



## Water from on High

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

Water is the lifeblood of Texas. Starting with our state's early inhabitants, the availability of water determined where Texans would live.

The insatiable demand also led to creative attempts to produce more water. Experiments in rain-making began in drought-plagued areas of Texas more than 100 years ago. In a memorable experiment in 1891, college professor John T. Ellis fired cannons at explosives that had been launched with balloons over South Texas.

"After several delays because of unsettled weather, a two-day bombardment of the sky apparently paid off with a downpour. But cynics said that Ellis had simply stalled until rain appeared inevitable, and doubts remained about the practicality of the technique," according to the Handbook of Texas.

As populations increased, Texans wanted dependable water reserves. Where towns sprung up, so did water towers. The municipal water tower is often the first sight as you approach most Texas towns. Along with their primary function, water towers provided city leaders an opportunity to welcome visitors and to advertise their community and its points of pride.

In Poteet, host of the Strawberry Festival each April, the tower is painted to resemble the town's most famous product. The water tower in Luling, home of the annual Watermelon Thump festival, depicts its leading crop. Crockett promotes "Paradise in the Pines."

While all water towers rise above the landscape, some stand out for their design or message. Kemah on Galveston Bay built a water tower shaped and painted to resemble a lighthouse – in addition to operating as a lighthouse as well. Alice bills its tower as the "world's tallest, cement water tower."

Kermit, near the New Mexico border, painted its tower to resemble the beloved frog star of children's television. A tower in Plainview bears the name of another town, Rustwater, the fictional place featured in Steve Martin's 1992 film, *Leap of Faith*. San Benito's tower recognizes the town's famous son and Grammy-winning singer, Freddy Fender.

The most common tower design, however, is the "Tin Man" shape, reminiscent of The Wizard of Oz character. Other designs are used: Pedespheres

sometimes are described as a "golf ball-on-a-tee." Standpipes are tall columns. Some water tanks are supported by tripod structures. Many cities are building water spheres, which are large tanks supported by a number of pillars.

Some towers are central to local history. "In 1918 the six-year-old Fentress water tower collapsed onto the town's only bank; cashier J. W. Lipscomb saved his life by dashing into the vault. This high water mark in Fentress history was viewed by some as divine judgment," the Handbook of Texas reports.

In Columbus, the original tower – built of 400,000 bricks with walls 32 inches thick – defied attempts long ago to demolish it with dynamite. It now serves as a history museum.

Texas water towers promote the names of high school sports teams, including the Fighting Wildcats, Gladiators, Cubs, Pirates, Yellowjackets, Trojans and Badgers. In Progreso, home of the Mighty Red Ants, the top of the tower is painted to resemble an ant hill.

Whatever their size or shape, water towers are designed to ensure stable water pressure. Homeowners and businesses depend on them, as do firefighters. Many are used as a backup when emergencies threaten water availability.

By continuing to invest in lakes and reservoirs, water treatment systems, conservation and reuse programs, desalination plants, weather modification and new technologies, and by safeguarding the quality of our water, we can meet the future needs of Texas towns, agriculture and businesses. This is an important part of being good stewards of the State we call home.

*Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Border Security and Refugees subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee's Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: [www.cornyn.senate.gov/column](http://www.cornyn.senate.gov/column).*