

LONG ISLAND FORUM

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Shadybrook Farm, sketched by Alonzo Gibbs.

The Road Trade

"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" — F. Scott Fitzgerald

"The Lady with the Little White Dog" as we called her, was shapely in a fore-and-aft way. She wore fringed hats, tight fire-red or black taffeta dresses, and lattice-work stockings. Her make-up was theatrical: she could have just arrived in some dressing room after playing Sadie Thompson in Somerset Maugham's "Rain."

In my youthful memory where sex is only symmetry, she is always stepping down from the high, chrome-edged running board of a sleek, olive-green Pierce Arrow, which had headlights melding like morning glories into the mudguards. Her skin was leathery tan. With her mascaraed eyes, she might have been a gypsy; but I prefer to think that she was the wife of some diamond-studded bootlegger who had iniquitous dealings with the Great Gatsby. Perhaps she too came from a lavish "West Egg" home.

The little white dog, pampered with sweets into somnolence, was always draped over her left arm and trailed a red-leather leash. He was the usual sore-eyed toy poodle and the logo by which we identified this Saturday afternoon customer whom we knew came fresh from bets won or lost at Belmont Park track.

She greeted my father each week with the same question: "How is the Golden Bantam corn today, farmer?"

Beside her as she chain-smoked perfumed cigarettes, a tall, impassively bored chauffeur would somehow remain cool in his gray, buttoned-up, tailored uniform and visored cap, even on scorching days. He would at times hitch up his long jacket and produce from a slit-pocket in his trousers the nickel or dime she needed to complete the amount of her purchase. He was along, one supposed, as a symbol of the dignity which her unchallengeable vanity told her she possessed.

Alonzo Gibbs



Alonzo Gibbs watches the traffic go by on "the short-cut to New York" — Hendrickson Avenue, Valley Stream (1921-1922).

I was only a scrubby little boy, yet I recall vividly the unusual characters of what was referred to as "the road trade". Sometimes I think we had one of the first farm stands on Long Island. It was certainly the first in the Valley Stream area. Roadside stands existed along the main routes, but they bought their produce from farmers or from the market, while we sold directly out of the fields to our customers. In fact, we had no stand at all: transactions were accomplished in our driveway where a scale hung by a chain from a lilac bush.

Most Long Island farmers were true market gardeners, which meant

they trucked their produce to the Wallabout Market, then in New York City. Selling to the road traffic was too much trouble; also they were usually shy, reticent men who preferred not to talk with strangers.

Our *Shadybrook Farm* advertised itself in chrome-green, gold-shaded letters on a sign which also bore the promise "All vegetables in Season for Sale" — meaning my father refused to add oranges, bananas, coconuts, melons or to buy from the city market in off seasons. This kind of integrity, while an inconvenience to some customers, brought the health addicts and aficionados who knew they were buying — to use an expression of the day — "the real McCoy." Father, for instance, would not pull corn until a customer asked for it, and often he made a trip to the fields with a feed bag and returned with enough to satisfy five or ten customers at once. They would wait around the yard, patting me on the head, nosing about in the big, cool barn, or they would raise the hoods of their automobiles which ran hot in summer. When Father eventually appeared out of the tasselled corn, the customers would cheer and crowd around him eager to feel the dampish husks. One banker in an expensive summer suit often followed my father into the dew-wet rows and came out with two or three dozen ears in his arms.

On the grass along our driveway, Father kept a pile of what he called "nubbins" — stunted or imperfect ears. To each regular dozen which sold in those boom years for 60 cents, he would add three or four from the heap. This baker's dozen made up for the small-sized *Golden Bantam* which in quantity could not compare with the kernels on, say, an ear of *Country Gentleman*. Perhaps the lure of something extra produced the 80 or more cars parked on a Saturday or Sunday for a quarter of a mile down Hendrickson Avenue — then called "the short cut to New York." Following this route, cars used to turn off crowded Merrick Road onto

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Corona Avenue, drive north to Hendrickson, westward on Hendrickson to Central Avenue, and thence north and west again to Linden Boulevard.

I have a photograph of my father, also Alonzo, then. He looked something like Woodrow Wilson (his hero) and wore the same frameless glasses. Only five-foot-five, with ebony hair and eyes, half Irish and half English, he gave the appearance of being, and was, a determined, upright, straightforward, kindly man who never evaded a responsibility or a memory, sad or foolish. He accepted himself completely in those matter-of-fact years before amateur psychobabble took us through the looking glass into a world of motives, resonances, inhibitions, and shadowy identities.

He was an example of generosity succeeding in business. One day a man in street clothes stepped forward after a group of customers had departed. "Farmer," he said, "I'm from the Nassau County Department of Weights and Measures. My job is to travel around and test the scales in stores, stands, and so forth. For half an hour you've been giving a pound-and-a-half for every pound the customer bought. I won't bother to test your scale. I'll just put a seal on the face of it." He laughed and added, "Why should I spoil a good thing?"

During my youth I always hoped that I'd grow up to have my father's black hair and eyes, but my hair went from white to brown to white. I once said to a man in the office, "When I was a boy, they called me Whitey Gibbs." He looked at what Pasternak in his own case described as "the snow of age" on my head and smiled. "They could call you that again," he said.

So there my father was and, although long dead, still is to me. In a trunk in the hired hand's room of the barn he found a Harvard football uniform packed away by the previous owner's son out of some reluctance to let go of memories of gridiron glory. The shoes with their wooden cleats fitted

my father and he wore them to keep out of the mud of wet fields and — this thought occurs to me now — to make himself somewhat taller. He also wore old blue serge pants and a white collarless shirt really made to go with a celluloid collar. The only part of his outfit which was at all related to a farm was his wide-brimmed straw hat.

But the customers loved this jolly, inappropriately dressed man who had come to farming straight out of the inspirational pages of *Five Acres and Independence* and Russell E. Conwell's *Acres of Diamonds*. Wall Street brokers picked up corn at four o'clock weekend mornings on their way to sports fishing off Montauk. They left part of their catch in the milk box or on our front porch when they came back in the early hours of the next day.

At times, too, near the end of the season, there would be a new French briar pipe to hold Papa's *Velvet* tobacco. One Jamaica banker used to bring his sparsely-haired, perspiring old mother — originally out of a Middle Border pioneer farm background — just to sit on the shady porch and talk to my mother. Once, when Mother (Annie Gibbs) showed her our cellar full of a winter's supply of vegetables and fruits preserved in Mason jars, the banker came back to say, "Mother is so envious of your preserves. How much, Mrs. Gibbs, will you take for all of them? Set a price and I'll pay it gladly." Mother thanked him and said that if she sold, there would be nothing to feed her own family during the coming winter. But she told the story proudly for years.

The twenties, make no mistake about it, were affluent, extravagant days when fresh eggs sold for \$1.20 a dozen. All the industries of an inventive generation were growing to size and fortunes were made and lost in the flick of a ticker tape. That it was to end tragically, as all so-called "Golden Ages" have thoughtout history, in no way diminishes the electricity, the heartening sense of material arrival and purpose we all shared then. It was a wild, gorgeous, jazzy, flashy time to be alive, even if such

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affluence bred hedonism and eventual decay.

Another memorable customer was "old Coo-cumbers." He was a big-bellied Dane, who stretched an anchor chain of gold from vest pocket to vest pocket, where on one end was a penknife he could swing when nervous and on the other a hunting-case watch. His accent was like Victor Borge's, only thicker, and his voice rumbled under the locust trees which edged our driveway.

"Farmer," he would say with innocent importance. "Haf you any yallow coocumbers left in your plot yet?"

My father, upon first hearing this request one September day, was astonished. "Yellow cucumbers . . . yes, of course . . . vines full of them. It's the end of the season, you realize."

"Vell, I vant to buy all of dem."

"I wouldn't sell them," Papa said. "They are past their prime. I'm going to plow them under."

"Oh, Gott, don't do anything so foolish! I'll buy dem all . . . all!"

Papa had to laugh in wonder. Most customers would not buy a cucumber with a single yellow spot. "What in the world do you want them for?"

"To make vine — vine!" Coocumbers rubbed his belly appreciatively.

"Take a basket then," my father said, "and pick all you want. I won't sell them; I'm glad you can use them."

After that, each fall, Coocumbers appeared on schedule, although I can't recall his ever patronizing our farm otherwise.

We could have sold anything to those munificent players of the ponies, sports fishermen, pent-house or estate owners, ladies of fashion, mistresses waiting for their paunchy "sugar daddies" to depart this life and leave them in the cash. Once I picked up windfalls from the orchard and played store with them, placing them in strawberry baskets on the front porch. My father had to stop several customers from buying them from me at ten cents a throw. I wish that kind of shrewd acquisitiveness had not faded from me as I grew in grace and understanding of what men like Henry Thoreau were trying to teach us. I've been buying apples with worms in them all my life, so somebody must think it is ethical to sell them; and mind you, I had the advantage, as the canny and cagy say with such pomposity, of *an early start*.



Alonzo Gibbs still does a bit of "kitchen farming" at his place in Waldoboro, Maine. There is no "scale hung by a chain from a lilac bush" but friends who drop in may well leave with a bit of produce.