

SULLIVAN'S CORNER

THE LAST YEARS OF THE FARM

POST # TWO

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PART ONE — AS THINGS WERE

SAVING THE BARN

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SAVING THE BARN

CHRISTMAS following the death of Frances' mother in 1947 brought heavy snow, and the start of several more endings. New England weather is famously erratic, and the previous year had one of the lowest ever accumulations.

When snow began falling on December 23, it had been two years since any storm had brought more than eight inches. This winter, in contrast, was to be the harshest in many years.

From reports in the *Ipswich Chronicle*, the blizzard on Christmas Eve delivered a near record snowfall that paralyzed traffic throughout New England. The amount in parts of Ipswich reached twenty inches. More followed, and by January 7 a fourth storm added another eight inches to what had fallen so far. Two coastal storms accounted for a good part of the snow, but inclement weather was almost continual well into March, and Frank had all he could do just keeping some of the driveway clear and a path open to the barn.

Compounding matters, the temperature stayed very cold in the weeks following the solstice, rarely going above freezing, so that by the end of January—with little loss to melting—the depth of snow cover across the north-east corner of Massachusetts, had reached as much as forty inches.

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The date was not recorded, but eventually—probably by early February, with three feet of standing snow covering almost everything—the old timbers of the Sullivan barn gave up under the load.³

The barn was larger than one would imagine today looking at the site where it stood. It was not a grand example of the traditional New England form. A rather plain structure, really. Its beginnings were as a railway freight house on the Boston & Maine Eastern Branch, and when it was surplused by the railroad, the Sullivans bought it and had it moved to the farm to replace an earlier, smaller building. Over time, it was lengthened, and a three-bay equipment shed was added on to the back.

The barn had withstood decades of heavy use and hard exposure, but that winter was worse than any it had seen in many years.

The whole structure didn't come down. The gable roof had developed a sag at the ridge already, and that's where it let go—caving in and exposing the haylofts and the cross-aisle between the horse stalls and the cow room. Luckily, the cows were still somewhat sheltered by the floor of the haymow above them, and could stay put, so the milk operation, at least, was able to continue.

But the two horses had lost the containment that kept them warm, so, for a while, they were stabled with Frank's brother-in-law, John Bradstreet, in Rowley, the next town to the north of Ipswich. Frank and he relied on each other in that way farmers do—being each other's spare hand, or source for anything one of them didn't own but the other did.

At the barn, Frank and Jackie shored up what they could—enough to get through the remaining winter—and covered the exposed hay and sacks of grain with canvas tarps. The small herd of Guernsey cows were the constant daily business of the farm, and to feed them, Frank—going on sixty-five at the time—had to climb into the lofts, beneath the collapsed roof, and drag their hay out.

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Come spring, as the snow receded, Frank moved equipment and materials out of the barn, to the garage and various field sheds, so that rebuilding could begin.



THE KEY PERSON in the rebuilding was Mike Phelan.

Mike and Mary Phelan were longtime acquaintances of the Sullivans. All six of their children had been pupils of either Kate or Nellie, and several were youthful companions of John Clasby. The family lived on Pine Swamp Road, as tenants at an old farm out beyond the slaughterhouse that used to be there. Mr. Phelan did a little farming himself, and Mary took in boarders, but Mike's trade, in his working years, was carpentry. Despite being seventy-three, he didn't hesitate to take on the repairs. His skill was welcome and needed.

Frank's relationship with Mike was like that with John Bradstreet—another long account of mutual aid. They often traded equipment and tools, and occasionally Frank would even loan a horse to Mike for some job that needed it.

There's a story I heard, in numerous retellings, which sprang from this cooperation. It's a narrative that also hints at the pre-modern character of the town then. It went like this.

Mike needed a horse for some task, so Frank brought over one of his pair to leave for a couple days. The route he usually took to get there, with a horse or team, was an old wagon track that ran between Topsfield Road and Pine Swamp, and both of Frank's horses knew the route well, from having been over it so many times. But, after being brought there, the one left at Phelan's got lonesome for his regular stable-mate. Somehow the horse managed to work its way out of Mike's tie-up, walk back through the woods and down Topsfield Road, a good mile-and-a-half altogether, and go right into his empty stall. And there he

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stood—like usual—when Frank came out for the next feeding.

Tales like this were a staple of Sunday afternoons, when company visited, and folks would enjoy retelling such yarns, no matter that they'd been heard before. During visits, a child—up to a certain age—was expected to meet the visitors, and stay patiently nearby, while the grownups exchanged their news. One might have seemed to be lost in some quiet distraction, but even when the topic of discussion was beyond grasp, things about the character of the people speaking, and the matters they cared about came through.

Most of those stories are lost to me now, but “The Borrowed Horse” is lodged away in some, so far, safe compartment. The point in time when the horse was loaned, if that was mentioned, did not stick though, so this tale exists in a dateless setting. But that in itself may be apt, just because it could so easily have been an account of something that happened the week before, or twenty years earlier. Either equally plausible.

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ONCE THE SNOW WAS GONE, construction began. Mr. Phelan led the work, with Frank alongside every day. When more hands were needed, Jackie was called on, and others joined in on weekends.

Timber for framing new roof trusses was gotten from the salvage of a barn takedown at some other farm in the area, and any serviceable lumber that could be pried from the winter wreckage was set aside. In spare moments, Frank pulled nails from the old boards, and straightened them for reuse. Together, employing mainly handsaws and hammers, he and Mike worked on into the summer.

The job went smoothly enough, except for one incident that became another of those Sunday tales, and a permanent part of the story of rebuilding the roof.

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Among his tools, Mike had a folding ruler that he'd owned for years. It was missing an end section that had broken off at the metal pivot—so the first measurement on that end was the six-inch mark. The ruler worked fine, from the other end, but measuring anything greater than five-foot-six meant adding differently than working with the familiar six-foot length. Frank would pick it up from time to time, to mark a board for cutting, and—on long pieces—he'd be bothered by the need to make allowance for the missing section.

Finally, Frank asked, "Mike, how can you work with this thing?"

"Oh, I don't have any problem," Mike replied, "I just keep track of it in my head."

It was a common type of rural thrift: extending the life of something that was worn out. One just had to adapt how it was used. But, in that way where things often go wrong just after some hazard has been dismissed, Mike cut one of the expensive truss timbers short by six inches. It was a costly waste that surely offset any savings from not replacing the ruler, and it was a mistake he never lived down in Frank's company.

Around the farm, the legend outgrew its origin, and for a good while, the parable of Mike Phelan's broken ruler was reliably called on whenever proof was wanted to support either of two old adages: "measure twice, cut once" or "penny wise, pound foolish"—depending on which one was being invoked.

All the same, as work neared completion, the farm seemed renewed. The original gable roof had been enlarged into a gambrel style—the iconic barn form—with bigger haymows. And a reclaimed mechanical fork-and-trolley system was installed for taking hay in through a high door at the far end. Once new roofing was applied, the weathervane—a simple homemade affair rescued from the old structure—went back on top. The big sliding doors were repainted with Barn Red and rehung, and the cow room walls

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got a fresh coat of whitewash. Animals and equipment were once again in their usual bays, and daily activity returned to normal.



EVEN WITH THE ECONOMIES, the expense of rebuilding drained savings meant for later years, and came, unfortunately, just as Nellie's retirement was on the horizon—1948 would be the last year of a full income from teaching. That spring, before starting the work, Kate, Nellie and Frank faced both the cost of the repair, and the fact that revenue from the farm was shrinking.

One option would have been to simply forego the rebuilding and gradually shut the farm down, but that was a choice Nellie couldn't accept. Considering it all, they reached a different, but also difficult decision. Some land would be sold.

In the years since the war, several local people had approached Kate and Nellie to ask if they would sell their frontage on the adjoining Mill Road. One who had pressed hard for this was Kip Corliss—back from service in the Army Air Corps, and working at his family's nursery business in town. They chose his offer, on the intimation that he wanted the land for agricultural use, as well as for a home. Perhaps they simply heard what they wanted to, but the impression would turn out to be mistaken as, instead, Corliss recovered his outlay by subdividing into three other house lots besides his own. There would be some lasting resentment over that, but the money they got from the land did cover immediate needs.

In the fall, with the bargaining finished, two land transactions were made. One was the deed to Corliss, recorded in September, which conveyed a wooded parcel of a little more than six acres, extending some six-hundred sixty-five feet on Mill Road. The other transaction dealt with a different matter.

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The sale to Corliss had brought attention to the status of the Clasby home. It had been thirty years since John arrived at Sullivan's Corner as a sixteen-year-old, and over that time he had become a part of the Sullivan family. His home had simply been on the farm: first with them in the house on the corner, then in the new one that he started building in 1941. Until this point, the new house had been on land undivided from the Sullivans'. When John Clasby and Frances O'Connell wed in 1943, the marriage announcement stated that the couple would be "At Home – Topsfield Road," the address of the farm, not Mill Road where their house was situated.

Now, Kate and Nellie concluded, it was time that John and his wife should have their own place—free and clear of whatever destiny lay ahead for the farm—and a second deed was drawn up. The lot that was set off for John and Frances contained the land between the Sullivan driveway and an old cart path that bordered the Corliss parcel. That cart path, a one-rod-wide track which reached the lower fields from Mill Road, followed one of the boundaries of the original land that Eugene Sullivan acquired in 1870.

Besides their home, the parcel included "the shop"—a building moved to the farm from Newburyport in the 1930s for John to pursue an interest in metal- and wood-working projects. The land also incorporated an acre of woodlot, and on a small rise in the middle of that, a hencoop shaded by a massive white pine. The henhouse had roosting perches and two tiers of metal nest boxes for about a dozen birds. Once, the hens had produced enough eggs for both the family and some for sale.

At this stage, although John was not much involved in the farm, the egg business remained one part that he still took care of. Even so, since marrying, time for tending the brood had grown short, and the number of laying hens steadily decreased as each eventually fell victim to the recipe that Frank called "Madame Poulet."

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After the land was conveyed to them, the address for the Clabys changed to Mill Road—also called “the back road” by those who used it to shorten the distance from town to Danvers and Salem. The nickname was apt. It was very much a back road. Two-thirds of a mile down, it passed over the Ipswich River, and then wound on through sparsely populated terrain in the adjacent towns of Hamilton and Wenham.

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Going down Mill Road, the scene near the river is among only a few in town that one can say looks much the same today, as in the time of this story. The road crosses on a three-arch stone bridge—Warner's Bridge—rebuilt from an earlier version in 1856. At the bridge, the water is about a hundred feet across, and five serpentine miles from its ocean destination.

It's not a deep river, though some of it is swimmable, but it's quite shallow on the downstream side of the span, where rubble from the former milldam makes an area of rapids. Below the mill sites, and on past the farm frontage, the stream returns to a more characteristic width of sixty to eighty feet.

Although mills powered by the river were present on both the north and south banks by about 1700—and the structure of one remains even now—there'd been no mill activity since early in the twentieth century.⁴

Traffic on Mill Road has varied over time. Busy, relatively speaking, when the mills were active. But after that, until the war was over, the number of automobiles was small, and the condition of the road, although more improved than many outlying routes in town, was still somewhere in between rustic and modern.

The only other homes on the Sullivan side were those at the old mill sites, and two summer places at Holiday Hill, above the mills. Across the road, all of the land from the river back to Topsfield Road, once belonging to the Warners, had been owned and kept undeveloped since

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the early 1900s by a member of the Appleton family. The ancient and expansive Appleton Farms estate was just beyond the river, and James Appleton — “Mister Jimmy” — whose main residence was in New York City, used the Warner acreage seasonally for riding and hunting.⁵

Except for a late eighteenth-century dwelling uphill from the river built by Captain William Warner, and a residence connected with its barn, there was just one other house on that side of Mill Road, located at the corner, opposite the Sullivans. That house was part of the Appleton property, but had changed hands four years earlier, following Mister Jimmy’s death, when Benedict and Virginia Andreozzi bought it from his estate. In the years ahead, that side of the corner became a landmark in its own right owing to Benny Andreozzi’s business there selling plants from an acre of glorious flowering perennials.

All through the war years, the character of the neighborhood had barely changed. The transition of the area, and the whole community, to the suburb of today began with a program of road improvements which seemed to anticipate the growth that was coming. The Superintendent of Streets, in his report for 1949, noted that the town was continuing state funded paving work, constructing a permanent surface on Topsfield Road. He goes on: “[last year’s] project on Topsfield Road was completed between the Dyer house and Mill Road, improving the bad curves a great deal.” One can see traces of those curves yet, in the surviving borders of the earlier route. Where old rock walls veer away from the line of the pavement, those divergent stones witness the location of the older way, before it was straightened.⁶

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AT THE TIME, homes along the road between town and Sullivan’s Corner were nearly as scarce as on Mill Road, without many more than the few which were there in the 1940 census. Coming out from town, at night, was a dark ride. Beyond Kimball’s Brook,

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window lights helped mark the way at no more than four or five houses over the next three-quarters of a mile. And if there were streetlights on some of the utility poles by then, they were just old-fashioned incandescent bulbs.

Improvements notwithstanding, both roads remained country routes without much accommodation for pedestrians, or not those used to city sidewalks anyway. Despite the affection she had for her married home, Frances had another lasting reservation—besides raw milk—about life on the farm. In the five years she had been there by this point, she never got over the isolation of country life.

Well, that's overstating the case. Really, it was more the difference from what she was used to. The absence of the bustling urban world she grew up in made her situation *seem* remote. What Frances found isolating was the contrast with the independence of her former life—the ability to get wherever she wanted, on her own.

During the twenty years of her secretarial job at General Electric, she had been used to walking everywhere: to work, to shop, to see friends. The GE River Works plant was half a mile from her home in McDonough Square, the library was less than a mile in the other direction, and the stores and theaters were just beyond that. Often she'd covered more than the distance to downtown Ipswich on foot. But here, in the absence of a paved walkway, she was not about to go “by shank's mare”—as she would say—along the uneven shoulder of the road to town.

Of course, if she'd had a license, and a car, it would've been different. But in her whole life—like many women then—Frances never learned to operate an automobile, so she was somewhat stranded at Sullivan's Corner. Due to their teaching jobs though, and the demands of rural life, Kate and Nellie both drove. Kate had stopped by then, but through Nellie's good graces, Frances was able to get around a little on weekdays, while John was at work.