

The Good Ole Days, Digitally

By James Fanelli

A September 8th message asks if anyone knows a gang of kids from years past known as the Austin Street Boys, or if anyone remembers Bennie, a handyman commonly referred to as Mr. Fix-it in Kew Gardens.

These are typical postings on Joseph De May's website — where current and former residents post nostalgic shout-outs to a time when Kew Gardens was a suburban enclave filled with Victorian Houses set back from the streets with kids playing baseball, and shakes and burgers at the local joints were a childhood delight.

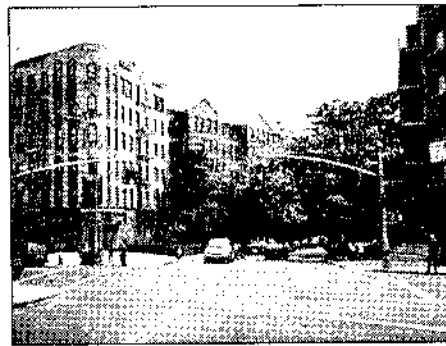
De May's site, OldKewGardens.com, provides a history of his neighborhood — from its humble origins as a golf course of Richmond Hill to, he laments, an increasingly homogenized commercial and residential center that's slowly losing the charm that made it memorable.

"Whatever the cultural or educational benefits are, most people who visit the site do so because it's fun to see where our community came from and what it used to be like," said De May, a nautical lawyer, who's lived in Kew Gardens since 1974. His digital preservations have created a bit of a cyber stir, with many former residents logging on to navigate through pictures and history of their old haunts.

The website provides a photo album of images of past and present landmarks, coupled with rich anecdotes. In one sequence of photographs, the site shows how the current PS 99 was formerly the site of the Driscoll House, which, head-scratchingly, now resides on 82-46 Kew Gardens Road. When construction began on the school, the contractor, George Driscoll, had the house placed over logs and rolled to its present location. He then lived in it the rest of his life.

The website's guest book has also become a forum for former residents. Some use it as a way to catch up with childhood friends with whom they have fallen out of touch. "My heart quickens at the prospect of being reconnected with them and reminiscing about old times," said one hopeful signer.

Others use the space to reminisce about their salad days there. Favorite spots to grab chow are a popular toast — Hamburger Train on 108th Street in Forest Hills was the highlight of



Photos courtesy of Joseph De May

Oldkewgardens.com, a website by Joseph De May, shows how Kew Gardens has developed over the last century. The photo at left shows Lefferts Boulevard at Metropolitan Avenue circa 1920, and at right, it's the same scene in 2003.

one poster's young life. Another poster waxes poetically with an ode to schoolyard 99. Another wonders about the veracity of a childhood rumor that an ex-U-boat captain owned a Kew Gardens diner (still not corroborated, although one poster has confirmed he was from Germany).

OldKewGardens.com didn't pop up overnight, rather it came about accidentally. "Acquiring old pictures took a long time and a lot of money," remarked De May, who, when not visiting his fiancée, Christene Warby, in Australia, devotes much of his free time to its upkeep.

He started his website in 2000 as a way to teach himself web design. At first, it was a simple page, with some information about himself and a picture of his apartment building, the Beverly House. To complement the picture, he looked for an old photograph of his apartment building from the first half of the 19th century. The rest was history — literally.

Three years later, through collecting old postcards, using his own camera and reading author Barry Levy's book *Kew Gardens: Urban Village in the Big City*, the part-time chronicler has amassed a panoply of past and present pictures of various locations that show how buildings have changed or remained the same.

"He's just blossomed with his website," lauded Carl Ballenas, a public school teacher and Richmond Hill Historical Society member, who recently wrote a history book with Nancy Cataldi called *Images of America: Richmond Hill*, which relays interesting tidbits about Kew Gardens before it was developed. He and De May, both avid old-time post-

card collectors, have shared artifacts and information with each other.

Part of De May's goal for the site is to draw attention to the impact of excessive commercial and residential development on the neighborhood's beauty.

"Every time a distinctive old home or other community landmark is replaced by a cookie-cutter-style multiple dwelling, the neighborhood we live in becomes more cluttered and loses more of the distinctive character which has always made it such a wonderful place to live," rued De May. "Just talking about it doesn't have the same impact as letting residents see for themselves what has been lost."

"It's a very hard battle," said Cataldi, president of the Richmond Hill Historical Society, about the fight to prevent overdevelopment. She became acquainted with De May when he took out an ad in local newspapers asking for help finding old photographs. Since then, she has provided De May with historical information and photos, and he, in return, has donated many old photographs and postcards to the society's archives.

Though De May may move to Australia when he marries his fiancée, he vows not to slack off with his digital chronicle. If it's too difficult to upkeep, he said, the Kew Gardens Civic Association and the Richmond Hill Historical Society have both expressed interest in keeping OldKewGardens.com alive.

"I spend so much time working on it that my fiancée says I care more about the website than I do her," joked De May. "She's wrong, of course. I love them both the same."