Around Fort Worth, the “roar” in the Roaring Twenties sounded more like the scream of a panther—bold, strong, and determined. The bountiful resources of West Texas stoked the city’s economic engine, feeding industries with cotton and grain, oil and gas, and everything on four legs that bawled, whinnied, oinked, and bleated. This nature’s metropolis was a magnet for the people of West Texas, too. Some came to shop, others to make money, and all to enjoy life in the city “Where the West Begins.” For better and worse, the prosperous Twenties saw Fort Worth take great strides in the development of an urban society whose appetites and interests drew in part from its western and southern roots, but also from an emerging modern America.

Standing tall in the center of all the action was Amon Carter, publisher of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. With the “glibness of a snake oil peddler, the dogmatism of a saved-again evangelist, and the sincerity of a first-term congressman,” he played cowboy for America and put Fort Worth and West Texas on the nation’s mental map. Typically Carter wore his Shady Oak Stetson hat whenever he traveled, often accented by a bandana held in place around his neck with a diamond stickpin. He stuffed his tailored pants into handmade purple and white boots—the colors of TCU—stamped with the horned frog mascot, and occasionally topped off the outfit with chaps and spurs and a holster that cradled two pearl-handled pistols. His biographer asserted that “the cowboy” was a “caricature, not a characterization, of the western Texan.” It was something an enamed public far beyond the Red River did not know, and Carter played their gullibility for all it was worth. For the Panther City, that image was worth a fortune.

Bowie native Amon Carter had landed in Fort Worth just after the turn of the century and co-founded the interminably struggling Star. When the paper finally foundered, Carter “traded up,” he later said, manipulating the purchase of the successful Telegram. With the forceful cowboy behind it, the combined daily would become one of the country’s most influential newspapers well into the 1950s. By 1923 the Star-Telegram...
had become the largest newspaper in the southern half of the United States.

It was West Texas that boosted the paper’s circulation beyond those in such larger cities as Houston, New Orleans, and Atlanta. To West Texans the Star-Telegram was their equivalent of the New York Times. Most of them could care less about what was happening on the other side of the world. What they wanted to know was: “Could Bossy live on mesquite beans and cactus pods, and will the turkey plague in Cuero spread to San Saba?” Of course, the Star-Telegram covered the news of the world, but usually explained events as they related to West Texas. With Carter promoting the entire region, the newspaper led the fight for better roads and higher prices for crops and beef. It brought new industry into West Texas, and in 1923 it pushed the state to establish Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

Amon Carter cultivated his contacts from a suite at the Fort Worth Club, but did his most effective boostering at Shady Oak Farm on the shores of Lake Worth. Alva Johnston, in a Saturday Evening Post article, described it as “a sort of one-man Bohemian grove,” where multimillionaires, politicians, and celebrities were always welcome. “It is hard for any financial or political giant to cross the country without finding himself making a stop-over at Shady Oak Farm and fishing from Amon Carter’s black-bass pool,” wrote Johnston. Important guests usually left wearing one of the publisher’s signature Shady Oak Stetsons. He gave away thousands of them. When Lord Sidney Rothermere visited, his aides dryly informed Carter that the distinguished board chairman of the London Daily Mail would not “play cowboy with him.” Yet, directly, there he was—plain ‘ol “Sid” to Amon Carter—outfitted like one of the Sons of the Pioneers. When he departed, the delighted Rothermere was not only sporting the Stetson, but also one of Carter’s pearl-handled six-shooters.

To Carter it was all about boostering. He reveled in the glow of friendships with...
prominent men and women, but he always wanted something in return. Whether it was a business relocation, some money to fund a special project, or merely a good word for Fort Worth and West Texas, Amon Carter persisted until he roped in his prize. Once, when wealthy rancher-turned-oilman W. T. Waggoner posed for a Star-Telegram photographer, he held up a silver dollar: “Here, take a picture of this,” he barked, “It’s one dollar Amon Carter didn’t get.” One of the publisher’s most significant coups was stealing Texas Air Transport from Dallas and winning a bid to deliver airmail from Meacham Field, a lonely spot north of town that observers described as a “weed patch.” Within a year a hangar capable of sheltering fourteen aircraft housed a fleet of Curtiss passenger planes and Pitcairn Mailwings on the former pasture. Shortly afterward, TAT became Southern Air Transport—an ancestor of American Airlines.

Carter represented modernity, and progress meant that some older ways of life would
disappear. During the decade the old commission form of government was retired, and in its place a city manager and council began calling the shots. In 1928 the Concho Wagon Yard was sold to a buyer who converted it—appropriately—into a parking lot. The last of about a dozen such facilities, the old stopover had taken up most of the 400 block of East Belknap since the 1850s. Greenwall’s Opera House fared better. Remodeled and renamed the Palace Theater, it cast its lot with Hollywood, boasting a massive pipe organ touted as “second to none in any motion picture theater in America.” When the new curtain drew for the first time, viewers delighted to Nazimova in the title role of The Brat. Down the Street, where patrons had fed coins into primitive nickelodeons, the old Lyric theater was razed, and in its place the Capitol Theater emerged. While the amusement park at Lake Worth enjoyed expansions and growing crowds, the boardwalks and pavilions at the old turn-of-the-century parks weathered into disrepair. Lake Erie, for example, once a popular spot for moonlit strolls and picnics under the shade of its arching willows, was unceremoniously drained as part of a campaign to rid the surrounding area of malaria-carrying mosquitoes.

Change also engendered a sense of history, and in the autumn of 1923 Fort Worth celebrated its past with a “Diamond Jubilee.” Several events and commemorations anticipated a weeklong pageant and carnival billed as the “biggest the state has ever seen.” In New York City the Texas Club there supervised a ceremony at the grave of the city’s namesake, General William Jenkins Worth. Back in Cowtown, a film of Fort Worth during earlier times pushed the box office gate at the Hippodrome past all of the first-run movies then showing. Also tied into the festivities were football games and polo matches, Indian war dances, and the usual kickoff parade, led by a chuck wagon with “Fat Stock Show, 1896” painted on its side.

As the date of the celebration approached, Mayor E. R. Cockrell issued a call for “all citizens of Fort Worth to enter into the spirit of the Diamond Jubilee by dressing in the styles of 50 and 75 years ago.” They did not disappoint. Bewhiskered cowboys and women in poke bonnets and Mother Hubbard dresses filled downtown streets illuminated by flaming lights that flickered blue and yellow. A different activity unfolded on each block below Main Street. Between First and Second, Will Travis’s “Negro Jazz Band” played; on the next block was the Wilbur Brown orchestra. Down other streets were minstrels and blackface comedians, snake charmers and fortunetellers, boxers and strongmen, and all kinds of singers and dancers. To Cockrell’s chagrin, a few of the celebrants on the first night got carried away, discharging their firearms and setting off explosives that cost the city about $15,000 in repairs. Milling among the crowd the next evening was a body of cowboy-clad policemen.

The crowning touch of the Diamond Jubilee was a history pageant of ten episodes that unfolded on the grounds of Forest Park. Actors relived the founding of the military post, the defeat of Birdville for county seat, and the exodus of men who fought for the Butternut and Gray. Crowds experienced anew the coming of the Texas & Pacific, the discovery of an artesian well, and even such recent events as the explosion of commercial growth and army life at Camp Bowie.

Meanwhile, the big oil strikes, of which the late history was such a major part, flowed seamlessly into the oil fraud trials of the 1920s. Among the hundreds of
petroleum companies operating in Fort Worth during the boom were a host of suitcase operations, many of them rife with con men. Scores of hopeful millionaires eagerly turned over hard-earned assets to barkers peddling worthless stock on the street corners. Others ended up on sucker

Petroleum Building, arose at 210 W. Sixth Street in 1927.
COURTESY OF QUENTIN MCGOWN COLLECTION, FORT WORTH

The Petroleum Building. The Star-Telegram Building.
COURTESY OF THE FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, AR 406 1-26-53A.

As new radio stations signed on, the Star-Telegram’s “Station Log,” featuring a roster of frequencies and programs, became a standard item in family living rooms during the Twenties.
COURTESY OF THE DALTON HOFFMAN COLLECTION, FORT WORTH

From this small room inside the Star-Telegram Building, WBAP broadcast its program to an ever-growing audience.
COURTESY OF THE FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, AR 406 1-74-8A.

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lists and surrendered their cash only when promoters called in the middle of the night to announce they had struck oil and needed just a few thousand dollars more to finish drilling.

Most of the victims were shamed into silence, but Hale Center rancher Frank Norfleet refused to take his fleecing without a fight. In 1919 master swindler Joe Furey and four confederates in the lobby of the Westbrook Hotel gained his confidence by painting rosy visions of easy oil profits. At one point, just after turning over $45,000, Norfleet grew suspicious and drew his revolver. Reaching for a Bible, one of the grifters clutched it to his heart: “I swear by my mother’s grave that I am not trying to trick you…don’t kill me.” Satisfied, Norfleet agreed to meet the gang in Dallas the next day. Of course, by then, they were long gone. The story, however, was just beginning.

Into the early years of the 1920s, Norfleet pursued ringleader Furey, just missing him in places as far away as England, France, and Germany. Finally the swindler’s luck ran out at a café in Jacksonville, Florida. There, Norfleet cornered Furey and held a gun on him. The quick-thinking conman started hollering, “Bandit! Robber!” and immediately a crowd mobbed Norfleet. Still, the rancher managed to grab Furey, who writhed violently, scratching and kicking his tormenter, even biting Norfleet and taking off a piece of a finger. After police arrived and sorted out the story, it took four of them to handcuff their prisoner. In the end Norfleet did not get his money back, but his satisfaction was worth far more. “I tricked the trickster,” he declared. Furey later died in a Huntsville prison serving out his sentence.

For other swindlers the bubble burst when they turned to the U.S. Mail to market their schemes. Dr. Frederick A. Cook, self-proclaimed discoverer of the North Pole, had created quite a sensation when he came to Fort Worth, renting the entire twentieth floor of a downtown office building and combining 413 companies—each with a golden sucker list. At his trial, the prosecution used two hundred witnesses and submitted nine hundred exhibits to convince jurors of the doctor’s overwhelming guilt. From the bench, federal judge John M. Killits gave the grand swindler a cold stare and decreed: “First we had Ananias. Then we had Machiavelli. The twentieth century produced Frederick A. Cook.”

The W. T. Waggoner Building; the old Board of Trade’s six-story tower (behind it, and to the right) looks tiny by comparison.

Important visitors often lodged at the Fort Worth Club, where the city’s most influential businessmen kept private rooms.

A downtown “canyon” began to develop along West Seventh Street during the 1920s that grew into “Show Row” by the 1940s, so named for all the movie theaters whose towering signs lit up the canyon with a gaudy brilliance. In the foreground (left) is the Elks Hall, which would soon be razed.

New construction peaked with the completion of the Blackstone Hotel in 1929.
At Arlington Heights the recently vacated Camp Bowie was quickly transformed into an upscale middle-class neighborhood. Its network of roads and trolley lines provided a ready-made site for developers. The skyline can be seen on the horizon (right).

Another oil company found guilty had posted four hundred thousand letters a week for over two months and could barely keep pace opening envelopes full of cash, checks, and money orders that came in return. Its principals and hundreds of others went to jail or paid significant fines, but at least one swindler reportedly escaped the concerted sweep by actually drilling and hitting pay dirt. When he learned that postal inspectors were investigating his operation, the promoter determined to hustle a boiler to the site where his well was supposed to be. When the truck broke down, he ordered to a crew, “drill right where you are,” and by luck or providence the roughnecks brought in a gusher. To play it safe, he later drilled at the original site, which coughed up nothing but dust.

The notoriety of the protracted oil fraud trials did little to slow legitimate drilling. Neither did it retard the building boom that transformed the skyline into a modern metropolis, pushing new businesses and residences into prairies where cows grazed. At its peak, Fort Worth was gaining five thousand new residents a month, and only swindler could point to more new residences into prairies where cows grazed. At its peak, Fort Worth was gaining five thousand new residents a month, and only America cities could point to more new construction. The Star-Telegram exclaimed that Seventh Street “from Main west to Lamar resembles more some large industrial plant than an artery of traffic.” Its own new building at Seventh and Taylor was among those that had policemen rerouting traffic. The eleven-story building of cotton broker Neil P. Anderson, built in 1921, soon looked modest sitting in the shadows of such giants as the twenty-story W. T. Waggoner Building and that of the Farmers and Mechanics Bank that scraped the sky at twenty-four stories. Briefly the F&M Building was the tallest in the state.

Still other structures added to the skyline. Lending an agrarian touch was Universal Mills. Along with competitors Bewley and Burrus, it bolstered Fort Worth’s claim as the “grain hub” of the Southwest. In 1925 the city showcased its mills and sixteen elevators when the Texas Grain Dealers Association met there. New hotels such as the Texas and the Worth were joined by the new Fort Worth Club building, where many notable industrialists and celebrities stayed. But it was the Blackstone Hotel, completed in 1929, that became the focal heart of the city’s social scene until after World War II. The imposing art deco building, with its vertical set-back form, copied the design of hotels that had recently been constructed in New York, Chicago, and Saint Louis.

Where there was building, of course, there was also commerce. Banking grew fat on oil and agribusiness wealth, as new institutions such as the Trinity State Bank and the Union Bank and Trust Company joined the First National, the Continental National, and the Fort Worth National. The latter bank in 1927 absorbed the F&M and put its name on the recently completed office tower. Together they bankrolled a host of businesses that provided jobs for the swelling population. During the decade manufacturers opened modest plants that produced such items as batteries, rubber products, bricks, boxes, shoes, and tools. With considerable fanfare, the Justin Boot Company of Nocona moved to Fort Worth in 1925. A perfect fit for Cowtown, Justin arrived in a caravan of about sixty trucks, greeted by “bands, banners, cheers, and éclat,” as one reporter put it.

Early in the decade a series of strikes threatened to put the brakes on the feverish boom. A steel strike, leaving builders wanting for nails, inspired a correspondent to compare the situation to “the same problem that confronted the Children of Israel.” Like making bricks without straw, builders confronted the problem of “making houses without nails.”

Railroad workers during the summer of 1922 went on strike, too, disrupting timetables and provoking sabotage and violence. Because the nature of railroading left workers isolated, union men found it easy to capture strike breakers and spirit them away for a flogging. Typical was the experience of two T&P scabs kidnapped at gunpoint and forced into a car. On a rural lane the pair was told to strip off their clothing and lay on the ground. After a brutal whipping, the strike-breakers were ordered to put their clothing back on and run. Only a little luckier were four adolescents employed by the Frisco shops. As the boys approached the top of a hill by the Dreamland Dance Hall, a group of about twenty-five men seized them and drove to a spot outside of town, where they roughed them up. The boys got the message. The next morning they went to the shop, got their pay, and quit.
Despite their violent tactics and adverse press, the striking railroad workers enjoyed no small measure of support. Local churches raised donations for the union men, and from the pulpit, pastors heartened them with instructive sermons. When September rolled around that year, Labor Day held more meaning than usual. The next day the Fort Worth Press reported: “Four thousand men and women who turn the wheels of industry in Fort Worth marched or rode in the parade Monday morning.” Most of the men walked in shirtsleeves and work clothes; others, such as the spotlessly white bakers, wore the apparel of their trade. Many of the women marchers carried signs declaring such messages as: “We are homeowners and tax-payers.” About two-hundred striking garment workers carried banners that read: “Do we look like outlaws?” Among the bands and marchers were several floats decorated in red, white, and blue carrying the wives and children of union men. On one of them sat children under the banner: “For these we are fighting.” The parade ended at Trinity Park, where the workers enjoyed an all-day picnic and a program of concerts and contests.

The most serious strike, however, involved workers at the meat packing plants, who put pressure on Armour and Swift to close the open shop. This, the meatpackers would not do, and soon they refused to recognize the unions themselves. When Armour and Swift cut wages, John Malone, district president of the Butcher Workmen’s Union, received an order from Chicago to join forty-five thousand workers in fifteen states for a general strike. About two thousand union men in Fort Worth walked off the job for the first time since 1904.

Then the situation grew ugly. The packers pitted black against white by recruiting African Americans to take over the jobs abandoned by the strikers. As tension mounted daily, a crowd of menacing union men met about a thousand workers leaving the plant on December 6, 1921. All along the line police opened spaces for the departing men, and just as quickly the strikers blocked their path. Just then, one of them grabbed African American Fred Rouse by the arm, and he reacted by jerking loose and firing a .32 pistol point blank into the crowd. Tom and Tracey Maclin happened to be the unfortunate ones to stop the bullets, but neither was seriously wounded. Rouse then fled, but was quickly overtaken and suffered a tremendous beating.

Rouse was carried to the City-County hospital, where he recovered for several days under the guard of a solitary policeman. The officer, perhaps tipped, stood down when a mob composed of young men wearing “handkerchief masks” brusquely shouldered aside a doctor and nurse and seized their victim. They carried the unclothed Rouse to a car and headed for Samuels Avenue, where a large hackberry tree provided a convenient

North Side, dominated by Swift and Armour, looked peaceful from the air, yet during the Twenties the meatpackers became embroiled in a bitter strike when disgruntled union workers walked off the job.

The “Great Flood” of 1922 claimed over thirty lives and left over a thousand homeless. Yet, later it would be all but forgotten, and new construction along the Trinity River bottomland invited even more devastating floods.

COURTESY OF THE DALTON HOFFMAN COLLECTION, FORT WORTH
gallows. As he hung there, the mob riddled his body with bullets. Only after it was over did Police Chief Hamilton arrive on the scene. The affair brought condemnation on city and county officials for negligence, but a grand jury that conducted a lynching probe could find little evidence among a hundred subpoenaed witnesses to bring a case to trial.

Meanwhile the strike ran its course. Union men continued to intimidate scabs by derailing trolleys trying to enter the plants and occasionally administering a beating. One of the Maclin brothers, in fact, was back in the news for his part in assaulting a strikebreaker. Even though the local union remained willing, the strike ended when workers in Chicago, Omaha, and Oklahoma City threw in the towel. Both Armour and Swift said they would take back many of the skilled workers, but declared that the “strikers must act as individuals in seeking to get back their jobs,” and only then “as vacancies occur.”

Soon a back-to-business attitude prevailed, and the consumer society that emerged during the decade demanded a range of goods and services that scarcely existed only a few years earlier. Filling stations, restaurants, and tearooms proliferated, and customers buying on the installment plan not only bought cars, but also lined up at dozens of shops for radios, refrigerators, and all manner of electrical products. While many retailers bellied up, long-time merchandisers Stripling’s and Monnig’s responded positively to changing consumer tastes and buying patterns and held their own with chains such as Woolworth’s and the Dallas-based Sanger Brothers. Perhaps nobody, however, worked as conscientiously as the farsighted Leonard Brothers, Marvin and Obie. Just before the decade began their storefront had claimed just twenty-five feet of downtown space. During the 1920s they bought unclaimed railroad freight, fire stock, and the inventories of bankrupt competitors. Consequently, Leonard’s peddled everything under the sun—from fur coats to tuna fish, and from pianos to tractors—setting the course for expansions that would eventually command parts of six city blocks.

Consumers also developed an appetite for leisure activities, and Fort Worth during the 1920s provided plenty of amusements. During the summer months, Lake Worth was the place to be. On a typical Fourth of July as many as thirty thousand people splashed into the water, raced their motorboats, or screamed into the dips and turns of a massive roller coaster hugging the shoreline. Added to the park’s attractions, the Alvez, a 130-foot double-deck excursion boat, plied the waters of Lake Worth for the first time in 1925. Powered by two one-hundred-horse-power diesel engines, it could carry about six-hundred people with room enough left for dancing. “When the mercury becomes unbearable it will be the coolest spot in Texas,” gloved its owners. “She is hemmed in by a line of windows that drink in the Lake Worth breeze.”

As elsewhere, Fort Worth during the Roaring Twenties experienced its share of bootleg liquor. “There were a few people who neither bought, traded, or made liquor, beer, nor wine during the epoch,” read a contemporary report, “But there were only a few.” Peddlers sold illicit spirits from their trunks in dimly lit parking lots and made home
deliveries, but it was the speakeasy that best characterized casual tippling among the partying crowd. Women, lately empowered by the vote, broke gender barriers by defying outdated moral codes that had kept them from smoking cigarettes, drinking liquor, and going on unchaperoned dates. At speakeasies off South Henderson, Summit Avenue, and the Lake Worth Road, flappers made merry right alongside men, dancing to the same jazz tunes that were all the rage in other big cities. In addition, “Exchange Avenue was loaded with speakeasies,” recalled former police officer, Andy Fournier. “You know that prohibition law—well, that was a law that was never very popular.”

However reluctant, the law responded to the call of duty. Fort Worth officers working with federal agents made many a raid on suspected bootleggers, although more got away than were caught. Most of them were small-timers anyway, such as the one who sold a bottle to a young Central High coed at a dance. Shortly afterward Principal R. L. Paschal caught her in the school basement passing around what was left. More serious was an episode where officers discovered a dozen fifty-gallon barrels containing about $10,000 worth of liquor. Some residents on Decatur Road had tipped off the police after noticing trucks going up and down the otherwise sleepy lane late at night. Officers probing the ground with pickaxes destroyed some of the evidence before finding the cache under a pile of hay, but the remaining barrels were sent to an evidence warehouse. There they aged, while police searched in vain for the bootleggers.

In the normal course of affairs, the Fat Stock Show set a new one-day attendance record in 1925, when fifteen thousand people passed through the turnstiles. An even larger throng visited the Fort Worth Zoo that year for a birthday party honoring Queen Tut, a five-year-old baby elephant. The zoo anticipated as many as twenty-five thousand children. The Yellow Cab Company donated five thousand bags of peanuts for the occasion, enough “to bring tears to the eyes of every circus elephant in the land,” wrote a reporter. “Chefs at the Texas Hotel have baked the biggest birthday cake in the history of the universe. It is so tremendous that a truck has been chartered to transport it to the grounds.” No doubt the party made up for some of the adverse press surrounding a settlement made to young Jack Wiggins. A few months earlier he had gotten too close to a bear that thrust a paw through its wire cage and mauled the boy’s leg.

Perhaps the greatest attendance records for an amusement were not even kept, divided as they were among all the movie houses across the city. By 1920 Texans were shelling out over $24 million dollars a year for tickets, or, about twenty movies per person. A great boost to summer business came after air conditioning was added. Yet, even during days when the temperature topped a hundred degrees, some patrons could hardly wait for the show to end. The early units were not equipped with thermostats, and audiences became so chilled that many people caught colds. The most popular innovation, however, made its Fort Worth debut at the Palace Theater on November 15, 1928. “A miracle occurred,” declared house manager, Harry Gould, when The Jazz Singer opened. “Al Jolson came onto the screen and talked right out loud”—
“Come on Ma, and listen to this,” twittered the actor, as he led into a popular hit of the day, “Blue Skies.”

Among the brightest stars in Hollywood during the Roaring Twenties was Rudolph Valentino. When he visited Fort Worth in 1923, a crowd mobbed the handsome actor, mostly young women “gasping about their hearts being weak.” To get his interview a small crowd of reporters packed into a car to escape the chaotic scene. One of them breathlessly summed up her report: “He’s a Prince!”

Another clung to his manhood, claiming: “He failed to give me a thrill. He’s certainly a nice young feller, but...the Sheik couldn’t cause my gizzard to do a clog dance.”

Of course, the 1920s was the “Golden Era of Sports,” and the nation’s pastime was also Fort Worth’s. From 1919 to 1925 the city’s beloved Cats enjoyed a seven-year run atop the Texas League. Five times they won over a hundred games, and their success floated the entire league into “Class A” ball. In 1921 the Cats forced the inauguration of a “Dixie Series” with the winner of the Southern Association, billed as the world series of the minor leagues. Special trains leased by Amon Carter—“Dixie Specials”—carried hundreds of Cats fans to games in Memphis, Mobile, Atlanta, and New Orleans. In five attempts, Fort Worth returned home with the championship trophy four times.

So successful were the Cats that fans bragged they could take on the New York Yankees. An exhibition game in Fort Worth gave them the chance. Three times Babe Ruth faced the Cats’ Jimmy Walkup, and three times the “Sultan of Swat” struck out. Saving face, the slugger reminded: “I’m in the big leagues, and he ain’t.”

The Cats’ answer to Babe Ruth was Clarence “Big Boy” Kraft. Between 1922 and 1924, he led the Texas League in home runs, hitting a record fifty-five during the 1924 season. Then, at the peak of his game, Big Boy announced his retirement. It would be many years before players began seeing lucrative contracts, and quite simply Kraft saw more security in owning a Ford
dealership than swinging a bat. Baseball great Bobby Bragan recalled that the showroom filled with customers, but it was baseball, not automobiles, they wanted to talk about. “Finally,” Bragan said, Kraft “felt forced to post a notice that no one could come in and discuss baseball without purchasing a car first.”

For some men and women who associated change with the erosion of their mores and social status, the Twenties were moving too fast. Sunday Blue Laws were passed by a city council feeling the pressure of religious groups wanting to return the Sabbath to a day of rest. The first Sunday when the law went into effect, crowds wandered aimlessly among the closed theaters, stores, and filling stations, discussing the terms of the order. Many motorists who had left their cars at garages on Saturday night were left stranded on Sunday morning. Among the notices posted on the door of a locked store read: “Hush, don’t make any noise; Fort Worth is dead.” Dallas, however, whose own Blue Laws had not yet gone into effect, managed briefly to drain the Panther City’s entertainment dollar as interurban cars filled to capacity made the one-hour run to the city “Where the East Peters Out.”

The harshest face of resistance to change covered itself under the white hood of the Ku Klux Klan. In 1921 Kleagle No. 101 set up shop in Fort Worth. As part of the larger movement, it rode a two-and-a-half-year wave of violence and intimidation aimed at monitoring morality and race relations. The Klan in Fort Worth was longer on talk than action, but across Texas, reports of lynchings, whippings, and even an acid tattoo—“KKK” emblazoned across the forehead of a black bellhop in nearby Dallas—had bootleggers, African Americans, “foreigners,” and Catholics lying low.

In February 1922 about eighteen hundred Klansmen from Fort Worth and North Texas answered the clarion of trumpeters blaring forth the “Ku Klux Kall.” From the T&P Station the column headed up Main Street to the courthouse behind a horseman who carried an electrically lighted red cross. Following were drummers, cross and flag bearers, and hooded men, many whose masks were blown free by a strong wind. The almost surreal parade was met by an eerie silence broken only by hollow drumming, the flapping of robes, and by ripples of applause that competed with occasional jeers.

As elsewhere, a vocal bloc of Fort Worthians felt more threatened by the vigilantes than the forces the secret society was trying to protect them from. Members of the local Liberty League met at the Westbrook Hotel to condemn the Klansmen as “shysters…feasting on an innocent public and prostituting the offices and courts of this country under the blind guise of patriotism and one hundred percent Americanism.” The demonstrators indeed had something to fear. At the four-thousand-seat Klavern Hall
on North Main a speaker from Atlanta boasted that the city’s public offices were filled with its members. No doubt he was exaggerating, but his chilling pronouncement that “90 percent of the preachers, your leading lawyers and your social leaders are loyal klansmen” made it seem as if the secret society were taking over the machinery of society.

In the early summer of 1923, downtown traffic came to a standstill for two hours as seemingly everyone in Fort Worth turned out for what was promoted as the first official masked parade of Klan women. Just as the fifteen hundred marchers started through the business district, an airplane outfitted with red lights to resemble a fiery cross flew low over the parade route, briefly drowning out a chorus of “Onward Christian Soldiers.”

The next evening the Ku Klux Klan lit a thirty-five-foot cross on Camp Bowie Boulevard to mark the opening of their grand “Beno Bazaar,” featuring carnival attractions, vaudeville acts, and other amusements as well as the giveaway of sixteen new Fords. Organizers had scheduled events to last several weeks, but trouble over the lease of land and complaints about some of the games being used as devices for gambling forced Klansmen to end the bazaar early, with six of the new cars remaining in their possession.

Then, seemingly overnight, the Klan’s prestige in Texas evaporated when “Ma” Ferguson defeated the secret society’s gubernatorial candidate in 1924. That year the Klan headquarters in Fort Worth was bombed twice, and when an arsonist finally succeeded in burning the hall, the secret society was hard-pressed to muster the resources to rebuild. Leaders made one last dark rumble, though, when Klavern No. 101 asked for a recall of the city council and its manager, O. E. Carr, for discriminating against its members. “Forty ‘protest crosses’ blazed forth at various places in Fort Worth nearly all Friday night,” reported the Fort Worth Press. Yet the fiery crosses burned and died, and their embers grew cold, and nobody seemed to care one way or the other. To underscore his authority, city manager Carr dismissed the men whom the Klan was supporting, and with that, the flap ended.

The nightmarish episode of white hoods and burning crosses was but an aberration in a decade in which the people of Fort Worth felt their way, sometimes with more emotion than sense, into a modern age. Business and ballyhoo better characterized Roaring Twenties life in the Panther City than Klan parades and labor strikes. It was a decade of adolescence, when the pockets of oilmen appeared as deep as the wells they drilled, and the thoughts of most men and women were occupied by movies and baseball and

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The 1920 football team of the Fort Worth Colored High School. The next year it would be renamed for long-time African-American educator I. M. Terrell.

courtesy of the dalton hoffman collection, fort worth

Fort Worth’s black community continued to thrive despite a climate of racial antagonism. Here, several citizens gather at a local soda fountain on Juneteenth, c. 1925.

courtesy of the fort worth public library, tarrant county black historical & genealogy society collection.
how they could scheme to acquire all the new gadgets and conveniences that were suddenly available.

The stock market that crashed so resoundingly on Wall Street that black Thursday of October 24, 1929, seemed like a faint echo in faraway Fort Worth. On the front porch of West Texas the commercial pulse beat to the ups and downs of petroleum and agribusiness. The headline of the evening Star-Telegram that day concerned a bank robbery in Brownwood that netted the holdup men $5,000. Only under a smaller banner warning of a possible freeze did the newspaper report “Near Panic in Stock Market.” The next day the story took second place to the outcome of former Interior Secretary Albert Fall’s guilty verdict for taking kickbacks in the oil patch. By Saturday the stock market collapse fell from the front page, and, for the moment, all seemed right in the Panther City.

A Klan parade in nearby Dallas, 1921. Fort Worth also had its share of these bizarre spectacles.

Courtesty of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram Photograph Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries, Arlington, Texas, AR 406 1-42-23A.

Burnett Park as it appeared at the beginning of the decade; like many unimproved spots around the city, it would soon be transformed. See p. 54.

Courtesty of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram Photograph Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries, Arlington, Texas, AR 406 1-31-33.

Perhaps the city’s most controversial figure, the First Baptist’s J. Frank Norris was a rabid reformer and leading supporter of the Ku Klux Klan. In his war against bootleggers, Norris once auctioned bottles of confiscated liquor to members of his congregation who delighted in smashing them to his exhortations. In 1924 he founded radio station KFQB (later KFJZ), which broadcast his fiery sermons from towers atop the church. Norris in 1926 shot to death church member D. E. Chipp, who had accosted the preacher in his office. Facing a murder charge, he nevertheless drew a host of supporters, both prominent and plain. L. P. Bloodworth, for example, a Methodist minister and grand dragon of the Texas Ku Klux Klan, vowed to do everything he could to assist “Brother Norris.” The murder case ended like the previous decade’s arson trial when a jury set him free.

Courtesty of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram Photograph Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries, Arlington, Texas, AR 406 2-82-43.