

Faced with life's deep dish pie of pain, Donny Damon always ordered his slices *à la mode*. It was a habit he'd acquired from his old man Harry, who'd been born in a land where the streets were paved with gold, days before the Blizzard of '88 paralyzed the East Coast, and who did little to hang his hat on until 1923, when Harding's sudden death out west landed brine-faced Coolidge in the Oval Office.

Silent Cal's pronouncement that "the chief business of the American people is business" was a turning point for Harry Damon, inspiring the colorless street pug to scrape together whatever cash he could, marry the first woman he could fast-talk in front of an altar and make a go of "Damon Truss & Convalescent Supply" on New York's Lower East Side. The driving force behind this enterprise's success was the 35-year-old's decision to have his child bride strut her fine, precocious stuff behind the shop's plate-glass window, wearing little beyond a leg cast, neck brace and strategically placed Ace bandages. Since such a display was an insult to community standards, it drew the smutty-minded, bogus lame and halt to his establishment from a twelve-block radius and kept its cash register ringing for as long as Olivia Damon continued her risqué showcase.

Harry's missus gave the act the hook during FDR's first administration and would eventually divorce her husband claiming alienation of affection. But by then the small business owner hardly even remembered being married and had gone all in on racketeering practices that expanded Damon Truss ten-fold during the Great Depression. By the time the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, he was piloting a regional wheelchair powerhouse while also heading a body bag monopoly in New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey. Damon's stranglehold on these markets, however, couldn't and didn't last. America's entry into World War II gave Feds the excuse they'd been waiting for to nationalize his enterprises rather than let Harry spend the next several years dodging profiteering charges.

Being put out to early pasture may have caught the wheelchair king off guard, but it couldn't keep him and his enormous wad of buyout cash down for long. Within a few months, Mr. Damon was steering his Studebaker President north along the mighty Hudson to a sleepy river town founded by the Dutch and re-christened by the Brits to honor the neatly trimmed juniper bushes surrounding its village green. Or so the story went.

The actual name change to "Carvéd Hedge" dated only from the 1920s, when those eponymous hedges were first planted. Back then, local politicians and the chamber of commerce decided that a little fudged history would attract new business, along with a better class of people, and make the dusty old place a village to be proud of instead of the shoulder-shrug whistlestop it had been sliding into for decades. This effort hadn't made much of a difference. But every once in a while, a resident would surprise the neighbors, show some talent or initiative and put the community's general mediocrity to shame.

Sharpie Bev Boslegovich, for example, parleyed her ability to recognize a born patsy when she saw one into a thriving local real-estate business. So when Harry Damon turned his big sedan onto Main Street in 1942, he couldn't even put the damn thing in park before "Hiya, handsome! Lookin' to settle down?" came winging his way from under a mop of Shirley Temple curls.

Since sparkplug Bev believed in telling people what they wanted to hear, she gave a twist to her town's Jazz Age creation myth that a mark like Damon would be powerless to resist. Namely ("Turn left at this corner!") that an eyesore property, sitting idle on her books for months, had once been the home of a profligate Tory ("You know, before the Revolution.") who spent the bulk of his fortune developing a topiary wonderland of trees, bushes and shrubs that a small army of gardeners had stripped, clipped, bent, and chiseled into a stunning array of geometric and animal-shaped confections.

Not a word of this was true, of course, but Bev understood Damon had journeyed to her little piece of heaven on earth because he was in the market for prestige as much as a home. To hear her tell it, the property she was hawking was the true inspiration behind the name of the village that tripped so lightly off her tongue. "Why else would they call it Carvéd Hedge?" Bev demanded as much as

wondered.

Moved by the realtor's aggressive eloquence, Damon's gullibility made him believe wholeheartedly that the unruly mess he was looking at was precisely the spot where a vital, breathing, European artform had jumped species and taken root in Colonial America. This despite the fact that the "estate," as Bev called it, was nothing more than a derelict saltbox with a sagging catslide roof, centered on a half-acre lot and thick with oversized, misfit verdure that, if you wanted to believe in it hard enough, at one time might conceivably have served some decorative function. Boslegovich sealed the deal when she told him, "There are some things you just *can't* put a price on." Damon barely flinched when she quoted a ridiculously high ask and bought the place for cash. "None of that buying-on-time crap for me," he crowed. It was the maraschino cherry topping a forced retirement that had already started to melt.