

# A Childhood Memoir

*by Tom Turkington, who has kindly allowed Sprintsail to adapt and edit sections of his book-length memoir, Before I Forget.*

My first home was on Fairview Avenue in Falmouth center. But when I was about two, we moved to 14 Mill Road, close to where the railroad crossed Woods Hole Road. Stavre and Gladys Panis, expert silversmiths, lived nearby on Pin Oak Way in a tiny house with an attached workshop and sales area heated by a wood stove. Behind the shop the Panises kept chickens and grew grapes and vegetables. Their cottage was ringed by shrubs, flowering trees, and boxwood. I often followed Gladys around as she made her rounds with the watering can. Even now a whiff of boxwood or ripe grapes on the vine sends me back to her home.

Just up from our house, Mill Road forks onto Locust Street by a small, triangular green space on which the town had created a monument to sailors lost at sea — a large rock with an anchor on top and a plaque fastened to its side. Climbing the rock and hanging from the anchor was one of our pastimes and the way I first recognized my physical growth. Suddenly, one day I could get the side of my foot up on the ledge at the bottom of the plaque and then claw my way up the side of the rock with my fingers to grab the anchor and pull myself onto the top of the rock and stand there like Edmund Hillary on Everest.

There were scads of kids in the neighborhood. The Haustons, the Bailows, the Langenheims, the Mullens, the Voses, the Richardsons, the Ketchums, and the Struths all had homes near ours. Most of our activities took place in somebody's yard, or started there and spread out. Sometimes

we wound up at the beach on Vineyard Sound less than a mile away. Or we wandered through a large estate that ran down to Salt Pond where trails meandered through the puckerbush and came out at the railroad tracks.

The railroad tracks crossed Woods Hole Road just the other side of the sailors' monument. Considering that the rail bed was an unpleasant combination of rust and tar and creosote and crushed stone, we spent an inordinate amount of time playing on or around the tracks — perhaps because being there was a little daring. We put our ears to the tracks to see who'd be the first to know that a train was coming.

My older brother, Eric, and I vacated our bedrooms during the summer so that my parents could take in roomers for a fee. This was a common practice for Falmouth homeowners who could free up a room for tourists traveling on the cheap. We hung a sign by the sidewalk: "ROOMS." We boys were tasked with delivering glass pitchers of ice water to the roomers. I believe that was the only amenity offered, other than the right to use the bathroom. When we took in roomers, Eric and I slept on cots in an enclosed porch off the kitchen that was usually used for storage. It was always hot at night, always pleasant by morning. One day I woke up to a simple bird song outside the porch. The high-pitched cheep followed by a lower cheep, then a break, then the two cheeps again was the sweetest sound I'd heard in my young life. The sun was bright, the air clear, and I knew that this day

was starting off perfectly. It was many years before I found that this was the call of the chickadee. It still means summertime to me.

The most exciting event of a summer day came toward the evening when the ice cream truck arrived. The truck had a rack of bells over the windshield. After dinner, we kept an ear open for their sound. A torpid summer evening burst into a frenzy of sprinting children at the first audible jingle, with kids racing first to their parents for ice cream money, then across whatever yards and stone walls stood between them and the truck's destination. The social aspect of the congregation was part of the attraction, but the true excitement was in having something sweet to eat and paying for it with cold cash. Those of us with nickels got Popsicles and were silently envious of the kids who came with dimes and got ice cream bars.

Another magnetic communal event occurred when the

DDT truck sprayed trees along Mill Road with poison to kill mosquitoes and gypsy moths. Back then it was just taken for granted that the way to

get rid of irksome bugs was to spray them with DDT. One DPW worker drove while another held a hose fed by a compressor and a big tank of poison. He aimed that hose up into the tree branches. It shot pretty far. We kids would run out to the edge of the yard and breathe in the sweet mist as it filtered down, a little pungent and a little damp. It didn't smell bad, it didn't smell good: it just seemed kind of cool to be sucking in this stuff

that came shooting out of a hose in the back of a truck.

In 1958 we moved to Scranton Avenue, which at that time ran from Main Street past more than half a mile of open space until five tightly clustered shingled houses suddenly appeared. The first of these was number 287, a prime example of 1920s middle-class house design, construction, and workmanship. My parents took possession of the property for the sum of \$10,500.

That fall I entered fourth grade in the Village School. Margaret Mullen was principal. I was

amazed by her hair — blinding orange and coiffed high upon her head — and by her dress, always, it seemed, rich purple from collar to hem. Every



Margaret A. "Peg" Mullen, Principal of the Village school. Probably 1961.  
Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

morning she stood inside the main entrance to her school and greeted each child. As the doors were wide and we were full of energy, the stream of children flowed fast, but Miss Mullen greeted each of us in rapid-fire fashion with “good morning.” In the afternoon she’d be there again, “goodnight-goodnightgoodnightgoodnight...”

From time to time the school conducted air raid drills. Because we lived close to Otis Air Force Base, we kids were used to seeing and hearing fighter jets screaming overhead, so the notion of being attacked from the skies was not wholly theoretical. Most of us knew that the Cold War contained a deadly heat under its cold surface and were well aware that planes and missiles could deliver devastating nuclear bombs from the other side of the world. The startlingly loud buzzer sounded, our teacher, Mrs. Leonard, shouted for us to get under our desks, and we sat there on the floor with our heads between our knees and our arms over our heads.

Some wishful people tried to prepare for the results of nuclear war by having fallout shelters installed in their yards. People of lesser means, like my parents, prepared in lesser ways. We stocked one corner of our small basement with jugs of water and cans of Spam and sardines. I don’t know how adults coped with the threat of nuclear war, but to kids who had only recently outgrown “Howdy Doody,” it was a very real and present danger.

It was harder to stay scared in the summer. As I grew older I spent some of my summer days hanging out at Surf Drive Beach, about a mile from home. The town anchored a raft about 50 yards offshore that offered all kinds of opportunity for fun. It had a diving board just a few feet above the water, a platform about eight feet up and another about 12 feet up. And it had a long slide with a shiny metal surface except for a couple of burrs

we had to watch for so we didn’t rip our bathing suits, if not our flesh.

In the summer I made a little extra money mowing lawns in the neighborhood. Fifty cents an hour was about the going rate for kids doing menial work. As a condition of borrowing the family lawn mower for personal financial gain, I was expected to keep gas in the tank and change the oil from time to time. Dad showed me how to do that. I got the mower a little ways off the ground, unscrewed the drain plug and ran the dirty oil into a pan or wide-mouthed jar. Then I dug a hole several inches deep in the ground a little ways from the house, poured the oil into that hole and filled it back up with dirt. My parents were well-read and thoughtful people who would have been well up on environmental consciousness if there’d been any then. But generally there wasn’t, except among a few scientists.

In the fall of 1960, when I was in the sixth grade at the Hall School, I looked forward to going back to school in at least one small way: I would be in the senior class in the building. There is a distinct feeling of elevated status when one is part of the oldest class in any school, a feeling undiminished by the fact that this school served only two classes. But it was not to be.

Five days before school was to open a routine state inspection determined that the building needed major structural repairs, which would take several months. School was about to begin, so immediately all fifth and sixth grade classes had to find new homes.

Somehow classroom space was found in or near the center of town — in other elementary schools and the dilapidated recreation building. Mrs. Pederson and Mr. Kenney’s classes were held in the National Guard Armory on Jones Road. I was in Mrs. Pederson’s class. The Armory had a large func-

tion room divided by an accordion door. Closed, the door afforded barely enough room on each side for teacher and student desks, and a table or two. Visitors to the second room had to bob and weave through the first room, lift the latch on the accordion door, push it open and inch through.

Educationally, the setup probably didn't meet even minimal 1960 standards. Administratively, I'm sure it was a nightmare. But to the students it had more plusses than minuses. The Armory was mostly a cavernous hall spacious enough for training Guard units and for storing heavy artillery, with plenty of room left over for games. Outside was an expansive open area of pavement and gravel surrounded by war equipment and a chain link fence. We had tanks, howitzers, and camouflaged personnel carriers right there in our playground! In the parlance of the day: Cool, or what?

The other teacher in our Armory schoolhouse was Ray Kenney. Male teachers at the elementary level were even rarer then than now, so his presence alone would have been a change even if he didn't connect well with the kids. But he did. He initiated new activities, introducing us to soccer for recess by making a couple of goals, teaching us the rudiments of the game and letting us go at it. He started a chess club and even lined up matches with other schools. We won easily, much to our collective surprise. We dressed in jackets and ties for our away meets at schools on the Otis Air Force Base and in Barnstable.

I added an after school job, delivering *The Falmouth Enterprise*. It was published on Tuesdays and Fridays. In those years its delivery system relied on kids 11-14 years old who brought the paper to subscribers' doors after school. For most of us it was the initial foray into the world of work. I took on the job though I wasn't sure I liked the idea of going into the homes of total strangers, especially

to collect money. I was assured that my reluctance would pass, and for the most part it did. Making money was the big draw. I had 42 customers, hence 84 deliveries to make per week, and got three cents out of the dime each paper cost. The math: \$2.52 a week if everybody paid me, plus there were always some tips. Not bad, not bad at all.

Tuesdays and Fridays after school I walked or biked straight to the Enterprise office, picked up my 42 papers and got right to it. The paper was not to go on the front lawn or into a tube; it was to go inside the storm door or into the house. No soggy Enterprises for our customers. My route started at King Street and Main. I covered King Street, Queen Street, Allen Avenue, Robinson Road and a few side streets. It took an hour and a half if I kept moving. I was businesslike about the performance, but not about the finances. On my way along Main Street to the route, I always stopped at a bakery for a Bismarck, a sandwich-sized pastry filled with whipped cream and strawberry jam, absolutely irresistible to a hungry boy. I also usually stopped at the Sandbar, a variety store-cum-lunch counter run by Ralph and Helen Sullivan, to buy a pack or two of baseball cards.

After sixth grade, all Falmouth kids went to Lawrence School. I made something of an art of walking home. I didn't need to go much farther than a mile, but found many ways to negotiate it so the walk could easily use up a good part of what was left of the afternoon. Once on Main Street, I might be moved to stop in at Harvey's Hardware to look over the bicycles or sports equipment. Getting home via the streets would have meant a series of right and left turns, but it was more interesting to go through people's yards. I did this without a thought that anybody would mind. Sometimes the chosen route would oblige me to hop over a picket fence or pass within a few feet of someone's

# Falmouth Fire Alarm Signals

Published by The Falmouth Enterprise  
Cape Cod's Most Interesting Newspaper

## IN CASE OF FIRE

Pull a Fire Alarm Box if One is Near and  
Wait to Guide the Firemen.  
If You Must Telephone, Speak Slowly  
and Clearly

DIAL Kimball 8-2323

Say "Fire Department—Emergency"  
Then Tell the Firemen Your Name,  
Where the Fire Is, What Kind, Whether  
House, Chimney or Brush Fire.

Box	Location	Box	Location
14	Falmouth Heights Post Office	345	Quissett Harbor House
141	Oak Crest Hotel, Heights	346	Quissett Four Corners
142	Terrace Gables, Heights	347	School St., W.H.
143	Park Beach Hotel, Heights	348	Gunning Point District
144	Amherst & Grand, So. Heights	349	Sippewissett Hotel District
145	No. Grand & Penn. Aves., Heights	35	Albatross & Millfield Sts., W. H.
146	Frost's Boat Yard	36	Juniper Point, Crane Estate
147	Heights Rd. & Jericho	37	Steamboat Wharf, W.H.
15	Tower House, Heights	38	Breakwater Hotel
16	Maravista Ave. & Menauhant Rd.	39	Penzance Point Section
162	Acapesket District	41	Engine House No. 5, E. Fal.
163	Maravista Ave. & Massasoit St.	411	Old Barnstable, Near Pine's
164	Maravista Ave. & Montauk Rd.	412	Central Ave. & State Highway
17	Davisville, So.	413	John Parker Rd. & State Highway
212	King St. & Clinton Ave., Village	414	Brick Kiln & State Highway
213	Scranton & Clinton Aves.	415	Brick Kiln & Sandwich Rds.
214	East Main & Nye Rd.	416	Pinecrest Beach
215	Scranton & Main St.	417	Shorewood Beach
216	E. Main & Maravista Ave., Teaticket	418	Green Pond, West Shore
217	Trotting Park Road Section	419	Geggatt Rd. & Thom. B. Landers Rd.
218	State & Sandwich Rd., Teaticket	42	Menauhant District
219	Queen & Allen Ave., Village	43	Waquoit District
223	Wormelle's Boat Yard	431	Old Barnstable Rd.
23	Palmer Ave. & Jones Rd.	432	Fresh Pond District
231	Sippewissett & Old State Rd.	433	Seacoast Shores
232	Palmer & Oakwood Aves.	434	Ostrom & Meadow Neck Rds.
233	Dillingham & Hamlin Ave.	435	Seconsett
234	Amvet Ave. off Gifford	436	Metoxit
235	Queen's Buyway	437	Seapit
236	Saconnesset Hills	45	Main & Old Dock Rd., W. Fal.
24	Congregational Church	451	Chapoquoit Island District
25	Wood Lumber Company	452	Blacksmith Shop Rd. & Main St., W.Fal.
251	Depot Ave.	453	State Rd. & Cordwood Landing Rd.
252	Elm Rd., Moors	454	Fassetts Point, W. Fal.
253	Surf Drive	456	Falmouth Cliffs
254	State & Ransom Rds., Quissett	46	Engine House No. 3, No. Fal.
26	Masonic Building, Village	461	Winslow & New State, No. Fal.
27	Main & Walker Sts.	462	No. Fal. R. R. Station
271	Elm Arch Way & Main	463	No. Fal. Post Office
272	Ludlam & Walker Sts., Village	464	Chester & Wild Harbor Rds.
28	Main & Shore Sts.	47	Noyes' Garage, Megansett
282	Main & Gifford Sts., Village	471	Garnet & Holmes Aves., Megansett
283	King & Fairview Sts., Village	472	County Rd. & Nye St.
32	Water & East Sts., W.H.	473	Abbie's Lane & Chester St., Meg.
323	Engine House No. 2, W.H.	48	Arlington & Silver Beach Aves., Silver Beach
324	Church St., Woods Hole	481	Silver Beach Highlands
325	Nobska Point Rd., East Side	482	Old Silver Beach District
326	Glendon Rd., W.H.	483	Ocean View & West Ave., S.I. Beach
327	F. R. Lillie Rd.	484	Point Rd., Wild Harbor
328	The Fells & Oyster Pond Rd.	485	Nye's Cliff, N. Fal.
329	Fay Rd., Woods Hole	49	Coonamessett Ranch
34	Quissett & Buzzards Bay Aves.	491	East End Meeting House
341	Gardiner Rd. & Buzzards Bay Ave.	492	Hallett's, Ashumet
342	Gansett & W.H. Golf Club Sec.	493	Wheeler's, Ashumet
343	Near Keith's, Quissett Ave.	494	Sam Turner & Meeting House Rds.
344	Racing Beach	614	Private Box, MacDougall's Boat Yd.
		615	Stop & Shop
		616	Private Box, Maravista
		621	Mayflower Homes
		624	Private Box, New High School
		627	Private Box, Pafford's Block
		628	Public Schools Center
		631	Private Box, Tilney's, W.H.
		632	Private Box, near Mellon's, W. H.
		634	W.H.O.I.
		635	Private Box, Town Dock, W.H.
		636	Royal Megansett Hotel, N. Fal.
		641	East Falmouth School

living room window, but I wasn't looking at the world through the eyes of a homeowner, never mind one who tended the lawn diligently or had a strong sense of privacy.

A distinguishing feature of life in Falmouth center that each village shared was the fire station whistle. It had a sound midway between a foghorn and a police siren, and the volume of both combined. It also set the dogs to barking, as many of them were running free outdoors. The whistle blasted twice at noon (Time for lunch, people!) and twice more at 4:30 (Quittin' time, everyone!) but it really got a workout when there was a fire in town. Our town had volunteer firefighters, so for their benefit every location had a designated four-digit code. When a fire broke out, the whistle would signal where it was. If the code was, say, 282 for Main and Gifford Streets, we'd hear two blasts, short break, eight blasts, short break, two blasts, long break, then the whole sequence all over again. Those who thought they might want to see a fire, or those whose jobs required them to attend fires, such as newspaper reporters, kept a sheet nearby that listed the 124 signals (in 1958, the last time they were published) and their corresponding locations.

*We no longer have some of the distinguishing sounds from Tom's childhood – fire whistles (discontinued in 1986), trains (Woods Hole service ended in 1959, Falmouth service in 1989, now replaced by the Shining Sea Bikeway), lumbering radar picket planes and roaring jets from Otis overhead (picket planes disestablished in 1969, fighter jets left in 2005) – but we still have the chickadees and the ice cream truck bells!*

### **About the Author**

Tom Turkington, the son of the late Frederick T. and Dorothy Turkington, was born in July, 1949, at Tobey Hospital in Wareham at a time, he said, when “you could speed right over the Bourne Bridge on a midsummer day, and Dad took full advantage of that circumstance.” Tom grew up in Falmouth when many children led freer, less monitored lives than they do now. He lives in Lyme, New Hampshire.