

# Thomas Reese Spence Memoirs

Recorded Nov. 10, 1972

*These memoirs were originally recorded on tape and reproduced onto audio cassettes for the family. In July 2004, Chris Spence transferred the recording to CD-R format. This is a transcription made from one of the audio cassettes. Question marks enclosed in parentheses indicate uncertainties as to names and spellings. Anyone who can clear up any of these uncertainties is invited to notify David W. Spence at [David@Spence-Family.org](mailto:David@Spence-Family.org).*

Reese Spence at my residence in Eldorado on the evening of Friday November 10, 1972. It is being recorded at the request of my nephew David Moss of Dallas, and it is my understanding that what he wants is for me to put down on this tape my present recollections of the early life at College Station of my parents, my two sisters, and me.

Our father was David Wendel Spence, born in Austin, Texas on September 22, 1869, the son of Joseph Spence and Margaretta Deaderick Wendel who had come to Texas from Murphreesboro, Tennessee in 1859 and had settled, after renting in Austin for the first year, at a place which later became the Spence homestead four miles east of Austin and just north of the Montopolis Bridge. There is a nursery on this ground now, and the office building of the nursery is the remodeled old Spence homestead where my father was born.

On June 14, 1893, he married at Hempstead, Texas, our mother Lucy Reese who was the daughter of Thomas Sidney Reese and Mary Virginia Lester. Thomas Sidney Reese had come from Alabama sometime after the civil war, he having served in the civil war in Alabama. She was born at Hempstead, Texas on October 25, 1870. Her father died of Bright's disease in St. Mary's Hospital at Galveston on June 28, 1917, having lived only the short span of 47 years, dying in his very prime.

My mother died at Dallas, June 1, 1959 at the age of 88 years, having had 25 happy years of married life and then 42 years of widowhood.

Our father first attended private schools in Austin and was four years at Professor Bickler's(?) Texas German and English Academy at Austin. In 1889, he graduated from the University of Texas with a B.S. degree in civil engineering. In 1890 he finished a year of graduate work at the University of Michigan, and after a year of practical work, he was granted the Civil Engineer degree in 1891. He first worked as a chief draftsman for the South Halsted St. Iron Works of Chicago.

He had met my mother at the University of Texas, and although I do not know whether she graduated, I know that she did teach school and was teaching school in Hempstead at the time that he married her in 1893.

A classmate of my father was J. C. Nagle who came to the A & M College in 1890 as associate professor of engineering and physics. In 1891, he was associate professor of civil engineering and physics, and then in 1892 he was professor of civil engineering and physics, and he brought my father to A & M in September of 1892 as assistant professor of civil engineering and physics and drawing. My father continued in this position until 1898 when he advanced to the title of associate professor of civil engineering, physics, and drawing, and then in 1899, he became professor of physics, which position he occupied until 1903. In 1903, he became associate

professor of civil engineering, continuing there until 1909 when he became professor of structural engineering. He held this title and position until 1913, and then from 1913 to 1917, he was dean of engineering and professor of civil engineering at the A & M College. [5:25]

I was born Sept. 11, 1895, which makes me 77 years old now. Virginia was born January 28, 1898, and Bess was born on November 26, 1900. We were all born in a building which was the second hospital of the college, and it was located where the Sbis Hall, the big dining hall, is now located. In fact, I was born about where the kitchen of that dining hall now is. When Fay learned that it was the largest dining hall in the country, seating about 3500 people, and that I was born in the kitchen, she thought this was very fitting. It was a pretty good monument to my appetite.

The first hospital of the college was a couple of rooms on the second floor of the old main building at a time when the college only had two buildings, but by the time that my father was married, I was told that they boarded for a year with a professor of mathematics or history or something and then moved into this house when a new hospital building was built. And this house consisted of, I believe, four rooms on each side and a bath and a hallway down the middle. When I was born on the east side of that residence, the west side was occupied by Duncan Adrias(?) who at that time was a professor of chemistry, I believe. In the same year, his son Guy Adrias was born, and then Guy Adrias became professor of horticulture at A & M and occupied that position during the 25 years that I was later at A & M.

My earliest recollection, I guess, goes back to our sand pile just by the side of that house, and I don't remember anything at all that happened before about 1902. But we had a sand pile there, and it was really quite an affair. I mean it was quite an important thing in the lives of our friends and other children because this is where we always played – in this sand pile.

Also I remember that the college first got sewer lines laid while we were in that [house], and I recall when we first had an indoor bathroom. I even can remember taking baths on the kitchen floor in a wash tub with water heated on the stove.

Now this, of course you understand, was all in the horse and buggy days. It was quite different from the world that my grandchildren have known, and for that reason I am very glad to try to create an image of just what life was like in those days.

In 1904, we moved across the campus over to the south side into a brand new house. This house was one of five that were built on the same plan, and as I recall, the cost of these houses was about \$2500 each, which gives you an idea of the value of the dollar in those days. Each of these houses had, on one side, a living room with a fireplace, a bedroom, a bath, and another bedroom. On the other side, it had a parlor, a dining room, a pantry, and a kitchen. Nearly all of them later built a stairway to the upper floor, and up there we had two bedrooms, one that I occupied, and one that our white servant occupied.

And all through my early childhood, we had white servants who were Bohemians, I believe, who had come up from Courtney just north of Hempstead. Our first servant that I remember was Mary Heise(?), and I don't remember very much of her. And then Mary Lappey(?), who was, as I recall, somewhat lame, was our servant then for many years until I had finished school, as far as I can remember.

The college was one hour drive from Bryan by horse and buggy and was a very self-contained little community. The mess hall sold groceries, staple groceries largely, and during my early boyhood, I made spending money by doing grocery shopping for the people that lived up and down our street, going across the campus on my bicycle. There we could get meat and bread and some staple vegetables, some staple groceries. The grocery store in Bryan would send a man out, a Mr. Newton, as I recall his name, and he would come out to the college twice a week and would

go from door to door taking orders, and then he would go back into Bryan and send out the groceries that they had ordered on a delivery wagon the next day.

For schooling, the college built a little one room frame building located very close to where Guyon(?) Hall at the college now is. And this was only a block from where we lived. The people on the campus, employees of the college, who had children, then jointly financed the employment of a teacher. And the only school I went to was a one teacher, one room school where I went until I entered A & M in 1909. I think that Virginia also went to school here, but by the time Bess was ready to go to school, I believe we had the gasoline inter-urban running between Bryan and College Station, and I think that Bess got all of her education in Bryan.

I remember having only two teachers before entering college. Miss Effie Macon(?), I think taught me the first and second grades, and then by that time, we got a wonderful teacher who was the crippled brother of the professor of modern languages and also the chaplain. This was Mr. Beal(?) Biddle, and although he taught there in that little one room school, he was really qualified as a very good teacher for all the grades on through high school. Well the upshot was, of course, that there were just four of us in a class. We studied the exact textbooks that were used in the public schools in Bryan, but whenever we got through with a grade, he would go right on ahead to the next grade with the result that many years we took two grades in one year. This resulted in my starting school at the age of 6 and entering college at the age of 14. When I graduated in June 1913, I was only 17 years old which I think makes me the youngest graduate of A & M. Of course, this is also making me survivor of a class where there are not very many of my 1913 classmates still living. [18:00]

My recollection of our childhood life at College Station is just one of pure pleasure. I think we just had really a wonderful life. School, of course, was the item of absorbing interest during the school months. And then through the summer, we just played. We went from one house to another playing. I remember the boys used to come down to my house and we would tear up newspapers into little bits and then we would play hare and hounds on down through the pasture and the creak back of our house, down south. I don't know whether they would let us get away with that now, this idea of not throwing any trash around, but we would send a man out in advance with a sack of these torn up newspapers, and he would leave a little trail. We'd give him 15 minutes start, and so he would leave a trail, and he would start on off, then, and get to where he was going to make a fork in the trail. He would go off one way maybe two or three hundred feet and then he would come back and pick up his trail again, so that when the rest of us came along later trying to find him, we'd go up these blind trails, of course, all the time. Eventually, of course, we always would catch him, but that was a game that was always good for a half day anyway.

Then the college had a great big parade ground, and in the summer time, the grass grew on this. The college also had a dairy herd, and so in the latter part of the summer after the grass had grown, they would come out and cut this grass with mowers, and then they would rake it up into big piles. Now this was always quite an event with us because this meant that in the evenings we could go out and play on these hay piles because they would leave them out in these piles for several days before they would gather them up and take them down to the barns and put this hay in the silos. But I can remember many an evening when we would play out there on these piles of hay on this campus.

Then we frequently gathered at somebody's house in the evening, and we played games. We played cross questions and crooked answers. Now here you would appoint two captains and they would choose their sides until everybody was chosen. Then they would line up, and then the captain would go down the line, and he would give each person on his side a question to answer. And then the captain of the other side would give each person on his side an answer to give. Now

the questions thought up by one person and the answers thought up by another without knowing what the questions were of course resulted in some hilarious answers, and there was quite a lot of laughing and giggling connected with that game. Then, of course, we played drop the handkerchief and half a dozen others.

One of my classmates was Albert Hudson, and in his family reading aloud was quite popular. His father was the professor of history and we would frequently go to his house in the evening and his father would read to us. This was always a great pleasure.

Then the biggest thing was going for a picnic out at what we called then the fish tank. At the present time, it's simply a pond of water in the forks of two of the runways out at the airport east of Wood Field. It was about a two mile walk to get there from our residences on the campus, and we would always get a hay wagon, and though some of us walked out there, we would get a hay wagon from the college with a couple of white mules and we would drive out there, and driving out was about a three mile trip on the road. Then when we got there, all the kids would go swimming, and then the parents would spread the picnic supper and cook bacon and eggs. I think my father has cooked enough bacon and eggs on the shores of that old fish tank (because he was the official bacon and egg cook) – I think he cooked enough to have fed an army. However before going in the fish tank you had to know how to swim because the fish tank was just simply made by putting a dirt dam across a wash, or draw, and after you got out about 10 or 15 feet from the bank, you just dropped off into water way over your head. So we all learned to swim in the college natatorium. It seems to me that the girls did go swimming there sometimes, but at any rate, that's where all of us boys learned to swim was in that college natatorium.

This was used during the school year by the students, and in fact, there were no bathing facilities in the dormitories. This was the place where all the students took their baths. There were showers and also this swimming pool. Later on I discovered that the college had been in operation for quite a number of years before this natatorium was built, and I asked a man that I met at one of these class reunions who had graduated along about 1889 or something like that. I asked him just what they did before the natatorium was built for baths, and he said, "Well we had a long catwalk with a board fence around it and a pipe going down the middle elevated about six feet off of the catwalk, and we would go behind that fence and take off our clothes and then we would bathe with water from spigots on that pipe." And I asked him if that wasn't pretty cool in the winter time. He said, "Yeah, but we didn't take any baths in the winter time, either." [27:04]

Eating watermelon in the summertime also was a big thing with us. There were some farmers down in the farmland south and north of the college who would come through the campus in the summertime with watermelons on a wagon. Of course everybody bought them, and my recollection is that we always kept watermelons on the front porch of our house which was in the shade except in the early morning. And we kept them cool by keeping wet sacks on top of the watermelons and keeping them wet, and keeping those sacks wet was my particular job. In the summertime, we would generally have watermelon just before going to bed or in the afternoon on Saturday or Sunday or just really on any other time. We might have watermelon in the middle of the afternoon. But eating watermelon was big business.

A number of the campus families, including ours kept a cow. We also had a horse, and it was my boyhood job to put out feed for the cow and the horse, but my father did the milking. [End of side 1 of the cassette. At this point a short segment is missing due to problems in the tape reproduction.] ...milk, and couldn't even do it today. I don't know whether my mother just objected to his putting that chore on me or whether it was the fact that about the time that I was getting old enough that I could have been taught to milk, he had gotten very interested in getting his Jersey cows into the advanced registry. They were registered Jersey cows, and to get them into the advanced registry, you had to show a certain amount of milk and butter fat production,

and he wasn't about to let anybody milk his cow who wouldn't be able to get all the milk that she could give and encourage her to give more.

Also we, along with many other people, had a garden. My father was great for experimenting with the greens. He raised some kale. He raised some kohlrabi and a lot of other exotic greens, but he never could persuade anybody in the family to eat the greens, so he ate those greens himself. But, of course, we also had spinach and corn and tomatoes and squash and cucumbers, and I was impressed into some amount of work in the garden.

My mother was quite a pianist, and as I recall, she was the pianist for the choir for the church services and for the glee club all during my boyhood years. Also she afforded us many very happy evenings listening to her playing the piano there in our home.

Our house was heated by wood fires. We had two fireplaces, and in the big central hallway, we had a big iron stove, and the doors opened up to where that stove would pretty well keep the house warm although the bedrooms did have some iron stoves in them. And keeping that wood brought up was my childhood job. The wood would be brought in in four foot lengths, and then a saw would come and would cut it up into fireplace and stove lengths, and then I took charge of it from that point on, and kept the wood box on the porch full.

Perhaps a good place to end this narrative is to bring it down to the automobile age which for me occurred in my senior year. My father, as you recall, was teaching structural engineering which had to do with the design of bridges. A few rich people in Bryan had automobiles, and my father commandeered enough of these to carry the senior class on an inspection trip to see the railroad steel bridge over the Brazos River west of Herd, about a thirty mile trip from College Station each way. And we went down in an automobile. This was my first automobile ride.

In 1916, when I came home during the summer vacation from Cornell University, my family, by that time, had acquired an automobile, an Overland, and we undertook a trip down to Galveston while I was home, and it took us two days to get there. My father was in charge of construction at A & M and at Prairie View, as I was many years later, and as such, he had access to the board of directors' rooms down at Prairie View. We got there, 50 miles from College Station, the first day and spent the night in the board of directors' rooms, and then went on to Galveston the next day, an all day trip: 100 miles from Prairie View to Galveston.

This now will be the end of this narrative which probably is much longer than David bargained for when he asked me to start it. [*Side 2, 5:05*]