

Aunt Nannie

I knew Aunt Nannie as my only "real" aunt, that is, my Dad's (Willett J. Hickman)'s only sister. All other aunts got that way through marriage: Aunt Oma and Aunt Vesta, Mother's brothers' wives, and Aunt Tina, Daddy's brother's wife.

Aunt Nannie lived on the outskirts of the small north central Texas town of Gainesville, on a long, slender piece of land that was bounded on one side by a railroad, whose four-times-daily trains (three freight and one passenger) were an endless source of fascination to me as a child. There were also other sources of fascination at Aunt Nannie's, but, so far as I was concerned, she was the principal attraction.

Aunt Nannie's husband, whom I was never able to think of as "Uncle" Jack, was reputed to be a former alcoholic. He was taciturn, elusive, and seldom seen. I can't remember ever having a conversation with him. I saw him and his two oldest sons, my cousins Ray and Mike, as people to avoid because of their teasing words which I never entirely understood. My cousin Ruth, on the other hand, who was approximately the same age as Ray and Mike, was a delightful companion whom I sought to be around.

As to Aunt Nannie's family, after the threesome of Ray, Mike, and Ruth, there was an interval of several years before the last three, who were roughly contemporaneous with me and my two siblings Martha and Willett, Jr.: Mutt (his name was W.B., but I doubt he ever heard it outside of school), Billie (actually Rebecca), and Louise. This latter sextet was fairly close, with Ruth joining us, being companionable with the youngest six cousins.

But Aunt Nannie was the real substance of the house. And of a good part of Gainesville, too, I suspect. I gather she was a much sought-after midwife and general nurse in town, but she always seemed to be present for the preparation of meals and welcoming of endless visitors, both townspeople and relatives like us.

Her household and family duties were endlessly time consuming, yet she always had time to let a niece or nephew take a hand at churning or trying to catch a chicken for the next meal. I was awed by her ability to wring a chicken's neck with an apparently effortless twist of her wrist or by a quick de-feathering of the headless bird after she had dipped it in boiling water. I learned to identify all sorts of varieties of chickens, especially my favorite Buff Orpingtons or the feisty little guinea hens whose function I never did understand. I don't remember her sitting down much except to snap beans or preside over the overflowing table she always set; she was generally moving, but without giving the impression of frantic motion. She was a thoroughly comfortable person to be around. No wonder we Hickman kids loved to visit Aunt Nannie!



Nancy "Nannie" Hickman Conley