

## Walter Matthew Albritton Jr. Remembers:

Family gatherings at Carol Villa were exciting when I was growing up. Caroline, my mother, was the oldest child of Seth and Neva Johnson. Born in Newnan, Georgia, in 1902, she grew up in Montgomery. The family lived in that large, majestic home south of the Atlanta Highway that became known affectionately as Carol Villa. Mother had nine brothers and four sisters. They all called her "Sister."

Our modest home in Elmore County was comfortable but nothing compared to the stately home of my grandparents. Its massive front porch with white columns offered an impressive view of the large cotton fields on both sides of the dirt road leading to the house from the Atlanta Highway.

The grand old home had quite a history. Built in 1838, and expanded in 1860, it sat proudly amidst towering Oak trees for 128 years. Having served its purpose the splendid structure was finally torn down in the mid-1960s, giving way to the homes now called the Carol Villa subdivision.

The large Johnson plantation enabled my grandparents to raise a large family and have a good if not affluent life. Thirteen children grew to adulthood. They produced more than 50 grandchildren of whom I was the oldest. The number attending reunions grew dramatically every year.

The most important annual gathering was usually the Saturday nearest the fourth of July. Hot weather was no problem since we had never heard about air conditioning. High ceilings in the old home place did assuage the effect of the heat, as did several big ceiling fans. When the temperature seemed unbearable we could stir the air with the old funeral home fans.

I never knew my paternal grandfather. He died years before I was born. Since my mother's family was close-knit I did get to know her parents well. Her mother was "Grandmama." Her father was "Papa." Grandmama took care of the home; Papa handled the farm. Like many cattlemen he grew a lot of cotton and corn as well as the hay needed for the cattle.

Papa taught me one lesson I have never forgotten. When we were walking in the cow pasture one day he pointed to a fresh pile of cow manure and said, "Walter Junior, don't cut your foot." He meant not to step in it. That became later a principle of life for me. It is important to be careful not to step in the manure that we often find on life's journey. Some of it is not created by cows.

Papa's pump house was one of my favorite spots. It was in the back yard, not far from the steps leading up to the kitchen. I loved to go inside the pump house and listen to the old water pump wheezing, coughing, and sputtering as it struggled to pull cold water out of a deep well. I think it was powered by a gasoline engine.

It was always fun to play with my cousins, especially Mickey, Buddy, Buck, Randall, and Seth Arthur. We shared many adventures during those daylong reunions. One of our favorite sports was to find a yellow jacket nest, disturb those stinging devils, and run for our lives. The slowest ones occasionally got stung. Our uncles, older and wiser, always lectured us about upsetting wasps and yellow jackets. Then they would treat our stings with wet tobacco from a cigarette or a cigar. We were proud of those stings. They were our badges of courage. We figured our bravery impressed the girls.

Every reunion was an occasion to romp and play in the hay barn. Behind one barn we found a good place to hide and smoke rabbit tobacco. That was exciting until that sad July day when carelessly we burned down the barn. I say "we" but evidently it was I who burned down the barn, since none of my cousins remembers helping me. I keep hoping that one day one of them will admit smoking with me that day. As always, hope springs eternal. I remember my dad gave me a good whipping with his mean, black belt. Dad blamed me more than anyone else since I was the oldest. I was never as sure about that as he was. But it taught me a good lesson. That was the last day I ever smoked rabbit tobacco.

One of my uncles (whose identity I will not reveal) taught me and one of my cousins something else at one reunion when I was about 12 or 13. He had several bottles of whiskey in the trunk of his car and offered us a drink. Since my dad was a teetotaler I had no idea how strong a drink of Four Roses straight bourbon whiskey would be. It took my breath away and convinced me my dad had the right idea about alcohol. I had no trouble following his example of abstinence. My uncle did me a favor.

One of the problems of growing up in a big family like ours was the teasing our uncles imposed on us. Like it or not we had to learn how to deal with friendly ridicule and sarcasm. They taught us many lessons, sometimes by embarrassing us. If we were too loud, or impolite, or unwilling to wait our turn, we got a stern reprimand. No sin was left unnoticed or unpunished.

In my late teens I brought my girl friend to the family gatherings. Having grown up in a small, quiet family with one sister and no brothers, Dean was shocked by my loud, boisterous family. She blushed in utter humiliation when Uncle Philip said, "Walter Junior, your girl friend is cute. Where did a country boy like you find her? Has she let you kiss her yet?" Both of us blushed as everyone laughed.

Grandmama more than made up for the teasing we endured. She made Dean feel welcome in her home. The two of them developed a special relationship that lasted until Grandmama died of cancer not long before we were married. Dean admired the quiet strength and strong faith of this courageous woman who faced her impending death without whimpering. Grandmama showed us how to face the harshness of life without losing faith in the love of God. I still remember how scared I was when she asked me to pray at her bedside not long before she died.

Every family brought lots of food to each gathering. It was like dinner on the grounds at a country church. Desserts were plentiful but the main dessert was homemade ice cream. Even warm banana pudding was no match for the ice cream. When my cousins and I were old enough, it was our job to turn the cranks on the ice cream freezers. Our uncles saw to it that we turned those cranks as long as we could. Then one of them would turn the crank a few more times to show us how weak we were.

Many of us remember how scared we were of Fling Down, the ghost that lived in the attic. Such memories are fun to remember and share. One thing we can all agree on is that reminiscing about Carol Villa is truly good for the soul. ☺