

BYE-BYE, BRIGADOON

Are celebrities taking over Snedens Landing?

BY AIMEE LEE BALL

A

IKE NICHOLS

and Diane Sawyer sent their lawyer to federal bankruptcy court not long ago to buy a Snedens Landing house, a seven-acre estate that has changed ownership several times since it was built 40 years ago but is still known affectionately as the Katharine Cornell house. The property was supposed to be auctioned by the court for about \$4.75 million as part of bankruptcy proceedings against the Isley Brothers, the Motown band that recorded "Twist and Shout" and "This Old Heart of Mine" in the sixties.

The auction was a window of opportunity for Bill Murray. The actor had lived in Snedens for a number of years—first in the old manse across from the town's pretty steepled church, more recently in a rambling yellow clapboard house—and he was determined to own the most spectacular property there. He came to court prepared for high-stakes bidding against Mr. and Mrs. Nichols and didn't stop until he'd won—if "winning" is the proper term for a prize that cost him \$7 million.

This single transaction may have quietly but irrevocably changed the character of a community that almost all its residents, past and present, regard as unique. Snedens has a long tradition as a retreat for writers, artists, and actors—its roster has included Noël Coward, Orson Welles, John Steinbeck, and John Dos Passos—but neither the real estate nor the social life

SNEDENS LANDING HUGS
THE HUDSON.





Local lore has it that Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier lived in the house at far left, Noël Coward in the center one; near left, the pool on the Katharine Cornell estate.



Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh.



Katharine Cornell.



Noël Coward.



Orson Welles.



Ina Claire.

CHARMED CIRCLE

It was the presence of Katharine Cornell's famous friends in the thirties and forties that first anointed Snedens Landing as a celebrity haven.

has ever been Hollywoodish or Hamptons-like. The drama of the place is its glorious sylvan perch above the Hudson—country living just twelve miles north of the George Washington Bridge—and with immutable boundaries of mountain and water, geography has precluded much development. Since the days when Rockland County was practically the wilderness, Snedens has been celebrated for its magnificent isolation.

But its beauty, exclusivity, and star power have also brought a new, crazed intensity to Snedens, and the clamor is threatening the quiet and seclusion so long taken for granted. Ellen Burstyn's modest "upside down" cottage (two bedrooms at entry level, living room downstairs) is on the market for \$1.5 million. You can have a fixer-upper owned by the former editor of Times Books for \$1.2 million and, after building a new kitchen, borrow a cup of sugar from neighbors Al Pacino and Diane Keaton. Status has driven up property values, and the higher taxes are dispossessing some locals who are not so interested in the cachet of having William Hurt or Mikhail Baryshnikov as a neighbor. With \$1-million-per-acre gentrification going on, can Blockbuster Video and Mrs. Fields Cookies be far behind?

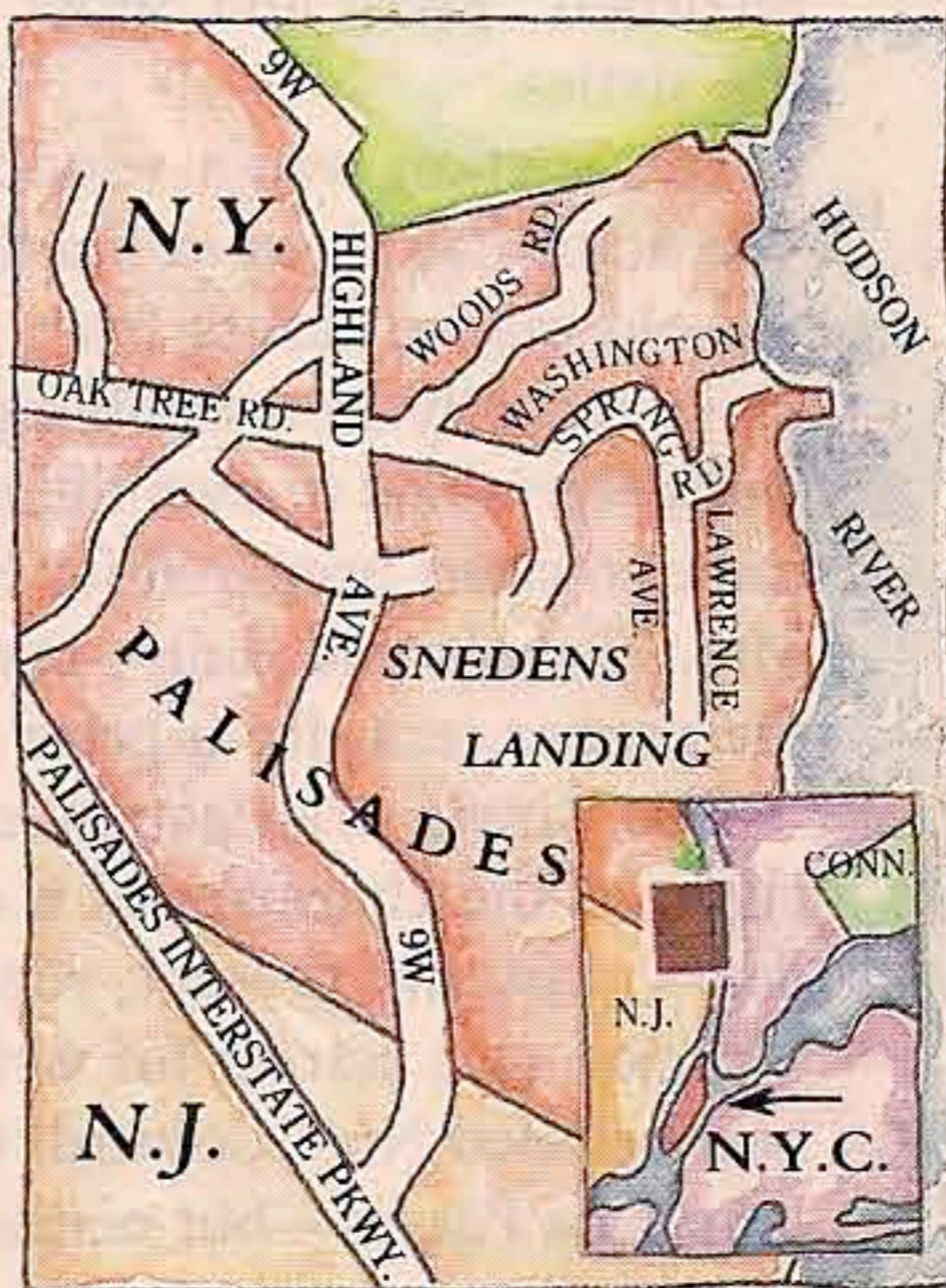
IT IS NOT INAPPROPRIATE TO THINK OF Brigadoon. No signpost marks the spot, and the palindrome of Snedens does not even appear on most maps, since it is not a hamlet, not a village, not an official entity at all. Snedens is only an arbitrary designation—that part of the town of Palisades east of Route 9W to the river. (Some wannabes to the west of the highway have been heard to claim residence in "Upper Snedens Landing," which is roughly equivalent to calling First Avenue Upper Beekman Place.)

Unless you are looking for it, and perhaps even then, you will pass it by, which is the in-

tent of the locals. The entire community consists of fewer than 100 houses, many of them old white frame structures or built of red sandstone carved out of a river quarry just to the south that also produced many of Manhattan's "brownstones." There is little new construction and absolutely no commerce in town—no drugstore, no bank, no barber shop, no 7-Eleven or Hunan Garden or Häagen-Dazs. For worldly goods and creature comforts, the residents of Snedens go north to the village of Piermont, where they can find a pizza or a bottle of Absolut, hear Loudon Wainwright III or the Lisa Best Blues Band at the Turning Point, buy a flannel shirt or *The Mambo Kings Sing Songs of Love* at Whispering Pines, an eclectic shop owned by Bill Murray's wife.

All the roads in Snedens are dead ends, leading to the river, into the woods, or twisting up the cliffs to Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Geological Observatory. Most of the houses do not have addresses, but many have quaint names like "The Laundry" or "Pirates Lair," and everyone knows their provenance. Keeping track can get complicated because of the erratic celebrity census and the local custom of playing musical chairs with houses to accommodate changes in family size or marital status. Margot Kidder lives in "The Ding-Dong House," which was at one time or other the home of Aaron Copland, Jerome Robbins, and the pianists Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale. Next door is "Chateau Hash," now owned by Roger Hooker, who is Bill Murray's lawyer and a scion of Hooker Chemical, the company involved with the toxic-waste dump at Love Canal. Joe Piscopo is selling a house owned at various times by Jon Voight and by Cass Canfield, the former president and chairman of the board of Harper & Row.

The cross-connections can get so convoluted that you need a scorecard. Ellen Burstyn buys or



rents a different house in Snedens every few years. Her former Actors Studio co-director, Al Pacino, bought a house that had belonged to the actress Sally Bates, who was the aunt of *New Yorker* writer Calvin "Tad" Tomkins, whose former wife Judy first lived in Snedens when she was married to the character actor Henry Jones and who subsequently rented her house to both Dan Aykroyd and William Hurt. Mikhail Baryshnikov lives in the "Red Barn," across the road from what was once a French ambassador's house and was subdivided by Mike Wallace, whose present wife, Mary, lived in Snedens when she was married to Ted Yates, who produced Wallace's old *Night Beat* show. Wallace's stepson by his first wife, Lorraine, married the daughter of Rebekah Harkness, who turned part of Katharine Cornell's estate into a dance studio when she owned it.

Snedens may offer privacy, but there are no secrets.

THE RICH AND THE FAMOUS HAVE ADDED LOCAL color, but Snedens Landing has always been a little chunk of history. It was the Sneden family who ran the famous Dobbs Ferry across the river from 1758 until the end of World War II. The original Snedens were rabid Tories: A Revolutionary War document named several of them as "inveterate enemies to the common States of America." Local lore holds that Mollie Sneden, the family matriarch, once hid a redcoat spy in a large chest covered with pans of milk, refusing to allow the soldiers pursuing him to disturb the cream that was rising. The American flag was first saluted by the British in 1783 from ships anchored off the Snedens' dock.

Because of its steep terrain and winding roads, Snedens hasn't been much of a business center since the mid-nineteenth century. At that time, there was a "bone factory" there, where the bodies of horses that dropped dead in New York City streets every day were taken, the hooves used to make glue and the carcasses ground up for bonemeal. And Snedens was an important ferry landing, linking the Dutch farmers upstate with city markets. But the ferry fell into disuse as the Palisades became more accessible by road or train, and as steamboats, which could not come in to the pier at Snedens, replaced river sloops. Business fell off, and New Yorkers began buying the land for summer homes.

The community as it exists today was largely the creation of Mary Lawrence Tonetti, who was born in 1868. When she was two, she moved to Snedens with her parents, who had the architect of the old Metropolitan Opera House design a mansion on a bluff. Descended from Commander James Lawrence, whose dying words in the War of 1812 were "Don't give up the ship!", the Lawrences were a conservative social family, but Mary was an odd duck who resisted Victorian convention. She was a large girl—a disaster when she was sent to dancing school to learn charm—who liked to hang out with the stable boys and the kitchen staff. She thought of clothes as "a horrid nuisance" and sometimes dressed in old damask curtains fastened with safety pins or held her hair up with tenpenny nails under a fireman's hat.

While studying sculpting in Paris at the turn of the century, Mary went to a ball given by Charles Dana Gibson, the illustrator who created the Gibson Girl, and there she met another young Bohemian sculptor, François Tonetti. They were married in 1900 at New York's Grace Church. Mary gave up sculpting, apparently feeling that one artist in the family was enough, and transferred her creative energies to another medium. Having inherited some property at Snedens, she bought much more, then renovated or embellished the houses (sometimes with the advice of her friends the architects Stanford White and Charles McKim) and rented them at nominal fees to people she liked, thereby creating a kind of giant outdoor salon. Her taste in houses was whimsical—she pieced together sheds, greenhouses,

railroad stations, schoolrooms—and her criteria for tenants were talent and *joie de vivre*. She admired painters, poets, musicians, and carpenters, and wanted to provide them with a place of beauty and privacy for communion with their Muses.

The eldest of the five Tonetti children, Anne, had a brief career as an actress in the twenties, appearing in several plays produced by Guthrie McClintic, who was married to Katharine Cornell. The two women became friends, and "Katharine the Great" rented a house on part of the Tonetti property at Snedens. It consisted of a prefabricated log cabin ordered from John Wanamaker's tacked onto a small Colonial house that had been moved from the neighboring town of Tappan. There was plaster on the inside of the cabin, plywood covering the outside curves of the logs, and a huge masonry fireplace built into the wall that connected the cabin to the house. Cornell used the "Log Cabin," as the resulting hodgepodge was known, off and on for 25 years, and often commuted to her Broadway performances with two taxi-driver sisters from Snedens who would take her to the ferry at 125th Street.

In the late forties, when she inherited \$300,000 and a lifetime trust from her father, a prominent doctor, Cornell built her own lavish house in Snedens. It was the presence of her famous friends that first anointed the area as a celebrity haven. Ginger Rogers, Madeleine Carroll, Laurette Taylor, Burgess Meredith, and Maurice Evans all lived in Snedens for a time. Ina Claire came for one season with the prince of Liechtenstein. John Steinbeck and John Van Druten lived there. So did Whitney North Seymour and Marcel Duchamp.

A friendship between Katharine Cornell and Laurence Olivier had survived the time an American columnist asked him if he believed Cornell to be the greatest living actress and he replied that although Miss Cornell was admirable, there were a number of superb English actresses. One newspaper headline the next morning said UNKNOWN BRITISH ACTOR THINKS CORNELL STINKS. In the summer of 1940, while Olivier and Vivien Leigh were waiting to divorce their mates and marry each other, they appeared on Broadway in *Romeo and Juliet*. Publicity along the lines of "See real lovers make love in public" brought in huge advance sales, but the production got such bad reviews that ticket holders began lining up at the box office demanding their



OH, WHAT A PARADISE IT SEEMED

"There were all these magical and strange things" at Snedens, says a woman who grew up there.

"We were living in a little Eden."

money back. Olivier gave instructions to issue refunds—a proud but expensive gesture. With most of their savings gone, the two checked out of their hotel suite and moved to Katharine Cornell's house. Olivier took flying lessons at a seaplane base opposite Snedens, preparing for active duty in the war.



ONE OF SNEDENS'S FIRST LITERARY FIGURES (starting when he was three days old, in 1920) was the *New Yorker* writer and editor Roger Angell, who spent summers there with his parents before they divorced and his mother, Katharine, married E. B. White. "There were no year-round houses then because there were no furnaces," he says. "During the Depression, we used to make our own wine. My father had a grape arbor he was proud of, and kids would mash the grapes in big washtubs. One of the great attrac-

tions of Snedens in those days was that the regular way to commute was by boat across the river. There was a sizable old tubby without a mast and a dock at the foot of the hill about two planks wide. Every morning there would be two or three runs over to Dobbs Ferry to meet trains to Grand Central, and the ferry captain would pick people up at night. At very low tide, they had to transfer to a rowboat. That's a wonderful way to commute, starting the day with a boat ride. There was even a song that Mabel Mercer sang: 'Did you ever cross over to Snedens with the setting sun blessing your hair?'—although that 'blessing' was considered extremely affected by everybody who lived there."

In the fifties, Angell returned to Snedens with his own family and commuted by car pool, once turning a word game the commuters played into a *New Yorker* piece—the men split Angell's fee and went out to lunch together. "It wasn't an artists' colony," he says. "There were always some businessmen and lawyers and architects and journalists mixed in. It was hard to define the place, and I think that is a recipe for a successful colony. Everybody felt that Snedens was special, probably to an excessive degree—I think there was a sense of 'we happy few.' But it wasn't based on money or society, neither was it intellectual or artistic. Writers were a common denominator. Theater people

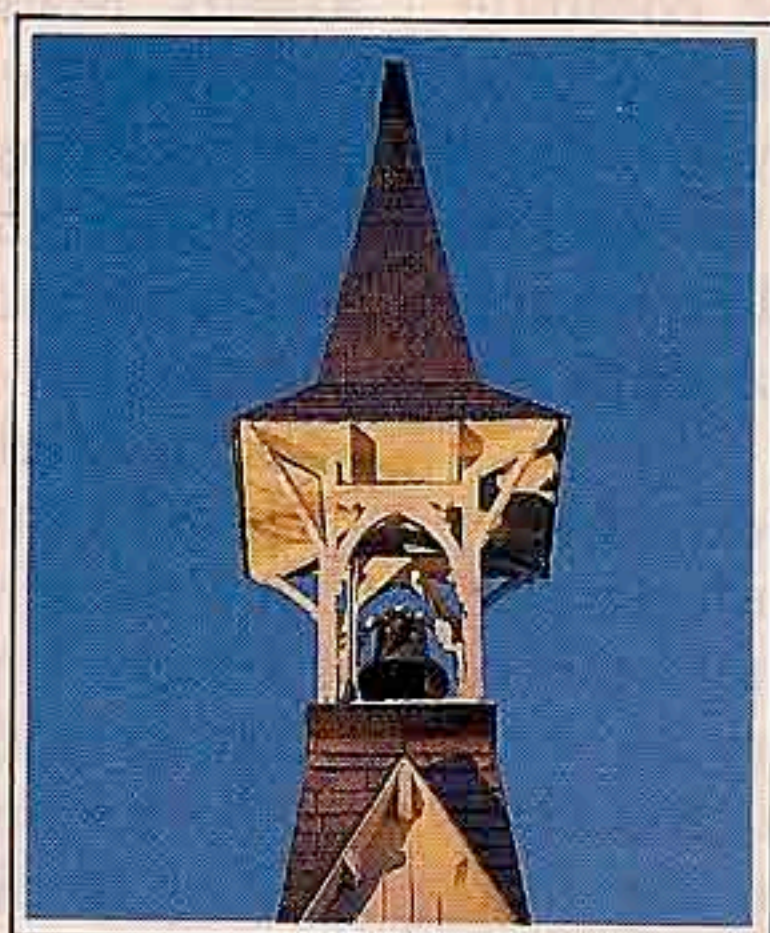
School), and classes were so small that little girls got to be on the baseball team because there weren't enough little boys. Several generations of children played with a sailboat called the *Fiddle-dee-dee* that Vivien Leigh had given Laurence Olivier when they lived at Snedens, shortly after she made *Gone With the Wind*.

"There were secret paths through the woods all over Snedens," says Mary Ann Miles, a Manhattan businesswoman who grew up there, thanks to her grandmother's Tonetti connections, "and there was a tradition that when you got to be a certain age, a big kid would initiate you about these things. There were all these magical and strange things. And the grown-ups were magical and strange, too. We had a neighbor who was a famous fly-fisherman and would teach us how to tie flies. There was Marian Grey, an Englishwoman who was a lace expert and lived in a house that looked like it was held up by a spell. She'd have proper English teas for children, if she approved of you. She'd have the children prepare the tea because she was quite arthritic. She'd read a little bit of *Ivanhoe* aloud, and if we were really good, she'd show us things. She had the empress Eugénie's wedding veil in a drawer. We were living in a little Eden, and I think I was formed by it, to both my benefit and my detriment."

The downside of never-never land is the rude awakening the real world brings. "The whole thing was so ephemeral and, in a way, such a fantasy," explains Tad Tomkins. "So many of the children we thought were getting this wonderful benefit actually seemed to suffer from it. So many seemed never to be able to grow up and be happy anywhere else. There was one young man who spent a couple of years in his late twenties living in a tepee in a meadow there. It seemed a symbol of the difficulty of getting out into the world. Snedens was this precious little place, and children were told it was so precious that they were disappointed by other things."

FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

"In a sense, Snedens wasn't in touch with the rest of the world," says Morley Safer, who lived there in the seventies.



were common. It was highly informal, and there was no flaunting of wealth. It's a rich person's community now—there's a Beverly Hills feeling to it. The driveways are finished with fancy gravel and fence posts and stuff like that. When I lived there, it was half tumbledown."

In 1955, Snedens was examined in a book by A. C. Spector called *The Exurbanites*, a somewhat self-conscious description of those people living in "a physical and mental region between suburb and frontier." Tad Tomkins was living there at the time, writing for *Newsweek* and selling fiction to Roger Angell at *The New Yorker*. "Our illusion was that Snedens avoided the ills of suburbia," he says. "There was a lot of self-congratulatory talk about how non-suburban we were. We thought we were much more interesting and intelligent and individualistic. But it was a suburban community like others where people drank too much and behaved in rather silly ways. It was certainly gossipy. We were a little fatuous in thinking how superior we were. One of the cardinal things about Snedens in those days, and maybe now, is the smugness—that suffocating, often unspoken but tacit assumption that we were better than other people."

At Snedens, Tomkins met Gerald and Sara Murphy, who were Scott Fitzgerald's models for Dick and Nicole Diver in *Tender Is the Night*. Gerald Murphy had given up a promising career as a painter in Europe to run the family business, Mark Cross, and the couple had bought a house at Snedens known as "Cheer Hall," where the governor of New York had stayed in 1702 to avoid a yellow-fever epidemic. (This is the house that Mike Nichols and Diane Sawyer decided to rent after losing the Cornell estate.) Tomkins became friendly with the Murphys when his daughter wandered into their yard, and later he wrote their biography, *Living Well Is the Best Revenge*.

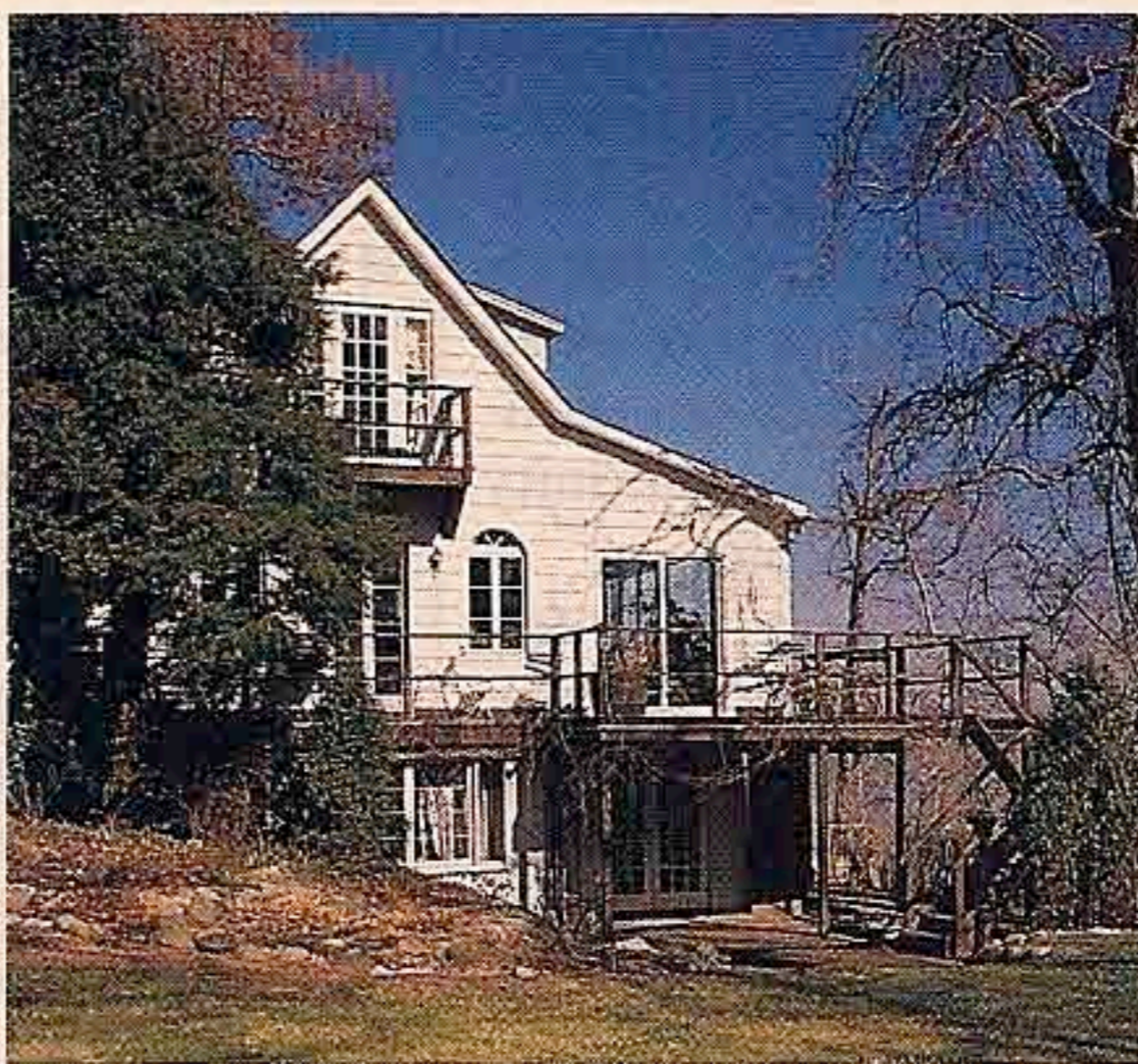
Snedens was an Elysian place for children in the fifties and sixties. The only school in Palisades stopped after the eighth grade (teenagers went on to private school or Nyack High

HERE ARE A FEW UNPLEASANT FACTS OF LIFE that affect everyone in Snedens. One of them is septic tanks (sewers are impossible because of the terrain). Another is snakes. ("We're all used to copperheads," says one local matter-of-factly. "We know we can get up to Nyack Hospital, where they have the antivenin.") And some of the houses have ghosts—there are various reports of hearing Revolutionary War troops marching or the voice of Edna Ferber, who swore she'd come back to haunt Pirates Lair.

"In some ways, it was the most romantic place I've ever lived," says Betty Friedan, who started working on *The Feminine Mystique* while living in Snedens. "I would type with gloves on because every time you turned the heat up, you felt like dollar bills were being burned.

"The sociology of the place was interesting," says Friedan. "There were some very interesting people who lived there, and there were some people whose main claim to fame was living there because of that sort of specialness. I remember someone who lived on the other side of the highway and had a play on Broadway one year. In my naïveté, I wondered why he wasn't invited to join the tennis club. And the answer was 'Of course not—he's not one of us.' I kept saying, 'But he's got a play on Broadway.' It was as if living in Snedens somehow made you more creative."

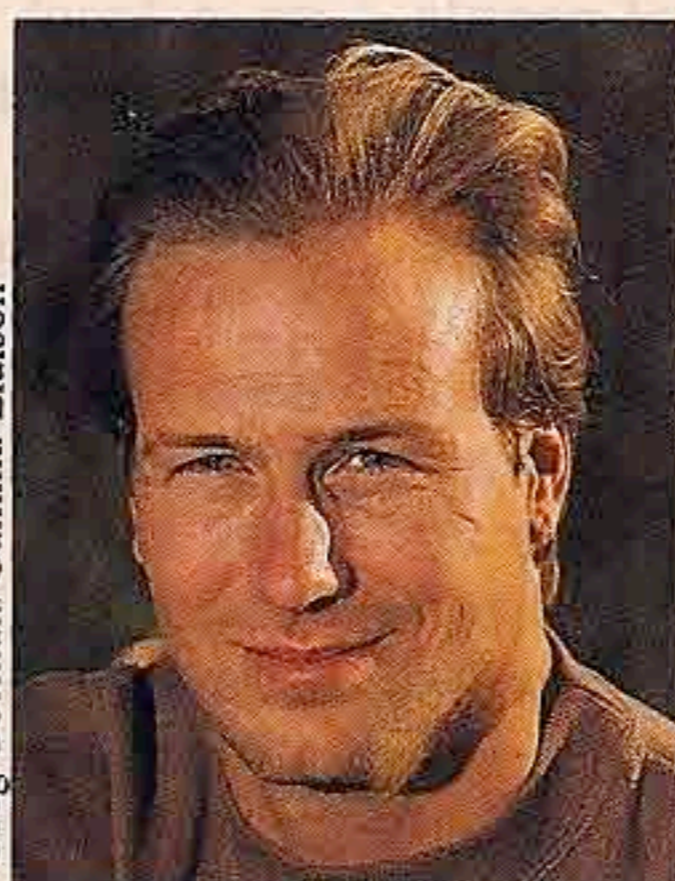
"I guess, in a sense, Snedens wasn't in touch with the rest of the world, and you can't blame people for not wanting to be," says *60 Minutes* correspondent Morley Safer, who lived there in the seventies. "Television reception was awful—the depth of its terribleness varied from house to house because the signals would bounce off the Palisades. It was the most wonderfully bucolic place. When my daughter was small, we'd walk down to the water and find river glass. We used to go over to Tallman Mountain State Park and watch the Russians getting off their



Morley Safer.



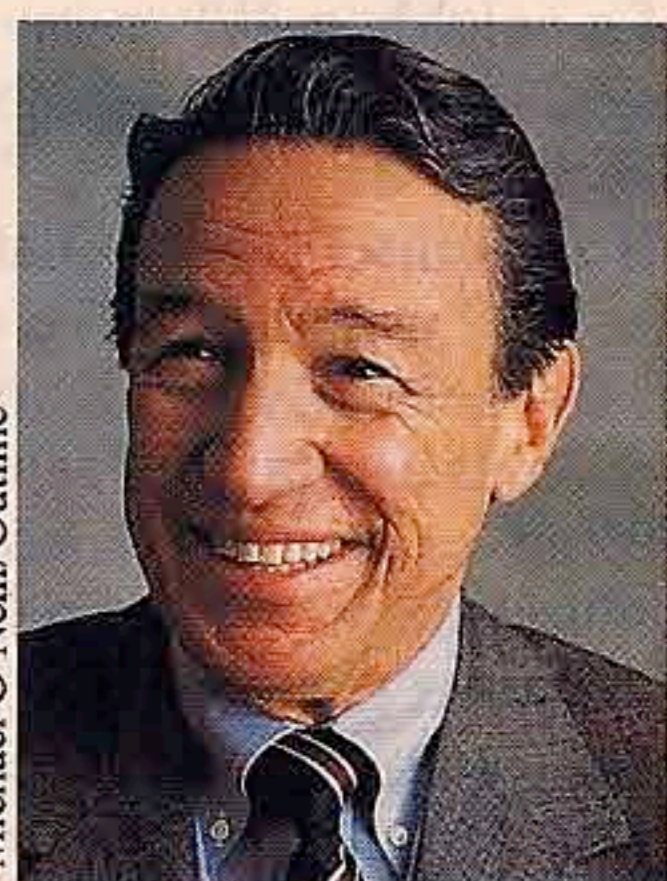
Diane Keaton and Al Pacino.



William Hurt.



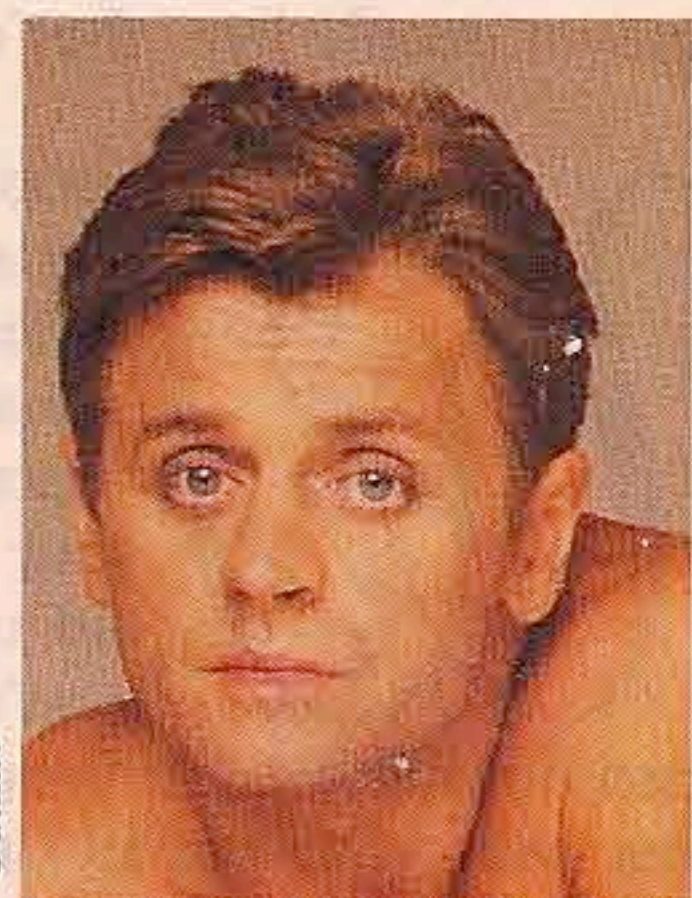
Pinchas Zukerman and Tuesday Weld.



Mike Wallace.



Margot Kidder.



Mikhail Baryshnikov.

LIFE-STYLES OF THE RICH AND FAMOUS

To ensure their privacy, some celebrities—Al Pacino, Mikhail Baryshnikov—have bought the lots around them as they became available.

buses: That was the farthest they were allowed to travel, according to the reciprocal rules between the Soviet embassy here and the American embassy in Moscow. So they'd bring their families for picnics in these buses, usually followed by an FBI car, and do their Russian things in the woods. We weren't part of a 'scene' because there wasn't a scene. There weren't the kinds of social stakes of certain chic communities. There weren't the heavy-duty obligations of other places, that business of we've-got-to-have-them-because-they've-had-us. It was a lovely, soft life."

THE SOCIAL SCENE IS STILL LOW-KEY. THERE ARE two big community events: a twice-yearly plant sale to raise funds for the Palisades library and an annual tennis tournament at the pretty, shaded clay court (where, according to Mike Wallace, neighbors meet on weekends to shoot the breeze). The Presbyterian church—the only public building actually in Snedens—is a gathering spot for Sunday-morning services and Wednesday-evening A.A. meetings.

"Like everything else in Snedens, how the church ought to be handled was hotly debated," says Tomkins. "There was a suc-

cession of ministers, all of whom were wrong for one reason or another. I remember one quite intellectual young fellow, just out of theological seminary. An elderly Snedens lady was heard to say as she was leaving the service, 'I go to church to hear about Jesus, and all I hear about is T. S. Eliot.' "

But some of the small-town feeling is dissipating. "In Snedens, the rule is that you socialize with each other," says one woman. "God forbid somebody isn't invited to somebody else's party—it becomes a personal affront. But there are a lot of new people coming in, and it's changed so much. Ellen Burstyn used to do *Midsummer Night's Dream* parties every year on the lawn, and everyone here was just dying to be invited to one of those. But she has her own friends from the theatrical world. They do keep to themselves."

Some of the local celebrities get high marks for civic-mindedness: Bill Murray dressed up as a black slave girl for a reading from Mark Twain at the nearby Rockland Center for the Arts. After an art auction at the church, several women heard a vacuum cleaner going and turned around to see Bill Hurt tidying up. And Pinchas Zukerman keeps his neighbors as well as wife Tuesday Weld happy by practicing with the windows open.

"There are different kinds of celebrity neighbors," says An-

drew Norman, chairman of the Norman Foundation, a private grant organization, who moved to Snedens 30 years ago after being introduced to the area by the actress Marian Seldes. "There are many who are full-fledged members of the community. And there have been quite a few whose lives are intense in their professional work, so they don't have the time or emotional energy to be involved in the daily life of whatever community they're living in, be it Snedens Landing or the Dakota."

Snedens used to have a lot of absentee landlords who rented their homes on a seasonal or yearly basis. Now many of the celebrity owners are replaced by their on-site caretakers for long stretches of time. "I call it Hollywood East," says Jack Jefferies, a lawyer who has been there for more than twenty years. "I think it's become more isolated. When there are a lot of movie actors and they don't participate, it's like having a blank instead of a neighbor. When my daughter was born, a parade of people came in to see her, just because she was a new child. It was very touching. But Al Pacino's not coming in anywhere—he's sort of off to himself. And Diane Keaton lives in the next house, and she's off to herself." To ensure their privacy even further, many of the celebrity residents buy the lots around them as the land becomes available. Pacino now has two houses. Baryshnikov acquired several acres bordering his house and put a fence all around them. ("If he'd kept his antennae up, he'd have realized that wasn't necessary," sniffs one woman. "There have always been famous people here, and other people are protective of them. From the time they're old enough to understand, children are told that if strangers come around asking where the well-known people live, they're to say, 'I don't know.'")

WOODY ALLEN TRIED TO USE JEFFERIES'S house for the shooting of *Interiors*, and Jefferies claims that Allen's retribution for his refusal was a line in *Manhattan* about "spending another boring weekend with your parents in Snedens Landing." Allen did use a Snedens place for John Houseman's home in *Another Woman* (Houseman himself lived in Snedens more than 50 years ago, while his first wife, who was in California, generously paid the bills despite what she called his "romantic entanglements"). George

Jenkins, a set designer, used his own terrace for the opening scene in *Klute*. And another house was used for *Starting Over*.

Neil Simon set his play *Rumors* in Snedens. "I was aware that it was a new chic place to live," he says, "and I love the name. It's a funny name." Ironically, his daughter Ellen was renting in the area when her husband was struck and killed by a car while jogging on Route 9W. "In tragedies, the whole community pulls together," says a longtime resident. "We had one suicide. We had the death of a well-liked young doctor. There was a period when three couples got divorced—boom, boom, boom. Everybody pulls together. People come over with food."

But such a small community can also become a Peyton Place. Some years ago, an unmarried Snedens woman had a child, and the little boy would run through the streets yelling, "Who is my father? Who is my father?" More recently, the gossip centered on a local woman who sued her lesbian lover for palimony. They're both still in Snedens, and today's scuttlebutt concerns the former lover's new girlfriend, who is pregnant by artificial insemination.

"I'm sure everybody knows everything about me from the time I was born," says Jefferies, "but I don't feel uncomfortable with it. I have faults and they have faults, and I know theirs and they know mine, but we're all human." Many locals claim they do not feel exposed to one another so much as invaded by outsiders. "There are a lot of new people who are very nouveau, with all the pejoratives that implies," says one woman. "There's always been money here. Michael Currier is a Mellon. Andy Norman is from the Sears, Roebuck family—he's got tons and tons. He used to drive around in a Volkswagen convertible with one of the doors roped shut. When he went to the city, he would park near 125th Street and take the subway. At Christmas, he gives a big party, and everyone in Snedens is invited, including the second and third generations—you're talking about 500 people. You can pretty much tell who has what here by how nice they are. The nicer ones are the ones who have it."

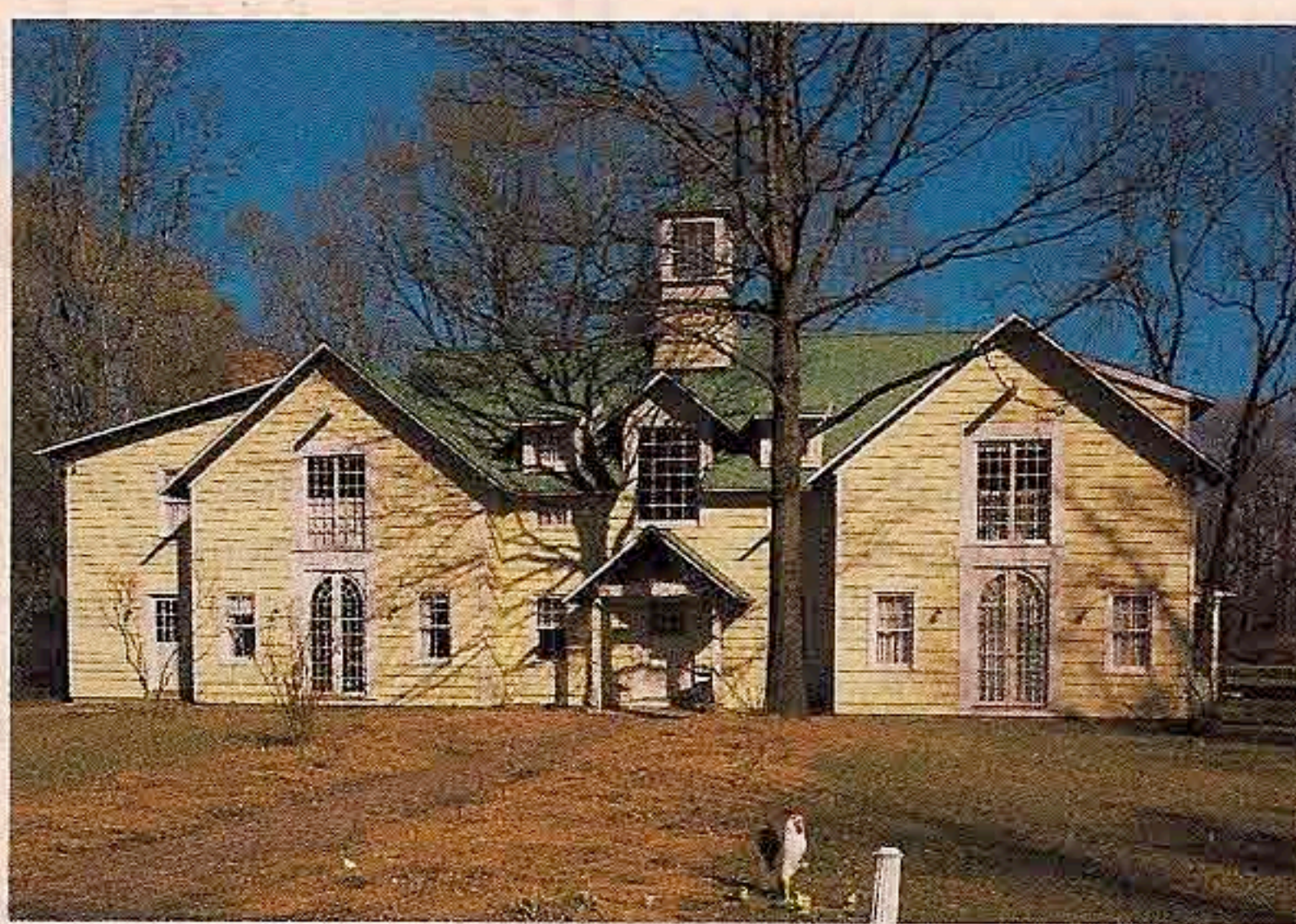
But according to one former resident, anyone hoping to buy in Snedens these days may get the impression that unless he is an Academy Award-winning performer, he does not deserve to live there. A man who recently looked at real estate in the area was outraged at the price attached to cachet. "One house had termites and water in the basement," he says. "The wiring should be sent to

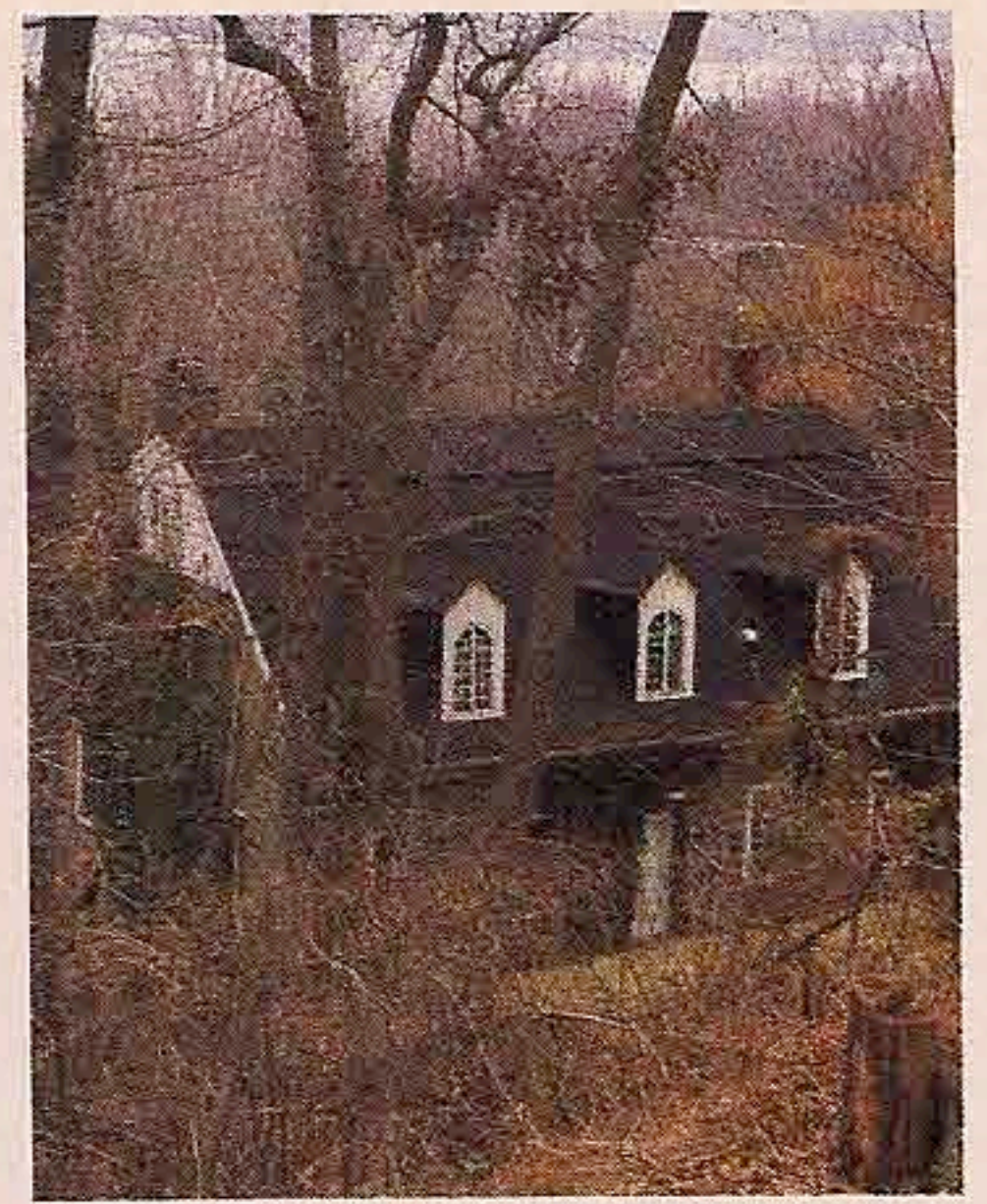
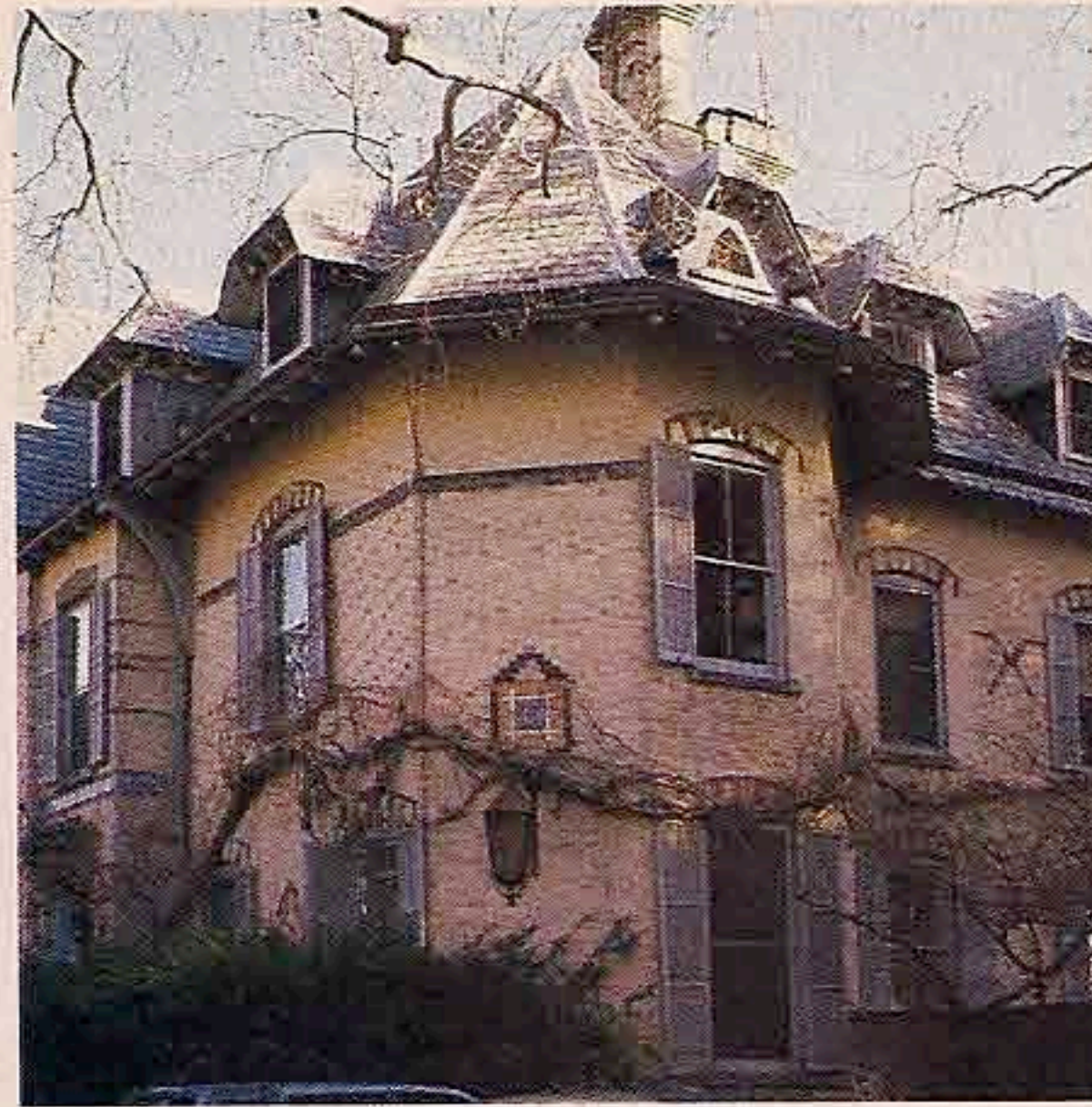
the Marconi Museum. There's no way to use the land—I'd have to get a goat instead of a dog. And this house was over a million dollars! Everybody talks about how 'special' Snedens is. Fine—let them put a fence around it and secede. People are buying based on emotion rather than value, which is okay in an escalating economy but not in a static market. They'll never get their money back."

One local talks about the current influx of "people who are so concerned with who they think they are"—the doctors and businessmen who can afford the price of admission. The "Snedens Hilton," one of the biggest houses in town, has a bowling alley in the basement. It may be outdone by the newest exercise in ostentation, a huge, glaringly modern structure at the intersection that is the unofficial outer parameter of Snedens. Many neighbors express chagrin about the older cottage that will be torn down to make room for this "lookamee" house, owned by David Seeger, who runs a company called Today



Bill Murray's current Snedens house, top, and "Peter Rock," the seven-acre Katharine Cornell estate, which he bought in January for \$7 million.





THE TIMES, THEY ARE A-CHANGING

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Video. "The Historical Board is supposed to see that that doesn't happen," says one man. "We've given them hell because they let that house come up right at the beginning of Snedens."

One woman says the inflated prices of Snedens houses have tripled her real-estate taxes in fifteen years. Baryshnikov's house cost \$340,000 in 1981. Joe Piscopo's house cost \$485,000 in 1985. William Hurt's house cost \$900,000 in 1987.



AND NOW THERE IS A \$7-MILLION HOUSE. THE place that Katharine Cornell called "Peter Rock," for her father, began as a Long Island barn that was dismantled piece by piece and reconstructed as an aerie over the river. But when Cornell sold her townhouse at 23 Beekman Place, the country retreat became more extravagant, with crystal chandeliers, a circular staircase, a domed foyer painted with a zodiac mural, a library, terraced bedroom suites, a servants' wing, and underground storage for theater trunks and memorabilia.

Such a showplace was an anomaly in Snedens, where a certain degree of dilapidation has always been prized. After years of on-and-off occupancy, the house now needs work, but some residents are put off by the plans of Bill Murray, who has been heard to say that he intends to restore his new home in the manner of Katharine Cornell. ("My God," says one neighbor. "Next thing, he'll want to be Ethel Barrymore.") Mary Lenk, the real-estate agent who sold the house, often handles properties of comparable size, but she was dazzled at the bidding war over this one. "It was incredible," she says. "It's quietly done. The judge excuses himself, and a lawyer conducts the auction, until

one of the bidders says no. It was over rather fast. But it was dramatic in that nobody knew where it was going to end, how high it would go."

Which, to many who remember the past with fondness, is precisely the problem. "I think money has made a big difference in Snedens," says Roger Angell. "It's not welcoming. You drive down to the bottom of the hill, and the sign says, DON'T TURN AROUND HERE. There's a strong feeling that the prices have skyrocketed an extra amount because of the kind of people who live there now. There was always a great pride of place in Snedens, knowing it was like no other place. But it was not an address to flaunt. I sense it is different now."

More than 50 years ago, Mary Tonetti refused to cooperate with a writer who was doing a magazine article about Snedens. "It is far too humble and personal an affair to appear publicly," she declared. "Snedens is a thing of shreds and patches, a picture done in handpicked rags against an enduring background." Some of the current residents still subscribe to this conceit, protesting that any special attention directed at Snedens is both unwarranted and unwelcome—while at the same time gloating over a shared secret.

"It is lyrical," Jack Jefferies says of Snedens. "You feel like you're out of the time sync for a while. I do not know why on God's earth Bill Murray ever told anybody he bought that place for \$7 million. He knows the general code is that you don't go around saying stuff like that. When I first came out, one of the Tonettis told me, 'We don't like people to bring in fancy cars.' I was driving a Chevrolet at the time, which I'd thought would be all right." Jefferies sighs with the weariness of one who realizes that the new neighbors refer to their BMW as a Beemer. "I guess Ivana Trump will come out now." ■