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LAST RIDE FROM AUSTIN

by Ben Z. Grant

The clouds hovered low over the dome of the 92-year-old Texas Capitol. Just enough morning sun filtered through over the flat lands to the east to put a brief blush on the dour, strong-jawed Goddess of Liberty perched on top. I guess I shall never cease to be in awe of that magnificent structure. It has inspired me to keep plugging away on more than one occasion ever since my days at the UT Law School.

Like Carl Sandburg's anvil which has "laughed at many hammers," the old Capitol has endured, perhaps not always laughing, the blows of scandal and the raucous ring of demagoguery through the years. Still she sits there in defiance of it all, solid and proud. My departure, just as my coming a decade ago, was irrelevant to her. She is the Capitol of the State, the people of government are only replaceable fixtures.

Outside on the grassy lawns, the old men had taken their posts in their folding chairs to guard the designated parking spaces for the SO license-plated vehicles. I walked down the echoing pink granite halls through the rotunda, pausing to look up for a last view of the dome's interior, an architectural design of another century. It was the place of my wedding, which I had managed to pull off even without permission of the security guards.

Soon a Capitol guide, in her blue and white uniform, would be informing tours of early morning visitors, with only slight hyperbole, interesting facts about the center of state government such as the Capitol grounds boasting a tree of every variety that grows in Texas soil.

The House Chambers were quiet now, but in a week, the roll call would start in the midst of the noise and clamor of the beginning of the regular session... "Agnich ... Allee ... Barrientos ... Benedict." They always seem to get a quorum on opening day, which by the Constitution falls on the first Tuesday after the second Monday of odd numbered years and by tradition is 140 days of turmoil and confusion. Soon they would begin lighting the voting board for the first vote of the 67th Legislature, the first vote in ten years that I would not cast. A member once asked me why I didn't dodge some of the hard votes. I told him pushing that voting button was what I hired out to do, but I had to admit to myself that I sometimes wished for a "maybe" button on my desk in between the "aye" and "nay."

There would be many new members full of self-importance—some soon forgetting that they were there in a representative capacity.

There had been long hours of drudgery on that floor when Dave Allred would lean over and say to me, "You people in government lead

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such interesting lives.” That would be on the tedious occasions when the topic of debate was about as interesting as the sex life of a female liverwort, and the speakers were about as obtuse as a 170 degree angle. But I knew the issues must be important; otherwise, why would they be before the Texas Legislature.

There were times when departures were made from the dull and serious business of the day, and it was his levity, or sometimes abortive attempts at humor, which gave the Legislature a bad name, or at least was a contributing factor.

Hung respectively in its framed glory in the center of the west wall of the Chamber was the object I much admired, the Flag of the Battle of San Jacinto. Unlike the pictures, plaques, and other decor, it had been there and witnessed the battle for freedom, fought and won. Then after residing in a shoe box in an attic for many years, it had come to grace the House Chamber as a reminder of the heritage of our state. The issue stated in the words draped on the sword on the flag “Liberty or Death” seemed simpler than the complexities of our times. I remained surprised that during the furor of some debate on obscenity some member of the House had not moved to have a patch placed over the nude breast of Miss Liberty which is brazenly exposed on the flag.

The sessions of the Texas Legislature are always begun with a prayer, which is appropriate for as the sign says, the life, liberty and property of the people are not safe while that body is in session. I have heard numerous visiting preachers put forth their best and longest prayers on those special occasions, with a few side bar remarks to the Deity on pending political concerns. The House finally discovered a man who offered zingers which summed it all up in one prayful sentence, and he was immediately hired as permanent chaplain. “Lord” he prayed “remind us preachers and politicians that those who talk the most are usually those who have the least to say. Amen.”

Humility is a rare trait in the Legislature. For the most part there is an ego aura surrounding that body that would dwarf the West Texas plains and the Gulf of Mexico. Perhaps it is an integral part of the political endeavor. I remember as a freshman member spouting off about my victorious campaign when another member reminded me that everybody there was a winner, which was a prerequisite to sitting in that august body. My mouth was closed to further sinful boasting, at least on that subject.

The hall brought back memories of friends and foes, whose names were too many to recall at one sitting. Those friendships went beyond political philosophies and co-sponsorships. Those members I respected most were those who worked diligently and who cast each vote conscientiously in accordance with sincere beliefs, not for selfish motives.
On the other side of the fence, were those who were only be'ers, not to be confused with killer bees, who were only interested in being a member of the Legislature, for whatever prestige that might innure from that position, with little regard to what might be accomplished.

The Legislature, as a whole, is an unpredictable body, sometimes having difficulty deciding when to recess for lunch. Nobody knows the Legislature through and through. There are unseen influences lurking in the minds and new ideas stirring in some far corner. The body offers a psychological study in the human capacity to withstand pressures and cope with divided loyalties.

There had been advocates on that floor who were accomplished artists with the spoken word; many were just poor imitators. There were some, I guess the real politicians, who could explain a bill in such broad and convincing ambiguities that every listener thought the bill did something different—something good, noble, and close to the listener's heart. (Legislative intent is a myth invented by the courts to cover for the Legislature.) Usually though the less said about a bill, the less likely an author is to stir up opposition... mumble... mumble.

The topic which I heard most discussed in the conversations of members on the floor of the House, more than education, tax-relief, highways, or whatever, was who would be the next Speaker of the House. Every member knew in his or her heart that he or she would be the best choice. The constituency is small for that race. Only seventy-six votes are needed to make a winner for that powerful post. I always thought Speaker Grant had a nice ring, but I missed out this lifetime. It was a shame too, because my mail reflected a ground swell of support for me to become Speaker—that is if two letters could be considered a ground swell, one from my sister and one from my mother-in-law.

Sauntering back to my first floor office, which was one of the few rewards for seniority in the Legislature, I raked the contents on my cluttered desk into a paste-board box. My desk usually remained cluttered during the session with a defensive sign, sometimes buried in the debris, which declared. "A clean desk is a sign of a sick mind." My excuse was that we had to cope with thousands of bills, some as thick as a Sears-Roebuck catalog, added to a volume of mail which would have choked a good-sized billy goat or made a recycling machine regurgitate.

With good-byes to my staff (a good staff and experience with perennial issues had made my job easier through the years), I headed for the door. Laden with brief cases, let me hasten to add, filled with personal belongings only, I negotiated the heavy wooden doors on the west wing of the building and loaded my car, hoping it would last for the final journey home. I had worn three cars slap dab out making
that trip. It probably wasn’t my last trip to Austin, but it was the end of an era for me. It was the last trip on legislative duties which gave me constitutional immunity from arrest on the basis of twenty miles a day travel.

I know I am going to miss Austin, but I served my time. I figured ten years in the Legislature was enough, and I had successfully leaped from the legislative branch of the tree of government to the branch of the judiciary. I was now a lame duck ready to limp home for the last time on a long road of memories.

I circled the Capitol grounds which are filled with statues, memorials, and squirrels. It is often said in legislative debates that there is no statue on the grounds to an author of a tax bill. I have never made a concentrated search and could not verify this as a truth, but it smacks of validity. Also, I have never noticed a memorial to those who have been indicted in service to their state. Richard Bache, who was the only legislator who voted against Texas entering the union as a state, may still get a memorial in his honor some day.

I drove by the historical Sholtz’s Beer Garden which is just a stein’s throw from the Capitol complex. I have heard it said that many important decisions of government have been made at that spot during its 112 years existence.

I passed the UT law school, where some professor at that very moment was probably saying, “the Legislature in its infinite wisdom” with a tone of derision in his voice.

My journey north took me by a slough of massage parlors, marked with signs proclaiming their services. I had never figured out how people determine which are the legitimate places that offer massages and which are sexually oriented. A friend once explained that none of them were legitimate in his opinion. A taxi driver once explained to me that he could distinguish the ladies of the night from police women, because the good-looking ones were police women. So it goes.

After a half-hour battle with Austin traffic, I was on the outskirts of the city headed north on I-35. I looked back for a last farewell. Austin meant a lot of memories to me. I even named my boy Zane Austin, with the agreement that on his fifth birthday he can change it if the name does not suit his fancy.

The signs inform the folks trafficking the four-lane pavement that if they keep going north, they can see the Interspace Caverns. Well, having seen them already, I took a familiar shortcut through Pflugerville (the P is silent as in horses), population 618, last count. As most short cuts go, it is really not a short cut at all. I measured it once, and it was about the same distance either way as I recall, but the scenery is good. I met a Mr. Pfluger once in Dallas who lives on the shortcut
road just out of Pflugerville. He invited me to come by and sit a spell with him, but duty had always pricked me on at such a fast pace that I never got around to making the visit.

So on I went. Texas roads are long. This particular trek from Austin to Marshall is six hours at the wheel, a tank of gas, a tired back, and a package of Salem cigarettes. About 286 miles if one wants to measure it that way, and whatever that adds up to in kilometers.

On the open road, I set my cruise control in an all out effort to be a law-abiding citizen. Of course there had been occasions when running late for a speaking engagement that the old car had exceeded the posted limit, which the law says is by prima facie evidence unreasonable. But I had learned as a boy that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory, and I do know for sure one East Texas legislator who has a heavier foot than I do. In ten years, I have only been stopped once . . . make that twice.

On one occasion outside of Taylor the officer gave me a long lecture about exceeding the speed limit by five miles an hour or so. He further explained that inasmuch as I had made the law, it certainly looked bad to the public if I violated it. I could only agree and apologized to him and the people of the State of Texas. Then I sheepishly crawled back into the car and eased slowly down the road.

On the other occasion, I am not sure I was really speeding. The officers never said one way or the other. They just talked to me about the need for lowering the retirement age for highway patrolmen. They made some good points on the subject.

That long, hard route from Austin to Marshall was the slice of Texas which I had come to know best. It took me across the post oak belt to the piney woods belt near the Louisiana line. The truth is I grew up in Louisiana, but, as I told my constituents, I had moved to Texas as soon as I was old enough to know better. I had further assured them that Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin had not been born and raised in the Great State, but nobody had ever accused them of not being good Texans.

The short cut brought me back to Highway 79 around Hutto. On the stadium, I could see the sign declaring the town to be the home of the Hutto Hippos, a mascot comparable in uniqueness to the Rotan Yellowharnmers and the Leesville Wampus Cats. I had always wondered if their football team tended to be on the heavy side.

It seemed like most county-seat-sized Texas towns were situated about a day’s ride by horseback apart. I had made the journey once on horseback. It all stemmed out of a moment’s inspiration, or perhaps some loose-tongue disease, when in a speech to the Lions Club, I had pledged to travel by horseback to the Constitutional Convention in 1974,
that is, if somebody would lend me a horse. A fine gentleman named Gerald Smith produced four horses, and I sallied forth. The trip took eight and a half days. (I could have got the mail contract if I could have made it in five days.) Of course, I had all my troubles behind me by the time I arrived in Austin. There's nothing like a good horse ride to familiarize a body with the details of the road.

For instance, there's a house outside of Hearne that I remember vividly. It was a cold day, and the trainer, an old gentleman named Ralph, was riding with me. Ralph's wife was a talker, but Ralph did not say much and did so gruffly. A man came out of the house and greeted us. "Are you the Senator?" he asked Ralph.

Ralph, without slowing his horse, or looking at the man, replied, "I wouldn't make a wart on a senator's rear."

Ralph apparently held the Senate in a higher regard than I did.

The first horse I rode on that journey was named Miss Entertainment. That hardly seemed appropriate for a politician, so I renamed her Miss Liberty in honor of the sixteen foot lady who tops the Capitol Building. The Harrison County Judge said by the time I finished riding the first day, I would rename her Miscalculation. At the end of the first day's ride, I found some wisdom in his words. Being a pioneer in spirit only, I had spent most of the nights on the horseback trip in the comforts of a camper.

I turned my mind back from the trip by horseback to the ribbon of pavement stretching endlessly before me. I took the by-pass loop around Taylor. I remembered back to my freshman term when I had listened to a legislator named Patterson from Taylor explain that a legislator had to be a generalist, because it was impossible to be an expert on everything going on in the state. He was right, of course. I learned to rely on experts, and I never met anyone that did not know more about something than I did... such as how many hamburgers in a cow or the exploding temperature of propane.

Down the road, I came through the little town of Thrall which was memorable for the aroma of cooking cotton seed oil, which rivaled baking bread for its sweet fragrance. A short way north of the hamlet, the smell turns sulfuric at the creek where I speculated some free-enterpriser had built cement troughs in a vain effort to capture the sulfur rising from the springs by the roadside.

The Duroc Hog farm brought my mind back to the Legislature. I guess there never was a legislative body that did not have some pork-barreling—along with boondoggling, chubbing and snorting.

In a few weeks, the law-makers would again face redistricting the state after the federal census. That's the one that hits the legislator where he lives. The last go-round, they had paired Rep. Fred Head
and me in an effort to rid the Capitol of at least one of us. I was happy that I did not have to go through that blood-letting again.

The next town was Rockdale, which boasted as fine a collection of tombstones by the side of the highway as you will ever see at one gathering. It is also the home of Rep. Dan Kubiak to whom I am beholden from an event that occurred during my freshman year.

I was voting from my heart on the rules of the House which I felt would be fair to all members. (I later learned that the general public did not give a rats about the rules of the House.) A member of Gus Mutscher's staff had come back to my desk and with some degree of intimidation had advised me that I had better go apologize to the Speaker for voting against his rules. I figured if they were going to tell me how to vote that I might as well have stayed at home and let them mail me a postcard to tell me how I voted. I tried to tell the fellow about freedom and the Alamo, and how I was there to represent District No. 3. At that point, Dan Kubiak came to my rescue and laid strong words on the man as to what would happen if he ever again attempted to interfere with a member's voting. I guess I did not get off to a good start with the team. After that, I was about as popular as fish-flavored ice cream with the leadership. I was even informed that they had taken my name off the list to be on the Judiciary committee. It did not matter that much to me. All the committees seemed about the same at that time.

A hawk glared down from the long row of utility poles, and I was headed toward Hearne. The Brazos River ran her crooked course across my path. Before I reached home, I would cross the waters of the Neches, the Trinity, the Navasota, and the Sabine.

Driving north of Hearne, I guessed that I was reaching what a member of the Governor's staff had referred to as the hinterlands in condescending words, as in "The Governor is interested in what is going on in the hinterlands."

My ole car had the road memorized. On that road I had watched houses rise, roads being repaired, ponds drying up and refilling again, and gasoline prices double.

A faded campaign poster on a fence post reminded me that myself was a politician. That last trip must have been a bitter undertaking for the numerous incumbents who had been defeated through the years. I have always felt in that regard that our system should work like that of Great Britain where after defeat an incumbent cleans out his or her desk and leaves office the following day without the necessity of lingering on in misery.

The way the Texas system works is that a state representative spends one year serving and the next year campaigning to stay in office.
In answer to a questionnaire I sent out, I learned that my constituents preferred four-year terms. I guess they got tired of hearing the hoopla of campaigns so often, but without recall they could not turn the rascals out if they got dissatisfied.

Campaigning was always an interesting adventure. I remember one occasion when I was freshly briefed on the current issues of the day. I stepped into a rural general store to extol my virtues of statesmanship to find that a controversy had developed over a heated issue to the extent that even the domino game had been halted in the midst of play. One of the men turned to me, wiping the tobacco juice from his chin, and declared the issue of discussion in plain language: "Do you think Roosevelt done the right thing when Pearl Harbor was bombed?" One look at the solemn faces told me that there was no right answer to the complexities that had been developed in long hours of clashing opinions. I explained that it all occurred before I was born which made me totally ignorant on the subject. Then I made a speedy exit.

I never intended to go into politics. As a matter of fact, I made a public statement one time that I would never run for another office (after having won the post of JP and having the county commissioners attempt to abolish the position) unless I received a mandate from my Maker signed in triplicate. But folks change their minds. Any old excuse will do when the mind decides to go another direction. A Chinese fortune cookie predicting public service is enough to do the trick.

Somewhere down the line I finally realized that the minute I announced for public office and asked the people to "win with Ben," I was no longer considered an earnest citizen wanting to do a job as a part of the elective system, but instead I became a "politician," a word that in itself connotes distrust and commands disrespect. I became part of the popular pastime of making fun of politicians.

I guess this really came home to me when I returned from my first session, proudly announcing my membership in the Dirty Thirty as my credentials of integrity for fighting the corrupt system. (There could not have been a Dirty Thirty group without me. I mean, how would Dirty Twenty-nine sound? It somehow lacks the rhyme and rhythm needed to capture the public imagination.) A man confronted me who said, "Well, you were down there, and that makes you guilty as all the rest. We're painting you all with the same brush."

Well, I figured if I stood up trying to tell everybody what an honest politician I was, I would sound like some crybaby, or worse still some guilt-ridden sinner who protesteth too much. If I praised my honor, they would begin to count their spoons. Furthermore, I was never comfortable spouting a lot of rosy rhetoric filled with platitudes and promises, but I stumbled into an approach that I felt right for me. I dis-
armed by candor and by poking fun at the Legislature myself. A little self-criticism can do us all a world of good, and Lord knows I did not have to do a lot of hard studying to come up with some imperfections of the body politic about which to talk.

My journey had now taken me to Buffalo, the halfway point of the ride. I was too far from Austin to turn back and too tired to go on. My craving was for Star Trek technology, so I could beam myself home at the speed of light. Without such a machine, I compromised by stopping for a bite to eat.

I-45 comes bustling through the sleepy town of Buffalo to connect Dallas and Houston. On the north side of this modern Texas roadway, I found the Rainbow Cafe. It was a place not destined to make the gourmet's list, but it offered some pretty good country cooking. I ordered a bowl of chili. It is on my soul that I had proposed and passed a resolution making chili the official state dish of Texas. I had almost become cured of eating the stuff after judging several chili cooking contests with numerous entries of strange concoctions.

I cringed at the thought that welled up in my mind. What if the waitress just asked me point blank what I thought I had accomplished in the last ten years. What had I done to improve her quality of life in the State of Texas? Well, let me see, how could I sum it all up? A lot of laws maybe did not affect her directly, and she should be careful not to blend all levels of government together, blaming state government for what some other level of government had done. I had helped fill a shelf with law books and House Journals. I did my job. I made the difference on some close votes. If they had not invited those other 180 members down there I could have gotten a lot done. I authored maybe a hundred bills that passed. Anyway, people shouldn't go around asking that kind of question. I mean I could ask her what she had accomplished in her lifetime. What had she done for me lately?

My peripheral vision noted that she was approaching my table expecting me as a dealer in words to be able to convince her that I had served the taxpayers faithfully and well.

"Would you like some more tea?" she asked.

"I made chili the official state dish of Texas," I blurted out.

"It oughta been barbeque," she replied.

Back on the road, I fiddled with radio dials as the country side glided past the windows of the car. I know it’s impossible to please all the folks. A Dallas radio station was detailing a traffic report in the metroplex, which I needed to know about as much as I craved to know the temperature in Calcutta.
Two inquisitive calves watched me roll by, and then returned to their grazing. Nearby an abandoned school building was filled with hay—probably a victim of consolidation.

Down the road in a little community was a school that I connected in my mind with a tale that I had told so many times, that I could not remember whether it was true or not. It was the story of how important I was believing myself to be on my horse ride when I pranced by a school yard a long ways from my own legislative district, and all the school kids came out to the fence, shouting, "Hi, Ben Grant! Hi, Ben Grant!" Here I was, more than a hundred miles from home, and all the kids knew my name. I wondered just how famous can a fellow get in one lifetime. Then the humbling part came when a little boy, say seven or eight years old, was waving and saying, "Bye, Ben Grant! Bye, Ben Grant!" Just before I got out of earshot, I heard him turn to his teacher and say, "Teacher, who is that man riding Ben Grant?"

When I reached Palestine, I felt like I had arrived in East Texas proper. There is a giant oak to the northeast of that city where a highway patrolman stopped during my horse ride to inform me that it had been reported that a truck had hit and killed me and the horse. Borrowing a line from Twain for the occasion, I told him that in my opinion the report of my death was greatly exaggerated.

There were a lot of places where I never got around to stopping on that road from the Capitol City. I had familiarized myself with the roadside parks, and studied most of the historical markers, like the one telling about the hat factory at Jacksonville, but there were names like Snuffy's Place, The Good Ole' Boy Cafe, and What's Your Beef?, that I had missed. I remember a legislator from Dallas who allegedly stopped at every drinking spot en route to Austin causing his journey to take at least eight hours. Such legislative probes were no doubt well justified in his mind to obtain valuable information and to defeat soberness by the time he arrived in Austin.

New Summerville, Henderson, Tatum. I was headed home to listen to the motions and emotions of the courtroom.

I drove past the areas where big machines were stripping the earth's surface to recover energy in the form of lignite. Some had said that I was far afield when I had introduced the first bill in the early seventies to require restoration of the surface after stripmining. It just seemed to me that we hold the earth in trust for future generations and that we owe them a duty of care. Even Mrs. Wilson's tom cat covers his own diggings.

I had not anticipated any bands or tickertape parades when I reached Marshall. Chase and Aussie Gooddog barked to welcome my
return. That is the nice thing about dogs. They are always glad to see me come home regardless of where I have been. I do not think that they were very big on the Legislature anyway.

Dawn had fixed me a bowl of chili for supper. I never have figured out how she always knows exactly what I have eaten for lunch.

After ten years, I deserve a depletion allowance. I reached for the alka-seltzer to calm my head and belly. I had lost my appetite for driving halfway across Texas.

Never again, a trip so long, so often.