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Star of the Republic Museum

Government Publications
Texas State Documents

FEB 14 1990

Notes

Vol. XIV, No. 2

Dallas Public Library

Winter 1989

Texas: "A Beautiful, Promising Land"



FRIEDRICKSBURG,
TEXAS

"I wish that the contents of this book may not prove entirely worthless for a more accurate knowledge of a beautiful, promising land."

Ferdinand Roemer referring to his manuscript, *Texas*, which described his travels through the country from 1845 to 1847.

Contemporary Texas reflects a vastly altered landscape - in both fauna and flora - compared to the environment encountered by immigrants to the region in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The images of antebellum Texas described primarily by Anglo explorers and settlers expressed their attitudes towards the land and its wildlife. These "landscape images" profoundly affected how they used the lands of Texas and the country's other natural resources.

In the 1840's James W. Parker wrote of Texas: "When I say that there is not a country within my knowledge of the same extent of territory as that of Texas, that has as much rich soil - that has a more general healthy atmosphere - that is blessed with better water - that has more beautiful lakes or richer landscapes - that has a more extensive range for stock - or that surpasses her in commercial, agricultural, or manufacturing advantages, I speak truly. But I can, with equal truth, say that within my knowledge, there is not a country of the same extent that has more poor land; that has a greater number of local causes of disease - that has more unseemly and disagreeable swamps and ponds, or that has more snakes, mosquitoes, ticks and flies than Texas."

"The finest artificial garden in the world would sink into insignificance when compared with this garden of nature's own planting."
Charles Sealsfield

Parker's description represents a balanced evaluation which was generally the exception when discussing Texas. The varied images of the country recorded by travelers reflected the geography of the area they visited and the season, but they were with few exceptions extremely positive. When first entering Texas, young Rutherford B. Hayes described the area around San Marcos: "I should be driven to extremities in attempting to spread before you the singularly picturesque appearance of the upper country." Any-

It is lined by beautiful banks, densely covered with bushes. Overhanging branches often brush the boat's deck. One cannot easily imagine more luxuriant vegetation than this. All the timber and underbrush of a tropical climate - cedar, cypress, and the like - rival one another in rank growth. From among them is wafted the fragrance of the blossoms of the magnificent magnolia, which I have seen nowhere in such splendor and profusion.

German traveler, Gustav Dresel describing Buffalo Bayou in the late 1830's, which is now the Houston Ship Channel.

one who visited Texas during the spring was universally impressed with the prairies and wildflowers. In 1837 a visitor from Ohio wrote, "The whole country, during the months of April, May and part of June. . . is fascinating beyond description."

The purpose of their visit, whether as land speculator and potential colonist or explorer and collector/naturalist, also influenced traveler's perceptions of the land. While journeying through Texas in 1821, the *empresario* Stephen F. Austin consistently described the region in terms that appealed to land speculation and colonization. He noted that, "Texas as a Country may be advantageously compared with any portion of North America." His succinct description of the region along the Brazos River makes clear his intentions for the land: "very good, rolling Prairie black soil, sufficiently timbered." In the 1840's, Mary Maverick expressed the potential the Republic held for new immigrants: "What a grand home for the toilers of Europe. Tomorrow they will come - tomorrow the overcrowded of the cities, the wearied sons of toil will come, and will build up this magnificent country into a grand empire."

Explorers and naturalists traveled throughout the country, collecting geological specimens, plants and animals, some of which, like the horned toad, were never before seen outside of Texas. Many times, the species were named after their discoverer. The post oak, *Quercus drummondii*, is named after Thomas Drum-

mond. Sent to America by the Botanical Society of Glasgow, Scotland, Drummond trekked through Texas in 1833, sending numerous specimens back to England.

The German paleontologist Ferdinand Roemer explored Texas in 1845. He later described the land for potential German immigrants in his book, *Texas*. Roemer traveled by mule and noted that the animal "offered a grotesque appearance, carrying in addition to myself, a leather saddle-bag full of stones, a bundle of plants, a young alligator hanging behind the saddle, and a four - or five-foot chicken snake suspended from the pommel."

Several of the naturalists who explored and collected in antebellum Texas were well-known men, such as John James Audubon who visited Texas in 1837. Others worked in relative obscurity; nevertheless their contributions were still impressive.

A Yale graduate, Charles Wright came to Texas in 1837 and taught at Rutgersville College near LaGrange. Joining a surveying expedition for a new road from Austin to El Paso, he was forced to walk the entire 673 miles while collecting plants under the most arduous of conditions. Yet, he managed to send over 1400 specimens back to Asa Gray at Harvard's Peabody Museum.

Scientific observations about the country were also recorded by individuals on military and mapping expeditions. In the 1840's, Captain Randolph B. Marcy spent several years on the Texas frontier, involved in surveying and exploring ex-

peditions. He wrote of west Texas: "Not a tree, shrub, or any other object relieved the dreary monotony; it was the vast, illimitable expanse of desert prairie - the dreaded 'Llano Estacado'; or the great Zahara of North America." Marcy's observations contributed to the myth of the "Great American Desert," as the plains were called in the early nineteenth century.

Because of its size, geographical diversity, and great variety of fauna and flora, Texas can be considered the "biological crossroads of North America." Yet, in the early nineteenth century, travel literature on Texas tended to divide the area into "three distinct geographical regions - the *level*, the *undulating*, and the *mountainous* or *hilly*."

It is important to remember that during the antebellum period, travel and settle-

In contrast to Indians who saw the land as "something to which they belonged," Texas pioneers perceived the land as space "to be expropriated, delineated, and rendered hospitable."

ment patterns were primarily confined to southeast and east central Texas. Cities like Austin were considered to be on the frontier and in Indian territory. Consequently most written accounts of the land

and its inhabitants tend to describe this same geographical region.

Nineteenth-century immigrants to Texas brought preconceived notions or images of the land with them, what one scholar has called "anticipated landscapes." In contrast to Indians who saw the land as "something to which they belonged," Texas pioneers perceived the land as space "to be expropriated, delineated, and rendered hospitable." Anglos and Europeans saw the lands of Texas "as a wilderness and as a garden."

Texas was a "howling wilderness" to be conquered, and redeemed from "chaos and bestiality," i.e., civilized. The "Father of Texas," Stephen F. Austin, frequently expressed the nature of this challenge in his writings. In recruiting colonists Austin noted that "through noiseless perseverance and industry the settlers would force nature to unlock its bounties so that the axe, the plough and the hoe would do more than the rifle or sword."

Settlers often overcame the intimidation an "untamed wilderness" presented by finding "home" in it. Central Texas was transformed into another "German Rhineland" or English "Windsor Forest." One immigrant wrote that the country around Brownsboro looked like Norway, with "high ridges and large pine woods."

Colonists also described the fauna and flora of Texas in terms familiar to their native land. "Peach" lands referred to a region with excellent soils, due to the fact that a "native indicator plant" growing in the area had leaves which "tasted like the kernel of a peach stone." Many settlers called the scissortail flycatcher a "bird of paradise," because of its resemblance to the birds of New Guinea.

Early nineteenth-century settlers also recognized Texas as a garden, both in a natural landscape sense and as the end product of cultivation. The land was seen as "parkland" or some European country estate, and one Britisher noted, "the lawn, the avenue, the grove, the copse, which are produced by art, are here produced by nature."

In 1832, Charles Sealsfield seemed overwhelmed by the Republic's beauty. "The finest artificial garden in the world would sink into insignificance when compared with this garden of nature's

own planting. My horse could scarcely make his way through the wilderness of flowers, and I for a time remained lost in admiration of this scene of extraordinary beauty. The prairie in that distance looked if clothed with rainbows that waved to and fro over its surface."

A moderate climate, fertile soils, and extensive grasslands reinforced the myth of Texas as a potential garden, capable of supporting farmers, planters, and stockmen. Mary Austin Holley wrote in her "Texas Letters" that the climate of the country "enjoyed a perpetual summer," while another writer claimed that away from the coast, "no part of the globe is more friendly to the regular actions of the human frame."

The rich alluvial soil along the Brazos was called "Mulatto soil," and the lands adjacent to the river were "not surpassed in fertility in the far-famed lands of the Delta of the Nile." In describing Texas, William Kennedy noted: "It will cost more to raise a brood of chickens in Texas than an equal number of cattle." He was alluding to the fact that cattle could graze

on their own, while chickens had to be fed and protected from predators.

This mythical garden, with its "peach" lands and salubrious climate, was increasingly viewed as "North America's Mediterranean." The "Italy of North America," as Texas was called, referred not only to the country's geography, but also to the potential culture and civilization that these lands would nurture. In the 1840's an immigrant's guide to Texas described the future country as being as "beautiful as are now the scenes where once a Fabius fought, a Tully spoke, and Caesar reigned," while another publication declared that "the eagles of Rome, in all her glory, soared not over so fine a country."

One of the most important contributions of the land speculators, surveyors, and naturalists, with their maps, collections, published descriptions, and immigrant guides, was an increased awareness of Texas. This knowledge promoted settlement, encouraged by the belief in "Manifest Destiny," a nineteenth-century concept which dictated that the expansion of the United States and the domination of

"Proud oaks and lofty pecan and hickory trees were ruthlessly cut down, the tropical persimmons, rudely shaken by the heavy blows, shed their pretty orange-tinted, plum-like fruit."
Herman V. Ehrenberg

everything in its path was foreordained by Providence. Pioneers in Texas viewed the vast expanse of their new land as symbolic of nature's bounty, God-given for the benefit of human beings. They thought that it was their duty to tame and subdue the "howling wilderness."

Ironically, the process of transforming Texas "from its wilderness state" and cultivating the "garden" drastically altered the landscape in the areas of Anglo settlement. By mid-century the prairies

had been plowed and the woods axed and burned; cotton and corn, along with stock, had come to dominate the landscape in settled areas. These early pioneers came west to reclaim the "wastelands from savagery." Yet this "civilizing" process in reality only simplified natural ecological systems, causing many native plant and animal species to become less numerous or even extinct. In 1835, Herman V. Ehrenberg graphically described the subjugation of the wilderness at Washington-on-the-Brazos:

"We were obliged to stop for a few days at Washington, then a new settlement. Here the colonists had built their homes on a gentle slope of ground which climbed up into the forest where rang out the dull thuds of the immigrant's axe. Proud oaks and lofty pecan and hickory trees were ruthlessly cut down, the tropical persimmons, rudely shaken by the heavy blows, shed their pretty orange-tinted, plum-like fruit. Piles of twisted branches and knotty trunks were set on fire, and the bright blaze of these burning heaps cleared off the dampness of woods so thick and tangled that the rays of sun could hardly pierce their somber masses of leaves."

. . . to be continued with an examination of the "Beautiful, Strange and Menacing Animals" encountered by early Texans, including many species now extinct, such as the Carolina Parakeet and Passenger Pigeon, and the *supposedly* mythical "Jackalope."

Editor's Note: This issue of the *Notes* is the first of a two part series highlighting the exhibit, "A Beautiful, Promising Land," which will open in association with the Texas Independence Day Celebration on March 3 and 4, 1990. Many of the concepts expressed in the *Notes* and the exhibit come from the publication, *Wildlife and Man in Texas* by Robin Doughty. Dr. Doughty is a cultural geographer at the University of Texas, and has written extensively on "landscape imagery" in Texas. E.M.



Deer in Pedernales. Hermann Lungkwitz. Courtesy Dr. H.P. Harris

Field Trips

In association with the exhibit "A Beautiful, Promising Land," the Museum has organized a series of field trips to view three unique biotic communities. Each of these regions represent isolated remnants of the landscapes encountered by visitors to Texas in the early nineteenth century. Dr. Merrill Sweet, an environmental ecologist from Texas A&M University, will be our interpreter and tour guide. He has been leading field trips to these sites for several years as part of an ecology course at the University. Do join us for a series of remarkable educational experiences as we explore the natural history of the land and its inhabitants!

Saturday, March 24, 1990. *The Big Thicket*

At one time, the Big Thicket covered thousands of acres in central and east Texas. Today it is still considered the "Biological Crossroads of North America," with over 1,000 species of plants, including at least 40 kinds of orchids and four of the five genera of carnivorous plants found in the United States. Within its boundaries are areas of both temperate and subtropical jungle, swamp, woodland, plain, and desert. These diverse ecological communities provide a home for a wide variety of animals, including 300 species of birds, who either live in the area or visit it annually. We will leave at 8:00 a.m. from the Museum and return in the early evening. The cost is \$35 per person, and the deadline for reservations is March 9.

Saturday, April 28, 1990. *West Cave on the Pedernales*

Located in a deep, cool canyon with a cave and waterfall, West Cave Preserve presents a striking contrast to the dryer grasslands of the surrounding countryside. Now managed by the Texas Nature Conservancy, this is a remarkable environmental "niche." There are more than 200 plant species in the canyon which leads to a grotto and cave, where fragile "soda straws" hang from the ceiling. With a lunch on the Pedernales River, this promises to be an excellent opportunity to experience the Texas Hill Country. We will leave at 8:00 a.m. from the Museum and return in the early evening. The cost is \$35 per person, and the deadline for reservations is April 12.

Saturday, May 26, 1990. *Aransas Wildlife Refuge*

Take a Rookery tour of the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge and associated islands. Each island will be covered by thousands of birds at the height of their plumage, nesting and raising their young. You will visit the largest Reddish Egret rookery in the world! This will be a 60 mile boat trip on Capt. Ted Appell's "skimmer" which provides a covered seating area and observation deck. We will leave at 7:00 a.m. and return late that evening, following dinner "on your own" in Rockport. The cost is \$55 per person which includes the boat tour, and the deadline for reservations is May 5.

The fees cover transportation from the Museum (provided by Bryan/College Station Bus Charter), and a catered lunch. Reservations will be confirmed upon receipt of payment. Each trip is limited to 40 individuals, so make your reservations early. Call (409)878-2461 for further information.

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Notes

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Star of the Republic Museum

On March 3 and 4, 1990, the Museum will present a major new exhibit entitled, *Texas: "A Beautiful, Promising Land."* This exhibition will examine the landscapes, plants, and animals encountered by antebellum Texans. The perceptions or images of the land held by these travelers and settlers profoundly affected how they utilized its resources, and ultimately transformed the "howling wilderness." "*A Beautiful, Promising Land,*" features a remarkable collection of artifacts including: a pair of Ivory-billed woodpeckers and a Passenger Pigeon (both of which are now considered extinct), full mounts of an American bison, alligator, and a jaguar, along with numerous other historic artifacts such as a game pouch, surveying equipment, and plant collecting devices.

Last year the Museum's education programs operated at capacity levels, especially in the spring. To be sure of obtaining a tour reservation, you should schedule your visit as soon as possible. For further information on reservations or the Museum's school outreach programs, please contact the Curator of Education.

Front page illustration: *Friedrichsburg, Texas.* Hermann Lungkwitz.
Courtesy Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth.

In recent months the following individuals have donated or loaned artifacts to the Star of the Republic Museum:

- Mr. & Mrs. Harvin C. Moore, Chappell Hill
- Tom Whitehead, Jr., Brenham
- Ken Lindow, Houston
- Miriam Korff York, Giddings
- George F. Wingard, Navasota
- Davis Houston Linn, Huntsville
- New Year's Creek Settlers Association, Brenham

We wish to express our sincere appreciation to these individuals for their generosity and willingness to preserve and share our cultural heritage.

EXHIBIT SCHEDULE
Texas: "A Beautiful, Promising Land"
March 3 through October

MUSEUM SCHEDULE
Wednesday through Sunday
10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m

Administered by Blinn College, Brenham, Texas

- DirectorHouston McGaugh
- Curator of Exhibits Sherry B. Humphreys
- Curator of Education Ellen N. Murry
- Administrative Assistant Suzette S. Jensen
- Editor Ellen N. Murry

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