



On the Street Where We Lived

I was fortunate to have grown up with my younger brother and sister on a section of Hill Street in Latham Park, what realtors might call ‘Old Irving Park adjacent.’ Bordered north and south by Wendover and Hammel, this two block stretch had the feel of a cul-de-sac, as did the avenues west and east—Grayland, Briarcliff and Latham. My grandparents had lived in three properties on Hill at various times, my parents at 1116 before settling in to a two-story, late-1920s three bedroom brick bungalow at 1204. Our Mema lived on the corner at 1119 in a charming Tudor Revival cottage and would, almost every afternoon, walk down to ours carrying a basket covered over in gingham filled with still warm silver dollar buttermilk biscuits, lemon chess pies and pound cakes.

We were so close with our next door neighbors the Kings we became family, summer afternoons spent at Blair Park where the city paid two college coeds to babysit, play marbles, weave pot holders and get sugared up when the snow cone truck stopped at 2:00. The park was renamed Troy A. Johnson after the tall, skinny old guy who hung out there pulling quarters out of little kid’s ears, a public service if there ever was one. The ‘Toot Toot Truck,’ a Carolina Blue fifties Ford pickup loaded down with farm fresh produce, candy necklaces, Astro-Pops and Wacky Packages, made two daily stops in front of our home, operated by Mr. Wilbert Sullivan, a kindly, grey-haired country gentleman in a train conductor’s cap and bib overalls.

My father Bill Ingram worked hard but not long, whole-heartedly embracing Billy Black's philosophy: "If a man can't make a living by eleven in the morning he ought not to be in business." In cahoots with WBIG's morning man Bob Poole, Dad employed the body shop at Ingram Motors on North Elm to convert a school bus into a booze cruising nightclub, this in the days before liquor-by-the-drink, and could consistently be counted among the faithful at the M&M (Merchants and Manufacturers) Club bourboning weekday afternoons away shooting pool and playing gin rummy behind a black door buried inside the bowels of an increasingly seedy O.Henry Hotel. "Oh, our folk drank at midday, and before," my father's business partner turned author Thomas Peacock wrote. "But still had the grace to be a little ashamed and confined their tipping to places like the M&M Club, where the light of day had never once sullied its crumbling valances." About their decades long association Peacock marveled, "This blithe spirit, this happy warrior, whose work habits could have inspired seminars on how not to succeed, marched to his own bouncy drummer, and like the honey bee whose aerodynamic structure precluded the possibility of flight, flew anyway and made a little honey every day."

Don't get me wrong, my parents were the greatest. It's just that, despite waiting until their thirties, I don't think they cottoned much to the idea of raising kids, not at first. When Dad whistled out the door we were expected to prick up our puppy dog ears and race back to the kennel to be fed and put to bed by 5:30. That was so the adults could fire up The Snake Pit at the end of our shared driveway with the Kings, a circle of tattered lawn chairs littered with crushed butts and Budweiser pull tabs where Irving Park businessmen, car lot lizards, captains of industry, crazy neighbors and tipsy trust-funders gravitated towards during the cocktail hour(s). I believe it was Nancy Merritt who, upon witnessing this motley assemblage, quipped, "I don't know who wrote *Tobacco Road* but I know where he was standing when he thought it up!"

At eleven years old I published a weekly newsletter with content generated by peppering my parents, after they'd had a few drinks, with questions about the neighbors. Carbon-copying what they said, I peddled that chit-chat door to door for 5 cents (my sister insists she got 25). This led to visiting at length with several of the neighbors, like Harry and Daphne Lewis at 1202. Very nice couple in their 70s, the first time I was over Daphne enlisted me in a trick on her husband, a retired copywriter. In the RC Cola on the rocks I was to bring him, she gingerly placed a novelty plastic ice cube with a fly visibly encased within it. On its discovery Harry always acted surprised even though she pulled that gag so often it had to be a subtle form of torture.

Daphne really irked neighboring mothers by sunbathing nude all summer long in her wide open backyard. She couldn't have cared less there were youngsters

playing on all sides, her dried arrangement on full display. If nothing else Mrs. Lewis provided, for a gaggle of elementary school kids, a low bar for any expectations regarding the female form after puberty.

Don't know for who's benefit all that tanning was for, certainly not her husband in light of the sixty minute shrill, harpy-esque haranguing she assaulted him with every night, ending only after he mustered enough bluster to shout her into submission. Even death from a thousand pecks couldn't stop those verbal blitzkriegs, Daphne was convinced Harry's spirit remained seated to her left in some ethereal plane and could hear her every word just as clearly as we could next door. Mrs. Lewis passed away not long after he did but not before having the last laugh. Assisting her sister Dacia in packing up the home, whenever we entered a room knickknacks tumbled from the shelves, shattering against the hardwood floors, and that damn ice cube with the fly in it was in a glass next to where Mr. Lewis always sat.

After I staged a parody of *Dragnet* in a corner courtyard my dear old dad, no doubt intoxicated by its brilliance, station waggoned my brother Hank, sister Rives, Toot & Hannah King, the Warren sisters and myself over to channel 48's studio on Warehouse Street where they videotaped the play for airing on *The Kiddie Scene With Mr. Green*, a Bizarro world children's show hosted by an overly-effusive hippy dude that played 'Yakety-Sax' incessantly. (The 'Hill Street Moppets' had to tape the play twice after Trudie Warren called my 9-year old brother, who in all fairness was playing two roles, a dumbass.)

Mrs. Bunn, Irish born wife of a WWII Army veteran, lived directly across the street. On occasion she and I would sit together on her front steps while she chain smoked, complaining about married life. Hearing an explosion just after dusk in September of 1971, I ran to the front door to witness Mrs. Bunn standing atop her high perched porch, a .22 resting in her hand. Her 51-year old husband lay sprawled across the blacktop between our home, dead from a single gunshot. Naturally, we kids spent the evening posing for pictures inside the chalk outline of the body the police left behind, just like in the movies with one arm pointed up, the other down. Within a short time the shooting was ruled justified. Having exercised her Second Amendment right to a divorce, and following an appropriate period of mourning spent with her boyfriend, she returned to live in the home. A few doors north a homeowner tragically gunned down a teenager outside his home. The boy, who lived one block up on Grayland, was mistaken for (or actually was) a Peeping Tom nuisancing the neighborhood.

But it wasn't naked frivolity or the O.K. Corral aspect to life that made Hill Street so memorable, it was atmospherics of a different sort.

On February 12, 1960, local folks went to bed expecting rain but awoke to a skyfall lasting twenty continual hours, dropping 2¼ tons of ice and snow packed 9 inches deep. A mere prelude to March 9th when the other shoe dropped and a foot landed on the Piedmont, one of three events that month totaling almost two feet of snow. Maybe that's why the prospect of winter weather still excites me, the impression that waist-deep wonderland had on a 3 year old, followed as it was by the many super storms of the sixties... when the city's slipperiest slope, a white capped rapid, beckoned right outside our front door.

Beginning at the Grayland Street summit, West Northwood makes a dramatic plunge as it dissects Hill, Briarcliff then Latham Road before a seamless soft landing into the park where the landscape levels off for another block-long stretch. A quarter-mile long speedway where low riding road warriors whizzed downhill at speeds up to 25 mph. A spectacle this preschooler could still only enjoy vicariously as more than 2 feet of snow carpeted the streets over three months beginning New Year's Day 1962. Instead I was relegated to sledding down the Baby Bump, a short slope on our block traveling a whole sixty feet from the corner.

Hard to believe, but a mere 2-inch glacial glaze knocked the city off its feet for two days on January 12, 1964, sending myself, and even parents in the neighborhood, surging down the big hill under optimal conditions. Without significant drag or resistance, rocketeers reaching peak speeds became momentarily airborne at Briarcliff where the intersection levels off suddenly before resuming an even steeper downward trajectory. Someone would be watching for wayward cars jackknifing into Hill Street from Wendover but, as a city designated sledding area, burning smudge pots barricaded the final two blocks as Northwood shepherded sledders into Latham Park's chilly embrace. Ideally a journey grinding to a halt at creek's edge but, with a surface this slick, it took



considerable effort or a last minute bailout to avoid plunging into icy waters. A badge of honor for some but hardly worth an hour cooling your heels while layers of outerwear hung over a radiator to dry.

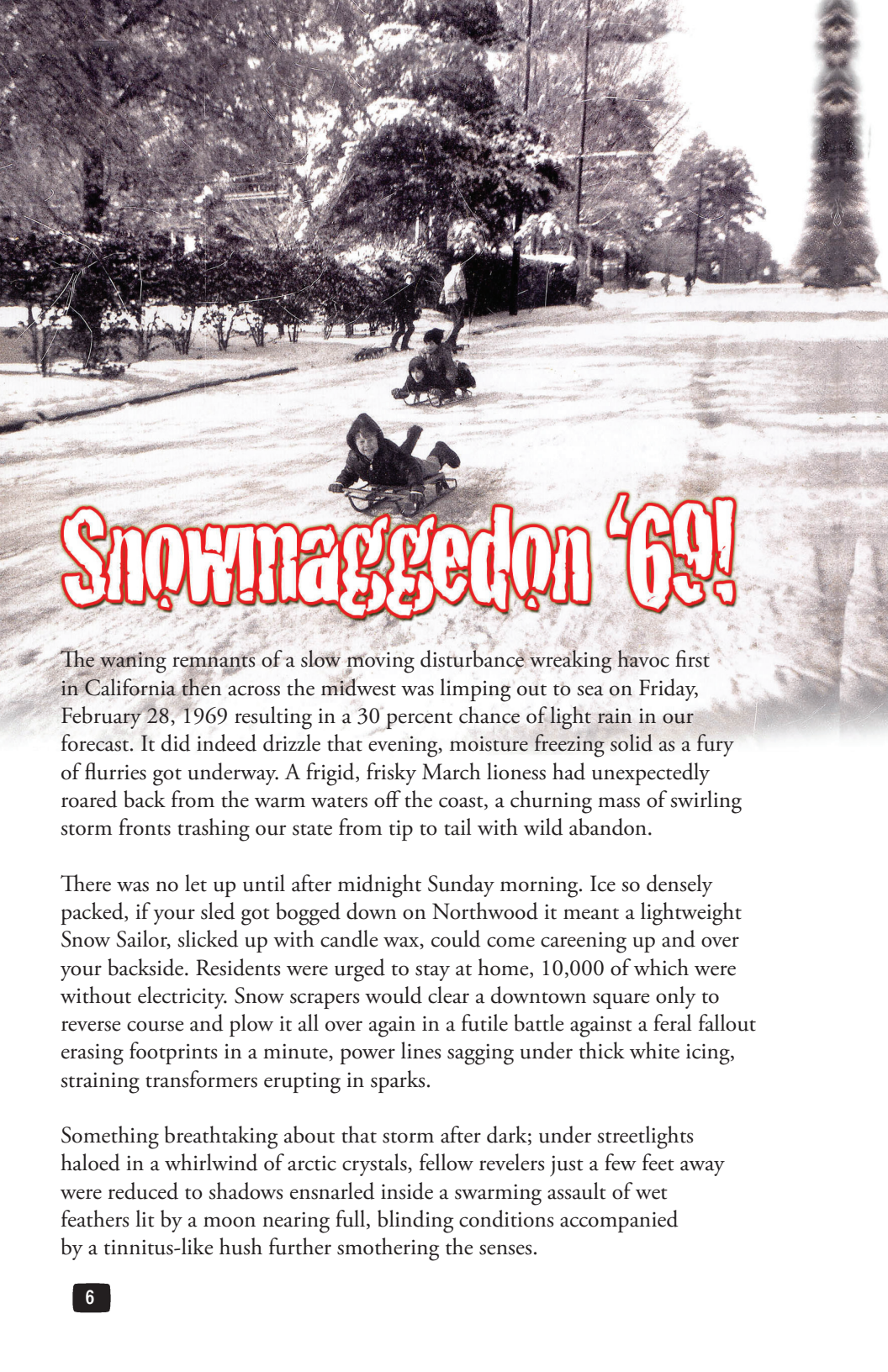
On January 25, 1966, for a third time that month, *The Greensboro*

Record affixed their snow covered logo to the masthead. The first frosted flakes began darting in the breeze that evening, over the next five days more than 16 inches whited out the landscape as a flotilla of Flexible Flyers slalomed down Northwood, scissoring in and out of crusty ruts like small crafts sailing into breaking waves. Early mornings, after a hard freeze, sleds were needles on a record dropping into hardened grooves worn into the roadway.



My siblings and I were commandeering two sturdy mid-fifties No. 12 Yankee Clippers purchased for about \$10 from Fleet-Plumber Hardware; a wood-framed model sporting a jetliner logo embossed into the middle of 3 varnished slats atop red steel blades. But baking pans, cafeteria trays, even flattened cardboard boxes would do in a pinch. New on the '66 scene were blue and yellow round plastic saucers with rope handles, capable of attaining dizzying speeds and rpms. For whatever reason, intentional pilot error maybe, these misguided missiles were highly prone to plowing into crowds, curbside boys and girls toppling like tenpins. The earlier metal versions were even deadlier, especially after traversing the Briarcliff landing when disc and rider parted company mid-air and that outbound torpedo tobogganed into someone's noggin, teeth and crimson ribbons splattering the bright white mantel.

Aluminum trash can bonfires blazed on corners into the wee hours, attracting teenagers, winos and old timers who swapped tales of massive coverings-over the likes of which these young'uns hadn't seen. Like January of 1900 when 2½ feet buried Greensboro alive, or so they said, no one was keeping score back then. They were in 1930 when 14.3 inches landslided from the heavens in a single day, a record that had gone unchallenged until an unlikely contender leapt forward to join that pantheon of champions...



Snowmageddon '69!

The waning remnants of a slow moving disturbance wreaking havoc first in California then across the midwest was limping out to sea on Friday, February 28, 1969 resulting in a 30 percent chance of light rain in our forecast. It did indeed drizzle that evening, moisture freezing solid as a fury of flurries got underway. A frigid, frisky March lioness had unexpectedly roared back from the warm waters off the coast, a churning mass of swirling storm fronts trashing our state from tip to tail with wild abandon.

There was no let up until after midnight Sunday morning. Ice so densely packed, if your sled got bogged down on Northwood it meant a lightweight Snow Sailor, slicked up with candle wax, could come careening up and over your backside. Residents were urged to stay at home, 10,000 of which were without electricity. Snow scrapers would clear a downtown square only to reverse course and plow it all over again in a futile battle against a feral fallout erasing footprints in a minute, power lines sagging under thick white icing, straining transformers erupting in sparks.

Something breathtaking about that storm after dark; under streetlights haloed in a whirlwind of arctic crystals, fellow revelers just a few feet away were reduced to shadows ensnarled inside a swarming assault of wet feathers lit by a moon nearing full, blinding conditions accompanied by a tinnitus-like hush further smothering the senses.

Up to 14 inches had fallen on Guilford County that weekend but, with temperatures hovering around freezing, that soggy slush had been pushed aside from major arteries to such an extent that school was scheduled to open on Monday. Before buses could be dispatched administrators changed their minds before another storm topped us off with 3 more inches of powder and frozen rain that night. It was only fitting we had snowfall not only for Christmas in 1969 but New Year's Eve as well.

By that point, the Snake Pit days had given way to what passed for parenting in the seventies. Helicopters? Submariners, maybe. As a sophomore I hopped off the bus from Page and walked into our front door to discover everything but the curtains, carpet and greasy appliances gone. 'We' had moved but my devoted parents neglected to tell me. I'd been shown the new house on Blair Street, vaguely aware it was nearby, just not exactly sure where. Miraculously, brother and sister were accounted for when I finally located the place.

Returning to live in Greensboro after a lifetime in Los Angeles, I fell sway to the blizzard of January, 1996, fiercest since '69. Flopping atop a skidder racing down Northwood from Grayland, visibility again nearing zero, I realized that, if indeed you can't go home again, perhaps a moment inhabiting that amorphous space between where home was and where you think it might be now is all the comfort a blanket of snow can promise, or ever possibly deliver.

