



STATE CHAMPION

WITH TWO NEW BOOKS IN 2018, TEXAS STATE HISTORIAN BILL O'NEAL IS BURNISHING AN ALREADY EPIC FRONTIER LEGACY.



By Chuck Thompson

LIKE SO MANY THINGS ABOUT TEXAS, IF YOU WANT TO UNDERSTAND Bill O'Neal, you've got to understand high school football. A retired history professor and the current Texas state historian, the 76-year-old O'Neal got his start in education in the late 1960s as head football coach at "little bitty" Anna and Waskom high schools. Career record: a not-too-shabby 14-5-1.

"I sure had that coaching work ethic," O'Neal says. "You coach all seven days a week, you coach in your sleep. When I transferred over to college work [Panola College, 1970–2011], I couldn't believe all the free time I had on my hands. Golly Pete, I've got evenings and weekends free?"

O'Neal put the open hours to use, writing enough books — more than 40 by his count — on Texas history and other topics to make him one of the most prolific published writers in the West. In 2007, *True West Magazine* named him the West's "Best Living Nonfiction Writer." In 2012, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Wild West History Association.

The descendant of a great-grandfather who drove cattle on the Chisholm Trail and a grandmother who arrived in Texas at age 7 in 1881 by covered wagon, O'Neal writes about real-life gunfighters, outlaws, and frontier culture.

"There's nothing more dramatic than life-and-death conflict," he says. "When you dress it up in cowboy boots and Winchesters and big hats, it has considerable audience appeal."

O'Neal is publishing two books in 2018. *Frontier Forts of Texas* is an illustrated history of military forts built mostly in the second half of the 19th century. *John Chisum: Frontier Cattle King* is a biography of the legendary Texas and New Mexico cattleman who died in 1884.

The garrulous O'Neal is a first-rate storyteller. But true to the old coach that still bangs around inside him, it's the hours of work he puts in to get the details right that have earned him a position among true Texas legends.



Cowboys & Indians: Your book on John Chisum is one of the most vibrant biographies you've done. What made Chisum different from his cattle king contemporaries?

Bill O'Neal: His business model was the open range. All those other guys acquired titles to land and built large ranches and began to fence them in. Richard King acquired about three-quarter million acres before he died.

Chisum didn't want to be encumbered buying titles to land and tying up his capital. If he used his capital, he paid unusually large crews and bought cattle. He had one trail drive after another. It sort of connected with his nature. He never minded moving farther and farther west. It got into his blood.

C&I: Didn't ranching on unclaimed rangeland expose him to all sorts of dangers?

O'Neal: When he got out to New Mexico, golly Pete, there was 27,000 square miles of Lincoln County that was virtually empty, with no law and vacant ranges. There was a sheriff and three or four deputies, but that was for 27,000 miles. He could be really tough when he had to be. These cowboys began to call him Judge Lynch. But that was not his manner. He liked to deal with people on a friendly basis. He was a gregarious and fun-loving and genial person.

C&I: How'd he manage to hold off raids from rustlers, banditos, and Natives in such a lawless place?

O'Neal: He always had a bunch of pretty rough guys working for him. I know someone in mid-management in the oil fields in West Texas. A couple years ago I asked about the kind of crews he got out there. He said, "We don't ask many questions. These guys come out, they might have prison records or rap sheets. We don't ask about that stuff. They don't offer it. We just need guys to go out there and do that dirty work."

That's the kind of guys Chisum hired. Who else is gonna be out there? Somehow he was able to control them. I don't know of any rancher breaking out a keg of whiskey in the middle of a cattle drive, but he did it. He paid decent wages, he didn't ask many questions, and had a bunch of tough gunmen behind him.

C&I: Was Chisum a good businessman?

O'Neal: He had an affinity for it from Day One. Very early on he got \$2,000, and for that he bought a thousand cows and somehow persuaded the owner to deliver them to his ranch. He was pretty much a wizard at that.

He had a philosophical nature. He lost an entire herd of horses twice to Indians. Then he lost an entire herd after he delivered it to his brother. He took his first herd of 900 longhorns to New Mexico and they paid him in bad paper. He just shrugged off all that stuff. He had the temperament to take reverses in stride.

C&I: In Frontier Forts of Texas, you write that one-third of Army enlistees during the Indian Wars deserted. What was the main reason?

O'Neal: A big part of that desertion problem was [the Army] enlisted guys for five years, not two years. A great many enlistees were immigrants right off the boat. They didn't have a job, they didn't speak the language, they didn't know anybody. A big part of their idea was to enlist and learn the language and go from there. After two or three years they got the language down. And a private was paid only \$13 a month—five years of \$13 a month?

And, yes, your life was at risk. But more often it was the boredom thing. Those guys went out there and they were used for construction duty to build all those forts. They signed up to be soldiers and wound up being cheap construction labor.



C&I: Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, William I. Sherman, J.E.B. Stuart—why were the Texas frontier forts such a proving ground for so many Civil War figures?

O'Neal: When Jefferson Davis took over [as secretary of war] in 1853, he was farsighted enough to see the Army needed a cavalry regiment like the Texas Rangers to fight all these horseback Indians—Comanche and Kiowa—out of these forts. He built up the Second U.S. Cavalry Regiment [headquartered at Fort Mason].

The word got out that this was going to be a fighting unit. The best I can explain is it had the same appeal as the SEALs do today. The guys are in it 'cause they really wanna get after it. It wasn't just these young junior officers right out of West Point. It was also the top noncoms, the really good sergeants, who really wanted to see some action.

That regiment was about 700 strong. They saw action throughout the 1850s, and during that time they taught the rest of the Army how to fight horseback Indians all over the West. It was a fighting outfit, an elite outfit. They, of course, weren't as well-trained and couldn't do the superman things the SEALs do, but it was the same kind of guys who got in it. They relished the role.

C&I: Why were there more battles between Anglos and Indians in Texas than anywhere else?

O'Neal: There were twice as many Indian combats in Texas as any other state or territory. The frontier Indian [combat lasted] a decade or so in most places. In Texas, it went on about 60 years. The last Indian combat in West Texas was in 1881.

A big part of it was the actual size of the state. Texas had a series of frontiers. The other thing was the Indians. My God, those Comanche and Kiowa were ferocious. It took a couple decades to learn how to fight them, and even then, they just kept coming.

C&I: *The Civil War was also a factor, right?*

O'Neal: They just about had the [Natives] on the run, but when the Civil War started they were able to make a comeback. Quickly they noticed soldiers were no longer in those forts. From 1861 to 1867 they pushed the frontier back 100 miles. It was 1867 before the Army went back out to the frontier.

That was the particular Texas problem. In the Civil War, we were the only one of the Confederate states with a frontier. But the Confederacy needed manpower so badly they drafted that Texas frontier regiment into the Confederate Army.

The occupation troops in Reconstruction wouldn't allow us to form a Texas Rangers regiment—the Northern government wasn't gonna let us have 1,000 armed Texas Rangers! So [the violence] went on longer in Texas for a variety of reasons, the Civil War being part of it, but also the quality of the fighting Indians.



OPPOSITE PAGE: John Chisum.
THIS PAGE: Officers' Row at Fort Davis.

stable for them and everything. Fort Lancaster had a lot of them.

They were very ornery and the soldiers hated them. They stunk and were hard to deal with. But these things turned out to be great pack animals.

C&I: *So why aren't there camels all over the West today?*

O'Neal: It was a very successful experiment, except the Civil War comes along. After the war, for the federal Army, anything having to do with Jefferson Davis was anathema. They dropped the camel experiment at that point and would not resume it.

C&I: *It wasn't all heroics. In 1836, Col. James Fannin surrendered at well-provisioned Fort Defiance and got his 400 men wiped out a couple weeks after the siege at the Alamo.*

O'Neal: When I was growing up in Texas, Fannin was still celebrated. A grade school in our town was named after him. But later on, people began to realize, "Hey, he had the biggest force in Texas and was defending a much better fortification than the Alamo, and he surrendered and blundered around and man, was he lousy." And the guy had spent a couple years at West Point!

He squandered the best force that we had and got himself and his men killed in the process. They made a hero out of this guy! When Santa Anna killed his men, they made a martyr out of this blundering fool. Everybody knows better now.

C&I: *Jefferson Davis also started the U.S. Camel Corps. How'd that work out?*

O'Neal: It was successful. Davis said, "Here we are in a desert in Texas and New Mexico and Arizona. Camels can carry more and go longer than horses and mules and without water and can eat almost anything." He imported camels [from Africa] to the Texas coast and brought them up to Fort Inge and built a special camel

C&I: *What other changes in Texas strike you as significant over your lifetime?*

O'Neal: The Texas when I was born was only a fourth of the population it is now. There were about 6.5 million people here at that time. Now it's 28 million. The Texas I grew up in was very rural.

The state industrialized and urbanized like crazy after World War II. So there is an urban Texas, and it is far more influential. I continue to identify with the rural parts. I recall talking to my grandmother who had the pioneer experience of coming to Texas in a wagon train in 1881. My dad was the son of a pioneer.

C&I: *What's the least Texas thing about you?*

O'Neal: I'm kinda Texan to the bone, I'm afraid, except maybe I am aware of a world outside of Texas, which some people aren't. [Laughs.] I celebrate that. I never limited my travel or writing career to just Texas.

C&I: *What's the best thing about being the Texas state historian?*

O'Neal: I spread the Texas history gospel. I adapt my programs depending on the audience, but one of the things I've always done, I always point out that Texas has the richest and most colorful history of any state or territory in the union. It's been absolutely the greatest gig in the world.

Visit cowboystindians.com for Bill O'Neal's favorite Texas and western movies and recommendations of Lone Star State frontier forts worth visiting.