CHAPTER I

Discovering My Texas Identity

I was a young girl when Edna Ferber came to Texas to do research for her book on Texas, which was later made into the movie *Giant*.[1] In Texas it was a big event, at least for those of us who were preteens, when *Giant* hit the silver screen.

Ferber was eager to describe the relations between the Mexican Texans and the Anglo Texans. To help her examine the issue of prejudice against Mexican Texans, she was introduced to my father, who, at the time, was executive secretary of the Good Neighbor Commission. This was a committee that President Roosevelt created to improve interactions between the United States and Mexico. One of its major goals was to end the segregation of Mexican Americans in Texas schools and to convince the University of Texas to allow Mexican Americans access to a university education. My father was introduced to Ferber as a man with deep Texas roots who closely identified with Mexico and Mexican Texans. Enthusiastic about showing Ferber the progress that was being made on civil rights in Texas, he drove her around the state and introduced her to his friends, both Mexican and Anglo. He took her to restaurants and bars where she met Texans who were rich and Texans who were poor, both Mexican and Anglo. They spent hours talking about Texas history and Texas identity, the points of pride as well as the imperfections.

Driving Ferber across the desolate South Texas brush country, my father told her about the dismal conditions for Mexicans there. In particular he described a cause that he had personally been involved in, the Felix Longoria affair. Felix Longoria was a young Tejano patriot who went to war for his country during the dark days of World War II. Exceptionally brave, he won medals and commendations and died a hero in battle. When his body was brought home to the little town of Three Rivers, deep in the heart of South Texas, the one and only local funeral business refused to hold a wake for him, informing the Longoria family that only Anglos could hold wakes in their facilities. My father and Hector Garcia, who was president of the G. I. Forum, fought to correct this injustice. Their aim was modest: Felix Longoria had died for his country; therefore, he should be allowed a burial just like any other American. As Longoria's nonburial turned into national news, the Mexican population

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in South Texas became galvanized, creating a diplomatic crisis with the Mexican government. Interestingly, the local Anglos still did not budge, so the young idealistic senator Lyndon Johnson arranged for Longoria to be buried in a hero's ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery.[2]

Edna Ferber relished this story, making it into a cornerstone of her book. However, after reading the work, my father was very disappointed. In his opinion, Ferber, like so many writers before her, had ended up creating yet another caricature of Texas. She had simplified and stereotyped the Texas bluster, the cattle and oil cultures, the subtlety of relations between Texas Mexicans and Anglos, the complex tensions between rich and poor, male and female, and the deeply rewarding family ties.

When the movie came out, everyone in my family piled into our DeSoto Suburban and went to watch it. Given what my father had said about Ferber's rendition of Texas, I was taken aback that I liked the film. It was true that the movie was full of clichés and ridiculous exaggerations, but for me, at twelve years of age, it captured something I recognized in my life—the simultaneous pride and embarrassment at being Texan: embarrassment at the prejudice, the crassness of the oil rich, the way women are treated as if they do not matter, yet pride in the way that Texans can overcome prejudice, the beauty of family loyalty, and the way women are strong and capable. Watching *Giant* was a turning point for me, poised as I was on the cusp of adulthood. The movie spurred me to think about what Texas meant to me, why it is so full of contradictions, why is it so hard to understand, and why it is so maddeningly difficult to explain to others.

MY LIBERAL EDUCATION

I grew up in a family that was an integral part of the liberal political community of Austin, Texas. During the 1950s and early 1960s, I spent my childhood steeped in that liberal culture. The *Texas Observer* was our newspaper, and its editors at the time, Ronnie Dugger and then Willie Morris, were regulars at our house. Writers ate at our table and engaged my father in what seemed to me to be one continuous conversation about life, liberty, and Texas. State senator Maury Maverick Jr., writer J. Frank Dobie, Mexican American activists Hector Garcia and Ramón Guerra, historian Frank Goodwyn, television personality John Henry Faulk, U.S. representative Bob Eckhardt, economist Eastin Nelson, and writer Bill Brammer were all friends of my family and regular characters in my childhood. With few exceptions, it was an exclusively male club. Fortunately for me, one exception was my aunt Liz Carpenter, who kept in touch from her Washington bureau and later the White

House during the administration of Lyndon Baines Johnson. She gave politics a live urgency at the dinner table and showed me what a strong Texas woman can do.

Conversation at our dinner table centered on how mad the Texas liberals were at Texas Democrats for not being liberal enough. In places such as Scholz Garden, while the men talked politics at the outdoor tables and drank beer, I ran around with the other children and listened to their plotting. They planned to save the Democratic Party by expunging it of conservative members. By voting Republican, they hoped to give the poor fellows a boost in the then solidly Democratic Texas. The reasoning went that, if the Republicans had a ghost of a chance at winning anything (a laughable thought at the time), the conservative Democrats would defect to the Republican Party and leave the Democratic Party machinery to the liberals. I eavesdropped on this convoluted stratagem with its strange logic. As we now know, only part of this scheme worked out the way the liberals had hoped. Texas did eventually become a two-party state; however, it ended up more Republican than Democrat.

My upbringing on a steady dose of the purest liberalism was tempered by my parents. With deep roots in a Texas family whose traditional values he espoused, my father passed these traditions on to his children through stories about his ancestors. These tales emphasized their integrity and fierce loyalty to family and Texas, as well as their propensity for violence and excessive pride. From my father I acquired a sense of belonging to a part of Texas history, but the oblique references to murder and mayhem were disturbing.

Because of this, I would go to my mother, a blueblood from Charleston, for an outsider's eye. After graduating from the College of Charleston in mathematics and Latin, she had come to Texas to get away from Charleston and take graduate courses at the University of Texas. She arrived in Austin in 1932 and stayed in Mrs. Kirk's boardinghouse for ladies at 2100 San Antonio Street, where room and board cost her thirty dollars per month. She regaled me with stories of her first view of Texas as a "wild and woolly" place. Enjoying her newfound freedom from rule-bound Charleston society, she immediately painted her toenails cherry red, smoked a "flat fifty" tin of cigarettes a day, and threw a spitball at a gawky young man in her first class. He instantly fell in love with her. That spitball was the thunderbolt that drove him to write poems to her, follow her back to Charleston, and carry her off to Texas, much against her parents' wishes. Reared in a suffocating "proper" society, she would advise me, "Remember, Anne, rules are made to be broken. Someone made those rules. You can remake them."

At the end of the 1950s, Willie Morris and other restless liberal spirits left Texas. When I graduated from the University of Texas in 1964, I followed in their footsteps, seeking adventure in Brazil and studying in England. Buried

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in my anthropology books at Oxford University, mercifully I missed the home front of the Vietnam War and instead picked up some anthropology lessons. I learned what the English mean by "civilized" and how they construct the world into classes of people. In the English world of class, every object in the home, every piece of clothing on the body, every spoken word, every morsel of food, and every flower and bird in the garden has a "proper" place. English robins are middle-class birds, whereas sparrows are working-class birds. The word "bird" is middle class when referring to our feathered friends and working class when it means "woman." Catsup on the table is working class. Tea and scones are middle class, but high tea is working class. Americans, of course, live ignorantly outside this class structure, but in Oxford I was known as "the Texan," a specimen of the utmost curiosity. My best friend at Oxford was a daring English girl named Anna. I was dubbed "Texana."

Then off I went to California to do my fieldwork on the Roma Gypsies. The Roma were an important part of my early education in cultural differences and the subjects of my first ethnography. Magnificent talkers with a gusto for telling tales of life's agonies and absurdities, they taught me to grapple with everyday cultural practices and the ways in which people use their imaginations to transform the world into one they recognize as real. The lives of the Roma are a constant reminder of situated difference, the difference between their worldview and that of non-Roma, with whom they are in daily contact. One of their major goals is to mobilize group identity, to create a sense of self, to understand their experiences, and to understand who they are in relation to the outside world. Their culture is an imagined community that is constantly tested by their interactions with others; they taught me to view my own as such.

Immersed in other cultures, I returned to my native country, wiser and more patriotic, and was hit by the reality shock. I went to live in Minnesota, a state noted for an excess of niceness, sincerity, and horrendously cold winters. It is also characterized by an ironic touch of wackiness, evidenced by a Reform Party wrestler governor, Jesse "the Body" Ventura, and the oppressively serious, politically correct liberal arts college where I taught. There in the tundra I was introduced to good, earnest people, but I ended up longing for the lighter skies and livelier humor of Texas.

STORYTELLING AS A TRADITION

My parents introduced me early in life to the rare art of storytelling. Every night at dinner my large family and the many political and personal friends

who dropped by to eat with us were urged to tell a good story about their lives. The next time they ate with us, they would be expected to improve on the first version, making the story even better.

Storytelling was not something I was expected to know from birth, but it was just assumed that my six sisters and I would become adept at it. We began by listening to everyone's tales, and as soon as we could speak, we were encouraged to tell our own. At night when we all piled into bed on the sleeping porch, we regaled each other with anecdotes until we fell asleep. We edited and repeated the stories so often that they changed somewhat, but we followed the dictum that any story worth telling is worth improving, so by the time these tales were handed down to me, they had gone through generations of improvement.

From my father I heard stories about Cabeza de Vaca and his experiences with the Indians, about George Sutherland bringing hundreds of his kin to Texas, about the terrible hardship of the Runaway Scrape, when my family had nothing to eat, and the fall of the Alamo, where my great-great-great-uncle Willie died when he was only seventeen. We learned about the empresario Robertson, who locked horns with Stephen F. Austin, won his battle for land, fought Indians, and had a terrible temper. And we found out that his son built a plantation house and a town and a college so his twelve children could get an education. We listened to the saga of another great-great-great-grandfather, Sam Rogers, who fought in the Texas army under George Sutherland, survived the Battle of Plum Creek against the Comanches, and outlived just about everyone he knew.

STORYTELLING AT FAMILY REUNIONS

Storytelling became an elevated art form with the Sutherland-Rogers side of my family, my father's father's relatives, who got together every year at Uvalde State Park for a family reunion. Between two and three hundred of us filled the park and spilled over into nearby motels. Most of these family members lived in the Texas Hill Country around Uvalde. This was a loyal group, but what we had most in common was a love of stories about family and Texas. The weekend of the Sutherland-Rogers reunion was the champion storytelling rodeo of my life. These kinspeople were just naturally good storytellers during the rest of the year, but when they got together, they tried to "out-storytell" each other well into the night. My great-uncle Wells Sutherland liked to tell the reunion children, in his slow-moving, understated way, the story of being treed by a cougar one day when he was riding a fence. When

the "Texas lion" spooked his horse, Wells agilely jumped into the nearest tree rather than be thrown on the ground. The horse bolted, but, in a stroke of bad luck for Wells, the lion decided to take a catnap under the tree. Wells was stuck there for the night. As he told it, that night the mosquitoes were so happy they just "sang and sang," but he thought too much slapping and twitching might arouse the cat, so he sat there and got bitten. This was the all-time worst night of his life.

Then my Aunt Alice recited an anecdote I had heard many times. Just seventeen and about to go on her first date, she was showering in preparation for this historic event. Suddenly her older brother Tommy (my father) burst into the bathroom, grabbed the "go-devil" (toilet plunger), and stuck it on her wet rump so hard no one could remove it. She screamed and cried, but to no avail. They could not pry the plunger off her wet bottom, and her date had to be turned away. We children could tell she was still indignant forty years later. When she finished describing her humiliation and ire, she looked at me and said, "Your daddy is meaner than a rattlesnake. Did you know that?" I howled with pleasure at her characterization of my father and cut my eyes to him. He had sat through the whole story as he did every year, pursing his lips in mock shame, but this time he gave her a triumphant look: He was going to outdo her. He held up a poem about George Sutherland he was planning to read at the reunion's Sunday service. We quieted down while he read it:

Our forebear was George Sutherland,
Born seventeen eighty-eight in Old Virginny.
At sixteen crossed the Gap at Cumberland.
Married in Tennessee, grew strong as any,
Led folk to Alabama, made a town,
Was a Banker, and their leader in the House.
He helped Old Hickory beat the British crown.
Then Spain fell. With kith and kin and spouse
George headed west to Texas—promised land.
His tent was the first church of settlers here.
The promise was denied. War was at hand,
Our People fought and won and George was there.
George traveled far to rich and bloody ground.
We stand in memory of all he found.[3]

My great-aunts Mabel, Jean, and Ara wept quietly. We children did not pay much attention to them because they were always weeping. Then, from the spread of dishes everyone had brought to the table, we all ate until we

were stuffed. When I flopped into bed that night, exhausted from running around all day with a bevy of cousins, I remembered my father's poem and wondered how George Sutherland had come to Texas in the first place. Before I fell asleep, I made a note to find out some day.

My sense of self as a Texan is the outcome of the hours and hours of stories told to me about the state by my numerous Texas relatives. Even at the time, I suspected that the tales I was raised on might not always be strictly accurate, but they were vivid, gripping, and full of the Texas mystique. In my mind, those anecdotes created in both the heroes and the rascals a Texas persona imbued with strength and love. They gave me a Texas identity embedded in historical memory. However, my family's storytelling tradition also got me into trouble with the literal-minded, who would mistakenly conclude that Texans are liars instead of entertainers. These same people would then be caught off guard by my frankness, even bluntness, on issues such as politics, religion, and sex, topics they considered of such great importance that it is best to lie about them. Nonetheless, I did not really pause to think about what all these personal accounts added up to until I left Texas at eighteen to see the world. My first stop was Brazil.

"Where are you from?" someone inquired.

"I'm a Texan," I replied without hesitation.

"Aren't you an American?"

"Well, yeah . . ." I stuttered reluctantly. At that moment I discovered that, although I was completely sure of my Texas identity, I had not quite acquired a strong American identity. Another important piece of information came to light while I was living in Brazil. To my surprise, I realized that Texas is famous. Amazingly, Brazilians had not only heard of Texas but also harbored all kinds of preconceptions about it and even identified with Texas in some strange way. The idea of Texas was fun. "Bang, bang!" their fingers fired at me. What a riot.

At that time, although I had found out that Texas was well known in the world and I knew I had a strong sense of self as a Texan, I still did not know what Texas was famous for or what this identity I professed to have really was. Over a lifetime of living in other places—São Paulo, Brazil; Oxford, England; Palo Alto, California; Farmington, Connecticut; St. Paul, Minnesota; Atlanta, Georgia—I grappled with the strange power the image of Texas has on others and the enigma of my own Texas identity. Out there in the rest of the world is a dizzying array of ideas about Texas, some of them romantic, many of them unflattering. It has taken me years to come to terms with them.

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