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TEXANS ON THE ROAD: THE FOLKLORE OF TRAVEL

by Jim Harris



If the interior world of our minds reflects the exterior world in which we live, the American mind must look like a road map. Or better yet, if we could peer into the national mind, it would look like a road. It would be Interstate Highway 95 from Maine to Florida along the East Coast. Or it would be Highway 101 from Oregon to California along the West Coast. Or still better, it would be Route 66, the mother of all American roads—in the twentieth century anyway.

In 2001, Route 66 was seventy-five years old, although as everyone knows, the fabled artery has been plowed up, paved over, and renamed in recent decades. That didn't stop people from remembering Route 66 in 2003, when the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington D.C. celebrated a transportation exhibit. At that celebration, a concrete portion, saved from a part of the route in Oklahoma, was put on exhibition.

Route 66 is the road John Steinbeck wrote about in the 1930s in *The Grapes of Wrath*. It is the road jazz singers celebrated in the 1940s. "Get your kicks on Route 66." It is the road television producers featured in the 1950s with a popular television show: two guys in a Corvette traveling from adventure to adventure along its twists and turns.

It is our hallowed highway, but it is not just Route 66 that we have loved. Americans have always been lovers of the open road. It is a national tradition and an historical fact. Frederick Jackson Turner saw all of American history as a road trip west. Walt Whitman, our

great Democratic poet, wrote a 14-section, 224-line poem he called “Song of the Open Road.” The poem begins:

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road
 Healthy, free, the world before me,
 The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

Our roads are no longer “long brown” paths, but we still see the road as a symbol of the kind of freedom we have here.

Some folks think America’s greatest novel is Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, the story of a young man taking a trip down the country’s super highway of the nineteenth century, the Mississippi River. On the surface, Huck floats down the Big Muddy, but he is really traveling down a mythical American road.

Texans have always had a special place in their hearts for the road. We had only a little part of Route 66 up in the Panhandle, but the open road has always been a romantic place for us. “Just can’t wait to get on the road again,” Willie sings. It’s his signature song, and as far as I am concerned it could be the state’s signature song. Let’s sing it at our TFS meetings instead of “The Eyes of Texas” or “Beautiful, Beautiful Texas.”

For how many of you is our annual Easter gathering an opportunity to get on the road again? For how many of you is the yearly TFS meeting a pilgrimage that has its comings and goings on the road that are also an important part of our Easter experience? Up in northern New Mexico this time of year hundreds of my fellow New Mexicans make a pilgrimage to some holy ground at El Santuario de Chimayo. Easter weekend with the TFS has become my family’s equivalent of that pilgrimage. We haven’t missed Easter weekend with the TFS since 1975.

At our annual meeting in Nacogdoches, I told John Lightfoot that I wanted to do this paper on the folklore of travel in Texas. In 2000, the state’s most famous fiction writer came out with a book about his travels on American interstate highways: Larry McMurtry published *Roads: Driving America’s Great Highways*. It is a book in which he acknowledges his addiction to being on the

road. In his introduction, McMurtry writes, “From earliest boyhood, the American road has been a part of my life—central to it I would even say.”¹

Now, McMurtry’s *Roads* is no literary masterpiece. It is no “Song of the Open Road” or *Huckleberry Finn*. However, it does say a few things about my topic. For instance, he writes, “I had no river to float on, to wonder about. Highway 281 was my river, its hidden reaches a mystery and an enticement.”² And still later in his introduction, he says, “Three passions have dominated my more than sixty years of mostly happy life: books, women, and the road.”³ That’s pretty good company, being third only to books and women.

McMurtry is a collector of books and claims that he has read and thought about over 3,000 travel books. He says, “I have also read a fair amount about the great roads or routes of old, the famous caravan routes, particularly the Silk Road out of Asia and the spice and salt routes in Africa, mainly out of an interest in nomadism itself and in the desire humans seem to have to migrate, even though the routes of migration are hard. Trade has usually been the motive for travel on the routes, but the need to be on the move may be an impulse deeper than trade.”⁴

Perhaps that should be my title for this paper—an impulse deeper than trade. It is certainly a deep impulse for me. My childhood of the 1940s and 1950s is filled with many fine memories. Despite the fact that those years were on the heels of the Great Depression and sandwiched between two wars—World War II and the Korean War—I had a childhood oblivious to all but the world of my family and friends.

In those two decades, we lived on the edges of a mushrooming urban Goliath—in a part of West Dallas called Cockrell Hill, and then in far south Oak Cliff. We were lower middle class, my parents having been brought up on farms east of Big D and struggling for the necessities and luxuries afforded the pastor of several small Missionary Baptist Churches. Most of our neighbors talked and acted like they were just a few steps from the plowed fields of Texas farm life.

The memories of those times are overwhelmingly good: going to the Cockrell Hill indoor theater or the Chalk Hill drive-in

theater; visiting my grandparents, Momma and Poppa Ausbrooks, on their farm outside of Garland, where they lived in the house where I was born, a house in the middle of a cotton field; staying a couple of weeks each summer on a farm with my country cousins; and taking annual vacations with my parents, my brother, and my sister.

In fact, most of the truly great memories I have of my youth involved some sort of travel. These are the things that have stuck with me. For instance, we made more than one vacation out of trips to Carlsbad Caverns. In 1952, when I was nine years old, we drove a gray 1950 Plymouth four-door on one of the grand adventures of the Harris family. My parents still recall it fifty years later. We went west along Highway 180 through Fort Worth, Snyder, Lamesa, and Seminole before jumping off into exotic New Mexico. We went through Hobbs, New Mexico, to Carlsbad, and then south out of the town to the caverns and into country that seemed like the edge of the earth. Sometimes I think it odd that Mary and I have lived only a few miles from those caverns for the past twenty-six years.

On another one of our annual vacation trips, my family drove up Pikes Peak. That trip was made in the same 1950 Plymouth, and when we reached the top of the mountain I thought we had ascended Everest. The road had been important in the families of both my father and my mother. My grandfather's great-great-great-great-grandfather on my father's side came from Wales. My grandfather Harris came to Texas from Arkansas in 1914. On my mother's side the Ausbrooks family came from England in the early 1700s, settling first in Virginia. My grandfather Ausbrooks came from Tennessee to Texas around 1904. He took the family to Hall County, west of Childress, where a storm blew away his house while he and his family huddled in a storm cellar. A blacksmith and a farmer, grandfather Ausbrooks put the family in a wagon and drove to Dallas County, country not so wild as the Panhandle. They settled northeast of Dallas near Garland.

Many of my memories of the 1940s and 1950s involve some sort of travel, and getting on the road was as much of a tradition in

my family as was Wednesday night prayer service. Well, perhaps that is a bit of an exaggeration. The trips, though, were customs in the Harris house that had a tremendous impact on me. I think I would go so far as to say that there were no other experiences more important in impacting the way I have lived and the way my own immediate family has lived. Being on the road has been at the center of my life and of the lives of my wife Mary and my son Hawk. Life has been a highway for us. We have carried on the vacation tradition and developed it. And I think that has been the case for many Texans and, indeed, for many Americans.

Here are some of our proverbial expressions about the road that are part of American speech:

A man never got lost on a straight road. Don't cross the road till you come to it. Every road has a turning. Follow the straight road. It is a long road that does not end. It is a long road that goes nowhere. Keep in the middle of the road. No road is long with company. The middle of the road is safer. The road of life is lined with many milestones. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. There is no royal road to learning.

The folklore of travel is an enormous subject, and I would like to suggest in the remainder of this presentation some of the possibilities for detailed study of Texans on the road. First, a definition. I have used the expression "on the road" several times already. What I mean is just movement that involves some time and distance. It might be temporary movement, such as a vacation, or it might mean permanent movement, such as in pulling up stakes and finding a new home. It might mean movement for business, as a modern truck driver might experience, or it might mean movement for pleasure, such as a trip to South Padre Island. Being on the road might be movement that is voluntary or movement that is forced.

Here is my list of the top ten approaches to the study of travel lore:

1. Modes of transportation, such as by car, truck, train, motor home, plane, bicycle, or foot.
2. Destinations—where the traveler goes, such as traditional locales like Galveston or Big Bend.
3. Stopping places along the way, such as motels, camp sites, roadside parks, and rest stops.
4. Reasons for traveling, such as business, recreation, and health.
5. Psychological impulses and ramifications, such as a need for mobility or a need to escape the routine of ordinary life.
6. Who it is that travels, such as individuals alone, people in tour groups, families, or different economic groups. Recently, I learned that private pilots have clubs for owners of particular types of planes, and that they rendezvous in different locations for annual celebrations.
7. When we travel, such as during summer vacations, on religious days, or on designated national holidays.
8. Traditions within certain businesses that depend on travel to make a profit, such as UPS, the postal service, airlines, and outfitters who take hunters into the outback of the Valley.
9. Differences between true folkways of travel and travel created by advertising, popular culture, or mass media.
10. Differences between different kinds of travel traditions, such as stories a family might tell about a particular vacation trip, games they might play traveling down the highway, or the foods they consume along a traditional route.

To illustrate just how enormous is this subject, the folklore of travel, I will mention just one topic that I think has potential for study. Mary has wondered for several years how I was going to work into a TFS presentation something that has become a hobby for me and for hundreds of other folks in the Southwest and in America. The subject is running. Distance running. Road racing. I

think my love of the sport and hobby has come partly from my love of travel.

For more than two decades, I have been a jogger interested in keeping off a few pounds. For the last five years, I have been a racer, running in competition against individuals who are roughly my own age. I have run road races in several states, including Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Nevada. I belong to several clubs; the Hobbs group is called The Road Warriors. I also belong to the Arizona Road Racers, the Roswell Running Club, and the Midland Running Club. The West Texas Running Club, headquartered in Lubbock, is the one I am closest to; I run thirteen club races each year with them, and then several other races in town that the club helps organize. Last year I ran twenty-five races, the shortest a two-mile sprint, but most of them three, four, or five miles, and the longest a 10k, or 6.2 miles. I run about thirty miles a week in training.

This year in Austin, on April 1, I ran in the 24th Annual Capitol 10,000, in which over 15,000 runners participated. My son Hawk is the real runner in our family, having run cross country races since he was in junior high school. He is the one who inspired me to start running competitively when I was 53 years old. Hawk finished 25th out of those 15,000 runners in Austin. The *Austin American-Statesman* carried the story of Austinite Sid Smith, who is 90 years old and has run each of the races since 1983. The Saturday headline read, "Still in the running. At age 72, Sid Smith raced his first Cap 10k. At age 90, he sees no reason to quit."

Hawk started me racing, and going to the races has become a custom that has kept our immediate family close. On February 10, 2001, we traveled to Las Vegas, Nevada, where Hawk ran a half-marathon and Mary and I ran a 5k race in the streets of the glittering gambling capitol. I think of our road races as an extension of our love of the road. Running six miles around Buffalo Springs Lake outside of Lubbock is just a long road trip in miniature.

I think the numbers of individuals doing it, and the length of time that it has been popular, make road racing more than just a

fad. It is true that its popularity has something to do with the love of professional and amateur sports that has consumed the nation. It is also true that the popularity of running has something to do with our consciousness of the importance of staying fit, of the baby boomers and the rest of our aging population wanting to stay healthy, and of all of the medical data that reminds us of how important it is to be active.

But in October of 2001, I will run in the 20th annual Red Raider Road Race, which is run on homecoming weekend at Texas Tech University. It is sponsored by the WTRC, and it will be the sixth year that I have participated. I would love to spend some time talking to you about the traditions, customs, and practices of road racers, the marathoners and those who run the shorter races. Their rituals and customs are just as elaborate and complex as any other group formed by common interests. For instance, if you are a runner, you don't want to mention certain four-letter words, such as "rain" or "wind" in the days before a race. Some runners wear a particular article of clothing for good luck. For some, a particular meal the night before a race will result in a good finish. Runners have their own vocabulary. The term "hit the wall," for instance, means to arrive at a point in a race when it feels like all the body's fuel has been used.

Runners are different. They think differently, they act differently, and they are a unique group of men and women who have their own heroes and legends, who have their own superstitions, who have their own practices that some would think as fanatical. For the last ten years, I have spent a week the first part of June on a lake in the bush of northern Saskatchewan with some Canadian friends. When I run in the mornings on the northern Cree Indian Reserve, I wear a bell to make sure I do not startle a bear and get a leg bitten off, which would probably slow me down a bit.

Have you heard that joke? The park ranger is guiding hikers through the woods and telling them to be very careful because they are in bear country. The ranger says, "Always wear some bells so you won't surprise them, and be careful when you come across bear scat on the trail. And be especially careful if you come upon

some grizzly bear scat.” One of the hikers asks the ranger how you tell grizzly scat from black bear scat. The ranger says, “The grizzly scat is the one that has the little bells in it.”

There’s a road joke for you. But back to the running. When I travel today, wherever I travel these days, I spend some time exercising on the roads of that place. I have run on farm roads in Ireland, on the city streets of Papeete, Tahiti, in the deserts of southern Arizona, on the beaches of the island of Kauai, in the mountains of New Mexico’s Sacramento Range, along the Kenai River in Alaska, along the harbor in St. Thomas, and many more places. It is a different way of seeing and knowing a place.

Road racing is not just a fad. It is here to stay. The Boston Marathon and the thousands of small club races held around the country will continue, partly because they are for amateurs as well as the professionals. This is not going away. I have a feeling that at a TFS meeting 100 years from now some man or woman may be giving a presentation on the beginning of the road racing clubs back in the 1960s.

Road racers make up just one small part of the thousands of individuals crowding the American road. Do they represent a folk group? Not as we have defined folk groups in the last century-and-a-half. But as everyone is aware, as we move into the twenty-first century, as we move along the information super highway, we are going to be rethinking our ideas about who constitutes a group.

Geography, language, and ethnicity do not divide us as much as they once did in America, and I think one of the many ways that we might help decide who we are is to study our traditional lives along the roads that connect us. Perhaps one of these days we should designate one of our annual publications to the subject of Texans on the Road—this impulse deeper than trade.

ENDNOTES

1. Larry McMurtry. *Roads: Driving America’s Great Highways*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000. 11.
2. *Ibid.*, 11.
3. *Ibid.*, 11.
4. *Ibid.*, 14.



Archie McDonald