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Diminutive Leader Of Overton Park Battle Is No Novice

By NICKII ELROD

ANONA STONER IS a reluctant interview.

"To be perfectly candid, I'm wary of making any statement at all," says Mrs. Stoner, executive secretary of Citizens to Preserve Overton Park. "We haven't found the press to be at all sympathetic to our point of view.

"I also do not wish to be singled out as someone special. Our accomplishments in behalf of Overton Park are the sum total of many people working together — each equally committed."

Observers of the nine-year battle between the Citizens and the bureaucracy say Mrs. Stoner's

So what's a quiet girl like this doing in a fight against such formidable foes as the Secretary of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration, the Tennessee governor and Highway Department, the Mayor of Memphis and Chamber of Commerce, along with powerful business interests.

And make no mistake about it. Mrs. Stoner is in the fight to stay — with her time, her money and her prayers.

IT MAY COME as a surprise to bureaucrats at state and federal levels with whom she has

NEVERTHELESS, SHE IS deeply concerned for the generation to come. "They must have the same rights and privileges of the natural environment that we have all enjoyed," she says.

"We (CPOP) have been accused of standing in the way of progressive change. But we see this as only change for change's sake and that's not desirable unless you're sure that the change will better what you already have."

Mrs. Stoner believes that no matter how many dollars the finished freeway might bring to downtown or other Memphis areas, no cash values can be measured against the value of a natural area within the confines of a teeming city.

When she moved to Memphis from Ohio in 1962, she was already a veteran of a similar battle. Planners had proposed that the state's Bryan Park be bisected with a highway. The route was also planned to ribbon through a natural wooded area, the property of Antioch College.

Mrs. Stoner stationed herself in the forefront of those opposed to the highway.

THIS TINY, dynamite battler grew up in Brooksville, Ohio, an only child of the Samuel Spitlers. "We were a small town and the forests were only a few dozen steps away but from the time I could walk, I gloried in being taken for a walk in the woods," she said.

Her love of natural sanctuaries grew and expanded through the years and while a student at Antioch at Yellow Springs, she was even further influenced by two ardent conservationists, Dr. and Mrs. Arthur E. Morgan.

Dr. Morgan was the college president, his wife was a biologist.

After graduation, Mrs. Stoner became Dr.

Morgan's private secretary and coordinator for students, working for him until he left the college to become the first chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

She says she watched with interest his controversial years with TVA, when his conservation policies, which ranged from refusing to despoil the natural areas to building recreation areas and encouraging preservation of folkways, drew the ire of bureaucrats anxious to hustle things along and damn the environment.

"THOSE THINGS have become a vital part of our present environmental program," she points out. "And as I saw him refuse to back down but continue to fight for what he knew was best for this country, I developed my own philosophy that makes it impossible for me to stand by while natural areas are being wiped out."

She says that when she joined the Ohio battle, which they won, she heard almost identical words as she hears today: Is it worth devoting your energies to a cause for which you get so little support?

"Yes," she says. "Values must be balanced as we look to the future.

"There has to be a source of inspiration for those to come. Just as there will be in those Ohio woods we saved another botanist like Edward Orton, or in Overton Park, another Mack Pritchard (Tennessee naturalist).

"How do you rate a future in which there's no Sidney Lanier to spin his dreams of streams and clouds and suns and birds and bees?"

"... from the time I could walk, I gloried in being taken for a walk in the woods."

words have merit but add that she has played a special role through the years. One says, "She's the glue that sticks the Citizens together."

And then there's the brass marker that Citizens members placed in the park. It reads:

Anona S. Stoner
Perseverance and Integrity

THERE'S STILL ANOTHER reason why Mrs. Stoner is reluctant to discuss her contribution to the effort. She's a very private person.

She makes a point of serene surroundings — from her carefully tended grounds, planted to ward off high-decibel traffic noises, to the tranquil interior of her home, sparsely furnished with fine antiques. Even her choice of hobbies reflects the same search for tranquility: Her piano, church, membership in the Tennessee Ornithological Society, picnics in the woods.

carried on a correspondence, but Mrs. Stoner looks nothing like an embattled Amazon and even less like the radical she is often called by irate opponents.

She is deceptively fragile looking because she is so tiny (4 feet, 10 inches tall and weighs, maybe 85 pounds dripping wet). Her hair, gone gray with her 70 years, aureoles like an angel's wing around her alert, still-piquant face. She speaks softly — even on such a distasteful subject (to her) as a freeway slicing through the heart of Overton Park.

Mrs. Stoner has no personal ax to grind in her resistance to the proposed route. The home which she and her husband own is east of East Parkway and is less likely to depreciate in value. She is adequately buffered against increased traffic noises and she has no children for whom she wishes to preserve the public domain.



—Staff Artwork