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One state or more? Fort Worth's Glen Sample Ely inspects Texas' historical DNA

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For residents and visitors to the Lone Star State, it's a question that ranks right up there with the dilemmas posed by the chicken and the egg or the unstoppable force slamming into the immovable object: Is Texas the West, the South, a blend of both, or something altogether its own?

It's a thought that Fort Worth-based historian Glen Sample Ely, whose documentaries have been seen on the History Channel, PBS and the Discovery Channel, has been pondering for years. And he has put all of that into his new book, *Where the West Begins: Debating Texas Identity* (Texas Tech University Press, \$34.95), where the issues that shaped the region and the country -- ranching versus farming, the Civil War, race relations -- are viewed through a particularly Texan prism.

We spoke to Ely recently by phone and via e-mail.

What first got you thinking about this topic?

While in graduate school at TCU, several course books I read argued that Texas was "one with the South." Now, having driven more than 600,000 miles throughout the state for two decades doing Texas history documentaries, I agreed that this statement held true for East Texas. West of Sweetwater and San Angelo, I instinctively knew that this region was part of the American West.... Until now, much of this Western-Southern identity debate about Texas has been theoretical, especially in relation to West Texas. I felt the discussion needed to be grounded in fact. I spent the last seven years looking at the Lone Star State's historical DNA.

How would you say Texas identity has changed over the years?

After the Civil War and Reconstruction, state leaders looked to rebrand Texas, repackaging its identity as forward-looking, modern and progressive. Toward this end, Texas possessed something that its sister states in the Confederacy lacked. ... The first was its Texas Revolution identity, and Texans could also escape their Southern heritage by heading out West to blend in with the cowboys, cattle drives and gunslingers. ... Since the 1980s, there's been a needed correction, reintegrating our Southern legacy into the state's narrative. It's important to remember that Texas is many things. Its identity is complex and cannot be fully understood within the limited Southern, Western or independent context.

You talk about Fort Worth but not much about Dallas. So is Dallas where the East ends?

East Texas and the South do not abruptly end in Dallas. One can still find elements of Southern identity in cities such as Weatherford, Decatur and Graham. Dallas is only 30 miles from Fort Worth and the two share cultural similarities. For example, on Feb. 23, 1861, Dallas and Tarrant [counties] voted for secession by more than a 3-to-1 margin. ... Fort Worth certainly has authentic Western characteristics [but] in July and September 1860, Fort Worth mobs lynched two alleged abolitionists. ... In branding itself Western, the city is simply doing what much of Texas did during the '20s and '30s, escaping out West to avoid its Southern heritage, the legacy of defeat in the Civil War, military occupation during Reconstruction and troubled race relations. Finally, it's no secret that the Old West and Western destinations remain very popular with tourists.

What was different in West Texas [which Ely defines as starting near the "20-inch rainfall break line" near Lubbock and Amarillo]?

The kind of violence that manifests itself in lynching, burning and dragging of corpses didn't happen in West Texas. From

what I could see, that sort of thing was not typical in West Texas.

So should Texas have been two or more states?

As the last 175 years have shown, the Lone Star identity is stronger than any regional or sectional issues. Texas is perfect the way it is.... The problem I have is with limiting our conception of Texas, trying to make it fit one overarching interpretation. For the record, the Lone Star State is Western, Southern and much more. This is precisely what makes us so unique.

Does the current talk of secession reflect more of the Southern Confederacy or Western individualism roots?

The current talk of secession is just that, all talk. All hat and no cattle. Certainly, there is an element of independence and individualism in the rhetoric; Texas and other Western states chafe at federal regulations yet are dependent on federal subsidies.... When Texas entered the Union, our finances were bankrupt and we required a large bailout from the federal government to help stabilize our economy. Texas also needed federal troops to help secure its border with Mexico and defend against raiding Native Americans.

So how do most historians view Texas these days, as Southern, Western or neither?

There's still a lively debate among Texas historians regarding state identity, with no consensus as of yet. Hopefully, we will soon move beyond these limiting, one-dimensional labels and increasingly appreciate our state's diverse complexities. These complicated characteristics are what make the study of Texas history so intriguing.

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