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TRAVELING TEXAN

by Archie P. McDonald



People just can't stay put. As much as we love hometowns, or Texas, or America, curiosity and horizons summon us to adventures beyond the seas. Texans, no less than Connecticut Yankees, wander the world with itchy feet and wide eyes at the wonder of it all.

I joined the caravan late. Apart from occasional excursions across the Rio Grande, I was dangerously close to the epitaph I read in an old novel a half century ago: "Here is my butt, the very water-mark of all my sails." Title and author escape me now, so this is as much attribution as I can muster for a line I wish I had written.

Then, in 1986, Ab and Hazel Abernethy tolerated my tagging along with them to Australia for three weeks on a folklore exchange. Ask Ab about our assignment to entertain the inebriated crew of the USS *Joseph Kennedy*, in port at American River on Kangaroo Island, South Australia, or the controversies that come with comparison of Queensland versus South Australia beer.

The passport acquired for visiting Australia got another stamp in 1990, when the fellow slated to escort fifteen high schoolers on a three-week summer trip to Germany had to withdraw. "Have passport and will travel," says I, when the chairman of the exchange committee asked me to take over. The deal involved round-trip airfare and home stay with Rotarians in three cities. How could a schoolteacher turn down such an invitation?

We gathered in Houston for the Lufthansa flight, and the Rotarian in charge of all this sternly, but I feared futilely, attempted last-minute lessons in etiquette and deportment; I told them we were going to have fun. When we arrived in Frankfurt for the transfer to Bremen, I asked my high schoolers to stick close until we found the gate for our next flight. I needn't have bothered. When they saw security guards patrolling with automatic weapons, my charges went to big-eyed but becalmed anxiety.

In Bremen, the kids scattered to homes in various cities and I was taken to the home of Dr. and Mrs. Viehoffs in a small town. We all gathered on a farm near Bremerhaven a week later, which enabled me to confirm that there had been no hasty marriages, broken bones, or international incidents; we scattered again—my next billet was in Mella—rendezvoused for a three-day tour of the German Democratic Republic and Berlin, scattered once more with me visiting with the Rochmanns in Achen, and finally reunited at the Bremen airport to return to Houston. Here are some memories:

- all my hosts had been prisoners-of-war after WWII, with all but one grateful to have been in the custody of American or British forces instead of Russians;
- in those days, a West German could say “GDR” and make it sound like profanity;
- German beer really isn’t better than American, French, or Italian beer, but it is more pervasive;
- in East Berlin, still communist then, I attempted to switch a purchase in mid process to a more expensive item, which irritated the clerk—my host explained that the amount of my purchase was irrelevant to the clerk, whose pay was decreed by the government;
- most Germans speak English—I mean BBC English—which leads me to the following tale.

Before departure, my wife suggested that I get out the German books that helped me pass that language test I needed to receive a Ph.D. at LSU in 1963. I declined, fearing I would give offence. I couldn’t wait to tell her of my visit to a plastics factory conducted by proprietor Claus Spies. His explanations were all in German, then translated for me. Finally, he conducted us to his office for coffee, where he spoke the only English of the visit. Gesturing politely to a chair, and with a smile, Claus invited me to “Sit on your arse.” A perfect description of the anatomical action involved.



The author on the street in Beaune, Germany

In March 1991, my colleague at SFA, Jere Jackson, led about forty of us on a fiftieth anniversary, World War II tour of London, a channel crossing to Normandy, and on to Paris. I fell in love with Paris. The saying is “See Rome and die,” but I believe everyone should see Paris—as often as possible—and live! The “us” cited above included my wife, Judy, who served as a city commissioner and then mayor of Nacogdoches for nine two-year terms, so until 1996 we traveled with Jere only in non-election years, always over Spring Break—though we left early and stayed late to enjoy twelve days in, by now, every country in western Europe and one memorable trip to Egypt. Judy’s mayoring also enabled four trips to Japan as part of a sister city/sister university exchange with Naze City, Amami Island, and the Nissho Gakuen Educational Corporation, headquartered in Miyazaki. Along the way, granddaughter

Kelly accompanied us on trips to London, France, and Ireland. (I have now every grandparent's dream: an excuse to tell you about my perfect granddaughter. Some may call this "bragging" but grandparents will recognize it as just good reporting.) Here are some memories, and lessons learned, from a Texan perspective, about these marvelous adventures.

For most of the year Kelly then lived in North Texas with her parents. She spent some of the summer in Nacogdoches with Papa and MiniMac, the moniker our mischievous son taught her to call her five-foot grandmother. MiniMac determined one or two weeks insufficient, so she contrived an extension—after Kelly's visit in Nacogdoches, they'd have another week's vacation for the whole family. At age four, this meant that MiniMac took *my* granddaughter and her parents, *my van*, and *my credit card* to Colorado after I had started fall classes. They got away with this just one year. For ages five and six, I accompanied them; age seven, we took the Inland Passage cruise to Alaska; age eight, we visited London—the real London, where Big Ben lives. We had read about him in numerous books, and on our first day there we experienced his solemn tolling of the time.

We visited the War Cabinet Rooms, petted the horses at the Horse Guard station, marched with the band to change the guard at Buckingham Palace, toured the Tower of London, attended Evensong services at St Paul's, viewed the tables and tombs honoring monarchs and poets in Westminster, and bounced in the red double-decker busses above and swayed in the Underground below to various destinations in the city. And on the flight home, Papa got to visit the flight deck of the British Airways 777 just because a flight attendant thought an eight-year-old girl ought to have the experience—and let an old man tag along. What is not "perfect" about that? How can you build a better memory? Maybe in Paris.

I already had promised Kelly that Judy and I would show her Paris when she became twelve years old. Never make promises to little girls unless you intend to keep them. She never forgot; even in London, when Judy had asked her something about that trip,

she replied, “Yes, and when I’m twelve I get to go to Paris.” She made it at eleven years, nine months because I couldn’t let the chance to show my best girls the City of Lights escape me.

We departed the day after Christmas and spent the next six of them in the most beautiful city in the world. We included museums on our itinerary because one simply cannot travel to Paris without visits to Musee D’Orsay or the Louvre. Impressionism *is* French art to most Americans, and one *must* view the *Venus de Milo*, *Winged Victory*, and the *Mona Lisa* without the filter of photography, if such is ever possible. DaVinci’s most famous work disappoints most tourists because it is small and displayed so darkly, and because so many others want to see her that guards literally exhort viewers to remain in motion as they pass by. I expect we spent about as much time in museum shops and restaurants as we did with the art, but hey, it’s Paris—it’s *all* art.

A tour by bus of historic Paris and another to Versailles helped fill some days, as did frequent visits to Galleries Lafayette, Paris’ most famous and interesting department store. Metro rides to explore Montmartre, La Chapelle, a special Sunday visit to St. Sulpice for the organ concert, the *Arc de Triumphant* and *Tour Eiffel* (as the French call Mr. Eiffel’s tower), filled our days, as did lingering dinners at various street cafés evenings.

A special New Year’s Eve dinner aboard a *Bateau Mouche*, followed by watching midnight fireworks in the *Place de Concorde* while standing in the middle of what seemed like a million people on the *Champs Elysees*, topped the trip. On the way home, Judy asked Kelly for her best memory of Paris. “All of it,” she replied.

While Judy served as mayor of our town, she helped develop a sister-city relationship between Nacogdoches and Naze City, Japan. The moving force from the Far East was Daiji Goto, chairman of the Nissho Gakuen Educational Corporation. Goto is a man of means who uses some of his wealth to promote world understanding. This relationship resulted in several trips to Japan to visit Goto’s schools. I was permitted to tag along, and soon learned that my name in Japan is “husband.” It is almost a promotion when sounded in that patriarchal society. Our trips involved

more than schools, for the Japanese are marvelous hosts. They wanted us to understand as much as possible about their geography, culture, and cuisine. About the latter, I really think they just wanted a good laugh while we confronted unaccustomed creatures from the sea with chopsticks.

On one visit, they took us to Nagasaki. The historian in me was eager to examine the site of our second nuclear bomb, delivered on August 9, 1945, as the *coup de grace* to end World War II without an invasion of Japan. The American in me was a little anxious about the visit. We sat for photos at Ground Zero, which is marked by enlarging circles in a now tranquil park. We visited the memorial museum, which includes no politics in its exhibits—only consequences. I'll never forget the display of mangled, gold eyeglass frames.

A day later, Goto asked our reaction. We pussyfooted a bit until he seized our attention with the admission that the bad bomb had produced a better Japan. Goto explained: a boy of seven in 1945, he was trained to defend Nippon with only sharpened bamboo. His father, a soldier survivor, came home and founded schools, because, he said, education was the only route to peace. His best pupil was his son. Goto did not *like* that bomb, but he accepted it as necessary shock treatment to stop the war. The copilot who dropped the first atomic bomb recorded only "My God . . ." when he looked back into the mushrooming cloud in his wake. I don't know his inflection then, but after our visit to Nagasaki and Ground Zero, that sounds like a prayer.

Our visits to Japan made us prime targets to host Japanese guests when the John Manjiro Whitfield Foundation chose Texas for its twelfth Japan-America Grassroots Summit with Nacogdoches as one of the host cities for forty Japanese for a weekend emersion in American culture. For forty-eight hours—noon Friday to noon Sunday—they were dealt out for homestay. Since Judy was in charge of the dealing, we got two guys—Fukuda Asushi and Matsuo Hitoshi. This was an act of faith—we can say good morning in Japanese—"ohayo gozaimasu"—and a few more pleasantries; their command of English exceeded ours of Japanese, but not by

much. Nonetheless, it is amazing how much communication can be achieved with pointing and facial expressions—especially a smile—and good will.

“Good will” is the whole point of the Summit and of the sister city relationship between Nacogdoches and Naze. We are peoples of polar opposites. Their society is remarkably homogenous—imagine a street, a school, an auditorium, filled with folk of black hair and dark eyes and copper skin, and mostly dressed in dark, formal clothing. Similar settings in America offer shades and hues of all these aspects, and casualness of dress.

Japanese are compulsive about the exchange of “business cards,” which tells as much about what they are as who they are. There is a protocol to the presentation, acceptance, and fate of the card that Occidentals simply have to be taught—it would never occur to them that the card must never be stored in a pants pocket.

Here is a moment of the visit others might like, at my expense. One of our city’s guests, Yoshie Nakayama, a bright and attractive lady of fifty-two who was billeted with a friend, seemed always around me when we gathered for dinner or a ranch party. On the final day of the visit, she told me why: “You remind me my father.” She spoke *that* English plainly enough for everyone to hear and to the amusement of all but one.

On our Spring Break trips to Europe, Judy and I join a group of old friends. We have numbered as few as twenty-five and as many as fifty on these trips, always led by my History Department colleague Jere Jackson. Jere does this better than anyone I know, and most of us, who are decision-makers in our real lives, luxuriate in not having to decide much for a fortnight—Jere plans everything and we are just proud to show up at appointed places and times. A 4:00 A.M. departure from Rome strained us a bit, but not so much that any wanted to be left behind the next year.

We are sufficiently experienced to wear comfortable shoes, carry travel-sized umbrellas, and know when it is safe to drink the water, though some of our friends will appreciate me not mentioning names of those who prefer to sample local wines as much as possible. I have learned that it is always best to travel with good

friends, especially if they are doctors. Our little band had two medical crises one spring and it pleases me to report that when needed, both of our traveling medicos responded promptly, competently, and without apparent concern for malpractice suit.

First, one of our friends fell in the street of a small town in France. The blow opened the skin on a good portion of his forehead and his glasses plowed a deep furrow across the bridge of his nose. Hand surgeon Dr. Dennis Stripling responded immediately. Dennis cleaned the wounds, produced bandages from a store in his luggage, and gave our friend a non-narcotic pain medication. For a while he kept an ice pack supplied from a nearby *brassier* on his wounds. Though he had bled like a stuck pig, as we say in East Texas, he healed nicely and only those of us who know can even detect a scar.

Two nights later, another of our number stoppered her esophagus with a hunk of lamb. Our other doctor, Hamp Miller, a gynecologist/obstetrician who treated my sinuses in Vienna one year, responded immediately. Relieved that the obstruction involved the esophagus rather than the trachea, which meant there was no danger of suffocation, Hamp nonetheless tried the Heimlich Maneuver, to no avail. Then, abandoning dinner, they spent much of the night in an emergency room in Nice, getting the lamb to lie down. It is a great comfort to us to know that we have competent, caring, and willing medical providers to minister to us in a time of need, in a foreign place, when we know not where else help is available.

On one of our spring trips, we visited the Burgundy area of France and Jere arranged for us to examine the vineyards operated by the Duchess of Magenta, and to lunch with her at Chateau de Sully. We arrived at the vineyards late of a cold but bright, sunny morning, and there awaited the Duchess. I don't know what the others expected, but I had envisioned a dowager making a living by capitalizing on her title. Only part of that was true.

A tall, dark-haired woman, perhaps forty-five years of age, met our bus at the edge of the vineyard. She did so quite democratically for a duchess, shaking hands all around and greeting us with a

decidedly English—turned out she was a Scot—not French, accent. The Duchess set to her work, which was more tell than show because, in March, vines have been pruned to a single runner not far up a gnarled old stump, and await only warmth to spring into annual renewal. Afterwards, the bus followed her auto to Chateau de Sully. Upon arrival I received a warm greeting from the friendliest golden Labrador retriever I ever met, and we had lunch and samples of the yield of grapes of previous years.

The Duchess visited each table-of-eight during the meal and the sampling, never volunteering personal information but also never declining to answer a question. In doing so she revealed much about herself and her culture. She, a daughter of Scotland, had met the Duke of Magenta, her senior by about twenty-five years, at a wedding of mutual friends. Their eyes met, said she, “across a crowded room,” and it was love at first sight. The Duke’s reputation as a man of many lady friends did not discourage her, for indeed, both had found the love of their lives. So they married, had a boy and a girl, and . . . lived “happily ever after” if “after” describes their fifteen or so years before his fatal illness. Anticipating that this might happen, perhaps because of their ages, the Duke insisted that the Duchess learn the process of wine making from the ground up—literally. Now she was preserving the chateau, winery, and their way of life for their son, the next Duke of Magenta, still a schoolboy.

At this point all the ladies, whether or not they had ever read a romance novel with Fabio on the cover, had melted. What got the guys came later, when we departed, and that tall, brave, and determined lady—the Lab looking up at her—kept her eyes on our bus traveling all the way down the lane through the grapevine stumps back to the road and lives beyond the sea. Then she turned and walked, alone, slowly, back into her future. Where in the world is Fabio when you need him to make a story have a happier ending?

The group that Judy and I accompany on our Spring Break trips to the Old World makes every attempt to understand foreign cultures. Here is part of what we have learned—every quality European bathroom has a particular plumbing device called a

bidet. I asked all our Texas travelers plus a few others attending a late afternoon gathering in one of our rooms, how one used a bidet. None would admit to possessing this knowledge. One did say that his Daddy had encountered a bidet back in the 1950s, and that it had spit right in his eye when he inspected it. Our tour director, an experienced European traveler of several decades, said that he had washed his feet in many a bidet back in the days when the actual bathing and toilet facilities were always “down the hall” with only this curious commode of a creature available in sleeping quarters.

The item in question looks a lot like the johnny one might find in any American home, except the manufacturer did not supply it with a seat, so imagine a toilet or commode without a wooden or plastic seat. Also, without a water tank. But there is a faucet controlled by valves marked “hot” and “cold.” Officially this appliance is, “a fixture . . . for bathing the lower parts of the body.” I’m not sure that means Jere’s feet, but it may. Anyway, a pair of roommates found a use for the bidet at their party for the group. They filled it with wine bottles and everyone had their photo taken with it, even the Baptists.

We have, at last, moved to the bottom of the list of things Texans learn by traveling. The Department of State can advise you on the relative safety of other nation destinations, and your travel agent gives counsel on prices. But who will teach you how to flush a foreign toilet? You may think this a simple function, what with the nearly standardized American practice of slapping a lever beside a standup urinal or toilet, or depressing a handle on the front of a tank. This is not necessarily so in places outside our great state—or nation. In Asia and the Near East, one is likely to discover no toilet at all in the water closet. Instead, there is an opening in the floor, and places to locate one’s feet. In Japan, a cup-shaped riser to the front provides directional orientation. Most westerners will shun these devices until pain levels approach Mach 4 or 5.

Most of what follows grew from a fact-finding expedition to France. The subject came up when one of us returned to our

restaurant table and apologized for being unable to resolve the riddle of eliminating elimination. Each of us made the attempt; none found a solution. Turns out there was a lever beneath what appeared to be a small oxygen tank above the facility that had to be twisted with considerable torque. After considering the likelihood of obtaining a National Humanities Endowment grant to investigate this important cultural diversity, we judged this report sufficient. So, when “over there,” here is what you may find:

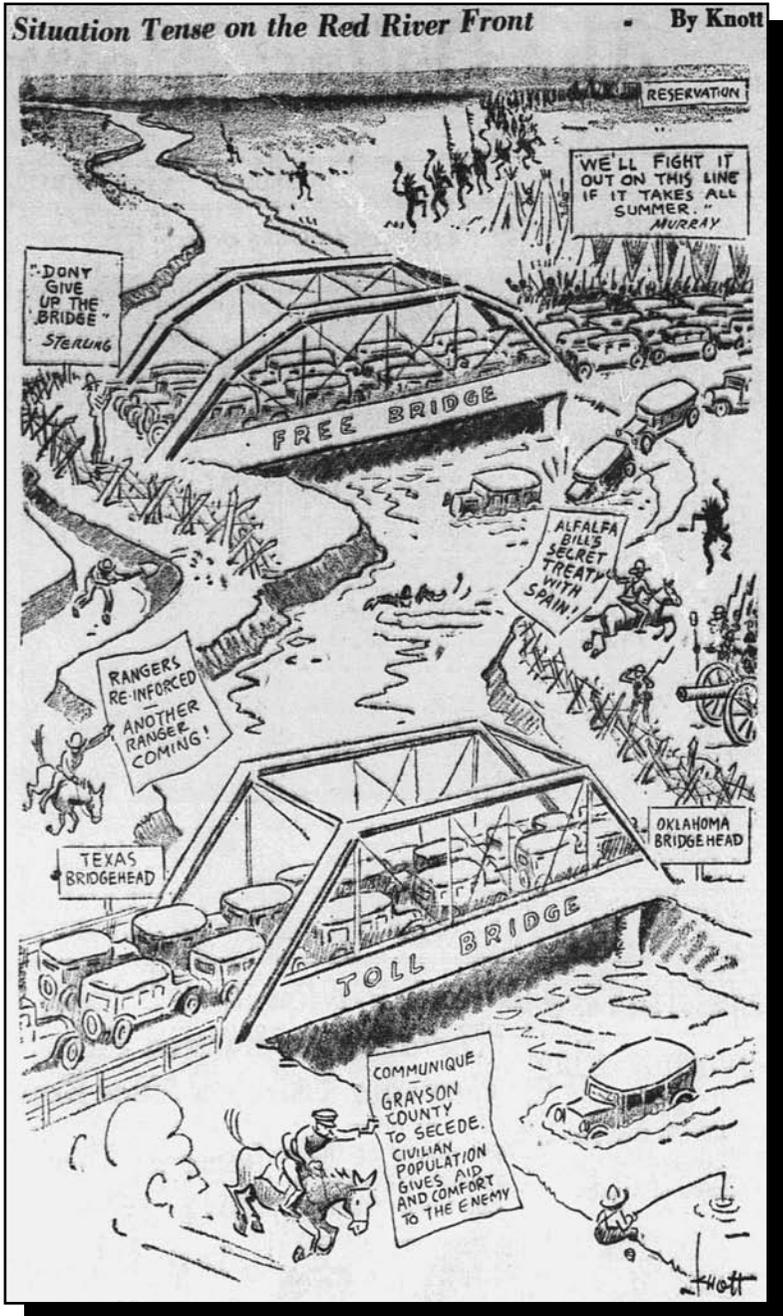
- some ancient equipment with a chain—pull hard;
- some tanks will have a button in the middle and, depending on no circumstance I can decipher, you push it or pull it, and sometimes you twist it;
- some will have a plate in the wall above the tank, which has a butterfly function—you press at the bottom and sometimes must press again at the top to stifle the flow;
- one had the outline of a human hand on the top of the tank and when a real hand covers it, *voilà!*
- And in downtown Paris, there are vending machine pay toilets on some street corners.

I didn’t go for the NEH grant, but I wonder if this publication makes the trip deductible from my income tax. After all, I returned absolutely flushed with information about foreign cultures.

[Some portions of these reports on Texans abroad were drawn from Archie P. McDonald’s weekly commentaries on Red River Radio, a National Public Radio affiliate network serving portions of Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. McDonald’s commentaries may be heard each Friday morning at 7:35 A.M. at 88.9 FM, or accessed via <http://www.redriverradio.org>.]

Situation Tense on the Red River Front

By Knott



John Knott's July 23, 1931, editorial cartoon in the *Dallas Morning News*