

Putting Down Roots: Lee Barrington, Jr.

Marlboro, NY, May 9, 2024, Lee Barrington, Jr. and I took a six-hour meander along memory lane. We found we had traveled a lot of that same roads and shared a good number of interests. I hope our paths continue to cross and that I continue to learn more about this funny, interesting man. But now, its time for you to meet him.

We hiked down the twisting hill trail toward the Hudson, the vine-marred trees close on both sides. No sign of civilization—but we know there had been houses here—and barns. We know that because my hiking companion, Lee Barrington, Jr., had lived in one of the two houses, had trudged up this hill to catch a school bus, had played in these woods. I took his picture at a junction in the path near where his home had been. Handsome, self-assured. Life-enjoying. A great conversationalist. A history-seeker.

More than a woodsy lane, it was Lee's memory lane. While near his former home-site, Lee spoke of the road—dirt—and that it was never plowed in the winter. It seemed impossible that any vehicle could travel up it after a storm, let alone on a lovely day as this in May. That home—no in-door plumbing, water from a hand-pump outside, coal stove for heat and cooking. We marveled and laughed at the similarities in our early childhood homes and how little we thought about such things at the time.

At 74, Lee climbed back up the steep path to Route 9W in Marlboro as though 66 years had not slipped by since he and his siblings raced for that school bus. Our conversation on this visit to his childhood of memory focused on the two defining threads of Lee's life: Family and work. First family: Parents, five sisters, two brothers. Second family: Wife, their children (2), grandchildren (5), and great-grandchildren (8). Work: Always something that needed doing. We talked for more than six hours about these two consistent major themes of his life, and many of the smaller ones, as well.

Lee's father, the family Patriarch, Lee Barrington, Sr., worked for Joseph Dall Vecchia, a market-making landowner and farmer in Ulster County. Before Senior Lee had moved the family to New York State, they lived for a short time in New Jersey where Lee Senior's father owned a convenience store. Then, he brought his family to Marlboro to work during the season of harvest. The Barringtons ended up remaining. And Lee, Jr. was pleased.

When Lee was about seven, the family moved



again. A short trip this time north on Route 9W to Highland, settling on White Street.

As we drove down White Street, Lee pointed out the location of his former home, which the family had rented—the Barrington's now had Highland roots, deep ones. Today, their house is gone, victim of time.

Lee recalled the apple cider plant a stone's throw down the hill. His father worked there during the apple harvest season and continued working for DallVecchia in other capacities throughout the year. Lee, Jr. also worked at the cider plant and vividly recalled the trucks of every age and description lined up to disgorge the tons of sweet-smelling apples to be washed and crushed for cider. Lee's job was to ensure each truck's entire produce left the truck bed and slid into the wash pits. He liked working. Better yet, he liked earning his way. Lee's two initial comments to me on the new-to-them White Street house was its unusual red porcelain sink and the tunnel near their home that provided safe foot-passage under the speedway of Route 9W. The tunnel was blocked off and in the 1990s its art deco style above-ground entry on White Street was demolished (fortunately, I had taken a photo of it). Another memory that then washed up for Lee was his mother's ringer washing machine. We had one, too. We traded memories of early technologies that seemed so miraculous at first, but quickly became unremarkable. Uneventful years passed. Lee attended the Highland Middle

School on Main Street, worked summers and weekends with his father, and then attended the "new" Highland High School on Pancake Hollow Road, graduating in 1969.

He briefly attended SUNY New Paltz. Then life got more focused—Lee got married. He and wife, Maryanne, had two daughters, Diana and Felicia. Lee and Maryann divorced after 22 years of marriage. Both daughters live in the area, as does one of Lee's brothers, John. All of Lee's seven siblings are living; he is the second oldest.

Before Covid they would gather for reunions for both his father's and his mother's side of the family. He misses those gatherings but is hopeful they might start up now that the world is calmer. I suggested Lee put one together, but he just laughed.

As to his time at Highland High School, Lee singled out several teachers as having significant impact on his thinking and conduct: Jack Mesquita, Charlie Busick, Richard Becker, Lem Atkins, Peter Rooney, and Ande Roumelis Rooney. Peter Rooney gave Lee a two-dollar bill for good luck—it's signed by several friends. He's carried it in his wallet since High School. (I also carry a two dollar bill in my wallet. Kindred spirits beginning to recognize each other).

In addition to the US government notes in our wallets and our early home similarities, we discovered we both had worked in the Plattekill Hot Shoppe on the Thruway, though at different times. I worked there three summers (1960-1962) and some holiday weekends in high school. Lee worked full-time and became the manager—the start of his first career.

The food service industry agreed with Lee—he worked in management at several chain restaurants. Then at 45, he left that arena and became an employee of Uncle Sam at the United States Postal Service. In fact, he was our mailman. We had a waving/chatting acquaintanceship until he retired after 25 years. Then I lost track of him. We met again by chance with some mutual friends for breakfast at the On A Roll Deli, just across 9W from the White Street of Lee's youth.

As we talked, Lee said how he had become

more interested in history and noted he was the only black person employed in the Highland Post Office until he neared retirement. We speculated as to why that might have been. I wondered if it might have had something to do with what happened to blacks in the postal system when, just before WWI, the Democrat President Woodrow Wilson's administration segregated the federal postal agency and fired all the black post-masters. Wilson's Postmaster General also decreed that no mail cars were to have blacks and whites working together. Until Wilson's time, merit had been the order of the day. With the provision that all potential employees submit a photo with their application, it was de-facto segregated. It remained so for decades. Perhaps that left a very bad taste in black mouths about the agency. Or, on a local level, perhaps it was that there were not very many black families in the Highland area, and frequently kids follow in familial foot-steps. If no earlier "first" black showed up at the USPS, none followed. What ever the reason, it did not affect him. Lee was content at the Highland job. He liked driving, delivering mail, and remarked it was a "congenial group."

When Lee first learned of my interest in local history, he asked what I knew of the black experience in the town. Not much, I confessed—but I knew who did: Lloyd Town Historian Joan DeVries Kelley. She had been doing genealogical research on the subject and had gotten a SUNY New Paltz professor and students to conduct archeological digs at the site of a Highland slave cemetery.

At the time of that first conversation, I did tell him that the Klu Klux Klan had met in High-

land once in the late 1920s, but it was to intimidate not the blacks, but rather the Italians who had come to Ulster County to farm, make wine, work on the Poughkeepsie Highland Railroad bridge, and produce large families of strong workers—perceived to threaten the status quo of white employment. I also knew that my mother-in-law, Town Historian Beatrice Hasbrouck Wadlin, had ferreted out the slave cemetery location on the bluff behind the Yelverton House on Maple Avenue that Joan was currently investigating. The story/legend offered that eight of Yelverton's workers, who were also probably his slaves, were drowned when the ferry they were sculling sank. The slaves were buried together on the site. Yelverton had run several businesses and was known to have had slaves.

Until 1777, when Anthony Yelverton added a flatboat ferry to his business empire on the west shore at the confluence of the Hudson River and Twaalfskill Creek there was no reliable way to cross between Highland and Poughkeepsie. Yelverton's home still stands. Its historic marker reads, "Yelverton House. 1754 historic site on the state and national registers. Sawmill, brick yard and store. Slaves sculled his ferry across the Hudson."

From that sad tale, to more recent history, Lee told me about delivering mail to the Gateway Diner early Wednesday mornings where he would see a meeting of prosperous looking people. It was the local Rotarians. Lee was approached by Ralph Smith of Accent Financial Group and asked to consider joining Rotary. Lee found the organization's purposes to his liking and joined. Until Ralph approached

him, it never occurred to Lee that he would be part of such a predominately, possible completely, white group. Thinking of the Rotary mission—service to others—made me ask what other goals he had. Lee laughed and spreading out his hands said, "I'm living my goals. I have no bucket list." His "significant other," Donna, and he live quietly on Gregory Court in Highland.

Lee has no wanderlust to travel. He and his sisters spend Monday and Thursday evenings in Bible Study online. As to advice to the next generation, Lee noted, "The Golden Rule seems to cover it. Go around obstacles the right way. Work the right way."

When asked about outstanding moments in his life, Lee was quick to say one was the election of the first black president, Barak Obama. He added regarding the Civil Rights movement, "I didn't feel it."

I should have asked more about that, but we moved on talking about Lee's hobbies: Computer games of strategy, risk, sports, and real-life golf. Which is a frequent topic at On A Roll Deli with our mutual friends.

Lee said he had not made the connection between his friend and attorney, Danny Martuscello and my husband John until our walk down the path in Marlboro—Dan and John have been business partners for more than four decades.

Yup, small world. Part of what we love about our area. That, and knowing we still have a lot to learn about each other.

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