

Lew Knapp May 14, 1987.

Over a hundred years ago, as you passed the old house on Shore Road, you would see Albert Laing sitting in his upstairs window alcove whittling away at a duck decoy. Mr. Laing had grown up loving duck hunting, and when he moved to Stratford in about 1860 he began to carve his own decoys. Today, the "Stratford school" of decoy carving is famous worldwide and Laing's ducks are among the earliest and most numerous. When Laing died in 1886, his estate listed one hundred eleven decoys. The Stratford decoy could usually be identified by its unusual breast shape, designed to counter the heavy currents of the Housatonic in winter slush and ice. Laing's decoys were usually branded with his name in 5/8 inch high letters.

Albert Laing was also a market gardener, with nearly ten acres under cultivation. He grew strawberries and other produce for shipment by train to New York. He kept detailed records of income and expenses; one recurring item is "Ale and peanuts -10c."

His house dates from about 1800, the transition period between colonial and Federal styles. The earliest part is of post and beam construction, set on a dry laid foundation made up more of cobblestones than fieldstone. Its diamond paned windows, porch and rear ell are later additions. In 1824 it was the home of Captain Porter; then a Mrs. Hale owned it until Laing moved in. Bachelor Laing willed the property to the Beers family who had taken care of him. His decoys seem to have gone to Cappy Wicks, Shang Wheeler and other Stratford men.

Jennie Beach Gasper and her husband, the French Count Gasper, owned it, then Harvey and duVivier. Old photos show a greenhouse attached and a windmill, whose foundation is still visible. The deed reads "middle of Selbie's Pond to edge of the channel in the river."

A long generation ago, the house became the home of the family of W. Forrest Davenport. "Torry" Davenport has always been a Virginia gentleman, with dignity, gentle wit and a ready story. Torry tells about his dog named Tony, who was a great friend of the mailman. Each day Tony would go off with the mailman, (mailmen walked, then) to complete his rounds, then afterwards to Ryan's Tavern at Hard's Corner. One day a taxi came up Torry's long driveway, the door swung open, and out hopped Tony. After recovering, Torry asked the driver, "What do I owe you?" "Not a thing," the driver answered, "The mailman forgot him and the boys all chipped in to send him home."

Then there was the time the America came to town. Rudolph Schaefer, chairman of Schaefer Breweries, had had a reproduction of the schooner America made, and had hired Stratford's Captain Jim Thorpe to skipper it. The Housatonic Boat Club had invited them to come to Stratford to display the boat and enjoy the club's hospitality. They tied up at Bond's Dock, and the route to the theater, where they were bound, lay across Davenport's front lawn. As Schaefer and his beautiful young wife walked up the driveway, Torry stood on his lawn with a bottle of Bud in his hand. When they greeted him, he looked at the lovely lady and said, "If that's what Schaefer does for you, Ah'm switchin'".

Caroline Davenport was as wonderful a person as her husband. She had a degree in horticulture, and the estate showed it. The yard was ever in bloom with natural flowerbeds. She was also responsible for one of Stratford's most important events. In 1954, Lawrence Langner was searching for a suitable site for his American Shakespeare Festival Theatre. When his negotiations with the Stratford town council over a site at Booth Park were becoming sticky, Caroline showed him the land next to her house on the Housatonic. He was ecstatic. (John Houseman says Langner claims that Housatonic is the Indian word for Avon.)

The August 2, 1954 meeting of Housatonic Properties, Inc. - the owners of the riverbank site next to Davenports - was held at Davenports' home. Minutes of that meeting read, "The Shakespearian Directors had looked at the property and liked same. ... The theater directors are awaiting the decision of the H.P. Inc. Mr. Sammis read a letter offering 14,000 for the property. All this to be confidential for the time being. ... Mr. Davenport raised the offer as agent for the Shakespearian Groupe from