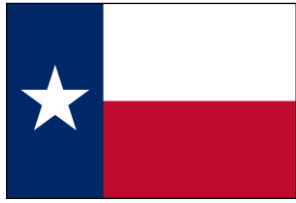


Dear Friends,



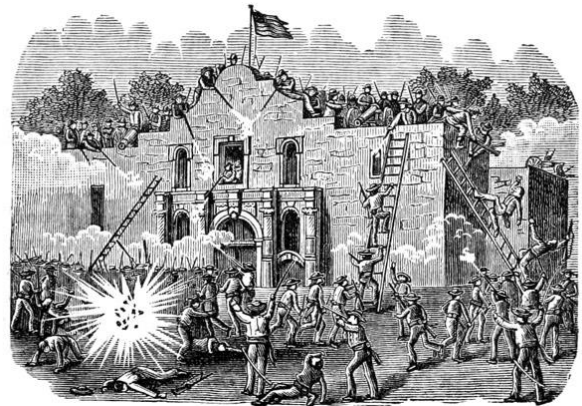
Why Texas (flag at left, arms at right)?¹ This was my 11th (or maybe 12th) trip there, and I still cannot manage to love the place, or even like it. The landscape is almost as alienating as the culture. But an important

collection is there – the matchless library and archive of the Flag Research Center, formerly operated by the master flag-scholar Whitney Smith, is now at the University of Texas (due in part to the help of the [Flag Heritage Foundation](#) on whose Board I sit). I needed to work in that collection and there was nowhere to do it but in Texas. Also I wanted to see the Alamo, and revisit the LBJ ranch, and see the famous West Texas Oil Fields, and pick up some more counties. I felt a need to be on the open road for a while, and in February (not a good time for North Dakota) the farther south the better. So I flew to San Antonio and settled into the first of many Motel 6s.



The Alamo is the main thing to see in San Antonio. What was it like? Sorry, I don't remember the Alamo.

Just kidding. It's a mission building where a band of defenders was [wiped out by the Mexican Army](#) in 1836. It is not entirely clear to me why staying in the Alamo in the face of certain annihilation is considered such a great thing to have done – brave, certainly, and stubborn, but would a strategic withdrawal not have made more sense all around? If there



were ever a time for such revisionist thinking, though, it has surely passed. The Alamo today is a rather gloomy building, mostly empty except for display cases filled with firearms. But it is set in a pleasant downtown park, and I'm glad to have seen it, and a fine diorama in the gift shop gives a good sense of the actual battle.

¹ The arms of Texas, found on the reverse of the state seal, feature three elements from the Texan War of Independence (from Mexico, in 1836): [the Alamo](#), the [Cannon of Gonzales](#) (which the Mexicans tried unsuccessfully to take from a Texas settlement), and [Vince's Bridge](#) (whose destruction was of tactical importance for the Texans during the war). The flags stand for the past sovereignties of Texas: Spain, France, Mexico, Texas Republic, Confederacy, and United States. The motto TEXAS ONE AND INDIVISIBLE is slightly ironic because Texas, uniquely, *is* divisible – under the [joint resolution of Congress](#) approving the annexation of Texas in 1845, Texas arguably retains the right to split into as many as five states (raising the truly scary possibility of ten U. S. Senators from Texas).

The other thing people say a visitor should see in San Antonio is the Riverwalk, a series of walkways by the San Antonio River. I did go there, on a boat, and found it a deeply depressing excursion into Marriott Land, by which I mean a canyon above which rise huge faceless chain hotels, with gaudy theme bars on the ground floors, everything processed down to the cellular level. If there had ever been any charm to the San Antonio River, it has been thoroughly beaten out of it by now. The same may be said of the city center, which I toured on an open double-decker bus, country music blasting at toxic levels until I asked them to stop (I was the only passenger). The part of San Antonio considered picturesque enough to be included on a city tour is mostly vacant lots, grim rectangular cinder-block warehouses, low office blocks, and an occasional structure from the now dimly-remembered time when ornament was still permitted. The dreariness of downtown San Antonio is hard to overstate, and the rest of the place is pretty dreary too, dominated as it is by enormous freeways, tawdry commercial strips, featureless malls and desolate residential districts. Brightly painted Mexican slums provide the only cheerful interludes.



After this dispiriting experience I was glad to head out, through my first new county (KENDALL), to the LBJ Ranch near Stonewall. The last time I visited the ranch, in 1975 (just a few years after Johnson died), visitors could not drive around, but had to be ferried from site to site in multi-passenger electric carts, still equipped with LBJ's piped-music system playing his favorite *Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head*. I was both disappointed and relieved to find that this surreal experience is no longer offered.

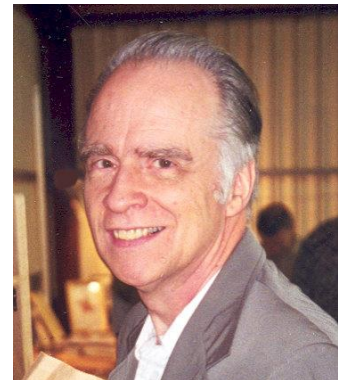


The main attraction is the house where the Johnsons lived for many years, which was called the Texas White House during his time as President. It was opened to the public after Lady Bird died in 2007, and offers fascinating insights into Johnson and his way of life. Of special interest are the telephones in every room (there was one mounted under Johnson's place at his dinner table, and another by the toilet in the main bathroom). At left I show the small office Lady Bird had built for him when

he was Vice President, so he wouldn't turn the whole house in to an office – on a couch

in that room is an embroidered pillow that says IT'S MY RANCH AND I DO WHAT I DAMN PLEASE. President and Mrs. Johnson are buried in a small cemetery on the property. His cattle herd survives (different cattle now of course), operated by the National Park Service as a profit center like the gift shop. The [Lyndon B. Johnson National Historic Park](#), as the complex is called, also operates another site in nearby Johnson City where LBJ lived as a child. Especially evocative are the small porches outside the rooms, where Johnson used to listen while his father held political meetings inside.

After a day with LBJ I headed for Austin. My main purpose there was to work in the Whitney Smith Flag Research Collection at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas. As noted, Whitney Smith (right) was until his retirement in 2011 the world's premier scholar of flags – the very word for this study (*vexillology*) was his invention. He had the greatest library ever assembled on this subject – you can read [here](#) a brief appreciation of the library I wrote for the final issue of *Flag Bulletin*, the journal Whitney published for 50 years. After he retired, his library and archives were moved to the University of Texas, to be preserved and used there forever.



I was the first scholar to work in the collection at Texas – they kindly let me in even though it was not quite ready. Most of it is still in 1500 boxes (see left) – 500 boxes of Whitney's priceless research files (finding aids coming on line soon), another 500 boxes of books and pamphlets, and 500 more with other things. I was looking for rare material to translate and publish in the Foundation's [Monograph and Translation Series](#), and in two days of rooting through boxes found enough juicy material to keep

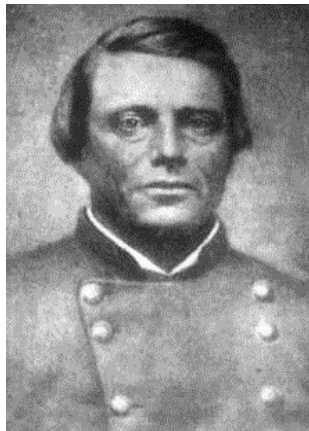
the program going for the next few years. It was a good feeling to work with this great collection, especially knowing that now it would be open to scholars from around the world in a way that was not possible while it was still lodged in Whitney's house.

I spent one more day in Austin, visiting the State Capitol (right) and the LBJ Library and Museum (next door to the Briscoe Center), where the most interesting displays were some of Johnson's telephone calls, audible on period telephone



handsets. My, how that man could talk! Listening to him run right over Richard Russell's objections to serving on the Warren Commission was a master class in persuasion. Austin itself, though, like San Antonio, would have been a disappointment if I had expected more. When the conversation turns to how awful Texas is, people always say *but Austin is different*. Well, yes and no. It is a college town, and of course not everyone in Texas is a right-wing zealot or a gun-toting reactionary. There are young people with stylish tattoos in Austin, and cafés that serve soy lattes instead of prairie oysters.² And so there is a sense in which it is an improvement over the rest of Texas. But like San Antonio, Austin is dominated by freeways and malls and tacky commercial strips, and its downtown by a few blocks of blank oppressive towers. Even the University is as ugly and unwelcoming as a giant Wal-Mart. So I was very glad to get out of there and begin my journey through 35 more new counties.³

First I went north for a bit, to clear up some counties that united one massive sprawl on my map, so it would become two *less* massive sprawls and not so intimidating. WILLIAMSON, BURNET, LAMPASAS, CORYELL, BELL. I was still in the Texas Hill Country, which has low hills, scrubby brush, some live oak trees (so called because they keep their leaves in the winter), and some other trees that looked very similar except without leaves. The landscape was mostly brown (because of winter) with some dull grayish green in places.



Saucy black grackles instead of pigeons or sparrows. I can sort of see how people who grew up there, like President Johnson, could love the Hill Country, but that is probably just because it felt like home. Philip Roth grew up loving Newark.

Then I headed west. SAN SABA County, better watered than the counties I was coming from, was sort of scenic in places, and my hopes rose. I stopped for the night in Mason (MASON County), a reasonably together town whose 1928 movie theater was still functioning.⁴ But the further west I got, the scruffier and scrubbier and drier and barer the landscape became. LLANO,

² Prairie oysters are fried bull testicles. I'd much rather have some of those than a soy latte, but they are a lot harder to find in Texas now than they used to be.

³ Texas has 254 counties, so even 35 counties, more than the totals for 16 of the states, is not even 14% of Texas.

⁴ It had been bought by a non-profit to keep it alive, and shows movies four nights a week. The Monday night I was there [American Sniper](#) (what else?) was playing to an almost-full house. It is actually a pretty good movie, although a lot of people get killed in it.

MCCULLOCH, MENARD, CONCHO, TOM GREEN (named for a Confederate general, above left), COKE, STERLING, GLASSCOCK, HOWARD, MARTIN, MIDLAND.

I stopped for the night in Midland, the metropolis of the West Texas oil country (the Permian Basin). The side of town south of the freeway is one of the worst places I've ever seen – an apparently endless landscape of low industrial buildings, trucks, oil gear, and rusted-out metal fences. The odd thing is that, although Midland is an active industrial center, the impression is one of neglect and decay. It goes to the horizon, with tanks and sheds and welding yards. There is nothing



wrong with an industrial zone, but this one was strangely featureless and oppressive.

I found that the industrial section was not the whole of Midland. On the other side of the freeway lay block after faded empty sun-blasted block of the dreariest 1950s tract housing I can remember seeing anywhere. This was the

nice section of town, and on one corner, indistinguishable from the other houses except for a sign, was the [George W. Bush Childhood Home](#), where Poppy Bush 41 moved his family in 1951 as he was making a career in the oil valve supply business. George 43 grew up there, and while the furnishings are period and not original a visitor can still get a good idea of how he lived – there is his childish bed, with a Cub Scout uniform neatly laid out on it. His smirk was already well developed (right). I have often wondered how someone who went to both Yale and Harvard could have so little curiosity about the world. Seeing Midland helped me understand this.



I continued west. By now there were no longer any trees, just flat desert and sand and sagebrush, and thousands of plastic bags littering the sides of the road, as in India. ECTOR, WINKLER, LOVING, REEVES. Loving County was a special prize – the [Extra Miler Club](#), devoted to the county completion quest, lists Loving as one of the most difficult counties to reach. There are only two roads in, and they do not cross; with only 82 people, it

has the smallest population of any county in the United States.

I crossed the Pecos River, west of which [Judge Roy Bean](#) famously claimed he himself was the law, and continued back east through the sandy, scrubby desert. There were lots of pumpjacks (below), those nodding devices so common in oil-rich areas. They manage to squeeze oil to the surface from deposits with insufficient pressure to push it up unaided. These have always intrigued me, and on the



next page I show a diagram (from Wikipedia) explaining how they work. There are usually a lot of power lines in a field of pumpjacks – the newer ones manage to self-power with gas that comes up with the oil, or by other means, but most of them are still on the power grid. WARD, CRANE, UPTON. Upton was the first pleasingly scenic county since San Saba – trees and hills started to reappear. REAGAN, IRION, CROCKETT, SCHLEICHER, SUTTON, KIMBLE – the first sign of agriculture for

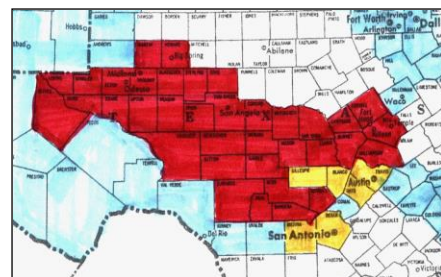
hundreds of miles was in Kimble County. KERR, EDWARDS, REAL, BANDERA, and finally back into San Antonio, more than ready for my flight home the next day. I had covered more than 1300 miles of Texas in my lemon-yellow Fiat 500. My new county count is now 2432 (77.63%); I have 701 counties to go, and of those 130 (almost 20%) are in Texas! I am reminded of the old ditty:

The sun has riz, the sun has set,
And still we be in Texas yet!

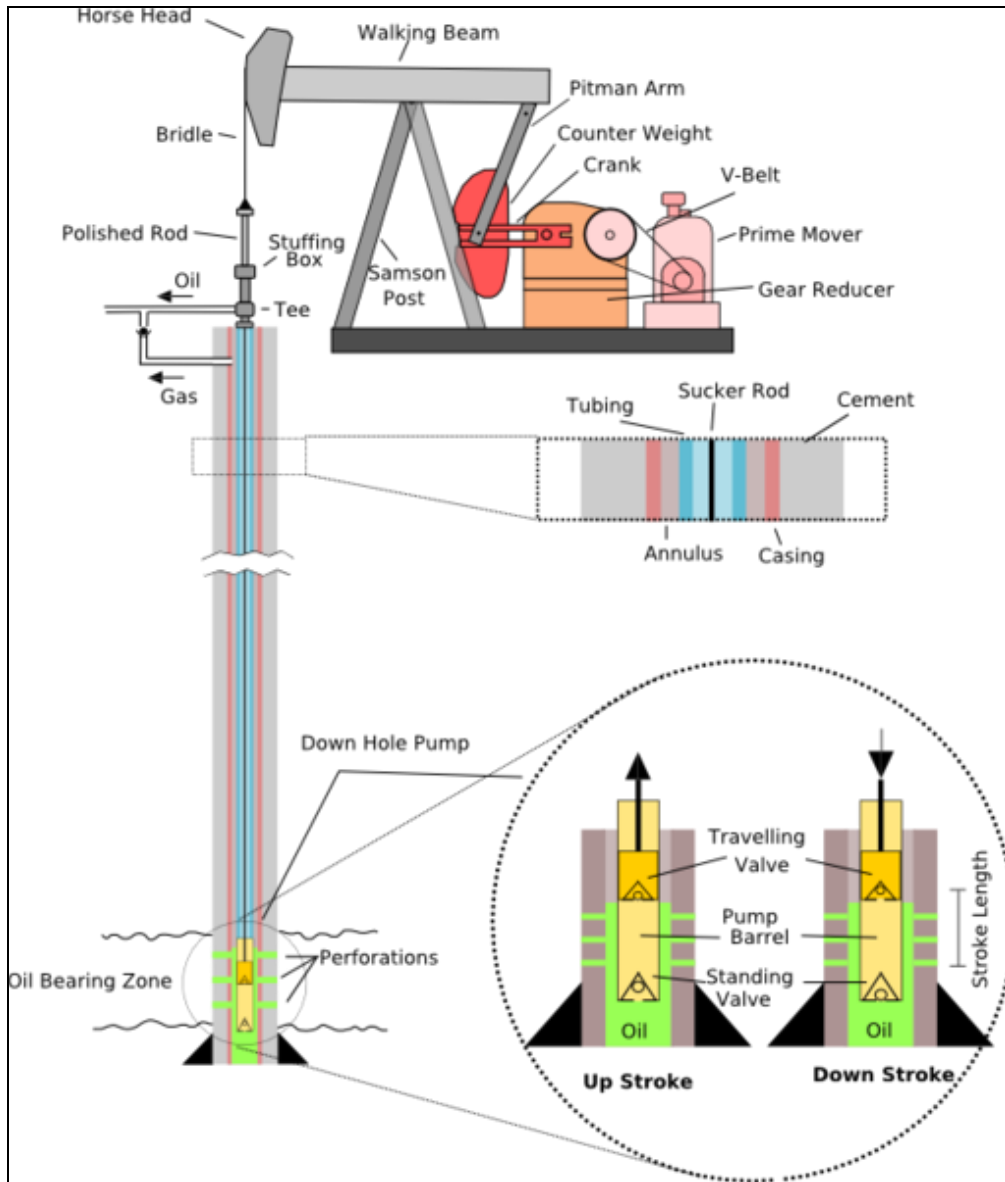
Maybe I *won't* flog myself to drive thousands of miles through 130 more Texas counties, just to say I've done it! We'll see how I feel when I finish up everywhere else.⁵

David

March 2015



⁵ On the map, red counties are new on this trip, yellow were revisited on this trip, blue have been reached before, and white have not yet been reached. The white area in the lower left is Mexico. The red patch itself forms a distorted outline of Texas.



PUMPJACK