THE NEW FRONTIER

A CONTEMPORARY HISTORY OF

FORT WORTH & TARRANT COUNTY

BY TY CASHION

Commissioned by
the Tarrant County Historical Society and the Fort Worth Stockyards Business Association

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On the cusp of the modern age. Fort Worth, c. 1910.
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A work of this nature, without fail, depends largely on the selfless assistance of many individuals whose areas of expertise or knowledge about particular subjects ultimately set the parameters for what the author is able to produce. Just as surely, they do it out of a love for “place,” and most often without compensation, and in near anonymity. In this respect, The New Frontier is true to form. This project has indebted me to a host of newfound friends and acquaintances who have shared with me their love for Fort Worth and a passion for historical detection and preservation. Collectively, they have read the manuscript critically, lent photographs and paintings, pointed the way to archival sources, and offered advice and encouragement unstintingly. They have also extended kindesses along the way for which I will be forever grateful. I could never express adequately the debt I owe these good women and men, and only hope that this book will reflect well on their gracious generosity. Among them include: Susie Pritchett and Dee Barker of the Tarrant County Historical Commission; at the Fort Worth Public Library, Max Hill, Kimberly Wells, Ken Hopkins, and Ken Jackson, retired, along with Amy Bearden of the library’s Foundation office; Carol Roark, who manages the Texas-Dallas History & Archives Division at the Dallas Public Library; attorney Jenkins Garrett, whose philanthropy has made the Special Collections Library at the University of Texas at Arlington one of the state’s premier research institutions, and members of the staff, Sally Groves, Ann Hodges, Shirley Rodnitzky, Blanca Smith, Kit Goodwin, Brenda McClurkin, and Colin Toenjes; Mike Strom and Susan Swain of the Special Collections at the Mary Couts Burnett Library; Texas Christian University; Douglas Harman, president and CEO of the Fort Worth Convention & Visitors Bureau; Jon McConal and Cissy Stewart Lale, both retired, of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, and Mrs. Lale’s husband, longtime journalist Max Lale as well as Jen Fennel, formerly of the Star-Telegram; Pat Pate of the Pate Museum of Transportation; and private collectors Scott Barker, Ace Cook, Gretchen Denny, Dalton Hoffman, Quentin McGown, Morris Matson, and Jack White; authors Mark Beasley and Carlos Cuellar; Mary Lenn Dixon of Texas A&M Press, and at TCU Press Judy Alter and Susan Petty; Jessica Beard of the Texas Rangers’ baseball organization; Margaret Kramer at the North Fort Worth Historical Society, the members of the Tarrant County Historical Society, particularly Steve Murrin; Ron Lammert, founder and president of Historical Publishing Network, and his staff, particularly Production Director Colin Hart, Sydney McNew, and a host of individuals who lent documents and photographs: Marsha Anderson, Mark Angle, Michael Bates, Paul Camfield, Joel Carranza, Jeffrey King Coffey, Sandra Daniels, Ron Jackson, Chris Lane, Greg Last, Debra McStay, Emil Moffatt, Carol Murray, Buddy Myers, St. Clair Newburn III, Charles Newton, Kim Novak, John T. Roberts, Tom Russell, Eric Salisbury, Janet Schmelzer, Lyndon Simpson, Robert B. Sturms, Renee Tucker, Paul Valentine, and Tom Wayne.

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Special thanks are also due my family and some friends: Buddy Hamm, who helped me recall the Fort Worth of our youth; my sister, Michelle Redwine, who has never been far away with a kind word and exhortation; my parents, Bob and Joann, always looked forward to my research visits and helped me by taking care of many little things that I could not do from Huntsville and The Woodlands (they also read everything as it took shape, even if their only constructive criticism was: ‘It’s looks perfect to us, dear.’). My wife, Peggy, and son, Sam, as always, have provided loving support.

Ty Cashion
January 2006

For Sam, native son of the Panther City.

The publisher, Ron Lammert, also wishes to express heartfelt appreciation to the businesses and foundations that made this book possible.
Fort Worth was among the first U.S. cities to operate electric trolleys. The first drivers, like this one, stood outside in the elements, just as they did when the cars were powered by mules. COURTESY OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, AR 407 1-9-54.

A jitney operator, registered and licensed, picks up a nickel fare in the early twentieth century. COURTESY OF THE FORT WORTH, TEXAS, PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, FWPP 2100-14.

Toll booths on the Dallas-Fort Worth Turnpike await the opening day’s traffic, August 26, 1957. COURTESY OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, AR 406 1-37-39.
Fort Worth’s history and development is interesting as well as complicated, and can be viewed from many different perspectives. It was a frontier fort, but only briefly. At the conclusion of the Civil War, Fort Worth was a small town struggling to find a reason to grow. Within a few years, cattle and the railroad became major factors that led to significant growth by the turn of the century. After the development of the Stockyards north of the business district, Fort Worth became widely known as “Cowtown.” It was a rugged village with a rowdy red-light district, Hell’s Half Acre, but it also possessed significant refinement, which its leading citizens built upon consistently over the next decades.

While Fort Worth’s cattle, agricultural and railroad traditions remained strong in the twentieth century, aviation became another major factor in its continued evolution. Amon Carter, Sr., newspaperman and promoter of Fort Worth as the city “Where the West Begins,” became one of the chief advocates to make Fort Worth a major aviation center through civilian and military developments, including Convair—the “Bomber Plant”—American Airlines, and Bell Helicopter. He was also a leading supporter in the city’s cultural development, pushing the creation of an arts district and establishing a foundation for one of the city’s great museums. Mr. Carter was only one, if perhaps the most vocal, of many key persons to guide Fort Worth along several progressive paths simultaneously.

Ty Cashion has done a masterful job of presenting a chronological story of contemporary Fort Worth and Tarrant County. The New Frontier includes many new insights and perspectives. Professor Cashion has also provided a wonderful book illustrated with many rare photographs. Over the decades, Fort Worth has evolved in some surprising ways and has been involved in some controversial issues. The very identity of the city as “Cowtown” has not always been embraced by all community leaders. However, today Fort Worth has become more comfortable with a dual identity that embraces both “cowboys and culture,” an asset that has paid tremendous dividends in attracting both tourism and business growth. Ty Cashion has made a significant contribution by identifying the many factors that have worked in concert to make contemporary Fort Worth a city with a distinctive past and a future with unlimited possibilities.

Douglas Harman, Ph.D., President & CEO
Fort Worth Convention & Visitors Bureau
2005
Fort Worth High School, located at 610 West Dagget Street. The Justin Boot Company factory presently occupies the site.

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City Hall as it appeared at the beginning of the new century.

COURTESY OF THE QUENTIN MCGOWN COLLECTION, FORT WORTH.

The Stock Yards Hotel and Exchange in Fort Worth’s North Side at the end of the old century.

COURTESY OF W. D. SMITH PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, AR 430, 87-1-45.
Fort Worth! By itself, the name evokes images of the Old West. A frontier history of cowboys and cattle drives, railroad building, and Hell’s Half Acre tells a rousing story, one often repeated and readily familiar to those who claim “Cowtown” as their home. Even as we begin a new century, this formative experience echoes from every corner of the city: in the wistful ambiance of Sundance Square; in the gritty, but welcoming Stockyards; in the arts district, where Goya and Cézanne find harmony with Remington and Russell. That same connection with the past resonates in many other, more ordinary places throughout Tarrant County as well. It can be as simple as gaining a sense of continuity by driving west on I-20 over the open, rolling hills and through the Walsh Ranch that cowman V. O. Hildreth founded in the nineteenth century. On the other side of the county that connection with the past might come unexpectedly in a chance encounter with “Puffy,” a nineteenth-century steam train, as it chugs and whistles its way along the route between North Side and the restored Cotton Belt Depot in Grapevine. Certainly such reminders lend weight to the claim that Fort Worth remains today, as always, the city “Where the West Begins.”

Just as surely as the frontier story of the pioneers left a deep and lasting impression on the popular imagination, those who succeeded the city’s founders often merited weighty sequels of their own. In fact, the twentieth century represents a history much broader in scope, one whose treasure writers have mined in parts, resulting in a wealth of biographies and thematic accounts of organizations, places, and episodes from the city’s past. There exists, however, no broad treatment of Fort Worth that gives contemporary times a voice in proportion to the city’s early-day heritage. Typically, these kinds of historical surveys rely on works already published; and, while the city’s twentieth-century canon is indeed ample, there have remained too many gaps to compose a well-rounded narrative without consulting the archival records. The remedy—an examination of such basic resources as newspapers and magazines, and special collections at local public and university libraries—has proven more tedious than daunting. I hope the product of this endeavor will bring some long-forgotten experiences back into the public consciousness and keep alive some well-known tales worth repeating.

The goal of The New Frontier is to introduce general readers to the Fort Worth that emerged out of its earthy, but mostly glorious beginnings. Each chapter attempts to convey, decade-by-decade, what an astute observer might have seen and heard, or even
experienced. It does not dodge the controversial issues that confronted Fort Worthians; to do so would diminish the good fights of those who fought them. Surely, the men and women who helped advance such causes as social justice or historical preservation, and even those who violated the public trust through criminal acts and pursuits of vanity, deserve some attention. At the same time, the parade of events that comprises the historical record recalled here marches at a pace that allows only brief glimpses, rather than exacting stares.

Along the way, three identifying characteristics of twentieth-century Fort Worth should come clearly into focus. First, the banner slogan “Where the West Begins” is no hollow euphemism. From its very beginning as a U.S. military post, Fort Worth fixed its sights on the western horizon, and the village that emerged there grew into a city by appending itself to the region economically, politically, and culturally to the mutual benefit of both. West Texans, until well after World War II, regarded Fort Worth as a kind of “nature’s metropolis,” a place where they marketed their goods, brokered their resources, and obtained the supplies and material services that kept the region’s economic engine purring. They also looked to the big city as a source for financing their land-intensive businesses, a place that gave them relevant news and information, and a cultural beacon under whose lights members of every social class could indulge their varied tastes. By the time Fort Worth began to realize there were other, equally profitable markets to tap, the western legacy itself became an asset that distinguished the city from so many other competitors.

The other two identifying characteristics of the twentieth century are closely related. The second is a sense of ambivalence over the city’s self-identity. Fort Worthians alternately embraced and discounted a popularly told heritage that was, at once, both grandly heroic and coarsely unrefined. Situated so close to Dallas—the confident and urbane financial giant that always seemed to stay a step ahead—Fort Worth endured a “second city” inferiority cultivated in cow-country commerce. Only lately, in relative terms, have Fort Worthians shed completely any lingering self-doubts. That slow reckoning heralds the century’s third
distinguishing trait: a persistence and continuity of the pioneer spirit. The never-say-die attitude that buoyed the city’s founding fathers through times of civil war, social chaos, and ruinous economic depressions set a course for later generations of civic leaders, who likewise met each new obstacle with the same grit and determination. By the time Fort Worth commemorated its 150th anniversary in 1999, its citizens had come to appreciate fully the seminal link that bound each new present with the past. That distant past, in turn, became an integral part of the self-identity that has transformed twenty-first-century Fort Worth into one of the country’s most livable cities.

The people of Cowtown, or, the Panther City, as many of them lovingly refer to their home, have surely come to appreciate the powerful mystique of what a recent generation of “new” western historians have derisively called our national creation myth—the idea that this great country was born of the westering experience, and that each new frontier reaffirmed the American character. These triumphal stories, even if white-washed and routinely exaggerated, nevertheless provide the purest expression of such time-honored virtues as individual enterprise, initiative, and self-reliance. The way Fort Worth’s tourist industry today promotes the seemingly ill-matched theme of “Cowboys & Culture” is, in one respect, merely another way of declaring: “We’ve arrived, and we got here on our own terms.”

As Fort Worth expanded, it gradually charted the destiny of other Tarrant County communities, some to a greater extent than others. As part of this volume, these cities and towns enter the story as they relate to the development of Fort Worth. Naturally, each possesses a distinct history and identity. Old-time residents of places such as Grapevine and Arlington are quick to point out The Ranch Museum. An endowment from the estate of publisher Amon Carter, which included his personal collection of western paintings and sculptures by such acclaimed artists as Frederic Remington and Charles Russell, gave his namesake a measure of elan from the beginning. That did not stop Time magazine from characterizing the institution as the “Museum of ‘Yippee-Yo-To-Yay!’” when it opened as the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art in 1961. What hung from the walls and rested on pedestals inside the gallery, however, quickly silenced any insinuations that it lacked sophistication. Before long, officials from museums in such places as New York City and Washington, D.C. were coming to Fort Worth, hat in hand, to borrow works of art for their own exhibitions. When the United States and the Soviet Union initiated a cultural exchange in 1973, the Amon Carter’s paintings and sculptures eloquently conveyed to our Cold War adversaries the raw spirit that is America.

“What is The Ranch?” a local radio station asks its listeners. “…all the Hanks, both Georges, Fort Worth…rodeo, horses, pickup trucks [and] everything that makes the West great.”

COURTESY OF THE FORT WORTH CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU.

The Fort Worth Star-Telegram’s “home delivery” service once offered an airdrop to subscribers on isolated ranches in West Texas. COURTESY OF THE FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, COURTESY, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, AR 408 1-26-53A.
out that pioneer settlements within their present corporate limits actually predate the arrival of the soldiers who founded the military post Fort Worth.

The first inhabitants, of course, are lost to history, but occasionally some ancient reminder bestirs mute testimony to an occupancy that can date back thousands of years. When the Texas Department of Transportation released its environmental study of the proposed Southwest Parkway late in 2004, the report noted that archaeologists working along the Clear Fork of the Trinity River had peeled back a three-to-four-foot strip of earth, exposing artifacts scattered around rock-lined hearths where prehistoric hunters and gatherers camped between 500 and 2,000 years ago. These people would have been relative newcomers if the historical marker located on the seventh tee at Lake Arlington Golf Course is accurate. Artifacts found there are said to date back almost nine millennia.

Other native groups attracted the attention of explorer-diplomats who traversed the future Tarrant County long before people calling themselves Americans arrived. During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Frenchmen Athanase de Mézières and Pierre Vial, working in the service of the Spanish king, became familiar with the land while visiting bands of Wichita and Tonkawa Indians, whose semi-sedentary lifestyle suited a place where the well-watered eastern woodlands gave way to the arid plains. De Mézières, in fact, glowed about this lush, riverine country characterized by fertile prairies and wooded valleys abounding in fish and game. Any plans that the Spanish had for the upper Trinity country soon fell apart, and, as one century gave way to another, American filibusters such as Philip Nolan swept through the area rounding up wild mustangs and gathering intelligence for men with even loftier visions.

It was an ignominious beginning for the next group of European-Americans who entered the all-but-forgotten land in 1837, this time as citizens of the Texas Republic. That November, eight footsore survivors of an eighteen-man ranging company from near the Little River, between Austin and Waco, limped into present Tarrant County from the west. They were lucky that a much larger force of Wichita and Caddo warriors they had engaged on the Rolling Plains did not kill them all, and luckier still that the Caddo village they happened upon extended them guarded hospitality.

White men returned in greater numbers the following spring, 1838, and this time they were not on foot. A militia expedition, ninety men strong, assembled at Fort Inglish, in present Bonham, to pursue an Indian raiding party that had lit out for the western prairies. Somewhere between the modern-day cities of Euless and Arlington, the Texans attacked a small Indian village, killing several of the inhabitants and recovering a few horses.

These years of the old Republic were times of mortal calamity for native peoples with hereditary claims to the future Tarrant County. Bands of Wichitas, Tonkawas, Caddos, and Comanches had long resided in the area, or at least hunted on its prairies and along the watercourses. Members of several non-Texas tribes like the Cherokees, the Choctaws, the Delawares, the Shawnees, and

**Anthropologists believe the earliest inhabitants of this area practiced trepanning—a kind of “surgery” that released evil spirits responsible for causing such maladies as headaches and dizziness. Remarkably, they became rather proficient at it. This lifelike diorama portraying the scene was for many years a popular attraction with children and grownups alike at the Fort Worth Museum of Science & History.**

**About the time Anglo Texans began exploring the future Tarrant County in 1838, Mariebrush B. Lamar succeeded Sam Houston as president of the Republic of Texas, replacing the old general’s enlightened Indian policy with one that offered only expulsion or extermination.**

**The sculpture High Desert Princess, by artist Mehl Lawson, greets visitors to Fort Worth’s National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, representing the comfortable expression of both refinement and traditional western culture that the city has cultivated. COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL COWGIRL MUSEUM AND HALL OF FAME, WWW.COWGIRL.NET, WWW.RHONDAHOLEPHOTOGRAPHY.COM.**

**The sculpture High Desert Princess, by artist Mehl Lawson, greets visitors to Fort Worth’s National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, representing the comfortable expression of both refinement and traditional western culture that the city has cultivated. COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL COWGIRL MUSEUM AND HALL OF FAME, WWW.COWGIRL.NET, WWW.RHONDAHOLEPHOTOGRAPHY.COM.**
President Sam Houston visited the abandoned Bird’s Fort in 1843 to initiate a treaty signed by the Republic of Texas and nine Indian tribes on September 29 of that year. Unfortunately, the Comanches and Wichitas were not among the signatories. Designed to repair some of the damage of the Lamar years by setting a boundary line between the two peoples, the treaty soon failed as the pressure of Anglo settlement forced the Indians farther west. By 1854 most of the tribes had accepted reservation life along the Brazos River in present-day Young County. Continued harassment ultimately compelled them to flee to Indian Territory in 1859.

COURTESY OF THE TEXAS STATE ARCHIVES AND LIBRARY, AUSTIN.

the Kickapoos were also attracted to this geographic borderland where no Anglos at present had settled. That, however, was about to change. Added to the mix were the alternating Indian policies of presidents Sam Houston and Martheu B. Lamar—the former offering an enlightened coexistence, the latter promising only expulsion or extermination.

Another foray in September 1838 penetrated as far as the Clear Fork of the Trinity and nettled about the same deadly results as the first. It was followed two months later by a more imposing campaign. At Clarksville, near the Red River, a force of five-hundred volunteer militiamen marched to the south-west and through the Eastern Cross Timbers, before stopping to make camp on the Clear Fork, in, or certainly near, present-day Fort Worth. There, General Thomas Rusk took command. The advancing Texans overawed the residents of a nearby Caddo village who immediately fled, leaving behind “Buffalo Skins, a few blankets, some guns &c.” After militiamen gathered trophies and set the Indians’ dwellings afire, the expedition was declared a success—and none too soon. The officer in charge of bringing up some cattle to feed the troops, then-captain Edward H. Tarrant, failed to appear. By then it was December. Cold, hungry, and tired, the men unhitched the oxen that had pulled their five wagons into the upper Trinity country and enjoyed a tremendous barbecue. Unburdened by the conveyances, they afterward returned to Northeast Texas. Despite their privation, Adjutant General Hugh McLeod extolled the agricultural potential of the surrounding prairies and bottomlands, a place that others, he sneered, had called a “sterile waste.” In his opinion, it represented “the finest portion of Texas.”

Such reports excited the imaginations of men who had taken part in the expedition as well as others who had not yet seen the land themselves, but dreamed of owning a piece of it. In 1841, under the terms of the Republic’s Military Road Act, Major Jonathan Bird applied for a grant of land just inside the future Tarrant County, south of where Euless would one day emerge. Confident that Congress would confirm his application, he put volunteer militiamen to work constructing a bulwark for a group of pioneers on their way from Fannin County, in Northeast Texas.

Arriving in a wild land unbroken by plows, and expecting a contest from the native inhabitants, the settlers no doubt gained a sense of security jacketed as they were inside the palisade of Bird’s Fort, the name they gave to the citizens’ post. They need not have worried, however. The Indians were already gone. Earlier that year the militia had prosecuted the only significant engagement the future Tarrant County would ever experience. A few miles south of where Bird soon erected his post, several bands of various Indian groups had accumulated in a series of concealed encampments along the thickly wooded Village Creek, near the boundary where Arlington and Fort Worth meet today. Upon discovering their location, General Tarrant and Captain John B. Denton distinguished themselves in the abortive Battle of Village Creek; the former for wisely ordering his troops to withdraw as Indian resistance grew stronger, the latter for becoming the Anglos’ only fatal casualty. It was for these men that Tarrant and Denton Counties were named.

The auspicious circumstance as it affected the prospects for the Bird’s Fort settlement soon mattered little. In January 1842 an agent of the Texan Immigration & Land Company, or colloquially, the Peters Colony, arrived and informed the pioneers they were “squatters,” and ordered them off the land. After the disbelieving leaders of the little band verified that Bird’s conflicting claim was indeed invalid, most, if not all of them, retreated eastward in the direction of the recently founded log village of Dallas.

As these unlucky émigrés from Fannin County learned, the Republic of Texas in 1841 had awarded the colonization company an immense grant of land. Upon its annexation to the U.S., the state legislature sustained the act. Even though the venture frustrated the Bird’s Fort settlers, it nevertheless gave impetus to a larger and more significant pioneer movement that introduced many hundreds of immigrants from states primarily of the Upper South and lower Midwest. In that way, the Peters colonists distinguished the demographic character of North Texas and diluted the influence of the plantation economy that made East Texas an extension of Dixieland.

First-comers from these sections, later joined by families and individuals arriving from the Lower South, laid out the future county’s earliest settlements. Peters colonists from states such as Missouri, Tennessee, and Illinois began plowing fields and erecting log homes in the middle 1840s in what would become northeast Tarrant County. By 1846 a community began emerging that went through a succession of names before folks there agreed to call it Grapevine. About fifteen miles to the south a trading house had been established in 1845 at Marrow Bone Springs in present Arlington. By the time war broke out the following year between

THE NEW FRONTIER

12

THE NEW FRONTIER
the United States and Mexico, it became a ranger station. It was also the place where former Republic legislator Middleton Tate Johnson was assigned frontier duty after returning from fighting below the Rio Grande. Sometime after the war ended and the Peters Colony contract expired, he took possession of the surrounding land. He also introduced large-scale cotton farming to the area—along with the attendant institution of slavery. The community that grew up around his fiefdom became Johnson Station.

As these developments unfolded, settlers in North Texas were anticipating the U.S. government making good on its promise to establish a fort for their defense. The annexation of Texas in December 1845, of course, precipitated war with Mexico, forestalling any plans to erect a strategic line of military posts bordering the state’s western frontier. With the return of peace in 1848, Major General William Jenkins Worth took charge of an undermanned Eighth Military Department headquartered at San Antonio. Oddly enough, the individual for whom the fort and town would be named expressed no enthusiasm for making it all happen. Despite the overweening demands of settlers in North Texas, he agreed only to “study the matter,” and sent General W. S. Harney to gather information and make a recommendation.

Hardly had the inspection party returned when Worth died of cholera. It was May 9, 1849. The very next day, Harney, who had assumed temporary command, ordered Major Ripley A. Arnold to lead Company F of the Second Dragoons back into the upper Trinity country to select the site for a federal post. Stopping at Marrow Bone Springs, the major secured the help of some guides, led by M. T. Johnson, who had come to know the land intimately as a frontier ranger. The men could not have found a more suitable location than the commanding bluff overlooking the confluence of the West and Clear forks of the Trinity River. After reaching the stream’s south bank, the men watched the sun set from a peninsular prominence, where a grove of live oaks provided cover. Samuels Avenue would one day bisect this ridge, and the early wealth that the future city generated would produce its first exclusive neighborhood there. That evening, however, Company F and its guides feasted on a deer in the rough camp they made beside a cold spring that spilled onto an ancient metate, a bowl-shaped rock that generation-upon-generation of native women had used for grinding their corn and grain. The next morning, the party made its way south and west for about a mile, just below the cusp of the ridge to a spot where the major determined to erect the fort. Much later, one of the men in M. T. Johnson’s company, Simon B. Farrar, recalled: “I thought it the most beautiful and grand country that the sun ever shone on.” Like both Arnold and Johnson, Farrar had served under General Worth in Mexico. It was right then, he insisted, that they decided to name the post in honor of the “Hero of Monterrey and Chapultepec Castle.” Almost a century later, another federal project, the Ripley Arnold Housing Center, would arise on the property bordering the western edge of the one-time military reservation where the post and city were birthed. Today the campus of RadioShack occupies that site; the Tarrant County Courthouse stands at the other end, where the soldiers drilled and paraded.
Anticipating the boon to civilian settlement, the Texas state legislature at that time adopted a motion to carve a new county out of Navarro. Governor George T. Wood on December 20, 1849, signed into law the act that created Tarrant County, named for its primary booster, Indian fighter Edward H. Tarrant. Over the ensuing months a horseman canvassed the area and recorded for the 1850 U.S. Census the names of 664 inhabitants within its boundaries.

For troops stationed at Fort Worth during the four-and-half years the post stood sentinel atop the bluff, life produced few idyllic memories. Even the fort's commanding vista came at the cost of being “exposed all winter to the northers and sleets of the country and in summer the scorching heats,” as a War Department inspector candidly reported in 1851. The soldiers’ existence, in fact, could be quite bleak, as the record of thirty-one desertions attests. Only an occasional opportunity to go fishing at the river or hunting along its banks broke the monotonous routine of drilling and maintaining military order. Yet, for the officers at least, there were happier occasions, the most notable being their first Christmas season at the post, when several barefooted farmers’ daughters living in the surrounding area accepted invitations to attend a party. No doubt the irregular visits by Lieutenant Colonels Robert E. Lee, Albert Sidney Johnston, John Bell Hood, and a handful of other future Civil War generals grew more pleasant in the minds of both the officers and enlisted men as time wore on.

About the only native peoples the troops encountered were the traders, the curious, and the alms seekers who came to the post, and others whom they met while on patrol, and these were normally respectful if not always friendly. Nevertheless, the popular canon includes tales of two hostile encounters, one invented by yarn spinners, the other a fragmentary account rooted at least partly in fact. The first involved a preemptive strike—a massacre really—in which the soldiers took the fight to two bands of Comanches led by Chiefs Jim Ned and Feathertail, who had determined to erase Fort Worth from the landscape and reclaim their lost hunting ground. The mythical contest did not end until the dragoons cornered the harried warriors in a Palo Pinto canyon, killing Jim Ned and setting the survivors to flight. While there really was a Jim Ned, the singular fact in this episode, he was in reality a Delaware Indian, who occasionally scouted for soldiers of both the old Republic and the U. S. Army. As for Feathertail, he does not appear to have existed at all. In the other confrontation, made popular as the vignette in which Oliver Knight began his classic history of Fort Worth, the garrison faced down a war party of Comanches and their Caddo allies with a blast from the fort’s cannon. While many historians later declared that the account was entirely apocryphal, Clay Perkins, in The Fort in Fort Worth, dutifully revealed two additional sources that suggest Knight’s recounting of an old soldier’s tale—while largely insignificant and probably exaggerated—at least possessed credibility at its core.

Even if the troops never engaged hostile warriors in battle, mortal peril was nevertheless omnipresent. Luckily, the garrison was never struck with such deadly epidemics as cholera and influenza, yet outbreaks in other places made the possibility seem real enough. Malaria, on the other hand, was endemic. The post surgeons who served at Fort Worth reported about a thousand more cases of the malady than there were soldiers. During the post’s occupation, enlisted men died of such diseases as typhoid fever, scurvy, dysentery, and diarrhea, over which post surgeons might poison them with “cures” of mercury or calomel; almost without fail the ill were subjected to bleedings. Even Major Ripley Arnold, whose career ended suddenly on the losing end of a shootout with the post surgeon at Fort Graham, was preceded in death by two of his children, after they had fallen ill at their post home.

Other than seeding a sparse and scattered civilian settlement and providing a living for those who filled army contracts, the fort’s greatest impetus to growth arguably came with its abandonment on September 17, 1853. A restriction that forbade civilians from establishing shops within a mile of the post stanched the emergence of anything resembling a business district. Then, suddenly, the removal of the troops farther west left the raw material for a readymade village, and the fort’s namesake town took off. The army stable became a combination

A hand-drawn map of Tarrant County showing early settlements and landmarks.

hotel-tavern, the soldiers’ barracks a general store. While the officers’ quarters provided a home and workplace for the village’s first physician, Carroll M. Peak, the post hospital housed the first school, run by Kentuckian physician, Carroll M. Peak, the post hospital stationed in the main building, providing medical care to soldiers and civilians alike. The officers’ quarters provided a home and workplace for the village’s first physician, Carroll M. Peak, the post hospital housed the first school, run by Kentuckian physician, Carroll M. Peak, the post hospital stationed in the main building, providing medical care to soldiers and civilians alike. The officers’ quarters provided a home and workplace for the village’s first physician, Carroll M. Peak, the post hospital housed the first school, run by Kentuckian physician, Carroll M. Peak, the post hospital stationed in the main building, providing medical care to soldiers and civilians alike. The officers’ quarters provided a home and workplace for the village’s first physician, Carroll M. Peak, the post hospital housed the first school, run by Kentuckian physician, Carroll M. Peak, the post hospital stationed in the main building, providing medical care to soldiers and civilians alike. The officers’ quarters provided a home and workplace for the village’s first physician, Carroll M. Peak, the post hospital housed the first school, run by Kentuckian physician, Carroll M. Peak, the post hospital stationed in the main building, providing medical care to soldiers and civilians alike. The officers’ quarters provided a home and workplace for the village’s first physician, Carroll M. Peak, the post hospital housed the first school, run by Kentuckian physician, Carroll M. Peak, the post hospital stationed in the main building, providing medical care to soldiers and civilians alike. The officers’ quarters provided a home and workplace for the village’s first physician, Carroll M. Peak, the post hospital housed the first school, run by Kentuckian physician, Carroll M. Peak, the post hospital stationed in the main building, providing medical care to soldiers and civilians alike.

The military roads leading from Fort Worth into West Texas had already established the post as a jumping off point for the vast, sparsely settled rolling plains at a time when settlers were beginning to test the unfamiliar land. Westering pioneers continued to trickle through this welcoming gateway, turning the trails into arteries of trade between Fort Worth and villages such as Jacksboro, Weatherford, and Palo Pinto. Contractors, who had supplied the garrison atop the bluff, afterward staged their deliveries at Fort Worth before sending them off to Forts Belknap and Phantom Hill and Camp Cooper that guarded the emerging frontier of Northwest Texas.

Then, in November 1856, the forward-looking little community on the Trinity improved its prospects considerably by jerking the county seat from under neighboring Birdville. Arguably, it was a stolen election. Fort Worthians first siphoned off their rivals’ get-out-the-vote keg of whiskey sometime during the previous evening, doubling their own quantity of free spirits. No doubt the mean prank helped swing the tight contest. Padding the count were fifteen cowboys from what would soon become Wise County. The men possessed an abiding interest in moving their neighboring seat closer to the developing range and determined to do their part to make it happen. Yet, despite the belief that they were voting illegibly, any man residing in unrepresented territory adjoining Tarrant County could legitimately cast a ballot. Nevertheless, their leader, Sam Woody, warned that if the polling judges exposed their scheme it would mean the penitentiary for them all. The thirsty cowboys, then, watched their kindred partisans raise glass after glass to victory, passing up the grand hootenanny of which they were rightly proud. The coup, however ill-gotten the intention, provided the highlight in a year that also marked the opening of a U.S. Post Office and a regular stagecoach route between Fort Worth and Jacksboro. Both made connections with the Southern Overland Mail—the Butterfield—further inserting the upstart village into the growing stream of frontier commerce and communication.

Among the procession of pioneers who passed through Fort Worth during these years was Jonathan Hamilton Baker of Virginia, who stopped long enough to teach public school for a session in 1858 before settling at Palo Pinto. A diary he kept left the impression of a bustling frontier center struggling to emerge from the pack of so many small places with big visions. “Some good buildings and the town seems to be improving rapidly,” he noted upon first laying eyes on Fort Worth. After accepting a position as schoolmaster, he found a place where “room, board, and washing cost $8 a month.” Predictably, he made note of the ever-changing springtime weather: late-season northerly wind that rendered the mornings cool and the afternoons sunny and warm; evening thunderstorms that illuminated a vast panorama, dumping “tremendous rain,” but leaving only muddy roads to betray a cloudless morning sky. Then, there was the heat, “hot enough,” in fact, to “cook eggs in the sand”—and it was yet only the first week of July.

Certainly, the Fort Worth he described was a product of the frontier. Scattered willy-nilly over the immediate landscape, small farms surrounded log and clapboard homes where skyscrapers would one day arise. Yet at this early date the smell of barnyard animals saturated the air, and the “chattering” of prairie chickens and crowing of roosters heralded the beginning of each new day. Amused by the proceedings in a temporary, makeshift wooden hall of justice, this man from the land of the House of Burgesses charitably described “court day” as “novel,” its members of the bar “presenting quite a disparity of talent and physical appearance.” Baker spared no measure of disgust, however, over the way merchants conducted business on the Sabbath. Each week, at the ringing of a bell—located, ironically, at Steele’s Tavern—those accustomed to honoring the day of the Lord gathered inside the homes of fellow townspeople, where they read and discussed the Bible, and, when opportunity presented, worshipped at services led by circuit riders. Once the crops were laid by in August, it was the season for revivals, and Baker mounted his “young and foolish” mule on which he crossed the Clear Fork to camp beside a brush arbor six miles west of the village. At the end of the term, the county treasurer remitted him precisely $21.25, and Baker shortly afterward departed for Palo Pinto.
Beneath the veneer of those serene observations, a brief feud between Fort Worth and Birdville over the so-called stolen election portended even graver events. An argument that began at a picnic resulted in Fort Worth’s only documented showdown in the middle of the street. Just outside the courthouse Sheriff John B. York happened upon disgruntled Birdville supporter, Hiram Calloway. Locking eyes, they paused momentarily, then drew their guns and fired, each killing the other. Following another slaying, the editors of two Birdville newspapers similarly shot it out there, this time leaving only the Fort Worth sympathizer dead.

Added to the editors’ enmity was their larger war of words over the impending crisis of secession. As the people of Tarrant County chose sides, the “Texas Troubles” unfolded during the torpid summer of 1860, attended by a series of mysterious fires and rumors of slave insurrections that plagued communities largely in the northern part of the state. A mood of hysteria swept away all reason, along with the middle ground on which a tenous coexistence between Unionists and secessionists rested. Moobs executed as many as a hundred suspected arsonists and abolitionists in North and East Texas, including at least two in Fort Worth. One of the men was a Methodist minister, Anthony Bewley, whom activists “extradited” from his Missouri home. Both victims of the mob dangled in the same hanging tree until birds picked them clean; later, someone cut them down and casually discarded their bones atop a downtown building.

By then, war was imminent. Once it was declared, legions of North Texas men marched off to fight, and the brisk momentum Fort Worth had enjoyed lost all forward progress. Soon, in fact, the conflict brought a retrograde movement that rolled back the population, all but isolating the two-hundred-and-fifty-odd citizens who remained. Beyond the village, on the rolling plains of Northwest Texas, Comanche and Kiowa war parties contested for the land with an itinerant cavalry and a home guard conscripted mostly from “cow hunters,” who forded their families for protection. In Tarrant County, Indian warriors raided near Johnson Station and got as close to Fort Worth as Marine Creek, where the Stockyards district would later emerge. If profiteering in scarce commodities cheapened pretensions of Confederate patriotism, then surely the failure of Tarrant County’s 850-plus slaves to rise up and throw off their shackles laid bare the Texas Troubles as nothing but empty vituperation. As if providing a metaphor for these dark times, a half-finished courthouse presented an omnipresent reminder of a larger job abandoned. Arising from a stone façade covering the first floor, the frame of a second story cut the sky like a skeleton of another kind, existing only to mock the self-ennobling cause that left it in such condition.

When the war ended, Fort Worth lay prostrate. Behind the locked doors and shuttered windows of business houses, empty shelves lined the walls. There was neither post office nor saloon. Hogs that roamed freely through streets overgrown with weeds found a suitable home in the unfinished courthouse. Elsewhere “there were many more houses than people to occupy them,” wrote newcomer Khleber Van Zandt, who arrived in 1865, about four months after the South’s surrender at Appomattox. This once-vibrant village, he concluded, had become in the space of four exhaustive years, the very “picture of desolation.”

During the period of Reconstruction, Fort Worth like the rest of North Texas was overrun with Confederate veterans seeking a new start. And although Southern sympathies ran deep, there would be little time to wallow in the Lost Cause. Where Dallas grew into the financial center for the postwar cotton economy of slaveless plantations and tenant farmers, Fort Worth reassured its claim to the Great West. Out there, cattle had multiplied on ranges where bison ran in seemingly infinite numbers. Ranchers and frontiersmen with the mettle to challenge the native claimants found an exploitable land that the antebellum society composed mostly of farmers had written off as worthless. In these years Fort Worth reemerged as a true western boomtown, enjoying a resurrected commerce in east-west traffic as well as new trails that led cattle drovers to railheads in Kansas and distant ranges as far away as Montana.

It did not happen all at once, of course. In the spring of 1866, Fort Worth presented a disheartening scene to cowman J. J. Myers of Lockhart, Texas, who rode into town ahead of about a thousand cattle. Entering the courthouse, he encountered old pioneer Charles Biggers Daggett, who quickly gathered some willing men, and together with Myers’ crew, they guided the herd through the desolate village and then down the bluff, where they forded the Trinity. The sight of all those bawling cattle, their horns bobbing through a cloud of dust, caused quite a sensation. Such processions soon became a routine sight, but they still quickened the pulse of men who recognized the opportunities at hand. Directly, Fort Worth became the last stop of any consequence on the northbound trail into Indian Territory, and the business of outfitting each crew was rived only by the lucrative rewards of entertaining them.

That first year drovers trailed their herds to the railhead at Sedalia, Missouri, but ran into problems that threatened to strangle the infant industry in the cradle. There, they ran into the fierce opposition of farmers whose cattle contracted a tick fever from the hearty longhorns, and when Missouri passed laws barring the importation of Texas cattle, other states followed suit. By the next year, however, cowmen and railroad officials had effected a compromise with their opponents, and Abilene became the first in a succession
of Kansas cattle towns that provided a final destination for the Chisholm Trail. From there, drovers sent their animals by rail to the packing plants at Chicago.

Then, in 1867 and 1868, respectively, federal troops established Forts Griffin and Richardson in Northwest Texas. Citizens in the settled eastern third of the state resented the soldiers for meddling in local affairs, but on the frontier, men and women were beginning to be occupied. Soon, old roads that had fallen into disuse once again came alive as soldiers worked with ranchers and settlers to clear the emerging range country of Indians and outlaws. From Fort Worth, contractors filled their orders, sending freight wagons with goods and supplies westward; others who raised horses and mules and grew the provender that fed them also found a brisk trade. With each passing year the stream of westbound immigrants grew, and those who made Fort Worth their final destination found opportunities aplenty.

By 1868 the meager population doubled, which was no great feat, but soon it doubled again, and Fort Worth began taking on a more substantial appearance. The courthouse on the county square, at last completed, dominated the scene below. From a narrow veranda circling the cupola, observers could survey stone and masonry buildings gradually replacing the log business houses that had been recently boarded shut. Beyond the modest commercial district, new homes sided with finished lumber similarly emerged among the old pioneer homes.

Serving the prosperous community by 1873 were hotels and restaurants as well as saloons and gaming houses that enjoyed a vigorous trade with the floating population of cowboys and frontierspeople. Shop owners peddled such merchandise as dry goods, hardware, and water-well supplies, many of them from false-fronted buildings in which they lived on a second floor. Manufacturers of ice, leather goods, and tin products also found a steady market, as did blacksmiths, printers, and a photographer. While a professional class of doctors and attorneys established comfortable practices, bankers operated out of three separate institutions. There were also clergymen enough to minister to the spiritual needs of Fort Worth’s mainstream Protestants, and although irregularly, Catholics and Episcopalians enjoyed mass as well. Education, too, thrived in upwards of twenty schools that instructed the children of Fort Worthians, black as well as white, most of them one-room buildings that operated under public supervision. After a succession of weekly newspapers came and went during these years, Confederate veteran B. B. Paddock arrived in 1872 and took over the Fort Worth Democrat, which he soon turned into a bully pulpit for boosting the city in much the same way as Amon Carter would later do with the Fort Worth Star-Telegram.

Eighteen seventy-three also marked another important milestone. To gain better control over their affairs, community leaders applied to the state of Texas for a city charter, and effective March 1, Fort Worth won the right to incorporate roughly four square miles of land that extended over the bluff from the Trinity River. Voters soon established a mayor–alderman form of government that promised to regulate vice, restrict the carrying of firearms, and even to build sidewalks and plant ornamental trees.

Certainly, by 1873 Fort Worth possessed all the features that would assure it a prominent place among the state’s leading cities, save for one key feature, a railroad. That seemed like a sure bet, however, because officials of the Texas & Pacific, then building across the state from east-to-west, were as anxious as Fort Worthians to establish a railhead at this gateway to a western market that had scarcely been tapped. Already, the line extended about six miles past Dallas, to Eagle Ford. In anticipation of its impending arrival, Fort Worth’s leading businessmen set aside a 320-acre donation for a railroad reservation, around which hopeful entrepreneurs and job seekers were already clustered in a subdivision of tents. Then, just at the moment when T&P President Thomas Scott was in London entertaining investors at a congratulatory banquet, a cable from New York arrived—Jay Cooke and Company, one of America’s most substantial business houses, had failed.

The ensuing Panic of 1873 set off the most severe depression the country had known up to that time. The prospective investors in the T&P were among the first to withdraw their support, sending ripples through the economy that dashed the plans of men in Fort Worth who had wagered their futures on the railroad’s arrival. The bottom collapsed under the market for cattle as well, and a killing blizzard that winter only added to the industry’s woes. B. B. Paddock later reflected: “The population dwindled as rapidly as it had grown.” Perhaps a thousand people remained, but business
The economic pall that followed the Panic of 1873 still hung heavy over Fort Worth when Dallas attorney Robert E. Cowart visited in 1875. According to local lore, Cowart returned home and, tongue-in-cheek, reported that business was so poor in the neighboring village he spotted a panther sleeping undisturbed in the middle of a desolate downtown street. Rather than express indignity, Fort Worthians embraced the lethargic cat. Its name and image would become ubiquitous, inspiring everything from the Fort Worth Cats minor league professional baseball team to countless businesses and civic organizations. The Panther Division, whose program is pictured here, trained at Fort Worth’s Camp Bowie during World War I and found the mascot to be a fitting symbol of its fierce pride. 

The new era began immediately. A count of businesses a few weeks after the railroad arrived numbered fifty-nine; four years later the city directory listed 460. For the better part of those four years Fort Worth represented the end of the T&P line, yet the westbound traffic continued. Lines of wagons pulling freight embarked each day for destinations as far away as the Caprock and the Pecos River country. On their return, it was not unusual to see the skins of such animals as bears and panthers, but mostly the wagons brought mountains of buffalo hides. In November 1876 alone, teamsters from Fort Griffin delivered ten thousand of the reeking specimens to the T&P reservation, where at times the stacks covered as much as fifteen acres and topped ten feet in places. And even though the Western Trail through Fort Griffin diverted some of the cattle traffic, drovers continued to push their herds northward through the streets of Fort Worth, a few blocks east of Main.

Another wester of activity emanated from the saloons and brothels that inevitably attended the boom in frontier commerce. During the trailing season, cowboys regularly “took the town,” as they called the routine of riding wildly up the street, whooping and firing their six-shooters at anything that made a good target. On the sidewalks, men gambled openly, while others, only a bit more discreetly, laid their money down on fights in the back rooms of such dives as Henry Burns’ saloon where pairs of cocks, dogs, and men squared off. At variety houses like the Adelphi

The arrival of the railroad heralded a period of spectacular growth. Men who controlled enough land to open businesses such as this one, run by E. B. Daggett, were among the first to benefit. 

Winter of 1874-1875, buffalo hunters tested the range beyond Fort Griffin, and by the next season the great slaughter began in earnest. Even without its railroad, Fort Worth enjoyed an enviable position as the provisioning point for all those westering endeavors. In the meantime, community leaders had not given up on the idea of becoming a railroad. The Texas legislature postponed the deadline for completing the road to Fort Worth until the date of adjournment, extending to the T&P its promise of granting sixteen sections of land for each mile of track laid. With the fortunes of so many hanging in the balance, construction on the twenty-six mile leg to Fort Worth continued at a feverish pace. Businessmen did their part by releasing employees to work on the line, while women shuttled food and water to harried crews. In Austin, Tarrant County Representative N. H. Darnell, although gravely ill, was carried into the House chamber on a cot, where, each day for fifteen days, his vote helped block the move to adjourn. Meanwhile, workers laid the last few miles of track over dirt roads and heaved a makeshift crib over Sycamore Creek that allowed the locomotive to pass. Finally, as chronicler Oliver Knight so eloquently described the scene, “old No. 20...its diamond stack sending streams of pungent wood smoke into the shimmery summer air, rolled into town at 11:23 a.m. on July 19, 1876.” At last Fort Worth had its railroad. There followed a celebration, the likes of which the city had never seen. 

There came to a standstill, and despondency replaced the giddy sense of optimism that had prevailed in the preceding months. “The grass literally grew in the streets,” insisted the editor. “This was not a metaphor to indicate stagnation but a doleful fact.”

Yet, while the country in general continued to flounder for the remainder of the decade, West Texas, and, in turn, Fort Worth, soon rebounded. Following the winter “die-up” of 1873-1874, prices for cattle quickly recovered. At the same time, the U.S. Army pressed its Red River Campaign against the Comanches and Kiowas. The conquest complete, settlers fleeing the economic depression found Northwest Texas a welcoming safety valve. Then, during the
and Theater Comique, patrons took pleasure in the company of chorus girls, with whom they drank and danced and fornicated. The blocks centered on Twelfth Street and Rusk (now Commerce) were wild, to be sure, but it was not nearly as violent as the creation myth would have it. In fact, the number of prostitute suicides far outnumbered the incidents of violence that found their way into the public record. As businessmen knew, wildness attracted money, and plenty of it; violence chased it away. There was always a pious element in Fort Worth that abhorred Hell’s Half Acre, as the district came to be called, but as long as the business of sin paid in cash, the voices of reform could never maintain their occasional ascendancy. During one of those brief periods, just as the cattle trailing season of 1879 was beginning to heat up, businessmen paid for an advertisement, pleading with their fellow citizens for more leniency: “…everyone is aware of the amount of money spent in this city by the cattlemen and cowboys, thus making every trade and business prosper.” Yet, on account of the cleanup movement, they lamented, “almost all of them remain in their camps a few miles from the city.” The petition must have worked, for directly, the paper proclaimed: “The voice of the cowboy is once again heard in the land.”

Soon enough, however, the sight of bawling cattle trampling through the streets once again became a novel experience. The long drive through Fort Worth ended when the final Kansas-bound herd passed over the bluff during the middle Eighties; the great buffalo hunt was all but over as the decade began, the last freight wagons topped off with the hides of varmints. In 1880 the Texas & Pacific continued building westward, and before the calendar turned again, Fort Worth became an important stop on a new transcontinental line, supplying stores with all the accouterments of living that could be loaded aboard a railcar. The decade of the Eighties that began with 6,663, finished with 23,076 in 1890. By the end of the century, 26,668 people resided in Fort Worth, numbers that no doubt seemed astonishing to old-timers who had weathered the years of the Civil War and Reconstruction.

The railroad, just as its original boosters had promised, transformed the frontier village into a prosperous city. In 1873, even before the first locomotive belched a curl of smoke into the sky above Tarrant County, an overenthusiastic B. B. Paddock had published a few scribbled lines emanating from Fort Worth that editors in nearby communities ridiculed as the “Tarantula Map.” At the time, the only roads leading into town were carved out of the earth.

As a key transportation center that employed legions of railroad workers—many who were members of the Knights of Labor—it came as no surprise that when the Great Southwest Strike of 1886 began tying up the region’s traffic, Fort Worth found itself at the center of the controversy. Railroad titan Jay Gould determined to break the deadlock by hiring scabs to replace the striking workers and sending Pinkerton detectives to intimidate them. The situation reached critical mass when the Knights stopped a train attempting to run its blockade at Buttermilk Switch, about where the 2200 block of South Main is today. A short, sharp fight ensued, in which a man on either side later died of gunshot wounds. At the behest of Fort Worth Mayor John Peter Smith, Governor John Ireland called out Texas Rangers and three-hundred militamen, who joined federal marshals already on hand. Ultimately the strike failed, leaving many working class Fort Worthians bitter over the way their government at every level had aligned with big business to frustrate their efforts.

Much of the acrimony centered on former City Marshal Timothy “Longhair Jim”
Courtright, who had fallen on the side of management. At the time he was operating a detective agency that was allegedly little more than a thinly disguised protection racket for shaking down the owners of gambling houses and brothels. When the strike erupted, he accepted a U.S. deputy marshal commission and took charge of the railroad guards. It was he, in fact, who took credit for mortally wounding the picketer. Tall and ruggedly handsome, Courtright’s quiet, but sure manner and the way he carried a brace of pistols butt-forward on his hips had at one time projected the very picture of a fearless frontier peacekeeper. After the strike, however, most citizens came to view him for what he was—a venal opportunist who operated on the edges of the law he was earlier bound to enforce.

Then, on the evening of February 8, 1887, Courtright’s checkered career came to an end when Luke Short, owner of the White Elephant Saloon at 308 and 310 Main Street, gunned him down. Presumably, the two were arguing over the terms of protection, and words escalated into a one-sided contest of arms. In contrast to fanciful depictions pitting the two experienced gunmen facing each other in the middle of the street, the fight erupted at near point-blank range in the doorway of Ella Blackwell’s shooting gallery, a half block from the White Elephant. According to friends of Short, Courtright reached for his gun first, but only because his adversary had indicated he was unarmed. Magician-like, Short produced a concealed Colt .45 and fired five rapid shots, three that found their mark. The second one, which passed through Courtright’s heart, knocked him backwards and onto the floor, just inside Blackwell’s gallery. He never even managed to clear his holster. There the former lawman lay almost still, while a crowd gathered and watched him die.

The widely reported “shootout” instantly became part of Fort Worth’s frontier lore, but more accurately it represented an exceptional event in a city whose wildest days were already in the past. Although Hell’s Half Acre itself would survive into the twentieth century, even by 1887 the district seemed something of an anachronism as the city reached out to embrace a new age of civic improvements, industry, and refinement. The Fort Worth Gazette declared that even four years earlier it was evident “the roughness of frontier life was passing away.” To the extent that the Acre’s red light continued to glow, beginning in 1885 it was charged by electricity. By then, telephone service had already been available for eight years. A local board of trade, which business leaders during the previous decade could not sustain, was revived during the 1880s and worked to attract desirable growth from the offices of its six-story building on the northwest corner of Seventh and Houston. The same year of the so-called shootout, developers laid out the Fairmount Addition south of the rail yards, where the neat homes of an expanding middle class began springing up along streets that were graveled, curbed, and guttered. One of the country’s first electric streetcar services soon provided its residents access to other lines in various parts of the city, signaling the end for the old mule-drawn cars. The last years of the century also counted among its civic improvements a municipal water system and sanitary sewers, up-to-date fire and police departments, a city hall and new county courthouse, tax-supported public schools, and home delivery of mail.

Full of pride and confidence in the way the city was flourishing, civic leaders in 1888 had put B. B. Paddock in charge of amassing a $50,000 fund to cover the costs of an event aimed at focusing the nation’s attention on the...
Panther City. Inspired by such material tributes to nature’s bounty as the “Corn Palace” in Sioux City, Iowa, during this age when Populism was on the ascendancy, the ambitious result was The Texas Spring Palace—an exhibition building covered entirely, inside and out, with virtually every kind of agricultural product grown in the state. When completed, the raw materials alone doubled the budget, but workers brought the project in on time. The aptly named hall opened in May with enough exhibition space to showcase the products of each Texas county. Among the attractions were historical artifacts, hundreds of brightly colored native birds, a miniature lake stocked with fish, and, of course, the products that represented the labor of men and women who extracted their livelihoods from the land. Daily entertainment featured the Watch Factory Band of Elgin, Illinois, and a man billed as “Mr. Leroy,” who parachuted from the basket of a balloon that rose a thousand feet above the city.

Despite its popularity the exhibition lost over $20,000. Yet far from discouraged, its promoters planned a second season for the following year that would eclipse their initial effort. Stage shows, dress balls, and excursion trains engaged the swelling multitudes that arrived from every corner of the state and throughout the nation.

As the ending date approached, officials decided to add a grand finale to cap their success. That evening, May 30, 1890, a crowd estimated at seven thousand packed the hall. After the Elgin band completed its last concert and exhibition-goers prepared for the farewell ball, fire suddenly broke out, greedily devouring inestimable acres of dried and brittle decorations. Outside, horrified witnesses watched as people and smoke boiled from every door and window, propelled by the intense heat. In fifteen minutes the Spring Palace had fallen in, taking on the appearance of a sprawling bonfire. Miraculously, the only fatality was Englishman Alfred S. Hayne. Several times he could have escaped unharmed, yet every time he emerged from the inferno with a rescued patron, the desperate pleas from those still trapped inside induced him to return until at last—with clothes aflame and an unconscious woman cradled in his arms—he leaped from a second-story window. Three hours later, doctors pulled a sheet over his burned and broken body.

Although Fort Worthians vowed to rebuild a fireproof Palace, the reluctance of insurers delayed their plans, and the Panic of 1893 dashed whatever hopes remained. That year, however, the city raised a fitting tribute to Al Hayne by erecting a monument at the conjunction of Houston, Main, and Lancaster Streets. Later, in 1922, vandals...
carried it away, but the city reaffirmed its veneration for the “Hero of the Texas Spring Palace” by building a new memorial in 1934, one that has survived all the construction, demolitions, and regeneration that changed the landscape surrounding it.

Fort Worth, at the century’s end, was beginning to show signs of maturing into a first-class city. While critical eyes need not have strained to catch sight of shacks and litter-strewn lots on almost every block, such blemishes were steadily giving way to pretensions of refinement.

As the old century waned, the boom in home-market industries continued almost unabated, even as businessmen rode out two economic downturns. The Texas Brewing Company, the city’s first large-scale plant, began operation in 1891 and was soon loading three thousand freight cars a year with its popular suds. The brewery joined a local economy that already boasted mills, foundries, machine shops, brick and lumber yards, and a marble works. A number of factories also contributed to the city’s growth, turning out such items as mattresses, carriages, windmills, boilers, tin roofing, and clothing. While the brief, but severe nationwide Panic of 1893 scarcely registered in Fort Worth—not a single one of its eight banks failed—it nevertheless slowed the momentum of capitalists who hoped to turn the city into a major packing center. Soon, however, another group of operators settled north of the river and built a stockyards district that would bridge the economy of the nineteenth century with the new age just around the corner.

There remained a final chapter, however, one that just crossed the century mark, before the Old West gave way completely to the new. It was at that time when two seemingly cultivated, well-dressed visitors to the city arrived, one Jim Lowe and a Harry Longbaugh. Although they walked the streets in anonymity, almost everyone they passed would have known them by their aliases—Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, two key members of the legendary Wild Bunch. The gang represented the last gasp of an era of “social bandits,” outlaws condemned by lawmen and business executives as thieves and murderers, but praised by common folk for striking a blow against the cold powers of bankers, railroad men, and big ranchers who connived to rob them legally. With the gregarious and detail-minded Butch Cassidy at the head of the Wild Bunch, they deserved as much misplaced
adoration as any gang. In Cassidy’s career as an outlaw he never killed a man and discouraged the kind of unnecessary gunplay that generated panic among bystanders. He and the others would not hesitate, however, to pull out a stick of dynamite to gain access to express cars and locked safes. Those equal measures of mercy and élan matched their efficiency for planning every phase of a robbery, from their lightening quick strikes to their wraith-like getaways, after which they would regroup at faraway places, including, at least once, Fort Worth.

After the Wild Bunch hit a bank at Winnemucca, Nevada, in August 1900, local posses, U.S. marshals, and detectives of the Pinkerton Agency and Wells Fargo scoured the Northwest, while Butch and Sundance casually steamed into the Panther City aboard a Fort Worth & Denver City train. Inside Hell’s Half Acre the pair rendezvoused with their compatriots in the job, Harvey Logan, otherwise known as Kid Curry, and Will Carver. A fifth member of the gang who had not taken part in the robbery, Ben Kilpatrick, also joined them.

So far, the Wild Bunch had escaped the law once more. Safe in Fort Worth, the gang melted into the transient population, where, according to Kid Curry, “we rented an apartment and were living in style.” From their base at 1014 ½ Main Street, a boarding house known as Maddox Flats, the outlaws unbuckled their gun belts and lightened their pockets, going on shopping sprees and seeking entertainment in the Acre’s saloons and gambling halls. They also began forging signatures on some of the Winnemucca bank notes, all which bore registered serial numbers. Compounding their carelessness, the five men walked into the Swartz View Company at 705 Main Street and sat for a portrait that would soon be reproduced on about fifteen thousand wanted posters. Even today, it remains one of the most recognizable images in the illustrated history of the Wild West. At last Cassidy came to his senses and advised the gang to clear out. The Sundance Kid, who had taken up with a lovely, but enigmatic young woman, Etta Place, joined him, and the threesome fled for New York City with plans for South America. By the time the Pinkerton men were able to locate and search the Maddox Flats apartment, the only trace of the gang the detectives found were some of the bank notes the fugitives had dropped in their getaway. The rest, as it’s said, is legend. It was the last hurrah for the old frontier, and the time for a new era was at hand.