

Our Back Porch

When I was six years old, my family moved into a brick house at 5726 Morningside Drive, where we lived until I was in college. The last time I was in Dallas, I drove by the house. The trees are larger, there's a new fence across what used to be the driveway, but the house itself is still the same. My sister and I knocked on the door, hoping to be allowed to visit our old home, but no one was there. We decided our memories are vivid enough without refreshing them. Of the rooms in that house, none is richer in my memories than the back porch.

The dimensions were roughly ten feet by eight feet, with a south-facing ten-foot wall, half screened and holding the screened back door, which opened onto a broad stoop with five concrete steps descending into the backyard. The opposite wall had a window into the breakfast room and a ladder to the attic. The shorter walls held doors into my parents' bedroom on the east side and the kitchen on the west. Between the kitchen and back doors lived the golden oak ice box with its troublesome drain pan, soon replaced by Daddy with a copper pipe drain through the floor and into a flowerbed. The ice box held a one-hundred-pound block of ice from which could be chipped the ice for tea or for great freezers of ice cream, cranked on the back steps.

Under the window to the breakfast room, never used for passage of boys and girls, was a long bench, an ideal perch for watching the fireworks of late afternoon thunderstorms, safely away from the reach of lightning or of rain blowing in from the south. In the summer it was a great place to curl up with a book and read, until Mother shooed me off for piano practice or setting the table. It was cooler and generally more private than the bedroom which I shared with my sister Martha on the southeastern corner of the house.

The steps to the attic led to a treasure trove of old trunks filled with Mother's turn-of-the-century clothing: sharp-toed, high heeled, high laced shoes of elegant kid leather, long, tiny-waisted skirts of wonderfully soft woolens and silks, and swooshy sheer scarves. They all had entrancing hints of flowery colognes, only slightly overcast with mothballs, a combination scent I still rather like. If the attic wasn't too hot, we donned our finery up there and played endless games among the boxes and stored furniture. The high heeled shoes made very satisfactory clunks on the wooden floor. The dim light filtering from the shuttered dormers lent an authenticity to our make-believe that we seldom achieved in the full light of day downstairs. I particularly remember one of my rare winter ventures into that unheated attic, one I only now reveal for the first time. During that solo foray I penetrated the Santa Claus legend. Before my unbelieving eyes were two unwrapped dolls and an electric train set. I hugged that shocking knowledge to myself for several years before I confirmed my sister's woeful doubts about Santa. The dolls and train set which appeared that year under the Christmas tree were exciting gifts, enhanced rather than tarnished by my secret knowledge. That Christmas is easily one of my most cherished Christmas memories.

One of my solo attic raids gave me another wonderful discovery. I had always been intrigued by my mother's name - Mattie O. Dunlap Hickman. Nowhere could I find her

full name written except with that bare initial - "O." What did it stand for? Mother wouldn't tell, and neither would her mother. I didn't ask Daddy, for I was sure that Mother wouldn't have told him if she hadn't told me. At the bottom of one of the clothes trunks, I found a bundle of old letters and a small New Testament. I never got around to reading the letters because the little white Bible contained exciting news. It was inscribed to "Mattie *Othell* Dunlap"! I cherished that bit of detective work for several weeks before I exploded my exciting knowledge in a dramatic revelation to the whole family. Mother cooperated with the proper expressions of displeasure and embarrassment, but I suspect now the whole game was one I had exaggerated. I did feel superior to my siblings for a long time, and Mother allowed me to tease her whenever the subject came up.



Needless to say, there was much traffic between the back bedroom and the kitchen. Not only were those doors into the porch a shortcut for cooking purposes, they also provided a path for the circumnavigation of the whole house by three racing youngsters and any of our friends who happened to be present when no adult was busy in the kitchen. If we were careful to close the doors after ourselves, we could use the back porch shortcut in the wintertime, speeding across the open porch almost fast enough not to feel the cold air.

The summer I was eight, the back porch became larger when the ice box was removed and a small copper circle was screwed across the hole made for the drainage pipe. The vacancy on the porch was caused by the arrival of our first mechanical refrigerator, which was granted the place of honor in the kitchen. I remember two men, painters I think, who were working in the kitchen and speculating about the folly of that refrigerator. It was a gas-driven Electrolux, and they were certain that there was no way that heat could produce cooling, much less ice. The whole family had gone along for the purchasing of that wonderful piece of furniture. I was only eight, but I found the brochures with pictures of the little blue flame wonderfully reassuring, despite not being the least bit enlightening. I do remember feeling that, *if* I had wanted to, I could have told those men that indeed a gas flame could keep our food safe and cool.

As I grew older, the importance of the back porch as a center of my entertainment gradually diminished, although I saw my late-arriving twin brother and sister use it much as we three older children had. But I still remember it as an important part of living and growing on Morningside Drive.