

A Beer Helps Create “Texas Chic”

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

Scott Sosebee is Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at sosebeem@sfasu.edu.

Learn more about ETHA by visiting the website at www.easttexashistorical.org.

Although today’s craft beer revolution has made positive inroads, the brutal truth is that most beers—and especially American beers brewed at the largest breweries—have the same generic taste, and “delicious” is usually not the adjective that most use to describe them. The mainstream beers tend to rely on advertising, image, and packaging to gain consumers. Budweiser built an empire on being the “King of Beers,” Clydesdales, and distinctive red and white cans; Schlitz—in the 1960s and 70s—became the biggest selling American beer because it was the “beer that made Milwaukee famous,” and Coors took America by storm by actually limiting its availability to the western states and somehow making Americans think that “cold filtering” made beer different and more tasty. Beer is perhaps the most successful of all American marketing shticks.

Lone Star Beer is a perfect example of how marketing makes a beer. Lone Star was a distinctly Texan beer at its inception, one that began in the Texas “German Belt” under the eyes of a son of German immigrants, Harry Jersig. The head of Lone Star had carefully cultivated the image of his beer as one that was inseparable with the mythical Texas of the 19th century, and he also made himself to fit that image. Jersig was a big-game hunter, and quintessentially “Texan.” His beer did well in Texas, but it had no real presence outside the state.

Lone Star, by the 1960s, become associated with a staid, older, more traditional Texas, one that did not translate as well to the new, increasingly urban, Texas. The national brands were killing its market share, even in its home state. Jersig first brought in Barry Sullivan, a native of Canada who had helped to turn Falstaff Beer of St. Louis into a national brand. Sullivan knew beer, and he knew Texas since he had been a part of Falstaff acquiring two small Texas breweries in Galveston and Houston.

Sullivan understood also that Texans—and beer drinkers—were changing. For years, beer was the drink of choice for the working class, the rural farmer, or the denizens of small cities. Its drinkers were traditional, usually conservative, and they identified with the past. But the 1960s were the age of Woodstock, hippies, protest, and “drugs, sex, and rock-and-roll,” a consumer base that was distinctly not rural and conservative. When Sullivan saw news reports about the Woodstock Music Festival in the summer of 1969, he knew that he had found his new consumer—the same young people reveling in the mud of Max Yasgur’s dairy farm.

Sullivan’s Texas Woodstock moment came when he saw Michael Martin Murphey perform at Willie Nelson’s second Fourth of July Picnic. Murphey, the self-proclaimed “Cosmic Cowboy” had long hair, a scraggly beard, and his music was part of the new sound that was becoming known as “Outlaw Country,” music that appealed as much to the hippies and the urban youth as it did to the honky-tonkers and the rural folk. Murphy was the personification, wearing his western hat over his hippie length hair and guzzling a Lone Star.

Sullivan immersed himself in the “outlaw” culture; he attended concerts at the famed Armadillo World Headquarters, interviewed some of Austin’s musicians, and became friends with Eddie Wilson, the self-proclaimed guru of Austin’s new music scene and the owner of the Armadillo World Headquarters. Most importantly, Sullivan began to listen to Jerry Retzloff, a Lone Star district manager in Austin who was also a huge fan of the new culture developing in the Capital City. It was Retzloff who introduced him to the Austin music luminaries, and who encouraged him to find a new “hook” to sell beer.

Sullivan wanted a new jingle, but one that would appeal to the new customer he was trying to cultivate. Through Retzloff and Wilson he first pitched his ideas to Jerry Jeff Walker, but he was under contract to Pearl, so he settled on Walker’s sideman Gary P. Nunn to write and perform a short, one minute song to sell Lone Star titled “Harina Tortilla.” Interestingly, it mentioned “Lone Star” several times, but never the word beer.

He still needed an icon, something that could become identified with Lone Star Beer. He got together with Jim Franklin, a man who had established a cult following as a graphic artist for the Armadillo World Headquarters. He designed a series of posters, newspaper ads, magazine slicks, and anything else that could be presented that featured an armadillo, a Texas symbol, at its center. There was the armadillo cowboy, the Giant Armadillo that could steal your beer, and any other situation they could put him in. The armadillo became a hit with younger culture, and a feature on countless dorm room walls.

As the new Texas Outlaw Sound became more popular, the beer that symbolized it became popular as well. At the same time, New York fashion designers had begun to develop styles that featured “western garb” at its center, with Texas being the operative symbol. “Texas cool” began to rise, and Lone Star was in position to be one of its symbols. It just needed a push, something to put it over the top. That came when it became one of the centers of a 1979 film starring ultra-popular John Travolta.

Urban Cowboy, was adapted from an Esquire article by Aaron Latham about the new young working class culture in Houston that congregated at a large “honky-tonk” in the shadow of refineries and other industrial infrastructure of the Houston Ship Channel in Pasadena. “Gilley’s” was named after its co-owner, country star Mickey Gilley, although it was the brain-child of the other partner, Sherwood Cryer. “Bud,” the main character, works at a refinery by day and dances and drinks at Gilley’s by night, and when he was at “Gilley’s” he always had a Lone Star beer—in its distinctive “long neck” bottle—in his hand. Almost literally overnight after the movie’s premiere, sales of Lone Star skyrocketed. “Texas Chic” took the fashion, film, fashion, and literary world by storm, and Lone Star Beer was its icon.

All things must come to an end. “Texas Chic” crashed and burned along with the oil bust of the late 1980s, and Lone Star Beer seemed to decline with it. Sullivan and Retzloff left the company for greener pastures and Lone Star sold first to G. Heilman Co in 1983 and then to the Stroh Brewery in 1996. Stroh closed the venerable San Antonio Lone Star brewery that same year and moved its production to Longview. Production of Lone Star moved back to San Antonio in 1999 when it was sold again, this time to Pabst, but it did not last. Pabst now contracts the brewing of Lone Star to a Miller Brewing facility in Fort Worth. You can still find it, but it just does not have the same “feel.”

#