

Westtown in the 1940s

by Gail O. Guterl, Westtown Township Historical Commission



"When I was a little girl in Westtown, looking out your window or driving down the road were farms and planted fields as far as the eye could see," remembers Barbara Cheyney Bentley, a life-long Westtown resident born on a Quaker farm along Wilmington Pike.

Barbara, now 79, is someone who has watched the scenery change over the years. The Historical Commission sat down with her to talk about some of her most compelling memories.

Life on the Farm

Farming was the township's main economy for many decades. According to Arthur James' *History of Westtown*, in 1926 the township numbered 700 people and had 22 farms. By 1950, the population had grown by almost 300 people. (Today it is 11,000.) "Westtown was rural," Barbara said. "In fact, our mail was delivered to RFD #5 (rural free delivery)." RFD, a term you don't hear often, is a service begun in the late 19th century to deliver mail directly to rural farm families.

So what was it like living on a farm in Westtown Township in the 1930s and 40s on land that belonged to a succession of families, such as Richard Whitpain in the 1680s, the Morris's, the Faucetts, the Cheyneys, and the Papenfuss's? Where did she go to school? What did she and other local farm children do for fun?

Barbara spent her early life on Wilmington Pike (what is now Rt. 202) on a farm owned by her grandparents just north of what is now the Go-Go Gas Station on Rt. 202. Later she moved only a few hundred feet to property her grandmother,

Anna Lloyd Henry Cheyney, gave her on Robin's Nest Lane, a small private road off Rt. 202 at the northernmost border of Westtown Township. Barbara speaks most often of her grandmother, "a tiny Quaker woman with her hair in a bun" because "my grandmother was the farmer and the businesswoman. My grandfather, W. Edwin Cheyney Sr., worked for PennDOT; he never farmed the land."

Raised with loving parents and grandparents living on the same property, Barbara remembers "an idyllic, happy childhood. To kids today that life would probably seem boring, but it wasn't. We always had something to do. Yes, we all had jobs on the farm, but in between we had a good time."

One of Barbara's responsibilities in the summers was to sell fresh-picked corn from a makeshift farm stand — the back of her grandmother's Chevy truck parked at the end of their driveway on Wilmington Pike — "until it was all sold." She began that job when she was as young as 10 years old.

School Days

In addition to her farm chores, Barbara attended Bartlett Manor School on Rt. 202 and East Pleasant Grove Road. The school was later renamed Westtown Thornbury School, and even later became the Westtown Township building. "The building had two or three stories with classrooms on each floor. My fourth and fifth grades were in the same room. You'd have two rows of fourth graders, and in the same room two rows of fifth graders."

On weekends and weekdays after chores were done, "we'd jump into the corn silo and play hide and seek and other games," Barbara said. Saturday nights were special. "That was when large farm families in the area would get together. The adults would play euchre [a card game] and

the children would run around and have a great time. I remember falling on a metal floor heating grate during one of those Saturdays and chipping my front teeth."

Like all farm children, Barbara learned to drive at a young age. "When I was 16 I got my driver's license, but I had been driving farm equipment long before that," Barbara said. "I remember driving a tractor down Rt. 202 to fields my grandparents owned and farmed," she said. She also remembers being able to drive west from her grandmother's house across the fields on a dirt road, all the way to South New Street, "without encountering another house." Today the Snow Drop Hill and Westview Acres developments sit on that land.

High Flying Memories

As her school days were ending, Barbara hoped for a career as a flight attendant. Her choice may have been influenced by two things in her life. One of her earliest memories was when airmail, literally meant “air” mail.

“A high point in this area was the hill where Starkweather and Stetson schools stand,” Barbara vividly remembers. “When I was growing up it was a hayfield on the Faucett farm, and there were two tall flag poles on that hill with a hook to hoist a bag to the rope strung between these poles. Periodically, a small plane would fly by with a large hook hanging from the bottom of the plane. The plane swooped down and snagged the rope that hung between the two tall poles and picked up the outgoing mail.” The plane then circled and dropped off incoming mail at the same location. “I can’t recall when that was discontinued, but it was quite a sight to see.” That was Barbara’s first memory of airplanes.

“Then when I was 18, I wanted to be a flight attendant; I probably got the idea from my maternal uncle Wally Money, who knew how to fly planes. A Westtown resident, he had joined the Canadian Air Force when he was 16, and later would fly over our pasture and throw out rolls of toilet paper. He was fun loving and I idolized him.”

To attend flight attendant school in Chicago, Barbara asked her grandmother for \$500. “My grandmother was wise. She said she’d give me the money, but asked me to wait

a year and see if I still wanted to go,” Barbara recalls with a smile. “Well, in a year, I had met my husband and we got married and eventually built our house on land my grandmother gave us on Robin’s Nest Lane. So in the end, I never left Westtown.”



Illustration by Jim Guterl.

Cheyney Descendants

Barbara’s association with Westtown goes back to the earliest days of Pennsylvania to John Cheyney, a candle maker from Oxford England, who settled in Middletown and Thornbury, PA. As his descendants multiplied and moved to other townships, they left their name on the unincorporated Cheyney, PA, and on streets in communities like Westtown.

Barbara’s family’s farm “on a much sleepier Wilmington Pike” had the usual farm outbuildings — a barn, ice house, springhouse, and a three-story stone farmhouse. “I could easily walk across Rt. 202 and get the Short Line bus into West Chester for 5 cents,” she remembers.

“My grandmother’s house had a front porch facing Wilmington Pike, but with the widening and straightening of Rt. 202 soon after I was born, the road was raised, our barn was torn down, and a stone retaining wall was built right in front of the porch. So from the road, you could only see the third story windows of the house,” Barbara explained. “Eventually, my grandmother tore the porch down.”

In 2014, the house was torn down to make way for land development. “It’s not there anymore, but I can still picture it and what life was like growing up in Westtown,” Barbara said.