

1-16-95

Sherman

I can date some of my earliest memories to a period of time before and slightly after the birth of my brother Willett in August of 1924. Some time before, we had moved to Sherman, Texas, so that my father could begin a cherished dream of running his own business. Until then, he had been one of many Texans who were connected with the oil business, in his case with the Republic Production Company. What his particular job was I do not know, but his work took him away from home at least part of the time (I remember Mother's talking about his being out of town at the time of my birth in Shreveport, Louisiana, an incident she had not taken lightly). He had been transferred from Shreveport to Dallas soon after the birth of my sister Martha. He had then acquired the Hupmobile automobile franchise. But all of this information I gained much later, well after the facts I relate here.

My first memory has to do with the physical move into our new home in Sherman. In order to keep Martha and me entertained, I suppose, Daddy opened our toy chest, a wooden box that must have been on the order of two feet deep, by four feet long, by two feet or so tall. I have a vague memory of my glee at seeing familiar toys in that unfamiliar house, a sense of pleasure which was interrupted by the cries of Martha, who couldn't have been more than a year and half old. The wooden lid of the box fell on her as she leaned into the box. Daddy had not entirely removed one nail which had been securing the lid of the box, and it cut her head. What emergency steps were taken I don't remember - just the noise of her cries and Mother's. The nail couldn't have been very long, for her injury was not grave. But I can imagine, now, Mother's and Daddy's horror at the accident.

My next memory in Sherman is of an event which happened, I think, in a downtown furniture store. There was a wide wooden staircase rising from the center of the shop. It was an irresistible magnet for two little girls who had never been around stairs before. We must have made quite a racket clattering up and down those wooden steps, for we came to the attention of a woman who was working on the second floor. She gave us each a balloon. Martha's was a bright metallic-looking gold. Mine was a beautiful, luminous silver. While we settled down playing with the balloons, admiring them, stretching the rubber, and trying to blow them up, I became fascinated with a new gadget in the store. A salesperson on the first floor put a paper (was it a sales ticket with accompanying money?) into a small cylinder. When she pulled a wooden knob, the cylinder whisked, with a satisfying whoosh, along a wire to a clerk on the second floor who replaced the paper or money with something else (change and a receipt?) and returned it to the person on the first floor. I am reminded of that mysterious maneuver every time I transact business at the bank drive-in. I place my deposit or check in a cylinder, press a button labeled "send," and hear the cylinder rush through a tube to the teller inside the bank, where I can see its last few feet of descent.

Back home, Martha and I went into our back yard to play with our balloons. Martha's was inflated and we tossed it back and forth. Inevitably it burst with a horrifying pop,

frightening her and appalling me. She immediately began clamoring for my lovely silver balloon. I felt responsible for the demise of her balloon. I coupled my feeling of guilt with a need for revenge born of sibling rivalry and quickly decided that I would probably have to share my prize with her. The horror of that prospect convinced me I had only one thing to do, and I did it. With considerable difficulty, I bit a big hole in my rubber plaything. Then, the consequence of my action became vividly clear - neither one of us had a balloon now. No amount of repenting my hasty action would restore the damaged balloon. I'd like to think I learned something, but I'm not sure I did.

Two more memories that I have from that early period in my life are connected with the house next door, where the Vollrath family lived. In the first remembered scene, I was in the back yard doing some vocalizing that must have sounded something like yodeling while Mother was hanging some washing on the line. Mrs. Vollrath came out and very seriously asked her if Mother was training me to be an opera singer. Mother told that story at dinner that night, much to my embarrassment.

The other incident happened some time later when I was alone in the yard. An older woman, whom I recognized as Mrs. Vollrath's mother, called to me from her back door and invited me to come see "something wonderful." It didn't look wonderful to me - just an ugly little wrinkled face surrounded by clouds of white blankets. "And her name is Betty Sue. Isn't she beautiful?" Well, no, not exactly. And then when I returned home and reported my adventure, my grandmother scolded me for bothering the Vollraths at a busy time. How was I to know?

Not long after that, my little brother was born, not at home but at the local hospital. Following the practice at that time, Mother and Willett, later known only as "Brother," remained in the hospital for two weeks. He was not nearly so ugly as Betty Sue by the time I first saw him. But, of course, I was an old hand at judging newborns by then.

So, what must have been a tumultuous time in the lives of my parents boils down for me to two or three disconnected recollections which have periodically haunted me over the years. In a short period, which couldn't been more than two and a half years, our family moved to a new town; Daddy began his great dream of his own business which soon dissolved into failure when Hupmobile went out of business; and they had their first son. Then we returned to Dallas, where Daddy returned to work for the Republic Production Company and where the memories I have today begin to be more coherent.

11-11-97

A Sherman My-story Story

Memory is an interesting phenomenon. Numbers of people have reacted to the Shepherd's Center class on "Writing Your Life's Story" by saying, "I'd like to take that class but I don't remember very much." Sometimes I suggest that they start by writing about a house they lived in when they were very young. Describing the house and recounting an event which occurred there frequently stimulates memories of other events during childhood.

Or hearing stories by other members in the class may recall faded memories that blossom into colorful anecdotes of past events. Soon they can begin reconstructing forgotten events, even recalling, perhaps, names of classmates and teachers as well as other details they've not thought about for years.

Thinking about a house my family lived in for a couple of years has caused me to remember some snippets of things that happened when I was three and four. That had to have been my age because we moved to Sherman, Texas, when I was about three. I can reconstruct some of the setting from family stories about the time, but I find that several of the memories are my very own, not recounted in summertime backyard family gatherings years later. Daddy must have had a strong desire to go into business for himself after having been in the oil business most of his working years. Apparently, he purchased a Hupmobile agency in Sherman, a small town north of Dallas.

During the chaos of our moving into our frame house, Daddy must have opened a big wooden toy box for Martha and me to have something to divert us. Martha was a sturdy toddler of some eighteen months. While she was searching for a toy in the box, the lid, still with a nail in it, fell on her head. I vaguely recall the hullabaloo that resulted, including Martha's hurt screams and Mother's anguished reaction, directed first at rescuing her injured child and then at blaming her careless husband for leaving the nail. The rest of the occasion is cloudy, although I'm relatively sure that Martha was not seriously injured.



I have fleeting memories of going to the building where the car agency was located, but all I can be sure of are several large black automobiles and a great deal of floor space that was forbidden territory for two little girls to run and yell through. There was a store in the vicinity that Mother must have taken us to several times, although I can't remember any particular merchandise. The store was big with a long, tall flight of wooden stairs leading to the second floor. I must not have been around stairs, for I delighted in tromping up the steps, with Martha in hand. A woman who must have been working on that second floor - a cashier/bookkeeper I assume - objected to the noise made by two little girls stomping up and down the bare steps. I remember my disappointment that the fun was stopped because it interfered with her work and made her head ache. The distraction that compensated for my not being allowed to climb the stairs was watching a cylinder race with an exciting hum up the wires leading from the desk on the main floor to the desk of

that disagreeable woman on the second floor. Then, mysteriously, the cylinder hummed back down the wire, to be opened and change given to Mother. That happened enough that I remember it vividly. Was the place a dry goods store where Mother purchased thread and fabric for making dresses for two noisy daughters?

Perhaps on one of our visits to that store, Martha and I were given balloons. I remember the balloons, a gold one for Martha and a beautiful silver one for me. Because of a continuing sense of guilt, I never discussed this incident with anyone. When we got home, Martha and I went into the backyard to play with our beautiful balloons. Very soon, Martha's gold balloon landed on a rose bush and burst. She went crying into the house. I knew with the certainty of a child who had been taught to share, however reluctantly, that I would have to share my prize with my careless sister. I didn't want to. So, with much anguished effort I chewed a hole in that lovely silver balloon; anything had to be better, to my mind, than sharing that rare treasure. Only later did the folly of my deed occur to me.



Peyton Manning and Jay Leno sitting on a Hupmobile. The first meeting to organize what became the NFL was in a Hupmobile dealership

My brother Willett was born while we lived on that street in Sherman. I couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. Around the time of his birth, Daddy's Hupmobile business must have failed (perhaps that car was no longer being manufactured?) for he returned to the Republic Production Company amid his duties of securing leases for oil wells in West Texas. When Brother was six months old, he was scheduled to spend six weeks in West Texas, spending a week or so at each of several towns in the oil fields. Mother decided she'd had enough of staying at home with three pre-schoolers (I was four by then), so she and Daddy bundled the whole family up and took off. I vaguely recall staying a week at a time in such towns as Midland, Odessa, and El Paso. In most of those towns, we roomed in homes where Mother made friends with our landladies and Martha and I could play in the yards. I especially remember the woman in Odessa where Mother got her prized chow-chow recipe. At the end of the six weeks, we stayed a few days in a hotel in El Paso, where Mother and Daddy spent the nights trying to protect Martha from mosquito bites. She and I were in the same double bed, but I wasn't bothered by the pests. The morning we were scheduled to leave the hotel, Brother crawled over to an electric outlet with Mother's curling iron, stuck it in, and blew out the power for the elevators as well as for our room. That memory was reinforced by its becoming a part of family lore as we grew up.

There was one isolated incident, however, that I recall stubbornly although Mother denied later that it could have happened. The events that I recall so vividly are bizarre enough that Mother was probably right and it never happened. If so, why do I recall so persistently that, one afternoon after my nap, Mother asked me to take a piece of paper to someone's house. "Do you remember where it is?" she asked. I declared that indeed I did, so off I went to the end of our street where it entered what must have been a moderately busy through street. I couldn't have been more than three and a half, but I felt very adult and responsible, as I crossed that street, turned left, and trudged down the sidewalk to a big white, two-storied house with two large columns. I had admired the house when we had driven by it. I timidly knocked on the door, gave the piece of paper to the woman who answered, and started to return home. The paper undoubtedly had Mother's name and perhaps even her phone number, for the woman called me back and insisted on my entering the house with her. She must have called Mother after she gave me a cookie. Very soon Mother, a very apologetic Mother, came to the door. She explained something to the cookie woman and took me home. All my wonderful feeling of being so grown up disappeared as I was scolded for going to the wrong house. Of course, Mother emphasized, she would never have sent me so far away. I merely felt wronged because I didn't understand why both the woman and Mother were so upset with me. What was the paper? Where would my cautious Mother have sent a three-year-old bearing it? Was I supposed to go to a house next door or very close instead of across a busy street? Whatever the occasion I can now empathize with my mother's unhappiness with me, but I surely would like to know the basis for my errand. The mystery will just have to be unsolved.