



Shadyside in the 1890s

Although technically speaking our branch of the Spencer family from the very beginning lived in the city of Pittsburgh, the world of our childhood was not in the least urban. When Grandfather Acheson in 1877 moved his family from Allegheny to Amberson Avenue, Shadyside was not very far removed from the farm it had recently been. By the end of the century, though the streets had been paved and flagstones had taken the place of boardwalks, the rural atmosphere lingered. A row of sweet cherry trees on either side of Grandfather's house still bore fruit of superlative quality—big cherries, almost black when ripe and richly juicy. The grandchildren swarmed in those trees during cherry season. Our own backyard had in it two apple trees and two rather spindly sour cherry trees. When the fruit trees blossomed in spring, Amberson Avenue looked like an orchard.

I am quite sure, however, that we thought of those trees in terms of fruit rather than of beauty. Pittsburgh in the 1890s had not yet learned the value of landscape gardening. Every house stood starkly in the middle of its ground without planting to hide ugly foundations or gardens to please the eye. We had some red rose bushes in our yard, to be sure, but they grew in a round bed that had no relationship to anything else. There was a round bed of cannas in another unrelated spot and a long row of cannas between our backyard and the adjoining cow pasture. What beauty there was was an accident of nature rather than the result of deliberate planning.

Yet at some point in the development of the neighborhood

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someone with an eye for beauty must have made his influence felt, for trees marched on either side of Amberson Avenue from its beginning at Fifth Avenue to its end at the Shadyside Station, mostly quick-growing water maples, but also some beautiful lindens and an occasional elm. The maples dropped innumerable seeds in the spring, and innumerable little trees sprang up, most of which were cut down with the grass. The Spencer twins when very small planted seeds at the end of our property along the Pembroke Place side that grew enthusiastically. Referred to always as Charles and Elizabeth, they helped to shade the street until the Todds, who bought our house in 1950, had them cut down to permit entrance to their garage. In the far corner of our backyard near the Macbeth line stood a big maple known until its death in the 1940s as the garbage-can tree because throughout our youth the garbage can stood beneath it. Why the garbage was placed so far from the house I have never been able to understand, for to carry it to the can through wet grass on a rainy day must have tried the souls of our cooks. But the tree itself was beautiful, and with other trees in other yards it helped to counteract the unattractiveness of un-beautified grounds.

Behind the row of cannas at the end of our backyard a heavy wire fence shut off the cow pasture. I do not believe that cows were common in the Shadyside of our youth, but they did not seem out of the way. Occasionally cattle were still driven up Amberson Avenue from the Shadyside station, where they were unloaded, to the stockyards at Point Breeze, and no farther away than Oakland the present Schenley Farms district was in very truth a farm, with cows cropping hillsides now covered with houses and University of Pittsburgh buildings. Our cows, then, were not unusual. As far back as I can remember we kept one in the cow pasture, and when Sophie Acheson was born, a second cow came to join ours so that all the very young could have home-grown milk. John Organ, Grandfather's Negro man of all work, milked the cows. One of the joys of our childhood was to help him mix the mash, taste it ourselves, and watch the milk spurt into his tin bucket. The milk was carried to our cellar, poured into big brown crocks, and set on the shelves of the double-doored icebox. After the cream had

risen, I loved to watch Mother take it off with a flat skimmer. We were able to watch this ritual until about 1902. That summer the cows, standing for shelter under a big ash tree in the cow pasture during a severe thunderstorm, were struck by lightning. I think their spectacular death marked the end of our cow keeping, though the Schenley Farm cows continued to crop the Oakland hillsides for several years longer.

Beyond the cow pasture lay “the woods.” The trees seemed to me as a small child to stretch away endlessly. Beneath them the light hardly penetrated, and by day the dim world they enclosed was full of mystery; at night owls hooted. There must have been a dump in the gully, for we found treasures every now and then. I remember only broken bits of china, but they seemed a promise of better things to come. Since the woods extended only from the end of the cow pasture to the beginning of the backyards on Lilac Street, they covered barely half a block, but they seemed to us a forest well touched with romance.

The neighborhood was not nearly so thickly populated then as it is now. On the corner of Castleman Street and Amberson Avenue stood a big square frame house with a mansard roof, long since torn down, in which the Marvins lived during our early years, and later the Brennemans. Next to it was Mr. Clapp’s house, in relatively recent times remodeled by Katherine Frazer, and beside it the Reed’s big house of red brick, now no more. Then in a piece of property extending all the way to Ellsworth Avenue, with a long tree-bordered driveway leading up to it, stood the Aiken house. Close beside our own house the Macbeths lived, but from their boundary line to Ellsworth Avenue there was only the Pitcairn house—an elaborately ugly example of late Victorian architecture, set in well-kept grounds and protected from intruders by a handsome iron fence. Across Ellsworth Avenue there was the Oliver McClintock house on the far corner, with a cottagey sort of house beyond it. I do not think that Bayard Street had been cut through to Amberson when we were small, but below where it now runs there was only a queer little square house with a mansard roof that Mother spoke of as the Swiss cottage. Above it rose the McKay hill, and beyond that were the Shadyside station and the

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Pennsylvania Railroad tracks. On the other side of Amberson Avenue the Albert Childs' house was the only one between the station and the Wood house on the corner of Ellsworth Avenue. Between us and Fifth Avenue was what is now the McClintock house, beyond it the Edwards' house (later the Lincolns', but no longer in existence), then the parsonage and the church. Across Westminster Street I do not remember that there was any house at all except the big square cupolaed mansion on the corner of Fifth and Amberson where the Lawrence Dilworths lived briefly during our childhood. On the other corner was the Negley house, now the Gwinner's, then Uncle George's and Grandfather's houses. Between Grandfather's and Castleman Street only the Bruce house stood when we were very small, but it was soon supplanted by the Smith and Lewis houses.

Castleman Street had, I think, been fairly recently opened in our early childhood. The asphalt used in paving it must have been poor, for under a hot sun it grew delightfully soft. We loved to whirl on our heels on it, and for many years small heel marks in the paving recorded the joy its defective surface gave.

The fact that children could dig their heels in asphalt to their hearts' content indicates how relatively safe the streets were. Ice wagons jolted heavily from house to house, and delivery wagons rattled up and down the streets, but never in great numbers. In the afternoon carriages carried ladies about the neighborhood to pay calls. Occasionally a run-away horse caused great excitement, but on the whole a reasonably careful child could play on the streets without danger to life and limb.

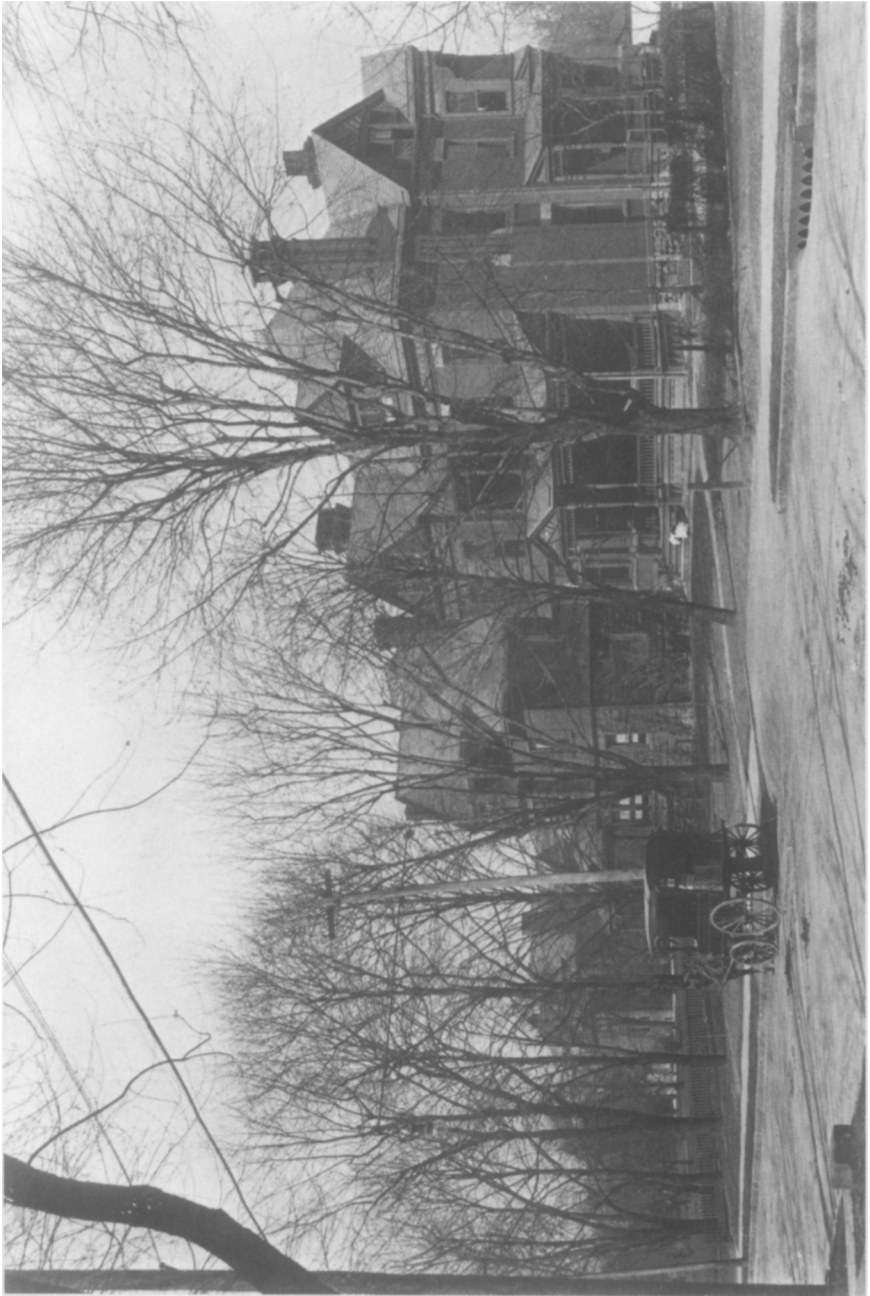
Dahlia Street, though always a threat, was not opened until 1902. Then, although we resented the loss of our side yard and the demolition of the honeysuckle-covered wire fence through which we had climbed into McClintock territory, we thoroughly enjoyed helping to build the street. Spencer and McClintock children were constantly under the workmen's feet. The sewer pipes appeared to have been piled up at the sides solely for our benefit. We climbed over them, walked along their tops, raced along the big curbstones, wallowed in mud—in fact, enjoyed to the utmost every step of street making. Since Dahlia Street opened up the

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property behind the Spencers and McClintocks, it was not long before new houses began to rise. We watched with proprietary interest Uncle Mark Acheson's house taking shape in what had been the cow pasture, and with only a degree less interest the other houses that soon appeared along the new street. It was not until about 1917 that we ourselves succeeded in selling the two lots father had owned just behind Lilac Street. The money Mother received for this property she used to build the cottage on Coraopolis Heights in which we spent our summers from 1920 through 1934.

I think it must have been fairly soon after its opening that the name of Dahlia Street was changed to Pembroke Place. At about the same time Lilac Street was transformed to St. James Street. The substitution of aristocratic names for garden flowers suggests the general transformation of the neighborhood. By the end of the first decade of this century Shadyside had lost its semirural character and Pittsburgh had ceased to be a big country town where everybody knew everyone else.

The same sort of transformation occurred in the way we got about the city. The bicycle was of utmost importance in our early years; without it we should have been confined pretty largely to the immediate neighborhood; with it we could wander relatively far afield. Late in the 1890s father had a bicycle shed built against the east side of the house between the kitchen wall and the bay window of the dining room. In it there were stalls for the family "bikes," perhaps nine stalls, though the picture suggests seven. The fact that I remember only vaguely seeing Mother on a bicycle probably means that she had ceased to ride before the bicycle shed was built, and I have no very vivid recollection of Father riding his either. In days before I can remember they took long rides in Schenley Park with Adeline and Kate, but by the time the younger children were old enough to take part in such excursions, Mother had too many children and too much to do at home to go bicycling, and Father had lost his enthusiasm. For the children, however, bicycles were the chief form of transportation. We rode them to school, to music lessons, to see our friends; without them life would have been immeasurably narrowed.



719 Amberson Avenue, May 1901.



719 Amberson Avenue (rear), 1901.



Amberson Avenue, looking toward Ellsworth Avenue, 1898.



The cow pasture and the woods, October 1901.



Elizabeth helping John Organ milk the cow, July 1901.



The bicycle shed, April 1899: Mark, Charles, George Macbeth, Elizabeth, Fluffy, Mary, Caroline Blackstone.

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When a more elegant means of transportation was required, we hired a carriage from a livery stable and rolled in state to our destination. Livery-stable carriages took us to parties, to weddings, to funerals, but they were too expensive to be indulged in often. Grandfather's carriage was almost as exciting to ride in and more frequently available. In bad weather Grandfather sent it, old Dan between the shafts and John Organ at the reins, to take us to school. Though Dan was an old horse, half-heartedly groomed by John, and the carriage was shabby, we felt very grand being driven through streets we ordinarily covered on foot or on bicycles. The sound of Dan's clip-clop always thrilled me, and the crunch of the carriage wheels on snow. Sometimes on Saturdays the older children were allowed to drive by themselves through quiet streets as far as the zoo, and these adventures I remember as sheer joy.

Ordinarily when we had to travel a considerable distance we used the cable cars that ran on Fifth Avenue or the trains that stopped at the Shadyside station at the foot of our street. The cable cars took us to town to shop, the trains to Edgewood to see Mother's two aunts. When cable cars were superseded by trolleys, we dearly loved to ride in the open cars that were put on in summer, but in general street cars and trains were a less exciting way in which to cover ground than carriages.

By 1900 an even more exciting means of transportation than carriages was beginning. The first automobile on our street belonged to Jimmy Reed, and in it each of the younger Spencers had his first automobile ride. Sitting on the curbstone we would watch Jimmy with pleading eyes as he coasted down the Reed driveway across the street from our house, and, nice boy that he was, he took pity on one little Spencer after another and invited us to share the high perch beside him. Adeline very likely had her first ride in Chick Curry's car, for from the time she was thirteen he was pursuing her, usually in an automobile. We younger children used to hide giggling behind the library curtains and watch her climb into his car—was it a Pope Toledo?—through a door in the middle of its back. Later when they had become engaged, and during the early years of their marriage, Chick on Sunday afternoons would fill up his car with Spencers and take us for a drive

through Schenley Park and over Beechwood Boulevard. The summer of 1907 when the Currys, the Spencers, and the Achesons took a house together in Marion, Massachusetts, his Packard gave us a glorious summer of motoring. During his own vacation he drove us about the countryside, and when he left he got a chauffeur named John to take over. Roads were narrow, rough, and incredibly dusty, and driving was an adventure whether Chick or John was at the wheel. Toward the end of summer when frail tires had grown frailer from use we had as many as eight punctures in an afternoon. Since each puncture had to be mended then and there, the ladies, enveloped in capacious dusters, their hats anchored to their heads by soft, hot chiffon veils, spent as much time by the roadside as in the car, and the men worked hard for their pleasure.

We were grown up before automobiles became a means of transportation that could be relied upon. Our childhood belonged to an age without automobiles, without labor-saving electrical devices, without radio, television, or aeroplanes. We had a telephone, to be sure, on the wall at the foot of the back stairs, with a handle we ground to summon "Central." Since our number was Bellefield 92, I think we must have been early subscribers. But there was no telephone when the two oldest children were born, for Father had to go to a nearby livery stable, hire a horse and carriage, and drive off to fetch both doctor and nurse. By the time memory begins for me the telephone had become an important part of household equipment, but it is the only one of the great modern inventions that links our childhood with the present. We grew up in a simpler, less complex world than the world of today.