

The Golden Strip of the Lehigh Valley

Although several homes had been built along MacArthur Rd. in the 1920s and 30s, the post World War II years and flourishing economy fueled a suburbanizing trend that took place on a national scale. Locally, Whitehall's vast farmland, gently rolling terrain, and close proximity to the City of Allentown, became prime choice for housing developments.



At the same time, George and Adam J. Henninger realized the value of their farmland lying between Mickley Rd. and Schadt Ave. Small, family-owned businesses were first to acknowledge the need for stores in the suburbs for the convenience of consumers.

Joseph M. George of Kleckner & Sons, whose store had been located in Egypt, negotiated with George D. Henninger. "Grandpa Kleckner grew up in the Scheidy's area. Henninger did not reside on the farm, but lived in the Drumhole area," he explained.

"In those days, people used to visit each other because they didn't have television. I came over to talk to him and get a price on the property. George first offered \$6/foot, but I waited before I bought. I finally bought at \$10/foot in 1948." Kleckner's opened for business on July 24, 1950.

Raymond and Joseph Wolf of Wolf's Orchards also bought from Henninger in 1948. Their first stand was next to Kleckner's, but moved to their present location in 1951. (Note: the second Wolf's Orchard produce stand was demolished in July 1997.)

Meanwhile, Peter Nestor of Nestor's Sporting Goods, had purchased his lot from the Charles Diefenderfer estate in July 1947. Before opening their new store in October 1952, they had been located in Cementon. Nestors lived in a home that stood at the south end of the store. In 1962, they added to their property, and later purchased a former bank building located at 2530 MacArthur Road.

After Route 22 opened in 1954, traffic that previously used Allentown's Tilghman St. now flowed through Whitehall Township. Larger, more aggressive stores soon followed.

Major changes in retail began in June 1957 when Two Guys from Harrison purchased 94 acres of Diefenderfer's failed "Mickley Manor" development.

Shortly after Two Guys opened in October 1957, a controversial "Sunday Sales" lawsuit began. Ending up in the U.S. Supreme Court, the lawsuit gained national attention. The court's ruling in 1961 upheld the blue laws, but Two Guys persisted Sunday operations for which they continued to be cited.

Suburban shopping offered conveniences Allentown's downtown stores could not, such as ample parking facilities. In spring 1965, ground was broken for the Whitehall Mall, the first enclosed shopping center in Pennsylvania outside of Philadelphia. It was built by Donnelly & Sues Properties on land acquired in three separate tracts from Morris Butz.

Richard Solker and Dent Hardware Co. landscaped with indoor plants and fountains and the innovative Whitehall Mall opened in September, 1966, boasting heating and air-conditioning for year-round shopping comfort with protection from the weather.

People traveled from great distances to see this modern curiosity. The anchor stores of Sears, Roebuck & Co. and Zollinger's began a trend of withdrawal from downtown Allentown. During this era, MacArthur Road was dubbed "The Golden Strip of the Lehigh Valley."

more...

The Golden Strip of the Lehigh Valley, continued...

Residential growth accompanied retail development in a ripple effect. Whitehall's separate villages of Fullerton, West Catasauqua, Hokendauqua, Egypt and Cementon began losing their individual identities in 1968 when the U. S. Postal Service centralized mail operations into one main office named "Whitehall, Pa" located at 2344 MacArthur Road.

Until 1970, the burden of development jurisdiction was borne by Whitehall Township's Inspection Department. The division was then restructured into a Department of Development in order to better oversee the functions of planning, zoning, inspecting and enforcing codes.

Just one month after the Whitehall Mall's opening, plans were announced for "the biggest shopping center in the state" to be built on six tracts purchased from Max Hess Jr. for \$2,200,000. Jarpenn Co. of Philadelphia experienced numerous delays and legal battles against PennDOT concerning traffic impact.

In anticipation of the proposed Lehigh Valley Mall, improvements were made to MacArthur Road. A tunnel was made under the highway for access to the mall, since southbound traffic would not be allowed to turn left into its entrance. However, the company failed to acquire the necessary land on the west side of the highway, and the tunnel was never put to use. (Note: the tunnel was demolished in 1996 when MacArthur Road was replaced with a new, concrete surface.)

The \$30 million Lehigh Valley Mall opened ten years later, on October 6, 1976. Although it boasted 130 stores, the ten-year delay kept it from attaining status as the biggest in the state.

After many years of speculation, in 1975 Hess's finally opened Hess's North in Whitehall, which was later demolished.

Current appraised property values along MacArthur Road collectively total \$162,815,400, from Allentown's border to Eberhart Road, clearly defining the roadway's nick-named, "The Golden Strip of the Lehigh Valley."

© 1995 Karen L. Gensey, Whitehall Township Historian

