

John Ridgeway
Former Dunleith Resident
Route 9 Oral History Project

Interviewed by: Michael Emmons, Center for Historic Architecture and Design, University of Delaware

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Abstract

Born in Dunleith in 1953, John Ridgeway spent his entire childhood and the early part of his adult life in the neighborhood, moving away when he got married in 1978. He currently lives in Landenberg, Pennsylvania. In this interview, Ridgeway recalls growing up in Dunleith, describes the architecture of the neighborhood, describes the close-knit nature of the community and diversity of occupation there, comments on the racial dynamics in the area in the 1960s and 1970s, describes recreational opportunities, and remarks on some ways in which the community has changed through the years.

John Ridgeway's parents were originally from Alabama and had moved to Wilmington—where his father's aunt lived—after his father served in the Army. Before Dunleith, his parents had rented in Millside, which they always remembered fondly. They were drawn to Dunleith because of the availability of financing for veterans and because it represented a unique opportunity for suburban homeownership in the Wilmington area for people of color. Ridgeway's parents purchased a new, three-bedroom home in Dunleith in 1952 in a part of the development near the entrance from Rogers Road. He recalls that his parents were early owners in the development, lists the family names of some of the earliest owners there, and remembers that the lots and homes in that part of Dunleith were larger than those in later parts of the development. He indicates that while the home models and appearance there are consistent with those in later-developed parts of the neighborhood, they hold more square footage even if they would be considered small by today's standards. He recalls that about 85 percent of residents owned their homes, and there were very few renters in Dunleith when he was growing up. He had no complaints about his Dunleith home and remembers some families adding a garage or a front or back porch to their homes or building extra rooms. He recalls a family adding a basement to their home, noting that a handful of the earlier houses in Dunleith were built with basements.

Ridgeway describes the neighborhood as a family that “embraced each other and enjoyed life day to day and supported each other,” and that outside of the neighborhood, “It was either Dunleith or everyone else.” He recalls a great deal of adult involvement and community parenting and says, “If I did something bad in Dunleith, no matter where I was at in the community, you can bet my mom would hear about it.” He explains how much pride there was in the community, that there was a shared sense of values there, and that it was a fun and supportive place to grow up where he made lifetime relationships. He also describes Rose Hill Gardens and Oakmont as social extensions of the Dunleith community and notes that he did not go into neighborhoods like Collins Park or Holloway Terrace except to play Little League.

Ridgeway recalls that many of his neighbors had southern roots, while many had moved from elsewhere in Wilmington, others had followed the Chrysler plant from Detroit, and another family had originated in Massachusetts. Ridgeway notes that his neighbors were “very diverse in talent” and held a variety of occupations he describes as “jobs of authority, jobs of substance, jobs of quality.” His father was a union carpenter, and he recalls a neighbor who was also a carpenter. There were bricklayers, contractors, postal service workers, teachers, lawyers, accountants, auto industry workers, and managers.

Ridgeway explains that neighborhood children went to Dunleith Elementary School but were bussed to the integrated Colwyck Junior High for seventh through ninth grades, with different grades attending school for different shifts of the day. He then attended De La Warr High School. Ridgeway recalls that racial incidents at the integrated schools were episodic and were not a day-to-day occurrence but notes that the segregated nature of the neighborhoods contributed to racial issues in the schools. He also describes experiencing racial profiling from the National Guard and FBI in the majority Black neighborhoods along Route 9 during the Wilmington riots in 1968-1969.

Ridgeway recalls that the grounds of the local schools were open for recreation after the school day and that a pair of churches in the neighborhood, Coleman United Methodist and Community Presbyterian, also arranged recreational activities for Dunleith children and youth, such as Friday night dances. Ridgeway speaks most fondly of Little League baseball games in the ballfields behind Dunleith School, recalling how the entire neighborhood would come to support the community teams. Community news traveled through these institutions. He was 13 or 14 years old when Surratte Park was built, which became a community recreation focal point. He also recalls bowling at the Bowlerama and swimming at the Wilmington Swim Club. He describes how the neighborhood kids would make their own skateboards and go-karts.

Ridgeway has seen Dunleith change gradually as the older families moved out and newer families moved in. He feels the sense of connection he experienced as a young person does not exist to a similar degree now. He also believes that there is greater ethnic diversity in the neighborhood today. Ridgeway remarks on the segregated nature of most of the neighborhoods along Route 9 when he was growing up and notes that today there is much more racial diversity in what were once all-white neighborhoods.