

# Village Voices

## In Our Own Words

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### ROLLER SKATING

by Alice Warshaw

The sidewalks in our neighborhood were perfect for roller skating. Norway maples lined the streets, and their roots pushed the concrete slabs up. These uneven conditions created a fun obstacle course.

I quickly learned to slow down next door where fresh gravel from the unpaved driveway spilled across the sidewalk. Knees into gravel. Coming in to get my wounds dressed, I discussed that gravelly sidewalk with Mom. She agreed it was a menace. To her though, the fact it was unsightly seemed almost as important. (I was beginning to understand that individual perceptions and priorities differ.)

Our driveway wasn't paved, either, but since it was mostly dirt with a little ancient gravel mixed in, our sidewalk was safe for skating. And our old driveway wasn't "unsightly," just practical.

None of us longed for fancy shoe skates. We liked that our attachable

ones were quick and easy to put on and take off. They clamped onto our oxfords. A skate key was inserted at the front side and rotated to draw in the claws that held fast to our thick leather soles. From time to time as we grew, the skates were lengthened by adjusting nuts underneath. That was a dad job.

Worn safe and secure as pendants round our necks, ready to use at a moment's notice, when a skate came loose, our skate keys were worn with pride.

We could skate for blocks. As we crossed from one corner to the next, riding the dimpled blacktop made my teeth chatter.

In fourth grade, my girl friend and I took up roller skating to school. We crouched low as we entered the final down hill, preparing for a possible wipeout as we accelerated. Carefully crossing the final street, we felt so successful as we hauled into the Pennington Primary School driveway. In a few days, we were called into Miss Winner's office. She was our

stern, but fair, principal. Or so I thought. She instructed us to stop skating to school. It wasn't safe. "But it is," I insisted. "We're VERY careful. Our parents let us. Would you please reconsider?" Politely pleading did no good.

We went back to walking. A pleasant enough trek, but lacking the wind-in-the-hair drama of skating.

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**AUNT ZEE  
AND UNCLE SWANN**  
by **Howard Arons**

Their real names were Swann and Zee Williams, and they were our next-door neighbors during all the years I lived in Dallas. They were a West Texas ranch couple, uncomplicated and plain-spoken.

Zee was a buyer for La Mode, a mid-tier local department store. Truth to tell, she was the breadwinner for the family. She took great pride in her two trips to New York every year to select the women's wear lines. She was a large woman with a forceful personality, a sort of Sophie Tucker mellowed by Rosalind Russell.

Swann was a butcher when he worked, and I believe he was good at his trade, but he didn't work full time,

perhaps because he didn't need to. He was a large, taciturn man who always had a five-cent Lovera cigar, either lit or ready for a match. His name for me, even from my earliest days, was "podner," Texan for "partner."

My most vivid memory of Uncle Swann involved a chicken. I couldn't have been much older than six or seven at the time. Our neighborhood in Dallas, or Highland Park to be exact, was strictly upper-middle class, and no one even thought about keeping chickens. No one except the Williamses, who, true to their roots, kept a few penned in their garage. I still remember one bright morning, standing quietly, watching Swann stroll into the garage, grab an unlucky bird by the neck and carry it out, squawking. Down went the chicken onto the flat of a tree stump, where a hatchet was conveniently at hand. Whack! I was fascinated to see the headless bird run helter-skelter for a few minutes, blood pumping from its neck. It was all done so smoothly, so casually, that I wasn't frightened. As for the chickens, the Williamses' other neighbor, a superior court judge, had long since lost his patience, and soon the chickens were gone for good.

Another, more pleasant memory was when Uncle Swann took me to his favorite haunt, the Union hiring hall, which he called "the Labor Temple." I sat and watched the men play domi-

noes and listened without much comprehension to the spirited small talk. They had a bar there, even though liquor by the drink was illegal in Texas, and I was mighty proud to be served a Coke with a Maraschino cherry in it when Uncle Swann got his glass of bourbon.

Food, and especially well-seasoned fresh vegetables, played an important part in Uncle Swann and Aunt Zee's enjoyment of life, as was true for most Southerners of their era. Many summer evenings, Zee or Swann would knock on our kitchen door, carrying a steaming bowl of their flavorful version of some fresh vegetable dish. Fresh-from-the-garden green beans with fatback. Okra and tomato stew, fragrant with cumin and chilies. Their best dish by far was cream-style corn. This was none of your canned stuff, but sweet white corn, freshly cut off the cob and simmered in milk, then thickened with bacon-dripping *roux* and generously seasoned with white pepper.

Zee's outgoing personality gave her a wide circle of friends—mostly in Dallas's fashion industry—ranging from a young Stanley Marcus (of Nieman-Marcus fame) to reed-thin fashion models. It always seemed to me that as soon as the sun went down, a party got underway at Aunt Zee's. She sat like a *salonnière* in her large, comfortable family room, which was per-

haps as close to a *salon* as Dallas had to offer. She always had her phone—the black kind with a cord and a dial—at hand, calling latecomers, inviting new people, or just gossiping. Sometimes a few regulars played canasta late into the night. After my dinner-time, I was often invited to mix, mingle, and generally entertain the grownups. If the party happened to be small, Zee would often say around eight o'clock, "Let's go out to the drive-in." This was not a movie, but Lobello's, a classic Forties place on the edge of North Dallas, complete with car-hops and curbside service. We piled into Zee's Ford V8, with me joyfully in the rumble seat, often with Aggie, one of Zee's young friends, about whom I was teased a lot. The adults had Red Cap ale, and I got a Coke. I was content to just drift in the warm night, under the lights of the drive-in, lulled by the murmur of the talk.

Christmas was a major holiday for Swann and Zee, not so much for religious reasons, but for the excitement, the food, and the opportunity to host a really big party. When I was very young, I was always invited over to watch them decorate their tree. I remember being particularly delighted by a delicate purple-glass bunch of grapes, which I was never trusted to put on the tree by myself.

On Christmas Day, the guests began arriving around noon, and cars were parked up and down our block. A buffet table in the dining room was loaded with a huge ham, fried chicken, pinto beans, cheeses, various side dishes, biscuits and rolls, and assorted Christmas cookies. But the heart of the party was an enormous bowl filled with Zee's famous eggnog. As far as I knew, the recipe was one egg, one quart of half-and-half, and one quart of bourbon, scaled up to fill the bowl. Fueled by that eggnog, the growing party became noisier and smokier with each passing hour. When I was young, Zee always invited me over "to help her put film in her camera," and as I approached my teens, I became the roving photographer. It was like being in a movie. There was often a strolling guitarist, who had slicked-back hair and a pencil-thin mustache; I never knew if he was a guest or merely hired for the party. In a corner, there might be a lovely young model, beautifully dressed, in earnest conversation with some middle-aged man, both of them obviously half drunk. The women stood in clusters, deep in the latest juicy tales of other people, while their men talked business, usually a little too loudly. And in the center of it all was Zee, drifting from group to group, refilling glasses and plates, and generally encouraging the merriment.

At some point, Zee began distributing the pile of presents under the tree. They were trinkets and off-color gag gifts, and each one produced shouts and paroxysms of laughter. After the party began to die down, I went home dazed, my senses saturated with noise and smoke.

I was a college junior when I went to my last party at Aunt Zee's. The crowd was smaller and quieter, and certainly not as young as in the old days. On the other hand, that high-octane eggnog hadn't changed a bit, and I could now have a glass to myself. Instead of fielding questions like "What are you studying in school?" I was asked, "How's your love life?" I admit that I enjoyed that last party much more than their parties when I was twelve.

Aunt Zee and Uncle Swann, though childless, were like a second mother and father to me, or maybe "indulgent grandparents" would be more accurate. I had the time of my life whenever I was with them.

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## **A PENNSWOOD CONNECTION** by **Claudia Burbank**

I was thumbing through a 2010 *People of Pennswood* directory when something caught my eye. It was the

name of a city: Berlin, New Hampshire (pronounced BUR-lin). It was where Louise Richter, a resident, had once lived. *Richter* had a vague ring to it, but perhaps I was confusing it with another time in life; it sounded like a name I should know.

I have never encountered anyone this far south who lived in Berlin, New Hampshire. The city is hardly an hour from the Québec border. It sits at the northern rim of the White Mountains and once contained three major paper mills; for about 50 years, it claimed the largest paper mill in the world. The majority of residents were French Canadians, followed by Norwegians, Russians, Swedes, Finns, Germans, Irish, Syrians, and Lebanese. My father's Yankee family was a minority in Berlin. I spent my summers there, and in St-Patrice de Beaurivage, P.Q., with my mother's Québécois family.

I was sad to see in the current *People of Pennswood* that Louise Richter was deceased in 2011. Then I noticed the name above hers—George Richter, Jr., her husband, deceased in 2010. That name rang a stronger bell, but I still couldn't place it. He was not among my father's schoolmates or ski-jumping buddies (Berlin had a world-class jump, and Pop was a champion ski jumper). I made a mental note to try and track down more information. But that vanished, as

often happens, in the quicksand of mental notes.

It wasn't until sometime later, while rechecking some old census data on Berlin, that I saw it: two houses down from my grandparents were George Richter, Sr., his wife, and young son George, Jr., future Pennswood resident.

It came back in a flash. My father, in college during the Depression, had fallen in love with X-ray crystallography and was set on pursuing a Ph.D. My grandfather, a stockbroker unfamiliar with prospects in science, fretted. Could a good career be had? Were the jobs secure? He turned to his friend and neighbor George, Sr., a chemical engineer with the Brown Company paper mill. George assured him that fine careers in science abounded, and with a solid future. He offered to have my father visit the labs there, and Grampa, hoping his son would have second thoughts, agreed.

My father went on to MIT, the Manhattan Project, Oak Ridge National Labs, and Bell Labs, Murray Hill, New Jersey, where he performed basic research for over thirty years and served as President of both the American Crystallographic Association and the International Union of Crystallography. He knew nothing of his father's concern until later. From time to time,

he recounted the story with a chuckle, touched by his father's worry and grateful for Mr. Richter's counsel. And if George Richter, Sr. hadn't reassured my grandfather? We'll never know. But I'm sure my father and his parents would have been tickled to know, a generation later, the Pennswood connection with their long-ago neighbors.

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**WALKING WITH OMA**  
by **George H. Kurz**

One morning on Memorial Day weekend, ten family members started walking a lovely path at Mohonk Mountain House near New Paltz, New York. It was a gradual ascent through the woods with beautiful lake views to a point called Eagle Cliff. Before long, Rebecca, our youngest grandchild, found herself falling behind the group. She began to feel bad that she couldn't keep up with the pace of the others. That is, until she realized that Elisabeth, her Oma (grandmother), had also fallen behind and was walking right next to her. Rebecca told Oma how she was feeling. Oma took her hand and lovingly reminded her that Rebecca was the youngest and Oma was the oldest and that was okay. "We have to stick together." The others could walk on ahead. She and Rebecca would walk

the Eagle Cliff Road and enjoy every minute of it, just the two of them. And they did. Rebecca has never forgotten how special she felt that day.

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**CAPE COD FISHERMAN**  
by **Norval Reece**

Old Cape Codder  
Weathered and worn  
Like driftwood on an empty beach;  
Scorning cane  
He walked his morning mile ramrod  
    straight  
With artist's eye alert for shorebirds  
And honking geese.

Pulling his eel traps in the bay  
Baited with she-crab,  
Flat-bottomed boat  
Bobbing on the waves;  
Or fishing the deep water  
Beyond the old wreck  
    of the *Pendleton*,  
He seemed a part of the sea itself.

A sea-going philosopher  
To every man who passed his way;  
Mark Hopkins and Socrates  
In one end of a wooden boat  
Holding forth on high tides  
    and haddock,  
Shifting shorelines and southwest  
    winds,  
Forecasting weather by the  
    setting sun.

Old Yankee gentleman,  
History itself;  
Judging not quickly but well;  
Independent and unencumbered  
By plastic labels and pigeonholes  
He searched the universe  
With stubborn probing lantern.

Old Cape Cod fisherman  
Nearly blind  
Saw more clearly than the rest of us.

*In memory of my father-in-law  
George E. Benson.*



**MY FLING  
WITH WILDENSTEIN**  
by Gaby Kopelman

Some time in the early Sixties, the art restorer Mario Modestini asked me if I would be willing to work for Wildenstein, an old and powerful name among dealers of Old Master paintings, with branches in Paris and New York. Mario had personally guaranteed the quality of my work, and Daniel Wildenstein was anxious to have me on board.

I, of course, agreed to Mario's proposal. I was then working on my own in New York and, though I had enough work, the more clients, the better!

Mario made it very clear, however, that the fact that it was he who'd recommended me, had to remain an *absolute secret*, just like the fact that Mario and Wildenstein had been, and were continuing to be, partners in many a deal, or that Mario, unbeknownst to Wildenstein, was equally "close" to Wildenstein's arch-rival, the dealer Rudolph Heineman.

Yes, yes, I'd been in that world long enough to know what went on behind the scenes.

Soon thereafter, I started receiving work from Wildenstein. I dealt mostly with Louis Goldenberg, then the head of Wildenstein, New York. Goldenberg knew nothing about paintings, but it was all very simple and pleasant—I did the work, and my bills were paid upon receipt.

I had done a few paintings for Wildenstein, when Daniel Wildenstein himself came to New York and asked me to come and see him. He explained that he really needed someone like me, but in *Europe*. "You could have a studio in Zurich, Geneva, or any other suitable place you choose, and I'll be your client!" he declared, grandiosely.

I was flattered, but told him that New York was my home, and that I had no wish to move to Europe. However, after some discussion, a compromise

was reached: Most of my summers were spent in Europe anyway, so I agreed to go to Paris on my own and work for them there for a couple of months as an independent contractor, just as I was doing in New York. I was elated—not only would I be in Paris, but I’d be paid for it!

It all seemed to go swimmingly. That summer I rented a small, cozy apartment in Paris on the Rue de Bac and, as soon as I settled in, went to work for Wildenstein in their large townhouse on the Rue de St. Honore. Wildenstein at first suggested I share their in-house studio with their restorer, but I insisted on separate but equal quarters, and was installed in their Grande Bibliotheque, where I worked away happily and undisturbed for the next few weeks, until it was time to present my first bill.

Since I preferred to keep my independence, this bill in no way reflected my travel expenses and rent, and my charge for cleaning and restoration was in keeping with my New York rates. I also wrote some estimates for paintings I was scheduled to work on next.

I presented the bill to M. Huysman, Daniel’s assistant, who presided in the outer office and, saying that he would show it to M. Wildenstein, Huysman then disappeared into the inner sanc-

tum, where presumably sat The Great Man himself.

A few minutes later, he reappeared: M. Wildenstein was sorry, but this bill was much too high. “Higher than he’s used to paying in Spain or Italy!” M. Huysman exclaimed in pained astonishment.

I looked at him dumbfounded. “But what does he think this work is worth?” I asked.

“He’ll pay half,” M. Huysman answered without hesitation.

With an equal lack of hesitation, I picked up my bill and left.

As soon as I got home, I called Mario Modestini in Switzerland, where he was staying with the Heinemans, and, still shaken, told him what had happened. “What should I do?” I asked.

“Well,” he said, “I’d try to be very nice . . . .”

It was obvious, now that I was *persona non grata* with Wildenstein, far from coming to my rescue, Mario was washing his hands of the whole affair. This was it—once again, I was on my own. Not only had I lost my new and potentially best client, my friend Mario felt he’d been betrayed.



In exquisite French—with the help of a translator—I wrote Daniel Wildenstein a Dear-Jean-letter, recounting exactly what had passed between me and Huysman, expressing my infinite regret that under these circumstances it was not possible for me to continue working for him, and telling him that I was leaving for Italy the next morning. I was determined to wash that whole episode out of my hair, and what better place to do so, than with my friend Tamara at her country house in Sperlongha?

A couple of days later, while lounging in the bucolic splendor of Tuscany, I received a letter from M. Huysman, saying how very sorry he was about “our little misunderstanding.” The letter was accompanied by a check that not only paid my bill in full, but also included payment for future work only estimated. I wrote back at once, correcting *his* mistake with a check for the sum of the estimates. And that was the end of my relationship with the house of Wildenstein.

I spent a lovely few weeks in Italy and, as usual, returned to the States by way of London, one of my favorite places, where I had several good friends, among them Geoffrey Agnew and his son Julian, major dealers of Old Master paintings, and very close to both Rudolph Heineman and Mario Modestini. I was still shaken by my recent experience and had always

been fond of Geoffrey. So, over a lovely lunch of Dover sole and white wine, I poured my story into his sympathetic ear, even going so far as to reveal that it had been his good friend Mario who’d recommended me to Daniel.

There was no love lost between Thos. Agnew & Sons and the house of Wildenstein, and Geoffrey was suitably outraged on my behalf. However, he asked, since it appeared I was willing to work in Europe, if only in the summers, why not work in London?

Why not indeed?

I agreed enthusiastically, and for the next couple of summers spent maybe six weeks working in London. Besides Agnew’s, I had other good London clients: Colnaghi, Brod, and others who’d heretofore sent me paintings to New York and who were delighted to hear that I’d be spending some time in London.

It all worked out splendidly for me, but my indiscretion caused Mario Modestini some discomfiture. Later that summer, Geoffrey’s son Julian was visiting the Heinemans in Lugano and, quite innocently, mentioned that I had been working for Wildenstein. The news hit like a bombshell. As Julian told me later, Rudolf Heineman had a veritable temper tantrum, practically foaming at the mouth, and

swearing that never again would he, nor his good friends Agnew or Mario, ever again give me a single painting to do!

When Julian protested that this was absurd and unfair, especially since it had been Mario who'd recommended me to Wildenstein, Heineman swore that this was the end of his partnership with Mario, etc., etc.

It took all the tact and wits of Lore Heineman, Rudolf's wife—who happened to have been sleeping with Mario for some time—to forge a reconciliation between her husband and her lover. It took a bit of effort, but by the time the autumn auctions rolled around, the usual partnerships, crosses and double-crosses resumed at their normal pace.

And once again, all was peace in the world of Old Masters. On the surface, in any case.



**TORN**  
by **Deidre Crumbley**

As I walk the road to dawn  
Night falters at my side  
Longing to meet the gift of day  
Dreading the loss of its self to light



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