

LOOKING BACK AT ...

# A gift from Arthur Godfrey

**W**hen Arthur Godfrey landed his plane at the Gillespie County Airport near Fredericksburg on Oct. 15, 1955, he was one of best-known entertainers in America.

Godfrey, a red-headed freckle-faced ukulele player, made his name in radio and transitioned easily to television. In 1955, he hosted a daily radio show and two weekly TV shows on CBS in New York. His programs were a medley of music, goofy extemporaneous commercials and uninhibited banter.

Godfrey was a powerful force in the entertainment business. His top-rated TV show "Talent Scouts," an early day "America's Got Talent," gave a shot in the arm to struggling performers Tony Bennett, Pat Boone, Patsy Cline and Roy Clark, but the show's screening staff rejected Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly. The King and the Cricket succeeded anyway.

Godfrey was an experienced pilot. He got his pilot's license in 1929. His plane, a decked-out DC-3, was a gift from his friend, Eddie Rickenbacker, World War I flying ace and president of Eastern Air Lines. Godfrey regularly flew the plane from his farm in Leesburg, Virginia to work in New York City.

The Old Redhead had a controlling personality and famous temper. He was known for buzzing the tower at airports that did not give him the runway he wanted, but he didn't have that problem in Gillespie County. There was no tower and only one runway.

## Hindsights

Michael Barr



Godfrey had flown from Virginia to the Texas Hill Country that October to visit his old friend, Senator Lyndon Johnson, who was laid up at the LBJ Ranch in Stonewall recuperating from a heart attack.

*The Washington Post* reported that Godfrey made an earlier trip to the LBJ Ranch at the request of Godfrey's friend, controversial Air Force General Curtis LeMay. Godfrey, an outspoken proponent of aviation, went down to Stonewall to see "Lyndon" to lobby the senator for support of the B-52 bomber, one of General LeMay's pet projects.

After landing at the Gillespie County Airport in October 1955, Godfrey spent the night at the LBJ Ranch; then returned to the airport the next day. By the time he arrived it was late afternoon and darkness was falling.

As Godfrey prepared to take off, he asked an attendant if the airport had landing lights. When told the airport had no lights, Godfrey responded, "I'll send you some."

On Valentine's Day 1956, several large crates arrived at the Gillespie County Airport addressed to Senator Lyndon B. Johnson from Arthur Godfrey, Leesburg, Virginia. The crates held a complete set of landing lights.

After electricians installed



Lady Bird Johnson, President Johnson and Arthur Godfrey at LBJ Park is from the Fredericksburg Standard, October 18, 1972.

the lights, county officials gathered at the airport to throw the switch. Senator Johnson was on hand for the ceremony.

In addition to being an entertainer and a pilot, Arthur Godfrey was a conservationist and a student of ecology. He spoke to groups all over the United States about the deterioration of the environment. He wrote three books on the subject.

His interest in the environment, and his long friendship with President Johnson and Lady Bird, brought him back to Gillespie County in October 1972. He flew in from Virginia as the guest of honor at Mrs. Johnson's Highway Beautification Award ceremony at LBJ State Park.

After the ceremony, and the obligatory Hill Country barbecue at the LBJ Ranch, Godfrey and the President talked about Godfrey's visit to the Hill Country 17 years earlier. Godfrey was pleased to learn

that his gift to the Gillespie County Airport was still in use.

The two men talked about the night Godfrey's lights probably prevented a tragedy.

Not long after Gillespie County installed the lights back in 1956, a student pilot training at a San Antonio airfield got lost in the dark, spotted the lights and made a safe landing. There is a good chance the pilot would have crashed had the lights not been installed.

The story made news nationwide after Godfrey told it on the air to his radio audience.

Senator Johnson placed the story of Arthur Godfrey's lights and the emergency landing at Gillespie County Airport in the Congressional Record.

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