

# At Ease



## Portrait of a First Lady

story by Ann Dejoie  
photos by Melissa Hohlt

Although most people think of Reveille as the "first lady" of Texas A&M, Mrs. Frank E. Vandiver is the real lady in the "White House." Her role as president's wife comes with both frills and responsibility. But even though she works in her husband's presidential shadow, Mrs. Vandiver retains a certain dignity and style all her own.

Being the wife of the president is a full-time job.

But Reneé Vandiver, wife of Texas A&M President Frank E. Vandiver, still finds time to cook, shop, clean the house and keep up with her own hobbies.

Born in New Iberia (about 138 miles west of New Orleans), Mrs. Vandiver grew up on a sugar plantation with her two sisters — one a year older and one a year younger than her.

"I grew up on a plantation that was quite large and had its own store, mill and church," she said. "It was like a huge playground. We had restrictions, but it (the '40s) was a good time to grow up."

While Dr. Vandiver was in Austin getting his undergraduate degree, Mrs. Vandiver, then Reneé Aubry, studied fine arts at Newcomb College of Tulane University in New Orleans.

"Being in the art school at Newcomb was very hard because we also did work with the architect school," Mrs. Vandiver said, adding that she spent a lot of time in the park across the street from the college working on drawings.

It was in college that she first met Dr. Vandiver. He went to Tulane to get his masters in history. While working on his degree, he taught history classes.

"A large group of the young women I lived with were in history school," Mrs. Vandiver said, "and that's how I met him (Dr. Vandiver)."

Throughout the following years they remained close friends and got married in 1980.

Mrs. Vandiver said she remembers the wedding vividly, especially since one of her sons was the best man.

As in the typical family home, the Vandiver's phone rings constantly, the phonebook cover is scribbled on, Dr. Vandiver's daughter is invading his home office with her stuff, and the driveway is full of cars.

Mrs. Vandiver, like the typical mother and wife, does her best to

allowed her to keep up with the trends each year.

"No one can fool me," she said. "I've been through it all. You can pull just about anything and I can relate."

Three of Mrs. Vandiver's children currently attend A&M, and one graduated in 1981.

"I let them go off a year to see if they'd rather be away," she said.

Mrs. Vandiver added that after a year away, the children looked into the programs at A&M, found them to be more advanced and transferred

and do it themselves while they do homework."

The children aren't the only family members that live on-campus. The president and his wife also call A&M's campus home. Their "White House" is located on Circle Drive across from the bonfire field.

Mrs. Vandiver said she enjoys living on-campus, and with so many children, she has easily adapted to being around the students. It's also convenient because Dr. Vandiver is only five minutes walking distance from work.

Mrs. Vandiver's role as wife of the president keeps her busy, but she doesn't let it interfere with her roles as mother and housekeeper.

She does all the cooking, and she and Dr. Vandiver try to eat dinner together with the children who are home.

"I do like to cook," Mrs. Vandiver said, "so that's no problem. The nice thing about being the cook is that you have dinner when you want."

A cleaning service helps her with housekeeping during the week.

"It's an easy house to keep clean," Mrs. Vandiver said. "It's very functional."

She describes her and Dr. Vandiver's house as deceiving from the outside. It has what she calls "a big front and a small back."

"When you walk in the front door," Mrs. Vandiver said, "you have a feeling of space, which is nice. But

**"No one can fool me, I've been through it all. You can pull just about anything and I can relate."**

**— Mrs. Frank E. Vandiver**

keep track of everybody's schedule and still remain sane. And she has a lot of positive things to say about her husband and children.

But unlike the typical family, the Vandivers don't have two kids, two cars, and two dogs.

They do have two dogs, Miss Scarlet and Fergus, but it stops there.

Both previously married, Dr. and Mrs. Vandiver have 11 children between them — ranging from 16 to 34 years of age. They also have seven grandchildren and one grandchild on the way. Mrs. Vandiver said this has

back to College Station.

"We gave them the choice of not staying at home," she said, adding that all three children at A&M live on campus and have a different last name from hers, which has helped them since they don't want people to know who they are.

Quite often, the kids go home for mom's cooking or a quiet place to study. But, Mrs. Vandiver said they know better than to bring their laundry home for her to do.

"If they bring their laundry home," she said, "they usually come at night