

# 'Dick's Dispatch'

## Columns 126 through 150

*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, 1984, and Nov. 16, 1985. 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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### **#126: WATCH WHAT YOU SAY AROUND FATHER SHORTELL**

The Rev. Richard E. Shortell was a very prominent man in local affairs for many years. He was possessed of a very strong personality and left his mark on the history of our town.

We will not attempt to write his long and illustrious history at this time. However, Father Shortell passed on to a reward he so richly deserves just 50 years ago last month and we are reminded of a story that may be of interest, especially since we have been writing about horses and blacksmith shops. As previously stated, this is a story of an incident which I did not witness, but it was told to me by Harry Thomas and that makes it a very true story.

Father Shortell had a fine driving mare named Blossom, and Blossom presented him with a beautiful little mahogany bay colt. The colt was named Peggy and served the good Father with distinction for many years.

According to Harry Thomas, when Peggy was old enough to train, Maurice Anderson was employed to do the job. Maurice, a brother of Bert Anderson and a grand uncle of Rodney Anderson, enjoyed a reputation as an excellent horse trainer, and the best was none too good for Peggy.

After being assured that Maurice would be kind to his fine colt, Father Shortell instructed him to take as much time as was necessary and not to rush through the training.

Michael Dowling (J. Edward's father) was the sexton at St. Mary's for those many years and among his chores was the daily care of Peggy. So it is easy to see that Peggy was treated with kid gloves from the moment she was foaled.

Her training took place in the open fields, just north and west of the horse barn, now the site of a development called Victoria Gate. Preliminary training was given in the horse barn.

Peggy was given time to get used to the bridle before the rest of her harness was put on her. The first bit that was put in her mouth was made of leather rather than the conventional metal bit.

When the harness was put on, care was taken that the girths were not pulled too tight. Peggy was led around inside the barn with the harness straps flapping until she was thoroughly familiar with the weight and the movement of all the various pieces of the harness.

Once Peggy became accustomed to the feel of the harness, Maurice put her between the shafts of a small two-wheeled training cart. The shafts were carefully poked through the tugs and a little weight was applied until she accepted all these things and was ready to pull the cart.

When that great day arrived, Peggy to the surprise of no one went right off like the lady that she was. All the careful, patient handling paid off and Peggy seemed anxious to complete her training in the open fields. She had already learned the meaning of the signal to start and to stop and soon she would learn to back the wagon, but first there would be the endless trips around the field.

All of this training had taken place on rather soft turf and shoes were not required. Soon she would be ready for the hard pavement of the highway and shoes would be a necessity.

When the day arrived for her to receive her first pair of shoes, Mike decided that since the blacksmith shop was only a short distance down the hill, he would lead her rather than hitch her to the wagon. So the pretty little filly with one of Mike's strong hands on her halter, the other on her lead rope, arrived at the shop like a kid going for its first haircut.

Later in the morning, when Father Shortell observed Mike mowing the lawn, he must have grown concerned about his little mare at the blacksmith shop in the hands of total strangers. At any rate, he decided to pay a visit to the shop in order to see for himself that Peggy was receiving all the decorum due a lady of her stature.

According to Harry Thomas, he had never met the good Father up to this time. However, like most everyone in town, he was well aware of his stern mannerisms and his rather formidable opposition to anything he considered to be wrong. It would not be unfair to say that he was a strict disciplinarian.

On this particular day, there were several horses in the shop which also meant that there were several teamsters in attendance. It was a well known fact that the vocabulary of these rough and ready horsemen was not intended for tender ears.

As Harry told the story, the men were exceptionally vocal on this day and their choice of words had no connection with a breviary. Harry went on to say that just as Father Shortell entered the shop, a particularly vile stream of profanity floated through the door.

To say that the priest was upset by the language that he heard would be a gross understatement. There was no way for him to tell which of the men had uttered the offending words. However, at that point, Harry said that he was nearest the door and more importantly he was bent over and in the process of picking up some tools of his trade from the floor. He must have presented a very inviting target and Father Shortell, who always carried a stout cane, took full advantage of it. Without hesitating he brought the cane down in a very resounding — crack — on Harry's rear.

Now it should be remembered that Harry was one man who never, ever used profanity of any kind. He must have been tempted to do so on this occasion.

However, as usual Harry kept his cool and proceeded to tell his assailant that he had made a terrible mistake. Finally from the group of men in the background came the voice of one

who took the blame off Harry by admitting that he was the culprit responsible for the swear words.

With John ----'s admission and the blame properly placed, it seemed to Harry that apologies were in order. He said that he waited and was disappointed when none appeared to be forthcoming.

We asked Harry if the good father said anything at all about his obvious mistake and his reply was “Yes, he told me that I should accept that crack just in case I was ever tempted to use such language.”

After thinking it over, Harry said that he finally got a good laugh out of the incident and the two gentlemen became good friends. While we are sure that the admonishment was not needed by Harry, it was said that there was a remarkable improvement in the language used at the shop on that day.

We asked Harry if he had any problem in putting the first set of shoes on Peggy, and he said that you would have thought she had been wearing shoes for years.

“As a matter of fact,” he said, “she was a perfect lady.”

## **#127: TWO INTERESTING CHARACTERS FROM THE BLACKSMITH'S SHOP**

It was late in 1926 when Harry Thomas decided to start building a new blacksmith shop on the opposite side of Catoonah Street. He had bought the lot just west of the firehouse some time previously. The grayish building is still standing at this time, but no doubt will have to make way for additional parking in the near future. [Ed.: Both house and shop are still there in 2021.]

Orlando Ciuccorelli built the foundation for the new shop and the carpenter work was done by William Browse Sr., Gus Sturges and Gene Scott. I never got to know Mr. Browse very well. He and his family lived in South Salem, but were very active in Ridgefield.

Mrs. Browse was an excellent singer and appeared in several local shows. Their daughters, Josephine and Vera, were also very talented, and Bill Jr. sang and acted in several plays. Bill was, like his father, a carpenter and was associated with “Bub” Finch in the construction of some very nice local homes. Bill also played on the Spartan football team, which sparked a lot of interest in the 30's.

Gus Sturges was the same man who helped Harry Thomas with the wild horses. He was a good carpenter as well as a fine horseman.

Gus did have a characteristic that must have been very painful for him. He stuttered. Without any question, he had the worst case of stuttering that I have ever encountered. This fact must not be construed to be uncharitable in any way. Like most people who have afflictions of this kind, Gus was a very nice man. However, it was actually agonizing to hear him attempt to carry on a conversation.

Those who knew Gus paid no attention but anyone meeting him for the first time would be startled when, before he could say a word, his well trimmed mustache would start to jump up and down and his eyes would blink in time with the mustache. The problem did not end there.

The first sounds that he could emit were Com, Com, Com, Quip, Quip, Kewaw, and this might be repeated before he could start to talk.

Those who knew Gus were fond of him and did not see anything funny about his grievous problem.

It was interesting that Gus could sit down and milk a cow and sing a song without missing a word, but as soon as he tried to speak, his problem returned. It was said that when he became annoyed, he could speak without difficulty and we know of two incidents where this actually happened.

There was a time when he went into a clothing store with his nephew, Ernest, to buy a suit of clothes. A clerk approached to take the order and Gus, with eyes blinking and mustache jumping, attempted to tell the clerk what he wanted.

Of course, when the clerk asked what he had said, there was a repeat performance. Finally, the thoroughly confused clerk turned to Ernest and asked that he tell him what Gus wanted. With that, Gus also turned to Ernest and said, as clear as a bell, "You will like h—; I'll tell him myself."

On another occasion, while I was superintendent at Hillscroft Farm, Gus learned that we had a bull calf, and wanted to buy it. He wanted to fatten the calf and then use it for veal.

However, the calf was not quite ready to leave its mother. So, every morning at exactly seven o'clock, our telephone would ring, and upon lifting the receiver (phones were not the compact unit that they are today), the sound coming through was Com Com Com, Quip Quip, etc.

After this was repeated several times, Gus would get squared away and inquire as to whether or not the calf was ready to go. This procedure was repeated every morning for a week.

So on this particular morning, when the phone rang at exactly seven o'clock, and I heard a familiar Com Com Com, it seemed only natural to say "Good morning Gus."

Immediately the voice came through loud and clear. "How the h—— did you know it was me?"

While there is some humor in these little anecdotes, we trust that it will be clearly understood that we are not poking fun and really had the utmost respect for this fine man. I am told that today his malady could be corrected.

There is a very sad ending to all this.

Like so many people, Gus in his later years became very hard of hearing. On an early evening in the first week of January 1954, Gus started across Wilton Road West to get his mail. Two automobiles, one traveling north, the other south, passed each other in the rapidly gathering darkness. The auto traveling north was driven by Gordon Auchincloss. After the two cars had passed, there stood 81-year-old Gus directly in the path of the Auchincloss vehicle. He died some four hours later in Danbury Hospital. The driver was later exonerated and the accident was called unavoidable. It was all very tragic.

Gene Scott was a very interesting character. He lived on Silver Spring Road, right near the Wilton town line. For at least the last 25 years of his life, he lived all alone and attained a very old age, despite a lifestyle that was not guaranteed to provide longevity.

Gene drove a 1919 Model T Ford touring car and townspeople had long since learned to give him a wide berth when meeting him on the highway. He was still driving in his 80's and his ability to guide the old vehicle was not improved on when he had imbibed on the fruit of the grape, which he was known to do on occasion.

He was a real large man, with mannerisms that can best be described as gruff. In cold weather, because of his open car, he wore a black-and-white fur coat that had once warmed a large holstein cow. It must have taken the entire hide of that cow to make Gene's coat.

I had a little white dog that was part bull terrier. I guess just about everyone in town knew Sport as he accompanied me most everywhere I went, even to school. He was exceptionally good-natured, but at the same time he was a great fighter and when stirred up, he would grab onto an adversary with a death grip and never let go.

One day while we were at the blacksmith shop, Gene paid Harry Thomas a visit. He had been celebrating something or other and was more than a little unsteady. Apparently Sport considered him to be menacing and grabbed the lower portion of Gene's great coat. Gene spun around in an effort to dislodge the dog, but Sport hung on till he was swinging three feet off the floor.

Of course, this was all too much for Gene and there was a tremendous crash that shook the whole shop as he landed flat on the floor and Sport was disappointed to find that his quarry was not the ferocious enemy he had anticipated.

Sport's efforts to make amends by licking Gene's face as he lay there were not the least bit appreciated.

## **#128: HOW GENE & HIS GOAT CRASHED INTO THE SCHOOLHOUSE & A COP**

We have been writing about Gene Scott, one of the carpenters who built Harry Thomas's blacksmith shop in 1926. Gene was described as a very large man with a demeanor that could be considered rather gruff.

He drove a 1919 Model T Ford touring car. He and the old car were involved in some incidents that may be worthy of note.

Touring cars, as such, seem to be things of the past. Actually they are convertible sedans. We have many convertible coupes today but the touring cars have just about disappeared and are seen mostly at antique car shows.

There was a time when most of the wealthy families in Ridgefield had at least one touring car. They were of the larger variety: Packards and Cadillacs. They were excellent for a ride through the countryside if one happened to be interested in a good view of the scenery.

These great cars had tops that could be folded back and before glass windows were installed in each door, they had side curtains. The curtains were kept in place by metal buttons on

both top and bottom. The transparent part of the curtains was made of isinglass, which was flexible so they could be rolled up and stored away when the weather was nice.

Many times Gene would leave the curtains on when the weather was clear. However, he would unbutton the bottom of the curtains, leaving them to flap in the breeze. When the bottom of the curtains was not secured, Gene would drive down the street at 25 miles per hour with the side curtains out straight like the wings of an airplane and you fully expected the little Ford to become airborne at any moment.

One day Gene had been out celebrating something or other. He lived on Silver Spring Road, right on the Wilton town line, and was returning home by way of West Lane. He safely negotiated the turn at the fountain and sailed past the Casa-More Store under a full head of steam (about 25 miles per hour). As he approached the turn-off for Silver Spring Road, with his wings spread, he apparently lost control and failed to make the turn. Instead, Gene's Model T Ford came to rest against the side of the Little Red Schoolhouse.

At the time Gene was about as flexible as his side curtains and, luckily for him, he was uninjured. Other than losing the front bumper, the little car survived very well.

There was no damage to the schoolhouse, but its feelings must have been hurt for being subjected to such an undignified attack. However, the police took a rather dim view of the assault on one of our town's landmarks.

For several obvious reasons, including his advanced age, Gene's driver's license was indefinitely suspended. He did not accept the grounding gracefully and after a few weeks decided that since he still had the car he would use it.

He had a "girlfriend" in Norwalk named Daisy and as he lived alone, no doubt felt the need for companionship other than that provided by his livestock.

Gene cranked up the old Ford and started for Norwalk. He did very well by keeping to the back roads but eventually had to contend with heavy city traffic. At one point as you enter Norwalk's Wall Street, it is necessary to make either a left or a right turn as a concrete bridge abutment prevents further travel in the direction you are headed. As this is a very busy intersection there was generally a policeman at this point directing traffic.

Most of the policemen in area towns were familiar with Gene and made allowances for his rather erratic driving habits. It would not be unusual for them to halt traffic from other directions and allow Gene to make his entrance.

On this particular day the officer on duty must have been a rookie. At any rate he put up his hand in a signal for Gene to stop. The next thing that the unfortunate cop knew, he was pinned against the abutment over the bridge.

The fact that the front bumper had been lost at the Red Schoolhouse no doubt saved the policeman from having at least two broken legs. The cop must have been terrified as he discovered that the two front fenders, which protruded a couple of feet beyond the radiator, had without question saved him from serious injury.

This time the old Ford followed Gene's license into permanent retirement. He was heard to grumble on several occasions that he would buy another car, but to the best of my knowledge, this trip to Norwalk was the last that he ever made as the driver.

One of Gene's most prized possessions was a goat which he called Nanny. This was no ordinary goat, Nanny was Gene's constant companion and she was very intelligent. She always rode proudly on the back seat of the Model T except for the incidents in Norwalk and at the Red Schoolhouse. On both of those occasions, the sudden stops caused Nanny to wind up in the front seat with Gene.

The goat was well trained and would patiently wait on the back seat of the car while Gene did his shopping or whatever. Someone jokingly told him that if he kept her waiting too long, Nanny would eat the "tin Lizzie," as the Model T was sometimes called.

One time Gene drove into Hillscroft Farm and, of course, Nanny was with him. I bid him "Good Morning," but he did not return my greeting. He just looked at me and gruffly inquired whether or not I had any blackstrap molasses. When I answered in the affirmative, he merely said "I need a gallon."

For those not familiar, blackstrap molasses is that dark, viscid syrup that when properly refined becomes the kind of table molasses available in grocery stores. In its raw state it is extremely heavy and meant only for animal consumption.

We used to buy it in 55-gallon drums for the cows. It is never used full strength but mixed half and half with hot water and then sprinkled on the hay. It makes the hay more palatable as well as more nutritional.

Gene had brought along a gallon jug which he handed to me without leaving the car. As I went into the barn to fill the jug, I could not help but think that a gallon of blackstrap would last that little goat a very long time.

I returned and put the molasses in the backseat with the goat. As I stepped back I told Gene that I hoped the goat enjoyed the molasses. "It ain't for Nanny," said Gene. "I been feeling poorly and that vet down in ----- told me I should take some every day for a month."

He noted my surprised expression and assured me that I had heard correctly. He said he never went to a medical doctor and that if a vet was good enough for Nanny, one was good enough for him. Somehow, despite his unorthodox methods, Gene survived to a ripe old age.

## **#129: THE GREAT STRENGTH OF HARRY THOMAS**

When Harry Thomas moved his blacksmith shop across Catoonah Street next to the firehouse in 1926, horses were rapidly losing the battle with the autos. This caused him to divert his attention from farrier work to the complex duties of a regular blacksmith. There were still horses to shoe but their numbers had diminished greatly. He could fix just about anything and people came to him with things to build as well as things to 'repair.

There was one fellow who was some kind of inventor and he used to dream up ideas and then come to Harry to have his gadget constructed. Sometimes he would furnish a drawing of his brainchild, roughly sketched on a plain piece of paper, and more often than not it was drawn on a

brown paper bag. It was little short of amazing how Harry could decipher these sketches and come up with what his customer wanted.

One time he worked on a rather large project that defied imagination. It was at least six feet long and had a series of gears and pulleys. When I asked him what the odd machine was, he replied. "It is a running gear to a hen's nest."

He had a couple of other pet words to describe these things. We never did find out what this particular project was all about.

When they built the floor of the new shop, they left an open space about five feet square. His answer to our query was that it was a "Thing-a-ma-jig."

It turned out to be a place where a concrete base would be built for a trip hammer. This infernal machine must have weighed more than two tons. It ran by electricity and could sure flatten out a large piece of iron. It saved Harry many swings of his sledge hammer and when word got around, there was a steady stream of townspeople who were inquisitive about the town's first trip hammer. It was but another example of how this man looked ahead.

Harry's shop was full of odd tools, many of which have been long since outmoded, although they would be worth a fortune today to those interested in memorabilia.

One such tool appears in the accompanying photo. The tool itself was a wheel about eight inches in diameter on which there were graduations like a ruler, down to one sixteenth of an inch. This instrument had a handle with two shafts through which the wheel could turn.

We came to learn that it was used in setting a tire on a wagon. It was run around the outside of the wagon wheel and the distance recorded and then it was run around the inside of the iron tire in order to find out how much the tire must be shrunk or expanded for a perfect fit.

The tire was then placed in the forge and constantly turned by use of a pair of tongs until it had been heated enough to change its measurements to fit the wheel.

When we first saw this rather unique measuring device and asked its name. We were told that it was a "perrywinkle." Whenever one of these misnomers was used, we knew that further questions as to the identity of the tool were futile.

Harry kept the old anvil that he had used so often but decided on getting a new forge to start business in his new shop. The forge was delivered by two big men in a truck. Instead of driving into the shop, they merely drove their truck onto the sidewalk, a good 125 feet from the shop and after a great deal of struggling, deposited the forge on the sidewalk and drove off.

Harry was so incensed over the inconsiderate way in which his forge was delivered that he rushed out to the sidewalk, picked up the heavy, cumbersome forge and carried it all the way to the shop. It must have weighed more than 350 pounds.

Harry never flaunted his great strength. but we have seen it exemplified on several occasions. One instance which we will never forget occurred on a very hot day in July.

A new customer came to the shop with a very large gray horse to be shod. After tying up his horse, this individual picked up his newspaper, sat himself in a chair and ignored everything



else. The horse just happened to be one who delighted in throwing his weight to the quarter on which the blacksmith was working, putting tremendous weight on that individual.

It was a common practice for the person with such a horse to stand and hold the horse's head and cause him to bear his weight on the other three quarters. Harry struggled with the horse for some time and finally when the horse began to look as though he was going to sleep, it became obvious that Harry was in danger of losing his temper.

Finally, in desperation, Harry dropped the horse's hoof to the floor. He then said "Damn you" and swung the open palm of his hand against the sleepy animal's side.

It was the first and only time I ever heard Harry use that expression. The horse was surprised, as was everyone else, as he hit the floor with a crash that shook the shop. He quickly scrambled back to his feet and stood at attention as his owner leaped from his chair to hold the horse's head. Suddenly the horse was most cooperative.

Harry Thomas was an ardent member of the Odd Fellows and when they started their Saturday night dances in the building that now houses Rodier's and the Cortina shop, among others, he was there each night to offer his assistance.

One evening a man, who had obviously drunk more than he could handle, decided he would enter the ladies room. Harry, ever on the alert, told the man that he did not think he should do that. When the man made a second attempt, the advice was furnished in much stronger tones.

The stranger looked at Harry and apparently decided he should make a third attempt. This time Harry wrapped his arms around the man and those nearby heard the unmistakable sound of cracking bones, as three ribs were to need a doctor's attention.

Word of the incident spread rapidly and the dance continued for many years without incidents of the type just described.

Harry enjoyed watching the happy dancers and the fun that they all seemed to have. Though he had never been a dancer, it occurred to him that he would like to join in the merriment.

Unbeknownst to anyone else, Harry started to take dancing lessons and in due time he became a part of the action that he used to watch. I guess he could be called a late-blooming dancer.

The ladies all loved to dance with Harry and they must have felt very secure in his embrace. Of course, his partners had to be prepared to occasionally being airborne, for at times he employed those gigantic strides that he used while walking.

My favorite recollection of Harry Thomas was captured on the film of the parade celebrating Ridgefield's 250th anniversary. He is shown on a huge float with his forge and anvil, actually fashioning a piece of metal as the float traveled down Main Street. It was said that by the time the parade ended, he had done three jobs.

### **#130: WHEN RIDGEFIELD WAS 10 YEARS OLD**

The year was 1718 and dear little Ridgefield was all of ten years of age.

Since its purchase from Catoonah, sachem of the Ramapoo Indians, the settlers were busy, clearing land and building their homes, on lots that had been assigned to them. It was at a

Town Meeting in Norwalk on Nov. 25, 1708, that the 25 original Proprietors divided up the land on either side of what was to become Ridgefield's famous and beautiful Main Street.

The original lots would extend from the corner of Main Street and Wilton Roads East and West, northerly to the corner of Main and Prospect Streets on the east side and as far north as Catoonah Street on the west side.

The following spring, another lot was added with the approval of the Proprietors. This was to accommodate the Ebenezer Smith family on the lot where now stands the Ridgefield Library.

In the fall of that year (1709), the settlement was again increased by adding another lot on the opposite end of town. This would encompass the property which just a few years ago became Ascot Lane. It would be the home of Joseph Benedict who, like the other settlers, had come from Norwalk.

One of the originals, James Bennedick, had already been awarded the corner lot just north and west of the fountain, where the Thomas McCue family now resides. The two family names are so similar, it is possible that they may have been related. There are still some descendants of the Benedict family in Ridgefield.

No town could successfully operate without certain mechanics and tradesmen and the people of Ridgefield were quick to start a campaign that would attract these people to the new settlement. In recent years our town has been successful in attracting industries from other states and even from foreign countries. We were not so well known 270 years ago, so the settlers made their recruitments from their former home town of Norwalk.

If the town was to survive, it had to have a blacksmith and a miller. They would prove to be very important cogs in the wheel that would turn the little hamlet in the wilderness into a bustling village. Norwalk seemed to have an abundance of skilled workers and it was noted that as Ridgefield's population increased by one, Norwalk's population decreased by the same amount.

The search for a blacksmith turned up a gentleman from our Mother Town, named Benjamin Burt. Ben was not only a very good blacksmith, he was a person with a real sense of humor. He and his wife had come to Norwalk from England six years earlier. Before docking in New York and while still on the high seas, Mrs. Burt gave birth to a son. At the boy's christening, some weeks later, Ben was asked the boy's name, he answered without hesitation "Seaborn."

The proprietors had thoughtfully reserved lot 28 for their future blacksmith to operate his business. It was the lot just north of Catoonah Street, where the Carnall Agency and Ridgefield Photo, among others, are now located.

Perhaps this very desirable location was instrumental in enticing Ben Burt to make the move to Ridgefield. He paid a nominal sum (nine pounds) for the lot. Wonder what the lot is worth today?

The agreement that Ben signed seemed to indicate that there was fear that he would not stay. In the event that he did not stay a required four years, the property could be transferred only to another practicing blacksmith. The fears were apparently groundless as Ben spent the

rest of his entire life in Ridgefield and is buried in Titicus Cemetery. There are descendants of this fine man living in Ridgefield today.

Only wealthy people could afford a horse in the early days of our town and most of the beasts of burden were oxen. So while Ben Burt put shoes on the horses and the oxen, his talents were applied, in the most part, in making tools and materials to be used in the construction of homes for the settlers.

Carriage makers had not yet made the scene so Ben was also needed to work at building and repairing wagons, as they were so essential in the transportation of materials and people.

Food was a most important commodity in the fledgling community and flour was the staple for these hardy pioneers. Therefore, their attention was turned to procuring a miller and the establishment of a grist mill.

The early settlers were a very industrious group and through an awful lot of hard work, they had cleared enough of the forests to plant fields of Indian corn, wheat, rye, buckwheat, barley, and oats.

It is truly remarkable that in such a short time, they were able to accomplish all this. It meant not only cutting the trees, which they used to build their cabins as well as for fuel, but there was the arduous task of pulling the stumps. The surface stones had to be removed and then when they were plowing the virgin soil, more stones were brought to the surface. Ridgefield has always had a goodly supply of rocks and stone.

The roots of the fallen trees were also a problem. All this strenuous work was done with oxen, as one neighbor helped another in what must have been a true exemplification of community cooperation.

The time came to make another raid on Norwalk's skilled craftsmen, this time for a miller. Daniel Sherwood seemed to fill the bill and he was persuaded to come to Ridgefield.

A very complicated agreement between the Town and Dan Sherwood was signed on Jan. 30, 1716. This document was a great deal more binding than the one Ben Burt had signed. It was sweetened somewhat by the gift of several hundred acres around Mammanasquag (Mamasasco).

Sherwood built his mill at the outlet of the lake and it stood there for more than two centuries. He was also given a lot on which to build his home and it reached from where Roma Pizzeria is now north to opposite Prospect Street.

So Ridgefield had its first grist mill and Dan Sherwood became its 29th Proprietor.

Long before Christmas Day of 1718, the pioneers were planning to celebrate the birthday of The Lord and the 10th anniversary of their Town. They did not have electricity to light their trees. There were no stores in which to buy candles — they made their own. Santa Claus was still being called Saint Nicholas and gifts that were exchanged did not come from the shopping center. There was no bank from which to get money for the celebration, but the whole affair would be a joint effort by all of the settlers.

There was no Community Center, nor was there a town hall. However, a few years before, these God-fearing people had constructed a little building on the Green, in front of where

the Patrick Crehans live now. It would serve as a church as well as a place to meet and also as a school.

However, there was no building large enough to accommodate everyone under one roof. This problem was solved by having the celebrators visit a half dozen of the larger homes.

And a Merry Christmas to all.

### **#131: A FICTIONAL FEAST IN 1718**

There was much preparation in Ridgefield for Christmas 1718. A major requirement for a wife in those days was that she be a good cook. On this particular Christmas their talents would be observed by everyone in town.

The previous 10 years had been little short of pure drudgery, as the pioneers strove to get the new settlement in order. New things had begun to take shape and they felt it was time to enjoy some of the fruits of their labor. There was a certain excitement in the air as the settlers planned for the approaching holiday.

After the purchase of the town had been completed, some of the Indians had remained nearby and they were invited to share in the festivities. They were not aware of the significance of December 25th, but the prospect of free food made a big impression on them.

However, the Rev. Thomas Hawley took the time to explain to the Indians what it was all about. He had arrived in Ridgefield some five years earlier and his house had been built on the lot on the corner of Branchville Road. The Proprietors had thoughtfully reserved the corner lot for Ridgefield's first clergyman and his house, which still stands, is recognized as the oldest house in town.

Mr. Hawley showed great vision when he selected Ridgefield as the town to settle in. He was a young man at the time and had graduated from Harvard only nine years before. The Proprietors had also exhibited great vision in reserving a place on the Village Green nearby for a combination church and meeting house.

Visitors many times marvel at how well our Main Street was laid out by the Proprietors — and to think it was done without a P & Z Commission.

Samuel Keeler Jr., Thomas Hoyt, Jonathon Rockwell and Daniel Olmsted formed a hunting party a few days before Christmas and went into the woods in search of game. The wooded areas were well stocked at the time and they were successful in bringing back many rabbits and partridge, as well as several wild turkeys. The prize of the hunt was a large deer that Sam Keeler was fortunate enough to bring down. All this game was augmented by several hogs that had been raised especially for the occasion.

Matthew Seamer had received a shipment of goods at his trading post that included many herbs and spices that the housewives had longed for. Now the competition between these ladies would intensify for the honor of having the tastiest pie, cake, or pudding.

Cranberries had been discovered in a bog where Cranberry Lane is now, just off South Olmstead Lane. They would add color to the buffet style feast that was being prepared.

All in all, as Christmas Day neared, the pleasant odor emanating from the various kitchens was almost overpowering.

There was grape, dandelion, and elderberry wine, which was reserved for use during the meal. If any hard liquor was available, it was kept well out of sight. The favorite alcoholic drink was cider and it was used sparingly. It should be remembered that these were very religious people who practiced sobriety. This did not prevent them from celebrating with great enthusiasm.

The great day arrived and rightfully started with the Rev. Thomas Hawley, presiding in the little church on the Green. Everyone turned out for the services and the building would hold only half of them. Fortunately the weather had moderated and those who had to stand outside in the snow were not uncomfortable.

In his sermon, Mr. Hawley retold the story of Christmas and asked the Lord's blessing on the food that had been prepared and the activities that were about to take place. He lauded the great efforts of the settlers and told them that they richly deserved a day to be festive and joyous over their remarkable accomplishments. Mrs. Hawley led the assemblage in singing the favorite Christmas hymns.

Following the service the families divided into two groups that would visit the homes that had been selected and in which they would start their day of celebrating. Those visiting the south end of Town would start at Jonathon Rockwell's home (just south of where the Keeler Tavern is now). Those who walked north would visit first at Matthias St. John's (where Aldrich Museum is now).

Presents for each group had been delivered to these two homes the previous evening. Tables were laden with goodies and various items that might be considered appetizers, although it is doubtful that there was any need to whet any appetites.

Soon it was time to open the presents and somehow they managed to have something for everyone. There were no computers among the presents, no Ataris or calculators or Cabbage Patch dolls. The handmade presents were rather humble when compared with the lavish gifts of today, but they were very much appreciated. Any kind of fruit was highly prized, as were sugar plums and popcorn balls, and a plain rag doll would make any little girl very happy.

By the time the goodies were consumed and the presents opened and inspected, it was near to high noon and time to move on to the next stop. To those going north it would be the Thomas Smith home (where Allan's store is now) and to those going south it would be the Samuel Keeler Srs., (on the corner where Main Street becomes Wilton Road West). At these stops, the main food of the day would be served. The deer that Sam Smith Jr. had furnished had been barbecued and divided between his father and Tom Smith and was now a buffet item along with the ham, pork loin, rabbit, wild turkey, and partridge.

The venison and other game was all quite familiar to the visiting Indians, but the ham was something else. Indians were rather stoic by nature, but when they had their first taste of the ham, they were delirious with joy. Oreneca and Narranoke were the ranking Indians at the feast.

The third and last stop for the group that had traveled north was at the Benjamin Wilson home (across from where Market Street now joins Main) and the group that had traveled south

made their last stop at the James Bennedick home, (just north of where West Lane joins Main). very pleasant odor of spices emanated from these homes, for this would be where pies and cakes and plum pudding would bring the great feast to a close.

The tour had ended close to where it had started that morning and as many as could gathered inside the little meeting house on the Green, as the sun began its descent behind West Mountain.

James Brown was an accomplished fiddler and Ben Burt brought out a little concertina that had accompanied him from England. Soon the air was filled with lively music and the dancing started. The settlers would find that they would use muscles that had lain dormant, while the arduous work of building the settlement took precedence over anything as frivolous as a Virginia Reel.

Everyone had their chance on the little dance floor, as the well-fed pioneers took their turns to trip the light fantastic to the wondrous music of Jim and Ben. It was eight o'clock that evening before the tired but happy Proprietors and their families ended the celebrating and returned to their homes to prepare for another hard day's work.

It was the first attempt at a genuine community celebration and it would not be the last, as all agreed that it was a tremendous success.

I'm sure my readers will have fun separating fact from fiction in this Dispatch.

### **#132: FROM HORSES TO CARS AT SPERRY'S STABLE**

Another attraction on Catoonah Street, to go along with the firehouse and the blacksmith shop, was Sperry's Livery Stable. This great building was erected before the turn of the [20th] century and was originally called Adam's & Keeler's Livery Stable.

The business had been started by Joseph Adams and William R. Keeler. They sold out to Morris Whitlock and when Morris passed on, his son Arthur sold the business to B. E. Sperry. At the time the building was constructed, it must have been the largest in Ridgefield.

By the time that Bert Sperry took over the business in the 20's, the horse was rapidly losing out as a means of transportation to the auto. The stables had been ideally located across the street from the firehouse and the horses had been used to pull the various pieces of fire equipment.

Now the Fire Department had become motorized and though Bert was a great lover of horses, he was also a good businessman and could easily see the handwriting on the wall. Soon he had installed autos that he used for taxis and the big building housed several autos that people used to store there.

One of the stored autos was an electric car and it proved to be a real curiosity. It resembled a coupe in appearance. It did not have a steering wheel as such, but was guided by a shaft that came up through the floor that had a rod attached to it making it look like a large number 7. At the end of the rod was a button, which when pressed put the car in motion. It was powered by large storage batteries and was kind of weird as it seemed to glide along with almost complete silence.

My curiosity got the best of me and kidlike I experimented until I was successful in getting the car to move forward. Fortunately it moved slowly as the front bumper came in contact with the side of the building. Though nothing was broken, it was very embarrassing as I did not know how to back the car away from the side wall.

To make matters worse, my little dog, Sport, sensed my frustration and barked so frantically that everyone in the building came on the run. It was my one and only ride in an electric car.

Some of the other cars in the big barn were a Jordan, a Wills Sainte Claire, a Marmon, a Graham-Paige, a Peerless and a French car called a Touraine. I guess the companies that made those cars have all long since gone out of business, but they were great cars.

Bert Sperry added a coal business as a supplement to his livery business and delivered the coal on short hauls with his last horse, a big black that they called Maggie, even though it was a gelding, and on long hauls a truck called a Republic was used.

Soon Sperry was operating a moving and storage business and the second floor was put to use as a storage place for furniture and other household effects. Then a gasoline pump was installed in front of the building. It furnished Socony gasoline and one pump was sufficient as in those days there was only one grade of gasoline and, of course, there were not so many cars.

To round out the many commercial ventures, Bert Sperry acquired the local Studebaker agency. The Studebaker was a popular automobile with a long and honorable history. In fact the company that manufactured these cars had started many years before by building the sturdy covered wagons used by the pioneers in the settling of the West. They were called Conestogas after an Indian tribe and many years later the name was applied to a Studebaker station wagon. just a few years before that company went out of business.

All of these activities at the old livery stable provided employment for a number of people. There were more. but some who come quickly to mind were Harry Dodson, Andy Frattini, Matthew Holmes, Charley Washington, Alfred Dodson, Walter McInerney and my favorite character, Jimmy Rogers.

Fleet Sperry, Bert's brother, looked after the coal and moving business and he had a son named Bill who assisted him. Helen (Coffey) O'Hara was the bookkeeper.

The office for this enterprise was on the northeast corner of the building and was complete with a large pot-bellied stove surrounded by five or six chairs where customers or passersby would sit and swap their wonderful stories. There was a metal grating, like a cage, that encompassed the large desk, at which Helen sat on a high stool to do her bookkeeping.

The horse stalls kept disappearing to make room for the autos until there was finally only one left for Maggie and that was at the extreme rear of the building. The poor horse looked awfully lonely in that great big stable, and he must have realized that he was on the way out.

One of the most interesting features of the great building was a hand-operated elevator. Its purpose was to carry furniture for storage to the second floor. This was no ordinary elevator. It was very large, rectangular in shape and probably twelve by fifteen feet in measurement. It

was not enclosed and had no guard rails. When this contraption descended from the second floor, it was as though a large section of the floor was coming down.

The elevator was suspended on steel cables and had a rope that ran through such a series of pulleys that even the heaviest load was easily taken to the second floor. It probably could have handled an auto but the only thing we ever saw on it was furniture.

The second floor of the building was as big as some of our gymnasiums. It was always full of such interesting articles that it made a veritable fairyland for a kid to play in. There was a little apartment in the front northeast corner, which I believe Bill Sperry occupied. Later on there was a larger apartment built in the rear of the second story for Harry Dodson and his family. .

Some of the people who stored their furniture in this enormous storage place must have forgotten it as many of the various items remained there for years. This place would have been seventh heaven to a connoisseur of fine furniture and valuable antiques. Several homes could have been lavishly furnished with the beautiful dining room, bedroom and living rooms sets. We remember one four-poster bed, complete with what looked like a silk canopy that would have been right at home in Buckingham Palace. There was also a Jacobean oak dining set that would have brought an admiring smile to the face of James I. These things were all in excellent condition and belonged to some. of Ridgefield's wealthiest families.

Of equal interest were items such as the antique Victrolas and phonographs with their large tin speakers. Some of these machines played the old flat tin records and some played a cylindrical tube. One thing is sure: they were great fun to play and listen to before radio and television.

### **#133: THE DEATH OF A VILLAGE LANDMARK**

For a number of years, B.E. Sperry conducted a thriving business at the old livery stable on Catoonah Street. What with his coal and wood business, his moving and storage, his taxi and gasoline and his new car agency, he was well diversified.

However, in the name of progress and other reasons that were beyond his control, many changes were taking place in both the domestic and the business world.

By the 1940's, coal was giving way to oil, just as the horse had given way to the automobile. The war had brought on gas rationing and the auto industry had turned its attention to the manufacture of articles of war rather than items for domestic use. Even the taxi business had deteriorated to a point where Sperry's was not the bustling place it had once been.

David Westheim was the owner and operator of the popular Martha West stores. He was very well known and highly respected in the clothing world of ladies fashions.

Apparently Mr. Westheim was just looking for an investment when he purchased B.E. Sperry's business and property, for he soon leased it to Patrick O'Keefe. Pat, who was a carpenter by trade, and a good one, operated the place as a service station for a time. Like so many others. he was engaged in making the necessary adjustments that resulted from the transition back to peacetime activity. After a time, Pat decided to return to his trade and the big old livery stable was once again available.



Leo Pambianchi was involved at the time in the restaurant business as well as the garage business and had the dealership of the Nash automobile. The Nash car is no longer being built and I believe that company was taken over by American Motors and Leo's brother Matty now owns that dealership under the name Pamby Motors. Pamby Motors also had the Studebaker agency.

Things progressed very well for Leo in his new location, but then on Dec. 23, 1947, it started to snow. We were sawing out fireplace wood on that day at Hillscroft Farm. When the snow started, it was very light and there was no indication, nor was there a weather prediction that would warn of what was to come.

However, Clifford Seymour, who was operating the saw, had a favorite saying, "As the days get longer. the winter gets stronger." When Clifford once again uttered his admonition, we all laughed, but as the day wore on, the storm increased in its intensity and continued all through the night and into the next day.

Christmas eve was extremely cold and many roads were blocked with snow. This was before Ridgefield had the modern snow removal equipment that it has today. Local contractors were employed with their trucks and bulldozers and they worked day and night to open the roads. It was this storm that caused First Selectman Harry E. Hull to ask for a special appropriation with which to purchase two additional trucks and the famous giant grader that the road crew named "Molly."

Christmas Day in '47 was clear and cold, but the following day the snow started again and came down harder than ever. The temperature did moderate enough to make the snow rather wet, but then it suddenly changed and dropped to ten below zero. This caused the snow to harden and made its removal that much more difficult.

There was great concern for buildings with flat roofs because of the great weight of the snow and ice. Once the roads and sidewalks were cleared, attentions were directed to the several buildings that were threatened with collapse. Many men were employed in this difficult task.

The old livery stable had a great concave roof that would normally have shed the snow. This time, however, the sudden frigid weather kept the tremendous weight planted firmly on the top of the big building.

Several days after it stopped snowing, there were signs that the old structure was in trouble. Some of the rafters in the roof had started to separate from their supports. An attempt was made to remove the snow but the roof was so steep that it was impossible for anyone to stand on it and it was feared that the added weight of the snow shovellers would increase the danger of its collapsing.

Pat O'Keefe and a crew of men attempted to shore up the building from inside. Heavy timbers were placed where it was felt they would do the most good.

Their efforts were in vain and there was a general feeling that the only solution was for a thaw that would melt the tons of snow and ice. There would be no thaw as the terrible cold weather continued unabated.

Horace Walker was the fire marshal at the time and after inspecting the building, advised that it be vacated. Two weeks after the big Christmas storm, the roof of the old livery stable was still heavily laden with snow. There had even been a couple of light snow storms during that period and sub-zero temperatures ensured that the accumulation remained intact, and each day seemed to furnish new evidence that the grand old building was doomed.

One person who seemed to have the utmost faith in the durability of the big structure was Harry Dodson. An apartment had been constructed on the second floor in the south end of the building and Harry and his family had lived there for the past dozen years. Like the horse who would not leave his stall when the barn was burning down around him, Harry steadfastly refused to leave his apartment.

After three weeks, most of the valuables had been removed from the building and fire marshal Walker had erected a sign warning those who had an idea of entering the building that they do so at their own risk. Now bets were being made, not only on how long the building would stay up, but which way it would fall.

The William Brown family lived in the house where the Rusty Nail Restaurant is now located. A little creek, about four feet wide flowed between the two buildings (and still does). and that was all that separated them. Bill was very worried, and with good reason, that the large structure would demolish his home.

Still, the Dodson family remained firmly entrenched. even though the gaps between the rafters and their supports widened with each passing day. They sure had a lot of courage.

It must have been the loud cracking noise of the crumbling timbers that finally convinced Harry Dodson to move his family to safer quarters. This he did in the afternoon of Jan. 16, 1948, and it was well that he did. Just 12 hours later, at 4 a.m. on Jan. 17, there was a tremendous crash as the huge structure gave up the struggle and disintegrated.

Fortunately the only damage, other than to the building itself, was to the front porch of Bill Brown's house, where bricks from the falling chimney struck it. Torquinio Pambianchi and Dino Giardini rushed across the street from the fire house and prevented a fire by turning off the power.

When it was all over. Ridgefield had lost one its best known landmarks.

### **#134: THE MAN OF WEALTH, POWER, PROGRESS**

There was a time, back around the turn of the century, when mention of the name Henry B. Anderson would probably stop all other conversation. The name was synonymous with wealth, power and progress. It also meant to a great many Ridgefielders at the time activity, work, and jobs.

Mr. Anderson was a young man in his mid-thirties when he and Mrs. Anderson moved here from New York in 1897. After graduation from Yale and Harvard Law School, he interned in a Wall Street law office and then joined his father's prestigious law firm. A few years later he and his brother formed their own very successful New York law firm, Anderson and Anderson.

Mrs. Howard Lapsley Thomas was a sister of Mrs. Anderson and when the Andersons visited Mrs. Thomas at her beautiful brick mansion on Golf Lane, they were enraptured by the beauty of Ridgefield. Soon the Andersons bought the property across Golf Lane from the Thomases, where Manor Estates is now.

Like so many who came to Ridgefield over the years, H.B. Anderson could envision numerous opportunities amidst all the elegance, serenity and beauty that the town had to offer.

When the Andersons moved to Ridgefield, the town was still reeling from the effects of the disastrous fire of 1895. The need to take steps to protect the town from a recurrence of that terrible conflagration was obvious. The Ridgefield Volunteer Fire Department was organized, with Charles S. Nash as its first chief, and it has remained through the years, a most efficient organization.

There was an urgent need for a public water supply. Without sufficient water, the town was at the mercy of any small fire. Many towns are located near a river and some even have a stream that flows right through the town. Ridgefield did not have this luxury and the protection that we take for granted today was a matter of grave concern, at the turn of the century.

The Ridgefield Water Supply Company was formed and a search was conducted for that precious element that would provide the much needed security. There were many ponds, but most of them were too distant from the village to be of real value to that area. During the search for water, a number of wells were discovered, tapped and the water was pumped by gasoline engines into the original stand pipe on West Mountain, from where it filtered by gravity into the mains.

There must have been great jubilation when the first water flowed into the pipes on June 13, 1900.

Though the population of Ridgefield at the time was only just over 2,500. it soon became apparent that the supply of water was not sufficient to meet the needs of a growing town. Into the breach stepped H.B. Anderson, who in the short time he had lived in Ridgefield, had taken an active role in town affairs.

In 1902. Mr. Anderson bought the controlling interest in the water company and things began to happen. His law practice in New York was flourishing and much of his time was spent in arduous commuting. Despite this fact, this energetic gentleman somehow found the time to devote to the welfare of his adopted community.

Under the direction of H.B. Anderson, the water company purchased Round Pond. This transaction was a master stroke as this body of water, entirely fed by springs. had the purest of water and the supply seemed endless. No debris or other objectionable material would ever taint this water because it was not fed by any stream that would carry such substances.

It is believed that the reason for the round shape of this fine pond is that a glacier once set where it is located and just melted away, gradually forming the contours of the pond as it disappeared into the soil.

The great taste of the water from Round Pond has changed somewhat through the years. as chemicals were added as a safeguard. However, this excellent source of water is still functioning well today, even though the population of the town has increased ten times.

In recent years there has been some concern that the strain of the population increase may cause an eventual shortage of water. We would like to think that additional sources will be located before these concerns become a reality.

H.B. Anderson was not through with his innovations. The Ridgefield Illuminating Company was a fledgling organization. It had installed a four-inch gas main from Bailey Avenue along Main Street and down West Lane. We remember seeing the gas fixtures in the old town hall, although they had even then been long in a state of disuse. I would bet that the gas lines are still in the walls of the grand old building, though the fixtures themselves were all removed during the alterations in 1950 that removed the large auditorium and provided many of the present-day offices.

Apparently the gas business was not very profitable, as it went out of business after a short time. Once again, H.B. Anderson was “Johnny on the spot” and in 1906 he formed the Ridgefield Electric Company. It was not just a project where lines were laid to a neighboring town to secure the power. The electric power was generated right here in Ridgefield. A building that was made completely of concrete, with walls so thick that it would probably have served as a bomb-proof shelter, was erected at the foot of Ivy Hill Road, right next to the railroad tracks. Two enormous coal burning engines were installed, to operate the large generator, that manufactured the electric power.

It was Anderson’s plan to first use the power to run the pumps to bring the water from Round Pond to the standpipe. If there was power left over, it would be distributed for lighting purposes among the three dozen stockholders in the company. These people were, for the most part, summer residents of Ridgefield, which automatically designated them as people of means.

The electric company proved to be a prosperous undertaking and plenty of electric power was available. Soon a few electric street lights began to appear as power lines were extended along Main Street.

Jack Cranston, a very knowledgeable electrician, was engaged to operate the new plant and provide the line services. Jack lived, at the time, right next to the new plant. There were those who believed that his living right there was to allay the fears of those who felt that the plant would surely blow up, as well as for his convenience in getting to his job.

### **#135 : THE POPULAR PORT ON WEST MOUNTAIN**

The Ridgefield Electric Company prospered under the guidance of Henry B. Anderson and by 1910 there were more than 100 families that were enjoying the new source of energy it provided. The number of street lights increased slowly and they were strategically placed. Even by 1920, there was a considerable distance between the street lights on Main Street.

There was a light in front of town hall and then going north, there was one in front of Johnny Lannon’s house (where Allan’s Store [Conservatory of Dance] is now). The next light

was on the library corner and no more until the entrance to Casagmo. There were two more lights, going north, one on Rolly Gilbert's (where Nina's is now [Main at Danbury Road]) and one on the corner where North Street branches off North Salem Road, which at that time was known as North Main Street up to that point.

The southern end of Main Street fared better with street lights, probably because there was more wealth in that area. I know it was awful dark and spooky going down the grade next to Casagmo.

In the early 20's there was a silent movie, "The Hunchback of Notre Dame." It starred the great Lon Chaney, in a most terrifying portrayal of the "Hunchback." This picture was shown in the old town hall on a Saturday night to a capacity crowd.

Jack Cranston manned the movie projector in the balcony and music, the sound of which rose and fell as well as slowed and sped in conjunction with the story being depicted on the screen, was provided by Lottie Boyce at the piano and Willis Boyce, with his violin.

It was a sure thing that the sight of Chaney, in his scary costume, was enough to strike fear to the heart of the bravest. People were in a high emotional state as they emerged from the hall after the show.

The group going north had reached the library when Jack Walker shouted in a loud voice, "Here comes the Hunchback!"

It must have been a good 150 yards to the next street light at Casagmo and I must have set some kind of record in reaching the haven of its friendly glow. It was much darker from Casagmo to my home, across the street from the next light, and it is doubtful if my feet ever touched the ground while covering that distance.

H.B. Anderson, satisfied that his latest venture was a resounding success, began to look for new worlds to conquer. He was a dreamer and one of his dreams had to do with establishing Ridgefield as a resort town.

Even while conducting the operations of the water company and the electric company, he was amassing large tracts of land in the northwest section of Ridgefield. Before he was through, he had close to a 1,000 acres in the area of town that is now known as Eight Lakes Estates. Just over the line in New York State, adjacent to his Ridgefield property, he accumulated almost 2,000 acres.

Mr. Anderson's interests had grown to a point where they were demanding too much of his time, so he brought to Ridgefield a man named Bailey. Eldridge N. Bailey was a man of considerable intellect and proved to be of great assistance in the Anderson enterprises.

The acquisition of so much acreage caused Mr. Anderson to need additional cash and he sold his interest in the electric company to E.N. Bailey and soon Bailey sold to the Associated Gas and Electric Company. A few years later the company was sold to the Litchfield Light and Power Company and in the early 40's, it changed hands again, this time to The Connecticut Light and Power Company. We still make our checks to C.L.&P. Company; however, the parent organization today is Northeast Utilities, a firm that encompasses other New England states.

Anderson's dream of establishing a resort on Titicus Mountain was about to begin, but additional cash was still needed. Among the wealthy clients of his law practice was a gentleman named Odgen Mills. Mills, who would later become secretary of the treasury in the cabinet of President Herbert Hoover, took an active interest in the Anderson operations, in which he soon became a partner and the stage was set to make the dream a reality.

Soon the construction of roads was started and the men, mostly the newly arrived Italians who had completed the building of the water and sewer lines, were employed in Anderson's new project. When the roads were completed, they extended through the vast acreage for more than ten miles.

The roads were of the finest construction, with a deep base of crushed stone of which Ridgefield has an unending supply. The roads were intended primarily for the use of horse drawn carriages, which were more narrow than today's automobiles. The roads served their original purpose well, but they were just not wide enough for the vehicles of today and this would cause a real problem later on.

A large rambling building was constructed at the top of Titicus Mountain. It was very picturesque and provided a commanding view of the surrounding countryside.

Meredith B. Nicholson, a prominent author, had a best seller at the time, "The Port of Missing Men." Anderson liked the name and borrowed it to apply to his soon-to-be-famous enterprise.

Mrs. Ida Smith, who was widely known for her ability to manage a high-class hostelry, was engaged to manage what would become an internationally known establishment. With Nanny Gasperini handling the food end of the operation, a solid organization was formed and opened to the public in 1907.

The reputation of the Port of Missing Men spread rapidly to every state in the union and in many foreign countries as well. I suppose that today we would have to call it the Port of Missing Men and Women. Of course, the ladies were welcome at the inn and in many instances they outnumbered the men, especially at the elegant afternoon teas that caused many to refer to the place as "The Tea House."

In the first two years of operation, more than 20,000 people signed the guest book. The roads were well kept in the summer, but the inn was closed during the winter months and so were the roads and large wooden gates prevented these private roads from being used.

This large operation provided employment for a great many people, not the least of whom were the local girls of high school age who worked there as waitresses. These jobs were much sought after as the guests were good tippers.

Mr. Anderson was so taken by the success of his new undertaking and the majesty of its surroundings that he built a large new home on Titicus Mountain. The Andersons moved to their new palatial home in 1908 and that same year, sold their West Lane estate to Frederick E. Lewis.

It is sad to relate that the Andersons did not have long to enjoy their new home, because of the untimely death of Mrs. Anderson. In his grief, Henry Anderson moved to Sands Point,

Long Island, and allowed the house [on Oreneca Road] that he had been so proud of, to deteriorate and finally fall in ruins.

### **#136: TOWN LOVERS & FAST-BUCK ARTISTS PLUS ANDERSON AND BAILEY**

In the early days, some of the original settlers that came to Ridgefield were encouraged to do so by their parents, who lived to the south of us. The parents probably had only one or two hundred acres and were beginning to feel crowded. Therefore, the young were pushed from the nest to make it on their own.

In later years some, after a visit, were captivated by the beauty of the town and others were seeking a quiet, restful place to live.

There were others who felt that a Ridgefield address carried with it a kind of status symbol. Employment was an attraction for some and the proximity of the town to larger cities made it attractive to those with sufficient fortitude to commute to their place of employment.

There were those, at one time, who were attracted by our low tax rate. In an effort to slow the growth of the town, concessions were made to large property owners. Valuable farm land was assessed at only \$50 per acre. The theory on the part of those who fostered this idea was that it encouraged owners of great acreage to avoid allowing their property to be developed.

The scheme worked well for many years. The day of reckoning came when the owners died and the property was split among the children.

A top-notch school system was also a great attraction and some of those who came to take advantage of it stayed here, but many moved on as soon as their children were educated.

There were also those who liked the friendly atmosphere of the town and once they settled here, found it difficult to move away. Some who had to move for business or other reasons returned years later to once again enjoy the good feeling and community spirit that Ridgefield had in abundance.

There were many who saw an opportunity to make money in Ridgefield and the vast majority of them did. The success stories of those who came seeking their fortune is endless. Some of these people learned to love Ridgefield for other than monetary reasons and stayed here. Others were "fast-buck artists" and quickly disappeared after making their bundle.

One thing is sure: They had a very definite impact on the growth of the town.

We would have to establish a separate category to fit H.B. Anderson. His record would indicate that he did not come to Ridgefield to have his young ones educated, or to line his pockets, as they were already well-lined. My guess is that an examination of his record would show that he gave our town a lot more than he got in return. It would seem reasonable to assume that had it not been for the untimely passing of Mrs. Anderson, the town of which he was so fond, would have benefited a great deal more.

After the closing of his Port of Missing Men, Mr. Anderson kept the roads repaired. For many years, the large wooden gates would be opened each spring for those who wanted to enjoy the scenic beauty of the area. Finally the gates, like the buildings, just fell in ruins. Then the

shrubby and trees along the roads grew out over the traveled portion, in such a manner as to choke off passage by auto.

One can only imagine what Ridgefield would be like today if H.B. Anderson had remained in town. We probably would have been one of the very first towns to have a radio station. With the Port of Missing Men flourishing, he no doubt would have added a TV studio to the building and top ranked artists would have been engaged to perform there. Our high school would have been more centrally located and the roof would never have leaked.

Ridgefield would have long since had its own modern and well-staffed hospital, probably in the expanded and converted mansion at Casagmo. A by-pass would have been carefully selected that would ease the terrible traffic congestion in the center of town.

Yes, we feel that a resourceful gentleman like H.B. Anderson, with his fertile mind and great energy, would be most welcome in our town today.

After his death in Sands Points, Long Island, on March 17, 1938, his large holdings were acquired by a syndicate that planned to develop the area. After World War II the area was named Eight Lakes Estates and lots were sold to many people who were promised that the roads would be widened and drainage systems would be installed. As time went on it became increasingly apparent that the developers had no intention of providing the promised improvements.

Homes began to appear on Sib Road, Blue Ridge, Scott Ridge and Caudatowa Drive and the homeowners found it necessary to take matters into their own hands. An association was formed that gave every appearance of being a potent political force. The association was determined that if the developers reneged on what was clearly their responsibility, the town would provide the necessary improvements to these private roads.

Over the strenuous objections of one member of the Board of Selectmen, the association was eminently successful.

After H.B. Anderson left for Sands Point, his influence was felt for many years in the person of Eldridge N. Bailey. While handling the various aspects of Anderson's enterprises, Bailey became very prominent in town affairs. Among other things, he ran the Ridgefield Water Company, until it was sold to Francis W. Collins in 1928.

Mr. Bailey was slender, well over six feet tall and altogether was a very imposing figure, with his light tan coat and camel-hair cap, that matched his facial complexion. His two gold teeth blended well with the aforesaid colors.

Anderson showed a great deal of confidence in Bailey when he selected him to oversee his interests. The building of the roads leading to the Port of Missing Men was an enormous responsibility and there were times when more than 200 men were engaged in this project. Bailey got a big assist from Big Jim Kennedy.

Neither Anderson, Bailey nor Kennedy spoke or understood Italian very well. However, Kennedy learned the language well enough to make himself understood and was very instrumental in bringing the laborers from the province of Ancona. When Julius Tulipani was promoted to foreman on the road-building project, communication took a giant step forward.



Despite all his other duties, E.N. Bailey found time to get involved in local politics. In 1910 he was elected to a Board of Selectmen that was headed by Benjamin Crouchley. The following year (elections were held each year in those days), Bailey was elected first selectman. He lost the following year to Charles B. Northrop and then was returned to the office of first selectman three years in a row.

Orville W. Holmes won the post in 1916 and for the next three years Bailey was not a member of the board. Bailey returned as first selectman in 1919 and won for seven straight terms. His total of 11 terms is a modern record.

### **#137: THE GRAND UPAGENSTIT ESTATE ON WEST LANE**

One of the nicest things that H. B. Anderson did for Ridgefield was to sell his West Lane property (now Manor Estates) to Frederic E. Lewis. The Lewis family would prove to be a decided asset to a community that already had more than its share of millionaires.

Mr. Lewis, a descendant of Moses Taylor, and Mrs. Lewis, the former Mary Russell, were very, very wealthy people. After purchasing the Anderson estate, they began to buy up the surrounding properties, until they had added more than 10 additional parcels of land that would become a part of what was to be one of our nation's showplaces.

The Lewises had two sons, Wadsworth and Reginald and 43 years after his death, Ridgefield still benefits from a trust fund, established by Wadsworth (better known as Waddy). The fund has been aptly named the Lewis Fund and many worthy, local organizations share in its annual proceeds. Waddy was a born philanthropist and, like his parents, always seemed to have the welfare of others constantly in mind.

The family had lived in a mansion on their estate in Tarrytown and while visiting here, were struck by the beauty of Ridgefield. They acquired the Anderson estate in 1907 and immediately started to enlarge the mansion, added to their acreage, and constructed the many buildings attendant to the operation of such a large enterprise, including homes for many of the employees.

Mr. Lewis showed his sense of humor, when after moving with his family to his new palatial home in 1908, promptly named it "Upagenstit" ("Up Against It") He had been involved with several large corporations and was president and principal stockholder of the Adams Express Company, which was the forerunner of the American Railway Express Company.

Whenever he learned of a family having difficulties, he was quick to respond by furnishing whatever was needed. His method of operation was to do these fine things in such a manner that the recipients never knew who their benefactor was.

Frederic was not a big man in stature, but he more than made up for that in the benevolence that he bestowed on his fellow man.

During the summer months, Mr. Lewis generally wore a stiff-brimmed straw hat, a blue jacket and white flannels that had a pinstripe like the uniforms of the Yankee ball players. He and Mrs. Lewis made a walking tour of their estate every morning. While out for their walk, Mr. Lewis always carried a cane which he twirled as they walked along.

He also whistled constantly, in order that the people working on the estate would know that they were coming. He did not mind if they sat down again after he and Mrs. Lewis had passed by, but felt that they should give the appearance of being industrious while they were passing.

On the northern part of the estate, Mr. Lewis had constructed a huge barn that housed their horses in one end, along with Mrs. Lewis's four little black ponies. On the other end of the barn there were stanchions for their herd of purebred Guernsey cows. There was a platform between the two rows of cows and a large barn door at either end of the platform.

Lawrence Copes and his brothers, Joe and Fred, were the cowmen. One of their duties each morning was to listen for Mr. Lewis's familiar whistle. The whistle was their signal to unroll a large red rubber carpet that covered the platform between the cows from one door to the other. After the Lewises had passed through the barn, the carpet was rolled up to await the next visit.

Mr. Lewis was a very jovial individual, but for all his good nature, he was known to possess a vocabulary that would match that of a longshoreman, and when he felt that it fitted the occasion, he did not hesitate to use it. This was something that those who had incurred his wrath were to quickly learn.

James Ballantyne was superintendent on the estate when it was in its heyday and he must have been a very busy man. Imagine, if you will, a place in Ridgefield large enough to necessitate the employment of three carpenters, just to keep things in repair, and on a full-time basis.

Edward Minnerly (Frank's father) was the head carpenter and Howard Thomas (Harry's brother) and Edward Findley were his helpers. Frank Minnerly has informed me that their activities were generally relegated to repair work and for any large project, a contractor was brought in to do the work.

When one considers the large number of buildings that had to be taken care of, perhaps the need for the carpenters would be more easily understood. Yet, I would guess that today, one would have to have considerable wealth to employ that many carpenters, even for a short period of time.

Incidentally, the large barn that was just mentioned was located at the end of the extension of what is now Manor Road and has long since been torn down, but parts of the foundation still remain. I feel that it is always sad to see a great structure, such as this building was, suddenly disappear. This is especially true in this instance, as there were two very nice apartments on the second floor for the employees.

The mansion itself stood on the west side of what is now Manor Road and about 50 some odd yards north and east of it was what must have been the largest garage any private family in these parts ever had. It was said that it would hold more than 15 cars. We do know that it was possible, when the garage was empty, to drive in and turn around to come out without ever backing up.

The Lewises did not do everything in threes, but they did have three carpenters. and three cowmen and they had three chauffeurs. In fact, Frank Minnerly said that there was a time when there were 100 people employed on this great estate.

At any rate, Jimmy Richards was the head chauffeur and generally drove for Mrs. Lewis. Tom Egan was the chauffeur for Waddy and Reggy and Bobby Maxwell kind of fit in where he was needed. All of these men were acquired after a lot of screening. In the early days of the automobile, passengers such as the Lewises were considered precious cargo and the drivers must have had training that was comparable to what the airline pilots had later on.

These three men all came with the blessings of the Brewster Automobile Company.

Mrs. Lewis had a Rolls Royce that had two little flower vases on either side that received fresh flowers daily. It also had a little tube through which the passenger could speak to instruct the chauffeur and through which he could answer.

Jimmy Richards said it was the only opportunity he ever had to talk back to Mrs. Lewis. Of course, he said this with a smile.

### **#138: LOVE STORIES**

With your kind permission we will interrupt our story about the F.E. Lewis family for this column and return to them next week. With a name like mine and today being the feast day of the great Saint Valentine, it would seem appropriate that we devote a few lines to the four-letter word, "love."

Love is the word most closely associated with this holy man who was to become a famous martyr because of his love for his fellow man. For that reason, on this day, many people exchange cards as one way of expressing their love for one another. The cards rarely reveal a likeness of Saint Valentine, but generally show Venus's son, Cupid, with his little bow and arrow.

There are many who labor under the impression that we celebrate the birthday of St. Valentine on Feb. 14. However, the fact of the matter is that St. Valentine was a holy priest in Rome and engaged himself in assisting the martyrs, who were being persecuted under Claudius II. While so doing, he was apprehended and when he steadfastly refused to renounce his faith, he was sentenced to death. Therefore, 1715 years ago, on Feb. 14 in the year 207 A.D., this kind and loving man was beheaded.

There are many different kinds of love and numerous ways of expressing it. There is the one on one kind that one person has for another and there is the kind that St. Valentine exhibited, which encompassed all of mankind, even his enemies.

There is the maternal or paternal kind of love that a parent has for his or her children. Many have a genuine love for birds and animals and all of God's little creatures.

Hero worship is sometimes akin to love, for a favorite movie, TV, or sports personality. We have always felt that the adulation expressed by baseball fans for the great Babe Ruth was pretty close to being love. It was not necessary for the Babe to hit a home run to elicit the cheers of his millions of admirers. The applause of his delirious supporters was almost as great when the Babe struck out.

We can remember watching him from a packed grandstand and 75,000 pairs of eyes were trained on him, to the exclusion of the other players. His every move was a cause to cheer. When an inning was completed and Babe trotted in from right field, he never failed to step on second base with his left foot. Just this simple act was enough to cause the stands to erupt in a thunderous ovation.

This could be interpreted as but another act of hero worship, but I always felt that these demonstrations were generated in no small way, by genuine love. Babe loved kids and they returned that love a hundredfold.

Once in a while we read about a person who has given his or her life to save the life of another. This, of course, is the ultimate and was what St. Valentine was trying to teach. Though only a few can be raised to that lofty pinnacle, "Greater Love Hath No Man."

When we were kids it seemed that the most common form of love was that shared by an elderly couple, one or both of whom, devoted much time in caring for the other. We know of some such couples today, but for some reason they are less visible.

We can think of three couples who must have brought a smile to the face of St. Valentine. Though there were more, these three came quickly to mind.

James and Margaret Cumming lived in the green-shingled house on Catoonah Street right next to our new post office. They were Jim and Ma to all who knew them, and just about everyone in Ridgefield did know them. Both Jim and Ma were very active in the war effort in World War I. Two of their sons, Henry and William, were in the armed services.

Bill was the first person from Ridgefield to enlist and he was the first soldier to give his life. It was a sad day in Ridgefield when word was received that Bill had died in a hospital in France. Despite their sadness, Jim and Ma redoubled their efforts in the cause.

During the war, Ridgefield was divided into districts for the purpose of correlating the resources of our farms. Jim Cumming was the town director of this project. He also found time to serve on several committees and was a member of the School Board, as the Board of Education was then known.

Ma was some kind of a little dynamo. She was a detachment commandant in the local Red Cross and she and her group performed yeoman's service. When the local Home Guard was organized, Ma presented the platoon with a flag that she had made. She was the first president of the American Legion Auxiliary and spent countless hours selling poppies to benefit the veterans.

One of our fondest memories is of Jim and Ma, sitting side by side in their rocking chairs on the front porch after their duties for the day were completed. It kind of gave you the feeling that everything would be all right.

Samuel and Elizabeth Snoecks were another venerable old couple. They lived in the first house on the left as you enter Catoonah Street from Main Street. The building now houses Sheer Cookery and John Annesi Tailors. It used to sit on the corner of Main and Catoonah and was moved to its present location 63 years ago when the long brick building, known as the Scott Block was constructed. [The "Scott House," moved to Sunset Lane at the turn of the 21st Century, is now the headquarters of the Ridgefield Historical Society.]

The Snoecks were affectionately called Ma and Pa and they took in boarders. I guess most every school teacher that came to town stayed at some time with the Snoecks. Among them were the highly respected Miss Ruth E. Wills and Miss Eleanor L. Burdick.

We spoke with Miss Wills the other day and she had so many fond memories of this wonderful couple. She said that Ma Snoecks was like a mother to her. As befitting her motherly ways, Ma had an angelic face and she and Pa were a Norman Rockwell picture as they sat on their front porch. Don't people ever sit on the front porch anymore?

At any rate, when Pa got very old Ma took care of all his needs and gave him tender loving care, day and night. When Pa died in 1939, Ma followed him to her just reward in a matter of hours.

Martin and Mary Dolan were another couple in the same category. They lived on the corner of High Ridge and Gilbert Street where Mrs. John Venus now lives.

Martin was an exceptionally handsome man. He was tall, with lots of snow white hair that capped a kindly face with a large white moustache. He was a gardener for Miss Mary Olcott, so you just knew he had lots of patience.

When we got to know the Dolans, Mary was almost 90 and she was about as cantankerous, or perhaps eccentric is a better word, as any person we ever knew. No matter what Mary did to annoy Martin, he never lost his temper. The man was truly a saint and we found it hard to understand how he could be so nice to someone who did so many things to provoke him.

We lived two houses away and my mother did many things for the old couple. Her explanation was that Martin remembered the days when Mary was a much nicer person.

We feel that these are three true love stories and, like the song says, "Love Is What the World Needs Now."

Incidentally, one January night in 1929 Mary died at 11 o'clock. Martin passed on three hours later.

### **#139: THE FABULOUS FLOWERS OF UPAGENSTIT**

One of the features of the F. E. Lewis estate was a large greenhouse that would match the conservatory in New York's Botanical Gardens. It was located at the northern end of what is now Fairfield Court and faced what is now Lewis Drive.

It was said that John W. Smith, who followed James Ballantyne as the superintendent of "Upagenstit" some 65 years ago, was the one who discovered the secret of growing [some species of] orchids in this country.

Jack isolated the orchid plants in a corner of the greenhouse where the humidity was high. Then, instead of just applying water directly to the plants, he sprayed the water into the air around the plants and let them soak it up.

One thing was sure, that fine greenhouse produced some of the most beautiful orchids ever grown. One in particular was named Lewis Cymbidium and it took first honors at the National Flower Show in New York at the old Grand Central Palace year after year.

There were about 16 orchid plants in the original collection. When the estate closed down in the mid 30's, Jack moved to Barry Avenue and constructed his own greenhouse. There he nurtured the original plants for many years and they flourished under his care.

We have heard that after Jack passed on, the plants accompanied Mrs. Smith to Ohio, where she went to live with her daughter. Those plants had a real history and we often wonder if they are still going.

That wonderful greenhouse was home to many exotic flowers and had one of the finest collections of roses to be found anywhere. Alex Roberti, Pompeo Roberti and Peter Serfilippi (there we go with three again) were some of the men who tended the great floral displays.

The Louis Waldarke family were very good friends of mine and I used to visit them on many occasions. They lived in the little house on the corner of West Lane and Golf Lane.

When the market crash came in 1929, the activities at "Upagenstitt," like on other large estates, slowed down considerably. It seemed like that just overnight, there was not enough money to go around, many businesses failed, and millions were out of work. Prices dropped drastically; for instance, milk went from 32 cents a quart to 10 cents and still many could not afford to buy the bare necessities. It changed the lifestyle of most everyone.

Louie Waldarke was not really a butler, or a valet. I guess you could call him a house man, or perhaps a major-domo. At any rate, he ran the operations at the mansion and the staff there was reduced, mostly through attrition.

In an economy measure, Mrs. Lewis had the Waldarke family leave their home on West Lane and move into the mansion. They were just like members of the Lewis family, who thought very highly of them.

I remember that Louis had a brace of beautiful meerschaum smoking pipes that were among many things that Mr. Lewis left to Louis when he passed on. The two hand-carved pipes were kept in padded cases about 20 inches long. When Louis showed them he never took them out of their cases and they were such works of art that he never smoked them. They were valued at \$1,500 at the time and one can only imagine what they would be worth today.

The Waldarkes had two children, Dorothy, who was a classmate of mine, and Paul, a very close friend who played saxophone in the band with me for 18 years.

On one of my visits, while this nice family were living in the mansion, they gave me, as they usually did, a bouquet of flowers to take home. It was a very dark night, as I started my walk home. As I walked happily along what is now Lewis Drive, I was clutching a large bunch of beautiful red roses.

My trip was uneventful until I reached the entrance to the greenhouse. Suddenly a gruff voice ordered me to halt and I found the muzzle of a very large revolver that was leveled within inches of my nose.

Needless to say, I was scared out of my wits. Then, as a flashlight was trained on me, there came a loud laugh from behind the gun and I recognized the holder of the weapon as Frank Miller. It was a welcome relief and I was very happy that Frank used his flashlight before pulling the trigger.

Frank Miller had been a neighbor when we lived at what is now 612 Main Street and he and his family lived just around the corner on Danbury Road, where Johnny Tulipani now has his plumbing supply store and showroom. Frank had been a harness maker by trade and he was a good one. However, he found it necessary to make the switch to night watchman for the Lewis estate, when harness-making disappeared with the horse.

Frank's granddaughter called me recently in search of information about him and we were happy to oblige. When just a very little kid, I used to toddle over to the Millers' house and watch at the basement door as Frank cut strips of leather with which he made or repaired a harness.

One of the tools he used was an awl, a sharp pointed instrument with which he made holes in the leather in order to sew it. When I asked Frank what it was and he said that it was an awl. I thought he was putting me on and asked no more questions that day.

The Lewis family owned considerable property in New York City and it was customary for them to spend the cold winter months there. Their family home was at 23 West 52nd Street and they had several other buildings on that street that became noted for its numerous night clubs, including Sherman Billingsly's famous Stork Club.

Through the years much of their property on 52nd Street was disposed of, but Mrs. Lewis refused to sell the family home. It became just about the last family residence on the street.

The house on 52nd Street had many fireplaces and they used up firewood at a very rapid rate. The wood for the fireplaces came from Ridgefield and once a week a truck made the trip to New York.

The truck was a 1915 Federal made by a firm that went out of business many years ago. It was a chain drive and had solid rubber tires. Those hard tires did not improve the riding quality of the vehicle and on a bumpy road (which most of them were), the driver might have had difficulty keeping his seat in the cab. It was also very hard to steer and the little carbide headlights were so dim that the trips to New York started real early in order that the return could be made before dark.

Fred Minnerly was the regular driver of the truck and years later Fred became one of our local policemen.

#### **#140: THE POOL, THE POND, & THE POLICE**

Wood was just one of the many products from "Upagenstit" that had to be transported from Ridgefield to the Lewis's winter home on 52nd Street. There were also such items as milk, cream, butter, ice cream, eggs, meat, and, of course, flowers from the greenhouse.

Each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, someone made the trip to New York with some of these things, especially the flowers, which went on every trip.

Finding someone to make the delivery to the City was no problem. It was a much-sought-after assignment and was much coveted by the young men who worked on the estate. The trip was made on occasion by auto when there were too many items for the

messenger to carry. However, the trip was made, in most instances, by train and Frank Minnerly was generally the lucky one who was selected to make the delivery on three mornings each week.

Frank would take the 8:15 train from our local railroad station (wish we could save that building) hard by the Ridgefield Supply Company. The train, with Frank Seymour at the controls, would arrive at the Branchville Station just in time to be connected with the 8:30 on the main line, which was then a direct to New York City. When Frank arrived at Grand Central at 9:45, a taxi would take him the rest of the way north to 23 West 52nd Street. The trains ran on time in those days.

This was a real fun trip for young Frank and he not only enjoyed the ride to the city, but was treated to a scrumptious lunch at the Lewis residence. To top it all off, Mrs. Lewis always made sure that the lucky lad always received a substantial tip for his efforts. Small wonder that there was such spirited competition, among those who might be selected to make the trip.

One of the features of the great showplace on West Lane was an Olympic-sized swimming pool, which was located just west of Manor Road on Lewis Drive. The pool was built in 1910 and was rather unique in that it was enclosed with glass.

The basement of the bath house contained a furnace that heated the enclosure in cold weather. The glass roof over the pool was so designed that it could be rolled back and opened in warm weather.

The various owners continued to use the pool for a number of years. When the property became a development in the 1950's, the surrounding homeowners all had the privilege of using the pool, which by then no longer had its glass roof, which had fallen into disrepair and was removed.

The plan worked out very well for a while and the residents enjoyed the pool a great deal. However, as time went on, unauthorized swimmers began to appear and some stayed until very late at night and then there was the inevitable vandalism. The result was that like so many good things, the pool came to an end. It was filled in and graded and seeded and another gem of a luxury item had disappeared forever. The general outline of the pool is still visible as a reminder of the glory days of the past.

Just below the pool and about 100 yards to the west of it a small stream ran through the property. There were also a number of really good springs in the area. Mr. Lewis decided that it would be an ideal place for a pond so he hired a firm to dig the nice pond that sits on the corner of Lewis Drive and Golf Lane.

The pond is probably 175 feet wide and more than 200 feet long. It was here that a little octagon shaped building served as both a boat house and bath house. When World War II started, this building was moved to where the tennis courts are now on East Ridge and housed the airplane spotters at night. After the War, the building was moved again, to Bailey Avenue where it still sits and where it has served as an office for Bacchiochi Inc.

I am not sure whether or not Lewis's pond was good for swimming but it sure made a wonderful place to skate and we skated there both day and night for many winters. It seemed like



the ponds froze over much earlier in the winters of years ago and we had some great hockey games on this pond and there was still room for those who just wanted to skate.

An American chain wire fence now encloses the pond, which I believe is now a part of Ward Acres.

It took a lot of houses to shelter families that were employed at "Upagenstit." They were located on Olmstead and South Olmstead Lanes as well as on Silver Spring Road and West Lane. Bart Keffe was the coachman for the family and lived at 70 West Lane. That would be the second house on your right as you enter West Lane from High Ridge and travel west. As autos gained in popularity, coach horses were phased out, although the draft horses were kept as well as Mrs. Lewis's four little black ponies.

Like many old coachmen, Bart had nothing but contempt for the auto, which in his opinion was an infernal machine. When he informed Mr. Lewis that he had no intention of ever learning to pilot the gasoline monster, Mr. Lewis promptly pensioned him off and gave him life use of the house at 70 West Lane.

Does anyone ever do nice things like that anymore?

Directly across from the Keffe home, there is a large three-story house at 65 West Lane. It was owned by Charles Hoyt, who also owned the large three-story house on the corner by the fountain, now the home of the Thomas McCues. The Lewis family had many weekend guests and Mr. Lewis felt that he needed more room to house them. He tried unsuccessfully to buy the house at 65 West Lane. However, Charlie Hoyt did lease the house to Lewis and whenever their weekend guests numbered more than eight, they were put up at the Hoyt house.

A few years later, in 1920, the State leased this house and established Station A, the first State Police barracks, Sgt. Buschy was the first commandant. We remember him as a rather portly individual, with a large but well-trimmed mustache that partly concealed a very stern expression.

Two young troopers who got their start here were John C. Kelly, a local boy who became state liquor commissioner and later state police commissioner and later still, Ridgefield's representative to the General Assembly, and Leo F. Carroll, who became a major and acting Commissioner of State Police and later the State Liquor Commissioner, and later still, Ridgefield's first selectman. John passed on last year and just last week Leo went to his just reward. When coupled, the distinguished careers of these men extended for more than a century.

Later, in the 20's, the State Police moved to East Ridge, where our local police are now located and the Hoyt house was sold to the Boland family who, after some 60 years, are still the owners.

#### **#141: UPAGENSTIT HAD A CHEF & DOCTOR AND HOUSES FOR THEM, TOO**

We have been telling of some of the many buildings that were connected with the operation of Frederic E. Lewis's estate, "Upagenstit." One of the most prominent buildings was allocated to the superintendent, whom Mr. Lewis felt should live in a style befitting his station in life. This large house is at 74 West Lane and is now the home of the Joseph Dunworth family.

Just west of the Dunworth residence is the entrance to Manor Estates which earlier served as the elaborate entrance to the Lewis estate. Directly across the street from this entrance is the residence of Dr. James J. O'Toole. at 83 West Lane. It is a very stylish, white house with a sun porch, enclosed with small panes of glass.

So the story goes, Mr. and Mrs. Lewis were having dinner at one of New York's famous hotels and liked the food so well that they hired the chef on the spot. This meant that the chef and his family had to move to Ridgefield.

The family took up residence on Lewis Drive in a rather small house. After a few months, the chef and his family began to get restless and word trickled back to Mr. Lewis that the family were considering a move back to the City.

Mr. Lewis, being a very practical man, bought the nice house at 83 West Lane and moved the unhappy family to the larger quarters. All talk of returning to New York quickly evaporated as soon as the chef's wife had a look at her charming new home.

Lewis sure knew how to satisfy his employees.

Right next door to the house just described there is a cluster of three two family homes. At one time there was a very large, brown-shingled house where these three buildings now stand. It had once been the home of the James Mullen family, among several others.

Mr. Lewis had as his personal physician, a New York doctor named Fiske. Each time the two men met, Dr. Fiske reminded Mr. Lewis of how fortunate he was to have such a lovely town as Ridgefield in which to make his home.

After a while, Mr. Lewis determined that Dr. Fiske would like nothing better than to move his family to Ridgefield so he bought the large house that stood at 89 West Lane.

Dr. Fiske and his family got to enjoy living here and Mr. Lewis was happy to have both his chef and his physician, living side by side directly across from the entrance to "Upagenstit."

No one should have envied Frederic E. Lewis and his great wealth for he sure knew how to use it to benefit others, and he thoroughly enjoyed doing so many nice things.

That large building on the corner of Olmstead and West Lane had kind of an interesting history. In the 1940's it was acquired by Mrs. Eloise Lindsay who proceeded to turn it into a French restaurant, called La Bretagne.

In April of 1947 there was a very bad fire that almost destroyed the building. Damage was estimated at \$40,000 and one can only imagine what it would have been by today's standards.

The necessary repairs were made and the restaurant reopened. On Feb. 27, 1960, there was a fire in a small house on Hayes Lane, just a short distance from La Bretagne. The fire occurred in the late afternoon and it was a hot one, but the firemen with their usual efficiency were successful in saving the house.

Later that evening the firemen were again summoned, this time to a fire at La Bretagne. It was felt that the second fire was caused by sparks from the first.

Whatever the reason, smoke poured from the big building and just as the firemen arrived, the whole place seemed to go up in flames. The efforts of the firemen were seriously hampered

by very low water pressure and we can remember Norman Craig holding a hose from which only a trickle of water was emitted.

To add to the problems encountered by the firemen, the weather had become terribly cold and their attempts to operate on the icy roof were fraught with danger. The ladders also quickly became covered with ice and it was indeed very fortunate that no one was seriously injured under these conditions.

This marked the end of La Bretagne and Mrs. Lindsay finally sold the place to William Peatt and soon there were three buildings where the restaurant had formerly stood.

After the Lewis family moved into their mansion on West Lane, Mr. Lewis continued buying additional parcels of land as they became available. One of these parcels was the large field, just west of the Casa-More Store. In recent years this great field has become overgrown with trees and shrubs and it might be difficult to visualize it as an open field of some 15 or 20 acres. Actually it had been several smaller fields and Mr. Lewis had the stone walls that divided it removed. It seemed large enough to have made a small airport.

For many years, Mrs. Lewis had put on a rather spectacular fireworks display on each Fourth of July. It had been the custom to stage the display on the great lawn in back of, and just to the west of, the mansion.

At this juncture this area of the lawn had a considerable slope and in the winter it was the site of a toboggan slide. The slide started at the kitchen of the mansion and went down to Lewis Drive and across the pond, which we have previously described.

Paul Waldarke used to water the slide at night, so that it would freeze to a shiny surface. The following day we would have a real fast trip, down the slide to the pond. I still have a toboggan, but I guess no one now uses them in their winter sports program.

Perhaps because of the slope or because of a need for more room, or because of a safety factor, Mrs. Lewis changed the site for the fireworks display to the large field next to Casa-More.

The fireworks were purchased locally, through Howard Thomas who at that time ran the store that is Casa-More today. They must have been the finest fireworks available and were selected for their beauty rather than the thunderous noise of some of those we see today.

There were the various sky rockets and Roman candles. etc. However, the most spectacular depicted Niagara Falls. the Statue of Liberty and, of course, the American flag. Professionals were imported to handle the setting off of the fireworks and they put on a great show.

The public was invited to attend and did so with enthusiasm. Just about everyone in town turned out for this annual event.

The show made a lot of people happy but none was as happy as Howard Thomas. Howard was once heard to say that the profit he made on the fireworks took care of all his expenses for the year and the rest of his sales were just gravy. He had good reason to be happy.

#### **#142: UPAGENSTIT'S FIELD OF FOOD AND TEAMS OF GRAND HORSES**

The large field next to the CasaMore Store had more uses than just a place to set off fireworks. A great portion of the field was allocated to growing hay for the Lewises' livestock.

You can bet that it had the nicest crop of timothy and redtop, with a little alfalfa mixed in. This called for another building in which to store the hay. So, a very large barn was constructed on the southern end of the field. It may still be there but we cannot see it, as through the years the trees have grown to a height that cuts off the view.

If you have been keeping track of the great many buildings that made up the Lewis compound, it is easy to understand why it was necessary to employ three carpenters, full-time, just to keep all these structures in good repair.

The northern end of the field was devoted to the growing of vegetables. It must have been the largest garden of its kind in the area. Just about every kind of vegetable was grown in this great garden. It was here that I first saw a watermelon actually growing.

The size of the garden is understandable when you consider that it supplied not just the Lewis family, but the families of their many employees. The garden was so productive that it developed a surplus and much of the produce was given away. That great field could probably have supplied the entire town with vegetables, at the size Ridgefield was at the time.

John Robinson, Clem Pasquarella Sr., Pat Boland, and Eugeni Fishcialetti were just some of the people that planted and tended the vegetables with loving care. They were all expert in their profession.

The family that lived in the building that is now the CasaMore Store had a good-sized grape arbor from which some very fine wine was produced. As might be expected, it soon became a very popular place for the Lewis employees to have their lunch.

As previously noted, the Lewis family had disposed of their driving horses and coach horses. However, they retained two beautiful teams of draft horses. One was a perfectly matched team of greys.

As anyone who has driven on Manor Road and Lewis Drive knows, these two wide thorough-fares have gutters on either side that are lined with white bricks. Michael Geoghan was the teamster who drove the gray team and twice daily he drove his team the length of the estate. Another employee would sweep the brick gutters and place the debris in Mike's wagon.

Everything was kept very neat at "Upagenstit." After 75 years those white bricks are still pretty much intact except where they have been removed to make entrances to the many homes that now make up the development. [Alas, the brick gutters were removed by the town in the early 2000s.]

Mike Geoghan was a very nice man, with a happy disposition that endeared him to all who knew him. He never appeared to have a worry of any kind. This made it very difficult to understand why he would ever consider taking his own life. However, early one morning, just before Christmas in 1928, Louis and Paul Waldarke were out for a walk and they found Mike hanging from a tree. He left no note and no one in his family could provide any information that would give a clue as to a reason for the tragedy.

It should be noted that there was a fine drainage system along these driveways and catch basins were installed at strategic intervals. The driveways were, of course, well constructed. They had a deep stone base and were topped with the finest blue stone and easily met the

specifications when years later the developer offered them to become a part of Ridgefield's public road system.

The roads are plenty wide enough to allow automobiles to pass each other with ease. There were beautiful street lights all along the driveways and they were very similar to the lights that flank either side of the front entrance to the Ridgefield Library. For some reason, these lights were removed when the estate became a development. Someone made a terrible mistake.

John Hobby was another teamster at "Upagenstit." John had a very fancy team of strawberry roans. He had been a driver in the Barnum and Bailey circus and knew all the tricks to make his team look their very best.

As a rule the teamsters thought more of how their horses looked than how they looked themselves. John kept the harness clean and polished the brass ornaments until they gleamed.

He had a way of spreading the horses so that their heads turned outward and they gave the appearance of being so frisky that they were ready to fly. Actually, these horses were very well trained, were quite docile and easy to handle, though they stepped higher than a blind goose walking through rye stubble.

John used to mow the expansive lawns on the estate, with his team of roans. They pulled a series of gang mowers that were very similar to those that are pulled by tractors on the golf links today.

These horses were large and they were heavy, about 1,450 pounds each. They also were fitted with sharp iron shoes. Therefore, care had to be taken to prevent the beautiful lawns from being marked up by the horses' boots. The problem was solved by using leather boots on the horses. The boots fit right over the iron shoes and the grass was protected.

Just a couple of years ago, we saw one of these leather boots hanging in the show window of Young's Feed Store and could not help but wonder if any one of the many people who passed by it, knew what its purpose was.

The mowing did not stop with the lawns. The roadsides were also kept in first-class shape and John with his roans could be seen each week, mowing along West Lane and Golf Lane.

In the ensuing years the roadside on West Lane has become overgrown with trees and bushes to such an extent as to prevent people from walking along what used to be such a very pleasant walkway.

The State of Connecticut owns the property right up to the stone wall but that did not prevent the Lewis family from maintaining it. You may be sure that it was well manicured and there was not a blade of grass out of place.

Our hope is that it will one day again become attractive and a pleasure to walk on. In the past year, of necessity, we have become a born again walker and because of that fact we have become cognizant of the many sidewalks in Ridgefield that are in a sad state of disrepair.

John Hobby liked mowing the roadsides as it gave him an opportunity to show off his classy team to passersby, many of whom stopped to admire them.

When mowing the lawn near the mansion on those warm summer days, John would rest his team under one of the enormous shade trees that dotted the area. He always made sure to stop

near the kitchen on the north end of the mansion and almost as on signal, one of the maids would appear with a cool pitcher of lemonade.

### **#143: AROUND AND INSIDE THE LEWIS CASTLE**

Frederic E. Lewis had a reputation as a man who would settle for nothing but the very best. Therefore, when it came to landscaping “Upagenstitt,” he made sure that only the choicest trees and shrubs were planted on his lovely estate. Many of the plantings were imported and 75 years later. Some of them are still being enjoyed by residents of Manor Estates.

Along Manor Road and in back of where the garage once stood, there are several clumps of very large white birch trees and they are in good shape, despite their age. Various species of evergreens and pines, both coniferous and deciduous, from the original plantings are still thriving throughout this very fine development.

Most people have a favorite tree and the Lewises were no exception. The favorite for Mr. Lewis was the mulberry tree. We remember how, in the song, it was “Round and Round the Mulberry Bush,” but actually they are a tree. There are still two magnificent specimens of the mulberry tree, just inside the main entrance on Manor Road. The largest of the two can be seen on the lawn of the Knortz family and its size certainly qualifies it as a tree. The graceful limbs of this tree descend to the ground from a height of almost 20 feet. I would say that it is the largest that I can remember ever seeing.

The oriental red maple was the favorite of Mrs. Lewis and she had both the regular and the lacy leafed variety. The regular variety grows rather slowly, but the lacy leaf grows so slow as to make it appear almost dormant. However, they are beautiful and the largest we have ever seen is on the corner of East Ridge and Prospect Street, in front of the former residence of the Ernest Brunetti family. We would hesitate to guess how old that one is.

There are several of these fine trees along Manor Road and one that will quickly catch your eye is right across from where the mansion used to stand. There is a wide turn-around at this point and this pretty lacy leaf sits on the eastern side of the turn-around. Though it is not over seven feet in height we would bet that it is over 100 years old.

All this has brought us to the site of the mansion, so it would seem appropriate that we tell about what was probably the finest structure of its kind. The entire building was encased in solid concrete and one could easily get the impression that it was intended to last forever.

The front entrance was most impressive and was protected by a very large porte-cochère, over which there was a parapet that gave it the effect of a medieval castle — and a castle it was. The massive entrance hall was open to the third floor, in the style of the Capitol, except that it was not rotund. Mr. Lewis liked everything square.

As one might expect, the main dining room was on the right, where there was easy access to the kitchen. They would not have their maids carrying food any farther than was absolutely necessary. As it was, they had to cross two other rooms, one of which was a very large butler's pantry, to reach the dining area.

At the southern end of the building, there was a glass-enclosed sunroom from which one could enjoy watching the sun disappear each evening behind West Mountain. At the northern end of this extraordinary building was a fully equipped dairy room. In between the dairy room and the sunroom were more than 40 magnificent rooms, many of them were very large.

The dairy room had a cream separator, a butter churn, a bottle washing machine and a gigantic ice cream freezer. Mrs. Lewis spent considerable time in the dairy as she had a great interest in its operation.

The milk cows at "Upagenstit" were purebred Guernseys, so the butter always had that golden yellow hue. They also made hard cheese and cottage cheese at the dairy, but the product that had the greatest appeal to Mrs. Lewis was the ice cream.

One could only guess as to how many gallons of ice cream Mrs. Lewis made with Mrs. Waldarke's help. I do know that when the estate was closing down in the early 30's, the dairy herd was sold off. This did not bring the ice cream making to an end. Mrs. Lewis just called the Conklin Dairy and ordered a 40-quart can of heavy cream. When I delivered it, she used to say that she was making the ice cream for the kids in the neighborhood. She was always doing something for someone else.

Right next to the dairy room was the laundry. It was a very large room, probably 30 feet wide and 40 feet long. It had the usual apparatus one would expect to find in a laundry, but one thing made it unique. It had a clothes dryer and this was many years before the sophisticated, automatic dryers of today. This drier was of simple design, but it did the job.

This clothes dryer was located at the west end of the laundry room and was actually a room in itself. It was as though someone had laid a huge chest of drawers on its side. There were probably 20 of these drawers and they extended the full width of the laundry floor.

Each drawer was somewhat larger than a king-size mattress standing on edge and extending from the ceiling to the floor. The end of each drawer that faced the laundry room was covered with a light shiny metal and each drawer had a metal handle, with which the drawer could be pulled out into the laundry room for some 12 feet. The drawers ran on a track that was so well engineered that a child could pull one out and push it back after it was loaded with the wet clothes.

Each drawer had a clothes rack extending from one end to the other. The floor of the dryer had several metal registers that were connected to large air ducts. The ducts carried the warm air from one of the two very large furnaces back to where it circulated through the dryer. The warm air did its job and the clothes were quickly dried. What an energy saver such a dryer would be today.

The mansion had a basement that extended the full length of the building, which must have made it at least 200 feet in length. As stated, there were two enormous furnaces and coal bins that would hold more than 60 tons of coal.

There was still plenty of room in the basement for a wine cellar of such size that it would complement the Lewis castle.

It is worthy of note that the white mansion was topped with a red roof. That large red roof was so easily identified from the air that it was said the pilots of a bygone era often used it as a landmark. Fortunately none ever tried to land on it.

#### **#144: LEWIS HAD MANY FRIENDS, INCLUDING COON HUNTERS**

At one time there were beautiful supplies of game in the wooded areas of Ridgefield. For the early settlers, game birds and game animals were actually a means of survival. For well over 200 years, a hunter could roam the woods in Ridgefield, without being overly concerned about the danger of accidentally shooting another person, or being accidentally shot himself, by a stray bullet.

During the Depression years there was a shortage of money with which to buy food and during World War II, food was scarce. During these years many local families, in an effort to make ends meet, used local game as a supplement to their food stuffs.

Ridgefield had a very active Fish and Game Society during the 20's and 30's. I recently came across one of my old membership cards (1934). The card carries the signature of my neighbor Jack O'Keefe. Jack was secretary for the society for many years.

The organization used to meet in the old Odd Fellows Hall and noted sportsmen appeared there as guest speakers. Fred Carley of Danbury, a noted photographer of wildlife, used to show movies of his many hunting expeditions.

Suddenly all this changed, as Ridgefield started to grow and the wooded areas began to disappear. My own days as a hunter ceased abruptly when shots from the guns of other hunters began whistling through the bushes on what is now the development known as Westmoreland.

Some hunters had a greater interest in fur bearing animals than those intended for the table. Edward Minnerly Sr., used to head a party of raccoon hunters that included his sons, Ed, Fred and Frank. When Frederic Lewis learned of this, he asked to accompany them.

Apparently Mr. Lewis found this nocturnal hunting to his liking and on the next hunt, he brought along a friend. On this occasion, when the hounds had treed the coon, the friend climbed the tree and attempted to shake the coon out of the tree. The limb on which he was standing broke under his weight and he landed with an injured back.

After this incident Mr. Lewis hired Walter Crissey, who was a lineman of the Electric Company, to accompany the hunters. Walter did all the climbing as he had the leg irons with the long spur that enables one to climb a utility pole.

Frederic Lewis was a very outgoing person and enjoyed the company of other people. It naturally followed that a wealthy man, with his disposition and generosity, would have a lot of friends, and he had more than his share. It mattered little that he might not know a family or individual personally. If they were in need, Mr. Lewis was right there to help, but without fanfare. If you were a friend of his, there was no length to how far he would go for you.

A town official once disappeared with a sizable amount of the town's money. The person happened to be a friend of Mr. Lewis and to no one's surprise the money was quickly replaced.



One story about Mr. Lewis was to the effect that he offered to build the original school on East Ridge and give it to the town. His affinity for things square came again to the forefront when he added a stipulation that the pillars at either side of the front entrance to the school be square. The school board at the time insisted that the pillars be round. The end result was that the taxpayers paid for the school.

It is interesting to note that there was considerable deterioration of the pillars through the years and during one of several renovations of the building, it became necessary to replace them. You guessed right — the round pillars disappeared and to this day they are square.

My father and Frederic Lewis became good friends. It may have been because of their mutual interest in the Adams Express Company. One as the local agent, the other as an owner. I'm sure that it would not be necessary to say which was which. Then again, it may have been because the two men found that they each had a penchant for bending their right elbows.

At any rate, Old Joe, the express horse, made at least one trip each day to Upagenstit. If it became necessary to make a trip late in the day, Pop would leave his assistant in charge of the office and make that delivery himself, especially if this occurred on a weekend.

It was the custom in those days to do the weekly shopping on Saturday. Most of the stores cooperated by remaining open until nine o'clock.

I was little more than a toddler at the time, but I well remember walking with my mother in front of J.E. Ryan's Store one Saturday evening when we heard the unmistakable "clip clop" of a horse approaching from south Main Street. As we crossed Bailey Avenue to the Town Hall, Mom said "That looks like Old Joe!"

Sure enough, while Pop was visiting with Mr. Lewis, Old Joe got tired of waiting and took off alone for the barn. It was rather fascinating to watch the well-trained horse, without benefit of a driver, execute a perfect left turn in Catoonah Street and, when he reached the fire house, another perfect left turn into B.E. Sperry's Livery Stable. Once safely inside, someone unharnessed him and put him in his stall.

It would be some time later that Pop would arrive home via Mr. Lewis's auto.

There is no end to the stories about Frederic E. Lewis and the nice things that he did for his friends, but one concerning George Kirk and Cyrus Cornen is certainly worthy of mention. Cy and George were good friends of Frederic and one day, just to demonstrate his friendship, he bought them each a brand new Brewster automobile. The Brewster was considered an excellent auto and I think they were made in Bridgeport. [Ed.: While the Brewsters were a Connecticut family and set up their first carriage factory in New Haven around 1810, their cars were made in Long Island City, N.Y.]

Anything as beautiful as Upagenstit should have something to protect its boundaries and to this end, Mr. Lewis decided to build a stone wall. This would be no ordinary wall; it would have to be the best and of course, true to character, he wanted it to be square. Every stone would be cut and only the flat faces would be exposed.

A firm owned by Michael Mattil of New Canaan was engaged to build the wall. Mike had a crew that sometimes numbered as many as 10 and they worked for three years to build a

wall that not only enclosed the estate but property on Olmstead and South Olmstead Lane that went with it. It must have a wonderful foundation as after all those years, it is still in excellent shape. So China has its great wall and Ridgefield has its great wall.

Finally came the day when James Ballantyne, superintendent on the estate, informed Mr. Lewis that the wall was completed. He then asked Mr. Lewis if he had anything further for the men to do.

With typical humor, he replied: "Yes, have them move the wall six inches closer to the highway."

#### **#145: REMARKABLE MARY LEWIS WAS IN A CLASS BY HERSELF**

Frederic Ellsworth Lewis was considered to be a very smart man. That fact was proven without any doubt when he married the wonderful Mary Russell.

They were certainly the ideal couple. Both were wealthy, each in their own right. Both were philanthropists in the best sense of the word. Both enjoyed doing nice things for others and both loved Ridgefield. I would even bet that they both loved Mary Pickford, "America's Sweetheart." What we are trying to say is that they had similar interests and were well-suited to one another.

One thing was sure: When they arrived in Ridgefield almost 80 years ago, they did not come here seeking their fortune. It seemed that their ambition was to enrich the lifestyle of others and this they proceeded to do with vigor.

There are always the usual cynics, who dismiss the kind deeds of people like the Lewis family by noting that they could well afford to do nice things. Fortunately, they are a distinct minority. Most people are well aware that in a community that had more than its share of wealthy people, only a select few will be remembered for their kindness to the town and its people.

We think that it is a fine thing that people who have been good to Ridgefield receive due recognition for their kindness. It is hoped that the most recent generous benefactor to the Ridgefield Library will soon be made known. Fortunately we still have a few people who are willing to help while shunning the accolades that their benevolence would surely generate.

The contribution of the Lewis family to Ridgefield should not be considered only in a monetary sense. They put their shoulders to the wheel and did their part in a physical sense as well. Any worthwhile venture was sure to attract their attention and receive their support.

Mrs. Lewis lived to be 89 and seemed to possess an extraordinary vitality that allowed her to participate in many of the local activities. Before World War I she helped to organize the local chapter of the American Red Cross and was a tireless worker for that organization. She was its first local chairman and held that post for some 30 years.

Those who worked on the staff of the Red Cross would attest to the great work performed by the chairman. They were kept informed of their duties and the goals of the organization by her personal contact. Her almost daily visits were made many times by use of her four little black ponies, drawing the little black wagon with the red wheels. It was an inspiring sight to see her

driving down Main Street to visit Mrs. William H. Allee, Mrs. David Workman, Mrs. James Cumming, or Harvey Lown.

We recall that on one occasion, when one of her ponies had a little black colt, they presented a rather unusual sight. The colt was probably only two or three months old and somehow, within minutes after Mrs. Lewis drove away from the stable, the colt managed to free itself from its stall and took off after its mother.

The colt caught up with the ponies as they entered West Lane and Mrs. Lewis continued on her way, with the colt trotting along, close to its mother's side. Fortunately the mare was on the off side so that the colt was protected from the oncoming traffic. They made an unforgettable picture.

The Red Cross was just one of many organizations to which Mrs. Lewis devoted her time and talents. The Ridgefield District Nursing Association was organized in 1914 and as one of its original organizers, Mrs. Lewis was elected chairman. The first nurse was Miss Ellen Enright and it was Mrs. Lewis who persuaded her to take the position.

Miss Enright was born on Ramapoo Road, just across from Casey Lane, in 1861. She had traveled as a nurse all over the United States and the West Indies. She was noted for her ability and was well loved for her kindly disposition. The house where she was born was once thought to be haunted and is still owned by her family. .

The fact that Mrs. Lewis provided Miss Enright with a Model T Ford coupe with which to make her rounds, may have been an inducement for her to take the job. At any rate, she was an ideal selection and served for many years. She became a household word in Ridgefield as did Miss Irene Hoyt, her very capable and well loved successor.

Mrs. Lewis reported in 1926 that Miss Enright had made 1,043 visits that year. The population at the time had not quite reached 3,000 and this would seem to indicate that in the course of the year, Miss Enright must have visited most of the families in town.

Just to show her versatility, Mrs. Lewis was chairman of a fair that was held in the old town hall to raise funds for the Ridgefield Baseball Team. As you might expect, it was a very successful affair.

Mrs. Lewis was very modest and avoided taking credit for many of the nice things that she did for people. However, though she did not elicit or in any way encourage a thank-you for bestowing a gift, she must have had her own method of keeping track of her acts of kindness.

When they were youngsters, all seven of the Venus boys had their own newspaper route. They also all had the good fortune to have the Lewis family as a customer. Orders were that the papers should be delivered to the front door. On occasion this posed a problem in the spring of the year, when shoes might be muddy.

Despite the mud, it was always necessary for the paper boy to enter and sit in the great hall, while Mrs. Lewis herself served hot cocoa and cookies. She always seemed to get particular enjoyment from this little act of kindness. Then at Christmas there was always a very nice present for the lucky boy.

My brother William left Ridgefield in 1915 to seek his fortune. He went on to become superintendent of the Jewel Alloy and Malleable Steel Company in Buffalo, N.Y. There was a wedding in the family in 1940 and Bill came with his family to attend the event.

On the morning of the wedding, Bill came out of Shorty's Barber Shop (now James of Ridgefield). Mrs. Lewis came out of Harvey Lown's office next door (Craig's Jewelry Store). Bill was overjoyed to see his old friend after 25 years. As he said "good morning," Bill added that he did not expect Mrs. Lewis to remember him.

"Oh yes, you are one of the Venus boys."

Bill said "You certainly would not know which one."

"Yes, you are Willy," said the great lady.

Bill was astonished even more when Mrs. Lewis pointed out that he was wearing a stick pin in his tie that she had given him for Christmas so many years before.

Mrs. Lewis was close to 80 at the time and proved again that this remarkable lady was in a class by herself.

#### **#146: REGGIE AND WADDY AND THE GREAT, OLD BASEBALL GAMES**

So we have been telling about some of the nice things that Frederic and Mary Lewis did for Ridgefield and many of its people. As might be expected, their two sons, Reginald Mentourn Lewis and Wadsworth Russell Lewis, were sure to follow in their footsteps. The apple does not fall far from the tree.

We have no specific acts of philanthropy that could be credited to Reggie, as he was still a young man when he moved with his wife and children to Norfolk, Conn. However, we are confident that it was our loss and Norfolk's gain.

Before leaving Ridgefield, Reggie had purchased and developed the former Richard Keeler farm on South Salem Road. This beautiful place was described in previous columns. It spread over some 100 acres that stretched on the north side of South Salem Road from Cedar Lane west and north to Peaceable Street and east to Golf Lane.

It was a showplace in its own right. Reggie's mansion still stands directly across from Cedar Lane and is now [1985] the home of the Harry Neumann family [at 100 South Salem Road].

Both Reggie and Waddy were early enlistees in World War I. In fact, before enlisting as a yeoman in the Naval Reserve, Reggie had volunteered and performed service in the American Ambulance Corps.

When the Reginald Lewis family moved to Norfolk in the late 20's, the estate was purchased by Robert P. Scripps, of the famous publishing family. In subsequent years, it was the home of the Zinssers, the Wards, the Sosseis and now the Neumanns.

With World War I raging in Europe and the entrance of the United States expected at any time, Wadsworth Lewis donated his yacht to the Navy Department. Later on, this country became a participant and Waddy enlisted in the U.S. Navy. He was given command of his former yacht and put on patrol duty in New York harbor.

In a short time, Waddy lost interest in the routine duties of harbor petrol and requested a transfer to something that would provide more excitement. He was sent to Washington and assigned to the Intelligence Service, serving in the Censoring Department of the War College, with the rank of lieutenant.

Waddy was fond of sports and was an avid golfer. In the mid-20's, he got involved with the Ridgefield baseball team and soon became its sponsor. Bob Richardson was manager of the team and was assisted by Larry "Pudd" Davis and Joe Zwierlein. I was the bat boy for the team and still carry a scar over my left eye as a reminder that hitters, when taking their practice swings, should be given plenty of room.

Bob Richardson was the cashier in the First National Bank (now Union Trust [Wells Fargo]) and was a good friend of Waddy. No doubt it was Bob who got Waddy involved with the baseball club. At any rate, the team was the beneficiary of the support of this kind man.

Waddy bought uniforms for the players as well as the various pieces of equipment that they needed. The larger surrounding towns, such as Danbury and Norwalk, were always sure of intense competition when they played the fine Ridgefield team.

Two members of the great Ridgefield teams of that era are still around. Tabby Carboni and Frank Minnerly were both infielders and both are in excellent shape today.

Tabby (like in cat) was noted for his juggling act before throwing to first base to catch the runner by a half step. He also had the uncanny ability to throw the bat at the ball and bunt a dribbler and then his great speed would enable him to get on base in most instances. Later on Tabby's brothers Peter, Lynce and Reno, would follow in his footsteps.

Frank Minnerly was a fine fielder and a real power hitter and could hit for an extra base more often than not. Like Tabby. Frank came from a family of good baseball players.

Both Ed and Fred Minnerly were fine pitchers and Harry (Tige) Minnerly was famous for roaming left field at East Ridge. That field dropped off so sharply that the crowd could not see whether or not a fly ball was actually caught. We will always remember how convincing Tige was as he charged up the hill with the ball held high in his right hand to indicate that he had caught it. I doubt if he was ever challenged.

In an effort to make the team even better, semi-pro players were hired and added to the local roster. Then toward the end of the season, when players from the big leagues were available, pitchers such as Bots Nekola from the New York Yankees and Buck Weaver from the Washington Senators would appear for the local team.

Danbury would counter with Jimmy Ring from the New York Giants and Roy Sherid from the Yankees. You can bet that just about everyone in town turned out for these games. You can also bet that it was Waddy Lewis who was able to lure these stars to our little town.

We can remember a game at Lee field in Danbury when more than 5,000 fans crowded into the ballpark. Almost half the crowd came from Ridgefield and they traveled by bus, by truck or any other conveyance that would get them to see and cheer for the Ridgefield team. They should have called them Waddy's All Stars.

It is always nice to see a well-pitched ball game and a stolen base adds to the excitement. but a home run seems to be the thing that the fans enjoy most. Perhaps because of that fact, one day at East Ridge, Waddy offered a five dollar bill to each local player that hit a homer.

The offer was only a few minutes old when a conference with the opposing pitcher was held behind the old grandstand. The result was an eruption such as has seldom been seen on any ballfield. Baseballs began to rain on Governor Street and some even reached the lawn of the State Police barracks.

They were not fooling Waddy — he was well aware that he was being taken. However, he enjoyed the demonstration as much as the players and the fans and he had a broad smile as each crack of the bat sent the ball soaring in the air.

Wadsworth R. Lewis, like his parents, was always giving something to one of his many friends. It was Waddy that gave Alex Santini the famous putter that Alex used, not only for putting, but for driving and pitching as well, and was able to beat other good golfers who used a complete set of clubs.

Waddy's greatest gift was to the town that he loved when he left what has come to be known as the Lewis Fund. This remarkable bequest has meant so much to so many worthwhile local organizations.

Probably there are only a few members of these organizations that would remember Waddy, but all must be grateful and so we say “Thank you. Waddy.” He was a fine man and will not be forgotten.

#### **#147: THE REVOLUTIONARY, THE VIOLINIST & THE CHICKEN HOUSE CONCERT**

So, to invoke an old cliché that says all good things must come to an end, the days of the palatial showplace known as “Upagenstit” seemed to be numbered. Its demise may have been caused by a number of circumstances.

Mr. Lewis had passed on some 15 years before and Reginald and his family had moved to Norfolk, and then the Great Depression had settled in. Mrs. Lewis courageously kept the beautiful place going during the first five years of those troubled times, but the burden must have been too great.

The place was put on the market and, like so many great estates during this period, “Upagenstit” would bring only a fraction of its real worth. It was sold in 1934 to Ely Culbertson who, as they used to say, “got it for a song.”

Culbertson was a rather controversial character and had received a considerable amount of notoriety for his activities as a revolutionist, as well as a great deal of acclaim for his ability in the game of Contract Bridge.

Ely was born in Romania in 1891, the son of Almon and Xenia. Almon Culbertson was an oil engineer and was born in this country but traveled to the Caucasus to prospect for oil. While there he met Xenia, a Cossack, and married her. It was said the Ely learned the rudiments of revolutionary life shortly after taking his first step.

To Ely's credit, it should be noted that he was a proponent of world peace. However honorable his intentions were, his methods of achieving that highly desirable goal were questionable. Ely Culbertson spent a considerable amount of time in jail for his activities in the revolutionary field. He plotted revolutions in Russia, Spain, and Mexico as well as several other countries.

His first wife, Nadya, was also a revolutionist and in one of their bouts with the ruling forces she was murdered by The Black Hundreds [an early 20th Century Russian movement that supported the czars].

Ely was jailed again after an unsuccessful attempt to murder a local governor and this activity annoyed his father a great deal. When he was released from jail, Almon decided to send his son to the United States.

Ely attended both Yale and Cornell, for short periods, but failed at both. He turned his attention to the game of bridge as a means of raising money to finance his revolutionary tactics.

True to his accepted lifestyle, he revolutionized the game. His method of bidding in contract bridge was scoffed at by the experts at that time. However, they could not deny his success and soon he became a member of the international bridge team.

His match with Sidney S. Lenz in 1931 lasted for six weeks and made the front pages of newspapers across the country. The famous match was even aired on the radio and became the subject of newsreels. Ely won the match and was on his way to fame and fortune.

Josephine Murphy Dillon was a young widow at the time, and was also an expert bridge player. She and Ely were married and became partners at the card table as well. They proved to be just about unbeatable.

Ely then turned his hand to writing and soon became editor of the periodical, The Bridge World Magazine. He also wrote several books, some of which became best sellers, including The Contract Bridge Blue Book.

The game of bridge requires a player to have considerable skill and up to Culbertson's time had been pretty much relegated to intellectuals. Ely seemed determined to change all that. His prowess at the game and his books on the subject, with all the attendant publicity, caught the public's fancy during those gray depression days. This also made Ely a millionaire.

Culbertson had set his sights on raising money for his international political aspirations but apparently decided to divert some of his fortune for his family's pleasure. Therefore, he purchased "Upaginstit" and moved with his wife Josephine, his daughter Joyce Nadya, his son Bruce Ely and his brother, Sasha, to the great showplace on West Lane.

Sasha was a concert violinist and considered to be a very good one. Bob Scala tells a funny story about Sasha. Bob was just a little boy when the Scala family rented one of the houses on the estate, on Lewis Drive. According to Bob, Sascha encountered difficulties with the acoustics in the mansion.

Sasha's problem was easily understandable because the beautiful tapestries that had once lined the walls of the great house had been removed prior to its sale. Those bare walls were

bound to play tricks with the notes that flowed through the house from Sasha's Stradivarius. His music was distorted to such an extent that Sasha flatly refused to perform again in the mansion.

As Bob Scale tells it, there came a time when a dozen or two guests arrived at the mansion for a weekend visit. They had been friends and admirers of Sasha when he lived in New York and after a fine dinner and a few glasses of wine they expressed a desire to hear Sasha and his Stradivarius.

Sasha was always willing to oblige, but informed his friends of the impossibility of performing in the mansion because of its undraped walls. There were exclamations of disappointment from the guests, to such an extent that Sasha offered to play for his friends but there would have to be a change in venue.

After much deliberation Sasha agreed to move his act to a chicken house that was some distance from the mansion. The chicken house was made entirely of wood and could be expected to furnish the complementary acoustics.

The guests readily agreed and were bundled into several automobiles for the ride across the estate to the chicken house. However, once there another problem was encountered. The building was already occupied by some 30 or 40 chickens.

Undaunted, the guests joined hands and herded all the chickens into one end of the large building. They then took turns keeping the chickens from returning to the area where Sasha would perform.

Alas, another problem cropped up, in the person of a large Rhode Island Red rooster. This uncanny bird had the ability to crow about an octave above what Sasha could coax from his fiddle.

Sasha, of course, was outraged at the audacity of this cantankerous fowl and refused to continue. The dilemma was finally solved when one of the guests had the presence of mind to open the door of the chicken house and allow all the chickens to run free.

#### **#148: HOW ELY LOST UPAGENSTIT AND 'CHIEF' HELPED AT WAR**

It was only after the Culbertson family moved into the great mansion that they learned that the purchase price did not include the tremendous cost of maintaining such a large estate. This was a common misconception on the part of many people who were buying up large estates whose former owners had been victims of the Depression.

For example, during that first autumn, Ely Culbertson, in preparation for the coming winter, ordered five tons of coal. What he did not realize was that this amount of coal was little more than enough to just light the two huge furnaces in the basement of the mansion. Before that first winter was over, a great deal more coal would be delivered to satisfy the voracious appetites of those furnaces.

The fact that to maintain an estate such as Upagenstit one must have a considerable amount of capital in reserve was brought home to Ely Culbertson in no uncertain terms.

In an effort to raise the necessary cash to keep the place going, Ely and Josephine continued their bridge matches. Ely also kept on with his writing of books as well as his



syndicated newspaper column on his favorite card game. However, domestic problems cropped up as Ely and Josephine agreed to disagree and soon were divorced.

Things continued to go from bad to worse and to augment his income, Ely wrote his autobiography, "The Strange Lives of One Man." He proved to be a rather prolific writer and followed up with "The World Federation Plan," "Total Peace," "Must We Fight Russia," "Hoyle, The New Encyclopedia of Games," and "Point Count Bidding."

Ely had retained an abiding interest in the affairs of state and while in Ridgefield decided that he would enter the political arena. He made a run for the nomination of the Democratic Party candidate for Congressman at large. His bid was unsuccessful, though he had the support of the local party organization. He was very confident that he had something worthwhile to offer and was very disappointed at his failure to secure the nomination.

Ely's plan for world peace was set forth in several of his books and in some ways it was similar to what later would become the United Nations. His plan called for a general assembly as well as a security council. He also envisioned an international police force, the members of which would be recruited from smaller countries.

In Dispatch 137 we described the huge garage that F. E. Lewis had built just north of the mansion. In the late 30's a fire of suspicious origin broke out in this fine building and the flames were quickly squelched by our ever efficient fire department. A few months later, a second fire seemed to have a much better start and this time the great building was completely destroyed.

Ely's winning ways at bridge had taken a definite downturn to such an extent that feelings were brushed to one side and Josephine returned, at least as his bridge partner. Despite the maneuvering, there was still not a sufficient cash flow to keep the estate going and it finally became necessary for the Lewis family to take back a great portion of Upagenstit.

The Culbertson family had meanwhile moved into the Dunworth home on West Lane, which they retained after completion of the foreclosure proceedings. This large house must have seemed like a doll house after living in the mansion.

The financial problems that Ely had encountered must have continued to plague him, even after he relinquished more than 90% of the estate. His milk bill at the Conklin Dairy rose until it was out of proportion and I was sent to collect it.

The negotiations with Ely turned out to be a replay of my trade with Mike Massamino, the barber, as related in Dispatch 84. When Ely declared that he just could not pay the bill, we exhibited a willingness to take a partial payment. Soon he was offering some household effects as a means of satisfying a portion of the bill.

A badly worn out Atwater Kent radio did not appear to have much of a monetary value and a copy of his book "The World Federation Plan" did not strike a responsive chord. However, we had noticed a nice young dog tied to a tree.

The dog turned out to be a fine looking, registered German shepherd. She was exceptionally nervous and we learned later that she had been born on a ship on the high seas during a terrible electrical storm and this may have been a reason for her nervous condition.

It may also have been a reason for Ely's willingness to part with her. It was several months before "Queenie" quieted down and began to enjoy life. A year later she was bred to a handsome show dog and the result was two beautiful puppies, Major and Chief.

Major was very good natured, as well as highly intelligent and remained a valued member of our family for some 15 years. We parted with Chief when he was two months old, but never lost track of him.

Chief was rather aggressive and his owner placed him in the Canine Corps while he was still a young dog. Apparently he performed yeoman's service during World War II. The Bridgeport Sunday Post devoted a full page to Chief, describing his exploits while in the service. There was also a picture of him wearing a string of medals around his neck as he stepped from a Liberator bomber that flew him home from Tokyo.

However, Chief's military training made him unfit for civilian life, though several attempts were made to debrief him. Whenever he saw a soldier in uniform, he tried his best to accompany him and would refuse to leave his side. If an airplane should fly over, he would dive for the nearest cover and refuse to emerge until all was clear.

In the meantime, Upagenstit was put back on the market by the Lewis family. In the next few years the great place would change ownership, as well as its personality, several times.

The fine wide roads that were formerly driveways, the white brick gutters, and the beautifully landscaped lawns with some of the remaining exotic shrubbery are gentle reminders of the glory days of this magnificent estate.

#### **#149: WHEN RIDGEFIELD WAS A COLLEGE TOWN**

So once again "Upagenstit" was placed on the market and a rare opportunity was repeated. This time the place captured the attention of the directors of a girls school that was operating in nearby Stamford.

Jessie Callum Gray had founded the school about the time of World War I as a college preparatory school for girls. The school was named for its foundress and proved to be very successful. Soon more room was needed.

The need to expand was satisfied when Upagenstit became available, and Gray Court College was established in Ridgefield. The school was considered a welcome addition to Ridgefield as it seemed an ideal use for the large estate.

The school purchased only a portion of what had been the Lewis estate. Its holdings would include the mansion and some 40 acres, along with many of the outbuildings and the pond.

Gray Court College opened in May of 1941 and a bunch of very happy girls moved into the old mansion to enjoy the luxuries it had to offer. The faculty turned out to be quite innovative. As an example, it is doubtful if classrooms had ever before been held under the glass of a conservatory, or study halls conducted in a glass-covered swimming pool. One thing was for sure, the girls would not lack for vitamin D.

The mansion was dubbed Lewis Hall and it served as a dormitory, a library, a lounge for the students, a dining room, as well as furnishing offices for the President and the dean and other administrators. The converted conservatory was called Crystal Hall and the former greenhouse became Cummings Hall. As well as classrooms, Cummings Hall also furnished the students a very unusual art studio.

Baker Hall was a portion of the greenhouse devoted to the study of science. No name was assigned to the swimming pool. It was just known as "The Pool," but what fun it must have been to use this most unique study hall. Fifteen minutes of study and twenty in the water may not produce a Madame Curie, but there was always the possibility of another Esther Williams.

The house on West Lane where the Dunworth family now lives was called Culbertson House and was reserved for the family use of the college president.

The pleasant environment at Gray Court College was enjoyed by both the students and the faculty. They had fine tennis and basketball courts, an open expanse suitable for field hockey, baseball, soccer and badminton, as well as an archery range. The skating pond was popular during the winter months and of course The Pool was used in all seasons of the year.

The Silver Spring Country Club had recently been constructed and was available for girls interested in golf. Bill Patten started a riding stable on the nearby farm that had been built by Reggie Lewis. Many of the girls were interested in riding and it was great to see them with their horses in groups of three or four. Traffic was not heavy as it is today and they used the main highways as well as the bridle trails that had been built.

Much to the delight of the boys of Ridgefield, students were permitted to visit the business area of town at regular scheduled intervals. Their appearance on Main Street always caused a big stir and there were just not enough boys to go around.

Our dance band played for one of their proms and it was a very gala affair. On this occasion, boys were imported from such exclusive schools as Choate and Canterbury. However, some of the girls insisted on inviting boys they had met on their visits to town.

From all this, it would seem reasonable to assume that the student body at Gray Court came from families that were not really concerned about where their next meal would come from. It is interesting to note that the charge of \$875 [about \$14,100 in 2021] for the school year included tuition in all departments, a furnished room, meals and use of the facilities, such as the library, athletic fields and the swimming pool.

For all the things furnished, the price may seem so low as to be ridiculous. However, the year was 1941 and the country was still feeling the effects of the Depression.

Alas, the fine school enjoyed only a relatively short life and probably encountered difficulty in operating because of restrictions brought on by World War II. Whatever the reason, we lost something that could have been nice for Ridgefield.

Once again "Upagenstitt" was put on the market and once again, its character would change. This time, the grand old mansion would become an exclusive inn and restaurant.

It seemed an ideal purpose for the great building. There were an ample number of fine bedrooms, a large and beautiful dining hall and a kitchen that was as well equipped as the very finest of hotels.

An important part of that kitchen equipment was a young chef named Walter Tode. Walter had mastered the culinary arts and was starting a reputation that would take him to one of the major airlines (TWA) as the director of food preparation.

Along the way Walter discovered and developed a very special sauce. This sauce was so good that when it was poured over any old piece of meat, that meat was transformed into a dish fit for a king.

Despite Walter's growing popularity and the euphoniousness of the name "Ridgefield Country Club," business was not of sufficient volume to keep the place going. The idea for this type of hostelry was a good one. However, it was apparently just a little bit ahead of its time. One can only imagine the impact that such an inn would have in Ridgefield today.

No doubt, the fact that the effects of World War II were still being felt was an impediment to the successful operation of such a large enterprise. At any rate, the day finally came when Ridgefield Country Club ceased to exist and the big house looked very sad again. Perhaps when he named it "Upagenstit" so many years before, Frederic Lewis was looking into the future. The mansion had seen many happy days, but without people to fill the rooms it took on a very depressed appearance.

So the club closed and Chef Tode took over the former Ingersoll house on West Lane that Chris Kane had been operating as the Kane Inn. It was renamed Tode's Inn and today it is known as The Inn at Ridgefield [Bernard's].

### **#150: ESPIONAGE AND EXPLOSIONS MARKED END OF UPAGENSTIT**

Some folks like to speculate on what might have been. Before all the numerous changes of ownership and the varied roles played by "Upagenstit," two friends of ours were offered the opportunity to purchase the great estate. The price was so very attractive, they gave it serious consideration. However, their available cash had been invested in a business venture. Added to that was the problem of what to do with that great expanse of real estate.

It was with great reluctance that the young men decided to devote their energies and resources to the business in which they were already engaged. Had they taken the plunge, it was agreed that the mansion would be retained for some useful purpose. The word "condominium" had not yet achieved common usage as it has today, perhaps because it sounded so much like condemn.

At any rate, after serving as a home for the Lewis family and the Culbertson family, as a college for girls, as The Ridgefield Inn, as the Ridgefield Country Club and The Ridgefield Health Resort, it was now on the market again. The news at its availability spread for miles around and a group that called itself The Jewish Fraternal Order became the new owners of what was left of the great showplace.

Very little was known about this organization and stories about its plans for use of the place ran rampant around the town. Some had it connected with the Garment Workers Union. Others had it serving as a base for a network of espionage activities. At the least, there was an aura of mystery about the new owners that many local people found to be very intriguing.

Young people, who had been accustomed to playing on the spacious lawns that surrounded the empty mansion, now found that they must find other places for their games. A guard patrolled the premises and his demeanor was not of the variety that would attract the little ones to his side.

One of our children wrote an essay for his English class concerning the activities around the mansion. The teacher said that it would compare favorably with the best of Ellery Queen.

Most of the supplies used at the mansion were imported from New York City. The few deliveries made by local merchants brought fresh stories that just added to the perplexing puzzle that was rapidly forming. The deliverymen were always met at the service entrance and none gained admittance to areas that had been so familiar in years past.

One person who had the temerity to make his call at the main entrance returned with the story that when the door opened he could see a picture of Josef Stalin hanging in the entrance hall. The story created renewed speculation as to the intentions of the organization and it was substantiated by others who were employed on the place. One thing was sure: The traffic to the mansion was several times greater after dark than during the daylight hours.

As huge as the mansion was, it apparently was not big enough to suit the plans of the new owners. Soon they were seeking approval of a plan to erect a very large addition to the southern end of the building. This was in March of 1953.

The proposed addition was to serve as a kind of convalescent home for members of the organization. It caused quite a stir in the community.

Since the request was actually for an extension of a nonconforming use, it was properly turned down by the Zoning Commission. The case was then referred to the Zoning Board of Appeals, and I happened to be secretary of that august board at the time.

Though there was great interest among the townspeople, I think they were outnumbered at the public hearing on the matter by the battery of high-powered attorneys that represented the applicants.

Some members at the Board of Appeals appeared to be duly impressed by the large delegation of legal beagles. However, a decision on this important matter was wisely deferred for a week. By the time the week had elapsed and members of the board had given the proposal sufficient thought, the application was denied by unanimous vote. It is with pride that I still carry a scar from that incident.

There was some talk of an appeal, but the matter was settled rather permanently when the applicants were judged to be a subversive organization and it was disbanded by court order.

So once more "Upagenstit" was up for sale. It seemed as though the saga of the great place was a reminder of Anna Sewall's excellent novel about Black Beauty and we kept hoping that a kindly owner would come along and restore it.

In the 1950's, Ridgefield was in the process of being rediscovered. The demand for additional housing was rapidly rising. Developments were springing up in various parts of town and homes were being purchased as fast as they appeared.

A development group came to town and promptly labeled itself Ridgefield Manor Estates. The president of the group was Harold F. Benel and the vice president was Howard J. Viele. They could see the great potential offered by the beautiful estate on West Lane and quickly acquired the ownership. The group brought with them a good reputation for building quality homes and attracting families of more than a moderate income.

When the subdivision plans of this organization were presented to town authorities, they experienced little difficulty in having them accepted. Home buyers welcomed the idea of living in such a beautifully landscaped area, and doesn't everyone want to live in Ridgefield?

The great pool was theirs to share with their neighbors, though the glass top had been removed by now.

The problem of what to do with the mansion remained, and after some time it was decided to tear it down. This was a sad day for Ridgefield.

Eliminating the great mansion would prove to be more difficult than anticipated. F.E. Lewis built things that were intended to last.

A firm from Mt. Kisco was engaged to remove the building and they had the salvage rights. I remember that huge machine with the long boom and the long cable and steel ball that were suspended from it. The ball was swung with terrific force time and again against the side of the building and it failed to even crack it. Finally, in desperation, many charges of dynamite had to be used and Fredric Lewis must have smiled at the efforts of the wreckers.

At any rate, this fine development is a credit to the town.