William Gould Brokaw

Great Neck’s Playboy

By Alice Kasten

During the late 1800s, Great Neck was home to some of the wealthiest industrialists in the country; the same set that had homes in Manhattan, Florida, Newport and Europe. One of the most colorful was William Gould Brokaw, who moved here toward the very end of the century, purchasing a 125-acre estate. His sisters were already located in Great Neck. His sister Florence had married Standard Oil executive James Martin, and was living on a large estate at what is now Martin Court; the other, Lilla, had married wealthy merchant Henry Bramhall Gilbert and was also living in what is now Kings Point. The Brokaws had family money – their father was a partner in a very lucrative clothing business, and William had inherited over $4 million by the late 1800s.

Brokaw’s estate, Nirvana, was located near where North High School stands today. It encompassed all the land between Middle Neck Road and West Shore Road, and between what is now Old Mill Road and Beach Road. Besides a mansion, and many so-called cottages, the estate included a half-mile horse race track and polo fields. Many of the street names in that neighborhood today harken back to Brokaw and his family: we have Polo Road, Brokaw Lane, Gould Street, Henry Street, Florence Street, Preston Road and William Street, to name a few.

William had no interest in working, nor did he need to do so. He was interested in speed. Besides racing horses, both on his property and at the fashionable tracks around the country and in Europe, Brokaw was involved in the practice of racing yachts, turning to racing automobiles when they were developed. His yachts were the finest that could be had, and one account of the day stated that it was such a foregone conclusion that they would win that people stopped watching the races.

By 1903, the automobile had been developed into a race car, and Brokaw owned several; he was particularly fond of Renaults. He drove in some races himself, including the Vanderbilt Cup Races organized by William K. Vanderbilt Jr., for others he used the services of a driver. He also invested in several race car companies, among them the Front Drive Motor Car Company and Hibbard & Darrin, the latter producing Rolls Royce designs as well as coaches for other companies.

And his interest did not stop with racing on the water and the land. In 1904 he ordered a Dumont airship for his personal use, though it is not clear if he ever received it.

Because this is a family newspaper, I cannot get into his tumultuous marriages, affairs, and lawsuits, but I can say that one of his divorces made the headlines almost daily for over a year, literally in hundreds of publications around the country. Brokaw was sued by several different women for millions of dollars over a period of years. The women invariably won their lawsuits, though sometimes for not quite as much as they had demanded.

Larger than life, Brokaw was certainly the Playboy of Great Neck. In 1896 he began developing a Sportsman’s Retreat in North Carolina, and when it was completed Brokaw lived there and in Europe, selling Nirvana in 1910. He was here briefly, but flamboyantly.