

A friend and I were recently talking—via our long-distance, handwritten letters—about our earliest memories.

It is often difficult to determine for certain whether a “memory” is really something we actually recall, or if it is a family story that is repeated so many times one might think that it is a memory.

Runo and I will often talk about some happening years ago, and either of us might ask the other, “Was that before I met you?”

Some people date their memories by events that loomed large in their lives. More than once I have heard the phrase, “that was after (or before) The Wedding,” tying a memory to a son or daughter’s marriage.

Earliest memories, though, are quite different. I usually “see” mine rather than recount any words spoken. The past does not seem like a movie that begins when we were children and rolls through time up to the present. To me, it is more like a series of snapshots or slides. Interesting that we can recall these in whatever order we desire—at random, skipping back and forth over the years—or as a progression of pictures in an old photograph album.

I told my friend that my earliest memory, one that has been consistent over the decades, is of the time we had a family picture taken at a photographer’s. I was, according to older family members, two years old. My sister was six, and our brother was ten.

My recollection of that day began with me sitting on the kitchen table while my mother was fastening a ribbon in my hair. I was wearing a yellow dress, though that I know from hearsay, not from memory.

The next snapshot of that experience was at the photographer’s. We were seated, me on my mother’s lap. The photographer tried his best to make me smile. He held up a stuffed monkey, as I either recall or have heard from the rest of the family.

Even as a two-year-old, I perceived this as stupid, and it only made me more and more angry. He must have given up, because my toddler face had a distinct scowl in our family picture.

The other memory from my early childhood was of playing in a washtub of water in the yard. I think it must have been a hot day, and I was probably whining. My mother put a little cool water in the tub and let me play in it. I remember sitting there and then becoming very frightened, because an airplane flew over. We didn’t see planes and helicopters as often as we do now.

My very earliest “memory” probably was not a recollection at all. We moved from the little log house here where our cabin stands now to the farmhouse to live with my grandma. She was no longer comfortable living alone. I “remember” the move. But, since I was only six weeks old at the time, I guess I really shouldn’t claim that memory. The picture I see of our family trudging down across the farmyard—me in a basket—is so clear, because I heard the story so many times. I think my dad told that tale as he did many others—narratives to relax a little girl who was sitting on his lap before bedtime. I remember best his description of my sister wearing “a little flat straw hat.” When I was small, I always coveted that hat.

Early memories aren’t always accurate, but we do often find them a

source of pleasure. And, they fill out the bare bones of our past, giving us a background of both richness and substance, part of a good foundation on which to build a life.