

Rabbit Row (A Great Neighborhood)

By: John W. Garrison, Jr.

Built in the 1870's, our house was a white four-room frame sitting next to the Wabash Railroad at 1132 Reservoir Street, and my home for nineteen years. In the old days, Reservoir Street and the surrounding area was known to many as Rabbit Row. I would guess that an abundance of kids living along Reservoir Street's six block length at or before the turn of the century was the reason for the name. In this writing, the boundaries of the neighborhood may have been stretched a bit, but with so many of our relatives living so near, I had to include them.

My parents, John Wesley and Mary Mae Marie (Goodman) Garrison bought the house in 1922 and moved in with their first three children, Edythe Lorraine, William Edward and Lois Bernice. In 1932, after helping to dig out for a basement under the Third Presbyterian Church, John decided to do the same thing to his house. The basement was all dug out with shovels and the dirt hauled up a ramp with a wheelbarrow. A three-foot ledge was left to support the old foundation and the walls and floor were all covered with hand mixed concrete. Marie canned fruits and vegetables and the cement ledge around the perimeter of the basement was great for storing a lot of full mason jars.

The snow was falling hard during a cold winter storm on February 4, 1933. John had taken Marie to the hospital the night before and had driven home, but by morning the streets were impassable, so he left his Model T Ford parked, with Edythe in charge of her siblings, and walked to St. John's Hospital so he could be there when I was born.

Some of my earliest memories were of the record hot summers of 1935 and 1936. Our new basement was a refuge from the unbearable heat. We would eat our meals in the basement and I would play there all day. Late in the evening, we would go up and sleep on the front porch. Another memory that stuck with me as a two year old was of Mom taking me to Chicago on the train to visit Edythe, who had recently married. I can still picture my sister's efficiency apartment with a Murphy bed behind a door on one wall.

Reservoir Park was just one block North of my house. It was a popular place for picnics, fishing, boating and ice-skating. The reservoir, built in 1870, was about 75 feet high and used to store Springfield's emergency water supply. Concrete steps led all the way to the top and in the winter, the steep slope was crowded with sleds and toboggans. Much of the other activities in the park took place around the several ponds, which had been excavated to form the embankment containing the reservoir. To the east of Reservoir Park was a baseball stadium where the Springfield Browns of the Three I League played. After the new Lake Springfield began to fill, the reservoir was no longer needed and Lanphier High School was built in its place. My brother, Bill, was in the first class to graduate from Lanphier in 1937.

About two blocks north of Lanphier High School, the circus was held when it came to town. The circus train would pull up along the south side of the grounds, stopping at Eleventh Street, and all of the people, animals, and tents would be unloaded. There would usually be a parade through town to show off the elephants and caged animals before the circus began. I

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remember once helping to erect the tents, earning a ticket to attend the circus. The children of Melvin and Thelma West were especially lucky because they lived on Black Avenue, just across Eleventh Street from the circus grounds. Another very popular place was Memorial Swimming Pool, which was built in 1928. It was located one block west from Lanphier High School at the Northeast corner of Ninth and Converse Streets.

Bunn School was one block away and south of my house. My sister Edythe, who is 17 years older than me remembers four teachers that she had at Bunn School that were still there to teach me when I arrived, and three remained for years after I graduated. They were the misses Ethel Brown, Kate Smith, Rhoda Mutter and Laura Kiser. Miss Kiser died in March of 1942. My mother was active in PTA at Bunn and at Lanphier while we were in school and she also held many of the elective offices, including president.

Almost everything we needed in our neighborhood was within walking distance but we did have some things delivered. We would put a 15-inch square sign in our window with a large number printed at the top of each side of the sign. The number that was upright (25, 50, 75 or 100) indicated in pounds the size of the block of ice we needed for our icebox. The neighborhood kids would gather at the ice truck and would be given the small chunks of ice that were left after the blocks were separated with an ice pick. We also had cream top milk in quart bottles delivered as well as our supply of coal for heating in the winter.

Six blocks south at Fourteenth and Reynolds Streets was Rechner's Bakery. They sold the best butter cakes in the world for only a dime. Noll's Grocery was at Thirteenth and Reservoir Streets and was a good place to get a hand dipped ice cream cone. Steinkueler's Grocery was at Eleventh and Reservoir and that is where I bought my comic books. At one time comic books contained 64 pages for a dime, but later there were only 32 pages in them, and they still cost a dime. Harry Hoehn's Barber Shop was on Reservoir Street- behind Steinkueler's. At Ninth and Reservoir you could catch a streetcar to ride downtown. I believe that the streetcars gave way to the busses by 1937.

Between Eighth and Ninth Streets on the north side of North Grand Avenue, were Coutrakon's Confectionery, (famous for vanilla and chocolate cokes) the Pantheon Theater where Saturday matinees were only a nickel for kids, Watts Brothers Drug Store, Kroger's Market and Wonder Freeze (later called Velvet Freeze) Ice Cream Parlor. This one block strip was known to us kids as "The Avenue" and was the center of much of the after school activities for Lanphier High, Cathedral High and Ursaline Academy. A branch of Lincoln Library was in the next block to the West. There were two service stations at Ninth and North Grand, Standard Oil and Huck Roseberry's Sinclair.

Three churches served most of our ethnically mixed neighborhood. They were: Third Presbyterian, Concordia Lutheran and St. Joseph Catholic. There was also a Lutheran Seminary at Twelfth and Enos Streets. Our family and many of our relatives and neighbors were members of Third Presbyterian Church. The Reverend Herman Martin Hildebrandt was pastor for about 56 years.

Reverend Hildebrandt married my parents on August 18, 1914, just one month after coming to Springfield from the Presbyterian Church in Petersburg, Illinois. The marriage took place in the Manse, in front of the fireplace where many more weddings were to be celebrated.

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The fireplace in the Manse was also the background when my sister Bernice was married on August 2, 1942 to Arthur Joseph Stofko. Art was in the Army Air Corps, Stationed at the State Fairgrounds. He soon became a bomber pilot and flew more than thirty missions over Germany. The manse is long gone, but the old fireplace is still around, being on display in Fellowship Hall at the church.

My Uncle Jesse Goodman and Aunt Bernice (Bruckman) Goodman lived at 2208 South 11th Street with their daughter Betty Jane. They also belonged to Third Pres. and they would take turns with my parents hosting family dinners after church on Sunday afternoons. This custom started before I was born and continued until sometime after I was married. I remember once as a three year old, while the women were preparing a late afternoon Sunday Dinner, we men in the family walked from 11th and Cornell Streets all the way to South Grand Avenue to see the movie "Heidi", with Shirley Temple, which was playing at the South Town Theatre. I was bored and didn't like the movie very much.

Many of our neighbors worked at the Illinois Watch Factory, Sangamo Electric, C&IM Railroad, Pillsbury Mills, International Shoe Factory and Panther Creek Mine #5 called "New North". My Dad worked at the New North mine and was a motorman (sort of like an engineer on an underground electric railroad). The main shaft was located at Ridgely and Eleventh Street and Dad worked there for years until the mine closed in 1953.

The men were lowered into the mine in a cage (elevator) attached to a cable. The operator of the cage would work the controls from a place with a good view of the top of the shaft, but since he could not see the cage as it approached the bottom, there were tags attached to the cable that he could see clearly and when a certain tag was lined up with a predetermined mark, he would know that the cage was near the bottom and would stop it just in time for the miners to step off.

The empty cars pulled by the motor were used to transport the men from the bottom of the shaft to the face of coal at whatever place they were to work on that particular day. This could be as far away as the Sangamon River. During the day, after all the cars were filled with coal, Dad would take them back to the main shaft and they would be hoisted to the tippel where they were emptied, one car at a time.

Before the Springfield mines became electrified in the 1930's, mules were used to haul the coal cars and at that time Dad drove a team of mules. He was kicked in the head more than once by mules and lost a couple of toes and part of a finger while working around the coal cars. When mules were taken below to work in the mines, they usually stayed here for life, being stabled and fed in a mined out room. My Dad's brother, Henry Alva Garrison was killed in May 1953 while working in another mine in Springfield. A large piece of coal fell on him from the roof of the mine.

Dad's father and grandfather along with others in the Garrison family came to Illinois from Cape May County, New Jersey after the Civil War. They worked on farms near Ashland and Pleasant Plains, Illinois, where several other farming families from Cape May County had

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relocated, some as early as 1830. Many of them attended Bethel Methodist Church northwest of Pleasant Plains. Peter Cartwright was the preacher for several decades. Cartwright was also Abraham Lincoln's opponent three times in races for the Illinois Legislature.

In 1880 the Garrison men began to work as coal miners in Riverton, Illinois. By 1890, when my father was born, the Garrisons were living in Starne, a small company town on the northeast side of Springfield. The men worked at the coal mine, which was just across the tracks. From 1880 until 1937 all of the adult males in our family had worked in coal mines, as did many of the Conlees and the Reddings. My father began in the mines before finishing grade school and my brother Bill started work at New North after graduating from high school. Bill narrowly escaped death when he fell under a runaway coal car that passed completely over him, injuring his back, leg and arm. After recuperating, he decided to never go back to the mine.

Harold Wilcox, the son of Bion and Louisa (Conlee) Wilcox, and his wife lived in a brick home on the west side of North Main Street in Athens. Harold owned a small coal mine and was my dad's cousin. My mom and dad took me to their house while I was still in grade school. I remember their beautiful new Spinnet piano and how well Mrs. Wilcox played it. She also let me play a piece or two that I knew.

A few years later, in 1959, I took on the job of surveying the workings of the coal mine owned by Harold Wilcox and his partner John Verna. The mine was located one half mile south of the entrance to New Salem Park. Once a year, my friend Ralph Williams and I would meet Harold and he would take us down in the mine, about 250 feet below the surface. We would measure and locate, on that single day, all of the entrees and rooms that they had mined out for the entire year. I would then draw the new workings on the official map and submit certified copies for recording and for mine rescue purposes.

The entrees were usually shored up with heavy timbers, but the rooms, which branched off from the entrees and were about 20 feet wide, and 100 or more feet long, were left un-timbered and the remaining top coal and the shale above it would be left to eventually cave in. Once, a part of the roof fell in a room that we had just finished measuring. I was not at all disappointed after four years when Harold retired and the mine closed.

While in high school, I worked as an usher at the Pantheon Theater. In 1948, Josh McGee, an usher working with me, died suddenly of polio. A short time later, Mr. Grey, the owner of the Pantheon lost his thirty-year-old son to the same disease. In April of the previous year, my future wife, Marnie, was having a birthday party and the boy that she especially liked, became sick and had to go home. He died of polio within a few days. Those were scary times. People were dying all over the city. No one knew what caused the disease or how it was spread, other than by personal contact. The wading pools in all of the city parks were drained, and later removed. Memorial Pool was also closed that summer, and no one under sixteen years of age was admitted to the State Fair.

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Mary (Redding) Lavin was living four houses West of our house at 1118 Reservoir Street at the time that my parents bought our house. My aunt and uncle, Mildred (Sparks) and Henry Garrison bought Mary Lavin's house sometime after they were married in 1925 and lived there with their son Henry Jr. Aunt Mildred's sister Eileen later lived behind their house in the garage that my brother built as a shop project in his senior year at high school. Aunt Mildred's other sister, Eleanor, lived on the north side of Reservoir at Thirteenth Street with her husband Lindell Smith and their son Robert. In the late 1940's, my Aunt Agnes (Garrison) Henderson and her husband, Joe lived with their youngest son, Donald Robert "Bob", in a second story apartment on the northwest corner of Eighth Street and North Grand Avenue. Bob was a couple of years younger than I, but we were very close growing up.

An old maid named Nanny Boulware lived next door to Uncle Henry, at 1116 Reservoir. Her father had manufactured storage batteries in the 1880s. Nanny was deaf but could speak very well. She taught me her own two-handed sign language. She could easily read my lips, but we would often talk with our hands. When about 10 or 11 years old, I did some chores for Nanny. She had an outhouse at the rear of her lot, but at night she would use the commode that she kept in her bedroom. It was my job to carry the bucket from the commode to the outhouse and empty it. I also carried coal in from her coal shed, which was next to the outhouse. Nanny cooked on a kerosene stove and could make great pancakes. She would make delicious syrup by dissolving sugar in water and boiling it until it was just the right consistency. Later, as a boy scout, I attempted to get a merit badge for learning the sign language, but the scoutmaster wouldn't accept the alphabet that I had learned from Nanny.

Hoboes riding the rails would often stop at our house asking for food. Mom almost always gave them something. In 1943, my brother Bill joined the Navy. After his training he served in the South Pacific. One of his friends was bitten by a coral snake on the beach and began to run. After about thirty seconds, he fell to the ground, dead. While Bill was overseas, his wife Doris "Dody" (Galligan) Garrison and their two children, Bill and Judy lived with us. Dody told everyone that she felt safe, as long as I was there to protect her. After all, I was 12 years old and quite brave. One night I heard something moving outside my bedroom window. My dad and I, along with Mr. Yonk who lived next door went out to investigate. They were about to give up when I let out a scream. I had stepped on a drunk or a hobo lying on the side of an ash pile near the railroad tracks. Mr. Yonk sent the man off with a warning not to come back again. I don't think Dody ever felt quite as safe with me on duty as she had before.

Dody and the kids moved out when Bill was discharged from the Navy, but I missed my chance to get a bed of my own. About that same time, Art was discharged from the Air Force and he and Bernice moved in with us, bringing their daughters: Kathy, born in Springfield Massachusetts and Karen, born in Springfield, Illinois.

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Many more of our relatives lived nearby. My great aunt, Evaline (Conlee) Redding lived with her son, Bob Redding on Bengel Avenue, just north of North Grand Avenue. Bob Redding was in the army during World War I. Once while visiting, Bob thrilled me by showing me his old uniform, complete with boots, leggings, steel helmet and a gas mask. I had seen the movie "Sergeant York" with Gary Cooper, and in the movie, he wore a uniform just like Bob's.

During WWII, my dad rented the back yard of two lots that were next door to Aunt "Evvie" to grow a garden. I spent many great hours working in that garden with Dad. Mom would can the tomatoes and most of the other vegetables. The potatoes that we grew there were put in a large wooden bin in our basement and they would last the family all winter long. The bin served as a clubhouse for my friends and me during the few months when the potatoes were gone.

After Grandpa Jerry Garrison II died in 1927, my grandmother, Emma (Conlee) Garrison, lived with her daughter and grandson, my Aunt Maude Nesbitt and Delbert Nesbitt, in several places around town, but her last home was the one I remember the best. It was in a second floor apartment on Sixth Street across Reynolds Street from St. Peter and Paul's Catholic Church. It was in this apartment that I was introduced to one of my father's favorite cousins, Bion Conlee, who was living at that time, in Macoupin County. Grandma Garrison died in October 1944, one month before her sister Evaline.

In 1925, Aunt Bessie (Miller) Guinan-Hendrix lived with her family two houses west of the southeast corner of Thirteenth and North Grand Avenue. Aunt Fern (Miller) and Uncle Perry Redding lived in the 1200 block of Fifteenth Street. Because I was related by blood to each of them, Uncle Perry liked to tell me that he was my "double barreled cousin uncle". I also believe that it was because of this unusual double relationship and while attending family gatherings that my mother and father first met.

Aunt Emma (Miller) Zellers lived at 1026 North Eighth Street across from Enos Park and her daughter Imogene and grandson Jack, lived a couple of blocks south. Aunt Millie (Miller) lived for a time in the Northmere Apartments at the corner of Ninth and Converse Streets and my great grandfather; Adelbert Cason Miller lived at 1028 North Fifth Street. Aunt Emma's son Max Zellers lived on the west side of Fifth Street about a block North of Grandpa Miller.

When my sister, Edythe was a teen, she would go to dances at the Orpheum Ballroom. My dad would ask Delbert Guinan and Perry Redding, both a few years older than Edythe, to see that other boys at the dances would treat her right, and they did. Edythe and her friend Louise Mac Murray would often walk to town down Fifth Street passing by Grandpa Miller's house. Sometimes, when Grandpa would see her, he would give her money for the dance. She would always thank him and give him a hug and kiss in return.

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When Grandpa Miller was 73 years old, a young man with his right hand shoved in his pocket as if holding a revolver, stopped him near the railroad tracks at Fifth and Rafter Streets and said "hands up". Instead of following orders, Grandpa struck the robber on the jaw with his fist and sent him sprawling. The embarrassed hoodlum then ran away. A few months later, in February 1933, Grandpa slipped and fell on an icy sidewalk and broke his hip. He died of complications in April.

While not pertaining to the neighborhood in discussion, I would like to relate some other stories about the Miller family:

Margaret Hohimer, a great granddaughter of Emma Zellers, told me that Aunt Virginia "Essie", who was not married, had become pregnant. Grandpa Miller had sent her away and she lived with one of her sisters until the baby was born. My mother was not one to gossip, especially about family matters, so I had never heard about this story from her, but while reviewing the 1910 Census for Springfield, Illinois, I found that Essie was listed as a 20-year-old sister living at Lewis and Washington Streets in the household of my grandparents, William and Maude Goodman, along with my mother, my mother's sister, Mabel and her two brothers, Jesse and Hermit. This seems to support the story told by Margaret. I don't know what happened to the child if the story was true, but most likely, it would have been given up for adoption.

Aunt Virginia later became an opera singer using the name Virginia Pemberton (her grandmother's maiden name). Virginia, a soprano, often sang the role Violetta in the opera La Traviata as she traveled with touring companies. She often sent money home to Grandpa Miller, but I've been told that she never returned to visit. My mother occasionally corresponded with Aunt Virginia who said that she was a close friend and neighbor of actress Marion Lome. Marion played the part of " Aunt Clara" in the television series "Bewitched" until she died in 1968.

Aunt Jessica Miller married Harry Kingdom Goff on July 20, 1899. He was the only offspring of the late-in-life marriage of Eli Murray Goff and his second wife, Elizabeth. Eli was a brother of Caroline Goff, who was Jessica's great grandmother. Jessie and Harry had one daughter, Louise. Jessie died suddenly in December 1909 and Louise went to live in Farmer City with the Pantiers, Aunt Kate (Miller), Uncle Jim and their daughter Pearl who was a little younger than Louise. Uncle Jim was a well known and highly respected automobile mechanic who went to Detroit to learn the trade. After Uncle Jim died, I believe in 1926, Aunt Kate moved to Springfield and ran the Stockyard Restaurant north of Sangamon Avenue. She also bought a large house on at 216 South Walnut Street, where she took in boarders.

Harry "Pop" Goff began work in the livery stables as a stable boy, then as a driver. He later was a dispatcher for the horse drawn taxis. He started with Yellow Cab Company when motorized taxis first were introduced to Springfield before World War 1. He continued as night dispatcher for the Red Top Co. when Yellow Cab removed its franchise from Springfield. He was living in the Argus Hotel at 214 South Fourth Street where he hung himself with a leather belt on January 5, 1938. His friends said that he had been feeling ill for about a month.

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Louise married Robert Nevitt and they had two children, Garland and Weyland. Robert Nevitt died and Louise had remarried, changing her name to Louise Essay and was living in Los Angeles, California when her father died.

Pearl married Paul Bercott who had been a coal miner. They bought a farm near Waggoner, Illinois and invited us there a few times to hunt rabbits. After Aunt Kate died in 1950, Pearl and Paul moved to the house on Walnut Street. Paul died in 1972 and Pearl continued to live there and rent rooms until she passed away in 1996.

When I was a freshman at Lanphier High School, my dad had a 16-year-old Model A Ford. When I would go places with Mom and Dad, I was embarrassed to be seen in such an old car and would slide down in the seat each time we passed anyone that I knew. A year or two later when I was 15 and passed the drivers test, I proudly drove the Model A to school and was the envy of my peers.

I joined the National Guard Band in 1949 and graduated from high school in 1950. Marnie and I met on New Years Eve that year and became engaged the following September. We were married on February 14, 1952, one day before our band went on active duty. The 44th Division of the Illinois National Guard boarded a troop train headed for California on February 18, 1952. This was the end of my nineteen years of living on Reservoir Street, but the memories have lasted a lifetime.