

# LONG ISLAND FORUM

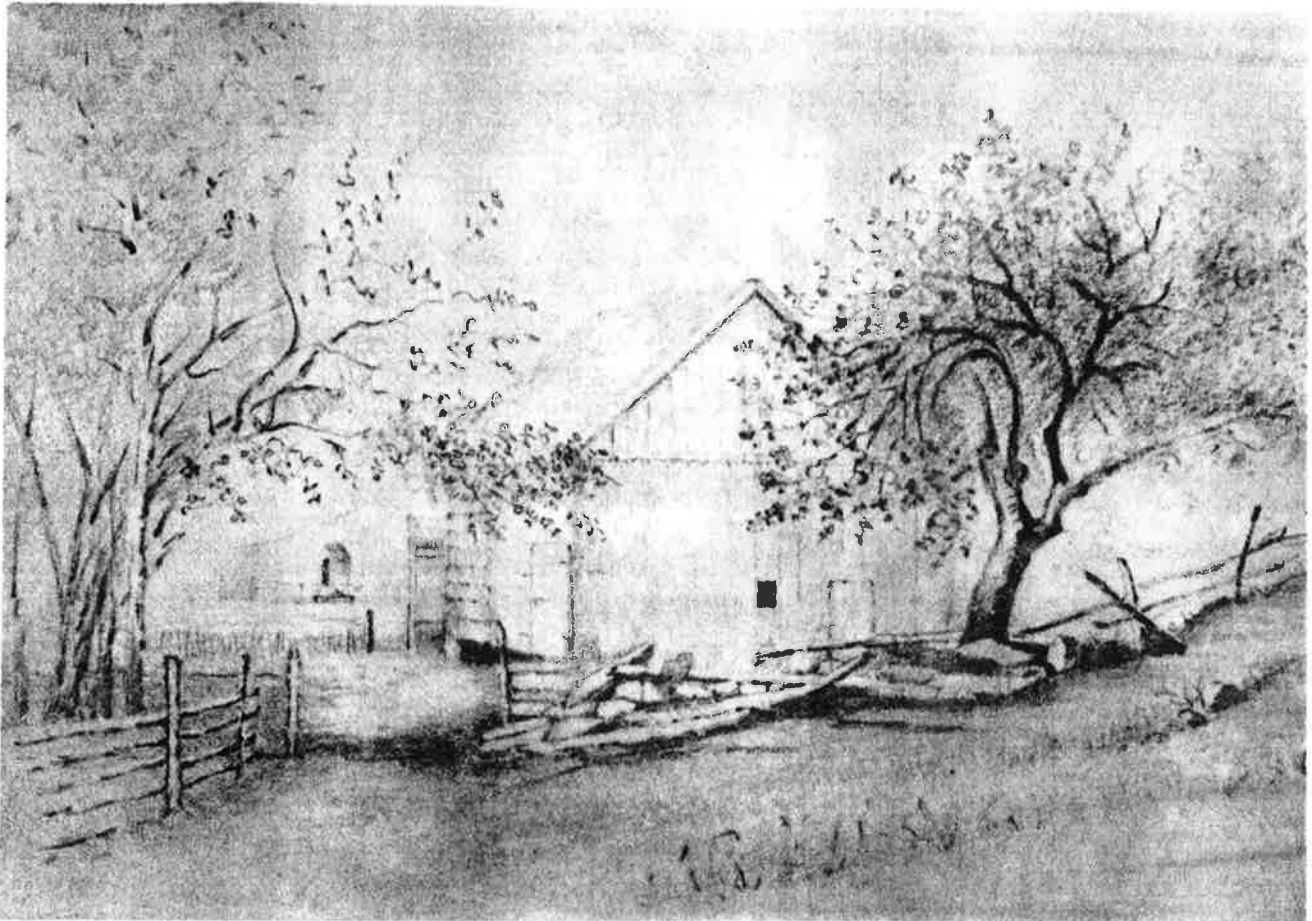
(ISSN 0024-628X)

1979 FEB 21

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Henry Waldinger Memorial Library  
60 Verona Place  
Valley Stream, N.Y. 11580



Shadybrook Farm, sketched by Alonzo Gibbs.



From a Mountr Sketchbook, Courtesy Queens Borough Public Library.

"The barn . . . had stalls typical of the Long Island barns depicted in Mountr's paintings."

## Good-bye, Good-bye to Everything!

Alonzo Gibbs

OUR BIG rust-colored barn bullied the nearby farmhouse in summer, and would not let it have a cooling, northern breeze. In winter it was a husky brother, turning back the drive of the snow.

Inside, at the western end, a platform-like mow became a ceiling darkening the stalls below. Behind the rear wall of this mow was an empty room, which instead of a hired hand contained a setting of eggs some hen had long since deserted. We needed no extra help. My father, Alonzo Senior, was quick and competent. He had studied the books of that first scientific farmer, Liberty Hyde Bailey, Dean of the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell. From them he had learned ways to shorten time-consuming tasks. So the room filled

*And fare you well for evermore,  
O ladder at hayloft door,  
O hayloft where the cobwebs cling,  
Good-bye, good-bye to everything!*  
—R.L. Stevenson

with spiderwebs and dust, and Poppa worked a twelve-acre market garden farm alone.

Downstairs, on true ground level where the floor beams were held clear of the ground by flat stones, a Swiss cow, a heifer, and a Morgan-Percheron-Clydesdale mix of a horse, called Blackie, had at one time or another munched at hay in the mangers. This western end of the barn was an open space and had stalls typical of the Long Island barns depicted in Mountr's paintings. Then came the central portion, more a

long hallway, and beyond it another bay or opening in which we kept our new Model T.

Two of the back stalls at the western end had been converted into a box stall for Blackie. Box stalls are more comfortable for an animal and less dangerous for the farmer. Horses lean, either accidentally or on purpose, according to how one feels about life on any given day. A horse can shatter a man's bones against either of a stall's half walls, should some necessity force the farmer to go in beside him. Some of the old timers I knew used to enter with the tines of a pitchfork toward the animal, the handle end held level against the boards. Few men who work day in, day out with horses ever trust them. The graveyards

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eventually hold the sentimental husbandmen.

Every so often you would come upon a good horse who would die working for you or would take care of you, sensing somehow his awful strength and your fragility. But if you met up with an average horse you could not count on his having character. One neighbor used to say, "Always speak to a horse before you pass behind him, but even that ain't gonna do you no good if he stands with one foot cocked!"

In the tunnel or hallway I have mentioned, underneath the room of that non-existent hired hand, we used to keep the cockerels from a spring hatch until they grew big enough for Sunday dinners. They crowded in a tentative way at first light and flew in frustration against the brick chimney rising up through their strawy pen.

Some latent farmer instinct in me has caused me to look first at the barn. One of the Hendricksons had built the post-Civil War farmhouse (Hendrickson is an early New Amsterdam Dutch name and the family had been around Valley Stream for a long time). Its peaked roof stepped down, one lower than the other. First came the earliest dwelling: a room downstairs, a hallway, and a stair climbing to the upper floor where there were two bedrooms. Later affluence had added a dining room under another roof, with an attic above it, and eventually, much later, came the kitchen with its flat tin roof. Over this resounding metal surface, squirrels bounced at night, disturbing the dreams of modern generations.

A lady doctor in Rockville Centre, named Ballard, had used the old place as a summer home. The football gear of a Harvard player filled a steamer trunk in the hired hand's room, along with bound copies of *Harper's Round Table* for the years 1895 and 96.

Why Doctor Ballard and her husband had sold the farm to my father I cannot say. Its twelve acres ran down Hendrickson Avenue and then up Henry Street to about where the Southern State Parkway crosses

it today. The rest of the land bordered a brook which still flows there in places despite all changes in the landscape. The price of the house and land was \$10,000. A quarter of a million would not buy the acreage now! Once, in recent years, I went back for a look at the old homestead only to find it a rental unit in disrepair. A year later I drove by again and it was gone; a developer had moved in and bulldozed under what had become for me a symbol of my happy childhood.

In the days I write of, a sunporch ran across the entire back of the farmhouse, connecting the house proper to the small summer kitchen where my mother, Annie, did her canning in August and September, and made apple butter which was as good to smell as to eat. This porch had a door to the outside at both ends. On rainy days I rode my three-wheeler up and down that narrow, many-windowed run. Double French doors opened from it upon the living room and upon the dining room. The original, simple farmhouse had been dandied up to that extent; otherwise it was typical of the pre-Civil War period dwelling.

Our front, along Hendrickson Avenue and opposite Fletcher's Lane, which was then two muddy trails side by side separated by an island of brush, grew cherry, maple, and osage orange trees. We called them "mock" oranges and delighted in the green fruit which fell to the ground in season but was only good for throwing.

From these trees the limbs grew inward, burdened with leaves, almost to the front porch roof. Yet grass somehow flourished sleek and tall behind our shaded picket fence with its gate posts and swingable gates.

To this farm my father brought his family, a wife and six children: five girls and one boy, me. World War I had just ended; customs and conventions were changing. Few were content with their old way of living. People believed that after all that sacrifice of men and money life should be better. At least the truth

had been brought home to them that in such a dangerous world men and women had a duty to seek fulfillment of modest, long-held dreams. My father had always wanted to be a farmer, and our days in Valley Stream, at what he called Shadybrook Farm, went smoothly.

But one night—was it in 1923 or 1924? no matter—my sister Ellen, a dark-haired, dark-eyed sensitive girl, awoke from sleep to what seemed the crackle of rain falling on the roof. She slept with sister Ruth in the rear bedroom, in the oldest section of the house, while my father and mother slept in the front bedroom down the hall. Across the hallway Father had converted the attic above the dining room into a fairly large bedroom by nailing plasterboard onto the joists and rafters. Here slept Carolyn, Lillian, and Margaret, the rest of the big family.

That night Ellen awakened Ruth. "Do you hear the awful rain?" she said. Then she shouted down the hall, "Poppa, do you hear that awful rain?"

Later my father could not remember answering her. He had spent a day of hard work in the fields. No kind of farming is more taxing than market gardening. After hours of hoeing, weeding, thinning, one fell into bed for eight hours of rock-like rest.

So without awaking anyone Ellen and Ruth went back to sleep and the sound of rain or whatever it was continued to echo through the house with nobody to realize that it might be the snap of fire.

Fire! I can remember starting up in terror to hear a neighbor, Mr. Foote across the street, who had risen early to milk his cows, shouting my father's name. "Mr. Gibbs, Mr. Gibbs! For God's sake wake up . . . Your barn is on fire!"

I sprang out of bed bewildered. My father and mother were up, pulling on their clothes. We ran downstairs to the lower hallway. My sisters followed, wondering what to do. Somebody called the fire department. I sat shivering in my under-

wear, hearing the crackle and roar of that inferno outside. The smell of burning tar paper filled the house. My mother, a quiet, kindly woman who always thought first of others, climbed the stairs and returned with my clothes. I pulled on my knickers; her nervous fingers fumbled with the buttons on my shirt. She had forgotten to fetch my white elastic garters, so she knotted my long black stockings above the knee.

Where was Poppa? He had gone outside to save what he could. I ran to the sunporch and looked through a window. Fire slithered between the sheathing of the barn's face; Brownie, our big bulldog, howled as he stood on his hind legs and fought the chain attached by an eyebolt to the siding, I saw him spring against his collar, twist, and fall back. Then Poppa ran to him and wrenched the chain free. But the vibration made a part of the wall collapse above them and a mass of char and flame crashed into the dooryard as they spun and lurched out of the way.

Suddenly Poppa was back in the kitchen where my mother and sisters huddled together. "Gather your clothes; don't stay in the house, the paint is already blistering. Go across the street to Mr. Foote's!"

We again scurried about. The arms of my sisters grasped heaps of dresses, coats, high-heeled shoes, all tangled together. As we hurried through the front gate, we could see the red firetrucks careening up the tar road. Sirens shredded the morning and aggravated our alarm. One sister dropped a shoe and stopped, although in the path of the oncoming truck, to retrieve it. We shivered in the misty air of morning as we stood in a state of shock on the Foote's front porch, away from the heat and towering black smoke across the way.

The firetrucks of Valley Stream's four fire companies—hook and ladder, hose carts, a chemical pumper (there was no water system then outside of town)—clanged by, men sliding into black rubber coats and pulling on helmets.

As we watched, the trucks swung into the driveway which circled the house and came out on the side road. The shouting men dismounted, grabbed up hooks, unrolled a red hose from the pumper. But the chief suddenly called them off. The town fire line, he said, ran between our house and the barn. The barn stood in the Elmont Fire District. We had called the wrong department. All they could do was protect the house, the barn would have to burn. Elmont would never now arrive in time.

So our barn flamed all that Sunday morning and the firemen stood by, many deeply concerned about the decision which had been made, for some of them were farmers who knew what a serious matter the loss of a barn could be. But they realized too, I suppose, that the chemical-and-hose truck held only enough to save the house should the fire spread. It was one of those no-win situations where you are wrong whatever you do.

My father learned from the chief that ours was the thirteenth barn to burn in Valley Stream within a short time. Each had been ignited in the early hours of a Sunday morning by what was thought to be some pyromaniac who worked all week and liked to go to fires on his day off.

Constable Comstock (later Captain of the Merrick Precinct), who lived up Henry Street but worked in those days out of Mineola, was sent on Monday to investigate. He found that a board had been pried off the corner of the barn next to the road in such a way that the fire could have been set there. But fixing the blame or even catching the culprit could not help us. Sadly, my father had reduced the insurance on the barn a month before from \$2,000 to \$1,000, needing the additional premium money for other things. This act of folly worsened the tragedy for him.

By afternoon the firemen made ready to go home. The barn lay in ashes. Ruined and glazed red, the body of our new Ford rested beside

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the still upright chimney. An open touring Model T, its canvas top had burned to ashes and fallen along with debris of all sorts into the front and rear seats. But when a few neighbors offered to push the dangerous chimney over before leaving, it twisted and fell toward the automobile which disappeared under a pile of bricks, the final misfortune of a long, trying day.

My mother loved to cook and entertain. Each Sunday night my sister's boyfriends, uncles, aunts, and cousins, came to supper. The meal consisted

of baked beans, German potato salad, cold cuts, salmon salad, hard and soft rolls, coffee and freshly baked yum-yum cake, which had become popular during the war because it required little sugar or shortening to make.

But this Sunday the guests who came by car or trolley walked in on a disaster. The ashes of the barn were two feet deep, with a charred joist jutting up here and there. We could smell roast chicken, for all the young roosters had perished. Much of the debris still glowed in the last of the evening light as hot coals broke out in active fires. Smoke could swirl up and take one's breath away or cover one's clothes with soot whenever a puff of wind blew from the north. My father worried that sparks might still set the nearby house afire.

"Well," suggested one young fellow, "let's do something about it!"

He quickly took off his jacket and rolled up the trouser legs of his good suit. The other men did the same. They then lined up, the girls joining them. From kitchen pump to what was left of the barn, pails of water were passed in the old bucket brigade tradition. If they were in general ineffective, they did dampen

the liveliest spots. White steam soon rose in columns, as the "fire-fighters" worked. Sparks floated up and joined the indifferent stars or winked in the dark like fireflies.

Then, after the critical smouldering had been drenched, the brigade sat down late to a supper which covered the length of our dining room table, even though all the leaves were in place. My father, too, sat down and ate his food with enjoyment. He was half Irish and the Irish always seem to find a reason to enjoy themselves. And he was grateful that the big, farm animals had not been in the barn.

Only a few days later, Poppa was walking along Henry Street, wondering what he might use as a storage shed for new tools and fertilizer. Suddenly he spotted my mother's summer kitchen. Word went out to those loyal guests. All appeared on the next Sunday morning. The summer kitchen was detached from the house, jacked up and moved on rollers to a location beside the spot where the old barn had stood. It was small and inconvenient. But my father looked on the bright side of life where even an inconvenience can be made to serve a need.

*Remembrances of childhood are like drawings done with a burnt match.*

—Chekov