

The Always Open is Closed

by John Farrow

The place is just a little bump in the road out of San Antonio. There wasn't even a traffic light when I left (there are three now), but it's where it all began for me. It's Homecoming and a class reunion. First, there's time for a run through town to check things out after all these years.

Turn up from the main street and on a little hill off to the side is the Baptist church where every Sunday Brother Joe Roy Dale would pound the pulpit. Robes flowing, the organ building to a crescendo, he would plead for one more lost soul with arms outstretched, beseeching each and every one of us to look deep into our hearts while the choir sang one more chorus: "Come home, come hoome. . ."

Finally, it would become pretty obvious that somebody was going to have to get saved or we were going to starve to death, and so one of us would relent and walk slowly, reverently forward like a sacrificial lamb to get it over with. I thought then that must be what the song was about, you know, "We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheep." It must have had something to do with the fact that they ate a lot of mutton in Biblical times.

But preaching never paid all that well, and Brother Joe Roy Dale had a Bible sales business on the side. He was as smooth as silk, with the self-assured tenacity they teach at Baylor. He'd usually start you out on a small, soft-cover number just perfect to keep in your purse or coat pocket for easy reference. If he thought you were good for it, though, the next thing you knew he'd have you signed up for the \$2,995 deluxe lifetime study Bible personally autographed by Jesus Christ Himself.

Bear across the creek and the football field out near the edge of town still looks pretty much the same as when I was playing for the Wildcats. The grass 440-yard track is gone, replaced by a new rubberized 400-meter oval. Going by, I try to imagine what my 52-second

quarters on grass might be on this surface.

It's a Fall Friday and in Texas that means high school football. Tonight the whole town will be here, spilling out of the too-small bleachers and along both sidelines. In a little out-of-the-way place like this it doesn't take much to entertain, as long as it has to do with football. They love their football and their team, win or draw. Just don't draw too many.

The refinery is over the next hill, flanked by grazing cattle. It used to be the biggest employer around with lots of plum jobs, but it closed when oil prices dropped a few years ago. They had to keep drilling deeper and deeper, and it just got too expensive. It still smells like a refinery, though.

Back in town near the crossroads is the Always Open. Never the greatest food, but it was hot and there was plenty of it, any time, day or night. Plenty of local news, too, whether you were interested or not. Sweet little Linda Lou would be waitressing, all chatty and a bit too friendly. Not a lot upstairs, but plenty more elsewhere.

It had a great juke box and lots of booths in the back where we would all crowd in on a Saturday night and teach the girls the words to "Louie, Louie." They would squeal *Can they say that?* in feigned disgust and then run to the restroom to compare notes.

The place went by a lot of names over the years, but like the marquee said, it was Always Open. Until now. Some say it's just a sign of the times, but the Wildcats won that night, and for a while at least, that was all that mattered.



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