

The Front Porch

There once was a beloved and useful space called the Front Porch. It existed most profoundly in the small towns and sprawling farmhouses of the rural South. In the days before air-conditioning ran us off the porch and into the barren bowels of television, the front porch was the family room. Without air-conditioning, folks automatically gathered in that shaded, cooling space to connect with neighbors, friends, and families.

Born in 1940, I grew up in a very small town built around a perfectly circular lake ringed with Victorian homes with massive front porches. The porches of those houses were like small kingdoms ruled by a Monarch Mama and her army of female soldiers. In those days, intergenerational living was not a new concept or excuse for the fact little Johnny couldn't get a job, despite his expensive college degree. It was the simple fact that families expected to look after their own. The porch was littered with maiden aunts, an old granny or two, plus an occasional derelict of the family who was "just down on his luck." That usually meant Uncle Earl liked liquor more than he liked labor. But all were useful in some kind of semi-forced labor—whether it be gardening, laundry, housecleaning, childminding, or cooking. They were particularly helpful as the communications committee, and no tidbit of information was too small to repeat.

The porch was the useful setting for observing the ebb and flow of small-town life, and the gossip generated was far more reliable than the local newspaper. In fact, the motto "we are our brother's keepers" could have been altered to "we are our brother's peepers." Little went on in the community that was not observed, reported, and enhanced by the front porch police squad.

Social media could never compete with the speed and force of local gossip, which provided not only the scenario but opinions and solutions with lightning speed. The casual comment "I saw Lou Ann at the Piggly Wiggly yesterday, and she said her new neighbors had a teenage son about the same age as her Catherine" would become, within hours, a saga of epic

proportions translated into “Lou Ann doesn’t like her new neighbors. They have a son who’s just all over Catherine. Why, they have already had to run him off the porch twice at night. You know Catherine’s always been a good girl, but it won’t last long if that keeps up. They’d better get a new porch light and keep those living room curtains open at night.”

Children were never out of sight because Granny or Aunt Mary or someone from the squad was always on the lookout. It was virtually impossible to misbehave without getting caught and punishment promptly meted out. The entire front porch squad had spanking privileges, which included not only their own but neighbors’ kids as well. Sometimes it got to be a little like a competition between porches when dusk began to fall and the chatter of adults was interrupted by “Little Johnny, you get on home now” or “Get off Miss Helen’s porch because supper’s ready and you need to get washed up.”

Supper was usually early because there were several mountains of dishes that had to be washed and dried by hand since dishwashers had not yet invaded kitchens. Dishwashing was still an affair of the assembly line, with someone needed to scrape plates and others to wash, rinse, dry, and then store. There was plenty of conversation along the assembly line consisting of “You didn’t get this one clean” or “What the washer doesn’t get the dryer has to.” The anguished cry of “I’ve got to unload the dishwasher” was a far cry into the future.

Soft summer evenings were the perfect respite after supper. The entire household gathered on the porch in the dwindling light to share the day’s events and watch the children chase fireflies or shell peas or butterbeans for the next day’s meals. Gallons of sweet tea were consumed while ladies sat in their rockers with an apron covering outspread legs to catch the peas or beans. But those same legs could come together as quickly as a lightning bolt if a visitor approached. Small children were useful in crawling around between legs, gathering any stray peas that might have suffered from such quick action. “Waste not, want not” was a mantra practiced every day, and not a single pea escaped rescue.

It was a time of quiet contentment as crickets chirped amidst the laughter and cries of the little ones begging to stay up “just a little bit longer.” Some evenings a piano could be heard trilling light tunes or, more often, hymns. There was usually somebody in the family who played the piano for the

church, and depending on their ability, the evening was either enhanced or shattered by their need to practice. Aunt Ethel was one of those. She could just about manage “Amazing Grace,” but when she thundered into “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” it turned into a rout by the front porch crowd, who headed for the exit like squirrels hunting for nuts. All the while muttering things under their breath, like “She’s certainly enthusiastic, but maybe the Spirit won’t keep her at it too long. I don’t think she understands flats and sharps too well.” In louder voices, comments like “I’ve got a pot of beans on the stove I need to tend to” or “I promised my wife I’d fix that screen door before dark” covered their hasty escape.

All the while, the men smoked their pipes of Prince Albert tobacco, deftly tapped from the popular bright red tin can with a picture of a handsome Victorian man on the front. Cigarette smokers with deeply tobacco-stained fingers hand-rolled their own, as filtered cigarettes were yet to come. Rolling cigarettes was an art form requiring a snakelike tongue to send a river of saliva down the carefully half-curved, almost transparent white paper. Cigarettes could be fat or thin, depending on the purse of the smoker. Each man carried his own tobacco pouch and a roll of papers. The papers were usually kept in a shirt pocket, whereas the pouch was carefully secured in deep pants pockets. Common courtesy required them to always offer, “Would you like a smoke” before they took their own cigarette.

Only men were allowed to smoke, as it was absolutely scandalous for a woman to light up. That act would put her in the realm of a social pariah and a “loose” woman. She’d be quickly dropped from her Sunday School class and snubbed by the Woman’s Club with great piety and satisfaction. Yet deep in the countryside, farm women often chewed tobacco or dipped snuff with impunity. They might have been liberated women with tobacco, but they were still confined to hard labor at home.

The women chattered as they swayed back and forth in their rocking chairs, drinking large glasses of cold, sweet tea while mending socks or indulging in a simple version of the beauty shop—brushing their hair. Beauty shops were a luxury and home hair dryers unknown, so women washed their own hair and brushed it vigorously to dry it as quickly as possible. Most women wore their hair long, making the drying process lengthy. They cut their own hair as well as each other’s when fashion decreed a new style.

While men dismissed beauty aids, they still went to the barbershop once a month. That was more for recreation than necessity, as they liked to gossip as well as the women, though never admitting it. There they picked up tidbits such as “Fred got a new car, but he’s having a hard time paying for it. That new wife of his is spending too much money on curtains and clothes.” Others would lament, “Business is bad. I’ve sold just about everyone in town all the insurance they can use and some they can’t.”

Every porch had a swing, and its gentle creaking was a constant and reassuring note in the sounds that came with the evening symphony of sundown. Soon the time would come for someone to call out, “Time for bed and prayers,” and there would be an immediate and complete evacuation of that sacred spot to make way for the coming of the next day.

The only thing left on the porch was Midnight. She was the sneaky, old black cat who stole her way onto the porch swing as soon as it was vacated. She leapt up with the agility known only to cats and proceeded to rule from her mobile perch. She could twist her fat tail around one of the chains and move the swing just enough to rock herself gently to sleep. She was rudely awakened with the coming dawn and the brisk brush of a busy housewife shouting, “Get down from there, you ole hairy thing, before I sweep you off that swing along with the porch floor, or I let that old yard dog in to chase you. He needs the exercise anyway.”

I miss that old porch and the contentment that came with it.