

Richard T. Gilmartin

The year my parents moved us out to the very tip of Long Island at Montauk in 1956, the Supervisor of the Town of East Hampton was Richard T. Gilmartin. It was apparently quite special for him to have won the election, and then the re-election, my father told us. Gilmartin was from Montauk, the most easterly of the six hamlets that constitute East Hampton Town, and no one from Montauk had ever been accorded this honor before. The other five communities were all three-hundred-year-old English hamlets with big white churches, windmills, great leafy elm trees, and a staunch bedrock Christian population whose ancestors went back all the way to colonial times. The land surrounding the towns was largely potato farms. There was a small colony of wealthy New Yorkers who came out to big oceanfront mansions in the summertime. But that was it. As for Montauk, far out at the end of a fifteen-mile-long peninsula, it was a raucous windswept tourist town consisting mostly of about forty motels with names like White Sands, the Atlantic Terrace, and the



RICHARD T. GILMARTIN AT HOME

(Courtesy of Timmy Gilmartin)

Surf and Sand, all lining the beaches in the center of town and all owned by “newcomers.”

It had been a shock to the system when they were built, all at once, just a few years before, right after World War II. Certainly, there would never be anyone from Montauk running East Hampton. What did Montaukers know? And yet, there he was, this man Gilmartin, now in his second term.

I was sixteen years old, just turning seventeen the summer we moved to Montauk from New Jersey. The Hamptons meant nothing to me. They were just the sleepy little towns you had to drive through to get to all the activity at Montauk. You’d pass signs at the entrances to those towns that read **FOUNDED** 1644, or 1639, or 1648. One town, Southampton, had a sign

at the entrance that read OBSERVE OUR VILLAGE DRESS CODES. I had no idea what that was all about.

In any case, we were certainly newcomers. In Millburn, New Jersey, where we had come from, all the houses were in neat little rows. All the dads went to work at eight in the morning. There were maple and elm trees everywhere and the summers were broiling hot.

Now our home was Montauk, where my dad had come to buy the only drugstore in town. There were rolling hills and dunes, beaches and ranches, a cooling wind almost every day, and a quaint little fishing village on a harbor about four miles away from downtown. Downtown featured as its centerpiece an abandoned seven-story skyscraper—everybody called it the White Elephant—facing an open, grassy plaza with a circle road around it that was the center of town. Our store was around the corner. The post office was on one side. The liquor store was on the other side. Across the street was a fishermen's tavern called the Shagwong, a bait-and-tackle store and a meat market. And that was about it, other than the dozens of motels and restaurants down by the beach a short walk away. Gilmartin must be quite a guy, I thought, to be supervisor of a town that wanted the village he lived in to just go away.

One day—just before the beginning of summer that first year, my dad called me back to the pharmacy to tell me I needed to go to the insurance office in the abandoned seven-story office building around the corner to sign some insurance papers.

“I thought nobody worked in the White Elephant,” I said.

“Mr. Gilmartin does. And he’s our new insurance broker.”

“But if the building is abandoned, how do I find him?”

“You’ll figure it out,” dad said. He grinned. Apparently this was going to be some kind of test.

It was just a hundred-yard walk to the front door of the White Elephant. And of course it was locked. I banged on it. Peeling paint flew off.

“Over here,” a man’s voice said.

Just adjacent to and attached to the White Elephant was a small one-story building built out of the same white brick as the White Elephant. And out front, on a wooden post, was a small shingle that read RICHARD T. GILMARTIN, INSURANCE.

“Okay,” I shouted back.

I walked over. There was an odd thing about the front entrance to this little building: it had a plywood ramp with a makeshift railing made out of plumbing pipes. The ramp went up only one step.

“Just push it open.”

The voice had come from inside. I went in.

It was a single, large, dusty room, filled with bookcases, filing cabinets, paperwork, pictures on the walls, and this big wooden desk with a man in a wheelchair behind it. It brought me up short.

“Don’t mind that I don’t get up,” the man said. “Just have yourself a seat.”

Mr. Gilmartin was about sixty, hunched over, and had some kind of disease that gave him patches of white powder on his face and hands. He had a round face and a full head

of salt-and-pepper hair in a crew cut. It all made him look like some strange overgrown teenager.

“People looking for me rattle the White Elephant all the time,” he said. “I just shout through the window.”

“My dad sent me over. I’m supposed to sign some paperwork.”

He smiled. “Which dad? We’ve got a lot of dads.”

“Al Rattiner.”

“Ah yes.”

He leaned forward, raised up a tall stack of papers on the left side of his desk with one hand, and then, when he found what he wanted, with the other slid out a single piece of paper. He looked down at it.

“Says here you’re only sixteen years old. This is about a car. People who are sixteen don’t drive cars in New York State.”

“In New Jersey we get a learner’s permit at sixteen and a driver’s license at seventeen.”

“Do you have a car?”

“I do. My dad gave me his old convertible.”

“The local kids your age must love you. It’s eighteen in New York. Everybody’s gotta be asking you to give them a lift.”

I fished out my learner’s permit and handed it to him.

“Well, you have to sign this on the bottom. And I’ll witness it. Either way you’re underage so somebody’s got to vouch for you. How do you like it out here?”

He slid the papers over to me with a pen and I signed.

“I like it a lot.”

“Why?”

“My dad put me in charge of the soda fountain. It’s a kid’s dream. And also, as you said, I drive everybody.”

“That’ll do it.”

I paused. “What’s the story about the White Elephant? I’ve never seen an abandoned skyscraper before. Someone told me a businessman built it a long time ago and then the business failed.”

“A millionaire named Carl Fisher built it. It was 1926. Then came the crash of 1929. Fisher went away and died of drink. He was going to build a city here. This was to be the first of many skyscrapers.”

“Wow.”

“You ought to go up to the top of it sometime.”

“I should?”

“It’s locked up. But if you ever want to,” he leaned forward mischievously, “I’ve got the key.”

“I’d love to do that.”

“Just let me know.”

I left Mr. Gilmartin’s office then, and walked back to the store. It sold everything. Jammed in everywhere were toys, toasters, kites, beach blankets, television sets, radios, swimwear, shorts and shirts, hats, cosmetics, magazines and newspapers. In the back, up two steps, was the prescription room. And along one whole wall, there was the soda fountain, with a marble counter and stools that spun around. At that moment, half the stools were taken by people slurping malteds and shakes and sodas and eating sundaes. Eileen Hewitt, behind the counter, was busy waiting on everybody.

“I signed the papers,” I said when I got up to the prescription room. “And I met Mr. Gilmartin.”

“We put everything on one policy,” dad said. “And Mr. Gilmartin is quite something, isn’t he?”

“How did he get sick?”

“He had polio when he was a boy. He’s been paralyzed since.”

“He sure doesn’t seem to let it bother him,” I said.

My job at the store was not only behind the ice cream counter, but also everywhere else in it, except, of course, the pharmacy. Some day, my mom said, this store will be yours. That is, if you are interested.

I stocked the shelves and with a plastic tag gun put the prices on the merchandise. I swept the floor. I waited on customers and worked the cash register, I unpacked deliveries in the stockroom and organized the shelves. I worked seven days a week.

“The business is only in the summertime,” mom had said, explaining that. “It’s now or never.”

I loved my mom and dad, but I didn’t enjoy working in the store. I daydreamed. I hope they don’t make me become a pharmacist, I thought.

Sometimes I’d get time off. I loved the outdoors in that town—the sunshine and the wind from off the sea. I’d change into a bathing suit and go to the beach.

The kids my age were another matter. Unlike Millburn, where all my friends hoped to become lawyers or doctors or dentists, here the kids were different. One was a mate on a fishing boat. Another worked for his dad who owned a motel.

Another was a rich man's son out for the summer who did nothing. I met all these kids at night at one of four taverns in town where the guys went to meet girls.

One kid I befriended, two years older than me, was a private at the radar air force base out near Montauk Lighthouse. One day he asked me to lend him fifty bucks. Payday was in two days and he'd pay it right back. Two days later, he was gone, transferred to another base somewhere and I never saw him again. This sort of stuff did not happen to me in Millburn.

One morning, thinking about Gilmartin, I found some excuse to go back to see him. I felt drawn to him.

"I wanted you to see something," Mr. Gilmartin said when I came in. I hadn't even had a chance to say hello. "I know you've come here to go up to the top of the White Elephant, but I have someplace else I'd like you to see first."

"What's that?"

"Well, did you know that the United States Army, practically the whole thing, spent the month of August in tents here in Montauk? It was about sixty years ago. None of the town was as you see it now. As far as the eye could see, all there were were these white tents set up with soldiers in them. There were nearly ten thousand tents."

"Why were they here?"

"They'd fought and won the Spanish-American War in Cuba two months before. Then, for almost a month while surrender terms were worked out they had to wait in the hills overlooking Santiago. And they all got sick with tropical diseases. Dysentery. Small pox. Yellow fever. Malaria. In

America, President McKinley was afraid to bring them home. Everybody wanted them back in the States for homecoming parades and celebrations. He was afraid there'd be an epidemic. So he had them brought in troop ships to this isolated place—Montauk—to either recover or die. Said it was 'maneuvers.'

He opened a drawer to his desk and pulled out a large piece of paper that had a site-plan drawing on it.

"Have a look," he said. "Last week a friend in a Washington museum traced this map of Montauk and mailed it to me. See all these squares? Each one is a tent. Here is Teddy Roosevelt's tent. The Roughriders were nearby. And over here, right behind where this building is now, right on Fort Pond itself, is a bigger square, which is a laundry. It's where all the soldiers had their clothes washed. I want to ask a favor of you."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to walk over to where the laundry was, and I want you to look around in the weeds. I never knew there was a laundry there. So I've been wondering if there are any brass buckles or military buttons there. Could you have a look?"

He was a man in a wheelchair. "Of course I'll do that," I said.

The hike through the weeds to the shore of Fort Pond was a hundred yards from where we were sitting.

"I'll be right back."

"Take your time. Look good," Gilmartin said.

I spent twenty minutes combing through all the weeds and bushes. I got burrs stuck to my pants. I sank deep into

mud at one point. But I found no brass buttons or buckles or anything else in there. I came back to the office.

“There’s a big concrete pad of some sort next to where the laundry was,” I said. “I think I found a wooden post that might have been one corner of it at one time. But no buttons.”

“I know about the concrete pad. Try not to track in the mud,” he said.

“What is it?”

“It was a launching ramp in the First World War for dirigibles. That was twenty years after Roosevelt was here. Some people tried to fly one to Paris. They failed.”

“They did?”

“Crashed in Newfoundland.”

“There is all this history here in Montauk.”

“Yes there is.”

“Did you ever meet Teddy Roosevelt?”

He laughed. “How old do you think I am? The wash room is right behind me. Get the mud off your shoes. I presume you are working the fountain this morning. You can’t go back like that.”

“I was in the stockroom.”

“Wash them anyway. Then I’ll give you the key to the White Elephant. It’s best seen from up top at night.”

Thus began a friendship between me and this wonderful older man that lasted for years. He’d tell me this astonishing story of the town. I had no idea there were places like this so full of history. And I was living in one!



SUPERVISOR GILMARTIN DEMONSTRATING NEED FOR DISABILITY
RAMP AT THE MONTAUK LIGHTHOUSE
(Courtesy of Timmy Gilmartin)

He had me drive to the huge cliffs on the south face of the Montauk Lighthouse, where there were rocks and boulders a hundred feet down on the stone beach. Gilmartin was interested in knowing whether or not I could get into the underground bunkers at the top of the cliff that served as ammunition dumps for the anti-aircraft guns that were mounted there during World War II.

“You’ll easily find the concrete anti-aircraft pads they built there to fend off the Nazis,” he said. “The guns are gone of course, but you’ll see where they were bolted down on the pads.”

I went out there in a strong wind later that day, and reported back that the underground ammunition dump, which

I had found by lifting the very heavy concrete hatch he told me about, had a steel ladder that went down only three feet before disappearing into filthy, oily black water.

“They’re flooded,” he said. “That’s new. You want to get flippers and a mask and go diving?”

“No diving. The water’s disgusting.”

“I’ll get somebody else. There’s a guy I know on the police force. I want to get some anti-aircraft shells from down there.”

“Would you like a dish of ice cream?”

“Sure.”

“What flavor?”

“What have you got?”

He sent me to the Walking Dunes, a spot even windier than out at the Point, where three giant sand dunes were slowly being blown southward toward the Atlantic Ocean. He asked me about a particular silver tree top that he had been told was being slowly covered up, and I was able to tell him it was gone.

He showed me a drawing, published on the front page of the old *Brooklyn Eagle* newspaper, which included a small beach house in Napeague, almost to Amagansett, with an odd triple dormer on the roof. The artist had drawn a black X on the beach in front of it where four Nazi saboteurs came ashore one night from a submarine during World War II and where they buried explosives right in front of this house.

“I believe the house is still there, even after the hurricane last year. With the triple dormer, it should be easy to find.”

It was still there. But there were no signs of Nazis or buried explosives. I did dig.

Another time, I brought him some news.

“There are two enormous buffalos in the pasture right out front of the entrance to the Deep Hollow Ranch,” I told him. “They weren’t there last week.”

“That’s got to be Hy Sobiloff. I’ll talk to him. Hy writes books of romantic poetry. He’s also very rich, with a house on the ocean. I bet he thought the ranch ought to have some buffalo to keep the cows company.”

This caused Gilmartin to launch into the story of how the cattle from the two Montauk ranches were, for many years, driven at the end of each summer ten miles right through town to a corral at the railroad station to wait for the cattle cars to come.

“They’d been doing this since the railroad came through in 1895,” he said. “But the very last one was last year. You missed it. They came right by here.”

“Why did they stop having them?”

“Railroad stopped hauling freight. Now, big livestock trailers come to the ranch and take them right out of the pasture and down the highway, straight through town. The cattle drives were sure fun, though. You shoulda moved out here a year earlier.”

“Do you have pictures?”

“Sure do.”

He pulled one out of a drawer. It was an amazing thing, with the cars, the stores, the motels, and several hundred head of cattle charging down Main Street.

“See these tourists on the sidewalk watching the cows? Look at the expressions on their faces.”

“Scared,” I said.

“Yup.”

“You take these pictures?” I asked. The angle was from right in front of the White Elephant.

“Yup,” he said proudly.

Once, I ran into him on the front steps of the East Hampton Library, sixteen miles away, the nearest library to Montauk, and I helped his wife, Winnie, wrestle his wheelchair up the brick steps.

“He comes here every Tuesday after the Town Board meeting,” she told me. “I make Tuesday my shopping day.”

“Easy,” he shouted as we hit a bump.

I offered to take him to see the gravesite of Stephen Talkhouse. Talkhouse was one of the last Montauk Indians. He was known for walking long distances. He could walk to East Hampton and back in a day, thirty-two miles round trip, and often did. People paid him to deliver messages along the way. He died in 1879 after having fought for the North in the Civil War.

“I can’t get up there,” Gilmartin said.

“You can now. They’ve paved the dirt track. The grave’s got a white wooden fence around it with little American flags on the corners now. You want to go?”

“I’ll have Winnie take me,” he said.

I did go up to the top of the White Elephant. Each floor on the way up was filled with the desks, chairs, phones, wall calendars, and conference tables that had been there on

September 22, 1938, when everybody working in that huge building, as one, cleared out and just left it. Calendars on the walls displayed that month. Several had the day circled. Way up at the top was Carl Fisher's now wrecked penthouse apartment.

"It's a national treasure," Gilmartin said. "A giant historical filing cabinet."

"Did you know Carl Fisher?" I asked. "You must have been in your twenties."

"Of course I did. I worked for him. We all did."

Three years later, my friendship with Mr. Gilmartin ended. It involved just the most terrible tragedy imaginable.

The Gilmartins lived in a small house in the Shepherd's Neck section of Montauk where they had raised two children. One was Tommy Gilmartin, who at the time of the disaster was twenty-five. The other was Timmy Gilmartin, who was twenty.

When it happened, the whole town knew about it within hours.

On July 14, 1958, Tommy Gilmartin, alone in a brand new Austin-Healey sports car that his dad had bought for him, drove off the road halfway down the Montauk Parkway, the five-mile-long limited-access highway that Carl Fisher and Robert Moses, the Long Island State Park Commissioner, built as a joint venture in the 1920s.

Tommy skidded off the road and into the decorative wooden split-rail fence that lined the length of the parkway on both sides, demolishing the part he hit. One of the wooden railings, sixteen feet in length, came loose, got knocked into

the air, and came over the hood to smash through the windshield and spear him. He died instantly.

The insurance office remained closed for a month after that. Also, it was announced that Mr. Gilmartin would not be running for re-election as he earlier had announced he would.

The town mourned. And, as a matter of fact, within a month, the wooden railings were all torn down and replaced by continuous steel corrugated railings so that could never, ever happen again.

I was nineteen when Tommy Gilmartin died. I was so upset I could not bring myself to go to the funeral. And I did not see Mr. Gilmartin until later when he briefly opened his office to wind up his business.

"I am just so sorry," I said, after summoning the courage to come over.

Tears welled in his eyes. "You have no idea."

With his office closed, I had no easy way of contacting Mr. Gilmartin. Indeed, according to my dad and other people in town, he and Winnie were now living in seclusion. I never saw him again.

I secretly believed, however, that Mr. Gilmartin had to know, and had to be very proud of my starting the town's first newspaper two years later. Many of the amazing stories that Mr. Gilmartin told me became the basis for the paper. I had never heard such remarkable stories about one single place. And I just thought that along with everything else in the paper, everybody would like reading them.

The birth of the newspaper had come from the fascinating and curious mind of Richard T. Gilmartin.