

Tempting God in a Texas Drought

By Bennie Bock, II

So many years have passed that the incident had become dim in my mind. That is, until the searing heat, row after row of parched corn in the adjoining field as well as the dried grass facing my cattle in the desolate pasture reminded me of something that happened in similar times more than a half a century ago.

That memory jolted me as I drove around on the ranch that has been in my family for almost 80 years. In the 1940's our place was miles in the country from Austin, Texas. Today it is one mile from the new toll road that will someday encircle the city and is surrounded by over five hundred homes.

Once surrounded by a few farmers in cotton country, our place morphed from a farm into a cattle ranch over the last 50 years. Lack of competent labor, lower stock prices and the vagaries of the weather all contributed to the change.

Today, the stock tanks that were filled just 18 months ago in one of the wettest years on record in Central Texas are dry. The summer of 2007 belies what ranchers' here now face: The worst drought in history. I believe that because the parched ground in the early 1950's burns in my mine, and simultaneously contributes to the incident that changed my ~~life~~ life.

In 1952, I was a bookish, slightly built, ten-year-old who cared more for classical music than rock & roll. I preferred to listen to the 10 p.m. "Morgan Beatty & the News" rather than baseball games. I was always fascinated in government, politics and history. It was in the genes. I came from an intensely active political family of partisans who called themselves Democrats. Patriots all, but after the name, their philosophies differed mightily! In comparison to today's climate, most feel in the center of the Texas one-party political spectrum—conservative thinkers on fiscal matters and liberal doers on human rights.

Some relatives were office holders—the long forgotten founder of the Texas Highway Commission & Texas Parks System, a State Representative, a County Commissioner, a sheriff and a Texas Ranger or two. Most, including my father, were involved in running and helping to raise money for campaigns—both

new stars and old stalwarts. I ate dinner inculcated in political personalities like some boys grew up challenged by records of sports figures. Dessert was served up as the latest political rumors. Consequently, President Truman and I were the only two people in the world who thought he could win in '48! Four years later, he decided not to run again—and without warning, did not consult me. Undeterred, I enthusiastically welcomed the challenge to study new candidates.

Lacking was a television. In 1951 not many households had them. Wrestling and soap operas were the only content. But in the spring great news arrived: Both political parties nominating conventions were to be televised! I was dreaming and scheming on that mid-morning Sunday as my father and I drove over the dusty ranch road. There was not one cloud in the azure sky, or peaking out on the horizon.

It hadn't rained in 3 months. It was so hot and dry my Shetland pony, "Bill", remained saddled but tied under a shade tree. In contrast to my grand thoughts, Dad, of course, was thinking about the drought, the pencil-thin cows and calves in the pasture, mounting feed costs, burning prickly pear for fodder, and how he was going to pay the bank note on the new, but now dry pasture he had just bought last year.

The prior winter he pulled weaker cattle out of the frozen stock tanks. Many died.

I didn't have a clue. I knew it was dry. Yet, I hadn't kept track of that with all of the other political problems we had! Besides, it would rain someday, wouldn't it?

Current events and notable people swirled through my head like a Christmas peppermint candy cane: Adlai Stevenson, Estes Kefauver, Sam Rayburn, Lyndon, Ike and particularly Korean War headlines! After what seemed to me to be at least several hours of silence, I couldn't stand it any longer. "Dad, can we get a television? It would be really interesting to watch the political conventions this summer!" I didn't press it further. I was never the salesman like he was.

He did not hesitate, "Well, yes, if it rains *today*, we can get a television." No answer was any more unequivocal, yet simultaneously uncertain. Remember? The clouds were non-existent.

But in my youthful, yet, optimistic obliviousness, I was elated. I imagined myself in just 20 days in our "family room" watching the political intrigue of a nominating convention! Oh! The speeches I would hear and the history that would be made! ***I would be a part of that!***

Noontime came, still no clouds in the sky. We ate Kreuz's Barbeque at the work pens in the shade of the 100 year old mesquite trees. Dad and the "hands" talked, discussing the drought, burning prickly pear for the cattle to eat, the lack of stock tank water, and then the drought again. The television dream amplified: Wonder how big it would be? Where would we put it? How many people would come to our house just to see it?

At 2:00 p.m. one lonely little cloud appeared on the horizon. It stealthily moved toward the ranch like a fox on the prowl: Stopping, starting, stopping again, moving faster & faster until it was on top of us.

At 3:00 p.m. the sky turned black. The now big cloud gave birth to five other clouds, all of them more angry than the mother cloud.

Then, it rained. Two inches.

Dad didn't say anything.

On Friday morning the television was delivered to our house. We put it at the end of the family room and removed the cardboard game table. It was a 24-inch Hoffman, the biggest you could buy, with doors on the front. I still have it.

I have remained optimistic and certain in my life that God can do ANYTHING!

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