

9-16-98

Trees

Daddy was born on a farm in Cook County, in north central Texas, near the Red River. He, his brother Tom, and his sister Nannie, owned the property until it was made an Army camp during World War II. During my childhood, the farm (divided into two parts known by their locations as the Near Place and the Far Place) was one of my favorite places to visit despite its total lack of human habitation. The attraction was a large grove of big pecan trees on the Near Place.

I liked the trees because of their size, their graceful spread, and their cool shelter. In the fall the trees were a particular source of pleasure because of their crop of nuts. Daddy would throw a stick into the trees if there wasn't an abundance of pecans on the ground, a practice called "flailing" and frowned on by most tree lovers because of the damage to the limbs hit. Unlike the pecans we see today, these were quite small, with hard-to-crack shells. We generally gathered several large bags full. After we got home, Daddy would sit on the concrete back steps and shell the nuts with his pen knife, which he always kept murderously sharp. The ground would be strewn with small bits of shell, for he generally completed shelling at least a quart jar full of the perfect pecan halves which, for me, made a feast by themselves, but I also looked forward to Mother's pecan pies and pralines.

Trees were otherwise a rarity in my life. Oh, there was a variety of big old trees in a few older well-established residential sections of Dallas, but those I was able to see only on an occasional Sunday afternoon drive. There was also a gigantic pecan tree in the median strip at the beginning of Armstrong Avenue in Highland Park. It was my favorite goal for a family drive, especially when it was decorated with hundreds of lights during the Christmas season. Most Dallasites referred to it as "the tree." Otherwise, the only impressive trees that I knew were the two tallish, slender oak trees which shaded the Derbys' yard next door and provided us with refreshing shade on hot summer afternoon. I didn't know how lucky we were not to have to rake those leaves every fall.



Daddy planted two twig-sized pecan trees on the parkway in our front yard. He assured me that someday they would rival the Highland Park tree or the farm trees in size. Sure enough, as we saw when we were in Dallas last summer, the trees are large enough to shade the street but are not yet the size of "the tree."



Meanwhile, I had to be satisfied with vistas of trees only when we were away from home. As you might imagine, years later when we moved to Richmond, one of the deciding factors in our choice of a home on Stratford Road was the uncountable number of majestic oak trees, white, red, and hickory, on our acre lot. Their size put the former trees in my life to shame. They were, and are, beautiful in every season: bare, brown branches in winter, pale green spring leaves, dark green summer shade, even the ground-crunching collection of acorns before the leaves fall. Oh, yes, the heavy carpet of orange and brown leaves starts out beautiful, even though they do have to be raked endlessly both fall and spring, since some varieties don't drop their leaves until then.

I've loved all those trees through their leafing-out in the spring, when they make all our neighbors disappear in a green haze and on into fall, when they shed their leaves and open up neighborhood vistas we had almost forgotten.

In our twenty-five-year-plus association with those lovely trees I have luxuriated in their size and beauty, learned how they occasionally shed small limbs as a part of the growth process, and sometimes have had to grieve over the loss of one or two giants a year. There was one memorable time when, during a spectacular afternoon storm, five great trees were knocked onto our house, dominoed by the falling of a single large tree down the hill. No one needed a topic of conversation that night when our guests arrived for a party and found our rear-view windows covered with downed tree limbs.

I really thought I had learned to accept philosophically the loss of trees until a month ago when we discovered that the patriarch of our domestic forest was obviously dead. Some two hundred feet high, it stood poised to crush the western portion of our house if it was allowed to fall. Even so, I was unhappy about its loss. Tim, our friendly tree man, verified its demise because of borers. At the same time, our next-door neighbor asked Tim to remove several small trees from her yard so that she could add a circular driveway. Before he had arrived, she had learned of her greater need for help when a mammoth limb, itself larger than the complete trees I had grown up with, fell almost on her house while she was looking out into her backyard. The tree itself proved to be completely hollow, a real hazard to her house and a problem for Tim to take down.

The next Monday morning Tim and a large number of workers arrived in an assortment of trucks, varying from modest pick-ups through a large dump truck all the way to a bucket truck, the kind you see during emergency tree removal following catastrophic storms. The men provided us with a whole week of thrills and examples of their skill in planning and felling of the trees. They had to take down several smaller trees in order to clear the way for the safe operation of their jobs in taking down the targeted trees. At one point Paul and I took two folding chairs into our yard to watch the painstaking maneuvering in the taking off of limbs and the scaling of the trees above the reach of the bucket. Otherwise, we lurked behind inside windows to get varying views of the woodsmen's activities. Of course, the simultaneous operation of several chain saws provided us with lots of background noise. The chain saw racket paled when the automated woodchopper began gobbling the lopped limbs, everything short of the thick trunks of the two trees. Those had to be sawed into eight-foot lengths and carried off on flat-bed trucks after being expertly moved by a hard-working vehicle called a bobcat. I was glad to see that the men who fed the noisy wood-eater wore protective earphones. Otherwise, the decibels generated in that operation would have drowned the largest amplifiers at a rock concert, resulting in permanent deafness for the operators.

Tim and his remarkable tree surgeons have completed their extensive operations in our two yards. They have departed and have left big holes in our little forest. We miss the men and, especially, the trees. We console ourselves with the thought that we may be able to produce some tomatoes next year in our backyard which will no longer remain entirely in shade all day. AND, we still have more trees than we care to count.