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Ardmore

I've long been intrigued with the way childhood memories cling in some cases and disappear in others. A case in point is my uncle Errett's house in Ardmore, Oklahoma. I've no idea how many times we visited him and his family, but I can't remember ever spending the night at his house. That may be an accurate memory, for Mother's two brothers, Errett and Laurence, both lived in Ardmore. Of the two, Uncle Laurence, the younger, was clearly her favorite. His wife, Aunt Oma, had been Mother's close friend long before Oma's marriage to Uncle Laurence. Their children were roughly the same age as my brother, sister, and I. At any rate, it always seemed logical to stay with Uncle Laurence in his smaller house.



FURNISHERS' CLUB.

Mattie and Laurence Dunlap (front right), Atlantic Christian College, 1910

I wasn't terribly concerned in those days with cause and effect, and it wasn't until much later that I knew that, although Mother adored her older brother, Errett, his wife was far from her favorite person, relative or not. Uncle Errett appeared to me to be a big, bluff, friendly man always full of jokes and fun ideas for his nieces and nephews. I've since learned that he was actually a short man, but I'm sure the rest of my memory of him is accurate. Aunt Vesta, on the other hand, was tiny and tightly put together, always hyper-correct in her assumed Pennsylvania speech and in her role as hostess. I was not a cuddly child; in fact, I can't remember enjoying the traditional hugs and kisses associated with greeting any relatives. Uncle Errett, bless him, merely trumpeted his hearty greetings, reserving his hugs for his sister. I very much liked my cousin Elsie Ve, their only child at home; her older brother, Errett, Jr., was generally away from home, either still in school or later in business in the East. Elsie Ve and I were almost exactly the same age, and we had great fun whenever we were together.

Their house was really the primary attraction to me because it was so different from home with its many rooms and especially its second floor. I loved to watch as we approached it, an impressive white frame, two-story house, in the middle of a slight hill on a block where it was the only house. On a typical visit, our car would turn up the inclined driveway, two strips of concrete, rising to the level of the house and going through the porte cochere to the spacious parking area beyond. Generally, Uncle Errett, Aunt Vesta, and Elsie Ve were on the broad side porch to greet us after we parked the car in the spacious parking area. Typically, Uncle Errett's greeting to us children was boisterous and mercifully brief, for I was never sure of what to say to him. Aunt Vesta I always approached warily, because she gave ceremonial hugs and kisses. Once she embarrassed me by saying accusingly, "Ghe-url, you don't like to be kissed", and I never remember her trying after that. After the grown-ups went into the house through a side entrance, Elsie Ve would grin at us and we children would get on about our own business as soon as the formalities were over.

Frequently, we were content to stay on the broad porch which wrapped around three sides of the house. Like the house itself, it was wooden, taking its color from the white walls of the house and the stately Victorian pillars and the grey wooden floor, which always seemed to have been painted just last week. On the east side of the house, the area where we first arrived, the porch had several rocking chairs and a wooden swing, suspended by chains from the porch ceiling which easily seated four youngsters as long as they remained friendly. When Brother, the youngest, got bored and went elsewhere, Elsie Ve, Martha, and I were apt to investigate the morning room which opened onto the porch. It was a small room, small, that is, in comparison to the rest of the house, located at the back with both a north and an east wall. We sometimes played there, but I have no recollection of the furnishings - I'm sure they were neither wicker nor over-stuffed, but very comfortable and good for little girl play. In its east window, this room usually had a thriving Boston fern. Opening from the morning room was a larger room, used as an informal family room, also comfortably furnished. We could remove an area rug from the floor there in order to play jacks on the dark, polished floor. I remember a small 1920's style radio that we were not interested in playing. There were three doors, one from the morning room, one to the hall, and one opening on a roomy old-fashioned bathroom, with an enormous claw-footed bathtub and a toilet with a tank mounted high up the wall and a chain to pull. Mother usually reminded us beforehand that the chain was to be pulled no more often than we used the handle on our toilet at home. The bathroom had two doors, one into the family room and the other opening onto the front hall.



The "Dunlap House" in Macon, Ga, maybe in the right style?

That front hall was the first wonder to me - as wide as our living room at home and extending all the way from the gracious front door to the stairway at the back. A short hallway beside the stair had two doors, one leading to one of the more intriguing rooms, to me (its sort is still of interest to me). It was no more than a storage room nestled under the first flight of the stair, but its location there lent it a special kind of air, a wonderful use of otherwise wasted space. Whenever we played hide-and-seek (which we were always required to do cautiously and quietly without loud stomping of feet), I almost invariably hid in that little storage room. It was magic because I was seldom found early in the game.

The living room, entered from the west side of the main hall through a wide rectangular opening, was a spacious room furnished in a way that always signaled "comfort" to me, not chic by anyone's standards I should think, but solidly Victorian and comfortable. I doubt that Uncle Errett would have been happy with any pretentious or uncomfortable furniture, and I'm sure that Aunt Vesta could not have tolerated anything ugly or totally unfashionable. I do remember a handsome, tall mahogany record player with a small supply of seventy-eight rpm records, 78 rpm I'm sure, on its shelf. I regret that I spent so little time observing the room that I remember nothing except its aura of quiet comfort. I suspect that I looked forward to being released from the formality of a family gathering and, consequently, paid little attention to the decor. It always left me with a light, brown feeling (I can't explain that feeling except that places often reminded me of colors).

The dining room, reached by a large squared arch from the living room, I remember much better because of a number of memorable family dinners there, particularly one summer dinner at which Uncle Laurence, Aunt Oma, and their two children were present, along with we Hickman five and the Errett Dunlap four (for Errett, Jr., was home from New York on one of his rare visits). Laurence Jr. and my brother, Willett Jr., were about eight or nine. Uncle Errett, abetted by Errett, Jr., conducted a lively contest between the two little boys to see which one could eat the most fried chicken. Aunt Vesta looked on with disapproval but said nothing; Mother looked both disapproving and angry at her son but said nothing. He, of course, was having so much fun that he did not accept her unspoken signals. The same for Aunt Oma. The boys did their noble best, piling up an impressive number of bones on their plates. Finally, Aunt Vesta had enough and declared, "Errett, you'll make those boys sick. They've had enough." She had spoken, the contest was over, a draw. Mother had a great deal to say on the way home.

Now I look back in awe, not at the chicken feast, but at the size of the dining room and that enormous oak dining table. On that occasion it seated eleven, but on a couple of Thanksgivings there were at least thirty-five at the main table and ten more at a smaller table to the side. It was the only house where the rotating family Thanksgiving dinner could be accommodated all in one room. At Mother's and Daddy's house, the children's tables frequently ran to at least three placed in other rooms and we were sometimes crowded with an adult overflow from the main table.

The stairs to the second floor were a primary attraction to me. I've had a love affair with stairs ever since. The first landing, halfway up to the second floor, was an area large enough to hold a sofa, three chairs, and a low table large enough for a display of a fascinating variety of magazines. We occasionally settled there for our play. I envied Elsie Ve such a perfect setting for curling up with a good book.

From there, another flight of steps rose to the second-floor hall, even wider than the entrance hall below. This hall stretched all the way to the front windows. It too was furnished with a number of comfortable conversation groups, also good for our play. I think that there were six or eight doors opening off that second floor hall, six of which must have been bedrooms. Did the other doors lead to bathrooms? I have no idea. If we ever spent the night at Uncle Errett's, I don't remember it, and I don't recall having any curiosity about the rooms beyond the doors. I guess I found the size of the hall so awe inspiring that my curiosity simply didn't extend beyond the doors. I remember once asking Elsie Ve if she was allowed to roller skate in the hall. With its dark polished floor, it looked ideally suited to such an activity. She was shocked at the idea. If she had ever suggested such an activity, it was clear that Aunt Vesta must have answered, "Ghe-url, what an objectionable idea. Find something more appropriate to do." And I honestly admitted that Mother would have had the same reaction.

I base that assumed dialogue on Elsie Ve's having told me that her mother was heartbroken that she wasn't a natural little lady. Her blond hair was completely straight, and she refused to wear pink bows in her hair or ruffles on her dresses once she learned to talk. I thought those attitudes reflected rebellion against Aunt Vesta's precise speech and her liking to hug relatives.

The house had the substantial appearance of a structure which had always belonged just there. Mother told us that the number of his address at 117 Stanley was duplicated in Uncle Errett's phone number as well as, every year, in his automobile license plate. Since our phone number did not resemble the number of our street address and our automobile license was different every year, with no discernable pattern to them, I found that Uncle Errett's identical address, phone number, and license number lent that much more magic to the spacious house he and his family lived in.

I've not been in Ardmore in more than fifty years and have no desire to go there. The town has grown; 117 Stanley is gone now, to make way for a block of business buildings. But the house lives vividly, if incompletely, in my scattered memories and, unlike other cherished memories which have not survived current reality, does not have to be tested.