

ABSTRACT: Dianne Schmidt is a resident of Cottage City. She recounts here fond memories of the town when she was younger, from playing on the street as kids to the organization of team sports. She has seen change, but reflects on the positive aspects of change. Dianne feels that history is important to revitalizing the community.

Dianne Schmidt on childhood in Cottage City: “There were a lot of children on our block. And we would all come out after dark and play hide-and-seek, cause you could hide in the dark. We never went off the block. Our parents were usually on the front porch. At that time, everybody was outside. It was before air-conditioning. So, you always stayed outside. So, we would all play hide-and-seek until the Mr. Softy truck came by, the ice cream truck.”



Ft. Lincoln Cemetery, Colmar Manor



Dueling Grounds, Colmar Manor



Oldest House in Cottage City – Bunker Hill Road



Cottage City

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“Bladensburg Dueling Grounds.” Folder. Prince George’s County Historical Society

Location: Prince George’s County Historical Society

Port Towns Interview Project
Suzanne Stasiulatis interviewing Dianne Schmidt
Interview at 3806 36th Ave., Cottage City (Brentwood), MD 20722-1812
December 12, 2007

Suzanne: Ok. Can you state your name, age, and where you're from?

Dianne Schmidt: Ok. Dianne Schmidt. I am 58, and I'm from Cottage City.

Suzanne: And how long have you been a resident of Cottage City?

Dianne Schmidt: I have been a resident at the house since 1994, but my parents bought their house on 40th Ave. when I was born in 1949. So, I was there...oh lordy...I was out of high school and that was '67. So, probably the '70s I left for a little bit, moved into another town, but then I came back. I've been back and forth. In between '70 and '94, I've was back and forth several times.

Suzanne: Where did you go to?

Dianne Schmidt: In '73, I went to Riverdale, stayed there for about 4 years, then moved back into town for a couple more years, and was in town until '89, moved to Laurel for, I think 2 years, and then we bought this house.

Suzanne: What is your occupation or previous occupation?

Dianne Schmidt: A LAN-system specialist. Computers.

Suzanne: What is your favorite childhood story?

Dianne Schmidt: I've got a couple. One of them is playing hide-and-seek at night on our block. There were a lot of children on our block. And we would all come out after dark and play hide-and-seek, cause you could hide in the dark. We never went off the block. Our parents were usually on the front porch. At that time, everybody was outside. It was before air-conditioning. So, you always stayed outside. So, we would all play hide-and-seek until the Mr. Softy truck came by, the ice cream truck. When he came by, that was a signal, whoever was getting ice cream got ice cream and then everybody went home. And that was always fun. We always had a lot of fun.

Another one is, during the winter, Parkwood St. on the other side of 38th, that hill, they would shut that down and we'd sleigh ride down that hill. We'd have a big bonfire at the top of the hill and we would just sleigh ride until late at night. I remember I used to be able to stay out way past when the street lights came on. That was the other thing. When the street lights came on, you had to go home. Now, they don't shut down any streets. A lot of things we used to be able to do that you can't do now.

Suzanne: Safety?

Dianne Schmidt: Yeah. Well, that's why they stopped doing the sleigh riding, because there were cars. The town wouldn't take responsibility if we got hurt. For several years, we did do it.

Suzanne: If you were writing a history about Cottage City, what would you include?

Dianne Schmidt: What would I include? I'm not sure what I would include. I mean I have a lot of stories about growing up. The elementary school across the street from us...I didn't go there, but it provided us with some place to play, because that was the only play area in the town. We didn't have any ball fields or anything back then. The town has grown a lot. I'm not quite sure. There are a lot of historical things I've been told, but I don't know.

Suzanne: What were your experiences as a child or young adult in Cottage City? How has Cottage City changed?

Dianne Schmidt: Ok. Like I was just saying, we didn't have any place to play. We now have a ball field. We now have a park with a pavilion. We have tennis courts. We have a tot lot on 40th Place. So, it grew in a way to provide more things for kids. We played on the streets when we were little, because there weren't any parks near. So, in the beginning...not in the beginning, they've been doing it for years now...providing more things for children. I know when I was growing up, we never had ball teams in this town. We always had to go across to Colmar Manor. I always played ball for Colmar Manor. Then, Cottage City started having a rec. council. So, we had our own ball teams and stuff. Well, then that kind of fizzled out. And now, their trying to bring that back again. They're doing more for kids that I see.

Suzanne: So, you were born in Cottage City and then you left and came back a couple times. Why did you move back?

Dianne Schmidt: Well, I liked the area. I knew several people that also grew up in the town. There are still people in here that grew up as children in the town and now have houses in the town. So, it was a lot of friends. It was just very familiar. Like I say, I liked the area. It was small. St. James was my home church. So, no matter where I was, even when I was in Laurel, I always came back to St. James. Riverdale...I always came back. So, this is kind of like home. It was always home.

Suzanne: What was high school like for you? Did you go to high school around here? And what were your experiences?

Dianne Schmidt: Ok. I went to Elizabeth Seton in Bladensburg. And I really enjoyed it. I was kind of one of those weirdoes who liked school. I was active in different activities the school had, dances. I was in a couple of clubs. It was a very positive influence on me. And again, a lot of kids in town, we all went there.

Suzanne: What clubs were you in?

Dianne Schmidt: I was in the athletic club, booster club. Those are the only ones I really remember. Maybe, a home ec. I'm not sure about that one. I can't remember.

Suzanne: What community activities do you participate in now?

Dianne Schmidt: I'm with the volunteer fire department. I've been a member there since 1989. I was with the rec. council. I was on the town commission for several years. I helped put on the town Halloween party. Which, that's also a big event in this town. Growing up that was a big event.

Suzanne: Tell me about the town Halloween party.

Dianne Schmidt: Well, I think I told you before, as far as I can remember they haven't trick-or-treated in this town since the '40s. And I can only imagine that the town decided it was a better thing to have a party than to have kids visiting the town. But anyway, that's the way they did it. There used to be different clubs in the town. They had a mother's club. Then, they had the fire department. Then, they had a church club. A civic association, maybe. And they all put together this Halloween party. They went door to door and they just asked you to donate part of what you would spend...if we were having trick or treating, take part of what you would spend on candy and donate it. They pooled the money and then they went out and bought candy. And we had a big parade around town. Of course the fire trucks led it. We'd parade around town in our costumes. And then you'd end of the fire house and you'd get your bag of goodies. And they had different prizes for different categories, different ages and stuff. That was for the kids.

After that, then they had the teen dance. They no longer have the teen dance. The teen dance was just so much fun. I remember being in the firehouse, and they had so many teens in that firehouse, the floor was actually rocking. They would have a band and you would just party there. There were so many fun things. But anyway, I helped with that. I coached t-ball and softball for our teams. I'm trying to think what else. I volunteer to do stuff in town. I deliver fliers. I am on the board of elections for the town. Usually, if they need somebody to do something, I'll just volunteer to do it.

Suzanne: Did the town take over a lot of these activities...for what reason did the town start doing all these things, doing the teen dance and the Halloween parade.

Dianne Schmidt: I'm not exactly sure why they did it, because it was done in the '40s. The decision was made way back then. I don't know if there are any records, town meetings back then. I don't know. But they just kept it up. I know with newer, younger people moving into town, there has been talk that they would like to see trick-or-treating again. And I don't know if that will ever go through, because it has been a part of this town for so long.

Suzanne: What is your favorite spot in the community?

Dianne Schmidt: Favorite spot. I walk the town almost every day. I didn't get out today. I haven't walked since it snowed. But I walk every day. Let me see, favorite part. I'm not sure.

Suzanne: You can say the road you walk.

Dianne Schmidt: I mean I just like walking through the town. Maybe the park. It's so wide open. You can sit down there and reflect. But I enjoy walking. I get kind of caught up in my own little world when I'm walking, taking it all in.

Suzanne: What is your favorite landmark or historic site?

Dianne Schmidt: Ok. We used to have...there was a house on 42nd. That had...they were wheels, stone wheels. I was told they were from a mill. They were the actual wheels that they used to grind. And that would be one of the things I most remember. I think one of the wheels is up at the town hall. I think they removed it and they put it down, I think it's where the flags are. It's just a circular thing of stones. That and there's a monument also that they moved that used to sit on the corner of 38th and Parkwood. It's like a cemetery stone. It was a war memorial, I believe. And it just sat up at the corner, a little fenced in area on the corner. And they decided to move it to the town hall, where it would be better taken care of, I guess. That would be another one. I guess that's about it. I've heard stories about some of the houses in town. On Bunker Hill, there's supposedly one of the oldest houses in Cottage City. I've been told it still has wooden nails in it. One of our town residents, she has since passed, was born in that house. And on 38th, I believe, there are the apartment buildings. There was something about Underground Railroad connected with those. I'm not sure, but there are a lot of historical things.

Suzanne: How do you feel about the term Port Towns? It is an effective tool in drawing history to the community?

Dianne Schmidt: At first, I don't think I was real enthused about it. But yeah, this whole area is very much in history. Of course, the port there at Bladensburg where the ships came up, and they marched right down Bladensburg Road to D.C. We have the Dueling Grounds in Colmar Manor. So, there's a lot of historical stuff around. So, yeah, I think it's a good thing.

Suzanne: How have gender roles changed over the years?

Dianne Schmidt: Well, you see more and more females doing things. I know, if you look back on some of our first commissions, it was all male. And now we have evolved to...let's see now we have two females, Aileen and Phyllis. Yeah, yeah, we have two. So, females are more of a common thing now, whereas way back when they weren't.

Suzanne: How have conceptions of race changed?

Dianne Schmidt: Well, I know there has been a big influx of, I don't know if their Mexican or Spanish. Someone said El Salvador. And I think they said the White population is like 10% now in Cottage City. That's what somebody had told me that the White population is way down. And I don't see a problem with that as long as they control, try to control this multi-families moving in one household. I don't know if you're familiar with that, where they get 2 or 3 families moving into one house. You know, I don't see the big problem as long as they try to control that. I don't agree with having all these people in one house. These are small houses, and it wasn't meant to be, you know, multi-families. But other than that, I don't see the big deal about it.

Dianne gets a phone call

Suzanne: So, we were talking about race.

Dianne Schmidt: Ok. Yeah, there has been a big influx in the Spanish, but I don't see where it has hurt the town any. On this block, when we moved in in '94, my two daughters and I think the corner house had a daughter. Those were the only kids on the block. Now, there are tons of kids. So, the town is rejuvenating. A lot more kids coming in, which I think is a good thing. So, it's a lot of young families coming back in. New blood. New blood.

Suzanne: So, that leads into my next question about how the children fit into the story of Cottage City. Do the children who grow up in Cottage City stay in the community?

Dianne Schmidt: I know in my generation there are several of us that grew up in this town that now live in the town. And I know our kids that have moved into the town also.

Suzanne: How did you get around when you were younger?

Dianne Schmidt: I remember when I was like in grade school, we walked. And there was a railroad crossing on 40th Ave., where the railroad tracks go through. And there used to be a crossing right there. There was an actual platform, and you could walk across the tracks. I think the house that lived next door to the railroad, that was the guy that kind of watched out, I don't know what you would call him, but he watched out for the crossing and stuff. And I can remember walking over to Mt. Rainer, because my grandparents lived in Mt. Rainer. But we did a lot of walking. As I got older, we rode bikes. We rode bikes everywhere. We could take the bikes along the dike and go to the different towns. We did that. But as teens, if we weren't riding our bikes, we were doing a lot of walking.

Suzanne: When did you get your first car?

Dianne Schmidt: In '67. I had a '67 Mustang. Yeah. But not till after I was working for about....I'd been working...I graduated in '67 and I got it at the end of '67. Not till I had a job.

Suzanne: What are the major political issues in the past or today?

Dianne Schmidt: In the town? Let me see. One of the big fights was trying to keep the fire department in town. Course, we lost that. We had been fighting that since the '70s maybe, when they first talked about consolidating fire houses. I remember going to rallies in Annapolis with my dad opposing consolidation, closing fire houses. And I guess it was about 4 or 5 years ago it came to fruition that we're all in one big fire house on Rhode Island Ave.

Suzanne: And what communities does the fire house serve?

Dianne Schmidt: Mt. Rainer, Brentwood, North Brentwood, Cottage City, and Colmar Manor. It's really 3 fire houses in 1. They took Mt. Rainer, Brentwood and Cottage City and put them in one big house. That was a big issue. I'm trying to think of other issues. I mean, there have been things....we're always trying to go after Park and Planning for more programs for the town. And let me see what else....course going after grants. That's a political thing. Or police department. That's about all I can think about right now.

Suzanne: What economic changes have occurred in the past 10 to 20 years?

Dianne Schmidt: Economic. We have more businesses along the Bladensburg Road corridor. That sort of helped out. Don't know other than that.

Suzanne: Do you feel history can contribute to revitalization?

Dianne Schmidt: Yes. Yes.

Suzanne: How?

Dianne Schmidt: Well, just bringing it to kids nowadays. Letting them know that there is history here. I just find it very interesting that these things happened here. You read about the American Revolution in the book. But to know they were right down the street. You just don't...I remember taking my children when they were little over to Ft. Lincoln Cemetery. We would take a hike. It is a hike when you're walking. And we'd walk over there for a field trip, just us, and let them play on the cannon and stuff. And I'm going over, "This is really a fort. When you say Ft. Lincoln, it's just not a cemetery. It was an actual a fort. This was the last stand between here and Washington when they raided Washington." And they just say, "Are you kidding me? This is really it." And I'd say, "Yes." I can remember playing in the Dueling Grounds and finding cannon balls. I wish I'd have kept them. But, you know, we really found them along the creek beds. And so, try to show that to the kids. It's just not a story. This is real. It really happened, and it happened close. It's kind of exciting.

Suzanne: 10 years ago the concept of the Port Towns was created. Has anything changed since the creation of the Port Towns concept?

Dianne Schmidt: I think there is more communication between the towns now. Before it was Cottage City doing our thing. Colmar Manor doing their thing. We'd get grants for Cottage City. Everybody was taking care of their own town. Well, now it's almost like a co-op. I don't know if that's what their intent is. I think it is, but. Now we talk to one another and say, "Hey. We did this. This is how you can do this." Or "This is how we can work together to better Bladensburg Road to make it more appealing." Instead of us fighting our side and them fighting their side, let's do it together. Yeah, I think it is a good thing, as long as we don't lose our identities. We still want to remain Cottage City.

Suzanne: I've been hearing a lot about that: Identity.

Dianne Schmidt: Yeah, we want to maintain that. We are Cottage City, but we're a part of Port Towns. I've heard stories where they want to make us one great big town and name it Port Town. And I don't think I'm for that, but I'm not against us all working together. That could only be a plus. So, you know, they're all talking about, "We all use the same trash company. Maybe we could get a better deal. Then, you use A, we use B. Let's use one of those and maybe we could get a discounted rate." Maybe, we can work something out, where it works out better for all of us. So, in that respect, I think it's a good thing.

Suzanne: Do you know about the Port Towns Community Development Corporation, the Anacostia Trails Heritage Area, the Prince George's County Historical Society, or any other historical organizations?

Dianne Schmidt: I know a little bit about ATHA. I know a little bit about that, not a whole lot. What was the first one?

Suzanne: Port Towns CDC.

Dianne Schmidt: I've heard positive things and then I hear negative things, especially at election time. I really don't know a lot about them.

Suzanne: What are your satisfactions or dissatisfactions with the community?

Dianne Schmidt: Well, I like the influx of new people, all the younger people coming in. I get frustrated with the way the town looks. I told you I walk everyday. I take a trash bag with me and I pick up trash off the street every day. And I know, for the most part, it's nobody's fault, because we have all the fast food places across the street and they just come and dump it. But I don't think people tend to take care of their property like when I was a kid. Our parents were always out there taking care of the front of their house. People don't do that as much. And I hear other people talking about it too, "Why can't they just get out and sweep their curb or cut their grass or whatever." And that is a little frustrating to me, but, you know, I don't have any control over that. I just take care of mine. That has changed. Whereas everybody used to get and take care of...you used to see people out all the time taking care of their yards. And I don't know if that's because when I was growing up there were a lot of single income families. And now, you have

both parents working. So, I know there's not a lot of time. But it's still frustrating to me. So, that has changed a little bit. Other than that, this town...we're central. I can walk to the church. I can walk to the post office. We've got a shopping center down here, groceries, the bank, CVS. You've got everything within walking distance. I think that's a real plus for the town. So, and that's another thing I really like. I can walk anywhere I want to go. If it snows, I can walk to church.

Suzanne: Ok. Last question. How is Cottage City unique? And how is it unique among the Port Towns?

Dianne Schmidt: I think it's unique, because it's a small town. A lot of people know one another. When I'm walking down this town, today's society you have a fear and you have to be aware of where you're walking, because it's just the way society is now. But I can walk down any street in this town and I know somebody or several people on every block. So, I don't have a problem walking. I'm not sure if I could say that if I went to another town. I know if I was in Laurel still, I wouldn't walk. The bigger towns, there's just too much of it. It's just a small little group of people. And I know our commission is trying very hard to get everybody out to meet one another, so we do know our neighbors. I mean, growing up here, I know a lot of people who have bought houses and moved back into town. So, I know a lot of people. But all the new people, they don't know one another. I try to introduce myself, when I see new people in town. Let them know about the trash days. We have free leaf bags. When the leaves fall, you can get free leaf bags. So, I know their working hard so we can get to know our neighbors again. That's the way it used to be, when I was grew up in this town. Everybody knew everybody. I think that's what kind of makes us unique, that there is that opportunity to get to know your neighbors. And the fact that, we are central and we have all the things within walking distance. Bladensburg is even within walking distance. I've walked to Bladensburg several times. We can go across that bridge to that nice water park area. Yeah, this is nicer.