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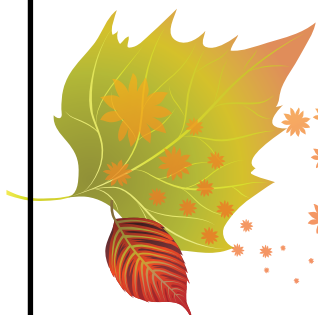
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NOVEMBER 2023



TOURIST CENTERFOLD MAP 

*The Stewarts of Mattituck  
on the 150th Anniversary  
of the J.D. Stewart Farmhouse  
— Memories of Bessie Stewart —*





# Peconic Bay SHOPPER

...preserving North Fork History

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art/sales — Rita M. Hagerman | rita.academy@gmail.com



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## On Our Cover... ELSIE!

The Albertson Store window, July 1951, featuring Elsie the Borden cow.  
(Currently occupied by The Giving Room, Route 25, Southold)

It looks like Elsie is holding a cell phone but it's a block of cream cheese. In the 1930s the dairy industry saw publicized price wars between farmers and dairy processors that caused larger dairies to be portrayed unfavorably. The cartoon Elsie was created by Borden's advertising agency in 1936 to help make the brand more friendly and approachable to the public. Photo courtesy of Kathleen Albertson DePetris.

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# The Stewarts of Mattituck on the 150th Anniversary of the J.D. Stewart Farmhouse — Memories of Bessie Stewart —

by Jim Ellwood

John Douglas Stewart was born in Northern Ireland on August 12, 1843. He immigrated to the United States in the late 1850's and settled with relatives in the Riverhead area.

In 1863, John married Elizabeth Sara Short, who had also immigrated from Ireland with her family. The couple would eventually have a family of seven children, five daughters and two sons. The first four daughters, Mary Ellen, Annie, Elizabeth and Margaret, were born while the Stewarts lived in Riverhead.

In the early summer of 1873, John Stewart purchased farmland in Mattituck. According to an article in the *Long Island Traveler* July 24, 1873:

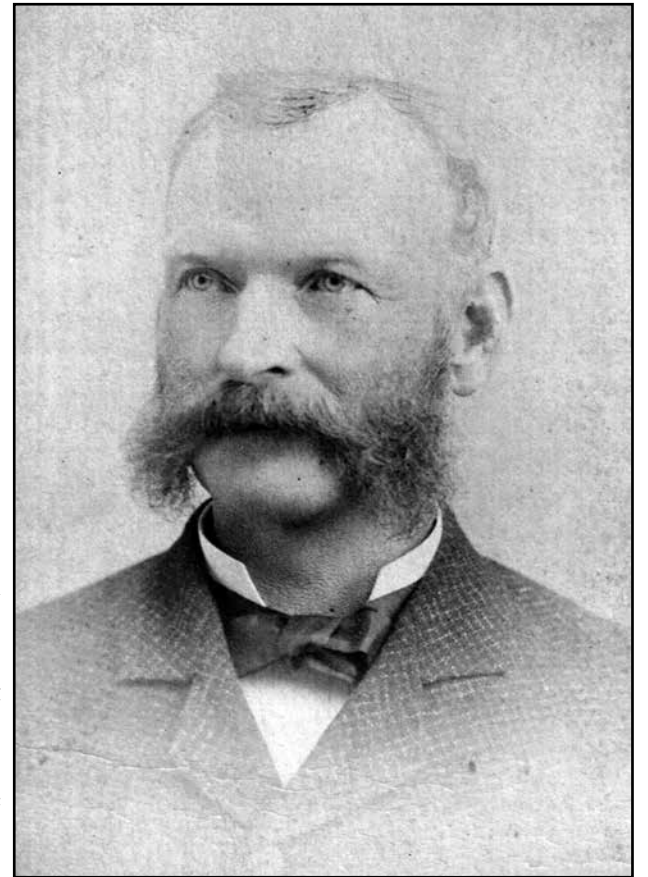
"Mrs. Betsey Reeve of Mattituck has sold her farm, containing 18 acres, formerly belonging to her deceased husband, Henry Reeve, to John D. Stewart. Terms Private. Mr. Stewart is to erect a dwelling house thereon, to be completed by fall."

The farm extended northward from the Main Road up to the LIRR tracks and extended from what is today the eastern driveway and eastern boundary of the Mattituck High School track field eastward to what is now Village Lane. Stewart erected the farmhouse on the southernmost acre of the property facing the Main Road and subsequently constructed a large barn, corn crib, several smaller sheds and a chicken coop slightly north of the house.

On the 17 acres in back of the barns, Stewart planted potatoes, cauliflower, corn, brussel sprouts and beans. The Stewarts also owned several

horses to pull the farm machinery, cows, pigs (kept in a fenced-in pen in front of the large main barn) and chickens. Like most other farmers in this area in the late 19th century, the Stewarts lived off the land, as well raising produce that was shipped by rail to the New York City area. In addition, Stewart was also a foreman for part of the North Fork line of the L.I.R.R.


In the years that followed the building of the farmhouse, John and Elizabeth had three more children, their first son, William Leslie, born in 1877, followed by daughter Agnes in 1878, and finally in 1881 their last child and second son, George. All the Stewart children were raised as Roman Catholics




John Douglas Stewart ♦ 1843-1906

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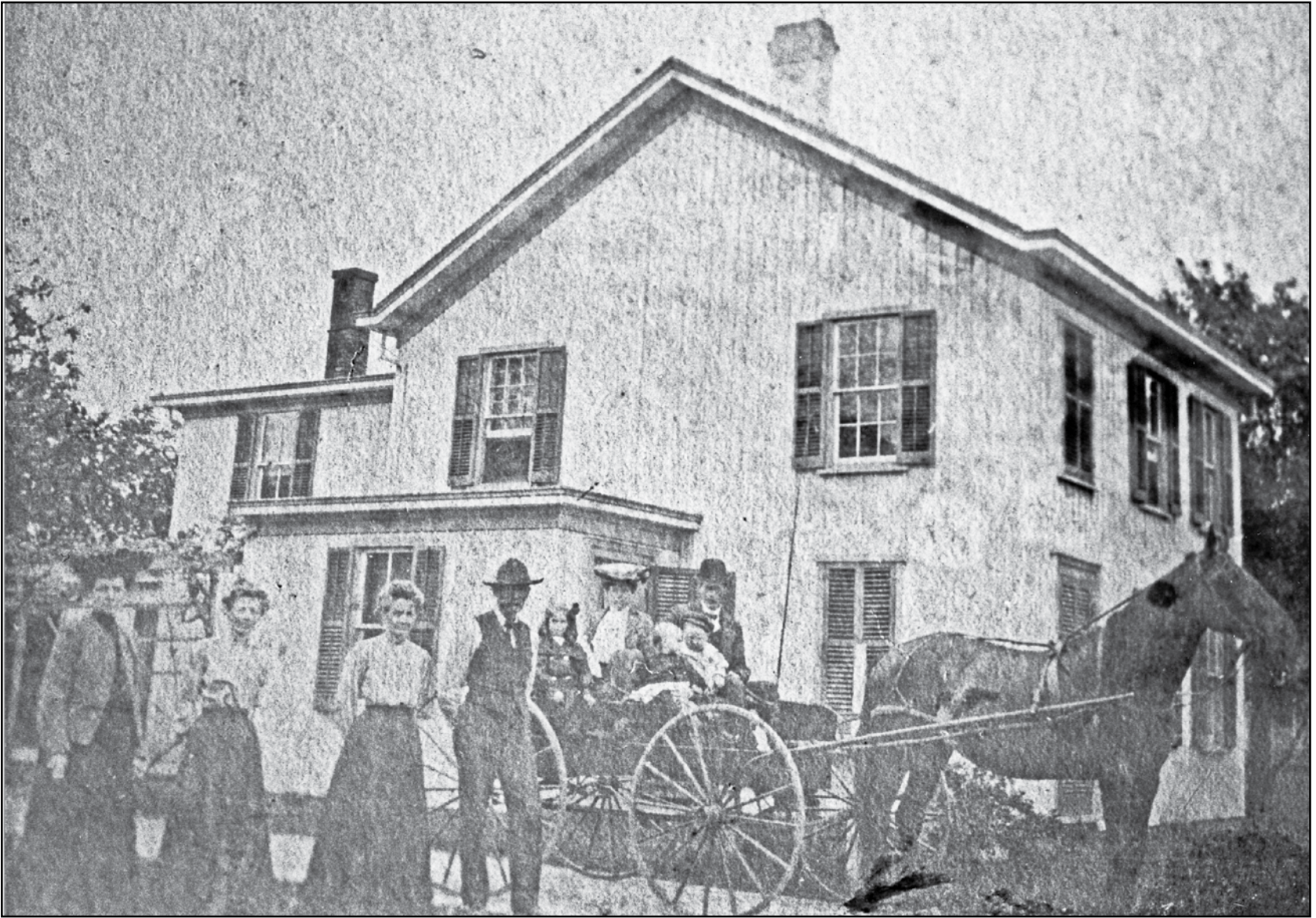
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J.D.STEWART FARMHOUSE c. 1905

Left to right: Annie Stewart Helfrich, Elizabeth Stewart Boucher, Margaret Stewart Welch, John Douglas Stewart  
The William Leslie Stewart Family in the wagon, left to right: Bessie (6), Elizabeth Seymore Stewart, Mary (1), John (3), William L. Stewart

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A young Bessie Stewart c. 1909

and attended Sacred Heart Church in Cutchogue after the church was erected in 1878.

In 1889, Stewart constructed an addition onto the north side of the farmhouse. The two-story addition had a dining room on the ground floor and a large walk-in closet room on the second floor. A potato and root cellar was dug underground below the dining room. A small kitchen was also added on the north side of the new addition.

The 1880's and 1890's saw the marriages of most of the Stewart children. Annie Stewart married John Helfrich, a builder and carpenter. Mary Ellen Stewart married Fred J. Greeves. Elizabeth Stewart married William Boutcher. Margaret Stewart married Patrick Welch. William Stewart married Elizabeth (Lizzie) Seymour of New Suffolk. Agnes married William Tresback. Son George, who had been in frail health since childhood, never married. He died from a heart attack at the age of 27 in 1909. In addition, Agnes died at age 29 after sustaining abdominal injuries from a fall off a train in 1907.

Annie's husband, John Helfrich, built two houses on the Main Road, about a quarter mile west of the Stewart farm, diagonally across from today's Matituck/Laurel Library. Both houses had floor plans similar to the original Stewart farmhouse. Mary Ellen and her husband Fred Greeves lived in the westernmost house. The house to the east was built for William Boutcher and his wife, Elizabeth Stewart. Initially, however, Boutcher rented the house

to William Stewart after his marriage to Elizabeth Seymour in 1897. During the period William and Lizzie lived in the house, they welcomed their first three children, Florence Elizabeth (Bessie) in 1899; a son John (Jack) in 1902, and Mary Agnes in 1904.

John Stewart's wife, Elizabeth, passed away in 1901. On February 17, 1906, while milking a cow in the barn, John suffered a stroke and died. Upon his death, the entire property was ceded to oldest son, William. William then moved his family back to his childhood home and went on to take over operation of the farm. The Boutchers then moved into the house vacated by William.



A teenage Bessie Stewart holding baby sister Helen, c. 1915. (Helen thought of Bessie like a second mother.)

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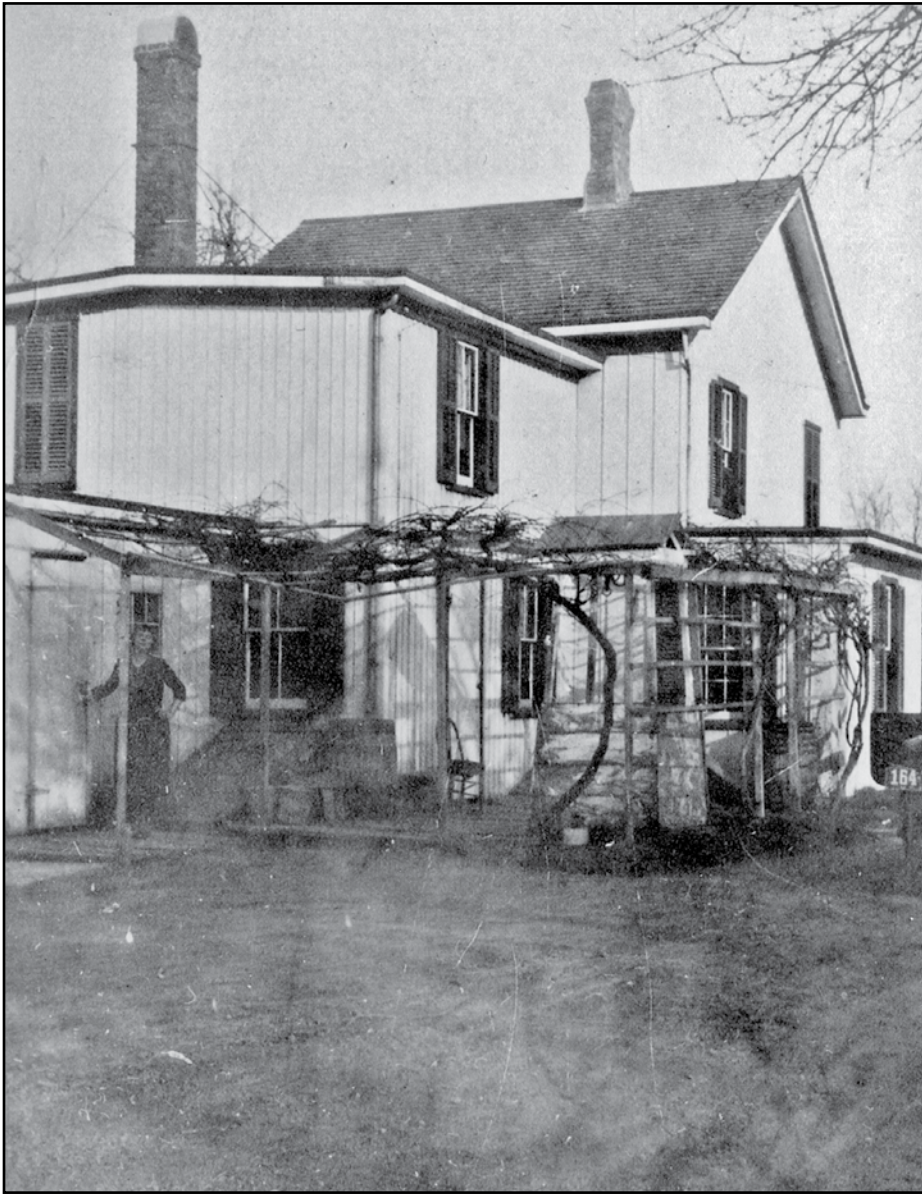


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*J.D. Stewart Farmhouse from the back, c. 1920.*

In 1913, William and Lizzie welcomed their fourth child, Helen Margaret. In June, 1920, they suffered the loss of their son, Jack, who succumbed to cancer at the tender age of 18. However, the family was consoled two years later with the birth of their last child, a son, William Henry, who incidentally, shared the same birthday as his deceased brother.

By the late 1920's, William Stewart's health began to decline due to a weak heart. Worried that if he should pass away, the work and upkeep of the farm would be too heavy a burden for a wife, daughters and a small son, he made an arrangement with a neighbor and fellow farmer, Frank Tuthill to lease the Stewart farm and take over operation of the farm if Stewart were to die or become otherwise incapacitated. William would succumb to heart failure in October, 1929. Tuthill proceeded with the plan to lease the farm, take over the daily operation of the farm, as well as the care of the livestock, raising produce for his profit, while paying rent to William's widow, Lizzie. In addition, the eldest daughter, Bessie, upon graduation from high school in 1916, took a clerical job with the Suffolk County Treasurer's Office in Riverhead, so that she could help contribute to the financial demands of the farm with her salary.

By 1943, just Bessie and her mother, Lizzie, were the sole residents of the Stewart farmhouse. Bessie's sister, Mary, married Albert Gignor in 1927, and youngest sister, Helen, married Lee Ellwood in 1934, with both Mary and Helen moving to Riverhead to raise their families. In 1943, son William joined to U.S. Air Corps (later becoming the U.S. Air Force) during World War II, and went on to have a distinguished 30-year career in the Air Force, during which time he lived in various places around the world with his wife, Annette, whom he married in 1947, and family of five children.

From the 1930's through the 1950's, the Stewart homestead was the gathering site of Bessie's sisters and their families for Sunday and holiday meals. Grandma Lizzie was a phenomenal cook and whipped up many sumptuous dinners and deserts on those days.

The Tuthill lease arrangement with the Stewart farm continued into the 1950's, with Frank and his son, Malcolm. However, by the 1950's, with the elder Tuthill now in his seventies and no longer up to the demands of farm work, coupled with Malcolm not having the desire to run the farm on his own, the leasing arrangement with Lizzie Stewart came to an end. The fields to the north and east of the barns were allowed to go fallow.

In July, 1960, Lizzie Stewart passed away, leaving Bessie as the sole resident living in the Stewart farmhouse. In 1962, Bessie sold the entire property to



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Baxter Brothers Realty, with the provision that she receive a "life estate" on the one acre containing the house and barns and could remain living on the property until her death. The remaining 17 acres were sold for development, and it was at this time the present Village Lane was built on the east side of the property.

Like her father and other members of her family, Bessie developed heart problems in her last years, and passed away in May, 1968. This brought the ownership of the homestead by the Stewart family to an end after nearly 95 years. The realty company took over the property and the house and barns were purchased by Susan Roache in 1970. Shortly after, the barns and sheds were torn down due to safety concerns. Ms. Roache would live in the farmhouse for 46 years and took great care in maintaining the property. She was keenly interested in the historical preservation of the farmhouse, and in 2007, she was responsible for getting the house listed on the Southold Town Register of Historic Landmarks. Ms. Roache sold the house to the present owners when she relocated to Florida in 2016.



Bessie Stewart, left as a young woman (c. 1920), and right enjoying her gardens (c. 1947).

### MEMORIES OF BESSIE STEWART (1899 - 1968)

Among the fondest memories of my 1960's childhood, were the times I spent at the J.D. Stewart Farmhouse in Mattituck with my Aunt Bessie Stewart, who was the last member of the Stewart family to live in the farmhouse.

Florence Elizabeth Stewart (known to family and friends as either Bess or Bessie) was born April 12, 1899, the first child of William L. Stewart and his wife Elizabeth Seymour Stewart (known to many as "Lizzie Stewart"). When Bessie was 7 years old, Bessie's parents, along with Bessie and her two younger siblings, John and Mary, moved from a house built by Bessie's



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On the west lawn of the Stewart Homestead, Easter 1943  
From left to right: pet dog "Lady Mary Stewart Gignor  
Elizabeth Seymour Stewart  
Bessie Stewart with her dog "Pal"  
Helen Stewart Ellwood  
Lee Ellwood (husband of Helen)

Below:  
Bessie on the east side of the house.



Uncle John Helfrich on the Main Road, just east of Mattituck village, to her father's childhood home after the death of his father, John D. Stewart, who built the house in 1873. Bessie would live in this house for the rest of her life.

From family accounts, Bessie was a bright, industrious child and undaunted by any task given her. As she and her younger siblings grew they helped shoulder the tasks and chores of running the 18-acre Stewart farm and household. After Bessie graduated from high school in 1916, she was hired to a clerical job in the Suffolk County Treasurer's Office in Riverhead, from which she contributed to the household expenses with her salary.

Bessie doted on her siblings, particularly her youngest siblings, Helen and William, born after her family moved to the farmhouse. Helen (my mother) was born in 1913 and William was born in 1922, and as such, Bessie being much older, was able to help buy clothes and gifts for the younger siblings. My mother, Helen, often remarked that Bessie was like a "second mother" to her. Bessie lost her oldest brother, Jack, to cancer in 1920.

Around the time of the first World War, Bessie, in her late teens, fell in love with a local young man. He went off into the service during the war, and the two corresponded regularly. Their plans were that they would marry after the War was over. Unfortunately, before that time came, Bessie received



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a letter from the young man that he had met another young lady overseas and had to decided to marry her. Bessie was understandably broken hearted, and according to my Aunt Mary, never really got over this sorrow. From that point on Bessie eschewed marriage in favor of supporting her family and the farm.



Bessie with her mother Elizabeth Stewart in the 1950s.

Bessie was devoted to her mother and the families of her sisters and brother. After the death of her father in 1929, the marriages of her sisters, Mary in 1927 and Helen in 1934, and finally the departure of young William into World War II in 1943, Bessie would be the sole caregiver for her mother the last 17 years of Grandma Lizzie's life. Grandma would pass away in 1960, leaving Bessie alone in the Stewart homestead. Bessie would continue working at the County Treasurer's Office for practically the rest of her life. She took great interest and comfort with tending the gardens around the farm, particularly her flower garden on the southeast corner of the property. Bessie had precious little time to care for the house and the yard as she worked five days a week, spent most of her time Sundays with her extended family, leaving only Saturdays to devote to the care of the property. She would keep the lawn mowed in the summer by mowing a patch of grass each evening after work with her manual push mower, until the entire lawn was mowed at the end of the week.

My memories of occasional weekends spent at the Stewart house be-



James Ellwood (son of Helen Stewart) at age one sitting in his grandmother Elizabeth Stewart's rocker in the Stewart house living room in 1957, and at age 3 standing outside the chicken coop north of the house in 1960.

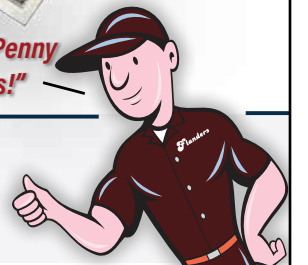
gin around 1960, when my Grandmother Lizzie Stewart was still alive. In those earliest memories as I had not yet reached my 4th birthday, I would sleep in a crib in my Grandmother's room. After her death in July, 1960, I slept in the big double bed in the east bedroom of the house. After my Grandmother's death, Bessie would have supper at either my house or at my Aunt Mary's in Riverhead after she got out of work at the Treasurer's Office. On those weekends when I would stay with Bessie at the Mattituck farmhouse, she would pack me up in her 1961 black Mercury comet and speed off to Mattituck. (I might add here that Bessie was no slouch behind the wheel!). I would sleep over Friday and Saturday nights and return to my home for the Sunday midday meal that my mother would prepare.

Spending a weekend at the Stewart Farmhouse was a fascinating experi-

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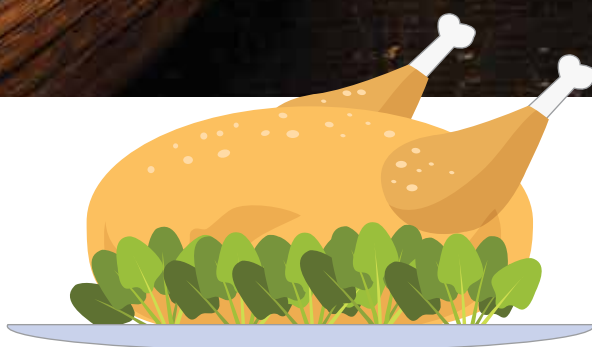
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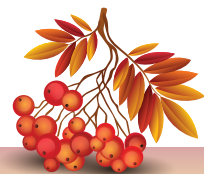
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ence for this young baby boomer born in 1956. It was like stepping back into the 19th century. Bessie had a disdain for many modern devices. During the 1960's the only appliances in the farmhouse were a kerosene stove and refrigerator in the small kitchen, and a 1950's TV set in the living room. The electric lamps and lighting fixtures dated to the 1920's when electricity put in. The house was heated by coal, with Bessie going into the cellar under the living room and shoveling heaps of coal into a large furnace which pushed heat up into the house through a large grate in the middle of the living room floor. There was also a large iron coal stove in the kitchen on which Bessie preferred to cook and heat food items. In addition to her other yardwork duties, Bess would go out to the chicken coop north of the house and feed the one sole black hen that lived on after the expiration of the other flock of chickens that once inhabited the coop and fenced-in area outside of it. The poor old hen died in 1965.

In spite of the lack of a some modern conveniences, I loved the peace and serenity of the old farmhouse from an early age. I remember arriving at the farmhouse one summer Friday evening in the early 1960's and running into the house and flopping into one of the chairs in the living room and enjoying the peacefulness of the room illuminated by the soft light of the setting sun coming through the west window. At that moment I just loved being where I was!

On Friday nights I would fall asleep in the east bedroom watching the headlights of cars coming from the curve east of the house shine across the bedroom wall. On Saturdays, I would follow my Aunt Bess about as she would go about her chores in the house and yard. This could include seeing her wash clothes by hand using an old washboard in a tin tub, sweeping the floors, or weeding her garden on the east side of the house. At some point in the day, Aunt Bess would announce that it was time to "go up to the village". In those days "the village" was pretty much just Love Lane, where Bess would go to the drugstore or hardware store and pick up her mail at the post office.

One of the most pleasant rooms in the farmhouse was the southeast room off the living room, that was referred to as the "parlor". (This was common in the 19th century where houses had a room reserved for visitation by relatives and friends when household members passed away). I remember how the sunlight streamed through the southern windows of the room in the morning. This room also contained antiques from another era, including a large upright wall radio, a wind-up phonograph and an upright piano. I would be fascinated when Bessie would wind up the old phonograph and play her old 78 RPM records. On other occasions, Aunt Bess would take out her old sheet music and tickle the ivories of the old piano.

In my younger years, Saturday nights meant getting the "Saturday night bath" 19th century style. Bessie would heat pails of water on the coal stove in the kitchen and pour them into a round tin tub in the middle of the room and I would then get into the tub of be treated to a standing bath. When Bessie was done scrubbing me, I'm sure that there wasn't a trace of dirt left in any pore of my body!

After getting into my pajamas, we would go into the living room where we would watch one of Bessie's favorite TV shows, "The Lawrence Welk Show". (Practically everyone I knew in those years watched Lawrence on Saturday nights.) Sunday mornings came too fast for me. Never being an early riser, it was tough when Bessie aroused me from my peaceful slumber shortly after dawn, so as to get up, get washed, and dressed in order to attend the first Mass at Sacred Heart Church in Cutchogue. Despite my occasional pleas to attend a later Mass at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church, which you could see from the front lawn of the homestead, Bessie would not even consider anything but going to the first Mass three miles to the east. Most likely, Bess had last minute chores to do that morning before returning me to Riverhead around noon. Upon returning from church and having breakfast, I often would begin to feel a bit of sadness as I knew my weekends in the 19th century farmhouse with Aunt Bess were coming to a close.

In the summer of 1967, Bessie's health began to fail and she was hospitalized several times that summer and fall. She would stay at our house in Riverhead between hospital stays. In January, 1968, Bess insisted she felt well enough to go back to her home and returned to work part-time at the Country Treasure's Office. My mother gave in after Bess agreed to have gas heat installed in the farmhouse and end the days of shoveling coal. I spent my last night at Aunt Bessie's house on Friday, February 9th, 1968. Late in the afternoon of the next day, my mother brought me back to Riverhead and I was quite tearful when I left Mattituck.

Bess would again be hospitalized in late April, and on the sunny, spring day of May 14, 1968, Bessie Stewart passed away. Other than being in the

farmhouse during an estate sale on a Sunday that June, I would not enter the old farmhouse again until 1988 when the owner of the house at that time, Susan Roache, opened the house to a house tour sponsored by the Mattituck Historical Society. I was thrilled to enter the house again and through this encounter I was privileged to get to know Sue Roache and visited with her a number of times at the old farmhouse over the following years, until she relocated to Florida and sold the house in 2016.

To this day, whenever I drive past the J.D. Stewart farmhouse, beautifully maintained and landscaped by the present owner, I always remember those weekends many years ago spent in the house and my beloved Aunt Bessie Stewart. 🐾

*Continued on page 14...*



*Last photo of Elizabeth Seymour Stewart two weeks before her death in July 1960, with five of her grandchildren (Jim, Bob, Kathy, Jeff and Bill Stewart) under the grape trellis on the west porch of the Stewart farmhouse.*

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Continued from page 11...



A full view of the barn, chicken coop and house on the Stewart property in April, 1966 in the final years of the Stewart ownership. (Note some of the first houses on the newly paved Village Lane can be seen between the barns.)

One more family photo — William Henry Stewart, youngest child of William and "Lizzie" Stewart c. 1926



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# Bluefish Cove – The inspiration for a groundbreaking play.

Karen Sauvigné<sup>1</sup>



In December, 1980 award-winning playwright Jane Chambers' groundbreaking lesbian-themed play, *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*<sup>2</sup> opened off Broadway, as part of the nation's first Gay American Arts Festival. In the play a group of women gather annually at a secluded, seaside hamlet on the North Fork. Their group is upset when a naïve straight woman happens into their circle and falls in love with the protagonist, Lil. Lil was played by Emmy award-winning actress Jean Smart (*Designing Women*, *Hacks*) in her first NYC stage appearance; she got a Drama Desk Award nomination for that performance. Chambers' play is full of camaraderie, joyfulness and love.

The true-life setting that inspired Chambers' play was a group of cottages on a cliff at the end of a dirt road in East Marion. Chambers first visited in the summer of 1972. She and her partner, talent manager and producer Beth Allen, came as the guests of novelist Sandra Scoppettone (*Suzuki Beane*, *Razzamatazz*). Jane and Sandra had met earlier in the summer during their shared Eugene O'Neill Fellowship in Waterford, CT.

Because Sandra's cottage was tiny, Jane and Beth slept in a tent on a bluff-side terrace behind the cottage. (Beth recalls fearing she might roll

over and fall down the cliff.) They found the experience and the community of women magical and readily accepted Sandra's offer to stay on for a while when she returned to NYC. The visitors had fallen in love with the beaches and the sunsets and the rustic community life. The group's summer afternoon beach gatherings evoked feelings of acceptance and love during an era that was still hostile to "women loving women." During that visit extension, Jane and Beth decided to find their own house in the area and soon bought a small stucco barn/house on nearby Stars Road, where Jane later wrote the play. (Still later, from 1989 to 2007, I owned that Stars Road house with my then partner, Martha Stark.)

The enclave included a main house where photographer and naturalist Edna Bennett, (1919-1991) and her life-partner, arts teacher Marie "Pepper" Wheeler (1921-1996) lived year-round; a small A-frame owned

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by sculptor, Dorothy Abbott (1932-2015); a summer cottage in a grove of cedars where feminist scholar, Kate Stimpson (b 1936), lived with her partner philosophy professor, Sue Larson; and the small one-room cliff-side cottage with sweeping views of the Sound that had captured Jane's imagination.

These women -- artists and writers -- created an isolated, idyllic summer community during a time (1960s and 70s) when many lesbians feared losing their jobs or homes if their identity were discovered. In East Marion they were able to build friendships, catch bluefish, hunt mussels, picnic on secluded beaches, eat fresh corn, and feast on the bounty of the land. It was a little corner of paradise.



Note: I welcome other photos of the cottages or the people. KarenLee7a@gmail.com

Women from the community relaxing on the rocky Sound beaches. PHOTOS (above and on facing page) FROM THE COLLECTION OF SYLVIA NEWMAN.

<sup>1</sup>Karen Sauvigné is an historian who has lived in East Marion since 1988. Her first EM house was where Jane Chambers wrote *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*. She is at work on a short history of the women whose lives gave rise to the that play.

<sup>2</sup>Originally produced by The Glines, *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* opened at the Shandol Theatre, running for eight performances. Directed by Harriet Lieder, the cast featured Jean Smart ('Lil), Madelyn Albert (Eva), Ellie Schadt (Kitty), Aphrodit Kolaitis (Annie), Madeline Welsing (Rae), Janet Morrison (Rita), Stephanie Rula (Sue), and Karen Senderholm (Donna). *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* transferred, with the same cast, to the Westside Mainstage in June, 1980 as part of The First Gay American Arts Festival, produced by The Glines. In December 1980, the play moved to Actors Playhouse on Seventh Avenue South. It closed March 1, 1981 after 80 performances.

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