

# Mrs. Oliver, Where Have You Been?

by Mary Anderson Cooper

Eleanor Oliver was greeted with that question at a local dry cleaner on the west side of Connecticut Avenue, near what is now the Cleveland Park Metro station when she and her husband Len returned to the neighborhood after a six-year sojourn in Chicago. It is that sense of community that lured the Olivers to the neighborhood in 1962 and brought them back ten years later. Eleanor was a homemaker after her children arrived and Len, who worked for the National Endowment for the Humanities for several years, spent the last 30 years of his career as a free-lance consultant on public policy issues. A soccer fanatic, he was a member of the 1964 U.S. Olympics team.

The Olivers are veterans of many of the struggles that have taken place in the neighborhood over the years, including the effort to reopen Klinge Road, getting the area designated as a historic district, and the campaign to preserve Rosedale. Their daughter wrote her senior paper at Bryn Mawr on the campaign to save the Park and Shop and prevent its being massively developed.

Their children attended local public schools, graduating from Wilson High School. The Olivers are active supporters of the city's public schools. At one point in the mid-'80s Eleanor helped to run a cultural enrichment after-school program at John Eaton for children up to sixth grade level who needed a safe place to be until their parents finished their work day. This program was funded in part by funds raised at the annual Newark Street Block Party.

There were also morning "Front Porch Summer Camps" staffed by neighborhood teen-aged girls who would offer games and crafts and walk children to the playground so that mothers could have a few hours to get their own work done while the teens earned pocket money.

Reflecting on the fact that the city's schools did not always enjoy community support, Eleanor recalled once being asked, "Your children are in public school? Don't they have further academic aspirations?" Both children graduated from top colleges.

The Olivers found Cleveland Park to be a great place to raise children because the schools are excellent and their children could play safely outdoors all day. Their neighborhood on 34th Place "felt like home," perhaps in part because of the custom of holding "porch parties" several times a year, usually on Friday evenings after dinner, where neighbors get together to share news and welcome newcomers.

Asked how she had seen the neighborhood change, Eleanor said that when they first arrived, it was rather run down and unfashionable. The businesses were far more service oriented, with less emphasis on dining out. The Roma, Yenching Palace, and Hot Shoppes at McLean Gardens (now all gone) were nearly the only restaurants, and the buildings that are now mostly food service establishments then included barber shops, a hardware store, independent pharmacies, clothing shops, small Giant and Safeway stores, a furrier, several dry cleaners, shoe repair shops, a Chinese hand laundry, and a laundromat. Especially missed are Howie's Chicken Bucket on Connecticut Avenue, Murphy's 5¢ and 10¢ Store on Wisconsin Avenue, and Young Playways in the parking area next to the former 4Ps. Merchants knew the names of their customers, and offered more personal service than is available now.

Asked if there was anything she would like to see changed about Cleveland Park, Eleanor said she thought the neighborhood was getting "a bit precious" because people no longer do their

own yard work or paint their own houses.

She would welcome having neighbors be "more bold about living in the city" and "be creative about how they paint their houses." She would like to see more fruit trees planted and wishes that there were some beekeepers. Given the rich history of the community before it was Cleveland Park, she wishes that the former names of streets and neighborhoods were shown on street signs, beneath the present names. For example, 34th Place was once called Folsom Street, in honor of Grover Cleveland's wife.

Eleanor also cautions against rushing into any plan to close the service roadway on Connecticut Avenue since many people with mobility problems cannot walk to the shopping area and need to have parking available if they are to shop there. Also, given that Washington's weather is often either too hot or too cold to enjoy being outdoors, she thinks the desire for sidewalk dining is more wishful than practical. The service drive is there at the instigation of the shopkeepers, who wanted the parking.

Among Eleanor's many contributions to the community is the creation of a series of note cards showing a variety of scenes from Cleveland Park. While the cards are no longer available, their sale contributed to the budget of CPHS, which now owns the rights to the drawings. She also painted the picture of the Park and Shop that is inside the call box in front of Medium Rare at the corner of Connecticut Avenue and Ordway Street. Originally conceived as a monochrome illustration (reproduced below), but later colored at the insistence of the Call Box Project director, the picture is so accurate that it even includes the area's omnipresent pigeons.

