

Meanderings and Mullings



Earl B. Russell

A unique chronicle of true stories, short essays, humor, travelogues, and ruminations that entertain, inspire, and stir thought. Russell has a voice that is easy to hear as he takes you back to his animated childhood in the South, and through adulthood with intriguing takes, poignant observations, and delightful surprises.

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Russell's first book, *Cold Turkey at Nine: The Memoir of a Problem Child*, tells of a life forever changed by his paranoid schizophrenic mother's death at his father's hands. In that book and in this one, which *Kirkus Reviews* notes "is made of more cheerful stuff," Russell writes with unusual empathy for the struggles of others he comes to know. With curiosity, humor, and insight in this his second book of nonfiction, you will come to know an earlier America now unknown to most, and a world that gets smaller and more precious as we experience it.

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Permission to quote an excerpt from the *ScienceDaily* article, “Political Views are Reflected in Brain Structure,” April 7, 2011, in Part 6, is gratefully acknowledged.

Front cover photo: “Charming Chambord.” Painting by Ellen Summerfield Russell, Chambord, France. 2013. The Part 5 story, “Painter and Her Magic,” describes how this painting came to be. Author photo.

Back cover photo: Ellen Summerfield Russell painting Chambord Chateau, Chambord, France, 2013. Author photo.

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“kidwich” on our check at the deli reminded me of those grilled cheese sandwiches from my early years.

Grilled cheese sandwich. Kidwich. For the rest of my life, I will most likely associate grilled cheese sandwiches with my childhood. I now know what to do when I want to feel like I’m still a kid.

Alice’s Restaurant

It seemed like a stroke of genius. Owner Nina Marlowe opened a new restaurant and music venue in Niederwald, Texas, somewhere around 2005. She named it Alice’s Restaurant for the famed restaurant of the same name that operated in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and was immortalized by singer-songwriter Arlo Guthrie, the famed son of the more famous Woody Guthrie.

Well, a few months after it opened, we invited our friends Bill and Paula Kemp to go with us to check it out. We trusted that this new Alice’s Restaurant in Niederwald would be true to the promise of Arlo Guthrie’s famous song, “Alice’s Restaurant.”

We chose to visit on a Friday or Saturday evening, which we figured would find the place hopping with customers energized by the touted live music there. Marlowe had staked a big part of the reputation of this new jewel on featuring Austin-area singer-songwriters. We were in for a local cultural treat.

We arrived to find a nearly empty parking lot at Alice’s Restaurant. Inside, we saw a band off to our left playing to a group of about forty empty chairs. A friendly waiter seated us at a table on the opposite side of the restaurant. Two other patrons were seated in the dining area when we arrived. We figured we had just arrived too early for the place to be hopping, but that a crowd would begin to trickle in as we ate.

The waiter gave us menus and took our drink orders. Each of us looked over an impressive list of down-home foods that would make any Central Texan proud. After an inordinately long wait, our waiter came to take our orders. Paula ordered the smoked pork chop, Bill ordered a sirloin steak, my wife Ellen ordered the catfish, and I ordered a chicken-fried steak.

After about forty-five minutes, our waiter reappeared with the disappointing news that none of the things we had ordered was available. He must have been engaged in a deep conversation with the chef about this dilemma. Keeping a stiff upper lip, our waiter handed us the menus again and asked us to make new choices. After a very short deliberation—remember we were extremely hungry after the long wait—we ordered alternatives that we thought would suffice. The waiter disappeared again for about a half hour.

As we waited, we noticed a good-looking young couple climbing into a small aboveground pool that butted up against the railing by the outdoor patio. This pool was about fifteen feet from our table and easily visible. After a few minutes it was obvious that the young couple liked each other very much. There was a lot of physical contact between them, with a type of innocence that must have been part of the chemistry between Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This couple at Alice's Restaurant seemed completely oblivious to our presence, as if they were the only two people in the world—either in love or in heat! I must confess that this unanticipated entertainment by the romantic bathers did help suppress our appetites for a time.

Finally, our waiter reappeared, this time with his tail firmly tucked between his legs. He sheepishly confided to us in a low voice that the only menu items available were hamburgers. He quietly asked us if we would like a hamburger. We basically said yes, anything, after being foodless there for well over an hour.

We laughed a lot about the irony of our dining experience compared to the famous line from Arlo Guthrie's song, which I will here paraphrase into what we all anticipated before arriving at the

restaurant: *We can get anything we want at Alice's Restaurant.* The gap between our expectations and the reality of Alice's Restaurant in Niederwald, Texas, on that particular day, was wide, to say the least. But Bill and Paula were good sports, to the point that they even praised us for our bent toward trying new restaurants. Somehow our disappointment with Alice's Restaurant in Niederwald was partly offset by the unique entertainment provided by the young bathers.

No other diners arrived while we were there. This was a dining experience like none other. It was indeed a local cultural treat. *Nolo contendere.*

We heard a few weeks later that Alice's Restaurant had closed. While not surprising, I could not help but feel sad for Nina Marlowe and her shattered dream in Niederwald.

Hot and Spicy

This is a hot story about my spicy late mother-in-law, Rose Madeline, who was one of my favorite people on the planet. We called her Madeline. She was the child of Sicilian parents who immigrated to the United States and settled in Chicago in the early part of the 20th century. She loved zesty foods beyond those of her family's traditions, and during the years I knew her, she relished hot spices.

Her love of spicy foods came into sharper focus for me after Ellen and I lived in Austin for a few years, a place we came to appreciate more spicy foods than were commonly available in other places we had lived. We learned on her visits there, for example, that she loved spicy Texas barbecue, Mexican, and Tex-Mex foods. She often added hot sauce on top of any barbecue sauce she felt was just too mild, and her favorite brand of the hot stuff was Cholula.

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