

HELEN BINNEY KITCHEL

I think I had the best childhood anyone could possibly have had. Growing up in Sound Beach, I experienced a delicious freedom - summers for swimming in the Sound, climbing trees, exploring the beach and fragrant pastures, winters for snow coasting and ice skating, falls for apple picking from the many orchards around and springs for discovering wild flowers and returning birds. Ahhhhh, those were delicious days and Sound Beach my Garden of Eden. My paradise world was discovered in 1888 by my city living parents, Edwin and Alice Binney, when they were visiting friends in Stamford. My father, called Bub by the family, bought a piece of land on the shore from Oliver Ford in January of 1889 and that spring built a small house on the edge of the rocks there – for weekend and summer use. I think people in those days thought he was a bit insane to build a house right on the water. Except for a tiny watch house on the bluff next to our beach, there were no buildings on the shore at all. As the years went by, this little summer cottage grew and then was moved and was joined by other houses along the shore. But that's another story. My parents decided to make Sound Beach their permanent home in 1895 and this is when my love affair with this community began. I was then five years old. My name? – Oh, yes, - Helen Binney Kitchel.

Schooling began for me at Miss Lockwood's private one-room schoolhouse on Tomac, a little north of Lockwood Avenue. My recollections of this period are a bit vague but I do remember a few former classmates from those days and my two sisters, Mary and Dolly, also were in school with me there. There was one day I can not forget. That was the day when I informed my class that I had a new baby brother. The date? March 20, 1899. That was the day Edwin Binney, Jr., was born - although he was known to us all as "June".

Miss Lockwood's schoolhouse was situated across the street from the Bladworths and Gratacaps. It's funny how things pop into memory but there's a vague recollection of children from one of these houses singing "Reuben, Reuben". (chuckle) Oh well, back to school.

Some more lessons were learnt at the 2-story frame schoolhouse on the corner of West End and Sound Beach Avenues where the fire department building stands today.

The brick schoolhouse was built in 1902-03 but I never went there, although my four children did, several of my grandchildren and even some of my great-grandchildren. I don't know at what point it was, when it was decided that

my schooling should be continued in Pelham for a while where I was to live with my grandparents.

Of course, the most memorable school I attended was prep school - the Catherine Aiken School in Stamford. It was memorable for a number of reasons: It was high school and, of course, I remember more because I was older and those are such impressionable years. I had a very special teacher, Miss Annie Beecher Scoville, who was not only a favorite teacher, but later a dear friend. But the most memorable occasion at the Aiken School was the day of the tea party. Yes, it was the tea party for me, for I was then 15 years old, passing cookies to the guests when I met Allan Kitchel, a 20-year old college man - from Yale! Well! (shrugs shoulders) - It was love at first sight. As a matter of fact, in the ensuing 3 1/2 years, it was all Allan could do to finish Yale! Yes, at one time he was going to quit college, get a job, and then we would get married. And that was that! But, ahem, Allan's father had other plans for him - graduation from Yale, a 3-year engineering course at M.I.T. and then a year or two of special study in Germany! Mr. Kitchel's very sad and untimely death while Allan was still at Yale, meant that Allan had a little more to say of his future, and in his senior year, he informed my parents that we would be married as soon as he graduated. Although there were many job offers, my father offered him a job with his company, Binney and Smith, in the Talc department! The starting salary? - \$15 a week! And Bub told us we could live in the Bungalow, rent free for a year as a wedding present. The Bungalow was a 5-room house built by an old friend of Bub's whose wife couldn't take the rugged life of Sound Beach, so he sold it to Bub - it was right next door. It was made habitable for winter and painted white and, oh yes, a bathroom was put in. When my mother later asked us what name we were going to give our house, I then realized we were actually being given the Bungalow. The name we chose? Oaklyn - because of the four large oaks between the house and the beach. Ohhh the memories in this wonderful house. All four of our children were born here. First child: Barbara (Bobbie), then Happy, after her, Allan, Jr., but called Tim by all of us - and then Douglas (Doug).

These were busy years for me. I not only had the children to keep me jumping, but the house also - it kept growing! And my gardens! Oh, yes! There's my west garden and terrace. This is where the Japanese dogwood grows with its seedlings and the original lawn has long since been taken over by myrtle. It's here I have my water-lily pool and terrace flanked with rhododendron and azaleas and a magnificent magnolia. There are, of course, spring blooming bulbs and the summer annuals. I was also tending my formal garden and vegetable garden. A

lot of work, yes, but worth it. My special love was my wild garden though. Oh, this took a lot of planning and planting – but it was a dream come true. It's on the sloping southwest corner of our property and because we had water piped from the higher ground, we have a fertile environment for wonderful plants: columbine, dogtooth violet, bloodroot, trillium and so many other. And ferns! - many varieties, including my favorite, the maidenhair. One of my biggest successes in my gardening is here - the transplanting of a small clump of arbutus, a very temperamental plant.

I guess my reasons for describing my garden is to get across my love for the out-of-doors. As a youngster, I was certainly a tomboy and Sound Beach my playground - as I told you earlier about my tree climbing and sled coasting. My children, as they were growing up, found out that my tomboyishness was hard to fade away - especially in the winter after a lovely snowfall. How we loved the coasting and the hitching! (In a confidential tone) We'd connect 4 or 5 sleds together and hitch behind a car and off we'd go. Oh dear, don't tell anyone, less they think we were too, too reckless.

But I digress –

Because of my love for the out-of-doors, as I got older, I realized the specialness of natural places, such as the seashore, wooded areas, swamps, indeed any environment where wildlife thrives. I also realized that our Sound Beach was growing like Topsy and that some of these special places were becoming building lots. My father also realized this when he bought the marshland across (pointing toward Binney Park) the street. This came about when our hopes were dashed about the state's not buying the Laddin's Rock Farm for a park, and Greenwich and Stamford's refusing to acquire a joint town and city park, since Laddin's Rock Farm was in both – well, we were devastated. Sound Beach needed a park. Bub stepped in and bought the wetlands on Sound Beach Avenue. And the young minister of the church then, Allen Lorimer, talked the developer who owned the marsh land south of Wesskum Wood Road to lower his price - and the Town of Greenwich bought that parcel to add to the Binney Park area.

And not long after my father's death in 1934, I persuaded mother to purchase the wooded hillside across the park on Arch Street as an annex to the park. There were a few complications (waving hand) in this endeavor but we prevailed and Old Greenwich is the richer.

You might have noticed - I said "Old Greenwich". Yes, that's right. Sound Beach was now Old Greenwich thanks to the Old Greenwich Garden Club.

You see, this name change was a dream of ours since, after all, Greenwich was founded here (pointing down to the ground, for emphasis) and Sound Beach sounded like a beach resort. Well - when I assumed the presidency of the Garden Club in 1930, the retiring president, Mrs. Milliken passed the banner, and the fight, to me. My vice-president, Honney Thieler, and I solicited advice and aid from our senators and congressman, got permission from First Selectman Tuthill, and collected, with our club members, hundreds of signatures on our petition. When we went to Washington to meet with the post office officials, their concern was with the similarity of the names, Greenwich and Old Greenwich. When we assured them the post office had no problems serving Hartford, East Hartford, West Hartford and New Hartford as well as New Haven, West Haven, et cetera, et cetera - well, then they were on our side.

The railroad was convinced next.

And so on April 20, 1931, the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad changed Sound Beach to Old Greenwich and on July 1st, the Post Office followed suit. Now it was official - and a lot of sign painting in town!

Now, while negotiations were going on in regard to the hillside annex to Binney Park, there was a rumor afoot that there was going to be a gas station built on the corner of Harding Road and Sound Beach Avenue! Well, this simply could not be - and so mother was persuaded by, ahem, Yours Truly to purchase this small lot. And we landscaped it into the Outdoor Reading Room of the Perrot library.

The next challenge I was faced with started with a phone call. "Did I know that the part of Laddin's Rock Farm lying along Harding Road would soon be developed and that several apartment houses would be built there?" Oh, no! Another battle, another fight with the ensuing pleadings, arguments, arm-twisting and tears. I think it was a teary-eyed daughter that won dear mother over. When we heard that a Mr. Waid - he was one of the donors of the Perrot library - would donate \$5,000 to help buy some of the property, mother and I agreed to match his gift. So, we bought as much land as that \$10,000 would buy - 10 acres. We were disappointed that it was not more, but that was the best we could do. It's called "Natural Park" - there're a few trails but no other intrusions of man's designs.

Remember I said I was busy? Well, politics was very much of my life then. I served four terms in the State Legislature. My special project during this tenure was to rid the roadsides of billboards. Indeed, because of this fervent battle of mine, I was denied a long promised Senate nomination. The strong outdoor

advertising lobby had flexed its muscles, the party bosses genuflected and my long awaited phone call never came. I was grievously hurt and disappointed.

Even though I was always deeply involved with community and state affairs during these years, my family was always there supporting me and never ceasing to cheer me up. And, for some reason or another, if we ever needed extra cheering, we would crank up the Victrola and put on our laugh record. (tape) It never failed to work!

When I told you earlier about the Reverend Lorimer and his part in the Binney Park addition - I think you'd be interested in how he ended up at First Church. It was in late '26 or early '27 that First Church needed a pastor and some revitalization. Edward Grant (the father of our incoming president, Carolyn Colegrove) and Allan were very concerned. Allan got in touch with Dr. Henry Sloan Coffin, president of the Union Theological Seminary, and asked for his help, and Edward, Dean of Admissions at Columbia, sought out and persuaded the young Seminarian, Allen Lorimer, who was recommended by Dr. Coffin, to come and give a sermon at First Church. I'll never forget the Sunday morning Allen Lorimer came to Old Greenwich: He hopped off the train and was faced with a young couple (pointing to self) in a large black Cadillac sedan and an old farmer in a rather broken down truck. Well, he thought this small town was a fishing village populated by simple hardworking folk with wonderful honest attributes but certainly no sophistication. (slight pause) He approached the farmer. This was the first of many surprises that awaited Allen Lorimer in his seven years in this town and in this church.

I taught Sunday School here! That's right. I don't remember when it was but I received a telephone call from a woman in the church whose name I can't recall right now. And she asked me to teach Sunday School. I was very apprehensive about this and very reluctant, and asked that she please try everyone else before me. Her answer - I'll never forget. She said she had tried everyone else before me! My children thought that very amusing and chuckle about it 'til this day.

Oh my goodness! I have talked on and on but there's so much to tell. I haven't told you about my forest - well, it's the state's forest now: the Algonquin State Forest and the Kitchel Wilderness Preserve - but that'll have to wait until another time.

And then I can tell you about our Christmases - the large turkey, the myriads of decorations, my sachets and my cranberry jam - I'll give you the recipe. And, oh, yes, the fourth of July with the tons of fireworks, and the Memorial Day

parade. And Hallowe'en, when we bobbed for apples, and had doughnuts on a string, and played games and drank apple cider.

Oh dear, I could go on forever, But I must leave now. Just one more indulgence - a portion of my Tim's favorite hymn. (tape)

Thank you.