

THE STORY OF THE MESQUITE PLAQUE

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Background:

If you were around back in the day while some of our founding members were still attending the meetings, it would not be long before you felt someone tap you on the shoulder causing you to turn around and be met by some smiling face. They would greet you and offer to do anything they could to help you on your beekeeping journey. This exact thing happened to me and upon turning round, I was greeted by the smiling faces of James and Tressie Garner. They thrust out their hands and just drew you in with their hospitality and kindness. Little did I know how meeting these two wonderful people would change my outlook and my life. I was drawn into them just as so many others had been.

This is what the founding members intended; They wanted to have a place where people could learn and share their beekeeping journey. There was no “How many hives do you have?” (a question most old-time beekeepers consider offensive. They would gently and tactfully get you straightened out on asking that question). Unless asked, they were loath to begin to tell you that “You need to do this or do that” They just wanted to help and for you to enjoy this amazing insect and be happy with your bees. It has been the essence of the Alamo Area Beekeepers Association all these years.

In 1990, our then President, Ernest Caldwell, wanted to honor some of these founders or anyone that embodied true servant leadership and served our members. A lot of thought and discussion was had about this, a vote was taken, and it was decided to create our Life Membership Award. It was to be given to a member that embodied the spirit of true servant leadership and who had served our members above themselves. It was not about who is the best beekeeper or who has the most hives. It was about serving our members. It was not intended to be an annual award lest it become “just another award and diminish it’s significance” but rather a milestone award for our members. The very first Life Member was Elbert Youngblood of Pearsall. A more deserving member would be very hard to find. His love and caring for members were given with great humility and most of the time, offered anonymously.

The Award:

Mr. Youngblood was given a paper certificate. At that time there was much discussion to have the recipients receive something more substantial. Of course, Mr. Youngblood would not hear of it for him. He appreciated and was humbled by the thought and love he knew was behind that certificate. Nevertheless, the conversation about this continued. What should it be?

Enter James and Tressie Garner:

James and Tressie kept bees on the renowned Moody Ranch in Kinney County. In fact, you could argue that the Moody Ranch **IS** Kinney County. It is over 60 miles long, spread out along the Rio Grande south of Eagle Pass. With its stunning scenery and iconic status, the ranch was, and is a magnet for

Hollywood

producers and many movies were filmed there. The most notable was the television series *Lonesome Dove*. In fact, James and Tressie kept bees literally on that movie set, right in the middle of “town”. Both Robert Duvall and Tommy Lee Jones liked the area so well that they both made other movies on the ranch.

For whatever reason, an old and twisted mesquite tree seemed to have almost always appeared in scenes in these movies. It can be seen in *Lonesome Dove* as the cattle drive begins and crosses a creek with deadly water moccasins and with Tommy Lee Jones and his girlfriend in *The Last Rodeo*. When the long running and popular television program *Gunsmoke* ended after 20 years, the public demanded more from James Arness and crew. He signed a contract with CBS for several full-length television movies that are still being shown today and are reputed to be more popular today than when they were first shown. During the filming of one of these movies, *The Last Apache*, a tornado went through the ranch and this much-loved mesquite tree was felled. The last time it was seen in a movie, the last Apache, was shooting arrows from behind the fallen tree.

It was not long after this that James and Tressie began their labor of love for the Alamo Area Beekeepers Association. In the weeks that followed, James and Tressie, now in their 70's made many trips from San Antonio to the ranch to painstakingly harvest the wood from this tree before it was gone forever. They took chainsaws and sledgehammers and together hauled as much as they could, one piece at a time in the back of their truck, many times in over 100 deg. temperatures. When logs were too heavy for them to lift high enough to be placed in the truck, they brought their Lincoln Continental and put those heavy logs in the trunk! James was a Master Woodworker and Craftsman. He knew what was hiding inside that old, twisted trunk and he was right. It was a true diamond in the rough as the spectacular grain began to emerge. They wanted to do this to show their love for our organization. They had a plan.

Getting the tree harvested and brought back to their home was just the beginning. It now had to be cut into boards that could be dried and later planed. James did not have a sawmill so instead, he meticulously hand cut the logs with a hundred-year-old handsaw to get them into a form for drying in the back of his shop. There the boards were stacked carefully to allow air flow and were stored for over 2 years before he would allow any to be milled into lumber.

The Plan Comes Together:

While standing in front of his shop one evening, James announced to me, “Dave, I think I have just what we need for the Life Memberships, mesquite plaques!” As he unveiled his story to me, I got more and more excited, and we could not wait to present his idea to the membership. We hoped they would be as excited as we were. Our concerns quickly vanished at the next meeting as the members were just as excited as we were.

It was decided that with rare exception, and contingent upon the approval of the Board, that the mesquite plaques were to be reserved only for those that achieved Life Membership.

The plaques should be left as they were created by nature. They could be finished for protection but all cracks, worm holes and voids would be left as is.

The mesquite wood represents our honey plants and optimism for the future and the next honey flow. The cracks represent the many paths and turns you take along your beekeeping and life journey.

The knots represent the challenges you have faced with your beekeeping and how you worked around those and continued.

The worm holes represent the love in our hearts for those that have passed on and that will never be filled.

At the end of the meeting, James came to me and said, "Dave, I will get the wood planed and ready if you will make the plaques. We both knew I was no match for his craftsmanship and skills but just like Alamo Area, it was not about who knew the most. It was about encouraging me on my woodworking journey. Service to others. James had a plan for me.

The Years Go by:

Through the years, plaques were made and awarded. At some point, more plaques were requested, and returning to James' home to get more wood, it was discovered that the wood was gone. Sadly, along the way we had lost Tressie and time, and health were catching up with James (he attended meetings well into his 90's). No one knows what happened to the remainder of those original logs. We soon came to the sad realization that we could still make mesquite plaques, but not out of the original wood that James and Tressie harvested for us so many years ago.

They were not through yet:

New mesquite wood was purchased from local sawmills and a round of plaques were made from this. Somehow, they just did not seem to be the same. The wood was stunning, but the plaques seemed lacking and lifeless and that is when James and Tressie sent a sign! In making these plaques, many scraps are generated. Bark needs to be trimmed; holes cut around and, in the end, the grain must be orientated correctly. Over time, these scraps accumulated. There was no real use that could be thought of for them, but no one had the heart to throw them out. Why not take these scraps and cut small wooden dowels or plugs from them? These could be inserted into the new plaques, and they, too, would have a piece of the original wood from our famous tree. Although finished, these plaques went right back in the shop and a wooden plug inserted and refinished. The plaques came back to life and James and Tressie's vision would continue.

The wooden plugs inserted in the back of these plaques represent the thread of Servant Leadership and Service to others that connect us all back to our founding members.

The Future:

If you were awarded a plaque or will be in the future, I hope you will give pause from time to time and reflect on James and Tressie and all the founding members. That plaque represents the spirit of love and service to others that our organization was founded upon. It is hoped that this tradition of encouragement and service to others will continue as long as there is an Alamo Area Beekeepers

Association. With James and Tressie watching over us, our future is bold and bright.

Some Interesting Facts about Mesquite Trees

- Every part of a mesquite tree is edible in some form or fashion.
- Mesquite is a nitrogen fixer and the soil under the canopy has been measure up to 9 times more nitrations.
- Houston Street in downtown San Antonio was once covered in mesquite blocks. Mesquite is so hard that the blocks lasted for decades.
- There are 40 species of mesquite worldwide, with seven of those growing in Texas.
- 76% of all mesquite trees in the US grow in Texas.
- A 15-foot-tall mesquite tree can have a tap root that extends down 200 feet into the earth.
- Comanches chewed mesquite leaves to cure toothache.
- During the Civil War, when coffee was hard to come by, mesquite beans served as a substitute.
- The seeds of a mesquite tree can lie dormant for up to 40 years before sprouting.
- The seeds themselves have a sweet coating that makes them appetizing not only to animals but to humans as well. They are quite nutritious, containing about 35% protein and about 25% fiber.
- There is a mesquite tree in Real County that is 14'4" in circumference and 56 feet tall and with a canopy of 90 feet.