

THE MUSICAL, 1971

If you draw a line on a map from Shiloh—where I'm from—all the way south to, say Donie or Box Church, and even incorporating a broad sweep of 10 miles to the East to factor in LaSalle, Prairie Grove, Shady Grove, Lost Prairie, Fallon, Jewett, and Personville, you won't find much on the map but a few creeks: Pin Oak, Sandy Branch, Big Creek, Middle Creek, Spring Creek, Turkey Creek and a few other smaller unnamed tributaries and fish ponds, all emptying into the Navasota River which eventually itself dumps its own muddy load of slow-moving river water, snapping turtles, mudcat, longnose gar, crappie, drum and fat white bass into the Brazos River many miles further south.

The map might also reveal a few of—but not all of—the little county blacktops, farm-to-market roads, unpaved back roads, gravel roads, dirt roads, cowpaths and trails that chop up these large parcels of fenced-in and weedy and in some places woody fields and pastures along the roads. From those roads you can hardly see them but there are houses back off in those

fields, quite a few of them, filled with families: the Castleberrys, the Byrds, Huckabees, Moodys, Eubanks and Weavers ... all making few trips into town and living mostly off the cows they milk and hogs they slaughter, the chicken eggs they harvest, the hay they bale, the firewood they chop, the water they pull from deep natural waterwells and all the fish, turtles, squirrels, turkeys, quail, deer and even raccoons and snakes they can manage to reel in or get within the sights of their 22s and 410s.

My family is a little different, if only because we are closer to the highway. Daddy, if he's not out of town on pipeline jobs, runs a filling station in town and my mother worked first in the food service line and is now a secretary in the large asylum out on the Tehuacana Highway. With my dad's decent income as an itinerant bulldozer operator we're wealthy enough to not have to live off the land like these other folks do. My mother takes great puffed-up pride in buying namebrand jellies and pickles instead of canning her own and getting her tomatoes and peaches from the supermarket in town instead of at any of the little roadside fresh produce stands that dot all these backroads.

If we aren't precisely the most affluent family in the whole population of Shiloh—which, according to the sign at the Shiloh Road turn-off from Highway 39, numbers exactly 110—we are at least the most visible

from the road. And if the population is in fact actually 110, at least a hundred of them live way off back in the woods along all those dirt roads. It is to these hundred that the Every 3rd Saturday of the Month Musicals are addressed.

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From the roof of the backporch of my parents' house you can see the old schoolhouse where my grandparents went to school. I'll endeavor to describe it here:

Plain white clapboard sided no-frills blockhouse architecture—with no ornamental shutters and no distracting filigree, as thick as it is wide as it is high and pierced with an even number of big homely two-pane windows and topped with a low-pitch roof covered in green shingles. A little one-room schoolhouse had sat here before, built in the mid 1890s but with the coming of the feeder arm from the Texas-New Orleans Railroad the classes boomed to over a hundred kids and, in 1908, with plans for "The Hamilton Model" bought from a Sears-Roebuck catalog, the two story unembellished box was built by all the neighboring pig and cotton farmers.

Symmetrical inside, the front door opens onto a grand creaky-floored hall, wide double-framed doors open right and left into two huge 12 foot high

chambers, dark gray surfaced chalkboards are permanently inset into the walls of each classroom, the left connecting to another similar room and the right to a cafeteria and kitchen. But the broad stairway in the middle of the main hall is its main feature—attended by the splayed uniformity of a curving open-armed balustrade, its ample broad glossy coal-colored steps ascend with a soldierly regularity, generous wide and solid—and in the scalloping swoop of its outstretched handrail, the rigidity of its white posts and contrasting black planks, and especially in the music elicited by the dusty screeches and reedy squeaks of the boards underfoot as you climb them two or three at a time, you get the distinct impression of entering deep into the elegant lordly interior of the most marvelous and consuming of gigantic grand pianos.

The air as one ascends the staircase, coming up in gusts and seeps through the cracks and little breaches between the stairs, is saturated with a heady moldy spunk smell, a nauseating and wondrously heady odor ... of gray mopwater and vinegary lysol, of rancid dark porcelain bowls sprinkled with bluish-white perfumy BonAmi, of decades and decades of dank moisture collected on the faded yellow peeling plaster walls of two dark and fabulous little cabinet-sized grottos hidden beneath the stairs.

Above, at the top of the stairs, a landing and then two smaller sub-stairs branching off to either side and

opening up into an immense and sunlit cavernous space, an auditorium, stretching from one bank of wide windows to the other, punctuated here and there with slender posts to hold up the ample ceiling and crowded underneath with rows and rows of darkly stained bentwood and black iron stadium seating, all facing in angled rows ... a stage—bigger than a baptistery but smaller than a theater stage, its floorboards painted a murky red and lit by the flip of a simple switch by chains of lights, green blue red and alternately white, filling its proscenium—edged as it is with thick hulking purple velvet curtains—filling it with the most hot and crystalline raptures of pinkish-yellow bright light.

To either side of the stage, behind all the fascinating pulleys and drawstrings used to control the curtains, the dressings rooms where all the props and costumes for all the Christmas pageants, talent shows, Passion Plays and Easter Festivals must've once been kept and even a few—after all these long years and years—still remain: a cardboard Persian scimitar painted silver, a tinfoil crown and a gold tinsel halo, a gossamer fairy gown in seafoam glittery green chiffon but mostly in webby tatters now, a king's robe in red velvet, an angel's wings made from moth-eaten turkey feathers, patchwork hobo rags, an Indian headdress in red yellow blue and white, crenellated silk choir robes, a giant candycane, a painted lilypad, a gray castle wall, a pretty plump toadstool dressed in polkadots and

stripes, a gnarled old haunted tree made from coathangers and crumpled up bits of faded black construction paper, a big yellow cardboard harvest moon, grinning and winking and lording high over this cluttered bungle of crepe-paper treasures ... all reeking of a damp black choking mold, a smell as strong and suffocating and heady as the thick arid mephitic of a freshly manured cabbage patch, as thrilling and worrying as the pungent funk that rises—musklike and intoxicating—from the grimy corners and sweat-slick benches of a boys' lockerroom ...

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All these echoes and shadowy flavors and spectral scents of kids long since grown lay palpable and heavy in the thick hot stuffy air of the old schoolhouse, padlocked as it has been for the decade since 1961, the year that Shiloh incorporated into the local school district and all the kids began riding—like I do—the schoolbus into town. Though never particularly thriving or lively, the little community has begun to dwindle into littery abandon and decay. Evident in the main road which the county no longer paves but only patches, in the little corner store where a kerosene pump sits rusty and unused outside, where the canned goods on the shelves grow dusty and scummy and stacks of Big Chief tablets lay yellowing with age, in the old homesteads that had once lined the little one block lane of Shiloh Road—each one

gradually beginning to be more and more derelict and uncared for, the scaly spines of their roofs now collapsing altogether into heaping gray piles ... and perhaps nowhere is the decline more evident than in the graveyard across the gravel road from the old schoolhouse. In just a few short years it has backed its rear fencerow up twice, gobbling up another acre of dry cracked prairie each and every time ... the new tenants culled from a near-centuries' worth of neighborhood schoolkids, all grown up and passed on, returned back to their old stomping grounds, much changed by time, task, heartache and the embalmers' arts ... laid to rest ...

My grandfather has often told me to stay away from the old schoolhouse when it's padlocked or I don't have a growup to go with me. The whole building, he says, is infested with hives of yellowjackets. You may not see them immediately but they're there—underneath the eaves, hiding beneath the skirting close to the ground, teeming and bustling in massive bristly nests between the walls.

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Something of Shiloh's somber downturn will be remedied by the 3rd Saturday of the Month Musicals. Organized by Mary Catherine Moody, owner of the country store she is the closest thing we have to a mayor ... it is to take place in the grand auditorium