

FLORIDIAN

SUNDAY, JANUARY 19, 2003 ■ THE TIMES

SUNDAY JOURNAL

SMALL TOWN GROWS IN STATURE

By MARY ELLEN COLLINS

I went home for my father's funeral, to the western Pennsylvania community and the house in which we both grew up. My husband and I drove north from the airport, tracing the usual route through the outskirts of town, past the high school, through the three-block business section into neighborhoods filled with old houses on shady streets. It all looked exactly as it had on every visit for the past 25 years, but an unfamiliar sadness hung in the air when we reached 319 Edgewood.

Before we reached the front porch, my sister Carol came running across our yard from the neighbor's to greet us, wrapped in a bathrobe, her hair wet from the shower. I knew right away what her solution was when our one-bathroom house had reached overload capacity.

We stepped inside to join a flurry of planning for the next day, everyone busying themselves with tasks that kept reality at bay for a few more hours. My other sister was ironing; my brother, inexplicably, was scrubbing the basement floor; and my mother was fielding phone calls and presiding over everything with her characteristic grace under pressure.

Offering to help with the search for tripods on which to display Dad's paintings, we headed back downtown to the print shop

Please see **JOURNAL 8F**

Journal

from 1F

that had occupied its same Broad Street location for 50 years. The owner, a grayer but still recognizable version of his senior class picture in my freshman yearbook, quickly dismantled his window display and told us to keep the easel as long as we needed it.

Back at home, a steady stream of comfort food made its way to our kitchen: covered dishes arriving through the front door and plates of cookies appearing on the back steps. When members of the local American Legion Post paid their respects by delivering a 5-pound addition to our seemingly endless supply of "sympathy hams," all we could do was laugh. And even though none of us had much of an appetite, we filled our plates with an eclectic sampling from friends' and strangers' kitchens, and let lunch satisfy something other than physical hunger.

In the afternoon, we steeled ourselves for the next step and caravanned six blocks to the funeral home, where the director introduced himself with respectful familiarity. "Your mother and I go way back," he said, referring to three decades during which a night-shift nurse and the local undertaker helped families navigate the most difficult part of the life cycle. Now that it was our turn, at least we knew we hadn't put Dad in the hands of a stranger.

Throughout the afternoon and evening, decades of familiar faces caught my siblings and me in whirlpool of flashbacks and whispered condolences. Former neighbors, babysitting clients, elementary school teachers and parents of old classmates. Children who had grown up, adults who had grown old. People who hadn't seen me since I was 6, 16, or 26 told me I looked exactly the same.

My father's rehab therapists and nurses, a collection of caregivers we'd known for just a month, came in together and offered hugs that extended far beyond the boundaries of a hospital room and the duration of an illness.

And mixed in with the faces I knew was a kaleidoscope of strangers who inhabited my parents' Grove City world but not mine: I had left after 22 years, my dad had stayed for 77. My mother introduced me over and over, to old mill-worker buddies, the news center owner's daughter, the electrician's wife and even Laura, the 12-year-old newspaper carrier.

Following the funeral mass the next morning, we climbed into cars that carried us slowly through a cloudy autumn Saturday that looked like a thousand others I'd spent in that town. As we entered the cemetery chapel for a final prayer, I asked about the frail-looking man who lingered near the pallbearers, and my mother supplied a name that rang a distant bell.

"Oh, he retired from the funeral home years ago. He just came because he wanted to walk with your dad."

When I had finished college in that town in the '70s, I couldn't wait to leave. I longed for a life outside a community that, to a 21-year-old, had little to offer in the way of excitement or opportunity. I think Grove City even became my basis for using the term "small town" as an adjective to mock the simple, unsophisticated nature of a person, place, or thing.

But that visit provided a glimpse through a different lens. As we headed back to the airport, driving through neighborhoods filled with old houses on shady streets, I thought hard about the values of the people who lived there. In the space of two days, "small town" had become the best compliment I could pay to the place where my dad and I grew up, and to everyone there who touched us along the way.

Mary Ellen Collins is a freelance writer who lives in St. Petersburg.