



Bob Burleson and his guitar.

photo by Dick Leverich

Take off your rose colored glasses

If the world no longer seems filled with stupid politicians and highly placed miscreants, maybe your subscription has expired. There are two ways to keep the *Texas Observer* exposing injustice:

Wild Man

Dave Richards | [May 15, 2009](#) | Commentary

I first came across Bob Burleson's name in the preface to Justice William O. Douglas' *Farewell to Texas: A Vanishing Wilderness*. "Jim Bowmer and Bob Burleson of Temple guided me through secret canyons of the Rio Grande," Douglas recalled, "led me in ever-widening circles to discover wilderness areas from Capote Falls in the west to the Big Thicket in the east."

Bob, who died in April at 71, played an instrumental role in luring the Supreme Court's "Great Dissenter" and part-time conservationist to Texas on the trip that became a groundbreaking book in 1967. Bob and his uncle, Jim Bowmer, with whom he practiced law, had decided they needed to publicize what they saw as threats to the Texas environment. They knew about Douglas' nature writings and offered to pay his expenses and take the justice on a tour of the state's endangered areas. The result was one of the first serious popular treatments of Texas' physical wonders and the threats they faced.

Bob leaves behind a formidable legacy of environmental achievement—literary, political, and personal. For some, he'll be remembered as our generation's pioneer in river exploration. The ultimate wilderness river trip in Texas is through the Lower Canyons of the Rio Grande. Entering at Stillwell Crossing, below the mouth of Boquillas Canyon at the edge of Big Bend Park, you don't spot civilization again until you reach Judge Roy Bean's Langtry, more than 100 miles down the river. Today you can arrange for river guides to take you. Bob did it on his own—and then helped others make the journey, publishing the first detailed guide to this unexplored part of Texas. Later, when Congress was considering designating it as a Wild and Scenic River, a group of us, including then-Land Commissioner Bob Armstrong, took Joe Lelyveld of *The New York Times* down the Lower Canyons. We wanted good PR for the proposal. After several days of fast water and loose behavior, Lelyveld was suitably impressed. His subsequent piece in the *Times* concluded that it mattered little what Congress decreed: The river and the people were already wild enough.

Bob's activism ranged as broadly as he did. Under his leadership, the Texas Explorers Club, which he helped found, became the moving force behind creating Guadalupe Mountains National Park. Bob had hiked these mountains, knew their owner, and convinced him to cooperate with the national park campaign. After years of constant pushing by Sen. Ralph Yarborough, the park became one more tribute to Bob's persuasive powers and his determination to preserve Texas' best. Bob became Texas conservationists' favorite member of the state Parks and Wildlife Commission, leading the fight against dredging oyster beds. He served from 1968 until 1975, when Gov. Dolph Briscoe declined to renominate him.

Though Bob's guitar was a constant companion in his travels across the Southwest and Northern Mexico, you should not conjure up a vision of some latter-day Woody Guthrie. Bob was a lawyer, and his principal practice was defending insurance companies against medical malpractice cases—making him, in some people's estimation, one of the Darth Vaders of the law. He was also the guy who spent a number of years volunteering with the botany department at the University of Texas, exploring Northern Mexico and collecting plants and fauna in cooperation with the Mexican government. His 1986 book with David Riskind on “unconventional tourism” in the region, *Backcountry Mexico*, came from that part of his life. Bob was impossible to pigeonhole.

With his wife, Mickey Burleson, Bob also became a pioneer in “prairie replication.” The Burlesons restored their 500-acre Bell County farm to a pre-cultivated, pre-livestock state of tall-grass natural prairie; more than 80 varieties of wildflowers, among other original prairie plants, have returned there. As part of their project, the Burlesons co-authored a guidebook, *The New Southern Reconstruction: Home Grown Prairies*.

“If you have reverence in your heart for the natural world,” Bob said, “if you feel like your time on earth is really very short, then you don't necessarily have the right to use up all the resources of the earth for your own personal benefit.”

He was a great man to run the river with.

Dave Richards is an attorney and author.

<http://www.texasobserver.org/article.php?aid=3049>