

Wind Power in Texas

The winds that howl across Texas paint the very picture of loneliness. Yet, ironically, these same winds – harnessed to human purposes – are the harbingers of civilization.

Ranching sprang up in South Texas in the presence of watering holes and absence of fences. As newcomers arrived and fencing began, developers looked toward arid regions like the Panhandle. Water was the limiting factor. Windmills could pump water from deep underground, but these required an operator in attendance – until a Connecticut Yankee developed a fixture that could turn itself to face the wind.

Halladay's 1854 invention might have been self-orienting, but it was not self-oiling. Range riders performed the thankless job of climbing and greasing far-flung windmills, twice each week. Design improvements slowly spread into the Texas hinterlands. Steel blades, introduced in the 1880s, encountered vehement opposition but eventually replaced wooden paddles. Self-oiling models came into production in 1912.

Windmills provided water for steam locomotives and enticed settlers to the farthest reaches of the state. Windmills offered a source of municipal drinking water for small towns. By far their biggest role in Texas, however, was pumping water for livestock.

At one time the XIT Ranch in the Texas Panhandle had 335 functioning windmills.¹ Its largest unit stood 130 feet high to catch the winds above canyon walls.² Small farmers and ranchers considered windmills essential. In 1928, half of all windmills sold in the United States went to Texans.³

During the 1930s, the federal government extended electric lines into rural areas. Many stockmen replaced their windmills with electric water pumps. A number of landowners, however, continued to maintain their wind machines. As late as the 1960s, the King Ranch kept 262 windmills in constant operation.⁴

In recent years wind has been directed into generating electricity. Large three-bladed rotors—properly called “wind turbines”—convert wind into nonpolluting energy. With its immense windy plains and shoreline, Texas has become an epicenter for wind power in the United States.

¹ Clay Coppedge, “Windmills,” <http://www.texasescapes.com/ClayCoppedge/Windmills.htm> (April 10, 2009); *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. “Windmills,” <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/WW/aow1.html> (April 10, 2009).

² John Watson, “The Windmill: Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow,” <http://buckcreek.tripod.com/windmill.html> (April 10, 2009); *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. “Windmills.”

³ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. “Windmills.”

⁴ *Ibid.*

Quotations

The farmer coming in from the field . . . could get a nice cold drink of water fresh from the well. Most farmers kept a long-handled dipper hanging on a wire attached to one of the legs of the windmill tower. You did not need refrigeration of any kind to get cold water, as it was naturally cold coming from deep underground. – John Watson⁵

A windmill was on our farm in Lubbock, Texas in the late 1930s. . . . As six and seven year-old children, we would climb the windmill, scoot across the small pipe, and swim in the tank. – Bob Walker⁶

Windmills are the desert's handmaidens and signal the possibility of life in landscapes seemingly barren of comfort or overwhelmed by isolation. – E. Dan Klepper⁷

Phyllis.Mckenzie

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Wikipedia, s.v. "Windmill," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Windmill> (accessed April 9, 2009).

⁵ Watson, "The Windmill: Yesterday/Today/Tomorrow."

⁶ Bob Walker, "A Texan in Florida," Dec. 20, 2005, quoted in Clay Coppedge, "Windmills."

⁷ E. Dan Klipper, "Sail Ribs and Tailbones," quoted in Clay Coppedge, "Windmills."