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RESTORING THE FINEST HOUSE IN TOWN: THE WEISMAN-HIRSCH HOME IN MARSHALL, TEXAS

By Gail K Beil

Joe Weisman, a native of Syracuse, New York, was nineteen years old in 1866 when he stepped off a steamboat at Swanson's Landing in Caddo Lake and rode a stagecoach into Marshall. One by one, six of his seven brothers and sisters made the same journey. Little more than a decade later he founded East Texas' first department store, known in its heyday as "Neiman Marcus East" - although Joe Weisman and Company, established in 1878, predated that venerable Texas institution. Some argue that Weisman's store was in fact the prototype for Neiman's. He opened an enlarged, elegant new store on North Washington in Marshall in 1898 and expanded his mercantile holdings to include stores in McKinney and Texarkana and an office in New York City. By the time his first home burned to the ground in 1899, Weisman was probably Marshall's most prosperous merchant. So it was not surprising that he would set about to build what the newspaper would call "the finest house in town."

"The finest house in town" was not quite what we found, almost by accident, in May 1972. My husband Greg and I moved to Marshall the year before. He was head of the science department and I was on the staff of Wiley College, an historically black college founded by the United Methodist Church. We had accepted an offer to teach in this small East Texas town after years spent in Houston, Los Angeles, and Mainz, Germany, where Greg completed his Ph.D. in nuclear physics at Gutenberg University. We had been married twelve years and had an eleven-year-old son, Tom, and a daughter, Laura, age nine. Our dream had been to raise them in a small town in a big, old house with enough land to have a garden. It took a year, but found what we were looking for two blocks south of the courthouse square. On an errand into downtown, Greg drove by a huge old house, shrouded by about a dozen half-dead redbud trees in the front yard, its white painted exterior streaked with rust from old window screens. He came home, picked us up, and then could not find it again. As we drove around, searching, we decided that, if we located the house, we would just knock on the door and ask if it was available for purchase. Greg is shy; I'm not. So when we finally found the house again, I walked up onto the rotting porch, rang the doorbell, and asked the man who answered the door if he was interested in selling.

He was only the caretaker, he said, but he assured us that it was for sale. Joe Weisman's grandchildren owned it, he said. One of them, Joe Weisman Hirsch, still lived in Marshall and managed the store, which remained an important part of Marshall's retail economy. But the store was also owned by his two sisters who lived in California and the widow of his brother, Martin. Tired of doing all the work but dividing the profits four ways, Joe was ready

to sell both the house and the store. Though we were new in town and had never formally met, we knew that Joe Hirsch had a reputation for honesty. We went home to our tract house and I called Joe at the store and told him we were interested in buying the house at 313 South Washington.

"I don't want to bargain," he told me. "I'll tell you what I want for the house. If you meet that price, I'll sell it." The price he quoted was \$40,000.²

We went back to look at the place more carefully. Paint was peeling, we noticed, and the place was filthy inside and out, with ragged curtains and threadbare rugs throughout. But we also saw the bookcase wall and magnificent staircase to the second floor, the massive leaded-glass entryway, four impressive fireplace mantles, and at least fourteen rooms. The quarter-sawn oak paneling and woodwork had never been painted; only one of the thirteen-foot ceilings had been lowered. The house, though certainly shabby, had never suffered the most destructive fate, being broken up into apartments. The caretaker, J.C. Hughes, was most helpful. Hughes was the window decorator and advertising manager at Weisman's, and Joe Hirsch had convinced him to move his family into the house in 1966. The house was not in good shape then and nothing had been done to improve it in the ensuing six years. But Hughes' presence kept it from being vandalized, a sure fate had it been simply abandoned.³

"There are about seventy camellia bushes out there, a couple of fig trees, and a peach tree in the back yard," he told us.

Not that any of these could be seen. The camellias were merely bumps in the vine-choked side yard and we never did find the peach tree. We knew that there had once been a back yard, although it now looked like a jungle. We had driven around the property and discovered that it occupied three-quarters of a large city block. In addition to servant's quarters with an outhouse, there was a ramshackle one-car garage, a chicken coop, and something that looked like a big barbecue pit. We later learned that it was a hand-dug well surrounded by the remains of a gazebo.

It took almost two months to arrange financing on the purchase. Not only had the house been redlined by local lending agencies, but the principal at one of them apparently hoped to purchase the lot, tear down the house, and expand. When we signed the final papers we were told that we could double our money immediately, since Hirsch had received an offer for \$80,000 shortly after we began searching for a loan. He could have backed out, since no contract had been signed, but he was as good as his word. We took possession on June 20, 1971.

Not that we could move in right away. It took Hughes until mid-September to remove all of the out-of-season window decorations and other belongings. We didn't even see the dining room until then. It, like the large hallway, was wainscoted in oak, all of which, we later learned, was cut and assembled on-site by craftsmen from the Texas and Pacific Railroad shops. We also saw for the first time what can only be described as a commodious

attic, reached by a staircase to the third floor. The house had been designed by well-known East Texas architect C.G. Lancaster, whose other work included the Weisman store, the Ginocchio Hotel and home on North Washington Street, and a number of schools, theaters, and homes in the area. His most important work was the Harrison County Courthouse, which he and Texas courthouse architect J. Riely Gordon had designed some two years earlier.⁴

Our plan had been to spend six months replacing the old kitchen and generally cleaning the place while we waited to sell our suburban home. That plan changed when our home sold four days after we listed it—we had to be out in two weeks.

With no kitchen sink and only two electric skillets with which to cook – one of them was wired directly into the breaker box – we moved in. Delaying our work on the kitchen, we instead frantically cleaned and painted the children's rooms, including the wallpapered ceiling in Laura's room. Big mistake, and the first of many. Within a month the ceiling wallpaper began peeling. Before long it looked like the curtains on a stage ceiling. Laura finally solved the problem herself. A lover of all things feline, she owned more than twenty cat posters. So she and her father climbed a ladder and glued them to the ceiling, where they served as giant patches.

Meanwhile, there was the kitchen. Youth and finances convinced us to do all the interior restoration, save refinishing the fragile oak floors, ourselves. About the time Greg was putting the sixth coat of paint on the kitchen and butler's pantry walls and re-caulking cracks that kept appearing, I managed to pull loose a section of the wall. It turned out to be linoleum. Apparently, in the days before washable wall coverings, someone had decided to cover those walls, and those in the huge downstairs bathroom, with a washable surface. No one, including us, ever successfully painted linoleum, so we started over, removing the linoleum and covering the walls with washable wallpaper.

We moved on to the vast hall, living room, and dining room. No bizarre wall coverings there, just peeling, flaking, cracked plaster. We taught ourselves a new skill, since we could find no one who knew how to repair seventy-year-old plaster properly. Within six months the plaster again began to crack and peel. We finally sent a sample of the plaster to Texas A&M University, where experts discovered that there was too much lime in the original plaster recipe. They suggested that we shellac the walls before painting them. Shellac helped, but by the time we heard about the solution we had completed five more rooms. When we came to the hallway we faced what at first appeared to be an insurmountable problem. The ceiling was twenty-eight feet high and we weren't ready to cantilever scaffolding across the banisters and balustrades of the staircase. Greg took our twenty-foot ladder, washed all of the walls he could reach, repaired the plaster, shellacked and primed it, put on two coats of paint, and moved on. It took about six weeks to finish.

We did have the roof, plumbing, and floors professionally done—the roof and plumbing for obvious reasons, the floors when they turned out to be only

a quarter-inch thick, and could only be sanded and refinished one time, definitely not something amateurs wanted to tackle.

In 1979 Greg began painting the outside of the house, using the same technique he had perfected in the hallway. It took seven years, because he had a full-time job, but he managed to paint the entire house. He did it again in the 1990s. There turned out to be a dark side to that job. In 1999 he was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. Researchers have learned that one of the factors that may cause this disease is exposure to lead-based paint.⁵

In order to retain some measure of sanity, most old-house restorers have developed a sense of humor. Early on, we acquiesced to the "square-root-of-old-house" rule: that is, every forty-five minute job will take four hours, every four-hour job sixteen hours, and so on. And it should be noted that the Weisman-Hirsch Home is not a "divorce house." Neighbors restoring another house in the neighborhood coined that term. When I asked what it meant, Helen Erie, the neighbor, said, "Well, when Chas and I were married we decided we didn't want a new house where there was nothing to do but sit around and look at each other until we got bored and got a divorce."

But the adventures were many. One time Greg drew his putty knife across a crack in the plaster and an entire wall, right above an old-fashioned floor furnace, crashed to the floor. At least we had had the foresight to cover the furnace grate with plastic. When we tried replacing canvas-backed ceiling wallpaper in Tom's bedroom with new wallpaper, we learned that there is a basis for all those ceiling wallpaper cartoons – it's called "wallpaper," not "ceiling paper," for a reason. Within six months it looked as dirty and was just as ripped as what we replaced. The ceiling is now sheet rocked.

Speaking of sheetrock, we also replaced the dropped ceiling in the dining room. When we removed the acoustical tile and aluminum runners, we found a mess. The ceiling installers had taken a wrecking bar to the old ceiling, which had been seamlessly attached to the wall by way of hand-molded coving. We no longer had the tool used to create the coving so all we could do was repair the bottom half with our fingers and replace the top with wood, then sheetrock, tape, and float a new ceiling at original height. Although the work was tedious, everything progressed beautifully until I pushed the scaffolding and sent it through a large windowpane, one of the original rolled-glass ones. So we learned another new skill – window glazing.

Restoration, of course, is never finished. When we moved in the uninsulated kitchen was the coldest room in the house, so about 1976 Greg and a friend dumped 500 pounds of loose Vermiculite – that white stuff found in potting soil – in the kitchen attic, which is located in the single-story rear wing of the house. Over the years, the vermiculite soaked up moisture and dirt and the kitchen ceiling, made of some sort of fiberboard, began sagging. Last spring, about two-o'clock in the morning, a great crash awoke us. We ran to the source of the noise. A third of the kitchen ceiling was on the floor and Vermiculite, about seven inches deep, was everywhere. This time we called in the professionals. While they were on-site, we decided to have them look at

the damage done by a leaking shower pan in the downstairs bathroom. They told us that it had leaked so long it had rotted about a quarter of the floor in the bathroom, all of which had to be replaced. For years we had noticed a hole and broken plaster in the same bathroom ceiling, which was covered with what looked like canvas. So we had them look at that as well, since they were already working in the bathroom. Turned out most of plaster ceiling had pulled loose from the lathe and was being held up by the canvas alone.

We began thinking about the phenomenon of dead plaster, and realized that we had another large spot in the front hall that had appeared during a sudden rainstorm when workmen were halfway through installing a new roof some years earlier. Water drenched the second floor and poured through part of the plaster ceiling in the great hall. So now, we figured that we had better get the ceiling repaired before it, too, ended up on the floor. Since the plaster ceiling and the walls from the floor to the attic were all one piece, they would all have to be repaired and painted.

It is definitely not a divorce house!

As we cleaned, explored, and sorted what we found in drawers, closets, and boxes from the attic to the seven-foot high area under the house, we learned more and more about the significance of the Weisman-Hirsch House and the family who built and occupied it. In the mid-1970s we decided to apply for designation as a Registered Texas Historic Landmark. Such a designation required that the house be at least seventy-five years old, that it be historically significant, and that the persons who owned it be important to the community. Substantiating all three was not difficult, especially after Greg flipped over a termite-scarred board under the house with "C.G. Lancaster, Architect" painted on it. Lancaster had, without question, designed this eclectic Queen Anne home of more than 5,000 square feet. In August, 1901, when the Weisman family moved in, they enjoyed both indoor plumbing and electricity. "One switch could turn on every light in the house," crowed the Marshall Evening Messenger article in September, 1901.

As we spent hours reading microfilms of old Marshall newspapers, local history came alive. We learned that Joe Weisman was among the most respected merchants in East Texas. He was also a prominent member of the Jewish community and instrumental in the building of Temple Moses Montifiore, also a Lancaster design. Joe Nathan Hirsch, an orphan from Campti, Louisiana, when he moved to Marshall at age thirteen, followed in his father-in-law's civic and mercantile footsteps. By the time he married Weisman's youngest daughter, Valrie, Hirsch owned a store of his own, though Weisman soon convinced him to close his operation and join in the management of Joe Weisman and Company. The Hirsches continued their civic commitment as well. Though intensely apolitical, Joe Nathan, as well as his son Joe Weisman Hirsch, served on the Marshall School Board. Mrs. Hirsch was a church, civic, and cultural leader. The Weisman-Hirsch home often hosted meetings of the local chapter of the American Association of University Women, the Jewish Sisterhood, the Marshall Symphony Society, and other organizations.

Usually anonymously, Mrs. Hirsch contributed to every local charity, from the symphony to the United Way, and guaranteed that each reached their fundraising goal. Joe W. Hirsch said at his mother's funeral that numerous people told him about private assistance they or their family had received from her. Wiley College records reveal decades of support for the library and for individual students. Joe W. Hirsch threw his support behind the March of Dimes and the eradication of polio. His efforts, as well as those of others in town, allowed Marshall to become the first city in Texas to inoculate every child in the county against that crippling disease.⁶

The marker designating our home a Registered Texas Historic Landmark was dedicated in November, 1979. In 1983, the same year we adopted our daughter Angie, the house was entered into the National Register of Historic Places. It has been featured in television documentaries, movies, magazine articles, and was recently the subject of a Home and Garden Television channel program called "If Walls Could Talk."

Almost from the beginning, Greg and I knew that we bought more than the structure in 1972. The Weisman and the Hirsch families shared themselves and the house with the community, and we have tried to do the same. The house is often lent to the city, the Chamber of Commerce, and various civic organizations for functions. Our children's friends still talk about the good times they had as teenagers "experiencing the architecture," as son Thomas once put it. The house is filled with books, four generations of family photographs and letters, research papers, and the knick-knacks collected in nearly forty-six years of marriage, and we can't imagine ever parting with the place. In fact, we have decided to be cremated and have our ashes dumped in the back yard; Greg's under the tomatoes, mine in the daffodils. We will leave disposing of the artifacts to the children, who inform us that they will just build a large fire in the yard and burn the lot.

NOTES

¹*Marshall Evening Messenger*, September 5, 1901.

²Audrey Daniels Kariel, "Weisman Family in Marshall," speech made to Longview's Temple Emmanuel Sisterhood, October 23, 2003; author's conversation with Joe Hirsch, May, 1972.

³Author's conversations with Hirsch and Hughes, May 1972. Hirsch's mother Valric, youngest daughter of Joe and Lena Weisman, married Joe Nathan Hirsch, once her father's stock boy, in 1910. When Weisman died in 1918, Hirsch began managing the store, and did so until his death in 1966. Martin and Joe, Hirsch's sons, then managed the store until Martin's death in 1968, when Joe became the sole manager.

⁴For more information about Lancaster's work, see various editions of the *Marshall Evening Messenger* cited in the Texas Historical Marker applications for the Weisman-Hirsch Home (1976) and Joe Weisman and Company (2004). Both were written and researched by the author and her husband, Dr. Ralph Gregory Beil. For a description of the house and its original construction, see the *Marshall Evening Messenger*, September 5, 1901.

⁵When the Joe Weisman and Company store building was restored, the same thin oak floors were found under years of asphalt tile. Both floors were milled in Shreveport, Louisiana. For

more information about the connection between lead paint and Parkinson's, see <http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/Parkinsons> disease.

Jewel Allen, "The History of Negro Education at Wiley College," unpublished thesis for East Texas State Teachers College, 1940, p. 127; letter from Weisman grandson Dr. Raymond Kay of Los Angeles, California, in possession of another grandson, Louis Kariel of Marshall, Texas; unpublished application for RTHL for Weisman-Hirsch Home, Texas Historical Commission, 1979. For more information on polio, see various editions of the 1955 *Marshall News Messenger*.

Documentaries include Bill Moyers' 1984 PBS program, *Marshall Texas/Marshall Texas; Go Forward*, a film for the Baptist Church; "If Walls Could Talk," November 2, 2004, *HGTV, Texas Homes*, May 1982, a publication of *Texas Monthly*; numerous articles in the *Marshall News Messenger* and the *Longview Daily News*.