

Sodonia Parker
Current and Historical Oakmont Resident
Route 9 Oral History Project

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

Interview Date: May 25, 2022

Abstract

Sodonia Parker, a retired corrections officer, purchased her Oakmont home in 1967 and moved there with her husband and four children. She has lived in the same home there since that time, staying through the years to provide a family anchor point and, additionally, because it provides a good home base from which to travel the world. Her four children grew up in the Oakmont home, and some of her grandchildren and great grandchildren have also resided there throughout the years. In this interview, Parker recalls moving to Oakmont and raising her four children there in the 1960s and 1970s. She describes the close-knit community there and how much her neighbors meant to her, talks about architectural amenities of the homes in Oakmont, discusses recreation, schools, and the racial dynamics in the area in the 1960s and 1970s, and remarks on ways in which the community has changed through the years.

Transplants from Louisiana, Parker and her husband James—who passed away in 2022—had followed his job laying oil pipelines to Oklahoma. They had stopped through Delaware on their way back to Louisiana to visit Parker’s recently injured father-in-law, who was living in Hamilton Park at the time. When they decided to stay in Delaware to aid in his recovery, they were attracted to Oakmont because of the space, quality, parking, and overall value it offered the large family. She remembers being impressed even when looking through the window and seeing how spacious the rooms looked, and, with its multiple levels of living, double closets in the master bedroom, as well as its unfinished basement, the rowhouse generally seemed very roomy and represented a large contrast from the homes she was accustomed to in Louisiana. The Parkers purchased one of Oakmont’s end units, which allowed them to adopt the adjacent communal open space as a side yard, which offered extra play space for the family’s four children. Her husband, James, finished the basement space, which was quickly adopted by son Jimmy as his bedroom.

Parker had very few complaints about the architecture of her home but did make a few alterations over time. At one point, the family desired additional outdoor space for congregating, so they built a back porch on their unit. Eventually, they discontinued using it because their yard looked straight across to the back of Dunleith and also because much of the social action in the community took place at the front of the house facing the street. Though some Oakmont units had laundry rooms on the main living level, hers was located in the basement. As the Parkers aged, this became more inconvenient to access, so they eventually installed a stackable washer and dryer upstairs. The Parkers also recently updated their kitchen.

Parker explains that it was the neighbors and community that made Oakmont a special home for the Parkers. She recalls that several of her neighbors had relocated from the South and had a variety of different jobs, including medical and technical professionals, teachers, employees of DuPont, Chrysler, and General Motors, among others. Residents enjoyed each other's company and would gather outside in the communal spaces for conversation or barbecues. Parker describes how community members all watched over each other's children as they played in the neighborhood, and kids frequently gathered at the Parkers' household, even staying for dinner sometimes. In general, it was a tight-knit community with close networks of friendship and mutual support, where Parker remembers, "We looked out for one another," and how residents would "sleep with the screen doors open . . . and you felt safe. You never gave a thought to nobody harming you or anything—[it] wasn't even a fleeting thought that any harm would come to you in that area." Neighbors, she says, would help each other when they needed it. She recalls that the civic association took care of many of the community's maintenance needs until the city stepped in to take over many of these duties after neighbors began speaking out at county council meetings.

Children in her neighborhood went to Dunleith School, Parker remembers. Her oldest daughter went to De La Warr High School, but her other three attended William Penn in the mid to late 1970s. For recreation, the kids played baseball, and Community Presbyterian Church held many activities for them. Parker also recalls a summer camp put on by the State Police that neighborhood children attended. In addition, the Parkers would take their kids roller skating and to the movies. She also indicates that the families would host each other's kids for dancing and entertainment.

Parker recalls some of the racism she and her family encountered in Wilmington and along the Route 9 corridor, particularly in the late 1960s and 1970s. She describes how the family encountered racism from potential neighbors in Wilmington while house hunting in the late 1960s prior to purchasing in Oakmont, and how, when her children were young, her family was treated with suspicion from staff when they visited the public library in New Castle. Parker's job as a Head Start recruiter throughout the 1970s brought her into some of the majority white neighborhoods along Route 9, where she recalls a racially charged exchange in Collins Park. She also recalls that Holloway Terrace had a racially antagonistic atmosphere.

Parker notes some changes to the neighborhood over the years. While her children and their neighborhood friends often played in the side yard adjacent to their house, Parker notes how impressed she is with the amenities of the park in the center of the neighborhood that went in later, including how well the city maintains it. She says that today the neighborhood lacks the same neighborly quality it once had and that she no longer knows most of her neighbors. She notes, too, that many of the properties have been purchased as rentals in recent decades. The demographic composition of the neighborhood is different from the early days, too: while the neighborhood was almost entirely Black when her family moved there, today she says there are more white and Hispanic residents.