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*Sedum "Autumn Joy" in the Danbury Museum garden.*

## **Hello Friends!**

*"But it's a long, long while from May to December  
And the days grow short when you reach September  
And the autumn weather turns the leaves to flame..."*

Happy *almost* September! The summer, especially this last month, has sped by quite quickly. But we have a busy autumn ahead with numerous events scheduled in September and beyond.

Starting off on September 14, the Danbury Garden Club's annual Plant Sale & Harvest Fair from 10am-1pm on the museum campus. This event will be held rain or shine.

On September 21, at 2pm, Bethel Historian Patrick Tierney Wild joins us to talk about his latest book *Bethel: A Village in the Hills*. Books will be available to purchase and the event is free and open to all.

On September 28, at 2pm, classical guitarist Carlos Pavan performs in the museum's Huntington Hall. Pavan skillfully blends Argentine tango & folklore rhythms with classical and jazz concepts. The event is free and open to all.

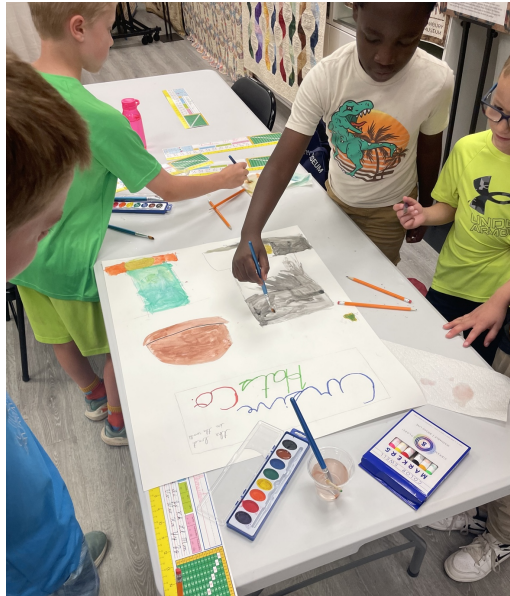
As always, check our [Upcoming Events](#) page for all the latest details.

We have a full slate of Charles Edward Ives-related programs--in conjunction with our friends at the Danbury Music Centre--coming October 15-20 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of his birth. Full details to come, but you will want to set aside the entire day of October 20th (Charles Ives's actual birthday) for very special performances by the Danbury Symphony Orchestra and internationally renowned Canadian pianist, Louise Bessette. Louise's concert will be the grand finale of our celebrations. **And the best news, all of these programs and events are FREE and open to all.** We are grateful for the generous support and sponsorship of the Danbury Cultural Commission in helping to defray the costs of these friend-raising (not fundraising) celebrations. [If you, too, would like to support our community-wide collaborative efforts, please see our sponsorship opportunities.](#)

We are most fortunate to have both John O'Donnell and Dr. Thomas MacGregor writing with us this month. John writes about the many talents of Rex Stout, and Tom writes (in cursive!) about an odoriferous topic, a white skunk!

Welcome, autumn, and we'll see you shortly!

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## **Wrapping Up Cursive Camp 2024**

Cursive Camp 2024 was a resounding success with so many great campers! Thank you to Representative Farley Santos and the Danbury Legislative Team for their work in securing the YSP Grant (\$50,000 in 2024, \$50,000 in 2025) that allowed us to make not only Cursive Camp FREE, but to cover the costs of our 3rd Grade field trips, too. That \$50,000 positively impacted more than 1250 Danbury students across both programs! Cursive Camp students went home with markers, workbooks, paints and more, supplies to keep the summer learning going. Many students generously donated back their materials and we were able to pay it forward and make a donation of supplies to the students at Harambee Center for Youth, furthering the impact of this grant.

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*Rex Stout on Our Secret Weapon (December 1942)*

## **The Man of Gargantuan Gifts: Rex Stout**

by John O'Donnell

Many of us are devotees of mystery stories and frequently start by reading the stories and novellas of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his masterful creations Sherlock Holmes and his assistant Doctor John Watson. These stories are well-written and ingeniously plotted, and frequently lead their readers to become lifetime aficionados of this great genre. In the 20th century we were fortunate to have worthy successors to these two great characters. They are detective Nero Wolfe and his assistant Archie Goodwin. What many people are unaware of is that these two enthralling characters were created by a local area resident who is one of the premier mystery writers of all time. That man was Rex Stout who was a prolific and



writer as well as a man of many other interests. He was a human dynamo whose life needs closer examination.

Rex Stout (1886-1975) was born in Noblesville, Indiana but his Quaker parents soon moved their family (9 children in all) to Kansas. According to the authorized biography of Stout by John McAleer, his parents lived under the same roof for twenty-five years and hardly spoke to one another. Stout never forgot having been their medium of communication or that he had to usurp many of his father's functions in the household in financial and other matters. His father was a teacher who encouraged his son to read. Rex had read the entire Bible by the age of four. At age thirteen, he was the state spelling bee champion. He attended Topeka High School and the University of Kansas. He served in the United States Navy from 1906 to 1908 including service as a yeoman on President Theodore Roosevelt's presidential yacht. His first big break came in 1916 when he invented a school banking system which made him financially independent. About four hundred United States schools adopted his system for keeping track of the money that school children saved in accounts, and he was paid royalties (much as Charles Ives devised creative ways to structure life-insurance packages for people of wealth, which created the foundation for estate planning and made him very wealthy in his own right). In 1916, Stout married Fay Kennedy of Topeka. They divorced in 1932. In that same year he married Pola Weinbach Hoffmann, a fashion and textile designer, and they had a very happy relationship until his death in 1975.

Rex Stout started writing stories between 1912 and 1918 which included romance, adventure, science fiction/fantasy and detective fiction that prefigured elements of the Wolfe series. In 1916 Stout was tired of writing stories whenever he needed money. He decided to stop writing until he had made enough money to support himself. He accomplished this through the school banking system and saved a substantial amount of money so he could write when and as he pleased. The biggest bonus of his new approach was in 1934 when he turned to writing detective fiction. He wrote *Fer-de-Lance* which introduced Nero Wolfe and his assistant Archie Goodwin. This book and its successors established Stout as a master of the genre and launched a powerful surge of popularity for these works.

It is a fair question to ask why these stories and novels were so popular and became such an incredible phenomenon. One answer, I think, lies in the creative background of Rex Stout himself. It has been said that his “was the most civilized mind ever turned to detective fiction.” With the publication of this book came into being a brownstone house on Manhattan’s West 35th Street which the protagonist rarely left, and which one hundred million people could describe in minute detail. He was also an overweight perfectionist of a gourmand and orchard fancier as well as being described by a reviewer as “that Falstaff of detectives.” He was ably assisted by Mister Goodwin, his cheeky young partner and better-behaved Boswell. In *The Red Box* (1937) Archie describes his duties as “I know pretty well what my field is. Aside from my primary function as the thorn in the seat of Wolfe’s chair to keep him from going to sleep and waking up only for meals. I’m chiefly cut out for 2 things: to jump and grab something before the other guy can get his paws on it, and to collect pieces of the puzzle for Wolfe to work on.” The series was so popular that after 1940 Stout wrote almost exclusively Nero Wolfe stories. He continued the series for the rest of his life, publishing at least one adventure per year through 1966 (with the exception of 1943 when he was busy with war work) His rate of production went down somewhat after 1966, but he still published four more Nero Wolfe novels prior to his death in 1975.

There is another very interesting facet to Wolfe’s background. In the earlier stories there is no background ascribed to Wolfe. But in two novels, *Over My Dead Body* (1940) and *Black Mountain* (1954), Stout reveals that Wolfe was born in Montenegro. John McAleer’s authorized biography of Stout notes that this apparently came about because of Stout’s friendship with another writer named Louis Adamic who had been born in Montenegro. It is a canon of Wolfe lore that he refuses on every possible occasion to leave the brownstone on West 35th Street. But in *The Black Mountain*, Wolfe was uprooted from his comfortable circumstances and sent by Stout to this tiny country on the Dalmatian coast. During the action of this novel Archie sees Wolfe as the man of action he used to be and gets a little culture shock. In these strange landscapes, Nero replaces Archie as the expert operator.

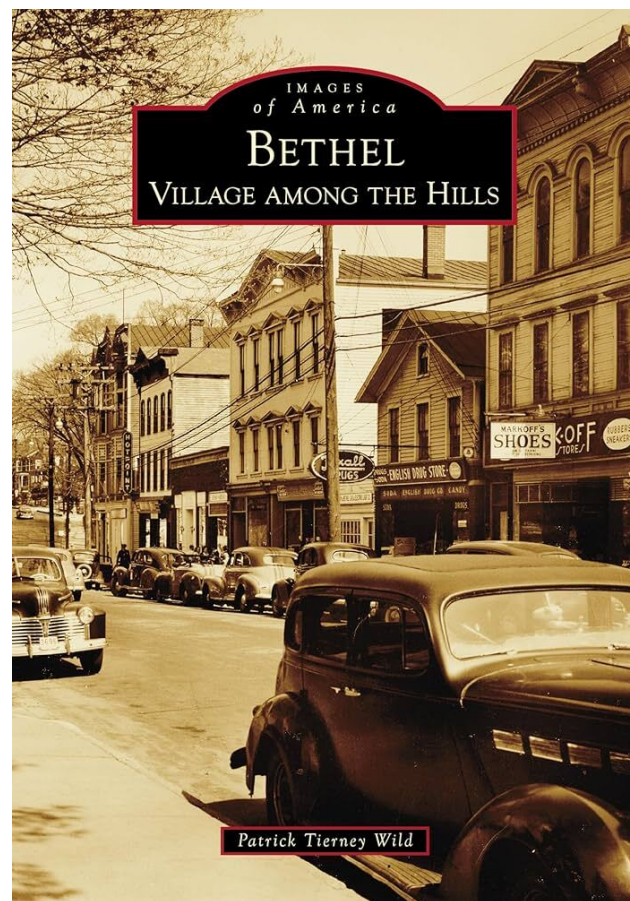
Rex Stout was a tireless worker in so many different fields. He was a co-founder of the Vanguard Press, president of the Mystery Writers of America, stalwart of the Author’s Guild and a leader in the fight for

copyright reform) as Charles Dickens had been in the 19th century, Dickens's last unfinished novel was *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*). As if this were not enough with his prodigious writing skills, Stout designed and built his own fourteen room mansion, High Meadow in Brewster, N.Y. and also built most of his own furniture, grew most of his own food, became known for his iris gardens and his knowledge of gourmet cooking. But the greatest gift that he left us was the corpus of novels featuring Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin. Thank you, Rex Stout, for this generous gift.

Editor's note: For more *Nero Wolfe*, Rex Stout, and a little Dick Cavett, here's [Stout on the old Dick Cavett show](#)

**John O'Donnell first became a history devotee while in elementary school. He was raised in Brooklyn and frequently went to Prospect Park which has a Revolutionary War monument. He was hooked!**

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**Patrick Tierney Wild @ the Danbury Museum!**

On Saturday, September 21, at 2 pm, Bethel Historian Patrick T. Wild will

speaking about his latest book, *Bethel: Village among the Hills*. His talk will include the behind-the-scenes stories of obtaining historical photographs and background information required to produce an accurate and comprehensive look at Bethel's past. Books will be available for signing and purchase.

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## **This Essay Stinks**

by Dr Thomas MacGregor

(Editor's note: Tom submitted this charming essay as both a handwritten piece and a typed doc. Since we recently had three amazing weeks of Cursive Camp in July--that served more than 135 fabulous campers--we thought it would be far more fun to share the handwritten version!)

**After 33 years at Boehringer Ingelheim, Dr. Tom (UConn '85) retired to his garden and piano.**

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## This Essay Stinks

As children, my brother and I would watch cartoons on Saturday mornings. The television had only three channels and broadcasted in black and white. Since my brother was a year younger, he was the designated 'remote control'; meaning he had to get up to manually change the channel and to adjust the antenna at the back of the television set to get optimum clarity. However, he did get to choose which cartoons to watch.

My favorite cartoon character was Pepé Le Pew, a striped skunk voiced by the legendary Mel Blanc from 1945-1989. Pepé was always in pursuit of various female black cats (he thought they were female skunks), and spoke with a fractured, but romantic, French accent. Following years of French classes in college, I surmised that the accent and perhaps the cartoon were perpetuating a stereotype of French, male culture. Thinking back about this cartoon, I guess it needed to be a black skunk with a white stripe to show up on a black and white television show. Even until recently, I thought all skunks looked similar to Pepé Le Pew.

When an all-white, odoriferous animal showed up on my patio one evening last month looking for insects, I was quite surprised to realize that it was a skunk. This sighting led me to do some research. According to a recent (November 2023) journal article in Evolution (volume 77, issue 11),

a white skunk is a result of living in a minimal predatory environment. The authors theorize that the black variety with a stripe down its back, which is native to Canada and northern United States and was named "seganku" (translated as fox with stinky urine) by the southern New England Algonquin Indians, used the black and white markings to deter enemies from attacking. Skunks use their two anal scent glands to spray offensive thiol liquid compounds as a defensive weapon when they feel threatened. Since skunks are omnivores with diets of insects and grubs in the summer and scavengers of garbage from humans in all seasons, this white skunk's only predator in Danbury is probably a neighbor's dog.

Most wild animals know to stay far away from a black and white skunk out of fear of a blinding spray to the eyes followed by sharp claws and teeth. Unfortunately for a white skunk, spraying is its first defense if a predator gets too close. However, skunks carry only enough spray solution for six sprays, and it takes at least a week to produce another supply. During this week the white skunk, having no deterrence, would be defenseless and would need to fight "tooth and claw" to survive.

Since evolution may have threatened the survival of some skunks, in the skunk-world it may be a blessing to look like Pepe LePew.

## Danbury Garden Club's Annual Plant and Harvest Fair



### **Carlos Pavan @ the Danbury Museum!**

Pavan is a Brooklyn-based composer who skillfully blends Argentine tango & folklore rhythms with classical and jazz concepts. He performs in our Huntington Hall on Saturday, September 28 at 2:00 pm. This event is FREE and open to all, but donations are welcome.

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