



The Weston Voices Oral History Project

In His Own Words: Reflections on the Founding
of the Weston Woods Studios



Morton Schindel

*Founder and creative force behind Weston Woods Studios,
known world-wide for its innovations in the world of children's literature*

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on behalf of the

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The video as well as this transcript are archived at the Weston Historical Society and the Weston Public Library and are also available on their respective websites. The opinions expressed in this interview are solely those of Mr. Schindel.

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The Weston Historical Society's "Weston Voices" Project

Presents

In His Own Words:

Mort Schindel and The Story of Weston Woods

Morton Schindel, known affectionately by one and all as "Mort," is the American educator, literacy advocate, and founder of Weston Woods Studios, which became a flourishing hub of innovation in the world of children's literature.

Mort became fascinated with picture books while reading to his children but wanted to do more than read them aloud--he wanted to bring them to life. That inspiration led him to become the pioneer in adapting children's books into animated films.

After graduating from Columbia University's Teachers College, Schindel began making films in the late 1940's about curriculum-related topics, which proved a difficult business. After switching to his new interest, the business became more successful and Mort started thinking about moving out of New York City. Through friends he found Weston, and bought the property that would become the Weston Woods studios in 1950.

Told in his own words, here is the story of how he took an idea and a ramshackle house and property and built it into the creative center that Maurice Sendak, the famed children's author and a good friend, described as "nirvana... a place you can hardly believe existed." The video on which this transcript is based includes many photographs of the development of the property and the people who helped make its studios world famous.

Mort begins by talking about the circumstances that brought him to Weston....

We were beginning to turn around. I was beginning to have what I characterize as good luck. There I was with a lovely apartment in New York, in Chelsea. I had a business that was going. Our daughter, Cathy had been born. A friend of ours, a photographer for "Holiday" magazine, along with his wife, were good friends.

They were getting sick of traveling around the world, photographing royalty. They were looking for a place in the country where they could settle down. To be able to go on assignments, but not live in New York in the meantime. They would go out on a field trip to look for a place. We'd get together and they would tell us what they saw. So gradually the bug was beginning to bite us.

One day they told us about this place up in the woods, on a road that wasn't yet paved. It was just a log cabin in terrible shape but it was well within our price range. It wasn't right for them. It wasn't close enough to the railroad station. In a heavy rain, you might have to go five miles around, because this road would wash out.

We came, and I just fell in love with the place. It was god awful. What's now a lovely pond in the front was a swamp. Inside, the windows were broken. It was clear that it hadn't been occupied in many, many months. Tree limbs were growing through the windows. There were little snakes lapping around on the floor. Unbelievable, but the price was right..

It had room enough for us to partition it into enough rooms and make room for a nursery for Cathy. It had an outbuilding. That was the studio of the wife of the man who had built the building [*by the artist Karl Godwin, --ed.*], which I could use for my studio. The price was \$23,000. It had 2.5 acres. The taxes on it were \$168 a year. Additionally, there were six contiguous acres he was willing to sell me for \$6,000 if I was interested. They turned out to be ten when it was properly surveyed. I didn't have the money [for the extra acreage]. He said, "Well, just send me a little money whenever you have it." He wasn't in a hurry to get it. We decided we would get a mortgage, and buy the place, which we did.

One of the things I loved about it was that I like to do things with my hands. I could whack a nail into this place without much precision and it would look as good as what the artists had done. What he had done actually is cut logs off of his land from chestnut trees that had died out at the turn of the 20th century. Now, if these trees didn't fall on the ground, they were just solid. He used those as the logs that you see.

The stones all came right off the property. At one time, it was a sitting room when we first moved here. We used all our money to buy the place so we literally were sitting on boxes with cushions on them and things like that. As time went by and as things perked up we had more and more activities in there. We started having groups up to 25 or 30 people at that time. We also had conferences there.

I especially remember a conference that took place sometime in the '70s. Captain Kangaroo had been using our things on television. I was never satisfied with what he did. I'd started feeling that the time would come when we had to develop a television program of our own.

There are a lot of considerations that I wanted to get advice from authors and illustrators about. I knew that they had strong feelings about how meaningful our films were to their books. Maurice Sendak commented in an interview that we had emancipated the picture book. We had given a range that the author and illustrator had never conceived of.

I had a meeting which took place in the living room. The place we now call the conference room hadn't been built yet. Bob McCloskey was here. Ezra Keats was here. Maurice Sendak was here. Marcia Brown was here. Lily Argoman was here. Sendak could never sit still without a pen in his hand. He drew pictures of the people that he thought could conceivably be the host and hostess for the show.

Some good ideas came out of that, from the direction in which we could move and editorially, and we did all of that. As the business grew, there wasn't room for the numbers of people who came. We could put only about 20-25 people in there comfortably.

We were having groups of teachers and librarians come by the busload for the day, from as far away as Providence or even Philadelphia. We needed more space. We built one wing onto the house, which is a room that we think of as the conference room today that seats up to 60 or 65 people. It has its own kitchen and its own bathroom.

We could cut it off if we wanted a privacy of a home. Other people and the staff could be entertaining the people who were here for a workshop. We had bought a house that was characterized by the building inspector as the biggest no-bedroom house that he'd ever seen, because Karl had made his bedroom in the back of the studio.

We were looking for a way to enlarge the house with bedrooms. We got architects, all of whom told us to just get a bulldozer, bulldoze down the stones and the logs, and start from scratch. I wasn't about to do that because I really tried very hard to bring this back to where Karl Godwin, who had been the builder and owner of the house, had brought it.

We just couldn't figure out how to do it until somebody introduced me to a landscape architect who was accustomed to building gazebo out of redwoods and things like that. She sat down one day, made some sketches that I was very enamored of. I said, "Let's do it." We never had an architect make an architectural drawing.

I said, 'This is what it's going to look like on the outside. Now, let's take some graph paper, and see what it's going to look like on the inside.' Which she did. She just filled in the space that she projected, and then we started together putting in partitions and making room for bathrooms, closets, hallways, and where the windows would be, and so forth.

It turned out that the windows in the original house were very old because they had been scavenged from houses that had been inundated when the river that ran through Weston was dammed up to make a reservoir for Bridgeport. [*The Saugatuck Reservoir in Valley Forge. -ed.*]

Karl Godwin had very little money and that's why he used the building materials right off the property. He bought up these houses, which you could buy for \$50 if you would cart

away the pieces that he took away. They wanted to keep the foundations. It didn't bother them if they were submerged. They wanted to get rid of the timber.

In the backyard here were piles of second-hand bricks, dormer windows, and just plain windows, which were built into the house and worked fine as long as they were put in a place where they didn't have to swing on hinges. That really was the genesis of the building that we have today.

I think there were two currents working when we were changing this building when adding to it. One of the currents was making it adaptable to the uses that the activities here were developing, the other was at the same time keeping it the way it was, not only because there was an aesthetic that was terribly appealing. I loved that fact that there was no straight line. It was like an animal habitat, that you could really feel at home. You could put your feet up and it wouldn't be impolite.

Of all of the occasions we've had here, two in particular, come to the fore. One of them was our 50th anniversary, which was in 2003. The First Selectman of Weston, Woody Bliss, was here. At lunch, I sat at the same table that he did. It was very informal. You sat where you wanted to. Woody leaned over and he said to me, 'Mort ... I have to thank you for putting Weston on the map.'

The other occasion was quite a few years ago now. The American Library Association had its annual conferences, its convention in New York. It was customary that they would offer, in their prospectus, tours, pre-convention and post-convention. I had a telephone call from them. They said, 'We would love to offer a post-convention tour to Weston Woods when we have our convention in New York. Would I consider that?' I said, 'By all means, we'd love to have them.'

With a final count, 700 people came here that week. There were key people who I wanted to have [for a special dinner] who I didn't even know. These were people like the Board of Directors of ALA, the American Library Association. A buffet supper was served. There was a table with candlelight at the pool.

When I went to that table, I knew one person, Rebecca. I greeted her. The woman sitting next to her was somebody from the Board of ALA. The other people of the table were too. This other woman from the Board said, "Mr. Schindel, what is that Weston Woods does?"

Before I had a chance to answer, Rebecca got up and she said, 'You don't know what Weston Woods does? Weston Woods does for children's books what the colonel did for chicken.' I just thought that was so appropriate. In those days, Colonel Sanders was really a big deal.

This transcript serves as the written record of Mr. Schindel's narration underlying a special 18-minute video created and produced by the Weston Woods Institute on behalf of the Weston Historical Society's tribute exhibition,

“Where the Wild Things Are.” It was first shown at the unveiling of the Exhibition on December 5, 2015. The Weston Historical Society is deeply grateful to Linda Lee, Paul Gagne and others associated with the project at the Weston Woods Institute, without whose generosity it would not have been possible.