HISTORICAL SOCIETY NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

A MID-VICTORIAN HOUSE (ca. 1870)
RESIDENCE OF J. W. FLEMING, 1902-1909

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In 1902, when I was four years old, my father moved his family from Fairmount Street where I was born to what was known as "The Old Keller Place" at 900 South Braddock Avenue at the corner of Henrietta Street. The property consisted of nine acres of level land which ran all the way back to Fern Hollow on the west and extended into Swissvale on the south. It was really a small farm. The white brick house stood in the middle of the property, far back from the street, behind a white picket fence, a row of tall maple trees, and a broad lawn. Built about 1870 by a Mr. Keller, who had made a fortune in the coal business, it was an excellent example of the mid-Victorian style.

As the photograph accompanying this article shows, the house was rather simple in design and had escaped the towers and turrets, gewgaws, and over-ornamentation which came later in the era. For example, the roof had several rows of square-ended slates alternating with several rows of "fish-scale" slates. This was a practice popular at the time, but the slates were all gray in color, and thus avoided the garish effect of alternating rows of red and gray slates seen in some of the houses of the period. There was considerable decorative exterior woodwork, such as brackets under the porch roof and eaves, cornices over the windows, supports for the lightning rods on the roof, and unusually elaborate jigsaw scroll-work under the overhanging main gables and the gables of the dormer windows. There were three big chimneys with a separate chimney pot for each of the seven fireplaces, plus one each for the kitchen stove and coal furnace.

The front entrance to the house had tall, double doors leading into a vestibule with a colored tile floor and wainscoting. From the entranceway inner double doors with frosted glass in their upper

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halves opened into a wide center hall. To the left of the hall was the library, a comfortable and cozy room filled with books where the family spent its evenings.

Directly across the hall was the parlor, formally furnished and so little used that it was seldom heated except for parties. Each year a large Christmas tree was placed in the big bay window where it lasted very well in the cold room. The heat was turned on, of course, when all the aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends arrived for the holiday festivities. Then the Christmas tree was briefly lighted. This was quite a task, for candles were the only lighting available for this purpose in those days. The candles were about four inches long and were mounted on spring clips which were attached to the branches. Because of the fire hazard, after they were all lighted they were allowed to burn only until all the “oohs” and “aahs” had subsided. Then they were put out, much to the dismay of the children, and all attention was diverted to the distribution and opening of presents.

In the back of the library on the sunny south side of the house was the dining room, with heavy golden-oak furniture and a table which could be extended to seat a dozen or more people. It was separated from the kitchen by two pantries with a pass-through window between — a butler’s pantry and a kitchen pantry. The butler’s pantry was an anachronism, for I am sure that nobody who lived in the house ever had a butler. It was used in my time only for very formal dinners which were few and far between. These pantries could be bypassed and food taken from the kitchen to the dining room across the back of the wide center hall along a narrow passageway behind a paneled wood and frosted-glass screen provided for that purpose. This screen extended from floor to ceiling, and when its access door was closed no clatter of dishes or kitchen smells could reach the front of the house.

The kitchen was quite large and contained a big black iron coal stove when we moved in. Much to the delight of the cook, we quickly replaced this with a new gas range. The kitchen was a busy place during the harvest season when my mother, an aunt or two, and the maids — their long hair tied up in kerchiefs — were cooking fruit and vegetables grown on the place and were putting them up in Mason jars. I was much underfoot at that time, for the kitchen was full of steam and delightful fragrances.

Between the kitchen and the front parlor was a two-story stairwell with a wide staircase curving around a landing. The carpentry on this staircase was so good that, as a boy, it took me several years
of sliding down the banister before I could be convinced that it had not been made in one piece. A side hall opening to the outside ran under the landing, and our old-fashioned stand-up telephone was affixed to the wall at the foot of the staircase.

On the second floor was another wide center hall with its own window in front. Four corner bedrooms opened onto the hall. None of the bedrooms had a built-in clothes closet, so the two most-used ones had large wardrobes. At the back of the hall was a large bathroom divided in the middle by a partition. On one side was a table-sized marble slab with a basin in it, and on the other a toilet and tub. When we moved in, the original "zinc" tub was still there. In reality, it was made of galvanized iron set in what looked like a big wooden box. It was soon replaced by a "modern" cast iron, porcelain-lined tub painted white on the outside and raised above the floor on four short cast iron legs. However, the old chain-pull toilet with its water tank up near the ceiling still remained.

On the third floor there were two maids' rooms and an enormous attic playroom which in bad weather was shared with visiting cousins and neighborhood children.

The house had a deep, full-sized cellar, well lighted by numerous small windows. There more products of the garden and orchard were stored. To be found were a barrel of cole slaw, a barrel of dill pickles, apple butter in big stone crocks, and potatoes and onions in the root cellar. Only the part of the cellar floor near the furnace was cemented. The remainder was hard-packed clay with board walks to keep people from tracking dirt into the upstairs.

There were no window shades anywhere in the house, and none was needed. All the windows had lace curtains which were of astonishing length because the windows on the first and second floors were in proportion to the twelve-foot ceiling heights. The library, parlor, and dining room also had heavy overdrapes. In addition, every window had two sets of solid, not louvered, shutters, one for the upper sash and one for the lower. The window embrasures were so deep and the sills so wide that these shutters could be folded back into shallow receptacles on each side so that they looked like panels.

There was one omission in the house which would have been considered intolerable by today's housewives. There was no electricity! I do not remember the reason for this. Certainly electric service was not available in 1870 when the house was built. As the last house within the Pittsburgh city limits, it may still have been slightly outside the service area at the turn of the century. I am strengthened
in this belief because the house was lighted by gas, and the street lights in the neighborhood also burned gas. The light poles were only about ten feet high, and every evening a workman carrying a short ladder and blowtorch walked along Braddock Avenue. At each light pole he climbed the ladder, turned on the gas, and ignited it with his torch. In the morning, he retraced his route, without the blowtorch, and turned off the lights.

In these days when an electric power failure can shut down whole cities and their environs, it is hard to realize that it was possible to exist without it. But gas illumination in the 1890s and early 1900s was quite advanced technically and was extremely good. The old “open flare” lights had long since been replaced by “mantles” of woven metallic material which looked like oversized thimbles. When the gas was lighted, the mantle became incandescent in the same way that the filament in an electric light bulb does, and a brilliant white light emanated.

Gas was also available in the old coal fireplaces in the house where it had been used to start the coal burning. After our family moved in, these were replaced by “Taylor furnaces,” which were flat hollow steel plates punched with rows of small holes and covered with asbestos. They filled the whole fireplace opening and gave more effective heat with no dirt or ashes.

It must be admitted, however, that without electricity routine housework was hard labor. Of course, we did not have modern electric vacuum cleaners, and during spring cleaning all the furniture had to be taken out of the room and the large heavy carpets rolled up and wrestled painfully into the backyard. There they were draped over wire lines and the dust flailed out of them with wicker or heavy wire carpet beaters. It was hot, dirty work. There were no household electric refrigerators and would not be for a decade. Weekly the ice wagon rolled up to the kitchen door and the driver replenished the icebox. Except for lighting, and for the ungainly electric fans of the time, there was little use for electricity in the home. There were no electric toasters, mixers, broilers, or space heaters — none of the myriad gadgets so common today.

There was, of course, no commercial radio, and there would not be until the 1920s. Television was still over forty years in the future. But we were not without mechanical musical devices in the Braddock Avenue house. We had an upright player piano using punched paper music rolls and powered pneumatically by pumping foot pedals. We also had one of the first cabinet Victrolas. It was a handsome
piece of furniture powered by a series of tightly coiled springs and hand-wound with a crank. Life was good.

Referring to the photograph here reproduced, the driveway in the foreground was the seldom-used left half of the crescent which gave access to the house through two separate gates opening on South Braddock Avenue. As the picture was taken on October 11, 1906, the foliage and flowers were not at their lush best. The bush on the right was a hydrangea. The vines on the porch were honeysuckle next to the steps and were dutchman's pipe on the side. The bushes at the bay window were lilacs. The planting in the flower beds was changed with the seasons, and it included many different varieties, such as tulips in the spring, tall red canna in the summer, and chrysanthemums in the fall. In the left foreground is a pear tree, and at the left edge of the picture there is an apple tree. Both were part of the old orchard which was a mass of fragrant blossoms in the spring and which produced high quality fruit bountifully in season.

The small wooden building peeking out from behind the house was the "wash house." My mother never liked this picture because there were sheets on the line when it was taken. Nearby was a grape arbor, and the unpainted picket fence of a large pasture. In the far background of the photograph are the forest trees of Fern Hollow.

Hidden by the house as viewed from the front was a big square two-story barn topped by a cupola. It had living quarters for a hired man, and there was space for two carriages, two horses, and two cows. We had only one of each, plus a Shetland pony for a short time. There was also a big hayloft where children could play. This could have been dangerous because there were several uncovered openings in the floor where hay was pitched down to the mangers and stalls. There were pitchforks and an axe, a grindstone, and a rather fearsome-looking corn shredder. Also the hay-loading door was usually open to the outside. However, we had all been warned of these things and promised severe punishment rather than sympathy if any of us got hurt — so nobody got hurt.

This semiurban, semirural home was a wonderful place in which to grow up, and I had a very happy life there. I believe that my parents did, too, although eventually they found the management of a place of that size was too much of a burden. Also, in the days when almost everyone used public transportation, my father found it to be a long and time-consuming trip from our house at the very edge of town to his office in the Golden Triangle. Therefore, in 1909, we moved to Meade Street. It was a much more crowded neighborhood,
but it was one where transportation was fast and frequent both by streetcar and railroad.

The Braddock Avenue house stood for another ten years or so before being torn down to make way for a high-grade housing development. Now the land is occupied by a dozen or more attractive two-story red brick houses, in one of which by coincidence a second-generation cousin of mine now lives.