

EARLY AUSTIN YEARS

One of the most significant events of my life occurred in 1934, when my Aunt Frances died. She and her family had moved to Austin sometime before, where my Uncle Dick had some political appointment through his good friend Governor Jimmy Allred. I don't know her cause of death, but I have a vague memory that people murmured (in later years) about "woman trouble." I think she'd had an operation and died either then or shortly thereafter.

I don't remember my Aunt Frances at all, a fact which I've always regretted. She was evidently a vibrant, multi-talented person. She had been sent, for some reason, to Texarkana to high school, where she graduated (I think it was) as Salutatorian. In those days, this gave her a lifetime tuition waiver to the University of Texas at Austin. I don't know if she went right then, but she did afterwards, when they lived in Austin.

She had also been a painter, and we almost had one of her paintings. Nothermama sent one to us, placing it in a package with other things, underneath a false bottom. Mother didn't spot the false bottom and threw the box away before the letter arrived telling where the painting was. Interesting, what? A bit of a Freudian slip, maybe? Anyway, Nothermama sent us the painting by her sister, Aunt Lem, which is a true favorite of mine, as a sort of consolation. It's the forest scene that hangs in the stair well and was the only painting we had in my childhood. I can remember studying it and fantasizing about being in those woods by that fire.

The word about Aunt Frances in the Dalby family was that: "If Frances had lived, Dick would have been Governor." They had a time adjusting to Uncle Dick's second wife, Alla Dees, who was a very nice, responsible person, but, of course, no one could have lived up to Frances.

At any rate, the decision was made right after Aunt Frances's death that my family and I would move in with Uncle Dick and his two boys. My Dad already worked for the State Comptroller's Department in the east Texas oil fields, and they arranged for him to transfer into the main office in Austin.

I have very few memories from that first house where we lived, in south Austin on Riverside Drive—except when Wallace and I were in Austin a few years ago, I found it—despite a main highway that now runs behind it. It sat high on a hill over the river, with lots of steps leading up to the front door. I remember clearly sitting down in my little canvas chair one day on that front porch. The chair wasn't caught properly and crashed down, catching my right little finger between two pieces of the wooden frame. I know it hurt something awful, and I was rushed to the doctor. I also know that it left me with a flatter fingernail on that finger all my life.

I'm sure it was a shock to me suddenly to have two older "brothers," and of course those boys had just lost their mother—so I'm sure the adjustment was not easy for any of us. Looking back I feel really sorry for my mother, who, after all, was only 23 and suddenly faced with this enlarged family. I do remember odd bits—Paul sticking me with pins. Also, oddly, that Paul would take a corn bread stick, butter it, and just lick the butter off, then want more butter—a practice he was not allowed to continue. I think I thought it was both strange and admirable of him.

Probably that house was too small for all of us, and we moved to a larger one on Travis Heights Boulevard. There I remember again only bits and pieces—an obnoxious boy next door who constantly made scatological jokes which embarrassed me horribly, and a big Thanksgiving dinner with lots of people around the table. I was in a high chair at the corner, and (I realize looking back) the adults were all drinking—so nobody paid much attention to me. I was a picky eater, I think, but what I remember is that every time the sliced tomatoes came around I took some, and that’s all I ate. No one noticed, or I’d never have gotten away with it.

Travis Heights Blvd. is also when I “gave” one of my dolls to Paul. He was so rough on dolls that I feared for their lives, but I evidently decided that it was better to sacrifice one of them than let him hurt them all. I wrote this into a short story years later, and it is probably still around in some file.

At some point it was evidently decided that my grandparents would move to Austin to take care of the boys, and my grandfather was provided with a state job. I think they had Aunt Lucile and her family move into their house and work their farm during those years. We moved first to a rent house on the north side of Austin—I think for a very short time. I have no memories of that house except that the photograph of me on a horse (pony, I guess, more accurately) with the cowboy regalia was taken there by the side of the house. I think a man came around with the pony and things, selling photographs. I vaguely remember that Paul was visiting me that day, but Mother didn’t let him have his picture made.

We must have stayed there a very short time before we moved back to south Austin to a house on Pecan Grove Road, where my memories really begin more fully. That house was on a lot which sloped up at the back and then dropped off into a creek which ran behind the house. Across the creek was a city playground with lots of activities for children. There was a tree at the top whose trunk was bent over at right angles, and it was a wonderful place to sit and dream up stories, looking down on the creek and the playground, and the houses beside ours.

It was here we lived when I started school in first grade at Fulmore School. My first teacher was Miss Cunningham, who seemed incredibly old to me (and, actually, I think she was). She wore very long black dresses. My most vivid memory of her was a day when we had been set to draw a house. One boy drew a house and scribbled it all over with a black crayon. Now I realize that this probably should have been a clue which a modern teacher would probably note, perhaps calling in the school psychologist if there were more clues. What Miss C. did was hold the picture up and make fun of it before all the rest of us. Even then, I was mortified for him and knew she should never have done such a thing.

I only have two other memories from there. One is that I loaded a book satchel I had (probably an old brief case) with several of my books from home and carried it back and forth, heavy as it was, every day—so people wouldn’t know I was just in first grade! The other memory is of my excruciating embarrassment because if we wanted to go to the rest room, we had to raise our hands and get permission—which I simply couldn’t bear to do.

Each school year was divided into A and B—e.g., 1A and 1B. For some reason, they took me out of 1B and moved me to 2A for the second half of the year. I don’t have

memories of that teacher at all, so presumably my various embarrassments were not so pronounced.

I also kept skipping half grades—I don't know why. I know I was tall, because I was the same height I grew to—5'7"—when I was eleven or so. So I've always joked that they moved me because I was too big for the chairs—but, really, I was just being fake modest, and it was a way of saying I got skipped without sounding braggy. Anyway, while we were in south Austin, I skipped the 1B, the 2B, and the 3A. So, having started school at 6 and ½ in September, 1936, by midterm end in early 1939, I had finished 3 and ½ grades and was still 8. I've wondered as an adult what that did to my social skills and the ability to make friends—I'm sure it hampered me. I have few other memories of Fulmore—running back across the playground one day with a pencil in my hand, being jostled and running the pencil lead into my chest—it's still there, because I wouldn't let them dig it out—what a brat! (And that reminds me of an earlier story, true, that I have rickets (sp?), a bone deformity, because I hated castor oil and so Mother wouldn't make me take it.) I do have some autograph books, which were the rage then, with signatures on each page, and usually a little poem, from teachers and students.

I remember being startled by one teacher who wrote the poem about the little girl with the curl right down the middle of her forehead and when she was good, she was very, very good and when she was bad she was horrid! Sweet little me?

We thought the poems were awfully cute. Some were plain, like “Roses are red, violets are blue, sugar is sweet and so are you.” Then there was “Remember the girl in the city, remember the boy in town, remember the girl who ruined your book by writing upside down.” Grade school humor to the max.

Part of the time while we lived on Pecan Grove Road, my grandparents moved in with us, before they went back to the farm. My Uncle Dick had gotten married by then. Scattered memories only then—two little girls down the street, named Monell and Mona Ray (Texas names!), who for some reason I couldn't fathom had no father. Getting the measles and being out of school for two weeks. Ready to go back, I broke out in chicken pox (or maybe it was the other way around.) Sadly, I gave both my parents the measles, and they were REALLY sick with them, as adults are with childhood diseases.

I had two cats—one odd looking fellow who just came by that we named Jeep—after a comic page character; the cars weren't invented yet. The other was a yellow Persian named Mitzi, given to me (the first of several) by Uncle Warren and Aunt Willie McCright, who raised them for sale. My Dad loved to play with them—he'd tear a hole in the bottom of the paper sack, hold it up and crackle it till they jumped in, then stick his finger through the hole while they tried to catch it. (Oh, I thought he was SO brave to stick his finger in, when it might get scratched!) Or he'd take the cellophane off a cigarette package, tie a string around and drive them crazy chasing it around the room and into the air. Mitzi was stolen, we always thought.

Whenever we would visit the farm, I would be invited to spend one day with the McCrights. They had no children, but they did have the most amazing collection of tame animals. Under some of the trees, was quite a large aviary, full of different birds. The barn yard was also full, in addition to the usual barn animals with tame deer and peacocks, as well as numerous dogs. As I said, they also raised Persian cats for sale. The most exotic thing, though, was that they always had a talking parrot inside the house. My

favorite was one who had been taught to “sing” Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee. Truly remarkable. Aunt Willie and Uncle Warren would also frequently come over to my grandparents when we were there, and the adults would sit around and trade stories with each. (Mother, who was less keen on this, used to say they told the SAME stories over and over.) I thought they were great though. Uncle Warren was quite a distinctive-looking man. He had acquired the nickname “Choc” because he was thought to resemble a Choctaw Indian with his beak nose.

Odds and ends: I also for years had very painful bladder infections and had unspeakable things done to me by doctors. I also got blistered in the hot sun and also often fell and had pretty permanently skinned knees—I’ve NEVER been graceful! A lovely memory is the grown ups sitting in chairs outside during the summer (no air conditioning or TV) while all the kids chased fireflies, caught them and put them in jars with holes pierced in the lids to watch them light up. We did have radio, though, and I do remember my mother waking me up to listen to the radio when King George in England was crowned, saying you’d probably never have such a chance again.

At some point, we moved to another rent house on Kenwood Drive, still in south Austin. This neighborhood was fabulous—especially for an only child. In a two block range, there were something like 27 kids! Our landlords, the Struhalls, lived on the same block, renting out the house between ours and our house. He was also our dentist—I’m not sure we had ever had a dentist till then. They were Roman Catholics and had 7 children when we moved in and another—up to eight—while we lived there. I was bound to find someone to play with in that crowd, and sure, enough, there was Grace, just a year older than I. She went to a Catholic school, as did all her brothers and sisters, and once when we had a holiday and they didn’t, I visited that school with Grace. What an incredible mystery it was for this little unchurched girl—chapel, kneeling, candles, and all those nuns in the elaborate habits of the day. I also went to church sometimes with the Struhalls—I don’t remember how much—but that was my introduction to Jesuits, I believe it was—though I didn’t know it at the time.

One big treat was always eating lunch up at the Struhalls—a long table with attached benches along each side to hold us all. I remember once during Lent, Mrs. Struhall had the maid Rosie fix me a hot dog because I thought I didn’t like the fish they were having. Jamie and Al, the next youngest brothers had trouble understanding why they couldn’t have a hot dog. At some point, though, I decided to try tuna fish, which I had never tasted, and loved it—and still do.

As you can imagine, playing in that neighborhood was amazing. I remember long evenings of Kick the Can, when we all scattered and hid and whoever was “It” had to find us all. In fact, behind a hedge at the Struhalls, Sonny Struhall, Grace’s older brother, gave me my first kiss. We also had softball games in the summer along the lane by our house. But the capper was one year we decided to do a play, to be performed on a patio in Joyce Moursand’s house across the street. We were going to do Cinderella, and—glory—I got to be Cinderella. I won that coveted roll because I could cry at will. Probably that was when the performing bug got deeply ensconced in my being. I remember days of rehearsals, but I can’t remember that we ever actually performed the play for an audience.

Grace and I also played just with each other by the hour—usually a game we called “Movie Stars.” We’d take turns being the boy and the girl—like, “You be Tyrone Power and I’ll be Sonja Henie.” [sp?] Mother was much amused because when we played at our house, Grace would always suggest going to a “restaurant.” This meant we went to the refrigerator and made “hamburgers”—potato salad sandwiches on bread.

I had also started taking piano lessons at some point in here—we had an old upright piano. Like most children, I guess, I hated practicing. My grandmother was the one who could get me to practice. When we finished lunch, she would say, “Do you want to practice or dry the dishes”? I thought I was being very clever, realizing I would have to practice afterwards, even if I chose the dishes, never realizing she was getting me to practice when no one else could.

Another memory I have there is that my Dad and my grandfather built a big frame for quilts in the back bedroom. It was on pulleys, so it could be pulled up to the ceiling to get it out of the way. There would be a number of women sitting around it, quilting and visiting with one another—and I remember liking to sit under it and listen to them. This was probably my one touch with the rural habits of an earlier generation.

After my grandparents moved back to Bowie County to their farm, one of my great memories was visiting there in the summer and at Christmas time. As I look back, I realize we had little or no money for things like vacations and staying in motels, so vacation was always back to the “home place.” Two memories from those travels. They would make me a bed in the back seat of the car and I would sleep part of the way. Also, the one they told on me for years was that about the time we got to the city limits of Austin, I would claim to be hungry. This was because only on these trips did we get to eat “bought” hamburgers, which I loved, so I wanted them as soon as I could.

Frances, two years younger than I and also an only child, always came to stay while I was there, and we slept in a big iron double bedstead. I must have been quite obnoxious to her, but I would draw a line down the middle of the bed and demand that she stay on her side all night—a thing she was evidently constitutionally unable to do. She loves to tell stories now about my ignorance of animals. It was there I learned that when a horse got close to home, I wasn’t strong enough to keep it from running there, no matter how hard I pulled on the reins.

One lovely animal memory I have is once when we were there a calf was born on the “Lower Place.” Evidently they usually tried to bring the cows up to the main farm’s barn before the calved, but this one fooled them. We rode down a long dirt road in a wagon pulled by one of their horses, and they lifted the calf into the wagon. My Dad and I rode in the wagon with the calf, and when the calf went silent and the cow quit following the wagon, my Dad would give a PERFECT imitation of the calf, and the cow would begin trotting after us again to catch up with her calf. I thought that was wonderful of my Dad.

I also remember playing down on the “branch,” a fresh stream that bubbled up and flowed through some woods at the bottom of some of the fields. We were warned to watch for snakes, and I was a little afraid, but, oh! how I remember the cold fresh water bubbling up and getting such a good cold drink from it. Once Paul was there when I was, with, I think, a Waters cousin of his, and the four of us labored mightily and dammed up the stream to make a little pond. What lovely, dirty work!

Another memory—a very warm one—from those years is going dove hunting in the fall with my parents and their friends. My father, of course, loved guns, and they were always just a natural part of my life. I think this is more common with families who grow up on farms, where hunting is just normal. I always loved to stay with him, and he sometimes used me like a hunting dog to run fetch his doves. You would hunt at dusk, by a pond of water as the doves flew in to get a drink. Autumn is beautiful in Austin and the surroundings, and it was a good experience.

Probably one reason I remember it with such pleasure is that the whole group would go to someone's house and cook and eat together. My family was never very socially involved, and looking back, probably the reason I loved it so was that wonderful feeling of a group together in a festive way. And to this day I really love wild birds, which we would have with gravy, biscuits, and fried potatoes—surely nothing ever tasted better to me!