



Stepping Stones News

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THE SOUNDS OF MUSIC

When Bill and Lois moved to Stepping Stones in May of 1941, it was the first time in 23 years of marriage that they had a house of their own. Stepping Stones not only afforded Bill and Lois a place to hang their hats and call home, it also created a space where the Wilsons could rediscover many of the pleasures that alcoholism and homelessness had taken from them.

Chief among these was their love of music. Both Bill and Lois considered music to be a central part of their lives, and soon after they moved to Bedford Hills they played together almost every day. As Nell Wing says, "I always remember music in the house. It was like a ritual almost. I would come up on Friday nights for the weekend and Bill or Lois, depending on who wasn't doing anything, would pick me up at the train station. Soon after I got there the two of them would start playing their instruments."

Lois' instrument was the piano, and as Nell recalls, "she was so talented in so many ways and played very well. Bill was really good on the cello which I think was his favorite, but, of course, he loved the violin, too. He would play it at the picnics roaming around with it like some kind of gypsy. In fact, we used to say, 'There goes the gypsy!'"

Nell, who was Bill's secretary and a close friend of his and Lois', also joined in on piano. "Sometimes when Lois was in the kitchen making dinner, Bill would say, 'Come on, Nell, let's play some of the old chestnuts,' and we'd play some Bill's favorites like 'Wearin of the Green', 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary', that old World War I song, and 'Seeing Nelly Home'."

Although Bill enjoyed playing old popular tunes, his and Lois' first musical love was classical music. "That's the music that would be on when we ate dinner," Nell notes. "We'd always be listening to it, and Bill and Lois played so many of the familiar classical pieces."

According to Nell, Bill's violin, the one that rests on

Lois' piano at Stepping Stones, was a gift from an AA in Minnesota named Gib. Bill's first violin came from the attic in his grandfather's house in East Dorset where Bill grew up. The violin had belonged to Bill's uncle and was in some disrepair after years of neglect. The always-inventive Bill rebuilt the instrument and taught himself how to play the way he did everything in his life -- with fierce determination until success was achieved. He taught himself so well, he eventually played first violin in his high school orchestra.

Besides playing for themselves, Bill and Lois loved to share their enthusiasm for music with their many friends. It was customary for them to have soirees where tables were set up the living room and friends entertained and invited to play. These parties

were lots of fun. Bill and Lois were social people, and sharing their favorite pastime with others gave them much satisfaction.



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OUR PIANO IS MISSING!



When asked about how long it would take before the restoration work was completed, Mr. Ford said, "About three months. One day at a time." Seems everyone knows the language.

John Ford (below) works on Lois' piano in his Peekskill shop.

Many a visitor to Stepping Stones has wandered over to Lois' beautiful piano and asked, "May I play this?" and we have always responded with a, "Yes but it's really out of tune." And, a few chords later, the player knows we're not lying.

Truth is, the piano has not been played regularly in several years and has been in need of some major re-vamping. It's finally getting it. John Ford, a third-generation piano restorer in Peekskill, NY, now has the piano in his shop and is doing extensive work to bring the instrument back to it's true potential — a piano with an exceptionally beautiful sound.

The piano is a Mason and Hamlin, one of the better pianos crafted in this country in the early part of the century. Unlike its better known cousin, the Steinway, which produces a great sound for a large space, the Mason and Hamlin was built for smaller spaces. So, the sound is more mellow and softer, according to Mr. Ford.

Lois and Bill moved into home of her parents, Dr. Clark and Matilda Burnham, in 1930 as a result of the stock market crashing and Bill's alcoholism preventing him from making a living in the financial markets or anywhere else for that matter. After both of her parents died, Bill and Lois could not afford to live in the house themselves and were forced to move out. They put much of the furniture into storage with the hope that perhaps someday they might put it in a home of their own. "Someday" was the day Bill and Lois moved into Stepping Stones and their furniture came out of storage, including the piano.



IT'S THAT TIME OF YEAR!!!

The annual Lois W. picnic will be held on Saturday, June 7, 1997. Grounds open at 12:30 PM and stay open until 5:00. Bring a blanket or chair and your own picnic lunch. (No cooking allowed.) We will provide cold sodas, and if you want hot coffee, please bring your own thermos.

The meeting will begin at 2:00 with AA, Al-Anon and Alateen speakers. The house will be open for touring, and anyone wishing to volunteer to help may call us at 914-232-4822. There is no raindate. Looking forward to seeing you at this Stepping Stones tradition!

EIGHTY YEARS OF LOVE

For those of us who are blessed to know her, it's impossible to believe that Nell Wing is celebrating her 80th birthday on May 27th. How can anyone so energetic, effervescent and so much fun be 80? Well, if you're Nell, it's easy.

Being around Nell is like being with the sun; she shines, and her warmth radiates to everyone around her. It's no wonder Bill and Lois found in Nell the offspring they always wanted. They loved her like the daughter they never had. She was to them as she is to us, a gift.



Nell met Bill in 1947 when she agreed to take a temporary job working at the AA office before taking off for Mexico to become a sculptor. She took the spot to make some money for the trip and also because she had read about AA and was very impressed with it. In a short period of time, Nell advanced from receptionist to Bill's secretary, and upon his death, to first AA archivist. As a result of her friendly personality and extensive knowledge, Nell has been as busy in retirement as when working. She has traveled all over the world, accepting speaking engagements at AA functions, including the conventions as a non-alcoholic friend of the fellowship. To our mind, Nell probably had the most successful temporary job history.

If it hadn't been for Nell, AA wouldn't have many of the important historic documents its archives now has. After Bill died, someone was cleaning out his office and about to throw his papers away when Nell said she thought that might not be such a good idea. She rescued the materials and before long, AA had its first archival collection.

At Stepping Stones, the blue bedroom downstairs at Stepping Stones was nicknamed "The Nell Wing Room" by Bill and Lois because Nell stayed in it so often. Like a daughter coming home for holidays or the weekend, Nell's room, with Lois's grandfather's imposing bed in it, was always ready for her.

Nell was a devoted friend to Bill and Lois. She was with Bill at his death and was there for Lois when she died, as well. Nine years before Lois passed on, she created the Stepping Stones Foundation. Nell was one of the four founding trustees; today, she is the only trustee emeritus on the board. She comes to Stepping Stones often, usually bringing a friend or two, and then walks through the house remembering many delightful stories of her time here with Lois and Bill. And any visitor here when Nell arrives is always in for a special treat.

So, Happy Birthday, dear Nell, and a big thank you for all you have done for and given to Stepping Stones over the years. To know you is to love you, and we do.

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There are several photos upstairs at Stepping Stones that attest to the Wilsons' love of playing their instruments. One particularly striking portrait hangs on the wall of their bedroom. Taken in the early 1960s, the black-and-white picture shows a dignified Lois sitting at the piano and an equally dignified Bill standing next to her with violin under his arm. They both look so happy, as if they are truly at home, doing something they really love to do.

In the library, in the corner by Lois' Al-Anon desk, there are a few photos of Bill stringing away at his cello. In one, he is looking right into the camera, beaming.

Stepping Stones is more than a home, it a testimony to a reconstructed life made possible through the healing power of AA and Al-Anon. And, in that way, it is so like millions of homes around the world. That's probably why so many visitors to Stepping Stones feel they are in a new place that is at the same time somewhat familiar. Stepping Stones is a reflection of Bill and Lois's recovery, and we often feel reflected there, too.

MEMORIES, MEMORIES...

Are you one of those lucky people who remember Stepping Stones when Bill and Lois lived here? If so, we hope you'll share your memories with us.

While we have a rich archival record of Stepping Stones through the letters, books, diaries and such left by Bill and Lois, our archives would be enriched by your personal recollections or with the recollections of those who visited here when the Wilsons were alive. Also, your memories would help others in the future better appreciate the environment and atmosphere which gave rise to and nourished the AA and Al-Anon fellowships.

If you have any anecdotes about private visits, group visits, picnics, old-timers meetings, whatever, please send them to us. We'd love to hear from you!

Please call Paul Lang, our archivist, at 914-232-4822 or write to the Archives Committee at the return address

on this newsletter (We'd appreciate your including your phone number in case we need to call you.)

A word to our visitors....

Looking back on last year, we want to thank all of you who visited Stepping Stones in 1996. We welcomed some 1,100 visitors, many of them from countries such as Russia, Finland, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil and Japan. It always amazes and moves us that people will come from such a long distance to experience Stepping Stones. It is such a gift for them to be here, and we want to extend this gift to everyone in AA and Al-Anon. Stepping Stones was left for all of us to enjoy, and we fulfill Bill and Lois' deepest wish by coming here and keeping Stepping Stones alive. Please tell your friends and those in your groups about Stepping Stones and encourage them to call us at 914-232-4822 to arrange a visit. Hope to see you soon.

**The Stepping Stones Foundation
PO Box 452
Bedford Hills, NY 10507**

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Address correction requested