

3-5-94

2612 Rosedale Street

By the time George was a year old, we started looking for a larger home, one which we could afford to buy. That was a large order for two impecunious recent graduate students, new instructor, and new parents. We did find one after careful search. The house, within easy walking distance of SMU, was a buff brick cottage. It was the middle house of three, in a block next to the Central Expressway. The outside of the house looked conventional enough. Inside there were a few details that didn't quite add up. The positioning of the doors leading to the outside was the oddest part - one outside door on each of the four faces of the house. As one might expect, the front door led directly into the living room, and the back door served as an exit from the kitchen into the fenced backyard. But the other two doors were puzzling: the west one exited from a pantry just off the kitchen directly onto the driveway, not a very useful door. The east door dead-ended from our bedroom onto the fenced backyard of the house next door. It served for occasional conversations over the fence with neighbor Polly Funderburgh, but that was its only apparent use. Before long, that gossip-fence aspect of the door led to an explanation of the unusual history of the house.

Polly told us that the house, which she thought might have been an old farmhouse, had been moved from a lot several streets away to accommodate the construction of the Central Expressway, the first freeway to be built in Dallas.* In the moving, the house had been turned ninety degrees, placing the former front and back doors on the new sides of the house, turning the living room into our bedroom. The house was placed on an unusually high foundation, giving a generous crawl space and necessitating the five-step-high concrete stoops on all four sides. Why the side doors weren't eliminated at the time the new front and back doors were created we never discovered. Otherwise, we found the house comfortable because of its location and its two large bedrooms and spacious kitchen.

Our adventures with adapting the house to our use and our adventures with beginning parenthood make for separate stories. In this one I'll concern myself with our efforts in trying to adapt the house to our way of living, or maybe just to make it livable, and then, I'll try to look at the possible effect the house had on our parenting. We had been married ten years, five years "out" for World War II and the rest for graduate school, when George was born. That delay certainly had some effect on us as parents, but couldn't the Rosedale house have influenced us in some significant way, too? Looking back, we sometimes wonder. Was our life influenced by that unusual house, or were we peculiarly unfitted to be parents, or even homeowners? Was it Rosedale Street? Or was it Paul and Mary Frances?

*Named not for central Dallas but for the use of the abandoned right-of-way of the old Central and North Texas Railroad. When we first moved to Rosedale, George was eighteen months old and resisting the transition from his tiny bedroom on Airline Road to his new large bedroom. So, the first change we made in our new house was to paint his new room the same color as his old room, that same old Airline Road gray. Nevertheless,

for several weeks he wasn't happy going to sleep in the strange room. We were able to take advantage of the sparse traffic on the incomplete Central Expressway to drive him up and down until the motion of the car lulled him to sleep. The house certainly worked for us there.

We needed more storage space than the house afforded. The closets were tiny, and we had spent more than ten years accumulating books, records, and household paraphernalia. In the ceiling of the one closet in our bedroom was a two-foot-square trapdoor which served as access to a large, high-ceilinged attic. Our second improvement to the house we decided should be the replacement of that small opening with a pull-down attic stairway in the hall. Paul ordered the stairway and pull-down door from Sears. The directions for installation began helpfully with "cut a three foot by six foot hole in the ceiling." Period. He anticipated the problem of the cut-out portion of the hole crashing down on his head by going into the attic and bracing the anticipated opening with lateral two-by-fours across the rafters to hold the cut-out piece steady. The ceiling was hard plaster which rapidly dulled any saw which Paul used on it. He had to replace a borrowed carbide-tipped Skil saw blade several times before he triumphantly got a teaching colleague to help him lower the cut-out portion safely to the floor. Installation of the pull-down stairway with its hinged cover was time consuming and labor intensive but easy once the hole was cut. He laid four-by-eight pieces of plywood across the rafters as flooring so that we had ample and accessible storage.

We were told that the house had been owned by a plumber. Instead of being the asset we anticipated, the plumber's ownership was a decided liability; he was either a very negligent owner or a very bad plumber or perhaps both. Almost all the plumbing in the house had to be worked on over the next year, including the toilet which, soon after we moved in, fell right through the floor of the bathroom. Not only that, he had left a huge neon sign behind the garage. Paul gradually dismantled the sign, putting the pieces of metal little by little over the back fence, which had no gate, into the garbage can. The enormous transformer that remained was apparently in good working condition. Paul's brother Truett welcomed the transformer for use in one of his many ongoing electronic projects.



We thought the high foundation of the house was unattractive and made landscaping the front of the house difficult. When we could afford it, we had the driveway paved and also had the contractor build reinforced concrete and brick retainers for flowerbeds across the front of the house to reduce the area between the yard and the first floor. The beds worked well for a couple of years but before we moved they had begun to crack. (Dallas could have told Chesterfield County a great deal about shrink/swell conditions.) Moreover, when we sold the house, an economist friend chided us for having spent any money on the driveway and flowerbeds because we hadn't used them long enough to amortize their cost.

The first summer we had the house, we went to Raleigh, North Carolina, for six weeks to take advantage of a study grant Paul had been awarded. When we returned to Rosedale Street, we unpacked a few necessities, got the gas hot water heater lighted, dumped George into bed, and fell into bed ourselves. Waking during the night to check on George, I stepped into a couple of inches of water. The hot water heater's rusted bottom had dropped out while we were gone. The return of water to the tank had run full force from the bottomless tank, flooding the house. At least the water hadn't run the entire six weeks we'd been gone. Lots of mopping and a new hot water tank later, we were ready to get on with living.

The rest of the settling in was relatively unexciting. The Chambers range was handsome and helped me expand my rather limited cooking skills. Paul did other construction without incident. He put a built-in desk in the hall between our bedroom and the kitchen. Its primary function was to hold the old black upright telephone which traditionally resided in a niche in the hall, but it also held my small collection of cookbooks and served as a planning and writing desk. In the backyard, he built a sand box and a swing/ladder set out of two-by-fours and large dowels. George enjoyed the swing but avoided the ladder. Later, Roland enjoyed both.

We learned a great deal about buying a house and about living in it from our Rosedale residence, but perhaps the experiences we had as new parents there taught us even more. That's my next story.

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2612 Rosedale Street II

The move into our first home on Rosedale was an exciting and satisfying one. The house was a learning experience from the first. We were rather proud of ourselves in the way we solved our first problem with George's sleeping. At eighteen months he was new enough and charming enough to keep us delighted through the Rosedale years, during which time he was joined by Roland, another charmer.

Shortly after we moved, we had two experiences with television that should have warned us what a menace TV could be. First, let me say that I had lovingly called George a monster from the first time I had seen him. The tone of voice had charged the word with a meaning that is directly the opposite from its dictionary definition. George was shocked by that meaning when he saw a cartoon version of "Beauty and the Beast." He was horrified by the meaning of monster as revealed on the show. I had to work very hard explaining that my meaning was quite different and that he was not a cartoon-type monster. I immediately stopped using the epithet.

A few weeks later, he was entranced with Mary Martin's "Peter Pan" on the tube. The next morning it was my time to be horrified when I walked into the living room to find him balanced on the back of the sofa, both arms and one leg extended - ready to follow Peter and Wendy into the air bound for Never-Never Land. I guess we managed to convince him of the difference between reality and fantasy and what he was likely to find on television. At any rate, we never again discovered him ready to take flight.

George recently mentioned to me the confusion of the side-by-side doors from his room, one into the living room and one into the hall, legacies of the reorientation of the house.

One of the attractive features of the house was the big, flat, fenced backyard in which Paul had built a sandbox and swing with ladder. Whenever George played in the backyard, Polly Funderburgh, our neighbor, would appear, lean over the fence, and entertain him until either Paul or I came out to take him back into the house. We wanted him to learn to play alone, but Polly considered us cruel and took matters into her own hands, even though she disliked taking so much time from her busy schedule. When I was able to assure her that one of us was always watching out the kitchen window to monitor his safety, she eventually gave up her time-consuming entertaining. It's worth noting here something that neither Paul nor I noticed then: George did not use his ladder much, preferring to keep his feet solidly on the ground. The first summer we had the house, we went to Raleigh, North Carolina, where George had his first head injury requiring stitches, and I became pregnant, two events not necessarily connected.

Immediately after we got back to Dallas, Paul was offered a visiting professorship at Virginia Tech. We quickly rented our house to a Methodist missionary family back for a sabbatical at SMU. Roland was born during our year in Blacksburg, and George received his second head injury requiring stitches. We returned to Dallas with a six-months-old Roland and me with a thyroid illness that definitely affected my mothering skills for a time.

A week after we returned from Blacksburg, we attended a faculty picnic with the two boys, Roland in his stroller. George somehow escaped from us, boarded a moving merry-go-round-type swing, fell off, and received a nasty cut on his head. After a trip to the doctor for stitches, we returned to the picnic at George's insistence. We still have nightmares over losing sight of George for those few minutes.

Roland had his own adventures. When he was six months old, he climbed high onto our old upright piano. Not able to find his way down alone, he made enough of a fuss that we were able to rescue him. After that, the piano bench was positioned so that it was not an attractive first step onto the piano.

Roland was every bit as curious as other babies and was walking when he was eight months old, a development of which we were proud then but now wouldn't wish on our worst enemy. Neither our missionary renters nor we had completely cleaned up the pantry, an oversight which caused another adventure. While I was taking a necessary rest and Paul was proofreading his dissertation, Roland had been investigating the pantry. He emerged quite happily foaming at the mouth, having consumed an unknown quantity of an aluminum cleaning powder. Roland and I rushed to the pediatrician's office while Paul stayed with three-year-old George. The cleaning powder was not on the poison center's list of dangerous substances, but Dr. Hawkins pumped Roland's stomach anyway, to be on the safe side. Roland apparently found the experience restful for he went to sleep during the operation. But he was very hungry by the time we got back home.



Two weeks later, Paul woke me from my afternoon nap, holding an innocent-looking Roland, clad in new yellow corduroy overalls, new white shoes, and a heavy coat of India ink which Paul had been using to insert symbols in his dissertation. In my sleepy stupor, I dragged Roland across the hardwood floor and into the bathtub, leaving a thin trail of black ink behind us. The ink washed off his smooth baby skin easily but forever marked the yellow corduroy suit, the white leather shoes, and the oak floor.

Three months later, after I had recovered from my illness and could no longer blame Roland's adventures on my need to rest, he scaled a kitchen cabinet and stuffed his hand into a freshly poured glass of plum jelly, spilling the hot liquid onto his face and down his bare chest into his diaper. Again, we made an anguished trip to the doctor, this time for treatment of his second-degree burns. Fortunately, he healed without any scars.

We were rapidly gaining a reputation as negligent parents. Mother pointed out that she had had no burns, or poison lavages, or stitched heads during the growing up of her five children. There is no telling what Polly next door had to say. That was by no means the end of the boys' love affairs with accidents, although George remained very cautious about climbing.

As he got older, George played with David Funderburgh next door, the only other child in the neighborhood. David was three years older and frequently bullied George. When George began spending much of his time complaining about David's hitting him, we decided that he needed to learn to fend for himself. We suggested ways he might be able to get along with David and instructed him to hit back if the peace-making strategies were not successful. Imagine my surprise the next day when I saw George raise his right arm menacingly and heard him loudly proclaim, "I'm going to hit you. My mother told me to." Unfortunately, Polly also heard George's ultimatum, and our relationship became rather cool from then on.

The loudest and longest lasting disaster on Rosedale Street took place when George entered kindergarten, not then a required school activity. While she was still speaking to me, Polly had recommended a school David had attended, within walking distance of our home. I found it fit my idea of a proper kindergarten, and George seemed to be excited about it, so he was duly entered. When I started to leave him for his first full day at school, he began howling hysterically. Despite the teachers' forceful recommendation, I took him home because his crying was totally uncharacteristic of him - he had been quite happy the year before in a play school. Successive days did not improve George's reluctance, although I did leave him once or twice for an hour, and he cried the whole time. Because we were in the midst of moving to a new home, Paul and I decided not to insist on George's remaining in school. The director predicted that if George won that battle, he would probably refuse to go to school the next year when he was six. Her prediction proved wrong; he went happily off to first grade and enjoyed the whole first grade experience. It was several years before I thought to ask George why he had objected so violently to the school. His matter-of-fact reply was that David had assured him that he would have to pass "tree climbing," a terrifying activity for a child who, at the time anyway, did not like to get his feet very far from the ground.

After we left Rosedale for Wild Valley (of all names), our life settled down considerably. Maybe the Rosedale adventures were attributable to Rosedale and not to Paul and Mary Frances. And, again, perhaps not.