



WE WERE ALL FARMERS

1940s

*by Gordon Hastings
Growing Up in Boylston **

Grandpa Garfield, a man in his early eighties, presided over the last vestiges of farming in my neighborhood at the intersection of Cross and Central Streets. With a full head of grey hair, mustache and a lanky build, Grandpa Garfield cared for a lone dairy cow named Hazel, a flock of chickens, a large vegetable garden, a belligerent white goose and an aged bay Belgian draft horse named Molly.

“Grandpa Garfield’s hitching up the hay wagon,” I said. This was the signal for a daylong adventure of joyful proportions.

“Come on kids, climb on.” Grandpa Garfield said, stopping the big hay wagon at the foot of the driveway leading from his barn. My father and Uncle Ralph, Grandpa Garfield’s Son, (Uncle Ralph wasn’t my uncle but we always addressed adult men or women adult neighbors as aunt or uncle.), sat up front on the wagon seat with Grandpa Garfield. Sonny, Sis and I scrambled on to the back of the wagon with the Garfield kids. The large wooden spoked wheels with metal rims made a crunching sound against the gravel road as we moved along Cross Street. Molly had four white socks and a white blaze on her forehead. Grandpa Garfield had acquired Molly when she was just a foal. She had had one speed, slow and deliberate.

Molly pulled off the dirt road and the wheels became silent as the wagon entered a field of mowed golden hay, all arranged in perfect winnows, from the expert swing the day before of Grandpa Garfield’s scythe. With pitchforks in hand hay flew atop the wagon from each side as Molly expertly stepped between the rows. The work of loading the hay wagon became play, and I loved doing it.

“That’s all for this trip, everybody on top,” Grandpa Garfield said.

With the wagon piled high with hay, I scrambled to the top of the load along with the other kids for the trip back to the barn. Covered with hay chafe, one round trip from the hayfield to the barn followed another until the harvest was neatly stacked in the hayloft above Molly’s stall.



MOLLY AND FRIENDS

*Astride Molly front to back: Gordon & Calvin Hastings and Paul Pratt
Standing: Carol Garfield and Marianna Hastings*

Every other Saturday morning beginning in mid-June Dad borrowed Molly and hitched her to an ancient hand-held cultivator that tilled the soil between the rows of vegetables in our garden.

“Up you go,” Dad, said as he lifted me on to Molly’s back, sitting just behind the big leather harness collar with the brass adornments.

“Here, take the reins.”

Molly slowly rocked between the rows of potatoes, corn, green beans and squash. The rhythm of the chains that were connected to the whippetree jangled in perfect cadence with Molly’s careful steps. The leather harness squeaked and the sweet smell of horseflesh rose up as Molly’s coat and my pants became wet with her sweat.

“Keep her straight, Son,” Dad said.

He had me convinced that I was maneuvering Molly but later I understood that the old horse needed no direction. With his legs making long and deliberate strides and his hands gripping the cultivator handles, Dad was covered with chalky brown dust, his graying hair muted with sweat. Then came the end of the row. I pulled lightly on the turning rein and the big horse with cultivator and Dad in tow would execute a perfect turn and head down the next row, never stepping on a tiny plant sprouting from the earth.

“Let’s rest a minute,” Dad said. Molly stopped. *“Only four rows to go.”*

It was hard work on a hot summer’s day. I would have been happy to stay on Molly’s back all day. I was helping with something important. The cultivator was unhitched at the end of the last row where it would sit motionless in the sunshine and the rain until the process repeated itself in two weeks. Dad walked with his hand on Molly’s neck as we crossed the street and headed up the small hill to Garfield’s barn. Dad removed the harness, piece by piece and in exact order, explaining to me the function of each piece of the leather.

“Fill the pail son,” I pushed the hand pump handle and up from the well came a torrent of cool fresh water.

“I’ll carry it in. You get up on that block and wipe her down.” Dad said. The day could not have been more perfect.

We didn’t own a real farm tractor but my father had rescued an old Model A Ford truck and with the help of the neighbors Dad had converted the truck into a homemade tractor that we called the Doodlebug. The fancy John Deere tractors had been sold long ago with Maplewood Farm.



THE DOODLEBUG
Gordon and Marianna Hastings

The Doodlebug was an odd-looking contraption assembled by cutting the roof from the truck and shortening the chassis. The hood and the engine remained intact. Looking more like a dismembered truck than a real tractor the Doodlebug had oversized wheels in the rear and the driver’s seat was from an old car.



CALVIN HASTINGS, GORDON HASTINGS, AND THE FAMILY DOG, PAL

The Doodle Bug could pull a hand plow and cultivator but it would have been useless without our ancient wagon used mostly for hauling wood for the household furnace.

The sad part of the arrival of the Doodlebug is that it replaced Molly. Then again, everything changes. Does it not?

*With permission from the personal memoir of Gordon Hastings: *Rocky Road to Dublin*
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