

# Deep in the Heart of Texas

## Prolog: History is Where You Find It

Our first visit to Austin, Nicki and I decided, had more than lived up to our expectations. The all-too-short day-and-a-half there had been filled with swarming bats, stately meeting halls, ornate accoutrements, aspiring musicians, presidential encounters, painted guitars...and some really *killer* barbecue!

But it wasn't until our final morning in Austin, when we were getting ready for the drive down to San Antonio, that we discovered the place where one of Austin's most prominent residents had lived. On my way to pick up the rental car, I noticed an unassuming stone plaque at the corner of the sports bar restaurant of the hotel where we had been staying. It conveyed the surprising information that this was the place where the famous writer William Sydney Porter, otherwise known as O. Henry, had resided between 1884 and 1895. Later on the house was demolished after real estate in downtown Austin started to become valuable, and all there is now to denote the location is that stone tablet. Little did Nicki and I know, the previous evening when we shared a dessert in that restaurant, we may have been sitting in the exact location where Mr. Porter had developed ideas for some of his stories.



outside Champions sports bar in Austin

History is all around you. All you have to do is find it.

## The City of Stevie Ray Vaughn

Austin is famous for its music, and that was one of the reasons we made it part of our late summer Texas trip. The PBS television show *Austin City Limits* showcases the best of it – everything from Texas Swing to Tejano, including Blues, Rock & Roll, and Progressive Country. Many famous musicians have played in Austin, including the great blues guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughn who lived in the city for much of his life. No concerts were scheduled for any of the larger venues while we in town, but there is a stretch of bars and restaurants on 6<sup>th</sup> Street where up-and-coming musicians ply their trade. At one of these, a guy-and-gal duo had set up near the door and were doing country rock to an almost empty room. The young woman, who was playing electric bass, stepped outside to chat with us and let us know where their next gig was, all the while not missing a note as the song went on.

Everywhere we looked we could see that Austin is *serious* about its music. If the 6<sup>th</sup> Street scene wasn't obvious enough there were plenty of other indications, including the results of a city-wide public art display – painted guitars! That *that*, Nashville!



one of Austin's painted guitars

## Keeping Austin Batty

One of the painted guitars, titled “Keep Austin Batty”, paid homage to another of Austin’s claims to fame – the Congress Avenue Bridge. Underneath it resides the world’s largest urban bat colony. They swarm about sundown, and that daily event is a big enough tourist attraction that it adds several million dollars each year to the local economy.



the evening swarming of the bats

The evening Nicki and I experienced the event, there were dozens of people on the bridge and even more in tour boats down on the lake. Everybody we saw on the bridge had a camera, but nobody was allowed to get very close. Those who tried to move over to the side of the bridge where the swarm was exiting got shooed away by a policeman. Even *he* had a camera, and from his location as bridge sentinel, he probably got the best photos of all.

## Under the Dome

A much better photo op was the Texas State Capitol. Everything is bigger in Texas, as the saying goes, and that includes its Capitol – it’s larger, in terms of floor space, than any other state capitol building. We had a very entertaining historical tour of the place by a lady who sounded a lot like the late Texas Governor Ann Richards. And she even had the same swagger.



at the Texas State Capitol Building



Texas Senate Chamber

But what impressed me most about the Capitol was the ambience of the place, and the amount of continuing care that it must take to preserve that sense. While we were in the two legislature rooms, it was as if we had stepped back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I was not surprised to learn that the building has a place in the National Register of Historic Places.



The Capitol dates back to the 1880s, the land (very valuable even then) acquired by a public land swap that created the world's largest cattle ranch up in the Texas panhandle. The building was constructed using Texas red granite that almost seems to glow in the light of the setting sun. The overall splendor of the Capitol was truly



six nations floor mosaic in the Texas Capitol

awesome, right down to small details like the ornate brass hinges on the interior doors. There were many such niceties that practically implored you to take a photo, and we frequently did, but my favorite image from the visit was the floor mosaic, situated directly beneath the rotunda dome, which depicted the seals of the six countries which have governed Texas during its long history. At about 30 feet across, it seemed larger than life. Just like many other things in Texas.



door hinge in the Texas Capitol

### Communing with LBJ

Four blocks north of the Texas Capitol is the campus of the University of Texas, and at the far northeast corner of the campus is an unassuming monolithic ten story building that houses the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library. Nicki and I had wanted to visit this maybe



Nicki has an LBJ photo op

even more so than the Texas Capitol and we found that



in the LBJ Presidential Library

we had arrived for our visit on a special day – what would have been LBJ's 105<sup>th</sup> birthday. There was cake!

There is more there than just a repository of the historical documents from Johnson's presidency. The top floor is a mini-museum of his years in the Oval Office, including exhibits on civil rights, consumer protection, the Medicare social insurance program, and the expansion of the U.S. space program. And there was also a big exhibit, with photos and video, about that day in late November 1963 that brought Johnson to the Presidency.

I'm a big fan of him; I believe he was one of our greatest presidents and accomplished more than Kennedy most likely could have. If Vietnam hadn't tarnished his legacy, there probably would be a large LBJ Memorial on the National Mall in Washington by now. As there should be.

## The City of the Big Pecan

The first thing Nicki and I did after we checked into our hotel in Austin was to follow our noses. We had been given directions to a very good barbecue restaurant down near the convention center but we really didn't need them because we smelled the tantalizing aroma of smoked pork and beef from several blocks away. The food would be equally good in San Antonio but first there was a memorable food stop, of sorts, on the drive south from Austin.



Iron Works Barbecue in Austin



Nicki in Seguin with the Big Pecan

“Pecan Capital of Texas”, and it was near enough that I felt obliged to pay an *actual* visit. When we got there we found a five-foot long concrete nut on a pedestal next to the county courthouse and even better, a locally-owned ice cream shop that was a nice respite on a very warm day. There was butter pecan, of course, and it was the best I've ever had.

## Down by the River

The hot weather in central Texas lasted all through the Labor Day weekend, which made being out on the streets in San Antonio during daytime a perspiration-inducing experience. But there was an alternative. Back in the late 1920s, a flood control project transformed a two-mile section of the San Antonio River that loops through the downtown area into a shallow canal about 20 feet below street level. It didn't take long for developers to



San Antonio's River Walk



realize the possibilities and in 1938 a local planner and architect, Robert Hugman, secured funding for the “San Antonio River Beautification Project” that has, over the years, created a network of walkways along the watercourse interconnected by many bridges and staircases. It was an ideal place for restaurants and other places of business to locate, and today there are dozens of them there. On holiday weekends the place is practically shoulder-to-shoulder with tourists, who have brought millions of dollars each year into the local economy.

Nicki and I certainly did our part. The heat of the day was a lot less down there than at street level and it quickly became the preferred place to find a meal. There are also boat tours, scheduled so often that it’s almost impossible to take a photo in the River Walk without having one of them in the image. A boat tour turned out to be a good way to learn more about the history and architecture of San Antonio, and we thought that eight dollars each for the half-hour was a bargain. But in the end, it turned out to be even less expensive than that when my mantra “Is there a seniors discount?” produced results. Proof positive that growing old doesn’t suck *all* the time!



during the River Walk boat tour

### Sixteen Years Between

The main reason Nicki and I had come all the way to Texas was to attend the 2013 World Science Fiction Convention, LoneStarCon 3. The previous time we had been to San Antonio was back in 1997 for another Worldcon, LoneStarCon 2, which was a *very* memorable convention, with dozens of interesting program events, many dinner excursions with friends, a multitude of evening room parties, and a Hugo Award for our fanzine *Mimosa*.



A lot has happened in the past 16 years. Several friends who were at LSC2 have passed on and others no longer attend Worldcons. And *Mimosa* is no longer being published – this year’s LoneStarCon was the ten year anniversary of its final issue. As for me, I’ll reluctantly admit that 16 years has taken its toll. My energy level is not what it was back then, and I’ve long since stopped trying to experience Worldcons in fast forward. This year I didn’t even go to the Hugo Awards ceremony – I rested in the hotel room to save some endurance for the evening’s tour of all the room parties. So instead of getting my blood pressure up when the Best Fanzine Hugo went to a non-fanzine that was somehow allowed to be eligible (and don’t get me started on *that*), I kicked back and instead got my blood pressure up while enjoying my latest TV sports pastime – NASCAR!



## Speak No Evil

Someone who still, at age 94, has a reasonable energy level is my friend Dave Kyle, who has attended Worldcons all the way back to the very first one in 1939. That 1939 Worldcon included a softball game of “fans vs. pros” and 74 years later, a recreation (of sorts) of that game was staged at LSC3. Dave, who participated in the 1939 ballgame, was given the honor of tossing the ceremonial first pitch.

There are not very many people left who attended the very first Worldcon. Dave and two other famous fans of that



Bob Madle, Erle Korshak, and Dave Kyle

era, Bob Madle and Erle Korshak, sat on a LSC3 panel that described it and some of the other early science fiction conventions including the very first one, in 1936. Back then, there were industrial-strength feuds involving several of the most well-known fans of that era. But there were no harsh words about anyone from the three panelists. The intervening three-quarters of a century has long since created a strong sense of nostalgia about that earliest era of science fiction fandom. Either that, or the three of them had decided it might be better after all this time if were “Hear no evil, see no evil, and speak no evil”.

## All Things Howard

Something else that occurred in 1936 was the death of fantasy author Robert E. Howard, creator of Conan the Barbarian and, by extension, arguably the entire sword and sorcery genre. Howard had lived in Cross Plains, a few hours drive to the north from San Antonio, so LSC3 had a track of programming specific to him and his writing. This included a screening of the 2011 documentary film *Barbarian Days*, which is described (on IMDB) as “a civilized look at the modern day fans of Robert E. Howard ... as seen at the annual Texas celebration known as Howard Days”. Several of these fans are actual scholars in all aspects of the life and literature of Howard, and three of them were at LSC3.

One of these guys is my friend Rusty Burke whom I’ve known for more than a third of a century, but I’ve only very recently become aware of his expertise in this area. They are very actively researching the life of Howard, and the annual Howard Days get-together in Cross



Dave Kyle (with umpire Joe Siclari) tosses the game’s ceremonial first pitch



R.E. Howard experts Mark Finn, Rusty Burke, and Bill Cavalier



Plains includes sessions where papers are presented and the Robert E. Howard Foundation Awards are given out for publications and writings. Rusty has been working on a new biography of Howard that will complement a biography by another of the Howard experts, Mark Finn, which was published back in 2006.

This was the closest I've ever come, or possibly will ever come, to attending an academic track of programming at a science fiction convention. There were no papers presented, but the program participants all had standing as R.E. Howard researchers. And it was fascinating to find out more about the man. Not quite enough for me to want to attend a Howard Days celebration, but enough for me to want to learn more about the types of research being done on the author and his work. I'll for sure be talking to Rusty about it next time I see him.

### **Dancing with the Lone Stars**

I found a lot of interest in the LSC3 program, but there are so many tracks of programming at modern Worldcons that it's almost impossible not to. I was on three panels, including a very well attended one on near-future energy sources which I moderated. Nicki also had three panels, including two media-related ones that looked to be standing room only. But for sheer entertainment value, it was the after-hours dances that were the most fun. There were three of them, each showcasing a different musical genre. The one that Nicki and I found most interesting was the Tex-Mex Conjunto dance, with music by the Los Paisanos de Chalito Johnson Band. Conjunto is the everyday music of the Mexican-American working class people. It doesn't have the brassy sound of a Mariachi band or the synthesized sound of a modern-day Tejano band. Conjunto has been described as a Mexican analog of Country & Western music, but in reverse – the dog doesn't die, the wife doesn't leave, and the truck keeps running. Conjunto has a happy, uplifting sound. And it's very danceable.



Los Paisanos de Chalito Johnson Band at LSC3

I like to think that I have many life skills, but dancing is not one of them. Nevertheless, Nicki insisted that we join the dozen or so people on the dance floor. It wasn't pretty and we weren't out there for very long, but it *was* fun and I think I managed not to embarrass myself very much. It was also enough to earn Nicki and me "Dancing with the Lone Stars" ribbons for our convention badges.

We observed dancers of various different skill levels, but if there had been judging for proficiency the top prize would have gone to a couple of young guys who were really, really good. They looked to be locals, possibly gamers who had been ensconced all day in the basement of one of the hotels away from the rest of the convention. They came in about halfway through the event, and it wasn't long before they were in demand as dance partners by women who had been struggling to dance with guys having about the same level of talent as me. It was

all very entertaining for this wallflower to watch, and it's one of the many pleasant memories of LSC3 that I brought home with me.

### Epilog: The Shrine of Texas

Nicki and I couldn't leave San Antonio without visiting the most revered place in the entirety of Texas. It's The Alamo, of course – the site of a famous 1836 siege where the Mexican Army, led by General Santa Anna, wiped out to the last man a much smaller garrison of freedom fighters led by William Travis, Jim Bowie, and Davy Crockett. Texans refer to the place as 'The Shrine', and it's so venerated that visitors are requested to remove their hats before they enter.



The Alamo at dusk

A very knowledgeable docent named Steve provided historical background of the battle and briefly showed us around the interior of the place



inside The Alamo with Steve the Docent

(it isn't very large), pointing out places where bullets had struck and defenders had died. Turns out that he is a direct descendant of one of The Alamo's defenders – Juan Nepomuceno Seguín, who, because of his fluency in Spanish, had been dispatched as a messenger prior to the closing battle and managed to make it through enemy lines unscathed. The city of



Seguin is named in his honor, and we had seen his statue in the town square when we were there a few days earlier.

It will probably be a long while before Nicki and I are back in Texas again, but I hope not another 16 years. There are just way too many other interesting things that we never got around to do and see, and it deserves another trip when there isn't a 4,000 person convention to absorb most of our available time. It will be pleasant to be deep in the heart of Texas once again. ☀



Nicki and the statue of Juan Seguin