

## Side Story: "The Eyes of Texas"



Jim Cannon

### **James Reece Cannon (Jim)**

was one of eight children, born in Cannon, to Elijah Halston "Hoss" and Alice Tolbert Cannon. Jim was a grandson to the patriarch, Elijah Cannon. Jim's family moved to Van Alstyne in 1895. He loved athletics and was a member of the Van Alstyne Grays, a semi-pro baseball team

well-known in the area at the time.

Jim attended the University of Texas in Austin for two years. In 1903 he returned to Van Alstyne to start a business. Jim installed the first telephone system in Van Alstyne in 1903, shortly after his return. He married Maidee Baskett who died in 1923 without bearing him any children. After his wife's death, Jim moved to Amarillo where he met and married Catherine Beckman in 1925. They had

a daughter, Catherine (Henderson), born in 1926. In 1937 Jim and Catherine moved back to Van Alstyne where their daughter attended school.

Jim pursued farming on Cannon property. They called their house on the old Cannon property their "farm home". It had been built in 1857 by Jim's uncles, Hoss and Oscar. Catherine was still living in that house when the Livingston family visited her in 1980. She lived alone, took care of her property and herself and was very physically active and sharp at 88 years old.

### **Jim's part in the song "The Eyes of Texas":**

In 1901 Jim enrolled in the University of Texas in Austin as a business student. As a sophomore, Jim sang bass in the school's glee club, which performed at various events around Austin. In 1903, Jim and his "Varsity Minstrel" quartet were to sing for an annual Spring music festival held at the Old Hancock Theater on 6th Street, then one of the best theatres in Texas. The money raised for the event was to be used for the UT athletic association. Jim's close friend, John Lang Sinclair, had been asked by the Festival chairman to write a new song. With the tune of "I've Been Working on the Railroad" in his head, Sinclair composed the lyrics to "The Eyes of Texas" on a piece of yellow Bosche Laundry paper that had been wrapped around one of his shirts. The song was written as a prank because UT President W.L. Prather was always telling the students in assemblies that "The Eyes of Texas are upon you". It became a campus joke and when students saw the president ("Prexy") walking on campus, they would say "there goes the eyes of Texas".

The night of the show, Sinclair collared Jim's quartet and talked them into singing the new song for the festival. The song was so new that it wasn't included on the written program. The only



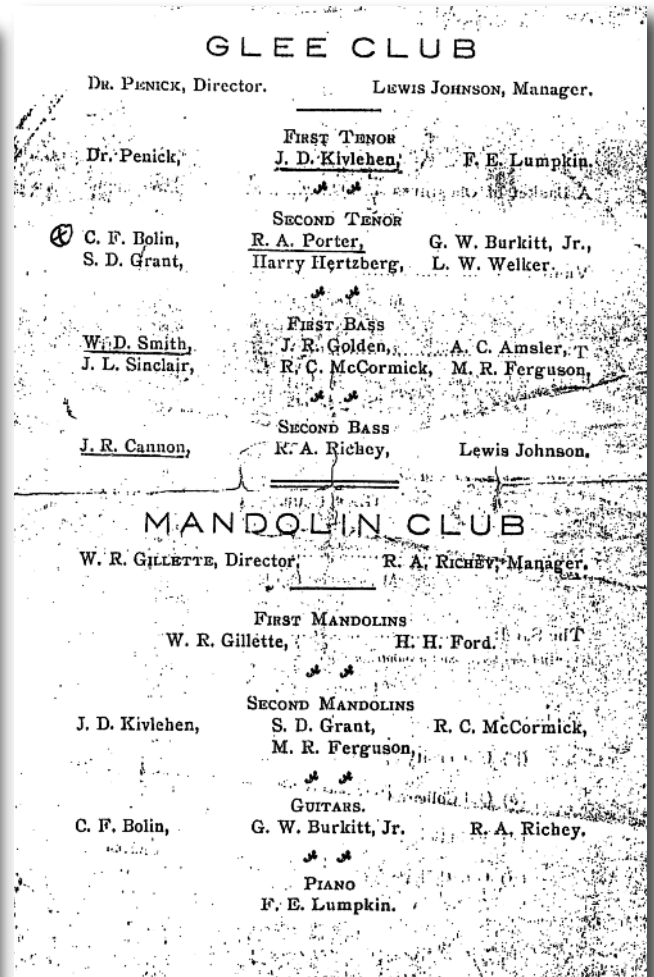
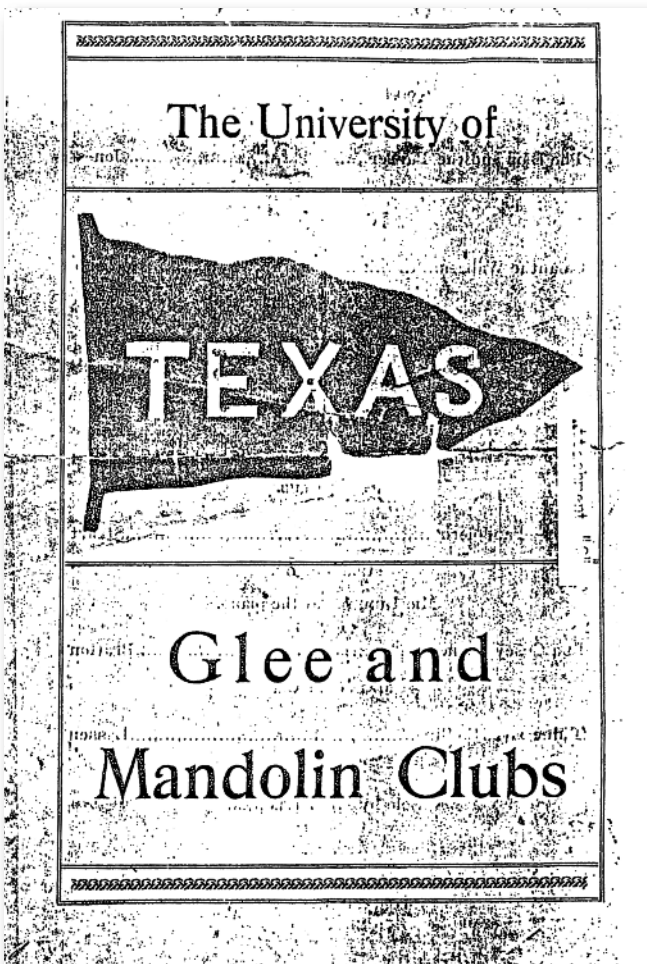
Catherine Cannon, age 88, at her farm home in Cannon

copy of the lyrics was written on the laundry sack, but since the tune was already familiar to the singers, they were confident they could perform it. When the boys stepped out on the stage they were dressed in formal dress suits. "Prexy" was in the audience. The quartet sang; and what started as a ripple, turned to laughter, and finally thunderous applause. The crowd pounded the floor and yelled for encores. The quartet sang the chorus again and again, with the students joining in. By the next day, the band had learned the words (Sinclair was in the band) and they paraded around campus playing the song. Mail flooded into administrative offices, asking for the quartet to make personal appearances. School officials obliged and picked up the tab, thinking these boys were great goodwill ambassadors for the university.

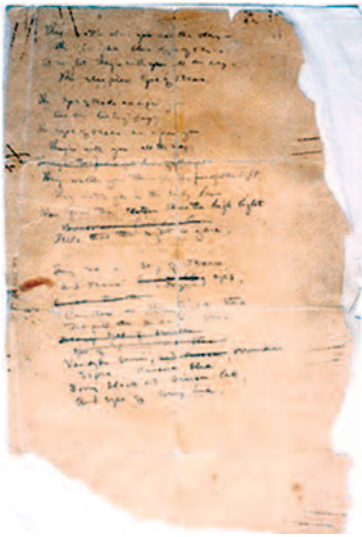
At the end of the school year, Jim decided to go into business in Van Alstyne instead of going back to school. Sinclair, author of the song, gave the original manuscript, written on the laundry sack, to Jim as a sign of their close friendship. Years later, Jim loaned the manuscript to another member of his quartet and never received it back.

In the early 1930s, Jim received correspondence from University dean T.U. Taylor and a few others who was compiling material for books about UT's 50th reunion, which was to be held in 1931. Dean Taylor wanted to know which members of the quartet had been the original boys performing the song on that first night at the music festival. Independently a woman wrote to Jim asking if other verses had been written for the song? And a third letter came from Lewis Johnson, manager of the Glee Club at the time of the performance. He was compiling manuscripts and in need of Glee Club books, programs and other materials. Johnson told Jim Cannon that at one time he had possession of the original Bosche Landry paper with the famous words of John Lang Sinclair, although it was unclear how he had come into possession of the paper. He told Jim he knew it must have come from one of the other quartet members, but he had misplaced the paper several years before.

Jim gave each of these people information that helped answer their questions. Jim provided Dean Taylor with an original Glee Club program with the names of the singers underlined (shown in this document). He also provided additional verses of







Original Bosche Landry paper with the famous words written by John Lang Sinclair

the song that had been written, though not used. He gave Lewis Johnson some materials and though we don't know how the University acquired it, the original manuscript with lyrics to "The Eyes of Texas" can now be seen in the lobby of the Texas Exes Alumni Center in Austin. The Briscoe Center of American History

also has one of the first copies of the manuscript.

In 1930 an anonymous alumnus presented the University with a set of tower chimes to go into the belfry of the Old Main Building. The first two measures of "The Eyes of Texas" rang out over the Forty Acres upon the stroke of every hour.

The song itself was subject of a lawsuit in the early 1930s. When the original copyright expired after 28 years, a New York publishing firm latched onto the song, seeking to receive royalties from anyone playing it. Bill McGraw, the Texas Attorney General at that time, appealed to Texans by asking in newspapers for anyone to come forward with any help they

could offer about the origin of the song, because at that time the records were still scanty. Jim Cannon came forward with a suggestion that that if a copy of the University yearbook contained words of that song, the publishing firms' case would be without foundation. Sure enough, the song was published in the yearbook and all yearbooks are copyrighted. The University of Texas won the case and continues to own the copyright to "The Eyes of Texas".

Shortly before Jim's death on April 28, 1966, he requested of his wife that "The Eyes of Texas" be played at his funeral. His final wish was carried out. Jim is buried in the Van Alstyne Cemetery.

Almost everyone knows the chorus of "The Eyes of Texas", but have you heard these stanzas in two verses?:

#### Verse 1

I once did know a President  
Away down south in Texas  
And always, everywhere he went  
He saw the eyes of Texas  
(Chorus)

#### Verse 2

Sing me a song of Prexy  
Of days long since gone by  
Again I seem to greet him  
and hear his kind reply  
Smiles of gracious welcome  
Before my mem'ry rise  
Again I hear him say to me:  
"Remember Texas' Eyes"  
(Chorus)