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Main Avenue, Bryan.

DOWNTOWN BRYAN

Remaking the Past in Search of the Future



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Historic storefronts on Main Avenue, Bryan. The First National Bank (1919) is at the right.

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Bryan owes its existence to the Houston & Texas Central Railroad, whose surveyor, Theodore Kosse, platted a townsite on land donated by William Joel Bryan in 1859. The rectilinear layout of the town was typical of Kosse's plans for a series of towns on the route north from Houston. In Bryan, though, he elaborated on his usual layout, designing a park site around the proposed railroad station, a courthouse square, and sites for a school and a Methodist church.

Citizens of nearby Boonville, established during the period of the Republic of Texas (1836-45) as Brazos County's first county seat, recognized the importance of the rail connection and bought lots in the new town.¹ In Bryan, as in so much of Texas, history has been driven by a fierce individual entrepreneurial spirit. Businessmen chose building locations not necessarily according to a town plan but where they thought the most money was to be made.² Accordingly, the citizenry voted in 1866 to move the county seat from Boonville to Bryan, anticipating the first train, which arrived in August 1867 to a gala celebration.

Early photographs of downtown Bryan show it to be typical of many late-19th-century frontier towns: wide streets lined with single-story wooden structures housing livery stables, general mercantile stores, saloons (reputedly two on every block in Bryan), and Guy M. Bryan's money-lending institution, precursor to the First National Bank. As the new century approached, brick structures began to replace the original wooden buildings, often two-story with fine detailing, cast-iron elements, and sidewalk canopies.

A 1900 photograph shows telegraph lines and street lights suspended along the middle of Main Avenue. A Carnegie library was built in 1903, designed by F. E. Geisecke, an architect and faculty member at the Agricultural & Mechanical College of Texas. Bryanites had successfully lobbied for the new college to be built in Brazos County, promising both money and land. The school, established in 1871, was purposely located a prudent four and one-half miles south of Bryan so the young, all-male students (who first arrived in 1876) would not be tempted by the many opportunities available in the metropolis of Bryan.

The first two decades of the 20th century brought a flourishing economy, based on the successful and internationally prized Brazos cotton. New office and bank buildings appeared, as well as St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Temple Freda, and, in 1927, the eight-story La Salle Hotel. Neighborhoods filled with grand houses. In spite of the depressed national economy, the First State Bank and Trust Company constructed an Art Déco building on Main Street, and the City of Bryan completed a similarly styled municipal building for its city offices and fire department.

World War II added to the area's economic strength with the Bryan Air Base, where air crews by the hundreds were trained. Just prior to the beginning of the war, College Station changed from being the name of a post office to that of an incorporated city. Even with the post-war boom in enrollment at the college, there was little concern that Bryan would be overtaken by College Station as the commercial hub of the region.

As late as the early 1960s, downtown Bryan was full of shoppers. Drug stores with soda fountains and lunch counters abounded, and merchandise of all kinds could be selected from lively, competing establishments. The Palace, Queen, and Dixie theaters were all in operation, and on weekends downtown was as busy as it was at mid-week. Local residents were served by food stores of all kinds, including the legendary Humpty Dumpty Stoop-no-More Grocery, founded in 1924. Woolworth's modernized Main Street by demolishing several 19th-century buildings in the mid-1960s to make way for its new department store.

However, change was coming. The improved county road system and the post-war economy made the car ubiquitous. Businessmen, as their predecessors in Boonville had done, moved to ensure prosperity, choosing new locations for the convenience of the motor vehicle, not the pedestrian. New generations of the founding families led the charge to places like the Townshire Shopping Center on Texas Avenue, the new highway that linked Bryan and College Station and carried traffic from Houston toward Waco and Dallas. Banks, car dealerships, and stores moved to the wide and wider open spaces, and more and more strip shopping centers followed the growing economy to College Station, which underwent boom growth after 1963, when the Corps of Cadets was declared a voluntary organization and (horror of horrors) women

were admitted. Texas A&M changed its name as well as its style and became a university. New residential areas grew up alongside a new east-side country club in Bryan, and the north end of Bryan became more overtly separate socially and economically. In short, the 1960s were not kind to downtown Bryan.

The elegant La Salle Hotel became a nursing home and then was abandoned. Bryan shops changed their clientele or closed altogether. Even though the courthouse (a 1950s CRS-designed replacement for the Second Empire confection of 1892 by Houston architect Eugene T. Heiner) remained in Bryan, along with the city offices and a new public library, it was on the wrong side of the tracks.

When College Station opened the 800,000-square-foot Post Oak Mall in 1982, the university exceeded 25,000 students with attendant growth in housing, entertainment centers, and even more strip shopping areas. By 1985 the fate of old commercial Bryan seemed hopeless. Yet the economic neglect and displacement that changed downtown Bryan also saved the essence of its physical fabric.

The 1976 Bicentennial of the United States reawakened a national interest in history. Government policy began to favor reuse of old buildings, and people grew hungry for the scale and humanity represented by older downtowns. While it may have been merely nostalgia, by the Texas Sesquicentennial in 1986, even Bryan was beginning to feel the change.

Merchants and business people who had remained downtown formed "Downtown Now" to dream up a future for the city. Its new young leaders approached the city for support, and by 1992 "Downtown Now" had segued into the Main Street Project, a program begun by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, with a dynamic director as a part of city government and with state support from the Texas Historical Commission. A quixotic newcomer, Reid Monroe, acquired property and began the process of renewal. He died tragically in a fall from the La Salle Hotel, but not before he had demonstrated that eating establishments, entertainment venues, and selective retail outlets could thrive in the charm of a rediscovered downtown Bryan.

The Bryan Main Street Project encouraged the city government to include the downtown area in its capital improvement plans, resulting in new "historic" street lighting, better utilities, and attention to old roads and sidewalks. The Historic Resources Survey prepared in



Schulman Palace Theater Park, Main Avenue, Bryan, The Mathes Group with David G. Woodcock, architects, 1996. This open-air amphitheater was created from sections of the Palace Theater (1919), which collapsed in 1986.

1985-86 by Marlene Elizabeth Heck helped place dozens of downtown buildings in the National Register of Historic Places and led to the designation of historic districts, although Bryan rejected zoning several times during this period.³

The Main Street Project and Bryan's Community Development Office aimed at the whole community with considerable success. Students, with cars, financial resources, and *esprit de zest*, have found the night life of downtown Bryan to their tastes. How ironic that the very students banished up the road to College Station for their moral protection are bringing about Bryan's rebirth.

The annual arts event, Festifall, attracts performers from all parts of the twin cities. In October, crowds of all ages and all walks of life throng sidewalks, and streets are barricaded for shopping, looking, eating, and listening. The old Palace Theater, whose roof collapsed one Sunday morning in 1986, is now a city-owned open-air theater with free Thursday lunchtime concerts during the spring, summer, and early fall. The Carnegie Library building is being restored and will become a community meeting place, city museum, and genealogy library. Bryan continues to work with developers and owners to provide tax credits, loan programs, and infrastructure support. A paint program supported by local merchants is giving direct assistance in return for compliance with approved color schemes and appropriate signage.⁴

Kay Conlee, a younger member of an old Bryan family, has created a wonder-world of antique shopping in the old Central Texas Hardware Building, a mecca for household goods, farm equipment, and the odd nut and bolt until it fled to a strip mall and perished. Significantly, the La Salle Hotel, opposite the Carnegie Library, is in the initial stages of rehabilitation as a high-end hotel being developed by Houstonian Morgan Hill. A gala opening is planned for October 1998.

The vision for downtown Bryan is, however, incomplete. There remains a gap between the north end of Main Avenue (anchored by the 1912 Ice House and the Corbusier Chevrolet Building, now home to a local theater company) and the 12 blocks of the Downtown Historic District at the south end. Yet, here again, entre-

preneurial spirit may prevail. The north end buildings are less dense, and that community is less affluent but thriving. The Downtown Merchants Association is alive and well, making money on the credit lines of Texas A&M students.

A drive for more parking ignores the fact that parking at Post Oak Mall, while extensive, is not adjacent to every storefront. It is activity, not open space for cars, that attracts people. The Bryan City Council sends a mixed message by supporting renewal programs while it is poised to tear down the 1930 Municipal Building, which simply needs time for a new use to emerge. The announced use of the site for parking belittles the value of that building and returns to the short-sighted internal-combustion-engine-asking era of city planning. As the Strand Historic District in Galveston proves, waiting out economic downturns may be profitable in the end. Certainly, the tide is turning for downtown Bryan. The just-opened Bush Library will bring thousands of new visitors to the region. A new and renewed mindset assumes that looking back is as interesting and exciting as looking forward.

I, for one, anticipate visits to downtown Bryan in the year 2000 that will be as exciting as they were during my first forays there in 1962. Its commercial emphasis will have changed, but its fabric will survive. Stewart Brand's recent book, *How Buildings Learn*, addresses the way buildings are inherently conservation-friendly and can easily adapt to new uses.⁵ In Bryan the need will continue for leaders who will work to retain the best of the past, while keeping a vision of the future as dynamic and determined as those of the founding fathers of the city. There seems to be plenty of evidence that downtown Bryan will thrive. ■

1. Margaret Lips van Bavel, *Birth and Death of Boonville* (Austin: Eakin Publications, 1986).

2. Glenna Foreman Brundidge, ed., *Brazos County History* (Bryan: Family History Foundation, 1986).

3. Hardy, Heck, and Moore, Inc., "Bryan Historic Resource Survey" (Austin, 1986).

4. Tom Neiderauer, "Historic Preservation Plan for Bryan" (Dallas, Neiderauer and Associates, 1989).

5. Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1994).