Jane Henry
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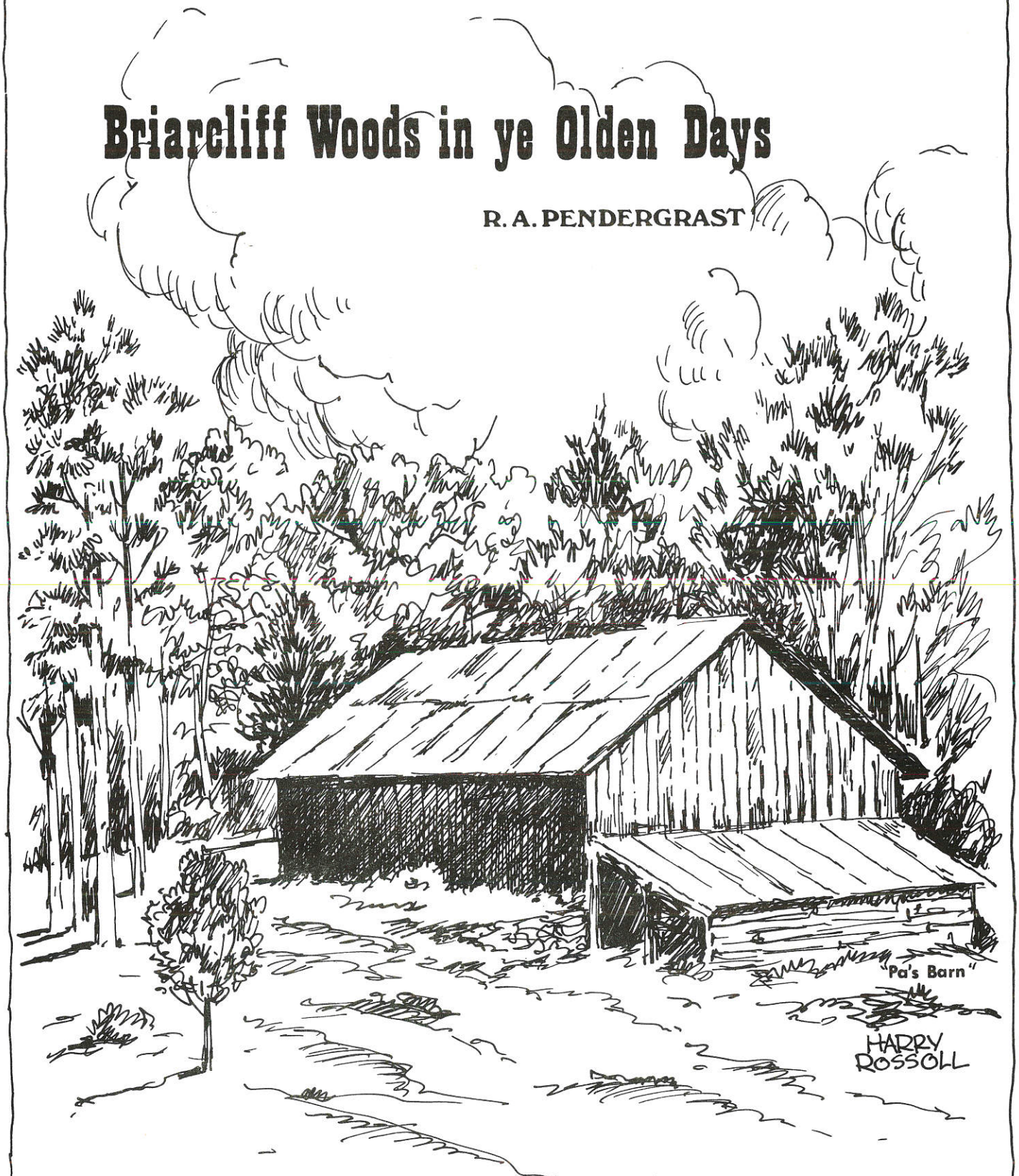
Briarcliff Woods in ye Olden Days

R. A. PENDERGRAST



Briarcliff Woods Civic Association

PREFACE

By way of introduction let me state that I am by no means the oldest in terms of residence in the area now encompassed by Briarcliff Woods. My acquaintance with the area dates only to 1929 when I was a pre-school child, and at that time the Lively and Buchanan families were established residents. Therefore, any person who is truly interested in history of this section of DeKalb County should consult Mr. L. E. Munday, Mr. W. R. Lively, Mrs. G. A. Oakes, Mrs. T. O. Humphries, or Mrs. J. R. Nalley, any of whom are far better qualified than I to describe the gradual encroachment of suburbia on what was once an area so remote that one looked up when an automobile came along Briarcliff Road. At any rate, I have been asked to write on the subject, and write I shall, to the best of my ability.

Briarcliff Woods In Ye Olden Days

The chain of title to my four-acre plot at the corner of Briarcliff and Chrysler Drive traces through my father, John Brittain Pendergrast (who conveyed it to me by deed of gift) and the Lively family back to Milton Lively in the early 1800's when this was part of Gwinnett County. The plantation passed from the first Milton Lively to his son William. My recollection of old "Uncle Billy" Lively is exceedingly faint, though I vividly remember his account of seeing the Yankee soldiers overrunning the place. Part of the old plantation home still stands, considerably remodelled, atop the hill overlooking the valley down toward Oakawana and Abby Lane. His son, "Mr. Charlie", lived about at the corner of what is now Abby Lane and Briarcliff, and another son, "Mr. Will", lived diagonally opposite me in the white frame house still standing on the corner. "Mr. Charlie" had a sawmill across the road, about where Briarlynn Court is. The Buchanan home place is on Chrysler Drive, now occupied by their daughter, Lavinia Nalley. These were the only near neighbors we had in the early 1930's.

My father had bought, a little at a time, parcels from the Livelys and some adjoining property holders until ultimately he owned 90 acres on both sides of Briarcliff running from the Chrysler Drive Corner up almost to Crestline.

The roads have had their names changed. Crestline used to be Ridgeway Road. That part of Chrysler south of Briarcliff, running to Crestline, was Elmwood Road, while that part to the north was Johnson Road, so called because Miss Ruby Johnson owned property at the termination of the road (now across Interstate 85) where there was a small rental house occupied by the Fowler family. Mr. T.O. Fisher, of LaGrange, owned adjacent land. There was a rental house on it facing Briarcliff where Gardner Brown now lives. It was Gardner Brown who bought the Fisher property and the back portion of the Pendergrast land and developed Briarcliff Woods.

Briarcliff Road itself has not always been where it is

now. Traces of the old roadbed may still be found diverging from the existing right of way in front of my house and rejoining it just short of North Ridgeway. The relocation was before my memory but the old road used to be more visible than it is today. We did some grading to fill in the deepest cuts.

In 1930 there was a tenant shack on my father's land, right where the Coursey's driveway splits to circle the flower bed. It was rented to a negro couple, Hank and Leila. Hank, who was part Indian, was a charcoal maker. He burned hardwood down the hill in what is now my yard, and smothered the fire over with ashes and dirt. They moved when my father decided, in 1930, to build a summer cottage on the place, and my father, after placing a small bet with Dr. John Hurt, pushed the chimney down by hand. At that time we lived on Oakdale Road in Druid Hills and a trip to "the farm" was an adventure. Briarcliff pavement stopped at the grade crossing of the Seaboard tracks below what is now the Sage Hill shopping center. Wallace's mill was on Peavine Creek and the freight train occasionally stopped there. There was no depot, but a sign identified it as "Wallace, Ga.". In 1930 the nearest commercial facility to Briarcliff Woods was Mr. Homer Jones' grocery and filling station at the Clairmont corner. The gasoline pumps were operated by a hand lever. A vertical cylindrical glass chamber, graduated in gallons, sat on top of the post. Mr. Jones would pump up the number of gallons requested, which were then drained by gravity through the hose into the gas tank of the car.

The summer cottage my father built was a simple two-bedroom affair. We four boys shared one room with two double-deck steel cots. There was, of course, no gas, electricity, phone or water services, so we curbed up a spring and cistern and put a Harris compressed air water system in it to pump up the hill. We had a Kohler generator powered by a gasoline engine to provide electricity. Hank and Leila had used a dug well under the oak tree by their house, but it was not very hygienic and over the years we filled it up with trash and dirt. There is still a slight visible depression where the well was. When

school was out we would close up the house on Oakdale and move to the country for the summer, where we boys could run around like half-naked savages. It was a good way to grow up. We kept chickens and a cow. My father hired Clarence Buchanan to dam up the creek to make a little mud hole that sufficed for swimming. The grading was all done with a mule and drag-pan.

By 1936 Briarcliff was paved all the way to Clairmont and paving was projected to be carried further, so my father decided to build a permanent home in the country. This is the stone house now owned by my neice and her husband, Mr. & Mrs. J. W. Coursey, at 3436 Briarcliff Road. The builders finished before the WPA got through paving. In the winter of 1937-38 the only way we could get home was to come around LaVista and Oak Grove, down Elmwood, park in the Lively's yard and walk through the mud. My oldest brother Ambrose, was through school by that time and working in Delaware. Britt, the second son, was in Georgia Tech, while Bill was in Emory and I was in Druid Hills High.

Britt had an experience working with the carpentry crew that he says shaped the entire philosophy of his life. They were putting a roof up over the spring and cistern (we still had our own water system) and a stone mason built the footing. When the carpenter foreman came he stretched his tape across the diagonals and found it was not square. In the presence of my brother he summoned the mason and said "What kind of work you call that?" The mason replied, "I thought that was pretty good." The carpenter looked at Britt and said scornfully, "He calls wrong pretty good."

We did get electricity and a telephone (a four-party line at first) but the place was still remote. There were only two houses between us and Clairmont. I rode the school bus (Mr. Will Lively was the driver) to Druid Hills in the morning and in the evening rode it home about half the time. The other times I would walk from Druid Hills to Emory and study in the library until I could get a ride home with brother Bill. It was a little lonely severing after-school ties with my close friends, but I soon learned to drive and occasionally got use of a car

before I was old enough to be licensed. Those days were more casual.

Mr. Fisher built a respectable lake on his place. It lay approximately where the back yards along the low side of Imperial Drive are. I swam there when nobody was looking. Where Bill lives (3398 Briarcliff) there was an old log house sheathed over with clapboard, and a log barn. We got some tenants and kept cows, pigs, sheep, goats, horses and chickens. Eventually we built a better barn, where Renault is now. I well remember having to get up at dawn to milk the cow after having been out most of the night. I earned my college expenses playing in a dance band. In the winter of 1941-42 I would come home late at night and hear the rumble of bulldozers where they were working day and night to build the airbase over on the Buford Highway. The change I most regret in our neighborhood is the noise. Prop planes and stick-shift cars never bothered me, but jets and automatic transmissions are offensive.

The corner of Briarcliff and Clairmont started to get some commercial development after World War II. Mrs. Mollie Simmons, who lived in the stone house on Oak Grove by (now) Lakeside Highschool, drove an old Franklin long after Franklins stopped being made, and she bought gasoline at the Pure Oil station at the corner. The Franklin had an air-cooled engine. The boys at the station liked to tell any new employee to be sure to check Mrs. Simmons' water, and then stand back and watch while he searched for the radiator cap.

Gardner Brown bought the Fisher Property and most of my father's land and laid out the subdivision we live in. When I built, in 1956, Johnson Road was dirt, seldom maintained, and was frequently confused with the Johnson Road that is an extension of Highland Avenue. I took an address on Briarcliff until Brown paved the street and named it Chrysler Drive, then simply moved my mailbox around the corner to the end of my driveway and changed the mailing address. Our friends thought we had moved.

You-all come see us and we'll show you the site of the spring house, old road, barn, etc..

R. A. Pendergrast (1981)