JUNE 12, 2009 | $3.00 | OPENING THE EYES OF TEXAS SINCE 1954

The Texas Observer

Gov. Rick Perry
Weiner dog to the vet...what kinda strange allergies are out there??? Her eyes are almost swollen shut?

Gov. Rick Perry
Wow...we need to be paying attention to this Supreme Ct appt. If you care about property rights, get to work!!!

Can social media transform politics—

THE TWITTERING CLASS

by Josh Berthume

Rep. Aaron Peña
The cockfighting bill will die when the rooster crows at midnight.

U.S. Rep. John Culberson
New blog post: Celebrating a Crisis

—and reboot Texas Republicans?

Railroad Commissioner Michael L. Williams
Only $4K left & 3 days to go to hit our online goal. Thanks for all the RTs. We're almost there.

Railroad Commissioner Michael L. Williams
Help me fight cap and trade. This is bad policy. Will reduce GDP, jobs, earnings.

U.S. Rep. John Culberson
@smthorpe I will not respond to name calling -

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The Texas Observer

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Cover illustration by Daniel Lievens

A FOND FAREWELL

Thank you for your fine article about Bob Burleson ("Wild Man," May 15). Bob was a man of many talents with expertise in numerous unrelated areas. He was truly a Renaissance man whose recall of information and the lyrics of at least 1,000 songs was amazing. A prolific reader, he loved to share his knowledge. In fact, the term "walking encyclopedia" may have been formed to describe Bob.

More than smart, talented and, indeed, wild, he was a kind man. Among his former clients and business associates, his kindness was storied. Though many don't know it, for more than 25 years he headed a Christian social-work project similar to the Peace Corps in poverty-stricken areas of Mexico—primarily in the rugged outback where he was most at home.

Dave Richards got it right when he said Bob was a hard one to pigeonhole.

He will be deeply missed by many who appreciated him, including me (his wife and canoeing partner for the past 48 years).

Mickey Burleson
Temple

COME AGAIN?

"Reappraising the Governor" (May 29) grossly misstated information concerning Rick Perry and other property owners on the Peninsula in Horseshoe Bay, Texas.

1. Gov. Perry bought the lot from Sen. Fraser in 2001 for the going price to the general public!

2. The developer's claim that the Peninsula is the most prestigious property in Horseshoe Bay or on Lake LBJ is not correct! Applehead Island is the most prestigious, with gated security and armed guards.

3. Gov. Perry fought for his right to contest property values, the same as all property owners have done and still do! Check other property owners' appraised tax values on the Peninsula for the same years and see if there is truly anything illegal or underhanded going on! After paying taxes and interest for 6 years he may have doubled his money. Who knew real estate values would skyrocket like they have? It could have gone the other direction just as easy. Big deal!

4. The new sales price for Gov. Perry's old property has been grossly overvalued by the new owner, who is not a U.S. citizen. He bought the lot for less than half the price he is asking!

5. I bought my lot, #8, in 2003 for $579,000. It has increased in value to $1.5 million and is twice the lot that Gov. Perry sold to Wallace Holdings. Lucky me. My taxes have gone up 300 percent since that time. Unlucky me!

Get the facts right before you write articles that are slanted to your liking and the ordinary reader can't or does not know if you are right. When you're right it's great, when you're wrong, you're still right, unless someone proves you wrong. Gotch-U!

Randy Pipkin
President
Peninsula Property Owners' Association
Horseshoe Bay

The editors reply: *Mr. Pipkin alleges misstatements but identifies no errors. The* Observer *stands by its story.*

A FEW GOOD WORDS

Vintage Bode excellence ("El Paso Journal," May 29).

David Woods
Posted at www.texasobserver.org

CORRECTIONS: In "If They Build It" (May 29) we misidentified the interim executive director of Groundwork Dallas. She is Casie Pierce.

Because of an editing error, our May 29 review of *Hiding Man: A Biography of Donald Barthelme* mistakenly referred to *The Dead Father* as Barthelme's last novel. In fact, the novels *Paradise* and *The King* followed.

The *Observer* regrets the errors.

EDITORIAL

Terror for Life

Move over, Paul Ross Evans. There's a new martyr-saint for hardcore prolifers to publicly pooh-pooh and privately celebrate: conspiracy nut and serial clinic stalker Scott Roeder, who gunned down Kansas physician George Tiller, the nation's best-known practitioner of "late-term" abortions, during Sunday services at his Lutheran church in Wichita on May 31. But never fear, Mr. Evans: The justifiable-homicide crowd will not soon forget you. And neither will—neither *can*—the doctors, nurses, volunteers and patients at Texas abortion clinics.

Two springs ago, Evans, a 27-year-old ex-con and tattoo-parlor worker, deposited a nail bomb in the parking lot of an Austin clinic. Built with materials Evans had picked up at a Lufkin Lowe's and an Austin Wal-Mart, the bomb was capable of killing anyone within a 100-foot radius. Luckily, it was spotted by the clinic's business manager and ended up being detonated by a police robot after an evacuation. Credit-card charges at Wal-Mart led the Texas Joint Terrorism Task Force to Evans, who also claimed five previous bombing attempts and had planned a cross-country terror spree on behalf of "life."

Like Scott Roeder, Evans was hailed by anti-abortion zealots like Donald Spitz of Virginia, who runs the notorious Army of God Web site. "I would have preferred that babykilling abortion mill, the Austin Women's Health Center, would have been blown off the face of the earth," Spitz wrote. But even if his efforts came up short, Evans—now serving a 40-year prison sentence—was soon featured, along with well-known murderers like Eric Rudolph and James Kopp, as one of the Army of God's 14 "Prisoners of Christ," each with his own tribute section. If you Google "Paul Ross Evans," the Army of God site is your first result.

Unless you can stomach the specter of digitized dripping blood, images of aborted fetuses and gleeful celebrations of violence against "babykillers," I can't recommend that you click the link. But if you're made of stern stuff, the site can be edifying in a twisted sort of way—particularly if you're among those who wonder whether anti-abortion violence really adds up to terrorism. Army of God stalwarts like Evans, who is credited with several lengthy essays on the site, make no bones about the fact that terror is the point.

"Although the abortionist and his evil minions slithered away from the bomb unscathed," Evans writes, "I still consider my effort to bomb the Austin Women's Health Clinic abortion mill a success. ... I felt, and still feel, that if abortion mills and other anti-Christian venues are targeted with enough terrorism, eventually the United States government will abandon its protection of them."

A more crystal-clear definition of terrorism could hardly be found. The scariest thing, of course, is that it works. Particularly in states like Texas, it's helped make legal abortions increasingly hard to attain. It's also silenced both women who've had abortions and those who support their right to have done so safely.

"Forty-five million women have had an abortion," says Terry Sallas-Merritt of the Whole Woman's Health Clinic in Austin. "Why aren't all those women talking? Why are they so silent? You see providers silent, too. ... The threat and intimidation takes a toll. They want women to feel ashamed and providers to have difficulty providing care."

Make that *two* crystal-clear definitions of terrorism. —*Bob Moser*

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Hero's Reward

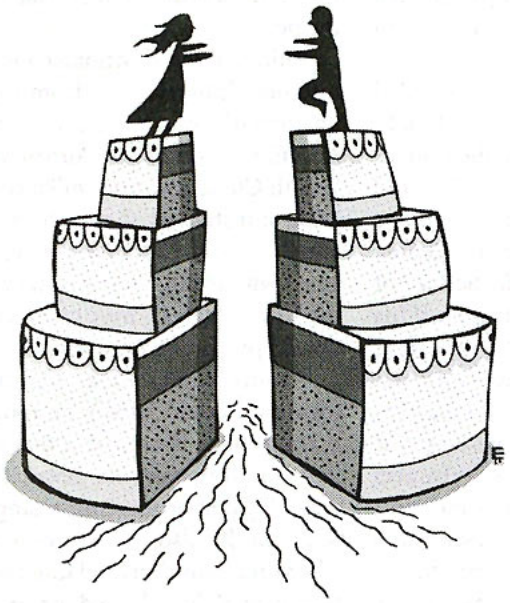


illustration by Alex Eben Meyer

Yusef "Joe" Ali Ghamdi loves his job in the U.S. Army. After his first tour in Iraq, during which he pulled Saddam Hussein from his final redoubt, Ghamdi volunteered for a second tour. Now an Army staff sergeant, Ghamdi has an unwavering sense of duty, but as he prepares for his third tour, he wonders if the country he has sworn to protect is hostile to the best interests of his family.

Ghamdi's wife, Coral, is facing deportation for entering the country illegally, a charge the Ghamdis vehemently dispute. The couple has a 3-year-old daughter. "It's ridiculous," Ghamdi says. "What happens to my family if something happens to me?"

The Ghamdis are not alone. The government doesn't track how many military families are affected by immigration troubles. But according to Margaret Stock, an immigration attorney and associate professor in the Department of Social Science at the United States Military Academy at West Point, not a week goes by that she doesn't hear of another heart-wrenching example. "I have a pile of these cases right now that still haven't been resolved," Stock says. "It's a readiness problem and a morale problem and it's across all branches of military service."

The Ghamdis' story began several years ago on the Texas-Mexico border. He was a self-described "dumb" Army private who traveled on a whim to Brownsville from Fort Hood in 2003 before shipping out for Iraq. As the 23-year-old Ghamdi and a few of his Army pals cruised through the city's crowded downtown retail district with the top down on his red, 2003 Sunfire GT convertible, Coral Olguin, 18, was walking down the avenue. Olguin had made the short move with her family from the neighboring Mexican city of Matamoros to Brownsville at age 9. What began as playful flirtation with a confident soldier became an invitation to her mother's house for a longer visit.

Ghamdi and his buddies arrived with beer and cigarettes, but Olguin's mother had not yet returned from her job at Gatti's Pizza, and until she did, the conversation would be confined to the front yard. Furthermore, the teenager made it clear there would be no drinking or smoking if Ghamdi had any interest in pursuing her. "We're trained to kill and here was this 18-year-old girl standing her ground," Ghamdi recalls. "I was mind-boggled." He'd headed to the border in search of a good time; instead he had stumbled upon a "real keeper."

During his tour in Iraq, Ghamdi gained considerable recognition for his participation in the four-man raid that captured Saddam. He returned a decorated hero. But his thoughts were on Olguin. A few months after coming home in 2004, Ghamdi proposed and she accepted. They'd never discussed Olguin's legal status. But it has been at the root of many conversations since.

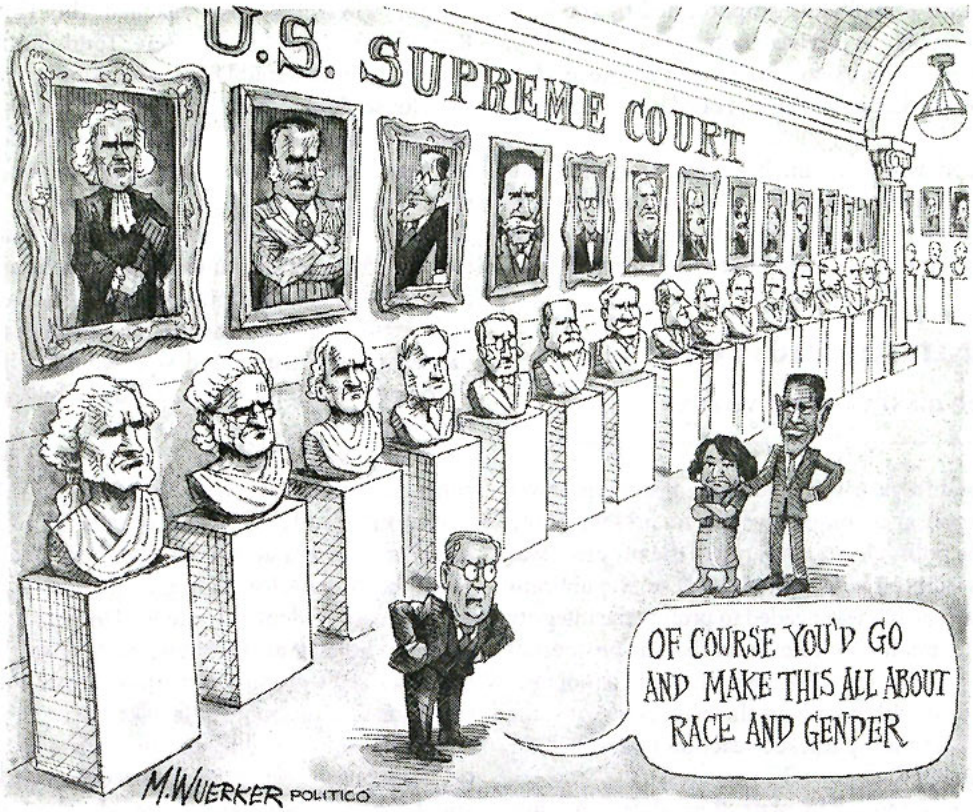
Olguin's visa had expired long before, making a legal U.S. marriage impossible. The couple had their ceremony on one of the three international bridges connecting Brownsville to Matamoros, where they honeymooned. On their return trip, the Border Patrol agent at the international bridge showed enthusiastic interest in Ghamdi's military service, and waved the newlyweds across without inspection.

That slip in protocol is at the center of a legal dispute between the Ghamdis and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services that has dragged on for more than two years. An immigration agent who interviewed the Ghamdis suggested that approving their request to adjust her status to permanent resident would open the floodgates for all soldiers to get their wives citizenship. "I said, 'Exactly, that's the idea,'" Ghamdi remembers.

The government claimed that absent any legal document, such as a border crossing card or passport, Coral must have lied to enter the country or intended to do so. "Essentially the government is saying you haven't convinced us that you're not telling a lie so you must have lied," says the Ghamdis' immigration attorney, Jaime Diez of Brownsville.

In a couple of months Ghamdi will return to Iraq, likely before the issue is resolved. In his absence, Coral faces deportation. Their daughter Luna, who is a U.S. citizen, will go with her mother.

Although they are reluctant to talk about such things, the Ghamdis are fully aware of the dangers that lie ahead. On his previous tour, Ghamdi says, he survived the detonation of at



least eight improvised explosive devices. On 17 occasions, he says, he's been targeted by rocket-propelled grenades. He can't remember how many times he's been under gunfire.

"I've literally bled from my back protecting a country that won't even give my wife her citizenship," Ghamdi says. "I should have taken that sucker Saddam hostage when I had the chance and said, 'You can have him if you just give my wife her citizenship.'" —*Aaron Nelsen*

Love's Mayor Lost

A MATCH MADE IN SAN ANGELO

When the popular mayor of San Angelo abruptly announced after his landslide election to a fourth term that he was stepping down to be with his gay lover, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, the story quickly became a media sensation.

"It was kind of a *Brokeback Mountain* deal," says Gregory Gossett, a close friend of Mayor J.W. Lown and director of the Gospel Vision Foundation, an evangelical missionary organization. "The man from the West leaves for a gay lover. How is this happening in some area that we think is homophobic?"

The local fallout was far different. "I was very impressed with people in San Angelo," Gossett says. "It was kind of a big yawn. The only hostile reaction has been: How can he quit us?"

Lown was the first full-time mayor of San Angelo, a heavily churched city of 90,000 people. The position only pays $600 a year and previous officeholders had "kinda treated it as a shiny badge to wear," says City Council member Charlotte Farmer.

Not Lown. "He was an outstanding mayor," Farmer says. "J.W. Lown was a people person. He sincerely loved and cared about this city and its people." Locals speculated about his political future. Perhaps he would eventually run for the Texas Legislature or even Congress. Many townspeople knew Lown was gay. But in the live-and-let-live tradition of West Texas, few made an issue of it.

Lown hasn't been giving media interviews, but he talked briefly by telephone to local reporters from a hotel in Mexico after his resignation. The reporters grilled him about the timing and circumstances of his actions. When did he decide that he and his partner would have to move to Mexico to apply for a visa? Did he run for re-election knowing that he might resign?

Lown explained that he'd met his partner just a couple months before the election. Only after consulting with an attorney about the legality of harboring an undocumented immigrant did he come to the conclusion, on election night, that he'd have to go to Mexico.

"I know the timing is less than desirable, but this spectacular thing happened in my life and I don't think you can plan for that," Lown said.

"In a relationship, you have to have trust. There's a great sacrifice on both of our parts. Imagine coming across that border on your own as a teenager—five years ago—it's a very scary thing to do. … I actually have the luxury of two citizenships and so I could make that sacrifice."

Lown said he had no idea how San Angeloans would react.

But he left behind his e-mail address, published by the local paper. Out of 300 e-mails he's received, only two were negative, he told the reporters. "There's so much support and understanding out there, so that gives me a great deal of comfort," Lown said.

A reporter asked what was on his mind as he left San Angelo. "The whole way we asked ourselves over and over, 'Is this the right situation? Is this the right decision to make?' It kept coming to us that it is. It's meant to be." —*Forrest Wilder*

Fearing the Vote

GOP DISSES YOUNG VOTERS

The Texas Legislature nearly melted down this session over a controversial proposal to require voters to present photo identification at the polls. Democrats argued the proposal was a naked attempt to suppress voter turnout. Not so, Republicans countered. They said the bill was needed to protect the integrity of elections. Perhaps, but there's little doubt that the prospect of higher voter turnout in Texas—and the presumed Democratic gains that would come with it—scares the bejesus out of some Republicans. Consider their panicked reaction to another, far less publicized, voting bill.

House Bill 1654, authored by state Rep. Rafael Anchia, a Dallas Democrat, looked innocuous enough. It aimed to increase voter registration among high school seniors in Texas—a piece of good policy that might have been expected to glide through the Legislature unscathed.

Only about half of 18- to 24-year-old Texans are registered to vote, which ranks the state 42nd in the country. (About 70 percent of all Texans are registered to vote.) To increase those numbers, Anchia's bill would have required public and private high schools to deputize more people to register students to vote. Under current law, schools have just a single voter registrar—the principal or someone designated by the principal. This bill would have raised the number of required voter registrars in each school to at least four.

The bill breezed through committee. The legislative liaison for the Texas Republican County Chairmen's Association testified in favor of the bill. No one opposed it.

But when HB 1654 reached the House floor, some Republicans freaked out. Rep. Todd Smith of Euless was one of the few Republicans who supported the bill. During the House floor debate, he summed up his GOP colleagues' objections this way: "I've heard some talk that the majority of teachers are Democrats. That might be a problem [if they're registering students]."

Of course, many Republicans wouldn't say they were worried that more young voters might give Democrats a boost at the polls. Instead they offered up all kinds of other concerns: They didn't want to infringe on "local control" of schools; they worried teachers and staff wouldn't have enough time to register voters; one even called the bill "another unfunded mandate."

Finally, Rep. Phil King, a Republican from Weatherford, conceded what really bothered him and others. The bill, he said, would create an "army" of perhaps 10,000 teachers and school employees across the state that could register voters. The subtext was clear enough—this army of teachers might indoctrinate students to vote for Democrats. The whole thing seemed a little paranoid, but when it comes to issues surrounding voter registration and turnout, that's where many in the GOP are coming from these days.

The bill squeaked through the House on a 75-74 vote. Only two Republicans, Smith and Rep. Tommy Merritt, R-Longview, voted for it. The measure later died in the Senate, where Republicans refused to bring it to the floor.

For the next two years, at least, the GOP is safe from a scourge of politically conscious 18-year-olds. —*Dave Mann*



YOU DON'T SAY:

"U ridiculed my education every drunk opportunity u had. U R not my friend."

–text message from state Rep. Norma Chávez to Rep. Marisa Marquez, quoted in an *El Paso Times* story about the Democratic legislators' ongoing feud.

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

Is West Texas' water supply at risk of radioactive contamination?

by Forrest Wilder

In 2007, geologists for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality told their bosses that a proposal for a radioactive waste dump in West Texas was fatally flawed because of the landfill's proximity to the Ogallala and Dockum aquifers. Then-agency head Glenn Shankle (now a lobbyist for the dump's owner, Waste Control Specialists) overruled his employees, issuing licenses for the two adjacent landfills in Andrews County. But as a compromise of sorts, he required Waste Control to conduct a number of tests and studies to prove that the site was dry enough.



photo by Diane Poteet

Water seeps from the ground at one of Waste Control's radioactive waste dumps.

Critics, including three whistleblowers who quit the agency in protest, were hardly mollified—in a sane world, they said, the company would have to prove that the dump wouldn't leak radioactive waste into the groundwater *before* getting a permit, not after. But that's all the TCEQ bosses were offering.

Now, some of the results from those studies are in. They are hardly reassuring. Waste Control, owned by Dallas billionaire Harold Simmons, has identified nine areas inside and near the proposed landfills where groundwater is present. The company has argued to the TCEQ in recent filings that these so-called "pockets of groundwater" are isolated from the aquifers and not a cause for concern. Some of them, the company says, are probably linked to playas—surface depressions, common to West Texas, that fill with water. Others, Waste Control contends, result from small depressions in the top of the red bed clay. The playas will be filled in with soil, the company promises, and the depressions in the clay are too small to matter.

Even so, the presence of any water is troubling. "If you have water in the ground you shouldn't put a landfill there," says Patricia Bobeck, a hydrogeologist who left the TCEQ in September 2007 and went public with her complaints that upper management had ignored the environmental and safety risks. Water can provide a pathway for radioactive particles to move quickly through the earth and permanently contaminate drinking or agricultural water.

Bobeck says the latest findings only underscore what she and other experts have been saying for years. "The people who rejected this site were not acting on a hunch," she says. "WCS has corroborated that with their own data."

In the past year, Waste Control, at the TCEQ's request, has drilled dozens of new wells. Many of them, including some within the footprint of the radioactive waste dump, have inches or feet of water at the bottom.

"These wells indicate that the area around the byproduct excavation and southeastern portion of the low level site are much wetter than previously thought," wrote Conrad Kuharic, a TCEQ geologist, in a February memo.

In its license application, Waste Control had argued that the landfills would be well away from a "dry line," a shifting boundary on a map dividing wet wells from dry. But in April, confronted with the evidence from its own wells, the company conceded that that critical line had moved 200 feet closer, almost inside the landfills. Increased rainfall in the future may put the "dry line" inside the dump, TCEQ experts have contended.

That, Bobeck says, is "bad news. This landfill by law cannot be placed in proximity with water."

For years, Waste Control has touted its 1,300-acre dump site as nearly geologically perfect for containing radioactive waste for tens of thousands of years. The company's primary selling point has been what it calls the "almost impenetrable red bed clay" in which the waste will be buried.

But the red bed is leaking. After giant earthmovers dug deep into it, water began seeping out of the walls. On the southern wall, enough seeped out to form a pool of standing water. In December, the company claimed that the water would soon dissipate. But when a trio of TCEQ geologists visited Waste Control's dump in January, a month and a half later, they noted that the puddle had actually grown (see photo above).

Bobeck is skeptical that the discovery of groundwater in the radioactive waste dump will prompt the TCEQ to crack down. The additional studies, she says, were never intended to change Waste Control's course.

Not surprisingly, the company agrees. "Groundwater occurrences in the vicinity of the Byproduct landfill have no impact on current planning for the operation of the landfill," the company told the TCEQ in May. ■

DYING TO BUILD

WHY TEXAS IS THE DEADLIEST STATE FOR CONSTRUCTION WORKERS.

by Melissa del Bosque

On Oct. 23, 2006, 19-year-old Omar Puerto was painting trim and preparing to install rain gutters on a three-story apartment building in South Austin. It was his third day on the job. So far, the main challenge had been moving the heavy 40-foot aluminum ladder; he and a fellow worker had struggled with it all three days.

Behind the men was a spider's web of electrical wires leading from the apartment building to a 7,200-volt transformer. Federal law requires that workers be trained before working around live wires. The law also says that any exposed wiring must be clearly marked. These wires weren't. And Puerto, according to his family, had gotten no training.

Now it was time to coax the 40-foot ladder toward the next section of wall. As Puerto and his partner yanked and pulled, the ladder hit an exposed wire connected to the transformer. The guy on the other end of the ladder took off running. Puerto had so much voltage running through his body that he couldn't release his grip. He died right there.

Puerto's sister, Martha, keeps a framed photograph of her younger brother on the living room wall of her modest Austin home. Puerto lived with her before the fatal accident. He had moved to the United States three years earlier from the rural farming town of Yoro in mountainous northern Honduras. Like so many immigrants, he found plentiful work in the booming Texas construction trade.

"He was such a hard worker," Martha says. While he dreamt of buying his own Toyota Tacoma truck, Puerto gave most of his earnings to his family. "Each month, he sent $1,200 to our parents to build a house in Honduras," Martha says. Puerto hoped to rejoin them before long. "He wanted to make his money," Martha says, "then go home in five or six years."

Instead, Omar Puerto returned to Honduras in a casket. His death was tragic and unnecessary—but hardly unusual.

A construction worker dies in Texas every 2 1/2 days. No other state in the country has as many construction-related deaths: 142 fatalities were reported in 2007, up from 131 the year Puerto died, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's most recent statistics. The causes are far from mysterious: lax enforcement of labor and safety regulations, too many overtime hours without rest breaks and a lack of safety training and equipment.

In Puerto's case, safety training—as mandated by law—and



Martha Puerto holds a picture of her brother, Omar, who died at 19. *photo by Eugenio del Bosque*

a fiberglass ladder would likely have prevented his death. The only restitution made by Gutter Tech, the Austin company that hired Puerto, was $5,000 to have his body shipped back to his parents in Yoro. Since Gutter Tech had no worker's compensation insurance—Texas is the only state where that's optional—Puerto's family was stuck with $8,000 in hospital bills for the autopsy and ambulance ride.

Gutter Tech, which did not respond to interview requests for this story, was fined $4,950 by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Puerto's brother-in-law, Arthur Ortega, thinks that's a pittance to pay for a man's life. "I read the autopsy reports and it was a horrible death," Ortega says. "It should never have happened."

Puerto's family has been pursuing a wrongful death lawsuit against Gutter Tech and the owners of the apartment building. They've had little luck finding a lawyer to take the case, however, because the company is a small business that had no insurance, Puerto says.

"I had to move out of my home after Omar died," Martha says, looking at the framed photo of her brother. "I couldn't stay there anymore after he was gone—I just left everything behind, it made me so sad."

While the housing crisis has pricked the construction bubble elsewhere in the country, Texas still has America's most vibrant market. In a February 2008 study by the Federal Reserve Bank of Texas, author D'Ann Peterson cited two keys to the state's success: "ample land supply and relatively few regulations on construction."

The lack of regulations—and enforcement—exacts a price from workers. "Every month we are seeing more workers," says Cristina Tzintzún of the Austin-based Workers Defense Project, a nonprofit group that helps construction workers seek unpaid wages and restitution for injuries. "And these are only a small portion of what's out there because law firms typically take on these injury cases."

Workers Defense has just completed a study of construction workers' safety and wage issues in Austin. For three months, volunteers visited construction sites, asking workers on lunch break or leaving the site a series of questions about workplace safety, wages and labor laws. Altogether, the researchers spoke with 312 workers.

The report, *Building Equality, Building Justice*, will be released on June 16; the group shared its findings in advance

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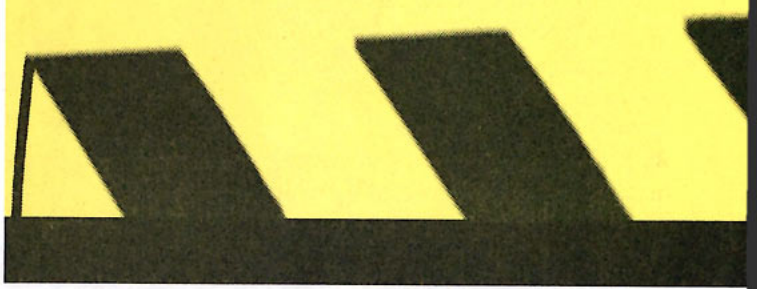
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questions

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At least 45% of the workers surveyed earned poverty-level wages. 1 in 5 had been injured on the job. 64% said they had not gotten basic safety or health training.



with the *Observer*. They are eye-opening. "It was far worse than we had even imagined," says Tzintzún, who thought she'd heard it all.

Researchers found that Austin construction workers—whether they're legal immigrants, undocumented workers or seventh-generation Anglos—have plenty in common: Most work long hours without overtime. Few receive adequate safety training. And few get basic safety equipment when they're hired for a job.

"Texas has failed to guarantee even basic safety and labor protections," Tzintzún says.

At least 45 percent of the workers surveyed earned poverty-level wages. One in five had been injured on the job. Sixty-four percent said they had not gotten basic safety or health training. Many reported that they'd had to bring their own hard hats and safety belts to both government-funded and private-job sites.

Most construction workers had never heard of government regulatory agencies like OSHA or the Texas Workforce Commission. Safety inspections are left up to the federal agency, which is stretched thin: OSHA has a regional office in Dallas that also serves four surrounding states.

Despite its construction boom, Texas has the second-lowest

number of OSHA inspectors in the nation—after Florida, which was also booming for many years. According to a 2008 report by the AFL-CIO, *Death on the Job*, it would take the 77 OSHA inspectors in Texas 144 years to visit every workplace in the state at least once. That breaks down to about one inspector for every 132,000 workers, according to Tzintzun's calculations. The benchmark established by the U.N.'s International Labor Organization is one for every 10,000.

Safety inspections were a casualty of the government-shrinking ideology that prevailed in Washington following Ronald Reagan's election until the current economic crisis. Especially during George W. Bush's administration, the emphasis shifted from enforcement to voluntary compliance. Meanwhile, the ranks of OSHA inspectors have been thinning for years. In 1980, there were 1,469—14.9 per million workers. By 2007, there were just 948 OSHA inspectors nationwide—6.4 for every million workers, the lowest level in the agency's history.

Pedro Hernandez, a 39-year-old roofer, says he has never seen an OSHA inspector in 10 years working on Austin construction sites. But he knows firsthand what happens when there's nothing but "voluntary compliance" to keep contractors in line.

Two years ago, Hernandez went to work for a small roofing contractor, installing a roof on a two-story home in East Austin. OSHA requires a safety harness for anyone working construction at a height of six feet or more. Hernandez wasn't given one. He didn't think much of it, he says, because he'd never once been provided with either a harness or a hard hat. (Safety harnesses for roofers cost $200 to $300 apiece.)



Safety first? A worksite in Austin. *photo by Lesley Nowlin*

Hernandez ran out of luck on that East Austin roof. He slipped and tumbled 14 feet, landing on his back. For four days, he lay in intensive care at Brackenridge Hospital, unable to move his arms or legs. The doctor said he might be paralyzed for life. Making matters worse, the roofing contractor wouldn't pay for the work he'd done. And the contractor didn't carry worker's compensation, so Hernandez would have to pay the $7,000 in hospital bills.

After six months, Hernandez was able to walk again. In the meantime, he hadn't been able to send money to his two young children. And he'd lost his apartment. "When I got out of the hospital I had to go live in a shelter," Hernandez says. He still has pain in his right leg and back, and gets debilitating headaches. But he's back at work, wearing an elastic back brace under his tool belt. On bad days, he takes pain medication. "The doctor at the hospital told me I'd need rehabilitation," he says, "but I had no way to pay for it.

"I know many men who have had accidents," Hernandez says. "The bosses, they don't give you any safety equipment. I don't agree with this. I think they should provide equipment."

Hispanic construction workers suffer disproportionately from the lack of worksite regulation and enforcement in Texas. In 2007, Hispanics accounted for 55 percent of the state's construction deaths (leading the nation in yet another grim category).

Solid statistics on injuries are tough to come by, partly because undocumented workers are often reluctant to report problems. Rebecca Smith, coordinator of the Immigrant Worker Justice Program at the nonprofit National Employee Law Project, says undocumented workers are the most vulnerable of all construction workers. "Employers feel they can get away with breaking the law because the worker will be afraid to report it," she says. "The number of fatalities in Texas is beyond shameful—it's tragic."

"To us, it isn't an immigrant issue, it's an industry issue that affects all construction workers," says Tzintzun of the Workers Defense Project. "But we did find that some workers were afraid to come forward and report abuses because of immigration enforcement."

The language barrier between many Hispanic and Anglo workers can exacerbate the existing problems on Texas worksites. Cody Clegg, an electrician for 13 years, says communication between English- and Spanish-speaking workers is the No. 1 safety issue at his current job in Austin. "A guy came up to me yesterday and said something in Spanish," Clegg says. "He could have been asking for toothpaste or telling me that they had just knocked down a wall—I had no idea."

Clegg says his Spanish-speaking co-workers are routinely mistreated. A bilingual worker told him the men had been brought to Austin from Orlando, Fla. "They were paid $14 an hour in Florida and now they are getting $12 an hour here," Clegg says. "They were also told they have to buy their own safety harnesses, and they are being housed 10 to 12 workers to an apartment.

"If an employer told me he wouldn't provide a safety harness," Clegg says, "I wouldn't work for him."

With the state doing nothing to ensure that workers are properly trained and equipped, a Dallas contractor has tried to pick up the slack. Javier Arias is chairman of Hispanic Contractors Association de Tejas, which has six chapters around the state providing Spanish-language safety courses for contractors and foremen. With a $190,000 OSHA grant this year, the group now offers free, 10-hour safety training to Spanish-speaking workers as well. It's a drop in the bucket, but it's something.

"This is something we've been working on since 2000," says Arias. "Change is not going to happen overnight—it's going to take time."

Clegg has seen too much to be hopeful. He says that safety is often sacrificed on smaller jobs with limited budgets. "On a $5 million project there will be safety officers and training," he says. "But sometimes on a $50,000 project you are on your own."

Clegg has some advantages over many of his co-workers. An Anglo, he has no language barrier with the bosses and no worries about being undocumented. He carefully considers safety risks before taking a job. He learned the hard way about those risks. During his first year as an electrician, Clegg was working with an apprentice electrician who hadn't been properly trained and mistakenly grabbed a live wire.

"I kicked the wire out of his hand," Clegg recalls. "He had third-degree burns on his arms and hands and blood coming out of his eyes, ears and nose. It was gruesome."

Clegg, who is married with two children, almost gave up the trade. "I didn't want to end up like that," he says. "But I had a baby on the way and I had to make a living.

"I have to consider the risk," Clegg says. "I've been on some small jobs where I've been the only person in the building at the time. If something were to happen and I became unconscious—I'd be dead before anyone found me."

When you're working construction in Texas, it's hard not to conjure up such nightmare scenarios. ■

HIGHTOWER

Driven a Geely Lately?

What are we going to be driving a few years from now? GM is in bankruptcy, Chrysler is now run by Fiat and the future hardly seems rosy for Ford. Who'll be the next king of America's roads—Toyota, Honda ... or maybe Geely?

Who? Geely Automobile. It's one of China's largest auto manufacturers. Along with Chinese automotive giants BYD and Chery Automobile, Geely has big designs on the American market. Never heard of 'em? Get ready to be introduced.

China is projected to displace Japan this year as the world's largest car producer. China already tops U.S. carmakers in sales.

The chairman of Daimler, Germany's top auto company, bluntly acknowledges that "the center of gravity is moving eastward." But the East is also moving westward. Chinese cars are expected to arrive in U.S. showrooms in just over a year, and rumors abound that the Chinese are kicking the tires of Detroit's auto companies, with an eye toward buying a piece of one or, at today's bargain prices, a whole company.

One reason for the Chinese surge is that China's industrial and political leaders have been planning for and investing in the future, while American car honchos were hunkered down in their SUV strategy. China's fuel-efficiency standards already exceed the 35 m.p.g. average that President Barack Obama recently said U.S. cars must meet by 2016. A week after Obama set that goal, Chinese officials upped the ante, saying their vehicles will soon average 42 m.p.g.

Meanwhile, China's BYD company has gotten the jump on the next level of fuel economy. It is now producing a mass-market, plug-in electric car—well ahead of the Chevy Volt that GM has been promising. Assuming GM will still be around to deliver it.

THE TWITTERING CLASS

Can social media transform politics—and reboot Texas Republicans?

by Josh Berthume

For better and worse, we've all gotten used to being flooded with messages from elected officials, campaigns and candidates: Postcards urging you to vote a certain way. E-mail prodding you to send money, now! Phone calls from robots or celebrities, telling you where and when to head to the polls. Or, if you follow the governor of Texas on Twitter, urgent dispatches from the front lines of today's ideological battles like the following:

> Slugfest!!! DBU 11 Aggies 10 Rubber match tomorrow...get out and go to a ballpark! Live Life!!! *9:49 PM May 1st*

What have Rick Perry's nearly 8,500 Twitter followers learned? In just 140 characters, they know their governor spent an early May evening at a college baseball game between Dallas Baptist University and Texas A&M. They've been treated to: (1) a description of the contest; (2) the final score; (3) the information that the final game of the tied series will be played the next day; (4) a directive; and (5) a platitude. More important to most, though, they've gotten a somewhat unfiltered window into the thought stream of the longest-serving governor in state history.

"I am a real tweethead," Perry tweeted (of course) to *Austin American-Statesman* reporter Corrie MacLaggan back in March, after she asked his office whether the governor did his own Twitter updates. "[W]rite my own tweets," he continued, "sometimes from my blackberry, a lot from my laptop."

He's hardly alone. Perry's avid tweeting—he's averaged about 21 tweets per week since he became enamored of the latest hot social media tool and first implored us to promote a "culture of life" in his debut tweet on Jan. 2—puts him in company with growing ranks of local, state and national politicians. Some politicians—or, in some cases, some politicians' staffers—use Twitter much like e-mail, as a vehicle for sending out short (very short) press releases. Others, like Perry, take it a step further and use it to air what they are thinking, seeing or feeling at a given moment.

I now know, for instance, that Perry likes to share pictures of his dog, and that he celebrates small victories by going out for dinner. I've picked up similar insights into other "tweetheads" in Texas politics. I've learned that when state Rep. Aaron Peña, D-Edinburg, gets bored during late-night Lege sessions, he starts posting Billy Joel music videos he's found on YouTube. I've learned that his Democratic colleague Rep. Joe Deshotel of Beaumont especially enjoys discussing the food he's eating, assessing the food he's just eaten, and planning what food he will eat later. Planning other things, too: Once, Deshotel tweeted that he was at Supercuts trying to decide between clippers and scissors.

Which adds up to what, exactly? The content is often every bit as banal as the tweets from your BFF. But for many "tweetheads," that's the point. It doesn't get more real than inane minutae. Before I began following politicians on Twitter, I believed that many, if not most, belonged to the austere and Spartan class of serious political professionals—the kind of people who micromanage their lives in such a granular way that where they eat dinner is a political decision that must be war-gamed. Now, I feel like I know some of these politicians, in their sloppy realities, better than I do some of my blood relatives.

The political usefulness of all this is debatable and, at this point in the early history of social media, anything but certain. But the larger trend it represents is clear—and in many ways healthy. "Politics used to be peer-based," says J.D. Angle, a Fort Worth-based political consultant. "Radio and TV made politics top-down and centralized. Social and new media are gradually returning it to a peer-based state."

Where most statements by politicians have historically been carefully regulated for risk-mitigation, the personal Twitter update is the high-tech equivalent of seeing an elected official at a bar and hearing him or her say whatever comes to mind. It carries all the risk of the open-mic gaffe with none of the standard damage control possible in the aftermath: What a politician puts on the Internet largely stands alone, and it lives forever.

"We used to be able to get away with shouting at voters, having a one-way conversation via press release. Now voters want to have a conversation with you, and we have to go where they are."

Which is another reason to love it: Tweeting politicians like Perry are surely driving communications directors and campaign strategists to drink. Especially since politicians' tweets aren't always about baseball, Billy Joel and haircuts; they're usually about politics, one way or another. They often drip with authenticity—and, sometimes, with unintentionally revealing ironies. Take this juxtaposition of double-exclamation-pointed Perry tweets from April:

> Devastation in Montgomery Co is extreme in places. Feds needs to speed up those emergency decs so these folks get some relief!! *3:42 PM Apr 17th*

Followed by:

> Live on Hannity today 3:30 PM. Tenth Amendment being debated n state house. Send ur rep a message to support HCR 50. Let Texans run Texas!! *9:12 AM Apr 21st*

The feds had better help us, in other words—except that they also better leave us the hell alone. Normally, such doublespeak would be parsed more carefully, hardly noticeable to most folks, appearing four days apart in old-media news stories. On a Twitter feed, one line of logic bumps right up against the next for every follower to see, making a whole 'nother aspect of Perry's political personality impossible to ignore.

Twitter and other social-media tools certainly illuminate the humanity—not to mention the political non sequiturs—of pols like Perry, who make enthusiastic use of the newest technology. But is this kind of social networking politically effective? Does it give Twitter and Facebook followers anything more important than a sometimes-revealing glimpse into their favorite politicians' consciousnesses?

So far, most tweeting pols use the medium like Perry: primarily as a one-way form of communication. Despite a load of people attempting to engage the governor with questions, statements or sweeping judgments, his @ replies—direct conversations via Twitter—totaled fewer than 20 out of more than 250 updates written from January to early May of this year.

During Perry's states' rights/Tenth Amendment push this spring, his tweets often sounded very much like his speeches in condensed form:

> Just back from Tom Green Co Reagan Day Dinner. Tenth Amendment supporters out in force in West Texas!! Keep the heat on Washington!! *8:58 PM April 29th*

But the main political function served by tweets like Perry's is a bit more subtle than firing up the troops. Social media "tools serve one fundamental purpose," says Matt Glazer, a Democratic campaign consultant and editor-in-chief of the Burnt Orange Report blog, "and that is evangelizing people that already support you. ... It can turn casual supporters into informed supporters, and an informed supporter is evangelized: They go to events, they get more involved."

That's especially true for politicians who mix it up with their online followers. Republican Railroad Commissioner Michael L. Williams, who hopes to succeed Kay Bailey Hutchison in the U.S. Senate next year, has about 2,800 Twitter followers. One reason they follow him was exemplified in late April, when Williams tweeted on the state Senate's passage of a bill changing the Railroad Commission's name to the Texas Energy Commission. One of his followers, screen-named snowed_in, replied:

> @Michael Williams Doesn't changing the name involve quite a bit of expense? Obviously, the new name fits better, but still. *4:40 PM Apr 30th in reply to MichaelWilliams*

That same evening, not five hours later, Williams answered:

> @snowed in The Legislative Budget Board estimates the cost to be about $109K. *9:31 PM Apr 30th in reply to snowed in*

This exchange blows my mind, probably because I'm one of those people who write letters to my elected representatives. Like most of my fellow citizen-wonks, the most extensive reply I can typically hope for is a form letter letting me know

CONSTITUENT

Doesn't changing the name involve quite a bit of expense? Obviously, the new name fits better, but still.

4:40 PM Apr 30th

RAILROAD COMMISSIONER MICHAEL L. WILLIAMS

The Legislative Budget Board estimates the cost to be about $109K.

9:31 PM Apr 30th

that <INSERT ISSUE> is very important to my representative, and that they voted for or against it because of <INSERT JUSTIFICATION>. This is not a criticism; elected officials get tons of letters like mine and they can't help being selective about which constituents they personally answer.

When they do personally answer a letter or question or query, though, they get down to business. Just purely on a cost-benefit level, think what Williams' direct reply meant. How much time and effort would it have taken snowed_in to find out how much it was going to cost to change the Railroad Commission's name? More, typically, than would be practical for the average concerned constituent. Williams reduced the cost of finding out that information to almost zero. In doing so, he might very well have turned a constituent into a supporter—or a supporter into a volunteer for his Senate campaign.

Williams approaches his status updates very differently from Perry. "The world has changed," the commissioner says. "We used to be able to get away with shouting at voters, having a one-way conversation via press release. Now voters want to have a conversation with you, and we have to go where they are. We have to use every communication tool that's available. It isn't enough for us to stand on the courthouse steps and scream, because voters won't listen."

With social media still young, of course, the number of voters using it remains relatively modest. Williams might be a leader among Texas GOP social media users—he also deploys Facebook, among other tools—but the people who follow him online are a subset of a subset of a subset: They're politically engaged, likely to be conservative, use Twitter, use Twitter's conversation function, and they know who Michael L. Williams is—either by virtue of living in Texas or because they're interested in national Republican up-and-comers. Unless his Senate campaign catches fire, that won't describe a whole lot of folks.

Social media, Glazer notes, "operates somewhere in between communicating to a specific universe and mass communication. It is always micro-targeted and never mass-targeted." Citing the most famous and effective political practitioner of social media, Glazer notes that President Barack Obama had "somewhere like 16 million" people on his e-mail list during the 2008 campaign. Of that 16 million, about one-fourth—4 million—followed Obama on Facebook groups. About 800,000 followed his campaign's tweets, "so he was only talking to 2 percent of his e-mail list on Twitter. Even if such an effort is incredibly successful, you're really only ever talking to a tiny percentage of the people that will eventually vote for you.

"The flipside," Glazer continues, "is that if you can take 1 percent of your e-mail readers and turn them into field organizers, that's a game-changer. If you can turn 1 percent of your Facebook supporters into donors, that's a lot of money." Enough, for sure, to give a tech-savvy candidate an edge in a close race. Particularly for local candidates, Glazer says, "This technology is incredibly well-suited to helping people get re-elected when they were initially elected by a razor-thin margin."

Williams' 2010 Senate campaign is counting on making that formula work statewide. "If the candidate knows who they are and can make a compelling case for why voters should elect

them," says Corbin Casteel, Williams' campaign manager, "social media should be an integral part of that campaign's plan. If they don't, it would be a waste of time. You can't just sign up for Twitter and become savvy in the use of social media. You have to have a message. You have to know where you stand and who you are to engage in the discussion."

Campaigns and candidates are increasingly aware of the pitfalls inherent in instant, informal communication. For all those who might use social media to triumph, Obama-style, more than one politician will surely tweet his or her way to defeat before long. It's conventional wisdom that YouTube lost Virginia Republican George Allen his Senate seat in 2006. Genially conservative in a Reaganesque way, Allen had legitimate presidential ambitions before he was filmed—and YouTubed—calling the lone person of color at a rural campaign stop "Macaca," which the world soon learned was a racial slur.

The truth, of course, is that Sen. Allen, not YouTube, was responsible for his downfall. Politicians who are similarly dumb on Twitter or Facebook, or the next new social-media tool, will be similarly punished. At the same time, we are in a new age and there's nothing for the savvy candidate to do about it but to learn—and watch as those who refuse to learn get relegated to the footnotes of political history.

GOVERNOR RICK PERRY

Received Brad O'Leary's book "Shut Up America! The end of free speech" This will open your eyes...thank God for Twitter/Facebook/talk radio! 9:37 PM May 6th

If Michael L. Williams is the advocate-king of GOP social media in Texas, Republican Congressman John Culberson is the prime minister. He has more than 11,000 Twitter followers, and hundreds more supporters and friends on Facebook. Culberson doesn't just tweet about living the good conservative life, as Rick Perry often does, or use the medium for direct constituent communication, as Williams often does—though there's plenty of both. He lets both his personal and political views hang out with exhilarating abandon.

Culberson tweets about what he's going to do with his tax refund (pay down his credit-card debt, just like financial guru Dave Ramsey says to); about his struggles with learning new technology (he tried to get TweetDeck, an application for Twitter power-users, up and running before deciding to uninstall the program because of concerns about viruses); and about his thoughts on new media. (Culberson sees it as a "truth detector," and is convinced that with each tweet, he's burying old media.)

This kind of open, full-access approach is standard fare for younger non-politicians who've fully embraced social media as an inexorable fact of life, but it's not the norm among elected officials. Sen. Claire McCaskill, the Missouri Democrat, might be the closest analogue to Culberson: She's attracted an avid Twitter following not only with candid thoughts on bills, but also with her descriptions of the rush that occurs when the Senate floor candy drawer gets refilled and her updates on whether she finished her laundry as planned the night before.

The point, Culberson says, is not just to uncork his personality and ideology with rare candor. "Social media has allowed me to communicate more effectively with my constituents," he says. "It has also made the legislative process more transparent."

Transparency, Culberson insists, is the main reason he tweets. "I do not view social media as a campaign tool," he says. The very first thing any of his staffers told me, in fact, when I called with questions on social media, was just that: "He doesn't use it to raise money, and he doesn't plan to."

That's all well and good, but making government more transparent through social media ultimately seems like a stretch. Sure, Culberson's own transparency as a legislator and human being has been enhanced, as has McCaskill's and, to a lesser extent, Perry's. It's commendable that Culberson makes a concerted effort, in post after post, to let his followers know what he's up to, what bills he is sponsoring or writing (and why and how), and what led him to vote one way or another.

Greater transparency is possible for individual politicians, if they're disciplined and/or obsessive enough to constantly throw open the shutters to the social-media world. But there will never be many members of Congress who feel compelled to do so. And even if there were, the transparency of government itself is a whole different beast. Consider the nightmare of trying to funnel the activities of a federal or state agency into one centralized social-media application: If it were even possible, transparency might indeed be enhanced, but simply describing what an agency does—let alone why it does it—would produce an informational firehose. Who would have time to tweet it all? And who, pray tell, would ever want to read it all?

State Rep. Mark Strama, a youngish and tech-savvy Democrat from Austin, surely made a salient point this spring, when he said, "If we're expressing policy in 140 characters or less, that's the ultimate degradation of politics." Until it evolves into something we can't yet imagine, social media will be more politically relevant as campaign tools than as a window into the inner workings of government or political thought.

"I agree with Mark Strama," says Glazer, "in that if you are trying to boil politics down into 140 characters, you are doing your constituents a disservice. However, any time you are using social media"—in two-way mode—"you are increasing the ability of people to engage with you and discuss ideas and concerns and solutions with you."

Which brings us back to the big question: Are social media genuinely useful in a politically practical—or politically idealistic—way? The answer, so far, is ultimately unsatisfying: It depends. Some politicians will talk about haircuts and half-court shots and not really open any doors to their constituents, other than revealing parts of their personalities and proclivities they think will be attractive or entertaining. Others will take the idea to heart and explain everything they do and why, and there's certainly something to be gleaned from that. The political potential of social media, for at least one more electoral cycle, remains mostly a matter of conjecture—an evolving experiment being conducted by enthusiasts like Williams and tech-ready consultants like Glazer and Casteel.

One thing you might have noticed: In Texas, at least, it is Republican elected officials who have embraced social media in a particularly hardcore and uncharacteristic way. Social media are supposed to be the province of young people, and young people are overwhelmingly Democratic these days. What are Republicans doing taking the lead? Perry, in a recent tweet, offered a strong hint as to why:

> Received Brad O'Leary's book "Shut Up America! The end of free speech" This will open your eyes...thank God for Twitter/ Facebook/talk radio! 9:37 PM May 6th

Indeed, governor, and what a revelation: What an insight into the lens through which Perry sees things. Will social media be the First Amendment's new battleground? Do conservatives really view social media as, if you'll pardon the expression, the natural evolution of talk radio?

Whoever eventually wins the battle for technological supremacy in politics, the heightened activity and interest among conservative politicians and activists (see: tea parties) makes one thing clear: Progressives are not likely to maintain total dominance over social media forever, as the Obama phenomenon seemed to promise. It is entirely possible that social media could develop into the talk radio of the 21st century. Whether you want to thank God for that is up to you. ■

Josh Berthume is a freelance writer living in Denton. His work has appeared in numerous publications, including Fort Worth Weekly, *Boston's* Weekly Dig *and* Quorum Report. *You can follow him at twitter.com/jberthume.*

HIGHTOWER

The Battle of Coal River

"You've got to stand for something," John Mellencamp sings, "or you're gonna fall for anything."

Folks in West Virginia's Coal River Valley are no longer falling for the litany of lies they've gotten from coal company executives and bought-off politicians. The state's corporate elites have destroyed mountains, forests, streams, wildlife, livelihoods, human health and whole communities in Appalachia by using a contemptible form of coal mining called "mountaintop removal."

For years, people there have tried the usual political and legal channels to block the corporate assault, yet it continues. So people are now putting themselves on the line. "Somebody has to do something about it," one activist says, "so we do the little things we can."

One of those "little things" is going to jail. On May 23, at three mountaintop removal sites, protesters engaged in nonviolent civil disobedience, and 17 were jailed. Two women donned hazmat suits and respirators and boated onto the Brushy Fork impoundment – an 8-billion-gallon lake of poisonous coal slurry waste. After unfurling a floating, 60-foot banner reading "No More Toxic Sludge," they were arrested for—get this—"littering!" How can you litter a toxic waste dump?

Though the charges against the protesters are misdemeanors, state judges demanded that each one post a punitive bail of $2,000 cash, rather than the much lower bonds that are more typical. Contrast these bail rates with the $1,800 fine one of the coal giants paid when its slurry lake broke, poisoning 14 miles of river.

King Coal may think it owns West Virginia, but the people are in revolt. To connect with this growing movement, go to www.ohvec.org.

For more information on Jim Hightower's work—and to subscribe to his award-winning monthly newsletter, The Hightower Lowdown—*visit www.jimhightower.com.*

The MOLLY *National Journalism Prize*

RECOGNIZING SUPERIOR JOURNALISM IN THE TRADITION OF MOLLY IVINS



The Texas Observer's tough, passionate investigative reporting and fearless, witty commentary were Molly Ivins' great loves until her untimely death in 2007.

How better to remember her, we thought, than by honoring outstanding American journalism that exemplifies the deep thinking and bracing contrariness of her own best work? That was the idea behind The MOLLY National Journalism Prize, now in its second year. The inaugural winner was Diane Suchetka of the Cleveland's *Plain Dealer*, for a five-part series following a young inner-city man struggling to earn his high-school equivalency degree.

The prize recognizes print or online journalism of exceptional merit that tells stories that need telling, challenges conventional wisdom, focuses on civil liberties or social justice, and embodies the smartness and sharpness of the journalism Molly Ivins produced and nurtured as an *Observer* reporter, editor and columnist.

This year's winners were honored at an awards dinner on June 11. Together with the scores of worthy entries from which our judges chose, they demonstrate that in this trying time of transition and uncertainty for American journalism, conventional wisdom is still being challenged—and difficult, buried truths are still being brought into the light of day with style and nerve.

The MOLLY *2009 Winner*

I GIVE THANKS FOR ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

by Rick Casey, Houston Chronicle

The winner of The MOLLY National Journalism Prize of 2009 is Rick Casey, metro columnist for the Houston Chronicle *since August 2003. Before moving to the* Chronicle, *Casey wrote columns for the* San Antonio Express-News *and the* San Antonio Light. *Previously, Casey edited two city magazines, worked as a reporter and editor for the* Seattle Times, *and freelanced for publications including* The New York Times, Washington Post, Boston Globe *and* Newsweek. *The 62-year-old St. Louis native has spent more than half his life in Texas. Among numerous awards, he has twice been named best general columnist for a major Texas newspaper by the Associated Press Managing Editors Association.*

Casey's winning entry consisted of four related columns offering fresh perspectives on immigration. Below, we reprint in full his Chronicle *column from Nov. 25, 2008. Casey's other winning columns can be read at www.texasobserver.org.*

This year, as we gather for the feast, I am giving thanks for illegal immigrants.

I have a particular group of illegals in mind, but I confess that my gratitude to them does color my view of most other illegals.

I refer to the liars, debtors, opportunists and criminals who flooded into Texas in the first half of the 19th century, and then wrested the land from Mexico.

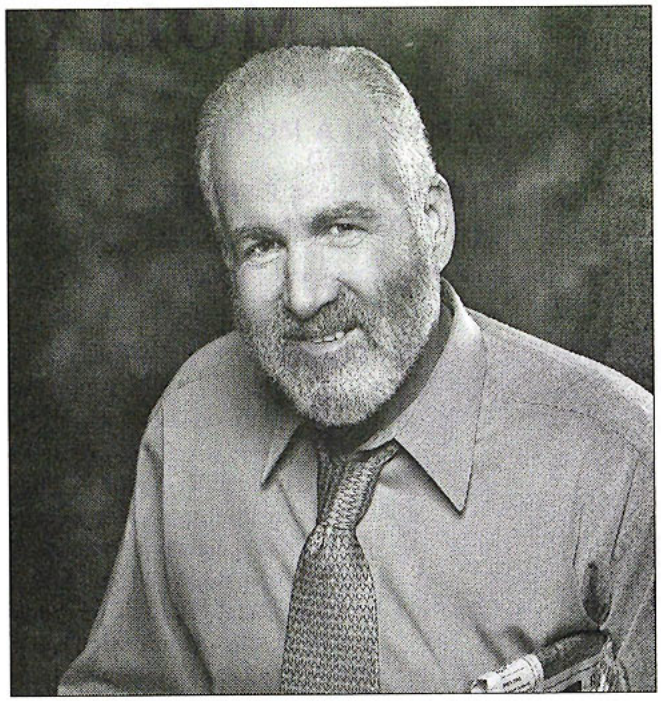
Their story is told in *A Glorious Defeat: Mexico and Its War with the United States.* The author, Timothy J. Henderson, earned his bachelor's degree at the University of Texas at Austin and his doctorate at one of those well-regarded institutions back East. He is now a professor of history at Auburn University Montgomery. So he brings both experience of Texas and an academic distance from it.

Stephen F. Austin, who brought many Anglo families to Texas,

The **MOLLY** *2009 Winner*



RICK CASEY



is not numbered among the illegals. Henderson describes him as "likable, handsome, hardworking, and well educated, with cultivated manners, a moderate temperament, and a sometimes unfortunate tendency to assume the good intentions of others."

He traveled to Mexico City to negotiate a pact under which he pledged to bring Anglo settlers into Texas according to rules set out by Mexican authorities. Austin, writes Henderson, "from the outset made plain his intention to do everything by the book, and for most of his adult life he never wavered from his commitment to be a good citizen of Mexico."

He negotiated a generous deal. A head of an immigrant family would get 4,438 acres for farming and another 177 acres for livestock. For every 200 immigrants he or other impresarios brought in they would receive 66,774 acres.

There were a few rules. They had to pledge loyalty to Mexico. If they weren't already Roman Catholics, they had to convert.

Despite Austin's best efforts, Henderson says, Anglos came pouring in and most "had no intention of abiding by their end of the bargain." Mexican law, for example, stipulated that any slaves would be free as soon as they entered Texas. Anglo immigrants "elected to assume that this referred only to the buying and selling of slaves and did not apply to slaves brought by colonists for their own use," writes Henderson.

One Mexican general wrote that the colonists "commit the barbarities on their slaves that are so common where men live in a relationship so contradictory to their nature: they pull their teeth, they set dogs upon them to tear them apart, and the mildest of them will whip the slaves until they are flayed."

Some illegals came to escape debts or domestic obligations. Some were simply adventurers. Some were fugitives from justice, "sporting brands on their faces marking them as miscreants." (Think gang tattoos, only not voluntary.)

Some of these, not surprisingly, continued their criminal careers in Texas. Colonists who caught them at it considered the Mexican prohibition of the death penalty to be inconvenient and carried out executions.

These immigrants not only entered illegally or violated the terms of their legal entry, but rather than keep their heads down and try to fit in, they lived in active defiance of the law.

So much so that the Mexican government in 1830 passed a law barring all new American immigrants from entering Texas. Among the illegals violating that particular law were David Crockett, William B. Travis and Sam Houston.

For the fact that tomorrow we celebrate the particularly American holiday of Thanksgiving in Texas, we owe them and the thousands of other illegals whom they joined our enthusiastic gratitude.

I also give thanks for those illegals who have worked hard to clean up the Galveston area in the past weeks, and have shown no interest in importing slaves or overthrowing our government.

Our history shows that immigrants—even illegal ones, especially when laws are out of whack—often make things better. ■

Read *The* MOLLY *2009* winning entries at www.texasobserver.org.

The **MOLLY** *2009 Honorable Mentions*

"A MY LAI A MONTH" *AND* "THE VIETNAM EXPOSÉ THAT WASN'T"

Nick Turse, The Nation *and TheNation.com*



The My Lai massacre shocked the American conscience when it was first reported by Seymour Hersh in 1969. That American troops could engage in the wanton slaughter of civilians—men, women and children—was a chilling revelation. But some took comfort in the unconfirmed belief that My Lai was an isolated case.

It wasn't. That is the story that Nick Turse convincingly told, nearly 40 years later, in "A My Lai a Month" in *The Nation* and "The Vietnam Exposé That Wasn't" on TheNation.com.

Turse's years-long investigation of mass civilian slaughter by U.S. troops during Operation Speedy Express, which occurred during 1968 and 1969 in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, not only revealed killings of thousands of innocent Vietnamese and the destruction of villages to enhance "body counts," but exposed a Pentagon-level cover-up abetted by a major news magazine.

Is a story about a 40-year-old government-condoned, if not government-sponsored, slaughter of civilians in a now almost-forgotten war still news? Clearly the answer is yes. The old saw that history ignored is history repeated happens to be true. In the years the United States has waged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, we have learned that our nation has engaged in torture, inhumane and indiscriminate imprisonment, and, once again, the slaughter of civilians.

We will always need reporting that shocks the conscience. Nick Turse's work reminds us why.

Nick Turse, an award-winning journalist, historian and essayist, is associate editor of the Nation Institute's Tomdispatch.com. Author of The Complex: How the Military Invades Our Everyday Lives, *he has written for* The Los Angeles Times, The San Francisco Chronicle, The Nation, In These Times, Le Monde Diplomatique, *and* The Village Voice, *among other publications. For his coverage of U.S. atrocities in Vietnam, Turse received a Ridenhour Prize and a James Aronson Award for Social Justice Journalism from Hunter College. He has a Guggenheim Fellowship for his in-progress history,* Kill Anything That Moves. *A fellow at New York University's Center for the United States and the Cold War, he has a Ph.D. in Sociomedical Sciences from Columbia University.*

"RACE IN AMERICA," AN OCCASIONAL SERIES

Howard Witt, Chicago Tribune



Under the rubric of "Race in America," Howard Witt vividly illuminated the corners of the nation's soul where racial prejudice and discrimination still lurk, even as an African American occupies the White House and the first Latina has been nominated to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Witt reported from Phoenix, "the latest fault line scarring America's long-troubled racial map," that "The newest tactic in America's quickening effort to gain control of its porous southern border starts with a cracked windshield, a broken taillight or even a failure to signal a right or left turn. That's all the probable cause sheriff's deputies here in Maricopa County say they need to pull over a vehicle they suspect might be carrying illegal immigrants."

From a tiny, backwoods Louisiana town, Witt informed the nation about a young, inexperienced white police officer who administered nine 50,000-volt Taser shocks to a non-violent handcuffed black suspect, resulting in the suspect's death. "No novelist could have invented Winnfield, a town so steeped in corruption that they built a local museum to try to sanitize it all," Witt wrote. The police officer was indicted for manslaughter and official malfeasance.

Other pieces in Witt's occasional series explored racial prejudice among the elderly and exposed what Paris, Texas, police initially called a hit-and-run as a likely hate crime that resulted in the mutilation and partial dismemberment of a young black man.

Howard Witt is senior managing editor of Stars & Stripes, *the independent newspaper serving U.S. military deployed overseas. From 2003 to May 2009, he was southwest bureau chief of the* Chicago Tribune. *During his 25-year* Tribune *career, beginning as a summer intern, he was a national correspondent, foreign correspondent and editor. He covered the Lockerbie bombing, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the ouster of Ceausescu, the release of Nelson Mandela and end of apartheid, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Oklahoma City bombing and Hurricane Katrina. For civil rights coverage, Witt was a Pulitzer Prize finalist and earned the Nieman Foundation's Taylor Award for Fairness in Journalism, the American Judicature Society's Toni House Journalism Award and other awards.*

Being Townes

STEVE EARLE, HERO WORSHIP, AND THE CULT OF THE TEXAS TROUBADOUR



Waitin' around to die: Steve Earle and Townes Van Zandt.

"Townes Van Zandt is the best songwriter in the whole world, and I'll stand on Bob Dylan's coffee table in my cowboy boots and say that." —Steve Earle

If that quote's not the very portrait of abject fanboydom, nothing is. And the working definition of fanboy (put down your dictionaries; I'm making this up as I go along) is that the boy in question (and yes, for some reason it's always a boy) doesn't just admire the object of his infatuation—he wants to *be* the object of his infatuation.

Steve Earle, now 54, seems to have begun in his teens wanting to be Townes Van Zandt. That's when Earle dropped out of high school and moved to Houston, where Van Zandt was making his bones in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Since then, Earle has indulged and survived periodic heroin addictions, like Van Zandt. He's gotten married more often than the average man (seven times, so far), as did Van Zandt, with three. Earle had a boy and named him Justin Townes; Van Zandt named his own boy John Townes II, after himself. Earle gave the famous quote taunting Dylan-worshippers and sang Van Zandt's songs and recorded an album with him (and Guy Clark: *Together at the Bluebird Café*). And Earle has compiled a body of work comprising a bunch of great songs, though perhaps none quite as great as Van Zandt's greatest.

In 2001, Earle covered one of those songs, Townes' "Two Girls," for the Van Zandt tribute record *Poet*. Earle has a vocal mode in which he sounds like the worst ham in the world—like he's aping Steve Earle aping Tom Waits. That's bad Steve Earle, and he's intolerable in that mode, if you ask me. That's the tone he brings to "Two Girls," the album's last track. And damned if Earle doesn't bring the same hammy hand to the first track of his own new record, *Townes*, which is comprised of nothing but Van Zandt songs. (The only words on the cover are "Steve Earle" and "Townes," with the image of a molting moth between them; it's kind of creepy if you think about it too hard.)

That first track, less necessary than perhaps anything ever recorded, is "Pancho and Lefty." Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard proved that slippery song uncoverable in 1983. (Delbert McClinton

doesn't do any better on *Poet*, but he at least sounds like he's having a good time trying.)

If you've listened to much Steve Earle, the twang-overkill isn't surprising. It's just bad Steve Earle. What is surprising, given Earle's tendency toward vocal exaggeration and his unbounded admiration for the material, is that the rest of *Townes* is not just good Steve Earle, but get-out-of-the-way great Steve Earle. In combo with Van Zandt's tunes, the effect is that of a biofeedback loop of self-amplified brilliance. Earle may not have written these songs, but he learned how to inhabit them just as fast as he could.

There's a story that gets told, most recently in the 2005 documentary *Townes Van Zandt: Be Here to Love Me*, about Van Zandt going to college in Colorado, where he tended to hole up in his room drinking wine and listening to Lightnin' Hopkins records. There was a party one night, and Van Zandt was sitting on a balcony railing a few floors up when he got to considering the edge between balance and free-fall. To find the line, he later told an interviewer, he knew he'd have to cross it and fall. So he did, landing flat on his back and unhurt. In one published version, he didn't even spill his drink.

It's my favorite of the Townes stories, even if it's at least a little apocryphal, as seems likely, because it explains the fanboydom. "Where I lead me, I will follow," Van Zandt sang. You had to follow Townes, even if you *were* Townes, because Townes was the guy who would always go a little further out. He went out there for the sake of the songs, and he brought plenty back.

In *Be Here to Love Me*, he's recorded saying of the singer-songwriting life: "There was one point when I realized, man, I could really do this. But it takes blowing everything off. It takes blowing family off, money, security, happiness, friends—blow it off. Get a guitar and go."

That was the thing about Townes Van Zandt, the thing that made him an inevitable role model, despite having had perhaps the worst taste in shirts (think patterned polyester) in the history of the music business. His code was about purity of mission, and to hear just about anyone tell it, he lived it.

It wasn't just Steve Earle who aspired to that standard. It was that most terrible of artistic appendages: a cult audience. Common usage to the contrary, artistic cults tend to have less to do with the size of the artist's audience than with their fervor.

Townes Van Zandt generates fervor. He connected with me so directly and so powerfully that his songs have become, for better or worse, a soundtrack to substantial chunks of my own biography.

I learned to play pool at the Waugh Drive Pool Hall in Houston, where I reliably cued up Jimmy Reed's "Bright Lights, Big City," Tommy Roe's "Sweet Pea," Creedence Clearwater Revival's cover of Screamin' Jay Hawkins' "I Put a Spell on You" and Townes Van Zandt's "Turnstyled, Junkpiled." Townes, I learned later, had played pool there on Waugh Drive. His friend Blaze Foley had painted the pool ball mural outside.

(Asked about Foley, for whom Van Zandt later wrote "Blaze's Blues," Steve Earle told *Houston Chronicle* writer Andrew Dansby, "Blaze Foley wrote some good songs, but I don't get the mystique at all. I know he and Townes were close, but they weren't the same. There's just no comparison." Well, we can't all be little Townes Van Zandts, after all.)

I interviewed Van Zandt over the phone from his home in Tennessee for almost two hours, and I saw one of his last shows, at Rockefeller's in Houston. Afterward, backstage, my girlfriend introduced herself and told Townes, "You used to date my mother." When she clarified that she was in no way implying paternity, he looked up sloshily from where he sat and said to her chest, "If you keep leaning over me like that, I'm going to grab you."

POETRY | TIM CLOWARD

TOPIARY

My brother was a barber for a while; he sculpted people.
He cut the President's hair, before he was President.
He cut Miss America's hair, after she was Miss America.
My brother, before I was born, wasn't my brother.
He played outside in the yard, by himself, sculpting bushes
And George Bush gave him a big tip—he said.
And Miss America gave him a million dollar smile—he said
And public opinion shapes the course of events
By shearing off what it deems excessive
And if I were sculpting the Bushes, by George,
People would remember why a barber's pole is striped with red
And there are no stars in the barbershop, my brother said.
Back in the day, barbers were also surgeons. They wound
The bloody rags around the pole to dry and the bushes
Would grow how they would grow but today we do our yards
Like we do our hair. Everybody's shorn a sheep
And my brother's only got one leg left, doesn't cut hair no more.
He says he'll miss America.

TIM CLOWARD *is a poet/performer and the creator of the Dancing Tongue Literary Cabaret series at Dallas' Undermain Theatre. The former president of the literary organization WordSpace, he was, along with Patty Turner and David Davis, published in the influential chapbook* Three Dallas Poets *in 1986. He holds a Ph.D from the University of Texas at Dallas.*

I wooed my ex-wife playing "No Place to Fall" to her at a Bolivar Peninsula beach house, and I couldn't help but melodramatically invoke "Our Mother the Mountain" when I realized I was headed for divorce. I learned how to play "Pancho and Lefty" living briefly outside of Terlingua and named my dogs Pancho and Lady, which is only half embarrassing. I had just piggybacked a freight train from Alpine to Houston when the news arrived that Van Zandt had died, on New Year's Day 1997, at age 52. I ended up writing one of many remembrances for the weekly paper. Years later, I accompanied a friend on guitar while he sang Van Zandt's "I'll Be Here in the Morning" to his beautiful new bride.

I don't think there's anything particularly special about this relationship I have with Townes Van Zandt's music. I think it's pretty much in line with a lot of people's relationships with his music—Steve Earle's more than most.

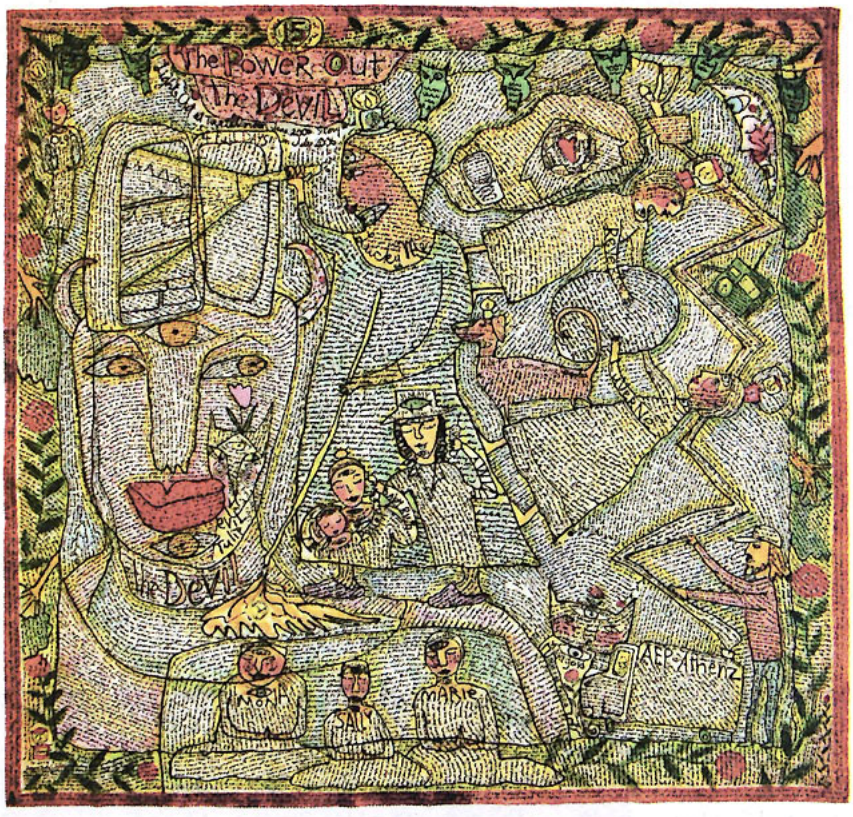
Earle may be a slavish Van Zandt fanboy—and his liner notes on *Townes* confirm it with touching self-awareness—but he rarely makes the rookie mistake of reverence. He turns "White Freightliner Blues" into a rumbling bluegrass juggernaut. He gives "Where I Lead Me" a Bo Diddley backbeat that was only implied in the original. "Brand New Companion" gets the walking bass line it's always begged for. Earle loads up "Lungs" with a bunch of studio sturm und clatter that recalls Robert Plant and Alison Krauss' recent cover of Van Zandt's "Nothin'" more than anything Townes himself ever recorded. That's no complaint. The songs are strong scaffolding, and they hold up just fine. For a fan, and maybe even more so for the uninitiated, it's nice to have the option of hearing *Townes* without Townes around. So many of his original recordings are stripped so bare, so immediate and unadorned, that they're painful.

If Earle isn't trying to sound like Van Zandt, he does a fine job capturing the spirit. He gets the goofiness of "Delta Momma Blues" and the brutal pathos of "Marie," the sweetness of "Don't Take It Too Bad" and the bravado of "Mr. Mudd and Mr. Gold," the Faerie Queene stylings of "(Quicksilver Daydreams of) Maria," and the melancholia of "To Live is to Fly."

But no matter how good these covers are—and they're awfully good—they'll likely remain footnotes to Van Zandt's original body of work, if not to Earle's own. These songs may have taught the younger man how to live, and led a lot of other fans to varying degrees of emulation, but Townes himself pretty much died for them. That's why, in the wandering world of cult Texas songwriters, Townes Van Zandt is still a saint among disciples. ■

New West Records released Townes *in May. Earle plays live at Conroe's Crighton Theatre (June 18), Austin's Paramount Theatre (June 19), the New Braunfels Whitewater Festival (June 20), and Dallas' Lakewood Theater (June 21).*

PREVIEW

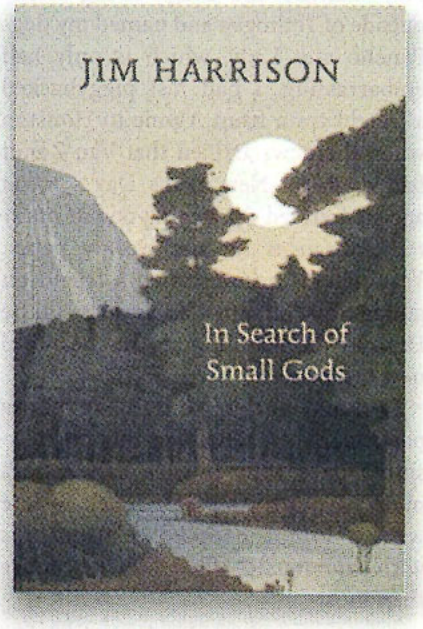


Susan Shie's "The Power Out" (2006; airbrush, airpen and fabric paint on white cotton fabric; 66" x 69.5") is on display as part of *Literally Figurative* at the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, 4848 Main St., through July 3.

Feeding the Beast

BY DAN OKO

In Search of Small Gods
By Jim Harrison
Copper Canyon Press
120 pages, $22



Now in his eighth decade, the novelist and poet Jim Harrison, a Michigan native who most years follows a bird-like migratory route between homes in Montana and Arizona, still invites readers to see the world in new ways.

After 30 books, one can't help hoping that Harrison's twelfth volume of poetry, *In Search of Small Gods*, will draw new readers to this one-of-a-kind author. Harrison's acclaimed fiction, including the novella-turned-movie *Legends of the Fall*, earned high praise for the author's conjuring of diverse voices, male and female, old and young. His essays on food, published in *Esquire* and elsewhere, are as nourishing and flavorful as organ meat. His poetry expresses a profound sensitivity to the natural world, which may surprise those who identify his books with macho Hollywood overreach.

This latest slim volume, divided into three sections, meanders meaningfully through life's cosmic mysteries, including death. Birds, bears, snakes and trout (i.e. fishing) are frequent talismans in these Zen-like visions. As he traverses the globe, plumbing the depths of his memories, Harrison reminds that the earth's geographic frontiers are dwarfed by the horizons on view in our mind's eye. "Poets run on rocks barefoot when shoes are available for a dime," Harrison says in a vignette called "The Penitentes." "They stand on cliffs but not too close to the fatal edge."

If his best novels are so evocative on account of their author's far-and-wide sympathies, his poems succeed on the basis of an open heart and a still-ravenous appetite for life. Time and again, Harrison peels the onion to get at some pungent truth. Fortunately, being sensitive is not the same as being precious, and Harrison's observations are as likely to provoke laughter as tears. Even in the book's middle section, filled with close to 20 distinct prose vignettes, Harrison is committed to revelation over obfuscation.

In "The World's Fastest White Woman," a surreal story that flies off the page like a flash-fiction experiment, the University of Texas at Austin makes a cameo. When it comes time for Harrison's fast female to refuel, Texans may not be able to suppress an honest chuckle: "We went to a BBQ shack where she ate a huge triple portion brisket platter with the hottest of sauces and an ample bowl of pickled jalapeños."

The short pieces of the middle section arrive like meat-and-potatoes entrées amid the delicate canapés and savory desserts that bookend them. And as indicated by the volume's title, they're only part of the story. Across the 50 or so pages exploring his heart's panoply, Harrison the free-verse poet meditates on age, war, love, sex, spirituality and alcohol. The clarity of the poet's monocular vision of the world—Harrison lost sight in one eye as a child—is all the more remarkable for the muddle that seems to surround him. In the short poem "Child Fear," he offers the following litany: "Sour milk. Rotten eggs. Bumblebees.... Hitler and Tojo.... School Fire. Snake under hay bale. Life's end." Then there's a stanza break before the poem concludes: "That your dead dog won't meet you in heaven."

Time and again, Harrison arrests attention with juxtapositions like that, contrasting childlike wonder with mortal dread. Deep in the last century, the late Frank O'Hara managed to focus a similar intelligence on the affairs of city life, most memorably in a collection called *Lunch Poems*.

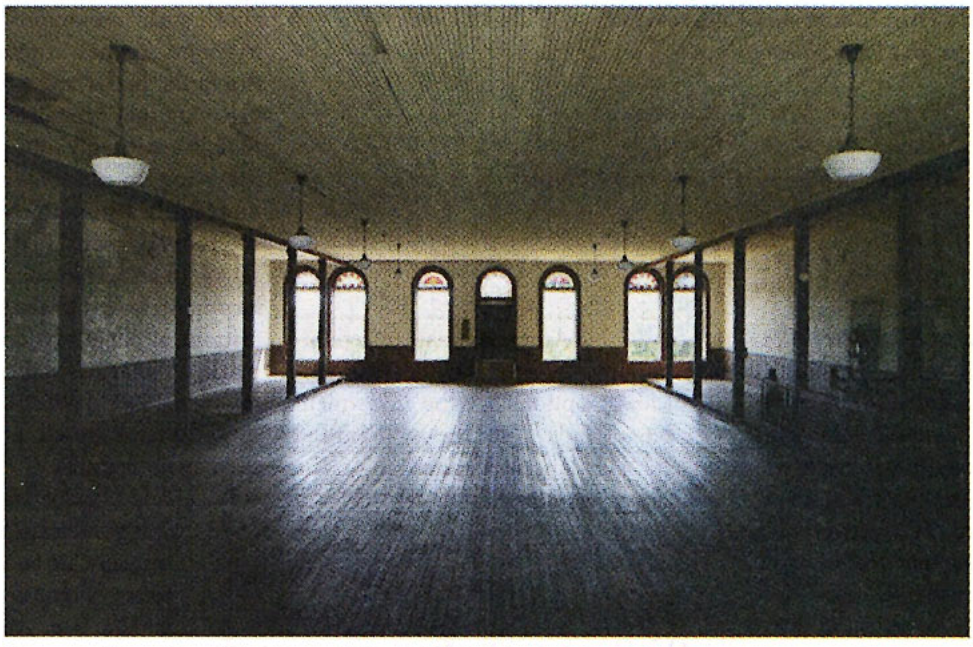
Small Gods makes a fine country-fried companion to that work. It's poetry for dinner. ■

Dan Oko is a freelance writer in Austin.

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Destination Dance Hall

BY MICHAEL HOINSKI



The restored dance floor of Sengelmann Hall in Schulenburg.

Live music promoter Steve Dean may have solved his location problem.

The veteran impresario's previous venue, The Oaks, was just far enough northeast of Austin to keep city slickers from making the trip, thus dooming it to closure. Dean's current venture, Sengelmann Hall, located in Schulenburg at the heart of the Austin-Houston-San Antonio triangle, tries a different approach: pitching authentic roots music in restored digs to not one but three major markets. Sengelmann's doors, closed for 60 years, reopened last month.

Sengelmann is one of many historic Texas dance halls built by German and Czech settlers for the purpose of showcasing their manifold contributions to Texas culture: beer, food and music in particular. Revived under the ownership of Houston artist Dana Harper, Sengelmann merges old-world charm with new-world sophistication. The original bar and hardwood floors, both made-over, complement additions including a biergarten and a balcony overlooking Main Street. Then there's the state-of-the-art sound system giving texture to the wide-open performance space. And don't forget the "pul a pul" cooking, which fuses traditional German and Czech food with modern Texas cuisine.

There are roughly 400 dance halls throughout Texas. That number comes courtesy of the nonprofit Texas Dance Hall Preservation Inc. (Dean is on the board), which raises awareness of these historic hangouts, which Dean will catalog in an upcoming book and video documentary.

Sengelmann will celebrate its revival with summer shows by Hank Williams Sr. ringer James Hand (June 13), Tin Pan Alley revivalists White Ghost Shivers (June 20) and old-school country outlaw Billy Joe Shaver (July 24), among others. Add to that regular Sunday polka sessions and free Thursday shows by honky-tonk pianist Earl Poole Ball, and the vast spectrum of Texas music is pretty well covered—all in one handy hall. See www.sengelmannhall.com for more information. ■



REVIEW

The House Built on Sand

BY ANIS SHIVANI

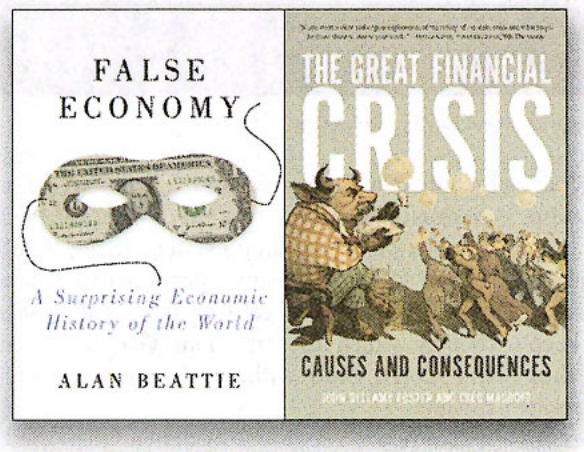
The Great Financial Crisis: Causes and Consequences
By John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff
Monthly Review
160 pages, $12.95

False Economy: A Surprising Economic History of the World
By Alan Beattie
Riverhead
321 pages, $26.95

In his April 14, 2009, "new foundation" speech on the economy, President Barack Obama said, "It is not sustainable to have an economy where in one year, 40 percent of our corporate profits came from a financial sector that was based on inflated home prices, maxed-out credit cards, over-leveraged banks and overvalued assets."

Since the Reagan years, the United States has relied less on producing goods than on serially inflating bubbles to sustain false prosperity. While it's true that trillions of dollars of paper assets create real wealth—the Manhattan investment banker has actual cash to buy houses and pay staff—such prosperity is limited, and ultimately delusional. In 2008, reality popped the bubbles we'd been living in, revealing the absence of a truly productive American economy that works for everyone. Two new books—*The Great Financial Crisis: Causes and Consequences* by John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff, and Alan Beattie's *False Economy: A Surprising Economic History of the World*—try to explain how we got here.

Foster and Magdoff bring to the question a Marxist perspective that differs fundamentally from Beattie's free-market orientation. For Foster and Magdoff, it's not just a matter of mistakes being made—deregulating the financial services sector, for example. The more essential problem, in their view, is the long-term stagnation of America's mature capitalist economy, which provides increasingly fewer options for the investment of excess funds. This thesis, premised on the permanent stagnation of the American economy, puts Foster and Magdoff at odds with most mainstream economists, who treat each fresh crisis with surprise, as though it could not have been anticipated.



Yet the crises have been increasing in both intensity and frequency: the 1981-1982 recession, the 1987 stock market collapse, the 1990-1991 recession, the 2000-2002 collapse of the high-tech bubble, and the mother of them all, the ongoing collapse in the American housing market. It's no coincidence that during these years the Reagan, Bush, Clinton and Bush II administrations busily promoted one bubble after another as the latest, greatest salvation for capitalism run aground.

In the view of orthodox economists, the economy periodically falls into recession because of underconsumption; it needs only to have the pump primed with monetary and fiscal stimulus. During the American economy's golden age, from 1945 to 1973, economists could afford such rose-colored thinking. John Maynard Keynes, capitalism's savior in the 1930s, had a more pessimistic view, believing that capitalist economies tend to fall repeatedly out of equilibrium, reverting to underconsumption and underutilization. Post-war American economists translated Keynes into a set of fine-tuning policy prescriptions, having regressed to abstract conceptualizations of perfect competition in a free market. America's imperial domination following World War II allowed economists to treat growth and prosperity as permanent features.

Foster and Magdoff argue that the post-war golden age was an anomaly, unlikely to be repeated. Long-term stagnation, they argue, is alleviated only by epochal inventions like the steam engine and the automobile. (American prosperity in the 1950s was driven in part by construction of the interstate highway system.)

In theory, there's no limit to the number of inventions that might revitalize an otherwise stagnant American economy. But in practical terms, there is. Is the Internet such an invention? That was the argument during the 1990s—remember the immune-from-recession "New Economy," and Alan Greenspan claiming the old laws of economics no longer apply? In fact, as Foster and Magdoff show, American capitalism during this period was in dire straits.

After the collapse of the high-tech stock bubble, policymakers made a purposeful decision to inflate the housing bubble by extending generous credit to homebuyers who didn't qualify, and securitizing the loans to give excess capital a place to invest. Before the collapse, the next big bubble was to have been the green economy. One hears little talk these days of the green bubble, and more

about getting used to a lesser standard of living.

Throughout the years 2006, 2007 and 2008 Foster and Magdoff accurately forecasted the recent financial meltdown. (Liberal economist Dean Baker, to his credit, predicted the housing bubble back in 2002.) But the current collapse is not limited to finance—it reflects weaknesses in the overall economy.

Building on the work of economists Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, Foster and Magdoff focus on the astronomical growth of debt—particularly private debt, often ignored by mainstream economists, whose focus on the considerably smaller public debt understates the problem. They also track the unsustainable volume of mortgage borrowing and the mind-boggling profusion of new financial instruments like collateralized debt obligations and structured investment vehicles.

If we accept the thesis of mature capitalist stagnation and an economy always in search of bubbles to blow up, a new policy prescription presents itself. It would seek economic bedrock—equalization of incomes, investment in human capital and physical infrastructure, and extension of real opportunity to ignored segments of society, in President Obama's vision. In other words, a sort of Americanized socialism.

Although Beattie doesn't have much to say about the current economic crisis, his book provides a sweeping historical overlook from which to view the situation. Beattie's prism is individual choice, rather than Marxism's material destiny. Even so, he recognizes that given enough poor choices by policymakers, a country could find itself permanently derailed into diminished economic growth. One case in point is Argentina, which at the end of the 19th century resembled few countries so much as the United States. Some thought Argentina would become a world power. From there, the two nations' paths diverged radically. The Argentinian state was captured by *rentiers* who preferred to live off the land rather than invest in the infrastructure crucial to development and growth, as the U.S. went on to do.

Given the current crisis, the question confronting America is whether it has already proceeded so far along the path of financialization that return is impossible. After all, great discrepancies in wealth distribution and access to opportunity have already skewed from the norms of American capitalism (sometimes exceeding even the distortions of the Gilded Age). Beattie's answer is that a return to a real economy is possible, though increasingly difficult as time passes and players like Europe and Asia bring their competitive creativity to market. For Foster and Magdoff, the very question is wrongheaded; capitalism's recurrent "crises" are just the tips of the iceberg representing capitalism's inability, if left to itself, to invest in people.

Beattie's investigations into why certain countries prosper despite apparent material disadvantages, while others languish despite material advantages, are relevant to the current crisis. Natural resource endowments such as oil and diamonds can be more trouble than they're worth, since they can inhibit entrepreneurial creativity. We import our asparagus from as far away as Peru because farmers there have obtained unequal access to markets. Special interests get fat on state largesse and move entire economies in unproductive directions. Something similar has happened with the financialization of the American economy.

Yet Beattie's main thrust is to show that the economic fate of nations is not inevitable. Given the right policy choices—which in Beattie's view amount to trusting the market and limiting government intervention—any country can liberate itself from economic tyranny.

Indeed, policies giving more rein to the market are often effective. But it's all too easy to ascribe causation in retrospect, justifying the free-market perspective in hindsight.

American development in the late 19th century had as much to do with control of the state by industrial, rather than agricultural, elites. Heavy import tariffs of precisely the kind that Beattie derides among today's developing countries were common to both camps.

During the last 30 years, the American economy has been managed according to the needs of an increasingly frenzied financial sector, as manufacturing declined. Why would financial interests give up their virtual monopoly?

Beattie also fails to address the fact that America grew so phenomenally in the 20th century in large measure because of war-making, the ultimate Keynesian stimulus, of which we've taken repetitive advantage during the post-World War II period. Our wars have fueled bursts of "economic growth," but have we reached a limit there, too? Kevin Phillips' prescient 2008 book *Bad Money*, a necessary supplement to Beattie, connects the financialization of the American economy, very much as Foster and Magdoff describe it, with the demands of American empire.

What, then, are the prospects for recovery? According to Foster and Magdoff, the reckoning has arrived. Debt has been too grossly inflated to fuel another recovery, and America has no choice but to deleverage its economy and return to those forms of real productivity still open to it. A decision must be taken to pursue greater equality, which would require lessened reliance on asset bubbles, else the foreseeable decline will be all the more painful.

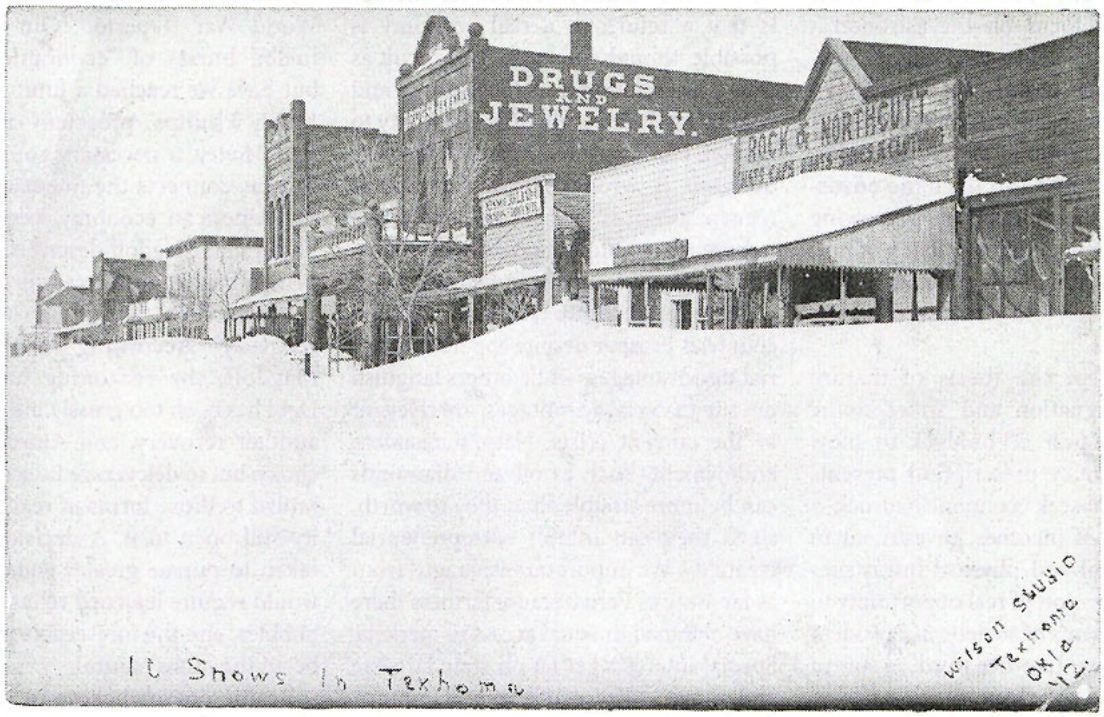
Beattie doesn't believe in the permanent stagnation of mature capitalist economies. Yet his thesis converges with that of Foster and Magdoff in that departure from the norms established by narrowly interested elites becomes more difficult over time. The pragmatic realism so far displayed by President Obama, and very much in evidence in the books discussed here, is still sorely lacking in mainstream media accounts. These continue to harp on subprime lending and irresponsible borrowing as the wrecking balls that brought down the house. At best they advocate re-regulation of the financial sector as a means of preventing a recurrence, rather than asking why the house was built on sand to begin with. ■

Anis Shivani is a fiction writer, poet, and critic in Houston. His collection Anatolia and Other Stories *will be published by Black Lawrence Press in October.*

The Weather Up There

BY JOHN MILLER MORRIS

The photos and text on the following pages are excerpted from *Taming the Land: The Lost Postcard Photographs of the Texas High Plains*, by John Miller Morris, published in April by Texas A&M University Press. The postcard photos reproduced here are from the author's personal collection.



Albert Lawrence Wilson
"It Snows in Texhoma"

Texas County. Severe winter weather is routine in the Panhandle, but the winter of 1911–12 was a small ice age. From November through April fierce blizzards tested the fortitude of isolated farmers and ranchers. Some snowfalls were so heavy that settlers were forced to dig tunnels out of their homes. Townfolk traveled along towering "snow bridges," immense drifts that linked half-buried buildings together. Wags said the country was "open range" once more, as all the fences were buried. Most settlers, with prior experience or roots in the Great Plains communities farther north, coped admirably with the privations of being snowbound. But there were also reports of emergency situations—lack of food, fuel, doctors, or medicine—throughout the region.

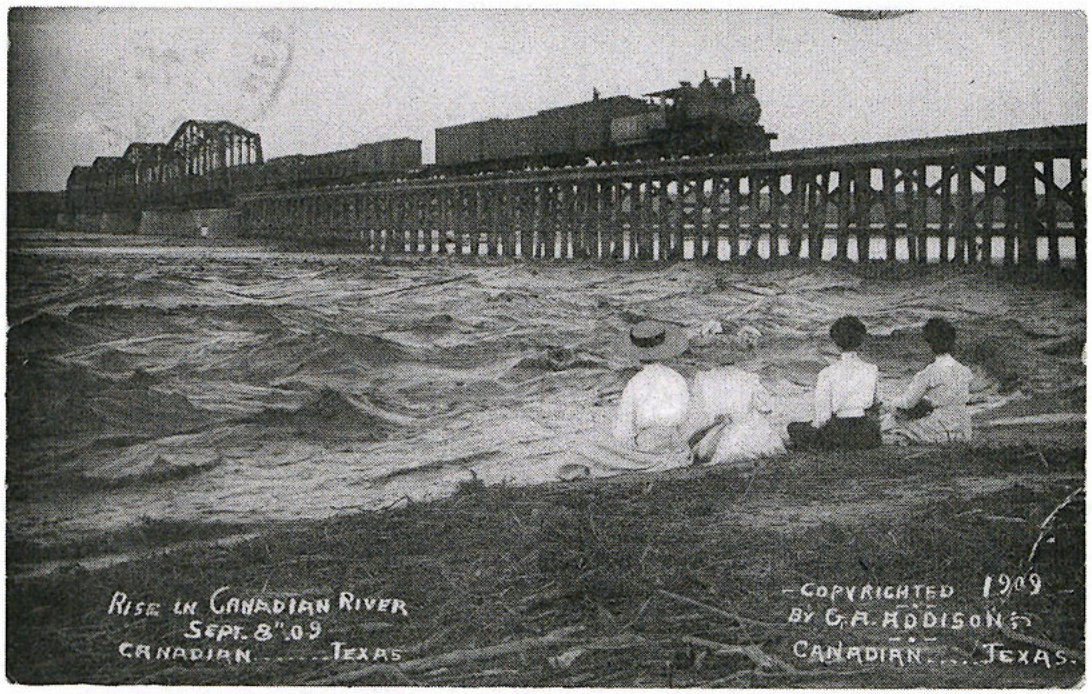
Like many residents, A. L. Wilson took an abiding interest in the weather of the High Plains. He was fond of its precipitation events, photographing Texhoma in the aftermath of rains as well as winter blizzards. As this winter 1912 heavy snowfall suggests, the very top of Texas was far more Canada than Mexico. The worst of these winter storms smothered towns, threatened the lives of freighters, toppled windmills by the dozens, froze livestock, and generally buried the puny vertical improvements of mankind under a vast mantle of white horizontality.



Wyatt E. Perry
"Dust Storm Approaching, June 4, 1937–7:20 p.m., The Perry Studio—Perryton, Texas"

Ochiltree County. While the April 14, 1935, dust storm was particularly memorable, other dusters periodically swept into town, as depicted in Wyatt Perry's photo of the June 4, 1937, "black duster." Merchants turned on their lights in an effort to dispel the approaching gloom. Although these storms were horrifying, most urban communities recovered fairly quickly with brooms and mops. These storms were devastating, however, to rural populations. Blowing sand killed off the tender shoots of planted crops, while massive soil erosion buried farm buildings in huge drifts.

A number of America's most talented photographers were drawn to the 1930s dust bowl of the Texas Panhandle. Photographers from the Farm Service Administration (FSA)—including the exceptionally talented Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, and Arthur Rothstein—arrived to document the searing human and environmental tragedy. Indeed, much of the 1930s FSA photography was the ultimate set of "disaster photos" for a region that lost five thousand farms and twenty thousand farmers.

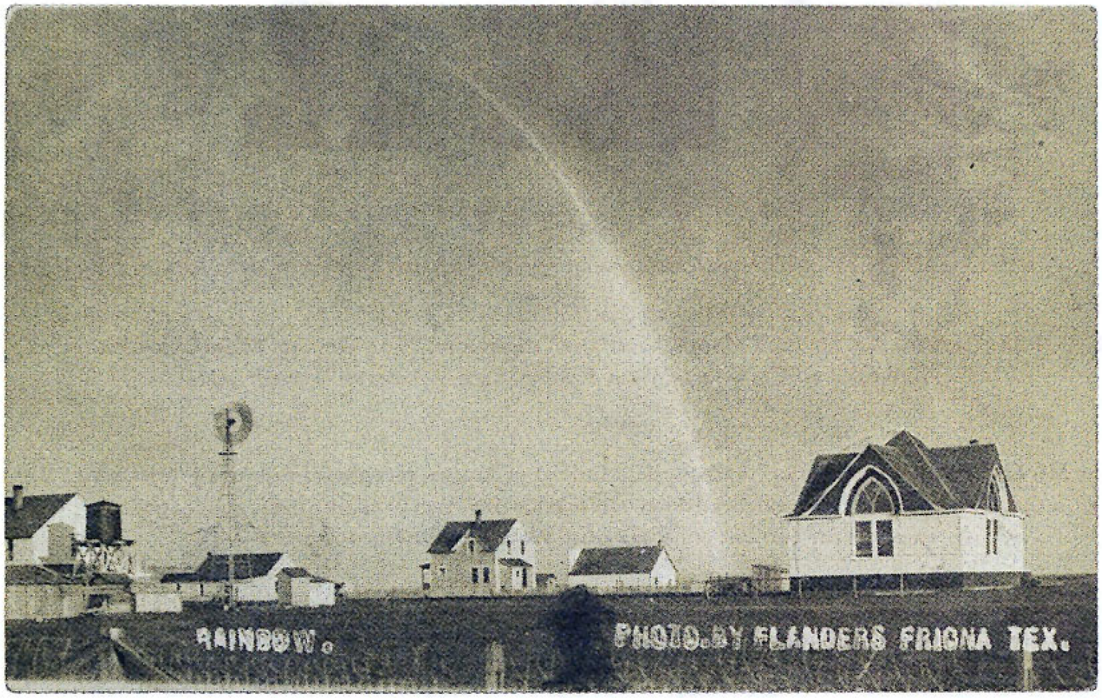


George A. Addison
"Rise in Canadian River, Sept. 8th '09. Canadian ... Texas"

Hemphill County. Four women watch an impressive "rise" on the Canadian River as a Santa Fe train steams across the railroad bridge leading into town. As the largest tributary of the Arkansas River, the Canadian River was notorious for its sudden rises. Heavy localized rains in the upper watershed—a realm stretching from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of New Mexico through the Panhandle—could appear suddenly far downstream in Canadian as a mighty torrent on a sunny day. Although the four ladies appear untroubled, the railroad was perennially worried about rises. They sometimes swept away the bridge in a great "washout." Addison's dramatic photograph captures the fascination this environmental hazard exercises on the mind.

Postmark: "Newton & Amarillo R.P.O. TR4 Mar 5 1910" to Enid, Oklahoma.

Message: "Dear Friends. I will drop you a line as I promised. Got home all O.K. but it is very lonesome here. Have only heard from the little one once she got home. All O.K. I stop[p]ed at Shattuck and saw my Mother. Write soon —From W. C. Eaton."



Charles M. and Luisa Flanders
"Rainbow, Photo by Flanders, Friona, Tex."

Parmer County. The celestial promise of rain, wealth, and good fortune appears to touch down in the new town of Friona. Rainbows, mirages, halos, and other optical events of the atmosphere were natural features of the High Plains. But sky phenomena were typically random and short-lived, and therefore difficult to photograph. This card is the only known real photo of a rainbow in the Panhandle. The photographer had to work quickly to capture the moment when sunlight was reflected and refracted off raindrops to form a rainbow with its foot anchored on the edge of town. Although sepia tinting washes out the six-color spectrum, the image was intended to be symbolic of the good fortune hovering over the new community. Rainbows were very appealing environmental images to farmers of the Great Plains.

Postmark: "Ama. & Ft. Worth R.P.O. TR 8 Oct 24 1909" from R. H. to Mrs. T. O. Wright, Roosevelt, Oklahoma.

Message: "We are in Amarillo on the train waiting for it to pull out for Friona. It is about 11:15 now. Saw Mary Cobb and her husband last night. She works in one of the stores here. Took quite a walk over town this morning. Lunch sure tasted fine. Will said to tell you that we sure put that chicken away and came very near eating the basket. Will write later. —R.H."

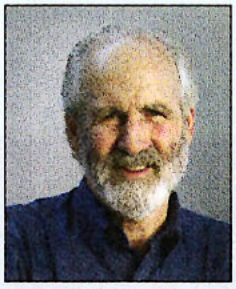
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