

Childhood On a South Natick Farm

by

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(Based on an informal talk given at the Natick Community Organic Farm to members of the NCOF board and volunteer workers on May 20, 1995.)

It's a pleasure to be here today at the Natick Community Farm, and I don't think you can imagine how lucky a person I was to have been born right here. That was in 1927, and the property was then a twenty-four acre farm called "Elmbrook" owned by Miss Jane Patten. On Eliot Street her land started at what is now the Memorial School driveway, and it extended southwest to the beginning of property then occupied by Barr Florists where prize carnations were grown for many years. Riverbend Road now runs through what was the Barr property.

I don't know if she was related by blood, but Miss Patten certainly had a close relationship with the Hunnewell family, and several years before my birth, my aunt, who lived in Wellesley, was engaged by the Hunnewell family to tutor some of the Hunnewell children as well as Miss Patten's two adopted daughters. The teaching took place here on the farm, and it was then that my aunt learned there was a position open here for a caretaker. She informed my father and mother who, with their three year old son Olin, soon moved here from the farm on which they had been living in New Hampshire. The year was 1924.

My father's duties were to maintain the grounds, tend the fires, take care of the outbuildings of which there were several and - above all - to see to the well being of the animals. In exchange, he was permitted to operate his own poultry business on the farm, and he was provided a house for himself and his family.

Perhaps to orient ourselves to the farm and its buildings as they existed in the twenties and thirties would help make clear the many, many changes which have taken place during the past sixty plus years.

In traveling on Eliot Street from South Natick square toward Sherborn, just before what is now the Memorial School driveway, there was a big open field on the right toward the rear of which there was a long, high hill ideal for toboggan rides ... and what wonderful rides they were. The hill, of course, was leveled in 1970 to make room for the new Memorial School.

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When I was a little girl, the school driveway was a dirt lane which led back and up into the property of the Oblate fathers. The main entrance to their seminary was on Woodland Street, but the young fathers were often to be seen studying their bibles as they strolled up and down that little lane. "The lane" ... that's how we referred to it.

Just beyond the lane, still on the right on Eliot Street, there is now a house on a lot which was then vacant. In fact, the lot is on part of what used to be the first of Elmbrook Farm's hayfields as they extended back from the street. Some of the cedar trees which in places marked the demarcation of the fields are still standing. That first field also contained an area laid out as a rude baseball diamond where my brother and his friends played.

Next on the right on Eliot Street is the house where our family lived and where I was born. The house was a small, green bungalow then. It stands on the same spot today but with the addition of a second floor. In the early days one could see the entire house from Eliot Street; today it can barely be seen due to the planting in the front yard.

Miss Patten's was the next house on the right. Thanks to the Natick Historical Society, I have learned that through the years several houses have occupied the site of the Patten house. In fact, the first was a parsonage built early in the eighteenth century and occupied by the Reverend Oliver Peabody, then minister of the Eliot Church.

The house built by Miss Patten was a lovely, white, three story dwelling where she lived with her two adopted daughters, both several years older than I. The house was burned by vandals sometime in the 1960's, and on what I'm sure is the identical site was built the white brick house which stands today situated well back from Eliot Street. It is on the same site as was Miss Patten's, but it faces almost directly toward Eliot Street while Miss Patten's was on much more of an angle facing toward the driveway leading from the street.

After my family moved from the farm, the bungalow became the home of Mr. Laurence B. Flint and his wife Elizabeth, one of Miss Patten's daughters. Still later Miss Patten and the Flints exchanged houses as the big house became too big and the bungalow better suited for Miss Patten.

The driveway which enters from Eliot Street, somewhere between what was "our" house and that of Miss Patten, is still there. You can see that it forks immediately at the edge of the sidewalk with one branch leading to each of the two houses; the big difference is that the driveway, now nicely hot topped, was then a dirt drive leading to our house and a gravel drive leading to a gravel "court yard" in front of the "big house" as we called the Patten residence.

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Behind our house was situated a garage which housed both Miss Patten's and my father's cars. (On occasion my father served as chauffeur for Miss Patten.) To the right of the garage in the direction of "the lane" was first a clothes yard and a croquet court (croquet was a favorite pastime), then our vegetable garden and lastly the hen house which served my father's modest poultry business. These elements marked the separation between the first two hay fields.

To the left of the garage began a path which led across a brook via a single plank bridge and exited onto the gravel driveway at the big house. The driveway passed to the right of the house and then continued on back as a dirt lane leading to the barn. It was wide enough for a car and for the farm wagons and carriages. Today the driveway comes to an end beside the white brick house. The area just beyond the house is completely covered with trees and bushes, and at that point there is not the slightest evidence of the old driveway.

However, its vestiges can be seen as one moves deeper into the property toward the Community Farm. The driveway led back from the house, first to a little three room building called the "school house". I don't know the original purpose of the building (perhaps the basement was a cold cellar), but it was on the ground level where my aunt tutored the Hunnewell and Patton children. The original building from the foundation up is now gone, but, although a storage building with a sloping roof has been built on top of it, I can see that the old stone foundation remains very much as it was.

When I was very young, tutoring on the farm came to an end, and the schoolhouse came to be used only for storage, but it also became a lovely place to play "house". My cousin Ruth, who lived north of Boston, visited us each summer, and how we loved to play together in the old schoolhouse. We would drag a child's cart full of old clothes from the bungalow so that we could "dress up" ... and there was old china stored in the building so that we could serve dinners and wash dishes. We were undaunted by the fact that it was a goodly distance from the brook to carry water for the washing.

Continuing on past what was the schoolhouse, the old driveway can be seen clearly today as it leads to what is now another small shed built above an old stone foundation. When I was little, only the foundation was standing, and I have no idea to what purpose the structure originally served.

It is at the driveway near that second shed where I have been most struck by the changes which have occurred with the passage of time. Of course, the fencing and outbuildings constructed by you folks along both sides of the driveway make it very different, but what is even more striking is the height of the trees and the growth of bushes and underbrush in the fields.

When I was little, there was a row of trees lining each side of the driveway. Some of the trees (cedars) are still here, but much taller, and new trees have grown up. Then the fields beyond the trees were quite clear of growth other than grass and hay. The driveway seemed very spacious and sunny which is difficult to imagine today.

Continuing past the second shed and still farther up the driveway, one arrived at the first gate of a rough fence which enclosed the barnyard. Less the greenhouse addition, the barn stands today very much as it did sixty years ago. It was a very important part of my life in those days. It was dull red in color, and it was partially enclosed on three sides by the barnyard fence in which were located three gates.

At the first gate, the driveway ended. A few yards beyond the gate was what must be considered today the rear barn door. To us it was the front door, the main door. The door at the opposite end of the barn (your front door) was rarely used other than as a passage for the wagons as they went to and from the hayfields.

Of the two other gates located in the barnyard fence, one opened to a dirt drive leading to a carriage house, now defunct, located seventy or eighty yards to the southwest of the barn. The other opened to a horse path leading to a spacious field behind the present location of your workshop. Horse jumps were constructed in the field, and it was here that the Patten girls honed their equestrian skills.

The barn was my favorite place on the farm. The interior layout of the stalls and tack room has not changed to this day. I loved the barn just as I loved, in varying degrees, its occupants.

There was a goat named "Ben Goddard" and a pony named "Kimball O'Hara Pie". I have no idea of the origin of those names which to me did not seem at all unusual. Kimball O'Hara Pie lived in the stall to the left as one entered the barn from the yard, Ben Goddard at the end of the passageway between the tack room and the first stall on the right.

Of course, the principal members of our animal family were the three horses. In fact, they were the only animals remaining by the time we moved from the farm.

The farthest right-hand stall nearest today's front door was occupied by a chestnut riding horse named "Tomcat" who, on looking back, must have been the nearest normal of the three. The next stall housed a brown horse named "Duchess", a neurotic female who took particular delight in trotting beneath low branches in an effort to dislodge her rider. And in the third stall, next to the passage beside the tack room, was "Major".

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Major was a work horse. He was big and black, and he'd served in the army during World War I. He had an army brand on his rump to prove it, and it was obvious he felt that he had done enough for his country without having to perform menial tasks about a farm. He hauled wagons loaded with grain and hay, in the winter he hauled a drag to pack down the snow on the driveway and he did many other chores as well, frequently making it clear he was not pleased with the idea.

But Major was my favorite, and an oft repeated story in my family concerned the day I entered our kitchen, having just come from the barn, and proudly announced to my mother, "I come up to where Major begins!"

A real treat for me was when my father would lead Major about the barnyard with me perched on his back. This was definitely beneath his station, and he vented his displeasure by coughing the entire time ... enormous coughs which caused him to shudder from head to tail ... but I didn't care - I loved him.

And I loved the barn, a wonderful place to play. Depending upon the season and the depth of the hay, the loft was great fun.

But the super treat for me was when I was allowed to choose a carriage from the carriage house, my father would hitch Major to it and we'd have a grand ride about the farm. The house held perhaps eight carriages, and a big part of the fun was choosing the one for our ride ... maybe the two seater, possibly the surrey with the fringe on top, perhaps the elegant carriage with a footman's seat at the rear ... or in winter, the big red sleigh.

These were wonderfully happy times for a young child. Our family's stay on the farm lasted from 1924 to 1939. For most of that time the country was in the depths of the great depression, but that was far beyond my understanding. The farm, its treasures and its amusements, cost nary a cent! Miss Patten was very kind to us.

I'm quite sure some of you knew my brother, Olin Hayes, who for several years in the 1950's was editor of the old Natick Bulletin. He was my elder and had to be the best big brother a little sister could have ... always inventing games, making up stories, playing with me and putting up with me despite the six year difference in our ages.

The wonderful childhood we had on what is now the Community Farm will always be a shining memory. Some of the happiest days of my life were spent here, and then came the hurricane of 1938 which totally demolished my father's hen house.

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I don't know all the why's and wherefore's, but those happy days at Elmbrook ended in January 1939 with one of the saddest days in my life when we had to leave the twenty four acres I adored. I did not have the heart to come back to visit here for years. Memories of crisp, cold nights on the toboggan run, of warm summer days at the barn ... too many memories.

But now I'm here, and I can see the love and effort that has gone into creating the Community Farm. You should be very proud of what you have created. I feel better ... and I'm thrilled to learn that "my" barn is to be restored!

Thank you for inviting me today.

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