"Taking Root in Wilmette"

by

Elisabeth G. Weedon (1867-1965)

Undated conversation between Vivian Weedon (1903-1995), and her niece, Deborah Ardley. Weedon read aloud an article written in 1931 by her mother, Elisabeth G. Weedon (1867-1965). The reading is interspersed with questions by Ardley followed by Weedon's replies and comments. This recording is part of the Wilmette Public Library Oral History Project begun about 1974. A June, 1976 interview with Vivian Weedon's sister, Sydney Weedon Templeton (1894-1994) is also part of the library's Oral History Collection.

Hi I'm Vivian Weedon. Today I'm going to read you a story which my mother wrote. This story tells about coming out to Wilmette to make a home in 1895. Now things were very different in 1895, and even I who came along in 1903, don't remember many of them. However, in an attempt to bring it even more up to date, I've asked my niece, Deborah Ardley, to question me as we go along, about things as we go along about things she doesn't understand. Deborah was born in 1948, and um..she spent much of her time with Grammy in the old home. But she can't remember some of these things, and so as we go along she's going to interrupt me.

Now this article was written by mother for the 40th anniversary Bulletin of the Wilmette Woman's Club [pp.9-13]. That was in March 1931. OK...we'll go along.

It's called "Taking Root in Wilmette," by Elisabeth G. Weedon.

There is an old theory to the effect that every seven years one is a completely new being; that there remains not even the least tiny atom of the person who existed before. Whether true or not, this seems rather a fascinating conjecture to follow into it's varying by—paths. To be sure the change in one's personality, bodily, mental, and spiritual, (if the behaviorist still allows us a mental and spiritual existence), is so slow as to parallel that of evolution. And yet, if one looks back, critically, upon her individuality at seven, at fourteen, at twenty-one, at twenty-eight and so on, (this one simply refuses to go a step farther than nine times seven) it is apparent that nothing remains of the self of the early septennates and only faint traces of that appearing in the later ones.

"I am not the man I once was," is often said, sadly. I wonder if it might not be said gladly. The passing years do steal the gold and leave the gray, abstract the high ideals and bring passive acceptance, take away the belief in Santa Claus and leave the certainty of the tax collector. They also bring, however, understanding, tolerance, a breadth of view and a sense of humor which makes an apparently drab pattern of life more comfortably wearable than in the days when one confidently and breathlessly attempted to pattern it after an unattainable design. How many of us, having hitched our wagons to a star, expecting to reach the status of a second Rosa Bonheur, a second Julia Marlowe, a second Patti or George Eliot or Pavlowa, suddenly have found ourselves wheeling a baby carriage and really enjoying it!

Thirty-five years ago Wilmette was a village of far horizons;

DA: She wrote this thirty five years ago?

VW: Yes, she wrote it thirty-five years ago which was 1931...in fact well I guess that doesn't exactly...well maybe she wrote this in 1930. We lived in that house from 1895 until your aunt Winifred sold the house in 1967. Now let's see where were we?

… of autumn fields gay with the blaze of goldenrod and prairie sun flower, with the crimson, knightly spears of liatris, with the purple mystery of the wild aster, with the thrilling blue of the fringed gentian.

A village set in spring woods spangled with violets, blue, white, yellow; with Solomon's seal, spring beauties, purple phlox, wild geranium, buttercups, the pink of wild crab) trees, the white mist of wild plum and shad bush.

A village of bird song and of bird beauty; the brilliant orange of the oriole, the scarlet flash of the tanager, the clear color of the little blue bird and the more sober hue of the indigo bunting; [Track 2] …the brown of the thrush, the gray of the catbird, the scarlet tip on the red—winged black bird and the many colors and shapes of the little warblers and many varieties of woodpeckers.

A village of hopeful pink sunrises and gorgeous golden sunsets that could be seen without dodging around bricks and mortar;. a village of unlimited possibilities, a place to make a home.

That is the way it looked to two adventurers way back in the mauve decade;

DA: Mauve decade?

VW: What about it dear?

DA: What does it mean?

VW: Well, that's an expression that applies to the years 1890-99, but why it was called the "mauve decade" I haven't the slightest idea. It always seemed sort of lavender to me you know. People were very polite and underplayed. But I don't know. Maybe we can look it up sometime. OK we have our adventurers in the mauve decade. We'll go on.

…two possibly sentimental and certainly unsophisticated explorers in search of a tract of land on which to plant the flag of their union.

One of them, London bred, Boston, New York and Chicago experienced, had never grown a single plant outside of a window box. The other had memories of her mother's garden, but as one viewing a lovely picture with no knowledge of how to paint it. And, as all people enjoy an exploration into the unknown, these people ardently desired to create a garden. In the sunny window of their city flat (and in those days it was a flat,

DA: That's very English. They used to call it flat?

VW: Flat? Oh, yes mother goes on to say...

…not an apartment) they had a pot of sweet scented musk, a thriving English ivy, and an oxalis, whose quaint trick of closing its prettily shaped leaves at night and going to sleep was a source of unfailing interest and delight.

For awhile this represented all out doors to them. After a time it became necessary to find a place where the biggest baby could run across the floor or even jump from the davenport without causing an eruption from the dwellers in the flat below.
Then a miracle happened. In the very next block was a row of cottages, each one having a back yard about the size of a large pocket handkerchief. One especially desirable had vines over the front porch. In their after dinner walks eyes had often been turned with longing in this direction and one evening the unbelievable happened. There was a “For Rent” sign in the window of the most beautiful cottage. Believe it or not the lease was signed that very evening, as the owner, fortunately, lived in almost the next house.

I wonder if ever flowers were so wonderful or vegetables so large and so luscious as those grown in that tiny city garden. What matter if a large crop of pigweed were lovingly tended under the misapprehension that it was portulaca? Pigweed is really rather beautiful if not brought into competition with roses and, if one cares to investigate, does belong to the same family as portulaca. There was a border of sweet alyssum, some precious petunias, a few brave, bright geraniums, a flaming salvia,

DA: Salvia?

…dear to the heart of the masculine member of the firm,

VW: Don't you know what salvia is my dear?

DA: No, what does it look like?

VW: Well, I always have to laugh at that. Daddy simply adored it. You know Daddy likes everything red. That was your grandfather. And he used to come home and say that he had met a very, very attractive woman that day. And mother would say, "And she had a red hat on." And he used to come home and say, "How do you know?" But it always turned out that she had had a red hat on. However you're very naughty. Uncle Harvey used to mispronounce it. And I must say that I never read it, and I hope I said it right this time, because I never read it without thinking of the mispronounciation. He used to say that his mother used to plant the "saliva" next to the "spitunias." He was funny.
[Track 3] OK, we'll go back to the "saliva."

…dear to the heart of the masculine member of the firm, and sweet peas along the whole length of the high board fence.

Once the family went down to the country for ten days on an early vacation. On their return, dropping satchels and bundles on the front steps, they rushed to the little back yard to see what had happened the flowers. The whole row of sweet peas was in wonderful, fairylike bloom, the airy blossoms rioting all over the old gray fence and tugging and straining to fly straight top into the sky—a sight to be carried in memory for nearly forty years.

I expect the family might have taken root right there had there not been talk of an elevated railway being built. It was rumored that the survey was to come down this narrow, north side street so the landlord would not give the long time lease the family wanted. To go back into a flat was unthinkable, especially as the second baby was now big enough to jump off the davenport. The problem was to find another home comparable to the old that was being wrested away from them.

So they left the two babies with a neighbor and boarded a car at the old Ferris wheel on Clark street, a car going north. They rode and they rode. As they got farther north the car passed through patches of sweet clover so high that it brushed the shoulder of the conductor as he swung along the running board, collecting fares. At length the car came to the end of the line, Fountain Square, Evanston.

DA: Now..did they have streetcars then?

VW: Oh yes, they had street cars. As a matter of fact, they had street cars in Chicago up until fairly recently. When I moved back to Chicago in 1938 I took a small apartment on the near north side. And in those days I used to take a street car to the office. I really don't know but I think it was the 1940s before they took the streetcars off the Chicago streets. These were rather interesting streetcars though. And I seem to remember them, although maybe it's just that I've been told about them. They were streetcars in which you sat in the middle facing out and there was a running board on each side where the conductors went down. Now...

…To the two explorers, who had their minds set on the great open spaces, Fountain Square, even at that date, seemed too urban and there were no “For Rent” signs. So they walked north to Noyes Street, took one of those satisfactory, diagonal short-cuts that used to cross vacant lots in the early days and reached the Milwaukee Railroad tracks.

DA: Is that where the Northwestern is now?

VW: No, Honey, it's more where the...as a matter of fact it IS where the elevated runs now, the CTA. If you get off the CTA at Davis street in Evanston and walk North down ....is that Emerson street the CTA run on?... I think it is...you can find a big plaque that tells about the Milwaukee railroad. The Milwaukee road now runs way to the west, about

Northbrook way. But in those days it went down... and of course there was no elevated then. So let's see that was the Milwaukee Railroad.

[Track 4] Northward ever northward they trekked, walking sometimes on the ties and sometimes on the cinder path until they reached a little way station, labeled Llewellyn Park. An inviting board walk here led west and they were tired of walking on railroad ties so they walked along until they saw a man and his young son chopping up a tree that had blown down in his yard. They asked the man if there were any “For Rent” signs in the immediate neighborhood. He kindly directed them farther up in the village but as they reached the next corner they saw such a magnificent tree just a little way off that they had to go that way to look at it.

DA: That wasn't the tree you and I saw this year was it?

VW: Oh no, dear!

DA: Remember that old tree, hundreds of years old?

VW: Oh yes, that was in Evanston. This tree was right after... right by Grandma's house. And I don't know whether it was chopped down before... I think maybe it was chopped down before you were born. It has a crazy history. Do you want to hear it?

DA: Um hum.

VA: Well it was a beautiful, beautiful tree...a great big, enormous tree. And I remember once when a man came out from Lincoln Park, and spent an entire day at one of our windows getting pictures of a robin's nest. Well we always thought it was our tree. Mother and Dad had bought the house, really, because of it. But our tree.. But when they came to build a house between our house and the one next, they surveyed and find that not a tiny piece of bark was on our property.

DA: Oh dear

VW: It was pretty much of a shock to us, but that was that and you know, it was a beautiful tree and you would never think of anyone cutting it down. Well that went on for years, and we still had our beautiful, beautiful tree. Course, a cottonwood is what people would call messy, but we never minded that. You know you just rake it up with the leaves. Well it went on that way until World War II. And I think this is all fiction that I'm telling you, but I mean all the side parts of this is fiction. It was really true. Well a family moved in next door with a very English sounding name, but both of them had very fine sounding voices. There were two children. They didn't have much to do with the neighbors, and once, one of the children was locked out of the front door, and came to a neighbors' to get help. And the neighbor said, "Well let's go round the back door and see if that's open." And the child said, "Oh, No! We're never allowed to use the back door!" Well the man insisted on absolute quiet at night. I remember once when your sister, Ellen, was visiting us. And

she was a tiny child, and she used to sing little songs in a toneless kind of way when she went to bed. And she was sleeping in the little bedroom that's nearest this house. And the man just opened the window and yelled at her, "Shut up." That was a pretty horrible experience. Well anyway, the rumor, and how it started I don't know, went around the neighborhood that he was a German spy, and that using this great big tall tree he had some sort of electronic equipment so that he could spy on our electronic equipment and perhaps send it to Germany. I don't know much about those things, but it always seemed to me to be to be very wild. I'm sure that our, whatever we had, CIA or whatever, would have been able to find it. But anyway that was...Well they moved away. And incidentally I heard later that she had a job in the government. So maybe they were government people. Our government people here, I don't know. But they moved away. And in moved a former chaplain at one of the mid-western Universities who was hated by many of the people on the campus because he was a pacifist. And of course it seemed a little funny that these people we thought were spies, and then a pacifist came in apparently. I don't know. They probably didn't know each other. But anyway, that is what happened.
[Track 5] And they had three children who had asthma. And they thought that the cotton from the cottonwood caused their children to have asthma, and they had the tree taken down. And of course, the people who had this rumor before, were just sure they were in cahoots with the spy, and that they had not found the tree so that there would be no record. One of the funny parts connected with this was that when I went to Los Alamos to help with their safety program, I had to be cleared by the FBI, of course. And the FBI went to the minister's house next door to find about me. If he'd gone two houses he would have run into the Loeffler [family] who had known me for years. Or if he'd gone down the other street he'd have known people. But these people hardly knew me at all, but they were consulted by the FBI. So that's funny as I say. But it was a beautiful tree, darling. I wish you could have seen it. I'm so happy I had it. Now let's see. I think I was at "magnificent tree" wasn't I? Yes."

[Track 6] …Nestling in the shade of this great cottonwood was a little house, evidently only half built, that looked, in spite of its unfinished state, as though it might possibly have the word “home” concealed somewhere about it.
The two adventurers approached the rear and discovered a quite discouraged young carpenter sitting in his shirt sleeves doing nothing. On investigation they found that he had started to build a home, that his wife and baby had been ill, that he had been having had luck everywhere, that he had no money left to buy his lumber and his “‘ardware” and that he was at the end of his string and would sell out for his “heqity,” whatever that might be.

DA: She was trying to say "Equity?" And, what, did he have a Cockney accent?

VW: Well I suppose he was a Cockney. You've been in England. Do the Cockneys leave the H's off one place and put them in another?

DA: Well they leave them off, I thought, but I don't know if they put them in another.

VW: Well apparently that's what this guy did. Now we're back to the article

…By this time the wonderful air and the sunshine and the flowers— especially the flowers— had had their effect on the two young people. They promptly abandoned the idea of renting a home and with the complete knowledge that they did not possess the money necessary to pay for the cottage, they decided to buy it.

Just how, after sleepless nights and much planning and contriving, this was accomplished, is quite another story.

It is a significant fact that on the twelfth of October, the day dedicated to the great explorer, at the hour of six in the afternoon, a moving van bearing their entire worldly goods reached the corner of Hill and Sheridan road.

DA: Hill St. Where's that?

VW: Well honey, that's the street you know now as Maple. And there's a rather interesting talk about that but again I don't really know. But when I was fairly old even on the corner of what was then Hill street and Sixth, one block over, we lived on Fifth [204 Fifth St., Wilmette], and this was one block over on Sixth, was a simply precious and fascinating wood log cabin. And that was Mr. Hill's house, one of the very early pioneers of Wilmette. And we were terribly unhappy. We didn't have a good historical society that could have done anything about it in those days. But we were terribly unhappy when the man that owned the property tore it down, because he said it attracted tramps. Do you know what a tramp is?

DA: A bum?

VW: Hobo! They traveled around and worked where they could and got fed and so forth. There is a Hobo Association so I guess they're still around, but we don't really see them much. I think they wouldn't have liked the word bum because I think they really kind of earned their way, but they had no roots. Well, anyway, As I remember the story there was someone with influence in the village setup, the governing body, who also had ancestors who had come to Wilmette as pioneers, and they objected to Mr. Hill getting all the credit on Hill St. So they put it through, and made it Maple. Let's see that would be Maple Avenue. But the maples, according to your Aunt Sydney, that gave the street its name were all planted by Mr. Hill! So he lived [indistinct]. Let's see this is Hill and Sheridan Road. Now can you think were that is. It's South of the Baha'i Temple. So that would be now Maple and Sheridan Road. And if we go all the way back to the moving van.

…It turned into the sunset, lumbered perilously over the shaky boards that bridged the little stream, meandering across Hill Street, and made straight towards the big tree. They had covered the fifteen miles from Chicago in nine hours. The mother and the two babies had come out on the train and had been waiting on the steps for centuries, wondering when father would come with the familiar home furnishings that had looked so strange and houseless, standing there on the sidewalk, or lodged at undignified angles on the van. And Remus was coming, too, Remus, their friend, protector and playmate. Remus had

gone on the van with father because dogs were not allowed in trains but it had been very lonely all day without him.

DA: Were you around when Remus was here?

VW: Oh, Deborah, I have to tell you! Again that I'm not entirely sure whether I really was, and I think I really was, or whether I just heard so much about him. He was a great big beautiful black dog. And every time there was a new baby, and I think this applied to me too, mother gave the baby to Remus. She had a formal little ceremony and

DA: [Laughter]

VW: [Track 7] thereafter he guarded that baby. You know sometimes you hear of dogs hurting them. I remember Mother often telling about the day he died. She was sewing and he kept sort of coming and lying at her feet. And she didn't realize that he was sick or she would have taken time off to love him anyway. One of the older girls would know whether I was at home or not. I think he was. Anyway he's very close to my mind. It has been lonely without him.

…When at last Remus did come and was released from his shaky prison he was a dog mad with joy. He seemed to realize that he had reached a place where he could he free, where he could bark, wag his plumy tail and run without criticism or restraint and run he did. Over piles of sand, mortar boxes, boards and shavings, around and around the little house he ran like a wild thing, until, completely tired, he threw himself down at his master's feet. He, too, had come home.

The fall that year was late and lovely. As the house was still in the hands of plumbers, plasterers and decorators, the next four weeks were spent in the open, exploring fields, woods and sands. The board walks would be followed as far as they went, then the baby carriage would be abandoned there and the journey continued. Through the fields, down the steep bluffs along the shore they would go, always getting back in time to meet father's train.

The evenings were long and quiet, very quiet. There were no automobile horns, no radios, not even the rumble of an elevated train. The roads were plain Illinois dirt roads or cinder paths so even the hoof beats of a belated horse were muffled. The streets were lighted at spasmodic intervals with oil lamps and the darknesses between were abysmal.

There was "no place to go but out, no place to come but in." Not a movie anywhere or a theater short of Chicago.

DA: They had movies way back in those days? Silent movies?

VW: Ah, I doubt it. I doubt if they had movies even in Chicago, but they had theaters. Recently I turned over to Frank Collotti at Northwestern University all the programs that the family had had. And oh, they went back with people whose names you would recognize. Wonderful old actors and actresses! Back to the, well, I think there some back to the 1880's even. But I know there were , Well no, there weren't I don't imagine. I don't think Dad came to Chicago until 1891. But anyway, [indistinct]. But I don't think movies. Now I remember very well the first movie house in Wilmette. And I was 10 or 11. Although I am sure there were some downtown. And there were some of these things that weren't really movies. What do they call those things? Lanterns. Magic lanterns. We had some of those in the home. I don't really know when movies started. I'll have to find that out somewhere.

[Track 8] …But the quiet was soothing and the long evenings gave time for the avocations which were pushed aside during the busy days. Time to read, to talk, to write, to draw, to bind books, to study, to join with other young people of the neighborhood in learning and acting small plays. There was never any time to be bored.

VW: You noticed she mentions "bind books". If you'll look over in the bookcase here you'll see about six books that mother and dad bound. And Mother embroidered the name on it. These were of a very very interesting little magazine. It sold first for 5 cents a copy and later for 10 cents a copy, and it was called the Chat [Chap ?] Book. Now it may be that the Newberry Library in Chicago will ask for those. A friend thought they might be interested. So I sent down what we have. So maybe you better look at them before they go flitting away. Now let's get back to the article.

[Track 9] …Then the spring time came. The one policeman of the village, who was also the representative of a firm of nurserymen, called with a book containing wonderful colored pictures of Baldwin apple trees, Yenshi peaches and early cherries.There were also grape vines and standard rose trees and purple clematis. The young people plunged. They ordered two of everything. It was something of a blow to find some days later that the entire orchard could be put in a large umbrella stand. However, the baby trees were set out with a great deal of care and ceremony and in after years grew to resemble their pictures in the catalogue.

There were no trees in the parkway around the home but the ditches and woods nearby had many slender saplings—elm, maple, oak— to be had for transplanting. It was great fun to hunt for one with just the right shape, carefully to dig it, solicitously transport it, so that no branch would be injured, and pains-takingly plant it.

There was no need to leave home at vacation time— life was really vacation, if one chose to regard it that way. The lake front became as much home to the growing family as the house. It almost seemed as though no one else had discovered that there was a lake front so secluded were they. Whole days were spent on the beach. So many pleasant memories of that time arise. The going at early dawn; the scramble down the steep bluff; the building the camp fire of driftwood; the delicious smell of bacon and coffee cooked out of doors; the castles and caverns built in the sand, the elephants and lions modeled in the

same plastic material; the brown children, tumbling in and out of the water, or paddling an old canoe close to the shore; the growing brilliance of the fire as the dusk came in; the last crimson shreds of the sunset; the moon climbing enormous and orange colored out of the lake, sending an inviting path across the ripples to one's very feet. Then the gathering up of sleepy babies and carrying them home, pick-a-back in the warm, fragrant dark, while the older children, on their bicycles, acted as advance guard.

The years slipped by. The little place which was to have been but a stepping stone became a hearth stone. Partitions were taken down, rooms enlarged, and built on, to keep pace with the growing family. Friends moving on, farther north, advised a like removal, the building of a larger house, a new start. And still, as in the beginning, Wilmette seemed to them to hold all that was necessary to the making of a home.

The far horizons have vanished. Once again one has to dodge around bricks and mortar to see the sunset. The spangled fields, the restful woods, the long stretches of quiet and almost deserted beach live only in the memory, that memory that destroys all things hard, inconvenient or unpleasant and leaves only things beautiful.

Yes, the five times seven years have taken their toll of springtime beauty, of freshness, of simplicity; but they have brought a village of comfort, of convenience, of efficiency, of a mature beauty that fulfills the promise of its youth—a place that holds in memory and in reality the essence of the word "home."