

Growing Up In Gaithersburg

By Marien Helz

Names



I recall reading a novelist who mentioned that in New York City, people's names are not common ones as they are in other places. That caused me to think about the surnames in Gaithersburg when I was growing up. All those names seemed ordinary because they were the ones I grew up with, but that doesn't actually make them common. The family across the street and several doors down from us, with kids whose ages corresponded to ours, had the surname Federline. They are the only people I have known since with that name, and I never heard it again until recently because a celebrity has the name as well. Although it's very unusual, that doesn't occur to you if it's a name you hear on a daily basis.

Other families around had decidedly more usual names; one family across the street were the Walkers. Even though there are a lot of people with that name, however, I don't currently know anyone with it.

The Kinseys across the street had a name that everyone recognizes just because Alfred Kinsey did an early sex study in 1948. Nothing like sex to make a name common. These Kinseys, however, were a beautiful, quiet family of three—which included a grown son on whom my high school girl friend had a crush. Mr. Kinsey owned the gas station on Frederick Pike. He had white hair, blue eyes, a constant tan, and a very engaging smile. If you had car trouble, he would fix it for you. Mrs. Kinsey was a woman who loved dachshunds and people. They had two of those dogs, a black and a brown one. It was always pleasant talking with Mrs. Kinsey.

Her brother had a more unusual name, I suppose. It was Ayton [pronounced Ate' ton]. When we were small, for some reason my mother and father were talking about the Kinseys and their son, who, my mother remarked, was half Ayton. My younger sister was probably six at the time and thought that she had said that Eddie had gone to the war and come back half aten [eaten]. It's impossible to be careful enough about what you say around kids.

Down the street from us on Highland Avenue were a family named Blood. Because that's a word, you might expect it to be common, but I've never heard that again, either. Mr. Blood owned the jewelry store that was next to Wolfson's store. When you think about it, Wolfson isn't that common a name either, but when you grow up around it, you think that it's ordinary especially if it's the name of a store. The Bloods' eldest son was in my class, and his name was Roland. It would be hard to get more unusual than that—or more poetic.

Also in my class was a girl named Sharon Bohrer. Now there's quite an unusual name, but it doesn't occur to you that it is uncommon if you grow up with it. Strangely enough, she married Eddie Bohrer who was not related to her—not until they got married, that is. She didn't even have to change her name. I wonder what that was like when they went down to Rockville to get their marriage license.

I remember bemoaning the fact that I had to change my name at the time I was getting married. Men are supposed to be enamored of their name and want sons so they can pass it on. Yet my father said, "Oh well, Helz isn't that great a name anyway." And speaking of Helz [pronounced Helts], it's pretty unusual as well. The only people I know with that name are related to me, and there aren't that many of them. I remember having an argument when I was in the second grade about how the name was pronounced. My friend was pronouncing it Hells. That always grated on me even when I was seven. The problem was that she immediately asked my mother if our name was Hells, and my mother, who was not aware of the disagreement and was probably thinking that it was not Brown or something like that answered in the

affirmative. “Seeee,” Barbara said.

There was also a family down the street named Lynch. That’s not too uncommon, but somewhat rare. The maiden name of the woman directly across the street from us had been Talbot—a name well known in Maryland—but his name, and their name, was Sigafoose. Now there's a name that I have *never* heard again.