

Ann Gilmore



This interview on March 24, 1982 is part of an Oral History of West Islip project sponsored by the West Islip Public Library. I am Ethel Morris of the library staff and I will interview Ann Gilmore, who has lived in West Islip since 1930.

Ann, where did you first live in West Islip?

We lived on Sequams Lane, in a house that was partially, the middle part of that house was moved from the corner of Totten Place and Montauk Highway in Babylon by a minister who's name was Reverend Sparks. He and his wife moved that small house to Sequams on its property where it still is and built on two wings: a garage wing and a living room wing. The center part of that house is about 150 years old. And in recent years, it was known as the Oar House; in our day known as the Sparks House, and we lived there from 1930 to about 1935.

What number Sequams is that?

It didn't have a number. It was too long ago. But it's on Sequams Lane, "Way" I guess they call it, because it faces the open area which is used as a ball field by the kids. It faces the marina. It faces south.

What was Sequams area like at that time?

Well, I don't recall any houses between that house where we lived and the Babylon Yacht Club. There were no houses to the south at all. And I should say the biggest difference is the influx in people, houses and cars since our early days.

The Babylon Yacht Club is down on the bay?

The Babylon Yacht Club is on the bay. And that was where we spent a good deal of our time.

Is that the original setting for the Babylon Yacht Club?

No. The Babylon Yacht Club, the club house, was moved from Yacht Club Road, which was just to the west of the village dock in Babylon across the cove, Babylon Cove, by barge, to its present location in I'd say early 20's. And I remember that very well. I remember my family taking pictures of it as it was floating across.

In that area there seem to be many houses with a Spanish type of architecture. Do you know why that is?

Well that was part of the early post-depression boom of building. The south shore of Long Island was beginning to come alive with smaller houses after having been primarily large estates and the developers for some reason imagined it as an American Venice. And this trend came from eastern Copiague through Islip because in Islip, Bayberry Point, there are many of those Spanish houses, much more elaborate than the ones built in Sequams. But Sequams was known as Sequams Colony in the 30's and a developer built I would say 10 of Spanish type houses with tiled roofs and stucco and very out of key with the area.

Now that Sequams area was once known as the McCurdy estate. Is that right?

Well the nursing home, nurses home, not nursing, the nurses' home was on Montauk Highway on the land which is now Gristedes. And they owned property from there pretty much down to the canal where the marina now is on Sequams. And they had horses and a large beautiful estate with a magnificent barn. It was on Eaton Lane, just about opposite Mrs. Zimmerman's house. And it had beautiful copper and weathervanes, and it was just outstanding. And Mrs. McCurdy, I believe it was she, and possibly it was Mrs. Born because there was a Born family that lived there I can't quite remember, was a registered nurse and when she died she left the house for the nurses of New York hospitals, or I guess any hospital as a recreation and rest place to come. And she also bought land, or had land on the bay, just opposite the Babylon Yacht Club, on the

point which is the end of Sequams Lane Center. That land belonged to the Nurses House. And they had a little beach house, and they swam there, and had umbrellas and parties and it was all part of the great fun that they had when they came to rest at the Nurses House. And I think they came for very nominal charges. And the nurses house was filled with all of the antiques from the McCurdy family. And each room, and I think there was over 30 rooms, was decorated in a different way, each one had their own wallpaper, its own color scheme, its own bed spread. And so the nurses always had their favorite rooms to stay in. The nurses loved that area, and built at least 4 or 5 houses in Sequams, where and when they retired they came to live.

Are there any vestiges, any remains of the estate in the Sequams area today?

Well, this is thought to be lure by some, but I remember it quite distinctly that when we lived in Sequams in the 30's, my father and others has seen vestiges of a race track, actually an exercise track for McCurdy horses. It went from the McCurdy estate, which was on Montauk Highway down Sequams Lane east around Sequams Lane Way and then down Sequams Lane Center. And if you think about it, it is a circle. And that was an exercise track. And when they were excavating there for houses and new roads they often came upon metal, sort of a foundation where the race track was.

So they probably had many horses on the estate.

Yeah they did.

What did you do for recreation when you were growing up?

Well we all loved the ocean, and my father particularly, and so on a Sunday we would drive from Babylon to Wantagh and along the wonderful Loop Parkway that took us to the Jones Beach State Park. And my father took me to Jones Beach on the opening day, which was in 19 oh probably 28 or so. And quite often we would go and go to the eastern end of the parkway which I think then ended at Gilgo and then we would let the air out of our tires so that we could ride comfortably along the beach to Oak Beach and we would go there and spend the day and see friends and picnic, and then we would come back, and *hand pump the tires*, and head back to Jones Beach and Wantagh Parkway and back home.

No road in those days to Oak Beach. Haha. What do you remember about the opening day in Jones Beach State Park?

Well I remember that it was magnificent and we all just thought it was the most beautiful thing we've ever seen. And I remember standing by one of those huge urns in which they still plant flowers; there is still vestiges of that. And of course it was all very art deco and marvelous brass and it was magnificent.

And beautiful flowers then too, like today.

Oh yes.

Very crowded?

No, not very crowded. All the men had to wear tops. No man could be seen on the beach with out a top.

That's kind of fading soon. Do you remember ever seeing or meeting any famous people around here when you grew up?

Well, I never met Charles A. Lindberg, but my father was just fascinated by this flight that he was planning. So he took my sister, I was really too young, over to Roosevelt Field for the day of the planned flight and they stood around for several hours and listened to Lindberg chatting with the mechanics and all the people who were there, sponsors about whether or not he should take off. And the weather was not very good and so he did postpone the flight as I recall for a day or two, and they didn't get back for the final take off but they did have the great fun of seeing him in the *Spirit of St. Louis*. And so on his return, after his triumph, my father took us all into New York and we went down to lower Broadway to his office and we sat and looked at the Ticker Tape Parade which was as though we were having a huge blizzard of paper. Ticker Tape was from the stock machines, which today are all digital and up on the wall, this was actual tape that came out of the machines showing how the market was selling, and how the buying and selling was going. And the ticker

tape was then discarded, and then it was saved for one of these occasions so they threw it out the windows. Like confetti.

Like a big snow blizzard. Speaking of blizzards, I understand that the winter, the winters years ago were much more severe than they are today. Do you agree with that?

Well, actually I think probably. I just remember one distinctly and that was the great blizzard of '34. And I don't remember how many inches fell but I think it was something like 30 inches, but it was a very difficult blizzard because it high winds and tremendous drifts. And we were then living at Sequams and we had no heat and no lights and lived with gas stove in the kitchen for about 3 days before finally my father and about 2 or 3 other men went with sleds to the village and were able to get us some milk and bread and supplies. And my father in law at that time, came, he was the first person in Babylon village after the blizzard coming from the west from the Gilmore Place and he came with 2 horses and a sleigh in the great blizzard. He made quite a sight coming down the middle of the road, and my father saw him. Little did he know that I was going to marry his son.

No snow plows then.

Well they were pretty slow.

Speaking of bad weather, do you remember anything about the famous hurricane of 1938?

Yes, I remember it very vividly. I was working in New York and I had heard that New York, Long Island, had a terrible storm and I was to be met at a train that was probably due in at probably 7:15 leaving New York about 6:30 and we didn't arrive until about oh I guess 11:00 that night. And we had very little information on the train about what had happened. And we got to the station, and got out and the gypsy trees and elms that used to be around the Babylon Station, many of them were down, and had squashed cars. Probably 8 or 10 cars were destroyed by fallen trees and then we realized how serious it had been. And I was met at that hour and we drove around as best we could. There were just millions of trees down, and high waters, high tides, boats up on the land. It was a terrible, terrible storm. And no warning storms in those days.

During the winter in those days, were you able to skate a great deal?

Oh yes, we skated everywhere on the bay. And not only did we skate but we used to take our car on bay. And my father would drive us over to Oak Beach and any place we felt like going.

You drove right across the bay?

Right across the bay. And I hadn't seen that repeated until the last 5 or 6 years here when we finally had a bay that would hold cars again. It was very common then. We always skated on the bay.

And you drove across the bay very often.

Oh yes. Oh yes.

So I guess the winters definitely were more severe.

I would think they were, yes. And of course the storms, you know we didn't even call that, that was the first hurricane we ever really named as such and it was devastating because no one had any warning at all. And we had, after that, many more in the '40's and even then we didn't get proper warning.

What do you remember about the Depression years?

Well the Depression years, I remember most distinctly the things that happened in New York City going in, as we often did, to visit my grandmother and seeing the lines of men in raggedy clothes in soup lines for the soup kitchen which was food supplied by Red Cross, Salvation Army, New York agencies and they were all over the city. And even in some of the neighborhoods where today there are fancy shops there were soup lines, I remember on Madison Avenue. And people were really hungry, and these men would line up, not only men but women, and they would sometimes have shelter for the night. But the biggest thing I remember was the long lines waiting. And then others were selling apples. And the apples were supplied by the

government to give these men some feeling of working. They certainly couldn't support themselves. The apples were 5 cents a piece. And there were apple salesman on every corner. And I also remember going south that summer of '31 and we went through Washington and they had the Veterans from World War I protesting the fact that they had never received a bonus for their service. And they had set up a bonus army. And it was an enormous group of tents and men living all around the parks in front of the White House and Washington Monument. And I think literally there was thousands of them. And it was not to be repeated I guess ever.

The first demonstration outside the White House.

I can't say the first, but certainly the first where people were actually living in tents outside.

Ann, I understand that you visited some of the beautiful estates that were in the area when you were growing up.

Oh yes, my aunt was quite friendly with Annie Arnold, who was better known as Ann Tea. And we used to go there for tea occasionally, my sister and I. And we liked it because it was an enormous house. It had a beautiful living room, wide windows, and the tea was always very elaborate and maids and black uniforms, white aprons, all around and it was a very beautiful luxurious setting. But more primarily, the grounds were just stunning, beautiful gardens, green grass, beautifully manicured. There were many people who worked on that estate; in fact there are people in West Islip now whose grandfather, or aunt or someone worked on the old Arnold Estate. It was magnificent.

And how many people worked on the grounds?

Well I'd say they had 10 people on the grounds and I think there were at least 5 or 6 servants in the house. I don't remember too well.

What other estates do you remember?

Well I remember the Van der Veer Estate.

And that's where Good Samaritan is now?

Yes, that's where Good Samaritan is. And that was a lovely old house with a big porch. It wasn't an estate in the terms that Ann Arnold's was. It was just a beautiful old house. And next door to them was another lovely estate, owned by the Parkinsons who I can't quite remember what he did. And next to him, to the east, was the Yates Estate.

What was Mr. Yates..?

Herbert J. Yates was a movie producer and owned Republic Pictures. And these movies were very popular and they involved Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Judy Canova who were frequent guests at the Yates place during the summer. And the Yates house, Mrs. Yates, used black velvet clothes to clean the film that had been used in the studios in California. And I think they had a studio in Jersey as well. And would just sit and polish film. And then Mr. Yates built a movie theater in the back of the house. It was a beautiful little theater which seated about 50 people. And we used to go there quite often to see Best Years of Your Lives, Best Years of Our Lives, and it was very luxurious. And then before that, I used to play there, we used to play kick the can in the back of the Yates house. And the Yates's had chauffeurs and limousines and lots of servants and it was not infrequent to be picked up from the Babylon grade school in 7th grade with Dickey Yates, who was in my class by the chauffeur who would bring us home for a wild game of kick the can and then bring me home afterwards. It was quite a contrast to the way most of us were living right after the depression. The Yates estate ran all the way to the bay and had magnificent wetlands and had a natural inlet that went through their property. And they had a beautiful boathouse at the bay side and then half way up to the north they had a tennis court and a lovely tennis house. And during Prohibition, the Rum runners, and there were many coming out of Babylon, used to go down to the Yates property and inch through those canals at night and you could hear their motors thumming away and no lights and they would enter their cargo along the inlet and would be picked up by truck.

So then the Yates estate encompassed the whole area from Montauk Highway down to the bay where the 2 elementary schools, Captree and Bayview...
Yes.

The Yates estate had many hundreds of acres.

Yes it did. And it had magnificent wetlands. I remember that. And that's where all the houses are now.

Were you ever invited to any parties on the estate?

When we were teenagers a time. Mr. Yates would come home in the summer particularly with some of his Hollywood cronies and quite often Gene Autry would appear, Roy Rogers with some of the celebrities, and they would have parties outside of the pool, the pool was magnificent and they would have buffets with enormous plates of foods, meats, and incredible foods and music, and they had a recreation room behind just south of the pool. And the parties were something that I had never seen before. They were beautiful parties with all kinds of wonderful people.

And Ann, where is your present home now?

My present home is only about a quarter of a mile from my home that I lived in 1930.

It's on Parkwood Road, just at the point where Evelyn and Parkwood meet. And the house was built by Richard Burns and his daughter was Jane Warren, a friend of mine and we bought the house from the Burns. So there's only been 2 families in that house. And when we moved there, to the east, there was a large field with beautiful apple trees and cows grazing, and those cows belong to the Nicolas family who live to the north of us on Parkwood Road opposite the Hawley mansion in a beautiful Victorian house that was about 4 stories high. And one time, Mrs. Zimmerman, who knew the family from the time she was a child, took us in the house, the house was still in very good shape and we went in and it had beautiful wallpaper and leather tin low ceiling and it had stairway that was the servant's quarts, but it was 4 stories high. It was a beautiful house, but it burned down in the early 50's. The house was in very good shape when we moved to Parkwood Road, and it was used in 1948, 9, by the West Islip School District because that was when West Islip was beginning to build and grow and they were cut short and had really no school, Higbie Lane and that was it. It was considered a fine school. A lot of Babylon children paid tuition to go to the West Islip School when it was in the Hawley mansion.

The Hawley mansion no longer stands.

The Hawley mansion no longer stands. It was vandalized and finally was taken down. And the Hawley mansion was really the Empingham...and in our backyard we had two of the old ...<too blurry>

And that pond at the very western border between Babylon and West Islip is the Hawley Pond, and that was a man made pond for the estates.

Not exactly. Because the Sequams River comes into that and that stream that fed the lake from the north goes all the way up to ...so it was a lively stream.

Ann, it sounds like you had a very enjoyable and interesting childhood. And I assume that if you had your life to live over again, you would choose to live it in the West Islip area am I right?

Yes, I think I would. I feel very strongly about living in West Islip and the Babylon area because my grandmother, great aunt, great grandfather were all involved in Long Island for many years. And that's where I spent my life living and my children spend their younger years here. And we had a very happy time. We all loved being near the water. I suppose that's what I'd miss the very most if I ever had to move out of this area. And the beauty of it is really never changed despite the terrible population growth. And of course the proximity to New York which is ...

Ann, what are you doing now? What have you been doing for the past many years?

Well, I've been working for the local paper.

Which is the Babylon Beacon.

For about 12 years. And I do a lot of freelance things. I have my own darkroom. I do a lot of photography. And I at the moment sending out a newsletter for Brunswick hospital for the employees. And I am still very active physically. I run. I like to run. I run about 5 miles a day. I enjoy that very much.

So you do write? Does anyone in your family do any writing?

My mother is a short story writer, wrote fiction very successfully.

What was her name?

Her pen name was Elizabeth Stoy. And my father's brother was a columnist for the New York Times

You come by it naturally.

Well I don't think I'm in their class. Maybe just a little bit.