

## **After growth, stability (most of the time)**

**1950-1990**

***“We had four ice cream shops in town. We rode our bikes up and down the Boulevard and stopped at the soda fountains.”***

*-- Longtime resident Don McKay, on growing up in Bellefonte*

After experiencing strong and steady growth throughout the first half of the 20th century, Bellefonte entered an era of stability from 1950 through 1990. The town’s population, recorded at 1,472 in the 1950 U.S. Census, would increase by 4.3 percent to 1,536 a decade later. Since the 1940 Census count of 2,593 was subsequently determined to be erroneous, the result of having counted households outside the town’s boundaries, it’s reasonable to believe that the 1960 count represented the town’s historic high.

Population then began a steady decline, to 1,442 in 1970, 1,279 in 1980 and 1,243 in 1990. The prime reasons for the change are quite obvious. First, by 1950, homes had been constructed on most of the available building lots in the town. More importantly, the second wave of suburbanization in New Castle County, starting at the end of World War II, was much larger than the one that prompted Bellefonte’s early growth. As new (and usually larger) homes were built across Philadelphia Pike, stretching west to Concord Pike and beyond and north to Naamans Road and the Pennsylvania state line, Bellefonte transitioned into becoming a mature community.

In fact, the headline of 1961 feature article about the Penny Hill- Bellefonte area in the Evening Journal described it as “suburbia running wild,” but the story made clear that most of the action was occurring outside the town because Bellefonte’s growth “was curtailed by its limited area,” which by then had been pretty much built out. That article also took note of the town’s prosperity, citing interest gained on the excess collected from sewer connection charges in the 1930s as a major factor in building up a balance in excess of \$50,000 in its investment funds.

For the town commission, 1950 began with a discussion of some familiar issues. The construction boom had not quite ended, and questions were raised in the January meeting about contractors and others digging out cellars and pouring concrete foundations on Sundays. Several commissioners suggested that doing commercial work on Sundays was not desirable, but one of them, perhaps remembering how Charles Frampton was fined for working on his own house in 1937, questioned how to distinguish between commercial work and individuals improving their own property. Although no action was taken, the discussion prompted a decision to search the town’s records for antiquated ordinances and to create an index of those that should remain on the books.

In February, discussion turned to a familiar topic, the widening and repaving of Brandywine Boulevard, with engineers from the state Highway Department describing a plan to improve the boulevard for its entire length, from Edgemoor Road to Duncan Road. The new roadway would be 40 feet wide, with curbs, a three-foot-wide strip of grass and four-foot-wide curbs on each side. The project was expected to start in the summer. As it turned out, work didn’t begin until 1951 and, not long after it began, several side streets, including Maple, Fairview and Phillips avenues, started giving way from the weight of buses using those roads as a detour during the construction period.

Roads dominated the commission's agenda in March as well, with talk turning to widening Beeson Avenue, Monterey Place and Schoolhouse Lane and figuring out how to pay for it. In July, the commission voted to have the town's attorney draft legislation for the General Assembly to consider that would permit the town to hold referendums to raise funds for public improvements like street and sidewalk paving. That legislation was ultimately approved, but another snag developed: the north side of Schoolhouse Lane was actually outside the town limits and the Mount Pleasant School District, whose property bordered the roadway, said it didn't have the funds to pay for repaving and the state Highway Department refused to pick up the district's share. In March 1953, residents of the three streets overwhelmingly approved a referendum permitting the town to issue a \$30,000 bond, to be repaid by a paving tax assessed on owners of the adjacent properties.

Traffic matters drew more attention in July and August with discussion on a variety of topics, thanks to a report prepared by Allen W. Ridgaway, who had been elected to the commission in June. He told his colleagues that the town had no jurisdiction over the opening of Marion Avenue to Philadelphia Pike because the unpaved area was outside town limits. Ridgaway also concluded that there was no need for traffic lights in town and that it would be impossible to enforce the town's 25 miles per hour speed limit without hiring a police officer.

But traffic wasn't the only issue the town confronted in 1950. The plumbing code was amended, the trash collection contract was renegotiated (\$3,000 for the year), a new fire code was adopted, new street signs were ordered, and a complaint was filed about a trailer parked on a lot on Grandview Avenue that was being used as the residence of the property owner's mother – a violation of the town's building code. Also, in September, a resident of the 1100 block of Prospect Avenue asked that "No Hunting" signs be posted near her home. Heeding her suggestion, the commission asked the town secretary to purchase about a dozen "No Hunting" signs and have them posted around town. (It isn't clear in the town's records whether the secretary ever followed through. The same resident made a similar request in August 1951.)

The issues discussed by the commission in 1950 were representative of what the town would face for much of the ensuing four decades – items that might be considered as "dull but important" punctuated by the periodic mini-crisis and quirky requests like for those "No Hunting" signs.

### **Growing up in the '50s**

In short, Bellefonte had settled into a period of stability – a generally quiet, comfortable place to live, a community that had reached maturity and attracted relatively less attention in the region as newer suburban developments grew up around it.

A 1951 community profile published in *The Morning News* described Bellefonte as "a typical residential suburb – the comfortable homes lining its tree shaded streets surrounded by well-kept lawns and shrubbery. It is a town whose life is brightened by the laughter of children and the cheery hellos of neighbors. It is a town marked by the whirl of lawnmowers in the summertime and by the pungent odor of burning leaves in the fall. It is a town which, in the words of those who take pride in calling it home, is 'a swell place to live.'"

Youngsters in town would also agree with that assessment, as the reminiscences of longtime residents Don McKay and Dorothy Marx indicate.

McKay, who was 1 year old when his family moved to Bellefonte in 1938, recalls spending plenty of time in the ice cream shops – “one in the apartment house across from the firehouse; one at Campbell’s, at Maple and the Boulevard; Mr. Ferrier’s off Marion Avenue, and in the drug store on Grove.”

“Doc” West, the proprietor of the shop at Grove and the boulevard, made his own root beer, and Marx declares that it was “very good,” especially with ice cream.

One of the more popular amusements of the day was stopping the electric-powered trolley cars that ran along Brandywine Boulevard. “They had two poles on top, connected to two wires overhead. If you pulled one pole down, you’d cut off the power,” McKay says.

When the interruptions became too frequent, Marx adds, the trolley company sent out a car to follow the trolleys and catch the youngsters in the act.

Marx, who has lived her entire life on Rodman Road, laments how times have changed since the ‘50s. “We all rode bicycles and played ball. There used to be kids around. Now you can drive on the boulevard and not know whether there are any kids in town,” she says.

If there wasn’t enough to do in town, there were plenty of amusements nearby, Marx and McKay recall. There was swimming in the Price’s Run pool in Wilmington’s Riverside neighborhood and the annual circus performances at the old Wilmington Ballpark at 30th Street and North East Boulevard and long walks down River Road to the Delaware River.

The views from town were pretty good too in those days. “I could sit upstairs in my dad’s house and look down and see the river,” Marx says.

For the adults running the town, however, the 1950s would offer a mix of big issues and quirky controversies.

1951 began innocently enough, when Harry E. Voelker, the town’s building inspector, informed the commission in February that he had approved a request from a Grandview Avenue resident for permission to build a tool shed in his yard. But the word around town was that the tool shed would be used as a pigeon coop, so the commission directed the town secretary to write a letter to the property owner informing him that this use would violate the town’s building code. In March, the property owner’s attorney asked the commission to reverse its decision. The commission backtracked, acknowledging that the pigeons would not be used for commercial purposes. Within three months, the commission passed an ordinance setting restrictions on the keeping of animals and fowl within town limits.

Interest in electoral offices reached a new high in Bellefonte in 1951, after Irvin H. Borer, who had been president of the town commission for 10 years, decided not to seek another term. A record 329 ballots were cast as nine candidates, including four members of the Brandywine Hundred Fire Company, vied to fill three seats in the June 5 election. The winners were: Maurice Campbell, with 202 votes; incumbent Lawrence Stinchecum, 178; and Paul Collison, 147. All four firefighters on the ballot were defeated. A week later, the new commissioners chose Stinchecum as their president and Frank Martin as secretary.

In 1953, trash and garbage collection became a sensitive issue. Robert Huber, who was being paid \$250 per month to handle the collections, asked in July for an increase of \$50 to \$75 per month. The commission appointed a committee to review the request, and invited Huber back to the October meeting to present his case. He explained that a recently passed state law had added to his expenses. The law, he said, required him to cook the garbage he collected before feeding it to his pigs. Also, he noted, because residents were permitted to place trash and garbage in the same container for pickup, the collections were practically worthless for him to feed to his pigs. Huber said he was willing to forfeit his \$300 performance bond to the town if it did not increase his fee. The commission voted in November to increase its monthly payments to Huber to \$307.50.

Also in October, the commission held a special meeting and decided to appoint a town law enforcement officer. Rodney D. Richter was sworn in a month later. The town also agreed to purchase a siren and light for his car, as well as a .38-caliber revolver and box of 50 shells.

In December, Richter filed his first monthly report, saying he had worked 93 hours, driven 222 miles and issued 135 warnings. He asked for a book of the town's current ordinances and a copy of any curfew law on the books, adding that he often saw boy 8 to 16 years old on the streets between 10 p.m. and 1 a.m. For the month, the commission approved paying him \$121.93.

Richter's service with the town would not last long. He complained at a special commission meeting in January 1954 that he was not permitted to collect a fee for each arrest he made. The commission then voted to pay Richter \$85 monthly, retroactive to December, with the payment intended to include any expenses he incurred for gas, oil and auto repairs. Commissioners also stated that the officer would not be paid any special fees. At the May 10 meeting, Richter announced his resignation, effective June 8, and asked for reimbursement of \$193.98 in expenses plus his \$85 monthly stipend. After Commissioner Paul Collison brought up the payment terms set at the January meeting, Richter said he would resign immediately. The commission accepted his resignation, and paid him \$28.50 for work performed in May.

By 1954, St. Helena's Catholic Church, just outside the town but considered by many to be part of it, had outgrown its original structure, built nearly 20 years earlier. The parish broke ground in March for a new, larger church, facing Philadelphia Pike. When construction was completed in the summer of 1955, the original church was converted to a parish hall.

As St. Helena's was completing its project, the Brandywine Hundred Fire Company was beginning one of its own, starting with a \$20,000 fundraising drive to help pay for construction of a two-story fire station that would feature six bays for fire apparatus and a first aid center, plus a meeting room for the town commission, on the first floor, with office and storage space upstairs. The building would face Brandywine Boulevard, behind the existing station which faced toward Rosedale Avenue. Members of the fire company were expected to handle much of the construction work. The project was completed in 1957 at a cost of about \$175,000. The old firehouse, built in 1923 with an addition in 1931, was torn down when the new building was completed.

### **Protests, protests, protests**

1955 offered an example of the difficulty the town occasionally encountered in enforcing some of its own laws. Remember the complaint that was filed in 1950 about the trailer parked in a yard on Grandview Avenue and being illegally used as a residence? Well, it was still there in the fall of 1955 and a resident complained again. An inspection revealed that the trailer had its own lighting, but no

sanitation facilities. The commission gave the owner until January 31, 1956 to have it moved. At the December meeting of the commission, the property owner asked for an extension until June, saying his mother was living in the trailer (just as she was in 1950) and that certain heating issues prevented him from having it moved that soon. The commission granted an extension until March 31.

If years had names, 1957 would be remembered in Bellefonte as “The Year of the Protest.” It started on May 13, when the commission met for the first time in its new meeting space in the new fire hall. Forty-two people turned out – not to check out the new meeting space but to protest plans for a liquor store at 901 Brandywine Boulevard. Commissioners noted that the town’s zoning code would not specifically prohibit a liquor store from being located in the business district but, given the strong opinion of the delegation, who claimed to represent 275 residents, the commission authorized their secretary, Ernest Martyn, to attend the upcoming hearing of the state’s Alcoholic Beverage Control Commission and speak in opposition of the proposal. Martyn would tell the commission that the town’s charter authorized only businesses that were “necessities” and that there were 22 licensed package stores within a half-mile of the town’s boundaries. The license application was ultimately denied.

Later in May a smaller group of residents protested the issuance of a building permit for a Cities Service gas station at the corner of Brandywine Boulevard and Elizabeth Avenue. The fire company also expressed opposition, saying the gas station would pose a fire hazard. Commissioners set up a meeting with the oil company to delay construction while determining the opinion of town residents. That protest failed as the plan satisfied the requirements of the town’s zoning code.

In response to those two protests, and before final decisions were made, commissioners hastily drew up a draft ordinance that would have eliminated the business district along Brandywine Boulevard, with specific prohibitions of gas stations and liquor stores, and including a grandfather clause to permit existing businesses to remain in town. At a special meeting on June 3, Charles Scharp, the commission president, stated that the prevailing view of residents was that they did not want to see businesses that would attract customers from outside the Bellefonte community.

The battle over the business district would continue at meetings in June and July, with owners of businesses saying the proposed ordinance’s requirement that an existing business could only be replaced by a similar operation would eventually destroy property values and lead to a town filled with empty storefronts. The commission debated, adopted and revised several versions of the ordinance before finally voting in October to reinstate the business district on Brandywine Boulevard with stricter requirements – including consent of three-fourths of the adjacent property owners and passage of a town-wide referendum – for approvals for certain types of new businesses.

Smaller protests occurred in September. The first came when a resident of Grandview Avenue requested a building permit to transform half of his garage into an office for a kitchen-cabinet sales business. The property owner was told to take his request to the town’s Board of Adjustment. He returned to the commission in October to report that he had shut down his business. The other protest concerned residents in the 900 and 1100 blocks of Grandview, who had begun repairing and selling cars in their yards. Neighbors complained that these operations were turning the street into the town’s “Skid Row.”

While the business district controversy was raging in May and June, it was only fitting that there would be an unprecedented outcome to the annual town elections. With three seats open, incumbent Alfred J. McGinnes and newcomer David Freeman finished first and second on June 4, with 92 and 79 votes, respectively. But there was a tie for the third seat, with the incumbent, Howard R. Searles Sr., and

Edward A. Strahm each receiving 66 votes. That forced a runoff election on June 10, and the margin of victory was razor-thin, with Strahm winning 55 to 53.

After a hectic 1957, relative calm returned to Bellefonte the following year. The commissioners did increase the town's tax rate by a nickel, to 33 cents per \$100 of assessed valuation, as the town's budget increased to \$12,141. The major expenses, as usual, were for trash garbage collection (\$5,100), street lighting (\$2,026) and the annual contribution to the fire company (\$1,500).

Although there was no report of a ribbon-cutting or any other celebration, one of the town's longest-running stories finally had a happy ending. Marion Avenue, for the first time since Bellefonte's incorporation, was paved and opened to traffic in August from the town line west to Philadelphia Pike. The new roadway would relieve congestion on Rodman Road and the narrow Bellefonte Avenue and it would eventually become the primary entrance to the community from Philadelphia Pike.

And, as has become common for the commissioners, they had to deal with another quirky complaint – this time over barking dogs. In November, they gave final approval to an ordinance requiring that dogs be confined to an enclosure from which they cannot escape from sunset to sunrise and imposing a \$5 fine on owners whose dogs annoyed others by barking or howling. Many of the complaints about noisy dogs were related to a dog-shampooing business on Grove Avenue near Brandywine Boulevard. Two months later, the commissioners were told that the business was operating under “improved conditions.”

The commission ended the year by dealing with an unexpected expense. Due to a new state requirement for keeping records, they voted to spend \$346 for a fireproof file cabinet and \$69.75 for a standard file cabinet.

### **The missing ordinances – and how to enforce them**

At the end of the decade, the commission found itself in a somewhat embarrassing position. As reported in *The Morning News* on August 12, 1959:

*The commissioners know there are traffic, health and other ordinances but they are buried in the minutes of 30 years of meetings or other old records. Commission President Ernest H. Martyn has been making a review of past records in an effort to locate the ordinances but so far has not found any of them.*

The matter of the missing ordinances came up in a discussion about confusion in the enforcement of town ordinances. At the time, the closest magistrate (justice of the peace), who would normally have jurisdiction to handle these matters, was a resident of Gwinhurst, a community near Philadelphia Pike and Silverside Road, but he had recently declined to hear any cases concerning violations of the town's laws. On top of that, the commissioners were uncertain of the extent of the powers of the town alderman, a law-enforcement position established by the town charter in 1915.

Nevertheless, the commissioners continued to pass new laws when they thought they were needed. They closed 1959 by approving a measure authorizing the towing of vehicles parked overnight on the town's streets for extended periods of time.

The decade of the 1960s began with trustees of Bellefonte Methodist Church purchasing a two-story apartment building on the lot on the corner of Elizabeth and Rosedale avenues. At the same time, the church announced that work was under way on an addition that would add eight classrooms and an assembly room to the north side of the church.

In September of 1960, the commissioners resumed discussion of how to handle law-enforcement issues, bringing in Newport's police commissioner to explain that town's procedures. Commissioner Stoll Grotz emphasized the importance of taking action because of a growing number of complaints about illegal parking, speeding, overgrown and trash-filled lots, rowdy youth and damage to several no-parking signs that had recently been installed. The discussion continued in October, with commissioners reporting on a meeting with New Castle officials to learn about their procedures, and in November, when Newport's town attorney participated in the monthly meeting.

Several options were considered. The town's alderman could assume law-enforcement duties, but the town charter set a \$10 limit on fines the alderman could impose and several town ordinances established more severe penalties. Empowering the alderman to impose larger fines would require amending the charter, a time-consuming procedure that would require action by the General Assembly. Hiring a policeman was another possibility, as was asking New Castle County police to help enforce parking regulations.

In December, the commission started moving to resolve the issue, establishing a committee to draft a new code of laws for the town and securing a legal opinion from the state attorney general to define the powers of the town's alderman to bring violations of town ordinances to hearings before magistrates.

While the town struggled over how to enforce its laws, another example of the problem came before the commission in July of 1961. Residents complained that the 17 dogs owned by Mrs. Joseph Kuchenbacher were creating a nuisance in the 1000 block of Grandview Avenue. At the time of the meeting, Mrs. Kuchenbacher said she had only four dogs. The commissioners told the complaining residents that they would have to go to a magistrate and swear out a complaint. Edward Strahm, the town secretary, said the town charter had a section calling for a \$10 a day fine for maintaining a nuisance. Mrs. Kuchenbacher said her attorney had been unable to find such a law.

In December, the town took a significant step toward solving the enforcement issue by hiring a law-enforcement officer, Wilbert F. Peterson, a former town commissioner.

More progress had been made by January 1962, as Strahm reported that he had prepared a package of ordinances – some new, some revised – that would be ready for the commission to adopt in a month or two. Among the items covered: prohibiting bicyclists, sledders and skaters from clinging to another moving vehicle on the street; a ban on allowing weeds to grow on vacant lots; parking restrictions; and requiring that trash be placed in plastic, rubber or metal containers.

By April, Strahm and his wife, Dorthea, had compiled and typed a new package of the town's laws and had provided them to Peterson, the law enforcement officer, and to Watson S. Minner, the magistrate who lived closest to town, as he would be responsible for imposing penalties on violators of the ordinances.

With its laws updated, the town took action in August against Mrs. Kuchenbacher. Commissioners signed out a warrant charging her with maintaining a public nuisance. By December, her case had been

moved up from Magistrate Court to the Court of Common Pleas and Judge Robert Wahl gave her until January 15, 1963, to reduce her brood of miniature poodles to two or face sterner action. "Breeding dogs is a commercial business and should not be conducted in a residential area," the judge said.

1963 began with a mix of good news/bad news for the town. The good news came first, with federal officials heeding a plea for a postal substation. The request was made in January and by June the substation was open inside the Bellefonte Drug Store, at the corner of Brandywine Boulevard and Grove Avenue. The bad news was that the state didn't respond favorably to a request to repave five miles of roads within the town (every street except Marion Avenue and Brandywine Boulevard). As a result, the commissioners decided in June to hold a bond referendum so the town's property owners would wind up paying for the road improvement project.

Concerned about low participation by residents in elections and other town affairs, the commissioners took an unusual step in June – voting to impose a 50-cent head tax on all residents age 21 and older who did not own property in town. At the same time, they decided to change the voting eligibility requirement from property owners only to anyone over 21 who paid taxes.

Trailers of all kinds – boat trailers, camping trailers, anything with a hitch and one or more wheels – became the town's preoccupation in 1964 as residents urged enforcement of an ordinance passed in the 1940s. Some 30 residents turned up at a commission meeting in May to complain about the proliferation of trailers parked on the street, in driveways or in back yards. The demonstration of strength in numbers was so persuasive that even a commissioner who owned a boat trailer voted to enforce the ban. (The commissioner, David A. Freeman, did acknowledge, as reported in the Evening Journal, that he had a place to keep his trailer – at his workplace, outside the town limits.)

Following the town elections in June, the newly reorganized commission put a hold on enforcement of the ordinance while a committee of eight residents studied the matter. More than 50 residents showed up at the commission's June meeting to discuss the issue.

The committee returned in July with three recommendations: trailers could be parked in back yards, provided setback requirements were followed; maximum trailer size would be 25 feet long and 2,000 pounds gross weight; if a neighbor objected to the presence of a trailer, the owner would have to receive written consent from a majority of adjacent neighbors to keep the trailer on the property.

1965 opened with a Boy Scout from Bellefonte securing the year's equivalent of "15 minutes of fame." Eagle Scout James Pooley, who lived at 805 Rodman Road, received a handshake from comedian Jimmy Durante on "The Ed Sullivan Show" on Sunday, February 8, then headed to Washington, D.C., the following day to help present the Scouts' "Report to the Nation" to President Lyndon B. Johnson, Speaker of the House John McCormack, other lawmakers and government officials.

In April, the town got its first opportunity to glimpse the future of television as Rollins Inc. explained its proposed cable TV service. Wilmington had already granted Rollins an exclusive cable franchise, and the company was also seeking exclusive service agreements with Newark, Newport, New Castle and Elsmere. Rollins said it would provide subscribers with access to eight new TV stations – in addition to the four already available locally – for a fee of \$5 per month for the first TV connection and \$1.50 for each additional set. Rollins, however, did not make a good first impression with the town commission. They didn't have a written proposal ready for a special meeting that they requested, and then their representatives didn't appear as promised for the commission's regular meeting the following week.



Action on the proposal was tabled.

The mid-1960s brought to the commission some new names. Harry B. Raign and Clinton Rowe were first elected in 1963, with Ann Frampton following a year later and David Darling the year after that. In 1978, Frampton, as president, as well as Raign and Darling were still serving on the commission, while Rowe had moved over to become the town's treasurer.

*Author's note: From mid-1965 into 1969, much of Bellefonte's history remains a blank slate. Minutes of meetings of the town commission for that period are nowhere to be found – not in the Town Hall, not at the State Archives. In 1980, the town did receive a letter from the Archives indicating that documents from the town had been mislaid, but it was not clear what period the documents covered. Reporting of town activities by The Morning News and the Evening Journal in the late 1960s was also sparse. The most significant news item from those years was a report on the death of Frank Murphy, a town commissioner. On Aug. 22, 1966, Murphy, a troubleshooter for Delmarva Power & Light Co., fell from a utility pole as he attempted to inspect a transformer after residents of the Windybush neighborhood in Brandywine Hundred had reported a power outage. He was 40 years old.*

In early 1969, at the height of the Vietnam War, 22-year-old ceramist Harry J. White, who had his studio at 803 Brandywine Boulevard, the current location of Brandywine Arts, became front-page news for a day when he asserted that he would not be reporting to the State Armory in May for a pre-draft physical examination. White had a good reason for that decision, as he was diagnosed as a child with Friedreich's ataxia, an inherited neurodegenerative disorder for which there is still no known cure. White's mother, Mrs. Joseph Hoon, told The Morning News that she had thrown out three letters from the Selective Service System to her son after the local draft board had apparently failed to follow up on phone calls she had made to the draft board when White was 18 and 20 to advise them of his condition. The matter was resolved when a heart specialist who had previously treated White agreed to send a letter to the draft board stating that White was unfit for military service.

On Tuesday, May 20, disaster struck just outside the town limits as St. Mark's Lutheran Church, on Duncan Road, was gutted by fire. Members of four fire companies – Brandywine Hundred, Claymont, Talleyville and Minquadale – battled the blaze, which was first noticed about 10:30 a.m. by a patron of the Delaware Trust Company branch bank on Philadelphia Pike. Several bank employees helped evacuate kindergartners from the education building that adjoined the church. Officials of neighboring congregations provided support, with Hillcrest-Bellefonte United Methodist Church offering its sanctuary for use the following Sunday for St. Mark's scheduled confirmation ceremony for 22 young members of the congregation. The fire severely damaged the interior of the church, but the brick exterior walls remained standing. The pastor, the Rev. George P. Mocko, estimated damages at about \$200,000.

The summer of '69 marked the first appearance of a Bellefonte resident in the "Vietnam Mailbag," a popular column that ran from 1968 to 1972 in The Morning News, featuring letters written by Delaware servicemen stationed in the combat zone. The column is believed to have been the only one of its kind published in a U.S. newspaper during the Vietnam era.

"I have finally arrived in the land of the endless summer – and rain," Army Cpl. Bohdan "Bo" Tanchuk wrote to columnist Nancy E. Lynch. He described Saigon and its suburbs as "a huge slum [where] the living conditions are unthinkable and despicable" but reported that "the Vietnamese beaches are really beautiful."

Later in July, after astronaut Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon, the Wilmington papers were filled with commentary, much of it saluting the achievement. In a letter published on July 22, Rev. Mocko, the pastor at St. Mark's Lutheran Church, took a dimmer view. He wrote: "As I face the specter of my individual death in a world which, incidentally, will still be full of disease, bloodshed and injustice, I cannot see how the fact that I saw television pictures of someone walking on the moon will provide me with much support."

Later in the year, more mundane matters attracted attention, like the hearing in October when the lawyer for the proprietor of the Bellefonte News Shop at 901 Brandywine Boulevard asked a judge in the Court of Common Pleas to order New Castle County police to return evidence seized during an arrest in February on charges that were subsequently dropped. The evidence, according to The Morning News, consisted of about \$300 worth of "nudie books and magazines." The store's proprietor, Gilbert Henick, had been charged with violating a state law that banned the production, sale or distribution of obscene materials. According to his lawyer, Henick had placed each item in a brown paper bag which was then stapled shut so only its title was exposed. The lawyer, citing U.S. Supreme Court rulings, said the search was improper.

In 1970, speeding on Brandywine Boulevard was a major topic of conversation, prompting discussions about paying Delaware State Police for additional patrols. According to correspondence between the state police and the town commission, police set up a radar unit on the boulevard for three hours and made about 20 arrests, including one for driving 57 miles per hour in a 25 mph zone. After a few months of meetings and exchanging letters with the state police, an agreement was reached to have Bellefonte and Arden share the cost of supplemental patrols in their communities, and a sixth-month trial of the arrangement began in late January 1971. The agreement was renewed in July and would remain in effect until Oct. 1, 1973.

### **A town hall, finally**

As 1970 drew to a close, the town learned that the trustees of the Hillcrest-Bellefonte United Methodist Church were again trying to sell the old Bellefonte church, which by now had been reduced to serving as a thrift shop operated by the women of the congregation. The town considered the church as a possible permanent location for the town hall. Commissioner Ann Frampton reported that she was trying to set up a meeting with church leaders, but it was being held up pending an appraisal of the property, which included two additions made a decade earlier to the church as well as a two-story apartment building at the corner of Elizabeth and Rosedale avenues.

In February 1971, the church notified the town that the appraisal was under way. A few weeks later, the church issued a formal statement acknowledging the building was for sale.

Negotiations continued, and the town commission held a special meeting on May 3 to discuss the possible purchase. At that meeting, Commissioner Harry Raign reported that another church had offered to buy the property for \$55,000. Commissioners remained interested in the site, but did not want to raise taxes to pay for the purchase or additional maintenance costs. They directed Raign to seek additional information from the church. A week later, the commission voted to offer \$55,000 for the property. The church accepted the offer and the transaction was completed in December.

Within three months of acquiring the church property, the town realized that it had acquired a nuisance as well. Neighbors complained to the commission about loud noises, including music from drums and amplifiers, coming from the second-floor apartment. Squealing tires and gunning car engines added to the disturbances. In June, the commission warned the upstairs tenant that that he would have to vacate the apartment if the loud music did not cease.

The dispute continued into 1973. When both tenants were behind on their rent payments by May, the commission cut off delivery of heating oil to the building and sent out eviction notices. During the commission's June meeting, a last-ditch effort was made to collect the back rent. Two commissioners were dispatched to the apartments: there was no answer upstairs and the first-floor tenant promised to pay up the next day. It is unclear whether either tenant ever paid their back rent, but the Brandywine Hundred Fire Company requested permission in July to use the building for training purposes and the commission decided in September that the building would be torn down in November. Longtime resident Don McKay, who was president of the fire company from 1967 to 1972, says he believes the building was burned down as a training exercise.

In April 1971, discussion resumed on a topic first brought up in 1965 – developing a franchise agreement to provide for cable television service in the town. A representative of Rollins Cablevision made a presentation at the commission's June meeting. Under the proposal, the town would receive a fee equal to 2 percent of annual receipts or a minimum to be agreed upon by the two parties. The proposal was sent to the town's attorney for review.

The cable installation, however, would not go smoothly. By mid-1974, Rollins had installed cable wiring on some utility poles in the town, but it had not begun making connections to individual homes. Residents complained to the commission and to Rollins, writing letters and sending petitions, but to no avail. The back-and-forth would continue for six more years, with Rollins claiming for much of that time that Federal Communications Commission regulations prevented them from setting up cable service that included Baltimore television stations in Bellefonte, New Castle and Arden. Finally, in September of 1980, Rollins and the commission reached an agreement. Residents would get 12 channels for a \$10 installation fee and \$8.34 per month, plus a \$2.10 monthly maintenance fee. The town would receive a 3 percent commission on the base rate. That amounted to 25 cents per customer. One premium channel was available – HBO, for an additional \$9.25 a month.

In September 1975, Bellefonte resident Janice Slattery came to the commission with three suggestions – two of which would eventually fall into place. She suggested additional police protection to help businesses on Brandywine Boulevard cope with vandalism, setting up a cooperative childcare center in a portion of the town hall and transforming the area next to the town hall into a mini-park, complete with shrubbery, benches and a fountain. Commissioner Padraic Boyle followed up with a logical suggestion: make Slattery the head of a committee to study the feasibility of a childcare center. Slattery returned in October with her recommendations and some estimates. She said the childcare center would need a fenced recreation area, separate bathroom facilities, cots and a room for the children to nap. By the following June, Slattery's involvement in Bellefonte grew even more, as she was elected to a two-year term on the town commission.

Police patrols remained an issue in 1976, with residents complaining not only about speeding cars but also about disturbances outside a pizza shop on Brandywine Boulevard, where gangs were said to congregate at 1:30 to 2 a.m. Commission members contacted both state and county police for estimates on the cost of additional patrols. In the following two years, episodes of vandalism raised concerns, and

residents expressed dissatisfaction with what they considered slow response times by county police. Toward the end of 1978, commissioners worked with county police to set up a “community watch” program in which pairs of neighbors would walk through town on three-hour shifts for several hours a week and call police when they observed inappropriate activities. The experiment didn’t last long because few residents were interested in patrol duty. In May of 1980, the commission signed an agreement to pay for supplemental coverage from the state police for 12 hours a week.

For all the concern about public safety, the town experienced a significant decline in interest in public service in the 1970s. The annual elections in 1977 and 1978 drew a total of five voters, a far cry from the 329 ballots cast in 1951. Interest surged for the 1979 voting, with 28 residents heading to the polls, even though the candidates for five offices were running unopposed. Harry Raign won his ninth term on the commission, and was joined by newcomers Joann Dougherty and Kathryn Lichtenstein. Clinton Rowe and Charles Frampton were re-elected treasurer and assessor, respectively. The elections marked the end of David Darling’s 14-year tenure on the commission.

While pigeons have a significant historic connection to Bellefonte, birds of a different feather flocked to town in the mid-1970s. Morning News columnist Betty Burroughs, known for her reporting on animal issues, wrote on several occasions about a pair of yellow-headed Amazon parrots with a fondness for apples who made frequent appearances along Brandywine Boulevard and River Road, and in other areas east of Interstate 95 in north Wilmington from late 1974 through August 1976.

By at least one account, the birds followed a somewhat regular schedule. In one of her columns, Burroughs quoted June Conway, a Bellevue Manor resident, saying, “We had to go over to Bellefonte to see them. The people over there can predict, almost to the minute, when they’ll be there.”

### **The school in the town hall**

Not long after Janice Slattery suggested in 1975 that a wing of the town hall be used as a childcare center, Diane Monteith appeared at a town commission meeting with a proposal of her own. In April 1976, she inquired about renting a portion of the building to house the private middle school she planned to open. Monteith and the commission began discussing terms of a lease that summer and the talks would continue on and off for two years, with an agreement finally reached in August 1978, just before the school would open that September.

Monteith launched her school venture at the same time as court-ordered school desegregation began in most of New Castle County, with mandated busing resulting in most suburban students being sent to Wilmington schools for three years out of twelve, and Wilmington students being bused to the suburbs for as many as nine years. With many suburban residents opposed to busing, numerous private schools were established, some of them affiliated with local churches.

Monteith’s school started with 57 or 58 students, according to a report at the town commission meeting on opening day, and it would operate for nearly six years, even expanding by purchasing a building at 600 Duncan Road, just outside the town limits, in 1981. At one point enrollment approached 100, ranging from preschool through 10th grade, but the program never attracted enough students to become sustainable. Monteith closed the school in March 1984 after her accountant advised her that she needed an additional \$93,000 to keep it open through June.

Monteith's relationship with the town commission was frequently contentious. At classes began, Monteith said the furnace and windows needed repair. Over the Christmas holidays, she claimed that teenagers climbed on the roof and caused a leak and that residents were dumping their trash in the school's cans. By the spring and summer of 1979, Monteith was talking about building a second floor over the classroom area and even purchasing the property and leasing space back to the town for its meetings. The commission rejected Monteith's offer to buy the building for \$45,000. In December the commission made a counteroffer to sell for \$65,000. The haggling continued through 1980, with disputes over dumpsters and payments for insect control. By August, Commissioner Harry Raign asked to be relieved of responsibility for dealing with Monteith, and Kemer Lefler was named the commission's liaison with the school. In 1981, Monteith's discussions with the town concerned subletting the building, how much notice she would have to give to move out, fencing the playground area, repairs to the roof and furnace, and the possibility of opening a preschool program. In 1983, she battled with the commission over who was responsible for making repairs to the boys' bathroom. In 1984, weeks after closing the school, Monteith returned to the commission with multiple proposals – permission to sublet, asking the town to reimburse her for improvements made to the building, or gaining permission to negotiate with any new tenant over the cost of improvements. The saga ended in May 1984, when the commission voted to assign Monteith's lease to the operators of the Foulk Road Preschool and Day Care, who were seeking to expand into a larger space.

While dealing with big issues like police protection and uses of the town hall, the commission's agendas were punctuated by discussions of little problems that seemed like big ones to the individuals most directly affected. Based on minutes from the period, squabbles among neighbors were common in the late 1970s and into the 1980s. Typical concerns included the operation of home-based businesses in residential zones, abandoned cars and trailers, trash left on porches, children not being cared for by their parents, dogs barking loudly, lawns left uncut and even a resident who left a roll of used carpet in the street for at least three months.

One of the more unusual complaints was a Grinch-like episode in December of 1981, when a resident contended that Harold McGinniss was illegally selling Christmas trees from his home. The town attorney wrote him a letter. McGinniss showed up at the commission's January 1982 meeting to explain that he had a business license to sell the trees at three locations outside of town, and that the trees on his property were being held for customers to pick up.

Throughout this period, and into the 21st century, the commission, an all-volunteer body, struggled to enforce its own ordinances and to resolve issues associated with property maintenance, building codes and permit requirements. Finally, in 2006 the town reached agreement to transfer most of these responsibilities to the New Castle County government.

As the commission dealt with such nuisances, the town nonetheless cultivated its image as a place with "a comfortable, lived-in feeling," as the headline on a 1982 feature article in the Sunday News Journal put it.

Residents noted the changes in the town's business district on Brandywine Boulevard – the hardware store, pharmacy with postal substation and grocery stores had been replaced by a bakery, a used-book store, a flower shop, a bridal shop, a beauty shop and a resale store. One constant through it all was barber Dominic Nardo, who recalled how residents signed petitions in 1935 opposing his business because they didn't consider a barber a necessity for the town.

Businesses may have continued to come and go, but its blend of old-timers and newcomers helped define the community. As Lynda Lefler, a town commissioner, told the writer: "I feel like I'm in a small town.... You can walk around and each house has its own identity. Everything is different, but there is a closeness you can feel. There is so much variety and a lot of character."