

Breaking the Racial Barrier: One Man's Influence on a Community

By Bo Weathersbee

In a small town in West Texas there was a big hero. He might not have been as famous as Martin Luther King, Jr. or Jackie Robinson, but he definitely helped break the color barrier in a small town named Rotan. His name was William Henry Govan, but everyone that knew him called him "Mr. H."¹ Today racism continues to be a problem just like it was in the past century. However, Henry Govan helped pioneer the way for many blacks in the surrounding area of Rotan, Texas.

His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Dave Govan, gave birth to William Henry Govan on November 27, 1897, in Crockett, Texas. On November 27, 1919, he married Teresa King.² He came to Rotan by train in 1918 to work at a cottonseed oil mill for five dollars to six dollars a week.³ When he finally arrived from the four-day train ride to Rotan, all he had was fifty cents and a pair of overalls.⁴ Even though his resources were few, he began his journey in this small town that would eventually impact many people's lives.

¹ Byron Weathersbee, personal interview, 20 Oct. 2000.

² Byron Weathersbee, "Eulogy of H. Govan," First Baptist Church, Rotan, Texas, 15 Dec. 1988.

³ Kim Pease, "Govan Will Begin 60th Year As Yellowhammer Trainer Next Monday, Memorial Due At Homecoming For Rotan Legend," Rotan Advance, 1982.

⁴ Jerry Waggoner, "H. Govan Becomes "Living Legend" After 59 Years as Trainer for Yellowhammer Teams," Bryan-College Station Eagle 1982: 17.

Govan lived during a time of great racial tension. This was definitely the case in Rotan. Whites were very prejudice against blacks during the early years of his life in Rotan. For example, in restaurants blacks had to sit in a section in the back away from the whites. They also had to drink from a separate water fountain and sit in the back of the bus. By the way Govan lived his life he helped change the image of the black man during a time when blacks had no respect.

Govan was a hard working man. He could have retired at the age of fifty-five, but instead kept working until he died of at the age of ninety-one.⁵ He worked many different jobs such as shining shoes, farming, and doing janitorial work for several businesses. He also raised pigs and at one time owned a jukebox chain around Fisher County. However, the most important thing that he did until he died was his job as the trainer/waterboy for the Rotan High School football team.⁶ For sixty-six years, he continued to do this job that impacted the youth of Rotan.



Fig. 1 Picture of H. Govan in letter jacket, Personal photograph by Norvelle Kennedy, - 30 September 1986.

Oleta Parker, "Rotan Water Boy 31 Years Honored," Abilene Reporter-News 20 May 1969: B2.

⁶ Oleta Parker, "HS Annual Dedicated to H. Govan," Abilene Reporter-News 1958: B1.

Govan had several different sayings that he would use with the football players. One of his favorites was, "Hey here, my man, what you know good?" If someone beat him to saying this, he would say, "I don't know nothin' bad; everything I know is good." Another favorite saying of "Mr. H's" was, "Everything's gonna be alright."

Govan meant a lot to the community of Rotan. That is what put him in such a great position to ease racial tension between blacks and whites there. Throughout his sixty-six years as a trainer, "Mr. H." meant the most to the players on the Rotan High School football team. It was a tradition for him to shake hands with the entire team before the opening kickoff of every game.⁷ Govan and the football players formed a close individual relationship. They cared about him, and he cared about them. Whenever someone would get hurt, "Mr. H" would run onto the field and tell the injured player, "Everything's gonna be all right" even if they broke every bone in their body.⁸ One time when a boy on the football team had broken his leg during a team practice, Govan put a splint on the boy's leg before making any attempt to go to the hospital. It was later reported that the doctors said that they had never seen a better job with a splint.⁹

Through the years, every single team that played for Rotan High School thought of Govan not just as their trainer but also as a personal friend. He never told the kids, "do

⁷ Cathy Harasta, "Loss of a Legend," Dallas Morning News 22 Sept. 1989: B3.

⁸ Keith Mullins, The West Texas Schools American Heritage Project, vol. 4 (Abilene: 1980).

⁹ Weldon Rives, "I Remember William Henry Govan," Rotan Advance 9 March 1989: A2.

this” or “do that.” He always told them what they were doing right instead of criticizing them.¹⁰

The football team was behind “Mr. H” even in the most hostile racial environments. One incident was in 1953 when Rotan visited Throckmorton High. Govan needed a police escort to the stadium because of this small town’s hatred for blacks. An example of racial tension in this town was a road sign that said, “N----- don’t let the sun set on you in this town.”¹¹ In another incident the team was eating a pre-game meal at a restaurant when the café owner told Govan that he wasn’t allowed to come inside. As a result, the whole team got up and left the restaurant leaving several dozen steaming steaks for the café owner to eat. In both of these incidents, Govan’s response was to ignore the situation. He did not really care that he was black. He thought that every man should be treated equal.¹² That is how he treated every man. Ted Posey, one of the coaches at Rotan from 1976 to 1990, observed, "That racial stuff never bothered him. He'd just say, 'Everything's fine. There's no problem.'"¹³

Everyone that lived in Rotan knew how great of a man Henry Govan was.¹⁴ Even the famous NFL Hall of Fame Inductee, Sammy Baugh, respected him. After being asked what kind of a man Govan was, Baugh noted, "He was a fine man."¹⁵ Everyone else in Rotan also showed Govan their appreciation. They gave him several different

¹⁰ Bill Hart, "Long-Time Rotan Trainer Dies at 91," Abilene Reporter-News 16 Dec. 1988: B1.

¹¹ Jerry Waggoner, "Gimme a Gee! Gimme an Ohhhh! Gimme a V-A-N! Govan! He's Our Man!," Family Weekly 26 Sept. 1982: 21-22.

¹² Ted Posey, personal interview, 20 Oct. 2000.

¹³ Erich Schlegal, "Game not the same without 'Mr. H,'" The Dallas Morning News 22 Sept. 1989: B14.

¹⁴ S.M. Weathersbee, personal interview, 20 Oct. 2000.

¹⁵ Sammy Baugh, personal interview, 20 Oct. 2000.

honors, plaques, and a letter jacket for every year he served as the trainer for the football team. At his home the letter jackets started to pile up and filled one whole closet.

However, the ultimate honor "Mr. H" received was when the team gave him the game ball when Rotan won their only state football championship in 1962. Unfortunately, Govan's home caught on fire and he lost every bit of this.¹⁶

On one occasion when Rotan honored Govan, he was told to go home, dress up, and come to the high school gym at 2:00 P.M. When he entered the gym, there was a roar of applause from the adults, students, players, and coaches of Rotan. The head coach at the time gave Govan a commemorative wall plaque and then made a speech about how much Govan meant to the community of Rotan.¹⁷ In another occasion, Govan was honored at halftime at a Rotan Yellowhammer football game. Football was a main interest of many small towns in Texas and because of this there was a large crowd at the game already.¹⁸ Since "Mr. H" meant a lot to the town of Rotan the rest of the town was there to cheer for him.¹⁹ It must have been an unusual feeling for Govan for Rotan to be cheering for him instead of him cheering for Rotan. For the second time, Govan was honored at halftime at Rotan's homecoming on November 10, 1961. Football players

¹⁶ Tom Mauldin, "It'll be H. Govan Night in Rotan," Abilene Reporter-News 27 Nov. 1979: D5.

¹⁷ Oleta Parker, "3 Decades of Yellowhammers Honor Rotan's Water Boy," Abilene Reporter-News 12 Nov. 1961: C3.

¹⁸ H.G. Bissinger, Friday Night Lights: a Town, a Team, and a Dream, (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1990.

¹⁹ Michael O. Wester, "Hammer Fans Pay Tribute to H. Govan During Halftime Friday," Rotan Advance 1 Nov. 1973: B4.

from four decades were there to honor him. To top it all off, Rotan's football team won their game 45-0.²⁰

Govan was on the sidelines for Rotan's very first football game in 1923.²¹ From then on he went to every single game during his sixty-six years of training the team, except for six that he missed because he had to work and due to health problems.²² That means he was at 99.4% of Rotan's football games when he was the trainer. Even when he was ninety-one years old he was still traveling with the team and standing and cheering at the games.²³ This shows that Govan committed his heart to the welfare of the Rotan community. If everyone were as committed to treating all colors of people as equally and as respectfully as Govan did there would not be as much racial discrimination or conflict between blacks and whites as there was.²⁴

There are still some racial issues today that have caused numerous people to file lawsuits against companies that have not allowed blacks to have the same privileges as whites.²⁵ Hopefully, we will not have to face the racial problems of Govan's era. Today blacks do not have to worry about not being able to eat in a restaurant or buy something as simple as chewing gum. In the mid 1900's, the Civil Rights Movement began to form new frontiers of equality for African-Americans. More and more people started to protest

²⁰ Oleta Parker, "Yellowhammers Honor The Remarkable H. Govan," Abilene Reporter-News 12 Nov. 1961: A2.

²¹ Oleta Parker, "Rotan's "Waterboy" Recalls Early Days," 28 Sept. 1955: B8.

²² Michael O. Wester, Rotan's Football Trainer, Team's No. 1 Fan," Rotan Advance 1 Oct. 1987: B3.

²³ Byron Weathersbee, "Tribute To Two Leaders," Rotan Advance 5 Dec. 1988: D5.

²⁴ Weathersbee 2000.

²⁵ Sheila Kaplan, "The new face of racism," U.S. News and World Report Jan. 2000: 25.

against racial segregation.²⁶ On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to move to the Negro section of a bus in Montgomery. Parks refusal awakened the nation to the need for change. From then on, more people became aware of the problems of segregation. Martin Luther King, Jr. stepped up to lead a huge movement against segregation. By 1955 more and more states started to make laws concerning segregation, but the Deep South remained opposed to equality.

In 1964 Lyndon B. Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act, which prohibited segregation in public accommodations and threatened to withhold federal funds from communities that persisted in maintaining segregated schools. The Civil Rights Act was followed by the Voting Rights Act in 1965. This act led to drastic increases in the numbers of black registered voters in the South. Then in April of 1968 Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. This event caused riots to break out between people who were for or against segregation. During the late 1980's, the civil rights movement began to calm down, but to this day it is still persevering.²⁷ While the civil rights movement was going on, in his own quiet way Govan was showing the community of Rotan that blacks should be treated as equals to whites. People in Rotan respected Govan so much that they did not care if he ate at the same restaurant as they did. They would have probably welcomed it. People in Rotan also desired his friendship and wanted his influence on their children.²⁸

²⁶ Howard N. Rabinowitz, The Reader's Companion to American History (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1991).

²⁷ Britannica Online, 1999-2000, Encyclopedia Britannica, 11 Nov. 2000 <<http://www.eb.com/>>.

²⁸ S.M. Weathersbee 2000.

Govan taught Rotan in his own way that every man should be treated equal. He once said, "Treat others as you would have them treat you and whatever you do, don't hate anybody."²⁹ This is why he pioneered the way for the black race in the community of Rotan. Even though there are still some racial issues going on these days, it is nothing like what Govan had to endure. He did not let all of the racial discrimination get to him.³⁰ This is why people really respected Govan for enduring all of the many trials of being a black man when racial discrimination was common. He showed others that blacks could be respected just as much as whites. William Henry Govan might not have influenced as many people as Martin Luther King, Jr. or Jackie Robinson, but he certainly did pioneer the way for African-Americans in the area surrounding Rotan, Texas. "Mr. H" showed all people to care, value, and appreciate one another regardless of skin color. His life shows how one person's influence on a community could advance the frontier of equality and race relations by changing hearts and minds, one person at a time.

²⁹ Pease 1982.

³⁰ Schlegal 1989.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Baugh, Sammy. NFL Hall of Fame Inductee and Retired Professional Quarterback.

Interview by author, 20 Oct. 2000, Rotan, Texas. Downtown Rotan, Texas.

I learned from this interview what kind of man H. Govan was. Baugh quotes, "He was a great man." This showed me that even a famous quarterback knew and respected him.

Eulogy of H. Govan. Delivered at Govan's memorial service by Rev. Byron

Weathersbee, First Baptist Church, Rotan, Texas, 15 Dec. 1988.

This speech at H. Govan's funeral taught me how much he contributed to the whole town of Rotan and how he led the way for blacks and whites. I also learned some of the main dates in his life like his birthday and when he died.

Hart, Bill. "Long-Time Rotan Trainer Dies at 91." Abilene Reporter-News 16 Dec.

1988: B1.

This article showed me how H. Govan was more of a friend rather than a coach when he was on the sidelines of Rotan's football games. He was always loyal and went to every single Rotan High School event. I also learned his real name and his nickname.

Mauldin, Tom. "It'll be H. Govan Night in Rotan." Abilene Reporter-News 27 Nov.

1979: D5.

I learned from this newspaper article that H. Govan was a supporter of Rotan High School sports since 1923. He was everybody's friend, especially the football players. He would praise them when they won and comfort them when they lost. I also learned that he got the game ball when they won the state championship.

Mullins, Kieth. "H. Govan-A Living Legend." Big Country People, Events, and Places.

Abilene 1980. Vol. 4 of The West Texas Schools American Heritage Project.

This article was mainly a chronological order of H. Govan's life. It taught me how he started out as just a poor shoe shiner and ended up as a Rotan legend. During the time he lived in Rotan he cared for everyone.

Parker, Oleta. "3 Decades of Yellowhammers Honor Rotan's Water Boy." Abilene

Reporter-News 12 Nov. 1961: D3.

From this article I learned that H. Govan was a well-dressed, highly respected man. The whole community honored him by giving him a standing ovation when he arrived at a surprise ceremony. The ceremony celebrated his 30 years of being a water boy.

Parker, Oleta. "HS Annual Dedicated to H. Govan." Abilene Reporter-News 1958: B1.

I learned from this article the many different jobs H. Govan did. He was a hard working man that could have retired at the age of fifty-five if he had wanted to, but kept working until his death.

Parker, Oleta. "Rotan's "Waterboy" Recalls Early Days." Abilene Reporter-News 28 Sept. 1955: B8.

This article taught me about Rotan's first football game. H. Govan was there from the very beginning. This showed me how loyal and committed he was. I think that is why he was such a big influence.

Parker, Oleta. "Rotan Water Boy 31 Years Honored." Abilene Reporter-News 20 May 1969: B2.

From this article I learned that the whole town of Rotan supported H. Govan the whole time he was a water boy. This article was mainly about him being honored by the entire community.

Parker, Oleta. "Yellowhammers Honor the Remarkable H. Govan." Abilene Reporter-News 12 Nov. 1961: A2.

I learned from this article how much H. Govan was respected and honored in the town of Rotan. The football players considered him as another coach that only told them what they did right. He never said, "do this" or "you gotta do that."

Picture of H. Govan in letter jacket. Personal photograph by Norvelle Kennedy. 30 Sept. 1986.

This picture showed me how confident H. Govan was about himself. It also showed how long he had been working with the Rotan Yellow Hammers, as well as the role of trainer/manager for the school's football team.

Posey, Ted. Rotan High School Football Coach 1970-1982. Interview by author, 20 Oct. 2000, Rotan, Texas. Rotan Library, Rotan, Texas.

I learned from this interview how much the Rotan Yellowhammers were behind H. Govan. From my conversation with Coach Posey I learned that all of the Rotan football players respected H. Govan. Coach Posey told me a story that illustrated this.

Pease, Kim. "Govan Will Begin 60th Year as Yellowhammer Trainer Next Monday, Memorial Due at Homecoming for Rotan Legend." Rotan Advance. 1982.

From this article I learned on of Govan's quotes on how to be respectful to other people. His quote was, "Treat others as you would have them treat you and whatever you do, don't hate anybody." I also learned how much he earned when he was working at the cotton mill after he had just moved to Rotan.

Rives, Weldon. "I Remember William Henry Govan." Rotan Advance 9 Mar. 1989: D2.

This article told me a story about H. Govan going into Throckmorton with the football team. Throckmorton had a law back then that did not allow blacks in the town after sundown. Govan was trying to buy chewing gum before the football game when two police officers came and had to escort him to the game.

Waggoner, Jerry. "Gimme a Gee! Gimme an Ohhhh! Gimme a V-A-N! GOVAN! He's Our Man!" Family Weekly 26 Sept. 1982. p. 21-22.

By reading this article I learned the main highlights of H. Govan's life. It is a brief biography that tells from when he stepped off the train in Rotan to when he died in 1988. He touched many lives during his time in Rotan and pioneered the way for blacks.

Waggoner, Jerry. "H. Govan becomes "Living Legend" After 59 Years as Trainer for Yellowhammer Teams." Bryan-College Station Eagle B8.

This article provided insight on how much H. Govan meant to the community of Rotan. He knew just about everybody that he would pass. He did not have a single enemy in Rotan.

Weathersbee, Byron. "Tribute To Two Leaders." Rotan Advance 5 Dec. 1988: D5.

I learned from this article how unselfish H. Govan was. Even when he was 91 he was still going strong with the Rotan Yellowhammers. There are not many people that are over 90 that can go to a football game and stand and cheer for the majority of the time.

Weathersbee, Byron. Rotan High School quarterback 1977-1980. Interview by author, 20 Oct. 2000, Rotan, Texas. Rotan High School, Rotan, Texas.

From this interview I gained insight about H. Govan from a player's perspective and what Govan meant to Mr. Weathersbee. Mr. Weathersbee told me that H. Govan was an extraordinary man with a simple life style. I learned some of H. Govan's favorite quotes that he used to say on the sidelines.

Weathersbee, S. M. Longtime resident of Rotan, Texas. Interview by author, 20 October 2000, Rotan, Texas. Rotan High School, Rotan, Texas.

I learned what it meant to watch H. Govan over a sixty-year period and how important he was to the community of Rotan. Mr. Weathersbee also told me of a story about H. Govan.

Wester, Michael O. "Rotan's Football Trainer, Team's No. 1 Fan." Rotan Advance 1 Oct. 1987: D7.

I learned that H. Govan played three roles for the Rotan Yellowhammer football teams. He was a loyal trainer/water boy that was at most of the games, he was Rotan's #1 fan that was always cheering on the sidelines, and he was a best friend to every football player.

Wester, Michael O. "Hammer Fans Pay Tribute to H. Govan During Halftime Friday." Rotan Advance 1 Nov. 1973: C5.

This article was about how H. Govan got honored at halftime at one of Rotan's home games. Instead of him cheering for the Yellowhammers, they were cheering for him.

Secondary Sources

Bissinger, H. G. Friday Night Lights: a Town, a Team, and a Dream. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1990.

This book has helped me understand how football has power, control, and influence in the state of Texas. Football is one of the main interests of many small towns. The smaller the towns get the bigger high school football. H. Govan was in a perfect position to lead the way for blacks because of the popularity of football in Texas.

Britannica Online. 1999-2000. Encyclopedia Britannica. 20 Nov. 2000
<<http://www.eb.com/>>.

I learned the history of the civil rights movement from this website. Two crucial events were Rosa Parks sitting in the white section of the bus, and Martin Luther King, Jr. getting assassinated.

Harasta, Cathy. "If Only They Let You, You'd Play All Night." The Dallas Morning News 23 Nov. 1989: B6.

This newspaper article provided the insight of how much H. Govan meant to all of the Rotan Yellow Hammers ever since he began as the trainer. He touched generation after generation of Rotan's football players. He was like a second head coach.

Harasta, Cathy. "Loss of a Legend." Dallas Morning News 22 Sept. 1989: B3.

I got the feel of a Rotan Yellowhammer football game from this article. Almost all of Rotan comes to H. Govan Field on Friday nights during football season. I learned that one of H. Govan's traditions was to shake hands with the team right before the kick-off of every game.

Kaplan, Sheila. "The new face of racism." U. S. News and World Report 3-10 Jan. 2000: 25.

This article helped me understand that racism is still going on to this day. Even though H. Govan did a lot for the town of Rotan, Texas there are still issues of racism going on. It was a very big issue back in H. Govan's time. That is what made his role in Rotan much bigger.

Rabinowitz, Howard N. The Reader's Companion to American History. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1991.

I learned from this book the history of integration and how blacks and whites came together. It was not easy for the two different colors to come together, but if they had not there would still be a whole lot more issues today than there already is. I think H. Govan helped ease the racial tension between blacks and whites.

Schlegel, Erich. "Game not same without Govan." The Dallas Morning News 22 Sept. 1989: B14.

From this article I learned how H. Govan never really did care about all of the racial discrimination going on at the time. He would just turn his cheek and do his best to try to ignore it.