

SULLIVAN'S CORNER

THE LAST YEARS OF THE FARM

POST # ONE

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PART ONE — AS THINGS WERE

THE BACKDROP
&
WHO WAS THERE

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THE BACKDROP

The road from Ipswich to Topsfield runs by Sullivan's Corner going roughly east-west, about five miles from the railroad tracks at the edge of downtown Ipswich, till it meets the Newburyport Turnpike—U.S. Route 1—in the neighboring town. Along the way, in the margin between upland and areas of former meadow, it traces the lower contours of a row of drumlin hills made of ice-laid glacial till. The road is also loosely parallel with a meandering old river, although the distance between them varies a good deal—more than half a mile apart some places, actually coming together at the Willowdale Dam, near Topsfield. The location that was once called Sullivan's Corner is on the other side of the road from the hills, the river side, falling about midway between Bush and Scott hills—the second and third mounds coming out from Ipswich.

This land had been farmed since long before the arrival of European explorers, and establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Some of the first pastures used by English colonists who founded the town were openings in the fertile river plains cleared by Algonquian tribes who camped in the region seasonally for millennia. Native women had used the fields for raising corn, squash and other crops, while the men took fish from the coastal waters.

For three centuries following the Puritan migration to this continent, the new settlers and their successors drew a livelihood out of the stony

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ground. The character of the farming changed over time, along with the origins and inclinations of the people doing it, but there was a common thread in the continuity of people doing the timeless work of producing food that sustained their community.

The route to Topsfield began as a driftway traveled by colonial cowherds driving the village cattle out to graze on common pastureland in the meadows along the river. Within three generations though, descendants of the original town proprietors, and later arrivals, faced pressures from a growing population, and abandoned the practice of pasturing their stock in common fields.¹

After about 1700, the shared expanses of pasture and tillage land gave way to private farms as the proprietors began apportioning shares of the common land among themselves, and established individual titles of ownership. With that, farmsteads spread along the outlying roads—away from the central village—and, from then on, the land was worked by successive generations of independent farmers.

Some of the last land to be farmed along Topsfield Road was at Sullivan's Corner. The farm there stretched from the road to the river, where they're somewhat farther apart, and where another road intersects from the south-west. Its boundaries changed a few times over the years, but from the beginning of the twentieth century the farm occupied an irregular and elongated area of about thirty-four acres. On its lower extremity the farm was bounded by four hundred feet of the river, while the northern edge, on Topsfield Road, was the shortest of any—just a hundred and twenty feet, corner to corner.

This is a story about the last years of that farm.

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PART ONE
AS THINGS WERE

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A WIRE RACK BESIDE THE FRONT DOOR of the newer house held two quart bottles of milk. The Hood man had taken back two empties and continued on his route. And the milk, beginning to freeze in the pre-dawn cold, was starting to push up paper caps that showed it to be Pasteurized, Homogenized, and Grade A.

An aging refrigerator in the older house across the way contained a pitcher of milk that was actually fresher, and Frances could have had all she wanted of that, for free, if she were willing to forego the benefits of dairy processing and trust her family's welfare to milk straight from the cow.

It was mid-winter, and almost the midpoint of the twentieth century. Frances had lived in the newer house since her marriage, a little more than a year ago, and, so far, had stood fast in her belief that the modern practices she'd grown used to were bypassed at her peril. This was one of a very few points of friction that had surfaced with her husband's family. But for Frances, whose disposition and natural red hair were well matched, this was one point she was unwilling to yield on—on logic, or temperament.

Nellie Smith, equally strong-willed, scoffed at this unnecessary expense when good milk—"and none better"—was available every day from her own cows. But she knew Frances' view was formed in the city, and she expected, or at least hoped that, with

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time, John's wife would come around. After all, Frances had been welcoming of the fresh garden produce in summer, and appeared equally pleased with the eggs from hens her husband kept. For Frances Clasby though, forty years old at the time, views on many matters were pretty well fixed, and this offer of milk in its raw form was one benefit of farm life she was not about to embrace.

This was early in 1945. The turmoil of the second great war of the century continued, although the outcome seemed clear and only a matter of time.

By April, Harry Truman will have been installed as president, following Franklin Roosevelt's death in office. And a few days after that, the German army will have surrendered, ending the long conflict in Europe. The war had pulled the country's economy out of its Great Depression, and in Ipswich — as across the nation — hope was building for a return to some sort of familiar order.

In the new house, Frances and John Clasby were in their second year of marriage, with a first child just months old. If there was any unhappiness in their lives, there's no evidence of it. They shared in the same air of confident optimism that was growing all around them.

The year before, John's foster mother, Katherine Sullivan, had retired from a life of teaching in the town schools. She and her sister Ellen — Nellie, also a teacher — had both lived all of their lives on this farm, which their father began operating on Topsfield Road some seventy-five years ago. Kate and Nellie, and Nellie's husband Frank Smith, and the Clasbys, and Jackie Hoar, John's nephew, were all living there, on the farm. Jackie, in tenth grade at Ipswich High School, had been there with the Sullivans, and his uncle, since before he was three years old.

This group made up an unusual sort of extended family, bound together by varying mixtures of blood and marriage and circumstance and chance. They were also bound to the place itself by

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ties of several sorts. The farm hadn't changed much over the years, and had long been a comfortable home to its residents, but the ten years just ahead were about to depart from that, and test all of them.



THE PREVIOUS JUNE, when Kate Sullivan left her position as principal of the Winthrop School, had been a time of high emotions. Her teaching career spanned fifty-one years. She had started at a one-room schoolhouse on the road to Rowley, and later taught classes in the grammar and middle school grades at the Winthrop, and been principal of both the Manning and Winthrop Schools. A month before, there was a public tribute that, from a published account at the time, filled the high school auditorium with seven hundred people—from a town of fewer than seven thousand—former students and fellow teachers, people from town and some from far away. At least one person was there to represent every class she had taught.

An editorial in the town's weekly newspaper testified to the high regard for her work. "It would be difficult to name a person who has done more for the town in the past half-century than this quiet-spoken woman ... The principles she has instilled in these children, who have subsequently grown to adults and contributed much to life, [are] still bearing fruit."²

The numerous affirmations from past students whose lives had profited from Kate's efforts seem fitting. Consistent with the social expectations for teachers of her era, she never married, but instead had dedicated herself to her profession—giving her attention to the lives of the children in her classrooms. Many were influenced by her guidance, in school and beyond. But none were more greatly affected than some who, as it happened, also came to live at the farm.

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While neither Kate or her sister Nellie had children of their own, together they were guardians to a number of boys they took into their home in foster care. So, in addition to the Sullivans, any account of the farm also needs to mention the ways in which three of their wards—John Clasby and Jackie Hoar, and Tommy O'Brien—were entwined with the story of the farm through its final years.



A FEW OTHER LIVES were also braided in with those at the farm. One was Frances' mother.

For all that was good in her life, including her older brother's safe return from the war, Frances was entering a difficult, if common, passage. In the spring of 1946, her father suffered a stroke and died at home in Lynn, some twenty miles away. Then, that summer, her younger brother, Emmett, died suddenly from an accident at the age of thirty-eight. And in that same period came the recognition that her mother's memory was failing.

Neighbors in West Lynn were noticing little things, and reports started coming back from people at the stores where she had accounts. At seventy-six, Margaret O'Connell was having trouble with everyday affairs. Soon there were problems that made it clear she could no longer be on her own.

Although Frances' brother, Vincent, and sister, Constance, were both living with their mother at the time, they each had jobs that kept them away from home throughout the day—more than was safe for Margaret. They discussed the matter with Frances and John, and the conclusion was that Margaret would go and live with her daughter in Ipswich.

Her stay at Sullivan's Corner was not a long one. She lived there through four seasons, if not a full year. In mid-August 1947, Margaret had a fall, and a broken hip. The bone was repaired at

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Cable Memorial Hospital in town, but while that was mending pneumonia set in, and she was gone in a matter of weeks. On October 1, she died at the Cable.

There's little evidence of her time in Ipswich—a few snapshots and a piece of eight-millimeter home-movie film. In the movie scene, she is watching, visibly amused, as a red-haired boy, almost three, chases an unfortunate Rhode Island Red hen back and forth across the lawn.

Thinking of her brief time there, one finds a small irony, or maybe more of a symmetry. Margaret was an émigré from Ireland, and before arriving in America as Margaret Ryan, in her teens and unmarried, she had left a rural area deep in County Cork, where her family had farmed the same piece of land for twelve generations. While she spent most of her life here in urban places—first in New York City, and the last four decades in Lynn—the setting for the final year of her life was a farm not terribly different from the one where she was born. Even if not always sure of where she was then, it's likely Margaret recognized the lowing of cattle, the smell of tilled earth, and the patterns of daily life.



MEANWHILE, as Kate settled into retirement, much about the farm was as it long had been. This was small-scale, mixed husbandry, as practiced for ages throughout New England: a dairy herd at the core, with the occasional cow or hog raised for meat. There were poultry and eggs, and a garden and small orchard that used to send produce to the open-air markets in Salem and Newburyport. The kind of productive, self-sufficient enterprise that once was commonplace. But cultural changes that had been accelerating since the onset of the Industrial Age continued, and, with the end of the war, new forms of social and economic structure were taking shape.

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While the Sullivan farm continued in its customary practices during the years after the war, the town around it—just like the nation—entered a period erupting with newness. As Americans reset their course for the future, everything was subject to refashioning, and remnants of age-old modes fell away, almost unnoticed.

There are family photographs from that time, but the likenesses they capture are incomplete, at best. And there are almost no pictures of the place itself—or the working parts of it anyway. But I was there then, and much of that world is imprinted in my memory. So, perhaps I can make a set of sketches, in words, that show more of the place and its people and their lives as they passed through those years.