

Growing up in Clifton

Based on the reminiscences of Norma Stafford by Carol Tobe, Director, Callahan Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind

In her oral history, Norma Stafford paints vivid pictures of growing up in Clifton. In the early 1900s, Norma's family moved to a house on State Street—a house that looked so elegant to her mother and grandmother that the story of their first impression became a family legend. There were cherubs playing harps and frolicking among the clouds on the blue living room ceiling. There were grapes twining on an arbor in the dining room. Years later, Norma would confirm her grandmother's stories when, as she was removing layers of wallpaper, she discovered the legendary cherubs on the ceiling.

State Street, when Norma grew up, did not go down to Brownsboro Road. The brick street stopped at the top of the hill where there was a cliff and a big rock, the perfect place for neighborhood children to play. The holes and crevices of the big rock were wonderful hiding places for their treasures and the “jewels” they collected. Across the street was a steep dirt bank where the children spent many summer days making miniature villages with roads for their toy trucks and cars.

Before the additions were made to the Printing House, there were picturesque grounds behind it. Norma has vivid memories of how beautiful it was to play there in the spring when the white dogwoods were in bloom and the ground was covered with violets. In the summer they took their buckets and picked daises along Pipe Line Lane (now Zorn Ave.). Every Memorial Day, the family loaded the children's wagon with buckets of daises and flowers from their yard to decorate the family cemetery plot, pulling the wagon from their home on State Street to the back gate of Cave Hill Cemetery. Highlighting Norma's autumn memories, is the sweet flavor of beechnuts from the ancient beech tree across the street on the Printing House grounds.

Norma and her friends did not miss a movie at the Hill Top Theatre. Their ritual was to stop at Young's Drug Store before they went across the street to the theatre. Norma's uncle, Howard Young, always in his white druggist's coat, presided over the candy counter. He filled a white paper sack for each child from the array of candies on the shelves so they would not go hungry during the movie. If they were still hungry after the show, the children could buy wonderful homemade ice cream at Spooner's Tavern where Mrs. Spooner served ice cream on one side and Mr. Spooner poured beer on the other.

The manager of the Hill Top Theatre, Herb Nadel, was a top-notch “promoter”—before they had a word for it. He always had a gimmick to attract an audience. There were talent shows and raffles on baskets of groceries. Norma thinks that Major Bowles Original Amateur Hour was once one of the special attractions.

What better place for a growing child than Clifton in those years—with the natural, park-like grounds of the School for the Blind and the Printing House—right down the street from a movie theatre and neighborhood shops. Thanks to Norma Stafford's memories, we have a glimpse of a child's adventures in early 20th century Clifton.