

The Time Machine

Another sordid tale of fantasy meeting reality, by Curt Mobley

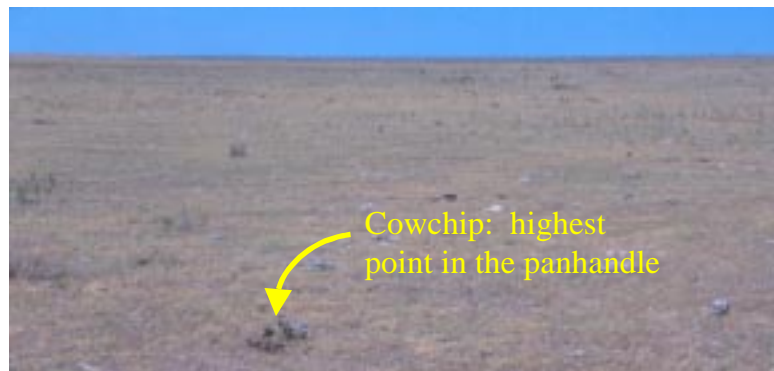


Coyotes howled. Birds quit chirping. Women stayed indoors.

Yep, word spread quickly that a stranger had arrived in town. But he wasn't your ordinary drifter down on his luck between cow punching jobs. Nope, he was holed up in the best B&B that Canyon, Texas had to offer. He wore nice clothes, too, and a hat that cost at least fifty dollars. Nor did he seem like a total stranger—although he talked like a Yankee, he knew the local dialect, and he seemed to know his way around the old parts of town. He asked questions about places that had been gone for 30 years. Maybe he was harmless, but you never know—he might be an atheist coming to town to tell the children about evolution, or an environmentalist sent by the PETA to spy on the cattle feedyards. On the other hand, he did eat lots of barbeque, so at least he wasn't a vegetarian. Best just to remain calm but keep a close eye on him until he played his hand.

Thus began my first real visit to my hometown since I fled from there in the mid 1960's. About six months ago, one of my fellow students from the Canyon High School Class of 1965 decided to see how many of us he could locate. An internet search immediately turned up about two thirds of my class of 118. Emails were soon flying between old acquaintances, with attached pictures of numerous grandchildren. We decided to get together for a 37th reunion. You could not have paid me enough to get me to attend my 10th or 25th class reunions, but I am a new person now and I couldn't wait to see everyone.

The Texas Panhandle [that's the part in between Oklahoma and New Mexico that sticks up towards Canada] is definitely the most sun baked, wind blown, flattest, treeless, desiccated, God-forsaken, Republican, cow-shit-encrusted piece of real estate in the entire U. S. of A., and Canyon sits right in the middle of it. By any rational, objective criteria, this land would be judged unfit for human habitation. Yet, like a criminal returning to the scene of his crime, I was inexorably drawn back for another look.



Shortgrass prairie east of Canyon. This is where the devil sends landscape photographers who go to hell.

I retrieved my senior yearbook from the garage and drooled over pictures of nubile with bouffant hairdos and perky young breasts. Maybe, just maybe, I thought.... Well, it was a pleasant fantasy in spite of Ann's deflating calculation of the exceptionally low probability of any woman showing an interest in a fat old guy with gray hairs in his beard. It turned out that she was right, and my own lecherous thoughts quickly cooled when I got a look at some of those wasp-waisted beauties of yesteryear. How can I say it politely? Hour glasses had turned into diamonds. And those perky young breasts...well, uh, they weren't *up* there any more...they were sort of hanging *down* there, victims of 35 years of suckling babies and gravity. [I, myself, do admit to being a few pounds heavier than when I was in high school, but of course my weight gain is all muscle ;-)]



1965. So clean cut and innocent. Who could have guessed that I would turn out so badly?

"The Home and the School Should Work Together For the Welfare of the Child."

PUPIL'S REPORT CARD

CANTON HIGH SCHOOL
CANTON, TEXAS

Name: Mobley, Curtis Date: 63-64

Subject: Geography

	Six Weeks Periods			Ex. Gr.	Sem. Grade
	1st	2nd	3rd		
Grade	98	99	99	100	99
Days Attended This Class	30	30	25		
Days Absent From This class	0	0	1		
Tardy to This Class	0	0	0		
Observably	A	A	A		

Ray C. Wells Teacher

Subject: _____

	Six Weeks Periods			Ex. Gr.	Sem. Grade
	1st	2nd	3rd		
Grade	100	99	99	97	99
Days Attended This Class	24	27	28		
Days Absent From This class	6	0	2		
Tardy to This Class	0	0	0		
Observably	A	A	A		

Ray C. Wells Teacher

85-100 — Superior 77-85 — Average
 80-84 — Above Average 50-76 — Below Average
 0-76 — Failing

(over)

A typical report card. You can pretty much guess what sort of social life accompanied those grades.

I had kept in contact with only one person over the years, so there were many stories to tell. "My first marriage was a disaster, but the second one has been great" could be the refrain of a new class song. A few people looked like they were 35, but some looked like they were 75, so I remain content with what I've got. Viet Nam, cancer, car wrecks, and suicide had already claimed a tenth of the class. That was very sobering for me. I'll be content to die in twenty years, but I have many plans for the next two decades, and it was hard to imagine that the game was already over for people I knew well. No more chances to visit Europe or raft the Grand Canyon for them. *Carpe diem*—you may not get another chance. I was struck by the fact that, without exception, we had all been hit hard by at least one of life's big setbacks—divorce, death of a spouse, bankruptcy, serious health problems—but we had all recovered and were now content with our lives. Bland, repressed, social losers at 18 (me in particular) have blossomed and are now leading exciting lives. People who struggled for C's are now successful business men and women. Everyone was proud of their children, or at least of the ones they talked about ;-). [I seem to be the only person in my class who didn't have kids.]

In high school I was an insecure nerd and definitely not a part of the “in crowd” of extrovert class favorites, but now I fit in perfectly well. The lesson for me was that “not fitting in” had all been in my 18-year-old head. All I had to do now was just say “hi” and the doors of friendship opened wide. After the big Saturday evening reunion, I even got invited to the home of the homecoming queen herself, for a few more hours of visiting. I repeat: the *homecoming queen* asked *me* over to her house—life doesn’t get much better than that! [Yea, I must admit, she invited 40 other people as well, but that is irrelevant.]

I also spent a few days driving around inspecting my old haunts. Buffalo Lake, once a place for water skiing and fishing, is now a fenced-off, fetid cesspool used to catch the runoff from the cattle feedyards upstream. [The Texas Panhandle has 70 feedyards with 20,000 to 85,000 cattle each at any given time. About 6.3 million cattle are fed each year, producing 36 billion pounds of manure which, I can assure you, is a *lot* of cow shit. Wanna-be rancher Dubya’s very first act as president on the day he was inaugurated was to repeal a Clinton executive order restricting the amount of manure runoff allowed from feedyards.] This loss of recreation is the environmental price of a Big Mac. The number of fundamentalist churches seems to have expanded faster than the population, and even the Mormanoids have taken root. On the brighter side, nearby Palo Duro Canyon, where I first imprinted on red rocks and desert landscapes, now has mountain biking trails. The Panhandle Plains Historical Museum has expanded greatly and remains one of the best regional history museums in the U. S. The tiny house where I grew up is still there, repainted but minus the five elm trees I climbed so often. There was even a good lightening storm one evening, but only a few drops of rain. [In Canyon, a “one-inch rain” means the raindrops are one inch apart where they hit the ground.]



1966. The ultimate killing machine: intelligent enough to operate the most sophisticated weapons, but too brainwashed to ever ask why. Here I’m receiving the “Outstanding Freshman Military Science Cadet” award in college; the next year I was Cadet Sargent Major. Three years later I was just another long-haired anti-war freak smoking hash and rejoicing at Nixon’s ignominious demise.

I had a fabulous week. This trip may not have been as exotic as a trek in Nepal, but it was just as much fun. I reconnected with people I hadn’t seen since the day we graduated. I vanquished a few leftover high school ghosts. I came to admire every single person I saw at the reunion; without exception, they are all exceptional people, and in so many different ways. It is good to know that there are still a few family farms left, growing wheat and corn; I wish them well as they try to survive takeovers by giant agribusinesses. Most of all, I’m now looking forward to hosting a steady stream of Texan visitors who wish to escape the summer heat and see trees and mountains. I just wish they could bring a good thunderstorm with them.