



Ed and Pat Muczek enjoy their view of life from the front porch of their downtown Farmington home.

Porch as social gathering place is diminishing

By Diane Hofsees
special writer

"It used to be that after dinner people sat out on their front porch that faced Main Street and looked at others," remembers Jim Turner, an architecture professor. "Nowadays, streets are stinky and porches are on the backs of houses where it's more private."

The disappearance of front porches sadly reflects a growing desire for personal privacy, says Turner, who teaches at the University of Michigan. Others, however, maintain that television may have helped cause the disappearance of the front porch.

Disappearing with the porches, says Turner, are family and community bonds that were once formed in friendly places like front porch swings and wooden steps.

To the family, the front porch was a living room, a play pen and a library all in one. By night, the porch

was a place where young lovers could "spark." By day, it was the ideal spot for a nap on a homemade pallet.

To the neighborhood, the front porch was a place to see and be seen. It helped people know what their neighbors looked like and what they did. The porch was a place to socialize.

Turner says household members have moved from the front to the back porch or patio. Media experts say they've moved from the front porch to the couch in front of the television.

"In old neighborhoods like Hamtramck, folks still sit on the porch after dinner and watch the kids play," says Turner. Neighbors know each other and there's a sense of community.

BUT NEWER houses and neighborhoods don't have big front porches. They have stoops that are just big

enough to stand on while you fish for your keys.

Closer to home than Hamtramck, Oakland Street in the heart of Farmington is another example of an older front-porch community. Nearly every house on Oakland between Warren and Farmington roads has a front porch that reminds you of the days when all telephones were black and bathtubs were white.

In sharp contrast, Wabeek is a brand new neighborhood in West Bloomfield where houses cost about \$400,000. Anybody who could afford a house there could afford a front porch, too, said Malcolm Leventen, the architect and builder of many Wabeek houses. But Wabeek housebuyers don't want front porches, he said. They want "rear terraces and flying decks. People don't sit out on the front porch anymore."

The disappearance of the front porch is not a question of social class or money, he said. People just don't

have front-porch personalities much anymore.

"People aren't even as friendly as they used to be. They want their privacy."

So Leventen designs and builds houses that are far apart and spacious. They are on hill tops and command respect, rather than inviting warmth. They look bold, not friendly, posh, not comfortable. The creak of a front porch swing would be as alien to a Wabeek house as a white picket fence.

"Even if I put a porch on one of those homes, it wouldn't get used," Leventen said. For one thing, he said, the houses are too far apart for people to talk to each other from their porches.

Architecture doesn't change social trends, anyway, he said. It's the other way around.

EIGHTY YEARS ago, at the turn of the century, the social trend was to

entertain on your porch. The P.D. Warner governor's mansion in Farmington on Grand River had a wrap-around front porch added on expressly for entertaining. Built in 1887, the five-bedroom house resembles a three-tier wedding cake. It was the scene of many a porch party given by Michigan's first governor to be elected for three terms: 1904, 1908 and 1912.

People just don't add on front porches anymore, Leventen says.

Media experts Wilbur Schramm and William E. Porter have questioned whether there is a connection between the disappearance of the front porch and the chunk of time Americans have devoted to watching television. Television was the experimental child of the '30s that saturated American households by the '50s.

Today, a beginning teacher in high school has spent more time watching television than doing any other activity besides sleeping.

"I just built a house that has 27 television outlets," Leventen said. These are different from ordinary outlets because they look up to an "aerial antenna system in the attic" for better reception without unsightly roof-top antennae. This social demand for so many television outlets in new homes is another way in which architecture reflects social trends, Leventen said.

"The day of the front porch is gone. It will probably never come back. People are too fearful of each other and want their privacy."

But Turner disagrees. "People are going to realize they liked watching the paper boy deliver the paper from the front porch, and they liked watching the car go by."

And when this happens, Turner predicts, front porches will reappear. But he has no idea when the reversal might begin and sheepishly confesses that he just built a back porch onto his house in Ann Arbor.

memory lane

Memories, memories... have we got the memories. And we'd like to share them with you. Using local newspaper files, we're dishing up generous slices of life in the Farmington area from 40, 30, 20, and 10 years ago.

June 29, 1944 —

Farmington Public Schools were accredited for three years by the University of Michigan Committee on Relations with Secondary Schools. The secretary of the committee called the schools "well-organized" and said periodic visits by a University representative would be provided for maintaining contact with the schools.

Purchase of Savings Bonds in the Fifth War Loan Drive stands at \$76,000 in Farmington. Bonds are sold by the Oakland County Women's Volunteer Corps of Farmington at booths located at Farmington State Bank, Olive Theater, Farmington Daily and the Post Office. Farmington residents are urged to go out and purchase extra bonds in order to make the loan drive a success in Farmington.

"Dog days" is the way to describe the weather of the past few days noted item in the Around the Block column on the first page of the Farmington Enterprise. Temperatures reaching the high 90's were recorded for the last days of June.

"The next best thing to having a soldier open the door at home with 'Hi Mom, it's me!' is to hear him say it over the telephone," read an advertisement on page 3 of the Enterprise. "This evening thousands of boys and girls in uniform will be asking for the long distance lines that connect them with their homes all over America." People were reminded to "have the wires" from 7-10 p.m. for the service men.

Fireworks will light up the sky over Edgewater Park for four nights over the July 4th week-end. Bunting, pinwheels, altitude-breaking skyrockets, beautiful color and picture bursts will be part of the free display July 1, 2, 3 and 4. In addition, the World's Fair "Believe It or Not" freak show made famous by Robert Ripley will be open. "There's a girl who swallows a soap tube and a man whose hand revolves" are the article reads.

July 1, 1944 — City and township police are preparing for an anticipated record flow of traffic through the Farmington area during the long July 4th week-end said the lead story of the Enterprise. Three city policemen will be on duty during the daylight hours throughout the holiday, and both police cars will be on road patrol according to Police Chief DeVoe. To facilitate traffic movement along Grand River, plans are being made to manually operate the signal light at Farmington Road and Grand River when the situation requires it.

On other front-page news, Wendell Brown was named to his fourth consecutive term as Farmington Township School Board president. Samuel Turner was re-elected as secretary, and Bayard Tupper was re-elected as treasurer. Mrs. Chester Downing and Varsity Thompson will serve again as

trustees. It was agreed that each board member receive a "flat token salary of \$150 a year."

Farmington township and city residents were reminded that voter registration must be completed by July 6 at 8 p.m. for those wishing to vote in the General Primary August 3. "Only a few registrations have been taken to date," said Henry McCracken, township clerk and Harry Moore, city clerk. The number is expected to increase some as the deadline draws near, however a light registration is being predicted by both officials.

In the shopping markets, the price of rib-club steak was 49 cents a pound, ground beef 39 cents a pound and a half-gallon of vanilla ice cream could be had for a mere 68 cents.

June 25, 1964 —

New home construction in the Thompson-Brown Company's Woodbrook subdivision was approved June 23 by the Farmington Township Board. Residents already occupying homes in the development appeared to hear what steps were being taken to clear up homeowner complaints of sanitary sewer failures. Of the 35 homes presently occupied in the subdivision, there have been reports of septic tank problems from at least seven or eight homeowners.

Owners of vacant properties or land areas in Farmington where noxious weeds grow are being reminded this week to cut and destroy these weeds. Citizens are required by law to eliminate weeds twice a year. The first deadline for cutting will be July 6. After this time, offenders are subject to let the city cut the weeds at the owner's expense plus pay a 10 percent penalty.

The National Bank of Detroit celebrated the grand opening of its new Farmington branch office located on Farmington Road and Alta Loma. The bank features three new drive-in windows, large parking lot and Italian office. On hand for the celebration were Lloyd Sibley, chief deputy Oakland County treasurer, James M. Read, assistant superintendent of Farmington schools and Floyd Cairns, Farmington township clerk.

July 27, 1974 —

July 3 has been set for consideration and possible enactment of a noise control ordinance for Farmington Hills. The ordinance was introduced at Tuesday's meeting following a request by council member Joan Dudley. If adopted, the ordinance would regulate excessive noise and set up penalties for offenders. Residents would be prohibited from "yelling, shouting, boozing, whistling, singing or making other loud noises on the public street between 11 p.m. and 7 a.m."

Gill Road will be paved from Eight Mile to Oaklawn without setting up a special assessment district. The Farmington Hills council voted to pave the road without charging the existing property owners, following a lengthy debate at the last board meeting. The debate centered on the location of a local road, and whether Gill was a local, subdivision road or a main or secondary road.

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