

## **Ed Bell**

(1905-1986)

### **I. Context**

The positive influence on generations past, present, and future in both economic and oral tradition has become evident through the implacable character and storytelling of Ed Bell. It was through storytelling that drew people to the old town of Indianola, Texas. Indianola began to flourish as a family vacation and fishing haven from near and far. The individual primarily responsible for this feat was Ed Bell.

### **II. Overview**

Born at the head of the Frio River, near Leakey, Texas, on January 10, 1905, David Edward “Ed” Bell was the son of Calvin Oscar, Sr. and Annie Shackelford Bell. Ed was the second child and oldest son of ten children.

During his elementary school years, Ed was advanced two extra grades. He commented that this caused some deficits in math. It was over a mile to the school from the Bell Ranch, and the children rode the donkeys, walked, or ran to school and home. Several of Ed’s tales originated from these early day experiences. “The Large Watermelon” was an example of one of those tales.

Ed left home at an early age. Unfortunately, the Great Depression had seized the United States economy. He recalled, “I was standing in line to get a job. I was single and there were so many men with starving families at home. I just couldn’t take food out of their mouths.” It was during the Great Depression that he met and married Mary Alma Smith, of Victoria, on April 21, 1935.<sup>1</sup> Over the next 17 years they had four children Patricia Lee, Calvin Lewis, Alva Leann, and Catherine Louise.

To help feed his family, Ed would catch various forms of seafood at Indianola and sell it door-to-door in Port Lavaca and Victoria. Alligators, rattlesnakes, and water moccasins were just a few of the dangers that faced Ed and his peers in the early days at Indianola.

Over time, Ed set up and determinedly made his Indianola family safe and friendly with his diligence. “I bought seven and one half acres of land along Powderhorn Bayou, mostly marsh. This acreage took in Trapper’s and Tex’s location, as well as mine.”<sup>2</sup> It was here that Ed spent over forty years serving and entertaining his customers. Originally, his business was named Ed Bell’s Sports Haven and later Ed Bell’s Sportsman’s Paradise - “...customer’s always just called it Ed Bell’s Fish Camp.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bell, Ed

<sup>2</sup> Bell, Ed (1983) *The Hard Way*, Part IV, Gulf Coast Fisherman

<sup>3</sup> Wolff, Henry, Jr.

In 1942, a hurricane destroyed the Bell home and store. The Bell's found what was left of their house on the road near the monument.<sup>4</sup> Indianola was then closed to the public, forcing Ed and his family to move. Ed moved his family first to Victoria and worked at Aloe Field and later on they moved to Orange, Texas where he worked in the shipyard. After the war, Indianola was reopened and Ed returned to his favorite habitat.

Ed was determined to win all the battles for his domain including hurricanes. He was completely wiped out three times (1942, 1945, and 1961) during the forty years of business at Indianola. Each time a hurricane wiped him out, he used the storms as an excuse to rebuild bigger and better. In 1961, Carla took his store, pier, shrimp pond, land and boat sheds. He had built the first house on stilts at Indianola. He said the house must have exploded, because he couldn't find the roof, door, or anything. Ed cheerfully said, "Well we didn't lose anyone and the ground is cleared. It is ready for us to rebuild."<sup>5</sup> Within a week structures were up at Indianola.

It was during these forty years that Ed had made a name for himself as a storyteller. People would come from all over to find and hear one of Ed's stories. The Victoria Advocate ran an article dated January 28, 1973, an article called "Ed, A Legend in His Own Time". His picture was inscribed "Mr. Indianola."

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<sup>4</sup> Wolff, Henry, Jr.

<sup>5</sup> Wolff, Henry, Jr.

Near the end of Ed's fishing camp adventure a young graduate student, Patrick Mullen, from the University of Texas, looked up Ed. He said he had heard Ed's name first at Brownsville, and the closer he got to Indianola the more often he heard Ed's name as a story spinner. Once he arrived at Indianola, he asked Ed to tell him a few stories, after several hours he put his pen down and set up a recorder. Patrick ran the recorder for several more hours. Ed had a lot of stories... Later, in his book, "I Heard the Old Fishermen Say; Folklore of the Texas Gulf Coast", Patrick included "The Bee Tree", "Fishing in the Fog", and "Finding Old Indianola Treasures."

Patrick Mullen wrote, "I recorded Ed Bell's stories on three different occasions, in 1967, in 1971, and in 1976. The first time he talked about the history of the area, told many personal experiences, and related some buried treasure legends and five tall tales. The second time he talked about his storytelling and told anecdotes and six tall tales. The third time we discussed the aesthetics of storytelling and how he used stories to attract customers. The first two recording sessions provided circumstances which were close to the natural context of the usual storytelling events.

Ed Bell's image as a storyteller is traditional. He learned the tales and the style within an oral tradition from older men as he was growing up and as a young adult. The first influence on his storytelling was a cowboy named Alec Moore whom Ed knew when he was a teenager in Central

Texas. Two of his longest, most complex tall tales, “The Bee Tree” and “The Wonderful Hunt” were learned at the age of sixteen from Alec Moore.<sup>6</sup>

After Ed retired from the fishing camp he returned to the Caldwell family ranch and became a member of the National Association and Perpetuation of Storytelling.<sup>7</sup> Ed was a featured storyteller at the National Storytelling Convention held in Tennessee for four years. He was a featured storyteller at the San Antonio Folk Festival until 1985 when he was too ill to participate. Ed was one of the storytellers invited to the 200th National Celebration at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C.<sup>8</sup> Ed thrilled children of all ages with his tales at elementary schools all over Texas. Ed’s stories are on file with the University of Texas, University of California at Berkley, and the Texas Culture Center in San Antonio, Texas. His stories included “The History of Indianola”, “The Large Watermelon”, “The Bee Tree”, “The Successful Fishing Trip”, (taken from a tale told to him by one of his great nieces), “The Pet Fish”. Some of Ed’s stories are now told by other professional storytellers. Other examples of his stories are imbedded in this expository.

Ed has been featured in the Port Lavaca Wave, and the Victoria Advocate. One of his stories, during the late 70’s, was picked up on the Associated Press wire and appeared in local papers

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<sup>6</sup> Mullen, Patrick

<sup>7</sup> Laredo News

<sup>8</sup> Wilkerson, Trisha

from the east to the west coast. Several authors have included Ed's tales in their text books. Some college courses include these texts. As an example: "Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literature Culture"<sup>9</sup> have young scholars read and study these timeless tall tales.

Ed was the leading edge of the revival of oral storytelling.<sup>10</sup> His stories, along with a few contemporary story tellers, have influenced a second generation of oral story tellers, including a daughter and students who continue to delight audiences with the same oral tradition. Scott Hime wrote, "He [Ed] loved the place...His knowledge made him a living link for a generation that grew up with television, to an Indianola that no longer existed..." I had the opportunity to see it [Indianola] through Ed Bell's eyes."<sup>11</sup> And, these second generation tellers are influencing a new group of storytellers who will continue to delight listeners throughout coming history.

Ed and Alma made their debuts in the film industry by playing extras in "The Great Waldo Pepper". In 1979, The PBS channel in Austin had a feature on Ed directed by Pat Jasper. It featured Ed's stories and was filmed at the Bell Ranch in Caldwell County. He was also a guest storyteller for "On the Road with Charles Kuralt."

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<sup>9</sup> Bauman, Richard (1986)

<sup>10</sup> Mullen, Patrick

<sup>11</sup> Hime, Scott

Ed passed away in an Austin hospital with a brain tumor on April 1, 1986. Ed, his wife Alma (died 2002), and daughter Patricia (died May 2000) are buried in the Harwood Cemetery.

### **III. Significance**

“It is not at all a stretch to say that Ed was legendary, or that he changed the face of fishing along the Texas Coast. And that change was no small part of the development of an industry that brings millions of dollars to coast communities every year.” He was instrumental in developing an interest for traditional oral narratives that will live on in future generations. <sup>17</sup>

The scholars who recorded and wrote about Ed Bell recognized his cultural and historical significance as one of America's premier storytellers from an oral tradition that went back to colonial times and became especially important in the development of the identity and image of Texas. Folklorist Patrick B. Mullen said of him, "Ed Bell is a remarkable storyteller from Indianola, Texas. In a fast changing society influenced by urbanization and electronic media, he has maintained the art of the traditional American tall tale." His repertoire included not just tall tales but also historical stories, local character anecdotes, jokes, and personal experience narratives. Richard Bauman called Ed Bell a "virtuoso storyteller" and "a man of the liveliest intellect and imagination, fascinated by knowledge and always intellectually engaged with the world around him. His lively mind and fertile imagination animated his life and his art, shaping his reflections on experience, knowledge, and reality. His stories reflect these life concerns in

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<sup>17</sup> Hime, Scott

various ways."

His storytelling performances took place in widely different venues, from his fishing camp in Indianola to the National Mall in Washington DC where he represented Texas at the Smithsonian Institution 1976 Bicentennial American Folklife Festival, from folklore classes at the University of Texas in Austin to the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesboro, Tennessee. His storytelling lives on through a tape recording of his stories that accompanied the 2nd edition of "I Heard the Old Fishermen Say," (1988, Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press). Folklore students in classes at colleges across the country continue to hear Ed Bell tell his tales on tape and in a documentary film.

Finally, closer to home, he is still a legendary figure in and around Indianola, not just for his storytelling prowess, but as an entrepreneur who knew how to attract customers to Indianola and to his business. Ed once explained the success of his bait camp in this way, "I knew I had to be the Ed Bell at the fishing camp . . . when I was the Ed Bell it kept people coming . . . . If I could thrust myself out before them, and not for wise things, but for entertaining ideas, then they would flock back and bring their friends. Because they'd say, 'Listen, come down and listen to old Ed Bell tell those tall tales.' Well, you know, if I could get them to do that, I know that I would be doing better." Early on he knew the keys to tourism--give people entertainment as well a product and emphasize unique local attractions, in this case, not just the great fishing in the area but also a well-known character who represents the local community. As a great storyteller Ed Bell



created a memorable image of himself, the larger than life "salty old yarn spinner," and as he said, the customers kept flocking back. As "Mr. Indianola" he helped make the town and the area better known to the outside world, and his business and others nearby thrived as a result.

For all these reasons, then, he should be honored with a historical marker to remind people of the past and how it lives on in the present.

#### **IV. Documentation**

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