

"THE ARKANSAS TRAVELERS"

with

PROLOGUE

Presented To:

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Presented By:

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## PROLOGUE

Mr. President, fellow Society members, charming brides of the Athenaeum, and honored guests.

It is an awesome responsibility to be assigned the task of presentation at the annual Open Session. Quite frankly, I was surprised at being accorded that assignment--that is until I enlisted Mr. Webster's aid in determining a sure definition of "open".

Mr. Webster defines open, among other descriptions, as "expanded, or spread out". Once realizing that, it becomes apparent why I, and my friend Mr. Cayce, are the ideal choices for this evenings offerings.

Mr. Webster also adds that "open" may mean "legally available for hunting"--I trust that all firearms have been deposited at the door, as I was assured of earlier by our President. You see we have all had to meet a different "Standard" this year.

Choosing a subject for an Athenaeum paper is an agonizing task for me. Being the learned intellectual that I am, the choices are plentiful and abundant so as to offer so many wonderful possibilities that it boggles even a great mind. I used to think that choice of subject was of paramount importance, which only added to the anguish and intensity of selection. However, my colleagues who have presented essays during this, the 1986-87 season, have allayed my fears regarding the critical aspect of choice of subject.



After this year, I'm convinced that few of our members give much thought to the process of selection. I discern a degenerative trend in papers, a trend that threatens the integrity of the society. Maybe this is due to the increasing popularity of educational television with the likes of "This Old House" or "The Woodwright's Shop", or perhaps aspertame is, after all, a mind dulling concoction. But, for some mysterious reason, a trend is firmly in place.

"How-to" and "personal experience" presentations have become the norm. Really now, David Riley, on "How To Move An Old Log Cabin", or Tom Westerfield on Water Witching, Brooks Major on the "Care and Feeding of Teeth", and the attending curses visited upon us the absence of such care, the consummate "worm", Marshall Butler on "How to get by on \$0.75 a day in New York City", this is taking process analysis too far.

As if that weren't enough, late season offerings had Mike Herndon instructing us on how to cope with being shorter than everyone else. (Now if a writer is in truth shorter than everyone else, which Mike is, who, pray tell, does he propose to help by writing such a paper)? Dudley Galloway told us "How-to" measure everything from bulk sawdust to the human foot, but it mattered not one whit, cubit, or smidgeon.

Jim Adams, Bill Rowlett, and Bob Sivley unknowingly illustrated "how-to" fake an Athenaeum paper. Adams did so by stopping by the regional TVA office and picking up several historical brochures, printed at taxpayer's expense, I might add, for a treatise on the economic and sociological impact of TVA

since its inception. Bill Rowlett assembled several excerpts from his medical journals and publications in an effort on "how-to" protect ourselves from Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, and Bob Sivley held forth on "how-to" advance the "witchcrafty" parapsychology of Extra Sensory Perception through the employment of some kind of nursery school flash cards, Zener Cards, I believe he called them.

Marshall Bassett, not surprisingly, read on "how-to" maintain a Union divided in his subversive and prejudicial tome "An Unreconstructed Rebel's Sad Lament". Bill Engler aggrandized at least secondarily on "how-to" beat a dead horse, in commenting on Richard Nixon's handling of an incident involving the loss of a U.S. reconnaissance plane off the North Korean coast.

Now I'll admit that George Street Boone, Gladstone Major, Duard Thurman and George Draper did their dead level best at preserving the integrity of the society. But their efforts paled in the face of the previously mentioned instructional importunities in process analysis.

Of course, the highlight of the year came early on, when Bud Hudson surprised us all with a paper on athletics.

Now, let me assure you, I come not to either praise or bury Caesar. I simply feel a strong, irresistible commitment to serve the society by attempting with all my might and main, to reverse the downward trend which I have so ably demonstrated.

I have decided to do so by presenting a "how-not-to" treatise based on personal experience. The title of my paper is, "The Arkansas Travelers".

## THE ARKANSAS TRAVELERS

The story you are about to hear is true. The names have not been changed to protect the innocent. All participants were of legal age, and then some, and certainly had no reason to have retained even a modicum of innocence.

The time is Wednesday, March 14, 1973, about 7:30 A.M. My bride of some 7 1/2 years and I are cheerfully loading our 1972 Buick Riviera in preparation for a four day escape with friends to the resort capital of the South-South Midwest, Hot Springs, Arkansas. We are cheerful primarily because we have a garage in which to stand while loading our car. Outside, it is pouring rain, as it has been for the past 36 hours.

Flood warnings are out for Western Kentucky and reaching South into Tennessee, but what adventurous young couple would be swayed by some mundane omen such as that. We complete our packing, exulting in the dryness afforded by the garage. The automobile, while having had a year long propensity to ooze citrus juice whenever touched, has just returned from the shop the afternoon before. It has been checked for every automotive malady known to man. It stands ready, like a trusty steed, to carry us to our destination. I even fantasized hearing a gentle snorting from its nostrils and a firm pawing of the garage floor by its steel belted radials.

Our four year old son is to spend the next 4 days with his grandmother of 4 years and my mother of 35 years. He is dressed

in his finest playsuit, which resembles a New York Yankee uniform and has a resonable facsimile of a baseball player on the chest.

We are now ready to journey across town, from North to South to deliver our precious cargo, and be on our way. Luck is with us, the rain slackens; no sun, but only a slight sprinkle. This apparently pleases our precious cargo, because, as we begin to enter the car, he decides to check out the lighter drizzle, exiting the garage, making a record setting 40 yard dash down the drive, and executing a near perfect swan dive into the rain swollen drainage ditch fronting our house. The butterfly strokes that followed were not bad either.

I saw the dive, and accorded it an 8.5 on a scale of 10. Joy saw the result and gave it a zero. She also had to return to the house and give him a different outfit, ironically one which had a picture of Aquaman on the chest.

Undaunted, we drove to Grandmother's house, where we were greeted with slurs upon our sanity. "You surely aren't going in this weather!" Seeing the alternative as staying home and building an ark from scrapwood, I replied gently, but firmly, in the affirmative. I promised to exercise utmost care, to phone daily, as well as to keep our powder dry. However, my dear mother persisted negatively, with the same resolve that I retained in my positive argument. We quickly reach an impasse, which is nothing more than a compromise affording mutual dissatisfaction.

Finally, we kissed our son and mother goodbye, and beat a hasty retreat to her parting words, "I need to know where you



keep your Last Will and Testament." With that statement ringing in my ears, I twisted the ignition key to get under way. The ringing in my ears continued, but nothing else happened, at least after the battery had given its last groan. I should go back in the house and call my friendly repair shop, right. But I know that this malfunction will be construed as a sign from God. Logic prevails though, as I must get assistance quickly, since we are meeting our companions in Nashville, and I am convinced that God has better ways to communicate than through a faulty fuel pump; a burning bush, maybe, but not a fuel pump.

Wrong! As I re-enter the house I hear "God is telling you to stay at home!" God must have told the tow truck to stay at home, too, because it took him 45 minutes to arrive.

As we wait the two and one-half hours it takes to install a new pump, allow me to enlighten you regarding our traveling companions.

Ralph and Ginny Green are dear friends from Huntsville, Alabama. We have enjoyed many trips, weekends and visits with them and our relationship has remained strong. The miraculous part of this journey was that our friendship survived, and has to this day.

Our appointed meeting place in Nashville was at the home of Ralph's Grandmother's half-sister's daughter. I think that made them third cousins! Since they were the only people in Nashville whom Ralph knew, it was an ideal place to store their car, at no expense, while we were gone.



Knowing we would be terribly late, I attempted to phone the third cousin to let them know of our predicament. There was no answer. I suppose this made her a third cousin, once removed.

Two more calls were made with identical lack of success--third cousin twice and third removed!!

After about an hour of pacing the Williams Chevrolet showroom, reading all the technical specifications of the 1973 Chevy Corvette, drinking three cups of courtesy coffee, and telling 11 different salesmen that we really were not interested in buying a new machine, I was able to get an answer. Third cousin was no longer removed, but her hearing aid apparently was.

"Mrs. Vines, this is Charles Tilley", I introduced myself. "Hello Billy, how are you" came the reply. "No, Mrs. Vines, this is Charles Tilley, I'm trying to reach Ralph Green". "Well you're in luck, he's coming to leave his car here next week".

For the first time, panic began to settle in. Had I not spoken with the Greens just the night before? What I had said and what I had heard certainly sounded like the English language. Now, if I can just resurrect the content of the conversation. Yes, I'm right. If Mrs. Vines is not removed again, at least she's out to lunch.

"Uh, Mrs. Vines, I think he's coming today!"

"What is today, Billy?"

"Wednesday, March 14, Mrs. Vines!" I started to add "1973", but thought better of it.

"Oh, my Lord, I've got to get the garage cleaned out".

"No No, don't go, Mrs. Vines, I desperately need to leave a message for Ralph".

"Hold on a minute, Billy, there's someone at the door"--  
Silence, footsteps fading away, door hinges creaking, SHOUTING!

Finally, a familiar male voice on the phone--"Hello"

"Ralph", I said, "this is Billy--I mean Charlie" I then proceeded to relate our situation, estimating our arrival in about two hours, or approximately 1:00 P.M. Ralph allowed as how he could use the time to visit with Cousin Sadie. I advised him to turn up the vocal volume a couple of notches and use excessive animation.

Some 30 minutes later, we were \$179.00 poorer, but heading South. Traffic was blocked by high water at Springfield, Tennessee. The low road may get you to Scotland "afore me", but the high roads of Robertson County were our salvation. We were not to be denied. The detour cost us 30 minutes, but it was of no consequence compared to the elation we felt at finally coming together.

When we arrived at Aunt Sadie's, Ralph was extremely hoarse and Ginny had a splitting headache. Cousin Sadie was in better shape than either of them.

With little wasted motion, we transferred the luggage to the Buick and were on our way. It was beginning to rain again on I-40 toward Memphis, but the radio reports spoke of a change in the weather, changes like tornado warnings and tornado watches!

We immediately mobilize into an efficient disaster unit. I drive, using all my cunning and expertise to remain earthbound

and on I-40, Ralph mans the radio to receive updates on the particular Tennessee counties affected by the warning and/or watch, Ginny plots our course on the map to determine what county we're in, and Joy visually scans the surrounding area for ditches into which we may fling ourselves in case of a sighting.

At about this time, I'm wondering if perhaps God does speak through faulty fuel pumps.

Amazingly, we withstand the rain and the wind through Memphis and into Little Rock, Arkansas, even though water was lapping at the edge of the interstate in many places. After what we'd been through, what's a little water.

It was at this juncture that I gained more faith in my own judgment (after all we had taken on the elements and outrageous fortune head to head, and had emerged somewhat victorious.) At the same time, I began to doubt my three companions.

It was nearing 7:00 P.M., we were passing through Little Rock and we were hungry. As was our tradition and custom we chose a restaurant by the democratic process. Much as a candidate might stand at the polling place and pass out campaign cards, the El Chico Mexican Restaurant had erected a billboard, in full view from the interstate. Sucked all three of them right in. Aye, Aye, Aye, nay! The "ayes" had it. I had about "had it", too.

I've been on the road, behind the wheel, on and off for some eleven hours, and they want me to partake of refried beans and hot tamales, with yet another 60 or so miles to go.

I don't take any chances, I order a hamburger from the American menu. It comes with a miniature American Flag shewered to the bun with a toothpick, but is dressed with lettuce, refried beans, and guacamole dip.

Oh well, when darkness falls, can morning be far behind? Had we known the correct answer to that philosophical question, our fortunes might have changed, but, alas, we pressed on through the beautiful clay dirt and bank gravel countryside of South-central Arkansas.

Our Hot Springs accommodations were at the luxurious (according to the travel agency brochures) Majestic Hotel. Here, we were told, we could enjoy those same indulgent amenities as had been afforded Presidents, celebrities from the entertainment field, and, most likely, Mafia chieftains. Three hundred fifty rooms, mineral baths, massage, spacious veranda, five star service, gourmet dining, all available at our beck and call!

Now friends, let me tell you, the fellow who compiled that brochure owned a pair of rose-colored bifocals.

When we arrived at about 9:00 P.M., there was one foursome of octogenarians playing bridge on the veranda. As we passed, even though we heard the bid reach 6 no-trump, all four breasted their cards and gave us there undivided attention. I overheard one of them exclaim, "They really shouldn't allow these young whippersnappers in here."

The desk clerk was a friendly senior citizen of about 70, who asked us if we needed help in parking our "Flivver". We didn't. As we left the desk to unload our luggage, an older,



wizeden cane bearing gentleman shuffled by, obviously retiring for the evening.

"Good night, Mr Shapiro", called the desk clerk. "Good night, Sonny", replied Mr. Shapiro.

Our suite was furnished in early Salvation Army. Our coffee table had been constructed from a used hardwood veneer door, about 2 feet wide and 7 feet long. Four V shaped wrought iron legs had been attached at the corners. One of the legs was loose. The circular opening which had accommodated the knob and hardware, had been ingeniously filled with a comparably sized vase. The flowers were plastic.

A small apartment sized refrigerator stood under a counter, close to the entrance. The refrigerator door was extremely ill adjusted, due to the hinge bolts having become loose. It didn't get cold enough to freeze ice, but it kept the room nice and cool while running constantly.

I could sense the spiritual presence of Clara Bow or Al Capone, or maybe it was just Mr. Shapiro.

No amount of disappointment, though, could flag our enthusiasm for tomorrow. We would bathe and be pampered tomorrow.

We arose, nearly refreshed. We inquired as to the bath procedure, and were told that we must have our own personal white terry cloth slippers and luffa scrubbing mitt.

After an expenditure of about \$12.00 apiece, we were properly attired and equipped for the bath. I might mention two facts which may offer proper perspective regarding the ordeal I was about to experience.



First of all, I am cursed with flat feet, which made it all but impossible to keep those little white terry cloth slippers on my feet while walking. That little strap is designed to fit across the instep, and since I do not have an instep, the little devils have a tendency to fly off in midstride.

As we trod the quarter mile corridor, I lost the right one three times and the left one once. The loss of the left was especially perplexing, since it sailed down an open stairwell, landing in a laundry cart on the floor below. By the time I reached the cart, another load of laundry had been placed on top. Five minutes later, I convinced the attending maid that the slipper was, in truth, mine, and was able to effect the rescue.

Secondly, my skin is a bit on the tender side, and luffa mitts are close to coarse steel wool in texture. I wonder if I can get by on three or four less layers of skin.

Let it be known now that my friend Ralph stands 6'5" tall and weighs some 160 pounds. Also, let it be known that I am somewhat shorter, and somewhat heavier.

We were a charming looking pair as we entered the bath area. Ralph's towel always seemed too narrow, mine, too short.

Ironically, Ralph drew an attendant/masseur by the name of Lavelle, who measured 5'6" and tipped the scales at around 130. Lavelle was of African descent and proudly displayed two gold teeth in the middle, upper positions. We thought he was smiling constantly, but it turned out he was only "displaying".

I, in turn, drew a bruiser named Gustav, a huge Swede who most certainly could have fared better in the role of Mr. Clean.

It was time for the bath! I dropped my towel and nonchalantly gave a quick flip with my foot to send that little white slipper flying. Pardon the pun, but "no soap". By now the slipper was plastered to my foot by the combination of my perspiration mixed with the glue used to cement the terry cloth to the thin cardboard sole. I had to carefully peel them off and enter the claw footed tub, which seemed to have 5 foot sides.

Gustav smiled patronizingly, as I rather ungracefully plopped into the tub. (It was the most embarrassing moment I had experienced since the previous summer when, while sunning myself on a Florida beach, five members of the Gold Coast Humane Society had rushed up and tried to drag me back into the Gulf.)

The Swede commenced pouring large pitchers of heated mineral water into the tub, raising the temperature until it was comfortable, for him, that is! He never asked me!

Quickly, he began the luffa mitt scrub, arms, legs, back until the dermis had become the epidermis several times over. I suppose I should have been more appreciative, since medical dermabrasion is normally much more expensive than the fee I had been quoted!

Now came the massage. Gustav was ill informed regarding the human anatomy and its physical, mechanical and structural limitations. He erroneously assumed that, while lying on my stomach, either of my legs could be lifted 90 degrees to the vertical with a right angle at the hip. Maybe Harry Houdini, Gustav, but not me.

Now he slathers on some kind of oil, smacks me on the back, folds his arms in the classic Mr. Clean pose, and waits for his gratuity.

Where does one carry money for tipping when in the bath? We are told it may be added to the hotel tab. Gustav follows me to the window under the pretense of saying goodbye. I sense his real concern, and mindful of his strength, enter a more than generous tip.

Lavelle practically demands a larger than usual honorarium from Ralph, claiming extra distance walked in order to cover his more lengthy frame. When he gets it, he finally stops "displaying" and starts smiling.

On our return down the quarter mile corridor to our suite, we find that three out of four do not like the bath or massage and four out of four do not care for the anointing with oil. We all showered immediately upon our return. I slid out of the large, naughhyde reading chair three times while waiting for my turn in the shower.

The afternoon, though, holds great promise for us. We are going to Oaklawn Racetrack for a day with the ponies. We will be able to pay for our little trip with our winnings. The rain has continued through the morning, but with a glass enclosed clubhouse and concourse, we'll not even notice the weather. Being expert at reading the racing form enables me to pick "mudders" almost at will. It will be a fun and profitable afternoon.

Ralph gets lucky--two of his picks finish as high as fourth. I'm not sure what follows Win, Place and Show in progression, but whatever it is, it pays poorly.

During the third race, a light snowfall begins. By the fifth race it is a veritable blizzard! I bet a horse in the fourth race who, when the starting gate springs open, is in there backwards.

We are told by oldtimers at the track that it has not snowed during the February through April meet in 13 years.

Ralph begins muttering about his desire to be back at our luxurious hotel, the ladies have taken up permanent residence in the ladies room to stay warm. The combination of the massage, followed by the severe drop in temperature, has stiffened Ginny's back and bent her forward at the waist in a non-flattering, obtuse angle. I am concerned about her but I continue to bet. My walled is hurting worse than her back.

By the ninth and final race, I'm down about \$50.00 but not to worry, the ninth has the consummate hunch bet entry, a beautiful animal by the name of Sadie's Snowball. What more could I ask?

I double up to catch up and come back to my seat with a smile that would put Lavelle to shame.

Snowball comes out of the gate as if he was "singlehoofedly" going to reverse our string of bad luck. Strong and steady he maintained a five length lead heading into the home stretch. No other nag was even close.



But Snowball's sense of humor overpowered him about 50 yards shy of the finish line, or maybe it was a lack of a sense of balance! I don't know! At any rate, he executed a perfect imitation of a gooney bird settling in from flight. His four legs went in four differing directions, his chin and his belly hit the track simultaneously and he slid some 20 yards, finally coming to rest paradoically on his jockey, who at one time during the fall had been leading the race himself by about one-half length.

Okay, so we have a little more ill fortune. We have an inside recommendation on the best restaurant in Hot Springs, we'll have a lovely dinner tonight. We will persist, we will persevere, we shall overcome.

Snow is now six inches deep and we don't want to remove our car from the hotel parking garage. So, we decide to call a cab. Perfect solution it was, too, because we weren't that familiar with the city.

On the other hand, maybe it wasn't a perfect solution--our inside source neglected to tell us that the restaurant was 15 miles from the Majestic--\$45.00 fare, round trip we learned after we arrived. The dinner, I suspect, was cooked by the bartender and/or the waitress, who were the only other people there, save the owner, whose mission in life was to guard the cash register.

After returning to the hotel, we placed the democratic process in effect one more time. The vote was four to zero to return to Nashville the next morning after a late breakfast.



Being March, it was time for the NCAA Basketball Tournament, and Kentucky, my favorite team, and Alabama, Ralph's favorite team, were both scheduled to play Saturday afternoon. Joy and Ginny could look forward to a nice dinner Friday night, and a full day of shopping or relaxing on Saturday prior to our return home Saturday evening.

Even though at this point the task of salvaging our vacation seemed identical in difficulty to raising the Titanic, we felt we had chosen the ideal course to accomplish our mission.

Friday morning broke, clear and almost warm. We repacked our car, said goodbye to Sonny, the youthful desk clerk and several celebrity ghosts of the past, and hit the open road.

All was well with the world. About 20 miles out of Hot Springs, we stopped for gas. Having been snowbound in Hot Springs, we had not done so since Wednesday, somewhere along tornado alley. We chose a service station close to Benton, Arkansas which sold gasoline, T-Shirts, and foxtails.

While a toothless attendant filled the car, Ralph and I took care of the normal maintenance tasks one would normally perform while filling up. We looked at the engine, fondled the windshield wiper blades, and kicked the tires. Immediately after kicking the left front tire, we discovered that we were either parked over a pit of vipers, or the tire was rapidly losing air. It proved to be the latter.

We asked "Pearlie", the attendant to repair the tire. He said he could put some more air in, but could not repair it. He referred us to the Benton Recapping Company, a U S Royal dealer

in Benton, about four miles away. We found a large steel building, covering close to an acre, located on a stone surfaced street in Benton. There were enough tires in the building to replace all the auto, truck, combine, and construction equipment tires in the entire state.

The owner, however, after seeing our Kentucky license plate, and hearing our tale of woe, realized that out of all that stock, he only had two tires in the building that would fit our car. He further pointed out that we needed them both, since the radial belts on both front tires appeared to have failed. The two tires, which had cost \$56.80 each in Hopkinsville, were priced in Benton at \$103.99 each, but, of course that included mounting.

Even though the tires had only 5,000 miles on them, there was no warranty adjustment available, due to the technical explanation offered by the owner. "Them tars been rode hard and put up wet" he explained.

By now the left front is flat, the spare is buried under 17 pieces of luggage, and I'm resigned to the taking of the bait, however, unpalatable. Benton's slickest son does not want to accept my credit cards, but finally agrees to do so for a 10 percent premium charge. "They ain't nothin' like cash" he states philosophically. I agree, and wish I had some. Of course, there is no room in the car for the two failed tires, which are needed for adjustment later in Hopkinsville.

I pile them on top of the car and dump them in "Slicks" front drainage ditch as we leave. Maybe this way, he won't be able to submit them under warranty for personal gain. Even if he

can, he'll have to get wet! I made sure both filled with water and sank to the bottom.

We arrive at the Trinity Lane Holiday Inn in Nashville at about 10:00 P.M. We are amazed that our reservations are in order. This is a positive sign.

Saturday morning we have a leisurely breakfast and negotiate with management for a late check-out, in order that we may enjoy the basketball games in comfort and privacy. This is non-negotiable, so we are forced to rent one room for another night, even though we plan to leave by 4:00 P.M.

Just prior to noon, we moved our luggage from the room with the black and to the one with color. We're in time for the 12:05 starting time. Joy and Ginny are preparing to shop the afternoon away. We have weathered the storms, and are happy and content.

As the ladies ready for their departure, one, who shall forever remain nameless, brushes by the TV set and upsets a cup of coffee which has been carelessly placed on top. Coffee being the efficient electrical conductor that it is, all those little electrons suddenly take detours. Even though the 4th of July is 3 1/2 months away, we have an early fireworks display. Smoke temporarily fills the room and we miss the tipoff!

Daunted, we moved our luggage back to the black and white room, checked out of the color room, complained about the TV being out of order, and limped back with head both bloody and bowed. You can't hurt a basketball fan any worse than taking away his color set.

The Wildcat's and the Crimson Tide both lost. By this time, we expected worse, if that were possible. We said a brief "Farewell" to the Greens and anxiously began the journey home.

Joy put the four day ordeal in perspective by observing that the highlight of her trip was the refried beans and hot tamales at El Chico's in Little Rock. Come to think of it, it was mine, too!

We have not set foot in Arkansas since 1973, nor do we plan to in the future. I'm even yet a bit suspicious of Eddie Sutton. I still pray daily that the Benton Recapping Company will suffer irreversible losses.

And so, the travesty ended. This story virtually cried out to be told. And, whether I have instructed you on "how-not-to" enjoy a vacation, or, "how-not-to" present an Athenaeum Society paper, I am confident that I have scotched a negative trend. No self respecting member will ever "resort", pardon the expression, back to the "How To" approach.

Long live this Society!