

## At the Station

*Patricia Sylvia Burke*

ARR FALMOUTH 5:10P FRI  
LV FALMOUTH 4:48P SUN\*  
\*ALL TIMES EST

Before World War II, all railroad timetables were on Eastern Standard Time, so that you had to mentally add one hour to the times listed when you consulted a timetable during the period from April to September. Even the clock in the train station was on Standard Time. The times given above are not precise; they are within a few minutes of the actual schedule. But on Sunday nights in the summer the timetables didn't mean much anyhow. The trains were always late. And we were always early — my father, my sister Dorothy and I.

Dot was embarrassed that we made such a big deal out of driving her to the station — only a five-minute walk from the house — and waiting until she was on board the Boston train before we'd leave her on her own for the two-hour ride. She would keep suggesting that my father and I really shouldn't wait any longer, she would be fine until the train came. I'm sure she put up with us because she knew I enjoyed the ritual and she humored me to the point of waving goodbye from the train window as it pulled away. Dot was eighteen years older than I — a career girl who had her own apartment in "the city," and when I was eight or nine or ten, she came down from Boston most weekends in July and August. With my other sisters home from college for the summer, the family was complete and



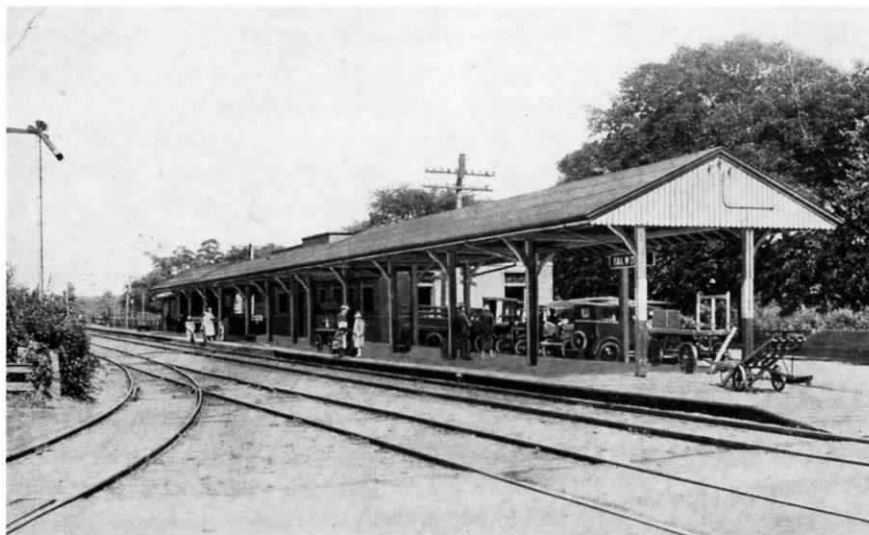
My sister Dorothy, ca. 1939. Courtesy Patricia Burke.

the house was busy. Living on Cape Cod, a mile from the beach, you can count on a busy house on any weekend in July and August. With three grown sisters who had boy friends, who had friends, etc., plus friends of my mother and father who found that "it was so hot in the city today, we thought we'd drive down," (and what are you having for dinner?), confusion was common and solitude rare. But by Sunday evening most people were on their way home. Then the station was busy. The interior of the building was similar to most small-town railroad stations: high ceilings, uncomfortable high-backed wooden benches, the walls painted depression green on top and depression brown on the bottom half (the colors not reflecting an economic depression, but, rather, likely to cause an emotional one), and the pendulum of the large clock (on Eastern Standard

Time) swinging away the end of a summer weekend. So most people went inside only to purchase their tickets, then came out onto the platform. The Reynoldses were usually there seeing off their house guests. They played some sort of game with coins on the track. They would each place a coin on the track and after a train went by they would pick up the coins, inspect them, and declare the winner. I wondered what the point was and how they decided the winner, but I never asked. I just watched and wondered.

There were a number of trains that ran over those coins on the tracks. They were all late because they waited for the boats from the Islands. The steamers from Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard were supposed to connect precisely with the trains which ran from Woods Hole to New York and Boston; but winds and tides and fog determine a boat's timetable, not a printed schedule. So the trains would wait at the Woods Hole terminal for the boat passengers to arrive, walk the length of the dock, and board them. Sometimes there were so many passengers that they would fill an entire train which they would send

straight through to Boston. Our station, Falmouth, was the first regular stop along the way, only four miles from Woods Hole, with two sets of tracks in case a northbound and a southbound train arrived at the same time — a rare event. When we heard a train coming, everyone peered out, leaning over the tracks as if to welcome a long-lost friend, unless someone saw the white flag on the front of the engine which meant: express coming through. With its steam engine puffing and blowing out the last of the two long and short blasts which came for every crossing and station, it was a power to be respected. The express would have its passengers in Boston in an hour since it didn't have to stop at the stations along the way as the regular trains did: at Falmouth, West Falmouth, North Falmouth, Cataumet, Pocasset, Monument Beach, Buzzards Bay; then Onset and Wareham, South Middleboro, Middleboro, South Bridgewater, Bridgewater, Brockton, Quincy — into the South Station in Boston, easily recognized by two famous landmarks — well, signs of the times. One said DOMINO SUGAR and the other, GILLETTE. In a young girl's mind the train was taking its passengers



Waiting for the train, under the canopy of the new brick Falmouth station, ca. 1939.

Courtesy Philip Choate.

from our plain little town to the glamour of a city; in reality, the train ride from Woods Hole to Boston was from sun and waves to sugar and shaves.

An express train going through did give validity to my father's theory that if you drove to the terminal at Woods Hole, four miles south, to get on a northbound train, you would save time. I only wondered if an express train speeding through pressed those coins on the track any differently than the trains that slowed and stopped at the station.

There was a lot to see while we were waiting. If it had been a sunny day, we looked for the person with the worst sunburn (easily identified by his or her reaction to being tapped on the shoulder). We watched the New York train stop and pick up its passengers while the conductor shouted over and over NOO YAWK TRAIN so as not to take on any Boston-bound passengers. Of course the people who boarded the New York train were the most sophisticated group there; even the people who saw them off had a certain presence. They were the ones who were likely to have

brought along a thermos of cocktails and paper cups and who got happier and louder while waiting. For their five-hour ride, the New Yorkers had the option of a Pullman car with dingy velour chairs (extra fare, of course) and a dining car, where we could see the white-jacketed waiters hurrying back and forth serving meals and drinks. Finally, when the station agent moved the mail cart to a particular position on the platform, we knew he had gotten the signal that the Boston train had left Woods Hole. Now a lot of the kids would crouch, put their ears on the track, and listen for the hum of the approaching train. The theory was the same as that of the Plains Indian putting his ear to the ground listening for a herd of buffalo. But this lacked the nobility of a Remington painting; this was just a bunch of kids, backsides up, ears down, seeing who would pick up the sound of the train first. And when someone claimed "first" there was no way to disprove it. As long as the train showed up within five minutes, we had to take his word for the claim.

Crowd at the Woods Hole terminal waiting for the boat to arrive.  
Courtesy WHHC.



Dot avoided the ceremony of being “met” at the station when she came down on Friday nights by never telling us which train she would take. She would just appear most weekends walking in the driveway, suitcase in hand, and have bestowed upon her by my mother, my father and me, a welcome fit for royalty. (Better all this fuss at the back door than at the train station.)

On weekend nights my three sisters went out. There was never a shortage of dates. With three girls in their twenties, if only one had a date, well, he could bring a friend who could bring a friend. But stay out of their way on a Friday night when the girls were getting ready to go out. The safest place to be then was out in the yard, where one heard only the loudest of complaints from the open windows: “Where is my . . .” “Who took my . . .” “Oh, damn! Another run . . .” My father, the only male in a household of six, would take refuge outside, in mowing the lawn or trimming the shrubs — wearing his yard-work outfit. This consisted of the suit, shirt and tie he had worn at his law office all day — minus the suit coat. This was his salute to informality. Formal dress meant putting on the coat again. (On Sundays he wore his “white ducks”, first to church and then later to wash the car.) After the girls went out the house was quiet, and I was asleep hours before they came in. My father would probably still be up when they came home, though — sitting at the library table which was his desk in his study “looking law” to prepare his cases. He claimed he was too busy talking to clients all day at his office to do the research that each case required, so most nights he worked until well after midnight, with the family cat curled up on one corner of his table. If he did go to bed before my sisters came home, he left them well-chaperoned at the door: he saw to it that the outside front light was turned on. It was rumored that this light had the same candlepower as the lighthouse at Nobska Point and we agreed that if the power ever went off at Nobska, we could turn our outside light toward the ocean and it would serve just as well for a beacon.



My father or, as he liked to sign himself, “J.P.S., Jr.,” in his “white ducks,” on the Woods Hole Golf Course. Courtesy Patricia Burke.

Saturdays were comparatively relaxed in the house, but Saturday night was date time for all three. In general, the same ablutions, the same frantic calls, the same rushing about went on as on Friday night. My number two treat on a Saturday night was a walk into town with my father, window shopping and always ending up at an ice cream counter. Number one treat which happened only once in a while was being given a ride by Dot and her boy friend — the one who owned the old Ford with the rumble seat. An open convertible was fun, but a rumble seat was joy unbounded! I’d climb in and ride around town or by the beach in that rumble seat — it was a great place to put a kid sister since it left the couple inside the car free to talk without being overheard and, for the kid sister who wanted to be pilot when she grew up, it was the closest she ever came to flying in an open cockpit. With a scarf and goggles she would have challenged the Red Baron — at a time when Snoopy was still gestating in Charles Schultz’s inkwell.

On Sunday mornings the entire family took part in THE SCENE. The last Mass at our church was at 11 o'clock. When I grew older I had the sense to go to an earlier Mass with my mother so that I could be the audience rather than one of the players in THE SCENE. Ten o'clock was curtain time and my father sent up the first call to my three sisters: "Time to get up or we'll be late for church." (Voice normal.) The second call was given at 10:15: "Get up now or we'll miss Mass." (With feeling.) By 10:30 there was much shuffling and banging of doors from upstairs — two out of three were up and about but Dot was still a peaceful lump under the covers. The 10:30 call for her came with agitation; the 10:40 with open hostility and the warning that: "This is the last time I'm calling you." That seemed to be the cue. Dorothy got out of bed. In truth that was not the last time she was called; only the instrument of calling was changed — from the human voice to that unchallengeable champion of irritating noises: the horn of a Chevrolet. At this point everyone but Dot was ready and waiting in the car, engine running, doors open, and horn blowing. To her credit, once out of bed Dot moved as a fireman to the sound of the gong. By 10:50 she was dressed, made up, half-a-cup-of-coffee awake and in the car. The entire scene was real theater. We all knew that Dot went to church only when she was at home, because it was expected of her. And she knew that we knew. But no one ever talked openly about it. We all took part in the pretense that she was a regular church-goer.

Having everyone in the car did not signal the end of the difficulties of getting to Mass. Next, we took our show "on the road." Off we went — five Portuguese-Irish-Catholics on our way to Mass down the Main Street of a New England Yankee town, past the village green with its stately elms, past the Congregational Church with its bell which had been cast by Paul Revere, mind you, past the Episcopal Church where the local society leaders were on the way in to *their* services. The one-mile trip was fraught with delays

since Main Street had been designed — if indeed there was any design to it — for the sparse traffic of a quiet town and now had to accommodate the weekend summer visitors. All those tourists were driving back and forth looking for breakfast, newspapers, or religion. It was traditional during this drive for someone in our car to express vocally the common complaint of the native Cape Codder during July and August: "Summer people! Why don't they stay home and just send their money?" Despite the delays, however, we were never very late for church because, like the trains, Mass never started on time either.

Going home, we usually took the longer but faster route: the shore road which passed the town beach. On a good day there would be a lot of people there, already enjoying the sun and ocean — presumably atheists, agnostics, and the ambitious faithful who had enough sense to go to church early and make the most of the day.

But we were not yet free to go to the beach because, when we arrived home, my mother was preparing THE MEAL. Company or not, Sunday called for Sunday dinner. The beach would have to wait until we had gathered together and partaken of this MEAL, the main course of which was always a roast which my father proceeded to butcher at the table into odd-shaped chunks despite instructions from Dot as to how the English carved *their* roast beef and reminders from the rest of us that it was already dead. That, plus potatoes and dessert, constituted a meal guaranteed to deter swimming for at least an hour.

Sometimes my sisters would let me tag along with them to the beach, which meant just being there while they and their friends hashed over their Saturday night or talked about people I didn't know. But sometimes Dot would take me for a swim — just the two of us. She believed a trip to the beach should be as unencumbered as possible, so we went native: no towels, no shirts — bathing suits and caps were all anyone

needed; well, a dime for ice cream at "the stand" and sneakers were allowed for walking the two miles there and back. Thus provisioned, we were qualified to chuckle at the little old ladies in bathing slippers who dared to wade in our ocean. When you went for a swim with Dot, you *swam*. None of this lying-around-getting-a-tan business. If you wanted to sit down after swimming, you sat on the sand; to dry off you leaned against the bath house or walked up and down the beach. To dry off faster? "Well, silly," I was told, "run up and down the beach." A refreshing swim followed by a run on the beach and topped off with an ice cream cone (with jimmies, please) was Heaven-on-earth. However, this ecstasy was followed by the penance of the walk home: one mile of agony because of (1) a wet wool bathing suit with a little sand inside it which rubbed and chafed with every step; (2) sneakers with, also, a little sand inside them, which sandpapered one's toes and heels with every step; and (3) skin which felt one size too small for the body thanks to time spent in the sun and the residue of salt from the ocean. If we had timed things correctly — that is, if we had stayed too long at the beach, then panic

would have set in at home. My mother and father were afraid Dot would miss her train so they would drive down and pick us up, thus cutting short our period in purgatory.

Then a much-subdued reenactment of the Sunday morning scene took place at home, with my father mumbling something about missing the train and Dot rushing to get washed, dressed, and packed. Then the three of us were off in a mad dash to the station where we would wait and wait for the train that would be late, where we'd look for the worst sunburn and see who heard the hum of the train first and where, after waving goodbye to Dot ("Are you coming down next weekend?"), I would watch the Reynolds pick up their coins from the track and inspect them. I still wonder what was supposed to happen to the coins. I don't really want to know. I just like to wonder about it.

Patricia Sylvia Burke grew up in Falmouth. She holds an M.A. from Fordham University, was an English instructor at Montclair State College, and has had articles published in *New Bedford Magazine*, *Women's Circle Home Cooking*, *Our Little Friend*. She now lives in Quissett where she pursues her interests: reading, writing, and running.



At the beach, where I am being royally ignored by one of my sisters (Claire, second from right) and her friends. Courtesy Patricia Burke.