

# 'Dick's Dispatch'

## Columns 26 through 50

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

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### **#26: TOM KEHOE'S BIG MACHINES; 'SNEAKY PETE' FROM THE SILO**

Just south of the old Victorian is another large house and barn. This is now the home of George Schuster. Once the Otto Seemann family lived here. In the 20's, Grover and Mrs. Phelan and their children, Elsie, Marion, Harry, and Ray made their home here.

Harry was employed for many years as superintendent of the D.T. Bulkley estate, and passed on just a few years ago. Ray lived most of his life in Ridgefield and then headed for warmer climates about two or three years ago.

From the Phelans' house to the Titicus River Bridge, during the 20's, was just an empty lot. The very nice house that stands there now is owned by Rico Casavechias.

Just across the bridge and opposite Titicus Store is a large two-family house, and, at the time we are covering, it housed the Brennan and Clark families. At one time this house had a North Salem Road address. Since then it has been changed to 2 Mapleshade Road, with some justification, I would say.

Next door and just east of this house, at the top of a little grade, was the home of the Thomas Kehoe family. It was the only house on Mapleshade at the time. Of course there were no houses on the south side of the road as this was the old cemetery. Mrs. Kehoe still lives in Ridgefield and this very pleasant little lady still gets around very well.

Tom Kehoe had a very large team of horses. He also had a lot of heavy machinery, and the horses were used to pull it from place to place. Tom always had a good reason for everything and when asked why he always bought such big horses, replied that he had found out many years before that big horses could do heavy work and light work, whereas the smaller horses could not do the real heavy work. He was a big man so perhaps his reply was making a second point that referred to himself.

Tom was very mechanically inclined and should be considered as a contractor of sorts. He was hired by many farmers and by wealthy people who had farms on their estates, whenever the use of heavy machinery was required. During the haying season, he mowed the hay and transported it to the barns and their haylofts, for storage. There were no hay balers in Ridgefield at the time so the work was all done by hand with pitchforks.

Later in the summer, Tom would reappear with a reaper and binder that he used to harvest cereal grains such as oats, wheat, etc. This wondrous machine would cut the crop and then tie it in bundles for easy handling.

He also had a huge threshing machine that separated the grain from the chaff. The grain came out of one side of the machine and was put into bags for storage. The chaff came out of the opposite side and was used for bedding the livestock.

In the fall, Tom was again available. This time it was with his corn harvester. This machine had a small wheel on one side and a large wheel with a heavy ribbed-tread on the other. It was so hard to pull that it generally took three horses to do the job. This machine had a chute, on either side of which was a sharply pointed nose. The noses straddled the row of corn with the chute directly over the row. In the middle of the chute was a large knife which rotated back and forth, cutting the stalk about six inches above the ground. The corn stalks then passed through the chute to the rear of the machine where they were tied into bundles and loaded onto the wagons.

The ears of corn remained on the stalks and the bundles, or sheafs as some might call them, were then transported to the silo. Here another of Tom's machines, an ensilage blower, would be waiting to devour the stalks and ears of corn. A conveyor belt carried the corn into the mouth of the blower where more knives cut the stalks in pieces an inch or two long. The knives were attached to large fans, which were whirling with tremendous speed and blowing the corn with centrifugal force, up a pipe and into the top of the silo.

This machine was the forerunner of today's leaf blower, or air rake, as some call it. In fact, leaves are blown today, from large areas such as on a golf course, by a machine exactly like the ensilage blower, except that it has no knives.

The most popular ensilage blower of the time was called "The Blizzard." Those who worked inside the silo would attest that it was aptly named. These men had to keep the silage leveled off and tramped down. The corn came in through the pipe with wind that had been generated to hurricane velocity. The shower of corn that descended on those working inside was certainly mindful of a blizzard.

The blower was powered by a large and very heavy gasoline engine. This engine would be a collector's item today. It was mounted on a chassis that rolled on four iron wheels. It had a pulley on one side from which an endless belt extended to the blower some 30 feet away. On the other side of the blower was a huge balance wheel. It took someone with the strength of Hercules and the ingenuity of a master mechanic, just to start the engine. To keep it going required additional talents.

Tom Kehoe was equal to any situation and when a breakdown occurred, he always came up with a solution. It was good that he was able to do this as when the blower was idle, so were anywhere from 10 to 15 men.

In later years, tractors were used to power the blower. This greatly simplified the entire operation.

Once inside the silo, the corn silage would start to ferment and did so all through the winter months. The odor emanating from the silo during this process was not unlike that from a brewery. There were those who tapped the bottom of the silos. They collected the juice from the corn that resulted from the fermenting process. The juice was then distilled into what then became corn whiskey. Because of the potency of this powerful liquor, it was called "Sneaky Pete" by some who had sampled it.

So the corn operation was popular with the cows, who were kept warm and happy by the silage. It was equally popular with those who were kept warm and happy by the strong liquid by-product. It should be remembered that these were prohibition days.

At any rate, Tom Kehoe had all the machinery that was necessary to process food-stuffs for the livestock and he had to move this equipment from farm to farm and estate to estate. Because of the size of the machines, Tom would do the moving part in the very early morning hours when there was practically no traffic. It was not unusual to see him, perched high atop his threshing machine, with the oil lantern swinging to and fro under the rear axle, at 2 or 3 'o'clock in the morning.

There was something very exciting about all the activities that occurred at harvesting time. It might even have been considered glamorous to a young boy growing up at the time. Perhaps he may have known in some way that he was witnessing something that would soon pass from the scene, never to be seen again. There are no more farms around this area, where reaping, binding, and threshing are carried on. Silos are still being filled, but generally with grass silage rather than corn. I guess that Dan McKeon is the only one left in Ridgefield who still fills a silo.

You can believe that all of the operations we have mentioned were actually an awful lot of hard work. However, the strenuous effort put forth was balanced by the satisfaction of knowing that the winter supply of fodder was safely stored away.

## **#27: BAD SMELLS AND GOOD SOUNDS OF THE TITICUS STORE IN THE 20s**

On the southeast corner of Mapleshade and North Salem Roads stands the building that was once the Titicus Store. During the 20's, the store was owned and operated by Shoman Elliss.

Shoman was not a showman, as the name seems to suggest, although the pronunciation is the same. Actually he was a very quiet, retiring sort of person. Shoman bought the store from a Mr. Thomas, just 60 years ago. The second story of the building was provided with living quarters so he had a rather compact operation.

The business itself was that of a typical country general store. There were clothes for sale and tools and groceries and vegetables and lots and lots of candies. Probably most of the customers were kids as the proximity of the store and Titicus School had to be a plus for Shoman.

The store had several peculiar and very distinctive odors, depending upon the area in which you were standing. Two of the odors were rather rank. The vegetables and groceries seemed to be all right, but the clothes needed something, perhaps a good airing. The smell from the penny candy was very definitely not fragrant. It had an adverse effect on me and I just could not eat any of this candy, even if they were five for a penny.

It was necessary for me to have some justification for entering the store so I saved my pennies that would have been wasted on candy. When my grubstake reached the grand total of five pennies, they were exchanged for a nickel. Now we were ready to treat ourself to the most melodious music to be heard anywhere.

The most beautiful, most interesting and most attractive single item in Titicus Store, for me, was a machine that I guess was properly called a nickelodeon. This mechanized piano was so intriguing to a little boy that, though the cost of putting it in motion was a whole nickel, we would have gladly paid more, even a dime.

When you looked at this marvelous exhibition of engineering, you had no way of knowing that the enclosed, intricate machinery would lead to the ultimate development of the computers we have today. We were enraptured by the wondrous melodies that emanated from Titicus Store's contribution to the world of culture.

If all of this has not stirred your interest, then try to imagine a very fine piano, from which the front has been removed. It is replaced by stained and leaded glass. The center of the glass is clear but the little square of clear glass is surrounded by glass of various colors, mostly red, green and yellow.

After depositing your nickel, you were then privileged, not only to hear the great music that poured forth, but you could also witness its operation. As you peered through the little square of clear glass you would be astounded to actually see a drum being played by some unknown force, a banjo being strummed by some invisible hand, as well as the piano hammers, rising and falling, apparently without benefit of any human participation.

There was a light inside the nickelodeon that gave a good view of the contents and, thankfully, it did not blink on and off as would be the case today if rock (music?) were being played. Come to think of it, this fine, aristocratic, musical instrument would undoubtedly refuse to play rock.

Titicus Store, for the most part, had a kind of tranquil atmosphere. Neighborhood people would meet there and converse on matters of mutual interest. Kids would march in and out with their penny candies, etc. Of course there were the usual neighborhood pranksters as well as a few real characters who would liven things up once in a while. Their actions always provided food for discussions at the store.

Lou and Sandro Feduzi were little boys living across the road from the store. They once witnessed a local horse trader trying to drive his horse and buggy into the store. Several attempts were made and the horse finally did make it inside the store. However, the buggy was just too wide to go through the door. So there was the horse inside the store and Charley with his buggy outside on the little porch. Eventually the project was abandoned, much to the relief of poor Shoman, who had stood quietly by, hoping that his store would not be wrecked.

The old store was started way back in the last century and has had several owners. At one time it actually served as a district post office. D. Smith Sholes was postmaster of Ridgefield at the time and handled the main office in the center of town business area. The eternal problem of operating space for Ridgefield's postal facilities was in effect at the time. The main office had been moved time and again but the problem remained. It was even located for a short time in the town hall.

This action by the Post Office Department was a giant step forward at the time. Someone down there had vision. The little district post office helped to relieve the congestion in the main Ridgefield Post Office and it provided a more convenient way for the good people of Titicus to handle the postal affairs.

In the 190 years of its existence there have been many pleas to the department in Washington for separate postal facilities worthy of the most beautiful town in America. Our personal knowledge is that the money for this purpose was approved and appropriated more than five years ago. Promises were made time and again and recently we read that it is finally going to happen within the next couple of years. We sure hope to be around to see that.

At any rate the records show that John D. Nash was appointed postmaster of Titicus District, by the Postmaster General, on Feb. 12, 1885. At that time postmasters were appointed by the President, and District Postmasters were appointed by the postmaster general. Today all postmasters are appointed by the postmaster general. In this particular instance we find it a little difficult to understand the date used for the appointment. Perhaps Abe Lincoln's birthday had not yet been made a national holiday.

Karl Nash's grandfather owned and lived in the large white house that still stands just north of the store. John Nash owned and operated Titicus Store with the help of his sons, Howard and Luther. Howard was Karl's father. So John was then a postmaster and a storekeeper and the little store took on an added significance. It is truly a worthwhile landmark and a very definite part of Ridgefield's history.

It seems that each of the columns I have submitted concerning the Titicus area carries some mention of the Nash family. There seemed to be more Nashes than others. Perhaps it would be appropriate for historical purposes that some of this area could be named for the family. It could be called Nashville.

## **#28: MORE ON THE STORE, SETTLERS OF THE ROCK**

Just a little more about Titicus Store. Joe Young owned the store for some time after Shoman Elliss left. Joe did not operate the store for some reason and it remained vacant for several years.

Because it is located in a residential zone, zoning regulations required that it be operated continuously, otherwise it would revert to residential status. When Max Seemann and his brother Henry bought the place from Joe Young, the store had been closed more than the one-year limitation. Therefore, it was necessary for them to acquire a variance of the zoning regulations.

The Seemann boys received their variance and then got a permit to sell beer. Thirty-three years ago they petitioned for a permit to operate a liquor package store. They planned to close in the shed that was located on the south side of the store for this purpose. However, the Zoning Board of Appeals denied the application. It lost by one vote. We understand that the present owners are converting the former shed into office space.

Max continued to operate the store after Henry left to become an insurance man. Finally, about a dozen years ago, Max closed the doors for the last time and another landmark disappeared.

Just south of the store, opposite where New Street joins North Salem Road, is the entrance to Fairlawn Cemetery. On the left of the entrance is what we would call a stone belfry. It once housed a very fine bell as we pointed out in Dispatch No. 8. The bell has been missing for several years and we hope that it was not stolen. Rather, we would hope that it was removed to prevent just such a thing happening.

On the south side of the entrance stands Settlers' Rock. I suppose it is really not a very beautiful landmark. However, it has great sentimental as well as historical value for those who love Ridgefield.

Legend has it that five of the original proprietors spent their first night in Ridgefield atop this rock. Some are rather skeptical as to the veracity of this story. They generally take the position that the rock is not large enough to accommodate five grown people. These skeptics fail to consider that the rock is somewhat smaller today than at the time. It lost some of its size, in the name of progress, as the road continued to be widened. These people should also spend a night on the rock, while being surrounded by roving bands of Indians, a few unfriendly black bears and some screeching wild cats. We are confident that under those circumstances, the old rock would provide room for many more than the five huddled there.

During our 250th Anniversary celebration in 1958, we had a bronze plaque inserted in the face of the rock. The plaque notes the importance of this landmark of our town. It was unveiled with appropriate and impressive ceremonies.

At this time we are struggling to create public interest in a suitable observance of Ridgefield's 275th birthday. The date is Sept. 30 next year. It happens to be a Friday so I hope to devote that weekend to commemorate this important date in history.

Every organization that we know of in Ridgefield has been invited to participate. The response at this time has not been encouraging. Perhaps when the holidays are over, enthusiasm will mushroom and the old Ridgefield spirit will again manifest itself. A few very dedicated people have met twice concerning this matter. The committee is looking for support and will have its first 1983 meeting on Thursday, Jan. 6 at 8:00 in the town hall.

As we continue up Titicus Hill, one unpleasant occurrence keeps coming to mind. In Dispatch No. 5 we mentioned a little grove of trees that stood about halfway up the hill. It was located across from the cemetery, where Jack Nalley later built the green, stucco house. One of the boys attending Titicus School climbed one of the trees, which harbored a robin family. The nest contained three little eggs which he proceeded to throw to the ground. As if that was not bad enough, he then reported the incident to his teacher but then blamed others for what he himself had done. Fortunately he had been observed by others while committing his dastardly act. I am not sure what his punishment was, but at least those who were innocent were absolved of any connection with the malicious deed.

This boy continued to commit unsavory acts as he went along. We recall a treasury that became short of money while in his charge. The last we heard of him was several years after he left Ridgefield. He was arrested for stealing from a blind man who was selling pencils. I guess today he would be called incorrigible. We offer this story merely because some readers have wondered why only nice people have been described in this column.

At the top of Titicus Hill, where North Street branches off North Salem Road, was a very large and very old house. The James Kennedy family moved here from Fort Hill during the early part of World War I. It was a very ornate building and must have been considered a mansion at one time.

This property was owned by the railroad, which had intended to build a sort of trolley service between Port Chester and Danbury. The road bed for this project is still quite visible in many areas of the town. The idea was abandoned for some reason that has never been clear to me. Probably the advent of the auto was a contributing factor in discouraging the railroad.

When the Kennedy family moved to Bridgeport toward the end of World War I, the Ciuccoli family moved in. Ciro and Mrs. Ciuccoli had six children, Lydia, Amelkri, Altero, Mary, Nello, and William. The boys were all nicknamed "Chick." This can be very confusing.

Amelkri has operated his own building business for many years and Altero keeps the grounds entrusted to him by the Parks and Recreation Commission in excellent shape. As a young fellow, Altero established a reputation as being the first in Ridgefield to go swimming each spring. As a matter of fact he even beat spring by a few days, as on each St. Patrick's day he dove into the icy waters of Lake Mamasasco. This "Chick" was certainly a very rugged guy. He still is. Nello, of course, operates his own TV repair and sales business and Willie is a fine plumber. It can be safely said that these four "Chicks" make an interesting little "flock."

When this family moved after living here for more than a dozen years (that is another story), the old house was torn down. The very nice little house now on this property is the home of Mrs. Alfredo Eppolite. It has a North Street address, though we always considered it to be a part of north Main Street.

## **#29: TWO WHO FOUGHT GREAT DEPRESSION & THE GENERAL'S ANVIL**

During the Great Depression, men used to congregate in front of the Town Hall each morning. These men were a part of the large mass of unemployed. They were hoping for a few hours of work that the town might have to offer. Perhaps a person would come along, looking for someone to perform some little job of any kind that would pay for the family's Sunday dinner.

Skilled workers, who could not find work in their own trade, accepted whatever was available. No job was menial enough to cause it to be turned down by men who had not as yet become familiar with unemployment insurance. When the family was hungry, pride had to be moved sometimes, to the back burner.

During these times, there were some thoughtless people, especially among those who were more fortunate, who did not experience the disastrous effect of the hard times. They were overheard, on occasion, to make disparaging remarks about these unemployed men. These people seemed to feel that anyone who was unemployed was lazy.

They were only a few, of course, but their unkind expressions hurt just the same. It seemed that these people were completely unaware of the deep concern of these men who wanted, desperately, to provide for their families, at a time when there just was no work available.

The effect of the Depression on the cities was much greater than on a town like Ridgefield. At least people here could plant gardens. Most people had room to grow some chickens, or raise a pig or two. They did all of these things and more, refusing to give in to despair.

Many Ridgefielders met adversity head on, and won. Two come quickly to mind.

Ciro Ciuccoli was an excellent mason and bricklayer. So was Charley Severini. They also had a good working knowledge of construction of a building. Somehow, despite all the misery and gloom that these times presented, these two gentlemen scraped enough money together to purchase a couple of lots on what is now called Roberts Lane.

They were also able to purchase the building materials that resulted in the construction of two exceptionally fine little homes for their families. There were, as we have said, others who would not accept defeat by the discouraging conditions prevalent at the time. However, these two did so much to dispel the snide remarks, directed at the unemployed, that we feel they are worthy of mention.

The two splendid buildings referred to are still in excellent condition. They rest on Roberts Lane as a living reminder of how two families fought the Depression and won.

Next to the Ciuccoli family and going south again, lived William and Mary Creagh and their children, Margaret, later Mrs. Thomas Christopher; William Jr.; Catherine, later Mrs. Octavious J. Carboni; Mary; Alice, later Mrs. Francis Brown; and Agnes. Mary still lives in the old family homestead.

William Sr. was a good-sized man with a large moustache and a very strong will. He was also a very intelligent man. He had been a first sergeant in the Home Guard in World War I, after serving with the Santa Barbara Shani Shooters in the Spanish-American War. These activities were enough to earn him the affectionate nickname "General."

Bill was a carpenter and builder by trade, but was knowledgeable in so many areas that his career was rather varied. In the early part of this century, he was superintendent for Colonel Louis D. Conley, when the colonel was building his beautiful estate, "Outpost Farm." The Colonel had been with the famed 69th Regiment in the Spanish-American War.

Later, Bill became superintendent on the George G. Haven estate. The Haven mansion, just off West Lane on Country Club Road, is now the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Delli-Bovi. Later still, he was head of maintenance for our school system.

Finally, Bill returned to his first love, building. I believe Amelkri Ciuccoli worked with him, also Jack Morrisroe.

As a little kid, I was strongly attracted to the Creagh compound and spent considerable time there. They had a cow or two and a horse and this made it a farm for a kid with a great love of animals.

The horse's name was "January" and when I asked how he got the name, Bill replied, "Because he moved about as fast as molasses in January." He added that if the horse had a sweeter disposition, he would have called him Molasses.

There were no houses in Peatt Park at the time. Most of the area was then an apple orchard. Now, of course, there are many nice houses on Lafayette Street, Washington Avenue, and Rochambeau Avenue.

During the early 20's the old orchard served as a pasture for the Creagh family's livestock. There were times when the cows got too many apples. This made it difficult at milking time, as they had to be propped up before this important chore could be performed. I am not sure what effect this mixing of cider and milk had on those who drank it, but the effect on the cows was remarkable.

The stock had to be herded down North Street to the orchard, which had a gate, just opposite the intersection with Maple Shade Road. The gate was attached to a very large post. The post was round and made of hundreds of stones that were cemented together in what was more like a monument than a gate post. It still stands in the same place and is mindful of the style of those at Fort Hill. Perhaps it was built by Jim Kennedy. At any rate it was strong enough to support a gate that could close off Main Street.

One day as the stock was being herded to the pasture, my sister Mary was riding "January." There was no saddle, no bridle, or even a halter as, of course, he knew where he was going. One of the herders smacked "January" on the butt with a stick, to make him move faster. The old horse took off like Man O'War and we quickly learned that he may have been as slow as molasses in the month for which he was named but in July he was a real speedster.

I guess that I was always asking Mr. Creagh if I could help him, as it seemed that my constant trips there needed some justification. He must have gotten tired of saying that he did not have a job that I could do. So one day he said, "Sure, Dick, you can put that anvil in the cellar for me."

Now, anyone familiar with the weight of an anvil can appreciate the task that this presented. The cellar door opened at ground level and the anvil sat about 10 feet from the door. A valiant attempt was made, but of course a little kid could not budge it, let alone carry it into the cellar.

Ten years later, while driving a team of horses for Irving Conklin, I was assigned several spring plowing jobs. One of them happened to be the Creaghs' garden. When I drove into the old familiar surroundings, the first thing I spotted was the anvil, right where it had stood years before. Before any plowing was done, the anvil was carried, though not easily, into the cellar and placed near the stairway to the upstairs kitchen.

A few minutes later, as the plowing was being done, some very strong language emanated from the open cellar door. When the "General" saw me, he wanted to know who in



#\$@&%\*! had put the #\$@&%\*! anvil in the cellar. He had tripped over it on his way out to the garden.

Fortunately, he had a sense of humor and when it was explained to him that he had actually requested the action years before, he smiled. I was relieved that his memory was good, as he was not one who easily accepted pranks.

### **#30: THE MOYLANS, 15 CENT GAS, AND PUTTY STEVENS' COW**

Next door, on the south side of the William Creagh family, is a very old, two-family house. We have been unable to determine the exact year that this house was built, but it had to be in the very early 1800's. Frank and Margaret Moylan and their children, Mary, Margaret, and

Francis, lived in the north side of this house during the early 20's. Another son, Joseph, was born later on. Mrs. Moylan was my Aunt Maggie, a younger sister of my mother.

Frank was a bookkeeper, and apparently a very good one. The term bookkeeper is not used so much today. Generally we hear it referred to as office worker, accountant, or even systems analyst. The important thing was that this person kept his employer informed of how the business was progressing. Uncle Frank kept the books for Charles Riedinger, an electrician back in the early days of electricity. Riedinger had a store right across the street from where The Ridgefield Press is now.

Later on, Uncle Frank performed the same duties for Charles D. Crouchley, who operated a plumbing business next door to Riedinger. The Crouchley business eventually moved to Main Street, where Robert Wilder now conducts his real estate business.

A feature of this new business location, and an additional job for Uncle Frank, was the operation of a single gas pump in the curb in front of the store. The cement curbing still shows the scars where this old hand pump was anchored. It must have been a remarkable pump when one considers that every gas station today specializes in a pump that fits the need of your particular car. Today's pumps dispense unleaded gasoline, leaded gasoline, super unleaded gasoline, high octane and low octane, at a staggering price. We remember that this little old pump gushed out Good Gulf at 15 cents a gallon, seven gallons for a dollar. Whether it was Grade A, Pasteurized, Homogenized, or Golden Guernsey, there was no way of knowing. However, it seemed to keep all the automobiles happy, whether they were Cadillacs, Hudsons, Pierce Arrows, or Model T Fords.

The Moylans were another family that chose to stay pretty much in Ridgefield. Only the youngest, Joe, left for other parts. He is now in Raleigh, N.C., a doctor of psychology. Mary is now Mrs. Robert Mulvaney (Bob is now a retired supervisor of Ridgefield's Public Works Department). Margaret (Peggy) is a retired registered nurse and, of course, Francis is Ridgefield's first full-time fire marshal.

Many young married couples got their start in this nice two-floor apartment. John and Marion Corrie live there now and I guess we cannot class them as newly married, even though Athena appears that way sometimes.

On the south end of the old house lived Charles Stevens. He was affectionately known as "Putty." Several theories have been advanced as to how he acquired this nickname. Some said it was because he was always puttying up the window glass, others said that it was because he pattered around land, still others said that it was because he was so good natured that he was like putty in the hands of designing person.

Whatever the reason, we remember him as good-natured and very fine gentleman. "Putty" always wore a white shirt and a tie, whether he was in overalls (gray with white stripes

and a jumper to match) which he wore most of the time, or a business suit in which he was rarely seen. A Mrs. Mathieson, who I think was his sister, lived with him, as well as Addie Gilbert, who worked for him. They were both very kindly women and well liked by all who knew them. Addie was a very tall and very thin lady. She had a facial expression that belied the fact that she had a great sense of humor.

Charley always kept a cow or two in the barn that now houses the Tinker Shop. In the 20's he sold a Jersey heifer to Ernest O. Wilson who operated a dairy farm on Ramapoo Road. Shortly thereafter, Wilson sold the farm and the livestock to Irving B. Conklin. When Irving learned where the heifer had come from, he promptly named her "Putty."

Cows are not generally considered beautiful, and rarely do they have much of a personality. "Putty" possessed these attributes and became a kind of pet. She remained a member of the herd that supplied the milk for Conklin Dairy for many years.

Charles Stevens must have been a good businessman. He owned the house we have been referring to, as well as the large two-family house, just south of Nina's Restaurant at 613 Main Street, and another house on Danbury Road.

He also owned and operated the Ridgefield Bakery for many years. The bakery was where the Roma Pizzeria is now. The actual baking was done in the old wooden building behind the bakery store. It was complete, with very large ovens and the very long paddles that placed the bread, cakes, pies and buns, way back in the ovens.

The bakery enjoyed a very fine reputation and was known for many miles in any direction. Door-to-door deliveries were made in the traditional horse drawn bakery wagons and then later, of course, by Model T Ford.

In the late 20's, Rudolph Hurzeler acquired the bakery. Rudy operated it as a family affair and the bakery grew to even greater proportions. Deliveries were made as far north as Lake Mahopac in New York State.

One Christmas, "Putty" gave me a sled. I guess it should be called a bobsled as it was made many years before sleds were made with a steering apparatus. He had apparently originally purchased the sled for one of his children, at some bygone Christmas.

### **#31: THE TRIALS OF TIRES ON A SUNDAY 'JOY RIDE'**

Just south of Charles Stevens lived Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Bates. Herb ran a taxi business from the present Acorn Press building on Bailey Avenue. A taxi business during the 20's was quite a lucrative venture. At one time Herb had four regular drivers.

There were three other taxi businesses in Ridgefield at the time and all seemed to do very well. Perhaps this was due to the many wealthy people we had at the time (not all had chauffeurs) or perhaps there were a number of people who had not yet mastered the art of driving an automobile.

The population in the 20's was less than 3,000 and, with the number of people who used taxis, or the railroad, or the regular bus to Danbury, there was much less traffic. Incidentally, the bus was called a "jitney" and Dave Ritch operated it at a profit, even though the round trip fare was only 25 cents.

The term, joy ride, or pleasure ride, was applied to Sunday afternoon tours of the surrounding areas. The rides were truly joyful and any aggravation encountered was not due to congested highways. There were no long lines on West Lane at the fountain, waiting for an opportunity to enter Main Street. There were no long lines on Main Street, waiting for traffic

lights to change. In fact there were no traffic lights. Another pleasant part of motoring was the ease with which one could find a parking space.

Of course, the roads were not as good as they are today, and cars seemed to have the distressing habit of developing motor problems, especially when the driver was dressed in his Sunday best.

No doubt, the biggest problem a motorist faced was the pneumatic tire. There was no question that these tires improved the riding quality over the hard, solid-rubber tires. However, the uncertainty of how far these tires would take you, before they blew out or just went flat, tried the patience of many a driver.

Today tires are inflated to between 18 and 30 pounds of air pressure. Contrast this with the Model T Ford, which had a slender 30 by 3½ inch tire that carried 110 pounds of pressure.

On just a short trip to Danbury, one could experience one, or two, or even more flat tires. If one were fortunate enough to have two good spare tires, he could replace the damaged tire without a major operation. However, once the spare tires were all in use, further tire trouble became a real problem.

The procedure was to remove the lug nuts that held the tire and the rim to the wheel. Then two tire irons, one long and wide and one long and narrow, were put into service to remove the tire from the rim. This was no job for a weakling.

The tire was then carefully examined to determine the cause of the deflation. It could have been a nail, or possibly a stone bruise.

No one traveled any distance without a repair kit. The kit consisted of a heavy patch for the inside of the tire and a lighter sheet of rubber that could be cut to the correct size needed to patch the inner tube. The ailing part of the tube was roughened with a gadget, generally the top of the repair kit. This supposedly made the patch more adhesive to the tube.

A patch was then cut from the sheet of rubber used for patching. It was applied to the tube after the puncture spot was coated with a rubber cement glue, which was allowed to dry for a minute before the patch was pressed upon it. The large patch was then cemented into the damaged portion of the tire. When that was set, the tube was finally inserted into the tire. The two tire irons were then brought back into play in a gigantic effort to get the tire back on the rim.

If, by now, you are exhausted from all this activity, we just hope that you have sufficient energy in reserve for the toughest part of the whole operation. A hand pump was considered an integral part of the tire repair equipment. You will now pump steadily for ten minutes and the tire gauge will show that you probably have raised the air pressure in the tire to about 55 pounds. Cheer up, you are now about half way there.

Perhaps you could entice one of those riding with you to share in the pumping. Up to now all the others have contributed, on a very warm Sunday afternoon in July, is their moral support and perhaps a few kind words of encouragement.

At long last, the offending tire is now ready to be put back on the wheel and the lugs are tightened again.

Perspiration is wiped-away, along with the grime on your hands, clothes are straightened and you start the remainder of your trip. You will be very lucky if five miles are covered before the repeat performance is necessary.

Of course, there were those wonderful days when mishaps of this kind did not occur. This generally meant that you could expect a double dose the next time out, to make up for the trouble-free trip.

One thing was for sure, there were not very many teenage drivers in those days. The family car was treated with considerable reverence and probably received more care than the family horse that preceded it. The younger members of the family cleaned and polished the car each Sunday morning, in preparation for the afternoon excursion. Before the young ones were allowed to sit in the driver's seat, they took an oath that they would drive carefully and never exceed a speed of 30 miles per hour.

Despite all the problems attendant to auto trips, it was still considered joy riding and autos were looked on as a luxury. Now that each member of the family has his own car, they must be thought of as a necessity.

I guess we kind of got away from Herb Bates and his taxi service. Herb was a very well-dressed man and always presented a very dignified appearance. His suits must have been tailor-made and he always wore a high, stiff collar. He was quiet, very reserved and showed very little emotion.

The Michael McGlynn family lived next door, between Herb Bates and Joe's Store (now Country Corners). They had five children. Ethel became Mrs. William Ryan and was very active in politics. Irene became Mrs. Joseph Zwierlein. Tom, who now lives at Ballard Green, was a plumber, as was his brother, Richard, and Mary, who taught at Titicus School, became Mrs. Ralph J. Kasper.

Mr. McGlynn, known as "Tinker Mike," was a well-known plumber and also served several terms as the Democratic member of the Board of Selectmen. "Tinker Mike" was a little man, but he had a good voice and was a fine speaker. It was great fun to hear him debate at town meetings. He took issue with some pretty big people and always gave a good account of himself.

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Our hope is that all my fellow Ridgefielders will have a Happy and Prosperous 1983.

### **#32: DICK'S GIRLFRIEND CALLS, 62 YEARS LATER**

It would seem appropriate that we start the new year by acknowledging a few of the many messages received, encouraging me to continue this column. They have come in the form of letters, phone calls and personal conversation. Naturally, I am very grateful for all the kind words and it pleases me greatly to find that our stories have made so many people happy.

One of the first letters was from Mary E. Gazek, whom we knew when she lived on New Street. She then was Mary McGowan. Mary lives in Danbury now and retains her interest in the old home town, through the pages of The Press.

Another was from Elsa Hartmann, who now lives in Bethlehem, Conn. Elsa taught school in Ridgefield for many years. She is, of course, the daughter of the famous Joseph Hartmann, whose photographs are a feature of each issue of The Press. The Hartmann family lived for many years in the two-family house on Catoonah Street, between Helen Cumming and the Loren Caddells.

Mary Zandri wrote from Florida, with a very encouraging message. She is the former Mary Dowling and with her husband Levio Zandri, started married life in that haven for newlyweds, at 613 Main Street, as related in Dispatch #3. Later on the Zandris moved to High Ridge Avenue and Marie and I moved into their grand apartment.

Levio taught at Ridgefield High School for many years and his students thought very highly of him. Lev was a great bowler and a mainstay on the fine K of C bowling team. In the great parade that marked the 250th anniversary of the purchase of our town, he portrayed the famed Pere Marquette depicting his exploration of the Mississippi River. John Corrie and Levio's

son, Billy, also appeared on that float as an Indian guide and the explorer, Joliet, who accompanied Father Marquette, on their historic trip in 1673.

A letter from Jude Lyons noted her interest in the column and especially the one about Joe's Store, (#1). Jude, who now lives in New York City, recalls how she and other teenagers, used to hang out at the store in the early 60's. We remember her as a very pretty graduate of Ridgefield High, in the Class of '63, with our son.

Another letter, all the way from the Bahamas, was from Beatrice Brown. Beatrice is the former Beady Scott and grew up on Soundview Road, with her brothers, Harold, Francis, and Donald. All the brothers still live, side by side on Soundview.

Beady's husband, Donald Brown, was the harbor pilot at Nassau, as was his father before him, in the days when the large ships crowded the harbor.

Beady was very interested in Dispatch #3, which told of the Will Stevens' house at 609 Main Street, now Paris Hair Stylists. In converting the house to business use, the name Thomas Scott and the date 1917 were uncovered, etched in the concrete. The workmen carefully framed the little plaque for posterity.

Tom Scott was Beady's father. Her mother, Mildred, was the former Mildred Northrop. Mildred's father was Caro Northrop, who was the greatest mover of buildings that Ridgefield ever had. We will be having some very interesting (we hope) stories about Caro later on.

To get back to Tom Scott. He was a fine carpenter and the reason his name was inscribed in the Hair Stylist building is, of course, because he worked on it when it was being built, back in the teens.

A recent letter we received was postmarked, San Bernardino, Calif. I guess by now, it is safe to assume that The Ridgefield Press has a real wide coverage in the good old U.S.A.

The letter starts out, "As one old Postmaster to another." It was from Margaret Kennedy, a retired California postmaster. Margaret was attracted to the column (#22), about "Big Jim" Kennedy. He was Margaret's father.

Apparently we only scratched the surface as far as Jim Kennedy's building activities are concerned. This beautiful, three-page letter, was not only encouraging but very informative. Among other things, it cleared up the mystery of where the name, "Fort Hill," for the Kennedy homestead was derived. We will leave all this great information for another column.

Readers of this column may recall Dispatch #6, concerning Titicus School. It revealed that at age 5, in first grade, I was attracted to a girl in second grade. She was the only one in the school who had a wristwatch and it made a very big impression on this little kid. In the column she was referred to as my first "girl friend."

A few days after the column appeared, my phone rang and a lady's voice asked, "Is this Dick Venus?" When the answer was in the affirmative, the voice continued, "Well, this is your first girl friend."

If one considers the elapsed time, between 1920 and 1982, perhaps we should be credited for not dropping the phone, in surprise at this very pleasant call. We felt it truly delightful that this fine person would call, so I listened to Lorraine Goeppler recall the early days of our schooling at dear old Titicus School. She even remembered the name of her wristwatch. It was a "Tip Top" and we think it was made by the Ingersoll Watch Company.

Lorraine was understandably proud of her little watch and I was equally proud that she remembered me. That this little column is able to bring voices out of the past, is very inspiring.

Another phone call came, a few days after Dispatch #18, which told of the turkey shoots that used to take place on Tackora Trail, so many years ago. This call was from a gentleman, who

asked the usual questions but did not reveal his name. When I asked who was calling, his reply was that I would not know him for we had never met.

An old Parker shotgun that we used to borrow from Howland Adams was described in some detail in that column. The old gun was almost falling apart, but it won most of the turkeys and drove to distraction, those who had modern and expensive shotguns. The caller explained that he made periodic visits to Altnacraig to visit his sister, Mary. He seemed to enjoy the columns which Mary saved for him.

My caller then informed me that he was now the owner of that famous old gun. We were happily surprised that after all these years, the gun was still around. We again asked his name and he once again said that I would not know him, as we had never met.

Finally, our caller said that his name was Joseph Adams. I remembered him immediately as Howland's younger brother, and reminded him that we had met one time, many years ago. He asked when it was that we had met, and was informed that it was during Danbury Fair week in 1931. After explaining some of the details of our meeting at his brother's farm in South Salem, he seemed to remember the occasion.

His father was the very well known Joe Adams, of the firm known as Adams and Keeler. Joe Sr. and William R. Keeler, operated a large livery stable at the very southern end of Main Street. The large barn was destroyed by fire and several horses were lost in the terrible conflagration. Details will be covered in a later column,

To say that we are grateful to those who have taken the time to write or call, or stop us on the street with well wishes, would be an understatement of the greatest proportion.

### **#33: THE MAN WHO DIED AT JOE'S CORNER**

So we started at Joe's Store (Country Corners) [Tony's Corner Deli], crossed the street to the Newton house. We then went north to the New York state line, on the west side, and back on the east side to Joe's Store. I hope you enjoyed the trip through this historic part of Ridgefield.

For more than half a century, the names Joe's Store and Joe's Corner have been unchanged. Through the ensuing years both the store and the corner have undergone considerable change. From news emanating from Hartford, more changes are contemplated.

It appears that the state Department of Transportation, with its benevolent concern for the safety, health and welfare of Ridgefield's long suffering citizens, is about to supply us with even more-detestable traffic lights. Along the way, it is to be expected that they will also destroy some of the fine trees that have made our Main Street a thing of beauty.

We have witnessed some of the changes made at this corner over the years. Some of the changes were good and others were of questionable value. My interest in these proceedings stems from the fact that I was born only about 50 yards from the corner.

A certain amount of sympathy can easily be generated for those in the late afternoon who are traveling north and attempting to enter North Salem Road. We can also sympathize with their efforts to enter Main Street from North Salem Road in the early morning hours.

However, there are alternatives for those familiar with the roads other than Main Street. Also, a policeman directing traffic during the short peak periods would seem to be more efficient....

There are some who feel the recent alterations at the intersection of Routes 35 and 7 are an improvement. There are at least equally as many who do not agree. Guess it depends on how it affects you personally.

The first major change was made to the corner in 1926. At that time the surface of the highway to Danbury and all of Main Street was changed from tar to concrete. It had been tar all the way to Danbury with the exception of a short stretch along "Sugar Hollow" which kept sinking and was repaired with load after load of gravel. The tar-surfaced roads of that time were made of a far different substance. Black surfaced roads today also contain asphalt which makes them a great deal more pliable.

The firm of Osborne and Barnes rebuilt this highway in 1926 and in the process changed the right-angle corner on the south side of Joe's Corner to the gentle curve that it now has. As well as having a right-angled corner, the road at that point was not nearly as wide as it is today.

There has been one fatality at Joe's Corner through the years and it is doubtful that traffic lights would have prevented it. However, it is felt that the tragic incident did have some bearing on the widening of the road and the reduction of the sharpness of the corner.

In the teens, Peter and Augusta Hornig and their daughters, Flora and Gertrude, lived in the large white house just north of Nina's and across from Joe's Store. Peter had retired as caretaker for George M. Olcott at Casagmo. He and his family had lived about where Wayside Liquor Store is now and operated a little greenhouse and flower shop to the rear of that building. He also had a few cows and pastured them across the street in an open field. The gate to the field was just about where Chambers Army and Navy Store [Bareburger] is now.

It was a simple matter for Peter to cross the road at milking time. Traffic at the time was no problem. However, when he and his family moved to the house opposite Joe's, the journey at milking time was somewhat longer.

It was Peter's habit to carry his milk pail and walk down the left side of the hill to his greenhouse. After caring for his flowers in the greenhouse, he then crossed the highway to do the milking.

On Sunday afternoon, April 9, 1916, about 5:30, Peter with his milk pail on his arm, was walking down the left side of the road. He reached a point between where Bellagarnba's Floor Covering shop is now located and where Tom Clark now lives. These are the first two structures after Joe's Store, going down the hill.

A chauffeur-driven vehicle came down the hill, crossed the road to the left side and struck Peter. He was knocked down and the wheels of the large auto passed over him. He died the next day of his injuries.

The tragic incident caused considerable repercussions in town. Peter Hornig was a well-liked man and there was talk of proper punishment for the driver as well as recommended improvements in the physical structure of the corner.

An inquest took place on Tuesday, April 11, at the office of Dr. Russell W. Lowe on Main Street where Dr. Peter Yanity now lives and practices dentistry. The inquest made the front page of The Ridgefield Press and is a perfect example of how several persons can witness an incident and have widely divergent ideas of what actually happened.

The Press account states that the inquest was conducted by John J. Phelan of Bridgeport, who was the coroner at the time. It was revealed that the car was owned by George L. Wilson of New York City. He and his party were returning from an afternoon spent at the Port of Missing Men. The large auto was a Pope-Hartford and was driven by the chauffeur, George Brown, also of New York City.

A local gentleman, George Pratt Ingersoll, represented the Homig family. He called Mrs. Frank Miller as his first witness. The Miller family lived in the very first house (brown shingled) on the right side going down the hill. Frank was a harness maker by trade and a very good one.

As the horses gave way to the automobile, he became a night watchman on the Frederic E. Lewis estate. His daughter, Ruth Perregaux, still lives on Bryon Avenue.

Mrs. Miller stated that the accident occurred almost directly opposite her home. She was sitting on her front porch when it happened. There was no other traffic and there were no objects to interfere with her view of what happened. She noted that Mr. Hornig always walked on the left side of the road as his flower shop was on that side. Mrs. Miller observed Mr. Hornig making his usual trip with the milk pail on his arm. As he passed her house, a large car turned left into Danbury Road and "hugged" the gutter on the right side of the road. Suddenly the car swerved to the left side of the road and struck Mr. Hornig in the back. Mrs. Miller thought a horn might have blown. She also felt that the car was traveling at a low rate of speed.

Joseph A. Zwierlein had a very different picture of what happened. Joe was one of my favorite characters and we hope to write more about him soon. At any rate, he said that he was sitting on his front porch and saw the whole thing. The front porch he refers to is still there at 613 Main Street, just south of Nina's. It would have afforded him a good view of the area.

Joe said the car was traveling at a great deal of speed and the driver did not sound his horn. He also described the swerve of the vehicle as it veered to the opposite side of the road.

In the house next to the Millers going down the hill lived the Fred Claus family. Fred was a fireman on the NYNH&H Railroad and worked the engine that came into Ridgefield. Fred was musically inclined and played both the piano and the banjo very well. There were many happy times when I accompanied him with my harmonica as the neighbors listened in. At the inquest Fred testified that he heard the commotion in front of his house but that he did not actually see it happen.

More conflicting testimony and a very unpopular decision next week.

### **#34: PETER HORNIG'S DEATH: WHAT LITTLE LYNCE SAW**

We left off last week, in the middle of an inquest held in Dr. Lowe's office. The inquest was caused by the tragic death of Peter Hornig, just east of Joe's Store on Danbury Road. Mr. Hornig died of injuries received when he was struck by a car that had rounded Joe's Corner and then swerved to the opposite side of the road. The accident occurred April 9, 1916.

Witnesses at the inquest had given conflicting testimony as to whether the car was traveling fast, or slow. Some said the driver had blown his horn and others said that no horn had been sounded.

Percy and Edith Humphreys, and their children, Percy Jr. and Lloyd (Gertrude had not yet arrived), lived in the house just east of the Fred Claus family. The former Humphreys home is at present going through a complete face lift, as new siding is being applied.

Mr. Humphrey testified that he heard the noise and ran out on his front porch. He said that the car had stopped on the right side of the highway. He saw Mr. Hornig lying on the left side of the road. It was his estimate that the car had traveled about 250 feet after the impact.

He rushed across the street to see if he could be of any assistance to Mr. Hornig. As he reached the injured man, the car started to back up the hill, on the right side, until it was opposite the scene of the accident. He felt that no horn had been sounded.

Other witnesses who testified were John Raifstanger, the proprietor of The Sportsman Inn, Michael Foshay and young Master Fred Foshay.

The owner of the car, George Wilson, testified that he and his party had been guests that afternoon at the Port of Missing Men. He said that they decided to go to Stamford, via the Danbury Road. There were some skeptics as to the wisdom of this decision.



Wilson said that his four cylinder Pope-Hartford auto was in good condition, with all gadgets operating well. His testimony included a declaration that his chauffeur, George Brown, had blown his horn before reaching the corner and again after making the turn at the intersection of Main Street and Danbury Road.

Wilson placed so much emphasis on the blowing of the horn that one could get the impression that such an act on the part of the driver relieved him of any further responsibility. Everything, including pedestrians, on either side of the highway, should vanish, as they had been amply warned. Objects on the highway must make room for the auto or suffer the consequences.

The chauffeur, George Brown, testified that he was traveling at about 12 miles per hour. He did not explain why, at that speed, it took him 250 feet to bring the car to a halt. One can only imagine that if he were going at top speed (between 45 and 50), he might have stopped half way to Danbury.

Brown also testified that he had blown the horn twice. One might consider the very large horn that a Pope-Hartford sported. It was quite similar to a large trumpet with a rubber ball, the size of a basketball, to provide the air pressure. When that large ball was squeezed with sufficient force, it would put Louis Armstrong to shame, and be heard for miles.

It does seem amazing that so many people could witness this tragic event and have so many different versions of what actually happened. About the only thing they agreed on was that the car entered Danbury Road from North Salem Road. This would be easy to assume as the party in the auto was on its way back from The Port of Missing Men (also known as the Tea House).

Not so, according to an old-time Ridgefielder, who was there, but was not called to testify. So, as Al Jolson used to say, "You ain't heard nothin yet."

The house just east of the Humphreys' home was a large, two-family building. This house was the other half of the house where I was born, up the hill and around the corner on Main Street, hard by the stone wall that encloses the Casagmo complex. Ridgefield has an awful lot of buildings that were moved to their present location, but that's another story.

Some 20 years ago the house next to the Humphreys was torn down and replaced by the attractive brick building just across the street from Ridge Bowl. In the very next house lived Mr. and Mrs. Benvenuto Carboni and their children Adrian (Ade), Octavious J. (Tabby), Navio (Pete), Olinto (Lynce), Mary, and Reno (Rinz). We will not attempt to write about this fine family at this time. They are worthy of a whole column by themselves. We will note, though, that despite the fact that each boy had his own individual nickname, they all answered to just one. Whereas the Ciuccoli boys were all "Chicks," the Carbonis were all "Bones."

At any rate, Lynce, who as a little boy used to play such games as mumbly-peg, duck-on-the-rock, statue and keily-over with other boys in the neighborhood, was so engaged about 5:30 p.m., on Sunday April 9, 1916. Lynce had become a real good friend of Peter Hornig. He was always ambitious and willing to help. It was his custom to watch for Mr. Hornig to make his customary trip down the hill at milking time. When Peter appeared Lynce would dash across the street and carry the milk pail for him.

On this particular Sunday, Lynce looked up from his game, just as Peter reached the house on the north side of Danbury Road where Tom Clark now lives. Lynce immediately ran toward his friend.

Just as he reached the highway, and started to cross it, he heard a loud roar from a speeding car. Lynce says that he looked up the hill and saw the car coming from the south on

Main Street as it swung into the corner and entered Danbury Road. He could see that the car was traveling too fast to safely negotiate the turn.

Then, as he looked on in horror, he saw the car cross to the north side of the road. As the auto struck Mr. Hornig, he said, the milk pail went flying into the air.

Lynce remembers being led away from the scene by some older person. He was not asked to testify and he thinks it was because he was so young at the time. However, Fred Foshay testified and he was about Lynce's age.

One thing is for sure: If he had been a couple of seconds earlier and had made it across the street, he would not be around now to tell about it. As the others all had the car coming from the north whereas Lynce swears it came from the south, one can only imagine the commotion he would have caused if he did get to testify.

Unpopular court decisions seem to be rendered quite often today and apparently they are nothing new. The coroner ruled that because of the conflicting testimony, he found no criminal liability and refused to prosecute. Despite the fact that many local people were very upset, the owner and the driver of the car were freed to go their way.

It was brought out at the inquest that the coroner and the owner of the car were well known to each other. It was not implied that this fact influenced the coroner's decision.

It is doubtful that if traffic lights had been installed way back then that a life could have been saved. Constable Frank Taylor, that grand old limb-of-the-law, was the investigating officer. He was heard to say, after learning where the car had come from, that "They must have been serving some awful strong tea today."

### **#35: MOVING HOUSES WITH A PAIR OF HORSES**

Peter Hornig's death caused considerable sentiment to be expressed in favor of reducing the sharpness of the corner at Joe's Store. It is doubtful that Peter's life would have been saved, had the corner been less sharp at the time. If there had been sidewalks back in those days, he would not have had to walk in the road. Traffic lights would have been of no help.

It was ten years later when the firm of Osborne and Barnes repaved Main Street and Danbury Road with concrete in 1926. At the same time, they did some surgery, reducing the sharp right-angle turn to the gentle sloping curve that exists today. This alteration was a large improvement, with special benefits for those approaching the curve from the business center on Main Street.

However, those coming from the north and those turning left, from Main Street, into North Salem Road, were still at the mercy of those traveling up and down the hill. They were also deserving of consideration.

As the flow of traffic increased through the years, so did the pace of life itself. Everyone seemed to be in a big hurry. Few, if any, were willing to stop, or even slow up, to let those from the north turn left onto Danbury Road, or those from the south turn left into North Salem Road.

Four portable stanchions were placed at the intersection in an effort to create a modified rotary traffic pattern. Like "Topsy," the number of stanchions grew from four to 16. They offered an inviting target and were knocked down, like bowling pins, on many occasions. There was room for a car to maneuver in this congested area, if the driver was skillful, careful and considerate.

The permanent type traffic controllers that now grace the corner were somewhat of an improvement. However, a police officer, directing traffic during the peak periods, plus courteous and considerate drivers, would seem to be an even greater improvement.

Rather than the Department of Transportation plan to install five more lights, we would advocate a bypass to relieve the situation. It would seem that a long-term solution would be to decrease the number of cars using Main Street unless they actually had business in the center of town. This would be preferable to having cars needlessly stopped, bumper to bumper, the length of Main Street in one direction and half way to Danbury in the other. We have seen autos backed up as far as Gilbert Street by the traffic light at the corner of Danbury Road and Grove Street.

Now we have lights at Limestone intersection as well as where Route 35 and Route 7 meet. A trip light at Limestone would be preferable. The blood pressure of drivers must be tremendous when they sit waiting for a light to change, when no cars are entering from the roads that have the green light.

We just wonder if those with the intellect to create mind-boggling traffic stallers have ever figured how much precious gasoline is wasted by autos idly sitting with motors running, waiting for the light to change. More traffic lights, we do not need. Are they trying to make us over in the image of Danbury? Many have noticed that when the lights were turned to just blink during the height of the Christmas season on Main Street, the lines of traffic moved along slowly and smoothly. At least it was moving.

At any rate, when the state finally got around in 1926 to fixing the corner, it entailed the moving of a couple of houses. One house that sat right on the corner, was moved back a considerable distance and placed on an angle parallel to the corner.

William J. Humphrys and his wife, Phoebe, lived in this house, as well as their son W. Reginald and his wife, Jennie. William was noted for the vanilla extract that he produced in the basement of this house. The extract must have been very good, as people came from miles to get it. One of his best customers was Harvey P. Bissell, when Bissell's Drug Store made their own famous ice cream.

The house, like many of the older houses, has undergone several color schemes during its long life. Just a few years ago it was a real bright yellow and now it is a very light blue, with shutters of a darker blue.

Jennie Humphrys was well known for her ability to knit woolen articles of clothing and was also very adept at making rag rugs. Reggie once worked as a coachman for Morris B. Whitlock, who operated a livery stable where Ridge Bowl is now located. Later on Reggie became a taxi driver, as the horses began to disappear.

Humphrys Taxi was one of several that operated in Ridgefield at the time, as Reggie finally went into business for himself. He was an exceptionally careful driver and if he ever had an accident, it could not have been his fault.

At one time, in the 20's, Reggie had an enormous Studebaker touring car, replete with real leather seats. The leather was affixed with deep-set buttons that gave it a look of genuine elegance. His last car was a little black Chevrolet, vintage 1933.

Reggie's cars always lasted a very long time because of his habit of treating and driving them with care. When he retired, he sold his business to Tommy Scott. Tommy moved to Wilton but continued his business under the name Humphrys Taxi.

Reggie was also well known as a trombone and tuba player with the old Ridgefield Band. You may recall that in Dispatches 3 and 4, we noted that this neighborhood produced some real good musicians. There were Reggie and Percy Humphrys, Fred Claus, Sam Nicholas, Will Stevens, Pat Leary, Phil Leary, and George Knapp, all surrounding Joe's Corner.

The house between the Humphreys house and the Venus house was known as the Roach house. The Ned Roach family lived there for many years. This house had to be moved also, but so slightly that it could hardly be noticed.

To get these houses moved it was necessary to call on Ridgefield's premier mover of buildings, Caro H. Northrop. Caro was considered a genius at moving a building. No task was too great for him and it was said that he never cracked a ceiling or wall. There was some talk about moving the furniture from the house but Caro nixed that. He said you can leave a glass of water on the dining room table and I won't spill a drop. He was as good as his word.

Samuel S. Denton, another member of the band, owned these houses and all the others on that side of the street. He and his trusted lieutenant, Al Ferguson, joined Caro and Caro's son Reed, in this house-moving project.

Great 12-by-12 timbers were used for this work. After the house was loosened from its foundation and jacked up, the timbers were slid under it. The house was then jacked up again and large wooden rollers were placed between the timbers, in strategic places. Extreme care was exercised to make sure the building was kept level.

A series of block-and-tackles was then brought into play. It seemed like a mile of rope was used and no one but Caro knew what each rope would do. Then it was up to Caro's faithful team of horses, a gray named Jerry and a bay named King.

Jerry and King were not big horses and they were not young. They probably were not very strong. In fact, Caro used to jokingly say that "they could not pull the hat off your head." However, they knew their job very well and by the time Caro had put together his "Rube Goldberg" pulling arrangement, a small pony could have moved the building.

Caro let me drive the horses when each pull was made. At least I thought that I was driving them. Actually, I guess they could have made the trip from the Humphrys' house to where Pamby Motors is now located, without any driver. That "trip," which probably was about 300 yards in length, moved the house about eight to 10 inches. This would give some idea of how long it took to move the house to its present location. However, it was great fun and made me feel very important. It made 1926, a very important year for me.

Another thing that I remember about the project is that at noontime when the men stopped for lunch, one of them opened a nickel can of beans, which he proceeded to eat with the pancakes that were left over from breakfast. There are those who feel he could have afforded filet mignon.

### **#36: WHEN THE IRON HORSE IRKED THE LIVING HORSE**

Last week, the Press carried on its front page a picture of the building that once served as Ridgefield's Railroad Station. We feel that this grand old building has considerable historic value, and hope you agree.

It is more than 100 years old and served both as a passenger terminal and express office until August of 1925. For several years after the last passenger train had made its final run, the building continued to serve as an express office.

A new building, with concrete exterior, had been built in the southern end of the freight yards, to be used exclusively as a freight station. This building, next to the old elevator building, is now occupied by a woodworking business. For several years after the last passenger train, the tracks were used to bring freight into Ridgefield, as well as express, as the old steam engine huffed and puffed up the hill from Branchville.

My father was the express agent in the early part of the century, so the old railroad station has a special meaning for me.

There was a certain excitement about the activities at the station and the arrival of the big steam engine. I think it had emblazoned on its front, the number 600.

The track from Branchville to Ridgefield Center was called a spur. Using the word Branchville in this context makes it appear as though Branchville was another town, whereas, of course, it is a section of Ridgefield, just as is Farmingville, Ridgebury, etc.

The spur ended on Prospect Street and since there was no turntable to change the direction of the engine, it came head on up the hill and then backed down the hill. There were trips on which the engine backed up the hill and then returned head on down the hill.

As a little boy, I had, like many other boys, a newspaper route. The Ridgefield Press was my weekly and the Norwalk Hour was my daily. I also had a weekly magazine route, The Saturday Evening Post, etc.

The magazines always came by the train and they always came on Saturday morning at 8:20. The train ran on time those days. Railroad men seemed to take a fierce pride in keeping to their schedules. They were constantly checking their large pocket watches. The watches seemed to be either Waltham or Hamilton and were attached to large gold chains.

It was always a thrill to stand waiting for our magazines, as the old engine rolled into the station, hissing steam from the boiler, air from the brake system, smoke from the smoke stack and the bell clanging incessantly.

You could hear the loud whistle as it left Branchville Station and as it blew for each crossing, at Route 7, Florida Road, Cooper Hill, Ivy Hill Road, Prospect Street Extension, and Grove Street. The bell rang all the way from Ivy Hill into the station. Sometimes it continued to ring, even after the train had stopped at the station. We never knew why.

All of this noise was a part of the glamour of railroading, and caused many a young fellow to dream about becoming an engineer. The ultimate in thrills would be to sit in that engine, on the high perch on the right side of the cab, with a hand on the throttle, as the train went speeding down the tracks. The fact that the old 600 from Branchville probably never exceeded 15 to 20 miles per hour did not dampen the ardor of a boy who aspired to become the man who actually drove that big engine.

The noise of the engine and the commotion surrounding its arrival had a far different effect on horses that had not become familiar with all this clamor. Many are the stories told by teamsters and coachmen about the first time their horse, or team, encountered the excitement, attendant to the approach of a large steam engine as it entered the station. It was a real problem and taxed the skill of some very good horsemen.

Most people with a new horse took someone along with them to assist in the confrontation of a living horse with the iron horse. Some horses became accustomed after a few such experiences and others never got used to the noise of the great black monster.

Someone must have been looking over my shoulder as I write this column, Just as I reached this point, and at this very minute, the telephone rang. The caller was Frank Scallon, a former Ridgefielder now living in Norwalk. His father worked on the John Hunt estate, at the state line on North Salem Road, and the Scallon family lived on the estate.

The Hunt family was very fond of young Frank Scallon and gave him a donkey and a cart as a present. Frank said that one of his first jobs was to drive the donkey to the railroad station to meet his grandmother who had just come over from Ireland. The year was 1914 and the lady was to arrive on the 2 p.m. train. Frank arrived at the station 10 minutes early and the train

pulled in right on time, with bell ringing. As the train came to a stop, a large burst of steam was emitted from under the engine, along with a tremendous puff of black smoke from the smokestack. There was no emission control program in those days.

The little donkey could tolerate the bell ringing, but the smoke and the hiss of the steam were something else. He decided that this was no place for him. The next thing that Frank knew, the donkey had taken the bit in his teeth and was on his way home as fast as he could go. Frank was in his early teens and was a strong lad. He tried pulling one rein and then the other, to no avail. It is very doubtful that a grown man could have changed the little animal's mind.

At any rate, Frank, against his will, was taken all the way home, with no stops in between. The poor grandmother had no one to meet her, but fortunately she had directions as to where the Scallon family lived.

Undaunted she started the long five-mile walk to the state line. After walking some distance she met someone who had one of the few phones in town at the time. The person called the Hunts who then notified the Scallons. By this time the donkey's aversion to railroad engines had subsided somewhat and he agreed to meet Frank's grandmother half way.

Mules are a hybrid offspring of a male ass and a mare (horse). They inherit the strong sense of self preservation of the sire. They also inherit their stubbornness, which is exemplified by flatly refusing to move one inch or by refusing to stop, once they get started, as the donkey did.

There is a story about an old fellow who drove a mule that pulled a bakery wagon years ago. One day, when out in the countryside, making deliveries, the mule decided to balk. When the driver realized that his efforts to make the mule move were in vain, he phoned his boss and told him of his predicament.

The boss asked if he had used his whip.

The driver replied, "Yes sir."

The boss asked, "What happened then?"

The driver replied, "He just kicked the front of the wagon."

The boss asked if he had tried beating the mule's front legs with a stick.

The driver said, "Yes sir, I tried that, too."

The boss again asked, "What happened then?"

The driver said, "That mule just hit me on the shoulder."

The boss wanted to know if the driver had tried starting a fire under the mule.

The driver replied, "Yes sir, boss, I tried everything."

When the boss asked what happened after he built the fire, the driver said, "That mule went ahead just far enough so the wagon burned up."

### **#37: WHEN THERE WERE 11 TRAINS A DAY**

We have been reminiscing about the old Ridgefield Railroad Station. It seems incredible now, but at one time, it was advertised that there were six New York City trains daily and eleven in all, counting the freight trains. Considering the population of Ridgefield at the time, it seems like an awful lot of train service. Most everyone in town would have to use the train to make the service pay. The town must have been practically empty, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The number of people that had a part in the operation makes one wonder how the train service could have been very profitable. Just the actual operation of the train must have been rather expensive.

George Weir was the conductor and lived on the corner of Bryan Avenue and Greenfield Street, where the Garbins now live. Frank Seymour was the engineer and lived in the two family house on "Depot Hill," directly across the street from where the Village Bank [The Prospector in 2019] is now located. Fred Claus was the fireman and lived in the second house on the right, going down Danbury Road from Main Street. Jack Walker was the brakeman and lived at the very end of Prospect Street Ext.

Marshall Ralston was the ticket agent and lived on Gilbert Street, where Frank Warner is now. Fred Thomas had been a ticket agent before Mr. Ralston, but quit to go with the Ridgefield Lumber Company. Fred and his family lived for many years on Fairview Avenue.

All of these people were employed just to get the train to make its run back and forth to Branchville. There were others, not directly involved with the operation of the train, who were needed to round out the process of delivering passengers, freight and express items.

Walter Olmstead was the express messenger. I was not sure if his first name was Walter or Frank. Charley Elliott was the man who delivered the express; so I called him. Charley has an excellent memory and quickly informed me that the messenger's first name was Walter.

Walt was rather tall and always wore a cap, a pair of very heavy shoes, a trim little brown moustache and overalls of the same color. The brown overalls were of the type made popular by men who worked for the Electric Light Company.

The most important item, of all the things he wore, was a large .45 calibre revolver. Compared to a .32 calibre Saturday Night Special, a .45 is like a cannon versus a pistol.

The reason for this piece of heavy artillery was the valuable cargo that was carried in the baggage car. This was before the days of the private couriers that serve our present-day banking systems. The baggage car carried the U.S. Mail, which included registered articles, jewelry, and cash, as well as the more valuable express items.

Walt was responsible for the safe delivery of these items from station to station. As the train made ready to leave one station or the other, he would lock himself in the baggage car. He stayed locked in until "old 600" pulled into the next station. The valuables were then examined against the manifest by the station agent. When he was satisfied that things were in order, he signed the manifest, relieving Walt of further responsibility.

During the late teens and the 20's, Theodore Mead was the express agent and Charley Elliott delivered the express. Charley first used a fine horse named Evo and then in the late 20's he was provided with a Model A Ford truck.

The express horse used to be stabled at Morris Whitlock's livery stable across from the firehouse. Later on it was found to be more convenient to keep him in Jack Walker's stable that was just around the corner on Grove Street.

The express horses got to know Ridgefield better than some people would know it today. It was said that Charley could tell Evo what stops he had to make and the horse could make the trip by himself.

Charley used to let me drive the horse on occasion, especially when he was working on the new house he was building on the corner of Mountain View Avenue and Hillsdale Avenue. Naturally this gave me a feeling of great importance, until I realized that Evo knew more about all this than I did.

Evo was a good strong horse but like all heavy horses of the day, he suffered from the increasing number of hard paved roads and streets. Horses were just not meant to do their thing on the hard asphalt and concrete surfaces. However, the cursed automobile was here to stay and was catered to as it increased in popularity.

Along the way, some kind-hearted person invented a rubber-padded shoe which helped greatly in lessening the shock to the hooves of the poor horses. Harry Thomas, the fine Ridgefield blacksmith, outfitted Evo with these new softer cushions and the horse actually smiled with relief as he trotted down Main Street. The new device would keep him going a few more years, but his days were truly numbered.

They tell of my father, when he was the express agent, taking a 510-pound barrel of sugar off the back of the old express wagon. I can well remember Charley Elliott, wrestling very heavy trunks and boxes. He was not very big, but Charley knew how to lift and nothing was too big for him to handle.

Fish was shipped in barrels those days. Of course, the fish was packed in ice and the barrel had a piece of burlap stretched across its top. Perhaps it was necessary to have some air get into the barrel. It sure let some air out and the aroma was really not all that great. It kind of curbed my appetite for the denizens of the deep. Fortunately, I got over that.

Hibbart's Market was located in the store now occupied by Cappiello Brothers. This was a very busy little store and they sold a lot of fish. The heavy barrels of fish arrived on the late afternoon train each Thursday. The ground at the back of the store sloped quite sharply to the east. This meant that poor Evo had a real tough job backing the wagon up to the platform.

Charley had an equally tough task in rolling those barrels uphill to the rear of the wagon for unloading. The rear of the wagon must have been more than a foot higher than the front when parked on this incline. There was no easy way. So both Charley and Evo had to work very hard.

I am reminded of the young man who came over here from England. After he had been here a few months, his brother George wrote to him and asked what kind of a country it was, as he was considering coming over here.

The brother wrote back to George and said, "It's a great country for women and dogs, but it's 'ell on men and 'orses."

My, how times have changed!

### **#38: SOME WILD AND WOOLLY TALES OF THE VILLAGE STATION**

only talk, they could tell some very interesting tales. They can't, so I will try.

A place as busy as the station seemed bound to have a lot of things happen. Some of the people who worked at the station developed a fondness for the juice of the fruit of the vine, the nectar of the kernels of rye or barley, the liquid that was left after the corn was squeezed, or the fluid that was found after the apples were pressed. This may, or may not, have had some bearing on things that occurred.

The affection for beverages such as the above, can be dangerous when firearms are within easy reach. One fellow, who was ordinarily as quiet as a mouse, became a real joker after only a little imbibing. He possessed a penchant for dancing. Not his own. He just liked to see someone else dance.

When this fellow discovered that Charley Elliott was light on his feet, he encouraged him to be even lighter. He wanted a demonstration and his requests that Charley dance were punctuated by blasts from a .45 calibre handgun that normally lay in the office safe.

Charley got the message, but tried to ignore the invitation for a command performance. However, when the words, "Dance, d... you," were accompanied by the sharp crack of the old .45, and the thud of a slug tearing into the heavy old oak floor, Charley started paying strict attention.



Fred Astaire and his sister Adele were at this time in the early stages of their illustrious careers. They were sufficiently advanced, however, to fend off any threat that Charley may have posed with his gyrations around the old pot-bellied stove. Come to think of it, he may have been a little ahead of his time as his style was probably more reminiscent of the excessive movements of the Presley years.

After his initial performance it is certainly understandable that Charley exercised extreme caution when approaching the express office. On one occasion as he backed old Evo up to the loading platform, he noted that the office was unusually quiet.

Upon entering the office, he noted that the large door on the office safe was open. Further examination showed that the door to the compartment that housed the Colt .45 was also open. It also looked very empty. Charley did not need any further urging to make himself scarce.

It was quickly decided that Charley did not have time to get back to his horse, so he left Evo and took off as fast as his legs could carry him. He was making pretty good time when he reached the point where the Village Bank now stands. The theater had not as yet been built. The first shot was fired as he reached this spot and Charley was surprised to find that he really had not been running as fast as he could.

For some reason, the shooting episodes generally occurred right after lunch. It is not thought that the solids consumed at lunch were a contributing factor.

There was a time when Charley used to hire Harold "Buck" Mead to make deliveries when he was otherwise engaged. Buck was an affable fellow and got along well with everyone. Charley impressed on Buck that after any registered articles that he may have been carrying, his most important responsibility was Evo, the horse. We always thought the horse should come first.

It is not clear whether or not Charley failed to warn Buck of what he might encounter on certain afternoons at the station. However, early one afternoon, Buck was backing Evo up to the platform when he heard the unmistakable click of a revolver being cocked. Buck took one look at the expression on the face of the person holding the gun and decided that it might be wise to postpone the loading of the wagon, until later in the afternoon.

At about this time his concern for Evo's well-being surfaced. Buck hopped back on the wagon seat and he and Evo were seen passing East Ridge at a gallop.

In retrospect, it should be considered a minor miracle that no one was seriously injured during these incidents that were so mindful of the "Wild and Woolly West."

On one occasion, the dance routine had just started when the whistle and the bell announced the approach of old 600. Walt Olmstead, as usual, was riding in the baggage car as the train pulled into the station. Above the clanging of the bell and the hissing of the steam, Walt heard the crack of the .45, emanating from the express office.

His first thought was a robbery was in progress. Walt dutifully drew his own trusty Colt .45 and fired a couple of warning shots. Once again a shooting spree is ended and the participants in Ridgefield's combination of a drama and an "Our Gang Comedy," are very lucky.

It would be fun to go into the old station once more and look for the bullet holes in the floor. I'm sure that Charley could point out each one without any trouble.

What is to be done with the old station? It is owned by the Ridgefield Supply Company. They have no use for the fine old building. They have offered it to a local society that is engaged in preserving such historic edifices. The company has generously offered a sizable sum to offset the cost of moving the station. There has been much talk but no action on a proper disposition of the matter.

Anyone who has been to Chattanooga, Tenn., would not leave the city without seeing the famous Chattanooga Choo Choo. The little train is well worth seeing and it sits on the tracks, right outside the equally famous Chattanooga Railroad Station. This fine old station has been restored and is a thing of real beauty. It has been converted into a very fine restaurant, while remaining replete with all the characteristics that give that warm and homey effect to a railroad station.

After admiring the very ornate exterior of the station and before entering the restaurant, you approach the ticket office, just as if you were buying a ticket for a trip on the train. There you are handed a very extensive menu. As you make your selection of food and beverages, the "ticket agent" punches your choices on a ticket that resembles the old railroad ticket. After paying your bill, in advance, you proceed into the very elaborate restaurant, hand your ticket to the waiter, and then sit back and enjoy yourself.

It is all so very simple and there is something nice about getting up from a meal that has already been paid for. Wouldn't it be nice if this could be made to happen to Ridgefield's fine old historic railroad station?

We have room for one more anecdote. The south end of the station was actually a large shed. The sides were open and the roof was about 20 feet high. At ground level and near the center of the waiting platform was placed a large scale that gave your correct weight for a penny.

The scale stood a little over five feet and was standard equipment in all railroad stations. What a collector's item that scale would be today. One Saturday afternoon, one of Ridgefield's fine young gentlemen (the term is used in its literal sense), drove his car too close to the platform and knocked the scale over. He had been celebrating that afternoon with some friends and was in a very expansive mood.

Eddie was a real nice fellow and noted for his politeness. He slowly got out of his car, carefully picked up the scale, put it in an upright position, dusted it off, apologized, "Sorry Miss," tipped his hat, returned to his car, and slowly drove away.

### **#39: WHEN FREIGHT AND COAL CAME BY RAIL**

The spur, as the branch railroad line from Branchville Station to Ridgefield was known, was built in 1870. It lasted for 55 years of passenger service and transported many Ridgefield commuters to New York City and to points in between. Passenger service ended Aug. 8, 1925.

The freight business was also handled by the railroad and continued for another 30 years. It was obvious, however, that it too was dying a slow death. The automobile and the trucking business made a tremendous impact on the movement of freight.

The magnitude of the freight business in little old Ridgefield would have to be seen to be believed. Yet its demise was assured when deliveries began to be made directly to the customers by truck.

There were other reasons for the end of the freight business, but as with the passenger business, it was the conveniences offered by the autos and the trucks that really did the job.

The original express business in Ridgefield was known as the Adams Express. It was a vibrant, privately owned business and its success did not go unnoticed by those who operated the railroads. Adams was pressured into selling to the railroad and the American Railway Express was born. It lived a relatively short life.

At one time, the old Ridgefield Railroad Station housed three different operations. The south end of the building was devoted to the selling of tickets for passenger service. Then there was a freight office and an express office. Someone in the freight end of this complex must have

been wearing glasses that had a rosy tint, and a new freight house was built at the south western end of the railroad yards. Those responsible for the building of this concrete-sided structure must have had visions of mountains of freight. However, I never saw the building when it was crowded, even in its best years. As the volumes of freight decreased, the freight house appeared to get larger.

Just north of the freight house and on the eastern side of the railroad yards, a trestle had been built. The trestle was a great conglomeration of huge timbers, concrete and steel. It was about 20 feet above ground level and railroad tracks were laid along its upper surface.

The purpose of the trestle, in case you have not already guessed, was to facilitate the loading of the coal trucks that would make the home deliveries. The coal arrived in Ridgefield, in open railroad cars that were equipped, on their underparts, with doors that could be opened to release the coal.

The railroad coal cars were pushed up onto the trestle and parked with the previously mentioned doors, strategically placed over large holes in the floor of the trestle. The coal trucks were then backed under the trestle, directly beneath the doors. The doors were then opened enough to let the coal slide through and pass into the body of the coal truck. This avoided all the shoveling that otherwise would have to be done to unload the coal car.

The trestle would hold only two railroad cars at one time. This could cause a problem from time to time as there were several coal companies in Ridgefield. The use of the trestle had to be handled with some dexterity.

There were occasions when three carloads of coal would arrive on the same day. The company owning the car left at ground level had the choice of either unloading by hand or waiting for one of the two parked on the trestle to get unloaded. This could be expensive as the railroad allowed a limited time, generally three days, for unloading. When the time limit was up, demurrage charges were then incurred. With wages as low as they were at that time, it probably was cheaper to hire someone to shovel off the coal.

This dilemma was solved to some extent, when the Ridgefield Lumber Company (now the Supply Company) purchased an electric conveyor, which could load trucks from the coal car that was at ground level.

Switching the cars around in the railroad yards and getting the empty cars out of the way of loaded car was always an interesting operation. The engineer generally pushed the cars up from Branchville Station. Its first job, on reaching Ridgefield, was to hook onto the empty cars and switch them to the unused side tracks.

The engineer was the original "sidetracker." After the empty cars had been sidetracked, the loaded cars were put in their proper place. This could take some time if there were six or eight cars to switch. There were two switches, one on either side of Prospect Street where it crossed the railroad tracks. A third switch was located near the engine house near Grove Street.

It took a considerable push to get the two coal cars up onto the trestle. Each car carried 40 tons and the engine had to proceed rather slowly as it had to stop immediately after placing the car. There was no other place to go when the end of the trestle was reached. The old steam engine had no problem putting the coal cars in their place, but we noted in later years, when the Diesel engine replaced the steam, there was a lot of wheel spinning before the job was done.

Some of the coal dealers that we remember were the Ridgefield Lumber Company, The James F. Kennedy Company, The Samuel S. Denton Company, The Ernest Scott Company, and the B.E. Sperry Company. Each of these companies had access to the rail yards and each had its

own little place to store the excess coal. There was no fence around the storage areas and it was said that the harder the coal, the quicker it evaporated.

Charley Standard and Harry Terpenney drove teams of horses for the Lumber Company. Charley had been one of the many fine coachmen in Ridgefield's horsey days. He must have been a good one as he drove for the Hamilton family on High Ridge.

I guess that Charley's life story was one which was repeated many times over, across the country. In his early days he was a real dandy and dressed the part [picture next week]. He was what was known as a liveried coachman.

He was considered very proficient in the art of handling highly spirited driving horses. His ability in this connection can only be truly appreciated by those who had to depend on him, or others like him, at a time when horses were the means of getting you to where you had to go.

Charley, his wife and daughter, lived in the same house that is now the home of the editor of this paper. His attitude toward life in general took an abrupt change when it first became known to him that the horse would be banished forever as the main means of transportation.

Even though the horse was through as far as transportation was concerned, Charley felt that the large draft horses could not be replaced. To him it was inconceivable that the horse was no longer a necessity.

The Hamiltons moved away and their house was moved across the street to where the Jack Sherrys now live. Charley found himself without a job and also without his beloved horses. He had no further use for the elegant attire that was an integral part of the exalted coachman's apparel. This must have been a very severe blow to Charley's ego. The Hamiltons were one of the last families that required a coachman. There were no more similar jobs to be had.

#### **#40: THE PRANKS THEY PLAYED ON CHARLEY**

Charley Stannard was a very practical person. Practical but stubborn. He just could not give in to the hated automobile.

As the glamorous coachman jobs disappeared forever, Charley decided that the next best thing would be a job as a teamster. At least he would still be working with horses. They would be considerably bigger and slower than the magnificent coach horses that he was accustomed to handling, but still they were horses.

Charley must have swallowed a couple of times as he switched to the heavy draft horses. He got a job driving a team for the Ridgefield Lumber Company. One horse was a jet black named Fritz and the other a mahogany bay named Lady. Both carried the brand USA on the respective rumps. This was the result of having served in the U.S. Army during World War I.

The skill required to handle these horses was not as great as that needed to manage high spirited coach horses. This meant two things to Charley. First, he would not be drawing the amount of pay to which he had become accustomed. Second, he would need an extra job. So he became what we would call today a "moonlighter."

Charley got a little red push cart. It had three wheels. A small wheel in the front and two larger wheels in the rear. In the bed of the cart, he placed a large cabinet. The cabinet was full of all sorts of goodies that he would sell at various public gatherings.

Arthur Ferry, and later, Jack Coughlin, conducted Saturday night movies in the town ball during these times. Silent movies, of course, but they were well attended. Charley was always out front of the hall shouting "Peanuts, popcorn and Cracker-Jack."

He never missed a baseball game. They were also well attended. Even though our population hovered around 3,000, it was not unusual for the games to draw several hundred fans.

Charley did a very good business with his little push cart, but his success led him to a rather close acquaintance with John Barleycorn. This lasting friendship caused him to descend the social ladder. It also caused him to be the butt of many pranks.

The boys of the day took particular delight in annoying Charley. His low boiling point only made him a more interesting target for all kinds of jest. It should be noted, however, that when he became an old man and lived in a rest home, the same boys who tormented him years before were very good to him. They used to go to the rest home and take Charley out for a ride as well as furnish him with a nice dinner.

At any rate, there was one occasion at a ball game when one of the boys attracted Charley's attention, while two others ran off with his push cart. The cart not only contained his various commodities but his cash receipts for the day.

Naturally, he almost went out of his mind. Actually he had nothing to fear and when he finally got home that night, he found his cart waiting for him — and nothing was missing.

The hazing and the teasing continued for many years, even into his advanced age. Somehow, one got the impression that even though Charley's reaction to the tricks was rather violent, he found some kind of enjoyment in it himself.

There was one prank played on him that we are sure he did not enjoy. Once when just a little kid, I was playing a game of catch with Walter "Chuck" Walker. Chuck later became one of the very best pitchers in the history of Ridgefield High School. He lived with his parents, Uncle Jack and Aunt Joe Walker, on the corner of Prospect and Grove Streets. That building now houses several different businesses, including a French restaurant [in 2019, Gallo]. Uncle Jack was the John L. Walker who conducted a very successful moving and storage business before becoming Ridgefield's postmaster when F.D.R. was elected president.

The Walker property adjoined that of the Ridgefield Lumber Co. The large gate to the lumber yards was, even then, about where it now swings. The office was located to the left of the gate and near the railroad tracks. It was a house that had been converted to office use and still had an apartment upstairs. The Corbett family lived there at this time. Directly behind the office was a small barn that was home for Fritz and Lady.

One of the features of the gasoline-powered vehicles was that when you were through with them, you needed only to turn off the key. Not so with horses. It was Charley's custom to appear at the lumber yard on Sundays and holidays to care for the horses.

On this particular Sunday afternoon, as Chuck and I played catch, Charley showed up to perform his chores. His first move was to go to the old hand pump, which was located some 60 feet north of the gate. After pumping the large barrel full of water, he turned the horses out to drink while he cleaned the stable.

As we played catch, Chuck threw me a fast ball, and even as a kid, he had plenty of speed. While waiting for my hand to cool off, I observed that it seemed very inhumane to keep animals and birds confined in yards and cages. Chuck readily agreed and noted that the large gate, just a few feet away, was secured by a small wooden peg in the hasp.

After making sure that Charley was busily engaged inside the barn, two kids quickly approached the gate. The small wooden peg "fell" from the hasp. The gate slowly swung to the north. Old Fritz, who had been watching the proceedings, moved over to investigate. The gate had opened enough for him to get his nose through, so he pushed it a little farther.

There was no greener grass directly on the other side of the fence. However, the horses must have been reasonably sure that somewhere out there they would find a lush pasture.

With another nudge of his nose, Fritz completed the opening of the gate. Then like the gentleman he was, he stood aside while Lady raced by him.

Without question, the greatest pictorial of freedom in action is a horse that suddenly finds himself unfettered. With heads held high and tails even higher and with their manes flowing in the breeze, Fritz and Lady headed for Main Street at a gallop. There was no traffic light at the top of Depot Hill so they just turned left and went south.

I can still hear the sound of their iron-shod hooves on the newly laid concrete surface of Main Street. That pair of horses were just about the most happy animals we ever saw.

As fast as the horses went one way, two little boys went the other. Their ears were ringing with words that Charley was shouting. Words that they had never heard before.

Hard cider became a very popular drink during Prohibition days. It was very popular with Charley. One day as he was relaxing at the firehouse, two brothers, John and Harry, produced a gallon of cider. Charley had considerably more than he could handle and went to sleep.

He did not awaken as the brothers sat him up in a wheelbarrow, opened his shirt and stuck into it a large cabbage leaf. They opened other parts of his clothing and then wheeled him right down Main Street and into the Belmont Restaurant, to the astonishment of the customers of that establishment (where the Question Mart and Candlelight Shop are now [Touch of Sedona and Tundi in 2019]).

It was said that two ladies who encountered the group on the street took one look and fainted away.

#### **#41: THE DANGERS OF THE RAILROAD AND OF ONE-LEGGED TOM CURLEY**

Railroading has long been considered a very hazardous occupation. Despite this fact, there were those who considered it to be quite glamorous. This was especially true of those who were directly engaged in the actual operation of the engine.

Many a young boy dreamed of one day being an engineer on the railroad. The words, "going like sixty," were generally thought of as referring to an automobile. The big steam engines were much faster and traveled at speeds up to 100 miles per hour. To be the person in command of that big iron monster as it hurtled down the tracks was the ambition of adventurous youths. We wonder if space travel holds the same allure today.

I had two brothers engaged in railroading. Jack was on the New York, New Haven and Hartford line and Charlie on the Harlem Division of the New York Central. Charlie was the engineer selected to go up to Canada and bring back the Queen of England for a tour of New York's World Fair. Charlie had 45 years of railroad life before retiring and yet when he had a day off, it was not unusual for him to pick up Jack and go over to Harmon, N.Y. to see the engines come in.

The engines on Ridgefield's little branch line never approached the speed of the trains on the main line. Still, its great size and enormous power held a certain fascination for a young romantic. The dangers that were inherent to railroading seemed only to increase the desire of some to be a part of it.

When a train came into the sleepy little Ridgefield Station, either passenger or freight, the rail yards would suddenly bustle with activities. Cars had to be switched from one track to another as they were made ready for the return trip to Branchville.

Switching was a rather slow operation and the engine seemed to operate with great restraint. Despite the slow-moving engine and railroad cars, it seemed that this was the time when most of the accidents occurred. Feet were crushed. Arms were mangled, etc.

I can remember one occasion when a freight oar jumped the track while it was being switched in the yard. It probably was not traveling more than five miles per hour at the time.

The cause of this accident was not revealed and since no one was hurt, there was no official investigation. It was said unofficially that a loose rail was the cause and made you wonder how bad it would have been if the engine had been speeding.

One time Jack Walker, while serving as brakeman on the train, stepped off a car that was moving slowly through the yard. It was custom to alight from the train at this very spot several times during the day. He was unaware that some bricks had been dumped where he would step down. His ankle was splintered and he was never able to walk again without a cane.

All of the accidents in the yard were not incurred by railroad personnel. Eugenio Frulla was killed in a very tragic accident, only 25 feet to the north of the station platform.

There had been considerable criticism of the policy of backing the engine from Ridgefield down to the Branchville Station. Actually there was no other way to make the return trip as there was no turntable with which to turn the engine around. However, in backing the engine, the view of the engineer or the fireman was impaired and it was felt that this was a contributing factor in this instance. In the night hours the danger was more acute since the only headlight was on the front of the engine and was of no help in the direction the train traveled when in reverse.

On Wednesday evening, Jan. 11, 1911, Eugenio was visiting friends in the area. He lived on Abbott Avenue at the time but had formerly lived at the south end of the railroad yards, about where the Casey oil tanks are now located. Records reveal that the train arrived on time, at 7:38 p.m., and as was customary, it began the return trip almost as soon as the passengers alighted.

On this very dark night, at 8 p.m., John P. Manion was walking along the tracks. He had not gone far past the station when he stumbled over something. Though he could not see what it was, John instinctively knew that something very bad had happened. He went back to the station and procured a lantern. He then returned to make a very gruesome discovery. Eugenio had been cut completely in two by the wheels of the coal tender as the train backed down the tracks.

Dr. E. A. Stratton, medical examiner from Danbury, was called in and a hearing on the tragedy was held. Frank Seymour, the excellent engineer, stated that he never knew that he had hit anything. The controversy over the system of backing the train down to Branchville again surfaced. It boiled, then simmered, and finally died.

Several suggestions for corrective action were proposed but none was ever adopted and 14 years later, the passenger service ended.

Incidentally, we received a phone call from Fred Romeo, a former and long-time Ridgefield resident. Fred now lives in Lakeville and he called to inform us that passenger service did not end on Aug. 8, 1925, as previously stated. Fred claims that he was still taking the train from Ridgefield every morning until 1930. We will stand by the 1925 termination date.

In Dispatch No. 8, we told of another railroad accident in which Tom Curley lost his leg at the knee. He spent considerable time at Danbury Hospital and was outfitted with a wooden leg that was kept in place by a series of straps. With the help of a cane, he was able to get around, but not too well.

The Rev. Michael J. Brannigan once told a story of a visit to Tom's house. He was stationed here at the Holy Ghost Novitiate (now the Board of Education [in 2019, congregate

housing]) during the middle 20's. His first assignment was to assist Rev. Richard E. Shortell at St. Mary's, hearing Saturday night confessions.

Father Brannigan had walked to St. Mary's and Father Shortell said that if he would wait while he made a sick call, he would drive him back to the novitiate. As they were riding to the sick call Father Shortell told of how the sick call was being made to insure that one of his parishioners who had over-indulged would stay home and keep out of trouble. He went on to describe Tom as a very kind and gentle giant when he was sober. He then noted the complete about-face that occurred when he was not sober.

Father Shortell's description of Tom's tremendous strength and the destruction he sometimes caused was so vivid that the young priest became concerned for his safety. He offered to go into the house with him. The old priest refused any help and explained that he and Tom knew each other well and all he had to do was make sure Tom stayed home and avoided trouble.

Father Shortell stayed in the house a considerable time and the young priest was on the point of going in to see what had happened. At that moment, Father Shortell reappeared carrying a pile of newspapers which he placed on the rear seat of the car.

Father Brannigan told of how he was worried about his safety and Father Shortell reassured him that he had no need to worry. When asked if he was sure that Tom would stay home, Father Shortell replied, "Oh yes, that's his wooden leg on the back seat and he knows he will not get it back until he is all right."

#### **#42: THE FATAL WRECK OF 1905**

Railroad accidents were numerous, if for no nether reason than the very nature of the business. Train wrecks always received considerable publicity and fatalities, on several occasions, were incorporated into music of the day.

Some old phonograph records that come quickly to mind were "Casey Jones," "The Red River Cannonball" and "The Wreck of the Old 97." Later there was "I've Been Working on the Railroad." However, though this song proved to be a great favorite, it did not dramatize railroad work, as the others did.

It would be questionable as to how many young men were led to railroading by music that stressed the glamour and excitement of the big steam engines. One thing is sure, any home that had a phonograph in a corner of the parlor also had at least one of these records. Some would have all these songs and on many a Sunday evening, the family would gather around to hear them and perhaps even join in singing them.

Years later, the songs "The Atchison Topeka and The Santa Fe" and "The Chattanooga Choo Choo" set thousands of feet tapping, especially when played by the great Glenn Miller Band. However, their purpose was to encourage the great indoor sport of dancing, rather than recruiting young men for railroad work.

There was once a very popular song entitled "Come Josephine in My Flying Machine," but it did not cause a rush by young men to join the airlines. It would be safe to say that not one of the many pilots who have lived in Ridgefield were influenced by this nice old waltz. Years later, that stirring march of the US. Air Force that starts "Off We Go into the Wild Blue Yonder" probably encouraged many to enlist.

The old railroad songs kindled a definite interest in the hearts of the young men of the time, even though some of the stories they told were sad. "The Wreck of the Old 97" told of a train that was running behind schedule and the gallant efforts of the train crew to make up the time and maintain their proud record of punctuality. Yes, they once ran on time.



At any rate, as the name of the song suggests, there was a wreck. The engineer, in the best tradition of railroading, urged the other crewmen to leave but stayed with the engine himself. As the words went “She was going down grade making 90 miles an hour, when the whistle blew into a scream, He was found in the wreck, with his hand on the throttle. He was called into death by the steam.”

Apparently the song was supposed to illustrate the devotion of these men to duty. I have always felt that these old railroad men were justifiably proud of their ability to run the trains on time.

Our little branch railroad line experienced the death of a gallant engineer in the tradition of a “Casey Jones.” It was on April 7, 1905, and the tragic accident caused the engine and the coal tender to leave the tracks.

As related previously, it was the custom for the engine to push the cars up the hill from Branchville Station. It then made its return by backing down the hill, pulling the cars after it.

The 8:20 a.m. train was backing down on the return trip to Branchville Station. It had passed the Prospect Street Extension crossing and was approaching the Ivy Hill Road crossing when several severe jolts were felt. It was a clear indication of trouble.

Somehow, the tender had become disconnected from the engine and was running free on the track. As the train reached the crossing, the engine struck the tender twice. Then they left the track and rolled down the steep embankment, landing on their sides across the tracks from the old Power House. This was near the home of the Tony Gaeta family. Tony Jr. still lives in this area.

The engineer, William Horan, was crushed beneath the engine cab. He was scalded by the escaping steam and succumbed at the scene of the accident. Other crewmen and some passengers were injured, none very seriously.

Railroads at the time must have been somewhat immune to public opinion as no official reason for the tragedy was ever made known. It probably was the fault of the railroad company. Possibly loose tracks or something. It is fairly certain it was not caused by excessive speed.

The old Power House, previously mentioned, is still standing, just a few feet southwest of the crossing. It is a one-story, concrete building with walls thick enough to make it qualify as a bomb-proof shelter. In the late 40’s, Otto H. Jespersen converted this solid structure into a very nice dwelling.

Otto and his wife, Greta, conducted their upholstery business from the basement of this building. They were very good at their trade.

The basement had formerly housed two large steam engines. These coal-burning engines ran a generator that produced Ridgefield’s first electric power, just one year after the train wreck. The building was equipped with a tall chimney which attempted without much success to carry the smoke to higher levels.

We mentioned switching as being a very dangerous part of railroading. There were several reasons for this. At each end of every railroad car, there is a large metal clevis, or buckle which keeps it attached to the next car. In order to make the connection while switching, the engine pushes one car smartly into the other. one. The clevis is then activated and they grab each other like two large animals in a death grip.

Hanging alongside each clevis is a rubber hose. It is about four feet long and probably two inches in diameter. This hose carries the air for the braking system in each car. The hoses have to be clamped together as the clevises are slamming together, and this is where most of the accidents happened.

One of the train crew had to stand between the cars that were being joined. As one car rammed the other, the clevises clanged together and the two hoses were connected by the train men. This was all one operation and it was performed with extreme quickness. Just a slight slip could result in the loss of a hand, an arm, a leg or even more. Generally it was an arm that was caught in the large metal connectors.

There were many railroad men with only one arm. Some of the victims of this type of accident went back to the railroad after losing an arm. For a great many, the accident was a cure for any enamored feelings that they once had for the railroad.

Such a man was the late Al Knapp, a longtime resident of Ridgefield. Al's accident did not happen in Ridgefield, but it was on the New York, New Haven and Hartford line. His arm was severed just below the elbow and his manner of overcoming this very serious mishap is a story that must wait till next week.

### **#43: WHAT AL KNAPP AND OUTPOST INN HAD IN COMMON**

I did not know Al Knapp when he had two good arms, but he must have been some kind of man. My first meeting with him took place one evening when he had tire trouble, on the corner just north of where the Fox Hill complex is now located on Danbury Road.

At the time, Colonel Louis D. Conley had completed the renovation of the old building that became the nationally famous Outpost Inn. In the process Col. Conley had traded to the State of Connecticut that land on which the long straight stretch of road was built in 1926, when the road to Danbury was rebuilt as a concrete highway.

In return the Colonel received that portion of the state highway that is now serving as the main artery serving the Fox Hill complex. It then became a private road. It was a perfect trade as the state could then build the stretch of road in front of Fox Hill and at the same time greatly reduce two curves. This portion of the road serving Fox Hill had been made very attractive by a number of beautiful maple trees, lining either side of the road.

Col. Conley not only did a fine job of landscaping the property around the inn, he also transformed what had been a swamp into the very attractive little lake along the roadside. He then had the foresight to appoint Joseph Gibney as manager of the inn. Joe, in turn, had the common sense to secure John Scala as his head chef. (Years later, John bought The Elms Inn.) [Ed.: Gibney was not the first manager; Gibney arrived about 1934, four years after Col. Conley's death. The first manager was Vincent Bordenave, who had managed the Mid-ocean Club of Bermuda.] This happy combination resulted in Gourmet Magazine's listing the Outpost Inn as one of the ten top eating places in the entire country.

The inn was a thing of real beauty. With its fine landscaping, tall trees, and exotic shrubbery, mirrored in the little lake, it had a kind of fairyland setting. A lot of good times were had at Outpost and we are sorry that most of our newer residents did not have the opportunity to share in the enjoyment that the inn afforded.

Just a few yards in from Danbury Road, on the southern end of the road that goes through Fox Hill, a culvert carried water from the swamp, under the road and formed a brook that flowed through the Great Swamp. It eventually became a part of the Norwalk River.

There was a short metal pipe fence along the road and over the culvert. Next to the culvert there was a kind of swale that allowed one to drive his horse down to the small stream of water emanating from the culvert.

After the horse had satisfied his thirst, he could then pull his wagon across the water and on up the other side of the swale. This little scene was re-enacted many times by those who were

traveling to, or returning from Danbury. As the auto began to replace the horse, some of the early autos also found it necessary to stop at this little oasis, for the purpose of replenishing water that had boiled from its radiator.

I did not forget Al Knapp. It is just that I could not go by the Outpost Inn without a tip of the hat. At any rate, on this particular evening, I noticed a car with a flat tire, parked on the roadside, about where the north end of the outlet at Fox Hill is now.

We stopped nearby to give the driver assistance in changing his tire. My pace quickened when it became apparent that he had only one arm. However, instead of helping Al Knapp, I was privileged to witness a remarkable performance by what we had thought was a handicapped person.

After thanking me for stopping and assuring me that he really did not need help, he proceeded to prove his point. His quickness was surprising and he was so right in saying that he did not need help. It would be fair to say that he changed the tire in a flash.

We got to know Al Knapp quite well. We learned along the way of how he lost his arm while coupling two railroad cars. How he had been outfitted with a very complicated artificial arm from the elbow down. He became very disgusted with the arm so he discarded it and refused to wear it.

Al's extreme quickness was coupled with a determination to do anything that anyone else could do and do it better. He was an excellent gardener and was once employed by Louis Morris Starr (of Black, Starr and Frost), in that capacity. One day he was tying beets and carrots into bundles and Mrs. Knapp and her sister offered to help. Al accepted and then asked that they throw their bundles into one pile and he would throw his in another. They were instructed to count and when they had 50 bundles, they were to stop. When they reached the 50 bundles, he asked them to count his and they found that he had tied 55, or five more than they had.

Al could tie a bow tie in a flash. He could fill his pipe without spilling any tobacco, in seconds. He could even drive a six-horse hitch by wrapping the reins around his stub and guiding the horses with his free hand.

He did excellent carpenter work and drove the nails by holding the head of the nail against the side of the head of the hammer, tapping it to start it and then finished driving the nail with his strong right hand.

One time he was repairing the hay fork track in the very top of a barn when the ladder slipped from under him. The barn was empty of hay and Al hung on to the track with his good arm, some 40 feet above the barn floor, until his shouts brought someone to replace the ladder for him to descend.

One time, in the 20's, Major Tumbridge was building the house which is now owned by Henry Leir. Several teams of horses were employed to bring in stones for construction purposes. One of the teams was driven by George Mulvaney Sr. and another by Al Knapp.

George felt that it was incredible that this man could do so many things so well with only one hand. While having lunch one day, George observed that it must have been tough to have to buy a pair of gloves when you could only use one.

"Not so bad," said Al, "I have a friend who is a glove salesman and he gives me the sample gloves when he is through with them and since they are made for the right hand only, it works out well for me."

George then said, "But it must be really tough to milk a cow."

Al replied with a question, "How many valves does a calf milk at one time?"

Of course, the reply was, "One."

Al laughed and then asked, “Well, he gets there, doesn’t he?”

#### **#44: GRAPE TRAIN, TOTTERING SHELLS AND THE PEANUT BUTTER MILK**

We have been telling about the old railroad yards, the branch line to Branchville, the old railroad station and some of the personalities that were involved in operating them. There is more to tell about them and at the same time we would like very much to generate some interest in saving the grand old railroad station.

The restoration of the railroad station at Chattanooga, Tenn. was mentioned in a previous column. Recently, we had the opportunity of again visiting this excellent example of preservation, at its best. It would be easy to wax with great enthusiasm in describing this delightful memento of the elegance of yester-year.

The Hilton Corporation established a fine hostelry to complement the very unique restaurant. With all this splendor and with the old Chattanooga Choo Choo parked out front, one feels compelled to visit and enjoy this refreshing bit of nostalgia.

Won’t someone please come forward and accept the very generous offer that has been made by the Ridgefield Supply Company?

Save the old Ridgefield Station.

###

So we are back to the old railroad yards. Until oil burners became popular for home heating, coal was probably the principal product brought to town by rail. Coal was one of the few products that come in carload lots.

Another commodity that filled a railroad car was the grape. Italians have long been noted for their ability to make fine wines. Vino was a very definite part of their diet.

Ridgefield’s large Italian population used to get together each year as the families placed their orders for grapes. When all the orders were in, the grapes would be shipped in via the railroad.

It was not unusual to see two full carloads of grapes on the railroad siding in August or September. Can anyone imagine how many grapes there are in a railroad car capable of handling 40 tons?

Making wine was actually a lot of hard work and today the fine art of winemaking has all but disappeared in Ridgefield. It is easier to buy wine in the store and probably cheaper, but is it as good?

Another commodity that came in to Ridgefield by rail was lumber. A full carload could contain enough lumber to build a couple of small homes. The railroad proved to be very handy for the Ridgefield Lumber Company (now Ridgefield Supply), as the cars came right up to its door. There were less lumber cars than coal cars those days, as it was before the building boom hit Ridgefield.

At one time, Ridgefield had several farms of various types as well as the gentlemen’s farms that were owned by the numerous wealthy families. Food for the farm animals was available at the Ridgefield Lumber Company as well as at the railroad car itself.

At one time, Irving Conklin Sr. handled products that were produced by the Eastern Farmers Exchange. This was a very popular cooperative, with mills in Buffalo, N.Y. Their products included not only grain for the animals but various household articles and flour for making bread. There was white flour, whole wheat flour, rye flour, buckwheat flour and graham flour. Farmers came right to the railroad car, to pick up their grain for the horses, cows, pigs,

chickens, sheep and that very nice flour that their wives made into bread. I guess that bread making is somewhat like winemaking, if not a lost art, at least it is one that is seldom used today.

One other thing that Irving Conklin imported, in carload lots, was peanut shells. Now that may be a little hard to believe, but it is quite true. What would he use them for, you ask? Well they were used for bedding for his cows and they came by the carload from the Planters Peanut factory in Virginia.

Want to guess how many peanut shells there are in a carload? Probably more than three times as many as the number of grapes in the next car. That's an awful lot of peanut shells, you say? Well, Irving had an awful lot of cows back in the days when he sold just about all the milk that was sold in Ridgefield. Of course, that was at a time when the per capita consumption of milk in Ridgefield actually exceeded the per capita consumption of alcoholic beverages.

I remember that the shells cost \$11 per ton and the freight on them was \$15 per ton. When the freight charges exceed the price of the item, you can be sure that the product is both light and bulky. As a matter of fact, the peanut shells came in bags that were almost large enough to hold a Volkswagen.

Because of the fact that the large bags of shells were really not that heavy, there was a tendency to pile more on the wagon than could be transported with safety. It should be noted that the peanut shells were hauled from the rail yards to the Conklin Farm on Ramapoo Road (now Farm Hill Road, Overlook Drive and Nutmeg Court) by teams of horses, drawing hay wagons.

My team had a real large hay rigging to pull. It was eight feet wide and 22 feet long. The bags of shells kept coming out of the railroad car and we kept piling them on until we were even with the top of the car. My opinion that the load was big enough fell on deaf ears, and the bags just kept on coming, so I put on another layer. The extra layer raised me high enough to necessitate raising the utility wires so that I could pass under them.

We did pretty well going up Depot Hill and along Main Street, until we got to the Elms and then had to turn into Gilbert Street. At that point there is a rather pronounced dip in the entrance, Main Street being a little higher than Gilbert caused the dip. The dip is hardly noticeable today as you turn into Gilbert Street, in your well balanced car, with its coil springs and shock absorbers. However, this large wagon was devoid of all these modern mechanical wonders.

The left front wheel made its descent into the dip but as the right front wheel started to follow, the wagon rocked back and forth as if by a giant hand. The rocking dislodged a couple of bags on the right front end of the wagon. Just as they landed in the middle of the intersection, they were quickly followed by more than 50 of the large bags of shells. Included in this sensational demonstration of just how fast a wagon can be unloaded, was a very scared boy who descended from his elevated perch on a bagful of shells that was mindful of a magic carpet. We will carefully refrain from describing how traffic was blocked by the incident, and the extra wagon that was needed to clear the street.

I guess the cows appreciated the warmth provided by the shells on the cold winter nights, but for some reason they could not resist eating them. The shells had no particular food value but many of the cows would turn their stanchions and reach around to eat them.

Eventually, Irving decided against continued use of the shells for bedding the cows. When asked why he stopped using peanut shells, he answered with a smile, "Because the milk was beginning to taste like peanut butter."

## **#45: WHEN COAL CAME RATTLING THROUGH YOUR CELLAR WINDOW**

Recently, a picture of the Old Railroad Station appeared in The Press and it seemed to remind us that here is an old historic building, just dying to be saved. It noted that it was here that the residents picked up the coal to heat their homes. Actually the local coal dealers delivered most of the coal right to the homes.

The coal was carried in a horse-drawn wagon until motor trucks took over. After the wagon was loaded, a long metal chute was placed on top. When the point of delivery was reached, the chute was hooked to the side of the wagon with the other end of the chute placed through the cellar window.

The sound of the coal, rattling down the chute into the cellar coal bin, was not unpleasant, especially when one thought of the warmth it would give on those cold winter days.

Those who shoveled off the coal developed a rhythm that did not vary as they swung their shovels. When a real good one, like Irving Van Wagner, was shoveling, it was almost like listening to a machine. By the time a shovel full of coal had reached a point midway down the chute, another was on its way, so that sound was continuous.

In the event that the house was set back a considerable distance from the driveway and the lawn could not be disturbed, the coal was delivered in heavy canvas bags. The driver would place the chute in the cellar window and carry the 100 pound bags to the chute. Of course, there was an additional charge for this kind of service.

There were a half dozen or more coal companies. They were allowed four or five days to unload a carload of coal. If the car was not ready for return by the end of the period, the dealer was compelled to pay a demurrage charge for each day that he kept the car. To avoid this penalty, each dealer provided himself with a stall in the railroad yards, across the street and south of the old station.

The stalls had to be large enough to hold whatever coal he was unable to deliver by the end of the grace period. The stalls had a back and two sides, but no front and no top. Each stall always had some coal, piled as near the back as possible. There was no fence or other protection and it was said that homes in the area were the warmest in town, and the cost of home heating was considerably less than any place else in Ridgefield.

While all the piles of coal seemed to shrink a little each night, one pile always had more than the others and grew right back to size each day. It was replenished several times daily.

It was mandatory that each wagon be weighed daily before being loaded. It would be driven up to the D.F. Bedient Company each morning where the large scale was located on the south of Bailey Avenue side of the building. The spot where the platform was is still visible today.

The weigher would be Andrew Bloomer Sr., Lawrence Coleman, Jack Whitlock or Francis "Beedie" Bedient himself. After the weighing ceremony, the tare was established for that day and the driver was free to load the wagon and return with the load to be weighed. The tare was deducted and a ticket verifying the weight of the load was handed to the driver. Sometimes the driver left the wagon when the tare was being recorded. If he did, he must do so each time the load was weighed that day.

One driver had exceptionally big feet. He would leave the wagon as the load was being weighed, but would stand close enough so that a considerable portion of his feet was still on the scale. This, of course, added several pounds to the load.

Between the front wheels and the rear wheels of the wagon was what was called the "reach." It was an oversized two-by-four that spaced the wheels to fit the particular body that might be used.

The “reach” was close enough to the underside of the wagon as to be quite difficult for the weigher to see. One dealer used to wrap a very large chain around the “reach” after tare was established. This would add many pounds to each load of coal. He also had his driver make a trip back to the coal yards and throw off some coal before making delivery. This was at the stall that always seemed to have the biggest pile.

If these tricks were played on the wealthy “summer people,” they went unnoticed, or may even have been considered clever. However, if the one being short-weighted was a native, or a year-around resident, it was treated with much disdain and the word spread rapidly through the town.

Men engaged in the building trades used to congregate around Bedient’s each morning and wait for a ride to work. They were very observant and were quite aware of the practices that the dealers engaged in.

One driver did not like being a part of the trickery. He engaged in many heated arguments with his employer. Of course, he always lost and many times he got fired on the spot. If he got fired, the employer would drive the horse that day himself. However, the same driver would be back to work the next morning.

One morning as the men standing by the store listened intently, the daily argument heated up rapidly. The employer was heard to say, “D— it, Fr—, you don't know nothing.”

The driver answered in a loud voice, “By Golly, I know 1,500 don't make a ton.”

Fr— had gotten himself fired again, but was back the next day. The men on the corner had a great laugh over the incident and for a while there were no more morning arguments.

Two of the drivers who worked for the lumber company were a father and son combination. Both were excellent workers and handled their jobs very well. Strange as it may seem, both men carried pocket watches. Large watch fobs hung from their watch pockets.

They always had the correct time but neither could tell time.

One morning the two men met in the middle of the coal yards. It was just before noon and the father asked the son what time it was. The younger one pulled on his watch fob and produced his large Ingersoll watch, which, as usual, had the correct time.

He held the watch up for his father to see it and said, “There it is.”

The older man gave the watch a quick look and replied, “D—, it ain't.”

#### **#46: MY ALL-TIME FAVORITE CHARACTER**

Some of the readers of our column have asked that we stop writing about the old railroad station and the railroad yards. They have expressed a desire to hear about other areas. However, when I ask if they want me to write about their particular street, they generally decline.

Well; we would like to do one or two more about the railroad yards and the interesting people who lived, worked or played there. We have mentioned some of Ridgefield’s characters from time to time and there are lots more. If a town has any life to it at all, it is bound to have these kinds of people. We have always felt that Ridgefield had a corner on the character market and it certainly has been a lively town.

My own all-time favorite character is Jimmy Rogers. The stories about this funny man are legion. He was a chauffeur for several of the wealthy Ridgefield families. In his last years in town (the 30’s) he drove a taxi for Herb Bates. As mentioned in an earlier column Herb’s taxi business was conducted from the building on Bailey Avenue that now houses this newspaper.

We think that the many stories about Jimmy are so good that to be thoroughly appreciated, they must be passed out piecemeal. Therefore, we will attempt to relate each one while writing about the area in which they occurred.

Jimmy Rogers, despite an excellent wardrobe — and it was one of the best we ever saw — was a funny-looking character. He never wore a hat but his splendid suit was always topped off with a fine cap. The cap was usually a light tan or camel hair.

The cap surmounted a face that, once seen, was never to be forgotten. I guess that face would compare favorably with the much photographed countenance of the late and beloved Casey Stengel. Two very green eyes peered out at you from under real heavy eyebrows. They were set in grizzled features that were exceedingly red in both winter and summer.

Jimmy's ears were exceptionally large, again like Casey. His right eye had marks across it that looked like scratches made by a cat. We were never sure what effect, if any, the scratches may have had on his eyesight. His shoes were always beautifully polished and the toes turned in to some degree as he was pigeon-toed.

A description of Jimmy Rogers would not be complete without mention of his voice which was very high pitched in its natural state. However, he had acquired the ability to change his voice from high to low and could even be guttural, when the occasion required.

Jimmy was a very kind person and the many people who knew him liked him very much. He had no known enemies. He also had no wife that we ever heard of. If he had had a wife, she would of necessity have had to be a person with a great understanding plus a fantastic sense of humor.

You must understand that Jimmy was imbued with the idea that his mission on this earth was to make people laugh. That he was eminently successful, there can be no doubt.

During the dark days of the Depression, he was priceless to those who needed a laugh. He could cause you to smile just to see him coming toward you down the street. As he came closer your smile would broaden in anticipation of whatever zany act that you knew he was concocting.

I guess by now you must have formed the opinion that Jimmy was at least slightly demented. Nothing could be further from the truth. He had all his buttons and some to spare. He just seemed to enjoy being funny despite the serious expression in his classic features.

There is a great temptation to reveal all of the antics of Jimmy Rogers. However, as previously stated, we will resist the urge and just dole them out at appropriate intervals.

One that he once told me of just did not work out. It was about 1930 and Jimmy bought, for a few dollars, an old Model T Ford. It was of very little value and was probably about to be junked. He proceeded to take off all of the tires. Those who remember the old Model T with its 30 by 31/2 tires know that the rims that held the tires were similar in width to the wheels of the railroad cars.

Somehow, Jimmy with the help of a crony was able to adjust the wheels to fit the railroad tracks. One evening, with the help of a jack, they were successful in hoisting the old Ford onto the tracks. They did this at the most southern end of the dead-end tracks.

There were two empty railroad cars ready for return in this area. The small car was almost completely shielded from view by the large freight cars.

Jimmy then took a dummy that he had previously stuffed with straw and placed it in the driver's seat. The arms of the dummy were then tied to the steering wheel of the car. Next the old Model T was carefully chained to the rear of one of the freight cars.



It was customary for the freight train to arrive in Ridgefield about 10 o'clock in the morning. It would leave whatever freight cars that were intended for Ridgefield and tow the empties back down to Branchville.

However, there must have been a shortage of empty cars and the engine was sent to Ridgefield that night to pick up the empty cars. Alas, Jimmy's carefully laid plans went awry. He and his helper had just finished their work when they heard the engine's whistle as it approached the Ivy Hill Road crossing. They had planned to return the next morning to watch the fun.

The engine entered the railroad yards and no time was wasted switching cars around as nocturnal visits of the freight trains were frowned on by people in town. The engine quickly hooked on to the empty cars and just as quickly backed out of the yards with the Model T in tandem.

As Jimmy once told me this story, a tear came to his eye. It was to have been his masterpiece. What was to have been a laughable incident for many people was seen only by Jimmy and his pal. He said that the Ford made it all the way to Branchville station where it was discovered and removed from the tracks.

The prank was only one of many and Jimmy had much better luck with the others, although one almost cost him his life. We will tell about them as we go along.

#### **#47: FREIGHT AGENT HOUSE AND HIS HOCUS POCUS**

In our stories about the old railroad yards, we have neglected one very important building. The former freight house is a large building, in the southwest corner of the yards. It has concrete siding, a flat roof and a large ramp on the northwest end. The ramp was built so as to accommodate the large articles that were shipped by freight.

The railroad tracks went right between the freight house and the large old elevator house. The elevator house is still standing, but not in very good condition. It got its name, of course, from the fact that it housed an elevator that was used to carry grains to the upper part of the building.

At any rate the buildings were just far enough apart to allow two tracks for railroad cars to pass between them and then come 50 feet farther where the tracks ended. Just before the end of the tracks was another building used by Bacchiochi Inc. for storage of such materials as cement. This firm also used this building as a carpenter shop.

All three buildings are still in use. The elevator house serves as a storage building and the other two are used by The Woodworks, which turns out fine woodwork.

This little complex was very handy during the years of the railroad. The doors to the platforms of the three buildings were the exact height of the floor of a railroad car and since the cars came within inches of the buildings loading and unloading operations were greatly simplified.

The freight house was built around the time of World War I and Mr. Pettit was the freight agent for several years. George House became the agent around 1932 after Marshall W. Ralston retired. George had been in charge of both freight and express in Pleasant Valley, N.Y., for many years.

George was an exceptionally nice man with a great sense of humor. He was also, however, a terrible practical joker, as you will see. He and Mrs. House lived at 160 High Ridge until the freight trains stopped coming in and the freight house closed for the last time in 1952.

Ridgefield had almost as many practical jokers as it did characters, so George joined with many other jokers when he came to Ridgefield.

Mr. House had a real large goiter on the left side of his neck. It was said that the great swelling was caused by a lack of iodine in his system. I had never seen a goiter before and felt very sorry for this nice man. However, it did not seem to bother him in the performance of his duties.

Once I ordered a washing machine in October that was to be a Christmas present for my wife. It was to be shipped from Chicago by freight and as it was to be a surprise, I planned to store it in the basement till Christmas.

However, two weeks before Christmas the washer had not arrived and I was beginning to get concerned. Each day I kept asking George about it and he kept assuring me that I would have the washer by Christmas. During the final week before Christmas, my concern turned to alarm and I guess George got tired of my inquiries.

The day before Christmas George called in the morning to tell me that he had the washer. He planned to close the office at noon because it was Christmas Eve and he wanted me to come by at noon and pick up the washer. I asked that he leave the washer out on the platform and I would pick it up later in the afternoon.

George insisted on my coming before he closed as he said the box was very heavy and he would have to help me load it on the pickup truck.

When I arrived at the freight office George showed me an exceptionally well constructed, large wooden box. When he said that the box was heavy he was not kidding and it took our combined efforts to load it on the pickup. Had I not been so excited over the arrival of the washer I probably would have given it a closer examination.

Marie had an appointment at noon so I planned to get the washer into the basement while she was gone and uncrate it after work. It was a real hard struggle and I still do not know how I ever got that crate out of the pickup and down the basement steps.

That evening after work I scurried home as fast as I could and prepared for the unveiling of the big surprise and a surprise it sure was. It took a wrecking bar plus a crowbar to get the first board off the top of the box. The board revealed that exceptionally large nails had been used. Finally the last of the top boards was removed and there in the middle of the box was a tiny washing machine, about six inches in height. George had bought it in the toy department of a local store.

To give the crate sufficient weight, he had placed three 100 pound bags of rock salt in the bottom of the box. My first impulse was to look at the basement windows, as I was sure someone must have been out there laughing as they enjoyed my displeasure at being so thoroughly fooled.

George must have spent more than a week constructing that box. I finally got over it and we remained very good friends. It was just a good example of the lengths to which a practical joker would go.

He later told me of a young fellow who had ordered a diamond ring for his fiancée. The young man came each day to George's express office in Pleasant Valley to see if the ring had arrived. George assured the man that he would call him as soon as it arrived.

Finally, George went to the nearest five-and-ten cent store and bought a cheap little ring with a large glass centerpiece. He had Mrs. House wrap it nicely and then called the young man to come to his office, which he did on a lead run. George had him unwrap the ring so that he could see it.

As the stone was much larger than the young fellow expected, he was thrilled by the sight of it. George asked how he could know that it was any good and the man replied that it had

to be because it had cost so much. George asked to examine the ring and then told the young man that he thought it should be tested. With that he picked up a hammer and struck the ring a sharp blow. Of course, the glass shattered in many pieces, and the poor fellow passed out cold.

The greatest practical joker we ever knew was the late Raymond Keeler and we will tell about him as we go along.

#### **#48: THE RAZING OF THE OSBORN EMPIRE & THE ARRIVAL OF THE ITALIANS**

We will leave the old railroad yards briefly but it will be necessary to come right back, as we feel that there are still some interesting stories about the area.

So let's start at the top of Depot Hill — they now call it Prospect Street. On the south corner of Prospect and Main Street until just a few years ago stood a large and very well built house. It was the home of Richard Waldo Osborn, where he lived with his wife, Annie Talman Osborn, their grand-daughter Winnie, and Mr. Osborn's sister, Miss Winifred Osborn. It was at that time 149 Main Street and since the number changes, 10 years ago, it has been 470 Main Street. This beautiful house was torn down in recent years to make room for the large brick structure that houses the Silk Purse and other stores and offices.

"Dickie," as Mr. Osborn was known to his friends, was a rather short little man. He was not short on talent, however, and was a great baseball pitcher in the days of Francis D. Martin, D. Harvey Valden, Charles D. Crouchley, Lou Abbott and other fine ball players of the time. Mr. Osborn was also a very respected businessman and around the turn of the century was owner and operator of the Ridgefield Lumber Company.

The Osborn holdings extended from his home on Main Street, down Depot Hill to the corner of Prospect Street and Bailey Avenue. Mr. Osborn had built his house early in the century after moving his old one down the hill. To the rear of the new house was a brown shingled bungalow where Al and Ann Girolmetti lived for many years. A bit farther down the hill was the old Osborn house, now for two families. The railroad engineer Frank Seymour lived there, as well as my brother Gus and his family. Harold and Ann Mead as well as several other families, lived in this house through the years. There are few, if any, houses like that one, in Ridgefield today. Like its successor it, too, was torn down to make way for Yankee Ridge.

Just below the two family house, George Clarke Operated a furniture repair shop, where he also sold antiques. He had a sister, Flossie, who helped him at the shop, when she was not busy as a clerk in the Ridgefield Savings Bank. Flossie was a little lady, I guess she could have been considered tiny. She was probably less than five feet tall and always quite thin. Her voice was very squeaky and might startle you when you first heard it. This is not meant to be disrespectful in any way as Flossie was a very nice little lady and she was very well thought of .

The building in which George operated his business, had been moved to that location. Apparently they had been in such a hurry to get the place in operation, that they failed to provide a basement. The building was deposited on several poles that kept it about two or three feet above the ground. It must have been a very difficult place to heat. The building was two stories high with a facade that was mindful of the storefronts that were to be seen in some of the cow-towns out west.

In later years this place served as an antiques shop that was operated by Raymond Krotz. Ray also repaired and sold furniture. Still later, my niece, Kathryn Rosa, carried on an antique business from this old building. It was also occupied by the Toy Caboose.

Next there was a small, one-story building that was used mostly as a storehouse. At one time it was used briefly as a meeting place for one of the trade unions and before that as an office for the Lumber Company.

On the corner of Prospect and Bailey Avenue there was a two-story building that was the original Ridgefield Lumber Company warehouse and sales office. This building was right where The Regiment is now.

All of these buildings were removed to make room for the many new business establishments that now line the south side of Prospect Street.

Mr. Osborn operated the lumber company for many years until he finally sold the business to a group headed by William H. Cargon. Ownership of the business passed on to Frank Dain and eventually to the Louis Price family who are the present owners.

Richard Osborn died in 1933 at the age of 86, while his wife, Annie, lived on until 1965, by which time she had reached the age of 101.

The area started to go through some real changes in the early 1900's, when Italian families began to arrive in Ridgefield. In 1902 the first four Italian men appeared and settled on Bailey Avenue. Much of this information, concerning the advent of our Italian population, was gleaned from an interview with Octavius J. (Tabby) Carboni, conducted by his son Robert Carboni. The interview took place a dozen years ago, and Tabby has a good memory now, so it is reasonable to expect that it was even better then. Bob Carboni was exceptionally well suited to the job of interviewing his father, as he had, for several years, written a column for this newspaper. [Note: The complete Tabby Carboni interview is posted on Old Ridgefield.]

Benvenuto Carboni and John Christafaro were two of the first four Italian men to come to Ridgefield. The other two will go unnamed for now. Benvenuto and John came here at the time the first water lines and the sewer lines were being installed. Italians are noted for their proficiency in masonry work and these gentlemen were no exception. Therefore, they readily found employment on the two projects previously mentioned. John Christafaro had somehow learned a little English and quickly became a foreman on the job.

The trick was, how did they know that so much work was available in Ridgefield? Somehow the word had traveled across the ocean (by grape vine?) to Italy, to the Province of Ancona, to the town of Monterado, near Ancona, to Castelvecchio, Mondolfo, Ripe, Cesano and Castel-Colonna, and Ridgefield then started to grow.

The first four men lived together in a two-story house that used to sit on the south side of Bailey Avenue, just about where the back loading platform for the GranGentral store [today the Thrift Shop] now stands. As more Italian people began arriving, it was natural for them to seek out those already here for guidance. Perhaps this was a reason for the heavy concentration of Italian families in this area.

It was not unusual for men to migrate to this country and then, after working a few years to establish a "grub stake," they would send for their families to come over and join them. Such was the case with Benvenuto Carboni. He was very industrious, a "Jack of All Trades" as Tabby called him. My father said that he was the hardest working man that he ever knew. At any rate, in a couple of years. Benvenuto had sufficient funds to send back to the old country for his little wife, Assunta and their two boys, Adrian and Octavius.

More on the Carbonis next week.

#### **#49: HARD-WORKING BENVENUTO CARBONI OPENS STORE, AND DANCES**

In the year 1904, Center School was located on Bailey Avenue, on what is now a municipal lot. On the south side of Bailey Avenue, right across the street from the school, lived the Carboni family. The two-story building in which they lived has long since disappeared to make way for the GranCentral store.

Benvenuto Carboni would be a rare individual today. He firmly believed that to get ahead in the world, a person should work hard. He instilled this philosophy in the rest of his family. His ability and capacity for hard work was coupled with an eye for business.

Benvenuto quickly realized that the many Italians who followed him to Ridgefield would need grocery products that were not readily available in a small New England Yankee town. He knew that to be truly happy, his friends, with their love for Italian dishes, had to have their native hard cheese, olive oil, pasta, Italian bread, etc. Somehow, he was successful in locating a firm in New York City that would supply him with these necessary ingredients.

In due time Benvenuto transformed the two front, downstairs rooms of the family home into the first Italian store in Ridgefield. A salesman from the New York firm would call each week and take the orders for the much sought after food stuffs.

Assunta (who was the first Italian woman in Ridgefield) and her little boys, Adrian and Octavius, ran the store during the day, while Benvenuto handled the operations in the very early morning hours and again after his days work was completed. The fact that none of the family spoke English was not a hindrance as their customers, during this period, all spoke Italian. \

To augment the store, one of Benvenuto's friends, Giuseppe Tonetti, was persuaded to open the first Italian bakery in Ridgefield, in the rear of the Carboni store. Giuseppe had been an excellent baker in the old country and the Carboni enterprise flourished.

With the family living upstairs over the store and bakery, the store hours became quite flexible. Customers came very early in the morning and still it was not unusual to hear a knock on the door at 10 or 11 at night. When this happened, one of the family was sure to accommodate by producing what the caller required.

In four years, business at the store had increased to a point where it became necessary to find larger quarters. Benvenuto learned that Richard Osborn was planning to move his lumber company operations across the way, to the north side of Prospect Street. He lost no time in setting up a meeting with Mr. Osborn concerning the building that stood on the corner of Prospect Street and Bailey Avenue.

Apparently Mr. Osborn was very much impressed with Benvenuto's aggressiveness and his business acumen. At any rate, Carboni's Italian Market was moved to the former lumber company building, on the corner where The Regiment is now.

The year was 1908 and soon a little girl, Mary, was born into the family. Unfortunately the little girl died while still a baby. Next to come along was Navio Peter Carboni and we called him "Navz" when he was a schoolboy, then in later years he became known as Pete to his friends and customers at the A&P Liquor Store.

Shortly thereafter, another boy, Olinto arrived and he was quickly to become known as "Lynce." When, a year later, a little girl joined the boys she was named Mary, just as was the daughter who had preceded her. In those days, it was not an unusual practice to do this. My own father was named Charles, after a little brother who had predeceased him. [Another son was Adriano, known as "Ade."]

The last of this original Italian family came into the world a couple of years later and he was named Reno. The name did not last very long and he became "Renz." When we were little

kids, and he was asked where he had been born, his stock answer was “In a showcase at my father’s store.”

As pointed out in Dispatch No. 34, even though each member of the Carboni family had been dutifully assigned an appropriate nickname, they all, and that includes Mary, answered to the name “Bones.”

In order to survive in this very active family, it was absolutely necessary that you be an athlete. As Casey Stengel used to say, “You could look it up,” as the records will reveal that the Carbonis were eminently successful in just about every sport, as well as the avenues in which they pursued their livelihoods.

Benvenuto has been previously portrayed as a very hard working man. As a matter of fact, while busily engaged in his daily employment, and his activities at the store, he somehow found time to build the very nice future home of the family, at what is now 24 Danbury Road [now gone; it was in the area of today’s Webster Bank]. It is a very well constructed house and the greater part of the work was actually done by Benvenuto (in his spare time). Tabby had dubbed him as a “jack of all trades,” and that he must have been.

It is very doubtful that all his activities left him much time for sports. We have however, witnessed at first hand, while playing in the band, his considerable talent on the dance floor. There was this Italian folk dance that I think was called Farlanda. I believe that its purpose was to portray a cow and a hull. The dance went on until one of the partners had to quit because of sheer exhaustion, as the music was fast and a great deal of energy was expended.

Benvenuto would start the dance with, of course, Assunta as his partner. Perhaps because of the exertion he had put into his normal daily activities, he was never able to finish the dance. He would drop out and another man would replace him, only to suffer the same fate. It was not unusual for Assunta to wear out four or five partners before she would reluctantly give in and allow some other lady to replace her.

It was a very exciting dance and the crowd would always loudly applaud as each of Assunta’s partners fell by the wayside. She was a great little lady.

Though the elder Carbonis did not have time for sports, the younger ones did, even though they did their share of the work. Each excelled in at least one sport and some were proficient in several. More about them, next time.

## **#50: THE CARBONI FAMILY, ON COURT AND FIELD**

The name Carboni was considered synonymous with the word sports. For more than half a century, an examination of the local sports pages was bound to reveal the name of at least one member of the Carboni family, listed in one of the line-ups. They were in many different sporting events.

Adrian (Ade) was a good baseball player and a fine bowler as well as a great man. He never stopped running, even in his advanced years. He was also a very good student and in eighth grade was first in his class.

The following year Octavius (Tabby) also finished first in his class. Tabby excelled in baseball and basketball. He was a good bowler and played a fair game of golf and was considered very good at ping pong. As a matter of fact, if you had some money and needed a lesson in pool or billiards, he was always willing to oblige.

Tabby used to have a standing invitation to play a game of pool or billiards with the late B. Ogden Chisolm. Mr. Chisolm had a fine game room in his beautiful mansion on Peaceable Street, and his billiard was the very best to be had.

There were those who felt that Tabby was pretty good at pinochle and poker. No doubt this feeling was generated to a great extent by their rapidly diminishing stack of poker chips.

There are many who believe that the nickname "Tabby" is not necessarily a contraction of the word Octavius. It could very well have been given in recognition of his feline-like quickness. His very alert mind kept pace with his physical speed.

A person with a real strong heart could thoroughly enjoy watching Tabby play baseball. He always played the infield, either at second base or short-stop. In a real tense moment of a close game, it was a treat to see a ground ball hit the heel of his glove, run up his arm to the elbow, then bounce to the opposite shoulder, from which vantage point it would then roll down his right arm to his hand. The batter, in the meantime, would be racing to first base, but a lightning-like throw would nip him just as he was about to step on the bag.

Tabby was not a power hitter like Babe Ruth but he acquired the ability to "hit them where they ain't," like Wee Willie Keeler used to do. Tabby, like the rest of his family, was not very tall and therefore he was not easy to pitch to. If he did not succeed in pushing the ball past one of the infielders, he would usually draw a walk.

Now that Tabby was on base, the excitement mounted as he was almost sure to try to steal second base. He was not quite as fast on the basepaths as his brother Ade. However, he was a good runner and if the play at second was close, Tabby would slide in head first (a la Pepper Martin).

Tabby played a good game of golf and some of those he played with were Mally Knapp, who was the pro at the Bloomerside Course, Peter McManus, Johnny Kelly, and Bernie Christopher. Twenty-five years ago Tabby was Ridgefield's town treasurer.

Navio (Naz or Pete), was good at baseball, but his best sport was basketball. He starred on more than one of the champion high school teams. Pete was also a real good golfer and once scored a hole in one on Vail's Course.

Olinto (Lynce) was probably one of the very best all-around athletes that Ridgefield ever had. Though he was good at baseball, like his brother Pete, Lynce excelled in basketball and was very exciting to watch. Many of us thought that he could have played with any of the professional teams. As might be expected, Lynce was not very tall. He would probably not stand much above the belts on some of the gigantic basketball players of today, but they would find it almost impossible to stop his great speed and elusive maneuvers.

Like Pete again, Lynce was a top player on the champion high school teams of the mid-20's, as well as several of the town teams, later on. On some of the teams, he and Pete played together, as a fine brother act.

Lynce also starred in football with the Ridgefield Spartans as an excellent ball carrier. His prowess in the field of sports did not end there.

In the late 20's and early 30's, Lynce was considered an excellent boxer and there were many who felt that, had he chosen to pursue a career in the ring, he would have been another Willie Pep. That was at a time when boxing bouts were in the auditorium of the town hall, or in the Italian American Hall. We seem to remember one of Lynce's bouts that was unscheduled and took place in the parking area back of the town hall.

Nowadays he will settle for a quiet round of golf, unless dancing can be considered a sport. Lynce, like his mother, is a great dancer and once the music starts he is out there for every dance. Lucky for him, Dorothy also loves to dance and it is nice to see them tripping the light fantastic.

Mary Carboni, now Mrs. James T. Mitchell, was not to be outdone by her brothers, and she played a great game of basketball. Had there been as many opportunities for girls in sports in those days, I'm sure that Mary would have been top notch in any one of them.

Along with her other talents, Mary was an exceptionally good dancer and it was my good fortune to have had her teach me the way around the dance floor. Today, and for many years she has been the Republican Registrar of Voters.

I am the youngest of nine children so please forgive me for ascribing to the theory that they get better as you go along. Of course, I am being quite facetious, as I never really felt worthy of carrying the shoes of any of my six brothers or my two sisters.

So, we come to Reno "Renz," the youngest of the large Carboni family. Renz kept the family's tradition going in the field of sports. He excelled in both baseball and basketball, as well as some of the minor sports. He always had a very intense urge to win no matter what the game was. We can well remember one very close baseball game when he slid into second base with such fierce abandon that his ankle was shattered. He still walks with a slight hitch as a result of that unfortunate incident.

Renz loved to play tricks and he would use wile along with his great natural talent to best an opponent. Once while we were playing some kind of kid game in back of his home on Danbury Road He called out that he had injured his foot and limped into view. The other kids were aware of his penchant for playing tricks and went on with the game. This time, however, Renz was not kidding.

Adolph Hoffman had operated a laundry in an old building that was in a state of disrepair, and had been abandoned. The building stood just about where Pamby's Body Shop is now. Renz had stepped on a nail that protruded from a board and we saw him hop all the way home with the board still clinging to his foot.

Many years after his father sold his store (where the Regiment now stands), Renz bought it and ran the store for a while and then turned it into a lunch room. A new customer seated at the lunch counter might be impressed to see a snake slithering down the counter towards him. It was a fake, of course, but it was always good for a laugh on the unsuspecting customer.

He also used to place a life-sized dummy on the seat of his panel truck, to give the impression that he had a passenger. Unless you paid strict attention on the golf course, you might discover that your ball was not near the place where you expected to find it.

He enjoyed good fun and still does. You can be sure that there is never a dull moment when he is around.