

The Huntington Industrial Park & The Former West Elmwood Neighborhood: Quotations for use in teaching K-12 students

It was a good place to live. You know, you could have your little gardens because it was open space, you know...and so I remember my Uncle Jim and my cousin Precious that lived on Barrington St., they had a beautiful cherry tree in their backyard and the family still talks about how delicious the cherries were on Uncle Jim's tree. (Tall Oak Weeden Interview 6).

During the thirties, it was the one area in the city that was primarily a residential area for blacks. Those who lived there owned their own homes, had a moderate income, and knew everyone. The pride of the whole community [and] living together as a family is what made the Mashapaug Pond area so unique. And I think the whole uniqueness of it was that you had so many families that lived in this particular community that you knew them and knew about them and you knew their children. You could go up and down the street and you know it's something that just doesn't happen too often in today's society (Ralph Simmons Interview 3).

No, this was right across the street from where I lived. The brook came up out of the ground and just flowed away there and of course you know turtles, you saw turtles out there. There were crawfish. We used to like to catch crawfish. People used to get the snapping turtles and make turtle soup. Only thing we ever did with the snapping turtles was play with them a little bit and try not to get snapped. Let 'em go. But there were other people that made turtle soup because there was lots of lots of snapping turtles (Ed Hooks Interview 12).

All the trees, speaking of cooking, all the trees, fruit trees, peach trees, plum trees, apple trees. I mean all kind of apples, everything from a Crab Apple to a Macintosh. Grapes, both white grapes and black grapes were all through here. On the hills this area as you call it around the pond, there were blueberry bushes and raspberries, I mean. You could eat your way through there [chuckle]. And it was fun. Mostly raspberries and blueberries were on, they were just out there where everyone could get them. Most people on their private property would have their fruit trees. But as kids we raided them anyway. And I know I guess everyone raided everyone else's. Right across the street from us was an empty lot that had several peach trees and several, a couple of plum trees and I remember there was a brook that emerged from the underground and flowed toward Niantic Avenue if you want to take Frankfort Street (Ed Hooks Interview 11).

The water would run down through the spillway over the cement base. And it would run through a little field there, then run in back of Calart Artificial Flower Company which then supported a beautiful flower garden, in back of Calarts. It was like, it was like going into an oriental garden. It was spectacular. In the spring of the year, people toured that garden, took pictures of it. It was a highlight of Providence (Chatowsky Interview 4).

As you came along that shoreline now and you're kind of heading to the east, there was a vein of clay. That it was gravel and oak trees and everything on both sides of it but right from the pond up, there was a vein of clay that had to be thirty - forty - maybe fifty feet wide. And we as kids dug a cave in that clay. And that cave went in - god - it was dark. We had candles in there. That cave had to go in fifty feet, maybe forty feet. And we'd go in there and play and we'd sneak a cigarette and go in there and smoke as kids. But I can remember that clay cave and I'm sure the Indians [that] were in that area used that clay, maybe with some other stuff to make potteries, what not. But that's the only vein of clay and it was a natural vein of clay. It wasn't something that was dumped there because like I say, it went in twenty-five, thirty feet, maybe forty feet, I don't really remember. But we could crawl in it as kids. You know, three or four of us could go in there with candles (Chatowsky Interview 7).

I can remember at night, with my brother and I, skating down that pond. And this huge bird flew over the top of us. [My brother] took marine biology at URI and eventually went to medical school and became a psychiatrist. But, back then he was into all this stuff. Rocks and birds and snakes and lizards, he knew it all. And he looked up and it was a snow owl. And this huge snow owl flew over us a couple of times, maybe it saw us skating on the ice and though it might have been something it could pick up. I don't know. But...I'd never seen such a big bird in all my life. It had to have a five or six foot wingspan. And it flew in front of us and landed on the ice. And, you know, we stopped and looked at it but as we progressed toward it, I can remember it flying away. It was a beautiful starlit moonlit night and this snow owl flew right over the top of us. Incredible (Chatowsky Interview 9)

Quotes for use in teaching Middle and High School Students

Well, it's interesting that you should interview me, because my grandson was invited to a bowling party and that was in the old area...but I sat in the car while he spent about an hour or so inside with his mother and I looked up and I saw the sign: Niantic Avenue. And I said, oh my goodness, this is what people have been telling me. This is what has happened to West Elmwood. And of course the area in which I was sitting was totally industrial park. And I said, now I get it. But I had to come home and try to remember where Niantic Avenue was in relationship to Pacific, where I lived.

AE: That's really interesting. So, how did that feel?

JS: Felt very strange. In a sense, it almost gave me a period of being slightly depressed, in a sense, because the area was not there for me to remember anymore (June Simmons-McRae Interview 6).

It does have a certain deadness to it, and I don't know how else to explain it. But life has been taken out of many things, and I think that that's one example [pause]. Part of the pond, too, the other thing that I grew up with an instinct about was landfill [clears throat]. This is from the earliest I can remember, once I knew what landfill was, that I could recognize it, in artificial lakes and things like that, that this is something incomplete, or, or, it was a product. It wasn't real. That whole eastern side of Mashapaug Pond is landfill. If you look at it, it's all just debris – sand and gravel, old junk, old tires, stuff like that, that were just, you know, pushed into the side of the lake there to create more land for businesses along Reservoir Avenue (Bill Simmons Interview 12).

And at the end of that peninsula, on the, on the southwest side of that cove would be, let me see, oh I would say from the pump house maybe a hundred yards toward the end of the peninsula, the hobos that used to ride the trains had little camps set up. We never knew what they were 'til we, 'til one day we were in the woods and we saw this hobo. And they used to put bedding down and they'd sleep there. And as a slow freight came by and they wanted to get on a freight train, they'd go around the cove, across Gorham's property and up to the railroad tracks and jump on a plane and whatever their destination may be, that's where they went. But I remember. Matter of fact [laughs] one time, we found a bunch of snapping turtle eggs. And we went over to – there was nobody in the area – we went over to that little bunk that they had built with blankets and cardboard. We put the turtle eggs under the blanket and we took off us kids (Richard Chatowsky Interview 6).