Book Notes

By Archie P. McDonald

This column continues by the sufferance of Director Scott Sosebee as a means of giving notice to recent publications on the history, life, culture, and varied interests of East Texans beyond individual reviews found in the next section of the Journal.

We begin with an awe-filled book titled After Ike: Aerial Views from the No-Fly Zone, by Bryan Carlile and introductory essay by Andrew Sansom (Texas A&M University Press, 4354 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-4354) which is Number Seventeen of the press's Gulf Coast Books series. Carlile flew along the coast in a helicopter as a first-responder in the days immediately following Ike's landfall on September 13, 2008, on its way to becoming among the most destructive storms in American history. Carlile took his camera along and took several thousand photos of the destruction. Each is different, of course, but there is sameness, too, of what excess wind and water can do to the puny efforts of man. Each is marked by something different—an overturned truck, a barge out of place across a highway, a teddy bear face down in the sand—but all show destruction. Sansom, who grew up along the coast and knows the rhythm of hurricanes, contributes a highly personal and insightful essay from the perspective of the true "insider." Both Carlile and Sansom know whereof they write and photograph. I think you have to go through one of these things to appreciate these pictures fully; my memory starts with Audrey in 1956 and extends (so far) through Ike in 2008—and all are bad, bad, bad. Carlile makes the point that his photos from the air do not capture the human (and wildlife) struggle going on below his helicopter, but if you experienced Ike, they are real enough. Carlile's pictures show the playgrounds of my halcyon days along Bolivar Peninsula and Galveston "after Ike," and they are sad indeed.

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TCU Press (Box 298300, Fort Worth, TX 76129, 2009. $9.95), continues to publish entries in its Small Book series. The latest received include Braggin' On Texas, by Sherrie S McLeroy, and Lone Star Lost: Buried Treasures in Texas, by Patrick Dearen. Braggin' considers things in our state to brag about under fourteen categories as varied as architecture, music, and writers, and cites those first/best/biggest/most unique for some reason or the other. For example, The First Million-Selling Country Song was "The Wreck of the Old '97," by Vernon Dalhart, really East Texan Marion Try Slaughter who adopted his stage name from two Panhandle towns near where he once worked as a cowboy. The wreck happened in Virginia. Treasures presents tales of lost/buried/misplaced loot, usually quite a great deal of it, which will excite the interest of the curious and the greedy. Of special interest is "The Golden Head of Joseph Simpkins" because it, allegedly, is "lost" in East Texas. These Small Books are quick and fun to read; I would have added "easy to read" but for the small print that strains these old eyes.

Sacred Memories: The Civil War Monument Movement in Texas, by Kelly McMichael (Texas State Historical Association, 1155 Union Circle #311580, Denton, TX 76203-5017. 2009. $9.95) documents the postwar movement to memorialize Confederate soldiers, especially the fallen, in monuments that decorated courthouse squares and public parks throughout the state. Coverage is divided by region—East Texas, North Texas (some of which is really East Texas), North Central Texas, Central Texas, Panhandle and West Texas, South Texas, and Southeast Texas (most of which is just East Texas), and present in sixty counties. I looked on page 86 and there he was—the Johnny Reb soldier standing atop a white stone in Weiss Park in Beaumont past whom I must have walked or driven a thousand times on my way downtown to attend the Saturday morning Organ Club at the Jefferson Theatre, or later, some grander movie under the Jefferson's ornate chandelier. I also learned Johnny Reb had toppled in 1986 under attack from a storm but that Beaumonters put him back up on his pedestal. The thing about monuments is that they remind different people of
different things.


Nature of the Forest, Temple-Inland’s Timberlands In the Twenty-First Century, by David Baxter, with photographs by Laurence Parent, published by Temple-Inland Inc., is a book most of us who live in the shadow of pine trees will understand. Baxter, a former editor of Texas Parks & Wildlife magazine, and photographer Parent have produced a tribute in words and pictures of the resource that makes East Texas what it is. There is plenty here on the trees and the critters that live in, on, beneath, and sometimes over them. I once asked the late Arthur Temple about his business practice of buying forestland, even if it meant debt to do so, and he responded, “The forest will always grow you out of it.” Maybe so; anyway, we who live here will always be in debt to the forest.

Taming The Land: The Lost Postcard Photographs Of The Texas High Plains, by John Miller Morris (Texas A&M University Press, 4354 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-4354. 2009. $45.), is as handsome—and heavy—a book as this distinguished press has produced. Postcards remain ubiquitous at tourist attractions the world over, but those that have survived nearly a century are also a photographic record of how our cities and monuments looked to earlier generations. Postcards reproduced with narrative descriptions depicted here are all, as advertized, from the High Plains, but we can hope that eventually East Texas can be documented in just such an impressive way.
Call Me Lucky: A Texan in Hollywood, by Robert Hinkle with Mike Farris (University of Oklahoma Press, 2800 Venture Dr., Norman, OK 73069) is for those, like myself, who are movie-struck and particularly interested in movies about Texas. For what is likely a more competent evaluation, see the review written by Josh Rosenblatt for The Texas Observer, pp. 28-29 in the October 30, 2009 issue. I did not read that review, knowing I would be writing this one when I finished Hinkle’s movie-style autobiography. Hinkle’s personal story commences in Brownfield in West Texas where he learned the ways of Texans. But since that very thing was his “big break” for a career in Hollywood, Hinkle commences his autobiography with an account of being hired by director George Stevens to teach Rock Hudson, Elizabeth Taylor, James Dean, and other characters in Steven’s film Giant to “talk Texan”—and also dress, move, and maybe think Texan.

Hinkle suggests that Dean was the best student of the subject and also became his closest friend of the lot, though he developed similar if less intense relationships with other “students” such as Paul Newman, whom he tutored during the making of Hud. Though Hinkle makes no such claim, outright, anyway, his narrative includes many examples of how his expertise on things Texan improved these filmed examinations and exposés of Texas life—at least making them authentic.

Alright, I am double dipping with Lovin’ That Lone Star Flag, by E. Joe Deering with an introduction and afterword by Ruth Rendon (Texas A&M University Press, 4354 TAMU, College Station, TX 77843-4354). The folks at Texas A&M University Press invited me to examine the manuscript on this one and even quote part of my response on the flyleaf: “These pictures are magnificent and well illustrate the theme that crazy Texans (God bless us) will decorate anything with the image or colors of our flag. I would not be surprised to see it anywhere.” Nothing in the transition from MS to published volume changes that conclusion. Deering kept his camera ready and his mind alert for any and all presentations of our state flag on barns, mailboxes, birdhouses, and everything else imaginable. And Texans are magnificently imaginative in their application of
the flag to any object. It won’t take long to leaf through this collection of photos and the effort is justified by the reward.

The presidential election of 2008 may not be "history" yet, but Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime, by John Heilemann and Mark Halperin (HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022, $27.99), is a good place to start to understand contemporary politics in the United States. Heilemann and Halperin seem to have interviewed all the principals—candidates, staff, etc.—and none come off all that well. Barack and Michelle Obama fare the best in terms of focus, organization, and having a sense of mission. The foul language attributed to virtually all of them would make ole’ Dick Nixon blush. John McCain’s selection of Sarah Palin, according to the authors, came after an abbreviated and poor vetting process, and was only one of the reasons he lost the election. The real theme is the dance between Obama and Hillary Clinton—that, and attributing her loss of the Democratic nomination to poor organization and interference from husband Bill Clinton. I don’t agree with all their conclusions, and you won’t, either; but this is a MUST read for all political junkies.