

## **Cornelius "Neal" Thomas Spillane** **Long-Time Influential 20th Century Orleans, MA Resident**

**by Barbara (Spillane) Mina, niece, 2014 reminisces**

Cornelius "Neal" Thomas Spillane (1907-1988) was a long-time Orleans resident who influenced the town's progress towards modern local government, education, and commerce.

Born June 25, 1907 in Boston, MA, Neal was one of four sons of Cornelius John Spillane (1878-1941), an insurance actuary whose father had emigrated from Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century. His mother was Mary Gertrude LaVigne, a French Canadian (1876-1946) originally from St. John, New Brunswick.

The four Spillane boys were raised in the (then) scrappy Hough's Neck section of Quincy, MA under the auspices of nearby Roman Catholic Churches (Immaculate Conception, Revere; Saint John the Baptist, Quincy; and Holy Name of the Blessed Sacrament, Quincy (now Holy Trinity Parish?). They were presumably all schooled at Codington Elementary School and graduated from Quincy High School.

Brothers Maurice (Mike) and Robert (Bob) married and lived with their wives and children in Quincy the rest of their lives. Lawrence (Larry), a much-vaunted pitcher for Quincy High and the area's semipro teams, had set his heart on playing major league baseball until he had the opportunity to be the first of the family to go to college. He graduated from Boston College in 1939.



The four Hough's Neck, Quincy, Spillane boys about 1940, left to right: Maurice (Mike), Cornelius (Neal), Lawrence (Larry) and Robert (Bob)

After the boys' parents died in the late 1940s at the Spillane's last known Quincy address (83 Turner Street), Neal moved to what was then the wilds of Cape Cod and became a proud Orleans resident. The brothers and their families were frequent visitors over the next four decades, and some of its next generations settled on the Cape.

Raised as avid Boston Red Sox fans, the Spillane boys retained their loyalties, particularly lamenting the seasons when the team got oh-so-close...except for the youngest. After he settled in the New York area as an F.B.I. Agent, Larry was persuaded (strong-armed?) to switch loyalties to the NY Yankees, an understandable point of contention between him and the rest of the brothers all their lives.

After Neal moved to the Cape, he bought a four-room white-framed, black-shuttered cottage at what is now 185 Rock Harbor Road. About a half mile from the Harbor itself, the house overlooked the vast picturesque marsh. The original 2-bedroom, 1-bath home with living room and kitchen was heated by a central floor register. It featured wood floors, knotty pine built-in corner cabinets, Shaker-style woodwork, and Z-patterned interior doors with wrought iron thumb-activated latches. By 1953 Neal had added a dining room out to the right side of the kitchen which connected to a garage.



Cottage bought by Neal Spillane at 185 Rock Harbor Road photographed Summer, 1950, with brother Larry's children John, James, and Barbara Spillane on the front stoop



Neal with brother Larry's wife Jeanne showing the cottage's dining room and garage addition, Summer, 1953

Later Neal converted the back porch off the kitchen to a sunroom. In the late 1970s he built on a deck in the back with wideswept marsh views.



Neal and marsh views behind his 185 Rock Harbor Road cottage from the new back deck, about 1975

Because there was little furniture available for sale on the Cape when Neal moved there, he furnished his modest home over the ensuing decades with oriental rugs and furniture he'd order--sight unseen--from advertising pictures placed by prominent department stores in the Boston newspapers. As a child of the Great Depression who had to pick wild dandelions for the family's vegetables in hard times, he was thrifty to a T. He used the old Duz detergent to wash everything, from his clothes to his floors to his dishes. Rinsing and reusing pieces of dental floss, he was way ahead most others in daily tooth care as well as on the cusp of the conservation movement. He never bought what he didn't need.

Neal attended St. Joan of Arc Roman Catholic Church in Orleans for most of his mature years although he was drawn into a more charismatic form of Catholicism later in life.

Before the Mid-Cape Highway (Rt. 6A) was cut through Orleans, Neal could take the short walk down his country road onto Main Street and into Snow's Department Store, the Town's big purveyor of goods of all types, seeing few cars. Once he latched onto the fancy Ford Thunderbirds (T-birds) as his vehicle of choice in the mid-1950s, he forever after preferred driving...although it tended to be fast!

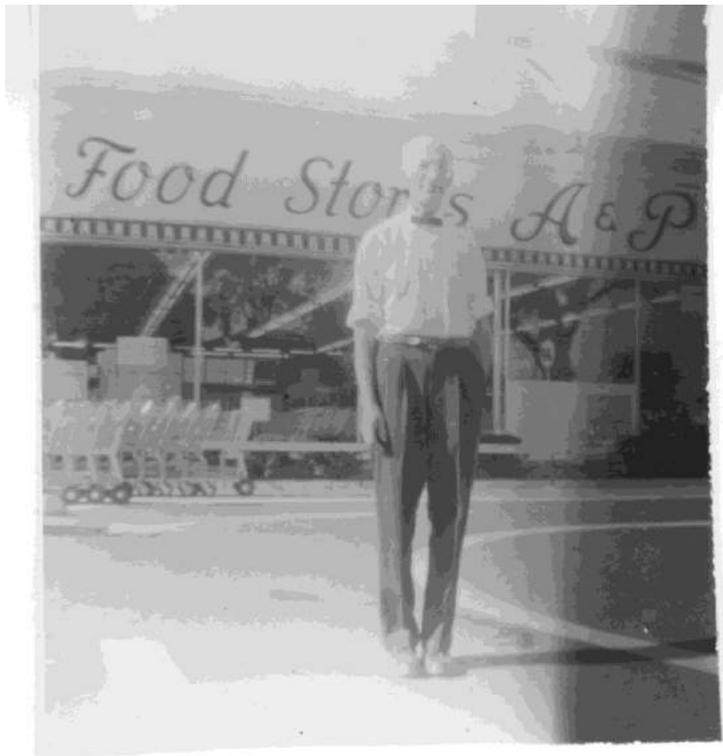
Like most residents who live in areas that become popular for vacations, Neal almost never swam in Orleans's salt or fresh waters. You'd only rarely find him at the bay--what we used to call "Namskaket Beach" until people shortened it to "Skaket"--or the ice-cold ocean waters of Nauset Beach, now part of the Cape Cod National Seashore. He grew beach plums for jelly on bushes in his front yard and later was proud of the roses he grew on his street-side split rail fence.

A tall, lanky, and deeply religious man, Neal was a man of few words. That meant that when he spoke and/or evidenced emotion--whether to an individual or at a Town meeting--it really counted. Although he never married, his taciturn, yet expansive loving nature made him a favorite. His nieces, nephews, and their children remember him as their most beloved uncle of all time.

Commercially, Neal worked his whole adult life in the grocery industry. Most people first knew him as the butcher at the small A&P on Main Street in the center of Orleans. It was an old-fashioned market that displayed fruits and vegetables in open-air bins on the sidewalk.

When the Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company underwent its 1950s expansion, it sited a much larger property south of downtown Orleans to build one of its new modern "supermarkets" with what was then thought to be a huge parking lot to accommodate the post-WWII car culture. Neal was appointed Manager and heralded the way to a new order of business in the grocery industry in the central Cape.

In the summers, when business at the A&P exploded with the advent of tourists, Neal had to add summer hires. This gave him the opportunity to hire a succession of nephews.



Cornelius (Neal) Spillane, Manager, in the parking lot of the new A&P Supermarket, designed in typical red brick with white trim and cupola, south of downtown, 1959



Cornelius "Neal" Spillane's nephew John, the oldest son of his youngest brother Lawrence Spillane, who had by then moved to the New Jersey suburbs, is shown working in the (open air?) sundries division of the A & P supermarket promoting straw hats for the beach by wearing one himself, July, 1960



Cornelius (Neal) Spillane's nephew John Spillane, a Summer, 1960 hire in the requisite A&P "uniform" wearing dark pants, white business shirt and black bowtie, modeling one of the store's straw hats with his younger brother James in front of the grocery store. John and James were the sons of Neal's brother Lawrence Spillane and his wife Jeanne of New Jersey. Note phone booth to the right.

After Neal retired and development exploded on the Cape, he sought to get away from the new construction and increased traffic that had suddenly intruded too closely to his Rock Harbor Road cottage. In 1980 he reluctantly he listed it for sale at \$62,500 and moved to a home on a more secluded wooded lot in Brewster. Neal died 8 years later at the age of 81. He has been sorely missed.

I was always told Neal was active in the Town of Orleans, although I do not know if he was ever officially elected to the Board of Selectmen or just voiced his opinions at Town meetings. He had close contacts with, or possibly served on, the local Board of Education. As a grocery manager, he worked closely with other area merchants. Active in his church, he was acquainted with all its priests and parishioners.

A model citizen, Neal Spillane was an integral part of the Town's fabric. While he didn't always agree with every step toward progress--he was an early proponent particularly for retaining authentic Cape culture and history--his cautious voice helped ease Orleans steadily forward into the future it occupies today.