

A Reading Guide for Live Oak County, Texas

- Kurt House, originally printed 1977, revised 1980 and 2018

Introduction

The purpose of this bibliography is to simplify the study of relevant topics in Live Oak County, Texas. From my experience through many years of study, it is somewhat difficult to locate all the various sources of the county because it requires much research and is not available in a single document. By necessity therefore, this is a temporary list which will be revised from time to time as the author discovers more sources. I have endeavored to keep the style readable, so as to insure its comprehension and appeal to the county population as a whole, and while I have tried to make many of the primary sources available in the Live Oak County Library, the cost and effort to maintain all such sources prevents my donation of all of them. Some of the key articles however, such as that by Price and Gunther (1942) concerning the change of south Texas grasslands to the brush country, I have photocopied and donated to the county library, as well as a copies of this guide which were also placed in the libraries of George West and Three Rivers. The important articles are indicated by an asterisk(*) and are now available in the county library at George West, Texas. I invite the contributions of others who know of books, periodicals, newspaper articles and other sources regarding the history of our area and I will assist anyone who is unable to obtain enough material to his or her liking. To that end, contributors can address all correspondence to my permanent address:

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Ironically, although I independently conceived the idea of this bibliography, I soon discovered Live Oak County's most famous son's work, J. Frank Dobie's *Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest (1942)*, and my purpose was so similar to his that I use his words here:

"...It is designed primarily to help people of the Southwest see significances in the features of the land to which they belong, to make their environments more interesting to them, their past more alive, to bring them to a realization of the values of their own cultural inheritance, and to stimulate them to observe...." (1942:9)

One of the classic stories of Dobie is that when he presented his intended course "Life and Literature of the Southwest" to the faculty at the University of Texas in the 1930's, that all these learned men guffawed. There IS no unique life and literature of the Southwest, they claimed. Several decades of successful and popular teaching later however, they were more inclined to agree with Dobie. There is irony in this publication moreover, because he was born and reared in the southeastern portion of Live Oak County. For any Live Oak County resident, no more than 70 miles or so separate anyone from Dobie's birthplace on Ramirena Creek, since the county is no larger than that in its greatest dimension. The many writing of "Mr. Frank" Dobie

are recommended for two main reasons: his writings not only focus on this area in detail, but also have universal appeal in relating this area to the world beyond.

I have arbitrarily divided this bibliography by subjects, which include Anthropology and Prehistory, Biography & Journals, Biology, Folklore, Geology, History, Literature and Miscellaneous and Folklore topics for ease of the reader not interested in all subjects and some sources are noted in multiple categories. It is notably deficient in current events, politics and religion. Several periodical publications and organizations involving this area are listed for the desire of persons wanting to know more about a particular topic. Joining an organization of your choice is the best way to get involved, and failure of a person to gain new ideas is what Dobie declared was "...a pretty good sign that his mind is petrified and need no longer be accounted among the living..." (1942:1).

What is Natural History?

Natural history could be defined on simplest terms as the study of nature from a popular point of view. As a rancher's son growing up in Live Oak County from the hard drought years of the 1950's to the present era of the Nueces River Project, I was fortunate to be taught both a love for the land and an interest in the unique plants and animals which it produced. Many plant and animal species native to this county are rare elsewhere in the state, and there are numerous opportunities for the budding young scientist reared in our midst. But it is necessary to understand one crucial fact: the "Brush Country" so characteristic of southern Texas is changing at an alarming rate. Not one of the first regions to be settled in the state, the area has maintained some, but maybe not enough of its colorful flavor. Together with isolated portions of western Texas, it was the last to become "civilized", underlining the importance of preservation of its unique history.

Interest in and love for the land was a quality considered necessary by the earliest settlers of Texas as well as Live Oak County, and the extent of one's knowledge in those frontier days often meant the difference between crop success or failure, human health and economic and social well-being, often life or death. This intimate knowledge of the land, with its particular plants and animals allowed successful use, for the most part agricultural, since the county was organized in 1856 as a separate county from Bexar, Nueces, and San Patricio County. Descendants of many of those early pioneers who formed the county still live in the here today. From early agricultural use, which may have been more for traditional use than logical, through the recent highly technological oil and gas "fracking" booms to the mining of uranium which eased us into the Atomic Age firsthand, this county has contributed significantly toward the wealth of Texas. Various sources, such as the *Texas Almanac* list cattle, farm products and oil and gas as major county exports and economies, but it is not common knowledge for example, that Three Rivers was the home of the first glass factory in Texas.

What students of Live Oak County history can be grateful for is that throughout this time of early development and despite the stress and distractions of modern life, knowledge of Live Oak County history and natural history has been preserved, even if not with 100% success. One of the most important sources of this knowledge lies right in our midst and is happily passed on

to the interested person. This source, of course, is the older generation in our communities; if the young are our greatest resource, then the old are our greatest legacy. Most of this knowledge has been passed on orally from one generation to the next, but much of it has been lost. In addition, there is the danger that residents take for granted that everybody knew it, consequently much of their knowledge has never been recorded. A by-product of this paper, hopefully, will be the stimulation for some to record what they understand only as oral history.

Although one may find the Spanish names of the native brush species amusing and colorful, only after one has become infected with how the animals are related to these plants, and how these plants are related to the soil, which in turn is explained by geologic history and climate, does the whole of natural history come to fit together efficiently. It is usually at this point in one's thinking that mere amusement becomes a growing desire to know more. We owe much to our present and past elders in our communities, many of whom have seen more than eighty winters, and it is to these that this work is dedicated, yet to date no concentrated effort has been made to collect their oral history. We all know their names, and they are so numerous that I dare not mention any, for fear of omitting some. Because of them, because they cared enough, or thought it was important enough to know the land, they have passed on to some of us of my generation that beautiful understanding of how Mother Nature works.

By contrast, the ancient Maori people of New Zealand for example, now extinct, not only well understood their environment but also were efficient transmitters of their oral history. They defined the earth as "...a Mother that never dies...". However ominously, for Maori or American culture, each succeeding generation in today's world grows less concerned about the land and its natural resources because increasing urbanization has separated them from it. By the same token, they are more dependent on their neighbors to fill their needs and wants. Such social evolution is exactly the explanation for the present worldwide problems of pollution, over-population, and diminishing resources such as fossil fuels. Because we are less concerned, we learn less from the old-timers and much of the valuable oral history is lost forever. If we lack interest, they confide in us less, thus the cycle is such that we know less and less directly from participants and become more and more detached from the land. Instead, we become more reliant on formal educational institutions for what we think we should know. In local terms, we are also more dependent for economic and social stimulation on outside-the-county resources, and thus many of our directions are from this county outward. Instead we could be proud of what we have, to learn to market it, and what southern Texas has more than any other region of the state might be termed a dynamic and colorful history. It is no wonder that the local merchants who depend upon us are troubled; it is as if a steady stream of raw resources, from flax seed to our own youth are streaming out of the county at a maximum rate. Much of what returns is not of benefit to the county.

One thing is certain: our culture in southern Texas is changing; synthetics have replaced older materials, skill and craftsmanship is being replaced by automation and machine made products; fence building and hay production are good examples. Habitat in southern Texas is under constant modification because man is the only creature with the awesome ability to change his environment. Since Ice Age seas gradually retreated from this area toward the present Gulf of Mexico leaving ribbons of younger and younger sediments in the county

proceeding southward, the triangular block of space which has been our county's claim on the atmosphere has become more and more polluted. Chlorinated hydrocarbons found in almost all pesticides (e.g. Mirex, Malthion) enter the biotic systems of our area and kill life forms before they are even documented. The Choke Canyon Dam impact studies listed several endangered plants which are rare elsewhere, but will be flooded anyway, not to mention innumerable archeological and historical sites which will be lost forever. Range acreage (native brush) in the county decreased over thirty thousand acres in the period 1958-1967 alone, and this decrease more than doubled in the next decade.

As a youngster learning to swim in the rivers of our county, I enjoyed hundreds of mussel shells of all sizes and species creating wonderful splashes of purple, pink and orange on the gravel bars of our waterways while filling an ecological niche as well. Lately, as my wanderings in old haunts reveal, there seem to be hardly any remaining. Why is this, I asked? The answer is simple: from reading natural history I learned that the more sensitive life forms of an area are the first to succumb as the area becomes polluted. It has not been solely because of pollutants discharged directly into these streams by our own industries (even though at this writing one source poured oil muck into the Frio River just yards away from a city water supply), but because such manmade, unnatural, non-biodegradable chemicals have been carelessly dumped upstream into the muddy little stream even before it gets its name Frio River. A hundred years ago, Dr. Charles F. Simmons advertised this same area in a promotional pamphlet entitled "Home, Sweet Home" in order to lure settlers to the Simmons area by making wild claims to the clean water and fertility of the soil (Cf. Schmidt 1977:4).

A preservationist might object even if progress conflicts with our standard of living, but the future holds more than doom and gloom; we must simply ask ourselves: Progress at what cost? Economic development in the county is sure to come as exploration for oil, gas and mineral reserves continue at a rapid rate; our county holds vast potential. What has become painfully clear however, is that it is not impossible to destroy the beauty of the land. For many years, we have under-estimated that beauty, and considered it indestructible. Now we see the landscape modified by giant earth-moving equipment on a scale never imagined by a farmer using a two row planter. We now watch mountains of non-uranium overburden growing daily to create mountains where mountains never were before. From early strip mining requiring no backfill we are now finding how easily the very terrain is destroyed. The natural beauty of our area is not immune to affects that uncaring outsiders have; land conservation is in our custody, and we can have uranium mines, oil well pads and coal mines without eyesores. It is our responsibility as residents to maintain the beauty of our area as well as its history, if not for ourselves, then for our children. We can best do that by knowing it as well as possible.

The cultural trend mentioned earlier, that of knowledge being transferred from one generation to the next, does not necessarily have to be in one direction. WE determine whether or not it is a one or two way street, and if we develop our personal knowledge through sources unavailable to those wonderful oldsters whose experience has taught them so much, we may through contact and discussion with them teach them some of the new ideas resulting from "progress". We can make any street two way; we can not only learn, but we can teach,

but prior to being able to teach we must learn. We can educate ourselves through research done by scientists on the kind of habitat found in Live Oak County and in the rest of the Gulf Coastal Plain. It is to this end that I have prepared this list of scientific sources of data, and I hope that some of the sources can be studied by our youngsters and elders alike. No one can anticipate the fervor nor the directions of study each person may choose; I can only start him or her with what small insignificant gatherings that I have been able to randomly collect while engaged in other studies. This bibliography will never be complete but will require constant revision; hopefully someone will pick up the banner after I relinquish it.

Acknowledgments

I must give credit to those who have inspired this publication, for no one generates an idea alone. I was one of those youngsters who was purposely exposed and infected by my parents and grand-parents with the desire to know more about our area. A perhaps terminal infection of natural history gained control of me at an early age. One of my first lessons in natural history is worth recounting: it was gained from my grandfather H. D. House who knew medicinal uses for many plants in southern Texas. Pestered by the incessant question typical of small boys, about "What is this?" and "What good is that?", he introduced my cousins and me to the wonders of sage tea. He did so easily, because we were eager. Now some readers may know their natural history well enough to predict the end of this story, but when my grandfather told us how good the tea was made from the leaves of this plant, we couldn't wait to get a pickup-full of it home. Once there, he insisted that we must dry it in the smokehouse for a week. Every day we checked it feverishly and questioned him on its readiness. "No", he would say, "...a few days more...". He doubtlessly enjoyed our mounting desires. Finally the day came that we thought was years away, and he admitted that it was ready. He helped us crumple the leaves and we could hardly get to grandmother's stove quickly enough to use the old blue teapot and water that he had prepared. If you have ever tasted sage tea, then you know what faces we made on the first big gulp (Ugh!) and how disappointed we were, but if you have never made Live Oak County sage tea, then you don't know how terrible it is, nor that it was formerly used as a folk medicine. Awful faces and painful howls greeted grandmother as she caught him in his prank, but he was laughing too hard to notice. We DID, after all, learn what sage tea was all about. The lesson here is that we learned about sage tea from someone who remembered his oral history and in turn, imparted it to us, and inspired us. If I ever need a natural cathartic, I will know where to find it in the soils of southern Texas.

From this beginning I found that no single volume existed where I could learn about grasses at Nell, the rocks and soils around George West, the deer around Three Rivers, the history at Simmons, and the Indians that had lived around Oakville. Since our definition of natural history is "...the study of nature from a popular point of view...", then as a necessity natural history must be interesting. It has to appeal at least to those who are remotely inclined, and it must offer something to its readers. Put another way, one might question, "Who cares about old

deeds, beads or weeds?" Knowing that Pseudo abutilon weeds were slowly extending from the George West area northward into the Simmons area enabled my father to predict soil changes that gave him the choice of doing something about it which could be economically advantageous, as an illustration of the value of knowledge of our area.

Although not in every case, it seems that many issues must be justified by economics to get some folks interested. If that is what it takes for those types, then perhaps this reading guide will help. Education, most of us realize, is money. The post-World War II surge of interest in education showed that most Americans believed that to be true. "...Get a college education to be successful..." was the assumption, and while the lack of other qualities can prevent this from being true in every case, it does seem basically to hold. Now the energy shortage, pollution, inflation and other worldwide problems have whispered into the ears of those who care to listen to another voice; know the land. There are other commonly understood reasons for knowing natural history too, and I hope that the combination of these and the ones I have mentioned will kindle the mental flame in at least a few individuals. If this reading guide makes it easier for just one young mind, then I will get my reward.

Lastly, I am compelled to admit that this guide reveals my particular bias from my background of anthropology and history, and within this last realm, especially that of western history. Understandably also this list is heavily weighted with the writings of Love Oak County's most famous son, J. Frank Dobie. To that end, the reader is directed to the exhaustive bibliography by McVicker. Neither is the list exhaustive, obviously, and it will constantly require updating. However, for the beginner who wants to become familiar with the most important literature about Texas, John Jenkins tome *Basic Texas Books (1983)* and later reprinted by the Texas State Historical Association is the best place to start.

Finally, I feel that I must single out some individuals without whom this booklet would have been much more difficult to produce, among them Dauris Mahony, Thelma Lindholm, H. D. House, Harold D. House, Elmer House, Taze House, Bobby House, L. F. Clayton, Jimmy Carroll, Earl Dillon, Thomas Morgan, J. B. Kolb, Charley, Ernest and Barney Valentine, Leroy and Addie Secrest, Adolf and Grace Houseton, J. T. Bomar, Homan Bluhmn, Madison Bedell, Dr. Jack Walper and many others. For those I have failed to mention, please forgive me.

November 1977; revised 1980, 2018.
The time of pecans on the Nueces

Kurt House

List of Organizations and Periodicals Pertaining to This Area

American Midland Naturalist
Corpus Christi Caller newspaper
Live Oak County Historical Commission
Live Oak County Progress newspaper
McMullen County Historical Commission, Mrs. Harry Zavisch, chairman, 1980
San Antonio Express newspaper
Southern Texas Archeological Association (Publishes newsletter, *La Tierra*)
South Texas Historical Association
Southwestern Historical Quarterly
Southwestern Journal of Anthropology
Texas A & M University at Kingsville, the Dr. George O. Coalson Annotated Bibliography of
South Texas Resources
Texas Archeological Society (statewide, publishes the annual *Bulletin of Texas Archeology*)
Texas Academy of Science (statewide, publishes *Texas Journal of Science*)
Texas Folklore Society (statewide, publishes *Texas Folklorist*)
Texas Historical Association
Texas Highways
Texas Parks and Wildlife
Wild West History Association (WWHA, nationwide, articles on southwestern Texas history)

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