

The Legend of Big Tex

by Alan Elliott

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There are as many legends and tall tales about Texas as there are bright stars in that big night sky. The tale that is about to be spun here may be one of the biggest Texas stories ever told. Just for a moment, take yourself away from the sounds and busy pace of today, and listen to the wind blowing through the Davis mountains in Big Bend. Listen as it blows through the oak trees of the hill country, through the Piney Woods and across the waves pounding against the gulf shore. You can hear the wind carrying a story down through history. Listen closely -- can you hear those ancient mission bells ringing a message of freedom and courage? They are the bells of the Alamo, and that is where this tale begins.

The Battle of the Alamo

The Legend of Big Tex was born in the hearts of those brave men and women who fought for the Independence of Texas at a small church mission called the Alamo. Although no record shows the exact circumstances of his birth, you might say that Big Tex had a number of mothers and fathers, all defenders of liberty -- like Jim Bowie, Davy Crockett and Colonel William Travis. The story of Big Tex begins in February of 1836 and has been passed on from Texan to Texan to this day.

During the fight for Texas independence a small group of 150 Texans in a mission compound called the Alamo bravely stood against Santa Anna's army of 6,000 troops. Day after day, Santa Anna bombarded the Alamo, but the Texans held their ground. At

night, the bombardment would stop for a while, and there was a time of silence when even the singing of birds and the chirping of crickets could be heard. At night, the sky above the Alamo was big and bright, and the soldiers sat around a campfire in the Alamo plaza, and looked at the moon and the stars, wondering about the future. One night in early March, Bowie, Crockett, Travis were talking about the upcoming battle and listening to the sounds of the night. Unexpectedly, a different noise caught their attention. It was the cry of a newborn baby. They all stopped talking at once, and listened. After a minute, Colonel Travis stood and said, "That's the new Texas being born. We may not be here to see it ourselves, but with our help, that baby will see Texas free." He told the men of the Alamo that the outlook was bleak. If they wanted, they could escape in the night and avoid the battle. Then he took his sword and drew a line in the soil. "Those who are willing to fight and die for this young Texas to be free, cross the line and stay here to fight. Otherwise, you are free to go." Jim Bowie, who was ill and could not walk, asked his men to carry him over. One by one the Texans crossed the line, and stood with Colonel Travis.

A few days later, the Alamo was attacked by all of the force of Santa's Troops. The battle was fierce. Line after line of Santa Anna's troops charged the Alamo, but were turned back. In one of the assaults, the north wall was breached next to the gunner's barracks, and soldiers began pouring into the compound. The Alamo's huge courtyard was filled with hand-to-hand fighting. Colonel Travis was killed near the north wall in fierce hand-to-hand combat. Davy Crockett took a position near the back of the Church and fought bravely, but he was shot and killed. Jim Bowie was killed as he lay in his sick bed, but not until he had fired his pistols at his attackers. The Texans fought with all their might, but they were finally overwhelmed. In the end, all of the defenders were killed.

A few women and children, hiding in a corner of the chapel survived the battle of the Alamo. With the smoke and fire of the conflict still rising around them, they escaped into the town of San Antonio. One of the survivors, a young senorita, carried with her the little baby that was only a few days old. She called the baby "Texas, " and this was the little baby that would grow up to be called Big Tex.

Although the Texans had lost the battle of the Alamo, they were determined not to lose the war. While Santa Anna marched his troops east across Texas, General Sam Houston rallied his troops at San Jacinto. From atop his white stallion, Saracen, Houston called out to his troops, "Remember the Alamo! the Alamo! the Alamo! Victory is certain! Trust in God and fear not!" By the time Santa Anna's troops were near, the Texans were ready for battle. On April 21, 1836, the two armies met near Buffalo Bayou and the San Jacinto

River. In the afternoon, while Santa Anna's troops were least expecting it, Houston attacked with 750 soldiers. The attack was fierce, and Houston had two horses shot out from under him. In the end the Texans prevailed, and The Republic of Texas was born.

Big Tex Grows Up

After her escape from San Antonio, the senorita took the Texas baby to the new capital of the Republic, which was named Houston City. The townsfolk adopted Tex, as they called him now, and took care of him. When Tex was a baby, people said he was "knee high to a grasshopper," because he wasn't very big at first. Then he began to grow. And grow he did! As Tex grew taller than the tallest man in town, so did the stories about what he did and where he went. By the time he was three years old, there wasn't a bed in the town that could hold Tex. The townsfolk chopped down three dozen trees to make a bed out of logs big enough for the boy to sleep in. And since he was too tall for all of the doors in the buildings, Tex had to sleep outside, which was okay with him, except when it rained or got real cold. Since he couldn't fit into the school building, the teacher opened a window so Tex could lay down beside the schoolhouse and look inside to hear the lessons. By the time Tex was a teenager, he would eat 25 eggs for breakfast and wash it down with two gallons of milk. For lunch and dinner, Tex would usually eat a bushel of corn, a side of beef and eleven loaves of bread. To help provide his food, Tex helped the local farmers tend their crops and herds. He could plow a forty acre field in a day, and clear an acre of new ground in an hour so the farmers could plant more crops. Big Tex was as friendly and helpful as a person could get. He liked knowing that his name meant "friendly" in the language of the Tejas Indians that lived thereabouts. By the time Tex was ten years old, The Republic of Texas became the State of Texas, when Texas became the twenty-eighth state in the United States.

Lassoing a West Texas Tornado

When Big Tex got old enough, he set out to see this great big state of Texas. One day as he was traveling up in the Panhandle area near a little settlement called Amarillo, a large thunderstorm appeared in the eastern sky. As the wind and dust began to blow, the townsfolk ran for cover. The dust mixed with the rain and the mud began to fall from the sky. A small whirlwind poked its nose out of the bottom of one of the clouds. As the wind picked up speed, the whirlwind grew and grew until it was a giant whirling Texas tornado, heading right for the town. It was destroying everything in its path. Mesquite and cedar trees were flying into the air and being snapped

in two like toothpicks.

The wind blew so hard that Big Tex could hardly stand on his own two feet. But he knew that he had to save the town. Tex fought his way through the wind and rain until he was right on the tornado. He grabbed the lasso that was hanging by his side and whirled it around his head seven times, tossing it with all his might toward the tornado. Sure enough, the rope caught the tornado, and it and Tex were in for a knock-down, drag-out fight.

Tex pulled the twister away from the houses and barns. The tornado gained strength and dragged Tex along the ground and back toward the town. Just as Tex seemed to have the tornado under control, it gained more strength and threw Tex back to the ground. Finally, Tex clenched his teeth and with all his might whipped his rope and snapped the tornado back into the clouds. The tornado just missed the town, but Tex was so wrapped up in his rope that he couldn't let go. Tex was caught up in the twister and spun round and round, and almost lost control. But he fought the tornado with all his might, and buried his spurs deep into the ground. For miles the tornado dragged Tex this way and that way southeastward across the Panhandle along the Prairie Dog Town Fork of the Red River digging a gully a hundred twenty miles long and more than eight hundred feet deep. Big Tex hung on until finally the twister lost its strength, and Tex was able to sit down to rest. Now the gully that was dug by Big Tex's fight with the tornado is known today as Palo Duro Canyon, and the small town where Tex was finally able to sit down and rest is called Happy.

While Tex was resting, he heard a faint mew coming from under a nearby bush. Under the bush, he found a baby mountain lion. Tex tried to find the kitten's mother, but the twister had devastated all of the land nearby, and the mother was nowhere to be found. Tex adopted the kitten, and called it Puma. There must have been something about living with Big Tex that made Puma grow to be the largest of all mountain lions. With Texas growing bigger each year, Tex and Puma eventually made their home in the wide open regions of west Texas from Guadalupe Peak to the Davis Mountains.

Big Tex at Spindletop

At the beginning of the twentieth century, most Texans lived on farms, and made a meager living. While Texans were struggling to make ends meet, there was something new happening in the world called the industrial revolution. This revolution was changing the way people did work, making it easier to do big jobs in less time. One of the biggest parts of this revolution was the invention of the a machine called a piston engine. With this engine, machines helped

farmers harvest their crops faster and better than before. Locomotive engines made it possible for railroads to carry crops and people to places from one end of the United States to the other. Small piston engines were used to power those new fangled horseless carriages that people called automobiles. All of these machines ran on fuel made from oil. In 1900, Texas didn't have a lot of oil. However, things were about to change.

The change that placed Texas into the industrial revolution took place in January, 1901 when Big Tex was visiting Captain Anthony Lucas at Spindletop near Beaumont. Lucas was trying to drill an oil well in a field, but the land was like quicksand and any hole that he drilled would quickly fill up with sand. Big Tex had an idea. With his thumb he poked a hole in the ground three feet deep to have a place to start the well. He built a derrick eight hundred feet high over the well and placed a bit eight hundred feet long in the derrick. He placed the drill bit into the ground, and turning it with his hand, dug a small hole about fifty feet deep. Sure enough, as he drilled into the ground, the hole began to fill with sand. Tex knew that the bit had to turn faster than he could turn it with his bare hands.

From the nearby town of Beaumont, Big Tex borrowed a blacksmith's forge and hammer and he began to make a chain. Lucas' workers piled logs on the blacksmith's fire, and the heat from the forge flamed up into the sky. Clang went the hammer as he forged another link in the chain. Clang! Clang! It took the constant attention of five men with mops and buckets to mop up the sweat that poured from Big Tex's brow as he banged out the links in the chain. The chain was one mile in length. Workers threw more logs into the blacksmith's fire as Big Tex worked into the night. Clang! Clang! The chain was two miles long and Tex kept going. Finally, after 24 hours of work, Big Tex sat the hammer down. His chain was three miles, two hundred feet and 5 inches in length. "That ought to do it," he said.

Big Tex wrapped the chain around the long drill bit. He placed the chain over his shoulder and began to pull. As he pulled the drill bit began to turn, drilling into the earth. At first Tex could barely get started in the soft sand, but finally he began to build up speed. As he pulled on the chain, the drill bit turned and dug into the earth, deeper and deeper. The drill dug a hole into the ground faster than the sand could fill it up. The well was a hundred feet deep, then two hundred feet deep. As Big Tex pulled, Lucas' men sprayed water on the bit to cool it off. Three hundred feet it dug... Tex pulled faster and faster until he had pulled all of the chain from around the drill bit. Even with the chain gone, the drill bit kept turning for thirty minutes and the well got deeper and deeper. Then, all was silent as the drill

bit stopped. Nothing happened. There was no sign of oil. Captain Lucas hung his head in defeat. Then, he heard a rumble coming from the well. Around the pipe, the mud began to bubble as gas escaped to the surface. "She's gonna blow!" he yelled. The rumble turned into a roar. "Everyone out of the way!" All the men began to run from the well. First, an explosion of gas burst up through the well tossing the drilling pipe into the air as if it were as light as spaghetti. Then a gusher like no one had ever seen spewed hundreds of feet up into the air. It was black gold! Texas was in the oil business! From that moment on, Texas provided the fuel that made the Industrial revolution a reality.

Now even though Big Tex was glad to have helped Lucas drill the well at Spindletop, he asked Lucas to keep this story under his hat. Tex had other things he wanted to do besides help drill the thousands of oil wells that would dot the Texas countryside after that day in 1901. Tex also knew that drilling wells would provide jobs for thousands of Texans for a hundred years to come. That's why, if you come across a Texas oil man, he'll flatly tell you this story never happened, just to help Big Tex keep the secret.

Walking Across Texas

When Big Tex is not helping the people of Texas, he likes to spend his time in the wide open spaces of the west, mostly around Big Bend country. At least once a year, Big Tex makes a walk across Texas, visiting his favorite spots. Sometimes he travels up north through the Panhandle and sometimes south through the valley or to the coast.

In the spring, Tex likes to visit the rose fields near Tyler. There is one farm near Wills Point that sets aside a special field where Big Tex can camp. At night, Tex sleeps in the open air and enjoys the wonderful smell of the roses in bloom. If he has time, Tex visits First Monday in Canton. He usually buys an old telephone pole for Puma to use as a scratching post, and enjoys a lunch of fifteen smoked turkey legs and a few gallons of homemade lemonade.

In the summer, Tex likes to visit the hill country. He'll usually visit the capitol in Austin, Alamo, and San Jacinto to remember the heritage of his birth, and the great people that made Texas what it is today. He always takes a side trip to see the little creamery in Brenham to get a few gallons of Cookies and Cream.

During the fall, one of his favorite spots is near the World's Chili Cookoff in Terlingua. Some of the contestants will make special fifty gallon kettles of chili for Tex to sample. After a kettle of Texas' best chili, Tex cools off by gulping down ten gallons of ice cold Dr. Pepper.

One winter, in 1949, on his way back from Padre, Tex was

asked to help the people of Kerens (near Corsicana) celebrate Christmas. Tex is always ready to have a good time, so he dressed up like Santa Claus and entertained the shoppers. No one had ever seen such a big Santa, and it caused quite a stir around those parts for years to come. The people in Dallas heard about Big Tex as Santa, and a few years later they invited Big Tex to visit the State Fair of Texas in Dallas. That was the start of a genuine partnership. Big Tex liked being able to talk to people from all around the state, (and all over the world) so every year since his first visit, he has come back to the biggest and greatest state fair in the world.

Tex wants to make a good impression on people who see him at the fair, so every few years, he gets a new outfit to wear. Now, it's hard to find a size 90 shirt, a 75 gallon hat and size 70 boots. Even Neiman Marcus runs short on those items sometimes, so the H.D. Lee company had to make up a special plaid shirt and jeans for Big Tex to wear at his first fair. In 1965 the Mexican government gave Big Tex a serape weighing in at over 300 pounds to help celebrate the appearance of the Danzas Y Cantos de Mexico in the Cotton Bowl. When Big Tex ordered a new set of clothes in 1970, his new 150 pound shirt was stolen just days before the fair was supposed to open. The Lee company went into overtime making a new shirt and had it delivered to Dallas just nine hours before the gates opened. Big Tex likes his job of talking to people when they come to the fair and showing visitors just how friendly Texans can be. Every time someone walks by Big Tex greets them with, "How-dee folks, welcome to the Great State Fair of Texas!" Today, the State Fair just wouldn't seem right without Big Tex Standing as the centerpiece.

Now some people say that all of these tales about Big Tex are a bit exaggerated. They call them "tall Texas tales". But then, Big Tex is about as tall a fellow as you will ever see. And besides, no one can argue that millions of people see Big Tex every year. They'll all tell you that he is something to behold. If you are one of the few people who've never seen Big Tex, you should plan to do it soon. In the spring, you can look for him in east Texas enjoying the roses. In the summer, you might find him in the hill country or visiting his old friends in San Antonio and Houston. In the fall, you might find he and Puma strolling along the Rio Grande in Big Bend. If you don't find him any of those places, you are sure to find him every October in Dallas standing tall and proud, welcoming visitors and saying "How-dee folks. Welcome to Texas!"