

ACROSS THE SPECTRUM



by Nancy Alden

A fascinating family history

One of Dutchess County's most interesting and erudite citizens is my good friend, John Winthrop Aldrich, better known to all as Winty. He lives at Rokeby, the historic estate in Barrytown, in the Town of Red Hook, and is the Deputy Commissioner for Historic Preservation of the New York State Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. Winty came by to see us not long ago and told us of the book about his family that was published recently, called "The Astor Orphans - A Pride of Lions."

The book jacket describes the story: "In a sweeping saga of society figures and adventurers, of politicians and reformers, of misfits and madmen, this book tells the fascinating, sometimes hilarious, story of eight men and women known as the 'Astor orphans.'"

It said: "When Margaret Astor Ward Chanler died in 1987, she left a clutch of eight children under fourteen, and a colossal fortune. The boisterous, opinionated, quarrelsome young Chanlers grew up on a sprawling Hudson River estate minded only by an elderly female cousin, servants, and distant guardians. Although firmly established in society by their Astor money and their handsome lineage (Winthrops, Stuyvesants, Livingstons, Beekmans, etc.), the Chanlers refused to be bound by any disagreeable constraints." Of this brood it was noted that, "Winthrop loved hunting so violently that he solved short-term cash problems with insurance money paid out for his horrendous accidents. Willie adventured out West with Butch Cassidy before turning to serious exploration of East Africa, then gun-running and revolution. Archie married a gorgeous drug-addicted, best selling author of steamy romances. And when railroaded into an insane



AN INTERESTING FAMILY HISTORY: John Winthrop "Winty" Aldrich visits the historic St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Staatsburg. (Photo by Nancy Alden.)

asylum by his brothers, he escaped to fight a twenty-year battle for control of his inheritance. Willie and Winthrop larked off to fight the Spanish-American War, and so their determined sister Margaret marched off to nurse the wounded, her heroics winning her lavish newspaper coverage. [She was my friend Winty's grandmother. On Dec. 17, 1939 her work in the Spanish-American War was given public recognition when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt presented her with a special Congressional gold medallion.] Lewis Chanler annoyed New York judges by acting as the city's first pro bono criminal lawyer, while big, bluff Bob surprised everyone by becoming a successful painter and setting up a riotous establishment in New York presided over by two red-headed mistresses. Scatterbrained Alida, the baby of the family, lived to see men walk on the moon." She died at 97 in 1969.

This book was a long time in the making. The original author was a man named Robert van Pauling Steele, who used the pen name Lately Thomas. Winty Aldrich supplied him with records found at Rokeby and elsewhere. Winty said, "Over the years I ransacked family attics and closets, borrowing, organizing, copying and shipping books, correspondence, clippings,

photographs to Mr. Steele in San Francisco. However, Steele became ill and died in 1976." Winty continued to work on the project when time permitted. Eventually, the book was published by the Washington Park Press in Albany in 1999. The royalties are being used to preserve Rokeby. Anyone interested in Hudson River history will find this book fascinating.

Winty's hope is that Rokeby's fate will be similar to that of Montgomery Place and Wilderstein - "a springboard to an entirely different sense in the larger community of what we do with our land resources, what we do with our historic heritage." He thinks that this is happening in northern Dutchess County. He especially commends Sally Mazzarella, who for many years was chairman of the Rhinebeck Planning Board. Of her he says, "We were lucky to have her come into a position of responsibility with the attitude that she was going to learn about this planning business and was going to learn about how government should work to protect these resources and how we can get this message through to the people."

Anyone reading this book should thank Winty for his perseverance!

(Nancy Alden, a Staatsburg resident, was supervisor of Hyde Park from 1992 to 1993.)