

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

May 2023

Exploring Our Neighborhood and Culinary History

This issue explores the developmental history of our Highland Avenue neighborhood and our members' fascination with baking and enjoying cakes, especially their Favorite Childhood Cakes, the theme of this year's competition held at the Annual Meeting of the Members on February 27 at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens.



Birmingham Realty Company Offices (1904), 2118 First Avenue North.

Designer of the offices was the New Zealand born and trained architect William C. Weston who practiced in Birmingham from c.1900 to 1913, designing many of the city's finest commercial and residential structures. Birmingham Historical Society.



Interior, Birmingham Realty Company Offices.

Patrons walked up to the teller windows and purchased land upon which they built their homes and offices and industrial plants. Birmingham Historical Society.

Birmingham Realty Prepared to Sell Land

"This city has natural advantages which are unsurpassed anywhere in the country. In fact, I do not know of a single city in the United States which could be converted into as pretty a residence city as Birmingham."

—John Charles Olmsted, quoted in *The Birmingham Age-Herald*, October 3, 1905.

In 1899, the Birmingham Realty Company became the successor to the Elyton Land Company. The latter company owned the land upon which it founded and developed the city center, the north and south sides (of the railroad tracks) and its South Highlands property: 5,500 acres. At the turn of the 20th century with the regional economy growing, the city was experiencing a real estate boom and Birmingham Realty began aggressively acquiring and preparing to subdivide more land.

Civil engineers laid out subdivisions in the flat valley lands, employing a grid network of straight streets and avenues. The realty company had laid out Highland Avenue in 1885, discovering that boulevards lining a streetcar route encouraged homebuilding and elevated property values. In 1902, Robert Jemison Sr. employed the first landscape architect to practice in the city. Samuel Parsons of New York designed Jemison's residence park at Glen Iris with its stately homes nestled into the ridges about a central park. Birmingham Realty Company followed by laying out a streetcar line to form Norwood Boulevard with its wide central park.

In 1904, Birmingham Realty moved into its stylish Beaux Arts headquarters. Here a dramatic-sky-lite chamber welcomed visitors to the sales area. Maps lined the walls, showing lots available for sale in the city center, along Highland Avenue, and in Norwood. At this time, directors of the realty company included A. L. Fulenwider, President; William Halls Jr., Vice President; E. B. Daffin, Assistant Secretary and Treasurer; and Alex T. London, General Counsel.



Announcing the Fruity Wonders Cake Competition, 2024

The Criterion: A forever family favorite that includes some element of fruit—inside or on the top. And, of course, a wonderful story to go with it.

The Categories: Most Colorful, Best Creative Use of Fruit, Best Visual Presentation, Best Flavor Profiles, Best Memory Statement

Exploring the history of our neighborhood ... Visits of John Charles Olmsted

Creating a residence park in the highlands

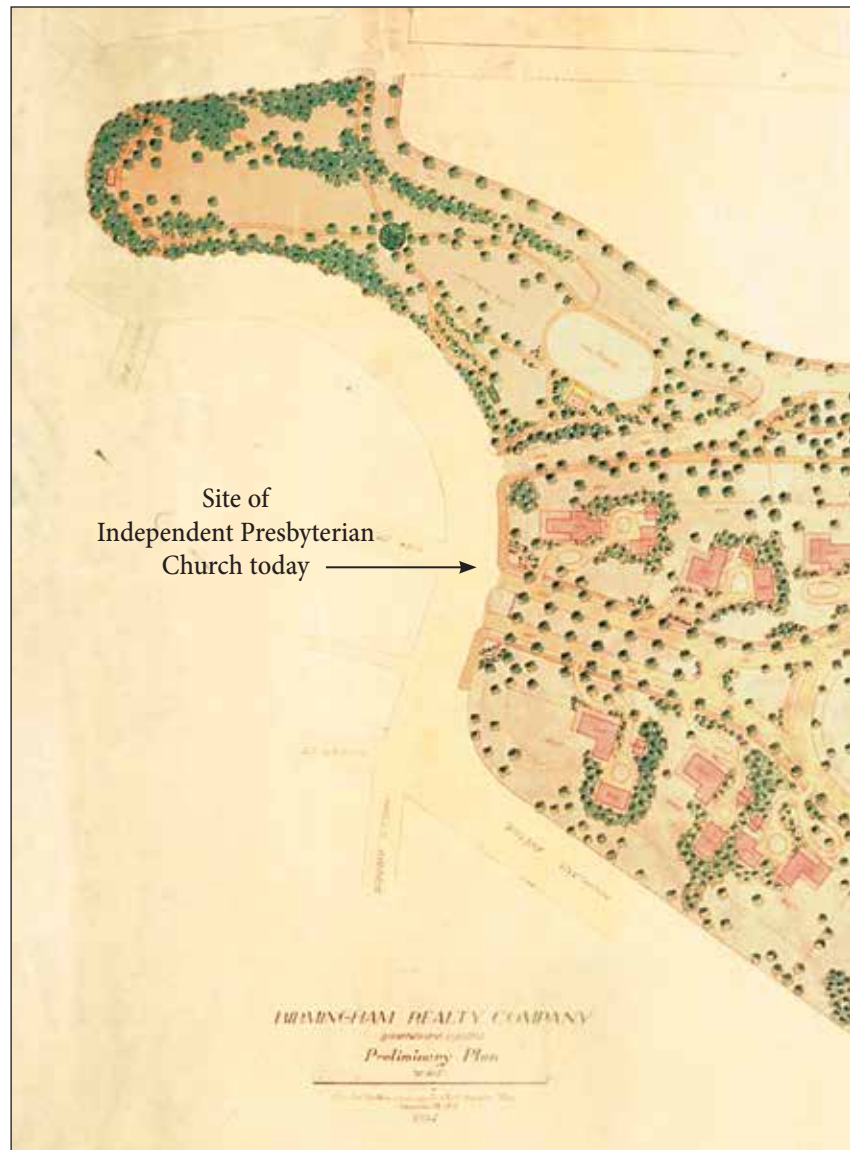
In 1905, Highland Avenue was a premier address and the City was paving it with Bitulithic. Seeking to create an upscale residential area on undeveloped company lands at the eastern end of the avenue, Birmingham Realty sought out the Olmsted Brothers landscape architects and planners of Brookline, Massachusetts. John Charles Olmsted (1852-1920) served as managing partner of the firm, the successor to the legacy of his uncle (and stepfather) Frederick Law Olmsted, father of the American parks movement, who had died in 1903. The firm's southern projects included the Louisville parks and parkways and Druid Hills in Atlanta. In September 1905, attorney Alex London called upon a firm representative in Louisville and said they had 144 acres for which they desired plans. Following an agreement on a fee, Mr. Olmsted came to the city for a visit from October 1st to 3rd.

Driving in a horse-drawn hack and accompanied by realty company president A. L. Fulenwider, city engineer Julius Kendrick, and street commissioner John McCartin, Mr. Olmsted toured the lands proposed for subdivision. They also stopped at Mr. London's Highland Avenue residence and his office and dined at the Birmingham Country Club, then located in today's Highland Park. The lands "to be laid off" (at \$5.00 per acre, plus travel and expenses; parks were \$10 per acre) included two yet unnamed hills—one overlooking Lakeview Park and the other above St. Vincent's Hospital—the residential estate of Mr. Fulenwider high up above Pawnee Avenue, a "small valley park," and Lakeview Park. Today, these properties bear the names Chestnut Hill, Hanover Circle, Redmont Park, Rushton Park, and Highland Park.

An *Age-Herald* reporter interviewed Mr. Olmsted after his tour of realty company property. His report stated that the "noted landscape artist" would be converting "about 100 acres in the neighborhood of Lakeview into one of the finest residential sections in the entire South." The reporter stated that, the realty company would spend "a large amount of money making this one of the prettiest places of its kind in the country." In his notes on the visit, Mr. Olmsted stated that his "few vague phrases [were] developed and supplemented about 1,000% by the reporter or Mr. Fulenwider for advertising purposes." (The reporter's comments are cited on page 1 of this newsletter.)

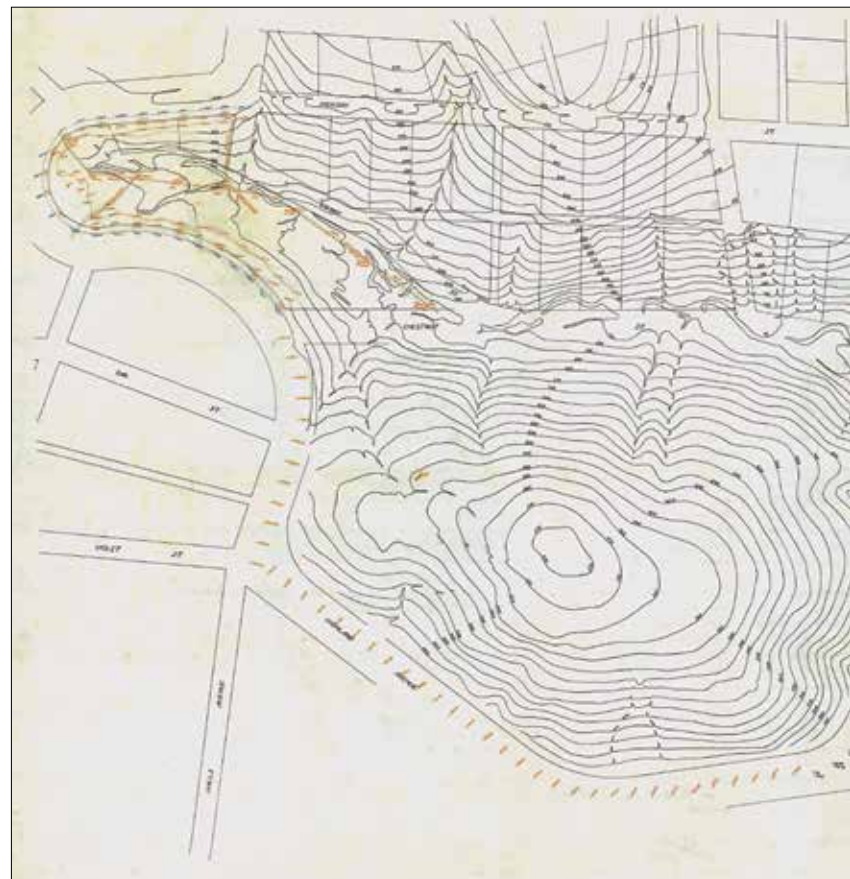
Today's Chestnut Hill

For the hill overlooking Lakeview Park, Olmsted suggested a loop drive around the summit of the hill. Mr. Fulenwider wanted to call this upper drive a "place" and have an imposing entrance suggesting exclusiveness (socially) and a high price for the land. The client wished the entrance would be from Highland Avenue. Fulenwider further specified that individual properties were to include a main house, a stable, and a servants house, as Mr. Olmsted noted, "It is not customary to have servants in the main house." He suggested the loop drive be "cut to supply earth to grade up the front lawns of the lots on the downhill side." He was skeptical of the possibilities of the soil: "a whitish clay with a large proportion of chert stone like a disintegrated macadam roadbed. It looks unpromising for planting, yet they say, with manure, it is easy to grow trees and shrubs in it and very easy to cover it with Bermuda grass. One summer makes a thick turf. They have 60" of rain a year, they said." Mr. Olmsted was directed to draw up a preliminary plan.



ABOVE: Preliminary plan for the hill between Highland Avenue and Chestnut Street (today's 31st Street S.), December 5, 1905, the pencil sketch colored as "a sun print," Olmsted Brothers, Project #3083, courtesy National Park Service, Frederic Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

On February 23, 1906, Fulenwider reviewed and approved this plan that shows the proposed lots with residences, servants houses, and stables and the valley park extending along today's 31st Street all the way from Highland Avenue to Clairmont Avenue. His only





revision was to add a fourteenth residence. Olmsted doubted the steep Highland Avenue entrance to today's Chestnut Hill district would ever be built.

BELOW: Topographic Plan. Olmsted Brothers, Project #3083, courtesy National Park Service, Frederic Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

The plan shows the steep terrain separated by the natural floodplain (today's 31st Street South) that channeled water running off of Red Mountain.



How the Olmsted firm designed land subdivision

During his visit John Charles Olmsted made detailed notes of his observations about the areas to be planned, proposing and discussing ideas with his client. From these site visits and discussions, the firm would draw up a preliminary plan and then return to stake out the plan on the ground for client review and approval before proceeding to grading and planting plans. Olmsted's correspondence with A. L. Fulenwider and Alex London is now held at the Library of Congress. The Olmsted plans are found at Fairstead, the Olmsted office now a National Park Service site in Brookline, Massachusetts. The Olmsted drawings are reprinted courtesy the National Park Service, Frederic Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

Today's Highland Park

In 1902, the company leased the Lakeview Park property to the Birmingham Country Club (for golf) for 10 years, after which they intended to subdivide it. Mr. Fulenwider wanted a plan to guide them in planning sewers, etc. for future use "as they say it will not be long before sales can be made, even subject to lease, owing to speculative fever." Two streams fed into the then extant lake; the realty company wanted it filled up. Mr. Olmsted noted "there is prejudice against ponds in the South for fear of malaria." Delineating the northern boundary of the park, the future Clairmont Avenue was to be carried straight into Highland Avenue. "This will leave a slim triangle with considerable slope across it between the two and I advised that it be dedicated and improved as a park," he continued.

On the origin of Highland Avenue and its parks

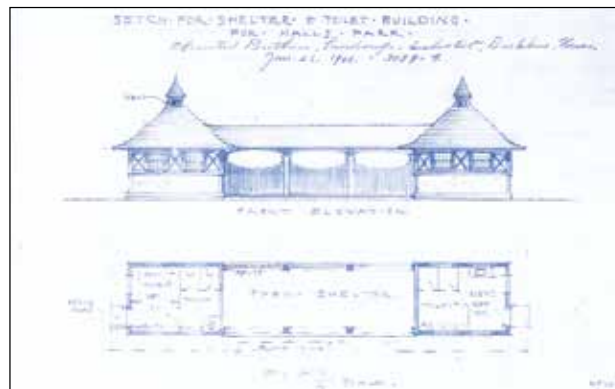
The Olmsted firm would become the nation's premier planner of park systems: parkways (tree-lined boulevards) linking parks. By 1903, John Charles Olmsted had developed a comprehensive plan for Seattle's city parks and boulevards and had worked with Frederick Law Olmsted on many other park plans. He recorded Fulenwider's explanation of the origins of Highland Avenue and its parks.

"The little park (Rushton Park) was given to the City by the Realty company presumably because it was nearly worthless, and would, if preserved as a park, benefit adjoining residence property instead of being a menace if left to be sold in small lots for cheap residences. There are two other similar little parks on this avenue further southwest. This avenue came about rather accidentally they said. A dummy steam line of railroad was built [in 1885] to afford access to the proposed subdivisions. It was done with light grades and avoiding cuts and fills and bridges as much as possible, hence it is very crooked. One of the loops is at this park which is the narrow valley the railroad skirted on each side. Afterwards it was decided to build a drive on each side of the railway as a driving boulevard. This has proved a success in enhancing neighboring land values."

— John Charles Olmsted, Report of Visit, October 2, 1905.

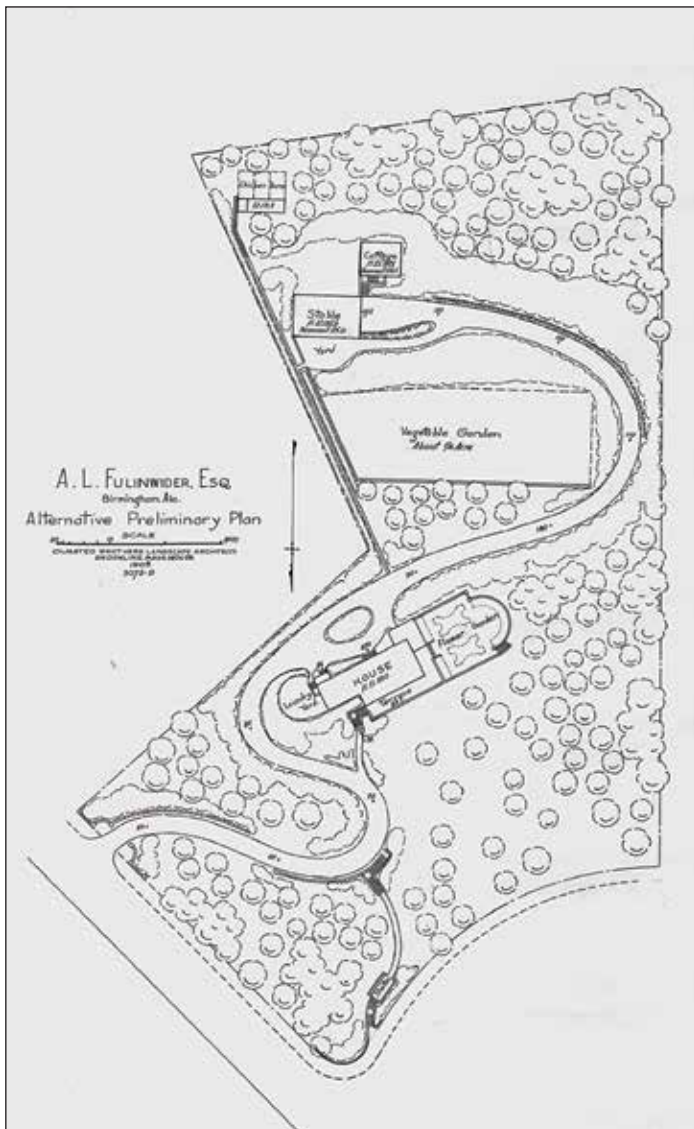
Planning for "the little valley park," today's Rushton Park

The City had agreed to help improve the "little valley park" if the realty company would provide the plan. Upon inspection, Olmsted suggested curving today's 31st Street South and enlarging the park up the valley to today's Clairmont Avenue, building a roofed shelter and a wading pool, and planting the steep banks with *Rosa wichuraiana* (Memorial rose, introduced in the United States in 1891 and often used as a ground cover) and shrubbery in occasional clumps to help hold the banks. A hardy presence of evergreen trees and shrubs was deemed appropriate. These suggestions were approved and plans for the park [today's Rushton Park] were to be prepared. A sketch for a shelter was to be presented to a donor willing to put up \$1,000 for improvements. The City's "days works gang" was to accomplish these improvements. A grading plan and a plan for a shelter were sent to Birmingham in January of 1906.



Sketch for Shelter and Toilet Building for Hall's Park, January 26, 1906.

Olmsted Brothers Project #3089-4, courtesy National Park Service, Frederic Law Olmsted National Historic Site.



A. L. Fulenwider Esq. Alternative Preliminary Plan, November 8, 1905. Olmsted Brothers #3075-9, courtesy National Park Service, Frederic Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

For the challenging site that included a 150' change in grade, Mr. Olmsted recommended this alternative.

Planning for A. L. Fulenwider's residence

During his October 1905 visit, Mr. Olmsted toured the lots proposed for Mr. Fulenwider's private residence in the company of his architect, William C. Weston. Fulenwider told him that he wanted "to keep the cost of improvements low so that he can make a profit selling the place by and by." Olmsted noted that Fulenwider "will spend freely for showy improvements done in a cheap way." Following up on the site visit, on November 5, 1905, Mr. Olmsted wrote Fulenwider, "we have found your problem an unusually difficult one, owing to the steepness of the land on which you propose to build and the restricted space available in which to layout a drive from the street to the house, and we have made an unusual number of studies showing different possible arrangements."

Planning for Hanover Circle

Mr. Olmsted returned to the city on December 5. He reviewed preliminary plans for the park and the hills behind St. Vincent's and overlooking Lakeview Park with Mr. Fulenwider and the firm's newly hired civil engineer, Mr. Meriwether. Fulenwider thought "it would pay best to improve the latter first, as the Country Club and improvements would draw the most wealthy class to it and this would tend to greatly lift the value of the hill by St. Vincent's for those who did not care to go so far out." Realty company principals also discussed preparing plans for the future subdivision of Lakeview Park and the firm's recently acquired 40-acre tract (in today's Forest Park). Olmsted noted, "They spoke as if it were easy enough to lay out, but it did not strike me so judging by the contour map. I understood they got it cheaper

because it had no outlet street into Avondale through which the electric cars run without buying lots and turning them into streets.... I inferred this tract would be cut up into 50' lots to be sold to all comers."

During January of 1906 the firm was working on the hill back of St. Vincent's and found it "even more puzzling than the first hill." Dealing with the complicated topography, Olmsted noted, "requires a great deal of study and is a very different proposition from our usual land subdivision plan... To preserve the relatively high value of the land would justify your Company in expending more for the plans than is normally the case." Fulenwider responded that they did not care to go to any extra expense to lay out the property and that Olmsted should proceed as originally agreed regarding the price or withdraw from the process.



Preliminary Plan for Subdivision of Land between Poplar St. and 26th St. South of 10th Avenue S., January 3, 1907. Olmsted Brothers #3089-18, courtesy National Park Service, Frederic Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

The plan for this unnamed hill that Mr. Olmsted called "Mt. St. Vincent" (today's Hanover Circle) was complete except for the proposed road names.

What happened?

During 1907, no final approval of work, nor payment due for professional services rendered for planning the two hills, Fulenwider's homesite, or the park was forwarded to the Olmsted office. On July 5, 1907, Fulenwider wrote Mr. Olmsted that the plans suggested for his residence are "not at all satisfactory and we will not use them . . . I have had other plans made which are more practical."

By September, Mr. Olmsted appealed to company attorney Alex London for assistance in collecting funds due. London responded that he had severed relations with Mr. Fulenwider.

Fulenwider sold his estate to real estate developer and coal mining investor Frank Nelson. Birmingham Realty Company had a new president. On March 31, 1908, the firm forwarded \$527.12 to Olmsted Bros., closing this opportunity to implement the proposed preliminary plans.

The sequel

Birmingham Realty filed a plat for Hanover Place in July 1908 and five years later in May of 1913 a plat for today's Chestnut Hill. Civil engineer B. B. Meriwether, who had staked out the Olmsted plans following the tutoring of John Charles Olmsted, platted these subdivisions called *Hanover Place* and *Birmingham Realty Company's 5th Addition to Birmingham* (today's Chestnut Hill). Meriwether's plat for Chestnut Hill included grand pedestrian staircases linking the homes high up on the hill to Highland Avenue. Birmingham Realty developed major portions of Forest Park. Golf continued, uninterrupted at Lakeview Park after the country club moved to Shades Valley in 1922. The City acquired the park in 1929.

The Olmsted Brothers firm returned to Birmingham to prepare a park plan for the region in 1924. To this day, preliminary, grading, and platting plans for Rushton Park prepared at this time remain unimplemented.

RIGHT: Perspective of a Pond and Shelter, 1924. Olmsted Brothers #3089-18, courtesy National Park Service, Frederic Law Olmsted National Historic Site.

Mr. Olmsted advised that the waters of the spring at the head of the park then being piped to Lakeview Park be held in the park for a wading pool, now that 31th Street South had been built in the floodplain subsequent the 1905 plan. Soon, the City of Birmingham will spend \$2 million to drain Caldwell Park of the water flowing from Red Mountain and flooding the Little Theatre and Episcopal Place. A natural floodplain might have been a good idea here also.



Favorite Childhood Cake Competition, 2023 • Participants and Their Cakes



Wilson Green and Mrs. Tinsley's Sour Cream Pound Cake

Best Overall Cake: Mrs. Tinsley's Sour Cream Pound Cake by Wilson Green

Judging Criterion: This category literally "takes the cake" in terms of hitting all the marks: quality. . . texture and baking. . . masterful execution, and a winning taste experience.

My Memories of This Cake:

In 1968, my father Frank Green integrated the faculty at Hayes High School on Airport Boulevard in Birmingham. Mrs. Myrtle Tinsley, the Home Economics teacher, befriended him. They shared a love of baking (Dad was a cook in the Army). Mrs. Tinsley's Sour Cream Pound Cake became a staple in Dad's baking routines, especially at holidays. I was his assistant for making many of these. He always let me lick the bowl. I still make the cake all the time, using his original recipe card from the early '70s (which gives Mrs. Tinsley the credit). We marvel at the cake, but marvel more at the respect and genuine affection Mrs. Tinsley and my Dad had for one another, when the times might have suggested otherwise.

Whose recipe was it? My father's via Mrs. Tinsley

Do you still make it? Six times a year

Best Memory Cake: Grand Aunt Myrtle's Lane Cake by Don Cospers

Judging Criteria: This cake tells the best story and links the cake to the baker's childhood in evocative and interesting ways.

My Memories of This Cake: *The Lane Cake recipe comes from my Grand Aunt Myrtle. We often had it at Sunday dinner at her house. Her husband, my Grand Uncle Frank, died in 1956 when I was a child, leaving my aunt with a respectable house and a nice pension. That, however, did not keep Aunt Myrtle from cultivating the "poor widow" persona. She leased out her spacious lot to gardeners in return for produce from the garden. She also baked cakes for extra income. One of her most requested cakes was her Lane Cake, which uses whiskey in the recipe. Aunt Myrtle was an upstanding Baptist lady who was a teetotaler, therefore we always wondered how she got the whiskey for the cakes since she did not drive. Maybe she shared Miss Maudie's (from Eudora Welty's To Kill A Mockingbird) source for her "shinny." As an avid traveler who often took the train (and later the plane) to Virginia and*



Don Cospers and Grand Aunt Myrtle's Lane Cake

Baltimore and even to several World's Fairs, I figure the cake business must have been rather lucrative.

Whose recipe was it?

Mrs. Frank (Myrtle) Parsons

Do you make it often? NO



Most Vintage: Caramel Cake by Elizabeth Hester

Judging Criteria: It dates impressively back in time and speaks strongly of a particular era.

My Memories of This Cake: *I have vivid memories of my grandmother bringing a caramel cake along with mason jars of vegetable soup to our house. I once made it for a family reunion and left it atop the car. Of course, it flew off. My grandmother and everyone else was heart-broken!*

Whose recipe was it? My grandmother's

Do you still make it often? Yes



grandparent's homes in Tennessee. A cousin still insists on it for her birthday! It might have been a favorite when flour, etc. was rationed??? Mrs. Howard W. Cater included it in Kitchen Notes, published by The Know Music Club of Anniston, Alabama in the 1950s.

**Most Beautiful: Napoleon
by Vasilisa Strelnikova**

Judging Criteria: The eyes win out over taste on this one. Further, it is a joy to regard both at first glance and then as you slice into it.

My Memories of This Cake: *It was the most delicious cake, it was so delicate, creamy, and melted in my mouth. I loved it then and it's still one of my favorites!*

Whose recipe was it? My grandmother's

Do you still make it? Often

**Most Unusual Cake: Potato Caramel
Cake by Alleen Cater**

Judging Criterion: Something beyond the expected either in regard to flavor, appearance, or theme.

My Memories of This Cake: Birthdays and other special occasions.

Whose recipe was it? *Recipe might have originated in maternal grandparents; or*



Birmingham Historical Society
P.O. Box 321474 | Birmingham, AL 35232

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED



Postcard, c.1949. Gift of Alvin Schaut, Birmingham Historical Society.

More Cakes ...



A. Bamar's and Miss Belle's 1-2-3-4 Pound Cake by Anne Miller

B. Sinful Chocolate Cake by Pam Ager

C. Surprise Cake by Steve Coleman

D. Grandmother's Pound Cake by Fletcher Harvey and Ann Relfe

E. Applesauce Cake by Carolanne Roberts

F. Aunt Dotty's Jam Cake by Marjorie Lee White

G. Flourless Chocolate Torte by Joy Ledvina

H. Grand Marnier Cake by Eva Ledvina

I. Chocolate Ice Box Cake by Susan Haskell

J. Chocolate Texas Sheet Cake by Sarah Slaughter

K. Gingerbread (of the 1950s and Today) by Marjorie White

