

# This Place Matters

**Growing Up At the Haldeman Mansion from 1934 To 1950**

**By Loman McCurdy**

## **Part I - 2009 Third Issue**

Whenever I am in the Bainbridge area, I always make it a point to drive on the Locust Grove Road past the old mansion and reminisce. The other day I happened to think that 75 years had passed since we moved there in late spring or early summer of 1934. I asked myself, "What has or has not changed?" It saddens me to realize that very little is the same as 1934. Yes, the stone posts and driveway up the hill are much the same. The carriage house (We called it the garage.) looks the same. The old oak tree is still there, as is the ginkgo tree in the lower yard. Also the large holly tree on the lower is still there. Other than this small list, I see nothing that has not changed to the building or the lawn and gardens.

There is constant change everywhere. Probably, there was a daily change which we did not realize. For this article, I will think of the changes as events that happened and not be too critical. I might mention that for the sixteen years, from 1934 to 1950, this mansion was always called the "Hoffman Mansion" for the more recent Hoffman Era. Regardless of what it is called, to the McCurdy Family, it was always referred to as "The Mansion".

I would like to mention that all I write here is from my memory. The dates, names, and remarks have not been verified.

By the early 1930's, the J. E. Baker Company at Billmeyer had acquired the Hoffman Estate which consisted of the entire village. This included land halfway to Bainbridge and to Stackstown and beyond. By this time my oldest siblings, Edna and Freeman, had moved away from home. My brothers, Harry, Jr. and George, were teenagers. Also, the depression was still raging, and if you had a job, you were lucky to work more than one or two days a week. The Baker Co. made a deal with my father to move from Bainbridge to the mansion to maintain the grounds rent-free. We had no car, so we used one of Baker's trucks to move our belongings. One might ask, "How in the world could you live in the country like that without a car? We were given soft coal for the large furnace at no cost, but we had to haul the coal home ourselves.

I do not know how we had the field plowed and ready to plant. There was a man, in Bainbridge, named Paul "Squirrelly" Smith who had two mules and did this type of work. Also, during this period, farmers would do this work as a trade-off or they were kind enough to lend their horses.

The Baker Co. had a stable full of horses which we could borrow. It was one of these ways that the field was plowed. We always raised all of our vegetables, and my mother did a lot of canning for the winter. We, also, raised almost an acre of field corn. The portion of corn which we did not use was sold to the people who lived in the village of Billmeyer.

Imagine this! We had many vendors that came to our door. We had an ice truck twice a week, several meat trucks a week, several bakeries, and a clerk from the Company would come to take orders and deliver groceries in a day or so. You could have your milk or eggs delivered. Usually, we bought raw milk from the Hixons who lived on the farm. We always raised chickens for our eggs. If the hens did not lay, we would have them for Sunday dinner. We raised two hogs which we butchered in late fall or early winter. We also made a large kettle of apple butter in the fall. Most of the apple butter was packed in one or two gallon crocks and stored for the winter months.

### **Part II - 2009 Fourth Issue**

Let me give you a picture of how the village looked when we first moved there. Coming from Bainbridge, we go down a steep walled grade. On the left side, there was some kind of living quarters which had already been torn down. There was a railroad overpass. Next, on the left side, was a large red building which was a distillery. This was later demolished, but the foundation is being used as a patio. The house on the right was occupied by Harry and Eva Poole. Where the garage is now sitting, there was an access road to the railroad and the river. After crossing the bridge, on the left, there was a large stone mill. There was just enough space for a driveway between the creek and the mill. If you look up stream to the rear of the distillery and mill, there was a steel railroad bridge. This railroad spur followed the creek to some kind of quarry which the Baker Co. operated. This area was called #6. There were two dwellings at # 6. The Charles Nauss family lived there many years. As kids, we liked to sit in the yard of the mansion and watch the trains cross this bridge. At one time there was a dam in this area made for the mill, but that had washed away before our time. There are still remnants of the dam in the creek. The large building on the right of the bridge and the mansion driveway was a tobacco warehouse. It was painted yellow until recent years.

John and Thelma (Hixon) Bair lived in the next house on the right. This house was much smaller then today. The mailboxes for the village were fastened to a steel pipe railing in front of Bairs house. There as an approach to the mansion that cut across in front of the house and met with the existing drive just below the stone posts.

John and Edith (Hixon) Huggins lived in the next house on the left. The Vernon Hixon family lived on the farm. This farm house still had siding over the logs and the whole area had a neater

and more spic and span appearance. There as a gravel road that went around the farm house and passed the two tobacco sheds to the #6 quarry.

Now let's check out the grounds and garage (carriage house). The driveway was always a problem. In the summer when there were heavy rains, it would wash out and become impassable. In the winter, we had snow to shovel. We also spread ashes over the snow if it wasn't too deep.

Now to the posts! They never did light. The glass globes were broken before we moved there. Today one will notice that one cap is not square with the base. This happened when a young friend of a neighbor struck it while driving.

Next, the plants and shrubbery on both sides of the driveway! A large private hedge ran along the left side from the posts to within 20 feet of the garage. On the far side of the hedge was a large rock garden with a fish pond in the center. After we removed the rocks, this became the vegetable garden. The fish pond was still there when we moved away. Now it is the parking lot .I might mention., "When Mrs. Hoffman moved to Mount Gretna, she made an agreement with the Baker Co. that whenever she wanted, she could come back to collect small plants and top soil." So several times over the summer months, her chauffeur would come and collect small plants and top soil. She always seemed rather nice. Starting at the post on the right side, there would have been a driveway along the side of the warehouse. Next there was a cluster of about 4 midsized pine trees. At the top of the hill, there were a cluster of shrubbery and midsized trees, then a large blue spruce tree. There was a driveway that ran from the corner of the house to the front porch, facing the river. In the corner of the two driveways was a large weeping- type mulberry bush.

Continuing along the driveway, the area between the house and the garage was a good place to play ball. My brother Harry was a great baseball fan, so whenever he was around, we would usually have a game going. We never had a real bat, so we used a pick handle and any ball we could find. We also had to close the shutters, or we would break out the windows, which happened quite often.

There as a sandstone stepping stone coming off the back porch. This was used to help in mounting the horse or stepping into a carriage.

The driveway continued to form a circular courtyard in front of the garage. There were two swinging gates leading to the fields. The rest of the courtyard was encircled by a row of Rose of Sharon shrubbery, which we kept trimmed to a reasonable size.

The appearance of the garage was much the same as today. Going inside, there was a laundry room with a hot water furnace and laundry tubs. We never tried to use this room for laundry. We used this room to dry potatoes before taking them to the bin in the basement of the Mansion. We usually had a barrel of homemade vinegar in this room. There was room in the garage for three cars. There was a cistern of water with a pitcher pump. The cistern needed to be primed every time it was used.

To enter the upstairs, we had to go up steps and through a trapped door. The first room was unfinished and it was used for storage. We dried the field corn here after being harvested. The other room was a finished chauffeur's living quarters. Over the years my brothers and my grandmother lived here.

Across from the garage was the outhouse. It was very primitive and as constructed of oak boards. When the boards dried out, they left large cracks. Later this outhouse was replaced by a new "modern" model which had a concrete floor and a ventilating system.

Beyond the garage was another building for the animals. We usually had chickens, two hogs, a couple of rabbits, and some wild pigeons caught at the Hixon farm.

### **Part III - 2010 First Issue**

Now let's go to the Summer House. The summer house was in disrepair when we moved to the Mansion and did not receive any improvements during this time. Most of the windows were gone and the back door was loose. The bricks were crumbling away. We used the large fireplace when we butchered, and when we made apple butter. This house was used mainly for wood storage. In the summer and fall, as we had time, we went into the nearby woods and cut our firewood for the cook stove for the following winter. Once we got the wood home, we hired someone to cut the wood into stove length pieces, which then had to be split with an axe into smaller pieces that would fit into the stove.

The upstairs of the summer house was used as a playroom. Also my brother George used the upstairs as a workshop to make lawn ornaments, a hobby of his.

I remember sitting on the porch, with my other brothers, husking corn while my sister Dorothy and my mother did the canning. This was a hot job.

A trumpet vine covered half of the summer house. Next to the summer house was a large bed of ferns with a path to the Billmeyer plant. Another memory of the summer house porch, was waiting for my father to come through the ferns from work.

Now let's go to outside of the Mansion. I will discuss the outside first. It is my understanding that the large amount of wood trim and additions were added by the Hoffmans. Facing the river, along the right side, was a large bay window from the ground to the roof level (two stories). Moving around to the left and facing the back porch (L-shaped), over the long part of the "L", there as a balcony the same size as the concrete porch below. Over the short part of the "L", there was a sun porch which was mostly windows. We used the sun porch for storage even though there was a continuous problem with the roof leaking. Leading off of the short end of the porch was a walkway to several steps. Although there was nothing there, in my opinion, there was probably a Gazebo or an arbor one time. Attached to the sun porch and covering, this walkway was an arbor about 12 feet long for roses or some other type of vine.

Going around to the right side of the house and facing the river, there was a small wooden structure that clung to the second story of the house only. This was the ladies' bathroom. I always wondered why it did not fall off the main building.

The long front porch used to have a roof over it. This roof developed leaks and instead of being repaired, it was torn down. This happened while we lived there. All of these additions, which I just discussed, are now gone, either from lack of care or because of historic restoration.

Before we enter the house, let me mention that several years after we moved to the Mansion, the Baker Co. decided to change the Mansion to two dwellings. Initially, there were 14 rooms in the house and by adding two partitions, they ended up with 16 rooms. We always furnished nine rooms and considered the back side of the house our area. The second dwelling was toward the river. We referred to this as "the other side".

Getting water into the Mansion was always a problem. When we moved there, we had an inside toilet; plus we had a sink and wash bowl in the kitchen, but no running water. There was a large dug well between the summer house and the main house with a huge wooden pump. This had to be removed and a new pump installed. The water had to be pumped out and then tested before it could be used. If I'm not mistaken, we had to carry our water from the farm while this was being done. Regardless, we always had to carry the drinking water in a bucket which sat on the table in the kitchen. All the water used in the house came from this well.

Our hot water was heated in several different ways. There was a reservoir built into the cook stove, and we had a large copper teakettle sitting on top of the stove all the time. On wash days, we heated a large copper boiler of water, possibly 10 to 15 gallons, on the stove. The only way you could use the bathroom was by carrying your water upstairs. During the mid -forty's, we installed a pump in the basement, dug a ditch, and laid a pipe to the cistern in the garage. You could not drink this water.

#### **Part IV - 2010 Second Issue**

Now let's go into the Mansion. We will enter the first door on the back porch. This was our summer kitchen. We had a kerosene stove in this room that as used after the large wood burning cook stove was shut down for the summer. From this room, there was a stairway that led to the second floor. This room could not be heated during the winter so we used it as a refrigerator. When we butchered, we hung our sausage here. Our hams and bacon were smoked and laid out on tables. We also had other meats in a barrel of brine to preserve them.

Back to the first floor - The next room was our kitchen with two doors leading outside. These helped to circulate the air during the hot summer months. I think the walls of both kitchens were painted and the floors were covered with linoleum.

The stairway to the basement led from the kitchen. This was a large basement, under most of the house except the two kitchens and the front porch entrance. In the basement there was a small room which was divided when the house was made into a double house. In the large room was a large steam type furnace which burned soft coal. There was water in the coils above the fire box and this made steam which flowed to the radiators until it cooled and then flowed back to the furnace to be reheated. Also in the basement were a large coal bin, a good sized area for canned goods, and a potato bin. I used to be afraid of the bin when the potatoes would sprout. I guess I thought they were snakes.

Coming up from the basement, make a sharp right and you will be in our dining and sitting room. This room and the room above are the rooms with the bay windows. These two rooms had fancy hardwood flooring over the usual wide floor boards. There is another stair way to the second floor. The dining room also had a large built-in china closet on the one wall. Besides dining in this room, there were several odd chairs and the radio extending into the bay window.

The next room was half the size of the previous over-sized room. Before Baker Co. divided this room, it was not furnished. The younger children played and roller skated from room to room. Also the Methodist gave us a Baby Grande piano. My older brothers and sister would invite their friends and have sing-alongs. For some reason, we had our parlor on the second floor in the front corner bedroom. This changed when the house became a double and the other family got our upstairs parlor. After being divided, the first floor room made a nice parlor for us and a bedroom for the other tenants.

I will tell you about one other room. As you enter the front door from the long porch, you will find yourself in a very large room that extends across the short part of the "L" to another door to

the back porch. This is the room that has the winding stairway to the attic on the third floor. No one ever used the attic. This winding stairway was very impressive and still is.

A Few Observations about the Interior of the Mansion. The light fixtures were mostly chandeliers hanging from the ceilings. Some of the rooms had wall-type fixtures. The wall coverings were not the ordinary kinds but they were made of heavy material that could be washed. Some of the wallpaper was very ornate. The woodwork was always painted white. My dad kept the floor boards around the carpet and linoleum painted brown. In discussing the mansion with my brothers and sister, we all agreed that living here as quite comfortable and we felt that it looked rather nice in appearance.

### **Part V - 2010 Third Issue**

When we moved into the Mansion, we found all the neighbors friendly. The Hixons were quite helpful. I remember evenings when the work was done, they would visit, and we all sat in the yard and talked. Odessa Hixon Beisecker was just a teenage, but her personality was the same then as it is today. She would tease me a lot.

There was a wild weed called "burn hazel," that grew in the garden. To show off, we would run through this plant until we got welts on our legs and it would really burn.

I am sure that everyone was extra busy from the first day we moved into the Mansion. My mother and sister, Dorothy, were kept busy with the household chores. My father worked for the Baker Co. My brothers, Harry Jr. and George attended school, did work at home, and also worked for other farmers. They had to work in our field and garden, cut firewood, mow the lawn, and rake leaves in the fall. Their biggest job was mowing the entire lawn. This had to be done once a week with the old push mowers that had no motors. We never had a power mower as long as we lived there.

In the spring of 1936, we had a flood. The river overflowed, the creek backed up, and flooded the entire lower level of the lawn, around the warehouse, and ended above the stone posts at the driveway. When the water receded, it left behind a thick layer of muck which had to be cleaned up. We had several other floods while living there, but the water was never as high as the flood of 1936.

Down the hill and to the right of the oak tree was a large flag pole. This flag pole was made of wood and was thicker around and taller than a telephone pole. It had a hollow metal ball about 18" in diameter on top. Someone decided that this pole should come down, it was sawed off about 3feet above the ground, and this stump was still there when we moved away.

There was never a telephone in the village. I guess no one could afford the monthly fee. It was decided that everyone in the village would share one. The telephone was located at the farm. This worked out fine for most of us, but the Hixons had to locate the person being called. I think this was still being done when we moved away.

Another problem was our electrical transformer. Every time we had a thunder storm, it would be blown out. We would lose our power until the electric company would get around to fixing it, which was not very fast.

Occasionally, I would work for the Hixons on the farm. I would drive the tractor while Mr. Hixon and Les loaded the hay. I also drove the horses hitched to the cultivator while Les hoed the tobacco. I always loved horses and would have worked for nothing just to be around them. My dad bought a car about this time, so economy was improving.

My youngest brother, Richard, was born in 1937 and my youngest sister was born in 1939. Life was not all work. Our friends would drop around and we would visit them. We played around the creek, went swimming in the river, and listened to the radio a lot. I particularly liked the serials. Tom Mix, Superman and Jack Armstrong were on from 4 o'clock to 6 o'clock in the evening. The Lone Ranger which came on later was our favorite. We also did a lot of hiking. People in those days did not mind if you crossed their property.

By 1940, my brother Harry, Jr. was married, and soon after my brother George went off to Fight in World War II and returned in four years. About this time we stopped raising the hogs and before long, the chickens were gone. Then we made the animal house into another garage. We bought another cook stove and burned coal in it. That meant we didn't have to cut stove wood. With these changes, a lot of work was eliminated.

In 1945, I bought a large pony or as some people referred to it as  $\frac{3}{4}$  size horse. He was always a pony to me. I did a lot of horseback riding. I imagine that I neglected a lot of my chores which fell on my family. At this time, the farmers were selling their horses and buying large tractors. Their tractors were too big to cultivate our garden. We did our gardening with a hand cultivator. We usually put a rope on the cultivator. I pushed while my brother pulled the rope. Sometimes I pulled and my dad pushed. Les Hixon would tease me about doing my pony's work while he was grazing in the yard.

When I turned 16, I started working for the Baker Co. at the Billmeyer Plant part time. After graduation, I worked there full time which was six days a week. Of course, I still helped with the chores at home. About this time Baker Co. knew that they were running out of the type of stone they needed. They built a new plant near York, so they would be ready for the closing of the



Billmeyer Plant. Baker also started to sell their properties in this area, including the Mansion. The asking price was \$5000.00. Many people couldn't understand why we did not buy it. In those days, \$5000.00 was a lot of money and the upkeep was a lot more than we could afford.

So in the spring of 1950, we moved to the "Billmeyer Row". Looking back, I would say that this place, the Haldeman Mansion, was a wonderful place to grow up. It gave us a lot of space to roam. Also, it taught us how to work and become independent, responsible men and women.