

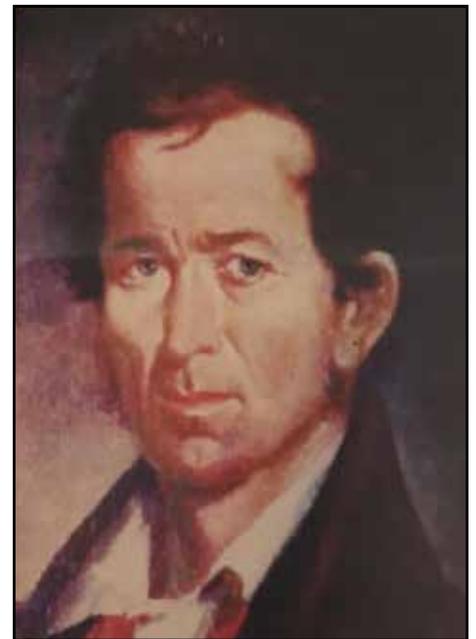
### Still Seeking Deaf Smith A Forty-Year Adventure

*In 1980, a Yankee from Boston moved to Big Spring, TX to become a founding faculty member of Southwest Collegiate Institute for the Deaf. Then former TAD president Larry D. Evans shared an incredible tale about Erastus “Deaf” Smith, another Yankee who settled in Texas 160 years earlier. Steve Baldwin became so enamored by Smith’s feats that he drove 400 miles to visit a tiny museum in the Texas Panhandle, thus commenced his forty-year research journey.*

#### **PART ONE:** State Capitol Exhibit, Deaf Wax Sculptor, Statewide Tour, Donating My Deaf Smith Collection to the Briscoe Center for American History

By Steve C. Baldwin, Ph.D.  
NAD Region 3 Representative  
Deaf History & Culture Section Board Member

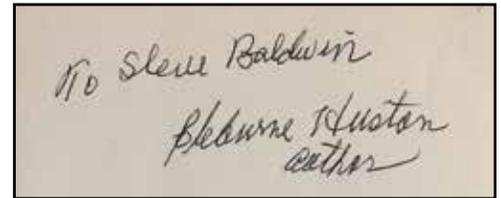
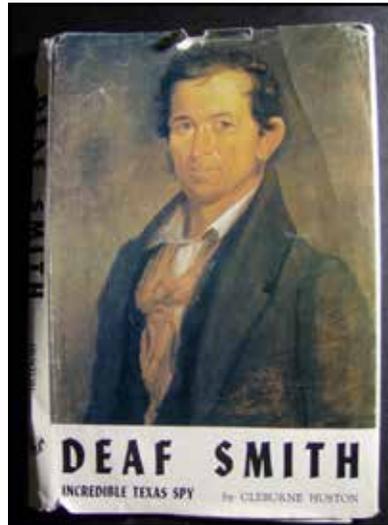
Call my adventure a forty-year journey when I sought more information about Erastus “Deaf” Smith in 1980. As a trained historian, I saw the basic need to separate the facts from myths. But there’s no need to cover the period from that time until 2011 because the “breadth and depth” about Deaf Smith was already published by *The Deaf Texan* (TDT) in 2012. That “monograph” as Dr. Jean Andrews, a retired professor emeritus from Lamar University termed it, is an essential part of my complete collection. Without *Texas School for the Deaf* (TSD) and *Educational Resource Center on Deafness* (ERCOD), the TDT Special Edition, a remastered video of my 1985 play about Deaf Smith, a videotaped pantomime, a PowerPoint presentation (look for link within Part 1), and free lesson plans, the whole package would not be available for your curious perusal. Thanks primarily to TSD Superintendent Claire Bugen, Diana Poepelmyer, David Coco, and David Pierce for making my Deaf Smith collection digitally available for Texas and the nation. (Readers can download the Deaf Smith booklet and other programs in the link provided elsewhere in this introductory part. Plus, Grant Laird Jr.’s excellent PowerPoint presentation about Deaf Smith.)



Portrait by T. Jefferson Wright,  
commissioned by Sam Houston,  
in 1836.

## Deaf Smith by Steve C. Baldwin, Ph.D., *continued*

For this inaugural part of the series, we need to recognize two historians and one wax sculptor who inspired me. Before all three gentlemen passed away, I met and communicated with the definitive biographers Cleburne Huston and Robert Swaim, Jr. A native Texan, Huston published his authoritative Deaf Smith biography in 1973, and Swaim wrote his major biographical article earlier in the *Deaf American Magazine* in 1969. Swaim, a deaf writer from New York, lamented the fact that Huston beat him to the punch by getting his book published first. Unfortunately, Swaim never had his manuscript published after I offered him constant encouragement and constructive ideas for his dream book in the 1980s.



Dr. Baldwin purchased this book for \$17.50 in the fall of 1980. It has the author's rare signature. The pages are worn out from continuous use. Anyone can purchase the same history book for up to \$50 on Amazon now.

**Photo credit:** Steve Baldwin

Don Baer, a deaf wax sculptor from California, had his big dream come true when we displayed his amazing full wax figure of Deaf Smith at the Texas State Capitol from April 18 to 20, 2012. Seven years earlier, July 2005, Don politely requested my assistance related to Smith's physical attributes. He even sent me examples of different hair colors and photos of Smith's facial features, piece by piece, week after week while he developed his artwork. After I approved his final head sculpture from a historical perspective, I donated a period jacket, hat, and rifle. Those were the same costumes and props that came from my 1985 play about Deaf Smith. Presently, the Deaf Smith wax figure is permanently on display at the California School for the Deaf in Fremont. Don passed on December 10, 2013. His wonderful sister Jennifer Baer said the trip to Texas was an extraordinary achievement and fond memory for her terminally-ill brother. TSD and Deaf

Television Foundation (chartered in 2007) literally made his dream trip possible.



Wax sculptor Don Baer contacted me in January of 2005 & asked for Deaf Smith's precise physical description. Two years later he sent me 20 photos showing the progress of the bust. This photo is one of them. Five years later he displayed the wax figure in the basement rotunda of the Texas State Capitol from April 18 to 20, 2012. It was his dream come true before he passed 20 months later.

**Photo credit:** Don Baer

## Deaf Smith by Steve C. Baldwin, Ph.D., *continued*

Driving Don's costumed mannequin throughout Texas was not exactly like a waltz across the Lone Star State. My estimated total miles were about 2100. Sometimes driving Deaf Smith felt like driving a hearse, especially on rural roads fraught with road kills, hungry vultures and jaywalking tumbleweeds. The three-city tour was exhausting, and only three sponsors helped with the touring expenses, including Humanities Texas. In addition to two venues in Austin, the touring exhibit landed in Dallas, Beaumont, and Big Spring. My favorite stopover was performing before 200 deaf and hard of hearing students in Dallas on October 25, 2012. With the help of Grant Laird, Jr., I did a disappearing act by changing quickly into my suit and tie by emerging from the back after my staged performance as Deaf Smith ended within minutes. The Houdini trick delighted the surprised audience of wide-eyed teenagers. (Look at the photo that shows my act.)



Don Baer stands beside his Deaf Smith wax figure on April 19, 2012. The large background banner was constructed by Allen Hamilton. The cast iron fireplace dog was loaned to the exhibit by Marilyn Swanson-Rogers. The fake flowers came from Rosie Serna. Hundreds of people had their photo taken in front of Deaf Smith during the three-day exhibit.

**Photo credit:** Steve Baldwin/Jennifer Baer



Ribbon cutting business for the opening of the Deaf Smith Exhibit at the Texas State Capitol on April 18, 2012. From left to right: Larry D. Evans (TAD president), Steve Baldwin (organizer), Blaine Brunson (COS from Lt. Governor David Dewhurst's Office), Don Baer (wax sculptor), Claire Bugen (Supt. of TSD), Sericia Jackson-Stemper (Miss Deaf Texas), Paul Rutowski (Master of Ceremonies), Matt Adams (Deaf Smith knife sculptor).

**Photo credit:** Rosie Serna



In this photo Baldwin performed the role of Deaf Smith before 200 deaf & hard of hearing students at the Mabel Peters Caruth Center in Dallas. The host of the event on October 23, 2012 was *Deaf Action Center*. The student covering his ears asked Baldwin if Deaf Smith could talk or yell. Well, he got the answer quite clearly and loudly.

**Photo credit:** Grant Laird, Jr.

It was time for me to ship the Deaf Smith mannequin back to Don Baer in November of 2012. Eventually, I donated my 24-year papers to the Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin in early 2014. The nationally known history research center was the same library that had only ONE thin folder about Deaf Smith when I visited there 30 years earlier. Now they have a thick file of historical information for researchers. (There's a link below that lists what I donated to the Briscoe Center. Check it out.)

End of my journey? Well, it never happened. The descendants of Deaf Smith and new discoveries started me on another adventure about the "eyes of the Texian army" that Republic of Texas President Sam Houston called "A man more brave and honest never lived" in November of 1837. Henceforth, the adventure resumed with renewed curiosity and energy.

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Part 1 suggested links you must check out:

### **Deaf Smith Collection via TSD/ERCOD**

<https://tx50000592.schoolwires.net/Page/522>

### **Grant Laird Jr.'s PowerPoint Presentation that which I have endorsed**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FTvAiKs\\_eg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FTvAiKs_eg)

### **The Briscoe Center for American History: file information about Deaf Smith as donated by Dr. Steve Baldwin in January of 2014**

<https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/taro/utcah/03449/03449-P.html>

### **Plus, NAD Deaf History and Culture Section. Join our section!**

<https://www.nad.org/members/sections/deaf-culture-history-section/>

**Editor's Notes:** The exhibit, tour, and collection earned Dr. Baldwin four major awards and citations. If you have any questions related to Deaf Smith for Dr. Baldwin, email them to Editor Dr. Patti at [tadeditortdt@gmail.com](mailto:tadeditortdt@gmail.com) by July 20, 2020. Watch for Part 2 in the *The Deaf Texan* summer issue.