

# Texas:

## Eternal Triangle of the Southwest

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TO say that Texas is the eternal triangle of the Southwest demands an explanation not to be found in geometric forms. The three definite sides of this state must be developed in the human mind, and in the third dimension of history. It is from the stuff of history, and not from the form of the map, that the figure is constructed. The map itself, by which I mean the outlines of the boundaries of the state, long defied the skill of the image maker. The five-pointed star finally became the symbol of the state, not because Texas resembles a five-pointed star, but because it has five corners instead of the conventional four like several of the box-like commonwealths. It took a poet, however, to find the symbol of Texas, and a recent poet, a tenderfoot, at that. The fact that he is not a native Texan enabled him to see with the fresh eyes of a stranger, and a poet, that Texas resembles the open right hand. Townsend Miller's "A Letter from Texas" has compressed into eighteen lines the form, the magnitude and something of the spirit of Texas.\*

John it is a strange land. John it is hard to describe.

But perhaps like this: hold up your right hand, palm outward

And break the last three fingers down from the joint

And there I think you have it. The westering thumb

The beautiful bleak land, the silent mesas

Big Bend and the great canyons and at its end

El Paso, the Northern Pass . . .

Southward and east the slow hot river moving

River of Palms, Grande del Norte, and over the wrist

To Brownsville . . .

Upward the long coast curving and far above it

Over the bent joints the red bordering river

Red River . . .

And last the index, Panhandle, the high plains

The bleached bone laid on the huge heart of the continent.

This is the empire; this is the hand flung out

The large western dream and the tongue staggers

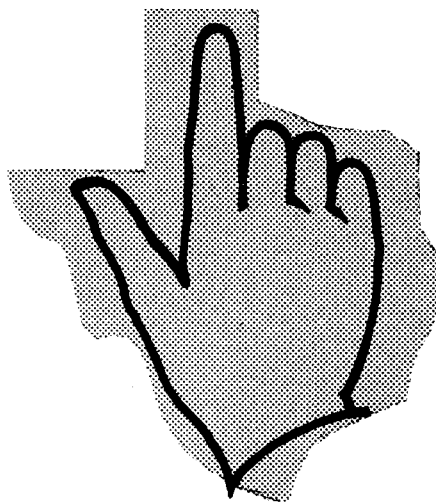
To speak it . . .

Strange land . . . hard to describe . . . the hand flung out . . . the large western dream . . . the tongue staggers to speak it! Texas. It would be

\*The poem and drawings are reproduced by permission of Townsend Miller, the author, and Stanley Marcus, the publisher.

easy here, for one who has a high regard for his own land, to break down into cheap panegyric about size, distance, and elevation. But the eternal triangle is the subject, and it is my task to make the triangle emerge as an historical image as clearly as the poet made the hand emerge as the visual image.

The triangle of Texas may not be eternal, but it is of long duration, extends far back into the past, exists in the present, and will not be obliterated



in the near future. It has the antiquity of geology, the stability of climate, and the persistence of a culture complex. The triangle grows out of the fact that in Texas three environments meet. The three great natural environments may be listed as follows:

1. *The Great Eastern Woodland.* This wooded and well-watered region comprises the original thirteen states and extends to the west bank of the Mississippi. It was the original home of the Anglo-American people in the United States. The eastern portion of Texas is the southwestern fragment of the woodland environment.

2. *The Great Western Plains, or the Great Plains.* This is the rolling or level country that begins where the Eastern Woodland stops, west of the Mississippi. It is the land where, in the words of Herbert Quick, "God has cleared the fields." The northern and western portion of Texas is a fragment of the Great Plains. The Panhandle of Texas—"The bleached bone laid on the huge heart of the continent"—is the finest example of a plains environment in America and there is nothing to surpass its

degree of "plainness" anywhere in the world.

3. *The Great American Desert.* The whole southwestern portion of Texas, from Brownsville to El Paso, is an extension, a north-eastern fringe of the deserts of northern Mexico and the most arid portions of the western United States. There are only spots in all this region that can be cultivated successfully without irrigation. From the Big Bend to El Paso true desert conditions exist, save in the high mountains. The low rainfall and the high rate of evaporation combine to place the entire area in the semi-arid or arid class.

Here are the three segments of Texas, the three faces of the eternal triangle. Though I would avoid speaking of the size of the state, or of its parts, I can not do so here because of the significance of area. It is probable that the plains segment is the largest, the woodland area second, and the semi-desert region third in rank. The important point is that each is enormous in size, each large enough to impress its character on its own inhabitants, and upon the state as a whole. None is so small as to be lost or overwhelmed by the other two.

We come now to consider the implications of the existence of these three contrasting environments in *one* commonwealth. The term that best describes the situation is turbulence, not turbulence among human beings but turbulence in nature, among environments. The desert is constantly striving to encroach on the plain, and in drought it does; the forest is likewise attempting to push trees onto the plain, and in wet years it has a measure of success. Drought and rain drive each other to and fro, parching and flooding the land in turn in a way that makes the weather man despair of his prophecy. The eastern clouds thunder and growl fierce intentions in summer, but the thirsty western breezes come racing in like Indian ponies and suck them up without a trace. In winter the blue northers come whooping south like banshees, roaring at Amarillo and perishing in the chaparral this side of Brownsville. The weather comes in from the forests or from the sea, from the desert or from the plain. But wherever it comes from, it is likely to meet a conflicting environment and peter out in shame. Where, no man can predict.

Each of the three regions is a fairly distinct zone of flora and fauna. Pine, hickory, walnut for East Texas; buffalo, mesquite, and gramma for the plains, desert shrub—greasewood, ocotillo, lechuguilla, maguey for the desert. For the forests gray squirrels, fox squirrels, deer—all the forest-loving animals found in the East; for the plains jack rabbits, prairie dogs, antelope; for the desert ground squirrels,

Gila monsters, and horned "frogs."

We now come to the threshold of history to view man's residence within the eternal environmental triangle which is Texas, and to observe not primarily what he did to the land, but what the experiences he met have done, and are still doing, to him and to his culture. Clark Wissler, the cultural anthropologist, has said that "culture mocks at the boundaries set up by politics" but that "it approaches geographical boundaries with its hat in its hand." Wissler means, I am sure, that men bend politics, but that they bend to environment. Each of the three Texas environments has molded and fashioned its own men, modified their culture, dictated to them whether they should plow or ride or row. The woodland made lumbermen, cotton planters, and small farmers, the plains made cowpunchers, wheat growers, and dry farmers; the desert made shearherders, cowboys, and irrigation farmers.

Not only are all these men in Texas, but they represent all men in the United States. There is not a way of life, dependent upon nature, in the United States that is not represented in this one state. This means that one can experience in a single state all the experiences that can be found in a great nation, simply because Texas contains a sizeable chunk of each of the three great natural environments of the nation. For good measure it has an outlet to the sea, really a fourth determining factor. It must be said, however, that up to this time Texas has not been salt water conscious. Texans have neglected the sea more than they have any other resource and are almost as insular in psychology as a land-locked middlewestern state.

What I have said means that a Texan can have a national experience without leaving the borders of his own state. He can meet western cattlemen and miners, southern planters, small farmers, and lumbermen in any city; he can observe irrigation farming, dry farming, ordinary farming, at will; he can drive through citrus orchards, cattle and sheep ranches, pine forests, plains and deserts in a few hours and without crossing a state boundary. He can do deep sea fishing in the gulf, shoot alligators in the Sabine or Neches, ride a horse, rope a cow, hunt antelope, or put out to sea, without setting his foot on "foreign" soil. He dwells next door to a neighbor who speaks a foreign tongue. He can become a cosmopolitan by staying at home. It is not strange that he carries himself a little proudly, that he is filled with nostalgia when out of the state, that he has the gracious gift of meeting all men on a basis of equality. He has seen them all in Texas.

The linear history of the state has

reinforced the character of the Texan. That history has been noted for turbulence, and that turbulence resulted from a conflict which ensued when in the early days the chosen warriors of the three environments in Texas met in a mad three cornered battle for possession of the state.

The American warrior came from the old states into Texas, warriors from Tennessee, Georgia, Louisiana, and from all the other "old" states. The Plains Indian warrior stood on the edge of the prairie and watched them come with misgivings. Through the deserts of northern Mexico came the warrior of that land, the Mexican. The conflict with the Plains Indians began first and continued longest, until about 1882 when the Texas Rangers had their last skirmish with the Apache Indians in the Diabolo Mountains near El Paso. The fight with the Mexicans broke into open war in 1836. The Anglo-Americans won, set up a republic with a seal, a flag, a land office, navy, army, and a national debt. There were ten years of intermittent conflict with Mexico with a real war at each end of the decade. Then Texas joined the Union, but Texans have never got over the memory of the Republic.

The early disasters of the Texas revolution which culminated at the Alamo and were avenged at San Jacinto have left a lasting mark on Texas psychology. Fighting has never been since the Alamo something to which Texans are averse. Defeat does not appall the Texas spirit. In the siege of Corregidor Texans remembered the Alamo where a few men achieved by their stubbornness glory for a whole people. The supreme sacrifice at the Alamo has done much for the spirit of Texas, of the Southwest and all America. Forty-six days later—April 21, 1836—the Alamo was avenged at San Jacinto. The two events coming so close together emphasize strongly the extremes often noted in the state.

If I have made clear the three-sided nature of Texas, then perhaps I have shed some light on the whole Southwest of which Texas is so large a part. If Texas may be thought of as the place where three great environments and three great culture complexes—the forest, plain, and desert—meet, then the larger Southwest may be thought of as an extension of these three environments and cultures. Therefore a strange land . . . hard to describe . . . this empire . . . this hand flung out.

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## Man to Man

By Witter Bynner

### I

#### Indian Youth:

O H, there are things I surely understand  
Better than any white man in the land!  
I know the weathering sky, the weaning heart . . .  
Why should I live distinct from you, apart  
From the white magic which has made your cities?  
Why should I be a waif your custom pities?  
I am as wise as you: an Indian, yes,  
But I have known the same desiring stress,  
The same attachment, wonder, worship, doubt,  
Which none of you, though white, can live without.  
Freed now from medicine-men, who held my mind  
To many superstitions of my kind,  
I would know white kind, live as well as you,  
I would do all the things that white men do.

### II

#### White Elder:

Come then and learn of us: though first I say  
Few white men can receive and use the day  
And night as simply, wisely and as well  
As your folk can. But which of us shall tell  
Whose way is better:—to reveal the gods  
In pine-clad bodies and by feathered rods,  
To test man's temples with a buffalo-horn;  
Or, louder than a thunder-bird is borne,  
To match machinery against the sky  
For proof that humankind was made to die,  
To send man up with steel and wheel and fire,  
His wisdom lower but his knowledge higher  
In ways of ritual and sacrifice? . . .  
Oh, let us face each other and think twice!