

LUBBOCKIAN IDENTITY

By Michael Ventura

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Let us consider Lubbock, Texas.

1973, January through September, I lived in Lubbock -- not a resident; a drifter, taking my time passing through. The Lubbockians I got to know all were Texans, mostly born and raised in Lubbock. Ethnically, most were some mixture of Anglo-Saxon-Celt, often with Cherokee stirred in a few generations back. Many traced their American ancestry to well before the Civil War. As for Lubbock -- socially (to state the obvious and put it mildly), Anglo-Saxon-Celts, Hispanics, and African-Americans did not mix much and tended to keep to their own neighborhoods (the Anglo-Saxon-Celt neighborhood being most of Lubbock). Once or twice, at the Cotton Club, I saw an African-American male dancing with an Anglo-Saxon-Celt female; I admired his guts and feared for his safety. The only Jew I was aware of was the Long Island-born friend who'd driven me here, and she didn't stay long. Lubbock's cuisine in those days was limited -- lots of Texan diner food, some Mexican, a Chinese restaurant, an Italian restaurant, and that was about it. Back then, Lubbock bragged about having the most Christian churches per capita of any city in the world. (Was it true? I never knew.) And all the Texans had Texas accents.

(Footnote: My new-found friends were -- and are -- among the smartest, most original, generous, multi-talented people I've known. They changed my life. Long story.)

It's thirty-five years later, and I've been a Lubbock resident for three-plus years. Lubbock has changed. To understand America today one must understand the scope of that change.

Now, many who've grown up here have barely a trace of Texas in their speech, sounding sort of San Fernando Valley-with-a-lilt. Now the best supermarkets in Lubbock are identical in look and products to the best supermarkets in Los Angeles. Note: they have kosher sections and sell *challah* on the Jewish sabbath. There's an Oriental market; also, a "Ghandi" market, serving families from the Indian subcontinent. Lots of good food -- Texan and Tex-Mex, plus the chains, plus Thai eateries (run by Thais who've been here a generation), a Vietnamese restaurant, two French restaurants, Japanese, Chinese, New Orleanian, a fancy Italian restaurant run by a New York Italian, and the old Italian restaurant now has two outlets and is Lubbock's most popular eatery. There's a mosque. I'm told the synagogue has a visiting female rabbi. One of the first people I met when I re-settled is an Iraqi who's lived and raised a family here for twenty-odd years. As in L.A., it's not rare see people of indeterminate ethnicity, Asian-Hispanic, Middle Eastern-Celt, Euro-Asian, African-Middle Eastern, etc. On my street, in a down-at-heels part of town, there's every sort of race, and no trouble that I've seen. It's not unusual, in any part of town, to see interracial couples of all ages and mixes, with no fuss, no self-consciousness, and no one but me seems to notice (because I take notes). Not that there are *many* interracial couples, it's just not unusual and it's no big deal. The other day, at a Mexican café, I saw a classic well-dressed West Texas Anglo-Saxon-Celt old lady, her blue-white hair in a firm bubble 'do -- her old-timey accent rang through the room as she happily played with the child on her lap, her half-African-American granddaughter. No one took notice but me and my notebook.

When that West Texas lady was born, every school, restaurant and bathroom in this state was segregated, and most Anglo-Saxon-Celtic Texans meant to keep it that way. (Lest we forget, most of *them* were passionate Democrats -- not so much because of FDR's New Deal as because Abraham Lincoln was a Republican.)

Thirty-five years ago Lubbock was *Texas* -- the old-timey image of Texas. Now a strong Texas accent is as unusual as a cowboy hat. Now many (especially women) look less like Levelland and more like Santa Monica. Lubbock is still a family-values town, still very conservative, very Christian. You still have to drive across the county line to buy package booze, and Lubbock still advertises itself as a pure creation of the pioneers of the Great High Plains. Over 100 miles from any city its size, and 400-ish from any city one might call "major," yet Lubbock has become -- there's no other word for it -- cosmopolitan! Comparatively. When compared with Lubbock '73, *positively* cosmopolitan. True, Lubbock has special demographic circumstances -- Texas Tech University grows by leaps and bounds, and requires a sophisticated faculty and staff; also, Lubbock is a medical center for a large area, its hospitals and clinics staffed by people from all over the world. Still, if a place like Lubbock is no longer classically "Texas," then Texas is no longer what once was meant by the word "Texas."

And that is no small matter. In 1973 the Texan self-image, the Texan reality, and the world's image of Texas, were roughly approximate. Not an accurate image even then (no such image ever is). That image didn't include the likes of Bill Moyers, Butch Hancock, JoCarol Pierce, Terry Allen, Molly Ivans, John Henry Faulk. But there was still plenty of room in that traditional image for a poseur like George W. Bush to hide, cloaking his spooky lack of identity with a Texas oilman's façade. In 1973 Texas still took its basic image from its small towns and ranches. Now its small towns are falling apart, its ranches are subsidy-addicts, and Texas no longer has an Anglo-Saxon-Celt majority. Many urban Texas kids talk like they do in the San Fernando Valley.

The same is happening all over the country. I know young people reared in Atlanta who have no trace of Southern accent. Last time I was in Manhattan, it was almost a full day before I heard someone speak with a strong New York accent. When I first hit the road in 1972, accents, attire, and behavior were markedly different in different parts of the country. There was some ethnic diversity in the big cities, but almost none anywhere else. All that has changed, and the traditional images of a Southerner, a New Yorker, a Texan, are fading further and further from the reality "on the ground," as they say. This is especially true of the middle class and affluent.

As I cited a couple of columns back, California and New Mexico also have nonwhite majorities, while New York, Arizona, Maryland, Mississippi, and Georgia are 40% nonwhite. The state with the fastest-growing Hispanic population is none other than Arkansas (BBC World News America, Nov. 8). All of which reveals a surprising, utterly unanticipated fact: We don't yet know what an "American" is! We don't yet know what an "American" even looks like. That identity -- an "American" -- has not yet been settled by history.

From about 1930 to about 1980, the question of American identity seemed settled; but history didn't accept that era's definition of "American." History moved on, though America's self-image lagged (and still lags) far behind our historical reality. Think of Lubbock, this supposedly right-wing city, in the middle of nowhere. If so much drastic

ethnic and social change has happened here in merely one generation, try to imagine Lubbock one or two generations from now. You can't. No one can. The same holds true across the country. The American identity is in flux, undefined, and no one knows what it will be in another generation, much less in two.

Nothing so disorients an individual or a people as an identity undefined, threatened, in flux. George W. Bush's core supporters have been people clinging to his imitation of an antiquated American identity. The vitriolic irrationality of anti-immigration frenzy is fueled by a panic of identity. (Irrational, yes. As Louis Black pointed out, just *how* do you round up 12 million human beings? You'd need prison-space half again the size of New York, and more buses than are on the continent, not to mention an extra army.) Americans no longer look or sound like, and will never again look or sound like, this country's rigid image of an "American." Many are unhinged by that fact; their pent-up panic, caused by myriad changes, is unleashed upon one comparatively minor change: "illegals." But what changed Lubbock? Not illegals. Lubbock is changing because of tidal shifts in economics, culture, technology, and perception.

A panic of identity can sway politics, but politics can't legislate identity. Such questions get decided by forces more inexorable. Lubbock, Texas, 1973, would never have agreed to become Lubbock, Texas, 2008. Rather, its changes were and are irresistible. What many cannot admit is that change never stops for our convenience. History never picks *you* to be its exemplar, because history is never satisfied with you or me or anyone. The forces of history are never a matter of the past, but of what comes next. History never goes backwards and never remains static. When history repeats itself, it does so in a different language. Or, at the very least, in a different accent.

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