



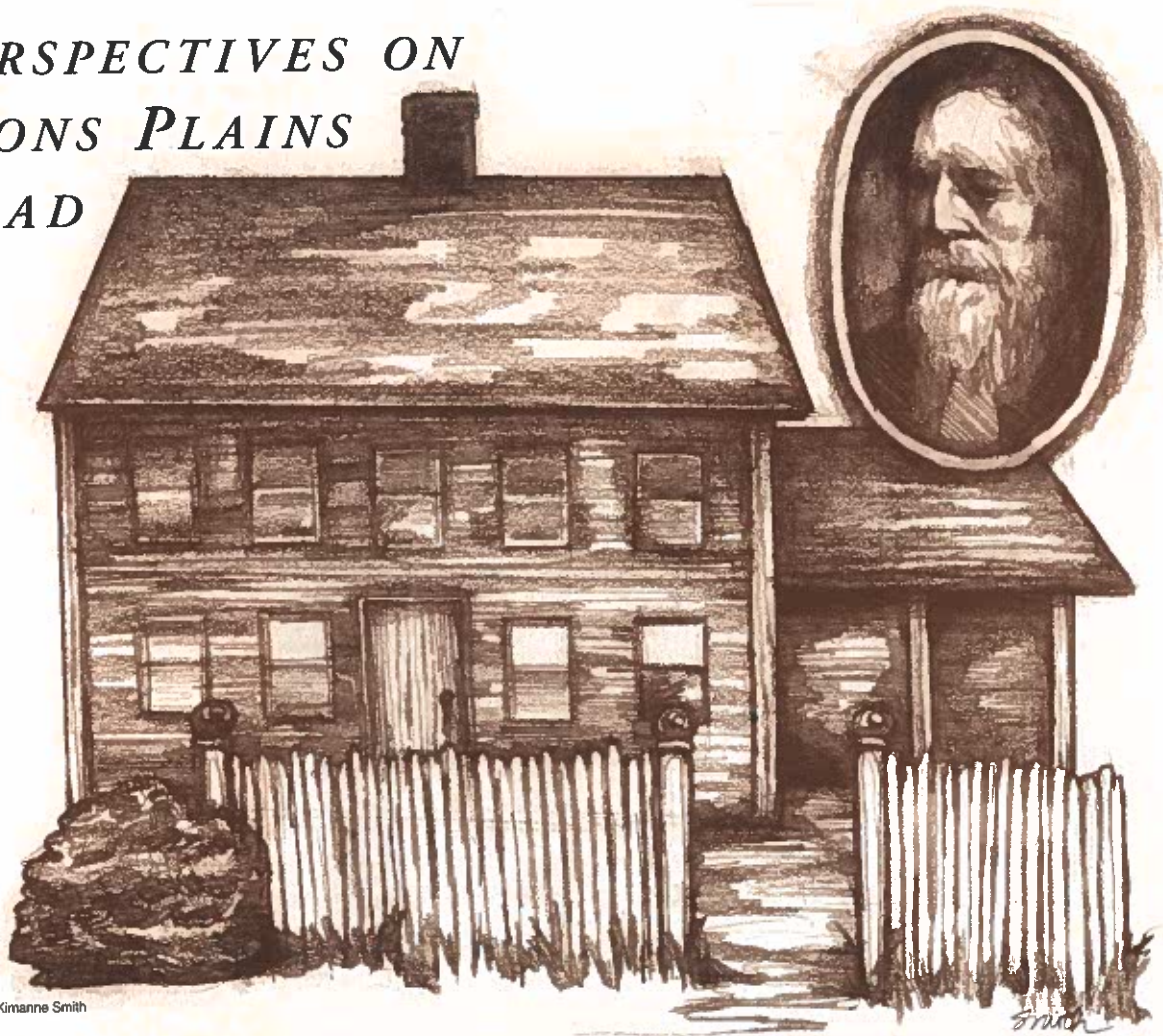
# The Chronicle Quarterly

Weston Historical Society

Fall 1995

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## SOME HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LYONS PLAINS ROAD



Illustrated by Kimanne Smith

*Banks Tavern, circa 1700 and Philip Gerhardt who purchased the tavern in 1871.*

*Lyons Plain Road was named for the Lyon family who came to America from England in the 1600's. Some of the family settled in Weston on the plain in the Southeastern section of town. Among the family*

*members, Captain Ephraim Lyon served in the Revolutionary War. Frank Lyon lived in the duplex house most recently owned by Irv Patchen.*

Near the northern end of Lyons Plain Road is the former Tom Banks Tavern dating back to the 1700's. The

tavern was famous all over the countryside when rum sold for 3¢ a glass. The building was used for many purposes such as auctions, theatricals, caucuses and dances. It was especially well known for its popular sleigh riding parties. Old diaries show that people came from as far away as Bridgeport and neighboring

*continued page 4*



## SCOTT AND BETTY HILL

*During our recent membership drive,  
we received a lifetime membership with a note attached.*

*"We are sending in a lifetime membership  
as we are sure that we have used up the first one."*

*Signed - Scott and Betty Hill.*

Scott and Betty came to Weston twice - the first time in 1939. Scott was born in the midwest and was raised in Reno, Nevada. Upon his graduation from college, he went to work for G. E. covering the Schenectady, Pittsfield, Buffalo, and Baltimore circuit. Betty, who was born in Pennsylvania, had moved to Schenectady to work at the YWCA. An old friend of Betty's arranged social events so that Betty could meet some men in the area. An ice skating party was where Scott and Betty met for the first time. Scott said it was about 20 degrees below zero, but apparently the sparks flew between them.

Scott's job eventually landed them in New Jersey, and Scott commuted to New York City. When the G.E. office moved closer to Grand Central, the Hill's decided it was time to move. They got in their car one afternoon and drove on the Merritt Parkway until it ended, which happened to be Exit 41. They followed the road and ended up in front of the Post Office in Westport. Betty found someone and asked her to tell her

*Scott and Betty Hill, Lifetime Members - Twice!*



Photo - Roger Core

something about the community as they were interested in relocating. The woman encouraged them to go to Weston as they had just opened up a wonderful new school. She contacted a real estate agent who showed them three houses for rent, one of which was the Mansbridge house at the end of Lyons Plain. Scott and Betty took the house and eventually wanted to buy it. Ruth Fox, a Treadwell daughter, owned the house and refused, saying it had always been in the family and she would not sell. She did, however, sell the property next door where Scott and Betty now live. The job took them away from Weston in 1945, but brought them back in 1959.

Scott and Betty remember quieter and simpler days in Weston. As people largely stayed at home in those days, they helped neighbors and friends. Men shoveled their way down to Westport in winter and neighbors helped pull folks out of the mud on the roads in the spring. A day at Compo Beach, or a trip to Ridgefield, was considered a great happening. When Scott and Betty were first in Weston they could see Compo Beach from a site on 11 O'clock Road, and could hear music and fireworks from the Italian Festival held in Saugatuck.

Scott and Betty threw themselves into our community with their hearts and souls. Betty remembers the early days of the school and its principal, Mr. Work. He had come from a private school and believed in hard learning. There were mostly men teachers but Betty's children did have Helen Mason for a teacher. As there were very few, if any, activities for girls after school, Betty helped to start dancing lessons. A teacher from New York was hired, but because of gas rationing during the war he could not come out here. A Russian ballet teacher, Mr. Volodine, who lived in town took over the reins, but wanted the boys to come too. There were many outraged parents who thought it was awful to have boys in dancing class. The teacher persevered and ended up teaching everyone, culminating in a wonderful Christmas show which delighted all the students and parents.

In 1938, a very public spirited mother organized the hot lunch program at school. She started by bringing hot soup that she had made at home. During the war years, Mrs. Ethel Neuberg enlisted all the mothers in town to can and freeze vegetables from their gardens to

be used all year. Ethel was able to bring in government money for milk and was able to serve a wonderful hot lunch of chicken, dumplings, vegetables, and dessert for 5¢.

Scott and Betty remember fondly the comeback of square dancing in 1940 in the basement of the Emmanuel Church. Dutee Hall who lived in the parsonage with her husband and four children organized the dancing. Every Saturday night folks in Weston came together to dance and drink lemonade. Dutee organized a band, including William Wakeman on the fiddle and Willard Thorpe on the banjo.

Scott commuted to New York each day, but during the War years there was little or no gasoline so Elmer Zimmerlie brought one of the school buses around to pick up the commuters, including Scott, Joe Leopold (advertising executive), and Franklin P. Adams. Twelve to fourteen men and one woman rode the bus, Fran Harrington, who was always late, powdering her face even as she was getting on the bus. A bus was also organized to go to Westport on Saturday mornings. Occasionally Helen Keller would ride the bus with her companion Polly, and Scott would converse with them.

Scott became involved in many organizations after his return to Weston in 1959. He has served on the Board of the Aspetuck Land Trust, which acquires pieces of land through contributions. Scott spent many Friday mornings mapping out trails throughout these properties. He also served on the committee overseeing Devil's Den. For years he worked for the Weston Watershed committee, also serving as its president. This group was committed to preserving the river and watching the water. Scott measured daily the height of the river and its temperature. His work served as early warning for floods. Scott also served on the Hurricane Watch committee but never did anything. He was in Montreal during the only hurricane while he was serving on the committee.

After retirement Scott spent a week or two being embarrassed by the fact that he was no longer working. He

plunged in to many activities including the Norfield Church, the Red Cross, the Community Council, and was the driving force behind the inclusion of Weston men in the Y's Men of Westport/Weston. He served as Program Committee and later on President. Betty was helpful with the start of Ys Women. Scott also served as President of the Weston Historical Society for several years and has been an active member. He implemented the Society Bus Tour and wrote up the history of homes and points of interest along the way. Betty, along with Mac Farrel and Lou Bregy, gathered the pictures used in the book "Weston, the forging of a Connecticut Town," written by James Farnham.

Retirement years included travel for the Hills. Scott is delighted they had the time and the money to go. They have been to Russia, Europe, and around the world visiting 100 countries and all the continents. Usually they would rent a car and go off on their own. They have also visited every state.

Betty has also been involved with music, she has headed a book group and is still very involved with the International League for Peace and Freedom. She loves to cook and sew, making most of her clothes over the years, and is a Deacon Emeritus at the Norfield Church.

Scott and Betty remember a Weston that was for "everybody." Neighbors helped each other and everyone knew each other. Someone would knock on the door and say, "come on we're going to pick blueberries" and everyone went along sharing the bounty. During the winter Mr. Gjuersko would come along and plow them out with a horse and sleigh, just to be neighborly. The biggest change they have seen is the new, big homes and so many more people in town. They still feel, however, that the same spirit of friendliness and helping exists today. Betty is 96, Scott is 93, and they have a wonderful sense of humor and positive outlook on their town of Weston. We salute you both for all you have given us.



## CHRISTMAS AT THE COLEY HOUSE



Our annual Christmas open house will be held on  
**Saturday, December 2, and Sunday, December 3**  
from 12 - 4.

The house will be decorated with "Christmas Carols" theme  
and our gift shop will be open.

The preview party will be held for all Society members on  
Friday evening December 1, from 6 - 9.

### *The Chronicle Quarterly*

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## SOME HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LYONS PLAINS ROAD

*continued from front cover*

towns to enjoy an evening in the dance hall. Sleighing was also popular among the girls, and they would stop along the roads at every inn and have a dance. The girls usually drank Madeira and the boys took "flip," the most popular rum drink of the times for which Tom Banks was famous. Frank Lyon recalled, "There was a lot of heavy drinking, but they didn't abuse it as they do now. A man drank and worked then, now they just drink." (Quoted from an article appearing in the *Bridgeport Post* around 1932.)

In the early 1900's, the tavern was occupied by Albert Gerhardt whose father, Philip, had purchased it from the second Tom Banks. Philip remodeled the tavern into a charming house. The Tap Room was left intact with its 10 foot wide fireplace, its oven found at the back rather than at the side as are those built after 1750. The old ballroom where square sets were danced to the tunes of fiddling peddlers, was turned into bedrooms. The home has changed hands since then and other changes made, but its charm and secrets remain.

At the southern end of Lyons Plain sits an old cobblestone house built in 1914 by Dominico Castiglia. Mr. Castiglia came to American in the late 1800's and settled in Manhattan. He met and eloped with Virginia Esposito in 1905 and shortly thereafter he formed a partnership with John Delarmy who owned a home in Weston. Mr. Castiglia (shortened to Castell for business purposes) and Mr. Delarmy set up business in New York City where they produced exotic ostrich plumes, a most popular accessory of the day.

It is believed Dominico became enamored of the countryside in Weston and in 1914 he purchased 25 acres bordering the Aspetuck River and north along Lyons Plain Rd. For the first mile there were no houses on the road with the exception of the old home at the corner of Rt. 57 and Lyons Plain. The Unitarian Church was not there and there were no side streets (Riverfield, Little Lane, or Coley Drive). The road in those days was unpaved and a grand mess in rainy weather. The original bridge over the Aspectuck River is now covered with brush and was replaced by a new bridge and paved road about 1945.

Dominico and his wife decided to build their home and during the construction rented a small house in Weston, about 1 1/2 miles north of their property. (This small house had been moved from the Aspectuck Reservoir area in 1775 by a team of oxen, and served as a store for years before it was converted into a house.) Each day the Castiglias would walk from their house to the building site to work and supervise friends and relatives who were helping. Most of the work was done by hand and the final result was a home almost like a fort. A thick foundation of cement and cobblestones and outer walls of stone produced window sills 9" deep and ceilings 9' high with a decorative cornice of plaster that would cost a fortune to produce today. The house included the usual kerosene lamps, wood stove, a hand-dug well, and the little house in the back with the half-moon on the door.



Photo-Courtesy of Louise Messer

*Members of the Lyons Family.*

*L-R Lebing, Minnie, Willis, Mort's wife, Mort and Willis' wife*



*Front - Cobblestone House about 1928*

*Cobblestone House on Lyons Plain built by Dominico and Virginia Castiglia.*



*Virginia Castiglia performing one of the family chores.*

An old business ledger reveals the dissolution of the partnership (which had been converted to making buttons) around 1912. With all the land they owned, the family decided to try their hand at farming. They sold eggs and farm produce, but with the times and their lack of expertise, they were unsuccessful. To support their growing family of four children (Marion, Frank, Laurie, and Virginia), Mrs. Castiglia started taking in bus loads of boarders from New York, sometimes as many as 80 at a time.

Despite hard times, there were some lighter moments for the family. During a hard winter one of their horses died. The digging was very difficult but they managed a hole of sorts. They pulled the horse into the hole and were astonished to find that his legs stuck up above the ground. They solved the problem by cutting off the legs of the horse and laying them in the hole. On another occasion, Mrs. Castiglia was driving along the Merritt Parkway when she hit a deer and killed it. She immediately thought of all the venison for her family and she wrestled the deer into the car. By the time she arrived home the deer had rigor mortise and they had a terrible time getting the carcass out of the car. Many laughs have been shared by family and friends over these stories through the years.

One of the most amusing stories about Lyons Plain was documented by Ronald Mansbridge who moved to Weston in 1947. He wanted to have some letterheads printed with his new address, but looking at old maps he found that the street was spelled three different ways, Lyons Plains, Lyons Plain and Lyon Plain Rd. Being very confused, Mr. Mansbridge wrote a letter to the State Highway Department in Hartford. His reply did not clear up the confusion as they based their information on "the land of Steady Habits" which does permit the continuance of inconsistencies such as he had stated.

Consequently, Mr. Mansbridge wrote to the Department of the Interior in Washington Director of Geographical Names. A reply came from Mr. Sears stating that they had no information on this name other than a Geological Survey map of 1889, which showed the locality as "Lyon Plain" and a Corps of Engineers map which shows it as "Lyons Plain." A week later Mr. Mansbridge received a formal card informing him that the names would be on the docket of pending cases and that he would be notified when a final decision had been made.

But Mr. Mansbridge was in for a shock. The Board of Geographic Names sent a release to the newspapers about their current decisions. Unfortunately the New York Sun (known for its inaccuracies) reported that a suggestion had been made that the name of the Town of Weston be changed to Lyons Plain. The Westport Town Crier picked up the story and carried it on the front page "Mystery Request to Change Weston." Mr. Mansbridge was duly horrified and imagined that if the identity of this mystery man was revealed, he would have been run out of town. Fortunately the next week's Town Crier gave the true story and all was well. Finally in July the Board of Geographic Names published its Decision List. Our road was unequivocally declared to be Lyons Plain Road. So Ronald Mansbridge was finally able to order his letterheads.

*Ed. note: My thanks to Mr. Mansbridge, Bruce Wilkins who was married to Virginia Castiglia, Louise Messex, Julia Studwell and Susan Feliciano for sharing their information with us.)*



*The Castiglia family loading hay for the winter.*



*Labor Day "guests" of Dominico and Virginia*



*Frank Castiglia, Dominico and Virginia's son*

## CARRIAGE HOUSE RESTORED

*Thanks to the contributions  
of money and  
the hard work of  
"Historic Preservations"  
our carriage house is again  
standing firm.*

Wess Corjuc of Weston, who owns the company "Historic Preservations," was in charge of the nuts and bolts of the job. Wess worked with his father learning his craft and emigrated from Rumania 12 years ago. The Norfield Church and many other old buildings in this area have been redone by this business.

The carriage house was built in the early 1900's to house the family's carriages. When Weston Road was widened and newly paved in 1955, the carriage house was moved back from its original site. Wess and his men took out all the flooring and jacked up the building to replace the sills and reinforce the foundation. He anchored the walls with tie rods and concrete to keep the building from moving and concrete pillars were constructed under the flooring for solidity and evenness. The joists were replaced with new 2 x 10's and new tongue and groove flooring was put down. The top



Photo - Roger Core

### Carriage House

floor of the building has also been reinforced and old-fashioned C-clamps were used to replace the old rotten wooden nails. A new drainage ditch was dug around the building and will take rain water away from the front of the building preventing future destruction. New shingles and coat of paint, hopefully

in the near future, will finish the job.

Plans for the building are still a bit up in the air. Jim Coley had used the building for a workshop and it is hoped it may be restored to that purpose. Whatever the outcome, we are happy not to have lost the building.



## SCARE FAIR

The Scare Fair will be held **Saturday October 28, from 11 - 4.**

There will be food and cider as well as a Haunted House and a new Happy Halloween House for the little kids.

Come join us at the Coley Homestead for a day of fun and games.

Kids are encouraged to come in costume.



# ANDY NEILLY AND THE HAUNTED HOUSE

*On October 28, the Coley Homestead will be alive with pumpkins, ghosts, goblins and fun for the whole family. The barn will again been turned into a "Haunted House" under the direction of Andy Neilly. Andy and his family are no strangers to ghosts and goblins. He had spent summers as a boy at the Steel Pier in Atlantic City and was fascinated with haunted houses.*

In 1959 Andy, his wife Janet, and their three children, Susan, Tom and Sarah, moved to Weston. When Halloween rolled around Andy took his children Trick-or-Treating, but as they grew older and no longer wished to go out, Andy stayed home and waited for children to come to his house. He noticed that no one came because of his long, dark driveway. Inspired by this, Andy enlisted the help of his family, friends, and some members of the Weston Fire Department (where son Tom is a volunteer) and they put together their own haunted house. They put an ad in the paper inviting the children of Weston and families poured in.

Andy would greet his guests at the basement door dressed as a hideous goblin. Sometimes parents, and children, turned right around and headed back out. But for those who were brave enough to enter, they were treated to a walk through a basement filled with ghosts, goblins, witches, quirky doctors and dentists. Guests could be heard shrieking as they wended their way through. At the end, guests were treated to cider and treats on the porch.

One of their most famous guests was Harry Reasoner and his daughter. Mr. Reasoner was so impressed that he wrote an article about the Haunted House for the Saturday Evening Post. Andy feels his biggest triumph, however, was scaring Fire Chief Fred Moore, but he says to this day Fred denies it.



*Andy Neilly*



*Andy Neilly's daughter Sue takes a moment out with Bliss and Cayman.*

When Ed Sanford bowed out of the duty, Jane Atkinson twisted Andy's arm to do his magic at the Coley barn. Andy worked with Pietra Knaus and again enlisted his family and members of the Society (Roger Core, Herb Day, Joe

Spetly, and Donna Moore) to work. Even a friend of Sue Neilly comes all the way from Maine to participate.

Andy was in the book publishing business for 47 years and retired three years ago. He now attends Silvermine and does beautiful watercolor paintings and takes a drawing/painting class from Joey Tate at the Westport Arts Center. He serves on the Board of the Nature Conservancy and is still involved with publishing as Chairman of the Board of the Columbia University Press. Andy also serves as a trustee of the University of Rochester and spends time fund raising for the library endowment fund.

Andy's wife, Janet, served on the Board of Education and the Building Committee. His daughter Sara, is a doctor in Boston, son Tom, is a lawyer in New York and other daughter Sue, teaches at the Weston Music Center, curently renting space at the Emmanuel Church. Sue also models for art classes in Westport from time to time.

Weston and the Historical Society thank you all for scaring us to death.



**VOLUNTEERS**

**NEEDED**

*Any  
Society members and family who  
could help us  
before or during  
the SCARE FAIR,  
please call  
Bill and Millie Correll  
226-4157.*

*Help in any way  
would be greatly appreciated.*

*The Chronicle Quarterly*

*9 Christopher Hill*

*Weston, CT 06883*

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