

Lisa Lansing Simont

By Brenda Underwood

Lisa's association with Cornwall is a long one. As a young child she started coming to Cornwall to spend summers with her grandmother, Martha Hale Hubbard, who lived in the house behind the white picket fence at 8 School Street. Her memories of those long summers and the friends she made remain with her as something to cherish.

Lisa Lansing was born in Providence, Rhode Island on May 13, 1942, the first child born to Tod and Elisabeth Lansing.



Lisa in front of a painting by Genevieve Ireland, Marc Simont's sister.

The Second World War had started for America and soon after Lisa's birth, her father, who was working for the *Providence Journal*, went away to serve leaving his young wife and newly born Lisa with elderly relatives for company, said Lisa, who, after reading her mother's five-year diary for the year she was born, realized, "she must have been bored to tears."

By late 1943, Elisabeth Lansing decided to move with Lisa from Providence to Cornwall to live with her mother. "When the ration books were issued," explained Lisa, "it must have made more sense to live together and share. I'm one of those war babies who

remembers the plastic sacks of white margarine with the bead of yellow coloring to be kneaded in to make it all look like butter."

When the war ended and Lisa's father returned home, the family moved back to Providence to take up the threads of their former life. Three siblings, Lydia, Robert and Mary, were born in the four years following the war. "My sister, Lydia, is now in New Hampshire up in the North Conway Valley area, Rob lives in Lake Forest, Illinois and my youngest sister, Mary, is out in Mill Valley, California."

During the summers, however, Lisa came back to Cornwell to stay with her grandmother. "I was not a cooperative older sibling, and to keep things cool at home in Providence I was sent out here to stay with my grandmother. Those were the most wonderful summers; days that seemed as long as a full year," remembers Lisa, who has written many articles for the *Cornwall Chronicle* about this time. "Those were days when children were just left to their own devices. After you did your chores and brushed your teeth in the morning you were just gone for the day – off around the village with your friends."

Among those friends were her cousins Becky Gold Williams and Betsy Beers Unger. With Amanda Fenn, Sally Foote, and Janet Walker the girls spent a lot of time at the lake just talking and devising games and schemes. “Those were the closest friendships I had as a child.”

Ruminating about her childhood years in Cornwall, Lisa remembers that, “Cornwall Village in 1950 was land of opportunity for kids of just about any age. To be sure the smaller ones were only allowed out in the care of an older sibling but it was easy to ditch these hangers-on within sight of their front doors. After all we had things to do: Like swim in the old Foresters’ Pool off Essex Hill Road, or play in what was then the thick and boggy wood behind Ben Gray’s house. Here frogs and snakes and huge insects were captured in glass canning jars, brought home to be studied for the brief remainder of their lives. My grandmother luckily was game for all this zoology and seemed to know what to feed a praying mantis or a moribund frog.”

And, now that Lisa herself is near her grandmother’s age, “I regret with all my heart the mornings I slipped away from her to play with my friends when I know she wanted my company for herself.” However, once a week, “she did get my attention on the mornings when she drove to Litchfield to have her hair washed and rinsed a lovely pale blue and I spent a blissful hour among the comic books at the drugstore on the corner,”—something forbidden to Lisa at home—“and afterwards eating ice cream cones.”

Besides the cousins mentioned above Lisa has a number of other first and second cousins in Cornwall. “The best way to explain it is that Charlie and Ralph Gold and Betsy Unger and I have mutual great grandparents. Our various grandparents were siblings. My mother’s best friend was Betty Gold, Charlie and Ralph’s mother.”

When Lisa was in sixth grade, her family moved from Providence to West Norwalk, Connecticut where she went to an inner city school for seventh grade. The following year, the family moved to Southport and Lisa went to Roger Ludlow High School in Fairfield and then Mount Holyoke College.

Always knowing that she wanted to be a newspaper reporter, Lisa got her first job with *The Berkshire Eagle* in Pittsfield, MA after she graduated from Mount Holyoke in 1964. “I was all over the place covering police news, court news, writing reviews of films or plays. The paper at that time was very well known; about seven or eight years later it got a Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing.”

After three years with the *Berkshire Eagle* Lisa decided it was time to move on. She had been an intern in the Senate Press Gallery in Washington, D.C. while in college and interviewed for and got a job at the *Herald Tribune* as assistant to the Bureau Chief. As fate would have it, the day she left the *Eagle* en route to Washington, D.C. she learned that the *Herald Tribune* had folded. She accepted a position at the Congressional Quarterly in 1967 and was assigned to three areas: congressional ethics, the interior department and consumer affairs. “[At the time] all three of those areas were absolutely dead, a safe place for a new staff writer,” said Lisa, adding that within one year things starting popping. “Adam Clayton Powell, the congressman from Harlem, faced allegations that he had misappropriated funds, Senator Thomas Dodd, whose son Chris Dodd is now our senator, was having difficulties over ethical issues and then something blew up about the Indian reservations.” To add to the drama, “Ralph Nader also showed up in town.”

In early 1967 while working for the Congressional Quarterly, Lisa met her first husband, Milton Gwirtzman, who worked for the Democratic Committee and was a former classmate of Ted Kennedy

at Harvard. “When Robert Kennedy ran for the Presidency, a bunch of us wanted to join the campaign,” said Lisa. She left the Congressional Quarterly and joined Milton and others working for the campaign.

“I worked for the campaign from early 1968 when the decision was made to go into the later primaries. Indiana was a huge event for us and then, of course, California. After Milton and I were married in May, we went straight out to California. [Kennedy defeated McCarthy in the critical California primary.] “After Bob had given his victory speech, he turned around and went back to the kitchen at the Ambassador Hotel.” [Robert Kennedy was shot shortly after midnight on June 5, 1968 and died on June 6.] Lisa, who worked for Pierre Salinger who ran the press operation for Robert Kennedy’s campaign, remembers returning to New York on Air Force One with Robert Kennedy’s body on board, an experience that must have been devastating.

She was also on the train that carried Senator Kennedy’s body in state from New York to Washington, D.C. and witnessed the crowds of mourning people gathered at the stations along the way to wave their last farewell. She remembers one poignant scene as the train made its slow, sad journey: “Just as it was getting dark in rural Maryland, a solitary family—a mother and father with two small kids—stood in their field waving at the train.”

The first of Lisa’s two children, Matthew, was born in May 1969, “and from that point on I became part of the mommy world. I did freelance work occasionally but I was really mostly taking care of Matthew.”

“In 1970, when Matthew was still a baby, we went to live in Paris for a year and a half. That was wonderful fun. Matthew became known as ‘the baby who lived in Paris’ by all the other little kids.”

While in Paris, Lisa took a six-week course at Cordon Bleu. “It was really one of the great life-changing things,” said Lisa, who now likes to cook northern Italian food because of its simplicity and few ingredients.

When they returned from Paris in 1971, Lisa was pregnant with Danny, their second child and the 1970s were spent in Chevy Chase, Maryland raising children and volunteering. When Milton accepted a position with the Kennedy Library Corporation in Boston, the family moved. “I was very happy to go back to New England because Washington and the whole Washington wife thing was not for me.”

In 1981, Lisa went back to school and earned a Master’s Degree in Business Administration with a specialty in public management from Boston University, a prescient choice as it turned out. At this point, Lisa and Milton broke up, “perfectly amicably; our lives had just sort of diverged. We are still good friends and stay in touch,” she said.

However, living in the Boston area raising Matthew and Danny allowed Lisa to sample a number of different careers through part-time jobs. Some of those jobs included working at Action for Children’s Television; as Joan Kennedy’s press secretary during Sen. Kennedy’s run for the presidency in 1980; editing business school cases at Boston University; as a collection manager at the China Trade Museum in Milton, Mass; and as manager of government and private foundation fund-raising at the Museum of Science. “The Museum jobs were my favorite mainly because the people were so interesting, especially the wildly talented exhibits department at the Museum of Science. Several of

them were circus or theater scenery riggers so when the King Tut exhibit came to Boston, they just removed the roof of the building to lower the enormous sphinx-like image of Tut into place.”

Lisa’s children are both on the east coast. Matthew lives in the Boston area and works in the mailroom of a law firm and Danny, who had been a financial editor with Morgan Stanley, is now the proprietor of a very successful Bikram yoga studio in Locust Valley, Long Island.

The tornado in July 1989 brought Lisa home to Cornwall to help after a dozen or so mature trees were blown down at Tod and City’s house on School Street. She also reconnected with someone from her childhood summers in Cornwall, Marc D. (Doc) Simont who was carrying a chainsaw around in the Village helping out. “Our parents, my mother and father and Marc and Bee Simont had known each other since the thirties. Lisa’s mother, who wrote 46 children’s and young adult books during her lifetime, had written Marc’s biography after he won the Caldecott Medal and Marc had illustrated several of her books – *Deer River Raft* and *Deer River Hideaway*. (Among the books written by Elisabeth Lansing are a series of three she did in the 1950s which were inspired by her own childhood experiences in Cornwall -- *The Pony That Ran Away*, *The Pony That Kept a Secret* and *A Pony Worth His Salt*. They were about growing up on what is now Hedgerows Farm on Cream Hill Road where she and her brother, Bill, and sister Lydia Wolf had a pony named Pinto.”)

In 1991, after moving to Cornwall and buying Mary and Sedgwick Cooke’s house on Pierce Lane, Lisa accepted a job with the Town of Cornwall handling the finances for the town.

Lisa and Doc were married in 1997 and they live, along with a large Maine Coon cat named Rocky, in a light-filled house with pegged floors and knotted pine doors overlooking hills and valleys. On the walls are favorite photographs and drawings of people and pets, and paintings by Cornwall artists. A book by De Toqueville sits on the dining room table, a table which once belonged to Lisa’s Lansing grandmother.



Clockwise: Elisabeth Lansing, Bee Simont, Doc Simont as an infant, both drawn by Marc.

Behind the house is a broad field with a copse that becomes, “a deer nursery once a year because the grass is soft and it’s quiet there.” At the bottom of the field is a natural corridor, “literally a turnpike for animals” who move down off Dibble Hill through the woods and fields to cross Route 4 and track along the side of Coltsfoot into the Shepaug Reservation. “They have figured it all out,” said Lisa, of the deer. “Once they get across route 4 at night, they can get all the way down into the town of Washington.”



Snookums, Drawing by Ruth Gannett

Lisa is an active volunteer in Cornwall. Along with Doc, she edits the *Cornwall Chronicle* periodically. She also volunteers at the library once a week. From 1997 to 2002 she was President of the Board of Trustees of the Library when funds were being raised to build a new library. “That was biggest volunteer effort that I’ve worked on. We raised \$1.8 million for that project, which was really exciting”

Reading is a passion, “mostly non-fiction biographies and older novels.” She also sings with The Kent Singers and has recently joined the Board of the North West Connecticut Arts Council.

Several years ago, Lisa, who has been very active in the Episcopal Church, participated in a program called Ministry, Education and Exploration Program (or MEEP), a course offered by the Diocese of Connecticut designed to educate lay people and those headed for the ministry. “It was exciting to meet terrific new people. In the end I decided to remain a lay person.”

As someone who knows and loves Cornwall, “it worries me to see people come here and buy houses, often old houses, that have been part of the community for years, put in marble countertops and smarten them all up to increase their value by a million dollars which takes them out of the stream of housing that will ever be affordable to anyone in town again. But Cornwall is changing, it is going to have to change. With Gordon at the helm we have been very lucky that people have really paid attention to the issue of what the community is going to be like in the future.”



Pick-up Hockey on the Lake by Marc Simont

August 2008