

HILLANDALE

A Personal History of Place

by Robert Davis

Written in 2006 and revised in 2008

Home

I live on an oasis, in the Chemical Capital of the World, where banks and Fortune 500 companies have their corporate headquarters and land is at a premium. I watch the sun rise over a shopping center and set over a woods. On my walks I linger over the views, recalling when the dairymen sold their land and moved to Florida, or into the townhouses where their silos once stood.

I live on Hillandale, sixty-acre farm with houses, two barns, and a spring-fed pond where I skinny-dip in the summer.

My parents bought Hillandale in 1940, but didn't move here until '42, when my older brother Tommy was born. This was a horse farm then, with off-season racers from Delaware Park in one barn and foxhunters' thoroughbreds in the other. My parents, who weren't farmers or horse lovers, rented out the barns and stables for twenty years, until they got tired of the traffic on our lane.

I live in the "tenant house," a two-story cedar shake young families rented when my father was alive. I grew up in the main house across the field where my Pennsylvania Dutch mother lives. She turned ninety last month, surviving my father by twenty-five years.

Now the haylofts are filled with stuff he bought at the auctions. The horses are gone and in their place are Christmas trees and a pond where a pair of Canada geese have

wintered the last five years. Before the pond was dug, my mother and I picked watercress by the springhouse and made peanut butter and watercress sandwiches. They were a treat until I started school and classmates accused me of eating grass.

To the west is a county park, eight-hundred acres of woods, through which foxhunters cut a bridle trail before my parents bought the farm. Walkers, runners and mountain bikers use the trail today.

Hundred-foot sycamores border our lane, and Polly Drummond Hill Road borders Hillandale to the east where suburbia has replaced the rabbit farms. The highway department removed the tree at the end of our lane when they rerouted the road thirty years ago. Before then, it ran over Drummond Hill, three-hundred-seventy feet above sea level, supposedly the second-highest point in Delaware, at the southeast tip of the Pennsylvania fall line. The house on the hill was once an inn, owned and operated by Polly Drummond, member of the Underground Railroad. Formerly known as Meeting House Hill, this was also the first site of White Clay Creek Presbyterian Church in 1721. Two years later, the elders suspended a pastor for profaning the Sabbath by washing himself in Middle Run Creek below the hill's west slope.

When I was a boy my mother, Verna Davis, made Tommy and me picnic lunches she put in paper bags she called *toots*. We carried them tied to sticks like hobo pokes, down the bridle trail to the creek. She brought up the rear with her basket of towels, old quilt, and our balsa wood ships. We ate under the gray birch, stripped to our swimsuits, and launched our clippers. Each summer from 1950 to '55, Tommy carved his initials and the year on the birch with his Bowie Knife. They're easy to read today.

Charley Wooleyhan was the horse trainer. He lived in the two-room tack house between the barns, and had a kerosene stove and squeaky bed beside the big room of saddles and bridles. He shuffled around on stiff bowlegs, drank rum from the half-pint he kept in his right boot, and rubbed his horse-kicked flesh with bottled liniment he kept in his left. I believe he used the contents of each bottle for both purposes and never minded the mix-up. We called him Charley Horse.

He cracked his ivory-handled whip as he raced the horses, one at a time, on a lead line around the courtyard. When he curried them in the owner barn, he had me stand by their bellies. "They can't kick sidewise, son," he said, as he sat on an upturned bucket and groomed their tails.

Once, when Charley Horse snared his dandy brush in a filly's tail, she kicked him in the chest, knocking him on his back. He staggered to his feet, pulled a bottle from his boot, reminding me of a gunslinger's draw in shaky slow motion, and spent a good ten minutes cussing the horse and easing his pain.