

JESUS WALKING THE PANHANDLE

By Michael Ventura

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We lived in a caboose and a trailer near the cliff of a quarry by the Salt Fork of the Red River. Texas State Highway 70 ran by our – our what? Encampment? A caboose and a trailer all by their lonesome on rolling plains in the middle of nowhere. That stretch of 70 followed the trail of the cattle drives on their way from West Texas to the Kansas railhead at Dodge City. (Growing up on cowboy movies viewed in Brooklyn and the Bronx, this seemed to me one damned romantic fact.)

The nearest town was Clarendon, eight miles south. In the early morning I'd drive an old truck about 10 miles north to Interstate 40, turn around and drive the 18 miles south to Clarendon. The distance between I-40 and Clarendon was roughly the length of Manhattan. From the road you could see several miles east and west – an area wider than the mighty island of Manhattan. Manhattan fit in this short stretch of the Texas Panhandle. That fact impressed me mightily. Manhattan – drop it in the West and it's but a ripple on the land. The Texans called me a Yankee. My morning ride put “Yankee” in perspective.

Butch Hancock and I were the encampment's long-term residents. Others came and went for as many reasons as there were travelers. Some were friends, like Joe Ely. Some were strangers: a scared-eyed Oakie carnival barker accompanied by two Cherokee strippers, stranded during a winter storm. Some stayed weeks; some, overnight.

Why our encampment existed would take too long to tell, except that we were searching for something we could not name (though we spent long hours trying). Butch and I were in our 29th years; our friends were more or less our age. For us, the so-called “normal” life wasn't an option; all that mattered to us was a search the object of which was not clear, yet not in doubt. We didn't care about what we'd find at the end of the rainbow. The rainbow was enough. (It still is. In that sense, nothing's changed.)

Clarendon College sat on the north end of town, abutting U.S. 287. There was a drama teacher we'll call Norma. She sported pink toenail polish – risqué, back then, for a teacher in the Bible Belt. She'd heard I was a writer (I'd published nothing but an obituary of Jack Kerouac in an obscure Eastern rag). Norma told me she'd always longed to put on a passion play during Easter month. Might I write it?

Me, a leftie Yankee, write a Bible Belt pageant?

“You're the only writer in Donley County.”

Not strictly true. A man of local ill repute lived in an oddly shaped structure on what passed, on these plains, for a hill. He was a writer. Had published books (under names not his own). He'd drawn my friends and me to our encampment. He knew stuff. Fascinating stuff. But righteous Christian Texans wouldn't ask him the time of day, much less to write a play.

As no one in this whole wide world had yet requested my services as a writer, I signed on. There would be no fee but the fun. (We of the encampment were living on room-and-board paid by that fellow of local ill repute, for whom we odd-jobbed.)

Following scripture closely, though not exactly, my script was titled *Jesus the Man*.

“You seem a theatrical kind of person,” Norma observed. “Would you act in our play? Couldn’t you direct? I betcha y’could.”

Beware of sharp-eyed Texas gals with automatically gleaming smiles and equally gleaming pink toenails. If they speak to you at all, you figure in their schemes. Served me right for how I’d oversold (lied shamelessly about) my experience in the theatre.

Then Jesus took over.

Saith Lubbock-reared Spider Johnson: “It’s in the DNA to respond to the context of ritual – bound up as we are in the thousands of years of rituals and practices.” That spring in Donley County, I learned this the interesting way.

For me, a Sicilian-American fallen Catholic, Jesus was on a cross back in Brooklyn. He didn’t follow me around. But for the youths of Norma’s drama class, reared in small Panhandle towns as Baptists, Church of Christ and Pentecostals, Jesus was the overpowering presence of their entire lives, as he was for just about everybody in the county. Some rebelled against their social restrictions, but none rebelled against Jesus. Our play was the most important event these students had yet participated in.

Important to Donley County, too. Every minister had to sign off on *Jesus the Man*. If any demanded changes, changes there must be.

My position was as amusing as it was solemn: A young irreligious Yankee, who’d never heard of the Church of Christ or of Pentecostals before arriving in the Panhandle was suddenly central to a solemn ritual performed by a community in whose eyes this play would be enacted directly for Jesus himself as a communal act of faith. Their earnest fervor was as foreign to me as anything could be, but I’d become its instrument. As one friend put it: “Strange days are upon us.”

“Come unto me, ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. . . . For I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” That yoke is anything but easy, that burden anything but light, but, as a willy-nilly servant of this community, I was bound to respect both.

I did. I do. To disagree with such a faith and to regret many of its consequences – that’s one thing -- but a faith so exacting, and even desperate, merits respect if only for the enormous human effort with which people cling to it, white-knuckled though their clinging may be. A heretic surrounded by fundamentalists, a stranger welcomed by these (mostly) kindly people -- whatever their flaws and prejudices, and whatever mine, fate or God or absurd chance had bound us to a task over which 2,000 years of Christian history hovered like a thundercloud.

Donley County’s ministers demanded but two changes: Jesus was not to dance at that Cana wedding (“What could you be thinking, young man!”); and Judas could not pick up the ear severed in the Garden of Gethsemane and carry it as a talisman. Otherwise, *Jesus the Man* passed the strictest fundamentalist muster, even though in our enactment Mary Magdalene was the strongest apostle. (Honestly, I still don’t know whom I was serving – God, the Devil, or a heartily laughing Buddha.)

I wrote the role of Pilate for myself so I could ask, as Pilate asked: “What is truth?” My Pilate taunted Jesus and Donley County with what crucifixion really meant: flies you couldn’t blink away, crows that pecked at your parts, dogs that fed on your toes. Thousands suffered this at Roman hands. That much, anyway, was historical.

The cast did itself proud. Most of Donley County saw our play. Joe Ely operated the lights. Butch Hancock shot slides we projected on a screen. We’d raised three tall crosses

on the bluff above the quarry one gray day. Butch's photos looked real as news footage – a solemn afternoon for all. No joking, no malingering. Jesus, the thieves, the women at the foot of the cross, the guilty soldiers, all of us -- devout for an afternoon.

Those crosses overlooked the Salt Fork of the Red River for years and years. Visiting my Clarendon friends, I'd take that drive up and down Texas Highway 70, and there they'd be, meaning whatever they might mean to all who passed. Emblematic of what? Faith? The lack of it? The lie of it? The need of it? The effort of it? Its absurdity? Its necessity? Its continual and irresistible reassertion at the core of history?

For me, then as now, the cross is a question mark.

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