

# Some Family Stories from Centuries Past

## Seventeenth Century

**Massachusetts colony, 1692:** The small, sleepy farming community of Salem Village, north of Boston and on the outskirts of the bigger Salem Town, suddenly found itself in the Massachusetts colony's spotlight in the early months of 1692. Fits of hysteria, mostly among young girls, led to accusations of witchcraft and dozens of arrests. Before the madness ended early the next year, nineteen innocent people had been hanged as witches and a twentieth was crushed to death with heavy stones. The episode remains notorious to this day. Out of embarrassment, Salem Village later changed its name to Danvers, but the city of Salem draws hordes of tourists because of the association of the name "Salem" with the witchcraft trials.

Among the victims falsely accused of witchcraft, probably none was more respectable than our ancestor Rebecca Nurse, a frail 71-year-old widow and mother of eight children. She was hanged on July 19, 1692. Today the Rebecca Nurse Homestead in Danvers holds a restored colonial house like the one where Rebecca and her family lived, as well as a monument with the names of townspeople who signed a petition defending her good name against the accusations. Among the defenders thus honored were John and Rebecca Putnam, two other ancestors of ours who lived in Salem Village. (But their son, also named John Putnam and also an ancestor of ours, testified *against* Rebecca Nurse. And so did a young cousin, Ann Putnam, Jr., who was 12 years old at the time of the trials. As an adult, she repented publicly in the Salem Village church. In her statement she said, "... And particularly, as I was a chief instrument of accusing of Goodwife Nurse and her two sisters, I desire to lie in the dust, and to be humbled for it.")

## Eighteenth Century

**Nova Scotia, 1760s and after:** After the British-French war (called the "French and Indian War" in North America) that lasted from 1756 to 1763, Great Britain took control of the French colonies in what is now Canada. The new rulers were especially harsh in their treatment of the French settlers, known as Acadians, who lived on lands near the Atlantic ocean. Driven from their homes on short notice, they scrambled to find homes elsewhere. Many settled in New England, while some fled all the way to the French colony of Louisiana, where the word "Acadian" soon became slurred to "Cajun." Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic nineteenth-century poem "Evangeline" dramatizes their history. Back in their former home, Acadie was renamed Nova Scotia ("New Scotland").

The expulsion of the French settlers, brutal as it was, made good farmland available to new, English-speaking settlers, some from the nearby New England colonies and some from the British Isles. Among the families that came was one of the by-now numerous Putnam families in Salem Village. Even as Salem Village's population grew, its farmland stayed constant. Some of the people who were being squeezed out felt the lure of the new lands to the north. The Putnams settled in or near a small farming/fishing village called Noel ("Christmas") on the shore of the Bay of Fundy.

Another family, Scotch-Irish in ancestry and headed by Timothy O'Brien, came from northern Ireland to the same part of Nova Scotia as the Putnams. The O'Briens were Protestants, like the Putnams. Before long, Timothy O'Brien's son Jacob married Nancy Putnam, from the Massachusetts family. They had a son, also named Jacob, and when the younger Jacob married Sarah Densmore, they honored the Putnam family name by christening their son James Putnam O'Brien. Since then Putnam has been a middle name in six consecutive generations: three of us named James Putnam O'Brien and one each named George Putnam O'Brien (my uncle), Brian Putnam Fenn, and (named as a result of effective lobbying by his genealogy-minded grandmother) Lucas Putnam Fenn.

## **Early Nineteenth Century**

**"The Ohio Country."** Not long after the Putnams and O'Briens took up farmland in Nova Scotia where French Catholic settlers had once lived, others of our ancestors moved to what had recently been Native American lands in Ohio. All of what is now Ohio, in fact, had been Indian territory before the American Revolution: the British government forbade white settlers from crossing the Appalachian mountain chain into what is now the American Midwest. Once the new United States gained its independence in 1783, settlers began crossing the mountains and the new American army fought battles with Indians who tried in vain to resist the onrush.

By 1803, Ohio was an American state, and its English population swelled even faster. Many New Englanders went due west to northern Ohio, near Lake Erie, while migrants from New Jersey and other colonies south of New England came to southwestern Ohio, where Shawnee and Miami Indians had once thrived. Two of the families that made this latter move were named Phillips and Ely; in mid-century, Homer Phillips married Mary Ann Ely and they began raising their own family on a farm near Middletown, north of Cincinnati. They had four children, one of whom was my grandfather on my mother's side.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the state, a Congregational minister with the imposing name of Nehemiah Cogswell Coffin, a graduate of Dartmouth College, moved with his family to northern Ohio, near the college town of Oberlin. His daughter Lizzie was to marry my other grandfather, whose story follows.

## Late Nineteenth Century

**Coming off the Farm.** The second James Putnam O'Brien (named for his father) was raised in the same small community of Noel where four generations of his family had lived. For all but the first ten days of his life he was raised by his mother: ten days was the interval between his birth and the day his father died in an accident with a runaway ox cart. My grandfather did not add to the roster of O'Briens who owned farms in Noel. Instead, he immigrated to the States as a young man in order to study theology at Oberlin College in the early 1880s. He stayed in the States as a Congregational minister, becoming an American citizen in 1891 (I have the certificate). He married Lizzie Rust Coffin, who may or may not have attended Oberlin for a time. (This was the first American college to admit women as well as African Americans.) He was a preacher for the rest of his life, and in his last years he was president of Straight College, a small church-affiliated school in New Orleans for African American students (it later became swallowed by Dillard University).

James and Lizzie O'Brien had four children. The ones I knew were my father, Henry Rust O'Brien, and my uncle, George Putnam O'Brien. They had a younger brother named Carleton, who died as an infant, and an older sister named Esther who died at age 7. I've always thought that these deaths, which occurred when the family was living in a remote Ozark Mountain region of Missouri, may have influenced my father in his career choice of becoming a public health doctor.

My other grandfather, my mother's father, also grew up on a farm, the one owned by his parents, Homer and Mary Ann Ely Phillips. He was born in 1867, two years after the end of the Civil War and also two years after the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. His father had served in the Civil War, and he and his wife gave their new son the first name of Lincoln.

The contrasting lives of my grandfather Phillips and his older brother represented two sides of a gradual movement in American life from farm to city, with smaller families. His brother Jim Phillips remained a farmer all his life; he married the daughter of a nearby farmer and they had a total of ten children, not counting two who died in infancy. Lincoln Phillips, for his part, taught school for a year and then went to medical school to study homeopathic medicine. He married Jennie Hatch, who was the sister of a medical-school classmate and the daughter of a small-city businessman. They moved to Cincinnati and instead of having ten or twelve children, had only two – my mother, Mary Lou Phillips, and my aunt, Martha Phillips. Lincoln Phillips had his office on the first floor of the house where the family lived, and the Methodist church that the family (or at least the mother and daughters) attended was only a few blocks away.

## Twentieth Century

My mother grew up in the middle-class Walnut Hills neighborhood of Cincinnati and after graduating from high school attended Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. I believe she was the first member of the Phillips family to attend college. She made lifelong friends at Miami: all the way up to her death in 1984 at age 87, she was part of a round robin” chain of woman friends who kept in touch with each other’s lives through letters. The man she married, though, was her high school sweetheart from Cincinnati, Marion Carr. It was an ill-starred marriage, not because of conflict but because Marion came down with a dreaded, then-incurable disease, tuberculosis. For most of their marriage’s short span, he lived away from her in a facility for tuberculosis patients. She was soon a widow. Having had a knack for writing, even at a young age, she went to work for a Dayton, Ohio newspaper, where she was the society editor.

At the time when she met my father, in 1926, introduced by mutual friends, he was well into a career in medicine. After attending medical school at the University of Michigan during World War I, he served an internship on Ellis Island in New York City. He was there at the time of the Great Flu Epidemic of 1918, which killed between twenty and forty million people worldwide. (His future father-in-law, Lincoln Phillips, was active during the flu epidemic also – my aunt said once that he was run ragged during that time and she felt that his death in his early sixties may have been due to his overwork during the epidemic.)

**Overseas and Back Home.** In the early 1920s my father made his first overseas trip, a seven-week ocean voyage that took him to Thailand (then named Siam), where he spent two years working in public health with the Rockefeller Foundation. He hoped to get back there some day. By chance, he was in Cincinnati in the mid-1920s, where he met Mary Lou Phillips Carr and they hit it off right away. She also agreed to buy into his foreign adventure: soon after getting married in early 1926 they were on a sailing ship bound for Siam, under the auspices of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, with my father committed to medical work in the northern city of Chiangmai and my mother as a writer and editor for Mission publications.

Being away for four years in an age before commercial airline travel meant being away from their families in the States. When they got back in 1930, it was barely in time to have a last visit with each of their fathers, both of them in declining health. Each was to see his first grandchild (my sister Martha Jane, aka “Farmor” or “Raney”) on only one visit. Visiting my minister grandfather, James P. O’Brien, had special meaning. Martha Jane had been born overseas in 1929, but my parents held off on having her baptized until Grandfather O’Brien could do the honors. He was in a hospital in New Orleans, where he stayed alive long enough to baptize his granddaughter.

My father would have liked to return to the overseas mission field, but my mother resisted and they remained in the States, where my sister Sue (“Grandma Sue”) and I were born in 1933 and 1941 respectively. My parents came back to the States in time for the Great Depression, which must have been a tough time financially, though my father always had a job (a succession of them, for county and state health departments and the federal Public Health Service, lasting till his retirement from the State of Pennsylvania in 1964, Of us three

children, Martha Jane as the oldest must have been most aware of the economic trauma that the society was going through. In fact, by the time I was born the economy was booming again with the impetus of military spending, and eight months after my birth Japanese planes attacked Pearl Harbor and the U.S. plunged into World War II.

My mother never held a paid job during those years. Wherever the family lived, she was active in the community, especially in church and in drama groups (as actress and playwright) and sometimes as a humorous speaker to women's groups. She also had the primary child-raising responsibility. This was especially true during the war and in its aftermath, when my father served overseas in non-combat duties (though he had the rank of colonel) for the American military and then in postwar international relief programs. It was not till 1947, after he had found a job with the U.S. Public Health Service in Washington, D.C. and bought a house in suburban Maryland, that we were all together again as a family. The following summer, he took Martha Jane, Susan, and me on a three-week vacation to Nova Scotia while my mother stayed home. It wasn't until decades later that I realized whose vacation that had been!

## **Time Starting to Fly**

The one grandparent I ever knew was my mother's mother, Jennie Hatch Phillips (known to us as "Mommom"), a devout but good-humored Methodist who passed away in January of 1959. At the end, she was an invalid but still mentally sharp. Only a short time before her death, she was happy to get the news that for the first time she had a great-grandchild, namely, Brad. For that brief interval, until she passed away, there were four generations still alive in our family.

Both of my parents were alive for the arrivals of their four grandchildren: Brad, Brian, David, and Mary in 1959, '61, '63, and '65, respectively. My father had contracted Parkinson's disease by the mid-60s, and his health declined from then until his death in 1970, but my mother lived for fourteen years after that, and was able to get to know her grandchildren well. She had immense pride in them; if she were alive today (not likely, since she'd be 120 years old!) her pride would be richly affirmed. It would also extend to the eight members of the newest generation, whose birthdates stretched from Jonas's in 1988 to Jasper's in 2009 (every one of them above average!).

## **Thoughts about Changes over Time**

My aunt Martha Phillips told a story of a time when her mother went to visit relatives on their farm north of Cincinnati. While she was gone, my grandfather Phillips broke his arm while starting his car. (That doesn't make sense unless you know that in order to start a car back then you had to stand in front of the car and turn a metal crank.) Because there was no

telephone at the farm, he had to type and mail a letter to his wife asking her to come home, which she did.

Of course, the car (like the typewriter, also new by the late nineteenth century) was already a sign that times had changed. It wasn't an automobile, but an ox cart that did-in my great-grandfather O'Brien back in Nova Scotia. And change has continued, at an accelerated pace. What strikes me most of all is what a privilege it is to be able to stay in touch with each other as easily as we can now. When my parents went off to Siam/Thailand for a four-year commitment in 1926, they were away from the United States for that whole time. Today, their grandson Brian and his family, residents of Sweden since 1994, have flown back and forth to New England at least twenty times. Unlike my parents, who relied on letters to and from their families, the Swedes (and for that matter the younger Fenns who've begun sneaking out to California!) can stay in touch just about any way you can think of: U.S. mail, telephone calls, email messages, text messages, Skype (talking selfies), and who knows what else (Instagram? SnapChat? not for me).

It is hard to imagine myself in the shoes of any of the ancestors I've written about in these stories (even my parents). But it's also hard to avoid a fascination with them. There is something about kinship that goes beyond logic. What I do know is how fortunate I've been to be part of a family that stretches, not just back, but forward. Watching the newest generation change and grow has been a continuous blessing to me.

*These stories, based in large part on the genealogical research by the family historian, Martha Jane Fenn, were solicited from me by her grandson (and my great-nephew) Marcus Fenn. Thanks to both of them.*