

The Bandera PROPHEET

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Today in Texas History

By Bandera Spirits of Texas

On this day in 1911, barbed wire promoter and oilman John Warne (Bet-a-Million) Gates died.

Gates was born in Illinois in 1855. Gates arrived in Texas as a barbed wire salesman for the Washburn-Moen Company in 1876. He rented San Antonio's Military Plaza, constructed a barbed-wire corral, and filled it with longhorn cattle to demonstrate the holding power of barbed wire. His demonstration resulted in orders for more wire than the factory could produce.

Gates returned to Illinois and, upon being refused a partnership in Washburn-Moen, quit. He went to St. Louis, where he helped build the Southern Wire Company into the largest manufacturer and distributor of unlicensed "moonshine/non-patented" barbed wire.

Gates became a prominent industrialist and a notorious bon vivant. He controlled the Kansas City Southern Railway and formed the Texas Company (now Texaco), in which he owned 46 percent of the stock, to finance the drilling efforts of Pattillo Higgins at Spindletop.

Gates's nickname derived from his fondness for gambling at poker, the stock market, and horse races. According to rumor, he bet a cool million and won two million in a 1900 horse race in England; in actuality, he bet \$70,000 and won \$600,000.