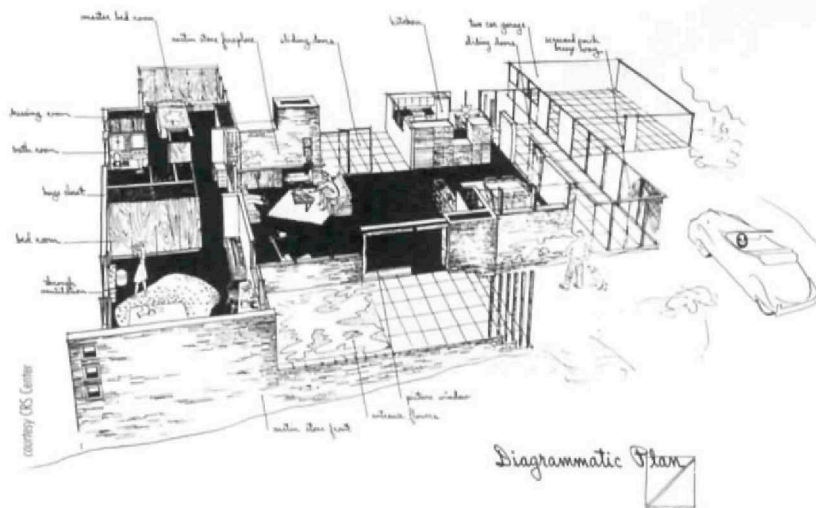




Fred Fenton House, Austin, Caudill & Rowlett, architects, 1946.

# FLYING HIGH

JAY BAKER AND BARRIE SCARDINO



Fenton House. The drawings Caudill & Rowlett produced in the 1940s had a graphic simplicity intended to make modern architecture more accessible.

In 1946, when William W. Caudill and John M. Rowlett returned to Texas from overseas duty in World War II, they pooled their muster-out pay to form an architectural partnership. With the flip of a coin, the two decided whose name would come first. Bill Caudill won. And so was set the first name of the company that, as Caudill Rowlett Scott (CRS), would one day grow into the world's largest architectural firm.

Though CRS eventually settled in Houston, it was in Bryan-College Station that it took its first steps toward becoming a self-propelled machine devoted to client service, change, and growth. The home of Texas A&M offered CRS an incubator in which a 12-year period of invention and experimentation could occur. Such CRS legacies as architectural programming, squatters, diversification, and architecture by team began to develop in College Station. The young architects forged a convergence of modern and rural sensibilities, developed both individual and team capabilities, and produced ambitious designs using hard-nosed business practices. From the start and throughout its history, CRS investigated the limits of professional practice.

Bill Caudill received his B.Arch. from Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State University) in Stillwater in 1937 and his M.Arch. from MIT in 1939. He began teaching at Texas A&M before entering

the Naval Reserves in 1943. On his return to Texas in 1946, he resumed his teaching position in College Station. John Rowlett, who had taught with Caudill at A&M before the war, received his B.Arch. from the University of Texas in 1938. He moved to Austin in 1946 to live near his family and teach part-time at the University of Texas. The firm of Caudill & Rowlett used Rowlett's sister's Austin address until it obtained a post office box and, finally, an office at 1401 1/2 Lavaca Street in Austin.

Caudill & Rowlett's initial success was due in part to the optimism and expansion that followed World War II. Yet, more to the point, the two partners, having grown up during the Great Depression, equated hard work, energy, and self-reliance with survival, growth, and success. Years later, Caudill said, "In the beginning our motto was simple: to produce good architecture, to make some money, and to have some fun doing it."<sup>1</sup>

As they began their practice together, albeit in separate cities, the two men shared an interest in school architecture. Caudill's thesis at MIT had been a long-range plan for schools in Stillwater, Oklahoma. At Texas A&M he had assigned schools as research projects to his students, focusing on such issues as lighting, ventilation, and circulation. In so doing, Caudill discovered the poor condition of schools in Texas. His research culminated





William W. Caudill House, 2313 Truman Street, Bryan, Caudill & Rowlett, architects, 1946.

## a n d F A S T

### The Genesis of CRS

in his first book, *Space for Teaching*.<sup>2</sup>

Caudill's interest in school architecture was complemented by Rowlett's double major in education and architecture. Without ever having designed a school, the pair garnered a reputation as innovators in school design. And even though they promoted their firm on the basis of producing schools, their first commissions were primarily residential.<sup>3</sup>

The work executed by Caudill & Rowlett during its Bryan-College Station period is decidedly modern and consistently rooted in the specifics of site and climate. At times the work also displays a rustic, rugged materiality. Despite a devotion to modernism, the firm's commitment to client service and architectural problem-solving formed the philosophical core of Caudill & Rowlett's practice. As Caudill responded to one complaint: "I told them that it would improve the air flow pattern and, if there was no water problem, to leave the windows installed upside down."<sup>4</sup>

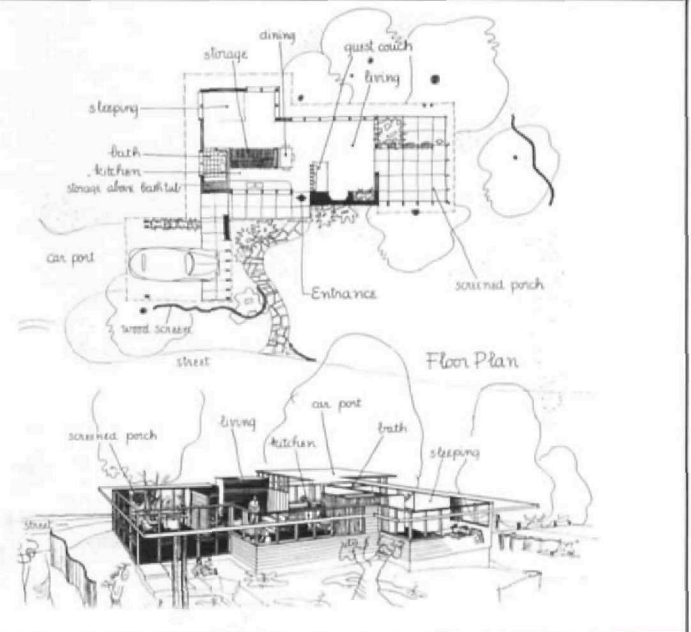
Their first commission was a small house for Fred Fenton at the corner of Raleigh and Gilbert in Austin. This resulted from a chance meeting between Caudill and Fenton, a woodworker by trade. Rowlett followed up on the contact and wrote back to College Station regarding the firm's initial job. "We are laying a firm foundation that will pay off dividends in the future. I think a few houses

to tie us over might be the answer to our problems."<sup>5</sup> From College Station Caudill sent plans and sketches to his partner, who supervised the construction.

The Fenton House, completed in late 1946, is a collage of opaque and transparent volumes, layered to separate living and sleeping areas. Abstract principles of modern design, including a flat roof and full-height windows, are evident. The Fenton House displays Caudill's knowledge of Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian houses, but the house more closely resembles the small-scale residential work of Richard Neutra and Marcel Breuer in the 1940s.

During construction of the Fenton House, Bill Caudill built a house for his family at 2313 Truman Street in the Lakeview Addition of Bryan. This became Caudill & Rowlett's first project to be published in a national architectural journal.<sup>6</sup> Caudill, who called himself the "Public Relations Department," continually sent out letters urging publication of Caudill & Rowlett's work. Through the firm's many transformations, Caudill's preoccupation with publication, exhibition, and communication remained intense. He managed to get drawings of what were then Caudill & Rowlett's only projects, the unfinished Fenton and Caudill houses, included in an exhibition on contemporary architecture at the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts in October 1946.<sup>7</sup>

In early 1947, John Rowlett moved his



Caudill House, Bryan.





Philip G. Murdoch House, 748 South Rosemary, Bryan, Caudill Rowlett Scott & Associates, 1948–50.



Murdoch House interior with suspended stair and exterior view.



Fred Weick House, 1115 Langford, Bryan, Caudill Rowlett Scott & Associates, architects, 1948–50.

family and the firm's address to College Station. Caudill & Rowlett's first real architectural office was located above the Southside Food Market, which still stands across from Texas A&M at 340 George Bush Drive.

Domestic commissions continued to dominate the practice during 1947 and 1948, which gave Caudill & Rowlett an opportunity to refine their architectural ideas. With a house for A&M professor Philip G. Murdoch (1948–49) on South (now North) Rosemary in Bryan, Caudill & Rowlett attempted a more complicated composition. Oriented for view and breeze, the Murdoch House used vertical circulation as the hinge between public and private spaces. A transparent riserless stair, suspended over an interior planter next to a full-height glass wall, blurs the line between house and garden.

Also in 1948, Caudill & Rowlett designed a house at 1115 Langford in College Station for Fred Weick, an aeronautical engineer and pilot.<sup>8</sup> The Weick House is clad in stone and vertical board-and-batten and features a shallow-pitched gable roof. A description of the project by Caudill indicated his awareness of current trends: "The bi-nuclear plan is from Breuer, the structure from Drake, and the sliding walls from Neutra."<sup>9</sup> The use of stone from an old corral was described as "regional, not primitive," and the insertion of glass between beams resting on load-bearing stone walls was intended to look "discovered . . . not designed."<sup>10</sup>

The Weick House was the first of what would become the most characteristic type of modern house built in College Station and Bryan during the 1950s. C. Gale Cook, an A&M architecture student who worked for Caudill & Rowlett in 1948, described the glazed gable inserted above a planar wall and beneath the rake of a shallow, pitched room as Wrightian, but Caudill & Rowlett's treatment of this formal pattern was, like Breuer's and Neutra's, consistently crisp, lightweight, and tectonic.<sup>11</sup>

In 1953, Caudill designed a new house for his family in the College Station neighborhood known as The Knoll, which had been laid out with Caudill's help in 1947. A number of houses designed either by CRS or by firm members for their own families were built on The Knoll, which was intended as a modern enclave. Some streets on The Knoll were named for A&M architects and engineers.<sup>12</sup>

Caudill's second house is the outstanding architectural accomplishment on

The Knoll, and it was probably the best small-scale work produced by the firm in Bryan and College Station. This Caudill House is one large volume with living spaces divided by movable storage cabinets. The shallow-pitched gable roof is supported by a steel structure independent of its brick perimeter walls. Extensions into the landscape — a carport with brick garden walls, a brick-paved patio, and a wooden wall leading to a small brick studio-guest house — provide a counterpoint to the main volume of the house.

Other architect-designed houses built on The Knoll include the Frank Lawyer House (1955) at 1214 Orr Street, designed by Lawyer, who became one of CRS's most highly regarded designers. Dave Yarbrough, a production drawing specialist at CRS, built his house at 1213 Winding Road about 1958. The Yarbrough House was the only one of these houses designed for air conditioning. Theo K. Holleman and Ben H. Evans, two A&M architecture faculty members who worked on occasion for CRS, also built their houses on The Knoll. Most of The Knoll houses have suffered unsympathetic modifications.

While located in Bryan and College Station, CRS designed fewer than 20 houses there, but by 1955 the firm had designed almost 100 in other Texas and Oklahoma cities.<sup>13</sup> This client pattern was even more dramatic in terms of school commissions CRS received. Of more than 100 schools the firm completed from their Bryan-College Station offices, only the A&M Consolidated High School in College Station was a local project. After CRS moved to Houston in 1958, it grew rapidly, eventually receiving commissions all over the world, but as in Bryan-College Station, the firm was not busy at home. CRS partners sought a few large projects rather than many small ones. Consequently, the firm's promoters traveled in search of larger and larger commissions, both in terms of dollars and square footage.

CRS grew in this way because of another early decision. Bill Caudill and John Rowlett were not afraid to continually expand their staff, hiring young architects as soon as they could find a place for them to sit. They brought good assistants into the partnership and fostered a productive, democratic atmosphere in their practice, which eventually led to a policy of specialization and architecture by team. Recalling the beginnings of CRS, William M. Peña said, "None of us were geniuses, but we could have a



team of specialists, . . . [and by] pooling our talents together, we might be a genius."<sup>14</sup>

The first employees of Caudill & Rowlett were Jo Hans and John Zemanek, recent architecture graduates who worked for Rowlett in the Austin office, and Gordon McCutchan, an A&M graduate and architecture instructor who worked for Caudill in College Station.<sup>15</sup> McCutchan became a junior partner in 1946 for an investment of \$250, then left to pursue an academic career at Texas Tech. Wallie E. Scott, Jr., became the third partner in 1948, and the firm name was changed to Caudill, Rowlett & Scott.<sup>16</sup>

In 1950, Willie Peña became the fourth partner, but he insisted that the firm's name expand no further. Ultimately, eight men, all of whom joined the firm during the 12-year Bryan-College Station days, would be known as the founders of CRS.

Al Martin, a structural engineer, became the next partner, but he left in 1955. Thomas A. Bullock, who began working for CRS part-time in 1948, was brought in as a partner in 1954. Bullock worked in the office in Oklahoma City that Rowlett opened in 1950 and eventually became the firm's managing partner. Al Martin was replaced by Ed Nye, another engineer and a longtime friend of Caudill's who graduated three years ahead of Caudill from Oklahoma A&M. Of the Bryan-College Station period at CRS, Tom Bullock said: "We heard about our new partner [Nye] by a phone call from Bill Caudill. We flew pretty high and fast in those days."<sup>17</sup>

Charles E. Lawrence, a particularly gifted designer, became the seventh partner, and C. Herbert Paseur, the last founding partner of CRS, began working for John Rowlett and Tom Bullock in Oklahoma City in 1955.

Many young architects who worked for CRS in College Station or Bryan went on to other local firms. Most well-known members of the Bryan-College Station architectural community from the 1950s, to the 1970s had some tie to CRS.<sup>18</sup>

As Caudill & Rowlett became successful, it also became the target of Bryan architects who saw competition from A&M faculty members as out of line. Caudill wrote Rowlett: "Yesterday the Dean of Engineering received a letter from the Dean of the College saying the Bryan architects had been complaining about Mr. Caudill's activities. . . . I think I am in the clear as the Board gave me permission to practice architecture, so I am calling

their bluff and bringing this thing to a head once and for all. . . . The College is sending a reply to whoever wrote the letter to cite specific cases, dates, etc. so that we can really argue it out."<sup>19</sup> A complaint was also filed with the American Institute of Architects asserting that the firm got jobs by cutting fees and using student labor.<sup>20</sup> The firm did use paid students, but it did not cut its fees. Caudill sent Rowlett a suggested list of fees, saying, "Check them to see how they compare with architects in Austin. Let's not underbid anyone."<sup>21</sup>

Caudill fought these issues because he was committed to practice and teaching. The complaints soon simmered down, sealing the relationship between teaching and practice not just for Caudill, but also for others who both practiced architecture and taught. Some 20 years later, as both director of the Rice University School of Architecture and leader of CRS, he would say, "I run my school like a firm, and my firm like a school."<sup>22</sup>

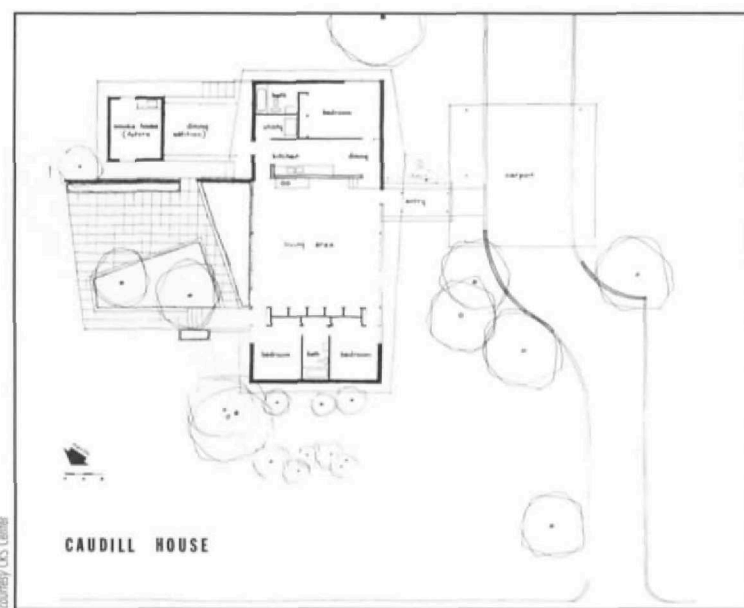
The relationship between CRS and Texas A&M's architecture school was strongly rooted. Of 26 early CRS employees who have been identified, eleven taught at A&M.<sup>23</sup> Caudill, a full professor, taught through 1949; Rowlett began teaching at A&M as an associate professor in 1948 and was promoted to professor the following year. Others who taught for a time were Tom Bullock, Frank Lawyer, James Lemmon, Ben Evans, Gordon McCutchan, Harry S. Ransom, Edward J. Romieniec, Theo R. Holleman, and Melton Harper.

CRS also had a policy, unusual at the time, of associating with local architects on out-of-town projects. This facilitated its access to the then lucrative school business, giving the firm a chance to execute some of the principles established in *Space for Teaching*, which questioned the rigid guidelines of the federal School Building Law of 1913 and showed what might be possible if progressive school architecture responded to progressive education. Caudill theorized that natural light, movable furniture, outdoor circulation, ventilation, and soundproofing were anchors around which flexible, low-cost schools could be produced.

In 1949, CRS received a commission for two elementary schools in Blackwell, Oklahoma. Similar in design, they were based on an inversion of a student project by Willie Peña. The Blackwell projects — Huston Elementary and Washington Elementary — provided tangible evidence of CRS's commitment to a new approach to



William W. Caudill House, 1206 Orr Street, College Station, Caudill, Rowlett, Scott & Associates, 1953.



courtesy CRS Center

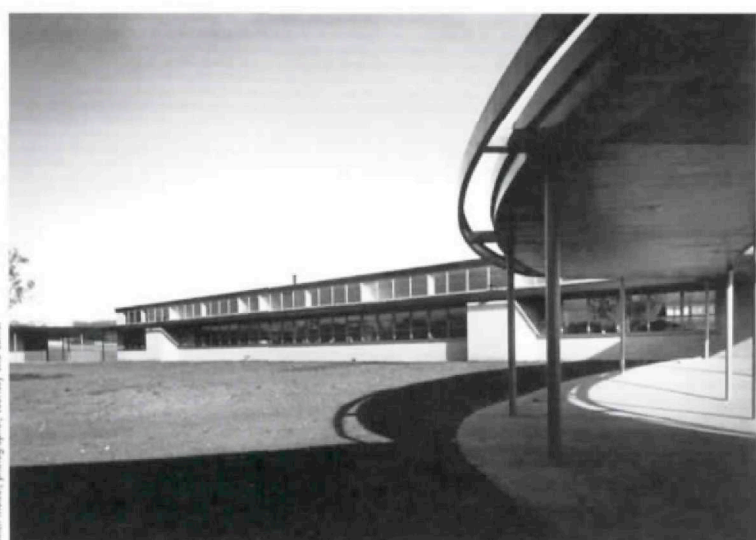


Left to right: Bill Caudill, John Rowlett, Wallie Scott, and Willie Peña, the first four partners of CRS, in their Bryan office, ca. 1954.





Washington Elementary School, Blackwell, Oklahoma, CRS, architects, 1949–50.



Albany Elementary School, Albany, Texas, CRS, architects, ca. 1951.



A&M Consolidated High School, College Station, CRS, architects, 1952–54; partially demolished 1993. The domed auditorium at the right is extant.

## WHAT BEGAN AS A COIN TOSS

school architecture. They comprised 75 percent of the firm's fees in 1949. The success of these schools, which opened to an enthusiastic reception in April 1950, brought CRS an expanding list of school commissions.<sup>24</sup>

But not until 1952 was CRS offered an opportunity to produce a school at home. The most striking feature of the A&M Consolidated High School in College Station was a 600-seat mushroom-domed auditorium, the only component of the school still standing. The auditorium is supported by laminated timber buttresses spaced at regular intervals around a cylindrical base.<sup>25</sup>

In 1953 CRS received a particularly significant commission to design the Brazos County Courthouse and Jail in downtown Bryan. Altered in the 1980s, the complex originally consisted of a four-story block that housed jail, jury rooms, civil defense offices, and courtrooms. The building's program was visually diminished by breaking the structure into components and by raising part of the building on concrete piers. In 1957, *Architectural Record* recognized the CRS courthouse as a constructive change in the character of county courthouse designs: "Unfortunately, one is seldom able to visualize the typical county building — most likely 50 to 100 years old — as either attractive or convenient. The spaces behind its usually pompous façade are often ill-planned, poorly lighted, and depressing for the public and employees alike. Thus, when a new county building does provide a generous measure of both amenity and good looks, it assumes unusual significance. The Brazos County building so qualifies."<sup>26</sup> The interiors, furnished by Knoll Associates, were streamlined examples of modernism. As a result of this notable commission and its fast-growing school business, in 1954 CRS moved its offices from College Station to a considerably larger space on the edge of downtown Bryan at 425 South Main Street.

By 1958 CRS had 50 employees working in Bryan and Oklahoma City. Most of the partners had pilot's licenses, and the firm owned five airplanes. Realizing that CRS worked on a regional scale instead of relying on local opportunities, managing partner Tom Bullock and accountant John Stambaugh researched other Texas locations that might more adequately ensure stability and growth. Different partners preferred Austin, Dallas, San Antonio, or Houston. But Stambaugh, Caudill's childhood friend and life-

long financial adviser, stressed the need for a dynamic city with travel connections. (Stambaugh was wary of having busy CRS architects flying their own planes around the country.) Bullock enlisted planners to produce statistics on banking, competing firms, client base, and projected growth; Houston was the clear choice. Bullock took the proposal to Caudill and convinced him to agree.

Still, despite the move, CRS never really left Bryan-College Station. It continued its contributions to the development of the College of Architecture at Texas A&M University, established the CRS Center for Architectural Research at A&M in 1993, and, most recently, designed the George Bush Presidential Library.<sup>27</sup>

CRS brought post-war modernism to Bryan-College Station and fostered new ideas there both by building and by teaching. The firm's expansion into a regional and ultimately an international practice should not eclipse the legacy its partners left as teachers to the students of Texas A&M and mentors to the many young architects who worked for a time in the College Station and Bryan offices. It was in Bryan-College Station that CRS established its strongest and most lasting value: a conscious belief in the interdependence of the *idea* of designing and the *action* of building architecture. ■



## BECAME A SELF-PROPELLED MACHINE

## DEVOTED TO CLIENT SERVICE, CHANGE, AND GROWTH.

1. CRSS *Stories: Motion in Only One Direction* — Forward. Houston: CRSS, 1992.

2. William Wayne Caudill, *Space for Teaching in The Bulletin of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas*, 4th series, vol. 12, no. 9 (August 1, 1941). College Station: Texas Engineering Experiment Station series no. 59, 1941. *Space for Teaching* was positively reviewed in such magazines as *Architectural Forum* (May 1942) and the *RIBA Journal* (December 1942).

3. The partners took any work they could get, which, in the first year, consisted of houses, a chapter room for SAE (Caudill's fraternity) at OSU in Stillwater, and a small Methodist church in Taylor, Texas. In addition to the Caudill and Fenton houses, 1946 correspondence mentions the Walter Britten House (1946–47, 2310 South College Avenue, Bryan); the Walter Griffen House (1946, on South College Avenue, Bryan near the Caudill House); the Dr. T. O. Walton, Jr., House (1946, in North Oakwood); and the Morris J. Garber House (Bryan). CRS Center, School of Architecture, Texas A&M University.

4. Caudill to all partners, August 7, 1951, regarding Washington School in Stillwater, Oklahoma. CRS Center.

5. Rowlett to Caudill, April 8, 1946. CRS Center.

6. "House in Texas Provides Maximum Living in Two Major Rooms." *Architectural Forum* October 1946, p. 109.

7. Caudill to Rowlett, August 16, 1946. CRS Center.

8. Caudill to Fred Weick, April 17, 1969. Twenty-one years after the construction of this house, Caudill wrote Weick with his customary humor and energy: "You're the only genius I know and I am proud to know you. I must say, however, you were a hell of a client. You wanted that College Station house to fly, too." CRS Center.

9. Caudill, "Weick House – 1948," CRS promotional brochure, n.d. CRS Center.

10. Ibid.

11. C. Gale Cooke interview, May 13, 1997.

12. The South Knoll was laid out in 1954 based on a plan by architecture student Doyle Lowery, according to Frank Lawyer. Dr. E. B. Clark, A&M economics professor and developer of The Knoll and The South Knoll, named streets for Lawyer (Lowery's studio instructor) and Caudill in appreciation.

13. Other Bryan-College Station area houses designed by CRS include the Robert L. Puerifory House (1950, 301 E. Brookside Drive, Bryan) and the Carleton G. "Spike" White House (1951, 702 South Thomas Street, College Station). Outside of Bryan-College Station, the firm designed houses in other small Texas and Oklahoma towns including 50 for the Mayfair Construction company and 80 for Warr Built Homes Co. in Oklahoma City (*Architectural Forum*, June 1949, pp. 100–101). CRS designed several plans and options for these spec houses.

14. Jonathan King, "An Oral History of CRS," 1997, manuscript, ch. 10, p. 2.

15. Caudill to Rowlett, May 28, 1946 (Hans); June 30, 1946 (Zemanek); and August 16, 1946 (McCutchan). CRS Center.

16. CRS has been known over the years by various combinations of the founders' names. The first three-name title was Caudill, Rowlett & Scott, then Caudill Rowlett, Scott & Associates, and later Caudill, Rowlett & Scott Architects. The engineering firm J. R. Sirrine Co. merged with CRS, creating CRSS in 1983, then the architectural division of CRSS was sold to HOK in 1994, and CRS was dropped from the firm's name all together.

17. King, ch. 1, p. 2.

18. In addition to Zemanek, McCutchan, and Willie Peña, early employees of CRS included Harry S. Ransom (1949–53), who worked later for William E. Nash (1953–57). Ransom designed the Peña House in Brownsville and the much publicized elementary school in Industry, Texas. Theo R. Holleman also worked for William E. Nash (1949–51). Other early CRS employees were Cleon C. Bellomy; Merton Harper (1955–64); E. Earl Merrill, Jr.; James H. Lemmon, Jr.; and Charles E. Estes, who designed the Bryan Fire Station and Drill Tower for CRS in 1952.

19. Caudill to Rowlett, September 4, 1946. On October 4, 1946, Caudill wrote: "Today I found who filed the complaint about me practicing. It wasn't Phil after all. It was Henry Mayfield. So far the administration is backing me up." CRS Center.

20. Students were an important part of CRS's research and production from the beginning. Caudill wrote in an undated letter to Rowlett in 1946: "I've been working on Fenton's house. A student is helping

me." On July 17, 1946, he wrote again: "I am going to put one of our better students on our payroll."

Harold Jordan, a fifth-year architecture student, was credited with helping in supervision of the first Caudill House in Bryan.

21. Caudill to Rowlett, n.d., ca. September 1946.

22. Tom Bullock interview, October 17, 1995.

23. Texas A&M catalogues, 1945–1955. Cushing Library, Texas A&M.

24. "Ultra, Ultra, Ultra," *Blackwell Daily Journal-Tribune*, April 23, 1950. CRS developed clusters of school work, sometimes based on the partners' personal connections. Because Wallie Scott was from Port Arthur, Texas, CRS was able to gain entrée, collaborating with the Port Arthur architect J. Earle Neff on numerous schools there. Likewise, Willie Peña's hometown connections and long-term association with Laredo architect A.A. Leyemdecker brought CRS school commissions in Laredo. Tyler in East Texas, Andrews in West Texas, and the Wharton-Bay City-Palacios-Edna area southwest of Houston are other locales where CRS's work was clustered in the 1950s.

25. "High School Without Doors," *Architectural Forum*, April 1955, pp. 128–32. The small, two-story classroom building of Texas A & M Consolidated High School was demolished in 1993, as 40 years of space needs, demographics, and educational patterns caught up with the progressive planning so valued in 1954.

26. *Architectural Record*, January, 1957.

27. CRSS was awarded the design contract for the Bush Presidential Library, but, before the plans were complete, CRSS was bought by HOK. However, the same team from CRSS continued to work for HOK, completing the project.



Brazos County Courthouse and Jail, 300 E. 26th Street, Bryan, CRS, architects, 1956.