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THE NASSAU COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY JOURNAL

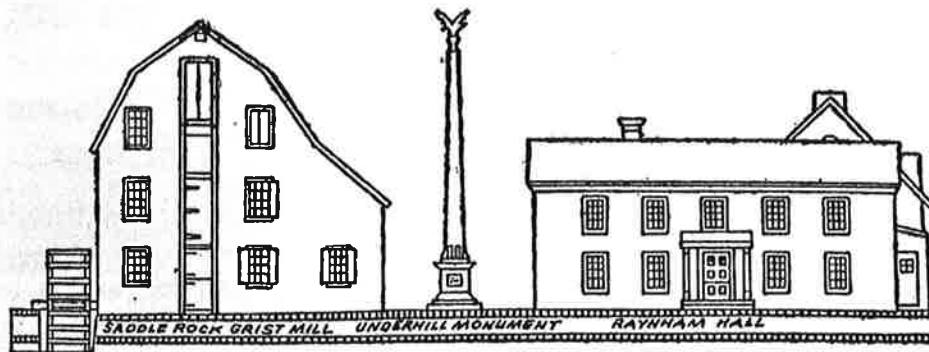
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NUMBER 1

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NASSAU COUNTY
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Notes on Contributors

Julian Denton Smith, a trustee of the Society and a well known writer on Long Island subjects, has contributed many articles for the *Journal* over the years. We are always delighted when one appears.

An author of several books on Long Island for the younger generation, Alonzo Gibbs brings to their pages an understanding and appreciation of the Island's past that will remain indelible on the minds of his readers for many years to come.

The author of the article on Nassau County's Government, Edward J. Smits, is also the compiler of the Nassau Historical Notes, which are carried in every issue. He is the Director of the Nassau County Historical Museum in Salisbury Park.

CONTENTS

MY GRANDFATHER—J. GILBERT SMITH	1
<i>Julian Denton Smith</i>	
PROFILE OF A LONG ISLAND TOWN	10
<i>Alonzo Gibbs</i>	
GOVERNMENT IN NASSAU: ITS FORMATIVE YEARS— 1900-1930	18
<i>Edward J. Smits</i>	
NASSAU HISTORICAL NOTES	43

This issue of The Nassau County Historical Society Journal is the first to be published by the Society since the issue dated Winter-Spring, 1967, Volume XXVIII, Number 1. In 1968, a copy of The Development of the Aerospace Industry on Long Island—A Chronology: 1833-1965, edited by William K. Kaiser, was sent to all members and libraries in lieu of the issue of the Journal which would have been published under the date of Summer-Fall, 1967, Volume XXVIII, Number 2. Since the Journal was not published in 1968, the current issue is numbered as Volume XXIX, Number 1, and carries the date of Winter-Spring, 1969. Another regular issue is scheduled for the fall.

PROFILE OF A LONG ISLAND TOWN

ALONZO GIBBS

EVERY town is in a real way historical. On the hill beyond it, Revolutionary troops might have thrown up a breast-work; in a home on one of its by-streets, a great painter might have been born. Either of these accidents could have marked it as an important site. But a town is significant regardless, and all of its events and the lives of its ordinary folk are history too. For, as E. M. Forester has pointed out, civilization is those intervals between the dramatic disturbances of an era. And sometimes the truly civilizing events occur in provincial places and pass unnoticed.

I propose then to tell you of the Long Island town of Valley Stream in the early 1920's. I shall see it through the eyes of a very small boy. Perhaps I shall not see it clearly, nor understand what I see, but even our false conceptions, our prejudices, are valuable as a way of rounding out the history of a given time.

The automobile was new then. There were electric runabouts, Model T Fords with planetary shifts, Moons, Packards, and Pierce Arrows. Each Sunday morning they sped from New York City and Brooklyn eastward along Merrick Road. Each Sunday evening they sped back from Montauk or the Branch, past stocky Phil Gunther, directing traffic on the corner. We used to sit in an open touring car on summer nights, eating ice cream cones and watching the traffic flow by. It was all new, all entertaining. Phil had a heavy hand when it came to dealing with violators of the law. His polished puttees shown under the street lights, his polished holster held his bone-handled gun. He was more than law and order; he was the *schout* of the earliest Dutch, and the sheriff from Zane Grey's novels.

Across from Phil on the northwest side of Merrick Road, near

Rockaway Avenue, was the place of "Pete the Greek." His restaurant was a true diner and it had the true shape of one of those derailed dining cars which were to prototype our present day short order establishments. Across from Pete's stood Eisenberg's cinder block garage, and farther down Rockaway Avenue was the wooden building of Schopps, the barber, and beyond were scattered stores like Margolis Stationery, and scattered weedy lots until you came to Muller's Drug Store with its bottles of colored water, gleaming with a subterranean light in dimly lit windows. Then you drove on south to Lang's Department Store and Mills-Muller Real Estate and Insurance, and on past other stores to the Long Island Rail Road tracks. Here the tracks split three ways, as they still do: the South Shore Line went on to Montauk; the Branch went off to Hewlett and the Rockaways; the "Dinky" turned north toward Hempstead.

On the other side of the track, the south side, Billy Gibson had started one of the first huge developments Long Island was to know. The older residents, some in mortise-and-tenon-beamed houses, spoke of the new development homes as flimsy. Apocryphal stories of pianos that fell through the floor into the cellar grew out of the native's resistance to change—not so much to change as to disproportionate, hasty change. Change, if acceptable, had to be slow. It had to be first a seed and then a tree and then an apple. We had just fought World War I to keep that world of slow change safe. Only yesterday the older folk had known the Gibson lands as meadows, woods, swamps, and streams beyond the conduit of the Brooklyn Water Works. These lowlands had given the town its earliest name, Foster Meadows. And the Fosters were still in the village, still in their fine house on Merrick Road, and Doc Foster was quick to come when you were sick, and always slow to send the bill. "When are you going to bill me for Mary's measles, Doc?" "Damn it . . . don't bother me again . . . I'll get around to it one day." Doc Foster, then, had that proper pace, just as Billy Gibson was a hasty man, as were the city drivers who sped by Phil Gunther's upraised hand on a Sunday night. The seed and the tree seemed not to be needed anymore; presto! there was the apple.

My father who was almost sixty could remember Valley Stream when it was a place of taverns at the end of a "century

run" from Brooklyn during the bicycle craze. You rode fifty miles out, had a few beers and lunch, and then you rode fifty miles back in one day. Sometimes you were lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the "Heavenly Twins"—really a mother and daughter—pedalling glamorously along.

Prohibition had hit the taverns hard. There were West's and Pitney's on the north and south sides of the track. If they were still selling beer and liquor, only those who were regular customers could say. And a new kind of roadside eating place, catering to the automobile trade had come into being: the Pavillon Royal where Guy Lombardo and his Royal Canadians entertained for years, or Hoffman's Inn, eventually taken over by Texas Guinan of nightclub fame.

We townspeople seldom went to these expensive places. Most of us were, I suspect, lower than middle class—English or Old Dutch or German dirt farmers, at least one Swede, an Italian or two, a few Jews, and the city people moving in to the wide-spread Gibson Corporation homes.

We met one another on Saturday nights when all of us came into the village to shop at A & P, Roulston's, Bohack's, Wood and Mills Hardware Store, or to deposit our savings at the Valley Stream National Bank. There was much to talk about. In a nearby town, one or two of the Home Defense, a group organized during World War I as an auxiliary police unit, had become highwaymen and were waylaying the occupants of automobiles by night. The Ku Klux Klan had burned another cross or threatened a negro. In the Klan's case on Long Island, it was not so much crime as it was bigotry and irresponsible adventuring.

My family lived in those days on a lonely farm at the northern extreme of the town. It was the old Hendrickson family farm with a homestead that had been built around 1865. Before it stretched Fletcher's Wood with two dirt lanes leading through to Valley Stream Reservoir, an artificial pond glistening behind an earthen dam thrown up by the Brooklyn Water Works which had bought the rights to all of the County's streams before the turn of the century.

The homestead faced south as was the custom in those parts, and the barn loomed to the north of it, a sheltering wall in winter. I suppose this farm was not much different from the

Schneider home down the road to the west, although it was certainly different from the house immediately east of it on what we called the Fletcher Estate. Old Fletcher owned Fletcher Shipyards in Hoboken, and some folks claimed that he had given Valley Stream its name. Be that as it may, the house was a miniature of the grand houses one can still find on the North Shore. It stood behind a white picket fence—so did our farm for that matter—and it had white columns before the door and a water tower converted to a hatchery. Young Mr. Fletcher lived there. A son of the old man, he had studied agriculture at Cornell. We thought of him as a gentleman-farmer who showed his book larnin' by using a Fordson tractor with great, cleated, iron wheels, while his neighbors were plowing and cultivating the "right way," with horse-drawn equipment.

Behind the Fletcher Estate lay a deep wood through which a wide brook ran south with a nice sense of direction toward the reservoir. On the far side of that wood, near Dutch Broadway, stood a home for wayward girls, the Wayside Home. It was not operated by the Salvation Army then as it is today, and often the forlorn wailing of a siren told of some girl's escape, either along Fletcher's Brook or by way of our brook, a half mile or so to the west.

These sounds and occasional sightings of the pursued were not our only excitement. A fanatic set fire to barns, one each Sunday until twelve or thirteen had burnt down, ours among them. And there were the tales of older folk who remembered when the dinky had hit a tally-ho full of Sunday School picnickers at what was now called Tally-Ho Crossing. These antiquarians also recalled for us that fabulous, pipe-smoking old lady who had once lived to the north of Merrick Road in a "no man's land" unlit by streetlights, between Valley Stream and Lynbrook. After her, supposedly, this stretch was called "Tiger Town"—although I must confess I do not see why.

Our school was P. S. 13 on Wheeler Avenue. It was wooden—clap-boarded below and shingled above—and it contained four classrooms on each floor. The south side of the town went to P. S. 24 as did the children from Billy Gibson's development. We had no high school, no library, no cultural life of any sort. I can recall one elocutionist who performed for us. A line of hers, delivered with the proper exaggeration of that Victorian style,

is still remembered: "It's a wonder to me that he did not fall . . . for he went through the gate like a cannon-ball." I have never been able to bury that verse under better lines I know, so she must have had an effective delivery, poor valiant thing. The Methodist minister, Pastor Medd, once spoke on the "Life of Robert Burns" and showed magic-lantern slides. I can still see Burns in faded tertiary colors fleeing over the Brig-a-doan. Or was it Tam O'Shanter?—small difference, I suppose.

But we weren't without entertainment. The trolley ran along Valley Stream Boulevard and on to Lynbrook, Rockville Centre, and Freeport. We therefore went to Lynbrook on Saturday nights to follow such serials as "Wolves of the North" at the Arcade Theatre, called by the young bloods, "the monkey house." Here I saw Harold Lloyd in "Hot Water" and bought candy with the nickel saved by hanging on the cow-catcher of the trolley.

There was also hunting. Men of the town came out of the fall woods with a rabbit or the tail of a squirrel. Sometimes they shot at helldivers fishing the reservoir, or at honkers and ducks coming down at dusk after long flights from as far north as the Labrador.

And radio was just entering our lives. We had crystal sets at first: copper wire wound around shellacked oatmeal boxes, a condenser, a crystal, and a "cat's whisker" adjusted to some sensitive spot which brought in one of the earliest stations. In order to hear the Dempsey-Firpo fight, we sat around a headset in a cut-glass bowl. This arrangement amplified the sound of Graham MacNamee's voice. Will any generation ever again be so naive?

But if we were provincial, if we were regionalists in the narrowest sense of the word, our loyalties at least were to a national institution—the Republican Party. Not in our town, though, were the candidates chosen by the common folk in caucus. If common folk chose them in smoke-filled rooms, the *Magnificent Ambersons*, straight out of Booth Tarkington's novel, told the common folk whom to choose. These Ambersons read the Saturday Evening Post, and sang in the choirs of our churches. They sent their sons off to the best colleges and permitted them to roam the town all summer in "cake-eater" blazers, with tennis rackets under their arms. To some degree these wealthier persons

were snobs. But like the academy in the arts, they provided standards and gave direction to a democracy not yet mature.

Back then, too, our towns were small enough in size so that we came to know our state senator or assemblyman, if only by sight. And with his starched collar and string tie and somber suit gone baggy at the knees, he was close to that frontier figure cartoonists still portray. It was the dress adopted by the old professional of any given discipline.

And below the state officials in rank was our committee man, who extended small favors such as freeing a busy farmer from jury duty, or speaking to the district attorney about leniency for some first offender.

Neither the old nor the young, as I recall, were as politically aware as folks seem now. The old stayed inside largely, the women knitting by heavily curtained windows, the men pulling at a pipe, playing pinochle, or reading the *New York World*. The young were out to remake society, it was the mores, not the institutions, they wished to change.

Down on the Long Beach road in East Rockaway was one of the first hot-dog stands, "The Roadside Rest." In Model-T's, some with brass radiators, or in roadsters, the young folk tore out of town of a summer's night and parked beside this eating place. Ukeles were the in-thing then and they accompanied such songs as "It Ain't Gonna Rain No More" and "Yes, We Have No Bananas." The Teenagers—we never used *that* word for them—also gathered outside and inside the ice cream parlor on Rockaway Avenue in Valley Stream. The ice cream soda had to a large extent replaced the now illegal glass of beer. Beer companies like Horton and Anheuser-Busch were converting to the ice cream business.

These parlors were all the same. Usually they had terrazzo floors and a huge fan which slowly turned against a ceiling of elaborately relieved metal. Near the door to the right or left would be a glass candy case, and on top of it decorative boxes of candy. Next, on the same side, was the marble soda fountain, and beyond it, in the cool gloom of the rear, stood round tables and wire-backed chairs. These sweet shops always smelled of melted chocolate, and sold an expensive chewing gum which came wrapped in gold-tipped paper and looked like flattened cigarettes. In our town the proprietor, Teddy, was a Greek.

Outside, under the streetlight, the youths watched the girls go by—in this one phase of our lives we were cosmopolitan. Or they wandered down the sidewalk to the pool parlor and sauntered up a step or two and entered that shabby world which existed behind windows green-curtained half-way up. To pass here at any time was to hear the click of billiard balls, the thunder of bowling balls, the crash of a strike. Bowling was not the respectable sport it is today, and we looked upon pool parlors as the hatching places of petty crime.

Sometimes in summer members of the Epworth League gathered in the evening at the Methodist Church and drove on to the moonlit sands of Long Beach for a "weenie roast" or "beach party," as it was called.

All the girls were flappers. John Held, Jr.'s drawings show them with great fidelity. They had daringly shortened their skirts, and bobbed their hair, and painted their faces, but under it all they were still as Victorian about morals as their mothers had been. A few young people frequented speakeasies or carried flasks, but the chancy life was usually experimental and hardly ever habitual. Everything back then was gay and somewhat impermanent. World War I had taught us that man not only lives but dies. All wars bring this sad fact home to us, and the shock for a time makes hedonists or philosophers out of even the otherwise insensitive.

Parties, too, were a way of passing time. Japanese lanterns hung above gardens. Lawns became bottle green under their strange, wistful light. Or in winter, the family phonograph with its morning-glory horn played the earliest tunes of Berlin or Gershwin. Nora Bayes, Freddie Murray, Caruso, Al Jolson, sang in our living room, and merry young folk danced the fox trot which had replaced the turkey trot.

And there were winter sports to keep the blood hurrying at a good pace. On freezing nights ice skaters twirled and glided over Twin Ponds, near a town to the west called Rosedale. Fires of broken box wood flared on the shores—you know the way. These ponds, so clear and full of sky then, have become the merest smutty little brooks beside a presumptuous highway.

Now, as with all outpourings of middle-age, there is the poetic side of life to end with. I can still hear, home-town of my memory, the prance of your rain on our kitchen's tin roof; the

roar of Constable Comstock's motorcycle swinging late at night from Hendrickson Avenue into Henry Street; the peepers of May and the bass voices of summer frogs crowded in some pool of an otherwise bone-dry brook. I can still see the high crowns of your roads, the horse and plow and harrow that remade them as good as new each spring; the piles of sand I played in before the road gangs came by to spread them over glistening wet tar; the peddlars and their raggle-taggle gypsy-o wagons moving over these roads once they were dry and grey and hard; the inside-of-a-cat black of your neonless nights when the stars shown clear in a smogless sky. Goodbye! Your place, home-town, is at the unlit edge of that dazzling sophistication which was soon to overwhelm us. Again goodbye!