

Peg O'Keef Writing Samples

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Texas Time Travel Tours—Hispanic Texans: Journey from Empire to Democracy “Terlingua” (Listen: <https://texastimetravel.oncell.com/en/terlingua-93656.html>)

These days folks make the trek to the tiny ghost town of Terlingua for curiosity and celebration. The annual chili-cook off and Day of the Dead events bring color and fun to the town... but Terlingua's story isn't much of a party.

It all begins with Cinnabar—a red-colored ore that, once crushed and heated in a furnace, produces quicksilver, better known as liquid mercury.

From its discovery in Terlingua at the end of the 1800s, cinnabar became the source of the town's fortune and also its tragedy.

Chisos Mining Company opened in 1903 and, according to the *New York Times*, “supplied much of the global hunger for explosive mercury crystals... through one world war and the start of another,” stripping the landscape for firewood to run the furnace. The company earned \$12 million for mine owner Howard E. Perry.

For Mexican workers, eager to escape the political and economic chaos back home in the early 1900s, it was a job... but an awful one. Miners worked 12-hour shifts in two-man teams, one man wielding a spike, the other a hammer, and carried 80-pound packs of ore on their backs out of the mine to the smelter. Burros were deemed too valuable for such work. For this labor, the workers were making \$542 a year. Perry, however, made \$4,400 per worker.

The town itself was segregated; the Mexican workers lived east of the company store, while the Anglos lived on the west side, dominated by Perry's mansion.

If you visit the cemetery on Day of the Dead, you'll encounter a colorful array of decorations... but beneath the ribbons and candles are starkly un-embellished graves of many Mexican workers who died in accidents or suffered the slow agonies of mercury poisoning or the influenza epidemic.

The mine's production declined in the '30s and the company went bankrupt in 1942, closing in 1946. People simply left. Terlingua had a population of 2,500 in 1918, during its mining heyday; by 1970 it had dropped to 25.

Today the population has increased a bit as Terlingua has evolved into a charming relic, a ghost town where curiosity seekers visit to drink a beer and eat some chili.

Fortunately for them, tourists are considered more valuable than burros.

Museum of Modernism—Nakashima Tour “Hi-Fi Cabinet with Bitter Brush Handle”

Bitter brush is a very special kind of wood—able to withstand great heat and intense cold as well as strong wind. The harshest and least forgiving environment is the natural home of this slow but resolutely growing plant. It holds a powerful place in the world of Nakashima.

In 1942, shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he, his wife, and his newborn daughter—like many Americans of Japanese ancestry—were forced into internment camps or, as he called them, concentration camps. Nakashima referred to this tactic as “a stupid, insensitive act, one by which my country could only hurt itself... a policy of unthinking racism.” The Nakashimas were shipped to Camp Minidoka in the Idaho desert.

There, Nakashima met a Japanese carpenter Genturo Hikogawa—who had an intimate knowledge of traditional Japanese woodworking. And even though he was an accomplished architect, designer, and furniture maker already, Nakashima became Hikogawa’s student.

He learned the ancient methods of joinery, working with traditional hand tools on the materials that were available—whatever he could find lying around. And since he was in the desert of Idaho, it was mostly Bitter Brush—the very wood you see on the handle of this record player cabinet.

Years later, Mira Nakashima remarked on her father’s ability to reframe the incarceration of his family. She said, “Fortunately he was able to transform anger and negativity into the positive passion of conviction, the passionate creativity of his work, and the passion for beauty and perfection, which served him well.”

Even after the Nakashima family’s release was arranged and they moved to New Hope, Pennsylvania, he would design with Bitter Brush many times... Always with reverence for its strength in the face of terrible circumstance.

Museum of Modernism—Nakashima Tour “Weatherbee End Table”

Nakashima did not trust perfection. In fact, he spent much of his life exploring the beauty of imperfection. The distinctive bumpiness of this wood would have sent most woodworkers fleeing in the other direction. The bumps, known as burls, were commonly considered faults in wood—a sort of tumor in the tree.

But to Nakashima, these irregularities were a source of beauty. Mira—commenting on her father’s attraction to what she called “weird pieces of wood”—once said, “A burl could be conceived as an aberration, but for him that was the art, something to be recognized and used. The form that nature gives was his inspiration.”

He referred to burlled English Oak as a “treasure” and said that sawing such wood required the “precision of a diamond cutter.” He wrote, “Each of these oak burls can occur only once, in a never-to-be-repeated pattern.” The roots structures can be as or even more spectacular than those above ground.

The treasure George found in these imperfect objects can be defined using a Japanese term that has become very popular in Western cultures too: *wabi-sabi*.

“Wabi” and “Sabi” have individual definitions, but together they describe a way of viewing the world and seeing beauty in unexpected places.

“Wabi” means that something is in tune with nature and real—utterly authentic. It is what it is... and it’s not pretending to be anything else. “Sabi” things carry the burden of their years with dignity and grace. They may be weathered, lined, mottled, or even decomposing. The march of time is part of their beauty.

Wabi-sabi lives in the simplicity of an old pottery teapot or in the enduring dignity of an aging barn with a rusted roof. This table is a very rare creation—revealing the swirling grain in three-dimensional grape burls. Ancient imperfections in perfect form. It is truly wabi-sabi.

Modernism Museum of Mount Dora—Esherick and Castle Tour “Castle’s Crescent Rocker, Chair, and Table Lamp”

“Come here,” says either of these Wendell Castle chairs. And if that invitation is tempting—if you feel a little more alive or maybe even a little awkward—you know you have been seduced.

Sensuality defined.

It’s not difficult to imagine its caress of your hips when you accept the whispered invitation. Not difficult to imagine wanting to reach out and give the smooth arms a gentle stroke. Not difficult to imagine comfort as your head settles back against the soft leather... as you give in and allow it to carry you away.

Even Castle’s lamp just adds to the scene. You can imagine leaning over, perhaps your hand brushing the polychrome wood, as you turn on—or perhaps turn off—the light.

If poets and lovers are to be believed, seduction is an art. But it must be an invisible art. The minute you see the labor behind it, the illusion falls away.

So just float away.

Or look more closely. Observe the excellent craftsmanship of the wood—shaped to please the eye and ensure lasting value. The precise joinery. The extraordinary balance and weight of two inviting chairs that are ever-so-earthly but sublimely sophisticated.

“Come here.”

Texas Time Travel Tours—World War II on the Texas Homefront—“Sweetwater: WASP Museum” (Listen: <https://texastimetravel.oncell.com/en/sweetwater-national-wwii-wasp-museum-92198.html>)

As the war heated up, almost every U.S. military pilot worth his salt was shipped overseas for combat. However, plenty of flying duties still needed attention stateside: testing, training, and ferrying aircraft.

Recognizing the crisis at hand, General Hap Arnold was urged by popular pilot Jaqueline Cochran that women could fill those duties just as well as men.

For two years, from 1942 to 1943, Avenger Field in Sweetwater became the location of a remarkable wartime training program: Women Airforce Service Pilots—or simply WASP.

A total of 1,074 women completed the program, every one fully licensed to fly before she stepped on the field. They were hungry to perform their patriotic duty—just like their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sweethearts were doing.

And they succeeded beyond even Jackie Cochran’s expectations—graduating at a higher rate than their male peers while having fewer accidents. In the course of their service, they flew over six-million air miles and piloted virtually every plane in the military arsenal, even the mammoth B-29.

Coming from all over the nation to Sweetwater, the female pilots had some difficulty adjusting to the heat and dry wind of West Texas. But they loved the limitless sky overhead and its dramatic sunsets—giving birth to the WASP motto: “We live in the wind and the sand and our eyes are on the stars.”

They became role models for the young women in the community too, as one remembers, “I’ll never forget them.” She said, “They were so independent and so self-assured. To me, they symbolize what I had suspected for some time: there truly could be a bright future for us girls beyond the city limits of Sweetwater if we wanted to seek it.”

Texas Time Travel Tours—World War II on the Texas Homefront—“Lubbock: Silent Wings Museum” (Listen: <https://texastimetravel.oncell.com/en/lubbock-silent-wings-museum-92459.html>)

“It all started in Lubbock town,” said World War II veteran Vernon Houk, a long-retired veteran glider pilot, when describing his adventures flying “silent wings” during the war. That was where he got his training for his extraordinary mission.

Gliders are not the first aircraft that comes to mind when thinking about the bullet and flak-filled skies over Europe. And the contemporary notion of them as sleek flyers is also inaccurate.

The combat glider flown by Vernon and most other U.S. pilots was the Waco CG-4A. About 48-foot-long, with an 84-foot wingspan, this somewhat lumpy canvas bird was capable of carrying 15 men, or a jeep, a howitzer, or even a small bulldozer.

The pilots that flew them were a special breed too. Their combat flights were always one-way. If they landed the Waco successfully—an operation sometimes called a “controlled crash”—they had to be as good with their rifles, fighting their way out, as they ever were with their aircraft controls.

And since the glider was considered most useful as an invasion vehicle—towed and released over battles, often at night in chaotic situations—landing was always risky business. If they went in nose first, their cargo could roll forward and crush the pilot.

But those realities lay in the future for Vernon and his peers as they sailed through the skies over the south plains of Texas. He remembered those easy days as he said, “[It] was beautiful, level, no trees, no nothing — we really should have had some obstacles.”

When the pilots completed their training, they received a pair of silver wings with a G in the center. Naturally, this stood for “glider” but most of them knew it also stood for “guts.”

The American Underwater Warfare Center—Destroyer Escort USS Stewart—“The 3-Inch/50-Caliber Gun” (Tour stops 205 and 206)

As you explore the ship you will see three batteries of three-inch 50-caliber guns like this one. Two of them are in forward positions, and one of them is aft on the fantail. These guns provided protection from surface vessels as well as from aircraft.

You may be thinking the barrel looks bigger than the fifty-caliber you would see on a military aircraft, and you are right. In the language of navy artillery, the “three-inch” refers to the diameter of the projectile shot from it. And “50-caliber” refers to the relative length of the barrel in relationship to the diameter of the barrel; therefore, this gun’s barrel length is 50 times the width of the barrel, which makes it 150 inches long.

Look at the whole gun. Pretty intimidating: set in an open-pedestal mount and surrounded by a circular shield that barely protects it from enemy fire and shrapnel. It is designed to send shells flying at an initial velocity of 2700 feet per second—that’s nine football fields every second. The maximum horizontal range was approximately 12,000 yards, which equals about six miles, and the maximum ceiling range was about 21,000 feet.

If you can do so safely, we encourage you to step up into the mount. Take in the view of the crew who operated it. Imagine how it must have felt to work with this large weapon.

Consider this: these guns were hand-loaded. The shells all weigh approximately 13 pounds, and the different types of projectiles varied in length from 9 to 13 inches. And as you picture yourself working this weapon, keep in mind that it wasn’t just one man shooting it. It took a whole crew of men.

Just aiming and sighting this gun required several members of the crew—a pointer who aimed the gun up and down... and a trainer who aimed and moved the gun side to side. Yet another sight-setter made adjustments for range. Up on the flight bridge, a radar director also helped with the aim.

Back here, a gun captain “called the shots”—so to speak. One loader received ordnance from another loader who passed the ammunition. The first loader rammed the ammo into the open breech, which is the rear of the gun. Another man set the fuze and closed the breech. When the gun fired, the hot shell casing ejected out of the gun and became the responsibility of the hot shellman, who disposed of it. In the midst of all these actions, a safetyman—called a checker—made sure the sight for fire was clear.

That’s what it took to fire one round.

Now consider this: the firing rate for this weapon was ten rounds per minute. In other words, the elaborate coordination of action I just described could take place every six seconds. This is a powerful example of two of the Navy’s greatest characteristics—teamwork and training.

The crew of this gun was a well-oiled machine. They had trained and drilled the operation so many times that they knew what their teammates were going to do before they did it. As one veteran said: “In the Navy, you train and you train... and then you train some more. When you got in a pickle, you know how to do your job so well, you do it automatically... because you can’t learn in the heat of battle.”

No one was trying to be the hero—but everybody was fully invested in the total success of the operation.

Fantasy of Flight—Audio Experiences—“Supermarine Spitfire MK XVI” (Written in collaboration with Kermit Weeks)

NARRATOR: What happens when we place limitations on ourselves... or accept the limitations imposed by others?

CHARACTER VOICE—WINSTON CHURCHILL: Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.

NARRATOR: These were the words you heard Churchill utter in honor of the pilots who flew in the Battle of Britain, pilots who, like you, were henceforth known as “the few.”

You know the conflict well. The enemy’s attempt to destroy the RAF and pave the way to an invasion of Britain was merciless. You know that many of “the few” are lying in their graves and that those who survived were not only “few” but also damned lucky.

Those were horrifying battles flown over the English countryside and the streets of London, but you helped turn the tide against a fierce and determined enemy. It took luck and nerve.

Sensational flying and strict strategy. It took two excellent planes, Hawker Hurricanes and Supermarine Spitfires ultimately to force the enemy away from England and prevent an invasion.

One thing was not required: legs.

To learn how to be a hero—even without legs, push the green button

NARRATOR: You are Douglas Bader and you lost your legs in a flying accident in 1931. The RAF has forced you to retire after your accident, but the looming world war only serves to build your earth-bound frustration. You know in your heart that you must fly again. You will not allow them to make you a cripple. You know if you label yourself, you limit yourself.

By being one obstinate, determined pain-in-the-neck and using every channel you can find, you convince the RAF that, even with your artificial legs, you are an asset to the war effort. With great hesitation, they let you climb into the Spitfire and fly again.

The glorious Spitfire is as fierce as she is beautiful. Enemy fighter pilots regard her with awe and terror... she is their deadliest foe. She is always in demand. In fact, she is the only fighter aircraft to be in continual production before, during, and after the war. Why?

CHARACTER VOICE—DOUGLAS BADER: Well, I suppose the Spitfire and I have a lot in common. We can adapt to changing situations with ease... and yet we never lose our desire to win the fight we're in. We just don't stop. We keep at it. We reject any efforts to limit us. Don't try to put us in a box unless you want the battle of your life. (laughs) If we can't shoot a hole in you, we'll work at you till you beg us to stop... or simply give way to us.

NARRATOR: You're not joking. That's how you got back in your plane. You persisted until the argument ended... and you won. You may not have made many friends along the way, but you earned a lot of respect. Respect from the men you lead... You are a wily tactician and a fierce protector who knows how to cut through the red tape—how to get things done. With or without legs, you are the leader they want.

And you have earned the respect of your enemy. By the summer of 1941, you have laid claim to 22 enemy planes shot down, the fifth highest record in the RAF—all in your superb Spitfire. But your war is not over yet... new challenges await you.

To come face to face with your foe, press the Yellow button.

NARRATOR: Everything changes when you are shot down in August 1941 and taken prisoner by the enemy—who are thrilled to have captured the notorious Douglas Bader, a pilot of such legendary skill and courage. They even arrange for the allies to drop a new prosthetic leg to replace the one lost when you bailed from your plane. Soon, however, you become a pain in their necks too—just as you had in the RAF. You make so many escape attempts that your captors threaten to take your legs away and, ultimately, they put you in their most “escape proof” prison, where you stay until war's end.

We don't envy your prison guards. We're sure you are a handful.

But you are not forgotten. Upon liberation from prison at the end of the war, you are given the honor of leading a victory flypast of 300 aircraft over London.

Throughout your life, you inspire many—both able-bodied and otherwise—to be as persistent and demanding as you are in seeking a meaningful life.

CHARACTER VOICE—DOUGLAS BADER: Don't listen to anyone who tells you that you can't do this or that. That's nonsense. . . . Go anywhere you want to. But never, never let them persuade you that things are too difficult or impossible.

NARRATOR: To hear Kermit's Comments, press the Red button.

KERMIT: Douglas Bader was not a great handicapped pilot. He was simply a great pilot. The fact that he flew without legs is remarkable because of what it says about his spirit. He was never diminished by what happened to him. If anything, his challenges only amplified his determination. Whether it was losing his legs or being forced into premature retirement or facing an enemy or being imprisoned... he never let up.

Legend has it that Bader actually had a slight advantage flying without legs. When subjected to high G-forces, pilots risk losing consciousness because their blood rushes to their extremities and their brains can become oxygen deprived. Perhaps not having lower extremities helped Bader a bit. It is an interesting idea to ponder. However, I believe that Bader's success was due to the fact that he was a go-getter and never allowed others to limit him.

What happens when we place limitations on ourselves... or accept the limitations imposed by others?