

# A Christmas Story's Sullivan County Link

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Hardly anyone would have predicted when it premiered in November of 1983 that "A Christmas Story" would become a holiday classic, but the low budget Depression era story of a young boy who dreams of finding a Red Ryder BB gun under his Christmas tree has done just that.

With a budget of only about \$4 million and a cast of mostly unknowns, the film seemed to have little going for it. But Peter Billingsley turned in an unforgettable performance as Ralphie, the boy with the dream, and Darren McGavin - arguably the biggest name in the cast when shooting began - supported ably as his father, adding up to a heartwarming and inspiring film that has now joined "White Christmas" and "It's a Wonderful life" as holiday viewing staples.

It is McGavin, the veteran actor with a list of movie and television credits dating back to 1945, who provides the film's link to Sullivan County. Long before his turn in "A Christmas Story," and even before he gained cult immortality with his role as reporter Carl Kolchak in the television series "The Night Stalker," McGavin purchased a home in Beaverkill and remained a summer resident of the area for the next dozen years.



Born William Lyle Richardson in San Joaquin, California on May 7, 1922, he received his dramatic arts training at the Neighborhood Playhouse and the Actor's Studio before embarking on a film career with bit parts in films as diverse as "A Song to Remember," "Counter Attack," and "Kiss and Tell."

McGavin had yet to turn in a notable performance when he landed the lead in the 1951 television series, "Casey, Crime Photographer," foreshadowing his "Night Stalker" role by portraying a newspaper photographer who continually stumbles upon great stories. Despite its pedigree as a long running radio series, the show's television run was a short one, and McGavin was back to small roles in movies and various television series.

He turned in a critically acclaimed performance as Louie, the drug dealer in the 1955 film, "The Man with the Golden Arm" with Frank Sinatra and Eleanor Parker, and soon landed a plum role as the tough guy lead in the television series, "Mike Hammer," which filmed in New York City. Leads in several other television series followed, including "Riverboat" in which he co-starred with a young Burt Reynolds, "The Outsider," "Night Stalker," and "Small and Frye."

He worked steadily in both New York and California, but found time in 1956 to purchase the Scullin farm, a 200-acre parcel with a traditional farmhouse on Elm Hollow Road in Beaverkill. He would summer off and on there for the next twelve years, selling the property in 1968. That was the year that "The Outsider" a TV movie he had made about a down and out ex-con turned Los Angeles private investigator was picked up as a television series.

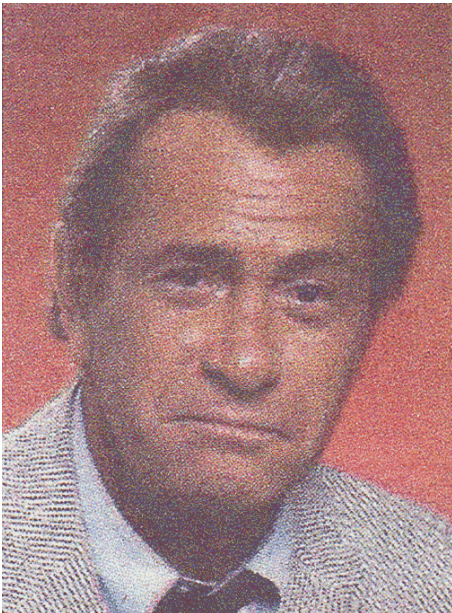
The farm had been built in the latter years of the 19th century by Irish immigrant John Scullin and his wife Catherine, who raised ten children there. One of the ten, their son Edward E Scullin, took over the farm in the 1920s and operated it until selling it to McGavin. During that time, besides working the farm, Ed Scullin and his wife Lillian also took care of numerous orphaned boys from

the Catholic Home Bureau in New York City. Several of those youngsters stayed in the area after reaching adulthood.

In 1972, Darren McGavin starred as an abrasive newspaper reporter who couldn't hold on to a job in a lightly regarded made for TV vampire movie set in Las Vegas, entitled "The Night Stalker." It was, unexpectedly, a huge hit and prompted the producers to order a sequel, "The Night Strangler," also starring McGavin, this time set in Seattle, where the city's abandoned underground section played a big part. The movies were so successful that the following year a series was launched with McGavin again playing reporter Carl Kolchak, who each week tracked down the story of another supernatural villain or occult phenomenon, this time from a base in Chicago. The show lasted only a year in its original run, but attracted a loyal following and has surfaced from time to time in reruns ever since.

McGavin never lacked for work. He performed on stage, guest starred on popular television shows like "Murphy Brown," and appeared in numerous movies, both theatrical and made for TV, usually turning in solid and sometimes exceptional performances, as he did as the villainous gambler Gus Sands in the 1984 baseball classic "The Natural." His performance, which came about immediately after he had finished filming "A Christmas Story," helped make "The Natural" one of the best sports movies ever made.

Still, it may be "A Christmas Story" that is Darren McGavin's greatest legacy. His turn as the sometimes buffoonish but ultimately caring father was a highlight of the film, and the movie continues to prove popular with virtually every age group, typically airing numerous times each holiday season, even now, exactly thirty years after its initial release.



Darren McGavin died in Los Angeles of natural causes on February 25, 2006. He was 83. John Conway is the Sullivan County Historian and teaches a course on the History of Sullivan County at SUNY-Sullivan, where the spring semester will begin on January 22. Visit his website at [sullivan-retrospect.com](http://sullivan-retrospect.com) and e-mail him at [jconway52@hotmail.com](mailto:jconway52@hotmail.com)<sup>1</sup>

