



Life and
Letters

VOLUME VB

Boiler"

Emily Dickinson once confessed, "I scarcely know where to begin, but love is always a safe place." At the closing of each semester of LIFE AND LETTERS, I, too, find myself at a loss. Where does one begin expressing the gain intimated by the loss of words? For starters, I present to you this collection of stories. Within these pages lie the lessons of the 'lives of my life history writing students. For their "writing" kind of giving I am grateful. My students have given me their hopes and heartaches and have shown me that the key to the future is sometimes a wise look at the past. From people they have met to the people they have become, these friends have become my teachers. Welcome, again, to the stories of reminiscence that teach us to laugh at the future. Enjoy them as you read on.

-- Joan Stear
April 1992

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Front Cover (clockwise from upper righthand corner): Anna Lee; Jeanne Domingue; Tillie Nixon; Joyce Michel; Ann Lee; Barbara Hanson; (center) Bootsie Brown; (left center) Carol Tufts

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GOING TO THE MOVIES

by

Barbara Hansen

I remember going to a silent film with Mom and Dad. I tried so hard to read the words, but I didn't know them all so I would lean over and whisper to Mom, "What did it say?" She would tell me, but once was not enough. Finally she said, "I can't read it all, just watch." Instead, I turned my attention to the piano player down at the front. Imagine, playing in the dark for the entire movie. The music had to fit the fast-moving parts and the sentimental parts and everything in between. One day, much later, when we were talking about silent films, one of our family friends said that she used to play piano in the theater for the films. I thought that was quite remarkable.

The next movie we went to was talking. It was about men in a submarine. I guess it was war and they got hit. The ship started to sink out of control. When it reached the bottom it was very quiet and all we could hear were the men gasping for breath. I was so upset and knew they were all going to die. Dad said I didn't have to watch, so I buried my head in his shoulder and covered my ears; but of course, if I didn't peek sometimes I wouldn't know what was going on. I thought of those trapped men so many times, especially at night.

One Easter Sunday after dinner at my grandmother's house, my cousin Ray, brother Fred and I were looking for something to do. We remembered that "King Kong" was playing at the theater downtown. After a lot of discussion, checking on feature times and being told to take care of my brother, we were given money for admission and the streetcar ride. We were sort of dressed up and I wore gloves, which was very unusual. Our little trip by ourselves went fine and we loved the movie. Of course, it was very suspenseful and when we walked outside I noticed that I had chewed off the ends of all the fingers on my gloves. I thought my mother would be mad, but she just laughed. I guess she knew I would never be wearing them again anyway.

I heard many people talk about the new theater that had been built downtown. They called it Radio City and I wondered what that had to do with the movies. The time finally came when our family went to a movie there. It was about the San Francisco earthquake. Walking inside seemed like entering a new world. There were big, tall marble pillars and marble floors. Ahead was a huge, wide marble staircase. I felt like a princess walking up. At the top I heard piano music and to the side was a big grand piano. The keys were moving, but nobody was there to play it. What a revelation to me-- I probably would have preferred watching and listening to the piano, but Dad said, "Let's go." While the buildings were falling down in San Francisco and people were running all around, I was thinking about that self-playing piano. On the way home, I insisted on an explanation of just how it worked.

One Saturday afternoon when I was old enough to walk by myself to the neighborhood theater, The Granada, I saw a movie with Greta Garbo. It was either "Camille" or "Anna Karolina." She was so beautiful, and I was enthralled by every scene she was in. At the end she was standing in the bow of a ship, sailing away from her lover and the tears were streaming down my cheeks. I was rooted to my seat and thought, "I would like to see this part and that part once more." After all the short subjects, newsreels and previews were over, there she was on the screen again in all her beauty. Just then I saw Dad walking up the aisle looking side to side until he spotted me. The spell was broken, and I jumped up. He was angry and talked about how worried they were at home when I didn't come back. I tried to tell him how wonderful the movie was and how beautiful Greta Garbo was. Mom and Dad didn't seem to understand. There was really no explanation good enough to account for not showing up at home after the film ended.

My girlfriends and I used to wait eagerly for the Photoplay magazine and others like it. After seeing the photo portraits of those unreal "stars," we would choose a favorite, cut it out and pin it to our bedroom walls. There was a special quality to those old films. Now we have realism. We no longer say, "Those things only happen in the movies."



IN THE HEART OF TOWN
by
Carol Tufts

A new highway would come right through our house, so in 1924 we moved again. Few houses in town were big enough for our family of eight. The Presbyterian Church had an itinerant minister, and the red brick house on an adjoining lot was waiting for us to rent it.

We were now much closer to the small business district, the school and library, and even the mountains. The mountains running north and south of Idaho Springs closed in gradually, making this section narrower. Our new home had a flight of cement stairs from sidewalk level, and High Street, back of us, had literally been carved out of the mountain;

Our large living room easily held the coal-fueled circulating heater. In the ceiling were registers which could be

opened to let warm air rise to the front bedrooms. Registers were also good for listening to grown-up talk in the living room when I was supposed to be in bed.

The kitchen had a table for our daily meals, a tall cabinet and work table, plus an ample storage pantry. The most important item was the great coal range with handsome trim and railing around it. On the ornate oven door it said in raised metal lettering: MALLEABLE IRON. Those were good words to say.

At the back of the house was a slanting double door to the root cellar. Way out back was a barn and a chicken house. With our big yards, the church yard, and alley and a steep road for sledding beyond the church, we had a perfect area for games. The neighbors never complained about our early evening noise when we played "Run, Sheep, Run," "Kick the Can," "Red Light," and "Statues."

Next door east of us was a modern house. A mining engineer, who was also the town mayor, lived there with his wife and daughter. Virginia Lee was a little younger than I, but we had good play times in one house or the other. The Harrington's house was always cozily warm, even on the coldest days. Virginia Lee had a neat playhouse under the stairway which her Daddy had built for her.

The towering north mountain behind our house was not easy to climb. Near the top I found a flat ledge in a cliff, which became my private turf, just right for sitting and daydreaming. Since I was always visible from the backyard, I could go up there whenever I pleased.

The library was, to me, the Queen Building of the town. The Carnegie Library, built in 1886, and still in mint condition a century later, was diagonally across the street from our house. In the dry Colorado climate, structures last indefinitely, and rust and mold are unknown. Two tiers of granite stairs led to a storm vestibule equipped with rubber matting for the galoshes left out there. The wide hall up to the circulation desk was also carpeted with rubber to catch snow drippings. The ground floor was City Hall. I always thought the officials had to interrupt their work to stoke the furnace. The hissing, clanking radiators gave off a toasty smell that mingled oddly with the rubber matting odor.

Beyond the library was a playground, the school and gymnasium. The school accommodated all twelve grades. The classrooms were very light, with many tall windows. These must have caused great heating expenses during most of the school year, but they made pleasant classrooms.

Downtown, or Main Street, was only a block south. There was the sprawling Placer Inn, a short-order restaurant where the buses stopped. Sometimes my brothers would set up a small table near the Inn with mineral specimens to sell to the summer tourists.

My Dad's grocery store was a block down the street. I loved all the glass display cases and the big refrigerated meat case. One day Mother sent me to the store for lunch meat. The butcher

showed me everything, but none of it was right. Finally, he asked Dad to help. I explained that the meat was brown and we always had it on Monday noon. Cold roast beef was my idea of good lunch meat. Sometimes Dad would give me a ride on the flat freight elevator he had built, probably putting his knowledge of mine hoists to good use.

Across the street was Keplinger's barber shop. Everyone called him Kep. On a wall at the back of the shop was a sign: BATH-- 25c. This was a profitable sideline, especially on weekends, when the miners came to town for the Saturday night dance above the movie house, and perhaps to attend church.

Lu'a's confectionery was a fairyland. Everything about it was clean and attractive, and it smelled delicious. There was a sparkling soda fountain and five small marbletopped tables with little round-seated chairs. There were cases and jars with every kind of homemade candy. Lula was a dainty, dark-eyed lady, and she did not mind penny and nickel sales to drooling children.

For our frequent hikes and overnight campings, the south mountains were best. They overlooked Main Street and were gentler and more hospitable than my own private mountain. The top was named "Flirtation Peak." A needle-carpeted zigzag path led up to the first mesa, where there was a clear, busy stream and a narrow waterfall. More climbing took us to the sturdy, red ice house, which had "KEEP OUT" signs on all sides. Above that was the Idaho Springs reservoir, enclosed by a high fence.

We had a choice of wide places for spreading out our blanket rolls and building a fire, and there was always water near. We had been taught about making fires and caring for them. It was fun to sit near one and be Indians or pioneers.

The town had a swimming pool at the eastern entrance. It was a huge white frame building with a great black sign, NATATORIUM. The water was always warm, coming from thermal springs on up the valley.

In a "Y" of the road across from the pool was a small pavilion with a handpump. Tour buses stopped there so the passengers could sample the cold soda water that supposedly had curative effects. We often walked to the pump in summer so we could make fizzy lemonade.

Veering to the South, up Soda Creek Canyon, was the Hot Springs Hotel. It was rustic-looking, with wide verandas running the length of it. There were hammocks scattered within hearing distance of Soda Creek. Many people came there in summer to rest and try the thermal baths.

I vaguely dreamed of being grownup and rich and becoming a guest at the Hotel. Years later I spent a day and a night there. It was pleasant, but did not fulfill my childhood dream. The mountain scenery and a climb up to Flirtation Peak was as satisfying as ever.



ROLLING THE EGGS AT EASTER

by

Anna R. Lee

What fun we had during the Easter holidays! Even before I started school, I would go with my brother, Jim and George, to pick blossoms to use for dyes to color the eggs.

We had to be careful when picking the one we liked the most, the yellow blossom. Our task was to pick the blossom without getting pricked by the sharp thorns on the branches, and the ones who did not get pricked would be awarded extra eggs to color. I guess that was Mama's way of warning us to be careful. We had quite an assortment of colorful weeds, too. Mama added purple and light brown onion skins. Alum was mixed with the purple skins to make a grey green color. Tea leaves made shades of brown.

For several days before the "big day" we made our baskets and prepared the dyes. We used paper, wheat stems and rushes, which we would braid, and the older children or adults would sew them together. Mama made paste from boiling water and flour, so we could glue our paper baskets which we cut from a pattern. We usually had more paste on our clothes than on the baskets. We used ribbons and laces to complete the baskets. Now we were ready to dye the eggs, purple, yellow, green and shades of browns and violets.

Another activity we had was to prick the egg at both ends and blow the insides out. The eggs were then washed and dried. We decorated the eggs and made designs on them and trimmed them with beads, lace, and ribbons. We found a branchy branch, put some dirt in a flower pot and inserted the branch, hanging eggs on the branches. This arrangement decorated the kitchen for a long time.

Easter Sunday was here at last. Dressed in our new Easter finery, we went to Sunday School. After church Mama invited Uncle George, Aunt Maggie, and their children, Dick, Willie and Sandy, to enjoy a delicious dinner.

We were never allowed to have any form of unnecessary work or active play on Sundays. Usually we read or played quiet games. Checkers, spinning tops (made from empty spools) and crisscross or oxo were some of the games I remember. Whenever I look up the correct word, I remember how I enjoyed reading and looking at the tiny pictures in my favorite book, a large old dictionary.

Finally Easter Monday came. Mama packed picnic lunches of bread and butter, cucumber sandwiches, slices of cold chicken, carrot and celery sticks and plenty of fruit. There was always hot tea. We packed potatoes and mushrooms for baking.

We would mark our eggs for the "Rolling" on the same hilly field each year. As the children climbed to the top, the adults would find a warm sheltered place to sit. Daddy dug a hole in the ground and built a fire to bake the potatoes and mushrooms.

The fun was about to begin. As soon as we heard the whistle

and after lining up, we followed our eggs. The egg that reached the bottom first would be the winner, and the child would be crowned for the day. We continued rolling our eggs until they cracked, and then we ate them. By the time lunch was ready, we were not too interested in food.

After the egg roll, we had sack races, egg in the spoon, three-legged races, and we rolled down the hill. When it was time to go home, we reluctantly gathered all our things together, dogtired, but happy.



CAN'T EVER TELL WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE WHEN YOU GO FISHING

by

Ann Lee

as told to her by John Q. Lee

Still alive in my mind are the good ol' days growing up on a farm in south Georgia. Certainly the fun times far outweighed the hard work and more hard work that just seemed to be a part of my life. Our "neck of the woods" was blessed with beautiful pine forest timber and a clean, clear river which offered opportunities for hunting and fishing. Seventeen Mile River with its sandy bottom and deep lakes made a great swimming hole for Josh and me. Many times in the summer with the sun blazin' down while we were plowing in the fields with the ol' mules, Molly and Coaly, we'd slip away at the end of the row, stripping off as we ran across the hill to Deaton Lake, challenging each other to be the first to make the big splash! Just a few quick dives-- then back to start the next row-- Molly and Coaly didn't seem to be in any hurry for us to get back.

Besides swimming we always looked forward to the fishing trips to the river. One moonlit night stands out quite vividly in my mind when Dad, Uncle Willie, and Dewey, a farmhand, got in the ol' truck with our fishing poles and headed out to "catch the big one"! How exciting for a ten year old boy like me, since I had heard so many of Uncle Willie's and Dad's fishing stories!

At last we arrived at the long bridge over the river. We got the truck parked, and it didn't take long for Dewey and me to find the best place to stand on the bridge so we could start fishing. After Dad and Uncle Willie sat down on the bridge, Dad held the flashlight on the sandbar where the shallow water flowed across it so Uncle Willie could use his .22 rifle to take "pot

shots" at the fish as they swam over the sandbar. Each time he'd shoot a fish, Dewey or I would climb down and retrieve it. Needless to say, this type of fishing was prohibited and frowned on by the game warden, but we tried not to think about that as we were putting the fish on the stringer. We were having such a good time, when suddenly we heard a commotion at the far end of the bridge.

We couldn't see, but it sounded like a team of horses coming on the bridge. As the sound got closer we could see the flashing eyes of an animal running full speed toward us. As a matter of fact, he was running so fast the whole bridge was shaking. Dad grabbed his flashlight, shining it on the beast, and yelled, "run for the truck!" I almost froze as I watched those eyes that looked like coals of fire coming so fast! As I jumped into the truck, Uncle Willie climbed in the back. Poor Dewey was so petrified he shinnied up the first pine tree. Dad held the light without moving. As the animal came off the end of the bridge, it was then Dad could see it was a huge dog with his tongue hanging out and foaming at the mouth.

A mad dog, for sure! Looked like the dog was after Dewey as it skidded toward the tree; but then it took a turn toward the river, and the next we heard was the big splash as he went over the ten foot bank. We could hear him swimming around, making gurgling sounds, and finally Dad was able to spot him with the flashlight. After we stopped shaking so bad, we looked around for Dewey. There he was sitting flat on the ground with his arms and legs locked around the tree. I yelled, "Come on, Dewey! He can't get ya now-- he's already in the river and Dad's got the light on him."

Then Uncle Willie said, "Hold it on him, Jim. I'll run to the truck to get my shotgun!" At this point I had to hold the light when Uncle Willie called Dad to help him get the buckshot shells out from under the seat in the truck. My heart was pounding so fast even though I could see the dog was swimming toward the opposite bank. At last Uncle Willie got the gun loaded-- "Jim, we've got to get rid of him before he bites somebody." Dad held the light steady while Uncle Willie fired two shots. He was pretty sure he'd gotten the dog out of his misery 'cause we thought we could see it crawl out into the tall brush on the other side.

It was too risky to go over there that night, so we grabbed our string of fish and headed for the truck. It was then the question came up about Dewey's leg which had been scratched. He wasn't even sure the dog hadn't done it when it was running by the tree. That had to be something we'd decide the next day. We knew we better get going, in case we had just wounded the dog. Uncle Willie told us on the way home he thought he knew the man who owned the dog and he'd go by to tell him what happened.

So the next morning when we got back to the river, a big crowd had already gathered, including the owner of the dog and his six-year-old son. Exciting events, like those of the night before, really travel fast. Someone had spotted the dead dog,

and as we gathered around, the little boy started crying and sobbing, "You didn't have to kill him-- he was just having a fit. I could have put my hands over his eyes, and that would have calmed him down." It was hard to see him so heart-broken, but when the final report came back, it showed the German shepherd did have rabies. We still worried about Dewey and his scratched leg, but after examining the tree, we could see the knots where Dewey could have gotten scratched as he was climbing the tree.

Not all fishing trips in the years to come were as exciting, and thank goodness I never was as scared!



BAYOU AND ME
by
Jeanne Domingue

One fall day in 1922, Rita Jeanne was born near Bayou Teche in St. Martinville Parish. My parents, Hubert and Rita Melancon Hebert, lived next to Mere and Papoe, Mom's parents. Lafayette became my home after only six weeks in the small two-bedroom wood house away from the bayou.

The big flood of 1927 forced Mere and Papoe to come stay with us in our small house. I slept on the floor near the fireplace until they returned home.

In 1928 Mom was expecting her sixth child, and Daddy became part owner of the Lafayette Steam Laundry. On January 11 of that year, I went with him to check on things at the Laundry. He helped me into a big washer to get coins, pins, or whatever remained in the drum. I still have the small gold cross I found that was never claimed. Grandmere, Dad's mother, lived across the street. As Dad and I crossed over, an aeroplane flew overhead and Dad told me the stork had brought twin sisters. "Oh, two babies at one time. I want to go home now! Please, Daddy?" "Not now, Jeanne. Be good, listen to Grandmere, and I'll be back soon." Next day I went to visit my twin sisters, Sophie and Sarah. I couldn't wait to hold each one.

I started school at Mt. Carmel Academy that fall. I remember being very shy because I spoke very little English. Frequent visits to my grandparents on the bayou in my primary years, forced me to communicate in French rather than in English, but with special effort I overcame the shyness of the bayou, my birthplace.



MOVING ON
by
Tillie Nixon

When I graduated from high school on May 14, 1943 (my eighteenth birthday), I decided to take a business course at Jackson Commercial College in Jackson, MS. This was not really what I wanted to do; but at the time my stepfather, Kimble Rushing, was ill, and I had two younger sisters, Nell and Grace, and one brother, Sammy, at home. So I decided not to go to Millsaps College in Jackson to study chemistry as I had planned, so that the money could be saved for my younger siblings.

In October of that year, Mrs. Schilling, owner and manager of Jackson Commercial, received a call from a Mr. Carroll Lambert, landman for Continental Oil Company, who wanted to interview someone for a secretary. Mrs. Schilling arranged for me to meet Mr. Lambert in the lobby of the Robert E. Lee Hotel. This arrangement was quite an adventure for me as I was only eighteen and just a small town girl. At the time, I was living with my mother's sister, Aunt Lottie; so her husband, Uncle Paul, drove me down to the hotel and sat across the lobby from us. All went well, and I was hired to start work November 1st at a salary of \$125.00 monthly, an undreamed of salary. Most office jobs paid \$60.00 to \$70.00 monthly.

Things went well with the job, although I never really did enjoy typing. Still, I felt that there was more for me to accomplish. Millsaps College's night law school was moved downtown for the fall session of 1946, so I decided that I would attend classes four nights a week.

The staff of the school consisted of Supreme Court Judges, practicing attorneys and the United States District Attorney. Courses studied were Contracts, Mississippi Code Pleading, Bankruptcy, Oil and Gas Law, Personal Property, Partnership, Criminal Law Procedure, Bills and Notes, U.S. Constitutional Law, Code Pleading, Chancery Practice, Federal Procedure, Mississippi Code, Real Property, Evidence, How to Find the Law, Sales, Corporations, Torts, and Commercial Law. Judge Julian Alexander, Mr. John Satterfield and U.S. District Attorney, John Hauberg, were my favorite teachers.

Sometimes when night court was held, a group of us would go to court sitting among the defendant's family. After class most every night, we would go to Primeaux's Restaurant for the most delicious, mouthwatering brownies in Mississippi.

On weekends, we spent much time in the Mississippi Capitol Library doing research and writing cases. This may seem like a rather hectic schedule-- working five days from eight to five, going to school four nights a week and spending parts of the weekend in the library; but I was young and ambitious, and it was gratifying.

Just before I finished my final semester in June 1948, I decided to file to take the State Bar Exam in February. I was

accepted so I had to cram for the Spring semester subjects.

The week before the Bar Exam, some judges and lawyers held the Mississippi Law Institute, which was a review of law subjects on which we would be tested. Students from other law schools who planned to take the exam came to Jackson to attend the Institute. Out-of-state students had not studied any Mississippi law, so some of them wanted to study with our group.

On Sunday afternoon before the exams began on Monday morning, our group checked into the Heidelberg Hotel, so we could study between exams and at night, not being bothered by the outside world. My friend, Virginia Ferguson, and I were the only females out of fifty-one applicants.

Monday went well, but I was so nervous I was chewing gum ninety miles an hour. Judge Wingo knew one of the men in our group, and he told Lee to tell me not to be so nervous. To this day, I have never chewed another piece of gum.

Tuesday also went well, but of course, without the gum. But Wednesday morning I awoke vomiting about five. I told Virginia, "I will have to come back in July and start all over again." But she insisted on calling the house physician. After giving me an injection and some little cotton ammonia balls to sniff, he wrote me an excuse for being late that morning.

I wandered into the exam room an hour late with tears streaming down my face and feeling very shaky. The examiner said, "Don't worry, little lady, I'll stay here with you until you finish." So my fingers flew over the typewriter, and I seemed to be in another world. Finishing that afternoon at six, I was very surprised that I had made it through the day.

The next six weeks were a most anxious time as we awaited the results. Finally, the day arrived. I was among the lucky twenty-six who made the grade. Thus another phase of my life had ended.



DIAMOND DAYS AND MAGIC PLACES
by
Bootsie Brown

There are places in the heart of each of us that will not only live forever but become more enchanted as time goes by. My childhood world was made up of many such magical places that live deep within my psyche. And even though the perimeter of that world was quite small, the spaces were filled with adventure.

My parents' house was one block from my mother's mother, Grandma Ney, and next door to my father's parents, Grandma and Grandpa Manena. Between our house and Grandma 'Nena's house was

an empty lot we called "the field" that belonged to Daddy's brother, Sonny. The front half of the field was allowed to grow as it willed. Sometimes there were tall weeds and other times it was covered with beautiful green clover. I can still remember how soft and cool it felt to sit in the midst of the clover beds and look for the stems with four leaves to bring good luck or pick the flowers and tie them together to fashion necklaces.

But the back half-- ah, yes, the back half-- that is where the magic was! That was where the fairies lived. Oh, I couldn't actually see them, but I knew they were there; I could feel them all around me hovering about the fruit trees that were planted there by Grandma's father years before I was born. There were pear, peach, plum, and citrus trees as well as several varieties of figs and a couple of grapevines and one or two Japanese plums. When all these trees bloomed in the springtime, the birds would sing so loudly I would join them in their hymn of praise. I would visit each tree, inhaling deeply the fragrance their flowers offered and tell them how beautiful they were. I thought the pink peach tree blossoms were the prettiest; but the sweet pungent odor of the creamy white orange tree flowers smelled the best of all. To be perfectly honest, though, I considered the white pear blossoms rather stinky; they reminded me of cat urine. I felt bad even then for thinking this, loved them anyway and thought them pretty. How ironic that today one whiff of their fragrance can transport me to that former ecstasy quicker than any other's.

Near the fruit trees was a deep concrete water well, no longer in use by the time I arrived upon the scene because we now had city water. Grandma 'Nena was afraid I would fall down it and drown so she told me the devil lived in that well. I don't think I ever believed that story, but I did understand the danger of falling into it. The concrete lid that guarded the top was too heavy for me to lift, but I used to stand on it and jump to catch a low hanging pear tree branch nearby. Of course, when I got bigger and stronger, I not only lifted that lid, but shouted down into the well and threw things into it to hear them splash into the water at the bottom. The devil didn't jump out or make a sound, so I knew for sure then that Grandma had been telling me a story.

Part of Grandma 'Nena's backyard was fenced off at one time to contain a few chickens. I developed a close friendship with one of the hens who followed me around the yard. The friendship ended abruptly one day, however when it pecked the pretty blue stone out of a ring I was wearing.

The enclosure also held a horse named Nellie that pulled Grandpa 'Nena's ice cream wagon around Lake Charles. I can't remember much about Nellie except that she was big and dark. Sometimes I would try to feed her grass picked from my side of the fence, but when she would start to take it from my hand, I'd drop it and run. I was fascinated with her, but afraid also.

In our backyard was an outhouse. I used to climb upon its roof from a chinaberry tree that grew next to it. This roof top

perch was made private and cozy by a nearby willow tree whose branches hung over it. From up there I could look down upon our backyard neighbors' chicken yard and spy on the ducks, guineas, and chickens below as well as on the alley cats that lived in the bamboo that bordered it. I spent many peaceful hours up on the roof of that outhouse reading the Sunday comics, watching the animals go about their business or simply daydreaming. It's where I would go when I felt aloof and wanted to be alone.

Between our house and the field grew a few tall tallow trees. I liked to climb as high in them as I possibly could, especially when the sky grew dark with storm clouds and the wind began to blow. Sometimes I would pretend I was "wolf girl" or "Sheba, Queen of the Jungle." Other times I would just whistle or hoot like an owl until my Grandma 'Nena came out onto her back porch. She would look around and say, "That sure is a funny sounding bird." But if she saw me so high up in the tree top, she would say, "Evee! Evée! You're going to fall and break your neck!" I would simply laugh at her faltering "Hail, Mary" as the wind blew the tree and me to and fro.

Just down the street that ran perpendicular to the front of our house lived Grandma Ney, my young aunts and uncles and my dear Great Aunt Mamie. Walking the few hundred feet down the gravel road to her house, I entered a whole other world of adventure. But my story grows too long, so that tale will have to wait for another day to be told.



MY MAGIC STICK
by
Joyce Michel

Like Julie Andrews in "The Sound of Music," I, too, could tell you about favorite things such as raindrops-- oh, could I! How the drops drummed on our tin roof and lulled me into a dreamy sleep! How the rain fell and bounced off the smooth dirt under our gutterless eaves!.. Bounced so high that I once asked Mom, "What are those little round things?"

But it rains on us all. And I know that you have your very own raindrop memories.

I could tell you about the dewdrops that shimmered like diamonds on Mom's roses as each wet little tear cried its timid descent before the rays of the morning sun. Her roses grew inside the garden fence, safe from the indiscriminate taste of the sheep that "mowed" our lawn. Behind the weathered, lichen covered, spit-railed fence, one-shady and secluded part of the garden seemed especially quiet. I thought of it as my own secret

garden, a place where I could hear the dewdrops fall from leaf to leaf.

But you have seen dewdrops. They continue to wink at us all, if we but look.

Instead of raindrops and roses and dewdrops and gardens, I will tell you about my magic stick. The stick was not really magic, of course. It was just an old roller that once held a window shade. But when I was a little girl of six or so, I thought of it as magic. The joyful jingle of its broken spring kept perfect rhythm with each step I made as I wandered around our forty acre farm.

On good days, I thumped my way out the back yard, strode across old rice levees and headed toward the cows that Dad milked. The cows heard the jingle of my magic stick and left their grazing, aware that it was indeed time for the cows to come home. Our cows were gentle, but I had a great respect for their size and for their horns. I watched eagerly for that first head to lift in response to the jingle of my magic stick. Then my magic stick and I did an about face and beat a quick retreat home, while the cows followed at their own slow pace.

Often, my magic stick and I strolled down our country lane to check the mail. Because our house was located almost in the center of forty acres, it was too far to see the flag on our large rural mailbox and know whether or not the mail carrier had passed. But there were so many exciting things to do along the way that we, my magic stick and I, welcomed return trips. As I poked the weeds, my magic stick encouraged little green frogs to jump a bit farther, and one more time.

Sometimes my magic stick dozed in the warm grass as I stooped to pick blackberries or gather bouquets of white wildflowers and purple asters.

I did not pick the morning glories that twined around the fenceposts; but I did stop to look for the biggest, bluest flower on the vine. Then, mentally, I snipped out the neck and arm holes to make a morning glory gown for the tiny, fairy-like creature in the story Mom had read to me.

I loved to hear stories. But the story of the earth opening up as Persephone picked flowers in a meadow frightened me. I did not like to dwell on this Greek myth when my magic stick and I ventured to the wide but shallow spot in the gully that cut across our back field. Here under the shade of an old willow tree we watched a dainty trickle of clear water dance over a scattering of pebbles. My magic stick waited patiently while I dipped my fingers to touch the smooth, beige earth that looked like taffeta moire.

The trickling water beneath the willow tree remained a favorite spot to visit even as I approached my teenage years. By then, I hummed "Flow Gently, Sweet Afton," pondered its words and forgot all about the magic stick. Unnoticed, the magic stick slipped quietly away. But it had worked its magic.



GRANDMA'S EARLY YEARS

by

Yvette Bleichner

My grandma, Lelia Dugas, was born in 1902 in Grand Anse, a tiny community just outside of Cecilia, Louisiana. Grand Anse, French for "big hook," was named after the shape of the main dirt road which wound the small town. It was here in this French speaking rural area that Grandma was raised, the oldest of nine children of Alfred Dugas and Rose Talley, both of direct Acadian descent. I never met Alfred, my great-grandfather, but knew from Grandma that he was a kind, gentle man with a slight build. He drove a wagon for Lecky Olivier's Merchandise Store in Cecilia, delivering goods to the rural folks all around the town. Grandma "Pope or "Peaupon" as she was called, my great-grandmother, was short and robust with a slight American Indian look enhanced by her wearing of a long braid across the top of her head. She was much more verbal and rough, ruling her brood with a not so gentle hand. She earned money for the family as a seamstress, an excellent one, my grandma said. Together the two of them raised their family on very little by being self-sufficient, frugal and hard working. Nothing was ever wasted or taken for granted. Grandma's parents were Catholic, of course, as were the majority of Cajuns, and indeed their strong faith bound them into a strong entity. Little was done without the invocation of Jesus or Mary and the saints. This faith helped to keep the family strong and resilient in good and bad times.

Over the years, Grandma learned strong values from her parents and large extended family. One of the most important and first that she learned was the value of hard work. She despised laziness and definitely practiced what she preached. Her strong work ethic was always visible in her everyday life. I believe with her strength that she could outwork most men. In addition, she learned the importance of honesty, sharing with others, and resourcefulness. She saved everything that crossed her path and later could find a use for it. She also valued cleanliness and was very family-oriented, always putting her husband and child first. Her faith and religion saw her through many hard times. These qualities in her were learned from her parents' examples and were evident throughout her Cajun culture.

Her family lived on a small farm where the way of life was simple but hard. Good food was a very important part of their life, and most was grown at home. The large garden produced fresh vegetables year round; there were also pecan and fruit trees of figs and pears. Chickens provided meat and eggs, and cows gave beef and milk. They made their own cheese, butter and buttermilk, too. A large pig was slaughtered regularly at a boucherie, and neighbors would come to help make the fresh andouille and gratons, as well as share the roasted pork. Boucheries always meant a lot of fun and activity, where gossip and camaraderie was shared and enjoyed with friends. They'd

"pass a good time," as Grandma would say. The extra ham and bacon was saved in the smoke house or hung at the bottom of the well where it stayed cool. Living so close to Atchafalaya Basin meant there was always wild game and fish to enjoy, too. Grandma often talked of the abundance of good fresh food in her youth, because in front of her house was a big ditch where she could catch a bucket of crawfish, or ecrevisse, anytime she wanted. The family ate their large meal at noon and every night there was cornbread, fresh yams, cheese and cane syrup for anyone who was hungry. Many visitors and even travellers passing through could always find something to eat at the Dugas homestead.

Because Grandma's mother was a seamstress, the family was always very well dressed by her own hand. Grandma spoke with pride of her beautiful dresses and though the family was poor, she was always one of the best dressed girls around. Grandma "Pope" also made mattresses from ticking stuffed with chicken feathers, as well as pillows, curtains and bedspreads. Every once in a while, neighbor ladies would gather at each others' homes for a quilting bee where a whole quilt would be assembled and finished in one day. These were fun times for Grandma, too, to be able to play with the neighborhood children and cousins who came with their mothers.

Soap was made at home, too, by combining lard and the lye made from the ashes of hardwood trees. This job was time consuming, exhausting and hot because the soap was made outside in a large black cast-iron pot over a woodburning fire. This same black pot was also used to wash and boil clothes outside when extra cleanliness was required. For smaller jobs, Grandma used a washboard in a tin tub. Water was plentiful from the above ground cistern and underground water well.

Transportation was for the most part by foot. Although her family owned a horse and buggy, this was used for special occasions and emergencies only. Grandma walked the few miles to school in Cecilia and to church with her brothers and sisters.

There was no electricity in Grandma's childhood; light was from the coal oil lamps at night and the fireplaces in winter. When it was very cold, the children would bring their mattresses close to the fireplace at night for warmth, and before going to sleep put a whole log in. When they awoke in the morning, the ashes were still hot enough to start the family meals. Yams were laid in the hot coals and quickly cooked. Cornbread batter was poured in black cast iron skillet, covered and cooked in the hot embers as well.

Grandma often spoke of their big wood stove which provided heat as well as cooked wonderful meals. One of her favorites was homemade biscuits made fresh almost every morning. These had an especially wonderful smoked flavor she loved, made delicious with homemade butter and fig preserves.

Medical care was very scarce at that time and families relied on many homemade remedies. Grandma said they used to put spider webs on bleeding cuts to make a scab quickly. The doctor was notified for emergencies, but often didn't arrive in time.

Two of Grandma's younger brothers died for lack of a doctor's attention. Life was often painful, but family and friends would always be there to help and comfort each other.

Grandma's own personal life experiences revolved around the busy work on the farm. In addition, being the oldest, she was given the added responsibility of caring for her younger siblings. Her chores were many and hard. By the time she was ten years old, she was cooking the family meals and tending the children. Her mother was busy sewing so Grandma was taught early to do the housework. Almost every day she would kill and cook fresh chickens or hens for fricasse or gumbo. She did the laundering, too, for her mother who was very particular about cleanliness. Grandma told me that on inspecting the freshly washed laundry hanging on the line if Grandma Pope found it slightly soiled, she would pull it all down and let it drop in the dust. Then Grandma had to start all over. After hearing that I really understood why when Grandma had a job to do, she'd always do it perfectly the first time. Another difficult chore was to scrub the wood floors every week. This back-breaking work was accomplished on her hands and knees by using a brick and ashes and water. She also helped her mom with the sewing. The family had two machines. Grandma Pope would cut the fabric from homemade patterns and assemble the garment on one machine, and my grandma would do the finish work on the second one. They often sewed late into the night by the light of the coal oil lamps. Grandma Pope was well known in the area for her ability to make clothes fit "to a tee" without a pattern, for her beautiful dresses and even men's suits. Grandma learned from her many skills, even to finishing the inside of the garment as well as the outside.

Third grade was as far as Grandma got in school. It was not that she wasn't smart, because she always got good marks. She chose to stay at home and do the housework so her brothers and sisters could finish their schooling. French was forbidden in the English schools, and if a child was caught speaking it, he was punished by having to kneel on rice in a corner of the classroom. Unfortunately from that experience, my grandma learned to be ashamed of her Cajun French. She and her friends were made to feel inferior to the "Americans," or English-speaking people, moving in. There were good times at school, too, though. Grandma loved to play baseball at recess, and she loved to sing. She had a beautiful voice and was often chosen for the lead in class performances. Her blue eyes would twinkle so prettily when she'd sing for me some verses of those long ago tunes.

In addition to work and school, Grandma babysat for Mrs. Olivier's children in Cecilia. Mr. and Mrs. Olivier owned the merchandise store there, and they would pay Grandma with bolts of material and colorful hair ribbons. She and her mom fashioned beautiful dresses with these gifts.

Discipline in the homes was different than it is today, she would tell me. Parents would take the time to explain things to

their children to help show them why they should or shouldn't behave in certain ways. Grandpa Dugas would always talk to Grandma carefully and with concern until he was sure she understood him. By creating an atmosphere of love in their home, Grandma and Grandpa Dugas made the children feel important and respected, so harsh treatment was often unnecessary. Of course, Grandma was the oldest and probably the most obedient.

Most of the fun back then was when family and friends visited each other, which was often. Without the distractions of television and automobiles, there was much more time for getting together and relaxing after the daily chores were done. News, laughter and friendship were exchanged on front porches and around kitchen tables where coffee was always served. These gatherings were often planned as well as for practical reasons such as raising a barn or for fun, as in hosting a housedance, or bal de maison. In times of sickness and death, a friend or relative often moved in to help out and would lend a hand until the sick one was well again. So there was always sharing both in good times and bad times.

Music was homemade. There was always a fiddler or accordion player who would be greeted with enthusiasm when he spontaneously began to play for gatherings, large or small. There was always dancing, young and old together, both the two step and the waltz. This is how they looked forward to "passing a good time."

Such was the way of life of the Cajuns in my grandma's early youth, as she told me-- lots of hard work, sharing with each other and closeknit families all tied together with a strong faith and joie de vivre. I once asked Grandma if she'd go back to those old days with all the hard work, and she said, "yes, in a minute." She said nowadays we have everything we want and need, but no one visits anymore so it is lonely. She much preferred, even with the hard work, her early years surrounded with friends and family, simple pleasures and pastimes.



