

Memories of Peach Street

By Lee Grant

Have you seen Peach?

I'm from Peach, the brown man
in the wheelchair says.
durazno in Spanish. Succulent,
ice cream made at home, peach cobbler and
southern brandy the best medicine,
roasted calabasa,
pumpkin from the wood-burning stove
and brown sugar;
he grew up with *café con leche* in the mornings,
gone now.
All this happened right here, under
the HemisFair Tower; where he was born on Peach,
la calle Peach, aqui in San Anto.

I was born right here, but everything
is gone, so did it happen?
Is the Tower my house now?

Have you seen Peach?

--Barbara Renaud Gonzalez (1)

HemisFair 1968, the exposition that changed sleepy San Antonio to the vibrant city it is today, and 281, the expressway connecting north and south San Antonio with the heart of the city...

No doubt the benefits of these two projects are still enjoyed 50 years later by locals and visitors alike. But for the hundreds of families and small businesses uprooted in the mid-sixties for the benefit of tourism and improved traffic flow, it brought heartache and helplessness. Gone would be nightly card games with long-time neighbors, the corner grocery, the barber shop and ice cream shop, and the Polish church and school. And gone would be part of Victoria Courts, home for many years to low-income families.

The expo grounds would take North Street and the two large homes at 140 and 144 North built by wife's great-grandfather. North, South, Water, Center, and Goliad streets with their wonderful crooked paths designed to follow the acequia would be included in the mass demolition. Waitz Grocery Store, founded in 1886 and known for its fresh produce, would have to relocate from Goliad Street to the Northside, leaving behind generations of Southside customers.

I miss Peach Street! My grandparents had lived at 521 since 1924. My dad spent the last 8 years of his single years in that house. We played ball, tag, and hide-and-seek in the small yard and many games of canasta in front of the swamp cooler in the living room. Mamaw grew wonderful flowers and plants and had a grape arbor Papaw built for her outside the kitchen window. (2)

My grandfather worked as a carpenter at the Arsenal for many years. From Peach Street, he often walked downtown and to St. Michael's Church. Even as a young boy I was allowed to walk to Sally's barber shop on Goliad.

The tiny backyard was plenty big enough for the baseball games cousin Margaret and I would play with a ping-pong ball. The fence separating us from Suerte Street and Victoria Courts formed the right field fence, and the garage the left field barrier. When we tired of that, we'd move into the garage where we had a play kitchen and lots of dishes.

The garage was spooky to me. Mamaw and Papaw did not own a car, and in one's place were boxes and other things stacked to the roof. No telling what family treasures were buried in there. How I wish I had had more interest and less fear of that place.

I spent many nights at that house. Many times Margaret and Kathy were there, too. To say that Mamaw spoiled us would be a gross understatement. Candy, soda, late nights, no wonder my mother was not happy with the time I spent there. Oh, did I mention pancakes? Mamaw would make mounds of them, and keep them coming as long as we would eat them.

I remember the August 4 morning when my sweet Aunt Maurine dropped off the girls. She was on her way to work and I was still in bed in the front bedroom. I can still hear her laugh and cheerful voice as she left the house. Who knew that she would no longer be with us by late afternoon?

It was always a big time when the Oldreives visited. Margie's laugh and good humor would fill the house. Handyman George would swoop in and begin making repairs. One only had to mention something to George that he would either fix it

or purchase another. We only saw the cousins every few years and we spent as much time together as possible during those visits.

Papaw's bedroom was actually a tin-roofed screen porch. It must have been wonderful sleeping during a rain, but how he stayed there during winter nights I cannot imagine. He was vulnerable to a break-in, with only a simple door latch for protection. I did find many years later that he kept an air pistol handy, though I don't think he ever had to use it.

The breakfast table was a homemade wooden base with a marble top. My parents later used it for a side table in their dining room for many years, and my dad always told me that he wanted me to have it. When I finally moved it from my house, I found "Boyd" written on the underside. Boyd was the name of Papaw's mother and her parents. We are at least the fifth generation to have it grace our home.

On the corner of Peach and Virginia stood Jose P. Cabana's grocery store. It was a small place with just the basics. Joe ran the store and his two sisters always sat a small table in the living space at the rear. Joe was blind and yet when my grandfather would ask for a can of something, he would feel his way down the tall shelves behind the counter, reach for the can, and then place it on the counter. I don't think he ever made a mistake. Just inside the screen door was a large glass cabinet that served as the candy counter. It was filled with what seemed to be every kind of candy made. Papaw always had company on his trips to Joe's as we were guaranteed a few pennies of candy from that case. Once we had our candy, Margaret and I would race home and hide under the Boyd table. Mamaw would ask Papaw, "Where are the kids?" To which he always replied, "I guess they're still at the store." Margaret and I would then begin giggling and "give away our hiding spot."

Mamaw would often host canasta parties in the evenings. Since she had taught me the game, I was often included. There was always candy on the table and the games could pretty late so I felt privileged to be included. Mrs. Hilt and Mrs. Ingle are two neighbors that were regulars in the group. One lady was Molly O'Leary. I was so taken with that name that Martha and I named one of our daughters Molly.

Papaw would play cards with us kids but did not participate in the women's games. He much preferred to sit on the front porch and listen to the San Antonio Missions baseball game. His favorite chair was one of those with an adjustable wood frame and a canvas sling. One Easter morning the canvas tore with him in

it, and he ended up with several broken ribs. I am sure he was sore for weeks. Margaret and I also used the porch as a hiding place each evening when Papaw's carpool dropped him off after a day's work at the Arsenal.

One of the small businesses forced to move was Warwas Barber Shop, or "Warwa's Barber Shop" according to the plate glass window. Sylvester Warwas, or Sally to everyone, was the proprietor of the three-chair shop. My dad began handling Sally's books and taxes at an early age in return for free haircuts for him and his dad and later me. The first time I actually paid for a haircut was my first week in college. Sally could be pretty ruthless in his kidding, and I never liked being the butt of his jokes in a shop full of old men. The back of my head is quite flat, and one day, he spun the chair around to announce to the old men that it looked like someone had hit me in the head with a frypan! With HemisFair, Sally moved the shop from Goliad Street out to South Hackberry.

The Double Dip Ice Cream Company was a family favorite. Whenever my mother drove me for a haircut, she would treat the two of us to the famous double-dip cone for a nickel each. Most trips to Peach Street also included a stop here. The family retired the business rather than relocate it.

Sadly, St. Michael's Church and school on South Street fell to the wrecking ball, all in the name of progress. Originally started in 1855 to serve the Polish community, it was the third oldest parish in the city. The church would relocate east to S. Cherry Street.

The Four Brothers' Steak House on South Street was known as the best steak place in the area. It reopened on Brooklyn Street but never was as successful as at the former location. The building now serves as the band hall for Central Catholic High School.

Mamaw and Papaw were forced out of their home for the past forty years to a home on the near East Side. It was a nice place with a large grapefruit tree in the back. But their longtime friends and neighbors settled elsewhere. Gone were the nightly card games and walks to church and the grocer. The neighborhood was not as "comfortable" as Peach Street. One day Mamaw was walking to the bus stop when she was mugged by a young man who stole her purse and badly damaged her shoulder. Her health began to deteriorate after that, and their lives were never the same. I dare say her last years would have been much better on Peach Street.

- (1) Used with permission of author.
- (2) The 500 block of Peach was between Iowa St. and Virginia Blvd. I estimate that the house would now sit in the median of the north and south bound lanes of I-37.

Lee Grant

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