

Stomp and Gouge: Texas Folk Fights



Texans have a reputation for being tough and fighting for what they believe in. Undeniably, some of their bravado can be traced back to the Texas war for independence in 1836. But from where did that aggressive fighting style originate?

The roots of Texas folk fighting can be linked to the 18th century bare-knuckle style of fighting known as “boxing.” Jack Broughton, a renowned British fighter, devised seven rules of fighting “fair” which were regarded as a standard from contest to contest. However, settling disputes in the 19th century backcountry of the southern United States evolved into hand-to-hand combat known as stomp and gouge, rough and tumble, no holds barred, or rend and tear. This style of fighting came to Texas with the first Anglo settlers.¹

A lifestyle characterized by competitive activities like horse racing, gambling, and fist-fighting, accompanied by a lot of whiskey drinking led to this tough fighting style. The encounter usually began when an affront or perceived insult had been made, then the offender was challenged to a fight. When a dispute arose, the participants

could either agree to fight “fair” (according to Broughton’s rules) or “rough and tumble.”² A contestant could kick, stomp, gouge, choke, bite, strangle, pull hair, or resort to anything else—including severing body parts—using his hands, feet, legs, arms, or mouth. No weapons of any kind were allowed. A circle of spectators usually formed to enforce the no-weapons law and to cheer on the combatants. The fight was over only when one contender conceded he had had enough.

Davy Crockett died fighting in the war for Texas independence. His life and death became part of both history and folklore. His legendary antics included the stomp and gouge fighting technique, as described in his account of a fight in Washington when he was a member of Congress:

He seized the waistbands of my breeches as I come down, and I stuck my thumb in his eye; he roared out like a bull, and tried to punch me in the bowels with one fist...jist then he fixt his teeth into my throte, and I felt my windpipe begin to loosen. I kept my thumb in his eye, and war jist going to give it a twist and bring the peeper out, like taking a gooseberry in a spoon.³

Luckily for his opponent, someone interrupted the melee before Crockett succeeded.

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Texas Ranger Big Foot Wallace took part in the ill-fated Mier Expedition, in which a group of Texans invaded Mexico. Wallace recalled a rough fight,

One fellow came along by where I was standing, and planted his boot-heel with all his might on the top of my toes! I gave him three or four pounds of my fist right in the middle of his forehead, and he tumbled over on the floor, and didn't take any more stock in that "scrimmage." ... Two fellows grabbed me at once: I took an "under crop" out of the ear of one of 'em, and about half the hair off the head of the other. ... Pretty soon I saw a mahogany chair flying straight toward me, and I rather suppose, from the bump that was on my head the next morning, that it had finally stopped the chair.⁴

Stomp and gouge fighting began to wane in the 1840s due to the emergence of the Bowie knife and revolver. These new weapons made frontier fights more lethal and decisive. Nevertheless, the expression "saving face" remains in our vocabulary today, obviously a reference to the effectiveness of stomp and gouge fighting. A man would be wise to apologize for a perceived insult in order to "save face!"

¹Sitton, Thad. "Stomp and Gouge: Speculations about Texas Folk Fighting." 2011 Fall Meeting. East Texas Historical Association. Hotel Fredonia, Nacogdoches, TX. September 23, 2011. Speech.

²Gorn, Elliot J. (February 1985). "Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch: the Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry." *The American Historical Review*. 90 (1): 18-43. Print.

³Dorson, Richard Mercer. *Davy Crockett: American Comic Legend*. New York: Spiral Press for Rockland Editions, 1939. Print.

⁴Duval, John C. *The Adventures of Big-Foot Wallace, the Texas Ranger and Hunter*. Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1871. Print.



Christmas Traditions

Germany is credited with starting the Christmas tree tradition in the 16th century when devout Christians brought decorated trees into their homes. Some built Christmas pyramids of wood and decorated them with evergreens and candles if wood was scarce. The Christmas tree custom gradually became popular in other parts of Europe. In England, Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria, made Christmas trees fashionable by decorating the first English Christmas tree at Windsor castle with candles and a variety of sweets, fruits and gingerbread in 1841. Of course, soon other wealthy English families followed suit, using all kinds of extravagant items as decorations. Charles Dickens described such a tree as being covered with dolls, miniature furniture, tiny musical instruments, costume jewelry, toy guns and swords, fruit and candy, in the 1850s.

Can you guess what these Christmas items from the museum collection were used for?



Wooden Christmas tree stand with holes for receiving boughs in center post; bottom is x-shaped with a peg on the end of each cross piece.



Colored glass cup with wire to hang from the branch of a Christmas tree; used either candles or wicks floating in oil.



NATIONAL HISTORY DAY

BRAZOS VALLEY REGIONAL HISTORY FAIR

Plans are underway for the seventh annual Brazos Valley Regional History Fair, hosted by the Star of the Republic Museum on February 10, 2012. The regional fair is one step on the road to National History Day, a year-long, non-profit education program dedicated to improving the teaching and learning of history. Students choose their own topics of study related to an annual theme, conduct extensive research, and choose the best method for displaying their findings. The theme for 2012 is "Revolution, Reaction, Reform in History."

Volunteers, sponsors and judges are still needed. If you or your organization would like to help, please contact Anne McGaugh, Regional Coordinator, at (936) 878-2461, ext. 237 or amcgaugh@blinn.edu.

New Medicine Cabinet

Don't miss the new medicine cabinet in the Showers-Brown Discovery Room at the museum! The existing cabinet was completely overhauled by Education Assistant, Valerie Purcell. A question is printed on the outside of each of the nine drawers, and the answer—supported with images, artifacts, and other interesting items—is found inside. You might be surprised at some of the 19th century beliefs and theories about human health! For example, what was believed to be a cure for lockjaw? The answer—cockroach tea!



Night at the Star of the Republic Museum!

Night at the Star of the Republic Museum was held on Saturday, October 22. From 7:00 to 9:00 p.m., the lights were turned off and the museum's exhibits told the story of the Texas Republic. Over 200 visitors explored the museum by flashlight, never quite sure of what would be found around the corner! As in the movie "Night at the Museum," the exhibits came to life after dark! Actually, live characters were stationed in the exhibits, and each had a story to tell. Visitors met such characters as Stephen F. Austin, a Mexican *soldado*, a Texas Ranger, a Spanish priest, a riverboat captain, and numerous early Texas settlers.



The Museum would like to thank the volunteers and cast who made the evening possible (from left to right): Steve Haley, Mark Sanders, Roger Finke, William Bennett, Jim Lauderdale, Kellie McKenney, Janice Campbell, Ketra Williams, Elizabeth Rollins, Denise Campbell, Jeff Bolich, Tom Scaggs, and Sheri Finke.

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Upcoming Events:

December 3, 10, & 17 Christmas at the Park

Celebrate the season at Barrington Farm from 10:00 am to 4:30 pm. Make a Christmas craft at the Museum at 11:00 am and 2:00 pm!

December 24-January 1, 2012

Museum closed—
Happy Holidays!



January 13 Registration deadline for Brazos Valley Regional History Fair.

January 28-29 “Making Every Stitch Count”

Focus weekend at the Park, highlighting various textile skills from the mid-19th century—Quilts and other items from the museum collection will be on display.

February 10 Brazos Valley Regional History Fair

Regional competition for students in grades 6-12, which culminates with National History Day.

March 3 Republic of Texas Art Contest Awards

For 4th grade students in Washington and Grimes Counties; Winners will be announced in the Museum Theater at 12:30.

March 3-4 Texas Independence Day Weekend

Join us for a giant party celebrating Texas' 176th birthday, to recognize the adoption of the Texas Declaration of Independence. All admission fees waived!

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STAR OF THE REPUBLIC MUSEUM

Washington-on-the-Brazos State Historic Site

Open Daily
10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

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