



Joan Decker in 1992. All photos courtesy of Joan Decker.

JOAN WELLS DECKER

By Carleton Mabee

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Joan Wells grew up with her parents, she recalls, in Gardiner's Ireland Corners neighborhood. The Wells home was a little house located on the west side of Route 208, four houses south of the long-established Ireland Corners Hotel. Like much of Gardiner at that time, their home was surrounded by extensive open land, which is very different from the area's wooded character now.

The youngest child of Myron John Wells and Rose Davis Wells, Joan was born on January 15, 1932, of Irish and Dutch ancestry. At the time of these interviews, she was 77 years old. Like her sister, Harriet, and brother, Myron, Jr., Joan's birth took place in a hospital in Newburgh while her parents were living in Gardiner.

As Joan talked, we were sitting around a dining table. She was already seated there when I arrived and did not rise from the table at any time while I interviewed her. Rising would be difficult, as she has limited use of her legs from the polio she caught as a child.

Joan's grandfather, Charles Wells, was a carpenter who built his house on the road from Ireland Corners to the Gardiner hamlet, about halfway between the two. As Joan recalls it, the family called this house the "half-way house." Still standing today, the house is on the south side of the road now known as Route 44/55, opposite where the present Michelle Drive comes into it. The house was recently owned, Joan said, by Lyle Goodnow, a Gardiner veterinarian.

Myron Wells was for many years a station agent for the New York Central Railroad. He worked at various locations, including Weehawken, NJ, on the West Shore Line; Cottekill on the Rondout Valley Line; and Binnewater, on the Wallkill Valley Line. But while his daughter Joan was growing up, Myron was the regular agent at the Gardiner station, on the Wallkill Valley Line.

Many Gardiner children, including his daughter Joan, admired Myron Wells when he was at work at the



Joan's father, Gardiner Station Agent, Myron Wells, in 1930 at an unknown station.



Myron Wells (left) and unidentified man on tracks in Gardiner, date unknown.



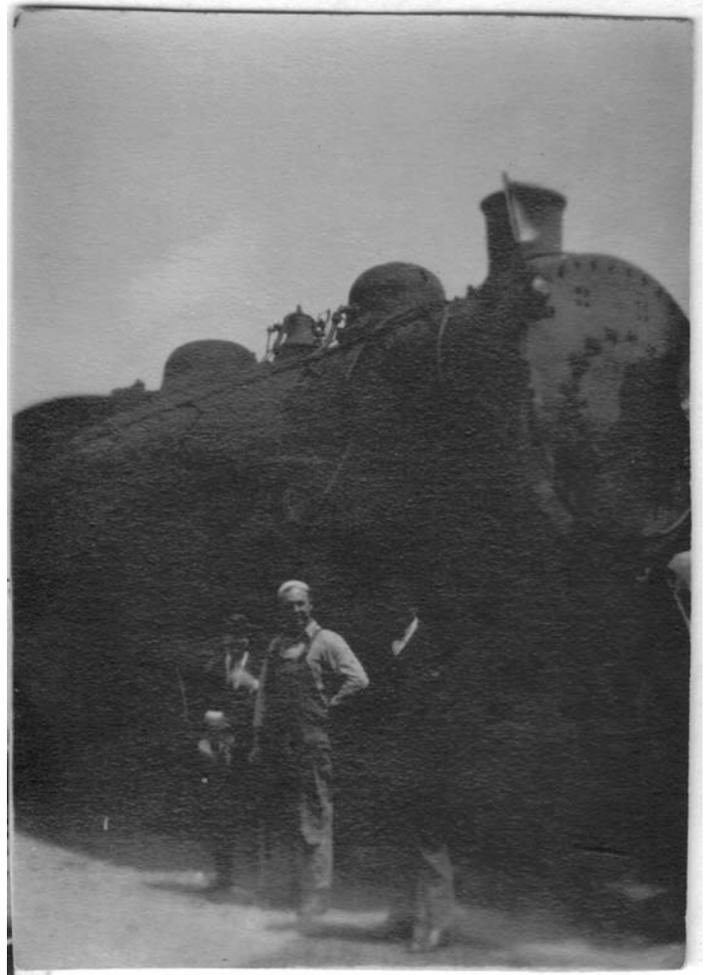
Myron Wells in Old Tiparary, 1920.



Gardiner Station, date unknown.



Water boy (center) and workers on the Gardiner tracks around 1920.



Unidentified photo, Gardiner Station.



Freedom Train passing through Gardiner, 1940.

railroad station. Inside, smartly dressed in jacket and tie and wearing owlsh glasses, he clicked a mysterious telegraph key, sending messages by Morse Code. He also sold passenger tickets, (that is, he sold them up to 1937 when the rail line stopped its passenger service). Outside on the station platform, wearing a blue denim apron, he handled freight.

Joan's father also served as the town's fire commissioner. Working regularly at the railroad station as he did, he was conveniently located across the road from the fire station. So when there was a fire, Joan recalled, he could ring the fire bell, and open the doors to let the fire engine out.

Joan recalled that her parents taught her to be herself, to love God, and to be positive. She found herself inclined to sing and smile a lot. Waking up each morning, she learned to say a verse from Psalms, "This is the day the Lord has made; let me rejoice and be glad in it."



Joan's grandfather, Charles Wells, demonstrating with his ice hoist in the 1920s.



Workers loading ice onto New York Central Line train in the 1920s.

As a child, Joan often walked from her house to a nearby grocery store on the northeast corner of Ireland Corners, a store that has now become Grandpa's Antiques. Sometimes she went there to buy something for her parents. At other times, she might beg her parents for a dime to buy sweets. Coin in hand, she'd go to the store with her friend Ruth Williamson, whose father operated a garage on Route 208 (later Jake Honold's garage, and now a Mobil gas station), close to the Wells house. They might buy candy, or a small can of condensed milk which they would bring home to eat right out of the can – it was pleasingly sweet.

Joan attended the two-room Gardiner School for six grades. (The building has recently been renovated as part of the present town hall.) She usually walked the mile to the school, though occasionally her father, if he was free from work, would drive her there. She was often joined by her brother and sister, and several children from the Clinton family next door. Mary and Leo Clinton had a large family, and farmed the land right behind their house, raising cattle and growing apples. Joan and the Clinton children would walk at first not on the highway, Route 44/55, that led to the school, but cross lots, through the Clinton farm, and behind the Catholic Church. Then, when they reached



A ball game in progress in the field at the Gardiner School (now the Town Hall) in the 1930s.

her grandfather's "halfway house," they would walk out on the road the rest of the way.

The lower grades at the Gardiner School met in the more easterly room, closest to the highway, while the higher grades attended class in the more westerly room, farther back from the road. Joan's major teachers were Emma Bahr and Agnes Van Orden, but in her later years at the school they were assisted by other teachers. A photo of the faculty and pupils of the school, taken in 1939, shows Joan, aged seven, among altogether 43 children and five teachers, including teacher aides and special teachers.

The education she received at the school, as Joan recalled it, was good quality. The teachers would help you learn, she said, even if they had to keep you after school to push you into it.

At the school, the children sometimes acted in plays. One Christmas, Joan remembered playing Mary, holding a Jesus doll, and singing "Away in a Manger."

The school children often played baseball in the school yard – not in the big field currently located near the school, which she believed was not yet developed into a ball field, but one closer to the building. One game remains particularly memorable. Joan was playing catcher, standing behind Henry Majestic who was at bat. Henry swung at the ball but missed and threw his bat away, hitting Joan over her right eye. She bled so profusely that when Mrs. Bahr saw it, she fainted. Mrs. Van Orden sent Henry to Joan's father at the railroad station not far away, to tell him what had happened. Henry, horrified at what he had done, told agent Wells, "I think I killed your daughter." Joan was given six stitches, wore a patch over her eye for two weeks, but recovered.

In winter, Joan joined other children in ice skating on a pond at the farm behind their house. In summer she joined them in biking, or playing softball. She also attended Sunday school picnics at Midway Park, the swimming beach on the Shawangunk Kill, south of Benton's Corners. She joined in trips to Tillson Lake, far on the southwest corner of Gardiner, to roller skate – it was Mr. McGowen, she believed, who operated the roller skating rink there. Sometimes her father would drive Joan and her friends to the skating rink, and sometimes they would beg rides from others. Occasionally a family group



The home of Rose and Myron Wells (left) on Route 208 near Route 44/55 as seen from the hill when the aqueduct was being built. St. Charles Church can be seen in the distance on far right.



Anna, Grace and Emma Bernard, Joan's great aunts on her father's side, lived on Dusinberre Road.

would make an expedition up into the Shawangunk Mountains to pick blueberries, or to swim in the pool at the bottom of Awosting Falls. Joan also often joined her friends in watching movies in the Gardiner hamlet.

It was Victor Riche (pronounced Rich-ee) who showed the movies, at first in a hall at the Gardiner Hotel, by the railroad station. But after the hall was condemned as unsafe in the 1950s, he showed them in the building on Main Street where he and his family lived. Riche was the father of three girls who later became Patricia Faulk, Muriel Bradshaw, and Kathleen R. Conner. The Riche home was located at about where the Village Market now stands. Movies were shown especially on Friday and Saturday nights. They were mostly cowboy or jungle movies, and they cost 25 cents. Spectators sat on planks laid on milk boxes.

Before going in, Joan and her friends might stop by McKinstry's store to buy ice cream for 5 cents and gum for 1 cent, eat the ice cream immediately, and then go inside to chew the gum all the way through the movie.

Halloween was a big event in the hamlet, Joan recalls. Many people handed out sweets to children. You tried to scare everybody, and you tried to hide yourself by wearing a mask. But nearly everybody knew who you were anyway.

Myron and Rose Wells were officers at the Gardiner Reformed Church in the hamlet. Joan's grandfather Charles Wells had also been active there. As a carpenter, he had helped to construct an extension onto the back of the church – it contained a kitchen and a dining hall. Families related to the church often had church windows named for them, one such family being the Wells family. Joan herself attended Sunday school there. Later she attended the youth fellowship, and she sang in the choir for sixteen years.

Joan had many relatives in the Gardiner area. Her grandfather had married Elizabeth Bernard, of the large Bernard family which lived on Dusinberre Road. William Bernard operated a butcher shop in Gardiner, across Main Street from where HiHo Antiques is now. Abraham Bernard, though virtually blind, worked at the Gardiner creamery, next to the railroad tracks. Mary Tubbs also grew up on Dusinberre Road. When she walked by, Abraham could recognize her by the sound of her walk. He would call out to Mary while sitting on his porch, and they would chat.

Joan's great uncle, Sidney Wells, along with other local residents, helped dig the first aqueduct that passed through Gardiner when Joan was a small child. Ironically, Joan recalled that her mother's grandparents, the Delamaters, who lived in the town of Olive, were forced to move when the Ashokan Dam was built to provide water for the same aqueduct which Sidney Wells helped to dig. The aqueduct was constructed to supply New York City with water. According to what Joan understood, it brought so much money to the town that for a time no property taxes were imposed.



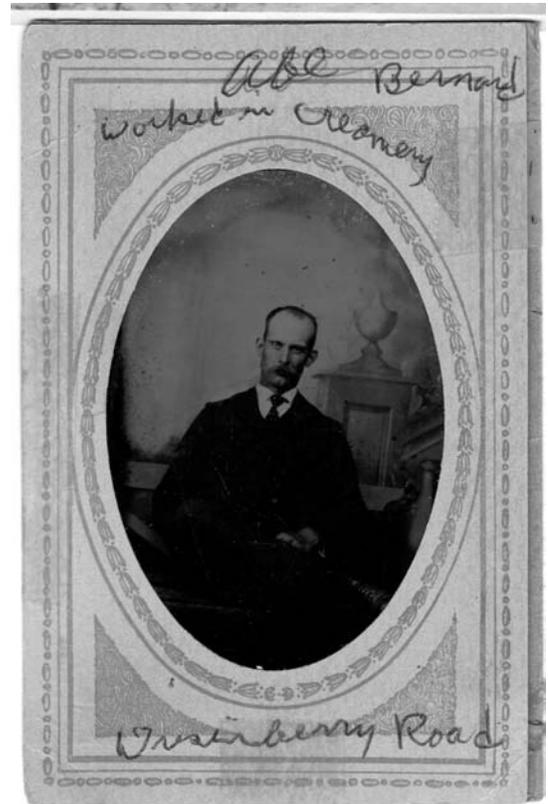
Above left: the Bernard home on Dusinger Road around 1900. Above right: Joan's father's relative, Annie Bernard, who grew up in the house.



Left: Acey Barton, Douty Bevier and Art Wood outside the Borden Creamery, date unknown.



Abe Bernard, at right and in detail above, who worked at the Gardiner Creamery. Joan says he also made horse-radish, which he sold to "the store" in Gardiner.



Abraham Deyo, often called "Abe," lived in the house at Ireland Corners that has recently become the Ulster Savings Bank. Abe Deyo ran a farm right behind his house, Joan recalled, where he kept cattle. When he had become elderly, Joan and the neighborhood children were amused to observe that when he needed his glasses, he often could not find them. He kept forgetting that he customarily pushed them up onto the top of his head!

As Joan grew up, she and her brother and sister had chores to do, either for their own family or for others. When Myron, Jr. was in high school, he used to go to the Gardiner veterinarian hospital run by Dr. Clifford Hoppenstedt early in the morning to clean up after the animals. Only then would he catch the bus to school. Joan herself often baby-sat for neighboring children. She watched Jake Honold's children after he took over the Williamson's garage, as well as her sister Harriet's young ones. Joan also used to set hair for Gardiner homemakers in their homes. One of her customers was Abe Deyo's wife, Mary. By the time Joan was about 18 or 19, she sometimes washed dishes for Ike and Anna Klive at their Ireland Corners Hotel. Especially on Saturday nights, Myron Wells sometimes tended bar at this same hotel.

Cousins of the Abe Deyos, the Andrew LeFevre Deyos, lived in a farmhouse just east of Ireland Corners, now the Mabee house. In season, this Deyo family created a makeshift farm market on the highway, Route 44/55, in front of their house, Joan remembered. They set up boxes, laid a few boards across them, and the women of the family sold apples there.

Once, Joan Wells remembered, she was sitting on the porch of Abe and Mary Deyo's house at Ireland Corners when one of the Andrew LeFevre Deyo family, Lizzie Deyo, drove a horse and buggy down the hill on Route 44/55 into Ireland Corners, carrying boxes of fruit.



Joan wearing her leg brace, photographed with her mother, Rose, in 1944.

Startled by a car passing in front of her across Route 208, she stopped her buggy so quickly that it tipped over, and she and her fruit boxes fell out. But as Joan watched, Lizzie got up quickly, righted the buggy, replaced the fruit, and drove on where she intended to go. She continued to the Gardiner station, to deliver her fruit for shipping. According to Joan, Lizzie was "tough." Lizzie Deyo might have been tough, but as everyone knew, she had a speech defect. Joan's parents used to tell her that Lizzie was born with the impediment. She couldn't help it. So, they said, never make fun of her.

POLIO ARRIVES

In the summer of 1944, fighting in World War II was intense. Joan's mother served as an airplane lookout, to help give a warning of any possible air attack. Joan had graduated from the Gardiner School at the age of 12, and was looking forward to the fall when she would take the bus into New Paltz to attend middle school. Meantime, she had been working a little at the Tantillo farm, about a mile south on Route 208. She was picking

tomatoes, being paid 50¢ a bushel. Suddenly one morning, Joan could not get out of bed. She was sick to her stomach and had a high fever. Her parents called Dr. Virgil Dewitt to come from New Paltz to see her — there was no doctor in Gardiner at that time. The doctor asked her to close her eyes, stuck a pin into her, and asked her to say where she could feel it. He found she could not feel a pin anywhere below her neck. He called her paralyzed. He diagnosed her as having polio.

Of course Gardiner was alarmed. At that time, polio had crippled thousands of children nationwide. In 1937, President F. D. Roosevelt, who himself had been crippled by polio, had led in creating the Foundation for Infantile Paralysis, a private charity which was widely known as the March of Dimes. Despite its efforts, polio remained little understood, Joan recalls. It was not until 1955 that Dr. Jonas Salk developed a vaccine to limit polio's spread.



Teddy Wright, Jr. and his brother Robert in 1944. Teddy had injured his hip and was at the hospital with Joan.

Following Dr. Dewitt's instructions, Joan was isolated in a bedroom at home, with only her mother allowed to enter. While Joan lay on a plastic sheet, Rose Wells pressed her daughter with hot, wet compresses. The treatment was repeated every twenty minutes. To do this, her mother, who seemed to Joan never to complain, carried pans of hot water from the kitchen stove to Joan's bedroom. To make it easier to wring out the compresses, Myron moved a washing machine, which had a clothes wringer attached, from the basement upstairs.

Friends speculated on how she had caught polio, Joan recalled. The Tantillos worried that perhaps they had worked her too hard, out in the sun. Joan and her friend Ruth Williamson had splattered cold well water on themselves when they were hot, and they wondered if this had caused too great a shock to her system. A Gardiner child who had contracted polio earlier was Harley Franks, a brother of the teacher Hildreth Freer; he walked awkwardly all the rest of his life. Other children in the region who came down with the disease at about the same time as Joan included Jimmy Stokes who lived in Tuthilltown; Florence Crispell, who lived off of Albany Post Road in the Guilford region; Tony Ruiz of New Paltz; Gail Grimm, Joan Wahl, and a son of the Alhusen family who lived on Alhusen Road, all of Modena; and Flossy Fiscella whose parents ran a bar and pizza shop in Ardonia. Of course, the more children who caught polio, the more the surrounding community was afraid.

For three days, Joan remained at home while the family waited for Benedictine Hospital, in Kingston, to find isolation-room space for her. Once an ambulance had driven her to Benedictine, hot compresses continued to be applied to her there. Meanwhile, Joan found consolation by becoming acquainted with another polio patient, Betty Emerick, of Kingston. The two girls discovered that their mothers had attended the same school in the town of Olive.

After about two weeks at Benedictine, the girls were driven to the West Haverstraw Reconstruction



Joan with her father, Myron, in 1944.

Home in Rockland County. This was a rehabilitation hospital equipped to treat polio patients, and the March of Dimes funded Joan's care there. Joan was given medicine and sent daily to a hot-water pool, which Joan remembered as having its temperature up to 114°F. This treatment seemed to help, Joan recalled. Gradually Joan could sense that feeling was coming back into her body, and she began to be able to move her limbs. After a few weeks, while Joan remained at the hospital, she was removed from isolation.

As months passed, the hospital's teachers assigned Joan school work to do, and nurses arranged to give her craft work to exercise her limbs. Her parents came to see her every weekend, taking the train to West Haverstraw, and then walking up the hill from the station to the hospital. Eventually, the nurses allowed Myron and Rose to take Joan on brief trips outside. She had other visitors, as well. Among them was her pastor, Rev. John Dykstra. Two of her Bernard cousins, both in military uniform, also came for a visit and, she remembered, when one of them kissed her, she blushed very red, as it was her tendency to do. Her grandmother Jessie Davis, Rose's mother, taught her scripture verses to help sustain her, such as Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." This verse, Joan recalled, "gave me hope." It helped me "to not give up."

In time, she began to move around with the help of a wheelchair. Later she was able to walk in the halls, holding onto bars that ran along the walls. For a time they placed a plaster cast on one foot, and later made a brace for that foot. Meanwhile, to help her walk, doctors recommended surgery on Joan's heels, which would fuse their bones together. But her father, aware that any polio-related surgery was only experimental, would not permit it. She never had the surgery.

After a year and a half at the West Haverstraw Home, Joan returned home to Gardiner. For some time, the March of Dimes continued to pay for certain aspects of her care. But eventually, because hers was not an extreme case, the March of Dimes funding ceased. Meantime, Dick and Helen Clinton, who owned the Gardiner Hotel, ran March of Dimes events locally to help her buy braces. Gardiner people, she recalled, were very supportive.

Joan did daily exercises and moved around in her wheelchair. After she had been home for over a year, her mother was astonished to see Joan stand up, lean over to pick up a pin from the floor, and still not fall. Rose Wells broke into sobs, saying, "Praise God." A photo taken in November, 1945, shows Joan as wearing a leg brace and



Joan with fellow-polio sufferer Flossy Fiscella, in 1945. It was about this time Joan began to walk on her own again.

standing, with a friend holding onto her. It was at about this time that she began to be able to walk on her own again.

One of her teachers at the hospital had sent her dad a letter saying that because polio had damaged her brain, she was not capable of learning much more. This letter discouraged her parents from sending her back to school. However, her father watched her singing along with songs on the radio and noticed that she knew all the words. That suddenly led him to announce, "If you can do that, you're going to school." So the family sent her to school in New Paltz, by bus.



January 11, 1951. Gardiner Hotel owners Rich and Helen Clinton at the spaghetti dinner they hosted for Armon Barton, Charles Majestic and Raymond Stamatedes. The boys were inducted on January 15th to serve in the Korean War.

Joan finished the 7th and 8th grades at the Campus School in New Paltz. She then went on to New Paltz High School, which was then still located on Main Street at the corner of South Manheim Boulevard, in the current middle school building. While climbing stairs at the high school, Joan's friends would carry her books, so she could concentrate on pulling herself up. Joan sang in the school's glee club and majored in Home Economics. She has preserved a photo of herself at the school rolling out a pie crust with a rolling pin. In her senior year, she took a driver's training course and passed it, receiving a license to drive. She graduated from the high school in 1950, having missed scarcely any schooling along the way.

In the 1940s, square dances were often held in Gardiner. At first they were held at the Gardiner Hotel, but once its hall was declared unsafe, they were held at Carpenter's barn – called that because Mr. Carpenter ran it. The barn is now part of the Widmark Honey Farm, on Route 44/55. While Joan was in high school, she went to the barn dances with her parents. Not being able to dance, she just watched, as she remembered it. A local band, consisting of a saxophone, drums, and a piano, provided the music for these dances. Joan's Aunt Grace (Grace Davis Hicks), of Cottekill, her mother's sister, was the pianist. She could not read music; she played only by ear.



Joan (second from right) at work at Rosendale Electric Company on Sand Hill Road in January of 1953.

After graduating from high school, Joan had recovered enough to be able to take a job in a Gardiner factory, where she continued to work for three years. Called Rosendale Electric-Assembly, the factory made TV and radio coils. It operated at Theodore Wright's Gardiner Airport, on Sand Hill Road, in property rented from Wright. In the morning before work, she often went to a dentist, Dr Lightcad, whose office was right across Sand

Hill Road from the factory. Because polio had weakened her bone structure, the dentist removed all her teeth and gave her false teeth instead.

Her factory boss was Ralph Sarno. Among her co-workers, as shown in a photo she took of them, were Mary Thorpe (the mother of the Gardiner band leader, Roger Thorpe), Mrs. Bastian, Ruthie Simmons, Cid Connors, Hilda Brown, and Ethel Rhodes. Others not in the photo included Marion Peterson, Anna Peterson, Betty Ann Kite (now Mrs. Scott), Mary Linz of Sand Hill Road, Ellen



Wright's Farms selling apples at the hairpin turn on Route 44/55 in 1956.

Gierisch of Modena, and Alma Lohrman of New Paltz. Joan was still living at home while working at the factory, but, as she recalls, she paid her parents ten dollars a week for her board.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

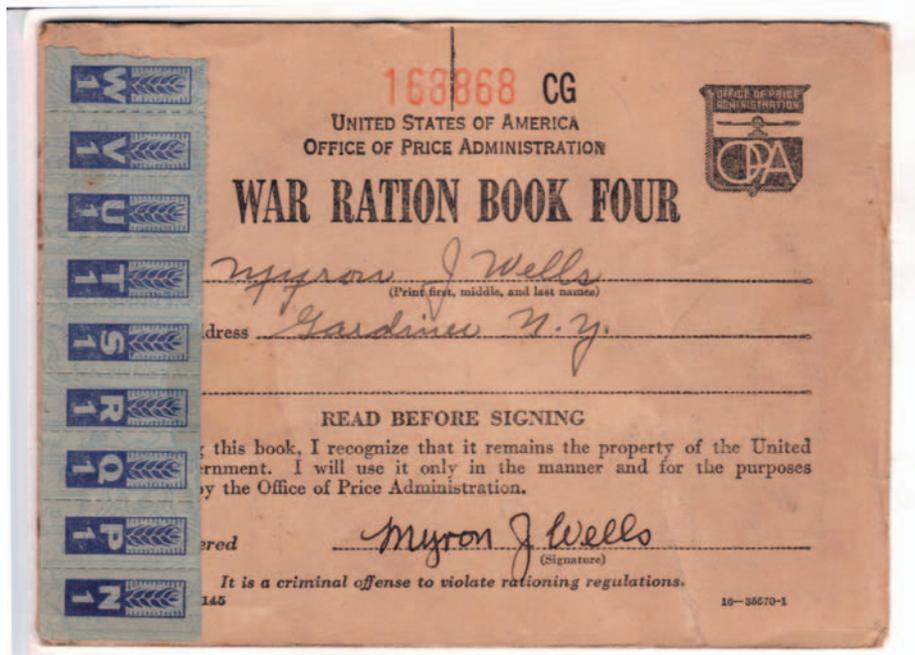
During this time, Joan began seeing Leslie Decker, of Modena. They dated for five years. They often went to the movies, and heard a lot of music, both classical and cowboy. At first, Leslie worked on a fruit farm on the south side of Route 44/55, on the border of Gardiner and Plattekill, for Mrs. Sarah LeFevre. Then he went into the military for three years, and was sent to Korea where he won many honors. After his discharge, he returned to Mrs. LeFevre's farm for a time and later worked for Federal Bearing, a maker of roller bearings, in Poughkeepsie. On Aug 22, 1953, Leslie and Joan married.



Leslie Decker, US Army Field Artillery, 1951 - 1953

While her brother and sister had married informally, at home, Joan preferred to have a formal church wedding, wearing a white gown. And so, she and Leslie were married in her family church, the Reformed Church of Gardiner. Rev. John Van Strein, pastor at the time, officiated. The reception was held in the hall at the back of the main church building. It was followed by a dinner at her parents' house.

Leslie Decker had three brothers, Watson, Martin, and Donald, all of whom served in the military. One of these brothers, Donald, was already married to Joan's sister Harriet.



Myron Wells' World War II war ration book.



The GLF Building on Main Street in October of 1952. It burned down in 1978. The site is now occupied by Kiss My Face.

Leslie was a devoted baseball player, active in playing for the Walkkill Athletic Club, for whom he



Joan and Leslie's wedding, August 22, 1953

continued to play after he was married. In the summer of 1961, Walkkill was playing a team from Milford, PA, when Leslie, sliding into third base, fractured an ankle. This sent him to Kingston Hospital, put him on crutches, and kept him out of work for a month. After he was hurt, when the Walkkill Old Timers played the Gardiner-Modena Old Timers on the "Gardiner School baseball diamond," they called the occasion Les Decker Day. Afterward, they held a dinner-dance at the Gardiner Hotel, beside the railroad station. The combined players presented the proceeds of the occasion to Leslie Decker, to benefit him.

Soon after Joan and Leslie were married they rented a little house off Route 44/55, near the Walkkill River, from Ivan and Alma Ostrander for \$68 a month. While they lived there, Joan's father helped them buy land, as he had for his other children, on which they could later build a house. Joan and Leslie bought property near where they were renting, in Gardiner, on the north side of Route 44/55, just east of the highway bridge over the Walkkill River. The land was owned by James and Mabel George. Myron Wells co-signed their mortgage. When their first-born child William was one and half years old, they built a house on this land, and they still live in the same house today,

Joan and Leslie raised four children, three boys and one girl, all born between 1954 and 1966. With a house full of young ones, Joan found her leg brace too heavy. Her doctors ordered her not to wear it, and as a result she sometimes fell.

In summer, the Decker children fished and swam in the nearby Walkkill River and played baseball with their father. They attended Sunday School at the family church, the same Sunday School Joan had attended when she was growing up. They also went to the same elementary school that Joan had, the Gardiner School. For a time their oldest child, Billy, had the habit of carrying toothpicks to the school, taking the elastic out of his socks, and when the teacher was out of the room, using the elastic to shoot the toothpicks. He did it until the teacher, Hildreth Freer, told his parents about it, and they put a stop to it. Eventually both Billy and younger son Tom became electricians for the College at New Paltz, and in recent years Tom lives close by his parents.



Myron and Rose Wells at their 25th anniversary party in 1950.

When Myron Wells became aware that there was no monument in Gardiner to honor its veterans, he decided to do something about it. He built a sign listing the names of Gardiner's World War I and



A newspaper clipping from May, 1972, showing Joan's uncle, Floyd Wells, driving in a nail with his artificial hands while his wife holds the nail. Handwritten at top left it says, "Silence is golden," she says, "when he misses the nail."

ll veterans. He placed it on Main Street in front of the Gardiner Hotel, near the railroad station. Sometime after he died, in the mid-1970s when the hotel was taken down, the sign disappeared. Now no one, Joan grieves, seems to know what happened to it.

Myron had a brother, Floyd Wells, whom Joan came to admire. He lived in Modena, on Route 32, but worked as a maintenance man at the GLF farm service center, on Main Street next to the railroad tracks. In 1962, as Joan well remembered, Floyd was injured at work. He was repairing the worm of a feed conveyor, which dropped feed into bags for shipping out on railroad cars. When his hands were in the machine, with the electric power off, the GLF manager, in trying to turn on a switch for another mechanism, accidentally hit the wrong switch, turning on the machine which Wells was repairing. Wells' hands were pulled into the worm and he screamed. The manager turned off the switch immediately. But the damage had been done. At Kingston Hospital, doctors tried to save his hands, but failed. Both

were amputated.

Joan, having had cataclysmic experiences of her own, marveled at how her Uncle Floyd responded to his loss. He refused to say his life had been ruined, or act as if it had been. With the help of his wife Mary, he redesigned his tools so that his artificial hands could use them. "All things are possible with God," comments Joan. Floyd did carpentry. While his wife held nails for him, he pounded them in, sometimes hitting her hands. He mowed lawns. He did house painting, was the caretaker of the Modena Rural Cemetery, and served as an usher at the Modena Methodist church. Myron Wells had started to build an extra bedroom in the attic of Leslie and Joan's house, but died before finishing it. Floyd, whether he had hands or not, managed to finish the room. Uncle Floyd was "one of my idols," recalled Joan.

LATER YEARS

Leslie worked for twenty years as a janitor for the State University College in New Paltz, retiring in 1988. At various times, however, he has had several surgeries. In 2006, when he was 80, he had a quadruple bi-pass surgery, but recovered well.

In her later years, Joan has been exceedingly busy. Besides doing the usual house work, she has

taken on various jobs such as ironing for several Gardiner families. Moreover, because Joan and Leslie both enjoy it, and because it helps support them, they have a big garden. As Joan says, she believes that “he who plants a garden works hand-in-hand with God.” Leslie starts tomato and cucumber plants on their sun porch. Joan cans pickles, tomatoes, and peaches. She freezes beans. They grow their own potatoes. Joan also bakes a great deal, often bread and pies. She bakes birthday cakes, she explains, for everyone in the family each year. She loves cooking, she says, and is thankful that her mother and her high school taught her how.

Myron Wells had served as chair of the March of Dimes for Gardiner. After he died in 1964, Joan took the position in his place. As such, in the 1970s she helped organize a walkathon. The participants walked from the Gardiner firehouse south on Sand Hill Road to about the Shawangunk town line, and then came back via Route 208. Among the walkers were Joan’s son, the young Tom Decker; Luke Lyons, who lived near the firehouse; and Mrs. Alex Rooney, the oldest of the walkers.

Once, in about 1971, when Leslie had crawled under a car to repair it, the car fell on him, pinning him to the ground. He was able to call Joan, and told her not to take the time to jack up the car, but to lift the car off of him. She lifted it. She says it is amazing what adrenalin can cause you to do. Joan does not like anyone to consider her an invalid. In the 1980s, however, as she grew older, her leg came to bother her more. The doctor ordered her to wear a brace again, but a lighter one than she had worn earlier.

About 1991-92, her pastor, Rev. Gary Sissel, taught a “Bethel Bible Study” class for teachers and she took the class. It was a two-year class, and severe. Rev. Sissel expected us to learn many Bible details, she recalled, including the names of many kings. He gave us tests, she said. Afterwards, at the age of 63, she began teaching a class of adult women. It met once a week in each other’s homes. While she does not teach the class any more, the women of the class still keep in touch with each other, she said. “We encourage each other to keep faith, and to give all our burdens to God, and to think positive.”

In 2003 the Decker family celebrated Leslie and Joan’s 50th wedding anniversary. Held at the Gardiner Reformed Church, in the Education Building, the party was arranged by their sons, William, Kenneth, and Thomas Decker, their daughter Barbara Agor, and their eight grandchildren.

In her church, Joan says that now she is part of a prayer chain, and “we pray a lot for each other.” She keeps telling others “Don’t give up.” She loves to sing hymns, one of her favorite ones being an old traditional one, “Amazing Grace.” She believes she has had several healings in her own life which



A newspaper clipping showing Floyd Wells mowing the lawn with his artificial hands. Around the margin of this image Joan had written, “My Uncle Floyd Wells, my father’s brother! And one of my IDOLS. Aunt Mary Wells too.”

she considers were miracles and wants to continue to “walk by faith.”

While Joan has never had surgery, she does have to cope with both arthritis and osteoporosis, and she has fallen several times. She and Leslie consider themselves blessed to have both Medicare and Empire health insurance. When she needs new leg braces, the last of which cost \$2,000, the insurance pays for it. Still, when her special shoes require repairs, as they recently have, at a cost of \$240, the insurance does not pay for that, so they themselves have to pay it.

While both Leslie and Joan are able to drive a car, Joan does most of the driving and loves it. She has been well enough to have traveled some distance, as far south as Maryland and Virginia.

Today Joan is obviously sharp, quick, and energetic. But she remains limited in the use of her legs. She says that as she ages, her early paralysis has “almost” returned. Ever since she caught polio, she has been unable to stand on her toes. She has, she explains, poor memory, though it surely does not seem in evidence in this interview. She says she has muscle weakness and inadequate circulation. She and her husband go regularly for chiropractic treatment. Although she continues to wear a brace on her left leg, she cannot walk up or down stairs.

Joan goes in and out of her house by a ramp – it was built in 2004 by her son Tom Decker and her son-in-law Craig Agor. She says, “Thank God for the handy men in our family.” She uses her walker on the ramp, and then uses a riding cart to get to the car. Even in winter when the walking is slippery, Joan still often gets to church. She says, “God is testing our faith every day.”

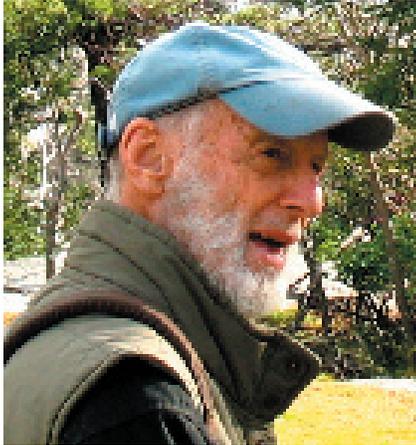


Joan & Leslie Decker in a newspaper clipping taken at their 50th wedding anniversary in 2003.



The World War I and II Honor Roll built by Myron Wells in 1944/45 (see names below). It stood in front of the Gardiner Hotel. Joan does not know what became of it.

Ackerman, John	Crispell, Howard	Het, Robert (DECEASED?)	McCord, Fraley (sp?)	Schoonmaker, Aurthur
Andersen, Alfred	Crispell, Thomas P.	Hoffman, Chester	McCullen, Dorothy	Schoonmaker, John J.
Andersen, Hans	Dickinson, Dale W.	Hoffman, Russell	McIntosh, Lucille	Smith, Roy G. Jr.
Barry, James L.	Deyo, Robert	Immendorfer, W.M.	Metzler, Edward	Stametedes, William
Bayard, Lawrence Jr.	Donahue, Francis	Jayne, Edwin S.	Miller, Joseph J.	Stanley, Morris
Bayer, Francis	Donahue, Paul	Jayne, Francis M.	Monahan, Edward T.	Taylor, Theodore
Bayer, William C.	Ecker, Christian W.	Jayne, George	Montagny, Fracis S.	Thaden, Rev. Ben M.
Beatty, Robert A.	Ellison, Emil	Jayne, Lewis M. Jr.	Moran, Frank	Tiffany, Edward F.
Bennett, Floyd	Ellison, Henry	Jenkins, Dubois	Moran, Henry A.	Thobin, Herman
Bennett, Preston Jr.	Finch, Paul	Johnston, David	Moran, James W.	Thobin, John
Bevacque, Edward	Franks, Fredrick	Johnston, George	Moran, John M. Jr.	Totels, Francis
Bevacque, Michael	Freer, David	Johnston, Simon	Mulqueen, Thomas	Totels, Richard
Bevier, Gilbert M. Jr.	Freer, Guernsey	Keeping, Ernest	Nielson, James	Totels, John
Bevier, James M.	Freer, Ranson	Keeping, John Jr.	O'Neill, Daniel	Townsend, Leslie (DECEASED?)
Bevier, Louis	Freer, Stanley	Keeping, Thomas	O'Neill, Edward	Townsend Miles
Bevier, Mary E.	George, Catherine L.	Keller, John (DECEASED?)	O'Neill, Florence	Tuthill, Walter E.
Boland, Thomas J.	George, Charles D.	Kircher, Frederick	Otis, Albert	Vandermark, Alton
Bonagura, John	George, William S.	Klyne, Harry	Penzato, Joseph Jr.	Vandermark, Malcolm G.
Bostrom, John	Gerkins, L. E.	Knowles, Kenneth I	Pizzuto, Joseph	Vondereson, Albert
Buttles, Merritt	Gerson, Harry	Krajicek, Joseph	Pruss, Walter	Walter, Robert W.
Burke, Edward	Gerson, Carl O.	Ladue, Alex	Quinby, Lewis	Warren, Daniel Jr.
Carpenter, James	Gibbons, John J.	Lawrence, George	Roth, Homer	Whitmore, Adelbert
Caston, Albert	Goettler, Joseph A.	Lopez, Jose	Roth, Kenneth A.	Wichtowski, J.
Caston, Clyde	Gondo, Andrew J.	Lotin, David	Roth, Theodore, R.	Williamson, Frederick
Caston, Roy	Gray, William	Majestic, Edward	Ruger, Ellsworth G.	Wright, Gilbert W.
Coddington, Leigh	Hasbrouck, Kenneth	Majestic, George	Schiro, Emil	Wright, Charles E.
Coffey, John	Hernwall, Fred	Marek, Francis R.	Schiro, Nicholas O.	Wright, William
Coffey, Thomas J.				Yeaple, William
Conklin, Bruce A.				
Conklin, Clifford E.				



Carleton Mabee

Writer

Carleton Mabee has long been a historian. He has a PhD in History from Columbia. He moved to Gardiner in 1965 when he came to teach History at SUNY-New Paltz. He has written two biographies, one of Samuel F. B. Morse, the artist and telegrapher, which won a Pulitzer Prize, and the other of Sojourner Truth, the Ulster County slave who became a well known advocate of rights for blacks and women. He has written two railroad histories, one on the Wallkill Valley Railroad which passed through Gardiner, and the other on the Poughkeepsie Railroad Bridge which is now being remodelled into a walkway. Last year, he published a history of Father Divine's many interracial, utopian communities in Ulster County, and this April he is publishing a history of the Gardiner Library. He volunteers as the Gardiner town historian.



Barbara Whitney Petruzzelli

Editor

Barbara Whitney Petruzzelli, editor of the Joe Katz, Gladys DuBois, Burnice Aumick and Bill Conner stories for the Hudson Valley History Project Gardiner, is the library director at Mount Saint Mary College in Newburgh, NY. She has edited a number of books and articles, including *Connecting Campus and Community*, published by the Haworth Press in 2006 and *Strength/Beauty/Spirit* by G. Steve Jordan, published in 2003. Barbara has served as an editor for the Hudson Valley History Project Gardiner since its inception. She and her husband Lou have lived in Gardiner since 2003. Their son, Matthew, attends Keene State College in New Hampshire.