

## Melvin Epstein

by Doug Kent

Our story this month begins around 1898 in Russia and Poland where two people sought to escape oppression and migrated to the United States. Successful in leaving their countries, they arrived in New York to find out that all quotas had been filled. Undaunted by this rejection, they were told that Galveston Texas was accepting immigrants from their countries and they traveled there to begin their new lives.

One generation passed and our Mr. September (Mr. S) was born in Houston Texas in 1926 the second of three children. Life at that time was not easy, and in order to make money to support his family, Mr. S's father took on the responsibility of managing a dry goods store in Bay City, Texas for a person who wanted to return to ranching. The agreement was that he would receive \$15.00 a day to support his family and the rest of the day's sales would go to the owner. Mr. S's father managed to eventually purchase the store by hard work, ingenuity and the desire to provide for his family.

During this stressful time called the "Depression", Mr. S managed to complete his grammar school education in the Bay City Public School System. An above average student, he participated in activities and worked in his father's store on weekends. A very special friend of his, Charles, had a part time job selling popcorn and Mr. S would follow him everywhere he would go. This relationship went on for several years. It was on a special day after all the popcorn was sold, Charles decided to show Mr. S a very special "hidden place" where they could explore the "facts of life".

In high school Mr. S. played the clarinet, loved to read and was a regular fixture in the school library. He enjoyed movies and continued to work in his father's store. He maintained his high grades and after graduation in 1943 he began attending the University of Texas in Austin. After completing a year and a half of studies in business, he received a call that his father was ill and he had to return home. By the time he got home his beloved father, who had worked so hard to provide a good life for his family, had passed away. Devastated, but not defeated, Mr. S began attending the University of Houston which was closer to home. On weekends he would return to work in the family store. While in Houston he met another special friend, Jimmy, a pre-med student, and they spent a lot of time together. Their favorite "sport" that required very little money, since they had none between them, was dressing up in their one and only pin striped suit to attend anyone's wedding at the Rice Hotel. The bride would think they were friends of the groom, and the groom would think they were friends of the bride but in reality they didn't know a soul. They ate and drank well and

partied with both the brides and grooms friends, and then they would have a super time afterwards by themselves. This "sport" was enjoyed throughout their college years and they became the best of friends.

Through an expedited program Mr. S finished his business degree in 1947 and was now ready to begin his own career. In 1949 he married Renee and settled into family life. Always remembering that "hidden place" Charles had shown him and with fond memories of his time with Jimmy, Mr. S always admired men. Even though both of his sons were gay, he never explored while he was married.

In 1950 he purchased the Bay City store from his mother who did not like the retail business. In 1958 he purchased the second store in Bay City, a third store in Freeport, Texas in 1962, a fourth store in Lake Jackson in 1964 and finally a fifth store in Clute, Texas in 1966. Busy, but not exhausted, Mr. S fathered four children, two boys and two girls, during this time of expansion.

Sadly in 1995 Renee passed away. Mr. S at the age of 70 began a new life. He sold all his stores and labeled all his household belongings with his children's names in the rather large home he and Renee had built. He then called his children to pick up their stuff. He began to explore and is still exploring what he and Charles began in that "hidden place". An avid traveler he has visited all the major cities of the world, he is a volunteer at the Bonnet House, enjoys all the performing arts and is very active in Prime Timers. He is considered by many to be the "*Nicest man that has ever left Texas*".

