

TEXAS PLACES IN JOHN WILL HARRIS' LIFE
THEN AND NOW: A VIRTUAL JOURNEY
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INTRODUCTION

One can't help but be curious about the exotic names of the Texas towns in the early life of John Will Harris: Dripping Springs, Dilley, Cotulla. Harris was born in the first, raised in the second, called to the ministry in the third. What were these places like back then? What are they like now? This essay will take you back to the 19th century in each place. That's the easy part. There is lots of information from Harris' biographers on the early part of his life. There are encyclopedias such as *The Handbook of Texas* with its history of every county in Texas. There are original documents from the IAU *Museo Histórico* in San German.

Reporting on these towns today is trickier. Neither you nor I can take a month off, hop in a car and wander around the dusty roads of southwest Texas. But thanks to modern technology we can make a virtual visit. Instead of a car we will hop into a vehicle called the "internet"¹ and we will see the towns through the eyes of the people who live there now. We will be roving reporters, albeit virtual ones.

DRIPTING SPRINGS TEXAS

THEN:

Hays County is located in south central Texas. It is mostly hilly, tree-covered, ranch country (live oak, cedar, pecan, and mesquite). The county has numerous streams and springs. The Edwards Aquifer underlies the eastern area, where San Marcos Springs, the second largest in Texas, delivers over 102 million gallons daily.² One of the Edwards Aquifer springs is called Dripping Springs.

Dripping Springs is located close to a ridge (Pilot Point) that can be seen from a long distance and was used as a landmark by Indians, Texas Rangers, scouts, and early

¹ The main internet sources are citydata.com, YouTube and the town home page. Citydata.com is a national data collection service, covering over 74,000 towns and cities. It is basically a marketing service (15 million hits per month) and has every statistic imaginable on a town, including maps. A second source is the town's home page on the internet. All the towns in this essay have a homepage, which gives statistics and the local impression of what the good things are concerning the town. The home pages are of varying quality. Third and last is You Tube. This is the place to go for a "you were there" experiences. Each of the towns in this essay have dozens of YouTube videos which gives visual information recorded by the people who live there or are visiting there.

² Paul F. Cecil and Daniel P. Greene, "HAYS COUNTY," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hch11>), accessed 26 October, 2011. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

settlers. Dripping Springs, just north of Pilot Point, provided water and a convenient camping area for travelers and was an attractive area for settlers as early as 1845. The first settler in the area is thought to have been a man named Fawcett, who arrived about 1849. Other families began farming the valleys of Little Barton and Onion creeks in the early 1850s. In 1857 Dripping Springs opened what became a permanent post office³. A little later, the Harris family arrived in Dripping Springs. One of their five sons, John Will Harris, was born in a log house in Dripping Springs on January 12, 1876.⁴ By 1884 the town supported several businesses, including a steam gristmill and cotton gin, and a population of 130. But by then the Harris family had pulled up and left. The town was getting too crowded for them.

NOW:

Dripping Springs is close to Austin, the capitol of Texas. It is no longer a little cow town but almost an urban extension of Austin. Twenty four miles distant, it is an easy drive. Although many residents are employed in Austin, the area remains largely agricultural. Cattle, goats and sheep predominate, but many ranches raise exotic animals such as fallow deer, ostriches, llamas, elk, and buffalo.

The best time to visit Dripping Springs is during the Founders Day Parade held every year in April. Let's drop in and visit. The weather is warm and pleasant. The atmosphere is informal and relaxed. Jeans, shorts, T-shirts and baseball caps are the standard dress. The parade goers are decidedly Anglo – blond hair, blue eyes, fair skin. Not a Black or Hispanic face in the crowd – this is an Anglo town. The best place to view the parade is in front of Rogers Music Store. The parade starts. The skimpily dressed High School cheerleaders are in front with an oversized, furry, mock up of a tiger (the school mascot). The High School Band follows with snappy uniforms and polished brass (nine tubas!). Antique tractors are a big hit as they chug by. Endless amateur floats pass with children sprouting angel and pixie wings. A Scottish bagpipe group dressed in kilts is a welcome change. A huge Texas flag goes by. Then the crowd quiets down as a lone cowboy on a shaggy pony slowly trots by. He is dressed in a drab vest, shirt and trousers. He has a six shooter at his belt. He has a slouch hat on his head (not as big as Harris' famous ten gallon hat), is mustached, eyes straight forward. He is clearly old. The pony is totally uninterested in the crowd. The goal of the rider and the pony seems to be to head back to the herd and the day's roundup. John Will Harris would have liked this old cowboy.

We track down the mayor, Todd Purcell, who is eager to tell us about the town. He calls it "The Little Town with a Big History". The town water tower also calls it "Gateway to the Hill Country". The population is 1508 inhabitants and growing fast. The internet is full of Austin realtors advertising new houses in and around Dripping Springs. These are

³ Daniel P. Greene, "DRIPPING SPRINGS, TX," Handbook of Texas Online (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hld36>), accessed 26 October 2011. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

⁴ Riding & Roping: The Memoirs of John Will Harris. Edited by C. Virginia Matters. Inter American University Press, San German, Puerto Rico, 1977, p. 4 [hereafter cited as Riding & Roping].

large, upscale, ranch style houses with huge yards (one advertiser says “Yes, you can own a horse”). The town’s single downtown street is lined with quaint yellow sandstone store fronts. The mayor calls this the “historic district”. There is a farmers market, several restaurants, and an annual Chicken Cookoff. Every town in Texas has its own specialty Bar BQ and Dripping Springs is no exception. Outside the town is a museum located on the grounds of a restored 1854 house which had belonged to a Dr. Pound, one of the earliest settlers.

Our next stop is the High School. You can tell a lot about a town by its high school. A large sign announces the High School with its motto “Expect More Achieve More”. Realtors call it a “sought after school district”. The facilities are large and ultra modern. Not just high tech classrooms but a huge gym and behind the school a large stadium. As in most towns in Texas, the football season is the main entertainment for a large part of the year. This is a “Friday Night Lights” town. They play nearby teams like Cedar Park and Round Rock. Too bad John Will Harris never had the advantage of a school when he lived there.

Oh yes, one more thing about Dripping Springs. Willie Nelson owns a ranch nearby. In March 1972 Willie and some of his country music buddies held a country music festival at the ranch. It was so successful that they decided to organize a one day music event on July 4, 1973. Thus was born Willie Nelson's famous Fourth of July Picnic, an extravaganza that continued all through the 1970's.⁵

DILLEY TEXAS

THEN:

When the Harris family left Dripping Springs they headed south, past San Antonio, to open range country in Frio County. It was wild, ranching country. Stray longhorns were driven to Kansas up the nearby Chisholm Trail. John Will grew up there on his family's ranch near Dilley. He received what little education he had there. As he described it later: “school lasted only three months and the racehorse course of instruction was in reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic”⁶

The community was originally called Darlington, after a local landowner who settled in the area in the mid-1860s. There was no town in the area until the International-Great Northern Railroad from San Antonio to Mexico was built. At the time Darlington had a general store and several dwellings. The community was sometimes called Ford because of a nearby Frio River crossing of an old Spanish trail, known as Rocky Ford. The I-GN built its first railroad depot, siding, and stock pen near the crossing. Paul and Alex Meersheidt of San Antonio purchased and platted land surrounding the railroad depot and

⁵ Laurie E. Jasinski, "WILLIE NELSON'S FOURTH OF JULY PICNIC," Handbook of Texas Online (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/xfw02>), accessed October 26, 2011. Published by the Texas State Historical Association

⁶ RIDING & ROPING, p.3

laid out a town with the assistance of a local rancher, W. D. Harris (John Will's family?). A Darlington post office had been established in 1885. In 1890 Jim McAllister laid the first telegraph line in Frio County, from San Antonio to Darlington, which that year had an estimated population of fifty and a general store owned by J. N. Harris (John Will's family?) The post office was named Darlington at least until 1892.

In 1896 the name of the community was officially changed to Dilley in honor of George M. Dilley, an official of the railroad. The townspeople have an anecdote about the name change. They say "Dilley is the only town in Texas to be named after the first man to step off a train". The first man in this case was George M. Dilley of Palestine, Texas. George was the president of Dilley Foundries - the firm that made the rails for the International and Great Northern Railroad, or at least the portion that went to Laredo. It is not known if a Mr. Darlington stepped off an earlier train.⁷

In 1896 Darlington/Dilley had an estimated population of fifty. By that time the Harris family had moved further south to even wilder country – Cotulla, Texas.

NOW:

Dilley is located on the Missouri Pacific Railroad (the old I-GN) and Interstate Highway Thirty Five (I35), sixteen miles southwest of Pearsall in far southern Frio County. Dilley is not hard to get to. If the Interstate went straight you would drive right through the middle of Dilley, but fortunately the Interstate curves around the town then straightens out again (the railroad, does run right through the middle of town). Interstate I35 is one of the most heavily traveled highways in the US. I35 runs from Mexico, through Texas and the US midwest, to Canada. Little wonder that one of the most widely advertised employment opportunities in Dilley is for truck drivers.

In the twentieth century Dilley experienced on-and-off growth and development. By 1914 the town had an estimated 1,000 residents, a State Bank, a weekly newspaper, a cotton gin, seven general stores, and two hotels. Dilley had become a shipping center for cattle, vegetables, and fruit. In 1928 a macadamized highway in Frio County was completed from Dilley to Eagle Pass on the Mexican border. By 1929 Dilley had an estimated population of 1,600. Then a combination of the Great Depression and the boll weevil destroyed the cotton industry and the town actually lost population in the 1930's.

Then Dilley rebounded after World War II. The population rose steadily during the 1950s and 1960s, to an estimated 2,318 by 1967. At that time Dilley was the county's second largest town and a commercial shipping point for peanuts, watermelons, and cattle. Oil exploration began in the region using the horizontal-drilling technology developed in the late 1980s. By 2000 the population had grown to 3,674⁸.

⁷ Ruben E. Ochoa, "DILLEY, TX," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hgd06>), accessed November 04, 2011. Published by the Texas State Historical Association

⁸ Ibid

Dilley is decidedly a Hispanic town (69.7% of the population)⁹. Dilley is not a rich town like Dripping Springs. Its economic stats rank below the Texas average in almost everything: 35.8% of the population below the poverty line; house value significantly below the state average; percentage of population with a bachelor's degree significantly below state average.

Let's visit. Approaching the town, along I35, the land is flat, arid, covered with scrub growth, a far cry from the hill country of Dripping Springs. Yet it has its own kind of beauty and a feeling of spaciousness and freedom. You can see for miles. Entering the town, the main street has a bank and a few commercial buildings. The tallest building in town is two stories. The Dilley Feed and Grain Company operates a large grain elevator and silos, and is rumored to be haunted. Most of the employment is in the gas and oil industry. But ranching and agriculture is important too. Dilley is said to grow the best watermelons in Texas. The welcome sign at the entrance to town say "Welcome to Dilley: a Slice of the Good Life". There is a large statue in the town park of a green watermelon, half cut away to show its delicious red meat and black seeds.

We meet 86-year old Uncle Ted, born in 1923 in Dilley, Texas. He's a hardworking simple cowboy who talks to us from the tailgate of his pickup truck. He remembers when a movie costs a quarter. His Dad would give him fifty cents and he could take his girl to the movies and buy a ten cent hamburger and a five cent soda pop.

As in Dripping Springs, the school is the best gage of the city. The school is just off I35 (in fact the whole town can be seen from the interstate). There are 207 students in the High School and 433 in the elementary school. The school is spacious, modern and super neat. The library is well equipped and quiet with kids studying. We stop by a classroom. Every face but one is Hispanic and we are introduced to kids with names like Rodriguez, Alvarez and Ramirez. Hispanic, yes, but also typical American teenagers, laughing, joking, full of energy. Oddly, no Spanish is heard, only English. They apparently speak Spanish at home. There is no hint of a Spanish accent in their speech. Also their English has none of the Texas twang that we find in Dripping Springs. Their English is crystal clear, standard English, like one hears in Indiana and the Midwest.

Outside the school there are tennis courts and a huge dish antenna that furnishes internet connection for the school. Further back is the ubiquitous football stadium and track. The large gym is the site of pep rallies before the game. The cheerleading team is snappily dressed in the school's purple and white colors with the school's wolf emblem embossed on the front. The cheerleaders are all Hispanic young women except for one blond girl. The football team plays nearby Pearsall and other small town teams but their main rival is Cotulla in the next county. It's Friday Nigh Lights all over again.

⁹ DILLEY TEXAS <http://www.city-data.com/city/Dilley-Texas.html#ixzz1cmp8OBKI> [unless otherwise noted all statistics for Dilley are from this site]

COTULLA

THEN

Cotulla, the county seat of La Salle County, is twenty-seven miles north of Encinal on U.S. Interstate Highway 35 in the northwestern part of the county. The town was named for Joseph Cotulla, a Polish immigrant who arrived in La Salle County in 1868 and established a large ranching operation. After learning that the International-Great Northern Railroad intended to lay tracks in La Salle County, he worked to establish the town of Cotulla. In 1881, he donated 120 acres of his land to the railroad, and in 1882 a depot was built. In 1883, the town was granted a post office and several new buildings had been constructed, including a general store, a hotel, and a jail. By 1890 it had a population of 1,000, three general stores, two weekly newspapers, two churches, a saloon, a bank, a corn mill, and a cotton gin.

Cotulla developed a reputation as a rough place during its early years. According to one story, railroad conductors announced the town by calling out, "Cotulla! Everybody get your guns ready." Three sheriffs and nineteen residents are said to have lost their lives in gunfights in the town.¹⁰

John Will Harris was sixteen years old when the family moved into this wild and rough area. He described the atmosphere in these words: "It never occurred to me that a man could die a natural death.... Most men died in the smoke of a Colt revolver. One man was condemned to death by a court – the first time a court ever did such a thing – and was hanged in the open jail yard of Cotulla where everybody could see it well done."¹¹ Though a teenager, John Will carried a gun. When he first applied for admission to the local Cibolo Presbyterian Church (the only organized church south of the Frio River), he was turned down because he was "wild and would dance". Harris admitted : "I had carried a Colt, loved ... to shoot and never could see the sin in dancing".¹²

John Will's father owned a sheep ranch several miles out of town. John Will and his brothers herded the sheep on horseback and slept outdoors much of the time. In this desolate environment John Will had a dramatic religious experience that changed his life. "I was sleeping in a camp with brother Charlie, surrounded by 3,000 sleeping sheep, I dreamed I saw God in the rifts of the clouds.... I awoke frightened and shocked into serious thought."¹³

But civilized institutions were also evolving in Cotulla. By 1885 Cotulla had a school enrolling 135 students, and by 1886 the town had a debating society that discussed such

¹⁰ John Leffler, "COTULLA, TX," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hgc16>), accessed November 06, 2011. Published by the Texas State Historical Association

¹¹ RIDING AND ROPING p. 3

¹² Ibid p. 7

¹³ Ibid p. 6

topics as "Should the education of a woman be co-equal of that of a man?" By 1892 Cotulla had a hotel, four general stores, three saloons, a meat market, two grocery stores, and daily stage service to supplement its railroad connection. But much of this progress was passing John Will Harris by (especially the school). In January 1895 he caught a cattle train heading north to search out and attend Park College and begin a long road that would eventually lead him to his life's work in Puerto Rico.

NOW

Cotulla's economy has always been largely based on sheep and cattle ranching. By 1914 the community had 1,800 residents, three hotels, two banks, two restaurants, an ice plant, an electric power plant, and a movie theater. In the mid-1920s new elementary and high schools were built. By 1931 Cotulla had a population estimated at 3,175 and seventy-five businesses. The population remained relatively stable and perhaps actually grew during the 1930s. A free public library was built in 1937, and by 1941 Cotulla had 3,633 residents and eighty businesses. In 1947 fifty-four businesses were reported. In 1949 the town built its first airport. During the early 1950s the discovery of oil in the area helped to bolster the economy. By 1971 Cotulla had an estimated 3,814 people and forty-seven businesses.

In 1974 the mayor of Cotulla was of Mexican descent, as were several members of the town council and two-thirds of the population. Since Cotulla had no industry, however, many residents lived in the town only part-time and seasonally migrated north to look for work. In 1990 the population of Cotulla was 3,694 and in 2000 it was 3,614.¹⁴ The closest city of any size is Laredo, Texas, 64 miles away on the Mexican border (population 176,000). The closest large city is San Antonio, Texas, (population 1,144,000) 83 miles to the north.

Let's visit.

Cotulla, like Dilley, is located on I35. A bypass curves around the town otherwise the highway would cut right through the city. The railroad, much older than the Interstate, does indeed pass through the city, cutting it in half. Turning off the Interstate, a large cement sign at the entrance to the town announces "Welcome to Cotulla, established in 1882, a Main Street town". The bottom of the sign says, "The place you have been hunting for", apparently a reference to the excellent hunting in the region especially on the huge ranches in the area. It's a one street town, with old buildings from the 1920's and 1930's lining the main street, reminiscent of hundreds of small towns all over Texas. The Stockman's National Bank presents a more modern façade. There is a Brush County Museum showing artifacts from the old ranching days. The mayor's office and town government building is set off the main street facing a large "plaza" with benches, a gezebo, a few plants and a deserted look. Side streets are dusty with brush type trees, except for a few stately palms. Houses are small, many in disrepair, several mobile

¹⁴ John Leffler, "COTULLA, TX," *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hgc16>), accessed November 06, 2011. Published by the Texas State Historical Association

homes line the streets. Churches are well represented – all the Protestant denominations plus the Catholic Church and Knights of Columbus. Modern health care is provided by South Texas Rural Health Services (John Will Harris had tried to establish a public health clinic in the area in 1947).

Cotulla is a poor town – 25.7% of the residents fall below the poverty level. Compared with other Texas towns, Cotulla ranks below state average in median house value; below average in number of college students and significantly below the state average of persons with a bachelor's degree. The per capita income for the city is \$10,856; unemployment averages 8.4%. There are some statistics in which Cotulla excels. The foreign born population percentage is significantly above the state average (Mexican immigrants). The Hispanic population is significantly above the state average. Cotulla is a Hispanic town -- 83.56% of the population.¹⁵

A welcome addition to construction in the town is the new Ciena Hotels/Suites just completed in 2011. The groundbreaking speech in July was given by the Honorable Joe Lozano (note, Hispanic), the Mayor of Cotulla.

What does Cotulla do for entertainment? Musical groups often give concerts in the plaza – “ranchero” music seems to be the favorite. Rodeos are held in the outlying ranches. George Strait has a ranch near Cotulla. Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon.com has acquired a 25,000-acre ranch in Cotulla. Hunting is popular – deer, quail, wild hogs, even rabbits. A wild hog cookoff is held each year (John Will Harris is said to have brought Texas hogs [javalina] back to the campus in San German). Game is so plentiful the town is full of stories of two deer or two hogs or two rabbits brought down with one shot. Guns can be seen everywhere (John Will Harris would have felt comfortable). But hunting is mostly for rich non-residents. Josh Beckett, pitcher for the Boston Red Sox, owns Herradura Ranch, a 7,000-acre deer-hunting enclave located approximately 28 miles from Cotulla.

But like most small Texas towns, the real action is at the High School, a large, modern complex south of town. We should note that one of Coyulla's claims to fame is that former U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson taught public school in Cotulla in 1928 for one year. A letter home to his mother asked her to send 200 tubes of toothpaste. Lyndon was already exhibiting the concerns that made him a great president – education and awareness for the needy.

The teenagers in the High School are typical – tee shirts, faded jeans ripped at the knees. Everyone looks Hispanic. But curiously, just as at Dilley, Spanish is not heard and the English is clear midwestern without any trace of the Texas twang. This may be an Hispanic town but the school kids are 100% American.

The football and track stadium behind the school is emaculately kept. The football team plays neigboring towns, some even smaller than Cotulla. The school colors are purple and black and the school logo is (appropriately) “cowboys”. The nine young cheerleaders,

¹⁵ <http://www.city-data.com/city/Cotulla-Texas.html#ixzz1cud77s8m> consulted March 3, 2012.

dressed in purple, are all (Hispanic) smiles. Everyones turns out for the games (Friday Night Lights again). The High School marching band, 50+ members, four tubas, is snappily dressed and know how to put on a good show. A recent half-time show was entitled “A Night in Old Mexico” and was a huge success..

The High School seems to be especially talented in music with several student musical groups who perform off season. But there’s a different twist – the music has a decided Hispanic flavor. Cotulla High School’s *Mariachi Cotuleño* placed 1st in the National High School Mariachi Competition in San Antonio, Texas in 2009. A high school with a mariachi band? Now that’s southwest Texas!

Postscript

In 1937, with the university on solid footing, Harris and his wife left Puerto Rico and moved back to Dilley, Texas, where he dedicated himself to running a cattle ranch. The ranch, Guajalote, covered some 2,500 acres. But the educator in him couldn’t stop. Immediately he had a new project – a Back to the Farm Movement, teaching young Texans proper use and care of the land. He envisioned an educational complex of an administrative center, a community house, stores, shops, stables and a bank. The surrounding land would become model farms and ranches.¹⁶ It sounded very much like a new Poly. The project never came to fruition, possibly because of the onset of the war.

But by 1947 Harris had another project in the making, this time in public health. Harris incorporated a non profit entity at Dilley, Texas, called the Southwest Texas Clinic. He set out to raise funds just like in the early days of Poly. One of his flyers said: “The green light is on and we are off. Give us your prayers, your kind words and moral support, and at least a share in the 15% allowable as deductible for your income tax”.¹⁷ This project also did not reach fruition. Harris died in Texas on June 14, 1956, as the result of an automobile accident.

¹⁶ PARK ALUMNIAD, “Dr. J. Will Harris Returns from the Presidency of Polytechnic Institute of Puerto Rico [Park College, 1937] p.4 on digital file at the Colección John Will Harris Inter American University, San German, Puerto Rico, accessed at <http://old.sg.inter.edu/revistas/museo/file1/225.pdf> 3 March 2012

¹⁷ Digital file at the Colección John Will Harris Inter American University, San German, Puerto Rico, accessed at <http://old.sg.inter.edu/revistas/museo/file1/344.pdf> 3 March 2012

