

THE BANNOCKBURN STORY¹

By Mary and Jack Herling

What were the beginnings of Bannockburn, as we know it now? Back in 1944, in the depth of World War II, a group of individuals who participated in a variety of consumer cooperatives organized a Group Housing Cooperative. Their objective was to build homes and a community as well.

For a year and a half, they met with increasing regularity, first in seminars and then in larger gatherings at the Friends Meeting House on Florida Avenue to talk about hopes and plans. They invited architects and community leaders from various parts of the country to tell all they knew. Since construction was banned during the war, the interval—until peace came—had become a time for dreaming large dreams, to bring about the satisfaction of housing needs of consumers. Or as Will Shakespeare once remarked, “to give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.”

Over a period of time, small committees of exploration were dispatched to surrounding counties to find a suitable and available location, 75 acres or larger. On one of these forays, the Bannockburn Golf Club was discovered. Along with a clubhouse, it was 124 acres of rolling land, with wooded and open spaces. Somewhere between hope and anxiety, there was one who said: “This is the place.”

Through a combination of lucky events, it was learned that Bannockburn was to be sold at auction. Until the date of the auction, there was an interlude when interested members of the Group Housing Cooperative could visit the proposed site, quietly and with a seemingly casual air, to avoid the danger of having the owners raise the eventual price. Enthusiasm grew, but now there was the little matter of raising the money. Came two weeks of intensive activity by personal solicitation and letters to members of cooperatives in the

¹ The late Mary Fox Herling was the president of Group Housing Cooperative and the executive director of Bannockburn Cooperators, Inc. This article appeared, with slight differences, in this *Directory* (1976 through 2000) and in *Bannockburn, the Story of a Cooperative Community* (1978), published by the Bannockburn Community Club and updated in 1984. Copies of the updated volume are still available. Dick Ramsey brought this article up to date in November 2006.

District. The program was outlined and the property described. The response exceeded expectations. More than \$50,000 in cash and \$20,000 in pledges was raised and placed in the hands of a trustee who was to do the bidding. On a beautiful spring day—April 6, 1946—right at the old clubhouse, the auctioneer’s gavel fell and Bannockburn was born. The property was bought for \$193,000 with \$50,000 in cash. The owners were persuaded to take back a purchase money mortgage for the balance, with interest at 2.0 percent. The mortgage was paid off in three years.

It was Mary Goldwater, bearing the modest title of “consultant” to the Bannockburn project, who did a considerable part of the planning. An architect and planner herself, she contributed greatly to the success of the community’s reaction by her dedication and the generous sharing of her technical knowledge of the field and of the imaginative people in it. Her enthusiastic presence kept spirits high.

The next step was to find responsible, sympathetic and experienced architects. Finally, the project was placed in the hands of a team—Burket, Neufeld and DeMars—to develop site plans and see the project through. Bannockburn’s beautiful slopes presented engineering problems, but they also gave promise for each house of interesting vistas and of a site design not possible on level lots.

To participate in the matter of design and housing needs, members filled out long questionnaires. What did they want in their home? What did they not want? What could they pay? [At that time the average annual salaries of the members, mostly government workers, few of high degree, ran slightly above \$6,000, equal to about \$78,000 a year in 2006 given inflation and rising productivity.] Answers carefully analyzed and summarized were incorporated in the drawings of several types of homes.

As the Bannockburn plan took shape—actually there were several plans—it won the enthusiastic support of the nation’s leading planners. This is how Hugh R. Pomeroy caught the vision of the founders: “It will produce a real community in which family life can take deep root, in which the finest in citizenship can flourish and find security. . . . A most important consideration is the fact that the development will have integrity; it is not a raw fragment, ragged at the edges, raveling out in the adjacent neighborhood and feeding on the excellence of the environment.”

The first 24 houses—the “pilot project” with a variety of house types—were constructed in 1949-50 at Wilson Lane and today’s Braeburn Place. After many vicissitudes, the building of Bannockburn houses, about 275, was virtually completed in late 1960. These are only some of the high spots in the story of Bannockburn’s creation. Ordeal by committee seemed never-ending. The struggle for excellence, for confidence and reassurance lasted a thousand and one nights, some joyous and some complete with nightmares. And our history spawned the three “BCs”—BCA, BCC, and BCI—which are described in the “Community Organizations” section of this Directory.

Bannockburn has a history of paying attention to local needs and wants and of involvement in political and social issues on wider stages. Before the County was ready to build a school, the directors of the Bannockburn cooperative assigned nine acres of land on which the Bannockburn Elementary School now stands. The Bannockburn Nursery School has served Bannockburn and a far-wider area for decades. Many in the community worked to desegregate the Glen Echo Amusement Park. Residents harbored peace marchers, helped enroll inner-city children at Bannockburn Elementary School and participated in other civil rights and labor activities. Bannockburners of old were once described as “active, articulate, conscientious and concerned.”

In 1996, Bannockburn was half a century old and had grown by about 100 households with the addition of the neighboring Fairway Hills area the year before. The county spruced up Bannockburn with new curbs and sidewalks, and the neighborhood celebrated itself in a joyous homecoming weekend. The homecoming reunited nearly 800 current and past residents from across the country. Celebrants included second-generation Bannockburn families who had resettled in the neighborhood and pioneer homeowners who had moved on. A directory of residents over the years, the painstaking work of Bannockburn homeboy and researcher Danny Maltz, was published to mark the event.

The panoramic photograph (part of which was the cover of the 1997 *Directory*) taken at the reunion highlighted the many children who are part of the renewal of the neighborhood. Streets that in recent decades were without Big Wheels and other signs of childhood

sprouted and sustain basketball hoops and bikes, signaling new concentrations of younger families.

During the final weekend of June 2006, the community celebrated its 60th anniversary with the program—“Remember, Rejoice, Renew” that drew about 800 to many events. The fantastic weekend began Friday evening with an opening reception at the Clubhouse energizing 300 who attended. A Bannockburn swimming pool meet Saturday morning was followed by an outdoor luncheon cookout at the pool picnic area. A poignant Founders Day Forum was held in the Clubhouse Ballroom in the afternoon. It featured nine founders who shared their memories of the earliest days of the community. That was followed by an ice cream social on the Clubhouse grounds. A VIP reception for local officeholders who represent Bannockburn at the federal, state, and county levels netted three official proclamations honoring the community. The evening was capped by a gala dinner and dance. The fabulous dinner was under a huge tent erected on the flat surface below the first slope of the grounds behind the Clubhouse. Dancing was in the Clubhouse to a live band. The final event was the Farewell Brunch Sunday at the Clubhouse.

Many of the new residents share Bannockburn’s commitment to community and have embraced its activities and interests. Among these are the cooperative nursery school, swimming pools, and especially the Clubhouse. The neighborhood newsletter, published since May 1953, unites Bannockburn neighbors through reports of our passages, triumphs, and disasters: “Clubhouse Boiler Bursts!”—and the state of the world just outside our borders.

Every year the sense of community awareness is heightened by the production of the spring play, a musical spoof combining Gridiron Club candor and Hasty Pudding verve. The writers, the directors, the actors—nearly all are Bannockburn folk. The year 2006 marked the 50th consecutive annual Spring Show production, with the Clubhouse curtains opening on seven sold-out performances of “Solid Gold.”

Every year the neighborhood’s professional and amateur artists come together for a craft and art show that draws hundreds of customers from Bethesda and beyond. Both the spring show and the craft fair benefit the Clubhouse, the aging and much-used facility that is the physical heart of our neighborhood. It is where the children rally for their annual Halloween party, and where the ice cream socials,

Newcomers' Dinner, dance classes, New Year's Day potluck brunches, and many meetings of BCA, BCC, and BCI are held.

Keeping the Clubhouse going and in working shape has become a central focus of the neighborhood. Anyone wanting to offer labor or money on behalf of clubhouse renovation please contact the Bannockburn Community Club.

Throughout the years, the Bannockburn Community has enjoyed its close proximity to the Glen Echo Park. In 2002, when the Glen Echo Park Partnership for the Arts and Culture, Inc., replaced the Glen Echo Park Foundation, Bannockburn was pleased to have its representative on the new managing board of directors. Initially, Gerrit Hale, then president of the Bannockburn Civic Association was the BCA representative on the partnership board. Dick Ramsey, the current president of BCA, has been on the board since January 2005. He co-chairs the board's Operations Oversight Committee.

Bannockburn residents, who are considering a contribution to support Glen Echo Park, are urged to make it through the BCA. You can do this by making contribution checks payable to the Glen Echo Park Partnership (GEPPAC) and sending them to the BCA Treasurer, currently Cheryl Dodwell. Channeling contributions through BCA demonstrates the community's commitment to support the park and makes the voice of its representative stronger. Donations to GEPPAC are solicited, as are Clubhouse Renovation Fund contributions, during the annual combined membership drives of the Bannockburn Civic Association and Bannockburn Community Club.

Many permanent institutions connect Bannockburn, including the highly active PTA at Bannockburn Elementary School and the various community organizations. In addition, floating institutions such as the babysitting cooperative, book clubs, potlucks, and bridge gatherings keep Bannockburn neighbors in touch with one another.

A sense of permanence characterizes life in Bannockburn. Many residents temporarily overseas receive the monthly Bannockburn Newsletter to keep in touch when away from home, and many former residents continue to receive the Newsletter, as well, keeping in touch with former neighbors. All are neighbors, in the best sense of the word.