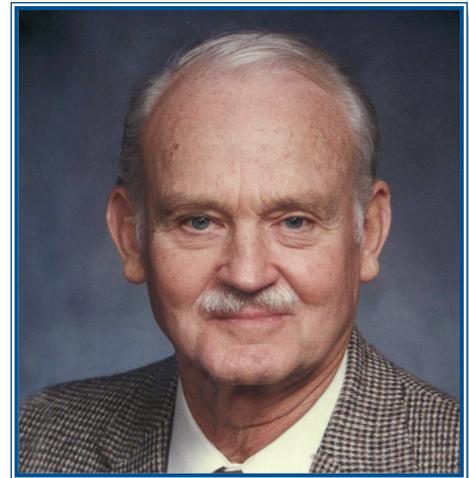


Readers' Forum

THE SELECTION BELOW INCLUDES EDITED EXCERPTS FROM THE FORTHCOMING BOOK, *A BOY'S LIFE IN HOUSTON: RECOLLECTIONS, 1926-1931*, BY THE LATE ROLLIN H. BAKER, WHICH WILL BE PUBLISHED BY THE OLD HOMESTEAD PRESS IN 2008. MR. BAKER, A ZOOLOGIST, HELD NUMEROUS ACADEMIC POSITIONS DURING HIS LIFETIME AND FOUNDED THE PRAIRIE EDGE MUSEUM IN EAGLE LAKE, TEXAS, WHERE HE ALSO SERVED AS CURATOR. HIS RECOLLECTIONS PROVIDE SEVERAL INTERESTING DESCRIPTIONS OF "GETTING AROUND" IN 1920S HOUSTON FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A YOUNG BOY.



Rollin H. Baker

FIRST VIEWS OF HOUSTON—AUGUST, 1926

There was some of the summer left before school so I started to explore the new surroundings. Houston's commercial, hotel, and theater district was about five miles away [from our home in Southampton]. It stretched for about ten blocks in a southwest to northeast direction along Main and adjacent Travis and Fannin streets, mostly between Lamar and Franklin, with the centerpiece, the classy and plush Esperson Building, standing conspicuously tall and graceful.

Trolleys and city buses were convenient ways to get around. This was because in this city of more than 200,000 people, auto traffic was severe and often choked up travel on the narrow streets. The city planners had definitely not designed the thoroughfares for gas buggies. There was also limited downtown parking, including few commercial parking lots. As a result many commuters used public transportation. Father took the bus to and from work. Mother transported much of her purchases from shopping tours by means of the bus, at least until the family had a company car and ultimately its own car to use. The children either walked or rode the bus to and from school, at least until they had bicycles. Sometimes they even had to transfer to a trolley to get to some parts of town, like the Houston Heights.

MODEL T FORDS

For those of us whose families didn't have their own oil well money and couldn't afford a sports car like a Stutz, Cord, or Marmon, it was possible to go to any of several junkyards and buy stripped-down, well-used, vintage, but drivable Model T Fords for a few dollars.

The catch that really didn't concern me and others in Southampton was that these castoffs flivvers lacked tops and passenger interiors but usually still had windshields.

The user merely cranked, or better still had a companion crank, such a vehicle, then jumped over the front door, took a seat on top of the gasoline tank, revved the motor, and drove off while using the reverse pedal as the brake. Since the regular brakes were totally worn, this breaking method eventually wrecked the reverse gears. And it was fun fixing them, especially when Walt Cronkite (future television journalist) was around to help. He was our local 'master' mechanic. Driving was mostly at low speeds in the neighborhood with the operators avoiding such busy traffic lanes as Bissonnet or Rice Boulevard. Besides, the police discouraged such flimsy and unreliable cars on major thoroughfares.

Eventually the gang outgrew the Model T craze. As boys will be boys, they merely abandoned those shabby eyesores on vacant lots. No doubt, thoroughly disgusted police or garbage collectors had the unwelcome task of hauling the flivvers away.

OTHER MEANS OF TRANSPORTATION

Bikes were used to ride to and from school, but the automobile became the vehicle of choice on other occasions. This is because father had fulltime use of a company 1928 four-door Chevrolet. This gave mother and I a good chance to learn how to drive. Actually it was mother who needed most instruction since between ages 11 and 12, I had already learned the fundamentals. In those days, apparently, there

were no rules or regulations to prevent ‘underage’ people from driving. Thus, by the time that many precocious guys and some similar-minded girls had enrolled at Lanier, they had learned to drive their family cars. In fact, some of the better-endowed and show-off guys would even drive their cars to school. Anyway, mother, and later my sister Virginia, learned how to drive using proper clutch shifting as was the case with the 1928 Chevrolet. Aside from mother banging not too violently into a mule on a country road near Sugar Land, the family registered no fender-denting accidents.

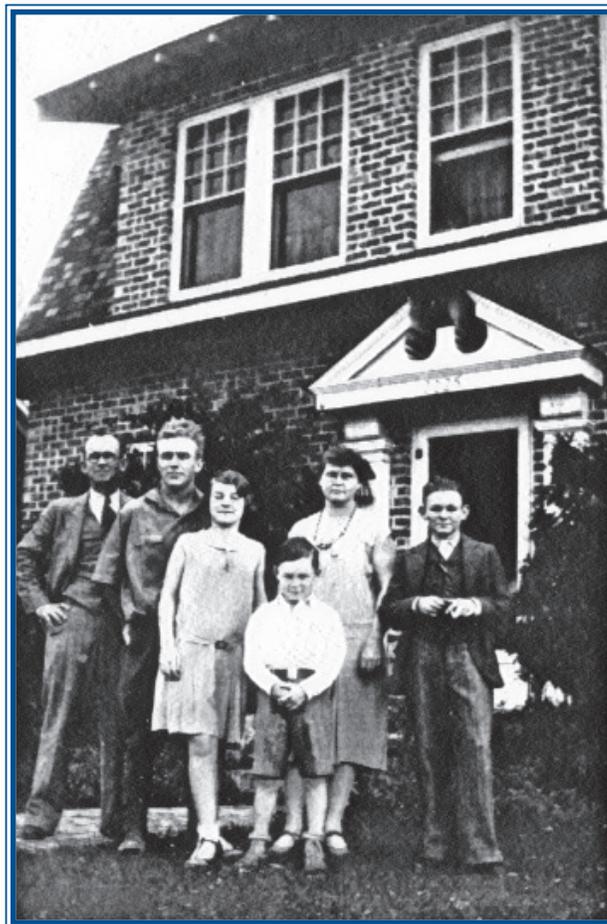
However, the traffic in the business district was terrific. It was indeed a slow process going uptown on Main from, for example, the corner of Bissonnet Avenue to Texas Avenue. Main Street was not only narrow but jammed with autos - from tiny Austins to bulky Franklins and Pierce Arrows. And there was a stop-and-go traffic light at just about every intersection. Yet, while often sitting on an elevating pillow, I operated the 1928 Chevrolet and later the 1930 Model A with the vehicles suffering nary a scratch. I also had a chance to drive other kinds of automobiles. The father of a friend down the street owned the Hudson-Essex dealership. The Hudson was a neat and powerful car. Then, Geologist Lyman Reed, one of father’s friends, let me drive a souped-up 1928 Buick sports roadster with a rumble seat. Once on a trip to Bryan that speedy car traveled at more than 80 miles per hour on that unpaved and dusty road.

LOCAL TRAVEL

It was never clear why my parents had not purchased a vehicle earlier. In Houston, however, neither parent considered using an automobile for long trips with the railroad handy for trips to Dallas, Lufkin, Groveton, Shreveport, San Antonio, or even to Galveston. Beginning in those early years father did take the family on Sunday drives on the rural roads around Houston. There was a blacktopped highway out west that he would often take as far as Richmond. Father called it a Jim Ferguson road, so named because it and many others were constructed during the administration of a former governor bearing that name. These were characterized by being narrow and somewhat crowned in the middle and sloping off a bit on each side.

However, most of these outings were on country roads, some being plain dirt while others liberally coated with gravel or oyster shell. In those days, the piles of oyster shells left over by shuckers made good roadbeds for autos but not bare-footed boys. Later they discontinued this shell use after learning that it was better oyster conservation to put the shell back in the water to provide solid bases on which the young free-living stages of the oyster could attach and grow to maturity.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF BYRON BAKER



Baker family at Southhampton home, 1929. Charles Laurence and Minnie Louise Perkins Baker and children Virginia Alice, Norvil Arnold and Rollin Harold plus an unidentified friend. Photo taken at 2025 Albans Road in Houston around 1929.

Most of these country drives were out west and south of our home in Southhampton. After we drove out on what was to become US-90 and beyond the huge “forest” of derricks in the extensive Pierce Junction oil field, we immediately entered the domain of the Texas Prison farms. They were apparently situated south of the prominent tower at Sugar Land. The public roads cut back and forth through these prison lands, with convicts nearby working in croplands. This proximity of convicted evildoers always made mother uneasy since she feared that if our automobile broke down that a murderous gang of escaped convicts would molest us.

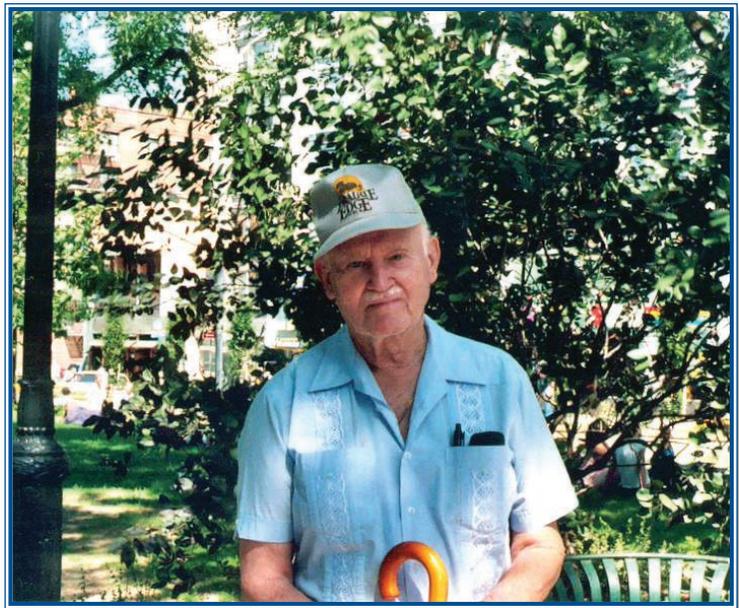
And she did have what East Texans call a “hissy” when sure enough our 1928 Chevrolet four-door sedan did have a flat. And not far away were shotgun-carrying prison guards on horseback riding herd on a bunch of convicts as they were hoeing cotton.

Tire changing in those days was a major operation. I helped father jack up the back wheel and pull off the deflated

tire and its heavy metal rim. Father removed the flattened inner tube and used the air pump, a standard item under the front seat of most cars in that period, to blow it up. He found the leak by dipping the inflated tube in water standing in the roadside ditch and looking for oozing bubbles. Then he wiped the part having the leak clean, rubbed it with a piece of sandpaper, dabbed it with black glue out of a toothpaste-like tube. Then he cut a square piece out of a roll of rubber that came with the inner tube fixing kit. He then peeled off a thin covering and applied that side to the glue-anointed spot on the inner tube and using a screw clamp tightened it to blend the patch and the tube together. Leaving that to set, father then explored the inside of the inner tube until he found the offending nail and removed it. Putting the tire with the patched inner tube back on the metal rim was tricky. But finally father, with plenty of experience as a field geologist in mending flat tires, got the contraption back together in order to save poor mother from roaming bands of escaped prisoners.

On these outings father would “lecture” about the local plant and animal life and about the geology of what he termed a coastal lowland. As I listened with fascination, I decided that some day I would study more about nature.

Editor’s Note: Rollin Baker went on to study at the University of Texas (BA, Zoology), Texas A&M University (MS, Entomology), and the University of Kansas (Ph.D., Zoology). ★



Rollin H. Baker, 2005.

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