

B2 Lifestyle

Grasmere

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melite Sisters. Thriving, too, is the Academy of St. Dorothy, opened in 1932 when the Sisters of St. Dorothy purchased the famous Villa Tocci estate, a three-story yellow brick mansion situated on 13 acres overlooking Hyman Boulevard.

Surrounded by sculptured gardens and furnished with antiques, the villa was owned by the Goggi family, which operated the Goggi Brothers winery in Stapleton.

The villa itself has since been demolished, as were the old studios that the original sisters were forced to sleep in for years.

The current school building was dedicated by Francis Cardinal Spellman in 1953, and a new convent was built in 1973.

"I love the school and I love my kids," said Sister Rosalie, school principal. "It's a very family-oriented school now," she added, explaining that many of the 306 students are children of school alumni or have siblings there.

Further north on Hyman Boulevard near Clove Road, the Old Mill Restaurant, known for its distinctive outdoor windmill, has been replaced by a Chase Manhattan Bank branch. But there's still the ever-bustling Country Club Diner, and the word is that a new Roy Rogers restaurant will soon be the latest of several restaurants next door.

Small new townhouse developments — Grasmere Estates, Grasmere Court — have jumped into much of the Grasmere's remaining space. Many of the housing units were sold by promoting their proximity to the two SIRT stations Grasmere and Oldtown — that lie within Grasmere's borders.

Feeling the squeeze

Not surprisingly, longtime Grasmere residents who enjoyed their relative isolation for many years are starting to feel the squeeze.

"I'm completely boxed in," said Carlo Malaspina, 87, pointing to the large Stonegate of Grasmere complex behind his rear yard. Across the street, a new strip of townhouses has brought a score of new neighbors.

A retired city sewer worker, Malaspina watched half in amusement and half in disgust as the townhouses went up, as construction workers tried to undo the naturally high water table by driving a score of telephone-pole-sized piles into the swampy soil.

"Those people are buying a pool, already built-in, right in their basement," he says.

Malaspina's home, which once served as a small cigar factory, has a sump pump almost continually working in the basement.

Behind him, owners of the Stonegate complex have also learned that nature's forces aren't so easily undone.

In November, 1988, under a settlement arranged by State Attorney General Robert Abrams, Stonegate's developers agreed to spend up to \$600,000 to repair a courtyard and parking area that had begun to sink. None of the nearby townhouses had showed signs of damage, but Abrams noted that sewer and utility lines had ruptured in 13 of the townhouse units, apparently when water collected beneath sinking sidewalks.

Malaspina grew up a few blocks away on Parkinson Avenue, and remembered when he and other neighborhood ballplayers like Andy Barbieri and George Balotto played for the Grasmere A's against the Dongan Hills Steamrollers and their arch-rivals from nearby Concord.

Malaspina's father-in-law was Lorenzo Capelli, one of several proprietors who operated the popular Harmony Park picnic grounds.

It was there that both Islanders

and Brooklynites celebrated everything from weddings to group outings, with celebrations that featured clam chowder, hot dogs, softball and lively music.

For many years, the land was owned by the Rubsam & Hormann Brewery, and operated under lease by Capelli and partner Joseph Focacci.

It went through several owners before the Moskonos family sold five acres of the land to the Advance for its new building in 1959.

"We were looking for at least five acres, with a railroad siding and access to main roads," said publisher Richard Diamond, recalling when the Advance looked to expand from its old West Brighton plant. (The Advance donated that building and land to the parish of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel-St. Benedict.)

The Advance's new plant cost about \$2.5 million to build and totalled about 50,000 square feet. The first newspaper at the new Grasmere plant was printed on Nov. 6, 1960.

Diamond said that the relationship between the Advance and the surrounding community has generally been a good one.

"When we first moved here, we promised both the neighbors and the borough officials involved that we would have a beautiful garden and I think we've done that," Diamond said. "In fact, I think it may be the nicest garden on Staten Island. Very often in nice weather we'll see families and wedding parties posing in front of the flowers, and I think that's great."

Diamond said the building was erected with the capability of sustaining an additional floor if needed. But new construction techniques and the lighter weight of cold-type printing machinery have continued to allow the ongoing two-story addition that will bring the total volume up to 85,000 square feet.

At the Carmel-Richmond Nursing Home, the only Roman Catholic nursing home on Staten Island, a \$34-million expansion program will add a two-story and basement wing that will provide space for a new adult-care program.

Carmel Richmond opened on Oct. 29, 1973, one of 27 nursing homes in the United States operated by the Carmelite Sisters.

With an excellent reputation for care, the home's 300 beds are always filled — about 85 per cent of them with women. Carmel Richmond features a crafts room, a beauty shop and dining area, even its own grill and cocktail lounge.

The plant closed in 1947, and was used for a time by the Statwood Home Improvement Co. before being purchased by the Salvation Army in 1961.

Today, the Salvation Army center is home to 41 men, enrolled in the residential program for drug and alcohol dependency.

"It's totally a spiritual program with work therapy emphasis," says Major Herbert Hamilton, administrator. "We ask them (the patients) for a 90-day commitment. If they stay in the program, hopefully they'll be able to return to work."

The adjacent thrift shop, where clothes and other dry goods are sold at sharply discounted prices, helps support the rehabilitation program. Hamilton said patients are referred from all over the city, but added, "there's always a waiting list."

The Durkee's family house was located a short distance away, at the corner of Fingerboard and Glove Roads, now the site of the chiropractic office of Dr. Nicholas Diano.

For many years, the Durkee Manor home was occupied by the family of Edward Tierney Sr. who operated the Tierney Beverage Co. and whose family was well-known throughout the neighborhood.

Advance Food Editor Jane

people during World War II, manufacturing an assortment of marine hardware, from engine room telegraphs to propellers.

Milza, one of Tierney's seven children, recalled how their home became a celebrated neighborhood meeting spot when her father purchased the neighborhood's first TV set during an auction at the 1939 World's Fair.

"We must have had 100 people over our house to watch the Billy Conn-Joe Louis fight," Mrs. Milza recalled. "My father never minded us bringing people in, as long as we turned off the TV when we were finished with it."

Further down Clove Road near the SIRT overpass was Lucio's old bowling alley, where pins were set by hand.

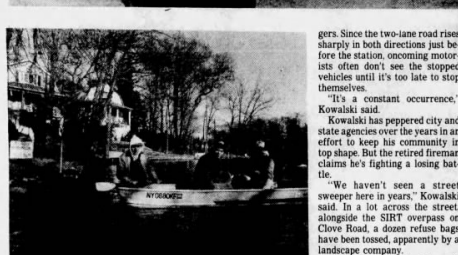
The lanes were so old they had grooves in them," recalls Leon Kowalski, another longtime resident. "All you had to do was throw the ball in the right groove and you'd get a strike."

Before that, the building was known as Grasmere Lodge, a favorite hangout of World War I GIs stationed at the nearby Fox Hills barracks.

The old Lucio building has been demolished recently, and neighbors are wondering what will go up in the empty lot.

Kowalski's home on Hillcrest Terrace just off Fingerboard Road gives him a close up view of one of the island's most notorious traffic hazards, the Clove Road overpass at the Grasmere SIRT station.

Fender benders are no numerous to count there, he said, most involving cars stopped to discharge or pick up SIRT passen-



Pete Winkler, Lorry Cirillo and Tom Winkler, head out for some fishing on Brady's Pond.

gers. Since the two-lane road rises sharply in both directions just before the station, oncoming motorists often don't see the stopped vehicles until it's too late to stop themselves.

"It's a constant occurrence," Kowalski said.

Kowalski has peppered city and state agencies over the years in an effort to keep his community in top shape. But the retired fireman claims he's fighting a losing battle.

"We haven't seen a street sweeper here in years," Kowalski said. In a lot across the street, alongside the SIRT overpass on Clove Road, a dozen refuse bags have been tossed, apparently by a landscape company.

"I caught a guy doing it once," Kowalski said. "I walked and grabbed him and said, 'I live here, pal. Now clean it up.'"

Raymond Hemmes, a Grasmere resident since 1918, (his grandfather, Barney Hemmes Sr., owned one of the first grocery stores in town near the corner of Clove Road and Mosel Avenue) remembers when the old Grasmere train station was operated by the Hansen family, in the days when each station had resident ticket agents.

The SIRT crossing at Clove Road also had gatekeeper, Edward McCall. A young Hemmes would spend hours with him as McCall stood his watch.

"He'd sit in a little shanty and tell me all the old stories about Grasmere," Hemmes said. "Every once in a while, some drunk would drive through the gates and they'd have to send the carpenters down from St. George to fix them."

Even for residents along pristine Cameron Lake and Brady's Pond, preserving Grasmere's beauty hasn't come without effort.

Reclaiming the lake
When John and Rita Higgins moved to their lakefront home on Cameron Lake 46 years ago, they said they could hardly see the pond for all the seaweed and plant life that had overrun it.

"People would come over and say 'Where's the lake?'" Higgins recalled.

After consulting with Cornell University and doing other research, Higgins and the late John Gardner found the best way to reclaim the lake was the old-fashioned way, with a rowboat and hook and lots of sweat.

It wasn't just the plant life that was out of control. Bullfrogs covered their lawn and the shoreline,

keeping them awake at night with a cacophony of croaking. Finally they were contacted by an enterprising restaurateur, whose menu was about to expand to frogs. "He'd get a bamboo fishing pole, attach a three-way hook to it and put a bright red wool thing on the end. He'd shake it in the water and pull them out."

Much about life on the pond remains quiet and natural. In addition to the mallards and ducks that make it home, there are a variety of turtles, who'll occasionally clamber up into adjoining backyards and bury their eggs. And fish are still fairly plentiful.

Not surprisingly, life around Grasmere's lakes has encouraged the artist in a number of residents. John and Rita Higgins' son Bill is a well-known island photographer, and several other renters have been spawned from the shoreline homes.

What is surprising is that the majority of residents within the eligible Cameron Club boundaries — basically defined by Roderick Cameron's old estate — have no bother to join.

"At one time, back around 1950, there was a waiting list," recalls Sam Leotta, now serving his third term as club president. Now, we're down to 127 families. Most people have seen their children grow up and let their membership lapse.

Brady's Pond — billed as "the only privately-owned, spring-fed swimmable lake in the five boroughs" — was hardly undervalued back in the early days of the lake, when it was used as a location for several "Perils of Pauline" and Mabel Normand films.

One former lifeguard at Grasmere said that the bottom of the 15-acre lake still conceals the soggy remains of an old stagecoach used in the filmmaking.

Unfortunately, Brady's Pond has also witnessed many real-life drownings over the years.

Hemmes can still produce newspaper accounts of the day in March, 1900, when his two young uncles, Albert and Henry Hemmes, aged 8 and 7, fell through the ice there and drowned. But in most cases, the tragedies occurred when youngsters ventured out into unauthorized areas of the lake.

Conversely, the chief threat to the area's undisturbed character is man.

The Staten Island Expressway construction actually chopped off a portion of Brady's Pond, and in the early 1970s, one developer sought to extend nearby Normale Road through one edge of Cameron Lake.

Higgins and other members of the Grasmere Homeowners Association got that blocked in July, 1978 when they got the State Department of Environmental Conservation to designate Cameron Lake and the surrounding area as freshwater wetlands. But three houses went up anyway.

Where once they had to drive to Dongan Hills and New Dorp for groceries, the Higgins and their neighbors can now walk to any one of numerous stores down on Hyman Boulevard.

And there are far more bus lines now than there were years ago, when the Number 3 bus was the only one plying Hyman Boulevard.

All this has made life a lot more convenient. But there are liabilities, too. The express buses draw commuters whose cars remain parked in front of residents' houses all day, and those new stores have brought through traffic to heretofore quiet streets.

Still, the Higgins have nothing but positive things to say about the younger families that have started to replace their own contemporaries. "They're all wonderful people. And it makes us feel younger to have them around."

Next week's article looks at Bulls Head.

The Advance has already profiled the following towns: Tarrytown, Great Kills, Port Richmond, Annandale, Cedarhurst, Corlies, Elmsford, Emerson Hill, St. George, Charleston, New Brighton, New Springville, South Beach, Concord, Tottenville, Mariners Harbor, Oceanside, Stapleton, Westerleigh, Huganville, Richmond, Fort Wadsworth, Livingston, New Dorp, Eltingville, Tott Hill, Cittery, Silver Lake, Whitelock, Dongan Hills, Tompkinsville, Thersville, Roadkill, Bunnysville and Greentown, Elm Park, Egbertville, Great City, Pleasant Plains, Arverne, Rosedale Manor, Arden Heights and Midland Beach.

John Bellini has been a fixture at his Grasmere Market on Clove Road since 1947.

Major Herbert Hamilton and manager Patricia Simmons in the Salvation Army thrift store.