SULLIVAN'S CORNER
THE LAST YEARS OF THE FARM

POST # TEN
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PART TWO — WHAT BECAME OF IT ALL

WHAT REMAINS
&
LOOKING ABOUT

What Remains

EVENTUALLY the river land was sold too. After a while, Frank and my parents reconsidered the prospects for the wooded knoll that Nellie couldn't bear to part with. Without the force of her emotional ties, they were unable to find any likely purpose for it. The remoteness, the long driveway to reach it, seemed to make her hopes for it too improbable. Jack was settled, advancing in his work, and happy in Gloucester. Some new expenses were coming up. And, all told, any other possible future must have appeared to be very far off.

There was a standing offer from Larry White, so they let it go to be rejoined with the fields. The isolated garden plot, where the last sweet corn grew, went as well. By deed, the land on the river was said to contain about ten acres. And the price for both, combined, was twelve hundred and fifty dollars. With that, the property held by Frank and my father and mother returned to what was—it turns out—the same four acres that Eugene Sullivan started with.

In bits and pieces, the material remains of the farm were dismembered. Things that seemed to have been there forever were suddenly gone. Howie Kent, from Rowley, bought the old kitchen stove, the orchard spray pump, and the hit-and-miss engine for

scrap value, and came back later for the plows and harrows that had no horse to pull them. People from new ranch houses stopped and asked for wagon wheels to use as driveway ornaments. The hay-rake went to the Andreozzis to be a feature at the edge of Benny's flower garden.

For a while, unexpectedly, the barn got a little more use when a couple of stalls were rented to a neighbor to keep riding horses. It was a short reprieve. The foundation sills were going — more costly to repair than any foreseeable return.

After Frank died, early in 1962, the house on the corner was sold. The barn and a couple remaining buildings went with it. The stand was the first to go. The barn stood another five or six years. But for the new owner it had no real use, and was becoming a hazard, and finally it was pulled down and burned where it fell.

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WELL, TIMES CHANGE. Over the years, farms evolve as farmers adapt to their times — to market forces, and notions of what will bring a good return. The areas of the farm that were turkey yard and orchard had other uses before. A photo of my father and another boy, taken in 1920, shows them in an open field below the barn, pausing from their work digging potatoes there. What for me was fenced in and planted with fruit trees, only became that during Frank's tenure.

Things end too. Till the last, they all had simply done what farm people do — replant, rebuild, start over again. But the day of this kind of small general farm finally just ebbed away. The town, and life in it, had moved on.

When Mill Road was new, the town had been an expansive patchwork of open meadowland, cultivated fields and orchard — with some incidental woodlots. Then, as American agriculture moved away to the west, open land here, left fallow,

began yielding to succession growth. As the twentieth century pressed on, much of the acreage that had been laboriously cleared of old growth forest gradually grew back to woods again.

By 1962, Topsfield Road — and other roads like it — had become straighter and wider. Sidewalks were still scarce, but the roadways were lined with homes, and busy with the traffic of cars and people coming and going. And the construction was nowhere near done. Side roads were springing into any available open field or re-wooded hillside.[20]

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ELEVEN YEARS LATER — eighteen years after Nellie's death — when the Whites had grown older, they sold their home, and broke up the property so that two additional houses could be built — one on the rise above the land that was hayfield and one in the woods on the other side of the knoll. The old cart path became the driveway to them.

There are fragments of the farm left, even today, and they help renew these images. The two houses at the corner are still there. My brother lives in the one we grew up in. At Thanksgiving, and other times, my wife and I visit Dan and his family. More often, I'm there to use the tools in the shop on some project.

The land that Kate and Nellie granted to my parents grew to include the little orchard. Now I'm the one who walks down there. When there's time, I work at clearing the brush that's always trying to grow in, and pile the cuttings to burn the following winter. I enjoy the solitude of the work, and I'm grateful for it. It's a task that removes one from the noise and abstraction of the world beyond.

Rusting cylinders of ten-gallon milk cans, once central to the dairy work, collapse onto the cement slab left from an otherwise

vanished field shed that once housed them. They're merging into something that looks like a common boulder left by the glacier. On another slab are a walk-behind cultivator, a dried-out leather horse collar and several whippletrees — perforated by generations of beetles. The place is a small, temporary trove of agricultural archeology.

There's a soapstone sink on the ground at one edge of the orchard area. It went there from the kitchen of the old house, and had a second life as a watering trough. Now it holds half a spool of barbed wire. And here and there on the ground nearby are small porcelain cylinders — insulators from an electrified fence which once enclosed the area. Those are the last traces of the farm.

In a few more years there may be no visible remains. All but a couple of the apple trees are gone now, and the small field that's left needs to be mowed once or twice each summer to keep it from returning to woodland. Still, long since the departure of the animals, and the last rows of garden vegetables, an almost tangible past inhabits the place, particularly when a warm breeze sweeps through grass getting high enough for haying.

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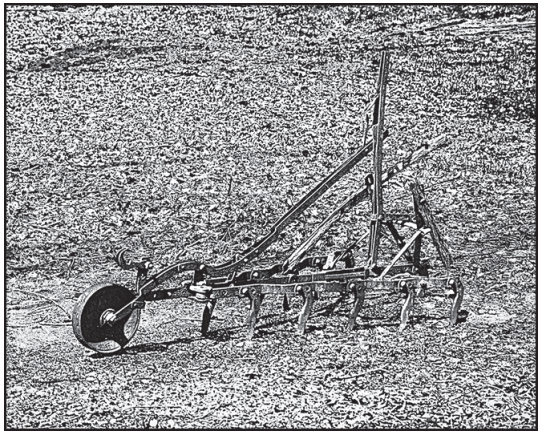
WHAT LASTS ANYWAY? The spring where cows drank in the pasture has grown invisible from years of decomposed grass that filled the well hole. And the ditch that drained the meadows to the river has gone the same way. Our impositions on the land are gradually, but always, reclaimed by natural forces.

At the end, it was a place that had gotten out of step with time, and perhaps was only special because of that. Certainly, it was a past no more perfect than the present, it simply was made of things that were different from the world that came after.

As more years pass, what little is left of the farm will decay further and fade away with the memories of one who wandered those fields and woods — memories so indelible, of such ordinary things, that they could only have formed during the years of childhood.

Yes, things end. What's left then is not really tangible, exactly, and yet it seems no less real. Memories of such things go on for those who remain, and keep important parts of the world as they once were. These recollections bring back lives made of simple substance — ever busy with work that mattered. Even in ruin — maybe more so in ruin — such memories arise: images of people, and places and times that we return to because they are so close to the bones one hopes to be made of.

So, Nellie Smith's true bequest — the legacy of them all, really — turns out not to be the property that she wanted so much to pass on, the land that went, piece by piece. Instead, it is the wealth of these memories from a vanished place and time. Although little of the farm was passed on — not the fields, or the knoll, or even the barn — something more valuable was. While that world soon disappeared, Nellie succeeded after all, and the place and its people survive, just as they were.



Looking About

Things would have been little different if Frank and Nellie could have carried on a while longer, or if Jack, or anybody else for that matter, had wanted to go at it. Those days were over. By the time it was done, the farm at Sullivan's Corner had outlived its era by fifteen or twenty years. One small postponed ending, among many, in the finish of that kind of farming.

But agriculture is cyclical, in more ways than one. Farming in these parts had faltered before, once badly in the mid-eighteen hundreds. That time, too, was preceded by a shrinking amount of land available to a growing populace. Then came the impact of new long-haul railway systems that made it possible to ship staple farm goods — grains and meats — in large quantities, from farther away. Families who had grappled for generations with the difficult earth and small fields here, abandoned farms throughout the region and moved on to larger and more productive tracts of land in Ohio and Indiana and beyond. One result was a collapse of agricultural prices — and still more failures among the struggling efforts left behind.[21]

Another outcome of the nineteenth-century downturn was a sharp — if temporary — decline in real estate values. And that downturn was the setting which Eugene Sullivan came into, the opportunity which enabled him to acquire land in the first place. For that four acres

"…and the buildings thereon," he paid two hundred dollars down and took a mortgage for the three hundred dollar balance.

What repaid Mr. Sullivan's investment was that farming in New England eventually came to something of an equilibrium, where the amount of land in cultivation balanced with what was needed for products that had a reliable market close by. During his time a reasonably profitable demand continued for hay for a while, and — in a time before refrigeration — for perishable items, garden and dairy products, where there was a natural advantage in being close to the growing populations in nearby cities.[22]

There were good years and lean years, but local farming of this sort continued through more than another half-century, before new forces — after the war — brought it to a finish. The reason the Sullivan farm kept on as long as it did was Nellie's love for the place. But similar ends were met all around, as towns like Ipswich changed into places that belonged to the world of their day. Throughout the region, any number of other small farms went out of existence during this period, each in its own way, but most — one expects — with pieces of what occurred here.

Certainly, the relentless demand for residential land in the postwar years hastened the decline of farming hereabouts. More than two hundred years passed while the population of Ipswich slowly doubled to the sixty-five hundred inhabitants at the beginning of this account. In just sixty years since, it doubled again to thirteen thousand. In that same sixty years, a million and a half acres of farmland went out of agricultural use in Massachusetts.[23]

Always though, there are people drawn to working with the land. Presently, we have gestures toward a return to local agriculture. The fresh flavors, the healthful appeal, the environmental benefits, are all easy to understand. Whether the economic and societal workings of the world today will sustain it is unclear. Maybe this renewal will thrive and increase. Perhaps even small farms will have another day. Time will tell.