

Travel Tales

Travel Tales Turns Ten

by

Llewellyn Toulmin

“Travel Tales” began in August 2002, so this month the column turns ten years old. I am proud to have had such a long run in an industry beset by financial challenges, contractions and technological changes. This month I will review how my writing and the column got started, describe a few of my favorite stories, and highlight some possible future pieces.

I published my first travel story in October 1976, at the ripe old age of 25, on a “sail and learn” vacation in the Grenadines. I got the piece accepted by *Canadian Yachting*, and the thrill never left me of seeing and learning new things, summarizing them accurately and concisely, and (immodestly) getting my name in print.

I published travel stories intermittently until March 2002, when Dana Mulhauser, then-editor of the *Montgomery Sentinel*, kindly accepted my story on “Breaking the 100 Country Barrier.” This was about visiting my 100th country, and qualifying for membership in the Travelers’ Century Club. In May she accepted my story on being the first tourist into destroyed East Timor, and in June I got an unexpected call from her, asking me to lunch.

Over fish tacos Dana suggested that I write a weekly travel column for the *Sentinel*. I gulped and said I didn’t think I could manage a column once a week, since I didn’t travel that often, but perhaps I could write one a month. She agreed. We then batted around some titles for the column, and I happened upon “Travel Tales.” We both liked the alliteration, and the column was born.

Dana also agreed to my recommendation that the column be intentionally different from most local or even national travel series. I would not do many commercial pieces, but rather would do interesting stories about unusual places and experiences. I would not be a slave to the 100 mile radius around the county, like the series of “weekend getaways” in most papers and urban magazines. Instead I would try to provide pieces that would grab the interest of the cosmopolitan and sophisticated readership we have in Montgomery County.

I kicked off the column with an offbeat story about a guy who was collecting and web-publishing information on every public swimming pool on Earth, so that other swimmers could visit them during their travels. Next, inspired by my on-going interest in sailing and naval history, I wrote about the USS *Olympia*, flagship of Admiral Dewey in the Spanish-American war, which was languishing and rather isolated on the Philadelphia waterfront. Later I wrote about numerous cruise ships, and about crewing on various tall sailing ships, including the famous *Amistad*, on the Atlantic, Pacific and Gulf of Mexico.

I wrote a few columns about my past, growing up in Haiti, Thailand and Wales. I wrote about how my father was almost shot by Haitian Dictator-for-Life Papa Doc Duvalier, for advocating good financial management in that beleaguered and corrupt country.

The KGB had tried to recruit me as a secret agent back in the Reagan administration, so I wrote a column about the inept little roly-poly KGB officer with the too-wide orange tie who tried to recruit me with promises of “nice trips to beautiful Caribbean islands.” I told him I had already been to most of them, thank you very much.

As a child in Bangkok, with no TV for entertainment, I had listened to a scratched record of *South Pacific* about 10,000 times. I was convinced that “Bali Hai” was a real island paradise, and was quite disappointed to learn that it was fictional. Later I wrote



The legendary John Clouse (1926-2008), the “Most Traveled Man on Earth”

to James Michener and he kindly told me that Aoba in the New Hebrides, now Vanuatu, was the inspiration for his creation. I learned that the island had never been documented since Michener’s time. I had to go, and when I got back I wrote about the island with its dangerous volcano, strange customs of ritual pig-killing, and warm and friendly people. This led to being elected a member of The Explorers Club and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

I was fortunate to meet many fascinating people in my travels. I did profiles of the First Lady of East Timor (a former ballerina and spy); a mad Irishman who had run with the bulls at Pamplona 50 times; a Papal Swiss Guard who had watched over the body of Pope John Paul II; and an intrepid explorer from Montgomery County who found evidence of an ancient civilization in the dangerous Darien Gap in Panama. My greatest

thrill was meeting and interviewing the late, great John Clouse, anointed by Guinness as the “Most Traveled Man on Earth.” What a guy.

My fascination with classic cars led me and my terrific wife and travel companion Susan to drive across the US three times in our 1968 “Bullitt” Mustang. We competed in and wrote about the Great Race road rally from DC to Tacoma, Washington, about cruising down all of Route 66, and about the amazing Peking to Paris classic car rally.



Kirsty Sword Gusmao, First Lady of East Timor, former ballerina and spy

A burgeoning interest in aviation led to stories about helping to close the case of famous adventurer Steve Fossett, who had gone missing in his light aircraft; the underwater search for the last missing member of the World War II Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP); and the successful search for a Cessna missing for two years, just a few miles from the lovely resort of Sedona, Arizona.



The 1968 “Bullitt” Mustang has driven across the US three times

I wanted to cover unusual destinations. So I wrote about the capital of Tonga, which was burned down around our ears; the best places to see the rare “Green Flash;” the traces in Ireland of High King Brian Boru and in England of Lawrence of Arabia; exclusive clubs in London frequented by royals, aristocrats, pols and literary lights; and about the ultimate, final travel destination – Forest Lawn cemetery in Los Angeles.



The search for Steve Fossett was the beginning of the Missing Aircraft Search Team (MAST)



In the search for the last missing WASP of WW II, MAST did not find her, but did find two other missing planes!

When I was a kid I had rejected my parents' love of genealogy, but in 2001 I suddenly caught the bug. That led to stories about tracing my French ancestors back to the founding of New Orleans, finding the lost ghost town of my fifth great grandfather in the remote hills of Alabama, and to climbing the biggest genealogical mountain of all – proving descent from St. Gregory of Armenia, who lived in 250 A.D. (Hey, I couldn't make this stuff up.)



The Pitcairn Island longboat and almost the entire population of the island

It's been a wild ride: 120+ stories in 10 years. I have now made it to 138 of the 195 countries on the planet. Where to next? Well, my planned future stories include: returning to Vanuatu and Bali Hai/Aoba, to excavate and document a World War II

fighter that I found there; searching for the missing plantation and battlefield of another fifth great grandfather, the “Benedict Arnold of South Carolina,” who was also the first major American double agent; finding the best sea glass beach in the world; dodging rioters in Malawi; and looking for more missing light aircraft in the US and Venezuela. And I want to drive our “Bullitt” Mustang all the way down the Blue Ridge Parkway and Natchez Trace, and up along all of the Great River Road beside the Mississippi.



Who knows where the road will lead?

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Me and the membership medals of some of my lineage societies