

Memories of a Small Table

Lowell L. Getz



Fig. 1. Wrought iron table, in sunroom Champaign House.

The small white, black-flecked, Formica-topped table with black wrought iron legs sits inconspicuously in the sun-room. Three matching chairs (there is no room for the fourth chair, now residing in the attic) complete the set. Just an obscure small table providing a place for plants, a lamp and decorative items. But, its innocuous appearance belies the role this table has played in our lives, dating back 58 years. Nor, can anyone sense all the memories associated with this old table.

We purchased the table in July 1955, upon leaving the Army and beginning graduate school at the University of Michigan. The only suitable housing we could find at the time was a small one-room efficiency apartment, with a very small kitchen. None of the furniture stores in Ann Arbor had a table small enough to fit into the kitchen. We finally went to a trailer sales store and bought the small wrought iron table and four matching chairs. Even so, the table would fit in the kitchen only when we left one leaf down. And there was room for only two chairs. But it worked.

Thus, we began graduate school. We ate our breakfasts and evening meals on the table. I went back to campus most nights to study in the biology library, but the library closed at 10:00 PM. I needed more time to study for the required written preliminary exam and did not want to keep my wife, Mary Ruth, awake. She worked on campus and needed her rest. We kept what at that time was called a "portable" radio, about 6 x 12 x 10 inches, on the table. I glued a picture hanger on one end of the radio. On this I hung a small wall lamp so as to have light directly on my books, without using the kitchen ceiling light. I placed a wash cloth over the top of the shade to reduce the glare in the other room and studied until well after midnight almost every night.

The next year, we moved to a small "railroad" apartment three blocks from campus. The table barely fit into this kitchen, too. We were so close to campus both of us typically came home for lunch. Thus, we were able to have all three of our meals together on the table. One night in August 1956, while eating dinner at the table, I received the phone call telling me my Dad had died. In October, I passed the written prelims and began the next phase of the graduate program, my doctoral research.

The study area I selected for my research was 12 miles from Ann Arbor. In order to be closer to the study sites, we bought a small cottage in Whitmore Lake, three miles from the sites. We moved there in May 1957. The small table and chairs thus became a part of our first, albeit very small, home.

In December 1957, another major phase of our life began when our first daughter, Colleen, was born.



Fig. 2. Mary Ruth, giving Colleen a bath on table in Whitmore Lake House.



Fig. 3. Mary Ruth feeding Colleen, in Whitmore Lake House.

We were now starting a family. At first, there was a red-seated, chrome high chair with a chrome tray at the table, as we fed Colleen. Slowly she learned to feed herself, with the usual tossing of dishes and food on the floor.



Fig. 4. Colleen, eating in her high chair next to table in Whitmore Lake House.



Fig. 5. Colleen in her high chair, first birthday in Whitmore Lake House.

When she had grown little larger and more coordinated, we took the tray off the high chair and Colleen sat with us at the table. Soon, she was large enough to sit on a regular chair, with catalogs on the seat so she could reach the table.



Fig. 6. Colleen, sitting on catalogs in chair at table for Mary Ruth's 29th Birthday in Whitmore Lake House.

This was the beginning of our family sitting at the table as we ate our meals together.

Soon the research was done and the degree awarded. In the meantime, I had obtained a post-doctoral research position at the University of Michigan. We stayed on in the little house in Whitmore Lake. For the next two years the three of us sat around the table for breakfast and dinner. I worked in Ann Arbor and did not have time to drive home for lunch. Thus, the table was an integral part of the early years of my professional career and of our family. There we were, the three of us together, just a small family sitting at a small table in a small house, but to us a major beginning to our lives.

At the end of the two-year post-doctoral program, I obtained a faculty position at the University of Connecticut at Storrs and was on my way in academia. For the first three years, we lived in University housing, a four-room unit in Northwood Apartments. The table served as our kitchen table.



Fig. 7. Mary Ruth and Colleen, with Allison on the way, Thanksgiving in Northwood Apartments, Storrs.

It was at the table the early October 1961 night that we drank coffee to calm our nerves after Mary Ruth received a call from her sister telling her that their Mom had died. Five months after arriving in Storrs, the final addition to our family joined us, a second daughter, Allison. Our family was complete. Once again the red and chrome high chair was next to the table as we fed Allison and watched as she, too, tossed dishes and food on the floor and learned to eat.



Fig. 8. Allison in her high chair, Northwood Apartments, Storrs.



Fig. 9. Allison, first birthday. Colleen and Mary Ruth, Northwood Apartments, Storrs.



Fig. 10. Colleen feeding Allison, Northwood Apartments, Storrs.



Fig. 11. Lowell, Colleen and Allison, Northwood Apartments, Storrs.



Fig. 12. Colleen and Allison carving Jack-o-lanterns, Northwood Apartments, Storrs.



Fig. 13. Colleen and friends, sixth birthday party, Northwood Apartments, Storrs.

It was while still in the high chair, that Allison said her first sentence. Her foot became wedged in a table leg. As she struggled to get it out, she said: "Got my foot caught."

We eventually saved enough money to afford to buy a lot and have a house built, our first "real" home. We moved there and the two girls began to grow. Now it was the four of us sitting in our kitchen in the wrought iron chairs at the table for our mealtime interactions.



Fig. 14. Colleen and Allison, at new house, 26 Farmstead Rd, Storrs.

As with most families during those years we ate our meals as a family. Some of the meals were fun times, others were disruptive, but whatever, we were together and we were a family. There were the usual spillages. If one of the girls did not spill milk during the meal, either I, or Mary Ruth, would. And, there was the time that Mary Ruth was trying to tell the girls a poetic epitaph she had learned as a girl. When she started struggling over the words at the beginning, Colleen rattled off the entire epitaph. She already knew it, from where, we did not know. Thus, the table was an indelible part of our family memories as the girls were growing up.

In March 1969, I received a letter that was to change our lives completely. In it the head of the Zoology Department at the University of Illinois offered me a position in his department. I had received my undergraduate degree in Zoology at the University of Illinois; this was a chance to return "home." The official offer came in late April and we arrived in Champaign in late July. In the meantime we purchased a much larger, new house in a new housing area in south Champaign. The furniture arrived a couple weeks after we did.

The table remained a participant in our daily interactions as we began the final phase of our family at home. Colleen was in the 7th grade and Allison in the 2nd grade when we arrived in Champaign.



Fig. 15. Allison and Colleen, carving Jack-o-lanterns, Champaign House.

We still ate breakfast and dinner together. Times had changed. The girls commented that they were the only ones they knew who had a "sit-down" breakfast with their mother and father. All too soon Colleen left to go back east to college (Smith College) and five years later, Allison to the University of Michigan, where she "had been conceived", as she liked to say. Now it was just the two of us sitting around the table. We had come a complete circle, but there were two empty chairs, chairs once filled by Colleen and Allison. There were the memories and visions of all had taken place around the table, the life of a family. The breakfasts and evening meals were quiet, too quiet.

Soon Mary Ruth said it was time we get a new table, one that matched better the wooden kitchen cabinets. She, rightly, felt the white, black speckled Formica topped wrought iron table and chairs had served their purpose and did not "fit in" with the maple kitchen cabinets. I understood what she meant, but there were all the memories of what had taken place around the table, from the beginning of the graduate program, through our first little house, the beginning of our family, the postdoctoral years, the first years of the academic career at UConn, the return to Illinois, and the ending of the family times together. My nostalgic sense weighed heavily. Finally, Mary Ruth

simply went ahead, selected and purchased a new wooden table and chairs. I came home from work one night and there they were in the kitchen and the old table and chairs in the garage.



Fig. 16. New wooden kitchen table, Champaign House.

The old table and chairs sat in the garage for weeks. I did not have the heart to get rid of them, but we had no need for them any more. The more I looked at them, the more nostalgic I felt. Finally, one day I took the legs off the table and put it and the chairs in the attic. I thought this was the end of their being a part of our family and that they would remain in the attic until we had to leave the house.

But, I was wrong. The year I retired, 1997, we did something Mary Ruth had long wanted to do--add a sunroom to the back of our house. Once the room was built, we needed to put some furniture in it, especially a small table on which to place a lamp and some decorative flowers, and to have somewhere to set things we were bringing in or taking out of the house. We immediately thought of the old wrought iron table. The color and design fit perfectly the sunroom, with its white metal frame and black trim. The top of the table was at the level of the horizontal frame of the windows and did not block the view. Nor did the slender wrought iron

legs. After a hiatus of 15 years, the table once more was a part of our lives, albeit a passive one this time.

To visitors, the small wrought iron table and chairs are simply utilitarian pieces of furniture. But, when I look at them, a flood of memories come back--studying for prelims late at night; eating supper the night my mom called to tell me my dad had died; the table and chairs in our first house, really a small cottage, but ours; eating Thanksgiving dinner while watching the Green Bay Packers and Detroit Lions play football on a snowy afternoon; Colleen in her high chair at the table and later sitting on catalogs so she could reach the table; eating in our apartment at Northwood Apartments as we began our "academic career" at the University of Connecticut; drinking coffee at the table the night Mary Ruth's Mom died; Allison, as a baby, in her high chair as we ate at the table; Allison's first sentence; family meals together, with all the arguing, crying, laughing; all the spilled milk; the birthday cakes; and, the empty chairs when the girls went off to college. A life-time of memories, known only to our family.

All too soon it will be time for us to leave our home in Champaign and move into a retirement facility near Allison. We will take the wrought iron table and chairs with us. There, they will be placed in a small breakfast nook, not unlike the small kitchen on Anderson Ave., Ann Arbor where we first had them. Only this time there will be no light late at night on a radio on the table. The table may be dark, but it will be bright with memories.