

JULY 17, 1986

Traveling in China is kind of like herding woolies and hollow horns back home. You don't seem to make much headway. We've overstayed our visit in Beijing, and we learned last night that we are going to return to the capital before we go home.

Any time there's any waiting to do, it'd be my best judgment not to ask my countrymen to do the waiting for you. Mankind has been plenty lucky that Magellan was the first man to sail around the world. Had it been an American, we'd have overshot the stopping point a full half of a lap, just getting slowed down to throw on the brakes or drop the anchor chain.

Wherever we are on this China trip, however, we have a short meeting every morning in the lobby, or off to one side in a conference room. Different delegates, from an ex-congressman to a widely traveled foreign educated professor will have spoken.

The audience pops out of bed more alert than we would at home. We are using mattresses made from corn shucks and pillows stuffed in peanut hulls for bedding. About six of the eight hours reserved for sleeping is spent working out a spot in the bed and on the pillow that fits the contours of the body and the shape of the head. I've learned to have a snack before I retire at night. Until I caught on to that trick, I had an uncontrollable craving for those salted nuts like they used to have in bars on state side.

So after thrashing around on the dry shucks and the crushed hulls, the soft chairs in the lobby are inviting and the speeches are invigorating. I haven't been asked to speak because there are only eight of us from Texas who speak the same language. Also, quite a number of the group are highly papered college people. Once they've graduated and been anointed with PhD's they don't seem to want to get an education from the outside. On several occasions I've dropped a lot of little pointers their way, but they'd just look out of the bus window or feign a sudden interest in repacking their camera bags.

The day we went out to the Great Wall, you'd have thought the wall was wrapped around each delegate from the way they withdrew in their seats. I was having a grand morning. Our Chinese hosts were preoccupied, too. I've seen guides spend more time tracing the history of a two-passenger foot bridge. Talk about the inscrutable Oriental! Those two fellows were so quiet, I thought maybe that the Great Wall was still a classified military secret.

One question that kept coming up among the Americans was why the Great Wall was continued under so many dynasties until it was 6000 miles long. Finally, I told them that emperors and kings have to make promises just like presidents and governors. The difference is that our politicians make those promises to the voters while the monarchs and other royal big shots make them to some dame, like a queen, or an empress, or a concubine, or all three.

Stroking them under the chin and bringing back a rug from the last royal visit to India will only last so long. Ladies of the court, as they are delicately called, don't give a hang about walls, but they sure don't want to have less wall space than their predecessors. And in my opinion, folks who don't have the gumption to understand that much about royal nature are destined to be the dullest kind of commoners.

I got so carried away that I lost contact with my audience. Modern day education under the People's Republic have to teach history with a Communist bent, but that's no excuse for their American visitors to be so close minded. We are going to be plenty sorry when we get back home and family and friends start quizzing us about the origin of the Great Wall.

It's too late now to ask me to speak at one of their pre-breakfast sessions. They aren't fooling me. They understand a lot more of the Texas lingo than they let on, especially the ones that live near us in Oklahoma.