The Year of the Tornado

Thirty years ago was the summer that changed Cornwall, the Lost Summer, the Year of The Tornado. The day began as just one more suffocatingly hot, humid day. Prediction: thunderstorms with possible hail and high winds.

Five of us (including Thalia Scoville, Estelle Stetson, and my mom Doris Hart Cross) arrived at the parish basement for some afternoon work. No windows. Very cool there. At quitting time, I was the first up the stairs and thought night had come. Couldn’t believe it. Opened the door and the air was sucked out of my lungs, so gasped and yelled for everyone to get home. Three left and Mother ran for our truck. I was almost right behind her, fumbling for the key to lock the building. Forget it. Get home. The sky was now a filthy yellow green black. Just made the truck when a giant downdraft sheared the branches off the 70-foot locusts where we were parked, like peeling bananas. Small trees on both sides of us were anchored but flat to the ground. I managed to get the truck turned around without rolling it, then explained to Mother that I was going to keep the engine running “just in case.” Every huge tree within our limited view was down. As we watched, we could feel the truck lifting, saw the church chimney fall, the steeple lose parts. We watched as the three-story Rumsey Hall began to shed big chunks of its roof. Ever larger parts began to hit us and I began to worry that Mother might get hurt.

The thunder was deafening and constant. The lightning was constant and rifle-cracking, so loudly that I just knew it was hitting the building next to us. The rain, which finally blocked our vision at the windscreen, was a milky lemon yellow with black objects flying by. There was no time to be afraid. Larger chunks began to hit and the truck seemed in danger of rolling, so I backed it into the lee of the parish house, also yelled to Mom that she was seeing 125-mph winds. She was really cool. Later she told me that I was so calm and collected, but my language had been “terrible.”

During a brief lull we landed right in front of the steps. Jumping out of the truck, we ran into the building. Drenched, we were choking on plaster dust, the walls were shaking. There was water pouring in under doors, windows, and through ceilings. The fire alarm was ringing constantly. No way was I going to the basement if there was a chance of fire. A fact check: it seemed the building was going to make it. However, about a third of the end of the first-floor main ball was gone where a section of flying roof had hit as it slammed by.

Suddenly the storm was over. I went to the door to look out. I think there was a brief time of sun, blue sky, and birds began to sing. Everything sparkled with raindrops, and there was barely a tree standing anywhere. The surrounding mountains, not seen for over a hundred years, were now all in plain sight.

I went outside to survey the damage, leaving Mom in the parish house. When I came back in, she was playing the piano in the middle of the big room; the piano had been pushed half way across the room when the wall crashed in. “Mother,” I said, “what are you doing?” And she replied, “I always play the piano when I’m nervous.”

In a few minutes there were more and young people checking everywhere to see that all were safe. Within an hour, volunteers got to work: chainsaws whining, axes chopping, and later the sounds of farmers’ tractors and the rumble of loggers’ equipment. It was almost too much to comprehend this vast destruction. I got Mom settled for the right with a neighbor and started to hike home with a friend. Climbing over and under trees, we had to take the long around, shoes squelching and clothes dripping.

(continued on page 2)
Who Was Rose Algrant?

This year will mark the 60th anniversary of one of Cornwall’s best traditions: the Rose Algrant Art Show. But who was Rose Algrant?

By the time of the first show in 1959, Rose was already a key figure in the Cornwall community. She had emigrated from Europe to New York at the outbreak of World War II. In 1942, Rose moved to Cornwall to be close to her son Roland (Rolly), who was boarding at Rumsey Hall School, then located in Cornwall village.

Rose took a temporary French teaching position at Rumsey and ended up teaching there for over 40 years. She was one of the toughest French teachers around, but also one of the kindest and most generous, creating lifelong bonds with some of her students.

Her house was always open to everyone and what a house it was! Lots of local writers, such as James Thurber or Mark Van Doren, and artists such as Armin Landeck, Ruth Gannett, or Marc Simont would come to Rose’s for drinks and dinner (and then more drinks) to engage in a lot of “lively” discussions on just about every topic under the sun. Some say it was the closest thing Cornwall ever had to a French salon.

So, how did the first Rose Algrant Art Show come to fruition? Legend has it, according to Rose’s grandson Daniel Algrant, that her artist friends wanted to paint her portrait, but Rose didn’t like being the center of attention and agreed only on condition the artists put on a show with their own work.

Another legend, told to Summer Ireland by his mother Genevieve Simont, is that during a dinner party at Rose’s house someone noted all the artwork on her walls and suggested that she had enough for an art show by her friends.

Now, here is the fact: in 1959, the first “The Friends of Rose Algrant Art Show” took place with nine artists. (Nancy 5. Day, Ruth Gannett, Amy and Armin Landeck, Anne Spencer Pratt, Genevieve and Marc Simont, Pillar Sureda, and Arlington Yutzler) at the West Cornwall train depot. It was a success (a fresh keg of beer rolled down to the depot helped) and the rest is history.

But why has it continued to be a success even after Rose passed away in 1992? I asked this question to Rose’s other grandson Joe Algrant. He said it was mostly because the community of artists was close-knit, talented, spirited, liked one another, and, of course, liked Rose.

Rose loved putting the show together and was happy to see the artists being able to display and sell their work (especially those still struggling). Others were eager to join, from Bee Simont to Armin Landeck who, according to his grandson Michael Hemming, liked to mix up the work of different artists when he hung the paintings. The energy and momentum grew over the years as more artists got involved, such as Tim Prentice and William Beecher, or Peppino Mangravite (just to name a few). Rose’s spirit of generosity and belief in the art and the show has made it endure for 60 years. Not only, according to Joe Algrant, would she make a huge dinner the night before the show, but she refused to take her commission. She also started to donate some of the proceeds from the show to a charitable or civic program in Cornwall. In the mid-80s, proceeds went toward a new ambulance for the town, and in subsequent years proceeds have gone to such beneficiaries as the Cornwall Food and Fuel Bank, the Cornwall Historical Society, or the Little Guild.

Sixty years ago, nine artists took part in the first Rose Algrant Art Show. This year, more than 50 artists will display their work ranging from paintings and photography, to sculpture, jewelry, and digital art. Wine and beer will be served at the Trinity Retreat Center and 15 percent of the show’s proceeds will go to the Cornwall Volunteer Fire Department.

The tradition lives on. —Valerie Zabriskie

Cornwall’s Lumberyard, Restored

News that C. A. Lindell had suddenly closed its lumberyard in Canaan at the beginning of May, laying off the entire workforce, inspired this reporter to take stock of business at the Cornwall Bridge lumberyard owned by Northeast Building Supply. A huge fire there on January 12, 2015 nearly lost Cornwall one of its largest employers. The cause of the blaze still remains a mystery, but the keys to Northeast’s recovery are not: sufficiently capitalized ownership, good management, and finely tuned customer relations.

Carrying out the last two tasks is the responsibility of branch manager Rick Kearns, who has been working at the business—owned by the Sandmeyer family until late 2005, when it was known as Northwest Lumber—for 33 years. For more than 18 months the entire yard was under lock and key, and except for a transition team of Rick and two others, all yard employees had to find work elsewhere or accept reassignment at Northeast’s headquarters in Bridgeport.

After the fire, Rick started the same way he began, having lumber delivered to the hardware store, stacking it there, and re-contacting the contractors who had always bought from him. Fortunately, Northeast’s home office could supply its Cornwall branch with materials that otherwise could not be kept on hand.

As of spring 2019, business is almost back to where it was before the fire. There’s plenty of building going on, and a fair number of contractor house plans are crossing Rick’s desk.

Lumber sales make up some 70 percent of business at Northeast’s Cornwall Bridge location (hardware and paint account for the rest). The branch now provides work for a dozen employees. Rick sees a solid future for increasing business by growing his base of mostly local contractors—as well as reaching out to the general population. Last June’s public pig roast celebrating the long-awaited completion of the new lumber warehouse was so successful that Northeast is repeating it this year. Mark your calendar for mid-day on June 15 in Cornwall Bridge: free lunch along with a chance to explore samples and displays by some of the company’s most popular vendors.

—Paul De Angelis
Letters to the Chronicle

TRASH IS TRASH
I popped down to the dump two weeks ago to drop off the weekly garbage and recyclables and started to head for the swap shop when Ted said to me “Don’t cry.” You see our family takes great pride in finding the best birthday and Christmas gifts at either the swap shop or the rummage sale. As a consequence, I regularly explore the best bargains in town and sometimes neaten up the shop as I do so. Ted, and the fine crew, had refrained from cleaning up the swap shop for a few weeks, just to let people see what a mess we leave. I was horrified. Broken toys, lids with no jars, boxes of linens or china with mouse droppings, broken empty CD cases, ripped record jackets, and the piece de resistance: an undated jar of home-canned beans and half of a fossilized cracker.

Did you know that you need to check with the crew before you “donate” an item? Think of it as a treasure trove for the thrifty. Clean your items. Display them carefully, color coordinate, create a tableau. They say one man’s trash is another man’s treasure. But trash is trash and treasure is a find.

—Jane Prentice

PLAQUE OF CIVIL WAR VETERANS
My name is Spencer Markow and I want to let you know that for my eighth-grade Explorations Project, I am in the process of making a monument with a plaque of all the Civil War veterans that enlisted in Cornwall. The Explorations Projects at Cornwall Consolidated School are supported by the CCS Fund for Excellence. Students choose a topic that has a sustainable impact on the community. I chose to design this monument because of my interest in the Civil War and my relation to Major General John Sedgwick. Working with resources from the Cornwall Historical Society, National Park Service, and Connecticut State Library, I have compiled a list of names for the monument. If you have any comments or questions about this project or would like to see the list of names prior to the monument being completed, please feel free to contact me. I hope to place the final monument near the Sedgwick Monument on Route 63 in July. My school email: 19markow@cornwallschool.org.

Consensus on a Water Treatment Facility?
The West Cornwall Water/Septic Study Group has pursued its study for well over three years. Two public gatherings are now scheduled for the summer months. The first, on Friday, June 28, at the CCS gym at 7 p.m., is a town-wide informational meeting with the purpose of presenting current findings of the study group and allowing ample time for exchange of questions and opinions. The second meeting, tentatively scheduled for July 26 at 7 p.m. (also at CCS) is intended to move toward a consensus on the overall position the West Cornwall community holds concerning a septic/water treatment facility and whether to authorize the town to make expenditures to pursue federal grants to fund it. This spring the study group and First Selectman Ridgway toured existing treatment facilities in the state to observe what kind might fit the size and needs in West Cornwall.

—Hugh Cheney

June is for the Dogs

The state of Connecticut requires that all dogs six months of age or older be licensed annually on or before June 30 in the town clerk’s office in the town where the dog is owned or kept. Licenses will become available on June 3 (the first is a Saturday and the office is closed). A current rabies vaccination certificate must be submitted or be on file. Neutered or spayed dogs cost $8 and male or female dogs cost $19. For a neutered or spayed dog being licensed for the first time, a certificate from a licensed veterinarian must be presented. Penalties apply for late registration. If you register by mail, enclose a SASE for return of tag and license, otherwise the town clerk’s office is open Monday through Thursday from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m.

Events & Announcements
For updates, changes, and additions, check the online calendar at cornwallchronicle.org or cornwallct.org (it is the same calendar). And for reminders, see the Chronicle Facebook page.

CCT is hosting a hike led by President Bart Jones at Trinity Forest Preserve in conjunction with the Connecticut Forest & Park Association’s CT Trails Weekend on Saturday, June 1, from 10 a.m. to noon. Meet between 134 and 152 Dible Hill Road. More info at cornwallconservationtrust.org.

At the Cornwall Library
Saturday, June 1, 10 a.m.: Children’s Sing Along, song and dance program with

(continued on page 4)
Senior Morning Coffee & Conversations on Tuesday, June 25, at 9 a.m. at the Parish House. Breakfast and social hour, no cost.

The Cornwall Fire Department is offering Mental Health First Aid training at no charge on June 10 and 12 (attendance at both sessions required) from 5 to 9:30 p.m. at the Cornwall Library. Dinner provided; space is limited. All invited, but preregistration required at ctclearinghouse.org/registration. Questions? Contact Elizabeth Ridgway at eridgway1994@gmail.com.

Art in Cornwall
The Souterrain Gallery will be hosting an artist reception from 3 to 6 p.m. on June 15 for the exhibit “Trees,” by Shaun MacDavid, which opens June 8. The gallery is open Thursday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

At the library, Tim Prentice’s show, “Gone with the Wind,” kinetic sculptures over the years, opens with a reception on Saturday, June 1, from 5 to 7 p.m. RSVP for opening reception at 672-6874 or at cornwalllibrary.org. Show hangs until August 17.

At the Parish House, the exhibit of Joan Hinchman’s photographs, “More Than Meets the Eye,” continues until June 3. View it weekdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and Saturdays 10 a.m. to noon, and by appointment.

The Toll House Gallery in West Cornwall continues to showcase paintings of Lennart Swede Ahstrom, landscape photographs by Ian Ingersoll, and paintings by Don Bracken, open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Hammond Beach is opening June 20. New hours this year are from 10:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. on a trial run. Special event of SUP Yoga takes place at 11 a.m. on June 22 and the Hammond Beach Swim Program begins June 24. For updates see facebook.com/hammondbeachct.

“Blown Away, Remembering the 1989 Tornado” opens at the Cornwall Historical Society on June 21, from 5 to 7 p.m. (See insert.)

The Little Guild Great Country Mutt Show welcomes all dogs to the Cornwall town green on June 22, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. (See insert.)

Karate Kid, the first of four summer outdoor movies, will be shown at dusk at Trinity Retreat Center on Sunday, June 23. (See insert.)

Come see and celebrate the renovation of the North Cornwall Meeting House on Sunday, June 30, at 4 p.m. Brief remarks will be followed by a reception. (See insert.)

Getting Ready for the Rummage Sale: Cornwall Woman’s Society is gearing up for another great sale, taking place this year from July 20 to 22. Please hold on to your donations until July, when instructions about where and how to drop off all your goods will be provided in the Chronicle.

The Cornwall Food Pantry is in need of donations, most of all beans, cooking oils, pasta and pasta sauces, snacks, coffee, oatmeal, rice, and personal care items. Drop off items in the Day Room at UCC, or send via Amazon or other delivery services to the town hall, Attn: Social Services, 26 Pine Street, Cornwall CT. Thank you!

Grumbling Gryphons Annual Theater Arts Camp will be held at town hall (ages 6 to 16), including a teen internship option. Week one runs July 29 to August 2; Week two from August 5 to 10. Activities include theater, music, dance, and art from 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.; half days are optional. Limited scholarships, discounts for siblings or two-week enrollments. Contact Leslie Elias at 672-0286 or grumblinggryphons@gmail.com. grumblinggryphons.org to download registration form.

THE CHRONICLE NEEDS YOUR SUPPORT

We hope you enjoy this on-line edition of the Cornwall Chronicle. Remember that all our revenues come from readers like you, and we need your help to continue producing this electronic edition along with the print edition. If your contribution is $15 or more, we'd be glad to mail the print edition to any out-of-town address. Please mail your tax deductible gifts to: Cornwall Chronicle Inc. PO Box 6, West Cornwall, CT 06796. Comments, letters and news may be E-mailed to the publishers at: info@cornwallchronicle.org