



In 1920 the big oak was at the edge of Goose Creek. It was sometimes used as a billboard and cars often parked under it.



The oak tree has survived both disease and the threat of the axe. Red Pruett has seen the tree through both of these dilemmas and continues today to care for it.

ROOTS IN THE PAST: BAYTOWN'S BIG OAK TREE

*Mark A. Alford
Lee College*

If you have ever walked down the cracked cement road named Texas Avenue in Baytown, Texas, you have undoubtedly come across a giant live oak tree growing in the middle of the road. No one knows the actual age of the oak. It is estimated to be anywhere from two hundred to two thousand years old.¹ Ironically, the once thriving Texas Avenue business district witnessed the near-death of the tree on several occasions. Now, the fertile green tree stands in the midst of a slowly dying Texas Avenue. The avenue and the town of Goose Creek grew up around the old oak, as did the folklore of the tree itself, and the tree still has an influence on Baytown today. Among the folklore myths told, one claims that General Sam Houston and his army spent the night under the big oak just before the attack on Santa Anna's army at San Jacinto – not more than five miles away.²

In more recent times, as the growth of the towns of Goose Creek and Baytown took place, new stories and verbal histories of the Big Oak were told and developed. However, its history is as real as the leaves that fall from its branches every autumn. The citizens of Baytown are proud of the giant oak because it is a survivor of time, disease, and several threats. To many, the tree stands as a monument of the past, a symbol of both good and bad times in "old" Goose Creek, now known as Baytown, Texas.

It is easy to understand why Baytonians, especially those who have "been around" quite awhile, are virtually "in love" with the fifty-foot tree. The memories of the old town and the tree are inseparable, especially for a life-long Baytonian by the name of R. H. Pruett, known to the rest of Baytown as Red. Red is the son of the late Prince Pruett who originally owned all of the land that the dying Texas Avenue and the flourishing oak tree now occupy.³ The Pruett homestead, in 1902, was on 293 acres of land of which most is now owned either by Harris County or the City of Baytown.⁴ The Pruett's original house was located not far from the oak, which was, in fact, in their front yard. As children, Red, his brother, and his sister played under the shade of the tree. "I had a dog once when I was a little kid that would run up and jump on the tree and climb it. We would spend all day climbing on its branches," Red stated.⁵

Not far from the peaceful home of the Pruetts, a company that would change and affect the lives of many was to be built. Oil was fastly becoming the commodity of the day, and the Goose Creek area was rich with the "black gold." On June 12, 1908, the first oil well was brought in at the Goose Creek Oil Field.⁶ During the next eight years, the oil activity continued, and in 1916 discovery of oil along Tabbs Bay and nearby Goose Creek Stream promoted population growth and community development along that area. However, in 1917, a "wild gusher" broke up the community and scattered the citizens.⁷ Later that year, Ross Shaw Sterling, one of the founders of Humble Oil and Refining Co., which had an interest in the Goose Creek Oil Field, purchased land near Black Duck Bay, adjacent to the Houston Ship Channel.⁸ The land was needed for the building of a refinery to be known later as the Baytown Refinery of the Humble Oil and Refining Company.

Intermittently, settlements of the workers and their families were again set up.

Sterling saw a distinct need for a central community – a town. In 1917, he purchased three-fourths of a square mile from Price Pruett to build that town.⁹ Sterling and Pruett laid out the entire city and called it Goose Creek. As the oil business grew, so did the population of Goose Creek. And as the town grew, so did its transportation problems. Texas Avenue, a country road for many years, was now a part of Sterling's Goose Creek. The county road, running from Cedar Bayou east of the town and through the new town, stopped directly in front of the old oak.¹⁰ The refinery, west of Goose Creek, had no accessible road from the town to the refinery. A roadway was needed between the two, and for the first time, the tree stood in jeopardy of its life. Because Texas Avenue was a county road, the county had the responsibility to provide for its maintenance. Yet, the land directly west of the big oak still belonged to Price Pruett, and he refused to see his tree cut down! Charles Massey, County Commissioner of Precinct 2 of Harris County, haggled with Pruett, and before the conflict was over, Pruett had given the right-of-way to the County with only one stipulation: that the tree be allowed to stand and die a natural death.¹¹ Little did either party know that this small agreement would, in effect, save the tree's life on several occasions.

The truth generated a myth; a related folklore story arose in which Ross Sterling was riding by when he spotted engineers from Goose Creek Realty Co., and Harris County, surveying the right-of-way on which the tree stood. They were actually planning to cut the tree down and run the road over its rooted grave. Supposedly, Sterling stopped and commented: "It required many years for nature to produce a beautiful thing like that, and we must save it!"¹² In any case, the tree was spared. The road was bent south of the tree, and a roadway between the new town and the new refinery was completed.¹³

The flourishing community of Goose Creek soon became one of the largest "boom towns" on the Gulf Coast. The many stores up and down Texas Avenue were as bricks stacked one next to another. There was T. C. Culpepper's Furniture Store, Guberman's Dry Goods Store, and the Texan Theatre, to name a few.¹⁴ The tree harmonized with the community and was loved by most of the citizens of Goose Creek until it fell blame of a death. On October 28, 1929, at 10:30 p.m., a twenty-two year old machinist at the refinery was going to work in an open-aired taxi. Driving the taxi, was R. L. Fisher. The young Humble employee, Marvin Epperson, was in the back seat. As Fisher and Epperson approached the bend in the road around the big oak, Fisher was blinded by the lights of two on-coming cars. One of the cars was approaching Texas Avenue while the other car was coming from a root beer stand. Fisher, trying to avoid the two cars, headed off the road and hit head-on with the oak tree. Thrown out of the back seat of the taxi, Epperson hit headfirst with the five-foot diameter trunk of the tree. His skull was crushed, but he did not die until two hours later in a hospital, two blocks away.¹⁵ The tree was condemned as a traffic hazard. One story goes that an axe-wielding mob formed by some of the townspeople intended to cut down the "awful hazard" but did not succeed.¹⁶

The townspeople soon forgot the incident, and the town was back to its usual routine. As always, the workers on Texas Avenue would take their sack lunches and picnic under the tree. Soon some enterprising fruit farmers set up shop underneath the old tree to pedal their green goods. One such individual was Joe H. Hall, my uncle. A farm boy from Willis, Texas, Joe found the shade of the tree an excellent place to sell his watermelons. During the summer of 1930, when Joe was nineteen years old and just out of high school, he and his father filled their horse-drawn

wagon with the melons that Joe had raised, and the two men traveled down to Goose Creek to sell them underneath the big tree. They pulled their wagon up on the north side of the oak and nailed a sign to the trunk that read, "Willis Watermelons - 25¢." Joe sold a few melons, but not as many as he had expected. That night they stayed with some relatives in town and, the next morning, returned to the shade of the oak. The traffic was beginning to pick up as the men traveled to the refinery. However, Joe's sales were not. One little old man pulled his car up behind Joe's wagon, got out, and looked the melons over. "Hey Sonny," the man said to Joe, "the sign said these melons were grown in Willis." "Yes, Sir," replied Joe. "some of the finest melons you'll ever eat." "Well, Sonny," the man explained, "I've eaten many a melon in my lifetime, and the best one I ever ate was a Hempstead melon. I wouldn't give you 10¢ for a melon that's grown anywhere else." The gray-haired gentleman walked over to his car, got in, and drove off to the refinery. He wasn't too far down the road before Joe had a new sign made and nailed to the tree. It read, "Hempstead Melons - 30¢." By the end of the day, Joe's wagon was empty and his pockets were full. My aunt, Sue Hall, tells me that Joe used the money to buy the only suit he owned through the four years at college which he wore at his graduation.¹⁷

After 1930, the town grew more rapidly than ever before. New businesses were formed. Old businesses left their original occupancy and moved to the more valuable property along the avenue. One such business helped preserve Baytown's living legend. The Home Lumber Co., which is now Woods Home Center at 80 E. Texas Avenue, was once located very near the tree. The tree was actually used as a landmark for the lumber company. Their letterhead contained the slogan, "By the Big Oak Tree." The lumber company, in concern for the tree, hired tree experts to periodically treat the tree when it was damaged or ill. Traffic still ran to the south of the oak although on occasion tall trucks would detour to its northside since the branches on the southside hung lower than those to the north. This way, the trucks avoided coming in contact with the spreading arms of the giant. For several years during this period of time, the Baytown Lions Club decorated the tree for Christmas. Today, the annual Baytown Christmas parade still begins at the tree.¹⁸

In 1948, the town of Goose Creek, along with the towns of Pelly and Baytown, consolidated and formed the town of Baytown.¹⁹ On the newly formed city council was member R. H. "Red" Pruett, Price Pruett's son. The tree, blamed for several more traffic accidents on Texas Avenue, occasionally, was threatened. Yet, cutting down the tree was not seriously discussed. The road around the tree had been paved, the tree's roots covered, and it became apparent that the tree might die "a natural death,"²⁰ an act of God which reflected the original agreement between Pruett and Charles Massey.

On Monday, December 12, 1950, the Baytown City Council met as usual, with one council member absent - "Red" Pruett. The remaining members were W. D. Reeves, E. W. Buelow, M. L. Campbell, Rufus Bergeron, and W. C. Williams; the mayor was J. A. Ward. Not far into the meeting, W. D. Reeves brought up the subject of the tree in a discussion of old business.²¹ "just wondered if it wouldn't be a good idea to go ahead and get rid of it. What do you think?" Councilman E. W. Buelow remarked that it certainly was a traffic hazard. "I move that we cut it down and pave the area," Council M. L. Campbell said. Reeves seconded the motion and a vote was taken by J. A. Ward. The council voted in majority to cut down the old oak.²² "Red" returned the next day and soon found out what his fellow councilmen had done. Yet, Pruett was not extremely upset by the vote.

"I missed very few meetings as a council member. The vote was merely a routine deal. There was really nothing personal about it. They thought it was a hazard, and it was just routine."

Pruett quickly telephoned the other council members in an effort to change their minds. "I asked them to just give me a chance. It was almost dead. I urged them to let me try to save it. I promised to pay for all the expenses. I didn't think it was right for the City to pay for it."²³

On the following day, Tuesday, a prominent Baytonian, Fred Hartman, played a minor but humorous role in saving the tree. Mr. Hartman, owner of the *Baytown Sun* and several other Texas newspapers, recalls the story of how the tree was saved from the axe in 1950.

The tree just barely escaped this tragedy. The Baytown City Council passed a motion – adopted a resolution, which directed the City Street Director, W. M. "Red" Grantham, to cut down that tree – at a council meeting like on a Monday night. And "Red" was gonna' cut this tree down Wednesday morning. At that time, I was a stringer for the *Houston Post* while I worked for the *Tri-City Sun* (Baytown Sun) and I told them (*Houston Post*) that they were gonna' cut down that tree and that it might be worth a picture and if they wanted someone to try to get a picture, to let me know. They called me back and said that they wanted that picture now! Well, "Red" Grantham was a friend of mine, and I called him and told him the dilemma I was in, and I asked him if he could help me. 'What do you want me to do?' he asked. Well, the first thing I want you to do is to get an axe and meet me up at the oak tree and we're gonna' fake you swinging the axe. Naturally, I don't imagine they would of used an axe, but it was symbolic. He said, 'I'll meet you there in thirty minutes.' Well, he showed up with some members of the City Council and that axe he had borrowed from the fire department, and I went up there to supervise it and I took a photographer along. We were taking a picture of "Red" cuttin' down this tree and it attracted attention. It was about shift-change time at the refinery and in those times, the traffic on Texas Avenue was tremendous – fifty times as congested as today – and they were watching us as we took the picture and lo and behold, a car came by. I'll never forget it, it was going west on Texas and it rolled up there and stopped. A lady, Mrs. R. L. Dial – Mrs. Dial was a wonderful lady, I've known her for years. Real fine lady. Had two boys that went to school and her husband was on the school board. She was just a fine lady. And if she didn't like what was in the paper – why – she didn't have any adversion to telling me about it in pretty eloquent language. And by the same token, if somebody else said something about the paper, she'd try to kill 'em. Just a true friend of mine and the paper's. She stopped and she said, 'Fred Hartman, what in the world are you doing?' And I says, 'Mrs. Dial.' (She hadn't read the paper that afternoon. It had come out in the paper Tuesday afternoon covering Monday's City Council meeting.) 'Apparently you haven't read the paper, Mrs. Dial. We're gonna cut down the tree Wednesday morning, and we're just going to get some pictures ahead of time.' She looked at me – I mean her eyes were glowin' – she didn't look at me. She looked *through* me! And she said, 'Listen here, young man, that tree will never be cut down.' And

I said, 'Oh, yes ma'm, we're gonna – I mean *they're* gonna cut it down in the morning.' 'No, sir, they *ain't* gonna cut it down!' She went home, called down to the city hall and got the names of the city council members she didn't know and I'll guarantee you by supper time, there wasn't gonna be no tree cut down. And I mean it hasn't been cut down to this day! If she hadn't driven by there, it would be gone.²⁴

On the following Thursday, an article appeared in the *Baytown Sun* and its headline read, "Oak Tree Solves City's Problem by Dying." The story went on to tell that the tree was starving to death. The roots were not getting enough nourishment. The last line of the article read, "Time marches on, even over the Big Oak."²⁵

Pruett was committed to seeing the tree through its crisis. Again, he talked with the other members and pleaded his case. On December 14, 1950, Pruett was quoted by the *Sun* as saying that there was a definite agreement *in writing*, that the tree would not be cut down as long as it lived. Consequently, if the tree was cut down, the land given by Pruett to the county would revert to the Pruett Estate. "I don't want to be in the way of progress," said Pruett, "and if most of the people feel like it should be cut down, I won't object." Pruett concluded by saying, "If it's got to be cut down, why that's the way it is. I'm afraid it's dying anyway."²⁶

It was almost as though the tree was on death row; a stay of execution was desperately needed. Before long, the public became emotionally involved, for the salvation of the oak.²⁷ Citizens Bank (founded by Price Pruett²⁸) ran a full page advertisement in the *Baytown Sun* on December 23. A photograph of the oak tree was pictured behind the words of a popular poem by Joyce Kilmer: "I think that I shall never see/A poem as lovely as a tree." At the bottom of the advertisement, in bold print, was the statement: "This is an urgent appeal to our City Council for the preservation of the Big Oak Tree."²⁹

The council met on December 26, 1950. R. H. Pruett stood as a defense attorney for the dying and already condemned tree. The minutes of the meeting reflect his appeal that "for personal, sentimental reasons, the tree be allowed to stand."³⁰ Pruett vowed to erect a curb around the tree and put blinking lights and reflectors on the tree.³¹ Perhaps the action to cut down the tree would have been retracted that night. However, the council waited and action was postponed until Mayor Ward, who was absent that night, could be present.³²

Over the Christmas holidays, Pruett did much lobbying. The council next met on January 5, 1951. All members, including the Mayor, were present. As the minutes state:

Rufus Bergeron moved to rescind action of the City Council – cutting down the oak tree. R. H. Pruett seconded the motion. A vote was called and all were in favor of retracting the previous motion, except for E. W. Buelow, who voted "nay."³³

Buelow, the last holdout, believed firmly that the tree was a definite safety hazard. Mr. Buelow and all the other council members, except "Red" Pruett, have since deceased. Mrs. Corabell Buelow, wife of the late Mr. Buelow, recalls that she discussed the subject a great deal at home. "Bill was very safety conscious," she said. "He only wanted the best for the community."³⁴

Nevertheless, "Red" and the tree won their case. Just about everyone was pleased with the verdict. "Red" stated that "The City Council was actually glad that the tree would stay – they were 'tickled pink.'"³⁵

One person who was not so pleased wrote an editorial to the *Baytown Sun* on January 6, 1951. It began,

A random thought: It's comforting to find out we here in Baytown can still be moved to debate over a tree. There is more concern here for the fate of the old oak tree than there is over a human being in Communist China where life is so cheap. . . . Thousands of Chinese troops are being sent to their slaughter in Korea, apparently without a qualm on the part of the Red rulers.

Even those of us who want the tree cut down as a traffic hazard will admit there would be sentimental feelings of loss at not seeing the gallant old oak standing in the middle of Texas Avenue anymore.

It's not too late to take time out for one more New Year's resolution; not to lose our sense of values, our feelings for fair play, the individual rights of man and love of freedom.

Without these values, we have lost the war, even though every Communist in China and Russia is dead.

Doggone, if that random thought didn't turn out to be an editorial.³⁶

The concern over the fate of the oak tree was still on "Red" Pruett's mind. He had won the battle with the Council, but would he win the battle with nature? Over the next two years, "Red" spent over \$1,000.00 of his own money to nurse the tree back to life. Both local tree surgeons and surgeons from the Beaumont area were called upon by Pruett to help save the tree. Pruett vividly remembers the struggle.

We dug nearly twelve to fourteen yards of bad earth out from underneath the tree and put in some good, rich soil in its place. We axe trimmed all the dead limbs and leaves off of it and got gallons of termites out of it. We had to tear almost all the bark off of it and drilled into the tree to doctor it. People said I was going to kill it, but I told them it was gonna die anyway if I don't try to save it. I put curbs up around it and inset reflectors on the tree and fertilized the top soil. Withing two years, it started to sprout out green.³⁷

Red and the tree had finally won the difficult battle against nature.

"There hasn't been much scuttlebut about the tree since then," Fred Hartman says. "With the origination of all these shopping centers, and Texas Avenue becoming a graveyard - Hell! There ain't no traffic anymore. Very few people drive by there anymore. They've slowed the traffic down, put all that snake business* in there, except on the nights when those kids come over here and raise hell. It's not a problem; Texas Avenue has become 'deader than an iron doornail.' It doesn't create the hazard nor the congestion it once did. You might as well go out in the middle of the prairie somewhere and say, 'Let's cut down that tree!'"³⁸

Today, R. H. "Red" Pruett maintains a close proximity to his tree. His new house was built not more than two-hundred yards from the Big Oak and three-hundred yards from the sight of the house he lived in as a youngster.

The oak tree has actually become the symbol of Baytown. To Red, it's much more than that. It is a monument to the agreement between his father and Charlie Massey and a reminder of the time and money Red spent to save the tree from death. Pruett says,

I pass by there almost every day. I make sure it's doing all right and that no one has nailed anything up on it. It's really *never* been a traffic hazard. I've always said if a person (drunk or sober) couldn't see a five-foot round, fifty-foot high tree in front of them, well, they have no business driving anyway.³⁹

Although Texas Avenue is now just about "dead," the tree is very much alive and so are the many memories held by those who were here in earlier times, who ate and played underneath the spreading branches of the tree and enjoyed the shade it provided. Presently, on Friday and Saturday nights, kids from all over the area come to Texas Avenue to ride up and down the street, starting at the tree, showing off their cars and "raising hell." They pass the tree, probably without realizing what an important role the Giant Oak has played in Baytown's rich history.

If trees could only talk.

*In 1974, Texas Avenue was redesigned in a series of alternating curves.

NOTES

¹Betsy Weber, "It was Sterling who spared our Big Oak." *Baytown Sun*, 4 July 1976, n.p. (Hereafter referred to as Weber)

²*Ibid.*

³Interview with R. H. Pruett, 19 October 1982. (Hereafter referred to as Pruett interview.)

⁴Weber

⁵Pruett interview

⁶J. M. "Deacon" Jones, *Historical Sites and Markers of Baytown, Texas* (Baytown, Texas: Baytown Sterling Municipal Library, 1980), p. 1.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Interview with Fred Hartman, 2 November 1982. (Hereafter referred to as Hartman interview)

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Weber

¹²Weber

¹³Weber

¹⁴Hartman interview

¹⁵Weber

¹⁶Hartman interview

¹⁷Interview with Sue Hall, 7 December 1982.

¹⁸Weber

¹⁹Jones, *Historical Sites and Markers*, p. 1.

²⁰Weber

²¹*Baytown City Council Minutes*, 12 December 1950.

²²*Ibid.*

²³Pruett interview

²⁴Hartman interview

²⁵"Oak Tree Solves City's Problem by Dying," *Baytown Sun*, 14 December 1950.

²⁶"Old Pact May Balk Oak Cutting," *Baytown Sun*, 21 December 1950, p. 1.

²⁷Hartman interview

²⁸Pruett interview

²⁹"Trees," *Baytown Sun*, 23 December 1950, p. 2.

³⁰*Baytown City Council Minutes*, 26 December 1950.

³¹"Trees," *Baytown Sun*, 23 December 1950, p. 2.

³²*Baytown City Council Minutes*, 26 December 1950.

³³*Baytown City Council Minutes*, 5 January 1951.

³⁴Interview with Corabell Buelow, 7 December, 1982.

³⁵Pruett interview.

³⁶"Random Thought," *Baytown Sun*, 6 January 1951, p. 3.

³⁷Pruett interview

³⁸Hartman interview

³⁹Pruett interview.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baytown City Council Minutes. 12, 26 December 1950; 5 January 1951.
Baytown Sun. 13, 19, 21, 23 December 1950; 6 January; 5 April 1951; 26 April 1952; 2 October 1966; 4 July 1976.
Buelow, Corabell. Interview, 7 December 1982.
Hall, Sue. Interview, 7 December 1982.
Hartman, Fred. Interview, 2 November 1982.
Jones, I. M. "Deacon". *Historical Sites and Markers of Baytown, Tx*. Baytown, Texas: Sterling Municipal Library.
Pruett, R. H. Interview, 19 October 1982.