Being Brought Up in Huntsville

Eleanor Hutchens
Southern childhood has been written so thoroughly, by so many writers, that I sometimes think I have lived a script. Even my specific early experiences in Huntsville, or a good many of them, have been written or told by my contemporaries who shared them, from climbing on the back of Hogjaw’s ice wagon on hot summer days to standing in the East Clinton schoolyard to watch Lindbergh fly over in *The Spirit of St. Louis* as one of our teachers said, “Yes, NX211! that’s his plane all right!”

I take strong exception to the description of my old Huntsville as “a sleepy little cotton town.” For us whose first and deepest impressions were formed here, it was the world itself. Its adult citizens moved as large mystic figures, saying and doing
amazing things. All was new, all was exciting; nothing was sleepy to us whose elders struggled to make us take afternoon naps. And our elders were not sleepy; the people who built the Russel Erskine Hotel, the old Times building, and the Terry-Hutchens building almost simultaneously in the 1920’s were not sleepy people. Nor were the homeowners who built the houses we can see today, showing the up-to-date styles of their times. Nor were the store owners, who ran their businesses personally six full days a week and whom I remember as cheerful bright-eyed men with short haircuts, rather like Ross Perot.

It was not a quiet town. Train whistles, church and courthouse clock bells, mill whistles, clattering automobiles, street cars, barking unlicensed dogs, and roving free bands of shouting and skating children made noisy the streets of residential neighborhoods that are now silent and sedate. The blocks around the courthouse square were full of cars and farm wagons and pedestrian shoppers and lawyers and—yes a few drowsy loafers.

In those few blocks you could buy anything you needed in life, from a John Deere tractor to a hundred shares of General Electric to a length of satin ribbon. Today I don’t think you can buy a quart of milk or a pair of socks within half a mile of the courthouse. I’m not complaining—much. It’s just that such a concentration of people and activity made for liveliness.

So much for the sleepy little cotton town. But I’ve decided to talk today, not on the intrinsic excitements of a youth in Huntsville but on the steady efforts our elders made, both for themselves and for us, to be in touch with the larger worlds of Washington and New York and London and Paris and with the great things of all time, the books and the art and the great individual lives that had been lived. Sometimes these small-town efforts have been noted in fiction and recollection, but usually with a
patronizing smirk, as if they were affectations or were hopelessly touched with ignorance and futility. But what would small towns have been without them? They would have been ingrown patches of ignorance and futility—possibly even sleepy little cotton towns.

In the first place, there were the songs, tales, and books that our parents and grandparents bestowed on us from birth. The first lullaby I remember was a poem by Tennyson set to music. The next was a Gilbert and Sullivan song my grandmother sang to me, “Tit Willow,” a song I now think a work of comic genius. But as a toddler I was grief-stricken at the suicide of the little bird. I could not understand my grandmother’s amusement as she sang it. Then there was what my grandmother called grand opera, which she loved and played on the Victrola. Trying to form my taste, she used to pay me a nickel to give her a concert—that was, to climb on a stool to wind the Victrola and to place the needle carefully on the rim of the record. Once at the end of an aria by Caruso she said, “Isn’t it wonderful that we can hear him sing after he is dead? “DEAD!” I squawked, and did not want to go near the machine again for some time. A dead man singing! But by the time I started school I knew the stories and some of the music of a few great operas and of the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, which my grandfather also quoted fondly.

There were books in plenty. Our elders read them, both current ones and classics; and talked about them in our presence. Among living writers, my mother especially liked F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Galsworthy. I eventually inherited four full sets of Dickens, all thoroughly read, from different older members of the family. Murray’s bookstore on the west side of the Square, and the public library just off the Square, kept a supply of books moving into and through the house. Many people subscribed to the Memphis Commercial Appeal and The Chattanooga Times in addition to The Huntsville Daily Times. My Grand-
father took these and The Wall Street Journal. For breaking news, he relied on the stock market ticker at a downtown brokerage office. I remember the day he telephoned my grandmother to tell her that Lindbergh had taken off for Paris.

Magazines were publishing good fiction and nonfiction. The National Geographic kept my grandfather informed of new developments in archeology and earth sciences. He had a special interest in astronomy and used to talk at the table about the expanding universe and the possibility of space travel. He very much wanted to live until man landed on the moon, and he died in 1956 confident that Huntsville would send man there. But he had been talking of space and its wonders thirty years before. He himself was not a scientist but a cotton merchant.

In the meantime, there was earth travel. Huntsville had two trains a day to New York, and Huntsvillians actually went up there for a week or two of theater, shopping, and business. Of the four or five million residents of New York, I doubt that more than one in a thousand went to the theater in a given season. Of the eight thousand souls who lived in Huntsville proper during the 1920's, I could easily have named more than eight who saw plays in New York each year. So, if big-city play going is one measure of being awake, Huntsville was no sleepier than New York. And there was travel abroad. My grandmother had taken the grand tour in 1890 and enjoyed its memories to the end of her life. Most of her old friends had been to Europe at one time or another. I remember that when she told me a family friend was going around the world, I thought that meant to visit every town on the map. So she knew it was time to give me a globe, and she did.

Business connections with cities outside of Huntsville went well beyond cotton. My grandfather had his suits made by a
tailor in New Orleans, his shoes by a firm in Atlanta who kept his individual last, and his shirts by a New England company whose representative visited him twice a year. There was a perfectly good clothing store for men on Clinton Street, just a block and a half from his office on West Side Square, but old cosmopolitan habits prevailed with him.

He thought Prohibition an outrage. Having friends in Canada whom he visited every year or so, he brought back good Scotch whiskey in triumphant defiance. Once he raised his glass to my grandmother and said something completely unintelligible. She explained to me: “That’s what French people say when they mean to your health.” “Don’t French people know how to talk?” I asked. My grandmother, who never missed an opportunity to enlarge one’s mind, said, “The French people might think we didn’t know how to talk”—thus creating an internationalist on the spot.

One private school and the Catholic school survived here in the 1920’s, but nearly all children went to the public schools. I believe I was the first of my family, on my mother’s or my father’s side, to go to a public school. Parents and grandparents had gone from private schools in Huntsville to boarding schools in other states where they had made friends from different places whom they visited and corresponded with for the rest of their lives. In the 1920’s, boys and girls were still sent away to school; but, by the 30’s, when I reached my teens, the Depression had changed this so that one was lucky to go to college when the time came. However, of the shouting and skating children on Locust Street when I was a small child there, three within the space of a block became university professors, two rose to national success in art, two became engineers, and one worked all his adult life as a scientist at Oak Ridge.
If you have seen *Driving Miss Daisy*, you have had a glimpse into one aspect of private life in 1920’s Huntsville. Its order and its style were made possible by many highly skilled household employees. Both of my grandmothers were driven by chauffeurs in large black cars, as were many of their friends, both men and women. This was not a matter of display; people their age had learned to drive late, if at all, and this was the most convenient way of getting around. The chauffeur wore a dark suit and a visored cap; on getting back to the house he put on his white coat and served dinner. Early the next morning he might be cutting the grass or firing the furnace. Cooks and nurses, both very good at their jobs, kept houses and children in order. I have been told that in 1900, the largest single occupational category in this country was domestic work. Our cook was with us for 52 years, our houseman for 56. They taught us children respect for all our elders, especially themselves. It was they who made possible a Huntsville with leisure enough not to be a sleepy little cotton town, and I honor the memory of them with profound love and admiration.

I had the great good fortune to sit, for three meals a day, at the table with a father who was a determined Republican and a grandfather who was an equally adamant Democrat. The first Presidential election I remember was in 1928, when the merits of Al Smith and Herbert Hoover were debated by these two. I felt that I knew the two candidates well. Distance meant nothing: I felt that in fact I could run the government if given the chance. I was not a small child in a sleepy little cotton town but an American fully involved in history. Huntsville had always made me feel this way.
A recent walking tour of downtown. Looking at the Bibb-Newman House from across Williams. Tour sponsored by HHF, courtesy of Harvie Jones and Hall Bryant.