



Before the Lake

One of a series of articles sharing the history of the St. Elmo/Winkler/Midway area, as told through personal stories, written by the Editor of The Southsider after interviews with the subject.

Born in "the Big House"

Joan Baker Troegel comes from a forward-thinking family in the St. Elmo/Winkler/Midway area—not that her family owned a lot of land or ran a big business, but Joan's dad worked for a man who did both of those things.

Joan's parents were Glenn Courtney Baker and Berta Mae Ferguson Baker.

"Daddy came here from Louisiana around 1916 or so," said Joan. His first stop in Texas was in the Ennis area where he picked up work as a cotton picker and, for a while, as a bricklayer. In fact, he laid some of the bricks on Beaton Street in Corsicana. Eventually he worked his way down to the Streetman area where he learned that the Anderson Ranch needed workers.

The Anderson Ranch

Owned by Dick and Mary Anderson, the Anderson Ranch was 5000 acres of prime grazing land covering an area from Richland Creek on the north, to the current Masonic lodge on the east, County Road 2350 on the west and to the south quite a distance where the border was a jagged line, thanks to Anderson's sporadic habit of buying up properties that became available.

Courtney Baker started working for Dick Anderson in 1917, then went into the Navy in 1918 and spent much of his service time in California. Anderson was true to his word and had a job for him when he returned from the Navy in 1920.

Berta Mae Ferguson

(photo circa 1918)



Baker became manager of the ranch and oversaw the entire property and the work of about 40 ranch hands, who helped with the cattle, fencing, and crops. The majority of those workers, both black and white men, lived in housing provided for them right on the Anderson Ranch (many with their families). As the ranch manager, Courtney—or as the workers called him,

(photo circa 1918)

Glenn Courtney Baker



Joan Baker Troegel was born in "the Big House" the main house on the Anderson Ranch. This photo was taken of the house in 1875 and shows Dick Anderson as a child on a tricycle beside his father, with mother and aunt on the balcony. The house was torn down during the 1950s.

Mr. Cote-nee—got to live in the "big house," the ranch's main structure, a white, two-story, five-bedroom modified Victorian house at the junction of CR 2390 and FM416.

One day Courtney met a beautiful young lady named Berta Mae Ferguson. She was the daughter of John Roddy (JR) Ferguson, also known as "Big Papa," who owned a grocery and general store in Winkler (located directly across from the John and Connie Standridge property). The Ferguson home was right next door to that store.

Berta Mae was a teacher at the nearby St. Elmo School. Courtney and Berta Mae were married on December 28, 1920 in the rectory of the Corsicana Episcopal Church.

Berta Mae taught school a year or so after her marriage but then started to manage the company store on the Anderson Ranch property, which provided goods for all the workers. Berta Mae had acquired the nickname "Pete" as a child and it stuck. The workers at the Ranch called her "Miz Pete." She kept a sewing machine in the store and made and mended the cotton sacks as well as clothing and household items for the workers.

Pete and Courtney had three children: Glenda (Sissie, born 1925), Ernie Peyton Baker (Buddy, born 1928) and Mary Joan Baker (born 1930). Young Peyton died at only two years old from what was listed on the death certificate as dysentery, signed by Dr. McDaniel, who became the family's doctor for years to come. All the children were born in the "big house," and all were attended by Dr. McDaniel.

Courtney continued to work as the Anderson Ranch manager until 1936, when he and Berta Mae purchased a 287-acre farmstead in the Midway area (the property where Tresa Scammel, a granddaughter of Berta Mae, now lives).

The Depression was hard on the cattle business, and Dick Anderson, who also had a house in Corsicana, lost interest in investing more funds into the ranch. At this point

Courtney partnered with Monnie Anderson Eden, Dick's sister, to purchase cattle for the ranch. She provided the funds and he provided the work and a smaller portion of money, and they tried to make the ranch profitable through the difficult years of the Depression.

The Baker Place

The new place the Baker's had purchased needed work both inside and out. They remodeled the house and made local news when they installed a Delco System* for their household electricity. Joan, at only age six at the time, remembers that they were one of only a few families in the entire area that had electricity and the only family to have indoor plumbing.

Working with mules, Courtney invested months of work adding terraces to the sloped land so that it could be farmed more efficiently. Joan felt so bad for those mules as they trudged up and down that long slope with slip-scoop loads of dirt for those terraces.

Like the Anderson Ranch, the Baker property was also bordered on the north by Richland Creek. Joan remembers the almost annual floods, when the creek escaped its banks and spread out to a width of a half mile. During the flood's more turbulent stage, folks would go watch the rising waters from the vantage point of higher ground. It was a fascinating form of entertainment. She also recalls the time they were watching the water, and young Buddy, not even two years old, from the safety of his mother's arms, removed one of his new shoes and threw it in the raging water, just to see what would happen.

Glenda and Joan grew up on that property, which came to be called "the Baker Place." Glenda had attended school at St. Elmo School when the family lived at the ranch. Joan started school the year they moved to Midway, and Glenda transferred to the Streetman School district. The two girls were able to ride the school bus back and forth to Streetman School.

The school bus also picked them up for after-school activities, such as their annual Halloween parties.

"My Aunt Myrt would dress up in a gypsy lady costume and tell everyone's fortunes at those parties," said Joan. "Halloween parties were a big deal when we were young—with a haunted house and scary characters. I

remember we were blindfolded and had to feel our way through the haunted house. Those eyeball-grapes scared me to death!" That same "Aunt Myrt" Ferguson's granddaughter Rhonda Russell, lives along 416 on her grandmother's property.

Corn, oats and cotton were raised on the Baker Place. As a youngster, Joan had the job of reading the scales and entering the weights in the log book for the cotton pickers. They were paid according to the number of pounds they picked. She recalls that

"some made good money and others not so much." These pickers, usually between 15 and 20 per day, both black and white men, were hired from around the communities along FM 416.

In those days feed sacks were made of cotton with colorful patterns printed on them, and thrifty housewives repurposed them into aprons, quilts, and even dresses. "Mother sewed everything for us girls," Joan explained. "as well as pillowcases, sheets and curtains. Generally, sheets were made from four feed sacks; curtains, children's clothes and dish towels were made from the smaller flour sacks. Often she would sew needed items as part of a worker's pay."

The 416 Corridor area holds many special memories for Joan and her descendants, and she's happy that many of them have chosen to live on family land here in the area.

"When the Lake came, most of us old-timers resisted the idea," Joan said. "We thought it would take our land, bring trouble and too much traffic to our area, but I must admit—it is beautiful! Even if our pecan grove is now at the bottom of the lake!"

**The Bakers' Delco System was a gasoline-powered engine that charged a bank of batteries that provided electricity to the house.*



Glenda and Joan Baker, photo taken in 1932.

Special People Indeed

Bessie Bluitt and her son Dick, a black family, served the Anderson Ranch as household manager/babysitter/cook and Courtney's right-hand man. This lovable duo lived in a shotgun house on the Anderson Ranch, just a few minutes' walk behind the property. Billy Massey, another long-time area resident, recalls Bessie saying (more than once) that if she "could have a cup of strong coffee and a dip of good snuff, she could make it through the rest of the day on nearly nothin'." Cecilia Bowles, Berta Mae's granddaughter and Joan's daughter, remembers when, as a small child, she often got to spend the day with

Bessie, frying fish, collecting eggs, picking vegetables, milking a cow and marveling at all the wonders of farm life.

Joan holds a special place in her heart for Bessie.

"I remember that I could see the ground—and the chickens—through the floorboards of Miss Bessie's house," said Joan. "Miss Bessie had one book in her house—a well-worn Bible."

Once the Baker children came into the picture, Bessie became a nanny-like figure in Joan's and sister Glenda's lives, accompanying them on road trips to see Courtney's family in Mansfield, Louisiana, and on other exciting excursions. Joan remembers feeling pretty special riding in her dad's Studebaker touring car clear over to Louisiana, and with a nanny along, to boot!