

Housing Criteria

With the wisdom of hind-sight, I think that one of the most important criteria in looking for a place to live is one that we seldom think of. That condition could possibly be one over which the home-seeker has no control, but when we look back trying to analyze why our home choice was a good one, that one thing may be the reason for our success or failure. The people around us, who share a wall perhaps, or whose children customarily play on our front doorstep, frequently make our home a thing of joy or misery.

Our very first apartment, over which we didn't have any real choice, is a good example. The tiny furnished rooms were adequate and had a pleasing location in a quiet neighborhood. Moreover, the couple who shared one of our walls were made-to-order - he was a colleague of Paul's, her taste and mine were similar, and we just generally became good friends. We had no contact with any other of the apartment occupants. The landlord was an amusing puzzle to us, first coming to us in some uneasiness that he had inadvertently broken the rules of mandatory wartime fixed rents, a dilemma which he solved to his satisfaction by giving us a silver dollar and having us sign a paper indicating our satisfaction with our rent. The basement laundry facilities were far from perfect, but they were included in the cost of our very reasonable rent. I quickly learned not to let any of the freshly washed clothes or linens touch *anything* in the basement - ceiling, washing machine, clotheslines, and all. After I had rubbed the lines with a wet washcloth, they were safe. Everything was coated with soot from the wood-burning furnace which shared the basement. But, hey, for free laundry facilities in a dwelling place in the beautiful Pacific Northwest, I was happy.

Our second home was furnished and had three giant, heavily blooming camellia bushes, a wood-burning fireplace, and a piano. I never met any of the neighbors except for a number of children, ages six to nine, who frequently dropped by to chat and to be sure I was happy. We frequently shared cookies. A few days before Christmas they grieved over our Christmas tree which, although it was decorated, had no presents under it. They gradually drifted out of the house to come back soon with a beautiful child-wrapped package that I had to unwrap at once. It was a two-quart pyrex casserole dish, something I didn't own. In many ways it was the best present I had that Christmas, and I think of those children every time I use it. That would have been a lovely home even without those gorgeous camellias in the yard.

Our next home was in Takoma Park, Maryland. We had a basement one-bedroom flat furnished with war-time manufactured furniture, which we had had to buy in order to rent the apartment, after we had sold our car in order to buy the furniture! A nice but fairly large family, with whom we occasionally swapped ice cubes, lived above us. Next door was a similar house, containing three rather than two apartments. We became friends with the people who occupied the main apartment. Above them lived a malcontent who gave no evidence of liking any person in the world. (She probably had a husband, but he never entered into any of her activities.) Robbie, my friend, would go out to the backyard to hang the clothes for her family of three. There was no back door, so that when her

phone rang she had to leave her wet clothes in the yard and run around to the front door in order to answer it. No matter how fast she ran, there was never anyone on the line. After I slipped into her apartment while she was hanging her clothes, we verified our suspicion that Unhappy Top-Floor Lady was the culprit, apparently dialing Robbie's number when she saw Robbie in the yard, then hanging up when Robbie answered it. Also, her stairs ran the diagonal line from floor to ceiling of Robbie's living room, and it became obvious that the poor soul, seeking excitement we supposed, would go halfway down her steps when Robbie had company and listen to the conversation of the guests. Robbie thought she might some day work up the nerve to guess exactly where her listener was eavesdropping and, protecting the wall, bang hard where she expected the listening ear to be. Those were small but niggling exasperations and didn't bother us except in sympathy for Robbie's discomfort.



Two or three apartments later, in Arlington, Virginia, we lived in a typical D.C.-area apartment, a one-floor two-bedroom apartment under a similar apartment, which housed a family with three small children. All three children had tricycles which they usually left crowded into our entryway. Once, Paul came home from work rather more tired than usual. He moved the tricycles to the steps going up, blocking their way while freeing ours. The obvious hint was followed; after that the sweet, overworked mother moved the wheels into their apartment. On payday, father occasionally came home somewhat inebriated. He was not above hurling one or more of the tricycles across their living room. Someone must have told them that Paul was a Special Agent with the F.B.I. because we heard nothing more from the people - no bikes, no heaving of heavy implements across the room. Poor kids.

When we were in graduate school in Chapel Hill, we had what must have been our funniest neighbors in one of our apartments there. The partitions between adjacent apartments were thin enough that we probably could have heard breathing if anyone next door was near the wall. Our neighbors had a piano, a real boon for us, since whoever played the instrument was a good pianist and had good musical taste; the music we liked, in other words. The piano seemed to signal the end of their work/study day, providing us with very enjoyable lullabies. It's possible they had no idea how thin the walls were, because Paul and I had little or no conversation after we were in bed. We did overhear some interesting exchanges from their side of the wall one night, for instance: "Hoyle, what are you doing?" "Standing on one foot." Followed by dead silence.

When Spring Break came, Paul and I had plans to visit friends in Baltimore over the holiday. Our custom had been (still is, in fact) to get up early the day we were to leave, packing last thing before leaving. Hoyle and companion, it developed, did just the opposite - packing before going to bed. With their usual abandon, they kept us aware of the state of their packing. We ground our teeth and went to sleep in the midst of their packing. At 6:00 a.m., the next morning, we began our packing, not making unnecessary noise, but, on the other hand, not going to any pains to be quiet. After Spring Break, we exchanged our customary warm greetings with Hoyle and spouse, and they did, too. But we never again enjoyed any of their arcane conversations or piano concerts, either. Hoyle got his legal degree and Paul got his PhD, and we've never heard from them since. Nor have we had any more such interesting neighbors.