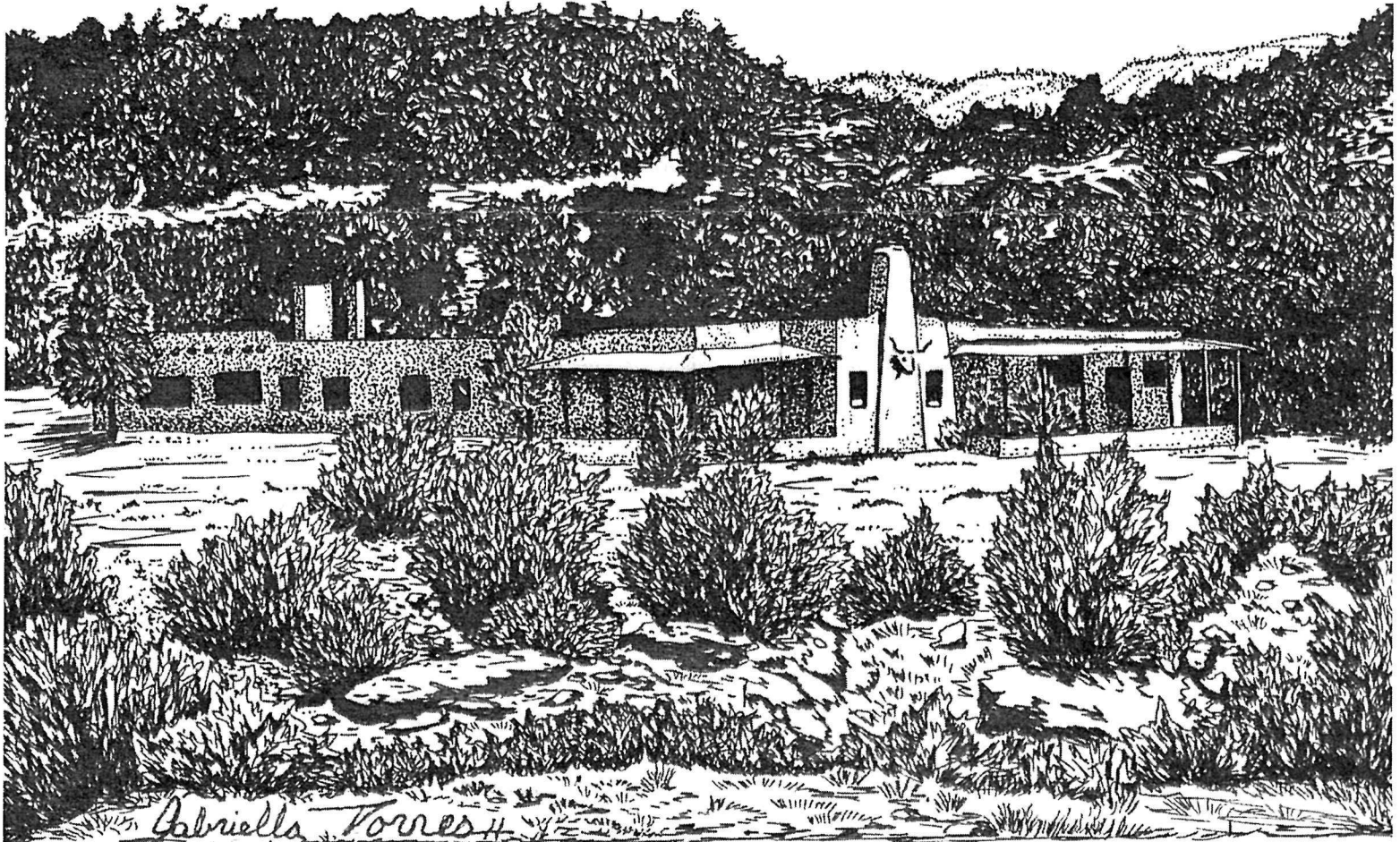




The Forked Lightning Ranch

Tex's "Dudes" to Texas Cattle



When 20-year-old Clarence Van Nostrand left home in 1908, he reinvented himself for a life of adventure. He changed his name to John Van Austin but everyone knew him as “Tex” Austin. Although born into a strict St. Louis household, he claimed to have been born and raised on a cattle ranch in Victoria, Texas. After working on New Mexico and Texas ranches and he briefly joined the Mexican Revolution.

Rodeo Firsts

Tex started producing rodeos. From his first rodeo in El Paso in 1917 to his last in London, England, in 1934, Tex was known for his generosity and showmanship. When he produced the first Madison Square Garden Rodeo in 1922, the prize money was a record \$25,000. Tex had other “firsts”—

First recorded indoor rodeo in Wichita, Kansas (1918); first rodeo ever held in Chicago Stadium (1926); and the first contest rodeo to go overseas.

Some 114,000 people attended his 1924 rodeo in London’s Wembley Stadium.

Everyone agreed that Tex was “possessed of tremendous charm and bluff” and “spent his last dollar like it was a leaf and he owned the forest.” Tall and lanky, Tex was not considered a decent working cowhand by his cowboys, but “he did learn to wear a big hat and to sit his saddle as if born to the leather.”

“Way Out West an’ a Little Bit South”

In 1925, Tex bought up parcels of land on the old Pecos Pueblo Grant and called his 5,500 acre holdings The Forked Lightning Ranch. The remains of Kozlowski’s Stage Stop and Tavern on the Santa Fe Trail (1858–1880) became part of his new holdings, which Tex converted into ranch headquarters and a trading post. He hired architect John Gaw Meem to design and build the main ranch house on a bluff above the Pecos River. (The assignment was one of Meem’s first. He later became famous throughout the Southwest for his “Pueblo Revival” buildings.) All

rooms in the rectangular house faced a grassy patio. Its defining touch was a huge, specially sculpted steer head mounted outside on the chimney. Tex’s advertising touted it as “the most complete, modern and comfortable ranch house in the West. The life of the romantic West is at its doors.”

Tex hoped for a share of the growing East Coast tourist market to New Mexico. The ranch, after all, was less than two days by train from Chicago: “Thirty-four hours, and you’re out where the West

is—and will be for some time.” Train travelers got off at Rowe just a few miles down the road.

For \$125 a week, 18 guests sharing nine bedrooms received “all proper service . . . to insure the comfort and friendly atmosphere of a country home. . . . Feed—and how! . . . served ranch style . . . in big heaping dishes. Pitch till you win and no one keeps track of the helpings!” “Pack and chuck wagon trips to the high peaks” were a highlight of many available amusements.

The Forked Lightning was a working cattle ranch too, reputed to run several thousand head of cattle on 100,000 acres of leased grazing land in the valley. One story had Tex taking the train to Chicago, finding a bar, and then complaining to patrons that he had all this cattle to go to Las Vegas, New Mexico, for loading on the train and no one to do the work. He found “dudes” who volunteered to take the trip to the Forked Lightning at their own expense just for

the chance to be on a cattle drive. So he found paying customers for the ranch and got his cattle moved, too!

The ranch only operated for seven years; the last guests left in May 1933. Tex had heavily mortgaged the ranch and couldn’t pay the debt. A year later, his attempt to produce another London rodeo fell on hard times. British animal rights groups tried to stop the show on the grounds that steer-wrestling was cruel. Though they failed, Tex lost over \$20,000. After losing the ranch, Tex moved to Santa Fe and opened the Los Rancheros Restaurant near the Plaza. In October 1938 Tex committed suicide. Rumor at the time was he had been told he was going blind. Tex Austin, the “Daddy of Rodeo,” was named to the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in 1976.

A New Breed

In 1936, W. C. Currier bought the Forked Lightning Ranch, and five years later sold it to E. E. “Buddy” Fogelson, a Dallas oil man and rancher. Over the next 25 years, Mr. Fogelson purchased land to the south, expanding the ranch to 13,000 acres. The Forked Lightning became a small cattle ranch and Tex’s ranch house the Fogelson summer home. After Mr. Fogelson married the actress Greer Garson in 1949, the ranch house became a center for gracious entertaining. Active in ranch life, Mrs. Fogelson unsuccessfully tried to raise white Shorthorns imported from her native Scotland. While attending a cattle auction in 1958, Mr. Fogelson spontaneously purchased a purebred Santa Gertrudis bull named “Gee Gee” which, with three heifers purchased at

the same auction, became the foundation for the Forked Lightning Santa Gertrudis herd.

Santa Gertrudis, the first officially recognized American breed of cattle, was developed on the famous King Ranch in Texas. A cross between a Brahma and Shorthorn, the breed resulted from an effort to produce good beef animals better suited to the heat, humidity, and range conditions of South Texas. When Mr. Fogelson brought Santa Gertrudis to the Forked Lightning it was the first time the breed was wintered at high altitude. A tireless promoter of the breed, Mr. Fogelson was the first to exhibit Santa Gertrudis at the New Mexico State Fair in 1961.

When Mr. Fogelson died in 1987, the Forked Lightning was divided along the old southern boundary line of Tex’s original Forked Lightning. Greer Garson Fogelson received the “old” Forked Lightning Ranch and Mr. Fogelson’s son inherited the southern portion. In January 1991, Mrs. Fogelson sold the Forked Lightning to The Conservation Fund, which donated it to the National Park Service to become part of Pecos National Historical Park.


The ranch house has remained relatively unchanged. Tex’s Forked Lightning brand still marks the original fixtures in the living and dining rooms and the steer head still stares down the Pecos. It is not difficult to imagine the famous and not so famous gathered around the huge fireplace, sipping drinks on the wide front porch, or enjoying the sun on the patio—all basking in the warm atmosphere that welcomed many guests for more than 60 years.

TO VISIT THE RANCH HOUSE: The areas around the Ranch House are currently closed to public use. Information on guided tours is available from Pecos NHP, PO Box 418, Pecos NM 87552, 505-757-6414 ext 1.

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AUSTIN'S
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LIGHTNING
RANCH

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