

From Soaps to Saltboxes

Text by JAIME FERRIS

For decades, Americans found themselves entangled in the extraordinary world of soap operas, once a fixture of American daytime television. Whether one's show of choice was "All My Children" or "Guiding Light," "As the World Turns" or "The Young and the Restless," we became members of these characters' families, have found ourselves embroiled in their personal relationships, walked with them through emotional and moral conflicts and, of course, have been intrigued by their romances—and there have been many.

As Agnes Nixon, the writer, producer and creator of "One Life to Live" and "All My Children" so aptly put it, "The great and the least, the rich and the poor, the weak and the strong, in joy and sorrow, in tragedy and triumph, you are all my children."

Salisbury, Conn., resident Susan Strickler knows such sentiments well, having worked for a quarter-century as a producer and director for some of this country's most successful soaps, from "As The World Turns," "Another World" and "Guiding Light" to "One Life to Live," "All My Children" and "The Young and the Restless."

As the television landscape evolves, soaps are slowly fading



Susan Strickler in a photo by Laurie Gaboardi.

from the daytime lineup—first to go were CBS's "As The World Turns" and "Guiding Light," and now fans are preparing to bid adieu to "One Life to Live" and "All My Children," and, subsequently, to soap opera icon Susan Lucci.

Though Ms. Strickler is sad to see them go, she has found a new calling in life, one that some might say started 19 years ago while she was working on "Another World." Living in New York City at the time, she came to Litchfield County for a visit, and she knew immediately that this was an extraordinary area, a place she could someday call home.

"I had been living in New York and always sensed a shift in the rhythm of life in Litchfield County," she said in a recent interview.

"Anyone who has been to New York knows how hectic the city can be, knows its intensity. It is an exciting and thrilling place to live, but

I needed ... to find some balance before I was swept away by it. It was important to come here on the weekends, to see the stars and watch the birds outside and tend to the garden."

Renting a home in Norfolk, Conn., for six months, Ms. Strickler spent weekends looking for the perfect home, and she found it in a 1921 farmhouse along the Housatonic River in



A private house and studio on 82 acres in Falls Village, Conn., has an asking price of \$3.45 million.

Salisbury. The initial draw to Litchfield County was its natural beauty—its pristine lakes and rivers surrounded by mountains and farms—which lent itself to hiking, swimming and gardening. It didn't take her long to discover the rich history of the region, or its bountiful offerings of music, theater and antiquing, among many other pleasures. To Ms. Strickler, Litchfield County was a perfect foil to her demanding life in New York City.

“Coming here allowed me to get attuned with the countryside,” she said. “I could go hiking, or work in the garden, or just relax. It was beautiful and diverse, and I fell in love with the area immediately.”

So it is no surprise the Emmy Award-winning director has chosen to help others explore the region and all of its treasures

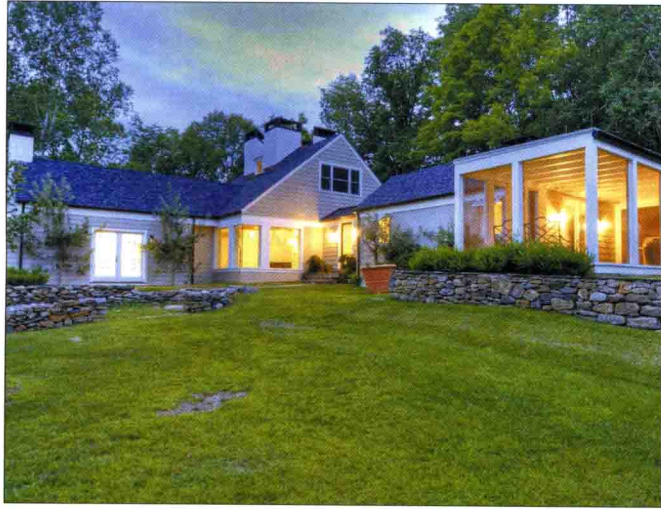
in the hopes of finding their own country retreat or full-time home. She recently joined the award-winning team at Klemm Real Estate in Lakeville, Conn., and is covering northern Litchfield County and southern Berkshire County, Mass.

“After watching the television landscape the past few years and seeing its tremendous shifts ... I thought about what else I was passionate about. I have always been interested in history, and it can be found everywhere you look up here,” Ms. Strickler said. “That’s one of the things I love about Litchfield County—its rich history and stories. And I’ve always been interested in real estate; I suppose you could say it is a family hobby.”

While Ms. Strickler certainly appreciates the architecture indigenous to the area, the history of its homes intrigue her, and that includes the history surrounding her own home. The old farmhouse was owned by the late Hal Borland, a well-known American author and journalist who, in addition to writing several novels and books about the outdoors, wrote “outdoor editorials” for *The New York Times* for more than 30 years, from 1941 to 1978.

His nature books include “An American Year,” “Beyond Your Doorstep” and “This Hill, This Valley,” for which he wrote about a year on his Connecticut farm in 1957 and 1990, and “Sundial of the Seasons” among others. Ms. Strickler has collected his works, both fiction and nonfiction, and pulls them off the shelf often for reference.

“I feel so fortunate to have had Hal introduce me to the area through his books,” she said with a smile. “It’s fascinating, because I can look outside and then open one of his books and see what it was like on that same day in 1957. He was a fabulous writer and has been my tour guide along the Housatonic River and through the woods, and he has helped me better understand the nature that I observe here. He is so well known that people still stop by and tell me stories about Hal and his family. It is that sense of community, that sense of history, that makes this area so special.” ▶



Above, a cottage restored by designer Eric Cohler in Falls Village, Conn., is on the market for \$925,000. Above right, a Victorian in Litchfield, Conn. with four fireplaces, a library and a wine cellar has an asking price of \$795,000.

Though Ms. Strickler has been with the Washington, Conn.-based Klemm agency for a short time, she is taking advantage of further exploring the countryside.

“I find Litchfield County fascinating. Each town has its own personality and so many hidden treasures,” she said, noting the varied landscape. “There is the charm of the country, the beauty of nature and a cultural sophistication you can’t find anywhere else.”

In addition to the rich history of the iron ore industry, the Underground Railroad during the Civil War era, the artists’ colonies, and the long list of historical figures, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, who planted their roots here, Ms. Strickler is equally in awe of the cultural amenities here—Music Mountain in Falls Village, Conn., Yale University’s summer Norfolk Music

Festival, Tanglewood to the north, and a plethora of galleries and theaters of Broadway caliber that dot the landscape in between.

She admits that times remain economically challenging, but said this is the time to buy if you are fiscally able. It is still a buyer’s market.

“There are three very positive factors buyers should take advantage of,” she said. “First, there is a lot of inventory. Second, prices are lower than they’ve been in years. ... And, finally, we currently have historically low interest rates.

“I think what has held many people back from buying a home right now is the economy and concerns about the debt ceiling and how it will play out,” she continued. “No one knows how it will affect the real estate market in the long term. It is a mystery of life, and will be for a while.”

She chose to work with Klemm Real Estate for its values and reputation.

“The Klemms believe in this market, and they have shown their faith in the market through their own real estate dealings. They really believe it is the perfect time to make a move,” Ms. Strickler said. “I also love that they have such a positive attitude. Buying real estate is a great investment, and it’s an investment that you can enjoy, especially in an area like ours, with its wealth of history and culture, nature and all it has to offer, and the pleasures of living in a small town.”

Ms. Strickler certainly does appreciate all it has to offer, having grown up in Philadelphia, where she went to school with soap creator Agnes Nixon’s daughters. She studied acting, voice and dance at The National Theater Institute at the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center, followed by music studies at Manhattanville College, and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in theater and

history at the State University of New York Empire State College.

She moved to New York to make a name for herself and got her break through connections made when she did summer theater. A colleague suggested she would make a great producer and told her about an opportunity with “As the World Turns,” where Ms. Strickler started her career as a production coordinator. She worked her way up the ranks and through the various soaps, starting with “Another World” in the mid- to late-1980s (four years as a producer and two as staff director) and continuing on to “All My Children,” “General Hospital,” “Loving,” “Valley of the Dolls,” “One Life To Live,” “13 Bourbon Street” “Guiding Light” and “The Young and the Restless.” Most recently, she worked as a freelance writer for “Biography.”

During her 25-year career in the business, she was honored with a 1992 DGA Award and an Emmy Award for Best Directing Team, both for “Another World”; was a 1993 nominee for an Emmy for Best Directing Team on “Another World”; and she was nominated for a DGA Award and an Emmy Award for Best Directing Team, both for her work on “Guiding Light.” And though she loves her new lot in real estate, nothing, she said, compares to her years working on the soaps.

“I was fortunate to work with some of the best in the business. ... I’d be lying if I said I didn’t miss it,” Ms. Strickler said. “A lot of people look down at soap operas, but what I have found most amazing is how many people actually do love them—and from all walks of life, including men. I was recently at an event and talking to a banker from Smith Barney when his girlfriend came over and said to him, “Go ahead. Tell her,” effectively outing him as a fan of ‘The Young and the Restless.’ It’s always fun when you meet the secret fans and the longtime fans of the shows. They love to talk about the storylines, the gossip and they are always looking for the latest scoop.”

Now, the scoop she is sharing is for Klemm, and helping people find their dream home.