The Vietnam War, race riots, and a rebellious youth culture threatened to turn many American cities inside out during the Sixties. Fort Worth, by comparison, seemed almost quiet. Its frontier legacy had nurtured a sense of God and country that dovetailed tightly with conservative business attitudes, especially in the defense industries. Socially, it discovered a liberal heart that largely accepted integration. Yet the Panther City was not without its own upheavals, even if they were mostly demographic. West Texas began fading in importance as Fort Worth started looking to all points on the compass to boost its population and business growth. The rush to suburbia accelerated, too, leaving the inner city to scramble for its viability. In the outlying communities, national chains settled in, compelling homegrown retailers to compete against an impersonal bottom line. It was a new Fort Worth to be sure, but one that drew successfully on the same kind of far-visioned leadership that had brought it this far.

The pace of life during the decade seemed to be gaining a step at every turn, and the passing of personalities and landmarks from bygone days provided occasional reminders. In 1961 Fort Worth mourned “Westerner” Gary Cooper, who had thrilled so many local people at the movie’s premier two decades earlier. Billy Rose died in 1966. At the zoo, the seventy-five-hundred-pound Queen Tut, a favorite there since 1923, collapsed suddenly and keeled over in 1964.

Materially, Fort Worth gave up on a number of once-thriving downtown hotels and theaters. The last picture shows flickered at the Worth, the Hollywood, the Palace, and the Majestic in once-opulent halls that had been left to age with neither dignity nor grace. The turn-of-the-century Metropolitan Hotel came down in 1960, and its contemporary, the Westbrook Hotel, lay vacant by the end of the decade, awaiting the wrecking ball. The old blues institution, the Jim, preceded it into oblivion, its site turned into a parking lot. At the Blackstone a series of new owners were left frustrated by low occupancy rates, and by the end of the decade “Fort Worth’s Hotel of Distinction” stood empty, its once grand entrances boarded up to keep out vandals and wandering derelicts.

If Fort Worthians mourned the vanishing symbols of downtown’s glory days, the demise of the strip on Jacksboro Highway brought more sighs of relief than cries of anguish. City officials seized the right of eminent domain to scrape from the landscape considerable swaths of former nightclubs and seedy motels as part of a road-widening project. Other places, such as the once-hopping Skyliner fell to wrecking crews or found new, if even lowlier, uses.

With the passing of so many landmarks many Fort Worthians wondered aloud if the city’s best days were behind them. When the decade began, the outlook presented more pitfalls than opportunities. To image-sensitive
leaders, the appellation “Cowtown” seemed the mark an ignoble heritage, rather than an industry whose economic might had carried the city well into the twentieth century. It was an industry, however, that clearly lived on borrowed time. Early in 1962 the Fort Worth Press published the obituary of the sixty-year-old Armour and Company with the headline: “Death of a Giant.” With it went twelve hundred jobs. Bemoaning the plant’s astronomical overhead, one observer noted: “They could buy meat from the independent packer cheaper than they could process it themselves.” Modernizations at Swift allowed that plant to hold on for a few more years, but the demise of its amicable competitor signaled the end of an economic era.

Structural changes in the petroleum industry had also left the self-described “Oil Capital of West Texas” with another sobriquet that rang hollow. Even the defense industry was suffering troubled times. In June 1960, seventeen hundred union workers at Bell Helicopter staged a walkout to gain leverage for negotiating better wages, more holidays and vacations, and better pension plans. Over at General Dynamics—formerly Convair—the imminent fulfillment of several contracts had economists predicting that employment would fall to six thousand by the end of 1962, a faint echo of busier times when thirty thousand men and women had kept the mile-long plant humming. It was during such crises as these that Amon Carter had so often come running, but now he was gone.

Despite the dire outlook, Fort Worth businessmen remained optimistic. An encouraging word came, of all places, from the Dallas Morning News, which late in 1962 praised the Panther City for its resilience during many dark times in the past. Fort Worth, it marveled, “has demonstrated a strong capacity to change—and to continue growing.” Suburban construction and retail sales made up for the industrial downturn, the article noted, signaling that the economy de jour would be consumer driven.

The power vacuum left by Amon Carter was being ably filled by a cooperative leadership that worked more like a team than the clique of millionaires that had always set the city’s course from smoke-filled rooms at the Fort Worth Club. In contrast to the old wheeler-dealers, the new leadership in 1963 threw open the doors of the Will Rogers Auditorium for the first of the decade’s three Town Hall meetings, broadcast live on WBAP radio and televised by KTVT’s Channel 11.

Two thousand men and women turned out to offer hundreds of ideas that ranged from practical needs like attracting new industry to such chimerical suggestions as bringing the Gruen Plan out of mothballs. Continued support for cultural activities, branch libraries, and additional parkland gained wide support. The Reverend Douglas Olson voiced the General Ministers Association’s desire to root out pornography, clean up the slums, and bridge the gap between the races. Yet, without question, a proposal already in the works to build a downtown convention center and market hall generated the most excitement.

Like the old North Side Coliseum, the Will Rogers complex had become inadequate to accommodate the country’s lucrative convention traffic. A massive civic center, proponents argued, would not only bring business back to Fort Worth, but if situated downtown, it could help reverse the decline that marked the core business district. A delegation of several dozen Panther City officials and civic leaders then began a cross-country tour of the latest facilities in places such as Pittsburgh, Miami, Las Vegas and other popular convention destinations to find out what made the best ones successful and to spot any avoidable flaws. When the
The Texas Boys Choir always showed Cowtown’s best face to admiring audiences. The group moved its headquarters in 1956 from Denton to Fort Worth, where it reached new heights of acclaim. Their tours took the boys to cities throughout North America and Europe. Here, during the summer of 1963, Director George Bragg leads the group into Wales, where they sang at the International Music Eisteddfod.

The advisory board put the bond issue before Tarrant County voters on April 25, 1964, the vote was not even close. Downtown would have its convention center.

The fourteen-block site, south of the Hotel Texas, targeted the remaining physical remnants of Hell’s Half Acre. Workers prepared for the demolition by carrying away all manner of fixtures, furniture, and junk left behind by the evicted tenants. Rumors abounded with regard to some spectacular finds, especially rare coins—“enough to make numismatics drool,” wrote the Star-Telegram’s Roger Summers. Lewis Gribble, an Abilene salvage dealer, supposedly walked away with a 1787 half-dollar inscribed “United States Federation of America.” Another story told of a laborer who suddenly quit his job upon finding a wad of bills that had rolled out of a piece of furniture he was hauling away. “The last they saw of him,” continued Summers, “was his north side headed south.”

On the eve of the demolition, the bloated section of squalid shops, warehouses, and hotels stood eerily silent. Reporters likened the doomed blocks to a ghost town and speculated about the stories its buildings could tell. Indeed, as the walls came tumbling down, the jaws of a massive clamshell crane exposed to the sunlight many long-hidden or forgotten sights and artifacts of the city’s headiest days. Here, the rooms of a second-story hotel erected on top of another building gaped open for the first time since closing during the Great Depression; there, a football board betrayed the once lively activity of a bookmaking operation.

Then, there was the old Majestic Theater, for which columnist Jack Gordon waxed nostalgically. Through its stage entrance door had walked the likes of Mae West, Harry Houdini, the Marx Brothers, Helen Hayes, and other stars, some equal, most lesser. Surveying an alleyway littered with wine bottles, he lamented: “The once lovely playhouse has been beaten to its knees. By tomorrow, it will be no more.”

Four years later the Tarrant County Convention Center opened officially just before Thanksgiving, 1968, with a ten-day “Action Spectacular,” featuring all manner of shows, special events, and celebrities. The cooperative effort in 1965 had earned Fort Worth the National Municipal League’s All-America City award. It was the largest of the eleven U.S. cities that gained similar recognition that year among 121 competitors. The plaque, reading in part, “In recognition of progress achieved through intelligent citizen
action,” certainly captured the spirit of the broad grass-roots support that had filtered up from the Town Hall movement.

After a weeklong siege of hard spring rain, the skies parted for the celebration that attended the award. Spectators lined up ten-deep along the parade route and began cheering as Carswell’s color guard turned the first corner. Following close behind, members of civic groups smiled broadly and waved to the crowd, while lines of convertibles carrying suburban dignitaries idled behind their high school marching bands. Predictably, an ear-piercing rock ensemble proved the favorite among the many teenagers who attended.

Among dozens of floats was a model of General Dynamics’ F111. Leonard’s too promoted its business with a papier mâché version of its recently introduced M&O Subway car. The Texas Electric Service Company rolled out Reddy Kilowatt, a jolt of electricity in each hand, under the banner: “More power to Fort Worth.” NBC affiliate, WBAP Channel 5, also played the double-entendre with its rainbow-spectrum slogan, “Proud as a peacock.”

As in times recently past, the parade ended at the Will Rogers Coliseum. There, Governor John Connally exhorted an overflow crowd to “face the future with the same faith that brought you here tonight. Make no small plans. Dream no timid dreams. Reach boldly for the destiny of your time with vision and determination.”

Even before the governor took the dais, nine-year-old Joe Irwin had elbowed his way to the platform, where he took a seat among the distinguished guests. The boy soon drew the attention of a curious reporter to whom he confessed that he did not belong on the stage. He justified his actions, however, by
exclaiming: “I wanted to see Governor Connally real bad.” The reporter quoted one of the guests, impressed with young Joe’s pluck and determination, as predicting that someday he might grow to be governor himself.

Despite the Convention Center and the goodwill cultivated by the Town Hall meetings, downtown did not suddenly spring back to life. Retailers and restaurateurs continued to go under, and conventioneers from out of town preferred to stay at places like the sprawling Green Oaks Inn in Arlington Heights or the Western Hills in suburban Euless. Yet from the expansive portico of the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, visitors beginning in 1961 could enjoy a panoramic view of the ever-inspiring skyline and pretend that on the street the city was as vibrant as it had always been. Certainly the foot traffic inside the Arts District grew busier during the decade.

Inside the rugged fossil-limestone edifice was the publisher’s collection of western paintings and sculptures. Since the late Twenties he had been accumulating them, mostly the works of his favorite artists, Frederick Remington and Charles Russell. Amon Carter no doubt would have approved of his museum. After all, he had picked the site himself, and his daughter, Ruth Carter Stevenson, ably led the foundation to which he had bequeathed $7 million. Under her direction the museum board soon broadened its mission to include art that represented all periods of the American frontier. It also began accumulating a wealth of old newspapers, photographs, and historical documents that made the Amon Carter a nationally recognized research facility as well.

At the Children’s Museum, a new wing was added that made it the world’s largest of its kind. With new exhibits, a library, and meeting rooms, the range and scope of the...
facility soon obligated directors to change its name to the Museum of Science and History. Not many youngsters had a use for the eight-thousand-volume science and medical research library. Nor could they intelligently follow the proceedings of the Audubon, astronomical, and archaeological societies that met there. Nevertheless, inside the main halls the hands-on displays and visual exhibits still focused on educating the children for whom the museum was originally intended.

Beyond the Arts District, other museums opened. The short-lived Heritage Hall, presenting the life story of Fort Worth in a series of ten dioramas, took over the old Kress Building on Main Street in 1966. It attracted Interior Secretary Stewart Udall and western character actor Slim Pickens to the opening, but the museum fetched only a fraction of the three hundred thousand annual visitors predicted by the Downtown Fort Worth Association. Neither a general store, nor live entertainment and silent movies, could save the museum, and it soon folded.

More enduring was the Pate Museum of Transportation, fourteen miles beyond the Weatherford traffic circle near the community of Cresson. Marie Pate, wife of Texas Refinery Corporation founder A. M. Pate, Sr., used the business’s recreation ranch as an outlet for her obsession with various modes of travel. The idea formed as her collection of antique automobiles grew. “People began to come to see them anyway,” Mrs. Pate explained, “so we decided the logical thing to do was to open it to the public.” So she did in July 1969. In addition to automobiles formerly owned by celebrities and wealthy businessmen, Mrs. Pate obtained a railroad passenger car, a mockup of a Gemini space capsule, a Korean tank, several airplanes, and even an old stagecoach. Her most cherished prize, however, was a 1917 Premier, the only automobile left of its kind.
Across University Drive from the Forest Park Zoo, the Log Cabin Village brought pioneer days to life for a generation of youths who passed many a Saturday watching TV westerns. The driving forces behind the park were Fred Cotten, a civic leader from nearby Weatherford, and local advertising executive Mickey Schmid. The men shared an alarm over the disappearing vestiges of the area’s frontier days. Their mission to relocate and restore area cabins found like-minded supporters who solicited funds, researched the history of each structure, and enlisted the help of restoration architects.

Yet, as piles of weathered and rotted logs accumulated, the project came under fire by residents in the adjoining neighborhood around the exclusive Colonial Country Club. One irate homeowner complained to Mayor Tom McCann that the entire collection was nothing but a “bunch of junk and trash,” adding: “Let the people who started this monkey business come and tell us what they proposed to do and when they are going to do it.” Soon enough, teams of carpenters, engineers, and grounds workers transformed the village into a treasured landmark of furnished cabins, enhanced by a natural wooded setting dotted with period items such as wells and wagons, and tools and grinding stones.

Along with the two-story Harold Foster home, claimed Park Manager Betty Regester, came an unexpected surprise. In the corner of an upstairs bedroom they often felt an overwhelming presence, accompanied by the scent of fresh lilacs and a sudden drop in temperature. On several occasions staff members swore they actually saw the apparition of an attractive middle-aged woman with long, dark hair, dressed much like the period docents themselves. Wide-eyed visitors, too, occasionally came barreling down the stairs, which finally prompted park officials to close the second floor to the public.

If the ghost of the Log Cabin Village raised skeptical eyebrows, the “Lake Worth Monster” left others rolling their eyes. Those who claimed to have seen the mystery beast, on the other hand, stuck passionately to their stories. It all began during the decade’s final summer, when the creature—described as “half-man, half-goat, with fur and scales”—terrorized a car carrying six people. After a local radio station reported the encounter, crowds of curiosity seekers flocked to the site opposite Greer Island, a few of them armed and determined to bag the “goatman.” Surveying the dizzy mob, police Sergeant A. J. Hudson remarked: “I’m not worried about the monster so much as all those people wandering around out there with guns.”

The only shooting, however, came from the camera of a hopeful shutterbug whose errant aim failed to capture its subject. “I was too busy rolling up my window,” explained resident Jack Harris, whose sudden
encounter with the beast left him shaken. Authorities dismissed the monster as a prankster or even a bobcat. A crowd of about thirty or forty witnesses, however, would have none of that. Despite the creature’s imposing presence—one observer estimated that it was “7 feet tall and must have weighed 300 pounds”—some daring souls bragged they would “get mean” with it. It was then that the monster showed up and reportedly picked up a tire, heaving it toward the crowd from a distance of five hundred feet.

“Earlier there were some sheriffs deputies there,” said Harris, “and one of them was sort of laughing like he didn’t believe it.” But the tire toss and a pitiful, inhuman howl sent the officers scrambling. “Those sheriff’s men weren’t any braver than we were,” continued the would-be cameraman, “they ran to get in their car.” As quickly as the rash of sightings began, they abruptly ended, leaving Fort Worthians forever to speculate just what it was that had terrorized the shores of Lake Worth during the summer of ’69.

Such frivolity stood in stark contrast to the weighty issues that involved Fort Worth during one of the country’s most turbulent decades. If America ever enjoyed a measure of innocence, it ended November 22, 1963, a day that began for President John F. Kennedy at the Hotel Texas. The previous evening Air Force One had dipped low over the city, its skyscrapers outlined in Christmas lights turned on to honor the president and his wife, Jackie. On the roof of St. Joseph’s Hospital, a sign in lights beamed a special message: “Welcome JFK.” Thousands of local citizens had turned out to greet their leader at Carswell Air Force Base; hundreds of others lined the route to the city.

As the president waded through well-wishers at the Hotel Texas, he heard someone cry out: “Shafty!” Kennedy, responding to his World War II nickname, recognized the voice and made his way over to Edward Miller, a Marine whom the former captain of the PT-109 had rescued from an enemy beachhead in the Pacific Theater. After a warm embrace, the Kennedys made their way up to Suite 850, its walls decorated with priceless paintings borrowed from the Kay and Velma Kimbell, Ruth Carter Johnson, and other local collectors.

The next morning the president flipped through the Dallas Morning News and ate his breakfast, which lost some of its spice when he spotted a black-bordered, paid-for message accusing him of cozying up to the Communists. In front of the Hotel Texas there were no critics among a crowd of about five thousand mostly local people who waited in a drizzling rain to hear JFK make a few remarks. The president’s last speech was delivered to an invitation-only audience inside. By eleven o’clock, Kennedy was ready to take the short hop to Dallas, where his destiny awaited.

About an hour later, Fort Worth, like the rest of the country, stood frozen in shocked disbelief when reporters broke the news that an assassin had murdered the charismatic young president. By evening police had flushed out the suspected triggerman, Lee Harvey Oswald. Newsmen did not take long to discover his close ties to the Panther City.
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part of loosely organized programs such as
almost unnoticed in Fort Worth." A quiet revolu-
tion in integration has gone
bloody demonstrations in other cities," gloated
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they're doing now." The Negroes went wild. That's what
lived in Tennessee…when the slaves were
Worth man shrugged: "My grandparents
whites remained indifferent to the cause.
In matters of race, the mixed bag that had
alternated between progress and inertia dur-
ing the Fifties opened up to significant gains in the Sixties. Nevertheless, if segregationists
in Fort Worth had become less vocal, many
blacks remained indifferent to the cause.
Encapsulating their sentiments, one Fort
Worth man shrugged: "My grandparents
lived in Tennessee…when the slaves were
freed….The Negroes went wild. That's what
they're doing now."

Yet, in the Panther City and elsewhere, the
Christian love and non-violence practiced so
dutifully by such black organizations as the
Southern Christian Leadership Conference
had chipped away at a white society that pro-
cluded to own spiritual stock in those same
principles. In contrast to the "boisterous and
bloody demonstrations in other cities," gloat-
ed Fort Worth Press reporter Delbert Willis, "a
quiet revolution in integration has gone
almost unnoticed in Fort Worth."

Indeed, whether in church groups or as
part of loosely organized programs such as
"Operation Fellowship," the white and
African-American communities began con-
scientiously to bridge the gap of race by inter-
acting socially. The Mayor's Commission on
Human Relations reported during 1963 that
most of the city's restaurants, hotels, depart-
ment stores, theaters, athletic events, and
churches had already integrated—and with-
out soliciting any self-congratulations.

Arguably, the zenith of the movement in
Fort Worth followed closely on the heels of
violence at Selma, Alabama. Over six hun-
dred black and white marchers in the
Panther City joined hands early in 1965 for
a peaceful march on City Hall. Anticipating
hecklers after a bomb threat proved to be a
hoax, seventy-five extra-duty policemen
ranged a recreation building where the
march began. Not one incident, however,
marred the rally, described as more of "a
church service rather than a protest." As they
gathered, the marchers rang out "My
Country 'Tis of Thee," then started toward
City Hall, singing the movement's anthem,
"We Shall Overcome." At their destination,
ministers, both black and white, spoke uninter-
rupted from the steps.

Nowhere, of course, had segregation been
so adamantly defended or so passionately
attacked as in the public school system.
Nevertheless, a decade that began with the
Board of Education meeting behind closed
doors seeking to buck court-ordered race
mixing, ended with a matter-of-fact accept-
ance of a new status quo. As the 1963-64
school year approached, the district put a
gradual desegregation plan into effect. The
smooth transition soon rendered the plan's
continuation pointless, and, by the 1967-68
school year, Superintendent Eldon Busby
was able to report that the Fort Worth I.S.D.
was totally desegregated.

Already most suburban schools had
stopped paying transportation and tuition
fees for their black students who had tradi-
tionally attended high school at I. M. Terrell.
Even in Mansfield, where about thirty
African-American students pre-enrolled for
the 1965-66 school year, integration proved
uneventful. Most citizens there were simply
trying to forget the problems that brought
ignominy to the community just nine years
earlier. "They weren't ready for [integration],"
explained Superintendent Willie Pigg,
"Attitudes have changed particularly because
the people in Mansfield have changed."

In the Hispanic community, men and
women did not press for civil rights as
intensely as in black Fort Worth. Neverthe-
less, Orra Compton, with the city's
Community Relations Committee, expressed
bitterness over being "the forgotten minori-
ty." Fort Worth Tejanos were also frustrated
that schools seemingly denigrated the state's
Spanish-Mexican heritage as a matter of
course and felt that the city ignored their
neighborhoods when it came to developing
parks and playgrounds.

The "crux of the problem," according to
El Sol de Texas Editor G. L. Duarte, was a
"total lack of leadership and organization."
As the Fort Worth newspaperman saw it, the
city's Hispanic community was divided by
cliqués, its spokesman jealously of one
another's power and fearful they would lose
their influence if various groups combined
their strength. He also complained that suc-
scessful Tejanos quickly moved into white
suburbs, leaving the problems of the barrios
to others. Such problems, once exposed to public discourse, soon helped consolidate an ascending leadership that achieved rapid progress during the next decade.

Blatant racism in Fort Worth did not disappear, of course, but when it did show itself, the old specter popped up from the radical margins of a more tolerant society. “Little Sid” McGoodwin found out as much in 1966, when he wantonly killed black shoeshiner John Hughes Wallace at a North Side dive. Assistant D.A. Grady Hight made what observers called the most impassioned final argument of his career. “Texas is part of the old Confederacy,” he began. “A suspended sentence will make everyone ashamed except those people who think like this man [McGoodwin] does.” Calling for a new era of justice, he rang out: “Let the beginning be here and now!” An affected jury agreed and condemned “Little Sid” to a life sentence at the state penitentiary.

The Vietnam War also stirred the emotions of Fort Worthians. Materially, the city quite naturally supported the war effort by churning out all kinds of jets and helicopters, ending any concerns that General Dynamics and Bell Helicopter would be a drag on the local economy. Rarely was there a time during the day when a quick scan of the sky did not reveal some kind of flying weapon out for a test run. The crescendo of the plodding choppers, doors wide open, never failed to attract the attention of schoolchildren, but it was the F-111s that froze them in place as they anticipated the sonic boom that usually followed the rip and whoosh of the low-flying aircraft.

Far from the massive protests that rocked some other American cities, most Cowtowners were loath to give up on the police action without getting something in return for the sacrifice of so many young men. They were also generous with their moral support. In response to a lonely Marine’s letter, the city poured out its heart in a correspondence campaign. Virtually every school was involved in sending care packages along with their words of encouragement. In an open letter of thanks, Lance Corporal Gene Malone of Fort Worth admitted he figured that “maybe we would get a few ‘pen pals’ out of it,” but “I should have known Texans better than that.”

The stories of local heroes also boosted the cause. The Fort Worth Press lauded gunner’s mate Jack Wright, for instance, whose tiny Coast Guard cutter engaged a ninety-nine-foot trawler carrying a hundred tons of weapons and munitions headed upriver into North Vietnam. Strapping himself into the harness of a fifty-caliber machine gun, Wright fired and ducked for two-and-a-half hours. Despite absorbing a piece of shrapnel that seared into his leg, he also helped storm the ship’s deck, rousting out the survivors with his .45-caliber Colt automatic drawn and ready.

Just as Amon Carter had sent Star-Telegram reporters to World War II battlefields and camps to seek out Texans, the newspaper became the state’s first major daily to humanize local men who found themselves on the front lines in Vietnam. The assignment fell to promising twenty-eight-year-old North Side and TCU graduate Bob Schieffer.
During his four-month tour the newspaperman filed reports about soldiers such as former quarterback Gray Mills, calling the shots for a much different team than the one he had directed at TCU. He interviewed Master Sergeant Paul Hudak, a former employee of the newspaper, who had driven off a flight line just as an explosion rocked a row of twenty-two planes. Then, there was forty-year-old boot camp instructor-turned-combat sergeant Robert Bedwell.

So tough had the Fort Worth native been on his recruits, that one of them wrote a letter of complaint to his congressman. The hindsight afforded by a tour of combat duty, however, made the carping young Marine see things more clearly. Schieffer noted that the recruit reacted well under fire, risking his life to drag out his wounded comrades. Bedwell, he pointed out, also demanded as much of himself. During Operation Utah the sergeant had “crawled under heavy...machine gun fire for 100 yards with one of his wounded men hanging on his back.” Then, the reporter added, “He went back and got out two more.”

The war, of course, unfolded alongside happier times, led by an easily distracted suburban society. Jimmy Stewart and Maureen O’Hara packed the Palace Theater for the world premier of The Rare Breed in 1966. On the small screen, local TV stations were still enjoying the heyday of live children’s shows in the Sixties, and virtually anyone who grew up in Fort Worth during that time got a steady dose of Icky Twerp and Slam Bang Theater on KTVT Channel 11, and the rival Mr. Peppermint Show on WFIA-TV Channel 8. Their live schtick, woefully unsophisticated by today’s standards, nevertheless delighted a generation of baby boomers.

Bill Camfield, better known as the frenetic Icky Twerp, got children out of bed in the morning and greeted them when they came home from school in the afternoon. With his comically undersized cowboy hat and horn-rimmed glasses, he threw pies and broke up fights between his ape companions Ajax and Delphinium. Together they hammed it up while technicians got the next episode of The Three Stooges ready to roll. Many were the parents who worried aloud about the effects this nutty fare might have on their kids, which, of course, simply made the daily spectacle that much more appealing.
In contrast, the low-keyed Jerry Haynes more presaged Mister Rogers. In his trademark straw hat and peppermint-striped sport coat, he conversed with inanimate guests and showed cartoons such as Bennie and Cecil. Among Mr. Peppermint’s most popular cast members were hand puppet “Bun E. Rabbit” and “Mr. Wiggly Worm,” which was nothing more than a puppeteer’s finger, painted with dot-eyes and a smile, poking up through the bottom of a box. To his adoring audience, such details did not matter.

In the 1960s, Arlington became the playground for both Fort Worth and Dallas with the opening of Six Flags Over Texas and Turnpike Stadium. For local families and visitors, trips to the two parks would provide lasting memories far removed from the weightier issues of the day. For the business community, it helped seed a booming tourist and convention industry and cultivated an already growing sense of cooperation among the many suburban communities and the two great cities that anchored either end.

As first announced by the Star-Telegram in 1957, the former Waggoner DDD Stock Farm at the Turnpike and Watson School Road would give way to a “Disneyland-like Great Southwest Land,” with all kinds of rides and attractions. At the center would be a one-hundred-thousand-square-foot retail store carrying all kinds of sports and camping equipment, motorcycles, and clothing. Target ranges, casting ponds, and

*The Butterfield Stage was a popular ride when Six Flags Over Texas opened in 1961. The park’s three-hundred-foot-tall landmark Oil Derrick now occupies this spot.*

*COURTESY OF THE FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, AR 409 1-59-15.*

*The slide at Skull Island.*

*COURTESY OF THE FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, AR 409 1-59-12.*
other demonstration facilities would crown the project.

The park—minus the giant retail center—opened in August 1961 as Six Flags Over Texas. Over fifteen thousand people turned out for the opening. Taking part in the ceremony were mayors Tom Vandergriff of Arlington, John Justin of Fort Worth, Earle Cabell of Dallas, and their counterparts from Grand Prairie and Irving. The park’s chief owner and developer, Angus G. Wynne, Jr., cut the ribbon, declaring that Six Flags would be “as a shining beacon” for the millions of visitors whom he predicted would come to enjoy good-old-fashioned Texas hospitality and wholesome family fun.

Befitting the theme of the six flags, the park was divided into sections representing each era of the state’s history, complete with miniature period towns and attractions. For $4.50 for adults, a dollar less for children, parkgoers got full access to all the rides and attractions. Aboard the Butterfield Overland Stage they braved the attacks of painted Indian warriors and cowboy bandits; rowing in long canoes, friendlier Indians guided them across a shallow lagoon; in the “Astrolift’s” gondola cars they glided from one end of the park to the other; they serried into fiberglass logs that floated along a serpentine plume set among the trees, ending with a long slide and a splash; they also set out in a river boat to rescue the lost expedition of French explorer La Salle. This last ride endured such hazards as Spanish cannons and a man-sucking whirlpool. When it appeared as if the boat would crash into the face of a rock cliff, a secret tunnel opened, revealing treasures and the skeletons of those who died trying to claim it. At the Southern Palace, live shows struck a patriotic theme, and when the entire cast assembled to sing “You’re a Grand Old Flag,” it never failed to bring the crowds to their feet.

Each season brought new attractions. When guests wandered into the Confederate section during the park’s second summer, they passed through four Greek Revival columns that had once supported the portico of a Southern plantation house. There, a band blared “Dixie,” signaling a Confederate recruitment rally, while a strolling troubadour entertained the park’s guests until they learned that he was really a “Yankee spy.” Skull Island, the Runaway Mine Train, a giant smoking volcano, Boom Town, the Spelunkers’ Cave, and a three-hundred-foot-tall oil derrick all debuted as the decade progressed.
Six Flags immediately became the most popular business in the region for college students seeking summer employment. Each year about ten thousand of them applied for jobs, yet nine out of ten would walk away disappointed. The lucky ten percent, according to Public Relations Director David Blackburn, got their jobs largely on appearance and personality. “It’s hard to beat that pretty girl flashing that smile,” he chirped. Before she put on the bright whites and candy stripes, however, she and other successful applicants would have to know sixty pages of the “do’s and don’ts” that made Six Flags, as the manual said, “the friendliest place on earth.”

There was no question that Wynne’s park exceeded even his own visions. The Texas Tourist Development Agency reported in 1964 that Six Flags Over Texas had topped the Alamo as the state’s most popular tourist destination. The millionth visitor had spun the turnstile sometime during the 1962 season, a year that attracted parkgoers from every state in the Union and forty foreign countries. Soon it was bringing in that many and more in a single season.

Seeking a complement to Six Flags, Arlington announced that it was making a bid to bring big league baseball to North Texas. The majors were then expanding, and Mayor Vandergriff once more found himself in the thick of the hunt. Officials, including those of Fort Worth and Dallas, targeted a spot near the old Arlington Downs site as a perfect place to build a thirty-one-thousand-seat domed stadium. The coterie hoped to beat Houston to the punch, which had also announced plans for a dome. Anticipating another bond election, local minor league official Allen Russell warned: “If the majors should bypass this area on the first go-round it might be years before big league baseball would become a reality here.” Only one thing was certain, wrote a reporter: “If and when you do see major league baseball here, you’ll see it in the air-conditioned comfort of a [domed] stadium.”

In the end Houston got the dome and the Astros; Arlington ended up with Turnpike Stadium and the minor league Dallas-Fort Worth Spurs. Both the Houston and North Texas facilities opened for the 1965 season. While the Astros welcomed the New York Yankees to town, the Spurs played host to the Albuquerque Dodgers. Fans paid $1.25 to sit on a grassy right-field berm; for seventy-five cents more they could get a seat behind home plate. It was fun, but major league baseball, it was not.

Although the people of Fort Worth and North Texas missed baseball’s brass ring, there were few other laurels they failed to seize during the Sixties. Going into the decade, such issues as race, leadership, inner city decay, and even a sense of regional identity loomed ominously. Those same problems lingered as the period ended, yet they did not seem quite as imposing. Fort Worthians looked to the future undaunted, buoyed by the indomitable western spirit of a truly “All-America City.”