

# TEXAS Legends

## Tommy Joe Vandergriff



When Tom Vandergriff became mayor of Arlington, Texas, in 1951, the city of 7,000 residents spread over four square miles and was described by some as “the ‘dash’ between Dallas and Fort Worth.” Only twenty-five years old when he was elected, Vandergriff might have seemed an unlikely candidate to transform his community. In his almost twenty-six years of service, however, he played a central role in the transformation of Arlington into a business, sports, entertainment, and education hub in North Texas.

One of Vandergriff’s first endeavors was to help bring a \$33 million General Motors auto assembly plant to Arlington. This required negotiating a deal for a 250-acre plot of land big enough to host the plant and forging an agreement for the state to build a highway to the site in order to ensure materials could be shipped in and new cars could be shipped out efficiently. The plant

opened in 1953 and by 2014 employed 4,500 workers who built about 1,140 Escalades, Tahoes, Suburbans, and Yukon sport utility vehicles daily.

To put the city on the map with regard to higher education, Vandergriff played a role in turning Arlington State College into a four-year school in 1959 and brought the school into the University of Texas system in 1965. The University of Texas at Arlington is currently designated an emerging research university, offering numerous degrees to more than 33,000 students.

Vandergriff’s plans did not end there. After visiting Disneyland in the 1950s, Vandergriff decided to bring a theme park to Arlington. With his encouragement, developer Angus Wynne Jr. led the building of Six Flags Over Texas. The historically themed park opened in 1961, and in the half century since its inception it has become the anchor of one of the world’s largest theme park chains, with eighteen parks spread across the United States, Mexico, and Canada. The park attracts more than 3 million visitors every year.

Vandergriff believed that making Arlington a major city also required major league baseball. In 1959, he won voter approval of a \$9.5 million bond issue to construct a baseball stadium, and he set about looking for a major league baseball team. His first choice was the Houston Astros, but he was met with opposition from Astros owner Judge Roy Hofheinz, who received support from his friend, President Lyndon Johnson. The president spent more than an hour on the phone with Vandergriff, trying to convince him that Texas only had room for one major league team. The young mayor simply remarked, “I just listened.”<sup>i</sup> And

bided his time. In 1971, Vandergriff went after the Washington Senators, but again he faced presidential opposition, this time from Richard Nixon. According to legend, Vandergriff happened to be in the office of Senators owner Bob Short when Nixon’s son-in-law David Eisenhower arrived. Vandergriff hid in a closet until the man finished explaining Nixon’s concerns. In the end, Vandergriff prevailed, and the team moved to Arlington in 1972, becoming the Texas Rangers.

Not everything Vandergriff touched turned to gold. After a failed venture at a marine park, which left the city in debt from millions of dollars provided in bond money, Vandergriff resigned from the Arlington City Council. He went on to serve in Congress as a Democrat from 1983 to 1985, but lost his House seat to Republican Dick Army amid the Republican landslide behind Ronald Reagan’s 1984 reelection. He returned to politics as a Republican in 1990 and was elected Tarrant County judge.

By the time of his death, Vandergriff had seen Arlington grow to a population of over 365,000 covering almost ninety-six square miles. The city sees an estimated 6.8 million visitors every year and has played host to World Series, Super Bowls, NCAA Final Four basketball games, and other major sporting events. It also entertains millions annually at Six Flags, Hurricane Harbor, and other vacation destinations.

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i. Gerry Fraley, “Presidents Were No Match for Tom Vandergriff,” *Dallas Morning News*, January 2, 2011, [www.dallasnews.com/sports/texas-rangers/headlines/20110102-fraley-presidents-were-no-match-for-tom-vandergriff.ece](http://www.dallasnews.com/sports/texas-rangers/headlines/20110102-fraley-presidents-were-no-match-for-tom-vandergriff.ece) (accessed September 9, 2014).