

SULLIVAN'S CORNER

THE LAST YEARS OF THE FARM

POST # FOUR



PART ONE — AS THINGS WERE

THE WORLD NEARBY

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LOOKING AROUND IPSWICH in 1950 a visitor from the present would be hard pressed to know what decade it was. During this period right after the war the town was a place of almost indeterminate time. Most dwellings predated the early twentieth century—some near three hundred years old, few less than ten.

In the business district, there was nothing visibly new either. The depot where my mother and I got the train dated from the early 1880s. It was the same depot where my father arrived when he first came to the farm, and where he used to wait for the train, too—in the years before he had his own automobile—to get to his work in Lynn.

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The depot stood by itself, at one end of Market Street, the first notable structure past the tracks when coming into town on Topsfield Road. Adjacent, to the north, were two smaller buildings: a baggage house and a freight barn for the R E A.

The station had two waiting rooms—separate, mirror-image spaces to either side of a central ticket office and telegraph desk. One was for women and those traveling with them. In the other, tobacco and a more liberal vocabulary could be used. They were ample in size—near

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twenty by thirty feet each—and furnished with dark wooden slat benches along the walls. Despite tall windows, both rooms were poorly lit—daylight from the outside dimmed by a coating of dust and soot on the glass. There was a cast-iron coal stove at the center of each, for heat in the winter. And at a vending machine mounted to one wall a traveler could buy a tiny cardboard packet with two tablets of chewing gum—Adams, I think, or maybe Beeman's.

There were doors into both waiting rooms from Depot Square, and others out to the boarding platform where steel-wheeled freight wagons stood by, waiting to load or receive packages and mail from trains on either of two sets of tracks. Freight service still came through too—no longer hauling the large shipments of hay that, decades before, went to the Haymarket in Boston, or stockings from the Hayward mill, just up the tracks. Increasingly, the freight was made up of in-coming loads of building materials for new homes.

The Boston & Maine railroad had a durable reputation for being under-capitalized, and by this time its profits were about to go into an unstoppable decline. But the frequent thunder of steam locomotives pulling their clattering, time-worn coaches along tracks that curved into and out of the station area was still a major animation at the edge of downtown. And for all of its financial woes and aging equipment, the railway was also the source of a recent incursion of modernity: automatic crossing gates.

The town had resisted this change for a while due to misgivings of residents about reliability. But finally the B&M got permission, and had begun replacing manual gates, and their tenders, at grade crossings in town. They hadn't yet changed near the depot, where the tracks crossed Topsfield Road on a skew. There, for every passing train, a man still emerged from a wooden shanty to crank down, and then raise, the yellow-and-black striped wooden barriers.

In contrast to the newness of the automated gates at other crossings—with their flashing lights and ringing bells—most of the automobiles they were there to stop seemed to have been made before

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the war. For that matter, it was not unusual—beyond downtown—for cars to pass the occasional horse-drawn wagon plodding along at the edge of a road. It might as easily have been 1925 as 1950.

The factory in town, once a hosiery mill, had changed owners and products over the years, and was retooling again since its wartime work, but it looked the same as before. On the tidal flats, clam digging occupied some residents, and along the bigger creeks and the lower part of the river there were a few small boatyards. But most of the open land in town—aside from the estate properties—was engaged in agriculture, as it had been from the start. To all appearance, the town remained an active farming community.

The town's annual report for 1950 continued its long practice of giving counts compiled by the Inspector of Animals: 594 milking cows ... 165 heifers ... 24 bulls ... 71 horses, and so on for sheep, pigs, goats, and steers. In addition, a separate Milk Inspector reported on the number of dairy barns and milk rooms inspected. The fact that change was underway was soon to be reflected here, though. While similar detail was presented again the following year—with some shrinkage in the numbers—the report for 1952 replaced these tallies with a terse overview: "All farms were made to comply with the State Health Dept. Code."¹¹

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AT SULLIVAN'S CORNER, the future began arriving in 1950.

Until then—while the newer house had a modern electric range, and an up-to-date refrigerator—we had been without our own telephone. The farmhouse had long had one, since Kate and Nellie needed it for their school positions, and that had seemed close enough for us to share. Up till that point, if something was important enough for a phone call, one went over to the old house for it.

The latest thing in communications though—television—was another matter. It had suddenly become both affordable and

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irresistible. In January, a TV set was installed in the Clasby house. And before the end of the year, there was a telephone too. My father and mother, along with Kate and Jackie, had seen television demonstrated ten years earlier, at the World's Fair in New York. They had all gone together, during the second year of the fair, to view "The World of Tomorrow." But the new medium had lain dormant while the nation was at war.

Finally, it had arrived. There were two stations on the air from Boston, WBZ and WNAC, and it was plain that television would be the next big thing. The set my parents bought—an Admiral table model with a ten-inch black-and-white screen—cost them half a month of my father's salary. At first, there wasn't much to watch. Broadcast fare was mostly popular radio programs that moved over to the new medium, and, in their early years, neither channel ran anything but a "test pattern" during the daytime.

If having a television set at that point was still uncommon, one would expect telephones to be universal. Telephone service had been around for decades, yet, surprisingly, was not in as many homes as you might suppose. In the Ipswich street directory that year, there were listings for only about half the residential addresses.

Phone calls were not that frequent, and many relied—as we did—on a neighbor when something urgent came up. But, for my mother, the advantages in coordinating visits with her sister, as well as the approaching start of school for me in the fall meant the time had come to have a telephone in the house.

Very soon it became indispensable. Instead of going across the yard in bad weather, my mother could pick up the receiver, wait for an operator at the switchboard in town to come on, and request "...town, 4-7-6-J, please," to call next door and check on how Kate was doing, or when Nellie's next trip to town would be. Ours was a four-party line, just like most everyone else's—one common number shared with three other New England Telephone customers. The operator would connect our phone with

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line 4-7-6, and then push the button for ring pattern “J”—a double ring—that told everyone on 4-7-6 which house the call was for. And generally everyone followed an honor system of not listening in on each other’s business.

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AT THE END OF THE WEEK, my mother might ring 4-7-6-J to ask Nellie if there was anything she needed from town. Friday evening was shopping night for us—and a chance to repay some of Nellie’s favors. First though, like every night after dad got home from work, was supper.

Friday night’s meal was fish, always. Sometimes fresh—had-dock or halibut, in both houses, if Nellie had been to the fish market. Just as often, it was a salmon casserole or fried codfish cakes made with fish from a can. Then we went to town.

It was an unvarying routine. Primarily it was for provisions for the week ahead, but on Friday all the shops were open till eight, so often there were other errands too—something from the dime store, or material for a weekend project from one of the two hardware stores.

The hardware stores were much alike, with similar stock—including some version of open metal bins with loose nails, a steel claw to drag the nails into a paper bag, and a scale for weighing them—but we bought only from Ciolek’s. I remember Mr. Ciolek as amiably gruff, though always attentive. It was just for his own convenience, I suppose, but to him, I was always “Jackie”—same as my cousin. My father may have tried to correct him; I don’t think that I ever did, even when I had grown up.

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All the stores in town were small, and most of the principal ones were located on a single block of Market Street at the other end from the depot. On the north side alone, in little more than a hundred yards between Goodhue's—the other hardware store—and Central Street, were the savings bank and nine individual shops, including separate clothiers for men and women, and a First National Store. There was also an archaic A&P market—with sawdust on the floor—where we went for fresh ground coffee. But the rest of our groceries were bought at the First National. People thought of it as a "supermarket," and yet the whole place would probably fit within the produce department of a store we call that today. Nonetheless, most of what we needed was there.

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ON FRIDAY NIGHTS, Market Street was busy with people—most shopping, some going to a movie at the Strand—nearly all following routines that repeated every week. One could expect to see familiar faces, at the same spots, each Friday. In any shop we went into, my parents were almost sure to encounter someone—clerk, or proprietor, or another customer—who would ask to be remembered to Kate or Nellie. The conversations were becoming more economical though, as, increasingly, people were wanting to get home for the Friday evening TV programs.

If we were back by 7:45, there was the *Camel News Caravan* on WBZ—a newsreel summary of national and world events. Groceries were put away while the set warmed up on that, and at eight we'd assemble in front of the screen and change to channel 7 for the sentimental (*I Remember*) *Mama*. After that came *Man against Crime*, and, as I was packed off to bed, my father would start his weekly task of preparing beans for baking on Saturday.

A pound or so of dried navy beans, or once in a while kidney beans, were washed and put into a bowl of water to soak overnight. In the morning, he'd combine those with salt pork and molasses

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and some mustard powder, in a stoneware crock, and bring that over to the old house to cook all day along with Nellie's. It was one of the customs that endured for a while in this time of change, a ritual that went on at the end of every week, from the time my father and mother moved into their house, until we changed to canned beans after Nellie's death.

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Other than ordinary political turbulence, and the occasional troubling development in world events—much like life today—the midpoint of the century was an optimistic period for the whole nation. People were back at peacetime jobs, and American industry was turning out all manner of newly affordable goods: electric kitchen ranges, laundry machines, vacuum cleaners, and televisions for all the new homes being built. There were material comforts available for purchase that were barely imagined a decade before.

Two towns away, contractors were at work on a beltway road that would connect Gloucester and Cape Ann with communities west and south of Boston. The new highway was a response to personal mobility that had been increasing since the 1920s. Even before the war, town centers were becoming congested with cars that were just traveling through on their way to someplace else. But, surpassing its purpose of accommodating some of that traffic, Route 128 would go on to become famous as “America’s Technology Highway.” It was a time of enthusiasm for rebuilding the world, and this was a society confident that it could do anything it set its mind to. The oncoming tide of change met little resistance.

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THE TENOR OF LIFE around the farm seemed to reflect the national mood of contentment and the underlying expectation of an ever improving world. At that point, the only circumstance casting a noticeable shadow on the days at Sullivan's Corner was the matter of Kate's health.

Since the Parkinson's came on, four or five years earlier, her condition had been gradually deteriorating. In her teaching years, Kate was a commanding presence, taller than the average woman then, and erect in bearing, if slightly stiff from an old back injury. She was, by all accounts, the epitome of a well-ordered schoolmistress—meticulous and exacting by nature, indulgent when called for. If she had a reputation for steely resolve, it most likely came from the softly penetrating gaze of one used to being in a position of authority—accustomed from her many classrooms to hearing any request answered with, “Yes, Miss Sullivan.”

Gradually though, as the year wore on, the disease was eroding those traits, or masking them anyway, as she became increasingly frail, and finally, bedridden. No longer was Kate the steady guiding figure presiding over school—or farmstead.