

VENEZUELA



MARACAIBO, VENEZUELA

1956-1960



By the time Sharon was eight and Karen was four, it was decision time. The executives at Standard Oil headquarters, in San Francisco, knew of Bill and wanted to send him down to their operation in Maracaibo, Venezuela to get experience.

The first couple of times they mentioned it, he turned them down. But the third time he was requested to go, Bill told me, “You know, I either have to accept this or quit, because I’m not going to go anywhere in the company if I keep refusing.”

I said, “It’s okay with me. Let’s go for it.”

We started packing up. We moved a houseful of furniture to Maracaibo by ship, including our refrigerator. Bill went down three weeks ahead of us.

Before we left, the children and I stayed in Brownwood, Texas with my parents while we got our passports and immunizations. My father had been transferred to Brownwood by his job. It wasn’t too far from Fort Worth, but it was a much smaller town.

When the time came to leave, the children and I boarded a plane in Fort Worth and flew to New Orleans. There we spent a night or two with our dear friends Carl and Jeannie Schupp. They were not with the company, but they’d been our neighbors when we were in the duplex near Lake Ponchartrain, the one we had to leave because of the hurricane waters.

Carl and Jeannie took us to the airport, and we flew from New Orleans to Miami, Florida on a turbo prop plane and spent the night there. We met up with another woman and her children; they were going to Maracaibo, too, and her husband was already down there. I don’t think I slept a wink; I was so afraid we were going to miss the plane to Venezuela.

Just before we were to start boarding, we were in the restroom and Karen started vomiting, shooting all over. I cleaned everything up as best I could, and we got on the plane.



Reta and Bill around the time they left for Maracaibo.





Hotel del Lago, the family's first home in Maracaibo.

I held Karen all the way. The steward came back and offered something like milk, which would have made it worse. I said, "No, thank you." I knew enough to know that that was not a good thing.

I was really worried because there was just me, one person, with two children. What was I going to do if the plane went down? How was I going to manage all of this? That little fleeting thought was in my head the whole time.

I looked out the windows when we landed in Venezuela, and saw soldiers with machine guns standing around. Bill was waiting inside the little airport to meet us, but it took a while to get through customs to him. On top of that, they kept our luggage temporarily and I didn't have any place to shop, because it was the weekend.

We stayed in the lovely Hotel del Lago while they painted the house in the company camp that we were going to stay in. It had two bedrooms and terrazzo floors.

Over the course of the four years we spent in Maracaibo, we lived in three different houses. Our first was a two-bedroom house on B Street. A year or so after we arrived, we got a little surprise: I was pregnant! Bill requested a house with another bedroom, but we had to wait our turn for one.

Fortunately, by the time Toya was born a three-bedroom house at the corner of C Street became available. I had succumbed to getting a housekeeper, because all these houses had a room for one. Her name was Mirella, pronounced "Meraya." She was a young, young person. Her room was going to be painted, and I asked her what color she'd like. I certainly could have vetoed it, but she asked for red.

I asked, “The whole thing?” *Si*.

I’d taken Spanish in high school, but I didn’t know much at all. I waved my hands a lot and talked loudly, thinking they’d understand me if I did. I took Spanish lessons while I was down there, but maybe I just didn’t try hard enough. Since then, I’ve lost a lot of the vocabulary, and I never was very good at conjugating the verbs. The cleaning lady who comes to my home now is as limited in her English as I am in my Spanish. I somehow get things across in the present tense.

There was a Sears store in Maracaibo where I bought maternity clothes. In that era, the maternity wear was not fashionable, as it is now. The clothes were designed just to cover you up.

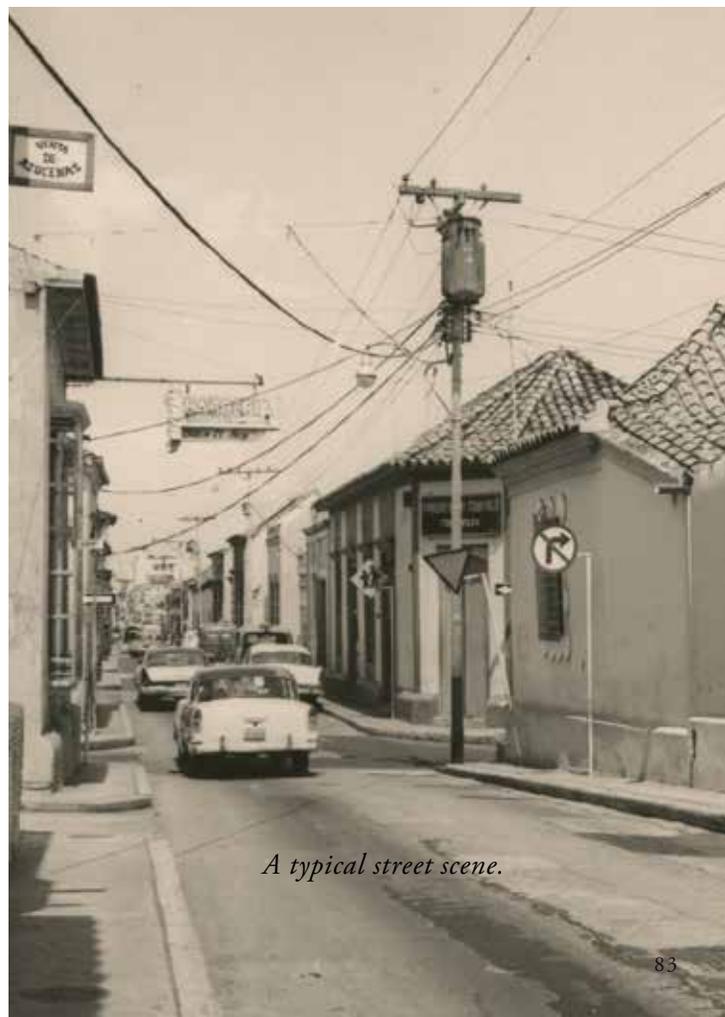
I gave birth to Toya on November 23, 1957. It was the third time I’d been to the hospital, thinking she was coming. After that, when there was a dinner, my place card read “False Alarm Reta.” *[laughs]*



Mirella and Toya.



One of Maracaibo’s lovely public parks.



A typical street scene.



Again, it was amazing that it was another five years between children. These were all natural childbirths; I didn't have any Caesarean sections.

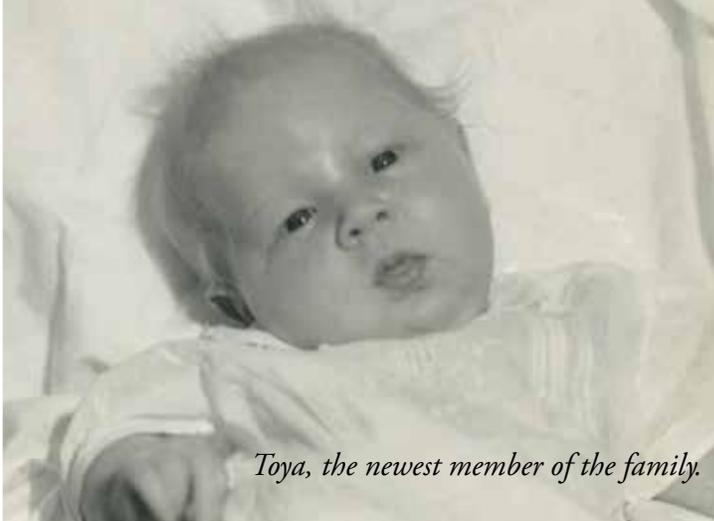
When we lived in Natchez, we knew a younger couple who worked for the company. Her name was Victoria, but her mother called her Toya. We always liked that name, and Sharon and Karen both did, too. So we named our baby Toya Jean, with the Jean coming from Bill's middle name.

I think Karen was more interested in the baby than Sharon was. Their interest has a lot to do with the age of a child — and, of course, their personalities.

Humorous place cards appeared at a company dinner after Toya's birth.



A Maricao street scene.



Toya, the newest member of the family.



CLASS OF SERVICE

This is a fast message unless its deferred character is indicated by the proper symbol.

WESTERN UNION

TELEGRAM (24)...

W. P. MARSHALL, PRESIDENT

SYMBOLS

DL=Day Letter

NL=Night Letter

LT=International Letter Telegram

1201

The filing time shown in the date line on domestic telegrams is STANDARD TIME at point of origin. Time of receipt is STANDARD TIME at point of destination

DA06 SSC092

D CDU035 14 PD INTL=CD MARACAIBO VIA ALLAMERICA 23 310P=

LT JOE ADAMS=

1901 10TH ST BROWNWOOD (TEX)=

ANOTHER GIRL RETA AND BABY FINE=

BILL=



The family attended this Anglican Church.



Toya and Karen.

Living in Maracaibo was a wonderful experience. We were there for four years, so I had a real opportunity to learn about the country, the surrounding area, and the people.

A lot of the people who were in the company camp were almost full-time expatriates, so they had a totally different outlook on things and were used to the extra perks of living abroad. Most were Americans. We had an interesting group, because so many of them had experienced World War II, including some that had been in Japanese prison camps. They had quite a lot of stories.

Our community was a self-contained, fenced camp, with one hundred to two hundred people. There was a commissary, but you couldn't get much there — milk, lettuce, and some things from "the States," as we used to refer to it — and the groceries were awfully expensive.

There was the manager's house, an open-air clubhouse, a swimming pool, offices, the gate, then four streets of houses, row after row: A, B, C, D. There were also quarters for single people and couples without children.

It was really a fun time in our life. The clubhouse was a wonderful gathering spot for parties and entertainment. It had a swimming pool and an outdoor movie theater with a big screen. Two nights a week, we'd go and watch movies, sitting in chairs. Some of the men constructed a poker table that moved around to a weekly poker game.

Carl and Jeannie Schupp visited us, from New Orleans. They stayed with us and I hosted a dinner for them.

We were warned about worms and parasites, but our family didn't have any problem with them; there were some people who did. I was careful about washing our produce, though I don't remember ever using Clorox. The water was potable.

Across the street from the camp was a little market. As time went on, a supermarket called Todos, where I bought meat, canned foods, and sundries, opened in town. I think the Rockefellers had something to do with it. One of the Rockefellers did a lot in South America, helping them get businesses started. I don't know that it was totally charitable, but a big part of it was charitable.

Then there was what they called the "free market," but it wasn't free — I don't know why they called it that. It was

the local outdoor market. It had a covering over it, but it was open, and had row after row of bins piled high with fruits and vegetables. I went there weekly to buy produce. I did all of the shopping, converting any recipes I had to kilos.

When I drove there, I'd usually take people with me, or some of us would take turns driving. We had to go through what they called a *cambalo*, which was like a checkpoint, with men in uniform. We stopped at the *cambalo* and then continued on.

Bill had had our big Buick shipped down to the camp, but after we got it, we realized we didn't need something that size. We knew a couple without children who really wanted that car, so we sold it to them and bought a regular four-door Ford, which was a lot easier to drive and manage.

At that time — this was the late 1950s — there were no stoplights, and most drivers didn't honk their horns. When they wanted to get your attention, they reached out their car windows and pounded loud on the side of their cars, meaning "I'm coming through!" So when you came to one of these five-way intersections, you'd just kind of take your chances. That's when I would be concerned; if I was arrested for a driving violation, they'd go get Bill, because I was his wife. That was the South American way.



Reta remembers:

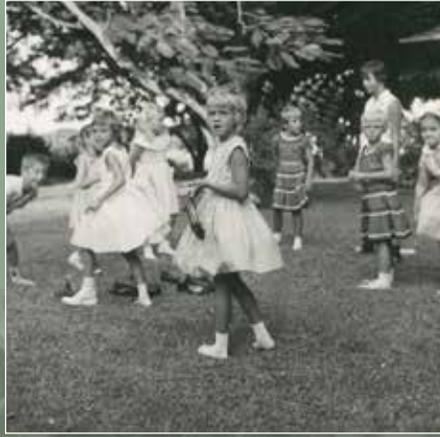
Our roles were clearly defined in those days. The women worked, played, shopped, and raised our children together. The men worked together all day, then enjoyed social time.



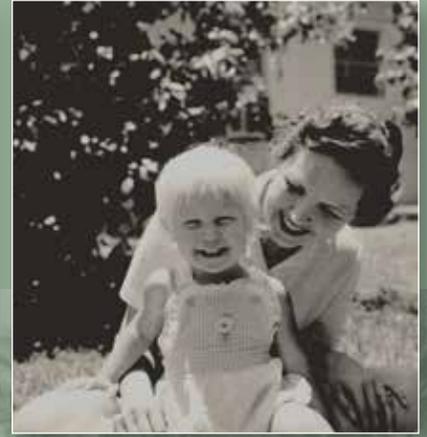
Bill (left) and coworkers.



Sharon, Toya and Karen.



Karen's birthday.



Toya and Reta.



Toya and Karen with puppy.



Toya and Reta relax by the pool.



Karen with a friend.



The beach at Lake Maracaibo.



Toya and puppy.



Bill with Toya.

LAKE MARACAIBO



*The compound's swimming pool.
At the far end was the outdoor theater.*



Toya and Sharon.



Toya and Sharon.