

Mysterious Old House on Valley Rd.

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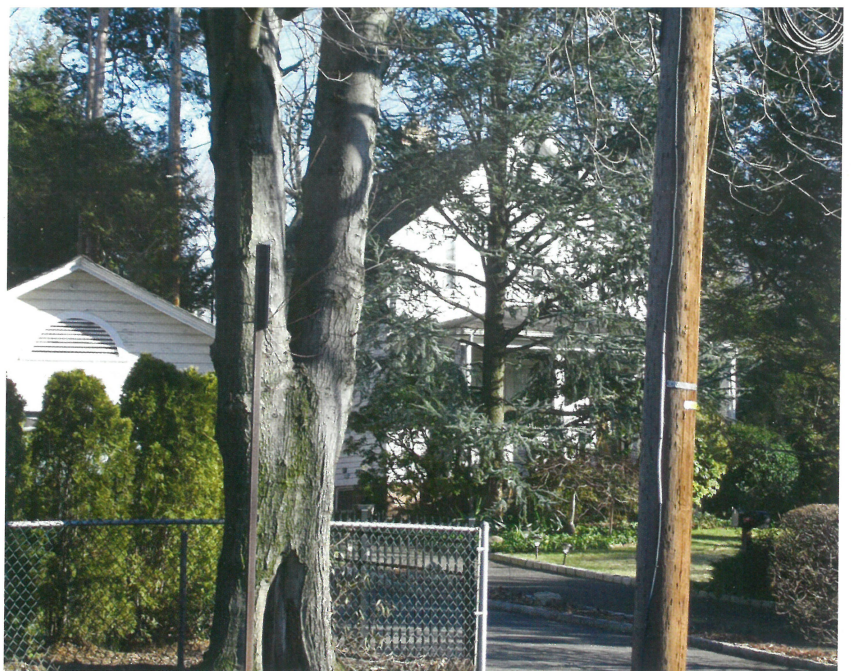
ON VALLEY RD., not far from the Acme, almost impossible to see because it is behind a dense stand of trees, is a small mysterious-looking old house. The deep set-back and full front porch gives it a mid-19th century feel. There is an outline of what was probably an arched window in the attic that has been covered over on the front façade. Windows like that were a common feature on houses built in Montclair in the 1850s and 60s. The house isn't quite as old as that. It has been vacant for a while and hasn't been kept up. That and the "No Trespassing" sign add to the mystique.

It was built about 1900 by William and Mabel (Bridgham) Wheeler. It was home to the Wheeler family for generations. The Wheelers bought the home of Israel Garrabrant in the mid to late 1890s. They built this house but didn't knock the old one down right away. Early 20th century maps show two houses on the site.

William was a butcher who had a shop on Watchung Ave. He moved his shop to Walnut St. a few years later. William passed away in 1906. Mabel continued to live in the house with her children. Mabel and William Sr. had a large family; some of her children moved away. William Jr., George, Harvey, Jennie, and Lillian continued to live in the house, for a while. William Jr. worked as a clerk in W.H. Power's shop on Bellevue Ave., then as a chauffeur. George was a plumber. Jennie worked her way up to become the chief clerk at the NJ Bell Telephone Company divisional offices in Newark. Harvey was a jack of all trades. He worked as a chauffeur for Joseph Neely on Wildwood Ave. He advertised himself as a gardener, a Furnace repair man and as someone who could fix floors in the Montclair Times. He married Mary Elizabeth Crisp in 1910 and moved out. Lillian married Charles H. Brooks in 1913 and moved to another house on Valley Rd., not far from this house.

It is not clear where the source of the water was, or who bottled it, but in the early 1920s the Montclair Times advertised that bottled water was available from the same address as the house. Whoever ran the enterprise called it Sparkling Spring Water and touted its health benefits. Toney's Brook runs near the house. That may have been where the water came from, although no one would want to bottle it today.

William and Mabel's son, George, moved to Connecticut around 1935 where he became a builder/developer. William Jr. served as a driver in the Quartermaster Corps. in France during World War I. After the war he married Lillian J. Medenbach. She had been married previously and had two sons who lived in the house with them. In the early 1940s William Jr.'s family moved to Connecticut where William went to work for his brother, George. Jennie stayed in the house with her mom until her mom passed away, then until her death in 1958. Mabel passed away in 1934.



This picture was taken quite a few years ago when the trees in front of the house weren't quite as thick. Photograph courtesy Mike Farrelly

Lillian and her husband, Charles Brooks, moved back into the house. Charles worked his whole career at the Westinghouse lamp manufacturing plant in Bloomfield (demolished). He was the chief quality control inspector when he retired.

William W. Brooks (Charles and Lillian Brooks' son) was in the merchant marine during World War II. He was lost at sea when his ship was torpedoed in 1945. His name is on the memorial honoring those lost in WWII on the island in Edgemont Pond. William's daughter, Barbara Jean Brooks, lived with her grandparents (Lillian and Charles Brooks) for several years before she was married in 1964. Lillian (Wheeler) Brooks passed away in 1964. Charles Brooks passed away in 1965. After 65 years the house no longer had any members of the Wheeler family living in it. Somewhere around the late 1960s, the noted jazz/pop pianist, Dick Hyman and his wife, Julia Ann (Gaines) Hyman bought the house. They never lived in it. They lived on South Mountain Ave. In 1971 they sold it to Gloria Harris. Gloria was born in rural North Carolina. Her parents [Maryland Lee Harris and Edna (Carter) Harris] must have loved movies because they gave her the middle name "Swanson" - Gloria Swanson Harris. They named her sister Joan Crawford Harris. Life was tough in rural North Carolina. Maryland's parents were farmers. Maryland (aka Merlin) was a laborer. Edna was a teacher in Macon, NC (population 110 in 2020). In 1938 Edna and Maryland split up. She headed north with her two children. She ended up in Montclair, where she married Melvin Givens. The small family lived on Elm St. Maryland also remarried.

Gloria went to Montclair High School then studied nursing at St. Vincent's School of Practical Nursing. She became an instructor there after she graduated. St. Vincent's School of Nursing was associated with St. Vincent's Hospital which used to be on Elm St. It closed as a hospital and became a nursing home which later moved to Cedar Grove. The vacant buildings were torn down to make way for the Charles Bullock School playground. Records are not clear as to where Gloria went after nursing school. A very short bio about her published in 2019 by The Cliffs, a senior care home in West Orange, stated that she used "her nursing skills all over the world". Gloria lived in our featured house until she moved into The Cliffs.

The house has recently been sold and we look forward to seeing what the new owner does with it. ■