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REMINISCENCES OF AN OLD TEXAS PIONEER

By Harriet Ella Cocke Cochran

(written several years before her death in 1921)

As a preface to my narrative, I must tell how it is that I claim the privilege of being one of Texas' Pioneers. My father, Rev. Stephen F. Cocke, had been, for many years, the Presbyterian pastor of a loved and loving church in the far famed Valley of Virginia; but during the year 1844, when I was eight years old, my mother's health became so weakened by lung trouble that her physician declared it imperatively necessary that she should live much further south. The warm climate and fertile soil of Southern Arkansas had attracted much attention in the older states, and many families from Virginia, of wealth and culture, had already settled in that section, and my father, his only brother, Dr. T. R. Cocke, and Mr. Geo. Harrison, their brother-in-law, decided to follow their example. Their wives were sisters and the prospect of being together during the long trip before them and after they reached their destination, lessened the bitterness of parting with those left behind.

Early in September the long procession of their carriages and wagons, drawn by strong horses and mules, the many grown Negro servants walking, and two young gentlemen on horseback, who were friends traveling with us, made an interesting sight as it moved away from where now stands the city of Roanoke, Va. We had been traveling in this way for a day or two when we were joined by a family named Kingsolving, who by mutual agreement became a member of our party. It may be interesting to note that this fact gave all of us an opportunity to test, by practical experience, the material advantage of resting from worldly employments on the Lord's Day. "Pity 'tis, 'tis true" that Sabbath observance was much more common then than now, and resting on Sunday and holding religious service, with a sermon by my father, was taken for granted by our three families. The first Sunday morning, after Mr. Kingsolving joined us, he had his part of the train ready for travel and came over to know why we were not moving. Father told him that we did not intend to travel on Sunday, first because we thought it was wrong, and also because we thought it better as a business matter to rest.

Mr. Kingsolving answered that he was sorry to leave such pleasant companionship, but that it would be cold weather before we could reach Arkansas and he could not afford to lose so many days traveling as there would be Sundays. So he drove away, and the next Friday we overtook him and he camped with us until the next Sunday morning, when he again drove off alone. During the next Wednesday we again overtook him. His greeting was "I cannot understand this. My horses are fully as good as yours and while I have had two more days traveling than you have had, you have overtaken me two days sooner this week than you did last. I am going to stay with you the rest of the way." Father told him we were glad to have his company and that the explanation was an easy one, because it always proves best to follow the Bible's commands, besides the strain on the strength of the horses in hauling heavy loads day after day demands rest one day in seven, which had kept our horses fresh and more able to do the work required than his, which had had no rest, and were consequently unable to do nearly as much work.

I have not the space to tell of the toilsome journey through the Mississippi River bottom, opposite Memphis, nor the minor incidents that happened on the whole, a pleasant trip. This journey was a long one and November winds were blowing when we reached our new home. But I cannot dwell on the weary eighteen months of sickness we spent in Arkansas.

I was in my tenth year when we left Arkansas for the newer and more sparsely settled regions of Texas. My father and uncle had previously taken a trip over its broad prairies and sunny slopes, and were

so charmed with the coast country around the town of Victoria that they determined to settle there. We left Spring Hill, Arkansas, during February, 1846, in company with Mr. Harrison and family, Dr. Cocke not moving from Arkansas until next autumn. We had large, strong horses to the vehicles, and the train of carriages and wagons, and scores of servants on foot, with two young gentlemen and my half-grown brother on horseback, made quite a procession as we made our way over the vine clad hill to the Red River bottoms.

But I promised to recall only incidents in my own life, and one of the things I most clearly remember happened when we had nearly reached the borders of Texas, and is equal in strangeness to what we read in fiction, but it is literally true. One afternoon as Father was driving his carriage in advance of the rest of the company, to select a place for camping for the night, he saw a gentleman on horseback in the lonely road before him who was an entire stranger. The gentleman drew his rein when he reached the carriage and asked, "Are you not the Rev. S. F. Cocke?" "That is my name," was my father's answer as he stopped the carriage. "Well," said the stranger, "you do not know me, J. D. Bradley, but I know of you and of the good work you have done in Spring Hill, for I have relatives there and I know that the people there have not paid the salary they promised, which you justly should have. Now, Mr. Cocke, I am a confirmed old bachelor with no dependent kin, and am abundantly able to carry out my proposition. I have here in my saddlebags and I want you to accept five hundred dollars from me as a free gift, because I like what I have heard of you." Father told him that while he greatly appreciated the kind and generous offer, he could not accept such a gift from anyone, especially from a stranger; that he already had sufficient money to pay his way, and that he must decline to accept any more than the good will towards himself, that Mr. Bradley had expressed. Mr. Bradley continued to insist and Father to decline when Father said, "My friend, we are about to encamp for the night, we are far from any house, we can easily give you comfortable entertainment and I would be very glad to have you be my guest for the night." Mr. Bradley readily agreed, and when camp was reached seemed to enjoy the hospitality of all the members of the party. The next morning, when all was ready for starting, with Mr. Bradley's horse ready for him to mount, he came to our carriage, wherein Mother and the children were seated, and spoke to Father, saying, "Mr. Cocke, you thought last night that I was in my cups, but I was perfectly sober, and I am as earnest as I can be now that you reconsider your refusal to accept my offer, and allow me to hand you the money before we part."

He seemed disappointed when Father again declined, and turning 'way, walked to his saddlebags behind his saddle, took from them a roll of twenty silver dollars, and coming back to the carriage, threw it into Mother's lap with, "By God, madam, you shall take this, and remember that you are never to repay it to anyone but old John Bradley when he comes in person and asks you for it." Before anyone could speak he mounted his horse and rode rapidly away. None of us ever saw or heard from Mr. Bradley again.

We passed through Shreveport and little of interest occurred until we shortly afterwards entered Texas. The weather was still cool and it was not long before we had our first experience of a Texas "norther", which came to us one morning while we were on the road over a prairie with no house in sight.

The cold, piercing wind came with a heavy rain which saturated the servants' clothing, and almost chilled them to the bone, when fortunately we came to a small tavern by the roadside. The white families were soon around a glowing fire, but when Father requested a room with fire for the servants, he was told that the kitchen was the only room where fire could be made. He told the landlord that in that case he must have the kitchen, at any rate he chose so to require it, and soon the servants, too, were as comfortable as a good fire could make them. The rain did not continue long, but immense droves of pigeons flew overhead that afternoon, and for an hour or so obscured the sun, and they flew so low that some of them were knocked down with poles.

In passing over this part of Texas now, in every direction you will see fertile farms and plantations of cotton, corn and small grain, comfortable houses surrounded by gardens and orchards, and a railroad station is within convenient distance of every village and country home. Then, one could travel

hour after hour and not have the monotony of the journey broken by a distant glimpse of a village or homestead.

Our road, known as the "Labadie Trail", was the highway of travel across the state from Red River to old Labadie on the San Antonio River, a few miles from Goliad, so memorable in Texas history for the massacre of General Fannin and his army by order of the Mexican General Santa Anna.

The first Texas town we reached was Marshall; now a city of fifteen or more thousand people, with factories for rail cars and machinery, and the center of trade for a large farming district. It was then not much more than a hamlet with a few stores, one or two blacksmith shops and carpenter shops, and scattered dwellings forming a few straggling streets. But this village was then of as much relative importance to the country around it as is now the busy city which has taken its place. Our road led through Crockett, Old Washington, and LaGrange, thence over a broad open prairie, through Halettsville to Victoria.

You may wish to know the exact routine of our life on this long journey, with neither railcar nor steamer to shorten the time.

Everything possible for the comfort and convenience of the travelers had been carefully provided before leaving what the Texans were accustomed to call "The States". Large covered wagons held the household goods not needed on the way, carefully packed where they would not be injured, and space was left before and behind for the tents, provision boxes and trunks of clothing, so they could be easily reached when needed.

Comfortable roomy carriages (usually driven by their owners) held the ladies and children and a light covered wagon was for the Negro women who had small children. All the conveyances were drawn by strong horses or mules. Every Saturday, early in the afternoon, the whole company camped at the most convenient place that could be found, where good water and forage for the horses could be obtained, for the rest of the Sabbath.

Father generally preached a sermon on Sunday, and the rest of the day was spent in recreation suitable to its sacred character. Everyone enjoyed the Sunday rest and were the more ready to take up the duties of the week's travel. Before sunset a camping place for the night was chosen, and as every servant knew the special duty assigned him there was no confusion or delay. As soon as the train stopped at the camping place, the teamsters would take their teams out of harness and water them. Some of the men would collect the fallen wood and build a fire before each tent, which other hands had taken from the wagons and carefully stretched.

When it could be secured, hay or grass was spread on the ground inside the tents, especially if the ground was damp. Light bedsteads were put in place for the women and children, and beds and bedding arranged by the house maids. The needed provisions and kitchen utensils were put near the fire built for the work, and soon a hot appetizing meal was spread on the light table, which had been set by placing the china and glassware on the snowy table-cloths. The colored mothers had prepared the food for their families and the unmarried Negroes, and before an early bedtime everything had been done for the night. Tents covered masters and servants, and after the children had gone to Dreamland, their elders would gather together to discuss the day just past, or interest themselves in such conversation as they had been accustomed to at home, 'til the bedtime arrived. Soon the entire camp was sleeping, trusting for protection to the care of the God they had worshipped around the family altar. Everything was astir at an early hour next morning. Food was prepared not only for breakfast, but for an abundant luncheon for everyone, to be eaten during the hour of rest at noon.

This was our daily life for nearly a month when one afternoon, as we were near Victoria, we found a fishing party of gentlemen and ladies on the banks of a creek we had just crossed. One of them came up to us and, addressing my father, introduced himself as Rev. Mr. Blair, the pastor of the

Presbyterian Church in Victoria. When he learned that the newly arrived stranger was a brother minister of the same denomination, he most cordially invited father and his family to become his guests until father could decide where he would make his home. So hospitable Christian fellowship, so characteristic of real Texans, met us on the first day of our arrival in the section which was to be our home. My uncle, Mr. Harrison, settled in Victoria.

After an examination of the surrounding country, father moved to Port Lavaca, on the coast of Lavaca Bay, thirty miles from Victoria. Two years before the little town of Linnville (two miles above where Lavaca was afterwards built) was burned by hostile Indians, on their last raid into that country in 1844. Lavaca, though it had only six residences, two of them hotels, was the seaport for all that part of the state between the coast and San Antonio de Bexar.

All the goods which were brought from New Orleans came in sailing vessels to Lavaca and thence carried on Mexican carts to interior towns. The trade with Mexico was carried on in the same way to San Antonio, and had proven so remunerative that the wealthy merchants of that place had long trains of carts constantly on the road to and from Lavaca. Those carts were evenly balanced on two wheels made of solid wood and were drawn by two to four yoke of oxen. These oxen were not yoked in the usual way, but had pieces of wood strapped to their heads with pieces of rawhide, and instead of the weight resting on the shoulders of the animals it rested on their horns. Each cart had a Mexican peon as a driver.

As the long train of carts moved along the road the creaking of their wooden wheels could be heard for half a mile. In spite of the rudeness of construction, they journeyed quickly, only taking three days, in good weather, to carry their loads from the coast to San Antonio, a distance of 110 miles.

Mother's health gradually improved and the mild air of Southern Texas eventually relieved her lung trouble, but during the first year in Texas she felt the truth of the Texas adage of that day: "Texas is a fine place for men and horses, but terrible on women and oxen."

Not long after we went to Lavaca the Mexican War began and Lavaca became the landing for Gen. Worth's corps of United States soldiers on their way to the Rio Grande. There was not a house for rent in the place, and we had to be crowded into one room of the hotel, father, mother and five children. Mother's youngest child was two years old, her eldest was twelve.

To add to her burden, I was taken sick with a severe attack of typhoid fever and no physician nearer than Victoria, and I think only one there. He came in answer to father's summons and said I was dangerously sick, but that it was impossible for him to stay with me because he not only had patients at home, but he had to go thirty miles further down the coast to prescribe for a daughter of Rev. Mr. Blair of Victoria, who also had typhoid fever. It proved fatal in her case.

"Man's extremity is God's opportunity." When my parents were almost in despair about me, father was told that a skilled physician who had given up the practice of medicine was in town on a pleasure trip, and that if his services could be secured he need have no fear of trusting my case to him. Father immediately sought his acquaintance and stated the circumstances and pled that he would stay and take charge of my case. Dr. M..... was a gentleman of culture and in former days had been accustomed to the best society. He had never married, and being fond of adventurous sports, he had for some years been living across the bay, away from requirements of social life. He told father that he had not thought of meeting ladies and that he shrunk from appearing before my mother in as rough dress as he wore. However, Father assured him that his dress was a matter of no moment whatever, and he most kindly gave his careful attention and unusual medical skill to me.

For three weeks I lay at death's door, while this friend in need not only waged a stubborn battle against disease in his patient, but he used all his gifted conversational powers to cheer the spirit of my

parents during the long hours of anxious uncertainty. By the blessing of God in his skill the disease left me, and after many years of convalescence I regained my usual health.

To give you an idea of the change that has come over Texas I must tell you how impossible it was to get what are now considered necessary things in a sick room. During my convalescence, chicken broth was prescribed, and tho' Father offered one dollar each for chickens, not one was procurable. All groceries were brought from New Orleans by small schooners, which made monthly trips to Lavaca. While I was so thirsty from fever I begged for ice, and the only answer was a promise that if the next schooner brought ice I could have some.

Another incident comes to me of those days. United States troops continued to land at Lavaca, and among them was an army surgeon who took a shed room just below ours, and he was seized with delirium tremens. The house had no walls but the outer shell, and my refined gentle mother was forced to hear for days his screams of terror and his terrible ravings.

Another scene will illustrate the mingled rudeness and refinement of that time. Another lady had been added to the guests of the hotel and there being but one eating room, and one long table for all the guests in common, it was the custom of the gentlemanly landlord to have the ladies and their children seated at the end of the table nearest his wife, before the bell was rung to give notice that meals were ready. The gentlemen who were regular boarders sat next to the ladies and children, the other seats being left for transient guests, most of them soldiers. One day at dinner, the husbands of the ladies were away from home and all were dining as usual, when a quarrel began between some soldiers at the lower end of the table, which became so violent that they began fighting across the table. This greatly frightened the ladies, who took refuge in the landlady's private room adjoining, only to find it full of soldiers who were rushing through a private room to know what was going on. I do not think I ever saw a more angry man than the grandson of the landlord when he ordered the soldiers engaged in the scuffle to leave the house, expressing his indignation that no more regard had been shown the presence of ladies.

Father was convinced that it would not be long before so inviting a country would be settled by a good population, and as soon as lumber could be obtained he had a residence built on land he had bought, and began preaching regularly. His first sermon in Lavaca was by no means in a church. On one Saturday evening, soon after our arrival at the hotel, he was talking in the public room among a small crowd of men, and made the remark that as the next day was Sunday he would like to preach, if there was a room to be used for the purpose. The keeper of the barroom was in the crowd and he answered, "I have only one room, Mr. Cocke, my barroom, and if you will use it, it is at your service." "Thank you", was the instant response, "I'll gladly accept your offer and you may expect preaching there tomorrow." I think the meeting was held in the afternoon, that due notice of it might be given. The liquor bottles were hidden by a curtain and the room was crowded.

A faithful gospel sermon proved so interesting to the hearers that before another Sunday, one end of a warehouse of cleared of goods, rude plank seats provided and Father was invited to use it as a place for regular worship. Afterwards the whole of a small warehouse was assigned to religious uses and was used until the population so increased that a small wooden church was built. Though the building belonged to the Presbyterian denomination, it was used freely by the Methodists, the only other denomination who had a minister to meet regular appointments. Both churches worked in harmony and used the same building until the Methodist church was built some years after.

The building was also used at first as a schoolhouse. Few schools now are blessed with teachers equal to the one who taught in that frontier schoolhouse. He was an old man, a bachelor, one of the kindest and most lovable of men, a polished gentleman and a ripe scholar, a graduate of William and Mary, when this was the leading college of the Old Dominion. He not only encouraged his pupils to gain information from text books, but he had the rare gift of training them to use their own minds by thinking.

Our town continued to grow and the country around it became sparsely settled. The pasturage was the broad prairie that extends for hundreds of miles around the Texas coast, which afforded food for cattle at no cost whatever excepting the trifling expense of semi-annual roundup and branding of calves, and in consequence but few farms were opened when plank cost \$25.00 per thousand feet and barbed wire had not been thought of.

Fourteen miles from Lavaca a beautiful lake four or five miles wide and twelve miles long lies on the inland edge of that part of the coast prairie. It is surrounded by a belt of forest trees, elm, live oak and semi-tropical trees and shrubs peculiar to that spot. Its beach is covered with pure white shells and sand, from which banks extended twelve to fifteen feet in height, while to the east a level prairie was then literally carpeted with wild flowers of many varieties and of every color. The soil around the lake is very fertile and flowering shrubs dot the banks, which enclose the limpid water which dances and sparkles in the sunlight as the wind lifts it in waves that break on the shelly shore.

To this beautiful spot my father moved from Lavaca in 1849. He had bought a large tract of more than 2000 acres, at fifteen cents per acre, and had built a large house, and here the rest of my happy childhood was passed. At that time houses were not finished on the inside, only the outside shell was built and unplanned plank partitions divided the rooms. The best houses were painted outside and had sash windows with panes of glass, but often solid wooden shutters were the only covering for the windows.

Some houses were handsomely furnished, but paper hanging, ceiled or plastered walls came into use years after those days. The cause of this was the scarcity and excessive cost of finishing material, the necessity of all woodwork, such as planning, mortising and sashmaking being done by hand; the scarcity of skilled workmen and the character of the climate, which was too mild to make double walls necessary to keep out the cold of the short winters. Now every house, as a rule, is finished as in the older states, as all the advanced machinery needed in any department of life is common in Texas.

When my father came to Texas he became the sixth minister in Brazos Presbytery, then the only one in the state. So rapidly has Texas increased in population that by 1851 two more Presbyteries had been formed and the first meeting of the Texas Synod was held in Austin during the autumn of that year. I was a girl of fifteen and my cousin, Miss Harrison and I, accompanied by my parents in our carriage were present on the occasion. We spent a delightful week in Austin and the mountain scenery around the city was a delight to us, who had been so long used to seeing only level prairies.

It was in this year, I think, that we had a visit from a tornado. The wind was so powerful that its roar was that of tremendous machinery in action at an immense steam sawmill, but owing to the space given it in the open prairie it did but little damage. It played one beneficent prank for Father's benefit. Our servants' house was a long row of rooms with its sides to the east and west. This proved so unpleasant during the heated summer days that Father determined to change the exposure. The great storm raged at night, and lulled before morning. When daylight came we saw the servants' house just as we wanted it, and not a person or timber had been injured. The servants said they felt a gentle motion of the house for a few moments, and again the house was at rest.

That winter my parents took me to school in Galveston, where I remained until the close of the session during the next summer. You did not have to go by land nor on a sailing vessel, for the commerce of Texas was now large enough to require the use of large steamships that made semi-weekly trips between New Orleans and Indianola, the seaport and county seat of Calhoun county.

The neighborhood of Green Lake was composed of five families besides ours, and in 1852 a private school was established and teachers of ability were employed to teach literature and music, and pupils from other neighborhoods came to take advantage of their instructions.

But I must describe the first wedding that took place at La Verde, the name of our county seat. You must not think this the usual custom of a Texas bride and groom, even in those days when Madame Grundy had not made our acquaintance. The bridegroom of this party had asked Father to officiate at his marriage at the house of his prospective father-in-law in Indianola, and Father had promised to do so. Indianola is eighteen miles from the Lake.

A few days after, they met again and the young man expressed his desire to have the marriage at our home. Though entire strangers to all of us, the request was readily granted. The appointed day arrived and the bright summer sunshine was as warm as the heart of any lover. The arrangement was for the bridal party to arrive in the morning and return immediately after the marriage ceremony had been performed. The early hours of the day passed away and it was nearly noon when two open buggies came into view, each having a gentleman driving and a lady seated beside him, both ladies attired in low-necked and short-sleeved tarleton dresses. Mother received them hospitably and they seemed perfectly at home. As time passed and they made no suggestion for the beginning of the ceremony, when the dinner hour arrived they were invited to dine with us, to which they readily agreed, saying that a two o'clock dinner would give them ample time to reach home before night.

After dinner they consulted together and told Mother they had decided to wait until after supper and drive home by moonlight. We were so accustomed to entertaining our friends that it was no burden to give these strangers another meal. I was about fifteen years old, and a girl friend came in the afternoon for me to go with her to spend the night with a mutual friend who lived nearby. You can imagine how two girls wondered at the queer taste of the stranger-ladies in selecting party dresses to wear in daytime, driving eighteen miles with a blazing sun overhead. The prospective bridegroom seemed to be the leading spirit of the bridal party, and when he learned that my friend and I thought of leaving before supper, he earnestly asked us not to leave before the ceremony, so we consented to "grace the occasion" with our presence.

Soon after supper the delayed ceremony was performed in the parlor and after congratulations had been offered, the bridegroom asked for some music. I sat down to the piano and selected a song which I supposed would express his feelings towards his bride. It was the old song, "Thou, Thou Reignest In this Bosom." The groom walked to and fro across the room while I sang, and at the close he stopped his walk and told us that this was not the first time he had been in love. A strange announcement, at such a time, to strangers in the presence of his newly-made bride.

My friend and I left to make our visit, supposing the bridal party would soon be driving under the moonlight. Imagine my surprise when I reached home the next morning to hear that they had spent the night and had left after breakfast, still in their low-necked dresses. Some months afterward Father was called on to unite the pair who had acted as groomsman and bridesmaid, but he went to Indianola to do so.

Another amusing incident, and I must draw this long jumble to a close. We had some friends living between the Lake and Victoria who were "Old Texans", and I remember one experience he had when Texas was a wild country. No cloth was for sale in the country and their clothes were spun and woven by his wife. He wore breeches made of buckskin, and it so happened that once his only pair of breeches were so grimed with dirt that his wife induced him to lie abed while she washed them. He told her she did not know how to wash buckskin, but she insisted that she would not hurt the breeches, and he reluctantly consented for her to try. He was not learned in books but was a good true man, and his eyes used to twinkle as he told the result. "Do you know that Ma took then britches and biled them? Yes, she did, and hung them on the fence to dry, double as long as they ought to be, and they drew up till when she brought them in for me to put on I saw at a glance that my only britches was spiled. But they was my only chance, and I put my foot in and pulled and pulled 'til everything got green before my eyes and I couldn't get them britches on." I do not know how soon he got another pair, but he never forgot the washing of his buckskin breeches. When he told us this, Texas was fast becoming as convenient a place to live in as any of the older states.

Year after year of pleasant life passed, with no special matters of interest happening, except the marriages of the girls as they grew to womanhood and went out to make homes of their own, 'til during the summer of 1856 my father and his dear friend, Mr. W. B. M.....died within two days of each other, and with them the attractive prosperity of Green Lake ceased.

One after the other the families moved away and now the Lake is only a beautiful lake with no one living on its banks. I am not writing a personal history of myself or my family, other than events in our lives that may give you an idea of Texas, then and now. I shall merely mention my marriage to Rev. J. M Cochran in 1854, and he was not obliged to preach in a bar-room for want of a better room, for life in Texas had become in few particulars different from life elsewhere in the United States.

The days of the Civil War brought, at first, many bright hopes of the success of our Confederate States, for notwithstanding the population of Texas was a mixture of people from every civilized land, by far the great majority of them espoused the cause of the Confederacy and proved their devotion by shedding their blood in its defense.

The dark days when hope of success was gone, (though love for the Confederacy was as strong as ever, and a firm belief in the justice of its claim remained unshaken) were too sad for the remembrance of them to be recorded in a paper like this.

Their remembrance brings back the sense of the injustice and tyranny under which our stricken Southland groaned, and of the infamous treatment inflicted on her Chieftain, imprisoned and tortured as a representative of her whole people, and it is best and more Christlike to try to forgive and forget our wrongs, rather than to revive them by dwelling on the past.

We should the rather rejoice that in our loved Texas there is now no distinction made between Federals and Confederates in our social life, but that all who are worthy are received on their true value, whether they were born in the North or in the South, or held General Grant or General Lee, Jefferson Davis or Abraham Lincoln as their models of patriotic warriors and statesmen.

Texas holds a fair place among her sister states in all that makes a prosperous country, and I doubt not that she will always support the general welfare of the people of all these United States in every enterprise that is for their advancement in happiness and prosperity.

Written by Mrs. Ella C. Cochran
Some years before her passing in 1921.

Mrs. Cochran was the grandmother of Ella Stuart Cochran Gwyn, who was born in San Antonio in 1898. Stuart lived her adult life in Texas and Chicago, Illinois. She retired from an active life in the insurance business to Baton Rouge, LA, where she died in 1982.

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