

LILLIAN SCHOONMAKER

by Jenny Wonderling



Lillian Schoonmaker at home in 2008. Photo: Jenny Wonderling. All photos courtesy Lillian Schoonmaker.

Author's Note: *As a Gardiner resident and writer, being given the opportunity to interview local legend Lillian Schoonmaker for the Hudson Valley History Project was an honor. Frankly though, I had a more personal motive: I now live in the Schoonmaker homestead that Lillian and her family once occupied. This 1860's house, nestled beneath the Shawangunk Ridge, with fields and river spreading out beyond, has nurtured and inspired my friends and family. As I have attempted to restore the old farmhouse to its original details over the last eight years, questions have arisen about the families who lived there before us, and how life in this house has changed over time. Meeting Lillian, I had the rare opportunity to learn some of the answers.*

The first thing that would strike anyone about Lillian Schoonmaker is her hearty, contagious laughter. She has an amazing sense of humor about life, which, perhaps, has been her secret ingredient in becoming not merely ninety-four years old, but a ninety-four-year-old who still mows her own lawn, cleans her own house and blows her own snow: Lillian Schoonmaker simply defies time.

Lillian (who likes to be addressed by her first name) has an incredible enthusiasm and joyfulness that is immediately apparent in the easy laughter that punctuates so many of her sentences. Whether she's generously fixing her guest a sandwich or giving a tour of her immaculate, cozy home, she is nonchalant and humble. "Oh sure, I clean it all myself," Lillian said as we walked through the large house. She makes such statements with neither complaint nor the need to be validated. She is merely stating *what is*. "My eldest daughter, Sharon, who lives here with me," Lillian went on to say in the cheeriest of voices, "leaves early and comes home late from work. The last thing she wants to do is *clean!* I make us breakfast and dinner too. Oh sure, I love to stay busy!"

Perhaps even more than a love of staying busy though, this is a woman who simply LOVES life. Her acceptance of what comes seems closely connected to a strong sense of duty to her family, exemplified endlessly throughout the near century she has lived. She keeps her hair naturally grey, ears adorned with simple stud earrings, and wears comfortable clothes. "I'm not the type of person to go to a beauty parlor all the time," she confided, giggling. "As long as it's up and out of my face, I think, *they're gonna have to like it!*" She goes to the beauty parlor two or three times a year for a cut, and has a friend curl it for her in exchange for biscuits or zucchini bread—because that woman has told her repeatedly, "No, Lil, I don't want your money!"

Lillian comes from fearless doers. She looks back on her life with gratitude for the strong work ethic her parents helped develop in her and her siblings, wasting no time in offering an unequivocal "yes" to the question of whether she had a happy childhood. "Oh sure. We had a happy house, always lots of fun. We had a nice childhood. But as I said, we always worked. When my mother went out in the garden, we went out with her, learning [things like] which were the weeds and which were the beets. I did that with my grandson, Morgan, when he was little, too. He thought that was cute."

There is a satisfaction that is self-evident in Lillian's stories about her life no matter what she was experiencing. Besides doing plenty of housework as early as she can remember, she was expected to give up her time after school, as well as most weekends and summers of her childhood, working in a boarding house. She had to drop out of school altogether after freshman year in order to help her parents on their farm. Upon marriage, proud to be a farmer's wife, she tamed the huge garden of her new home and produced all the vegetables needed to feed her own growing family and her in-laws, too, canning and freezing the bounty so they would have plenty to carry them through the winter. She cooked all the meals, cleaned the house, did the mowing, raised her daughters, kept and

slaughtered the chickens, and did the landscaping. She made many clothes and curtains, crocheted and knitted and quilted, and according to her, she has never ever been bored.

When asked if there were there any chores she hated her reply was immediate. "None of them to tell you the truth," she said cheerily. "We just had to do it!" And then she laughed and laughed, and so did I while I thought of my swallowed-down annoyance when faced with a pile of socks to fold. (I don't know why, there's just something about socks.)

Lillian Schoonmaker was born Lillian McEwan in 1915 and grew up on a farm "a mile down from New Prospect Church in Pine Bush, that big house on the corner that they're renovating. The old Colonel Jahnsen homestead." She learned how to milk cows but didn't like it much. Her brother, one year older, fortunately took over this chore and other work in the barn while Lillian worked in the house. "I had to take care of cooking, getting supper ready. As the oldest girl I had to make sure the kids were up for school," she says. Yet, whatever responsibility was heaped on Lillian, her mother's life as a child had been far harder; while the children of *this* generation lament not getting the latest video game or toy, Lillian's mother, Dora Decker, had to move out of her home and go to work when her mother died in labor with a fifth child. Dora, being the eldest and a girl, was sent to work in the home of a husband and wife who paid her in keep. She was a mere seven or eight years old, but for the Decker family it was a matter of survival; it would mean one less mouth to feed.

One day Dora ran away, even though she had on such old shoes that the bottoms were practically worn out. She walked from Coldenham, just outside of Newburgh, to Walden, hoping to find her father, who worked at a knife factory somewhere in that town. "Too far to walk for a little kid," Lillian says, sadly. Alone, and exhausted even before the journey began, Dora managed to safely hitch a ride part of the way with a wagon driver. Her father, surprised to see her, asked what she was doing there.

"I'm leaving those people," she said.

Her father asked, "So what am I gonna do with you now?"

With little schooling, Dora ended up working at a farm and boarding house. She eventually got married, becoming Dora McEwan, and went on to provide a happy childhood for Lillian and her three siblings.

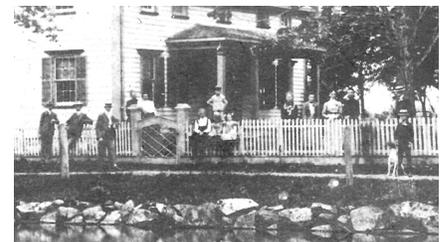
Like her mother before her, Lillian worked in a boarding house as a child, for a Mrs. Berger at Leona farm. She started when she was still going to school, and was "nothing but a kid, really," only ten or twelve. "In those days," she adds, "you had to do it all by yourself: set the tables, clean them up, wash the dishes. If you had any time when you were done you could lie and take a snooze, or go out and weed the flowers. This was back before there were toilets or anything. You had to bring the water to the room, and you had to cart the water out. The people would stay weeks sometimes. You know, they'd get out of the City."

There is a story Lillian particularly remembers from her time at Leona Farm. One day, the girls from Sunday school came up to the farm. They wanted to go out to the Shawangunkkill, swimming out to a raft. Lillian had never done that before and at first said no, "Cuz I don't even have a suit!" But one of the young ladies at the boarding house said, "I have one!" and then all of the sudden, "there I was with a red suit on." Of course, she could only go after she got all her work done, so she hurried through everything to get a few minutes to go to the river. Lillian walked through the field to the Kill, onto to the dock, and then said, "Now what do I do?" She was instructed to climb down the ladder and swim out. "I thought I knew how to swim," she says. "I didn't. And I'm telling you, *I was sick!* I fought something awful. The girls pulled me out. Well, I was no good for waiting on tables at supper time and Ma Berger was *mad*. I got it! She was very mad. I didn't want my folks to know it because they might not let me work and we needed the money, what little we made." Lillian never went swimming again.

In spite of the hard work she did at the boarding house and at home, she remembers plenty of fun. "We had a pond and we used to ice skate, sleigh ride. My father would take the wooden staves from an old barrel. Then he'd attach an old piece of leather from an old harness or something and he'd nail it on those staves. Those were our skis! Someone did give us a real pair though, great big long things and we got into much more trouble with those because

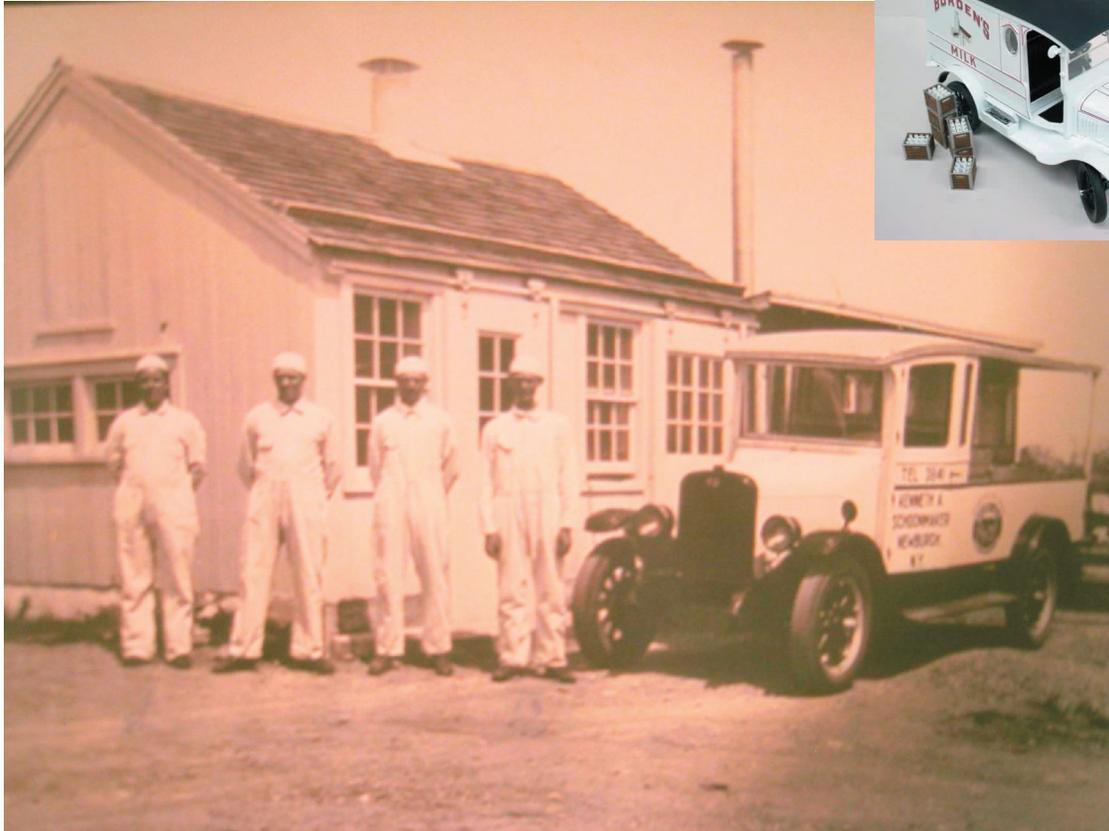
we fell like crazy. Our parents were afraid we were going to break our necks! But the neighborhood kids—they all got together. It was just one of those things, we had a good time. I got along well with my brother. My sister Janette who lives in Kingston is four years younger than me. Marietta is four years younger than her. I guess my brother, John, and I were meant to be twins because I was born 1914 and he was born in 1915. But he's gone now. I lost him.

“We had two horses. My brother and I would go horseback riding around the block, which was miles. Especially if we wanted to get out of work, or we thought we could [get out of it]. We never went fishing though. I never did learn to swim. I was always deathly afraid of water [after my near-drowning]!” Later in life Lillian was determined that her own children would learn to swim and had a pool put in for that reason. Not too long ago, Lillian's daughter Beverly said, “Mom, suppose you and Sharon and I go on a cruise? Let's do that!” Lillian's reply was, “You and Sharon go on the cruise and I'll stay home and keep the home fires burning! Hah hah! No way. I have no desire!”



Several views of the main house of the Schoonmaker Homestead on Bruynswick Road. At top right and in the detail below it, photographed on February 5, 1906, and above, at left, in a later undated photo.

Lillian was twenty-five when she married Spencer Schoonmaker in 1940 and moved from Pine Bush to Gardiner. She met her husband through her brother. “I don't know how it happened,” she says. “It was just one of those things; he was there quite a lot and then all of a sudden—I just went with him.” Lillian and Spence, as he was known, were together for two or three years before they got married. She worked in a clothing store in Middletown and would come home on weekends and, “he'd be there [at our house] because my brother would have him over. (Laughter.) We got married in the Shawangunk Church, in the parsonage of the church, because we didn't have a big church wedding.” The Schoonmakers were an old family and must have known lots of people, but, Lillian says, “We didn't *want* a big wedding, you know, or anything like that. Oh yeah! It would have been huge if we'd let it! But my family couldn't afford it. And I don't think his family could either. But I'm not one of those types—I don't need all that splurge!” Today, Lillian works down at the Shawangunk Church serving meals and has seen some of the “outlandish weddings.” “It's over the top!” she says. “You could put a good down payment on a house [with the money people



The Schoonmaker milk truck. From left to right: Spencer, an unknown man, Ken, and Clarence Schoonmaker. The photo is undated but is probably from the 1920s judging from the miniature model of a 1920s Borden Milk truck at upper right.

spend.] But I didn't go for that, you know. It was just our closest friends and family. And my mother, she had a whole family chicken dinner for us on the farm!"

Lillian stopped working once she got married. "I was just a farmer's wife, that's all, you know." Looking at the photos of the back yard of what had been their home, she pointed, laughing in response to all she grew in the big garden. "There were grape vines in here. I had beans, carrots, tomatoes, beets on the one side, and where you've got the swimming pool now, that was sweet corn. I did all my own canning. I made jams. The big closet downstairs in the basement, that was all full with my canning. Well, that was before we had a freezer, I don't know when we did get one. We didn't take it with us up all those stairs to this house!"

IN HER OWN WORDS

"My first impression of Gardiner was that I liked it. It was very friendly. I knew everybody then, or practically everybody. That's why it's so different here in Pine Bush. Now I don't know anybody. Then it was great. You'd be out there mowing the lawn and you'd hear, 'Hi Lill!' Or 'Hey Lill!' Or they'd pull over and chat with you, women or men. And Spence, of course everybody knew him because he grew up there. It was always like that. It was a very friendly place. And there were parties, my husband *loved* parties! That's why I never entertain now.

"Oh, we had over a hundred head of cattle back then. Over a hundred. The property went all the way up the mountain and down the road to where the Days' house is and Majestic farm all the way up Shaft. There's houses

all going up there now.” Gazing into some grainy old photos, she said, pointing, “My husband built that big barn, just the new one; all the other ones were here, the biggest one for cattle. The farm was inherited from my husband’s mother and father. The herd was founded in 1891, Holsteins... and the Schoonmakers had Percheron horses. There was a pair there when we first got married but my husband, he didn’t like cows and he didn’t like horses! The tractor stage was coming in and that’s what he loved. He bought the first tractor and his father nearly had a fit over it because he felt the horses could do “better work than that old tractor could.” [Of course the tractor wasn’t old then; it was brand new.] “They bought the equipment to go with it and Dad Schoonmaker learned after the first year that you could do more and get it done quicker. So finally the horses faded out. I don’t know when they got rid of them. And Dad Schoonmaker had to learn to drive the tractor and everything. (Laughter.) It was great.

“From then on Dad Schoonmaker ran the cattle and ran the farm, unless it was absolutely necessary for my husband to do it. We did our own butchering. We had pigs, chickens, and we had a man come in and help butcher them with Spence’s dad. I did the chickens; the chickens were mine. I never minded doing chickens. We never cared for veal; we weren’t the type. But we had beef once in a while. I just wasn’t brought up to eat veal. We had all our own vegetables. Just about the only thing we had to buy was fruit. Well, that’s not true. We had a neighbor who had huckleberries and he’d bring in pails of huckleberries. We had grapes between the garden and where the sweet corn was, and we had rhubarb too. And I still bake. I love homemade bread! I’ve gone through three bread machines making so much homemade bread.

“Dad Schoonmaker, he had three hired help to work with him. They lived on Shaft Road. There were two houses up there; you know the two houses up at the top on the right? Those were ours. Well, I don’t say *mine*, they were the Schoonmakers. And also, the house where the Days live, that one too. So they had those three houses and the L-shaped building on Shaft. They were put up originally for the Board of Water supply, the tunnel through to New York from the top of the mountain down. There was a “camp” up there, you know on Shaft Road, the long building—it was a “camp” for the Board of Water Supply workers. Mom [Marion] Schoonmaker, she used to run it. She had a cook, Arlo Parish, who did the cookin’ and his wife who did the cleaning. And Mom Schoonmaker was there running it like a manager. They had a lot of men working up there. Aaah, history, history, there’s a lot of it! There were sleeping quarters there and [the workers] were fed. It was an L-shaped building with a hallway. And nothing but cots. Good cots they were, a dresser and chair, rooms on each side of the hall. I don’t know when Mom Schoonmaker stopped running it, or sold it.

“I got along just fine with Spence’s parents. I called them Mom and Dad. They lived on up the hill, where the camp was. The main house, our house, originally was a two-family house. Mom and Dad made it that way. For a little while we were living on the side with the sun porch. There wasn’t a partition; we just kept the door shut.”

In the living room of Lillian’s Pine Bush home one day, we looked at photos of how my house had been when it was hers. The black-and-white pictures she held revealed a pillared portico over the front door, taken off long ago. The pond had been meticulously kept then, and “the fish would come up just like rain drops when Spence would feed them,” Lillian said. “They’d jump up and the water was just as clear as crystal.” Now, the pond is a pool of green murkiness surrounded by a bramble of growth. The large Dutch barn complex, which housed many head of cattle and chickens and pigs on the 260-acre farm when Lillian and her husband and in-laws lived there, had sadly burned down in a fire sometime after the Schoonmakers sold the property. I asked her if it was emotional to visit the old house now, with the changes that have been made by time and subsequent owners. In her usual, matter of fact way, Lillian said, “I’m the type that if it’s your house, well then, you fix it the way you want it. Even if this (her present home) was torn down—and this was my grandmother’s house—then there would be nothing I could do about it!”

LIFE IN PINE BUSH

While the loss of property appeared not to move her, Lillian did have tears in her eyes when she spoke of Spencer’s death from cancer in 1983. He was ill for a year or so, and one day when Spence was sick in bed he said, “You can’t manage this all alone. I bought your mother and father’s place in Pine Bush for you.” So that

was *my* inheritance. And the inheritance *he* got from his mother and father, he gave to our two girls. [Eventually] they sent him down to Sloane-Kettering and that didn't do any good. He died soon after. He was sixty-six, and we were married forty-three years. "After he died I lived in our old house for two more years." Lillian's love and respect for her husband are evident and she was clearly distraught by these memories, but being who she is, she immediately steered the conversation to practical matters. "Our daughters were fully grown then. Then I had our house to sell, all the machinery to sell, all the moving, and I had all this house," (she indicates her current Pine Bush home) "to take care of. And this house was old and run down too.



The Schoonmaker barns around 1953. The barns originally housed their many head of cattle but burned down some time after the family sold the property in 1985.



"My father was born here. I can't say *this* house, and yet you *could* say this house. The [original] house burned down in 1913 and then my grandmother rebuilt this in 1914 on the same foundation, practically the same. The first house was built in eighteen-something. And she had six boys! Can you imagine going through it SIX times?" she asked, laughing. "I just had the two girls. Well, my parents were of a different generation altogether!"

"My father, he lived here alone after my mother died and we had to come every day and cook and check on him. And then one day I came up here, he was on the floor. So we brought him to the hospital and then we had to put him in the nursing home. And every day between my brother, my sister and I, one of us would come see him. My brother lived in Middletown, my sister in Kingston, and since I was in Gardiner, I was the closest. When it was convenient, we all took turns. Meanwhile, Spence got sick.

"[When I moved here to Pine Bush in '85] I took all the old oatmeal paper off the walls. And the ceilings are so darned high in this house—all the heat goes up there, you know! Well, my grandmother, she was a lover of flowers

and she had a greenhouse, you know, out there in the back and that's why the windows are so huge. And I had new windows put in but every year I have trouble with them! I have to have the man come in and fix them. This one here's so hard to put up, the one in the hall, you don't dare unlock that or you might have that land on your finger and you'll be there a while! But when they work, they work lovely!

"Home on the farm I never had to wash the windows so many times! Here it's just terrible. [On the roads] they are driving their equipment back and forth all the time, dragging dirt, driving back and forth. I liked my life on the farm [better than here in town]. In the country you could do whatever you liked. You could even shoot in the country. Oh sure! I used to shoot because we had snakes, and I was always afraid of the snakes with the children—copperheads, water snakes. Oh sure, there were copperheads on the farm! I don't know if they have them anymore. And garter snakes! In fact I had one come in the cellar when I was doing the washing. He came out from under the board. Oh God I hate them! I was a good shot—well, I shot enough snakes and things! And I used to go hunting with my brother [when we were young]. Not for deer but for squirrels. My mother used to fix squirrels—parboil them and then fry them. The only part that was good to eat was the leg and the thigh. I don't have a vegetable garden anymore. I did when I first came here, on the other side of the barn. I had a nice fenced-in area by the barn but it's too much with the house for me to take care of. Now we buy our vegetables.

"The only thing I can say about Pine Bush—and maybe it's all places today—the people around here, they're not that friendly. Home in Gardiner, I knew all my neighbors. That's why it's so different. I don't know my neighbors here in Pine Bush, or if I do, it's only by name.

MODERN TIMES

When asked what she would like to be remembered for, Lillian answered without delay, "Oh, for being happy-go-lucky. I don't worry; I'm not a worry-wart. I take things as they come. Sometimes I wish they could be better but you accept them as is. I'm not a complainer; I don't complain," she reiterated. This acceptance of what is seems so healthy that one cannot help but wonder if this incredible ability Lillian has to be in the *now* has been her key to maintaining her inner balance despite having lived through a century characterized by more rapid changes to life as we know it than any century previous.

The twentieth century brought with it electricity, cars, planes, space exploration, computers, cloning, artificial intelligence, tissue and organ engineering. Turbulent and rife with technological advances and environmental challenges, the near-century in which Lillian has lived has seen a true explosion in human population. Along with that growth, cultural shifts and societal breakthroughs have also occurred, including the civil rights movement and women's suffrage. And yet, though aware to some degree of the societal changes occurring beyond her doorstep—which Lillian characterized as "not good"—she has kept a safe distance from it all. I asked her whether the women's rights or civil rights movements affected her life, and whether she felt the changes or saw changes in people around her.

Lillian, unperturbed said, "No, I never belonged to anything. I only belong to the church with the cooking, like I said. And I'm not that religious. I go to church on Sunday when I can. When I don't, I don't." Lillian has maintained her values and her joy, without ever having had to align herself with an organization in a didactic way, as if in her own bubble of protection. It seems her parents, siblings, husband and others treated her with the respect she deserved, in spite of external politics.

She acknowledged though, that times have changed. "Where we had to walk to school," she said, "these kids now in Pine Bush just take the bus. It stops right out here for the high school kids. High school kids!" she repeats in disbelief. "Later, another bus comes for the elementary school. And last, a bus comes for the teeny kids, the pre-schoolers or whatever. They're so little they can hardly get on the bus. But nobody walks anymore! The only one who walks is this lady across the street. I don't know her but she has two boys. The younger one, he's in the grades and she walks him up. And then when it's later in the afternoon, she walks him back. Every day, every solid day. Rain, shine. But she's the only one. And I think that's [one of the reasons] why there's so much trouble with children. Kids are brought up very wrong today. Kids aren't brought up to do work now. Girls don't want to do housework. These things are important.

"My youngest daughter, she's a retired schoolteacher. She had fourth grade. Beverly was a dedicated teacher and they were sorry to see her go. The fifth grade teachers used to say, 'I like it when your children come to my class because they

know how to behave.’ And they learned something. She was very, very dedicated to her children. She decided to quit [after] she had put in thirty-five years of teaching [because it was eventually hard to discipline the children.] But she always said, ‘I had the best kids.’ She loved them all. (Tears followed by laughter.) Now, she’s never home! She’s on the go continually. And she’s happy. That’s good for her!”

Lillian is not one to gossip or speak ill of anyone, but neither is she coy. When asked, for example, what she thinks about things like the modern predilection for plastic surgery, she answered without hesitation. “The only thing I had done is two knee replacements. I frowned on those too in the beginning, but I *had to* and it turned out great. I did them both four years apart. But I don’t approve of surgery for vanity. When ear piercing first came out I went in to my Dr. DeWitt for some reason and said, ‘I’d like to have my ears pierced.’ He said, ‘If the Lord didn’t put holes in your ears, forget it.’ My daughters did it, though. Now the doctors will do anything for the money! Surgery just for vanity’s sake? If a person likes you, they’ll like you however you are! If you’re not satisfied with one thing, it leads to another and another. No, I don’t approve of it, unless it’s like a child with a cleft palette or something important like that.”

Finally, when asked what change over the last century has been the hardest to get used to, she laughed and said, “Computers! I don’t have anything to do with them; they don’t interest me the least little bit!”



The Schoonmaker farmhouse as it looks today.

THOUGHTS FROM A HUMBLER AUTHOR

Lillian Schoonmaker is just as feisty now as she was when she was toting a gun to defend her kids against snakes. Sharp as a tack and with instant recall, except when it comes to dates, she seems to be the same caring, hard-working woman she was from the very start, without a trace of bitterness or fear. When asked her earliest memory, she said, turning inward, "Work." She laughed and laughed when she said it, and so did I. My own reaction when faced with a similarly endless cycle of household chores is far less cheerful. I do them all, sometimes even with joy, but too often with the nagging suspicion that there is something else more worthy of my time.

It was a privilege interviewing Lillian for this story, and I found that I just couldn't resist distilling some of what I learned from her into the following list:

My Top 10 Favorite Lillian Schoonmaker Life Lessons

- When you go out in the garden, take your children with you.
- Be a good (and friendly!) neighbor.
- Walking is a good thing! Do more of it!
- Keep yourself busy with productive things. "There's too much to do to ever get bored!"
- Instill a good work ethic in your children. "Kids aren't brought up to do work now and girls don't want to do housework. These things are important."
- Don't complain; take things as they come. "Sometimes I wish they could be better but you accept them as is."
- Don't splurge on a big wedding. "It will only get huge if you let it. You could put a good down payment on a house with the money people spend!"
- No surgery for vanity's sake. "If a person likes you, they'll like you however you are! If you're not satisfied with one thing, it leads to another and another."
- Live without regrets.
- Laugh. And then laugh some more.

And one more because it's just too good to miss:

- When your time comes, you go, that's it!



**Jenny Wonderling
Writer**

Jenny Wonderling is also the author of the Joe Katz story for the *Hudson Valley History Project: Gardiner*. She began keeping journals as a young girl. Today she has more than sixty, chronicling her own experiences and overflowing with stories about her unique and colorful family. Soon after moving to Gardiner, she published dozens of freelance articles and edited a book for Bantam Press—all this while restoring her 1860's Gardiner farmhouse with the help of her two young sons, family, and friends.

In 2005, Wonderling opened Nectar, a boutique in the heart of High Falls. Nectar is a rare blend of home décor, art, African tribal artifacts, imported furniture, gifts, and tea salon. Nectar is buzzing with visitors who love all that the store has to offer. And with each new visitor, there is a story...

At right, Jenny playing with children in a village in India.



**Nan Gatewood Satter
Editor**

Nan Gatewood Satter is an independent book editor who works chiefly on novels, short stories, and memoir. She has also worked with emerging writers as a workshop leader for more than a decade, first in New York City, and for the past seven years in New Paltz. She lives in Gardiner with her husband and son.