

Dallas, Not the TV Show
by
Robert rietschel, June 14, 2023

You've seen the stock character in the movies. The one in the trench coat who flings his trench coat open...no not the guy who exposes himself, the one with row after row of watches to sell you. That stock character. Now imagine instead of watches he has fountain pens, cigarette lighters, combs, and candy bars and you're at your desk and your boss won't give you any break time. You buy a candy bar from this guy. Or maybe a pack of gum. He's just some guy trying to hustle up a living in Dallas in the late 1920s and early 1930s. I never met the man, but I saw something he littered the empty fields around Dallas with in the 1950s. These were tractor trailers that normally would be hooked up to semis and hauling freight. On the sides of these in big letters, you would see, "Thank you Dallas for helping O.L. Nelms make another million dollars." There were quite a few of these sitting in empty fields. Fields that someday would be full of ranch-style homes. He made his money buying and selling real estate. He dressed like a rhinestone cowboy and paraded around places like Hollywood and New York City in his western wear. He relished his image as a rich Texas.

You have to understand Texas in the 1950s. Alaska was still a territory until the end of the decade when it was granted statehood. Texas was the largest state in the Union and Texas brags were as common as bowl weevils. It was expected that if you left Texas and traveled elsewhere, that you would inform folks in the hinterland that everything was bigger and better in Texas. It was expected and often it was delivered. Especially from colorful characters like Nelms. This sort of boorish behavior was so commonplace that when I went to Atlanta to work at Emory, my nurse upon learning I was coming from San Antonio said, "You can always tell a Texas, but you can't tell him much." Every sad sack coming from Texas had a reputation to live up to or live down as the case might be.

Nelms had a counterpart in Houston named Jim "Silver Dollar" West. West was known for dispensing silver dollars for the most trivial of favors. Nelms wanted to one-up Jim and tried to get the U.S. Treasury to sell him one million silver dollars which Nelms intended to display at the Texas State Fair in Dallas. Treasury only agreed to do the deal if Nelms presented a cashier's check for one million dollars and had several 18-wheelers to carry the 30 tons of silver...in quarter-inch thick steel boxes welded shut and welded to the trucks. Why the Treasury Department was concerned about those coins once they left Washington, I don't understand. Nelms decided the cost of security for the coins couldn't be justified even for a brash Texan.

Do you think that growing up in such a town might warp your values? Maybe it would if any of that money were to fall your way. But the idea that just about anything is possible for a Texan, well, that ethos was instilled in us. We were to show the folks how it's done. We were expected to be the Texans that my Atlanta nurse was referring to. The ones you can't tell much.

Nelms wasn't the only person making money hand over fist in real estate. There was Trammell Crow. I never met the man, but he built things in a variety of cities, and I've been in those "things". Things like Market Center in Dallas. Been there. Peachtree Center in Atlanta. Been there. Embarcadero Center in San Francisco. Yeah, been there too. Who is this guy? Well, he started out as a chicken plucker in Dallas. He was born in 1914 so he had to survive the Great Depression. During that time, he worked his way through night school at SMU and became a CPA. I can relate to starting at the bottom and moving up via education. After high school, my job was picking up beer cans in the ditches of Dallas County. I got a nice tan. At least on my arms and face. Lots of bug bites as well. But back to Crow. He started building warehouses and leasing space in them. Instead of building for a

specific client, he did a Texas thing. He built bigger than needed and leased the surplus space to multiple tenants. He hit it big with the Trinity River Industrial Park and went on to build a national firm that was privately held until 1997. He sold out then for 2.2 billion dollars. He had six children, one of whom is named Harlan. Harlan Crow has been in the news as Justice Clarence Thomas' best friend and traveling companion.

The TV show, Dallas, focused on the oil barons. I have not discussed that breed of Texan, but certainly the Murchison family who were the original owners of the Dallas Cowboys, and the Hunt family who were the original owners of the Dallas Texans, who became the Kansas City Chiefs and still are owned by the Hunt family would be their own soap opera. The outrageous behavior of Texas millionaires was stuff that locally would just elicit a shrug. Yeah, they act like that. Elsewhere, their antics would attract more attention and scrutiny. But back then, money did talk, and tongues didn't wag. At least not openly.

It was pretty much open warfare when Amon Carter, who owned the Fort Worth Star-Telegram wanted the new regional airport in Fort Worth. Dallas had Love Field and saw no reason for a new airport at all. Just expand Love Field and never mind that there isn't any land to expand onto and those Dallas skyscrapers are a landing hazard. The bickering went on for several years and resulted in the DFW airport on the county line between Dallas and Fort Worth. Civic pride was the rallying cry back then. Now the two cities have become so interwoven that you'd be hard-pressed to know which you were in. My friend from Fort Worth used to tell me that Ft Worth was where the West began, and Dallas was where the East petered out. Life was like that.

When you grow up in a place with extremes of both wealth and behavior by people who started out with no more than the average citizen, you can only ask yourself, why not me? Indeed, why not? Consider this simple question. If you were at a dinner party with these Dallas folks and you were offered a seat at the table with the "big boys" or with the normal folks, where would you sit? I think I'd rather take my food to go and eat in the car. Maybe that's because I was born in New Orleans, not Dallas.

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