

## 49 North Central Avenue

### *History Hidden in Plain Sight*

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I suppose that in some roundabout way I have Soly, Belarus to thank for my rekindled interest and appreciation for my childhood hometown — Valley Stream. After researching my Eastern European roots for well over a decade, I eventually hit the proverbial “brick wall” and couldn’t retrieve any further information on my progenitor’s ancestral *shtetl*. Reluctantly, I began to travel forward in time, to my family’s more recent past.

I don’t want to give the impression that I was completely ignorant of Valley Stream history — I was not. I knew the basics. I had read Howard Ruehl’s *History of Valley Stream 1840–1975* when it was published in 1975. It was that very book that I reached for when I decided to make my half-hearted plunge back into the waterways and farmlands of Valley Stream. Leafing through the familiar pages for inspiration, my eyes settled on the Central Avenue (originally known as Sand Street) chapter, which noted the homesteads, farms, and businesses that dotted the area north of Merrick Road. Of course, none of these properties exist anymore. Anton Brun’s residence and tavern was located where the Church of the Blessed Sacrament stands today. Hendrickson Avenue marks the general vicinity of Sidney Hendrickson’s dairy and then later, John Hendrickson’s contracting business. Key Food on Central Avenue and Fenwood Drive was once the site of Aulis Finn’s farm. The Joseph March farm was on the east side of Central Avenue, north of Hendrickson Avenue. And all that remains of Smith Stringham’s farm is a street named after him — Stringham Avenue.

There was another business mentioned in the Central Avenue chapter — Oscar Pflug’s

Grocery Store. Included was a black and white photograph of a one-story flat-roofed building with a striped awning and attached house. The caption read: “Oscar Pflug, First Village Trustee, had a store on Central Avenue.” Curiously, though, the location was not noted. Where on Central Avenue was Oscar Pflug’s store?

I went directly to Ancestry.com to access the Pflug (pronounced “Flewg”) census records for Valley Stream. The surname was unusual enough to ensure locating these records. I quickly found Pflug census records dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century for Oscar’s father, Jacob. The 1930 census, however, was the first census to note the actual house number, in addition to the street name. The Pflugs lived at 49 North Central Avenue.

Next, I typed the address into Google Maps. The address popped up immediately: it was located across from the CVS pharmacy, one block north of Merrick Road, on the east side of the street. Stein Street was the cross street to the north, and Stringham Avenue was the cross street to the south. Encouraged, I switched from the aerial view mode to the “Street View” option, allowing me to drive, virtually, up and down Central Avenue. When I “pulled up” to 49 North Central Avenue, I was stunned by what I saw — the house and business matched the black and white photo in Ruehl’s book! Unfortunately, my happiness was short-lived. In February 2014, a fire destroyed the store and damaged the attached home.

What irony! No sooner had I discovered that the Pflug house and store were still standing — a miracle to say the very least — than it almost burned to the ground.

A seven-page property card for 49 North Central Avenue from the Nassau County Land Records website notes that the house was built in 1894. It includes a sketch of four buildings: a two-and-a-half story house, an attached store, and two barns — one behind the house, the other to the left of the house. The barn to the left is no longer part of the original lot. The structure was torn down and in its place is Cheech Performance, a Volkswagen auto parts store.

The September 20, 1894 edition of the *Brooklyn Eagle* confirms the year the house was built: “Ground will soon be broken for a two story and attic frame cottage on Central Avenue, for Oscar J. Pflug. It will contain all improvements and has hot air heating.” The *Hempstead Sentinel* reported on April 25, 1902, “Oscar Pflug has set out a privet hedge in front of his premise on Central Avenue, making quite an improvement.” An architect I spoke with regarding the style of the house determined that it would probably be considered an unadorned Victorian, noting that it was “certainly no painted lady,” (a quaint way of describing a colorfully embellished home of Victorian or Edwardian design.)

Four months after the fire, I visited the Pflug property. It was a bittersweet experience to see the buildings in such a sorry state. I was thrilled however, to find that the pillars that graced the front porch, the same ones featured in the undated photograph, were unscathed. I ran my hands up and down them, hoping no one was witnessing my odd behavior. Noticing the open cellar door, I peered down into the darkness and caught a glimpse of a circular brick structure (which I later learned was a cistern). Stepping over broken glass and charred wood, I gingerly walked into the backyard and inspected the old barn-like garage. The structures — the house, store and barn, were covered in white shingle siding, certainly not original to the buildings. I took one last look around before heading home to Connecticut.

The property, vacant since the February fire, was remediated for asbestos in November 2014 in preparation for its demolition. I asked Valley Stream Historical Society (“VSHS”) vice president, David McKean to photograph the property after the remediation. The photos I received from Dave unveiled the property’s true beauty. Stripped of the scorched white siding, the original wood shingles were golden with age, lending the buildings a more dignified presence. The most glorious discovery, and one which I wished I had experienced first-hand, was the transformation of the barn. Revealed beneath the stripped off siding was the stenciling of an old sign that read: “Seed Center.” Three boarded over windows also became visible, their frames a pale aqua. Yes, the barn-turned-garage is in serious disrepair and literally falling down, but this did not lessen my pleasure. These are moments that all local history buffs live for — the literal uncovering of the past, the un-layering of time.

Oscar’s grandfather, Leopold Pflug (1816–1908), a tailor by profession, and his wife Dorothy, immigrated to the United States in 1850 from Darmstadt, Germany. According to the 1855 census, they settled in Brooklyn with their five children, ranging in age from 6 to 14. Leopold was widowed by 1870, and by the 1880 census, he was living in Franklin Square. His oldest son Jacob (1841–1917), who was also a tailor, moved to Valley Stream. Jacob and his wife Elizabeth raised seven children; Oscar Jacob, the second oldest, was born on April 26, 1874.

In the 1900 census, Oscar, his wife Elizabeth, and their baby son Ira, who was born in 1899, were living on Central Avenue. His profession is listed as a grocery salesman. In 1901, their son Raymond was born. Florence Kinsey Grimm, in her 1987 VSHS oral history recording, explains that before Oscar opened his store on Central Avenue, he worked at J.F. Felton, Grocery & Seedman, a general store that was located on the northeast corner of Central Avenue and Merrick Road. According to

the 1910 census, Oscar was listed as a retail grocer. “We bought our groceries from Pflug’s Grocery Store,” recounts Madeline Kappauf in her 1975 *Mini Memoir of Valley Stream*, “and our order was delivered by horse and wagon.”

By the early 1920s, Valley Stream’s population had grown considerably. New residents came from self-governed cities that believed a village form of government worked best. It took three elections before the move to incorporate was finally approved. In the final election on January 30, 1925, Henry Waldinger was elected president (the title was changed to mayor in 1927) and Oscar Pflug, age 52, was elected as a one-year trustee. There is a photo of the first Village board, taken in 1925, in Ruehl’s book; Oscar is seated in the front row, fifth from the left, to the right of Henry Waldinger. This wasn’t Oscar’s first foray in government and community participation. Pflug, at age 23, was an Inspector of Elections for District 16 of the Republican Party during the Town of Hempstead’s 1896 election.

The same year that Oscar became a Village trustee, he was also elected trustee at the Bank of Valley Stream located at 195 Rockaway Avenue. The bank, a casualty of poor management and the Depression, closed its doors in 1933. Three directors of the bank were adjudged bankrupt, including Mayor Arthur J. Hendrickson. Oscar, although not a trustee during that time, lost all his savings. He passed away “suddenly on Sunday, February 25, 1934,” as noted in his *Nassau Daily Review* obituary.

Roger Pflug never met his grandfather. Oscar’s only surviving grandson was born in 1942, eight years after Oscar’s death. The youngest son of Ira and Martha (Peggy), Roger and his wife Linda (nee Bowen) are both graduates of Central High School. They now live in Covington, Georgia. We chatted recently over the phone, “My dad was a 16-year veteran of the Valley Stream Fire Department and I believe my grandfather Oscar served, as well.” He explained that in 1956, Roger and his father

moved to 49 North Central Avenue to live with Oscar’s widow, Elizabeth (his grandmother). They lived in the house until his father passed away in 1957. When his grandmother died two years later in 1959, the ownership of the property went to his Aunt Evelyn, his Uncle Raymond’s widow. He was surprised to hear that the family homestead was being torn down. He hasn’t been back to Valley Stream in over 20 years. “One last thing,” Roger mentioned, just as we were getting ready to hang up, “Did you know there is a street named after the family, Pflug Place?” I did not.

Pflug Place is located two blocks east of Central Avenue. A short non-residential one-way block, accessed from Merrick Road (Miglio’s Real Estate is on the corner), it ends near the parking lot of King Kullen, the former location of Hattie Miller’s estate — a wood-framed rambling home once surrounded by pine trees and a spacious lawn. Pflug Place, alliterative in print if not in sound, has an oddly appealing industrial feel; a back street with warm brick facades.

Street signs are oftentimes the only vestiges left of a hometown’s history. Looking at an aerial map of Central Avenue and its side streets is like leaping back in time. The first settlers’ family names are displayed in quick succession, one after the other; surnames stacked one above the next, side by side, intersecting, interacting. There is an insistence in those street names, a gentle, yet persistent reminder to remember the Valley Streamers that came before us: Hendrickson, Fletcher, Stringham, Sapir, March, Remson, Raisig, Buscher, Hoffman, Felton, Payan, Crowell, and of course — Pflug.

A 1915 photo of the Pflug store and homestead was posted on the VSHS Facebook page, “Valley Stream of Yesteryear,” by Billy Florio, who recently published a photo essay book on Valley Stream for Arcadia Publishing’s *Images of America* series. This photo is slightly different than the undated one in Ruehl’s book.

In the 1915 photo, instead of an awning, there is a porch with four pillars, similar to the pillars in front of the residence. And to my delight, there are six men standing out front — all in summer hats. But which one was Oscar Pflug? I immediately compared this to the 1925 photo of the first Village board, and although there was a ten year span between them, it was not difficult to identify Oscar as a younger man, standing in front of his store. Oscar was the third man from the left, in a white shirt and a white hat, staring directly, proudly, into the camera.

The fate of 49 North Central Avenue now lies in the hands of its present day owner. The residents are outspoken regarding the re-development of this property. What will eventually be approved is unknown, but for certain, it will never again be a general store that delivers groceries by horse-drawn wagon or a seed center that supplies local farms. For the moment though, the property has been given a reprieve. It is a lovely piece of old Valley Stream history, hidden in plain sight.

There are times when I just stare at Google Maps, mesmerized, my mouse hovering over

Central Avenue and Merrick Road. I click on the icon that will enlarge this section of the map, my way of getting closer to the past. I click until I am as near to the ground as the computer will allow me. In my dreams, I *click-click-click*, until I finally break through the barrier that separates the past from the present. I am time-traveling now, riding in a stagecoach on “The Merrick Road,” past sparkling creeks filled with brook trout and ponds of sweet drinking water. Rounding the corner of Merrick, I pass Felton’s General Store, heading north on Central Avenue. When I reach the Pflug homestead, I hop off and pay the coachman. I continue my journey by foot now, admiring the farms with their neatly planted rows of potatoes, carrots, cabbage, spinach, celery, and asparagus — crops that mimic in symmetry the streets that will one day overlay this precious land of ours. If I keep walking north, less than a mile or so past the border of Valley Stream, I will reach the western edge of the Hempstead Plains, the only natural prairie east of the Allegheny Mountains; a vast 60,000 acre, 16-mile long, treeless terrain filled with wildflowers, native grasses and grazing cattle. But it is dusk now, so I turn around and head back to the Village. I want to get home before dark.