

Chapter 8:
El Turnio Tobin



All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories

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On many occasions I have had ample opportunity to observe politicians at work. This has been particularly so in relation to my work in school finance, where I found it necessary to attend each legislative session in Austin during a 25-year period. Some of the politicians are good, and some are not so good, but they all pale in comparison to my father-in-law, Antonio W. Tobin.

He was born and raised in South Texas, a direct descendant of Jose Antonio Navarro, leader and hero in the creation of the Republic of Texas. Navarro's daughter, Josefa, married Dan Tobin. They had a son named Antonio W., who had a son named José Antonio, who had a son, Antonio W., who had a daughter named Laura, who I married.

On his mother's side his roots in South Texas went back to the days of the Spanish Empire, with ancestors once owning the fabulous Espiritu Santo land grant (*encomiendo*) in the border area that now includes the city of Brownsville. One of my wife's ranches, located in Palito Blanco, Texas, just south of Alice, has the title dated 1735 and signed by the king of Spain. The title specifies that the land was given "for past services to the crown in the New World," so that the family's history in Texas must go back to much earlier than 1735.

I have said that his name was Antonio W. Tobin, but few people used the name. Among English-speakers he was known as "Tony Tobin," and among the Mexican American population of South, Texas, everybody knew him as "El Turnio Tobin." The nickname stems from a slight strabismic condition, and in English it would translate to "Cross-eyed Tobin."

Although officially he listed "ranching" as his occupation, politics seemed to be his primary business, concern and avocation, as well as that of the entire family. Suffice it to say that Tony Tobin was Commissioner of the infamous Box 13 the night that Lyndon B. Johnson was elected to the U.S. Senate. On that day, or perhaps that night, every registered voter in the precinct turned out to vote, in alphabetical order.

I don't know how the dead managed to vote in every election, but I do know that on the evening when Laura and I got married, he pulled me aside, reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, gave me a card from it and sadly stated, "I guess this belongs to you now." The card which he so reluctantly presented to me was my new wife's voter registration card.

Nothing pleased him more than getting involved in a political campaign. One time I mentioned to him that his good friend, Congressman Kika de la Garza, was going to have an opponent when he came up for reelection. His face lit up, and he responded with a quick, "Thank God."

“Kika has not been opposed in the last three elections,” he added.

“I thought you were a good friend of Kika’s,” I noted.

“I am. I am, but it’s awful going all these years without any big fundraisers and campaigns. If he draws an opponent, we’ll be all over South Texas during the next election.”

Since I was keenly aware that I would never be really accepted into the family without my involvement in ranching, I bought four hundred acres close to my wife’s main ranch and proceeded to learn to be a cowboy, a calling that I pursued for about 15 years.

Tony Tobin became my mentor, teaching me the difference between a cow and a bull and allowing me to learn by doing most of the well repairing, barb wire splicing, branding, castrating, dehorning, spraying and vaccinating at all the ranches.

One time that his water well went dry, he asked my wife and me to meet him in San Diego on a Saturday morning. At the appointed time, he shows up with a queer contraption in the back of his truck. It was a “Ditch Witch,” a marvelous machine, something like a small tractor, but with a ditch digging apparatus in the back. He picked up a large supply of PVC pipe, and he informed us that we were going to lay a water line from his sister’s ranch to his. As the pipe was being loaded on his truck, a group of friends drove up and started teasing him about the ditch digger.

“What do you know about the operation of these fancy machines?” he was asked.

“*Bola de pendejos* (bunch of idiots). I don’t know anything about this machine, and I don’t have to know anything. That is why I have a son-in-law with a doctorate degree. He’s an expert on this type of machinery,” he yelled back.

In less than an hour we were at his ranch ready to start putting in the water line.

“How are you going to get that contraption off the truck?” he asks me.

“I don’t know. How did you get it on?”

“I just backed the truck into a loading ramp, and they drove it on.”

“Well, you don’t have a loading ramp at the ranch.”

“I know that, but maybe we can find a hill or a mound. I’ll back up the truck, and you can drive it off.”

We drove around until we found a good sized mound of dirt. Sure enough, he backed up the truck, and I got into the Ditch Witch. I had never even seen one of these contraptions before and was trying to figure out how to start it and how it worked.

“Hurry up. Start it and back it into the mound. Hurry up and get it started.”

I finally got the thing started and managed to put it in reverse. It may seem easy, but keep in mind that the machine didn’t even have a steering wheel while Tony shouted for me to go to the right and then to the left and every which way.

To make a long story short, I got the machine off, dug the ditch, and my wire put in about a mile of PVC pipe. I even managed to get the thing back into the truck, but to this day, I still don’t know if such machines have a brake, let alone where it is located, since I never found it.

Once my wife and I rigged up the fittings at both end of the pipe, it was only a matter of time before water started flowing. Our eyes got moist watching the thirsty cows come up to the trough to drink.

It wasn’t all work, though, since every weekend we spent considerable time in what is known in South Texas as “ranch hopping.” No matter where he was, Tony Tobin was sure to have two things in his pickup truck: an ice chest full of cold beer and a package of loaded ribs. The ribs were specially cut for him in a meat market in San Manuel. The butcher used an English cut which left a three-inch slab of meat on the rib. Each rib was loaded with rib eye, one of the tastiest cuts in a steer.

On weekends, we would drive over to some ranch to look at the cattle, check on the amount of rainfall all over the county, or perhaps just make a social call on some of his many friends and relatives. As we drove around, we would make a stop at an icehouse and replenish our supply of ice and beer. Occasionally, we would pick up a package of tortillas here and a couple of avocados there. Whenever we got hungry, we would gather some mesquite wood, start a fire and cook the ribs.

His biggest thrill was having someone with a guitar come over to the ranch in the evening. Then we would have quite a party, culminating with Tony singing “Juan Charrasqueado” in English, one of his most amazing accomplishments.

Tony was known from Laredo to Corpus Christi and all points south, even in the border area of northern Mexico. Even today, I can walk into any ice house, bar, restaurant – even political rallies and weddings – in South Texas and say, “*Soy yerno del Turnio Tobin* (I’m Tony Tobin’s son-in-law),” and I am always welcomed.

One time he informed me that he had signed a lease with an oil company to do some drilling at his Rosita ranch in Duval County. The rental payment was minimal, and, since he didn't own the mineral rights for that ranch, the prospects of making money from the drilling were not good. Yet, he appeared to be enthusiastic, stating, "There are ways of making money even without the mineral rights."

As part of their exploration, the oil company workers dug a sluice pit on the ranch. When we saw it, we were disappointed that they had erected a sloppy barbed wire fence around it and worried that some of the cattle would fall into the pit. The concern grew greater when the sluice pit was filled with water.

As luck would have it, a small calf weighing about 200 pounds did fall into the pit and drowned. You hate to see that happen to a little calf, and you hate the monetary loss. At that time a calf like that would have been worth as much as \$200, a very significant amount, considering that the profit margin in ranching is very small.

Tony immediately contacted the oil company and submitted a claim for the value of the calf. The oil company, they always try to maintain good relationships with the landowners, accepted responsibility and volunteered to provide compensation.

The next day Tony received a call from an attorney in Alice representing the oil company. After providing condolences and an apology for the incident, the attorney asked Tony to drop by his office in Alice and get payment for the value of the calf. The following Saturday, Tony asked me to go with him to Alice to collect the money.

The lawyer took out a checkbook and asked, "How much do you figure the calf was worth?"

"Well, the calf was from a registered Charolais bull given to me by Mr. Howard, a friend in East Texas. I figure it must have been worth at least \$1,200."

The attorney almost jumped out of his pants when he heard the figure.

"That seems extremely high for a 200 pound calf, even for a registered calf, and this one wasn't even registered."

"That may be, but I am sure the calf was worth every penny of it. And besides, this has been a traumatic experience for me. I had gotten very attached to the calf. I'm not even claiming compensation for the psychological injury I have experienced at the loss of a pet calf. However, I'm not too familiar with the value of Charolais cattle. You may wish to call Mr. Howard and get an opinion from him."

Needless to say, Tony had already talked to Howard, and Howard was actually sitting in his office waiting for the call from the oil company lawyer.

“Mr. Howard, I am an attorney for an oil company, and Mr. Tobin lost one of his calves in one of our sluice pits. I am trying to get an estimate of how much that calf would be worth.”

“I gave Tobin one of my best bulls. I would guess that the calf would be worth about \$1,500.”

After ending his conversation with Howard, the attorney hung up the phone and proceeded to write out a check.

A few minutes later we were on our way back to the ranch with a check for \$1,200. As we passed Pedro Trevino’s hardware store in San Diego, Tony said, “Pull over at the hardware store. I need to get something.”

I waited in the pickup, and Tony returned carrying two new lassoing ropes.

“What do you want with the lassos?” I asked.

“We need them to catch some more calves and throw them into the sluice pit.”

But it turned out to be a needless expense. By the time we got back to the ranch the oil crew had already filled up the sluice pit. Obviously, they had no intention of paying \$1,200 for any additional calves.

On another occasion, Tony and I sponsored a political rally in Duval County for Ruben Hinojosa, who was running for the State Board of Education. When Ruben arrived a few minutes before the rally was to begin, he informed me that the political signs I had requested were in the trunk of his car.

Tony called over a few of his nephews and nieces and told them that there were some campaign signs in the trunk of the car. Without a further word of explanation or directions, the kids took out the signs, obtained staple guns, hammers and nails from the house, and in no time at all had the whole neighborhood looking like Ruben Hinojosa’s campaign headquarters.

Tony saved some signs so we could post them along the various highways around San Diego.

“Do you have any stakes?” Tony asked Ruben.

“No, we ran out of them today. Can you use the signs without the stakes?”

“Sure. Don’t worry about it.”

The next morning, Tony and I rode out in his pickup truck with the ample supply of campaign signs. As was customary, he prescribed the division of labor between us. He selected the sites where a sign should be posted, while I was assigned the task of putting up the sign.

Without stakes, the task proved to be much harder than we had assumed. It was illegal to post the signs on utility posts, and trees and barbed wire fences were not too cooperative in displaying the signs so that they could be easily seen from the highway.

As the thermometer moved closer to 100 degrees, Tony decided the results didn’t justify the effort. “Let’s go down to the ice house in Gonzalitos and figure out something else,” he said.

As we arrived at the ice house on the highway, Tony, as was his custom, immediately noticed a maroon pickup truck parked in front of the ice house.

“I wonder what cousin Oscar is doing out here?”

“I don’t know, but look at what he’s got in his pickup,” I replied. The back of cousin Oscar’s pickup had a stack of campaign signs promoting a candidate for the Texas Railroad Commission. With the signs was an abundant supply of wooden stakes.

“I think we have solved our problem,” said Tony. “Let’s go inside and work up a deal. You just keep your mouth shut and let me do all the talking.”

Just as soon as we had ordered a couple of beers, Tony goes over to Cousin Oscar and asks him what he is doing out on the highway on a terribly hot day like this one.

“*Que hay de nuevo, Turnio?* I’m putting up campaign signs for a candidate for the Railroad Commission. I just stopped for a cold beer.”

“That’s a coincidence,” said Tony. “We are also putting up campaign signs – for Ruben Hinojosa.”

After a decent pause, he added, “Seems like a waste of time and energy for both of us to work up a sweat putting up signs in the same area. Tell you what I’m going to do. José and I will place a sign for your candidate in every spot we put up a sign for Ruben.”

Oscar immediately asked a kid working in the ice house to transfer the signs from his pickup to Tony’s. “And all of the stakes,” Tony added to the kid’s instructions.

“Well, we got what we needed, let’s go before it gets any hotter outside, I suggested.

“I told you to keep your mouth shut,” Tony replied.

He then turns to Cousin Oscar. “It’s going to be hot out there putting up those signs.”

“What do you want? You were going to do it anyway.”

“A case of cold beer would make it tolerable.”

Cousin Oscar hesitated only a moment before saying, “All right.” He then turned to the ice house attendant and instructed him to put a case of beer and a bag of ice in the ice chest in Tony’s pickup truck.

“And a case for José,” added Tony. “He helps me a lot.”

“OK.” “Put two cases of beer in Tony’s pickup.”

We said goodbye to Cousin Oscar and got in the pickup truck.

“What for?”

“To dump those Railroad Commissioner’s signs. It’s too hot out there for you to be putting up two sets of signs. Besides, we don’t have enough stakes for both candidates.”

One Saturday morning Tony showed up at my ranch in a brand new pickup truck. At about the same time that he showed up, my wife asked me to get her about half a dozen cottontail rabbits, and she would fix them for us in garlic sauce since all of the meat in the freezer was frozen solid. I had a brand new Ruger semi-automatic .22 caliber rifle with a telescopic sight, just perfect for rabbit hunting.

“Bring your new rifle and get in my new truck so that I can show it to you while we look for cottontails,” he offered. I got on the passenger side, and his son, A.W., jumped in the back.

We had only gone about 50 yards before he spotted a cottontail just ahead on his side of the pickup. I opened the door on the passenger side, got off and drew a bead on the rabbit. It was an easy shot to the head, but unbelievably, the bullet went high, hitting about six inches above the rabbit.

“You went high. Haven’t you sighted that damned scope?”

“I sighted it yesterday at the rifle range. I got it dead center.”

“Well bring it down and try again.”

The little rabbit hadn't moved, so this time I aimed a few inches below the head and squeezed off another shot.

“You're even higher. Bring it down!”

I tried again. “You're still high. Bring it down!”

Six times I shot at that rabbit, and six times I missed high. It seemed that the lower I aimed, the higher the path of the bullet.

“Dad, he's shooting up your new truck,” screamed my brother-in-law.

Sure enough, I was shooting over the hood of Tony's new pickup, and each shot opened up a four-inch gash on the gleaming surface of the hood and pushed the bullet up. The more I towered the rifle, the bigger the gash and the higher the trajectory of the bullet.

Tony got out of the truck and looked at the front of his new pickup truck. I was glad that we were 50 yards from the house because I wouldn't want my wife or the kids to hear what he had to say about me, or what he suggested that I do with my new rifle.

Tony Tobin passed away on July 3, 1985, leaving a big void in the lives of his family and friends. His passing also left a big void throughout South Texas where his pickup is no longer seen going along the highway with an ice chest full of cold beer and a package of loaded ribs.