

**[Tony Washalaski]**

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### SUBJECT LIVING LORE

NAME OF INFORMANT TONY Washalaski ADDRESS NEW MARLBOROUGH,  
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Tony Washalaski, called "Tony Red" by his neighbors because of his red hair, was born in Poland about 50 years ago. Coming to this country as a young man he met and married a strapping Polish girl, and they had four children - the oldest and the youngest being girls, with a pair of twin boys in between.

In a small New England village mill Tony found a job, and for a time the family lived in the village. But there were no other Poles in the community, and no social life for Tony's family. They had no friends. Tony's "woman" could understand a little English, but could not speak it. Besides, the land was pulling strongly in the blood of these peasant-born folk. So they bought a 40-acre farm of rocky Berkshire pasture and meadow, with a small frame house and a big barn. They bought some cows and chickens and acquired a couple of dogs, some cats, rabbits, and pigeons for the children.

The family hangs closely together in a quiet, undemonstrative way. The oldest girl has always helped her mother with the housework, and the mother in turn, helps father with all his chores and work on the farm - even to haying and digging potatoes. The boys chop and haul wood. The youngest girl, now at eighteen buxom and attractive in the way of most youth, always has preferred picking berries or running about in the woods and fields with her brothers to doing housework, although of late she has worked as a housemaid for women in the village or the neighborhood.

All the children are respectful and obedient to their parents, even now that they are grown, and on the other hand their parents allow them to do what they like, within reason, or to order what they want from the mail order catalogues. There never is any bickering or quarreling in the family. On a summer evening they all sit upon the porch playing with

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their 2 pets and talking about the flowers in beds before the house. In winter they sit in the dining room, listen to the radio, play cards, and pore over the catalogues.

During the first few years on the farm the family lived simply, frugally, went nowhere, saw no one but the Polish friends and relatives who came from towns twenty miles away. They did not mix with the native hill people, partly because of the language barrier and partly because in cleanliness and industry they were far superior to most of the natives and felt some scorn for the latter's shiftlessness.

Tony still worked at the factory, as he does yet. He arose at four a.m., did his farm chores, then walked three miles to the village, in winter carrying a lantern to light the dark road. (The whole family is very much afraid of the dark.) After working all day he walked home and did a small amount of farm work again before going to bed. The factory was and is flexible, so that each week, or for a whole week at a time, he had some free days. In this way he kept up his farm.

Perhaps during those years he saved a small amount of money. Perhaps the extra wages of one son who later went to work with him in the factory made a great difference, and the small salaries of the girls, when they worked, helped. At any rate the time came - a few years after the first family of summer people invaded the neighborhood and set an example - when Tony's little frame house began to set more perkily on its neat green lawn. It was enlarged and painted white. Electricity was installed, a washing machine bought. Gay flowers were planted in profusion. At the back a stone terrace was made like a neighboring Doctor's. Fir trees were brought down the hillside and planted about the house. A grand new radio was bought, and then, marvel above all others - a car was purchased, a shining new car, a far better one than any of the nearby native Yankees own. Their pride and delight in it are as pure and gleeful as a child's. One of the boys drives - carefully and cautiously, as should be with such a wonder. Twice a day to the village and back, when the other two men are working; to a movie sometimes in the evening - the

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whole hearty family jammed into the car - or to visit the nearest town where there are other Poles, and noisy dances with Polish dancing and singing.

In the midst of Yankee hill folk decadence, shiftlessness and disease, dirt, [immorality?], and improvidence, "Tony Red" and his sturdy family are shining examples of hard work, health, soap and water. One hill mother sniffs and remarks that "none of Tony's kids finished school - they want smart enough." But the gossiping tales related of her own children - and sadly enough at least some of them are true - will never be applied to Tony's honest four. Superficial school[-?]room education is not necessary to their well-being.

Not one member of this family could be classed as intelligent, not one is a good talker. Obviously actions speak louder than words here. It is an important family through what it has done, not through what it has claimed to believe. Tony's speech is very bad, and he has few opinions about morality, politics, or any of the so-called important functions of human life. Economically he now stands out above his Yankee neighbors because for many years he has been willing to be an old-fashioned plodder, and because he raised his children to be, not exponents of learning or social graces, but assets to him, themselves, and any community they choose to live in. Tony has no debts, for the simple reason that buying "on time" is too complicated a system for him to understand or trust. Always he saves his money until enough has accumulated to buy the object of his desire. A simple, elemental, cash-and-carry sort of man is "Tony Red" of the hill country.

1

My neighbor and his two sons had just come in from chopping wood and brush on the high hill behind the house.

"Well, Tony, how was the chopping today," I asked.

Characteristically Tony gave vent to rising bubbles of laughter before he spoke.

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“By God! we cut two, mebbe t'ee cords wood today. Not work so long eider. Pretty good chop dere now since Johnny cut lots of da brush down las' wick. Brush make very hard cuttin' ya know, an' it's no use try t' chop mauch when bursh in way. Johnny he cut it when da moon dark. Dat's kip it from grow up agin, ya know. Always cut brush when da moon is dark, den it don't grow up no more. At leas' I always heard so.”

“Wouldn't it be a good idea to put tags on some of the stubble and find out for sure?” I asked.

Tony looked at me intently for a moment to see if I was joking, but not being able to tell he reiterated that he had “heard” this was so.

“I guess you're keeping good and warm this winter,” I remarked.

“Oh, sure! We got t'ree stoves goin' most da time. Look dere, see dat open window? We never close him, it kips so hot in here. Always kip him open now since Valeria got sick five year ago. Doctor say it good.”

“Oh yes, she had pneumonia, didn't she?”

2

“Why sure! Temperature was hundred an' fif. She was bad sick. For a while we t'ought she not get better, but now she almos' same as before.” The Washalaskis have so few important experiences that they like to make the most of those they do have. I remembered how they took so much pride in the elder daughter's temperature. They really seemed as proud of the girl's high temperature as a big league bell player might be of his high batting average.

“That was the year we had such a hard winter, wasn't it?” I asked.

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“Sure! Doctor he had to walk in snow up to his knees to git here. An' I hear he give da town hell for not having dis road plowed. Was tirdy b'low zero an' de win' blow hard! Most my fruit trees die dat winter too. Dey had jus' started to have fruit, but dat wind ketch 'em good an' kill 'em.”

“We've all had plenty of bid luck with our farming, I guess. Johnny was telling me last fall that many of your potatoes were spoiled by the wet summer. Are you going to have enough of them to last you through the winter?”

“Naw - already I buy five, six bushel. Half my potatoes field was under water all September. We use mos' seven'y bushel every year, an' las' year we dig no more dan twenty bushel altogedder. I tell you farmin' don' pay in dis countree. Sometime I tink I sell dis place an' move back to village. But no hurry 'bout dat 'cause now since I got car it's easy to git back 'n' fort' to shop. Johnny take me and Steve every day to work on days da shop run.”

3

“It's almost like having a private chauffeur, isn't it?” I said. “Too bad that you or Steve can't drive. Then Johnny would be able to do his farm work without interruption. Haven't you ever thought it would be worth while learning to read and write English? If you could do that you might be able to get a driver's license and drive yourself around.”

Tony bowed his head a little as if he were ashamed of his ignorance. Then he looked up and smiled.

“By God! sometime I wish I could get license. Johnny has all da fun at da wheel. He's good driver too. You should see us slide on road da udder day. It was all ice, and - whee! da car slip an' turn right aroun'! I t'ought we go in ditch sure, but Johnny wasn' scare.”

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"Well, you make Johnny be careful," I advised. "It seems to me that he's rather excitable at times."

"Oh - Johnny's good boy. He work hard on farm - cut mos' all da wood an' do lotsa chores. He work almos' hard as me now, an' he's young yet too. You ever see him an' Steve dress up to gp see dere girls in town? By God! dey look like men in dem blue suits an' hats an' black shoes."

"Yes, and it doesn't seem so long ago that they were only little boys, afraid of your old neighbor Silas. You haven't forgotten him, I'll bet - have you?"

4

"Naw, I think we never fergit 'im. Da racket he made yellin' all night sometime. Dere was nights we couldn't hardly slip at all, an' sat up wit' da lamp lit so we would know what was goin' on. Da ole fella did it jus' for spite. He didn't have nuttin' else to do an' could slip next day while I had to go to work. I guess he t'ought I was one of da men what pulled him out his house once on Hallowe'en, an' beat him up in da road. But he was wrong by god! I never would do such a t'ing to ole man - not even if I was drunk on Joe's bootleg! Dey said Silas wore woman's clothes in da night, but I never see him - never go down dat way in da night."

"You don't like to go out much at night, do you?"

"No, I stay in da house, listen to radio. By God! dose cowboys are good! We like dem better dan anything else. Some farm music good too. Hartford station has Polish dances sometimes , pretty late. How you like dis new radio we got? Lots better dan da ole battery set we had before we got lights in house. Dat one, da batteries have to be charge', an' always I have hard time wit' dat. No car den to take 'em to Canaan or nowhere. Some time I walk down wit' da battery, some time I take it to village an' ask fella in shop to take it

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down. Sometime pos'man carry it down - any way so battery get charge'. No trouble dough wit' dis kin' of radio! It got short wave too."

He gets up to turn on his fine new radio. It really is a good, expensive one, but at least one of its chief merits, tone quality, is lost upon the simple man who is operating it.

A sudden blast of searing sound blares into the small room, and Tony beams, unaware that he doesn't know the fine art of tuning in. Any approximation of a station sounds good to him.

"Can you get Poland?" I ask when the radio is turned off again.

"I dunno. I never did. Git Englan' an' Germany and lots oder places. We can hear Polish music an' talk right from Hartford when dey have Polish dances!"

"Do you ever think that you would like to do back to Poland to live?"

"Naw! Only richest people dare have t'ings like I have here - car an' 'lectric lights and good clothes. Farmers can't do nuttin' but get enough to eat. Besides dey have too much war in Europe. We better here."

"Don't you miss your relatives?"

"Not so much. Mos' of dem here. My brudder he live in Torrington. Dat not so far. An' my woman, her cousin live two mile down da road. Besides, my children, dey are all Americans. All born here. Mos' of dem not want to go to Poland. It mean nuttin' to dem, only what we tell 'em. An' now we have live' here longer dan we live in Poland. No, I guess dis our country, more dan Poland. We don' do tings da Polish way no more. My woman buy bread from da baker jus' like American. Buy all da clothes, not make any. Buy da butter and all da meat. She still make us some cheese, dough, because we like ut. Now we got washing machine, washing easy to do. But my woman she like to work. Pitch hay,

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plant garden, dig potatoes 6 just like me. Get fat on it too! What you tink my woman?" Tony considers this question a joke, and he laughs happily.

"Oh, you've got a fine woman - no doubt about that," I answer. "You've also got two nice daughters."

"Yuh! Valeria she come home from da place where she work becuase da house too cold. She say she never warm enough, an' all da children in da family, dey get sick wit' colds 'cause da house never warm. So I tell her she don' need go back. She don' need da money. Whatever she want I get her. Dey have a great time, dose kids, wit' da mail order catalogues. Da new one come yest'day. You see ut? Lots new tings in ut. Even bees dey are sellin' by da pound! I tink maybe I get some. Got almos' everyting else on dis farm!"

"But will you want to stay here if the new road they're talking about comes through?" I ask, referring to the fact that there is only a five mile stretch of improved road, our own, between the Connecticut state line and the nearest Massachusetts village.

"Oh sure! But dat will make higher taxes, I s'pose - what you tink?"

"Possibly - but your land will be worth more."

"Not to me, and not to nobody dat wants a quiet place to live. Dose people down da road, from New York, dey tell me dey don' want no hard road and trucks going by. So how I sell my farm to [city?] 7 people den? Only one good ting I see in pave' road. We have no mud in spring. By God! dat mud we get in spring is worse part of year. We hardly get trough at all den. But dese city people, what dey care how much mud we have in spring? In summer when dey here, road is fine. You remember dat young fella, da doctor's son, what came up from New York to live all time couple years back? He know about da road den you bet! Got good an' mad when he couldn' git trough da mud. Come here to my house all time an' talk about da road. He even go to vote at town meetin' so right man git elected an' take care of roads. We have some good talks 'bout tings when he come. But den he got job again in

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New York and not come up no more. I guess he had fill of country dose couple year. Bad weather too. Coldes' winter we have for long time. Day nearly froze in dat big house."

"What did you think of their farming?" I asked.

"Well, da woman have good garden - but dat's no farm. An' anybody can have good garden workin' in ut alla time like she did. She had lots different stuff - two, tree kin's tomatoes, poppers, lettuce, fancy tings - but not much any one ting - an' no potatoes at all. Bought all potatoes from me. She can stuff too - almos' much as my woman - an' pick berries all summer t' can. But no good t' can carrots an' stuff like dat, dat kips all winter in hole in ground.

"You know dat time da cows loose from da pasture cross da road an' got in her garden? What a fuss she make! Me, cows got in my 8 garden almos' every summer. Nuttin' to do 'bout it. But she was real mad. Dey don' like animals gettin' in tings. Like da geese dey bought. T'ought it be nice to have geese aroun' house, lookin' pretty, an' mebbe have stuff' goose to eat Christmas. But geese too noisy an' leave droppin's on porch an' yard and it kills grass. So dey give me da geese for some work I do dere, and I have not any foolishness wid 'em, you bet! We eat 'em up quick!

"Den dere was da pigeons. How dey work buildin' fine expensive roost, all cement floor an' everyting. To raise squabs an' sell 'em. But I guess dey ate 'em all dereselves. My pigeons only pets. Anodder place dey make for pheasants, an' one for high-class chickens. Now all da pens stan' dere empty. Dey had goats dere too. Ate all da bark off da trees in fiel's, and da people don' like dat. Make bad smell too. I guess dey sell 'em at los'. Dey very good people dough. I like 'em fine. Only dey didn't know what to do wid dere farm. My boy, he work down dere sometime. Dey treat him nice. Not like dose oder people from Hartford what treat my girl so bad. Dey tink she take money in house an' come here 'bout it. I not let her go dere no more now. She not have to work for people like dat."

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Tony is a slow talker and it has taken him quite a long time to tell me these things. Behind a curtained door leading to the kitchen I think I hear Mrs. Washalaski taking up supper, so I rise to go.

“It's fine that you have got to the position where you and your family can be a little independent,” I said. “Not many people can turn 9 down jobs - any kind of jobs - these days.”

“Data right!” answered Tony, obviously pleased, and he chuckled as he went to the door with me to look “at weather”, and say “come again” as I walked down the steps of his new porch.