

Texas



-Life Imitating Art -

Russ & Terri (Bear) Paton
January 2020

Texas is the Place I Wanna Be

January 15 to 21, 2020

Bear and I chose a holiday this winter using a thermometer instead of a calendar. *The minute the mercury drops below -20, we are out of here!* We also used the same instrument to determine where.

It is -30 in Millarville today, and +20 in Austin. American Airlines had two empty one-way seats to Texas and our frozen butts are going to be in them.

When the thermometer points north again, we will come home.



*Now I love the USA
And the other states
Ahh, they're OK
Texas is the place I wanna be*

Ray Wylie Hubbard



Where's Waldo?

January 15, 2020

Calgary Airport, enroute to Austin, Texas

Our flight to Austin boards at 6:05am so we were at the airport by 4:30, early even for us.

I like morning flights; we stay at the airport hotel the night before and give ourselves plenty of time for security and customs to keep the stress level in check. Today I occupied myself by taking a 30-minute heart-health walk through the terminal, and did some people watching. There are some fascinating characters traveling with us today.

Misery

The first encounter was with a Kathy Bates look-alike, and her beer guzzling husband.

A restaurant and bar in the international departure lobby area advertised a hot breakfast. There was only one other couple seated when we walked in at 4:50am. The woman had her back to me, but I noticed that the man was having a beer, which seemed an odd choice at this time of morning.



This is an *international* departure area I surmised; they could be from any time zone in the world. “*It’s 5 o’clock somewhere*”, as the country song goes.

My theory was shot down when the waitress brought the couple ham and eggs, and another beer, followed by a third.

Now they had my attention. I took a closer look and decided that the couple were Albertans, they were sporting identical “*Alberta Treasury Branch*” backpacks, so this really was a 5:00am, three-beer breakfast. I try not to judge but really, eggs and Budweiser?

Then I got a look at the beer-drinker’s companion, and it all became clear. The effect when *Mrs. Ham-Eggs-and Bud* turned her head to scowl at the waitress was pure evil, Kathy Bates at her sinister best.

For this poor guy, a three-beer breakfast is probably a minimum requirement.

Where's Waldo? - In Houston.

Waldo was boarding a flight for Houston with a dozen of his friends. The group appeared to be a basketball team - they were all about 15 years old, thin as rakes, and very tall. Every one of them was dressed in renegade attire and cocky as hell, as teens should be. There were several designer haircuts and bold fashion statements, but Waldo was the clear winner.



The moment I spotted him I determined that there was something special about this kid. If cocky could be quantified, Waldo was an 11. He wasn't the most handsome of the group, but his attitude elevated him to superstardom.

Waldo's designer sweats were rolled up to reveal bare ankles (it was -32 this morning), and his jacket slouched all over his thin frame, but he pulled it off. Where Waldo really stood out was above the shoulders; he had an angular face topped with a shock of curly red hair, shaved to the top of the ears, and wrapped in a red bandana.

I don't know where Waldo might go in life, but he will go far.

The Gravel Crusher

I am not an engineer, but I estimate that a lady in the line-up ahead of us was exerting a force of about 37 lbs per square inch, while standing. She weighed approximately 225 and was supporting her entire weight on a pair of stiletto-heeled shoes. I estimated that there was no more than 3 square inches of rubber on the road on each foot; multiplied by two feet, divided by the cargo weight, produces a load factor of 37.5 psi. If she had put her entire weight on one heel the effect would have been an impact sufficient to crush gravel.



I stayed well behind her in the line-up in case she stepped on my toe.

There are dozens of other notable travellers in our section of the airport, but it is time to go to Austin.

The call to board came all too soon for my liking.

Keeping it Weird

January 15, 2020
Austin, Texas

Every city has a slogan that defines it; Calgary is *The Heart of the New West*; New Orleans is *The Big Easy* and New York is *The City That Never Sleeps*. Austin decided to project its unique qualities to the world with the motto: *Keep Austin Weird!*

Bear and I looked for examples of people *Keeping it Weird* while we were there – we didn't have to look very far....



Until Austin, I wasn't aware that any female body parts were endangered. Apparently, I was wrong, and this guy is doing something about it.



Sculpture entitled: "Pull my Finger"

Antique stores are always interesting, but the merchandise is seldom what you would define as *weird*.

Except in Austin



Just in case there is any doubt about Austin's commitment to Weirdness, this monument is erected at the entrance to City Hall.



I am not sure, but I think this might be the mayor.



Roll Me Up and Smoke Me

January 16, 2020
Austin, Texas

Austin is Willie Nelson's hometown, and they suit one another. Austin is an island of liberal sentiment in an otherwise conservative state - Willie is a social democrat, in a cowboy hat.

*Roll me up and smoke me when I die
And if anyone don't like it, just look 'em in the eye
I didn't come here, and I ain't leavin'
So don't sit around and cry
Just roll me up and smoke me when I die.*

Willie Nelson



We bumped into Willie everywhere in Austin, not personally, but he is omnipresent – on murals, statues, t-shirts, billboards, and wall art. We stepped on him out front of the Driskill Hotel.

Willie will be 87 this April, with any luck it will be many years before we....

....roll him up and smoke him.

Legend has it that Willie smoked a joint on the roof of the White House while attending an event there honouring Jimmy Carter. Apparently, not all of Willie's heroes have been cowboys.

Doorknob

January 17, 2020

Austin, Texas

The Texas State Capitol building is a living work of art. The walls, floor and ceiling of the building are covered with images from Texas history, from the *Great Seal of the Republic of Texas* on the floor of the Rotunda, to the statue of the *Goddess of Liberty* on the dome.



In the Senate chamber there are two outstanding paintings depicting battles of the Texas Revolution: *Dawn at the Alamo* (below) and *The Battle of San Jacinto*.



It is all very impressive but what caught my attention was the door hardware. Every knob, hinge, and push-plate in the building is engraved with Texas-related images.

Bear: Which was your favourite? (Referring to the art in the Texas Capitol building)

Me: I was really impressed with the doorknobs.

Bear: You, are a doorknob.



Ghosts, Wearing Cowboy Hats

January 17, 2020

Austin, Texas

As impressive as the Capitol is, I didn't feel the essence of Texas until we visited the Driskill Hotel. Built in 1886 by wealthy land baron Colonel Jesse Lincoln Driskill, the hotel is *Texas* under one roof.

The Driskill was established in the heart of downtown Austin at a time when Texas was still the frontier. Its luxury equaled the grand Palaces of New York, St Louis, and San Francisco. The Driskill put Austin, and Texas, on the map.

Guests are pampered in opulent surroundings. Bronze sculpture and paintings depicting cowboys at work adorn every wall. Rifles and six-shooters hang on dark, panelled hallways and seem perfectly suited there. Dead animals ornament the foyer walls. The carpet is a mosaic of cattle brands, horseshoes, and lone stars. Every chair was once a cow.

Everybody who is anybody in Texas has stayed at the Driskill. Louis Armstrong played the ballroom often. Lyndon Johnson invited his future wife Ladybird here on their first date. The Johnsons watched the results of his 1964 Presidential Election from the governor's suite and Johnson addressed supporters in the ballroom after his victory. On September 11, 2001, Jenna Bush, daughter of President George W. Bush, was relocated to the Driskill by the Secret Service in the wake of the terrorist attacks earlier that day.



We stepped in the atmosphere of the *1886 Dining Room* at lunch time, absorbing the surroundings and trying to imagine life as a traveler to Austin in the late 19th century.

The Driskill Hotel is crowded with ghosts, most of them....

.....wearing cowboy hats.

Oh Henry!

January 17, 2020
Austin, Texas

O. Henry (1862-1910, born William Sydney Porter) called Austin home for much of his newspaper career. There is no record of any resumé prepared by O. Henry but, if there was, it might have contained the information on the right.



O. Henry is known for coining the term “banana republic” and for his famous short story *The Gift of the Magi*.

He couldn’t sustain his family financially in the early years, so he attempted to make a living at a variety of vocations while he wrote. Quick to learn, O. Henry picked up languages from his co-workers becoming fluent in Spanish and German.

O. Henry eventually garnered fame and a substantial income from his prolific writing, which he squandered, (O. Henry died a pauper at 47 of alcohol-related ailments.)

In 2011, President Barack Obama quoted O. Henry at a *Thanksgiving; Pardon the Turkey* event. As he pardoned the birds, Obama referred to O. Henry’s words; “*There is one day that is ours. Thanksgiving Day is the one day that is purely American*”.

While his words were used at a pardoning event, O. Henry never received a pardon for his crime. While struggling as a writer, he stole \$854.08 from his employer...

.... Oh Henry!



RESUME

William Sydney Porter

(a.k.a. **O. Henry**), seeks employment as a newspaper writer.

Previous experience:

- Pharmacist,
- Shepherd,
- Ranch Hand,
- Cook,
- Draftsman,
- Bank Teller

Talents include:

- Polyglot (English, Spanish & German),
- Artist,
- Musician,
- Heavy Drinker

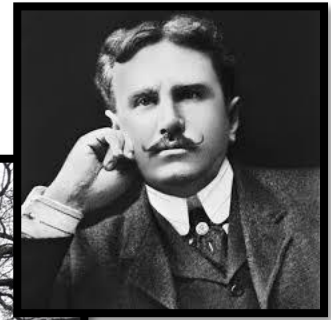
Extracurricular Activities:

- Embezzler,
- Fugitive (in Honduras),
- Prisoner (in Ohio State Prison for 3 years).

Accomplishments:

- Publisher of 600 short stories including *The Gift of the Magi*, 14 novels including *Cabbages and Kings*, and innumerable Poems, Articles and Editorials.
- Had a chocolate bar named after him.

O. Henry: He found stories everywhere –
Greensboro News and Record



O. Henry's Rented Home in Austin

I'll give you the whole secret to short story writing. Here it is. Rule 1: Write stories that please yourself. There is no Rule 2.

~ O. Henry

WISEFAMOUSQUOTES.COM

Rhythm of the Rails

January 18, 2020

Amtrak *American Eagle* from Austin to Dallas, Texas

There are probably as many “train” songs as there are songs about heartbreak. Often at the same time.

*All I do is sit an' cry
When the evening train goes by
I heard that lonesome whistle blow*

More than a few train songs involve prisoners:

*I'll never see that gal of mine
Lord, I'm in Georgia doing time
I heard that lonesome whistle blow*

Lonesome Whistle – Hank Williams



We bought tickets on the *Texas Eagle*, from Austin to Fort Worth, and boarded at 9:35 – right on time.

*When I got old enough to take the train alone
I rode that Texas Eagle down to San Antone*

Texas Eagle – Steve Earle





Amtrak's website advertises an ultra-clean environment, with smiling porters and "rich folks eatin' in fancy dining cars". The reality is slightly different. Don't get me wrong, the attendants are attentive but many of them seemed to be in an "it's just a job" frame of mind today.

*I bet there's rich folks eatin' in a fancy dining car
They're probably drinkin' coffee and smokin' big cigars
But I know I had it comin' I know I can't be free
But them people keep a movin' that's what tortures me.*

Folsom Prison – Johnny Cash

I didn't see a lot of rich folks, in fact more of the luggage on board is made by the *Hefty Bag Company* than *Gucci*.

The cars were clean, in a "train" kind of a way. Thankfully, nobody on board was "smokin' big cigars".

*The train pulls out at Kankakee
Rolls along past houses, farms, and fields.
Passin' trains that have no names,
Freight yards full of old black men
And the graveyards of the rusted automobiles.*

City of New Orleans – Arlo Guthrie

It's 45 degrees warmer in the middle of Texas than back home, but it is still winter. The "farms and fields" out our window lie fallow; the trees are dormant. Anonymous "passin' freight trains" and

"graveyards of rusted automobiles", all the colour and texture of dead leaves, present a dreary picture as they flick by our coach window. The sky is the colour and consistency of wet cement.



But it wasn't an entirely dreary day; one "old black man" gave it some colour. The elderly gentleman shuffled onto the platform at the Austin train station looking a little confused, just as the north-bound Eagle pulled in. I kept an eye on him as he wandered aimlessly among waiting passengers. The elderly man had all the signs of advanced dementia, repetitive gestures, incoherence, and confusion. He seemed harmless, but I was concerned about his safety, alone along the tracks.

My concern turned to wonder as the doors of the disembarking train opened and every porter on it rushed out to give the man a smile and a hug. I am not entirely certain what was transpiring but it seemed to me that the old man must have a routine of greeting inbound trains and is familiar to the Amtrak regulars. It was obvious from the warmth of their exchange that the railroad employees expected the man to greet them and that they care about him.

As the train pulled out the old man shuffled back from where he came, but he left behind a warm glow, on an otherwise dreary day.



*Good morning, America. How are you?
Say don't you know me? I'm your native son
I'm the train they call the City of New Orleans
And I'll be gone five hundred miles when the day
is done*

City of New Orleans – as sung by Willie Nelson

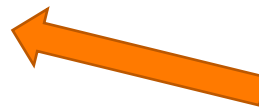
We only travelled the rails 200 miles today, but I now understand how music and trains co-exist – there is a deeply satisfying rhythm on the rails.

*Well it's all right, riding around in the breeze
Well it's all right, if you live the life you please
Well it's all right, doing the best you can
Well it's all right, as long as you lend a hand.*

End of the Line – The Travelling Wilburys



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMVjToYOjbM>



Tap here for the best train song, ever!

Tomorrow's Army

Sunday January 19, 2020
Fort Worth, Texas

I strolled down to the lobby for a coffee Sunday morning while Bear was fixing her hair. There were a few easy chairs and a TV in the lounge area, so I settled in to catch up on the news.

Fox seems to be the information channel of choice in Texas, so I was prepared for a Trump love-in, but this is Sunday. The hotel had chosen Texas' second favourite channel, *Trinity Broadcast Network*, to enlighten and entertain their lobby guests.

Televangelist, Joel Osteen was broadcasting live from his mega church in Houston. His sermon was entitled "*God's Got This*". Osteen seemed to be asserting that God has a universal plan - *lose your job, get a bad medical report, your family is breaking up - don't worry, God has a plan*. It put me in mind of that train wreck of a country song "*Jesus, Take the Wheel*" where the singer is in a car crash, so she takes her hands off the steering wheel and lets God take over.

Not a concept I endorse.

While Osteen was preaching, a message scrolled across the screen offering viewers several different methods of conveying their donations to the church. Osteen preaches a "*prosperity gospel*" where followers are led to believe that planting a seed (donating to the church) attracts God's attention and that your generosity to his church is rewarded with personal prosperity. Literally, *if you give your money to the church, you become richer*. That is as close to snake oil as "damn" is to swearing.



Bear showed up (expertly coiffed and looking as beautiful as ever), so I missed hearing what other guidance God, via Joel Osteen, has for me today.

Later, I did some research on Osteen. Turns out, the guy is a *machine* for Jesus. He preaches to a full house of approximately 43,000 people every Sunday in a stadium purchased from an NBA team. In addition to his enormous live audience, Osteen's sermon is broadcast to 100 countries around the world, with an audience of over 7,000,000 people every week!

It occurred to me that Joel Osteen may be one of the most powerful men on the planet. He has assembled a large congregation of people who believe that he has intimate knowledge of the will of God. He has unified millions in the common belief that his version of the Deity is the one true God. Osteen can direct the thoughts and actions of the masses with his words. There are very few people on the planet capable of that degree of charismatic behaviour.

There have been other spiritual leaders around the world who were able to convince their followers that they should commit mass suicide, or fly airplanes into buildings, in the belief that their version of God was directing them to do so.

Osteen seems like a genuinely wholesome fellow and his intentions probably don't stray beyond self-enrichment but we need to be wary of powerful, charismatic people....

..... today's congregation is tomorrow's army.



The Defiant Culprit

January 19, 2020
Fort Worth, Texas

This painting hangs in my office. Not the original, but a very good hand-painted replica. The original C.M. Russell's *The Defiant Culprit* is in the Sid Richardson Museum in Austin.

Painted in 1895, a Sioux warrior is facing his Blackfoot captors. The museum describes the painting like this:



“Russell has underlined the melodramatic nature of the moment by throwing the tipi into deep shadow, allowing the flickering firelight to play over the stern features of the culprit's judges and the stooped figure of the old woman. The long arm of the law literally rests on the culprit's shoulder while he stands with his blanket dropped at his feet, vulnerable in his nakedness but arrogant in his pride. “It's their religion to die without a whimper”, Russell wrote in one of his stories.”

Unfortunately, the original painting was not on display when we visited the Sid Richardson Museum in downtown Austin today. There were many other C.M. Russell and Fredrick Remington works showcased, but...

...the Defiant Culprit was locked up in the basement.



Too Good for this World

January 20, 2020

Dealey Plaza, Dallas, Texas

Anybody over 60 (and many people much younger) know exactly what you are talking about if you mention “the grassy knoll”. The little green strip of high ground in Dealey Plaza, in Downtown Dallas, is legendary.



Bear and I stood on the grassy knoll, in the exact location where Abraham Zapruder stood, on November 22, 1963, filming President John F. Kennedy's motorcade as it rolled down Elm Street. What happened between frame #150 (left), and frame #371 (below) is one of the most monumental events in the history of America.



To this day, those of us of a certain age often ask; “Where were you when you heard about President Kennedy's assassination?” Almost everybody can remember.

I had just arrived home from school and walked into the kitchen. Mom was listening to the news on our little Philco radio, crying. When she told me what had happened, I asked “Why?”

I will never forget her answer ...

... “I guess he was too good for this world”.



Window where Lee Harvey Oswald used this rifle to assassinate the President.



“Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country”.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy

Still Dreaming

January 21, 2020
America

Yesterday was Martin Luther King Jr. Day - a day of reflection on race relations in America. So, I took a moment to do that.

According to one Canadian:

Oxfam reported this morning that; *“22 men own more wealth than Africa's 326 million women”*. The article didn't say, but I assume that most of the 22 men are white - the 326,000,000 adult African women are definitely black.

There is a racist in the White House (not an opinion, just a fact.)

The Fort Worth Stock Show and rodeo is also on this weekend, including this event:

“Take your seats as the spotlight shines on top African American, Hispanic and Native American cowboys and cowgirls competing in traditional rodeo events, like bull riding, steer wrestling and tie-down roping. Taking place on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the rodeo features more than 200 culturally diverse athletes, bringing a variety of color and culture to the rodeo.”

A segregated rodeo, how quaint!



Homelessness is epidemic in Austin. I never counted but I estimate that the ratio of homeless black people is three or four times greater than the 12.7% of the total population African Americans represent.

Sorry MLK, still just a Dream.

Life Imitates Art

January 21, 2020

Texas to Canada

The thermometer was pointing north this morning, so we packed our suitcases and found an Uber driver willing to take us to the airport at 4:30am.

Christopher was way too chatty for my early-morning, pre-coffee liking, but there was no stopping him. Our hotel was 25 minutes from the airport and Christopher filled the entire trip with fascinating stories, such as: *Life as an Uber driver, holidays he had and hadn't yet taken, tattoo artistry as a side-line business, his darling grandchildren, and where to find the best deals on smoked meat.*

It occurred to me as he prattled on, that Christopher is a living embodiment of Texas. There is a big, bold, annoyingly self-assured side of Texas. On the other hand, the state exudes an alarming, yet charming, weirdness.

We experienced the dichotomy everywhere we went on this trip. One minute we were in awe of the scope of Texas' gregarious personality, and the next we were immersed in experiences teetering on the edge of reality.

This polarity is difficult to process, until you factor in music.

Everywhere you turn in Texas there are loveable artists from the unhinged fringe wearing bold cowboy hats.

In Texas, ...



... Life Imitates Art.

