlie, “and we called DC to ask them to protect the bridge over the creek at Mass. Ave. There was help on the way from nearly every fire department in Montgomery County.” The fire spread all the way along the creek to MacArthur Boulevard, dying off in part from a lack of oxygen in the tunnel near MacArthur.

A critical moment in the fighting of the fire occurred when Bobby Hook put on an asbestos fire-fighting suit. He went into the fire, and shut down the gas valve that was feeding the fire. It was a courageous act on his part,” said Charlie.

In the aftermath of that fire, the stone train overpass was rebuilt. Anticipating the possible widening of Mass Ave. one day, an extra wide bridge was built just south of the overpass, which can still be seen today.

Charlie and Dorothy have seen thousands of Wood Acres residents come and go during their six plus decades in Wood Acres. They have seen their address change from the original 6015 Wynnwood Rd. to their current 6104 address. They have seen the Park flourish, grow, expand and be renovated. They have seen a brand new elementary school thrive, expand, decline and be demolished and replaced by a gleaming new school. They have seen the Whitman cluster schools ascend to a Nationally respected level. They have watched as hundreds of homeowners added on large two-story additions. They have watched huge trees come and go. They have seen Mass. Ave. widen to four lanes between Westmoreland Circle and Sangamore, the construction of Little Falls Pkwy and the Westbard Shopping Center. Through all these changes, they say that they never once considered moving from their beloved Wood Acres.

“We have never regretted living here, even for one day,” said Charlie. “Wood Acres is a great place to live.”

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P.S. This Wood Acres story, past newsletters, virtual tours of many recent sales in your community, a 2002 year end recap of sales activity in Wood Acres and a history of Wood Acres sales going back to 1980, can be accessed at my web site www.matthewmaury.com. Click on Wood Acres.

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