



Memories of a Simpler Denbigh Still Linger

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Daily Press - Times Herald -
Newport News, VA -
October 1, 1987

For newcomers, it may be a bit hard to believe that Denbigh used to be farmland and dirt roads.

For at least one native, memories of a simpler time will not die. “When I was first born, there was no concrete road”, says Fauntleroy Bentien, 74, counting off the changes. “We did not have electric lights. We did not have city water.”

Bentien, then Fauntleroy Smith, lived in a home on what is now Old Courthouse Way, where Denbigh Warwick Shopping Center now stands. Her family bought the home about 1910 and lived there until 1971, when it was sold to developers.

“We had a pump on the back porch and we had a

dairy in the backyard,” she says. “Of course we had a garden.” The family also raised chickens and pigs.

As a child, Bentien enjoyed the rural character of Warwick County. “It was wonderful. It was peaceful and quiet. Everybody knew everybody then and everybody helped everybody.”

Bentien’s father, B. P. Smith, was Denbigh Postmaster until the early 1930’s. The mail came in on the “fast train,” an express train that did not stop at rural locations. Outgoing mail was hung on a hook and grabbed by the train as it sped by.

Denbigh residents had to travel to Yorktown to go to the bank, and the nearest drug stores were in Hilton and Yorktown.

Bentien’s grandmother lived in Lee Hall. “You would get in a rut and drive all the way to Lee Hall. Now and then when you met a car you had to get out of the rut.”

“When World War I came along, they concreted it and the troops marched along it,” she says.

The Denbigh School was three doors away from her family home. “A perfect fire trap if there ever was one,” she says. The two story wooden structure had four classrooms, each with its own wood-burning stove. Children from Lee Hall came down in six automobiles. “My mother used to give them dry clothes when it rained,” says Bentien.



A small high school building was next to the main school. Bentien remembers the day when boys at the high school spotted a fire on the second floor of her mother's house. The boys formed a fire brigade and hauled buckets to douse the fire.

Bentien attended the old Denbigh school for her first through seventh grades. "I got a wonderful education," she says. "There was always a teacher who could teach piano after school."

Principal James R. Mart also taught seventh grade. "He had enough blackboard space to send all 18 of us up to the board."

The first section of the present Denbigh Elementary was built in 1932. That building was gutted in June (1987) by a

fire started by a roofing crew.

After majoring in French and education at the College of William and Mary, Bentien taught for 11 years at the old Morrison Elementary. In 1944, Bentien moved with her new husband, Bill Bentien, to Wilmington, DE., returning to Denbigh in 1946.

"Before we could unpack anything, (Denbigh Elementary principal) Mr. San[d]ford sent for me and said he desperately needed a fifth grade teacher." For about the next 20 years, Bentien substitute taught at Denbigh and Sanford elementaries.

Bentien occasionally runs into former students while shopping in the area. As early as the 1940's, Bentien realized that the Denbigh area was growing too rapidly to retain its rural flavor. "I was teaching

at Morrison Elementary when I read that Warwick County had experienced the largest growth in the nation."

"Of course the war brought lots of people demanding places to live," Bentien says. "And then the shopping centers came on every corner. When we sat on the porch all you could smell was fish and chips and hamburgers."

In the 1950's, "Denbigh was still a village then and everybody still knew each other," says Bentien. "It was still very pleasant here." By the 1960's, the deer had stopped coming into the yard and the fate of Denbigh seemed to be sealed.

The Bentiens realized it was time to leave the home on Old Courthouse Way in 1971. The home was demolished s a shopping center could be built.

“It was heartbreaking,” Bentien says. “I couldn’t watch.” There was a huge magnolia tree and a Japanese cherry tree in the front yard, and although the garden club asked the developer to spare them, he refused. The Bentiens eventually moved to a home on Waterview Drive.

The overwhelming traffic problems that plague Denbigh have diminished the quality of life for Bentien. “Now I’m scared to go out there. I just don’t understand

where they all come from and where they’re all going.” Her husband agrees. “If it weren’t for the traffic problems, it wouldn’t be so bad.”

When Denbigh Elementary burned in June, Bentien was heartbroken. “I still think they should rebuild the brick school. When it was first built it was a community center.” The school had the first auditorium in the area and churches used it as well. “It was just the center for everything.”

Along with the courthouse and the clerk’s building, the school is a reminder of the Denbigh that once existed.

Despite the growth, and attendant problems in Denbigh, the Bentiens insist the people are still the friendliest around. Bill Bentien, born and raised in New York City, says he has lived all over the country before settling here. “This impresses me even today as a very friendly place”.

