WAGNERS POINT (BALTIMORE)

Life in Wagners Point: Cut off but happy

By David Brown

Jimbo Smith sweeps his right foot back and forth until it clears a black rectangle of dirt in the gravel of the vacant lot at Leo street and Cannery avenue in Wagners Point.

"All we do is stand on the corners," he says.

During the summer Jimbo helped a man in Brooklyn clean up yards, but now it is almost winter and there is no work. He is 17 years old and leaning against a car.

Steve Stump, freckled, 16 and laid off from a construction job a month ago, leans against another car, facing his friend Jimbo.

"Ain't nothing down here to do," he says in a voice that is too flat to be called complaining.

The one bar in Wagners Point—with its one pool table—is closed; the proprietor is out watching a movie. Otherwise, it is an ordinary afternoon in this neighborhood of six blocks bounded by industry and the waters of the Patapsco and Curtis Bay.

There may be no entertainment or employment, but what the young men of Wagners Point have is togetherness, and they sing its praises on the vacant lot.

"You go up to Brooklyn, go into a bar and get into a fight. Down here, everybody knows each other. So why should we fight? I like it better than anyplace," says Donald Smitley, 23, who used to work at a nearby factory that makes paper boxes.

"Everybody knows what's going on. That dog there—say it got hit by a truck. Everybody would know about it in 10 minutes," says Jimmie Selig, 29, laid off from an asphalt crew, nodding at a black dog at his feet.

"There's always someone to talk to," says Steve French, 19, who quit his job at a Harborplace food stall in June. "You want to bull---- a while, just walk up to them and start talking."

As if to prove the last assertion, the group at Leo and Cannery grows in the dusk until there are a dozen people, some relatives and all friends, sharing two quarts of beer and a common loyalty.

"It's funny. Everybody says there ain't nothing to do, but everybody says they like it down here," says Steve Stump. "Ain't that weird."

If today there is something weird about Wagners Point, it is not in the allegiance shown by its 280 residents but in the irony that time and progress have brought to its secluded streets.

Once a company town where even children were expected to work, the neighborhood is now plagued by unemployment. Built beyond the city limits a century ago, it is now surrounded by the city's heaviest industry. For decades a place to crab and swim, its waterfront is now off limits and invisible. The product of a Nineteenth Century paternalism that provided its residents everything from a church to Christmas presents, today it does not even have a bus stop.

The founder and namesake of the community was Martin Wagner, a child of German immigrants who was born in 1849 in Baltimore.

Mr. Wagner spent his youth as an apprentice in a can factory and by 1880 had his own enterprise on lower Boston street. Three years later, he began packing his cans with fruits, vegetables and oysters.

In 1896 Mr. Wagner moved the business out of Canton (leaving his name behind on one-block-long Wagner street) and onto 50 acres of land north of Curtis Creek. The new site was more accessible to steamers carrying produce from the Eastern Shore and to the truck farmers of northern Anne Arundel county.

Mr. Wagner built a cannery, a wooden box factory, a tin can plant and about 100 row houses. The supervisors were Anglo-Americans, who lived in the three-bedroom houses on Fourth avenue. The workers were Polish, who lived in the smaller houses on Leo street and Southport and Cannery avenues. Mr. Wagner lived at 206 Laurens street in Bolton Hill.

Among the dozen people of Polish descent who still live in Wagners Point is Adam Kolodziejski, born in 1902, the year before Martin Wagner died.

"You could walk out a mile and the water would be up to here," Mr. Kolodziejski said recently, measuring off, with his hand, a line halfway up his thigh. "We were down there every night. We lived on that water, us kids. You could get three, four dozen soft crabs in an hour and a half."

The houses rented for about $1.50 a week, and in front of each was a tree. Each spring the trunks were whitewashed by employees of the Wagner company.

"It looked real nice and white right in front of you, and then green above it. Looked nice," recalled Mr. Kolodziejski.

On Sundays, hundreds of city dwellers would cross the Patapsco in a scow and spend the day watching semi-pro baseball games, dancing in a waterfront pavilion and drinking beer. The last entertainment was possible because Wagners Point was not annexed by Baltimore (which prohibited sale of beer on Sunday) until 1918.

To all but the youngest of its residents, however, Wagners Point was mostly a place of work.

Helen Zebron, who later married Mr. Kolodziejski, quit school and went to work at age 11 after her father died. She earned $7 for six 10-hour days. Mr. Kolodziejski's father supported nine children by working at the cannery, cutting hair on Friday and Saturday nights, and in spare moments sewing pants from cut pieces farmed out by a manufacturer in the city.

Martin Wagner and his brother, W. A. Wagner, provided the community with a horse-drawn bus that carried residents, free, to the nearest streetcar stop. At Christmas, the company erected a tree in the firehouse, gave each child a box of candy and each family a basket of—what else?—canned goods.

In November, 1907, Cardinal Gibbons dedicated a Catholic church named for St. Adalbert, the apostle of the Poles. (A parochial school and meeting hall were added later.) The church seated 400 and cost $27,000, $10,000 of which was provided by the employer of its parishioners.

In 1912, the cannery burned down in the first of several spectacular fires that would draw the eyes of Baltimore, briefly, to Wagners Point. It was not rebuilt, but work went on at the box and can factories.

In the years that followed, new industry arrived bearing names such as United States Industrial Alcohol Company, Texas Oil Company and Standard Wholesale Phosphate Company, giving the rural neck of land the character it would not lose.

On July 19, 1920, a tank owned by the United States Asphalt Refining Company was struck by lightning, exploding a pocket of gas under the lid and setting the contents on fire.

"I was outside, right on the corner, when it hit. It was right after lunch," Mr. Kolodziejski remembered.

By early the next day, five petroleum tanks had melted, two others were afire, and burning asphalt covered 15 acres. Several wooden houses along the shore were destroyed, and one detachment of fire fighters had to retreat into the Patapsco, a portion of which was also in flames. Other firemen dug trenches to trap the liquid, but not in time to save nearly a dozen of the Wagner company's row houses.

"Before the torrents of blazing oil hundreds of residents fled from their homes, screaming in terror," a nameless reporter wrote in *The Sun*. "In their arms, some carried babies, others carried household effects, while still others, wide-eyed and panic-stricken, fled coatless and hatless in a frantic effort to escape the blazing flood."

One of the fleeing residents was the future mother-in-law of Doris Skrzesz, the 53-year-old proprietor of Wagners Point's only tavern.

"She was burned out; lost everything. She lived right out there across the street from the bar," said Mrs. Skrzesz, gesturing to a vacant strip on the east side of Leo street, beyond which workmen these days are putting new tops on petroleum tanks owned by Texaco.

Wagners Point survived, as did its main enterprise, which eventually was renamed Eastern Box Company. But the coherence and custom that Martin Wagner and his factories had helped provide the community slowly

began to ebb.

In the Fifties the Polish families began to move out and were replaced in large part by families from Appalachia seeking work in the mills and shipyards of the Baltimore waterfront.

Troy Ferris's father was one of them.

He stopped mining coal in West Virginia in 1957 and moved to Brooklyn on the recommendation of his brother-in-law, who worked at Bethlehem Steel. For two or three years he rented an apartment above a laundry and worked at the mill, making a 12-hour trip back to Oak Hill, W.Va., a couple of weekends a month. Finally, he got a house in Wagners Point and moved his family.

"I remember when we pulled onto the street down here telling my father, 'Don't that house have a lot of doors in it?' " Mr. Ferris, 34, said recently as he sipped a beer in Mrs. Skrzesz's bar.

"He showed us our one house and our one door in. We had never seen row houses. My mother, she couldn't believe the place. She just sat there and cried for three days."

With the arrival of new people, some of the less easily deciphered Polish names had their pronunciation recast. (Mrs. Skrzesz became—and remains for many—Mrs. Scratch.) There were occasional complaints of a louder street life. By most reports, however, the meeting of cultures was amicable.

Mr. Ferris remembers fondly an old Polish woman who often carried a Bible around the neighborhood and would cuff a child, any child, heard swearing on the street. It was accepted as part of the home rule that came with living in an isolated place.

Eventually, though, the Polish community dwindled until it could no longer support St. Adalbert's Catholic Church, its vital center, and in 1967, Cardinal Shehan celebrated a final Mass for 30 families.

The church hall, where dances, Halloween parties and neighborhood beauty pageants had been held over the years, burned down a year later. Five alarms were rung; the fire department is cautious at Wagners Point. A month later, the church itself went up in flames.

Not all the traditions were lost as the community changed.

There were frequently Fourth of July and Labor Day block parties. Each Christmas, residents would solicit money from nearby companies to pay for candy and fruit that were stuffed in stockings and delivered to children by a local Santa Claus. Even Eastern Box, which had moved to a neighboring community, continued to run a home-to-factory bus service until the firm was sold out of the Wagner family in 1959.

The trend, however, was all in the other direction.

In 1966, a year after 32 persons were injured in a nine-alarm fire at an oil company in Wagners Point, a city agency suggested that residential occupation of the neighborhood and nearby Fairfield be "phased out."

The people living there, however, sought payment for their houses that would allow them to buy comparable dwellings in other parts of Baltimore. The idea died, as it probably would again, for the houses today still sell for as little as $8,000.

In subsequent years, Wagners Point got a few concessions from the city. Sidewalks were built, necessitating removal of the annually whitewashed trees. Streets were resurfaced and, in one case, rerouted so that large trucks did not have to rumble through the neighborhood. But even with them, the community's isolation grew.

The 85-odd houses today are completely cut off from the water. BP Oil, Amoco, Texaco, and—on the site of the original cannery—Delta Chemical Corporation use the shoreline for unloading the fuels and chemicals for the city's industry.

The final closing of the waterfront is relatively recent; a few in the younger generation still remember growing up with activities that characterized the place from its founding.

"It used to be nice when I was little. The river wasn't filled in, and we used to be able to go fishing, go ice skating in the fields," said Shelley Regiac, 21, who now works in Wagners Point's single store and carryout.

"There was a swimming place, it was very shallow. Now people jump off the wall and it's over your head. There's nowhere down by the water that people are allowed to go."

The last access to the water was closed off in 1972 when the Patapsco Waste Water Treatment Plant undertook a major expansion, filled about 25 acres of riverfront and installed new settling pools and outside piping. The residents picketed the plant when a fence went up blocking the path to a fishing spot, but the city concluded there was no safe alternative.

A young girl from the neighborhood drowned off Wagners Point's shore in 1977, confirming the worst fears of the industrial operators.

"The dock is for unloading petroleum products from barges, and that doesn't make it conducive to swimming and fishing," said Frederick Staehle, terminal manager for BP Oil.

As for other recreation, Wagners Point's opportunities today are limited to a small playground built years ago, a field that Delta Chemical lets residents use for baseball, a bank of video games in the store and the pool table in Mrs. Skrzesz's bar.

In 1980, the city police department looked at an empty one-story office building owned by Texaco as a possible site for a youth athletic club, but concluded that the structure—and its location—were not suitable. The teenagers who gather on the corner of Cannery avenue and Leo street speak bitterly of the fact that Wagners Point is not likely ever to get a recreation center of its own.

(If the community showed enough interest and organization, the direct donation of the building as a recreation center "would be considered," said Terry L. Young, assistant operations manager for Texaco's regional office.)

The size and location of the neighborhood doesn't even earn it a bus stop, though a way of economically sending a route over one of its streets has been looked at "many, many times," a spokesman for the Mass Transit Administration said. The closest stop is about three-eighths of a mile away.

In the minds of some people in and out of the neighborhood, the lack of stimulation is more than inconvenience. It breeds an isolation in the community's young that becomes a sort of tribal value.

Though no statistics are kept exclusively on Wagners Point, a visitor is struck by how many teenage boys do not finish high school, some dropping out as early as ninth grade. There are a few families in which the parents finished high school but the children did not.

"Some of them have a difficult time going over the Hanover Street Bridge. They want to stay in this vicinity of the city," said Donald L. Knox, principal of Benjamin Franklin Junior High School in Brooklyn, describing a feeling he has seen in many communities south of the Patapsco.

Mr. Knox's school serves Wagners Point's children before they go to Southern High School, in South Baltimore. He believes that the dropout rate for Wagners Point is higher than that from other neighborhoods in his junior high school's district.

"I can't understand why those children down there don't have the ambition to better themselves," said Rhoda Reel, 68, who lives a half-mile from Wagners Point and has relatives there. "I never did understand it."

For some of the newer residents, the natural isolation of Wagners Point reflects a predisposition. It is as close to the city—any city—as they

care to get.

Fred Vance, 77, moved from West Virginia to Baltimore in 1963 and now lives in a four-house community on Fairfield road known locally as "The Heights." He lived in Wagners Point, however, for a year, and 14 of his 18 surviving children reside there now.

Mr. Vance owns several riding horses in Anne Arundel county and has a trailer in Upper Tract, W.Va. A stuffed bear cub, which he shot in his native state, suggests the pleasures of his spare time. He hasn't been to downtown Baltimore in six years, he estimates.

Marvin Ledford, 30, moved from Johnson City, Tenn., six years ago, works at a gas station in Brooklyn, and lives in Wagners Point with his wife and 4-year-old son. His only regret is the lack of space for a garden.

"I hate the city. . . . The only time I go in is for a doctor appointment for my kid," he said.

For the people who have left, or have left and come back, the neighborhood has a bittersweet pull they take pains to describe.

"It's hard to move away from a community you were brought up in," said Mr. Ferris, the man drinking the beer in Mrs. Skrzesz's tavern. But he did get away.

"I don't want to raise my kids down here. I like to got out before I did," he says emphatically. He now lives in Glen Burnie; he was stopping by to see his friends.

Nearby, Dreama Kerns, 21, talks of how, in her childhood, there were dodgeball and softball and so much more to do than she sees these days on the streets of Wagners Point.

"Kids don't know how to play down here," she says.

Ms. Kerns, also, is of West Virginia parentage, and she lived in Morgantown for a year after she got married. Then she moved back.

"Once you're away, you miss the place," she said, and explained: "You know everybody, and once you're away you don't know nobody."

The faces of