

# The Hippo Legacy in Hutto

By Mike Fowler

Updated: February 15, 2025 (World Hippo Day is every year on February 15th)

Just about everywhere that one goes and mentions that they are from Hutto, Texas; the typical response is: "Oh, the Hutto Hippos!" Hutto is most widely known for its high school mascot - the hippopotamus. So much so, that all of the schools within the Hutto Independent School District have the hippo as their unifying mascot and the school website is even [www.hipponation.org](http://www.hipponation.org) The people of the Hutto community have mostly and enthusiastically embraced our massive hippo uniqueness and local hippo haters are hard to find these days.



*2013 large wall mural by artist, Suzzana Huser on the south side of the Widmer building located along US Highway 79 at 101 East Street in old town Hutto. (2014 photo by Mike Fowler)*

Through time, tradition and branding, the hippopotamus or "river horse" as it translates from Latin to English, has become forever connected to Hutto, Texas.

## The Hippo legend begins in 1915...

I love this story a lot and am responsible for the great majority of the research and writing behind its creation. This story is by far the most popular and best liked local hippo legend, which begins in 1915 when a circus train stopped at the depot station in Hutto to take on passengers, pick up and deliver mail and possibly take on water and fuel for the steam locomotive. The circus train workers also would have obviously taken this opportunity to care for their animals. At some point during this

historic layover, a hippopotamus got out of its railcar and made its escape to the nearby Cottonwood Creek which flowed beneath the railroad tracks just to the east of the then Hutto Railroad Depot.



*Advertisement for the Barnes and Sells-Floto Combined Circus that featured a woman sitting atop a hippopotamus. Many traveling circus troupes incorporated hippos into their shows during these early circus days.*



*Another of many hippo circus references is this photograph of a hippo outside next to a train from the Harry Ransom Center Collection at the University of Texas at Austin.*

**This escape of the hippo into Cottonwood Creek caused much consternation among the circus workers. Local farmers and merchants watched the commotion in amusement and with interest as unsuccessful efforts were made to extricate the hippopotamus from the muddy waters of Cottonwood Creek. The Depot Agent, who at that time was Hal Farley, Jr., allegedly telegraphed the communities of Taylor and Round Rock that were eight miles to the east and west of Hutto with the message: “STOP TRAINS, HIPPO LOOSE IN HUTTO.” After much effort, the circus hippo was prodded from the mud and water that resembled its natural habitat in Africa and was reloaded back onto its circus train car. Soon afterward, the Hutto School adopted the hippopotamus as its mascot and as early as 1923 hippo illustrations appeared on official Hutto High School graduation announcements. Hutto, Texas is the only community in the entire United States with the Hippo as our official mascot.**

**The initial source of this legend appeared in a very brief article of October 20, 1979 from the Corsicana Daily Sun which reported of the 1915 hippo escape from the circus train and provided some level of validity to the legend. When he was alive, Hutto local hippo aficionado, Mahlon Arnett, long maintained the possibility of the circus train story that I had written. Mahlon also did extensive research and authored several articles to establish that this was indeed - the hippo story. Numerous elected officials, Hutto school superintendents, coaches, teachers, students, and many other locals have long repeated the story of the great hippo escape at Cottonwood Creek.**

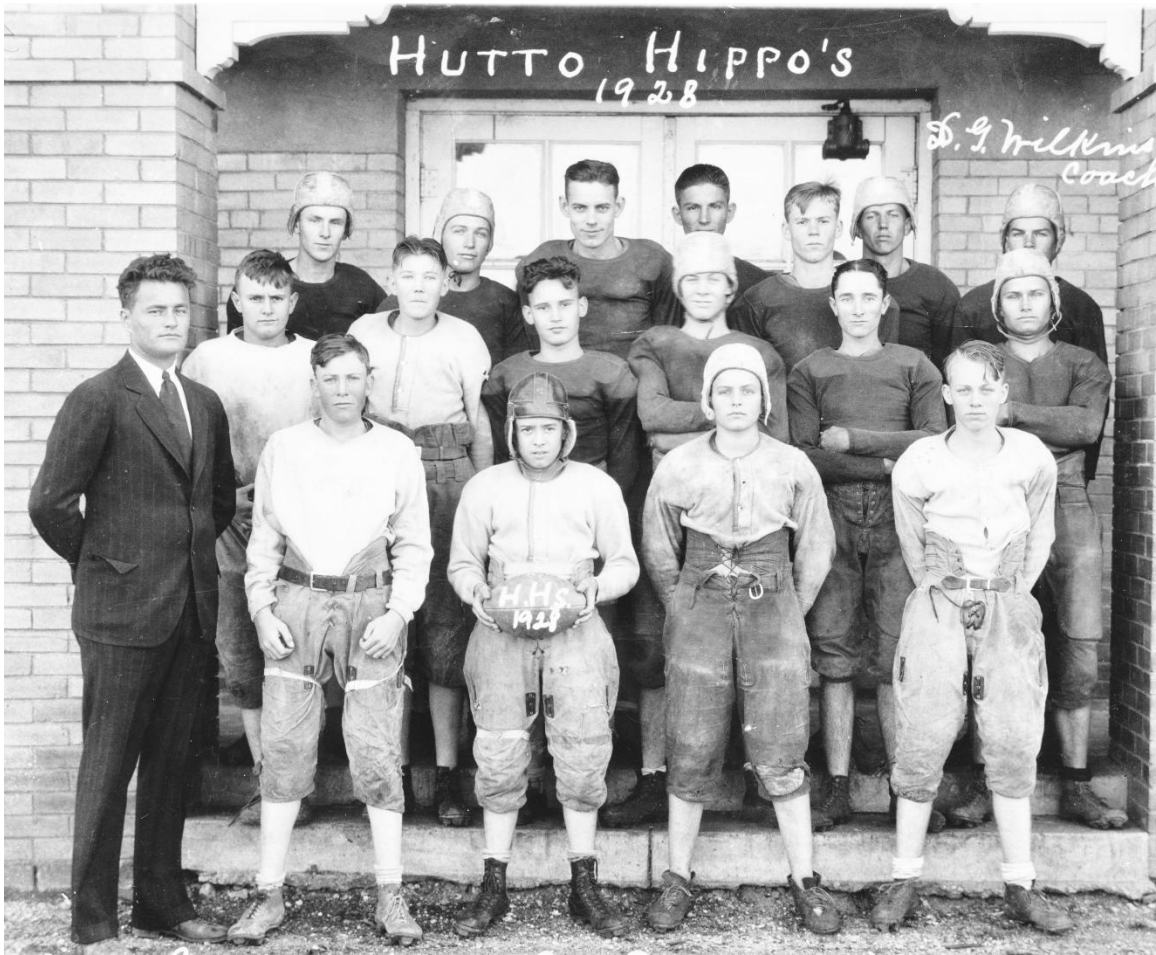
**Also, Daniel Brett of Hutto, did some remarkably interesting and detailed additional research and sent me the following: “Here is some information I found doing some online research on circuses in the area around 1915 and possible Hutto connections:**

- Sells-Floto Circus., while the advertisement was from an El Paso paper, but according to the circus route sites I find, it came to Waco on October 23rd, Temple 24th, Hearne, 30th, and Austin 31st during 1912, note the mention of a Baby Hippo in the advertisement.**
- The Yankee-Robinson circus came to Taylor on October 10, 1916, Cameron the 6th, Rosebud the 7th, Rockdale on the 9th, Georgetown on the 11th, Bartlett on the 12th.**
- Ringling Bros. was in Taylor on September 25, 1913 and September 27, 1917; and in the area of Waco, Temple, Austin on Oct 6, 7, 8 in 1915.”**

## **If it acts like a hippo and looks like a hippo - it might just be a hippo ...**

**According to local historian Mike Fowler, there are also numerous alternate stories and possibilities about the beginnings of the unique Hutto mascot that he has heard of over his five decades in Hutto.**

**One such story is that when the big Swedish and German boys of Hutto were playing their smaller foes in football, the visiting coach exclaimed: “We can’t beat those boys, they’re big as hippos!” The hippopotamus can also be an extremely aggressive animal and it kills more people in Africa than any other mammal except for humans.**



*Even though his picture of a ragamuffin 1928 Hutto Hippos football team coached by D. T. Williams may add a little credence with “hippo look alike” reference supported in the story below. These seventeen football players could still be wearing the “hand me down” uniforms from Southwestern University in Georgetown. The Hutto High School class of 1928 only had sixteen graduating seniors, so it is presumed that many of these players were underclassmen.*

**Another story, also based on the early days of Hutto gridiron lore, is that these Hutto football teams had no real jerseys and wore feed sacks for their uniforms. Again, it was an opposing coach who allegedly remarked that the football team looked like “a bloat of hippos” in their makeshift outfits. This would have been especially true if the young Hutto men were playing in wet conditions on their muddy Blackland prairie football field. It was also stated by then student and later local historian, Hugh S. Davenport that Hutto did not have football uniforms until 1925 when the then Superintendent, W. E. Gattis secured “hand me down” uniforms from Southwestern University in Georgetown.**

## **Hippodrome of Hutto ...**

During the early 1900's, after the 1902 fire, downtown Hutto had its own outdoor Hippodrome Theater located on the east side of East Street, where outdoor movies were shown as well as our own indoor Opera House located where the current Hutto Chamber of Commerce building sits at East and Farley Streets. Perhaps the Hutto Hippodrome name could have played a role in the naming of our local mascot.

## **Hippodrome of Waco ...**

A much larger and more famed Hippodrome, the Waco Hippodrome Theater, which opened on February 7, 1914, has been the location for a mixed bill of road shows, vaudeville tours, movies and local talent shows and events. With its ornate domed ceiling, gold leaf trim and proscenium arch, the Waco Hippodrome is still an architectural treasure of Texas. The Theater has received designation as a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark, and is listed on the National Registry of Historic Places. This theater was significant to the Central Texas area, and it is also possible that this could also have been an inspiration for the naming of our mascot.

## **Hippo Soda Water of San Antonio ...**

Another hippo hypothesis that is interesting is that the naming of the Hutto mascot was influenced by the "Hippo Size Soda Water" carbonated drinks that were patented on November 2, 1926 and distributed all over the San Antonio and Austin areas. This unique sixteen-ounce soda bottle was issued by the San Antonio Bottling Company and was embossed with a hippo and the words "Hippo Size Soda Water". This extra-large soda product sold for five cents a bottle mainly in central and south Texas. Today, hippo soda bottles, cases and associated memorabilia are highly sought after by antique bottle collectors. Maybe ... Hutto's mascot choice was somehow influenced the name of this hippo soda!

## **Heartfelt enough to appear in her obituary ...**

Another much more likely version of the Hutto Hippo origin was related by Evelyn Belle "Effie" Carrington (Hutto Class of 1931) Jacobsen who thought this information was important enough to include in her own obituary in 2008. Evelyn wrote that a young fellow student, Jim Holman, at a school assembly in 1927 called for the official mascot of the Hutto School to be the hippo and it was passed by acclamation with no opposition. While no such school record exists, this story probably formalized our mascot name and did happen. It is also possible that young Jim's motion could have even been based on the circus hippo escape of twelve years earlier in that the hippo first appeared on Hutto High School graduation announcements as early as 1923. Local deceased historian, Hugh S. Davenport (Hutto Class of 1926) strongly believed the Jim Holman story as did deceased Betty Sue

**Blackman (Hutto Class of 1949) Holmstrom, the author of the 2000 book, Hutto & Hippos. Both could be true!**



*James Higgins Holman was born on May 27, 1914 and died December 2, 1971. Jim Holman graduated from Hutto High School in the Class of 1931 and was the Mayor of Hutto from April 1954 until April 1958. Mayor Jim Holman was inspired by then Hutto School Superintendent Noel Grisham who had promoted the city water system purchase and building of our first city sewer plant. Holman helped to bring sewer to the City of Hutto in 1956 after the city had purchased the water works system from Charlie Hanstrom. Jim Holman was involved in a farming partnership and was a son of the first Mayor of Hutto, Willis D. Holman, who was elected in 1911 when the City of Hutto was first incorporated. (Courtesy of Holman family Collection)*

## Henrietta the Hippo...and others



*2014 photograph of Henrietta the Hippo on the east side of East Street in historic downtown Hutto. This photo was taken after recent landscaping efforts. Many thousands of people have had their photographs taken with Henrietta. (2014 photo by Mike Fowler)*

**It was back in September of 1992 that the Hutto Chamber of Commerce; much through the efforts of Murray McDonald and Josh Richards, purchased and brought Henrietta the Hippo, a 14,000 plus pound concrete statue on a trailer from Double D Statuary, in Sinton, Texas. Henrietta the Hippo stands proudly in a small 17-foot-wide City of Hutto alley that was near where many of the then downtown Hutto buildings on the east side of East Street were destroyed by fire in 1902.**

**Later, after the current City Hall located at 500 West Live Oak Street in the Hutto Co-op District was dedicated on May 2, 2019, City public works employees acquired a Henrietta hippo mold and cast their own large concrete hippo that was later painted following a design contest. That hippo stands guard in front of City Hall. Other similar large concrete hippos are located throughout Hutto. Beautiful bronze hippos are within a splash pad area of the Co-op district.**

**Many more unique hippo statues have been created and painted by artist and local business owner of *Set in Stone Statuary*, Greg Ray. Greg has done a brilliant job specializing in creating hippo statuary for Hutto, Texas. You can view some of his detailed work at [www.setinstonestatuary.com](http://www.setinstonestatuary.com)**

Another renown local artist and sculptor, Elizabeth Bonura of *Bonura Studios* also has sculpted numerous hippos and created wonderful works of art. Some of her work can be seen at [www.bonurastudios.com](http://www.bonurastudios.com)



*Another Henrietta the Hippo, the official mascot of Hutto High School, at a Chamber of Commerce appearance in 2005. It is an honor to be selected to be the student that is inside of the hippo costume. Various versions of this mascot have made appearances, mostly at Hutto school events such as pep rallies, athletic events, band performances, and school assemblies. Our Hippo is one of the most recognized and top mascots in the State of Texas and the United States of America even havng achieved international attention through news articles. (2005 Photo by Mike Fowler)*

## More Hippos of Hutto ...

*Hippos Unlimited* was at one time a 501C3 non-profit organization, now disbanded and DBA “Hutto Hippos” that stated its primary purpose to be: “to advertise and promote the Hutto community in a positive manner through the use of its primary identifier, the hippopotamus.”

The original *Hippos Unlimited* group, primarily consisting of Rose and Troy McMillin, Mike and Donna Fowler, and John Stern with help from others was began in the fall of 2001 and successfully accomplished the following:

- Promoted hippos everywhere in our community.
- Brought in over a thousand concrete hippos in various sizes that are located throughout the Hutto community and beyond. Some of the most visible and numerous examples are the large 725-pound hippos shown below. These concrete hippos are now sold by the Hutto Chamber of Commerce.



*The first of many large hippo orders and deliveries to Hutto was organized by Mike Fowler. This first delivery was assisted by Josh Richards through the use of his land and equipment to unload the large concrete hippos from Double D Statuary of Sinton, Texas. (2002 photo by Mike Fowler)*

- Mike Fowler got the State of Texas Legislature via former State Representative Mike Krusse to officially declare by resolution that Hutto is the official “*Hippo Capitol of Texas.*”
- Mike Fowler also got two Official Resolutions adopted by the City of Hutto declaring Hutto to officially become “*Hippo, Texas*” for the Olde Tyme Days weekend and the second resolution recognizing and honoring the Hutto Hippos.
- In 2003 Hippos Unlimited via Mike Fowler paid an artist for the use of his artwork for “*Hutto Hippos*”, *Hippos Unlimited* and within the “*Hutto Hippos*” with the Williamson County Clerk's Office including exclusive artwork and graphics below.



- Mike Fowler has written extensively about the history of the Hutto Hippos and branding of the Hutto Hippos for the community in many newspapers and magazines.
- Mike Fowler has donated one life-sized fiberglass hippo to Hutto High School. This hippo was created by Jerry Post of “Everything Fiberglass” of Bertram, Texas. Mr. Post was paid to produce this statue and four others; however, this was the only one that he completed before he died.
- Mike Fowler donated sixteen large concrete hippos to the Hutto Independent School District.
- Mike Fowler donated ten large concrete hippos to the City of Hutto.
- Mike Fowler donated sixty Hutto Hippo flags and panels to the Schools, City and Community including sending one to Zambia and one with our troops to Iraq.

- Sponsored or co-sponsored several community-wide painted hippo contests with prizes.
- Co-Sponsored with *Everything Hippo*, the 2008 Hippo Calendar that benefited the Hutto Independent School District band program.
- Worked with the world's first ever brick and mortar hippo store, *Everything Hippo*, owned by Robbi and Mahlon Arnett. When *Everything Hippo* was in operation the Arnett family did everything they could to promote the hippopotamus and community.
- Mike Fowler produced various hippo tee shirts, signs and many other hippo related products and items.
- Sponsored a hippo food and beverage themed Hutto Chamber of Commerce mixer event.
- Secured *Hippo Golf* as the primary prize sponsor of the first annual Hutto Chamber of Commerce Golf Tournament.
- Participated in numerous Hutto Olde Tyme Days and community events.
- Achieved coverage through press releases and articles for Hutto utilizing the hippo brand on a local, regional, state, national and an international level.
- Established a small *Hippo Museum* in 2007-2009 at the Chamber of Commerce; however, we are in search of a new, larger, and permanent location. Some items are currently in storage by the City of Hutto.
- Helped arrange for six life-sized metal hippo silhouette sculptures for Hejl, Lee and Associates from salvaged metal materials from historic Hutto Co-op property. In May of 2011, I repainted the six hippos to silver to be reflective of the Co-op look. The metal hippos are currently displayed in our downtown parking area off of East Street and Pecan Street by the City of Hutto.
- Acquired the hippomobile, Harmony, which has been used in parades, area, and community events. The hippo car appeared in the 2008, 2009 and 2010 Hutto Olde Tyme celebrations and parade was displayed as well to promote local businesses. In 2010, Harmony the Hippo Car was repainted from purple to orange. In May of 2011, the Hutto Hippo Car made history by participating in the 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Houston Art Car Parade of the Orange Show Foundation to the delight of approximately 300,000 parade watchers. Since 2021 the now grey Line-X coated hippo car renamed Hermes and is now privately owned by Billy Gartner.
- I have long worked with *Hippolotofus*, the International Hippo Lovers group, via Sue Shefman, Stuart Feldman, Alan Frank, and many other of its members. In the fall of 2002 and for Hutto Old Time Days in the fall of 2015 Hippolotofus came to Hutto for their annual convention. Check this group out at [www.hippos.com](http://www.hippos.com) Alan Frank wrote and directed, produced, *In Pursuit of Hipponess*, a feature length movie on hippos and Hippolotofus. Alan generously donated a copy to the City of Hutto, the Hutto Independent School District and the Hutto Chamber of Commerce in 2024 for their not-for-profit use through Mike Fowler. *Hippolotofus* is currently working with the Hutto Chamber of Commerce towards establishing a hippo museum in Hutto.
- Have promoted identity tourism through the use of the hippopotamus on a consistent basis.



*Donna Fowler in the Hutto Middle School parking lot dressed as the 'Mad Hatter' prior to a Hutto Parade in 2011. People still often see and take pictures of the hippomobile as it is driven around Hutto and Central Texas. (2011 Photo by Mike Fowler)*

## Hippo Good ...

Our hippos have proven to be great public relations especially for our schools, as well as for our community, tourism, Hutto Chamber of Commerce, economic development, and our local businesses. Our hippo branding has assisted in not only our community building and identity, but even in national and international recognition for our city and schools. We are known everywhere as the Hutto Hippos. In December of 1999, our Girls' Volleyball "Lady Hippos" were the first and only team to ever win a State Championship for Hutto High School. To many, Hutto Olde Tyme Days has also become known as the Hippo Fest and was at one time was promoted as such by the Hutto Chamber of Commerce. It is amazing just how many businesses have utilized the hippo as part of their business and their advertisement. In more recent years, the Hutto Chamber of Commerce has taken over the sale of

concrete hippos and other hippo-based items. In February of 2019, Scott and Stacie Feller opened the *Hippo Café*, one of many community businesses utilizing our hippo-based theme. Hutto has really just scratched the surface of some of the incredible hippo stories within our community and I surmise that many more will be told in coming years. Still, just looking around our community today, it is really hard not to smile at our many unique hippos and the great pride that we take in them.

## **The Hippo Challenge ...**

Is simply ... to just keep the Hippo Movement going! We have hippos, hippos everywhere ... and should continue to utilize the power of the hippo and create new, different, and better ways of taking advantage of our special mascot and unique branding. Hutto could and should have a large Hutto Hippos Museum, Hippo Trails in our parks, and God forbid the world's largest hippo statue as an immense tourist and local draw.

Many years ago, forementioned local resident and businessman Mahlon Arnett authored an outstanding article that he published in his periodic magazine, *The Hutto Business Update*, "*What's with all the Hippos?*" that in part stated: "Hutto is already self-branded with the hippo, and we should make the most of it. The hippo is Hutto's natural brand just because of this uniqueness. Wherever we go and mention Hutto, people who have never been to central Texas often know we are the hippos. Let us preserve our past and build our future with the heritage retention that is presented through the redevelopment and reclamation of the CO-OP property and downtown. It is time to create libraries, museums, heritage centers and art in public places. In Hutto it is clear that Hippos and heritage do go together. The possibilities are endless... our brand could result in a Healthy Hippo Festival, a water park, a cook-off, gift shops,... just to name just a few ideas. Let is not only take pride in our identifier, but use it to its fullest potential to promote community pride, heritage, uniqueness, economic development and most especially tourism."

Whatever the story is for the actual basis for our Hippo mascot; Hutto is the only School District and the only community in the United States to have the Hippo as its primary identifier. The Hippos provide Hutto a uniqueness like none other; Hutto and Hippo are synonymous to the degree that when people "You say Hutto, we say Hippo." While the widespread and most popular circus legend of how Hutto became the hippos ... might not even be completely true ... we are undeniably, the Hutto Hippos!

Now, and every year forward, February 15<sup>th</sup> is established as "*World Hippo Day*" on this special day following Valentine's Day, our special community has even more to celebrate and appreciate with our unique identifier. Check it out at [www.worldhippoday.com](http://www.worldhippoday.com)

Now, the next time someone asks you about the Hutto Hippos, you can share absolutely way more than they may ever really want to know about our genuinely great mascot, the Hippo. Go Hippo Nation!



*Mike Fowler is a local historian and an author of The Capitol Story: Statehouse in Texas; Hutto Lutheran Church: A Century of Community Faith, Images of America Hutto and other books and publications. He is also a retired State of Texas employee with twenty-five years who also served for twenty-five years as Councilman and Mayor of the City of Hutto. Mike is known as the pro-growth “Hippo Mayor” who secured long-term water and purchased the CO-OP site for the City of Hutto among many other pro Hutto accomplishments. Mike is also a licensed real estate broker and owns TEX US Real Estate and has a degree in government from the University of Texas at Austin. Mike can be reached by e-mail at [mfowler16@austin.rr.com](mailto:mfowler16@austin.rr.com) or [mikefowlertexas@gmail.com](mailto:mikefowlertexas@gmail.com) or call at 512-736-2000. This is original research by Mike Fowler and the information therein is for public - not for profit use - provided that the information and materials are properly credited to Mike Fowler. Also be certain to properly credit any additional sources cited in the above material.*