

Interview with Haig Ellian
The Town of Chevy Chase Oral History Project
Interviewed by Chris White on May 20, 2004

HAIG ELLIAN: We moved to Curtis Road in 1966, Halloween night. We were not part of what was then Chevy Chase Section Four, which I referred to as the high rent district. We were Section Eight. It was really a nice place to move to. The neighbors were very friendly. Colonel Kennedy, Russell Kennedy, who lived across the street on Leland beginning in 1936 and was married to the Thompson Dairy people. He used to tell us stories about fighting to keep Leland traffic from getting worse.

CHRIS WHITE: So things don't change.

HE: Things don't change, no. The players have changed but the situation remains the same. Colonel Kennedy lived at 4313 Leland Street. Captain Willy, a retired Navy captain, lived next to him. It really was a great community with a sense of community, but residents in Section Four began to realize that they had no standing in trying to stop the major development enveloping the town. So you might remember Phil Evans who was one heck of a guy. A retired captain, lived in town, old, old line, born to the Chevy Chase Country Club, was president of the Council at that time. And he did the numbers and we decided that not only was it legally good for the town to annex us but it was also financially good for the town.

Mirek Dubrowski, who owned the old farmhouse as you entered the town on Leland Street-- I believe it's 4500 Leland -- Rob Enlow lives in it now, Pauline McGuire from Stanford Street, and I were on the committee with Phil.

CW: And that was called the Annexation Committee?

HE: The Annexation Committee. And we became part of Section Four in I believe '69 or '70, Chris, but I, I really can't swear to it. And then I ran for council about a year after that.

CW: Were there issues that had to be resolved about the annexation or—

HE: Our part of Section Eight approved it first. Elm Street residents had some issues and they had a little more concern than we did.

Our main concern was actually Leland Street. And not only Leland, but Stanford and, you know, every street from here on out because the traffic was just unbearable, even in those days, when traffic was not, you know, like it is today. But then Elm Street had a traffic problem, too. And they came in a little bit after us, maybe six months after us. When we merged the sections, we changed the name to the Town of Chevy Chase.

And a lady named Anne Bushart was on the council and was chairman when I joined the council. And she gave up the chairmanship after about a year and I became chairman. And one of our first projects was the annexation of Leland, which was a very traumatic experience.

CW: Why was that?

HE: Well, the Bradley Lane residents felt that it would divert traffic from Leland to Bradley Lane. Unfortunately, we were on track to also annexing Bradley Lane, which would have given us total control of the main thoroughfares through Town. But one of the residents wrote a rather vitriolic letter. And so we didn't get Bradley Lane, but we did get Leland.

CW: I see. You certainly did get Leland.

HE: We got Leland. It was lucky for us, because Leland would have now been a throughway to East/West Highway.

CW: Indeed.

HE: And the gentleman that caused us the problem on Bradley Lane years later came by to say he should have kept his big mouth shut. [Laughter] Then Leland Junior High School became an issue because they wanted to tear it down.

CW: Can you talk about that?

HE: And they did tear it down.

CW: Talk about how that came to be.

HE: Yes. They were closing schools in those days. And there was a great deal of local politics going on in the different areas. Different areas, of course, didn't want their schools to be closed. Leland was one of the schools that closed. And there was a Catholic school that wanted to move in but some folks in town had some differences with that so that didn't work out. And there were a lot of rumor about, oh, they're going to put in townhouses and apartments and low-income housing. And the fear machine started to work. And we, we finally settled on the Leland Center, which also caused some qualms in town because we really didn't know how that was going to work out.

CW: I guess the school building belonged to the county.

HE: Yes, it did.

CW: Were you able to get the county to turn the land over.

HE: Actually, we don't own the land. What they did was build the Leland Center on the land. And what we did was, in order to allow the construction of the Center, we, the town

floated a bond issue and the county paid it back, or is paying it back. I'm not sure how long it lasted. But the county owns the Leland Center but we do have our offices there. We use to have our offices at the 4-H Club.

CW: Were you in the 4-H Club when you were on the Council?

HE: Yes, we were.

CW: So we've got a little bit better quarters now, I suppose.

HE: Yes, we have, much better quarters, and much more convenient for the town residents.

CW: Indeed.

HE: Leland Street was always an issue. Elm Street Park became a reality not too long after we annexed Leland.

CW: Can you talk about the process of that happening? I mean that's a pretty big impact on the town.

HE: Yes. It was a lot of lobbying going on. Elm Street Park, the Elm Street folks were very active in that. And, of course, the whole purpose of that was to block traffic from Elm Street. It was going to be a buffer between the Wisconsin merchants and Elm Street. And the town endorsed it heartily and it became a reality.

There was a state delegate who lived on in Section Five. And he was instrumental in getting Leland Street for us. There was a division in the town when we went to block access for Leland Street. It was a natural division, because no one wants traffic to be diverted. And that's what they were afraid was going to happen.

I think what happened was exactly the opposite because the traffic never stayed just on Leland Street. I mean it got diverted to every street in town.

We were very concerned about safety because we had a number of young children hurt, hit by cars. And so we put stop signs on just about every corner. And we reduced the speed limit. This all took place on a rather short space of time.

CW: When were you on the Council?

HE: I would say this took place throughout the seventies. It wasn't an easy process and it wasn't a quick process. But I'm convinced that it helped the town somewhat.

CW: Were there other issues of controversy beyond traffic during that period?

HE: Yeah, there were. There were a lot of unresolved issues for town residents. There wasn't an awful lot of dialogue between the residents and the town. And we weren't getting a lot of things done. Elm Street had an issue with their drainage, which I think just got resolved within the last ten years or so. A fellow on Stanford had a problem with WSSC.

There was apparently some kind of sewer system going through his property. We had a lot of issues of that kind.

Then we worried about the building on Wisconsin Avenue. And the traffic was always a major complaint for most people in town, not all, but most.

CW: Was the town responsible for sort of the same type of services that it is now?

HE: I think we assumed some services. We took over trash collection. We always had Mark Peyton doing the town trees. And we expanded his services. He became our trash man, as well, and our snow removal man. We had some problems with our staff.

We had a town manager at one point that asked Mark for a kickback. And I was at a council meeting and I got home at around eleven thirty. And Mark was sitting on the porch. And he said, Mr. Ellian. I said, yes. Mark, what is it? He said, I'm not coming in to work anymore.

And it turned out that the man had asked him for a kickback. And we took the manager to the detective bureau. And the man, indeed, had asked him for a kickback. The council was able to straighten this matter out.

CW: A little excitement every now and again.

HE: Every now and then.

CW: Can you talk a little bit about the other council members from that era?

HE: Yes. Anne Bushart was a dynamic lady. She just died in the last three years, dynamic lady. Phil Evans. Pauline McGuire was also a member, as was Jim Sullivan and Harrison Chandler who still lives in town and comes to every annual meeting. Bill Wilhack was chairman of the traffic committee when I was on the traffic committee and then I was elected to the council and he was, too. Jane Lawton. Mier came in my last year or two on the council. Harrison Chandler. He's still in town. He's in his eighties, mid-eighties. He's a nice, nice gentleman. Phil Evans, of course. He became our town manager. They were the mainstay of the council at that time. Then we had one or two people who came and went.

CW: Well, we've talked an awful lot about the politics of the era and the governance of the town. Are there other aspects of the town that you'd like to talk about? Or is there anything about the neighborhood that we haven't mentioned?

HE: Yes. I was very proud of the community spirit we had. And I used to tell my son who insisted he was going to Chevy Chase Elementary School. He didn't want us following him down there. And he and a little friend used to walk there. I used to tell them that if

anyone ever bothers you, you knock on any door in this town and whoever answers the door will help you. And I think he did that twice – once to go to the bathroom. I always felt that we had a great team spirit.

When we built our house in Bethany, I believe at fourteen he wanted to go to town by himself, and we had a few misgivings about it but we, we let him. And when he came home he said, dad, he said, I couldn't get into trouble if I wanted to. And he said I saw Dr. Gray in town. I saw Dan--. I forgot his name. He lives on Stanford Street. He says I saw him in town. I saw Mrs. Byrd in town.

CW: Not too much room for mischief.

HE: Not too much room for mischief. But we had a great community. Certainly there's no way you can stop progress. And I mentioned the dates and I suppose it was inevitable. But I think what bothers me most about the changes are that we don't really know our neighbors anymore because there are two people working in the family. All we see is the nanny. But most of our kids, most of the kids in the neighborhood grew up together. And the parents became friends. Some of those friendships do continue to this day even though they're no longer in the neighborhood. And that part of the expansion I miss.

CW: The feel is a little different.

HE: Yes, yes. And we knew everyone in town at that time. That's not true anymore. John Koons was a friend.

CW: Was he a neighbor?

HE: He was a neighbor. And he was on Underwood, I believe. Jim Sullivan was on the council. He lived on, not Stanford, not Rosemary but he lived near Connecticut Avenue.

CW: Near the school.

HE: Near the school. We knew just about everyone in town. You can't say that anymore. I don't know if that's a minus but it's just different.

CW: One of the questions that springs to mind is just to ask you about other memories you have of being out and about in the town and whether there are any particular places in the town that are your favorites.

HE: Well, I remember Leland Junior High School very fondly because, well, the tennis courts are still there, of course. But we used to go over there and play tennis. And this is where most of the kids in the neighborhood learned to ride their bikes. And we used to play basketball in the schoolyard so that, that remains a very fond memory. And of course, it wasn't in the town, but Chevy Chase Lake pool.

CW: Can you talk about that a little bit?

HE: Yes. That was, as you know, off of Connecticut Avenue, I guess just below where the Hyatt House is now, I think. I'm not sure.

CW: It was between the Hyatt and Parkway Cleaners, I think.

HE: That's the way I remember it. It really wasn't a lake. It was a huge pool with a lot of grassy areas. We used to use that pool and then we moved over to the other pool.

CW: The pool at Bethesda?

HE: No, not Bethesda, behind the Audubon.

CW: Oh, yes. I forgot the name but I remember that.

HE: And we belonged to that pool for a few years. It was a good experience. Many of us belonged.

CW: What period are you thinking of when you were going to the Chevy Chase Lake?

HE: Oh that was early. That must have been in the early seventies, late sixties, early seventies.

CW: That had been there for a while.

HE: That had been there for years. And the reason, as we understand it, the reason that they filled it in was they wanted to develop that area which they've done, of course. And so they filled in the pool. But that was a very popular spot during the summer.

CW: That was probably when I was a kid and when the polio scare came. That was when my family said you can't go to Chevy Chase Lake anymore.

HE: Oh, why was that?

CW: Well, they feared that if you were around enough people you might catch polio because for a while no one knew how contagious it was or how it was transmitted.

HE: Oh, that's right. So you have memories of Chevy Chase.

CW: Oh, yes. I certainly do, but enough about me.

HE: I really think that it's good, because we probably could swap stories.

CW: Oh, no doubt.

HE: Now we were reminiscing about the shopping center on the corner of Leland and Wisconsin Avenue.

CW: Yes.

HE: There was a lending book library there, as you remember.

CW: Right.

HE: And I remember the drugstore with a beautiful marble fountain.

CW: Do you remember when the building was built on that corner?

HE: Yes, I do. And, as a matter of fact, the town tried to stop that. The developer pled hardship, which was a strange thing because there was an embargo on building. And somehow they convinced the county council that the Ford Building, this huge building, would not use quite as much water as projected. We lost that debate.

CW: And low and behold it began spiraling up shortly after that.

HE: Yes, the building went up.

CW: But that was a decision that you just, I think I heard right, that it was the county council had the power to permit that building there.

HE: Yes. I'm not sure you're aware of this, Chris. The town actually doesn't have any zoning powers. I mean we've assumed some over the years. But we really don't have it. The county has the zoning power. And, and much of this development is really out of our control. We do have hearings and we do protest—

CW: There are some ordinances.

HE: Yes, but we really don't have that power. There again, the power of living in an incorporated town slowed down an awful lot of advances, I suppose you'd call them. It also gave us the ability to remain a peaceful haven surrounded by busy highways.

CW: Indeed. That's a nice way to describe the town, I think.

HE: Yes. I just think this town is wonderful. It is a great place. My son who has lived in Bethany Beach for the last thirteen years moved back here. He has very fond memories of growing up here with the friends that he made. He still maintains contact with some of them. He just thinks this was a neat place to grow up.

CW: When you decided that you were going to buy this house did you know much about the town?

HE: No, I didn't. We were actually not a town entity at that time or at least this section wasn't.

CW: Right.

HE: And my wife, who is a lot smarter than I am-- I was anxious to buy a house. I was looking in areas that did not appeal to her. And she asked a lot of questions about different areas. She found this house in the paper and it was one of the two houses that we could afford. Well we really couldn't afford any house because interest rates were high and money was tight. They wanted three down payments, five thousand dollars. She saw this house advertised in the paper.

And we drove in through Connecticut Avenue and we saw this house and we bought it.

CW: Oh, that's great. Well, can you just describe the house a little bit?

HE: The house was a three-bedroom, one-bath house. It's a replica of the one across the street. We added on the second half of it, doubled its size.

CW: When was that?

HE: We did that in 1973. We doubled the size of the house. It's now a four-bedroom, three-bath house. The house was built in 1926. And we have the ad. This whole street was being developed on spacious lots in a country setting.

CW: That's wonderful.

HE: And they began at ninety-six hundred dollars in 1926. Our next-door neighbor is an original owner. She's a retired military person. She had moved in when the houses were new. The house we bought had two previous owners. The original owner and another man who bought it but never lived here. He got transferred right after he bought it. And we bought it from him. A gentleman named Dobbs.

CW: I see.

HE: Who came from the lawyer's office after the settlement with a martini glass in his hand and said, trick or treat.

CW: Ooh, how pretty, honey? Is that your new dress?

HE: Mr. White is interviewing grandpa, honey. Oh you look so pretty.

CW: She really does. That's your granddaughter?

HE: Yes. That's Aimee, also known as Miss Pretty.

CW: Well, one thing you didn't mention you told me earlier was you just gotten yourself a completely redone kitchen.

HE: Yes. As you know, Chris, these old houses are not exactly prime material, very small kitchen. We had it redone in 1973. But we did a major overhaul on this.

CW: It's very beautiful I must say.

HE: We paid, paid almost as much as we did for the house.

CW: Yes, I'm sure. I'm sure given the changes of prices and things. Well, let's see what have I not asked you about? Can you think of anything else that would be useful for people to understand about the town – more about what things were like when you first moved here?

HE: The town—and it still is to a degree-- unique in that by working together as a town despite some differences, has been able to maintain a peaceful and quiet haven in the midst of mass development. When I come to the meetings and I see people getting passionate over traffic and development which I don't think has proven to be that much of a problem. Things are different, people are different, houses have changed but the town remains a wonderful place to live. And, we're all benefiting from it, house value wise. Of course, I do miss the spirit of the community. We had a lot of picnics in those days in Dubrowski's yard.

CW: Spike, Spike Dubrowski.

HE: Yes. He ran for council incidentally.

CW: Oh is that right?

HE: Yes, he did, but he did not get elected. We remain friends to this day. Yeah, Spike was a good man. And his daughter is the vice president of CNN. She was the first employee of--not CNN, the congressional station, CSPAN.

CW: CSPAN. I didn't know that. Well he has a theatrical background. That's how I know him.

HE: Yes, he did. I believe he was on radio.

CW: I'm not sure.

HE: His son was my son's baby sitter for a while. And the Burkes from Oakridge Avenue, their daughters were my son's baby sitter. And their daughter used to tell my son, you know what the world is made of. And my son would say, no, I don't. She says, worm doo. [Laughter]

CW: He enjoyed that story, I know.

HE: But I can't really think of anything else. It's been a great experience.

CW: Well I have to say it's been a great experience hearing about it.

HE: Well, thank you.

CW: I really appreciate it.

HE: I'd like to get together with you and chat about your growing up in the town.

CW: I'll be happy to do that.

HE: And I look forward to that.

CW: Well, good. Well, on that happy note I think we'll conclude this interview.

HE: I thank you, Chris. And thank you for taking the time.

CW: Well, it's been really fun.

End of Interview