

'Dick's Dispatch'

Columns 276 through 300

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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#276: THE VIEW FROM THE TOP

It was at the dawning of the 20th Century that Jonathan Bulkley and his family came to Ridgefield. It must have been pretty wild on craggy old West Mountain, when Mr. Bulkley started to amass hundreds of acres that would make up his great estate.

Rippowam Farm, as it was called, had very little level land and even less that was suitable for farming. However, a farm was just about a necessity on any large estate and Mr. Bulkley set right to work at clearing the land and leveling it for farm use.

A great amount of the acreage that made up the estate was acquired from the Mead family that lived in neighboring South Salem. The Meads were probably the owners of the greatest amount of land at the time in that area. [Thomas H. Mead called his mansion "Rippowam."] I believe they owned a lot of land around Lake Waccabuc and where Waccabuc Country Club is now. Further north, the largest owners of property were Ogden Mills and Henry B. Anderson.

A great part of the Bulkley estate was once involved in a dispute between the states of New York and Connecticut that went on for more than 200 years. Trouble between the states erupted soon after the boundaries were established in 1664, and continued, periodically, until a settlement was ratified by the legislatures of both states, and then by the Congress about 100 years ago. The dispute seemed to be fomented by the towns of Stamford and Greenwich and their desire to remain as part of Connecticut and New York State's desire to own the lakes at Waccabuc.

The difference of opinion in the matter was focused on a large tract of land that was known as "The Oblong" because of its shape. Since it encompassed some 62,000 acres, it was no small matter.

At any rate, in the settlement, Ridgefield lost the very picturesque lakes at Waccabuc, Peach Lake, and a freak of nature in North Salem that was called "Boulder Stone." This huge piece of granite was deposited on five smaller stones by the same glacier that gave us our present water supply at Round Pond. I guess we should credit that same glacier for the many hills and vales that add so much to the beauty of Ridgefield.

In the process of the settlement, the big towns of Stamford and Greenwich apparently gained the land that they sought. They also remained a part of Connecticut, and the state itself was provided with the little toe that protrudes from its southwest corner.

Years ago, as you entered the Bulkley estate from Oreneca Road, there were several houses that provided homes for some of the families that were employed on the estate. Only one of these houses remains, and it is the home of Gary Vozzo and his family. Gary is now the superintendent on the estate. One of the houses was moved some years ago to Danbury Aod, where it now sits on the corner of Limestone Road, just south of the Limestone Service Station. It does seem that more houses in Ridgefield have been moved from their original location than in any other town in the area.

George Beard was the superintendent for the Bulkley family during the period of which I am writing. George enjoyed a fine reputation as a horticulturist, and displays that he exhibited won many prizes at the flower shows. The large estates in Ridgefield were well known for the excellent displays that they entered in area flower shows and the big show in New York City as well.

To add to the prestige that was enjoyed by our town in botanical circles, in 1934 Mrs. Jonathan Bulkley was elected the president of the Garden Clubs of America.

To add to the natural beauty of his estate, Jonathan Bulkley had thousands of rhododendrons planted through the wooded areas and along the driveways. Someone must have sent word to the great herds of deer that roam about on the Pound Ridge Reservation. At any rate, it was not long before the deer descended on Rippowam Farm in droves. During their visits, the deer played havoc with the beautiful shrubs and presented George Beard with a very serious problem.

His plight was duly noted in an article that appeared in *The Ridgefield Press*. *The Press*, even in those days, had a very wide circulation among people who, for whatever reason, found it necessary to move from Ridgefield. These people wanted very much to keep in touch with their favorite town. Therefore, it was not surprising 50 years ago when a lady in the state of Washington read in *The Press* that George was having difficulties in protecting his shrubbery from the deer.

When a person's problem is made public, someone is almost sure to come up with a solution. The lady in Washington wrote a letter to the editor, in which she told of how a similar situation had occurred out on the West Coast. She told of how the deer had been discouraged by simply scattering camphor balls around the rhododendrons.

Perhaps the lady was thinking about a shrub or two, rather than the thousands at Rippowam Farm. However, George Beard was willing to try anything and he must have bought a truckload of camphor balls. I am not sure of how successful the experiment was, but it was said that there were no moths on West Mountain for a long, long time.

Jonathan Bulkley was the senior partner in Bulkley, Dunton & Company. This was a firm that manufactured paper, and it was founded by Mr. Bulkley's father in 1833.

Jonathan joined his father's firm right after graduating from Yale in 1879. He progressed rapidly in the business, and became a director in more than a dozen paper companies. Bulkley & Dunton had their offices on Madison Avenue in New York City.

Jonathan married the former Sarah L. Tod and they lived at 600 Park Avenue. Mr. Bulkley built his Ridgefield mansion at a very high point of land, with an excellent view to the west. It overlooks the lakes at Waccabuc, and much of the land that was taken from Ridgefield, in the settlement that has been mentioned. Since a large portion of his land extended into New York state, it may have been his way of reclaiming some of those many acres.

#277: THE SAGA OF SARAH BISHOP & HER CAVE

As you travel along Oreneca Road, a narrow one-lane road branches off to the north. This road leads to the Girl Scout Camp that nestles high on the mountain.

Some years ago, Earl Sturges and Warren Keeler donated a large tract to the Girl Scouts with the aim of allowing them to have a camp.

[To the south runs Rippowam Road and the Bulkley-Randolph estate, Rippowam Farm.]

Francis F. Randolph Jr, is now the owner of the great estate and it is with a feeling of gratefulness that I recall the tremendous help he was to me when I was chairman of Ridgefield's 275th Anniversary fete.

No account of the old Bulkley estate would be complete without telling about Sarah Bishop and her cave.

Most everyone is familiar with the tragic story of Ridgefield's most famous hermitess, but for those who are not, I will briefly tell it again. By so doing, I will combine the stories of historian George L. Rockwell and Samuel Goodrich (Peter Parley).

Mr. Goodrich's story was gathered first hand, as he actually knew Sarah Bishop. On several occasions she was an overnight guest of the Goodrich family on High Ridge. The place is known as "The Peter Parley House" and is now the residence of the Preston Bassetts.

My columns have dealt primarily with Ridgefield as it was in the 20's and 30's, but the saga of Sarah Bishop goes back 200 years. It seems generally agreed that this mysterious woman came from a good family and grew up on Long Island.

It was extremely difficult to get Sarah to tell about her early life, but bits of information, elicited during her more talkative moments, give reason to believe that her life as a hermitess was caused by a love affair that went sour. It was not a very romantic story. Sarah Bishop, as the story goes, fell in love as a young woman with a sea captain (possibly British). As the date for the wedding drew near, the captain just disappeared and Sarah soon learned that she had been jilted.

It apparently had a devastating effect. The poor woman went into a state of deep depression that worsened greatly when marauding British troops visited her town on Long Island. The soldiers destroyed the town and in the process burned the Bishop family home.

Before leaving the town, the invading troops caused Sarah to suffer "a fate worse than death."

Whether or not Sarah Bishop was the sole survivor of her family is not known. However, when the despicable raid was over, Sarah left the island. How long she wandered through the wilderness is also unknown, but at some point in time she arrived in Ridgefield.

She then made her way to West Mountain and found a spot that offered an excellent view of the area of Long Island where she had lived. After the heartbreak which she had suffered there, it would seem that she would not want to ever see Long Island again.

At any rate, high on the mountain, Sarah discovered a small cave that is just over the line in New York state, and it was here that her incredible story of survival began. The cave is located just a couple of hundred yards north of the Randolph mansion.

Sarah Bishop's cave is just as much a freak of nature as North Salem's "Boulder Staone." Certainly, it is not man-made, as it would have been impossible to arrange the huge stones that form the cave without the aid of the most modern machinery. It would be difficult to assemble the stones, even with today's sophisticated construction equipment, if such machinery could ever be transported to this rugged and craggy area.

So we can credit the great glacier for providing Sarah Bishop with this unique shelter, in which she would live out her meager existence.

Only a person with a vivid imagination can visualize this poor lady living in this little stone cavern for a dozen years or more. Yet, it is a historical fact that Sarah was able to brave the elements during those years until her death in 1810.

During her tenure on this mountain retreat, Sarah Bishop lived on berries and fruits and produce from a little garden that she cultivated. This was all fine during the summer months, but winters must have been a very horrible experience.

Goodrich, in his poem about the hermitess, notes that Sarah used to sit outside her cave, surrounded by her animal friends. He tells of how a fox would approach, close enough to nip at her lingers, and now the flapping wings of an eagle overhead caused a draft that fanned her long gray hair. He also depicts a crow sitting atop her head and a rattlesnake coiled in her lap. No doubt her gentle manner caused these animals to place their trust in her.

It was said that Sarah Bishop was a religious person and attended services at the Congregational Church, where the senior Rev. Samuel Goodrich was pastor. The junior Goodrich tells of how, when she was an overnight guest at the Goodrich home, Sarah would refuse to eat at the table with the family. No doubt this was to avoid conversation, with resulting questions. He said that though she accepted gifts, she would never beg.

There is a house in South Salem on the corner of Waccabuc Road that is still owned by the Hoyt family, and Sarah used to keep some fine clothes there with the Jared Hoyt family. She would change from her bedraggled, everyday clothing, to which she would return after attending church.

It was on a return trip from South Salem on a cold winter night that Sarah stumbled and fell to the ground. She may have suffered some kind of attack. At any rate, Sarah was found there by neighbors. She had frozen to death and was buried in the cemetery in an unmarked grave at North Salem. Sarah Bishop took with her a dramatic story that would surpass most of those seen on our TV screens today.

#278: THE ONCE-FAMOUS 'SWINGING BRIDGE'

On the return trip from our walk to Sarah Bishop's Cave, we again pass the great mansion that Jonathan Bulkley built so many years ago. It is not as large as it once was, but it is still a very impressive structure.

Jonathan's daughter, Sarah Bulkley Randolph, decided back in the early 50s that the place was much larger than she needed. The result was that the great ballroom and servants' quarters, as well as an archway that crossed the driveway, were removed.

To walk the distance through the heavily wooded area from the cave to the mansion is like taking a journey that in ten minutes would span two centuries. You feel like you have been in a time capsule.

Once back in the present time, your attention is attracted to the magnificent view to the west. It is a peaceful scene that stretches across the valley and over the three lakes, Rippowam, Oscaleta, and Waccabuc.

Very few houses can be seen, as most of them are hidden by the many trees that blanket the landscape. The trees also shield every roadway, and no movement of any traffic is evident. You could easily get the feeling that you are in another world.

While gazing at this delightful rural picture, you might find yourself tempted to forget that only a couple of miles away, the main highways of Ridgefield are clogged with many

hundreds of automobiles. To the east of the mansion are the garages, gardens and gardener's cottage.

Speaking of the gardeners, we are reminded of the many people who were employed on this great estate, through the years.

Just last week, The Press, in its 25 Years ago column, noted that William Roy had won several prizes for displays that he exhibited in the show under the "Big Top" at the Great Danbury Fair. At the time, Bill Roy was the gardener for Miss Emily Buch, when she lived at 212 Main Street (now the home of George J. Goodstadt and his family). Bill had previously been the head gardener at Bulkley's Rippowam Farm.

When a team wins the World Series or the SuperBowl, it is customary to give much credit to the manager, rather than the team players. In much the same way, a superintendent would receive the accolades when the gladioli, the dahlias or roses from the estate he managed won the blue ribbons at a flower show.

It was in this vein that a while ago, we gave credit to George Beard for prize winning entries from the Bulkley estate, when he was the superintendent at Rippowam Farm. Actually it was Bill Roy and his expertise in botany who developed and cared for the beautiful prize winning flowers. Bill has long since moved to Florida.

According to Bill Jr., better known as "Ike," the trophies that his father won were many and he still has them in his Florida home, which is overflowing with them. It is worthy of note that many years after Bill Roy left Rippowam Farm, his son Ike returned to that fabulous place, where he was employed for several years by Frank Randolph, the present owner. Ike is now in charge at the Henry J. Leir estate.

As you descend the winding driveway, from the mansion to Oreneca Road and thence to Rippowam Road, you will pass the Tod Bulkley estate. It lies just to the south and between Rippowam and West Mountain Roads. This all had been a part of Jonathan Bulkley's estate, until his son Tod built his nice home there more than half a century ago.

Both Tod and Mrs. Bulkley have now passed on, and their fine estate is now in the process of being developed. It is neither a pretty sight to see the great trees falling in front of the bulldozer, nor pleasant to hear the quietness of the forest being shattered by the roar of engines.

On Rippowam Road, across the way from the rear entrance to the Tod Bulkley estate, there is a break in the stone wall that lines the road. There used to be a path from this spot, that led to the famous "Swinging Bridge."

This great curiosity was a creation of Jonathan Bulkley's very fertile mind. Apparently Mr. Bulkley had been thinking about this project for some time, as it was no spur-of-the-moment idea.

At any rate it was at the close of World War I that he approached a New York firm about the possibility of building this bridge over a deep chasm. It took a lot of planning, as safety was of the utmost importance. [Some sources say work took place in 1913.]

Mr. Bulkley's plan was to build a bridge from a rocky cliff at the front of his mansion, and wrap it around a gigantic oak tree, stood in the middle of the ravine. It would take some skillful engineering.

A heavy metal band was fashioned to fit around the tree near its top. Five large chains were then attached to the metal band. The chains were then fastened to a bench that encircled the tree. The bench and the bridge were made of wood, as were the hand rails that went along on either side of the bridge, as it spanned the ravine.

The bridge was more than 100 feet in length, and it was some 40 feet above the ground at the tree end. At one place, it was 60 feet above the floor of the ravine.

A space was left at the tree where the bench encircled it. This provided for the expansion of the tree and allowed the bridge to sway a few inches. Thus, the name "Swinging Bridge."

The bridge must have attracted thousands of visitors through the years, as word of it circulated around the countryside. It was especially popular with young lovers, who enjoyed sitting on the bench and gazing at the lakes in the distance.

After 20 years the bridge showed signs that it was ready to succumb to the elements and there was some question as to whether it should be repaired or removed. Many people were happy when the decision was made to repair the bridge and John Walters was engaged to do the job. So the Swinging Bridge received a reprieve and it lasted another dozen years, until it was taken down.

The bridge was a novelty the likes of which Ridgefield will never have again. It carried the initials of many people and I seem to remember that R.E.V. appeared on the guard rail as the bench curled around the tree.

#279: MASTERS AND SUPERS OF IRADELL FARM

As we continue to travel down Rippowam Road, and approach West Mountain Road, we come to Iradel Farm, the beautiful estate of Mrs. Consuela Vanderbilt Earl.

Iradel has been one of Ridgefield's showplaces for many years. Back in the 30's, this place was a beehive of activity. It was at that time that Clarence P. Wyckoff brought his family to Ridgefield.

Mr. Wyckoff was a native New Yorker, but was educated in England at Harrow and Cambridge. They must have been the right schools for him for he became a very wealthy man.

After his schooling, Mr. Wyckoff returned to this country and went to work on Wall Street. He went up the ladder to success quite rapidly and soon became a member of the New York Stock Exchange.

It was right after the Wall Street crash of '29 that the Wyckoffs came to Ridgefield. The crash had caused a lot of belt tightening and many of the wealthy families had to change their style of living.

However, the Wyckoffs seemed to be relatively unaffected and that proved to be a great benefit to local people who were seeking employment. Mr. Wyckoff did very much to shape the beautiful place that Iradel Farm is today and in the process, gave work to a lot of people.

When Clarence Wyckoff was not busy making his fortune, he spent a lot of time collecting rare and valuable books. One of the features of his fine mansion was a library that was carefully stocked.

Unfortunately, Mr. Wyckoff did not have much chance to enjoy his new home, as he died only three years after coming here. Mrs. Wyckoff and the children stayed for a few years after his passing and then sold the place to the Wildenstein family.

I did not get to know the Wildensteins, but I am sure that they were also very wealthy. Dennis Lynch was their superintendent and told me how the bluestone driveways had to be raked daily, whether or not they had been used. They must have worn out a lot of rakes on those drives.

When the Earls came to Iradel in the early 50's, Aiken Knox replaced Dennis as superintendent, and gave the great place his tender loving care until he passed on, just a few years ago.

The word superintendent seems to crop up in this column quite often, but they were an integral part of the history of the great estates. They were sometimes referred to as “caretakers,” especially if they did not have others on the place to supervise.

They were a special breed as they must not only possess a thorough knowledge of the operation of an estate, but have some experience as a politician and a diplomat as well.

It was a position that was much sought after, as it generally provided a nice cottage to live in, as well as produce from the garden and a good salary. Some were even supplied with an auto for their own use. It was a position that was considered respectable and in some cases quite lucrative.

If the work force on a large estate was of sizable proportions, many a super found himself in trouble if he could not control his workers, while at the same time keeping his employers happy. While many of the superintendents retained their positions for many years, there were those estates where the turnover was great. They were like the manager of a baseball team, although unlike Billy Martin, once they were gone they did not come back.

Diplomacy had to be used when the master decided he wanted roses planted in a section of the garden where the madam had already instructed the super to plant her favorite tulips. On such an occasion, the super had better know which one of his bosses to please.

Before the Earls came to Ridgefield, Colonel Earl had served in the Army in both World War I and World War II. During the latter conflict he was honored with the Legion of Merit, and a special citation from the Secretary of War.

He was an active man and following his army career, served as a consultant to the Howard Johnson restaurant chain. He was also a director for the Division of Trade Bank and Trust, the Commonwealth United Corp., the Child’s Company, and Sherry Inc.

Mrs. Earl is a direct descendant of the famous “Commodore” Cornelius Vanderbilt. At Iradel she has maintained a large kennel of show dogs. At one time she raised miniature farm animals and it was a real treat to see the tiny cows, horses and goats, as they cavorted in their paddocks. Another curiosity was a little hen that laid blue eggs. They came in very handy at Easter time.

#280: MR. BUNKER AND HIS ESTATE

Traveling east on West Mountain Road from the New York state line just a half century ago, you would not see a house until you were almost at the top of that long steep hill. In fact, there were no structures of any kind until you came to William Bunker’s barn.

The barn was an exceptionally fine building, in which Mr. Bunker kept several horses and a couple of milk cows. In recent years, the barn has been converted into a very nice house, and is now the home of Frank A. MacManus and his family at 269 West Mountain Road. It is one of the finest examples of how a barn can be made into a nice dwelling that Ridgefield has to offer.

Just above this house is another example of the same. This is 257 West Mountain Road; this very pretty house was once William Bunker’s carriage house. This building once sheltered some of the finest carriages to be found anywhere in the area. It is now the home of Pierre Vallez and his family.

The Vallez residence is not just an ordinary building, it is an architectural gem. Like everything else that William Bunker did, this location is high enough on the mountainside to offer a fine view of the surrounding country to the west.

Just a little higher on the mountain is 253 West Mountain Road. This is the home of Minosh Mural and this fine mansion, as well as the former carriage house and barn, was built by William Bunker, just before the turn of the century.

The mansion sets a considerable distance back on the mountainside and cannot be seen from the highway when the leaves are on the trees. Its location provides an excellent view of the lakes, Waccabuc, Oscaleta and Rippowam, and beyond.

The Press recently carried a picture of the lakes that, I believe, could have been taken from this vantage point.

Mr. Bunker came here from New York City, where he conducted a produce business. He did not wait to retire before making his home in Ridgefield. In fact, he was still in his 30's when he arrived here and started to buy the land on which to build his estate. Therefore, it is fair to assume that he had been more than moderately successful in his large produce business.

He loved Ridgefield and his idea of relaxation was to ride about on our country roads. He enjoyed driving his own horses, although he had a coachman who was kept for the purpose of transporting Mrs. Bunker around the town.

After William Bunker passed on in the early 40's, the estate was purchased by Edward Schreyer. I am not sure what Mr. Schreyer's main source of income was before he came to Ridgefield. However, after his arrival, he established a workshop in which he spent a lot of time doing experiments and putting some of his many ideas to work.

Mr. Schreyer invented numerous household gadgets and it was said that he perfected the steam iron. He was also credited with inventing one of the early electric razors. The story was that it was one of the best razors at the time and that it was eventually sold to the Schick Razor Company.

The Schreyers stayed only about 10 years and then the place was sold to Robert C. Weinberg. Mr. Weinberg also came here from New York, where he had served in several capacities. After graduating from Harvard, with a degree in architecture, he worked at his chosen profession, in the office of a large architectural company.

After a few years, Mr. Weinberg opened his own firm and became a fellow of The American Society of Architects. Somewhere along the line, Mr. Weinberg became interested in city planning, and devoted much of his time to this occupation. His talents were quickly recognized and he was appointed to New York City's Planning Board, as a consultant.

He was involved in several of New York's great housing projects, including the large apartment house complex at Riverdale, in the Bronx. At one time, Mr. Weinberg served as adjunct professor of planning at New York University.

He also spoke on planning for several years on a regular radio program over station WNYC. In later years, he was a consultant to the Stamford, Connecticut Planning Board.

I would guess that the planning of the William Bunker estate was what attracted Mr. Weinberg, and of course the huge mansion, which is an architectural gem. The buildings were all erected at a time when excellent builders were available.

Mr. Weinberg always decried the fact that everything had to be done in such a hurry today, that builders cannot spend the time to produce the fine buildings of yesteryears.

After his arrival in Ridgefield, Mr. Weinberg lost little time in making his presence known and soon he was offering his advice to our local planners. He certainly had the credentials and his advice, which was given mostly at Town Meetings or public hearings, was given without charge. Sorry to say that much of his advice was ignored.

A number of years ago, when the police station was in the basement of town hall, and more space was needed for efficient operation, Mr. Weinberg came up with a rather novel idea that would cause an addition to the building. The addition would be built on columns and would extend it over the present parking lot at the rear of the building, leaving the space or parking, as it is now.

His idea was to keep the town government and all of its operations in the center of the town. He felt strongly on this matter and never hesitated to express his opinion on the matter.

He also was an advocate of Regional Planning and felt that towns should combine in their plans as they would know their respective needs better than someone in Hartford. He believed in more local control and less state control, and on this we definitely agree with him.

In his busy life Mr. Weinberg found time to write several books on planning that could be put to very good use today.

#281: HOUDINI & SUNSET HILL AND HALL

Old West Mountain Road stretches along the top of one of the several ridges that are a part of Ridgefield's mountainous region. In the process, it serves as the connecting link between West Mountain Road and Barrack Hill Road.

During the period of which I am writing, very few people lived on this old road. As a matter of fact, there were only three houses on the southeast side for the entire length of Old West Mountain Road. They were the homes of some of those who were employed on the John Hampton Lynch estate and were mentioned in a previous column.

The only other structure on that side of the highway was the great barn that housed the livestock on the Lynch farm.

Only one of the three original houses remains, and the large barn has been transformed by Leonard and Madeleine Corbin into as fine a dwelling as can be found in the area.

The rest of the land on that side of the highway, and all the way to Barrack Hill Road, was a part of the Arthur C. Fraser estate. That fact alone was sufficient to insure that there would be no more buildings on that side of the road, at least in Mr. Fraser's lifetime. He was a man who thoroughly enjoyed his privacy.

The hundreds of acres of rugged woodland on the northwest side of Old West Mountain Road were all a part of the Port of Missing Men properties. This great tract of land had been accumulated before and after the turn of the century by Henry B. Anderson. Mr. Anderson was a man with great ideas, and he had planned to establish a resort area here, similar to the one at Tuxedo Park over in New York State.

Mr. Anderson's holdings in Connecticut consisted of several hundred acres, but he had even twice as much land over the state line. After constructing his famous inn, and his own palatial mansion atop Titicus Mountain, Mr. Anderson intended to build a gigantic country club in the same area.

It was about 1910 that James A. Stokes joined the many notables who visited the Port of Missing Men, and like so many others, he was smitten by the great natural beauty of the surrounding countryside. Mr. Stokes must have been a man of great persuasion, for he was able to talk H.B. Anderson into parting with some of his most desirable land. Mr. Stokes purchased one of the highest points of land in Anderson's almost 2,000-acre empire.

James Stokes lost no time in starting the construction of the magnificent mansion that is now the home of Robert and Linda Vaughn and their family.

For many years, the Stokes mansion, and its outbuildings, including the homes for some of the employees on the estate, were the only buildings for the entire length of the northwest side of Old West Mountain Road. From its lofty perch on the mountain top, the mansion affords a view of the countryside that can only be described as spectacular. It is agreed by some of the old timers who worked on the estate, that prior to the age of pollution, when the atmosphere was clear, it was possible, with the aid of good glasses, to see the Empire State Building from the lawn on the west side of the mansion. [In the 1970s at least, you could see the skyline of Manhattan from Sunset Hall's widow's walk.]

In the 30's there was a giant dirigible, the Los Angeles, and on one of its trips, it flew from Lakehurst, New Jersey, to Albany, New York. In its flights, the dirigible followed a path along the Hudson River, and men who were painting the mansion at the time were able to see the great airship for several hours, as it sailed along its way.

After a few years, James Stokes sold the great estate that he had named Sunset Hill, to [the wife of] Dr. Leopold Weiss. Dr. Weiss was a brother of the famous magician and escape artist, Harry Houdini.

Houdini's real name was [Erich] Weiss and he and his wife spent many weekends at his brother's Ridgefield home. I recall seeing him as he shopped in the local stores on a Saturday morning. On one occasion I sold Houdini a Ridgefield Press, and that was in the days before it carried Dick's Dispatch. [Later research indicates Houdini's visits to Sunset Hall were probably very rare; the magician hated his sister-in-law, Sadie Glanz Weiss, a Manhattan fashion executive who actually owned the house, not her husband. Houdini was also estranged from his brother. The reason? Sadie Glanz had been married to Nathan Weiss, brother of Erich and Leopold, divorced Nathan, and 10 days later, married Leopold. Houdini was heartbroken as well as furious over what he considered scandalous mistreatment of Nathan. "Houdini's displeasure took many forms, including cutting Leo's head out of family portraits and forbidding his burial in the Weiss family plot," said John Cox, a longtime student of Houdini.]

Houdini was regarded by many to be the greatest of all magicians, and his success as an escape artist was little short of phenomenal. Millions of people must have stared in amazement as he performed his death defying stunts. One that was particularly daring was when he allowed himself to be tightly chained and placed in a large bag which was locked shut. The bag was then lowered into a body of water, like the Hudson River, and in a matter of minutes Houdini managed to free himself and rise to the surface.

It is ironic that just two weeks ago at Halloween marked the 51st anniversary of Harry Houdini's death. He was in the middle of famous escape acts when he was somehow struck a blow in the abdomen. There were many who thought that foul play was involved in the accident, but it was never proven.

At any rate Houdini's appendix was ruptured and though he was rushed to a hospital, peritonitis had set in. It proved to be an obstacle that even the great Houdini could not overcome.

After his death, Mrs. Houdini made several attempts over the years to communicate with him through a spiritualistic medium, without success. Houdini left his vast collection of magic secrets and his methods of escape to another brother, Dr. Theodore Franz Weiss. The brother was also a magician and operated under the stage name "Hardeen."

Sunset Hill became Sunset Hall in the early 30's, when the Cutten family took over the estate. Mr. Cutten headed one of the large oil companies. I think it was Sinclair, but I am not sure. One thing I am sure of and that is that Mrs. Cutten was known as "Sunny" and she was a singer and a good one.

The Cuttens did a lot of renovating to the place, both inside and out. It seemed like an army of men were employed, between Peter McManus on the interior and Raymond Keeler on the exterior.

#282: SUNNY CUTTEN GILDS THE SUNSET HALL LILY

Sunny Cutten had some very definite ideas as to how Sunset Hall, her luxurious mansion on Old West Mountain Road, should look. Her husband gave her a free rein and it was under Sunny's direction that many changes were made to the very imposing mansion.

The big structure was soon to become even larger and has so many rooms that a person could get lost in it. Every room would reflect Sunny's taste in interior decorating and she had good taste. That fact, coupled with an attitude that cost was no object, assured that this place would become something special.

Because of Sunny's musical background, much attention was given to the music room, or ballroom as it is sometimes called. It was all part of a large addition, which the Cuttens added to the south end of the building. This absolutely beautiful room, with its high 16 foot ceiling has very large glass doors that open onto the swimming pool. The floor is done in imported Italian marble of various colors.

A later owner covered the floor with a huge white rug that had tendrils three or four inches long, and a rake was used on it, in preference to a vacuum cleaner.

This room has one of the very finest fireplaces that I have ever seen. It is not only pretty, it is large and it works.

In one corner of this magnificent room there was a concert grand piano, and you just know it was a Steinway. Here in this room, Sunny Cutten could sing and play the piano to her heart's content, surrounded by pictures of herself in various stage roles.

I have no idea how much the Cuttens spent in "gilding the lily" that was Sunset Hall. It must have been a fortune by the standards of that day.

The estate had grown in size through the years, as owners added acres of the wooded areas until it comprised about 100 acres. At one time a portion of the land was cleared and a three-hole golf course was constructed.

This was back in a time when a golf course was often referred to as golf links. To be sure, these links were not very long. However, it was said that due to the steep slopes in the area, you could get as much exercise on the three short holes as you would on a regulation nine-hole course.

In the mid 30's, a small pond was dug on the north side of the mansion, and a skeet shoot was constructed on one side of the was pond. Clay pigeons were hurled across the pond as the marksmen tested their ability with a shotgun.

I did the grading around this area, with my team Kit and Lady and a metal grading scoop. The little pond is still there, but the skeet shoot is overgrown with trees.

The Cuttens did an excellent job of landscaping around the mansion and the grounds were dotted with very exotic shrubbery, much of which was imported. Many of the shrubs and trees are still there today.

Lee Vance was the superintendent for the Cuttens, and he was a very busy man. He was also a very nice man and is fondly remembered by all who knew him.

Lee and Phyllis Vance had a very handsome son, Lee Jr., who was lost in World War II, as a member of the U.S. Marines. [Major Lee R. Vance Jr. was wounded in fighting in the Pacific, but survived the war only to die in 1952 in the Korean conflict.]

A huge retaining wall was built on the southwest side of the mansion. There are several such walls in Ridgefield, but I doubt that any would rise to the height of this one. The face of the wall is curved and as you look up at it, it is mindful of an ancient battlement.

On either side of the wall there is a long winding stairway, with flagstone steps. It is truly a work of art.

As World War II was winding down to a close, the nations of the world were tired of war and men of good will were seeking a means of preventing another such tragedy. Out of their deliberations came the idea of a United Nations.

An international committee was formed for the purpose of finding a suitable site for this peace seeking organization. Sunny Cutten was one of the first to offer her great estate for this noble purpose.

Many other sites were considered, across the land from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Then came the day when an almost endless parade of chauffeur-driven limousines descended on little old Ridgefield. The committee seemed to agree that Sunset Hall offered the peace and tranquility that it needed, and certainly there was sufficient space for its purpose.

Another Connecticut site, in Greenwich, received favorable consideration so Sunny enlisted the help of Connecticut's Senator Brian McMahon. Soon the caravan made a return trip to Ridgefield in early 1946, but at this point the Rockefeller family entered the picture and their New York site was chosen.

Ridgefield was a town of about 4,500 at the time and while there were those who would welcome the United Nations, many felt that their town would be overrun with foreigners. These people breathed a sigh of relief when it was decided to make New York the world's capitol.

When her efforts were unsuccessful, Sunny Cutten made up her mind to sell Sunset Hall to anyone with the means to purchase it. Along came Samuel Rubel and he not only had the means, he liked what he saw, especially the privacy that the great estate had to offer.

Rubel, a Russian immigrant, had made a fortune in the coal and ice business in New Jersey, and was anxious to get away from it all. He felt that Sunset Hall was just made to order for him.

It was said that Sam Rubel had so many works of art, before long the place began to look like a museum. It sure looked like a museum a few years later when I was selected as one of the appraisers for the estate.

The Rubels did a lot of entertaining and one of the surprises for his guests were slides, similar to those on a playground that went from the bedroom windows to the pool. This was before the day of heated pools so it is expected that those using the slide in the early morning would be fully awake by the time they reached the cool waters of the pool.

#283: THE RUBEL BARBECUE AND THE VAUGHN TALENT

When Samuel Rubel and his family moved into Sunset Hall in 1946, it was with the expectation of enjoying country living to its fullest. After years of the confinement of city life, they found the rural atmosphere much to their liking.

An integral part of the family's new lifestyle would be the opportunity to experience the joy of having a great barbecue in their peaceful surroundings. To them, nothing was more countrified than a real, old-fashioned barbecue, with large chunks of meat turning on a spit over a bed of very hot coals.

A very large barbecue pit was constructed at the south end of the swimming pool. It was made of stone, to match the great retaining wall that was previously described, and placed midway between the long winding stairways that flanked the wall.

The steps of the stairways were made of very smooth flagstone, and as everyone knows, flagstone can be very slippery, especially when it is the least bit wet. This was a fact that was apparently overlooked in placing the barbecue pit near the stairways.

During the very first barbecue session, grease from the grill spattered onto the flagstone steps, with the result that a very slippery situation was created. The first person that tried to descend to the lower level arrived at that point in record time. Much to his surprise, he landed in a very unceremonious sitting position.

I do not believe that the Rubels, in their stay at Sunset Hall, made any major changes in the great mansion. However, the practicality of this family surfaced during an oil shortage.

As the story goes, Mr. Rubel had connections that afforded an opportunity for the purchase of a large shipment of oil just before the oil shortage became acute. Taking advantage of the situation, two very large oil tanks were quickly lowered into the swimming pool and they were filled with several thousand gallons of oil.

It was considered a graphic example of self preservation, and Sunset Hall would remain warm.

Incidentally the name of the place was changed to Sachem Hill.

After Samuel Rubel passed on, the great place was placed on the market and I was appointed one of the appraisers by Judge Ralph Cramp. It was an interesting experience.

The contents of the mansion, including the many works of art, were so numerous that they were placed in book form. It was a very large book and along with a description of each article, there were fine pictures of the more beautiful items.

In a short time along came the Paulist Fathers. Their full name is Congregation of the Mission of St. Vincent DePaul. The great mansion retired members of the order.

It was while the Paulists were here that their Bishop O'Shea, who had been a prisoner of the Red Chinese for 20 years, was released. The bishop was very old and in very poor health when he arrived in Ridgefield. Unfortunately, he passed on before he had a chance to enjoy his new surroundings.

One of the missionary priests, Father Trotta, used to assist at Saint Mary's and was a great favorite of the parishioners.

The Paulist Fathers stayed about 10 years and then moved, I believe, to Pennsylvania. In August of 1969, William H. Ashplant became the new owner of what we still call Sunset Hall. I only met this family once, and they stayed here only a few years.

Ownership then went to Dr. James G. Katis. Dr. Katis did a considerable amount of work on the mansion in the way of plumbing and electrical work, but no extensive decorating. All of these people enjoyed the splendor of this magnificent estate, but none were as happy with it as the present owners, Robert and Linda Vaughn.

I would guess that most people would agree that nothing could be done to Sunset Hall to make it any more appealing, but the Vaughns have done just that. Each owner, in his or her own way, has done what they felt best in improving the already very impressive mansion. It has gone from a baronial edifice, to a musical palace, to a novitate and now it is a very livable home.

The first impression one gets on viewing the large mansion is that it is just too big for a family of four. That thought is quickly dispelled when a tour of the place is completed. Every room has its purpose and every room is used.

The decor is in such exquisite good taste that you know immediately that someone used excellent judgment. It turns out that the person responsible for all this is Linda Vaughn. Her hand is reflected in every one of the many rooms, all of which have been recently redecorated.

The reason for this is really quite simple when it is revealed that Mrs. Vaughn is an interior decorator. That she is an expert in her profession is quite obvious. I could easily run out of superlatives in describing the beauty of this incredible home.

In describing the talents of Linda Vaughn, I almost forgot that her husband is also quite talented. I guess most everyone has seen Robert Vaughn, either in the theater or on the television screen. Robert has appeared and starred in many major productions and is still very much in demand.

It is next to impossible to carry on a conversation with him, as the telephone rings constantly with offers from studios and requests for public appearances. He seems to thrive on a very busy lifestyle that would wear most people out very quickly. Through all of this he manages to remain his very amiable self.

Despite the many serious parts that Robert Vaughn has played he will probably be best known for his role as "The Man from U.N.C.L.E." Not surprisingly, when the Beatles first came to this country, their very first request was for the opportunity to meet The Man from U.N.C.L.E.

Of course, Robert graciously complied with the request.

#284: AN UNUSUAL WOMAN'S IRS BATTLES

In telling the story of Sunset Hall, it was noted that Harry Houdini was a weekend visitor to this fabulous estate. It was owned at the time by [Sadie Weiss, wife of] Dr Leopold Weiss, Houdini's brother.

Since then I have learned that my former good neighbor, Selma Goldwitz, was a cousin of the great Houdini. So, as they say, it's a small world and getting smaller fast. Selma and her husband Sam moved a few years ago, but had the good sense to stay in Ridgefield. They now live on Spring Valley Road, and as a further show of good sense, they still read *The Ridgefield Press*.

Several owners of Sunset Hall bought up surrounding properties until the estate comprised more than 100 acres. Then, in the 50's, like things that go up, the size of the place started to come down. Acreage along Old West Mountain Road was sold off, for choice building lots.

One of the first to buy a lot from the estate, was a woman [photographer, antiques dealer and one-time racecar driver Jacqueline Seligmann], who rumor had it, was a direct descendant of the notorious pirate Jean Laffite. As every pupil in our local schools must know, Laffite established headquarters in New Orleans in the very early part of the 19th Century. From this vantage point, he engaged in smuggling and piracy. At one time, he had more than 1,000 followers, most of whom were desperadoes.

Laffite's brother, Pierre, was an unscrupulous New Orleans merchant, and served as a fence for his ill-gotten goods. The brothers each were able to amass a fortune from their nefarious activities.

Jean Laffite showed good judgment when he decided to assist the United States in the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812. In exchange for his support, the pirate was pardoned by President James Madison. He must have been one of the first to receive a presidential pardon.

However, Laffite later returned to his career as a pirate. He specialized in Spanish shipping, but then made the mistake of attacking an American merchant vessel in 1820. The pardon was negated and warships were dispatched to the Gulf of Mexico. Even so, Laffite was allowed to escape, with many of his cut-throat followers.

There is no way of knowing whether any of Jean Laffite's genes were passed on to his descendants. [Alas, no connection between Laffite and the Seligmann family has been found.] However, it would be fair to say that the person who built her house on Old West Mountain Road was, at the least, rather extraordinary.

She always drove a rented auto that was loaded with so many of her belongings that the rear bumper almost touched the surface of the highway. She changed autos quite frequently and the transfer of her baggage must have been a monumental task.

It should be stated that among the many objects loaded into her auto, the most important were two very large briefcases. Actually they were more like suitcases, and their contents made them bulge at the seams.

Apparently, the cases were loaded with the woman's most valuable possessions, and she never left them out of her sight. They looked to be so heavy that it would take a strong man to carry them. However, she handled them with ease and never left them in her car, even though she locked the car, while doing her shopping.

Each evening about 5, she would drive to the front of the post office, secure a Grand Union shopping cart, and load it with her briefcases. They would stay in the cart, under her watchful eye, while she did her business.

The woman had an unlisted telephone and would not accept delivery of mail at her home. She did have two post office boxes, and her last name ended with two N's. If a letter arrived with only one N, even though correctly addressed to one of the boxes, it was refused and returned.

On one occasion she mailed a registered letter to President John F. Kennedy, with a return receipt requested. It was apparent that she just wanted the President's signature. However, when the receipt was returned, it had been signed for by one of the presidential assistants, Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

The woman was furious and a terrible scene ensued. She refused to leave the post office, until there would be a guarantee that the President's personal signature would be forthcoming.

It was calmly explained to the woman that regulations in vogue at the time, allowed the President and the general of the army, to delegate the authority of signing a return receipt, to one of their subordinates.

It got to be closing time and the postmaster finally had to call the police, as the woman still refused to leave. The appearance of an officer was sufficient, peace was restored and everyone went home.

As a result of this incident, the IRS redoubled its efforts, and then came the day when a court appearance was ordered. The case was heard in New York, with the notable Judge John Murtagh presiding. A story in the N.Y. Daily News told of how a woman, carrying two enormous briefcases came dashing into the courtroom, yelling that she was an attorney and demanded the right to represent herself. The judge was so flustered, with his courtroom in utter chaos, that a mistrial was ordered.

It was rumored that the woman was very wealthy. However, according to the Internal Revenue Service, she suffered a mental lapse each spring, during which time she neglected to file an income tax return.

One December evening, at almost 6 o'clock, a handsome young IRS agent came to my office. He had spent considerable time without success trying to locate the residence of the woman.

After receiving proper directions as to how to get there, the agent quickly departed. He had only just disappeared, when I got the feeling that I should have warned him that he would not be dealing with an ordinary individual.

It was only a month later when another IRS agent, who had been assigned to the case, informed me of the young agent's harrowing experience. He was admitted to the house by the woman's companion, and was in conversation with her when suddenly the woman herself burst into the room. She was in a state of dishabille, and rushed at the young agent, while she screamed and accused the agent of the most abominable of crimes.

You can be sure that the agent was completely innocent. However, he had no witness, and because a complaint was lodged, he suffered two years' probation.

#285: THE ILLUSTRIOUS BRADLEYS, FATHER & DAUGHTER

In our trip along West Mountain Road, I bypassed one house that was built back in the middle 20's. This very attractive place was built by Mary Linda Bradley, and sits a considerable distance back from the highway.

Mary Linda really enjoyed her privacy. The long driveway leading to the residence is about 100 feet south of the entrance to Dr. Patrick Neligan's estate. The house was built to last, as its construction contains much stone work. There are also several retaining walls that are made of fieldstone.

Mary Linda Bradley came here from Chicago with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. William Harrison Bradley, and her sister, Marion Anna, just before the first World War. While their home was Chicago, they could have been properly called world travelers as they spent many years in foreign countries.

Mary Linda's father built his mansion on the southern end of West Mountain, with the main entrance on Peaceable Hill Road and a service entrance on Barry Avenue. The service entrance is now Woodcock Lane. The place was large enough to accommodate many people, but Mary Linda, who was a rather independent person, decided she would build a home of her own. Despite the fact that stones are quite plentiful in the area, many of the stones used in building Mary Linda's new home were trucked in from other places.

Miss Bradley never married and seemed to enjoy living alone in her mountain chateau, which she had named "Ackworth Cottage." In her younger years, she was quite athletic and participated in many sporting events. At one time she [was captain of] the [Katoonah Basket Ball Club].

She also had an avid interest in aviation in its early days. She was one of the first women to receive a pilot's license, and did extensive flying. Most of Mary Linda's flying was done in California and Arizona, two states that she visited quite frequently.

Many of her numerous ideas and feelings were expressed in verse. She wrote two books of poetry, one of which was inspired by her experiences while flying her airplane. She liked to write and never hesitated to express her views on local affairs, and matters that affected her adopted town.

In 1917, as her contribution to the war effort, Mary Linda Bradley organized and served as the first chairman of the local branch of the National League of Woman's Service.. These ladies valiantly performed their many duties until the local branch of Red Cross was formed

following the war. Mary Linda also chaired the Ridgefield Committee on Home Economics, another important part of the war effort.

Four days before the actual signing of the armistice in 1918, a false report of the ending of the great conflict was circulated. In no time, a great celebration was organized in Ridgefield. A parade was held, and following the Home Guard down Main Street, was the League of Woman's Service, with Mary Linda Bradley marching at its head.

In later years her health failed and she had to curtail many of her activities. Though she was ill for many years, Mary Linda lived to age 79.

I decided to take a ride up to see the mansion that Mary Linda's father, William Harrison Bradley, had built so-many years ago. Though it had been a long time since I had seen it, I knew just where it was, and expected no difficulty in finding it.

However, everything looked very unfamiliar as I climbed to the top of Peaceable Hill Road. The landscape had been completely rearranged, and where the main entrance and driveway used to be, there is now a new blacktopped road, and a sign that reads Blacksmith Ridge.

A tour of the area revealed many more changes, and a number of fine new homes. However, I never did find Bradley's mansion.

In desperation, I called my friend Pat Shaw, and she informed me that the mansion was no more. It turned out that the place first suffered a rather disastrous fire some years ago. It was then partially rebuilt, with a flat roof that eventually collapsed under a heavy winter snow.

So the Bradley mansion, which was called Felsenberg, is gone, and the large estate has been replaced by a very nice development. Which proves that people still find West Mountain a very desirable place to locate.

William Harrison Bradley had lived a very eventful and interesting life. He started his life properly by selecting as his father Judge William Henry Bradley. William Henry was a very prominent man in Chicago, where for many years he served as clerk of the United States Circuit Court.

William Henry Bradley showed the good judgment, for which his family was noted, by becoming the grandson of the famous Colonel Philip Burr Bradley. As every pupil in our school system must know, Col. Bradley was one of Ridgefield's all-time, most noted citizens. Col. Bradley's local residence was where Ballard Park is now.

Col. Bradley was one of the stout-hearted local men who courageously faced the overwhelming forces of the Redcoats in the Battle of Ridgefield, April 27, 1777. He was later appointed colonel of the Fifth Continental Regiment. He was an authentic hero and took part in many of the major engagements during the Revolutionary War.

It was just 200 years ago that Colonel Bradley was chosen one of Ridgefield's two delegates to the convention in Hartford, where the State of Connecticut voted to approve the new United States Constitution. He was also Ridgefield's second postmaster, following the term of Lt. Joshua King. He served in the dual role of postmaster, and as justice of the peace. At most town meetings he was selected as the moderator.

The Colonel's great grandson, William Harrison Bradley, continued to add lustre to the family name. He married Carolina Lawson, a sister of Victor Lawson, owner and publisher of the *Chicago Daily News*, and his sister Jessie, in turn married Victor Lawson. William H. was for many years with the U.S. Department of State and served as consul general at Nice and at Manchester, in England. His last tour of duty was as consul general at Montreal.

It seems a shame that he was not blessed with a son that would carry on the tradition of this extraordinary family.

#286: THE STORE THAT ONCE STOOD BY THE FOUNTAIN

Lately there has been considerable speculation as to the origin of an old house that is located on Bailey Avenue. Newspaper reports indicate that this building is to be either torn down, or moved to another location.

As usual, this would be done in the name of progress.

There are many who feel that this old structure has significant historic value, but no one seems to know where it came from. One thing on which there is complete agreement is that the building is quite old.

Funny how stories, if repeated often enough, seem to become facts. Some stories have the house as being constructed right where it stands. Others have it as being moved to its present location.

Some even believe that the house is actually the old Corner Store that stood near the fountain, on the corner of West Lane and Main Street. Their theory is that the house was moved from the corner many years ago and then converted into a two family dwelling.

I remember that Julius Tulipani once told me that on his very first day in Ridgefield, he carried on a conversation with a man who lived with his family in the house in question at that time. Since this had to be in the very early days of this century, it seems logical to believe that the house has been there a good many years.

Incidentally, the man with whom Julius spoke and received directions from was Luquette Travaglini. Luquette will be best remembered as the father of Ridgefield News Store "Big Squash" and police dispatcher "Little Squash."

All this would tend to eliminate the possibility of the old house ever having been the former Corner Store. The store still stood near the fountain until it was moved in 1929.

If in fact the house was moved to Bailey Avenue, it is possible that it was one of several buildings that were moved from the grounds of our present Community Center. Governor Phineas C. Lounsbury made a number of changes on his estate when he built his great mansion in the 1890's.

The original Corner Store was built in the early 1800's by Thaddeus Keeler. Mr. Keeler operated the place as a general store. When he was appointed Ridgefield's sixth postmaster in 1827, the post office was moved across the street from Timothy Keeler's Tavern to the Corner Store.

In the mid-1800's, the store and surrounding property was acquired by David Hoyt. One of Mr. Hoyt's first acts was to demolish the original Country Store. It was then rebuilt and again operated as a general store.

David Hoyt later sold the store to Edward H. Smith and D. Smith Sholes. Smith and Sholes decided to try something different and changed the place from a general store to a shirt factory. Apparently the factory did not do so well and after a few years, the partnership was dissolved. D. Smith Sholes became Ridgefield's 17th postmaster in 1884.

The Corner Store remained vacant for a while, and then Edward H. Smith was joined by his son Edward L. Smith. The father and son then reopened the place again as a general store.

Business was very good and soon the Smiths were able to hire a young clerk to help them. The clerk was George G. Knapp, and he was a very popular young man.

The young clerk had an eye for business and could see great possibilities for the Corner Store. After a short time, George Knapp purchased the business from the Smiths and ran the store for several years.

George Knapp married the former Josephine Nichols, who was one of Ridgefield's very favorite school teachers. They lived at 31 North Salem Road, the present home of the Kelley family.

George was one of our town's leading citizens and later became judge of probate. Unfortunately he passed on at a relatively young age.

Samuel D. Keeler took over the Corner Store and operated it as a general store, in conjunction with a much larger store that he owned in the business area of town. His main store was located in the building that he owned, and which now houses Ridgefield Auto Parts [Rodier Flowers in 2024]. I would guess that the initials SDK were as well known in Ridgefield as FDR, JFK and LBJ were in later years. As a matter of fact, someday, someone will remove the blacktop that covers the sidewalk in front of the auto parts store, and the large brass letters SDK will be revealed, embedded in the concrete sidewalk.

In the early 20's, William Travis Clark took over the Corner Store, and operated a thriving business there as an antiques shop. Bill also engaged in furniture repairing at this location. There was also a smaller building at the rear of the store that was used as a cobbler shop.

When D. K. Hoyt acquired the Corner Store and surrounding property, he ran it for a short time as a meat market. Then Mr. Hoyt leased the building to a man named Lyons, who lived nearby on Wilton Road East. Lyons once again had the business revert to that of a general store.

He was known as a man who lived a rather frugal existence. In fact, he invoked an economic approach to any matter that concerned food. He must have been the last one to operate the Corner Store as a commercial venture.

The name Lyons also had a particular affinity to the word fire, of which he had more than one. In 1925 there was a bad fire in his home and in 1926, his barn burned down. Fortunately his old sorrel horse was outside at the time and so was saved from the conflagration.

It was said that Lyons never overfed his horse, and as I remember, the horse gave that appearance. His coat was a pretty sorrel, but he was awful thin.

One day, when I was a little kid, my brother Paul and I were walking by the store and the horse was tied out on an empty lot, just beyond the store, where the Henle sisters live now. That house has since been moved, probably 50 yards closer to West Lane.

I asked Paul why Lyons had tied the horse there, and he replied, "Probably because he does not want him to blow away."

#287: WHERE THE CORNER STORE WENT; SIAMESE ROYALTY VISIT

Just in case you are still interested in what happened to the old corner Store, I am happy to report that it is still very much alive. The little cobbler's shop that stood behind the store is also still serving a useful purpose.

D. K. Hoyt sold the Corner Store and surrounding property to Herbert Spencer Griems in the late 20's. Mr. Griems decided that the old store had outlived its usefulness, and started to have it dismantled.

One of those engaged in the project was Thomas Scott. Tom was a carpenter by trade and could see at once the building was structurally sound, and an effort should be made to save it.

Tom approached Mr. Griems with an offer to buy both the store and the cobbler's shop. Mr. Griems readily accepted the offer and Tom made plans to move the buildings to his home on Soundview Road. According to Donald Scott, who still lives with his family on Soundview, his father added to the original building and it now serves as a two-family dwelling.

The cobbler shop was transformed into a small barn that housed some of the cattle, owned by the Scott family. It is still standing and is now used for storage.

It would not be difficult to figure out who it was who actually moved the two buildings to their present location. Ridgefield's premier mover of buildings was the noted Caro H. Northrup, and Caro just happened to be Mrs. Scott's father.

So Caro, his son Reed and Tom Scott, jacked up the buildings and slid long beams under them. They then placed wooden rollers between the beams, and with horsepower supplied by Caro Northrop's faithful old team, King and Jerry, the buildings were on their way to Soundview Road.

It was only a short distance, perhaps a half mile. It was rather slow work, and a lot of rope, with block and tackle, was used, but there were no long trailers such as we have today for moving buildings.

As I have said many times, it is my feeling that more buildings have been moved in Ridgefield, percentage-wise, than any other town in the area.

Just to the west of the property where the old Corner Store used to stand was the home of a very prominent attorney, Honorable George Pratt Ingersoll. He was also a very prominent Democrat, and perhaps that is why he never opened a law office in Ridgefield, which was at that time, more heavily Republican than it is now.

The Ingersoll family were not year around residents. When the cold weather set in each fall, they always went south. Well, if not south, then perhaps southwest, some 20 miles to Stamford, where it was at least three or four degrees warmer than lofty Ridgefield.

Actually George Ingersoll had a law office in New York City, as well as in Stamford. So proximity of his winter quarters to his Stamford office and the railroad station must have been a factor in his decision to migrate to the southwest each fall. Travel during the bad winter storms that we used to have over roads that were not cleared of snow as well as they are today, may have been an even more compelling reason for spending the winters in Stamford.

The major portion of Mr. Ingersoll's legal practice was conducted from his New York office, while in Stamford he was engaged as an associate counsel of the very prestigious law firm of Cummings and Lockwood. Cummings was, of course, Homer S. Cummings, another noted Democrat, who served as United States attorney general under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

There were many who wished that Attorney Ingersoll would establish an office in Ridgefield, for at that time we did not have a regular practicing attorney in town. Even our town counsel, Judge Light, came here from Norwalk when needed.

Mr. Ingersoll would, on occasion, represent a local person in need of his considerable legal expertise. One notable case was some 70 years ago, when he represented the Hornig family as a result of a fatal accident. Peter Hornig, as previously reported, died after being struck by an automobile while walking on the highway near Joe's Store. That store is now known as Country Corners.

In 1917, Gorge Pratt Ingersoll was appointed envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary of the United States to the Kingdom of Siam by President Woodrow T. Wilson. That seems like an awful long title to apply to our representative to such a small country, now known as Thailand.

Mr. Ingersoll, as well as serving a tour in the diplomatic service, held several other important posts. He was a delegate to the International Peace Conference in Washington, D.C., and was United States commissioner from Connecticut. He also served as a member of the State Board of Health and in 1910 he ran an unsuccessful campaign for Congress. His interest in politics is easily understood, as his father was elected governor of Connecticut in 1873.

The Ingersoll home on West Lane had some very important house guests. Phya Prabha Kararonvongee was appointed by the King of Siam as George Ingersoll's counterpart to this country. His name was almost as long as his title and his visit with the Ingersolls caused a great deal of excitement in town, as did a later visit by the Prince of Siam.

Following George Ingersoll's passing in the late 20's, his home was sold to Christopher and Page Kane. The place became known as the Kane Inn and was operated by the Kanes as a restaurant and provided lodging.

Actually the place was more a boarding house than an inn, as most of those who stayed there were rather permanent residents. Attorney Michael Bruno lived at the Kane Inn for several years.

Following the Kanes, Walter Tode operated the place as Tode's Inn in the 40's and 50's, and did a thriving business. Under Henry Prieger the name was changed to The Inn at Ridgefield. Several additions have been made to the place [recently Bernard's and now The Benjamin] but its original lines are still quite visible.

#288: HARVEY BISSELL AND HIS DRUG STORE

In my last column, George Pratt Ingersoll, who lived in the house that is now The Inn at Ridgefield, was described as a prominent Democrat. Mr. Ingersoll was not the only noted politician that lived in the West Lane neighborhood.

In fact, right next door in the house that is now Maureen Mayer's West Lane Inn [more recently owned by Christine Carnicelli and Danille Petrie], lived Harvey P. Bissell, a Republican whose political influence was felt all across the State of Connecticut.

Mr. Bissell came to Ridgefield just a short time before the very disastrous fire of 1895 that wiped out most of our town's business district. He had only just established the drug store that still bears his name. Bissell's Drug Store was one of the buildings that was destroyed in that terrible conflagration.

Undaunted over his great loss, Harvey Bissell started at once to reconstruct the large building that we know today [but that burned in 2005, replaced two years later with a replica]. Bissell's: was one of the first stores to be back in business.

The store did a thriving business, dispensing, not only, prescription and patented drugs, but other items as well. Whiskey is believed by many to have great medicinal value, and during the Prohibition years a drug store could serve as an oasis for certain "patients."

No one that I ever knew, ever saw a shipment of whiskey being delivered to Bissell's Drug Store. However, I remember a little sliding door that was a part of a larger basement door. The little door was just large enough to accommodate the passage of a pint bottle.

Some sort of password may have been used that would cause the little door to open, as it did not open for everyone. Perhaps it was the number of knocks made by the thirsty customer that caused the little door to slowly slide open.

At any rate, business was quite brisk, both upstairs and at the basement door.

Another product that made Bissell's a very popular place was its ice cream sodas. The syrups were all made right there on the premises. When they were properly combined with Rider's delicious ice cream, the result was a dessert that was fit for a king. It was a fact that many people traveled miles out of their way to enjoy this very tasty treat. I guess that in those days people were not overly concerned about calories.

Harvey P. Bissell was a tall man, and in his later years he was just slightly stooped. He had a rather stern facial expression that was augmented by a pair of pince-nez eyeglasses.

Actually he was a kindly man, though a new employee at the store would quickly learn that he must present a good appearance and no tomfoolery would be tolerated.

I would guess that the ever-popular "Squash" is the last one of the many who worked for Mr. Bissell who is still in Ridgefield. After being in Ridgefield only a short time, Harvey Bissell became interested in local politics.

He became a member of the Republican Town Committee and very soon became the chairman of that group. It was a post that he held for many years.

Mr. Bissell decided to run for public office and in 1901 he was elected a representative to the general assembly in Hartford. During his absences, the store was left in the very capable hands of a young local pharmacist, James J. Kelly.

Jim Kelly was later to become Mr. Bissell's business partner and this afforded Harvey even more time to devote to his political aspirations. It was not long before the state senator from this area was none other than Harvey P. Bissell. After serving three terms in the state senate, he became comptroller of the State of Connecticut. It was in this position that he became widely known and respected, while establishing a great reputation for efficiency.

Mr. Bissell was very fond of his adopted town, and wanted very much to see it grow. He was aware of the fact that good roads were a necessary ingredient in promoting the growth of any town. Therefore, his considerable energy was directed toward improving the state highways leading into Ridgefield.

His great influence was largely responsible for the several concrete roadways in our town. They were among the earliest of the state's concrete highways, and have since been covered with asphalt paving material. Though Barry Avenue and West Mountain Road were rebuilt after his passing, Harvey Bissell was the one who beat the drum to get this work done.

In July of 1923, Mr. Bissell was appointed collector of customs for the State of Connecticut by President Warren G. Harding. Only two weeks later, and before the appointment could be completed, President Harding died. President Calvin J. Coolidge revived the appointment process and Mr. Bissell served in that post with distinction.

Harvey Bissell was married to the former Flora Randall and they had a son Robert P. Robert was a lieutenant in the United States Army and served in both the Mexican Border War and World War I.

In the late 20's, Mr. Bissell retired and Mr. Kelly took over the store. Shortly after that, Mr. Kelly brought in another young pharmacist, Edgar C. Rapp. For some reason, everyone called him Dick Rapp. At any rate Dick became Mr. Kelly's partner, and later took over the store and ran the business for many years, as did Mrs. Cornelius Lee in later years.

No one ever changed the name and after more than 90 years the sign over the door still carries the name Bissell's.

Many people referred to the Bissell house on West Lane as the White House. Possibly this could be attributed to Harvey Bissell's political prowess, but it really was white for many years.

When Mr. Bissell passed on in 1929, his funeral was attended by the most prominent people in the state. All state offices were closed on that day and the flags on public buildings were flown at half staff. It was a real tribute to a man who began life as a little Connecticut farm boy.

#289: CHURCH HOUSE'S DEMISE & BLUEBIRD'S BENEFITS

This year [1988] will mark the 100th anniversary of the building of the present Congregational Church. The First Congregational Church was organized more than 275 years ago by Ridgefield's original settlers.

As most people know, the Rev. Thomas Hauley was the first pastor. A house that was built for the young pastor still stands at the corner of Main Street and Branchville Road, surrounded by a white picket fence. It is generally agreed that this building is the oldest house in Ridgefield, and The Old Indian Trading Post is the oldest structure in our town.

Reverend Hauley did not have to walk very far to conduct services, for a small meeting house was erected on the opposite corner from his home, in front of the present home of the George Goodstadt family. By the year 1800, the congregation had grown to the extent that a larger church was needed. It was built [just north of] where the Patrick Crehan family now resides [181 Main Street] and the highway passed on either side of it.

This church stayed in that location for another 88 years.

The beautiful stone work in the present church is the handiwork of the great builder, James F. Kennedy. It seems that we have mentioned "Big Jim" Kennedy several times in this column.

One thing is for sure, when he put up a building, it was made to last. This very fine structure is another example, and a lasting one, of his excellence as a builder. One can easily imagine Big Jim as he worked on during the terrible blizzard of '88 to complete this remarkable edifice on schedule.

Just to the west of the church stood a building in which its many social activities were held. The building was extensively remodeled in the 20's, and many dances and plays were held there. It was a very popular place and was known as the Congregational Church House, but was often referred to as "The Casino" or "The Playhouse," The name Playhouse seemed to be appropriate, as the Chekhov Theater Studio used the building on several occasions, and in the [late] 30's a summer stock group presented a number of plays, featuring such well known performers as Edward Everett Horton and Marie Wilson.

The building also had two bowling alleys in its basement. The well-liked and very respected Clifford A. Holleran, when he was the principal of our high school, used to take groups of students to these alleys to teach them how to bowl. It was here that I was introduced to the finer points of bowling.

There was also a sexton's house on the property, but it was removed some years ago.

Only just a few years ago, the church house was badly damaged by fire. It has been replaced by the splendid building [Lund Hall] that is now attached to the church.

Many years ago, before the bowling alleys were put into the basement of the church house, they were housed in a separate building that sat on the far western boundary of the property. This long, but narrow building fell into a state of disrepair. The roof developed a bad leak, with the result that the floor of the alleys became quite warped.

Old-time bowlers, such as Elmer Bouton and the Bennett boys —Dan, Finn, George and Dick — continued to bowl on the uneven surface. Once they had learned how to avoid the grooves in the warped boards, anyone who challenged them to a game was just fair game for them.

I never bowled with these men on the old alleys, but did so when the new alleys were installed in the church house. They were all excellent bowlers, and Elmer Bouton could bowl a good game even into his 80's.

Just to the west of the church property, in the 20's, 30's and 40's lived the Herbert Harde family. I delivered newspapers to this family many years ago, and later on they bought milk from me.

What Mr. Harde's business was I never knew. I believe that he was retired for a long period of time. He must have been a kind man and a good tipper, for though the charge per week for the newspapers was 24 cents, he always gave me a quarter and told me to keep the change.

In the large building next to the Harde house lived Ida M. Smith. Ida was the manager of H. B. Anderson's very famous Port of Missing Men. This place was later purchased by Harris Dunscombe Colt, a New York banker, who we told about in a previous column. I do not believe that the Colt family ever lived in this house. They did live for a number of years in the nearby Peter Parley House.

For the past half century, this great house has been owned by the Bacchiochi family, and it began to look as though they would not live here either. However, recently Jim and Gloria did a complete job of remodeling the building at the rear of the house and it is now their new home.

The main building has five units and it is often referred to as the Bluebird Apartments. The late Rudolph Martin had one of the apartments for many years, and many newly married couples started their lives together in the Bluebird.

Some that come quickly to mind, but by no means all, who enjoyed the friendly environment of this fine place are Ed and Mary Flanagan, Lou and Beth Price, Aiken and Dorothy Knox, Henry and Rena Travis and the Charles Kliens.

When they first came to Ridgefield, Bill and Valerie Casey also lived in the house where Jim and Gloria Bacchiochi now have their home.

I have always felt that a place like the Bluebird seemed more like home than the crowded condominiums that are so numerous today. Why can't we have more apartment houses and fewer condominiums? I am sure today's newly married couples would appreciate them. Perhaps the powers that be should make a New Year's resolution to give this some thought.

In one of my first columns, I told of the wonderful apartment in which Marie and Dick started married life. It is now 613 Main Street and many are the newlyweds who enjoyed it. It could properly be called the "Honeymoon Apartment." It had four very nice rooms and a large storage space, a garage for my car, a stable for my saddle horse, a chicken house, as well as space for a garden. All this at a rental fee of \$27.50 per month.

Of course, that was a few years ago.

#290: THE 'MR. RIDGEFIELD' OF HIS DAY

Directly across the street from the West Lane Bluebird Apartments, you will find one of Ridgefield's shortest streets. It connects West Lane with High Ridge Avenue, and is called Parley Lane. The name is derived from the fact that this little street leads to the famous Peter Parley house.

There is only one house on Parley Lane. However, that dwelling is rather important, as it was once the home of the Honorable William O. Seymour.

Just to say that William O. Seymour was a very prominent citizen of our town seems like an understatement. There seems little doubt that he was the "Mr. Ridgefield" of his day.

The Seymour family is one of Ridgefield's oldest, and can be traced right back to the original settlers. I am happy to say that several branches of the venerable Seymour family tree are still quite active in the affairs of our town. As a matter of fact, Thomas Nash, publisher of this fine weekly newspaper, is a great, great grandson of William O. Seymour. Of course, as you all know, Karl Seymour Nash, Tom's father, ran this newspaper for the past half century.

Sorry to say that the name Seymour itself has just about disappeared in Ridgefield.

William O. Seymour served in so many capacities that it would take an entire column to describe them all. Anything of importance that happened in town was sure to find him right in the middle of the activities.

Seymour was once Ridgefield's judge of probate, and was also elected several times as our representative to the General Assembly in Hartford. In 1902, he was Ridgefield's delegate to the Constitutional Convention.

Governor Phineas C. Lounsbury appointed Mr. Seymour to the State Railroad Commission. The railroad people recognized his ability as a civil engineer, and chose him to be chief engineer of The New York, New Haven and Hartford line. He later served as chief engineer on The Boston and Western Railroad.

His reputation as an expert in this field spread and he became chief engineer of construction in the building of the Wisconsin Central Railroad.

Despite the many exalted positions that William O. Seymour held during his notable career, the one that he enjoyed most was that of a teacher. He first taught in the public school system, but then started his own private school in the historic Peter Parley house, which he owned. He was, by nature, particularly well-suited to his role as a teacher.

The Peter Parley house already had a fine reputation as a seat of learning. It had previously served as a school, under the tutelage of the Rev. Samuel G. Goodrich, father of the famous Peter Parley. After the Rev. Goodrich, the school was conducted by Professor Hugh S. Banks. As might be expected, many of the students who attended this school later became prominent citizens in their communities.

Although he lived a very busy life, William O. Seymour did not neglect his religious duties, and was very active in the affairs of the Congregational Church. In fact it was just 100 years ago at the dedication of the present church that Mr. Seymour accepted the church from the building committee in the name of the church society.

It should be noted that the well-known Mrs. Howard D. Smith was a daughter of William O. Seymour. Mrs. Smith did a considerable amount of writing for *The Ridgefield Press*. She was affectionately known as "Galloping Gussie," probably because she was always in a hurry, especially when she was on the track of a good story for the paper.

I remember Howard D. Smith when he was a pharmacist in George A. Mignery's drug store when it was located where the Yardage Shop is now [423 Main Street]. He was an old man at the time and his movements contrasted from Gussie's in that they were considerably slower.

As noted in a previous column, the chairman of Ridgefield's 200th Anniversary Celebration was none other than the Honorable William O. Seymour. His great grandson, Karl S. Nash, was the chairman of our town's 250th birthday celebration in 1958, so I felt that I was in good company as chairman in 1983, of the 275th Anniversary affair. However, I have already declined the opportunity to serve in that capacity again in the year 2008. That should be a grand party.

Just to the west of Parley Lane at 48. West Lane, is an impressive building that was the home of Jim and Gloria Bacchiochi and their family for many years. This large house actually sits on an island, and is surrounded by three roads — West Lane, High Ridge Avenue.

This was once the home of the noted Dr. Cyrus Northrop. In fact he was born on this property in 1834. Dr. Northrop was destined to become another famous native son, of which Ridgefield seemed to have spawned more than its share. Though an attorney by profession, Dr. Northrop was best known as a leader in the field of education.

After graduating from Yale Law School in 1859, he served as clerk of the state Senate, but then returned to Yale, where he was professor of rhetoric and English literature for 21 years. While teaching at Yale, he also served as collector of the Port of New Haven.

His fame as an educator spread to the Northwest, and in 1884 he became president of the State University of Minnesota. Dr. Northrop is credited with playing a leading role in the growth and development of this fine institution.

Another educator to live in this house was Miss Katharine Day. Katharine taught in the New York City school system for many years and became principal of an elementary school in Yorkville. She became a member of our local Board of Education, but her ideas on education were not readily accepted by some members of the board. In fact, she was denied renomination to the board by the Republican Town Committee. However, Katharine took her case to the caucus, where she won handily over her opponents.

#291: MORE OLD WEST LANE FAMILIES

At 45 West Lane, a very stylish old house sets a good distance back from the highway. In one section of this house, the small window panes are set at an angle and quickly capture your attention.

For many years this place was owned by the George Pratt Ingersoll family. In the early part of this century, the Ingersolls used to lease this property, generally to people who liked to spend the summer months in Ridgefield.

One of those who came here during the summer was the family of the Rev. William T. Hitchcock. Rev. Hitchcock was a minister in the Episcopal Church, and had served as pastor in several parishes across the state.

He and his wife, the former Mary Taylor, and their children, Louisa T., Anita T., and Thomas T., quickly fell in love with Ridgefield. I guess each of the children used their mother's maiden name for their middle name. They were not actually children, as they were full grown at the time.

The two daughters became so enamored with the beauty of Ridgefield that they decided to make it their permanent home. So, Louisa and Anita pooled their considerable resources, and

purchased the property at 69 Main Street that is now the home of Mehdi and Raelene Ali and family.

This place was a part of Lot 23 that was awarded, by a lottery, conducted by Samuel Smith of Norwalk in 1708. The reason for the appendage (of Norwalk) was that Samuel Smith of Milford was also engaged in the lottery and was awarded Lot 8 which encompassed much of the land that is now the Community Center.

At any rate, the sisters demolished the house that stood at 69 Main Street, and built the very impressive residence that now stands there.

In their later years, the sisters decided to build a “smaller house,” on the corner of Wilton Road West and Olmstead Lane. However, that is another story. It will suffice for now to say that Louisa superintended the building of the “smaller house,” and she was in her 90's at the time.

Back to the house at 45 West Lane. Following the passing of George Pratt Ingersoll in 1929, his wife Alice and daughter Gertrude moved here from their home just down the street and which is now The Inn at Ridgefield [The Benjamin].

I remember Gertrude as a rather tall lady, who wore a hat with an extra wide brim that flopped around in the breeze when she drove by in her open Buick touring car.

A number of years ago, this place became the home of John Aylmer White, his wife Janet and their son Nathaniel. Both John and Janet were schoolteachers, and John commuted daily to New Canaan's St. Luke School for many years. Only recently, the White family sold their home and moved north [to New York].

Next to the house that we are talking about was a barn that has been converted into a nice residence [at 55 West Lane]. This building is just one more of the many that have been moved to their present location. This one originally stood at the rear of Alonzo Barton Hepburn's beautiful “Altnacraig,” on High Ridge Avenue.

Then, there is an open field at 63 West Lane [now a homesite], at the rear of which there is a two-family house. This place is now owned by the Fred Orrico family. Many are the families that have made their home in this house.

Recently an old picture in *The Press* showed Belden Nicholas at work in a machine shop. The shop looked an awful lot like the one that Orville Sprague once owned. This shop was described away back in Dispatch #5.

Belden and his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Nicholas, lived at 63 West Lane for many years. Sam Nicholas was a mason by trade and also played a horn in the old Orenca Band. I believe that Belden is still living in Florida.

Mr. and Mrs. Howard Beers and their son, Orrin, also lived in this house, as did Louis and Stella Mead, and Stella still lives in Ridgefield. Some of the others who lived in this house were the Patrick Bolands, the George McGoverns and the Alden Hights and many more.

Directly across the street at 58 West Lane, on the west corner of West Lane and High Ridge Avenue, is the residence of Dr. Simon M. Trutt and his family. During the period of which I am writing, it was the home of Mr. and Mrs. Edward Beech. Mr. Beech passed on in the late 20's and Mrs. Beech continued to live there for many years.

Some 25 years ago Raymond and Margaret Sawyer and their many children made their home in this house. Some may remember that the very energetic Ray Sawyer was a part of the team of underwater explorers from Columbia University that located the submarine “Thresher” in its watery grave off the New England coast.

The Sawyer family moved to Denver, Colo. a number of years ago. They were a very lively group, and when they left, things in Ridgefield slowed down considerably.

Next to the Beech house lived Frederic E. Lewis' old retired coachman, Bartholomew Keefe. I have already told about him in the story about the Lewis estate, and I must try not to repeat myself, especially when it is necessary to return to an area I have already covered.

Also in the story about the Lewis estate, I mentioned the large three-story house at 65 West Lane, and how Mr. Lewis leased this place to use it as a guest house. In 1920 this property was purchased by the State of Connecticut, and it became Station A of the Connecticut State Police.

When the barracks moved to East Ridge in the late 20's, this became the home of the Boland family, and William Boland still lives there. Bill's sisters, Mary and Elizabeth, were both local school teachers.

Bess is still living and was my teacher in first grade in 1920 at the old Titicus School, now the American Legion Home on North Salem Road. Mary, better known as Mae, was my teacher in sixth grade, when classes were conducted in the fire house during a classroom shortage in 1926.

Bill still works every day, and once was an active beekeeper. He actually made friends with the many thousands of bees that he kept in the open field next door to his home.

#292: WOMAN WHO GAVE TO A PRIEST; JOKESTER CAUGHT FIRE

As we continue down West Lane, we come to number 71, presently the home of the William Duckworth family. Back in the early 20's, a Mrs. Fabricotti made her home in this nice old house.

Mrs. [Sarah Frances] Fabricotti was a lady of great importance. I never knew what made her so important, but I do remember that she was always spoken of in glowing terms. So, I would have to guess that Mrs. Fabricotti did nice things for people, for that seems to be the way to have nice things said about you. [When she died in 1932, Mrs. Fabricotti HAD an estate worth nearly \$7 million in today's dollars and left more than \$800,000 of it to Catholic churches and priests. Among her bequests was \$10,000 — \$242,000 in today's dollars — to the Rev. Richard E. Shortell, pastor of St. Mary's Parish. Alas, Father Shortell died in 1934, before he actually received the legacy.]

This house was owned for a number of years by Robert E. Richardson Sr., and his wife, the former Edith Frances Bailey. Mr. Richardson was a retired carpenter when I knew him. He was a friendly old gentleman and always had a kind word when I delivered his newspapers.

Mr. Richardson's son, Robert E. Jr., was a very prominent man in Ridgefield. Bob was an officer in what is now The Union Trust Company [Wells Fargo], when it was called The First National Bank of Ridgefield. He was also a longtime member of the Board of Education when it was still called the School Board. Bob was chairman of that important body when I graduated from high school more than a couple of years ago.

Bob Richardson was a great baseball enthusiast. I do not recall that he ever actually played the game, but he did manage our town team for a number of years, as well as being the treasurer and chief fund-raiser for that fine organization.

Bob's knowledge of the financial world was of great benefit to a team that represented a little town of some 3,000 people. It was Bob who was successful in acquiring the backing of Waddy Lewis for the team. Waddy came through, as usual, and was a generous contributor to the welfare of a baseball team that held its own with the best in this area.

Waddy not only paid for much of the team's equipment, but also furnished the cash that attracted several big-league players, who performed with our local boys in the fall when the big league season ended. The result was that great crowds came to the games. This was all noted in Dispatch #146.

Just about everyone in town attended the games that were played on the East Ridge diamond.

Mention of the great games of many years ago reminds me of Jimmy Rogers and the fact that I have not told any stories about him for a long time. For the benefit of any new readers of this column, Jimmy Rogers was my very favorite character. Jimmy was described in an earlier column as the man who kept the people of Ridgefield laughing, even during the Great Depression [see Dispatches 46, 61, 97]. Just his appearance was enough to bring a smile to anyone's face, and his antics would cause a real healthy laugh.

Jimmy had the knack of dreaming up, and then performing, numerous zany acts that everyone enjoyed. They were accomplished at no one's expense but his own. One of his escapades almost proved to be his last.

Anything that Jimmy did was bound to attract a lot of attention, and on this occasion he expected to have a ready-made crowd. His plan was to have his performance viewed by the considerable number of baseball fans as they came along East Ridge following the game. Jimmy decided to stage his act in front of Larry "Pudd" Davis' house. Pudd was the assistant manager of the ball team at that time, and he lived at 113 East Ridge. The house is the first on your right as you enter East Ridge from Prospect Steel.

The little house is quite close to the highway, and at the time there was a maple tree at its front. The tree was a part of Jimmy's plan of action. Apparently Jimmy wanted to create the impression that he had been set upon by people who wanted to burn him at the stake. He put a little pile of leaves at the base of the tree and then partly covered the leaves with a cloth that had been soaked in used motor oil. His purpose was to create a large cloud of heavy black smoke.

Somehow, Jimmy was able to get himself tied to the tree. No one ever admitted to helping him out with his escapade, so we will have to assume that he was able to do all this by himself. At any rate, his plan called for perfect timing. He would wait until there were two outs in the ninth inning, then after securing himself to the tree, he would drop a lighted match into the leaves.

His frantic screams for help were sure to attract the people leaving the baseball game. On learning that Jimmy had staged the whole thing himself, everyone would have a good laugh. Everything proceeded as planned, but Jimmy had overlooked one possibility. The home team had been trailing by one run, but with two outs in the ninth, they managed to tie the game. The home team finally won the game, but it had taken a little extra time and in the meantime Jimmy was getting broiled, or at least baked.

As the crowd of baseball fans came along East Ridge, they could hear Jimmy screaming bloody murder, and by the time they reached him, Jimmy was covered with black soot from head to foot. His clothes had ignited as he was being rescued, and his pants were ruined before the fire was extinguished.

This time at least, no one laughed until some time later. It was the only time that anyone had ever seen Jimmy act the least bit serious.

However, it did not last long, and soon he was busy preparing another trick that would delight his many friends. Jimmy was a chauffeur by trade, and drove for several of the many

wealthy Ridgefield families. He was never fired from a job that I know of. However, he did not stay on a job for a very long period. Perhaps he quit in search of excitement.

In between jobs, he would drive a taxi for Herb Bates when Herb operated a livery service in the building that now houses The Press. He was a ventriloquist par excellence, and delighted in fooling a store clerk. Though Jimmy was the only customer in the store, he would throw his voice in various directions, until the befuddled clerk would think that the store was full of people.

#293: TED'S TALL TALES

Reader reaction, for whatever reason, is reassuring to a writer that someone reads his column. So I just picked up another reader along the way, in the person of Bill Boland.

Bill informs me that the building that was once a barn and stood at the rear of Alonzo Barton Hepburn's High Ridge mansion, is the two family house at 63 West Lane.

That great building mover, Caro H. Northrop, deposited the barn in its present location, where it was converted into a dwelling. Bill Boland remembers seeing Caro's faithful old team, King and Jerry, as they towed the building from "Altnacraig," down High Ridge Avenue and across West Lane. I often wonder just how many build- ings Caro moved.

In writing about the Richardson house at 71 West Lane, I got off on a Jimmy Rogers story. As usual, where Jimmy is concerned, I managed to get carried away for he sure was a great character.

So back to West Lane, and number 73, now the home of Michael and Mae (Lavatori) O'Keefe. For many years this house belonged to the late Elmer Bouton.

I told about Elmer in Dispatch #151, and how he was the superintendent for the MacDougal Hawkes family on High Ridge. Elmer lived for many years in the little house at 28 High Ridge that is now the home of the Jeffery Miller family.

Elmer Bouton had a beautiful flower garden on the western side of High Ridge and a fine vegetable garden on the eastern side of the street. It was his custom to plant his peas on Saint Patrick's Day, no matter what the weather might be at the time. If the ground was still frozen, he would make a hole with a crowbar to drop the seeds in. It must have been the right thing to do, as he always had an excellent crop.

While living on High Ridge, Elmer used to rent out his West Lane house. Richard C. and Ruhamah (Foshay) Bennett lived at #73 for several years. Like all the Bennett boys, Dick was a very fine gardener. I have many fond memories of the great gardens at "Hillscroft" that he tended for me 40 some years ago. Dick was a fine gentleman.

The house at 73 West Lane was also the home, for several years, of Joseph and Irene (McGlynn) Zwierlein. They were a very well known couple, and moved to West Lane from Barry Avenue in the early 40's.

Joe, like Jimmy Rogers, was one of my very favorite characters, and I have already told some stories about him. In fact Joe was the central figure in columns #241, #242 and #243.

Joe Zwierlein was a big man, with a temperament that made him prone to a considerable amount of teasing. Though on occasion Joe could be quite brusque, he was actually a very affable man.

To be sure, he did not want for teasing, with Bill Boland as a neighbor. Many were the tricks that Bill would concoct to keep Joe stirred up.

The large house at 74 West Lane has been the home of Joseph and Florence Dunworth and their family for more than 30 years. It had been the home of the superintendents of the

famous Lewis estate, James Ballantyne and later John W. Smith, and later still, the famous bridge expert, Ely Culbertson.

Across the way, at 75 West Lane, is one of the finest examples of turn-of-the-century architecture. It is now the home of David and Susan Mleczko and their beautiful little daughter Lily.

I must say a word about Lily, who is now three years of age. I got to know this remarkable little girl when my pony and I took her for a ride on her birthday. Lily fell in love with "Maggie" and Maggie fell in love with Lily. Of course, I love them both. Since their first meeting, Lily has been coming to see Maggie at regular intervals, and always brings along a carrot. Maggie looks forward to these visits and whinnies when she sees Lily coming.

Recent inclement weather has prevented meetings between the little girl and the pony and Maggie became ill. However, Lily came to see Maggie the other day and the little pony has made a miraculous recovery. I would like very much to be around in the year 2003, when Lily is a sure bet to become Miss America. [Today Lily Mleczko is executive director of the New York City non-profit, Rocking the Boat, which encourages youngsters to develop "pride, purpose, and possibility" by learning skills behind building and rowing wooden boats, sailing, and restoring the Bronx River. Among its aims is to encourage teenagers to stay in high school and then enroll in college or trade school.]

The 20th century was only a couple of years old when Theodore and Mary (Adams) Haight settled down at 75 West Lane. They, along with their son Milton, would make this the Haight family homestead for more than 80 years.

Ted was known as a painting contractor, but both he and Milton were also very fine carpenters. Story telling became an art for Ted, and he was known far and wide for his great stories, some of which may or may not have been authentic. You be the judge.

However, when there were sufficient listeners, Ted would light his ever-present pipe, and conversation would stop as everyone gathered around to hear one of his anecdotes. Ted had told these stories so many times, and his manner of delivery was so sincere that it was quite obvious that he had convinced himself that they were entirely true.

Ted drove a large Imperial 8 Chrysler, and the family did considerable traveling. He told of one time they were driving through the Blue Ridge Mountains, and stopped at a little service station for gas. The attendant appeared and dropped several pills in the gas tank. Then, over Ted's strenuous protests, the man filled the gas tank with water, all the while assuring Ted that this unusual fuel mixture would be most satisfactory. Ted said that his car performed at its best and he had better mileage than he would with gasoline.

Another time, the family was traveling through Arizona. It was after dark and suddenly the lights failed. There was some moonlight and they continued to drive across the desert, until the car came to a complete stop.

They decided to spend the night in the car and when the dawn came, they discovered they were right on the edge of the Grand Canyon.

Then there was the time when Ted was on his way to Tator's garage in South Salem. As he was going down Tator's Hill, he noticed that the left front wheel had become disengaged from the car and was rolling ahead of him. Ted said that he stepped on the gas and caught up with the wheel as he came to the next corner. The wheel slid back on the axle and he arrived safely at the garage, where repairs were made.

One of the best stories was about the time they were shingling a roof in South Salem. It was a very foggy day and as everyone knows, if it is foggy anywhere, it is the heaviest in South

Salem. Finally the fog got so bad, they had to quit in the middle of the afternoon. When they returned the following day, Ted said that he discovered that they had shingled two feet off into the fog.

I always thought that Ted enjoyed these stories, every bit as much as his listeners.

#294: MORE WEST LANE FAMILIES & AN ILL-FATED INN

As you look at the very nice house at 79 West Lane, you are bound to get the feeling that here is a building that was made to last. This place is now the home of Mrs. Azelia Lavatori, whose husband Sylvester provided tender loving care for so many years to the spacious grounds at Veterans Park.

Sylvester must have spent the best part of his life grooming the vast lawns, and the beautiful gardens that once dotted this great estate. His stewardship extended way back to when it was owned by the Griffith and Lounsbury families. It was obvious that he took great pride in keeping "Groveland," as it was called, as one of Ridgefield's most noted showplaces.

For many years, the Lavatori family lived in the house on Market Street that was a part of the estate.

Mrs. Lavatori's home on West Lane was built in the early part of this century by Arthur F. Eilenstein. Mr. Eilenstein came to this country in the 1890's as a young man who had just completed his required service in the German army.

Arthur Eilenstein soon acquired a new uniform and served in the United States Army in the Spanish-American War. He was in his 80's when he passed on in the late 50's, and was credited with being the last surviving veteran of the War with Spain in Ridgefield.

He never missed appearing in the parade on Memorial Day (Decoration Day). When he got too old to march, he drove his little Model A Ford coupe, and later on rode along the parade route with the other veterans.

Known as a bricklayer by trade, Mr. Eilenstein was actually an expert at any kind of masonry work. His pretty little house is a graphic example of his fine handiwork. He also built a garage with a styling to match his house, and he had the good sense to include a very nice apartment over the garage.

That little apartment is just what Ridgefield needs more of today. I know of several young couples who were happy to start their married life in the friendly confines of this apartment. It is now the home of Kevin and Susan Kerrigan.

During the period that I am attempting to cover, the William Ayles family made their home in this apartment. Some may remember that Bill was a state trooper when Station A of the State Police was located at 65 West Lane. This made it very handy for Bill, as his place of work was only four doors from where he lived.

Bill Ayles must have been very good at his job, for at a time when all policemen seemed to be very tall, he was much shorter than the rest. Bill's brother, Bob, was a popular young athlete in the 20's and early 30's. Bob was a fine bowler and baseball player, and played left end on our Spartan football team. We used to joke that the reason they had Bob playing left end was that he was left-handed.

Another young couple that lived in this apartment was the Bill Leals, when Bill and I worked at the Conklin Dairy so many years ago. In later years, I believe Sylvester Lavatori Jr. and his wife lived there.

The very attractive house at 83 West Lane was described in Dispatch #141, and is now the home of Dr. James J. O'Toole, his wife Patricia, and their five children.

In the late teens and early 20's, this was the home of the chef who prepared the meals for the Frederic E. Lewis family. Mr. Lewis had hired the chef away from one of New York's hotels. Prior to that time, the William Payne family had lived here for several years. Mr. Payne was a famous writer and novelist.

After Mr. Lewis passed on, things began to wind down on the Lewis estate and the chef and his family returned to New York City, and Mr. and Mrs. Thomas I. Walker came here from Rhode Island. Mr. Walker was an executive with General Electric. At one time he was in charge of that company's Rhode Island office. He passed on in the mid 30's and Mrs. Walker continued to live here for several years. [The Walkers' son was Ralph Thomas Walker, (1889-1973), a noted architect of skyscrapers whom The New York Times called "the architect of the century," for his many notable buildings in New York City and other cities. All three Walkers are buried in Fairlawn Cemetery.]

This place also had a very nice garage apartment that provided several young couples a place to start married life. Probably the Clem Pasquerella family lived here the longest. It is now the home of William and Nancy Gnewuch, and their family.

Next door, at 89 West Lane, there was once a very large brown shingled house. It was at one time the home of the John Mullen family. It became a part of the Frederic E. Lewis estate when Mr. Lewis decided to import his own physician from New York City. So Dr. Fiske came to Ridgefield and set up his office on West Lane, where it intersects with Olmstead Lane. He had a ready-made practice for he not only administered to the needs of the Lewis family, but the many people who were employed on the great estate as well.

After a few years, Dr. Fiske returned to the city and the place remained vacant for a while. Then, along came Mrs. Eloise Lindsay and her family. After using the place as a residence for a time, Mrs. Lindsay converted the place into a French restaurant, which she named La Bretagne.

It seems apparent that Mrs. Lindsay had established a very good reputation as a dispenser of French food before she arrived here. La Bretagne was soon attracting customers from the surrounding areas, and from as far away as New York City.

However, there was one draw-back to the operation. Somehow the place developed the bad habit of catching fire. It was just 30 years ago that one of the fires left the building in ruins from which it never recovered [a 1947 fire nearly destroyed the building, but it was rebuilt and the inn reopened].

The place remained in a state of disarray for some time, and then it was sold to William Peatt. After considerable sparring with Planning and Zoning, Bill got the go ahead sign for what he planned to do. So what remained of the building was demolished, and in its place we now have three, two-family houses.

Since the lack of water pressure contributed to the problem of fighting that very destructive fire, I just can't help but wonder whether there is sufficient pressure there today. I saw that fire, and the sight of that limp hose was frightening, to say the least.

#295: THE WANDERING WATERING TROUGH

As we travel along West Lane, our attention is directed to the little triangle that graces the entrance to Olmstead Lane.

There was a time when this small piece of real estate received very little attention, and was almost unnoticed. During the heyday of the F.E Lewis estate, employees from that great showplace used to keep the grass mowed, but after the estate closed down, the little triangle was

pretty much forgotten about. Then, following the disastrous flood of 1955, the great old stone watering trough was moved here.

This priceless old bit of Ridgefield's history originally stood in the center of Catoonah Street, where it intersects with Main Street. It provided a place for horses to refresh themselves and got plenty of use, especially by those who may have traveled a great distance to get to town on a hot summer's day.

Once a horse got used to stopping at the trough, it would just naturally gravitate towards it, without any guidance from the driver. When a team stopped at the trough, the two horses could drink the water about as fast as it was replenished.

Horses are very apt to plunge their noses right to the bottom of a trough, inhaling the water in large drafts. A mule, on the other hand, would approach the trough in an easy manner, and just wiggle his nose across the surface of the water, and then just sip it. The mule really has a great sense of self-preservation.

The trough that I am telling about was a gift to the town from John Ames Mitchell. Mr. Mitchell designed the trough himself, and he had the presence of mind to provide a little fount at its bottom, where a dog could also quench his thirst. This fact alone makes the horse trough rather unique, as I know of no other just like it.

Unlike the Cass Gilbert fountain, this horse trough never suffered the indignity of being knocked over by an automobile, at least as far as I know. If a wayward auto ever struck this massive piece of stonework, you can bet that the auto would have come out second best. This trough is made of solid stone and must weigh an awful lot.

Of course, during the years that it was exposed to the traffic at this busy intersection, there were not so many automobiles. There are those who would say that the drivers in those days were more courteous, or perhaps more cautious.

As horses began to pass out of the picture, as far as transportation is concerned, the trough was moved to the Titicus District. It sat at the foot of Saw Mill Hill Road, where it intersects with North Salem Road. Then came the flood of 1955, and the old bridge at this point was wiped out, as were most of the others in town.

The gorge left by the raging waters came dangerously close to the old watering trough. In order to make the necessary repairs to the highway and construct a new bridge, the trough was moved to its present location. This caused renewed interest in the little West Lane triangle.

The much traveled and very historic old watering trough deserved a suitable resting place. Under the watchful eye of Altero "Chick" Ciuccoli, the little triangle took out a new lease on life. A rail fence was built around it, and now perhaps we should call it Olmstead Park.

At any rate, we are all very proud of this little three cornered island. It looks especially good during the summer months, when the trough is loaded with pretty, ever blooming flowers that receive tender loving care from Mrs. Myles Eason.

The very attractive house at 97 West Lane, on the western corner of Olmstead Lane, is now the home of Richard and Nancy Callahan and their family. At the turn of the century, it was the home of Richard Keeler.

Dick Keeler was a well known Ridgefield farmer, and he must have been a very good one. In fact, he must have been the one they had in mind when they coined the word "eke" as a part of the English language.

Dick Keeler's farm was on Old South Salem Road. It later became a "gentleman's farm," after Reginald Lewis bought the place in the 20's. This property was well suited to Reggie's needs, for he was not dependent on the farm's products for a living. He had some cows, but they

furnished milk only for his family needs and for the employees on his nice private estate. He also had some beautiful horses that were strictly for pleasure riding.

It was a different thing when Dick Keeler worked this farm. He actually “eked” out a living from land that had more rocks than topsoil. I have always thought that this fine man should have received some kind of medal for getting this barren land to become productive. You can be sure that it took an awful lot of hard work.

There were several other Ridgefield farms that must have taxed the ingenuity of the farmer to the very limit. They are all gone now, with the exception of Dan McKeon’s farm up in Ridgebury, and even that one is beginning to give way to the developers.

Ridgefield’s farms, like the many great private estates, have been replaced by developments, condominiums and shopping centers. Those farms were a tribute to the many hardy souls that worked and slaved to make a living from the soil.

Of course, there were a number of farms with soil that was rich and productive. However, for most the greatest product were the stones that kept coming to the surface each year.

The farmers, with typical Yankee resourcefulness, made good use of the stones. During the winter months, they built the many stone walls that still act as boundary lines throughout the town.

Dick Keeler not only made himself a living, but did well enough so that in retirement, he and his wife, the former Anna Denton, were able to spend their winters in Florida.

Oh yes, in his busy life, he still found time to serve as Ridgefield’s first selectman at the turn of the century.

Mr. Keeler passed on in the mid 20’s and the house at 97 West Lane became the home of the Charles Benjamins, who had lived next door at 91 Olmstead Lane.

#296: THE WEST LANE BENJAMINS & ‘JOLLY’ JIM HALPIN

Charles W. Benjamin and his wife, the former Mary Estelle Bailey, lived for a number of years at 97 West Lane. They had previously lived with their children, Emerson, Dorothy and Alice, almost next door, at 91 Olmstead Lane.

Charlie was a carpenter by trade, and a real good one. In fact he was even better known as a fine cabinetmaker, and as a restorer of antique furniture. These are arts that require a considerable amount of skill and patience, attributes that he seemed to possess in abundance.

Much of his work was carried on in the barn at the rear of his home, from which he did a thriving business.

Charles Benjamin was also a well-known sportsman, and a crack shot, with both the rifle and the shotgun. During the period of which I am writing, the wooded areas of Ridgefield were inhabited with plenty of game, and supplied many a fine meal for local sportsmen and their families.

As the population of the town increased, open space began to decrease, and so did the hunters. Traffic has increased along with the population and it seems that more game has succumbed to the auto than ever did to the hunters.

Later in life, Charles Benjamin conducted a saw-sharpening business. Being meticulous by nature, you can just bet that when he filed your saw, you got it back in as good, or better condition than when it was new.

Charlie was blessed with a good sense of humor and it was always very pleasant to talk with him.

Mrs. Benjamin was a real estate agent back in the days when local agents could have been labeled as members of an endangered species. In the teens and 20's you could count the Ridgefield realty people on the fingers of one hand and have a few left over.

During those years, the real estate business was so slow that agents found it necessary to have at least one other source of income. Mrs. Benjamin took a position with the First National Bank of Ridgefield (now Union Trust) [Wells Fargo].

She was a fixture at the bank for 30 years and always seemed to enjoy working at the service window. She often said she liked the work as it gave her a chance to meet so many people. Just can't help but feel that she should have worked in the post office, for that is where you meet them all.

After retiring from the bank, Mrs. Benjamin devoted more time to her real estate business. Later on Colonial Realty was carried on by Emerson Benjamin and his wife, the former Irma Mae Finch. Today that same business is conducted by Mrs. Benjamin's grandson, Richard E. Benjamin. I guess that makes it a family business for more than 60 years.

Just to the west of the former Benjamin home is an open field that must be a very valuable piece of real estate. Then, at 113 West Lane, we come to a home that is also an antiques shop. It is now the home of Ralph and Gloria Perschino. This very well-preserved house, one of the oldest in Ridgefield, is home of the Red Petticoat Antiques.

This place was built by Benjamin Rockwell just about 250 years ago. Ben's father, Jonathan, was one of the original settlers, and was awarded Lot #31 on Main Street, on the north corner of what is now Rockwell Road. Like many of the original settlers, this Rockwell family came here from Norwalk.

Ben Rockwell and his brother Jonathan, also shared ownership of a lot on Main Street. However, for some reason, Ben decided to build his home on West Lane rather than Main Street. Perhaps he could not stand all that heavy Main Street traffic.

At any rate, during the period being covered, this fine old West Lane house was the home of James H. and Carolyn M. Halpin, sometimes spelled Halpine. Jim was born in a house that sat near the railroad tracks at the end of what we now call Halpin Lane [off Prospect Ridge]. He was a house painter by trade and when he retired, as World War I was drawing to a close, he and Carolyn moved to West Lane.

I seem to think that he had a wooden foot though I am not sure. I do remember that he walked with a decided limp, though he did not treat this as a handicap. In fact, Jim was a big man, with a jolly disposition.

When I first knew Jim Halpin, he drove a two-cylinder Hupmobile. It was an open car and probably had a top speed of 20 miles per hour. It sure would be a classic, if it were around today.

After the Halpins moved to West Lane, Jim purchased a Maxwell (a la Jack Benny). Like the Hupmobile, this car was a runabout, and for those unfamiliar with that term, this was an open car with one seat for two passengers. It had a canvas top, making it what we call a convertible today.

Like many of the autos of that era, Jim Halpin's Maxwell had a lot of brass trimmings, where today's cars have chrome. Jim always kept the brass well shined, and with its deep-buttoned, plush, leathered upholstery, this little car was quite attractive.

One of the features of this car was a large brass horn that greatly resembled a trumpet. To blow the horn, one must squeeze a rubber ball the size of a duckpin ball. A real good squeeze would send out a signal that could be heard at a great distance.

The horn was attached to the outside of the driver's side of the vehicle. However, Jim disconnected it and carried it on the seat next to him. Whenever he wished to sound the horn, it was not necessary to take his hand from the steering wheel. Jim would simply move his quite ample rump against the rubber ball, and the result was a clarion blast that was both loud and clear.

James Halpin passed on in the mid 1940's at 80 years of age. His brother John Halpin died two days later.

Just west of the Halpin house, a great field remained open and vacant until quite recently. There are now two new houses there that were built as homes for the Grasso and Morton families.

#297: WHEN RIDGEFIELD HAD MORE THAN 40 CHAUFFEURS

It was in the mid-1890's that John Mulvey purchased the property at 123 West Lane from the Osborne family. John was a construction worker, and was one of the many who were employed in building the great mansions that were the pride of Ridgefield.

A dozen years later in 1907, along came Daniel J. O'Shea and his family. The O'Sheas were to live in this nice house for the next half century.

Dan had come here from Ireland, and his wife, the former Jessie McDonald, had emigrated from Scotland. Dan and Jessie had four children, Dennis J., Elizabeth, Daniel G. and Isabel.

The boys sought their fortune elsewhere, but the girls wisely stayed in dear old Ridgefield. All four were blessed with their parents' excellent dispositions, and the girls in particular were very popular with the local gentry.

Any worthy local cause was sure to find the sisters helping out wherever needed. They were both great dancers and it was a real treat to see them, in their sailor suits, doing "The Sailor's Hornpipe." The girls had this dance down to perfection, and performed it in the great 1926 minstrel show. This was one of the many hits of the show, and the very enthusiastic audience caused them to dance several encores.

Elizabeth became Mrs. Harvey B. Lown, but Isabel never married and spent her later years in caring for her parents. Both girls were local school teachers, and lucky were the students who had one of them as an instructor. They were the old-fashioned type of teacher who insisted on getting some knowledge into the head of even the poorest of students. There were a number of such teachers in those days.

Isabel, as everyone should know, went on to become the principal at Veterans Park School. A grateful town named the auditorium at [East Ridge Middle School] in her honor. It was a well deserved honor.

I would guess that two of Dan O'Shea's characteristics that I remember best were his ever-ready smile and his abundant pep. He had very quick movements, and he kind of skipped along as he walked at a rapid pace.

Perhaps it was his lightness of foot that caused his daughters to be such fine dancers. It has long been my contention that a person's style of walking is one of the strongest traits that is handed down to children. I have noticed this in many families, including my own.

Dan O'Shea was a chauffeur par excellence, and when decked out in his livery, he was a real dandy. In his day, having a liveried chauffeur was a status symbol, and of course Ridgefield had more than its share of people whose station in life was considerably higher than that of a ribbon clerk.

On many of the large private estates, living quarters were provided for the chauffeur and his family. This served two purposes; the living quarters were considered as a part of the chauffeur's salary and it also made him readily available to the beck and call of his employer. Dan being rather independent by nature never took advantage of the offered living quarters, preferring to stay at 123 West Lane.

Those in the higher echelons, not only wanted their limousines to look their very best, but the drivers as well, so they were provided with uniforms. The traditional uniform of the chauffeur was a very dark blue, with a shiny, stiff-visored cap, and looked very much like that of a policeman. Some also wore puttees, similar to those worn by a motorcycle policeman.

The Biddle sisters could have well afforded a chauffeur, but insisted instead on doing their own driving. When they finally did acquire a chauffeur, it was only because they had become too old to drive.

These fine women were pillars in Ridgefield's society, but they had their own way of doing things. I do not think they could have been labeled as "free spirits," but they sure caused a stir when their chauffeur, Cortland Emlaw, showed up wearing ordinary street clothes. They were great ladies and no one dared to admonish them.

It may be hard to believe now, but back in the 20's, when Ridgefield's population was one eighth of what it is today, there must have been at least 40 chauffeurs in town. They even had their own organization, and each year there was the Chauffeur's Ball, a gala affair, attended by the wealthy, as well as the ordinary.

Saturday was shopping day, and it was not unusual to find a number of chauffeur-driven station wagons (then called suburbans), in front of the stores on Main Street. Then on Sunday mornings, you would find limousines parked outside a church, with a group of chauffeurs standing nearby. Their conversations no doubt centered around the relative merits of a Packard over a Cadillac, a Rolls Royce over a Pierce Arrow, or a Brewster over a Renault.

I am sure that somewhere along the way, the discussion would include some interesting revelations concerning the eccentricities of their employers. Too bad we did not have tape recorders back in those days.

You may be sure that many of these [wealthy] people were well able to drive their own vehicles. I know Dr. Russell W. Lowe was a very good driver, yet he had a chauffeur drive him to make his house calls.

The Wall Street crash of 1929 did much to change all this, and some people found that a chauffeur was really not a necessity. By the time of World War II, there were only a few chauffeurs left in town.

For several years, Dan O'Shea drove for the George M. Olcott family at Casagmo. This is noteworthy because chauffeurs came and went with considerable rapidity at the Olcott household. This was especially true after the passing of Mr. Olcott, and operations at Casagmo came under the command of his daughter Mary. But that is another story.

Dan's even temper and exceptional good disposition were tested to the limit [by Miss Olcott]. When they finally wore out, Dan transferred to the employ of the famous Geraldine Farrar, who had recently moved to Ridgefield. It was a happy switch for Dan, for the vivacious "Gerry" thoroughly enjoyed his sunny disposition, and they got along just fine.

#298: THE MUSICAL CASAGRANDES

The house at 123 West Lane seemed to have a way of attracting good-natured people. If you do not believe that, just ask Marge Casagrande, whose husband bought the place some 30 years ago.

The previous owner, Dan O'Shea, had set the pace and Gene Casagrande kept it going. Gene and I have been friends, good friends, for more than 60 years. In all that time, we have never had a cross word. I would guess that you could put the blame on Gene for that. He probably never had a cross word with anyone. Therefore, my description of Gene Casagrande could no doubt be liberally sprinkled with predilection.

Gene came from a musical family. His father, Aldo Casagrande, was a member of the old Ridgefield Band, in which he played the cornet. The cornet is very much like the trumpet, and my father used to say that Aldo was the very best in the whole State of Connecticut.

Aldo played just about every brass instrument, such as the alto horn, the baritone, the trombone and tuba. He also played the bass fiddle.

However, the cornet was his forte, and when he picked up this instrument and placed it to his lips, it was as much a part of him as his fingers or toes.

I had the pleasure of playing with him in both a marching band and a dance band, and it was a very rewarding experience.

The old Ridgefield Band was also known as The Oreneca Band, and it was a very good one. However, as the members of the band grew older, it seemed as though there was no one coming along to replace them.

Then in April 1922, a raging fire wiped out most of the south side of Bailey Avenue. In so doing, the little building in which the instruments were stored and which stood just to the east of the Acorn Press building, was completely destroyed.

Aldo Casagrande could not stand having no local band, so four years later, he gathered a bunch of kids together and started to teach them how to play and enjoy the brass instruments. Arthur Seymour came forward to teach the boys who were interested in playing the reed instruments, and my father and brother Joe helped me with the drums.

After some months of individual instruction, Aldo and Arty had the boys ready to perform as a unit. Our very first public appearance was just 61 years ago, May 30, 1927, in the Decoration Day parade.

The boys had to pay their own expenses, so we did not have formal band uniforms. We did have little navy blue caps with red trim and a stiff shiny visor, over which were the initials R.B.B. in gold. We also had navy blue sweaters with red trim and white duck pants.

All in all, we at least looked alike, and we were quite proud that our first appearance was received with genuine enthusiasm by our townspeople. As the initials on our caps indicated, we were called The Ridgefield Boys Band, but later adopted the name of the old Oreneca Band. As the band improved, it became quite popular.

Soon we were engaged to play, not only in Ridgefield, but in many other towns such as Danbury, Brewster, Lake Mahopac, Poughkeepsie, Port Chester, Katonah, Yonkers, and even New York City.

By this time and still without subsidies of any kind, the boys had acquired spanking new uniforms that were green with gold trim.

We had a lot of fun, and I am sure that every one of those boys felt greatly indebted to Aldo Casagrande for his great efforts. He was a fine man.

I said earlier that Gene Casagrande came from a musical family. Actually that is an understatement. It just seemed natural that Gene would learn to play the cornet, and then he mastered the violin. His sister Ann (Girolmetti), played the piano very well, and brother Peter added to the group with his alto saxophone, while brother Arthur joined in with his trumpet.

All they needed was my brother Joe with his drums and the little dance band was complete. This was one of the most versatile musical groups you could find anywhere. If you had a preference for any type of music, they could supply it.

When they played for ballroom dancing at the old town hall, they displayed only a part of their repertoire. They played for square dancing at Odd Fellows Hall, Italian folk dancing at the Italian Hall, Swedish folk dancing at Miller's Hall in Georgetown and Polish folk dancing at Vasa Hall in Georgetown. Aldo could play an entire evening for each of these diverse groups, without ever reading a note of music.

Gene Casagrande was a star in both basketball and baseball at Ridgefield High School. This was at a time when Ridgefield was usually at or near the top of the Housatonic Valley League. What Gene lacked in height, he more than made up for with accuracy and a great competitive spirit. He would have made a good match for the tall boys of today.

The school did not have a hockey team, nor was there an indoor rink such as we have now. However, we made up teams and Lewis' Pond, New Pond and Lake Mamasasco were the sites of some real great hockey games. I think that hockey was Gene's favorite sport.

Like most kids in those days, Gene had an after-school job. He was a newspaper boy and later worked at an antiques store that was located at what is now 440 Main Street. That little building was the Old Indian Trading Post that has long since been moved south to 23 Main Street. It is said to have been built in 1710, which would make it the oldest structure in Ridgefield.

When Gene graduated from Ridgefield High in 1931, the effects of the Great Depression were in full swing and jobs were scarce. However, Gene got a job as a route salesman for Rudy Hurzeler's Ridgefield Bakery, where Roma Pizzeria is now. The bakery was very popular and had several trucks that delivered its fine products over a wide area. Gene's route ended north all the way to Lake Mahopac, N.Y.

The experience that he gained in the bakery business was to prove invaluable to Gene when he and his partner, the late John P. Moore, opened their own meat and grocery store "Casa-More" in 1940, at 127 West Lane.

Three years later Gene was on his way to the South Pacific as a member of the United States Army.

#299: A COUNTRY STORE'S LONG HISTORY

During any major conflict, certain restrictions are brought to bear that create a change in the lifestyle of the civilian population. World War II was no exception.

Anyone over age 50 will no doubt remember that during the war, pleasure riding came to an abrupt halt. Local Ration Boards issued stamps that had to be surrendered whenever gasoline was purchased.

The same was true when tires were needed for the family auto. It also affected many food products, such as meat, sugar, coffee and many other items that were in short supply.

These shortages proved to be a problem for the storekeepers as well as their customers. Therefore, when Gene Casagrande prepared to go off with the U.S. Army, he and his partner John Moore decided to close their Casa-More store for the duration.

John and his wife, the former Rita Ryan, and their family continued to live in the apartment over the store, and the first floor of the building was rented to Dr. Herbert Cox, who must have been Ridgefield's first veterinarian. Up to that time our town was served by veterinarians from Danbury. Two that I remember were Dr. Knapp and Dr. Keresy.

So the building at 127 West Lane, which had served many years as a private residence, then as a grocery store, now became a veterinary hospital. The place had been built long before the turn of the century, and several families had made their home in this building.

The Achille Bacchiochi family lived there in the early part of this century. Mr. Bacchiochi once told me of a time when he was involved in a runaway with his gray mare, Mary. He had been doing construction work farther down West Lane at FairHaven. He was on his way home after a hard day's work, and he noticed that Mary was full of pep, and anxious to get home for her ration of hay and oats.

Mary started off at a brisk trot, and finally got up so much speed that Achille felt that he should slow her down. Alas, when he took up on the reins, one of them broke and Mary went into a gallop.

As they thundered by the Little Red School House, Achille said that he remembered being glad that school was out for the day and no children were around.

As usual, Mrs. Bacchiochi waited in front of the house to greet her husband. She heard the noise of Mary's approaching hoofs and knew that something was wrong. She waved as Mary went flying by the house, and all Mr. Bacchiochi could do was to wave in return.

Few things are more exciting than a runaway and this one lasted until Mary finally ran out of steam as she approached the business area of Main Street.

Achille laughed heartily as he recounted his harrowing experience, but you can bet that he was not laughing that day.

It was right after World War I that Howard Thomas bought the house at 127 West Lane. Howard lived upstairs with his family, and converted the first floor into a kind of country, general store. He was a good businessman, and with the famous Lewis estate right across the street, he was in a very good location.

Mrs. Lewis used to buy a large quantity of fireworks from Howard for a great public display on each 4th of July, and Howard said that he made such profit on the fireworks that his sales for the rest of the year were just gravy.

Howard was a great sport and a fine athlete. Basketball fans used to enjoy seeing him make those left-handed hook shots in the old Town Hall auditorium.

Howard Thomas ran the store through the 20's, and then the business was taken over by Carl Gustafson, who had been manager of the A&P store. Howard retained ownership of the building.

These were the troubled times of the Great Depression and Carl gave way to Paul Davis. Paul also found the going to be very rough, as did Jimmy Gaucher, who also tried to make the place go. One of them even painted the store with blue paint and called it the Blue Front, but even that did not work and they finally gave up.

It was not until Gene Casagrande and John Moore bought out Howard Thomas in 1940 that the business began to hum. Both of these gentlemen were possessed of a pleasant disposition that was augmented with a fine business acumen. It was a time when the economy was on the upswing.

With the end of the war, Gene and John reopened their store and started to rebuild the fine trade that they had temporarily relinquished.

John had a fine position with Electro Mechanical Research (EMR), a subsidiary of Schlumberger, that was located in the building on Grove Street that now houses Digitech Industries, Inc. [recently, the gym].

In the mid-50s, EMR elected to move their operations to Sarasota, and John decided to sell his share of Casa-More to Gene and move on south with his company.

It must have been a real struggle for Gene to compete with the large chain stores. However, he had a host of friends who were regular customers, and with his sunny disposition, plus a lot of hard work, he became quite successful.

Gene never seemed to have the desire to run for public office, but if he had done so, his popularity would have made him a sure winner. He did, however, find the time to serve several terms on our local Board of Finance, at a time when that was an appointed body.

Other than that, his outside interests were devoted to his two favorite organizations, the Knights of Columbus, in which he served several terms as grand knight, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, in which he was elected commander.

So after more than 45 years of operating his nice little country store, Gene finally sold his business to Joseph Hahn. Joe was made to order as the proprietor of the West Lane Market, and he did a thriving business. However, he had other interests that appealed to him, and the store is now owned by a group headed by Michael Apazidis. [In 2024, this business is called the West Lane Pizza & Deli.]

Gene can now devote his time to golf, which is his favorite game during the summer months, and to playing cards in the winter months. We have competed in these games for many years, as I have said before, without ever a cross word. Then again, this fine man has never had a cross word with anyone.

#300: HOW TO GROW GIANT MELONS; THREE ROADS HISTORY

In Dispatch #141, I told about the large field that is just to the west of the west of the West Lane Grocery. This field has been owned by Miss Elizabeth Hull for some time, and through the years, it has acquired a bumper crop of saplings of several varieties [It is now woods owned by the Land Conservancy of Ridgefield].

When this was all a part of the Frederic E. Lewis estate, a part of the field was used to grow hay and another part was planted into a beautiful vegetable garden. Just about every vegetable known to man was grown here, and in such quantity that it could have supplied the whole town.

It was here that I first saw a watermelon actually growing on the vine. The melons were enormous and one of the several gardeners, John Robinson, told of how they were grown to such a size.

John claimed that as soon as the buds dropped and the melons started to form, he would take an awl and make a small hole in the vine near the melon. He would then take a piece of soft twine and draw it through the vine, leaving a strand about one foot long on either side of the vine. The ends of the twine were then placed in a pan of water.

The water was absorbed into the vine and directed to the melon. As the melon grew, the amount of water that it absorbed increased. John said that it was not unusual for a large melon to drink two quarts daily.

He used the same method to grow squash and pumpkins that were too large to lift, only they were fed with skim milk rather than water.

This valuable property must be just about the most desirable piece of real estate left in Ridgefield. Much to her credit, Miss Hull has protected it from being developed for many years.

The great field was also the site of the magnificent fireworks displays that Mrs. Lewis used to put on for the public each Fourth of July.

Just across the street at 140 West Lane is the home of Susan York. This was also a part of the Lewis estate and was for many years the home of Louis Waldarke and his family. Louis was the butler, or houseman, for the Lewis family.

The house was considerably smaller in those days. In the late 20's, when the economy took the big plunge, even the great estates were forced to economize. "Upagenstitt" was no exception, so the little house at 140 West Lane was closed and the Waldarke family moved into the huge mansion with Mrs. Lewis.

The house remained closed until the estate disintegrated, and Manor Estates was developed. It then became the home of Peter and Peg Carboni, and their family.

Pete, who managed the A&P Liquor Store for a number of years, was a member of the Carboni family whose name was synonymous with many sporting events in the 20's, 30's and 40's.

The place has undergone significant changes in recent years, some were made by the Tiedgen family and some by the present owner. Additions were made to the little house, and the newly attached garage has made this a rather imposing structure.

Back to the south side of the highway we come to the very attractive little compound at 165 West Lane. It is now the home of Scott and Deborah Rhoades. Since their home sits at the focal point of three roads, Silver Spring, South Salem and West Lane, the family name seems to fit very well.

This place was owned many years ago by John Coffey and was known at that time as "The Coffey House of the Three Roads." Later, and for half a century, it was the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Coller. Mr. Coller was a prominent dealer in antiques and was noted for restoring 18th Century furniture.

Mrs. Coller was a retired school teacher, and was an active member of several local organizations, including the Keeler Tavern Preservation Society. I recall that when we reenacted the Battle of Ridgefield on July 4, 1966, Mrs. Coller acted the part of a nurse. The film of that event shows her administering first aid to a supposedly wounded British soldier. She was a lady of great compassion and did not notice the soldier's red coat.

A more recent owner of this place was Peter Henning. Peter is a professional photographer, as well as a director of TV documentaries. One of his documentaries was made at the Elms Inn a couple of years ago with Christopher Plummer and myself. I have been waiting to see it on TV, but apparently it has not attracted any sponsors up to now.

Next we come to the famous "Little Red Schoolhouse." This precious little bit of Ridgefield's wonderful history has somehow escaped the fate of our other one-room school houses that have been moved, made into residences, or demolished.

To a great extent we owe its excellent preservation to the diligence of the garden clubs. The school is open each year to the public, and every local student should make a visit so they can properly appreciate the modern schools that they are privileged to attend today.

They will find no computers, or indoor plumbing, or even electricity. They would, however, find slates on which to write and do their calculations. There is also a large fireplace that students would have to take turns in tending during the cold winter months.

Yet, from these rather primitive surroundings emerged some students who went on to become quite famous people. To just name a few, there was the great Peter Parley, and the two Lounsbury brothers that were later to become governors of Connecticut [they attended Farmingville and Florida schoolhouses].

I have a copy of a most interesting brochure that was put out in 1914 for the laying of the cornerstone of the “big” school on East Ridge, now occupied by Boehringer Ingelheim [Chef’s Warehouse in 2024]. It is hard to believe, but at that time, there were no less than 14 schoolhouses in Ridgefield, and they accommodated almost 500 students. The students are all listed in the brochure and the name Venus is liberally sprinkled among them.

The Little Red Schoolhouse had 43 students, so they must have attended in shifts. Of those students of 74 years ago at this little school, we know that Lyman Anderson, Aldo Bacchiochi, Milton Haight, Marie Kilcoyne, Isabelle Mullen, Jack O’Keeffe, Helen Tobin and Catherine Tobin are still with us. There may be more but these we know personally.