

# 'Dick's Dispatch'

## Columns 1 through 25

*Richard E. "Dick" Venus, a native son and Ridgefield's first town historian, wrote 366 "Dick's Dispatch" columns for The Ridgefield Press between March 13, 1982, and Nov. 16, 1989. They focus mostly on the people of the first half of the 20th Century and the events and places that were part of their lives.*

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*These 25 columns appeared in The Press between March 13 and Nov. 18, 1982. They have been slightly edited and annotated [shown in brackets] by Jack Sanders.*

### **#1: JOE'S AND JIMMY JOE'S STORE**

For some time now, I have been intending to write an occasional column for The Press. It would, of course, be about Ridgefield and some of the interesting people that I have known.

It never occurred to me that there would be any difficulty in getting started. However, it was soon discovered that the subject to be covered should be of interest to as many readers as possible.

After a great deal of thought, it became clear to me that my confidence that I could write a column of broad appeal was not nearly as great as anticipated. After all, if one cannot find a suitable subject for the first column, like a car that is out of gasoline, one just cannot start.

Suddenly, a subject appeared in a rather unusual way. It was presented by an old friend, Aaron Gilbert. Aaron, like so many other young fellows back in the 20's, got his start in the workforce by clerking at Joe's Store. The store is now known as Country Corners, but for more than half a century was Joe's to the people of Ridgefield.

Michael C. (Mustapha) Joseph started the business toward the end of World War I, in a small (20-foot square) building. At first it was just a neighborhood store that specialized in fruits and vegetables. Business increased rapidly and Joe, as he was affectionately known, proceeded to add groceries and kerosene to the goods he offered for sale.

Joe first acquired the kerosene from a local oil dealer, Matt Nesbitt. I believe it was Socony, which stood for Standard Oil Company of New York. As he was a rather astute businessman, Joe soon learned the advantage of buying his oil directly from the local Socony plant, which was being established on the corner of Grove Street and Sunset Lane. In a hop, skip, and jump, a gasoline pump was added, also Socony. Today the store sells Texaco.

Some of the young men who, like Aaron, started their business careers at Joe's Store, were Lynce Carboni, Paul Venus, Chick Ciuccoli, Dan Robinson, Jack Leary, Allen Miller, Pete Carboni, and Alton Claus, to name just a few.

None of the boys got very rich on the payscale of those days. However, they did gain some valuable experience.

They were all loyal to Joe, who was a very likable person. Some of the boys were very enterprising and two of them (I'm not saying which ones) learned how to use the pay phone at the store without having to pay for the call.

Their method was quite simple. Those days you needed only to pick up the receiver to have the operator ask "number please." After hearing the number (then only two digits or possibly three), she would ask for the coin. Local calls were five cents.

There was always a stalk of bananas right next to the phone. Hanging on the stalk would be a large knife with a hooked-blade with which the bananas were cut from the stalk. The telephone operator would say "five cents please" and the boys would take the banana knife and strike the phone sharply. It sounded exactly like a coin being deposited and the operator would say "thank you" as the call was put through.

The phone company sent a man around to the various pay phones each week to collect the coins. The collector always registered surprise at finding so few coins and soon started to make collections at Joe's on a monthly basis.

Business at the store continued to increase and in the early 20's, Joe found it necessary to double the size of the building by putting an addition on the rear of the store.

I believe that Joe was Lebanese. However, he mastered the English language very well, though some words gave him difficulty. Eskimo Pies were a new product at the time. This delicious chocolate-covered ice cream, produced by the Huber Ice Cream Company, came with a tin-foil wrapping. To Joe, they were always "ice creemo pies."

Aaron lived directly across the street from Joe's (present location of Nina's) with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Roland L. Gilbert and his two brothers, Harry and Percy. This made him readily available when business became too brisk for Joe to handle. It was always fun to hear Joe put in a call to the Gilbert home for help. He would always say, "Hey, is Arn uppada?"

In those days it was customary in football to use what was called the dropkick, rather than the placement kick that is used today. It took considerable skill to carry out this maneuver. Charley Brinkley was the noted dropkicker of the day. Aaron studied his style and became very proficient in the art of dropkicking.

On a certain Sunday afternoon in the little store, he was demonstrating his ability, with such enthusiasm that he put his foot right through the large plate glass front of one of the display cases. From then on, Aaron was known as "Kick" Gilbert. It should be added that he was one of the better big pin bowlers that Ridgefield produced.

Joe's Store continued to prosper and by the beginning of the 30's, Joe had moved the little building out back and erected the present store.

About the time that World War II was starting, Joe died. His brother Jim came from Georgetown to take over. Jim was known as Jimmy Joe, to distinguish him from his brother. The favorite clerk at this time was Gino Polverari, who later died a hero in the war.

Jimmy was not quite the businessman that Joe was. However, the business was very well-established and was commonly referred to as a "gold mine." So now it is Country Corners, but to me it will always be Joe's Store.

When I think of Aaron, it is natural to think of Joe's Store so it seemed natural that we tie all this together.

We should also include a word about Abbie Gilbert, Aaron's lovely wife. She is one of those loyal people, from one of the real old Ridgefield families. For all those many years, Abbie was custodian of the books at George Tator's garage. Those days the roads in northern Westchester County did not receive the snow plowing that they get today. It was not uncommon to find just two wheel tracks, sometimes four to six inches deep. When once in these tracks, it was not necessary to steer your vehicle for considerable distances.

Of course, a major problem developed when you met another car. Abbie was determined to get to work and being a very resourceful lady, always carried a hatchet in her little Model T Ford runabout. When she met another car, she would stop and chip the ice and snow away and climb out of the wheel tracks so that the other vehicle could pass.

We have fond memories of her parents who lived on Governor Street in a large house about where the entrance to the large parking area is now. Her father, the late Willis S. Gilbert, was also a former postmaster and served from Jan. 18, 1916, to July 1, 1924.

How Aaron gave me the idea for this column must be explained. A few weeks ago, one of Joe Hartmann's pictures appeared in The Press. It showed a horse drinking water from the old watering trough at the bottom of Saw Mill Hill.

The question was posed as to who the people were in the wagon. It also noted that I thought they might be the Bill Caseys.

The following week in "News Notes," Aaron stated that "Dick Venus was mistaken."

Aaron went on to say that the people in the wagon were his grandfather and grandmother. I would gladly have accepted Aaron's claim except that he went on to say that "Bill Casey never had a horse." That statement caused me to do a little thinking and a lot of research.

I remembered going to the Casey home on the corner of Casey Lane and Ramapoo Road as a little kid, to ride one of their horses. They not only had horses, but both Bill and his son, Charley, had reputations as being exceptionally good horse traders.

The picture in question hung in the Casey living room and when asked who the person driving the horse was, Bill said, "That's me."

He could have been mistaken, of course, but then my research brought me to the History of Ridgefield, written by the late George L. Rockwell, another former postmaster.

After spending considerable time with this splendid book, I discovered that very picture on page 427. Sure enough, under the picture it states clearly that the people in the wagon were Mr. and Mrs. William Casey.

So ends my first — I hope not my last — column.

## **#2: A GOOD DENTIST & HIS LOST WEEKEND**

We started out with a story about Joe's store and will stay in the area for this one. That's where it all started, at least for me, for I was born in that neighborhood. No one is quite sure of the exact day but we have seemed to settle on Friday the 13th.

The reason for the uncertainty is the fact that the doctor did not make it on time. He was an awful good doctor when you could get him. However, he did have the unfortunate habit of going on periodic binges and chose that weekend to celebrate something or other. Perhaps he was prepping for St. Patrick's Day.

At any rate I was three days old when old Dr. Mansfield arrived on Monday night. There were rumors to the effect that I was trying to walk by that time. No doubt they were started by the two fine women who had replaced the doctor. They were Alice Rowland and Margaret McGlynn. Both were great politicians and Alice became town chairman of the Republican Party and Margaret, town chairman of the Democratic Party. What they would not do to sign up a future voter!

The event was further complicated by the fact that when the good old doctor finally got around to recording it at the town clerk's office, he simply wrote "another son born to Mrs. Charles A. Venus, on or about March 13th, at 181 Main Street" (it is now 612 Main Street and an interesting story on that house will follow sometime).

No name was listed. As I was a seventh son, they may have been running out of names. The omissions were not discovered until some 20 years later when it was necessary to obtain a birth certificate.

Mine was a happy childhood; in fact, I have been fortunate enough to have had a very happy life, for the most part. Early happiness was due to a great extent to the many very nice and interesting people in the neighborhood.

It is felt that the neighborhood started at 563 Main Street where Mrs. George H. Newton lived at the time, directly across the street from Casagmo. Mrs. Newton was a very nice person and drove a Franklin car — with a right-hand drive. The special design of the steering apparatus was made necessary because Mrs. Newton was born with a deformed right arm and could not use it to shift gears, then in the middle of the front seat floor.

A dear friend, from an old-time Ridgefield family, Robert A. Lee had been born in this house. For a short period, this house was leased to a Harding family. It was said that Mr. Harding was a brother of the president, Warren G. Harding. I am not sure about that, but do know that they were a very wealthy family. They had two sons who always wore elegant clothing and were the envy of the boys in the neighborhood. As a further mark of distinction, they had a liveried chauffeur.

There are those who believe that Benedict Arnold's horse was shot from under him during the Battle of Ridgefield at the driveway entrance to this lovely old home (now owned by the Joseph Coffeys).

Just north of the Newton house was a vacant lot which the boys used on occasion for a ball game. On this lot now stands the residence of Mrs. Gerald R. Skillen.

Next was the large house where the Harry Bennetts live at 599 Main. At one time the Lee family also lived here. It once belonged to James H. Perry and later to the Clarence Shean family. During the early 20's, a Mr. Nace lived in this house. He was a big man and very handsome. He was an ardent golfer and played at the old Ridgefield Country Club on Peaceable Street (now Ward Acres). Mr. Nace was an inveterate pipe smoker and wore balloon-like knickers, made popular by Bobby Jones who was the great golfer of the day.

Miss Annie Durant was the housekeeper for Mr. Nace. She was a very nice person, full of fun, yet very refined. Annie not only did the house work but also planted and cared for a sizable vegetable and flower garden.

Mr. Nace had a beautiful little dog named Sandy. He was the first Sheltie that I remember seeing. He was a friendly dog and reflected the good nature of his master and Annie.

Later on Annie was involved with the operation of the Lorna Doone with the Hutchinson sisters. This popular little restaurant was located on the corner of Main and Catoonah Street, where Harry Neumann now has his real estate office.

Mr. and Mrs. Lon Stevens lived at the Corner of Main and Pound Street. They were old-time Ridgefielders and it seems I once heard that Lon was part Indian. He loved to hunt and was an expert shot. I once saw him shoot a rat that was near his barn, from his back porch. The distance was at least 150 feet. He used a 22 caliber rifle and needless to say I was much impressed by accuracy. Lon was a mason by trade and a very good one.

Dr. Edwin Van Saun was a boarder at the Stevens home. He was an excellent dentist and one of the most distinguished-looking gentlemen I have ever seen. He did not extract teeth but was a wizard at filling them.

During this period most men worked six days each week which made it difficult for them to get time to have their teeth cared for. Dr. Van Saun was very obliging and took care of many of his patients on Sunday at his office over the D.F. Bedient Store. He was so good at his profession that many Ridgefielders still carry some of his fillings. I have a couple myself.

Like our family M.D., he had a love affair with John Barleycorn. When he would develop the urge to partake in a rip-roaring binge, he had the good common sense to hire someone to drive his car.

One such chauffeur was Altero "Chick" Ciuccoli. On one excursion, their first stop was Tator's garage in South Salem.

George T. Tator was one of the biggest Dodge dealers on the eastern seaboard. He always treated his customers very well and in his office he had two little spigots coming through the office wall. One spigot was attached to a small keg of rye whiskey and the other to a keg of Scotch whiskey. It became a very popular place and Dr. Van Saun availed himself of the liquid gratuities. What was to have been a 10-minute stop turned out to be a three-hour session, with Chick waiting patiently in the doctor's car.

It was about this time that the Chrysler came out with a new complicated transmission that was called "fluid drive." Before the excursion continued, Dr. Van Saun became the owner of a new and very classy Dodge coupe. Chick readily adapted himself to the new car and the rest of the weekend was spent in visits to numerous places of merriment.

On Monday morning I met the doctor walking to his office and inquired, as to why he was not driving. His reply was that there was a strange car in his garage and he could not figure out how to operate it, or even how it got there.

This column is intended to inform new Ridgefielders of life in our town in years past and remind those who have been here a long time, as well as providing an occasional chuckle for both. Therefore, we do not like to end this on a sad note. However, it must be said that Dr. Van Saun was an avid sportsman and possessed many fine rifles and shotguns. One day in his office, he turned a shotgun on himself and ended his life. It was a great loss.

Other dentists, while caring for his former patients, always marveled at the fillings he had done. They were works of art.

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Since our last column which featured Joe's store we talked with some of the young men who were employed at the little store. We only mentioned a few. Some of the others (not all) were Gene Lavatori, Romeo Petroni, John Lavatori, Ed and John Freer, and Jack Morrisroe, Jr. Jack said that I should have mentioned Jimmie Joe's age the time he died. I had heard rumors about Jimmie's age but never could substantiate them. Jack claims that after Jimmie died, a nephew produced a document which indicated quite clearly that Jimmie had lived 117 years. This would probably make him the oldest ever in Ridgefield. We never knew how old Mary Steele was but speculation had her age over 100 when she died. More about Mary later but first we will continue our trip north on Main Street.

### **#3: A NEWLYWED APARTMENT AND NINA LAVATORI'S KITCHEN**

Next to Lon Stevens lived his son Will. Will's house is probably the newest of the homes in the area. This very well constructed house was built about 1918 and now houses the Paris Hair Stylists at 609 Main.

Both Lon and Will Stevens were masons and were experts at their trade. My father worked with them for many years. Along with Roy Davis and Percy Humphrey, they made up a team that did the plastered walls and ceilings in many of the fine Ridgefield homes.

My father kept a diary in which he recorded the daily activities of these fine craftsmen. An interesting recording in 1927 notes that the group had finished the interior of the Main Street home of the new Ridgefield doctor, Francis B. Woodford.

It should be noted that Will Stevens, Roy Davis, and Percy Humphrey all played in the old Ridgefield Band. They were as adept with their musical instruments as with their trowels and mortar boards. This fine musical organization later became known as the Oreneca Band, and was much sought after in this area of Connecticut. They also played several engagements in New York City.

Next door and still going north was a fine two-family house (now 613 Main) owned by Charles "Putty" Stevens. Both the upstairs and the downstairs apartments were excellent.

It seemed that those who lived downstairs stayed longer than those who lived upstairs. Perhaps that was because the downstairs people were generally a bit older whereas the upstairs families were for the most part newlyweds.

I would not hesitate to say that more newly married couples started married life in that fine upstairs apartment than any other in Ridgefield. However, I would not try to name them all as they were just too numerous to mention. Some that come quickly to mind are the Joseph Zwierleins, the Thomas Clarks, the Levio Zandris, the Dick Venuses, the Frank Warners, the Daniel Landons, and the Richard Hoyts.

It was the kind of apartment so sorely needed by young newly married couples in Ridgefield today, and not only because of the rental charges. I know that in 1940 the monthly rent was \$27.50 and that included a garage for my car, a table for my saddle horse, and a chicken house, as well as a fine place for a vegetable garden.

Some years later when my daughter and her husband started their married life in this same comfortable apartment, the rent was more than 10 times as much, with no garage, no stable, and no chicken house.

Downstairs, in the ground floor apartment, lived David W. Workman. a former editor of The Ridgefield Press. He later became some kind of a policeman, perhaps more like a night watchman, for the town.

Mrs. Workman was a peppy little woman who worked very hard for the Red Cross. Mrs. Frederick E. Lewis was the local head of the Red Cross for many years. It was necessary for Mrs. Lewis to visit Mrs. Workman on many occasions. Sometimes when she made these visits she drove a beautiful team of four little black ponies pulling a little black wagon with bright red wheels. As I lived directly across the street as a little boy, my day was made complete when this lovely lady came down the street driving her spirited little black ponies.

When the Workmans moved to Catoonah Street, John and Teresa Gunn moved in and lived there for many years. The Gunns must have outlasted 10 or a dozen of the upstairs newlyweds.

Next door lived the Rowland Gilbert family. Rollie also played (trombone) in the old Ridgefield Band. He was the cashier and I think, the trust officer, for many years in the Ridgefield Savings Bank.

At one time they had a cow in the barn at the rear of the property and this was a real attraction to a young boy with an interest in farm animals. The Gilberts were an old Ridgefield family. Mrs. Gilbert was a friendly, motherly type person. They were all very nice and very good citizens, typical of the so-called "Connecticut Yankees."

In the mid-30's the Lavatori family moved from Danbury Road to the Gilbert house. Nazzareno (Nany) and Nina and their six children were about as fine a bunch of neighbors as you could find. John, Angelena, Ponziano, Gloria, Margaret, and Gene were the kind of kids you did not mind having next door.

It is interesting to note that all except Margaret and Ponzy have remained in Ridgefield. This does not happen often today.

Nany was a pretty rugged looking man, but his rather rough exterior and deep voice concealed a very kind heart. He was always willing to do someone a favor.

His large, gnarled hands indicated many years of very hard work and when you played cards with him you learned very quickly that he was pretty smart, too. He had been in the ice business with Mario Girolmetti for many years. Now, with the advent of the electric refrigerators, the old ice boxes started to disappear, so Nany had to shift gears, and he became involved in construction with the Vincent Bedini Company.

Nina did not have to shift gears, she had an automatic transmission that was generally in its highest speed. This was a beautiful and most remarkable woman. One would have to see her operate in a kitchen with the traditional large coal stove. The lids would be red hot, the temperature at least 125 degrees and the delightful aroma of her excellent Italian cooking was assurance that all this tremendous effort was worthwhile.

Nina was not the least secretive about her culinary skills as long as one was willing to work hard and endure the unbelievable heat in that kitchen. She quickly took my Marie under her wing and patiently explained the mysteries of raviolis, the chicken cacciatore, and the very finest spaghetti sauce made in America.

Marie was a good pupil and soon became very adept at preparing these fine meals. So now, all these years later, we are still enjoying the best in Italian cooking because of this lovely human being. It is a tribute to her that the restaurant that she and Nany built in front of their home 40 years ago, still carries her name.

Next door lived the George G. Scott family. Mr. and Mrs. Scott had five children, George Jr., Edward, David, Faustina, and Hiram. The only one left in Ridgefield at this time is Hiram and he will soon be moving to Florida.

George G. Scott had operated a painting business and an automobile agency. He was Ridgefield's town clerk for many years and became judge of probate. Somehow he managed to handle both jobs very well. Some felt that this was testimony to the contention that a legal background was not a requirement to hold the office of judge of probate.

We had no lawyer in Ridgefield at the time. It was necessary to hire a Norwalk lawyer, Judge Light, to fill the office of town counsel. Judge Scott's ability to run his office was considered well above average.

We recall that in the mid-20's a fire broke out on the second floor of the Scott residence. Although the fire was very intense, the ever reliable Ridgefield Fire Department arrived very quickly and brought it under control.

During the height of the fire, two men appeared on the porch roof. Achille Bacchiochi and Charles Venus (my father) were holding a hose that appeared rather limp because of a lack of water, as the hydrant had not been fully turned on.

It should be pointed out that water pressure was really not a problem. If this sounds like an "Our Gang Comedy," it is not my intention. However, someone turned the water on full blast—it was thought to be Frank I. Gilbert. The water came through with such force that both men were knocked completely off the roof. Fortunately they landed on the ground without being injured.

Sam Nicholas lived next to the Scotts. He was also an excellent mason as well as a prominent member of the Oreneca Band. By now one must feel that a primary requisite for living

on north Main Street would be that you be a mason by trade and also play in the Band. More than likely it was just a matter of “Birds of a Feather Flocking Together.”

#### **#4: ‘UNCLE DICK’ CONTINUES WITH NORTH MAIN STREET**

Next to the Nicholas family, in a cute little stucco house, lived Thomas W. Ryan. The house no longer has a stucco exterior as wooden siding was put on in recent years.

Tom Ryan was one of my favorite persons. He was a very peppy and good-natured man, a jolly fellow who did a lot of laughing and that is my favorite exercise. His laugh was not robust, it was not a giggle or a cackle, but it was different from any other I have ever heard. It might be compared to the very unique laugh of our late and very popular Town Clerk Ruth Hurzeler. He could find humor in so many things.

Tom worked for his brother in the James E. Ryan Store. It was a general store where you could find just about anything that you could use in or out of your home. They sold hay and grain, groceries, and clothing, as well as sewing material.

Tom and Jimmie Ryan were two very fine and well-respected gentlemen. They also had some very nice people working in that very homey and very pleasant store. It was located where Trendsetters now has its business.

Louise Pehrson Pettit was a clerk in the store as was Louise Holt, Helen McGlynn Cummings, and Minnie Murphy Pehrson. Edgar Masten Sr. and Arthur Pehrson also worked in the store and made the deliveries.

People did a lot of walking those days. Art Pehrson lived on Ramapoo Road near Mulberry Street and always walked to work. He rarely wore a jacket even in real cold weather. When he walked by our house wearing a sheepskin coat, we always knew it was zero or below.

Tom Ryan also walked to work and when we lived on Main Street he used to pass our house on the way. He would come by with that peppy walk and if I was out in the front yard, he always took the time to smile and say, “Good morning, Dick.”

I must have been about five when the first of many nieces and nephews arrived. My sister Frances had cute little twin girls, Jean and Joan. I must have been very impressed by this important event and the next morning when Tom came by with his usual salutation, I quickly informed him that from then on, it would be Uncle Dick. Tom roared laughing and never let me forget this exhibition of self importance. For the rest of his life, he never failed to call me Uncle Dick.

Many of the local farmers brought their produce to the store. Sometimes the produce was sold to the storekeepers and sometimes was used to pay a bill that the farmer may have incurred before the produce was ready for market. It was said that when a farmer brought in a pail full of eggs, Tom could pour the eggs from the pail into a basket without cracking one egg. I never actually saw him perform this feat. However, knowing Tom, I’m sure he could do it.

One of the mysteries of potato farming is the speed with which potato bugs find the young potato plants. It seems as though as soon as the plants come through the soil, the bugs are right there to eat them. I once heard Tom, with a serious expression on his face, tell a farmer that the bugs had a scout stationed on his desk, early each spring, in order to find out who was ordering the seed potatoes.

Those days, people bought flour by the barrel. One time when Tom was taking inventory, he discovered that one barrel was missing. When he was asked what he did about that, Tom explained that he had 16 families who would buy flour by the barrel from him, so he added



one barrel of flour to the bill for each of the families and only one complained. We know that he was only joking for he was noted for his honesty.

I often thought that it was a great shame that neither Tom nor Jimmie had any children. They certainly would have made wonderful parents. People like the Ryans are very difficult to replace.

There was an empty lot between Tom Ryan's and his other brother William's. In later years, Will Ryan moved his rather large barn onto this lot and the barn was transformed into a nice little house for Miss Eleanor Burdick.

Miss Burdick was one of our beloved high school teachers for so many years. Besides the many hours that she devoted to the classroom, she found time to direct the many class plays that were staged in the old town hall. It was my good fortune to have the opportunity to appear in several of her plays, especially "Penrod," for the class of 1930.

Will Ryan married Ethel McGlynn and they had three fine daughters, Margaret, Mary, and Katherine. Margaret became Mrs. Peter Carboni, Mary married Robert Wilcox, and Kate is now Mrs. John P. Moore.

Will was the Ryan of the McGlynn & Ryan plumbing business. At one time their store was where DeLuca's Footwear now does business. Will also did picture framing and had very elaborate machinery and tools for making the frames. He loved to pitch pennies or match pennies with me when I was a little kid delivering newspapers. I won quite often and it was quite obvious that he was letting me win.

Later on Will became superintendent of the Ridgefield segment of the Connecticut State Highway Department. It should be said that the state highways in Ridgefield were serviced a whole lot better when we had the road crew domiciled right here in town. Some years ago the crews and the equipment for all the surrounding towns were moved to New Milford. Since that time the service has never been quite the same.

Next to Will Ryan lived George G. Knapp. George was at one time the town clerk for Ridgefield. He also was the proprietor of the old Corner Store at the corner of West Lane and Main Street.

Most important was his ability to play the baritone horn in (you guessed it) the old Ridgefield Band. If you have been keeping track of the musicians along this street you must be aware that in less than one-tenth of a mile, we had the nucleus of a pretty good band.

George was married to Josephine Nicholas. Josie was another well-loved school teacher who is fondly remembered by her former pupils. She moved back up the street to live with her parents when, unfortunately, George died in middle age. One can easily imagine that local boys and girls (mostly girls at that time) who became school teachers, were greatly influenced by their fine teachers, such as Josie and Eleanor, Grace White, Miss Wills, the Boland girls, Ralph and Mary Kasper, and Mr. Holleran, just to name a few.

North Main Street used to end at Will Ryan's house (now Eppoliti's). Some commission or committee, arbitrarily, and without consulting any of the residents in the area, decided to make some changes. People living north of Nina's and north of Joe's Store to the intersection of North Street, suddenly found out, a few years ago, that they no longer lived on Main Street. They had been moved without their knowledge. It would be nice to see this action reversed.

Right after the George Knapp house was another empty lot. The neighborhood kids used it for a playground when it was not being used as a vegetable garden. In the late 30's, Otto and Hilda Kuhlman built a nice little house there. Then there were the Roy Chamberlains and when they moved, the Edward Scotts with their children, Eddie, Jr., Dorothy, and Sidney lived there

for several years. Dr. Walter T. Dolan lives there now. He is, of course, a respected and well-known dentist and a 50-year resident of Ridgefield.

Next door were the Charles Birdsalls. Their daughter, Gladys, married Howard Light. Ralph became a pharmacist and worked for George Mignerey in George's drug store where the Yardage Shop is now located.

Ralph moved to Bridgeport and I believe opened his own drug store. He gave me a ride home one day, on the crossbar of his bicycle. As we went down Olcott's hill on Main Street, my foot or pants leg got caught in the front wheel of the bike. The results were disastrous. I wound up with a badly skinned nose and the knees of my pants were shredded.

Ralph's condition was even worse and I think he lost a tooth.

Charley Birdsall was a carpenter par excellence. Like so many of the fine craftsmen that Ridgefield boasted during these years, he probably would be thought of today as being some kind of "fussbudget." However, it is a fact that Ridgefield's tradesmen of this time — the carpenters, plumbers, masons, electricians, painters and general contractors, were for the most part, strictly top grade.

They had to be, as the many wealthy people in our little town demanded the very best. The fine homes that were built in Ridgefield from 1890 to 1940 are a tribute to these excellent mechanics.

This is not to say that houses built before 1890 or after 1940 are inferior. It is just my feeling that they were the best and I'm confident that history will bear out this theory.

Ernest Haight lived next to the Birdsalls. They were another very fine family. Their son, Alden, was an accomplished tinsmith. Their daughter, Dorothy, was a tall and lovely, willowy blonde who was well-liked by all who knew her.

Ernest Jr. was also tall and slender. I would guess that he became an electrician. If so, he no doubt was a real good one.

Ernest Sr. was for many years a member of Ridgefield's Board of Assessors. He was the head assessor for several years. He could be counted on to be very fair in putting an assessed value on your property.

In the middle 20's, Joseph A. Roach built the house next to the Hights. Joe married May Keefe and they had a cute, little, red-headed daughter, Rose Mary.

Joe was an authentic hero of World War I. While serving in the United States Army, he was blown up by the German Army in a raid at Seicheprey. He received four bullet wounds and eight shrapnel wounds. He was captured while unconscious and imprisoned at Minister, in Westphalia.

Somehow, Joe managed to escape and make it to Holland, 43 miles away. He then crossed over to safety in England.

He was very strong physically and an excellent boxer. His father, Ned, was engaged in the gravestone business and when he died, Joe took over the business. The square, flat-roofed building where he cut and polished the gravestones still stands close to the North Salem Road.

Joe came from a large family, most of whom were plagued by what was commonly called consumption. Today we refer to it as tuberculosis of the lungs. As I was aware of the history of this 'family' problem, I always felt a twinge of sadness when I saw Joe inhaling the dust as he made the engravings on the pieces of granite.

Later, a mask was developed as protection against the dust.

Joe died a relatively young man but is fondly remembered by those who knew him and his fine family.

## **#5: THE MANY LEARYS OF TITICUS HILL; SHORT-LEGGED ORVILLE SPRAGUE**

Just north of Joe Roach's monument works, there was a vacant lot that had a little grove of trees. In the early 30's, Jack Nalley built a very nice stucco house on the lot that is now 53 North Salem Road.

Jack was a very rugged fellow and worked for many years for what is now called The Connecticut Light & Power Co. Like the Connecticut Highway Department, each town had its own crew to maintain the town's service needs. The local crew for electric service consisted of Jack Cranston, the foreman, and Jack Nalley and Charley Baxter, the linemen. (Mr. Baxter's father, D. Crosby Baxter, was the founder of The Ridgefield Press.)

The duties of these men caused them to leave their homes, many times during the night, when a storm disrupted the flow of electricity. It was real dangerous work, but this fine crew was equal to any eventuality.

I seem to remember an instance on the corner of Gilbert Street and Abbott Avenue when on such an occasion, Charley had climbed to the top of a utility pole. While he was making a splice in a broken wire, a second wire made contact. There was a brilliant flash of light and the two Jacks quickly shut off the power and climbed the pole and cut the leather belt that was holding Charley to the pole. He could have been electrocuted and was in real bad shape when they got him down to ground level.

We all thought it was very dramatic but the men made it seem as if it was just part of their work.

Those days the linemen used a metal rod strapped to the inside of each leg. At about their ankle, a large spur protruded. With this device they were able to clamber up the pole to the trouble spot. It seemed that every pole that had seen much service was dotted with little holes from the spikes.

Examination of poles today will not reveal spike marks. Today, in the name of progress, repair work is accomplished either with a power extension ladder or from a cherry-picker type bucket that raises the lineman easily.

One other change is notable. At that time, utility poles were almost exclusively made from chestnut trees. When a pole was replaced, the family living nearest the pole was always happy to have the old pole left behind for use as kindling wood. No other wood split as easily as chestnut. The grain was always perfectly straight and it could be shaved almost paperthin. The crew was always very cooperative and would leave the pole for those who wanted it. Unfortunately, the beautiful chestnut trees are now long gone, although it is said that a new strain of chestnuts has been perfected that are resistant to the disease that once destroyed them.

In the next house lived the Lawrence D. Leary family. Larry was a house painter by trade. His talents were not limited, however. He could paint a portrait and I can recall a beautiful mural that he did of a sunken Italian garden as a backdrop for the stage in the old town hall. He also did a mural at St. Mary's Parish House, now the K of C Home. Somehow through the years this fine work was rather foolishly painted over. We noticed recently that the outline of this mural is beginning to show through the paint.

Larry had an excellent bass voice and he sang in St. Mary's choir and did solo work in many shows, including a minstrel show in which I had a part in 1926. He also did fine work with a quartet.

For many years, Larry was the chancellor of Marquette Council, K of C. This office required one to have the ability to remember, and recite, several extensive charges during degree

work. Because of his fine diction, excellent voice, and good memory, Larry was particularly well adapted to this office. He soon became noted for his performances and was much sought after to execute these duties throughout Connecticut.

In the late 20's, the Rev. Michael Brannigan, C.S.Sp., wrote and directed a play, "Bringing Up Father," based on the cartoon of that name. It starred Larry, Mary Creagh, and Fred Claus. They were exceptionally well cast, with Larry as "Jiggs," Mary as "Maggie," and Fred as "Dinty Moore." It was a thoroughly enjoyed, hilarious production.

Larry had a marvelous sense of humor that stood him in good stead when later in life, it was necessary to have one leg amputated near the knee.

One time he was asked how he liked the Titicus neighborhood. Without hesitation he replied, "I have fine neighbors. On one side I have an empty lot. On the other side I have my sister and her family, and the ones across the street give me no trouble at all." He was, of course, directly across the street from the Ridgefield Cemetery.

Whereas many go through a complete personality change after a drink or two (and he sometimes had one or two), Larry always remained good natured. He was always a gentleman.

Lou Barrett and his wife, Agnes Leary Barrett, lived next door. It was the former home of Mr. and Mrs. Patrick Leary, who had come here from England before the turn of the century. They were the parents of Larry, Fred, John, Philip, and Agnes. Pat was an accomplished cornetist and was for several years the bandmaster of (you guessed right again) the old Ridgefield Band. My father once told me that Pat was considered one of the very finest bandmasters in the state. His son Philip was noted for his singing ability, and was as well a fine cornetist. Phil played with the 69th Regiment Band during World War I.

Lou Barrett came from the fine Barrett family in Georgetown. He was a lineman with the local contingent of the telephone company. I believe he was put in charge of the unit when Frank P. Baxter (Charley's brother) was promoted to some other office.

Unfortunately, Lou's lovely wife, Agnes, died at an early age, and Lou and his children moved back to Georgetown.

Fred Leary and his wife, Elizabeth, and their children, Jack, Fred, Jr., Betty, and Winnie, then moved into the old Leary homestead. Fred had been with the 42nd (Rainbow Division) in the war. He saw action in six major operations during more than 18 months in France, and was gassed twice. Pat Leary's fourth son, John, served with the Canadian Army in the war.

Next to the Learys, Orville Sprague lived and operated a machine shop. I guess you could call Orville a midget. He was about four feet, six inches tall, with short arms and very short legs. His legs were quite useless to him for some reason.

He always wore overalls and a little black machinist's cap. I never saw him dressed in a business suit. He wore glasses and had a neatly trimmed mustache.

Orville was definitely not very outgoing and perhaps might be considered unfriendly. This may have been because of his handicaps and appearance. Perhaps it was because some of the kids would occasionally poke fun at him. However, once you made friends with him and gained his confidence, you would find that he was really a very nice little person and quite intelligent.

After many trips to the open door of his shop as a little kid on my way to and from Titicus School, I was finally allowed to come in and watch Orville at work. This was a rare treat and well worth the patience used in gaining access.

Orville had an abundance of agility which he used to its utmost in overcoming his handicaps. His entire shop was designed in such a manner as to afford him a chance to overcome

his disadvantages. His machines and a forge, similar to one that a blacksmith would use, were located close to the floor. He had devised a board with four small wheels (similar to that which is used by auto mechanics today). I often wonder if Orville should have patented his little crash board. He would throw himself onto the board and scoot around the shop very quickly.

He was a master mechanic and while the income was from repairing and sharpening lawn mowers, he was adept at all kinds of iron and steel work. He could repair just about any kind of machine. It was an education to watch him put his ingenuity to work.

Because of his inability to walk, he made himself a car that he used to go into town to get his supplies. It was an open buckboard probably no more than six inches off the ground. This would facilitate his getting on and off. It had a small gasoline engine and probably had a top speed of 15 or 16 miles an hour. He built it without any outside assistance and was fiercely proud of his accomplishment. He was allowed to drive his little car on the sidewalk, in deference to his problems. There, of course, was no sidewalk until he got up the hill to Will Ryan's house, and it did not take him very long to reach the top of the hill. He was always careful to give other pedestrians the right of way on the sidewalk.

Orville's living quarters were in the basement of that little brown building that still stands, just before the intersection of New Street with North Salem Road. The stairway posed a real problem, so again using his talents, he cut a large hole in the floor of the shop and installed a large brass pipe such as could be found in the firehouse of the day. It was really something to see him go sailing across the shop on his crash board, fling himself onto the pipe, and disappear in a flash.

For me, probably one of the great attractions in the shop was an old fashioned phonograph. It had a large, funnel-shaped speaker like the one used in the RCA Victor ad with the little white dog. Once you had gained Orville's confidence, he would allow you to listen to some of his precious old records, such as the "Two Black Crows" with Moran and Mack, or an Al Jolson record.

My favorite was "The Little Old Ford Rambled Right Along." The words went something like this:

*The little old Ford rambled right along.  
It went around a corner and bumped in a mule.  
And the gol darned mule began to kick like a fool,  
But the little old Ford rambled right along.  
We went down the highway and got a flat tire,  
So we stopped right there and bound it up with wire,  
And the little old Ford rambled right along.*

Fortified with such melodious gems as that, we were now ready to proceed to the next building, Titicus School. Here we would tackle the monumental problems that all second graders must face.

If nothing else, one could learn from Orville Sprague that most problems can be overcome, if one will only put one's mind to it.

## **#6: TITICUS SCHOOL IN THE 20'S**

Titicus School, now the American Legion Hall, is a place that I will always look on with affection. This little old schoolhouse filled the educational needs of a very nice section of Ridgefield for many years.

It has three rooms and could handle first, second and third grades very nicely. However, there were occasions when, because of classroom shortages, it was necessary to accommodate a fourth grade. When such a problem arose, first and second grades remained as is and third and fourth grades were combined. Such an occasion occurred in 1924. For that reason I was able to spend four pleasant years in this friendly little institution.

Remember your first day of school? For me, as with most kids, it was an excruciating experience. I had been to kindergarten and mostly because of the kindness of Miss Mabel Cleves and her able assistant, Miss Mabel Nickerson, I made it through. Kindergarten was somewhat new in the land and Ridgefield had been a pioneer in this field. Probably no one else in my family had been fortunate enough to experience this luxurious preparation for formal schooling.

However, Sept. 7, 1920, arrived, and now the real thing must be encountered. As the youngest of nine children, I had been adequately informed of the terrors that awaited me in first grade. After such preparation, to say that I was reluctant to make my first appearance would be an understatement.

To my dear sister Mary fell the dubious honor of escorting me on that fateful day. That she was successful in delivering me to the first grade teacher was, in a great measure, due to the fact that it was downhill most of the way to school. I must have been an awful drag, but Mary was determined.

My first teacher was Elizabeth (Bess) Boland. Bess taught first grade, Miss Mildred Kane taught second grade and Mary (McGlynn) Kasper taught third grade and fourth grade when called upon to do so. I'm not sure about Miss Kane, but Bess still lives at 65 West Lane with her brother Bill. Mary lives in Florida with her husband, Ralph Kasper, who is also a former and very fine teacher.

These teachers took their chosen profession very seriously. They really felt that they must drill some knowledge into their pupils' heads. If the pupils did not appreciate the zeal which these fine ladies applied to the task of teaching young people — some of whom really did not have any interest in learning — they must have had second thoughts about it later in life.

Somehow the teachers who were a little tough, those who were insistent on getting their points across and their meanings understood, seem to be the best remembered, and with considerable gratitude.

Whereas the teachers mentioned taught at Titicus during the early 20's, there were many others, before and after, who labored in the vineyards of this little seat of learning. Some, but by no means all, of these dedicated women were Anna (Claus) Riley, Elizabeth (O'Shea) Lown, Agnes (Fisher) Peatt, Mary (Moylan) Mulvaney, Lucille Nicholas, Katherine O'Hearn, and Mary Regan. It is interesting to note that Mary Regan's Aunt Helena taught at Titicus back before the turn of the century. She also taught at Limestone (now the home of the Andrew Moore family), and at West Mountain. The West Mountain School still stands. It has been altered in many ways and has served as a laundry as well as a dog kennel.

Helena's parents came from Ireland in 1860, as a result of the potato famine and settled in Ridgebury on the site of the present firehouse. It was this Regan family after whom Regan Road was named. My good wife, Marie, is a descendant of this fine family.

I have heard the story of how Helena, at age 16, walked all the way from her Ridgebury home to the Peter Parley House on High Ridge. In this wonderful old house, now the home of Preston R. Bassett, lived William O. Seymour. Mr. Seymour, a much-respected teacher, conducted a school at his home. He interviewed those who aspired to the teaching profession and

decided whether or not they possessed the necessary talents to conduct their classroom duties. Apparently Helena received his approval.

The Regans had a cousin in Ridgebury named Jeremiah Desmond. He had purchased a house from Col. Nehemiah Keeler. Col. Keeler had built the house which still stands and is considered one of the oldest homes in Ridgefield.

There were very few modern conveniences at Titicus School. It did have running water. Not hot, just cold.

There was no central heating system. Each room had a rather large pot-bellied stove. Later on a hot-air furnace was installed, but still no hot running water.

On real cold winter days, the old pot-bellied stoves would turn red hot, as they were filled to capacity with wood. They could have burned coal but for some reason, perhaps the economy, only wood was used. This meant that the first one to arrive in the morning must start the wood fire. One can only speculate on the temperature on cold winter mornings, in rooms that had not had the benefit of any heat during the night.

During the day, the fire was fed by pupils who made numerous trips to the cellar where the wood was stored. There was considerable competition among the boys in class for the privilege of making the descent to the wood pile.

I can recall an instance when Lawrence Leary and I were going down the old rickety cellar stairs when he lost his footing. He really had a very bad fall and struck the back of his head on a sharp stone in the cellar wall. It left a scar more than an inch long on which the hair never grew again. More than 50 years later, as I was walking behind Lawrence, I noticed the little spot and asked if he remembered how he got it. His reply was that since it was not visible to him, he had actually forgotten it. However, after having it brought to his attention, he quickly recalled the incident.

Among the missing modern conveniences were the inside boys and girls rooms. They were substituted for by two little outhouses, strategically located on the southerly border of the tiny playground. Permission for their use, during class, almost required an act of Congress. Because of this fact several embarrassing happenings occurred. As some of the victims are still around, they will not be described.

Somehow we learned to look forward to going to school. This was perhaps promoted by the friendships made with the other students. Another motivating factor could have been the mothers who made sure their little darlings made it to school, come hell or high water. The reason for missing school had better be a real good one.

My dear mother happened to be one who believed in some of the homespun remedies for minor ailments. An infected finger, the result of a pulled quick or whatever, called for a poultice of bread and milk. The wondrous drawing power of this concoction was somewhat offset by the less than delightful aroma of the milk as it soured. If you were unfortunate enough to have the croup, a tiny drop of kerosene was deposited in the throat with a feather.

I was prone to a malady called swollen glands. This called for a piece of salt pork, applied to each side of the neck and tied in place by string, and off to school I went. To be sure this remedy reduced the swelling and the soreness. However, as the schoolroom warmed up, or if your seat was near the pot-bellied stove, the result was a terrible itching. The cure was worse than the ailment.

## **#7: SWEET LORRAINE'S WATCH AND GAMES KIDS PLAYED**

The Ridgefield school system of the 1920's embraced the noble aims of the League of Nations. Students were accepted from Georgetown, Redding, Wilton, and even South Salem.

At Titicus School I was strongly attracted to a girl from Redding. When I was in first grade, she was in second. She must have been my first girlfriend. Of course, she did not know this. If you were going to be one of the boys, you'd better not be caught looking at any of the girls.

Aside from being very pretty, Lorraine Goeppler had several other attributes. She was very smart. Her father owned and operated a cider mill on the corner of Topstone Road and Simpaug Turnpike. She also had a wrist watch, which was probably the envy of the entire student body. It must have been the very first wrist watch that I had ever seen. I would have to say that it probably was the only wrist watch in the whole school. It is very doubtful that even the teachers had one.

At age five, her beauty may not have attracted me. At that age the cider mill would not have been a factor. Neither would her fine intellect. Therefore, it must have been the wrist watch. I have not seen Lorraine since Titicus School, but I will bet that when they wrote the song, "Sweet Lorraine," it must have been about her. [Editor's note: Lorraine Nina Goeppler lived in Redding many years and, in 1974 at the age of 59, she married Carl A. Carlson, who was 76. They lived in Westport for a while. She died in 2005 at the age of 90.)

At Titicus we did not have a gymnasium. The little school yard was not even large enough for a softball game, let alone regular baseball. We settled for games for which we had the room. These would be Keeley-Over, where a soft rubber ball would be thrown over the roof of the school house, caught by one of the opposing team before he could cross by the front door of the school. We also enjoyed Statue and the traditional games of Tag and Hopscotch.

The big favorite, at least among the boys, was Duck on the Rock. A large rock protruded from the ground on the south side of the school near the two outhouses. The rock was probably two feet high and six or seven feet long, above ground. A smaller stone (duck) was placed on the large rock. A line was made on the ground some 10 to 15 feet in front of the rock and the contestants then from the line attempted to knock off the duck with another stone at the agreed distance.

This was a rather dangerous game and I still have some scars to prove it. Whereas the legs of the participants took a real beating, the nearby outhouses were not overlooked especially when they were occupied at the time. At such a time, the accuracy, even of the better players, became very erratic and certainly highly questionable.

It should be revealed that back in those days, if you did not earn a passing mark, you stayed in that particular grade until you did. This caused a rather conspicuous gap in the ages of some of the students. We had one fellow, who will be unnamed, who must have been at least 13 or 14 and still in the third grade. He always wore overalls to school and they were generally held up by one strap. Many times he made his appearance without shoes. The younger kids were fascinated by the fact that he chewed tobacco in class.

There was a large knot-hole in the floor at about the center of the classroom. He was pretty good at ridding himself of the tobacco juice and with unerring accuracy he would hit the knot-hole plumb center, time after time.

Each year class pictures were taken. At the time we did not notice it or give it any thought, but in first and second grades, the boys were grouped in one picture and the girls in another. When we got all grown up and entered third grade the school authorities must have felt



that we were sufficiently advanced in the ways of the world to have the girls and boys grouped together in the class pictures.

I will always have a feeling of gratitude toward the little school and its fine teachers. There was a closeness among the students that was easily recognized. It was with considerable reluctance that we had to leave to attend fifth grade at what was referred to as the Big School, or Center School, or Benjamin Franklin Elementary School, which later became Ridgefield High School and is now Boehringer-Ingelheim.

The Titicus neighborhood was always quite active and in the late 20's a Parent Teacher Association was organized. It remained a forceful, lively group for several years after the little school closed its door for the last time. In fact in the late 30's, when I had finished my formal schooling, it was my privilege to play the lead in a play, "The Clay Is The Thing," for the benefit of the Titicus P.T.A.

Speaking of P.T.A.'s, Ann Landers recently published a letter from a woman who complained about the fact that at age 41, she was the oldest member of the P.T.A. I'm not sure if my mother ever belonged to a P.T.A. If she did, no doubt she would have been the oldest as she was 45 when I was born.

Additions had been made to the Big School and consolidation was the name of the game at the time, so little old Titicus School was closed in 1939 along with other little schools. As a result, a lot of young people missed some great experiences and a pretty good foundation in education. I am looking forward to seeing some of my first grade classmates at the 50th reunion of the 1932 graduating class of Ridgefield High School later this year.

#### **#8: CARETAKER CURLEY AND CONSTABLE JAP**

It took us two columns to cover the little old Titicus School and we will not do any more on it at this time. However, since reference was made to the many fine teachers who taught there, I asked my sister Frances, a teacher for many years, why she had never taught at Titicus. Her answer was that she had been fortunate enough to get a teaching job at the big school on East Ridge, which had just been completed at the time.

Frances had graduated from Norwalk High School as Ridgefield did not have a high school at that time. Like so many other students from Ridgefield, she made the trip to Norwalk each day by railroad train. She then proceeded to graduate from Danbury Normal School, now WestConn. This would have been in the middle teens, as World War I was starting.

It was the custom at the time to allow normal school students to act as substitute teachers during emergency periods. It was great training for the student teachers and provided much needed assistance to a very limited teaching force.

At one time, while still a student, Frances was assigned as a substitute teacher for several weeks at the West Mountain School. People have asked where this was located. It still stands near the highway on Dr. Patrick Neligan's property, just south of the Congregation of Notre Dame.

Frances told me that her assignment happened to be during the winter months. It turned out to be one of those winters when we had a lot of snow. She had to walk to school and when the snow was deep, it was necessary for her to hire a taxi. The taxi appeared in the form of a horse and wagon from Whitlock's livery stable, which was located on Danbury Road where Ridge Bowl now operates.

The horse was driven by Arthur Whitlock and the charge, one way, was one dollar. Since the pay for the teacher was only \$1.75 per day, a ride both ways would be a losing proposition.

Therefore, though it was dark night many times when she arrived home, the return trip was made on foot. As Frances said, "At least the return trip was all down hill."

Now, back to North Salem Road.

Just north of Titicus School was a cute little house which in the 20's was known as the "little red onion." The reason for the name is not very clear but I do believe that at one time it was painted red. At any rate, it was the home of Thomas Curley and still stands next to what is now the American Legion Hall.

Tom was one of the strongest men I have ever known. Some of the others would be my own father, Charlie Venus, and Harry Thomas and Edgar Masten. Unfortunately, Tom was involved in a railroad accident in which his right leg was severed at the knee. He was fitted with a wooden leg, which was kept in place by a series of leather straps.

Tom's powerful build was accented by his massive shoulders. Thankfully, he was a very good natured man, except after imbibing spirits, but that is part of another story. He enjoyed having kids around and delighted in inviting them to pinch him on the leg (the wooden one of course). Their futile attempts always caused him to roar with laughter.

This man's strong physical appearance was topped with an equally strong countenance that possessed a striking resemblance to that of President Ulysses S. Grant. As he grew older and more limited in his activities, Tom took a job with the Village Improvement Society. This fine group of citizens were very interested in the appearance of Ridgefield and worked diligently in keeping it beautiful.

Tom's duties were to mow and keep presentable, the little triangles at the entrance of various streets. He also picked up papers and other trash that may have been "accidentally" deposited on the streets.

He had a horse which he called "Sparky." No doubt he was named after "Spark Plug," the old race horse that belonged to "Barney Google" of comic strip fame. Tom and Sparky made a wonderful team and apparently understood each other very well.

Tom provided himself with a long pole that had a spike protruding from the business end. Armed with this simple, but unique tool, he could spear the papers as he drove along, without ever leaving his wagon.

The question most asked of Tom was, "How's business?" His stock answer, always given with a big smile, was, "Picking up."

Next to the "Little Red Onion" and moving north is a little, very old building which was at one time used in the manufacture of soft hats. It is now the home of Grace Cypher but in the period we are covering, it was the home of Jasper Walker.

Now, I have been accused of saying only nice things about the people of whom I write. Actually it is really much easier to say something nice and then these were very nice people. However, to tell it like it really was, requires some restraint, and still be charitable.

Jasper, or Jap, as he was usually called, was somewhat different and he was not noted for being good natured. To be sure, Jap did suffer considerable torment from the boys in the neighborhood. They delighted in annoying him by throwing stones at a bell that hung at the entrance to the cemetery, near Settlers Rock, across the street. The sound of the bell never failed to bring Jap, sailing out his front door with a shotgun in his hand. Either he was a very poor shot, or else he never really took careful aim, as no one was ever injured. That bell has been missing from the little archway where it hung for many years.

Jap was a constable at a time when this office carried with it some responsibility for keeping the peace. He even wore a uniform, which he provided for himself. It was always

referred to as a Charles Williams uniform. Charles Williams was a mail order firm that was similar to Sears, Roebuck store. At any rate, it looked rather authentic to the young people of the day.

Lake Mamasasco, or Birch Pond, as we called it, was a very popular place to swim. The Dixon side (east side) was owned by C.P. Dixon and drew the most swimmers at the time. As the number of swimmers increased, the Dixons felt it necessary to provide some protection for their property and hired Jap to take care of this matter.

On one occasion when Jap was making his presence felt in a matter that some of the young people did not appreciate, they picked him up and threw him, Charles Williams uniform and all, into the lake. For some time thereafter, Jap was considerably more tolerant of the young swimmers.

As the west side of the lake began to develop and the Peatt enterprises grew, interest in the Dixon side seemed to decline and Jap devoted more time to his painting trade. He painted wagons in the barn at the rear of his home and was good at striping. That is applying the little stripes to the vehicles that gave them a dressed-up appearance.

Jap had a mahogany bay driving horse. The horse's name will have to go unmentioned as the only name that Jap ever called him has been ruled unprintable by my editor. We have long been of the opinion that horses and dogs generally reflect a disposition that is closely related to their masters. Jap's horse would strike with his front legs and kick with his back legs. If anyone came close enough for him to reach with his mouth, his bite was a serious attempt to dismember that individual.

Occasionally, the horse would be seen hitched to the wagon and standing in front of the house. When Jap was ready he would come out, climb into the wagon, crack the horse with a whip and they would go tearing up Titicus Hill. On one such occasion, one of the boys who had a thorough knowledge of horses and their harness, gave a demonstration of his ability. He quietly crossed the street from the cemetery and proceeded to unhook the traces and the hold-back straps of the harness. The horse was now entirely free of the wagon. However, to all appearances, he was still hitched to the wagon. Jap came out and went through his usual ritual. He cracked the horse who then charged ahead, pulling Jap right over the dashboard, much to the delight of several boys who were viewing the proceedings safely from their vantage points behind the gravestones.

Jap finally got rid of the horse and bought himself an auto. It was a real flashy, tan-colored Pontiac coupe and had a rumble seat. Like several of the older drivers at the time, he never learned the complete operation of the vehicle and was content with the fact that the car was moving, whether in the proper gear or not. It seemed that he never actually got out of first gear and while the motor roared at a speed that would normally have propelled the car at 60 miles per hour, he probably never exceeded 15 or 20. He drove with a very rigid grip on the steering wheel, looking neither to the right nor the left, and people soon learned to keep out of his way as he drove into town.

Grace Cypher's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Fred Williams, took care of Jap in his later years. They must have had considerable patience. Mrs. probably learned that as is a school teacher. She taught at the original Scotland School.

## **#9: THE TITICUS FLOOD**

In September 1868 [see note at end], a flood occurred in Titicus. It did not have an effect on the town as a whole, but was a very serious matter to those that were involved.

The Searles brothers had built a dam for the Gilbert brothers and it created New Pond. The purpose of the dam was to store water for the Gilberts' mill farther north in Titicus.

New Pond was just west of New Street, high above Titicus center. It was not very deep except near the dam, but it covered a considerable area. It was fed mostly by rain water and some springs along the way from Peaceable Street, and then north through Bryon Park. The water finally formed a little stream that flowed under Barry Avenue, and then north to Ramapoo Road, under which it traveled, and thence to the pond itself.

At the time in question, rain had been falling for several days and the Gilberts were worried about the strength of their dam. Residents had predicted that the pond would never fill with water. Perhaps because of this feeling, the builders may not have concentrated on making it extra strong.

At any rate, the rains caused the water to spill over the dam to a considerable degree. William Gilbert visited the dam to see how it was standing the pressure from the rain water. He must have had a premonition of things to come.

Rockwell's "History of Ridgefield" states that there was a tremendous rock on the west side of the dam. The Searles brothers had used oxen to draw the rock in and place it in the dam. This, they felt, would be the strongest part of the dam.

After completing his inspection, William was standing on this rock when he felt it teeter. He jumped off to safety, just as the rock dislodged itself and then the whole dam disintegrated. That he was fortunate can be determined from the devastation caused by the wall of water four or five-feet high that inundated the valley.

A barn at the rear of the Edmonds home (now the residence of Grace Cypher), and D.H. Valden's office were swept away. It is interesting to note that no mention of any damage to the Titicus bridge is made in Rockwell's account of the flood. We would have to assume that the bridge was able to withstand the onslaught of the raging waters. The bridge was one of several that were to be destroyed 87 years later in the great flood of 1955.

Many interesting incidents were described, such as how Mrs. Charles Smith was in her basement kitchen, doing her baking. She was saved when her daughter called her to come upstairs. As she reached the very top step, the steps were washed away. When the flood had subsided, the Smiths' basement was a shambles. However, a basket of eggs that had been raised by the waters, sought a haven on the top step and whereas the rest of the stairs were gone, the basket of eggs was intact. Not one egg was broken.

One of the Smith boys saved a horse that was tied to a hitching post. He saw the flood coming, raced out and untied the horse just in time to prevent him from drowning.

These happenings may have a slightly humorous tinge, 114 years later, but at the time they must have been terrifying.

We have departed the 20's briefly, in order to inform those who may not have known of the great Titicus flood. It should be noted that some years ago, New Pond disappeared. Someone opened the dam and drained the pond that we had fun swimming in and skating on. There is now just a little brook flowing through where the pond used to be. It did have some fish, mostly carp, and many bullfrogs which seemed to thrive in its very muddy waters.

The pond did serve as a place to harvest ice in the cold winters. Joseph Hibbart used to cut ice there. This was quite an operation. The ice was scored into blocks with a gasoline powered saw drawn by one of Hibbart's mules.

If a mule went through the ice, a lasso was thrown around his neck and he was pulled out by another mule. It was said that a mule or two was lost there and left in the water. We never could confirm this and felt it was told in an effort to keep us from swimming there.

As far as the kids were concerned, the pond's greatest contribution was in providing an excellent place to skate. Many real, good hockey games were played on the old pond. In the evenings, great crowds of people came and skated by the light of huge bonfires that were fed, on occasion, by old automobile tires. This, of course, was before the era of environmental controls.

Back to the 20's, and the house just north of Jasper Walker, on the corner of North Salem Road and Saw Mill Hill Road, where lived Ernest Stash and his family. Between these two houses is where the water from New Pond joined that of the little tributary that carried water down from Upper Pond and Robert's Pond. The waters from this gentle brook had at one time powered the saw mill, at the top of the hill, from which the road got its name. Together, they formed the Titicus river that flowed north to the Croton, in New York State, after crossing North Salem Road at this point.

Ernie Stash was a chauffeur for Robert P. Scripps (of the newspaper family), who had purchased the Reggie Lewis estate and farm on South Salem Road. The main house on this estate is now the home of the Harry Neumann family.

Ernie was a very energetic person. He was also very athletic and was considered an excellent amateur wrestler. The K of C, during this period, sponsored amateur boxing and wrestling bouts, first in the old Town Hall auditorium and then in the new Italian-American Hall on Prospect Street. Ernie Stash appeared in several of these contests and always gave a good account of himself.

Ernie was also an avid hunter and I enjoyed many excursions into the woods at night, coon hunting with him and my brother Jack. He was always fun to be with and had an excellent sense of humor. He was a man of many talents, one of which was his ability to perform with the violin.

During this period, the fire departments in the area engaged in pinochle tournaments. For additional entertainment, I appeared as a little kid, many times, with my harmonica. The Danbury Fire Department had a little old fellow named Moxie Hahn who played terrific piano, in the style of Fats Waller. We were always happy when Ernie would join us with his violin. When he knocked at the door for admission, he always announced that the "musikan" had arrived.

Together we had loads of fun. Apparently the Danbury firemen appreciated the entertainment and on one such occasion presented me with a huge harmonica. It was actually eight different harmonicas joined together, with four on each side. This great musical piece was made by the M. Hohner Co. and came in a case like a violin. I'm sure their intentions were of the best and I was most grateful for this fine gift, which must have cost a small fortune. However, I was just a little fellow and could hardly lift the instrument, let alone play it.

There was never a dull moment when Ernie Stash was around and people always seemed to enjoy his company. Coon hunting is not really a very exciting sport, yet when Ernie was along, something of interest was bound to happen.

Some of the young ladies from the wealthy families used to like to go coon hunting with us. I can remember several occasions when Joan Lusk or Alice Doubleday would go along. It must have been Ernie's charisma that attracted them.

One morning Mrs. Stash called me and asked me to find some kittens that had been born under her kitchen floor. For some reason there was no cellar under the kitchen, perhaps because of the proximity of the Titicus River.

At any rate it was necessary to take up a few boards in the kitchen floor. I crawled in and located the kittens, but could not back out. Ernie came home for lunch and Mrs. Stash explained to Ernie that I was stuck under the floor.

In typical fashion he allowed me to languish in the confines of the crawl space while he asked me how many kittens there were, their color, how big they were, the color of their eyes, etc. Finally after having his fun he grabbed me by the heels and pulled me, and the kittens, out. He roared with laughter, but it was some time before I could join him in enjoying the humor of the situation.

In the early 30's the baby son of Charles A. Lindbergh was kidnapped. As so often happens, the publicity surrounding this tragic event put ideas in the minds of other people. The Scripps family received some kind of warning, packed some of their belongings and left for the West.

Of course the Stashes and their two little girls accompanied them and never returned. I never saw Ernie again, but often think of the great fun that we enjoyed together.

### **#10: THE SPY IN THE HOWE HOUSE; MUGSY'S FAMOUS NIGHTSTICK**

Just across the Titicus Bridge, on the left going north, stands one of the older houses in Ridgefield. The outward appearance of this fine old house has changed somewhat through the years. The front porch was removed several years ago. However, the interior still retains the quiet charm that such old homes seem to exude in abundance.

Each of the inner doors swing on the original, extra large, hinges that must have been made to last forever. The great stone fireplace is original and repairs made since it was built were done in such a fashion as not to change its character. The woodwork and the wide floor boards are a joy to those who love the old homes.

The present owners, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Dunleavy, purchased this lovely home some 20 years ago from the late Ernest Conti, who was Mrs. Dunleavy's father. Ernest had purchased the house from Ellsworth E. Russell in 1922, during the period this column has been covering. In a search of the attic, Ernest discovered two fine Revolutionary War muskets. Mrs. Dunleavy still has one of the muskets and it is in mint condition.

For many years it was believed that this house was built in the mid 1700's by Epenetus Howe. However, when writing his Ridgefield in Review, Silvio Bedini visited the house with a Mr. and Mrs. Nelson. Mrs. Nelson was a direct descendant of Epenetus Howe and had in her possession a hat, which she claimed had been made in this house.

This group made a tour of the house and after carefully examining the structure, expressed the feeling that it was actually built in 1725, which would have been before the arrival of the Howes.

At any rate, Rockwell's History of Ridgefield states that Epenetus Howe lived in the house during the Battle of Ridgefield. There is a story of how the British soldiers, retreating down North Salem Road after burning Danbury, had reason to suspect that a spy was hiding in the Howe residence.

One of the soldiers attempted to enter the house but found all of the doors were barricaded. He then attempted to gain entry through a window but someone inside used a butcher knife on the soldier's fingers with such effectiveness as to discourage further attempts at breaking in.

It was felt that the house would surely have been burned by the British except that at this point in the battle, the Americans were fighting with such intensity that General Tryon felt it best to move on as quickly as possible.

The old house had several owners during its long history. Jabez Mix Gilbert acquired it from the Howe family. Jabez was very active in the Methodist Church and held classes for the church, in his home from 1807 to 1826. He was known as "Uncle Mix" and was noted for his generosity. He founded the tannery and made it a very successful business.

He was known to share his success by loading his wagon with meats and groceries and delivering these foods to the less-fortunate people in the area. Therefore, it can be clearly seen that Ridgefield always had some very nice people, even from the beginning.

Back again to the 1920's. Just north of the Ernest Contis' was an open field on which Clifford Bassett built the house that now stands there. Next came the little house that stands close to the road and where Madelyn Moses lived and then Margaret Giddings and later the Robert Lincolns. Mrs. Lincoln was the former Margaret Nash, a sister of Karl and a classmate of mine.

The next house was a home for many different families. Some that we quickly remember were the Patrick Potters, the Otto Jespersens, the Archie Cogswells, and the Robert Bells. The Mario Frullas live there now and have lived there for some time. Mario, better known as "Mugsy," is a very well known personality.

Mugsy has been a member of the Ridgefield Fire Department for many years, serving both as a volunteer and as a paid fireman. He also built up many credits as a member of the Ridgefield Police Department.

During Mugsy's tenure as one of Ridgefield's finest, he was assigned for the most part to the foot patrol in the business area of the village. Without a car, or even a motorcycle, Mugsy made his rounds and vandalism was minimal and serious crime was practically non-existent.

Two theories have been put forth to explain his ability to keep the peace. One was that his engaging personality and his unusual rapport with the youth of the town was the cause for his success. The other places an even greater importance on Mugsy's ability to use with effectiveness, the rather large nightstick which he carried.

Whatever the reason, he is generally credited with doing a fine job. He now applies the same zeal to making Ridgefield's golf course the best in this area.

One family that lived in the Frulla house back in the 20's, provided us with many laughs. Before going to Titicus school in the morning, we would walk up to this house to hear Mrs. — getting Mr. — up to go to work.

She would call up the stairs, "Henry, it's time to get up."

He would answer with a question, "Is it raining?"

Mrs. — would say "no."

Henry would then say, "Well, then I am sick."

One way or another he was not going to work that day.

In the pretty yellow house lived the Charles Bennetts and next to them the Henry Crepets. As you can see, we are moving much faster along here. This is of course, because the houses were fewer at the time and much farther apart. In fact, there were no more houses until you passed Barrack Hill Road.

In the next house lived the George Hubers and their children, Clarence, George Jr., and Mary. Mary still lives in Ridgefield and she is one person who would not need to put a return address on a letter. Her beautiful hand writing is so distinctive that anyone would know at a glance who the sender was.

Mr. Huber had snow white hair and drove a pair of gray mares. When plowing or mowing a field, he really made a great picture. In the mid 20's he acquired an auto. Of course it was a Dodge and came from George Tator's. The story was that the first time he drove the car, he made out very well until he got back to the barn. As he had done for so many years, he drove in and then hollered "Whoa." The new Dodge paid no attention and just went right on.

Because of my great love for horses, I was strongly attracted to the blacksmith shop. My newspaper route brought me to the shop each afternoon. However, many times I was able to find an excuse to go there in the morning. The shop was located then where the Thrift Shop is now. I used to listen to the teamsters extolling the virtues or listing the faults of this horse or that mare and wondered about the difference.

On one occasion there were about a dozen horses in the shop waiting to be shod. As usual the drivers were sitting around reading the newspaper or swapping stories. I picked this particular time to ask Harry Thomas, the blacksmith, how to tell the difference between a horse and a mare.

I had great admiration for this very fine man and will write more about him later. On this day, Harry looked at me and apparently felt that I was not yet ready for a "Birds & Bees" lecture. He then told me how it was possible to tell a mare from a horse by examining their teeth. This was at least partly true, providing one had a lot more knowledge about horses than I possessed at the time.

One thing I was sure of and that was that George Huber had a pair of mares. They happened to be with the other horses in the shop so I approached them first. I carefully examined the teeth of each mare for several minutes and then went down the entire line examining each horse in turn.

When my inspection was completed, I stood before the group and announced that they must all be mares as they looked the same. This proclamation must have had a sensational effect as two of the drivers fell out of their chairs and Harry dropped his hammer on his foot.

## **#11: 'SKELETON FARM' AND THE BONES IN THE SAND**

Just north of the Huber homestead, on North Salem Road, and across from Wooster Street, was a farm, owned by Elijah E. Light. Its qualifications as a farm may be questioned, but Elijah did have some cows, horses, and chickens. By today's standards in Ridgefield, that would be considered a well-stocked farm.

There was a feeling that the principal product of this particular farm was the boarders that lived there. In the early twenties, there seemed to be a growing need for lodging for workers who were migrating to our rapidly developing town.

Katherine Wettingfeld reminded me that during this time, the farm was known as "skeleton farm." This name seemed to relate to the appearance of the boarders who had to contend with the frugality of the operators and the meals they furnished.

In 1922 the Wettingfelds bought the farm and lived there for many years. It was about this time that North Salem Road was being transformed from a plain, graveled roadway to the asphalt surface that it now has. The asphalt surface extended from the corner of North Salem Road and North Street to a point just north of Farrar Lane. A few years later, the asphalt surface was spread north to the New York State line.

There was a rather pretentious driveway to the front of the farm house. During the construction work, one half of the driveway was eliminated. Entrance and exit have since been made by the remaining half of the road bed.



The property changed hands several times after the Wettingfeld family moved to Ridgefield Lakes. In recent years, roads such as Settler's Lane have appeared and one of the town's very nice developments came into being.

Just north of this farm on the corner of Tackora Trail, a monument marks the spot where General David Wooster was fatally wounded. As everyone knows, this unfortunate incident occurred on April 27, 1777, as General Wooster and his Continental troops were fighting a delaying action against a large body of British and Hessian troops under the command of British General William Tryon.

Just beyond Tackora Trail, and still on North Salem Road, in the 20's, was one of the few gas pumps to be located on a main highway in Ridgefield. Alongside was a tiny store where one could purchase a number of items, such as candy, cigarettes, etc. This little roadside business was operated by William Bouton.

We never knew how Bill ever got permission to locate a gas pump on this corner. However, we do know that once the business closed and the pump was removed, the property returned, to stay, in its former hallowed status.

The Bouton family lived in the house that is still located on a gentle rise to the left and rear of the little roadside stand and gas pump.

Bill was an accomplished machinist and upon the demise of Orville Sprague, he took over and operated the little machine shop on Titicus Hill. This business, which did various repairs, specialized in lawn mower sharpening and repairs. It changed hands several times and finally was moved to Joe Roberts' garage on Roberts Lane. Some of the owners were Alfred Mills, Paul Marconi, Joe McCabe, and Bernie Rogers.

Most people have some little idiosyncrasy and Bill Bouton was no exception. His favorite drink was gin with a milk chaser. It would seem doubtful that many bartenders would be inclined to stock a bottle of milk along with their other wares. However, those who knew Bill were always prepared. I guess if a bartender received an order for gin and milk today, he would call for the men in white coats.

The Bouton family later moved to the rather large house that stands close to the highway and just north of where the gas pump was located. This is another of the many much-lived-in houses in Ridgefield. At times this has been a two-family house. My mother-in-law told me that she lived in this house about the turn of the century.

We are going so fast now that we almost missed a small structure, located between the last two houses mentioned. This building has all the appearances of a chicken house. It was not more than 20 feet square. It was at least 200 feet back from the highway, on an elevated foundation that arose at least five and probably six feet above ground.

It had no porch. It had few windows. It had a very small front door. Entrance and exit were accomplished by the use of a plank which ran from ground level up to the front door. The plank was studded with little boards that ran across its surface. This was apparently for the purpose of preventing one from slipping on the steep incline. Someone, at some time, started to paint this building a reddish color, but never finished.

There was much speculation as to how the person who lived there negotiated the trip up, and down, the plank. People used to wait in vain for a glimpse of Harry ———'s dexterity in accomplishing this feat. Some felt that he crawled up and down this very unusual walkway, but to my knowledge, no one ever actually saw him do it. The little building disappeared many years ago.

There were no more houses on the left side of North Salem Road, going north, until Sidney Farrar's residence. Sid, of course, was Geraldine's father. He had been a first baseman for the Philadelphia Phillies, before the turn of the century.

One story has it that Miss Farrar, as a little girl, went through the stands at Baker Bowl, after the ball games, picking up tin foil from candy wrappers and cigarette packages. The revenue from the tin foil was said to have paid for the singing lessons that developed that superlative voice.

We asked Miss Farrar one time about the veracity of the story. She laughed heartily, but neither confirmed or denied it.

My own feeling is that though voice experts may have shaped and perfected that wondrous voice, the great strength of it certainly must have come from her father. Sid had a voice that could be heard from his home all the way to Main Street.

Andrew Brady was superintendent on the Farrar estate. Andy had a voice that almost matched Sid's in carrying power. They always came into town together to do their shopping and at times would wind up on the opposite sides of Main Street. It was a real treat to hear the two gentlemen carry on a conversation from either side of the street, just as though they were walking side by side.

Mrs. Mary Olcott bought the estate when Sid passed on. She was a great horsewoman and brought along four fine saddle horses. The barn that had housed a couple of cows was renovated into a beautiful horse stable. The horseman's name was Hobby and to the boys in town, he quickly became known as Hobby Horse.

An interesting sidelight on the Farrar estate comes from Rockwell's *History of Ridgefield*. The story goes that two Hessian soldiers, killed in the battle of Ridgefield, were buried in a sand bank, south of the main house. Dr. Archibald Y. Paddock was having sand removed from the bank sometime around 1874 when the diggers uncovered some bones.

There were two skeletons, lying near each other, side by side. One was almost perfect and was placed on exhibit at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876 by Dr. Paddock.

Someone offered Dr. Paddock \$200 for the skeleton but he refused the offer. Today it probably would be worth a fortune.

## **#12: TALES OF SCOTLAND AND MAMANASCO**

There were open fields between Farrar Lane and the Vincent Bedini home at what is now 447 North Salem Road. Vincent, better known as Jimmie, had purchased this fine old house and the surrounding farmland from the Smith family in the early twenties. Before that the Bedini family lived at Mulford School where Jimmie had been grounds superintendent. He apparently anticipated the closing of the private boys school.

A very enterprising man, Jimmie ran the farm for a while and then decided to do outside work. Among the animals that came with the purchase of the farm were two black draft horses, Frank and Fritz. They were put to good use on the neighboring estates, plowing gardens and fields, mowing fields and hauling sand and gravel. In the winter they plowed snow from the driveways in the area.

Sand and gravel turned out to be important products of the farm. They were found in abundance, especially on the east side of North Salem Road.

Jimmie had a unique lumber-box wagon. The floor of the wagon was made of long, loose but tightly fitting poles. Upon reaching his destination with a load of sand or gravel, he

needed only to remove one of the side boards and slide each pole to one side and the wagon was unloaded with a minimum of effort and no shoveling.

This little venture grew into the Vincent Bedini Contracting Co. Jimmie was aided and abetted by his two sons, who at an early age learned the rudiments of various phases of construction. The appeal for this kind of work was apparently stronger in Ferdinand, who later took over the business, than in Silvio. Silvio later became famous as the author of "Ridgefield in Review" and even more famous as a curator at the Smithsonian in Washington.

Trucks had replaced Frank and Fritz and bulldozers had replaced the small farm tractors. The business hummed along until recently when Ferdinand retired and another fine little family operation disappeared. It was all a part of the developing history of Ridgefield.

I would be remiss at this point, if I failed to report an item that is just one of many that are frustrating to postmasters.

The Bedinis had built a new home just south of where they had lived for so many years. The classic old farmhouse was then sold to the N. Donald Edwards family who were then living on Tanton Hill Road. Appropriate recordings were made in the post office delivery records and for several years things went along smoothly.

When the Edwards family bought the former home of Mrs. George Doubleday on Peaceable Street, the records were changed again to reflect this fact. Just a simple little routine change? Yes, except for a very complicating factor. The N. Donald Edwards family, now Peaceable Street, sold their former home to the Donald Edwards family, who had been living on Barrack Hill Road.

Now, if mail came addressed to Donald Edwards at Barrack Hill Road, it was a simple matter to transfer it to North Salem Road. However, if it was addressed to 447 North Salem Road, do you deliver it to that address, or forward it to Peaceable Street? Guessing did not work at all. The renting of post office boxes did help some but it took a concentrated effort by both families to correct this perplexing situation. This little interlude is offered as a change of pace and we will return to the 20's at once.

There were no more buildings on the west side of North Salem Road until you passed Tackora Trail. The most significant thing that happened along this stretch was a barbecue, held by the British troops in the fields on the corner opposite Barlow Mountain Road. The main course was supplied by cattle, which they had commandeered from farms along the way. This was, of course, on April 27, 1777.

Just past Tackora Trail was an important seat of learning. It was the original Scotland School. As in the other rural schools of the time, the population fluctuated. School population in 1849 for the Scotland District was listed as 52. During World War I, there were only a dozen students. However, some very fine people, including the late Joseph Young, matriculated at Scotland. One of the teachers at this little school was Mrs. Fred Williams, mother of Grace Cypher.

It does seem incredible that only 60 years ago, Ridgefield had so many little rural schools. They were staffed by very dedicated, but grossly underpaid teachers. Besides Center School there were a dozen others that turned out many first-class citizens.

Next to Scotland School lived the Robert Hutchinson family. Robert Sr. was superintendent for the Dixon family. The Hutchinson house is still standing on the corner of Pond Road. It is now the home of the Peter Grommes family. The Hutchinsons had two children, Bob Jr., a classmate of mine, and Estelle. The little school next door had closed so both attended Titicus.

Pond Road was our access to Lake Mamanasco on the Dixon side. The Dixon side being the southeast side of the lake and owned by the C.P. Dixon family as opposed to the Peatt side on the northwestern side of the lake. The Peatt side was owned for the most part by William Peatt Sr., who was at that time developing the property.

In the 20's, the Dixon side, which had a nice little beach and a sandbar, was the popular place to swim. The fact that it was considerably closer had some bearing on its popularity. Especially on the part of those who, like myself, had to walk the three miles from town.

The Dixon beach was very near and in sight of the old grist mill that was erected by Daniel Sherwood in 1716. The old mill was still standing in the 20's.

Further north on the lake were some high and rocky cliffs. It was great sport for the young swimmers, providing they were skilled enough and bold enough and daring enough, to dive off this great ledge. As the water was not very deep at this point, extreme care had to be exercised to avoid a broken neck. Swimmers also had to contend with a very thick growth of weeds just below the surface of the lake. My brother Bill got entangled in these weeds one time and except that Jim Smith happened to be nearby in a boat, he probably would have drowned. Despite the dangers, this place held a great attraction for the more adventurous swimmers.

Another impediment to the high diving sport at Mamanasco was the fact that a repeat performance was difficult because of the height that must be climbed to get back to the top of the ledge. This was solved by the appearance of a large rope, which was attached to one of the trees at the top of the ledge. The rope was allowed to dangle over the cliff and into the water. The boys who were already expert swimmers, soon became adept at the necessary gymnastics. It was really something to see them scale the sides of the ledge.

It should be mentioned that the Dixon family lived in the mansion on Tackora Trail, just south of the old Scotland School. In the late 30's it was sold to George Scalise. In Ridgefield a little later, on Old Stagecoach Road, at "Pork Hollow Farm," lived Westbrook Pegler.

Pegler was a syndicated columnist for several of the big daily newspapers at the time. His column started carrying stories to the effect that Scalise should be confined somewhere, behind bars. He told some pretty bad things about this person whom he had ticketed for a ride up the river.

It would seem that Pegler was successful in his efforts and Scalise was incarcerated.

Philip Hilsenrad, who was said to have had some connection with the owner of the estate, was able to acquire title to the place. He ran it for many years as a hotel. Phil got tired of running the hotel and decided to open an office downtown for the practice of law.

The great place was then purchased by the Jesuit Fathers for a retreat house and named "Manresa." During this period, a beautiful altar was installed in the basement chapel. It was a gift in memory of the father of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis.

Manresa was operated for several years and then faded. It was purchased only a few years ago by the Order of Saint Thomas Aquinas. That order is now operating it as a seminary.

### **#13: A SAD COW & MISS RICHARDSON AND HER 'FARM'**

In the 20's, Pond Road had not been developed as it is today. In fact besides the old grist mill, there was only one house at the bottom of the hill. The house had been built by George Rockwell and stood about 200 feet back from the lake.

There had been a second house, much smaller and much closer to the lake. This one, also built by Mr. Rockwell, disappeared for some reason. There was also a boat house, which stood there for many years.

The first house, which was brown-shingled, is still standing and became the property of the Courtland P. Dixon family. From time to time, this house was unoccupied. When this happened we were allowed to use it for changing into our bathing suits. At other times we used the bushes, near the little beach with its sand bars.

It was said that there were occasions when swimming parties took place in the evening. After dark, it was said further that at some of these parties a place to change one's clothes was not a necessity as bathing suits were not considered a requirement.

About 100 feet south of the beach, there was a little dock, where 10 or 12 boats were tied up. One of the boats (I think it was Tom Ryan's) had a small tank that ran from one side of the boat to the other. It carried about a foot of water and its purpose was to hold fish after they were caught.

One of the boys used to put a bullhead into the holding tank, as it was moored at the dock. When a new kid was initiated into the swimming group, he was required to reach into the tank and take out the bullhead. Only those who have experienced the terrific jolt one could get from the sting of a bullhead, can thoroughly sympathize with the unsuspecting newcomer.

Fishing, skating and boating were some of the things that were enjoyed as well as the swimming at Mamanasco. Francis Martin remembers rowing Isabelle Rockwell and Patricia Ryan Nixon (later to become First Lady) around the lake. Mrs. George L. Rockwell was Pat's father's sister.

One was not considered a first-class swimmer until he could swim non-stop from the Dixon beach to the little Peatt store on the west side. This was quite a swim as the points were not exactly opposite each other. Peatt's was a lot farther north. Some of the boys located some large stones about three or four feet below the surface of the lake, at about its middle. In order to negotiate the trip from one side to the other, the boys would get a breather by appearing to tread water while standing on the friendly stones.

Pond Road, at the time of the Battle of Ridgefield, must have been little more than a trail, or accessway to the old grist mill. One can only imagine it being used by a cow, on the famous day in history, in her frantic efforts to elude capture by some hungry British soldiers.

As the story goes, Tryon's troops were confiscating livestock from the farms in the area. All of this was taking place in the morning before the battle. One cow was so terrified by the Redcoats that she dashed down the hill and into the lake. The poor cow died rather than satisfy the appetites of the invaders.

Going north again from Pond Road and still on the west side of North Salem Road, there were open fields until you reached the corner, opposite the entrance to Sherwood Road. There was Doctor Solley's little farmhouse occupied by the late George Reynolds and his family. The house is still on this corner, as well as the large barn near the road.

There were no more houses until the next sharp corner at the bottom of the hill. There on a gentle slope was a very large and picturesque farmhouse. The setting could have been right out of a Norman Rockwell painting. It is now the home of Al Biagiotti and his family.

During the 20's and for some years later, the Leon Sauves lived in this gracious old farmhouse. Leon was the superintendent on the Anne S. Richardson estate.

Miss Richardson herself lived in this splendid old building while her mansion was being built about 1912. At the rear of the farmhouse was (and still is) a great barn that housed the many animals that were a part of what was known as Mamanasco Farm.

The mansion which overlooked Lake Mamanasco was torn down after Miss Richardson's death just a few years ago. She left that part of her property to Ridgefield for a

park. However, like her friend Mrs. Ballard, she had a stipulation in her will that the beautiful mansion be removed. The very substantial and classic stone garage was left standing as a reminder of the elegance that was enjoyed by Miss Richardson and her devoted companion of many years, Miss Edna Schoyer.

Neither of these fine women ever married although Francis Martin says Miss Richardson once had a boyfriend. However, it apparently simmered out and so there were no children to enjoy her expansive and beautiful property.

It is doubtful that anyone would know Anne Richardson's exact height. It is safe to say that it was over six feet. Her great height was accented by the very large hats that she always wore. I would not describe her appearance as formidable, but certainly it was statuesque.

Miss Richardson may have been the original "poor little rich girl." According to Marty, her parents were extremely wealthy. We know that she worked as a girl in a Bridgeport corset factory. The opulence of the family was kept carefully hidden from this girl. Perhaps this was part of a plan to teach her the rudiments of economics.

Whatever the reason, when the facts of life were revealed on the death of her parents, the net result was continued frugality on the part of Miss Richardson.

This is not to say that she was not generous, just that she used her millions carefully. She is said to have made an unfortunate remark concerning the profits made in the munitions industry, at the close of World War I. This did not endear her to parents who had boys in the service.

Anne S. Richardson did many good things, other than her gift of the land to the town of Ridgefield. Almost on her arrival she became engaged in town affairs. She gave freely of time to the Village Improvement Society, the Garden Club and the Wild Flower Society. She was always active in Saint Stephen's Church societies. When the need for a Boys Club arose, she was right there with Mrs. John H. Lynch and Mrs. Edward L. Ballard to put up the cash to start it. She was fiercely proud of her membership on the Parks and Recreation Commission. When an attempt was made to remove her from that commission, she came to see me for assistance. I was sympathetic but carefully explained to her the political barriers that precluded my intervention in her behalf. [Dick was a Democrat, Richardson a Republican. Her 'enemies' were Republicans.—Ed.]

Miss Schoyer was always at her side in her endeavors — with one exception. Edna was a staunch Democrat and it was fun to hear them espouse their respective political philosophies. Both served at the same time in the 1940's on the Board of Education. Edna was a very cheerful person and once was president of the League of Women Voters.

In December 1926 a conference was held in Washington on the Cause and Cure of War. Both Anne and Edna traveled there as delegates to represent Ridgefield.

Anne S. Richardson's contribution to Ridgefield was recognized by the Rotary Club in 1964 and she received the Citizen of The Year Award. She truly was a part of the history of the town.

#### **#14: CHAUFFEURS, THEIR BALL AND MISS RICHARDSON'S CARS**

There were a number of wealthy people living in Ridgefield during the 20's. Some stayed the year round while others had apartments in New York City, and elsewhere, where they spent the cold winter months. It seems strange, now, to realize that so many of the great mansions of those days were not winterized and were used simply as summer homes.

At any rate, marks of distinction for those people were the fine limousines they rode in and the liveried chauffeurs they employed to drive them. Perhaps they never learned to drive. It is felt that more often the use of a chauffeur was deemed to be recognition of social standing.

It naturally follows that because of the numerous wealthy families there were also a great many chauffeurs during the 20's and up until World War II. They formed their own organization and for years ran a Chauffeurs Ball. It was considered one of the big events of the year. My band played for the ball in 1938, '39 and '40, and I have the programs for those grand affairs.

In '38 and in '39, the Ball was in the old Town Hall and in 1940 they moved it to the first high school gymnasium. The gym was located on the far eastern side of the school, and later became the cafeteria, when the expensive new gym was built on the north side of the building [in 1959].

The first and the second Chauffeurs' Ball that we played for went off without a hitch. The affair always featured an outstanding floor show that included a real good singer, a tap dancer and a ballroom team. It was a must that the employers of the chauffeurs attend these functions.

They were treated in 1938 to a performance by the famous international dance team, Veloz and Yolanda, and in 1939 to the excellent ballroom team, Vance and O'Dell.

In 1940 we had a terrific tap dancer, Arthur Brooks, as well as other fine performers. Artie had been featured at the New York World's Fair with the great Bill (Bojangles) Robinson. He was a real nice fellow and a great crowd pleaser. As he nimbly floated across the floor, he would tell stories as his shoes clicked expertly with the music.

We had two shows, one at 9:30 and one at 11. The 9:30 show was well received by the crowd of wealthy and not so wealthy. Artie gave a great performance and the crowd insisted on an encore. He tapped gracefully around the large floor while spinning his funny stories.

However, when Artie came out for the second show, his act had changed drastically. His dancing remained the same, but his stories became considerably more colorful. That he remained alive at the end of his performance was due in a large measure to the fact that I had only a drum stick, rather than a gun.

Unbeknown to us, one of the chauffeurs had produced a bottle of gin between shows. Tom Salvesson (Mrs. Lynch's chauffeur) thought it would be nice to share the gin with Artie. Artie thought that was a good idea, too.

Artie's very first story leapt from 1940 to 1982 in the short space of 90 minutes. His stories might have been considered mild by today's standards, but 42 years ago, they were a sensation.

The first story was met with deep silence, as was the second. Midway through the third story, I could see George Doubleday shifting uneasily in his seat. Mr. Doubleday, who was elderly at the time, had come to the affair dressed in formal evening clothes. He also wore bedroom slippers, so he apparently did not expect to dance. Miss Richardson and others hung their heads at the conclusion of the act.

One person in the crowd could hold out no longer. I will not mention his name, but he was called Irv. He started to laugh uncontrollably and was soon joined by the crowd as the tension was broken.

Sorry to have strayed again into the 30's, so we'll get right back to the 20's.

We have written about Miss Anne S. Richardson, so we must mention her long-time chauffeur, Tom Smith. Tom was the essence of the fine liveried chauffeurs. Like John McGrath,

who was Mrs. Sword's chauffeur and Dan McKay, who drove for the Maynards, as well as many others, Tom had been a coachman, before the advent of autos. John, Tom and Dan recognized the demise of the horse-drawn vehicles, shifted gears and learned to pilot the despised horseless carriage. I guess that, had the choice been mine, I would have elected to go with Charlie Stannard and other old coachmen who flatly refused to learn the operation of the auto. Even now, Marie would say that I never really did learn.

Like the other chauffeurs, Tom was rarely seen out of uniform. The standard uniform consisted of real fine blue material, a round cap with a stiff shiny visor, and puttees that sparkled.

Tom always claimed that his entire fortune was in his mouth. With today's price of gold, this could be more truth than poetry. Every one of Tom's teeth was gold. When he smiled, the reflection could light up an ordinary-sized room. There can be no question but that Tom was one of Ridgefield's real characters and he should be listed with those of whom I will write at a later date. However, since we are still on North Salem Road, I could not resist telling about Tom.

Another mark of distinction, which set the wealthy apart, was ownership of what we now call station wagons.

Nowadays many families, especially those with children, own station wagons. During the 20's, they were known as suburbans. Unlike the station wagons of today, the body of these vehicles was composed of beautifully grained wood, rather than metal. Miss Richardson had a 1924 Model T Ford. This was Tom's to use for trips in to the village.

In fact, he was to use it any time his employer was not riding with him. Tom preferred to use one of the limousines when going out for the evening. The favorite spot for libation during the 20's, and even later on, was a place called Kohler's, just across the line in New York State. It ran all during Prohibition and never closed one day or night. Tom used to pick up two close friends, Mary and Mike, on Sunday evenings and travel over the line. He always used one of the big cars for the trip. Anne warned him about the use of the large vehicles for this purpose.

One Sunday night, about midnight, when Tom returned home and drove into the garage, he was surprised to find big Anne, standing there waiting for him. As Miss Richardson towered over him, she asked, "Tom, do you know what I should do with you?" Tom replied, "Sure and I suppose you should fire me." The grand lady, with a rare show of good humor, had a fit of laughing and walked off and left him.

We always walked to Mamasasco for a swim, but on occasion, Tom would come along and give us a ride. Top speed of the Model T was probably 45 miles per hour. Tom generally drove at top speed and it was just too fast for this road.

The Model T had a choke, the rod of which was exposed, from the floorboard to the dashboard. In order to slow him down, we would work the toes of our shoes up around the choke rod and lift it. The resulting coughing and bucking of the vehicle would cause Tom to complain that he must "get the domm thing to the garage for attention."

It was a generally accepted practice for the chauffeurs to make the selection of the new cars that their employers would purchase. They would then share in the purchase price. In most instances, it was apparent that the employer condoned this ritual.

On one occasion Anne Richardson bought an enormous limousine without consulting with Tom. It was a gray Renault with an open front seat. In stormy weather, a sheet of canvas was used to cover the driver. The Renault of those days was vastly different in size from the ones they make today.



At any rate we saw Tom with this gigantic new car one Sunday morning in town. It was suggested that he christen the new vehicle. Tom's retort was, "Christen it? I ought to drown the domm thing."

### **#15: RIDGEFIELD'S PRIVATE BOYS' SCHOOL**

From Miss Richardson's Mamasasco Farm north, there were no more buildings, until one came to the entrance to the Ridgefield School. This fine boys school had been formerly known as Mulford School.

The north entrance to Lake Mamasasco was, and is, about midway between the farm and the school. At this point, the lake almost reaches North Salem Road. Mamasasco Road, as it is now known, was on the west side of the lake.

In the 20's, this road was hardly wide enough for an auto to travel. It was impossible for two cars to pass one another and the potholes were large enough to swallow one of today's compact autos. Today, this road has a fine bituminous concrete surface and is wide enough for two cars.

At the northern tip of the lake, S.S. Denton maintained a dock for about a dozen row boats. These boats were rarely used and always seemed to float there idly. Several of the boats would be half full of water all summer.

Francis Martin once made a rather gruesome discovery. He found a body floating under the dock. It was determined that the body of the victim, who had lived in a small cottage on the west side of the lake, had been in the water for several days. We never learned exactly how old Levi met his end.

Near the entrance to the boys school was one of the real old Ridgefield houses. Vincent Bedini and his family lived there during the early 20's, when Vincent was grounds superintendent at the school. In the mid-20's, the Bedini family moved south a mile or so on North Salem Road. Vincent then started his construction business, as related in an earlier column. Vincent's brother, Alexander, took over his duties and he and his family lived in this house for several years. They later moved to New Street. The house was vacant for some time and deteriorated rapidly.

A member of a family that lived in the house in later years said that the clapboard siding had separated in several places. He said that one morning the family came downstairs to find that the furniture had all been rearranged. No one admitted to moving the furniture. There had been a rather bad wind storm during the night, so it was decided that the wind had done a rather remarkable job and let it go at that.

Another family who lived in this house neglected to pay the rent for several months. Eventually the landlord said either pay or move. The following day, a fire was discovered at the top of the cellar stairs. It had apparently been set, either as a show of defiance or to indicate annoyance, or possibly to draw attention.

Whatever the reason, once it had started, the efforts of the family to put out the fire were futile. By the time the fire department was notified, the building was beyond saving. Damage was so extensive that it was decided to allow the firemen to use the remains, on several occasions, for practice. This fine, old, and probably historic house was destroyed because of a senseless act.

Mulford School was established by Dr. Roland Jessup Mulford in 1907. It was located originally on the eastern side of Main Street at its south end. By 1911, the school had grown to the point where considerably more room was needed. Dr. Mulford, with great foresight,

purchased the very picturesque 115 acres [at the north end of Mamasco], most of which Francis D. Martin has distributed to worthy causes.

A large main building of four stories, with more than 100 rooms, was built, along with several smaller buildings for the professors. The school continued to grow and at one time had more than 70 students. It was a very successful venture and early was named Ridgefield School.

Theodore C. Jessup succeeded Dr. Mulford as headmaster in 1922. Unfortunately, Mr. Jessup fell victim to an ailment which incapacitated him and 11 years later resigned in favor of Philip M. Gray.

The setting for the Ridgefield School must have been considered for an institution of this type. Few large tracts of land provide such a commanding and panoramic view of the surrounding, elegant countryside.

The school organization was replete with everything that such a fine private school could possibly need. Those who instructed the boys carried the finest of credentials. The land itself was rich in the various minerals that would produce the food for the staff and the students. Milk, vegetables, butter, eggs, etc., all came from the fine farmland. One could hardly imagine a finer

place to locate a school that would ultimately produce future titans in the fields of government, international relations, human relations, and the business world.

There seems no question that the school was highly successful. That it fielded those characterized above can be documented by the list of the many fine men who matriculated at the Ridgefield School. Without mentioning their names (which are available), we had a judge of the World Court, a United Nations ambassador, a governor, an ambassador to the Court of Saint James, and an ambassador to Sudan.

Registration at the school was not limited to the wealthy of other localities. Through the years, several Ridgefield boys attended. Among them were the late Ralph Crouchley, Charles Crouchley, Jr., Frank Baxter, Paul Morganti, Reed Shields, and Paul Hampden.

A lively topic of discussion at the supper table could be whether the acknowledged excellence of the instructors was responsible for the lofty positions achieved by the students. Could it have been their own natural abilities, or the already established standings of their families in the various categories? Whatever the reason, the school has left its mark on the history of Ridgefield and was a real credit to the town.

Dr. Mulford was a strict disciplinarian, as were his successors. It is doubtful that any boy was sent to Ridgefield School because of this fact. It was just incidental that the students benefited from the fine characters of their headmasters.

It must be considered that, though the boys were watched over with considerable diligence, they were normal and healthy youngsters and subject to all the escapades of youth.

Enrollment dwindled in the 30's. This was probably due to the Great Depression. Operation of the school required a staff of 28. When in the late 30's, the number of students dropped to 20, it was obvious that the school could not survive. Sadly, the doors closed for the last time in 1938.

Fortunately, Francis Martin acquired this beautiful part of Ridgefield. He tastefully retained the serene atmosphere of the countryside. That no attempt was made by him to create a complex, similar to that which has disfigured our Main Street, is to his undying credit. Several houses have been built on the property and they all blend with the fine character of this splendid estate.

We have always felt that Marty's purchase of this baronial estate was motivated somewhat by the fact that it faces to the east. This is ideal for his mode of living. He was never a night person, although his day has always started about 4 a.m. To be sure, this would be for most people, the middle of the night. It would be safe to say that few places, in Ridgefield, or any place else, can match the spectacular sunrises that can be seen from this magnificent vantage point. Marty and Doris must have enjoyed many of them.

I will resist the temptation, at this time to write about Francis D. Martin. There has already been a great deal written about Marty and there will be a great deal more to come. However, we feel that a news column, or even several of them, would not be sufficient to properly cover the very extraordinary Mr. Martin.

### **#16: FAREWELL TO MARTY, DAIRIES, AND EUGENE O'NEILL**

Since our last column went to press, we have lost our friend, Francis D. Martin. He was a subject of that column and as we stated in it, we will resist the temptation to do any extensive writing about him at this time. For the present we will merely state that in our humble opinion, few, if any, residents of Ridgefield have had such a positive effect on the overall good of this community. Marty worked tirelessly for what he felt would benefit his town.

Because of the tremendous effort put forth by this man, both in time and money, our town is a better place in which to live. He richly deserves the heartfelt thanks and prayers of all the citizens of Ridgefield.

Marty called me just a few days before his passing. He wanted to talk about his favorite subject, Ridgefield. He told me how much he enjoyed my columns and encouraged me to continue writing. His appearance belied the fact that he was nearing the end. Bright and cheerful, despite his physical problems, one got the feeling that he could go on forever.

When it was time for me to depart, he reached for my hand with his own left hand. We learned that the pain in his right hand prevented the traditional hand shake. A broad smile creased his ever handsome features, as he admonished me to come back again real soon.

So it is so long, Marty, you certainly will be greatly missed by all.

###

We will continue north on the west side of North Salem Road. In the early 20's, the famed author and playwright, Eugene O'Neill, lived on the next estate [Brook Farm] beyond the Ridgefield Boys School. It was here that the prolific writer did some of his finest work, including "Desire Under the Elms." That same year, 1924, O'Neill wrote another drama, "All God's Chillun Got Wings."

His "Beyond the Horizon" earned him the Pulitzer Prize in 1920 and the very next year he won this coveted prize again for "Anna Christie." He was recognized as the leading American dramatist and received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1936.

O'Neill's father was an actor and took Eugene along with him on his theatrical tours. No doubt these trips indoctrinated the youth in the ways of the theatre, though his first job was as a clerk and he even prospected for gold in Honduras before returning to his first love. He at one time worked as a newspaper reporter in New London.

He contracted a mild case of tuberculosis at age 24 and wrote his first plays while a patient in a sanatorium. They were of the one-act variety. It is probable that his rather delicate physical condition caused to turn from his arduous activities to the writing which made him famous. For the last 20 years of his life, he suffered from poor health and died in 1953 at age 65.

Several of his finest works, including "Long Day's Journey Into Night," were produced posthumously.

Ferdinand Bedini, as a boy, mowed the lawn and did other various jobs for the O'Neill family. He describes the dramatist as a very tall, handsome man with a large but very well kept mustache. Ferd said that when O'Neill was deeply involved in his writing, it was best not to approach him on any subject. When he walked around his estate, he was generally accompanied by Mrs. O'Neill, and referred any questions that might be asked to her.

The O'Neills' daughter, Oona, married Charles Chaplin. Marty told me of his visit to her residence in Switzerland.

Several families have enjoyed this fine estate since the O'Neills. It is worthy of note, that the present owner, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Dawes, are both engaged in writing and in publishing music. The beauty and tranquility of the area is ideal for such endeavors.

The John Hunt family owned a large farm just to the north of the O'Neills. The Hunts had considerable acreage that produced more hay than their livestock could consume. In the mid-twenties, the late Irving B. Conklin bought some of the excess hay. He was at that time superintendent on the estate of Dr. George G. Shelton. The two places were about as far apart as they could be and still be in Ridgefield.

The Hunt farm was the last place on this side of the New York line, going north, whereas the Shelton estate was the very last place on West Lane, going south, before entering New York. As a matter of fact, both of these places extended for a considerable distance into New York State.

In those days, a large scale was located close by the south side of the D.F. Bedient store. It was a busy place, for hay, coal, grain and other commodities all had to be weighed before delivery was made.

The hay purchased by Mr. Conklin was loose. The baling of hay was rarely done at the time. To build a good-sized load of loose hay required a thorough knowledge of the business. To build a very large load of hay, capable of traveling safely, from one border of the town to the other, was a real task. It was all done by hand and one had to be proficient in the use of a pitch fork.

On one occasion, the Conklin load was so large the utility wires had to be raised along Main Street to afford safe passage. When the hay wagon finally reached Bedient's, a goodly number of townspeople were on hand to witness its arrival.

Jack Walker, who later became postmaster, said that it was the largest load of hay he had ever seen. It weighed in at 4,750 pounds.

It was interesting that this tremendous load of hay was drawn by two little black horses, Lady and Jim. Lady weighed 1,200 pounds and Jim weighed 1,250. Therefore, their combined weight was only about half the weight of the load they pulled. It was a long haul, but they made it.

They were probably the finest team that I ever saw. We always thought they were mother and son, and they worked as a unit. It was beautiful to see them pull together. It was perfect teamwork.

A few years ago, a picture of a coach and four, appeared in The Press. They had participated in the parade in 1932 that marked the 200th anniversary of George Washington's birth. Lady and Jim were the lead team and Duke and Diamond were the pole team. This year is the 250th of Washington's birth.

Stewart Scofield bought the Hunt farm and conducted a retail milk business for some 15 years from that location. He called it Stone Hill Dairy.

This dairy was the second largest in Ridgefield at the time. The largest Ridgefield dairy was the Conklin Dairy. It was established by Irving B. Conklin, on July 1, 1928, on the former Ernest O. Wilson farm on Ramapoo Road. This farm was developed in the 1950's and was later divided into Farm Hill Road, Overlook Drive and Nutmeg Court.

The competition between these two dairies was tremendous. There were many smaller dairies earlier and later, such as David L. Jones's Walnut Grove, later Carl Stolle's, Irving Keeler's and Elmer Leeson's. The smaller dairies disappeared one by one until only Conklin Dairy and Stone Hill were left.

Stewart Scofield was a retired army officer. He studied for the ministry and became a clergyman as well as a dairy farmer. One Sunday morning when Mr. Scofield observed one of Mr. Conklin's customers paying him for the milk delivery, he admonished Irving for not keeping the day holy. Mr. Conklin, who was never at a loss for words, calmly replied, "I have always believed that the better the day, the better the deed."

Finally, Conklin bought out Scofield and for some years controlled all the milk delivered in Ridgefield. Mr. Scofield later sold this northernmost Ridgefield farm and moved to Millerton, N. Y., where he devoted more time to the ministry.

So we have completed our journey to the New York State line. Perhaps we will come back on the east side of North Salem Road. We shall see.

## **#17: A LOOK AT THE OTHER SIDE OF NORTH SALEM ROAD**

So, we will start south, on North Salem Road, from the New York State line.

In the 20's, the first house was owned by the Hennion family. It was not very large at the time and your attention was attracted, not by the house, but by a hand-operated gasoline pump at the side of the highway.

It is doubtful, with the limited amount of auto traffic at the time, that the little pump was a financial bonanza. However, it served its purpose, providing the family with additional income and convenience for the travelers.

Some years later, the property was purchased by Donald Torcellini. Don kept the pump going for a while, as well as his many other activities. A very popular movie was called "A Horn Blows At Midnight." This may have been inspired by gas pump owners who had to deal with the rigors of providing service at all hours. At any rate, Don and Yolonda tired of the gas business and had the pump removed. Once it was gone, it was gone forever.

Don put an addition on the little house and it became a haven for newly married couples, that is so sorely needed in our town today. Too many young Ridgefield people have to start life anew in other localities because of the lack of an affordable apartment.

For example, Quinto and Dora Cassavechia lived in this house when they were first married. So did Nano and Lena Marconi. We just do not like to think of what Ridgefield would be without them.

Next door lived the Tarbell family and then no one for a considerable distance. Then just before the very dangerous corner that many called "Dead Man's Curve," was the Louis G. Smith family.

There was justification for the name of this corner. Young people, returning from a night of revelry "over the line," found the long straight stretch leading to the curve a speedway that was hard to resist. The result was a large number of accidents, many of a very serious nature.

The Smiths had a chicken farm at this location and they called it Indian Rock Farm. The reason for the name is unknown, but it had nothing to do with the breed of chickens that they raised. They were white leghorns.

White leghorns are great for laying eggs. Big ones. Lots of them. They have never been considered ideal for eating. It is difficult to keep them confined. No fence is high enough, as they can fly like a pheasant. Their specialty is eggs and they were the best in the business of supplying them.

Energy-conscious people would be interested in this little bundle of energy. Some years ago, a science professor did a study on the energy expended in the production of an egg by a leghorn. His findings led him to the conclusion that this very slender little chicken generated as much energy in the manufacture of one egg as a large cow in producing 14 quarts of milk.

In later years, after the chickens disappeared, Mrs. Ada Phair conducted a riding school. This was about the time of the Chekhov Theatre Studio that had taken over the former boys school across the road. This studio caused considerable stir in town. It was operated by Michael Chekhov, a nephew of Anton, the famous playwright.

Success of the riding school may have depended to some extent on the studio. At any rate neither lasted very long. However, the studio harbored such as Yul Brynner and Beatrice Straight, both of whom are still performing, as well as Hurd Hatfield, best remembered for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Some 35 years ago the Leeman family purchased the former riding school and Evelyn still lives there. George, unfortunately, has passed on. He was a very noted figure in the music world. Though he himself was a top-flight musician, he was probably best known as an arranger of music. He worked for such musical stalwarts as Paul Whiteman, Archie Bleyer and Andre Kostelanetz, and did the Arthur Godfrey Show for many years.

Now that we have successfully negotiated "Deadman's Curve," we come to the Ridgefield High School. It seemed nicer, to me, back in the 20's when these great fields raised corn, wheat, rye, and oats rather than Cain.

The grain from these farm products was separated from the stalks and chaff by the great threshing machines of Tom Kehoe. Later on this work was done by the late Joe Young. First the corn had to be cut by a corn harvester and the other grains were gathered by an enormous reaper and binder. The fodder and meal that resulted from all of this activity was then put in winter storage and later fed to the livestock of Ann Richardson's Mamasasco Farm.

We have always felt that it was too bad that young people today never had the opportunity of viewing first hand, the basic principles of sustaining the life of domesticated animals.

There were no more houses until just past the intersection with Ridgebury Road. There, in 1924, Leon Sauve built a nice little house. Much of the construction of this attractive house was of stone. In the late 20's, the Kilcoyne family lived here, prior to moving to Barry Avenue, where Margaret and Marie still live.

In the next house lived Columbo Franceschini and his family, in a house that Miss Richardson had built for them in 1920. The Andrew Principi family also lived here until the next little stone house was built for them on the sharp corner.

Columbo was the cowman for Mamasasco Farm. Andrew was the chickenman and George Bickers took care of the gardening. When Bickers left the farm, Columbo took over for him and later on succeeded Leon Sauve as superintendent. They along with the chauffeur, Tom

Smith, and several women who worked in the kitchen and as maids in the mansion, made up a sizable workforce, that kept the place in first class condition.

The Franceschinis had three sons, Lindo, Bruno, and Siero. All of the boys worked at the farm and benefited from the valuable experience that life on the farm has to offer.

Lindo succeeded Tom Smith and served as Ann's chauffeur until his untimely passing at age 46. Bruno — "Prunes" as we always called him — did so many different things, but is probably best known for his culinary expertise and his proven ability to recite poetry.

Siero — "Si," as he was nicknamed — keeps Ridgefield Town Hall looking its best. I'm sure that he keeps all the people inside the hall on their toes. He is so well versed in so many fields that he probably could be used as a replacement for any town employee that might be unable to perform their assigned duties, for whatever reason.

Si has always exhibited a willingness to be helpful. This trait has contributed to his popularity, especially among the town hall people.

We think it is of interest to know that Mrs. Franceschini is still living in the same little house, 62 years later. It would seem that, since World War II, we have become a nation of people with nomadic tendencies. Because of that, we cannot help but wonder how many have lived so many years in one house.

Between the Principi house and the one in which Mrs. Fred W. Solley lives, is one of the most dangerous curves on any highway in Ridgefield. There have been almost as many accidents on this curve as the one previously mentioned, just a half mile north.

Perhaps the reason that accidents on this corner were generally not as serious as those on "Dead Man's Curve" is the absence of the long straightaway in the approach to it. Could be that some of the victims of this corner are those who find themselves in the middle of it, while still congratulating themselves on their success with the previous curve.

The next house, just around the corner, was a part of the Solley estate. In the early thirties this house was remodeled and Doctor Fred W. and Mrs. Solley moved in to make it their home. It would be safe to say that the Solley family was certainly medically oriented. Mrs. Solley was a fine nurse. Fred's younger brother, Robert, was also a doctor. Their father, Dr. Fred P., also was renowned in the medical field. It is fitting that this closely knit family all served at St. Luke's Hospital in New York City, where the younger Dr. Fred was chief surgeon for many years.

## **#18: THE TURKEY SHOOTS AND THE RUSTY PARKER**

Halfway up the hill, between the home of Mrs. F. W. Solley and the old Solley family homestead, is a large, brown, shingled house. In the 20's this was the home of the James Smith family. In fact, Jim and Mrs. Smith were married in this house.

Big Jim, as he was known, earned this moniker with his expansive six and one half foot frame. He was a great sportsman and loved fishing and hunting. Hunting the red fox was his favorite.

Mrs. Smith was a great worker and when the family later moved to Barry Avenue and operated a turkey farm, she did the work of several people.

The Smiths had three children, James Jr., William (Bunky) and Myrna (Minnie). These youngsters all helped with the work and quickly learned the rigors, as well as the benefits of farm life. More will be told about the interesting Smith family, after they moved to Barry Avenue in the 30's.

During the Depression years many families benefited from the pheasants, partridge, woodcock, and rabbits taken from the wooded areas of town. Meager family incomes were in some instances supplemented by cash received from the hides of small game, such as muskrat, skunk, and raccoon, as well as fox.

Big Jim acted as the middleman between the hunters, the trappers, and the buyers of pelts. He would buy the pelts or take the animals and do the skinning himself. Then, once a week, a truck would come from a large furrier outfit in Peekskill and take the skins for processing.

Bowling was a sport that flourished during these years and Big Jim had a team that was one of the best. This team bowled for large stakes at a time when cash was very hard to come by. Some of those who bowled on the team were George T. Tator, Nick Romeo, and Walter Scott. They bowled on the alleys, then located on the third floor over the J. C. Penney Store in Danbury, against such opponents as Eddie Cahill and Mort Lindsay. Mort was the world champion at the time. The contests created considerable interest and drew onlookers from all the area towns.

On one occasion, one of Jim's bowlers became injured the night before a big match. The next morning, Jim was having his coffee in the Ridgefield Bakery, where the Roma [Planet] Pizzeria is now located. He was having a hard time to find a replacement for the injured bowler.

The owner of the establishment overheard Jim discussing his problem. This man was a great talker and was constantly boasting and trying to impress anyone who would listen. The fellow, who had been in Ridgefield only a short time, chose this time to announce that he had bowled 300 on several occasions.

Big Jim spilled his coffee and almost choked on his sugar bun. He was elated when the newcomer agreed to make his appearance with the team that night.

It turned out that the braggart was not only a very poor bowler, he could not even keep the ball on the alley. Jim and the rest of the team were so angry with the fellow that they drove home without him. Shortly, thereafter he left town.

Turkey shoots were a popular "sport," in the 20's and the 30's. The first one that I attended was held in the open fields on Tackora Trail, on the west side about 400 feet north of the intersection of North Salem Road.

At first the old-fashioned shoots were in vogue. A live turkey was placed in a box with only his head protruding from a small hole in the top. "Sportsmen" then shot at the head of the turkey with a rifle. We will grant that it took considerable skill to hit a bobbing turkey head, with a single shot from a rifle. However, something about this kind of activity was repulsive to a real sportsman.

In due course, the method of winning a turkey was changed to where one shot at a paper target, rather than a turkey's head. Then they changed from using a rifle to a 12 gauge shotgun. The system boiled down to where the winner was decided by the most shot in the center of the target.

Irving Conklin used to borrow an old Parker shotgun from Howland Adams. The old gun had belonged to Howland's father, Joe Adams. Its true value was carefully concealed beneath a large accumulation of rust and numerous scars. Somewhere through the years, it had lost its front sight. The lack of a front sight would in no way prevent this marvelous old gun from playing an important role in the winning of turkeys. Someone dropped a small hot piece of solder in the area of where the original sight had been.



Despite its dilapidated appearance, this marvelous old fowling piece won more turkeys than any of the others. Irv Conklin, Lewis Courtney, and myself, as well as others, all benefited from the fine pattern that flew from the muzzle of this fantastic gun. The trick was to aim at the lower right hand corner of the target. If your aim was good, there would be 8 to 10 pellet marks in the center of the target.

Dr. Van Saun had a new Ithaca shotgun that he had recently paid \$375 for. Pinky Gillum had one of equal value. When one considers the value of the dollar in those days, you can only imagine what such guns would cost today. Yet, the old, borrowed shotgun outclassed them all.

At one shoot, after Courtney had won 3 turkeys, Conklin two, and myself one, Van Saun threw his beautiful shotgun against a stone wall fence. His example was quickly followed by Pinky Gillum and "Woodcock" John Richardson. It should be noted that these fine guns were not left there to rust away. Others, mindful of their value, retrieved them, had them repaired, and enjoyed them for years to come. The old Parker eventually disappeared and was replaced by another famous gun when the turkey shoots moved to Barry Avenue.

I guess I should say that the turkeys offered for prizes at the Tackora Trail Shoots were alive. On one occasion, John Richardson finally won a turkey after many attempts. He was known as "Woodcock John" because of the fact that woodcock were his favorite game bird. One had to be a real good shot to hit a woodcock, as they took off and flew like a jet.

At any rate, John was so elated over winning his turkey that he offered the live bird to anyone who could hit it. With that remark, he threw the live bird into the air and a dozen guns exploded. That no one was killed, or seriously injured, was a miracle.

From then on no live turkeys were offered as prizes. They were all dressed for the oven and later still they were of the frozen variety.

I'm afraid that we have strayed from our story of North Salem Road, Just thought you might be interested in the old-time turkey shoots.

Dr. Fred P. Solley lived in the large house on the corner at the intersection of Sherwood Road. He had already made his mark in the field of medicine. Not only was he the top man at St. Luke's Hospital in New York City but enjoyed what must have been the tremendous satisfaction of seeing his two sons, Fred W. and Robert, follow in his footsteps. Both boys became very successful doctors at St. Luke's and Fred was chief of surgery there for several years.

Like many other doctors who became tired of the hurly burly life of New York City, Dr. Solley longed for peace and solitude of his Ridgefield farm. The farm consisted of many acres on both sides of North Salem Road. He was particularly proud of his orchard on the west side of the road.

The orchard was quite successful and served a dual purpose as a fine place for church picnics etc.

For some reason, Ridgefield has never been really noted for its orchards. The high altitude of the town should be ideal for this type of venture. We once cared for eleven acres of orchard at Hillscroft Farm with only moderate success. Arthur Faubel's orchards in the Ridgebury area are probably the most successful Ridgefield has ever had.

Up to now, we have been dealing with people of moderate means and some with considerable wealth. As we move further south on the eastern side of North Salem Road, we will find some people who are poor, and I do mean poor. Perhaps the word destitute would be more descriptive.

## **#19: THE POOR HOUSE AND OLD HAM'S PARROT**

There were no houses, south of Sherwood Road, until you reached the top of the hill. The land on the eastern side of North Salem Road had been the James Scott farm for many years. In 1882, the Town of Ridgefield had purchased this farm. To all intents and purposes, it was to be the Poor House. We always called it the "Town Farm."

The farm consisted of a real old, and very large, farm house that is still standing today, several barns and some 40 acres of farmland. The barns have long since disappeared. One large barn stood just to the north of the farm house and housed the cows and the horses. There were several smaller structures for the pigs and the sheep.

One of the buildings that stood just behind the farm house, looked more than a little out of place, and it was. This building had been moved to this location from where it originally stood, 300 feet south and on the opposite side of the road. It had served for many years as the Scotland School and now had become a chicken house. It was later moved farther south and was remodeled into a family home.

The Town Farm was a place for those who were without any means of support and unable to provide for themselves. We knew some of the inmates personally. They were pretty much hopeless, although some were people who had been able to provide for themselves quite well in their younger years. A few were local tradesmen, who had been highly respected in their fields.

Now they were relegated to living out their lives on this farm. Their room and board were provided and any contribution they could make to the operation of the farm would be appreciated.

During the 20's and 30's, Mr. and Mrs. Fred Young were the operators of the Town Farm. They were the parents of Joe Young, who ran the store across from the fire house, that still bears his name [the old Young's Feed Store].

Fred was a tough old fellow, who had very little mirth in his makeup. For me, his attraction was his real fine driving horse, named Billy. We have it on good authority that Billy, as a young horse, had been an excellent trotter. He had raced at the Danbury Fair and had won several races. Billy was a white horse. Not gray. He was pure white and had a wonderful disposition that complemented his natural beauty.

We knew the days on which old Fred would come into town to do his shopping and used our best approach in requesting a ride on his trip home. It took some time but eventually he mellowed to the extent that he would on occasion give us a ride. For me, a ride behind Billy was much preferred over a ride with Tom Smith in his Model T, even though few words were spoken during the three mile ride. On most of our trips to Mamasasco, we walked.

Old Fred was probably nicer to Billy than to any other living thing. He seemed to have a kind of reverence where this horse was concerned. Probably this was because of Billy's fine record as a racehorse. At any rate, he never pushed Billy. He just let him set his own pace, which was a stolid 8 to 10 mile-an-hour trot. It was surprising how quickly he traveled the distance between town and the farm. The ride always ended too quickly for me.

There were two other horses on the farm. They were a team of draft horses named Frank and Dan. Frank was jet black and Dan was a mahogany bay. They had been overseas with the army in World War I and each had U.S.A. branded on his rump.

The farm had a very large vegetable garden and, with the livestock that it raised, was pretty much self-sufficient. It cost the town very little to operate this little institution. The inmates — perhaps they should be called inhabitants — participated in the operation of the farm, to the best of their physical abilities.

A large bell hung on a post, just outside the kitchen door. When the meals were ready, Mrs. Young, who was a real motherly type, would ring the bell, to call everyone in from whatever they were working at.

Altogether, it was a real well organized and worthwhile effort on the part of the town to take care of those who could not make it on their own.

In the 40's the town decided to end the project and the property was sold. The result was the development which gave us Circle Drive. Hobby Drive. etc.

Just south of the Town Farm, on the very next corner opposite the north entrance to Tackora Trail, was a very old house. During the 20's, and for many years before, this was the home of Hamilton B. Scott. It probably witnessed the march of the Redcoats in 1777, and no doubt had historic value.

However, in the interests of progress, the old house was torn down in the 40's and newer homes replaced it. We remember "Ham," as he was known, as a very old man. He had a long flowing beard and steely eyes. He must have owned an awful lot of land in the area; the land records show numerous sales, which must have kept Ham in comfort, as we do not ever remember him working.

Ham's house was located very near the highway. He always seemed to be sitting in a large rocking chair on the small front porch. I think we called it a stoop. He presented a rather formidable appearance and we were just a little afraid of him. However, if we were walking by, having missed a ride with Tom Smith or Fred Young, we always stopped to talk with him. Despite his gruff mannerism, Ham was a very interesting person, and once started, he had some real good stories.

The main attraction was a very large and colorful parrot that sat on a perch, just to the left of Ham's right shoulder. Ham claimed that this wondrous bird was given to him by a sea captain, who had acquired him in Africa.

Conversation with Ham was generally about the parrot and seemed always to run about the same. Time after time we would ask if the parrot could talk. Ham would growl and then answer in the negative. We would then ask if the parrot could do anything unusual and Ham would say that the damn bird was stupid. When we would turn to go, "Polly," which name seemed to be given to all parrots, male and female, proceeded to talk, or perhaps screech, would be a better word. The air was vented with words that, while very clear, are unprintable, according to our editor.

What with Ham, James, Hiram, Hezekiah, Nathan, Sam, and George Scott to name just a few, we can readily understand why this was called Scotland District.

Leaving Ham's and again traveling south, we pass our present first selectman's [Elizabeth Leonard] home. There were no houses along here during the 20's, until the little old, picturesque, saltbox on the corner of Barlow Mountain Road.

The Richard Jacksons lived here and Dick taught at the old Ridgefield Boys School. He was also the athletic coach at the school. He had a crippled right foot which prevented his active participation in sporting events. However, he got around well enough to gain an excellent reputation as a referee at basketball games and as an umpire at baseball and football games. Mrs. Jackson was very active in town affairs. The little saltbox still stands. At the time, it was part of the Pierrepont estate.

The next house was the tall, three-story Thaddeus Crane home. Thad operated a real estate and insurance firm in what we called the telephone building. This large tudor type building later became known as the Martin Block [today home of Planet Pizza and Amatuzzi optometry].

Thad's secretary was Ruth Miller. Ruth was voted the most popular girl in Ridgefield, at the time. This was understandable, as she had a most engaging personality. Ruth still lives in her Bryon Avenue home.

Thad one time ran a race with a locomotive in Wilton and came off second best. Ruth married Harry Perregaux, a budding electrical contractor, moved across the street to the north part of Bedient's store and continued Crane's business as well as Harry's, from that vantage point.

Many years ago, a number of Ridgefield families were involved in the traveling circuses. There were the Hunt family, the Titus family, the Turner family and the June family. Lewis June at one time owned the Crane home where the John Scott family now lives. He used to winter his circus horses on this property.

## **#20:THE MAN WITH THE WALLS OF FOOD**

South of Thaddeus Crane's homestead were more open fields. The first structure was an old barn that is still standing. It had been a part of Mary Smith's farm. Now in the 20's, it served Vincent Bedini as a place to store his machinery.

South of the old barn were more open fields. Then, just beyond where Altero (Chick) and Minnie Ciuccoli now live, was a long driveway that provided access to Achille Bacchiochi's sand.

I guess the ordinary man would never look in this area for a sand bank. However, Achille was no ordinary man. He used to spend a lot of time each Sunday, just riding around Ridgefield, acquainting himself with various areas of the town. He got to know it real well.

Achille must have done considerable tramping to find this sand bank as it sets well back from North Salem Road. There were swampy areas and the Titicus River flowed nearby. To all appearances, it would be an unlikely place to mine sand and gravel. As it turned out, the bank produced well for many years.

The next house, traveling south, on the eastern side of the road, set back more than 100 yards from the highway. A long semi-circular driveway made the house appear much larger than it actually was. As you neared the house, it seemed to shrink a little. This may have been because of the expanse of land, some 20 acres, that the house sat on.

Munson and Lizzie Wade built this house and lived there for many years with their daughter Edith. Munson drove a bay horse, whose name I never heard. I do remember that the horse had a rather unusual ailment that was called "string halt." The problem was caused by a strain of the ligaments in one of the hind legs. The result was that the poor horse as he walked would pick up the affected member considerably higher than was actually necessary. He would then slam the hoof of that leg down, with great force, on the pavement. It made a loud and sharp noise and you would wonder why the leg did not break.

Munson Wade also had leg trouble and walked with a decided limp. However, since Munson's malady and that of his horse were not of a contagious variety, it was felt that there was no connection between the two.

This place was once known as "Buffalo Creek Acres" and in the ensuing years it was owned by several other families. Some of these families were the Winfield Scotts, the Frank DeLucas, the John J. Kiemans, and the Jan H. Hutons. With your kind permission, we will leave the 20's for what may be an interesting incident.

Jan H. Huton had owned and operated a store in New York City. It was called Foremost Sportswear Company. At the time that this family arrived at "Buffalo Creek" in the late 30's,

war clouds were gathering over much of Europe. It is reasonable to say that the rest of the world was uneasy, to say the least.

In this country, great efforts were put forth to provide supplies to our allies in Europe. These efforts had the effect of causing shortages in many commodities. After Pearl Harbor, the supply situation became more acute and rationing was tightened considerably. Shortages in gasoline and automobile tires created anxiety and the effect of food shortages was frightening to many people. Hoarding of these essential items was considered unpatriotic and in some cases, illegal.

On Wednesday morning, Oct. 28, 1942, the Ridgefield Fire Department responded to an alarm concerning a fire at Buffalo Greek Acres. The fire seemed to be most intense in the kitchen area. Access to this area was hampered by the extreme heat. An order was issued to break through the wall so that the firemen could get to the source.

Joe Carboni, with a mighty swing, put his axe right through the wall. Joe instantly jumped back as a red liquid spurted out at him from the wall.

Mugsy Frulla thought that Joe had hit some person with his axe.

Joe thought that he had been stabbed by something that was concealed in the wall. He was covered with the red liquid that looked like blood.

After the two men determined that Joe had not been injured, they moved to the wall to examine it. The hole in the wall revealed that this wall, and others in the house, were loaded with canned goods of all kinds. What Joe had hit with his axe was a large can of tomato juice.

By this time the stored (hoarded?) merchandise was hot enough to pop. As the cans exploded they opened the walls to the firemen who were then better able to fight the fire.

At about this time a very sweet aroma wafted from the conflagration. This was attributed to the large quantity of sugar that was a part of the cache.

Back of the house a pile of tires was tipping from the intense heat. It looked like the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

A rather large crowd had assembled to witness this spectacular fire.

Firemen were hampered to some extent by the interested onlookers. At about this time someone noted several fill pipes from what were apparently underground storage tanks. When news of this discovery was circulated, the crowd dispersed as if by magic.

It was later revealed that there were actually several underground tanks full of gasoline and fuel oil. At least one of the tanks was of 3,000 gallon capacity.

It was indeed a miracle that these tanks did not explode. It would surely have been a catastrophe. The fire was brought under control about noontime. The firemen completed their job, made their final inspection, and returned to the firehouse.

Later in the day, Mr. Huton went into town to talk with his insurance people. Claims were prepared and reports of the fire were filed. While this activity was taking place at about 3:30 p.m., the fire whistle sounded again. The fire at Buffalo Creek Acres had started up again. This time, the loss was just about complete.

There was considerable speculation by the townspeople as to the consequences of what appeared to be several violations.

Mr. Huton's explanation for the large quantity of wall-to-wall foodstuffs was very simple and rather unique. He said that he had owned a rather large ship that had been outfitted and stocked for a cruise. Before the cruise could take place, the ship was sold, according to Mr. Huton.

He stated further that he had no place to store the articles and thought the walls at Buffalo Creek would be ideal for this purpose.

Two things come quickly to mind. First, the ship must have been the size of the Leviathan and second, a world cruise must have been contemplated.

It was not revealed whether or not the oil and gasoline had been pumped out of subject ship.

At any rate Huton's explanation must have been accepted as, to the best of our knowledge, no arrest was made.

So Buffalo Creek Acres has disappeared and in its place we now have a rather nice development on Hessian Drive.

## **#21: CYCLOPS, HOMER AND THE MAN WHO MADE TEDDY BEARS**

Just south of Buffalo Creek Acres was an old and very picturesque house. This fine old, unpainted house must have had a real historic value. We do not know exactly when it was built, but it must have been about 200 years ago. It was the home of Zebulon S. Main and the property has remained in the Main family all these years.

We knew the Douglas Main family very well. They lived here at the time it was torn down some 35 years ago. It was the type of house that would have attracted city people who, in today's market, are looking for something that would generate a feeling of nostalgia. The old house must have had some defects that were not discernable to a kid walking by on his way to Mamasco. Perhaps this may be the reason it was torn down. We know that, for this boy, the old weatherbeaten boards and the smoke rising from the chimney created an aura like the old song "Home Sweet Home."

It is interesting to note that the old Scotland School building, which as previously reported was moved to the Town Farm, was later on moved again and now rests right across the road from the old Main homestead. It has been completely renovated and added to and now serves as a very nice dwelling.

Next along on our travels south on North Salem Road is another example of the type of old house that we just described. We knew it as the homestead of the Fred Waite family.

This house has had several additions and is quite large. It sits very close to the highway and has a tremendous stone foundation.

The Waites had seven children, five boys and two girls; all are now gone from Ridgefield except the youngest. Horace moved from the old homestead to a little house on left side of the south entrance to Tackora Trail. He lived there for several years and now resides at Ballard Green. Horace told me that this house is more than 200 years old, although he is not sure of the exact year it was built. The original part of the house was put together with wooden pegs rather than nails.

A number of years ago George W. Rhine purchased this property and set about the task of restoring it. He did a masterful job and did it in a very tasteful manner. George devoted a lot of time, effort, and money to the project, and did most of the work himself. The stonework is probably the first thing that catches your eye as you approach the building. The stones are large and are fitted perfectly.

There were no more houses on the eastern side of the highway, traveling south, until Wooster Street is reached. There on the corner stands a fine home that once was owned by Elijah Light and in the 20's it was purchased by Adolf Gund.

Adolf was a master toy maker and used the barn on this property for his shop. The barn has since been converted into a dwelling. He enjoyed such a reputation as a fine toy maker that people traveled great distances to purchase his handiwork. [A “Who Was Who” post of Facebook’s Old Ridgefield group tells about the life of Adolf Gund, whose toy company still exists today.]

A few years ago the main house was gutted by fire. However, it has been restored and today presents its fine original appearance.

In the late 20’s William Wellings moved to Ridgefield. He bought a lot on North Street, just north of the intersection of Wooster and North Streets, from the Cox estate. He was a mason by trade and apparently a good one. He built himself a very nice little stucco house on this newly purchased lot. Bill convinced a friend and former neighbor that Ridgefield was a great place. The friend, James Lucente, bought the lot on the south corner of Wooster Street and North Salem Road. Jim was an excellent cabinet maker. In the early 30’s, during the dark days of the Depression, Jim and Bill combined their talents and the result was the very neat little stucco house with the Tudor effect. It is now the home of the Richard Serfilippi family.

Next and still going south was a very small house that burned some years ago. It was rebuilt and enlarged by the Andrew Frulla family who lived in the very next house. Alex Frulla still lives in the rebuilt house.

The Andrew Frullas like the Waite family, had seven children although the gender was the direct opposite, five girls and two boys. Andrew passed away several years ago, but Mrs. Frulla just celebrated her 94th birthday. Until recently she has been able to do her own housework. She and Andrew were bright people and this characteristic was passed on to their children.

Armando, the oldest son, was a paratrooper in World War II. He could have had a deferment, but was determined to do his part for his country. He gave his life at the Battle of Bastogne. His entire unit was wiped out in that fierce engagement.

Andrew was a very pleasant little man and always had a smile. He worked for some 40 years for the Holden family in South Salem. The Holdens, who were very wealthy, had an extensive estate, just over the state line. Andy drove his horse up Barrack Hill Road, over Old West Mountain Road to West Mountain Road, west to Oscaleta and then on Pumping Station, to get to his place of employment.

It should be understood that at one time a horse was considered a very important part of the family, and was treated as such. When a new horse was purchased, it might go nameless, until something the horse did would suggest a suitable name. One time, Andrew bought a horse from Charley Casey. The horse traveled the route outlined above without any problem. However, in the evening, on the return trip, the horse refused to turn right into the Frulla driveway. The still unnamed horse agreed to continue north on North Salem Road, but would turn only to the left. When the little turnaround at Tackora Trail was reached, the new horse willingly turned left, completely reversed course and headed south toward the Frulla home. This time, upon reaching the Frulla driveway, the horse did not hesitate but turned left and went down the driveway to the barn.

You may have guessed by now as to why the horse was reluctant to turn to the right. That’s right — he was blind in the right eye. You may also have guessed his new name. One of the Frulla girls was studying Homer and Greek mythology, so the name of the horse was a foregone conclusion. When she learned of the plight of the new steed, she promptly labeled him

Cyclops. Old Cyclops served the family well for several years, with allowances being made for his imperfect eyesight.

The next horse that the family owned was also a very interesting character. Andy, on his way home from work, retraced his way over Old West Mountain Road. Old Paul Marconi (Nan's grandfather) lived on this highway. Paul was noted for the excellent wine that he made. Grapes with which to make wine used to come into the old freight yards near the Ridgefield Supply Company during this Prohibition period. They came by the carload. Paul used to get his share of these grapes. He also made wine from elderberries and dandelions. The dandelion wine was especially good.

Paul used to invite Andy in for a little relaxation after a hard day's work. The visits were intended to be of short duration. However, as so often happens in sessions of this kind, minutes rapidly becomes an hour. When this occurred on the first trip with the new horse, the unnamed animal waited patiently for 30 minutes and then took off. Somehow he arrived safely at the Frulla homestead. As you may have guessed, his name automatically became Homer — and it had nothing to do with the Greek mythologist.

No one knows how Homer was able to keep track of the time. It is known that he made this trip on many occasions, only after faithfully waiting the 30-minute limit.

## **#22: THE HONESTY AND INTEGRITY OF 'BIG JIM' KENNEDY**

As we leave the Andrew Frulla family and Cyclops and Homer, we are still heading south on North Salem Road. There was, and still is, a large field where the horses munched grass and cavorted to their hearts' delight. Then there were, and still are, two rather large stone monuments. They are round and have inscribed on them the words "Fort Hill."

We are unaware as to the reason for, or meaning of, the inscription. There was never a fort here that we knew of. [Editor's note: "Fort Hill," a name predating the Revolution, may have referred to an American Indian fort on Barrack Hill.]

The style and pattern of the stonework is recognized as that of the late James F. Kennedy. It is the same as that found in the building that now houses our Board of Education, or the foundation of Saint Mary's Church, or the large mansion, just north of "Altnacraig" on High Ridge. These are all samples of the fine handiwork of this excellent contractor. In the 80's and 90's of the last century, "Big Jim," as he was known, was considered a premier builder.

About 150 feet east of the stone monuments still stands the large white house that was the Kennedy homestead. It is now the home of Jimmy and Helen Bellagamba. Like everything that Big Jim built, this house is very substantially constructed.

Kennedy and his wife came here from Scotland more than 100 years ago. Like their neighbors, the Waites and the Frullas, the Kennedys had seven children: Thomas, Frank, Richard, Agnes, Elizabeth, Ann and Margaret. They were all big people in this family. Even the girls were close to six feet in height. Ann and Margaret are still living. Margaret has been a postmaster in California, retired several years ago and still makes her home there.

There are numerous stories about Big Jim. He was intelligent and very ambitious. He started out in the coal business in Ridgefield. He was quite successful but had a great desire to become a builder.

Kennedy worked hard all day at his coal business and then studied construction at night. He started with small construction projects and worked his way up to the big ones.

Kennedy's hallmark was his honesty, integrity, and his obvious desire to build the finest structures possible. The fine reputation that he earned quickly spread in a town that was getting



ready to welcome some of the wealthiest families of the day. Soon the services of Big Jim were much in demand.

By the 1890's, Kennedy's business ventures had grown to a point where he was one of the largest employers in town. During that period, most everyone connected with the building trades worked for Big Jim at one time or another.

News of Kennedy's success soon reached across the ocean to his home town in Scotland. Along with this happy story went the news he had room for an architect in his organization. This message struck a responsive chord in the ear of a young man in Scotland.

The next ship coming this way carried among its passengers, a budding young architect. His name was Peter McManus. Peter not only took over the architectural chores for Big Jim, he also married Kennedy's favorite niece and a strong alliance was forged.

It would be very easy at this point to digress from the Kennedy story and become involved in the McManus story. However, we will resist that impulse at this time as that would be a story in itself.

As previously mentioned, Jim Kennedy made such a fine reputation in many of his smaller projects in construction that he was soon in demand for bigger things. Among the wealthy families seeking a haven in the most beautiful town that could be found anywhere was that of Edward Payson Dutton. Mr. Dutton had made his fortune as the foremost publisher of his time. He owned the large organization that bore his name and which is, even almost 100 years later, still in business and one of the biggest of the publishing houses.

Mr. Dutton bought a large tract of land on High Ridge of some 10 acres. It extended west to where Albert H. Wiggin later located. It had an entrance on both High Ridge and Peaceable Street. It was bounded on the south by what would later on be the Hamilton family property and on the north by the Gerard P. Herrick property.

Kennedy's fine reputation reached the attention of Mr. Dutton and he was awarded the contract to build this large mansion. The project took two years to complete and included two very large barns and a superintendent's cottage. The barns were in later years separated from the High Ridge property. They were converted into large dwellings with an entrance from Peaceable Street.

One story which we believe about the construction of the main house is an indication of Big Jim's determination to do a good job. It goes like this.

Mr. Dutton used to make a trip to Ridgefield each weekend while the house was under construction, to view the amount of progress made. When Mr. Dutton compared the blueprints with the actual construction, he noted that where the plans called for a two by four, very often a two by six was used. He was much impressed by Kennedy's determination to build a more than substantial structure.

One day on meeting with Big Jim, Mr. Dutton said, "Jim, I'm afraid that you are going to lose money on this job." Kennedy's answer was, "If I am, it's me own business."

Mr. Dutton was now even more impressed and according to my father, he gave Kennedy a bonus of several thousand dollars, on completion of the job. It is felt that this magnificent edifice is a tribute to both Kennedy and E.P. Dutton. Anyone who ever has an opportunity to visit this imposing structure, will be visibly impressed by it.

There is also a story that during the construction of the main house, Kennedy needed one of his carpenters for another job that he had in progress. They were in the process of shingling the mammoth roof.

Big Jim called up to the men and asked, "How many are ye up there?"

The reply came back indicating that there were three men on the roof. Whereupon Kennedy is quoted as saying, "Well, half of you come down here." This one I would take with a grain of salt.

Another story that seems to be well documented concerned George M. Olcott. He owned what is now Casagmo, the development on north Main Street. The name comes from casa (Italian for house) and the GMO from Mr. Olcott's initials. This story would be considered an illustration as to the lengths Big Jim would go to right what he felt was wrong.

Peter McManus had drawn plans for a formal and very exceptional sunken Italian garden to be constructed on the north side of the mansion. Big Jim was directing the work being done on this garden when Mr. Olcott engaged him in conversation. During the course of their talk, Kennedy informed Mr. Olcott that he had a feeling that the coal dealer from whom Mr. Olcott has just purchased his coal, had not delivered the amount for which he was charged.

Delivery should have been 40 tons as Mr. Olcott had purchased an entire railroad car load. Mr. Olcott was upset at the allegation and tended to disbelieve that such a thing could happen. Kennedy offered to have the entire amount of coal removed by hand, from the basement. He would then haul it with his horses, load by load, to Bedient's scales and weigh it. Kennedy asked that one of Mr. Olcott's most trusted employees accompany the wagons to verify the weights. If Kennedy was wrong there would be no charge for all the work involved. If he turned out to be correct, Mr. Olcott would agree to make his future purchases of coal from him.

The results of the verification proved that there were several tons less than the amount charged. Needless to say Mr. Olcott was a very irate man and Big Jim had another customer for his coal business.

Jim Kennedy did not become a very wealthy man but he certainly is well remembered by all who knew him. Unfortunately the lure of Wall Street was a very strong attraction and in this game he was not quite so successful.

### **#23: TILIO'S TEAM, HOME FOR WRITERS & THE JOB THAT CURVED BACKS**

The Kennedy family left Fort Hill during World War I. They moved to another very large house that was just north of the William Creagh house. That would be where the very first house on North Street is now.

Attilio Tarsi and his family moved to Fort Hill. Tilio, as he was called, was a contractor. At the time, he was just starting in business for himself. He drove a team of horses, whose names I was not familiar with. I do remember that one was a dappled gray and the other was jet black.

The Tarsis had three children. Lena was in my class in school and still lives on Bailey Avenue with her husband. Geno shared his father's love for construction work. He learned to operate all kinds of construction machinery and lives now on Overlook Drive. Silvio retired a few years ago after many years of service with the Ridgefield Fire Department. Si has lived a long time on Stonecrest Road.

In these days, in many instances, the children of Ridgefield families are forced, because of economic reasons, to locate elsewhere. We feel it is good that we can have a family like the Tarsis who were able to spend their entire lives in their hometown.

Tilio, like so many others, faded from the construction scene during the great depression. Ridgefield always seemed to be a place where a celebration would take place on the slightest provocation. If the cause were of great import, the town would go all out. 1932 was the 200th anniversary of George Washington's birth. This reminds us that this year is the 250th and

nothing has happened. This is too bad as we have always felt that Washington was the very greatest of the great.

At any rate the town marked his 200th anniversary with a very elaborate parade. Most every organization participated and many built fine floats to represent them in the parade. The Italian club entered a large and appropriate float. It was drawn by a team that belonged to Jonathan Bulkley and Tilio was selected to drive the very lively pair of dappled grays. Ahead of this marvelous float in the full uniform of a general in the continental army, rode Julius Tulipani. Julius was mounted on a very beautiful white horse. It should be said that Julius in his sparkling attire, with the three-pointed hat, bore a striking resemblance to our first president.

At any rate my part in the proceedings was that of a member of the Oreneca Band. I had a new deep street drum that was capable of generating a loud volume of sound. The volume was necessary as it was the only such drum in a contingent of some thirty boys.

As the parade was of considerable size, it was necessary for some units to meet and pass each other during the line of march. As Tilio and his large float were traveling north on Main Street, the Oreneca Band was marching south. We met at the corner of Governor and Main. As the sound of the approaching band reached the ears of the steed on which Julius was riding, the horse began to act up. However, he was able to keep control and quiet the horse. As he safely passed the hand, his horse gave the impression that he was walking on eggs.

The team that Tilio was driving was another matter. They were young horses and not very well trained. They had seldom been off the Bulkley estate and had never encountered such noise and excitement. As luck would have it, the band swung into a spirited march just as the team passed by. The horses stood stock still and refused to move. They were urged to continue and their response was to raise themselves on their hind legs. Further urging caused them to bolt to the right and charge into Governor Street. The last we saw of them it seemed as if they were going into the horizon as they raced past the crest of the hill near where the Toy Caboose [Bissell's Pharmacy today] is now located. We do not know where they actually stopped but one of the troopers at the State Police barracks said that they were exceeding the speed limit when they went by there.

Various articles were lost from the float along the way, as the horses rushed to put distance between themselves and the terrifying noises on Main Street. Tilio was an inveterate pipe smoker. It is to his undying credit that when the horses were finally stopped, his corn cob was still firmly clenched between his teeth, despite the hair-raising episode he had just been through.

We have been writing about the 20's with occasional excursions into other eras. To tell of the Kennedys it was necessary to go back before the 20's and now we have gone slightly into the 30's.

So, just south of Fort Hill, in the 20's, was more open land until you came to a rather large house that still sits close to the highway. At one time this house was quite square in architectural design. Subsequent additions have changed that somewhat. One of the most noticeable features is its flat roof. It is now the home of Barbara Wardenburg.

In the early 20s Joseph Roberts and his family lived in this house. Joe was another of Ridgefield's contractors and also owned a considerable amount of land. The Roberts had three children, Louise, Aldo and Arthur. Arthur is still employed in Ridgefield at Silver Spring Country Club.

We recall that the family had a very difficult time with leaks in that flat roof. In the mid-20's the house was sold to Robert Hosea. Hosea had no better luck with the roof than the

Roberts family. The late Bill Oexle and his wife, Lee, lived in this house some years later. Knowing Bill, I am sure that he would find a way to correct the roof situation.

The next house belonged to Prof. Larmon W. Abbott many years ago. It then passed on to his daughter, Arletta. There is some interesting history in this house. When John D. Nash lived there, a hundred years ago, his son Howard P. Nash was born there. Howard was the father of Karl S. Nash, publisher of The Ridgefield Press.

In 1926, a well-known writer, Thomas Boyd, bought the place. He and his family had been moving all around the country, much to the displeasure of their little daughter, Betty Grace. It was she who decided that Ridgefield was the place to be and announced, in no uncertain terms, that the days of moving were over. Betty Grace is, of course, the former Betty Grace Boyd, now Mrs. Karl S. Nash and managing editor of The Press. Betty Grace had her way and grew up in this house.

Later still, another writer, Ted Shane, lived here as did the famous Duncan M. Smith who wrote the Bird's Eye View column in The Press for many years. We have one of Ted Shane's books, Soft Ball: So What. This book dealt with softball games that were played for charitable purposes by celebrities such as Ted, Lowell Thomas, Gene Tunney and many others. This was truly a house of writers as Betty Grace's mother, who was Duncan Smith's daughter, was also a successful writer.

Next was more open land and then the home of George S. Bennett who later sold his place to the Clinton Reynolds family. Clint was a rural carrier for the Ridgefield post office for many years. As you probably know, the most noticeable difference between a city carrier and a rural carrier is that the city carrier uses a government vehicle whereas the rural carrier uses his own car. At the time Clint was a carrier, the vehicles were all left-hand drive. This made it necessary for the carriers to sit somewhere near the middle of the driver's seat and then stretch to their utmost to reach the mailboxes. This put a severe strain on the backs of the mailmen. Clint walked with a decided curvature which we attributed to the many years that he reached across the seat to put mail in the boxes.

The next house, where the Carleton Dillons now live, was the home of Adam Wurtz family. Later the Hume family bought it and lived there for many years.

## **#24: THE BUSY BEAVERS AND VALDEN'S VICTORIAN**

Just south of the Humes' property (now the Carleton Dillons') there was, and still is, a very nice little open meadow. We have never seen any particular use being made of this fine field. It would be easy to imagine a couple of ponies, or heifers, romping around on the lush carpet of grass. The field stretches back to the Titicus River. It was just a little north of this area that a beaver family established its Ridgefield residence. Its claim to this part of the river was based on Squatter's Rights.

The beavers really upset the neighborhood and their refusal to leave did cause a lot of trouble. A small pond appeared as a result of their expertise in dam building. The overflow from the pond did cause serious flooding of adjacent properties and raised particular havoc with the septic systems.

During the daytime, irate property owners tore the dam open and drained the pond. The following morning these people would awaken to find that the busy little rodents had rebuilt the dam and the pond had been recreated. This all happened just a few years ago.

The neighbors again set to work and removed the immense pile of sticks and tree limbs that had been woven into Bernie Beaver's idea of Boulder Dam. The beaver family entered into

the spirit of the thing and again fashioned a barrier that successfully blocked Titicus River for some distance. The river had not seen such a flurry of activity since the days of the tannery shops and saw mills.

The beavers won the contest, hands down, or perhaps we should say flat tails down. In desperation the property owners turned to the town authorities for assistance. Elaborate traps were set to ensnare the beavers and soon they were captured.

No one knew where the beavers had come from although more than a few voiced their opinion as to where they should go. Some people even suggested that the beavers had migrated all the way from Canada. They are not native to this area, but have occasionally been seen in the lands north of Ridgefield.

The big question now was what to do with the caged beavers. Eventually they were transported to the northernmost extremities of the town and released. Two days later, the dam was not only rebuilt, it was bigger and better constructed than it had been before.

Obviously it was time for drastic measures to be employed. The traps were reset, the beavers recaptured and this time they were taken far enough to the north to discourage even the most irrepressible beaver. I always felt that it was nice that they liked Ridgefield so much. The feeling was not shared by the people of Titicus.

The fine little meadow that we have described was a part of the Lewis L. Valden estate. David Harvey Valden, his father, owned some 20 acres that extended from North Salem Road, easterly and across the river to North Street. It was he who in 1857 built the grand old Victorian mansion that graces the property.

Lewis and his brother Charles had learned the tanning business from their father, David H. Valden. David had worked and learned the trade at the tannery that was owned by Jabez "Mix" Gilbert. "Uncle Mix," as he was known, passed away and David purchased the business.

The Valdens were industrious people and good businessmen. The little tannery along the river grew by leaps and bounds. At one time it had more than 100 vats in operation. To keep so many vats going must have taken an enormous amount of hides. One can envision numerous horse-drawn wagons loaded with hides approaching the tannery along Titicus River. The hides came from farmers who did their own butchering. There were not enough of such farmers in Ridgefield at the time so it must be assumed that the tannery served many farmers in the surrounding towns.

In his History of Ridgefield, George L. Rockwell tells of how the hair was separated from the hides and then sold for 60 cents a bushel. Local masons bought the hair and then mixed it with lime when plastering a house. The hair gave consistency to the plaster. Some have even suggested that it made the walls of the house seem warmer. Perhaps it did. It sure made the plaster stronger.

You just know that the walls and ceilings in Valden's great house contain hair that came through the old tannery. They are still in excellent shape today. Probably some people who have purchased homes in Ridgefield that were built before the advent of wallboard and plasterboard, have discovered that there is hair in their plaster. When making alterations or renovations this could easily happen. One wisecracker that we talked to said that he did not find any hair in the plaster but he did get some plaster in his hair.

One thing is sure, Lew Valden did not spare anything in the construction of his home. The very ornate woodwork on the exterior quickly catches your eye. The exceptionally long windows also summon your attention. The square little tower on the southwest corner of the building is a forerunner of the rounded turrets that are found in the large Victorians built around

the turn of the century. The sturdy, stone foundation of this grand dwelling gives the impression that it was meant to last forever.

At the time the Valden house was built, all this exemplary construction was capped by a durable slate roof. This type of roof was a mark of distinction on the finer homes and its lasting qualifications were unchallenged. For some reason however, in the ensuing years, the slate was replaced by more modern material.

Two equally well-constructed barns were built on this property. One is referred to as the shed, but it is considerably larger than most modern garages. The other building was referred to as the barn and it well earned the title. It was a very large building and capable of housing all of the livestock and it was also built to last. We keep using the word "was," as unfortunately this fine structure burned to the ground and was later replaced.

Lew Valden had a son who was named after Lew's father, David Harvey Valden. We knew him well and never heard him called David, it was always Harvey. Harvey passed away about four years ago and was in his 90's at the time. He was Ridgefield's assistant postmaster for more than 30 years and was much respected for his dedication to duty. He was an exceptionally fine man and in his younger days was considered an outstanding athlete.

Harvey had a great love for baseball and played on the same team with Francis Martin and Charles "Pop" Crouchley and other great players of the day. It is interesting to note that all three became bankers. Harvey and Pop with The Ridgefield Savings Bank and Marty with what is now known as The Union Trust Co. [Wells Fargo today].

Perhaps there is something about baseball that makes the players expert in money matters. The inflated salaries paid them today would allow several ball players to own their own banks.

Harvey was kind of a bank in himself and more than one Ridgefield family benefited from the personal mortgages which he granted. This was especially true during the depression years when Harvey's compassion and kind understanding saved some families that we know from losing their homes.

After growing up in the old Victorian, Harvey married and lived on south Main Street for many years. His son, Donald, was one of the most handsome young men we have ever seen. More about that if and when we get to south Main.

## **#25: THE BEAUTIFUL EPPOLITI HOMESTEAD**

Charles Birdsall was mentioned in our Dispatch No. 4. He and his family lived during the 20's about midway down Titicus Hill. We noted that Charley was an exceptionally fine carpenter. He plied his trade with several of the local contractors, including among others, Big Jim Kennedy and Cleveland Bassett.

The Birdsall family had lived in Mount Vernon, N.Y., for some years and came to Ridgefield about the turn of the century. Charley was "a perfectionist and enjoyed the fine architecture and workmanship found in many great mansions in Ridgefield.

Lou Valden's exceptionally fine Victorian appealed to Charley's sense of value. When this place became available, after Lou passed on, Charley bought it. The house was probably much larger than he needed but it was the style that he liked most.

The Birdsalls enjoyed the place for several years but as the children moved on, it may have appeared even larger. Back in Mount Vernon, Charley had a good friend and neighbor named George Rief. The two families visited back and forth and in 1916, George, who also had a fine set of values, persuaded Charley to sell him the place.

George and his wife, Teresa, with their children, George Jr., Charles, Elizabeth, Louis, and Bertha, moved to Ridgefield in the spring of that year. This nice family used the place with reverence and owned it for more than 60 years. Bertha, the only remaining member of the family, still comes to Ridgefield to spend her summers.

In the fall of their first year, misfortune struck. One Sunday morning, George, who was an early riser, looked out the window and noticed smoke and then flames emanating from the large barn just north of the house. He calmly roused his family by suggesting that they get up as the barn was on fire.

Unfortunately, the fire had made such progress that the barn was beyond saving, and burned to the ground. It was soon replaced by the large barn now on the place. Though the barn is a fine structure, you can tell that it was built in a different period than was the house.

Migration to warmer climates during the winter months caused the place to be used less and less until just a couple of years ago when Bertha sold the place to Edgardo and Marcia Eppoliti.

What a break this was for people who have a genuine affection for Ridgefield. Generally, we have come to expect that when an old place with extensive acreage is sold, a development of some kind replaces it. Even worse, this lovely little estate might have become another condominium complex.

Eddie and Marcia, fortunately, had no such intentions. Instead they set to work to refurbish this gem that they had purchased. Eddie, with his excellent knowledge of construction, did what is in our opinion just about the finest job possible. Everything — the main house, the shed, the barn, and the landscape — all felt his touch. We are confident that Marcia, with her excellent taste, exerted a very positive influence on the overall proceedings.

We can easily surmise that these two people spent many hours at the kitchen table, poring over plans and exchanging ideas. The end result was probably more successful than they could have hoped for.

We feel it is safe to say that we can offer this fine operation as a superlative example of what can be done when people work to enhance, rather than detract from, the beauty of the most beautiful town in America.

The first thing that catches your eye is the very neatness of the place. Everything is in order. The entire exterior of all the buildings has been gone over, with tender loving care. The main house has been so tastefully done that it has been prominently featured in one of the better magazines that deals with the very best examples of fine Victorian architecture that our country has to offer.

The landscape has received the same kind of thoughtful attention. Grading and reseeding has given the whole place a luxuriant appearance. A beautiful little pond, fed by water from the placid little Titicus River, has appeared, to the rear of the barn. A few ducks and some domesticated geese are living a most happy existence in this area.

A road, or perhaps we should say an accessway, has been constructed just south of the pond. It stretches across a little swampy area and all the way to North Street. The fine meadow which we have previously mentioned will, we hope, someday be grazed by a nice horse for the Eppoliti's son, Mike, to ride. A pony should be added for Mike's new and cute little sister.

Altogether, I guess what I'm trying to convey is that we need more people like these in our town. People who will make our lovely town even more charming. They would make Ridgefield an ideal place for those who seek a serene, healthful and happy place to rear their families.

Eddie came from Italy with his parents and family just a few years ago. This family was not the kind who would seek out support from the welfare system. They were, and are, industrious, serious-minded, and hardworking people. They pulled their own oar and richly deserve whatever gains they have made.

Marcia is a descendant of one of the truly old Ridgefield families. Her mother is the former Esther Nash, now Mrs. Alfred Kelley. The Nashes go back way before the American Revolution. Her uncle is the editor of this paper but we will not hold that against her.

It is sufficient to say that Marcia is a remarkable young lady who knows what makes things go. We feel that everyone should be happy for the fine job that this young couple has done. Take a ride by their Titicus estate and we are confident that you will agree.

I would be remiss in not mentioning the interior of this lovely home. It has received the same careful attention that the exterior enjoys. On entering this edifice you turn the clock back 100 years. The elegance of years past is there before you.

The kitchen has been slightly modernized without spoiling it. Other than that, the decor is strictly of the period it represents. Several gramophones, not phonographs or Victrolas or record players, are strategically placed in various rooms. Along with each machine there is a collection of priceless old recordings.

They even have a radio of early 1920s vintage. It has the familiar three dials that must be synchronized in order to get WEAJ in New York, or WJZ, Baltimore, or WRL, Cincinnati, or KDKA in Pittsburgh or possibly WBZ in Boston. A must for reception, of course, is an antenna stretched from the highest window to a tree or pole, some 100 to 200 feet away from the house.

We did not hear this marvelous old radio in operation. However, we are sure that it is in excellent working condition and it looks just like new.

We would offer our congratulations to this fine, industrious young couple for their adherence to qualities and niceties of life that so many will never have had the privilege to enjoy. We are sure that Lou Valden is happy that his 125-year-old home is being cared for by such capable people.