

# THE OBSERVER/ENTERPRISE

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## Cowboy Town

By James M. Decker

What does it take to create a cultural event that permanently influences a community's heritage and legacy? I often wonder whether you could intentionally create such an event, even if you tried, or if some good ideas can only become great in the most organic fashion.

In 1930, thirteen leaders of Stamford came together to establish the Texas Cowboy Reunion. Andrew John Swenson, William G. Swenson, Ray Rector, Rudolph Swenson, John Selmon, A. C. Cooper, F. Harley Goble, R. B. Bryant, W. G. Owsley, Charles E. Coombes, R. V. Colbert, Louie M. Hardy, and Roy Arledge sought to create an event that would boost community morale and provide entertainment during the tough early years of the Great Depression. I never got to speak with any of those men about it, but I doubt that their intention was to create an event that would become Stamford's cornerstone for almost a century.

And yet, they did just that.

### A legacy begins

12,000 people attended that first Texas Cowboy Reunion. Three days of calf roping, bronc riding, steer riding, and

the first known wild cow milking contest in a rodeo were held in a natural amphitheater on the Swenson Ranch just outside of Stamford. A 1933 newspaper article reflected on the early success of the event, observing that:

It is not a Stamford celebration, a Jones County celebration, or a Texas celebration. It is a "whosoever may come" affair. The man who is interested in the perpetuation of pioneer ranch days in Texas, whether he lives in Texas or elsewhere, makes it his reunion. Indeed, the original mission was stated as follows:

To perpetuate the memory of the West, to entertain the pioneers of the past, to keep alive the traditions of those that wrested this country from the Indians and the buffalo is our one aim, and to this task we have pledged our time, our money, and our efforts.

Concurrent with the inaugural Texas Cowboy Reunion, the Texas Cowboy Reunion Oldtimers Association was founded to "hand down posterity, customs and traditions" of the frontier. This organization would receive acclaim in the early years when memberships were purchased by the likes of Will Rogers (more on him in a minute), famed Texas Ranger Captain Tom Hickman, and media mogul/frontier booster Amon Carter.

However, the real celebrities were the 335 men who claimed membership by working as cowboys on the range prior to 1895. In 1930, Stamford (and America) were experiencing an economic depression. A World War was in the rearview mirror and another was looming. Automobiles, tractors, and electric lights were quickly replacing horses and kerosene lanterns. It was a rapidly changing world and these were actual cowboys from the Old West. These men had lived the life that the Texas Cowboy Reunion sought to promote. They were from another time and place and they were now straddling two very different eras of American life.

### The Will Rogers legend

Now, about Will Rogers. It is a famous story in local lore that the legendary humorist, writer, and trick roper attended the 1935 Texas Cowboy Reunion. As the story goes, he was spotted in the grandstand quietly watching a daytime rodeo performance (this was before lights were added to the TCR arena). After some prodding, he made his way to the arena. There, he performed some roping demonstrations and served as a pickup man. It would turn out to be one of his final public appearances—he died in a plane crash in Alaska only about six weeks later. I recently heard some additional context from a local citizen whose father was a Boy Scout in 1935. The Scout troop was taking tickets that day and when Rogers came through the turnstile, her father asked if he was Will Rogers. He said that he was and the Scouts eagerly told their troop leader, who notified someone to go look for him in the grandstand!

Rogers would mention his Stamford trip in a column shortly thereafter. I've always heard it was his last column, but that may be apocryphal. A reader recently emailed me one of the higher-quality PDF copies of that Rogers column that I've seen. Other copies are available

online, but the resolution is spotty. This one has a pencil notation that it was pulled from the Fort Worth Star-Telegram on Sunday, July 14, 1935. Rogers famously described the TCR and Stamford as "a real celebration in a real cowtown by real old timers," which is a statement that we hold dear here in Stamford, but the full context is even more interesting. Rogers's column is all about his travels across the country and his appreciation for the sights and places of the world. He closes the column (written in 1935, mind you, a pretty tough time in America) as follows:

Just quit listening to the politicians. They have to make a noise the nearer it comes to next year. Roosevelt aint going to ruin the Country. The Constitution will remain as it is. The Russians are not going to take us. Everywhere I have been on this trip there is a fine feeling.

### Mr. Texas and the Johnson City Windmill

I've written previously about the history and development of the Texas Cowboy Reunion over the last century. It has attracted sitting Governors, future Presidents, movie stars, and more. Lyndon Johnson and his famed "Johnson City Windmill" were scheduled to make a stop at the 1948 Texas Cowboy Reunion, during the heat of the bitter and infamous 1948 U.S. Senate election. In the Johnson biography "Means of Ascent,"

author Robert A. Caro describes how Johnson's opponent, esteemed former Governor Coke Stevenson arrived in Stamford to find a throng of reporters eagerly awaiting Johnson's helicopter. A Johnson sound truck drove through Stamford blaring campaign slogans and taunting Stevenson. It appeared that Johnson would have one of the great celebrity appearances in TCR history.

And then Coke Stevenson led the Grand Parade through the streets of Stamford.

It is one of the more dramatic scenes in a dramatic book, but Caro tells the story of Stevenson being given a hero's welcome in Stamford. He did not arrive to serve as parade marshal, but Bill Swenson (president of the TCR, manager of the Swenson Ranch, and a friend of Stevenson) quietly pushed him out front. Stevenson's welcome was not a raucous scene, mind you. It was a deeply respected man of a bygone era being recognized and honored by the cowboys, ranchers, and farmers lining the streets of Stamford. Caro describes it as a "quiet but immense outpouring of affection" down the entire parade route. This included a particular show of respect, in which men and boys alike touched their fingers to the brims of their hat to properly salute Stevenson, who was known in those days as "Mr. Texas." Stevenson sat in the judges' box

## Area Churches

### Invite You to Worship

#### Bronte

#### Bronte Church of Christ

PO Box 346

118 S. Jefferson • Bronte

Sun. 10 am & 6 pm, Wed. 7 pm

#### Central Baptist Church

324 S. Franklin • Bronte

(325) 473-4811

Dale Patterson, Pastor

Sun. 10 am Sunday School

11 am & 5 pm Worship

#### First Baptist Church

424 S. Washington • Bronte

(325) 473-2331

firstbronte@gmail.com

Pastor George Cooper

Sunday 9:45 am Sunday School,

10:30 am Worship

Wednesday 6 pm - 8 pm

Children and Youth

#### Bronte Methodist Church

Corner of Washington & Holmes

Bronte • (325) 650-4836

Pastor Keith Fletcher

Sun. 10:00 am Sunday School

11:00 am Worship

#### St. James Catholic Church

215 N. Washington, Bronte

(325) 365-2687

Rev. Timothy Hayter, Pastor

Sunday Bilingual Mass 8 am

#### Robert Lee

#### Emmanuel Pentecostal

PO Box 794 • 1004 Hillcrest

Pastor Brantly Robertson

(972) 841-2009

Sundays 10 am, Wednesdays 7 pm

#### First Methodist Church

PO Box 144 • 9th & Chadbourne

Pastor Gary Karschner

Robert Lee • (325) 453-2417

Sun. 11 am Worship,

#### Southside Church of Christ

PO Box 698 • 8th & Houston

Robert Lee (325) 453-2176

Sun. 10 am, Sunday School

11 am Worship

Wed. 6 pm, Worship

#### Northside Church of Christ

PO Box 508

9th & Chadbourne • Robert Lee

(325) 453-2685, (325) 763-2118

or (325) 473-1053

Services: Sun. 10 am

#### Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church

601 W. 10th, Robert Lee

(325) 365-2687

Rev. Timothy Hayter, Pastor

Saturday Vigil Mass 6 pm

#### Robert Lee Baptist Church

PO Box 493 • 22 W. 11th

(325) 453-2724

Chris Walls, Pastor

Sun. 9:45 am, Sunday School

11 am Worship

Wed. 6:30 pm, Prayer Meeting

#### Victory Assembly of God

(325) 453-2208, PO Box 638

202 E. 6th Street, Robert Lee

Rev. Rocky Youngblood, Pastor

Sun. 9:45 am, Sunday School

10:45 am & 6 pm, Worship

Wed. 6 pm, Bible Study

#### Coke County

#### Pecan Baptist

PO Box 542 • 12 miles West of

Robert Lee on Sterling City Hwy

(325) 453-2065, Bill Hood, Pastor

www.pecanbaptistchurchrl.com

Sun. 10 am, Sunday School

11 am & 7 pm, Worship

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