

Daffodils

growing up in Gates Mills



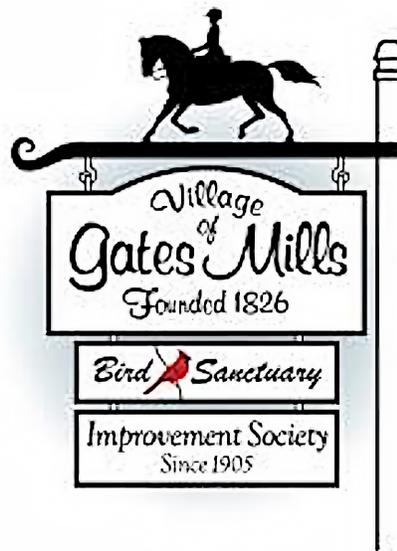
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The story of where I grew up and the great field of daffodils in the woods behind my house.



Part 1

The Village

I was lucky to have spent my childhood in Gates Mill, Ohio, a small village east of Cleveland. It sits in a valley through which the Chagrin River flows. Near the center of town, two bridges, one for walking and one for driving across the river, and a low dam carries the river over it. Many times, my sister and I fished below the dam with bamboo poles and fat earthworms for bait.

The town has a handful of fancy gift shops, the Red Fox restaurant, a red-brick town hall, a hunt club with beagles, a white church with a tall steeple, a small general store called The Tavern, and a cozy library that was once someone's colonial-style house.

Gates Mills School, which I attended, was on one side of river, and the library was on the other. So once a month we would walk through town, across the footbridge, and past the church to check out books. Even in the snowy winter. As a treat, my class would stop at The Tavern by the river where our teacher would buy us penny candy, which we would eat on a long bench out front.

Gates Mills had many annual events that I remember fondly. On January 6, every family brought their Christmas trees down to the lawn beside the town hall and tossed them on a big bonfire. Doughnuts and hot cocoa were served.

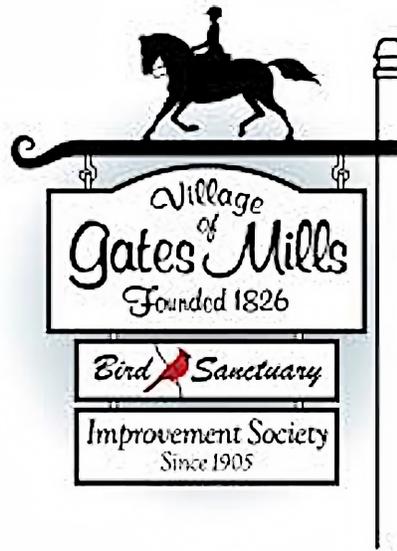
On July 4th, the big parade wound through town. I marched in it several times, once with my Cub Scout pack, and once with my Little League team. The parade ended at the polo field, where there was a hot dog roast and a Pony League game. Hall of Fame Cleveland Indians pitcher Bob Feller would sometimes pitch a few innings.

Finally, there was the school Halloween party, when they decorated the gym and each grade set up game booths all around it.

I loved living in that small village. I loved the long bike rides from our house into the valley. I liked visiting the beagle in the pens outside the hunt club. I loved the Sunday bird walks we took at different people's homes. I loved the snowy winters, the colorful autumns, the drives to Squire's Castle, Buzzard Sundays in Hinckley, and Sunday rides through the parks in the Emerald Necklace, now part of a national park.

I bet Gates Mills has changed very little sixty years later.





Part 2

Gates Mills School

Gate Mills School was a special place. Maybe going there was a reason I later became a grade school teacher for many years.

At the time I attended, it served grades K-6, one small classroom per grade. It had a good gym with a stage. Each day, the janitor would unlock rolling tables and benches from the wall, and the gym became our lunchroom. We ate together as a class. There were good

hot lunches, but most often I brought a sandwich in a tin lunchbox. Back then, we even said grace together before eating.

The asphalt playground had two levels. On the top level, we played running bases or SPUD. The lower level was packed with equipment that would never be found on today's playgrounds: a row of teeter-tooters, a merry-go-round, a giant iron pipe jungle gym without a mat underneath it, a long slide—also no mat—and a tall swing set that let you soar remarkably high.

There was a large grass area with a baseball field. No one played soccer. Mr. Keller, the principal, would sometimes come out and play football with us. But the most unique playground feature of all was the tall grassy hill behind the field. In the fall and spring, it was perfect for running and rolling.

Winter was the best of all. The school owned a fleet of toboggans, and each recess we raced to the top of the snowy hill for a long ride down. The sixth-graders were the loaders. While they held the toboggans steady, we climbed on one after the other, six in a row, knees up, arms and feet tucked in. The loaders gave a push, and we hurled down the hill. If the snow was good, we sometimes slid as far as the school building. Back then, the hill seemed enormous, but on a recent return trip as an

adult, it seemed puny But the memories of those snowy recesses remain huge.

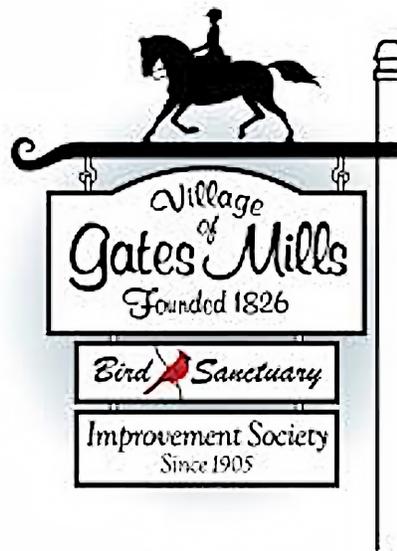
Each classroom had deep closets where we would put on our coats, gloves, and boots. It must have taken half of recess just to get everyone dressed and undressed, but I don't remember anyone minding.

I can remember each of my teachers, kindergarten through sixth grade. That's how it is with a small school. I remember the greenhouse we built in second grade and the animal-cracker cookies we earned for reciting the times tables. I remember when my fourth-grade teacher left halfway through the year, I cried. I remember my fifth-grade teacher's giant electronic map of the US with the capitals that lit up. I remember the weekly reports we wrote in sixth grade. My mother helped me with most of them. And when we left the classroom each day, the teacher shook our hands.

I was in the AV club that went into classrooms to set up film projectors. I remember the end-of-year movies we watched in the gym. *Daktari* was one of them.

Graduation from sixth grade was a big deal. We sat on the stage to receive our diplomas. It was hard to leave that school and move on to the big junior high in a much larger suburb. I can still name everyone in this picture.





Part 3

Dorchester Road

My house at 36600 Dorchester Road sat out of the valley. My father bought the two-acre property and built the split-level home. The land had plenty of woods, and he planted lots of gardens and lawns. That meant every weekend, my brother and I had to cut the huge front and back lawn using a push mower. There was also plenty of dirt moving, leaf raking, garden weeding, log splitting for the fireplaces, and snow shoveling. My

brother and I also had a paper route, delivering the Cleveland Press several miles down Dorchester Road each evening by bicycle.

The front yard was big enough to play whiffle ball, and we often played with the neighbors. I also had my own solo form of baseball that I played alone.

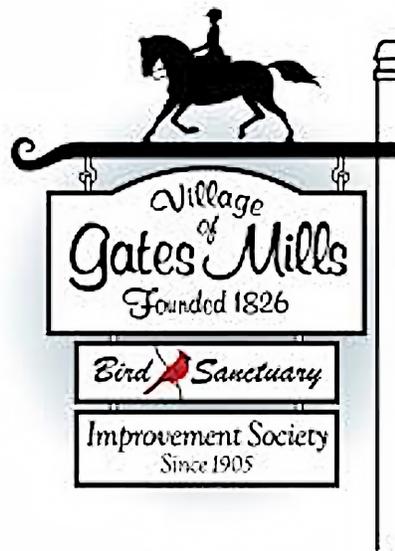
I shared a bedroom with my brother. We mostly got along, but sometimes we fought. He was a year older than I was and usually won. The unfinished baseball was a spooky place. But when I got a marionette stage and a two dozen marionettes, I spent down there writing and putting on plays. The middle level was the playroom, with a ping pong table.

The den, which had the TV and a fireplace, was the most-used room. Duchess, our Brittany-spaniel dog, had a rug under the window, where she slept and spent hours looking out into the dark. At Christmas, my mom put up a silver tree in there, while a real tree always went up in the living room.

The living room had a fancy carpet, and Duchess wasn't allowed in there. She was the best dog. When she wanted to go out, she'd sit at the front door. When she wanted in, she scratched at the door. I took many hikes in the woods with Duchess.

Despite all the yard work, I loved that house. Being out of the valley, we were one of the last stops on the bus route home. The ride took over an hour. I remember one winter morning while waiting for the bus, a stream of starlings flew overhead. The stream seemed endless. I never saw the end.





Part 4

Daffodils

Out back of the house, beyond the big lawn, lay a large woods. Past the broken-down picket fence that marked the boundary line was more woods, stretching a mile or so. This land was owned by Gilmore Academy, a Catholic school. A cinder path wound through it, and sometimes, while exploring, I'd see Catholic brothers strolling through the woods. The woods were filled with oak and maple trees for climbing, large boulders for scaling, grape vines for swinging, fallen branches for

making forts, and wildflowers everywhere. Walking through felt, always keeping an eye out for the brothers.

For years, I strung a covered hammock high up a tree deep in the woods. The mesh sides kept out mosquitoes. Often I camp there overnight with snacks, a flashlight, a book, and a transistor radio. Duchess would sit below the hammock, keeping watch, until late at night when my mom called to her.

“Duchy! Here Duchy!”

I’ve enjoyed camping alone ever since.

One of the most special parts of those woods was the field of daffodils spread out below the tree canopy. In spring, when they bloomed, I would hike back there and pick huge bouquets of daffodils for my mom. Since then, daffodils have been my favorite flower. They were strong, no-nonsense flowers. They always bloomed no matter the weather. They didn’t fuss about water or shade. Today I even have jars of daffodils in my writing studio.

During my freshman year in high school, my family moved. My dad gave up the home of his dreams and took a job in Minnesota. I remember packing up the station wagon and driving away from that house, my sister and brother in the middle seat, me and Duchess in the seat that faced backward. Edina, Minnesota, was a whole new

chapter in my life, a good one, where I met my best friends, took up canoeing, learned to ice skate, and deepened my love for the outdoors.

Still, I often think about my old home in Gates Mills, the wonderful school, camping in the woods, my marionettes, and that field of daffodils in the back woods. Daffodils are a hearty plant. I bet they are still blooming today.



