

**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Curio Stores and T-Shirts Anonymous

Your on the Street Reporter Curio Stores and T-Shirts Anonymous (TA)¹

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Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. Prior to continuing reports about the general bedlam in the world, a brief side-track might offer some relief.

I have posted several reports about visits to museums and art galleries. I've mentioned I'm an easy mark for the paraphernalia found in the shops that are usually located near the exit of these places. These stores reside along-side the monuments, archives, and libraries I encounter as I conduct research for these reports. I sometimes spend as much time in these shops as I do puzzling over the arcane artifacts residing in the adjacent gallery.

I suspect my addiction can be attributed to my childhood. From the stand point of coming across old artifacts, I was a deprived child. I was reared in a region of America where museums and art galleries had yet to make their appearance. Southeastern New Mexico was so bereft of a history and culture that...just consider... *curio stores* did not exist.

After all, if a town or county cannot lay claim to a well-known hero, a battlefield, strange terrain, a religious sandwich, or a tearing Madonna, what can the local curio store sell? Ceramic plates without a portrait on them? Un-embossed paper weights? Blank post cards? Dry-eyed Madonnas? Blank puzzles? They are not one's cup of tea.

You may be skeptical of my statements, especially if you come from a culture-laded part of America. You're probably saying *in what part of this great country can one not find a curio store? They're as common apple pie.*

Not so in my childhood home of Lea County, New Mexico. A few years ago, a best-selling writer wrote a book titled, *The End of History*, a pretentious title for an artificial idea. Regardless of its pretension, the title reminded me of my old stomping grounds, with this change: *The Absence of History*. Even the rugged Comanche and Apache tribes kept their tepees away from this harsh land.²

The meanderings of Cabeza de Baca's treks around the Southwest United States (the sixteenth century) also make my point. Even though he was desperate for water, food, and company, he went out of his way to avoid the part of the country I call home.

In earlier times, the Clovis Man camped-out 100 miles to the north of my hometown. Same goes for modern times. For example, the Roswell Man landed 100 miles to the west. And for more modern times, the adjacent town of Artesia, some 60 miles away, is home to the Border Protection Academy. But there is nothing of tourist interest in my hometown.

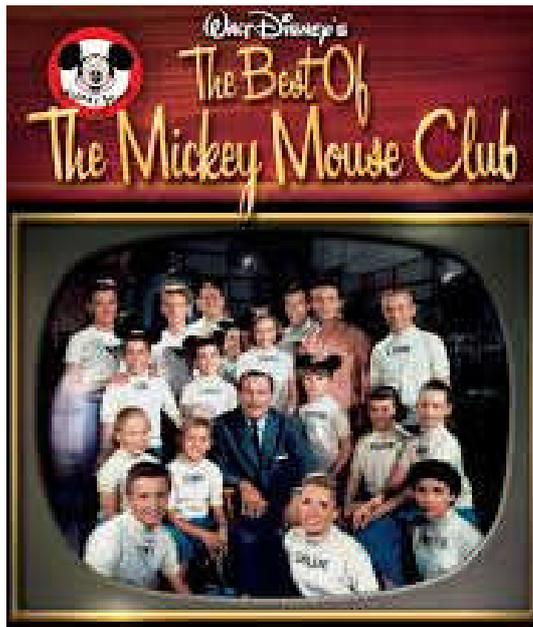
¹ Reposted from a report of 2009.

² They came to southeastern New Mexico to hunt, but returned east to what is now West Texas. The stark and treeless plains of New Mexico were almost uninhabitable in the winter.

Lovington recently ran a spread in a state magazine about its tourist attractions. The ad bragged about the cheese factory, an oil refinery, and a new prison. Recently, the area has come into to the news. Its politicians successfully lobbied for the region to become a long-term underground storage site for nuclear waste, a new industry that will likely not attract many tourists or curio shops.

Southeastern New Mexico in the 1950s was a homogenous culture, consisting mostly of white Anglo Saxon Protestants. Native Americans lived in the northern part of the state. Blacks were few. Browns from Mexico came around during cotton-picking season. Places of worship were for Baptists, Methodists, Assembly of God followers, and a few Presbyterians. Jews and Catholics were as rare as curio stores.

This situation presented a problem for potential curio store owners: No markets for ceramic Madonnas, no demand for moccasins or dinner plates that hang on walls. Plastic crosses would have been sellers to a few patrons at a potential curio store in my hometown. A few of my Baptist family and Methodist relatives collected crosses like Rush Limbaugh collects diatribes, but most of the citizens were non-cross carrying Protestants. Could the town support a curio store selling religious artifacts, and perhaps postcards with crosses on them? Maybe in Rome, but not in Lovington.



In addition, our town had no television. The nearest TV station was located over 100 miles away. This absence of a tie to America's vast entertainment industry and associated knick-knacks further discouraged curio store owner pioneers from migrating to this part of the nation. After all, how would this owner go about selling a Mickey Mouse Club set of ears to a child who had never seen a set of the ears to begin with? The Club members in this photo are wearing a costume that would likely appear to a TV-deprived kid as a poor rendition of Pluto's ears.³ To bring this home, I never heard the Mickey Mouse song until I was in college, and even then I did not catch-on to my college mates singing it as satire. Mickey Mouse cartoons, seen on Saturdays at the Lea Theater, were serious business to me.

So, there you are: No stuff. No TV. No Mickey Mouse Club mouse ears. No curio store. I hope you can now understand why I love stuff. I never had much of it. And curio stores are stuffed with stuff.

³ <https://www.google.com/search?q=Mickey+mouse+club&rlz>.

In the latter part of my first decade on earth, Dad withdrew me from my country cocoon in Southeastern New Mexico and deposited me for a couple days into Northern New Mexico. The purpose of our journey was to attend a ceremony in Albuquerque. My brother Ross was to be presented a trophy for his athletic prowess while a student at the University of New Mexico.

Prior to this seminal voyage, I had not ventured more than a couple hundred miles from my home. Some of my relatives lived in Texas, and we sortied-out to see them on occasion. But they lived in equally barren landscapes, cultures also unable to support a curio store.

I discovered my first curio store when Dad stopped at a one-gas-station town, called Clines Corners, New Mexico---about 60 miles south of Albuquerque. In hindsight, I am sure the station was selling gas as a front for its curios. I walked into the station and beheld a collection of the most worthless, useless, tasteless bunch of knick-knacks I had ever seen. I loved the place. Since that time, I rarely pass by a bric-a-brac store without buying several of its brics or bracs.

Curious Curios

Enough about the past. These reports are about the present. As part of an earlier report about the National Archives in Washington, DC, I asked a guide for the directions to the curio store. He responded, "Sir.....We **do not** (underlined and bold text as a way of expressing his expression) have a *curio store* in this building. We have a *gift shop*. Down the hall and to your left."

I had breached an unwritten rule by confusing two facts. Fact number one: *Curio stores* are located in undignified buildings that sell undignified junk (Clines Corners, New Mexico). Fact number two: *Gift shops* are located in dignified buildings that sell dignified junk (The National Archives).

I bought some stuff at the National Archives Gift Shop. My favorite item was a beautiful parchment-like document containing the words of our National Anthem...written in Spanish, the soon-to-be official language of America.

By the way, have you heard "The Star Spangled Banner" played by a Mariachi band? Pretty lively, especially when they throw in some verse from "Guadalajara."

Strum, strum, strum... (In Spanish):

Oh say can you see....

Guadalajara, Guadalajara!

By the dawn's early light....

Guadalajara, Guadalajara!

Underwater Pens

Until a couple years ago, my major curio store (eh, gift shop) weakness was T-shirts. I effortlessly bypassed the coffee cups with Lincoln's mug on it. I avoided buying plastic renderings of Washington's wooden false teeth without so much as a second look. Thank You notes? No thank you, email works just fine. Postcards? The same.

T-shirts were my main addiction, but like a substance abuse groupie---if T-shirts were not available---I could mainline substitutions. A few years ago, at an aquarium gift shop in St. Thomas, I fell prey to the lure of a pen designed to write underwater. Unless I was a Jacques Cousteau wannabee, why on---or slightly under---earth would I want this junk? I bought the thing, and for a hefty price. I don't know why, but it seemed like a good idea at the time.

I never used the pen. In my haste to buy it, I forgot to purchase an important accessory: waterproof paper. Consequently, the pen rested among my trove of treasureless stuff. Then, one Christmas season I passed it off to a friend---a fellow writer---who had recently signed-up for scuba diving lessons. Being a writer, it was a foregone conclusion he had to write about his new soul-altering experience of breathing oxygen while submerged in H₂O. He was impressed that I had selected a gift so closely aligned with his new passion in life.

Let's do a survey. Who among you are drawn to curio store junk? Admit it. Send in the names of your favorite items. I promise I'll keep your name and responses completely anonymous on a secret, public Web page. After the results are in, I'll publish a "Top Ten List of The Most Popular and Worthless Curio Store Junk."

T-Shirts, the Stuff of Life

I wrap up this report by making a confession. As mentioned, I was addicted to curio shop T-shirts. I couldn't get past the T-shirt shelves without buying one...or two...or three shirts---sometimes two with the same picture on their fronts; just in case the dry cleaners lost one of the duplicate shirts.

In desperation, I sought help. In so doing, I discovered most governments have hot lines and help desks for winos and druggies, but the social workers were less than helpful when I explained my T-shirt obsession. Lucky for me, I discovered T-shirts Anonymous (TA). Hallelujah! In case you want help, here is some background information on TA:⁴

T.A.'s roots date to a 1935 meeting in Akron, Ohio, of two men who had serious T-shirt wearing and purchasing problems. Both men had been members of a fellowship group that emphasized spiritual values and discouraged not only buying T-shirts, but wearing them as well. Through this group, both men achieved T-shirt sobriety. They learned that the excessive purchase of T-shirts was a disease, and with this new perspective, they were able to stop wearing T-shirts. The two men began working with other T-shirt sickees at Akron's City Hospital, referring to themselves as T-shirt Alpha and T-shirt Bravo, thus establishing the T.A. tradition of anonymity. Their approach—that T-shirt addicts must recognize their plight as a sickness—helped dozens of Akron T-shirt addicts to stop wearing T-shirts.

A Happy Ending

I am cured. Oh sure, I crave a T-shirt now and then. I even wear one on special occasions. But I'm careful not to over-indulge. As TA taught me, one T-shirt leads to another, and to another...and before you know it, you're off the wagon and burdened with that powerless feeling that comes from T-shirts ruling your life.

⁴ From Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia...with heavy alterations. Key in Alcoholics Anonymous.

So, I'm happier. My dog is happier because she senses her master is happier. My wife is the happiest of all, because she now has extra space in our closet to store her T-shirts.

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