‘Dick’s Dispatch’

Columns 301 through 325

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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#301: TOWN’S FIRST CATHOLICS; THE FOUNDER OF LIFE

Before we pass by the “Little Red Schoolhouse” on West Lane, I should mention that one of the several local blacksmith shops was located on the same plot of ground. It sat [in the 19th Century] on the eastern end of the triangle that separates the three highways.

For many years, the blacksmith that ran this shop was James Seymour. The name Seymour must appear many times in any history of Ridgefield, and it goes right back to 1708 and the original settlers. It is sad that the name has just about disappeared from our town in recent years, though there are still a number of native Ridgefielders whose ancestors bore that proud name.

In bygone days, the blacksmith was considered a very important man in any town. People depended on them, not only to keep their horses well shod, but to furnish them with various tools as well as hardware products for their homes. As every student should know, “The Village Smithy” was immortalized in the poem of that name by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

It seems fitting that James Seymour’s blacksmith shop stood near the Red Schoolhouse, for children could learn much from this ingenious mechanic. I would bet that a number of the students, especially the boys, found some reason to visit the shop and watch the blacksmith at work.

The two buildings were close enough so that the children could easily hear the ringing sound of Mr. Seymour’s anvil, as he pounded a piece of metal into shape. It was a pleasant sound and almost as though he was playing a tune.

James Seymour did not have to walk very far to reach his place of business. He owned and lived in the house almost directly across the street at 191 West Lane. This place is now the home of the Frederic Johnson family. It was known for many years as the Brophy house. [To make way for a new and much larger house about 15 years ago, this 18th Century house was dismantled and is stored in a container until someone figures out what to do with it.]

It is generally agreed that the James Brophy family was the first Catholic family to settle in Ridgefield. It was just 140 years ago this coming Thanksgiving Day that the James Brophy family arrived here from Ireland.

The Brophys lived in a house on Branchville Road, just across from where East Ridge connects with that highway. Father Thomas Ryan visited the Brophy home and said Mass there.

It is believed that the very first Mass was said in the Ridgcbury area, by one of the chaplains that accompanied Count de Rochambeau and his French Army. As everyone knows,

Rochambeau was marching his troops from Newport, Rhode Island, to the Hudson, and on July 1, 1781, they passed through the northern part of our town. It so happened that July 1 was Rochambeau's 56th birthday, and since he was leading 4,800 troops, it was no doubt a very festive occasion.

At any rate, it was one year after the James Brophy family arrived in Ridgefield that his brother Andrew and his family settled here on Pin Pack Road. The importance of this was that Andrew had a son named John, who was to become one of Ridgefield's most prominent citizens.

John Brophy was eight years old when his family came here, and he was quickly enrolled as a student at old Titicus School (now the Legion [Hall]). The Gilbert tannery was located only a few yards down the road, and it was not long before young John had a part-time job, pulling hides from the huge vats, in which they were being cured.

Though he worked long hours, John did not neglect his studies and it was late at night before he was able to complete his homework.

John Brophy was truly a very remarkable man and any history of Ridgefield must include the many ways in which he served his adopted community, and the State of Connecticut.

Mr. Brophy was a charter member of Marquette Council Knights of Columbus, and a charter member of the Ridgefield Grange. He was one of the original directors of The First National Bank of Ridgefield. He served two terms as our representative to the General Assembly at Hartford. For 12 years, John Brophy served as a commissioner of Fairfield County, and for 16 years, he was Inspector of Customs at the port of New York.

In 1893, John Brophy was elected Ridgefield's first selectman, an office in which he served with distinction for eight terms.

When the old town hall was destroyed by the disastrous fire of 1895, Mr. Brophy was quick to organize and direct the building of our present town hall. Many of his ideas were incorporated in this fine old structure.

While John Brophy was still a boy, his family moved from Pin Pack Road to 191 West Lane, thus it became known for so many years as the Brophy House. Of course, John then was transferred to the Little Red Schoolhouse and went on to become one of its most illustrious graduates.

Just across West Lane, at number 192, is an attractive building that was once a stable and then a garage for the John Ames Mitchell family. As was the custom on the large estates, the second floor of this building contained living quarters for the employees. This is now the home of Greta Welti, but at the time of which I am writing, Thomas Reiley lived there.

Tom was the gardener for the Mitchells, and the gardens that he tended were among the best in a town noted for its botanical splendor. He was a happy little fellow, with a ready smile.

Tom was once struck by a car as he walked along West Lane. Though he survived the accident, he walked with a limp until he passed on in 1931

The large and beautiful mansion at 194 West Lane is now the home of the Francoise Harkavy family. In the early part of this century, it was a part of the James Ames Mitchell estate.

Mr. Mitchell started, and was editor and publisher of *Life* magazine. He was an accomplished cartoonist and illustrator, and was also noted as a very fine architect. He headed the local, annual horse show and when that event showed a profit, Mr. Mitchell and his committee donated it toward the building of the famous horse watering trough that was described in a recent column. John Mitchell furnished the balance of the money needed and then drew the plans for what has become one of Ridgefield's historic treasures.

Oh yes, like most of the estates at the time, this one had a name — "Windover."

#302: FLEET OF FOOT, RICH OF VOICE

In telling about the John Ames Mitchell estate, I should mention that this great place was also the site of some very fine barn dances.

After the haymows [the part of the barn where hay was stored], had been cleared of hay [in late spring or early summer], it was common practice on many of the private estates for those who were employed there to invite their neighbors and friends for an evening of fun and dancing. It was an annual social event that they all looked forward to with pleasure.

The pretty building at 192 West Lane was where such things were held on the Mitchell estate. After acquaintances were renewed and pleasantries were passed, the dancing would start.

James O'Keeffe, who was superintendent on the nearby Swords estate, was an expert violinist , as was his son, Richard, who also played the mandolin and banjo. They would furnish the music for a lively evening of both square and round dancing, interspersed with some Virginia reels and Irish folk dancing.

No evening would be complete without a special performance by John McCarthy. John had been a coachman for the Mitchell family and was one of those who had successfully made the transition from a horseman to become the chauffeur for the Mitchells.

He had come here from County Kerry, and like most Kerrymen, John was an excellent dancer. At some time during the festivities, the other dancers would form a circle on the dance floor, and they would then urge John to prove that he was still nimble, despite an advanced age. John was not one to ever disappoint the crowd of merrymakers.

Somewhere in his repertoire, John was sure to include his favorite dance, “The Stack of Barley.” As he lightly flitted across the floor of the haymow, the music of the fiddlers was almost lost in the thunderous applause from the on-lookers.

John McCarthy was a pleasant man, with a ready smile and it was a real pleasure to know him.

The social functions of 50 or 60 years ago were probably very quaint when compared with those of today. However, there are those of us who feel that we could do with a little more of that quaintness. After being exposed to the ear-shattering noise that now passes for music, especially that which the rock groups are feeding the public via all sorts of electronic equipment, a return to a softer style would seem most welcome.

It might even change our lifestyle for the better. Let's bring back the real musicians for a respite from all this.

I did mention the beautiful formal gardens that extended out to the west of the Mitchell mansion and should also relate that there were many arbors, trellises and archways among the flower beds. They created a kind of Old World atmosphere.

The mansion itself was set at an angle that allowed for a fine view to the west. One can easily imagine how pleasant it must be to sit in that large drawing room and watch the sun slowly sink behind the distant mountains.

There are a number of new houses along this part of West Lane. At least they had not been built before, or during the period that I am covering.

Then there is Sycamore Lane that was developed in recent years by Morgan Helie. This property was all once a part of the Mitchell estate, and a portion was where the gardens that we just mentioned were located. So the people living here must have very rich soil.

Across the street, and just to the west of the home of Norman and Elsie Craig (who we told about in Dispatch #94) is number 209 West Lane. This imposing mansion is now the home

of Anthony and Jill Clapes. Jill is active in several local organizations and serves with me on the Historic District Commission.

It was in 1901 that Lillian Loomis Dempsey bought this property from John Brophy, and built this fine 22-room mansion that in 1924 became the home of the great Geraldine Farrar.

If you do not know of the fabulous "Gerry," then you would be unaware that she was the very first American Superstar of the Metropolitan Opera Company. The lively and very interesting history of this remarkable lady has been told many times, but just in case you are not familiar with it, I will review it once more.

Geraldine Farrar was born on Feb. 28, 1882, in Melrose, Mass., an attractive suburb of Boston. She was the only child of Sidney and Henrietta Farrar. Her parents both had very good voices and were active in the local musical affairs of Melrose.

No one was particularly surprised when little Geraldine started to sing almost before she could walk. Obviously she inherited the vocal talents of her parents, especially from her father, for Sid had a very powerful voice. I remember hearing him talk, in what he felt was a very moderate tone, while I thought he was shouting.

Sidney Farrar had a small business in Boston, which he conducted during the winter months. However, his summers were devoted to baseball, a sport that he loved very much. He was not just a journeyman ball player and his talents were such that he made it all the way to the Big Leagues.

Gerry was still a little girl when Sid signed a contract to play first base for the Philadelphia Phillies in the National League. At any rate, between his business and his baseball playing, Sidney Farrar had very little time to spend with his daughter.

So the early training of Geraldine was left in the very capable hands of her pretty mother. Henrietta was only 18 when her daughter was born, and Gerry said one time that they were almost like sisters.

Geraldine became somewhat of a local celebrity while still a child, and participated in impromptu performances at local churches and community centers, with her mother accompanying her on the piano.

Much as she loved to display her own talents, Gerry also enjoyed watching her father play baseball, and attended as many games as possible.

I asked her one time if it was true that she went though the ballpark stands looking for tin foil to help pay for her singing lessons.

She gave a hearty laugh and asked, "Where did you hear that story?"

However, she did not deny it.

#303: GERRY, THE GERMAN PRINCE & SINGING WITH CARUSO

The word "prodigy" was attached to Geraldine Farrar when she was still a little girl. However, her mother, Henrietta, felt strongly that Gerry should be brought along slowly, so to protect her daughter, she downplayed such adulation at every turn.

As part of her early training, Gerry accompanied her mother to the Boston Opera House. As it turned out, the very first opera they saw was *Carmen*, with Emma Calve in the leading role. Gerry was fascinated by all the pageantry and of course, Carmen was one of the roles in which she herself would become world-famous. The impression of that first opera was great and Gerry always felt Calve was the best Carmen.

The time came when Henrietta could teach her daughter no more, and she was sent off to teachers in Boston and New York. Geraldine was an apt student and worked hard at her lessons,

while attending the opera whenever possible. Along the way, Gerry's singing was heard by several artists, and they were of the opinion that she should study in Europe.

It was one year before the turn of the century that the Farrars took off for Paris. Gerry had learned both the French and Italian language and sang in each language with ease. Her voice, however, was not suited to the French method of teaching, so they decided to move on to Berlin, and after one season in Paris, they did just that.

The move to Berlin meant a crash course in German for Gerry. It was not easy, but in a short time she was able to sing in passable German. An audition was arranged, to which Graf von Hoechberg, intendant of the Royal Berlin, was invited.

Her German was not all that good, and it was the first time that she sang with an orchestra directed by the noted Karl Muck, but Gerry was an instant hit. Later that same evening, Miss Farrar signed a contract making her a member of the Royal Berlin Opera. Until her German was perfected, she sang her leading roles in either French or Italian.

At the tender age of 19, Geraldine Farrar, who would go on to become the first American superstar with the Metropolitan, made her debut in the role of Marguerite in *Faust* with the Royal Berlin Opera Company. To say that she was a success, is putting it mildly.

Up to this time, opera stars were not necessarily beautiful. Their voice was the most important ingredient. Here was a star that combined a superlative soprano voice, with breath-taking beauty, as well as a real acting ability and a very warm personality.

The Berliners took Gerry to their hearts, receiving her with tumultuous applause. She also became a great favorite with the royal family. In fact, in those early days of her career, much was made of the friendship between Miss Farrar and the crown prince. To be sure, this young man, who was also only 19 at the time, fell head over heels in love with the beautiful Gerry, and it touched off a major international press scandal.

However, Miss Farrar was staunchly defended by the American press in Berlin, and that young lady had no inclination for dalliance — her career was most important to her. However, she did remain friendly with the prince and the royal family, who had treated her with much kindness. It was well that she did; as a member of the Berlin Opera, she would need that friendship.

By 1906, Geraldine Farrar's fame had spread across two continents and she was invited by Heinrich Conrad to join New York's Metropolitan Opera Company. However, there was the problem of her contract with the Berlin, and that organization was not about to dispense with their star performer. The intendant flatly refused to present her request for a leave of absence to the Kaiser.

The intendant underestimated the determination of this young lady, who proceeded to go right over his head, and spoke to the Kaiser herself. His Majesty was understanding and granted her request, on the condition that she return each spring — for a season in Berlin. This she did each year until the outbreak of World War I in 1914.

Miss Farrar arrived in New York in November 1906, and found the gentlemen of the press more interested in her association with the prince. So, you can see that reporters have not changed that much over the years.

At any rate, Gerry received a hearty welcome from old friends and well wishers, and one week later made her Metropolitan debut in Gounod's *Romeo et Juliette*. From then on it was just a series of triumphs for this great American beauty.

The following years she became America's first Madame Butterfly in a production supervised by the composer Giacomo Puccini. The great Arturo Toscanini conducted the

orchestra, and was later said to be romantically linked with Gerry. Others who appeared in key roles in this production were Louise Homer, Antonio Scotti, and the incomparable Enrico Caruso. This was an all-star cast, if there ever was one.

Gerry once said that the very first time she appeared with Caruso, she was so enthralled by his impeccable voice, she almost missed her entrance cue.

The team of Farrar and Caruso is felt by many to have been the very finest that the world of opera has ever had to offer. Though these stars had a mutual admiration for each other, their ideas as to the technique to be employed were sometimes quite different.

Many prima donnas can be difficult to deal with. They operate from a pedestal, from which their every whim must be catered to. It was in such an atmosphere that this great team found themselves, as they strove for perfection.

There was the time in the middle of a performance when Gerry surprised the audience — as well as Caruso — by giving him a sharp slap in the face. Being a real gentleman, Enrico went on with the show and hid his embarrassment, but the newspapers had a field day with the incident.

#304: GERRY GOES TO HOLLYWOOD

There is still much more to tell about the interesting life of Geraldine Farrar, so I will continue before resuming our trip down West Lane.

The great lady's triumphs in opera seemed endless, but in the early part of this century movies were making inroads into the world of entertainment. Opera stars, as well as stars of the stage, were being lured to Hollywood by the big money and the glamor that it had to offer.

Several efforts were made to get the beautiful Gerry to perform before the camera. So it was not surprising when she succumbed to the allurement of "TinselTown," and headed west to California.

Remember, this was at a time when there were only silent movies, so her magnificent voice was not really the main factor in the efforts by movie moguls to get Gerry on film. Rather, it was her fame, her natural beauty and her acting ability that made her a movie star.

Geraldine Farrar made eight films and her debut in movie land was in a production of Carmen, a role that she had perfected on the stage. It should be noted that despite their greatness as operatic luminaries, Enrico Caruso and Mary Garden were complete failures before the cameras, Gerry gave great credit to the famous Cecil B. DeMille for her success on the silver screen, as it was he who directed most of her films.

However, the astounding thing was that she soon proceeded to outshine such leading men as Wallace Reid and Milton Sills. For those who are too young to remember those handsome gentlemen, I can only say that they were the Clark Gable, or the Paul Newman of that time.

Of her eight films, Gerry's favorite was as Joan of Arc, in the picture, "Joan the Woman." Would it not have been wonderful if that incomparable soprano voice, and that breathtaking beauty could have been captured and preserved in color, on the sound films of today?

Another of Miss Farrar's attributes was her boundless energy, which she retained even in her later years. It enabled her to fulfill her commitments to Hollywood and the New York Metropolitan Opera. Crisscrossing the nation as Gerry did must have been an arduous task in the days before the jet plane.

It was at this time that Gerry met and fell in love with another famous movie star, Lou Tellegen. With a superb physique and a Barrymore-like profile, Tellegen had been leading man to the great Sarah Bernhardt.

Their marriage was done in typical Hollywood style, and made headlines across the country. The newlyweds acted together in several pictures, but the word incompatibility began to creep into stories about them. The marriage ended in a much publicized divorce in 1923, when divorces were not as commonplace as they are today.

The previous year, in April of 1922, Gerry retired from the Metropolitan. It was a matinee performance of Leoncavallo's all but forgotten "ZaZa." She was 40 at the time, and though she said that she was leaving opera because she wanted to, she was well aware that it was time to go. She had overused that great voice, and there were the unmistakable signs of age and wear.

That last performance at the Met must have been something to witness. It was said to be one of the most emotionally charged events of the century. Scalpers had a field day and were charging $200 for a pair of tickets. They were immediately sold out and thousands were turned away. One can only imagine what those tickets would have brought today. Remember, in 1922, there was no inflation compared to today.

When the opera was over, Miss Farrar was mobbed by thousands of admirers who escorted her open car up Broadway. It must have been a triumphal procession. Her adoring audience included a multitude of "Gerryflappers," who did not want to let her go.

An old doorman at the opera house said, "There has never been anything like this here before."

The same year that Gerry retired, her father Sidney bought his "Farrar's Forty Acres" [some say "Thirty Acres"] estate on North Salem Road in Ridgefield. When Gerry came to visit her father, she was smitten by what she saw, and like so many others had done before and since, she fell in love with Ridgefield.

Just one year later, Miss Farrar moved to "Fairhaven," her fine estate at 209 West Lane. The name of this great place is engraved in the large stone abutment that stands at its entrance.

She used to refer to her home as "early McKinley," and it was during his time that it was built. Gerry brought with her Miss Sylvia Blein, who was her longtime companion, and Margaret Gallatly, her longtime maid. Sylvia had come here from France and Margaret was a native of Aberdeen.

Also on the staff at Fairhaven was Joseph Conti, who as superintendent would look after the estate for many years. Joe and his wife Iride lived in the nice garage apartment with their two daughters, Mary and Dora. Of course, you already know that Dora [Cassavechia] is our present town clerk, and Mary is Mrs. Mario Marcheggiani.

Gerry could drive an auto very well but in Ridgefield at that time you were just not with it if you did not have a chauffeur, so Dan O'Shea was pressed into service. Miss Farrar quickly became involved in our town's social life and her chauffeur was kept very busy. After Dan came Fritz Rux and I think her last chauffeur was Hugh Clark.

Oh yes, the little car shown in the picture with her, that appeared in *The Press* a couple of weeks ago, was a Crosley. The Crosley was popular during World War II, as it was a good gas saver and Gerry was doing her part to conserve fuel.

Miss Farrar was an avid reader and through the years compiled a great library that must have been worth a fortune. She was also very fond of animals and had two little dachshunds and

I think their names were Luca and Booby. At one time she had a cocker spaniel that she called Bijou. Dora says that they are buried on the grounds of Fairhaven.

Geraldine Farrar did not become a recluse after retiring from the Met. For several years she traveled back and forth across the country in her Pullman car, performing concerts along the way. Then, in the fall of 1931, at the conclusion of a Carnegie Hall concert, she surprised her audience with a few simply spoken words of farewell. She never sang in public again, despite the urging of her legions of fans.

You should know that she brought the great Toscanini and his symphony orchestra to perform a benefit concert in the Ridgefield Playhouse, where the Village Bank is now. There were those who felt sure that she would favor the audience with a song on this momentous occasion, but they were disappointed.

During World War II Gerry joined the American Women's Voluntary Services and as a member of the Red Cross, she served as chairman of Voluntary Services for Civil Defense. She was active in scrap drives, and the Red Cross Blood Bank and just seemed to be involved in every worthwhile cause.

It was my privilege to know this great lady and among my most prized possessions are some letters, written in her large scrawling hand, one of which contained a group picture in which we both appear.

In 1954, Miss Farrar and Miss Sylvia moved from Fairhaven to a smaller home on New Street. It was here that she died March 12, 1967. She was 85 years of age.

It was said that at one time, when a group had gathered for tea, someone brought up the subject of life after death, and Gerry was heard to say, "I shall not be afraid. I shall be very curious."

#305: OLD PRESCHOOL, FDR'S PEN PAL, CLIMBING FOR SWIGS

Just to the west of Fairhaven, there was a small house that I think had been converted from a farm outbuilding to a dwelling. At any rate, the building went through several changes, over the past half century. It is now 223 West Lane and is the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Harry J. Twine.

At one time this building served as a private school as well as a dwelling. It was about the time that World War II was raging in Europe, but before that conflict erupted in Southeast Asia. The school was much like a pre-school, or kindergarten, as the pupils were all little ones.

The school started with just a half dozen pupils at the home of Dan and Louise McKeon in Ridgebury. Apparently the idea must have struck a very responsive chord, for the little school just grew like Topsy, and at one time it had more than 40 pupils.

As student enrollment increased, it naturally followed that larger classroom facilities were needed. Then there came a time when it was necessary to move the school to Market Street. There it was located in a building that had been the home of Sam Perry, at the rear of the present offices of the District Nursing Association.

Enrollment continued to increase and the school moved to 223 West Lane. Children from the families of the McKcons, Grants and the Donnellys were among the students attending this school.

Mrs. Welch, a very accomplished teacher, was engaged to instruct the children. She is credited with giving her pupils a fine start in the academic world. However, as the war intensified, and our country became actively involved, the little school became another of its victims.

There was a very old house, directly across the street, about where the home of the Peter Lotus family is now. Mr. and Mrs. William Brown and their sizable family lived here in the 30's. The house remained empty for several years after the Brown family moved to Catoonah Street, to the house that in later years was to become the Rusty Nail restaurant.

Bill Brown was a prolific writer of letters, and his numerous missives were not limited to letters to the editor, though they were many. Bill wrote to some quite famous people, and he must have done a good job of it, for his letters always seemed to elicit an answer.

He was never at a loss for words, or solutions to problems that ranged from those of local interest to foreign affairs. One of Bill Brown's favorite pen pals was none other than President Franklin D. Roosevelt. F.D.R. never failed to answer, and Bill would proudly display any letter that came from the White House.

In the meantime, the old house on West Lane continued to deteriorate. It was eventually torn down and replaced by the relatively new house that now stands there.

I believe that it was the late Harold O. Davis who built some of the newer houses on West Lane. However, during the period we are covering, there were no more homes until we get to 256 West Lane. In the early part of this century, this was the home of Mr. and Mrs. John Mullen Sr., and their children John Jr., Margaret, Arthur, Isabel and Edward. Isabel is the only remaining member of this nice family, and presently lives at Ballard Green. I recall that she was a member of the cast of that great 1926 Minstrel Show in the old Town Hall.

There are still some descendants of John Sr., in Ridgefield. A grandson James E. Mullen, and his wife, the former Lynn Casagrande, live with their three children at 119 West Lane. They were not mentioned as we came along that section of West Lane, as their home is of quite recent vintage.

A grand-daughter, Patricia, and her husband Francis Simoneau, raised their four children at 9 Lafayette Avenue.

John Mullen Sr. was a painter by trade, and like in so many old Ridgefield families, his three sons all followed in his footsteps. John Jr. later became the representative of the painters union, and later still, became the business agent for all of the local labor unions.

John was also quite a storyteller and once told me about the two Behnke brothers, Bill and Bronco, who lived further down West Lane and just over the state line. The brothers were little fellows and were experts at tree climbing. John said that they were just like a couple of squirrels.

They were both very fond of hard cider. Cider was very popular during the era of Prohibition, and before the apple trees were subjected to the extensive spraying programs. So, the Mullens had a barrel of cider, but they would not give any to the Behnkes until the brothers gave an exhibition of their climbing prowess.

There was a large maple tree in front of the Mullen house, and Bill and Bronco had to climb to the top of the tree. While they were thus engaged, John would put a jug of cider at the foot of the tree. The brothers would then descend to a lower branch, from which as part of the ritual, they would hang by their legs, reach down and scoop up the jug. They were then free to enjoy the very potent apple juice.

Across the street, on the south side of West Lane, there were no buildings back in the 30's, from the aforementioned school to what is now 269 West Lane. It was a long and rather narrow field that served as a pasture for a wonderful bob-tailed horse named Davey. In case you did not know, Davey was the retired saddle horse of Henry C. Swords.

Not only were there no buildings in this field, it was also long before Memory Lane was built across it. Davey had the whole place to himself. My favorite pastime, when I was a little kid, was to sit on the stone wall fence and watch Davey as he munched on the lush green grass. Davey, though very old, was a beautiful bay and he seemed to thoroughly enjoy his retirement.

#306: WHEN HORSES WERE REALLY SPECIAL

Before Henry C. Swords passed on, he made sure that his favorite saddle horse, Davey, would be well taken care of. During the winter months, Davey was housed in a very comfortable stable, with a large box stall. Then there was the tender loving care provided by the horseman, John Mugavin. John was very good at his trade.

ln the warm weather, Davey had one entire pasture lot reserved for him. He did not have to share it with the other horses, and was allowed to cavort to his heart's delight in the long field where Memory Lane is now. His mornings were spent in munching the lush grass, in what he came to learn was his private domain. During the afternoon, Davey could be seen dozing in the shade in the eastern end of the field.

However, Davey did have one problem during the fly season. His little bobbed tail was not long enough to combat the pesky insects.

As a little kid, I was naive enough to believe that Davey had been short-changed by Mother Nature. It would be an understatement to say that I was disillusioned when later on it was explained to me that his tail had actually been docked.

To find that Davey, in the name of prevailing fashions of the day, had been deprived of his only means of fending off his tormentors was sad indeed. I can still see him swishing that little stubby tail, back and forth, in a fruitless attempt to protect himself from the annoying flies.

On the western end of this field we come to the great barn where Davey and his stable mates were safe from the flies and other forms of annoyance. This fine building, at 269 West Lane, is now the home of Martin and Frances Stuttman. It is my considered opinion that this is one of the very best structures in this area.

It was built by George G. Haven, just at the turn of this century. This was a time when wealthy people were building Ridgefield's large estates, and they seemed to try to outdo each other in the quality of buildings.

Mr. Haven, who was a great lover of horses, felt that they were entitled to enjoy a building that would be as fine as any mansion, so cost was no object in the construction of his horse bam.

Jack O'Keefe grew up on this great place and he tells of how at one time there were 13 horses on the estate. Some were for driving and some for riding, and since there was also a farm. there was also a team of draft horses, although they were kept in another barn.

Among Mr. Haven's horses were four very beautiful blacks. and they drew a coach, driven in what was called a four-in-hand by the coachman, John Connors. John was known as Ridgefield's premier horseman and it was said that he could turn that coach and four around on a dime.

John Connors always carried a very long whip that could reach the lead team, but it was only carried for show. However, he knew how to use it, and my father once told me that John could flick a fly off any one of the horses with that whip, without ever touching the horse. People along Main Street used to stop and stare in admiration as this great team and coach went passing by.

As l have said before, those who owned real good horses liked to show them off, and many were the races that were held right here on Main Street Some of those who raced on a Sunday afternoon were Dr. Van Saun, Edward P. Dutton, William R. Keeler and, of course, George G. Haven, who was generally the winner. So you can see that Main Street has been a raceway for many years — the only difference being that automobiles have replaced the horses as competitors.

l should tell of how, when John Morganti came to this country so many years ago, his first job was helping to care for Mr. Haven's horses. John then went into the army in World War I, and on his return worked as a foreman for the Charles Sturges Construction Company. They built three dams in the Bennett's Farm area. John must have liked the work, for he soon formed his own construction company that today is known far and wide as Morganti, Inc.

So back to the fine building at 269 West Lane. As a young boy, I visited this place just as often as possible. It was owned at that time by the Henry C. Swords family. The horse-drawn carriages had been replaced by the automobile, so the coach horses had disappeared.

However, the Swords family still retained some of the saddle horses and they were beauties. I guess that Mr. Swords wanted his horses to be considered as members of the family, for they were not assigned lengthy names such as race horses have. Besides Davey, there was Betty, Willis, Tom and Harry, but no Dick.

Upstairs in that fine horse barn, there were two very nice apartments that were separated by a large hay mow. One apartment was for John McGrath, who had successfully made the transition from coachman to chauffeur, and the other was for the horseman, John Mugavin.

The hay mow, like so many others on the private estates, was the scene of many a barn dance. The music was provided by fiddler James O'Keeffe and his son, Richard. After a few years of having the hay pushed around on it, the floor of a hay mow took on a shine that made it ideal for dancing. It was the custom for owners of these estates to attend these dances, and participate in the lively festivities.

However, it was the first floor of this building that thoroughly fascinated me, for of course that was where the horses were kept. There were both box stalls and straight stalls, and they were made to give the horses every comfort.

The first thing you would see as you stepped through the very large entrance door and onto the brick floor, was a large glassed in cabinet that served as a trophy case. This was where the many awards that the horses had won were put on display.

There was also a large tack room from which wafted the very pleasant aroma of the soft and very well-kept leather. All in all, you could easily get the feeling that here was a rather special place where luxury was combined with security and everything was right in the world.

#307: THE HANDSOME HAVEN HOME

The very neatest household could not have been any more tidy than George Haven's horse barn at 269 West Lane. The sleek and happy horses reflected the excellent care that they received.

Nothing was spared in keeping that stable and the horses in first-class condition. Even the straw that was used for bedding had to be bright and just the right color. Outside of each box stall and at the end of each straight stall, there hung a large iron ring, to which the horses were tied while receiving their daily grooming.

At the close of each day, the horseman would grasp a handful of the shiny yellow straw and draw it through each ring. Then with a deft twist, John would tie a knot in the straw and allow it to hang. It was strictly ornamental, but it did add to the final window dressing.

Oh yes, there was also a dog and a cat, as no first-class stable would be without them. Though it was natural for them to have a certain amount of animosity, they learned to get along and had a mutual respect for one another. However, their places to spend the night were separated, with the dog at one end of the stable and the cat at the other.

When the horses were bedded down for the night, this charming stable took on an air of tranquility. A peaceful quietness descended with each horse in its stall and the dog and cat curled up in their beds. It was a scene that was worthy of a lithograph by the famous Nathaniel Currier and his partner, James Merritt Ives.

In the late 40's and early 50's, Ridgefield's great private estates were in the process of being disassembled. It was a period during which these fine places could be purchased for the proverbial "song." People just did not seem to want the upkeep of the great mansions, and the many acres that went with them.

We seem to have come full cycle as the houses being built today compare in size with some of yesterday's mansions and just keep getting bigger all the time. So the period about which I have been writing might properly be called Ridgefield's "Golden Era," and like all good things, it just seemed to be coming to an end.

When the former Haven estate on West Lane was in the process of being developed, the horse stable was the first to become a part of the transition. Some alterations were made to this fine building and it became the residence of the Howard Willets family. Then, after Morgan Helie started to develop the surrounding property, he also took over the former horse stable.

In the late 50's, the converted barn became the home of Ward and Virginia Pitkin. This proved to be fortunate, as Virginia Pitkin was an accomplished interior decorator as well as a landscape engineer. To her everlasting credit, Mrs. Pitkin put her considerable talents to work, with the result that much of the charm of the place was preserved. She did her level best to retain the splendid atmosphere of bygone days.

The Pitkins were customers of Dic-Rie Dairy, and this gave me the opportunity to view the alterations as they progressed. It was with great satisfaction that I noted the interior of the box stalls were transformed into very nice bedrooms, but the exterior remained the same, giving the impression that the place was still a horse stable.

Fortunately, the Stuttermans, present owners of the place, also have a real sense of preservation. It is comforting to know that one of our very favorite buildings is in good hands.

Before moving on to the Haven mansion, it should be noted that in the late 40's, the property across West Lane from the entrance to the place just described was purchased by Mrs. Olive Eddy. It had been a part of the James Mullen family's holding. Mrs. Eddy had the very nice house built that now carries the number 272 West Lane. It was one of the first "newer" homes built in this area and is now the home of the Thomas J. Craddock family.

The former Haven mansion sits on the corner of West Lane and Country Club Road. For many years, this place carried a West Lane address. However, when the Planning and Zoning Commission renumbered the entire town some 15 years ago, the address was changed to 27. Country Club Road. The factor used in determining a person's address was changed to the street which connects with that person's driveway.

At any rate, this fine mansion is now the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph J. Delli-Bovi. Ralph, as no doubt you already know, is a very noted artist, and proved that he had an eye for beauty when he bought this great place.

What we now call Country Club Road was once a private driveway, serving both the Haven family and the next door Cary family. The entrances to both the previously described horse stable and the mansion are marked by great stone pillars, built so many years ago by James Kennedy.

Country Club Road, so named because its south end borders Silver Spring Country Club, came into being when the property south of the mansion was being developed some 30 years ago. George G. Haven bought this property at about the turn of the century, and continued to buy surrounding property until he had a sizable estate.

Mr. Haven was a Wall Street broker with the very prestigious firm of Strong and Sturges. Though not of a flamboyant nature, it was said that he could lose a million dollars one day and then make it back — and more — the next, without drawing a long breath.

Mr. Haven was a kindly man and very well liked by all who knew him. Whenever you spoke with one of his employees, they always referred to him in glowing terms, which is the true test of a good employer. He liked people, but really loved horses.

When Mr. Haven set about enlarging his mansion, he was no doubt aided and abetted by William Creagh, who was his superintendent at that time.

#308: REMINISCENCES ABOUT 'HOMEWOOD'

[*Note: Dick had missed a week due to an emergency hospital stay.*]

My favorite insurance company [Prudential] runs an ad that encourages people to buy a piece of the "Rock" Somehow, I acquired a stone and I guess that can be considered a piece of a rock. You can be sure that I did not order it, do not want it, and in fact I cannot wait to get rid of it.

This particular stone proved to be quite painful, as it just happens to be of the kidney variety. Sometimes you may feel that you have an ailment that is rather unusual, and then you find that many others suffer from the same malady.

One thing that all of these people seem to agree on is that a kidney stone is just about the most painful thing a person can have.

At first I thought that I might be one of a kind, but now I find that I am actually one in a thousand. I am told that one in every thousand will develop a kidney stone at some time or another.

One of these days — and soon I hope — I will be heading for the Lahey Clinic in Boston, where they will administer a treatment that is called Extracorporeal Shock Wave Lithotripter. They say that procedure will take about as long as it does to pronounce its name. That is very comforting and I think I will continue to practice saying it — rapidly.

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Some years ago, in Dispatch #36, I wrote about the old Ridgefield Railroad Station. In so doing, I told the story of a boy who came to the station one day, driving a donkey. The boy had come to pick up his grandmother who was coming for a visit. His name was Frank J. Scallon.

Frank passed on last year at the age of 88. Someone sent a copy of that Dispatch to Frank and apparently he enjoyed reading it.

He was born just over the state line in North Salem, but spent his formative years in Ridgefield and attended the original Scotland school and Titicus School. Frank remembered me, though I was just a baby when he left Ridgefield. At any rate, he called me and asked me to write his life's history.

At first I declined, but after several phone calls, I went to meet him at his home in Norwalk. It was good that I did, for his story turned out to be so fascinating that I soon agreed to put it in writing.

During my numerous interviews with Mr. Scallon, it became increasingly obvious that this was no ordinary man. His entire life seems to have been devoted to service for his fellow man.

No doubt Frank Scallon's greatest achievement was his invention of the Midget Louver, a small, round metal gadget which is placed in the side of a building for the purpose of controlling condensation.

However, he is equally proud of the fact that he was able to form the Frank J. Scallon Urology Foundation, with Dr. Paul Maloney as its director. Little did I realize at the time that I would one day be a patient of this fine foundation. So it really is a small world.

Four years ago a triple by-pass did not prevent this writer from completing his column, but this little piece of rock brought everything to a complete standstill. Perhaps I should call it the Rolling Stone. so, while waiting for my turn at Lahey Clinic, I will attempt to continue our journey down West Lane.

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When we left off, I was telling about George G. Haven and the additions that were made to his mansion at 27 Country Club Road.

William Creagh was superintendent on the Haven estate in the early days of the century. Bill was a carpenter by trade and I am confident that he had a great deal of input as to the many alterations that were made to the great house.

He was a man with a great deal of knowledge, and he did not believe in wasting it. Those around Mr. Creagh were sure to be influenced by his very strong personality. He was a veteran of the Spanish American War, and during World War I, he served as a sergeant in the Home Guard. Because of his military background, many referred to him as General.

William and his fine wife, the former Mary Ann Brady, were blessed with six very nice children: Margaret, Catherine, William Jr., and Mary were born on the Haven estate. Agnes was born at Colonel Louis D. Conley's Outpost Farm, where her father was also superintendent. Alice (Mrs. Francis Brown) was born at the Creagh family homestead at 22 North Salem Road, where her sister Mary still lives.

Both Mary and Alice are retired Ridgefield school teachers. One of the nice things about this little story is the fact that after more than 70 years, Mary and Alice still correspond with descendants of George G. Haven. Genuine friend- ships such as this are not as numerous today. As they say, "times have changed."

The cottage where the Creagh family lived on the Haven estate was destroyed by fire about 75 years ago. The family lived temporarily where the West Lane Grocery Store is now, while a new cottage was built. This cottage sull stands near the mansion.

The Creagh family moved to Outpost Farm before World War I. William Creagh took the position of superintendent for Colonel Louis D. Conley when that great estate was being put together.

James O'Keeffe became the superintendent for Mr. Haven and remained in that position until the place, which was called "Homewood," ceased to be a private estate. This was another fine family that made its mark in the history of Ridgefield.

The children of James and Honora O'Keeffe were Richard, John, Eileen and Patrick. I have already told about Richard, in Dispatch #227, and how he and his brothers all worked for their father on the estate. I should mention that the children were born in good old County Kildare.

Eileen still lives, I believe, in neighboring New Canaan and John is my good neighbor at 12 Olmstead Lane. Jack, as we call him, is highly intelligent and is always a joy to talk to. He is an expert in the field of horticulture and aspiring gardeners could learn a lot from this fine man.

Jack keeps abreast of what is going on and can give his own very clear analysis of what is good and not good in today's world. Those who worked on the great private estates were kind of a special breed, and the O'Keeffe family was a shining example of that it takes to keep a showplace like Homewood looking its very best.

#309: THE MULTITALENTED PAT O'KEEFFE

Just the other day, I received a phone call from a lady who grew up on the beautiful estate that was known as "Homewood." The caller was Mrs. William White, and she is the former Aileen O'Keeffe.

Aileen is a retired school teacher, and friend of long standing. She is further proof of how *The Ridgefield Press* gets around, as she has been following our trip down West Lane from her home in Stamford. Aileen is also a good example of how former Ridgefielders never lose interest in their old hometown.

As expected, Aileen had many more kind words for the George G. Haven family, and the Henry C. Swords family. The Swords family followed the Haven family at Homewood, after the close of World War I. It seems pretty well agreed that these were two of the very finest of the Ridgefield families during our town's "Golden Ycars."

Aileen informed me that Country Club Road was always considered to be a public highway, although during the years we are covering, its main purpose was that of a driveway serving both Homewood and the next door "Wild Flower Farm" [Wildfarms]. This road, at one time, stretched from West Lane south to where Silver Spring Country Club is now and finally connected with Silver Spring Road.

Aileen remembers walking the length of this road, as a child. She told of how she picked wild berries along the way, and said that they were much sweeter than the cultivated varieties. Years before, there had been several little farms in this area and as she walked along, Aileen said that the foundations of the farm buildings were still quite visible. The wells that had served the farms were still open. They were filled in later on, to prevent some unwary person from falling into them.

Aileen also admonished me to remember that her family's name was spelled with both a double E, and a double F. There is a tendency to use only one F.

The three O'Keeffe boys did not have to travel far to find their life partners. Richard married Sarah Wims and Jack married Mary Ellen Snee. Both Mary Ellen and Sarah were also employed at Homewood. Patrick had only to go next door to Geraldine Farrar's "Fairhaven" where he found May O'Loughlin. May was best known as Bobbie, though I am not sure where the nickname came from.

Pat O'Keeffe has passed on, but he will be well-remembered for his active participation in the affairs of Ridgefield. He was a carpenter by trade, but like his brothers, Pat had a solid background in horticulture and estate work that he acquired at Homewood from his father. In fact, at one time he was superintendent right next door at "Dunrovin" when that estate was owned by William Matheus Sullivan.

As a botanist, Pat was able to produce some great floral displays at the flower shows.

Pat was a fine athlete and though he loved to play baseball and basketball he was better known as a fine amateur boxer. I recall one occasion when the old Ridgefield Athletic Club was active in the late 20's and early 30's, and the club sponsored a gymnastic show at the old Congregational Church House.

Francis W. Collins owned the Ridgefield Water Supply Company at the time, and he was a member of the New York Athletic Club. The director of athletics at NYAC was the famous Arthur Donovan. Arthur was a friend of Mr. Collins and was persuaded by him to come to the show. Donovan was a son of "Iron Mike" Donovan, who operated his own very well-known gymnasium in New York City. However, Arthur was probably best remembered as an excellent boxing referee. He was the third man in the ring in most of the great Joe Louis championship bouts.

The program started with various gymnastic events, but the great crowd had gathered to witness the boxing matches. So a ring was set up and Mr. Collins and Donovan put on a rather spirited sparring match. It was of short duration as Mr. Collins was quite elderly at the time.

Then an offer was extended to those in attendance to put on the gloves with Arthur. Donovan. Several took advantage of the opportunity to test the skills of this master boxer. One was the late Charles Weitzel, who had been an amateur boxer, and he gave a good account of himself.

Then came Pat O'Keeffe, whose many friends had been urging him to get into the ring. Pat and Donovan only went about three rounds, but when it was over Donovan was high in his praise of Pat and urged him to follow a career in boxing.

However, Pat's ambition did not run in that direction. It was at a time when many people were very uncertain as to what they would be doing next. During the Depression years, many people found themselves working at something that did not relate in any way to what they had been trained to do. Pat O'Keeffe was no exception.

So this fine athlete, carpenter and horticulturist, started a new automobile dealership and garage on Catoonah Street, across from the firehouse, in the huge building that had been Whitlock's and then Sperry's livery stable. That great old building has long since passed from the scene. It was the victim of a very heavy snowfall that the roof was unable to support.

Pat also had a leaning toward a political life and devoted many years in that arena. During that time he served in several positions, including membership on the Board of Selectmen, the Board of Education, the Board of Assessors, the Board of Tax Review and as a Justice of the Peace. Pat also used his knowledge of construction to serve as the clerk of the works on several local building projects, one of which I believe was the Ridgefield Boys' Club.

I guess it would be safe to say that Patrick O'Keeffe has paid his dues to his old hometown.

#310: MELBERT CARY, RENAISSANCE MAN

It was considered a great loss when, after World War I, the Haven family moved from Ridgefield. However, that loss was greatly minimized when their estate, Homewood, passed into the hands of Henry C. Swords and his family.

The Swords family was of the same fine caliber as the greatly admired Haven family. Mr. Swords was a New York banker, and apparently a very successful one. Mr. Swords was very fond of horses and his daughter, Elizabeth, was a real fine horse-woman, so you can be sure that the great stable remained intact, as did the rest of this very nice estate.

Like most of the large estates, Homewood also had its own farm. These farms were not just for show, they were expected to be productive.

Food that was produced was used by the owners and the help that lived on the estate, as well as the livestock on the farm. The home-grown food was valued highly by those who had formerly lived in a large city.

Some of those who assisted the O'Keeffes in maintaining Homewood were Curtis Leighton and Thomas Potter. Both Curtis and Tom later became foremen on our local road maintenance crew.

It seemed that most of the great private estates had at least one Dodge product, and Homewood was no exception. There was a Dodge truck on the place that must have been purchased in the 30's. I believe that Ralph Delli-Bovi, the present owner of Homewood, still has that fine old Dodge truck, and after a half century, it still runs well. As some like to say, "They don't build them like they used to."

Of course, this truck, like all the many Dodges in Ridgefield, came from George T. Tator's garage in South Salem. George was one of the very largest Dodge dealers on the eastern seaboard. He had an excellent reputation, and his sales in Ridgefield did much to add to his fame as a salesman.

George's son, Charles, still operates Tator's Garage in South Salem after some 75 years.

When Mr. and Mrs. Henry C. Swords, and their daughter, Elizabeth, came to Homewood, they took over a rather large estate that had been put together by George G. Haven. Then Mr. Swords purchased some more of the surrounding property, making the estate even larger.

After the passing of Mr. and Mrs. Swords, Homewood was taken over by their daughter. By this time, Elizabeth was married to Wheaton Grant. The Grants kept Homewood operating for several years and they were blessed with three very cute little daughters. Two of them were identical twins, who I believe now live in England.

In the late 40's and early 50's, there was a buyer's market as far as real estate was concerned, and many of the large estates were put up for sale. Like so many of their friends, the Grants felt that it was time to sell their beautiful home and move on.

Mr. Grant was a geologist by profession, and had a hankering to settle down in Virginia. Perhaps there were more stones to study in Virginia, but I doubt it. Sure it was great horse country, but certainly no better than what we have to offer right here in Ridgefield.

At any rate, the move to Virginia was made and the demise of Ridgefield's great estates began in earnest.

I am happy to report that Dorothy Grant, who had become Mrs. David Halmstad, had the good common sense to stay in Ridgefield. So, we still have a representative of that fine family with us. Dorothy operates "The Paperback Trader" located in the "Old Ice House" complex, on Danbury Road.

Right next door to Homewood was another large estate that was called “Wildflower Farm.” It was the home of Melbert B. Cary [who, according to later evidence, actually called his estate Wildfarms, not Wildflower Farm]. It was indeed very unfortunate that the very large and very ornate mansion on this estate was completely destroyed by fire several years ago.

Mr. Cary was a lawyer by profession, and was a man of great enthusiasm and unbounded energy. He was a native of Racine, Wisc. and graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Princeton in 1872.

After several years as assistant general counsel of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railway, he came to New York and established the law firm of Cary, Miller and McEwen. He became president of the board of trustees of New York Homeopathic College and Flower Hospital and served in that capacity from 1905 to 1918. The affairs of that institution were at a very low ebb when he assumed that position, and he was given much credit for the prominence that it later achieved under his direction.

Mr. Cary came to Ridgefield just before the turn of the century. He was a true believer in the two-party system, and became an avid Democrat.

His interest in politics broadened rapidly, from local, to district, and then became state wide. He served as chairman of the Democratic State Central Committee from 1898 to 1902. In this capacity he learned first hand that little old Ridgefield played a very important part in Connecticut politics, for our own George E. Lounsbury was serving as governor of the state at that time.

In 1902, Mr. Cary let everyone know that Ridgefield also had an active, though small, Democratic party by becoming the candidate for governor of his party. However, his was the minority party in those years, and he lost the election to George P. McLean of Simsbury.

Melbert Cary was also a rather prolific author, and two of his books, “The Connecticut Constitution,” and “The Woman Without A Country,” were popular in the early part of this [20th] century.

Wildflower Farm extended west from Country Club Road to the New York state line, on both sides of West Lane. The farm and farm buildings were on the north side of West Lane. Two large barns have long since been converted to private dwellings. One at 334 West Lane is now the home of the Albert W. VanNess family. The other, at 336 West Lane, is now the residence of the Andreas Scott-Hansen family.

There was also a very large chicken house on that side of the highway, but I guess it disappeared some years ago.

#311: WHEN WILDFARMS BECAME DUNROVIN

Melbert B. Cary passed on at age 93, after a long and busy life. He was a very prominent attorney, a hospital administrator, an author, and a noted politician.

Mr. Cary also became heavily involved as a Wall Street investor while living in Ridgefield at [Wildfarms]. Enthusiastic investors came to be known as the “Bulls” of Wall Street and he would qualify as one who would fit neatly into this category.

There were times in the early part of this century when the world of finance sent out some unmistakable signals that it might be ailing. Then came the Panic of 1907 and 1908, and Mr. Cary was one of those who suffered serious financial setbacks. This may have been the reason that he decided to part with [Wildfarms].

Before this all happened, a rather important event occurred in the Cary family. In what was one of the great social pageants of the time, the Cary's son, Melbert B. Jr., was married to Mary Flagler. Mary was the daughter of the much-married Harry Harkness Flagler.

In case you are not familiar with who Harry Flagler was, you should know that when he was not getting married, he was busy at developing the state of Florida. He probably did more than any other individual in promoting the growth of that state.

Harry left his brand on many of the things he did, and "Snow Birds" on their visits to Florida will come across his name in many areas. There is Flagler County and Flagler Beach, as well as other things that were the result of this man's tremendous drive.

It was Harry Flagler who built the railroads that brought people to Florida and he is noted especially for the railroad that stretched across the Florida Keys. He also built several very large hotels that attracted many to the Sunshine State.

[Wildfarms] was not on the market very long. With the departure of the Cary family, this fine estate passed into the hands of the family of Joseph Epes Brown and his wife, Lavina. The Browns kept the place in tip-top shape, and added a cottage for their butler. This cottage, at 300 West Lane, is now the home of the Edmund J. McCarthys.

The Green brothers, Rufus and Clark, were caretakers, for the Brown family and lived in the apartments at the barns that were previously described. They had a nice team of bay horses named Jerry and Prince. Rufus Green later became superintendent for Mrs. Poor on her great farm, just over the state line in Lewisboro.

There is one very sad story concerning [Wildfarms]. One of the families that lived there had a very handsome son, who was engaged to marry a local girl. This beautiful girl was a member of a very prominent family. However, she suffered from a genetic ailment, and on the day of the wedding, as she was putting on her trousseau, her mind snapped, and the wedding had to be canceled.

Probably the best known of the owners of Wildfarms was the late William Matheus Sullivan. It was the mid-30's when he took over this fine estate. He had been looking for a place like this for some time, and as an indication that his search was over, he changed the name from Wildfarms to "Dunrovin." Then he showed real good sense by engaging Patrick O'Keeffe to run the place.

Mr. Sullivan was a very prominent New York City lawyer, and one of his clients was The New York Metropolitan Opera Company. He may have always had an interest in music, but one thing was sure, his interest really intensified we he became associated with the Met.

As soon as the purchase of his Ridgefield estate was finalized, Mr. Sullivan set about the renovation of the mansion. This was done under the direction of Archie Lubetkin, who was Mr. Sullivan's friend and constant companion for 42 years. The very ornate exterior of the mansion was not changed very much, as it was the fancy, hand-carved trimming that attracted him in the first place. The interior of the mansion was another matter and it underwent a complete renovation.

Mr. Sullivan had been a world traveler, and during his extensive travels, he acquired some very valuable furniture and many works of art. As soon as his mansion was ready for occupancy, he stocked it with his many prized possessions.

During his travels, Mr. Sullivan never failed to attend the opera, in the capitals of each foreign country. It was his opinion that the Metropolitan in New York furnished the very best music that he ever heard. This comment was always followed with the remark that his praise of the Met was in no way influenced by his association with that very noted organization.

As soon as he and Mr. Lubetkin were settled in their new home, Mr. Sullivan turned his attention to the excellent carriage house that stood on the property. The building was greatly enlarged and then transformed into a concert music hall, which he promptly dubbed "The Playhouse at Dunrovin."

This very classy building, which he had modeled after Frederick The Great's Opera House in Germany, became the scene of some great summer music festivals. The acoustics were superb and the place was beautifully decorated.

One of the first things that a visitor would notice was a Van Dyck original, "The Holy Family," which was hung in the lobby of the playhouse.

The opening concert at the playhouse was for the benefit of the Danbury Hospital, and it raised $5,000 at a time when the Great Depression was still being felt. Some of those attending were our own Geraldine Farrar, Grace Moore, Lily Pons, and Lawrence Tibbett. With famous people like that in attendance, you just knew that it would be a successful operation.

#312: THE SMILING LILY PONS AND THE DOGS OF DUNROVIN

William Matheus Sullivan was fond of music, flowers, dogs, and Lily Pons, though not necessarily in that order. In fact he had the cottage at 300 West Lane enlarged, and Lily used it as her summer home for several years. It was she who applied the name "Sky Cottage" to that cute little house.

With such personages as Mr. Sullivan at "Dunrovin," Lily Pons at "Sky Cottage," and Geraldine Farrar, just down the road at "Fairhaven," it is surprising that the name of the road was not changed from West Lane to Metropolitan Avenue. These noted products of the Met all lived within a quarter of a mile from each other.

Gerry was also very fond of Lily (wasn't everyone?), and called her the "little Cinderella." This was in reference to Lily's tiny feet.

We were privileged to have the opportunity of seeing Lily on several occasions when she came into town to shop. I remember meeting her in Bissell's Drug Store once and she seemed rather shy. However, when she smiled, the whole place seemed to light up and the old store will never be that bright again.

Sky Cottage later became the home of the David Westheims. This very fine gentleman owned several stores that specialized in the very best of ladies apparel. One of his stores was located in New Canaan, and operated under the name Martha West.

Mr. Westheim also put an addition on the cottage. He and Mrs. Westheim lived here for several years before moving to California. They had a butler for many years, and his name was Henry O'Brien.

Henry had been a professional boxer, and had a really good record. He lived to be very old, but no one knew exactly how old he was, and Henry would not tell. However, he performed in the ring for more than 20 years back in the early part of this century. He was a very good natured man and was a great favorite with the local people, especially the storekeepers.

As a result of Mr. Sullivan's fondness for flowers, the gardens at Dunrovin were not only rejuvenated, but greatly extended as well. Though he had many varieties of both perennials and annuals, his favorite seemed to be gladiolus. They were beauties, and his display at New York's World Fair in 1939 was a prizewinner.

At one time there were four dogs at Dunrovin, three English sheep dogs and a skye terrier. The little terrier was totally blind, and he was also quite vicious. He would snap at, and

bite if possible, just about anything that moved. Though he could not see, his hearing was very acute and once he had you located, he did not hesitate to attack.

On one occasion, while making a delivery to the mansion, I had to enter a room in which the little dog was the only other occupant. He wasted no time in attempting to grab my leg, and I had to stand on a box to avoid being bitten. The frustrated terrier raced around the room looking for me and he must have thought that I had a wooden leg. I guess the word terrier must have been derived from the word terror. At any rate, I was saved from the onslaught when Archie Lubetkin came to my rescue.

Another incident that almost got me in real trouble concerned one of Mr. Sullivan's sheep dogs. This dog was named "Rush," and one day, he rushed out to meet me as I drove up the driveway to the mansion. Now, as you already know, an English sheep dog is about half the size of a pony, and has a considerable amount of shaggy hair, some of which falls down over its eyes and must impair the dog's vision to some extent.

There was a rather steep bank on one side of the driveway with a drop of several feet. As Rush rushed out, he either forgot about the drop from the bank, or else he failed to see it in time. At any rate, he was traveling too fast to stop and came tumbling down, head over heels, in front of my vehicle.

The brakes were quickly applied, but I was sure that I had run over the dog and could well imagine being charged with dog slaughter, and perhaps being banished to some maximum security prison. It was with a feeling of great relief that I opened the door of the vehicle to find Rush was waiting there to be petted. He was a very good natured dog and I was very happy to see that he was all right.

You see, Rush had been a present to Mr. Sullivan from King Edward VIII, so he was not an ordinary dog. You may remember that Edward had become famous when he was the young Prince of Wales for falling off his polo pony.

He became even more famous in later life when, as Edward Albert Christian George Andrew Patrick David, King of Great Britain and Ireland, he renounced the throne, as he said, "for the woman I love." The woman he loved was, of course, the American divorcee, Wallis Warfield Simpson, and his announcement shook the British Empire to its foundation.

Edward was a very likable person, and there seems little doubt that he was the most popular of the members of the British Royal family. So you can readily see my concern over the welfare of this great shaggy-haired dog.

Before moving on from Dunrovin, I should mention that when this fine estate was owned by Joseph Epes Brown, he planted 30 or 40 trees along the north side of West Lane. They extended along the highway, from Sky Cottage, around that large S curve, west to the end of the property line.

The trees were mountain ash and they were trimmed back every year, so that during the winter months they were just tree trunks, about ten feet tall, with a large knob at the top. The trimmed trees stood as sentinels, guarding the property along the highway. During all those years many of these trees have died off, but four or five of them still remain as reminders of bygone days.

#313: THE STATE-LINE ESTATE AND ITS OUTBUILDINGS

As we continue down West Lane, and past the Dunrovin estate, there is an open field on the north side of the highway. Your attention may be directed toward a rather steep side hill, in

the middle of which you will note some stone work. This is the face of a root cellar (or dirt cellar, as some call it).

This structure was built right into the hillside some 80 years ago. Though it is a rather large underground room, only the entry can be seen from the highway. Except for the wooden door, it is made entirely of stone and the floor is left unpaved, and this may be the reason that it is sometimes called a dirt cellar.

In yesteryear, before the advent of freezers and refrigerators, the root cellar served as a means of preserving certain foodstuffs during the winter months. When properly prepared and stored, many vegetables kept very well until the gardens again supplied fresh produce.

This particular root cellar was a part of the huge estate that was once owned by Dr. George Gregory Shelton. It is so well constructed that I would guess that it could be used as a bomb-proof shelter.

The only larger root cellar that I have ever seen is one that Colonel Louis D. Conley built on Bennett's Farm Road at Fox Hill. The entrance to that enormous root cellar is also still visible as you drive by.

Dr. Shelton was a very prominent New York City physician, though he practiced there only 17 years. He retired at age 47, and came here to live in 1900, after purchasing what had been called the Birdsall Farm. The greater portion of the estate was over the line in New York State, but Dr. Shelton always considered himself to be a Ridgefielder.

One of the first things the doctor did was to establish a fine orchard that still stands and produces, just a short distance farther on. He then named his estate “The Orchard,” and in later years it was called Orchard Hill and Hobby Hill.

One of the few buildings on the Connecticut side of the state line is the cottage at 380 West Lane and which sits about 25 yards east of the line. Much of its construction is of stone and it presents a very sturdy appearance.

In the 20's, this was the home of Irving and Ethel Conklin when Irving was Dr. Shelton's superintendent and Ethel was the doctor's secretary. Come to think of it, on July 1, 1928, just 60 years ago tomorrow, the Conklins moved from this cottage to the large house on the corner of Ramapoo Road and Overlook Drive, where Irving would establish the very well known Conklin Dairy.

Like most of the large estates, The Orchard had its own farm. The farm buildings were located just across West Lane from the superintendent’s cottage. There were five or six buildings that made up the farm complex and they have all disappeared through the years. A disastrous fire, of very questionable origin, destroyed several of the barns in the late 30s.

One of the last of the buildings to disappear was the ice house. As you passed through the two stone pillars (they are still there) at the entrance to the little lane that led to the farm buildings, the ice house was the first building that you would see, though it was built mostly below ground. In fact, while only six or seven feet of the ice house appeared above ground, it nestled at least 10 feet underground.

There were two small ponds on the estate, from which ice was harvested but they did not furnish enough ice to fill this ice house, so ice was also cut from Raymond’s Pond on Elmwood Road in Lewisboro.

Two teams of horses and a Dodge truck were used to haul the ice from the ponds to the ice house. I well remember Nani Principi and Gino Petroni, packing the huge cakes of ice away, in this ice house. Though it was zero weather, these men worked in their undershirts and they perspired freely, as they struggled with 300 pound cakes of ice.

It was necessary to pack sawdust around each cake to prevent them from sticking together while in storage.

Harvesting the ice was very hard work, but before modern refrigeration, the old fashioned ice box (like the one used by the Kramdens on the Honeymooners) was the only way of preserving food during the hot summer months. Incidentally, if you have the opportunity to buy one of those old ice boxes, they make a great conversation piece.

Less than 20 yards east of where the old ice house stood, there is now a house, at 383 West Lane. It is now the residence of William and Joan Barrett, and is considerably larger than when it was a part of the Shelton estate, several additions having been made in recent years.

At one time, this house sat about 250 yards over the state line and on the north side of West Lane. It was then the home of the Louis M. Courtney family. Louis Sr. was the herdsman on the estate. He was a native of Virginia and was very much a fine southern gentleman.

When the Conklins moved to Ramapoo Road, the Courtney family followed suit and moved to 70 Ramapoo Road. Mr. Courtney then became the herdsman at the Conklin Dairy Farm. He was a fine person and just about the most dependable man that I ever knew.

The Courtneys had a son, Louis Jr., who was a very interesting person. He suffered from an ailment that caused his lips to twitch and oftentimes his hands would shake. It may have been some kind of palsy, but though he was very conscious of his problem, he never mentioned it and I never knew what it was. The doctors prescribed some powerful drugs for him and he was constantly popping pills.

Louis had a fine crop of curly red hair and there were those who thought that he resembled Rudy Vallee, a popular band leader at the time. He did not allow his ailment to curtail his activities and he became a very fine gymnast. On many occasions he would entertain during rest periods of the basketball games in the old town hall and the crowds were always greatly appreciative of his gymnastic ability.

#314: THE MANY PERFORMANCES OF A GENUINE CHARACTER

In mentioning the Courtney house that was moved from over the state line to 383 West Lane, I should have mentioned that it then became the home of Mr. and Mrs. Julius Latanzi Jr. Jay, as he was best known, played the saxophone in the Oreneca marching band with us and also played in dance bands as well. He was a real good sax player, as were most of those who were taught by the late Andrew Bloomer, and there were many. Andy was a real fine teacher.

Lewis M. Courtney Jr., who had lived in the aforementioned house when it was over in New York State, was a very good salesman. At one time he was a Fuller brush salesman, when that firm was very prominent in this arca. During the dark days of the Depression, Lewis also went door to door selling needles.

Lewis was exceptionally good at reciting poetry, and on several occasions, his recitations were heard over radio station WICC in Bridgeport. If we had television in those days he would have been a big hit, for to really appreciate his efforts, you had to see him as he was reciting.

Two of his favorite poems were “Casey at the Bat”" and “The Face on the Barroom Floor.” While reciting, Lewis would act out the umpire and go through all the gesticulations that an umpire might employ. He would then swing an imaginary bat, as the Mighty Casey struck out.

He was even more expressive while doing the “Face on the Barroom Floor,” and at the end of the poem, Lewis would fall flat on his face. This, of course, was all lost to everyone but the studio employees.

Lewis needed no urging to perform and many of the sales that he made while going from door-to-door were the result of his giving an impromptu display of his very expressive poetic talents.

Somewhere along the line, Lewis developed a keen desire to imitate other performers, especially those who might do some unusual trick. He seemed to think that just by watching someone else do a particular thing, he would then be able to do it.

He accompanied a group of young fellows one night to a roller skating rink in Bridgeport. He watched for a while and then decided to give it a try. Lewis soon found out that this was one thing you could not learn by merely observing others doing it. It was only after a number of falls that he became a skater.

On another occasion, Lewis attended the Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey Circus. His attention was strongly attracted to a performer who rode around the ring while standing on the backs of two horses. It seemed like a trick which he could easily master, so Lewis was determined to try it, at the very first opportunity. The fact that he had no experience with handling a horse did not deter him in the least.

One evening, after work on the Shelton estate was over for the day, Lewis brought out a team of horses and made ready for his ride. They were draft horses, so their broad backs provided a wide platform for him to stand on. It was also a great help that the horses were gentle.

Lewis got the two horses to stand together and then scrambled up on their backs. They started off at a walk and everything seemed to go well, so Lewis decided to urge them into a trot. However, this all took place in the orchard, and it was the wrong place to try the trick. While at a trot, one horse went on one side of a tree and the other horse went on the opposite side of the tree.

As you no doubt have already guessed, we found Lewis sitting on one of the lower limbs of the tree. In the meantime, the horses were peacefully munching the lush grass of the orchard, and Lewis had lost his desire to become a trick rider.

The Great Danbury Fair was in its heyday at the time and one of its many attractions was a side show that featured a man who appeared to be able to blow fire from his mouth. Lewis was fascinated by this stunt, and when he got home, he could not wait to try it. He had noted that the man had put a small amount of flammable liquid in his mouth and then he blew the liquid at a lighted match that was placed some 4 or 5 feet away.

Lewis practiced the trick and was able to perform it successfully a couple of times and then decided to do it publicly in front of the town hall. It was almost a tragedy, as apparently some of the liquid spilled over on Lewis' shirt. In less than a second the shirt was ablaze and only quick action on the part of the onlookers saved Lewis from a horrible fate. I do not think that he ever tried that stunt again.

All in all I guess that Lewis could be considered one of Ridgefield's real characters back in the 20's and 30's, and we had some good ones.

Just to the west of the superintendent's cottage on the Shelton estate was just about the very finest perennial garden in this area. Fortunato (Fred) Canestrari was the gardener on this fine estate for well over a half century, and this was Fred's baby. He took great pride in the fact that he always had some color in this exceptional garden, from early spring until late fall.

You can still see the outline of this garden, just inside the stone wall, after you cross the state line. I guess there are still a couple of the original plantings growing there.

Fred had just about every perennial known to man in this garden. My favorites were the delphiniums. They were the Giant Pacific Hybrids and they stood well over five feet in height.

One of the owners of the estate in later years decided to sacrifice much of the garden in favor of some chickens. Perhaps this was because of a food shortage at some time. At any rate, a couple of the chicken houses that replaced the flowers are still standing, though they have been empty for a long time. Just beyond the garden was the fine mansion where Dr. Shelton. his wife, the former Ida Sherman, and their children, Harriet May and Allen W. lived.

Sad to say, the mansion is now gone, and it was a beauty.

#315: WIFE DEPARTS, HOUSE FALLS, PRESTONE MAN ARRIVES

Dr. George Gregory Shelton may have been either a great success in his profession, or he may have been independently wealthy to begin with. Whichever the case may be, he practiced medicine a relatively short time and retired early, at age 47.

One thing is sure, Dr. Shelton must have been very well off when he purchased the large estate that he would call "The Orchard." He then acquired additional land in the surrounding area and his estate must have totaled well over 750 acres.

Dr. Shelton's holdings extended west from the state line, on both sides of West Lane. It went beyond Elmwood Road and almost to the Bell estate. The Bell mansion, which sits on the corner of West Lane and Route 123, is now a restaurant [later the home of the Jewish Family Congregation of South Salem, which moved to Ridgefield in a merger with Temple Shearith Israel to become Congregation Shir Shalom.]

Dr. Shelton had a fine dry wall built around his property some 80 years ago and it is still in good shape today.

In telling about Wildfarms in Dispatch 311, I told of a very stylish wedding, in which Melbert Cary's son married the daughter of Harry Harkness Flagler. Flagler's name crops up again concerning Dr. Shelton, who was a personal friend of his. It was noted that Flagler had several wives, and one of them had some kind of problem. She was committed to an institution by Dr. Shelton and Harry continued to get married.

If you are ever in St. Augustine, Florida, you must take a trip on one of those horse-drawn carriages that take you around the city. The old drivers are quite knowledgeable, and while the horse clip-clops through the narrow streets, he will point out many things of interest. Some of the things he will tell you about are the accomplishments of Harry Flagler, such as hotels and churches that he built.

At one point he will stop near an old cemetery and show you the grave of at least one of Harry's wives.

Dr. Shelton's mansion sat less than 100 yards over the state line on West Lane. I always thought it was a very pretty house, but apparently Jimmy Doubleday did not like it. He bought the estate in the late 30's and as was his habit, he tore down the mansion. It was just one of several fine structures that would succumb to Jimmy's penchant for replacing old mansions with more modern homes.

So it was not long after Jimmy purchased the estate in the late 30's that workmen were busy taking down the Shelton mansion. There were those who did not feel that the new mansions were any more livable than the originals. In the case of the Shelton mansion, the one that replaced it was not built on the original site.

The old mansion stood quite close to West Lane, whereas the new one was built some 200 yards back from the highway, and only the roof is visible as you drive by. The new mansion then became the home of Jimmy and Betty (Ballard) Doubleday and it surely is a fine structure.

However, they never seemed to stay in one place very long, and after a few years, the estate was again placed on the market, and the new owners were the Robert Hoffmans.

Bob Hoffman was a retired vice president and chairman of the board of Union Carbide and Carbon. He and his wife Margaret (Marge) were noted for their many philanthropies. They became very popular, especially with any fundraiser that had a worthwhile project.

They were also very active in helping individuals, who had come upon hard times and numerous people in Ridgefield benefited from their generosity.

Incidentally, among many other accomplishments, Bob was credited with discovering "Prestone" and it became one of Union Carbide's most popular products. Those who are too young to remember the problems associated with preventing the radiators of automobiles from freezing, cannot really appreciate the products used today.

Prestone must have been the forerunner of the many brands of anti-freeze that are now available. It was while managing a Carbide plant in Texas that Bob noticed a liquidy byproduct that did not freeze, even in the coldest weather. Up to that time, alcohol was used as an anti-freeze and radiators were constantly boiling over. When this happened the car was enveloped in steam and after inhaling these fumes a driver could be accused of DWI.

In the mid 50's Bob and Marge felt that the estate was much bigger than they needed and they sold the place to the Converse family. They moved to a beautiful apartment on Park Avenue in New York, with the understanding that if the Converses decided to sell, Bob would have the first refusal. Sure enough, at the end of the year, the Converse family wanted to move on and the Hoffmans were anxious to get back to their beautiful estate.

Unfortunately, while in the process of moving back here, Bob had a heart attack and passed on. It was a great loss and we are not apt to see his like again for a long time.

Bob, like Dr. Shelton, always liked to think of himself as being a Ridgefielder, even though their mansions were over the state line. I find that to be quite understandable.

I receive a number of inquiries about Ridgefield, and just the other day someone asked which one of the many famous people who lived here did the most to put our town on the map. My answer was that Ridgefield was very much on the map and known throughout the country, long before the so-called famous people started to arrive.

It should be noted that Dr. Shelton became president of The First National Bank of Ridgefield (now The Union Trust Company). He succeeded George M. Olcott of Casagmo when Mr. Olcott passed on in 1917.

Dr. Shelton's garage, a very large structure with apartments on the second floor, stood right next to the original mansion. It has recently been converted into an apartment house and studio by the present owner AJ. Abrams. Just beyond the garage, there is a brown shingled house that was once the home of the Johnson family and beyond it, used to sit the little Courtney house that was moved over the state line into Connecticut.

#316: THE AMAZING ABBE FAMILY

The story concerning the little house that was moved over the state line into Connecticut would not be complete without telling about a very interesting family that once lived in it. This house remained empty for some time after the Courtney family moved to 70 Ramapoo Road in 1928.

It was in the very dark days of the Great Depression that James and Polly Shorrock Abbe, and their three small children, came to live in this house. James [was a photographer] and

Mrs. Abbe [was a former Ziegfeld dancer and actress] at a time when people were just not spending a lot of money for their particular products.

Young people today are inclined to be quite skeptical when you tell them stories about how difficult it was to make a living and provide the bare essentials for a family back in the 30's.

However, the problems encountered by the Abbe family were not uncommon. Even those with the exceptional talents of the Abbe family found it very difficult to keep sufficient food on the table.

They were customers of the Conklin Dairy, so I had the opportunity of seeing first-hand how they had to struggle to survive.

In Dispatch #92, I told of the great Blizzard of February 1934, and how it was the third day of the terrible storm before Ernest Sturges and I were able to make it over the state line with a horse-drawn sleigh that was packed with dairy products. Perhaps it is worth retelling, for that was a long time ago and you might have missed it.

At any rate, the first house that we visited after crossing the line was that of the Abbe family, and they were in dire straits. They were out of both fuel and food, and it was 20 degrees below zero at the time. The entire family was seated around a pot-bellied stove. They had pulled the carpeting up from the floor and wrapped it around themselves, for whatever little protection it could provide.

They had run out of coal the previous day and had used what wooden furniture they could spare to feed the little stove. Now they were throwing old newspapers into the stove, but all the papers did was to make a large "swoosh" as they disappeared up the chimney, taking most of the heat along with them.

It was so cold in that house that a bottle of iodine that sat on a table froze and broke.

To say that this family was glad to see us would be a gross understatement. Their plight was enough to bring tears to anyone's eyes.

Ernie and I made sure that they had at least enough dairy products to tide them over until someone could come to their assistance.

It was shortly thereafter that the Abbe family moved out and we heard that they went west. They left behind a milk bill of $34.10. That amount may seem trivial today, but in the 30's it was considered a lot of money. We had no address to which the bill could be sent and after a while it was pretty much forgotten, for we never expected to hear from the family again.

Apparently we had underestimated the intentions of this fine family, for two years later, a check in the exact amount arrived in the mail with a Colorado postmark.

James Abbe became associated with the North American Alliance of Newspapers, which was being run by a fellow Ridgefielder, John Wheeler. He was assigned as a war correspondent and sent to Spain to cover the revolution that was taking place there. James must have made a good name for himself, for many other assignments came his way, and he and his little family travelled all over the world. It must have been a great experience for the children and they studied the habits and customs of people in the many countries that they visited. They became experts on ethnic foods and the way that they were prepared. Perhaps their experiences during the storm of '34 stimulated their interest in food.

Patience, Richard and Johnny Abbe all followed in their [mother's] footsteps, and became well-known writers. While they were still quite young, the three children collaborated on a book entitled *Around the World in Eleven Years*.It was a delightful story and became a great hit, and best seller.

[*Around the World in Eleven Year*s, published in 1936, tells the story of the children's nomadic childhood in Europe, following their father, photographer James Abbe, from France to Germany, Austria, Russia and England, returning to the United States for the first time when Patience was 11 years old. The book was a big best-seller, going through 16 printings in its first year.]

Patience was not only an accomplished writer, but also became a very talented dancer. *Vogue* magazine once had a two-page spread, showing Patience in several dancing poses.

Once the Abbe children hit the public's eye, Hollywood became very interested in them. Soon all three were cast in the movie "High Wind in Jamaica."

When the family finally settled down, I believe it was in Castle Park, Colo., on a rather large cattle ranch, James continued to [photograph] and became a columnist for the Castle Rock Record-Journal. Onc thing is sure — this was a family that succeeded, despite some trying times.

[The Abbe children had attended the East Ridge School in Ridgefield while living on West Lane. They followed their first book with a second in 1937, called *Of All Places!* and describing their experiences in Hollywood. Said a New York Times book reviewer: "Personal experiences and comments rattle on with the unexpectedness and disarming candor of the first book, with the Abbes' own blend of naïveté and sophistication, and with touches of genuine charm. Spoiled children, the Abbes say, are those who 'stay up to 10 o'clock every night, go to a movie every day, and whine.' The Abbes do none of those things. They live while they live, and enjoy the world."

[Patience grew up to be a journalist, sculptor and conservationist. Richard became a California state judge, and John, a conservationist and state employment agency manager. All have died.]

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Just across West Lane, from where the Shelton mansion used to stand, is another mansion that was once part of Dr. Shelton's estate. It was called "West Lawn" and may have been intended as a guest house. It once had a great wrap-around porch that has been altered through the years and now has actually three porches, one on either end of the building and one in the center.

In the early part of this century West Lawn was leased by Colonel Louis D. Conley for one year. While the Conley family lived at West Lawn, the Colonel used that year to tramp through the hills and dales, valleys and wooded areas of Ridgefield, searching for a suitable place to build a home for his family.

Of course, everyone knows, he selected a most imposing site for the great mansion that later became Fox Hill Inn. It was a perfect setting for a tremendous view, and became the centerpiece of his famous Outpost Farm.

It was probably the finest and most beautiful mansion I have ever seen in this area. I will never forgive IBM for tearing down that magnificent structure.

#317: THE FAMOUS 'GYPSY' OF WEST LANE

Most of Dr. George G. Shelton's large estate was in New York State, so it is necessary to cross the state to tell about this fine place. Dr. Shelton's second mansion, or guest house, was was called "Westlawn," and it is the first house on the left, after crossing the line.

At the time of Dr. Shelton's passing in 1925, this very attractive old mansion was being leased to Miss Amy Low Huntington. It always seemed as though West Lawn was an awful big place for just one person, but she had several domestics living with her.

Miss Huntington was a wealthy woman, and was known for the many contributions that she made to worthwhile causes.

In the late 20's Miss Huntington left Westlawn and moved to the prestigious, red brick mansion with the terraced lawn on the corner of Peaceable Street and High Ridge. This place is now listed as 19 Peaceable Street, though it could just as well have a High Ridge address, in as much as the entrance is on that famous street.

I have already told of Miss Huntington in Dispatch #193, so we will go back to West Lane and the Shelton estate.

Westlawn was not vacant for very long for as soon as Miss Huntington departed, Mrs. Shelton sold the place to Konrad Bercovici.

Konrad and his wife Naomi had two daughters, Rada and Mirel and two sons, Gorky and Rion. They were certainly one of the most interesting families in this area, and caused a real stir when they moved into Westlawn.

Konrad Bercovici was born in Romania in 1881, and considered himself to be a "gypsy" by choice, though to my knowledge, he never said what his nationality actually was. One thing for sure is, as a youth, he spent much of his time among the Romany, and he became an expert on the customs and lifestyle of the nomadic tribes that roamed central Europe.

Bercovici later became a very prolific writer, and was especially noted for his stories about the [Romani]. His book, *Story of the Gypsies*, which he wrote in 1928, was one of his best-known works. It also must have been quite profitable, for it was at this time that he purchased Westlawn, and the many acres of fine land that went with it.

During Konrad's youth there was a period of great turbulence in central Europe and his parents decided to move the family to the relative safety of France. He had already shown signs of becoming a very talented young man, and became so proficient as an organist that he was invited to give a recital at the great Cathedral of Notre Dame.

Long before he turned to writing as a profession, Bercovici gained a wealth of experience in various fields of employment. At one time he was a door-to-door salesman, a furniture repairman, and even helped to paint the frame of the Eiffel Tower.

It was more of the same, when, at age 23, Konrad decided to migrate to this country. Here, in New York City, he shoveled snow from the city streets, played the piano in a nickelodeon, and even tried his hand at doing the work of a blacksmith.

He was an avid reader and no matter what he was employed at, he always found time to improve himself.

Konrad Bercovici presented a demeanor that quickly caught your attention. His hair was an undisciplined black mane that was allowed to grow at its own convenience, as was his large moustache. He had very dark and piercing eyes that seemed to encourage you to keep your distance.

Despite this rather ominous portrayal, he was actually a gentle person. He was friendly, though I got the impression that he would prefer to keep to himself.

Though not a partygoer, he was called on to make many public appearances and made several talks to our local service clubs. His talks were always very interesting and punctuated with forceful gestures.

Konrad also appeared on television. One of his last public appearances was as a guest on The Betty Furness show just a few weeks before he passed on.

Besides his many books, Mr. Bercovici wrote for several newspapers and even covered sports for the *New York Morning World*. As he became more prominent in the literary field, he

was called to Hollywood and was acclaimed for the scripts that he produced for the movie industry.

Though his fame came mostly from his many writings, Konrad received nationwide publicity from a court case in which he sued Charlie Chaplin. The case had to do with Charlie's motion picture, "The Great Dictator." Bercovici charged that Charlie had stolen the idea of the picture from one of his writings, and he won the suit.

I guess that the favorite sport of the Bercovici family was tennis. At any rate, Konrad called on Irving Conklin to build a tennis court about 50 yards west of his home. When the court was completed, it got lots of use by the Bercovicis and the Kallos family that lived nearby.

The girls engaged in another sport that they seemed to enjoy. We were getting the hay in one day, when they came racing across the hay field and into a wooded area. If their purpose was to attract attention, they were quite successful. They were very scantily attired (for those days), and as you can imagine, all work by the haymakers ceased until the girls disappeared from view.

The Bercovici family was here only a short time when they were involved in a freak accident on Danbury Road. They were in a very large touring car — I think it was a Duesenberg. The weather was clear, but it had rained and the road surface was slick.

This was long before seat belts were used and the canvas top of the car was down, and the family dog, a German shepherd, was perched on the rear seat. The driver lost control of the car as they went down the hill just north of the Limestone Filling Station. The car turned over after leaving the highway and everyone went flying through the air.

No one was seriously injured, but the dog ran off and quickly reverted to the wild. Several days were spent trying to corral him, but to no avail. I am sorry to report that it was determined that the dog could never again be domesticated, and he had to be destroyed.

#318: CATTLE DRIVES AND A BARN BLAZE

When Konrad Bercovici took over West Lawn in 1928, there was a considerable amount of very nice farm land that went with it. However, Konrad was too busy with his writing to engage in any farming.

Irving Conklin used much of the farm land to augment his rapidly growing dairy business that was located on Ramapoo Road. Irv, as previously noted, had been the superintendent on the place when it was a part of the estate of Dr. George G. Shelton, and knew it was good farmland.

The stock on the farm, with one notable exception, had all been sold off at auction before the Bercovici family moved to Westlawn. The exception was a very fine team of horses, named Lady and Jim, who were needed to cut the hay and keep the place in shape.

This little team of blacks — and we use the term little, for they were not very big as draft horses go — had been imported from Canada just after World War I. Horsemen referred to Lady and Jim as "Canadian Chunks" because of their stocky build.

Lady and Jim had a combined weight of only 2,450 pounds. However, they were able to draw a load of loose hay that weighed 4,750 pounds all the way from the North Salem, N.Y. state line, to the state line on West Lane. That was a long haul, but they were equal to it.

In 1932, Ridgefield had a large parade, marking the 200th anniversary of George Washington's birth. There were numerous floats, many of which were horse drawn. Lady and Jim were the lead team in a four-horse hitch, drawing a tally-ho in which rode Karl S. Nash, dressed

in colonial garb as General Washington. That was even before Karl became editor of *The Ridgefield Press*.

I have always felt that Lady and Jim were mother and son. Lady, as her name implies, was very gentle and mild mannered. Jim was quite fiery, and a little on the mischievous side. Despite their different dispositions, they worked well together and it was a pleasure to drive them.

The last time I saw those great little horses they must have been in their late 20's, and still going strong.

In telling about the Bercovici family, it should be noted that Mrs. Bercovici (Naomi) was a very talented painter of both portraits and landscapes. Her children were also quite talented; although I never got to know Rada or Rion, I know that Mirel developed into a fine artist.

As a young man, the other son, Gorky, got the idea that he would like to try his hand at farming. It was in the heart of the Great Depression, and not the ideal time to venture in a business for anyone who had not been thoroughly trained. This was especially true of farming.

At any rate, Gorky examined the various categories of farm life and came to the conclusion that chicken farming would be to his liking. There were a couple of small chicken houses on the farm, but Gorky decided they were not large enough for the operation he had in mind. So the cow barn was converted into a very large chicken house.

Like the old saying "Do not put all your eggs in one basket," there is also a tried-and-true axiom that says "Do not put all your chickens in one chicken house," at least if you are planning to have a great number of chickens.

I am reminded of a chicken farmer who bought a new car. On his first trip into town, an old friend noticed the new car and said, "There must be lots of money in the chicken business." With that the farmer retorted, "Yes, there sure should be, for I put plenty into it."

One of the dangers of keeping a great number of chickens in the same room is that there is bound to be considerable crowding and any kind of disease would run through the entire flock like wildfire. Whether this was the case with Gorky is not clear, but I do know that a number of the chickens died, and his experiment was short-lived.

In the mid 30's, I was mowing the hay on the Bulkley estate on West Mountain and I could see a great cloud of smoke rising several miles to the south. The smoke was soon replaced by a gigantic mass of flames. It turned out to be Gorky's chicken house that was burning and it was a most disastrous fire and the large barn was completely destroyed, with all its contents.

It was labeled a fire of undetermined origin, and the firemen were hampered in their efforts by not receiving an early warning and by a lack of sufficient water with which to fight the fire.

Our firemen did their very best, but the fire had gotten too much of a head start and they had to devote much of their valiant efforts in saving the surrounding buildings. There was assistance by the Vista and South Salem fire departments and a fire truck came all the way from New Canaan. So there was plenty of manpower and lots of machinery, but the destruction of that nice barn was complete.

That ended the last attempt to do any farming at Westlawn, except for harvesting the hay on the place. Some years later, we planted corn on the large fields on the north side of West Lane, opposite Elmwood Road, but that was a one-shot deal and then trees were allowed to grow on what had been very productive fields.

In recent years several new homes have been built where once there were beautiful stands of corn and hay, and once again farming on what was once a great estate became a thing of the past.

In the 1930's, Irving Conklin used some of these great fields for pasturing his heifers. This provided a rather exciting adventure, for the heifers had to be driven along the highway, from the Conklin Dairy Farm on Ramapoo Road to the fields on West Lane, in the spring of the year and then driven back home in the fall.

If you can imagine 20 or more heifers being herded, cowboy style, along West Lane and High Ridge Avenue, you would then get a picture that was mindful of the old West. The drive was not as long as the ones from Texas to Kansas City, but it had all the elements for excitement.

Creatures of the bovine world have never been accused of having a super intellect, and these heifers had a particular disdain for the paved highway. Although motorists were always patient and gave them the right of way, the heifers much preferred to race across the lawns along the way and they rarely missed one on the drive to and from home.

#319: NATURE'S TASTY GIFTS & PAINFUL HAZARDS

Just to the west of the Bercovici mansion at Westlawn, there is now a short road that was named Stonewall Court. The road passes directly through and over the tennis court that 1 helped to build some 50 years ago.

Since it replaced the tennis court, that may have been the reason that "Court" was included in the name, rather than street, or avenue, or lane, or road. It was a fine court, and got a considerable amount of play in the days when there were not so many places where you could enjoy a good game of tennis.

To the south and west of the court, there were several hayfields and pasture lots. Cows are quite selective in their eating habits, and no matter how hungry they might be, when turned out to pasture, they will eat around the weeds and brambles.

This leaves the pasture lot with a rather unkempt appearance, as opposed to the nearby hayfields that always looked so tidy after the hay had been harvested. Therefore, when the haying season was over, a teamster, with his horses drawing a two-wheeled mowing machine, was assigned to cut down the offending shrubs and weeds.

The pasture lot, just to the south of the tennis court, had a great number of very productive blackberry bushes. These luscious berries made the very finest jelly that I have ever tasted.

In those days Ridgefield had a large number of blackberry patches, especially along Barrack Hill Road, as you neared the famous Port of Missing Men. During the summer months, both young and old turned out to gather in the sweet berries. A large box or basket was placed near a clump of the bushes, into which the berries were deposited from a small "picking can."

Many a boy or girl made a tidy sum by peddling the berries door to door, if they could resist the temptation to eat them as they were being picked. Some kids compromised by eating one and then putting the next one in the can. Then there were those who were all business and would never ever eat what they knew they could sell.

I well remember how my mother would put the berries into a cheesecloth bag and boil them on the kitchen stove. The bag was then suspended over the kitchen sink, and the delicious juice drained into a container for making jelly. The house would fill with the delightful aroma of the cooking berries, and there was really nothing else quite like it.

You can buy blackberry jelly in your favorite supermarket today, but it does not compare with the homemade variety. I would guess today who would got to the trouble of picking the berries and then making the jelly. However, the taste of that homemade jelly is just one of the many nice things the kids will never have the pleasure of experiencing.

Of course, with the growth of the town, the berry patches began to disappear, and it probably would be difficult to find one today. Mowing the berry patch did not discourage the bushes from growing, and next year they would come right back again. Some even burned over the berry patches, but this seemed to actually increase their growth.

One thing that they could not contend with was the developers' bulldozer.

At any rate, on one occasion as the bushes at Westlawn were being mowed down, Mr. Courtney, the herdsman, was bringing in the cows at milking time. On the way to the cow barn he had to pass near to where the mowing was being done.

Unbeknownst to either him, or the teamster, there was a hornets' nest in one of the bushes. Now, a white-faced hornet rarely goes looking for trouble, but when they are disturbed, they will look for someone to attack. As the mower cut the bush where the nest was hung, the nest came crashing to the ground. There is the expression "mad as a hornet," and it really suits thesc flying creatures.

They came out of the fallen nest in great numbers, and one of them landed on the back of Mr. Courtney's neck. If you have never been stung by a white-faced homer, you can consider yourself to be very lucky.

I was stung just once, in the darkened horse barn at Westlawn, and it was an experience that I will never forget. At first I was convinced that one of the horses had kicked me, and I was sure that my arm was broken. Later we discovered the nest in the barn that had not been used for some time.

No other insect that I know of can cause such terrible pain. The sting of a honey bee, or a yellow jacket, or a wasp, can be quite painful. However, the white-face attacks with great ferocity and drives its stinger home with real force.

I know of one instance where a horse was attacked by several hornets and they actually knocked the poor horse to the ground.

The neck is a particularly vulnerable spot on which to be stung, and poor Mr. Courtney fell as though he had been pole-axed. In minutes his tongue had swollen so much that he could not keep it in his mouth. Fortunately, the teamster witnessed what had happened, and shouted for help.

This was long before Ridgefield had an ambulance and even longer before we had medics, or walkie-talkies, and it was some time before help arrived. So, they rushed Mr. Courtney to Dr. Woodford, who had only recently moved to Ridgefield.

To make matters worse, the good doctor was on a house call at the time. That was in the days when they still made house calls. However, Dr. Woodford rushed back to his office and by now Mr. Courtney was only semiconscious, and in real bad shape.

The doctor quickly gave him an injection and it was more than an hour before the swelling in his tongue started to subside. It was even longer before he was considered to be out of danger.

Someone said that he felt that it was a good thing that the leamster was right there when the accident occurred. Someone else offered the opinion that if he had not been there, the accident would not have happened.

#320: LEWISBORO BARS AND THE STILL THAT EXPLODED

It was not my intention to go meandering over into New York state. However, there were some interesting people who lived just over the line, so perhaps I should go just a little farther.

West Lane, which starts at our much maligned Cass Gilbert foun tain, extends beyond the state line, to where it connects with Route 123. At the time of which I am writing, there were several fine hayfields on both sides of West Lane after we pass the Bercovici mansion.

One that was especially productive is on the corner of West Lane and Elmwood Road. This field stretched south alongEmwood for at least a thousand feet and was a part of the Shelton estate.

In the spring of 1938, we plowed, harrowed and graded this field and then seeded it to oats. It was no doubt the finest field of oats that I have ever seen.

There is something about an oat field that quickly attracts your attention as you drive by, no matter what stage of its development. The kernels of oats are quick to germinate, and soon after the seeding, the surface of the field looks like a great green carpet.

In good soil the stalks of oats will grow rapidly and may reach a height of three feet or more. Then when the breezes blow the stalks to and fro, the swaying oats resemble the ocean waves.

I have already described the harvesting of the oats from this field in Dispatch #230, so I will not repeat the story about the great loads of oats. It will suffice to say that half a century later, one of the stone pillars marking the entrance to the field is still leaning to the east. This may have been the result of the huge loads of oats that were squeezed through the narrow entrance.

A pretty white house now sits in the middle of what I still refer to as the oat field. In the mid 40's, this place became the home of Philip and Eleanor Masterson.

Phil’s is a success story that is worth telling. His parents both passed on when he was still a young boy, and he dropped out of school at the seventh grade.

He was an ambitious boy and was soon employed as an office boy in the Brooklyn assessor’s office. Phil kept his eyes and ears open and soon learned how the appraising of real estate was done. He went to school at night and completed his high school education.

After a couple of years Phil transferred to the probate office, where he learned the appraisal of entire estates. While still a young man, he opened his own appraisal office under the name the Philip P. Masterson Company. He established such a fine reputation as an appraiser that lawyers for some of the large estates began to seek his services.

Phil’s business grew to such an extent that he moved his office to Manhattan. Word of his ability spread and he soon became a leader in a competitive business. His appraisals were done so well that they were rarely ever questioned in the federal courts, and there came a time where he did more business than the other appraisers in the area combined.

Just some of the large estates that were appraised by the Philip P. Masterson Company were those of John Pierpont Morgan, Arthur Curtiss James, Hetty Green, Procter and Gamble, Harry Payne Whitney, Andrew Carnegie, and Marshall Field.

Phil thoroughly enjoyed telling about his rise to the top of his field, and how it was done without benefit of a college education.

Oh yes, his company did one local appraisal. It was the estate of Samuel Rubel, who lived on West Mountain in the mansion [called Sunset Hall] that is now the home of the Robert Vaughns [the Dick Cavetts]. I am proud to say that I played a small part in that appraisal.

On the opposite corner of Elmwood Road stands a very old house that was the home of previously mentioned Billy and Bronco Behnke. This house in later years fell into a sad state of disrepair and was restored by Mr. and Mrs. Gelert.

Farther down Elmwood Road, there was a large farm that had a very tall windmill. It pumped water into a tank that must have held more than 500 gallons, and supplied water for the farm's livestock.

There came a time when the mechanism that operated the windmill needed to be greased, and Irving Conklin volunteered to do the job. The giant fan was secured so that it could not turn during the operation, and Irv, with a helper, climbed the ladder to the top of the windmill. Then, just as the grease was being applied, the fan broke loose and started to turn. Only the quick action on the part of the helper saved Irv from a disastrous fall from that 60-foot structure.

This farm also had a silo that matched the windmill in height. Some bootleggers decided to use the silo to make liquor and they had a very successful operation going for some time, apparently without the knowledge of the authorities.

One night the still blew up, setting fire to the silo. It was a spectacular fire and could be easily seen for many miles around.

The mash did not burn as rapidly as the wooden sides of the silo, but it gave off overpowering fumes that seemed quite welcome to some of the crowd that gathered to watch the conflagration. Just a few whiffs of that pungent aroma were equal to consuming a large amount of whiskey.

West Lane turns to the left at its intersection with Spring Hill Road, and the house on this corner is where Fred Canestrari and his family lived when he first came to work on the Shelton estate many years ago.

Spring Hill is a short road and at the bottom of the hill, where it connects with Route 123, there is a small house that was known as the 5 and 10. It operated all through the Prohibition years and beer was 5 cents and whiskey was 10 cents. New York state had a number of such places just over the line that seemed to be immune to the liquor laws.

No story of this area would be complete without telling about Kohler's. If on approaching Spring Hill you turned left on West Lane, there would be only one house on the east side of the road, until you entered Route 123. That house still stands there, but several newer homes have on built around it in recent years.

This house had a circular driveway that passed through a rather large parking area at the rear of the house. There is a porch, the floor of which is only about a foot above the ground. The porch has an overhanging roof that is quite ornate.

This was the home of John and Frieda Kohler, from which they operated a fine oasis for thirsty travelers. John served Loewer's beer and it was considered the very best in this area.

It was another place that did not close during Prohibition, and numbered among its patrons were some of Ridgefield's wealthy residents. They would arrive in their chauffeur-driven limousines and park at the rear of the house. The drivers entered the back door and returned with a tray full of foamy drinks.

Frieda passed on some 20 years before John and he finally sold his lucrative business to his nephew, Fritz Yonkes. I would guess that Fritz was John's only nephew, but he more than made up for that by having the largest number of nieces that anyone could possibly have. After selling his business John moved to a house across the street and each weekend a niece came to visit.

This went on for several years, and though they did not reveal a marked family resemblance, they all had a couple of things in common. They were all quite young and they were all very pretty.

#321: THE OLD MAPLEWOOD INN AND A DEAD HORSE TRADE

In our travels around the town that Ridgefield was a half century ago, we have gone from Country Comers, along North Salem Road to the New York state line. Then we journeyed along Barry Avenue and West Mountain Road, again to the state line.

As we traversed West Lane, we started at the much-maligned Cass Gilbert fountain, and reached the New York state line for a third time, and even crossed it for a mile or so.

Another very important entrance to Ridgefield from the north is the heavily traveled highway known as Danbury Road. Just across the town line on the Danbury side, and about 100 yards on the right, there was once a very well-known inn called Maplewood.

The inn itself is now gone. It was a large sprawling building of wood construction, and a number of years ago it was the victim of a bad fire and eventually torn down. Maplewood had been run as an inn for many years by Benjamin and Phoebe Selleck. Maplewood became a real popular meeting place because of its proximity to both Danbury and Ridgefield.

Ben Selleck not only operated the inn, he was also a very good farmer. His farm extended along both sides of the highway, and included land in both of the towns. There is a small lake, just to the south of where the old inn used to stand. Water flowed over a dam near the highway and under a bridge that crossed the road. Travelers used to water their horses in the brook that was formed from the overflow. You could drive your horse down on one side of the bridge to the brook, and then drive out the other.

The old wooden bridge has long since been replaced by one of concrete material. There was a much greater volume of water in those days and it was used to power a gristmill and a sawmill.

The present owner [1988] of this historic property is William Pcatt. Bill can show you where the mills stood, and point out some of the timbers from the buildings that still lie in the soil near the bridge.

Travel over what is now Routes 7 and 35 was not something that one looked forward to in the days when the trip was made by horse and wagon. This was especially true on the Danbury side of the line, where you had to pass through Sugar Hollow. It was a swampy area and it was not unusual for sections of the road to sink into the mire.

Today, because of the very heavy traffic on this road, the ride to Danbury is not a pleasure trip, but the road is being improved and Danbury will soon be qualified to be considered as an important part of the greater Ridgefield arca.

It was possible to get a good meal at the old Maplewood Inn, and lodging was available as well as liquid refreshment. It was said that tea was not the strongest of the liquid refreshments served at the inn.

The place changed hands several times since the Sellecks have passed on, and several buildings were erected to replace the old inn. Joseph Stavola operated a restaurant here for a few years, and Daniel Tobin and Dominic Gaeta added some more buildings to operate as a motel.

Alfred Jeffers also ran the place for some time. Along the way the name was changed several times, from Maplewood Inn to Lakeside Tavern [under Jeffers], The Foundry, DownUnder and Triangles Cafe. It was called The Foundry because there actually was a foundry on the premises at one time.

The little building nearest the highway once served as an office for the motel. It now has a sign that reads Maplewood Glass Works and in this building a glass blower actually plies his trade. There is also a pet grooming shop, a lunch room, a bar and a clothing store.

At the rear of the complex there are several buildings that made up the motel. They have now been converted by Mr. Peatt into attractive office buildings.

In its role as a meeting place many years ago, the inn catered to people who did not want to make the entire trip from one town to the other. It was also a handy place for business men from both towns to meet. One can easily imagine the many deals that were consummated in the friendly confines of the old inn.

One rather unusual business deal that took place at Maplewood had to do with a trade. I guess you could call it a classic example of Yankee ingenuity, or the guile that was sometimes used by the old horse traders.

Years ago, when people decided that they would like a new horse, it was not uncommon for them to just trade the horse for another one. In many instances this was done by a procedure known as trading "sight unseen." Despite the implication, it is a good bet that one or both of the traders had actually seen the other's horse at some time.

Peter Walker had lived for some years in the house that still stands at 40 Grove Street. He was a brother of Uncle Jack Walker, who we hope to write about some time. Pete moved to Danbury, taking with him a fine dappled gray horse. Perhaps I should say the horse took Pete to Danbury.

Fred Leeson lived at what is now 219 High Ridge Avenue and he had a slick bay horse, but his horse was ailing. He remembered Pete Walker's dappled gray and called Pete to offer a trade "sight unseen."

Pete agreed to the deal and it was decided that they would meet the following week at Maplewood to make the exchange. Unfortunately, the ailment from which Fred's horse was suffering got considerably worse, and on the day on which the trade was to be made, the poor horse died.

Fred said to himself, a deal is a deal, and after all it was to be "sight unseen." So he borrowed another horse and put the dead horse in his wagon, and started for Maplewood. However, unbeknownst to Fred, one of his neighbors who had witnessed the demise of the horse called Pete to inform him of what had happened.

Fred arrived at the inn a few minutes before Pete, and as Pete drove up to the inn, Fred noticed that he was driving a jet black horse.

"Where is your horse?" asked Fred.

"Right here," said Pete and pointed to the back of his wagon, in which he had placed a sawhorse.

The two men laughed and went into the inn for refreshments.

How would you like to buy a used car from one of these gentlemen?

#322: THE MAGNIFICENT ESTATE OF A TINFOIL TYCOON

Just across from where the old Maplewood Inn stood on Route 7, there is a very impressive entrance to Bennett's Farm Road. It gives the impression that it would lead to a great private estate, and a number of years ago. it did just that. Incidentally, this section of Bennett's Farm was known as Maplewood Drive at one time.

This entrance was widened more than 70 years ago by the late Colonel Louis D. Conley, whose magnificent mansion once stood at the very top of the hill. He landscaped the entrance

and planted a cluster of spruce trees on a triangle close to the highway, creating a dual entrance or exit. The trees were removed a few years ago and the triangle, along with the entrance, has been repaved.

The colonel had a fine stone wall constructed along the road and it added to the feeling that you had entered a private drive. As you drive up the hill from the main highway, the landscape appears to be pretty much of a jungle today. It sure is a far cry from what used to be — probably the largest lawn in this area. That great lawn and its several terraces was always well manicured, and a thing of real beauty.

Just before you reached the top of the hill, on the left there was a white house that was used by the Colonel's brothers, John and Edward, as their summer home. Just beyond this house was a large garage where the Conley family kept their automobiles, and just beyond that building was the large barn where a fine herd of Guernsey cows was housed.

This was all part of Colonel Conley's Outpost Farm, and when portions of it were being sold off some 35 years ago, the cow barn was purchased by Sidney Sarner. Sarner was a doctor of some kind and came here from New Jersey. He remodeled the cow barn, and called it an experimental laboratory.

Many were the rumors and the wild stories that emanated from this place. There was a story that experiments were carried on in an effort to cross a chicken with a duck. Another had to do with attempts to cross much larger animals.

[Sarner maintained he was establishing an experimental farm via the Sidney Sarner Foundation for “scientific farming and experimentation in land fertilization,” and would be importing young wild and domestic animals from the “wilds of northern Canada and from parts of the United States” with the aim of seeing if they would cross-breed, creating new and hardy varieties. The foundation said one of the experiments was to determine whether wild animals could be tamed and made useful to man if raised under controlled conditions.]

One thing was sure, there were an awful lot of animals kept in this building. In fact, there were so many different species, the place was like a menagerie.

It seemed as if the operation ran into some zoning problems, and there were some court cases. Whatever the reason, the laboratory eventually closed down.

Directly across the road from the cow barn, there was a driveway that took you right to the very top of the hill, and to the site of what I have always felt was the grandest of all the great mansions in the area. It is hard to believe that it is now gone, demolished. How could anyone destroy a thing of such beauty?

Colonel Conley spent a whole year tramping through the undeveloped, wooded areas of Ridgefield, in search of a place to build his family’s mansion. The one he selected showed that he had excellent taste.

Some of the great private estates offered a view of New York state, and from some you could easily see Long Island Sound, and the Island itself. Outpost Farm had a view to the south and east of the rolling hills and ridges of Redding from one side, and to the north on the other side. It was a very peaceful setting.

When asked about his selection of this site, the colonel said, “I have seen all that I want of the other views, I just want to see the beautiful, and untouched, Connecticut landscape.”

There seems no question that the colonel could afford the extensive holdings that he would acquire in the years to come. As a young man he joined his grandfather, John Conley, in the operation of the Conley Tinfoil Company. The company grew to be a very successful

enterprise, and just about the largest of its kind. Mrs. Conley was the former Elise Ehret, a scion of the fine family that owned the famous Ehret Brewery.

The Colonel and Mrs. Conley and their four children, Richard, Louis Jr., Elise and John, came to Outpost Farm more than 75 years ago. This family was held in the highest esteem by the townspeople. Ridgefield was good to them and certainly they were good to Ridgefield.

Richard Conley has passed on, but his widow, the former Grace Sturges, still lives on their Rocking Chair Ranch, in Patagonia, Ariz.

His sister Elise and her husband, W. Bingham Cox, live in New York City, and make regular trips back to the old hometown. Elise is the only one left of this great family that has contributed so much to the history of our town.

The colonel must have stood about 6 foot 1 inch and ramrod straight, as did his son Richard Louis Jr., and John was even taller, and Elise was quite tall. The senior Mrs. Conley was not a tiny woman, she just appeared to be when surrounded by her family.

They were all fine looking people and Louis Jr. was about as handsome as any man that I have ever seen. His perfectly proportioned 6 foot 4 inch frame was topped by a head of closely cropped, curly red hair, and he had a most pleasing personality.

Louis Jr. married Catherine Schumann, and she was a very beautiful girl. Like his father, Louis had a military bearing, and when this very handsome couple walked down the street, all eyes were on them. To say that they stood out in a crowd would be a gross understatement.

Like many families, the Conleys had their share of sorrow and theirs came in the form of a disastrous airplane crash. Louis Jr. was a pilot and flew his own plane. On this fateful occasion the young man had just taken off from Norwalk airport when the plane went into a nose dive and a very promising career was cut short.

It was always a very exciting event when a member of one of Ridgefield's wealthy families got married. Marie and I were talking recently about some of the beautiful local weddings and it was her opinion that the wedding of W. Bingham Cox and Elise topped the list.

"Bing," as Elise calls him, is still a very handsome man, and Elise has that regal bearing that lets you know that they are something special.

#323: COL CONLEY AND THE FIGHTING 69TH

Colonel Louis Daniel Conley had two brothers, John and Edward. They had the same aristocratic demeanor that was a natural trait of this very prominent family.

John Conley was a little older and, in his advanced age, used a cane and he walked with a slight stoop. As a young fellow, I always thought that he was the picture of a very nice old grandfather.

Edward Conley was straight as an arrow and his gray mustache was twirled to a sharp point on either side. This created the impression that he might have been rather severe. Actually he was a real jovial character, always pleasant to talk to and enjoyed being called "Uncle Ed."

The two brothers had their own chauffeur, Harry Menzies, who drove them in their black Lincoln Zephyr to St. Mary's Church each Sunday morning, and oftentimes during the weck. While the brothers attended Mass, Harry tended the two little terriers that accompanied them wherever they went.

Harry blended in well with the Conleys for they were all quite tall and Harry must have been about 6 feet 5 inches tall. Harry had a pleasant manner and was treated like one of the family.

The Colonel himself had a countenance that went along with his title and his military bearing. His close-cropped mustache added to the feeling that this must be a very serious man. I remember him as being a very kindly and soft-spoken gentleman. He was only 56 when he passed on and his death was a great loss, not only to his family, but also to the town that he loved so well.

The famous 69th Regiment became well-known as a crack military force during the Civil War. It was called the Irish Brigade because of the ethnic background of its members.

During World War 1, the regiment earned the nickname "The Fighting 69th." The [motto] of the 69th Regiment during the Civil War [was] "Gentle When Stroked - Fierce When Provoked." The regimental flag said "Riamh Nar Dhruid O Sbairn Lann" or, "Who Never Retreated Clash of Spears."

It was considered an honor and a privilege to belong to this volunteer unit of the New York National Guard. This was true, even if you were just a buck private. To be an officer in this splendid military force was a distinction that was much sought after.

As a young man, Louis D. Conley became a member of the 69th Regiment. His extraordinary talents caused him to rapidly advance as an officer in the unit. He served in the Spanish American War and in the early part of this century he advanced to the rank of colonel, and then became the commander of the noted regiment.

Mexico had suffered serious internal problems for many years, and by 1916, bandits such as Pancho Villa were ravaging the countryside, and had become a real threat to the interests of the United States in that troubled country. The fighting often spilled over the border into Texas.

President Woodrow Wilson considered the situation to be so serious that he dispatched American military forces commanded by General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing to the Mexican border. The 69th Regiment, under Colonel Conley, was one of the very first units to volunteer its services.

The officers of the regiment had to pass a physical examination and on the eve of its departure for the border, General Wood of the War Department informed Colonel Conley that he would be relieved of his command. The only reason given was a "physical disability," perhaps a heart murmur.

The Colonel was extremely popular with the officers and the troops, many of whom wept openly when they heard the news of his removal. Colonel Conley accompanied his regiment to McAllen, Texas, where he then turned over his command to an officer of the regular army. Then, amidst a very emotional and tearful ceremony, he bid farewell to his troops and returned to New York to appeal the action of the War Department.

It turned out to be one of the most celebrated cases in the early years of this century, and the New York newspapers carried banner headlines on their front pages concerning the matter. There were several who sought the exalted title of commander of the 69th Regiment, and they pulled all the necessary strings to acquire it. Colonel Conley "stuck to his guns" and finally he was granted a second physical. However, the results were the same and the Army doctors again declared that he had a physical disability.

Then, as might be expected, the affair turned political, with both the mayor of New York City and the governor of the state becoming involved. The problem even reached the White House, where President Wilson found it necessary to uphold the action of the War Department.

The result was that after 16 years of faithful service, Colonel Conley was mustered out of the National Guard.

Unfortunately, according to recent newspaper articles, the guard is still involved politically today. That is a shame for the National Guard serves an honorable and very worthwhile purpose.

As it turned out, the action at the Mexican border was rather mild and could not have had a serious effect on the Colonel's health. Casualties among the troops were limited to a great extent to the terrible heat and horrid drinking water. Perhaps it was a tune-up for what was to follow.

World War I was raging in Europe at the time, and when the United States entered that great conflict the following year, the troops that Colonel Conley had trained again served with distinction. He made another attempt to be reinstated, but was denied the opportunity of participating in "The War to Save Democracy."

So he returned to his beloved Outpost Farm to commence the establishment of the famous Outpost Nurseries. It would seem that the energy he applied to managing what was to become just about the largest nursery in the world would equal that expended as commander of the 69th Regiment.

Although Colonel Conley died a relatively young man, his demise in 1930 was not caused by any malady that was discovered by the Army doctors.

His funeral was one of the largest ever held in Ridgefield. The Mass was said by his close friend, the Rev. Richard E. Shortell, assisted by Father Francis P. Duffy, the famous chaplain of the Fighting 69th Regiment.

#324: A MAGNIFICENT ESTATE AND ITS MANY CARETAKERS

Having completed his year-long search through the hills of Ridgefield, looking for the place on what was then known as Maplewood Road, and now is called Bennett's Farm Road, it is doubtful that Col. Louis D. Conley could have found a more majestic site.

The hilltop provided a spectacular view of the relatively untouched surrounding countryside, as well as the privacy that he sought.

The Colonel wasted no time in acquiring large tracts of land, from the estate of Isaac Selleck, as well as land from Emma David, Simeon Keeler, William Smith, and Andrew Bates. This was some years before he started the famous Outpost Nursery, which caused the purchase of a great many more additional acres.

So, the Colonel's original holdings were meant to make up his own private estate, which would come to be known as Outpost Farm. Several fine buildings were erected to house the farm's livestock, including a large cow barn, a horse barn, a sheep barn, and chicken houses.

There were also houses for the families that worked on the estate, and a garage to house several automobiles.

While all this was going on, construction of the great mansion was started. The name of the architect who drew the plans for the mansion is unknown to me, but he must have been the tops in his field. An attempt was made to duplicate this magnificent structure in recent years by John Yervant, when he built his Fox Hill Inn in Brookfield. John made a good try, but he found that despite the expenditure of a great deal of money, the original could not be matched.

The majestic front of the building gave it a look of such grandeur as to titillate the interest of any lover of fine architecture. Soft, tan leather paneling graced the walls of the great entrance hall and gave one a feeling of warmth, as one entered the place.

Like the dining area, the kitchen was worthy of a real fine hotel. It would serve the Conley family and their guests well, and in later years, the visitors, when it became the

well-known Fox Hill Inn. Most of the mansions in the area had ample kitchens, but this one must have been the greatest.

It took a great deal of help to operate such a large estate, and Outpost Farm had a great number of employees, some of whom lived on the place. Albert Servadio, father of Incz, Ada, Joseph, and "Tao," was the caretaker and he and his family lived on the estate, in the house that is now the home of fellow *Press* writer, Linette Burton.

To Albert was entrusted the care of the splendid grounds, and the gorgeous sunken Italian garden that spread its beauty at the front of the mansion. This he did well for some 33 years, and with great pride.

Albert had plenty of helpers, two of whom were Mr. Swarm and Attilio Casavechia, who also lived with their families on the grounds of the place. They mowed and manicured the gigantic terraced lawn that extended from the front of the mansion, down the hill and almost to the Danbury Road. Sorry to say that the splendid lawn is long since gone and in its place is an unsightly mass of weeds and bushes.

Joseph Baldaserini and his family also lived on the estate. Joe was the herdsman, and under his care was a fine herd of purebred Guernsey cows. He also had assistants, one of whom was Frank Scallon, who in later life invented the Midget Louver. I mentioned Frank in Dispatch #308, and you may read some more about him soon.

While at work, Joe Baldascrini always wore a neat pair of pinstriped overalls. They were a kind of uniform preferred by dairymen, as opposed to the regular blue overalls worn by other workmen.

Like the Servadios, the Baldaserinis had four children, three boys and a girl, Primo, Gina, Paul, and Gino. It was the custom in those days for all members of families on the large estates to take an active part in the operations, and so it was at Outpost Farm. All the children were given their assignments, and at one time both Mrs. Servadio and Mrs. Baldaserini provided their culinary expertise in the great kitchen at Outpost. It was truly a family affair.

Later on, and for many years, Mary Carboni became the major-domo, at dispensing food for the Conley family.

Many of the children still live in Ridgefield. Inez Servadio, now Mrs. John Carboni, lives at 10 Greenfield Avenue. Her sister, Ada, now Mrs. Gordon Knapp, lives at 34 Oscaleta Road.

Joseph is actually Albert Jr., but always has been called Joe to distinguish him from his father. Joe worked at Outpost Nursery before he entered the U.S. Army, in which he served as a non-commissioned officer for many years. After retirement from the Army, Joe returned to Ridgefield and became associated with the Woodcock Nursery that succeeded the Outpost Nursery. Joe and his wife live at 46 Soundview Road.

Primo Baldaserini and his wife, Elena, still live at 113 Hillsdale Avenue. "Preem," as his friends called him, was a carpenter by trade, but when someone saw him carrying a ton of lumber, it was suggested that he join the nursery where he could transplant 25-foot trees with his bare hands.

After a number of years at nursery work, Preem returned to his trade and helped to build many of the houses that replaced much of the nursery, especially in the Buck Hill arca. Preem's brother, Gino, lives with his wife Joan, at 15 Mountain View Avenue. Gene, as he was best known spent many years making golf clubs and now in his retirement has the opportunity to use them.

Their brother Paul [Baker] is the area's favorite toastmaster, and once worked for this newspaper. After service in the U.S. Army, Paul became a popular announcer on radio station WLAD and now operates his own TV station, while living with his family in Danbury, a suburb of Ridgefield.

#325: THE HURRICANE THAT WHITENED PAUL'S HAIR

With your kind permission, I will interrupt the story about the Outpost enterprises to recall an incident that happened just 50 years ago yesterday. It has to do with a terrible hurricane that struck this area on Wednesday, Sept. 21, 1938.

This story actually starts more than a year before when a super mechanic, Paul Raymond, decided to build himself a rather large motorboat. Paul was an avid hunter and fisherman, and never was quite so happy as when he was hunting a red fox, or fishing for flounder or bluefish. His favorite place to fish was in the waters of Long Island Sound.

Raymond's Garage was an auto repair shop, located in the old barn that still stands [not in 2025], just to your right as you enter Gilbert Street from Main Street. Paul was ably assisted by Aldo Bacchiochi, another top-flight mechanic. They not only took care of autos, but also fixed just about anything from an ailing eggbeater to the pumps of the water company.

So Paul started construction of a ship that would meet his own specifications. The work was done in the basement of the garage, and many people visited to watch Paul as he skillfully labored on what would probably be his greatest achievement.

Once the hull had taken shape, a fine marine engine was installed and the ship received several coats of spar varnish. It was a beauty and Paul decided to name it Muriel, the name of one of his daughters.

I asked Paul why most ships were named after a lady, and he said that it was probably because it took a man to handle them. This retort came from a man who could never be accused of being a male chauvinist.

All that was left to do now was the testing to see if the Muriel was seaworthy. The ship was some 40 feet in length, so a large trailer, which Paul also constructed, carried it to Westport.

As expected, the boat took to the water just like a duck, and several fishing expeditions were enjoyed that summer by Paul and his cronies, without any problems.

In mid-September of 1938, a very large storm was brewing in the Bahamas, similar to the one that has been named Gilbert, and which has just [1988] devastated Jamaica. Names were not assigned to hurricanes in those days, but some were quickly coined when this storm hit our Eastern Seaboard.

There was considerable damage in Florida and Georgia, but then the storm veered out into the Atlantic and it was felt that it would bypass this arca. So a fishing party was organized and very early on Wednesday, Sept. 21, Paul and his friends, Albert Rux and Byron Sherwood, met Ernest Scofield and Floyd Allen on the dock at Westport. Floyd was an old sea captain, with a thorough knowledge of the waters of the Sound.

Some stars were still shining when the Muriel, with its five passengers, sailed out onto the very calm waters of Long Island Sound. They carried no radio and so did not hear the latest weather reports that the huge and treacherous storm had decided to have another crack at the mainland.

This time the storm hit Cape May and careened northward, with winds of more than 90 miles per hour. It increased in intensity as it roared up the coast toward New England.

The fishermen were several miles off Old Saybrook when the winds started to pick up, and they thought that they were getting some of the tailwinds of the big storm. By mid-afternoon the wind was approaching gale force. In no time at all, the bright blue sky had turned pitch black, and the men decided they had better seek some shelter until the storm passed. Actually they were almost in the eye of the storm and the worst was yet to come.

Captain Allen suggested that they head for Plum Island, which was much nearer than Old Saybrook. This is a small island where the Army maintained a barracks and an old powder house. The barracks were on the far side of the island, so they traveled at full speed for the powder house, which had a good dock.

It was getting kind of scary, for as they neared the island, the waves were washing over the sides of the Muriel. On reaching the dock they found other boats tied up there, but no living person was in sight. On the island Paul made sure that the Muriel was tightly secured, and after they disembarked, they started for the shelter of the powder house.

By now the wind was blowing so hard that it was impossible to walk. There was a narrow-gauge railroad track, and they crawled along it, using the rails and ties for security.

Upon reaching the powder house, they learned that there was no electricity and it had become so dark that visibility was nil. Adding to the problem was the fact that the water had risen so much that it was now pouring into the first floor, and they had to use a ladder to reach the second floor. There the terrified men spent the night.

In the morning they were happy to find the Muriel still tied up at the dock, though the other boats had all been smashed to bits. It was surely a tribute to Paul Raymond's ability at boat building.

Much later the wind slackened and they made their way to the Army barracks, where they found eight frightened soldiers. The soldiers tried to send a message to the mainland on their shortwave radio, but power had been disrupted for many miles, and remained so for several days.

The barracks was in no better shape than the powder house and the roof had been completely blown off the building. There was great concern for the safety of the fishermen, and it was not until Friday that a shortwave message finally got through, telling of their harrowing experience.

The men arrived home in Ridgefield on Sunday the 25th, to find that our town had not been spared. Trees and power lines were down all over the place, though the greatest damage was along the shoreline where houses had been blown down and in some instances moved across the highway.

It was necessary to import tree men from Massachusetts to clear the debris. Leo Pimpair was in charge of one group that included Philip Piser, William "Smokey" Morris, Joseph Sheehy, Tony Shagatani, and a fellow called Whitey.

Like everyone else, these fellows fell in love with Ridgefield as well as with some of our local girls. Phil married May Moore, Smokey married Rosella Ferguson, and Joe married Theresa Knoche.

That storm caused Paul Raymond's hair to turn gray overnight and that is understandable.