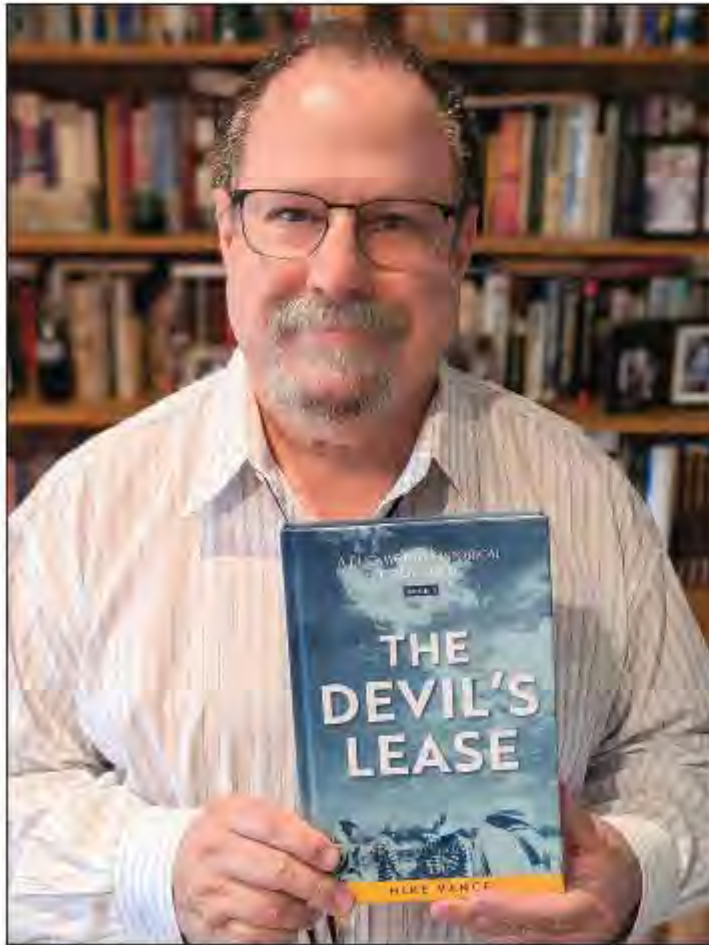


Fort Bend author pens book with Wharton connection



Mike Vance

By AL DUBÉ

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The devil is in the details and author Mike Vance's new book, *The Devil's Lease*, details a fictional retelling of true events surrounding sugar plantations, Sugar Land, and a trial change of venue that wound up in the Wharton County courthouse.

Born in Houston, Vance grew up in East Fort Bend County and graduated from Dulles High School in 1976. At the time, Dulles was the only high school in that county.

"I was supposed to be class of '77, but I was in a hurry to get out of there so, I took summer courses and Algebra II in a correspondence course from Texas Tech," Vance said. "I graduated a year early."

Vance attended the University of Texas studying history and government, but did not pursue his studies as a career. For about 20 years he did stand-up comedy, voice acting and a little professional writing. At one point, he pitched a regional history television show to a general manager at a

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television station where he worked - they went for it and he was back on the history track of his college studies.

"I ended up writing a bunch of nonfiction books, but always wanted to get into fiction. I did a couple of books, my first two novels were baseball related and were things that I had started a long time ago," Vance said, "I finally finished them up."

The Devil's Lease grew out of one or more of the nonfiction books he wrote. Texas Monthly writer John Nova Lomax, a friend of Vance's, talked him into doing a true crime book with him, an historic book set in Houston.

Collaborating with Lomax, the two split up legal cases and Vance did the earlier, World War II era stories. The authors got good feedback on the historical novel.

"During the course of doing that book, I ran across this lawyer, and the more I started looking into him, I thought he warranted a book of his own," Vance said.

Vance turned the lawyer in question into a main character in the Devil's Lease - J.B. Duckworth.

"He was a lawyer that was sometimes on the edge of the law himself, just a fascinating guy," Vance said.

Devil's Lease deals with the history of two men, Littleberry Ellis and Ed Cunningham, both of whom owned a plantation that encompassed almost all of Sugar Land. The plantation was located where Fort Bend ISD discovered an historic cemetery at their construction site in 2018.

"[Convict leasing] was a system that came about right after the Civil War because the state was broke," Vance said, "They

tried a couple of times, different deals that didn't work out well, but the third attempt, and basically what this was was, they privatized the prison system - the entirety of the prison system."

Vance said he learned a lot about the Texas Department of Corrections and the leasing of prisoners in the state.

"Out of the entire prison system, which had a population of 3,000 to 4,000 inmates, roughly half of them were leased out," Vance said, "And, they actually charged more for black convicts than they did white convicts, with the understanding that the black convicts were going to be worked harder and [for] longer hours."

Vance consulted old documents and Sanborn insurance maps, discovering that the old sugar plantation encompassed property roughly from Hwy. 6 almost all the way to the Brazos River.

"So, that's where the murders take place. There are a couple of trials in the book and one of them takes place in Richmond and one of them takes place in Wharton, because they moved [the trial] on a change of venue," Vance said.

Vance's book makes use of some of his other Wharton County stories. He's familiar with a lot of the history, but he still came back to the county courthouse for more information.

"Research is a constant thing for me. And, I'm one of those people, because I come from a history background first, I spend a lot of time digging around to find the answers," Vance said.

Vance's book Devil's Lease and others are available at his website www.mikevancewriter.com.