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If You're Thinking of Living In/Back-Country Greenwich; Winding Roads and Deep Pockets

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THE farmers and shoemakers who settled the lonely northern reaches of Greenwich in the 18th and early 19th centuries would be astounded to see what has become of their neighborhood.

Renowned as one of America's most prestigious addresses, the back country of this Connecticut Gold Coast community is not for everyone who is rich. Families of highly placed executives who traditionally shun publicity gravitate to its silent woods and quiet, winding roads, while celebrities tend to prefer the waterfront and a livelier atmosphere.

As a recent example, the television and sports personalities Kathie Lee and Frank Gifford recently moved from the back country to a waterfront location.

The legendary great estates are investments that hold their value in recessions and appreciate when times are good. But other back-country homes are equally resilient, whether they are antique farmhouses expanded into handsome residences, large homes on the minimum four-acre lots, or modest houses in the Banksville section on the New York State border.

The term great estates is reserved for exceptional homes on the shore, in the mid-country and the back country. The latter covers an area bounded by the Merritt Parkway to the south, Westchester County to the west and north, and Stamford to the east.

Among the most famous of the back country's 13 great estates is Dunnellen Hall, currently owned by Leona and Harry Helmsley. Completed in 1918, it was built for Daniel Grey Reid, a New York financier, as a gift for his daughter, Rhea, and her husband, Henry J. Topping, son of the president of Republic Steel.

Situated at one time on 208 acres, the 28-room Elizabethan mansion had additional accommodations for 23 servants. The lake was stocked with perch and black bass, and there was an eight-car garage, stables, pool, tennis court, greenhouse, a working farm and specimen gardens.

It was used to advantage by the Toppings' sons, who entertained lavishly and enjoyed the company of movie stars. Don and Henry Jr. each married the actress Arlene Judge, at different times of course; Don was also married to Sonja Henie, and Henry Jr. was wed to Lana Turner.

It usually takes a year or more for estates to be sold because the market is obviously limited and the owners can afford to wait for the right buyer. The Nuckols Estate, for example, on 14 acres, is for sale at \$18 million, the highest current price on the market.

"It is seldom shown," said Linda Hodge, vice president of Preferred Properties of Greenwich, a company that specializes in marketing high-priced homes. "The price reflects the value of scarce prime land close to New York," she said.

THERE are no restaurants or shops except in Banksville, where a tannery once served a shoemaking cottage industry. But the Uptown Deli and Finch's serve breakfast and lunch to people who work on the estates, and an IGA market, dry cleaner, pharmacy and hardware store are patronized by area residents.

There is also a general store on Round Hill Road opposite the firehouse. The firehouse, which is home base for about 20 volunteer firefighters, and its equipment are maintained by a \$5,000 annual stipend from the town and major contributions from the wealthy residents it serves.

An open house fund-raiser is held there each October when children are given rides on the fire engines.

Brad Hvolbeck, owner of Prudential Hvolbeck Real Estate, sold a 3,800-square-foot house on one acre in Banksville this year for \$525,000.

Almost half of back-country children attend private schools, two of which are located in the area. The Whitby Montessori School enrolls children from 1 year old through the eighth grade, with annual tuition ranging from \$7,250 to \$11,250. The Convent of the Sacred Heart accepts children of all faiths from age 3 through 12th grade. Tuition is \$6,000 to \$13,900.

The only public school in the area is Parkway Elementary School, where the curriculum includes art, music, science, physical education and a computer lab, all in separately equipped rooms.

CHILDREN maintain their own word-processing files and write stories that are published in the school newspaper or adapted into dance, drama, art or choral music. Almost 300 pupils in kindergarten through the fifth grade are bused for 15 to 40 minutes each way depending on where they live.

"They are not only from wealthy homes," said Dr. Sandra Mond, the principal, "but from families of stable grooms and housekeepers who live on the estates."

The Convent of the Sacred Heart is in the main house of what was once Overlook Farm, built in 1916. It is typical of several conversions of back-country estates in recent years. Together with zoning laws that allow homes to be built on 2-acre lots provided that 40 percent of the total property is dedicated to open space, conversions signal a significant departure from the otherwise rigidly enforced four-acre minimum single family zoning.

In the 70's the American Can Company bought Knob Hill Farm, built in 1916, retaining the main house as a guest house for its new corporate headquarters on the 154-acre King Street parcel.

Faircroft, completed on King Street in 1905 by James Rich Steers, whose construction company built Pennsylvania Station, was owned briefly by Clare Boothe Luce and expanded considerably in the 60's for AVCO Corporation headquarters.

It had a succession of office tenants over the years but has been vacant for two years partly because town zoning allows only 150 employees in the 90,000-square-foot building.

One of the subdivided estates is Conyers Farm, comprising 60 lots on 1,300 acres along North Street. Four homes are on the market through Mr. Hvolbeck. A colonial on 12 acres is listed at \$3.35 million, and \$8.2 million is the price of a Scottish-style castle, also on 12 acres. Building lots start at \$1.2 million.

Conyers Manor -- once on the property, but demolished in the mid-80's -- was built in 1904 by Edmund Cogswell Converse. His farm was a highly profitable enterprise employing dozens of local people in its dairy, produce farm, stables, garages, orchards and stone quarries. The manor was subsequently demolished.

In 1981, the estate of Lewis Rosenstiel, the late chairman of Schenley's, sold the property to Peter Brandt who redeveloped the property into deed-restricted lots of a minimum of 10 acres, some of which have been purchased as horse farms.

Local zoning permits one horse for every half acre. Residents belong to a private association and have sole use of a luxurious clubhouse. In June, July and September there are Sunday afternoon polo matches that are open to the public for \$20 a car.

Also under development on King Street, by John and Michael Fareri, is Chieftains, owned through two generations by the Gimbel department store family. It was built in 1911 and occupied until 1925 by Alfred Whitney Church, heir to the Borden milk fortune.

The 15,000-square-foot main house with its 65- by 40-foot living room will be retained as a single-family dwelling on three-plus acres; it is priced at \$2.5 million and needs repairs. Several outbuildings will be remodeled as homes and 23 single-family homes will be constructed on the 97-acre tract, where 60 acres will be set aside for open space.

Sales are expected to begin in June; prices range from \$975,000 for 2,300 square feet to \$1.25 million for 3,600 square feet.

Last June a great estate was actually saved rather than subdivided when the estate of Herbert Mayer sold Old Mill Farm on 78 acres for \$9.25 million to an undisclosed owner who registered the sale in the name of two trustees. The estate had a four-lot subdivision approved by the town in the event that it could not find a buyer for the entire property.

FAIRVIEW, Stanwich and Tamarack, three of Greenwich's seven private country clubs, are in the back country, offering golf, tennis, swimming pools and dining rooms. Initiation fees range from \$10,000 to \$15,000. Bruce Golf Course is public, operated by the town for seasonal memberships of \$40 and greens fees of \$12.50. Guests of residents may play for \$25 a day.

Anyone who owns or has access to a horse may pay \$90 a year to join the Riding and Trails Association, which maintains more than 150 miles of trails and must deal diplomatically with the occasional new resident who does not appreciate the time-honored custom of allowing horses to cross his or her property.

The golf course and the country clubs are part of some 5,453 acres of the back country preserved as open space and owned variously by the town, by land trusts, the Audubon Society, schools, the state or householders who dedicate land to conservation.

While public gatherings are rare, one event that draws even the most reclusive of residents is the Christmas Fair held in December in the Round Hill Community House.

"It started as a meeting place for people who worked on the estates," said Cindy Lalor, executive vice president of the 200-member, all-women Round Hill Community Guild. "Now the dominant tone is one of down-to-earth Yankee willingness to pitch in and work for the community, and be careful about money."