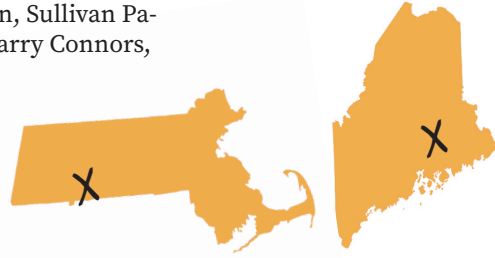


HOSTS: Factory owners Michael and Ed Sullivan, Sullivan Paper Co., West Springfield, MA, and Riverman Larry Connors, Bangor, ME

LISTENING CHALLENGE: Economic Disparity in America

PLACE: West Springfield, MA and Bangor, ME



TUNING INTO CLASS

*Things men have made with wakened hands, and put soft life into
are awake through the years with transferred touch, and go on glowing for long years.
And for this reason, some old things are lovely
warm still with the life of forgotten men who made them.*

"Wakened Hands," 1929 by D.H. Lawrence

I hold this D.H. Lawrence poem in my mind as I drive up I-95 North on my way to Bangor, Maine, to see the Peirce Memorial of Three Rivermen uncorking a log jam on the Penobscot River, a bronze statue the sculptor modeled, in part, after my relative and great-great grandfather, Larry Connors. The majority of Americans have lost all connection with jobs that require such hands-on labor and the respect we used to have for such jobs.

Many new books and countless news stories have chronicled the decline in the last decade of blue-collar jobs that pay a livable wage and the growing class divide, but one fact in particular has stayed with me no matter how much I read.

A college-educated worker earns 77 percent more than his blue-collar counterpart.

77.

That number deserves its own line because we *all* need to pay more attention. When I grew up in the 1970s, white-collar workers earned just 46

percent more—still quite a gap but nothing like what’s happening today.

This tremendous disparity feeds a growing chasm between the two social classes and has led, in part, to a disturbing rise in what scholars call “deaths of despair”—suicide, liver disease and drug overdoses—among blue collar males in particular, who have actually seen a drop in their life expectancy.

But these are just the most obvious and measurable problems. As the 2016 presidential election revealed with the surprise victory by Donald Trump, the cultural disconnect between those with and without a college degree has metastasized into a corrosive debate over so much that defines us as Americans, and paralyzed the government.

For college educated workers living in larger metro areas, it’s very difficult to register that **two-thirds of voters do not have a college degree**. Former President Barack Obama charged at the educated elites with superiority complexes in a 2019 speech when he declared, “The idea of purity and you’re never compromised and you’re always politically ‘woke’ and all that stuff, you should get over that quickly.”

New York Times journalist Tim Egan offered an outstanding example of class and educational disparities literally trumping logic and facts in his column, “How the Insufferably ‘Woke’ Help Trump.”

“Elizabeth Warren is not connecting with the very people her policies are supposed to help. Trump beats her or runs even in every tossup state poll but one.”

I hope to connect with these “very people” among my own extended clan by visiting the family paper company on my own for the first time in decades.



I pull into the snow dusted parking lot of the Sullivan Paper Company in West Springfield, Massachusetts, the first family-related stop on my journey to the statue. I click off National Public Radio with reporters yammering away on yet another story about The Wall President Trump wants to build. It's all connected—the wall, immigration, the growing fear among the white blue-collar class.

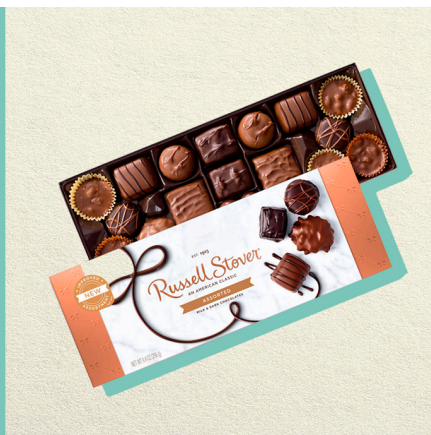
We don't know how to talk about these things, not as a country, and not even in my own extended family, which has divided along class lines since I was a young girl.

My grandparents, George and Elizabeth Sullivan, founded the Sullivan Paper Company in the 1940s, when this part of Massachusetts hummed with paper companies and other manufacturers, like shoe companies, which used the Sullivan paper for their boxes. Now, our family's factory is one of the last standing of its kind in the United States, alive because my grandfather, and later, his sons Richard, Terry, Tommy and Roger, adapted constantly to the shifting market despite intense competition from China, Taiwan and India, and rigorous environmental restrictions on how they handled the often toxic inks.

Estee Lauder perfume, Tiffany jewelry, Barbie boxes, wrapping paper for TJ Maxx, Trivial Pursuit games, boxes for candy--Russell Stover, See's, Godiva—paper for fake wooden frames, Sally Foster wrapping paper for school fund-raising drives, and endless rolls of holiday paper in small shops all across the country. All, at some point, printed by my mother's family's company.

If the paper shimmies and shines, it's probably Sullivan Paper.

My grandfather, raised in the lumber camps near Bangor, Maine, first in his family to go to college, studied chemistry at the University of Maine. He traveled as far as Latin America to study inks, and used his knowledge of every part of the lumber industry, from felled trees to the diamond tipped engravers that etched patterns onto copper rolls, to build



his unique high-end brand of papers. The fact he had four sons—each talented at a different aspect of the business—to carry on the work and they in turn had more sons, now the third generation—has also kept the huge rolls churning on the factory floors of West Springfield and East Longmeadow. Today they employ 155 people; at points they’ve had more than 300.

I have visited the family factory before, but always as an outsider, the daughter of a daughter, Connie, who was not allowed to work in the mill because of her gender. The three daughters had to look elsewhere and did. They married white collar professionals—a judge, engineer and doctor—and raised their children in a world far away from the dozens of Sullivan cousins connected to the families that did run the mill.

“First of all, you don’t need a college degree to work here,” my cousin Ed Sullivan, who meets me at the front door, tells me as we talk about the lack of decent paying jobs for blue collar Americans. I show him a photograph of the Three Rivermen statue in Bangor.

I study Ed studying the image and realize he has the same square-jawed head and taut build of the central figure in the sculpture modelled after Larry Connors.

We can share this, I think, already nervous about how little we do share besides our DNA. Figuring out how to build that moment of connection motivates me not just for this chapter but this entire four-part project.

“The kids coming out of school aren’t even thinking of manufacturing. The only requirement is a high school education and we can train them to work machines. They need an aptitude for picking things up and a good attitude. You have to show up to work on time. You can’t believe the problem we have with attendance now.”

As Ed talks, another cousin, Michael Sullivan, now CEO of the company, joins us and tells me there are 150,000 unfilled machinists’ jobs in Massachusetts right now, January 2019.

150,000.

So well-paying manufacturing jobs have declined—30 percent or more in the last 20 years—but those that remain often go unfilled because the US educational system is no longer set up to provide the trained workforce, and work habits continue to decline.

Both Ed and Michael tell me we need to offer more vocational training at every level.

“Who among us hasn’t been begging for an electrician or plumber in the last 10 years?” Ed asks.



“

Well-paying manufacturing jobs have declined—30 percent or more in the last 20 years—but those that remain often go unfilled because the US educational system is no longer set up to provide the trained workforce, and work habits continue to decline.

”

From top to bottom: Paper rolling and printing machines at the Sullivan Paper Company factory; Ed Sullivan; Ed and our cousin and the company's CEO, Michael Sullivan, in the showroom.

Fifteen years ago, when I was teaching at Johns Hopkins University's MA in Writing program, Ed's comments would have felt polarizing, since I am convinced that a decline in liberal education has contributed to the dumbing down of the American voter. They need more literature classes, more history classes, better critical thinking skills!

And I still think those things, but now that I've taught creative writing full-time for more than a decade at Central Connecticut State University, where a third of the students are the first in their families to go to college, and many would never ever tell their parents they are taking a creative writing class, I can listen with a more open mind. I see how my students struggle five or six years to graduate while they work full-time and take five classes. Often, they are the only motivated student in their extended family, so they operate in isolation. Their siblings need to take other routes, possibly vocational routes, and feel **good** about it.

Ed folds his hands and rests them on the conference table as we settle in for the interview. His own children went to fine universities; none of them want to work in the mill. His eyes focus on me as he explains that he sits on the Board of Directors at Westfield State University.

"I know that the number of people applying to our college is down, especially with white males."

While overall the number of people enrolling in some sort of college is actually on the rise, I know Ed is correct that the majority of Americans—**70 percent** --never make it through a four-year program and the range of well-paying options for those without that degree continues to shrink.

At points, while working at CCSU, I've often thought that many of my students should have chosen another route other than college and avoided all the debt and crazy 15-hour days of class and work, but they simply couldn't envision any other credible options. All they hear is how vital it is to secure a college degree, precisely because of that huge wage gap.

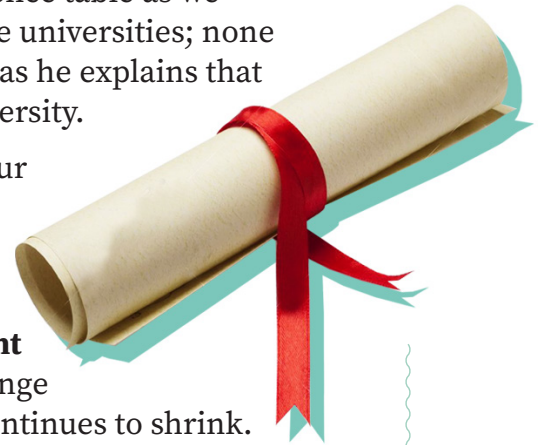
77 percent.

But it's not a sustainable model, with the four-year graduation rate well below 50 percent, and the student debt load rising so high the current generation of graduates must put off starting families and owning homes.

You don't need a college degree to work here.

Places like the Sullivan Paper Company do offer some answers, but, despite their continued success, Ed and Michael make it clear there's no guarantee in the current international labor market how much longer they can keep those paper rollers moving.

We all shift to the showroom, an expansive space full of colorful



boxes and other products wrapped in Sullivan paper. Michael grabs a roll of wrapping paper, his imposing six-foot frame a contrast to the delicate pattern now in his palm.

“Our paper is in all sorts of small shops all across the country. Wrapping paper is now about 40 percent of our business.”

The three of us stand for a moment, quiet, surveying the products in the room. They continue to sustain a good business with the high-end market, but have lost customers over the years, like Walmart and Target, who give lip service to buying American but actually get most of their products from overseas.

A Barbie doll in a glittering gold dress set in a box with a luxurious white and gold patterned background—Sullivan Paper—catches my eye. Made in a factory, celebrating a princess.

Painted portraits of our grandparents, George and Elizabeth (left), in late middle age, hang on a back wall. My grandmother’s blue eyes rest their attention on me. George wears silver-rimmed glasses circa 1950.

It all feels old and new at the same time. They still manufacture something in America but there’s a throwback feel to the room, the buildings, the town. Past patterns of work and business models that made

sense and still make sense keep the entire process going, but it’s clear from my two cousins that no one in the next generation is learning the tools of the trade. Like the lumbermen who passed their skill sets down son-to-son, at some point the chain breaks.

Things men have made with wakened hands, and put soft life into/are awake through the years with transferred touch...

Doesn’t anyone still take pride in producing something that they can see and hold, I ask?

“It’s gone.”

Michael says this. Twice.

He tells me that in the 1960s, one of the best paying jobs in America was working the Ford assembly line in Detroit. Now, the Sullivan Paper Company competes with retail and McDonalds in terms of wages, though they offer a good benefits package, something younger workers have a hard time appreciating. Huge pressures from factories overseas in China, Taiwan and India, really restrict the company as it tries to stay competitive.

They continue to adapt—adding solar panels to provide their own energy because electricity is so expensive in Massachusetts, for example—



but both concede “it’s not a level playing field” in terms of rules and regulations they must follow versus their overseas competitors.

And despite the fact there are 150,000 machinists’ jobs open in Massachusetts, computers have replaced a lot of the satisfying hands-on work.

“Twenty-five years ago, we had a staff of engineers and real artists, like 50 artists, and they were replaced by one computer-trained graphic artist.”

Michael says this, almost wincing. He emphasizes the word *artist*, which for me translates into pride in work, skilled labor, the art of physically producing something.

And for this reason, some old things are lovely/warm still with the life of forgotten men who made them.

Who would he bronze in the town square to honor his own ideal of work in America? Michael pauses, but just briefly.

“Our grandparents. There’s nothing past that. They were our founding fathers, as were our fathers. The rest of us are just poking out a living at it.”

I poke out of the parking lot in my old Volvo as my cousins stand in the doorway of the unassuming low-slung brick building that houses some of the printing presses, and so much more that’s happening in American culture along class lines that I hope to come to understand better as I point my way North to Bangor.



T*he Washington Post ran a snarky story about the President today because Trump likes Wendy’s. They just have such contempt for ordinary people*

The host of a radio show on 96.7 just outside of Kennebunk, Maine, takes over the space in my car and in my head. As a person who did not vote for Trump and remains incredibly alarmed by what he’s wrought on all fronts of our federal government, I force myself to listen. The radio guy, whose name I never catch, growls about the way the media portrayed Trump’s decision to serve hundreds of fast food burgers from Wendy’s and McDonald’s to the national championship winning Clemson University football team because the government shutdown left the White House short staffed.

These wussies just strip men of their masculinity. The ruling class of DC is just so mean-spirited.

This is what so many angry white blue-collar Americans listen to every day. And studies show that they tend to garner their information about national news from a single source, whereas Democrats seek a wider variety, which gives this radio host, who mentions Rush Limbaugh regularly during his hour, amazing influence.

So, I listen.

Because that's why I am out here, to feel the rage and rancor generated by the growing class divide, and find a way into a conversation instead of a shouting match.

As a white middle-aged American woman, I am ideally situated to walk in the middle zone. Here, I could pass for a liberal hyper-educated elite white Democrat or a blue-collar white Republican with deep roots in Maine. There's no way to tell by just looking at me.

And white women have been vital swing voters. According to the Pew Research Center, 47 percent of them voted for Trump, literally putting him into office, despite the stories of grabbing pussy and the chance to put a woman candidate, Hillary Clinton, into the presidency. (Eighty-two percent of nonwhite women voted for Clinton). When things go poorly for Trump in the polls, it's almost always the white women that he begins to lose.

Of course, noncollege educated white males remain the largest group of undecided voters—about half of the 15 percent of the electorate that aren't sure what they want—but they tend to lean conservative and not vote at all if they are displeased with the Republican candidate rather than vote for a Democrat. A 2019 *New York Times* poll showed that 84 percent of undecided voters complain in particular that “Political Correctness” has gone too far, an issue white males have stronger feelings about than white women.

All of which continues to convince me that the swing and shift among white women voters holds the answer to a more constructive middle ground for our government and social exchanges. The media tends to focus on the fringes—the 29-year-old Latina woman, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez from the Queens/Bronx district in New York or Republican Senator Lindsey Graham from South Carolina—but it's the swaying middle that could save us all from the extremism on both sides of the aisle.

Men stripped of their masculinity.

The host repeats this twice. I turn the radio off but try not to feel that I am turning the *host* off completely.



“As a white middle-aged American woman, I am ideally situated to walk in the middle zone. Here, I could pass for a liberal hyper-educated elite white Democrat or a blue-collar white Republican with deep roots in Maine. There’s no way to tell by just looking at me.”

Indeed, his wail over the radio waves stays with me as I enter the Maine State Museum in Augusta, which has a silent film about the logging camps and a renowned *Maine Labor History* mural by Judy Taylor I want to see.

I start with the black and white splotchy film capturing an American masculinity at play as complex, athletic, daring and wild-spirited as the cowboy culture out West. Sitting in the quiet by myself, I come as close as I'll ever come to watching my great-great grandfather, great-grandfather and grandfather at work.

Men in teams cut down trees by hand with saws and lug the logs through deep snow to sleds drawn by enormous work horses. The film leaps to scenes of spring time and the spring melt as the men drive the logs into the rivers; footage shows millions of square feet of lumber roaring down the waterways of Northern Maine to the sawmills near places like Bangor. Men dart like dragonflies from log-to-log as they move down the river in the early spring season, a feat of athleticism just impossible to imagine. If they misstep and fall between the lumber, they will drown.

I will now let Fannie Hardy Eckstorm take over the bandwidth of this chapter. A woman author who roamed the woods with her father in the early 20th Century to gather local lore about the woods working culture of Maine, she wrote the book, *The Penobscot Man*, published in 1920, which includes a chapter on my great-great-grandfather Larry Connors, who died uncorking a log jam on the Penobscot River in the famous Ripogenus Gorge in 1867.



It was a big job, funneling the logs from the upriver woods down to Bangor. All winter long crews of woodsmen cut the tall spruce down, yarded it up and then hauled it out and landed it on the ice of a lake or on the banks of a stream. In March the woods work was over and when the river was at a proper height the "drive" would begin. The landings would be broken in and the logs started on their long trips down to the great sorting and holding booms...Armed with no more than peaveys [long wooden poles with hooks] and pickpoles, the drivers had to keep those millions of logs moving like a wooden river... Dangerous jams would form that required all of the skill and strength and daring the men had to offer. The logs kept moving but all along this river and its tributaries there are the sunken graves of men who never did get to spend money at Barney Kelly's Saloon or at Aunt Hat's place up in Veazie.

The black and white film comes to an end after just a few minutes; I watch it two more times.

Three generations of my family on my mother's side lived this life, lived this vision of masculinity, faced these physical and mental challenges. Hardy herself describes my great-great grandfather in her book as the epitome of the riverman of Maine.

“He [Larry Connors] was capable of doing anything on logs. He was utterly fearless, thoroughly efficient, a fighting Irishman of the old bulldog type, close-cropped hair, cropped ears, bullet-headed, ready to always show his teeth. Yet the men liked him.”

I glance through the museum's cases of tools and clothing; in one the long wooden handle of a peavey (page 34) rests against the ever-necessary axe. A pair of work boots, smaller than my own size nine feet, have heavy metal spikes on the bottom. Most of the men wore basic trousers, often cut off at the knees, a work shirt and those caked shoes. Larry was known for also adding a bit of flash by always wearing either a red hat or scarf, “tied around his head kind o' cocky so the tails flew out.”

He died because he volunteered to go out solo to unjam a log holding back tons of timber on the Penobscot River, the same river my grandfather, George Sullivan, could see from his bedroom window in Veazie, Maine as a boy, the same stretch where, at age 10, he ran out on the logs to give the men their lunches.

Larry pulled a risky move and wrenched the log at an odd angle and, as Hardy describes, “the logs they started jumping and squealing and thrashing and grinding, like seventeen sawmills runnin' full blast on Sunday.”

Larry Connors, respected as a veteran riverman with a wife, Rebecca, and several children, was swatted away *like a dragonfly*, his red scarf the last spot of color they ever saw of him. They never found his body.

When the town of Bangor put up the Peirce Memorial of the Three Rivermen in 1925, the mills and logging culture had fallen into decline, a stunning reversal for a region that was once the number one producer of lumber in the world.

Men stripped of their masculinity.

The wail for what was lost still rings out clear on the airwaves of Maine. Those jobs aren't coming back, and while much of that high-risk macho culture is best laid buried, it's essential to also recognize all that it gave to the men who engaged in it, often for generations.

In the little black and white film at the museum, an elderly man probably in his seventies, appears in one of the frames. He scoots across moving logs on the river, a wooden pole in his hands for balance, with an easy grace. When he lands on firm ground, he turns to the camera with a grin, full of impish pride.

I think back to my cousin Michael Sullivan's response when I asked what happened to taking pride in your work, in producing something?

It's gone.

The man in the film clearly grasped *flow*, a way to describe what it means to be fully present and engaged in one's work. Studies show that a sense of flow is an integral part of taking pride in one's job and increasingly employers offer fewer and fewer workers—both blue collar and white collar—that sort of work.

Fifty artists were replaced by one digital artist.

Basically, when it comes to trends in wages and quality of work life, we all have more in common than we seem capable of seeing.

Both blue collar and white-collar America need to recognize that the median worker's wages have barely budged since 1975.

Both blue collar and white-collar America need to recognize that the strong growth in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in that same time period might have led to most of us owning way more stuff than we need, but it has not led to more *fulfilling* work or a more *livable* wage for the vast majority of Americans. Those without a college degree have been hit hardest, but most workers have not seen big gains.

For the first time there's a real chance that Americans under 35 may not do as well economically as their parents or even live as long.

Black people continue to struggle on many key counts—wages, life expectancy, addiction—more than any other demographic, but as Isabel Sawhill explains in her book, *The Forgotten Americans*, they tend to be more



optimistic because they see “some forward momentum” while blue collar whites in particular only see decline.

Some forward momentum.

Maybe it comes down to agreeing to talk about how we can regain that for as many Americans from all classes, races and ethnicities as possible.

When I finally stand in front of the mural in the museum lobby that I’ve come 200 miles to see on sketchy January roads, I am struck by the subdued blue and grey tones. Some sort of cold wind blows through the time line Judy Taylor builds in her 11 panel installation.

Initially commissioned for the Maine Department of Labor in 2008, it was moved here in 2011 after political bickering over the fact it appeared to celebrate unionized laborers.

“Like North Korean Propaganda” as then Republican Governor Paul LePage exclaimed to the media.

But the more I read about the general decline in livable wages and jobs that instill pride and encourage personal engagement, I think what I’m really looking at is a swan song to all of that and the battles—won and lost—over the generations.

Each panel focuses on some type of work in Maine, from canning to shoemaking, with an emphasis on manual labor. In the sixth panel, Judy focuses on Woods Workers, with an adult man talking to another man with an axe and a young boy in the mix. In the smaller background stories, I see men using long poles, peaveys, and straddling logs.

By the 11th panel, which captures the future of work in Maine, the tension seen in the earlier panels is missing. It’s clear the artist isn’t sure what’s replacing all that manual labor, the manufacturing, the raw materials industry.

Those jobs aren’t coming back, and while much of that high-risk macho culture is best laid buried, it’s essential to also recognize all that it gave to the men who engaged in it, often for generations.

A chef? A health care worker? A hiker as visiting tourist?

Or as *New York Times* writer Binyamin Applebaum exclaims in his feature, “The Jobs Americans Do,” “The emerging face of the American working class is a Hispanic woman who has never set foot on the factory floor. That’s not the kind of work much of the working class does anymore. Instead of making things, they are more often paid to serve people, to care for someone else’s children or someone else’s parents; to clean another family’s house.”

I doubt if any public square in America has a bronzed statue honoring hard working Latina women who serve, but in her final panel Judy intentionally added more diversity—people of color, a person in a wheelchair.

When Covid-19 hit in spring 2020, many Americans suddenly turned their attention to “essential” employees working hourly wages as aides for the elderly, nurses for corona patients, check-out clerks at the supermarket. Big hearts on signs posted in windows and on yards became a monument of sorts for the gratitude people felt for all of these unprotected, underpaid employees keeping the basics of society humming. Will our gratitude extend to a bronzed memorial for those who died in the line of service? Perhaps. But will it extend to agreeing to higher costs for food, elder care, child care and more in exchange for paying these workers a fair wage, providing them health benefits and weeks of paid sick and personal leave?



Probably not, even though that’s the “bronzed” statue they need and deserve.

Only by driving through this part of the country can I see and feel first hand just how disconnected the educated, metro-living ruling white collar class remains from what’s happened in these places and among wage-earning Americans in general. I do not agree with the value system and politics of the host on 96.7 but I have an empathy for his rage and fear that I never expected to feel.

Can I embrace that and still celebrate the idea of a bronzed statue to a Latina woman to honor the new face of blue-collar America?

Yes, I can. And holding such juxtapositions in our minds *without resentment* may be the key to regaining momentum, not just at work but also in our political and cultural discourse.

I have no doubt that Larry Connors would have identified more closely with the male host on 97.6 than with his great-great granddaughter

"History Of Maine Labor Mural," by artist Judy Taylor. *Yahoo! News*, AP Photo/Clarke Canfield



who works as a creative writing professor. But I'd also like to think that my respect for who he was, what he did, and all that the lumbering industry brought to Maine would nudge him to join me for a beer down at Barney Kelly's Saloon in Veazie.

"I was interested in how the country was built up by the laborers or manual workers."

Judy tells me this as we sit in a café next to the Bangor Public Library and the Peirce Memorial. She's dressed in refined shades of off-white with a spotted scarf. Her grey-flecked dark hair, pulled back tight, accentuates her eyes. A white woman over sixty, she attended the New York Academy of the Arts, studied figurative art in many places, including Chicago, and has served as an Artist-in-Residence for Acadia National Park, where she currently lives.

Somehow, she's straddled the New York City art world and the blue-collar lobstering culture of the laboring class on Acadia.



Judy Taylor

We speak at length about the physical grace and courage of the rivermen, and how it was very much an industry handed down from father to son. Twice she remarks on how taken she was studying the manual laborers of Maine for her mural project and the way they moved through space and in relation to others while on the job.

“I had people from all aspects of life coming into my studio while I was painting these panels. Very successful businessmen, who would normally not be interested in labor, but who are almost moved to tears because their grandparents had come up in the mills.

“Everybody, I don’t care who you are, has some working-class member in their family history at some point.”

We walk together outside in the clinching cold to visit the Peirce Memorial to The Three Rivermen.

My hunt through the archives verified that the artist, a nationally recognized sculptor, Nathan Tefft, based the memorial to the rivermen of the region on the men he’d watched on the Penobscot River while growing up in Maine as a boy, his “young mind impressed with the types, the ‘Larry Connorses,’” as he told a reporter in 1925 while working on the model. He also relied on advice on the author Fannie Hardy Eckstrom, and one of the last surviving rivermen, Pat Connors, then in his eighties, “the very ideal of the old-time lumberman,” as one reporter remarked. It’s unclear if Pat and Larry were related, possibly cousins, despite the variation in the spelling of the name. They were definitely contemporaries.

I do know that every detail of the statue sprang from Tefft’s interpretation of Larry and Pat as exemplars of the rivermen right down to the tools in their hands and the triangle of energy between the three figures. The central figure handles an axe with his left hand; according to my older brother Jim, my grandmother, herself a lefty, always said Larry was a southpaw.

I stand on sheet ice in front of the granite base, Judy standing quietly behind me. The eight-foot high figures each have a part to play in the bronzed scene of a log jam.

The one on the left has his mouth open, perhaps trying to communicate with the other two as he tries to make a better cut in the log; the central figure, his muscular arms firmly grasping an axe, dominates. He’s completely focused, staring straight at the visitor, packed full of raw energy, his square jaw, closed-cropped hair...*cropped ears, bullet-headed, ready*

to always show his teeth. Yet the men liked him.

And because Larry died doing his job on the waterways of Maine, because he died as a cog in the lumber industry that built up the state's economy and the buildings of the world, he left behind children who had no father in a culture with no safety nets. His wife, Rebecca, sold their daughter, Lora Connors, my great-grandmother, at age seven to another family as a worker.

They whipped and abused her, chained her to a bed each night, the daughter of the famed riverman Larry Connors, no better off than the generations of white indentured servants that came before her in New England.

“As a young girl, I had to wash the scars on her back with sponges because she couldn't handle the water pressure from the shower. Her back was thick with scars.”

My 96-year-old mother, Connie Sullivan Collins, shared that story with me before I left on my trip. As a girl growing up in the Great Depression in a household of nine children, an uncle, two grandmothers and her parents all surviving on her father's salary as an engineer at a paper mill in Rhode Island, Connie had to share a bed with Grandmother Sullivan.



Lora escaped her horrible situation by marrying Michael Sullivan, my mother explains, yet another riverman. No one spoke of him when my mother was growing up, especially not Lora and Michael's son George, but we know that Lora had at least five children and sold bootleg booze, ran a "boarding house" and a poorly managed small mill to support her brood.

I think of the young George Sullivan hopping across the logs at age 10 with lunch pails for the rivermen and assume he earned a few pennies for his daring. With drive and a raw intelligence for science and business, he managed to get out, to get an education, support his family during the Great Depression, then, later, after World War II when things began to pick up, start his own paper business one ream of paper at a time.

From bootleg booze in Northern Maine to Barbie boxes in West Springfield, Massachusetts.

Everybody, I don't care who you are, has some working-class member in their family history at some point.



Judy and I don't stay long at the memorial; the winter chill cuts deep. We say good-bye at her car. As I drive off, I see the green patina of the statue cast a dramatic flash of color against the drab colors of the landscape.

I intentionally drive in silence this time as I head to my hotel in Portland, Maine. I see Judy's palette of blues and endless shades of grey in the landscape and sky.

The hum of the car wheels keeps me drifting, thinking, feeling at times proud, sad, appalled, and empowered by all I've learned while making my way to another bronzed relative in America's public squares.

Finally, to break the quiet, I flick the radio on.

Again, a talk show, this time 91.3 Maine Public Radio.

A self-described "Filipino-African American gay man" dominates the conversation. He's being patched in from a station in California and talking about something he's started called "Define America."

"We even provided a Holiday Guide on how to handle uncomfortable conversations. Maybe a relative says racist things at dinner. How do you open a conversation with someone like that?"

I can't believe my luck that in real time I am listening to someone explore the power of story-sharing as I go on a story-sharing journey myself. In his case he's using a model established by the Gay Alliance to break down biases against the GBLTQ community by gathering stories and sharing them, but this time, with Define America, for immigrants and migrants. The goal: to use narrative to somehow underscore our shared humanity.

"Identities have become borders," he says to the radio host.

I write this line down on scrap of paper in my car while barreling at 75 mph down 95 South in Maine.

Later, I learn the speaker was Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist, Jose Antonio Vargas, author of the book *Dear America: The Story of an Undocumented Citizen*, and founder of Define America "a nonprofit organization intended to open up dialogue about the criteria people use to determine who is American."

But in that moment, all I can think is how none of this will work if the host from 96.7 never tunes into 91.3 and the listeners of 91.3 never listen to 96.7.

I turn the show off, this time feeling more aligned with the views of the guest and host than what I heard on 96.7, but still uneasy. At least Vargas acknowledges that we must enter into *conversations*. He even explained that he deliberately guest speaks on Fox News in an effort to not

just share his story but also *listen* to their reaction to his story.

I know, when I was younger, and first heard the story of how my mother, a smart, vivacious young woman with a knack for business, was told by her parents that the girls could not be in the mill, that I resented their sexism and judged their actions. It made me feel even more detached from my Sullivan cousins, whose fathers worked in the mill, and who, later, worked there themselves.

Our differing views on race, class, gender, education and politics divided us. Other than our Grandmother Elizabeth Sullivan's funeral in 1989, when about 35 first cousins showed, we never had any grand reunions.

But my journey up the New England coast to Bangor exposed gaps in my assumptions and conclusions. Many of my relatives may well embrace the host of 96.7 and his Rush Limbaugh-ways, while my siblings and me definitely lean toward NPR, but we can all look at a photograph of the Three Rivermen statue and see Larry Connors there and accept that the rivermen pulled off remarkable things with tremendous discipline, teamwork and pride.

I do not want to turn my back on all of those that still lament so much of what that culture meant to them, especially the men that worked in it.

My personal views about Trump as a real risk to the integrity of our federal institutions haven't changed as I cover the miles in Maine. Neither has my concern that most white Americans of **all** classes—myself included—struggle to face their own racist and sexist habits of thinking.

But my quotient of empathy for the fear, frustration, even grief, that I sense in many pockets of white America—especially blue-collar Americans—has definitely expanded.

I close with yet another poem, this one I found in a file in the Bangor Public Library archives, written by a young high school student, Fred Dingley, probably sent on assignment to the Peirce Memorial for an English class at Lee Academy back in 1964.

*So, cast these men in bronze and let them stand
In ragged clothes, untamed, with calloused hands
Forever frozen at the work which made this land.*

