

AMARILLO'S REALITY

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I was born in Amarillo and lived there for seventeen years before I served in the United States Army from 1999 until 2007. I was never stationed in Amarillo during those eight years. Regardless of where I was stationed, the idea of Amarillo lingered. Countless times I played George Strait's "Amarillo by Morning" and found myself filled with pride for the city of my birth. If I was in the barracks in Korea and got homesick, I could press play and feel nostalgia and pride and that sickness would go away. While deployed to Kuwait, the same story played out. When my wife and I were traveling on road trips or sitting in our apartment in Atlanta, press play. It was a theme. No matter where I found myself or what situation I was in, that single song took me home.

I was also able to observe what many other people knew about Amarillo during my time in the army. I met people from all over the country, its territories, and even foreign countries. All of these people had an idea and an image of Amarillo. It was a Western town with cows and cowboys. It was on the frontier of America where winters were harsh and summers brutal. It was a place that people knew before they knew it. I know from my own personal experiences that actually living in a place reveals much more about it than what that place is known for. I had my ideas about Baltimore prior to living a short drive from it in 1999. I had watched a television show called "Homicide: Life on the Streets" set in Baltimore. The gritty show caused me to believe things about Baltimore that bore no comparison to the time I spent in the city's Inner Harbor district. Korea was nothing like I expected it to be prior to living there for a year. The same can be said for everywhere I have lived since 1999. Perception and reality are two very different things. Is that true for Amarillo? Does this lone city in the Texas panhandle reflect its national and international perception?

Although I would love to take the credit, I am not the only person who has noticed how country music weaves itself into the idea others have of Amarillo. Paul H. Carlson, a history professor at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, also noted how country music has identified Amarillo in the minds of its listeners. He prefaces his modern history of the city, *Amarillo: The Story of a Western Town*, by noting that “there are few places of comparable size that have been the subject of as many country songs and western ballads” (xii). He goes on to list some of the most notable of those songs including that little song by Mr. Strait. Country music cannot define my city, though! That is far too simple. Surely there is more to our identity than the lyrics of country songs.

When I searched for outside views of Amarillo, I was able to find a description from Helen Kennedy, a writer for the *New York Daily News*. In 1998 Kennedy summed up Amarillo as a “staunchly conservative, overwhelmingly white Middle American cattle town.” Mr. Strait never talked about our politics in his song! Alan Jackson’s “Amarillo” failed to address it, and so did Jason Aldean in his song “Amarillo Sky” which is one of the most recent country songs to bring attention to the city. I have to ask why Kennedy chose to list our political leaning first and how she concluded Amarillo was so conservative. Fortunately her credibility is not harmed at all by that conclusion. Amarillo is, by all accounts, a hub of conservatism. According to the Cook Partisan Voter Index, Amarillo’s 13th Congressional District is tied with Alabama’s 6th as the most Republican district in the nation (Cook). Amarillo, of course, is not the entire 13th Congressional District of Texas, but data from the 2008 Presidential Election shows that the two counties Amarillo residents call home, Randall and Potter, clearly sided with the Republican, thus conservative, candidate, Arizona Senator John McCain. Only 29 percent of voters in the two counties voted for the Democratic candidate, former Illinois Senator Barack Obama (“Texas”). So our area is, in fact, conservative.

Kennedy’s next descriptor of Amarillo focused on race. Country music could provide a clue about race because it seems to be a genre dominated by whites, but the songs alone do not state how “white” Amarillo is. Could it be that Kennedy watches the videos? Regardless of the source of her information, it is still valid. Indeed, Amarillo does have a white majority. Having grown up in two areas with strong minority populations, I have never seen Amarillo as being such a white place but the numbers support Ms. Kennedy’s claim once again. According to Amarillo’s own Economic Development Corporation, the city residents

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are 57.6 percent white. This may not be as overwhelming as Ms. Kennedy saw it in 1998, but nonetheless, it is a majority.

Calling Amarillo "Middle American" is easy. Looking at any map of the United States, a person can reasonably see how Amarillo is in the middle of America. Was this a geographical reference? Perhaps not, perhaps Middle America is yet another idea predicated on identity. Using a less-than-reputable internet source, that I have been instructed not to use, I can quickly see that Middle America can refer to America's middle class or to America's Midwestern states. The esteemed Texas Tech professor points out that "Amarillo is a western city. But in substantial ways its image and character are midwestern" (Carlson 1). He refers to Amarillo's climate and industries, particularly the link to Chicago through the famous, but defunct, Route 66. Apparently, Kennedy was on the money again although it may have not been in the way she intended.

The "cattle town" reference, of course, needs absolutely no research to confirm. Any Amarillo resident can walk outside when the wind comes from the west, or east, north, or south, and immediately realize how much cattle influences our home. In fact, the very reason Kennedy's words even exist in reference to Amarillo is because of cattle. Her article focused on the trial, or showdown, between Oprah Winfrey and the cattlemen who were suing her for remarks she made about hamburgers. Without focusing too much on the details of the trial, Oprah made a comment and months later began filming her show in the Amarillo Little Theatre because the beef industry, in Amarillo, is king.

It is not that I mean to make Ms. Kennedy's single statement in an article about the Oprah Winfrey trial the sole focus of my argument, but it does present an outsider's view of the city, one that was easy to confirm and hardly controversial. Amarillo is conservative, white, Middle American, and loves its cattle! That reality, however, has its roots, its history. In other words, white conservatives closely related to the American Midwest did not just appear in an area north of Palo Duro Canyon with their cows overnight. Amarillo's history certainly plays a pivotal role in its present. What is that history? I will address that later. What I would like to ask now is a question that I find profound: if the perception and reality of Amarillo match, does that make either a good thing?

I would like to talk about two friends of mine, Roland and Rudy Escobedo, as much alike as different; young, Hispanic, flashy Caprock High School students. Roland graduated in 1998 after years as an athlete and cadet in the Marine Corps Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps.

Rudy, the younger brother, dropped out of high school in 2000 deciding, partly, that he could go somewhere better without a diploma. How did these two brothers I grew up with and played basketball with view Amarillo? Did they see it as Ms. Kennedy did? If they were still alive, I would ask them. In an e-mail I received from an ex-girlfriend of mine in April 2000, while stationed in Korea and no doubt listening to "Amarillo by Morning" or singing it in my head, I received the news that they had been shot to death. The *Amarillo Globe-News* article I retrieved online the next morning showed a picture of the crime scene illustrating the carnage from the night before. A bouquet of flowers was placed upon the pooled blood in the cracks of the sidewalk. Orange spray paint marked evidence found on the scene. "Two Brother Shot to Death" [sic] the headline read (Parker). I have heard many different accounts from high school friends and the Amarillo Police Department officer who answered the phone when I called a year later to find out what exactly had happened to the killer. Apparently the gun used to kill the two brothers was Roland's, the closer friend of mine between the two, and, apparently, the killings were deemed justified when it was determined the suspect acted in self-defense.

Regardless of charges, convictions, or stories, the reality of the situation is not up to par with Amarillo's image. Two Hispanic teens died at the hands of another Hispanic teen in a predominately Hispanic area of Amarillo. Amarillo does have its own "folk islands" even today. The city is divided clearly between "sides" and "colors" among other things. A city document even noted how regions in Amarillo had "historic self-segregation" (City IV). As this document looks even more closely at the city's demographics, it becomes increasingly clear just how divided the city is even with population increases in minority categories. Amarillo's citizens already know about the East Side, near Caprock High School, and the North Side, near Palo Duro High School. They also know about San Jacinto and Eastridge, the Boulevard and River Road. They also know about the South, Southwest, and West sides. Will research of news articles and publications state this in categorical or definitive terms? Will "Amarillo by Morning" or other such songs? Probably not, but asking any lifelong resident of Amarillo about those areas will establish the reality/truth of Amarillo's zones of difference.

A song called "(Is This the Way To) Amarillo" was released in the United Kingdom by Tony Christie. It was always more popular in Europe than in the United States. The song about Amarillo led to the death of an Englishman on American soil. Texas soil. Amarillo soil. I wonder how his family feels about Amarillo. Do they see Amarillo as

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this Middle American cattle town? Thomas George Reeve was shot at the Spotted Pony, a bar located on Paramount. His family said "he had chosen Amarillo as a stopping place because he liked the song (by Tony Christie)" in a statement released after his death. Police identified the shooting suspect as a 25 year-old Hispanic man. Fortunately for Amarillo, he is from Lubbock. Interestingly enough, the article makes it appear that the family's statement ends with a haunting phrase for Amarillo pride: "He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time" (Stecklein).

Amarillo, the wrong place? No, it cannot be! Maybe this is a trivialization; bad things happen all over the world, even in good places. Car accidents, muggings, incidents of drowning, and the list could go on of occurrences which could be explained by the wrong place-wrong time conundrum. In this particular incident, the alleged killer was not even from Amarillo's self-segregated areas and the shooting happened in a popular area of the city for the nightlife crowd. Reeve's daughter, who was nine months old at the time of his death, will probably never think of "Amarillo by Morning" as I do. That is very extreme though, one could even say it lacks credibility in the argument. "Mountains out of molehills" they could say. I suppose that would be true for everyone but the victim, his friends, and his family.

Come to think of it, though, I have never lived the lyrics of George Strait's song. Why was it such a source of pride and nostalgia when it was hardly indicative of my life in Amarillo? I never rode a bull or held all of my possessions on my back. My high school mascot was a Longhorn, but that does not make me a cowboy. I am getting off-subject, but how much truth is there to Amarillo's self-segregation and how much of Amarillo does not concern itself with politics or cattle? Is there a forgotten side of Amarillo, or possibly even multiple sides? Perhaps it is the underbelly of a seemingly friendly, utopian society that never makes the brochures or the Travel Channel?

Every once in awhile the tempers will flair between groups in Amarillo. In 1999, for example, a member of one such group, one that is definitely not conservative or cattle town in any way, died from injuries he received when a Tascosa High School student murdered him with his Cadillac. The incident itself, while tragic and needless, was brought to national attention when the trial was concluded. Amarillo, the cattle town, was now known as a hateful place full of intolerance. Dustin Camp and Brian Deneke lived very different lives but Dustin could fit in with all sorts. Brian, on the other hand, appeared anything but "normal" in the Amarillo area. His mohawk hairstyle, dark clothes, taste in music,

and chains showed that nothing about Deneke fit the Amarillo mold. When describing the dynamics of the two groups (jocks and punks), one article stated "Deneke was a punk, a wiry high school dropout with a faded blue mohawk, spiked collar, and leather jacket. He went by an unlikely moniker for a hardcore music fan, "Sunshine." Camp was the class clown, a baby-faced kid who played junior varsity football at Tascosa, earned above-average grades, and was more or less ambling toward college" (Lyons).

The defense attorney for Camp even went so far as to call him a "good, solid, *normal* kid wedded to Amarillo's favorite institutions, family and football" (Lyons). Of course this excuses his actions, right? If you looked at his punishment, you may think it had. He was given a \$10,000 fine and probation. Lyons mentions the rumblings that led to the fight that cost a young man his life, rumblings that grew into a large fight in an empty parking lot. When looking at Amarillo's history, Tascosa's rumblings appeared when black students were bused there after the closing of Carver High School, the all-black school. Tascosa, a school which celebrated the South, was not welcoming of the black students. They saw signs that said "Get a Nigger" or "Bus them back to Africa" in their new school (Roche 187). Would it be any surprise, then, that a school such as Tascosa or a town such as Amarillo would have conflicts between groups that were not part of the mainstream idea of what Amarillo ought to be?

I wanted a way to look at Amarillo historically to see how, or if, things had really changed. The way in which Jeff Roche explained Amarillo's history in his essay entitled "Identity and Conservative Politics on the Southern High Plains" shocked me. While he focused on the roots of conservatism in the region, he also took an extensive look at Amarillo as a city, and his words regarding minority populations can hit home to anyone who has lived the life nobody sees on the Amarillo phone books. When I read his essay, it made me think about my place in Amarillo's history. What is our generation doing right now that future generations may look upon with disdain and a lack of understanding? It is evident that the population is changing in Amarillo. Roche pointed out that the ethnic identity of the region will change and "disrupt the conservative hegemonic control" (189). Perhaps his most powerful words about the region can be seen in the city as well. "They continue to defend the myth that they live in communities of white, small-town, Protestant, yeoman farmers" (Roche 189). While there is enough evidence to support the ideas of Amarillo as a conservative, primarily white Western cow town, there is also the reality that ignores the myth.

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It is the alternate reality in Amarillo that leaves some people wondering if they are, indeed, in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Amarillo surely has its many claims to fame from cattle auctions to helium. Someone passing through the city can still see horses being ridden by cowboys and cowgirls behind a modern pharmacy on Amarillo Boulevard. There are still strong ties to the past and clear links to the perception outsiders have about the city. I do not wish to assault the way of life for many in Amarillo, but I do hope that I have presented the other side of the city. I have lived forever between three distinct groups in this community. I embrace them all but know, without a doubt, which one the city itself embraces. It takes nothing more than visiting the Rick Husband International Airport and seeing the displays near the baggage claims to realize the reason Amarillo's image is known throughout the world as a certainty. The next time you walk through any area in Amarillo, stop and look around. See how many white, conservative, Middle American cowboys you can count and remember the side the city sometimes seems to forget.

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