

For and About the People of Dutchess County

Fall 1997

Dutchess

Richard Jenrette

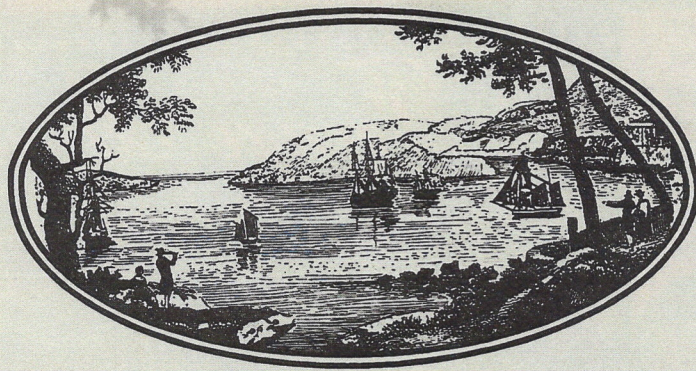
"The Contrarian Manager"

At Edgewater

Eco-Update

**20 Leaders Assess
Dutchess Economy**





Edgewater

Edgewater has been the great love of my life — architecturally speaking — since I first laid eyes on it nearly 30 years ago.

For *Dutchess* readers unfamiliar with this very special place, Edgewater is a handsome classical revival house built in 1820 on a small point of land jutting into the Hudson River in Barrytown, a subdivision of Red Hook in Northern Dutchess County. It is one of a number of "Livingston houses," built by or for members of the Livingston family that once commanded vast stretches of the Hudson Valley. Less famous and smaller in scale than its Livingston neighbors — Montgomery Place and Clermont, Edgewater seems eminently more attractive and livable to me. But I am biased after 28 years residing in what some might consider a museum but which is home to me.

Why is Edgewater so seductive? First, I believe, is the site itself. The

small peninsula on which the house is built is surrounded by placid lagoons, lined with weeping willows drooping into the river. The front porch of the house is no more than 30 yards from the edge of the river, making it possible to hear the lapping of the waves, sometimes gently, sometimes noisily. The Hudson is still tidal at this point, and the constant ebb and flow create a changing panorama of exposed rocks and rivulets when the tide is out.

Edgewater faces due west, with clear views of the Catskills except on foggy days. A green sward of lawn runs from the house to river's edge, reminding me that the place was once called "River Lawn," prior to a mid-19th century name change to Edgewater. Either is certainly appropriate to the setting. Sitting by the river's edge on long summer evenings is pure bliss.

Even had it not been built on so dramatic a site, the architecture of Edgewater would make the house appealing in almost any setting. The central block, built in 1820, is faced on the river side by six gigantic Doric columns, creating a commodious piazza for leisurely summer liv-

ing. I spend almost all my time on this porch when the weather is fine — eating, drinking, reading, and napping. It's perfection.

Lining the porch on the inside are five very tall arched French doors — capped by elegant fanlights. Three of the doors open into the principal parlor or living room. The other two provide entry into the adjoining dining room. Inside, sliding mahogany double doors between the living room and dining room make it possible to throw the two rooms together *en suite*. When the French doors are open to the porch on mild days, both porch and interior rooms flow together as a unified whole — a great place for a party! The ceilings inside are very high — 14 feet — and all the original moldings; medallions, mantels, and mahogany doors have somehow survived the house's 177-year history.

Before telling you more about Edgewater's quite interesting history, let me tell you how I came to own this jewel of a house and site. It seems like fate intended it. On a warm late September afternoon, I had been touring old houses of the Hudson Valley with a friend who

by Richard H. Jenrette
Photographs by Doug Baz

shared my love of old houses. We had just taken a look at Matzeffeld, an old mansion in Red Hook. The book we were using as a guide —

Great Houses of the Hudson Valley by Eberlein — described another historic house (Edgewater) which was only a mile or two distant, due west — right on the river. The book showed a less than flattering photograph of a colonnaded house that looked vaguely Southern in origin. The book noted that the current owner of Edgewater was the author Gore Vidal.

Although neither of us knew Gore Vidal, we proceeded to the site, arriving at sunset. We could look down a long driveway following the river's edge and glimpse Edgewater with its columns gleaming in the late afternoon sun. It was a magical view, with the water lapping the banks and everything green. The only fly in the ointment, so to speak, was the presence of railroad tracks just east to the back of the property, but I have found in this life that nothing is ever completely perfect. In any event, I thought to myself, "What a perfect Shangri-La for a writer. I'll bet Gore Vidal would never sell this place."

Nor was I looking to buy a house, having bought an 1838 Greek Revival house (which I didn't need but which captivated me) in

Charleston, South Carolina, the previous year. But I certainly coveted Edgewater from the moment I saw it — it looked so blissfully peaceful and I felt as home there. It was also more accessible than the South Carolina house since I worked in New York City.

I returned to New York but was unable to put Edgewater out of my mind. It seemed so perfect a jewel on the Hudson. Then came a big surprise — only three days later. Anthony Hail, an interior decorator from San Francisco, who was decorating my new house in Charleston, called me while he was passing through New York, en route from Rome — Italy, that is — back to San Francisco. He said, "Dick, there is a house you have got to buy. I was in Rome and saw Gore Vidal (who was then living there). He wants to sell his house on the Hudson. It's divine." I replied that certainly was a coincidence since I had just seen Edgewater this past weekend and loved it.

Tony told me how to contact Gore Vidal and two days later I had negotiated a deal to buy Edgewater although I had only seen it once. I've never regretted it, though I'm



Richard H. Jenrette, "The Contrarian Manager."



told by mutual friends that Gore later regretted selling it. However, he now has his own Edgewater, high on the Amalfi coast overlooking the blue Mediterranean, so weep not for his loss. I hear his place is spectacular.

Gore Vidal has only returned to Edgewater one time since selling it to me in 1969. He had owned Edgewater for approximately 20 years, having bought it shortly after the end of World War II. During the war, I am told the double-tracked railroads right behind Edgewater were so busy shipping war supplies to the port of New York that Edgewater had become unlivable because of soot and noise. At that time, trains still belched coal smoke. The house had stood empty during the war years. I learned later through Daisy Suck-



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It's perfection.

ley's diary that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a neighbor in Hyde Park, used to like to come sit on the front porch of deserted Edgewater to watch the Hudson flow by. Perhaps he was able to command the trains to stop for awhile.

Under Gore Vidal's aegis, Edgewater revived and had a colorful 20-year post-WW II era. Gore called

the place "Edgewater U" because he advanced his education there while writing and apparently enjoying himself. On one or more occasions, Eleanor Roosevelt evidently also discovered the charms of Edgewater while visiting Vidal, who enjoyed a fascinating coterie of friends — including such regulars as Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward. For readers interested in learning more

about the fascinating Vidal years at Edgewater, I refer you to Gore's recent autobiography *Palimpsest*, published by Random House in 1995 replete with details of his seemingly very happy years at Edgewater.

For at least a decade after I bought Edgewater, locals — on learning where I lived — said, "Oh,

you have Gore Vidal's house." I think a lot of Gore Vidal must still be at Edgewater. His biography indicated that he sometimes still dreams of the place. I have all his works in Edgewater's Octagon Library, where he did his writing. There must be something contagious in that room — I have recently produced a book — *The Contrarian Manager* — about my business career. Much of it was written in the same library that Vidal used. In fact, I now have a second book in the hopper on my strange predilection for buying and restoring old houses.

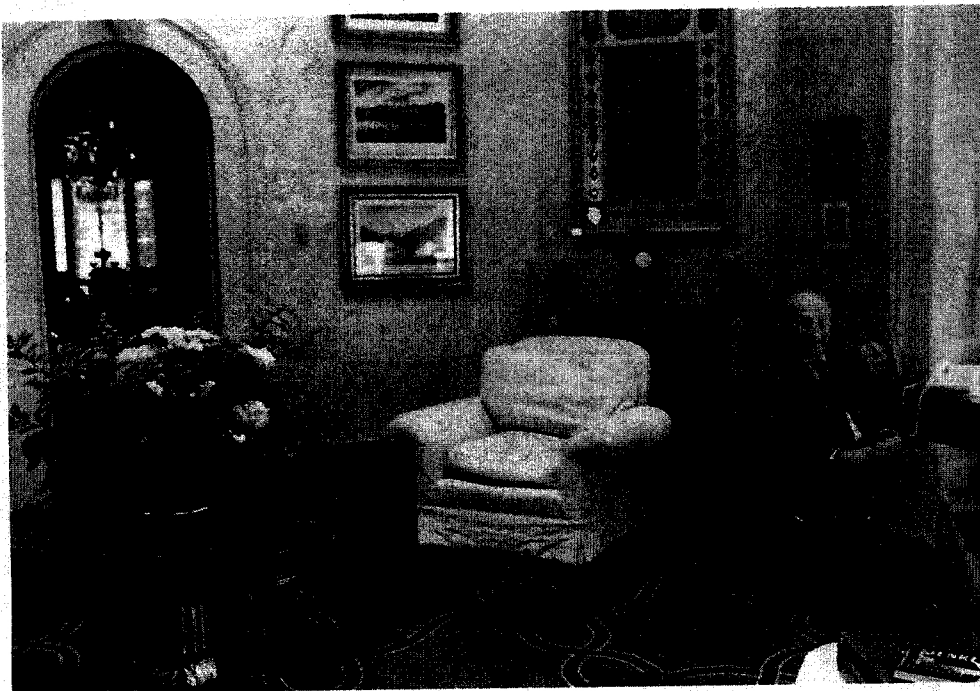
Let's move back in time to the beginning of Edgewater as a Hudson River estate. John R. Livingston owned the land on which Edgewater was built. I have a copy of the deed conveying the property in 1820 to his daughter Margaretta Livingston Brown, who had recently betrothed Captain Lowndes Brown, a descendant of a prominent Southern family in Charleston, South Carolina. There is strong circumstantial evidence that Robert Mills, a nationally recognized architect from Charlestown, drew the plans for Edgewater. It has all the hallmarks of houses Mills designed in South Carolina in the 1820s. That would explain the strongly Southern character of the house — high ceilings, huge windows, and raised piazza about the ground level, as in Charleston. Since I had just bought a house in Charleston, this added another taste of predestination that this house was meant for me.

The Lowndes Browns apparently had an idyllic life at their villa on the Hudson — this was before the railroad had severed the peninsula on which the house was built from the rolling hills behind. In 1852, some 30 years after the house was built, Mrs. Brown's world seemed to come crashing down. Her influential father John R. Livingston died — at age 90. I suppose that could not have been a total surprise. But her husband Lowndes Brown also died in the same year — 1852. The

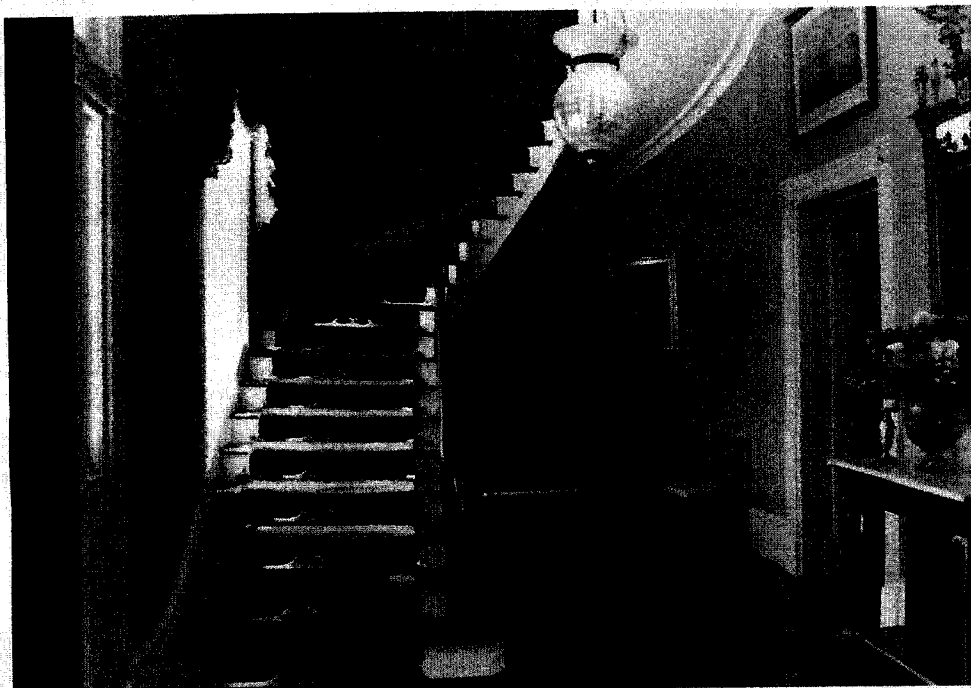
third blow to Mrs. Brown was the building of the railroad on land, taken by New York State through eminent domain procedures, right behind her beautiful home (no more than 20 yards away). I can only surmise whether apoplexy over the railroad had anything to do with the deaths of both John R. Livingston and Lowndes Brown in that

year. In any event, Mrs. Brown had had enough. She moved to London, where her only daughter had married the Belgian Ambassador to the Court of St. James, vowing never to return to the U.S., so angry was she at the railroad. She is buried in Kensal Green in London.

Not too much remains from the Lowndes Brown era at Edgewater,



The octagon library is where former owner Gore Vidal did much of his writing.



The house has a Southern character — high ceilings, huge windows and raised piazza.



in part because the next owner Robert Donaldson was so vigorous in planting his own imprint on the property. Donaldson was a wealthy, transplanted North Carolinian who purchased the property from the Widow Brown in 1852. Before that he had nearby "Blithewood," now a part of Bard College. Donaldson was born and raised in Fayetteville, North Carolina — another coincidence for me since I had been born and raised in Raleigh, North Carolina, only 50 miles away. At age 21, Donaldson had inherited \$300,000 from a bachelor uncle in London, a vast sum in 1820 (the coincidence with my life stopped there!). Donaldson's wife, Susan Gaston Donaldson, also was a native North Carolinian from New Bern, close enough to my home to give me a feeling of kinship. Other parallels between my



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life and Robert Donaldson's included the fact that we both were graduates of the University of North Carolina, both of us migrated to New York in our twenties, we both served as Trustees of New York University, we both were intensely interested in art and architecture, and — finally — the name of my investment firm in New York just happened to be *Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette*. Of course, I knew none of this at the time I bought Edgewater. It all seemed a bit eerie and almost preordained when I later discovered

these ties, as well as the strange way I had found the house. It rather seemed like the house had found me.

Other similarly "miraculous" occurrences, once I had discovered the Donaldson's history so similar to mine, reinforced the view that some divine hand was up there planning it all (I don't really believe this, but who knows — anything is possible). Almost miraculously, the Donaldson furnishings began to return to Edgewater. First was a life-size portrait of Mrs. Donaldson, which came to my attention through an *Antiques* magazine article on the artist George Cook. This eventually led to my obtaining not only the portrait but also a sofa and a pair of window benches — by Duncan Phyfe — that had belonged to the Donaldsons. Then I learned the Colonial Dames of New York owned the harp that Mrs. Donaldson was shown playing in her por-

trait. The Dames did not want to sell — but weeks later I saw an *identical* harp coming up for sale at Sotheby's, which seemed almost miraculous. This time the Dames let me buy it and swap it for theirs — so Mrs. Donaldson's harp stands next to her portrait, which shows the harp's details clearly.

Caught up in the spirit of things (so to speak), I decided to be more pro-active. John Sanders, a friend and college classmate of mine in North Carolina, had been concurrently researching Robert Donaldson's life — I suppose yet another coincidence. I learned from John that Donaldson had been a great friend and patron of A.J. Davis, one of the nation's most famous architects at the time who had been instrumental in building the North Carolina State Capitol in Raleigh, my home town, as well as many other buildings at the University of North Carolina. Donaldson had been largely responsible for A.J. Davis gaining these important commissions in North Carolina. My feeling of "connectedness" with this man Robert Donaldson was growing by leaps and bounds.

John Sanders told me that the last living descendant of Robert Donaldson — Mary Cromwell Allison — was now residing in Spain on the Costa del Sol. So, on a chance I wrote Mrs. Allison and told her I was restoring Edgewater, her family's ancestral home. She promptly invited me to visit her the next time I was in Europe. I soon found an excuse to go to Spain, and this time I really hit the jackpot. Greeting me as I entered her house was a marvelous portrait of Robert Donaldson himself, smiling an enigmatic Mona Lisa smile now that I had found him. I learned it was painted in London in 1821 by C.R. Leslie, an American, right after Donaldson had collected his inheritance (a more

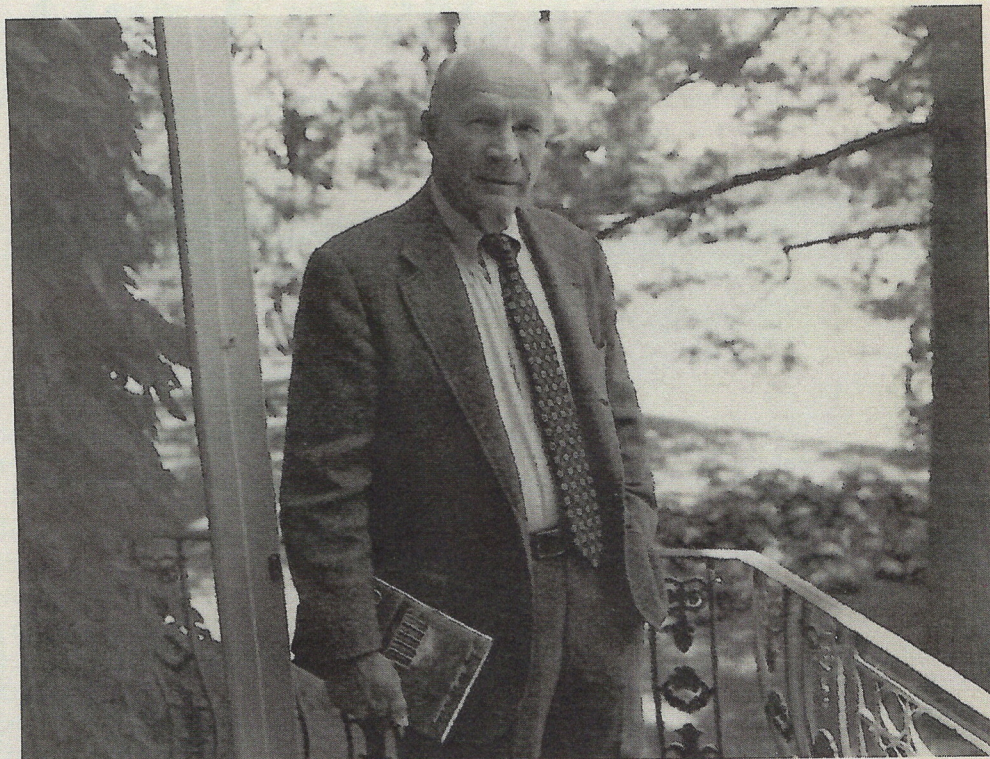
likely cause of his smile than my arrival to rescue him from Spain). Mary Allison's house was chock full of other Donaldson treasures and memorabilia — a grandfather clock, chairs, family silver, some other family portraits, photographs.

While we had a cordial visit and established correspondence, Mrs. Allison was unwilling to part with any of her family possessions — "my only connection to home" — but she said, in the presence of her husband, that she would like all these things to return to Edgewater some day after her death. (She had no children.) She had been in poor health, and several years later she passed away. To my surprise her husband contacted me and said "Mary had wanted her Donaldson family things to go back to Edgewater — come and get them!" And so I did. Robert Donaldson's portrait is now reunited with that of his wife, with the *tout ensemble* creating quite a history of the Donaldson era at Edgewater.

Robert Donaldson died in 1872 but his children continued to live at Edgewater until 1902 (completing

70 years of Donaldson ownership), at which point it was sold to the John J. Chapmans. Chapman was another popular literary figure, preceding Vidal at Edgewater. Mrs. Chapman was one of the famed "Astor orphans" of nearby Rokeby. The Chapmans owned Edgewater for about 40 years but made their principal home at Sylvania, which they built in the early 20th Century on high ground overlooking the Hudson on part of the old Donaldson estate. This house has recently been lovingly restored by Joan Lerrick, making a charming companion house to Edgewater.

After the Chapmans moved to Sylvania, Edgewater languished during the noisy coal-burning railroad heyday of World War II until it was rescued by Gore Vidal after the war's end. The coming of quieter, less smelly and less dirty diesel train engines, together with less traffic after the war, made Edgewater once again habitable. Its charming site and elegant architecture make it worth the occasional train rushing by. Alan Porter, a neighbor, used to tell this tale about Gore




Jenrette's new book, "The Contrarian Manager," has recently been published by McGraw-Hill.



Vidal's dinner parties. As usual, Gore, the reigning intellectual, dominated dinner table conversation at Edgewater. When he heard a train coming, he would turn to the guest next to him and say, "now tell me about your life." Just as the person began to talk, the train would rush by drowning out all conversation. I always recall this line, "now tell me about your life" when a train rushes by during one of my dinner parties at Edgewater.

Today mostly passenger trains to and from Albany run on the tracks behind Edgewater. They aren't really so objectionable and I've planted the tracks out. Still the railroad remains a sort of Sword of Damocles hanging over Edgewater if the tracks were ever reconnected to heavy freight usage. The CSX Railroad will soon gain title, following the recent split-up of Conrail. I am hopeful CSX will continue to use


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 The house is open on dozens
 of occasions each year for
 house tours, sponsored
 by various groups.

the tracks behind Edgewater for fast passenger trains and the parallel tracks across the river for slower, heavier freight, as is now the case. Well, there's always a serpent lurking in the Garden of Eden, it seems.

As you can gather from this article, my 28 years at Edgewater have been a delight. I keep the house open year-round but tend to favor South Carolina in the long winters on the Hudson. My indispensable

and invaluable caretaker of the past 20 years, Jack Smith, keeps things in perfect order year-round. The biggest social event at Edgewater during my era was a spectacular 25th anniversary party for Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette in 1984. Turning a problem into an opportunity, we chartered a private train that brought 400 guests from Grand Central Station to the very back door of Edgewater. The train was turned around at Albany and returned late in the evening to pick up the celebrants after a dinner-dance on the lawn and a fireworks grand finale.

Edgewater is private and not open to the public, unlike nearby Montgomery Place, which I recommend as a sister house also remodeled by A.J. Davis in the mid-19th Century. I try not to be selfish in keeping Edgewater to myself. The house is opened on dozens of occasions each year for house tours, sponsored by museum



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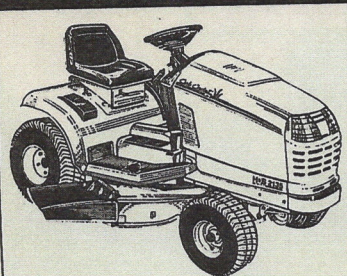
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groups, garden clubs, student groups, preservation societies, etc. Unfortunately, I can't accommodate all the requests I get for tours or I'd never be able to use it myself or Jack Smith would have to become a full-time tour guide. One of these days, after I'm gone, it may be open full time to the public by Historic Hudson Valley, which operates Montgomery Place as a museum. But in the meanwhile, I hope to have many more years to enjoy the golden days at Edgewater.

With two Harvard Business School classmates, William Donaldson and Dan Lufkin (now a parttime Millbrook resident), North Carolinian Richard Jenrette formed Donaldson, Lufkin, Jenrette (DLJ), a successful investment banking firm. In 1985, Equitable Life Assurance Society bought DLJ. Jenrette became Equitable's board chairman and CEO in 1990 and by the time he stepped down in 1996, he saw the company \$500 million in the red. His new book, "The Contrarian Manager," has recently been published by McGraw-Hill.

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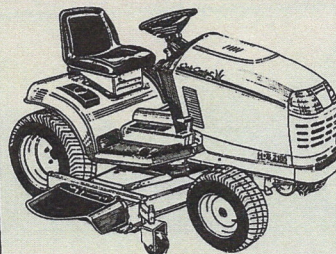


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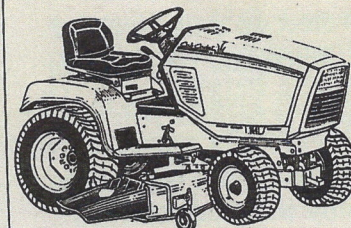


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