

HOMEFIELD

TEXAS HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL STADIUMS FROM ALICE TO ZEPHYR



Jeff Wilson

Foreword by BUZZ BISSINGER | *Text compiled by* BOBBY HAWTHORNE

FIELD

STADIUMS FROM ALICE TO ZEPHYR



Photos by Jeff Wilson

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THIS BOOK WAS SUPPORTED
IN PART BY A GIFT FROM BARBARA STUART
IN HONOR OF JOHN STUART AND
GEORGE MACATEE IV, CHEERLEADERS,
AND GEORGE MACATEE V, A SCOTSMAN, FROM
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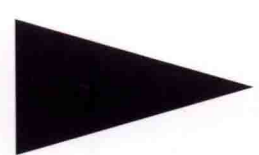
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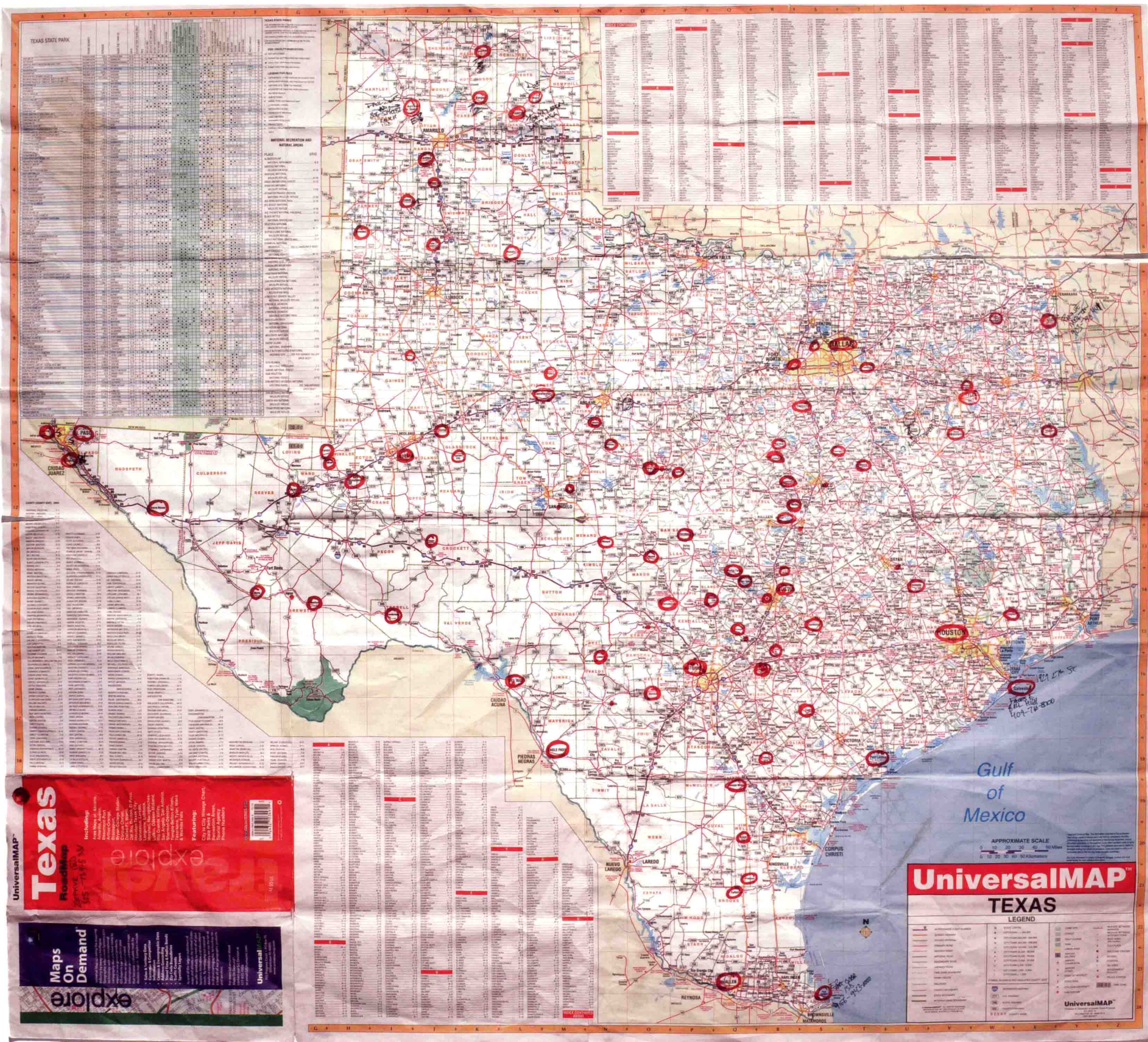
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CONTENTS

FOREWORD BY BUZZ BISSINGER

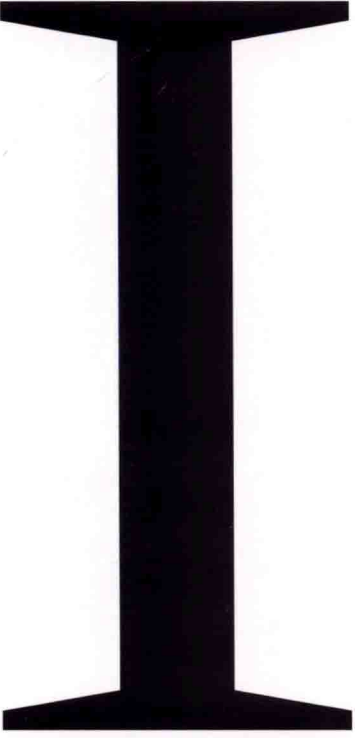
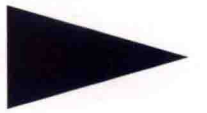
THE STADIUMS

AFTERWORD BY JEFF WILSON


ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A-Z STADIUM INDEX

FOREWORD BY **BUZZ BISSINGER**



HAVE BEEN ASKED
the question a thousand
times over. How did
you end up writing a
book about high school
football in Texas?



I would like to think
the curiosity about the

origins of *Friday Night Lights* stems from
the genius of the idea. But that is entirely
wrong, of course. It emanates from one
look at *me*: the anti-Texan, low not lanky,

east-coast speed-talker not take-your-
time twanger, striped tie not string tie.
I know so little about hunting I actually
thought there was such a thing as
searching for snipe. I don't think driving
two hundred miles to a sad little faucet
of water for fishing is a remotely good
idea. If I ever got caught in a bar fight,
I would be the first to hide under a table
and offer a bribe.

I say things I shouldn't; use a particular
obscurity as noun and adjective and

adverb; like hot dogs slathered with mustard and sauerkraut from unsanitary stands; cross the street only when the light turns red; and enjoy sneaking in an elbow on a crowded subway.

In other words, I was born and raised in New York City.

So how did it take place, this stranger plopping himself in the sui generis flatlands of Odessa in West Texas for a year to chronicle the sociological impact of high school football?

It happened because it had the same allure as the book you hold in your hands—a haunting beauty, an almost mystical enchantment, a sense that a high school stadium in Texas is not simply a high school stadium in Texas but a shrine, a temple, an epicenter of small-town life more important than the Baptist church or the local barbecue joint.

All books, at least the ones that have a chance to be good, are powered by a first kernel of love, wonderment without quite knowing what the wonderment is, and I instantly fell in

love with the Texas high school football stadium.

Long before I decided to write *Friday Night Lights*, I had an opportunity to see dozens of stadiums in 1986, when I drove cross-country with a friend. We shuttled along for several weeks that summer in a two-seater MG that did just fine except for stalling whenever it stopped. But the top was down and it hugged the ground, and you could almost reach out and touch the whistle-stops and tiny dots on the map we traversed.

We took the southern route, into the heart of high school football country. We went through Georgia and Alabama and Louisiana on back roads, avoiding the sixteen-wheelers on the interstate that literally would have blown us off the road. We saw high school stadiums along the way, but it was only in Texas that the power of them kicked in, the mix of physical humbleness and psychological pride that dug so deep. The trip was too long ago, and I am at an age where I forget far more than I

remember. I cannot tell you the names of the towns we went through, but I can tell you the inevitability of what we saw in our well-meaning MG. The downtown was dry gulch, once thriving but now bare, the only thing left of the Sears or the JCPenney the hieroglyphic of the faded lettering, the surrounding stores shuttered with scattered furniture covered by sheets, ghosts in the wind. Once past the border of Main Street, we drove by clusters of homes on two-syllable streets often named after trees or other states (with the exception of New York and New Jersey), some sturdy, some ready to blow away in the next galvanic thunderstorm.

And then there it was, a few blocks farther out: the high school stadium, with the field as green as the finest golf course and so lush even in the Texas heat of summer, the bleachers as carefully preserved as a bookcase of rare books, the rectangular scoreboard donated by the local bank or insurance company, the daddy longlegs of those magnificent

lights. I felt a shudder course through me whenever I saw these places, indestructible icons in a country of increasing physical impermanence.

I knew that Texas was synonymous with high school football (forget such faux interlopers as Florida and Ohio). As an addicted sports fan, I knew about the lore of the Sugar Land Express and Gordon Wood over at Brownwood and the great Abilene High teams under Chuck Moser and the one and only Tyler Rose. But I had never been to a high school football game in Texas; to tell the truth, I had only been to one high school football game in my life, when I was nine, in Tarrytown, New York. It was not the stuff of greatness.

I began to imagine what these Texas stadiums must be like on a Friday night, the great meeting places as the townsfolk watched their boys in the sweet and bittersweet splendor and spectacle of noble battle, the only places where regardless of race and class and gender you could spend two hours getting

away from the crops that wouldn't grow and the oil that no longer flowed and the marriage going sideways and the hardscrabble life that defined Texas every bit as much as the spectacular opulence of Dallas and Houston.

I knew something was powerful there, something worth spending time with and chronicling if I could get my arms around it, bottle and capture what had so moved me. After the trip I returned to the helter-skelter herky-jerky of Philadelphia, went back to work as an editor at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. I liked the job, as much as any editor likes making writers look good and never getting any credit for it. As another mishmash story landed on my desk that would take hours to fix—if it could be fixed—my mind wandered back to those high school football stadiums in Texas.

I was thirty-three years old at the time. I had recently gotten divorced, so my life was something of a mess. I felt wanderlust and an acute need to get away

from all that I knew. So I hearkened back to that unforgettable summer trip and turned it into something real, moving to Odessa with my four-year-old twin sons and fiancée in the summer of 1988 to write about the then-storied Permian Panthers. Odessa was not a quintessential small town; it had a population of about ninety thousand. But it felt like a small town because of its extreme isolation, roughly three hundred miles from Dallas, roughly three hundred miles from El Paso, roughly three hundred miles from everything, set smack in the scruff of the Permian Basin, what little green there was the scrubby tentacles of the mesquite bushes like the withered arms of a witch. Midland was close, but there might as well have been a Berlin Wall between the two because of their social and economic differences.

If I was going to do the book, I wanted access to everything, whether it be private or public. I needed permission, so I first drove to Odessa in the spring of 1988. It was the time of the oil bust,

and the ride in from the airport only accentuated the towering fall, dozens upon dozens of rigs lying on their sides like prehistoric skeletons. Trucks, water tanks, horseheads—one gigantic flea market where you could get pretty much anything and everything for ten cents on the dollar. The downtown was empty, dusty, carved in slanted shadow. The more I drove, the more I felt I had the right place. But I still wasn't convinced.

Until I saw the stadium.

Ratliff didn't produce in me the same sense of enchantment as had the stadiums I had seen during my road trip. It had been built in 1982, so it was still new. There was no beauty. But I had never seen anything remotely like it: a high school stadium that seated close to twenty thousand, with an artificial field, and so spotlessly clean it would satisfy the most serious obsessive-compulsive. I later found out that some expense had been spared: a decision had been made, reluctantly I imagine, not to put in an elevator from the concourse to

the press box. But the stadium still cost \$5.6 million. It was the only bond issue at that time ever passed by the county encompassing Odessa, Ector County. And because of its location, in the middle of nowhere, it reminded me of a rocket ship that had just landed on the moon. I could not resist. How could anyone resist?

As I later learned, the place literally shook on a Friday night, the sudden swell of the roars, the pageantry of the cheerleaders and the pepettes, the soldier-straight lines of the band playing the one song they had practiced over and over and knew perfectly, the little kids in the corner begging for the chinstraps of their high school heroes, the swaying back and forth of thousands like a grand chorus line, drenched in the school color of black. The lights rose through the vast ink-filled night to the heavens. Of all the sporting events I have witnessed, and I have witnessed many, nothing came close to these games.

But I still had a sweet tooth for the