

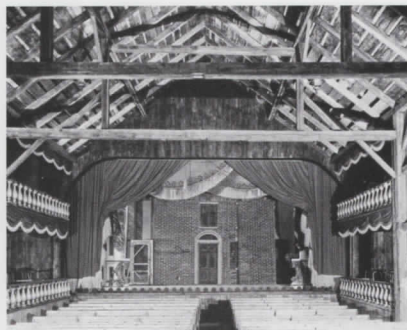
GROWING UP IN WESTPORT



BY JILL JOHNSON

A WALK DOWN **MEMORY LANE**, WHILE CASTING AN **EYE TO THE FUTURE** WITH CEDAR POINT YACHT CLUB, WESTPORT COUNTRY PLAYHOUSE AND THE WESTPORT WESTON FAMILY Y

Michael Laux, who has coached the YMCA's Master Swim Team since 1972, with Ann Smith and Allen "Onnie" Mackenzie in 1960 • Westport Country Playhouse (l. 1935 and c. 1933) • Celebrating a milestone at CPYC



Ask locals about growing up in Westport and the memories gush forth like water over the beach wall during a hurricane.

Actress Cynthia Gibb, who gives voice lessons to budding talent in town, attended preschool at the Nature Center (now Earthplace). "My daughter is now a junior volunteer there," she says. "When I go to pick her up, I experience a wave of childhood memories." Even though Gibb endured "bulldozers and mud" at Staples, which was under construction during her three years there, she raves, "I took away from Westport amazing friendships and an excellent education."

Photographer Georgiana Silk says, "Growing up on Owenoke was terrific. The kids (helmetless, of course) would have bike races from Owenoke around the Minuteman and back, with lots of wipeouts on the sandy gravel." She laments her mother's skyrocketing tax bill in what was once a middle-class neighborhood.

Artist Miggs Burroughs recalls the addition of a parking lot on landfill behind Main Street in the 1950s.

"The river came right up to the back of the stores before that," he explains. The town added a pedestrian tunnel, which Burroughs recently brightened up with a permanent art installation called Tunnel Vision. "The idea is to make it a destination," he says, "rather than a tunnel you pass through with your eyes closed and holding your nose."

Town curator Kathie Bennewitz cherishes her memories of lifeguarding at Compo. "I'm an advocate for preserving the character of Compo," she stresses. "I doubt the lifeguard shack, which brings back so many memories, will survive the new plans for the beach."

Honoring the past and progressing into the future requires a fine balance. Here we explore how three Westport institutions have struck that balance: Cedar Point Yacht Club, which just hosted its largest regatta ever, yet remains remarkably true to its simple roots; the Westport Country Playhouse, a state-of-the-art theater that is still dripping in history; and the Family Y, as it makes a monumental move, leaving its longtime home but taking along its heart. »

GROWING UP AT CEDAR POINT YACHT CLUB



Shots pre-1960s when the competitive sailing club moved into the transformed Bluff Point: photos by Peter Barlow (above) and Junior sailors embark in Optimist Prams (r.)



“ We didn’t waste our time socializing. We wanted to race.”

—GAY LAND

In April of 1887, a small group of men met just one-half mile from where Cedar Point Yacht Club now stands. They arrived on horseback and met under a tree on a spit of land that borders the Saugatuck River and extends out into Long Island Sound. . . . These men held at least two things in common. They owned sailboats, which they called yachts. And they were reasonably confident they could sail their sailboats. . . just a little bit faster than anyone else,” writes Benno Curtis, author of *A Cedar Point Century*.

Today, members don’t travel by horseback but not much else has changed. CPYC remains a purist’s club; it’s about the sailing, including a renowned junior program, which has been in place since the beginning. “It has been great for all of our children,” recounts Gay Land, who as treasurer was instrumental in securing Bluff Point for the club, in *Cedar Point Retrospective* (viewable on YouTube). “They not only became great sailors, but they were engaged in the summer in a wholesome sport.”

Land was commodore the year CPYC moved from Compo Basin to Saugatuck Shores, where members dredged a marsh to create a boat basin and built their clubhouse by hand. “We never had a dining room,”

Sailors vied for championships in three classes among 100 boats competing at the CPYC One-Design Regatta last summer. Regatta Chairman Halsey Bullen said it was Westport's largest-ever regatta.



notes Land. “There was a small bar where you could put a six-pack of beer, but we didn’t waste our time socializing. We wanted to race.”

Georgiana Silk, daughter of famed *LIFE* magazine photographer George Silk, recalls her parents joining CPYC when it was still at Compo: “I did frostbiting; we’d get all bundled up and race in the winter in the basin where the marina is now. I crewed for my dad. We had great fun.” Georgiana also recalls members’ “can-do attitude, creating the new facility on no money. They shoestrunged it together.” That work ethic persists. The members paint, build, garden, share potluck duty, instruct the youngsters. On a summer day, kids buzz around their little boats like worker bees. If they need a break, they climb a tree.

The Bemus family is one of many with three generations at CPYC. “We moved to Saugatuck Shores in 1963,” says Lea Bemus. “We bought a small sailboat and took a loan out for the membership fee. The kids rode their bikes to the junior sailing program. It was wonderful.” There were no formals, no white tablecloths. “One time my husband and I helped a fellow take a boat down to Larchmont in the sixties,” recounts Bemus. “We got there at six on a Friday night. They wouldn’t let us in the front door because we were in sailing clothes!”

Bruce Flournoy, who grew up at CPYC as did his kids, remembers learning why his mom chose sailing over lounging at a country club

pool: “The first race series we did my dad was away, so my mom, brother, sister and I sailed the boat. We finished second in the first race and won the second. My dad got back for the third race and we didn’t do so well. He was the object of some ribbing for that!” The Jackie Flournoy Cup, a race for women, is named for Bruce’s mother. The family can be found on her boat on Wednesday nights, when the sails of thirty or forty CPYC boats add the final touches to the picture-perfect sunset scene off Compo Beach.

Last summer Cedar Point Yacht Club held the largest regatta in its 127-year history. More than 400 sailors, hailing from Texas to Maine, participated in the 2014 CPYC One-Design Regatta. One hundred boats assembled for seven sets of races, including national, New England, and Long Island Sound championship races. The new, lighter and less expensive J70s in the regatta highlighted the influx of younger sailors to the sport. “Among the 100 boats, almost 40 were J70s,” says Wes Bemus, who attends Brown University and is a third-generation CPYC member. “Just a few years ago there were none, so it’s a big change. This is bringing great excitement to sailing.”

CPYC boasts one of the best sailing programs in the country, according to Bob Karpel, governor of membership; yet, amazingly, a new member (individual or family) can still join for under \$1,000, one-tenth the cost of some other yacht clubs in this area. »

GROWING UP AT WESTPORT COUNTRY PLAYHOUSE



All Westporters recognize that the Playhouse is a treasure, but anecdotes from kids who grew up here from the 1950s through the 1980s illustrate why.

“I was an usher during junior high,” says Ann Sheffer, who has been involved with the Playhouse for over fifty years. “In high school, I was in the Players, and the chief tech guy at Staples ran the Playhouse in the summers. A lot of us had jobs there. My brother was an apprentice in 1968. He did the props. He’d borrow everything from our house. My parents would go to a show and there would be our kitchen on stage or my mom’s high school diploma on the wall. It was professional but we had to scramble. We’d work eighty-hour weeks. Now everyone backstage has to be union. It used to be run by all of us kids.”

Chilton Ryan recalls his apprenticeship in 1949, along with movie director Frank Perry, saying “It was a life-changing experience.” Stephen Sondheim apprenticed the following year. “Even then, at twenty, we knew he was a genius,” says Ryan. “We had half a dozen apprentices from New York. It was prestigious and a great deal of fun.”

Westporter and artist Miggs Burroughs was an apprentice in the sixties. He recalls “painting sets in the driveway, and waiting with

bated breath to see which stars would arrive each week.”

Kathie Bennewitz moved to Westport from Washington, D.C., in the 1970s and became an usher. “To experience the Playhouse then—the building, the milieu of that summer theater space—was just memorable,” she comments. “Having been in grander, larger theaters, watching from the back of the house here and having that intimate experience and same level of quality and famous actors—to witness that was just tremendous.”

Cindy Eigen, cofounder of Kool 2 Be Kind, ushered during the eighties. “That was so important to me every summer,” she says. “Back then there were a lot of known actors. You got to hang out with them.”

Greens Farms Elementary School music teacher and performer Suzanne Propp recalls being awed by “the posters lining the walls of the Playhouse and knowing that many of those stars lived in Westport. We lived in a house on Crooked Mile Road next door to Bette Davis. My parents often mentioned Eva Le Gallienne, and one of the homes we lived in was a summer vacation spot for Cary Grant.”

Those posters imbue the renovated Playhouse with history, as do many original details. “Joanne Woodward was artistic director at the time of the renovation,” notes Playhouse PR Manager Patricia Blaufuss.

The Playhouse then (far l., 1935) and now (far r., 2005) has appealed to stars like Paul Newman (l., in *Our Town*, 2002) and Gene Wilder with interns (below, 2005)



“I recall her saying something like: ‘Make it state-of-the-art, but don’t change a thing.’ Comfortable seating was installed but retained the look of the original church pews. The walls on each side of the theater are original, with the same metal pie-plate light sconces.”

Ann Sheffer comments that her apprentice duties included “putting buckets under leaks.” She adds, “The Playhouse was in pretty sad shape fifteen years ago. It has been great fun to revive it.”

Deborah Grace Winer, co-conceiver of this summer’s *Sing for Your Shakespeare*, recalls Joanne Woodward giving her a tour and explaining that “two-foot-square pieces of the old stage were inset on either side in the wings so that every actor will tread on the same boards as were trodden by Helen Hayes, Christopher Plummer—all the esteemed actors who were there before them.” Winer, playwright and artistic director of the Lyrics and Lyricists program at New York’s 92nd Street Y, has fond memories of “a childhood spent shuttling between Lucille Lortell’s White Barn Theatre and the Playhouse.” She calls the Playhouse “the greatest regional theater in the world.”

While teens no longer apprentice, the Playhouse has an internship program and the childrens’ shows, often preceded by events at the adjoining Lucille Lortel White Barn, continue to sell out. »



“ I recall her saying something like: ‘Make it **state-of-the-art**, but **don’t change a thing**.’ ”

—PAT BLAUFUSS RECALLS JOANNE WOODWARD’S COMMENT

GROWING UP AT WESTPORT WESTON YMCA



The Y was a big part of my life as a youngster,” says former First Selectman Gordon Joseloff. “At age ten or eleven, I’d ride my bike to the Y on Saturday mornings. There was a billiard parlor in the basement where they played the Saturday morning serials, like *Hopalong Cassidy*, *Flash Gordon*, *The Lone Ranger*. After watching, we’d go across to Colgan’s Pharmacy (where Tiffany’s is now) for a Cherry Coke and hamburger. Then we’d see a matinee at the Fine Arts Theatre, which my grandfather built in 1915. I got in free. Others paid a quarter.

“I also took ballroom dancing at the Y with Miss Comer. I remember sneaking out and going across the street to the theater. That explains why to this day I’m not a very good dancer!”

Georgiana Silk reminisces about the “white gloves, patent leather shoes and puffy skirts” in Miss Comer’s class. “Everyone took her classes,” concurs Silk. “The Y even had a twist contest just after the Beatles came out.”

Later, Joseloff and friends started a radio station at the Y. “We set up a small transmitter at Compo Beach and ran a phone line down from the Y,” he says. “*The New York Times* ran an article about it in ’61 or ’62, and the FCC promptly shut us down!”

Miggs Burroughs recalls the fun he had as a Mahackeno camper in the late fifties and early sixties. “There was a giant World War II inflatable landing craft in the river, called *Moby Dick*,” he says. “The

Even in its early years, the Y has been a place to build strong bodies and strong community ties. Here, boys jump into the swimming hole at Mahackeno, now the site of the brand new facility (above).





idea was to jump as high as you could and fly into the water. It would be considered outrageous today!”

Suzanne Propp took guitar lessons at the Y. “Pru Gabert taught me ‘American Pie’ and ‘Take Me Home, Country Roads,’ when I was about ten,” she says, “and at twelve, I remember singing and playing guitar at the Salty Dog coffeehouse in the Y.” Propp also taught swimming and was a counselor at the still popular Hafaday program. “My own children went to daycare at the Y and my mom, who is a teacher at the Y, would take my daughter upstairs to Marlayne Schaeffer’s dance studio.”

Some people who grew up at the Y never really left. Mike Laux swam on the Y’s swim team in his youth, then started coaching the Y team after college and launched the Masters swim program in 1970. His daughter swam on the Y team and he continues to coach.

Since Doc Doubleday’s time, from the YMCA’s opening in 1923 to 1957, the Y has felt like family to many in Westport. His son Ed reports how Doc would stay late during the war, typing letters to each of the town’s young men who had been sent off to war. If one of Ed’s friends stopped coming to the Y when money was tight, he says, “Doc somehow would come up with the money, and a YMCA membership card would magically arrive in the mail at the boy’s home.”

The idea of moving the Y, of abandoning that “smell of old wood in the lobby—worn but substantial,” as Propp describes it, generated some controversy.

Burroughs, who was on the board a decade ago when the search for a new location began, comments, “The Y was losing people to gyms. They saw the writing on the wall. The building was charming but archaic. Thirty-five possible locations were considered, but, ultimately, using the Y’s own land in Mahackeno made the most sense. It’s on the river. There are huge windows overlooking the river. It’s a beautiful campus.”

Joseloff adds, “I wish it could have stayed downtown, but that building would not have supported renovations. The new Y is great. It’s going to be a boon to Westport.”

The board insisted on preserving the facade of the Bedford building. Developer David Waldman says the exteriors of “the fire house and old mansion will not change.” (see plans at bedfordsquare.com). Noting the 54,000-square-foot facility, he says, “It’s very possible my family will use it more than before.”

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—MIGGS BURROUGHS



The gymnastics team of 1993. The Westport Weston Family Y has fostered confidence and friendships of all ages for generations.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE WESTPORT WESTON YMCA