

# Amazon.com founder has plans for massive clock in West Texas

By DANE SCHILLER | Houston Chronicle | Posted: Monday, August 19, 2013 10:15 pm

SIERRA DIABLO - Sheathed in a 500-foot deep silo bored into a mountain rising from this rugged stretch of West Texas is a wildly ambitious project to build a massive clock that would tick for 100 centuries.

The clock is not just a dream. Construction is well underway, and being bankrolled by Jeff Bezos, the wealthy founder of amazon.com who recently agreed to buy The Washington Post.

He's a secretive man worth billions. And he is spending millions on this quest.

Bezos, 49, envisions the 10,000 Year Clock as a symbol to get people thinking about where mankind is headed, and what they'd like to accomplish with their lives.

There is no date set for when the clock will be complete, but Bezos has said when it is done it will be open to the public.

The pilgrimage would require a purposely tough hike to reach the monument-like clock's entrance via a cave. Visitors would then climb stairs that lead up and around the clock, and exit through a hole in the mountain's summit.

If the clock is even 300 feet tall it would be on the order of London's Big Ben, only inside a mountain instead of beside a palace in London.

Call him eccentric, crazy, or visionary, but also call him ambitious.

Ten thousand years is longer than Egypt's pyramids, England's Stonehenge or China's Great Wall have been around - and those marvels that have captivated man don't even have moving parts.

"Trying to have something work for that long is really amazing," said Ned Thomas, Rice University's dean of engineering. "What the hell is going to happen in 10,000 years? There may not even be humans hanging out here."

About 10,000 years ago, humans in Texas were coming out of the Ice Age, wearing animal skins and sharing the brush lands with mastodons, bison and armadillos the size of a Volkswagen.

The newest invention was the atlatl, a device for launching spears or darts.

The timepiece may be partially shielded from the wraths of man and nature by its dry, remote location - 150 miles east of El Paso - in the Sierra Diablo, Spanish for the Devil's Mountain Range.

This is a place where everything seems to have thorns, stingers or poisonous venom.

Walking or even riding a horse through country that looks like rattlesnake paradise might be forbidding, but maybe the sky overhead brings the true appeal for Bezos. The sun could hardly look bigger, and the crisp night-time sky, so far from city lights, offers an awe-inspiring look at the galaxy.

Bezos, a self-described nerd and Star Trek fan, has also launched a company, Blue Origin, that uses the wide-open skies here to develop a spacecraft. The idea is to one day offer safe, affordable commercial travel to everyday people.

Bezos is reportedly putting up \$42 million for the project.

The clock was first the dream of Danny Hillis, an inventor, scientist and engineer who now leads the board of the Long Now Foundation in California. With Bezos' funding, Long Now is spearheading the effort to make the clock a reality.

Despite Bezos' many adventures, going back to River Oaks Elementary where he tapped into the Houston school's mainframe computer, in these parts he's known as a land baron. He is the largest land owner in Culberson County, where he has 300,000 acres including the clock site, and another 100,000 in neighboring Hudspeth County, according to records.

The patch that includes the clock was bought by Bezos in 2006. Construction began about three years ago, but most of the work is underground and shielded from view.

The land has been snapped up in purchases large and small that are tucked away in records under company names that include explorers from hundreds of years ago: James Cook, Cabot Enterprises, Joliet Holdings, Coronado Ventures, Marquette Holdings.

You'd be hard pressed to find his name on any of the documents, but that falls in line with a reputation for secrecy that Bezos has forged in these parts.

"As far as what is going on, we don't know," said Maricel "Chello" Gonzalez, head of the Culberson Appraisal District, where many of the records are kept.

Bezos' base is the historic Figure 2 Ranch, which includes postcard worthy peaks and sits along the two-lane State Highway 54.

No trespassing signs are posted outside the main gate of the ranch, which was founded in 1900 and is surrounded by barbed wire fences, and said to be protected by cameras.

There's also a state historical marker that notes the Texas Rangers had among their last battles with the Apache Indians there.

On a recent morning, what appeared to be heavy equipment atop the clock mountain could be seen from the ranch entrance.

Pick-up trucks pulled into the ranch during a 20-minute period and headed down a caliche road toward a compound of several buildings, including sleeping quarters for workers, a dining hall and fuel tanks.

Those who have worked with Bezos are generally tight lipped, as they say they have signed non-disclosure agreements.

“Jeff Bezos is very private. He has done what he is doing his own way,” said Lyndon McDonald, a volunteer firefighter, retired probation officer and former county commissioner.

The firefighters have a “hand and glove” working relationship with Bezos’ team, McDonald said, and he’s helped the department get some needed equipment.

“They are very down to earth, and I think sincere in what they are doing out there,” he said.

Bezos and Amazon did not respond to Houston Chronicle requests to discuss the clock. In a 2012 interview produced by Amazon, Bezos said the clock symbolizes long-term thinking.

“If we think long-term, we can accomplish things we otherwise could not accomplish,” Bezos said.

“We humans are getting awfully sophisticated in technological ways and have a lot of potential to be very dangerous to ourselves,” he continued. “And it seems that we as a species are going to have to start thinking long term, and so this is a symbol, and I think a symbol can be very powerful.”

Some marvel at his dream, and hope the clock will one day bring some support to the nearest town, struggling Van Horn, with a population of 2,200.

About 38 percent of residents live in poverty. Finding a good paying job is about as tough as finding a shade tree.

Streets are dotted with crumbling homes, closed businesses, and even the Boys & Girls Club is on the verge of having to shut its doors over money.

Some locals wonder what makes Bezos tick, and want him to behave more like Bill Gates, of Microsoft, and share some financial love.

“This is a very poor town, a poor county,” said County Commissioner Gilda Morales. “There is a lot of blight, a lot of need,” Morales continued. “We would like him to be a good neighbor, he can afford it. How about a little endowment?”

Bezos has bought several homes in town and had them refurbished for his workers.

Heradio Luna, an 83-year-old retired school teacher, has seen many changes and outsiders come through here. He doesn’t think too many Van Horn residents will make the trek to visit the clock,

but hopes it draws tourists.

“I can’t see the reason behind it,” Luna said. “Whatever endeavor he is planning, I hope it works for him - anything that will bring business to Van Horn. To get over there, they will have to come through here.”

As Bezos looks to the future, Luna and others in Van Horn have sought to not let people forget the past.

Luna built intricate miniature replicas of how the town used to be, from the long-gone courthouse, to the silent movie theater, to a school once segregated for Hispanic kids.

He’s part of an effort to restore the century-old Clark Hotel Historical Museum, where remnants of those who have lived here before are displayed.

Bezos has apparently never been to the museum, but when one of the walls was crumbling a few years ago, his company Blue Origin donated \$5,000 to fix it, said Patricia Golden, the museum’s curator.

“He wants his privacy, and we give it to him,” she said of Bezos and his clock.

Luna wonders what might happen over the centuries as the clock ticks in the mountain and Van Horn and the rest of the world marches on.

“People will probably be flying place to place, there won’t be any cars or trucks or anything,” he said of the prospects for 10,000 years into the future. “A totally different way of doing things and dealing with people.”

Randolph Widmer, a University of Houston professor of anthropology, said it would be folly to predict that far into the future.

“We just can’t imagine how life will be,” he said, noting all the changes that have come about in just the last 100 years. “To me, it is beyond science fiction trying to figure out how things will be 10,000 years from now.”