

The Valley Stream Sanitarium

— Amy Kassak Bentley

For such a grand and gracious house it should have had a longer life. The stately Queen Anne, boasting three stories of almost 3,000 square feet with a wrap-around porch, a widow's walk perched on top and open land out back, should still be standing. The house, located at 392 West Merrick Road, was on the southwest corner of Merrick Road and Montgomery Street. Today it is a parking lot filled with shiny new cars that belong to the Acura dealership.

The provenance of the building, as well as the land that it was built on, is an integral part of Valley Stream history. In 1893, the Royal Land Company developed the west end of Valley Stream and named the area Irma Park. A long-time resident of Valley Stream, William (Billy) Smith, an immigrant from Bavaria, owned a large chunk of real estate in Irma Park, which in later years would be known as the West End. In addition to his two-story home, which ran long and deep, he owned and operated a clothing manufacturing business (he was originally a tailor) dating back to the 1870s. Smith was also the proprietor of the Irma Park Hotel, a Civil War-era inn that opened in the 1890s. The hotel, in the 1920s, was transformed into the world-renowned Pavillon Royal nightclub. In 1906, Smith passed away and Joseph Buscher, a butcher, who was also born in Germany, bought much of the land in Irma Park. In 1908, Buscher built his new home, the stately Queen Anne, situated between the old Smith homestead and the Irma Park Hotel.

In 1930, Joseph Buscher passed away, and that is when the use of this grand and gracious building becomes murky. It is likely that the Buscher family suffered financially after Joseph's passing. Classified ads with this address, dated 1932 through 1934, vary in content. One lists "furnished rooms for let, board optional." Another describes the property as "a beautiful estate, horses, swimming pool, sports, dietician." One that caught my eye, from the November 25, 1933 *Nassau Daily Review Star*: "Unsuccessful in love or business? Consult a well-known psychologist. Also choose your vocation by successful hand-reading. Yovana." And the last ad I found, remarkable in its range of rental opportunities, but cryptically worded, was from the May 22, 1934 *Long Island Daily Press*: "Concessions for rent – check room, parking space, cigarettes. 500 seats, prominent restaurant, adjoining Pavillon Royal."

Now imagine the Acura parking lot, once the Buscher homestead, as the Valley Stream Sanitarium.

In 1926, Edward (Eddie) Strauss and his family moved to 42 South Montague Street, a rural section of Valley Stream's West End, located a block west of the Buschers. The house was built in 1923. If you looked out the rear second floor bedroom window, you would be facing present day Terrace Place. But the land was still woods back then and homes wouldn't be built there for another 22 years. Eddie had lost his first wife, Hannah (nee Spiro) and his nine-year-old daughter Virginia, in 1924 and 1925, respectively. The newly-formed Strauss family now consisted of Eddie, his second wife Millicent, whom he married in 1925, and two children from his first marriage: 12-year-old Grace and three-year-old Daniel. Eddie's older son, Eddie Jr., was nineteen at the time and off on his own.

Millicent Meszaros was born in 1893 in the tiny farming community of Cogswell, North Dakota – one of nine children. Her parents emigrated from Hungary in 1883. Encouraged by her older brother John, a physician, she attended the Chicago College of Medicine and Surgery, and graduated in 1917. She was 24 years old. By 1920, she was living in New York City, where the flu epidemic (which hit the area shortly after World War I ended) was in full swing. Millicent worked on Randall's Island as a physician at the Children's Hospital, the same hospital where Eddie's daughter, Virginia, was a patient. It is believed that the couple met there at that time.

Although the 1920 census lists Eddie as an engineer for the U.S. government, in reality he was a bookie, and Belmont Raceway was located a convenient four miles away. When Eddie first told his physician wife what he did for a living, she naively thought that he manufactured books, explains Daniel, Eddie's son, in his 2001 Valley Stream Historical Society oral history recording. The many phone lines that were installed in the Montague Street cellar belied his true profession. Eddie didn't live long. He passed away from tuberculosis in 1929, three years after moving to Valley Stream. By the time Daniel Strauss was six years old he was biologically orphaned. In 1931, Millicent married Eddie Strauss' best

friend, Daniel Houlihan, the very person that Eddie's son Daniel was named after. To mitigate any confusion regarding which Daniel I am referring to in this article, I will refer to the younger Daniel (Strauss) Houlihan as "Dan" and his stepfather (who adopted him) Daniel Houlihan as "Daniel."

Millicent, although she practiced medicine on Randall's Island, was unable to continue doing so once she left the Children's Hospital. Dan Houlihan, who self-published the oddly titled memoir, *I Love You, I Said, That's Nice, She Replied* in 1998, explains: "She tried and failed to pass the New York medical boards. I remember her studying for weeks in the upstairs back bedroom. She became a medical social worker for the Town of Hempstead instead, and a very frustrated one, because she worked for doctors, felt a lack of respect from them, and made a lot less money. This carried over into a kind of bitterness."

Searching through online local newspapers, I found a good number of classified ads placed in the summer months from 1931 through 1935, advertising a school that Millicent had operated in Valley Stream, most likely in her home. According to the advertisements, The Irma Park School was "a school for retarded and mentally deficient boys, requiring individual training." Her son Dan never mentioned the school in either his memoir or in the oral history recording. But the ads persisted for five years; therefore, I am inclined to believe that the school existed during that period of time.

The Valley Stream Sanitarium opened for business at 392 West Merrick Road, the old Buscher estate, in 1940, with Dr. Millicent Meszaros Strauss Houlihan at the helm. It was Dr. Houlihan's opportunity to reclaim her role as a medical professional, a doctor, in a quasi-hospital setting. Her husband Daniel was employed as a wholesale hosiery salesman at the time. When the war broke out in 1942, his supply of nylon rapidly began to shrink. The military needed nylon to make parachutes, not stockings! Daniel, however, was ready for a career change. He took over the administration of the sanitarium with Millicent's "grateful approval," explains Dan in his memoir. Daniel relished his new responsibilities, and according to his son, he was a great success: "He loved to go over each night and talk to the patients and their families who would come to visit." Sometime during that year, according to numerous newspaper articles and classified ads, the institution changed its name from "Sanitarium" to "Nursing Home."

Daniel Houlihan passed away in December of 1944 at age 50, and the responsibility of the nursing home reverted back to Millicent. Their son Dan, a lieutenant in the U.S. Army Tank Corps, still had two years left in the service and didn't return to his childhood home until March of 1946, together with his wife Audrey and baby daughter, Colleen. Dan helped his mother run the business. That lasted about six months, as both mother and son were strong-willed people. "Your father wouldn't have done it that way," quipped Millicent in her son's memoir. "Trying to run the nursing home with two bosses wasn't working out," acknowledged Dan. Millicent agreed, and handed over both the building and the business to her son. When Dan took over in 1946, the facility had 16 patients. In 1948, to increase occupancy, he added an extension to the back of the house, and under his stewardship, the patient capacity grew to 26. The institution handled both private and welfare patients and many were elderly, afflicted with either dementia or Alzheimer's. I imagine that many of the nursing home patients were referrals from Dr. Houlihan's professional association with the Town of Hempstead's Board of Health.

Although Dr. Houlihan removed herself from the day-to-day responsibilities of running the nursing home once her son took over, she remained actively involved in the community. In the 1940s, Dr. Houlihan was elected president of the Valley Stream Republican Club's Women's Auxiliary, as well as chairperson of their nominating committee. In the mid-1950s, she volunteered her time to the Long Island Hearing and Speech Society and chaired their annual Orchid Ball. And in 1957, she served on the executive committee of the American Cancer Society's Nassau division. Dr. Houlihan had one other interest – she loved to dance! And despite her short stature and stocky physique, she was "surprisingly accomplished and graceful," noted Dan in his book.

Dr. Houlihan's legacy, however, and one that ultimately improved the quality of life for many Valley Streamers, was her advocacy for the founding of a local hospital. Houlihan, a member of the board of directors of the Valley Stream General Hospital committee, received a letter from the Nassau County Medical Society, endorsing the committee's plan.

The letter was reprinted, in part, in the June 12, 1950 edition of *Newsday*: “Your request for endorsement of a hospital in the southwest area of Nassau County has been received. It is the opinion of the executive committee of the medical society that a hospital is badly needed and they give wholehearted approval of the plans outlined.”

But, the location of the hospital was a different matter. The article further explained that the committee had received a final disapproval of its plan to erect a hospital on a six-acre plot in Valley Stream State Park from Robert Moses, State Park Commissioner. Moses declared that the 127-acre park was dedicated for recreational use only. Unfortunately, despite the hospital committee’s best efforts, it took another 13 years before Valley Stream realized its dream and opened a hospital on Franklin Avenue, south of the Southern State Parkway.

By 1950, Dan and Audrey were the proud parents of five children. The roof had been raised and a dormer added to the Montague house to accommodate the Houlihans’ ever-expanding family. That year, Dan had secured his first full-time position, teaching sixth grade in Valley Stream’s District 13 Wheeler Avenue School (he would later go on to teach at Corona Avenue and Howell Road elementary schools). The teaching position was in addition to tending to the nursing home at night and on weekends, assuming the role of an active father, and participating in various Valley Stream sports. And Dan sure did love his sports! Softball, baseball, basketball, football, punchball, tennis, ping-pong – any sport, really. “The only sport he didn’t like was golf, too slow for him, and it ‘interrupted a fine walk,’” confided Colleen Houlihan, Dan’s eldest, in a recent e-mail exchange. Dan still played pick-up games, not unlike those he played in the many empty fields and sandlots that dotted the West End of his boyhood; as well as participated in a number of organized leagues – the Valley Stream Cubs, the American Legion Senior Division Baseball League, Mail League, St. Mary’s (Holy Name of Mary), and for his favorite team of all – the West End Tavern, the local watering hole.

Dan’s stepfather might have loved the nursing home business, but Dan did not. He was proficient at managing the facility – staff scheduling, food and pharmaceutical purchasing, paying bills and employees, and diligently returning all the narcotics to the county when a patient died. Staffing, however, was a particularly difficult task – scrambling to fill a shift if a nurse or aide did not show up for work. The nursing home, in time, became a burden. It was just too arduous to teach school full-time, raise a family, work on his master’s degree in education, and manage the nursing home in the evenings and on weekends. There were other issues, too. When the nursing home first opened, only Nassau County would send inspectors to visit the facility. But later, New York State inspectors visited the site, and Dan found them intolerably meddling and mean-spirited. He preferred to spend his non-teaching hours with his family and playing sports. So in 1959, Dan made a lifestyle change. The family, which by that time numbered nine children (they built a new home at 225 Dogwood Road in 1956), moved to Stevens Point, Wisconsin, where they purchased 59 affordable acres. “The nursing home was left in the care of an agent and started to fall apart at the seams,” confessed Dan in his oral history recording. “The State of New York and the County of Nassau didn’t want to license it anymore unless I came back.”

The Valley Stream Nursing Home went out of business in 1961, and the property was sold. Dan and Audrey had one last child, a son, who was born in 1963, a year after the beautiful nursing home, the Queen Anne, was torn down. Dan lived happily ever after, in Wisconsin, where he passed away in 2005 as a retired professor at the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point, specializing in journalism.

Millicent, too, moved to Wisconsin – she wanted to live closer to her family. Dr. Houlihan had been taking dance lessons at an Arthur Murray Dance Studio in Manhattan, and her instructor, Maurice Haverson (who had become her companion) made the move with her. Haverson started his own studio at the Whiting Hotel in Stevens Point, but many people in this semi-rural community were not interested in taking lessons, and the weather was too cold for their liking. With a brief stop in Miami Beach, they settled in San Francisco, where a few of her older grandchildren were then living. She passed away in 1980. “My grandmother always loved kids, mused Colleen,” and she always loved dining and dancing – she was very light on her feet.”

Franklin General Hospital opened its doors on April 1, 1963 and the timing couldn't have been more poignant and less perfect. Dr. Houlihan had left Valley Stream by that time and was living in Stevens Point. Despite her absence, however, the founding of Franklin General (now known as Franklin Hospital, a member of the North Shore-LIJ Health System), cannot be solely attributed to the efforts of one person or group. Houlihan may not have been there for the ribbon cutting and other official festivities, but as an early pioneer of this grass roots endeavor, her hard work and determination should not be forgotten. The Valley Stream Sanitarium/Nursing Home, which was in continuous operation for 21 years (1940-1961), was Dr. Houlihan's vision of a hometown hospital.