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BENESTA LODGE MEMORIES



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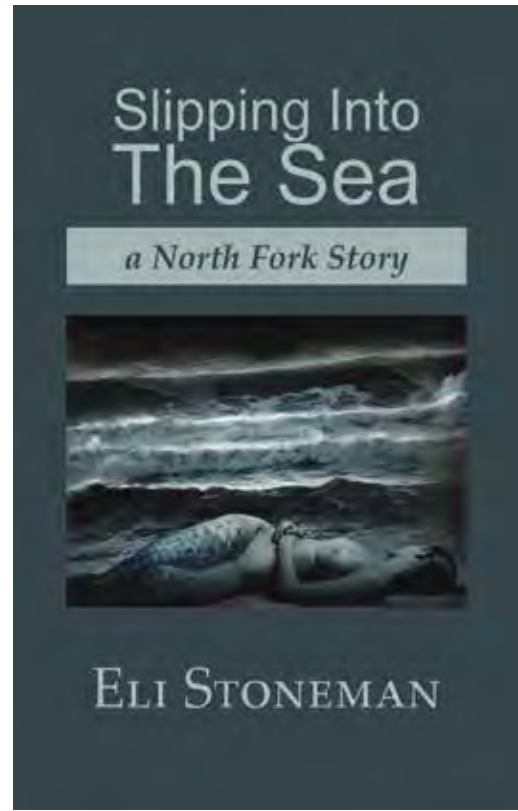
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Remaining publish dates for 2021:

September 2 • October 7 • November 4 • December 5

On our cover —

The 1938 Hurricane slammed into Long Island in September of that year. It is said that category five storm reached winds up to 160 miles per hour. Our cover shows the aftermath at Center and Main in Greenport as inspection and clean-up begins. The white house to the left was the home and office of Dr. Nathaniel Sperling, a much loved doctor that served the area for decades. The house still stands, and the street is now lined with small trees replacing all that fell.



COVER ILLUSTRATION BY PHIL MARCO

Eli Stoneman is an author and long-time resident of Long Island's east end. His first book was *The Girl in the Hat*.



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Benesta Memories

by John Eberling



When I saw the photos of Benesta Lodge on the cover of the June 2021 issue, it conjured up so many memories from my past. I thought to myself, what a great opportunity to share information about Benesta Lodge and its owners. I had hoped to assemble a comprehensive and cogent history. However, it turns out that I really don't know as much

as I thought I did, and I can present only a limited "History According to John," a stream of consciousness account of my memories, which may or may not have much to do with the history of Benesta Lodge. As Flip Wilson (aka Geraldine Jones) used to say, "What you see is what you get." So here it is. Let's begin at the beginning (at least my beginning).



The rear of the house. The Sledjeski's Packard can be seen under the car port on the right. Under the small tree in front of the porch is a cat house for "Tippy."

In 1947 when I was two years old my family (myself; my parents, Arthur and Ingeborg Ebeling; and my brother, Arthur Jr.) moved from Manhattan to Greenport. My Aunt Irma had been living in Greenport for some time, and I believe that it was she who encouraged my parents to make the move. I have no idea where we lived upon our arrival in Greenport; those memories are gone. My first recollection is that we lived at Benesta Lodge where my parents rented the second floor (or a portion of the second floor) as our home. The owners at the time, Stephen and Helen Sledjeski, occupied the first floor with their children: Helen, Ann, and Steve ("Sonny"). The Sledjeskis own Benesta Lodge for thirteen years.

Stephen Sledjeski was a farmer. He grew his crops on the ten-acre property of Benesta Lodge. While potatoes were the main crop of Long Island at the time, it seems to me that Steve was a truck farmer. I clearly remember a field of green peas behind the house. Peas were hand-picked and thrown into a hamper, and I recall my mother picking peas for Steve on a hot summer day. Now why would I remember something as inconsequential as picking peas? Well, it really wasn't the pea picking that made the lasting impression. A praying mantis had alighted on my bare arm, and in the eyes of a 6- or 7-year-old, a praying mantis is perhaps the largest, ugliest, and most threatening insect on earth. I was scared to death. I cried, I shrieked, and I screamed. I survived the ordeal, but I clearly remember it all some 70 years later.

Our upstairs apartment was comfortable enough. Kitchen, living room, bathroom, two bedrooms. My brother and I shared a small bedroom. As we entered the room, my bed was on the left, his on the right. At the foot of his bed was the door to the third floor, the entryway to the large, spooky, unfinished attic. Each night as I lay in bed, I kept an eye out for the bear who I was sure lived under Arthur's bed. My other eye closely watched the attic door, as I was fearful that a frightening creature might come down from that scary attic. In spite of the inherent dangers, I managed to sleep each night, and I awakened each morning completely unscathed. Over time my fear of "monsters" subsided, and in subsequent years exploring the attic was fun. In fact there were instances when brother and I would spend time together up in the attic. Art, who was eight years my senior, had an area up there to which he would escape now and then. On occasion I was privileged to escape with him. He had a bed directly under an east-facing window. At night we would sit there and gaze out at the lights of Greenport village. Not only did Art have a bed, but he also had his own radio. We would lie on the bed some evenings listening to shows like "The Shadow" and "Gangbusters." It was so much fun then; it is still fun remembering it today.

The living room was home to our Motorola console TV, pretty cool at the time, but not so impressive by today's standards. The picture typically rolled (fixed by constant adjustment of the "vertical hold" knob), and we were presented with blurry, snowy, black and white images that would not be tolerated



West side of house. Ann Sledjeski and "Sparky" standing by tree that was damaged by Hurricane Carol in 1954. The tree on the left is the horse chestnut.

today. Under a south-facing window stood a table which often was home to a vase of flowers. However, on one occasion on display was a vase of beautiful, shiny, green leaves. No flowers. Just spectacularly beautiful, glossy, green leaves in groups of three. While strolling through the woods, my mother, the city girl, was smitten with the beauty of the leaves of a poison ivy plant. What a lovely bouquet for the living room table, she thought, and that is exactly where she

placed them. When Arthur Sr. and Jr. spotted the poison ivy in the living room, both my dad and my brother knew exactly what it was. They proceeded to read the riot act to my mom. She, of course, was in disbelief. How could anything so pretty be poisonous? Well, out went the poison ivy. Within the next day or two even Ingeborg was a believer... yes, it was poison ivy. Her red puffy face and swollen eye lids provided all the proof she needed. Mom was a good-looking woman,

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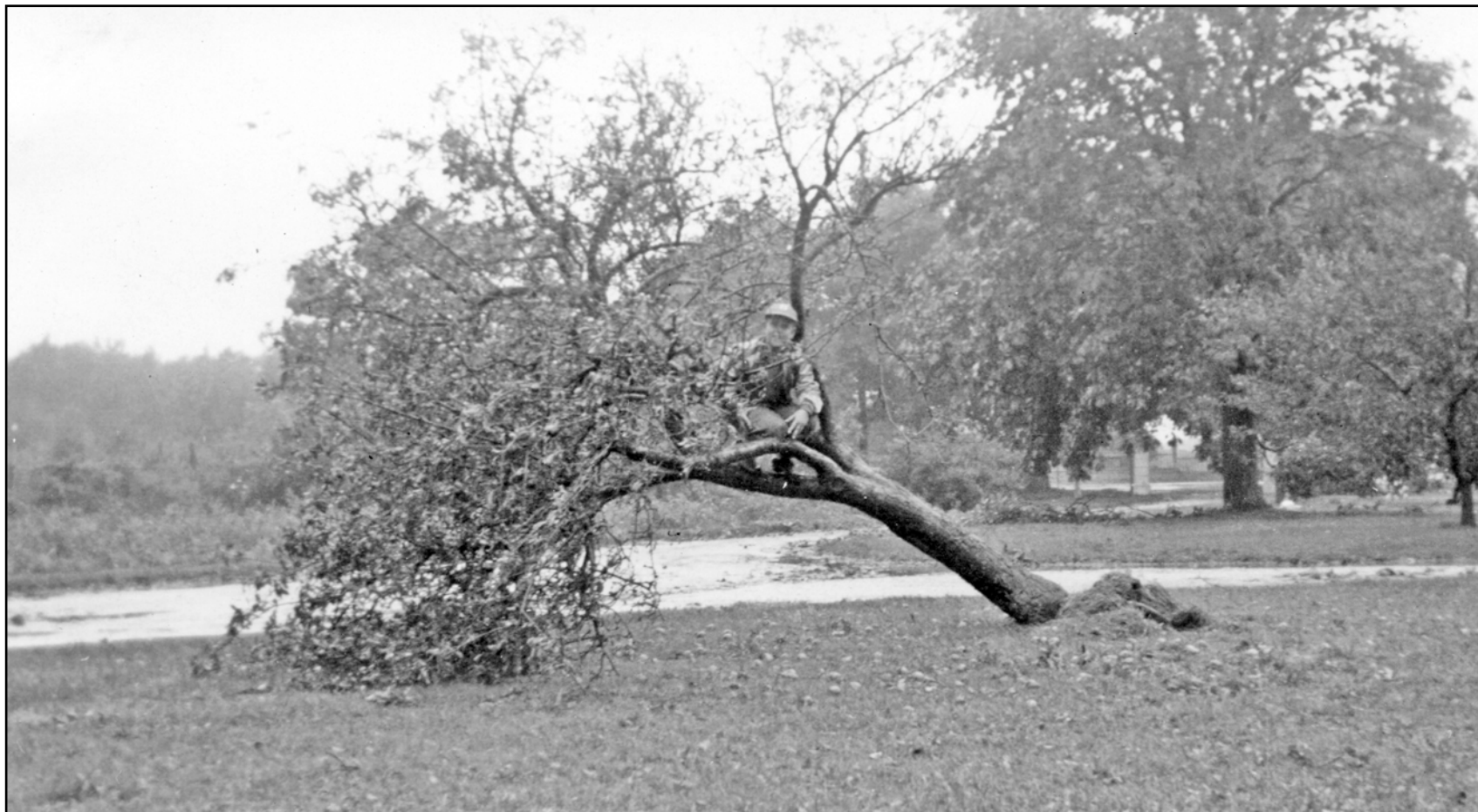
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Sonny Sledjeski sitting in a tree that was blown down by Hurricane Carol in 1954. Behind the tree is the western entrance and driveway that led to the large barn. Also visible is the circular drive surrounding the horse chestnut tree.

but following her poison ivy escapade she could have doubled for the bride of Frankenstein. Happily I can report that there was no permanent damage.

An expansive wrap-around porch graced the front of the house. I remember the main entrance being toward the west side of the porch, while the more commonly used entrance was on the east side where there was also a car port. I think that is where the Sledjeskis entered and exited the house most of the time, and if memory serves, Mr. Sledjeski drove a 1952 Packard sedan. Quite an elegant automobile in its day, and an automobile that I wouldn't mind owning today. I've always been a bit of a car nut, and my love of automobiles hasn't faded. But that's another story for another time. There are a couple of other cars that I remember during my years at Benesta Lodge. First and foremost is my dad's 1941 Ford four-door sedan, arguably the ugliest car ever produced in Detroit. I remember that when I saw a friend or classmate walking on the sidewalk while I was riding in the car, I would immediately dive to the floor and pretend to be tying my shoelaces to avoid embarrassment. I refused to be seen in that car, especially since Sonny Sledjeski's dad drove a Packard. I couldn't bear the shame. Another automobile belonged to young Helen's boyfriend, who I believe was Ed Brush. Ed Brush had a mid-1950s Oldsmobile convertible, red and white in color, and it smelled like Old Spice cologne. A spectacular automobile. Yes, that's another car that I wouldn't mind owning today. I seem to remember the car being under the car port at times, likely when Ed was picking up Helen to go on a date. And although the memory is vague, I seem to recall once going with Ed, Helen, and Sonny to the Riverhead Raceway, likely on a Saturday night. Back then, Riverhead Raceway had a dirt track. Lots of fun. Please keep in mind that all of this happened (or didn't happen) over 60 years ago, so my degree of accuracy may not be 100%. I think it was Ed, I think it was an Oldsmobile, and I think it was

red and white. But maybe not. Nevertheless, it's my memory and I'm sticking to it. The last car that I will mention is my Aunt Irma's baby blue Ford convertible, vintage 1950 or 1951. You guessed it, another car that I wouldn't mind owning today. The funny thing is that I never remember Irma, nor her husband Paul, driving a car. However, one day in the summertime, up the driveway rolls Aunt Irma in her Ford convertible, blond hair blowing in the breeze, big smile on her face. I remember nothing more of that day, but she sure looked good in that convertible. I learned some time later that Paul had been carrying on with another woman, Heinke. (You can't make these names up, you know). Well, Paul told my mom that he and Heinke were running off, that he was leaving Irma, and he then handed mom an envelope containing \$300. "Give this to Irma" were his parting words. My guess is that Irma took the \$300 and bought herself a sexy baby blue Ford convertible. Paul and Heinke were never heard from again. Irma moved to Miami, remarried, and lived happily ever after. True story.

The Benesta Lodge estate truly was magnificent. As I mentioned, there were entrances on both the east and west sides of the house. The western driveway was lined with four or five "umbrella" trees. I have no idea what kind of trees they were, but to us kids they were "umbrella trees," and we loved to play under them. The two driveways met in the back of the house forming a circular drive that encompassed a back yard that was likely an acre in size. In the rear to the west stood a huge barn in which Steve stored his equipment, and on the east was another ancillary structure, also used to store equipment, as well as provide an apartment for a family of three above the garage. On the west side of the house was a smaller circular drive that the Sledjeski's would use when going in and out of the house through the rear kitchen entrance. In the center of that circular drive stood a majestic horse chestnut tree; a matching tree stood in the yard on

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Garage and apartment structure on east side of property.
Tree damage in front is a result of Hurricane Carol in 1954.

the east side of the house. How much fun it was in the autumn to burn the fallen leaves and throw the chestnuts into the bonfire waiting from them to explode.

The large barn was a fun place for us kids to hang out. Steve had a couple of cows, and likely a bull. I vividly remember that we'd watch Steve sitting on a stool milking the cow, directing the stream of milk into a stainless-steel bucket. Just as we enjoyed the autumn bonfires, eagerly awaiting the pop of an exploding chestnut, we enjoyed the cow-milking with the knowledge that sooner or later Steve would pull one of the cow's teats and hit us with a stream of milk. He didn't do it often. Just often enough to catch us off guard and make us kids giggle. Then there was the hayloft, accessible only by climbing a vertical ladder that was attached to the barn wall. I think there was nothing of interest up there, just hay, but for some reason we were compelled to go up to the hay loft every now and then. The climb up the vertical ladder was a frightening experience, and maybe that's why we felt that we had to do it. Simply to prove to ourselves that we were brave enough to climb the ladder, not because there was much to do once we were up there. I don't remember how many cows Steve had, but I do remember that one had been slaughtered, and there was a side of beef hanging in the barn. I think the sight of that today would be distasteful to me, but then, as a kid, it was just part of life on a farm. The Sledjeski's also had chickens. When a hen stops laying eggs she suffers the fate of becoming a "soup chicken." On more than one occasion we watched Steve bring the hatchet down across the chicken's neck and subsequently watch the hen run around like a "chicken with it's head chopped off." Pretty gruesome, but at the time it was just part of life on a farm. Of course, the barn housed farm equipment, not the least of which was a John Deere tractor or two. The rear wheels of the tractor were about 4 or 5 feet in diameter. The inner tubes made huge "swimming tubes" which would easily accommodate several kids. What fun we had floating and frolicking in the Long Island Sound on hot summer days, and how envious were the other kids who didn't have a giant tube like ours. Not only did Steve have these gigantic inner tubes, he had an attachment on his tractor engine that provided him the means to inflate them. Watching the inflation was almost as much fun as floating in the Sound. Sort of like watching the inflation of the Macy's Thanksgiving



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Day Parade balloons. Okay, maybe not that much fun.

As I said early on, this is pretty much a stream of consciousness thing. I could probably go on forever, but I won't. Promise. Growing up in the 1950s in Greenport was a fun time, and growing up in the Sledjeski home, on the Sledjeski farm, made it even more memorable. Obviously, it was a simpler time, and in so many ways a happier time. The Sledjeskis sold their home to Louis and Henrietta Langone, I think in 1955. The Langones had a son, Michele ("Kala"). The Langones moved from Hampton Bays where Mr. Langone had a dry-cleaning business. When in Greenport he established the Village Dry Cleaners, and one of his delivery vehicles was a 1950s Pontiac panel truck. Nothing especially attractive about a Pontiac delivery van. Definitely not a vehicle that I would love to own today. However, that truck had the most beautiful, clean, shiny black tires that I had ever seen. Mr. Langone shared with me the fact that he applied glycerin to the tires (I guess he was a car nut, too). Not only did he tell me his secret for shiny black tires, he also gave me a bottle of glycerin which I used for years, long before the introduction of Armor All and similar products. The arrival of the Langones marked the end of an era for me. No more tractors, no more picking peas, no more hay lofts, no more chickens. However, Kala did have a Shetland pony named Beauty who had a "watch eye" (one brown eye and one blue eye). There was also a Collie named Rover, and a flock of homing pigeons which was pretty interesting. My family continued to rent the second floor apartment from the Langones for a short time until we had a new home built a little further east on the North Road (CR 48). The Sledjeskis moved into a new home they had built on the site of the former Browning Estate on the North Road in Peconic. Mr. Sledjeski farmed the acreage behind the home. At this point it all begins to get a bit fuzzy. The Benesta Lodge property was sold to the Geier family, ostensibly by the Langones, in the mid 1960s. The rest, of course, is history. Benesta Lodge is long gone, and what a shame it is that such a magnificent structure couldn't be restored. The Sledjeskis continued to live in Peconic for some years, but



Helen Sledjeski on the back porch and "Tippy" enjoying a snack in the foreground. Helen is holding the stainless-steel bucket that was used for milking the cows. The basement door was often used for car races when we let our Tootsietoys roll down side by side.

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ultimately the house and farm were sold. The house fell into disrepair. Ironically, in 1976 my wife Barbara and I purchased the Sledjeski home in Peconic. Mr. Sledjeski had since passed away, but his wife, Helen, was apparently a mortgagee, and she was present at the closing. It was a bittersweet reunion, and we exchanged some memories from the past. Helen asked me if Mrs. Langone made fresh lemonade for me in the summertime the way she had back in the 1950s. Nope. No lemonade. It wasn't quite the same after the Sledjeskis left Benesta Lodge. The Langones were great when we lived with them for a short time, but it just wasn't the same.

I promised that I wouldn't go on forever, but I guess that I'm still going on. Just as a point of interest, Steve Sledjeski had two brothers: Leo and Walter. Leo was a farmer who lived a mile or so to the west on the North Road. Walter, who lived a mile or so to the east, was the proprietor of Porky's Restaurant. Today there are countless fine restaurants on the North Fork. 50-plus years ago there was Porky's, Mitchell's, Claudio's, Sound View, and the Sea Shell. Porky's was my hands down favorite. I don't remember when Porky's Restaurant closed, but there have been a few reincarnations since then: The Shady Lady, followed by the Portly Grape, and today it's The Lin. But to me it will always be Porky's, it will always be a part of the Sledjeski family, and it will always be a part of my youth. And one more little piece of history... Although I have no firsthand knowledge of the Faulkners who sold the lodge to the Sledjeskis, clearly they were a wealthy family who owned considerable real estate in the Greenport area. On the corner of Queen Street and North Road there once stood a large stone pillar engraved with an "F." That would be "F" as in Faulkner. I believe the pillar is gone.



The garage/apartment that stood on the east side at the foot of the east driveway. The apartment was occupied by the Pavlovsky family. I'm unsure of the spelling of the name, but it looks pretty closed phonetically.

Continued on page 19...

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Sonny, Ann, and "Smoky" in the front yard near the west entrance. To the left is an "umbrella tree" which may have suffered some damage at the hands of Hurricane Carol.



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Ann, Sonny, and "Tippy."

Sonny holding "Sparky" and "Tippy." "Sparky" was a second dog on the premises that I like to think was mine. However, I believe that "Sparky" belonged to the Sledjeskis, as did "Smoky." "Tippy" was my cat.



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