

Avon Land Lovers

by Ruth Maher

Caroline B. LaMonica

Caroline B. LaMonica, Town Clerk, has long been an outstanding personality in the story of Avon. There probably are few people who know the town as well as she does, and she loves it all...land, people, history.

Caroline's father, John Battistoni, was born in the Lago del Garda area of northern Italy. Her mother, Alice Castagna, was born in New York City and later moved to Simsbury. John's father, Vincent, was a professional architect who designed churches in Italy. John's distant cousin, Harry Battistoni, developed the Lake Garda section of Unionville/Burlington and named the lake for his birthplace.



John was 12 when he accompanied his father to visit relatives in Torrington. Before it was time to return to Italy John had made a firm decision to stay in the United States.

On the day of their scheduled departure Vincent and his son boarded a train in Torrington to start the long journey home. They had to change trains in New Britain, and that's where John said good-bye to his father and disappeared into the crowd. Vincent, with his visa about to expire, was obliged to go on alone. As the story goes, John's mother died at the age of 104, still hoping her son would come home. He never did return to his homeland.

In New Britain, John was offered a kitchen job at a lumber camp in the Litchfield hills. At 15 he visited the Viti family in Avon, who had also come from Lago del Garda. He returned to Torrington and worked a few more years while attending night school, then finally settled in Avon. A mutual friend introduced him to Alice, and they were married in 1926. One of the first rules they established was that only English would be spoken in their home.

The Battistoni family owned a house on property that is now part of Avon Plaza. John and Alice and their two daughters lived

there until Katherine was five and Caroline was four. John was a skilled stone mason. He worked as foreman on the construction of Avon Old Farms School, St. Thomas Seminary in Bloomfield, and Avon Country Club. By 1932 those projects had been completed, and John needed work. Jobs were scarce in that depression period.

Mr. Owen Roberts owned Montevideo, a beautiful estate on Talcott Mountain. The property included a separate house for a full-time caretaker and his family. There was also a large body of water known as Hoe Pond. Roberts was a New York stockbroker who owned several other homes including an apartment on Fifth Avenue. During July and August he brought his wife and daughter to enjoy weekends at Montevideo.

Mr. Roberts had a great love of nature and was familiar with almost every rock and tree and living creature on the mountain estate. Throughout his extensive acreage he cultivated just about every plant that could be grown in the local area.

At the time when John Battistoni was looking for work, it happened that the 4-year-old daughter of the Montevideo caretaker was drowned in Hoe Pond. Her devastated parents went back to New York that same day, never to return to Avon.

Owen Roberts was left in desperate need of a reliable caretaker. He called Avon First Selectman Joseph Alsop, who recommended John Battistoni. The family was invited for an interview, and John was immediately offered the job. From that day on, Caroline recalls repeated warnings, "Don't go near the pond." She developed a haunting fear of the water, a fear that still persists despite her successful completion of two programs of swimming lessons.

From the age of four, Caroline grew up in beautiful but isolated surroundings. The only other residence on the mountaintop north of Route 44 was the Heublein Tower, which was occupied most of the time only by its caretakers. However, there were many occasions that provided opportunities for Caroline and her sister to enjoy time with other children.

The girls attended the old Towpath School. The town paid John a dollar a day, for the 180 days of the school calendar, to

transport his daughters to and from Towpath. During winter weather that made traveling difficult on the mountain, Caroline and Katherine boarded at the home of Angelica Consolini on Old Farms Road.

When friends visited John and Alice, they usually brought their children. Caroline recalls happy times when Paul Olson, the Brighenti boys, Ray Bussolini, the Brunoli boys or other children accompanied their parents on visits to Montevideo. The favorite activity of the ten- or twelve-year-olds was a race to the boathouse, where they piled into a canoe and paddled out on the pond...the same pond they'd been warned to avoid. Caroline was responsible for keeping them safe, and she still likes to remind Paul Olson, retired Avon Police Captain, that she used to "babysit" for him.

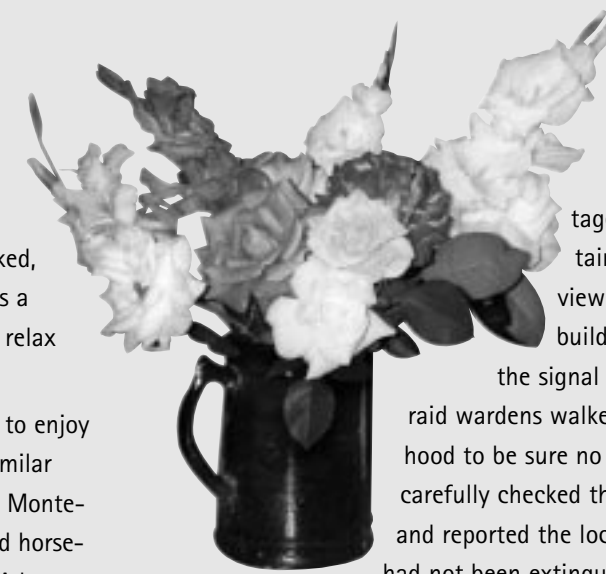
Members of the "Italian Club" (Prince Thomas of Savoy Society) held frequent social gatherings at which both parents and children were welcome. The kids loved the activity and the refreshments.

But most of the girls' free time was spent on the Montevideo property, and they experienced periods of loneliness. They became self-reliant and creative, not dependent on others to entertain them or occupy their time. Caroline grew to know and love the endless variety of plants and animals that were so abundant. She knew where, and in what season, to find the lady's slipper, trailing arbutus, honeysuckle, the forget-me-not, wild blueberries, mulberries, hickory nuts and black walnuts. One day she was thrilled to see a bobcat looking down at her from a tree limb. The only thing she feared was deep water.

Reading was a favorite hobby. Early in the academic year each classroom in Towpath School was given a catalog of children's books. Through the generosity of Mrs. Maude Ely Gibbons of Deercliff, every child was invited to select a book he would like to own. At a Christmas party held in the Avon Public Library, then located on West Main Street, each child received his chosen book along with a small box of hard candy. Caroline



Photos: Caroline in her office • View of Avon and beyond from the top of Talcott Mountain. • Flowers from Caroline's garden.



remembers those books as treasured gifts, some of which are still on her bookshelves. She also had access to the well stocked, elegantly furnished private library in the Roberts home. It was a wonderful place where she felt privileged to borrow books or relax in luxury and lose herself in literature.

When Katherine Roberts was 14, her mother wanted her to enjoy the experience of summer camp. She invited several girls of similar age and background, from all parts of the country, to come to Montevideo and share that experience. Since Mrs. Roberts considered horseback riding an essential summer camp activity, she consulted Ada Thompson, a well-known horsewoman and riding instructor. After careful interviews at her Fifth Avenue home, Mrs. Roberts selected Ada's 16-year-old daughter, Kathryn, to be the camp riding instructor. She was a resident of Wilton and a student at Thomas School in Rowayton, where she had previously given riding lessons. A van delivered three of Kathryn's horses to Montevideo. This was Caroline's first year in her mountain home, and the four-year-old was fascinated by the lovely "big girls" and the beautiful horses.

Many years later, when Town Manager Philip K. Schenck Jr. came to Avon, he had a particular interest in Talcott Mountain. One evening after a town meeting, he inquired of a small group whether anyone was familiar with the history of the mountain and people who had lived there. Someone told him of Caroline's childhood home, and he immediately asked her, "Do you remember the horses and the riding instructor?"

"Of course," Caroline answered. "Kathryn Thompson was the first person who ever put me in the saddle and allowed me to ride a horse. I loved it, and years later I took riding lessons at the Polo Grounds."

"Well," Philip told an astonished Caroline, "Kathryn is my mother."

During World War II John Battistoni was asked to render a special service to the town. From his van-

tage point high on the mountain, he had a panoramic view of Avon's streets and buildings. When sirens wailed the signal for a total blackout, air raid wardens walked through each neighborhood to be sure no lights were visible. John carefully checked the town from end to end and reported the location of any lights that had not been extinguished.

In 1949 the Battistoni family celebrated a double wedding. Caroline married Leonard LaMonica and her sister Katherine married his brother William. In May of 1999 they will mark their golden wedding anniversaries.

Caroline has been employed by the Town of Avon for a total of 36 years. For the past 30 years she has been Town Clerk. In her own words, "I have always loved Avon. My sentiments for the town and my knowledge about it just grew, like Topsy. I've never resented its residential, business and industrial growth. A great deal of credit belongs to Oliver Thompson and other civic-minded citizens who devoted so much time and effort to long-term planning because they also loved Avon. I've enjoyed my work and my contacts with so many wonderful people. I know I have been blessed in many ways."

Some years ago, when Caroline and daughter Ann visited John's relatives in Lago del Garda, Caroline asked a local artist to paint a picture of the lake. The colorful painting, which hangs in her office, depicts the lake and one of the churches designed by Vincent.

Also displayed in her office are several plaques and certificates commending her for outstanding service to the community, awarded by the Secretary of State, Lions Club of Avon, the VFW and the Town of Avon. All are obviously well deserved.

Caroline looks back with gratitude for all that Avon has meant to her, and she looks forward with confidence in the town's future. She is one of Avon's best known land lovers.

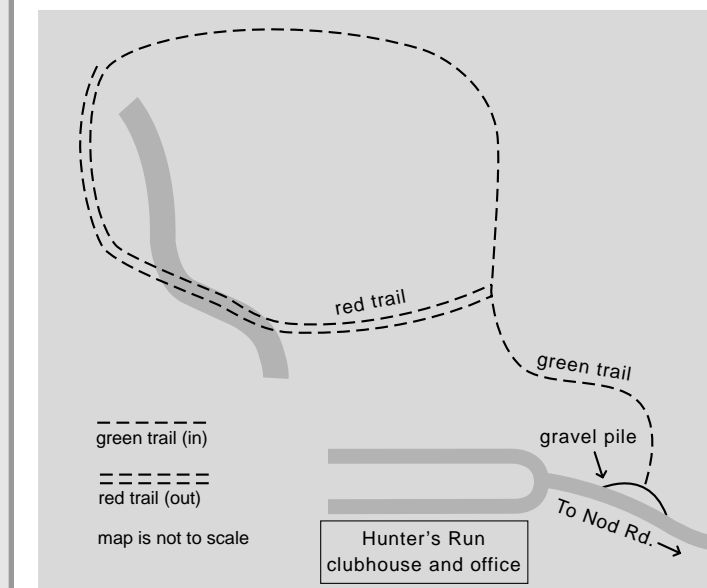
Land Trust Creates Trail at Hunter's Run

On September 12th Avon Land Trust directors and officers convened on the 40+ acres of the Hunter's Run parcel to blaze a new trail through this heavily wooded area. By the end of the afternoon, a 2-mile path had been opened up, features noted and a map of the area made. The trail is open to the public but some caution is warranted—many of the things that are there to see are fragile.



Hunter's Run trail committee (l to r): Harry Spring, Rich Dubiel, Tom Morganti, and Alan Aldag.

To get to the trail head, park at the gravel piles just south of the clubhouse on the opposite side of the road (see map). The trail is marked with green surveyors' tape going in, red on the return and is in the form of a "loop trail".



The terrain is steep in places, but less so than the temporary trail cut two years ago for the spring hike. The Land Trust asks only that hikers leave all markers in place for the benefit of those who come after and, of course, that they carry out all trash.

A hike and nature hunt for kids is scheduled at Hunter's Run at 1:00 on Sunday November 15.