**HYDE PARK**

My parents, Robert William Wissler and Elizabeth Anne Polk Wissler, were 27 in 1944 when I was born. They had grown up in small Indiana towns and in Quaker families that emphasized education. Both graduated from Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana in the depths of the Depression, class of 1939, and migrated to the University of Chicago for graduate school on scholarships.

Hyde Park was our neighborhood. It had not been an independent village for 100 years. But it still seemed to us to be a small town in a big city. We rarely left it for more exotic locations like Marshall Field’s department store or the Grant Park Fountain downtown, and we hardly knew the North Side existed. It was a walking neighborhood, bounded by Lake Michigan to the east and Washington Park to the west. Jackson Park, the Wooded Island, the 57th street beach, the Midway, and the Point provided relief from the flat rectangular grid of asphalt streets and cement sidewalks that characterized the rest of the city. For us children, the critical landmarks started with Finnegans Drug Store, two doors down from the house on Woodlawn Avenue my parents bought when I was eight, with its marble-topped soda fountain, now an historical artifact in the Museum of Science and Industry. Across 55th Street, Jimmy’s Tavern, a student hangout, had special allure because we were not allowed in. Nearby, the Neighborhood Club, our place for dances and sports. On 57th Street across from Ray School, my elementary school, was Walgreen’s Drug store for cherry cokes and root beer floats. The Tropical Hut, next to the school, a family restaurant since the 1940s, was exotic with its plastic palm trees and vines, lobster tails and steaks, where my father would announce “the sky’s the limit” for ordering on special occasions. The elevated tracks of the Illinois Central railroad ran north and south along Hyde Park Boulevard, offering rare trips downtown.

Fortunately for those of us who have no sense of direction and get lost easily, early settlers of Chicago and the then-separate village of Hyde Park had laid out this bit of swampy prairie in a grid, avenues running north and south, numbered streets east and west. When we lived in student housing, our block was bounded on the south by the University campus, followed by the Midway, a broad 10-block grassy strip left over from the world’s fair of 1893. East were more University buildings, more of the sturdy 3-story brick apartment buildings like ours, the Museum of Science and Industry, another exotic structure left over from the 1893 world’s fair, and the parks and beaches of Lake Michigan.

Hyde Park was a neighborhood of contradictions in the 1950s. A university community but also an inner-city neighborhood. Part of a city that Mayor Daley ruled with an autocratic hand for 20 years but in a state of constant rebellion against his political machine. A racially integrated neighborhood but with flair ups of racial tensions.

African American residents were confronted with Mayor Daley’s policy of segregation despite the fact that it was illegal. The Supreme Court had outlawed housing segregation in 1948 and school segregation in 1954. But Daley’s political machine built freeways and immense brick blocks of public housing to keep the city’s African American population contained within a “black belt,” and to preserve white neighborhoods. He financed these projects with federal urban renewal and transportation funds. It didn’t work, of course.

Hyde Park fought back. In my first-grade class at Ray School, about half the students were African American. My parents were active in the Hyde Park Kenwood Community Conference, an effort to create a stable, racially integrated neighborhood. Block by block, Conference volunteers made sure that buyers and renters of any race or background were welcome. My parents were both from Quaker families so racial equality was a given. They were also religious pragmatists. Instead of joining a nearby Quaker meeting a block from our house in Hyde Park, they joined the Unitarian Church two blocks away, at 57th Street and Woodlawn, where activist minister Leslie Pennington was helping to lead the fight for racial integration. By the time I went to high school in a period of gang violence, many white families had given up on the public school or moved to the suburbs. My parents continued to believe in public education. My sister and brother and I all graduated from Hyde Park High.

Our first-floor student apartment at 5715 Drexel Avenue was called a railroad apartment. The rooms marched in a straight line down a long hall. They began with a small living room facing the street, followed by my parents’ bedroom – once a parlor, a bedroom shared by my two younger brothers, and a bedroom – once a dining room -- shared by my older sister, me, and nighttime monsters. There was one bathroom, a small kitchen, and a wooden back landing, which featured a metal wash tub in the summer for cooling off.

The monsters in the bedroom and the fish in the bathroom sink are among my most vivid memories. The monsters appeared at night. They were huge and dark but they stayed along the wall. Each night I was on watch in case they advanced. The fish were a little scary too. They came out of the bathroom faucet when you turned on the water to brush your teeth. My father explained that Lake Michigan water was not filtered. That was a point of pride for Chicagoans. The lake water was so clean that it could be drawn from the water intake stations offshore and whooshed directly to our apartment -- fish and all.

From the time we were small, the university campus was a favored playground on warm afternoons, as we waited for my father to finish work. There was the whispering bench, somehow constructed so our voices carried. Just inside the university gates was botany pond, at that time a delightful mucky, smelly habitat for frogs, turtles, water striders, dragon flies, and small, unfortunate fish. There was a stone bridge across the middle of the pond, good for watching the movements of these small creatures and imagining their lives. Across the grassy quadrangle was a huge, black, pitted meteor, as tall as I was, outside the stone steps of one of the classroom buildings, another mystery. Occasionally, we visited the glass blower in a nearby building who created the forest of vials and test tubes that cluttered my father’s lab. Once he made my sister a clear glass goose with a golden glass egg inside. Later I would be married in Bond Chapel on campus.

We grew up in and on the water. For a time, my father owned an aluminum boat with an outboard motor, sufficient to rescue young children unable to remain upright on water skis. But none of us did much boating. It was the shore of Lake Michigan that held our interest — the crashing surf against the boulders of the Point, our neighborhood park on the south side of Chicago, the ever-changing sandy shore of the Michigan dunes that delivered treasures. Some were tiny hollow beads that were the fossil stems of ancient crinoids. There were bits of smelted iron ore from the steel mills on the Indiana shore of the Lake, driftwood of all shapes and sizes, smoothed by long journeys. My father balanced crinoids, pebbles, and small shells from gnarled wood as mobiles in the small cottage my parents eventually purchased in the Dunes. My mother liked the storms. My father liked the sunsets.

Summers were glorious. We picnicked at the sailboat basin or at the Point, swam at the 57th street beach, or took the orange train to rented cottages on the Indiana dunes two hours away. Kettles of peaches and tomatoes simmered on the stove. My father and his fellow medical students visited the farmers market, bought fruit by the bushel, prepared it for canning in our apartment kitchen, loaded it in our red wagon, and took the fruit to the autoclave in the University lab to sterilize the jars. My mother reconciled herself to the weekly arrival of tomatoes, beans, carrots, radishes, and zucchini the size of baseball bats that my father’s annual vegetable garden produced. Years later, I asked my mother what she did with all that excess zucchini. “When we had a car, I just left it in the trunk,” she said.

At Ray Elementary School in the first grade when I was six, the carefree days ended. I was different. Not everyone wrote upside down and backwards as I did. No one else was left-handed in classrooms where there were only right-handed desks. I now noticed that everyone in my family was right-handed except me, and had brown hair and eyes while I had blond hair and green eyes. School became troublesome. I didn’t want to go. I felt sick every morning and couldn’t eat breakfast. My father suggested a bowl of cereal the night before. That helped. Then I was held back in first grade. For a while, being different was just plain bad.

Ray School was a substantial and dignified red brick building that spanned the block between 56th and 57th streets on Kimbark, eight blocks from our apartment. It had been built as a public high school in the 1890s, an architectural tribute to the city’s pride in public education. On each side were unadorned asphalt playgrounds bordered with iron fences, one for the boys and one for the girls.

November 14, 1952, my eighth birthday, was moving day. With $2500, my father’s first academic prize for heart disease research, my parents had made a down payment on 5521 Woodlawn, a 50-year-old red brick house typical of Hyde Park, a few blocks north of the university campus, and closer to the lake and to Ray School than our apartment had been.

It was a two-story brick home with four bedrooms, one bathroom, and an unfinished attic which became, of course, a favored playspace. We added a perennial garden of phlox and peonies along the backyard stone walk, a black cocker spaniel named Perky, later the mother of two litters of black and blond messy and delightful puppies, a boa constrictor named Gus Gus, who lived among the pipes in the basement for a while, a sandbox, brick-red trim my father painted and re-painted while perched precariously on a ladder, my parents’ favorite  “pink fuzzy chair” that followed us from the student apartment, our first television, a set of Great Books that no one read, and an upright piano on the sun porch where my father’s German band of pathologists practiced on Sunday evenings and persuaded me to play the accordion. We appropriated a backyard cement fishpond, edged with flagstone, as a swimming pool. My birthday present as we moved in was a pair of red wooden stilts my father had made. For the next year, I spent much of my time being very tall.

For the first time, I had my own room. It featured a door to a small porch above the backyard. Along one wall was a bookcase I filled with bottles of potions concocted from hand lotion, berry juice, leaves, and whatever else could be scavenged. A flowery dressing table and wallpaper probably reflected parental efforts to encourage femininity. They were unsuccessful. In those pre-teen years, I raced with my two younger brothers through the alley and neighbors’ backyards, armed with a double holster and cap guns, resulting in skinned knees that left scars I can still see. We were inspired by characters on the new TV, Roy Rogers and The Lone Ranger. I visited the stables across the midway and saved my babysitting money for a palomino horse like the one Roy Rogers rode. Eventually, when boys became more interesting than horses, it was diverted to a college fund.

About the time my brothers got big enough to beat me at the game of “horse” at the alley basketball net, I noticed a university fraternity house on the corner of 56th and Woodlawn and contrived to walk past it several times a day, hoping that one of its tall, handsome inhabitants would notice a skinny 13-year-old in pedal pushers. None ever did.

When not in school, I still tried to spend every daylight moment outdoors. I collected butterflies on the Wooded Island in Jackson Park, part of Olmstead’s creation, swam at the 57th Street beach, and tried to persuade my father that I could shovel snow and rake leaves with the boys instead of doing kitchen work with my mother and older, more accomplished sister.

I was a frequent visitor to my father’s lab, room 313 in the hospital’s pathology wing. Wooden tables were arranged in a large square, senior scientists, junior scientists, and students all on lab stools. The conversation featured exotic accents. The war had brought over not only Albert Einstein, Enrico Fermi, and other famous physicists but also many senior physicians and researchers to the university. While U.S. universities still rarely admitted women in graduate science studies, they were the lucky recipients of many senior women scientists educated in Europe. There were early electron microscopes that revealed another world, teaming with small creatures. I had a lab coat and fed the white rats on Saturdays. They were friendly.  Some were on high-fat diets. These were early experiments that suggested that diet was a factor in the development - and reversal - of heart disease. Until then, heart disease had simply been seen as an inevitable part of old age.

When I was eight or nine, my father gave me a biography of Marie Curie, written by her daughter Eve. Marie Curie was the first woman to win the Nobel prize, and won it twice, one for physics and once for chemistry, for her studies of radioactivity, including the discovery of the radioactive element radon.  Her work helped make possible the use of X-rays to diagnose fractures among soldiers in World War I, the treatment of cancer with radiation, and understanding of the structure of the atom. Born in Poland to a family of teachers and educated initially at the clandestine Flying University that admitted women, Madame Curie continued her education in Paris and became the first woman professor at the University of Paris. She maintained a modest lifestyle, resisted publicity, and did early work in a shed because she could not afford a laboratory. She published her discoveries quickly to counter doubters who did not believe a woman could do such work. Still, it took the intervention of a senior scientist to include her in the first Nobel Prize which she shared with her husband, Pierre Curie.

I did not know at the time that my experience was different from other young women in the 1950s who found doors closed to them. The chance to observe women scientists at work, my father’s help with my writing, and my luck in having younger brothers planted the idea that women could do anything men could do. No one in my world ever suggested otherwise.