

The Legend of Big Tex

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Foreword to “The Legend of Big Tex”

Little did I know in 1952 when I created the Big Tex statue that he would still be standing at the State Fair today. We originally planned to put him up for only one year. Then thousands of school children began writing the fair, wanting Big Tex to come back. The letters came in by the truck load. As a result, Big Tex has returned every year. He belongs to the children of Texas. But he is not just known in Texas. Big Tex has been written about in Australia, Bangkok, Korea, and all over the world. He is an ambassador of good will for Texas around the United States and around the world.

When I think about what these Big Tex tales mean to kids of every age, I think about four things – addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. Add great imagination to the world, Subtract small thinking. Multiply your resourcefulness. Divide hard problems in the workable solutions. That is what the spirit of Big Tex is about.

Jack Bridges, 1994.

The Battle of the Alamo

There are as many tall tales about Texas as there are bright stars in that big night sky. This particular tale may be one of the biggest Texas stories ever told. The Legend of Big Tex was born in the hearts of those brave men and women who fought the fight of independence in a small adobe mission in San Antonio called The Alamo.

In late February of 1836, a small group of 150 independent-thinking Texans bravely stood against Santa Anna's army of 6,000 troops. In that battle, Santa Anna bombarded the Alamo day after day, but the Texans held their ground. At night, the bombardment stopped for a while and the soldiers sat around a campfire in the Alamo plaza, and gazed at the big bright moon and the flickering stars, wondering about their future.

One night in early March as the full moon hung in the night sky; Jim Bowie, Davy Crockett and Colonel William Travis were talking about the upcoming battle and listening to the sounds of the night. An unexpected noise caught their attention -- the cry of a newborn baby. Everyone stopped talking and listened. Colonel Travis stood up, took off his hat and said, "Gentlemen, that is the *new* Texas being born. We may not be here to see it ourselves, but with our help, that baby will see Texas free."

Colonel Travis gathered the rest of the defenders of the Alamo together that night. He pulled his sword out of its scabbard and with it 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, too ill to walk, asked his men to carry him over the line. Others followed and one by one the brave Texans stood with Colonel Travis.

A few days later, Santa Anna's troops attacked with all their might. Time after time the troops charged the Alamo, and were turned back by the defenders. Then, in one of the assaults, the troops breached the north wall, and soldiers poured into the compound filling the Alamo's huge courtyard with hand-to-hand fighting. The Texans fought bravely and with valor, but they were outnumbered and overwhelmed. In the end, all of the Alamo's defenders were killed.

A few women and children, hiding in a corner of the Alamo chapel survived the battle. 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 *señora*, carried with her the little baby that was only a few days old. She named the baby "Texas."

Although the Texans lost the battle of the Alamo, they did not lose the war. General Sam

Houston rallied his troops and waited for a time to do battle with Santa Anna. On April 21, 1836, the two armies met near the San Jacinto River. On that afternoon, while Santa Anna's troops were least expecting it, Houston called his troops into battle. From atop his white stallion, Saracen, Houston shouted, "Remember the Alamo! the Alamo! the Alamo! Victory is certain! Trust in God and fear not!" During the fighting, Houston had two horses shot out from under him. In the end, the Texans prevailed. As Colonel Travis wished, the baby born in the Alamo now lived in a new and free Republic of Texas.

Big Tex Grows Up

The young *señora* from the Alamo took the new Texas baby from San Antonio to Houston City, the new capital of the Republic of Texas. The townsfolk there adopted Tex, as they called him now, and took care of him. Some of his neighbors called him "knee high to a grasshopper," because Tex wasn't very big at first. As the years progressed, and Texas grew, so did the baby.

Soon Tex stood taller than the tallest man in town. By the time he was three years old, there wasn't a bed in the town that could hold him. 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. He couldn't fit into the school building, so the teacher opened a window and Tex sat down beside the schoolhouse and listened to the lessons about reading, writing, and arithmetic.

When Tex turned ten years old, his Republic of Texas joined the United States as its

twenty-eighth state. By the time Tex was a teenager; he ate 25 eggs for breakfast and washed them down with two gallons of milk. For lunch and dinner, the growing boy ate 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. Neighbors thought it mighty right that Tex's name came from the Tejas Native American's language, and meant "friendly."

Lassoing a West Texas Tornado

When Big Tex grew bigger, he set out to see this great big state of Texas. One day as he traveled in the Panhandle 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 whirlwind poked its nose out of the bottom of one of the clouds. As the wind picked up speed, the whirlwind grew and grew and turned into a giant Texas tornado, heading right for the town. It snapped mesquite and cedar trees like toothpicks, knocked down fences, and destroyed everything in its path.

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

Big Tex anchored his boots into the yellow soil and pulled the twister away from the

houses and barns. The tornado gained strength and dragged him along the ground and back toward the town. Tex clenched his teeth and using all his might, he whipped his rope and snapped the tornado back into the clouds.

The tornado missed the town, but the rope had wrapped all the way round Big Tex and he couldn't let go. The twister spun him round and round. He fought the tornado with all his might, burying his spurs deep into the West Texas ground. For miles and 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 he sat down to rest. Now the gully 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.

After the big storm, while Big Tex rested, 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. 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 somewhere between Guadalupe Peak and the Davis Mountains.

Big Tex at Spindletop

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the world experienced an industrial revolution.

A new-fangled contraption called a piston engine changed the way people did work, making it easier to do big jobs in less time. With this engine, farmers harvested crops faster and better than before. Locomotive engines carried the crops and people to places from one end of the United States to the other. Small versions of these engines powered automobiles. All of these machines ran on gasoline, made from oil. In 1900, Texas didn't have a lot of oil. However, things were about to change.

In January, 1901 Big Tex visited a friend named Captain Anthony Lucas at a place called Spindletop near Beaumont in south Texas. Lucas built big tall rigs to drill for oil in the fields near Spindletop, but every hole he drilled filled up with sand. His drills weren't fast enough or strong enough to dig a proper oil well.

Big Tex had an idea. With his thumb he poked a hole in the ground three feet deep to place a new well. Picking up big timbers as if they were toothpicks, Tex built a tall derrick.

From the nearby town of Beaumont, Big Tex borrowed a blacksmith's forge and hammer and hammered out the links of a long chain. Clang went Big Tex's hammer as he forged another link in the chain. Clang! Clang! It took five men with mops and buckets to dry up the sweat that poured from Big Tex's brow as he banged out the links in the chain. The chain reached one mile in length, and Tex kept working. Clang! Clang! Clang! The chain reached two miles long and Tex kept going. When his chain reached three miles, two hundred feet and 5 inches long, Tex sat his hammer down. "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 pulled. As he pulled the drill bit turned, drilling into the earth. At first the bit got

stuck in the soft sand. Tex pulled harder and the bit spun faster. As it gained speed, it sunk deeper and deeper into the earth, and dug the hole faster than the sand could fill it in. Down it went; a hundred feet deep into the earth, and then two hundred feet.

While Big Tex pulled, Lucas' men sprayed water on the bit to cool it off. Four hundred feet the drill bit dug. Big Tex pulled faster and faster until he pulled the end of the chain off the bit. Still the bit kept turning and dug the hole deeper and deeper. In sudden silence, the drill bit stopped turning. Captain Lucas hung his head in defeat.

The someone heard a small gurgle. They all looked at the well and saw bubbles ooze up in the mud around the pipe. The bubbles popped and more bubbles formed. Lucas knew that the bubbles were from gas escaping to the surface.

"The oil's a coming!" he yelled. "She's gonna blow!" The bubbles turned into a rumble, and the rumble turned into a roar. "Everyone out of the way!" he shouted.

All the workers ran from the well.

As they ran, an explosion of gas burst up through the well. It pushed the drilling pipe out of the hole and tossed it into the air as if it were spaghetti. A stream of black, smelly oil gushed from the well, and spewed hundreds of feet up into the air.

Captain Lucas and all of his workers yelled and jumped up and down with joy. Spindletop put Texas into the oil business! People called the oil black gold.

Now even though Big Tex helped Captain Lucas drill the well at Spindletop, he asked Lucas to keep this story under his hat. Big Tex had other things he wanted to do besides drill the thousands of oil wells that would dot the Texas countryside after that day in 1901. 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 his secret.

Walking Across Texas

When Big Tex is not helping the people of Texas, he spends time in the wide open spaces of the west around the Big Bend country. At least once a year, he makes a walk across Texas with Puma at his side, 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, Big Tex likes to visit the rose fields near Tyler. At night, Big Tex and Puma sleep in the East Texas open air and enjoys the smell of the roses in bloom. If he has time, Big 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, Big Tex visits the hill country, the capitol in Austin, Alamo, and San Jacinto to remember the heritage of his birth. He always takes a side trip to see the little creamery in Brenham. Puma gets a two-gallon bowl of milk, and Big Tex gets an ice cream cone with fifty-two dips.

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

One winter, in 1949, on his way back from Padre Island, the people of Kerens (near Corsicana) asked Big Tex to help them celebrate Christmas. Always ready to have a good time, 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 him to visit the State Fair of Texas in Dallas. That started 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 in 1952, Tex comes back to the biggest and greatest state fair in the world. Puma likes people but not too many at once, so he takes a nap in the Cotton Bowl when it is empty, and has his own tent near the midway where he can hide from the noisy crowds. Sometimes, if you listen carefully, you can hear Puma purring.

Big Tex enjoys the State Fair so much that 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. In recent years, the Fort Worth Dickies Company designed and provided Big Tex's outfits. Today, the State Fair 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. So every October, make your plans to visit Tex in Dallas where he'll be standing tall and proud, and welcoming visitors saying, "How-dee folks, Welcome to the Great State Fair of Texas!"

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