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## *Marvelous, Maligned, and Misunderstood: The Strange History of the Mesquite Tree in Texas*

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STANDING ON A HILL IN THE DRIER PARTS OF TEXAS, ONE INVARIABLY looks over a vast yellow-green swath composed almost entirely of the Southwest's toughest tree: honey mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*). This native, spine-covered, deciduous plant cannot seem to decide whether to be a tree or a shrub, appearing first as a rapidly growing bush before maturing into a tree standing thirty feet tall.<sup>1</sup>

Texans themselves have been ambivalent about this indecisive plant, changing their attitudes toward it over the century and half of Anglo American occupation. On first encountering the mesquite, Anglo Texans struggled to comprehend it, but by the late nineteenth century they saw it as a symbol of a developing and maturing state with an untapped economic potential. However, as the species continued to spread it came to be regarded as a nuisance, and efforts to control it began in the 1920s and '30s. Consuming rangeland and sucking valuable moisture from streams and aquifers, the plant came to be despised, and stories began to circulate of it being an invasive, foreign species. Ironically, the same Texans who reviled the plant inadvertently aided in the tremendous proliferation of the species across the region. After years of opprobrium, however, some Texans have risen in defense of the mesquite and its considerable virtues. The plant produces edible beans for livestock and people, potentially useful sap, desirable wood for furniture, and provides a rich flavor for the state's famous barbeque. The species also features prominently in Texans' interpretations of their state and themselves. The story of mesquite's

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<sup>1</sup> Tom D. Whitson (ed.), *Weeds of the West* (5th ed.; n.p.: Western Society of Weed Science, University of Wyoming, 1996), 342-343.

conquest of Texas illustrates how we change the environment around us, and how we, in turn, are changed by it. The mesquite, in short, is a plant Texans enthusiastically love to hate and but also hate to love.

Many people appear to believe that the mesquite made its way into the state in the bellies of early Spanish cattle brought from Mexico, or perhaps a bit later during the heyday of the great cattle drives. This belief endures, and even authoritative sources continue to claim that the mesquite was imported into the American Southwest. For example, Oklahoma State University's Oklahoma Invasive Species Web site claims, "Mesquite were brought to Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas in the 1800's (1866) on cattle trains from Mexico."<sup>2</sup> To be sure, cattle proved an excellent vehicle of transmission, carrying the mesquite beans before depositing them in a ready-made patch of fertilizer, and indeed in the years following the Civil War cattle certainly aided in the rapid advance of mesquite onto open grasslands.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps because of this diffusion, many Texans see the plant as an alien invader, but, in fact, mesquite has had a presence in the state for at least the last several thousand years, especially along the Rio Grande and along the Texas coast. One archaeological study of a cave near the confluence of the Pecos and Rio Grande rivers found evidence of human consumption of mesquite flowers between 800 B.C. and 500 A.D. The evidence, preserved in human coprolite remains, suggested that native peoples habitually consumed the flowers of mesquite trees.<sup>4</sup>

The mesquite also appeared in the accounts of early Spanish explorers. Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, the first European to visit Texas after washing ashore as a survivor of the disastrous Pánfilo de Narváez expedition of 1527-28, encountered Indians subsisting on mesquite somewhere in South Texas. Local Indians gave Cabeza de Vaca and three other survivors "much mesquite flour." They processed this flour by placing the bitter mesquite beans in a shallow pit dug in the ground. Adding water and dirt, they pounded the beans into a paste. Then, according to Cabeza de Vaca, "they sit down there, and each one puts his hand in and takes what he can . . . And those who find themselves in this banquet, which for them is very great, end up with swollen bellies from the earth and water that they have drunk."<sup>5</sup> Following this feast, the small band of Spaniards retired to a hut and slept off their unusually large meal.

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<sup>2</sup> "Mesquite," Oklahoma Invasive Species <<http://oklahomainvasivespecies.okstate.edu/mesquite.html>> [Accessed Jan. 10, 2014].

<sup>3</sup> Carl C. Wright, "The Mesquite Tree: From Nature's Boon to Aggressive Invader," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 69 (July 1965): 38-43.

<sup>4</sup> Vaughn M. Bryant Jr., "Prehistoric Diet in Southwest Texas: The Coprolite Evidence," *American Antiquity* 39 (July 1974): 407-420.

<sup>5</sup> Rolena Adorno and Patrick Charles Pautz, *Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca: His Account, His Life, and the Expedition of Pánfilo de Narváez* (3 vols.; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991) 1: 191, 193.

A century and a half later, in 1675, Fernando del Bosque led an expedition across the Rio Grande as far north as modern Edwards County. The expedition repeatedly encountered mesquite in northern Mexico and southern Texas. The land south of the Rio Grande he described as being composed of "plains with much mesquite and with fine pastures of green grass." Three days past the river, Bosque came to a place filled with bison. His expedition "arrived at a watering place in a plain without any trees except mesquite groves." Here they spent several days hunting bison and remarking on the presence of oaks and mesquite in an otherwise open grassland.<sup>6</sup> Alonso de León also found extensive thickets of mesquite on his 1689 journey across the Rio Grande and through southern Texas to Matagorda Bay. On April 4, near the Nueces River, they encountered several dense stands of the plant, including one "three leagues long." For the next several days, mesquite continued to present an obstacle for the members of the expedition, slowing their progress considerably.<sup>7</sup>

Farther west, Juan Domínguez de Mendoza led an expedition from El Paso northeast into the Concho River drainage during the winter of 1683–84. On several occasions his party encountered mesquite. After a long day's journey Domínguez de Mendoza stopped and camped to give his men time to rest in preparation for the next day's journey across a "rough land overgrown with mesquite and cat's claw."<sup>8</sup> A few weeks later in an area of mostly treeless grasslands the party discovered numerous pools of brackish water and surrounding these puddles were "great quantit[ies] of white and yellow mesquites." The explorer also saw evidence of the tool that had indelibly shaped this landscape: fire. He noted how fire shaped this vast grassland, creating an absence of mesquite and other woody plants. On one occasion a prairie fire swept toward their camp. Wisely they set a backfire around their camp to protect them from the voracious flames. Choking on smoke but otherwise unharmed, Domínguez de Mendoza (perhaps with tongue in cheek) christened the place San Lorenzo in honor of the saint who had been roasted alive. Later, his men descended into a river valley, with stands of oaks shading an open landscape devoid of thickets of cat's claw and mesquite. Approaching the village of the Jediondos Indians, Mendoza declared, "The pastures are apparently good, although we found them burned, and because of this we halted." The Jediondos, as he observed, used fire around their villages to promote the regrowth of grasses for use by game animals like deer and to keep the landscape open and free of brush. After staying at the village

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<sup>6</sup> Herbert Eugene Bolton, *Spanish Exploration in the Southwest, 1542–1706* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 296–299.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 390–391.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 322–323. The author thanks Angelo State University student Ray Theiss for telling him about the mesquite in Domínguez de Mendoza's account.

for a few days, the expedition set off into a grassland charred by a prairie fire that took more than a day to cross. Crossing this burned landscape meant entering a land with little food for their animals, but at the end of the day's journey they made camp "on a hill which was well supplied with pasturage" because it had been spared the wrath of the fire that burned around it. Domínguez de Mendoza experienced the awesome and transformative power of fire, both natural and man-made.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, Spaniards encountered the thorny plant throughout the southern and far western portions of Texas. Moving north from the Rio Grande onto the Balcones Escarpment, mesquite appears to have been fairly common, but in low densities. Mesquite existed in thickets, often with extensive grasslands between them, and along the banks of creeks and ponds. However, mesquite also coexisted in riparian zones with other trees, including pecan, ash, oaks, and hackberry trees. Perhaps these explorers mistook another plant for mesquite in their travels north, but that is unlikely. Mexico has at least nine species of *Prosopis*, including *glandulosa*, so the plant should have been quite familiar to these explorers.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, even the word "mesquite" is believed to have derived from a Nahuatl (an indigenous language most famously associated with the Aztecs) word for the plant.<sup>11</sup> Based on these early Spanish accounts, it is clear that the range of the plant, while certainly not as large as today, nevertheless extended far into Texas. As the accounts of Spanish explorers acknowledged, mesquite did not dominate the landscape as it does now, but that would soon change as Texas became home to permanent Spanish and later Anglo American occupation.<sup>12</sup>

Spanish settlers introduced ranching to Texas, bringing in horses, cattle, and sheep. This new method of land use differed greatly from Indian practices and created an opportunity for the expansion of mesquite. Keeping grazing animals close to their settlements denuded native grasses, and Spanish settlers often fenced in their pastures with wooden posts, which made burning the land, as Indians had, problematic.<sup>13</sup> Overgrazing and fire prevention created perfect conditions for woody invaders, like mesquite, to gain a foothold and overtake pasturelands. Not surprisingly, areas around Spanish settlements provide the earliest examples

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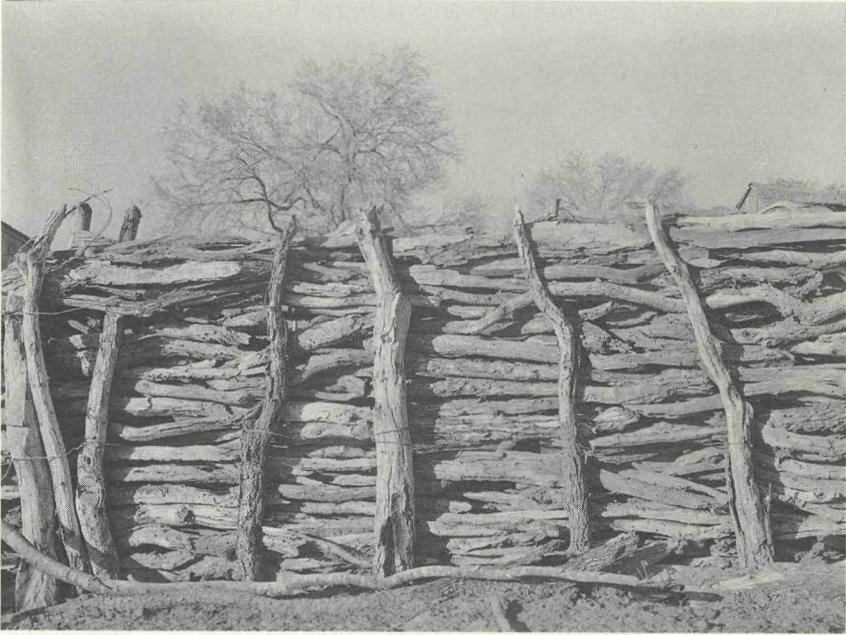
<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 327–333.

<sup>10</sup> Jerzy Rzedowski, *Vegetación de México* (1981, reprint; Mexico City: Editorial Limusa, 1978), 213–215, 220–222, 244–252.

<sup>11</sup> Mary G. Ramos, "The Ubiquitous Mesquite," *The Texas Almanac*, <<http://www.texasalmanac.com/topics/science/ubiquitous-mesquite>> [Accessed Mar. 6, 2013].

<sup>12</sup> Jack M. Inglis, *A History of Vegetation on the Rio Grande Plain* (Austin: Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, 1964), 95–96.

<sup>13</sup> Donald E. Chipman and Harriet Denise Joseph, *Spanish Texas, 1519–1821* (rev. ed.; Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 263–264.



As one of the hardiest and most common trees in Texas, settlers used the plant for a variety of uses, including building fences and corrals, such as this one photographed in February 1939 in Hidalgo County. Photograph by Russell Lee. *Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives, Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division Washington, D.C.*

of mesquite and other brush intruding on grasslands. Early descriptions of San Pedro Springs (in modern-day San Antonio) told of only sparse stands of mesquite, but by the middle of the nineteenth century the area had become overgrown with a dense thicket of mesquite and other woody plants.<sup>14</sup>

The plant, however, had its uses. Spanish and Mexican settlers, no doubt, had a long association with mesquite, using it for, among other things, heating and cooking, and as forage for animals. In 1898, one Anglo observer noticed that Mexican teamsters fed their mules mesquite beans, which the animals devoured with great relish. Mexicans, he continued, also made candy and jelly from the plant that, he claimed, tasted better than peach preserves. He even explained that Tejanos on the border told a legend about the creation of the mesquite and cactus. "They say that when Jesus Christ arose and ascended to Heaven, He passed over the

<sup>14</sup> Inglis, *A History of Vegetation on the Rio Grande Plain*, 101.

country adjacent to the Rio Grande and that in his flight heavenward, He dropped the 'crown of thorns' and from it sprouted all the mesquite and cactus on the border."<sup>15</sup>

Spaniards and their Tejano descendants, therefore, incorporated the plant into their daily lives, and certainly thought little about its presence in the environmental and cultural landscapes of the area. It had always simply been there. Early Anglo Texans, on the other hand, did not know quite what to make of it. The unfamiliarity of the plant, like the general environment of Texas itself, challenged newcomers. An 1837 article in Houston's *Telegraph and Texas Register* mentioned mesquite briefly in a discussion on the climate and geography of the new republic. "The mesquite," the paper explained, "is thinly scattered over the whole country." It noted Indians' use of the plant as a food source and observed that the sap could be a substitute for gum arabic.<sup>16</sup> The paper, however, made no judgment on the tree. Stephen F. Austin, in an 1828 promotional pamphlet, mentioned the "low tree . . . called Muskite" in a predictably glowing account of the attributes of Texas. His cousin, Mary Austin Holley, wrote that the tree afforded "excellent fire-wood and valuable material for fencing"—not inconsiderable uses given the need for these things by the incoming society.<sup>17</sup> Firewood provided heat and fuel, obviously, and fencing created the tangible boundaries for Anglo American notions of property. The anonymous author of one Texas guidebook even claimed that mesquite could be used to make hedges that "when once complete, would require little labor" to maintain, but he did wonder why mesquite and "musquit grass" (a generic name for several varieties of prairie grass) "should be designated by a name signifying musquitoe [sic] . . . They certainly merit much more honorable titles."<sup>18</sup> While his etymology proved grossly incorrect, he nevertheless saw potential for the plant. Far from a nuisance, therefore, early Texas emigrants believed the plant could be useful.

Some settlers also found the scattered groves of mesquite to be quite beautiful. Small groves clustered among grasslands made for a seemingly pastoral scene, and mature groves, widely spaced, gave a false appearance of having been cultivated, prompting many to compare them to fruit orchards. The resemblance took hold so strongly that Randolph B Marcy declared in 1854, "One cannot divest himself of the idea, entering in a grove, that he is approaching a house, and involuntarily listens for the

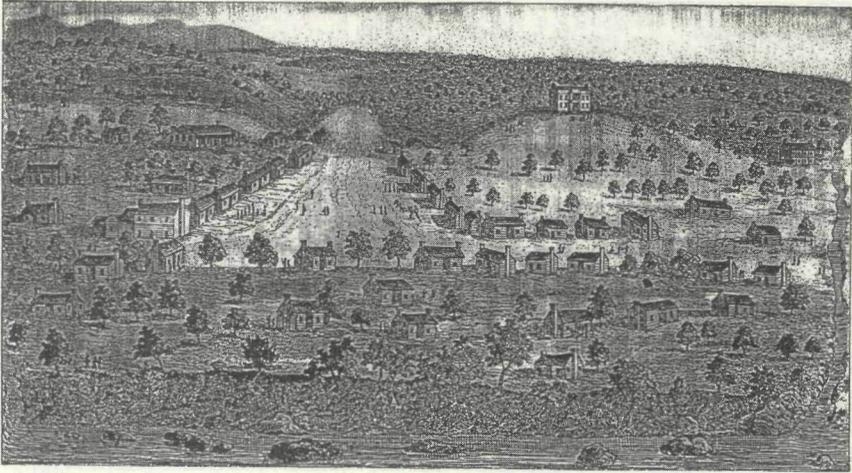
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<sup>15</sup> "Historic Fort Brown," *Brownsville Daily Herald*, Sept. 5, 1898.

<sup>16</sup> *Telegraph and Texas Register* (Houston), July 29, 1837.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Wright, "The Mesquite Tree," 38.

<sup>18</sup> *An Emigrant, Texas in 1840 or the Emigrant's Guide to the New Republic* (New York: William W. Allen; Reprint New York: Arno Press, 1973), 108–109.



Guidebooks like this one from 1840 idealized Texas, showing rolling hills, plentiful water, and an ordered, park-like landscape that Americans had long considered ideal. In short order, however, settlers inadvertently transformed the landscape, allowing the takeover of many areas by mesquite and other undesirable plants. From *An Emigrant, Texas in 1840 or the Emigrant's Guide to the New Republic* (New York: William W. Allen, 1840; reprint New York: Arno Press, 1973).

watching dog's bark or some other sign of human habitation."<sup>19</sup> Since at least the arrival of the Pilgrims, Anglo Americans had long seen grasslands mixed with stands of trees as desirable, and thus the Texas landscape could easily fit into idealized notions of landscape and therefore appropriate for Anglo American colonization.<sup>20</sup> These attitudes endured so long as mesquite did not crowd out other plants, making the seemingly ordered, pastoral landscape into something messy and less useful.

Accounts through the 1860s and '70s continued to stress the scattered presence of mesquite in Central and West Texas. Herman Lehmann, an eleven-year-old German American boy, spent nine years among the Apaches and Comanches. In his reminiscence he recalled seeing mesquite frequently. He remembered the day of his capture near his home in the Loyal Valley outside Fredericksburg clearly. His Apache captors "had me securely bound upon the back of a bucking bronco, stark naked. The Indians lost no time in getting away from there [Loyal Valley], and as we raced through the brush and undergrowth, my flesh was pricked and torn by mesquite and catclaws." Not long after his capture, the Apache

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Wright, "The Mesquite Tree," 38–39.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983), 25–28.

and Comanche went to war, and the Apache discovered two Comanche spies. Killing one in an ambush, they captured the other and returned to their village. Lehmann's Apache mentor, Carnoviste, cut two holes in the man's arms and hung him from a mesquite tree to die (although with the help of an Apache woman, he escaped).<sup>21</sup> Identifying the location of the second mesquite is difficult, but in general, based on Lehmann's account, it should have been north and west of the site of his initial capture, far out on the Edwards Plateau. Later, as a teenager and a warrior among the Apache, Lehmann participated in a war party that attacked along the frontier in the vicinity of the towns of Mason and Fredericksburg. Their herd of several dozen captured horses slowed the party's progress, and a band of Texas Rangers eventually located and attacked them near the headwaters of the South Concho River. In the battle Lehmann stopped to help a comrade, but had his horse shot out from under him, pinning him under its carcass. At first the Rangers appeared ready to kill him, but seeing that he was a white boy, they instead set off after his fleeing comrade, whom they soon caught and killed, scalping and dismembering him in the process. Lehmann, afraid of whites by this time, managed to free himself from the horse. He scrambled into the dense grass where he hid until they left. Lehmann quotes the account of one of the Rangers, Thomas P. Gillespie: "When they returned to where they had left the boy under the dead horse, he was gone. At this they were puzzled beyond expression. The scene of the fight and the chase was an open plain with nothing to obstruct the view for miles . . . there were a few scattering mesquites but none large enough to offer concealment."<sup>22</sup> In the early 1870s, therefore, mesquite remained in small thickets in an otherwise open and largely treeless grassland, and the landscape appeared much the same as it had when Spaniards first probed the area two centuries earlier.

As Apache and Comanche resistance faded and cattlemen came to occupy the grasslands of the Edwards Plateau, mesquite began its infiltration of the open plains. Texans did not seem to mind—at least not at first. Indeed, for a generation Texans believed the expansion of mesquite signified progress and the maturation of the state. An 1882 article in the *Detroit Free Press* (later reprinted in the *San Marcos Free Press*) lavished praise on Texas and its progress since the Civil War. The article congratulated Texans on their industry and work ethic, celebrated the supposedly harmonious race relations between blacks and whites, praised cotton production as the economic engine of the state, and extolled the region's warm climate. The article quoted its Texan source, Colonel T. J. Goree, on changes to

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<sup>21</sup> Herman Lehmann, *Nine Years among the Indians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 4, 48.

<sup>22</sup> Gillespie's account is quoted in *Ibid.*, 111.

the state's climate, a sure sign of progress. "As a grazing state, Texas has no superior. Our seasons appear to be changing. Our winters are colder, and we have more rain than formerly. Our treeless plains are growing up to the mesquite tree, and where that grows other trees will grow."<sup>23</sup> Colonel Goree, however, failed to see the contradiction between the spreading of mesquite and its influence on the grazing land of Texas. Perhaps, in time Texas would environmentally resemble states farther East. The proliferation of trees fit with deeply held views of the ideal landscape and became symbols of progress and maturation, of the state literally "growing up" to a higher stage of development.<sup>24</sup>

Other boomers also found reason for optimism in the expansion of mesquite onto grasslands. In an article celebrating the grazing potential of Tom Green, Dawson, Borden, and Andrews counties, the expansion of mesquite again foretold progress. These counties boasted of open plains, dotted with mesquite trees, luxurious grasses, and numerous springs and ponds. "The mesquite tree," the *Dallas Herald* explained, "which affords an excellent fuel, is fast encroaching upon the prairies."<sup>25</sup> This expansion would provide a valuable resource for settlers in the area, the paper opined, providing firewood and building material. The writers of an 1893 history of Texas concurred with the desirable effects of the rapid expansion of mesquite. This very useful and nutritious plant, they wrote, "has spread rapidly over the prairies within the last few years, and now furnishes firewood where a few years ago there was not a stick of any kind of fuel to be found."<sup>26</sup> The poet Sidney Lanier, sojourning in San Antonio in the 1870s, likewise repeated the claim that spreading mesquite helped change climatic patterns, bringing more rain and converting a "purely grazing district into an agricultural one."<sup>27</sup> In a sense, therefore, the mesquite seemed an arboreal frontiersman, planting its roots deep in the ground at the vanguard of Anglo American settlement.

The tree's commercial potential also created more than a few defenders. In particular the sap promised to replace gum arabic from the African acacia tree as a thickening agent in a variety of uses. The increasingly dense groves, Austin's *Weekly Democratic Statesman* observed, made collection of the sap comparatively easy and profitable—with prices hovering around fifteen cents per pound. The paper even waxed poetic at the prospect: "A mesquite grove is a novel and interesting sight, the encasings of the tree branches being likened to transparent crystal armor, reflecting the sun's

<sup>23</sup> "Texas," *San Marcos Free Press*, June 8, 1882.

<sup>24</sup> Julie Courtwright, *Prairie Fire: A Great Plains History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 83–84.

<sup>25</sup> "Our Railroads," *The Dallas Herald*, Sept. 1, 1882.

<sup>26</sup> *History of Texas* (Lew Publishing Company, 1893), 190.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Wright, "The Mesquite Tree," 40.

rays and glittering and glowing like unto some golden harvest."<sup>28</sup> The *San Marcos Free Press* tried to convince readers that the plant's attributes went far beyond its use as firewood. Its bark yielded tannin for tanning leather, its wood rivaled mahogany in color and appearance, and its gum surpassed gum arabic. "Added to all these valuable uses of mesquite trees," the paper declared, "it is in many instances a graceful and ornamental shade tree for the yard."<sup>29</sup> The *McKinney Gazette* added that the mesquite acted as a source of food during drought years when the tree, unlike other edible plants, produced a great surplus of beans. "No other tree here or in the States is so well adapted to man's wants and fulfills its mission so fully as our mesquite."<sup>30</sup> Given the tree's thin canopy and notorious lack of shade, perhaps the most generous assessment of the mesquite's attributes came from a promotional article in the *San Saba Weekly News*. "The beautiful foliage of the mesquite tree is just sufficiently dense to afford shade without obstructing the grass; in fact the grass is more thrifty under this tree than out of its shade."<sup>31</sup> Only in the hands of a gifted promoter could a tree that offered little shade be seen as perfect.

Yet a few, while still celebrating progress, also felt tinges of nostalgia for the Texas landscape of yesteryear. The citizens of Hays County tapped an aging Texas Ranger, James G. Storey, to deliver the keynote address during a ceremony laying the cornerstone of the new county courthouse in 1882. As Captain Storey explained, the ceremony provided a moment to reflect on the progress of the county, a chance for pioneers to "look back to those early days when you were here, standing sentinel on the border of this country, ready and willing to meet and repel the ruthless invasion of your country by the Indians then infesting the land." The memory of these heroic deeds, he explained, would remain far longer than any monuments made of marble. The landscape itself symbolized this progress, but it was a progress tinged with melancholy. Storey explained that when he first came into the country in 1846 no settlement had been built and the open "country about here was the prettiest I had ever seen. The country south and west of here was one vast prairie with here and there a live oak or mesquite tree; no mesquite thickets as you see now, the annual burnings kept them down."<sup>32</sup> Pretty, by Storey's standards, meant a landscape composed of open, park-like areas with a few trees for firewood and building material, but no thickets to make travel difficult. Indeed, those encroaching thickets foreshadowed great changes, both for the land and

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<sup>28</sup> "Mesquite Gum," *Weekly Democratic Statesman* (Austin), June 8, 1882.

<sup>29</sup> "Properties of the Mesquite Tree," *San Marcos Free Press*, Oct. 9, 1884.

<sup>30</sup> "The Mesquite Tree," *The McKinney Gazette*, Sept. 16, 1886.

<sup>31</sup> *San Saba Weekly News*, Oct. 16, 1891.

<sup>32</sup> "Address of Captain James G. Storey . . .," *San Marcos Free Press*, June 29, 1882.

for Texans' opinions of mesquite, and the changes owed their emergence, in no small measure, to the actions of Texans themselves.

As Captain Storey and other old-timers knew, one of the most important factors in the transformation of this landscape had been the suppression of fire—indeed Domínguez de Mendoza noticed the role of fire in the 1680s. Landscapes are not static, but rather constantly changing as climatic factors change, new plants are introduced, or processes are interrupted. The massive grasslands of the Llano Estacado of West Texas and Eastern New Mexico, for example, had changed repeatedly over millennia, hosting pine and spruce forests 14,000 years ago and oak and juniper 10,000 years ago before becoming open prairie in more recent times. The appearance of the grassland, however, prompted one Texan to declare that it had always been a vast expanse, untouched by anything except bison, antelope and wild horses, a landscape outside of time and beyond human influence. In fact, it and the rest of the grasslands of West Texas and the Great Plains had been indelibly shaped by frequent visits from prairie fire, both natural and man-made. Fire helped control woody plants like mesquite, destroying their shoots and preventing them from establishing a foothold on the grasslands. It also aided the grasses, returning precious nutrients to the soil, and within days of a burn new shoots began to push through the charred landscape. Within a few weeks, the grasses became so tall as to shade out the shoots of woody plants. The grasslands evolved to support and need the presence of fire. The periodic wet years encouraged the growth of grasses, creating combustible fuel that often burned during dry years. Wetter environments to the east, with more vegetation, rarely burned, while drier desert landscapes to the south and west lacked enough fuel to burn, but the Great Plains, extending from Texas to Canada, was literally in between these places, neither too humid nor too dry. The grasslands of the Great Plains had evolved to become an ideal fire landscape, a landscape that kept mesquite at bay.<sup>33</sup>

As Anglo American settlement continued, and especially as open range was fenced in during the latter part of the nineteenth century, fire became the enemy. Anglo American settlers waged a vigorous war to eradicate it from the Great Plains. No longer could fires go unchecked, because their presence threatened livestock, crops, fences, structures, and in some cases entire towns. The intrusion of these settlements, the creation of roads, and the plowing of fields also made controlling fire easier. Fire suppression, however, allowed woody plants to invade the open grasslands, and within a few years open grasslands began to change.<sup>34</sup> The author of a

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<sup>33</sup> Courtwright, *Prairie Fire*, 18–20.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

"General Survey of Texas Woodlands" in 1917 noted the decline in grass species and the proliferation of undesirable "weedy species" and "also the mesquite bean and cactus, both of which may be destroyed by fire, grew in numbers and commenced to crowd out the grasses."<sup>35</sup>

Fire suppression, however, did not transform the grasslands by itself. Overgrazing also played a significant role. The 1917 *Soil Survey of San Saba County*, while praising the usefulness of mesquite, nevertheless noticed the intrusion of undesirable plants onto open prairies. The report concluded that the carrying capacity of the land had certainly declined in recent years. "This decrease has resulted mainly from overstocking and premature grazing, thus preventing the grasses from maturing and reseeding themselves, while the prevention of fires has permitted an increase in such growth as cat claw, shin oak, and a species of bushy cacti, which greatly depreciate the grazing value of the land."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the number of cattle in Texas nearly doubled between 1880 and 1890, and overstocking continued well into the twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> Concentrating cattle onto fenced-in ranges increased the use of grasses. Normally, fast-growing grasses would smother the shoots of woody plants like mesquite choking off sunlight and killing them. Cattle, however, consumed these grasses and created the conditions necessary to foster the spread of woody invaders like mesquite.

Fire suppression and overgrazing aided in the massive transformation of the Texas landscape, and with the rapid proliferation of mesquite, especially onto rangeland, the plant soon became a nuisance. In the 1880s, mesquite could still find plenty of defenders, but a growing number of detractors began to voice their concerns. The *McKinney Gazette*, in 1886, felt it necessary to defend "this much abused and by some despised tree." Contrary to the beliefs of its opponents, the tree had many important uses, the *Gazette* claimed. Its wood provided furniture, fence posts, and firewood. Its lack of shade enabled many kinds of grasses to grow underneath it—protected from the worst of the sun, but still allowed enough light to flourish. Its beans provided food for cattle, especially in drought years, and "bees get the purest honey from its bloom."<sup>38</sup> Just as rangeland lost the battle against mesquite, mesquite's defenders soon lost the battle over its desirability.

Yet the tree also became part of the cultural landscape, and a few people even tied the tree to one of the most famous events in Texas history: the Battle of Pease River in December 1860. The Texas Rangers, led by Sul Ross, attacked a small Comanche village and captured the white

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Wright, "The Mesquite Tree," 42.

<sup>36</sup> J.O. Veatch, R. F. Rogers, M. W. Beck, and H. G. Lewis, *Soil Survey of San Saba County, Texas* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1917), 15.

<sup>37</sup> Wright, "The Mesquite Tree," 38–43.

<sup>38</sup> "The Mesquite Tree," *The McKinney Gazette*, Sept. 16, 1886.



An overgrazed field, near San Angelo, Texas. Note the complete lack of grass. Such denuded fields allowed the thorny mesquite, prickly pear cactus, and other armored plants to invade areas that once harbored a variety of native grasses. Image #1989-9476, Tom Green County Historical Society Collection, West Texas Collection, Angelo State University, San Angelo, Texas.

woman Cynthia Ann Parker, taken by the Comanches in 1836, and her daughter Prairie Flower while her sons Quanah and Peanut escaped. Ross, meanwhile, pursued Peta Nocona, Parker's husband, and wounded him severely in an exchange of fire.<sup>39</sup> In the standard version of the story, the wounded Peta Nocona "backed against a large mesquite tree and began to chant the mournful death song of the Comanches, the only privilege a redskin ever asked of his foe."<sup>40</sup> This image of the noble but dying warrior leaning against a tree became ingrained in the collective memory of Texans. The *Hereford Brand* in 1907 even claimed that settlers could point out to visitors "the identical mesquite tree under which the old chief was supposed to have been shot while singing his death song," making it one of Texas's more macabre tourist attractions.<sup>41</sup> Mesquite, therefore, found itself rooted into the state's mythic past.

<sup>39</sup> While numerous works exist on this particular incident, the best is probably Paul H. Carlson and Tom Crum, *Myth, Memory, and Massacre: The Pease River Capture of Cynthia Ann Parker* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2012).

<sup>40</sup> Mack Boswell, "The Capture of Cynthia Ann Parker," *The Mexia Weekly Herald*, Nov. 2, 1928.

<sup>41</sup> "Indian Graves," *The Hereford Brand*, Sept. 27, 1907.

By the 1920s and '30s, Texans' earlier optimistic assessments of mesquite had largely disappeared. The *Sweetwater Reporter* informed its readers in a 1938 article of the progress of a mesquite eradication effort on F. W. Alexander's Diamond ranch near Albany, Texas. For ten years, the paper reported, efforts had been underway to eradicate mesquite from the ranch's lands. After attempting various strategies, the ranch settled on kerosene spray as the best method of eradication. The effort had proven so successful that the ranch featured prominently in a tour of the area by the national Hereford Breeders' Association.<sup>42</sup>

Individual ranchers, however, lacked the resources to combat the infiltration of mesquite, and the plant soon found itself facing far more powerful entities who desired to check its conquest of rangeland: state and federal agencies. The massive economic and environmental crisis of the Great Depression spurred the New Deal's expansionary federal government into combat against the equally expansionary mesquite. The federal government unleashed an army of new programs intended to help the agricultural segment of the population: the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Farm Credit Administration, and the Soil Conservation Service, among others.<sup>43</sup> Many of these dealt with restoring productivity to the land, especially in the Dust Bowl of the Southern Plains. Experts in soil conservation fanned out across the plains, espousing the religion of conservation. Contour plowing, windbreaks, and agricultural subsidies became lasting elements of government intervention on the Great Plains and in the agricultural sector of the economy more generally.

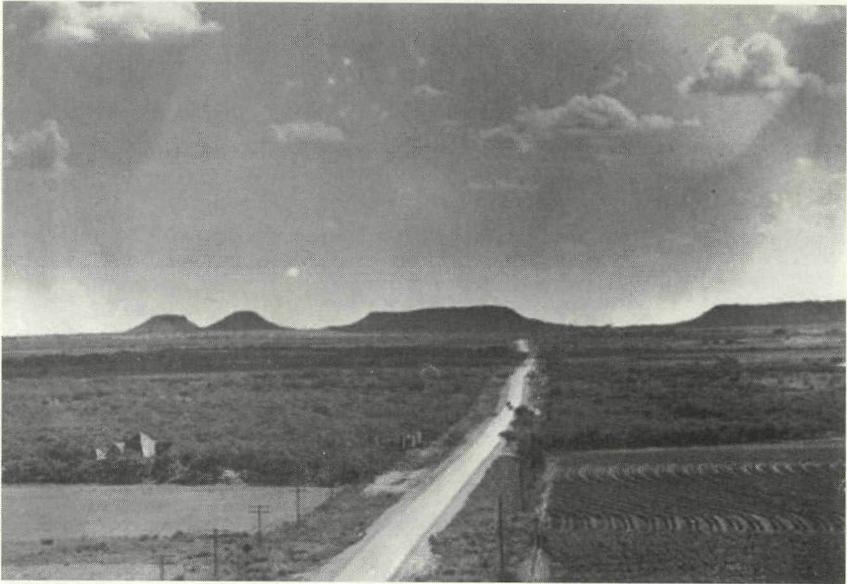
On Texas rangelands the conservation ethos and governmental agencies found an enemy in mesquite. Agricultural experiment stations and the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) led the charge to eradicate brush, including mesquite, from the grasslands of Texas. The SCS emerged from the sands of the Dust Bowl with Congress authorizing its creation under the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1935. The nation's over-used, abused, and exhausted lands fell under the new bureaucracy and its enthusiastic chief, Hugh Hammond Bennett. Much of the effort of the SCS focused on erosion and soil exhaustion in the Dust Bowl or American South. Returning the productivity of farm and rangeland ranked as the primary goal of the SCS. Farmers and ranchers had hurt this productively by mismanaging their lands, and thus scientists within bureaucracies like the SCS believed they could stop soil deterioration and maintain the productivity of the land through the application of "scientific agriculture."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "Hereford Breeders to Visit Herds in This Area," *Sweetwater Reporter*, July 10, 1938.

<sup>43</sup> Donald Worster, *The Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (25th anniversary ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 38, 213.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 212-213.



This image from ca. 1930 shows the transformation of the landscape near San Angelo, Texas. Note the ordered fields, telephone poles, roads, and structures in the foreground, as well as the dense brush and trees, including mesquite, surrounding the home. The changes in land use brought by farming and ranching precluded the use of fire to control woody invaders. Image # 1989-0904, Tom Green County Historical Society Collection, West Texas Collection, Angelo State University, San Angelo, Texas.

The expansion of mesquite and other woody invaders had little to do with soil erosion or exhaustion, but it did pose a problem for productivity, especially for ranchers. In a general sense, however, it fit with the belief that landowners had mismanaged and abused their lands, creating a need for scientific agriculture because mesquite and its fellow travelers took advantage of overgrazed fields.

Not everyone, of course, supported government intervention to stop the already undesirable intrusion of mesquite. Marguerite Allen, a McMurry College student, saw the mesquite tree as a symbol of Texas's vanishing past. Her 1938 short story "Gone with the West" (no doubt a play on the title of Margaret Mitchell's book *Gone with the Wind*) lamented the condition of modern Texas. The Old West of cowboys and Indians had faded into the past, replaced by cigar store Indians, Hollywood facsimiles of cowboys, and federal programs like the WPA and the "United States Conservation Service" that sapped the work ethic from Texans. Allen sighed, "The only thing that remains as an original part of the [Old] West is the mesquite tree. This dying ember has to struggle to keep from being

put in the shade by the soap and cigarette billboards."<sup>45</sup> It is certainly easy to point out Ms. Allen's fixation on a tree that those original cowboys would not have considered a significant part of the open ranges they once rode, but her placing of the mesquite in the category of authentically western (rather than corporate advertisements and government programs) speaks volumes to how completely the plant had come to seem essential to Texans' identity—or at least this particular Texan. A 1931 advertisement for the Magnolia Petroleum Company also conflated the heroic cowboy of yesteryear with the tenacious mesquite:

The pioneer cattleman who crowded the heels of savagery was of the breed which met emergency with resourcefulness, his word and honor needing no sureties. In the face of adversity he wrapped himself in his abounding fortitude and calmly awaited the opportunity to forge ahead. Like the mesquite tree, he was the first to occupy the vacant space and like the mesquite in drought, which dies back from the top but whose roots are deep in the sod, auspicious showers found him ready to again thrust out green boughs and luxuriant foliage.

Resourcefulness, patience, fortitude, and self-reliance in the face of hardship—the moral of the story was as powerful as it was obvious: like the rugged mesquite and the heroic cowboys of the past, Texans needed to trust in these traditional values to face the Depression and wait for the “auspicious showers” of progress to return, and, one imagines, not become dependent on government programs for help. Certainly, they would return, in part from the efforts of Texans and companies like the Magnolia Petroleum Company, which would soon bring progress and prosperity back to American. After all, the cowboy “a generation back read his letters from home by the light of Magnolia kerosene,” and his modern descendant now finds himself “hurtling across his range in an eight-cylinder motor car, still served by Magnolia,” and if that was not progress then what was?<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, government intervention in the agricultural sector firmly took root, and following World War II, the government again readied itself for the battle against mesquite. By the late 1940s the invasion of mesquite, like the feared invasion of communists, needed to be stopped, and the SCS set out like a defending army to resist the invaders. B. W. Allred of the SCS described the invasion in warlike terms, “Dwarf forests of invading trees and small shrubs have insidiously taken possession of millions of acres of the remaining uncultivated grasslands.” This expansion had been abetted by ordinary people who “have been deceived into believing that the trees or brush moved in like a plague or Passover and

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<sup>45</sup> Marguerite Allen, “Gone with the West,” *The Galleon* (McMurry College) 14 (Spring 1938): 13–14.

<sup>46</sup> The advertisement appears in *The Breckenridge American*, Apr. 22, 1931.

killed out the grass." That belief, Allred asserted was wrong. The take-over would not occur in one massive attack, but instead silently and slowly by probing for avenues to exploit and by taking advantage of weakened, neglected lands. A healthy, climax grassland remained impervious to woody invaders. Allred, like virtually all range managers and ecologists at the time, believed that a landscape evolved into a state of equilibrium, or climax state, that would continue indefinitely unless some large disruption interfered with the natural process. Like a fifth column, mesquite and its fellow invaders struck where conditions enabled their stealthy take-over where the natural climax state had been disrupted. Allred concluded that the sole cause of the invasion had been overgrazing, which weakened native grasses and made the range susceptible to colonization by mesquite, cactus, and other woody plants. Allred argued that fire could not possibly control the spread of woody invaders and discounted the accounts of pioneers who said it did. Instead, modern herbicides offered the only practical solution to the spread of mesquite, and where the rancher had failed, the scientist, armed with the latest technology, would succeed. Rangelands could be rehabilitated through wise management, and the invasion of brush could be curtailed with the employment of mechanical and chemical warfare. Kerosene had long been used to kill mesquite and other plants, and had proven somewhat effective. More recently, Allred explained, defoliant like 2,4-D (or dichlorophenoxyacetic, later a component of the defoliant known as Agent Orange used extensively in the Vietnam War) had been sprayed on infested areas. Mechanical methods, too, proved effective, he claimed, including bulldozing, cutting the roots with a special plow, circular saws, mowers, and "cabling," wherein two tractors or bulldozers stretched a cable between them and uprooted all the vegetation. Allred concluded that ultimately a sustained campaign of reseedling of native grasses, and chemical and mechanical control would be necessary to regain areas lost to the infiltration of undesirable plants. Mesquite, in particular, would require vigilance. Even after apparently successful efforts, ranchers and scientists would have to remain prepared for the reemergence of the threat. "Mesquite," he wrote, "may keep on sending up seedlings for 50 years or more after all trees are dead." Such vigilance, no doubt, necessitated the continued presence of the professionals of the soil conservation service.<sup>47</sup>

Farmers, taking the advice of experts like Allred, attempted to slow the spread of mesquite by employing both mechanical and chemical methods. In Stonewall County, airplanes dispersed the herbicide 2,4 5-T in a mixture with water and diesel oil over nearly two dozen ranches. The

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<sup>47</sup> B. W. Allred, "Distribution and Control of Several Woody Plants in Texas and Oklahoma," *Journal of Range Management* 2 (January 1949): 17-29.

results, according to extension range specialist H. H. Walker, offered a potentially cost-effective method to control mesquite and other plants.<sup>48</sup> Ranchers like H. G. Flowers of Aspermont, Texas, attempted to remove mesquite and reseed their lands with more desirable grasses.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Abilene Christian University agriculture students watched a bulldozer clear an area of twenty acres from the school's demonstration farm. The newly cleared land would be reseeded and returned to its former condition.<sup>50</sup> Such an easy rehabilitation, however, proved optimistic, for mesquite remained resilient in the face of such assaults. For example, at the Spur experiment station near Breckenridge, Texas, more than 1,200 mesquite seedlings had sprouted on a plot of land that had been cleared of mesquite only three years earlier.<sup>51</sup> Restoring lost grasslands would be no easy (or inexpensive) task.

Given the amount of rangeland in the state in need of rehabilitation, such efforts appeared at best insufficient and at worst Sisyphean. Texas ranchers watched as mesquite continued its march across their rangelands, thwarting the aerial bombardment of pesticides and the mechanized assaults of tractors. By 1965, C. L. Leinweber of Texas A&M's Range and Forestry Department concluded that 82 percent of the state's 107 million acres of rangeland had been infiltrated by woody invaders. Overgrazing, again, he concluded had led to this deplorable condition. Obstacles to rehabilitation, Leinweber argued, included, a lack of "range improvement finances; absentee ownership, and short-term leases; alternative use competition for the land; wildlife competition for forage; and lack of incentive, possibly brought on by the advanced age of many operators."<sup>52</sup> Lacking money and political will, therefore, meant mesquite's expansion would continue unchecked.

Texans and range scientists, however, still hoped to turn the tables in the battle against mesquite and its allies. By the mid-1960s, a group of North Texas and Panhandle ranchers and businessmen formed the Southwest Mesquite and Brush Eradication Association to raise awareness of the economic costs of brush intrusion. In December of 1965 the group organized a field day for some 5,000 visitors, including Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman. The purpose of the field day, according to the *Aspermont Star*, would be to "provide a graphic example of the inability of present methods [of mesquite control] to offer a permanent solution to the Southwest's devastating agricultural problem—the loss of land to the

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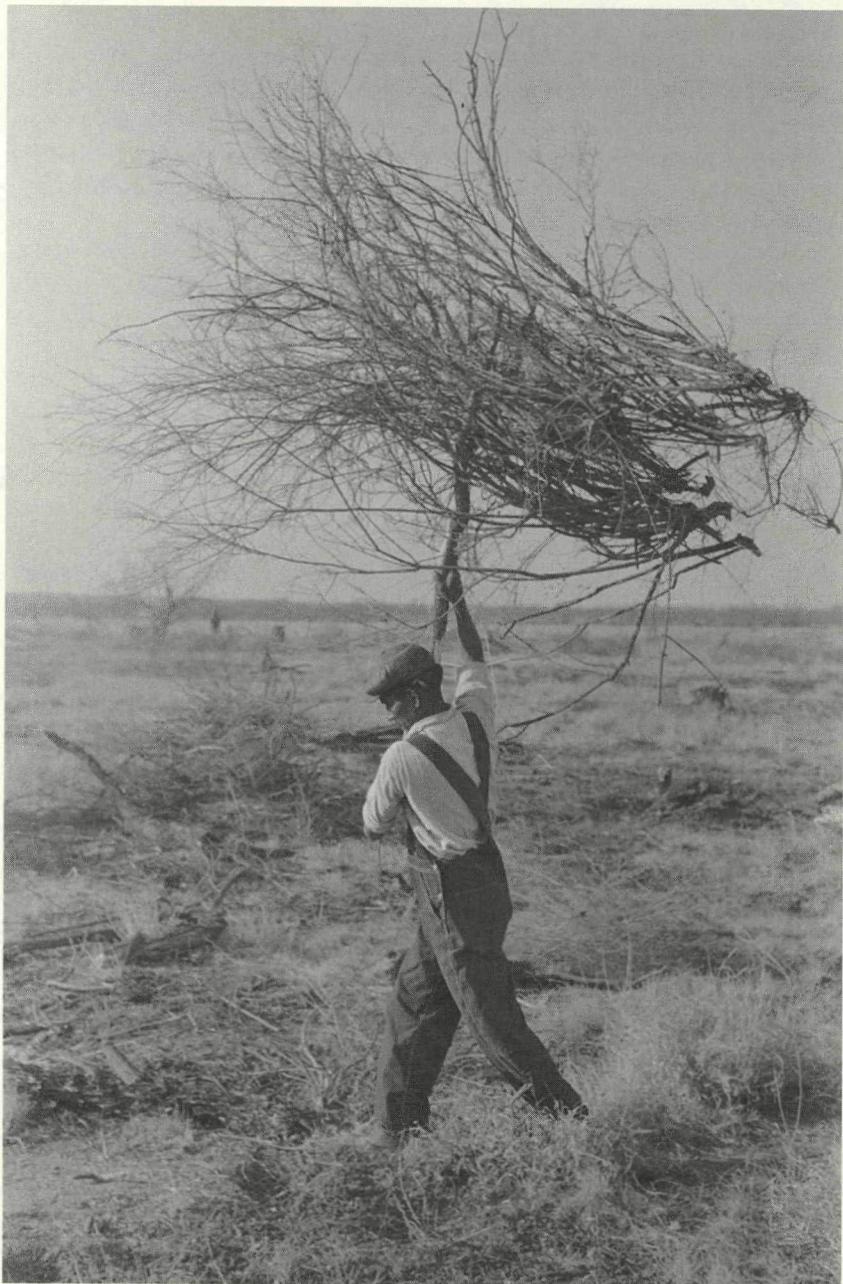
<sup>48</sup> "Effort Made to Control Mesquite," *Aspermont Star*, Nov. 16, 1950.

<sup>49</sup> "Show-me Tour Conducted by Stonewall Agent," *The Aspermont Star*, Sept. 19, 1957.

<sup>50</sup> "Mesquite Eradication Demonstration Give on ACC Farm," *The Optimist* (Abilene, Tex.), Nov. 17, 1948.

<sup>51</sup> "Veterans Visit Spur Station to Study Work," *Breckenridge American*, Nov. 10, 1946.

<sup>52</sup> "80 Per Cent Rangeland Listed Poor to Fair by A&M Man," *Alto Herald*, Apr. 22, 1965.



Man carrying mesquite to be burned at El Indio, Texas, in 1939. Photograph by Russell Lee. *Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives, Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division Washington, D.C.*

creeping paralysis of mesquite and other brush infestation." "We believe," the organization's president, W. C. Howard of Quanah, said, "that a concentrated and accelerated mesquite eradication research program backed by state and federal funds and from the landowners themselves can be successful."<sup>53</sup> Such a large-scale program, however, never materialized, and federal and state agencies continued to address the mesquite problem in a piecemeal fashion.

Control methods have not appreciably changed since the 1940s. Even today, herbicides continue to be the weapon of choice in the battle against mesquite. Aircraft spraying, though fairly expensive, continues to be widely practiced. Spraying on a smaller scale with tanks on backpacks or tanks mounted on trucks or four-wheelers has also proven popular thanks to a Texas A&M project known as "Brush Busters." According to Allan McGinty of the Texas A&M Research and Extension Center in San Angelo, ranchers tended not to treat mesquite until brush infiltration began to affect their profits, but often by then the plants had become too expensive to control adequately except by aerial spraying or mechanical removal. Then ranchers treated only a small portion of their land because most lacked funds to deal with their entire holdings. Thus, their efforts to control mesquite consistently proved too little and too late. McGinty, comparing their efforts to healthcare, told *Livestock Weekly*, "HMOs pay almost 100 percent for preventive treatments, because in the long run it doesn't cost so much. Brush control is no different . . . It makes good sense economically because ranchers don't have to put up so much capital to hire bulldozers and airplanes."<sup>54</sup>

By the late 1980s Dow's Reclaim and Remedy herbicides became the predominant anti-mesquite treatments—the names, born no doubt in the minds of advertising experts—clearly designed to take back land and finally provide a remedy to the problem of mesquite. In the spring of 2012, the company introduced its new herbicide, Sendero (a Spanish word meaning "path," perhaps because it could clear a path through mesquite or show a path to future control, and also clever marketing because mesquite are a problem in Mexico as well). Dow claimed Sendero "averaged a 76% root-kill two years after treatment compared to 64% for the Reclaim/Remedy Ultra tank mix."<sup>55</sup>

Another control method making a comeback is fire. During January and February of 2013, Texas Parks and Wildlife employees torched about 1,000 acres of land in San Angelo State Park. The mesquite and other

<sup>53</sup> "Eradication of Mesquites to Affect Economics of County," *The Aspermont Star*, Dec. 2, 1965.

<sup>54</sup> "Brush Busters Make Big Impact with Small-Scale Treatments," *Livestockweekly.com*, <<http://www.livestockweekly.com/papers/98/11/12/whlbrush.asp>> [Accessed May 14, 2013].

<sup>55</sup> "Dow Has New, Better Mesquite Control," *Farm Progress.com*, <<http://farmprogress.com/story-dow-has-new-better-mesquite-control-13-58691>> [Accessed May 14, 2013].



Mesquite being burned at El Indio, Texas, in 1939. Such laborious clearing did little to slow mesquite's expansion, forcing ranchers to increasingly rely on heavy machinery and herbicide. Photograph by Russell Lee. *Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives, Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division Washington, D.C.*

brush were cut down and bulldozed into piles. Removing fuel loads lessened the chance of a large, destructive fire starting in the park. The state parks service also hoped to restore the native grasslands and help improve the amount of water in the nearby North Concho River, since fewer thirsty mesquite would presumably allow more water to percolate through the soil and into the river.<sup>56</sup> In general, San Angelo State Park plans to use spraying, mechanical removal, and fire to make inroads in the dominance of mesquite in the park—a dominance that, according to park superintendent Kurt Kemp, has only been in place for the past few decades.<sup>57</sup> Regardless of the weapons employed, Texans certainly will continue to wage a ceaseless war on mesquite in the coming years, but it may well continue to be a losing battle.

Mesquite, most likely, will never retreat from the Texas landscape, and contemporary Texans have not given up on finding uses for it. Like those

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<sup>56</sup> Ken Grimm, "State Park on Fire: Burn Helps Keep Lands Safe and Healthy," *San Angelo Standard Times*, Feb. 8, 2013. On the problem of mesquite and other brush consuming valuable water see Keith L. Olenick, J. Richard Conner, R. Neal Wilkins, Urs P. Kreuter, and Wayne T. Hamilton, "Economic Implications of Brush Treatments to Improve Water Yield," *Journal of Range Management* 57 (July, 2004): 337-345.

<sup>57</sup> Kurt Kemp to Jason Pierce, Mar. 27, 2013, e-mail (copy in author's possession).

early boomers of yesteryear who dreamed of great things for mesquite, these people hope to see a nuisance transformed into a benefit. The *San Angelo Standard Times* in a June 2012 article reported on efforts to harvest mesquite and juniper trees for use in the production of biofuel. According to Jim Ansley, the head of a Texas A&M research project, mesquite and juniper could be harvested across Texas, chipped, and used to create a substitute for natural gas. In addition to a fuel, the removal of mesquite and juniper, Ansley believes, "would improve ecosystem quality as well as services from these lands, such as increased income from livestock grazing."<sup>58</sup> Further, the researchers found, that mesquite's rapid rate of regrowth could make it a very sustainable source of energy and its growth and harvesting (unlike other potential biofuels like corn) would not adversely affect the raising of foodstuffs.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps, the free market could roll back mesquite's expansion in ways that ranchers and government agencies had proven incapable of achieving.

Mesquite also continues to attract hundreds of woodworkers for its hardness and the uniformity with which it dries. These artisans prize mesquite for its usefulness as flooring, in woodturning, and for furniture making.<sup>60</sup> Natural foods retailers celebrate mesquite for the quality of the honey that bees make from the tree's flowers. The website *indigenousnutrition.com* sells a sixteen ounce jar of mesquite honey for \$8.95.<sup>61</sup> Mesquite flour has also attracted a following. Some research has indicated that mesquite flour is rich in fiber and natural sugars and useful in gluten-free diets or those with soy and peanut allergies.<sup>62</sup> Mesquite flour even features in a recipe for "Raw Mesquite Chia Pancakes" on Oprah Winfrey's Web site, *Oprah.com*, making it very mainstream indeed.<sup>63</sup> The wood, of course, has also long been prized for use in barbeque, and a stroll down a grocery store aisle reveals products like Jack Link's Mesquite Smoked Beef Jerky, Dr. Pepper More than Mesquite Marinade, and Butterball Mesquite Smoked Turkey Breast.

Mesquite also continues to figure in Texans' self-conscious construc-

<sup>58</sup> "Windmill Country: Mesquite, Juniper Could Be Key Ingredients in Biofuel," *San Angelo Standard Times*, June 7, 2012.

<sup>59</sup> R. James Ansley, Mustafa Mirik, and Michael J. Castellano, "Structural Biomass Partitioning in Regrowth and Undisturbed Mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*): Implications for Bioenergy Uses," *GCB Bioenergy* 2 (February 2010): 26-36.

<sup>60</sup> Ramos, "The Ubiquitous Mesquite."

<sup>61</sup> "Mesquite Honey," <<http://www.indigenousnutrition.com/p/mesquite-honey.html>> [Accessed May 14, 2013].

<sup>62</sup> Peter Felker, Gary Takeoka, and Lan Dao, "Pod Mesocarp Flour of North and South American Species of Leguminous Tree *Prosopis* (Mesquite): Composition and Food Applications," *Food Reviews International* 29 (Spring 2013): 49-66.

<sup>63</sup> "Raw Mesquite Chia Pancakes Recipe," <<http://www.oprah.com/food/Raw-Mesquite-Chia-Pancakes-Recipe>> [Accessed Mar. 4, 2013].

tion of their proud identity. One Texan, Sara Johnson, identified with the mesquite and its presence in rural West Texas, writing, "Sorry, but I lean towards the country people more times than those from the city. We are just a more polite people, maybe some [are] too stubborn and small minded but someone has to be different in every group. As I get older I am starting to realize that maybe that different person is me. Oh well. My roots are grounded so deep like the roots of a mesquite tree that I don't see them coming above ground anytime soon."<sup>64</sup> For Johnson, her home is among the mesquite, and its tenacious, somewhat lonely existence is a symbol of life in West Texas, a place outsiders cannot understand or appreciate, much like the tree itself.

Another Texan, former President George W. Bush, frequently spent time on his ranch in Crawford, Texas, finding respite and rejuvenation from political wrangling. He preferred to wrangle with the brush on his land. The *Washington Post* reported, "For Bush, who is known to spend early morning hours hacking at unwanted mesquite, cocklebur weeds, hanging limbs and underbrush only to go back for more after lunch, [brush removal] borders on obsession." Surely, the forty-third president did not need to do the work himself (he could certainly hire professional crews to do it for him), but the *Post* concluded, "Clearing brush projects the image of a cowboy president, a tough rancher fighting the elements to survive." Bush's neighbor Larry Matlodge laughed and assured the *Post* it was a ruse "to show he's a Texan."<sup>65</sup> Removing mesquite and other underbrush, no doubt, proved enjoyable for the president, providing a sense of accomplishment and transforming the landscape into a pleasing form featuring open stands of pecan and live oaks, and allowing native grasses (planted by the first lady) to reestablish themselves. President Bush, in this sense, was not so different from early Texans who appreciated open prairies mixed with stands of trees. Bush, therefore, embodied the Texan ambivalence to the plant, seeing it as a nuisance, but a nuisance that gave him purpose and an identity as a rugged, Texas rancher.

Although part of the Texas landscape for thousands of years and often seen as a fundamental part of Texan identity, the mesquite is also seen by some as the ultimate environmental pariah: an invasive species. Modern Americans, seemingly regardless of political affiliation or friendliness to environmentalism, have come to loathe invasive species, whether they are Burmese pythons, snakehead fish, common carp, tamarisk, eucalyptus, or kudzu. Most Americans would agree with former Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt, who in 1998 declared that imported plants and animals

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<sup>64</sup> Sara Johnson, review of *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* by Janisse Ray, unpublished (used with permission of the author).

<sup>65</sup> "Down on the Ranch, President Wages War on the Underbrush," *Washington Post*, Dec. 31, 2005.

“created a level of destruction to America’s environment and economy that is matched only by the damage caused by floods, earthquakes, wildfires, hurricanes, and mudslides.”<sup>66</sup> To be sure, mesquite has an adverse impact on grazing and water flow, and these harmful impacts have led Texans to attempt to eradicate the tree, but that does not mean that it is not native. Although ecologists have largely discarded the belief that nature tends toward balance and harmony, this ideal remains powerful for the general public, and it is often related to the idea that rural life is similarly idyllic. Organisms that seem to destabilize our most cherished landscapes, then, tend to be seen as unwelcome outsiders.

Expansionistic and thirsty, mesquite seems to fit the pattern of an invasive species, and blaming its arrival on the Spanish provided a handy way to denounce the plant while allowing modern Texans to exculpate themselves from any responsibility. The truth, however, is far more complicated. The native mesquite could not have spread the way it has without a great deal of human assistance, assistance inadvertently provided by the arrival of Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo settlers who allowed their animals to overgraze native grasses and sought to stop the frequent fires that had kept woody invaders at bay. These actions enabled mesquite to colonize new territory, threatening the very attributes that brought ranchers to the grasslands in the first place. Our dislike of “unnatural” mesquite, however, says far more about us than it does the natural environment. Thus, our ambivalence to mesquite is mostly cultural rather than natural. It is easier for ranchers to raise cattle on land without mesquite, and we prefer the beauty of open, park-like areas rather than dense brush. In the end, the invasive species most responsible for the expansion of mesquite has been *Homo sapiens*—the green swath of mesquite one sees spread across the landscape is testament to the hand of humans as much as that of nature. Loved or loathed, marvelous or maligned, the story of mesquite, with as many twists and turns as the trunk of the plant itself, is a tale of humanity’s influence on the environment, and of the environment’s influence on humanity. The mesquite will, no doubt, continue to play a major role in Texas, but only time will tell if that role will be as hero or villain.

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<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Peter Coates, *American Perceptions of Immigrant and Invasive Species: Strangers on the Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 2–3.