

The Van Sinderen Family and Hidden Valley

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Annie Jean and Adrian Van Sinderen at Glenholme

Attracted by the bucolic charm of the small Connecticut town, the Van Sinderen family of Brooklyn, New York, came to Washington in the 1890's. William Van Sinderen and his wife Mary Brinsmade were looking for a country retreat within a reasonable train ride's distance from New York City. For New Yorkers, Washington's landscape with its hills, vistas, open fields, and forests offered a welcome respite from the busy city life and the constant push of modernization.

Instead of living on or near the Washington Green, as did most of their friends such as, Ehrick Rossiter, Edward van Ingen and Richard Storrs Barnes, the Van Sinderens purchased 110 acres on Sabbaday Lane overlooking the Shepaug River Valley. They named their home Glenholme, because the property's rolling hills were pleasant reminders of their honeymoon in Scotland. At Glenholme the Van Sinderens became weekend and summer-month farmers.

"There was much to be done and my parents knew little about the doing of it. Father had never built a house, nor owned a horse nor bought a cow. Windmills, and sewerage disposal and ploughing, were completely out of his ken, as were both road construction and wire fences. Mother knew no more but took delight in reading aloud S. Weir Mitchell's My Farm of Edgewood, in order to educate her two little sons into the ways of farm life."

Over time, the Van Sinderen's interests grew from being part-time farmers to fulltime equestrians and Glenholme grew into an impressive equestrian estate. After the death of William Van Sinderen, in 1909,

his son Adrian inherited the property and moved from the small Rossiter-designed “summer cottage” into a much larger Colonial Revival mansion set prominently on a hilltop. Along with the larger home came formal gardens, a swimming pool and tennis courts with viewing pavilion. At the same time, the Van Sinderen’s collection of horses continued to grow and additional stables were built and numerous pastures created. Glenholme became an internationally recognized horse farm and the family participated in numerous national competitions. As a consequence, a show ring was added to the property along with storage facilities for the show and pleasure carriages and a trophy room that eventually displayed more than 2,500 ribbons and trophies. For three decades Adrian Van Sinderen was president of the American Horse Show Association.

The Van Sinderen’s passion was driving horses and in the early part of the 20th century, carriage driving in Washington was a very popular recreational past time. One of the best-known photographs of Ehrick Rossiter shows the architect sitting comfortably in a buggy with sunlight streaming down the side of his face and the carriage wheel. Edward van Ingen, Rossiter’s neighbor on The Green and the philanthropic owner of the Holiday House, would regularly take his buggy from his home, now Bourne Hall on the Gunnery Campus, down to the Valley Station along the Shepaug River to greet the New York factory girls as they arrived for a bit of country respite at their vacation destination. The advent of the automobile, however, began to change the ease with which one could ride and drive carriage horses comfortably on Washington’s roads and paths.

“Before long it became evident that the town roads provided little safety for young riders, due to the increasing number of cars and trucks; and the rapid spread of macadamization. The need to furnish protection became evident.”

The world was changing and the natural landscape and ease of country living that had so attracted the Van Sinderens, Rossiter and others to Washington was in danger of being lost. The reality of this threat was apparent even back in the 1880’s when Rossiter purchased 186 acres near his home on the Washington Green to protect this forested land from the timber industry. At a time when most of the land around Washington was open farmland, these acres, known as Steep Rock, offered a rare forest preserve. Under Rossiter’s ownership, these acres remained unspoiled. The trails lined with hemlock trees and mountain laurels were open to the public for hiking and carriage riding.

In 1925, Rossiter no longer wished to be the sole custodian of Steep Rock and gave the property over to the care of nine of his friends. One of those was Adrian van Sinderen who, at this time, undoubtedly inspired by Rossiter’s preservation motives and civic generosity, was taking similar steps to preserve the natural lands around his home.

“To the north of Glenholme lies a wild area, hundreds of acres in extent, containing timbered hills, a flat meadow, two brooks, and a peak. Through this country the Shepaug River winds its way for over a mile. As a boy I had often ridden to the top of the peak, or Pinnacle, so-called, to view below the valley which is not visible from any town road, and which is little known to most Washingtonians. Would this not make a splendid area in which to ride? The level ground provided opportunity for a mile-long track on which to gallop, and the remaining area gave space for 30 miles of trails through the woods.”

The preservation of this land became a mission for Adrian Van Sinderen, who together with his good friend Ralph Averill, negotiated the purchases of several smaller properties close to or abutting Glenholme. By 1928, Adrian Van Sinderen had accumulated 650 acres and named the property “Hidden Valley” after a place in the mountains of Utah, which he and Averill had visited on a trip out West.

“Soon the Gallop and the trails began to develop. We built the Zigzags, the Pirates Den, a ford to connect the trails on either side of the river, a trail to the summit of the Pinnacle, and miles of paths through the beautiful woods. The trails have always been open to, and enjoyed by, the public, especially the horsemen who love nature, who enjoy the stillness of the woods, the gurgle of a fast-running river, the strength of a galloping horse. No automobile can gain entrance to Hidden Valley and for those who ride within its confines the considerable danger from that source is eliminated.”

For the rest of his life, Adrian Van Sinderen remained an active Trustee of Steep Rock, guiding the preserve through many changes, the acquisition of new lands, the planting of new trees, dealing with the problems caused by the arrival of the automobiles, and the transition of Steep Rock into a public land trust. It is thus not surprising that in 1963 Adrian Van Sinderen donated the 650 acres of Hidden Valley as a gift to Steep Rock Association for the continual enjoyment of the public. He died in 1964 leaving their Glenholme estate to his wife Jean who gifted the property and building to the Devereux School in 1968. ■

Quotes from: *Our Home in the Country* by Adrian van Sinderen 1957