

Telling the Texas Story

“You don’t just move into Texas, it moves into you.”

Manny Fernandez

New York Times.

Why is Texas the way it is? What is it about this place that has attracted so much attention over time and has given rise to larger-than-life legends and lore that continue to color this state’s identity? The land surely played a part, but geography and climate merely created the backdrop. The people that were born here or came here have made Texas. What seemed like an inhospitable zone to many has proved to be a land of promise to those with fortitude and nerve. This is their story—and yours.

The original inhabitants of Texas, small bands of hunter gatherers, drifted across the land on foot for the first 14,000 years, migrating with the seasons from seashore to pecan-covered river bottoms or inland cactus groves. Armed with a knowledge of astronomy, water sources and food supplies, they acclimated to an environment which could be harsh and unforgiving, but which also provided a moderate climate during much of the year. In addition to the small wandering tribes, by the 1500s a variety of tribes known collectively as the Caddo had created farming communities and carried on extensive trade with peoples as distant as New Mexico and the Great Lakes.

In the 1520s, a small group of shipwrecked Spanish castaways made their way across Texas led by Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca—credited as the first European explorer in the region. After many trials, the survivors made it back to Mexico with the help of the many small tribes who peopled the land. It is believed that one of the Caddo tribes may have

introduced themselves to the Spanish using the word “Teysha” meaning friend or allies. The Spaniards, however, reported little of interest among their “Teysha” friends. There were no European style civilizations, but more importantly, there was neither gold nor silver to fill the coffers of Spain. Subsequent expeditions confirmed these findings and Spain lost interest. For 200 more years, Texas remained the domain of the native peoples.

By 1690, global jealousies among the European powers changed the Spanish attitude about their far-flung northern American frontier. In response to French incursions into Louisiana, Spain had to take a chance on this far northern *despoblado*, or wilderness. To establish control over the natives of these lands, which the Spanish called the great kingdom of the “Tejas,” the least expensive method was religious conversion. Franciscan missionaries marched north to take up missionary work among the Caddo, attempting to convert them into proper Christian Spaniards while others toiled among the natives along the coast. Far to the east, Los Adaes, the first capital of Tejas, anchored these efforts and served as a block to French ambitions. When smallpox killed their children, the Caddo refused the advances of the missionaries, using the Spanish outposts merely as stopping points on their annual migrations.

The wilderness rivalry continued for several years. Spanish and French interest in native trade and control enabled the Caddo to play the Europeans off against one another as the natives negotiated to secure their highly prized weapons and trade goods. The Spanish, having made little progress in converting the Caddo, withdrew their scattered missions back to the San Antonio River valley while maintaining Nacogdoches as a defense against French incursions and contraband trade. Spain also sent reinforcements to Tejas. In 1740, José de Escandón established half-a-dozen Spanish settlements along the Rio Bravo (Rio Grande del Norte) in a great land rush and a few years later built Presidio La Bahia to guard the coastal

road. By mid-century, Spanish Tejas could boast a population of 5,000 hardy settlers.

The Spanish settlers who moved into the new land to join the missionaries learned to be tough, self-reliant, and independent. A spirit of *patria chica*, or local loyalty, developed among the settlements. Following the dictates of laws from faraway Mexico and even farther away Madrid, the people of the province referred to each other as *vecinos*, neighbors, as they created a network of *compadrazgo* or godparenthood which provided support, friendship, and protection.

The indigenous tribes may not all have adopted Spanish religion, but they did adopt Spanish horse culture. The Comanche, mounted on stolen or captured Spanish horses, transformed themselves into a mighty empire. By the 1770s, from their home base in what is now north Texas, Oklahoma, and Colorado they swept south into Tejas and deeper into Mexico to raid Spanish ranches and feed a booming trade in horses. Spanish mounted units—*presidiales*—struggled to defend the region against these nimble adversaries.

Everything changed in 1810. Triggered by Napoleon's invasion of Spain, Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla led Mexico's first attempt at independence from Spain. San Antonio became a battleground as the small-town split between those favoring the Royalist cause and those seeking independence from Spain. Texas' first republic and first Constitution, written by Bernardo Gutierrez de Lara, failed in 1813 when Royalist forces including a young lieutenant named Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna arrived from central Mexico. At the Battle of Medina, General José Joaquín de Arredondo defeated an insurgent army and then massacred more than 1,400 settlers opposed to the royal government.

In 1821, after a lengthy eleven-year struggle for independence, Mexico at last emerged

as a new nation but its economy was in shambles. Threatened by the Spanish, French, Americans and the ever-present Comanches, Mexican leaders needed to people their northern border. They took a chance and invited American immigrants into the undeveloped, and now nearly depopulated, Tejas.

Where three hundred years of indigenous, Spanish and Mexican control had seen Tejas as full of difficulties and vexations, incoming Americans saw a land of boundless opportunity. The government of Mexico used a system of contractors—much like modern day real estate developers—to grant land to incoming settlers. People like Stephen F. Austin, Martín de León and Green DeWitt agreed to help the government settle people in the region in exchange for grants of large tracts of land. The Americans, attracted by the immense offers of more than 4,000 acres of land for each family, looked to commerce, ranching, farming and plantation agriculture to create a profitable economy.

The presence of enslaved people among these Americans proved a dilemma for Mexico. In 1829, the Mexican government passed a law prohibiting slavery—but exempted Tejas. Many opposed the institution on moral and philosophical grounds, but these immigrants and some officials saw it as necessary to develop the region's agricultural potential. These differences of opinion would be a constant cause of friction.

Local Tejanos had mixed feelings about the newcomers. While welcoming the energy, enthusiasm, and economics of the newcomers, the Spanish-speaking inhabitants of Tejas discovered their small population of some 2,500 people had been swamped by more than 30,000 American immigrants including 5,000 enslaved laborers and the attending evil of the institution. These new settlers, some of whom had come into Coahuila y Tejas illegally, rarely abided by their contractual obligations. They seldom spoke the Spanish language, only

occasionally practiced the official Catholic religion, and asked for their own judicial and educational systems. They even changed the similar sounding “j” to an “x” creating Texas when discussing the province. These Americans also believed in certain “inalienable rights” and were quick to defend them.

The Mexican hope and settlers’ dream of prosperity for Texas would take a lot of work and the burden of accomplishing it would fall unevenly. By 1823 a local militia, the Texas Rangers, emerged to maintain armed vigilance and protection over the project. Even so, Texas soon had a reputation. “Texas is heaven for men and dogs,” the saying went, “but hell for women and oxen.” This was doubly true for the enslaved, enduring the same hardship but under more cruel circumstances.

A revolt by Haden Edwards and his colonists at Nacogdoches in 1826 caused Mexican officials to reconsider the experiment. The government sent an expedition to Texas under General Manuel de Mier y Terán to determine the level of loyalty of the new settlers. In his 1828 report, the General observed, “Among these foreigners are fugitives from justice, honest laborers, vagabonds and criminals.” These Americans may have become Mexicans by law, but intellectually they remained attached to the ideals of the American Revolution. “Honorable and dishonorable alike travel with their political constitution in their pockets,” Mier y Terán wrote, “demanding the privileges, authority and officers which such a constitution guarantees.”

Mexico also fractured politically. One faction supported the Conservative Centralist position with power controlled from Mexico City while another was in favor of a Federalist states’ rights constitution with power in the hands of local citizens. Most of the newly arrived settlers favored the 1824 Federalist constitution. In 1830, a Centralist Mexican regime

attempted to resolve the American immigration problem by closing the borders. Just two years later, under a resurgent Federalist government, the border reopened, and American immigrants once again flooded into Texas.

By 1834, the Federalists found themselves again displaced by the Centralists, who had created a new constitution under the leadership of General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. Eight Mexican states revolted against their loss of local control. Santa Anna moved quickly and harshly to crush the rebellions. In December of 1835, Federalists in San Antonio defeated and expelled the Centralist garrison. Santa Anna turned his focus to Texas to stamp out the rebellion there and punish the so-called “Texians.”

Surprised by the Centralist army’s advance, some 200 insurgents led by William B. Travis, James Bowie and David Crockett made a stand at the small mission known as the Alamo in San Antonio. After a thirteen days siege, Santa Anna defeated the defenders and wiped out the small garrison. Meanwhile, at Goliad, Centralist troops captured a sizable Texian army under Colonel James Walker Fannin and executed most of the prisoners. This American-dominated region quickly shifted from a lukewarm loyalty to Mexico to a fervent enthusiasm for independence.

The Texians avowed their purpose. “The Mexican government, by its colonization laws, invited and induced the Anglo-American population of Texas to continue to enjoy that constitutional liberty and republican government to which they had been habituated in the land of their birth, the United States of America. In this expectation they have been cruelly disappointed.”

The men who declared Texas independent and fought to achieve that independence

included newcomers and native-born alike. On average, these men were about forty-years old, with the youngest in his early twenties, and the oldest in his seventies. Most were men entering middle age, most of them with families and obligations. By and large they were born in the South, but a handful came from Pennsylvania, New York, and Massachusetts. Others hailed from places like Ireland, England, Canada, and Central and Eastern European countries. A few held enslaved people as property, but the overwhelming majority did not. Many were farmers, but there were as many merchants, land speculators, lawyers, and doctors as there were sodbusters. A few seemed to fit Mier y Teran's description of *unruly*, but mostly they liked rules, they just didn't like it when people changed them without their consent.

Many of these revolutionaries were natives of Mexico, and like their compatriots born elsewhere, opposed tyranny. Francisco Ruiz, Juan Seguin, and Jose Antonio Navarro were from San Antonio de Béxar, now a battlefield in this struggle for independence. Lorenzo de Zavala, a native of the Yucatan, agreed. These men understood that the promises of liberty transcended national borders and nativity.

On March 2, 1836, this collection of risk takers announced the creation of a new nation: The Republic of Texas. The question that hung in the air that day was what kind of country would it be? In 1776, the men who declared American independence in Philadelphia two generations before had the *idea* of what their nation might be. In 1810, Father Hidalgo had issued his *Grito de Dolores* in favor of Mexican independence and pronounced "death to bad government." On March 2, 1836, the signers at Washington on the Brazos and heirs to these traditions knew exactly what they wanted. Here, in the lands stretching from the Red River to the Rio Grande, and from the Sabine to the great unknown to the west, these ideals would be tested in the field. On April 21, 1836, General Sam Houston led these bold Texians

and Tejanos to victory on the battlefield of San Jacinto.

The emerging Republic of Texas had plenty of problems as it attempted to live up to these promises. Deeply indebted to American creditors, the country claimed a wide swath of territory from the mouth of the Rio Grande to present day Wyoming. There were too few people facing too many problems. Texans hoped the United States would soon annex their republic before the new country collapsed. Mexico, meanwhile, refused to recognize the legitimacy of the upstart nation and threatened war with the U.S. should they occupy Texas.

Annexation would not come as easily as the Texans hoped. The Republic had patterned its constitution after those of North Carolina and Tennessee where slavery was legal. This complicated the issue for the American government which could not admit Texas without upsetting the fragile balance existing between slave and free states. As a result, the new Republic of Texas struggled for nearly a decade while presidents Sam Houston, Mirabeau B. Lamar and Anson Jones navigated Indian affairs, invasions by Mexican forces, and a ballooning national debt. Even so, Texas persisted. "Texas has yet to learn submission to any oppression," Houston declared, "come from what source it may."

Their stubbornness paid off. Skillful political maneuvering and diplomacy in Washington D. C. and Texas finally led to annexation in 1845. This, as Mexico had promised, led to a war between the United States and the Republic of Mexico. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the conflict, forced Mexico to give up one third of its territory, including Texas, in exchange for \$18 million dollars, an amount worth about \$600 million today. As the United States struggled with the question of whether the newly acquired territory would be slave or free, the Compromise of 1850 resulted in Texas losing its western third (what is now New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming) to pay off the debt the new state brought

with it.

At last, solvent and safe as part of the United States, Texas grew rapidly. Southerners, moved in, as did Germans, Poles, Czechs, and other Europeans. Their arrival, however, came at the disadvantage of the indigenous peoples and further marginalized the Tejanos in and around San Antonio and South Texas. In this process, what had been a diverse borderland became an extension of the American South. Enslaved individuals accounted for a third of Texas's 600,000 inhabitants by 1860 and a great deal of its productivity.

When the southern states seceded from the United States and formed the Confederate States of America in 1861, Texas joined them over the objections of legendary leaders like Houston and James W. Throckmorton. Many Tejanos and Germans opposed slavery and the Confederacy, and often served in Union regiments. Tens of thousands of Texans, including Tejanos and Germans, fought for the South. Some served as enthusiastic volunteers, while others joined after conscription became law and denied them the option of staying at home. Texans fought on nearly every Civil War battlefield, but especially in Louisiana. One in five Texas Confederates died in the conflict. The last battle of the Civil War—little more than a heated skirmish—was fought in Texas at Palmito Ranch a month after the surrender at Appomattox. On June 19, 1865, U. S. officials in Galveston declared the end of the war and announced the freeing of all slaves. It is a date which is still celebrated among African Americans as Juneteenth, now a national holiday.

Through it all, the state emerged defeated but relatively untouched as no major battles occurred here. Soon U.S. occupation forces moved into Texas to bring it back into the United States. Some of the newcomers wondered why they bothered. One disappointed commander remarked, "If I owned Hell and Texas, I would live in Hell and rent out Texas."

In many ways, the American Civil War, and the decades after, helped craft modern Texas. Reconstruction introduced Texans to a constitution in which the government in Austin was dominated by a pro-Union governor and his cabinet and with multiple laws opposed by many of the ex-Confederates. It also gave rights to a newly freed African American population who, with the help of the northern Freedmen's Bureau, took advantage of their chance at education and self- government.

With the end of Reconstruction in 1876, when given an opportunity to overhaul its state constitution, pro-Southern white Texans responded by creating a weakened state government while defending the concept of federalism as expressed in the Tenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. Following reconstruction African Americans lost many of their rights. The Comanche Empire also collapsed, and its people moved to a reservation. Commercial hunters killed off the American bison that covered the Texas plains nearly to extinction although many in the state lobbied to have the buffalo protected by law. Bold stock raisers turned long-distance cattle drives into a lucrative ranching industry. Railroads soon spread a steel web across the state, and even the great expanse of West Texas started to fill with homesteaders as railroads sold alternating sections of land to farmers. By the end of the century, more than 3 million people called Texas home.

Texas was prosperous but was not economically different from the rest of the South. It was an agrarian state like Alabama or Mississippi. Jim Crow laws discriminating against African Americans, and legal segregation and ethnic bias against minority groups continued into the new century. Like elsewhere in the United States, there was some population diversity with significant areas of German, Czech, Polish, Italian and other European settlement. The Tejano population remained relatively small and concentrated mostly in San Antonio and the

Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Yet, Texas was huge and remained full of promise. Promoters had always touted its great potential as a farm and ranch paradise. The idea that everything was bigger in the Lone Star State began to take root. The state government also fostered a probusiness environment. The image of the bold and daring Texan spread across the globe.

In 1901, Texas changed. The discovery of oil, especially at Spindletop near Beaumont, ushered in a period of remarkable transformation. Farm laborers and cowboys who had struggled as sharecroppers and ranch hands became roughnecks and roustabouts in the ever-spreading oil fields of the state. The state government protected the new industry with laws that favored independent operators over large national corporations. Houston blossomed as the energy capital of the world, while Dallas became a financial center where deals and fortunes were made. The “wildcatter” and the oil derrick became new Texas icons.

In 1910, problems in Mexico once again impacted Texas. The overthrow of President Porfirio Diaz led to a decade-long revolution that ravaged the country and drove thousands of Mexicans across the border into the United States, especially Texas. New tensions, cross border violence and raids, summary justice, and extralegal executions often at the hands of state officials marked this dark period. The United States also sent troops to Texas to guard the troubled border, and in 1916 even launched a brief raid into Chihuahua from El Paso in search of rebel leader Pancho Villa, but with little success.

The new immigrants fueled the booming Texas economy as its population swelled. Texas politicians took center stage in Washington D.C. Men such as Edward House, Sam Rayburn and John “Cactus Jack” Garner impacted U.S. and global affairs. Events surrounding

World War I brought a fresh interest in things Texan as American soldiers were stationed at newly established military bases.

In 1936, Texas made news across the country. At Fair Park in Dallas, the state threw a huge centennial birthday party marking the debut of a new and improved Texas. It reconnected with its revolutionary and republic origins, its cowboy identity, its lone star flag, and its growing energy dominance. It may have been a burst of romantic nationalism, but it did much to define the unique Texas identity and showcase the state to the nation and the world. “Texas is neither southern nor western. Texas is Texas,” wrote William A. ‘Dollar Bill’ Blakely, a successful and colorful businessman and politician. Author John Gunther of Illinois quipped in his travelogue, *Inside U.S.A.*, “If a man is from Texas, he’ll tell you. If he’s not, why embarrass him by asking?”

Texas was still far from perfect. The presence of racial oppressions such as the White Democratic Primary—which effectively barred African Americans from voting—and segregation laws remained vestiges that continued to shadow the Texas identity. Tejano natives and Mexican newcomers alike also faced discrimination.

World War II brought more prosperity, more recognition, and more population to the state. By 1940, there were 6 million people calling Texas home. Military bases and defense industries joined oil and agriculture as major employers. Texans did their part in the second World War as well. Names like Oveta Culp Hobby, Audie Murphy, Earl Rudder, Dorie Miller, and Samuel Dealey joined the list of national heroes. Admiral Chester Nimitz of Fredericksburg was the architect of victory in the Pacific Theater.

Like the rest of the nation, Texas was changing. After the war, many service members

who had enjoyed their time at Texas military bases came back to Texas and stayed. Others planned for a way to return, attracted by its wide-open spaces, and promise of opportunity. One of the veterans who immigrated to Texas was Connecticut native George Herbert Walker Bush who had flown bombing missions in the Pacific theater from the deck of the *USS San Jacinto*. He and his family were not alone in the move— by 1950 the state increased its population another million and added another 2.5 million a decade later for a total of 9.5 million Texans.

The Lone Star State also embraced the military as a permanent part of its landscape during the Cold War. Many of its communities hosted hundreds of thousands of newcomers in uniform from across the county. San Antonio, El Paso, Fort Worth, Abilene, Corpus Christi and many smaller towns hosted bases and enjoyed the influence of new residents.

Texas still had plenty of detractors. Edna Ferber wrote *Giant*, which many considered an unflattering novel about the state. When the book became a movie starring Rock Hudson, James Dean, and Elizabeth Taylor, Texans embraced the over-the-top portrayal of the state. John Bainbridge, in his 1961 book *The Super Americans*, described Texas as a land of wealthy, boastful, and boorish people but conceded that many were also optimistic, friendly, and pragmatic. To this day, the caricature of the outlandish, loud, and self-important Texan has become a staple of American popular culture.

Even so, Texas reached for the stars. In 1961, with the help and influence of Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) created the Johnson Space Center. One of the salient features of the Houston area that made it a good home to America's emerging space program was its well-trained work force and its institutions of higher learning. Rice University, although segregated at the time and therefore

ineligible for government contracts, rose to the challenge. “Rice University stands at the crossroads,” attorney Tom Martis Davis argued in a suit to integrate the school. “It can go to the moon, or it can return to the nineteenth century.” The school indeed opened its doors to all students. As a result of this progressive vision, the first word spoken from the moon was “Houston.”

The spirit of change transformed Texas during the 1960s. The Civil Rights Movement swept across the country and African American Texans who had shown grit and grace in the face of adversity for more than a century became active participants. Congresswoman Barbara Jordan of Houston became instrumental in using the levers of political power to help the movement along. After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas in 1963, Texan Lyndon Baines Johnson took over the presidency and became a tireless advocate of what he christened “The Great Society.” He promised equality and opportunity for all Americans passing the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and Voting Rights Act in 1965.

As the nation changed, so did its politics. The South, once solidly Democratic, shifted toward the Republic Party over the next few decades. Texas, which had long been solidly, if conservatively, Democrat since 1846, followed the defection toward the Republicans. The 1970s saw this shift gather momentum. By 1990, Texan George H. W. Bush, a Republican, was president of the United States. Four years later, his son, George W. Bush, was governor of Texas and he too became president of the United States in 2000.

Texas continues to grow. Its population is more than 30 million and it is expected to almost double by 2050. Houston, the fourth largest city in the nation, San Antonio, the seventh, Dallas, the ninth and Austin, the eleventh, are innovation hubs for the entire country and home to 54 Fortune 500 headquarters. Thanks to the Texas model – low taxes, reasonable regulation and

fair and balanced tort laws – Texas has flourished, leading the nation in exports while producing a tenth of the entire nation’s total economy. Texas currently has the eighth largest economy in the world, outpacing Russia, Canada and Brazil.

While energy and agriculture are the largest sectors of the Texas economy, the state’s \$141.7 billion information and technology sector accounts for 8.3% of the state’s total economy. 42,000 tech companies have been established in Texas, employing 226,000 Texans. The aerospace, financial services, biomedicine, and tourism industries are also thriving in Texas, and all play a huge role in the global economy. While the Texas economy has become exceptionally diverse, the state’s oil and gas production has led to a manufacturing boom and made the United States energy independent, thereby enhancing national security.

In the coming years, Texas will be the most populous state in the nation. Hundreds of people move here every day from other states and nations drawn by the region’s beauty, diversity, low cost of living and a culture that supports re-invention and innovation. Four out of five who move to the Lone Star State will stay for a lifetime.

From its past and present, and looking forward to the future, Texas has become a mix of remembering the Alamo, watching a rodeo, dancing to conjunto, and busting a rhyme, all with a touch of tuxedo and an aria by Mozart. It is barbecue, *barbacoa*, chicken fry and *schnitzel*. Texans are a people of many places united by a shared identity. The hope is that all Texans understand what they are receiving—what they are building upon—as they write new chapters of the story. Texas has always been a borderland, inhabited by people who create exceptional lives. This tale is far from perfect, like most human endeavors. Even so, it is full of optimism, energy, grit and gumption that sets a bold example for the rest of the nation and the world.

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Whether you are here for a visit or a lifetime, welcome to Texas.