

Memories of Other Times and Other Places

Helan (Kelly) Drake

PREFACE

Dear WASPs

I grew up in Sweetwater, Texas, during World War II, and on July 1 of this year I made a sentimental journey home to attend my high school reunion. Shortly after my return to Dallas, two articles concerning the WASPs appeared in the ***Dallas Times Herald***. From these articles I obtained your address. Prompted by the reunion and the articles, I searched through my writer's journal (I have taught English at Eastfield College, one of the Dallas County Community Colleges, for nearly twenty years) and found an undated entry which I had written perhaps twelve or fifteen years ago. I have always liked the piece and I hope you will too.

Now that I am also gray-haired and grandmotherly, I realize that you WASPs were early role-models for me. In those pre-LIB days you were my first examples of extraordinarily accomplished women. I admired you then; I admire you still. If you wish to use my writing in any way, feel free to do so. If you do not, that's all right too. I just thought you might like to know how at least one little girl (and probably many little girls) living in Sweetwater a long time ago felt about you.

Sincerely,

Helan (Kelly) Drake

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Sweetwater, Texas, in case you don't know, is a small town off Interstate 20 about 200 miles west of Fort Worth. That's where I grew up. When I think about Sweetwater, I think of mesquite trees, red ants and rattlesnakes. I remember winters when blue northers lashed down upon us out of innocent-looking skies, dropping temperatures thirty degrees in an hour. I remember springs when dust storms sucked up freshly-plowed topsoil from the Texas high plains and spewed it eastward, turning daylight into

red dusk. I remember summers when the always-sparse rains stopped altogether, when everything green turned yellow and foot-frying heat rose visibly from sidewalks and streets. I remember autumns which would have been summers anywhere else, when days were still hot and dry but nights became milder and almost comfortable.

The summers in Sweetwater are which I remember most vividly. I went swimming often, at least three or four times a week, primarily, I suppose, because there were so few other things to do in Sweetwater. I always walked to and from the city pool, probably a total of five miles both ways, often in temperatures of a hundred degrees or more. I'd swim for hours from shortly after lunch until five or six in the afternoon. I never lolled around the side of the pool, sunbathing. I swam, dived, dunked for pebbles, and played water tag with my friends. From the time I took the free Red Cross swimming course when I was ten until I went away to college after high school graduation, swimming was my favorite summertime activity.

Among the most memorable times for me were the summers during World War II when the local air base, Avenger Field, was, for a time, the training camp for the Women's Air Force Service Pilots, the WASPs. The WASPs were a small, select, voluntary group. WASPs weren't taught to fly; women had to be licensed pilots, young, and in excellent physical condition before they could join. In the early 1940's their numbers were few. These women were different, they were special, they were my idea of "high class" women.

These "high class" women held a powerful fascination for me. When, during the summer, they came to the swimming pool (just about the only place for them to go too, apparently), I observed them keenly. They stayed among themselves; they didn't mix with the locals, who, like me, stared at them with mixed curiosity and awe. They were tan; lithe; bold in appearance, speech, and behavior. They were aloof, self-contained, self-assured, and self-sufficient; at least so it seemed to me then. Their hair and their make-up had an elegance, a just-rightness, which no local beauty shop could produce. Their clothes were unlike anything found in J. C. Penney, Sears Roebuck, or even the elite Levy's Department Store. They wore jewelry, even while swimming, the likes of which had never been seen in Sweetwater. They spoke boldly and in hard, Northern-sounding accents. They used words we didn't use in Sweetwater - some long and fancy words, some short and pungent words. They even cursed openly, something which no "proper lady" in Sweetwater would ever do. In the women's dressing room at the pool, they stripped and walked around naked, unashamed of their nakedness. We had never seen anyone do that. Every Sweetwater female changed in and out of her bathing suit barricaded behind the firmly-locked door of a dressing booth. They never used the booths.

When winter came and the pool shut down, I didn't see them much. The only things left for anyone to do in Sweetwater were going shopping in town or going to the movie. The WASPs didn't seem to shop, at least not in Sweetwater; and when they took in movie, they went at night. Since I did my shopping at Woolworth and my movie-going in the afternoon after school, our paths seldom crossed.

But I read about them in the newspaper. I read about their deaths. When anyone from Avenger Field was killed in a plane crash, the story appeared on the front page of the *Sweetwater Reporter*. And many of these women were killed. Perhaps my memory is mistaken (perhaps it was because I was so enamored of them that I thought so many died), but in my memory one or two of them died every month or so. Why they died, I don't know. Insufficient skill in flying? Poor maintenance of airplanes? Carelessness? Unfamiliar weather conditions? Who knows? But it seems to me that every few weeks one of them died. I would read the newspaper accounts over and over again, feeling stricken by the loss. They seemed so perfect; they seemed to have everything. Somehow, I suppose, I thought that they should be invincible, immune to the vicissitudes of ordinary people like us.

Eventually the war ended; eventually I graduated, went away to college, married, and moved to Dallas. Then several years ago, after I had lived there for more than twenty years, the World War II WASPs had a reunion in Dallas. Again I avidly read and re-read newspaper accounts concerning them. Almost all had gone on to active, exciting, and fulfilling lives after the war. Many were still flying,. Accompanying the article were pictures of gray-haired grandmotherly-looking women. I searched each pictured countenance for traces of the goddess like creatures I remembered from my youth. What I saw were bright-eyed, smiling "senior citizens". These women would no longer turn heads, even in Sweetwater, Texas. But to me they will always be special. They will always be golden eagles who soar through my memories of other times and other places.