



EYES IN THE ALLEY

Memories of San Antonio
and the Great Depression

Vallie Fletcher Taylor

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EYES

IN THE

ALLEY

Memories of San Antonio



The Great Depression



Vallie Fletcher Taylor

EYES IN THE ALLEY

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DEDICATION

This book is in memory of
my mother

SALLIE ALEEN HAYNES FLETCHER

who believed *lie* and *liar*

were the dirtiest of words and must never be spoken aloud.

Thanks for giving me the courage to write “the truth and nothing but...”

and

of my father

WILLIAM ANDREW FLETCHER II

Generous and loving, with a dry sense of humor,
he taught the meaning of kindness and integrity
with his every word and action.

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Special thanks to my friend

JAN WILLIFORD

a former English teacher who bravely read this manuscript
and wrote “What?” in the margin when I got carried away.

To my Revere/Reviere/Riviere cousin in Florida

DONNA OWEN

a skilled genealogist who throws her internet lasso
and catches generations of missing ancestors.

To good friend

MERLENE PARKER WILSON

who took me on a guided tour of my old San Antonio neighborhood
and helped me fill in some empty heart-spaces.

To childhood friends

MARY GWENDOLYN ECHTERHOFF DUGAT

and

BETTY BRENT SCHAEFFLER DUGAL

who listened to my memories and added a few more.

To Beaumont historians and true friends

ELLEN WALKER RIENSTRA, JUDITH WALKER LINSLEY

and

ROBERT ROBERTSON

whose East Texas ancestors kept tripping over mine.

INTRODUCTION

Today, as I walk past any mirror I happen to encounter, I expect to see reflected the image of a young blond girl wearing a giant hair bow held in place by a golden barrette. Instead, an almost perfect replica of my great-aunt Vallie gazes back at me. Most assuredly, it is Aunt Vallie as she was in her elder years and not the glamorous socialite of the late nineteenth century.

I check the back of my hairdo with a hand mirror and realize that every swirl and wave of my swiftly graying hair has emulated the growth patterns of that first Vallie Fletcher's crowning glory.

Yet, I also realize that, somewhere beneath the surface of today's reflection, the little girl whose mother secured taffeta mega hair bows to silky blond hair still lurks. This child loved stories that began with "Once upon a time..."

So...

Once upon a time in south Houston, I found myself surrounded by twelve-year-old history students with inquisitive natures. Their young minds were best served by placing boring textbooks, written by college professors to impress other college professors, on a dusty shelf inside a sizable dark closet. Then, I began telling stories in the manner of ancient tribal wisdom-keepers, who passed along the history and customs of their people. Oral history was the brush I used as I painted portraits of courageous, and often impetuous, characters who once populated our state.

Focusing on the actions of individuals instead of mass political movements or terms of treaties, we proceeded to revisit dreams, fears and eccentricities of early Texans. As novice sleuths, my students acquired investigative skill as they attempted to track and relate to these wilderness pioneers.

Certainly, they came to realize that some who designed the heritage of our state were flawed and misguided, while others operated as true visionaries. Each displayed a combination of human characteristics and frailties which caused him or her to be truly unique.

As we viewed what was going on in the world through the eyes of powerful personalities who had escaped the confines of textbook covers, we discovered new lands, left behind loved ones and comfortable homes and initiated treacherous and physically draining journeys into the unknown. When stories bogged down because of sketchiness, and threatened to sink into a murky void, we turned to research and discovered facts that would float them back to the surface.

Those same pupils taught me an important and long-remembered lesson as we were involved in re-creating their favorite segment of Texas history. That lesson is: "People view what they read through the lens, and in the context, of their everyday life."

The first log cabins built and occupied by early Texas settlers held precious little in the way of furniture and personal belongings. These cabins, along with their meager contents, inspired a great deal of fascination and comment among my students. I was of the opinion that I had done a worthy job of transmitting details and concepts concerning the lives of these courageous individuals.

At the end of days of discussion pertaining to the lives of 1830s settlers, I tested student comprehension by passing out copies of a simple cabin floor plan and asking these seventh graders to draw the cabin's contents. As I checked the drawings of several students, I viewed some extremely puzzling pieces of furniture.

"What is this mysterious piece in the corner with three circles in front of it?"

"Oh, that's their TV with the stools the children sat on while they were watching."

Another student was asked, "What is this large object outside the cabin?"

"That's their car. I wasn't sure if they had a garage."

So, I was confronted with the sudden realization that, regardless of the time devoted to discussions of journeys by horseback, wagons or on foot, despite the fact that we had listed and re-listed the few pieces of furniture and personal belongings they built or brought with them, regardless of heaping a large measure of attention upon items we now take for granted but they did not have, my generous students greeted the settlers' arrival with gifts of modern technology.

As we advanced through numerous decades within the school year, we eventually came upon one that occurred a century later. Television historians of today refer to it as "the dark decade." In the past few days, with precious little time to devote to tube-watching, I have heard this same decade referred to as *brutish, gloomy, dismal, disastrous* and *doomed*.

Teachers searching for visual aids to illustrate classroom tales from this time period come upon the same few pictures reproduced in a variety of sources. Observing a current television documentary, I watch the identical miserable family standing in a cloud of dust that I first saw pictured in a copy of the *San Antonio Express* during the 1930s. A melancholy portrait showing a long line of men awaiting a steaming bowl of charity soup has also been used endlessly to illuminate the era of the Great Depression.

Yet families trying to survive farm life in arid Midwestern dust bowls or somber job seekers hoping for a hot meal in the Northeast neither illustrate nor represent the totality of contrasts embodied in the culture of the 1930s. When history is recorded for the benefit of future generations, it is most valuable when told through the eyes of one who lived it. This individual must stick to recounting firsthand experiences so the world around him or her will eventually fall into place for the reader.

I am either blessed or cursed with a wonderful memory. During the years I cared for my mother, until her death at age 93, I realized the importance of writing a memoir when one's memory is still intact and anxious to be tested.

I honor the writers who have gathered historical data and statistics for the rest of us to access. My strength does not lie in the field of numbers but my mind delights in the ability to revisit a past era at will and re-experience the sights, sounds, tastes, feelings and emotions of a young child.

Some terms used in the 1930s and '40s, especially those with rela-

tion to racial issues, sound crude and insensitive today. Yet those same words were not meant to be derogatory at the time they were spoken. In attempting to become more informed and sensitive, our culture has changed its vocabulary in a number of situations. In being true to the events and the era when these experiences occurred, and at the same time writing for today's readers, I tend to use terms from several different generations in my descriptions.

Lynda Powell, who works as a "land man" in the gas and oil industry, has become aware of numerous Depression-era sagas as she labors in courthouse basements tracing the ownership of mineral rights.

"I'm very sensitive to that era," she explains, "because my grandfather was a poor tenant farmer and my father a Depression baby. I remember my grandmother telling me that she once had nothing but a sugar cookie to give my dad to eat.

"My father, L.B. Billingsley, began delivering milk twice a day at age ten. He earned a dime for each shift and that helped feed his family.

"Now, as I search through old records, I learn so many facts that bring tears to my eyes. Land deeds tell of families who lost everything they had—their homes, their food, vegetable crops they grew and animals they raised, their income—all because they didn't have the money to pay taxes.

"I read where the lack of cash caused one woman to sell her prized milk cow in order to raise money to bury her husband. The owners of mercantile stores, where these poor farmers 'traded on account,' sometimes ended up owning their land as debt payment.

"On the other hand, records show where individuals with cash sometimes were able to accumulate great wealth and large land holdings during the Depression era. They were in a position to purchase prime farms and ranches that had been confiscated by a sheriff, simply by paying back taxes. Selling off timber, raising cattle or profiting from the minerals that were transferred with these lands created a new wealthy class."

Lynda's insights into the Great Depression come from tedious research, turning the pages of dusty ledgers to which few people seek access. They bring to mind situations, both enviable and pitiful, of families I knew as a child.

This book was written in a manner opposite to the manner in which non-fiction works are normally executed. Rather than doing copious research and then sitting down at a computer with note-filled legal pads, I

enjoyed working hind-part-before. I let my memory flow nonstop on each particular subject or category; and when I came to a stopping point, only then did I look up family notebooks, old newspaper articles or do research on the computer to check my facts. It was a painless procedure, and I was able to easily transport myself into early childhood surroundings.

Sometimes even Google does not have a memory that stretches back as far as mine. When I typed in “Comic strip character Tillie the Toiler,” it shot back the question, “Do you mean Tillie the Toilet?”

My true ace in the hole, as far as memory goes, is having been born in the first half of the 20th century, living surrounded by elders who lived in the 19th century and being able to enjoy a happy and healthy 21st-century life. It helped that my elders and ancestors were fond of writing memoirs. Those who didn’t record events were wonderful tellers of tales.

I invite you to explore a time that was very different from the one in which you now live. Visit my neighborhood, which none of the residents considered “gloomy” or “dismal.” Share a delicious meal with my family, who set a fine table despite “dark” and “disastrous” events occurring elsewhere in our nation. Ride a bus into downtown San Antonio where surroundings were tranquil rather than “brutish.” Play games with me and my childhood friends. We were all too naive to realize we were “doomed.”

I have attempted to sketch vignettes that will both elucidate and polish some of the many facets cut into that heavy and symbolic stone called the Great Depression.

CHAPTER ONE

NEIGHBORHOOD REFLECTIONS

My toddler bed, with low railings on both sides, was considered a step up, or rite of passage, from one's baby crib. The railings were designed to insure a small child's safety. I proved this to be a fallacy numerous times by using a rare talent that enabled me to roll up and over railings, plop on the floor and never wake up.

What did wake me, however, was the lion that invaded the bedroom, where he crouched in the corner poised to attack. I quickly pulled the covers over my head so I couldn't see him but still heard the terrifying sound of his snarls and growls.

Hoping he wouldn't notice, I furtively reached for my mother's hand somewhere in the nearby double bed. When I located it, I felt assured that as long as I held onto it the lion would be held at bay.

In later years, I realized our lion was actually a hulking shadow thrown from a dresser with attached mirror. Those ferocious growls that awakened me to shudder at the sight of our nightly predator were generated by my father, a world-class snorer.

Once the lion had awakened me, I became aware of the incessant tick-tock of our ancient bedroom clock. This small home did not contain any of the massive grandfather clocks owned by our ancestors. However, sitting on mantels and dressing tables were numerous gently curved wooden clocks, each with its own distinctive voice.

These timepieces also interrupted the night's ebony silence in a manner totally out of synch with the lion's growls. Our bedroom minute-

counter chimed at the same time bongs reverberated from my grandmother's bedroom. Chimes and bongs with slightly different inflections answered from the more distant front bedroom and living room.

My mother absolutely loved, and felt soothed by, all of these talking timepieces. Even as a toddler, I found their ticks most irritating. Their rhythm and mine dueled like conflicting metronomes. We each had been assigned a different time signature by our Maker.

This disharmony left me with the problem of daring to let go of that reassuring maternal hand in order to place both hands over my ears. Silence was something I needed more than pillows or blankets.

Mother's hearing was perfectly normal, so I assume her cocoon of contentment so insulated her from the noises emanating from the one who lay next to her that she was not in the least disturbed. Unfortunately, this talent was not genetically transferred. I was never able to tranquilly share space with a clock that ticked or a person who snored.

The homes that lined both sides of Kayton Avenue in San Antonio, Texas, in 1932, the year of my birth, had been built a decade earlier. These 20s-style bungalows were located close to the street side of narrow, slightly sloping and deep lots. Detached one-car garages were placed at the far back of the lot adjacent to a wide alley. The single-story frame dwellings were surrounded by trees and shrubs that had been cleverly placed by landscape artists to fool the eye of observers and visually enhance the size of the structures.

Two notable exceptions to the houses on our block were built on corner lots just east of our home. A large white two-story dwarfed all of the nearby homes. The neighbors directly across the street from this house planted tall-growing shrubbery so thickly that it created a high and dense barrier around the perimeter of their lot. This family became "the mystery people" to neighborhood children. Since their garage opened onto a side street, no one ever saw them enter or leave their property. For that reason alone, the family contributed greatly to currents of curiosity and flights of fantasy among others who lived in the 700 block of Kayton Avenue.

Number 736, our home, and a few others were blessed with large Southern-style front and side porches. Square brick pillars topped with white-painted extensions provided both eye appeal and roof support.

On the 1930 census form, my father estimated our house to be worth \$5,750. Other Kayton Avenue dwellers listed values ranging from \$3,500 to \$10,000. The average rent, recorded by people who did not own the homes in which they lived, was \$35 to \$45 per month. Census

pages reported that adults living in this area could read and write and most spoke English in their home. German, reflecting the heritage of a large number of southwest Texans, was still spoken within many of these residences.

Three generations shared the limited space within a large percent of these gracious cottages. As parents grew older, it was taken for granted that they would live with a son or daughter rather than be ushered to the nearest retirement center or nursing home. The era of elders who were considered both inconvenient and disposable had not yet arrived.

Since radio was the primary source for news and entertainment within a home, one column on the 1930 census form asked if the home had a "radio set." A little over half of the homes were still without that luxury.

Most heads of households were in their thirties or forties. The column that asks for age at the time of marriage showed that many of these couples had married while still in their teens.

Servant's quarters were attached to garages, and since indoor bathrooms were considered optional at the time of the homes' design, baths intended for family servants were placed in a separate structure next to, but outside of, the quarters.

These small, square rooms contained an older-style toilet than the one found in the main house. A water tank was suspended from the wall high above the seat. One flushed these antiques by pulling a brass chain with a wooden handle.

I recall that the Franz sisters, who lived next door, owned the only place on our block where the quarters actually housed a household employee. "Uncle Bill," an English immigrant who worked as gardener and handyman, occupied their room-out-back. In addition to working there, he also helped our family by doing yard work.

We used our quarters to store a number of antique humpback trunks and their unique historical contents. That left a good deal of room for Josephine, our "washwoman," to keep the large galvanized steel tubs as well as her ironing paraphernalia.

Kayton Avenue homes were designed to have two or three bedrooms, a living room, dining room and kitchen. In a search through my mother's cedar chest, I once found a copy of the original brochure for this neighborhood development. It proclaimed proudly, "A bathroom inside of every house!"

These homes did, indeed, have indoor baths. However, they seemed to be intended more for display than privacy. As a feature attraction of the twenties, the one bathroom was placed in the very center of the house.

Most bathrooms of that time had at least two doors, and I have seen some that had three. The idea behind this placement seemed to be that the facilities could be easily reached from the maximum number of rooms. Our bath, as those in many other houses, was situated where a hallway would have been far more efficient to accommodate the flow of traffic. In fact, it was used as a pass-through quite frequently.

The only logical access to my parent's bedroom was by using the hall door into the bathroom, walking through and then entering the connecting door into the master bedroom. When the bathroom was occupied, this path was blocked.

There were two other circuitous routes that allowed detours. One option was to enter the other back bedroom and then go through another door connecting to my parents' room. This bedroom was occupied by my grandmother during most of my childhood, and she did not like having her privacy disturbed.

The other detour meant exiting the house through the living room door onto the covered front porch, turning the corner where it continued on to become a side porch, then once more entering the house through a door into the master bedroom. This was hardly a convenient path, yet it was often the route used.

I assume the original builders of these homes must have regarded indoor baths, with their pedestal lavatories and deep claw-foot tubs, as precious jewels. They sought to protect them by surrounding them with all of the other rooms.

The front and side porches of these homes were used almost as much as the rooms. San Antonio was known as "the city where the sunshine spends the winter." Not only did we have mild winters, but the sun was a major factor in our summer activities as well. So, porches offered an opportunity to sit in a prevailing breeze and enjoy a certain amount of relief from the heat.

Porches also provided a natural location for neighborhood social life. Our comfortably furnished porch was a frequent gathering spot. During daytime hours, housewives usually arrived carrying something to keep their hands busy. Sitting in the porch swing or one of the rockers,

women shelled black-eyed peas, mended garments, darned cotton socks and silk stockings or crocheted an afghan as they chatted. My mother served coffee, iced tea or freshly squeezed lemonade during these gatherings. Aunt Julia Franz often carried a plate filled with my favorite “Ju-Ju’s Cookies” when she attended what she called by the Cajun term a *tour nay*. She was well-known on our block for her cooking ability and especially for seafood gumbo and those marvelous sugar cookies.

Today, the only recognizable vestige of my childhood home is the 736 painted on the front curb. The front lawn, where my friends and I played ball games and chased one another, is now a small forest filled with trees and shrubs. Most of the families on this block have enclosed the elegant old verandas to create more interior floor space. Altering original designs resulted in losing the integrity of shape and created homes that most resemble boxes.

I understand the need for more room for a family, but I shall never forget the fun of playing with my friends while listening to stories told by our elders on those shady and elegant porches of the past.



Census forms filled out during my childhood never mentioned two unseen presences who shared our home. I was never burdened by rigid beliefs of any organized religion, so was privileged to create God’s countenance from my own imagination. The God who shared my home was clean-shaven and looked a great deal like my father. He also shared Daddy’s penchant for wearing the type clothes my father wore on his days off or when driving to Jackson County to tend to his herd of Hereford cattle. Western-cut khaki pants, a khaki shirt with the sleeves rolled up and cowboy boots suited both God and my father. Evidently, God had as much disdain for the long robes I had seen him wearing in Sunday school book illustrations as my father had for business suits, ties and starched white dress shirts.

God smiled all of the time and often winked at me when we shared a joke.

Emily Post, on the other hand, frowned constantly. Whereas God was perceived as laid-back and enjoying himself, Emily remained ever-stern and deadly serious.

I knew that she and God were both writers of big, important best-sellers. My elders indicated that God’s book was called *The Bible*, and it dealt with treating others with kindness and consideration and always telling the truth. Emily’s books dealt with all facets of behavior called

“etiquette.”

My mother could quote chapter and verse from Emily’s books, though she sounded rather vague when answering my questions about what God had in mind. I much preferred sharing our residence with God to hanging out with Emily. God was lots of fun, and he wasn’t persnickety as long as I remembered my nightly prayers. Emily was sneaky and often lurked in the hall with her beady-eyed stare fixed on the dining table. She hoped to catch one of us forgetting to keep our non-dominant hand in our lap during a meal.



During those years, prior to air-conditioning and central heat, the temperature was adjusted by simply opening or closing windows and doors. Every family owned oscillating fans, which were moved around often during summer months.

Fan blades were not encased behind the type of safety grills used today. People often sustained damage to hands or fingers by inadvertent carelessness. Someone with a finger missing might report trying to move a fan while it was still in motion. At times, people simply made the mistake of gesturing with their hands while standing too close to a fan.

Heavy iron doorstops were used to prop doors open as breezes blew through the house. Our doorstops were cast in the shape of women wearing hoop skirts and sunbonnets. They looked intriguing, so I tried to play with them; but their weight would not allow me to pick them up. Every door had a keyhole lock and a removable key.

During the late fall, natural gas-burning heaters were taken out of storage and attached to gas jets to prepare for winter. People who lived in the country used wood, butane or kerosene stoves for heat. Friends up north heated with coal.

Most of the homes on our street had fireplaces, used for heat and not just atmosphere. Gas logs or push-a-button instant flames would not appear for many decades, so everyone kept a woodpile and a stash of kindling in their back yards. Match-holders containing large kitchen matches could be found sitting on end tables and matchboxes hung in a painted tin holder on kitchen walls.

Newspapers ran frequent articles telling of people whose clothing caught fire from standing too close to gas stoves. It was a temptation to hover around these small heaters during the process of changing clothes because the heat they generated did not reach very far. Concerned with keeping me safe, my parents purchased sturdy iron screens they placed

around our household heaters and the fireplace. “Don’t stand so close to that stove” was a warning I received repeatedly during winter months.

Other news stories dealt with explosions of butane stoves and heaters. The tragic aftermath of one of these events was brought into our family consciousness when my parents and I drove to the little East Texas town of Woodville in the piney woods.

We made the trip to visit a couple of old family friends. Both my parents and I found it extremely difficult to look directly at the woman who was undergoing treatment for serious burns on her face and most of her body. Our friend had managed to live through an explosion caused by escaping butane gas that ignited as she tried to light their cookstove. I tried hard to keep my dismay from showing as I realized this formerly beautiful woman had been left covered with deforming scars.

“Couldn’t you smell the gas escaping before you lit the match?” Mother blurted out as she sat on a black Victorian sofa. She was told that, unlike natural gas, butane had no odor. She quickly replied, “Well, there ought to be a law that some sort of scent must be added so people can realize when there’s a danger.”

It happened that the state representative from that area was also visiting in the home of our friends. He responded, “That’s a wonderful idea!”

We never knew if it was due to his subsequent efforts in Austin, based upon my mother’s suggestion, but our state soon had such a law. Butane stoves did not quit exploding, but leaking gas began to give olfactory warnings to those who remained attentive.



Because the narrow lots on Kayton Avenue meant houses were just a single driveway apart from one another, we were lucky to live between two quiet households. We often heard the words spoken by M— family members as they sat at their kitchen table drinking coffee and engaging in conversation.

The spinster Franz sisters, on the other side of our home, used to say, “We know it’s time for breakfast when we hear Mother Fletcher scraping [the burned spots off] the toast.” Since conversational noises traveled, one had to be careful in what room, and how close to which window, he or she stood while speaking.

Heavy paper roll-type window shades could offer visual privacy when they were pulled down, but they did not create a sound barrier. Country

curtains made of sheer organdy and trimmed with ruffles crossed over our windows and were held back on the sides by ruffled swags. Anything hanging in front of the windows would have contributed to a lack of cross ventilation so important at that time.

Various small farm animals inhabited some of the yards on our block. Many of our neighbors had previously lived self-sufficient rural lives, so they clung to previous habits. The Wallace family on the far side of the Franz home kept goats. The Yeager family, in the two-story home on the corner, provided neighborhood cock-a-doodle-dos courtesy of their back yard filled with chickens.

Soon after Christmas Day of my seventh year, I tried to ride my new bicycle and fell into a hedge of rose bushes at the side of this corner home. I soon forgot about painful scratches when I heard a terrible racket and saw a woman wringing a chicken's neck. A moment later, I saw the same headless chicken running around in circles on the ground. Totally horrified, I pulled my bike from the rose hedge and pedaled home as fast as I could.

Most homes had a small room between the kitchen and back porch. This great-grandfather of current day utility rooms contained the ancestor of today's crop of refrigerators: an icebox.

An icehouse in almost every neighborhood sold heavy chunks of ice, priced by weight. Many families also used the services of an iceman, who delivered a large, square chunk of ice each day. He carried this block of ice in a heavy canvas bag and lifted it into the top compartment of the icebox with a pair of huge tongs.

Kitchens contained a dangerous tool called an icepick—sacks of crushed ice and refrigerators able to spit out crushed or cubed ice at the push of a lever had not yet been envisioned. So, someone in each household had to repeatedly chop the ice blocks to obtain enough small pieces of ice for several glasses of that perennial Southern favorite, iced tea.

Icemen used gates leading into fenced back yards to deliver their product through back doors. Milkmen normally left fresh bottles of milk, cream and containers of butter on the steps of front porches. They also picked up the empty quart, pint and half-pint glass bottles that were sterilized at the creamery and used over and over again. If the woman of the house wished to change her daily order, she left a note, rolled up and inserted into one of the empty bottles.

The use of glass containers for all liquid dairy products as well as cold drinks meant that bottles were constantly in use and did not jam our

garbage trucks or landfills.

Due to the high rate of unemployment during the Depression years, men who delivered milk, ice or the mail valued their jobs and held them for years. So, they became almost like a member of the extended family. Our family knew the names of our delivery men and many details about their personal lives. Their services were appreciated, counted upon, and the men were always remembered with cards and gifts at Christmas.



Though none of the Kayton Avenue homes would have particularly impressed a passerby from the exterior, our home was known for its interior beauty. Antique beveled-glass French doors between the living and dining rooms created visual elegance as one entered the front door. Another pair opened out from the front bedroom and reflected the glass cutter's artistry. As sunrays connected with prisms of glass, sparkles of myriad colors were projected onto walls, floors and ceilings.

Trained in Europe, my great-aunt Vallie Fletcher was a well-known Texas artist. Her landscapes, still-life scenes and portraits, all beautifully framed, filled the walls of our home. Though she often held shows in New York City and other centers of culture, she gave most of her paintings to family and friends. A massive painted tapestry dominated the east wall of our dining room and hypnotized diners with its peaceful motif.

Mother was blessed with amazing skills as a decorator, though this talent was instinctive rather than learned in any formal setting. Aunt Vallie, educated in the intricacies of artistic flower arranging while living in Paris, never failed to marvel at the arrangements Mother created from flowers grown in our garden. Cut glass vases were placed in each room so we could enjoy both the beauty and aroma of fresh flowers daily.

Our feet connected with hardwood floors, partially covered by area rugs, in each room of the house. Plush woolen rugs allowed bare toes to feel pampered in the living and dining rooms. Crocheted multicolored cotton rag rugs, created by my mother and grandmother, covered floors in the bedrooms. Smaller versions of these rag rugs lay in the bathroom and kitchen.

Our entire house changed its interior look along with the seasons. Furniture reflected autumnal hues during late fall and winter. When spring arrived, custom-made slipcovers in pastel colors miraculously appeared on each piece of furniture as well as every pillow and cushion. Rainbow shades painted the chenille bedspreads that replaced heavy quilts, afghans and woolen blankets needed to keep winter sleepers

cozy.

Wallpaper did not change every season, though it was also replaced with great regularity. Mother impressed us with her ability to blend shades and values of color as well as textures and an assortment of patterns.

Antique furniture, first used by our ancestors, filled this small home. Such lovely and unique pieces could not have been acquired on my father's salary. Both sets of paternal great-grandparents left these valued items behind.

Great-grandfather A.N. Vaughan educated his four children with private tutors and art teachers. When his daughter Florence became engaged to Bill Fletcher's son Harvey, sets of fine Limoges porcelain and Havilland china were ordered from Europe. These sets were solid white so that my grandmother could paint rims of gold and an ornate monogram—FVF—on each piece. Every size and shape of serving piece was included. I still marvel at the extreme patience, and firm grip on the paint brush, she must have exhibited. Even the tiny individual salt cellars were exquisite in their perfection.

A curved-front glass china cabinet in our dining room held this wedding china while a similar corner cabinet encased other decorative pieces painted by my grandmother and her two loony, but artistically talented, sisters. All of these items, though fragile museum pieces in appearance, were used on a regular basis.

The triangular corner cabinet, filled with crystal and cut glass, sat close to a giant console radio. This prized possession was placed next to the French doors opening into the living room so it could be heard by listeners in either room. A tall, hand-cranked Victrola also shared the dining room with our formal table, chairs and buffet.

I have some very early and specific memories of the two china cabinets, and their priceless contents, which stood next to our dining room windows.

After supper one spring evening, Daddy took me out into the backyard to play. Looking at the western sky, he reached down, picked me up and set me on his shoulders.

"Look at the funny-looking sky," he said. "It's yellow." In the next sentence, he remarked, "Boy, that really must be a big freight train we are hearing!"

We lived several miles from a railroad track, and when the wind blew

from the right direction, the soulful sound of passing freight trains could be heard.

My father had barely finished speaking when our yellow sky became totally black and our freight train, in the form of a mighty hailstorm, was upon us. Daddy raced up the back steps with me still on his shoulders. By the time we got inside, huge hailstones were crashing through all of the windows on the west side of the house.

Daddy ran into the living room, grabbed a large overstuffed chair and put it in our central hall. I was quickly plopped into it and told to stay by both parents, who were yelling in order to be heard over the roar of the wind. Mother and Daddy yanked mattresses off of two double beds, dragged them into the dining room and placed them up against the windows. My parents, grandmother and uncle Nick leaned into these mattresses with every ounce of their weight, trying to keep them in place to protect the china cabinets.

Hailstones still poured through other windows and rolled across the floor to join bits of broken glass that littered the floors. In the eyes of a child who was twenty days short of her third birthday, this March 5, 1935, storm was high adventure. My only concern was for Stormy, my aptly named wire-haired terrier. In an agitated state, Stormy raced back and forth barking at the unknown invader. His path could be easily traced by a series of bloody pawprints running into, and out of, each room.

The storm (later considered to be a series of tornadoes) lifted as quickly as it had arrived. The rooftops of many homes across San Antonio were either gone or seriously damaged. Most every home had lost windows. There were estimates of more than a million dollars of property damage across the city. In 1935, people seldom spoke in terms of that amount of money.

The closest we came to a casualty was when my father tried to substitute as a handyman, a job for which he was not at all suited. In the wake of this destructive storm, roofers were in heavy demand throughout the city, so people were urged to get on a waiting list and do temporary patch work themselves. The day after the storm, my dad climbed a ladder with roofing nails and patching material to do his best.

After he finished and surveyed his work, Dad climbed down and folded up the ladder. It was then that his hammer, which he had left on top of the ladder, fell, hit the top of his head and knocked him out.



Leaving storm memories behind and continuing our house tour, a Victorian loveseat, marble-top tables that held reading lamps, several upholstered chairs and my great-grandfather Fletcher's wicker rocking chair were arranged to create an extremely comfortable living room. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves with glass doors framed the brick fireplace.

Steinway piano #51250, one of the first few made in the United States and originally sold in 1883, was a gift to our home from Aunt Vallie. She learned as a child to play on this small spinet, which had only eighty-five keys.

During the Christmas season, our living room became a place I never wanted to leave. The fireplace created a magical atmosphere as its dancing flames were reflected by every glass ornament that hung from the tree. Cut-glass French doors and glass book-case doors beamed even more images-in-motion around the room.

When strings of Christmas tree lights became available, a few of the families we knew began to use them. My father banned them after reading newspaper articles that told of house fires caused by problems with these new, and sometimes dangerous, decorative items. So, silver icicles and garlands of shiny materials wrapped around the tree substituted for electric tree lights in our home.

The rearrangement of furniture to accommodate a Christmas tree resulted in a fresh, unique and sometimes peculiar assemblage of shadows. These shadows invited me to watch in enchantment as they bent to chase rays that glittered, glistened and gleamed from glass ornaments.

Each bedroom in our home held a double bed, a chiffonier, a mirrored vanity with upholstered stool as well as the traditional rocking chair. A New Home treadle sewing machine, constructed with decorative ironwork, was an additional piece in Grandmother's room.

The only room that was a close replica of those in nearby homes was our kitchen. Each kitchen on our block included a breakfast nook, like the booths used in many restaurants today. Except for weekends when my father was able to stay at home, we ate our breakfasts there. Any meal served when Daddy was around was eaten in the formal dining room. Our table was set with monogrammed table linens, sterling silver place settings and napkin rings, crystal goblets and bouquets of fresh flowers. Each time my mother rang a tiny sterling silver dinner bell, our cook popped through the swinging door between the kitchen and dining room to see how she could serve us.

The only time my father had ever spoken crossly to my mother, or so the story was told, was when she handed him a stainless steel fork with which to eat a piece of pie. He informed her not to ever serve him with anything but sterling silver.

This bit of information would astound people who knew my father because he was in no way a snob. He had been raised in a home surrounded with elegant furnishings. Though his tastes were usually quite simple, he had definite ideas about how a family should dine. Thus, we were a linen-and-fine-lace family living in an oilcloth neighborhood.

Our kitchen was equipped with a tall stove supported by four narrow legs. There were no electric stoves, and gas stoves did not have automatic controls, so in the center of the waist-high natural gas burners was a pilot light.

Pilot lights were supposed to remain lighted at all times, but they could be tricky. A gentle breeze coming through a nearby window could extinguish the flame. Cooks were cautioned to always check the pilot prior to lighting a match and turning on a gas burner or the oven. An explosion caused by escaping gas was an ever-present danger, so we had to consider many safety precautions when we used these stoves.

A large pantry dominated the east side of our kitchen while a single porcelain sink beneath a window facing south served for washing the cast iron skillets and farmhouse classic enamelware.

Bottles of liquid detergent were an item devised in future years, so the lather created from a bar of Ivory soap was our cleaner of choice. Dishes, silverware and glasses were carefully washed separately in a dishpan then rinsed with boiling water heated in a teakettle.

Families with small children and pets almost always had fenced back yards. Because families were not as mobile as they are today, people seldom moved away from our area. Neighbors became close emotionally as well as geographically. Our white picket fence had gates leading into the back yards of both of our next-door neighbors. A larger gate could be opened to allow the car to be driven into the back yard and down to the garage.

A tall black telephone with a rotary dial and an arm that held the receiver rested on a tiny table in our hall. While operating this mode of communication, one hand held the body of the phone, containing the mouthpiece, and the other hand kept the receiver at the user's ear. Residence phones were almost always party lines, meaning that one or more

other families used the same line. This situation could be most irritating to everyone involved, and certainly required utmost patience. The best-case scenario called for everyone sharing a line to use consideration and limit the length of their conversations.

Numbers assigned to a household or business contained the name of an exchange plus four numerals. Ours was Kenwood-7275. Area codes would not become necessary for decades.

Many homes still did not have a telephone in the 1930s. Families who owned phones had only one, which was installed with a permanent plug in a central location. A tiny two-shelf phone table and stool were the only pieces of furniture in our hall.

Local numbers could be dialed from one's home, but to reach anyone long distance it was necessary to go through the operator. Long distance calls were not common at that time, so when the operator announced, "I have a long distance call for you," the first thought was "Oh, my gosh, it's an emergency!"

When placing a long distance call, one told the operator to make the call either person-to-person, which meant the call could be accepted by one particular individual only, or station-to-station, designating the caller would talk to anyone at the number dialed. Station-to-station calls were less expensive to place.

This was a time totally devoid of telephone solicitors or recorded commercial calls of any kind. A call received during the night was almost always a death message or news of someone's dangerous physical condition. I remember Mother's anguish after receiving middle-of-the-night news that her younger sister had accidentally shot herself.

Families in rural areas dealt with a different kind of telephone exchange. Even in the 1940s and 1950s, many had to rely on an operator called "Central." When our family moved into a coastal ranch home, we had to learn the intricacies of a wall-mounted wooden phone with a crank.

Cranking the phone put the caller in contact with Central, who was normally a local woman with phone equipment installed in her home. The caller told Central whose residence she or he wanted. Central then used her switchboard plugs and attempted to make a connection.

Many ranch families shared one line, with each household on the line assigned a specific series of short and long rings. Unlike city telephones, which rang only when someone in a particular house was wanted, rural

phones rang in all of the homes that shared a line. One home might have two shorts and one long as their phone signal. It was difficult to tell the difference between that ring and three longs. So, it was not unusual for a phone to be answered by individuals at several locations.

No one became perturbed about this. They were most likely long-time friends or close relatives.

A situation that was both funny, and sometimes helpful, was the knowledge that Central frequently listened to conversations. She wasn't alone. A number of the older women might hear an ongoing conversation as they prepared to use the phone and decide it was rather interesting.

I once placed a call to a cousin and was in the midst of informing her about my father's hospitalization with a broken leg. As I related the tale of an attack by a mother cow as Dad was worming her newborn calf, elderly women from several neighboring ranches asked me to "Please speak up and say that again."

Central overheard family plans and invitations all of the time. A relative from Beaumont tried to call us one evening. When she reached Central at La Ward, she was told, "Oh, they're not at home. They're over visiting at Cousin Katie Traylor's house. I'll ring them over there."

So, everyone knew to limit phone conversations to subjects that were innocent enough to be overheard by countless other families. Frankly, I would gladly go back to a friendly, curious and good-hearted Central and dispense with recorded calls where one is asked to punch in a continuous series of numbers and no human is available.

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