

THE MOORE LOG HOUSE

Since first settled in 1830, along a tributary of Buffalo Bayou that came to be known as Spring Branch, the area seventeen miles west of Houston was a rural community, largely dependent on dairy farming and sawmill and lumberyard operations. Although the land north of Buffalo Bayou was heavily wooded and ill-suited for farming, the growing population of Houston and the building of railroads provided a steady market for dairy products and the timber and lumber necessary for railroad ties and buildings. Most of the early settlers were German families who by the 1840s were immigrating in significant numbers, building their log homes and churches in clearings along the creeks and bayous. The roads west from Houston were primitive. The community of Spring Branch, known in the early days as Hillendahl after one of the first families to settle here, came to be centered on the confluence of Campbell Road, Katy Road, and the railroad. Except for the few enterprises on Katy Road, life west of the city kept its rural character until the mid-1930s. Only with the rapid postwar expansion of Houston in the 1940s did the land become valuable as residential property, prompting owners to sell the woodlots and sawmills. By the 1950s roads had been extended westward, subdivisions had multiplied, and the rural life of the area was all but over.¹

But in the 1920s the land west of Houston was still heavily timbered with second-growth trees, lightly populated, and attractive to Jesse and Edith Moore who wanted to get out of the city to the rural life they both preferred. In 1926 and 1927 they purchased two tracts of land west of the present West Belt, accessible only through fields and gates from the trolley on Katy Road. These 140.86 acres along Rumme1 Creek (named for another early

settler in the area) in the E. Williams Survey A-834 just north of Buffalo Bayou cost a total of \$6793.² The Moores would later acquire much more land in the vicinity, but these acres along Rummel Creek were to be the site of their home for many years. Here they set up a small gasoline-powered sawmill, where they prepared the logs for their log home, and built a 24-stall dairy barn on the east bank of the creek. In 1931 they began construction of their home across the creek.³ Significantly, the dwelling was built at the end of the era when a log house would not have been an unusual home. A home for Edith Moore for 43 years and the headquarters of the Houston Audubon Society for the past two decades, the hand-crafted log house (called a house instead of a cabin because of its size and sophistication) is the last of its kind in the area, a living reminder of a time that is past, still in the woods where it was conceived and built, and still being used and enjoyed.

The original plans for the modified single-pen structure, subdivided by a log partition wall into three rooms: a large living room and a smaller bedroom and kitchen, do not exist today. To make space for the building, over 100 loblolly pine trees, dense, straight, and slightly tapered, none less than eight inches in diameter, were cut and debarked on the site on the west side of Rummel Creek. The growth rings show that the trees were about 50 years old when they were cut, probably second-growth after an early logging operation had been abandoned in the mid-1800s.⁴ The outside dimensions of the house measured 36'x25', its logs saddle-notched with no wall covering inside or out. Piled rocks topped with square sill logs comprised the foundation, and the chinking was cement. An

uninterrupted sweep of roof, gabled at the north and south ends, covered the house. There was no ridge pole, just square hewn rafters. Square sedimentary sandstone blocks formed the chimney and fireplace centered on the gable end of the large living room. They also are part of Houston's history, curbstones salvaged by the Moores when Milam Street in downtown Houston was elevated to level the intersection at Preston Street.⁵ A small brick interior chimney in the kitchen provided the flue for the iron wood-burning cookstove.

The downstairs space was divided by a log partition wall into a living area and a smaller bedroom and kitchen. Against this wall steep log stairs from the living room reached a 16'x12' half-story above the kitchen and bedroom, used mainly for storage. A screened porch ten feet deep wrapped around the south and east sides of the house. Heavy plank doors opening into the living room on the east and the kitchen on the south provided access from the porch. A gasoline generator and a 12-volt Delco battery system housed in a shed outside the back door--from which a single wire ran to the house--supplied power for the house and water well. Except for the massive stone chimney built by an experienced stone mason, the house was constructed by Jesse Moore, Edith's nephew Lawrence Smith, and Mr. Moseley, a hand at the dairy, and one other helper.⁶ No records of the total cost remain, but with most of the materials fabricated in their own sawmill and lumberyard, the cost must have been low. In 1932 the Moores moved in.

Unhappy at being surrounded by the expanding city where they lived on Park Street near downtown Houston, both Edith and Jesse were well prepared for this change in their

lives. As a young college woman, Edith Lotz (born on July 12, 1884) spent an extended time living in a tent with but one companion at Christmas Lake in Minnesota, where she recuperated from a serious bout with pneumonia. There, isolated from family and friends, she was no stranger to a simple and lonely life; perhaps it was there that her devotion to nature began to grow into the dream of living among the animals and trees she loved.⁷ At the University of Minnesota, Edith trained to become a bacteriologist and pathologist. During the flu epidemic of 1918, eager to do her part in the Great War, Edith moved to Houston to work for the United States Public Health Service at Camp Logan. After the war she worked in Public Health Service laboratories in Beaumont, Texas, studying the control of malaria and bubonic plague. In 1920 Edith moved to Houston to become a bacteriologist for the City of Houston. It was there that she met Jesse Moore, a city milk inspector, whom she married in 1921.⁸

Ten years Edith's junior, Jesse Moore was born in 1894 near Hallettsville, Texas, to a farming family. With no more than a highschool education, he joined the United States Navy, attaining the rank of Chief Petty Officer in World War I (and again in World War II). Back in civilian life after World War I, Jesse took a job in Houston as City Milk Inspector, which he kept until he and Edith moved to the country in 1932. His farm background was never forgotten. Jesse had always dreamt of living in a log cabin, and was obsessive about owning and living on the land. So in 1926 he and Edith began to accumulate land west of Houston, eventually owning many acres between Buffalo Bayou and Old Katy Road in the

vicinity of the present West Belt.⁹ There they operated their small sawmill and lumberyard and a dairy farm--even, briefly, a frog "farm" to produce frogs for sale to Houston restaurants.¹⁰

On December 6, 1935, their home and their various enterprises faced calamity from Houston's worst flood in fifty years. A downpour at the western edge of Harris County, "the birthplace of floods," continued for two days, after which the normal banks of nearby Buffalo Bayou were under twenty feet of water.¹¹ The Moores had moved their cattle out, but the sawmill along the creek was inundated, logs swept away, and the frogs loosed to the flood. Ten feet of water flooded their house, floating Edith's grand piano to the level of the loft. The family, along with dogs, cats, chickens, and a passing pig later named Noah, was forced to the porch roof, where they were later rescued by their nephew who came in a motorboat over the fencetops from Katy Road. Although their furniture was ruined and the house covered with mud, the solid log building was undamaged. After the flood, they gave up their sawmill on Rummel Creek, but operated a lumberyard and small store on Old Katy Road, and continued to run their dairy farm for a few years and live in their home by the creek.¹²

In 1958, the year before the Moores divorced, they donated five acres across Rummel Creek for a new United Methodist Church.¹³ As part of the divorce settlement Edith received the dwelling and 74.40 acres surrounding it, but she gradually sold most of the land for subdivisions, keeping only her log home and twenty-five acres along the creek.¹⁴ (After their divorce, Jesse had no further connection with the history of the house. He lived to

the age of 99, dying in 1993.) Edith's love of all wildlife fed her determination to make her small acreage a nature preserve. As she had in the past, she permitted groups of children and adults to come and enjoy her woods, even offered her home and the land along the creek to the National Audubon Society to be dedicated as an urban wildlife refuge. Considered too small for the Society to manage efficiently, her offer was not accepted.

As suburbia increasingly surrounded her and vandalism and trespassing became problems, neighbors began watching out for their elderly neighbor and her home. Knowing she was a long-time member of the Houston Audubon Society, they eventually suggested that Edith formalize an agreement with the Society to allow them to protect and supervise the grounds while she continued to live there. This was accomplished in 1973 when she was 89 years old.¹⁵ When Edith Moore died in 1975, she left her house and seventeen and a half acres on Rummel Creek to the Houston Audubon Society, with the stipulation that the land be used forever as a bird sanctuary and the log house be made available to civic organizations "as a meeting place or otherwise [*sic*]." ¹⁶

Since 1975 the Houston Audubon Society (HAS) has used the land and the log house as its headquarters. Known as the Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary (ELMNS), the property, the first sanctuary HAS owned, is the nucleus of the chapter's activities. The house soon became its education and administrative center, the focus of the chapter's work in children's education and its involvement in Southeast Texas' environmental issues. The house is heavily used by the public, both children and adults, for classes and meetings and

the gathering point for tours of the sanctuary. The privately owned, tax-exempt chapter of the National Audubon Society depends entirely on dues and donations for its operating funds, but membership is not a requirement for participation in any activity of the Houston Audubon Society.¹⁷

Since its construction the building had had no significant repairs. By the mid-1980s it was apparent that major work must be done to rescue and preserve the structure which attracted so much attention. The wooden underpinnings were rotting. Both chimneys leaked at their juncture with the log walls. The original cement chinking had pulled away from the logs, letting daylight and cold winter wind through the cracks, and the whole roof needed to be replaced. Money for a major restoration was raised and in late 1988 proposals for the work were submitted and approved. Interestingly, the construction company selected to carry out the work was Bauer Construction, Inc., the "descendant" of long-time sawmills operated by the Bauer family in the Spring Branch neighborhood when the Moores came to the area.

To stabilize and level the structure, additional concrete pads and CMU blocks were installed to augment the remaining rock supports of the original sill logs; rotten joists and wood shims were replaced with treated 4"x6" and 2"x6" members; and the sagging roof was replaced. The original porch decking was replaced, and rusted, vandalized screening removed from the porch perimeter. The original cement chinking between the logs was replaced throughout with Perma-Chink latex caulking and backing rods. The central brick chimney, long unused and leaking, was removed. To accommodate sanctuary visitors, part of the

original kitchen was converted to an entry hall opening to the west, and the rest became a bathroom with a south-facing outside entrance. The small upstairs room remained, becoming the Society's office.¹⁸

Total changes were minor--both inside and out--the original log construction remaining as it had been built in 1931, the only exception being the opening cut for a door opening to the new parking area on the west. Even the original window frames and glass and hardware have not been replaced. The south porch was extended to provide cover for the new west entry. Eventually an open teaching deck was built on the north end, connecting to the original porch. Additionally a central air conditioning and heating system was installed, and the logs were treated to repel insects and water.

Since completion of the 1989 renovation the log house and the surrounding sanctuary have continued to be the heart of Houston Audubon Society's broad educational role in helping to preserve the natural world in the Houston area. The house, which everyone calls "The Cabin," arouses the curiosity of its visitors--When was it built? Who built it? Why was it built? The old log home is a living reminder of the history of the western outskirts of old Houston and a vanished way of life.

Researched and written by
Dorothy Mueller for the
Houston Audubon Society
August 1995

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Eileen Colquhoun et al. "Hunters Creek Heritage: A Commemorative Account of the Hunters Creek Village Area." (booklet prepared for the Hunters Creek Garden Club, unpublished, Houston, TX.), pp. 12-27; and Hedwig Village Gazette, Houston, Tx., July 4, 1986.
- ² Deed records: V. 665, p.497; V.703, p. 278, county clerk's office, Harris County Courthouse, Houston.
- ³ Statement by Dorothy McLaughlin (niece of Edith Moore), personal interview, January 1993. Notes.
- ⁴ Donald M. Gray. "Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary Rich in History." The Naturalist (Houston: Houston Audubon Society) March 1991, p.6.
- ⁵ McLaughlin, interview, January 1993. Notes.
- ⁶ Statement by Barney Morris (nephew of Jesse Moore), personal interview, August 4, 1994. Notes.
- ⁷ Mabel Deshayes, ed., "In Memory." The Naturalist, Houston: Houston Audubon Society, June 1975, pp. 1-3. Mrs. Moore's personal reminiscences of her life .
- ⁸ Tinling, Marian. "Moore, Edith Lotz, 1884-1975, Scientist and Conservationist", Women Remembered: A Guide to Landmarks of Women's History in the U.S. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1986) pp. 271-2.
- ⁹ Morris, interview, August 4, 1994. Notes.
- ¹⁰ Statement by Merle Barnes Whitman (niece of Jesse Moore), personal interview, June 29, 1994. Notes.
- ¹¹ "Time Takes the Edge Off Horrors--But Floods Come Again." Houston Chronicle" February 19, 1939.

Audubon Society.

Morris, Barney. Interview by author. August 1994. Notes in files of Houston Audubon Society.

Probate records. County clerk's office. Harris County Courthouse, Houston, Texas.

"Time Takes the Edge Off Horrors--But Floods Come Again!" Houston Chronicle .
February 19, 1939.

Tinling, Marian. Women Remembered: A Guidebook to Women's History in the United States.
Westport: Greenwood Press. 1986.

Villages: The Magazine of the Memorial Community. (Houston, Texas). August 1990.

Whitman, Merle Barnes. Interview by author. June 1994. Notes in files of Houston Audubon Society.