



Settled in
1665

RUMSON

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Briarwood, 87 Ridge Road, Rumson 1908

ALL ABOUT RUMSON

Briarwood 87 Ridge Road

Originally constructed in 1891-2 for the Robert L. Maitland family, Briarwood is an elegant and beautiful reminder of the richness of Rumson's history. Many of the early mansions in Rumson date to the turn of the last century when transportation by steamboat made it possible for New York City's elite to have week-end and summer homes on the northern New Jersey Shore. Sea Bright (then spelled "Seabright") was a fashionable destination, as was Long Branch and the surrounding oceanfront communities. The Jersey Central railroad ran right through Seabright passing beach houses and mansions on the eastern side of Ocean Avenue. Charles Day Halsey, known as Steve, and his wife, Euphemia Van Rensselaer Grubb, known as Effie, rented summer homes for many years in Seabright before they bought their own magnificent oceanfront "cottage" named "Easterly." They moved across the river to Rumson when they purchased Briarwood in 1906. At that time, Briarwood was a 30 acre property consisting of barns, chicken houses, a greenhouse, some sheds, sheep runs, pig pens, a pumphouse, and a windmill. The house was "just a box" until the Halseys expanded it with additions encircling the original structure. Added were the dining room, living room, music room, sun room and sweeping porches encircling a good portion of the house. At least nine people were employed to run the farm and home. Mr. Collins, the superintendent, lived in a cottage on the property.

Steve had a brokerage business in New York City, and he and Effie lived there in a series of town houses as their primary residence. Steve had great enthusiasm for overseeing his working farm, and in meticulous farm journals he recorded every detail of the costs and profits of his endeavors. Sales of eggs, chickens, ducks, turkeys, guinea hens, milk and vegetables were recorded and computed. Between January of 1908 and the following January, he sold nearly 9,000 eggs, and 5,000 quarts of milk. He charged three cents each for eggs, and eight cents a quart for milk sold to local stores and restaurants such as Pannaci's hotel in Seabright and Hintelmann's store (the current home of the Oceanic Free Library) in Rumson.

Briarwood was an elegant mansion with a paneled formal entry hall crowned by a huge staircase with an eight foot mirror on the landing. A large Empire sofa was along one wall, and a large sideboard with hurricane candles and a silver tray for calling cards was on another. A set of chimes with a felt mallet enabled the maid to "sound the gong" to announce meals, and a large piece of furniture near the entrance was filled with games, baseball bats, tennis racquets and the necessities of country leisure life. A formal living room was lined with tall windows that looked out over the hill to Ridge Road and the fields beyond. A book-lined library with glass enclosed cases for Steve's collection of leather bound books on horses and coaching and a music room flanked the entrance hall. Two large sliding doors opened to the dining room furnished with a table that could comfortably seat twenty. Heavy Federal style chairs with ball and claw feet surrounded the table, and magnificent paneling gave the room the atmosphere of an English manor house. All seemed quite formal, but funny things can hap-

pen such as the occasion when the dining room was prepared for guests to be seated, and the family's huge Great Dane, "Rajah", managed to sneak in and lick all of the butter pats that had been set out on plates at each guest's place. A swinging door led into a large pantry and, through another door, into the kitchen with its immense black coal-burning stove. Above the kitchen, accessible through a small back staircase, were four maid's rooms and a tiny bathroom. The cellar housed two furnaces, coal bunkers, a wine closet, wash tubs, store rooms and a tile walled milk room. The second floor had three double suites with their own bathrooms, and the third floor had four huge bedrooms for the children and the butler. Turkish carpets and English sporting prints added to the sumptuous décor. Effie and Steve enjoyed entertaining and had fabulous events: costume parties, minstrel shows, masquerades, birthday parties and formal dinners were done to perfection. Each Christmas, live trees were brought into the house to be used for the family's Christmas tree. Balled in burlap, they were decorated with real candles and used only on Christmas Day, after which they were planted in the pre-dug, leaf filled holes on the hill above Ridge Road. Those huge trees that we pass still gracing the hill were once Christmas trees.

The acreage was used for farming with the plowing being done by horses and the mowing by a huge horse drawn mechanism. The long driveways needed weekly raking. Steve added brick lined gutters along the main driveway, now Briarwood Road, and planted apple and peach orchards, quince bushes and a formal rose garden. Marks, the groom, cared for the horses and eventually adapted to life as a chauffeur of the new motor cars that replaced the carriages. When Marks retired in 1928, Van Halsey hired Benjamin Riegleman, a Rumson native who had been working in New York as chauffeur and bodyguard to a theatrical producer, to drive his two family cars, a Model A Ford and a Packard convertible runabout. Ben married Margaret Collins, the daughter of Briarwood's superintendent, and lived with her and their two children, Helen and Buddy, in a cottage located on the estate. Helen still lives in Rumson and is retired after a long career in nursing.

Rumson was a newly incorporated Borough in 1907, and Steve Halsey was a member of our first Borough Council, as well as the school board. Sadly, he died in 1923 at the age of 57. Effie moved into a lovely manor house across the driveway and signed Briarwood over to her oldest son, Cortland Van Rensselaer Halsey. Effie also built a brick house on Ridge Road between Buena Vista and Kemp Avenues for her younger son, Charles, and his family. Their daughter, Elizabeth Halsey Ilsley, known as Lilly, also remained in Rumson raising her son Robert and daughter June here. June and the late Stuart Young had their wedding in the house and still reside in Rumson. Van made Briarwood his home for over thirty years and raised his family there. He installed an elevator and became an avid gardener. Van Halsey served on the Rumson Borough Council for many years and was our Mayor from 1930-35. When Van Halsey sold the estate in 1955, it consisted of 26 acres. Today, a much needed restoration in progress by the current owners, it still commands the crest of one of Rumson's highest hills on the corner of Briarwood Road and Ridge Road.

* The material for this story came from a small book, OF GOOD COURAGE, written and privately printed by C. Van R. Halsey, Jr. It is filled with stories about his father, Van Halsey, and his grandparents, Steve and Effie Halsey. He was able to research it through photograph albums, journals and farm records-some of which his father was close to discarding. Buried within these family records was the story of Rumson at another point in time, a time nearly forgotten. Mr. Halsey sent the following note to our Borough Administrator and asked that we publish it in the hopes that it might help us to preserve more of Rumson's history.

"It would amuse my father, Van R. Halsey, Mayor of Rumson from 1930-35 to know that the house he grew up in on Ridge Road and the house his great grandfather lived in in Burlington, NJ are both being restored to their original grandeur at the same time. Much of my father's family history would have been lost had I not fortuitously come upon him one day in the basement of his home on Buena Vista Ave. sorting papers from an ancient steamer trunk which had been in several basements as he moved from Briarwood to Osprey Lane to Buena Vista. Consigned to the dump, until I rescued them, were letters, diaries, notebooks, souvenirs, news clippings, etc. Of course, Father was a saver. So, he had drawers full of his daily engagement books, telephone notes-in other words, junk, as it seemed to him.

These papers, which I rescued, served as the backbone of the biography of my father, OF GOOD COURAGE, which I published in 1989, two years after his death.

For some time after the publication of the book, the material for it resided in the same old steamer trunk in our cellar in Connecticut. When we decided to make an addition to the house, the massive trunk had no place to go. It was then that I contacted the Monmouth County Historical Association in Freehold to inquire whether they would be interested in housing Father's papers. Their affirmative gave me the impetus to transfer the papers to Freehold. And a year later, through contributions from Halsey family members, the MCHA hired a Rutgers graduate student in Library Science to spend the summer putting the papers in order, shelving them and getting them ready for any researcher to use them in search of what one family was like at the beginning of the 20th Century.

Of course, the more family histories residing in the MCHA archives the better that future historians of New Jersey will be able to characterize the culture and society of this county. So, this is by way of a plea to those descendants of old Rumson families not to 'throw stuff in the dump', but, first to contact MCHA with whatever it is which looks interesting."

*Editor's Note: Without access to Mr. Halsey's book, this chapter of Rumson history could have been lost. Any Rumson resident with a story to tell of interest to the community, please contact the Borough Hall and leave a message for the Editor of the *Borough Bulletin*. Your call will be returned and an interview scheduled. Most sincere thanks to C. Van R. Halsey, Jr. for recording his memories and for his generosity in sharing them.