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Barney and the Bulb

by Ruth Skovron

This whole story begins with a light bulb. The bulb belongs to Barney Megnin of Allendale and it is 70 years old—nine years younger than Barney himself.

Incredibly, for more than 65 years the bulb worked. At first it shed light in the kitchen of Barney's birthplace, a single-family dwelling in the Tremont section of the Bronx. In 1907 when Barney was seven, the kitchen and the living room of his home, as if by a miracle, received electrical current.

"My family had some friends at the electric company and they pulled some of their own strings to have power lines strung. It was the very first electricity above 177th and Park Avenue. We were quite proud to be the first ones on the street with electrical lights. In those days you didn't buy bulbs at the hardware store; you got them directly from Edison and they were valuable. Now I want to find out if this old bulb is a collector's item. I don't have anybody to pass it on to and perhaps it belongs in a museum," he said in earnest.

In 1915 the bulb was still working when the family packed it up along with the rest of their belongings and moved to the country—to Allendale. The bulb was installed in a marvelous 14-room home on West Crescent Avenue. The rambling house had a library, a billiard room and plenty of acreage for growing vegetables and raising chickens. The pond in front of the home was a child's delight for fishing and skating.

Just like himself, the house has had an interesting history. Barney started to tell me about the house, "but if I get to telling you about the old place, well, we just might not have time for the bulb. Besides, some of the things I could tell you that went on at that house after my family sold it are about people that are still around," he commented.

Barney's wife, Alice, who was in the kitchen slicing up a banana in some still-soft green jello, quipped, "Barney, don't go dredging up dirt from the past; first thing you know you'll be getting into trouble."

Originally the 14-room home of the Megnins, the mansion is now a restaurant.

"Isn't that somethin', I'm going to be 80 in the spring and she's still worrying about me getting into trouble," he chuckled.

For the moment we stopped talking about the house, which it turns out after a major fire, numerous owners and several renovations, is now the Ramapo Gate Inn.

After receiving his education in the local schools, Barney at 17 became a farmer.

"What's now the police station, that used to be the Borough Hall and before that was the elementary school when I was a kid. The high school was in Ramsey, but the rich kids in town went to the high school in Ridgewood. I liked being a farmer, but I was green, a city farmer. Somehow the auctioneers always outsmarted me when I went to sell my vegetables and livestock," he commented.

Still really a boy he gave up the farming and went to work for his brother, George, as a mechanic at the Central Garage on Myrtle Avenue. For many years Barney had a second job running a taxi service. Actually it was while driving the taxi that he was dubbed Barney, after the racing car driver Barney Oldfield. His real name is Frank.

"I was known in this area for my heavy foot on the gas pedal," Barney recalled.

Barney Megnin has a marvelous store of dates and events that he expends little effort recalling; they just seem to be there in the forefront of his memory.

"About the Barney Oldfield stuff," he said, "let me tell you a story. One of my steady customers missed his train at Allendale. He jumped back into my taxi and I just put my foot all the way down on the gas and held it there until we got to the Waldwick station—ahead of the train."

Once he was in a 2-car motor vehicle mishap near the Allendale-Saddle River border. In the accident, which he claims was his fault, he pushed the other car from one lane to the other.

"The cops liked me so much," he said, "that when they got to the scene they yelled at the other fella for driving on the wrong side of the road."

While Barney was working at the Central Garage and driving his taxi, the family home was sold and the 1907 bulb was located in the new house his parents built on the border between Allendale and Ramsey. When Barney's mother died the bulb went to his twin brother, Charles, who lived in Wyckoff. For a while Charles moved down to Florida; of course he took the bulb with him. When he moved back to New Jersey he installed the bulb in his bedroom and used it as a night light. After Charles died Barney inherited the bulb, which at age 65 finally burned out.

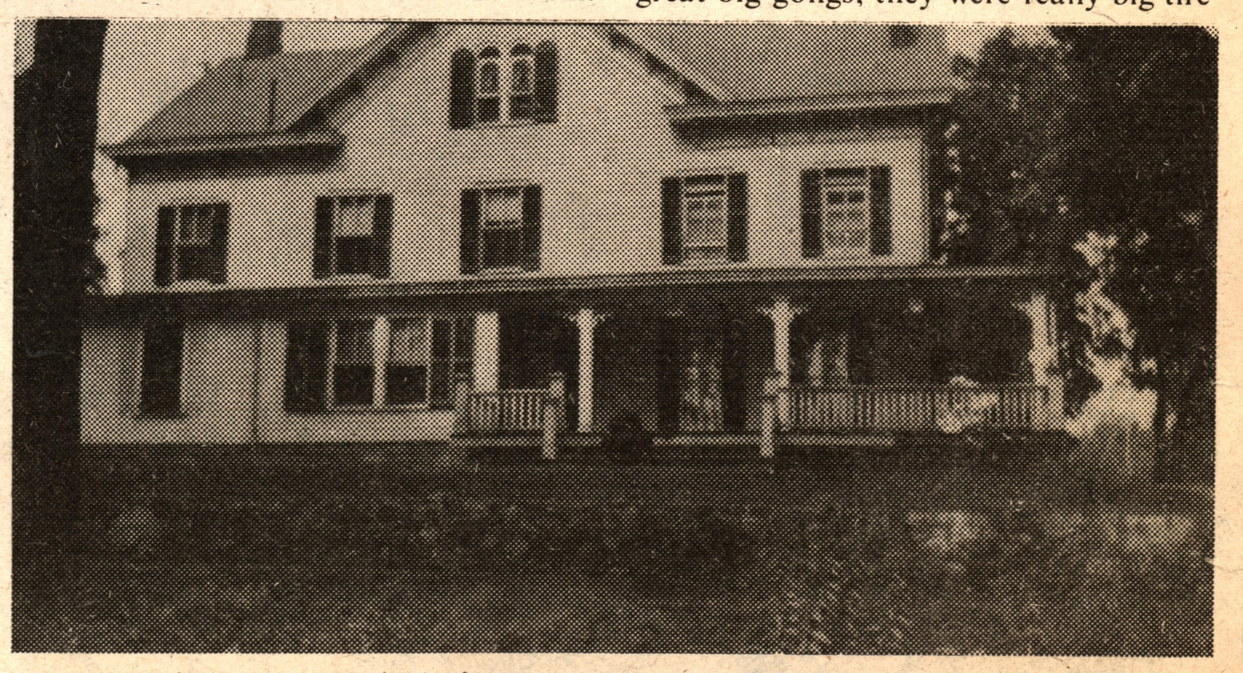
"I don't know why it never broke or why it worked for so many years," he said.

We strayed from the subject of the light bulb again to Allendale as a small town. Barney showed me an aerial photo of the Borough in 1939. Virtually unrecognizable.

Philosophically Barney said, "Just like the other old timers will tell you, Allendale was really a small town until WWII. During prohibition my old house was called the Steer Inn and all sorts of rich people and celebrities would step off the train and head for the inn. Sometimes these gorgeous dolls would inquire at the garage and naturally we would send them walking in the opposite direction from the inn!"

That's Barney. He remembers well an intimate conversation he had with his brother George when he spoke of changing, becoming more serious. George very wisely told him to stay just the way he was.

Besides his brother George, his wife Alice has always appreciated his humor. Alice and Barney were married in 1936; it was the second time for both of them.



While we were talking in their cozy living room filled with Christmas decorations, their dog, Kelly, started whining and pulling at Barney's leg.

"He must have lost his rubber ball again. This dog is 11 years old, but he thinks he's a kid," Barney said. He started to get up to retrieve the ball from beneath a bed in one of the other rooms, but Alice motioned for him to stay seated and continue speaking while she went for the dog's toy.

He looked at me directly and said in a serious tone, "She's a wonderful girl — really something special."

We got back to the light bulb again which is now carefully wrapped in tissue and residing in a plastic box. Barney unwrapped the bulb and held it up to the light to show me the delicate filament still intact in the transparent bulb. He tried to give it to me so that I might examine it more closely.

"No, I don't want to hold it; I have my own suspicions," I said.

"Well, if the bulb is too fragile for you, how about this?" he said as he produced a stubby billy club with a long leather thong.

Clearly Barney had been prepared for my visit.

"This billy club was my uncle's. When he was a kid in the Bronx some cop went after him with the club and when he swung, the club went flying. My uncle just grabbed the club and ran," he said.

For stories and memorabilia of Allendale's past, Barney Megnin has memories and closets full.

"I remember the first phone service in Allendale. The operator was a Mrs. Donohue, I think she lived on Cottage Place, she had the switchboard right there in her house and the minute you came on the line she recognized your voice; it was good service."

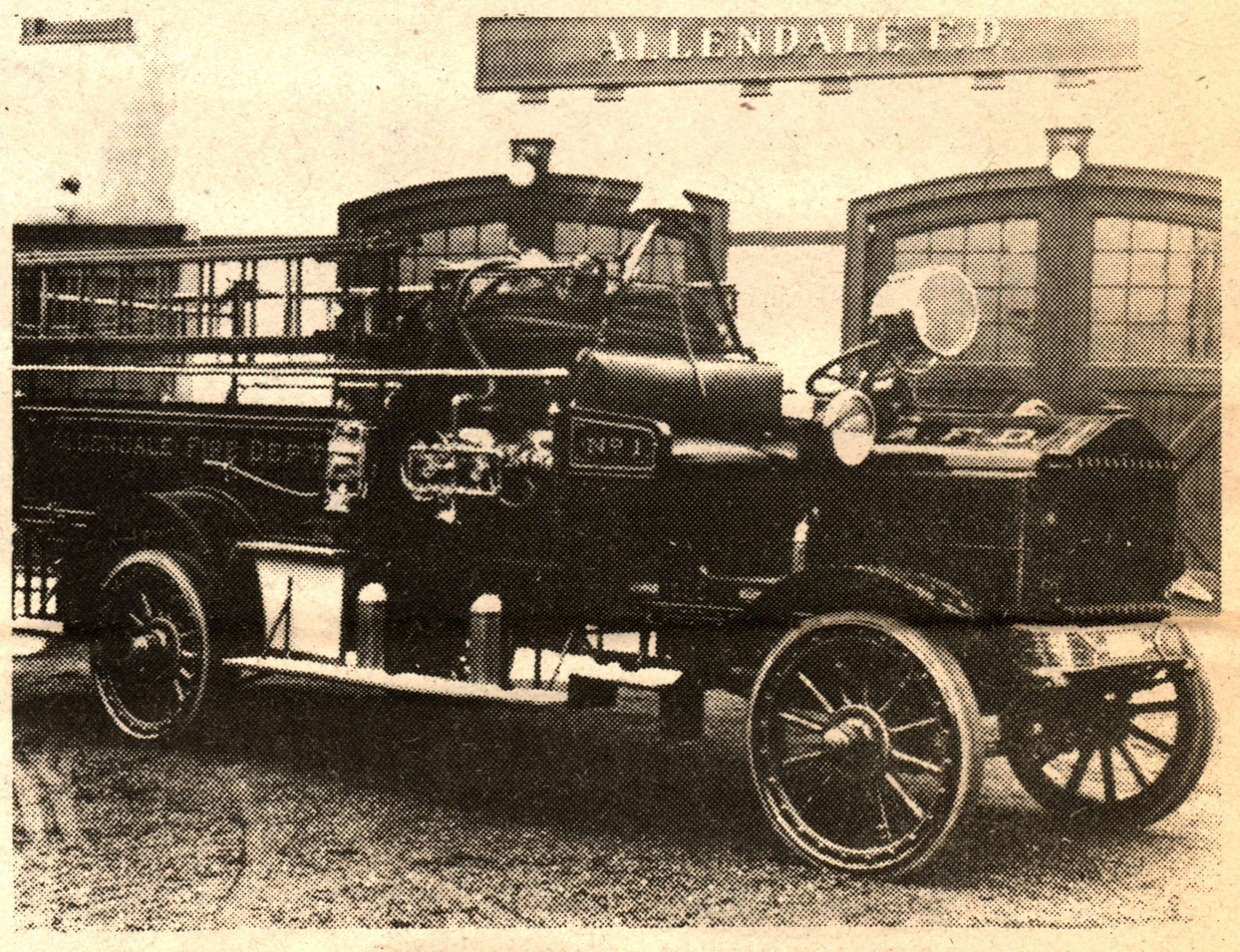
But by far Barney's most vivid recollections are about the Allendale Volunteer Fire Department of which he was a member from 1922 to 1956.

"My brother George was chief for 25 years. I never was an officer. We always had too many chiefs and not enough Indians, if you know what I mean," he said.

Barney's recall of equipment the fire department acquired, particularly in the transition period from horse-drawn to mechanized, is uncanny.

"We still had horse driven hook and ladder in 1922. The department had these great big gongs, they were really big tire irons; you could hear them ring all over town. The Winter Brothers and John Ackerman, people like that would get paid $2 every time a team of their horses was used to go to the scene of a fire. It got so that sometimes those horses would hear those deep rings from the gong and the next thing you know they'd be galloping down by themselves to the firehouse," he chuckled.

"Now if memory serves me right," Barney spoke carefully, "the first mechanized fire truck we had was a 1915 chain driven Reo; in 1928 we had a Model T Ford hook and ladder; in 1928 we got ourselves an American LaFrance. She was beautiful. Now don't get me going on the fire department. That pad of yours isn't big enough and your pen would run dry before I finished..."



"The Reo was the first mechanized fire truck the Allendale Fire Department purchased. We got a lot of mileage from those tires. We would bury the tires in the ground and the moisture would liven up the solid rubber," Barney said.