

# Lake Smith practically one big family

The community off Northampton Boulevard prides itself on longevity and stability.

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AFF WRITER

George Lassiter recounts his family tree by looking out his living room window.

His son's cousins live across the street; his stepson down the block; his sister in a nearby trailer, he says, sitting outside.

Lassiter, 85, lives in a community that is so close to being one extended family, he's lost track of which neighbors are relatives and which aren't. The couple down the block, though, he's pretty sure is one of a few that's not kin.

"The Lamberts are all to themselves," he said.

Lassiter paused.

"We might be (related), I don't know."

So it goes in Lake Smith, a small, mostly elderly, African-American neighborhood that prides itself on longevity and stability.

And while in the last 10 years construction of a sewer system, building of new homes and additions of paved roads has improved the neighborhood's physical environment dramatically, most residents will maintain that not much has changed in their intimate community—which is just fine by them.

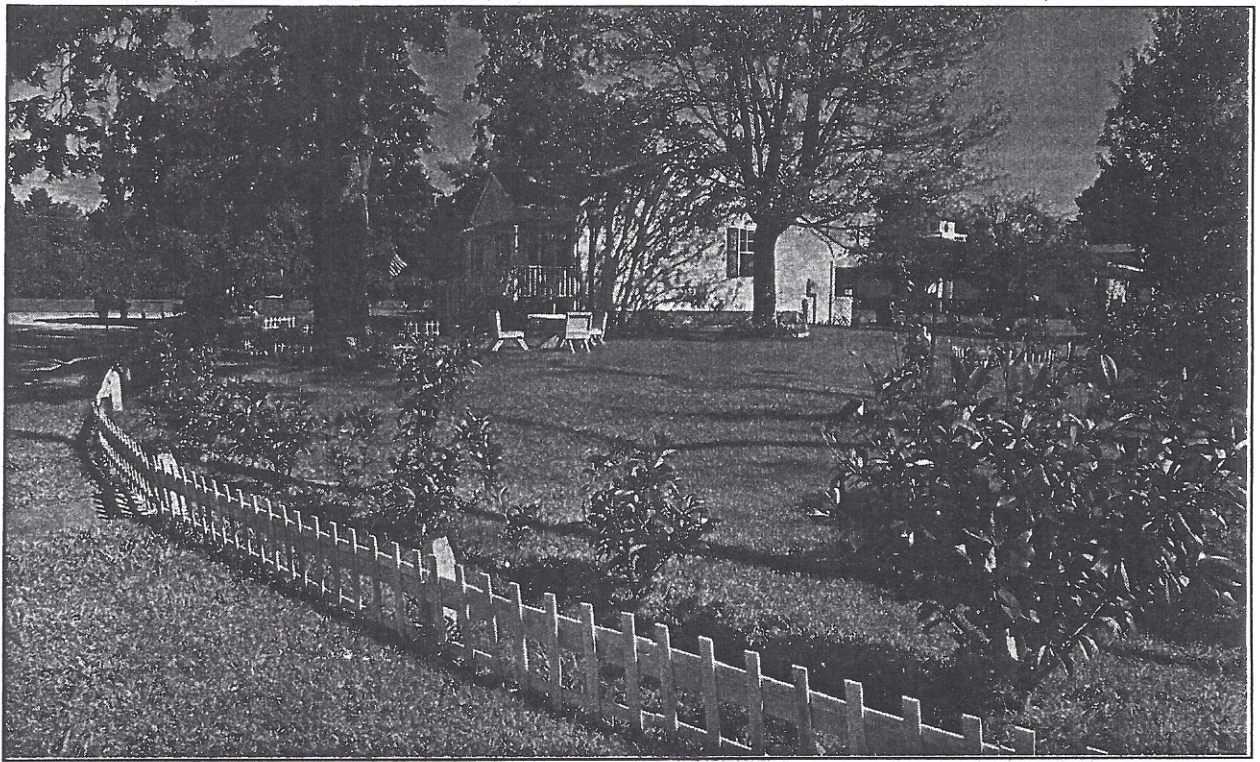
"It's always been a very nice community," said Renee McNeil, 60, at 42 is one of the younger newcomers in the area.

Twenty years ago, the city decided to invest in 12 low-income, mostly black neighborhoods, like Lake Smith, that had been left behind by Virginia Beach's development boom. The city has spent more than \$1 million in federal and local funds since then to extend sewer and sewer lines, pave dirt roads and rehabilitate housing in neighborhoods.

Located right off Northampton Boulevard, Lake Smith Station is an almost entirely residential neighborhood of about 100 people. In existence since around the turn of the century, the neighborhood today consists primarily of retired senior citizens.

As some of the residents on Panama Avenue, one of the main streets, gathered in the middle of the road to mull over the day, a sense of comfort imbued the scene. Most of us in this neighborhood family connected," Lassiter said. "We don't have any trouble with each other."

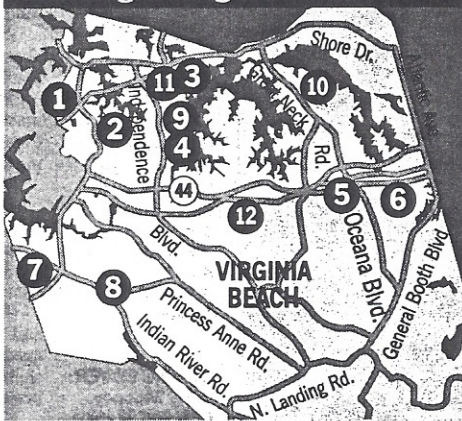
Nearby is the clamor of cars racing by on their way to the nearby Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, but Lake Smith remains dominantly peaceful and pleasant. The urbanization that has



Staff photo by CHARLES MEADS

Located right off Northampton Boulevard, Lake Smith Station is an almost entirely residential neighborhood of about 100. It originated shortly after the turn of the century, when white property owners sold off their land in small parcels to impoverished blacks. Today, it consists primarily of retirees.

## The target neighborhoods



- |                  |              |
|------------------|--------------|
| 1 Burton Station | 7 Queen City |
| 2 Newsome Farm   | 8 New Light  |
| 3 Lake Smith     | 9 Gracetown  |
| 4 Reedtown       | 10 Mill Dam  |
| 5 Atlantic Park  | 11 Beechwood |
| 6 Seatack        | 12 Doyletown |

sprawled around Lake Smith has not seemed to have greatly affected the neighborhood; rather it is the calmness of the surrounding lake which has always set the tone for this community that has existed in relative anonymity.

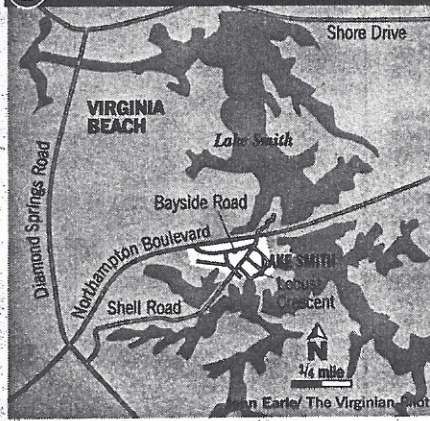
"The only time we get people from Northampton is when the cars break down and they ask to use the telephones," McNeil said.

Although there is little written about the neighborhood, oral histo-

ry suggests that Lake Smith, although it has dwindled dramatically over the years, was a cornerstone community for blacks in Norfolk and Virginia Beach.

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## 3 Lake Smith



### About Lake Smith

- Houses at start: 29
- Occupied houses deemed uninhabitable: 15
- Population at start: 93
- Percentage of land undeveloped: 49%
- Work completed: Water, sewer, streets, drainage, housing
- Public money invested: \$1.1 million



This is the third of 10 profiles on the city's Target Neighborhoods. Next: A look at Newsome Farm in Sunday's Beacon.

white property owners sold off their land in small parcels to impoverished blacks. Most of this land was sold by C.M. Hodgman and today comprises the bulk of Lake Smith.

Lassiter, who was born in 1910 and has lived in Lake Smith his entire life, remembers Hodgman as a man who treated the poorer blacks with kindness and respect. Lassiter's uncle, who raised him, was one who bought property from Hodgman, and Lassiter remembers as a boy playing with the white man's children.

"He was a nice man," Lassiter recalled. "He tried to help all the poor folks."

Soon an all-black, lakeside community was born—but it soon encountered extreme crowding problems.

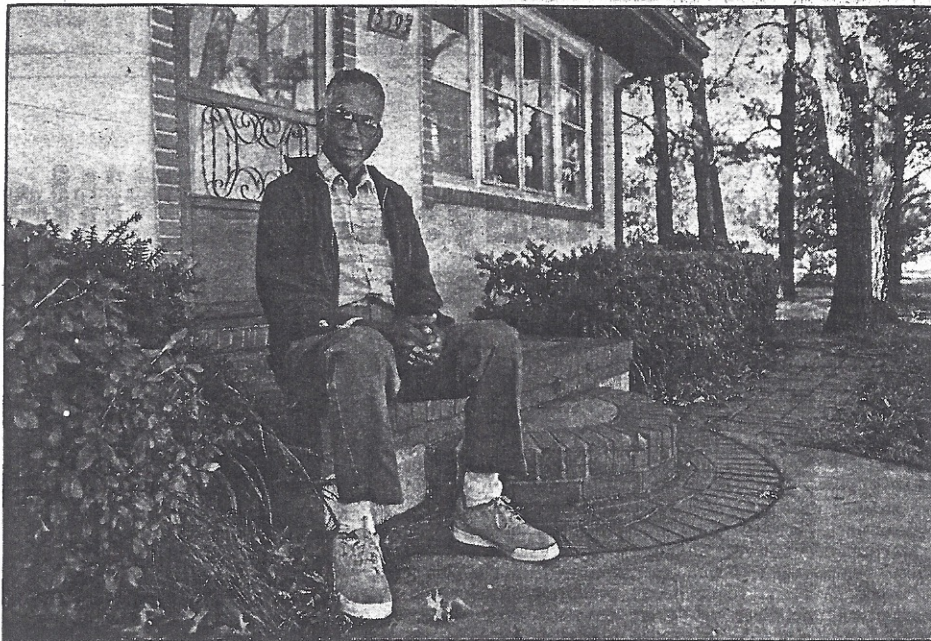
"This piece of land (Lake Smith) was sold to black people," said Willie Gordon, who has lived in Lake Smith since 1922. "Since they didn't have nowhere else to build they all crowded in here."

The early Lake Smith community had about three times as many residents as it does today, according to Gordon, which amounted to 300 people on 13 acres of land. Many of these early Lake Smith residents worked on the adjacent farms, often getting their meals by picking up scraps from the field.

"They were living on top of one another," Gordon recalled. "They were living like cats and dogs."

The crowding eventually became

Please see following page



Staff photo by CHARLES MEADS

**Willie Gordon, a Lake Smith resident since 1922, is civic league president. He and his family stuck it out through tough times. "When HUD came in here things started getting better," Gordon said. "And they're still getting better."**

*Continued from previous page*

too much for most Lake Smith residents. According to Gordon, in the 1950s, with opportunities increasing for blacks, many residents fled Lake Smith to live in Norfolk. Gordon's family was one of the few that remained.

"I said, 'Hey, we're living in a good place, why move out.'"

**Gordon and his family stayed in** spite of its obvious physical drawbacks. Until about 10 years ago, the community was extremely underdeveloped — there was no sewer system or running water, the roads were unpaved and most residents lived in trailers or inadequate homes.

More than \$1 million of grant money from the Department of Housing and Urban Development was plunked down for capital improvements in Lake Smith, and additional funding was provided for building and rehabilitating housing.

Today, the results of these efforts are evident. There is running water in every home to go along with a sewer system. All the roads are paved. And easily over half of the community's homes are recently built.

There are some complaints about the redevelopment. McNeil pointed out that the paint is still chipping from the shoddy job that was done and Lassiter asserted that his electric bill is high because the city refused to build him the chimney that he wanted in his home.

But mostly the work has helped keep the community of Lake Smith intact. Lassiter's stepson, Earl White, had grown up in Lake Smith, but, because of the physical drawbacks, wasn't even considering the neighborhood as a place to build his new home. After the improvements, however, he reconsidered and built one of the largest houses in the

neighborhood.

Today, White loves his new home, in his old community.

"I'm crazy about where I live," White said.

Gordon agreed.

"When HUD came in here things started getting better," Gordon said. "And they're still getting better."

**Yet even in stable Lake Smith,** there are problems. One issue concerns civic-league involvement.

As he has gotten older, Gordon, who is still the league president and the community's greatest link to city government, has had to care more for himself and his wife, lessening his civic participation. Unsure of how to fill his role, other Lake Smith members have become frustrated, resulting in some disarray in the community.

"I am very happy about Lake Smith now," Gordon said. "I'm not

happy about the way we work together . . . It's because of a lack of understanding."

Another major cause for tense feelings is the community's insecurity as a low-income, all-black neighborhood on the lake.

"Most people who live around this water are white people who are able to make enough money to live the way they want," Gordon said.

"Here, where we live at, we're black people. We just don't have a lot of money to live like we should around this water."

Lassiter takes the problem a step further.

"A lot of people want us out of here on account of these lakes," he said.

Of course, Lassiter and most of his extended Lake Smith family don't have plans of living anywhere else anytime soon.

"Like the old saying says," he said, "there's no place like home."

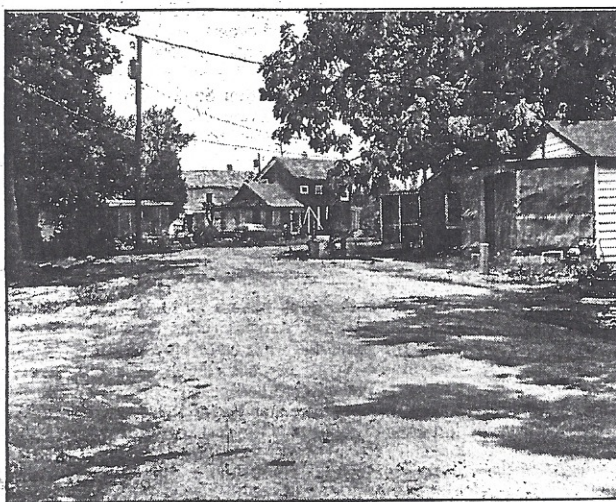


Photo courtesy of City of Virginia Beach

**This 1985 photo shows Ellis Avenue as it curves toward Bayside Road. A city sewer system and paved roads were about to be added.**