HENRY GAISMAN AND HART’S BROOK PARK & PRESERVE

Richard Presser and “The Committee to Save the Gaisman Property” have rightfully been given much credit for making our beautiful Hart’s Brook Park & Preserve possible. Of course, there are many others who deserve credit, including our Greenburgh Parks & Recreation Department that does a tremendous job of operating and maintaining the facility.

However, have you ever wondered about the Gaisman family, especially Henry Gaisman, who you might have heard had something to do with the Gillette Safety Razor? The trail maps available at a kiosk near the Ridge Road entrance to the park allow visitors to hike the network of trails of the former estate year-around and also give a brief history as follows:

ABOUT HART’S BROOK

In 1932, Henry Gaisman, who had made his fortune as a founder of Gillette, purchased 135 acres from George Christiancy, a former U.S. minister to Peru. In 1957, Mr. Gaisman passed the title to the land to the NY Archdiocese with the understanding that he and his wife, Catherine, could live on the property as long as they so desired.

Mr. Gaisman died in 1974 at the age of 104. His wife lived on the property for another 21 years and moved to Connecticut in 1995. The property was subsequently taken over by the Archdiocese, which leased the land to Marian Woods Convent. Through efforts of the Gaisman Committee, 124 acres were purchased jointly by NY State, Westchester County and the Town of Greenburgh. 11.5 acres were retained by Marian Woods. Visitors to the park may be lucky enough to spy some of its wildlife including foxes, deer, wild turkeys, great-horned owls, and an abundance of bull-frogs. The natural beauty of the land lends a unique character to each of the seasons.

In 1971, a “Man in the News” column appeared in the NY Times, featuring Henry Gaisman at the age of 101. Although the reason was his donation for another property, the article provides us with much more background on Mr. Gaisman’s amazing life and career. An edited version follows:

Quiet Benefactor: Henry Jack Gaisman, By Murray Schumach (1971)

More than half a century ago, when Henry Jack Gaisman attracted widespread attention because his inventions were fetching high prices, he fled to an isolated house in the woods of northern Michigan to escape reporters. Now, at the age of 101, the retired chairman of the board of the Gillette Safety Razor Company is again reluctantly in the spotlight! The reason: his donation of $2.25-million to enable the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of NY to purchase the remaining half of the architectural landmark on Madison Avenue directly behind St. Patrick’s Cathedral. While preferring his gifts to be anonymous, Cardinal Cooke persuaded him otherwise, afraid that people might not believe the money came from a donation. Mr. Gaisman, who is Jewish, has ignored religious distinctions for many years in channeling money to a number of institutions which he does not care to discuss. One of the beneficiaries is Mount Sinai Hospital.

Mr. Gaisman lost his sight two years ago, but still tinkers with ideas for inventions. Except when the weather is very bad, he usually takes two 20-minute walks a day near his home in Hartsdale, NY. The 84 inventions to his credit include a camera device that Eastman Kodak bought more than 50 years ago for $ 300,000, a new method for making razor blades that made him top executive of Gillette and a button gadget that prevented men’s belts from slipping in an era before trousers had belt loops. “I just wanted to make a better blade,” he said, referring to the achievement that led to his foundation of the Auto-Strop Safety Razor Company, which he sold to Gillette in 1931.

Mr. Gaisman still tries to get to the city about once a week and keeps interested in public affairs through meetings with well-informed men and women. “I like to know what’s going on,” he says, “I want to be alive.”

Keeping busy is a lifetime habit with Mr. Gaisman, who had to leave school when he was 13 years old. His father died of yellow fever when the boy was 3. At that time they were living in Memphis, where he was born, and the youngest of four children. “I had to go to work, we needed the money,” he recalled.

As a teen-ager he came to New York City “because I had a little invention – a belt that wouldn’t slip. I sold it.” In New York, he said, he found that his lack of formal education did not seem a serious handicap. He just worked hard and went many years without a vacation. Mr. Gaisman did not marry until he was 82. His wife, the former Catherine Vance, thinks there is nothing unusual in his working habits, that most self-made men work hard.

Grudgingly, Mr. Gaisman told how he happened to make his donation to the Archdiocese. He had known the late Cardinal Spellman for many years, he said, and thus became friendly with his successor.

“When I heard about this, I realized it was very important for them to complete the block,” he said. “They were hard-pressed financially. So my wife and I talked it over carefully, and we agreed to do it.” When asked how Cardinal Cooke reacted when he told him, Mr. Gaisman chuckled and said: “Let us say he was very appreciative.”

If you have not already done so, a visit to Hart’s Brook is well worth the trip. I am sure you will come away feeling “very appreciative” to Henry and Catherine Gaisman and all those who have helped to preserve their property. The beautiful barn and stable built by the Gaismans on their estate is another highlight of Hart’s Brook and may be the subject of a future article.

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