

The Case of the Stolen Landmark

By KATHLEEN SALUK FAILLA

A WROUGHT-IRON sign forged for the Town of Weston by American artist John Held Jr. was for many years a symbol that marked the center of town. When it mysteriously disappeared 30 years ago, few thought they would ever see it again. It took some clever negotiations to get it back.

The sign is a silhouette of a blanketed Indian chief saluting the setting sun, purchased by the town in the early 1920's from Held, an immensely popular and financially successful artist who immortalized the flapper and set the style for the Jazz Age, cleverly depicting that generation of youth in dress and manners.

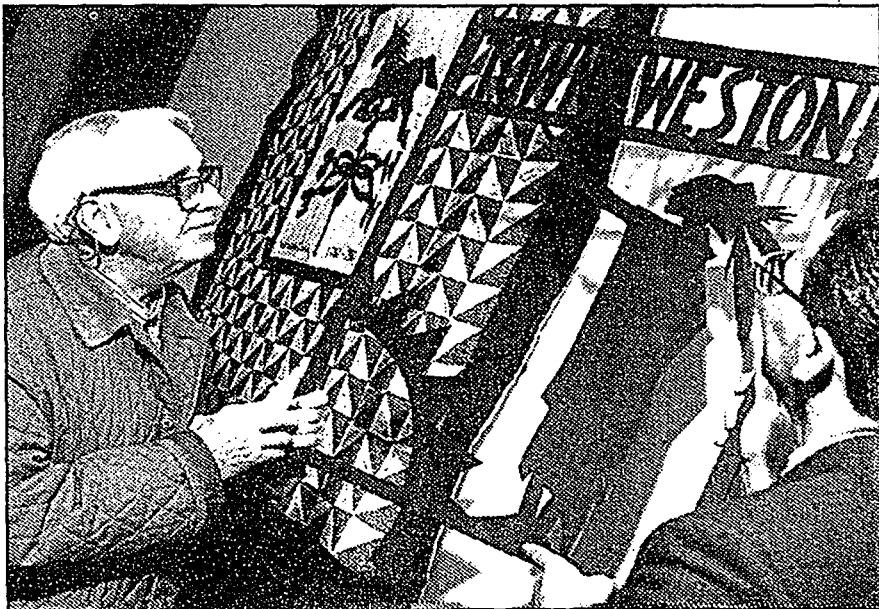
While the art world may consider it a work of art, to Weston residents the sign was a landmark. In the days when the town was more rural, with no stores or traffic lights, the sign signaled to people that they had arrived in town, said First Selectman George C. Guidera. For more than four decades, it hung from a post at a small grassy island at the center of town. Residents who grew up in town marveled at its beauty.

When the sign suddenly disappeared one night, it was as if the town had lost a treasure. "I never thought we'd ever get it back," Mr. Guidera said.

Antique Dealer Wants to Deal

Then a few weeks ago, the sign, a little worse for wear, reappeared but in a most unusual way. A man who identified himself only as an antique dealer drove into town with the sign in the back of his station wagon. He contacted the building inspector and offered to sell it to the town. But the town was put off by his original asking price.

A couple of weeks before the dealer showed up at town hall, the Weston Historical Society had received a call from a mysterious stranger. The society's president, Herb Day, said the man, who did not identify himself,



Janet Durrans for The New York Times

James Daniel, left, curator of Weston's art collection, looking at the recovered sign with Police Chief Anthony Land.

described the sign. "He wanted the name of the person who made it," Mr. Day said. "I said if original it was made by John Held Jr." Then the man hung up.

On March 10, when the dealer turned up in town, he went to the town's building inspector's office. He took the building inspector, E. Edward Hahne, to his car and pulled out a very battered and rusty sign with a stark silhouette of an Indian. At the top were printed the words: "Town of Weston." He said it was worth a lot of money and wanted to sell it back to the town. Mr. Hahne turned the matter over to the First Selectman.

"I told him to forget about it, and that I was going to call the police chief," Mr. Guidera said.

He called the curator of the town's art collection, James Daniel, and asked if the sign was worth what the dealer had asked. Mr. Daniel, a former first selectman, advised calling the police department because the

town was dealing with stolen art.

"It was very mysterious," Police Chief Anthony Land said. "When I got the call from George I knew what he was talking about," he said. The day before when he drove into work, he said, he had seen the building inspector with two men in the town hall parking lot looking at a rusty sign.

When Chief Land called the dealer the next day, he was rebuffed. "He didn't want to deal with me," the police chief said.

A Reward Is Offered

The town took the position that the sign was stolen, and so Chief Land offered a small reward for its return. The dealer responded by threatening to cut off the town's name and sell it to a private collector. Although the response upset town officials, the police chief continued to patiently court the dealer during negotiations that

Continued on Page 19