

6-18-96

Let's Go for a Ride

"Let's go for a ride!" Any one of us could have said it, although it had a genuine ring of "yes!" when Mother or Daddy said it; they, after all, knew what might be on the schedule for the rest of the day. Most of our rides were for an afternoon in the summer. In pre-air-conditioned Dallas, a Sunday drive was the best way of cooling off, even if the car was only stirring up a hot wind; at least the car-generated breeze was dry, fresh, and accompanied by nice scenery.

The order in which Brother, Martha, and I sat in the back seat of the car was determined by who had sat by the windows on our previous outing. The one who last sat by the window on the driver's side would move to the center seat, the right-hand window occupant shifted to the seat behind the driver, and the former center now had the seat by the right-hand window. For years that was the order, always settled *before* we entered the car and generally before Mother and Daddy appeared on the scene. Sometimes they did have to arbitrate, but not often.

Ordinary hot weather drives might be no more than an hour or two of cruising about the city to see what new was being built or to check out how far along the preparations for the Texas State Fair were progressing. Sometimes Big Tex, the mammoth blue-jeans-clad, straw-hatted giant which towered over the entrance to the Midway, was put together well before the October opening of the Fair.



Anyway, "checking out" the fair grounds was an exciting activity for a Sunday when it was possible for the car to go where only pedestrians could venture during the Fair. A drive through the Fair Grounds was even more exciting for a couple of years before the Texas Centennial in 1936. Several permanent buildings were added to the Grounds for that year-long celebration, and their construction needed to be checked up on. A dramatic entrance was built using a block-long esplanade flanked by two long exhibition buildings in a Texas-oriented Art Deco style. The stylized female figures were based on the posing of Georgia Carroll, the most popular model of the day, a fellow graduate of Woodrow Wilson High School (and later the wife of band leader Kay Kyser and a resident of

Chapel Hill during our time there). By the time of the Centennial celebration, however, our family had grown to five children and family drives were no longer comfortable or even practical.



Back in the halcyon days when we still took family drives, another routine trip was around White Rock Lake. The lake had once been the source of the Dallas water supply, but in my childhood time, even in the nineteen twenties, Dallas had outgrown the lake for its water needs and the lake was gradually being converted to recreational uses. There was a public bathhouse and beach on one section of the east shore. Usually, our family swims took place on weekday afternoons rather than on the crowded Sunday afternoons. Swimming was abandoned later when the lake silted faster then the de-silting operations could work. Then, sail boating would become popular enough and motor boating was banned, but in my early childhood we could see almost every kind of small boat - row, canoe, putt-putt motor, and occasionally even a sail boat. On rare occasions we would end our ride with a picnic.



A favorite place for a picnic was Flag Pole Hill, a memorable elevation in basically flat Dallas. It is located at the narrow north end of the lake, and in my childhood the hill overlooked a good bit of its length. Flag Pole Hill is still there but separated from the lake by a busy four-lane highway; the lake itself has silted up sufficiently that the northern bank of water is barely in sight. It's still a favorite picnic spot, valued for its view and for its height which captures any errant breeze that comes along. Now there is a roomy shelter for protection from the sun or from occasional rain storms. There is room for a couple of softball fields, too. When I was a child, we valued the hill for its vista, not only of the lake but also of the skyline of downtown Dallas, some ten or twelve miles away.



Sometimes we would drive north to some of the little country towns nearby, such as Richardson, Plano, Carrollton, and Lewisville. Those towns are all indistinguishable from Dallas now and have retained none of their small-town appearance. Several years ago, some Dallas News correspondent complained that North Dallas now extends a hundred miles north to the Red River, the border between Texas and Oklahoma.

Other casual drives might take us across the Trinity River. Most of the year the Trinity River is a feeble creek meandering through town, sometimes hardly flowing. It is, nevertheless, roughly comparable to the James River in Richmond in the way it divides its city, including the fact that downtown Dallas is near a bend in the river. Now, industrial areas stretch north from downtown Dallas for several miles along the flood plain of the river. In my childhood the river could leave its narrow banks and stretch for miles during the spring floods. Today it is contained during most flood times by high earthen levees a mile or so apart, making the prosperous low-level industrial section feasible.



Even without the later levees, crossing the Trinity River on those early Sunday drives was a big thrill to us. There were several bridges crossing the river, but I knew only the one known as the Houston Street Viaduct. First, we drove up a long ramp approach to the Viaduct, which began at Union Station and continued for two miles across the sometime invisible river to the higher bank that began Oak Cliff. Along the way, we thrilled to watch a streetcar or two crossing the wood-trestle bridge constructed especially for streetcars. I was once privileged to ride a streetcar across that rickety-looking bridge. If, on the other hand, the river was in medium flood and reached entirely across the flood plain under the Viaduct, that prospect was even more exciting. We could identify the main channel of the river by the angry swirl of the brown waters carrying uprooted trees. One time we saw a part of a barn, and once the carcass of a cow. Before the levees were constructed the annual spring floods were devastating.

To continue the Trinity-James analogy, North Dallas was then the desirable living location while the area south and west of the river - called Oak Cliff, occupying somewhat the same position as south of the James in Richmond - was highly prized by residents and looked down upon by those on the other side of the river. Oak Cliff had once been an independent town and, in my childhood, still had its own water supply, an artesian well with water highly regarded by residents of the area and scorned by "proper"

Dallasites. I thought it smelled bad and tasted awful. Even today there is occasionally serious agitation among the residents of Oak Cliff to secede from Dallas, reestablish the city of Oak Cliff, and capitalize on all its assets.

We would occasionally risk getting lost and drive across the Viaduct to Oak Cliff. There were nice hills and heavily wooded sections (mostly scrub cedars), areas now occupied by luxurious, attractive homes. It also had a large, well built recreation area called Kidd Springs, with a huge swimming pool, filled, of course, with artesian water. It was also necessary to go through Oak Cliff if we wanted to go west to Arlington, Grand Prairie, or on to Fort Worth.

One other ride that doesn't fit in with any others was the one out Northwest Highway to see the bluff on which was built an elegant neighborhood known as Bluff View. The subtly colored, striated stone bluff was a real sight for us from the highway, but I couldn't see the use of living on top of the bluff where there was no view at all.

Not all our rides were summertime ones. One extraordinarily cold stretch of weather resulted in the freezing of White Rock Lake. After a few days of people walking or skating on the ice and finding it solid, one fool-hardy driver succeeded in driving his Model T all the way across the narrow, shallow end. Of course, we had to see all that ice, even if by the time we got there, the police wouldn't allow any more cars on it. Also in the winter, at Christmas time we frequently ventured forth to view the decorated Christmas store windows in downtown Dallas. Beginning at Titcher-Goettinger's, we would drive down Elm Street to see A. Harris and then would turn at Sanger Brothers, seeing their windows and going back down Main Street to see the back (or was it the front of Harris?) and then the wondrous windows at Neiman Marcus. We also took several evening drives to see the decorated yards and Christmas trees in residential windows. By today's standards, the decorations were very plain, but we found them exciting and beautiful.

Some time during those childhood years, the city of Highland Park, a municipality entirely within the corporate limits of Dallas, began a yearly custom of draping a huge old pecan tree with Christmas lights. The tree was located at the beginning of a wide median strip entering Highland Park. The large size of the tree together with the masses of Christmas lights made "The Tree" the object of many drives for us and other people during the Christmas season. The tree has been babied and propped during the years so that the tradition could continue, but I understand that it is no longer sufficiently strong to support the weight of the many lights.



Nevertheless, all things considered, Sunday drives and Christmas drives represent a substantial and happy segment of my childhood in Dallas at a time when the whole family could share a pack of chewing gum and there was a seat in the car for each of us.