

THE CITY'S LANES HAVE CHANGED BUT THE "HEART & SOUL" REMAIN

by Lawrence Salinas

I returned "home" to Austin recently to visit family and friends – something I try to do every couple of years or so since I moved to California some twenty-two years ago. A lot has changed since I was here last in 1993, and even more since I moved West back in 1975.

As my airplane prepared to land, I peered out the window anticipating our arrival with such excitement, even though I had made the same trip many times before. I was looking for the Capitol and "The Tower" as though I were looking for some old friends to greet me. When the familiar landmarks came into view I pointed them out to my wife and three children. I felt I was home – a feeling I'm sure many people get when they return to Austin after a long absence.

I remembered climbing high into the Sycamore trees in my South Austin front yard with my best friend, David. We would look north at the downtown city skyline, which at the time consisted of the city's most notable landmarks – the State Capitol and the UT Tower. There were also a few commerce buildings thrown into the landscape no doubt by our city fathers for good measure. That skyline represented the "heart and soul" of our city. St. Louis has its Arch; Seattle, the Space Needle; San Francisco, the Golden Gate; Austin, the Capitol and the Tower.

When I was ten, I knew, as did other "natives" that those structures were something special; more than just bricks and mortar (or, in the case of the Capitol, pink granite.) Unfortunately it appears that during the past twenty or so years, some political leaders did not share nor embrace this view. As the city grew decisions were made to erect more and taller buildings, which forever changed the landscape of Austin.

Today, I find it somewhat ironic that my life's path took me into politics. I've often wondered had I remained in Austin, would I have cared so much about the "heart and soul" of our city? Would I have fought to save the skyline, as I once knew it? It is said that all good things must come to an end and so too, did that once familiar skyline.

We rode with my aunt Carol, a native Austinite, from the old Mueller airport to my grandmother's home in South Austin – the neighborhood where I spent the first thirteen years of my

life. I say South Austin, because people there have a special affinity for the area, an extraordinary sense of pride – apart from the rest of Austin or Texas.

My aunt spoke of how much the city

had changed since I was a kid. Nevertheless, I still planned to take my children for a drive and show them "where daddy grew up." As we continued the drive, we talked about other things too, the cold weather, politics, family, etc. Somehow though, her comments kept gravitating back to how much things had changed, and, in her opinion, not for the better.

I didn't say much for most of the ride. I just looked out the window and gave an occasional response. Silently though, I agreed with her assessment which became more obvious the closer we got to my grandmother's.

As we drove south on Congress Avenue near W. Live Oak, I noticed that the marquee on the little one screen Austin theatre had changed – let's just say it's not showing movies the likes of "Butch Cassidy" or "Patton!" Across the street, the "Old Bossy" dairy store with its life-sized Holstein twirling 360 degrees atop the roof was no longer there. Gone too, was the old "Mr. Gatti's Pizza" parlor, as well as the last full service Texaco station where I used to fill my bicycle tires with air. And the neighborhood Dairy Queen – ugh, sadly it too was gone. It is now a "salon." Imagine that!

I have some fond memories of that place. I used to ride my bike there on the weekends and take my sweet time sipping a large Coke or Dr. Pepper. I would hang around gazing at the food server, a pretty long haired brunette named "Pat." I had a 'Texas-sized' crush on her. Had the concept of free refills been part of the service back then, I would have never left that Dairy Queen. I might add this weekly exercise was much to the chagrin of my friend David. (So, Pat, if you are reading this, thanks for that giant "carton" of Coke on my 11th birthday back in 1972.)

To this day, when I hear George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord," I am immediately taken back to the jukebox at the DQ.

Despite all these changes, the most striking to me was the unbelievable expansion project of HEB grocery store at Congress and Oltorf Streets. I realized right then and there what my aunt was talking about. My old 'stomping grounds' had literally been paved over with the asphalt of change!

However, I was comforted to drive by some familiar landmarks – Brackenridge Hospital where I was born thirty-five years ago; the Driskell Hotel, Palmer Auditorium, Sandy's ice cream stand on Barton Springs Rd., and my old schools, Mollie Dawson, St. Ignatius and Fulmore Jr. High. All this time, the Bruce Springsteen tune, "This is your hometown," was playing in my head.

I was also relieved to see that two other familiar hangouts were still around – "The Pit" BBQ and "Fran's" hamburgers stand. I guess though, even Fran's changed too – it was "Dan's" when I was a kid. Thank goodness though, the burgers didn't change – still the best I've ever had!

We finally arrived at my grandmother's house on Euclid Avenue. The neighborhood looked smaller and many of the original people who lived on our block have either moved or passed away, including my grandfather, Sam Hill, founder of "Hill's Café" --another South Austin tradition. However, there





were still some familiar faces and names around. Seeing people like the Meziere's (David's family) Mrs. Eastburn, Mrs. Spiller; the Limon, the Hernández and Castillo families, and even Mrs. Bratcher instantly took me back to a slower paced time some twenty-five years ago. I recalled the

days of playing touch football in the street with the other neighborhood kids, often till dark. To this day, I am still convinced that Mrs. Bratcher has the largest football collection in the city, as a result of 'misdirected' footballs that landed in her fenced yard!

These names may not be familiar to you. They aren't rich or considered VIP's. They were, and still are to me, just good people and good neighbors. Although the neighborhood has changed these people represent a much simpler time in my life—before parenthood, job deadlines, mortgages and the fast lane of

California life.

At the end of five days, we were back on an airplane. When our plane lifted off, I found myself once again peering out the window. As I did, I poignantly thought about two little kids high atop a sycamore tree and how life's "lanes" had indeed changed. I looked down at my old home town and through the cluster of high rises, I quietly bid farewell to the loved ones left behind and to the two things that never changed -- the Capitol and the Tower. In five days I gained a renewed respect for my elders as well as those life-long Austinites who spoke with such passion of days gone by, and whose memories, like my own are safely tucked within the "heart and soul" of every person who has ever called Austin home. *Circa Spring 1995*

Bio: Lawrence Salinas was born in Austin and lived there from 1961 to 1975. He is a former congressional aide and now serves as a Governmental Relations director for the nation's largest investor-owned utility—Pacific Gas and Electric Company in California.

Addendum – February 18 2008:

February 13, 2008, was a day like most in Austin. But in the wee hours of the morning, unbeknownst to most of its residents, unbeknownst to the powerful and the powerless, the city lost a part of its "heart and soul" with the passing of one of its "quasi-native sons," my father, raul r. salinas.

Although I grieve for my loss, I share that grief with hundreds, if not thousands of people who my father impacted over the years.

As the dawn approaches on yet another new day, I sit here at the kitchen table, in the dark, penning this "addendum" to a story I wrote some 13 years ago. Ironically I do so, at almost the same

time of the morning my father left us, some five days earlier.

Today, as I prepare to return to California, I will undoubtedly gaze down upon this great city, my hometown, and reflect on the experiences of the past five days. Of course, I will have sadness, but I will also be comforted knowing that my father's work in the second phase of his life; his passion for writing, reading teaching and social justice, will live on in the hearts and souls of thousands of his students, friends, associates, family.... and without a doubt, in me!

4:44 AM –PST, *The precise moment I received word of my father's passing*

Who is this man?

Raul, Roy, "Tapon" Uncle Roy, "El stupido" as my grandmother sometimes called him

Who was this man who ran wild in the barrios of East Austin "con los pachucos" instead of being a "father."

Who is this man who was by his own mistakes (some of which I too have made) Not only got himself imprisoned but also imprisoned my mom, my brother, my sister and me.

Who is this man I could never call "dad" because he wasn't there.

Who is this man, who was out of sight but not out of mind who, as a lil kid, would often creep into my thoughts as I watched my friends go to father-son days at school or watch episodes of "mis tres mijos (my three sons) the Brady Bunch, or God forbid, Father Knows Best...longing for my own episode to run, but quietly knowing it never would.

Who was this man who I wished could have been like Ward Cleaver but in reality is more like ELDRIDGE Cleaver!

Who was this man who I've tried so hard my whole life to be un-like because of shame, embarrassment, and let's not forget the ever-present Catholic guilt...that today as I look at my own life, I find ironically, I am so much LIKE him.

Who is this man I curse every father's day as I make that painstaking annual pilgrimage to the card shop looking for that "perfect" card only to end up with the "Snoopy" one that lacks the love but hey, fulfills my obligation.

Who is this man - I hate for giving me the bad traits; but thank my MOTHER and HIS mother for the good ones, and secretly laugh because I find the more I "resist" to be nOt like him; the more I find I AM!

Who was/is this man that was such a stranger to me? Yet whose blood runs through my veins – forever connecting us...

Who is this man whose name I carry But do not really know him

Who is this man who caused me to struggle to understand why he seemed to have so much time for other "kids in need" but so little time for me?

Who is this man ya'll come to hear, to see? You say to him, "I love your poetry, you're an inspiration, you're so this, you're so that..."

Who is this man some have called over the years: artsy, a thinker, a writer, an activist, a lecturer, a "maestro"...and today, who would've thought, even an internationally "renowned poet"

Who was this man some once called a "ladies man" – un romantico, I can relate to that... hey, you know what they say bout' the apple not falling far from the tree

Who is this man whose image I once saw as a child, with blurry, yet rose-colored glasses; but today I see with the clarity and understanding of a man.

Who is this man?? He's my father.... and in some ways, he's ME...

-Larry Salinas, March 19, 2005

