The postwar Fifties for America and Fort Worth were prosperous, but precarious, times. The Panther City, as a center for national defense, enjoyed a windfall in federal contracts. But for men and women who drew a paycheck from Uncle Sam, the thought that their work had placed a nuclear bulls-eye over North Texas was never far from the back of their minds. Living where the West begins also meant being on the hither edge of the Old South, and Fort Worthians—often clumsily—came to grips with the problems of integration. The collective mind, however, would remember the decade more for the rise of the suburbs and the flourishing arts district that propelled Fort Worth into the first tier of American high culture. The homogenizing influences of television, mass markets, and popular culture diluted the “Cowtown” identity that city fathers over the years had alternately embraced and pushed away. Yet a new personality and a new Fort Worth was emerging—part western and fully cosmopolitan—that would set a tone for cultivating the best aspects of both cultures.

During the 1950s the population of Tarrant County beyond the corporate limits of Fort Worth grew faster than the city itself. While Fort Worth added about seventy-seven thousand new souls, suburban growth registered almost a hundred thousand, transforming once-rural pastures and dirt roads into grids of tract homes and busy streets and highways. Commercial growth in the new suburbs at first struggled to adjust to changing patterns of life. “You could fire a cannon down a busy thoroughfare at midday and not hit anyone,” one Hurst businessman complained of his bedroom community. Everyone, it seemed, had driven into Fort Worth to begin the workday. At suburban strip centers that sprang up like mushrooms along major highway arteries, entrepreneurs wrung their hands, hoping that weekend shoppers would make up for the lack of business during the workweek. Consequently, that figurative cannon would have found few targets on downtown streets at night. “In by eight and out at five” became the routine for most men and women who worked at the oil and financial companies that dominated the downtown business district.

The failed Gruen Plan, named for Viennese urban planner Victor Gruen, was a visionary concept that promised to turn downtown into a futuristic maze of shops and offices. Perhaps it might even have saved the central business district from the inner city decay that became particularly noticeable during the 1950s. Texas Electric President J. B. Thomas championed this model of urban efficiency, painting serene images of landscaped plazas where visitors and workers could stroll beneath arches and enjoy the gurgling of waterfalls and fountains without the irritating din of downtown traffic. Yet the prospect of a leisure city dominated by electric shuttles and skywalks seemed too far-out...
for automobile-dependent Texans, whose practical sense leaned more toward getting in and getting out than stopping to smell roses.

Nevertheless the skyline did change significantly for the first time since the commercial building boom of the 1920s. In 1956 the Continental National Bank constructed a thirty-one-story tower capped with an enormous revolving clock—the time lit up on two sides and “CNB” emblazoned on the other two faces—that squinting eyes could make out even from the distant ridges far beyond the central business district. Down on the streets, however, plywood gradually replaced many of the windows in the recently vibrant heart of the city. The big department stores such as Leonards and Monnigs managed to keep old customers and attract new ones, but other retailers and entertainment managers came to recognize that people shopped and played where they lived.

Fort Worth was far from dead, however. Just across the Trinity River its social pulse registered a strong beat inside the developing arts district. In the spring of 1953 the Fort Worth Art Museum staged its “Groundbreakers’ Ball,” arguably the most imaginative kickoff in the city’s history. Five hundred industrialists and society mavens turned out in costume—some as laborers, some as picketers, other as parts of buildings, and even a group who comprised a prison chain gang. Ted Weems and his orchestra supplied the music, while the guests danced and sipped cocktails and, with a fine Cowtown flair, feasted on gourmet cuisine served from the back of a chuck wagon.

Even as the art museum was breaking ground, the newly christened Children’s Museum next door was captivating groups of youngsters with a model of its neighbor-to-be. From its modest beginnings at the De Zavala School in 1945, the museum quickly outgrew two stately old mansions on Summit Avenue. In 1950 the city council passed a bond issue to build a permanent home just west of the Will Rogers complex. In the weeks before the opening, a tax measure came before voters asking them to provide even more money for maintenance. An open house, anxious officials hoped, would silence critics and swing the vote in their favor. The two-hour walkthrough succeeded beyond their expectations. Nearly four thousand children and parents lined up outside, some five hours before the doors opened, waiting for the chance to be among the first to experience the wide array of exhibits and hands-on activities from the worlds of natural science and history as well as art and astronomy. To the relief of museum officials, the tax bill passed.

The Fifties was an exciting time to be a child in Fort Worth. At the Forest Park Zoo they could take in just about everything that swims, slithers, walks, and flies. Among the new features included an aquarium, a reptile house, and an aviary that enhanced the park’s growing collection of land animals. For a brief, shining moment Queen Tut pushed all the new exhibits from the forefront of publicity. The baby elephant that...
had gorged on peanuts at her fifth birthday party in the Twenties and wallowed out a lagoon at Trinity Park the next decade had grown into a venerable old monarch by 1956. When a rogue elephant felled her longtime handler, Jim Brown, Queen Tut charged in and shoulder-blocked the crazed animal, gingerly keeping the zookeeper safe beneath her giant haunches. She then absorbed two vicious assaults before a frantic team of park workers could pull the near-lifeless man to safety. Now, concluded Texana columnist Frank X. Tolbert, “you can understand why the biggest animal at the Fort Worth zoo is the biggest favorite with Jim Brown.”

Running a close second among park-goers was the “Tiny T&P,” the labor of love created by former railroader Bill Hames. A miniature streamliner with eight blue and silver coaches, and another model of a wood-burning locomotive with a like number of antique-looking cars, ran a course that stretched along a scenic five-and-a-half mile...
roadbed through Forest and Trinity parks from a station at the zoo. On the occasion of the ride’s debut, the Fort Worth Press’s Jack Gordon chortled: “Gloomy rail moguls who keep taking off passenger trains, in listless surrender to other modes of transportation, should see what Mr. Hames is doing.”

At the time, the Tiny T&P was billed as the longest miniature train in the world. Hames had a worker walk the track at San Antonio’s Brackenridge Park with an odometer, just to make sure. During its first weekend the amusement drew 10,500 riders. Another three thousand long-faced children and adults had their money refunded as the sun lowered in the sky on the train’s final runs. There would be other weekends, though. In its first year and a half the little engines pulled over a half-million passengers.

Perhaps nothing in the emerging cultural district, however, generated more excitement than the new Casa Mañana. A wistful John Ohendalski informed Press readers in the fall of 1957 that the “dream-memory” of Fort Worth’s “closest brush with big-time show business was waking up.” The announcement credited local oilman J. H. Snowden as the project’s chief backer. As envisioned, two imposing Kaiser Aluminum Geodesic Domes would comprise the new Casa—one that would house a theater-playhouse, the other for hosting banquets and conventions.

Upon its completion in 1958, Casa Mañana was only half as big as originally planned, but under its single dome there was “plenty to whoop about,” declared columnist Gordon. The first season—opening with Can-Can and closing with Call Me Madam—played to eighty-four percent of capacity, “a remarkably high figure in any league,” the newspaperman continued.

Of all the shows that summer and fall, the most memorable single performance, according to Casa producer Melvin Dacus, came on a night when a fierce storm cut off the building’s electricity just as Beverly Sills began singing “Villa” in The Merry Widow. The audience at first began to stir, but, as Sills continued, they settled into their seats and drank in the beautiful melody that had taken on an emotional quality amid the darkened playhouse.

Billy Rose, no doubt, would have loved it. The creator of the original Casa Mañana never returned to see his legacy. He did, however, visit Fort Worth once, in 1954, to attend a testimonial luncheon. Among those gathered to honor him were thirteen of the old Frontier Centennial board. “Almost everything good that’s happened to me since stemmed from what happened here,” Rose confided.

For old-times sake the showman accompanied a smaller group to the grounds. There, he found only one building left standing, the Pioneer Palace. It all must have seemed so far away. Where once the multitudes ooh’d-and-ah’d to Rose’s overblown extravaganza, the bubble dances of Sally Rand, and the music of...
Paul Whiteman and His Orchestra, there was little left of the original Casa but a single star-shaped fountain and the rusting skeleton of the revolving stage.

The march of time also trod past some of the city’s leaders, men whose lives had shaped the economic and social landscape of the Panther City. In 1950 Fort Worth mourned the passing of Bill McDonald. Two years later the First Baptist’s fiery J. Frank Norris died. Joe T. Garcia, only fifty-four, followed him the next year, but his name survived in the restaurant that continued his legacy. Then, on June 23, 1955, Star-Telegram subscribers awoke to read: “Amon Giles Carter died at 8:20 p.m. Thursday.”

From across the country, an outpouring of calls, letters, and telegrams flooded the newspaper’s offices. Lyndon Johnson, whom Carter had once snubbed, praised the publisher on the floor of the Senate: “[H]e walked with cattleman and kings, with crop farmers and with presidents…” Such was the provenance of all those condolences. Upwards of fifteen thousand people turned out for the funeral. Among a sea of flowers was an arrangement sent by Billy Rose in the shape of a Shady Oak Stetson. Then, with a magnificent West Texas sunset for a backdrop, the man who had played cowboy for Fort Worth and America was lowered into his final resting place.

Even before Carter’s passing, it appeared as if his own success had begun to outgrow him. The economic scope and social diversity attending all the ventures he had fostered also bred mavericks who determined to break free of his lasso, men uninhibited by the size of the loop or how tight it promised to close on them. One of those rare individuals was a young man of unflagging fortitude, a thirty-one-year-old veteran B-24 bombardier from Weatherford with thirty combat missions to his credit. In the midterm congressional election of 1954, he challenged the publisher’s handpicked incumbent in the Democratic primary, House Representative Wingate Lucas. With the rival candidate gaining ground as the summer date of the plebiscite neared, Carter began trying to bully him from the political stage. On one hand, the Star-Telegram passively ignored his candidacy. Shaking a figurative finger, the upstart scolded the publisher for giving a wildly successful political dinner “less space than an obituary of [a] Chinese laundryman in Seattle who once passed through Fort Worth.” On the other hand, the challenger felt Carter’s full force land on him two days before the election in the form of a front-page

All roads lead to Fort Worth along the race’s routes.

To help promote the 1951 world premier of the movie Fort Worth, starring Randolph Scott, Cowtown promoters organized a unique horse race. As four contestants converged on the theater district from each compass point, updates via radio apprised those lining the routes of their progress, while loudspeakers near the finish line kept the multitudes assembled there in a state of anxious anticipation. Veteran rodeo star Bob Rothel of Weatherford (above) broke the tape in less than twenty-four minutes. The movie star himself, dressed in the black outfit he wore in the film, presented Rothel with a three-foot trophy and a new saddle donated by the Leddy Boot and Saddle Company. After the presentation, seven thousand jubilant moviegoers streamed into the Worth, Hollywood, Palace, and Majestic Theaters to enjoy the show. At the time, it was the largest crowd ever to attend a movie premier.
editorial extolling Lucas’ record, while dismissing his own detailed agenda as nothing but ‘vague promises.’

The very next day, the inspired challenger published an eloquently tenacious editorial of his own, one for which he had to dig into his own pocket to pay the advertisers’ rate of almost a thousand dollars. On July 23, 1954, in “An open letter to Mr. Amon G. Carter and the Fort Worth Star-Telegram,” the candidate declared: “You have at last met a man…who is not afraid of you.” While striking a balance between castigating the publisher for “printing only that which you WANTED the people to read” and praising him for “the many wonderful things you have done for Fort Worth and our area,” he reminded him that others also “aspired…to try to do things for our area and our people.” Closing with the promise that “I will be YOUR Congressman, just as I will EVERY-ONE’S Congressman,” the challenger closed: “Very sincerely yours, Jim Wright.”

The next day the people spoke with their ballots, and Wright came away the winner. The victorious election launched a thirty-four-year career that saw him rise to the speaker’s chair of the lower chamber. He also won over Amon Carter. To the publisher’s credit, he did not have to run the letter that was so critical of him and his newspaper. Neither did he have to pen a congratulatory editorial following the defeat of the man Wright had called his “personal, private Congressman.” But he did. Perhaps Carter saw a bit of himself in Wright, admonishing the young man to take to his new job, “and hop to it in full force and good humor.” Carter, of course, would soon pass from the scene, leaving Wright to continue building on his legacy by bringing home billions of dollars and thousands of jobs to Fort Worth and its constituent region in the form of government contracts and business development.

Like death, change, of course, was inevitable and not without its own peculiar pain. It went by many names, but as suburbia transformed the recently bucolic countryside, its appellation became “progress.” Azle turned into a haven for blue-collar defense workers, putting such a strain on the school that administrators were forced to divide the auditorium into four classrooms. Little Benbrook, home to about thirty people—mostly farmers—during the recent war grew by 548 percent during the decade. Across Little Fossil Creek from Haltom City the brand new community of Richland Hills carved out a spot in the awakening countryside. Everywhere, noted an alarmed columnist, the “little cities about Fort Worth are gobbling up everything in sight, stretching miles from their legitimate boundaries.”

Within the corporate limits of the Panther City itself Cass Edwards II ended years of speculation when he announced that the 4,020-acre ranch his great-grandfather had founded on the southwestern edge of the city would be broken up by a master plan of subdivisions and strip centers. “We hope to make this the most outstanding exclusive development in the Southwest,” he said, “one that the city can be proud of.” Opening up the sprawling ranch, lying between Westcliff and Ridglea, removed the barrier that separated TCU and Arlington Heights. During the Fifties it would quickly begin to fill in.

At Arlington the familiar sight of the well house at Center and Main was replaced in 1951 by a traffic signal. Community leaders believed the mineral tap from which generations of town folk had sipped and filled jugs had simply become a hazard. The well whose rich mineral crystals were once packaged and distributed across the country was unceremoniously capped; plans to pipe the water to a sidewalk fountain never materialized.

As Arlington grew into a bedroom community for both Fort Worth and Dallas during the late 1940s it took action to plan its future. City Manager Albert S. Jones
in 1950 marketed the strategically located suburb as a “growing city where real estate is big business and industry is not wanted.” Reality, however, soon dictated otherwise. Two years later General Motors announced that it had selected Arlington for the site of a million-square-foot assembly plant.

Shortly afterwards, at the former Arlington Downs where legal horseracing had enjoyed a brief heyday in the 1930s, H. C. Miller bellowed to his wrecking crew atop the weathered grandstand: “Rip it up, and throw it down.” The site soon became home to another massive industrial development, the Great Southwest Corporation, which joined GM as well as recent arrivals American Can, Menasco Aircraft, and a host of smaller businesses that manufactured everything from dolls and ceramics to furniture and an item that the Atomic Energy Commission would not reveal.

Orchestrating most of the action was “Boy Mayor” Tommy Vandergriff. Only twenty-five years old when he won the job in 1951, this son of local powerbroker Hooker Vandergriff soon made his own name. Critics had predicted that the flashy USC grad, whose business experience centered mostly around promoting sports contests and beauty pageants, would be a “playboy mayor concerned with nothing but fluff.”

He quickly proved them wrong. A tireless booster for Arlington, Vandergriff guided the well-planned and deliberate growth of an infant city poised to explode. The eight-thousand-odd souls who inhabited Arlington when Vandergriff became mayor topped 120,000 by the time he retired in 1977. With characteristic modesty, a manner that would endear him to fellow citizens, Vandergriff shrugged to an interviewer in 1957: “I’m not going to take credit for any of it.” Citing geography, timing, and harmony he declared: “Arlington grew because of an amazing civic spirit, a community-wide desire.”

Land prices in Arlington during the 1950s skyrocketed in some places from $300 an acre to over $3,000. The rigorously zoned city shone like a beacon to fastidious residential developers. During the decade over a hundred subdevelopments took root on Arlington’s bald prairies and cut into dense stands of post-oaks where the picturesque Cross Timbers intruded. At one point the city water department was connecting upwards of five hundred new homes a month. Supermarkets and shopping centers sprang up at the crossroads of major intersections that were dirt roads only a few years earlier.

At local schools, growing faculties greeted more than a thousand new students annually, compelling the Arlington I.S.D. to push a $3-million building bond in 1955, the first of several mammoth packages. To facilitate the sudden, but not entirely unexpected growth, the city dammed up Village Creek in 1956. The site where county namesake General Edward H. Tarrant had fought bands of Caddos, Tonkawas, and other Indians living in extended settlements along the bottomland that gave the creek its name, soon lay all but forgotten beneath the waters of the new Lake Arlington.

Anticipating the rural growth just to the north of Arlington, Bill Austin moved his
family from Fort Worth to Hurst in 1949, where he traded the log book in his commercial truck for an apron. There he managed Emma’s Café, a roadside eatery that served drivers who plowed the route along Highway 183 (now Highway 10) that connected Fort Worth and Dallas. It became a busier road in 1950, when work crews replaced the pocked asphalt with a new concrete surface. Nevertheless, the dusty lanes that fed into 183 betrayed few hints of the suburban phenomenon that was about to develop. In the Hurst of 1950, phone service was not yet a year old, and men and women still drew water from family wells. The teenagers who befriended Bill Austin’s young daughter anticipated country and western dances and bragged on the animals they were grooming for the 4-H Club.

All of that was about to change. Holding up a copy of the *Star-Telegram*, Principal C. C. Bodine on March 27, 1951 announced to his student body that the Bell Aircraft Corporation had bought a fifty-five-acre tract of land just up the highway that would soon become the site of a $3-million helicopter factory. “Take a good look at Hurst,” Bodine intoned dramatically, “It will never be the Hurst as you have known it.”

The announcement by company President Lawrence D. Bell came on the heels of a countrywide search that settled on Fort Worth, as he put it, “because of its strategic location, its large population…and our company's excellent relations with Convair…and other aircraft and industrial organizations in the region.” As envisioned the plant would employ two thousand local people as well as a cadre of managers who would swap the frigid winters at Buffalo, New York, for the sweltering summers of North Texas. At the time, the conflict in Korea was raging, and Bell helicopters were gaining wide and favorable publicity for evacuating wounded soldiers and taking part in reconnaissance missions. Adding Cold War imperatives into the mix assured that new government contracts would make the plant a growing force in the emerging economy of “Greater” Fort Worth.

Sure enough, Bell during the 1950s posted new orders in the tens of millions of dollars from the Army, Navy, and Marines. Within three years after turning out its first whirlybird, the Hurst plant grew into a $15-million factory with 3,500 employees. It also earned a promotion, as one correspondent reported, when workers pulled down the Bell Aircraft sign that signified its division status and placed in its stead a new logo proclaiming the Bell Helicopter Corporation, an independent subsidiary of the booming transportation giant.

As Bell churned out its turbine-powered HU-1s, the first generation of “Hueys,” it also developed new models and experimented
with other designs that were better left on drawing boards. The most radical project proposed an atomic-powered helicopter the length of a football field. A close match was the Dynasoor—short for “dynamic soaring”—a joint effort between Bell and Convair that was touted as more of a spaceship than a jet airplane. Its engineers foresaw a craft that would be boosted into the fringes of the earth’s atmosphere by rockets. There, in the rarified air, it would be capable of reaching a speed of 17,500 mph and circle the globe in the stunning time of an hour and a half. Yet another experiment, the XV-3, produced a “convertiplane” prototype that passed wind tunnel tests at Moffett Field in California. The tilt-wing aircraft showed much promise, but its designers never quite worked out the bugs. Stubbornly, it remained on the planning horizon, to the regret of some who saw the project grow into the troubled V-22 Osprey.

The same year that Bell opened its factory gates, the first passenger flight touched down at the ill-fated Greater Fort Worth International Airport, midway between the Panther City and Dallas. Just after World War II, businessmen and local officials in Fort Worth became convinced that Meacham Field was simply inadequate for the traffic generated by American Airlines, Braniff, and Delta. Dallas, on the other hand, chafed at the way its upstart neighbor was trying to stack the economic deck on what was supposed to be a cooperative venture. Petty bickering over the proposed location of the terminal finally provoked Dallas to back out and concentrate on improving Love Field. Meacham, meanwhile, languished.

Briefly it looked as if Fort Worth had pulled off its greatest coup over Dallas since staging the Frontier Centennial back in 1936. After the Civil Aeronautics Administration approved Fort Worth’s application for federal funds to build the colossal airport, Dallas congressman Frank Wilson convinced the House Appropriations Committee to kill it. Yet, like so many times before, a delegation of the Panther City’s “Who’s Who” descended on Washington, D.C. and convinced senators to revive the bill. Seemingly Fort Worth had won the contest, when, on April 25, 1953, a welcoming committee herded the sleepy passengers from a late night New York-to-Los Angeles flight onto the tarmac, where they were feted with a barbecue to inaugurate the field and terminal building named for its champion, Amon G. Carter.

In many respects, the grand opening proved to be the airport’s high water mark. Originally it was scheduled to open in 1950, but poor weather and shaky financing delayed construction for almost three years. In 1951 and again in 1952 voters had to approve expensive bond issues just to keep the earthmovers rattling. When the airport was completed, the number of daily flights...
never came close to its potential—in part because it could never attract Dallasites who preferred the conveniences of Love Field. Fort Worth businessmen conceded as much when they testified before a Civil Aeronautics Board hearing in 1956. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

The next year the Star-Telegram took a shot at its rival, predicting that improvements at the Greater Fort Worth International Airport would attract new passengers dissatisfied with the “hemmed-in and overcrowded Love Field.” While admitting that the “glamorous, giant lobby of the Carter Field terminal building [was] almost empty of customers,” it nevertheless gloved that “things are looking up.” Citing new runway construction, additional safety features, and a momentary upward trend in traffic, airport officials promised a turnaround—“and this time,” continued the newspaper, “they seem to really believe it when they say it.”

Giving the airport another boost was the opening of American Airlines’ “Stewardess College” nearby, the first of its kind in the nation. The luxurious complex, designed to train a thousand flight attendants annually, featured “country-club like surroundings of stone, glass, beautiful scenery and swimming pool.” Laborers constructed the façade largely out of West Texas fencing stones that early-day ranchers had used to enclose pastures on the near-treeless plains.

At a speech delivered at Carter Field, House Speaker Sam Rayburn dedicated the college as American Airlines President C. R. Smith and the first class of prospective

![Image of American Airlines flight attendants posing at the company's Stewardess College under construction.](COURTESY OF THE FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, AR 406 1-36-16.)

![Image of the Texas Tech Red Raider football team stopping over at the new Amon Carter Field to celebrate its 1954 Gator Bowl victory with local fans.](COURTESY OF THE FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, AR 406 5-16-4.)

![Image showing civilian uses for helicopters never fulfilled the hopes of Bell’s managers. Yet, for awhile, talk of ubiquitous heliports and commuter choppers excited the imagination of forward-looking executives. Here, young George Ann Ambrose and her parents check out the first helicopter to land at Eagles Nest Resort on Eagle Mountain Lake.](COURTESY OF THE FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, AR 406 1-21-45.)
graduates looked on. A few weeks later fifty-one young women received their wings, each polishing her pin with the same velvet cloth. The graduates started another tradition by dropping a personal item into the wishing well by the Kiwi monument, dedicated to the organization of former American Airlines flight attendants.

The breathtaking pace of suburban growth could not have been achieved without the new system of federally funded freeways, reinforced by immense state spending on secondary highways. During the decade a network of divided roads brushed the edges of the central business district, affording easy access to downtown businesses and government offices while routing other traffic away from the city’s nerve center. Where I-35W and the Dallas-Fort Worth Turnpike (now I-30) were joined by feeder roads, the “Mixmaster” directed often-confused drivers over a system of cloverleafs and bridges.
On the turnpike’s opening day, a reporter cheerily remarked: “After 117 million half-dollars are dropped into the toll-takers’ hands, the road will be toll-free.” The only incident that marred the opening came when a South Texas woman hauling a load of pigs to the Panther City got lost. Ending up at the tollbooth, she scolded the attendant: “To blazes with this paying money to ride on a road.” With traffic stacking up, the angry “pig lady” tried to make a U-turn, but her trailer was too long.

The experience that changed the face of Fort Worth and the unsuspecting farming communities on its fringes was a nationwide phenomenon. Yet, for all its good intentions, the colossal Federal Highway Program fostered suburban growth at the expense of their urban cores. Similarly, an expanded Federal Housing Administration program seeded the development of suburban communities, but its reluctance to extend loans for apartment construction and home improvements in older neighborhoods assured the decay of inner cities.

To African Americans, it seemed as if once again the blessings of democracy were eluding them. Against the backdrop of the growing Civil Rights movement, many black leaders in Fort Worth cried “Enough!” They went to city hall when the north freeway cut two of their parks in half—one that provided African-American golfers with the only course that welcomed them. When the board voted to close public swimming pools rather than desegregate, NAACP Spokesman Clifford Davis ridiculed their illogic: “Everybody will have equal access—to nothing.” Even as whites were boasting in 1956 that $8 million allocated toward recent building programs had given Fort Worth “the state’s [most] outstanding system of Negro schools,” local NAACP President Dr. G. D. Flemmings pointed out that the Board of Education was nevertheless “violating the law and they’ll find it out—very soon.”

For the time being, however, it was a hollow threat. The previous year black leaders themselves had learned just how steep a climb they faced in reaching that white schoolhouse. Going into the 1955-56 school year, three African-American students in the southeast Tarrant County town of Mansfield challenged the status quo in court. Local tradition meant that after the eighth grade, black students would have to complete their secondary education at Fort Worth’s I. M. Terrell High School. It also meant they would have to catch a Trailways bus that left Mansfield at 7:15 in the morning, then wait two hours after school

The Texas Progressive Youth Cup, an African-American organization that took its name from the Biblical verse “my cup runneth over,” successfully picketed several Fort Worth businesses during the 1950s. Here, protesters target the Coca-Cola Bottling Company, demanding that management hire black truck drivers.

Before and after: the Dallas-Fort Worth Turnpike near Oakland Boulevard.

Before the turnpike opened, traffic was heavy, and travel was slow. But after the turnpike opened, travel was faster, and traffic was lighter. The turnpike was a major improvement for drivers, but it also had a negative impact on the local economy. The local economy suffered because the turnpike took business away from local businesses.

The Texas Progressive Youth Cup, an African-American organization that took its name from the Biblical verse “my cup runneth over,” successfully picketed several Fort Worth businesses during the 1950s. Here, protesters target the Coca-Cola Bottling Company, demanding that management hire black truck drivers.
ended at 3:30 to return. If they played sports or were in the band or some other after-school activity, they had to find rides and might not get home until nine o’clock.

Despite a stunning victory in federal court, the black community in Mansfield knew it was still too soon to celebrate. On the first day of school, an angry mob blocked the path of the three students, punctuating threats with effigies they had hanged from the flagpole and over the school’s front entrance. Others, with the connivance of the mayor and police, set up a checkpoint on the edge of town, where they roughed up and turned back suspected sympathizers.

The action of Governor Allen Shivers and the inaction of President Dwight D. Eisenhower sealed the students’ fate. Texas Rangers, called in by Shivers, sided with the rabble. Eisenhower, facing reelection, chose not to intervene. So, it came to pass that Brown v. The Topeka Board of Education, which promised to end public school segregation, would cut its teeth at Little Rock, Arkansas; the Mansfield affair would be little more than a sordid footnote to the history of the American Civil Rights movement.

Other manifestations of white resistance emanated not so much out of hatred, but from a kind of pocketbook racism. About 325 Handley residents, for example, united to lobby the FHA against approving a 650-unit apartment complex for African Americans just east of Stop-Six and Rosedale Park. Later that same year, a woman speaking on behalf of the Forest Park Civic League drew applause when she protested the development of a housing project in North Mistletoe Heights. “We don’t object to Negroes having comfortable homes,” the woman bleated, “but when it happens out here our property value deteriorates.”

Complaining led to impending violence when African American Lloyd G. Austin moved his wife and infant daughter to Riverside in 1956. Once more effigies decorated the limbs of trees, but this time the mob—composed mostly of teenagers—burned crosses and called for blood. “Stay away and stay alive,” read the placard of one protester, as others hollered such epithets as “Hang the n[------]” and “Go back to the Congo.” Nervous policemen, unable to convince the protesters to break up, at least stood watch until the heckling cabal grew weary enough to call it a night.

There was another side of white Fort Worth, however, that wanted to move forward. Black and white citizens in 1944 had formed the Fort Worth Urban League, dedicated to improving the conditions of local African Americans. While it shied away from overt...
crusades, the organization nevertheless attacked head-on the problems of education, crime, and housing. In 1954, in fact, the Urban League’s efforts to build and repair homes in black neighborhoods funneled $5 million into the local economy and earned recognition for the top black housing program in the nation.

Fort Worthians marked progress in other ways as well. Early in the decade the black community finally got the policemen they had asked for just after the war. By 1958 there were more openings than applicants. When the first black golfers in 1955 hit the links at formerly all-white Rockwood, the Press reported that “nothing out of the ordinary happened.” The next year city buses desegregated just as quietly. A minor stir attending the realization that mixed-race baseball games were being played at Greenway Park served only to pack the stands.

“We’ve been playing white teams down here for nine years,” yawned African-American Athletic Director T. O. Busby. “It never attracted any attention before, but it sure helped the crowd.”

Those at the top of American society who continued to fight integration charged that communism lurked behind black unrest. Such voices were not as virulent in the Panther City as in some other places, nevertheless one thing remained clear—during the Fifties, Fort Worthians took the threat of communism and nuclear war seriously. Like their counterparts elsewhere, local teachers and government workers were compelled to take loyalty oaths, and the Red-baiting superpatriots who feasted on society’s pinkish fringe never lacked for popular support.

One visitor to the Fort Worth Public Library, upon noticing the writings of Karl Marx shelved alongside those of America’s Founding Fathers, expressed his outrage in a letter to the editor. “We have within our walls an evil Trojan horse,” he warned. “I ask that the public be informed as to [the] identity of [the] person or persons responsible.”

The culprit, of course, was Melvin Dewey, who had conceived his decimal system in the 1870s. The only thing “red” in this instance was the letter writer’s face when he finally learned how it all worked.

Given the Cold War rhetoric of the day, it was no wonder that some men and women were seeing Reds behind every tree. The speech that House Speaker Sam Rayburn delivered to the first graduates of the Stewardess College was just as much an occasion to “warn against complacency” as it was to honor the young flight attendants. Praising the women for spreading good will, “Mr. Sam” contrasted a world in which there was ‘less good will than there has ever been [since] anyone now living can remember … Our civilization and freedom are in danger,” he warned, “and let nobody tell you they are not.”

Then, there was the problem of Jacksboro Highway—a strictly American-made nuisance. Doing his part to kindle the rivalry between the two regional giants, a Dallas Morning News correspondent toured the strip three times during the fall of 1950. His report made page one. The sensational story charged: “Wide open gambling—dice, horse race bookmaking, slot machines or roulette—has been running unmolested in Fort Worth and Tarrant County.”

Indignant, District Attorney Stewart Hellman remarked that at least the Panther City “has been singularly blessed by being free of violence that has marked gambling activity in Dallas.”
Little more than a month later a spectacular bombing had the lawyer eating his words. Someone who knew what they were doing had rigged gambler Nelson Harris’s car to a charge of nitroglycerin that ignited when he turned the key. The blast blew his eyes right out their sockets and left his mangled body embedded in the seat. Tragically, he was not alone. Sitting beside him was his pregnant wife, who died on the operating table along with their unborn child.

It would be the first of several grisly underworld slayings that rocked Fort Worth during the decade. Wells, shallow graves, and the bottom of Lake Worth all provided convenient dumping grounds for the hoodlums who so viciously guarded their underworld turf. It would take a string of federal grand juries to bring the freewheeling strip under control. In the course of reform, several careers were broken, and any number of high-toned men and women saw their reputations sullied.

Despite all of society’s ills, average Fort Worthians were too busy making a living and having fun to become involved in matters that did not affect them directly. For the first time since the 1920s, a youth culture emerged that produced its own music, its own lingo, its own interests. Let the grown-ups worry about communism, their sons and daughters had more pressing concerns. Turning their backs on the problems of the world, teenagers in Fort Worth as elsewhere focused on congregating in parking lots, going to drive-in movies, and collecting the latest 45-rpm recordings of their favorite rock n’ roll stars.

At the North Side Coliseum, which had turned to promoting wrestling matches and trade shows, Elvis Presley played before a packed house in 1956. The venue’s manager, R. G. McElvey, had earlier booked the rock n’ roller for a mere $500 just before a string of hits propelled Presley to the top of the Pop charts. Despite the protestations of the
star’s manager, Colonel Tom Parker, McElyea refused to renegotiate the contract. Sullen or not, “The King” gyrated before a sea of screaming girls, while envious boyfriends looked on. It was a memorable evening, and one that would not come again for sixteen years.

In the world of college football, TCU also enjoyed a good run in the Fifties. It had been a long wait for fans who longed for the glory days of Sammy Baugh and Davey O’Brien. The Horned Frogs finished in the Top Ten four times during the decade and produced nine All-Americans, including running back Jim Swink, the 1955 runner-up for the Heisman Trophy. In 1956 the Frogs were eyeing a national championship, but their hopes were gigged and drowned at College Station in what became known as the “Hurricane Game.” Back then, coaches did not delay a contest because of bad weather. On this day the sky turned black, sheets of rain turned to hail, and gusts of wind threatened to snap the light standards at A&M’s Kyle Field. Behind 7-6 and facing the gale and a fourth-and-one at the Aggie goal line, the Frogs failed to find the end zone. TCU would never again come so close to a national crown.

It was a happier ending for Ben Hogan. Just sixteen months after his near-fatal accident, the Hawk-turned-Phoenix staged one of the most inspiring comebacks in sports history. In the summer of 1950 he captured the National Open, and that fall won the second of his four “Player of the Year” titles. Critics, who had once found Hogan aloof and even unfriendly, came to view him as a quiet and determined underdog.

His story soon attracted Hollywood, which cast Glenn Ford as Hogan in Follow the Sun. After the Cowtown world premiere, Marvin Leonard hosted a reception for almost five-hundred guests at the Fort Worth Club. To the amazement of the crowd, the normally reserved Hogan got so caught up in the moment that he joined fellow golfer Jimmy Demaret in a chorus of “The Sun’s Going to Shine.”

For all the problems of race, Reds, and crime, it seems ironic that the decade would be remembered in the popular culture as the “Fabulous Fifties.” Yet many of the problems that seemed so great at the time either worked themselves out or metastasized into bigger problems that characterized later decades. Certainly, measured by what loomed on the horizon, those who lived through the Sixties and beyond would look back nostalgically at the 1950s as an age of near-innocence.