

SEARCH



The Son Rises

HOW GROWING UP IN WEST TEXAS MADE HIM DIFFERENT FROM HIS DAD.

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GEORGE W. BUSH CAUGHT HIS FIRST GLIMPSE OF TEXAS in 1948, when he and his mother stepped onto the tarmac of an Odessa airstrip after a twelve-hour flight from the East Coast. He was just two years old then, and Odessa was a small industrial town: a scattering of pump jacks, equipment yards, and tin-roofed warehouses sitting on the prairie, where the roadside shimmered with gas flares and the sour smell of oil hung in the air. Even during those good times, the West Texas oil patch had little to recommend it besides the lure of black gold and the wide-open sky—a far cry from the gracious living in New Haven, Connecticut, where the Bushes lived next door to the president of Yale University. Now they found themselves in a dirt-under-the-fingernails workingman’s town, where drillers, roughnecks, and roustabouts were arriving by the day, crowding into tent cities and even chicken coops for shelter. Housing was scarce, the work was grueling, and the weather—tornadoes, sandstorms, and months without rain—was hard to endure. The tumbleweeds were so plentiful that residents painted them gold and dusted them with glitter, using them as Christmas ornaments.

It was an unlikely place for George W. to come of age, particularly since his parents were accustomed to the rarefied circles of the Eastern establishment. But for his
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of wealth but also the promise of self-invention: a strike-out-on-your-own, do-it-yourself sort of independence far removed from the patrician atmosphere of his father's hometown of Greenwich, where lineage and tradition dictated one's path. In 1948 George Herbert Walker Bush, then 24, was taken with this idea, just as his son would be nearly three decades later. Rather than heading to Wall Street, the elder Bush steered his red Studebaker toward the oil fields of Texas the day after he graduated from Yale, sending for his family once he had found a house to rent. The decade he would spend there would profoundly mark his son. Far from buttoned-down New England, George W. Bush would grow to be loud, loose, and earthy—a child with all the rough edges of the West and the jangling, nervous energy of the boom.

The Bushes started out simply enough, in a shotgun house along an unpaved road where outhouses and mules stood side by side. It was plain living: Two prostitutes lived on the other side of the house, which was split into a duplex by a makeshift partition, and the male clientele kept the house's one bathroom busy from dusk through dawn. The Bushes were clearly out of their element in Odessa and better suited to neighboring Midland, the tamer white-collar town to the east on U.S. 20, where engineers, geologists, and financiers were moving from the East Coast to cash in on the boom. Only twenty miles apart on the desert, the sister cities were as different as night and day—"Midland is for raising families" goes the adage, "Odessa is for raising hell"—but the Bushes wouldn't fully appreciate the distinction until they moved to Midland two years later. In the meantime they made do; George worked twelve-hour days sweeping out oil equipment warehouses and painting pump jacks for Ideco Oil, while Barbara looked after their strong-willed son. "I like to tease my mother that she has white hair because of me," George W. said this spring.

In 1949 George Bush was briefly transferred to California, where he traveled from rig to rig as a drill-bit salesman and where Barbara would give birth to a daughter, Robin. It was a lonely time: The family followed his work from Bakersfield to Whittier and then on to Ventura and Compton, staying in motels and rentals along the way. It came as a relief to them all when Bush was transferred back to West Texas in 1950, this time to Midland. For George W., Midland became the place that he would most closely identify himself with, the place that—despite ten years of schooling in the

East, summers spent at the family home in Maine, and considerable time in Houston, Dallas, and Austin as an adult—he still thinks of as home. “Midland made a big impression on all of us,” explains Charlie Younger, an orthopedic surgeon who was one of his first Midland neighbors. “It was an idyllic place to grow up, a real Ozzie-and-Harriet sort of town, and there’s a great sense of nostalgia among our group of friends for that time. Four or so years ago George and I were hashing something out, and he turned to me and said, ‘If I died today, I’d like to be buried in Midland.’”

Midland was a place of boundless optimism in 1950, a boomtown whose population would nearly triple before the Bushes left West Texas in 1959. Over the course of their stay there, its unpaved streets would give way to office buildings that could be seen from thirty miles away, jutting upward from the flat, wide expanse of buffalo grass and sagebrush. It was dubbed the Tall City of the Plains, but Midlanders preferred the grander “Headquarters City of the Vast Permian Basin Empire,” a nod to its new status as the center for Texas oil. Land and oil leases were trading hands at such a rapid-fire rate that most deals were done on a handshake; there wasn’t time for paperwork. “We were young and eager to do new things, trying to make our way in a part of the country that was completely foreign to us,” remembers John Ashmun, who lived two doors down from the Bushes. “All we had was each other’s company. In the evenings on Maple Street we’d sit around in khakis and sport shirts, and we’d charcoal some burgers while the children ran wild. After dinner the men would get in a corner and talk oil.”

Back then, Younger recalls, George W. was “just another pesky little kid running around the neighborhood.” Midland was still a small town, safe enough for parents to let kids roam around on their own, and George W. and his friends had their run of the place. Friday nights were spent watching football games at Memorial Stadium, where they rooted for Midland Bulldogs fullback Wahoo McDaniel. “On Saturdays we’d meet at the ball field and put together a ball game,” says Robert McCleskey, now the governor’s accountant. “In the afternoons we would ride our bikes down to the Ritz and watch the serials, mostly Buck Rogers and cowboy movies.” The neighborhood girls often came to watch them play ball, but George W. didn’t know his future wife, Laura Welch, even though she lived only a few blocks north of him. In those days Laura and her friends would meet at the Rexall Drug Store and sip Cokes on

Saturdays, recalls her longtime friend Regan Gammon, “and then we would go to a friend’s house and listen to 45’s—mostly Buddy Holly and the Drifters and Roy Orbison—and we’d dance in the den in our socks.” On Sundays George W. attended First Presbyterian Church, where his parents taught Sunday school; on weekend afternoons, his father would play touch football with other men from the neighborhood while Barbara and George W. cheered him on.

Football was the primary diversion in Midland, but baseball was the bond between father and son. Though George was consumed with his career in the early fifties, when he began to work as an independent oilman, he spent what spare time he had on the weekends coaching George W.’s Little League team, the Cubs. He had met Babe Ruth only a few years earlier, when he was captain of the Yale baseball team, and was revered among the boys for his baseball talents. “If he was standing in the outfield when someone hit a fly ball, he could put his glove behind him at belt level, drop his head forward, and catch the ball behind his back,” says Joe O’Neill, George W.’s oldest Midland friend. “We’d try to do it too, but the ball would always hit us on the back of the head. We all had scabs on our heads from trying to catch the fly balls like Mr. Bush did.” George W. seized on his father’s passion early on; when he wasn’t tossing a ball around in hopes that he could someday “be Willie Mays,” he was committing statistics to memory. “When Mr. Bush was vice president, he once brought down an old shoebox full of old baseball cards,” O’Neill says. “He started quizzing us on baseball trivia, the most off-the-wall questions you’d ever heard—‘Why was Shoeless Joe Jackson called Shoeless when he always wore shoes?’—and George could answer them all.” Baseball was a way the son proved himself to his father; he would later describe one of his proudest moments as the time his father no longer needed to hold back on his throws.

George W. would inherit his father’s competitiveness and love of the game, but it was his mother’s temperament—her irreverence, her quick wit, her blunt forthrightness—that would shape him. They were qualities that would become readily apparent soon after his sister Robin was diagnosed with leukemia in 1953. “We were too afraid to tell him that his little sister was dying—we didn’t want to worry him,” Barbara Bush said. During the seven months that Robin battled the disease at a New York hospital, Barbara Bush stayed at her bedside; George Bush, who had just founded

Zapata Petroleum Corporation, shuttled back and forth between Midland and New York. When he was gone, George W. and his baby brother Jeb were left in the care of family friends in the neighborhood. George W. vividly remembers seeing his parents drive into the parking lot of Sam Houston Elementary School one day in the fall of 1953; they had come to tell him that his sister had died. “I remember looking in the car and thinking I saw Robin in the back,” he said in a 1989 interview with the *Washington Post Magazine*. “I thought I saw her, but she wasn’t there.”

George and Barbara Bush were devastated by the loss of their daughter and were immobilized with grief for much of that year. “We awakened night after night in great physical pain—it hurt that much,” Barbara Bush wrote in her memoirs. In the months that followed Robin’s death she clung to George W. and Jeb, until she one day overheard her eldest son refuse an invitation to play at a friend’s house because, he said, his mother needed him. “That started my cure,” she wrote. “I realized I was too much of a burden for a little seven-year-old boy to carry.” It was around that time that George W.’s wisecracking, tart sense of humor began to emerge—an effort, perhaps, to deflect his parents’ attention from their pain. His wit was most memorably on display when, shortly after Robin’s death, his father took him to a football game. George W., after angling for a view, made the odd pronouncement that he wished he was his sister. His father’s friends stiffened with embarrassment, and after an awkward silence, his father pressed him to explain what he had meant. “I bet she can see the game better from up there than we can here,” he explained.

Robin’s death affected George W. more overtly than it did Jeb, who is seven years his junior. (Brothers Neil and Marvin and sister Dorothy are nine, ten, and thirteen years younger, respectively.) As the eldest child, he was expected to excel; he was a good student and an all-around athlete, first at Sam Houston Elementary School and then San Jacinto Junior High—albeit one with, in his mother’s words, “a lot of personality.” One brush with authority involved an incident in music class in which he painted a mustache on his face for the amusement of the other students. “But worse,” remembered Barbara Bush, “when he was sent to the principal’s office, he sort of swaggered in, obviously making light of the fact that he was in trouble.” Her son was promptly paddled with a board. Despite such antics, George W. showed a serious interest in politics early on; in the seventh grade he ran for class president

against the first baseman of his Little League team—and won.

The Bushes' time in Midland would end in 1959, when George's interest in offshore drilling would take him to Houston. After a decade in West Texas, he had—according to plan—fulfilled his hopes of becoming a self-made man. “He was the first of our group, along with Hugh Liedtke, to make a million, and in that day a million was a bundle,” says Midland friend Earle Craig, Jr. “I was pea green with envy.” It was an achievement not lost on George W., who had watched the family trade up to successively larger homes: from an 847-square-footer on the east side of town to a centrally located house on a corner lot to a sprawling, custom-built house with a swimming pool in the upscale Midland neighborhood populated by the town's millionaires. But for George W., the move to Houston was the most jarring one—“A shock,” he said, after the close-knit camaraderie and laid-back lifestyle of Midland. The family's new home, on Briar Drive, was decidedly “fancy,” he remembered, as was the elite private school, Kinkaid, where he entered the eighth grade. George W. quickly realized he was in a new milieu there: “One day at Kinkaid a guy walks up to me after practice and says, ‘Hey, you want a ride home, Bush?’ I was waiting for the bus. This was an eighth grader, who might have been fourteen at the time, and he was driving a GTO—in the eighth grade! I remember saying, ‘No thanks, man.’ It was just a different world.”

Two years later, when George W. left Texas behind for an elite Eastern education, Houston hardly seemed foreign anymore.

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