

Down to 'Derry



Coming of Age in Vermont

Jeanne Heffron Slawson



Vivid accounts of a young girl's life following her family's 1947 move from the Boston suburbs to a small farm near the village of South Londonderry. With humor, nostalgia, and poignancy, these short recollections introduce family, local characters, and cherished pets while telling of adventures, mishaps, and relationships. Reflecting the time's attitudes, customs, and innovations, these tales may rekindle old memories for many.

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This is a memoir. Some names have been changed to protect the identity of those involved.

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Prologue

I was born to artists. If they had been true to stereotype, I would have been raised, half-starving, in a garret and led a life of pale but interesting pursuits. Instead, I ended up on Vermont farm, feeding chickens, mucking out stalls, attending a three-room school, and having adventures a girl from the suburbs never dreamed of. This is how it all began:

In the early 1930's, my father taught an evening illustration class at his alma mater, The Boston Museum School of the Fine Arts. My mother was a fashion illustrator taking his class. Soon they were a couple. This evidently didn't sit well with the powers that be, for he was fired. He continued freelancing for The Saturday Evening Post, Pan American Airlines, and American Telephone and Telegraph, among others, until the Boston Post sent him to France and Spain in 1933, where he sketched and painted, submitting his work to the paper. By the time he left for Europe, they were committed; his diary testifies to his pining for the lovely, chestnut-haired woman he'd left behind. When he returned in 1934 they married and, with true artistic spirit, moved to the picturesque city of Taxco, Mexico, to live and paint for a year. They had to return to Massachusetts a little early, however, for the birth of my brother Paul in September 1935. They settled in the suburb of Needham and my father

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commuted by train to his studio in Boston. I joined the family in June 1938.

I was two when my parents took a driving tour of southern Vermont. My father learned of a derelict house and barn for sale near the small village of South Londonderry, “South ‘Derry” to the locals. Surrounded by fourteen acres of hilly fields and woods, the house’s only real attraction was its superb view of the West River and Glebe Mountain. Ever an optimist, my father saw possibilities in the sad Cape Cod and sagging barn; the price of \$1,400 was manageable. He convinced my mother they should have it.

The dripping pipe in the kitchen was replaced with proper faucets. A Kerosene stove was installed for heating water and cooking. Kerosene lamps were the only source of light after sundown. The two-seater outhouse off the woodshed remained—I always wondered who might share. With these and some minor living space improvements, the house was ready for use by the summer of 1941. Every June for the next six years, the family piled into the Chevy for the hours-long trip to South Londonderry, remaining until just after Labor Day.

In 1946, my parents decided to move permanently the following year. Local professionals were hired to do major remodeling and to add electricity, an indoor bathroom, and two in-floor kerosene heating units. The main feature was the Heatilator, the latest in fireplaces, with multiple vents, one of them being the only source of heat for the second floor. My

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parents' artistic sensibilities created a warm and attractive house, both efficient and inviting, with a beamed living room ceiling and multi-paned windows, extra large across the back. From living room, dining room, and kitchen we could enjoy the view over the fields down to the river and to the mountain beyond. The house was now white, its black-shuttered windows peering out from under two old maple trees, next to the still-sagging barn. My father's new barn red studio, with its' cathedral ceiling and huge, north-facing window, overlooked the area next to the barn that would later be the paddock; he dreamed of owning horses.

It was June 1947; time to move in. I was nine. I endured one more tortuous ride from Needham, the trip punctuated by my brothers' cries of, "She's gonna be sick again!"

My parents had thought of everything. My father could mail his work to his publisher, making a few trips to Boston for meetings. His gregarious nature was satisfied by outings to the village and serving as a town selectman. My mother retired before Mark's birth in 1941 and didn't resume her career until Paul was fifteen. The quiet life suited her reserved nature. She made our house and gardens lovely—and kept the family going. Get-togethers with a few other transplanted families comprised my parents' social life.

For me, life took on a new vitality and color. We had our own horses. Over time, we acquired a ram, a goat, a cat, various dogs, ducks, geese, chickens, and two black-eared lambs. Our schoolhouse had three rooms—

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an early “open school,” where we learned a great deal more than the Three R’s.

During the summer, our mother’s lists of chores for us appeared on the kitchen bulletin board each morning. I got the “girl’s” jobs: *clean bathroom, ring and hang out wash, iron Daddy’s underwear*, and so on, as well as my usual chores of setting the supper table, making salads, and drying dishes. Animal care was a given. We earned our allowance of twenty-five cents a week. Our father now commuted on foot to his studio, where he created schoolbook illustrations, coming back to the house for lunch at noon. Badminton was the after-dinner game in the summer, Ping-Pong in the winter. Winter weekends we skied at Bromley Mountain. My brothers were good. I was cold.

My Vermont memories are vivid still. With these small stories, I’ve tried to capture many of them—nostalgic, humorous, even painful—from 1947 to 1952, the five years before our rural adventure came to an unexpected end.



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