

SULLIVAN'S CORNER

THE LAST YEARS OF THE FARM

POST # SEVEN



PART TWO — WHAT BECAME OF IT ALL

THE STAND

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THE STAND

THE FARM made little money in those last years. From a business standpoint, even if you discount the value of labor, it couldn't have been much better than a break-even proposition. It's possible even that, in the period just before her retirement, Nellie's income from teaching was subsidizing the operation. In a way, it seems the farm kept going mostly from the momentum of so many years—and because Nellie couldn't bear to see it stop.

In 1953 there was one horse left, Joe, a Percheron, black as tarpaper and standing a good sixteen hands—about the same height at the withers as Frank was tall. So, Frank could still plow and harrow the garden and do the occasional odd job—like field mowing for neighbor Emily Scott, who had acquired the greater part of Jimmy Appleton's land, at the other end of Mill Road.¹⁹

And there still was money from turkeys at Thanksgiving and Christmas, although not a lot, after deducting the cost of feed. As little as the milk earned, at least that had offset taxes on the property, and more.

In retirement, Nellie's income was, of course, less than what she earned teaching. And they no longer had the contribution of Kate's pension. Even if they had, such retirement stipends were modest. Teacher salaries might have helped support the farm, but their pensions would not. Those were adequate for sustaining

SULLIVAN'S CORNER

retired single women living in small quarters. And Social Security had no part in it—not for teachers, covered by those small pensions. And not for farmers either, as far as that went. Not at the time.

So, while the farm had enjoyed relative comfort in the 1920s, and even through the Depression—when they had still been able to afford a hired housekeeper who took over after Mary's death—the return of prosperity after the war did not reach there. Things were very lean, and some other source of income would be a great help.

With time freed up by the departure of the dairy cows, Frank came up with one. He had been talking with Harry Bell, a sometime poultry man who once lived on Topsfield Road. They both had noticed the increasing car traffic in summer as more and more people came to town to visit Crane's Beach. Indeed, Frank's index for that might well have been the number of times people stopped at the corner to check their directions. After four miles of narrow winding road since turning off Route 1, many would stop at the junction with Mill Road, and come to the house to ask if this was where they should turn for the beach. It was not. But, together, he and Harry hatched an idea and agreed to be partners in it. At this place where folks were inclined to pull off the road for help, the two of them would open a store.

An ad hoc farm stand had been a seasonal fixture there for years—baskets and boxes on a table by the roadside, filled with whatever produce was coming out of the garden. Where the table with vegetables and fruit used to be placed, they would put an ice cream stand catering to beach-goers—on their way, or coming back. In the fall, they'd add apples from the orchard. Plus, Harry realized, there was business to be had all week long—selling coffee and cold drinks and potato chips to the tradesmen at work on the new houses going up all around.

THE STAND

As soon as winter's frost was out of the ground, they started building. For a floor slab, Frank hauled gravel from the pit in a horse-drawn tipcart, and Harry hooked up the farm's cement mixer to a belt-drive from the back wheel of his father's Model A Ford. Then, using planks and lengths of pipe for rollers, the three of them — Frank, Harry, and the horse, Joe — pulled the bean-drying shed and another small structure, out to the roadside, nailed them together, and put in windows with sliding panels and a service counter.

Harry ran electricity and water out from the house, did the wiring and plumbing, and put in a third-hand freezer case, some shelving and an old cash register. He had no regular occupation. Harry was just good with anything mechanical, and was often around the farm fixing one thing or another. And he got by like that, on a patchwork of whatever tasks came his way—the embodiment of a Jack-of-all-trades. When the store was ready, he painted the signs for it.

They called their business the Grasshopper Plains Store. The name was an old designation for a section of Rowley that Frank knew from his youth, but he had long ago adopted it as a wry description for his own fields. The name was memorable, and that suited both of them. They opened in the summer of 1953, with six or eight flavors of ice cream—just the basics—and a choice of waffle or sugar cones.

Harry, twenty-something years Frank's junior and unmarried, operated the store most of the time, with Frank joining him during busy periods. The two were similar in size, or height anyway. Harry was thin and wiry. He was a bit twitchy too, hard of hearing, and wore heavy glasses.

Harry was also a ready source of practical know-how, though, and made himself available for advice on all sorts of boyhood projects that Johnny Andreozzi and I got into. Rigging up our own telegraph system between two of the outbuildings, for instance.

SULLIVAN'S CORNER

Some of his knowledge was far-fetched, I guess. I remember him showing us how to dowse for water using a slender fork of a tree branch. Holding it *just so*, he claimed to be able to find a spot above an underground stream, and relied on this when choosing the location for drilling a well, another of his occasional jobs.

In the slow hours at the store, Harry let us hang around and pore through back issues of *Argosy* and *True Detective*, while he made plaster-of-Paris copies of figurines like “The Old Salt”—the familiar Cape Ann fisherman in yellow sou’wester—which he put out for tourists who were short on souvenirs.



MEANWHILE, in order to have fruit for sale in the fall, the apple trees needed attention.

The orchard, like the rest of the farm, was modest, but apples thrive in the New England geology and climate, and its yield in years past had been substantial. The apple trees were arranged in a kind of haphazard grid—roughly eighteen of them, spread across an acre that lapped over the turkey yard on one edge and the main garden on another. Most were McIntosh. Of the others, I remember a Yellow Transparent—which I liked because it ripened in mid-summer—and a winter apple, Northern Spy—that was Frank’s favorite. There was also a large Crabapple, whose fruit was used, before my time, for making preserves.

In recent years, the orchard had gotten less care than it needed. As a result, the fruit was of poor quality, suffering from scab and other blights, and most of what was picked went cheap to the McLeods at Goodale Orchards or to Dodge in Rowley for cider pressing. The new stand, however, brought the opportunity for selling apples again, like before the war. So, that summer, the orchard sprayer was revived.

THE STAND

The Sullivan farm never had much motorized equipment. From the beginning, the strength and versatility of horses had been sufficient. Until mid-century, for fields of this size, tractors were not that common. In a time of marginal revenues, the heavy draft horse remained inexpensive to keep, and capable of the work to be done. But there was a mechanical device that had become popular on farms in the 1920s: the “hit-and-miss” utility engine—and Frank had one of those. It was a primitive gasoline motor that could be moved about from one use to another, and was shared by two pieces of wagon-mounted machinery: the cordwood saw, and a power spray pump used for treating the fruit trees in the orchard.

The motor itself was transfixing to watch—a heavily built, single-piston, mechanical beast that looked like an inside-out display of how internal combustion works. All of the operating parts seemed to be exposed. A pair of flywheels, one on either side, gave it momentum to keep going, while rocker cams and connecting rods pushed valves open and shut. Frank started it by heaving the flywheels around till it caught, and once it was running it became obvious how the engine got its name. It fired just often enough to keep itself going—throbbing away in a rapid syncopation. It was a definition of rudimentary, but the twin flywheels produced enough torque for any number of uses.

For orchard work, the hit-and-miss was mounted on the pump wagon, and connected to a cast-iron spray pump with a three-inch-wide drive belt. A rubber hose came off the pump and went to a metal tube on a long pole for reaching the tops of the trees. The rest of the wagon carried a large wooden tank that, if full, could easily hold a hundred gallons. There, Frank mixed a solution of water and powdered arsenate-of-lead.

Then, old Joe was hitched to the wagon and pulled it down through the orchard. The trees were full-size, not today’s dwarf varieties—and they were beginning to be over-grown—but Frank got them pruned and sprayed enough to assure a decent harvest.

SULLIVAN'S CORNER

The Grasshopper Plains Store did sell apples in the fall, although, once again, many ultimately went to cider. Most of the revenue came from the summer ice cream sales—at thirteen cents for a cone with one scoop, eighteen cents for two scoops.

The ice cream itself was bought in three-gallon tubs from a commercial dairy processor, so the stand probably drew a lot of its appeal from the backdrop of old farm buildings, and their suggestion of “home made.” And it did pretty good business on hot days. First year profit was slight, given the expense of setting up, but it was enough to encourage reopening the next year.