

MEMORIES OF MOTHERS

Flipping through the scrapbook pages of our memories just a week ago turned up images of several mothers.

Page one opened at Deal Cemetery in Ladelle, Ark.

Mary's mother, grandmother and great-grandmother are all buried there. And though never a mother herself, our daughter Jenny occupies a spot as well, awaiting the ultimate arrival of her mother to bring one branch of the family tree to completion.

Unseen earthly remains and granite markers are but insignificant tokens of lives once lived, of joy and sadness, victory and defeat--all inseparable components of motherhood.

We lingered in the cemetery for half an hour or so, noticing subtle changes: how tall the stunted cedar tree had grown since the stately oak, once tiny itself in former generations, had died and opened a path for the sunlight.

Flipping to page two found us touring the campus of the University of Arkansas at Monticello. My mother graduated from there, and her mother, Sarah Norrell Tyson, whom we called Mama T, was housemother of Wells Hall. I often visited Mama T and propelled my bicycle around campus, streaking down sidewalks to the Commons and occasionally pausing to examine the flashing, finned inhabitants of the goldfish ponds.

Page three opened on East Jackson Street in front of the old house we shared with Miss Carolina Royer in the late 40s. While living there, Mother took sick, near death some would later say, and Daddy would take my sister and me to visit her in the hospital. When Mother returned home, I recall how she craved bits of crushed ice to suck on until she could drink fluids. Wrapping ice cubes in a wash cloth, I would try to gently crush them for her with a hammer. Now, even the hospital is gone.

South Edwards Street, page four. Our house is smaller now than childhood recollection paints it, and the redbud tree, once the superstructure of a boy's treehouse, is conspicuously absent. But the tin-clad, sloping door to the storm cellar where Mother would rapidly dispatch us when tornadoes threatened still appears to serve as a makeshift slide to yet another generation of children. The musty smell of that cellar, which Mother provisioned with blankets, water and a lantern, still prickles my nose.

Page five, back in Conway, and I'm studying the story of a large yellow "smiley face" sticker from 1984 in one of Mary's scrapbooks: Mary had been napping when three-year-old Barrett and I returned from a trip to the lumberyard, where a man had given him that sticker. Mary awoke to gentle pressure on her shoulder as Barrett affixed the sticker to her shirt with never-to-be-forgotten words: "This is your medal for being the sweetest mommy in the world."

Mother's Day is not as much about how we express appreciation to our mothers, but of fond and demonstrable recollections of what mothers have done to make themselves memorable.