

"A valuable and moving record of the struggle for
survival of one of the oldest farming communities in North America."
—PETER MATTHIESSEN, the critically acclaimed author of *Men's Lives*

HEAVEN *and* EARTH

The Last Farmers of the North Fork



STEVE WICK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LYNN JOHNSON

miles. He was also agent for the Aspenwall Potato Planter Company, the first mechanical potato planter. He also secured the first carload of Hoover potato diggers sent to Long Island.

"In those years at the time of James's death, crops on the farm were far different. About ten acres was in asparagus, which was sent to the New York market by the Adams Express, and to the Hudson Canning Co. in Mattituck. Probably about twenty acres was in cabbage for seed and this was sold to the Thorburn Seed Co. in New York—and finally there was a substantial acreage in timothy hay. This was stored in the big barn and on rainy days in the fall and through the winter it was pressed into two-hundred-pound bales in a 'jump press.' Men would fork hay into a boxlike structure open at the top. When it was loaded, a cover was clamped on and there was a big wooden wheel with a long rope wound around. A team of horses would pull out this rope, forcing a pair of knees to raise the bottom of the press to make the bales. Men would then insert the two wire ties, hook them and then back off the wheel a little, let down a side and roll out the bale. They were sent to New York to feed the horses that pulled the horsecarts. These were the main crops—wheat and corn were also grown for the livestock and at times there would be six or eight hogs butchered and hung up to cool."

After James's death, a court invested title to the home farm in Parker and Henry, seven and four years of age. John was given interest in the farm at Hashomomack and land near Patchogue that had been in his grandmother Sarah's family. But three small boys could not run the farm, so within days of her husband's funeral at the Presbyterian church and his burial at the Cutchogue Cemetery in the same plot with his parents, Cora arranged for a neighbor to lease the farm.

"We had a neighbor, a friend of our family's, named Harry Fleet. He had been a widower for a relatively short time, three or four years. And had really quite a small farm, just across the hedges. And my mother engaged him for one thousand dollars a year—which in 1914 was an appreciable amount—to manage this farm, to keep everything here going. And he was an expert cauliflower grower, and an expert cabbage-seed grower. And it worked very well.

"He did this for years—ten, fifteen years. Then another farmer took over, and he grew strawberries and potatoes, but he didn't raise any cabbage seed. He also grew cucumbers for pickling and had a field of dill right alongside our lane, and he did the whole operation right on the place. He had it for two or three years. Then he wasn't making any money. You see, farmers did very well during and immediately after the First World War, but by the early 1920s, agriculture on Long Island was in trouble."

Another man, Carlton Dickerson, took over the running of the farm until 1926 or 1927. But prices remained low, and soon Dickerson was in trouble. So Parker quit college after the summer session of 1928 and returned to Cutchogue. He just wanted to be outdoors and on his own, he told his brother. Back home, he worked in a garage the winter of 1926–1927; then as spring approached, he started farming on his own.

"Parker was enthusiastic about livestock. He was very much interested in registered Jersey cattle. I was going off to Cornell, and he had had a room reserved that he, of course, no longer

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needed. So my brother Henry and I took that room and were roommates. You know, three boys growing up together on a farm, they can get close. We were very close. Henry was smaller and a different sort of man from the one I am, but we could not have been better friends. I'll say this, Parker was better looking than I am . . . than I was. But if people didn't see us together, they usually mistook us. We were both tall, slim, with blond hair. Parker, who was the oldest brother, he was very much a person in his own right. I mean, he had a tremendous amount of energy and was the hardest-working man I ever knew, and he was the best man to work with I ever knew. Nothing was too much. He was always taking more than his share of the load—always.

"Because of his love of livestock, Parker raised Jersey milk cows and sold milk at the roadside. There was a large dairy in New Suffolk, and Ralph Tuthill had a large herd in Mattituck. The fall of '27, he was married and he built a new home alongside Wickham Creek, next to the Fleet property. Her name was Margaret Lane. Parker called her 'Miki.' Her mother was Marion Horton Lane, and the Hortons married the Tuthills, so she was a Horton and a Tuthill.

"By '29, Parker was operating the entire farm. I remember that year very well because I worked for him. Henry didn't. Henry was never interested in farming at all. But it was just because he didn't have a chance, as the youngest brother. I mean, had it worked out, he would have been farming. That year, '29, was a critically dry year. We had a real drought. It didn't rain from the fifteenth of April until August. And at that time, we decided that the barn ought to be reshingled, and I basically reshingled the whole north roof myself."

In his notes, John wrote of this drought: "It was not only dry this year it was hot, and in ridging potatoes on a hot afternoon one of the horses dropped dead just where Henry Fleet's house stands. Water was poured over the horse but he was gone. The potato crop was so poor that in a four acre field east of Dam Meadow Pond Parker put the entire crop of about 120 bushels on a new Dodge truck he had just bought."

In the spring of 1930, John was a senior at Cornell, rooming with Henry. On the North Fork, there was an early spring, and Parker planted seventy acres of potatoes, starting on St. Patrick's Day. He and Margaret now had two sons; their second, Stephen, was born on Christmas Day, a few months before planting started. In April, John returned to Cutchogue from college and, for the few days he was home, worked for Parker.

It was a warm spring, dry again. The brothers got along well—one a happy college boy studying engineering, the other a contented farmer with a four-month-old baby boy named Stephen and a three-year-old son who was named after Parker's father but from childhood was called Jimmy. From his new home on the creek, Parker could see the green expanse of the farm's eastern edge, a ridge of land like a series of knobs where the horses had been buried, and south of that the low land called Shell Bank. Farther south was a line of trees and the blue opening of the creek into the bay between two sandy fingers. From his second floor, Parker could see the dark mass of Robins Island in the middle of the bay.

On the morning of April 5, John and Parker were working in the big barn. The Cutchogue Fire Department, which occupied a building just west of the farm, had only recently installed a siren, and a few minutes after twelve noon, it went off. Neither of the boys had ever heard it before, and the sound was electrifying. They raced to their car.

"I said, 'You drive,' and Parker said, 'No, you drive.' It happened to be my car. And I drove. He said, 'You drive,' so I did. And we got to the head of the lane just as the fire truck went whizzing by, and we pulled out right behind it. I was about a half mile east and, of course, couldn't see ahead of the fire truck. And one of our men, one of Parker's workers, Florentine DeJesus—we called him 'Flip'—had gone out before the fire truck and turned east, and just at this moment he ran out of gas. He slowed down to about ten miles an hour.

"Anyway, the fire engine pulled out and went to the left and passed him. But when I got up there, there was another car coming from the east and there was simply no place to go. And not only that; I learned many years later that there were two kids on bicycles off to the north side of the road. So there was absolutely no place to go. And I hit the brakes, and you've got to remember that in those days there were only two-wheel brakes. The car slid around, and I corrected and got around this car somehow, and I still don't know how I got around it.

"And then it went into a worse swing the other way and just flipped right over on the highway. And my brother was thrown out when it flipped over. I was in the car. It slid along for about fifty or one hundred feet, upside down on the highway. It ground off the top of the radiator, and the windshield and all the rest. It was a LaSalle roadster, no protection on the top at all. When it stopped rolling, stopped sliding, I was upside down on the highway, head and shoulders on the highway, and my feet still up on the pedals, the steering wheel still in my hand, although the steering wheel was all broken up.

"And everybody thought I was finished. But I was perfectly conscious and so forth and I asked how Parker was, and they heard me, so they rolled the car off of me. I got up, and I had a little cut on my head where the steering wheel broke up and my jacket was torn a bit, but that's all. They were trying to resuscitate Parker. He had a little bump on his forehead but nothing else. But he had broken his neck and died immediately. Yet he looked fine. I walked back to the house, or someone drove me . . . I don't know. My mother heard the commotion, I guess. She was there. You can't imagine what that was like for me. It sounds odd, perhaps, but I had to be doing something. That afternoon, I went back planting potatoes with a three-horse team alongside the lane."

The *Riverhead News* ran the following article on April 11, 1930:

Cutchogue and other villages in this section were plunged into sorrow last Saturday afternoon when James Parker Wickham was almost instantly killed as his car rolled over while he was responding to an alarm of fire, he being one of the firemen.

The tragedy was the worst that has happened in this vicinity in several months, and grief was all the more pronounced because of the popularity of the young man who met

such a swift death at a time, too, when he was endeavoring to be useful and save others from possible trouble and expense.

John, a brother of James, was driving the car, and it is believed that brakes applied too suddenly caused the car to turn over.

The victim was thrown clear, and it is understood his neck was broken. John was pinned beneath the car, but he escaped with a few cuts and bruises. Later it was learned that the car ahead was stopping because it was out of gas. And the fire, it was ascertained, was only a brush fire at that and didn't amount to much.

Mr. Wickham was well liked by all who knew him and the sympathy of the entire community goes out to his entire family. He was only 23 years old, a son of Mrs. Cora Wickham, and leaves a widow and two small children, James Parker and Stephen Lane. Another brother, Henry, also survives.

The funeral was conducted Monday afternoon by the Rev. F. G. Beebe of the Presbyterian Church. It was one of the largest ever seen in Cutchogue, the firemen turning out in a body. The pallbearers were Preston Tuthill, Charles Lane, Carleton Wickham, Roy Glover, Stanley Case, Donald Robinson, William Wickham and Eliot Barteau.

Often during that spring of 1987 as John awaited Tom's return, he spoke about Parker's death. Over the next three years, he would talk about it more. Once he said, "My father's death made Parker a farmer; Parker's death made me a farmer. Although I had a chance, yes, but on most farms only one of the boys has a chance. Parker was the oldest and he had the chance. It didn't make any difference how I felt. It had suddenly changed. You know, I have always felt my life was spared, so I have had to think about what I would do with it and how I would live it."

In late spring, Tom returned. A drought had settled in, and Tom immediately went to work moving irrigation pipes and maintaining pumps. The pumps ran eighteen hours a day to keep the orchards wet. We drove around the farm early on a Saturday morning a few months after he returned, and we stopped to check the pump that pulled freshwater out of Dam Meadow Pond.

"I knew the time had come for me to come home," Tom said. "I really enjoyed the work abroad. It was enormously challenging for me. But I walked away from it. I am home because I wanted not to get out of touch with the farm. I began to see more and more that there was a clear role for myself. I came back to farm. There was no doubting I would."