

James Haley believes “History is for everyone”

Like cowboy boots strapped snug in stirrups, Texas history is sometimes squeezed and condensed into young’uns textbooks as lonely dates, battles and treaties. Well tip your hat to author James Haley who, o’er the years, has roped students and fans into adventurous, humorous, and sometimes shocking stories.

Passionate Nation: The Epic History of Texas is 554 pages of Texas tales (not including an afterword, selected sources, an index, and 16 pages of period photographs). Haley reflects on the state’s current political role and its cultural development since the Indians settled here years ago. He presents documents never before published and rebuts many Texas myths. The author also brings to light historical figures that somehow disappeared from popular history. Now that’s Texas-size reading!

“If you are a historian and you write books, what do you look for?” asks Haley at a reading and signing at Borders bookstore. “Facts and statistics,” he answers. “But if you are a writer, who writes about history, you look for stories. Hopefully, you can construct a journey that people will want to go on with you.”

Haley’s journey into national print began when he was 19 years old. He published his first history book in 1976 titled *The Buffalo War: The History of the Red River Indian Uprising of 1874 - 1875*. After graduating from the University of Texas at Arlington with a degree in political science, Haley moved to Austin to attend law school, and he’s still “living in the blue dot in the red state.”

Growing up, Haley dreamt of being a lawyer, a professional tennis player, a concert pianist, and a writer, but he said, “You can’t be a great lawyer and a great writer ... so snap, I quit law school. You have to prune yourself like a shrub and hopefully make the right decisions!”

From *Apaches: A History and Culture Portrait* (1981) and *Texas: An Album of History* (1985) to Haley’s first fiction, *The Kings of San Carlos* (1986), critics and fans would agree that he made the right decision. Haley’s book, *Sam Houston* (2002), the largest and most complete biography ever written on Houston, won nine literary awards.

About 25 pair of eyes are locked on Haley who holds *Passionate Nation*, a book so thick with history it resembles a Bible. “Having grown up Church of Christ,” he says, “the first thing I’m going to do is preach!” His audience laughs.

Actually, Haley talks about the book’s title. “You can’t call a book Lone Star-anything, anymore. Not only did Ted Fehrenbach mark that territory in 1968 [*Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans*], in the years since, there’s been *Lone Star Republic*, *Lone Star Nation*, *Lone Star Rising*, and *Lone Star Cookbook*. Lone Star is done.”

Haley then explains how John Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley* was the impetus for his title. Steinbeck writes that Texas, like most passionate nations, has its own private history based on, but not limited by, facts.

Passionate Nation introduces readers to historical figures who “fell through the cracks but are worth remembering,” according to Haley. “For example, in history class, they tell us the first governor of Texas was James Pinckney Henderson.

What about his wife, Frances Cox Henderson?”

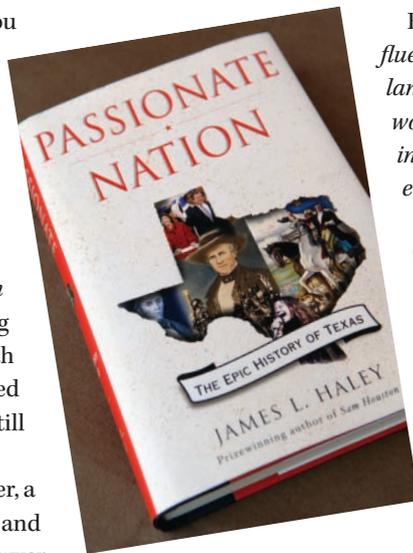
Haley reads: “*She spoke 25 languages (18 of them fluently) and published translations of foreign-language short stories – all of which leaves one to wonder how high she might have risen had women in that era enjoyed opportunities anywhere nearly equal to those of men.*”

“When Henderson came to Austin to be the governor, Frances could not have been less interested in coming to Austin to be his hostess and serve tea and cookies! She stayed behind in San Augustine to continue her career as an editor and transcriber.”

Haley continues, “One of my favorite people is William Radam, a German immigrant gardener in Austin. He came up with a new weed killer. It was 99 percent water, a little bit of hydrochloric acid, sulfuric acid, and some red wine. It cost him a nickel a gallon to make this stuff, and it became a patent medicine that he sold for \$3 a gallon!

“Or, Elmer Doolin. He had very little money. He got a potato ricer, and he purchased a corn chip recipe and invented Fritos!”

Haley’s enthusiasm at the reading draws a growing audience; stray shoppers become his students. “Another one of my favorite people is Martha McWhirter,” he proceeds. “She lived in Belton in the 1880s. An unhappy woman, she had 12 children, six of whom died, and she was convinced that her husband was cheating on her. She was a Methodist who hosted a interdenominational prayer group for women. Well,



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one day, she started this commonwealth of other unhappy women who became known as the Sanctified Sisters. Eventually, they moved to Washington D.C., bought a three-story Italianate villa and lived out there.” *A full-page feature story in the newspaper marveled at the success of ‘A Happy Home Without Husbands.’*” Haley reads.

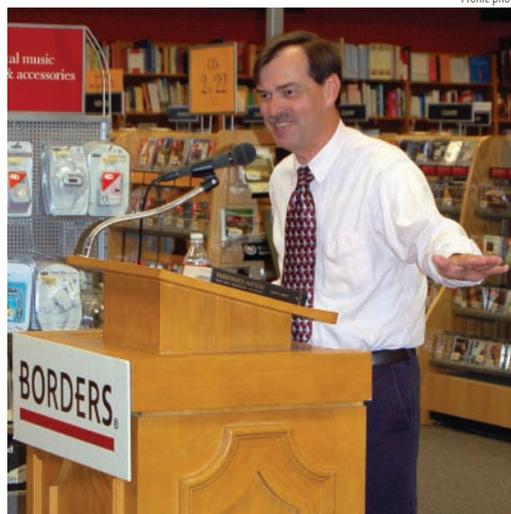
Haley turns history into personal stories. “When I give workshops at schools, I say, ‘Look at Sam Houston – he had a terrible relationship with his parents; he ran away from home when he was 16; he lived with Indians for three years, learned the language, hunted deer with a bow and arrow, and went around with Indian girls.’ ... Suddenly, history isn’t boring anymore!” Haley laughs.

Perhaps Sam Houston is this author’s favorite character from Texas past. “Wow,” he reflects. “I would love to have a beer with Sam Houston – well, you can’t have a beer with Sam because he stopped drinking after he married Margaret. ... It would either be Stephen F. Austin – ‘What were you thinking?’ Haley stammers in mid-sentence as if Austin is present. ‘You come to Texas; it’s raw wilderness. You plant civilization and then you stay loyal to Mexico long after people stop trusting you!’”

Haley proves that “history is not always going to put you to sleep.” He also attests, “History is for everyone. Everything that you believe about the current events or the things in your life are all filtered through what you think or know about history.”

Passionate Nation reveals the truth behind numerous myths. Haley was surprised, for example, by how much the South insisted on a Civil War, even after Texas elected Sam Houston, “a loud Unionist,” as governor in 1859. “The North tried many different times to appease the South, and the South meant to have a war!” Haley says.

“There are so many myths about the Alamo,” he continues. “There’s a chapter in *Passionate Nation* called ‘How Did Davy Die?’ It’s a synoptic comparison of the different stories and concludes what you have to – nobody knows! Every chapter in *Passionate Nation* has something in it that’s new, something that I would bet money somebody has never heard of.”



Author and history buff James Haley at a recent book signing at Borders Books.

Haley poses a question to his audience, “Have you ever seen the movie *Wings*? It is a 1927 great silent epic filmed outside of San Antonio. During World War I, Texas became a great center for military aviation because of the climate and vast space. Texas had been interested in aviation long before, and I wasn’t aware of the long history it had.”

After Haley reads about early aviation, he swoops in with a quiz. “We all know that the most decorated soldier in World War II was ...”

“Audie Murphy,” his audience reacts.

“OK, let’s try this – the most decorated sailor in World War II was ...”

No one responds.

“I’ll read this ... it is peculiarly appropriate to read in Dallas: *With a gambler like Nimitz commanding the Pacific Theater, it’s no surprise that the*

most decorated sailor in the war served under him, and was a fellow Texan, Lieutenant Commander Samuel David Dealey of Dallas, nephew of George B. Dealey of The Dallas Morning News.

... Dealey learned he was to be given charge of the new submarine Harder In four cruises he sank fifteen Japanese vessels, before being given the job in June 1944 of fetching British and Australian commandos from the north coast of enemy-held Borneo.

What made Dealey remarkable was his penchant for attacking destroyers, whose principal purpose is the destruction of submarines. Dealey realized that the Japanese navy was glutted with big powerful capital ships, but that their destroyer screens were inadequate. Sink their destroyers, he reasoned, and the big ships would be at the mercy of American submarines. ... (page 509 – 510).

As the session comes to a close, fans line up for Haley’s autograph. One fan clutches a 30-year-old copy of *The Buffalo War*, Haley’s first book. “When I was doing the research for *The Buffalo War*,” Haley says, “I spent a couple of nights camping in Palo Duro and drove home one night under a literal Comanche moon, and the grass was lit up like day. ... I thought it just doesn’t get more beautiful than this.”

He continues, “When I go to Galveston, I make it a habit to get up early and go running on the beach. I’ll have a cinnamon roll and throw pieces of it up so the gulls will snatch it out of mid air, and I think it just doesn’t get better than this. And when I go to Big Bend, I go hiking up in the Chisos Mountains and I think it *just* doesn’t get better than this!”

The vast beauty and rich history of Texas command awe and inspire strong affection. When asked how he would personify his home state, he says with a smile as long as the Rio Grande, “Muscular.”