

**A Trip To Texas
February 2018**



Tom Jones

On the occasion of my 90th birthday I decided that, instead of having a big bash in New York, I would like to take my sons on a trip back to the small town in Texas where I was born (and where I hadn't been for many, many years). Co-ordinating plans with my sister Beverly, who lives in Midland, Texas, I traveled there for a brief visit first. Sam and Michael arrived Friday evening and joined the family at a Tex-Mex restaurant for dinner. Attending were Beverly and myself, Beverly's son and daughter-in-law, Clay and Mary, their daughter Crystal and her eight month's old son Jansen. (Crystal's husband was off at a barbecue cooking competition.) We had a huge dinner with tacos, tortillas, guacamole, tamales, tostatos, chile con queso, refried beans, rice, hot sauce and, for Mike, Sam and me, Margaritas followed by beer. It was a convivial, get-to-know-each-other, event with lots of story telling and laughter and casually passing the baby around for different people to hold as they ate their food. The next morning before setting out on our journey, the boys drove over to Beverly's for a "ranch breakfast" featuring scrambled eggs, country sausage, potatoes, hot biscuits and cream gravy. And just to warn you: food, which is one of the most powerful memory sources, will be a recurring theme in this brief narrative.

And so here we are the morning of February 17, my birthday, in our rented space ship preparing to travel back through time.



The road north to Littlefield. Honk if you see a tree.



This is it. The plains. The panhandle. The land where I was born. On the other hand, this is also not it. This is, in fact, a wildlife refuge outside Muleshoe, Texas not far from my birthplace. The landscape here remains untouched, the way the pioneers (including my grandparents) found it around the end of the 19th century when it began to be settled. By the time I came along, there were some towns. Small ones. There were even one or two trees, planted by people near their houses as a source of much needed shade and as a small protection against the relentless springtime winds. By the time I came along, much of the land was plowed for cotton, turning the soft brown sand dune colors of the grass into dark, raw umber fields stretching to the horizon. By the time I came along, the Dust Bowl had begun, and I have dim memories of days suddenly turning pitch black as our mother rushed Beverly and me into the house and put towels in the windows and give us wet handkerchiefs to hold against our faces so we could breathe. And yet. And yet. Of all the places we visited during our trip, this is the one that haunts me most, the one to which I feel the most connected. I don't know whether it is because of the inherent beauty of the terrain or some dim, distant stirring of my pre-natal memory, but for whatever reason this is what I think of as my home.





Littlefield, Texas. “Birthplace of Waylan Jennings.” (Also of Tom Jones.) He was after my time, of course, although I think he may have dated my double-cousin Carol when they were in high school. I know his mother worked for my Uncle Quenton in the school cafeteria. He said she was a wonderful, sweet woman, but I think Waylan was, then as later, something of a renegade, and he would probably be more than a little amused to know that the most important street in town is now called Waylan Jennings Boulevard. It’s the “Boulevard” part that seems out of place.



Littlefield Texas - Main Street. It doesn't match any of my (admittedly dim) memories of long ago. We moved away when I was five years old, first to Tahoka for a year and then, finally and permanently, to Coleman. But my grandparents continued to live there, and my Uncle Quenton and Aunt Emmy, and we made the trip up from Coleman every Christmas and every summer and on many other occasions as well. I used to stay for weeks in the summer, hanging out with the Littlefield kids, especially next door neighbor, Billy Lyman. Later, much later, after my father died and Emmy died and my mother returned to the area, I took my first wife Ellie to visit where she, coming from the Philadelphia Mainline, fell madly in love with the country and the people.



I can't seem to match any memories with this "main" street. It looks for all the world like that scene in *ROMEO AND JULIET* where all the buildings are boarded up because of the plague. Every other storefront, it seems, has big sheets of plywood nailed over the doors and windows. We had been advised by a friend in Austin to have dinner at the Lone Star Café where they served chicken fried steak and bull's testicles, but the sign on the door said "Closed On Saturdays." Strange. It suddenly occurred to me that the owners might be Jewish. That would give a whole new meaning to the name Lone Star.



As it turned out, we went to lunch at a really nice little place called **WILLY'S GRILL**, where we were treated as honored guests and served Willy Burgers and Willy Beans. As Hannie says in our musical **ROADSIDE**: "I've saw worse."



The reason that Beverly and I were both born in Littlefield is that our grandparents on our mother's side, Tom and Ida Bellomy, lived there. They had come out to the plains early in the century, where they originally lived in a "dug-out," basically a hole in the ground with a mound of soil on top to raise the "ceiling." It was bare-bones, but the earth provided a natural insulation, and most of all, it provided good protection against the numerous tornadoes which lashed across the countryside each spring. Settling eventually into real houses, they raised a family of four: Ray, the eldest, who went off to Texas A & M and became a designer of light houses for the Coast Guard; the twins, Bessie and Jessie (our Mom) who had one year at John Tarleton College where, being identical twins, they were able to take each other's classes and tests, making sure that the one strongest in a particular subject took the final; and finally, Quenton, the baby of the family, a terrifically sweet but shy man who married my father's sister, Emma Ruth, making their daughters Anne Q. and Carol double-cousins to Beverly and me. This is the house Granddad Bellomy built, a fine house now fallen into sad disrepair. Beverly was born there. I was born nearby in a one bedroom frame house which has long since been demolished. It was in this house, however, where I was when I got pneumonia, aged two and a half, and had to be taken to the Lubbock hospital to have a rib removed so they could daily pump the fluid out of my lungs.



Littlefield accomplished, the next morning we began the second phase of our pilgrimage, to Coleman, the town where Beverly and I actually grew up. It was a familiar trip, one that we had made hundreds of times when we were children. After leaving Lubbock and going through Slaton, we eventually came down from the “cap rock,” the drop off which signaled the end of the great plains that went, flat as a board, all the way up to Canada. Though still pretty level, the terrain began to change. A few hills here and there, flat “mesas,” plateaus filled with mesquite scrubs and, new but numerous, wind turbines, hundreds and hundreds of them, twisting “slowly, slowly in the wind.” On past Snyder and Post. On towards Coleman. And then, oh my God, yes - Sweetwater, Texas: home of Miss Allen’s home cooked meals.



Miss Allen's is only open for lunch and it is served family style. No menu, the meal is always the same. It is served at big, long tables in big platters and bowls with spoons so you can dish it out yourself. When a platter or bowl is emptied, it is immediately replaced by another with the same dish inside. I'm not sure I can remember all of them, but what I do remember is this: big platter of fried chicken, big platter of brisket, mashed potatoes with hot rolls and cream gravy, sweet potatoes, red beans, green beans, okra, cooked carrots, cole slaw, huge glasses of ice tea and, finally, peach cobbler. All of it freshly cooked. All of it delicious. Price: ten dollars per person. We happened to be there on a Sunday, so a lot of people had come after church, many of the men still wearing their enormous cowboy hats as they sat down to eat. I hate to admit it, but this meal may have the most memorable event of the journey.



We arrived at Coleman Sunday afternoon, replicating the journey my family made in 1934. During the Dust Bowl, with the farmland rapidly blowing away, many people from the plains were beginning to hit the road. Some, like the Joads, went north and west to California. Some, like the Joneses, went south to central Texas. I was six years old, just getting ready to start school. Beverly was two. And though it was long ago, I can still remember arriving at the top of a hill and suddenly looking down on the town of Coleman, stretched out below us with wide paved streets and trees. Not just scrub brush, but real trees - pecans and live oaks. And lawns, too. We were in a truck, just like the Joads, and we didn't have a pot to piss in, but this was a new chance, a new beginning.

The first thing we did on our recent journey, coming down from that same hill, was to look for our original home, the one I lived in until I went off to college. It was gone. The block was there, just the same as it used to be. All the same houses. Except ours. In its place was some strange little ramshackle dump with a few children's toys in the yard.



This picture is of our second house, the one the family had when Beverly went to high school - the one I returned to on my visits home from college, and the army, and New York - the one which was our family home until our father died.



My highschool years coincided almost exactly with World War Two. I started as a freshman in September of 1941, a few months before Pearl Harbor, and I graduated the summer of 1945, the year the war ended. During that time our dad happened to own a drive-in café called the Dixie Pig. He didn't run it; he merely leased the property, but I was proud to have even a peripheral connection because it was a big deal in Coleman, Texas. Cute little car "hops" in matching uniforms took orders and brought out food to the kids in their cars (borrowed from the family for Friday night football or a Saturday dance). The food was on a tray which somehow fitted into the car window without crashing to the ground, the jute box blasted its boogie-woogie beat to the cars outside, and kids (other than the drivers, who were trapped behind the window tray) jumped in and out of cars, trading places with others in an orgy of gossip and steamy excitement.

All this is preface to the fact that, on our Texas trip, we couldn't find it. I sort of remembered where it used to be. So did Beverly, who went through the same rituals a few years after me. We looked and looked and finally narrowed it down, somewhere between the Baptist church and this Piggly-Wiggly sign, and, alas, it is no longer there. Done in some time ago I would imagine by the Dairy Queens, which are ubiquitous in West Texas. The main street is a little better off than the main street of Littlefield, but even the things that seem the same don't seem the same. What was it that Thomas (not Tom) Wolfe wrote: "You can't go home again."



**The Cemetery
Coleman, Texas**



There is a native American chant that someone gave me once and since I don't have a copy on hand, I will paraphrase. It is to be sung at a gravesite and the gist of it is this: "I am not here. Don't look for me among the graves for I am not here. I am in the wind that blows against your face. I am in the sun that shines, and in the grass, and in the bird which flies above you, singing. I am in the stars at night. I am in the changing of the seasons. I am in the beating of your heart. I am not here. Don't look for me among the graves for I am not here."





