At the beginning of the decade, between the venerable, but deteriorating Tarrant County Courthouse and the modern Convention Center, stood a nine-block collection of tired old buildings that had once heralded the wealth of earlier generations. Yet even before the 1980s had run its course, it became clear that downtown and indeed, Fort Worth itself, was beginning to stir from its long lethargy. The heart of the metropolis pumped anew, its asphalt and concrete arteries, recently atrophied by cracks and potholes, was transplanted with fresh paving bricks aglow on dewy evenings in the soft ambiance of period lighting. Reconstructed turn-of-the-century buildings stirred ghosts of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Here and there, restored art deco skyscrapers awakened images of the heady and unsettling days of oil booms, depression, and war. New glass and steel towers among the masonry, however, kept mindful the brisk economy that fueled the revival, despite a mid-decade bust in oil prices.

Members of the larger body similarly thrived: urban frontiers emerged in weathered neighborhoods; the maturing arts district continued to fill in the empty lots of Amon Carter Square; hoofbeats and the gunfire of six-shooters echoed again in the Stockyards, but this time for the delight of tourists; and, out in the ever-burgeoning suburbs, city planners refined identities that earlier developers and high school football teams had created. It was a phenomenon that other American cities enjoyed during the Eighties, but nowhere was the renaissance so swift, so thorough, so stunning.

In the waning days of 1979, the bang that rang in the new decade leveled the last traces of the old Leonards blocks, making room for the Americana Hotel. Developer Sid Bass, joined by fellow industrialists Phil R. North and Hal Milner, orchestrated the demolition from Two Tandy Tower, overlooking the site between their top-floor vantage and the courthouse. On Bass's order from a walkie-talkie, a multicolored plume of sparklers burst from a mushroom cloud of smoke, from which about five thousand helium-filled balloons then began rising, many carrying gift certificates redeemable at Tandy Center shops. The trapezoidal hotel—soon renamed The Worthington—opened two years later.

At the other end of downtown, facing the Convention Center, the old Hotel Texas reopened as the new Hyatt Regency/Fort Worth (now the Radisson Plaza Hotel). In the years after it opened in 1921, its register had routinely included the signatures of celebrities.
and on rarer occasions, even presidents. While the façade was restored to near its original condition, the inside was gutted and refashioned, its six-story atrium boasting a cascading wall of water that fed its hanging gardens and emptied into pools where Japanese carp swam among the coins of wish-makers.

In the wee hours of Sunday morning on December 8, 1986, another explosion—this one unanticipated—helped clear the last blighted buildings across the street from the Worthington. Just a couple of hours after five hundred wedding guests at the hotel’s grand ballroom had called it a night, a natural gas leak wafted over a spark, “turning the city’s retail hub into a sea of broken glass.” At least thirty structures suffered damage, including about a million dollars worth at the Worthington. Littered across the ballroom floor, a coating of shards was all that remained of a thirty-foot-tall plate glass window.

Miraculously, the explosion claimed no lives. The only injury, in fact, was a minor cut inflicted on former Dallas I.S.D. Superintendent Nolan Estes, who lay sleeping in his eleventh-floor hotel room. Also asleep, but just a precious few yards from the center of the blast, was Gregg Dugan, who ran the Caravan of Dreams nightclub and stayed in a backroom apartment.

A deep roar, followed by a numbing concussion, presented a rude awakening. Instinctively, the disoriented Dugan stumbled over the rubble and through a thick haze until he made his way to what remained of the alley. “I’m lucky, extremely lucky to be alive,” he so rightly concluded.

After the cleanup, the owners of the flattened buildings decided it was a good time to sell their lots, and a happy Ed Bass came into possession of the entire block. His plans for further developing it dovetailed neatly with the vision of Bass Brothers Enterprises, a consortium composed of Ed, his older brother Sid, and their two younger siblings, Robert and Lee. Together with their parents, Nancy and Perry, the Basses had...
become, by 1980, the wealthiest family in Texas. Heirs of Fort Worth oilman Sid Richardson, their responsible stewardship of his fortune maintained the continuity of philanthropy and development such earlier civic benefactors as Amon Carter, Pappy Waggoner, Richardson himself, and Charles Tandy had established.

Before the decade began, Sid Bass had considered the alternatives of moving his part of the growing financial empire to New York City or remaking Fort Worth into a place that could attract the same kinds of business leaders who normally landed in the Big Apple. "He chose the latter," commented his brother, Ed. It would be a decision of monumental consequence for the material fortunes of Fort Worth.

The Bass Brothers Development Corporation wasted no time in swinging a deal that would have wowed the old coterie down at the Fort Worth Club. Together with the Dallas-based Woodbine Corporation, the consortium bagged a multimillion-dollar Urban Development Action Grant that beautified the downtown infrastructure between the two anchor hotels. The creation of Sundance Square, in fact, became an integral part of the plan. It was a dreamily appropriate name for a development that featured rows of Victorian-Styled business buildings. Described by economic analysts as a high-risk, low-yield venture, it nevertheless quickly attracted trendy shops and restaurants as well as a variety of office tenants.

Sundance Square earned Sid Bass rich praise for its innovative approach of blending old and new. But it was Ed, often seen as the maverick in the family, who turned the most heads with his appropriately named Caravan of Dreams, located behind Sundance Square at 312 Houston Street. The man who introduced the Biosphere to America unleashed on Fort Worth a $5.5 million neon-trimmed nightclub/restaurant/theater with a cactus garden that looked as if it had been plucked out of a rocky desert and laid upon the roof; integrated into the landscape was a geodesic dome and a grotto bar. Inside the club were murals and paintings that captured the best features of avant-garde and modern art.

One reviewer likened the Caravan's effect on 'the usual Fort Worth leisure fare as, say, an Andy Warhol appearance might have on the Tarrant County Commissioner's Court." Despite the misgivings of critics, the Caravan developed a loyal following that became part of the blues and jazz scene that emerged there. Ed also introduced Cowtown to the kinds of cutting edge acts that played venues in New York and Los Angeles as well as resurrecting such controversial personalities as Naked Lunch author William Burroughs, whose Beat Generation poetry still resonated among off-beats of the "Me Generation."

Dominating Sundance Square were the Basses' City Center Towers, paternal twins that in 1982 and 1984 cut the skyline at 33 and 38 stories, respectively. At the foot of the project block lay Fire Station No. 1. Rather than tear it down, the Basses integrated the 1907-vintage hall into City Center, converting it into a museum to showcase images and artifacts from Fort Worth's past.

Unfortunately, several downtown icons surrendered to developers whose plans did not include historic preservation. At Main and Seventh the art deco Aviation Building, once home to American Airlines, fell to the wrecking ball to make room for the forty-story Continental Plaza (now Carter+Burgess Plaza). The emerald rhomboid became the new home of the Petroleum Club that occupied the top floor. Also sacrificed was the elegant Medical Arts Building, imploded during the previous decade, to accommodate the First United Tower,
Another forty-story skyscraper, completed in 1983 (now Burnett Plaza).

The rapid expansion of the central business district unfolded under the watchful eyes of other players—some big, some small—who possessed special interests. Women and men from old Fort Worth families cared deeply about preserving the physical remnants of the city that their grandparents and great-grandparents had called home. In 1980 the Junior League of Fort Worth funded the Historical Preservation Council of Tarrant County that unfolded an umbrella broad enough for forty organizations to huddle under.

Downtown property owners who wanted to cash in on the revitalization also pushed a positive agenda. In 1981 the nonprofit corporation Downtown Fort Worth, Inc. (DFWI) began operating on membership dues. One of its signal accomplishments was staging the Main Street Arts Festival. More controversial was the creation of a Public Improvement District in 1986 that levied taxes on downtown businesses to provide additional security, parking, and maintenance as well as marketing support to stimulate the budding tourist industry.

Momentum for judicious growth and preservation had gained steam as the Tarrant County Courthouse approached its centennial.
Outside, a thick coat of silver paint concealed its copper cupola from which each face of its four clocks gave different times. It was inside, however, where neglect and thoughtless expediencies took their greatest toll. At each level, flooring cut off the view of the once-breathtaking rotunda. Wood paneling covered marble wainscoting. Window units connected to electrical wiring dating back to World War I clattered from the transoms. Every other trace of the interior’s original design was erased by dropped ceilings and makeshift walls.

To the rescue came Judge Mike Moncrief, who in 1980 responded to those whose solution was simply to replace the worn and weathered masterpiece with a new courthouse. “Over my dead body,” he declared. With his backing, a $9.2-million series of bond packages to restore the originally priced $500,000-building passed. Under the direction of architect Ward Bogard the three-year project returned the Beaux Arts landmark to its former state of grandeur. Architects cobbled their blueprints from historic photographs and from drawings left over from the addition of a steam heating system that was installed in 1917. The subtle touches of such modern conveniences as elevators and central air did little to detract from the original features. Once again visitors would stop to admire the rotunda, walk the grand staircase, and generally gain a sense of being overawed by the cavernous hall of justice.

As long as the seemingly Soviet-inspired Tarrant County Civil Courts Building sat next door, however, the downtown development crowd would never fully achieve the combination of traditional, chic, and postmodern ambiance that it was striving so hard to cultivate. Most local people referred to the drab, modernistic box as “the Radiator Building” for the lengths of louvers running up its height. County Judge Roy English called it “the worst architectural accident to ever happen in Tarrant County.”

The problem, in the end, turned out to be as illusory as the solution itself. With the support of a $1.5-million grant from the Sid Richardson Foundation, New York artist Richard Haas turned the building into a grand canvas. His trompe l’œil masterpiece began with a striped surface onto which he applied a second skin of cement and sand-gravel. The few functional features, such as porthole windows carved out of the new surface, blended into such painted-on “architectural” details as ornamental brick clusters and sculpted capitals, creating an intricate three-dimensional appearance that truly “fooled the eye” as the French-translated term for the genre indicated.

So successful was his Texas-sized optical illusion that Haas was enlisted to put a quick facelift on other bland and blighted downtown facades even before his work on the Civil Courts building was finished. Some of his art jazzed up featureless surfaces with cornices, columns, and simple bas-reliefs. Others were murals that celebrated the city’s frontier heritage. In particular, his Chisholm Trail, on the south-facing wall of the 1902-vintage Jett Building at 400 Main Street (that once housed the Northern Texas Traction Company) became his signature work—even more so than the Civil Courts Building. Countless photographs of longhorn cattle seemingly bursting out of the mural behind smiling tourists so testified.

Not everybody hailed trompe l’œil, however. Its detractors thought it became overdone and contributed to an emerging image of Fort Worth as a western Disneyland. “Sure it has great entertainment quality,” remarked local art historian Judith Cohen, “but if you are entertained too much it becomes kitschy…like wearing too much jewelry.” Apologists, though, like Sundance Square developer Bill Boecker insisted that “what it does is blend art and architecture and…helps knit together the fabric of downtown.” For better or worse, trompe l’œil left its mark on Cowtown in the 1980s, inspiring officials in other Texas cities to bring “the Fort Worth look” to their own restoration projects.

Building a unique modern culture on the foundation of its western heritage allowed Fort Worth at last to shed the negative connotation surrounding the term “Cowtown.” “We’re through denying our heritage to prove we’ve made progress,” proclaimed Stockyards promoter “Cowboy” Steve Murrin. “Now we can say ‘You bet, this is where the West begins!’” So it came to pass that “Panther City” would be heard less often as enthusiastic promoters began hanging the newly preferred nickname “Cowtown” on businesses, visitors’ brochures, and locally sponsored events.
Backers of the Cowtown Marathon embraced the western handle to promote the inaugural event just before the decade began. On that February day in 1978 sleet-packed streets greeted only four hundred of the thousand registered runners. The slight turnout did not matter to founder Joel Alter. A veteran of races in cities whose scenery paled against the compact business and cultural districts of Fort Worth, the surgery professor at the Texas College of Osteopathic Medicine knew that Cowtown and the growing popularity of marathons were a perfect match.

As the event began attracting runners from most every state as well as Canada and Mexico, so too did it increasingly draw on the city’s claim to the title “Where the West Begins.” In 1980 the Tarrant County Sheriff’s Posse took control of holding back the crowd that gathered at the Stockyards where the 26.2-mile trot and the shorter, but still grueling 10K run, began and ended. Two mounted cowboys fired their six-shooters to start the race, while another cowboy smiling on the participants from posters hanging all along the route admonished “You can do it!”

As the crowd waited to hear updates between country songs on the mobile unit of radio station KXOL, the two starters—seemingly at odds with each other—climbed off their mounts. To settle their mock argument, the pair shot it out to the delight of children whose yards-length attention spans did not match the miles-length races. By the end of the decade, six thousand runners bulged forward at the gun.

All along the route the rows of spectators lining the streets grew, too. The vast majority cheered them on, many handing out cups of water and halves of oranges. Still, an occasional sadist could be spotted reveling in the agony of runners dragging oxygen-depleted legs toward their goal. Yale Youngblood expressed what many of the participants surely felt as they wondered why they were so intent on punishing themselves. Five hundred yards from the finish line a seven-year-old boy darted up beside him and cocked: “Wanna race, Mister?” “Wanna die before you reach driving age buster?” Youngblood growled back. At the finish line, the weary man assured his own young sons that he and Pheidippides, the original marathoner, had parted ways for good. Reminding his father that he had said the same thing the year before, Youngblood smiled: “You have my word as a runner.”

While most local people perceived “Cowtown” as largely symbolic, Tarrant County during the Eighties could still boast...
three ranches of ten thousand acres or more within view of the skyline. Other material links also continued to tie the traditional livestock industry to the livelihoods of genuine stockmen. At a time when Texas was exporting the image of the Urban Cowboy across the face of the globe, over a half-million people annually mobbed the Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show. Alongside dudes who bellied up to the bar at trendy Fort Worth saloons were men and women whose boots were no strangers to the droppings of cows and horses. All kinds of livestock organizations called Cowtown home. The National Cutting Horse Association (NCHA), formed at the 1946 Fat Stock Show, established itself on Benbrook Highway and annually held three of its six national competitions in Fort Worth. Similarly, associations that bred and registered Texas Longhorns, American Paint horses, and Texas Angus cattle maintained headquarters in Fort Worth.

Perhaps the most storied group was the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association. From its beginnings at the town of Graham, where theft-plagued cattlemen in Old Northwest Texas met under the branches of a post oak tree in 1877, the organization eventually settled on West Seventh Street in Fort Worth. The approximately fifteen-thousand-member TSCRA had long since made its monthly magazine, The Cattleman, a staple on coffee tables across Texas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma. The association grew into an industry force that lobbied for favorable legislation, provided insurance for its members, and even opened a research library and first-rate museum to cultivate awareness.

Nothing, however, said Cowtown quite like Billy Bob’s Texas. Nobody, save for its co-developers, could have envisioned rescuing the sprawling tin-covered structure that lay rusting and dented behind the Coliseum and Stockyards offices. To rancher and former Texas A&M football star Billy Bob Barnett and urban cowboy Spencer Taylor, however, the three-acre former cow barn was going to be the place where the West would begin and end. They saw in its sloping floor—constructed by the original owner for the convenience of his manure shovelers—an easy vantage for crowds viewing the band stage. They knew, too, that behind all that tin the department store had laid over the original façade was a sturdy building protected from the elements.

On opening night, in April 1981, Billy Bob’s Texas could not have provided a starker contrast to the otherwise moribund North Side business district. Six-thousand-plus first-nighters converged on the searchlights, passing along rows of boarded-up and seedy buildings lining North Main. On the other side of the giant saloon lay the catacombs of dark, empty cattle pens; beyond them, the packing plants loomed writh-like against the night sky. Only an occasional gaudy sign hanging over such Stockyards institutions as the Cattleman’s Steakhouse and Theo’s Saddle and Sirloin belied the district’s decline.

Back at Billy Bob’s, none of that mattered. Men and women who parked in the club’s seven-acre lot climbed into stagecoaches and atop backboards for a ride to the front door. Among reporters from People magazine and the Washington Post and crews from the morning shows at ABC and NBC, screen stars and high rollers mixed with cowboys, both real and imagined. They gawked at the eye patch that John Wayne wore in True Grit and admired the ambiance of the rough-edged cedar walls and the expansive bars with their brass rails and well-stocked shelves. Mostly they tried to grasp the scale of the “World’s Largest Honky Tonk.”

What emerged from the gutted shell was a breathtaking array of cow country commerce. The tens of thousands of customers who pushed through the louvered doors of the “saloon” could eat there, get a haircut, have an old-time photograph made, and outfit themselves in just about anything under the sun, so long as that sun shined in western skies. They could two-step to live music on either of the twin seven-thousand-square-foot dance floors; shoot pool at any of two dozen tables; watch a live rodeo; or, just sit and sip…all under one roof.

Billy Bob’s Texas was certainly the most prominent, but not the only, pioneer in the refashioned Stockyards. Others, such as Steve Murrin, became vocal about the district’s potential. In its long vacant or underused buildings potential investors saw a worn-out, but “constant reminder of our history, a way of authenticating the past for the present,” as Murrin put it. Here, he insisted, the roots of the city’s past awaited the same kind of rebirth that Chicago enjoyed in its Old Town and Denver at Larimer Square.

With Amonesque enthusiasm, a posse of investors transformed the Stockyards into a first-class tourist trap—in the most positive sense of the phrase. Once again the Coliseum hosted rodeos. Music filled the air along Exchange Avenue. Both dudes and ranch hands strode the covered boardwalk on their way to watering holes such as the White Elephant Saloon and the Pickin’ Parlor, at the Brown Derby and the Lone Star Chili Parlor they waited for booths to open up. The massively comfortable Stockyards Hotel, a line example of “Cattle Baron Baroque,” came to anchor the block at one corner of Exchange and Main. North Side soon became the place to go, and not just for locals. Striking a pose that would have made the old Star-Telegram publisher proud, Murrin stood in full western regalia before a travel industry meeting in
London and ended a pitch with: “Y’all come to Fort Worth!”

Van Cliburn also did his ambassador’s duty for his adopted hometown, returning to Russia, where the spotlight of world fame had first fallen upon him. At the invitation of President Mikhail Gorbachev and his wife Raisa, Cliburn’s jet entered Soviet airspace without a Russian navigator—only the second time such a flight had been permitted. After rhapsodizing the Moscow audience with Tchaikovsky and Liszt, he met the first couple backstage, where they accepted a silver Tiffany plate and T-shirts with “Fort Worth Club” emblazoned on the keepsakes in block letters. The pianist also presented a generous check to the Russian Cultural Foundation. Returning the favor, the Moscow Conservatory at Rachmaninoff Hall feted the pianist with its first-ever master of fine arts degree. It was Cowtown diplomacy at its best.

Back in Fort Worth a new sound assaulted the airwaves. Coming in just below the radar of American popular culture, punk rock was about as foreign to both classical music and C&W as a field hand at the Petroleum Club. For those who danced to a different drummer, Zero’s New Wave Lounge on East Lancaster became a short-lived, but vibrant underground scene. The stark hall attracted more curious spectators than it did devotees in leather and spiked hair. Nevertheless, bands such as The Hugh Beaumont Experience, The Ralphps, and The Telefones played regularly to enthusiastic audiences. Another popular band, The Fort Worth Cats, never broke the charts, but their album Earthquake at the OK Corral became a cult favorite. It was fun while it lasted, but all too soon the genre entered the mainstream in a more palatable form called alternative music.

Until the Eighties, Fort Worth’s Tejanos did not enjoy many media outlets. Then, KFJZ, a staple of local radio since the 1920s, switched to a Spanish language format and became La Pantera—the Panther. The transition heralded the prominence of Hispanic Fort Worth. The heart of the community beat in North Side, where the culture became dominant in the schools and churches. In 1983 business leaders of the reorganized Fort Worth Hispanic Chamber of Commerce doubled their efforts to cultivate small business growth. They also initiated a youth program that placed an emphasis on education. A $600 scholarship awarded to eighth-graders, redeemable with interest only upon graduation from high school, provided a creative incentive for students to further their education.

The growth of North Side’s Mexican Independence Day celebration—Díez y Seis de Septiembre—cultivated a citywide awareness of the growing tejano community. The first parade during the late Sixties consisted of only two floats and several groups strung out along a couple of blocks. By 1980, more than twenty-five thousand people watched the mile-long parade of floats, high school bands, and local organizations. In addition to a fiesta at North Side’s Marine Park, organizers arranged a celebration at Burnett Park. “The downtown fiesta is aimed primarily at the noon lunch crowd and that means mostly Anglo people,” explained coordinator Rudy Renteria. By the end of the decade, one Mexican holiday was not enough to satisfy the increasingly diverse crowds of partiers, and Cinco de Mayo was added to the city’s rites of spring.
Certainly Fort Worth was large enough to accommodate a multiracial population with a variety of cultures and interests. During the Eighties the population of Tarrant County passed the million mark, and by the time the decade ended, it had become home to over 309,000 more people than when it began. Of these newly counted souls, fewer were West Texans that those whom they had always referred to as “Yankees.” Yellow T-shirts sporting “University of Michigan” logos seemed as common in some suburbs as burnt orange or maroon. In their own estimation, these Rust Belt refugees saw Texas as immune to the economic shockwaves of the so-called “Reagan recession” that rippled through the industrialized North early in the decade. With oil commanding a premium, Texas was awash in investment capital and bristling with high-paying jobs.

It came as no surprise then, that not a single Tarrant County savings and loan association appeared on a “problem list” issued by the Federal Home Loan Bank Board in 1981. At the time, astronomical inflation and usurious interest rates troubled investors and compelled the board to monitor closely the nation’s thrifts. Richard Greene, president of Arlington Savings, nevertheless assured: “I’ll tell you what’s on the horizon. In Washington right now there are many savings incentive bills.” Pointing to a spirit of bipartisanship, he predicted that legislators would create all kinds of opportunities for investors.

Greene was speaking for the little man; legislators, plied with the dollars of special interests, had another class of investor in mind. In Texas, at least, millions of dollars and the promise of many more millions hinged on oil profits and a continuing building boom. The deregulated thrifts began signing off on loans that would have provoked earlier bank officers to give applicants the bum’s rush through the door they entered.

Then, all at once, in January 1986, a meteoric plunge in oil prices crashed down upon the shaky thrifts. At the end of the first business quarter that year Texas American Bancshares—owner of Fort Worth’s largest bank (the former Fort Worth National, by then renamed Texas American Bank-Fort Worth)—announced a $22 million loss. By the end of the year that figure had climbed to $115.2 million. Those losses soon paled beside the numbers that accrued once the dominoes began to tumble. In the second quarter of 1988 alone, the bank announced it had lost $135 million. TAB stock that had traded for $42 a share during the heady days of the Eighties oil boom fell to $1.50.

For a while it looked as if the bank would fare better than many of its competitors. At one point twelve of Tarrant County’s thirty-six thrifts—fully one-third—were technically insolvent. An FDIC bailout of TAB, assisted by a merger, promised to rescue what little shareholder equity remained. Charlie Hillard, local Ford dealer and a customer of the bank for forty years, emerged from a meeting of the board and moaned to a reporter: “I’m not happy about [the outcome], but it’s kind of like the girl said about her husband, ‘It’s better than nothing.’” The next year the new financial house of cards fell in again, and once more another institution—this time Bank One—picked up the pieces.

For customers, the industry shakeup left them facing a confusing game of musical chairs. Familiar signs came down and new signs went up with every failure, bailout,
and merger. Even before the oil bust, each of Fort Worth’s “big three” had departed its old quarters along Seventh Street for a more fashionable address. Fort Worth National, of course, took the name of its holding company, TAB; First National became InterFirst; Continental National changed its name to MBank. In River Oaks, where the Security State Bank had operated for over a quarter of a century, customers were notified before it joined InterFirst. Before long, however, it became First RepublicBank. That name lasted only a few weeks before the NCNB Corporation of North Carolina ordered yet a new sign to grace the street corner. At least the sign companies were happy. On average, they charged about $5,000 for every name change at the small suburban banks; high-rise urban banks brought as much as $50,000.

Measured in human terms the financial catastrophe claimed some notable victims. Among investors who had reached beyond their grasp was Billy Bob Barnett, forever afterward referred to as “the former owner of Billy Bob’s Texas.” His ambitious plans to renovate and put into use other buildings in the Stockyards ran headlong into the debilitating bust. With more than twelve hundred creditors lined up with their hands out, Billy Bob’s closed its doors in January 1988. Three months later Landmark Bank bought the nightclub at auction.

No one, however, illustrated the fall of the petroleum industry more vividly than Fort Worth oilman Eddie Chiles. The irascible business giant was at the top of his profession when the decade began. His well servicing outfit, The Western Company of North America, had gained an industry-wide reputation for feats of drilling, particularly from platform rigs. His crews punched holes into ocean floors from the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of Suez, and from the North Sea to the South China Sea. He also gained controlling interest of the Texas Rangers baseball franchise.

But it was radio that gave Chiles a public platform for stirring the apathetic masses to take action against runaway federal bureaucracy. His trademark greeting that began each broadcast on 650 stations across fourteen states announced: “This is Eddie Chiles, and I’m mad!” With that fact firmly established, he would roll into a prepared tirade. Everywhere, it seemed, red and white bumper stickers affirmed, “I’m mad, too, Eddie.”

Yet all too suddenly the downward spiral in oil prices forced The Western Company into bankruptcy. His ties to arguably the worst team in baseball seemed to magnify the buffoonish quality of his fire-eating appeals. Soon, new bumper stickers could be seen across the land, taunting that indeed, Eddie was mad. By the end of the decade, Chiles had stepped down as CEO of The Western Company, its remnants absorbed by a Houston outfit that left the once busy Western headquarters vacant. Over in Arlington, a group of businessmen that included oil scion George W. Bush, snapped up the remaining pieces of Chiles’ business empire.

Just before the oil and thrift fiasco, a catastrophe of far greater human consequence unfolded at DFW. No tragedy in the city’s history would come even close to matching the solitary failure of Delta Flight 191 that was arriving at DFW from Florida, August 2, 1985. Exactly fourteen seconds before 6 p.m., a radar controller casually reported “a little itty thunderstorm sitting right on the final.” Co-pilot Rudy Price added: “We’re gonna get our airplane washed.” A minute later another controller noted a rapid change in the direction of the wind.
At 6:03, as 191’s captain Edward Connors reduced his speed, a pilot on Delta Flight 963 watched the thunderstorm grow into a roiling green-black monster. “Is that a water spout out there?” he asked, “I’ve never seen anything like it.” Nevertheless, the tower asked Connors to continue reducing his speed. At 6:04 the 191 pilot reported lightning straight ahead. Then, at 6:05, the violent microburst of a wind shear pressed down on the plane. “Push it up, push it way up...Way up, way up, way up,” commanded the desperate Connors.

Amid the sounds of the driving rain and the roaring of the jet’s engines, all the helpless people in the tower could do was listen as Connors and Price wrestled for control of their aircraft. From the cockpit an unidentified voice sounded, “Oh [shit]...” as the flight touched down in a field north of Highway 114. Still traveling at 212 knots, it skimmed over the road and clipped the top off a car, killing instantly commuter William Mayberry, who had just moved from Mississippi to Grapevine the previous week. In another heartbeat the plane crashed into two four-million-gallon water storage tanks, and the radio went dead. From start to finish, it was all over in five minutes.

Of 165 passengers, only two walked away unhurt; 134 others were killed, and another fifteen suffered serious injuries. The tragedy brought attention to the microburst phenomenon, and small comfort that it was, the Delta crash led to improvements in air safety. Experts analyzed the disaster over and over to the benefit of pilots who would know better what to do when faced with the same situation. The crash also contributed to the immediacy of installing Terminal Doppler Weather Radar systems at airports across the country.

Fort Worth, and now the Metroplex to which it was attached, had suffered many calamities in the past and would be visited by killer hailstorms and even a tornado before the century ran its course. The fate of Flight 191, however, would stand alone in the collective memory. It was a tragedy that left permanent scars.

Although Fort Worth certainly lost its balance toward the end of the decade, it continued to focus on what lay ahead. The collapse of oil prices, ironically, had little effect on the Bass empire. A timely $400-million investment in Disney stock...
early in the decade had grown to well over a billion dollars by 1989, more than offsetting any disappointments in oil and real estate. While other oilmen scrambled just to remain solvent, Robert Bass launched a $20-million capital fundraising campaign to combine the city’s two children’s hospitals into the Cook-Fort Worth CMC. Described as “a marvelous mix between a magic kingdom and the Mayo Clinic,” the hospital bore the Bass mark of architectural distinction. A child’s vision of the “inner court of an enchanted castle” inspired the six-story atrium, its view accessible out of an occasional balcony extending from the patients’ rooms. Even the parking garage took on the look of a medieval castle. He called his effort to fund close to a third of the facility’s cost “the most rewarding thing I have done.”

Billy Bob’s also returned under new management at the decade’s “last call.” In April 1989 the second inaugural attracted an almost capacity crowd that turned out for Willie Nelson. Many in the audience professed their ignorance of the bar’s ten-month blackout. “Well, if this is the grand reopening, then I’m glad I’m part of it,” remarked a mildly surprised first-timer. Others professed they had just come to see the “Red-Headed Stranger.” If going to Billy Bob’s was still an event in itself, it took a back seat to the larger experience of a Stockyards district that had taken on a life of its own.

Elsewhere, the development that would perhaps hold the longest-term significance came with the announcement of Fort Worth Alliance Airport, the vision of Ross Perot, Jr., son of the famous Dallas billionaire. What would become the world’s first major industrial airport broke ground in 1988 on the immense rolling prairie about fifteen miles north of the city. Like so many other places in Tarrant County, this spot where cattle grazed and scissor-tailed swallows sang from strands of barbed wire fences was about to change. However, unique, it would be a familiar chapter in the story of Fort Worth and Tarrant County during the twentieth century.