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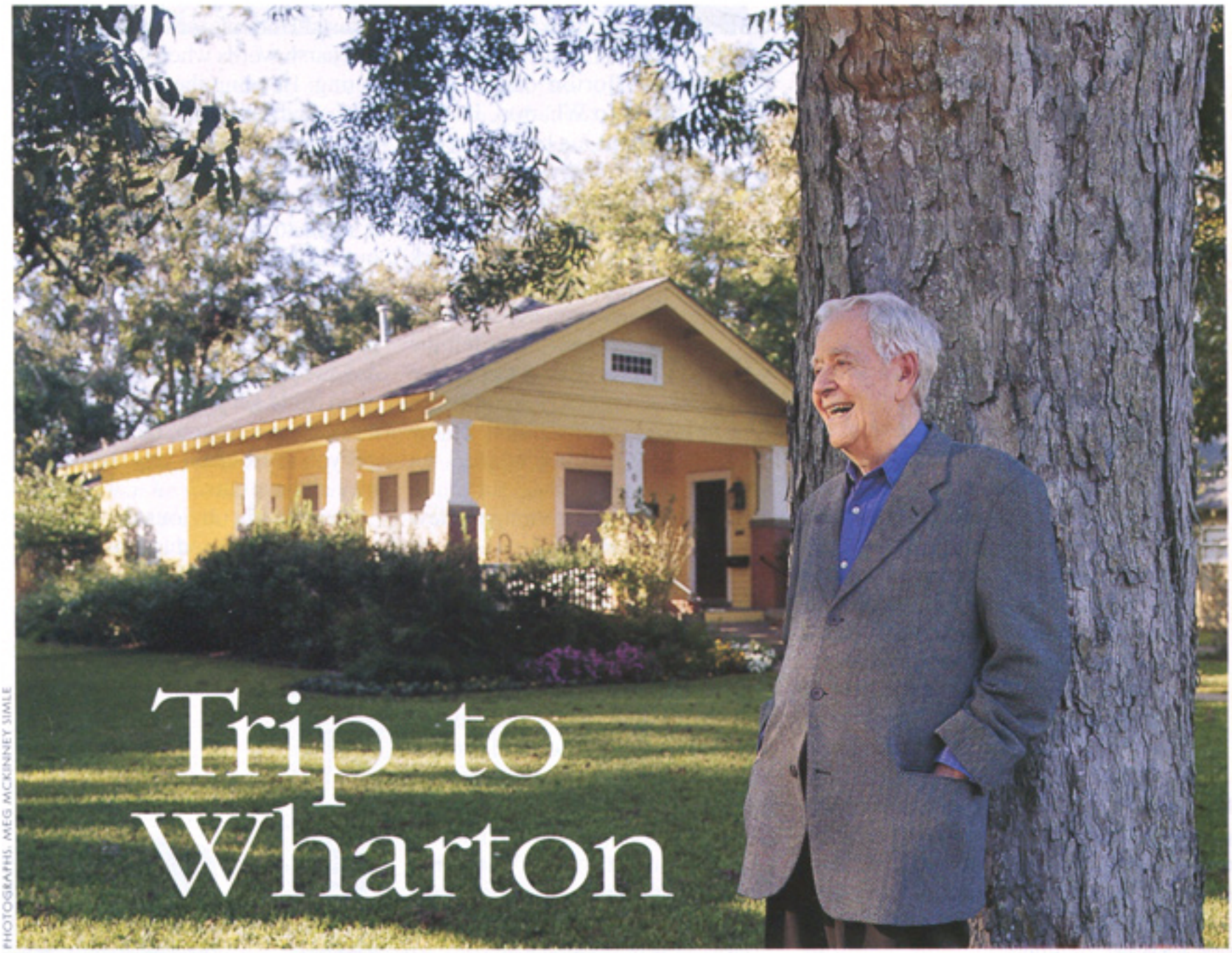


PHOTOGRAPHS: MEG MCKINNEY SIMLE

Trip to Wharton

Art truly mimics life for Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Horton Foote, whose memoir debuts this month.

The place you're born, that's the well you draw from.

Horton Foote

"I want to go home," pleads 60-year-old Mrs. Watts in Horton Foote's *The Trip to Bountiful*. Mrs. Watts's home is a once-vibrant spot in the Texas countryside that urbanization has rendered a ghost town. But because it is the place where she was born and raised, it is the place of her heart. And while against all odds she does make it back there, it is only for a brief, poignant visit.

Fortunately, her 82-year-old creator Horton Foote has had far greater luck with a similar journey. After spending most of his adult life in the diverse worlds of rural New Hampshire and frenetic New York City, the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright and screenwriter has returned to his own childhood home of Wharton (southwest of Houston), a once-vibrant spot in the Texas countryside also decimated by urbanization.

Now, nine years after that homecoming, he has written a detailed account of his early years in *Wharton—Farewell: A Memoir of a Texas Childhood* (Scribner; $24)—debuting this month.

Horton Foote hails from this little yellow house in the town of Wharton, where reality resembles one of his highly acclaimed plays.

"I used to not be able to write here," says Horton, sitting in the air-conditioned study of the small yellow house where he grew up. "It was almost too close to the reality."

Driving through the center of town,

it's easy to understand what he means. Horton has written so prolifically and with such detail about Wharton that the town feels like a stage set for one of his plays. Throughout the town are traces of a past era—the defunct cotton gin; the Wharton Grain and Produce Company, long since converted into a thrift shop; and freight trains resting permanently on a rusty track. Just outside of town, old, dilapidated houses and barns punctuate the fields.

Yes, this is Bountiful—or Harrison, as Horton refers to Wharton in his nine-play series *The Orphan's Home Cycle*—and it is a landscape this mild-mannered writer knows better than anyone. He is sixth generation here, and the town still bears signs of his family's influence. At the end of a cul-de-sac in one of the newer parts of town, small, modern houses meet the cornfields, and a low steel fence encircles an old mini-graveyard. Achingly out of place, it is a remnant of Mr. Foote's great-great grandfather's 6,000–acre plantation called Sycamore Grove.

A mix of circumstances eventually propelled Horton out of New York and back to Wharton. He had been renting out his house, a registered landmark, and was displeased with the way it was being kept. Then there was the problem of which so many New York writers complain: too many distractions. "I just felt the need to get to a place where I could begin concentrating on my writing again," he explains.

> I felt a great need to come back to my roots.

Returning to New Hampshire, where he and his late wife, Lillian, had raised their four children—Hallie, the actress who is known as her father's master interpreter; Daisy, a playwright; Horton, Jr., an actor and restaurateur; and Walter, an attorney and screenwriter—was not an option because he desired a warmer climate. More important, though, he also experienced a magnetic Mrs. Watts-like pull: "I felt a great need to come back to my roots."

Horton left Wharton in 1932 to study acting in Pasadena, California. Shortly thereafter, he moved to New York to pursue it as a career and began writing plays just so he could have shows to star in. Reviewers praised Horton's writing, but dished out harsh words when it came to his acting. Heeding the advice of both critics and colleagues, Horton gave up stage for script and began chronicling the way of life he'd left behind.

As he remembers it, Wharton was a small town cut off from the city but electrified with an energy all its own. "Saturday was a gala," he recalls. "Country people would come in from miles around and stay all day." Then came the changes. "A mule could get you into Wharton, or a buggy or a wagon, but it couldn't get you to Houston very well. Now they all have cars."

Despite his obvious distaste for some of the byproducts of technological advancement (he describes Saturdays in Wharton as "dead as

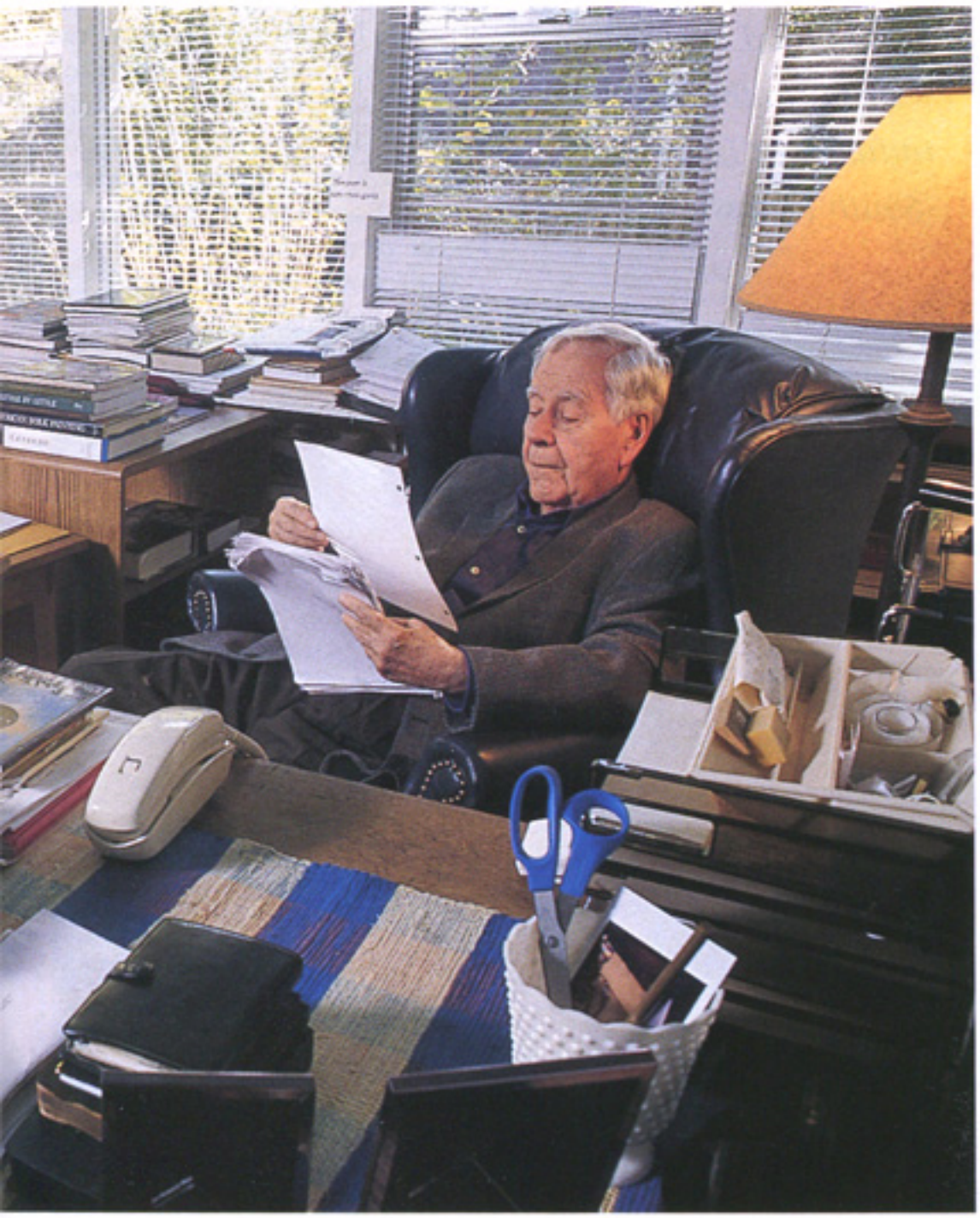
After living for years in the constant clamor of New York City, coming home to quiet and quaint Wharton has been a welcome change for the venerable author.

FAREWELL: A MEMOIR OF A TEXAS CHILDHOOD

An excerpt from Chapter 9:

Since our houses were so close, I spent as much time with my grandparents as with my mother and father. I always felt loved and welcomed by them, and one of the most pleasant and persistent memories of my boyhood was riding with them in their green Studebaker to check out their cotton farms scattered over the country. . . . And so riding around with my grandparents, and passing these dwindling and forgotten towns, "why" was added to my vocabulary. Why did this town never prosper? Why was it never more than a church, a grocery store, and one or two houses? Why did the people leave this town and go to another place? Why?

My grandfather would patiently explain how towns came to be and for what purpose; how circumstances changed so that towns were abandoned. He said that the railroad in the beginning almost went through Glen Flora instead of Wharton, and if that had happened, why . . . . Then he would pause and we would all contemplate what that would have meant. For Wharton in those days, God knows, was no metropolis, but it was the county seat; we had the courthouse, a respectable Main Street, two railroad stations, and three cotton gins.



heck" and laments the preponderance of strip malls along the highway), Horton speaks glowingly of how this same spirit of invention has enabled Americans to reinvent society for the better—to quash slavery and combat racism, for example. As for contending with those effects that are less palatable, he takes refuge in a utilitarian approach. "There's no point in crying about it," he says. "You just try to make as much of it as you can."

Whether standing in his garden exulting over spring in the country or speaking with enthusiasm about his newest project—his screenplay adaptation of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*—it is clear Horton Foote is thriving, still finding stories and ideas in his childhood home.

For some time now he has wanted to write a play called *The Last of the Jews* about the demise of the Jewish merchants in Wharton. "There was only one Jew left here that I knew, and he died two years ago, unfortunately before I could really get to him," he says. And there's the tragic life of his cousin, also a Whartonite, who killed himself because he was so distraught over the death of his wife. Might Horton convert that into a play?

"I don't know," he muses. "The whole process of writing is still a mystery to me. I honor it and try to be as good as I can be, but I still feel it's essentially a mystery."

But there is one thing that remains as clear as the sweet call of the redbird that Mrs. Watts hears upon her return to Bountiful: Horton will continue to write about home, about Wharton. "There's no choice," he says with a laugh. "The place you're born, that's the well you draw from." *Johanna Berkman*

Horton continues to write in his home office—future works are likely to include a screenplay adaptation of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*.