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My Favorite Town—

Montevallo, Alabama

by Virginia Hamilton

paintings by Richard Brough

OUR FRIENDS were politely shocked. Leave Washington? Walk out on a good government job and a good newspaper job to live in a little town on a mound in a valley in Alabama? Never shake the hand of the President of the United States at another crowded press reception? Never again glimpse your own profile in the newsreel of another hearing on the Hill? Stop getting those expensively engraved invitations to cocktails and caviar with some lobbyist or maybe tea and cookies with Mamie? Swap cherry blossoms and Senate bean soup and parades down Pennsylvania Avenue for a small college and the town of Montevallo, Alabama, whose population just manages to clear the 2,000 mark if you add in some 700 college girls?

Just a whim, our Washington friends told one another indulgently; one of those rural urges; give them six months. Privately, we did some wondering ourselves as our little car nudged its way through the cloverleaf mazes of Arlington and onto Robert E. Lee Boulevard, headed south.

It is noontime in our Alabama town, two years, one baby and one cocker spaniel later. A lot of folks like to nap after their midday dinner and the streets are quiet and empty. That noise is the wheeze of the 12:30 bus from Birmingham, stopped to let a housewife with packages off at her door. You

*Above right: One way to enter Montevallo is over Spring Creek Bridge.
Below right: Main Street has something that Pennsylvania Avenue hasn't.*



The house with the brown trim→

won't find an ulcer case in a town which takes its own good time—one hour and a half—between walking home for noon dinner and walking back to work.

I hear the noon lines still wait in government basement cafeterias, seafood houses on the Potomac and swank French restaurants on Connecticut Avenue.

Talking of food, my neighbor to the west brought over two old-fashioned, brown oven cups the other day, filled with egg custard and just a spoonful of homemade preserves at the bottom. Larry said he hadn't eaten anything like it since he was a boy in Indiana.

True, there's not a French chef in town but we have some fresh peanut butter cookies in the pantry, from the fragrant kitchen of another neighbor, and a jar of honey-in-the-comb from my friend at the post office who keeps bees.

We felt a little sad when the young couple from Washington who passed through town not long ago said they had no idea who lived in the 153 other units in their apartment village out toward the Maryland line. Maybe they were feeling sorry for us, too, since town seemed pretty quiet that night. Rocking on the porch, they brought us up to date on the constant ebb and flow of Iowans, Hoosiers and Down Easterns who become, for a spell, Washingtonians. It was one a.m., long past our bedtime, when they left and we slept through the Carter fire and the noisiest scrap in many a month between the couple down the street who don't get along.

Ordinarily the mournful, midnight wail of the laundry whistle, which means fire in our town, will wake every man, woman and baby from Shoals Creek to Dry Valley. It's the exact same whistle which proclaims noon and quitting time every day, but on a dark, chill morning it seems an ominous, urgent cry of trouble and doom.

You can feel the stir of the town struggling from sleep, watch bedroom windows emerge from darkness and hear the muttering motors in the cars of the first volunteers. The alarm of fire in our Alabama night is a personal thing, not the voice of a sleek, red machine that can be shut out with the pillow and then forgotten.

Small town noises are fun. Hurdy-gurdy tunes floating over town on a summer's night are the gypsy call of a carnival

Noontime quiet on Main Street→



The picnic ground at Spring Creek→

camped down by the creek. The drum roll of our high school band on the morning of a big game is more enthusiastic than any full-grown Army band escorting a visiting shah to the White House.

In political season, loud speakers interrupt biscuit-making, school lessons and domino games to herald a Main Street speech in just fifteen minutes, folks. Everybody got a big kick out of the hillbilly band of one candidate and the toy, steam-belching locomotive of another but it was the guy who landed a helicopter in that vacant lot across from the post office who won the governor's seat.

The zing of a bicycle bell means that the grocery boy is here, his basket heavy with brown paper sacks. A triumphant, extra-loud whoosh on the laundry whistle announces, not just an ordinary twelve o'clock, but the magical time of Saturday noon.

There's a certain magic, too, in the strum-strum of a guitar played by a Negro boy to dark store windows and deserted Main Street after the last show in our one movie house (thirty-seven cents apiece and two Westerns every Saturday).

We remember Washington, the exciting glimpse of today's celebrity across a smoky cocktail lounge and the lighted beauty of the city from the windows of an expensive little restaurant on Arlington Ridge Road. We remember long bus queues in the five p.m. twilight and the huddle of a state society in a hotel ballroom, everybody talking of home. We remember Washington, the electric quality of a city acting its drama on a world-wide stage, the thrill of a spectator at the big ringside and the temporary quality of home in an apartment next door to strangers.

In the Spring, when the Birmingham paper carries a picture of cherry blossoms around the Tidal Basin, we'll talk again about running back up for a quick visit. But those are the first swimming days of the year in the wide bend of Shoals Creek down by Big Spring. About that time, too, our whole Main Street closes up one afternoon for the annual town picnic. Who would help with the potato salad if I weren't there? Who would broil dozens and dozens of hot-dogs just the right shade of crackling brown if Larry were way up yonder in Washington? ■

Alabama State College for Women→

