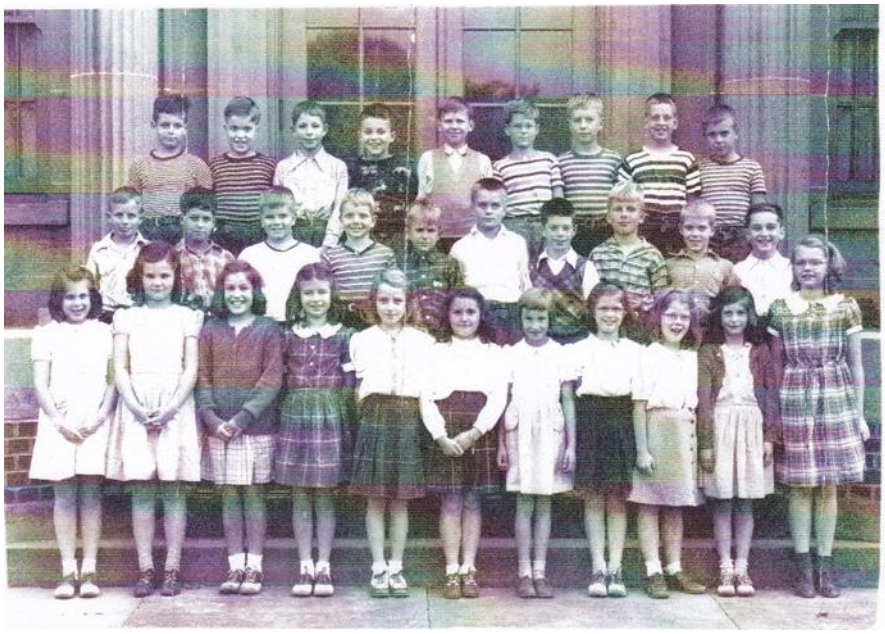
“I am proud of Malvern”: Imagining Our Past



“I am proud of Malvern” was the first line of our Malvern School song. We knew all the words, and, like the song says, we were proud of our school.

And here in the photo are some of us in fourth grade, I think, which would be 1946. I was in the other fourth grade and am not in this photo, but decades later, I remember the names of all but one of these children. And here are some of them: Dede, Joan, Jean, Connie, Nancy, Bob, John, Andrew, Philip, David, Keith, Neil, Bill, Ernest. And I could name the rest, but that would be showing off. And, to be completely honest, I have had to rely on my imagination to write this when my memory falls short.

Even without knowing the children’s names, you can learn lots about this public elementary school in Shaker Heights, Ohio, from this photo. The children are all nicely dressed for their class picture, but they probably were nicely dressed most of the time. The girls wear dresses or skirts and blouses; plaids seem to be in style, and so were saddle shoes; the boys favor striped polo shirts and long pants. The girls smile hesitantly in the front row. The boys stand resolutely behind them and also smile, but with restraint. The photo is black and white, but I imagine that the children’s clothes were bright and colorful: red, blue, green, perhaps purple.

All the children are white. There are outliers in this group, but they don’t stand out unless you knew them. One boy was the grandson of the elderly German who owned greenhouses a block east of our school. Perhaps the boy was a refugee. I’m not sure how well he spoke English, and German was not a good thing to be during World War II. Two other boys were Jewish. It was still difficult for Jews to buy homes in Shaker Heights, thanks to restrictive covenants, but there were always Jewish students at Malvern and Jewish families on my street. Although I don’t remember any specific incidents, it wouldn’t surprise me if these three boys had been bullied occasionally.

It was understood that everyone in the neighborhood went to the public elementary school, regardless of religion or socioeconomic status. Most of us walked to school; for me, my cousin, and my next-door neighbor, it was only a few houses away. Others rode the school bus the short distance to and from school and home for lunch and back. It was also understood that there would be someone at home to fix that lunch.

I also remember most of my teachers. They were central to our young lives, second in importance only to our parents. Their importance in the community is testified to by their obituaries in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Here I discovered that they had lives outside our classrooms. For example, my first-grade teacher, Miss Adolph, had a first name: Dorothea. She was born in Chicago in 1901, graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Chicago, and earned a master's degree from Western Reserve University. She taught in the same first-grade classroom for 40 years – *my* first-grade classroom – until her retirement in 1968. She seemed very old to me when she taught me how to read: she was 43. Our principal was Miss Gabriel – Florence Gabriel, actually. She also graduated from the University of Chicago; her master's degree was from Columbia University. She was Malvern's principal from 1926 to 1959, a veteran administrator by the time we came long. Miss Gabriel shared a Cleveland Heights apartment with my second-grade teacher, Hester South, a graduate of Ohio University with a master's degree from Columbia. Miss South retired in 1959 after 31 years in the classroom to travel the world with Miss Gabriel; and after her friend's death, Miss South donated a stained-glass window in her honor to the Church of the Saviour. She then became a tour director.

These teachers were extraordinarily well educated. They were single. Perhaps the school was their family, and we were their children. They taught us not only how to read, write, add, subtract, multiply, divide – the basics of elementary education -, but also manners: to stand up when an older person comes into the room, to hold the door open for someone older or less able than yourself; and how to vote in an election (and that if you got fewer votes, you lost). If there were discipline problems, I don't remember them – or at least, I didn't participate. On the whole, I imagine that we were pretty well-behaved children.

Our teachers were one reason to be proud of Malvern. Another was our handsome school building: only a piece of it is visible in the photo. Malvern was built in 1922, one of eight elementary schools in Shaker Heights built before World War II. All were done in the Georgian style; but each had distinctive unique architectural details. The city's developers, Oris Paxton Van Sweringen and Mantis James Van Sweringen, intended these schools to anchor neighborhoods of architect-designed homes in approved architectural styles, built of specified materials and colors.

Having weathered the Great Depression (although the Van Sweringens didn't), Shaker Heights established itself as an exclusive, well-to-do suburb in the 1940s. We didn't realize our privilege at the time, of course; most of us had never known anything different. But I imagine we were proud to live there.

We were also proud of our country. We ourselves had been soldiers in what historians call "the last good war" – "good" because it engaged almost all its citizens in a righteous battle against evil foes: Hitler, Mussolini, and the Emperor of Japan, who had attacked us at Pearl Harbor. Some of us – myself included – had had fathers or other family members serving in the armed forces. All of us had bought stamps to be pasted in books that could be redeemed for war bonds; we collected newspaper for paper sales, which we piled high in the gym to see which class had collected the most; our mothers shopped

with ration books; we doused the lights when the air raid warden (our next-door neighbor) came around. "Good citizens we will be," promised the Malvern song. And it was easy to be a good citizen in a country that had fought and won a world war and emerged richer and stronger than ever. But the long, draining Cold War against our recent ally, the Soviet Union, followed close on the heels of our war; subsequent wars had less clearly defined enemies and victories.

More immediately and closer to home, World War II brought prosperity, which made home-buying easier. Shaker Heights' population rose from 23,393 in 1940 to its peak of 36,460 in 1960. The war had been fought against a racist dictatorship that called attention to racial inequalities at home: our victory renewed hopes and efforts for racial justice. Consequently, Shaker's growing population included black families who were as attracted to the city's fine schools, distinguished architecture, and tree-lined streets as our parents had been. Blacks faced even greater obstacles to belonging in Shaker than had Jews earlier. The dramatic story of the battles to integrate Shaker Heights has been told often and eloquently, most recently by Laura Meckler's *Dream Town: Shaker Heights and the Quest for Racial Equity*. (And I want to credit that book with prompting me to write this very small story.)

The Shaker Heights school board struggled mightily through the 1960s to achieve racial balance in schools whose students reflected the economic and racial composition of their surrounding neighborhoods. At the extremes in 1967 were Moreland School, on Shaker's southwestern boundary with the city of Cleveland, whose student body was almost 90 percent black, and Malvern, "deep in the wealthiest section of old Shaker," which enrolled only one black child. Voluntary bussing of black students to Malvern and of Malvern students elsewhere made little difference, given the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood. [i] And enrollment at Malvern and other schools began to decline through the 1960s and 1970s.

In an effort to achieve some sort of racial balance and also address the diminishing number of students, the school board closed Malvern and three other schools – Sussex, Moreland, and Ludlow - in 1987. The city of Shaker Heights in 1988 bought Malvern's building and campus, hoping to turn the building into high-end condominiums. This would have required re-zoning the property for multi-family use. In a referendum in 1991, residents voted this down, wanting the property to remain a school. And so it did in 1992 when the city leased Malvern's building to Solomon Schecter, a Jewish day school. The irony of a suburb that had made Jewish residents unwelcome now welcoming a Jewish day school is obvious. Talks in 2000 with Hathaway Brown School about buying the building came to nothing, and when Solomon Schecter moved to Pepper Pike in 2001, the city sold Malvern's building to Hanna Perkins Center for Child Development, which leases the land. The other closed schools are now also used for educational purposes. Moreland became the main branch of the Shaker Heights public library; Sussex is now the Sussex Family Center; Ludlow will be used for Pre-K education. In a sense, the Van Sweringen's original intent for the schools has been maintained.

I had opportunities to see Malvern as it changed. When I visited during the Solomon Schecter tenancy, my kindergarten and first-grade room were exactly where I remembered them; the floors were as shiny, the woodwork as polished. The little ticket booth where we bought our war bond stamps, next to Miss Gabriel's office, was still there. The only difference: the signage was in Hebrew. In 2003, when the Hannah Perkins Center had an open house, I visited again. The Hebrew signage was gone, and we were greeted in the gym where so long ago we had piled our newspapers, sung patriotic songs and Christmas carols, and where the brand-new United Nations was explained to us by the father of one of

the little girls in the front row of the photo. The gym looked just the same. Well, perhaps smaller. I very recently drove by my old school with my grand-daughter. I tried to describe to her our old playground: the surfaces were asphalt-covered; our play equipment consisted of metal swings and "monkey bars" upon which we hurled ourselves backwards, fearlessly, preferably with no hands. All of that has been replaced by safer equipment, of course, and much of the gracious lawn has been planted with trees and shrubs, which is probably environmentally friendlier. The bicycle shed where we smoked our first cigarettes was gone. I imagine kids don't smoke cigarettes any more.

"Is Malvern Proud of me?" asked the second line of our school song. Well, I hope so, but I can't be certain. I can be certain that many in that photo have died. We are very old now, at least 87. And from that perspective, it's hard not to be nostalgic for that long-ago childhood in the photo.

But I prefer to imagine our lives after childhood and after Malvern School; to imagine that we seized the endless opportunities given to us by an affluent suburb, a distinguished school, and excellent teachers. In the photo, there are eleven little girls in the front row. Eight of us went on to high school together, and three of us went on to the same college. It was a comfortable, insular world for us girls. Perhaps it stayed that way, or perhaps Betty Friedan or some personal choice or adventure jarred us loose. What about the boys? Did they follow in their fathers' footsteps, or take a road less-traveled? I don't know for certain. So I like to imagine that those boys and girls outgrew plaid skirts and striped polo shirts. Perhaps, instead, when they became adults, they wore white coats and carried stethoscopes; or suits and ties in the court room; or aprons in the kitchen; or rumpled tweeds in the classroom; or a clerical collar in the pulpit; or a tailored suit selling real estate or stocks; or formal attire, carrying a cello into Severance Hall.

Perhaps some of those boys and girls even became famous. I can almost imagine that.

In 1946, at the conclusion of that world war, however, we could not have imagined how much our world, our home town, and we ourselves would change. Malvern School is gone, but our handsome school building has survived. And so has this wonderful photo, capturing one specific moment in time, when, like the song says, we were proud of Malvern. And we knew all the words to the song and all the names of each other.

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[i] Laura Meckler, *Dream Town: Shaker Heights and the Quest for Racial Equity* (New York, 2023): 98.