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FARM AND RANCH ENTRANCES IN WEST TEXAS

by Mary Harris



In Elmer Kelton's novel *The Man Who Rode Midnight*, the grandson of the old-time rancher and protagonist Wes Hendrix thinks about city folks moving to the country and pretending that they are ranchers. Kelton writes:

Along the road, especially near to town, Jim Ed saw perhaps twenty fancy gateways of stone and steel and brick, bearing names like Angora Acres and Rancho Restful and The Poor Farm. He looked twice at a sign that declared Heavenly Days Ranch. These were the harbingers of an urban invasion, ten- and twenty- and fifty-acre ranchettes, home-sites for city folk who wanted to play at the rustic life without suffering its discomforts.¹

The novelist's references to "fancy gateways," and what he later refers to as an "entrance gate" or a "decorative arch," are called in this paper "decorative entrances." These decorative entrances are those highway and county road structures that announce to the passer that here is access to a Charolais ranch or a cotton farm, or as Kelton writes, smaller places where the people want "to play at the rustic life."²

These structures, that are *not* just gates, and may or may not have cattle guards, appear across Texas and the Southwest, but for this paper the study is limited to parts of West Texas along the Pecos River and east, with a few examples from the southern part of the state. In West Texas the entrances appear infrequently north of the area around Seminole and Lamesa. In the Panhandle, rarely do you find them along the major interstates and highways. South of the Seminole-Lamesa area, though, they appear regularly and

seem to dominate some stretches of highway. In Elmer Kelton country, along Highway 87 between Big Spring and San Angelo, for example, it is rare that a rancher or farmer does not have some decoration at the entrance to his or her property. It appears that when one person erects an entry, others spring up like Johnson grass. Everyone wants to keep up with the Joneses, some would say.

Of course, some of these entrances are strictly functional, permitting or discouraging entry by particular groups. This study is limited to the decorative entries, or at least to those parts of the entrances that are non-functional, the intent being to see them as an aesthetic expression of the folk, a way of demonstrating originality by the rancher or farmer, while serving to mark his or her territory.

I might add as a footnote, that my husband, our son, and I traveled to the East Coast, then New England and eastern Canada one summer. And another summer, we traveled the entire West Coast and some of western Canada looking for entryways as we went. We saw very few in our informal survey.



Functional *and* personal

These structures may be thought of as a part of folk architecture, which includes, of course, fences, gates, and other structures outside the family dwelling. Warren Roberts in his essay “Folk Architecture,” states, “In folk architecture . . . traditional plans are followed in that the owner or builder . . . follows a design or plan with which he is familiar, either in that it is the prevailing pattern in the area in which he lives or it is one employed by his forebears, while the materials, tools, and building techniques are traditional.”³ Based on Roberts’ definition, the West Texas entries considered in this paper are definitely an expression of folk architecture. Rather than seeing them as attempts to keep up with the Joneses, builders of these seem to be following “prevailing patterns” and using materials native to the region.

In fact, using native materials is one of several important characteristics of the entrances. Where there is abundant rock, the rock entries dominate. Types of wood used in building them depend on the region. When wood or rock (other than caliche) are not available, brick or stucco entries are plentiful; or, when there is an



Incorporating native materials to supplement design

abundance of iron piping (as in the oilfields), the rancher becomes a welder and creates his own works of metal art. Sometimes the folk will use old telephone poles to decorate the entrances, or the driver across Texas can even see corrugated metal used.

Beyond the use of existing materials, some other characteristics include the following:

1. Often the entry is an extension of a fence; but when it is decorative, it will appear apart from it. The fence stops and the decoration begins.
2. The entry usually makes a portal, with a horizontal cross piece either curving from or at right angles to the vertical pieces.
3. Often the decoration will be in harmony with the house—the same type of brick, for instance, may be used on the house and on the entry.
4. Many times the decoration is added next to an existing gate, emphasizing again the non-functional nature of these structures.
5. Most of the entrances demonstrate the builder's need to express symmetry. Often the two sides are mirror copies, and only when an additional gate or cattle guard is added is balance violated.
6. Sometimes, as with an expression of folk art or architecture, the builder or craftsman will lean to extravagance of expression. Just across the West Texas line in Tatum, New Mexico, two welders decorate gates and entrances for many area ranchers and farmers. This father and son team, O. J. and Tex Welch, has been so successful that they have made the street signs for their town, and they do many advertisements for businesses in eastern New Mexico and West Texas.
7. Other characteristics of the entrances include the ranch or family name displayed, trees and shrubbery as a part of the decoration, hobbies of the owners announced and, finally, they may serve a commercial function.

Several times I have mentioned that these are ranch and farm entrances. Mostly they appear at the roads to ranches.⁴ In fact, very few farmers build them. When the farmers do put them up, they usually build very small ones or tend to be very reserved in their expressions. There may be several reasons for this, other than the belief some people might have that the rancher is just showier than the farmer. For one, farmers usually drive wide farm machinery, such as cotton pickers, and cannot maneuver them through narrow entrances. It may also be the case that the farmer values every foot of the land for planting and feels it would be wasteful to use even a small space just for decoration. However, farmers also use “live fences” or entryways, which can be used as windbreaks or “as a method of demarcating their farms.”⁵

As to why they appear at all, several reasons come to mind:

1. Psychologically, they may be ways to satisfy territorial instincts, or they may be just a way to say “I am.”
2. Socially, the entries are a way of being a part of a larger community, identifying with neighbors, or they may become customized, economic status symbols.⁶
3. Artistically, the entrances may be an expression of folk art, the highway equivalent of the yard art and kin to mailbox art, documented by other Texas folklorists and various folk art organizations in other states.⁷
4. Practically, the entrances serve several functions, including welcoming visitors, rejecting unwanted guests, identifying a family in wide-open spaces, and notifying the traveler that out of the many gates and roads on a multi-sectional ranch, the decorated entrance is the one road to the house.

As to why these entrances came into existence in the first place, research is sparse. However, it may be these originated in wealthier parts of cities and towns where commercial architects have the opportunity to make the estate stand out with a fence and decoration.⁸ Perhaps they were then picked up by rural folks. Second, if

they originated in the country, they may be just an extension of the fence. Third, the entrances can be an elaboration of the gate, which often is the place where the structural integrity of the fence is reinforced with a crosspiece as a fence anchor.

According to Steen in his Texas history, in the 1870s when ranchers in West Texas put up thousands of miles of barbed wire, they were required to have gates at three-mile intervals, and they needed some way to designate the one entrance to the ranch house.⁹ These entryways could have come into existence as spontaneous creations of the rural folks of the region, a product of the environment or necessities of West Texas or ranch country. Other folks might think of these entrances as originating far back in history, as elaborations of decorated heavenly gates.

In the Texas Folklore Society publication *Built in Texas*, C. W. Wimberly writes of elaborate gates built by individuals who wanted not only to mark boundary lines, but also to suit taste; they were “something to see.”¹⁰ Wimberly believes that the first cattle guards were built in the late 1890s, and it is a possibility that decorative entrances appeared after that time—that the entrances were extensions of the work that went into putting in a cattle guard. Regardless of the intent of the builders, the entryway is, in this part of the country, an often regular, familiar, and interesting structure to watch for while traveling. It is hard to explain why I became interested in the entryways. But somewhere along the road during our family trips, I got used to watching for them—these architectural expressions of the folk. These entrances may be functional or decorative, plain or fancy, homemade or professionally built. They are constructed of a wide variety of materials and probably for a variety of reasons. And whether or not research will ever show when or why these entryways came into existence, they will continue to be an enjoyable visual statement of folk architecture.

This paper began with a quote from an Elmer Kelton novel. I’ll end it with a recommendation for the reader of his novel to find and enjoy some of Kelton’s early artwork that shows that he too is interested in all kinds of entryways. And the next time you’re on the road, be on the look out for farm or ranch entryways.

ENDNOTES

1. Elmer Kelton. *The Man Who Rode Midnight*. New York: Doubleday and Company, 1987. 20.
2. Ibid. 20.
3. Warren Roberts. "Folk Architecture." *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. Richard M. Dorson, Ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972. 282.
4. Wildhorse Ranch [Culberson County, TX]. Retrieved January 8, 2007, from <http://www.reatarealty.com>.
5. S.D. Cherry and E.C.M. Fernandes. "The Overstory #38: Live Fences." *The Overstory: agroforestry ejournal*. Retrieved January 8, 2007, from <http://www.agroforestry.net/overstory/overstory38.html>. par.8.
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9. R.W. Steen and F. Donecker. *Texas Our Heritage*. Austin: Steck-Vaughn, 1962. 267
10. C.W. Wimberly. "Gates." *Built in Texas*. Francis Edward Abernethy, Ed. Waco, Texas: E-Heart Press. 1979. 192.