

## Holidays in the U.S.A.

Mrs. Whitelock's presentation in March [2015] was very interesting, and brought back lots of happy memories of my own family's vacations in the USA quite some time back, a little before the mass tourism really got started, at the time when it was almost pleasant to fly from the UK overseas, before the days of horribly overcrowded airports, security threats, jam-packed planes and all the other unpleasant manifestations of today's flying experiences.

My holidays in the USA were a result of marrying my wife Elizabeth, who when we first met, had just returned to the UK after her parents had emigrated and lived quite a while in Texas. This happened because her older brother, Michael, had met and married an American girl, Joy, when they were both at University in Cambridge, and they subsequently moved to Wichita Falls, in N.W. Texas. When their father had retired from the Norfolk Police force, her brother persuaded their parents to emigrate to Texas as well, taking Elizabeth with them, aged 8 I think at the time. Those living in Needham Market may remember Elizabeth – she was Warden at Drift Court from its opening, for 25 years. Elizabeth went through the American education system and gained an Honours Degree in Nursing (B.Sc.) at the University of Texas at Austin. She then worked for 15 years in a major hospital in Houston, Texas – this was Methodist Hospital, part of the world-famous Texas Medical Centre.

Her family's move to Texas was typical of the time, back in the 1950s, they emigrated on a cargo-passenger liner from Liverpool, the "SUE LYRES", belonging to Lykes Brothers Steamship Co. of New Orleans. They took with them her mother's Pekinese dog, "Ming", and the American crew were vastly amused to find that the enormous on-deck cage they'd patiently built for the dog, in massive 4" x 2" timbers, – part of the legal requirements to carry the little dog - at 12' long, 6' wide and 6' high, was all for such a tiny dog, the like of which they'd never seen before. Her mother said they could have accommodated a cougar in that cage!

Generally speaking it seems to me that Texas is not a destination that tourists from the UK aim for – of course it's mostly the well-known

tourist traps like New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles. Texas is at first overwhelming. It's three times the size of the UK, and its largest city, Houston, is almost half the size of Suffolk — it's a huge city, flat as a pancake with a very large and spread-out "downtown" of skyscrapers, shopping malls and tall buildings. It's also as hot as Hades, very humid, and is blessed with three concentric rings of roads, most of which are ten lanes, in places sixteen lanes (e.g. I-10 Katy Freeway) with a view from above like a dart-board, as the various highways radiate out from the centre across the three rings of beltways. Try to picture a vast city spreading out, covering all the land from Felixstowe to Bury St. Edmunds; Houston is 600 square miles and Suffolk is 1,466 sq. miles, as I said, Houston is almost half as big as Suffolk.

It's served by many airports, the two major airports being the "old", original inter-continental airport to the south of downtown, called William P. Hobby, or just "Hobby", but it's been superseded by a new, much larger international airport to the north of Houston, this is George Bush Intercontinental Airport, with its five terminals, each as large as Gatwick. Hobby still handles a multitude of flights, mainly to destinations to the south and west of Houston. GBI is the tenth largest airport in the entire USA, and Houston also has a very large and varied port, being the fourth largest port in the entire USA. Houston is also home to NASA, from where the American space program is run, and launches at Kennedy Space Centre at Cape Canaveral, Florida, are controlled. It's worth-while to go on-line and Google Houston, and be amazed by the size (fourth largest city in the USA), the sheer scale of the city, its diverse industries - oil, of course - universities, hospitals and NASA. And to think it's barely more than 100 years old! Oh, b.t.w — if you live there, it's pronounced "Hew-stun" and NOT "Hoo-ston".

After our wedding we had a low-key two week "mini-moon" in Cornwall as we had decided on a larger, longer (and more expensive) honeymoon in Texas. My first visit ever was, of course, an amazing eye-opener. Another Texas "institution" was a famous, very large Texas airline based at Dallas-Forth Worth International airport ( DFW ) called Braniff. I doubt anyone now in the UK recalls Braniff, but in its day it was a major airline serving north America, central America, most of south America and trans-Pacific. When we first travelled to the USA

Braniff was still operational, it had just one route to Europe serving Frankfurt, Gatwick and DFW. Braniff had a distinctive livery for all its planes, the system being that all planes serving particular routes were all painted the same colour, so, for instance, all planes serving, let's say, Seattle, were painted dark green, and New York, let's say, magenta. The planes serving Europe and Gatwick were all painted orange, so perhaps inevitably, their 747s were known as "the big orange". The interiors had large comfortable leather seats in the same colour orange and white as the exteriors, no cattle-trucks here, I assure you, and wonderful, glamorous infinitely helpful Texan stewardesses. Again a Google search for Braniff makes fascinating reading.

While on the subject of airlines, it was a Texas airline that conceived the idea of low-price, "fill-em-up" frequent "bus service" airlines: this was (and still is) SouthWest, based originally in Houston. This was the origin of all the present copy-cat airlines such as Ryanair and Easyjet. I flew SouthWest quite frequently on my different visits to the USA, it has a very quick aircraft turn-round and tightly-packed seats, and even with a few discarded wrappings on the floor going with very cheap tickets, what's not to like? I remember my first flight with SouthWest, an hour in the air each way 35 years ago between Hobby and Love Field (Dallas) for twenty-five bucks, who's going to say "no" ? I've also flown internally with Delta (my all-time favourite airline), United; NorthWest, and (once) with Grand Canyon Airlines, of which more later.

Going back chronologically to my first visit, our second honeymoon, it was very much a "getting-to-know-you" visit with Elizabeth's American family and her American friends. We flew with Braniff to DFW, at the time Michael and Joy were living in Wichita Falls, with their children Romney and Murray, and they drove to DFW to pick us up. Her brother's main career was as Minister in the Episcopalian Church of the USA and he had a large church in Wichita Falls, on a major road called, oddly I thought, "Speedway". My first eye-opener (this was over 40 years ago of course) was to go shopping on their way home, at 4 a.m. in a large supermarket. At that time in the UK we only had small supermarkets which closed at 6 p.m. and didn't open Sundays at all.

The other side of that was the American stores only had "cheese" in large plastic tubs, white, yellow, or orange, and served with an ice-cream scoop. Oh, they did have Kraft, wrapped in slices — yuk. Camembert, Roquefort, Caerphilly or Stilton? "Sorry sir, never heard of them". Things are MUCH better nowadays though, somehow a wagon-train gets through to the south carrying a decent Brie and a few bottles of Ch. Margaux.

My first visit was a run-around to the local "sights", the "Falls" in Wichita Falls are a disappointing trickle over a few ten feet high rocks, but across the border in Oklahoma, Fort Sill, there is the burial place of the famous Indian chief Geronimo, and a large herd of the one-time endangered bison, and a gigantic railroad locomotive. Staying with Michael and his family, for the first time I encountered a decent Big Mac, bottomless coffee cups, wonderful rib-eyes (this is Texas, remember) mountains of fries and endless seemingly mile-long counters of great mounds of wonderful varied serve-yourself salads, fruit, rolls, pastries, pancakes etc. We visited a number of smaller local towns with interesting historical names (Vernon, Burkburnett, Paris, Texas of course; Texarkana, Sherman, Longview where Michael had once had a church, and there's even a Manchester in N.E. Texas) to meet some of Michael's fellow enthusiastic dog-breeders, mainly Labradors. Several lucky dogs with their thick fur actually had air-conditioned kennels. Michael with his much-envied "English" Labradors was a well-respected dog show judge and breeder. Having moved on historically speaking it's often forgotten how much influence we British had in the early days of the USA and Canada: hundreds of place-names of British towns across north America were adopted by the early settlers — Sam Houston himself was of Scottish stock from the family estates in Renfrewshire.

Unfortunately I stupidly threw away all my diaries when I retired from full-time work. I wish now I still had them, because my memory is not able to re-create all our holidays in the USA in their entirety, so I think the best thing I can do is to remember one or two specific vacations, where we went and who with, and then remember as many of the places I can, that we visited apart from the specific holidays.

One of our earlier holidays (before our children were born) was another three weeks, one of which we spent in Houston on a visit with one of Elizabeth's best friends, Patsy Hall, a girl who worked for NASA, and thanks to her we had two "behind the scenes" visits to NASA (this visit and another, later one). It was fascinating to be able to actually touch one of the Command Modules that had actually flown round the Moon – incredibly small and flimsy - and stand at the end of one of the giant "Saturn" rockets laying on its side in the exhibition, with three enormous rocket venturis, each larger than I was. Thanks to Patsy we were able to walk quietly through the actual control center when the NASA staff were actually running a space mission (I doubt very much if anyone could do that nowadays).

Another week we had a very enjoyable and informative week travelling with another of Elizabeth's friends, a girl named Sandy Wilson, and her husband Randy. They lived in a pleasant city called Tyler, which is in between Dallas and Houston. I did like Tyler very much, it's in the foothills of the range of hills along the Texas/Louisiana border, so it has a slightly higher elevation and seemed cool and green to me, compared to the sun-blasted cities of the rest of Texas. Tyler is the "Rose Capital" of Texas, the climate and soil being very suitable for the cultivation of that very English flower, the rose, and they're cultivated on a vast scale, I believe it's the biggest rose-growing city in all the USA.

Randy Wilson's pride and joy was an original, beautiful and unrestored Coupe de Ville Cadillac which they kept in normal regular use, although they had their own, current model cars for more mundane everyday use. The Cadillac was a very large, most comfortable car, albeit a typical gas-guzzler. One day Randy filled up and I asked him what it "did". He said casually... "oh, around nine, I guess....maybe eleven on a run". He said it had a 50 gallon gas tank inside each of the rear fins, a typical fill-up gurgled in 80 or 90 gallons. The interior was finished in beautiful cream leather, not unlike the seats in a Braniff 747. He said the air-conditioning had a 13 Kw capacity, which was larger than our entire heating system in our original home in Ipswich.

We had an enjoyable week's cruising around Texas -in Randy's enormous, luxurious car. We had a day in Austin, the State Capital of Texas, I remember the beautiful building of the Capitol, all red Texas marble with white marble floors, and we found Elizabeth's student halls when she was studying for her degree. While in Austin we visited the Presidential Library of Lyndon Baines Johnson, 36th. President of the United States of America.

We had another interesting day visiting the ranch owned by the one-time President, who'd been hastily sworn-in after the assassination of President Kennedy. The Johnson ranch is close to Stonewall, 50 miles west of Austin, in the lovely Texas Hill Country, full of wild flowers, birds and butterflies. Their two typical flowers are Bluebonnets, which are rather like smaller bushy lupins, and the Indian Paintbrush. Of course the butterflies are mostly very large: one came to settle on me and it was as big as my hand!

We had a tour of the ranch in a non-polluting electric 2-car mini-train: the Ranch is maintained in many respects just as President Johnson kept it, with several of his favourite cars, convertible white Lincolns, parked casually around the main house. The ranch does, of course, have its own airfield which could handle flights by the Presidential Air Force One Boeing 707 (today's AF1 are two Boeing 747-200B). The mini-train took us along the banks of the wide but shallow Pedernales river, and from a distance we could see the gravestone of the late President, in red Texas granite. We also visited the LBJ boyhood home and the Johnson settlement 14 miles away in Johnson City. We had a short stop in an historical Texas town called Fredericksburg, originally settled by people of German descent, where the main road is enormously wide to allow the mule trains to turn round in one sweep.

After our week with Sandy and Randy, I conceived a desire to have a journey in a Greyhound, the old legendary long distance buses. Our friends said it was "inadvisable", but stupidly I was really keen and so they reluctantly made us a booking to return from Tyler to Houston, to get back to staying with Patsy Hall. In fact there was no service with the actual Greyhound but there was an equivalent, called Trailways. It

was an all-day run, but the coach was less than half full, so it wasn't too crowded, there was an on-board washroom and a coffee machine.

We soon noticed the reason why it was "inadvisable" as the other passengers were — with due respect — all a bit rough & ready, mostly men, mostly unwashed and unshaven, more than half were black or Hispanic; some a little "affected" who sat and muttered to invisible friends (or assailants, we couldn't tell). The coach driver was a leathery old Texan with a sweat-stained, battered Stetson with what looked awfully like a dead bird in the hatband; who called out the various stops in his rough voice — oh yes, sorry, I should have said, this was well before non-smoking travel and the air was thick with cigarette and cigarillo smoke; the driver smoked and chewed all the way on some evil-looking thin black cigarillo type smokes. There were a half-dozen stops: each time, the driver would turn and call out the stop, adding "comfort stop — twenty minutes".

I can only remember stopping at a legendary old cowboy city — Nacogdoches, which we looked at only through the windows. It looked very sad and down-at-heel, and the bus station was a filthy litter of wrappers and cigarette butts. Once as we got off half-way through, the driver held us up with a hairy sweat-stained arm across the exit and observed: "Heard y'all talking back there... y'all from Australia?" Again stupidly I was a bit indignant and said: "Australia? Certainly NOT, we're British!" "Oh well" the driver said, "whatever welcome to Texas anyways!" He gave us a shifty grin and his teeth were crumbling and black. To add a bit to our worries, Elizabeth accidentally dropped a plastic drum of instant wipes into the toilet, thus I guessed, blocking the wretched thing, so we said nothing and hurried off when we got to Houston.

When we saw Michael again he was fairly unforgiving; he told us that the main riders on these bus services were the itinerants and down-n-outs, people who can't even afford a car. In America, if you can't afford a car, then you're really on the bottom rung of society. After that journey I was a sadder and a wiser man. To this day, though, we still refer to the smallest room as "the Comfort Stop".

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