

## **“Thoughts on Being a Texan”**

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Thirteenth Annual Texas Independence Day Dinner

Bullock Texas State History Museum

March 2, 2017



I’m the least athletic person on the program tonight. I throw a ball like a pre-Title 9 girl. In intramural sports in the 60’s at UT, the only contest I won at Hiss gymnasium was for posture. I whipped everybody at “standing up straight.” But Earl and Nolan and this posture queen have a lot in common—we’re Texans.

I was born on a border—not the one that is in the news every day. I was born in Texarkana. The Pine Street hospital was only one block inside the Texas state line that split our town into. I have always lived in fear that the legislature might gerrymander the line and declare me a native born Arkansan.

I spent every summer of my college years working in Washington, D.C. After I married, I still had a strong enough case of Potomac Fever that I dragged my husband with me since he was still in law school and had summers off. The city was full of bright young men and women who came asking what they could do for their country. One evening, after a pleasant dinner with new friends from work, my husband commented, “I feel so sorry for those people. They have to say, ‘How do you do. I’m from Maryland or Delaware or New Hampshire or Rhode Island...’ or wherever the hell they’re from. I don’t even know what to call them. Delawareans? Who are their heroes? Does anybody make movies about them?”

Where does this superior attitude come from? Even if the myths we hold dear have little to do with our sophisticated urban lives, we hope visitors notice the swagger in a highway anti littering sign that says, “Don’t Mess with Texas.” Or that bronze statue at Love Field with its spare caption “One Riot, one Ranger.” Or that memorable moment in Lonesome Dove when Robert Duvall as Augustus McCrae smacks the bartender’s nose on the bar counter and says, “I can’t abide rudeness in a man.”

Was it the entire 7<sup>th</sup> grade year we spent immersed in Texas history and geography that made us this way? After my children and grandchildren finally came to their senses and moved from California to Austin two years ago, I noted a B in social studies on the oldest grandson’s 4<sup>th</sup> grade report card. “What happened here Nate?” “Oh, the class was studying Texas history and I’m a Californian—didn’t interest me.” Didn’t interest him? Well, get that boy some boots and take him to the Bullock.

Writers in Texas have a deep well to draw from. By the time my four years at UT were up, I knew people from Borger in the Panhandle to Brownsville in the Valley and from Elysian Fields in East Texas to El Paso. I never lived on a ranch, but I can speak the language “Had any rain?” “Nope, burnin’ pear.” When a former classmate introduced me to her new West Texas husband and said, “Prudence, he’s the greatest guy. He built me a little fence to keep the javelinas out of my pansies,” I knew the well would never run dry.

But sometimes it takes an outsider to tell us who we are. Writers from those paler states have always known they could find a story in Texas. In the fifties, Edna Ferber, born in Kalamazoo,

Michigan, flew in and out of Texas and scandalized us with the novel she penned called *Giant*. It hardly seems scandalous now since it actually contained more than a grain of truth about race relations and new money in Texas. Was it Ferber who snidely commented to a bejeweled Houston matron, "I always thought it was tacky to wear diamonds in the daytime?" The Texas woman just smiled: "I did too, honey; that was before I had 'em." And listen to Nobel Prize winner John Steinbeck summing us up in his 1962 book *Travels with Charley*. After a stop in Amarillo for a grand Thanksgiving dinner, he wrote:

"Texas is a state of mind... an obsession. Above all, Texas is a nation in every sense of the word...Texas is the only state that came into the Union by treaty. Like most passionate nations Texas has its own private history based on, but not limited by, facts...Among other tendencies to be noted, Texas is a military nation. Even the dearly loved spectacular sports are run almost like military operations. Nowhere are there larger bands or more marching organizations, with corps of costumed girls whirling glittering batons. When a Texas team takes the field against a foreign state, it is an army with banners... I have said that Texas is a state of mind, but I think it is more than that. It is a mystique closely approximating a religion."

Well, if Steinbeck is right, and Texas is our religion, then the Bullock must be our church. In that case, the stewardship committee thanks you. I think you've already paid your pledge tonight.