

Growing up in Center Line in the 1950s

By Roger Laske

Sometime before the end of 1948, we moved from an upper flat at 8272 Lyford Street in Detroit, near the City Airport, to 8221 Edward Street in Center Line, a northern suburb of Detroit in Macomb County. I had been attending Holy Name Elementary School a few blocks south of McNichols (6 Mile Rd) at Van Dyke Avenue.

Memories before we moved from Lyford were the ice man with his horse-drawn wagon, the photographer with the pony, and the one-mile walk to Holy Name School as a six year old. The ice man would give us kids some shavings from the back of the wagon.

I transferred to St. Clement Catholic School which had both an Elementary and High School in the same building on Van Dyke Ave. at Engleman Street (10 ½ Mile Rd). It was in the middle of the second grade and I remember that we attended daily Mass at the church facing Van Dyke. The nuns made sure we knelt upright; no resting your butt on the seat. Back then, we had to fast from midnight to receive communion at Mass, so as soon as we got back to our classroom after Mass, we had a snack from our lunch bag and they supplied small cartons of white milk for us.

Our house was the first house east of the Edward cross street, Automobile. In the next few years, houses were built on the two vacant lots. The Laske home was a two-story brick home with a two-car detached garage. There were two bedrooms upstairs with mine facing the front with a 2-window dormer. My sister's bedroom was on the eastside of the house. There was a full bath upstairs. My parent's bedroom was on the first floor and there was a bathroom with a shower stall. Kitchen, small dining room and living room also. My dad added a enclosed back porch about 1956, The basement was finished with knotty pine. We kids had a play room to the left of the stairs and later my dad added another bathroom to the right with a shower stall. I don't think we ever used the shower stall on the first floor.

In the far-right corner was my dad's tool room. And on the right wall was the laundry room. My dad got a stainless steel under bar from a burnt-out bar and installed right next to the tool room. When we first moved in, this area was taken up by a gas-converted monstrous furnace.

I do remember my third-grade teacher as she was a lay teacher in a building full of nuns, Mrs. Lambert, a young pretty blond lady. My fourth-grade teacher was a roly-poly nun, Sr. Fidelis, who wielded a mean pointer, smacking me over the head a few times. I have to jump to the sixth-grade and Sr. Mary Alice, an old, wrinkled small nun. Back then, we raised money for the Missions and the Baptism of third world infants. We actually had Certificates around the walls with the Baptized children's names. In the sixth-grade I attempted to become an altar boy, but could not memorized all the Latin prayers.

When we moved on Edward Street in 1948, the street was dirt. About 1950 they started paving the street. It was a sad time as I had a black & white Cocker Spaniel and she was run over by one of the cement trucks. It was then that we discovered she was pregnant as there were puppies in the remains. Sometime later, my dad brought home a full-grown black Cocker Spaniel for us. The dog was trained to only come in the front door which we hardly ever used. The dog would then walk through the living room and dining room to the kitchen.

Our house was on the third lot east of the cross street, Automobile, and the two lots were empty in 1948. About 1950, Leslie Bricker built a cinder block home next door to us. In the 50s and they also had a son named Roger. Pete Zemsta built on the corner lot. On the west corner lot of the Automobile-Edward

St. intersection lived the Elwarts: Paul & Virginia, and children Paulette, Thomas and Carolyn. Paulette babysat me when I was about 10 years old and Tom became my Best Man when I got married. Carolyn was in my sister's classes at St. Clement School. The Elwarts got the first TV set on the block and I remember going over there and laying on the floor watching "I Remember Mamma." Mama was the story of a Norwegian-American family living in San Francisco in 1910. The story is told through the eyes of daughter Katrin (Rosemary Rice). The show opened looking through the pages of the family album and remembering.

Next to the Elwarts were the Heberts: Eugene, Aileen, and their children: Janet, Mary, Donna, a boy. Janet was a year younger than me and took piano lessons and at times we had the same piano teachers. In the early 50s, the Brylls lived next to the Heberts, Stanley and Pauline, with children: Beverly, Dennis and baby Nancy. Beverly was in Jean's classes in 1952, 1953 and 1954. The previous owners were the Felsows with daughter Betty that was maybe five years older than me.. Next to the Brylls were the Martins, Henry and Stephanie, with children Thomas and James (Jim). Jim was five years older than me and later we would hang around with Jim as he had the first car amongst us boys. Jim attended De La Salle Collegiate High School in Detroit by City Airport so maybe that is why I went there also. I believe next to the Martins were the Fiedlers whose children were a little older than me. One of the children was a daughter, Joanne. Then there was an empty lot where the Dumonts lived with a daughter Gwen. Gwen, Joanne, Betty and Paulette hung together. There was another boy down the street, closer to Van Dyke and on the south side of the street, Jerry Radlinski, son of Steve and Mercedes, who also attended De La Salle. Steve Radlinski owned the Pastine Lanes Bowling Alley on E. 9 Mile Rd, west of Van Dyke. He sold that in the late 50s and bought the Breakers Motel & Restaurant, 4 miles west of Port Austin on Saginaw Bay.

At the corner of Edward Street and Van Dyke, facing Van Dyke, lived the Grubbas. Ray and Marie and their son Robert. I believe they had another, very young son also. The father was a Councilman and I believe the son was a Judge in Center Line and he owned a 1927 Lincoln Touring Car with a rear windshield and spare tires mounted on the front fenders. Next to the Grubbas on Van Dyke Avenue were the LaFlammes. I do not remember the parent's names but I played with the son, Armand.

Back to Edward Street. Behind the Grubbas and LaFlames, lived the Stempiens who moved in about the mid-1950s. Chester and Helen with their children: Diane, Delphine, and Theresa. Diane was in Jean's class at St. Clement and graduated with her in 1959. Across the street from the Stempiens lived Ed Grubba, a brother of Ray. And next to them towards the east lived the Lietze family. I remember a younger Bradley playing ball in the street with us. Next door to the Lietze lived the Terebesseys, Pete and Bernice, with their daughters Judy and Patricia. Judy was in my grade school class. Bernice was a sister to Steve Radlinski who lived in the next house east. See above. Next were the Josephs. I cannot remember the parent's names but they had a young son, Joe Joseph, who also played ball in the street with us.

Wow, I so not know anyone else going east until the cross street, Automobile, probably because they did not have any kids my age. On the southeast corner of Edward and Automobile Streets lived the Gillettes, Joe & Ruth, with their children: Roy, Carol, Jerry and Joey. The kids went to public school. Carol Jo, along with Carolyn Elwart, and my sister Patricia, did many things together, like tap dancing. There was another girl, Franny LaVinge, who lived on the next street, Coolidge, that also hung around with them.

Going back to our house at 8221 Edward Street and heading east was an empty lot that I had the chore of keeping the weeds down with a sickle. In the next white bungalow, the guy bought a 1057 black Oldsmobile with the split rear windows – cool car! The Blounts, Jesse & Eda, lived in the brick home on

the next lot. Old man Jesse actually built our house at 8221 Edward; using a horse team to scoop out the basement, or so he told me. Next to the Blounts were the Nagys, Andrew and Sophie, with their two sons, Ronald and Frank. Ronald was my age so we did a lot of playing and exploring together. I am skipping a few houses going east on the north side of Edward to the Bletchs, I don't remember the parents but they had a son that was one year younger, Ed, and he also was in Jean's class. In 1957 a grey brick ranch house was built next to the Bletches. It belonged to the Leaches. Across the street at the end of the block on the south side lived the Romanos and Chapmans. Ann Chapman was in Jean's class and died young. Kitty-corner from our house to the left, lived the Kulas, Anthony & Anna. She was a grouchy lady; the type that would keep your ball if it landed in her yard.

For my 14th birthday my parents bought me a Sylvania Hi-Fi record player. It played all three speeds, 33, 45 and 78 rpm. But all our 50s music was on the 45 rpms. I believe my first couple of records were Shaboom by The Chords, Earth Angel by the Penguins, See You Later Alligator nu Bill Haley & the Comets, My Prayer and The Great Pretender by the Platters. One of my first albums was Elvis with the sad song "Old Shep" on it. Next was one by Harry Belafonte.

That is about it for Edward Street memories. After the Leaches was the cross street, Federal, and east across from there were the Kramer Homes Coop. There would be summer activities in their Community Center and Jean and I moved there when we married in September 1961.

In the 50s, the neighbors joined in supporting one another. Joe Gillette's parents moved into a house on Theisen, next street south, that Joe Gillette had built. Paul Elwart did the masonry work and laid the bricks which Eugene Hebert brought on his truck.

A few other memories.

Brown's Dairy, located on the west side of Van Dyke at Edward Street. They sold dairy products and had a 10-seat dairy bar. We bought our milk there, in-between deliveries from the Twin Pines man but you had to cross busy Van Dyke.

LaGondola Pizza restaurant on the westside of Van Dyke, one block south of 10 Mile Road, was a good date place after a football game. It was the place that I first ever tasted pizza.

Gitzen Mobil Station and Rutley Standard Station. I started washing cars at Gitzen's station, Van Dyke and Gronow, in 1954 and it was now owned by Bob Brinker and Carl Rutley. (Carl & Ilene Rutley were my son David's Godparents). It was \$2 for a hand car wash, inside and out, which I got \$1.00. At age 16 I was legally able to pump gas and worked after school and weekends. In 1957 Carl Rutley bought the Standard gas station across Van Dyke on the corner of Van Dyke and Central Street. Conveniently, Jean lived down Central Street. About 1960, Carl moved to a brand-new Standard Station on Van Dyke and State Park. I continued to work part time for Carl, even I got married.

Berk's 5 & 10, located on Van Dyke between Gronow and Voerner Streets on the west side of Van Dyke. Jean work there in high school.

Joe's Bike Shop, located on Van Dyke about 2 blocks north of 9 Mile Rd. I bought cap pistols and caps and I got my 12-year-old Christmas present, a Hopalong Cassidy bicycle. I was the last of the neighbors to learn to ride a two-wheeler.

Liberty Theater, located on Van Dyke at Weingartz Street was a Saturday must be place. It cost 15 cents for the movie. I always had to see the cartoon and the serial clips before the main movie. I usually

bought Jujubee candies at the counter. Sometimes, we would walk down to the Motor City Theater on Van Dyke at 9 Mile Rd. In the late 50s, Liberty Theater became a church.

Center Line Library and Recreation, was located on Weingartz Street, behind the cleaners on Van Dyke. The two entities were in one building with the Library being the closest to Wiengartz Street. I remember the atypical grey-haired older Librarian. She was very strict. The Recreation building held amny of the St. Clement school dances. I still have a ticket or two from them. Bill Misterovich and Richard Oberleisen were in Jean's class and were the best male dancers. One summer I took ukelele lessons there.

Rinke Pontiac-Cadillac was located on Van Dyke at Harding Street, just north of St. Clement Church. While working at Rutley's Standard gas station, we would work on Norm Rinke's used cars. One day they brought in a 1957 Cadillac convertible for repair. I went to bring it into the bay for service, only no one told me it was in for no brakes. I therefore put the Cadillac into the back wall of the bay. Such a nice car!

George Rinke and son "Buzz" owned and ran the Rinke Appliance Store; attached to the south side of Rinke car building. It was where I bought our first TV after Jean and I were married. They had a cottage in Oak Beach, between Port Austin & Caseville, kitty-corner from my parent's cottage.

Playmates

Well, we mostly played outside. A taped-up ball in the street and once we were in our teens, we would go over to St. Clement ball field. I remember playing Canasta at Janet Hebert's house. Even played spin-the-bottle there when her cousin Marian Charbeneau was there. She was a little "frisky."

Some of the kids I hung around with were Art Rostow who was in my grade school class and lived way over, past Sherwood Rd, on Garden Court, a dirt road. He had a sister Margaret and they had a chicken coop in the backyard. I usually rode my bike over to his house. I remember his parents being very warm and welcoming.

Gary Fix, Gary Gathen, Bob Weber and Tom Vohs, all living on Warren Blvd. Janet Hebert's family moved from Edward Street to Warren Blvd. about 1956, a few houses off Van Dyke. A couple houses east was Sue Brady, also in Jean's class. A few other names are Steve Heide and Ron Sauger who lived on Sterling Street.

At the west end of Gronow Street at Lawrence St. lived the Kerns. Otis and Eula, with their children: Margaret (who became a nun), Helen, twins Irene and Ilene, both in Jean's class. I took Irene to my Junior Prom and Ilene to a Red Wing hockey game at Olympia in Detroit. Eula taught me how to play Cribbage and her husband bowled on my K of C bowling team at Ma Zott's Bowling Alley on Van Dyke and Engleman Street in the early 1960s.

When I was 14, I remember sitting in Jim Martin's car, a 1949 black Ford coupe, in his garage, with Tom Elwart and Joe Vigneau, smoking cigarettes. We would hang around Ronnie's Drive-In on Van Dyke, a few blocks south of 11 Mile Rd. We also rode to Ronnie's Drive in using Paul Elwart's black 1956 Chevy 4-door sedan and one time or two, in Paulette's beige & green 1955 Chevy.

I got a car in 1956 after my father towed one into the backyard to be overhauled. My Uncle Adolph was home on leave from the Army and showed me how as he was in the Motor Pool. It was a 1948 Dodge 2-door coupe, dark metallic green. It had a Fluid Drive transmission which allowed me to take off in 3rd gear on slippery streets. This car was rear-ended on my way to high school by a cement truck and put the spare tire into the back seat.

My first date in that car that I remember was to the Belair Drive-In on Eight Mile Rd. with Gayle Brueggeman. The Kern twins learned to drive in this Dodge. I took Irene Kern to my Junior Prom and Ilene Kern to a Red Wing hockey game at the old Olympia Stadium.

My next car was a beauty. It was my Uncle Adolph's 1949 Chrysler black coupe. He bought it in Texas and was originally brown but he had it painted black and re-chromed the grill. He also dropped in a 1953 Desoto V8 engine. This required raising the seats 2 inches on wood blocks. It also had a Fluid Drive transmission which you would take off, let up on the gas, and it would automatically upshift. It also had a push button at the end of the gear shift that would down-shift gears, similar to a passing gear.

Early girl crushes

In grade school, 7th or 8th grade, I had childhood crushes on Janet Reese, Fran Kula, Marcia Briggs, Kathleen Geisler, Shirley Patalon in my own grade level. I also liked a few in the year earlier, Dee Tranchida, Gayle Brueggeman, Sharon Raven (I took her to a DLS dance and rowing on Lake Pleasant), Eileen Flanigan, Barb Russell and Barb Ahern. There were two sisters, Helen and Doris (can't remember their last name), that worked the soda fountain counter at Homer Drug Store on Van Dyke. I did take Doris out a couple of times; she attended Center Line High. And then in 1956, at a basement party at Eileen Flannigan's house on Harding Street, I met Jean Skavery. At the time she was dating George Mayernick. It took at least six months to woo her away from George.

Mentioning Homer Drug Store brought back the memory of Homer playing Christmas Carols on his organ in the store. It was located on Van Dyke, between 10 Mile Road and Warren Blvd. In 1956 when I worked at the gas station, Homer asked me if I could rent a trailer and transport his organ from his house on Voerner Street to his drug store. I did it with a friend but had never backed a trailer up before. It was a learning experience for a 15-year-old.

In the 1954-56 school year, Roger Schoenherr drove me to De La Salle along with his brother Dennis Peter. The following school year, 1955-56, Pete Tranchida drove but we would drop his sister, May Ann, at the all-girls Dominican High School before heading to DLS. Pete also picked up Jerry Radlinski who was living with his grandmother on 9 Mile Road, east of Van Dyke.

1958 and after

In 1958 my parents had a new yellow brick ranch home built on the corner of Lorraine Avenue and Lorraine Court. I had just graduated from De La Salle and was starting my freshman year at the University of Detroit in Architectural Engineering. Next door to us on the Court was Al & Rose Fortuna. He was an Orthodontist which came in handy when my kids needed their braces. The Fortunas had an in-ground pool which we were allowed to use. Al also had a garage full of tools of all kinds. After I got married, I built a 3-piece walnut stereo cabinet in his garage utilizing his wood working tools.

In 1960 I taught a Catechism/Religion class in the evening to high schoolers at the new St. Sylvester Parish. In early 1961 my parents moved to Slidell, Louisiana, a suburb of New Orleans. This was some six months before Jean and I got married. I had just started working at Fisher Body Division at the General Motors Tech Center in the Fall of 1960. Nels Kragh who lived on the next corner north got me an interview with the Illustration Department where he and his daughter June worked. I was hired.

I bought a used 1957 Dodge 4-Door hard top with a right side that was side-swiped from the neighbor behind us; last name was Ahee. I borrowed the \$400 from Grandpa Stanley Musialowski and paid him back from my first few paychecks.

Well, I know there are many more memories from my life in Center Line and they will come to me when I am not trying so hard to remember.

Siblings

My sister Patricia "Patty Ann" was born in 1943 on Lyford Street in Detroit. She just turned 5 years old when we moved to Center Line. Her bedroom was upstairs before mine and was painted apple green. Her playmates were Carolyn Elwart, Carol Gillette and Franny LaVigne on the next street. In her teens, Pat dated Ronnie Peters who lived on Coolidge Street to our north. Ronnie did the photography for Larry and Carol's wedding. I vaguely remember Pat also dating another boy, Bill Savage. My sister got ringworm when she was in the second grade. They shaved her strawberry blond hair and applied a salve and then put a nylon cap on her. They would check her with an ultraviolet light to see if it was healing. She also burned her hair sitting at the kitchen table with her hair too close to our gas stove.

My brother Laurence "Larry" was born in 1953 and moved to Slidell, Louisiana, with our parents in 1961. While living on Edward Street before he moved, his playmate was Joey Gillette mostly. There were a few more kids on the block that he would play ball with but their names escape us now. They would ride their bikes everywhere but we all did. Our cousin, Tim Laske, who was Larry's age, lived on Harding Street some four blocks north of 10 Mile Road and would ride his bike to our house or Larry would ride over to his house. My sister Pat would get Larry to school at St. Clement every day. He remembers her getting grandpa & grandma's 1948 Packard to drive. Mom or Pat would make hers and Larry's school lunches every day and would tape a dime inside Larry's Roy Rogers lunch box for a carton of milk. Our cousins Barbara, Lori and Tim on Harding went to St. Clement also.

Pat would take Larry to Brown's Dairy at the end of the street on Van Dyke for an ice cream or milkshake. Pat was babysitting Larry one night when he set the couch on fire. Our dad came home and to find the fire department there. Poor Pat got the blame though. Poor Pat, she was actually ironing clothes in the basement while Larry played with matches upstairs! Larry remembers that he and Joey Gillette would ride their bikes to the Market/Liquor store on the corner of Federal and 10 Mile Road for their candy treats and soda.

Jean's story

Jean's family lived on Maxwell Street in Warren, Michigan, south of 9 Mile Road and east of Van Dyke, when they first came from Shenandoah, Pennsylvania. Her dad came first and rented on Cadillac Street in Warren for the work with the enticement of his friend Al Subach who was already in Michigan from Shenandoah. Jean's mother, Genevieve, came to Michigan on a train about 1942 with her one-year-old daughter. Genevieve said she came with a friend on the train but could not remember her name.

About 1952 the Skaverys moved to Center Line at 8192 Central Street, corner of Automobile Street. Stanley & Genevieve already had three children when they moved, Jean, Stan, and Tom. Son Raymond was born soon after in December 1952. Their last child, Gerald was born on Central. I had just started dating Jean when Gerald was born in August 1957. Genevieve had not visited a doctor until a few weeks prior to giving birth to Gerald. I remember driving her there. The doctor was located on Van Dylke about four blocks south of 9 Mile Rd.

Jean's best friend and later her Maid-of-Honor at our wedding was Delphine Jaszcz who still lived in the 9 Mile Road area. When Jean & I were dating, her girl friends were Barbara Russel who lived behind her on Harding Street, Eileen Flanigan who also lived on Harding. There was a strict Italian family with a girl, Mickey, Jean would sometimes "hang" with Jean. Up the block on Central, right off Van Dyke was a tall

girlfriend, JoAnn Blond. There were two other St. Clement classmates who lived near 11 Mile Road and they were cousins, Carolyn Koroleski and Rosemary Koroleski.

I have two letters from Novitiates at the Convent of St. Catherine in Racine, Wisconsin, in response to Jean's interest about entering the Novitiate. These response letters are dated 1954 and refer to Jean entering after she finishes 8th grade. Obviously, Jean did not make that decision to join.

At Jean's senior prom in 1959, St. Clement did not allow a person from another school attend, so Jean went with her classmate Jay McCormick. Jean was my date for my Senior Prom at the Lochmoor Country Club in Grosse Pointe. We double-dated with my classmate, Earl Allen. Jean worked at Berk's 5 & 10 on Van Dyke, right across from her street, Central. Jean also babysat for the Tooheys who had three kids and lived farther east down across Lorraine Avenue in Warren.

More memories from the 1950s – Cottage

About 1953 my parents bought a cottage in Oak Beach, about ¾ mile east of Oak Beach Road on Sunset Drive. It was a two-bedroom split log cottage with a half-bath. We used the lake for baths. It had a front covered porch. In 1956 my dad added a small room to the west side. Off the kitchen, with a stall shower that also held a set of bunk beds. Every year we had to shellac the west and lake side of the cottage due to the strong sun. Our kid's bedroom had a full-size set of bunk beds in it. A few pull-out couches in the living area.

The cottage sat on a dirt road, 3091 Sunset Drive, with a row of cottages in front of us on the water. We had an easement to the eater, kitty-corner from our cottage. When the cottage was bought, the front yard was a huge depression so my dad had a couple dump truck loads of dirt brought in. We had a galvanized steel 14-foot boat for fishing which we would just drag up on the beach and turn over when we weren't using it. Stored behind the cottage for the winter. It was bought from Randall's right up on the highway where our dirt road exited to the highway. We would get our minnows for fishing there.

When we walked to the beach through the easement and to the east was a large rock in the water that was about 20 feet high and at least 20 feet across. I think this was called Hat Point. The property that led to the rock from the highway was well-wooded and we could only see a glimpse of the home on the bluff (3170 Port Austin Rd). Buffa Rental Cottages were to the east of the rock.

I still ponder that my parents would allow this but I would hitchhike to Port Austin to roller skate at the rink at the main intersection. It was about nine miles from the cottage to town. We did a lot of perch fishing, and again, my parents allowed me to haul the Montgomery Ward's 7 ½ horsepower motor to the boat and go out fishing, sometimes with others; no life jackets, only preserver cushions. I would pass the Brakers Motel that was owned by our old neighbors, the Radlinskis, and the Knoblock Riding Stable across from the Breakers. It was scary coming back when it started to get dark as there was a stretch of dense woods on the water side about three miles from Port Austin with a single desolate brick smokestack in the middle.

My parents always had friends there: Smokey Joe & Kay Sturza, Dick & Sophie Wrobel, Al & Romaine Holka and my Uncle Leonard & Aunt Monnie. I remember bringing up a De La Salle classmate, Dan Coakley, to the cottage. He took the girl next door, Karen Engle, out for a ride in my car and sis a little smooching. I did bring Jean up to the cottage in the summer of 1959.



Patricia & Roger, 1952



Back: Roger, Jim Martin, Tom Elwart; Front: Carolyn Elwart and Janet Hebert, 1949



Larry & Pat, 1954



Patricia, 1954



Larry, 1954



Roger & Patricia, 1954



Roger, Boy Scout, 1951