

Tale of Two Cotullas

Descendants recall how this Brush Country town was tamed.

BY MARY O. PARKER



Bill Cotulla has a riddle for his dinner guests. “What three men — all with a connection to the town of Cotulla, Texas — have been on the cover of *Time* magazine?”

We practically shout our first guess out in unison. “LBJ!” That one’s easy because of the well-known fact that President Lyndon B. Johnson taught in Cotulla in 1928, when schools were still segregated. In fact, when Johnson signed the Higher Education Act of 1965, he cited his experience teaching Mexican-American children at Cotulla’s Welhausen School in his speech.

With a sly smile, Cotulla looks around the table. “Yes. Now, who else?” The last direct descendant of Joseph Cotulla is tickled that he’s stumped us.

The *Time* magazine riddle represents just a sample of the treasure in Bill Cotulla’s chest of anecdotes — no surprise considering that

Cotulla’s great-grandfather, Joseph Cotulla, founded the town in the late 1800s. Joe, as Bill refers to him, belonged to the wave of Silesians who came to Texas from the small corner of the Prussian Empire that we now call Poland. Accompanied by his aunt and widowed mother, Joe Cotulla arrived in Galveston on Jan. 9, 1857, at the age of 12.

Joe Cotulla’s presence seems to join us tonight as we savor our brisket, as does his likeness — a painting of him hangs over the mesquite-manteled fireplace and keeps watch over the house in which he died on Aug. 17, 1923. Cotulla history — from photographs of real cowhands to the 1856 revocation of Joe Cotulla Prussian citizenship to an oilskin map of La Salle County — fills every nook of the room. Everywhere I look I find signs of how the town and this family have shaped and been shaped by the tamar



A cutout shows the original wall, left, of the Cotulla family homestead. Right, history fills the walls of Bill Cotulla's home. Joseph Cotulla, opposite and below, founded the town.

of the South Texas Brush Country.

Before posing his riddle, Bill Cotulla told how original mortar, made of goat's milk and ashes, still holds the sandstone blocks of this ranch house in place.

"The part we're in was where my great-grandparents, their in-laws and their nine children lived with all their possessions," he says. At that, we scan the small space that barely houses the eight of us. "He built it in about 1865 to 1867, but we didn't buy the land from Sam Maverick, who was from San Antonio, until sometime around 1875 to 1877. No one really knows why the house was built before we owned the land."

When I ask how Joe Cotulla came up with the money to buy this land and the rest of the 20,000 or so acres Maverick sold him, Bill Cotulla chuckles in his soft, understated way.

"That's always been the question," he says. "How does a poor immigrant come up with the money to buy all that land? When I was in the Army I was stationed in Maryland for a little while, and you know, I'd have all this time on my hands, so one evening we were playing around with a Ouija board, and I asked it, 'Where did Joseph Cotulla get the money to buy the ranch?'" Cotulla pauses here for effect. "It spelled out 'R-O-B-B-E-D,'" he says.

"I've always thought that might be true," Cotulla says, "since Joseph was in the Union Army stationed in southern Louisiana in 1864 about the same time there was a major robbery in the region." Joe Cotulla served as a private under Capt. Adolph Zoeller in Company C, 1st Regiment of Texas Cavalry Volunteers.

Regardless of how it was bought and paid for, this homestead, which the family has always simply called the Cotulla Ranch, now bears a second moniker: A Texas Century Ranch. To receive such designation, the Family Land Heritage Program, through the Texas Department of Agriculture, requires continuous operation and

ownership of a ranch by the same family for at least 100 years.

That leaves a lot of history to uncover, as Cotulla found out when he joined his father, William Paul Cotulla (who died in 1995), on the land in 1990. Soon after, he took on the monumental job of restoring the main house and its outbuildings, including what the family calls the "goat-herder's shack," a structure moved to Cotulla from the Crystal City internment camp where it had housed a Japanese family during World War II. "It's sad to think of a whole family living in that tiny thing," Cotulla says, a serious tone coloring his voice.

"When I was fixing up the ranch house, there was some excitement when we found a trapdoor in the floor," he recounts. "My family also owned a home in Mexico City, which ultimately was confiscated by the Mexican government. It used to be you could take a train from Cotulla to Mexico City. Anyway, they'd bought a lot of opals down there and brought them back with them. Aunt Mary [one of Joe's daughters who took over the ranch in later years] was really superstitious, and when someone told her it was bad luck to have opals if they weren't your birthstone, well, she buried them. She never would tell anyone where, so when we found that trapdoor

we thought we'd found those opals, but when we opened it up there was nothing there but signs that a little animal was living inside." He shakes his head. "We haven't found them yet."

Nowadays, at just one section (640 acres), the ranch is not nearly as big as it once was, but the property — rich in mesquite, huisache and cenizo, and even, surprisingly, live oaks — still butts up against the Nueces River. It also adjoins the Nueces Strip, the area between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande.

In the 1840s, the Nueces Strip gained fame as a refuge for renegades because of the border dispute between the Republic of Texas and Mexico. Neither country had much control over what went on there. In the time between the Texas Revolution and the Mexican American War, lawlessness reigned on the part of both the law and the outlaws.



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"Things were done differently back then," Cotulla explains. "For example, an outlaw named California Jack Millet headed down from San Antonio and was caught by the sheriff and his men. In one day, they hung him and then buried him under the railroad tracks. No judge. No jury."

This part of the state continued to be a rough place in the late 1800s, and reportedly, when trains stopped in Cotulla, the conductor was known to holler, "Cotulla! Everybody get your guns ready."

In 1881, Joe Cotulla gave the International-Great Northern Railroad 120 acres of the current town site in an effort to increase the railroad's role in the region. His efforts to entice the railroad worked; ultimately, Cotulla became one of South Texas' major ranching and agricultural hubs. Meanwhile, Cotulla, the man, became one of its most prominent inhabitants.

"Now, a lot of people don't know about it, but there used to be two towns where the one town of Cotulla is today," Bill Cotulla tells us as he butters a slice of cornbread. "The original town of Cotulla was to be the county seat, but some of the elected officials wanted one they could control, so they founded the town of LaSalle, which was where Florita Plaza is now. But a vote in 1883 settled it and Cotulla became the seat of LaSalle County."

Apparently, this part of Texas also once harbored two Josephs with the Polish surname Kotula. "According to history books the two Joes met at the famous Menger Hotel in San Antonio to flip a coin to see who'd get to keep the original spelling and who would spell it with a C." Then, with a grin, Cotulla adds, "But, Aunt Mary always said they'd really met at the Buckhorn Saloon."

Between bites of the delicious jalapeño hominy he made him-

self, Cotulla jumps into another tale.

"They say that mesquite corral out there is where they kept some of the wild horses from one of the biggest mustang roundups in Texas history. I heard that about 5,000 horses were captured to send to the Argentine cavalry when the Nueces Strip became known as the Wild Horse Desert."

That's certainly a far cry from the situation tonight when said corral houses exactly one miniature horse named Fluffy and a three-legged, formerly feral hog named Tripod.

He shrugs. "You grow up on a ranch and you hear stories and you don't know where they come from or even if they're true."

With that caveat and a twinkle of the eye, the last of the Cotullas asks his guests, "Do you give up?" We're confused for a moment. Give up? On wild horses? On the meal? We've remained so enthralled that we've forgotten all about the riddle, but once we realize what he refers to our heads nod collectively.

"The second man who was on the cover of *Time* magazine and had strong ties to Cotulla was Edward M. House, whose family owned 97 sections in LaSalle County." Cotulla says that House served as "a kind of Karl Rove for President Wilson" and not only advised the 28th president on foreign policy issues, but also helped him write the Fourteen Points at the end of World War I.

Finally, over pie, Cotulla provides our last piece of the puzzle.

"The third was Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon.com," Cotulla says. "He spent most of his summers on his maternal grandfather's 24,000-acre Cotulla ranch."

Bezos was featured on the cover in 1999 as the magazine's Person of the Year because, like so much else with a Cotulla connection, he made history. ★