



Sam Lewis, 80, Tireless Armadillo Promoter

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His wife, the former Betty June Meek, died in 1999. In addition to his daughter, who lives in Irving, Tex., he is survived by his son, Samuel Jr., two grandsons, two brothers and four sisters. The family intends to keep raising armadillos.

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Armadillo expert, entrepreneur and promoter, Sam Lewis was also a Texas legend beloved by many

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It's 2, maybe 3 a.m. and I'm in the passenger seat of Sam Lewis' old brown van as we hurtle toward Terlingua.

We wander across the center stripe and back and back again - Sam's not near as worried about it as I am. Sensing my discomfort, Sam says, "Oh, I just kind of aim this thing down the road." And he does, not steering as much as giving the steering wheel a slap every now and then when we appear to be on the verge of disaster.

I'm reassured by the thought that Sam might have a few armadillos in the back of the van. Surely, he wouldn't risk harming them.

Tonight we left San Angelo at midnight - when I got off work - and we'll arrive at Sam's little adobe hut near Terlingua just before dawn. We'll nap for an hour or two, and he'll deliver a few boxes of Jalapeno Sam olives and catch up with some friends before driving back.

Along the way, he'll tell me how he became fascinated with armadillos, how he started his own business and lots of things I wish I could remember clearly.

I'm not quite 24 years old, and I'm exhausted.

Sam is somewhere in his 70s. He's all glasses and grin, and there's not an old man anywhere described as "spry" that has anything on Sam. He's a giver and is beloved for it. He's the grandfather I haven't had for 20 years, and he's family for many, many people.

That was 1995.

We lost Sam Lewis early Jan 10. He was 80 years old. He was buried last week next to Betty, his wife of 50 years.

Sam was more than an eccentric entrepreneur, an armadillo expert, a tireless promoter and a Lone Star legend. He was human, in a way we all wish we could be. He touched lives and changed them for the better, mine included.

All of Texas should mourn his passing; there won't be another like Sam.

You know Sam.

If you've been to most any big event in Luckenbach or San Angelo or Terlingua, he's been there racing armadillos or selling T-shirts. Short, slight, big glasses and a variety of broken-in hats, he was the old guy who wouldn't give you a handshake when a hug would do better. It didn't matter if he knew you or not.

It seems he couldn't walk into a honky-tonk in Texas without someone giving him a big smile of recognition, though Sam never drank anything harder than root beer.

Sam might be the only person from San Angelo who has had a musical written about him. His younger brother, Franklin, wrote "Jalapeno Sam as Seen Through the Eyes of Frankie Dan" for the Texas sesquicentennial celebration. The commission gave it their official seal, and the musical premiered in Austin.

Who knew Sam was so famous?

He invented the jalapeno lollipop in 1977 and sold millions. Jalapeno-flavored ice cream didn't fare as well, but jalapeno-stuffed olives were an even bigger hit. Today, his jalapeno-flavored foods, including guacamole, salsa and ketchup, are distributed by Unimark Foods Inc. as part of the Jalapeno Sam product line.

Then there are the armadillos.

Sam didn't just run armadillo races, he was an armadillo expert and perhaps the world's greatest promoter for the hard-shelled critter. It's little wonder his land near Luckenbach was called the "Armadillo Farm."

Sam's armadillos were famous, too. They could be seen during the opening credits of the Kevin Costner movie "Tin Cup" and had a bigger role in the Willie Nelson western "Barbarosa."

Sam introduced "San Angelo Sam" in 1984. This armadillo was our answer to Punxsutawney Phil. "That Yankee groundhog doesn't know beans about weather in West Texas," Lewis said.

San Angelo Sam predicted the weather on Groundhog Day the next several years x96 but wasn't much better at it than that Yankee varmint.

Sam even operated a "pet the armadillo" booth at the World Travel Market in London in 1982. Apparently the armadillos were extremely popular.

And famed writer James Michener called on Sam to learn about the armadillo when he was writing his epic "Texas."

But it was the armadillo races that will be his legacy.

I can still see him in Luckenbach during some event or other, his armadillo racing pen set up between the bar and the old blacksmith's shop. Sam has a tiny PA system and is rounding up youngsters and the occasional biker or cowboy to race his armadillos.

These races typically involve one armadillo sprinting for the finish line, one wandering aimlessly about and another refusing to budge.

"Blow on their tails," Sam says, "but don't kick them! Don't hurt my armadillos!"

Sam's last armadillo race was held in October in Pampa.

Sam had told me during that road trip in 1995 how he came to love armadillos. How he found one during a hunting trip when he was just a boy and thought he'd found a dinosaur. How he'd been fascinated with them ever since.

I'm sorry I can't remember the details. I always thought I'd have another chance to ask him.

I apologize for writing about Sam mostly from my point of view. Sam had a great many friends, and most of them knew Sam much longer than I did. I hope in sharing my stories that people who knew Sam can remember their own experiences. I hope that people who didn't know Sam can understand who he was.

I first met Sam in the summer of 1994 when John Raven, then-editor of the Luckenbach Moon, urged me to go meet my fellow San Angeloan.

Through the doors of an office on North Van Buren Street, I found a little old man at a desk.

"Tell me about the Terlingua chili cook-off," I said.

In the first half-hour, he had persuaded me to completely change my vacation plans and go to Terlingua in early November. By the end of the hour, he had all but adopted me.

I didn't arrive at the chili cook-off until well past dark that year, the first time I had ever been in the Big Bend region. I was completely disoriented until Sam found me.

"Park over there," he told me, "and come on, you've got to meet these people."

Minutes later, we had disappeared into the camp riding on "Geronimo's Cadillac" - an old open-air jalopy. Some hippie passed back a bottle of sotol. I guess it's Mexican white lightning.

"Don't drink too fast," Sam said. "You'll see pretty colors."

Sam was always right.

I woke up in that adobe hut the next morning and stumbled out to a vista that was wholly unexpected and wholly beautiful.

If discovering Big Bend and chili cook-offs were all I had to thank Sam for, it'd be plenty. But that was just the beginning.

Sam wouldn't hesitate to introduce somebody, to help somebody, to smile, to wink. I soon moved away from San Angelo, lost track of Sam for a while and then came home again. I'm ashamed to admit that sometimes I didn't have time for Sam, or to help him out.

No matter what I'd done, though, Sam was always Sam.

I remember clearly a moment in 2001. Some friends and I were at Blaine's Pub in San Angelo when Sam walked up, gave me a hug, gave me a picture of him and Willie Nelson and walked away.

"That's him and Willie!" a friend said. "Why'd he give that to you?"

I don't know. But I think it's just that Sam had something to give and someone to give it to. And that made him happy.

"Come over here, you've got to meet this person," is probably what I heard most from Sam throughout the years, maybe right after "let me know if there's anything I can do for you."

Sam introduced me to the famous and to the down-on-their-luck with the same respect for both. I don't know if Sam ever met a man he didn't like, but judging from the number of friends Sam had, I'd say it's doubtful. He wouldn't pass up the opportunity to say hello, to give a hug, to make a new friend.

A favorite memory: One night, in the Luckenbach Dance Hall, Sam was kicking up his heels. He was on the high end of 70 and he could dance. He asked every woman in

that dance hall to dance with him. No matter how unapproachably beautiful, no matter how . . . well, not beautiful. He asked them all, and I wasn't keeping track, but I'd bet he danced with nearly every one.

Sam was awfully proud of being married to Betty for 50 years - they had a grand anniversary celebration at the Armadillo Farm near Luckenbach in 1998.

They'd met after World War II, when Sam was a B29 tail gunner stationed at Pyote Air Force Base. They married in 1948 in San Angelo and enjoyed a half-century together.

When Betty died in December 1999, many of Sam's friends were worried that Sam literally couldn't go on without her.

But Sam struggled through. He might have leaned a little more on his closest friends, he might have slowed down a little, he might have been a hair more reflective - but he kept on going.

It was early Christmas week that I learned Sam had cancer and was refusing treatment. I went to see him that Saturday.

Standing outside Sam's home on Texas Tech Avenue in San Angelo, I might have turned back around and gone back to Blaine's Pub. I'm not emotionally prepared to see Sam in his final days. I don't know what to say to him. Hell, I can hardly talk at all. I'm afraid and I can't handle this.

And I think of the lines to a song by Ray Wylie Hubbard, who, in turn, was paraphrasing the German poet Rainer Marie Rilke: "Our fears are our dragons, guarding our most precious treasures."

And then I think of the best photo on the walls of Blaine's Pub, a picture of Ray Wylie and Sam standing together. I think Ray's got his arm around Sam.

And with a little more reassurance from my fiancée, Shannon, I go into see Sam for what would be the last time.

Some folks would tell me I shouldn't write about this part: how Sam was in a hospital bed in the middle of the living room, how he looked impossibly small, how he relied on his family and friends.

Some folks would say nobody wants to remember Sam that way. That's true. But I don't think they will.

Because even then, Sam was still a promoter, still a giver. And he knew how to put nervous visitors at ease.

When I first walked in, he asked me if I'd seen the December issue of Texas Highways; it featured armadillos and, of course, him. Then he went on to tell me about plans to hold a Llano River beauty pageant and cook-off.

"He never stops promoting," Dan Farmer said. Even now Sam is focused on the next project.

He was wearing a green Santa snowman shirt. He had a hard time hearing, but no problems understanding.

In the hour that I was there, a stream of friends came by. Later, former mayor of Luckenbach VelAnne Howle would come by and drop off a Gary P. Nunn CD for him to listen to. I've got to admit, "Home with the Armadillo" (as "London Homesick Blues" is often called) won't be the same without Sam.

Even some musicians from Luckenbach would come in to give a live performance.

But this day, the entertainment is a tourist calling from Luckenbach. He wants to see an armadillo and somebody told him to call Sam. We direct him to the Armadillo Farm. Maybe somebody there can help him out.

As we start to leave, Sam is blowing kisses to his daughter. I think I'd like to remember him that way. Shannon gives him a kiss on the forehead.

He looks up and says, "Thanks, I needed that," and he winks at her.

Then he takes my hand once more and says, "Thanks for being such a good friend."

I'm so choked up, I don't know if he could hear my reply. But I know he can now.

No, Sam, thank you for everything

By Douglas Martin

- Jan. 14, 2003

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