



# TEXAS *Legends*

## Judge Roy Bean

Roy Bean, a legend of the Texas judiciary, reflects the lax nature of frontier justice in Texas and the state's fondness for amateur justice. Born in Kentucky in 1825, Bean had no formal education that prepared him for service as a judge. However, Pecos County needed a judge, one that would allow the Texas Rangers to clean up the area without having to make a 400-mile round trip to the nearest courthouse and jail. Thus, for lack of a better choice, Roy Bean became a Texas judge on August 2, 1882.

Prior to serving as a judge, Bean's legal experience had been on the other side of the bench and cell door. After fleeing legal trouble in several states, Bean settled briefly in San Diego, California, where his brother was mayor. In 1852, he was arrested and charged with assault with intent to murder for participating in a duel over a woman. He eventually escaped from jail, allegedly using a knife smuggled inside some tamales to dig himself out. After relocating to San Gabriel, California, Bean became involved in another duel in 1854, killing a romantic rival.

This time, he didn't appear before a court; instead, he narrowly escaped lynching by his victim's friends.

Bean supplemented his judicial earnings by running a bar called Jersey Lilly, named for Lillie Langtry, a British actress with whom Bean was obsessed. (Contrary to rumor, Langtry, Texas, was not named after her. The city, originally named Eagle Nest, was renamed in honor of George Langtry, an area railroad engineer.)

While occasionally voted out of office, Bean mostly held onto the position of judge until his retirement in 1902. Despite his lack of training and his possession of only one law book, Bean's justice was creative. Because he lacked a jail, he favored setting fines over requiring jail time when sentencing. Horse thieves were generally released after payment of a fine if the horses were returned. When a man died after falling off a bridge, Bean discovered that the man had been carrying forty dollars and a concealed pistol. He fined the man forty dollars for

carrying a concealed weapon and used the money to pay for his funeral expenses.

Bean's legal and bartending careers complimented each other nicely; Bean required that jurors buy drinks at his saloon during every judicial recess. His most famous venture came in 1896 when he organized a world championship boxing title match. Since boxing matches were illegal in Texas, Judge Bean arranged for Bob Fitzsimmons and Peter Maher to box on an island in the Rio Grande. While the fight lasted less than two minutes, word of the match and its promoter spread throughout the United States.

Portraying himself as the "law west of the Pecos," Judge Roy Bean epitomized Texas justice in its infancy. He died in 1903, but his legacy continues to shape the town of Langtry. In 1939, the State of Texas purchased Bean's Jersey Lilly, making it the centerpiece of Langtry's Old West tourism business, and it has had over 1 million visitors to date.