

From: Sunday Islands by Harold Truman (travel writer and novelist) – This is a travel book about Australia, New Zealand, and Tahiti.

Harold (whose real name is John Hauer) and I were fellow Dekes at UT, and I roomed with him shortly at the Deke house. I saw him again at a recent Deke reunion, where he presented me with his book. It was the first time I had seen or heard of him in 47 years, and I told John that I would include this chapter in Ashes From A Glorious Campfire. I also told him that I must have seemed a little larger than life at the time, because he reported me as being 6'3" tall and weighing 220 pounds. There are a few other exaggerations in the story, too, but the spirit of the thing is true.

Super Sayles

Normally after learning something new or gaining from an experience, it becomes difficult for me to imagine that I had not possessed such knowledge from Day One. Recently I realized that for my first 24 years, I never once met an Australian. I knew no one my age that had even met an Australian. No one who had ever been to Australia.

Yet, in the summer of 1964, I felt as devoutly, as one could feel at the age of 19, that Ozzies and Texans were nothing less than spiritual soul brothers. An adage in Texas at the time was that whenever an Ozzie and Texan met, there was instant commonality. An instant understanding, unspoken bonds, two peas in a pod. Not that anyone I knew had first-hand experience, nor did anyone explain why this was supposed to be true.

I think the rural or frontier heritage of both places was the underlying precept. Both were noted for wide open spaces. Oz had its stations; Texas, its ranches. And neither Ozzie nor Texan was mortally afraid of looking foolish in public.

Yankees up north, as well as their elitist counterparts out west, were afraid of making themselves look foolish in public.

The world was a larger place then, with countless more "absolute truths" than nowadays. In 1964, among the galaxy of absolute truths, it was accepted that: A) God was a Texan, possibly Australian in the Southern Hemisphere; B) He was a Texas Longhorn football fan; C) Dekes had the best and wildest parties; D) It didn't matter how bad your grades were in college because you were only young once. Party on.

At times, "Old Dekes," undergraduates over 24, actually graduated. Word would filter back to the fraternity house. If you graduated, *especially* if you got married, "the party was over." It terrified everyone I knew. This was before "Vietnam" meant anything to us.

As June 1964 dawned, I found myself on scholastic probation, enrolled in summer school to atone for the "gentlemen's" F's I had gotten during the spring semester. Our dear old Deke house was considerably cheaper, \$35 a month, than an apartment. An additional benefit was that one could trash, even demolish one's living quarters to almost any extent, and no one seemed to care.

Not a lot went on in the summer. I made better grades than during the rest of the year. A "house mother" lived on the premises; a requirement handed down by the interfraternity council, ostensibly to maintain decorum. Mrs. Ferrier, a kindly old lady, had a spacious apartment on the ground floor, behind a mysterious door secured by two

dead-bolt locks. The only times we ever saw her were for the first ten minutes at official functions. After that she vanished into her private, no doubt soundproofed fortress. We never saw her in the summer. There were no official functions.

My roommate for summer school was a “brother” named Jimmy Sayles. I was 19. A sophomore. Sayles was three years older, approaching “Old Deke” status, but still a junior. He was a muscular, handsome guy, six feet, three inches, 220 pounds, from the West Texas town of Abilene, fondly known as “Abba Dabba.” Though I had never been to Abba Dabba, rumor was that one of its major thoroughfares was named Sayles Boulevard, and that his family owned an immense ranch in the vicinity.

I didn’t know him that well before we were thrown together for the summer. He was older. I did respect him, though, because he was an iconoclast and an individualist, not phoney-friendly. If he didn’t like you, he didn’t pretend to.

Our Hollywood heroes were not “team players.” They were people such as James Dean and Marlon Brando.

Sayles was from West Texas, which, like Australia’s outback, produced a small part of the population, but a large part of the state’s mythology. Its sense of self.

West Texans were thought to be “true Texans.”

I was a city slicker from Dallas. At first I could tell he wasn’t too sure about having me as a roommate, even though we didn’t see that much of each other. At such times when we were together he spent most of his time sitting back, his cowboy boots on the edge of the desk, sailing a foot-long Bowie knife across the length of the room into a well-carved section of the opposing wall.

We often talked politics. He was for Goldwater in the upcoming presidential election. I was too young to vote, but took LBJ’s side, mainly for the sake of argument and because LBJ was a fellow Texan. Actually I should say that Sayles was *against* LBJ, no so much *for* Goldwater, as it was the fashion then not to vote for politicians but against them. Most conversation trashed one or the other candidate, with good words for neither.

One night in July, Sayles returned from the Friendly Tavern. He talked me into joining the Longhorn Skydiving Club with him. We’d be “Charter Members”, he said. This was a time when nobody in his right mind jumped out of an airplane for fun. He made it sound exciting and I ended up persuading several buddies to join us.

I never saw Sayles crack a book the whole summer. But something about this “skydiving” pulled his string. It made me feel good to see him happy. He spent the next three days turning a white long-sleeved t-shirt into a light-blue Superman replica, with a red Double-S and yellow background.

“Super Sayles,” he announced after finishing it.

For me, it had just been a three day respite, reading textbooks without the thud of the Bowie knife sticking into the wall or crashing to the floor. I felt studious for a while.

On Sunday morning the skydiving instructor showed up at the Deke house. Five of us spent 30 minutes in the living room downstairs, jumping off a table onto the carpet, practicing our so-called “PLF” (parachute landing fall). That was it as far as training. Next we drove out of town to a small airport, Sayles beaming in the front seat, attired in his uniform. The rest of us were apprehensive.

On the field, the instructor told us that he had taken great care in packing each parachute. They were spread out on the ground. We each picked one. They were snapped

on like a heavy backpack. The instructor told us we were jumping off a static line, wouldn't even have to open our own parachutes "unless, of course, the first one doesn't open." He brought out the reserve chutes, which fastened around our waists. He pointed to a large silver handle.

One simply pulled it. "Pop. The reserve chute opens," he said.

He handed me a reserve chute to demonstrate to the others how easy it was and to make us feel better.

I am not a weakling, but I couldn't get the damn thing to come out. After 15 seconds of futility, the instructor grabbed it.

He said, "Never mind. You use it...it'll come out!"

Something about adrenaline.

Once in the air, the scary part was not even the jump. I remember how I thought Willie, the first to go, was such a wimp about it (watching him huff and puff to get out of the plane) until I climbed out, with what-seemed-to-be 100 pounds of gear, onto a tiny platform, then under the right wing, as the plane "slowed."

To 80 M.P.H. at 10,000 feet.

Holy shit. I jumped galdly. Zooming past the tail fin by a foot. The parachute popped with a jolt.

(In those days I was terrified of dying, secretly thinking I never would. Now, the thought was not as frightening, but the chances appear to have increased.)

It was breathlessly beautiful, floating down. Silence and crystal-blue sky. Just me and the green, carpeted country below. From way above, it hardly seemed that I was moving. I managed to find the toggles, even to guide the parachute a little.

Too soon, the ground was rushing up at me more quickly than I ever imagined.

I resisted the urge to lift my legs. According to the instructor, that would break the ankles.

The ground pounded both cowboy boots. I did my PLF, tucking my arms, rolling, then being rolled, absorbing the shock.

The dust settled.

I looked up. By sheer luck I had come out alive, only twenty yards from the target. Throwing off skydiving equipment like a madman, thanking the Lord, pretending never to drink or curse again, from above I heard a faint, "Harry!"

Sayles was less than a football length high. I saw the grin, and the bright red "Double-S." Somewhat horizontal, boots kicked out, arms stretched. He did look like Superman.

"Hey, Jimmy! Yeah!"

He was descending rapidly; looking back, laughing.

I screamed, "Look out for the fuckin' fence!"

Barbed wire. Seconds later, he was swooping toward it. From ground level, I figured Super Sayles and the fence were about to become one and the same. At the last instant he lifted both feet and disappeared into a cow pasture.

I ran over. He was disentangling himself from the parachute.

He said, "Let's do it next week."

We all said, "yes," but Super Sayles was on his own for the next jump.

After that, Sayles and I were friends, not just roomies. Toward the end of summer, we were sitting around staring at what by now was a small hole in the wall that had put an end to his knife-throwing practice. He was the type of guy who didn't talk much about himself or about other people. So I was amused when he asked me what I planned to do after I graduated.

I told him that if I ever did graduate, I might give law school a try. At the time the university accepted any of its own graduated students into law school, regardless of grade point average, if one did fairly well on the entrance exam.

"I'd like to prolong the inevitable." I muttered.

I asked what he planned to do.

Surprisingly, he said that he never intended to graduate.

"I'm just here because Mom and Dad wanted me to go."

He got a solemn look on his face, which was not unusual for a somewhat serious person. He said, "But its time for me to go now. I'm fixin' to head back to Abba Dabba. Then I'm gonna head out to Australia. I can buy 100,000 acres for 50 cents an acre in Western Australia. I'll have a 'station' there. Where the nearest house is 600 miles away."

"A station?" I asked.

"That's their name for a ranch. I'll spend the rest of my life in Australia."

It all seemed improbable. His family name adorned a major boulevard in Abba Dabba. The family spread in West Texas was probably 50 miles from the nearest house, given the size of ranches in those days.

If he did this, he was throwing that away, starting on his own, like a pioneer. Like a movie eclipsing into reality.

Fall semester. Sayles was gone.

Things didn't change much for me. I moved into a little studio by Lake Austin. The B's and C's of summer school turned into D's and F's during the regular school year. I went on extended scholastic probation. Busy social schedule. Then a year later, due to the kindness of the faculty, I was given a final chance and placed on extended-extended probation. Toward the end of 1965, I realized that Sayles and I had one thing in common. Neither of us cared about school. I just stopped going to class and flunked out. Then a funny thing happened, and I found myself in the Army for four years.

Older and wiser, I returned to Austin in 1970. By that time the university was still cheerfully accepting its own graduates to law school. Provided one had all A's. And had aced the entrance exam.

Thus the world was spared another lawyer.

On campus were hippies instead of frat rats. Fraternities were decadent capitalist institutions. Everyone, including me, attended class and studied a lot. Friendly Tavern had been torn down to widen Guadalupe Street. The kids choked on herbal weed; alcohol was now passe. A new rock group named The Doors had replaced any enthusiasm for The Beach Boys.

In the University Commons, I happened upon an old fraternity brother, who had slipped into the hallowed halls before the requirements were tightened and was about to graduate from law school. We started chatting about the good old days.

"Anyone hear from Jimmy Sayles?" I asked.

He said, "Sayles." Pausing, trying to put a face with the name. The light seemed to come on.

"Yeah, Jim Sayles. He took off for Australia a few years back...then he just disappeared somewhere in the outback."

I started laughing.

Gid on ya. Super Sayles!