

My Favorite Thing About West Texas Is...

CBS Early Show

Dear Mr. Rick Kaplan,

Driving into West Texas, I always knew we were getting close when I could smell the rank, yet all-too-familiar aroma of feed lots. I can still vividly remember the never-ending wind swirling around, and the rows of cotton crops as you enter the Panhandle of Texas.

West Texas was my second home to go back to every summer growing up. My grandmother and great-grandparents raised us as toddlers in West Texas. After his divorce from my mother, my Dad went to school in Lubbock to be an aircraft inspector. When Dad landed a job in Waco, TX, my twin brother and I moved to be with him at age 5. We left West Texas to live with my Dad and new mother, but we returned to Dimmitt, TX, every summer to visit my grandmother and great grandparents.

Each summer we spent about 2 weeks attending Bible school at the local church, swimming at the Hereford pool, bowling, going to the Amarillo zoo, riding roller coasters at Wonderland Park, and seeing the latest summer movies. My grandmother let all the grandkids visit every summer, and somehow she kept up with us! We had a very busy schedule with all of our activities, and every summer we looked forward to returning to our second home.

However, one of my favorite things that we did every summer was attend the play "Texas" held in the bottom of the Palo Duro Canyon. As we drove down into the windy canyon roads, my twin brother Brandon and the cousins were restless with excitement to see the play. We always arrived early enough to eat the BBQ dinner and drink ice-cold tea. Dinner was always right before night fall and was a prelude to the evening's show in the canyon. The picnic tables sat at the bottom of a hill, which as a child seemed like the Himalaya Mountains. As a child, I climbed every inch of that hill and got a front-seat view of the beautiful canyon.

After dinner and rock climbing, everyone was rounded up to take their seats in the Pioneer Amphitheater. It was an all outdoor play complete with 19th century costumes and actors from the local college. Spectators from all across the country came to witness such a magical play about pioneers that came to settle in West Texas in the 1800's.

As an introduction, the national anthem was played as horses descended from the top of the canyon wall dashing at full speed while 2 riders carried the Texas Lone Star flag and the United States flag. The play was full of theatrical songs, western dancing and was nothing short of pure excitement. A magnificent light show portrayed real life thunder as part of the plot, and the surround sound made you feel as if you were in that time period with the actors. Following the show, the actors lined up outside the theatre still in full costume and shook hands with everyone that attended.

It was tradition to see the play every summer when we returned to West Texas. My twin brother, Brandon, and I went to visit my grandmother every summer until we were sixteen. We had gotten jobs and life was so busy with high school activities. However, after 2 years at junior college, I made the choice to finish my college degree at Texas Tech University in Lubbock. Then shortly after I moved there, Brandon moved to Amarillo to work. We both lived close again to my grandmother, and since our birthday was June 23rd, we went to see the play "Texas" again to revive an old tradition on our 21st birthday. The following summer in June 2007 we went again, because no matter how many times you went, it was just like seeing it for the first time. I never expected it to be the last time Brandon and I would share our tradition that summer in 2007.

I graduated from Texas Tech University in August 2007. Brandon stood by and watched me get a college diploma and was so proud of me. He had not taken the route to college, but he was my biggest supporter. I got a job in Tyler, TX, many hours away from West Texas. Three months and eight days after leaving Lubbock, I got the news that Brandon had died in a fatal car crash on November 19, 2007 in New Mexico.

So, when I think of West Texas, I think of every summer we spent at my grandmother's house, my second home. We made a lifetime of memories that I carry with me to this day. Some often say West Texas is the dust-bowl of America, but to me it's my home away from home. We shared a lot of laughs and experienced many things in West Texas; too many to write in this letter in fact. If you're thinking of visiting West Texas, go experience the magic for yourself, because it's not about what you do, only who you experience it with.

The play is celebrating their 41st anniversary season this summer in 2008, and it is still a beloved play enjoyed by many people of all ages. It will never be the same without him, but the memories of that play with him every summer still light a fire in my heart.

Go experience your "Texas" and God Bless!

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