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The Suicide of Sally Perry

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I. The Setting and the Act

IT WAS Monday, the third of June in the year 1823, a day that was later to be remembered as the day before “June training.” The first Tuesday in June was at that time one of the annual muster days for the State militia. Except for a few exempted categories, almost all the adult males in Vermont between the ages of 18 and 45 were due to gather the next morning on the Commons in their respective towns.¹ In Plainfield, more than 70 men in the combined cavalry and infantry would be mustering,² which meant that just about every family in town had a brother, a husband, or a son who was involved. In spite of possible fines for failure to come properly equipped—there were no uniforms, but every man was expected to furnish his own firearms and other assorted items—nobody took muster days very seriously. It was the custom then, after the inspection and drill were over, for the commanding officers to provide treats, and jugs of New England rum passed freely from hand to hand. To most of the men, muster days were long-awaited opportunities for institutionally approved conviviality and general rowdyism. On the day before this event, in the midst of all the excitement, a thirty-five year old seamstress, daughter of one of the town’s earliest settlers, quietly hung herself in the woods near her home.³

Sally had been living on the home farm with her widowed mother, a married brother, and several younger brothers and sisters. Since the death of her father the preceding fall, the family had been in reduced circumstances.⁴ As late as the fall of 1821 young Lucy, Sally’s fifteen year old sister, could afford an occasional extravagance such as the

1. *Laws of the State of Vermont* (Randolph, 1808), II, 122 ff.

2. Treasurer’s Book, 1817–1833, military returns for 1824, Town Clerk’s Office, Plainfield, Vt.

3. Perry Papers, notes on Sally Perry’s suicide. These papers are in the possession of Daniel A. Perry, Barre, Vt.

4. Probate Court Records, Estate of Elijah Perry, November 1822–March 1825.

purchase of a \$7 gossamer shawl,⁵ but now such luxuries were out of the question. After the death of Elijah, the whole family managed to get by with a yearly cash expenditure of only about \$150. They had sold most of their personal possessions and leased part of their farmland to meet the debts against the estate. Sally was living at home and earning her keep by sewing for the neighbors.

On this particular Monday in June she had left home in the morning, and had made her way up over the hill to the farm of Justus Kinne, the recently married son of Plainfield's Congregational minister. Sally was usually hired to make men's clothing, and she may have spent the morning cutting patterns, sewing shirts, vests, pantaloons, or even a coat. The materials with which she worked were probably tough homespuns, and Sally's fingers were sore, as events later proved. Sally finished her morning's work and started home for the mid day meal. She had walked only part of the way when, either on impulse or by prearranged plan, she entered a lonely wooded area near the road, made a noose out of a skein of wool and fastened it to the branch of a tree. Then she climbed up on a high ledge of rock beneath the tree, inserted her head in the noose, and jumped.⁶

Suicide was rare, though not unheard of, in the frontier settlements of Vermont. A woman had hung herself in East Montpelier in 1801.⁷ More recently, a Plainfield man had slit his throat in Barre, after being arrested for forgery. But Sally's suicide was the first to occur within the limits of the town.⁸ In seeking the motives of Sally's suicide one must remember that suicide is both a personal and a cultural phenomenon. The forces that drive a person toward it, or restrain him from it, are inside the person and also outside the person, in the attitudes, habits, customs, and laws of his community.

II. Motives

The known facts of Sally's life are few. She was born in Middleboro, Massachusetts, in 1788, the oldest child of Jemima and Elijah Perry.⁹ In 1795 the Perrys left Middleboro with their three children, and after a laborious journey that probably took several weeks, arrived in the new settlement of Plainfield, then called "St. Andrew's gore."¹⁰ They

5. Hubbard Day Book (Montpelier) entry for October 8, 1821. Vermont Historical Society Library, Montpelier, Vt.

6. Perry Papers, *op. cit.*

7. A. Hemenway: *Vermont Historical Gazeteer*, Montpelier 1882, IV. 584.

8. A. Hemenway, *op. cit.*, 718.

9. *Middleboro Town Records*, Middleboro, Massachusetts.

10. Orange County Land Records, Chelsea, Vermont.

had probably come for the usual reasons—the lure of cheap and productive lands—and for the specific reason that Elijah's older brother James had recently settled there.

Sally was seven years old at the time of the move to Plainfield, old enough to remember a more comfortable way of life. Not only were there unaccustomed hardships and privations, but actual danger from bears and wolves. As the oldest child in the family she suffered from special disadvantages. No schools were built in Plainfield until 1804, and the first in her district was erected in 1805, when she was already seventeen years of age. Any formal schooling she had in Plainfield must have been scanty, and probably took place during the summers only, in a neighbor's barn.¹¹ The family kept growing, until by 1811 there were nine children in all,¹² with Sally undoubtedly her mother's chief helper in the endless round of household tasks and child care.

There would have been ample opportunity for Sally to learn the trade of tailoring. Since early childhood she had probably taken part in some of the many operations involved in making clothing out of flax and wool, the raw products of the home farm. After 1805 carding and fulling mills in Plainfield relieved the family of some of the more arduous steps in the process, but the family undoubtedly continued for many years after that to weave its own cloth and make its own clothing.

After years of toil and thrift the Perrys had added to their original land, improved about fifteen acres, and built a house with barns, shed, and a cider mill. Like most of the other small farms in New England, theirs was practically a self sufficient unit, with diversified crops and livestock. At the time of Elijah Perry's death in November, 1822, there were on hand 400 pounds of flax, thirty bushels of oats, 75 bushels of corn, over ten tons of hay, 50 bushels of apples, and nineteen barrels of cider. The livestock included one bay mare, one beef cow, one gray mare, one two-year-old heifer, two yearlings and calf, twenty-one sheep and three oxen.¹³

Elijah died without leaving a will, and neither had he made any arrangement with his grown sons for the care of their elder unmarried sister. (Sally's uncle James, for example, had deeded his property to his eldest son, on condition that he, his wife, and unmarried daughter would be given a home and care for the rest of their natural lives.¹⁴) Without a husband or father, Sally's economic position was precarious. Very few

11. A. Hemenway, *op. cit.*, 729.

12. Plainfield Town Records, Plainfield, Vt.

13. Probate Court Records, *op. cit.*

14. Plainfield Land Records, Vol. I. deed dated September 19, 1809, James Perry to Elijah Perry, 288.

occupations were open to women at that time and none was well paid. Sewing for neighbors, most of whom were not much better off than her own family, could hardly have been very remunerative, but it was Sally's only salable skill.

By the time she had reached the age of thirty-five Sally's chances for finding a husband in Plainfield were slight. She had few opportunities to meet men from other towns, and in Plainfield in the early 1820s there were not more than thirty men in the thirty-five to forty-five year age bracket, most of whom were probably married.¹⁵ No doubt Sally was already typed as an "old maid," and with this damaged social image her opportunities would have been even further reduced. Perhaps her best chance would have been with some newly bereaved widower, for males in this category were usually so desperate for a new wife that they would take anything in petticoats that could cook. But apparently none of the wives of potential widowers was ready to oblige, and Sally's hopes along these lines, if she ever had any, must have withered.

Sally was "one of the unfortunates," wrote Theron Perry, historian of the Plainfield Perry family, and her suicide, he goes on to suggest, may have been the result of despondency after "a hard run of typhoid fever." It is not recorded when this sickness occurred, and there are not known to have been any epidemics in Plainfield in the early 1820s. But at the time of his death in 1822 Elijah Perry had owed a local doctor almost \$150—an astronomical sum for medical fees in those days.¹⁶ This may have been a debt accumulated over a period of years, and while it tells us nothing specifically about Sally, it does suggest a good deal of family illness.

Thus we may say in summary that Sally's economic insecurity, her frustrated hopes for marriage, and her fears about her health, whether realistic or not, were all possible determinants, singly or collectively, of her self destructive wishes.

III. Deterrents

Studies of suicide patterns in the United States and other countries have indicated that strong family ties are one of the strongest deterrents to suicide. Thus married people, for example, tend to have lower suicide rates than single, divorced, and widowed persons.¹⁷ By 1823 Sally's first family had largely outgrown its need of her: her younger brothers and sisters no longer required her care; her father was dead; and her

15. U. S. Census, 1820, town of Plainfield.

16. Probate Court Records, *op. cit.* The amount allowed was \$146.24, to Robert Paddock (of Barre).

17. Marshall B. Clinard, *Sociology of Deviant Behavior*, Rev. Ed., 1963 (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., N. Y.), 417.

mother was depending on her "dower thirds," and on her sons. And Sally had no new family to take its place.

The same story of weakened social ties appears in the record of Sally's church affiliation. She had joined the Baptist church in Plainfield in 1811, and had stayed in it until September, 1820, when the church clerk reported that "Sister Sally Perry made a request to commune with other denominations and the church thought that they could not give their consent and she withdrew her fellowship from us."¹⁸ The winds of Arminianism had profoundly stirred the Plainfield Perrys. They had left the "standing order" Congregational church, and by the second generation were still unsettled in their new church affiliations. Sally's cousins, the sons of her Uncle James, were divided between the Baptist and Methodist societies, with one in the former and two in the latter. Sally's brothers, one of whom had started with the Baptists, later joined the Universalists.¹⁹ After leaving the Baptists, Sally may have joined some other congregation, or remained aloof from all of them. But whether she did or not, it seems clear that she probably had no religious advisor in the community to whom she could turn for comfort and counsel; and there seemed to be no single religious organization with which she felt greatly identified. She was, unfortunately, probably both socially and emotionally somewhat isolated.

Although not against the law in Vermont, suicide was strongly condemned by Common Law and religious teachings. Sally could hardly have been unaware of such a strong cultural taboo, and to defy it as she did must have required considerable courage. If there was a positive side to Sally's act it was in the illumination of her courage and independence of thought. These were traits which were of course greatly fostered by frontier conditions in New England at that time. Sally had not been taught to be dependent, resigned, or passive; she was taught self reliance and self-determination. She believed that everybody had equal rights, equal chances, and freedom of choice. If she had not been a product of a democratic, individualistic society she would not have dared to question its mores or to hope for something better than she had. She would have been less interesting, but perhaps she would have lived longer.

IV. The Sequel

Sally's father, a few years before he died, had bought a part share in what later became known as the Kinne cemetery, because it was orig-

18. Minutes of the Calvinist Baptist Church in Plainfield, 1811-1827, entry for Sept. 7, 1820. V. H. S. Library, Montpelier, Vt.

19. Treasurer's Book, 1817-1833, Society Returns for 1821 and ff. Town Clerk's Office, Plainfield, Vt. See also Baptist Church Records, *op. cit.* entry for Sept. 26, 1811.

inally a part of the farm of Bradford Kinne.²⁰ This burying ground was located high on a hill, north of the Kinne farm and within a short distance of a crossroad leading to Sally's house. This is presumably where Elijah Perry was buried, although the stone that must have once marked his grave has long since disappeared. According to a Massachusetts law originating in the seventeenth century and lasting until the nineteenth, no suicide was entitled to burial in the common Christian burying place.²¹ But there had never been such a law in Vermont, and Sally was buried in the family plot, probably next to her father.

Not long after this, some boys were fishing in the brook below the Kinne farm, and in the woods nearby they found a human hand, severed at the wrist. This grisly trophy was subsequently identified, by the needle punctures on the thumb, as the hand of Sally Perry, and it was then discovered that her grave had been opened and the body removed.

Penalties for disturbing the remains of the dead were severe in early Vermont. According to a law of 1804, persons guilty of this act were liable to a fine up to \$1000, a public whipping not exceeding thirty-nine stripes, imprisonment up to a year, "or any or all of the said punishments at the discretion of the supreme court."

Whenever a person died by violence, whether by his own hand or by the hand of another, it was required by law in Vermont that an inquisition be held in the town or place where the act occurred. The inquisition was to be called and presided over by a Justice of the Peace, there was to be a panel of at least twelve jurors, and it was to take place in the presence of the body.²² All of these conditions, except the last one, were complied with in what was officially called "the Inquisition on the body of Sally Perry."²³ This took place in the early spring of 1824, with Bradford Kinne as the probable presiding Justice of the Peace. There were twelve jurors, who included among their number two of the three town doctors, the town clerk, and a number of the leading merchants and farmers. They heard the sworn testimony of seven witnesses, one of whom may have been one of the boys involved in the fishing incident, and another of whom was Justus Kinne, probably the last person to see Sally alive. No record of this testimony has been preserved, but apparently no one but Sally was implicated in her death, and no one was formally accused of the crime of grave robbery, because the case was never brought to trial. According to family legend, however, many people in the town

20. Plainfield Land Records, Bradford Kinne to Elijah Perry and others, Nov. 18, 1818, Plainfield, Vt., I, 211.

21. Marshall Clinard, *op. cit.*, 408.

22. *Laws of Vermont*, 1808, 257.

23. Treasurer's Book, *op. cit.*, entry for April 6, 1824.

believed the theft to have been the work of a medical student, or of someone planning to sell the body to one of Vermont's two medical schools, presumably the nearer one at the University of Vermont, which had opened just the year before.

In the early days of Christianity, suicide was regarded as a sin against God and a sure passport to Hell. During the Middle Ages some European countries sanctioned the practice of all kinds of mutilation and degradation that could be brought on the bodies of suicides. Thus a person who had committed suicide could be hung on the gallows, thrown in the sewer, or even impaled on a stake as a warning to others.²⁴ These attitudes, in somewhat diluted form, had filtered into the American colonies and lingered long after. Perhaps the thief or thieves who took Sally's body had inherited some of this punitive attitude, and thought that what they were doing could be condoned in the case of a suicide. Vestiges of this punitive attitude may also be responsible for the careless, or deliberately sadistic, amputation of her hand.

Since the perpetrator of this crime was never found, we can only speculate on the degree to which commercial, punitive, or other motives may have played a part. But we know that it was the first and last episode of its kind ever to occur in Plainfield. It now seems grotesque and dated in comparison with the suicide of Sally Perry, which continues to be modern in its implications.

24. Marshall Clinard, *op. cit.*, 405.

