

FYI on Texas History by Bob Heinonen

A Free E-Mail Newsletter from Texas Heroes Issue 30 May 15, 2005



Bob Heinonen as
John Neely Bryan

JUST ONE MORE PERSONAE

During this past month, **Texas Heroes** has signed an agreement with the Dallas Historical Society to provide historical characters for their in-house and outreach programs. In the early and mid-1990's, I had portrayed John Neely Bryan, the founder of Dallas. I stopped portraying him when I formed **Texas Heroes** in 2001 because he doesn't have statewide appeal. With this agreement with DHS, I decided it is time to relaunch John Neely Bryan.

John is one of those men that came to Texas to start over, but in his case he was driven west for health reasons. He contracted cholera in 1833 in Memphis, Tennessee, and his doctor told him he needed to spend more time outside. So, at the age of 23, he headed west to live and trade with the Indians.

Then, in 1841, John joined a group of 400-500 men forming a ranging party to clear north Texas of Indians. After finding no Indians, part of the group decided to establish a fort – Bird's Fort was built in the area now known as Irving.

After helping build the fort, John started east in November, 1841, and came to a spot on the Trinity River where he apparently got a vision of a city. He felt he had found the farthest north a steamboat could come on the Trinity River and that the spot could become the commercial center of north Texas. He claimed a headright of 640 acres and laid out the streets of his new city of Dallas. And the story goes on from there.

LEGENDS OF TEXAS

Legend: The book *Lonesome Dove* is based on the adventures of Charles Goodnight

In the novel *Lonesome Dove* by Larry McMurty, Captain Woodrow Call and his partner, Augustus McCrae, are taking a herd of 3,000 head of cattle from the Rio Grande River to Montana to start a new ranch. On reaching Montana, Augustus and one of their top hands, Pea Eye, are sent on ahead to look over the area to find a good ranch site. Gus (Augustus) rides off to see what is over a ridge and runs into about twenty Indians who give chase. Gus and Pea Eye outrun the Indians to a creek bed and literally dig in - they dig a small cave in the bank in which to hide. Gus has an arrow in his leg that he has to force through the leg and pull it out the other side; the leg gets infected.

Gus decides that Pea Eye has to go for help. That night, Pea Eye jumps into the swollen creek and ends up losing all his equipment and clothes as he is swept down stream. For many days, Pea Eye walks south across the grassy prairies totally naked and is finally found by his men. Call and his men head north to find Gus.

In the meantime, Gus's fever has gotten bad. In a half-delirious state of mind, he decides to walk out of the creek bottom and, when he does, he finds that the Indians have left. He starts walking in the direction of Miles City; he knows he has to get medical attention quickly. He runs into an old mountain man who lets Gus have his horse.

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Gus makes it to Miles City where a drunken old doctor amputates his leg. Woodrow finds Gus in Miles City; the doctor says if he doesn't amputate the other leg, Gus will die. Gus refuses and does die. Before he dies, he makes Woodrow promise to take his body back to Texas to be buried at a place his only true love and he spent time together; Woodrow agrees.

After Gus dies, they put his body in a new casket Woodrow has made, and packs his body in charcoal and salt so the body will keep over the winter. The next spring, Woodrow puts the casket on a wagon and heads back to Texas where he buries Gus as promised.

How does that story compare to this one:

Charles Goodnight and his partner, Oliver Loving, are taking a herd of 2,000 head of cattle from north Texas to Denver to sell them. They leave from north Texas and head southwest towards El Paso; when entering New Mexico they catch the Pecos River and head north. It is then that Loving says he wants to go to Santa Fe to bid on a military contract for cattle and that he wants to go alone. Goodnight warns him he will be killed by Indians if he does and makes Loving promise two things: take along their best man, "One Arm" Bill Wilson, and only ride at night.

Loving makes both promises, but two days into the trip, he and Wilson haven't seen any sign of Indians so they ride during the day. Sure enough, the first day the Comanches spot them and chase them back to the Pecos River where the two of them jump into a ditch running into the river. Two hours into the fray, a bullet hits Loving in the wrist and hip, so that night Wilson goes into the river and heads south for help but it takes six days to find the herd on foot.

When Goodnight hears about Loving's situation in the ditch from Wilson, they ride to the ditch as fast as they can, but there is no sign of Loving. He figures the Comanches got Loving so they go back to the cattle drive. But a few days later, a man coming from the north looking for his own herd tells them that Loving is at Fort Sumner. A few days after Wilson left Loving, Loving figured he wasn't going to get help so he went into the river and headed north where he found some men who took him to Fort Sumner for medical attention. Upon hearing this, Goodnight saddles up and heads to Fort Sumner.

When he arrives at the fort, he finds that gangrene has set into Loving's wrist and Goodnight has the army surgeon amputate Loving's arm right below the elbow. Loving does pretty good for a while but then blood poisoning sets in and he dies. Before he dies, he tells Goodnight his only regret in his whole life is that he won't be buried in Texas. Goodnight has him buried at the fort and goes back to the herd.

But then, after Goodnight has sold the herd, he takes his men back to Fort Sumner and has them gather up all the used cooking oil tins and has the tins stomped flat. He solders them together in a huge tin sheet and has the sheet formed into the shape of a coffin. He has his men dig up Loving's coffin and places it in the tin coffin. Goodnight then packs the tin coffin with charcoal, seals the tin coffin, has a wooden box built around the whole affair, puts it on a wagon and heads back down the Goodnight-Loving Trail for Texas.

When Goodnight gets to Weatherford, Texas, he leaves his old partner's remains with the Masons who bury Loving with honors. Goodnight could not let his partner be buried in foreign soil.

I can see where Larry McMurtrey got the idea for this one episode in *Lonesome Dove*, but he has certainly changed most of the details and none of the rest of *Lonesome Dove* resembles the life of Charles Goodnight. I had told people over the years that *Lonesome Dove* was loosely based on the adventures of Charlie Goodnight because of what other people have said. Now that I have finally read *Lonesome Dove* I have to withdraw that comment and disagree with it. "Loose" is a loose way of putting it.

I will admit, however, that *Lonesome Dove* is a very good read. Thank you, Mr. McMurtrey.