

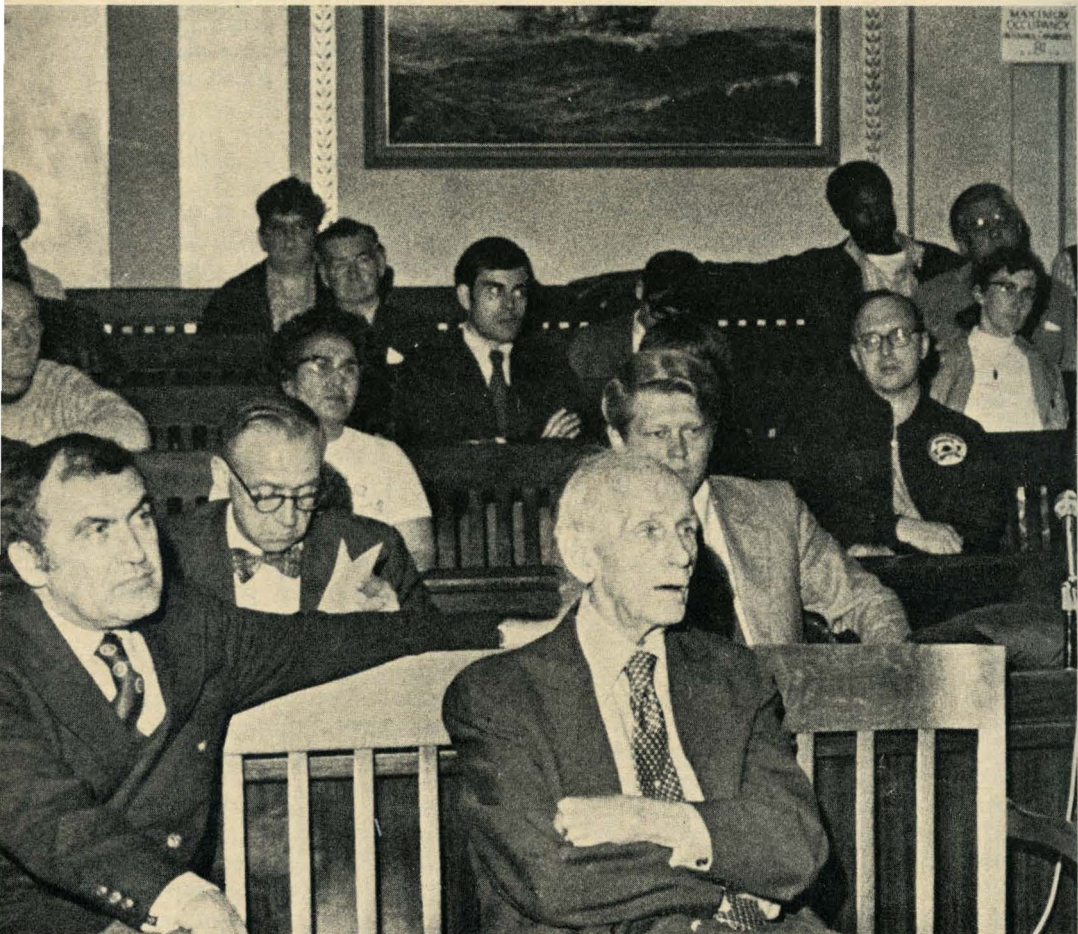
YANKEE

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50 CENTS



THE NIGHT THEY JUDGED



There were a lot of reasons for not renaming Main Street "Eugene O'Neill Drive." First, there was the matter of O'Neill's reputation — that of a drinker and carouser — and then there was the plain and simple fact that he "never did anything for New London."

Here is a record of a meeting of the City Council of New London — assembled just a year ago for the purpose of deciding a very hot question . . .

EUGENE O'NEILL by Fred Evarts



□ AS WE REMEMBER IT TODAY, THE first snowflakes of the season were falling on New London, Connecticut, that morning last October when a strange historic event was on the verge of unfolding.

A minister joked privately that, considering the many years some people berated the character of this Very Important Person, it would be a cold day in hell before the local genius was honored by officials in New London.

After all, some said, hadn't it been this very character who had been

From left to right: *Francis J. Pavetti, Art McGinley, Gordon S. Tuthill (standing), Dwight C. Lyman, and Jerome Silverstein.* Mr. Tuthill presents his case for renaming Main Street to the City Council in New London.

quoted as saying he hated New London? So why should New Londoners now do anything for him?

His supporters argued that he didn't actually hate the place, because he wrote so much about the people living there. And as for criticism of him for leaving town, could he be blamed for feeling that grass is

O'Neill fans held their breaths as they saw former Mayor Thomas J. Griffin rise to speak . . .

sometimes greener on the other side of the fence?

None of us knew if Eugene O'Neill could finally "make it" in his hometown. But an amateur astrologer seemed confident the snow was a prophetic sign something startling would come out of the meeting over O'Neill that Thursday. Later the snow disappeared. It was cold, but not cold enough to discourage a good turnout of townspeople at City Hall.

Some residents waiting on hard seats seemed sad it had taken so long for this particular session to materialize. It had been more than 50 years now from the time O'Neill first became famous, and 19 years since the playwright had died in Boston at 65.

Others acted encouraged that at last a decisive meeting was being called to see what the City Council of New London would do officially, if



Former three-time Mayor Thomas J. Griffin—felt that Main Street should not be renamed, and that O'Neill had gotten quite enough attention and sympathy already.

anything, to honor the name and memory of their most controversial native son.

The date was October 19, just three days after O'Neill's uncelebrated birthday. Even O'Neill himself — born 85 years ago this October 16 — might have been astounded by actions that night in New London.

It was no secret to those pondering the question that many decades ago some townspeople snubbed the O'Neill family, primarily because they were theater people, born Irish Catholics. They were even known to drink when they pleased, long before the Martini Age was in vogue. Some of these seemingly insignificant things, happening during one of New London's most colorful periods in history, helped mold the O'Neill mystique. It influenced his personality and character and, of course, showed up in his award-winning plays. Not everybody in the city seemed to appreciate the publicity!

Also, it was in the "Whaling City" that O'Neill first thought seriously about writing, and later tried his hand at it. He began converting the observable facts of life into drama. It was there too he started turning people he knew, especially those of his own family, into immortal characters. Years later some of his private love letters to a girlfriend back home would be purchased by a museum.

As the years unfolded, O'Neill developed into a local legend the likes of which New London had never seen before and probably never will again. Some charged him with being a drunk. Common sense dictates that if he drank anywhere near as much as some claimed he did, it would have been physiologically impossible for him to write so excellently and profusely over the years.

O'Neill was enjoyed or disliked; extolled or condemned; and recalled either with esteem or discredit.

With or without New Londoner's backing and support, O'Neill went on to become the only American

dramatist to win the Nobel Prize for his efforts, plus four Pulitzer Prizes, and the first dramatist to achieve international importance. Excepting those of Shakespeare and perhaps Shaw, the plays written by the man who grew up in New London probably hold the record for being the most widely translated, produced, read and taught in the world today.

Every major country in the world knew of Eugene O'Neill before he died, and many thoughtfully bestowed honors upon him. City officials in his hometown did not; but perhaps this would change as a result of the meeting.

New Londoners from all walks of life, including those who learned something about humanity from his dramatic classics, were impatiently waiting for the meeting to begin. There was a tinge of suspense in the air not unlike that created by his dramas.

Shortly after 7:30 P.M. Mayor Hubert A. Neilan banged his gavel loudly at his desk in the Council Chamber. He smiled politely, uttered a word of welcome to those of us present, then suggested the council suspend its rules and regulations to allow anyone who desired to speak for or against Eugene O'Neill to do so.

Gordon S. Tuthill, a local real estate broker with a keen interest in O'Neill and various community affairs, quickly arose from his seat at the front of the room. He made a carefully prepared presentation on behalf of his committee, named by the New London Arts and Festival Committee. His remarks were focused at renaming Main Street "Eugene O'Neill Drive," and it was Tuthill's emphasis that seemed to set the theme for the evening. It was not only on O'Neill the famous playwright, but also, to counter some of his reputation as a drinker and carouser, on O'Neill the human being. His speech was short, but seemed well received by the city councilors,

although they kept their own thoughts a mystery.

Dwight C. Lyman, a former president of the New London County Historical Society, strongly urged the councilors to "share in the reflected glory of a former resident." Lyman spoke softly, but assuredly, saying that the new street name would provide "inspiration" to youngsters who needed such encouragement, and that it would bring tourists from far and wide to the city.

Again there were no indicative comments from the council.

It was also suggested that to rename Main Street after Eugene O'Neill would be to settle a long-standing matter of international diplomacy, for "the eyes of the world are on New London tonight." To do so would not only serve the best interests of the city, but the general public as well. There would be some social and business benefits for all.

Again there were no indicative comments from the stone-faced city councilors sitting in judgment of Eugene O'Neill.

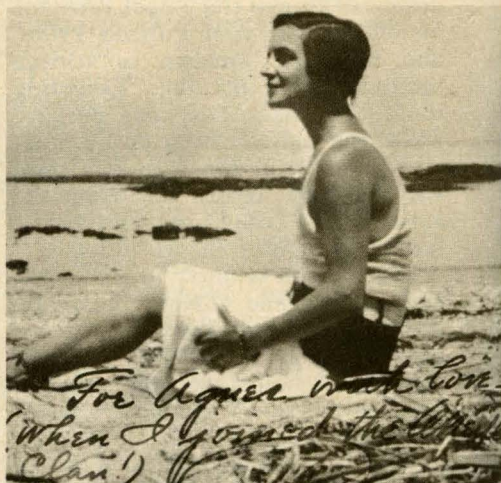
Arthur B. McGinley, Sports Editor emeritus of the *Hartford Times* and a boyhood friend of O'Neill, dynamically described himself as "closer to O'Neill than anyone in the formative years." He had made a special trip to New London just for this meeting and was emphasizing fond recollections of Eugene O'Neill . . . the human being.

McGinley, his voice rich with emotion, pointed out to the councilors that O'Neill's father was a nationally-known actor who owned considerable property in New London, and that his playwright son used his Connecticut experiences as the foundation for his classic writings which earned him the highest literary awards of all. It was McGinley's family, he announced proudly, who provided the inspiration for O'Neill's only comedy, *Ah, Wilderness!*

Showing a no-nonsense attitude before the council, McGinley came



Eugene O'Neill, standing precariously on a ladder, hammer in hand, is about to pound something into Tao House, the 22-room mansion built on a 158-acre estate in Danville, California, near San Francisco, where he and his wife Carlotta lived from 1937 to 1944. "Last picture I took of Gene!" Mrs. O'Neill penned on the back, noting it was taken in the summer of 1943 (seven years after he won the Nobel Prize).



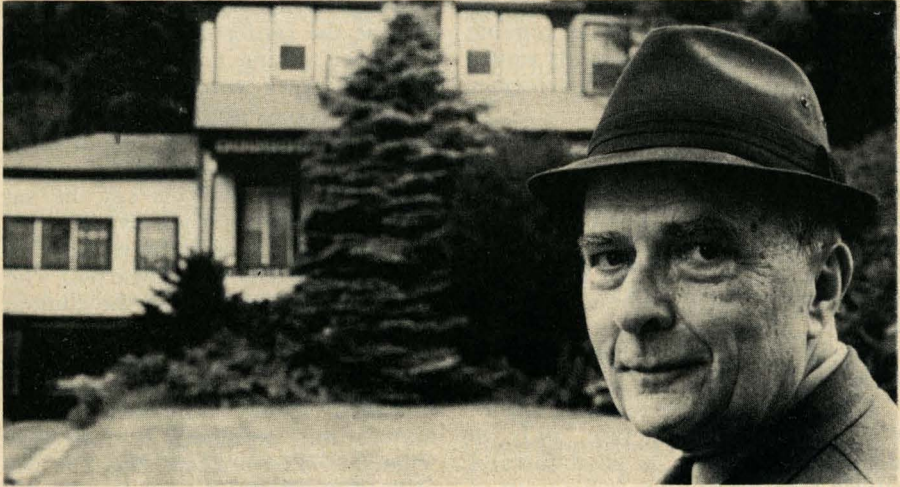
For Agnes with love - (When I joined the O'Neill Clan!)

"For Agnes with love - (When I joined the O'Neill Clan!)," wrote Carlotta Monterey O'Neill to Agnes Brennan, one of O'Neill's favorite cousins in New London. He was fond enough of her to send a needed \$300 when he learned she could not meet a mortgage payment on her house.

right to the point. "It has been mentioned that O'Neill was an excessive drinker. These reports are all too true!" McGinley asserted in his most serious tone of voice. O'Neill for years had been charged with being "the town drunk," and the committee to honor him had tried to smooth over this one major point of argument, hurting O'Neill the most. For a moment it appeared McGinley was throwing away his case in the hushed courtroom. He stood firm, didn't blink an eye.

With all the professionalism of a physician talking about his patient, McGinley asserted that O'Neill "fought a brave, uphill fight against alcoholism. He fought it long and hard, and in 1929 he won it. The determination O'Neill showed in dealing with drinking problems was typical of his life," the friend declared for all to hear.

Art McGinley moved quickly



Dwight C. Lyman stands in front of the O'Neill Homestead — he urged the councilors to "share in the reflected glory of a former resident . . ."

"Early in his career," McGinley went on to his captured audience, "O'Neill piled up rejection after rejection when submitting manuscripts; but he carried on in the face of any adversity, and never lost his vision of becoming a great literary figure."

Maybe this was all the City Council in New London really needed to hear, and it appeared at that moment McGinley had turned the tide in O'Neill's favor.

But McGinley was not satisfied and seemed to be giving them double-barrels. He took a deep breath and continued by informing the councilors that in the previous week he was pleased to have received a surprise transcontinental telephone call at his Hartford home from Sir Laurence Olivier in London, England, who was going to play the leading role in O'Neill's largely autobiographical play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, which had won a Pulitzer Prize in 1957.

Olivier had wanted to know details about O'Neill's life and style,

McGinley said. He asserted that Olivier too considered O'Neill "one of the world's greatest playwrights."

McGinley concluded, his voice still charged with emotion, that "any man whose work gives enjoyment to so many people has made a great contribution, and I do hope New London will recognize this man who has been acclaimed for so long!"

McGinley moved quickly to his seat, the audience applauded its approval, and even the councilors, moved by the presentation, spontaneously joined in the clapping.

It was the first time the councilors had seemed moved by a presentation, and O'Neill enthusiasts got their first inkling that they might be successful in their bid to honor the native son.

Then the O'Neill fans appeared to be holding their breaths as they saw former three-time Mayor Thomas J. Griffin rising to his feet. Everybody knew that this spunky octogenarian had for years opposed honoring O'Neill. Nobody could predict what Griffin would do, for he could be anything from cantankerous to charm-

to his seat while the audience applauded its approval . . .

ing. What McGinley did to build up O'Neill, Griffin was just as capable of tearing down. His opinions would be weighed carefully by his former colleagues.

Griffin, we knew, had charged many times that O'Neill was "a drunk" and "a stew bum:" the news media reported it from coast to coast. Often he had been heard to grumble publicly, "What did he do besides write plays?" Then, in typical fashion, answer his own question, "O'Neill never did nothing for New London!"

Contrary to expectations, Griffin now appeared temperate and restrained, reflecting a good-natured citizen who simply saw it his duty to speak up. He was saying that he felt Main Street should not be renamed. O'Neill had to be honored in some way, he supposed, and O'Neill lived his life the way he wanted to. Maybe something other than Main Street should be named for him — something contemporary.

But if Main Street was to be renamed, it should not be for O'Neill, Griffin (a one-time court bailiff) was saying, but rather for Thomas E. Troland, former Chief Judge of the Superior Court in Connecticut and former City Law Director in New London. Griffin could put on a production that even O'Neill would appreciate, and it appeared now that he thought O'Neill had gotten quite enough attention and sympathy. Why shouldn't *he* get headlines too?

In magician-like fashion, Griffin produced a "poison pen" letter from his pocket, which he said somebody had sent to him prior to the meeting. It indicated O'Neill would be remembered long after Griffin was forgotten. He decried whoever had sent it to him for his penmanship! He had had trouble reading it, he declared in an annoyed tone of voice, holding it up for all to see. He added also that he disliked receiving anonymous letters, and said he would much prefer to meet this person face to face.

The veteran politician was at his best as the center of attention. The press was taking notes and hanging onto his every word. For a moment O'Neill was almost forgotten; another Irishman was on center stage. His photograph was being taken. When he had had his say, he sat down. The filibuster was over.

Quick to Griffin's defense was City Councilor Richard R. Martin, who had served previously on the council with Griffin. Martin understandably uttered his support of the man and likewise indicated a keen dislike for unsigned letters. The two former mayors were agreeing, and nobody seemed to know where this left the O'Neill question.

When Martin was finished, somebody suggested the City erect a statue of O'Neill in a minipark on Captain's Walk . . . a new name suggested in a local contest to call attention to a new shopping mall on State Street.

Mrs. Sally Pavetti, curator of the theater collection at the world-famous Eugene O'Neill Theater Center founded by George White in nearby Waterford, Connecticut, appealed politely to the councilors to rename Main Street for O'Neill. She told several stories, one of which was how O'Neill once loaned a friend money. At the time O'Neill's own funds were low, she emphasized, but he instructed his friend not to think about repaying it "until long after you are on Easy Street."

Her appeal was followed by one from her husband, a local lawyer, who announced his support for the proposal of renaming Main Street for O'Neill.

In all there were only five persons who opposed the proposal, and of these, three who spoke in opposition were associated with the Savings Bank of New London, located on the street in question.

Bank President Richard L. Creviston said, in a businesslike manner, that "We've done business for over

120 years from the same address." He added politely but firmly, "We think we have a right to retain that address. The bank is not opposed to honoring O'Neill, but we wish to continue to be known as the Main Street Bank."

Joining Creviston was Attorney William W. Miner, a trustee of the same bank. He asserted that he was not opposed to honoring O'Neill, but he'd just moved his law office to the Main Street address and dutifully notified his many clients of the new mailing address. Now his problem was that he would have to notify them again if it was changed. He suggested a unique compromise in that the council should rename only two-thirds of Main Street, leaving the remaining one-third (i.e., where his office, the bank, and a newspaper office were located) unchanged.

After everyone had his say, Mayor Neilan concluded the lengthy meeting on O'Neill by warning those concerned that "there will admittedly be some inconveniences." He explained that when the State Route 32 interchange with Interstate 95 and the re-development along State Pier Road were completed, the present Main

Street would have a decidedly different character.

Perhaps the only clue to the outcome that night was provided by Thomas F. DiMaggio, a city councilor then serving his first term of office and often a lone dissenting voter on matters before the council. He remarked jokingly, just moments before final action, "Art McGinley said Eugene O'Neill got rejections. Well, I get a lot of rejections on the council too, and I can support the man." He had been prepared to reject the proposal, he revealed later.

The moment of decision had arrived. Councilor Martin moved that the O'Neill committee's recommendation that Main Street in New London be changed to Eugene O'Neill Drive should be accepted. Without further debate, it was voted for unanimously and officially approved. New London's longest, most colorful and strangest debate over a simple matter such as renaming a street was happily ended. The O'Neill enthusiasts, all smiles and yet appearing a little drained, drifted from the Council Chamber inside City Hall — outwardly delighted over their victory at long last. ♦♦



There's something in a name.