

Texans, Texas, and Me
by Dr. James W. Vardaman

Introduction: To begin with, I'd like to recognize the hard work and dedication of Babs Baugh. She is tougher than a \$3 steak and she gets whatever needs to be done, done--and she doesn't take "no" for an answer! If it can be done, she will do it. She is different, unique. May her tribe increase.

My Birth and Childhood—First Baptist Church of Dallas

George W. Truett was my pastor. He married my mother and father. He was a stand-in for God to my mother and father. Mother worshipped the very ground he walked on. When I joined the Marine Corps she would write me quoting the Bible and declare that, as George Truett said, "Not my will but thy will be done." At that time I was no Bible scholar, but I knew she was a bit confused.

However, Truett was a great man! You knew that he loved you. There simply was no doubt. He was a transplanted Texan from North Carolina. But he became a Texan through and through. He would not leave for power or glory.

If I may, I would like to tell you a little tale of my experience with him. Frankly, we were very poor when I was a child. My father died ten days before I was born. The devastating depression came shortly thereafter, and we lost everything. We were literally destitute.

Honestly, I do not know how we made it. There were five children—four boys (the oldest was named George Truett Vardaman) and one girl. We had no transportation, so we were forced to walk five miles to First Baptist Church, then five miles back. That night we walked again and then back home—20 miles a Sunday. Sometimes we went to prayer meeting on Wednesday evenings—same journey. Then as now, there was a dinner before the praying began. Most everyone paid a quarter each to partake. But not the Vardamans. We stood back in the shadows and waited for the others to finish their meal. As you might guess, morale was pretty low.

One night in the winter as we waited, my brother, Jerry, whispered to me that we could all sit down and eat. I said excitedly, "Why?" Because George Truett had seen us standing there and called my mother over and said, "Tell your family to eat." He made it clear that he would pay. We were so very happy! To this day I remember the dessert we shared that blissful night: dried apricot pie. I had never had any before. I wouldn't have traded places with the President of the United States! *Thank you, Dr. Truett, wherever you are. God bless you!! You couldn't really know what you did that evening, but six Vardamans knew and would never forget. I am the only survivor today, but as long as I live you will be praised for your love & kindness.*

In my mind, George Truett was and remains the greatest Texas Baptist minister ever! I remember listening to one of his sermons in the long ago in which he described a trip which he and his wife took around the world. One of his stops was Burma. Many of you will recognize the name Adoniram Judson. Judson was a particularly important hero to Dr. Truett, primarily because Judson and his wife had been the first Baptist missionaries to the Burmese people. It was a story of great hardship. Judson labored for years before he had a single convert. One day an individual passed by Judson and Judson handed him a New Testament, which he had translated into the native language. A few weeks later that man returned and informed Judson that he had read it in its entirety and he was intrigued. He asked questions....and more questions. It so happened that this man who soon became a convert was a member of a minority tribe that is called Karen. Members of that group began to come with this initial convert to see Judson. And to make a long story short, eventually practically the whole tribe became Christians, which they are to this good day.

In 1985 my wife, Betsy, and I were in Rangoon (today the city is called Yangon and the country is called Myanmar). Betsy had had to contact the American Embassy to have pages added to her passport. Upon entering the Embassy, we heard a Burmese guard singing a song that was quite familiar to us—"On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame. But I love that old cross where the dearest and best for a world of lost sinners was slain." I asked him if he were a Christian. "Yes," he said. "I'm Karen." Nearby was the Emmanuel Baptist Church, which Judson had founded. We will never forget being struck by the building itself later that day; it covers an entire city block right in the center of the capital. As we stood in front of that magnificent building, I recalled the words of Truett when he described his trip to Rangoon. He had preached in Emmanuel Baptist Church and related upon return to Dallas how the Karen congregation responded at the very mention of the name of Adoniram Judson. Truett told us that the reference to that great man had brought forth deep emotions. Truett said, and I quote, "Brawny men trembled." Obviously the memory was green in the minds of those who loved Judson from afar. And Truett's narrative power as he had told that story was still green in my mind. It still is all these years later.

At the tender age of 16, I joined the United States Marine Corps—4 year enlistment—an eternity it would seem to me. I had never travelled beyond Texas in my life. My destination was Parris Island, South Carolina, for boot camp.

Boot Camp was pure Hell. I don't know how else to describe it. The drill instructors were tough, sometimes brutal and often sadistic. I won't indulge you with the details—partly because you wouldn't believe me. There was one other Texan in my platoon, from Wichita Falls. I can't say that we ever became friends. But there were Texans in other platoons. For instance a group of six was there from Sunset High School in Dallas. All were ex-football

players (Sunset had won the city championship the year before.) I liked them enormously. They were a rough bunch. One of them—I still remember his name, Loren Smith, had been brutalized by a D. I. And could not take it. He smashed the D. I. in the face. God only knows what his fate was. Such things just didn't happen. For all I know, he may still be in the brig (Marine Prison). You just don't retaliate in Boot Camp to any abuse. You are as good as lost. I spare you other pleasantries of Parris Island.

Overseas

We sailed from San Diego, California, a month after the conclusion of World War II. I was never so homesick in my life. The Pacific belied its name. It was indescribably rough, and sea sickness was added to homesickness. The first night out, I recall one Marine from New Orleans who had the bad fortune to be in agony bent over the windward side of the ship. He vomited straight into the breeze and received the full force of nasty stuff right back in his face and body. He just sat down and began to cry. That poor kid would one day become my best friend.

I wound up on the Island of Guam in the Mariannas Chain in the Western Pacific. I was assigned to a detachment in Military Government. Our job was to keep order in the numerous villages on the Island. We were moved around frequently so we would not fraternize with the natives. There was one other Texan in my outfit, from Odessa. He was a huge fellow, named Jackson, who could probably whip his weight in wildcats. I was fond of him and proud to be a fellow Texan.

Soon I wound up in a village you could never have heard of, Sinajana. There were three of us—a sergeant, a corporeal, and me—buck private James Vardaman. I knew nothing about anything. One morning shortly after my arrival a jeep appeared in front of our quarters and a Lt. J.G. emerged to inform our sergeant that he needed help with some Japanese Prisoners of War down in the jungle. "Vardaman," the sergeant bellowed, "Get in here. This officer needs somebody and you're it! Get your gear and go with him." Off we went deep into the jungle. The road seemed to never end. Finally we pulled up in a clearing—there was a little sawmill and a lumberyard in the middle. And 100 Japanese prisoners in groups of 10—all seated on the ground doing nothing and with a surly look on their faces. "They won't work," said the Naval officer. "See what you can do." And off he drove, leaving me to face this small army of very uncooperative prisoners.

I was dumbfounded. There were five Guamanian guards with carbines cowering twenty yards away. They were still scared to death of the Japs who had terrorized them for four years. I had no idea what to do. I was sixteen years old, and these were grizzled veterans who looked more than fearsome to me. Well, I had to do something. I walked over to the first group of ten. Each unit had a non-commissioned officer with a white handkerchief tied around his left upper arm, which designated him as the leader. Need I add, I knew not a single word of

Japanese. So I fell back on my rich Texas English, declaring with all the imitation authority I could muster: “GET TO WORK!” There was not a single indication from any of the ten POWs that they had even heard a word. My only recourse was repetition: “GET TO WORK!!” I loudly intoned. This time there was a reaction—a collective sneer. So for a third time, I repeated “GET TO WORK!!!” very loudly this time. The NCO leader with the white handkerchief slightly inclined his head in my direction and gave me a look of complete disgust, whereupon—since this area was a lumber yard and that meant there was an abundance of wooden objects flung here and there upon the earth—I selected a very weighty stick. I had played on the varsity in baseball and lettered at North Dallas High School, and I now replicated the hardest blow I had ever given on the diamond. The stroke landed on the middle of the Japanese NCO’s back. He leapt to his feet, turned toward me, and proceeded to advance. I immediately extracted my equalizer, a Colt 45. I threw a round in the chamber and was prepared to act in self-defense. As youthful and inexperienced as I was, I knew perfectly well that I was prepared to do whatever was necessary to inflict a deterrent. We looked squarely in each other’s eyes. He knew what I knew. He turned on his heels, ordered his group to arise and work—and so it came to pass. I then proceeded to the second group. I said no words, but they, too, rose and applied themselves to the appointed task. I never had to go to the other eight groups. They all followed suit. Shortly things moved as they were supposed to move for the rest of the day. At the end of the day, the lieutenant JG returned in his jeep. I got in and he never mentioned what might have taken place, nor did he utter a word of thanks.

Later I ran into an old North Dallas teammate, Hank Dickerson. He was in the Air Force. We had some good times together. Later he would set a record for field goals at Baylor and became a wealthy real estate broker and partner of Roger Staubach. He died ten years ago.

After more than a year on Guam, I was assigned to the Marine Detachment aboard the Light Cruiser, U.S.S. Pasadena. There were no Texas Marines in our sixty-man unit. However, there were plenty of sailors from the Lone Star State, esp. from Adamson High School in Dallas. They were full of mischief and a bit of fun to be with.

After more than another year, I was stationed as a guard at the Naval Base in Bremerton, Washington. A lot of Texans were there. Lynch from Amarillo I especially remember—big, raw, almost primitive. Another from Port Arthur—DuPlantis, small & inoffensive. They had high words. Discussion was about religion. Lynch had some strong views about that subject—especially regarding Jesus. Deep into the conversation, he proclaimed with unmitigated, if unproved, certainty that no one really knew what Jesus looked like. Duplantis really knew what Jesus looked like. Duplantis, thus, firmly dissented, saying “Oh, yes we do because holy St. Veronica had placed a handkerchief on the blood-stained face of the Savior and thus had preserved a perfect likeness. The holy relic was housed somewhere in Italy and many had seen it. Lynch shouted not to give him any of that Catholic shit. He meant business so Duplantis became, upon short reflection, persuaded to refrain from further discussion of the

matter. Another Texan there, Sherry by name, whom I naively trusted, cheated me out of fifty dollars. Some Texans you may have noticed can disappoint you.

During my time at Bremerton I had happily gotten a 30 day leave to visit home. My sister, Ann, and brother, Jerry, were in Baylor and invited me down to visit. To my surprise I was deeply impressed by the place. How would I like to go there when I got out of the Marines? It seemed like a fine idea. There was one problem: I had not graduated from high school. I lacked a year-and-a-half. Things didn't look so good, as regards enrollment at Baylor.

Back at Bremerton I took the United States Armed Forces Institute high school equivalency test but the Dallas Public School Administration would not accept the results. I took a couple of courses from the Marine Corps Institute, but they didn't get me close to acceptance at Baylor. However, I had a trump in my corner: Ann Vardaman (later Miller), who went to the Dean and everyone else who mattered. Miracles began to happen. I was transferred to the Marine Detachment at the Ammunition Depot at McAllister, Oklahoma. The commander was a Major Kissinger, a Texas A & M graduate. He was a fine commander and very sympathetic. Because of this encounter I could never quite hate an Aggie in the way I might otherwise have. He arranged for me to be discharged at one minute after midnight on the last day I would be eligible to enter Baylor and receive the benefits of the G.I.Bill.

I drove all night and arrived in Waco around 7:00 a.m. I took an English test after Ann sat me down on a hard bench in Pat Neff Hall and drilled me without letup for two hours. I didn't know an infinitive or gerund from center field, but she hammered it all home. I passed—oh happy day! I was in, a college student. Who could believe it.

At Baylor I had the good fortune to take a history course under Dr. Bruce Thompson. It changed everything. I switched my major to history. I loved it all. Later Dr. Thompson asked me to grade for him. We talked about graduate school and maybe I might hope to become a college professor. It was heady stuff, and I determined to pursue the matter—all out.

So when I graduated, off I went to pursue my worthy goal. I spare you the intricacies but they included an M.A. University of Minnesota and a Ph.D. Vanderbilt. I must admit a touch of pride at this moment.

Eventually, after finishing, I took a position as Assistant Professor at T.C.U. I stayed there four years. While there, during my last year, I met a young, skinny, slack-jawed instructor in the English Dept. He sure didn't look like much. His office was on the floor below mine in Reed Hall. To observe him teaching his classes, one would think he was utterly out of his element. Frankly, I only talked to him one time for less than five minutes after he came into my office to ask me some sort of question. We seemed to both conclude that conversation was at an end, and we never spoke again. I am sure I would have totally forgotten that brief encounter except that this plain, unprepossessing fellow would that very year publish his first novel, and

it won the Texas Book Award. It was entitled, *Horseman Pass By*. It would shortly be made into a movie to be called, *HUD*, starring Paul Newman and Melvyn Douglas. Yes, his name is commonplace now, Larry McMurtry, surely the most famous writer in Texas today, especially after the book and movie *Lonesome Dove*.

After T.C.U. I accepted a position at V.M.I. It was located in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley, and I came to care deeply about it. The place was filled with descendants of famous men of Old Virginia. In addition, there were around 30 Texans with whom I eventually met and talked. I was proud of them. I discovered that there had always been plenty of Texans there since V.M.I.'s founding in 1839. Early on I met the athletic director who told me straight up that over his many years there he had never met a Texan he didn't like. I swelled with pride. He was a tough and shrewd person.

One of the Texas Cadets I can never forget was named John M. Marshall from Highland Park High School in Dallas. I came to know him well. He was a History major and excelled in the classroom. He was a member of the G.E. College Bowl team which was on national television and set a record for the most points ever scored on that very prestigious program up to that time. Incidentally I had the supreme honor to have coached that team. I loved the lot of them.

But what I remember most was his encounter with another Texan, Lyndon Baines Johnson. The President had come to Lexington in order to dedicate the George C. Marshall Library on the campus of V.M.I. John F. Kennedy had been scheduled to speak, but his assassination the previous November had shifted the burden to Johnson. The place was jammed with celebrities, including Dwight Eisenhower (born in Denison, Texas).

Would you believe John M. Marshall organized a group of the thirty Texas Cadets and Marshall led them right up to the President, who was surrounded with F.B.I. agents as well as throngs of others. He introduced himself and stated that the cadets with him were all full-blooded Texans, and they had an urgent request: would he, as Commander in Chief, abolish all demerits on record (and there were plenty of them) for the Texans enrolled at V.M.I. The astonished Johnson could only reply that they could consider them cleansed of all such sin committed by these fine young men from the Lone Star State. And so it was. John M. Marshall was, to put it mildly, exceedingly brash. He, I believe, would rush hell with a bucket of water. Today he is a retired judge in Dallas.

One day I received a letter at V.M.I. from my old mentor, Dr. Bruce Thompson, now chairman of the History Department. Would I come back to Texas and Baylor? I would be granted a full professorship, but the salary would be far less than I was making where I was. Also the benefits were inferior, so I just couldn't do it! Well, maybe....

Recently I had run across a second novel by Larry Mc Murtry called *Leaving Cheyenne*. Despite its title, it was all about Texas. The language, the values (or lack of same), the geography, the people, Gringos and Mexicans, the compelling sunsets, the arid plains, the desolation. It was all there. The screeching of a rusty windmill—Texas—raw, coarse and vivid. In the Preface, he quotes Judith Wright in her heartrending poem on Texas:

“South of my day’s circle
Part of my blood’s country,
Rises that tableland—clean, lean, hungry country---
I know it dark against the stars,
The high lean country....”

So I sat down and wrote my answer: When do I start?

And I came home to my own life’s blood. I never regretted it—“Texas, my Texas. All Hail the mighty state.”

Back home I eventually had the honor to meet an incredible man, Texas born and bred. His name was John Baugh. Men like him should live a thousand years. He had it all: courage, humility, intelligence, vision, strength, commitment, generosity beyond measure—and love for family, God & Texas. Born into very modest circumstances and a frugal childhood, he became the founder of one of the most famous enterprises in the state: Sysco. (Chicken fried steak) *Texas Monthly*—it included a section on John Baugh....

If for no other reason it was worth it to come back to Texas just to become his friend. He, too, respected & admired George W. Truett and his Baptist creed of the priesthood of the believer and the freedom of conscience. Indeed, John Baugh gave the money to construct the strikingly beautiful George Truett Seminary, the building you see on Baylor’s campus today.

So that’s it.

I would like to close by quoting George Truett’s searching benediction, which he intoned every Sunday evening:

“And now as the people go their many scattered ways,
May the blessings of God,
bright like the light when morning dawneth
and gracious as the dew when evening tide cometh
be granted you all and each,
now and forevermore.”

Thank you for listening.