

The Moffets of McMahon Street

My mother was born in the Germantown district of Philadelphia on 3 March 1931, the second of four children brought to this world by James and Anna Moffet. Her father worked for the port authority on the Delaware River; her mother was a full-time housewife. The family moved twice before settling on a house on McMahon Avenue—a house which fell victim to fire in the 1990s.

I'm not sure how much of her childhood my mother lived in this house, but I spent a fairly good amount of time here. After all, the Moffet household was less than a mile away from my home on 913 East Price Street, and my mother and grandmother seem to have had a very close relationship.

The photo to the right, taken in 1951, presents a challenge to my memory. This is the house that I remember, but I find it difficult to believe it was so small. If the porch I see here is not as cavernous as I recall, then that means the palatial rooms inside the house necessarily have to shrink in size. I find this realization disturbing and disorienting.



Let me set the clock back to 1963 and take you on a brief tour of the house. Three steps lead from the sidewalk to the paved landing. By going straight you walk on a poorly maintained paved path, lined with narrow strips of grass, between two houses. If you jump a little as you pass the windows on either side of the path, you can look into the houses and perhaps catch a furtive glance at the people inside. At the end of the path there is a very spacious grassy area—or is it actually a small lawn?—separated into two lots by a cyclone fence and a hedge. You're not allowed to set foot in the lot to the right; that belongs to neighbors who tend to be unsociable. If you are lucky enough while walking around the Moffet's yard as the sun was going down, you might stumble across one of the hiding places in which Black Bart buried some of his treasure. At least that's what my Uncle Jim told me, and I have found nearly two dollars in dimes and quarters over the past few months!

If you stand in the center of the backyard and look back at the house, you'll see a set of four steps leading up to the kitchen. About six feet to the right of the staircase there is a rectangular window, behind which you can find the kitchen sink. My grandmother told me that one night a woman who lived in a similar house on Locust Street, right around the corner, was shot and killed one night while looking out of the kitchen window. My mother was furious that my grandmother told me this story and had a few words with her that I could not understand. To this very day I have presentiments of tragedy whenever I look out of any window if it is located above a sink.

Let's walk around to the front of the house now. Make a right at the landing and walk up the four steps that lead to the porch. Here you'll find a two-seater glider under the living room window. The glider is a great place to sit on warm spring or summer evenings. Here you can watch the sparse foot and vehicle traffic on McMahon Street and see fireflies dance above the small front lawn. There's a chance you'll see Ms Gallo on the neighboring porch to the left. She's a middle-aged, matronly Italian immigrant who speaks little English, but she seems to get along quite well with the Moffet family. She smiles every time she sees me.

Walking into the house from the porch you first enter the living room. It is in the shape of a boxy "C". On the right wall there is a sofa and an armchair whose back touches one leg of the "C" (pictured to the right). In front of the sofa is a small, wooden coffee table that, depending on the day of the week, might have a *TV Guide*, the *Evening Bulletin* or *The Daily News*. I have the impression that one is either a *Bulletin* person or an *Inquirer* person, and for whatever reason the Moffets are hard-core *Bulletin* subscribers. My grandmother is a devotee of the *Daily News*: it offers abridged versions of all news stories as well as crossword puzzles that cater to a less erudite group of readers than the other two papers. I think that the more sophisticated *Bulletin* is the preferred reading material of my Uncle Jim, the sole college-educated member of the family who still lives at home.



Against the porch wall is a love seat, and to its left is a black-and-white tv with the traditional rabbit-ear antenna. The wooden floor is covered with a large area rug. There are no pictures or photos hanging on the walls, but I believe there is a small round table that displays a few standing frames. Next to the tv.



Opposite the sofa is a stairwell (pictured to the left) that leads to the bedrooms. On the left side of the landing behind me and my grandmother you might be able to make out half of a ceramic statue of Popeye that I wanted —no, I needed!—to have. I was told repeatedly that this belonged to Uncle Jim and that I could only look, but never touch, the statue. I could never understand why a man in his mid-20s was still so attached to something which a kid should be enjoying, but this was one of the hard lessons of life I had to learn and accept. Small consolation, but at least I had a rubber doll of Mighty Mouse and a complementary Mighty Mouse shirt!

There must have been ten or twelve steps that led upstairs to the bedrooms, which were adjacent to a long hallway that led to the sole bathroom in the house. Uncle Jim's cramped room, full of books and ham-radio equipment, was way in the back, next to the bathroom. My mother and her sister, Helene, had shared the next room; my uncle Jerry evidently had the small room before that; my grandmother the next small room; and in the front of the house was the large master bedroom in which my grandfather died in 1955 and which was for the most part off limits to anyone but my grieving grandmother.

Coming down the stairwell and then moving to the left, you see the other leg of the "C-shaped living room. Moving into the next room you find a large dining table in the center, behind which is a matching wooden credenza and wall mirror. To the right are three windows that look out on to the neighbor's house and paved walkway; against the back side of the "C" there is a secretary that is always filled with loose papers. To the left is an upright piano.

My grandmother could play the piano quite well: she had a light touch and she performed with a slight theatrical flair, particularly with her left hand. She had a very limited repertoire committed to memory (her favorite song was "Darktown Strutters' Ball," but could play a variety of songs from the 20s and 30s if she could find the sheet music.

I liked to practice my lessons on this piano in the afternoon: the piano we had on East Price Street had neither good action nor tone, and I always had a greater sense of satisfaction playing on the Moffet instrument. It was not unusual for Aunt Helene to offer humorous commentary on whatever simplified classical pieces I played out of the Schaum or Thompson books. I remember vividly the times that she accompanied my feeble attempt at Bizet's famous aria by singing "Toreador-uh, don't spit on the floor-uh," much to the chagrin of my mother. To the left of the piano was a closet that had been built into the underside of the stairwell. Here all manner of coats and hats were hung.

Leaving the dining room towards the kitchen you passed on the left a door that led down, down, down into the catacombs of McMahon Avenue: a dark, dreary, musty cellar lined with black cinder block walls. There must have been a hundred steps leading down into that scary realm. I was terrified whenever anyone opened that door. When I felt unusually courageous or spunky I would dare set foot on four or five steps to sneak a peek at whatever or whoever lived down there, but quickly retreated to the safety of the kitchen. I succeeded in passing my terror on to Bob, and I do not think my mother was at all upset. The last thing she wanted was for me or him to fall down the steps and risk severe injury. The Moffet family never missed an opportunity to talk about Poor Uncle Joe and his son, who fell down the basement steps at their house and suffered extensive injuries that left him a vegetable for the remaining 40 or so years of his life.

I remember the kitchen as being a palacious room, but I know I'm still seeing it with kid's eyes. There was a hallway that led directly from the dining room past the basement door through the kitchen to the door that led to the small backyard. On the way to the door you would pass a white kitchen table that could seat six people. To the left of the

door was a pantry and an ironing closet; to the right was the kitchen sink and a small counter for drying dishes. Above the kitchen sink was a window that looked out onto the backyard and a couple of neighbors' houses.

I do not recall ever having any major meals at McMahon Avenue. I do know we celebrated my birthdays at Price Street, and we had the entire Moffet family come over a couple of times for Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner. I find it difficult, though to make sense of these memories. The house on Price Street was quite a bit smaller than the one on McMahon, so I'm not sure how we were able to fit seven or eight people in our small dining room.



1954: Helene, Dad, Mom, Nan, and James Curran (Nan's father) holding me



1953: Mom and Dad holding me in the backyard of the house on McMahon Avenue



1951: Mom and Dad outside 5610 McMahon