Val Verde County

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Val Verde County has a Texas Historical Commission marker that notes the creation of the county with the year—but not much else. The plaque (for it is not a subject historical marker) sits in a city park next to the US Highway 90 between the two branches of San Felipe Creek. The Val Verde County Historical Commission would like to place a marker giving a greater history and place that marker in front of the county courthouse.

Val Verde County was legally organized in 1885. The county was formed from parts of three counties: Kinney to the east, Crockett to the north, and Pecos to the west. The borders of Val Verde County encompass about 3,150 square miles which make it larger than either Rhode Island or Delaware. At the time of creation, it was the sixth largest county in Texas; it is now the seventh largest.¹

The territory of Val Verde County has existed within several different jurisdictional boundaries. From 1836 the land now in Val Verde was assigned to Bexar County with San Antonio as the county seat; essentially, all of Texas west of San Antonio lay within this Bexar County Land District. Throughout the years of the Republic no changes occurred, reflecting the negligible population increase of West Texas. In 1850 (after statehood) several new counties were established by the legislature. Presidio County (named for the Spanish fort near modern

¹ Dallas Morning News, Texas Almanac, 1990-1991. The counties in order of size are Brewster (6,169 square miles), Pecos (4,776), Hudspeth (4,566), Presidio (3,857), Webb (3,363), Culberson (3,185) and Val Verde (3,150). Webb County includes Laredo; the others are all in the Trans-Pecos of far west Texas. Brewster County was organized from Presidio County in 1887, two years after the formation of Val Verde. Both the new Brewster and the remaining Presidio--in the Big Bend area of Texas--are larger than Val Verde.
Presidio) and El Paso County were organized west of the Pecos, with Presidio County in possession of the future Langtry area.

Uvalde and Kinney Counties were created nearer to San Antonio during that same year. Kinney County lay much further south than it does now, encompassing the vicinities of Quemado and Eagle Pass, and bordering Webb County near Laredo. Kinney County was named for the founder of Corpus Christi, Henry Lawrence Kinney, who also served several terms in the Texas Legislature. All of the Val Verde area east of the Pecos remained within the Bexar Land District.

Maverick County was created in 1856 from parts of Webb and Kinney Counties, and Kinney County was recompensed with extra lands to the north, including the southeastern parts of Val Verde along Sycamore Creek and across the lowest reaches of the Devil's. Uvalde County lost territory, being reduced to approximately its modern size and shape. In 1858 Dawson County was created from parts of Kinney and Uvalde Counties, but the county was never actually organized. It remained on the maps for eight years, but it finally disappeared by 1866 when boundary line changes for Uvalde, Kinney and Maverick Counties effectively erased the phantom county.² Val Verde's existence is probably owed to this erasure: Fort Clark would probably have fallen within Dawson's boundaries, Kinney County would have been further west, and Del Rio would have been Kinney's county seat while Langtry probably would have eventually been located into Terrell County.

Pecos County, including all of El Paso and Presidio Counties along the west bank of the Pecos River, was created in 1871. Crockett County was created from the remaining Bexar Land

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² Private William Henry Smith, traveling towards the New Mexico Territory, noted in his journal the county. "Took up camps on the Nueces River, in Dawson County." The county was on a least on Texas map from 1861. Walter A. Faulkner, "With Sibley in New Mexico; The Journal of William Henry Smith," West Texas Historical Association Yearbook, (Vol. 27) October 1951, page 116.
District north of Kinney, east of the Pecos (the County and River) and south of the huge Tom Green County (which was created only one year prior). Crockett County was named for the famed Defender of the Alamo. In 1885 the southern half of Crockett County was detached; part was given to Edwards County while most was given to the new Val Verde County along with the small parts of Kinney and Pecos.3

The formation of the county is directly linked to the coming of the railroad in at least two aspects. Before the railroad Del Rio was a small town on the western fringe of Kinney County. By coming to Del Rio in 1882, the railroad gave the town a huge boost in economic activity and population growth. Secondly, the railroad bypassed the Kinney County seat of Brackettville. The population growth of that town did not keep pace, and Del Rio quickly outgrew it. As a result, from 1882 to 1885, there was a growing popular demand for a new county with Del Rio as the county seat.4

The first attempt—in very early 1885—to achieve county organization was originally defeated in the legislature for reasons unknown. In March Judge W.K. Jones, Dr. Nicholson and Mr. Varney (whose given names were not reported) became Del Rio’s point-men at the state capital. The three went to Austin to personally lobby for the organization of Val Verde County. They were successful; upon reconsideration on March 24 of that year, House Bill 105, the organic law for Val Verde, was passed. On May 2 the county was organized, and officials were elected.5

The county could have been named “Peirce.” A group of local business owners were interested in that name for the county to honor Tom Peirce, formerly in charge of the Galveston,

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4 Perkins, Early History, page 82.
Harrisburg & San Antonio Railroad, Texas’ oldest rail line. When that railroad was absorbed into the Southern Pacific system, he became a vice-president in the larger company. However, "he found that he could do nothing without consulting his superior… [and] no longer exerted any far-reaching influence" over his own railroad. In an effort to immortalize his name on the map of Texas, he promised to build a good hospital in Del Rio if the new county were named for him. The business owners, called the "Ice House Clique," appear to have gone to Austin on the first, unsuccessful mission to convince the Texas Legislature to approve the county's formation.\(^6\)

The origin of Val Verde County's name is the subject of some debate, but the name may be the argument that prompted reconsideration by the state legislature. At least as early as 1882, the San Antonio Weekly Express referred to Del Rio as being in "Val Verde County" even though no such legal entity existed.\(^7\) "Val Verde" is a pair of Spanish words that translate as "green valley," an apt description of the canal-irrigated lands adjacent to San Felipe Creek. However, "Val Verde" is also the name of a site in central New Mexico along the Rio Grande where a small battle was fought during the Mexican War and a more famous battle was fought during the American Civil War. The Civil War's Battle of Val Verde was a victory for Confederate and Texas troops in early spring of 1862.\(^7\)

There is a tradition in Texas (and in the rest of the South) of dedicating and naming things for Confederate Civil War figures. At least one obvious example can be easily found in Val Verde County. On the grounds of the county courthouse, under a tree at the northwest corner of courthouse square stands a pink granite monument. The final part of the inscription reads "A Memorial to Texans who served the Confederacy."

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\(^6\) Verde County Library, April 6, 1986; (untitled article), San Antonio Weekly Express, March 14, 1885, page 1. \(^6\) Baker, Val Verde Centennial, page 5; One Version; Claude Elliott, "The Building of the Southern Pacific Railroad Through Texas," University of Texas (Austin), Master's Thesis, June 1928, page 127. \(^7\) Spirit of Val Verde, page 201. A San Antonio Weekly Express, March 16, 1882, article stated that "All had enjoyed
Memorials such as this exist all across Texas, and many other Texas counties have been named for persons or things associated with the Confederacy. Many Confederate officers have been so remembered: Culberson for Confederate Lt. Col. David Browning Culberson; Ector for Confederate General Mathew D. Ector; Foard for Confederate Major Robert Levi Foard; Gregg for Confederate General John B. Gregg; Hood for Confederate General John Bell Hood, commander of the famous "Hood's Brigade"; Johnson for Middleton Tate Johnson who raised a Confederate regiment and organized blockade runners to bring goods into the Confederacy; Lee for the famous Confederate General Robert E. Lee; Lubbock for Confederate Colonel Thomas Lubbock; McCulloch for Confederate General Ben McCulloch; Randall for Confederate General Horace Randall; Reeves for Confederate Colonel George Robertson Reeves; Scurry for William Reed Scurry, Succession Convention delegate and Confederate General (and a troop commander in the New Mexico Theater of the Civil War); Upton for Confederate Lt. Col. John Cunningham and Lt. Col. William Felton Upton who were brothers both in Hood's Brigade; and Winkler for Confederate Colonel Clinton McKamy Winkler of Hood's Brigade.

Other counties have been named for political leaders of the Confederacy. Coke was named for Richard Coke, a delegate to the Texas Succession Convention delegate (and the county seat for Coke County is named Robert Lee). Oldham was named for Confederate Senator Williamson Simpson Oldham. And the President and Vice-President of the Confederate States of America, Jefferson Davis and Alexander H. Stephens have been remembered as Jeff Davis and Stephens Counties.

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8 Val Verde County is home to THC marker “Hood’s Devil’s River Right” about an event in John Bell Hood’s early military career.
Several counties surrounding Val Verde merit particular notice for following this pattern. Terrell County (1905), bordering Val Verde on the west, is named for Confederate General Alexander Watkins Terrell. Sutton County (1887) on Val Verde's northern boundary is named for Confederate Lt. Col. John Schuler Sutton who died of his battle injuries sustained during the Battle of Val Verde in New Mexico. Schleicher County (1887) on Sutton's northern border is named for Confederate Captain Gustav Schleicher. And Tom Green County (1874) on Schleicher's northern border is named for Confederate General Thomas Green who "led the Confederate victory at Val Verde."9

With these examples in mind, it seems reasonable that Val Verde's naming was part of a pattern and that Val Verde County is named for the battle. This belief is supported by a number of local and state sources, including the county name plaque in the park along San Felipe Creek. The plaque states "Val Verde County...Named in Honor of the Battle Fought at Val Verde, near Fort Craig, New Mexico."10 This plaque represents a broad range of secondary sources.

Detractors have a point, however, when they state that, to date, no documentary material has surfaced to confirm this theory. It is far easier to state that "Val Verde" is nothing more than an environmental observation. The centennial publication, Spirit of Val Verde, does exactly that: "Contributing to the complexities of the area were the Rio Grande and other waters such as the: San Felipe Springs, the Devil's River and the Pecos River. (Why else could this be Val Verde

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9 It should be remembered that these people often contributed to Texas history or the various local histories in other matters as well. This information can be found in the various entries in the The New Handbook of Texas, 1996 Edition.

10 The 1996 New Handbook of Texas, Volume 6, page 694, reports that a small (population 25) town of Val Verde in Milam County is named in honor of the Battle of Val Verde. On the next page the Handbook reports that the Val Verde County is named for the battle. Another book, dedicated specifically to the counties of Texas, states that "San Jacinto and Val Verde were named for battles" and that the county was named "To commemorate the battle fought at Val Verde, New Mexico, on February 19, 1862. In this encounter, the Sibley expedition attempted to bring New Mexico under Confederate control. Led by Gen. Tom Green, the Confederate troops won at Val Verde but were forced into retreat at Glorieta." Luke Gournay, Texas Boundaries: Evolution of the State's Counties, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995, pages 33,107.
County?)” More authors follow that theme: "Randolph Pafford has been credited by some of the people with having named the place Val Verde, or Green Valley, and the name was later taken for the county name." The county "doubtless was named thus because of the broad expanse of fertile and verdant land." The idea of "green valley" is all the more plausible when understood that many of the English-speaking settlers had Spanish-speaking wives. However, documentary material supporting this position is also lacking. Still, A.F. Dignowity, one of the key men involved in creating the county was a Union veteran of the Civil War. Therefore it would not be logical for him to commemorate the Confederate victory.  

On the other hand, H.M. Block, one of the earliest settlers and community leaders was a Civil War Confederate veteran. He had even served with Sibley's Brigade which fought in the New Mexican campaign. He married in San Antonio in 1864 and served with Colonel John S. "Rip" Ford at the close of the war. In 1874 Block arrived in San Felipe Del Rio, went into partnership with James Taylor, then bought out Taylor's share from his widow after Taylor died. He served in several government capacities before dying in 1932 at the age of ninety. He was the postmaster credited with renaming the town from “San Felipe Del Rio” to “Del Rio.” It seems that such a prominent figure could easily have influenced the naming of the county. And while it seems odd to think that a Union veteran of the Civil War would support the naming of the county for a Confederate Civil War victory, it seems just as odd for a bunch of post-Reconstruction Texas Democrats to support a Republican Civil War Union army veteran. The Democrats of the "Dignowity Clique" would not support Dignowity, "a staunch Republican,"

11 *Spirit Of Val Verde*, pages 7-8; Seale, Writings, page 20; The City of Roses, page 53.
12 Perkins, pages 130-130a.
unless he was willing to give them something—something better than a new hospital. It appears he gave them, or perhaps they gave themselves, a memorial to the Confederacy.

This text is House Bill 105 which was approved by the Texas Legislature in 1885 which, when enacted, created Val Verde County.

"An Act To Create The County of Val Verde,  
And To Provide For Its Organization"

SECTION 1. Be it enacted by the Legislature of the State of Texas: That a new county, to be called Val Verde county is hereby established out of the following portions of the counties of Kinney, Crockett and Pecos:

Beginning at the confluence of the Sycamore creek with the Rio Grande in Kinney county, thence up said creek with its thread and meanders to the north corner of league survey No. 201, patented to Bexar county school; thence north to a point where a line running west from the northwest corner of Edwards and the southwest corner of Kimble county would intersect said point; thence west to the Pecos river; thence south to the Rio Grande; thence down the Rio Grande with its meanders to the place of beginning.

SEC. 2. That it shall be the duty of the county commissioners' court of Kinney county within ten days after the enactment of this law, to lay off and divide this new county into convenient precincts for the election of county officers and also to designate convenient places in the new county where elections shall be held, of all which they shall cause a record to be made by the clerk and a copy thereof shall be transmitted to the county judge of the new county when elected.

SECTION 3. That the county judge of Kinney county immediately thereafter shall order an election of county officers in said new county, and appoint the presiding officers and managers and clerks of election as is prescribed.

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13 Baker, Val Verde Centennial, page 5; One Version, April 6, 1986. "According to some historians, legislators named the county Val Verde ('green valley') for the Civil War battle of Valverde, fought in New Mexico Territory in 1862." Fowler, Queen City, page 36. This might mean that the Texas Legislature pulled a fast one. While local Union men might not name the county for the battle, members of the Texas Legislature, many of whom were ex-Confederates and sympathizers, would appreciate the irony of the petition and approve it with the battle in mind. If this were the case, as I believe, then Val Verde was named for both reasons.

14 The inclusion of “thence south” meant that the boundary did not follow the Pecos River. Therefore, Langtry and
by law in other cases, and shall also at the same time order an election for the location of the county seat of said new county, which shall be conducted in the same manner, regulating the election of the officers of such new county. The election returns shall be made to the county judge of Kinney county, who shall issue certificates to the persons elected, and shall approve the bonds of such officers, and shall administer to them the oath of office. He shall at the same time issue a certificate to the county judge of said new county, showing what place is elected as the county seat of the new county.

SECTION 4. That the new county shall pay a pro rata share of the existing debts of the counties from which it is created, and there shall be set apart so much of the county taxes levied and collected upon property situated in the portions taken from the counties of Kinney, Crockett and Pecos annually as will be sufficient to speedily liquidate said existing debts if any, and the said pro rata to be based upon the value of the property taken from each of the parent counties respectively, for each year of the existence of the said debts to be determined from the tax rolls of the said counties, as made by their respective boards of equalization.

SECTION 5. That the said county of Val Verde be attached to the 38th judicial district of the State of Texas for judicial purposes, and to the 27th senatorial, and the 81st representative districts for the purposes of representation.

SECTION 6. That all laws or parts of laws conflicting with the provisions herein contained shall be and the same are hereby repealed so far as related to the county of Val Verde.

SECTION 7. Whereas, the several county commissioners' courts from which this county is created are about to levy taxes for the present year, therefore an emergency exists, and an imperative public necessity requires that the rule requiring that bills be read on three several days be suspended, and this act shall take effect and be in force after its passage, and it is so enacted.

Judge Roy Bean, the Law West of the Pecos, became part of Val Verde County history.
As provided for by the organic law, the Kinney County Commissioners Court was responsible for the paperwork even though the bulk of Val Verde came from Crockett. There are three reasons for this. First, Brackettville and Del Rio were both stops on the San Antonio-El Paso Road and part of the same line of transportation and commerce. Secondly, the portion of Val Verde outside Del Rio’s immediate location was very lightly populated despite the county’s great size. Thirdly, Fort Clark (in Kinney County) soldiers had a sub-post outside Del Rio and ran patrols through the countryside. The two communities were closely related.

The county was assigned to the 27th Senate District and the 81st House District for representation in the Texas Legislature. Val Verde was placed in the 11th U.S. Congressional district for the state. An emergency clause, Section 7, was attached to the bill allowing for the bill to take effect immediately upon passage.

May 18, 1885 may be considered the founding date of Val Verde County. On that date a first county commissioners court meeting was held. Presiding was Judge W.K. Jones; attending the meeting were commissioners John Glynn and W.H. Liles, Sheriff W.H. Jones and County Clerk Peter Porter. Government being what it is, the county immediately got to work on taxes, naming a tax assessor and, on the following day, requesting lists of delinquent taxpayers from the three parent counties. The commissioners court appointed a committee around that time to "ascertain the probable costs of running a county here" and "see whether the money could be borrowed on the credit of the county at a reasonable rate of interest."

The court also named a constable and some justices of the peace. Having these officials, the county also needed a courthouse, for which it rented a stone building opposite the Del Rio Hotel for twenty dollars per month. A "store building" owned by B.C. Greenwood was rented at ten dollars per month for

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use as a jail. The county judge and commissioners paid themselves three dollars for three days of commissioners court work and paid the sheriff two dollars for the same.\footnote{17}

The map of the county drawn by the Kinney County commissioners court was accepted. On June 11, 1885 the county clerk was ordered to correspond with the Kinney County Judge concerning the organization of Val Verde County and to notify the Texas Secretary of State that Val Verde County was then organized and operational. Apparently the map contained some errors because later the commissioners court had Archibald Bogle, who was serving as county surveyor, made a map of that portion of Val Verde County west of the Pecos. He was paid $5.55 for the job.\footnote{18} Val Verde County was on the map.

The “Val Verde County” marker will be placed on our courthouse square a few feet from another marker, “Val Verde County Courthouse Square”; the Square with courthouse and jail buildings is a National Register site. This placement will create a matched pair of markers bracketing the main (west side) entrance to the courthouse.

Bibliography—


New Handbook of Texas, 1996.


"One Version of How Val Verde County Got Its Name," Transcript on file at Val Verde County Library, April 6, 1986

San Antonio Weekly Express, March 16, 1882; March 14, 1885.


