

## DON RICARDO'S REPORT FROM THE HIGH RHINE... DECEMBER 31, 2013

Back since the morning of December 19<sup>th</sup>, a bout of flu has delayed efforts to put out a December update on our trip to Texas. Herewith: Recent news, end-of-the-year roundup.

Gone seven weeks from our home on the Rhine, we spent our time in country graced by Texas rivers: the Colorado mainly, but also the Llano, and on a short swing further west, the Pecos and Rio Grande. The end of November found us up in Dallas, drained by the Trinity, and then near the headwaters of the Neches River flowing down from east Texas.

Driving east as far as Terrell after our show at Lucky Dog Books, we drove on to Canton early the next morning where we turned off Intrastate 20, headed for the Ben Wheeler Book Fair. Tom Geddie, the organizer had mentioned a huge three-day flea market taking place in Canton with as many as 200,000 people expected to attend. Sure enough, on our way through town we passed signs saying "Parking \$5.00." But the town was empty, as was the surrounding countryside. We saw no gas stations, no cafes or restaurants, hardly any churches even. Not many trailers or double-wides. No traffic, nobody around.

A tiny unincorporated community in Van Zandt County, Ben Wheeler is about thirty miles from Tyler, the town where I was born. My father was a young engineer working for Shell Oil Company in Kilgore, where he and my mother lived in the company camp. Kilgore had no hospital then, and when her time came, they drove together to the hospital in Tyler. My mother often told me how the redbud and dogwood were all in bloom on the drive, how beautiful it was. It did not take much imagining to picture how it must have looked: two-lane blacktop, cattle grazing behind rusty barbed wire. The roads would have been a little narrower. Driving through this country with Edith, the idea came to me that there might have been *more* people around here back in 1942.

Though we had never met in person, I spotted Tom Geddie right away, a poet-memoirist-music journalist. A soft-spoken man, slightly rumped in appearance, with clear and friendly blue eyes, I felt like I knew him already. The event was held in a wood frame building that had once been a schoolhouse. Built in 1917 and hauled to the site, it functioned as a community center, with a side building that served as a children's library.

There were thirty-two writers in all exhibiting their wares from tables around the room. Tom introduced us to the people seated next to us, a young woman accompanied by her mother. Her name was Imaj, accent on the second syllable. She was quite young, or appeared to be, and her mother, a handsome black woman with Indian features. Imaj had written a novel called *Harlow*. Also promoting her music career, she had a CD out. When I asked what kind of music, she said country.

The morning sun came in bright through the windows behind us, flooding the room. I introduced myself to a man seated across from us on the other side and we talked awhile. A retired businessman, his name was Avon Acker. He told me his interest was historical fiction, and he had written several books about the South. I later attended his talk in the children's library and

bought one of his books called *Colfax* about a little known massacre of blacks by white planters in post Civil War Louisiana.

A woman bought a copy of *Gulf Coast Boys*. Friendly in an old-hippie kind of way, she lived in Bryan, where as it turned out we had mutual friends. She was with a writer who had a musical history out about Deep Elum, in Dallas.

Our friend Keith had driven up to join us and hang out for the day. Leaving Edith to watch the table, we went outside to smoke. We looked at a hot rod parked out there, a “rag rod” Keith called it, a 1920-something pickup truck painted primer red, with bullet holes and biker stickers. The back bumper read in big letters: BUCK OFAMA. The front bumper sported a sign, with an arrow pointing down at the center that read: LIBERALS AND OTHER PERVERTS. Wearing a black skull cap, and bomber jacket with badges and various insignia, I had seen the owner inside. At first glance I thought he was one of the other writers, but he did not appear to be promoting a book.

If the rag-rod guy seemed vaguely threatening and intimidating, we felt similar vibes emanating from the table on our left where two men stood wearing black ball caps saying SECURITY, with large—and I mean *muy grande*—*pistolas* at the hip, extra clips of ammunition on their belts. “I like not these guns,” Edith said. “What they make here?” She didn’t bother to lower her voice.

Later Tom told me the security had been hired as protection by the author seated there, a thirty-something guy with spiky hair, dressed in a suit with cufflinks. Tom said the writer, also billed as a motivational speaker, had been a victim of child abuse, and had apparently received threats on account of books he had written on the subject.

I tried to talk to everyone around the room, or as many as I could that seemed friendly. I spoke with a woman from Shanghai who had put together a photography book. I talked with two women sharing a table about listening to music while writing, when it worked and didn’t. I met a couple whose daughter runs a house-concert series and suggested I get in touch with her. Overall, these people did not appear to be especially dangerous, or liberal.

While I’ve done bookstore readings for a couple of years now, I took the Book Fair as a kind of initiation into my fledgling author career. Along with copies of *Pleasures of the High Rhine* and the new book, *The Years the Wind Blew Away*, I had new, second-edition copies of *The Gulf Coast Boys*. They made a good display, I thought, and I felt authorial enough. At the end of the day I sold one book, bought one, and traded for two, among them *Reasons of my Own*, a memoir by Tom Geddie. I don’t think any of the other writers fared much better. Perhaps the weather was too nice and all the people were at the flea market in Canton. I think our young friend Imaj was a little disappointed. I had attended her talk in the library as well and found her to be very articulate, a wunderkind. Closing time was to be at five, but most of the authors had already packed up their books and displays by then.

Tom had not only arranged a house to rent, but had thoughtfully arranged a gig that evening in the restaurant there. While I was happy for the money, the place was loud with no one paying attention; like playing a Sports Bar, if you’ve ever done that. I played mostly cover songs.

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Back in Elgin on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, I finished a new song with old friend George Ensle the next day. I lucked into a pick-up gig on the 7<sup>th</sup> in Manor at a place called the Lucky Grill, but had to cancel a date with W.C. Jameson at Poodies on the 9<sup>th</sup> because of freezing rain. The weather cleared and we drove on to Llano the next day where I finished a song with W.C. Late the afternoon on the 11<sup>th</sup> I killed a big deer on Mike Blakely's ranch. I was hunting for meat, but when I saw the antlers, I took him. I field-dressed him, hanging the heart and liver on a barbed wire fence. It was dark by the time I walked back to the house and we drove back in Mike's truck to pick up the deer. The next morning he helped me skin and quarter the animal. The following day Edith, Lyse, and Stephen helped me cut it into steaks and roasts, and Saturday the 14<sup>th</sup> we made the rest into sausage. By now on the third day, the deer and I had become intimately acquainted. Mike saved the horns and skull, cooking away the meat in the European style.

I wasn't looking for anything to top this event. The kind of deer that a hunter might spend good money to have mounted, it capped a remarkable year. With the new CD, *Here in the Garden* out on Brambus Records; the new book of collected Newsletters out on Amazon, along with a new edition of *GCB*, my first printed book, it seemed like 2013 had provided about all the excitement a person could stand or ask for.

But there was more to come: Scrolling through Facebook, I came upon a posting that mentioned my name in connection with a new Johnny Cash CD called *Out Among the Stars* to be released in March of 2014. Following links, I read about a "lost" album recorded in 1984 with John and June Carter Cash singing a duet of "Baby Ride Easy." I knew that they sang it on a Christmas show that year; I had no idea they had ever done a studio recording. Having Johnny Cash record one of your songs back then was a high-water mark in any writer's career. Maybe it still was. Across the room Edith was reading her own mail on her I-Pad. "Schätzli, you might want to come over here and check this out—I think we just got a Johnny Cash cut."

All in all, it's been a hell of a year. *Guete Rutsch*, as the Swiss say—Have a *Good Slide* into 2014.

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