

COMMEMORATING TEXAS HISTORY:  
THE HISTORICAL MARKER PROGRAM

by

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On Sunday, January 14, 1962, at 2:30 p.m., Dr. Rupert Richardson, John Ben Shepperd, and F. Lee Lawrence stood among a crowd gathered at a roadside park two miles northeast of Tyler. They were there for an event which has been repeated 8,000 or so times in the 24 years since that day. They had gathered on that winter afternoon to dedicate a Texas historical marker and to inaugurate the state's current program of historical marking.

The marker in question told the story of Camp Ford, a Confederate Prisoner of War camp which one time held nearly 5,000 captured Federal soldiers. The marker was sponsored by George T. Abell of Midland's Abell-Hanger Foundation, whose grandfather had been a prisoner of war there, and Mr. Abell was a special guest at the dedication. Made of cast aluminum, the Camp Ford marker was the first of a series of Tourist Information or Travel Information markers. Somewhat larger than the later standardized marker size, the Tourist Information Marker had an ornate scrolled border. It was intended to stand along major highways to inform tourist and Texan alike about a nearby event or site of historical significance.

The idea of commemorating sites of historical importance did not begin with the Tourist Information Marker. It did not even begin with the granite markers erected in conjunction with the Texas Centennial celebration in 1936. Even in the 19th century, Texans were using inscribed stones to recognize their heritage. A memorial known as Brigham's Monument was erected at the San Jacinto Battlefield in 1881 to commemorate the Texans who died in that battle. The monument was paid for by voluntary contributions of the citizens of Texas. In 1903 the children of Gonzales City Schools sponsored a marker at the site of the 1835 skirmish over that town's cannon. The Daughters of the Republic of Texas attached a plaque to the wall of the Rice Hotel in Houston in 1914 to mark the site of the Republic of Texas Capitol, and a Waco DAR chapter in 1917 marked the site of the Waco Indian Village and Spring. The DAR inspired a series of granite stones which were placed along El Camino Real at five mile intervals in 1916-19. A number of these pre-centennial markers are compiled in William Moses Jones' book Texas History Carved in Stone, published in 1955. It also gives the inscriptions of the 1936 markers.

The rising popularity of the automobile in the early 20th century made the roadside historical marker a more viable means of commemorating events and persons of the past. As Americans took to the highways, several states began to combine this mobility with a natural curiosity about local history. The state of Virginia initiated an ambitious marking program in 1926, and Texas, Montana, Washington, and other states began erecting markers in the 1930s.

Michael has already talked a bit about the marking program that was a part of the Centennial celebration in 1936. A record of all the markers erected that year is contained in the book Monuments Commemorating the Centenary of Texas Independence, which was published in 1938. L.W. Kemp (1881-1956), a member of the Advisory Board, distributed copies of the report to libraries, public officials, county advisory boards, and governors of other states. So county historical commissions might well find this now rare volume somewhere within the county.

In the book, Kemp explains the process by which sites were chosen and markers written. County advisory boards submitted applications for the memorials and monuments. An authority on the historical subject or character was then invited to write the inscription. The inscription was reviewed by persons familiar with the subject for both historical and literary accuracy.

The book contains illustrations of the statuary and restored or replicated buildings erected during the Centennial as well as the markers. Kemp separated the markers into three groups: historical markers, grave markers, and highway markers. As Michael has already indicated, the 1936 markers concentrated on the events and individuals of the Revolution and Republic era, but they also commemorated the missions, French and Spanish explorers, the earliest settlers in a specific area, and the persons or places for whom the 254 counties are named.

There were over 450 markers in the "historical markers" category. These were granite slabs with the inscription either cut into the stone or cast on a bronze plate. A bronze star and wreath

decorated the stone. The stonework for all the 1936 markers was done by the Stasswender Company, and the bronze casting was done by the Southwell Company of San Antonio, which has also cast all of the aluminum markers erected since 1962.

The historical markers were placed at or near the site associated with an event or person. Topics commemorated by the 1936 historical markers included the site of Lorenzo de Zavala's home, the Battle of Medina, the town of Hidalgo, Torrey's Trading Post, the Sam Houston Oak near Gonzales, Tascosa, and Add-Ran Christian College near Thorp Spring.

The grave markers erected in 1936 were granite with a bronze star and wreath. Over 250 of these markers were placed at the gravesites of such Texans as Haden Edwards, Francisco Ruiz, William Goyens, and Ferdinand Lindheimer.

The highway markers were fashioned of pink granite with a bronze representation of the highway department insignia and an inscription on a bronze tablet. They were placed along major highways, although some have since been moved as highway routes were changed. Of the 264 highway markers, 220 related county histories, the facts of which were verified by county archives and county judges. The other topics commemorated were ten battlefields, seven towns, ten stage lines and cattle trails, three ferries, two churches, five forts, a home, mission site, school, a grave, a bridge, a mountain, and an expedition.

When the Texas State Historical Survey Committee was created in 1953, one of Gov. Allan Shivers first appointees was the same L.W. Kemp who had worked on the Centennial marker program. Kemp

was a noted Texas historian, despite the fact that he pursued research as an avocation rather than as a professional career.

He is especially noted as an advocate for the State Cemetery. Among his papers at the Barker History Center is correspondence with D.C. Greer of the State Highway Department about the Survey Committee's efforts to have damaged Centennial markers repaired. The Survey Committee also initiated a program to mark the graves of Texas War for Independence veterans who were overlooked in 1936. These stones were of gray granite with a star and wreath like the 1936 design.

In 1962 the Texas State Historical Survey Committee launched the current marker program on two fronts. One was the Travel Information or Tourist Information marker, of which Camp Ford was the first. It was followed three months later by a marker for the Odessa Meteor Crater, one for Castle Gap in Upton County, and then Alleyton, C.S.A. in Colorado County. The Alleyton marker was one of a number of plaques commemorating the centennial of the Civil War, which was a major emphasis of the Survey Committee in the early 1960s.

The other noteworthy event of 1962 was the inauguration of the building medallion program. Historical preservationists had begun to realize that commemoration of the past was not enough. Measures had to be taken to preserve the structures and artifacts of our heritage. To recognize significant historic structures, a round medallion with a map of Texas was created. The first one was awarded to the Eggleston House in Gonzales County, but other noteworthy structures such as the Governor's Mansion and

the Alamo were also honored. Each medallion carried a number on the back, and they still do today. The number identified the medallion with the structure to which it had been awarded. In the early days, the number and color of the stars along the rim of the medallion carried special significance, but that usage was dropped and the plaques were standardized. It was also determined that the medallion alone did not properly set forth the importance of a designated structure. An interpretive plate was required to provide a brief history of the site. In 1973 when the Texas State Historical Survey Committee was renamed the Texas Historical Commission, the designation Recorded Texas Historic Landmark was created. All medallion structures, now numbering 2,500 across the state, receive that prestigious designation. Later measures also gave Recorded Texas Historic Landmarks a measure of legal protection against damage or destruction and provided the owner with potential tax benefits.

In 1963 the Survey Committee received stronger statutory responsibilities for the state marking program. This paved the way for the ambitious program known as RAMPS, conceived and carried out under the leadership of John Ben Shepperd. The acronym RAMPS highlighted several aspects of historic preservation -- Recordation, Appreciation, Marking, Preservation, and Surveys. Begun in 1964 as a joint five-year program of the Texas State Historical Survey Committee and the Texas Historical Foundation, its goal was the placement of 5,000 markers across the state by 1969. During the RAMPS promotion, a number of special marker series were created.

The Moody Foundation sponsored a transportation and communication series, marking such topics as the Morgan Steamship Lines, the First TV in Texas, and the Butterfield Stage-Southern Overland Mail Route. Another series done in cooperation with the Texas Federation of Women's Clubs commemorated outstanding women of Texas. Governor John Connally suggested what became known as the John Connally marker -- a small plaque erected at the city limits to tell a brief history of a town. In 1966-67 special markers were awarded for the centennial of the Texas oil industry and the 75th anniversary of the Railroad Commission. Another series commemorated Texas law enforcement officers. There was even a series designated for historic trees, but preservationists discovered to their dismay that historic trees often declined and died just after the dedication of the marker!

One important focus of the RAMPS program was the link between historical markers and tourism. Statistics from the earlier Camp Ford effort were cited to promote this concept.

The Tyler Chamber of Commerce was reported to have estimated 30,000 tourists would read the Camp Ford marker during the first year alone! The Texas Highway Department conducted a survey that indicated each historical marker averaged 45 car stops per day with an average stay of 26.2 minutes per stop. There could be some truth to the rumor that Lee Lawrence and other Tyler preservationists influenced the outcome of that survey by scheduling frequent stops at the Camp Ford marker. In 1965-66 the Highway Department reported in another survey that each marker earned \$17.55 per day, \$536 per month, and \$6,405 per year in increased tourist revenue for the state.

One aspect of tourist promotion was the Texas Travel Trails series. This was not strictly tied to the historical marker program, but it did integrate recognition of historic sites into tourist promotion, and it was carried out in part by the Survey Committee staff. Governor John Connally called a meeting in Austin in May 1967 at the suggestion of Texas Tech to explore the trails concept. The eventual program was worked out by the Tourist Development Agency, the Highway Department, the Parks and Wildlife Department, the Texas State Historical Survey Committee, and the State Library. In January 1968 ten trails were announced covering all parts of the state from the Texas Forest Trail to the Texas Mountain Trail. The trail routes were marked by blue and white signs reportedly inspired by a blue dress in Mrs. Connally's wardrobe, and brochures were published to give information about historic and scenic landmarks along the way.

The RAMPS program was promoted through the Distinguished Service Awards and the Historical Foundation's Quota Buster awards which credited each county survey committee for work in this area. Mrs. Deolece Parmelee, who joined the Survey Committee staff in 1963, worked tirelessly with the marker program throughout the RAMPS era and served as Director of Research for the Survey Committee and the Texas Historical Commission until her retirement in 1979.

On October 27, 1969, RAMPS officially reached its goal of 5,000 markers with a marker commemorating the Rocking Chair Rancho in Collingsworth County. Much had been learned about the commemoration of Texas history during those five years. Many of the smaller markers were found to be too small to carry



adequate historical data, and in the early 1970s the sizes were standardized into the four marker types used today. With larger markers, the writing style was also improved and the annoying telegraphic style of marker prose was eliminated. It was also determined that the special series would be eliminated and instead incorporated into the overall marker program.

As the marker program matured, its course was charted by new goals established as part of the Survey Committee and Historical Commission's "Goals for the '70s" and "Goals for the 80s". Procedure was also standardized to assure the historical accuracy and literary quality of markers throughout the state. Under the current program, the marker topics are suggested by county historical commissions. Supportive research is also done locally, and much of the work reflects very high academic standards. A State Marker Committee, composed of gubernatorial appointees to the Texas Historical Commission, establishes overall marker policies and approves or rejects proposed topics for commemoration.

Because the Texas marker program is intended to recognize events, persons, and topics of local significance, as well as state or national importance, the number of markers continued to grow from the 5,000 erected during the RAMPS years. There are now over 9,000 markers in the state, establishing the Texas program as one of the most ambitious in the nation. For example, in 1972, when Texas had about 7,000 markers in place, the states of Alabama and Florida had about 200 each.

Part of the difference in numbers can be attributed to the size of Texas. Another reason is the significant role that

markers have come to play in the larger preservation movement. We've already mentioned the protection offered to Recorded Texas Historic Landmarks. Even when a marker does not offer legal protection, it draws public attention to a site that is worthy of preservation. Cemeteries, for example, need no protection; they are already protected under Texas law. But county historical commissions have often found that state recognition through a historical marker helps focus public support for cemetery preservation.

Needless to say, the 9,000 markers now in place include a variety of topics from the mundane to the unique. No one doubts that the eradication of the screwworm was a significant event in the history of the Texas cattle industry, but it certainly makes an unusual marker topic. Another marker commemorates the Crash at Crush, an intentional locomotive collision staged by the MK&T Railroad in 1896 near Waco. The crash was intended as a publicity stunt but turned tragic when a photographer and spectators were fatally injured by flying debris. A marker in Nacogdoches for Los Ojos de Padre Margil commemorates the site of the Holy Spring, discovered in 1718 by a Spanish missionary in response to the vision he had in a dream.

In New Braunfels a marker for the First Patented Wire Fence carries an illustration of the fence design. A celebrated marker in Henderson commemorates the Arnold Outhouse, the only outbuilding left from a Victorian complex. And in the Texas Panhandle stands a marker entitled "The Red River Plunge of Bonnie and Clyde", recounting the time the outlaw pair drove a stolen car through a barricaded bridge. There are even Texas historical

markers located outside the boundaries of the state. In 1936 a marker was placed at the gravesite of Thomas J. Rusk's parents in Pendleton, South Carolina.

With centuries of Spanish and Mexican influence, it is only natural that Texas has produced some bilingual markers. One stands in Pike Park in the "Little Mexico" neighborhood of Dallas. Another commemorates Don Pedro Jaramillo, a legendary faith healer from Brooks County. Recently in Hidalgo County a marker with an English text was dedicated in a bilingual ceremony.

Markers also record the significance of persons sometimes overlooked by published histories, including women such as Melissa Dora Oliver Eakle in Amarillo and Addie Graham of Young County. Ethnic and minority history is also recounted in markers. Black Texans from William Goyens and Hendrick Arnold to Zenobia Trimble of Wichita County have been recognized as well as countless teachers, doctors, nurses, ministers, and many generations of pioneers. One interesting marker in Guadalupe County tells the story of the Wilson Potteries, an industry operated by former slaves during the Reconstruction era.

Markers have been especially useful in recording changing population patterns and in locating the sites of once thriving communities which became ghost towns when they were bypassed by the railroad or lost a crucial vote for county seat. Bagdad in Williamson County is one example, as well as Buffalo and Science Hill in Henderson County.

Historical markers combine a sense of place with a written account of facts. What a vivid picture we get of the hardships of western travel at the site of Horsehead Crossing on the Pecos

River! Or standing before an old schoolhouse envisioning the generations of children who gathered there to learn.

Perhaps most importantly, the marker program has provided the impetus for local historians to research and record data that otherwise might have been lost. All of the documentation that accompanied historical marker applications has been microfilmed through a grant from the Hoblitzelle Foundation and is available at the Hoblitzelle Data Center at the Texas Historical Commission headquarters. In some cases, this is the only written account of a particular topic. The date inscribed at the bottom of the marker text will alert the reader about the availability of further research at the Historical Commission. In general the markers erected after the mid-1970s have fairly substantial documentation on file.

From the beginning, the marker program captured the public's imagination and drew public officials and other notables to take part in dedication ceremonies. Governor Price Daniel unveiled the Odessa Meteor Crater marker, the second in the Tourist Information series, in 1962. Bob Hope was a special guest at Port Arthur's dedication of the Babe Didrikson Zaharias marker in 1980. Lady Bird Johnson dedicated a marker for the First National Bank of Jefferson, and Vice President George Bush participated in ceremonies for the Hotel Texas marker in Fort Worth in 1981.

On the other hand, historical markers have come in for their share of ridicule. When I worked at the Historical Commission I ran across a cartoon showing a plaque with the following inscription: Absolutely nothing of any importance ever occurred at this site.

On another occasion I was teased about a marker that stood prominently in the middle of a downtown parking lot. "Did you write the marker for that parking lot?" my friend asked. The point remains that something existed on that site before it was a parking lot; in this case, it was a Swedish Methodist Church. The marker tells about the ethnic origins of early settlers in the community, about the importance they placed in their religious institutions, and about the changing face of the urban scene.

The Texans who gathered in 1881 on the San Jacinto Battlefield to dedicate Brigham's Monument, or even more recently those who stood before the Camp Ford marker on January 14, 1962, could not have envisioned that they were at the vanguard of a significant avenue of historic preservation. Our human need to record and remember the events of the past has been captured in a special way in the ongoing program of Texas historical markers.