

10-10-99

To the Border and Back

In the summer when George was nine and Roland six, we planned a vacation that would take us from our home in Dallas in north Texas to Edinburg in the farthest tip of southern Texas. Although the purpose of our trip was not to visit some of the oddly named towns of the state, we would go through or near a few, like Waxahachie, Waco, Killeen, Round Rock, New Braunfels, Seguin, Luling, George West, Refugio (pronounced Refurio for some reason I've never understood), Falfurrias, and Edcouch (one word, of course). By the time we returned home, we would have traveled more than eleven hundred miles in easy stages.

The first leg of our trip was a short one to Austin to visit Blanche and Don Edmondson in their new home there. Don had been Paul's colleague at Southern Methodist University before he moved to the University of Texas in Austin. While they were still in Dallas, they had built their home in Austin, and we had followed with great interest the various steps as they designed and supervised the building of an ultra contemporary house nestled into a high bluff. Despite our familiarity with their plans, we were still astonished by our first actual view of the house. The street-level entrance took us onto the second floor. The living room had two-story-high windows on two walls, which afforded a panoramic vista of the city of Austin, including much of the University of Texas campus nestled about the infamous library tower. Not long before we were in Austin, a deranged student with an arsenal of weapons had isolated himself on the top of the library tower and had fired at people on the ground for a long day, wounding and killing many in a massacre. We could see the Texas State Capitol, and the sweep of Lake Travis, formed by a dam in the Colorado River just below the city center. The Edmondsons were comfortably settled in their neighborhood and had accommodated well to the spectacularly changing views from all parts of their home. They said they were beginning to get work done instead of running from window to window admiring the changing view.



Lake Travis (not the Edmondson's house)

The next day, we drove on southwest through San Antonio, reluctantly passing up the many attractions of that city, although the ultimate attraction, the Riverwalk, had not yet been started. We still had a long journey ahead of us, continuing always southwest. We by-passed Corpus Christi and began the tedious part of our journey, at least as far as the boys were concerned. The next eighty or so miles took us along the edge of the mammoth King Ranch. We saw an endless, hot, flat, dry coastal plain, punctuated monotonously by scrubby mesquite trees and prickly pear cacti. But we saw none of the Santa Gertrudis cattle which had been developed on that ranch. It had thrived since 1853 when it was first assembled by Richard King, a Rio Grande River boat captain. Today, incidentally, it still is owned and operated by members of the King family. After a few miles we vetoed the idea of turning west some thirty miles to Kingsville, the headquarters of the ranch, where we could have taken a twelve-mile self-conducted tour of the ranch operations. Paul and I could already tell many tales about the vast ranch, about *Giant*, the novel Edna Ferber had written about it, about its 832,000 contiguous acres. Together with additional acreage in several foreign countries, the King Ranch was the world's largest privately owned ranch. The boys became impatient with the monotony. We didn't even meet enough cars to allow them to play their favorite number games with the license plates.



It was a relief to reach the visual variety represented by Edinburg, a small, attractive town laid out in the predictable grid pattern of a flatland town. We were attracted to the many kinds of palm trees and cacti we saw and marveled at the green oases of the yards of the suburban houses. We were visiting Paul's former student and colleague, Pat Crofts. Pat and Anne Crofts and their two children lived in an attractive home with lush flower beds and carefully tended lawns. Pat introduced us to what were, to us, exotic tropical plants, including bougainvillea and hibiscus, and promised us that the next day we would be able to see how they managed to keep their yard and garden green. We were able to see some of Anne's collection of pre-Columbian art. Pat played his guitar and told tales of the Mexican weddings for which he played in magnificent haciendas across the border.



The next morning, we saw the reason for the low earthen wall, some six inches high, around the perimeter of the back and front yards. The concrete-lined ditch at the rear of the yard had already been flooded by the irrigation system of the town when we walked out to see Pat open a metal gate which allowed the water from the irrigation canal to enter his yard to a depth of about four inches. When he closed the gate, we all piled into his car for an exciting journey to visit Mexico, some twenty miles away, a first foreign trip for George and Roland. First, we went through McAllen, which was a larger town than Edinburg, and saw some of the orange and grapefruit trees that are such an important and delicious part of the economy of the lower Rio Grande Valley. After crossing that liquid lifeline for much of lower south Texas and northern Mexico, we entered Mexico at the border town of Reynosa.



Pat and Anne spoke utilitarian Spanish and, in typical Croft fashion, had made friends with many of the merchants in Reynosa. The mostly unpaved streets were sun baked, and dusty, with few people about in the late morning hours. We drove around the residential areas before we left and found them as green and well cared for as those in Edinburg and McAllen. We could almost forget the sun as we investigated the shops of hand-crafted baskets, serapes, silver jewelry, and pottery. The shopkeepers were all delighted to see

Anne and Pat and had much to say to them. We had lunch in their favorite little restaurant and I had my first encounter with a tequila sour. I will always remember it as the perfect antidote for the powerful thirst I had grown as we walked about the dusty streets. Since then, I've had tequila sours, much better than margaritas incidentally, but none has ever tasted quite so good.

After lunch we avoided the siesta in Reynosa, when the entire town closes, by taking our hot, tired children and ourselves back to Edinburg. There we were surprised to see the flooded yards without any standing water and scarcely any mud, looking refreshed and ready to wait another week for the next scheduled irrigation. Pat proudly showed me a beautiful plant bearing many small, intensely red peppers. I naively bit into the hottest experience I've ever had. Fortunately, he had the remedy of a bit of butter on hand to quench my agony.

The next day was beach day for all of us, on the southernmost tip of Padre Island, a barrier island extending from Corpus Christi past Brownsville. We went briefly to Brownsville, at the very tip of Texas, and visited Matamoros across the Rio Grande in Mexico, in order to satisfy our curiosity about those places we'd heard so much about. We went across the San Isabel Pass to a lonely, beautiful beach with pristine white sand and a few patches of sea oats. We had the entire area to ourselves to do as we pleased, including watching the freighters far at sea bound for Corpus Christi. We gathered driftwood and had a fire to take the chill off the sudden descent of evening and cook our dinner. The Crofts returned to their home, and we spent the night at the lone motel on that end of the island. The next day we spent more time on the beach until the sun drove us back to our car, painfully scorching our bare feet on the overheated sand.

Like most homeward journeys, the trip back north to Dallas from Padre Island didn't seem nearly so long or so tedious as the trip down had seemed. We've since seen Pat and Anne here in Richmond several times before Pat's untimely death a few years ago; they have kept us aware of the tremendous growth in the whole Rio Grande Valley area. Pan American College, where Pat taught statistics in Edinburg, has grown into a substantial university, a branch of the University of Texas. Our part of Padre Island is now overbuilt by multi-storied hotels, with beach space at a premium for all visitors. But in our minds, it's still the part of Texas where we had our first tequila sours, watched the Crofts deliberately flood their yard with several inches of water, and capered in solitary splendor on the bright, white sands of the beach on South Padre Island.