



Taking Roots in Wilmette

By Elisabeth G. Weedon

There is an old theory to the effect that every seven years one is a completely new beginning; that there remains not even the least tiny atom of a person who existed before. Whether true or not, this seems rather a fascinating personality, bodily, mental and spiritual, (if the behaviorist still allows us a mental and spiritual existence) is so slow as to parallel evolution. And yet, if one looks back, critically upon her individually at seven, at fourteen, at twenty-one, and twenty-eight and so on, (this one simply refuses to go step further than nine times seven), it is so apparent that nothing remains of the self of the early septennates and only a faint trace of the appearing in the later ones.

“I am not the man I once was,” is often said, sadly. I wonder if it might not be said gladly. The passing years do steal the gold and leave the gray, abstract the high ideals and bring the passive acceptance, take away the belief in Santa Claus and leave the certainty of the tax collector. They also bring, however, understanding, tolerance, and breadth of views and a sense of humor which makes an apparent drab pattern of life more comfortably wearable than in the days when one confidently and breathlessly attempted to pattern it after an unattainable design. How many of us, having hitched out wagons to a star, expecting to reach the status of a second Rosa Bonheur, a second Julia Marlow, a second Patti or George Eliot or Pavlova, suddenly have found ourselves wheeling a baby carriage and really enjoying it!

Thirty-five years ago Wilmette was a village of far horizons; of autumn fields gay with the blaze of golden rod and prairie sun flower, with the crimson, knightly spears of liatris, with the purple mystery of wild aster, with the thrilling blue of the fringed gentian.

A village set in spring woods spangled with violets, blue, white, yellow; Solomon’s seal, spring beauties, purple phlox, wild geranium. Buttercups, the pink of wild crab trees, the white mist of wild plum and shad bush.

A village of bird song and bird beauty; the brilliant orange of the oriole, the scarlet flash of the tanager, the clear color of the little blue bird and the more sober hue of the indigo bunting; the brown of the thrush, the gray of the catbird, the scarlet tip of the red-winged blackbird and the colors and the shapes of the little warblers and many varieties of woodpeckers.

A village of hopeful pink sunrises and gorgeous golden sunsets that could be seen without dodging around bricks and mortar; a village of unlimited possibilities, a place to make a home.

This is the way it looked to two adventurers way back in the mauve decade; two possibly sentimental and certainly unsophisticated explorers in search of a tract of land on which to plant the flag of their union.

One of them, London bred, Boston, New York and Chicago experienced, had never grown a single plant outside of a window box. The other had memories of her Mother’s garden,



but as one viewing a lovely picture with no knowledge of how to paint it. And, as all people enjoy an exploration into the unknown, these people ardently desired to create a garden. In the sunny window of their city flat (and in those days it was a flat, not an apartment) they had a pot of sweet scented musk, a thriving English ivy, and an oxalis, whose quaint trick of closing its prettily shaped leaves at night and going to sleep was a source of unfailing interest and delight.

For a while this represented all outdoors to them. After a time it became necessary to find a place where the biggest baby could run across the floor or even jump from the davenport without causing an eruption from the dwellers in the flat below.

Then a miracle happened. In the very next block was a row of cottages, each one having a back yard about the size of a large pocket handkerchief. One especially desirable had vines over the front porch. In their after dinner walks eyes had often been turned with longing in this direction and one evening the unbelievable happened. There was a "For Rent" sign in the window of the beautiful cottage. Believe it or not the lease was signed that evening, as the owner, fortunately lived in almost the next house.

I wonder if flowers were ever so wonderful or vegetables so large and so luscious as those grown in that tiny city garden. What matter if a large crop of pigweed were lovingly tended under the misapprehension that it was a portulaca? Pigweed is really rather beautiful if not brought into competition with roses and, if one cares to investigate, does belong to the same family as portulaca. There was a border of sweet alysum, some precious petunias, a few brave, bright geraniums, a flaming salvia, dear to the heart of the masculine member of the firm, and sweet peas along the whole length of the high board fence.

Once the family went down to the country for ten days on an early vacation. On their return, dropping satchels and bundles on the front steps, they rushed to the little back yard to see what had happened to the flowers. The whole row of sweet peas was wonderful, fairylike bloom, the airy blossoms rioting all over the gray fence and tugging and straining to fly straight up into the sky- a sight to be carried in memory for nearly forty years.

I expected the family might have taken root right there had there been talk of an elevated railway being built. It was rumored that the survey was to come down this narrow, north side street so the landlord would not give the long time lease the family wanted. To go back to the flat was unthinkable, especially as the second baby was now big enough to jump off the davenport. The problem was to find another home comparable to the one that was being wrested away from them.

So they left the two babies with a neighbor and boarded a car at the old Ferris Wheel on Clark Street, a car going north. They rode and they rode. As they got farther north the car passed thru patches of sweet clover so high it brushed the shoulders of the conductor as he swung along the running board, collecting the fares. At length the car came to the end of the line, Fountain Square, Evanston.

To the two explorers, who has their mind set on the great open spaces, Fountain Square, even at that date, seemed to urban and there were no "For Rent" signs. So they walked north to Noyes Street, took one of those satisfactory, diagonal short cuts that used to cross vacant lots in the early days and reached the Milwaukee Railroad tracks. Northward, ever northward they



trecked, walking sometimes on the ties and sometimes on the cinder path until they reached a little way station, labeled Llewellyn Park. An inviting board walk here led west and they were tired of walking on railroad ties so they walked along until they saw a man and his young son chopping up a tree that had blown down in the yard. They asked the man if there were any “For Rent” signs in the immediate neighborhood. He kindly directed them farther up in the village but as they reached the next corner they saw such a magnificent tree such a little way off that they had to go that way to look at it. Nestling in the shade of this great cottonwood was a little house, evidently only half built, that looked, in spite of its unfinished state, as though it might possibly have the word “home” concealed somewhere about it.

The two adventurers approached the rear and discovered a quite discouraged young carpenter sitting in his shirt sleeves doing nothing. On investigation they found he had started to build a home, that his wife and baby had been ill, that he had been having bad luck everywhere, that he had no money left to buy the lumber and his “ardware” and that he was at the end of his string and would sell out for his “hequity”, whatever that might be.

By this time the wonderful air and the sunshine and the flowers had had their effect on the two young people. They promptly abandoned the idea of renting a home and with the complete knowledge that they did not possess the money to pay for the cottage, they decided to buy it.

Just how, after sleepless nights and much planning and contriving this was accomplished, is quite another story.

It is a significant fact that on the twelfth of October, the day dedicated to the great explorer, at the hour of six in the afternoon, a moving van bearing their entire worldly goods reached the corner of Hill and Sheridan Road. It turned into the sunset, lumbering perilously over the shaky boards that bridged the little stream, meandering across Hill Street, and made straight towards the big tree. They had covered the fifteen miles from Chicago in nine hours. The mother of the two babies had come out on the train and had waited on the steps for centuries, wondering when the father would come with the familiar home furnishings that had looked so strange and houseless, standing bare on the sidewalk, or lodged at undignified angles on the van. And Remus was coming too, their friend, protector and playmate. Remus had gone on the van with father because dogs were not allowed in trains but it had been very lonely all day without him.

When at last Remus did come and was released from his shaky prison, he was a dog mad with joy. He seemed to realize he had reached a place where he could be free, where he could bark, wag his plummy tail and run without criticism or restraint and run he did. Over piles of sand, mortar boxes, boards and shavings, around and around the little house he ran like a wild thing, until, completely tired, he threw himself down at his master’s feet. He too had come home.

The fall that year was late and lovely. As the house was still in the hands of plumbers, plasters, and decorators, the next four weeks were spent in the open, exploring fields, woods and sands. The board walks would be followed as far as they went, then the baby carriages would be abandoned there and the journey continued. Through the fields, down the steep bluffs along the shore they would go, always getting back in time to meet father’s train.



The evenings were long and quiet, very quiet. There were no automobile horns, no radios, not even the rumble of an elevated train. The roads were plain Illinois dirt roads or cinder paths, so even the hoof beats of the belated horse were muffled, the streets were lighted at spasmodic intervals with oil lamps and the darkness between them abysmal.

There was “no place to go but in, no place to go but out.” Not a movie anywhere or a theater short of Chicago.

But the quiet was soothing and the longer evenings gave time for the avocations which were pushed aside during the busy days. Time to read, to talk, to write, to draw, to bind books, to study, to join with the other young people of the neighborhood in learning and acting small plays. There was never any time to be bored.

Then spring time came. The one policeman in the village, who was also the representative of a firm of nurserymen, called with a book containing wonderful colored pictures of Baldwin apple trees, Yenshi peaches and early cherries. There were also grape vines and standard rose trees and purple clematis. The young people plunged. They ordered two of everything. It was something of a blow to find some days later that the entire orchard could be put in a large umbrella stand. However, the baby trees were set out with a great deal of care and ceremony and in later years grew to resemble their pictures in the catalogue.

There were no trees in the parkway around the home but the ditches and woods nearby has many slender saplings-elm, maple, oak- to be had for transplanting. It was great fun to hunt for one with just the right shape, carefully to dig it, solicitously transport it, so that no branch would be injured, and painstakingly plant it.

There was no need to leave home at vacation time- life was really all vacation, if one could regard it that way. The lakefront became as much home to the growing family as the house. It seemed as though no one else had discovered that there was a lake front, so secluded were they. Whole days were spent on the beach. So many pleasant memories of that time arises. The going early at dawn; the scramble down the steep bluff; the building of the campfire of driftwood; the delicious smell of bacon and coffee cooked out of doors; the castles and caverns built in the sand, the elephants and lions modeled in the same plastic material; the brown children, tumbling in and out of the water, or paddling an old canoe close to shore; the growing brilliance of the fire as the dusk came in; the last crimson shreds of the sunset; the moon climbing enormously orange colored out of the lake, sending an inviting path across the ripples to one’s very feet. Then the gathering up of the sleepy babies and carrying them home pick-a-back in the warm, fragrant dark, while the older children on their bicycles, acted as advance guard.

The years slipped by. The little place which was to have boon only a stepping stone became a hearthstone. Partitions were taken down, rooms were enlarged and built on, to keep pace with the growing family. Friends moving on, farther north, advised like removal, the building of a larger house, the new start. And still, as in the beginning, Wilmette seemed to them to hold all that was necessary to the making of a home.

The far horizons had vanished. Once again one has to dodge around bricks and mortar to see the sunset. The spangled fields, the restful woods, the long stretches of quiet and almost



deserted beach live only in the memory, that memory that destroys all things hard, inconvenient or unpleasant and leaves only things beautiful.

Yes, all five times seven years have taken their toll on springtime beauty, of freshness and simplicity; but they have brought a village of comfort, of convenience, of efficiency, of a mature beauty that fulfills the promise of its youth- a place that holds in memory and in reality the essence of the word "home."