

Bellefonte nestles amid suburbs

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— Lichenstein, Lefler and Frampton included — their relatives settled in Bellefonte soon after the town was established.

Bellefonte itself is a relatively young town, a 20th century town, incorporated in 1915 after the merger of the three separate communities of Montrose, Montrose Terrace Addition and Bellefonte Heights. It happened during a period that Wilmington author Henry Seidel Canby has called "The Age of Confidence."

Canby wrote that this period was "the last era in the United States when there was a pause, and everyone — at least in my town — knew what it meant to be an American."

"It was a time," wrote Richard Lingeman in his narrative history, "Small Town America," "when in the nostalgic memories of some, at least, life was lived out in the soft light of a tree-shaded street on a summer afternoon, to the soft clip-clop of horses, the drone of the bees and cicadas, the clink of ice in the lemonade pitcher, the creak of the porch swing — a time of pause and prosperity."

By the 1920s there were more than 300 people in Bellefonte, some with vision:

John H. Wigglesworth, who'd started the town volunteer fire department out of his rear garage (the fire bell hung in a big maple tree), got the county to take over maintenance of town roads when he was a county commissioner, then eventually got the state to handle the job. Town Commissioner Constance Gantt worked on obtaining Depression-era government funds to build sewers — replacing the town cesspools, which were dangerously close to water wells.

"I built those sewers," said Allen W. Ridgaway, 69, who retired as a

part-time real estate agent last year. "I got \$7 a week working nights and weekends while I went to school. My father made \$8."

Ridgaway is one of the majority of older residents in Bellefonte who recall the past with fond nostalgia, but are quite pleased with Bellefonte's present. It has remained quiet and changed little, they say.

Oldtimers do miss certain things: The amusement parks near town; fishing for sturgeon on the banks of the Delaware River, where two highways have since been built (Gov. Printz Boulevard and Interstate 495); the trolley from Wilmington to Darby, Pa., which rolled along Brandywine Boulevard; downtown grocery stores (one of which, Clark's, used to deliver to every home in Bellefonte, the deliveryman arriving in a Model T).

There are things in written accounts they had forgotten: The recurring problem 20 years ago with a woman on Grandview Avenue and her noisy miniature pool; the rumors during 1952 of what town officials called a "malicious hot-rod jalopy club," whose members allegedly received merit points for reckless acts such as running over dogs; the hiring in late 1953 of the town's first policeman, who resigned six months later after a dispute with the town commission about expenses.

And there are some things that cannot be forgotten.

"I came out here after high school in 1935," said barber Dominic Nardo, 65, who's been cutting hair in Bellefonte for 47 years. "There was hardly anyone [in business] here at all except the old A&P, candy store and the barbershop.

"There were 500 [petition] signers to stop the barbershop. They said they didn't want any stores unless

they were bare necessities. They didn't think a barbershop was necessary.

"The first couple of years were rough, but they came around. I'm grateful to stay here until 50 years anyway."

Nardo's commercial neighbors used to be a hardware store, a pharmacy-post office substation and a grocery store. Those places are gone. But they've been replaced by other businesses — a bakery, a used-book store, a flower shop, a bridal shop, a beauty shop, a resale store and civil engineer's office.

Unlike some small towns, Bellefonte is unblighted by vacant stores, at least on Brandywine Boulevard, its main drag. The Gino's fast-food restaurant on the east side of Philadelphia Pike, a favorite spot of many area school children during the 1960s and '70s, will close its doors Dec. 31.

"We used to sit in there — 10 of us, eating one bag of french fries," recalled Jane Monahan, a student during the late 1960s at the now-closed Mount Pleasant Junior High School. "I grew up in that place."

There is reason to believe that the cyclical nature of things is at work here: Stores open, stores close, elderly people "pass on," as their still-living contemporaries term it, young people move in, and some of the children who were reared here return.

"When Kemer first suggested we move to Bellefonte," recalled Lynda Lefler, "I thought, 'Oh, Bellefonte.' I had my heart set on Brandywine Hundred. I didn't know where Bellefonte was; I thought it was all working class.

"When we got here I did a total about-face," she said. "There is so much variety and a lot of character."