

A CONGENIAL ENVIRONMENT

by Fred Hobbs

“It takes a heap of livin’ to make a house a home.” So wrote the American poet Edgar Guest.

As a child, my family did “a heap of livin” in a “heap” of homes. In the 1930s in the height of The Great Depression my mother, three brothers, my sister and I lived in several different dwellings. This was because my father had died of tuberculosis contracted in the muddy trenches of France in World War I.

As a widow with five kids aged 10 and under, my mother had to support us on a very limited income. We never lacked for good food (Mother was an excellent southern cook) and we always had appropriate if not fancy clothes to wear.

She was extremely resourceful in finding places to live at rents she could afford...barely. We never lived in a slum, but we moved frequently as she somehow found a slightly better place than the last one at a cost that fit the budget. In all instances, she provided what can clearly be considered a good home.

Supplemented by a small widow’s pension from my Dad’s military service, Mother was also adept at finding part time employment that did not interfere with her maternal responsibilities and obligations.

At appropriate ages, we all held jobs. Being the oldest, my sister was able to do much of the housework; my older brothers caddied at local country club golf courses; I, the youngest, sold magazines to a captive audience of some 60,00 GIs at Lowry and Buckley Fields as the depression gradually lessened and World War II unfolded.

All of this helped, of course, but it was Mother’s aptitude for finding the best possible lodging that was the main reason none of us ever embraced the notion that we were poor.

We lived in three different small houses on the same street in suburban Englewood for a time, each a little bit nicer and presumably less expensive. For almost two years, we felt at home in several different cabins in Evergreen. In the summer, many of those cabins were occupied at least for a few weeks by what we called “rich Kansas farmers,” but in wintertime the owners were happy to have a family occupying them to ward off critters and vandals and to minimize damage from the rigors of snow and ice accumulations.

Even though the cabins had no electricity and running water was available only in the summer, we thrived in these homes. We had to admit, though, that the frequent short trips down the hill to the shack with the half-moon carved in the door was less than thrilling.

Eventually, we returned to the city, living in an upstairs apartment in an early 20th century house in Aurora and in a basement space in south Denver. Then, one by one, my brothers went into wartime service, my sister got married and my mother and I lived for nine years in a government housing project next to Lowry.

These places were each a true home in the best definition listed in Webster's dictionary: "a congenial environment." Just two regrets: my mother never lived her dream of owning a home in the Colorado Mountains ... and my kids and grandkids, in their relative degrees of affluence, aren't really sure Grandpa's story is true!