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Reputation is an idle and most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost without deserving.

—William Shakespeare, *Othello*
INTRODUCTION
THE SULLIVAN BROTHERS IN
AMERICA AND IN WATERLOO, IOWA

It is the summer of 1988 in Waterloo. With some promised funds for urban rehabilitation, the city fathers are making final plans to spruce up their municipality and stem its deterioration. Businesses and industries are failing, unemployment is up, and the town looks a little dilapidated. Waterloo is just one of the many casualties of the changes that have swept over the Midwest in the previous twenty-five years. For a long time Waterloo had staved off its decline, but since 1980 it had lost about one of every five residents. That year Frank Sinatra, expressing the feelings of an ambitious American moving out of the heartland for New York, sang about those “little town blues . . . melting away.” “Start spreading the news, I’m leaving today.”

In one small part of the fight to combat the exodus, Waterloo’s leaders are calling for the remodeling and renaming of the old ConWay Convention Center. Politicians had earlier designed it to attract conventioneers from the northern tier of Iowa, but the ConWay Center had never really succeeded. Waterloo’s elite proposed to smarten it up. They also wanted to give it a new name. “The Sullivan Brothers Convention Center” would highlight the region’s most precious commodity: the five valorous sailors from Waterloo who died in World War II when the Japanese sank their ship in the South Pacific. This was the single greatest wartime sacrifice that any family in US history had made, and in 1943 President Franklin Roosevelt had sent a personal letter of condolence to the mother of the young men.

Waterloo had Sullivan Park, and a wing of the county hospital commemorated the boys. Donations had financed a statue in front of their old elementary school, and a special marker was placed in a cemetery. A great “Freedom Rock” in a nearby town would also honor them. In Washington, DC, a stand of trees outside the Capitol memorialized the five. The US Navy had launched a ship in their memory and would
christen a second in 1995. Three years after that, in 1998, the blockbuster movie *Saving Private Ryan* would recall the Sullivans. Indeed, the film took its inspiration from a Hollywood production of 1944, *The Fighting Sullivans*. This heartbreaking movie showed, during World War II, how intolerable adversity could invade the lives of even a god-fearing and well-thought-of American family. *The Fighting Sullivans* most conspicuously exemplified how the Sullivans had given Waterloo national prominence.

In 1988, the question did not appear to be: Should we rename the ConWay Center? Rather the question seemed: Why didn’t Waterloo call it after the Sullivans in the first place?

Nonetheless, in that hot July, a public protest occurred. One headline from the local newspaper, *The Waterloo Courier*, read: RENAMING . . . A Close Call, while another announced: Pros, Cons to Be Heard. A poll by the paper, which always favorably reported on the Sullivan family, pointed out that about 45 percent of people in Waterloo did not want the change. The town called an initial open hearing in the large City Council chambers on the second floor of City Hall. One critic argued that the Sullivans already had a park. Some opponents did not want the brothers remembered in preference to other families who had lost loved ones and not been recognized. Don Miller, a longtime resident, stood up in the front row and said that he did not like to attack God, motherhood, and apple pie. But, he lectured community bigwigs, the “achievement” of the brothers was only “average.” He had respect and admiration for the Sullivans, he went on. But, Miller added, gesturing to the World War II veterans sitting in back of him, “every man behind me did the same thing”—a strange claim to articulate since all of the veterans to whom he pointed were alive.

Something strange was occurring in Waterloo. Hidden passions gripped this place forty-five years after a ghastly tragedy had destroyed a family and after Hollywood had given Waterloo stature all over the United States. The conflict was not a simple matter of where to plant some trees, or what to title a building. The debate reflected deeper issues.

In part this book is a collective biography of the Sullivans. It explores how misfortune transformed a family thought to be less than respect-
able—and transmuted five marginal young men into godlike beings. From the mid-1940s to the twenty-first century, various groups employed the deaths of the boys to promote a variety of political, commercial, and social causes, both in Waterloo and across the country.

Even if this old story is told without rose-colored glasses, why should it interest us today? Its central aspect concerns how the culture, and in this case also the government, manufacture heroes. How do we define an American hero? Because the United States has so often been at war from the 1950s on, the standard notion embraces men and women who have killed or been killed in the line of duty. But it can also encompass noncombatants lost in war, people murdered in random acts of violence, or those who surrendered their lives through natural disasters. We may also have living heroes—any veteran, even those who have only worked behind a desk. Civilians who have done altruistic deeds; endured some astonishingly dangerous experience; or simply participated in some significant or noteworthy events sometimes get counted as heroes. In many of these sorts of unusual or frightening circumstances, we have unmoored the heroic from the individual intrepid behavior that anchored its use in the past. People are often designated heroes in lieu of paying any further attention to them. In the most challenging cases, it is pronounced that someone who has been in the military is a hero. The person gets a “Thank you for your service” and is forgotten. Of those who are killed, no one is permitted to die “in vain.”

This book shows how narratives of the heroic are constructed and why we need them. In looking at the Sullivans, I attend to a less than virtuous activity of the government, but also to the centrality of Hollywood storytelling and to the ambiguity of the movie capital’s role. The tale of the Sullivans involves a chronicle of war, a family calamity, and a movie. It is, in addition to all these, an impressive example of how our history is made—and what it is made to mean.
From the southwest coast of Ireland the Beara Peninsula juts out into the North Atlantic. In the twenty-first century the area is still beautiful, but bleak and barren. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the male ancestors of the Sullivans lived there in the parish of Trafrask, near the tiny village of Adrigole in County Cork. The name Sullivan is a variant of O’Sullivan, the third most common Irish surname, and today the lore of County Cork sometimes refers to our five brothers as the “O’Sullivans.” The Beara Peninsula has a long history of tenacious farming, but in the 1840s the potato blight and the famine drove many of these tribal and deeply Catholic people away from their homeland. In 1849 the starving and impoverished migrants included a Tom Sullivan, his wife, and his brother, all bound for Ellis Island, off New York City, and a new life in America.

Tom Sullivan traveled first to Oneida, in upstate New York, and then left the East Coast of the United States, settling at least for a time in the just-founded community of Harpers Ferry, Iowa. The state was immediately west of adjacent Wisconsin to the north and Illinois to the south, and Harpers Ferry was at the Wisconsin-Iowa line, north of the border between Wisconsin and Illinois. Tom and his brother built homes in Harpers Ferry, and in 1855 they helped to erect a Catholic church there. But the town remained tiny, and the population never reached much more than 300.

The Sullivan family, however, obeyed the injunction—Be fruitful and multiply. Tom Sullivan and his wife had five children, and their oldest, Eugene, had nine more. Eugene’s oldest boy, Tom, was born “about” 1883 or 1884, according to different censuses, and years later fathered our five Sullivan men and their sister Genevieve. (Kathleen, the Sullivans’ second daughter and youngest child, died in infancy.) This Tom got four years of formal schooling in Harpers Ferry and at sixteen—about the turn of the twentieth century—set out to make his
fortune hunting for precious metals in the western states. According to his obituary, he worked for some time in the silver mines of Colorado, a place then a magnet for ordinary men eager for the main chance. Like most others Tom failed, and he also acquired a taste for alcohol, a dangerous craving that would mark his life. Some ten years later, he gave up his quest for mineral wealth and went back east, living 120 miles southwest of his relatives in Harpers Ferry in the larger settlement of Waterloo, Iowa. This town had over 12,000 people in 1900 and rapidly expanded, more than doubling in size over the following decade.

In his twenties, still a drinker but no longer an adventurer, Tom found in Waterloo hard if steady work. At the time the city offered two main options. One was the Rath Packing Company, which slaughtered and prepared pork, lamb, and beef for sale. Rath flourished when it began preparing food for the army in 1917 and 1918, as America entered World War I. The company’s Waterloo plant grew up as the largest such facility in the United States. Tom chose the other option, the Illinois Central Railroad (the IC). In part because of Rath Packing, Waterloo developed into a rail hub, delivering livestock for butchery and sending processed meat east. The IC, later named “the Main Line of Mid-America,” was the principal road between Omaha, Nebraska, 270 miles to the west, and Chicago, the king city of the Midwest, 300 miles to the east on the far end of nearby Illinois. Tom began as an unskilled worker in the railroad yards and worked his way up, taking up what would be lifetime employment with the IC.

The region of Waterloo had small rolling hills and low-lying wooded areas that, to the west, gave way to the prairie of the Great Plains. Settlers had built the town on both sides of the pretty Cedar River, which flowed south from Minnesota and snaked through Waterloo, cutting it more or less diagonally in two. Residents distinguished the (north) East and (south) West Sides. Locals considered the East Side, where Rath Packing and the IC had their headquarters, the more modest half, and the West Side the more affluent. Yet plenty of people of simple means inhabited the West Side. After World War I, the farm implement manufacturer John Deere bought up a small company in Waterloo to expand Deere’s own production of tractors, and eventually it had a major plant in the city. Becoming the third large employer, Deere was located in a
Thus, the industrial district straddled each shore of the river, as did the retail quarter. Historians date “modern” Waterloo from the opening of the James Black eight-story “Dry Goods Department Store” in 1916. Black’s landmark building would be a foremost Waterloo success story for almost seventy years. Scenic bridges easily conveyed shoppers, businessmen, executives and workers, and pleasure-seekers—in addition to horses and buggies and a growing number of automobiles—from one bank of the Cedar to the other. The central 4th Street span led directly to Blacks.

The railroad works more unambiguously divided the town. The IC had a huge yard that split the East Side itself. Other railroads had subsidiary tracks that further isolated the prosperous and commercial downtown East Side from less elegant quarters on that side of the river.

A group of working-class Waterlooans lived around Rath’s, behind some railroad tracks on the East Side near the Cedar. But the “North End” of the East Side close to the IC’s yard was home to the most sizeable group of poorer people. Many of these manual and unskilled laborers called themselves Irish, but in the early part of the century, railroad management had brought in Croatian and Greek immigrants to replace troublesome Italians who worked for the IC. When a strike threatened
in 1910, railroad executives imported African Americans from Mississippi to Iowa. In this North End lower-class mix, which finally included Mexicans, the blacks were the only significant Protestant group and the only significant nonimmigrants. Squeezed into their own segregated quarter, they lived between the IC’s yard and other tracks farther east. Political leaders and the real-estate establishment in Waterloo referred to this area of some twenty square blocks as the “Black Triangle.” West Siders, whose part of town was lily-white, might call it the “colored section.” The white neighbors to the north of the African Americans might know it as “Niggertown,” and some worried about its permeable northern border, which only restrictive housing covenants protected. The tracks and the covenants cut off the African Americans from poor whites, and the river cut both groups off from the upper crust.³

The blacks had the worst-paying and nastiest jobs on the railroad, even though their bosses had lured them from Mississippi by the promise of high wages and easy work. The white employers, however, had told the truth about housing. Waterloo had land to spare, courtesy of the retreat of the Indians across the middle of North America. The pioneers often laid out wide, tree-lined avenues with broad sidewalks. Even families with little money commonly lived in detached homes, which also had back and front yards. Beautifully positioned on the Cedar, the city did not get paved roads until the late 1920s and 1930s, and much through traffic was funneled to highways that skirted Waterloo. Cars did not create a nuisance downtown, where pedestrians abounded. Boosters proudly advertised the up-and-coming business and culture of this humming metropolitan area that also offered vistas of open countryside just beyond the city limits. Waterloo grew to over 60,000 by 1940, a bustling place set down in the middle of Iowa farms.

Tom Sullivan matured with the city. He had a small-town but urban mentality and was conscious of his workingman’s status. He attached himself to the East Side and lived there for well over fifty years, although his early jobs often took him far from Waterloo to repair tracks. When he later rose from unskilled laborer to switchman, he often slept over somewhere and was frequently away in “hostels,” the low-priced lodgings designed in the Midwest to give bed and board to trainmen. Tom’s jobs gradually got better, and he finally landed in a responsible
position as a conductor on the freight trains. This employment usually took him back and forth to Dubuque, Iowa—some ninety miles east of Waterloo at the Illinois boundary, and some seventy-five miles south of Harpers Ferry. On that run he still spent nights away from the East Side. At first alone with other single young males, Tom perfected his way of drinking—in Dubuque at Mrs. Joseph’s Erie Café or the Huss House, and at Stone’s Café in Marshalltown, another Iowa hub of the IC. Tom indulged only when he did not have to work, and although he habitually drank, he remained sober on the railroad and to that crucial extent controlled his habit. The liquoring-up went side by side with resolute skill as a railway hand untarnished by wayward performance in the yard.

Tom prospered with the Illinois Central. A union man, he benefited
from early organizations of skilled hands and the “railway brotherhoods.” Tom had a reliable paycheck and a good salary. Alcohol did not prevent him from achieving an unusually well-off life for an Irish American of little education in the early twentieth century. The common worker acquired valuable competencies.

Some of Tom’s success derived from his friendship with George Abel, a man from a middle-class Waterloo family. Abel had a more senior position at the IC. He also had a capable wife, May, and a daughter, Alleta, who began seeing Tom Sullivan in 1913. George Abel may have recognized something in the hard-drinking but soft-spoken and dependable Tom. Abel may also have foreseen limited marital options for his daughter. She had not completed the elementary grades and could claim few of the graces that girls might achieve through a high-school education or a polite upbringing. Whatever youthful charm, beauty, and vivacity Alleta possessed vanished early in her life, although she retained a steady and driving concern for the respectability of her family. Tom and Alleta married at Saint Joseph’s Catholic Church in Waterloo in early 1914. She was just nineteen; he was over thirty. After a Florida honeymoon, with the travel compensated by the IC, the couple settled in with May and George Abel.

Tom and Alleta’s firstborn, George, named after George Abel, was born in December 1914. Less than a week later, on December 19, a rail yard accident injured George Abel, and he died three days later. May Abel was a thirty-six-year-old widow, only five years older than Tom. Now she would live permanently with her daughter and son-in-law, and their new family.

This family expanded rapidly, and Tom and Alleta named their other children after relatives, as they had George. Francis, or Frank, arrived in early 1916; Genevieve, or Gen, a year later; Joseph Eugene (born in August 1918) was known as Joe or Gene and also Red because of his hair; Madison, or Matt, arrived less than fifteen months after Red. For the era, Tom Sullivan was a mature father—thirty-six when Matt was born. Nonetheless, three years later in 1922 Alleta delivered Albert, or Al, and nine years later in 1931 she gave birth to Kathleen Mae. We have no information about the couple’s birth-control practices, but by then Tom Sullivan was pushing fifty. The appearance of a child so late
Tom and Alleta. The couple honeymooned in Fort Myers, Florida, in February 1914 (Collection of Michael McGee).
in their lives is noteworthy. After Kathleen died of pneumonia as an infant, Al remained the youngest sibling.

Alleta quickly lost her looks, as they said—and more. Frequent pregnancies did not allow women of that time and place and circumstance to have much concern for their physical attractiveness. Too short to carry extra pounds gracefully, Alleta was soon heavy and clumsy. Pictures of her from the late 1920s through the early 1940s show her squat, overweight, and unattractive. One hostile commentator described her as an “obese” woman who “waddled” around Waterloo. Many testimonies pronounced Alleta withdrawn, but some also called her garrulous. I am convinced of her high intelligence, although she was peculiar and had little space to express her gifts. More important, Alleta was often depressed and incapable of functioning normally. When she had her “spells,” she took to her bed for days at a stretch. When she was up, she would sometimes sit on the Sullivans’ porch to watch the children, chewing tobacco and spitting it on the wood floor.

Tom’s drunkenness may have increased Alleta’s idiosyncrasies. She worried about what he was doing on the job, but he often used liquor at home, perhaps to make himself oblivious to Alleta. As time went on, passive-aggressive clashes occurred around the house, as wife reprimanded husband about boozing while Tom drowned out the reprimands with alcohol. Although a sociable drunk, according to reports, he did not talk much in his whiskey-infused encounters with his wife. Alleta would find secret stashes of drink around the house and, in the classic style of those close to an alcoholic, poured out the liquor and replaced it—with vinegar. Often Alleta informed the railroad that because Tom was “sick” he could not come to the yard. Yet his “illnesses”—inebriation or hangovers that prevented Tom’s going to his job—only occurred when the IC contacted him at short notice for impromptu freight runs that might need him but that were unscheduled.

Sometimes the drinking did influence Tom’s ability to manage the boys. We have evidence of what would now be called physical abuse, although the standards of the twenty-first century are not those of the American lower classes in the early twentieth century. A minimal example of paternal corporal punishment even appeared in the movie The Fighting Sullivans. When Tom slept during the day with the children in
the house, he would sometimes wake up and yell to Alleta, “Keep those sons of bitches quiet!”

Tom’s regular money and his calculation of his benders gave a rare twist to the lives of the family. We need to remember a decisive factor: financially secure if not prosperous, the Sullivans may have occupied a social but not an economic cliff.

In 1919 an amendment to the US Constitution outlawed alcoholic beverages, and laws to prevent their sale and consumption went into effect the following year. “Prohibition” dominated the 1920s, although we don’t know exactly how it affected Tom Sullivan. Drink was still easy to come by, and nothing suggests that he stopped consuming. Bootleggers provided alcohol in the alleys off of the main streets of the downtown East Side. We also have indications that Tom built stills to manufacture alcohol and satisfied his habit with his own illegal brew. In 1933 the law sentenced an Oscar Christiansen, who at that point lived with the Sullivans, to thirty days in jail for illegal possession of alcohol.6

Alleta’s mother, May Abel, kept the family together. People remembered her as a strong and optimistic woman. She took over when Tom was incapacitated or absent, or when Alleta was too down or blue to carry out her parental responsibilities. May organized the household and often meted out discipline to the boys.

The Sullivans moved frequently to accommodate a flourishing clan, the first time from May Abel’s house in 1916. Tom’s salary meant that May, Tom, Alleta, and the children could afford their own substantial place, but being comparatively well-off did not persuade Tom to give up his roots. He never resided in the fancy part of Waterloo, and we can trace the family’s relocations around the East Side and, for most of the boys’ abbreviated lives, literally on the “other side of the tracks” in the North End. In 1921—just about a year before Al was born—the family got a new address for a third time since Tom and Alleta’s marriage: 114 Newell Street, not much more than a block from the trains. Here the boys would grow up. The location was great for Tom’s job, and his sons had access to the backstreets of this fringe district and the lures of the railroad yard, not insignificant for these kids. They were also near the woods and fields of rural Iowa.

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Nonetheless, the Sullivans lived unnervingly close to the African Americans, and only social barriers and not rail tracks defined the northern edge of the ghetto, a few blocks south of Newell Street. By the late 1920s, probably in an effort to put some distance between themselves and the blacks, the Sullivans moved again, to another part of the East Side; it was here that their youngest child, Kathleen, died in 1931. The next year the surviving Sullivans moved a final time, to 98 Adams Street. Each move had brought them a more valuable property.

The Hollywood movie would make 98 Adams Street, at the corner of Adams and Ankeny, famous. Only a short distance from the old house on Newell Street and from where Tom reported for his conductor's duties, 98 Adams gave the Sullivans a comfortable home, although it still breathed on the Black Triangle. Marginal stores and shady undertakings lay within walking distance: drinking spots illegal during Prohibition; flophouses; betting parlors; pawn shops; pool halls; card rooms; pay-to-dance joints and more straightforward whorehouses; and various hangouts. The boys grew up largely unattended in a gamey neighborhood. The Sullivans would still be at Adams and Ankeny when the boys went off to war in 1942.

Frank and George were closer to each other than to their younger brothers. The two older boys were seven and eight years older than Al. Their experience of the world differed from his, and their connection to him during some periods was limited. George, Frank, and Genevieve started their educations in the early 1920s, and their parents paid a small tuition for them to go to the parish school of Saint Mary's Roman Catholic Church, near to their Newell Street home. The older children also may have attended Washington Public School. In the late 1920s and early 1930s it is possible that the younger brothers as well showed up at Saint Mary's. But Tom and Alleta may have decided that a parochial classroom was not worth even the minimal price, and certainly after elementary instruction at Saint Mary's their offspring attended public schools. The grown-ups had so little interest in learning that they did not brood over where the siblings went.

The boys reflected their parents' values. None of them was a serious student; in fact, the reverse was true. One neighbor remarked that
they were “not real bright”; the parish priest, who owned that he did not see much of them, described them as “pluggers.”9 One Waterloo researcher claimed that the boys may have been thrown out of Saint Mary’s for truancy, failing grades, and discipline problems and that the nuns removed the records of their various violations as the 1940s exalted the brothers to secular canonization. Saint Mary’s, however, has long since closed, and water had many times swamped the records stored in its basement when the school shut its doors.

The first part of the movie The Fighting Sullivans depicted a number of vignettes from the boys’ lives. Friends and neighbors remembered that something similar to events shown on the screen, suitably dramatized, had actually happened. We cannot entirely trust these remembrances, because a viewing of the film, in all likelihood, influenced every one of them. But we have more reason to give some credit to the reports than not. Footage from the film had the boys climbing a water tower near the tracks to wave good-bye to Dad when his train went off for the morning; at least it seems the boys used to wait on the tower to monitor his arrival home after some days away. One time when Al was little more than a toddler, the boys found an old rowboat and made it seaworthy by filling some minor holes with mud. On the Cedar River, where African Americans were forbidden to swim, the Sullivans launched their vessel, which at once began to sink. The older boys abandoned ship, while nearby adults rescued Al.10 The film featured a version of this incident. At another time, the Sullivans decided to build a box for firewood that would allow the family to deposit the wood on the kitchen porch and then extract it for the stove, on the other side of the wall inside the house. Before the children had finished the job, they had sawed through a water pipe in the kitchen and flooded the room. The movie illustrated this escapade, too.

People in Waterloo later recounted other stories about minor delinquencies. Banding together against other boys; driving more settled neighbors, usually older couples, to distraction; teasing girls; playing pranks on unsuspecting visitors to the neighborhood. All of this was expected conduct for children of their age and situation, and it was nothing to write home about. All the stories told after their deaths, and conversations conducted about them years later, inform us that the five
boys were energetic, robust, and independent—if sometimes lowdown. For a few years as they were growing up, Alleta had forced them to Sunday Mass at Saint Mary’s, which had become their home church, but they did not take to religion in part because of Alleta’s own lack of commitment. When the youngsters reached adolescence, the church was irrelevant to their lives, although they did think of themselves as Irish and Catholic.

The distinguishing stories recounted by acquaintances and neighbors pointed to the advantage Tom’s job gave the Sullivans in the economically constrained confines of the North End. They were uncommon in having an almost middle-class income combined with an underclass culture and set of attitudes. For a time the family had a large car for Sunday afternoon drives, a rarity in the alleys and streets near the tracks. On the Fourth of July Tom always purchased firecrackers and fireworks for the boys. Friends recalled that the siblings had store-bought kites. Because of Tom’s work, the parents also got discounted tickets on the railroads and were unusually well traveled for people of their sort. In addition to the honeymoon in Florida, trains would take them to other parts of the country.

We need to mention a final aspect of the Sullivans’ relative material comfort. When all the boys were in school by the late 1920s, summer vacations meant that May Abel and Alleta would have the boys on their hands all day, every day. Instead, they were sent east to Harpers Ferry, where Tom’s family still had a farm and two younger unmarried brothers oversaw the land. But Tom and Alleta did not dispatch the boys to harvest the crops. They spent leisurely Julys and Augusts in the fields around Harpers Ferry. They roamed, fished, hunted game, and enjoyed the rough-and-tumble of the outdoors, all under the easy rule of Uncle Joe and Uncle George. Remarkably for working-class boys of this generation, they never learned much about work.

My educated guess is that Waterloo early on developed a bit of unease about the Sullivans. Many of the characteristics that the boys displayed or would display—pedestrian minds as measured by IQ, a disdain for contemplation, a taste for brawling and boozing, and an uneasy connection to the cops—were par for the course in their milieu and certainly not to be troubled over. Yet an ornery aspect that the
boys displayed and that the parents did little to mitigate fueled some disquiet. It grew because the family appeared a bit arrogant on account of its relative affluence.

It is yet impossible to reconstruct in any detail or with great accuracy the family’s history, including the biographies of the five boys before the war. There is not much evidence pertinent to the Sullivans and precious little that is reliable. Tom, Alleta, George, Frank, Gen, Red, Matt, Al; May Abel; and Al’s wife, Keena Rooff Sullivan, whom he married in 1940, left few traces before the end of 1942. In the mid-1940s, when the Sullivans became important, commentators built narratives of the past from the memories of people who could not avoid having in mind the doom of the Juneau, the light cruiser that had taken the five brothers to their deaths in the South Pacific. Reporters and investigators interviewed remaining family members, friends, and Waterloo residents. The interviewers always had an agenda: to venerate a stricken family. All of those consulted had, naturally, different and sometimes conflicting stories, and the “oral histories” changed over the years. We have material from the mid-1940s, and also some from the 1980s and 1990s. All of it has a whisper-down-the-lane quality whose origins are in the 1920s and 1930s. Now all of the informants have themselves died, and we are left with disparate tales of almost every notable event in the lives of the Sullivans. Moreover, a famous Waterloo flood in 1961 destroyed much of what the family had in the way of memorabilia and documents.11

Easily the most significant piece of evidence dates from after their deaths—the 1944 movie; a series of conversations conducted in 1943 with the remaining Sullivans and with other people from Waterloo informed the script of the film. We cannot escape the movie, which influenced later recollections and even ostensibly more dispassionate studies. Life was shaped to copy art.

Any reconstruction of the lives of the Sullivans, including my own, is shaky and debatable. To remind readers of this aspect of the story, I have from time to time taken the unusual step of writing in the first person, not the conventional omnipresent third person of the historian; and I have sometimes alerted readers by using phrases like “maybe,” or “in all likelihood” in telling the tale.
It is not enough to see that a big gap exists between the reality of the Sullivans and the perception of them based largely on the film. We commonly find such differences and regularly find them to be wide. We speak no ill of the dead but always remark on the disparity between eulogy and private knowledge. It will be no news that *The Fighting Sullivans* romanced the past. A more important enterprise is to understand how American culture transformed the boys and their family. We need to learn who specifically benefited from different Sullivan stories.