



**WILLIAM CURRY HOLDEN<sup>1</sup>**  
1896–1993

In the decades of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, American anthropology welcomed and, in important ways, depended on a coterie of individuals who were not trained as anthropologists. These people made significant contributions to establishing the foundation for the subsequent expansion and specialization that has characterized the field in more recent decades. One such person was William Curry Holden, who was a primary figure in the development of anthropology in west Texas. He died in Lubbock, Texas, on April 21, 1993, at the age of 96 years.

Curry Holden received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Texas, continuing his graduate training at the universities of Colorado and Chicago before receiving his Ph.D. in history from the University of Texas in 1928. After teaching at San Marcos College and McMurry College, he moved to Texas Technological College in 1929. He arrived soon after the founding of this college and played an important role in its development by establishing what was then known as the West Texas Museum (and eventually laying the foundation for its successor, which is now one of the larger museum operations in the Southwest), building the Department of History and Anthropology, gaining accreditation to offer the Ph.D. in certain departments during the time he served as graduate dean, and setting up the Southwest Collection and the Ranching Heritage Center. During the late 1930s, Texas Tech was one of the very few universities in North America offering graduate work in anthropology.

Many of Curry's important projects began during the Depression of the 1930s. Field schools were run on a shoestring. He exercised many creative strategies to help students attend school or attend the field school; he once accepted a \$40 horse in partial payment for a season at Arrowhead Ruin.

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He began the original Texas Tech Museum in a basement and forged ahead with a "Give a Brick" Campaign to get materials to go above ground.

In 1929, while at McMurry College, he conducted his first archaeological fieldwork, in the form of a small field school at a site on Tarbox Creek in the Texas Panhandle. He continued archaeological work in the Panhandle after moving to Texas Tech; his work helped to identify the characteristic features of the unusual pueblo-like architectural style found at Antelope Creek Ruin, Saddleback Ruin, and other sites that are now assigned to the Antelope Creek phase. In the summer of 1930, Curry and his students moved further west to excavate the site of Tecolote, near Pecos, New Mexico. They hoped to establish a connection between the Puebloan cultures in eastern New Mexico and the Antelope Creek sites of the Texas Panhandle. Between 1933 and 1948, with time out for World War II, Tech archaeological field schools alternated between study trips to central Mexico and on-going excavations at Arrowhead Ruin, a large Early Glaze-period pueblo near Pecos, New Mexico. He also excavated Murrah Cave in the Texas Big Bend country and other caves in far west Texas, and directed seven years of archaeological work in east-central New Mexico. He was a critical figure in the decades-long struggle to protect and investigate the Lubbock Lake Site, which is now a National Landmark and State Park. At his death, he was the last surviving founding member of the Texas Archaeology and Palaeontological Society (TAPS); he served as editor of the TAPS Bulletin from 1947 to 1952, and as president in 1953–1954.

Paralleling his archaeological work was his ethnographic and ethnohistorical work with the Yaqui Indians of Sonora. In 1934, Curry took a group of fellow professors and interested Lubbock citizens to the Yaqui Valley. An ethnographic account published at Texas Tech in 1936 contained articles by an engineer, a medical doctor, a physical anthropologist, and a botanist, in addition to Curry's five papers on topics as diverse as "marriage, child rearing, and education," "household economy," and the "Fiesta de Gloria." He visited the Sonoran Yaquis many times over the next several decades. His interest in the Yaquis eventually resulted in a novel about the Yaquis, *The Hill of the Rooster* (1956), that Yaqui leaders have told us represents one of the best portrayals of Yaquis as human beings they have seen. Another spin-off of his Yaqui research was his in-depth study of *Teresita* (1978), a woman known as the Saint of Cabora who was a revitalization figure of the early 1890s in northwestern Mexico. Ever the historian, Curry convinced certain people to write their life stories; one such was the Yaqui, Rosalio Moises, whose handwritten story formed the basis of *The Tall Candle: The Personal Chronicle of a Yaqui Indian* (1971; Moises, Kelley, and Holden).

Although he loved anthropology, did impressive amounts of field archaeology, did basic ethnography and ethnohistory, and actively helped shape a nascent university, Curry never abandoned his primary field of history. One of his first books, *Alkali Trails, or, Social and Economic Movements of the Texas Frontier 1846–1900* (1930), traced social movements on the Texas frontier even before there was a field of social history. Ranching history and west Texas history remained his primary professional niche, with the publication of six major books in this area; several have been reissued in recent years. Indeed, *Rollie Burns, or, an Account of the Ranching Industry on the South Plains* was republished as a "classic" in 1986, more than 50 years after its original appearance in 1932, and Curry was still going strong at its second launching.

The founding of the Ranching Heritage Center and the establishment of the Southwest Collection are direct outgrowths of his focus on ranching and farming history. The Ranching Heritage Center began in 1967 when Curry and his wife, Frances, began convincing the owners of historical ranch buildings to have them moved to the Texas Tech University campus. These buildings, which come from all over Texas, offer a visual interpretation of Texas ranching from the Rio Grande valley to the Panhandle, from Spanish times until this century.

Interpreting history and anthropology to students and to the public was the thread that knit his many activities together. He explored multiple media and multiple avenues in his quest. For example, at the Lubbock Fair Grounds, he masterminded a large-scale pageant of Coronado's route across the southern Plains to mark that historic anniversary. He was instrumental in getting his friend, Peter Hurd, to paint a series of historical vignettes in a major fresco mural in the original museum building. Many regard this as Hurd's crowning artistic achievement. Interpretation of natural history, history, and anthropology was at the heart of Curry's long involvement in the museum field as

director of the Museum at Texas Tech from 1929 until his retirement in 1965. In fact, he continued to be active in museum affairs long after his retirement.

One of the interesting things about Curry's writings is the attention he paid to the roles of women. This is particularly noteworthy for the time in which he was writing and carrying out research. In his *Spur Ranch, a Study of the Enclosed Ranch Phase of the Cattle Industry in Texas* (1934), he focused on "Paint" Campbell and Aunt "Hank" Smith as significant to the history of the Llano Estacado; in *Rollie Burns* (1932) he showed the importance of Mary Burns in the early settlement of the southern Plains; in *The Hill of the Rooster* (1956), one of the key characters is the woman called Chepa, who is portrayed as a legendary leader of the mountain Yaquis during the 1926–1927 Yaqui rebellion; and *Teresita* (1978) is entirely focused on this Mexican Joan of Arc. In his own life, he freely acknowledged the importance to his own work of the assistance and collaboration of his wives, Olive Price Holden, who kindled his interest in anthropology, and who died in 1937, and Frances Mayhugh Holden, who participated in and made significant contributions to all of his myriad projects for more than half a century.

Although his list of accomplishments is the stuff of which Renaissance men were made, we feel that his greatest contribution may well have been as a teacher. He was an inspiring teacher, and many of his students regarded him as the best and most influential they had at the university. Many returned to tell him that they had thought, when taking anthropology, that it was interesting, but esoteric and impractical. However, in retrospect they came to feel it had been their best training for life.

The significance of his talents as an anthropology teacher derive in part from the context in which he taught. Lubbock was and remains in the heart of the "Bible Belt." A dose of cultural relativism and respect for other cultures was a sometimes unpopular, but much needed, message in the west Texas of those days. His enthusiastic and enlightened lectures on cultural and racial diversity and on the antiquity of humankind had a profound impact on many west Texans who became social and business leaders in the region. It was in large measure the many people whose lives he touched, who sponsored, supported and financed the two museums at Texas Tech, who contributed to the Southwest Collection, who built the Ranching Heritage Center, and who insisted that the Lubbock Lake archaeological site be preserved. This intelligent and informed support for historical and anthropological endeavors remains an enduring legacy on which the present generation builds.

Curry Holden is representative of an important aspect of the history of anthropology in North America. Many individuals who did anthropology, and who taught anthropology in the earlier decades of this century were trained in other disciplines. They were linked by a common interest in anthropology, and they learned as they worked. The best of these early pioneers understood the need for careful documentation and prompt publication. They spread anthropology out of the few major centers where it was well established and into the grass roots of the country. Curry Holden helped to spread anthropology into west Texas, and beyond.

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## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> The lead photograph appears courtesy Mrs. Francis Holden and the *Lubbock Avalanche Journal*.