

THE BRYAN MUSEUM: HISTORY IN HISTORY

A Conversation with J. P. Bryan and Chris Cookson

J. P. Bryan has spent a lifetime amassing the finest privately held collection of Texana and materials related to the settlement of the western United States. For decades, he has generously shared his collection, which was housed at his office, and recently took the major step of opening the Bryan Museum in Galveston as a permanent home. It is housed in the fully restored Galveston Orphans Home — a historic collection in a historic building. I had the privilege of visiting with J. P. Bryan recently to discuss his personal history, as well as the tremendous resource he has developed.

CC: What drove your original interest in history?

JPB: I came from a family important in the early Anglo settlement of Texas, and they were very proud of their experiences in that event. The family used to share, abundantly, in the retelling of that history. But, also I think it made an impression on all the family members that they needed to make their own history, while at the same time preserving the importance of the history that their ancestors had been a part of because it's a great history and it should be a source of inspiration for future generations of Texans or just people in general who take an interest in heroic conduct. There were literally thousands of heroes that were part of the history of the settlement of the western portion of the United States, both visible and invisible. So, it was through my family that I first established an interest, or more especially my grandmother, her name was Cassie. . . . My grandmother was diligent in teaching me the importance of Biblical study and the study of the history of Texas and, more broadly, the history of the western settlement of the United States. . . .

CC: And your father was a collector as well?

JPB: He was. He inherited a good bit of material from various members of his family, but he collected his own. He had a wonderful, probably at the time one of the best, map collections in the U.S., as it pertained to the western settlement of the U.S. He published a couple of things himself. He edited the diary of Mary Austin Holley, who was Stephen F. Austin's cousin. . . . and the one person he clearly evidenced an interest in marrying.

A photograph of J. P. Bryan, an elderly man with white hair, wearing a dark jacket over a blue shirt and blue jeans. He is standing on a set of stone steps, leaning against a brick wall. A dog is lying on the ground in the foreground. The background shows a historic building with stone steps and a brick wall.

*J. P. Bryan
and his dog,
Chalk, on
the steps of
The Bryan
Museum.*



This gallery in the Special Exhibits space will house rotating exhibits.

All photos courtesy of The Bryan Museum.



On June 12, 2015, The Bryan Museum opened to the public for the first time. The Galveston Chamber of Commerce conducted the ribbon cutting with Mr. and Mrs. Bryan, their family, the museum staff, and friends of the museum in attendance.

CC: Did you start collecting at an early age yourself?

JPB: I did. . . . My father and I had a common interest in the history of Texas. I was always fascinated with travel books, especially those that included maps. I thought they were a nice little embellishment, and I liked studying them. When I first started collecting, in a modest way, Texana, or Texas material, it was travel books. My early inspiration for collecting books at all was my necessity to pay for my education at the University of Texas. So, I worked with a friend of mine named John Jenkins. We started a business on Congress Avenue that published out-of-date rarities, which we named The Pemberton Press. . . . The initial effort was a reprint of the first cookbook in Texas, done by the ladies of the Presbyterian Church and it turned out to be an excellent seller. We got it out just by luck at the perfect time. It came out in October or November, just before Christmas, and we sold out the edition in short order. So, we thought, we have the formula here for sure success — we would just reprint interesting Texas rarities that aren't available. It worked OK. . . . We also did some fairly important early histories. We did the first biography of J. Frank Dobie ever done, right after his death. . . . We did a really good biography of Frank Hamer, the Texas Ranger who was responsible for capturing Bonnie and Clyde. And then we did a series of other historical books of that ilk. . . .

CC: And you didn't inherit your father's collection?

JPB: I didn't. He sold it in 1966 and so that's when I decided that if I wanted a collection, I was going to have to go get my own.

CC: Can you talk about the process of collecting? It is very gradual? Episodic? Do you find a trove of something?

JPB: It's all of those. Well, if you spend enough time learning the subject, and there's adequate diversity, or volume on the particular subject you wish to collect, you'll find it will come from a whole variety of venues or sources. I started collecting through the guidance of my partner Johnny Jenkins, who was probably the best rare book dealer,



The lobby of The Bryan Museum features the original fireplace and woodwork. The building was meticulously restored after purchase in October 2013.

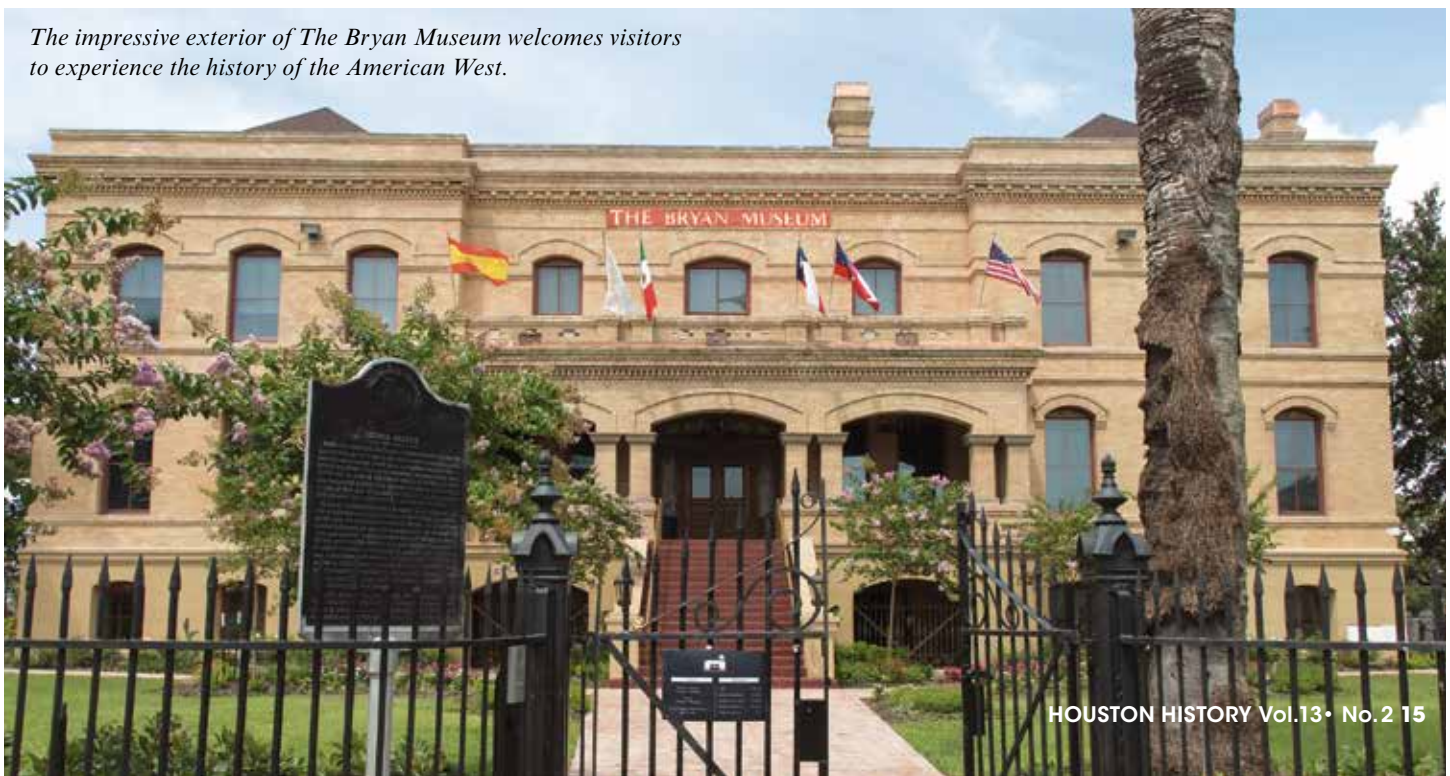
especially of Western Americana and Texana in the United States for about ten or fifteen years. . . . So, when I began, a lot of the rare items I got from Johnny. Then I began to develop other sources — individuals I knew who dealt in books and documents and the like. They would call me when they found something of interest. I would go to auctions, of course. . . . All that early period, up until the eighties, was dedicated mainly to books and documents. That's really the underlying strength of the collection, books and documents. There are some enormously rare documents, numerous of which are the only known copies. The other

thing that makes the total collection good is its diversity. In every sector, or every subject, whether it be bridles, saddles, guns, spurs, documents, or maps, you'll find some very unique and wonderful representations of those particular pieces.

CC: Do you have a favorite story about a particular piece that you chased for years or one that sort of fell into your lap?

JPB: I have a lifetime of them. The one that got away, and the thing I covet most today is the [Texas] Declaration of Independence. I bought one from an individual who turned

The impressive exterior of The Bryan Museum welcomes visitors to experience the history of the American West.





A model ship with actual working cannons excites visitors of all ages in a room dedicated to early native peoples and explorers of the American West.

out to be a master forger. I had it for a number of years before I figured out that it was a fake and went back to the dealer who sold it to me and we had a long discussion. He agreed to buy it back at a small profit, but it didn't come anywhere close to compensating me for what I would have had to pay then for a real one, because about ten years had passed. Since then, I have never been able to buy a Declaration of Independence. . . . It's the one piece I'd love to have. . . .

I bought a whole set of Saltillo serapes from a guy who thought he had a bunch of Mexican blankets. He brought them up to my office in the middle of summer; he was exhausted from carrying them some distance across town. So, I looked at them and I said, "These are not Mexican blankets, they are Saltillo serapes and he said, "Oh, I knew I'd been taken advantage of when I bought them!" And I said, "No, they are really better than Mexican blankets. What do you want for them?" And he said, "Let me just tell you one thing, you offer me what you think is a fair price, because I am not going down the stairs with these blankets." So, I did. I offered him a reasonable price for them. They are a great collection and I'd been looking for Saltillo serapes for years. . . .

CC: Can you give us some sense of the scale of the collection?

JPB: There are over 70,000 items.

CC: How did you get from a collection to The Bryan Museum?

JPB: It wasn't like jumping off a cliff into the museum. It's like a step-by-step adventure, getting here. It started with a zealous collecting habit, with which I filled my house with all these artifacts and paintings that didn't in any way complement my wife's interest in decorating our house. Finally she said, "One of these has got to go — me or your collec-

tion, because I am not living around this stuff anymore." I thought that was a real challenge, but I kept my wife and solved the problem by simply moving the collection to the office. We didn't have anything fancy or distinguishing in the decorating venue, so I just thought to decorate the office with all the things I had collected. We framed maps and related items. With the paintings, of which we had a few, we started putting them on the walls. It turned out to be quite attractive. People admired them. Over time, my collecting interests expanded from just books and documents and maps into paintings. In the eighties, I collected a lot of Texas art and that turned out to be a very good and attractive means for decorating the offices. . . .

In the later eighties, early nineties, I had a young curator, the first curator we had for the collection, who suggested that we should emphasize not just Texas for the collection, but we set out to really focus on the settlement of the western part of the United States, and collect all these symbols of that event — saddles and bridles and spurs and guns and the like, which I thought was a great idea because it meant I could go out and collect more stuff. Her next thought was: 1) we need to prepare a book about the collection, and 2) we need to build a museum style venue within the offices, where you could come in and have something of a museum experience. Also we needed an educational outreach to school children. We bought a chuck wagon, a real one, that had gone up the trail and brought schoolchildren in and introduced them to Texas history and the history of the West by sitting them all around the chuck wagon and talking about how they cooked on the trail. We also displayed for them other artifacts that were associated with the history of Texas or the West. They loved it, and it was a very interactive experience for them. . . . The kids, I think, came away with a rather profound experience and a whole new view of what history is all about.



J. P. Bryan stands in the Texas Masters Gallery, which highlights art by Texas artists, especially Charles Franklin “Frank” Reaugh, José Arpa, Robert Jenkins Onderdonk and Robert Julian Onderdonk, Tom Lea, and Elisabet Ney.

We continued with that format until about 2000 when we decided to move our offices. . . . We decided that it was time to retire, and shut down the business, and the question was, “What do you do with the collection?”

CC: What year was this, J.P.?

JPB: This would have been 2012. . . . We tried to find a building. The expense of it was fairly daunting in Houston. Things were, at that moment, booming in the oil business and our preference was to be in the Museum District of Houston. We could not find a building that was 1) historic, which was our preference, and 2) was not cost prohibitive . . . It just happened that we were down in Galveston doing some research for a book that I have been working on for

years about the Battle of San Jacinto. The museum director, Dr. Jamie Christy, and I left the Rosenberg Library and were driving back to Houston and we passed the Customs House, which had a “For Sale” sign on it — a beautiful Georgian building. . . . We thought, “What about Galveston, what about this building maybe?” . . . By the time we got to Houston we decided it makes good sense. Galveston was a major port, many immigrants that came to the western U.S came there, the Ellis Island of the West. . . .

Within a week, I had submitted a contract to buy the building. We got stymied in that effort when we examined the building closely and figured out that it had 5½ feet of water on the ground floor. With only two floors, we only had two choices — either raise the building 5½ to 6 feet higher in order to be able to put items on the first floor, a cost that would have been prohibitive, or just put all the valuables on the second floor, but there wasn’t enough space there to exhibit much. . . . Dr. Christy and I were quite devastated by that finding, and we were headed back to Houston when our curator Andrew Gustafson said, “Well you may want to come down 21st Street, you are right near there. There’s a building there, kind of spooky, but it might serve the purpose.” Dr. Christy and I pulled up front, looked at [the former Galveston Orphans Home] and said, “Well, it has some things about it that are a challenge, but wow, it looks like it could be a great facility — a wonderful looking structure.” It had a “For Sale” sign and I called the realtor. . . . She came and we walked inside and it was obvious that this was the place for the collection. The ground floor was quite a challenge, but the rest of the building was wonderful. You could see what its potential was immediately — to acquire it was an easy decision.

CC: How long did it take you to open?

JPB: Less than a year and a half.



As the museum’s library illustrates, J. P. Bryan passionately advocates educating both children and adults through access to historical objects and books. The museum’s collection includes 20,000 books and over 30,000 documents.

CC: Tell us about what that experience has been like? Who has come through — children’s groups? Educational efforts?

JPB: Well, some of those are in their infancy, most especially the children’s educational effort. We have a facility to accommodate their arrival, and we have a room already prepared with displays there, videos and the like, to entertain them. The more formalized educational structure of that experience has not been developed fully, but we are trying to design a tour of the museum that will be appealing to children and not get them embroiled in every artifact, but try to selectively pick things that we believe will pique their interest. To have them become engaged students, we give them information, they answer a quiz and cannons on the boat will fire if they push all the buttons and they get it right. They will learn going through the various displays and also see what it was like to be an orphan in an orphanage, which is part of our history also. For children, it will be a wonderful educational outreach. Of course, we think that’s the purpose of the facility to begin with. We are trying to educate — not just children but adults also, on the wonderful historical experience we all share in the settlement of the western part of the U.S.

CC: How many visitors do you average?

JPB: We are only open four days a week, and we are averaging about 100 visitors each time we are open, and that doesn’t include school groups that come.

CC: Are you pleased with that number?

JPB: No. I want it to be much higher. But, yes, as a recently opened facility, we are very pleased. We are even more pleased about the enthusiasm with which the people have discussed their experiences. Almost without exception, they have said, “Thank you, this is wonderful — it’s beautiful — thank you for doing this. It is a great experience. We are coming back. I didn’t even begin to have time to learn all there is to learn here.” . . . There has been excellent publicity about the museum. I am very heartened by all that. . . .

CC: You have aspects of the collection, particularly in the documents that haven’t been archived — that haven’t been catalogued. What sort of research opportunities do you suspect there may be there?

JPB: You could literally probably pick an item and do a whole thesis on that one particular piece and the things related to it and its importance in history. Then we have the complete history, or as complete a history as you’ll find on various artists or writers. Anyone that wants to do research on that person, or a biography, we have great resource material. I think there are literally hundreds of Ph.D. theses or other papers that could come out of the museum — enough to keep some history departments very busy.



This postcard shows the Galveston Orphans Home in the early 1900s, following repairs made in the aftermath of the 1900 Storm.

CC: So you have education for children as a mission. You have general education for adults and people of all ages as a second, but then there are also research opportunities. Could this become a research center as well?

JPB: For the academics and the non-professional historians, who, in my judgment, write the most interesting history of anybody. They are not as committed to write something that is politically correct. They want to write something that is historically correct. They are not bothered by recognizing people’s heroic conduct or their uniqueness — as a matter of fact, it normally drives their publication. They can be bad guys, too, who are also interesting. . . .

CC: Is there anything else that you want readers to know?

JPB: I guess the one thing I didn’t say very emphatically is the settlement of the West, which basically took place over 400 years, and I say 400 years because we are not talking about the time of the Native American, even though we certainly pay homage to their presence here. The settlement of the West, when it was actually transformed from a pristine environment by human habitation, took place over 400 years. And it is without question one of the most important historical stories ever enacted in world history. When you finally look at its history, you cannot find another 400 years of history in the world to match it.

Chris Cookson is a member of the Board of Visitors of the Center for Public History. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Houston and is an avid student of Texas history.

Open to the public Friday through Monday from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.,
The Bryan Museum is located at 1315 21st Street in Galveston. It is actively
engaged in a variety of educational pursuits and serves as a popular
venue for weddings and other events.