

SULLIVAN'S CORNER

THE LAST YEARS OF THE FARM

POST # THREE



PART ONE — AS THINGS WERE

PUTTING HAY IN

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PUTTING HAY IN

LATE FALL THROUGH WINTER was the only part of the farm year with any slack. Some of the short days were used for harness mending, tool sharpening and other annual repairs. There was tending the furnace, of course, and snow to be cleared from time to time. The cows still needed regular milking, and feed and water, but otherwise they mostly stayed inside, living on the hay crop from last summer. Their manure rotted in a pile behind the barn that would build until it was spread on the fields in the spring. Before then, the ammonia given off even on frigid days produced a shroud of sour vapor that hung over it.

In the winter a year after the barn collapse, Nellie left her role as principal of the Burley School. By the time she'd put a period to her work there at the end of December 1948, and joined her sister at home in retirement, her teaching career had spanned forty-seven years. That was only four short of Kate's term, but the similarity of their vocations more or less ends there. Nellie's personality—in the classroom and in life—differed markedly from Kate's.

While both, at the core, were softhearted and forgiving, Nellie was outwardly imperious and overbearing. She would not be remembered for the patient guidance that her sister exercised, so much as for a reliance on intimidation. No doubt Nellie cared as

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much for the progress of her students, but where Kate projected comfortable authority, resting on knowledge and reason, Nellie tended to get by on bluster.

Each was a singular figure, and not easily forgotten. Both were large women by norms of the time, but Nellie was also bulky. At seventy, her walk was becoming more of a lumber, and the effort made her breathing noticeably labored. In spite of her physical condition, Nellie would probably have preferred to keep on working, but retirement was mandatory at her age. And anyway, her attention was increasingly needed at home, where Kate was beginning to struggle with Parkinson's disease, which came on shortly after her own departure from the schools.

Busy and impetuous by nature, and no longer tied down by school hours, Nellie started going to town and back several times a day, so Frances' opportunities for getting about expanded somewhat. Her feelings about life in Ipswich remained an ambivalent mix. She was not lacking in social exposure—through Kate and Nellie she'd been introduced to people all over town. But Frances was never a joiner. She wasn't the outgoing type, and found little common ground in the interests and experiences of those she met.

With the ability to get to town more frequently though, she began to feel a little less isolated. She could more easily get to the banks during their limited hours—closed at 2:00 P.M. every day, Monday through Friday—to deposit John's pay, for instance. It was just a matter of arranging things around Nellie's errands, to get to a bank, or the post office. Or to the depot, to catch a train to Lynn.

Starting that winter, with Nellie's frequent trips into town giving her access to the railway, Frances was able to renew contact with the city where she grew up. For a while, she went every week or two, with her young son trailing along, to see old friends and prowl the department stores and favorite bakeries.

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When they returned, Nellie would be back at the depot to meet the train, with Frances and Tommy carrying the fruits of their trip. As the coaches moved on toward Rowley and points north, Nellie would steer her pre-war Plymouth sedan down to the news store for the afternoon paper.

The small shop had its own distinctive smell—mixed aromas of tobacco, candy and newsprint. At the counter she picked up a copy of the *Evening American* that the owner set aside for her every day, so she wouldn't miss getting it if she was late. Less than four years since the end of the war, the news was full of worrisome stories about the spread of communism, and trouble brewing on the Korean Peninsula. The Hearst tabloid always delivered something to be anxious about.

Then it was back to the farm—a little more than a mile from the railroad tracks. Frank would be looking forward to seeing what “Barney Google” and his hapless racehorse “Spark Plug” were up to on the funny pages.

The winter sun was already down, and there would be just enough time for Frances to get supper ready before John was home from work.



SLOW AS EVER, the winter days grew longer. “They increase by the length of a rooster’s step,” Frank liked to say. Eventually winter yielded to spring, and as spring climbed toward summer, the garden was plowed and harrowed, and crops were put in the ground. Meanwhile, the cattle were back out to pasture. And the hayfield was rising quickly.

Sometime after the summer solstice, when the timothy and orchardgrass were getting near two feet high, it was time for the first cutting of hay. The mowing at the end of June 1949 was only the third crop to go into the new haylofts. A good harvest was

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crucial to the milk business. Some years were perfect for hay, with alternating rain and sun. Just as often, the capricious New England weather brought weeks of May and June that were too dry, or that stayed cloudy and wet—either condition holding the threat of a diminished crop. And then came the treacherous part—finding a stretch of several days of fair weather for harvesting.

If it rained while cut grass was on the ground, much of the crop could be spoiled. Every year held the worry that it would be a poor one, worry that *something* would hurt the yield. But, while 1949 was not particularly bad or good, there was at least little risk of loss to an untimely rain. From May through July, the weather was exceptionally dry, and the grass, as a result, was thin and light—more like the weaker second cutting later in the summer.

No matter when the grass is cut, haying is hot work, and that June was unusually warm. Heat wave conditions were almost continuous in the second half of the month. And with all the regular farm work continuing, there was no relief from daybreak to nightfall.

After the morning chores, when some of the dew had burned off, Frank hitched the two-horse team to a sickle-bar mower. Riding the weathered steel seat of the mowing machine, he cut the five acres of lower field, in five foot wide swaths, as he had done dozens of times since taking over the farm after he and Nellie married almost twenty years before.

Frank hadn't set out to be a farmer. He grew up in a farming community in the neighboring town of Rowley—smaller, and more agrarian than Ipswich—but sometime after high school, he had gone to a two-year business college, and, following that, worked at a store in Ipswich. That's where he and Nellie met. Following their marriage, Frank returned to a life that he knew very well.

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After cutting with the machine, Frank took a scythe to the ragged edges where the rig had turned, and finished the job by hand. Later, he came back with the team pulling a dump-rake, going across the field and back, long curved tines combing cut grass into windrows. Through the following two days, that process continued, windrows being turned for the sun to cure the bottom grass—Frank with one eye lifted, watching for any darkening cloud. Finally, when it was dry enough—gone to a kind of pale silvery green—he cocked the hay up into small piles for loading onto the wagon. Jack would be coming, next day, to help get it in.

Jack was Jackie Hoar, or Jack Thompson, as he called himself by then. He was away from the farm more than on it those days, but Jack could be counted on to be there for haying. He knew the farm depended on this crop—and that Frank needed him. Jack had grown to a good six feet or more, muscular and agile, and with all of the stamina required for this labor. He had physical capacity that Frank no longer possessed, but as importantly, he knew the routine—how to build a proper load of hay, each forkful placed so it would stay on the wagon, yet unload easily back at the barn.



THE CHANGE OF JACK'S SURNAME was emblematic, as was his new haircut—grown out long enough to be combed back in the style that James Dean would make popular in the movies. The four years since he left school after tenth grade had been a period of devising his own identity. One part of that took the form of adopting the name of his mother's second husband. A bigger part involved separating himself from the farm. All of it, together, made up the necessary business of figuring out just who he was going to be.

To understand Jack's version of this, it helps to know more about how he had come to Sullivan's Corner. His mother, John

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Clasby's sister Helen, would surely have preferred to raise Jack herself, at home in Boston. But when her marriage broke up, after Jack was born, she was in a difficult position. The elopement with John Hoar had been disapproved of by her family in the first place, and—given the social mores of the time—the subsequent divorce caused further trouble. Helen faced the problem of supporting herself and raising her son in a time before daycare and flexible work hours.

It started as a trial arrangement. Who first proposed the idea is lost with the people that were part of it. The way I've pieced this together is that, as a temporary measure, Helen agreed to have Jack live at the farm for a while, entrusting him to the care of her brother, and Kate and Nellie. While all three were occupied, of course, with their own work, Kate and Nellie had the benefit of a housekeeper at the time, someone who could look after Jack during the day. It was thought that the farm would be a healthy environment for him—at least until Helen could get her own situation sorted out. And the arrangement worked as intended, except it continued until it gradually became permanent.

For Kate and Nellie, having raised him from such a young age, Jack must have come to be the most like a child of their own of any of the boys who ever lived there. And even though Helen remarried when her son was about ten—a man named Walter Thompson—the adults in Jack's life decided that his welfare was best served by remaining at Sullivan's Corner.

It did make sense. That was the world Jack was accustomed to. He was happy and doing well in school, and a return to the city would have disrupted everything. Also, after gaining a civil service appointment and earning several promotions, his mother had by then advanced to a position of some responsibility. So, between the contentment of Jack's situation in Ipswich and the demands of Helen's work and her new married life, the right time just never came for Jack to go home.

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While Helen's second marriage appears to have been much more agreeable, Jack was never really absorbed into it. But, at the risk of reading too much into the change, when it came to defining himself, the Thompson name provided Jack with a way to revise at least one part of the past.

The detachment surfaced in tenth grade. Jack lost all interest in academics, and after making poor grades throughout that school year, declared he wasn't going back. Kate was upset and quite certain that Jack was capable of doing much better, and she and his uncle tried to persuade him to at least finish high school. As an alternative, they proposed he attend Saint John's Prep in nearby Danvers.

Jack took the entrance exam there, scored the highest grade possible, and enrolled the next fall. But he was no happier than before, and by the end of November he had quit school for good. Kate and John were disappointed. They had hoped to see Jack go on to college. Nellie too thought Jack should finish high school, but she would have been just as pleased if Jack had only wanted to continue on the farm. That's not how things went though, and after a while Nellie agreed to buy a car for Jack, so he could look for work off the farm. To do that, she used money that would have been helpful to have soon after, when the barn roof collapsed.

Jack, capable of pursuing any interest, was unmotivated by education and lacked the inclination for farming. In the end, he may have simply been rebelling against a life in which other people had always determined what was best for him. No one ever said it directly, but I think all Jack wanted, at that point, was for the future to be of his own making.

So, there was Jack, in the process of both finding himself and removing himself. In the interval between leaving school, and leaving Sullivan's Corner, he still had his old room and kept many of his things there, but his presence was shrinking. If the measure

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of this informal adoption is complicated, one thing at least seems clear by then. After growing up from childhood on the farm—the last boy to live there and help with the work—Jack was not going to stay.

Although the farm could have been his in the end, if he had wanted it, Jack was taking another path. It wasn't a rejection of those who had cared for him. Jack always remained loyal to them. Most of the seventeen years or more since he arrived there had been woven into the cloth of activity on the farm. He knew its daily routines and its seasonal cycles. He knew when he was needed, and haying was foremost of those times.



BY 1949, baling machines—“square balers”—had been around for many years, but the farm never had one. There was not enough acreage to justify the expense. Instead, Frank and Jack worked along the piles of loose hay in the field with pitchforks—doing the job just as it was done for centuries.

Wearing high-laced black leather work-shoes, Frank stood five-and-a-half feet tall, or would have if not hunched over a bit from the chronic soreness in his midsection. One wouldn't have thought it, seeing that posture, the weathered skin above his collar, and the narrow fringe of hair from temple to temple, but once he had been as lithe and fit as Jack was then.

He still had the strong limbs and back for this work, but he moved sometimes in a crouchy sort of walk, favoring his abdominal muscles to minimize the pain from two unrepaired hernias, and the effects of arthritis developing in his knees. Again and again, Frank would lead the horses on a couple of wagon lengths, then rejoin Jack to continue throwing hay on, until any more would just slide off. In a dozen or so trips to the barn over two days they'd put in eight, maybe nine tons.

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At the barn, the wagon was stopped beneath the high door of the hayloft. First they watered the team, then themselves. The unloading started with Jack lowering the spider-like tongs of the hay-mover into the wagon, while Frank took the other end of the same rope, coming out through the open main doors, and hitched it to one of the horses. Then Frank walked the horse out the driveway, while Jack waited inside, on a platform above the loft floor, for the hay to rise.

As they worked, Nellie walked up from the house to bring salt tablets and see how the job was going. A young boy was right on her heels. That was me, John and Frances' son, curious about what was going on. And experiences like this one were just now beginning to be my own.

That day's activity was a big discovery. I remember being fascinated by the mechanisms and the industry of it—the wordless patterns of the operation: quiet as any summer day, except for the noise of a heavy rope straining through wooden pulleys, lifting the hay to the high door. Then came the sound from the metal wheels of the carriage rolling along a steel rail that hung below the ridge beam. And finally, the whooof of falling hay after Jack pulled the trip cord that opened the tongs and dropped a quarter or maybe a third of the wagonload in the farther loft.

Once the hay was unloaded, Frank returned the horse to the wagon and reattached the harness traces, while Jack worked in the haymow to move the fresh piles out along the sides and into the corners. When everything from the field was in, the main loft would be approaching half-full. With a second cutting, later in the summer, there'd be enough to feed the dairy cows, and the horses, through the next winter.

Meanwhile, watching all this, I had seen something that I wanted to be part of. I wasn't allowed to roam down to the fields yet, but next summer I would plead to be included in the work. And, on a few trips, I would get the customary tasks for children:

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holding the reins while the wagon was filled, and clambering up on top to tramp down the hay. Eventually, of course, I'd simply collapse into it, engulfed by the sweet smell and the surprising feel of it—soft and prickly at the same time. They'd leave me there during the ride back, to “hold the load on,” and I'd sink in deeper still as the wagon shuddered along its way. And those jobs would seem to be real work—like what Frank and Jack did. All of it though was a kind of work that time was running out on.

These scenes of work at the barn and in the field are from a few vivid memories I have from those years. The earliest—only a couple of them, and no more than brief moments really—are from the summer the barn roof was rebuilt. Later came others, like the journeys to Lynn by train. And then, these encounters with haying.

I was in those years when one first uncovers the sense of a self in some surrounding world. Four, going on five, and all these things were just beginning to condense into an awareness of being and place. Much of what I know about the farm in that time begins with this handful of remembered scenes. While a few helpful documents remain, the rest is the residue of things I saw or heard about in the years that followed. I've carried all this—the outlines for these sketches—around in my head for ages now, and many years went by before I realized that the images were growing more sharp and more bright to me, rather than less, even as they were becoming more distant.

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AFTER EACH LOAD WAS IN, and haydust and sweat were mopped from their faces, Frank and Jack turned the wagon for the next trip to the hayfield. As they got under way, the wagon came alongside an old stone wall separating the farm from the adjacent land.

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Walls like this, covered with lichen from two or three centuries of weathering, are everywhere throughout rural New England. They're not the carefully fitted stonework of some walls you see facing onto roadways. These are utilitarian efforts—crudely stacked, thigh-high fences built gradually by the joint labor of the owners on either side, to dispose of boulders pulled from their fields. In their day, they were known by their builders as pasture walls.⁷

Like the Sullivan land, the property on the other side of the wall ran all the way from Topsfield Road to the river. It too had been privately farmed from the division of the town's common fields up through the nineteenth century. Since early in the twentieth century, though, it had had a somewhat different use. Along with a good deal of other open land in town that ceased being engaged in ordinary farming, the property next door had become a country estate—a “summer place”—called Brookfield.

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Brookfield was part of a period known as the “Country Place Era,” when such estates became popular among the well-to-do from cities like Boston. In reaction to the growing number of factories, and swelling populations in the cities, those with means sought refuge from the increasing noise and pollution of urban life in summer houses out in the countryside. Drawn by the presumed restorative qualities of fresh air, they took to acquiring rural land, and converting old farmhouses into summer places—or, in some cases, replacing the old dwellings with expensive mansions.

Over several decades, this movement absorbed the remains of a lot of once productive farmland, and recast the landscape of many old agricultural towns. Ipswich, being on the seacoast as well, attracted a good deal of this activity, and this quarter of town had more than its share.⁸

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While the "Gilded Age" was largely finished by the end of the nineteenth century, country estate life on the North Shore went on—seemingly unaffected, even by the Great Depression. By the war years though, that had begun to change, and after the war, many of the once grand properties were broken up, or sold off to other uses. And for a while Brookfield was one that stood vacant.



FOLLOWING THE OLD WALL, on the way back for another load of hay, the wagon carried Frank and Jack along the same path the cows took to pasture—through a wooden gate behind the barn, down the gentle slope of the orchard, and on past the garden field. At the end of the garden, Frank would call out, “gee there, come gee now,” and give a light tug on the rein in his right hand to turn the team that way and keep on the edge of the first of two meadows—the one used for pasture. The mowing field lay on the other side of a small rise just beyond the far corner of the pasture.

The soil of both the pasture and hay fields, like much of the low-lying land in town, is what geologists call glacio-marine deposit, dating to a time at the end of the last glacier, when the sea extended farther inland. Being not much higher than the river, the ground of both meadows is wet every year in the spring.

Along the far edge of the more distant mowing field is another glacial feature. Rising out of the meadow—like a wooded island between the field and the river—is a broad, steep-sided mound of sand and gravel known in geological terms as a “kame,” stratified drift material deposited in a hole in the wasting Wisconsin ice sheet. Cresting some forty-five feet above the river, two to three hundred yards beyond, it was too small of a hill to have a formal name, but it was known on the farm as “the knoll.”⁹

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Moving on toward the knoll and the mowing field before it, the wagon's route turned again — “haw” this time — and joined the old cart path coming in from Mill Road. The cart track passed along the far edge of the pasture, up the rise to a gravel pit, then down again, on to the hayfield.

Glancing back across both fields, one saw the house of the Brookfield estate — set on higher ground just beyond the stone wall, and looking out onto the pasture. It's a rambling Federal style structure that began as an early eighteenth-century farmhouse, built by Robert Wallis, then expanded and embellished by later owners. Since 1915 it had been the summer home of George and Mary DeBlois. But after George's death in 1939, and through the war years, the property had been unoccupied.

Four years back though, right after the war, the estate was bought by new owners — Crocker and Janice Snow. The Snows' arrival in town was a matter of some local fascination. Janice Vaughan came from a prominent North Shore family, and had lived abroad for a number of years. Crocker was a noted pioneer in civil aviation, and had just returned from a long and distinguished tour of duty, flying in the war. The two shared a passion for horses and riding, and in purchasing this property, they sought a comfortable place to raise a family that would be engaged in all manner of equestrian activity.¹⁰

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THE FARM SHARED A BOUNDARY with the eighty-five acres of Snow land that ran a full half-mile, from the road to the river. So, once they were settled in, the Snows paid a call at the Sullivan house to introduce themselves. During the meeting, Mr. Snow explained that he planned to put in an airstrip for his own use. Actually, the deciding factor in choosing the DeBlois place was that it had an area in the length — and orientation — needed for

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a runway. Having returned to his pre-war position as Director of Civil Aeronautics for Massachusetts, Snow had also wanted a site that would be only a short flight to his office at Logan Airport.

Hearing this plan, Frank grew concerned by the prospect. In a tone near apology he noted that, despite the stone wall between them, his cows had a tendency to get off the farm from time to time, and stray onto the neighboring land. Untroubled, Mr. Snow proceeded to explain that the location of the grass airstrip would be well away from the low meadow area favored by the cows. Then, realizing that Frank's worry was really a more general one about boundaries and rural traditions of accommodation on such matters, Crocker went on to reassure him, "Now, Mr. Smith, you feel free to come on our land anytime you have to. No need to worry any further about that." It had been a cordial meeting, and Frank, Nellie and Kate were all pleased to have neighbors across the wall again.

In 1949, though, after several years in the old house above the pasture, the Snows began building a very modern style home down on their river frontage. When that was completed and they moved there, in the next year, they would sell the DeBlois house, along with six and a half acres, to a couple named Lawrence and Jane White. Within a very few years of this transfer the interests of the Sullivans and the Whites would intersect with lasting consequences.