

The Full Treatment

ONE OF MY FAVORITE PLACES to visit while growing up, in the early 1960s, was my Aunt Nevelle's beauty shop, a special place where customers became lifelong friends.

The shop sat on a corner at 3001 N. 16th St. in an Alabama town near Birmingham called Acipco, named after the American Cast Iron Pipe Company. I still recall the sounds of the trains moving in and out of the company's foundry.

On the shop's back wall were family photographs. On the windowsills behind the blinds of the front windows, blooming African violets splashed colors at sidewalk passersby.

I loved the Coke machine that looked like a red washing machine. It opened on the top to reveal a circle of Coca-Colas and a few Tabs. Sometimes, Aunt Nevelle would drink a Coke in three big swallows and get right back to work.

The shop had only one "beauty operator," as my aunt called herself. I thought she looked like Jessie Brewer on the TV show *General Hospital*, as she wore a white uniform and white shoes like nurses wore.

Customers usually came to spend the day. Some of the ladies would ride the bus to the beauty shop and change from their nice dresses, hats and gloves into the housedresses and slippers they kept in the back.

The customers would hold a tray in their laps while getting their hair set, handing rollers and bobby pins over their shoulders to Aunt Nevelle when they were needed. Then the women would settle under the loud, cone-shaped dryer with a Coke and a magazine—it was their time to relax.

I can remember Aunt Nevelle leaving a customer under a dryer and

another patron eating lunch in the kitchen while we went to pick up an elderly customer who could not drive. My aunt could always be depended on when someone needed her.

Aunt Nevelle lived in the back of the shop and cooked food like pinto beans, turnip greens, corn bread and baked sweet potatoes. With their hair in rollers, the women would sit around the kitchen table and eat lunch.

I remember one favor Aunt Nevelle did for a customer that didn't turn out too well. She gave a bath to a feisty Chihuahua named "Cutie" while the dog's owner swept up the front room. Cutie jumped out of the sink, covered in shampoo, and dried off her little body between the clean sheets on my aunt's bed. It caused a big upset then, but it sure makes me laugh now.

Best Time of Day

After the last appointment of the day, Aunt Nevelle and I would go do things together, sometimes to the park and sometimes to Ed Salem's drive-in for a hamburger.

Aunt Nevelle didn't have a bathtub, so at night, we'd drive to my Aunt Euthema's house to get our baths. I thought it was great fun to ride home in my pajamas.

Before we went to sleep, Aunt Nevelle would tell me about my ancestors. Sometimes, I'd see her sadness as she told me about her baby who died and her husband who was killed in the war. She'd show me the flag given to her at my uncle's funeral, carefully wrapped in yellowed tissue paper.

Aunt Nevelle had experienced tragedy, but I always remember how happy she was and how much she enjoyed life. Her beauty shop was more than just a place to style hair. It was a haven where women forged bonds of friendship with their "beauty operator," a woman who will always have a special place in my heart.

—Ginger Crick Reeves, Pinson, Alabama