

LESSON 2: TEXAS CENTENNIAL

TOPIC: Texas Centennial: A Celebration of 100 years of Independence from Mexico

OBJECTIVE: Students will:

Extend the study of celebrations by examining the Texas Centennial.

Analyze what aspects of the Texas Centennial Activities correspond with the definition of celebration.

Examine the role of art in celebrating the Texas Centennial

SYNOPSIS: The Texas Centennial marked the 100th anniversary of Texas independence from Mexico. In addition to the parades, speeches, reenactments, and entertainment, it was marked by beautiful architectural buildings, the creation of museums, and historic markers statewide. Through the arts, it depicted the history of Texas and its future progress. It created jobs during the Great Depression and put Texas on the map for America to see.

INFORMATION:

The Texas Centennial was the first of its kind in Texas celebrating the 100th anniversary of independence from Mexico. It resulted in the development of a permanent Fair Grounds and was a 176-day celebration. The Centennial was important in celebrating Texas' history, improving its economy, and defining a Texan identity.

The plans began as early as 1923 when Theodore H. Price of New York City, a publisher of *Commerce and Finance*, gave a speech titled, 'What Texas Has to Advertise and How to Advertise It'. He suggested that Texas history could be the focal point to advertise Texas. It should be done through industry, agriculture, and tourism. The upcoming Centennial would be the culmination of this advertising campaign. This would raise awareness of Texas history and bring revenue to the state. This speech was the beginning of the Texas Centennial.

The purpose of this celebration, according to Texas Governor Pat M. Neff, was to honor those "who laid the cornerstone of the Texas Empire" and to showcase the "great Centennial feats of art, history and industry, not only to show Texas to Texans, but invite the world to be our guests, that people everywhere may know that Texas is as great in achievement akin area."

The detailed planning began in 1926. Since the Great Depression had resulted in the drop in price of oil from \$1 a barrel to 8 cents, Dallas, by 1931, had 18,000 unemployed. Oil was no longer reliable income, and cotton, as the main agricultural product of Texas prices had fallen as well. Since there was little money for a large celebration, an amendment to the Texas constitution was passed allowing for the purchase of bonds and other ways to fund this event.

Dallas, due to having \$7.8 million in funds, won the competition to host the Centennial celebration; however, Dallas required state and

federal funds to assist in this endeavor. By 1935 all the funds were secured which included \$1.2 million for the State of Texas building.

Fair Park, in Dallas, was already the site of the state fairs, but needed remodeling and enlarging for the new buildings. George Dahl, who had designed several buildings on the University of Texas campus as well as local department stores and businesses, was chosen as the architect.

The Centennial celebration attracted over 6 million visitors, created 10,000 jobs, and brought in 50 million dollars to the local economy. It featured a theme of history and progress. The grounds had many semi-permanent structures that housed all sorts of activities. According to Jim Parsons and David Bush, authors of *Fair Park Deco: Art and Architecture of the Texas Centennial Exposition*, there were several oddities in the creation of activities and art at the Exposition.

- Nudity and girlie shows and “go-to for gambling, booze, strippers and other activities that repelled good, traditional Southern morals” were present at the Centennial

- The body of the woman who modeled for the Spirit of the Centennial was modeled after two women, one for the head and the other for the body since the first model did not want to model in the nude.

- Davy Crockett was painted, not in his coonskin cap, but in a suit. The artist was not familiar with Crockett’s history and found a picture of Crockett as a Congressman and as his image to paint.

- The most impressive part of the Exposition were the lights. People talked about this long after leaving the park. There were 24 moving, multicolored search lights that circled in a fan shape, visible around the main building, and were visible 20 miles away. Considering that most attendees were from rural communities without electricity, this was extremely impressive.

- A fresco in the Hall of State building, painted by A.S. Niendorff, had a love note in the lower corner of the fresco where he painted the names of all the people who had helped get him where he was.

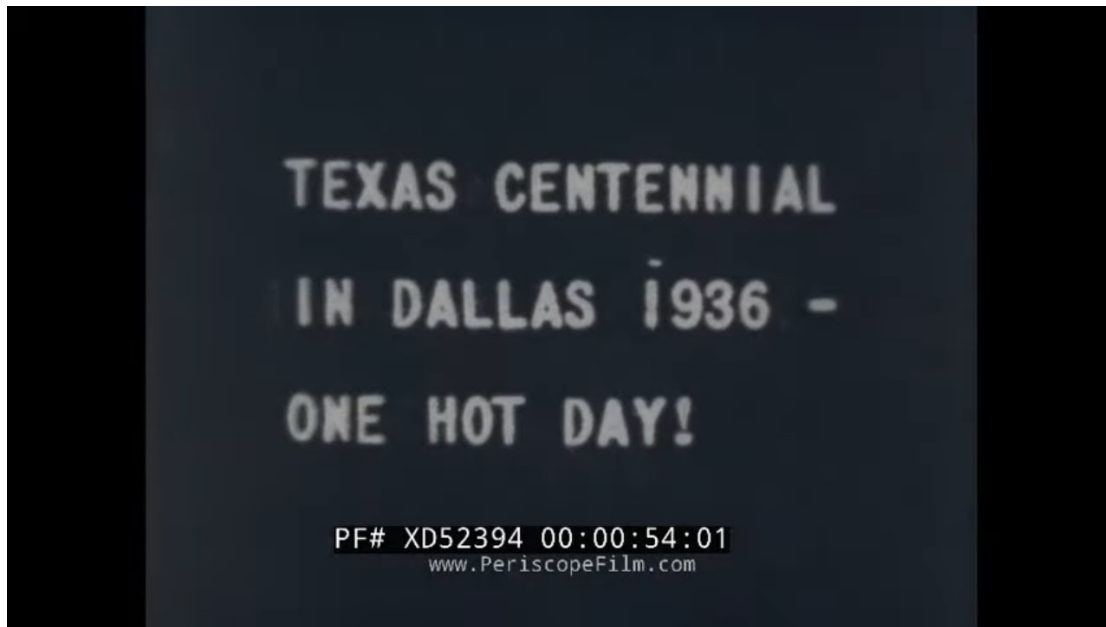
In addition to the oddities, there were popular attractions at this exposition:

- The Cavalcade of Texas was a pageant which featured four centuries of Texas history and was one of the most popular attractions at the Fair.

- The Hall of Negro Life was considered one of the first times that African American culture was recognized at a World's Fair.
- The first integrated athletic competition in the South was held at the Cotton Bowl.
- The Exposition had a 5000-seat amphitheater and an all-Black production of Macbeth as part of the Federal Theatre Project. The production was nicknamed Voodoo Macbeth and was directed by Orson Welles, who was very young and became a famous actor and some believe one of the greatest filmmakers of all times. It was one of the first times people had seen a professional dramatic presentation by Negroes and the audience was not segregated which was normal for the period in 1936.
- President Franklin Roosevelt made a visit to the Fair on June 12, 1936.
- Gene Autry's film, The Big Show was filmed on location at the fair.
- There was also a Beauty Pageant.... with only white contestants.

Texas was initially celebrating independence as a sovereign nation in 1836. It did not become a state until 1845. Fair Park still exists today with some buildings still standing, though many were destroyed, including the mysterious disappearance of The Hall of Negro Life.

REFERENCES:



Home Film of Texas Centennial:

Bizarre oddities at the Texas Centennial

<https://www.dallasobserver.com/arts/five-bizarre-fair-park-oddities-from-the-1936-texas-centennial-exhibition-7086181>

Video Texas Centennial Highlights

https://texasarchive.org/2014_03215

American Theatre during the Depression

<https://dp.la/exhibitions/the-show/african-american-theatre-impac/orson-welles-voodoo-macbeth>

Overview of the Texas Centennial

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Texas_Centennial_Exposition

List of all building, statues, monuments

<http://www.texasescapes.com/Centennial/Texas-Centennial.htm>

Fair Park after the Centennial

<https://www.dmagazine.com/frontburner/2017/08/a-scathing-look-at-fair-parks-history-and-why-dallas-needs-to-finally-fix-the-park/>

Texas Centennial Celebration Posters, 1936.

<https://www.thestoryoftexas.com/discover/artifacts/texas-centennial-posters-spotlight-100815>

Honey, Ain't You Glad We're Texan: The Mythic Narrative of Texas in The Texas Centennial Hannah Joan Wilson

<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/9504/cc4d3abee93f0f1d46eabc378528a1fd54e8.pdf>

Pictures of Buildings at Texas Centennial

<https://texashistory.unt.edu/search/?q=Texas+Centennial&t=fulltext&sort=&fq=>

<https://flashbackdallas.com/2022/02/06/stereoview-souvenirs-of-the-texas-centennial-1936/>

ACTIVITIES/ASSESSMENTS:

Select from the following people and attractions at the Texas Centennial and research the person/attraction and present an oral, written, or digital presentation to share with the class.

The Texas Cavalcade:

<https://flashbackdallas.com/2014/09/28/cavalcade-of-texas-1938/>

Voo Doo Macbeth:

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/federal-theatre-project-1935-to-1939/articles-and-essays/play-that-electrified-harlem>

Hall of Negro Life:

<https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/hall-of-negro-life>

Gene Autry, The Big Show

https://texasarchive.org/2010_00838

<https://www.allmusic.com/artist/gene-autry-mn0000160094/biography>

Who was George Dahl?

<https://www.faulknerdesign.com/george-dahl-bio>

<https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/dahl-george-leighton>

Texas Centennial and Segregation's End

Read this article from the Beaumont Enterprise. Discuss: Is this an accurate assessment? Did segregation and discrimination toward the African American end after 1936?

<https://www.beaumontenterprise.com/news/article/Texas-Centennial-played-significant-role-in-16827218.php>

Celebration or Not?

Lesson 2: Texas Centennial

Characteristic	Yes	No	Comments
Positive event			
Social interaction with others			
Looked to the past			
Remembered past accomplishments.			
Reflected on what was done well and what could be done differently.			
Took stock of people and resources needed to move forward.			
Paved the way for future success.			
People felt more supported after participation.			