



## Chicken Ranch

Some Texas legends are more interesting than others. A few have been told and retold again and again. However, only one has made it to Broadway and the big screen as a musical.

The Chicken Ranch in La Grange was one of the state's worst-kept secrets for decades. Operating in Fayette County, about halfway between Austin and Houston, the Chicken Ranch was said to be the oldest continuously running brothel in the nation, with roots going back to 1844 when Texas was a republic.<sup>i</sup> The "Chicken Ranch" label was earned during the Great Depression, when cash was in short supply and a little creative marketing led to a "one chicken for one screw" policy. The chickens provided food for the staff, and the madam brought in a little extra cash by selling surplus chickens and eggs. With the chickens wandering around the house, the place became known as the Chicken Ranch, and the name endured long after the "poultry standard" ended.

The occupants of the Chicken Ranch maintained good relations with the people of La Grange by paying their taxes, shopping with local merchants, giving generously to local charities, and working closely with local law enforcement to make sure that their clientele caused no trouble to the town. The ranch allegedly did a big business, drawing young men from nearby military bases and from Texas A&M. It was said that some fans even celebrated their team's victory at the Chicken Ranch after the Texas versus Texas A&M game on Thanksgiving Day.

In the summer of 1973, television reporter Marvin Zindler discovered the story of the Chicken Ranch and took to the airwaves of Houston to warn citizens. Zindler surprised Governor Dolph Briscoe on camera during an interview with the news that there was a house of prostitution operating in La Grange. Zindler offered up the testimony from his young camera man, who assured the governor that he had visited the Chicken Ranch the previous evening and that his personal experience confirmed that there was a brothel operating there. When Zindler asked the governor what he was going to do, Briscoe replied, "Marvin, we are going to close it up."<sup>ii</sup>

After the interview, Briscoe realized that while he had just promised to close a brothel, the governor of Texas had no authority to do so because this was a local matter in which state police lacked authority. Initially, Briscoe and Attorney General John Hill discussed the possibility of stationing state police nearby to record the license plates of clients so they could be shared with Austin newspapers. However, Briscoe worried that legislators would be drawn into the scandal, since, as Larry L. King wrote, "many of [them] could have driven to the Chicken Farm without headlights even in a midnight rainstorm."<sup>iii</sup>

The state asked local sheriff Jim Flournoy to shut down the ranch. Sheriff Flournoy declined because his office and the rest of the community had a friendly relationship with the ranch that went back decades. In fact, the sheriff claimed that he

had a stack of petitions from local residents demanding that the Chicken Ranch remain open. Eventually, Briscoe provided the local sheriff with the political cover he needed by issuing an order that the ranch be closed, and on August 2, 1973, the sheriff closed the ranch and ended the run of the Chicken Ranch.

Unfortunately for Briscoe and others who wanted to put the fiasco behind them, Larry L. King wrote an article about the Chicken Ranch for *Playboy* magazine that eventually brought the ranch back to life on Broadway in 1978 in a musical titled *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. The show was wildly popular, and even Briscoe snuck in to catch a performance in London where he thought he could enjoy the show without being recognized—but he was identified during intermission by other Texans catching the show. The Chicken Ranch's legend grew again after Hollywood took up the case, casting Burt Reynolds as the sheriff and Dolly Parton as the madam in a movie based on the musical.

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- i. Walter F. Pilcher, "Chicken Ranch," Handbook of Texas Online, [www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ysco1](http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ysco1) (accessed September 2, 2014). Published by the Texas State Historical Association.
  - ii. Dolph Briscoe, as quoted in Don Carleton, *Dolph Briscoe: My Life in Texas Ranching and Politics* (Austin, Tex.: Center for American History, 2008), 220.
  - iii. Larry L. King, "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas," *Playboy*, April 1974, [www.newlinetheatre.com/playboy.html](http://www.newlinetheatre.com/playboy.html) (accessed September 2, 2014).