

## HO-HO-HOWDY, FOLKS

In the free-wheeling years after World War II, merchants in Kerens, Texas, had a problem. Residents of the tiny town were driving to nearby Corsicana or even 75 miles north to Dallas for pre-Christmas shopping sprees. Looking for a gimmick that might encourage people to spend money at local stores, the Kerens Chamber of Commerce built what they claimed was the world's largest Santa Claus, a 49-foot-tall figure constructed from iron-pipe drill casing and papier-mâché, with seven-foot lengths of unraveled rope for a beard.

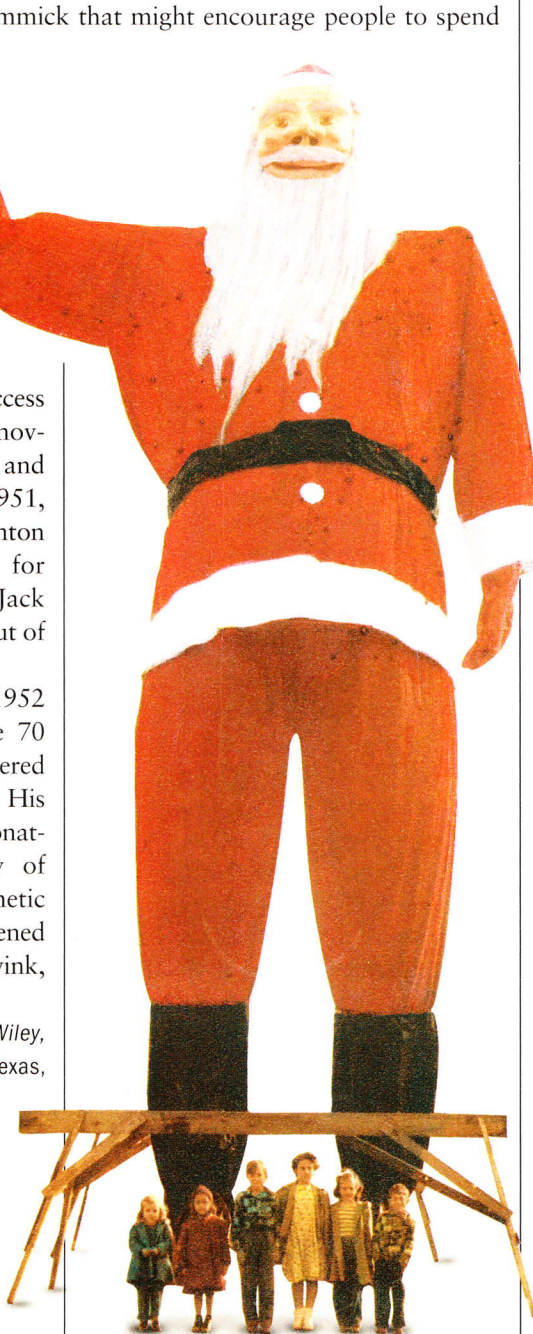
The promotion proved a big success during the 1949 holidays, but the novelty wore off the following year, and community support waned. In 1951, State Fair president R.L. Thornton purchased Santa's components for \$750 and hired Dallas artist Jack Bridges to create a giant cowboy out of the material.

Big Tex made his debut at the 1952 State Fair of Texas. Wearing size 70 boots and a 75-gallon hat, Tex towered 52 feet above wide-eyed visitors. His denim jeans and plaid shirt were donated by the H.D. Lee Company of Shawnee Mission, Kansas. Cosmetic surgery the following year straightened his nose, corrected a lascivious wink, and allowed him to talk.

—Nancy Wiley,  
from *The Great State Fair of Texas*,  
An Illustrated History (Taylor  
Publishing Co., 1995)

## PLAY BALL!

Andrew Johnson Jr. keeps things neat and green as head of the grounds department at the University of Dallas, but when he was the age of most students who play on the UD ball fields now, he tore up a few sandlots himself.



Now more than a half-century old, Big Tex, who welcomes visitors to the State Fair of Texas in Dallas with a booming "Howdy, folks," began life as a 49-foot Santa in the town of Kerens.

COURTESY STATE FAIR OF TEXAS ARCHIVES

In the 1950s and 1960s, Johnson had two jobs and children to support, but he still managed to play baseball many nights and weekends for the Dallas Brown Bombers. He and his team members would take vacation at the same time so they could tour around Texas and play in tournaments. At the time, more than 100 Texas towns hosted minor-league baseball teams.

Teams playing in the Negro League didn't always get the same warm reception on the road as their Anglo counterparts, Andrew says, but the men quickly discovered which gas stations and hamburger stands would serve them despite the Jim Crow laws still in force, and they shared the information with other black teams.

Even for the few players who made the leap to professional teams—Jackie Robinson first broke the "color line" in baseball when he joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947—there wasn't much money in the game. They played for the team, not for personal glory, says Andrew, with the older players teaching the younger ones how it should be done.

"When we were teenagers, we could run fast and throw hard," says Andrew, who played shortstop until he was 55. "But the older guys, they'd outthink us."

Many members of the Dallas Brown Bombers grew up together in West Dallas playing baseball in neighborhood sandlots. After two or three decades together, the teammates could use silent or subtle hand signals to indicate their plays, and they sometimes beat professional teams in exhibition games.

"People need to know these guys played tremendous ball," says Andrew, now 78. "They outplayed the guys in the history books. They played from the heart."

—Peggy Heinkel-Wolfe, *Argyle*