

Chapter 12: The
Shape of the World



All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

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Chapter 12: The Shape of the World

I can't remember making a decision to go to college. Throughout my early life, it was just something that everybody took for granted. My paternal grandfather had been a lawyer and newspaper publisher in Mexico prior to being exiled to the United States for his criticism of President Porfirio Diaz' dictatorial government. My maternal grandfather was a graduate of the Colegio Civil in Monterrey, Mexico. He came to the United States during the early 20th Century, realizing that revolutionary Mexico was no place for a man with a wife and five young daughters.

Family tradition has a strong impact on educational ambition. My father wanted me to be a lawyer and/or a newspaperman like his father; my mother wanted me to follow my oldest brother into medical school.

For my part, I wasn't sure what I wanted. When I enrolled in the University of Texas at the tender age of 15, I wanted to study journalism, law and medicine, but I also wanted to major in science and literature. It wasn't until my senior year after having taught some adult literacy classes and the enactment of the Texas Gilmer-Aiken legislation, which provided beginning teachers with an unbelievable high beginning salary of \$2,405 a year, that I decided to become a teacher.

During my senior year at Martin High School in Laredo, my father was transferred by the Missouri Pacific Railroad to Monterrey, Mexico. My mother joined him in Monterrey at the end of the school year when my brother and I graduated from high school. My parents were very supportive of my higher education schooling, but, unfortunately, they were equally supportive of my oldest brother in medical school, my other brother at Texas A&M and my sister enrolled as a boarder at Ursuline Academy in Laredo, where she would have the opportunity to graduate from an American school prior to enrollment at Texas Women's University in Denton.

Every month, my father would send me whatever financial assistance he could, although what he sent me could not even take care of my room and board, let alone tuition, textbooks, clothing and other college expenses. I therefore had to earn the major portion of the cost of my college education. Although I had a multiplicity of part-time jobs, my main source of income during my freshman year came from working at Renfro's Drug Store at a pay rate of 50 cents an hour. Most of my sophomore year, I worked as an apprentice carpenter in the building of student housing. My junior and senior years were mostly financed by translating into Spanish scripts for a radio station operated by the University of Texas. During all four years at the

university, I picked up some extra money waiting on tables in some of the luxurious fraternities and sororities, as well as tutoring other students in various subjects, but especially in Spanish.

I mention all of this because I want to emphasize my feelings upon graduation with a teaching certificate and the prospect of getting a job that paid the unbelievable sum of \$2,405 a year. I didn't attend the graduation ceremonies. That same day, I was taken to the Scott-White clinic in Temple, Texas, where I was paid \$10 for a pint of blood. With this money, I shipped all of my belongings to Laredo and hitch-hiked home to look for a job.

The year of my graduation was 1950. The baby boomers of the post-World War II years were too young to be enrolled in school, and the low birth rates during the depression and the war, and the discharge of military service men and women had created a surplus of teachers.

As soon as I arrived in Laredo, I submitted an application to the Laredo Public Schools and waited for a call. They had no vacancies, and it started to look as if my dream job would never materialize. On the last day before the start of the 1950-51 school year, I received a call from the personnel office informing me of an opening teaching science at L.J. Christen Jr. High. I was scheduled to meet with the county sheriff, who was also president of the school board.

South Texas communities sometimes have very strong political leaders heading very strong political groups. One such political boss was George Parr of Duval County, commonly referred to as the Duke of Duval. Another such political powerhouse was my interviewer in Laredo, who doubled up as president of the school board and County Sheriff.

When I arrived for my interview, I was disappointed to find four other applicants for the same position waiting to be interviewed. I took a seat among them, most of whom I had met before; some of them even close friends.

One of the applicants was called in, and spent a few minutes in the sheriff's office. He came out, muttered something about "stupid questions," picked up his things and walked out.

In turn, each of the other applicants was called in, came out confused or angry, made reference to "stupid questions," and left the office.

I was the last to be called in. I greeted the sheriff, conveyed greetings from my father, and was asked to sit down for my interview.

"I have only one question for you," he stated. "You want to teach science in our schools. Do you teach that the world is flat, or do you teach that the world is round?"

Just then I realized that the job was mine. I had heard the question before, I understood it, and I knew the answer the political boss of Laredo wanted to hear.

“Sheriff, I can teach it either way.”

That same day, I walked off the streets of Laredo and started my educational career.