



*Wadsworth
Russell Lewis
1889–1942*

Founder of the
Wadsworth Lewis Trust Fund in
The New York Community Trust
909 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022

He was born in grand times to a grand family. His father, Frederic E. Lewis, was a railroad tycoon—president of the Adams Express Company, which shipped freight from New York throughout the Northeast. His mother, Mary Lewis, was renowned throughout their hometown, Ridgefield, Connecticut, for her kindness and good works. Together, the family, including Wadsworth and his brother Reginald, were esteemed for their generosity.

Wadsworth grew up in the family's New York City mansion on 52nd Street and on their Ridgefield estate, "Upagenstit." This country manor was a national showplace with a small army of housekeepers, nannies, cooks, gardeners, farmers, carpenters, chauffeurs, and coachmen. The estate featured one of the country's first indoor swimming pools.

For the town, Mr. Lewis's many generous gestures included sponsoring the annual Fourth of July fireworks display, underwriting the local library, and offering to build a new school. He provided a Model T Ford to Viola Byxbee, the first district nurse, recruited by his wife, so that she could make her rounds. And he had

the stone wall on the estate rebuilt many times, just to create employment for immigrant masons.

In characterizing the Lewis brand of generosity, Richard E. Venus, Ridgefield's historian, takes special care to note that "the contribution of the Lewis family to Ridgefield should not be considered only in a monetary sense. They put their shoulders to the wheel and did their part in a physical sense as well. Any worthwhile venture was sure to attract their attention and receive their support."

Mrs. Lewis lived to be 89 and always played a vital role in town life. Just before World War I, she helped organize the local chapter of the American Red Cross, holding the post of chairperson for 30 years. She was one of the founders of the Ridgefield District Nursing Association, serving as its first vice-president for 31 years. And just to show her versatility, she was also chairperson of the annual fair to raise funds for the Ridgefield baseball team.

Mary Lewis was also responsible for many personal acts of kindness. Needy Ridgefield residents would sometimes find a mystery food package or an unexpected delivery of coal—the anonymous contribution of Mrs. Lewis. And Richard Venus fondly remembers:

When they were youngsters, all seven of the Venus boys had their own newspaper route. They also all had the good fortune to

have the Lewis family as a customer. Orders were that the papers should be delivered to the front door. . . . It was always necessary for the paper boy to enter and sit in the great hall while Mrs. Lewis herself served hot cocoa and cookies. . . . Then at Christmas there was always a very nice present for the lucky boy.

Born on September 6, 1889, Wadsworth Russell Lewis, or "Waddy," was made of the same generous stuff as his parents. Sometimes this generosity took unusual forms. During World War I, for example, he enlisted in the Navy, donating his yacht for wartime duty. The Navy promptly put him on patrol duty in New York harbor, in command of his former vessel. Tiring of harbor patrol, Waddy requested a transfer to something more exciting. He was sent to Washington and assigned to the Intelligence Service, where he served as a lieutenant in the Censoring Department of the War College.

Waddy's father died in 1919, shortly after the war. During the Depression, the family sold Upagenstit and moved back to New York City. In 1939, Waddy build another home in Ridgefield called "Taghkanick."

Waddy continued the active and giving ways of his family. He had a passion for sports. In the mid-1920s, Waddy be-

came sponsor of the Ridgefield baseball team, buying equipment and uniforms, and hiring semi-pro and professional players who became known as "Waddy's All-Stars." Richard Venus recounts a particular story about the team that seems to have entered local legend. Before one game, in an effort to please the crowd, Waddy offered five dollars for each home run hit by a member of the Ridgefield team.

The offer was only a few minutes old when a conference with the opposing pitcher was held behind the old grandstand. The result was an eruption such as has seldom been seen on any ball-field. Baseballs began to rain on Governor Street and some even reached the lawn of the State Police barracks. They were not fooling Waddy—he was well aware that he was being taken. However, he enjoyed the demonstration as much as the players and the fans, and he had a broad smile as each crack of the bat sent the ball soaring in the air.

Like his father, Waddy took special care in watching over his friends. John Nash, one of Waddy's closest buddies, remembers an instance of Waddy's coming to their rescue:

My brother and I had the Ridgefield Press, and in the early

days we were really struggling. The previous owner of the building sold it to us with a mortgage of \$9,000. Rather unexpectedly one day, they approached us and wanted us to close out the mortgage. We of course didn't have the money. We managed to negotiate them down to \$3,000, but we didn't have that either. Somehow Waddy heard about it, probably through our mutual friend Joe Donnelly who was the attorney on the original deal. One day he showed up with a chauffeur-driven Lincoln, and told us that he was going to take care of the problem. He drove us down to New York to his bank. He asked the bank manager to arrange a loan at a favorable rate for his friends. The bank manager said, "Of course, Mr. Lewis. Would a rate of 2 percent be okay?" That solved the problem for us and saved the paper.

At the time of his death on November 3, 1942 at Taghkanick, he was a member of the Board of Education, the town's building committee, the draft board, and the gasoline committee of the rationing board, as well as justice of the peace. The most generous of Waddy's contributions was the establishment of the Lewis

Fund, which bestows grants to worthy Ridgefield organizations. The Wadsworth Lewis Trust Fund now in The New York Community Trust "awards grants to organizations for activities which are conducted in whole or in part for the benefit or use of residents of Ridgefield and its vicinity."

The fund, carrying on the noble family tradition, awards more than \$50,000 annually to organizations that maintain or improve the quality of life for the residents of the town the Lewises loved so deeply.

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