

## Next Stop: Westport! 1950s TV/Film Writers' Inspiration, Cold War Zone

From Jan. 29 to April 28, 2012, the Westport Historical Society presents two complementary and thought-provoking exhibits, **Next Stop: Westport, The Inspiration for 1950's TV & Film**

and, as counterpoint, **The Cold War in our Backyard, An Archival Film Compilation by Lisa Seidenberg.**

"Write what you know" is the first advice given to any young writer. For about a decade, ending in 1958-59, Westport, Connecticut, already a haven for artists, also became a mecca for TV writers and novelists. Most were young World War II veterans, recent GI Bill college grads, newly married and starting families. Career opportunity drew them to New York City, and arts-friendly, family-friendly Westport and its commuter lifestyle drew them here. For some, "writing what they knew"—in *I Love Lucy*, *The Man in The Gray Flannel Suit*, *The Twilight Zone* and *Rally 'Round the Flag Boys*—made small-town Westport and its commuter lifestyle a national TV and film sensation, culminating with *Look Magazine* and the National Municipal League naming Westport, among towns its size, "All-American City" in 1958.

Meanwhile, national fear of Communist infiltration, invasion or nuclear war also was a fact of life. This was the era of the Sen. Joe McCarthy hearings, blacklisted writers, Chairman Khrushchev's "We will bury you" speech and the defensive proliferation of fallout



where Rolnick Observatory is now.

Looking back in a recent interview, artist and long-time Westport resident, Tracy Sugarman, described the era as "Discovery time for us all...Everyone was moving into town together, socializing and going to each other's birthday and anniversary parties." According to Sugarman, it was Dick Berg—owner of The Paint Bucket store and Poor Richard's Art Gallery at Sconset Square, and also a freelance TV scriptwriter—who introduced the Artists and Writers to each other.

Soon, recalls Linda Gramatky Smith, daughter of artist Hardie Gramatky, there were Artists vs. Writers Basketball Games (to benefit the March of Dimes), with manners moderated by etiquette doyenne, Amy Vanderbilt. Artist Miggs Burroughs remembers that, in season, his father, artist Bernie Burroughs, would bring him along to the weekly Artists vs. Writers Softball Game.

Novelist Max Shulman, author of *Rally 'Round the Flag Boys*, already was well-established, according to Sugarman, who was reading Shulman's

shelters and Nike Missile sites, including silos on North Avenue, in Westport, where Bedford Middle School now stands, and companion launch facility, on Bayberry Lane,

work in Europe during the War, and notes that Shulman, later a major factor in Westport's Famous Writers School, was far more comfortable at parties than rising star, Rod Serling. Sugarman was fond of Serling, an avid model airplane maker, and used to tease him about his car, a fancy white convertible.

By 1955, as U.S. television ownership rapidly proliferated, movie theatre attendance dropped to 50 million/week, nearly 50% less than 1946, and demand for TV scripts exploded. Then, TV production technology changed from live New York broadcasts to film, and Westport's TV writers, following opportunity, moved to Los Angeles. "Between 1958 and 1959, my wife and I lost about ten good friends among the writers. They all moved to California," says Sugarman. But the inspiration and friendships evidently endured. In the final year of *I Love Lucy* episodes, all written in



California, former Westporter Bob Weiskopf and co-writer, Bob Schiller, whose ex-wife was from Connecticut, featured Lucy & Ricky Ricardo and Fred & Ethel Mertz moving to

Westport.

Rod Serling's famous "A Stop at Willoughby" episode in *The Twilight Zone* features a man who commutes to work from Westport/Saugatuck by train. In 1961, 6-time Emmy Award winner (first 3 in Westport), Serling—who had moved with his family from High Point Road in Westport three years prior—

was featured in the launch promotion for Westport's Famous Writers School.

Sloan Wilson's novel, *The Man in The Gray Flannel Suit*, set and later filmed in Westport, starring



Gregory Peck, likewise portrays a rail commuter. Wilson's parents were writers; his mother, a *New Yorker* writer; his father, an NYU Journalism professor.

Rally 'Round the Flag Boys is set in fictional "Putnam's Landing", filmed largely in Los Angeles and stars (rail commuter) Paul Newman and (civic-minded volunteer) Joanne Woodward, but one need not look far from Max Shulman's River Lane home to find the inspiration for his satire. In January, 1955, the Civics Committee of the Westport Woman's Club organized a well-attended public forum to review the proposed siting, in Westport, for the defense of Bridgeport, of a Nike Missile. Eric Sevareid and a CBS News crew came to Westport to film the forum, later broadcast nationally on Sunday afternoon's "American Week". The Woman's Club also was well-known for its history pageants, including, in 1920, the Plymouth Rock tercentenary, a rather elaborate re-enactment of the

Pilgrims' landing. The work of long-time RTM Moderator Ralph Sheffer—also a commuting executive—as RTM Nike Site Committee Chair inspired the Harry Bannerman character played by Newman.

A vintage "Lucy" dress and gray flannel suit, along with an Apron exhibit, on loan from Janine Brown, offer a light-hearted context, along with a vintage writer's desk, typewriter, ash tray and bottle of "spirits".

Satire notwithstanding, Westport's proximity to the Atlantic Coast and New York City made nuclear war a real everyday fear, for adults and children alike. The WHS Little Gallery's **The Cold War in our Backyard** features images and artifacts of rational and irrational responses to those fears, highlighted by filmmaker Lisa Seidenberg's ([www.missmuffett.com](http://www.missmuffett.com)) cold war archival film documentary, with media clips from the Atom bomb to the Cuban Missile Crisis, in continuous loop. One focus is "BR-73", Westport's Nike Site, comprising silos on North Avenue, where Bedford Middle School now stands, and a companion launch facility, on Bayberry Lane, where Rolnick Observatory is now,

along with press coverage of construction and civil defense preparations here, and a statewide map of sites built concurrently "for the defense of Bridgeport and Hartford". Another is a national view of the Cold War, with *Time Magazine* covers, *New York Times* articles and even a corporate anti-Communist advertisement. Finally, for today's viewer, the Geiger Counter & Fallout Shelter Display, including tips for stocking "Grandma's Pantry" in the shelter, vividly recalls a nation's willing suspension of disbelief that these shelters ever would be sufficient protection from radioactive fallout from an actual nuclear bomb.

Research and production of these Exhibits was accomplished by the WHS's all-volunteer Exhibits Committee: Larry Untermeyer, Brian O'Leary, Lisa Seidenberg, Anne Levine, Sue Kirby, Janine Brown, Ellen Naftalin and Dorothy Curran.

The Thomas & Jeanne Elmezz Foundation sponsored this Exhibit, with additional major support from Annual Sponsors: BNY Mellon Wealth Management, Betty R. & Ralph Sheffer Foundation, The Leapley Financial Group/Morgan Stanley Smith Barney, Berchem Moses Devlin PC, TD Bank, Weichert Capital Properties & Estates.

## Calendar of Events

### Sunday, March 18

Westport Film Initiative co-presents **Man in the Gray Flannel Suit**, Westport Town Hall Auditorium, 3pm

Reception with martinis and light fare will be held at 2pm at WHS. Admission \$10

April Vacation Days for kids 5-12

### Mon. April 16 – Thurs. April 19,

10am – 2pm, Enjoy crafts, games, guest artists, dramatic play, cooking, yoga and more. Call to register. 222-1424

### Sunday, April 15

Westport author Nathan Allen will give a riveting talk about his new book **The Arsonist: The Most Dangerous Man in America**. —a compelling book about the American Revolution and early Colonial America. 2pm, author will speak and sign books Donation: \$5

### Saturday, April 28

Appraisal Day at WHS! Bring in your art, antiques and objects you cherish for an appraisal of their value by James Lipton, President of Appraisers Associates. 10am –4pm. Call 222-1424 to make an appointment.

### Monday, May 28

(Memorial Day Parade)  
New Exhibit Opening following the parade:

**Long Island Sound: Then and Now**  
10am – 2pm

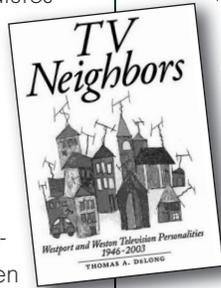
### HOLD THE DATE

### Sunday, June 3, 2012

**Join us for the 21st Annual Hidden Garden Tour & Garden Marketplace**  
**10am –5pm**  
**Toast the Tour Party follows the tour**

## Westport's TV Neighbors Connection by Wally Woods

Tom DeLong's 2011 book, **TV Neighbors – Weston and Westport Television Personalities 1946-2003** is a fine tie-in to the current WHS exhibit, **Next Stop: Westport**, which features major films and television episodes with Westport as their locale. In DeLong's book about the heyday of TV broadcasting from New York City, there is a chapter titled "Sitcoms Come to Westport" featuring the final season of *I Love Lucy* in 1957, when the Ricardos and their best friends, the Mertzes, move from New York City to the country setting of Westport,



Connecticut where they get into all nature of mischief. Another sitcom, *My World and Welcome to It* was based on the life and works of James Thurber who lived for a time in Westport. In another chapter of *TV Neighbors* are Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, stars of the 1958 movie *Rally 'Round the Flag Boys*. As we all know, Paul and Joanne then moved here to Westport in the early 1960's, becoming our town's most beloved movie star couple. Also in the book is a piece on Rod Serling who lived on High Point Road in

the 1950's, wrote nearly 200 television plays and created his own memorable series, *The Twilight Zone*. The plots of several of his teleplays were set in Westport even under the fictitious town name, Willoughby.

**TV Neighbors** features about 100 actual on-screen television personalities— from dramatic actors, comedians, soap stars, sports broadcasters, musicians and dancers, news journalists to TV pioneers and hosts—who lived in Westport and Weston in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Copies of the book are available for purchase in the WHS Gift Shop.

## President's Message



By the time you receive this, **Susan Wynkoop** will be our new WHS president (we were Holiday House Tour '11 co-chairs; see photo), and I will have joined Katie Chase, Allen Raymond, Joni Andrews, Dave Matlow, Maggie Feczko, Wally Woods, Roy Dickinson, Eve Potts and Ann Sheffer among actively involved WHS past presidents. (Some whisper that the whole point of WHS president is to become a past president). However, as I change seats at the table, I want to introduce Susan, thank special volunteers, and ask you to "Save the Date" for the April 21 **"Mollie Gala & Art Auction"**.

First, welcome to Susan Wynkoop! We all can sleep well at night knowing that the security of the WHS is in the hands of a retired FBI Special Agent. She, husband, Dutch (one of the most knowledgeable docents on the Holiday House Tour), and daughter, Katherine, live in Westport's oldest house, dating to the late 17th c. (Of Westport's 10,000+ household units, only 240 are plaqued, and the lovingly maintained Wynkoop home is the oldest of the old!) As an FBI Special Agent, Susan excelled in criminal

work: member, first Task Force in America and first female SA assigned to New York City's Joint Bank Robbery Task. Later, after retiring from the FBI, she became the non-profit FBI Foundation's Oral History Project Director. When not working for the FBI Foundation, private clients or WHS, Susan runs on Long Lots, rows on the Norwalk River and serves as deacon at her church. The WHS is lucky to have her abundant, intelligent, energy and charm.

Next, for those unable to attend the Annual Meeting, we recognized the service of several invaluable long-term volunteers:

**Elliott Netherton**, CFO, retiring after 17 years, whose vigilant financial oversight has favorably sustained our finances and shrunk our remaining debt; **Peter Jennings**, whose pro bono 24/7 management of our Wheeler House, Barn and grounds not only saves thousand\$ annually, but also ensures that we always look postcard-perfect (Peter also created our cemetery tours and worked on our Barn Survey); **Joni Andrews**, longtime chair or secret co-chair of Hidden Garden Tour and

Holiday House Tour, Silent Auction power shopper, Barn Survey team member and regular Reception Desk volunteer, and **Wally and Denise Woods**, who—when their friend, author Tom DeLong, passed away unexpectedly—undertook, without credit, to complete and see to publication of *TV Neighbors*, available in our Gift Shop.

Finally, in 2011, our beloved **Mollie Donovan** first retired, after mounting 50 WHS exhibits, then passed away. To salute her decades of service and devotion to Westport Artists, and preparing to re-name our "Little Gallery" in her honor, the WHS will host a "Mollie Gala" fundraiser on Sat. April 21, at the Westport Country Playhouse Barn, featuring music, wine, hors d'oeuvres and a Silent Auction of work by Westport artists—all to benefit the WHS. At about the same time, be sure to visit Wheeler House grounds... the 1200 daffodils (her favorite flower) that we planted last fall for Mollie should be making their debut.

Dorothy E. Curran





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## *From the Executive Director's desk...*



A new year invites all of us to embrace change. New possibilities and better results come with change. However, what

holds true for any change is that it is positive and improves a current situation. At the Westport Historical Society, change is happening all the time and as an organization we embrace new ideas and involvement from the community that brings something fresh and new to the table. We have forums in place to make these ideas a reality, and from an administrator's point of view, these new concepts are what's bringing WHS into the 21st century full speed ahead.

Our various committees are thinking of ways to bring people into WHS who will find something appealing and captivating. As a voluntary organization,

the people who put us on the map are our talented volunteers who take on responsibilities and tasks that are nothing short of remarkable. They spend hours behind the scenes to bring the information they research to new levels of understanding. The information is shared on our website, on paper, in videos, photographs, drawings and in presentations in our gallery. The amount of information available to the community about our town is bountiful and our mission is to bring it to you so that it can enrich and bring pleasure to everyone.

We are blessed to live in Westport where there is such a rich cultural heritage. We have the opportunity to showcase this heritage in three major exhibitions in our galleries. During the next three months, enjoy Next Stop: Westport and The Cold War in Our Backyard—two new exhibits in our

gallery spaces. Stay tuned for notices about the programs offered in our gallery and the engaging activities we offer youth in the Newman Room throughout the year. Think of us when you need a special Westport gift for someone.

I hope you will be a frequent participant in our programs and spread the word when you have enjoyed something at WHS. Become our friend on Facebook and call us to share information. Remember when you placed a soup can next to your ear with a string attached to hear the other person talk? We haven't forgotten the ways we used to have fun communicating, but today just send us an email or phone us because we're always happy you did.

Good health and peace in the  
New Year,  
Susan Gold