As the pall of economic depression overspread the land, Fort Worth for a while watched nervously from a distance, hoping that its West Texas markets and a recent flurry of building would keep the local economy afloat until fiscal skies brightened. Yet all too soon, armies of the homeless and unemployed strained the city’s resources, runs on its banks engendered panic, and a collapse in commodity prices threatened to sever its economic ties to West Texas. At the same time, the Great Depression brought out the best in a city whose leading citizens and solvent masses personified civic devotion and generosity. The Thirties was also a decade of happier events and even material progress. Magnified by the backdrop of hard times, Fort Worthians enjoyed a frontier centennial, gridiron victories, and New Deal programs that made the era a time to count blessings and even to do some celebrating.

To casual observers, the stock market crash that elsewhere pricked the bubble of business confidence showed few outward signs of deflating Fort Worth’s buoyant optimism. In 1930 the city was riding a building boom cultivated in its Five Year Work Program. Far-sighted businessmen and politicians in the late Twenties had convinced voters to pass $100 million worth of bond issues to finance roads and bridges and erect new public-use buildings to replace facilities the city had outgrown. Coupled with another $50-million share from a state improvement program, Fort Worth led all Texas cities in new building in 1929 and 1930.

Despite all the construction dollars circulating in the local economy, neither investors nor consumers were blind to the deepening national crisis. As if laughing to keep up their courage, some conventioners of an automobile industry meeting in Fort Worth scoffed at the idea that there was “anything depressing in the business outlook out where the West begins.” More cautious onlookers worried out loud, their very concerns threatening to snap the tenuous threads that continued to pull businessmen along. In an effort to boost morale the Chamber of Commerce sponsored a campaign called “Prosperity Month” to bring attention to areas of the economy that seemed to be doing well, such as retail sales and manufacturing. Perhaps businessmen even felt heartened when the general manager of the National Association of Insurance Writers told a Fort Worth audience: “Texans don’t know what a depression is. They ought to be in the East.”

Yet already, undercurrents of the business collapse were pulling down the weakest members of society. A wave of transients drawn to the Panther City by reports of construction jobs applied for work that was already taken. When the Star-Telegram
announced that engineers were ready to begin laying dams for Lakes Eagle Mountain and Bridgeport, local laborers had already filled every spot. Nevertheless, the headline proclaimed: “1,000 Unemployed Invade City to Seek Work on Two Dams.” The fragile prosperity in fact seemed to work against the city. An editorialist complained that Fort Worth was “fast becoming a mecca for ‘floating’ laborers [and] drifters.” Among the 165 unemployed men who took supper at the Union Gospel Mission early in 1930 were representatives of thirty-one states. The first pitiful cases that attracted public attention drew immediate action. When a North Side family was evicted from their home, they set up camp in a covered wagon along the Trinity River. How strange it must have seemed to passersby who saw the old pioneer wagon resting in the shadows of modern skyscrapers. What the curious found inside, however, was quite alarming. Around a little stove was a family huddling against a blue norther that had rolled in, caring for their matriarch who lay sick and emaciated. Parked nearby was an El Paso family of eight who had been heading for Kansas when their money ran out. Too proud to beg, the ill-clothed parents and their children sat shivering in their car, pondering their limited options. Authorities responded to the plight of these unfortunates by arranging for the sick woman to spend a few days at the City-County Hospital. They also set up a makeshift tourist camp for the others and anyone else who might find themselves in similar circumstances.

All too soon such heartrending scenes became commonplace, stretching the resources of relief agencies and well-to-do individuals to the limit. When 1930 finally ended, the City-County Hospital reported that 7,510 free cases during that year had almost overwhelmed them. Little did they know that in 1931 the line of patients unable to pay for the hospital’s services would grow to 36,433.

With so many men and women on the dole, city officials took measures to frustrate the “hobo, the panhandler, and the professional beggar.” A Bureau of Welfare

City fathers hoped their Five-Year Work Program, begun during the late Twenties, would keep the economy afloat until better times returned. Debuting in the first year of the new decade was the privately funded, nineteen-story Fair Building at Throckmorton and West Seventh that housed the eponymous department store and the Fort Worth Grain and Cotton Exchange.

Shorter than the Fair Building by three stories, but eminently more elegant, was the Sinclair Building at Main and West Fifth. Standing against the sky like an art deco jewel, its eagle finials and green window panels became awash at night in a dazzling luminosity.

The Fort Worth Public Market briefly defied the bleak outlook for agriculture, opening its doors in 1930 to fourteen commercial vendors and renting out stalls to 132 hopeful farmers.

The Medical Arts Building, here framed by Burnett Park, was a landmark on the west end of downtown. The building was completed in 1926.

The Fort Worth Star-Telegram Photograph Collection, Special Collections, University of Texas at Arlington Libraries, Arlington, Texas, AR 406 1-30-43.

The Medical Arts Building, here framed by Burnett Park, was a landmark on the west end of downtown. The building was completed in 1926.


COURTESY OF THE W. D. SMITH PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, AR 406 1-30-43.

Investigation and Registration established a network to screen out unsavory characters thought to be milking the system. What they found was that the vast majority were simply desperate. On one particular morning thirty unemployed men and women called on the bureau seeking jobs. Most of them showed up in work clothes and carried letters of recommendation and military veteran credentials—anything to gain an edge. They also made it clear they wanted work, not relief. Most of them were supporting families, and a few shed bitter tears when officials coaxed them into providing details of their conditions.

Some of the jobs the bureau was finding for its virtually exclusive Anglo clients involved work that whites had traditionally shunned. African Americans and Hispanics had routinely filled such positions as yard workers, janitors, common laborers, and maids. Yet now they found themselves being shouldered aside. Churches and an extended kinship network cultivated support for the jobless in the black community, but the barrios were still developing. An increasingly hostile mood and the efficient work of the Immigration and Naturalization Service resulted in the exodus of roughly half of the estimated five thousand Mexicanos who lived in the city in 1930. But, when INS agents persisted in harassing one North Side alien, he told them they could deport him, but added, “I’m coming back, so come back in thirty days and get me again.” The plucky response won the agents’ admiration; then and afterwards, they left him alone.

By the spring of 1932 it became clear that prosperity was no longer “just around the corner.” Some well-intended programs crusading under such banners as the “War on Depression” and the “Job Finders Club” did not seem to be making the soup lines any shorter. For the first time, officials at City Hall locked the front doors “to prevent its passageways from being converted into a dormitory by the disinherit ed ‘floaters.’” In the meantime a committee assembled by the Chamber of Commerce to assess the health of the city’s economy reluctantly reported: “It is the consensus of the executive committee on unemployment that a real emergency crisis exists in Fort Worth.”

To its credit, the Panther City responded. The Community Chest distributed thousands of meals to the destitute and organized a small army of volunteers to seek out those who were “too proud to beg.” In its busiest month the City Health and Welfare Department provided...
assistance for 2,667 families and boarded a hundred transients above the old Central Fire Station, where they enjoyed a hot shower, mattresses, and heavy woolen blankets. On New Years Day 1931 the Lena Pope Home for orphans bedded down its first twenty-five occupants, secure from the sleet that was falling outside.

Of course, the list of religious charities and the kindnesses of individuals were endless. More lighthearted than poignant was the good work of a congregation in rural Keller. When it learned that transients at the Union Gospel Mission were going hungry, they donated a live steer. Fortunately, one of the perplexed volunteers knew someone at the Blue Bonnet Packing Company, who dressed and prepared the animal free of charge. In another unusual case an insurance executive arranged to return a $3,500 home to an inconsolable client whose foreclosure had swept away $2,000 worth of equity.

Yet, while many gave, others took. Holdups became almost commonplace, and more than once, victims reported that apologetic robbers demanded money, intoning: “I hate to do this, but I must.” The level of desperation was marked by a willingness to risk life and freedom for a pittance. One frantic robber hit nine victims, but netted only $169.40 before his luck ran out.

A few days following his return, the gang was scheduled to meet at Stevens’ Handley residence, described by a Fort Worth Press reporter as a “feudal estate” of fifty acres, the house itself standing “like a fortress on a knoll that overlooked every possible entrance.” Three of the robbers, Jack Sturdivant and the Rutherford brothers, High and Shorty, showed up early and demanded their split of the loot, which no doubt antagonized their methodical-minded boss. The men’s insistence, however, brought only a payment in lead issued at near point-blank range, rendering their faces almost unrecognizable.

After stripping the dead men and packing their clothes in a hogwire cage, Stevens and W. D. May, his neighbor and closest associate, along with the other two robber-murderers, brothers M. T. and M. D. Howard, fashioned a similar truss for the bodies. They added two one-hundred-pound sacks of concrete for good measure. By the light of the moon, Stevens and his cohorts dumped the separate bundles into the Trinity River from bridges four miles apart. The scheme began to unravel when word filtered to police that the wives of Jack and Shorty were asking questions about their missing husbands. Directly, a seven-year-old boy spotted the bundle of clothing just beneath the surface where it was dropped. News of the discovery soon led a man living near the other bridge to report to police some suspicious activity.
that he had earlier assumed was simply “spooners” enjoying a tryst. It was there, just beyond the Allbright Bridge at First Street, where police located the bound corpses. Piecing together what had happened, the lawmen soon rounded up the four remaining members of the gang and charged them with murder and robbery.

Following a series of trials, the court condemned Stevens and May to the electric chair; the Howards got long prison sentences. Eventually, May was put to death. Stevens, however, won a reversal, and for his part in the robbery spent only sixteen years of a twenty-seven-year stretch in federal penitentiaries at Alcatraz and Leavenworth.

The story did not end there, however. An immediate search of the premises exposed all kinds of secret compartments in the walls, concealed entrances and exits, and even a hidden room under a stairwell. And although police turned up an estimated hundred thousand dollars in narcotics, only half of the loot from the T&P robbery was ever found. Over time, as the actual events grew dim, stories of ghosts and lucre grew in their place. The “house of mystery” for decades afterward continued to draw curious teenagers, treasure hunters, and junkies who plagued the succession of hapless owners.

Every bit as malicious were several outlaws on the FBI’s “Most Wanted” list who passed through Fort Worth during the decade. “Machine Gun” George Kelly hid out for a while at his mother-in-law’s house at 857 Mulkey Street, where neighbors occasionally spotted his sixteen-cylinder automobile rolling into the driveway. Later he used a shanty northwest of the city in the little community of Paradise, where he held a kidnapped Oklahoma oilman. When the dragnet began to center on North Texas, the FBI and local law enforcement officials met at the Blackstone Hotel to plan their strategy. Kelly got away that time, but he and his wife were later caught in Memphis, Tennessee. There, FBI agents burst into their hotel room, prompting Kelly to throw up his hands and plead, “Don’t shoot. It’s G-Men.” In that way, another euphemism entered the popular lexicon.

Bonnie and Clyde were also occasional Cowtown visitors. Once, the couple reportedly checked in at the Stockyards Hotel and occupied a strategic corner room overlooking North Main and Exchange. Just up the highway, outside of Grapevine, they had recently slain a motorcycle policeman, provoking a Star-Telegram headline that referred to Bonnie Parker as a “Cigar-Smoking Woman.” So incensed was her psychotic companion that he mailed a death threat to publisher Amon Carter, warning that “Another remark about my underworld mate and I will end such men as you might quick.”

Although none of the era’s most notorious outlaws made any gunpoint withdrawals from banks in Fort Worth, there were nevertheless two attempted holdups of the Stockyards National Bank. The first one came on a “dog day” August afternoon. A nervous, fidgety man, later identified as shop owner Nathan Martin, walked up to the counter and demanded $10,000: “I am desperate, I have a price on my head, and I don’t care anyway.” Under his arm he carried a satchel packed with nitroglycerin. While the bank’s vice president, Fred Pelton, went to vault, president W. L. Pier managed to slip away and telephone the police. Just as Pelton was returning, Martin spotted some officers and panicked. Whether he dropped the satchel or, as one report said, spiked the bottle of nitroglycerin on the marble floor, one thing was certain. A deafening explosion rocked the building, stripping the leaves from trees as far as a hundred yards away. Inside the lobby lay the mangled bodies of the robber and banker Pelton amidst the debris of twisted steel and splintered wood.

In the second attempt, a gang of four would-be robbers mistook a motorcycle rider for a policeman and confused his
backfiring engine for gunshots. Abandoning the heist, they piled into a black sedan and lit out for Saginaw, north of the city. After knocking out the back window they fired blindly at their phantom pursuer. By the time several citizens and a policeman actually did give chase, the outlaws had peppered the road with tacks they had brought along to cover their getaway. The only winners in the affair were local garages that specialized in fixing flats.

Rather than pariahs, the Depression-era bank robbers were heralded by many plain folk as heroes in the mold of the Wild Bunch. Like the Old West outlaws, these modern-day desperadoes were striking a blow for men and women who had lost their hard-earned savings when the institutions they had trusted became insolvent. The failure of one of the city's largest banks provided a bitter object lesson.

On the last day of January 1930, about a half hour before closing time, a run on the Texas National Bank emptied the vault, and soon it was discovered that the institution was $1.2 million in the red. Business leaders in the city tried to reassure the panicked customers of other banks that mismanagement, rather than general economic conditions, led to the failure. A judge agreed. After seizing their personal assets, he sentenced the bank's top two officers to the federal penitentiary at Leavenworth. The president, B. B. Samuels, learned of the verdict while in the hospital, recovering from an "acute heart condition" that saw the 170-pound man wither to a mere 70 pounds.

However repentant they were, the bankers got little sympathy in the wake of hardships suffered by former customers. One, a retired schoolteacher, was described as a "very gaunt woman with white hair pulled severely to the top of her head." For years she had lived frugally and saved $5,000 from a $100 monthly salary. Her loss forced her back into the classroom, where she taught the grandchildren of former students.

Even more tragic was the story of Louis B. Ward, a forty-seven-year old cashier of the failed bank. After losing his money he described as a "very gaunt woman with white hair pulled severely to the top of her head." For years she had lived frugally and saved $5,000 from a $100 monthly salary. Her loss forced her back into the classroom, where she taught the grandchildren of former students.

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Broadcasting live from Fort Worth, Wilbert Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel began seducing the masses in 1928 with his homespun radio program, sponsored by Light Crust Flour. The show, which reached an audience that covered much of the state, also launched the music career of Bob Wills, the "King of Western Swing," who soon left to form the legendary Texas Playboys. Riding his radio popularity, O'Daniel founded his own Hillbilly Flour Company in 1935 and filed for governor three years later at the urging of his listeners. "Pass the biscuits, Pappy!" became his campaign slogan, the Ten Commandments his platform. While he posed as a man of the people, he was in reality a product of public relations men and reneged on most of his Populist promises. Nevertheless, Texans again elected him governor in 1940, and in 1941 he narrowly defeated Lyndon B. Johnson in a special election for a vacant U.S. Senate seat. O'Daniel's folksy style proved an ill fit for that august chamber. Shunned by his colleagues and suffering a seven percent public approval rating, his political career ended in 1948.

At a time when fascism was seizing hearts and minds in other parts of the world, "Pappy" O'Daniel pandered many of the same transparent themes to gullible Texans, who ate it up as readily as his Hillbilly biscuits.

Bob Wills, who got his break helping the future governor peddle his Light Crust Flour, developed a sound—"western swing"—that has proven far more enduring than the politics of his one-time employer.

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climbed the steps of the police station and pulled out a .38 revolver. In front of an unsuspecting crowd milling about the street, he pressed the gun against his temple and pulled the trigger. A suicide note on the Texas National’s letterhead read: “To whom it may concern....My health is gone, my job is gone, and probably many of my friends. This is my only way of providing for my family—that is, by making available to them my life insurance money, that they may have something to live on.”

The failure of the Texas National inspired rumors that other Fort Worth banks were close to tanking, but once again the response by city leaders led to one of the decade’s finest hours. Bill McDonald, whose Fraternal Bank and Trust Company lost $209,500 that it had deposited in the Texas National, put an abrupt end to questions about the health of the institution on which the black community depended. “I was responsible for placing the loan,” he said, and, to his enduring credit, McDonald dipped into his own fortune and unceremoniously paid it back. The Fort Worth Star-Telegram did its part by focusing on the health of the financial community in general. It regularly highlighted reports of “all-time deposit records” and published lists of “cash balance on hand” along with gross deposits that showed the assets of local banks in the tens of millions.

After overcoming one last crisis early in 1931, it seemed as if Fort Worth had become inoculated against the grippe of panic that elsewhere continued to infect the industry like a fever it could not entirely shake. The month after the Texas National disaster, rumors began flying that the First National Bank was in similar trouble. At two o’clock on February 18 a herd of agitated customers invaded the lobby demanding their money. It was a classic “bank run,” or, in the Texanese of the institution’s largest depositor, W. T. Waggoner, a “money stampede.”

With the distressed crowd threatening to get unruly, directors of the First National Bank and city leaders such as Amon Carter and merchant William Monnig emerged from a quick, but decisive conference and announced that the institution would remain open all night to serve its depositors. For five hours the drama unfolded. Speech after speech implored customers to remain calm. The arrival of armed guards carrying in sacks of coin and currency from the Federal Reserve Bank in Dallas underscored the message. It was “Pappy” Waggoner, however, who finally won the depositors’ confidence. Promising to sell every cow and oil well, he raised a hand in oath: “I hereby pledge to you every cent I own and possess in this world that you will not lose a single dollar in this bank.”

Hesitant applause turned to light cheering when Waggoner repeated his vow. Then, the crisis turned into a party. Amon Carter had caterers bring in sandwiches and hot dogs, and two orchestras from the Hotel Texas filled the lobby with merry music. Officers looked the other way as customers passed around flasks of bootleg liquor, singing “Hail, Hail, the Gang’s All Here.” All the while cashiers serviced lines of men and women.

Fort Worth in 1936, looking east from West Seventh Street. By this time the worst of the Great Depression was over, and the local economy was beginning to show signs of vigor.

THE NEW FRONTIER
redosing their money. The next morning, there was more cash in the vault of the First National Bank than the previous day when the run began.

By the time newly inaugurated president Franklin D. Roosevelt announced his historic “banking holiday” in March 1933, an air of composure already prevailed in Fort Worth. The occasion even found most of its citizens in good spirits, many of them devising artful ways to barter. Hens were traded for gasoline and wheat for haircuts. A golf course manager swapped two apples he had just received on credit to a newsboy for a paper. At Leonard’s Department Store, brothers Obie and Marvin endeared themselves to their customers and eased the currency shortage by cashing checks partly in paper

scrip that was redeemable at their new store. When a client called on a banker and remarked how “quiet and serene” it seemed in the empty lobby, the official replied: “Yes...things are so quiet that you can hear the interest accumulate.”

At Texas Women’s College, the former co-ed Polytechnic, trustees were also searching for creative solutions to save their own troubled institution. They even tried selling one-by-eight-foot plots for a dollar apiece; in return contributors would have their names inscribed in a “Book of Life.” Faced with a declining enrollment, one administrator later claimed that the school’s tangible assets by 1932 consisted of “a side of hog meat [and a] cupboard of home-canned blackeyed peas.” TWC, it seemed, owed everybody in town. The principal argument against liquidation was that the property value was insufficient to make it worthwhile for prospective receivers to foreclose. Still, trustees were ready to throw in the towel, save for one dissenting vote—that of Reverend T. W. Brabham. In the end they decided to keep the school open on the condition that Brabham would become president. He agreed.

Miraculously, the good reverend led his flock across the Red Sea of ink that separated the college from solvency. One of his first decisions was to open the school to men as well as women. When the first mixed class enrolled during the fall of 1934, trustees had not yet changed the name to reflect the new status. Nevertheless, the Star-Telegram reported that the “boys enrolled at Texas Women’s College...are rapidly making their presence felt.” Several freshmen among them had pried the “W” and the “O” from the school’s sign, leaving “Texas Man’s College” to greet those arriving to the campus. By also refinancing its debt and convincing most of the faculty to stay on, the refashioned Texas Wesleyan College survived the crisis. By the end of the decade the enrollment was pushing four hundred, and the school was beginning to thrive.

Although hard times lingered, the worst seemed to be over. Fort Worth held its held its Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show during the banking holiday, yet there was little evidence of an economic pall. “Fort Worth has spirit,” wrote an enthused reporter who visited the Stockyards fair. “To see a town with its banners flying; a town which went right ahead in spite of moratoria and mourners, hell and high water, to stage its big annual show, one of the biggest shows of its kind in the United States. It demonstrates something unique in the form of civic spirit and undiscouraged civic enterprise—a first class, first hand demonstration of what America needs.”

What America also needed about that time was a stiff drink. In 1933 the passage of the Twenty-first Amendment repealing Prohibition injected some liquid cheer into the bleak despair of the times. On the evening when alcohol once again became legal in Fort Worth, raucous crowds packed the streets, while bands played How Dry I Am and strangers embraced like it was Armistice Day all over again. Chanting “We want beer,” throngs of merrymakers anxiously monitored the ballroom clocks at the Hotel Texas, the Blackstone, and Westbrook, waiting for midnight.

Within an hour after the stroke of twelve, bar owners were racing through the streets with permits to sell the forty-five carloads of suds that had rolled into town for the momentous occasion. With light ceremony, Assistant City Manager D. W. Carlson popped the top on the first legal beer that Fort Worth had seen in more than a decade. When the day was over, wholesalers estimated that Fort Worthians had knocked off 30,000 cases and guzzled another 12,800 gallons off of local taps. FDR’s popular edict also resulted in a modest construction boom and added to the public purse with the building of taverns and the collection of tax receipts. Among the winners was
Ben E. Keith whose distributorship grew into a successful wholesaling firm, propelling the tireless booster into the presidency of the Chamber of Commerce.

The same irreverent spirit that attended the repeal of Prohibition reached new heights in 1936 when the city openly thumbed its nose at Dallas by hosting what it called the Frontier Centennial. A kind of outlaw exposition, it was thrown in defiance of its neighbor's state-sanctioned observance of the Texas Republic's hundredth anniversary. Neither Fort Worth nor Dallas existed in 1836, a fact that even Amon Carter appreciated by assuming that San Antonio or Houston would be awarded the site. In the end, Dallas amassed a war chest that outweighed any historical merit.

The unsuspected coup jolted the Panther City's leadership out of their armchairs at the Fort Worth Club. Until then, society women had been planning a centennial fair that would have scarcely rivaled the Diamond Jubilee of the previous decade. The new circumstances now demanded a Texas-sized rebuttal. Amon Carter, William Monnig, and a handful of other Fort Worth millionaires swung into action. After gaining promises from the Public Works Administration for construction dollars, they recruited Broadway producer Billy Rose, who in the space of three months transformed a one-time horse pasture into a cross between a Ziegfeld extravaganza and the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show. The battle cry “Fort Worth For Entertainment; Dallas For Education” exploded across billboards and barns around the Southwest, skimming off some of the multitudes whose tourist dollars would otherwise have fattened the gate at the State Fair Grounds in Dallas.

The Frontier Centennial opened a month late, but in grand style, trumpeting a four-month run that would give its well-heeled neighbor to the east all the competition it could handle. Packed aboard a Wells Fargo stagecoach, triumphant city fathers accompanied by Governor James Allred and a bevy of other Texas politicians and notables—all elaborately outfitted in Shady Oak Stetsons and gaudy western gear—whooped onto the show grounds, hollering and waving. Perched on top beside the moneybox was the president’s son, Elliott Roosevelt. Three thousand miles away, fishing off the coast of Maine, his father pressed a button, and by the magic of twentieth-century technology FDR cut the ribbon that officially opened the festivities.

As it shaped up, the Frontier Centennial was an odd mixture that spanned the range of entertainment from county fair sideshows to Broadway musicals. Appropriately, workers recreated a frontier village, “Sunset Trail,” to occupy the center of the exposition grounds. Otherwise, Rose lined up agricultural exhibits and “freak shows” that included such oddities as a mind-reading dog and a 7’5” giant. He also put together a kind of variety show, “The Last Frontier,” that featured a herd of bison, cowboys and Indians, and sixty-eight teams of square dancers. On a nearby rise, 180 monkeys frolicked; a lucky eight comprised an all-simian band directed by one “Joe Peanuts.” Jumbo, a colossal...
musical circus, commanded its own building with state-of-the-art sound and lighting. Then, there were the “Six Tiny Rosebuds,” a chorus line of ample women who could have out see-sawed TCU’s starting linemen. The drawing cards that pulled in the crowds, though, were Sally Rand and Casa Mañana.

The provocative Rand had made the fan dance an artistic, if controversial, expression of interpretive dance. But the mobs of men who packed the Pioneer Palace each night left it to others to quibble over what was art and what was entertainment. They came to see the show. In Fort Worth, Rand traded the plumes for balloons. Bathed in a blue spotlight, she teased audiences by dancing gracefully behind the large bubbles, occasionally betraying flashes of her voluptuous body. Rand was also hostess of her own “Nude Ranch.” Inside the “exhibition” hall, fifteen beauties wearing nothing but cowboy hats and boots, and holstered guns and bandanas, tossed beach balls and pitched horseshoes behind a floor-to-ceiling wire screen to keep the more enthusiastic patrons from joining them in the fun.

As titillating as the flesh shows were, the crown jewel of the Frontier Centennial was Casa Mañana. It boasted the world’s largest revolving stage, turned by a 450-horsepower motor that took almost two minutes to complete a revolution. Built on tracks submerged in a man-made lagoon, the stage appeared to be floating. Along the rim, forty-three fountains shot up a curtain of water colored by a rainbow of lights. The stage sets were just as elaborate. As the massive wheel turned, renowned bandleader Paul Whiteman conducted two orchestras while recreated scenes from such venues as the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, the Paris Exposition of 1925, and the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress Exposition overawed spellbound audiences. Even Dallas reporters openly called the show “staggering,” admitting that it “beggars description.” Expressing apologies to Julius Caesar, the Dallas Journal’s Fairfax Nisbet wrote: “We went to Fort Worth, we saw, and will break down and confess we were conquered.”

Despite losing almost a hundred thousand dollars, the Frontier Centennial gave Fort Worth a boost that could not be measured in hard currency. The exposition drew over a million visitors who sorely needed a respite from the psychological doldrums of the Great Depression. For one shining moment the national spotlight turned on Fort Worth. Attending the festivities were such notables as novelist...
Ernest Hemmingway, Vice-President John Nance Garner, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, flying ace Jimmy Doolittle, and legions of politicians, show business personalities, and columnists of every leading newspaper in the country. In later years William Monnig reflected: “Fort Worth was flat on its back until we put on that show.”

Ironically the Will Rogers Memorial Center, considered by planners to be the key to the exposition’s success, did not open until after the season ended. The sole physical survivor of the centennial, the complex combined the Will Rogers Coliseum, Auditorium, and Memorial Tower, highlighted with ornate tile friezes, brightly colored bas-relief murals, and stunning geometric designs. To secure funding from the Public Works Administration, Amon Carter in 1935 had traveled to Washington, D.C., and told anyone who would listen that such a venue would be a perfect home for the city’s Southwestern Exposition, Fat Stock Show, and Rodeo. When PWA director Harold Ickes turned down the project, Carter went straight to his intimate friend, the president. As the story went, Postmaster General James Farley told Carter to wait outside the Oval Office, but purposely left the door ajar, knowing the publisher would be eavesdropping. Raising his voice, Farley exclaimed: “Amon wants to build a cowshed.” To which FDR bellowed, “Cowshed!” Just then Carter burst through the door to object, but hardly got a word out before Roosevelt and Farley doubled over with laughter. A few months later Carter received a note from Jesse Jones, director of the New Deal’s Reconstruction Finance Corporation: “Your cowshed has been approved.”

The PWA also provided funds to build roads and bridges, the Botanical Gardens, a new library, a sanatorium, and thirteen new schools and an athletic stadium. The Gardens, started in 1933, was the first federal relief project of the many developments that helped revive the city’s flagging employment. Inspired by some of the finest European parks, the gardens transformed a former gravel quarry into one of the city’s most enduring amenities. Queen
Tut the elephant, which had grown considerably larger since her fifth birthday party during the previous decade, aided in the construction effort by wallowing out a clay seal for an otherwise porous manmade lagoon. The piecemeal additions of the zoo and Trinity Park, the Botanical Gardens, and the Will Rogers Memorial Center laid the foundation for a sprawling cultural district that in later decades would come to rival much larger American cities.

If New Deal spending and the Frontier Centennial helped ease the pain of the Great Depression, football provided a transcendent glory all its own. No group of high school gridders was more worthy of adoration during these years of want than the boys of Masonic Home, an institution for orphans and dependents of widows. Always outmanned and outnumbered the “Mighty Mites,” as they were called, earned a Davidic reputation for playing—and beating—much larger schools. Whether at home or some faraway venue, a Masonic Home game was an event. On occasion police had to shuttle players from the courthouse to Northside’s LaGrave Field, because game traffic had turned the streets into a parking lot. The boys did not field a band, but the Shriners’ fez-and-tasseled drum and bugle corps filled in admirably.

During a four-season stretch, from 1930 to 1933, the Home lost only one game, and that to a junior college. Their small-school classification played only to the regional level during those years, but in 1934 they were “voted up” and seized the opportunity by going all the way to the state finals. At Corsicana they fought the brawny home team to scoreless tie. Over 12,000 fans crowded into the 8,000-seat stadium, and at one point a section of overpacked bleachers collapsed under the weight. Although obviously outmatched, the Mighty Mites held back five Corsicana scoring threats deep in their own territory. The game ended, in fact, with the home team on the six-inch line.

Other Fort Worth schools—North Side, Paschal, and Arlington Heights—also drew large crowds, which won the city a PWA contract for a new stadium, Farrington Field. Named for recently deceased Fort Worth I.S.D. Athletic Director Ervin Stanley Farrington, the twenty-thousand-seat facility opened in time for the 1939

TCU’s Davey O’Brien arrives at New York’s Downtown Athletic Club to claim the 1938 Heisman Trophy.

COURTESY OF TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, MARY COUTS BURSETT LIBRARY, FORT WORTH, TEXAS.

A post parade at Arlington Downs. Until pari-mutuel betting in Texas was outlawed, the track was a popular entertainment destination.

COURTESY OF THE FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, 57-405 3-6-8.
football season and instantly gained recognition as one of the finest public school stadiums in the Southwest.

TCU likewise broke ground for a new stadium in 1930. Eventually it would be renamed for Amon Carter, its biggest fan and the man most responsible for pushing the bonds that built it. Carter, sporting those omnipresent purple and white boots, followed the team everywhere, occasionally bursting into the dressing room to give half-time pep talks and exhorting the players to victory from the sidelines. In 1936 the Horned Frogs traveled to San Francisco for a game with undefeated Santa Clara, and there the publisher led the school band down Market Street to the team's hotel, where he was guest of honor for the welcoming banquet. Carter's bragging compelled his hosts to badger him into backing up the tall talk with his checkbook. Ordering the hotel staff to bring out a No. 2 washtub, Carter challenged the Californians to fill it up, pledging: "I'll cover anything you bet." Over ten thousand dollars flowed over the top and onto the floor, eventually landing in Carter's pockets when TCU upset the "unbeatable" Broncos, 9-0.

It was on the arm of "Slingin' Sammy" Baugh, however, that TCU rose to national prominence. The tall, lean West Texan, behind the blocking of I. B. Hale and fellow All-American Ki Aldrich, earned the reputation in many circles as the greatest quarterback ever to play college football. In one of those frequent "games of the century" Baugh and TCU hosted an SMU team at the end of the 1935 season that matched the Horned Frogs' perfect 10-0 record. Long after fans packed the new thirty-thousand-seat stadium, men were still leaping over wire fences from the tops of automobiles to get into the game. Sportswriting giant Grantland Rice of the New York Sun covered the contest, declaring it was "the most desperate football this season has known from coast to coast."

With seven minutes left to play and the scored tied 14-14, SMU's Bob Finley heaved a fifty-yard bomb out of punt formation to a leaping, twisting Bobby Wilson who pulled in the game winning pass. Behind 20-14, Baugh twice led his teammates deep into the Mustangs' end of the field only to see his receivers drop precision-drilled passes, which cost them the game. Despite the loss to SMU, on a cold but glorious New Year's Day, 1936, with diagonal sheets of rain pelting the Sugar Bowl field, TCU salvaged a share of the national championship, besting LSU 3-2.

As good as Baugh was, it was his understudy Davey O'Brien who led TCU to its only undisputed national championship at the end of the 1938 season. His gritty play and the team's almost magical success won the 5’7”, 150-pound quarterback the Heisman Trophy. With Amon Carter sitting atop a stagecoach beside O’Brien, the normally unflappable New Yorkers watched agog as the cowboy-clad contingent of the publisher and the quarterback, the TCU coaching staff, and the team captains waved and hollered as they made their way down the middle of Broadway to the Downtown Athletic Club.

Riding the wave of gridiron success and New Deal construction, Fort Worth rejoiced in 1938 when Forbes Magazine reported that the Panther City also resided in the economic center of the "No. 1 territory of the Nation." City leaders declared that in Fort Worth the Great Depression was officially over. If this dark chapter had obscured progress in the march of time, its evidence was nevertheless everywhere to be seen and felt. In 1930 the last of Fort Worth's founding fathers, Khleber Van Zandt, died peacefully in his sleep. Also passing from the scene during the 1930s...
was the old Carnegie Library, over which local women’s clubs at the turn of the century had fought so valiantly to acquire. Gone, too, was the vitriol that attended the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan. In its place, local religious leaders Hastings Harrison, Ernest May, William Margowski, and I. E. Horwitz headed a local chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, organized in 1939 to “promote justice, amity, understanding and co-operation” among the city’s several active faiths.

In the material culture, motor use continued to grow. The first traffic signals, featuring bells that rang each time a light changed, began regulating the movement of cars, buses, and motorcycles in 1931. Fully enclosed vehicles equipped with radios necessitated a switch to silent signals in 1937. Downtown, parking meters began popping up along the sidewalks in 1936, steadily growing in number from three hundred to about two thousand within a decade.

Finally, on New Year’s Day 1939 “Old Number 270,” the city’s officially designated last streetcar, “rumbled down Main Street…and on to the car barns and oblivion.” A sense that the Panther City was closing a quaint chapter in its record of development gripped those who came to watch, but most everyone was in agreement that it was time for the slow and virtually riderless lines to go the way of the old nickelodeons and vaudeville that disappeared a generation earlier.

In 1925 a newspaper report had boasted that together the city’s streetcars logged the improbable distance of 18,000 miles a day “or the distance from Fort Worth to Hong Kong and back again.” Yet the very next year, when passenger demands called for a new transportation artery between Oakhurst and downtown, officials heralded things to come by adding a bus service, rather than laying new rails. Within a few years the city council was regularly ordering the removal of track, attributing several fatal accidents to poorly maintained rails. By 1938 a fleet of 140 buses was serving riders, and officials of the Fort Worth Transit Company were peddling the last of their serviceable cars to other cities.

Aboard that final trip was one J. M. Higgins, who, as a boy of thirteen had appeared on the scene at the precise moment when the Panther City’s first electric trolley made its maiden run. He and some other boys had been fishing, Higgins recalled. “We passed the barn and saw the electric car moving out. I jumped on it.” A few blocks later he was “put off” for not paying a fare. Like the first time, his last ride was also free.

The Fort Worth of streetcars, silent movies, and bootleg liquor had matured on the breadlines and government teat of the Great Depression. Future generations would look back fondly at the Frontier Centennial, the illustrious football teams, and even the era’s character building experience with the same sense of nostalgia that had attended the last streetcar ride. As the decade came to an end, it was becoming clear that another great test lay before America and Fort Worth.