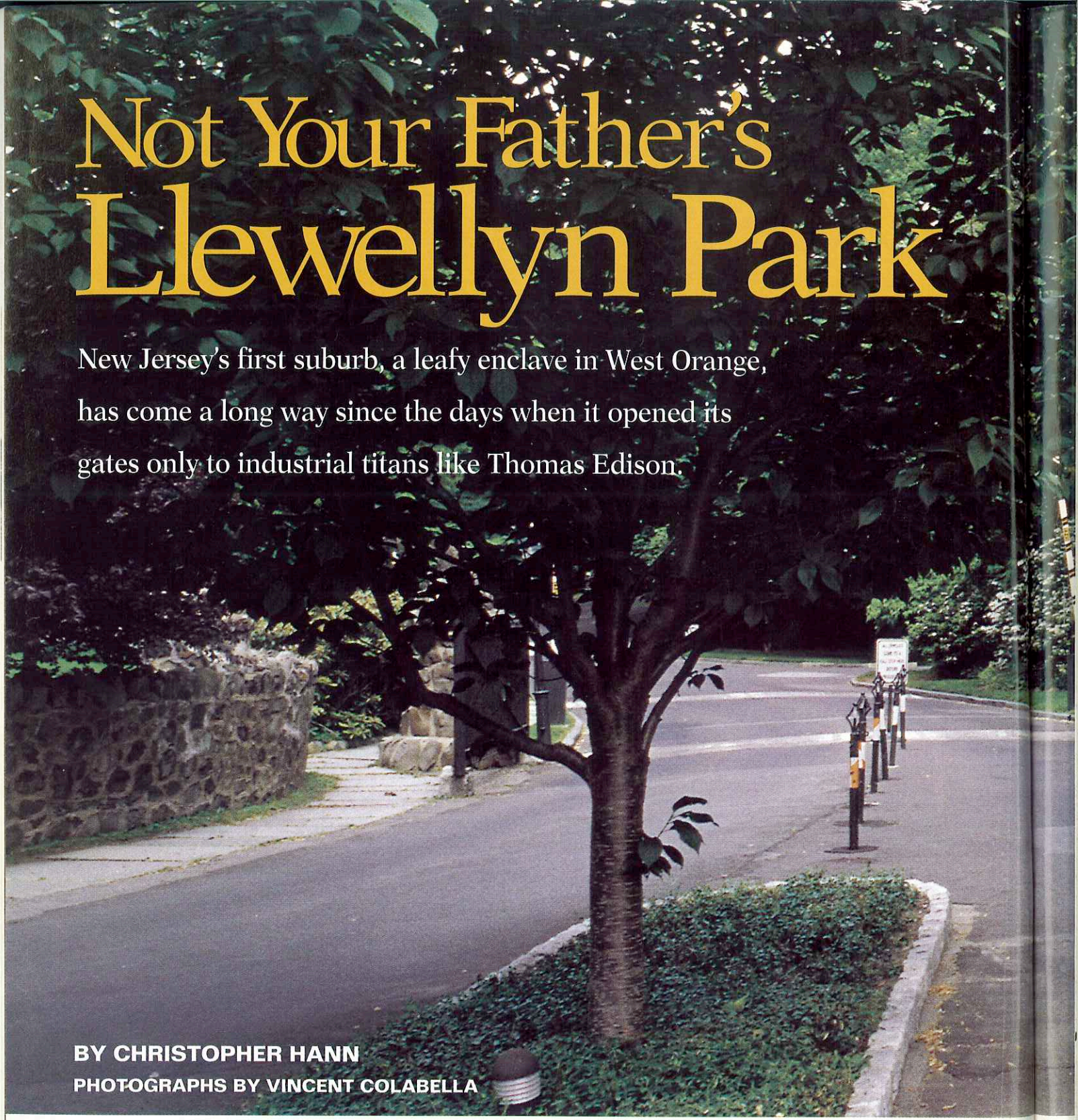
Not Your Father's Llewellyn Park

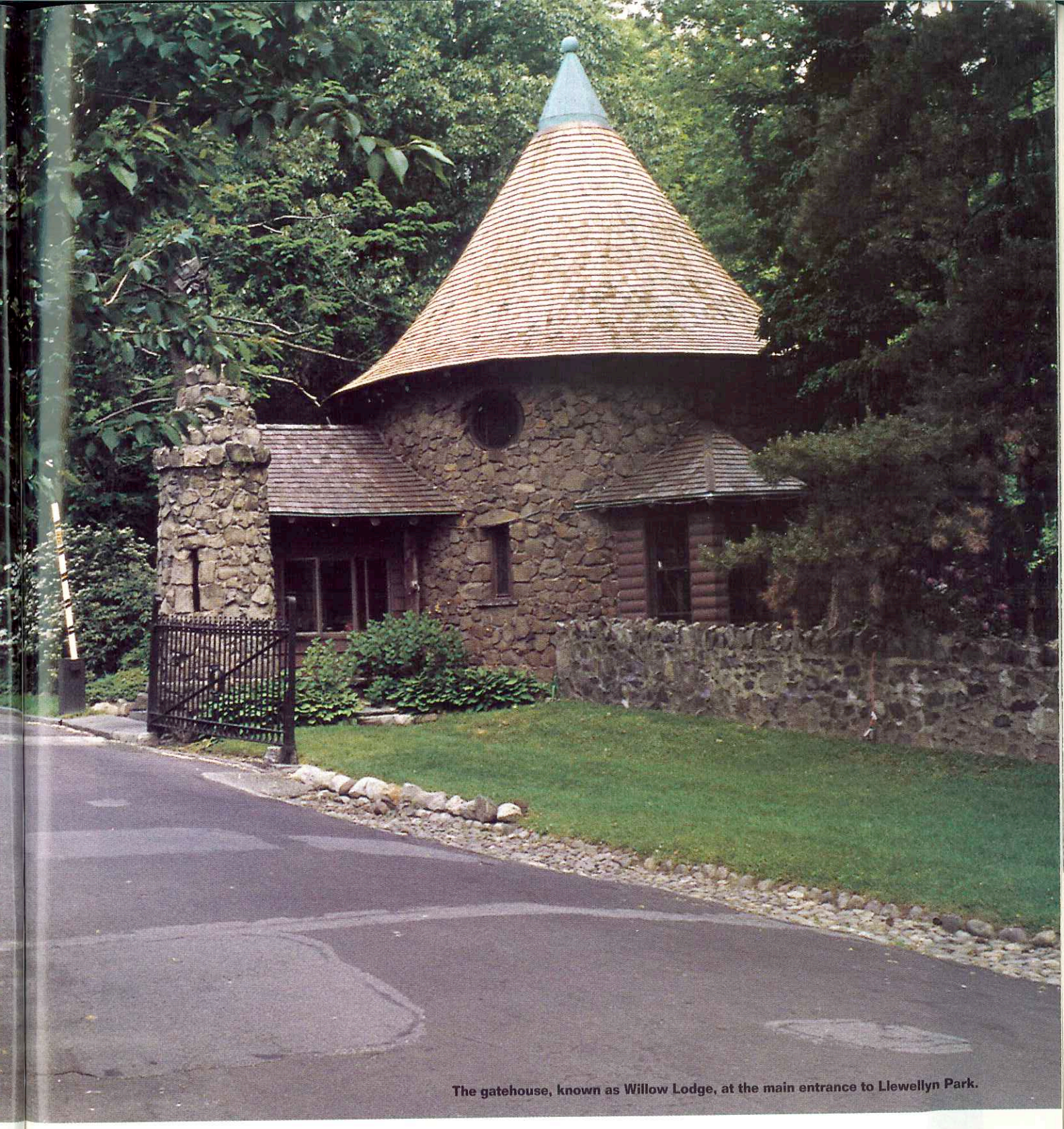
New Jersey's first suburb, a leafy enclave in West Orange, has come a long way since the days when it opened its gates only to industrial titans like Thomas Edison.



BY CHRISTOPHER HANN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY VINCENT COLABELLA

SOMETIME IN 1997, DR. VICTOR GROISSER LOOKED AROUND THE SYLVAN neighborhoods of Llewellyn Park, the abundantly affluent community in West Orange where he had lived since 1972, and noticed an unusually large number of homes for sale. This struck Groisser as odd. Llewellyn Park, after all, had represented for nearly a century and a half a fantasy of suburban living. The park, as it is known, was established as one of America's first planned communities, a richly landscaped oasis within the dense developments of western Essex County, just a twenty-minute drive to Manhattan, whose physical beauty and relative isolation gave it an unmistakable mystique. *Suburban Life* magazine once described the 425-acre park as "a veritable fairyland of beeches, oaks, stately tulips trees, wildflowers, and beautiful shrubs." Earlier this century, Thomas Edison made his home there—was buried there, in fact—and other park residents comprised a roster of upper-crust families whose names were synonymous with American business; Merck and Colgate, Stetson and Steinway, Schickhaus and Polaner, Johnson and Chubb.

But with many of the patriarchs of those old-money families having died as the end of the twentieth century drew nearer,



The gatehouse, known as Willow Lodge, at the main entrance to Llewellyn Park.

their estates were falling into disrepair, causing property values to decline. Real estate agents had grown reluctant to bring clients to Llewellyn Park, whose grand estates and blue-blooded origins had long made it one of New Jersey's most desirable addresses. When they did plan to show a property, they sometimes had trouble getting past the security guards at the park's gated entrance. Once inside, their clients saw few people out and about, and fewer children, which made the park less than inviting. Llewellyn Park was losing its luster. "We learned that Realtors would rather take people to Short Hills, to Livingston, to Bedminster," Groisser says.

In this context, Groisser, the faculty chief of gastroenterology at Mountainside Hospital in Montclair, took stock of the circumstances conspiring to threaten the community he held so dear. "When you move in there," he says, "you feel like you're living in something special." He decided to strike back in the most effective way he knew, with a method that the captains of industry who had preceded him as homeowners in Llewellyn Park had employed successfully in their own business ventures: He embarked on a public relations campaign. The idea was to

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spread the word to local real estate agents and thus to prospective home buyers, particularly those who worked in Manhattan, about the all but unparalleled appeal of so verdant a place so close to the city.

Groisser and his neighbors formed a committee, of which he was named chairman, and set about to create a four-color brochure that would extol the virtues of Llewellyn Park. Then they went a step further. They invited 100 local real estate agents to come and learn about the park's rich history—the entire park had been designated a national historic district in 1986—and see for themselves its beautiful homes and landscaped gardens. And so, on a Tuesday afternoon in October 1998, beneath a large white tent set up on the lawn of Glenmont, the former Edison estate that itself is a national historic site, the agents noshed on salads and cold cuts as they received freshly printed brochures, watched a promotional slide show, and listened to speeches by the mayor of West Orange and the superintendent of schools. Then they boarded two rented buses for a guided tour of the normally cloistered streets of Llewellyn Park.

This ambitious sales pitch represented nothing less than a watershed in the park's history. Here was a place, after all, that since the 1850s had thrived on its privacy. So exclusive was Llewellyn Park that as recently as 35 years ago neither a Jew nor a black was counted among its homeowners, or proprietors, as they are known—unusual in the mid-sixties for relatively diverse Essex County. Longtime inhabitants of neighboring towns knew little about the park, while others didn't even know it existed. And while the park's four entrances were once open to the public, inviting unlimited outside traffic, in recent years all but the front gate had been closed, further isolating the residents within. Now those residents had opened their closed community, inviting the intrusion of 100 strangers in an effort to let the world in on their preciously guarded secret. Llewellyn Park, it seemed, was changing.

Indeed, while today's park retains many of its nineteenth-century traditions, like the black-tie proprietors' meeting every January and the monthly sessions of the committee of managers, it bears little resemblance to the park of Edison's day. Gone are the resplendent afternoons when the rigidly formal Mina Edison, the great inventor's second wife, would preside over tea in their

Glenmont, the former home of Thomas Edison and today a national historic site.

1885 Queen Anne–style mansion, or when feisty Mrs. Hendon Chubb would call on a new neighbor in her chauffeur-driven limousine. For starters, more than a few Jewish and black families now call the park home. Last year Ernest Booker, a lawyer and municipal judge who moved to the park seven years ago from East Orange, became the first black person to serve on the committee of managers. "I guess the granters are turning over in their graves," he says with a laugh. In a place whose population of children had become nearly extinct, a recent census by Groisser's public relations committee counted 100 residents under the age of eighteen. And with the stock market in an extended boom, Wall Street has rediscovered Llewellyn Park, and new money is replacing old.

Dan and Corky Gaby with Corrine and Donny inside their 122-year-old house (TOP AND RIGHT) in Llewellyn Park.

Yet for all the change that has altered the demographics of Llewellyn Park, current residents retain an unabashed reverence for its history. One after another, they speak of their enduring wonder at the park's physical beauty and of their obligation to preserve a place that its founder, a wealthy New York City drug importer named Llewellyn Haskell, designed as, in his words, "a private pleasure ground...a place of resort and recreation."

"There's a sense of who lived there before, a sense of stewardship that infuses people with a sense of community," says Dan Gaby, chairman of the Keyes Martin advertising agency in East Hanover, and a proprietor since 1982, when he moved next door to the Edison estate into an eleven-bedroom home built in 1877. "We have an obligation to turn the park over...the way we found it."

LLEWELLYN HASKELL STARTED BUYING PROPERTY ALONG THE EASTERN slope of the first range of the Watchung Mountains in the 1850s and set out to create a suburban community whose finely crafted homes would stand amid the thick woods and rushing streams that so possessed him. A great lover of nature, Haskell had come to the area that later would be known as West Orange to escape what he considered the unhealthy climate of Kearny, where Haskell had previously made his home along the Passaic River, and where, in 1852, four of his five sons met their premature deaths, attributable, Haskell believed, to the poor quality of the town's air and water. From his new property high atop Eagle Rock—his first 40 acres, purchased in 1853—Haskell could take in magnificent views stretching as far as 100 miles: north to the Hudson River valley, and south to Sandy Hook and beyond to the Atlantic. Haskell began laying out winding streets and large lots to accommodate houses designed by noted architect and Haskell colleague Alexander Jackson Davis. In 1857, Haskell deeded 50 acres of his property to three trustees, marking the official creation of a mountainside community that he named Llewellyn Park.

He advertised the availability of "country homes for city people," envisioning well-to-do urbanites flocking to the park's fresh air and romantically landscaped properties. And he was right. Considered by urban planners to be among the first planned suburban communities in America—some say *the* first—Llewellyn Park soon became known as a community of immense wealth, home to some of the nation's most notable families. And though her own arrival in Llewellyn Park was still nearly a century away, it is by no means a stretch of the imagination to presume that Bunny Schickhaus was just the sort of person whom Llewellyn Haskell had in mind.

Said to be on the other side of 90, Louise Schickhaus, whom everyone knows as "Bunny," is one of the last remaining links to the Llewellyn Park of a bygone era. She still remembers the afternoon that Mina Edison invited her to tea, and she recalls visits to the park by Eleanor Roosevelt, who had relatives there. Schickhaus was a contemporary of Thomas Edison's son Ted and his wife, Ann, and also knew Edison's son Charles, a former

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New Jersey governor and himself a park resident.

This morning she greets her visitors in a simply furnished room of her large brick house. She sits in a wicker chair, striking a regal pose in a burgundy sweater, black slacks, dark blue shoes that look more like slippers, and an intertwined gold necklace and matching bracelet. The titles that fill the shelves of the bookcase behind her reveal the passions that have sustained a long life: *The Art of Enjoying Art, The Complete Encyclopedia of Antiques, Michelangelo, Van Gogh.* Her late husband was Edward Schickhaus, a Princeton-educated banker whose grandfather founded the Schickhaus pork products company in the late nineteenth century. She never was involved in the family business, sold long before she and Edward met.

Born Louise Dixon, she grew up in the Forest Hills section of Newark. When she was a red-haired, freckled-faced young girl, a nurse started calling her Bunny. The name stuck, and "Louise" was all but forsaken.

In 1941, she and Edward had been married for about five years when they began looking for a home in Llewellyn Park. They wanted a new house, but her father discouraged the idea, supposing they wouldn't have time to build one before the country entered the war in Europe, a move that he believed was inevitable. Heeding his advice, they moved into an existing house—she wasn't thrilled with it, but the magnificent garden out back won her over—on December 3, 1941. Four days later, Japanese fighter planes bombed United States warships stationed in Pearl Harbor.

Shortly after they moved to the park, Bunny Schickhaus received an invitation to tea at Glenmont. The very thought of it, she says, filled her with dread. But an obligation was an obligation, so she put on her white gloves and prepared to meet Mrs. Edison. "I was very young and she was a bit formidable. I'll never forget it—how scary, even today. I mean it was terrifying then," she says, hooting at the memory. "She was stiff as anything, and I was scared...to...death! She was not the kind of woman who greeted you heartily."

But she survived her encounter with the imposing Mrs. Edison, and in the ensuing years, Bunny and Edward Schickhaus became enmeshed in the social fabric that bound the residents of Llewellyn Park. Edward served as treasurer on the committee of managers and, during World War II, as an air-raid warden. They belonged to one of the exclusive local country clubs—though not much of a golfer, Edward enjoyed riding horses and playing tennis—and attended the opera in New York City. Her life has been marked by boundless civic activism. She joined the Visiting Nurses Association, served as treasurer of the Gardening Club of the Oranges, and helped found the Montclair branch of Planned Parenthood. In the seventies she organized an effort to plant cherry trees along Main Street in West Orange, convincing local merchants and her neighbors to donate $75 per tree.

Bunny Schickhaus has always believed that park residents should not isolate themselves, that they should consider the park part of the larger community of West Orange. "You can't separate Llewellyn Park from Main Street," she says. "That's always been my sales pitch." In the eighties she participated in an ill-fated effort to save the historic Condit house in nearby Orange, and upon learning that the oldest firehouse in West Orange has been put up for sale, she sits up straight in her wicker chair and vows to take action. "Well," she says, summoning her energy, "I've got to take more vitamins or something. I've got to fight it."

On a nearby wall hang pastel portraits of Bunny and Edward Schickhaus, drawn in the thirties in Nantucket, where they spent their summers. Hers shows a fair young woman of subtle beauty: a hint of pink in her cheeks, strawberry blonde hair parted in the middle and tied back, and wisps of curls at her temples; she wears a summer blouse, its top button undone, and smiles a Mona Lisa smile.

Now, across the room, as Bunny Schickhaus retraces nearly 60 years in Llewellyn Park, stories told with fondness, and good humor, and perhaps a touch of melancholy spill from her memory with ease. "One of the bad things about living to my age," she says, "is there's nobody left."

INSIDE THE TURRETED GATEHOUSE AT Llewellyn Park, members of the committee of managers have gathered for their monthly meeting, a tradition as old as the park itself. Built of native rock and designed in 1857 in the style of Llewellyn Haskell's own home by Alexander Jackson Davis, the gatehouse, known as Willow Lodge, is the first thing you see when you approach the park's main entrance. In his deed of trust officially creating Llewellyn

Park, Haskell established that a committee of managers would be responsible for maintaining the park's roads, bridges, streetlights, sewer system, and public spaces, and for hiring security guards and work crews. In effect, the committee operates like a mini-government, with residents assessed fees, in addition to the property taxes levied by the township of West Orange, to finance the park's upkeep.

Richard Cherchio, the committee co-chairman, brings the meeting to order. To his left, co-chairman Andy Lo Re, pen in hand, records the minutes. They are surrounded by a most noteworthy group. Among the sixteen or so committee members squeezed into the odd-shaped meeting room inside Willow Lodge are Leonard Polaner, the committee treasurer, of the Polaner food products company; Debbie Borenstein, former president of the Llewellyn Park Ladies' Association; Ira Rosenberg, a partner in Sills Cummis, one of New Jersey's largest law firms (the firm's chairman, Clive Cummis, also lives in Llewellyn Park); Judge Booker; Dr. Groisser; and Sylvia Steiner, who, with her husband, David, a real estate developer, last year opened her home for a political fund-raising dinner attended by President Clinton. The dinner took place only a month after news broke of a presidential sex scandal, and in return for their show of confidence, the President invited the Steiners to spend a night in the Lincoln Bedroom.

Seated on metal folding chairs around a rectangular wooden table in the spartan room, committee members have many issues to discuss: the pending installation of sound barriers along Route 280 at the southern edge of the park; the impact of recent snowstorms on roads and trees; the problem of speeding traffic on the park's narrow, winding streets; a review of the budget; and a proposed amendment to the deed of trust, the first such change to the document that has governed park operations since the 1850s. Like any of hundreds of property-owner associations throughout New Jersey, the committee analyzes and debates the day-to-day issues that define its community, plowing through its agenda one matter at a time.

Regarding the sound barriers, Cherchio updates the committee on discussions with the state Department of Transportation, which would require park residents to contribute $300,000 toward the cost of construction. Proprietors say that the sound-barrier debate typifies the sense of community that binds Llewellyn Park. Although the roar of traffic from the highway affects only a handful of the park's 170 homes, the committee of managers has made the barriers a top priority, and the burden of payment is expected to fall on all of the park's proprietors. Cherchio calls the barriers "an extremely vital issue to the survival of this community."

Cherchio and Lo Re, partners in a local construction company, assumed shared control of the committee of managers last year. Together they seem to embody the new generation of proprietor—Cherchio moved to the park in 1984, Lo Re in 1990—that wants to promote the park to the outside world but still carry on the institutions that are its legacy. Cherchio, 52, grew up in Bayonne and remembers his father telling him that Llewellyn Park was "where all the rich people live." Such a neighborhood seemed out of reach, he says, until he started to look for a new home with his wife. "She took me through the gates and I fell in love with the place," he says. "I couldn't believe that such a place existed so close to Newark."

Lo Re (pronounced "low-RAY") moved to Llewellyn Park nine years ago from elsewhere in West Orange, not long after his construction firm renovated the Edison estate. The job had lasted a month, and he was there every day. More than the stately homes, typically worth between $500,000 and $2 million, it was the park's heritage that appealed to him. Recognizing that Llewellyn Park's committee of managers had formed long before just about any other homeowner association in America, he says, a touch of awe in his voice, "We're dealing with all that history."

Talk to any number of proprietors in Llewellyn Park and you will find reverence for those who preceded them a common sentiment. Yes, they say, the park is a very different place today than it was not so long ago—new faces, new attitudes. Bernard Berkowitz acknowledges this in an interview at his law office. A former committee of managers chairman, Berkowitz moved to the park in 1979. He knows well the proprietors' longstanding penchant for privacy. "Twenty years ago," he says, "we wouldn't have had this interview."

But though the faces may have changed in Llewellyn Park, today's proprietors, too, talk about preserving a unique culture. Part of that means maintaining the park's magnificent grounds. Upon first entering Llewellyn Park, you approach a 50-acre common area known as the Ramble, consisting of woods, streams, trails, and a natural ravine with 50-foot cliffs. "When you drive through the front gate," Berkowitz says, "you just get a sense of being the most privileged person in the world."

Berkowitz has a right to feel privileged. When he and his second wife moved to their 1928 house on more than three acres, each of them brought three children to their new domestic arrangement. Nearly every bedroom came equipped with a bathroom and a fireplace; the master bedroom has two fireplaces. "It was," Berkowitz confides, "an embarrassment of riches."

Dan Gaby moved to Llewellyn Park into a house previously owned by a family named Douglass. He's been told that Thomas Edison often visited the Douglasses in their home, now his home. Gaby himself was friendly with Edison's son Ted, who lived across the street. "There's a very real, palpable sense...of being connected," Gaby says. "The beauty of the place—I'm still not accustomed to that after all these years."

Gaby's tenure in Llewellyn Park typifies the population shift that has taken place here. As a Jew, he knows that the park was off limits to him when he was growing up in Newark in the forties and fifties. He still remembers when, at his first proprietors' meeting, someone announced that a child had been born to a park family the previous year. So unaccustomed were the residents to news of a newborn, Gaby says, "there was literally a gasp in the audience."

During their time in Llewellyn Park, Gaby and his wife, Corky, have raised two children: Their daughter, Corrine, is fifteen; their son, Donny, is thirteen. Gaby's children, who have known only the gated confines of Llewellyn Park, are just two generations removed from his parents, who each immigrated from the Soviet Union in the twenties and settled in Newark, where Gaby's father worked as a steamfitter in the shipyards. Dan Gaby shakes his head in wonder at the thought. Someday, perhaps, his children will inherit his sense of stewardship. "It doesn't yield to its residents," he says of Llewellyn Haskell's enduring creation. "That's fascinating to me, that a physical place can have that kind of hold on the people who live there."