The people of Fort Worth counted down the last days of 1899, self-possessed with satisfaction that they had turned the corner of fortune. Among a crowd gathered at the foot of Main Street in the waning days of the old century were men and women who had come of age with the town and shared in its growing pains during much of the fifty years since the U.S. Army first planted its guidon on the nearby prominence overlooking the Trinity River. This December day the assembly convened, not to commemorate a half-century of history, but to mark another milestone, the dedication of the new Texas & Pacific passenger station. Nevertheless, former mayor John Peter Smith and other civic leaders, whose efforts helped bring the T&P to town in 1876, recounted the city’s ups and downs. Surveying the crowd, Smith estimated that “the sons and daughters of Fort Worth have built their commonwealth upon a solid foundation.” The Romanesque monolith that towered behind him surely added weight to his words. As the old pioneer continued his reminiscence, he likened the city’s struggle to one that mirrored the checkered growth of the state itself. Concluding his remarks, Smith said: “From this day we can look back fifty years and determine the development of Texas.” It was a proud day for the Panther City.

Four years later the grand terminal would burst into flames, leaving a stark and hollowed out hulk straddling its own ashes. It would be a bitter loss, but the city had survived even graver precedents. In the years to come it would bear even greater tragedies. Each time citizens set their jaws, rolled up their sleeves, and met the challenges at hand. As for the T&P, it was soon rebuilt, only to be razed by a later generation for an even grander station. Such are the ways of big cities. Fort Worth had indeed turned the corner of fortune.

With a new century upon them, the leading citizens of Fort Worth felt they had done everything they could do to transcend their frontier image and assure the city a stable and prosperous future. Certainly, there was the popular perception of Fort Worth as a wide-open community that had earned another, less desirable, nickname—“Cowtown.” That impression had taken root in Hell’s Half Acre, the earthy periphery of saloons and brothels that attended the cattle and railroad booms on which earlier town fathers had pinned their dreams for affluence. But there was another Fort Worth, one that by 1900 had grown into the fifth largest city in Texas. It enjoyed an infrastructure that anticipated a much greater population than the 26,668 souls who made their homes and livings there.

Everywhere signs pointed to a greater destiny. Anchoring the north end of Main Street, the Tarrant County Courthouse commanded a presence that would make many state capitols pale by comparison. Five years earlier voters had threatened to punish the commissioners responsible for approving the $500,000 building by turning them out of office at the next election. Now it was a gemstone that begged company. At the other end of Main Street, the railroad yards provided arteries that connected Fort Worth with the world beyond the bluff. There, at the T&P Station and the rival Union Station of the Santa Fe—a beaux arts masterpiece itself—as many as fifty passenger trains arrived and departed daily at the turn of the century aboard the two host lines as well as others that shared their facilities. Over the network of lines that converged on the city, steam engines pulled an annual load of a million and a half freight cars.
Fort Worth also possessed the kinds of services and amenities that befitted its cosmopolitan pretensions. It enjoyed a full range of municipal services as well as a system of streetcars that fanned out to islands of commerce and residential neighborhoods that lay beyond the city's core. Religion was well represented in the numerous houses of worship whose congregations entreated a God who listened to the prayers of Jews and Catholics and African Methodist Episcopals as readily as those of the Baptists and Methodists who dominated religious affairs in the Southwest. A free public school system was augmented by Fort Worth University, chartered in 1881 as Texas Wesleyan University, and Polytechnic College, founded ten years later. Oddly, it was the latter school that eventually evolved into the present TWU.

The 1900s would also begin with Fort Worth in America's spotlight as host of the National Livestock Association's annual meeting. “The livestock men of Fort Worth are known all over the country,” trumpeted the association's president, John H. Springer of Denver. “By reason of their well-known hospitality, this great convention was brought to Fort Worth rather than a number of Northern cities, who made a fight for it.”

Over four thousand stockmen from every state and territory in the West as well as many Midwestern and Northeastern states arrived in Fort Worth on special trains for meetings and festivities. A grand parade attracted a crowd of about twenty thousand people. Leading the procession were two hundred members of the Mystic Knights of Bovinia—a group of enthusiastic local cowmen and prominent citizens who “sprang as naturally from the circumstances in which it originated as the grass that grows in the great pastures beyond Fort Worth.” Behind them, waves of other fraternal organizations and groups of horsemen followed, along with a burlesque company from whose “uncouth instruments” emanated a sound that reporters likened to the “bellowing of a bunch of bulls, making an effect that was grotesquely pleasing.”
That evening the Knights staged a ball at the Elks Hall, where the city’s elite entertained the most distinguished of their guests in a more sublime manner. For the four hundred prominent wives who accompanied their husbands, the Women’s Federation Clubs of Fort Worth created a Japanese tearoom that served as their headquarters during the meeting. Led by Mrs. John B. Slaughter, wife of the legendary West Texas cattleman, the women arranged all manner of events, from informal receptions and organ recitals, to speeches and carriage tours of the city.

No less than the governor of Texas, Joseph D. Sayers, formally opened the convention, while his counterparts from Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Colorado looked on from the dais. The most important guest, though, was Phillip D. Armour of Chicago. At Fort Worth the millionaire meatpacker did something he had never done before, deliver a paper: “The Relation of the Packer to the Cattle Industry.”

At the stock barns, expert judges from all over the country had to look at so many entries that their work was not over until the evening after the convention ended.

Awash in success, President Springer predicted that great things would result from the annual meeting. “There is no telling how many hundreds of thousands of dollars of Northern capital will be advanced in Texas as a direct result of showing those northerners what we have in Texas.” His words proved prophetic.

Clearly, Fort Worth was enjoying the progress that its leaders had hoped for, one that would complete the transformation from a frontier town into a first-class city. Notwithstanding the celebrated visit by Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, a more visible metaphor for the closing of the frontier came during that same autumn of 1900, when Buffalo Bill brought the Wild West to Fort Worth. Eleven thousand people witnessed the troupe’s “feats of fearless skill and hazardous pastimes.” Upstaging the normal fare of cowboys and Indians was a re-creation of Teddy Roosevelt’s charge up San Juan Hill. The popular politician and recent events of the country’s war with Spain struck a chord with worshipful Americans eager to glorify the modern age.
unsightly web of telephone and electric lines projecting from constellations of glass insulators mounted on power poles, many of them standing at odd angles.

When the century began, a single block of cobblestone paving spanned Sixth Street between Main and Houston. But within a month, twelve carloads of vitrified Thurber brick arrived from West Texas and soon covered the macadam surface between the T&P and Santa Fe passenger stations. Slowly, too slowly to suit complaining citizens, work crews laid brick on the downtown streets, while on the outskirts of the city, convicts labored to grade and gravel the roads that linked Fort Worth to its rural markets.

The pressure for contractors to rush their jobs provoked the Fort Worth Record in 1903 to grouse about the shoddy workmanship that left Houston Street in poor condition. “Ruts, holes, and low places can be found along its length at almost any point, and vehicles risk damage wherever they are drawn.” Nevertheless, the paving campaign continued successfully, extending to the residential streets beyond downtown. A street commissioner predicted in 1907 that at the rate they were going, Fort Worth would have a hundred miles of paved streets within five years.

Increasingly, horses and wagons yielded to automobiles, and false-fronted firetraps surrendered to rows of graceful masonry buildings. Beginning as early as 1902 the first flivvers sputtered across city streets, drawing crowds of onlookers. The novelty of be-goggled drivers sporting white dusters and special gloves and hats soon wore thin as the cacophonous clattering and sharp backfiring caused men to jump and sent horses reeling.

In 1904 a municipal code began regulating automobile traffic. H. R. Cromer—bicycle salesman-turned auto dealer—enjoyed the honor of being the first to register his car, a topless, chain-driven Model E Rambler. Among the restrictions he was compelled to observe was a ten-mile-per-hour speed limit and the sounding of a “gong” or horn that was to begin at a
By the end of the decade, automobiles were becoming commonplace on downtown streets. Within the next decade, it would be the once-ubiquitous wagons that seemed out of place.

By 1909 the police were willing to give the gong a rest, but they still insisted that drivers maintain a safe speed. In fact, nineteen-year-old Henry Lewis, the city's first motorcycle cop, set up a speedtrap at the 1100 block of West Seventh. There he handed out two dozen citations to motorists for exceeding the ten-mile-an-hour limit before running out of tickets. That kind of initiative eventually earned him the position of police chief, a job that he held from 1933-1937.

Once outside of town, the road conditions normally conspired to limit such speed demons. A pick, shovel, and wire cutters were standard equipment on Cromer's Rambler. Some do-it-yourself roadwork came with the territory for early drivers, especially when they left the city limits. Cromer admitted to cutting fences and crossing fields and pastures in order to avoid having to use the heavier tools. Certainly, he had plenty of opportunities. Shortly after buying the one-cylinder, seven-horse-power car, he set out for San Angelo; another time he boasted of touching six counties in just three days. A trip to the St. Louis World's Fair in 1903, however, had to be aborted because of long stretches of mud.

Despite its limitations, the automobile was here to stay. In the same paper in which the Wood & Wood Carriage Repository ran a full-page ad offering substantial discounts on its $30,000 inventory of buggies, local car dealers peppered the classifieds with announcements. The arrival of a sixty-horsepower Pierce Arrow, for example, was peddled as news. An alluring photograph of the stylish vehicle and the dealer's address accompanied the piece.

Throughout the decade promoters came up with all kinds of imaginative ways to generate enthusiasm for this new wonder of the twentieth century. In January 1909 a garden show came to town that featured 301 automobiles, a number that equaled fully one-third of all the cars then registered in Fort Worth. Regular features such as "Automobile News of Local and General Interest" appeared in newspapers as well. Typical of most columns was some kind of eyebrow-raising accomplishment, such as making a trip to Dallas in a little under an hour-and-a-half. Speed also grabbed readers' attention. There was the White Steamer whose two cylinders managed to boil up enough pressure to propel the car sixty-three miles per hour. A fifty horse power American roadster reportedly topped seventy.
In every part of the city, new businesses and residences provided destinations for the increasing traffic. An emerging downtown cultural district began to rival the coarse fare of the Acre. At its center stood the Carnegie Library, built in 1901, capping an eight-year effort by women’s clubs. Fort Worthians were already accustomed to enjoying dramatic performances. The imposing Greenwall’s Opera House attracted some of the most popular actors of the day, including Lilly Langtry, Sarah Bernhardt, Douglas Fairbanks, and the Barrymores, John, Ethel, and Lionel. Down the street, the Vendome Theater hosted repertoire companies, while venues such as the Majestic Theater and the Lyric offered vaudeville. Film made its Panther City debut in 1903 with The Great Train Robbery, but using bed sheets for a screen did not exactly elevate the new medium as an art form. “In the cheaper class of amusements such as the moving picture theaters and 10-cent houses,” deigned the Fort Worth Record in 1907, “the town has an untold supply.”

All manner of commercial and institutional structures as well as homes and churches date their existence to the building boom around the turn of the century. The three-story Texas Lodge of the Knights of Pythias at 315 Main Street typified both the average commercial building and the innovative spirit of downtown businessmen. In 1901 the fraternal organization began holding its meetings on the third floor of the medieval-inspired castle hall and leased out the other two floors to offset the costs. Shortly after the building was completed, the Renfro Drug Company opened its first store there. As it grew into a significant chain, the anchor nevertheless remained a Knights’ tenant until just before World War II.

Building permits reflected Fort Worth’s growth at a $24-million-a-year clip by the end of the first decade. Later in the century, investors could sink that much and more into a single office tower, but at the turn of the century a dollar went much farther. In 1907

One of the major routes between Fort Worth and Dallas led through the country town of Arlington. The mineral well at Center and Main was already a favorite gathering spot when this picture was taken around 1908.

COURTESY OF THE ARLINGTON CITIZEN-JOURNAL PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, 1-2, ACJ 80-32.

A horse and mule team on the median of Camp Bowie Boulevard helps a steam-powered shovel grade the roadbed for a new streetcar line.

COURTESY OF THE JACK WHITE PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES, ARLINGTON, TEXAS, AR 407 1-4-53A.

In 1904, a farmer from Decatur, just northwest of Fort Worth, became the proud owner of a brand-new two-cylinder Schacht automobile, manufactured in Cincinnati, Ohio. Traveling through Fort Worth on his way to Mansfield, the car broke down. Returning with a wagon, the disillusioned farmer took apart the unreliable contraption and then tucked it under his house. There it remained, all but forgotten, for several decades. A subsequent owner of the home discovered the Schacht—save for two wheels that the now elderly farmer was using on a trailer. After striking a deal, the farmer got new tires, and the new owner of the Schacht was able to claim the original wheels. The car, on loan from the James Cogdell family, is part of the collection at the Pate Museum of Transportation.

VEHICLE ON DISPLAY AT THE PATE MUSEUM OF TRANSPORTATION, CRESCENT, TEXAS. PHOTOGRAPH BY THE AUTHOR.
Dr. Bacon Saunders, dean of the Fort Worth University’s medical school, produced the seven-story Flatiron Building on a triangle bordered by Houston and Ninth Streets and Jennings Avenue for a mere $70,893. Although the masonry Wheat Building remained the city’s tallest, the steel-framed Flatiron was recognized as Fort Worth’s first modern skyscraper. Based on New York City’s Flatiron Building, this prairie cousin distinguished itself with such features as a ring of carved panther heads outlining the top of the two-story base. A couple of blocks up the street, workers broke ground on the ten-story First National Bank building in 1909. When completed, its Bedford, Indiana, limestone base and French gray brick cut an imposing, but graceful figure on the emerging skyline.

The building boom that had the greatest effect on the economy of Fort Worth, however, did not take root in downtown; it did not even emerge within the city limits. Rather, it was across the Trinity River at bucolic little Marine where Fort Worth was transformed into nature’s metropolis. Along the creek from which the village took its name, local investors had founded a tenuous meatpacking operation in the 1890s that attracted some Eastern capital. In turn, those interests induced Chicago packinghouse giants Armour and Swift to build plants in the infant Stockyards. On March 4, 1903 the packers officially opened amid the festivities of the eighth annual Fat Stock Show.

After the National Livestock Association meeting in 1900 there was no question that Fort Worth possessed the potential for meeting the mammoth demands of the meat packing industry. Its rail network and proximity to the great herds of Texas, New Mexico, and Indian Territory made it a logical choice. By this time, too, Boston businessmen Greenlief W. Simpson and Louville V. Niles had gained control of the nascent Stockyards facilities and much of the land along the creek. The next year they began negotiating with the Chicago meatpackers. Simpson and Niles pledged almost twenty-one acres of prime Stockyards real estate to both Armour and Swift along with half their shares in the Fort Worth Stock Yards Company in return for the promise of opening plants in Fort Worth. It was not until local investors raised an additional $50,000 inducement, however, that the amicable competitors finally agreed to come to Texas.

The transformation was total. In 1903, Marine incorporated and expanded as North Fort Worth. Plant buildings, livestock pens, railroad spurs and trolley lines, a burgeoning business district, and all manner of dwellings from tents to mansions sprang up like mushrooms in the ensuing years. At the heart of it all was the Livestock Exchange Building—home to the Fort Worth Stock Yards Company, the commission offices, and other related businesses. Next door was its Mission Revival companion, the Coliseum. The magnificent twelve-thousand-seat arena dominated its neighbor, serving as the focal point for such civic functions as the National Breeders and Feeders Show, created expressly to showcase the district. Each year new pens, new tracks, and new buildings added to the...
By the end of the decade only Chicago and Kansas City enjoyed larger livestock markets. Soon, North Side, composed of Rosen Heights, Diamond Hill, and Washington Heights, became the city’s fastest growing suburban district. Packinghouse workers and other laborers naturally gravitated to the affordable and well-situated developments, but so, too, did doctors, lawyers, and professional men. Residents could enjoy all the luxuries of municipal services, public schools, and a popular amusement park, White City, yet still live a somewhat rural lifestyle, planting gardens and small orchards and keeping cows and chickens.

If the professional men of North Side comprised what the Fort Worth Star-Telegram called “the better class of people,” then the “best” resided on Quality Hill. The development of lavish homes on the city’s western bluff emerged as Fort Worth’s most exclusive neighborhood. The elevation afforded a breathtaking view of the Trinity River and distant prairies and caught the inviting breezes that helped its occupants better tolerate the oppressive summer heat. Old money took root there in ornate Victorian homes, broad-slung Prairie Styles, and other architectural forms that showcased the success of the city’s leading citizens. Joining bankers, doctors, attorneys, and businessmen were several prominent West Texas cattlemen. Burk Burnett of the Four-Sixes, W. T. Waggoner, whose ranch occupied much of adjoining Wise County, and George Reynolds of Lambshead, northeast of Abilene, all kept baronial homes on Quality Hill so that their families could enjoy the advantages of city life. In other parts of town, the social drums beat different rhythms. Down the bluff and across the river from Quality Hill lay the manufacturing district of Brooklyn Heights, where workers turned out glass, windmills, coffins, and light machinery. On the east end of downtown another manufacturing center emerged at unincorporated Glenwood, “home to the working man.” There, hourly wage earners assembled furniture, stuffed mattresses, and rolled cigars, while others worked for the International and Great Northern Railroad, whose roundhouse and terminal anchored the district.

The Garden of Eden, a small African-American community on the Trinity River, south of Birdville, cultivated a truck farming industry that supplied most of the city’s...
vegetables and fruit. South of downtown, neighborhoods such as the Fairmount addition had already taken shape on either side of Hemphill Street, and new residential building extended so far into the countryside that the formerly sleepy hamlet of Prairie Chapel—about where the Travis Avenue Baptist Church is today—applied for annexation during the decade and became the tenth ward. Other pockets of homes accumulated around Fort Worth University, which occupied the present site of Trimble Tech High School, and Polytechnic Heights.

Similarly, African-American neighborhoods developed in small clusters at the edges of commercial districts and, like the Garden of Eden, on other bottomlands that hugged the Trinity. Black Fort Worth provided an army of domestic workers, porters, and laborers who kept the engine of society running smoothly. Yet slowly, they developed a viable and distinct engine of their own, adding new schools, churches, and black-owned businesses.

One African American in particular, Bill McDonald, enjoyed the kind of success that was normally reserved for only the elite of white society. A skillful East Texas politician, he tied his wagon to the star of Texas Midland Railroad scion H. R. Green as his chief advisor. Spotted together in 1896 at the Democrats’ national convention in St. Louis, a local newspaper identified him as a “goosenecked sort of Negro,” and, no doubt to his chagrin, the name “Gooseneck” Bill McDonald stuck. Settling in Fort Worth at the turn of the century, he founded the Fraternal Bank & Trust Co. at Ninth and Jones and built a two-story mansion, where he lived for the next half-century.

As the people of Fort Worth worked, so, too, did they play. At amusement parks such as Lake Erie, Hurst Lake, White City, and Lake Como, people set out in rowboats and rode roller coasters, strolled along shaded walks and danced at pavilions, and enjoyed calliope music and fireworks displays. Many ethnic European citizens created their own diversions. Hermann Park grew out of a biergarten near the confluence of the West and Clear forks of the Trinity. There, the German Society, or Deutscher Verein, held its May festival each year. Heralding the event, their band strolled dreamily down residential streets, coaxing people from their homes with Viennese melodies, finally leading a lazy parade back to their open-air pavilion.

America’s favorite pastime was also Fort Worth’s. Quite naturally the baseball team that first took the field in 1877 adopted the Panther as their mascot, but fans always referred to them affectionately as “The Cats.” Occasionally, they got to see their boys match up with the best in the business, as when the Saint Louis Browns, the Detroit Tigers, and the New York Giants passed through the city during exhibition season in 1909. More often
they would find themselves paired up with lesser-known talent. “Claws proved more effective than Tomahawks,” declared the Star-Telegram, when the Cats defeated a feisty Oklahoma team composed of Chickasha and Pottawatomie Indians. Football’s heady days were still well in future, but on the same day that Buffalo Bill came to town in 1900, the Fort Worth Heavyweights issued a call for prospective gridders to meet at the parlor of the Y.M.C.A.

Academic events, too, commanded a place in the hearts of Fort Worthians. As the decade drew to a close, almost the entire student body of Fort Worth University gathered at the Union Station to greet R. P. Lightfoot, who returned home victorious from the state oratorical contest at Waco. According to the Star-Telegram, “As he left the train he was seized by the strong arms of fellow students and perched on the shoulders of athletic Coach Cavanaugh and hurried to the head of the throng of students who rushed cheering through the station.” From there they marched to the school, where students and alumni held a bonfire and enjoyed refreshments.

Families also looked forward each year to such local traditions as the Fat Stock Show that got its start in 1896, the Fort Worth Fair, and the Flower Parade and Festival. Just as often some spectacular event like Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show would hit town for a brief run. In 1907, Pawnee Bill brought his version of the “Grand Congress” to Fort Worth, kicking off the show with a spectacular parade in which Cossacks, Hottentots, cannibals, and Hindu magicians marched beside western sharpshooters and Indians in war paint. No doubt the greatest crowd-pleaser of the decade was a visit by President Teddy Roosevelt in 1905; a close second was the Big Train Crash of 1907.

On a clear, crisp April morning, the president arrived in Fort Worth on his way to an Oklahoma wolf hunt with West Texas ranchers Burk Burnett and Tom Waggoner. The parade route stretched from the depot to the courthouse, along which row after row
of streamers, flags, and bunting hung on ropes stretched over the street. The procession electrified a crowd that the Fort Worth Record estimated at eighty thousand—larger than the entire population of Fort Worth. Most of the multitude started cheering even before laying eyes on the Rough Rider, the din becoming almost deafening.

As TR stopped to plant an elm tree at the Carnegie Library, twenty-five or more men and boys were positioning themselves for a better look atop a small frame real estate office across the street. “The boys believed in the saying, ‘There’s always room for one more,’ and finally the roof became so heavily loaded that it gave way.” The crashing beams and the shrieks of nearby women added a comedic touch to the sight of those grappling at the pants legs of others clinging to the ledge, who were just as eager to keep their drawers up.

As the president passed city hall on his loop back to the depot, a choir of six hundred African-American schoolchildren strained to sing the “Star-Spangled Banner” over the multitude of cheering well-wishers. Onlookers packed the sidewalks and seemingly hung out of every window along the route; others climbed up telephone poles and stood on their toes atop barrels and balanced themselves on stepladders. The envy of the packed masses, though, was a resourceful young man who climbed the Hayne Fountain across from a stage constructed for the occasion. There, nestled high upon the monument, he sat grinning and waving a little American flag. Behind the stage a red, white, and blue curtain blocked the view of thousands of disappointed attendees, until TR bellowed: “Remove that bunting, the boys and girls have a misguided idea that they want to see me!”

At last the crowd grew quiet. After praising Fort Worth and Texas, Roosevelt imparted a patriotic message. Then, in a few minutes it was all over. An hour and twenty minutes after arriving, “the presidential special pulled out of the train shed for the land of the big wolves.”

Finished in another instant, two years later, was a spectacular train crash—the grand finale of the second annual Fort Worth Fair. The veteran promoters of this unique form of

White City was the creation of North Side developer Sam Rosen. Opened in 1905 as the terminus on Rosen’s streetcar line, it featured a small lake on which couples could go through a “Tunnel of Love” before hitting the dance floor at the spacious pavilion or playing games of chance along the midway. Other attractions included a mini-steam train that puffed around the park’s perimeter, a Ferris wheel, theater, baseball diamond and grandstand, and a massive calliope that lent a carnival-like ambiance to the amusement park.

COURTESY OF QUENTIN MCGOWN COLLECTION, FORT WORTH, TEXAS.

Lake Como, west of the city, also attracted crowds of pleasure seekers.

COURTESY OF QUENTIN MCGOWN COLLECTION, FORT WORTH, TEXAS.
entertainment drew a crowd of over twenty thousand paying customers, teasing the public for a week with newspaper articles and handbills. “No man who has not actually seen a collision,” read one tract, “can have any conception of what a thrill it gives one to see two big monsters steaming and snorting and tearing at one another as they race to the mighty clash.”

When the momentous day arrived, the promoters eased the heaving Baldwin locomotives up and down the half-mile makeshift track for over four hours, the crowd growing restless with anticipation. At last the eighty-ton titans backed off and stopped, puffing and whishing great clouds of smoke and steam. A band that had been entertaining the crowd fell silent. As the trains highballed toward each other “at a clip that was calculated to make the hair of the cab inmates stand on end,” the signal to “jump” came right before the moment of impact.

Then…BOOM! In the space of a heartbeat came the body-jarring concussion, a resounding crash, a gigantic cloud of smoke, and debris exploding through a blinding vapor. All at once the crowd swarmed the crash site, only to surge back when the mangled boilers loosened one last gasp of steam. In another moment, however, men were all over the wreck, checking out the damage and collecting souvenirs.

In Fort Worth, as in the rest of the country, men and women with leisure time split their energies between having fun and promoting progressive causes. Men’s clubs leaned toward the former, while women comprised the movement’s foot soldiers. At the Commercial Club a veritable “Who’s Who” of the city’s movers and shakers gathered in a cavern-like, dark-paneled room atop the red sandstone C. W. Connery Drug Store on Sixth Street. There, the coterie relaxed in the kind of environment that men enjoyed. “There was no dining room…no bedrooms,” remembered a woman who was a rare visitor to the all-male club, “just a big room where men could congregate to talk, smoke, play poker and billiards.” As a routine, members dispensed political favors, cut deals, and bankrolled the dreams of men with vision. In 1906 they settled on a new name, The Fort Worth Club, a fitting designation for their proprietary mission of shaping the city.

While the men cultivated business, the business of women was changing the world in which they lived. Empowered as the “City Federation of Women’s Clubs of Fort Worth,” their various organizations directed the building of outdoor gyms, tennis courts, playgrounds, and picnic facilities. They held clean-up days and gained control of

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Forest Park, transforming the natural advantages of woods and meadows that hugged a particularly scenic bend of the river. It also provided a natural setting for a zoo that opened in 1909 with one lion, two bear cubs, an alligator, and a small collection of other animals native to the area.

The Federation also embraced the consummately progressive slogan: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Women helped probation officers look after troubled juveniles and worked to ease suffering in the city’s slums. They rescued orphans and abandoned children, including several living out of boxes at the railroad yards. From the courthouse basement, volunteers performed settlement work.

Then, there was always the bothersome Hell’s Half Acre. Early in 1901 the Fort Worth Register reported that the last gambling house in the district had been put out of business, predicting “the closing will be permanent.” It was not. Five years later an irate saloonkeeper shot and killed County Attorney Jefferson McLean, who was leading the city’s latest anti-vice campaign.

While the popular crusader was mourned, the community seldom expressed compassion over the loss of an Acre patron. Many unfortunates ended up at FWU’s medical college, perched on the edge of the district. From the second floor, a few hard-hearted students were said to have amused themselves by flipping body parts onto pedestrians—particularly delighting in scaring African Americans.

The new century began with great hope for the city’s black population. On New Year’s Day, 1900, a national emancipation celebration convened at city hall, where Mayor B. B. Paddock welcomed the assembly. Professor I. M. Terrell presided over the meeting, and a program opened with the spiritual, “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name.” Local minister F. P. Gibson provided the headliner, reading his paper, “The Negro and the Present Hour.”

In the Old South, with which Fort Worth shared great affinity, the hour was nearing midnight. Every Sunday the Fort Worth Record featured a comic strip, “Scuse Me, Missah Johnson.” Its buffoonish characters and exaggerated likenesses reinforced all the negative stereotypes of African Americans—laziness, overweening sexual proclivities, and an inclination toward dishonesty and criminality.

The attitude that engendered racism certainly carried over into the administration of justice. During the spring of 1909 a great fire erased over a score of city blocks in the vicinity of the rail yards. In the aftermath, police and militiamen patrolled the South Side, protecting property that the conflagration had spared. Among thirty-four arrested was one Bob Brooker, “an aged negro,” who was carrying away a tow sack containing two “sad irons” and some broken pieces of a brass lamp. With a cold slap of the gavel, Judge John L. Terrell levied a $100 fine on Brooker for looting and sentenced him to six months in jail.

On the other hand, the rapacious fire did not discriminate, and many African Americans who lost their homes benefited from the relief effort that followed. The smoldering ashes of dozens of homes and businesses, three churches, the
Walker Sanitarium and the T&P roundhouse—where thirty-five locomotives were parked—brought another odd response. City spokesmen praised the disaster as a partner in urban renewal. The T&P announced that it needed a new roundhouse anyway, and the unsightly district composed of nineteenth-century leftovers was due a makeover. Work got started even before the second decade began.

The rebuilding effort augmented the breathtaking growth spurt that marked the new century’s first decade. In those ten years the city limits expanded to 16.83 square miles, embracing new neighborhoods and commercial centers, including all of North Fort Worth, save for the half-square mile that surrounded the packinghouses. The city’s population more than tripled; its business receipts grew at an even greater clip. Truly, Fort Worth more resembled the cosmopolitan city that it aspired to be, rather than the seedy frontier village, from whose past it was trying to flee.

Progress could also be measured in the way the decade ended—as it began—with the city playing host to yet another gathering of cattle raisers. Only this one would attract two-and-a-half times the number who attended in 1900. Many of the ten thousand cattlemen preferred to travel by automobile, rather than cram aboard special railroad cars chartered for the event. In fact, the Reid Auto Company, owner of a parking garage, doubled its facilities, while its competitor, the Lewis Garage, rented a Summit Avenue skating rink to make room for all the cars that clattered into town.

The welcoming speech for the event, delivered by the old frontier editor and former mayor B. B. Paddock, drew a response that provided an appropriate metaphor for dreams fulfilled. W. W. Turney of El Paso, ex-president of the Texas Cattle Raisers’ Association, told the crowd: “I remember how Captain Paddock stood upon a dry goods box when the first train rolled into Fort Worth and told the first passengers that Horace Greeley meant the Panther City when he said ‘Go west and grow up with the country.’” Indeed, many stayed and did just that. Fort Worth was growing up. During the new century’s first decade the city recommitted itself as the front porch for the great grasslands and rolling plains beyond the Trinity River, the masthead of its leading newspaper, the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, always reminding— ”Where the West Begins.”

Firefighters extinguish the last goops of the blaze that devastated the south end of downtown, 1909.

The remains of the Texas & Pacific shops and roundhouse.

A stark view of the damage. The building in the distant is the old Fort Worth High School, which itself would fall victim to another fire.