

FORT HILL MEMORIES

By Walter D. Kolos

763 words

To many, Lloyd Neck is an isolated rural place, a long trip to a wooded wilderness. For a heavily populated and overdeveloped Island, the Neck today would definitely qualify as such a place. The following vignettes hearken back to a time when the peninsula was a lonely and ignored backwater.

These reminiscences come from an autobiography written by Roger Alden Derby (1882-1949), the grandson of Anne Coleman Alden. Mrs. Alden bought the Fort Hill property on Lloyd Neck in 1878. She commissioned the firm of McKim, Meade and Bigelow to design a country home which would become Fort Hill House. Roger's parents, Dr. and Mrs. Richard H. Derby would spend their summers at Fort Hill with their family. Dr. Derby was a direct descendant of James Lloyd. His son Richard would marry Ethel Roosevelt, daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt

Young Roger's memories come from the last decades of the nineteenth century.

He wrote that Lloyd Neck was a lovely, but isolated spot to spend the summers. There were deer and plenty of quail, and wild ducks flew in the fall. The forests and fields were seemingly endless, realms of adventure for youthful imaginations.

The local waters were a place of rich harvests. Sea trout could be caught in the stream at Cold Spring, and good sized tautog were plentiful off the wharf near the causeway. Catching crabs and spearing eels was a great sport in Lloyd's Harbor, and Oyster Bay provided specimens for the aquariums at home.

He wrote that the summers on Lloyd Neck were long and hot, and mosquitoes were a constant plague. He and his siblings did the sort of things that children in that era would do for recreation. They of course had their dogs, and would catch young rabbits and woodchucks, hunted for bird's nests, played games, stole strawberries from the garden and rode their ponies. Time was also spent sailing, swimming, fishing, rowing and acting out charades---summertime activities that would probably be unfathomable to the 21st century Lloyd Neck child!

At Fort Hill his father bred English mastiffs, and kept a large kennel for them. He wrote that they were totally useless dogs, and consumed large quantities of meat that had to be cooked in a large iron kettle in a brick oven in the kennel. His father was president of the American Mastiff Club.

Roger Alden Derby's life was one of privilege, where money and social position were of great importance. Also, many of the great people of the day passed through his family's life. One recollection was a visit from Rudyard Kipling, and Roger's experience of ferrying him to Oyster Bay in a naphtha boat launch so he could catch a train to New York. They had trouble with the boat, and Roger found him to be most disagreeable for the ride across the bay. P.T. Barnum was a patient of his father, and Roger remembered him as being very friendly, sporting a large diamond horseshoe necktie pin and having a large red face.

The Alden and Derby families owned large tracts of land on Lloyd Neck in the late nineteenth century, and the peninsula was very sparsely populated. The only neighbors he mentioned lived in Oyster Bay—the Theodore Roosevelts of Sagamore Hill and Weeks family to whom the Derbys were related. The Weeks family, like the Roosevelts, were very fond of tobogganing down Cooper's Bluff on Cove Neck.

Roger also mentioned F. Hopkinson Smith, the engineer and artist who designed the Cold Spring harbor Light off of Fort Hill (dismantled in 1965). He once illustrated the principle of a diving bell for him with an inverted glass while Roger was taking his evening bath.

Unfortunately, young Roger did not write about many of the people he encountered on Lloyd Neck—aside from domestic staff. He did however reminisce about Carrie and Buck Sammis who operated the restaurant at the Big Oak at the east end of the Neck. In the early 1900's, customers would sit under the gigantic black oak (*Quercus Velutina*) and dine at trestle tables, savoring Mrs. Sammis' famous oyster and scallop stew, clam pie and scallop pie. All the seafood came from the waters off her front yard. The Sammis Inn was a favorite resting place for Theodore Roosevelt—clam pie apparently being his favorite.

Memories of the Village from this era are hard to find, as it is a curiously silent period. Recollections such as these give us an insight into a drastically different world and way of living.