

URBAN RIVALRY IN A RURAL COUNTY: THE CONTEST
FOR DOMINANCE BETWEEN ROCKDALE AND
CAMERON IN MILAM COUNTY,
TEXAS, 1873-1954

By

PHILIP GUY POPE

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN HISTORY

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

December 2006

Copyright © by Philip Guy Pope

All Rights Reserved

To the Modesettes, Charleses, Grahams, and Popes of Milam County

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to first thank my family for teaching me about my roots in Milam County. Some of my fondest memories are of the times when we returned to Milam County each summer. I still look forward to my trips there. With delight, I soaked up the tales spoken by my aunts, uncles, parents, and grandparents; I only wish that I could recall them all. I have been blessed in being associated with so many good storytellers.

Amy, my wife, deserves a great amount of thanks for indulging me in my desire to return to school. She encouraged me when the path looked dark and provided me with space when I needed to write. Thank you for understanding my pursuit of the lesser traveled road.

Thanks to my Committee, I am forever grateful for your insight, guidance, time, and patience. Thanks to T. Lindsay Baker for sharing his passion for ghost towns. Thanks to Donald Walker for expanding my horizons of Texas history. Thanks to Lynna Kay Shuffield for sharing some of her research on Milam County.

Thanks to all the helpful people at UTA Special Collections, Texas State Archives, and the Milam County Museum.

A special thanks to all the staff at the Lucy Hill Patterson Library in Rockdale. I cannot thank you enough for allowing me to monopolize the microfilm reader each week. Your kindness will always be appreciated.

September 28, 2006

ABSTRACT

URBAN RIVALRY IN A RURAL COUNTY: THE CONTEST
FOR DOMINANCE BETWEEN ROCKDALE AND
CAMERON IN MILAM COUNTY,
TEXAS, 1873-1954

Publication No. _____

Philip Guy Pope, M.A.

The University of Texas at Arlington, 2006

Supervising Professor: Richard Francaviglia

Throughout the history of the United States, natural resources have played key roles in determining where towns are formed, and when towns will die. For just as long, waterways, roadways, and railroads have played an equally important role in determining the location and success of many towns. This thesis builds on these two

broad themes—resources and transportation—to examine how Rockdale, Texas was able to become the most powerful town in southern Milam County, and successfully compete with Cameron, Texas for dominance in Milam County. Cameron was the established county seat in Milam County when in 1873, the International & Great Northern Railway bypassed Cameron and built its track south of the Little River. For two years, the newly established Rockdale was the terminus of the rail line. The railroad connected Rockdale with a large network of cities and it grew into an important center in the county.

This thesis also engages a third theme, community leadership and promotion, that is crucial in determining how a community thrives. In the years that followed, city leaders consistently worked to improve their town, strengthen relations with other towns, and diversify their economy. In 1951, the culmination of three-quarter's of a century of progress, combined with the natural resources found near Rockdale, the Aluminum Company of America erected a large aluminum smelting plant that would forever change Rockdale and secure its position as an important center in Milam County. The success that Rockdale capitalized on in 1951 was made possible by a series of events over the previous eight decades.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	viii
LIST OF TABLES.....	ix
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. 1873-1900: THE BEGINNING OF ROCKDALE.....	12
III. 1901-1919: NOT JUST A BOOM TOWN.....	38
IV. 1920-1936: THE HUB OF SOUTHERN MILAM COUNTY....	58
V. 1937-1950: TURNING THE PAGE.....	80
VI. 1951-1954: RENEWED LIFE.....	95
VII. CONCLUSION.....	109
VIII. AFTERWORD.....	113
REFERENCES.....	115
BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION.....	128

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure		Page
1	Milam and surrounding counties.....	5
2	Soil Survey of Milam County.....	7
3	<i>The Correct Map of Texas</i> , 1878, showing I&GN rail line in Texas.	15
4	<i>1952-1953 Texas Almanac</i> map of Milam County.....	17
5	1878 International & Great Northern map.....	19
6	<i>The Correct Map of Texas</i> , 1878, showing wagon roads.....	25
7	Official Map of Rockdale showing extent of paved area.....	75
8	Map depicting proximity of Rockdale and Alcoa plant.....	102
9	Rockdalian's Map of U.S.	104

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
2.1 Total Number of Farms in Milam County, 1870-1950.....	35
3.1 Population of Milam County, 1870-1960.....	41
4.1 Populations of Cameron and Rockdale, 1890-1960.....	78

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Texas holds a unique place in the American landscape. Its paternalistic antebellum history, well-watered Piney Woods, and its membership in the Confederacy associate it with the South. At the same time, the cowboy individualism, arid tracts, and relative dearth of trees characterize much of the western half of the state and align it with the West. Older, more established towns like Tyler and Palestine have a much more Southern than Western identity, while newer towns like Lubbock and Midland are much more Western in character. This underlying competition of regional identity has been present for most of Texas' history and will almost certainly continue to be present.¹

Within the borders of Milam County there has been much of the same type of competition that Texas as a whole has experienced: Southern versus Western, established versus progressive, urban versus rural, human versus natural. This competition has helped to create towns while dismantling others. Although this thesis will examine many types of competition within Milam County, the focus will be on the competition for county dominance between 1873 and 1954, and how Rockdale emerged

¹ James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 332. Frank Goodwyn, *Lone Star Land: 20th Century Texas in Perspective* (New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 1955), 5, 49, 51, 124. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1931), 4, 5. Terry G. Jordan, *Texas: A Geography* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), 2, 3.

as the most powerful town in southern Milam County and came to challenge Cameron for county dominance.

While this study builds on past works on the history of Milam County, it focuses on different aspects. Katherine Bradford Henderson’s “The Early History of Milam County” examined the history of Milam County previous to where this study begins—with the introduction of the railroad into the county. Margaret Eleanor Lengert’s “The History of Milam County” also focuses much attention on the history of Milam County prior to the introduction of the railroad. Lengert continued further and examined the history of religion, education, and government within the county. Of these histories, only Lelia Batte’s Cameron-centered *History of Milam County, Texas*, was published recently enough to include mention of the Alcoa plant. While all three mention multiple towns in the county, none mention the competition between the towns nor explore the reasons why Cameron and Rockdale have experienced more success than the other towns.

This study examines how natural resources, transportation, and community leaders enabled Rockdale to become an important county town that competed with Cameron for county dominance. This study culminates with the establishment of the Alcoa plant near Rockdale, an action that enabled Rockdale to solidify its stature as the most important town in southern Milam County, and one of the two most important towns in the entire county. This Rockdale-centered thesis attempts to be objective and

shed light on why Rockdale was unique among county towns in being able to become and sustain itself as an important county town.

By looking at why Rockdale was able to simply survive when many other county towns failed to do so, this thesis seeks to build upon a number of books written about Texas ghost towns. The most recent and prominent of these books are T. Lindsay Baker's *Ghosttowns of Texas* series, in which two Milam County towns are chronicled as ghosts. Although only two were chronicled by Baker, there are at least twenty towns within the county that are either shells of their former selves, or where nothing remains to indicate that a community was once present. Baker cites many reasons for the declines of numerous Texas towns including railroad routes, highway routes, finances, and changes in agriculture. These same themes contributed to the failures of many Milam County towns. Although Rockdale faced many of the same challenges, it was able to overcome and survive.²

Finally, by examining the relationship between Rockdale and Cameron, this thesis studies town competition and rivalry. While the focus is on town competition, several aspects of the greater field of urban competition are present and help to explain the success of Rockdale. Along this vein, this thesis builds upon themes of urban competition discussed by Carl Abbott in *Boosters and Businessmen*, which describes how cities competed with each other for dominance of shared hinterlands, and Don

² T. Lindsay Baker, *More Ghost Towns of Texas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 16. T. Lindsay Baker, *Ghost Towns of Texas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), 80-90.

Doyle's *New Men, New Cities, New South*, which describes the ascendancy of newer cities and leaders in the established South.

Although Abbott examines Midwestern cities prior to the Civil War, many of the themes and ideas he presents are valid in a discussion of competing towns in Milam County. A direct connection can be made between Rockdale's success in Milam County and Indianapolis' success in the Midwest. Indianapolis is situated near the geographic center of Indiana, and Rockdale is located near the geographic center of southern Milam County. In addition to location, each town would owe much of its success to the railroad. Indianapolis' "unrivaled railroad facilities" gave it easy access to extensive markets, and Rockdale's early railroad connection gave it quick and reliable access to surrounding markets that other county towns could not enjoy.³

Doyle's examples of new leadership helping to rebuild and reenergize southern cities after the Civil War are paralleled in the early success of Rockdale. Just as young leaders helped to build up the war ravished cities of Nashville and Charleston, young leaders helped build Rockdale from the ground up. The New South Movement that, Doyle writes, "gathered full power in the 1880s was the product of this ascendant business class of merchants, financiers, and industrialists and their allies, particularly those in the press." Although on a town scale instead of a city scale, the leadership

³ Carl Abbott, *Boosters and Businessmen: Popular Economic Thought and Urban Growth in the Antebellum Middle West* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 26, 175.

exhibited in Rockdale during this same period was akin to that present in Southern cities.⁴

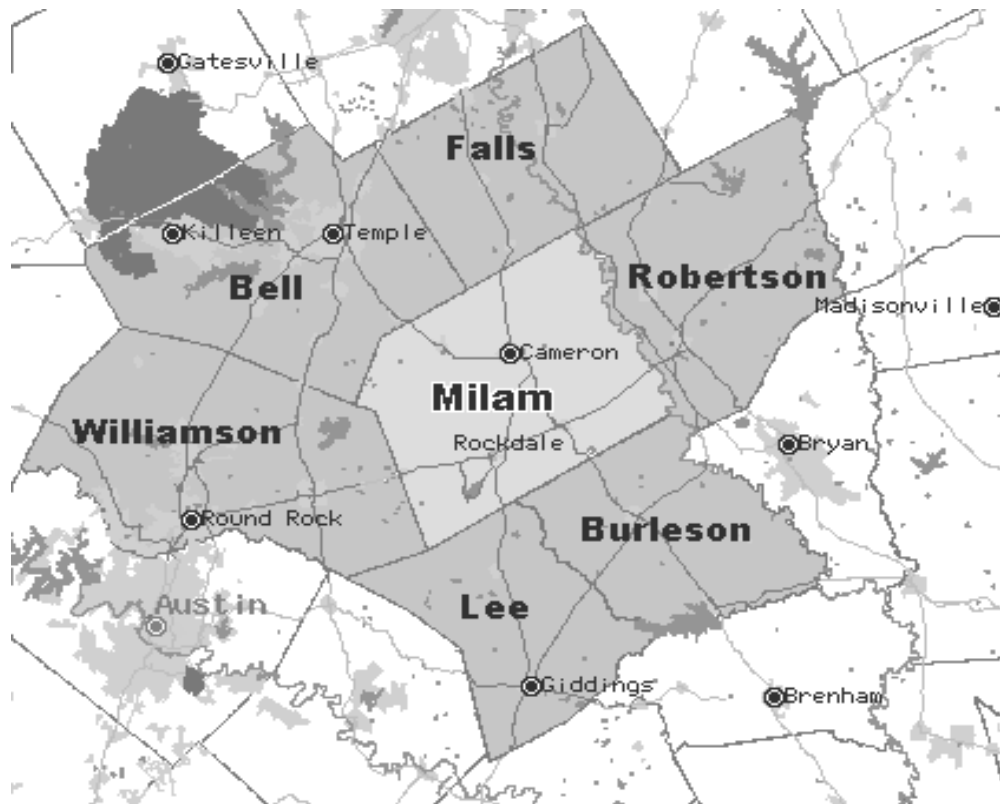


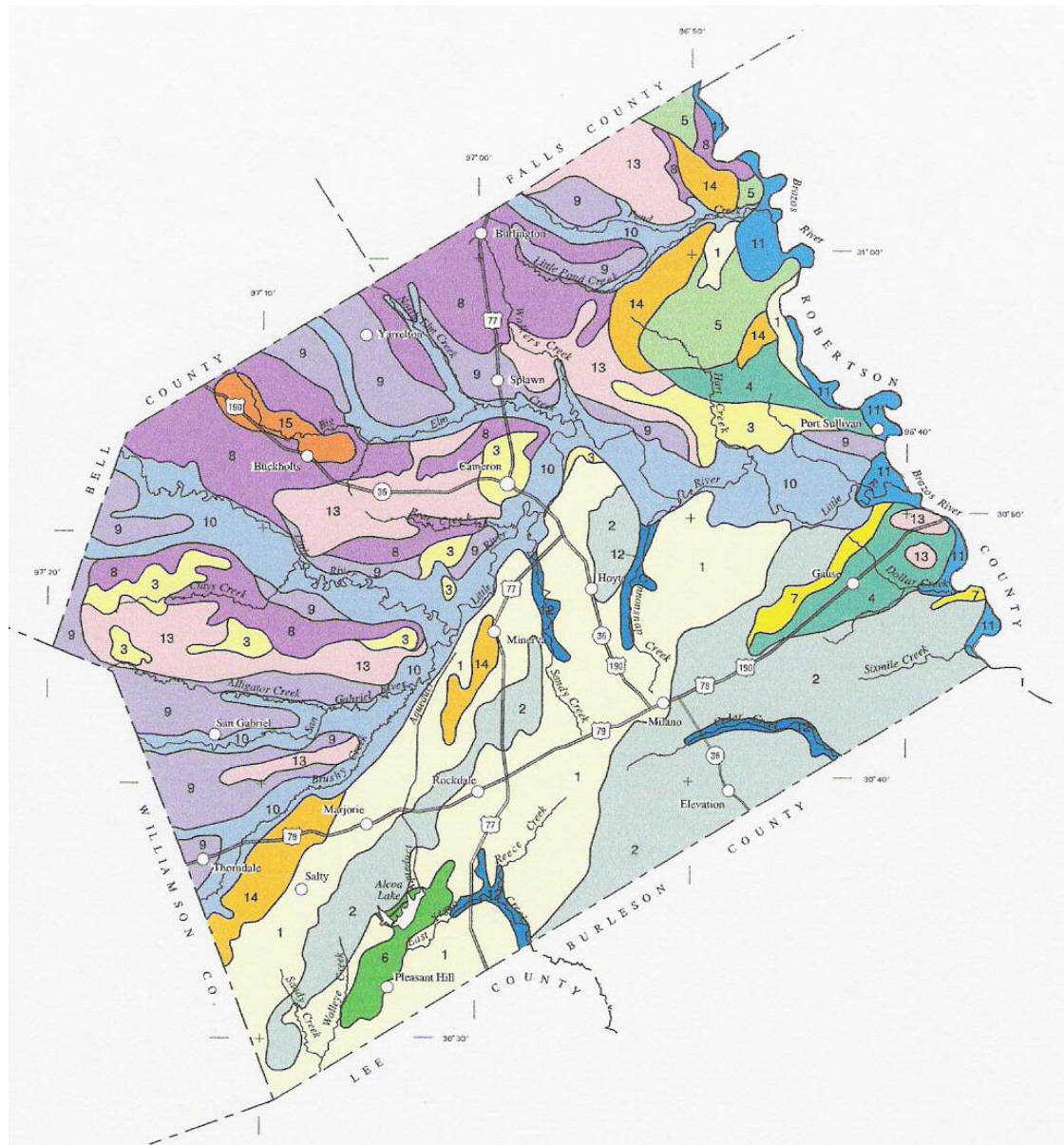
Figure 1. Milam and surrounding counties. From TXGenWeb Project.

Milam County was one of the original 23 counties in 1836 when Texas won independence from Mexico, its land mass then accounting for a full sixth of Texas territory. Because the county was so large, it was sometimes referred to as “Milam

⁴ Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 87.

County—an Empire within itself.” The following twenty years would see parcels of the county cut out to create 15 new counties and add to 18 others. The county seat was originally located at the short-lived town of Milam (1836), later to Nashville (1836), briefly to Caldwell (1842), before going back to Nashville, and finally to Cameron in 1846 when the county was just about done being carved up. Made up of 1021 square miles of nearly level to rolling plains, present day Milam County is situated in east-central Texas. It is bordered on the east by the Brazos River, on the west by Williamson County, Lee and Burleson Counties on the south, and Bell and Falls Counties on the north.⁵

⁵ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "County Organization"
<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/CC/muc10.html> (accessed July 15, 2006). *Rockdale Reporter*, 22 April, 1954. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Milam County"
<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/MM/hcm13.html> (accessed July 15, 2006). United States Department of Agriculture, *Soil Survey for Milam County, Texas* (Washington, D.C., 2004), 11. Lelia M. Batte *History of Milam County, Texas* (San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1956), 34. Margaret Eleanor Lengert, "The History of Milam County" (M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1949), 94.



- | | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Edge-Rader | 2. Padina-Silstid | 3. Minwells |
| 4. Travis-Gause | 5. Chazos-Silawa-Desan | 6. Bigbrown-Dumps-Pits |
| 7. Jedd | 8. Houston Black-Heiden-Ferris | 9. Branyon-Burleson |
| 10. Frio-Tinn | 11. Ships-Gaddy-Yahola | 12. Uhland-Sandow |
| 13. Wilson-Davilla | 14. Crockett | 15. Satin |

Figure 2. Soil Survey of Milam County. U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Milam County also reveals basic variations in environment. The western half of the county is part of the North Blackland Prairie, which is marked by deep clayey soils, while the eastern half is part of the Southern Claypan Area, which is marked by deep sandy loams. The soils of the Blackland Prairie are ideal for cultivated crops such as cotton, corn, and wheat, while the Southern Claypan soils provide a good growing area for truck crops like tomatoes, onions, beans, and melons. The most productive soil can be found in the Blackland Prairie and along the flood plains and stream terraces of the county's many waterways.⁶

It was these waterways that attracted settlers of Milam County from early times through Reconstruction. At least as far back as 4500 B.C. Native Americans, probably ancestors of the Tonkawa, inhabited land along the San Gabriel River. Spanish missionaries that came through the county in the 1700s erected sites along the San Gabriel and Brushy Creek and noted the plentiful water that the Little River, or as they referred to it, the San Andres River, provided. When southerners and other Anglo-Americans established sites in the 1830s and 1840s, they chose to do so near a spring or along a river or stream, as is evidenced by the location of the early county towns of Nashville, Bryant Station, Griffin's Fort, Port Sullivan, and Cameron, the eventual county seat. Davilla, for example, was a popular camp site for trail drivers during this

⁶ *Soil Survey for Milam County*, 11, 15, 20, 21.

time because of its good supply of spring water and wood, being located along the edge of the post oak woods.⁷

Beneath the south-central Milam County soil lies part of the Wilcox Group of lignite beds which contains roughly 28,000 million tons of lignite, a brown coal that has various uses in the production of energy. In addition to its energy use, byproducts of lignite include tars, waxes, dyes, and synthetic gas. Lignite, physically and chemically, is “a substance intermediate between peat and bituminous coal.” This area of Central Texas contains the greatest amount of lignite in Texas.⁸

From the time of the earliest Anglo settlers to the recent past, agriculture has been the basis of the county’s economy. The necessity of taking agricultural products to market in a timely fashion has made transportation a key element within the county. Nashville and Port Sullivan, being along the Brazos River, were early business and supply centers, as was Bryant Station, which was located along the Marlin-to-Austin stage route.⁹

⁷ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Milam County"

<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/MM/hcm13.html> (accessed July 15, 2006).

Katherine Bradford Henderson, “The Early History of Milam County” (M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1924), 13, 63. Baker, *Ghost Towns of Texas*, 14, 115. *Rockdale Reporter*, 30 April, 1936.

⁸ Susan J. Tewalt and Mary L. W. Jackson, *Geological Circular 91-1* “Estimation of Lignite Resources in the Wilcox Group of Central and East Texas Using the National Coal Resources Data System” (Austin: Bureau of Economic Geology, 1991), 1,2. Lengert, “The History of Milam County,” 156. *Dallas Morning News*, 14 March, 1897.

⁹ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Milam County"

<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/MM/hcm13.html> (accessed July 15, 2006). Milam County Heritage and Preservation Society, *Matchless Milam: History of Milam County, Texas* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1984), 8. *Matchless Milam* gives a brief overview of Milam County and its history. The majority of the contents are collections of family histories as told by those with roots in Milam County.

Weather, economic conditions, and transportation systems within Milam County did not always aid in the economic well being of those practicing agriculture. The economic recession in the South following the Civil War was especially hard on Milam County. With little business to do in the county, activity slowed and Cameron became “commercially stagnant.” Low agricultural prices and unreliable transportation networks made economic recovery difficult for those in Milam County. Milam County citizens could not depend on consistent river navigation because the water levels of area rivers, such as the Little and Brazos, fluctuated so much. Although steamboats and other vessels regularly navigated the Brazos, low water levels caused the rivers to become so shallow at certain places that boats were sometimes unable to reach their intended destination. In addition, hidden tree trunks just beneath the surface of the water posed a risk to the vessels of those who traveled along the rivers.¹⁰

Complete economic recovery did not come to the county until the 1870s, after the railroad was built through the county and the Panic of 1873 passed. The latter, a nationwide depression, hit Texas hard for three main reasons: the state was in great financial debt, lacked much developed industry, and suffered from low land prices. The introduction of the railroad would help the economy, but it would also realign the population and commercial structure of the county. These events aided in the decline and disappearance of towns like Bryant Station, Smith’s Mills, and Nashville, the

¹⁰ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Milam County" <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/MM/hcm13.html> (accessed July 15, 2006). *Ibid.*, s.v. “Nashville-On-The-Brazos” <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/NN/hvn4.html> (accessed July 15, 2006). Baker, *Ghost Towns of Texas*, 14, 115. *Cameron Herald*, 25 March, 1915.

former county seat and one-time candidate for state capital. Many towns never recovered from the combined depression and realignment. The college at Port Sullivan, for instance, once securely located along an important trade route, was only able to sustain itself into the 1870s. The railroad would create new competition within, and forever change, Milam County.¹¹

¹¹ Myra Hargrove McIlvain, *6 Central Texas Auto Tours* (Burnet, Texas: Eakin Press, 1980), 197. Baker, *Ghost Towns of Texas*, 116. T. R. Fehrenbach, *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), 433.

CHAPTER II

1873-1900: THE BEGINNING OF ROCKDALE

Since shortly after it gained independence from Mexico in 1836, Texas began plans for building railroads. During the next 25 years, when railroads were being constructed in earnest across the Midwest, giving rail cities like Indianapolis and Chicago more power and prestige, Texas rail lines remained in the planning stages only. In 1851, however, railroads began to be built in the Lone Star State. By the start of the Civil War, Texas had granted 58 rail charters, over 5 million acres of land, and nearly 2 million dollars to various rail companies, only to be rewarded with a mere 468 miles of track among ten short rail lines that were located in East Texas and along the Gulf Coast. The rail conditions in Texas were much like those across the South. In 1840, 44 percent of the nation's rail mileage could be found in the South, but by 1850 the South possessed only 26 percent of the nation's rail mileage.¹

During the Civil War, attention and resources were diverted away from building and maintaining railroads in Texas. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, railroad companies resumed building and improving their rail lines in Texas at a rate that outpaced that of prewar growth. By 1870, the International & Great Northern Railroad

¹ . Frank Goodwyn, *Lone Star Land: 20th Century Texas in Perspective* (New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 1955), 126-127. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Railroads" <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/RR/eqr1.html> (accessed November 10, 2006). Abbott, *Boosters and Businessmen*, 15, 26-27. James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 91.

Company (I&GN), whose line began at St. Louis, traveled south through Missouri, cut a southwest line through Arkansas, entered Texas near its northeast corner, and extended its line to Hearne, in Robertson County, Texas.²

In the summer of 1873, the *Galveston Daily News* reported a new town would be built along the line of the I&GN approximately 30 miles west-southwest of Hearne. The future townsite consisted of four-hundred acres purchased by the I&GN from area land owners George Green, B. F. Ackerman, and Frank Smith. It was speculated that the town would be named Milam City. By that September, however, and perhaps due to the fact that a Milam City already existed in Sabine County, the town was instead named Rockdale. In November, with the aid of convict labor, workers completed the track to Rockdale, which would be the terminus of the rail line for the next two years. From the beginning, there were lofty expectations for the new town, for during this time, the railroad was viewed as “the engines of change” that brought modernity and growth. The railroad also incorporated Rockdale into a nationwide and regional network of cities associated with the railroad.³

² Goodwyn, *Lone Star Land*, 129-135. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "International-Great Northern Railroad" <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/II/equi4.html> (accessed March 17, 2006). *David Rumsey Map Collection* "Map of the International and Great Northern Railroad. Lone (Star) Route and Connections" Woodward, Tiernan & Hale, Map Engravers: St. Louis. Rand, McNally & Co, Map Engr's Chicago (1878) <http://www.davidrumsey.com/maps770067-22085.html>. (accessed March 13, 2006).

³ *Galveston Daily News*, 16 July 1873. *Ibid.*, 30 September 1873. *Ibid.*, 1 November 1873. Ida Jo Marshall, *Rockdale Centennial: A History of Rockdale, Texas 1874-1974* (Rockdale: The Rockdale Reporter, 1974), 9. *The Roads of Texas* (Shearer Publishing: Fredericksburg, Texas, 1999), 107-108. Katherine G. Morrissey, *Mental Territories: Mapping the Inland Empire* (Ithica, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 116. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 313. This author is indebted to Lynna Kay Shuffield for sharing her findings from the *Galveston Daily News* as it pertains to Milam

Why, when the I&GN built through Milam County, did the track not go through Cameron, an established town and county seat? The most important rail hub east of Rockdale was Palestine. At Palestine, one I&GN track headed south to Houston and Galveston, while the other track headed southwest with Austin and San Antonio as future objectives. A straight line drawn from Palestine to Austin would cut Milam County almost exactly in half, with Cameron lying above the line and Rockdale below. There is more involved, however, in building a rail line than simply finding the shortest route between two points, as an often winding rail route from Missouri to Texas can attest to.⁴

From its entry into Texas near the state's northeast corner to Austin, the I&GN Lone Star line traveled through 13 Texas counties. Of these 13 counties, the I&GN traveled through only four county seats: Jefferson, Marshall, Palestine, and Austin. Part of the reason for the bypassing of county seats can be explained by examining town character and finances. The railroads often sought concessions from existing towns in exchange for building a line through their town. Dallas, for example, provided the

County. A portion of Ms. Shuffield's work can be found online at http://www.geocities.com/lks_friday/COLUMN-001.htm.

⁴ *David Rumsey Map Collection* "Map of the International and Great Northern Railroad. Lone (Star) Route and Connections" (1878) <http://www.davidrumsey.com/maps770067-22085.html>. "The Correct Map of Texas" Woodward, Tiernan & Hale: St. Louis (1878) map located at University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections, Map Room.

Houston & Texas Central Railroad a combination of cash, bonds, and land to build its tracks through the city.⁵

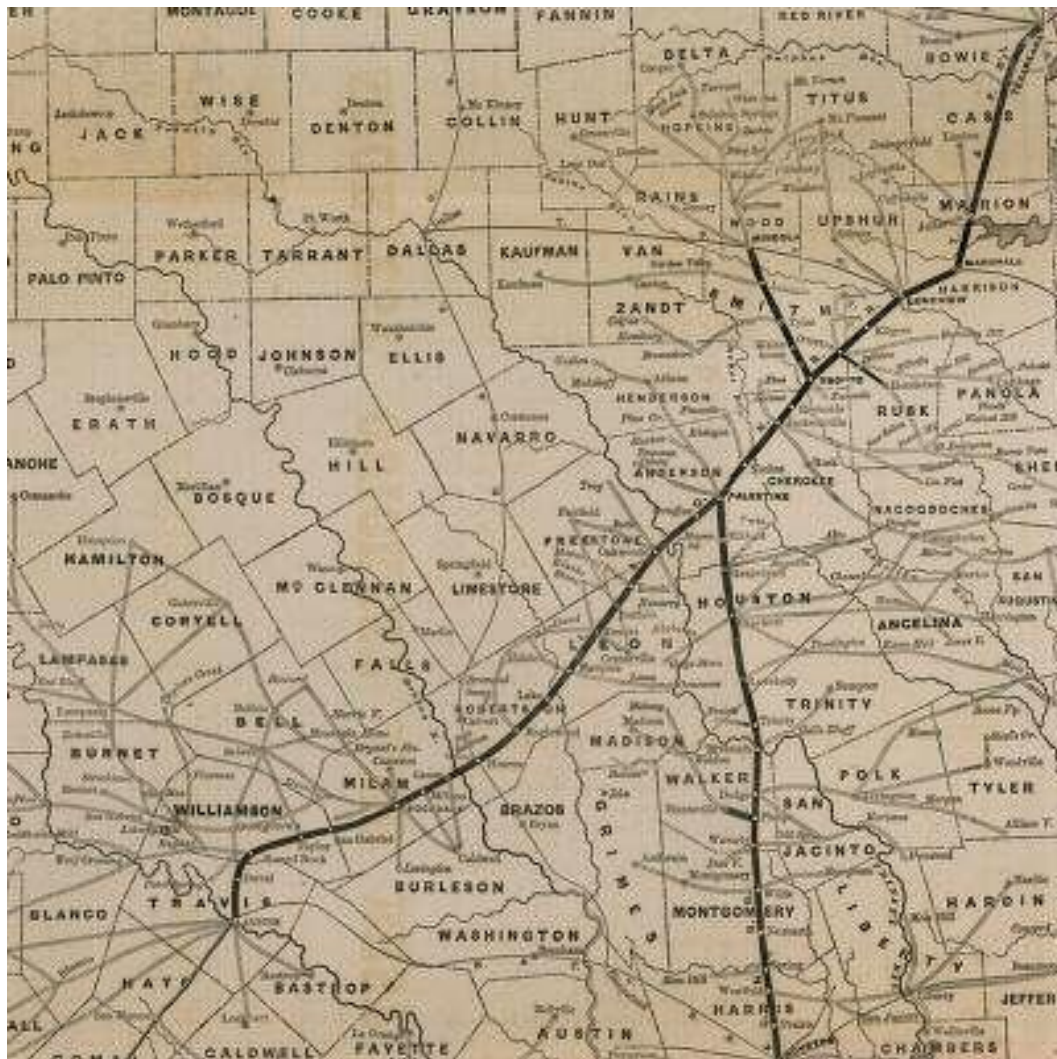


Figure 3. *The Correct Map of Texas, 1878*, showing I&GN rail line in Texas.

⁵ *David Rumsey Map Collection* “Map of the International and Great Northern Railroad. Lone (Star) Route and Connections” (1878) <http://www.davidrumsey.com/maps770067-22085.html>. Goodwyn, *Lone Star Land*, 130.

Just as important as town character and finances were the issues of geography and topography in relation to the sitting or location of towns. The elevation of Milam County ranges from 306 to 648 feet. The majority of the county is made up of rolling plains, but there are concentrated areas in which the elevation changes greatly. Along the San Gabriel and Little Rivers, and along Alligator and Clays Creeks, for example, the elevation often varies more than 100 feet. When planning where to build a rail line, a route of least resistance that is within certain geographic parameters is preferred. A flat route is ideal, but if not possible, the lowest grade is most desirable. A locomotive could more easily pull a train up a gradual incline than it could a steep one. In addition, more hours, material, and money were required to build a track across a river or other type of embankment.⁶

⁶ *Soil Survey for Milam County, Texas*, 11, 191. "Taylor Sheet" United States Geological Survey, 1894, reprinted 1916. "Buckholts Quadrangle" United States Geological Survey, 1909, reprinted 1912. Maps located at University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections, Map Room. *WVa-USA* "The Building of the C&O Railway" <http://www.wva-usa.com/history/mthope/cando.php> (accessed August 4, 2006).

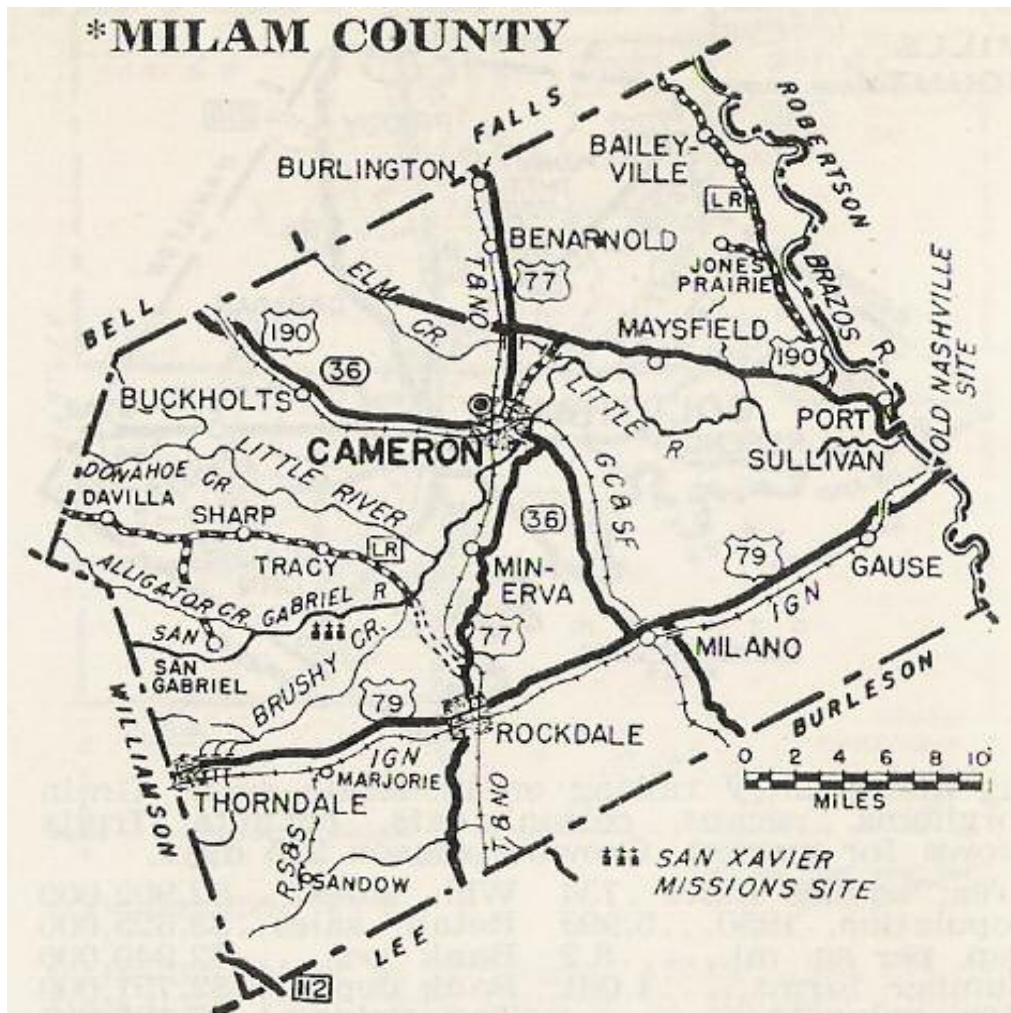


Figure 4. 1952-1953 Texas Almanac map of Milam County.

The Little River flows into the county near its northwest corner and flows east-southeast through a third of the county before turning northeast toward Cameron. At that point it meanders around the south side of the county seat and cuts northward just east of town, before flowing southeast again and meeting the Brazos River. The San Gabriel River, Alligator Creek, Clays Creek, Big Elm Creek and other smaller

waterways cut through the northwest quadrant of the county before flowing into the Little River and thus the Brazos. Rivers and streams course through the upper half of Milam County, the most convoluted merging of which occurs around Cameron. The half of the county below Brushy Creek and the Little River, in contrast, has only a handful of smaller creeks and streams.⁷

Although Rockdale and Cameron are roughly equidistant from an imaginary line running from Palestine to Austin, the more southerly route through Rockdale provided fewer barriers to rail construction. Building an east-west rail line through Cameron would have entailed crossing the Brazos into the county, the Little River at least three times, and the San Gabriel River at least once. Over the years, these rivers had broken from their banks and caused major damage during periods of heavy rainfall. In addition, bridges crossing these rivers proved unreliable at times. When heavy rains caused area rivers to flood the surrounding land, their waters sometimes unsettled, and even washed away, the bridges. Taking the southern route through Rockdale provided a more level grade with fewer rivers for the railroad to cross than a northern route through Cameron would have provided.⁸

⁷ *Soil Survey for Milam County, Texas*, 191.

⁸ David Ray Galbreath, compiler, *Index of Road and Bridge Commissioners Court Minutes, Milam County, Texas, Volume A thru Volume 15, 1874-1981* (Frankston, Texas: by the author, 2004). *Dallas Morning News* 9 April, 1900. Mabel Charles, *Personal Journal*, private collection. Ms. Charles (1903-2002) was born in and raised in the Duncan community, educated in Cameron, lived most of her life in the Tracy community near the San Gabriel river, and spent the last years of her life in Rockdale, living all her 99 years in Milam County. She was active in county organizations including the Milam County Heritage Preservation Society, and had a passion for local history. *Galveston Daily News*, 4 December 1874.



Figure 5. 1878 International & Great Northern map.

In the summer of 1873 Rockdale began to establish itself within the county. People were moving to town, houses were being constructed, and businesses were being

put in place so that by the time the railroad was completed to Rockdale on January 27, 1874, the new town experienced “good local trade.” Five lumber yards operated in town to support this rapid growth. Roads were being laid in all directions from Rockdale and accommodating bridges were built across the Little and San Gabriel rivers and Brushy Creek. To help support the necessary infrastructure, the citizens of Rockdale voted in May 1874 to incorporate, and in June the county judge issued the order, creating the ‘Town of Rockdale,’ which a year later was amended to the City of Rockdale. By contrast, Cameron would not permanently incorporate until 1889, as previous attempts to incorporate in 1856 and 1873 proved temporary. In addition to its road and rail connections, Rockdale was also connected with Galveston, another city on the I&GN, through a direct telegraph connection. Perhaps due to the connectivity of Rockdale, the county newspaper, the *Messenger*, moved from Cameron to Rockdale in 1874.¹²

By the late spring of 1874 Rockdale claimed a wagon trade of over 100 miles, from the Brazos River west to Georgetown, and from Giddings north to Waco. Area farmers and merchants traveled to Rockdale to do their business instead of Calvert, Bryan, Houston, or other railroad towns. Daily stage coach service was established between Rockdale and Belton, the county seat of neighboring Bell County. At the time, no rail service existed in Bell County. For surrounding areas, Rockdale was the

¹² Ibid., 4 December, 1873. Ibid., 3 January, 1874. Ibid., 27 February, 1874. Ibid., 8 March, 1874. Ibid., 22 March, 1874. Lelia M. Batte *History of Milam County, Texas* (San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1956), 51, 85, 89. *Rockdale Messenger*, 4 July, 1889. Ibid., 22 September, 1898.

closest town that had a direct connection with distant places. Because of this, Rockdale held an advantage over many nearby towns. In such a situation, the importance of a town with transportation connections was greater than its relative size may suggest.¹³

In 1933, the German geographer, Walter Christaller, introduced the concept of Central Place Theory to help explain how urban settlements evolve and how they are situated in relation to each other. A Central Place serves a surrounding area with goods and services that are unavailable in these communities. Although Christaller formed his theory to explain urban places, one could apply the same general theory to Milam County, and as such, Rockdale could be considered a Central Place in Milam County. Other towns in the county provided basic services like basic dry goods and food. Cameron provided high order services through the functions associated with being a county seat. By having a railroad connection, Rockdale provided a high order service to the surrounding towns, including Cameron. This being the case, the spheres of influence for Cameron and Rockdale overlapped through most of the county, creating an immediate competition for dominance via each of their unique advantages. Cameron, as the county seat, had established itself in terms of governmental services.¹⁴

¹³ Marshall, *Rockdale Centennial*, 9. *Rockdale Messenger*, 1 April 1874. Ibid., 5 March 1874. *David Rumsey Map Collection* "Map of the International and Great Northern Railroad. Lone (Star) Route and Connections" (1878) <http://www.davidrumsey.com/maps770067-22085.html>. Blaine Brownell, *The Urban Ethos in the South, 1920-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975), 2.

¹⁴ *Center for Spatially Integrated Social Science* "Walter Christaller: Hierarchical Patterns of Urbanization" <http://www.csiss.org/classics/content/67> (accessed April 19, 2006). *Revision Notes* "Central Place Theory" <http://www.revision-notes.co.uk/revision/176.html> (accessed April 19, 2006). Brownell, *The Urban Ethos in the South, 1920-1930*, 97.

Thus, while Rockdale was successful as a rail point, Cameron maintained itself as the seat of county government. On April 9, 1874, however, an event occurred which would ignite the competition between Milam County's two main towns. At 1 o'clock in the morning, the courthouse in Cameron was "wrapped in flames." When the fire was extinguished, it was discovered that the only item not destroyed from the courthouse was a single surveyor's book. When discussions began regarding rebuilding the courthouse, there was some debate as to where the new courthouse would be placed. The main question pertained to location: should the county seat remain Cameron, or should Rockdale, a bustling new town with better transportation, be awarded the title? In 1874, citizens voted to keep the county seat at Cameron instead of moving it south to the newer town of Rockdale. Then in 1880, after six years of sometimes heated discussion during which some in Cameron accused Rockdale citizens of torching the courthouse, the voters of Milam County decided the issue with a second vote regarding the placement of the county seat. The vote kept the status quo: by granting Rockdale 1,618 votes, and awarding Cameron 1,861 votes, Cameron remained the seat of county government. Rockdale may have lost the battle for county seat, but it proved that it could wage a good war. For the next 70 years, Rockdale waged a generally quiet but consistent war with Cameron for not only survival, but for dominance in Milam County.¹⁵

¹⁵ *Galveston Daily News*, 14 April, 1874. Dorothy Allison, *History of the Milam County Courthouses, 1822-1991* (Cameron, Texas: Main Printing Inc., 1991), 13-16. Batte *History of Milam County, Texas*, 77.

While Cameron rebuilt its courthouse, Rockdale developed networks with its hinterlands and major cities. In the fall of 1874, representatives of the I&GN and Rockdale leaders presented to the citizens of the area a plan to populate the surrounding countryside. The plan provided that within four months “hundreds of white immigrants” would be brought into the county, although they hoped that actual numbers would rise into the thousands. Their purpose would be to aid in the coming year’s crop and provide local businesses with a larger consumer base. The *Galveston Daily News* boastfully reported that young Rockdale, a population estimated at 1,800, was “doing more business than a half dozen old-fashioned, gray-haired cities,” and that it already had the look of a bustling railroad town, with “two or three banks, 50 or 60 merchants, and plenty of saloons.”¹⁶

Three years later, one could still find boastful commentary about Rockdale in the Galveston paper. It reported that many kinds of crops could be successfully grown in the area around Rockdale, and that the land was well suited for the raising of livestock. Available land sites were described as having plenty of trees available for fencing off the land and erecting homes, and that wells of “30 to 60 feet never fail through the driest of summers.” The mention of dry summers was a rare departure from the generally glowing reviews. The *Galveston Daily News* reported that six dry goods stores, eight grocery stores, two hardware stores, two drug stores, four churches, three

¹⁶ *Galveston Daily News*, 27 October, 1874. *Ibid.*, 7 November, 1874. Batte *History of Milam County, Texas*, 75. According to Batte, a movement to bring immigrants into Milam County was attempted in 1873 by B. F. Ackerman, George Green, J. W. McCown, Jr., William McGregor, and C. R. Smith when they formed the short-lived Milam County Real Estate and Emigration Association.

schools, three hotels, an Odd Fellows hall and a Masons lodge, and numerous other businesses could be found in Rockdale. An increasing number of Rockdale citizens, estimated at nearly 2,000, supported these businesses. Rockdale claimed to be a railroad town that conducted “extensive trade with the counties of Milam, Bell, Lee, and Burleson from its central location.” Conversely, the same paper described Cameron as being “an old town of about 500 inhabitants” that was “12 miles distance” from Rockdale which also served as its shipping point.¹⁷

Information found on maps published by the I&GN in 1878 also painted a positive picture of Rockdale and the surrounding area and recommended emigrants settle there, while casually dismissing Cameron. Visually, Rockdale appears to be the most important town in Milam County. Its name is printed in all capital letters, the only such town between Palestine and Austin to be so denoted on the map. In addition to the rail line running through town, wagon roads are shown radiating from Rockdale to the other Milam County towns of San Gabriel, Thorndale, Davilla, Bryant’s Station, and Cameron. Two other wagon roads head south from Rockdale to the Burleson County towns of Lexington and Caldwell. The wagon roads from Rockdale reach north into Hamilton County, northwest into Runnels County, and west into Menard County. This type of promotional literature was not new, as developing towns across the country had used similar tactics to shape imaginations in the promotion of a town.¹⁸

¹⁷*Galveston Daily News*, 21 October, 1877.

¹⁸“The Correct Map of Texas” Woodward, Tiernan & Hale: St. Louis (1878). Morrissey, *Mental Territories*, 129.



Figure 6. *The Correct Map of Texas, 1878*, showing wagon roads.

This map reveals much about the other transportation routes in the area. One of Milam County's important antebellum towns, Port Sullivan, appears to only have one wagon road which connects it not with another county town, but with Robertson County's Hearne, across the Brazos River. Cameron also appears to have but one road of service, and that road leads to Rockdale. With direct access to the only railroad that ran through the county and numerous wagon roads, Rockdale was assuredly the transportation hub of Milam County. Although there were most certainly more roads

that served these other towns, it is clear that the publishers of the map intended to provide travelers with a map that would shape their actions and attitudes in a manner that would favor Rockdale and the associated rail line. This is yet another reminder that publishers favored the enterprising towns that sought, and got, the railroad.¹⁹

The narrative information on the maps also made Texas, and specifically the area around Rockdale, seem like a desirable location. The heading of the verso of 1878's "The Correct Map of Texas" states that "Texas wants one million emigrants annually for 20 years." The emigrants could purportedly enjoy "low taxes and good government" as well as "cheap land." Milam County is described as having good soil for growing numerous crops, especially around the bottomlands of the Little River. Rockdale is described as the most important town in the county, and as having a number of businesses, schools, and churches. In addition to being the main town in Milam County, Rockdale also reportedly served as "the principal shipping point for the rich and populous county of Bell." Gause and Milano, the other county towns listed on the map are described as small towns that are surrounded by good land. Cameron, however, is depicted simply as an old town, although the county seat, and is virtually dismissed.²⁰

Cameron reasserted itself as an important town in Milam County in 1881 when the Gulf, Colorado & Santa Fe Railway (GC&SF) came through town. The GC&SF entered the county from the south, crossed the I&GN line at Milano, continued north to

¹⁹ "The Correct Map of Texas" Woodward, Tiernan & Hale: St. Louis (1878).

²⁰ Ibid.

Cameron, and then swung west through Buckholts and out of the county. This rail line began at Galveston, bypassed Houston, ran north to Dallas and up through Oklahoma. Ten years later, the San Antonio & Aransas Pass (SA&AP) Railway provided Cameron with a north-south line, and connected it by rail with Rockdale. Significantly, the SA&AP selected Rockdale as the site of its local headquarters. South of Rockdale, the line continued to Yoakum where it met another SA&AP line that served Houston, San Antonio, and south Texas.²¹

Although Cameron now became somewhat more accessible and its population increased after receiving direct rail service (500 citizens in 1878, 800 in 1884, and 2,000 in 1892), the impact the railroad made on the town was not as significant as that upon Rockdale. By the time the GC&SF and the SA&AP came through Cameron, rail service had already been established in the county. Certain ladies of Cameron's upper class during this time felt more compelled to shop for dresses in the up and coming Rockdale than in their older town. Cameron was also not as important a point on either rail line as Rockdale was on the I&GN. Rockdale was the end of the line for two years, whereas Cameron was never intended to be a destination, but rather just another town along the line. In contrast to Rockdale's designation on I&GN maps, SA&AP maps

²¹ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Cameron, Texas"
<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/CC/hfc1.html> (accessed May 10, 2006). *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Gulf, Colorado, and Santa Fe Railway"
<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/GG/eqg25.html> (accessed August 10, 2006). *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railway"
<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/SS/eqs6.html> (accessed August 10, 2006). *Rockdale Messenger*, 4 July, 1889. "Milam County" map, (Texas) General Land Office, June 1918. *Bill Roberts's Home Page* "Map of the San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railway and Connections" (1893)
http://www.wcroberts.org/Images/1893_SAP_Map.jpg. (accessed August 10, 2006).

denoted Cameron in regular type, the capital letters being reserved for Waco to the north and Yoakum to the south.²²

The railroad also had a greater impact on Rockdale than on Cameron because of the towns that the different rail lines connected. The I&GN connected Rockdale with the state capitol (Austin), which, at a little over 60 miles away was the closest city. Milam County was located on the fringe of Austin's hinterland, its area of influence. Houston, meanwhile, was about 140 miles away, Dallas 150 miles away, and San Antonio 155 miles away from the population centers of Milam County. Arguably, the most important rail line to go through Cameron was the SA&AP, but because its link with Rockdale better connected it with other area towns that also led to more of Cameron's residents traveling to Rockdale and other towns for services. Cameron, in other words, lost out to Rockdale for several reasons.²³

However, this did not mean that Cameron gave up. There was an attempt in 1894 to construct a railroad west from Cameron to Georgetown, close to the regional hub of Austin. For whatever reasons, the proposed Trinity, Cameron and Western line never came to fruition. Perhaps the existing and parallel I&GN line presented too much

²² Batte, *History of Milam County, Texas*, 88. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Cameron, Texas" <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/CC/hfc1.html> (accessed May 10, 2006). "The Correct Map of Texas" Woodward, Tiernan & Hale: St. Louis (1878). *Bill Roberts's Home Page* "Map of the San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railway and Connections" (1893). *Cameron Herald*, 25 March, 1915.

²³ *Cameron Chamber of Commerce* "About Cameron, Texas" <http://www.cameron-tx.com/aboutcameron.html>. (accessed August 10, 2006).

competition. Rockdale had already secured and established a line toward the regional hub, and there was just not enough demand for another such line from Milam County.²⁴

Cameron still claimed the county seat, but Rockdale seemed to have an edge in the fields of business and progressive citizens. In an 1893 publication listing prominent individuals of Milam and surrounding counties, more of the county's progressive and successful businessmen are shown as living in Rockdale than in any other county town. These Rockdale business leaders include J. S. Perry, Benjamin and Joseph Loewenstein, E. M. Scarbrough, and C. H. Coffield. In the course of running profitable businesses and being actively involved in a number of civic and fraternal organizations, these men provided business leadership during Rockdale's first 20 years. They also helped to make Rockdale recognizable as a "town of young men...and...youthful enthusiasm and energy."²⁵

Some of these stories reveal how the town of Rockdale lured the enterprising. For example, J. S. Perry was a lawyer who, in 1874 left the established town of Cameron for the new railroad town of Rockdale. Within two years, Perry was elected County Judge of Milam County, and a few years later, elected by the people of Milam, Brazos, and Burleson counties to represent their interests in the State Senate. In the 1890s he served as mayor of Rockdale, president of the Rockdale Cotton Oil Mills, and director of the Rockdale Improvement Company. Under Perry's leadership, Rockdale

²⁴ *Dallas Morning News* 4 October, 1894, *Ibid.*, 14 November, 1894.

²⁵ *History of Texas Together with a Biographical History of Milam, Williamson, Bastrop, Travis, Lee, and Burleson Counties* (The Lewis Publishing Company: Chicago, 1893). 824.

“prospered as never before, and it was mainly through his management that the town acquired its very efficient system of water works and electric lights.”²⁶

Benjamin and Joseph Loewenstein came to Rockdale from Prussia in 1873, shortly before the arrival of the I&GN. Upon arriving, they opened a dry goods store that came to be one of the most successful in the area. In addition to their store, they also operated the Rockdale Brick Works and helped build seven brick business buildings in Rockdale. The brothers were described as being “public-spirited...standing ready at all times to put their money in any legitimate enterprise and subscribing liberally for the promotion of local industries.” To this extent, Benjamin helped to establish the First National Bank of Rockdale, and served as its vice president. He also served on the bank’s board of directors. Joseph served on the local school board and was a member of a number of fraternal organizations including the Masons, Knights of Honor, and the American Legion of Honor. Both of the Loewenstein brothers were also active in the Hebrew order, B’nai B’rith. By associating with, and being active in, a number of orders and social clubs, these citizens could identify themselves as “members of the ascendant urban elite.” Having a progressive, visionary mindset would help these, and other men, lead Rockdale to success.²⁷

E. M. Scarbrough came to Texas in 1867 and settled at Bryant’s Station, working for the merchant firm of Hale & Evans before moving to the railroad town of Hearne in 1870. In 1874, however, Scarbrough moved back to Milam County,

²⁶ Ibid., 344, 824.

²⁷ Ibid., 345-347. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 208.

relocating to Rockdale. He had in fact lobbied the I&GN to build through Rockdale, and eventually became its mayor. In 1882, Scarbrough partnered with Robert Hicks, forming the firm of Scarbrough and Hicks, which the 1893 publication described as “one of the largest and financially solid establishments in this section of the state.” Scarbrough’s training in Rockdale served him well. After seven years there, he departed for Austin in 1889 where he would build that city’s first skyscraper and fully air-conditioned department store. Located on Austin’s Congress Avenue, The University of Texas at Austin’s *Daily Texan* credits the Scarbrough store as having “started the downtown business district.”²⁸

In August of 1875, C. H. Coffield arrived in Rockdale, and ever since the Coffield name has been associated with the town. Partnered with Hugh Witcher, Coffield engaged in a successful mercantile business in Rockdale, and with Benjamin Loewenstein, helped organize the First National Bank of Rockdale and held a stake in the Rockdale Improvement Company. Coffield also participated in the fledgling local lignite industry and real estate. Like many other business leaders in the area, Coffield

²⁸ *History of Texas Together with a Biographical History of Milam, Williamson, Bastrop, Travis, Lee, and Burleson Counties*, 568, 569, 636. *Austin Post Card.Com* “The Scarbrough Building” <http://www.austinpostcard.com/shistory.htm>. (accessed 10 April, 2006). *Daily Texan Online* “2 Austin buildings get historical markers” <http://www.dailytexanonline.com/media/storage/paper410/news/2002/11/15/StateLocal/2.Austin.Buildings.Get.Historical.Markers-497676.shtml?nrewrite200608131820&sourcedomain=www.dailytexanonline.com>. (accessed 4 April, 2006). *Daily Texan Online* “Historic Scarbrough house to be demolished” <http://www.dailytexanonline.com/media/storage/paper410/news/2001/02/27/News/Historic.Scarbrough.House.To.Be.Demolished-698843.shtml?nrewrite200608131820&sourcedomain=www.dailytexanonline.com>. (accessed 4 April, 2006).

was a Mason and Knight of Honor. He was also one of the earliest town boosters, claiming Rockdale to be “the best town of 2,000 people in Texas.”²⁹

It is doubtful that Coffield or others would have had much success in the lignite industry had it not been for the proximity of the railroad. The existence of lignite around Rockdale had been known at least since 1866, but it was not until 1890 when Herman Vogel began his operation three miles east of Rockdale that lignite began to be mined in Milam County. The lignite in Milam County was described as being “equal to the best quality utilized and far superior to much” that was being used in Western Europe. In 1892 the Rockdale Mining and Manufacturing Company, of which Coffield was president, purchased land adjacent to Vogel’s and also began mining lignite. By 1895, Vogel had demonstrated enough promise in the venture that he could be counted on to initiate other mining activities. With the aid of five other individuals, he formed the Black Diamond Coal Company. The success of these early lignite ventures was naturally due to the great amount of lignite present. The presence of good transportation facilities, however, played an equally important role. These early mines were located near the track of the I&GN, making the transportation of the lignite to other towns fairly easy.³⁰

While business and industry were important to Rockdale, agriculture was still the most important form of business county-wide. The Farmers’ Alliance had a strong

²⁹ *History of Texas together with a Biographical History of...Counties*, 824-826.

³⁰ Batte, *History of Milam County, Texas*, 106, 107. Ida Jo Marshall, editor, *Rockdale Centennial: A History of Rockdale, Texas 1874-1974* (The Rockdale Reporter: Rockdale, 1976) 3. *Dallas Morning News*, 14 March, 1897. *Rockdale Messenger*, 27 June, 1889.

presence in Milam County, as is evidenced by the number of businesses that fronted support for the Alliance. When the Alliance decided to boycott jute bags because of their artificially high prices, Rockdale merchants joined them by refusing to order any jute bags. Rockdale was the main shipping point for agricultural goods in Milam County, receiving “the larger portion of the crop of Milam County.” In 1887, roughly 7,400 bales of cotton were received at Rockdale, while in contrast, Cameron received only about 5,000 bales. Five years later, Rockdale received over 15,000 bales, and Cameron just under 14,000. Although Cameron narrowed the margin, Rockdale still commanded the cotton trade in Milam County.³¹

The importance of farmers to county merchants was evident in an 1898 letter to the *Rockdale Messenger*, penned by a Cameron citizen concerning some cases of smallpox:

The statement that Cameron has attempted to make the outside world believe that the danger was insignificant, etc., is not only absolutely false but it is more. Rockdale being a rival town, and the time being at hand when the farmers make their arrangements with the merchants for the new year, one must justly conclude that it was done for the purpose of benefiting Rockdale at the expense of Cameron and was definitely malicious.

³¹ *Dallas Morning News*, 18 November, 1886. *Rockdale Messenger*, 4 July, 1889. *Dallas Morning News*, 2 December, 1885. *Ibid.*, 22 November, 1887. *Ibid.*, 10 February, 1889. *Ibid.*, 7 January, 1893. *Ibid.*, 16 January, 1893. Jute bagging was used to hold together cotton bales. At the time, the Alliance-preferred alternative was cotton bagging.

Cameron grappled with smallpox from the middle of November through the middle of December 1898. City officials downplayed the cases, saying that they were “confined to negroes,” and that the cases were “mild” and “isolated.” The *Rockdale Messenger* described the first two deaths in Cameron caused by smallpox as being “an old negro otherwise infirm with age, and a young stiff-necked negro, who refused medical assistance.” When the disease was finally contained, Dr. W. W. Greer, the county health officer called upon those in the county to come back to Cameron to conduct their business. A state health officer, after meeting with Greer, traveled to Rockdale on his way back to Austin in an attempt to ease their fears. If there was any doubt before, the disagreements arising from the smallpox episode confirm that Rockdale was in competition with Cameron.³²

³² *Rockdale Messenger*, 22 December, 1898. *Dallas Morning News* 23 November, 1898. *Ibid.*, 26 November, 1898. *Ibid.*, 2 December, 1898. *Ibid.*, 19 December, 1898. *Ibid.*, 23 December, 1898.

Table 2.1 Total Number of Farms in Milam County, 1870-1950

1870	715
1880	2219
1890	3311
1900	5337
1910	5055
1920	5606
1930	5469
1940	3895
1950	2807

Data from U.S. Census Population and Agriculture Reports, 1870-1950

As evidenced by the previous letter, the press played a key role in developing ideas and opinions of those in the county. In many issues of the *Rockdale Messenger* around the turn of the 20th century, when circulation was around 5,600 copies a week, one will find editorials prodding Rockdalians to pitch in to make their town a better place. While the truth behind the editorials is questionable, what is clear in further reading is that the citizens responded to the challenges presented. As Blaine Brownell mentions in *The Urban Ethos in the South*, this boosterism in newspaper form was nothing new, as the press had been used in a number of successful cities as a tool of growth through boosterism. In the *Cameron Herald* of the same time frame, one is hard

pressed to find such editorials, leading one to believe that boosterism in Cameron was not as prevalent as in Rockdale.³³

Meanwhile, Rockdale received some bad press on occasion. An 1899 editorial in the *Messenger* claimed that an individual in another town who was very knowledgeable about Rockdale felt that the southern Milam County town “had been a good town but was on the wane.” Without naming any names, the editor continued to claim that local business men had been overheard making parallel claims. The roads leading into Rockdale, he went on, were “the worst in Central Texas.” The editor also lamented that there was no longer a young men’s business club to help take care of the existing roads or make an effort to extend trade.³⁴

In the latter half of 1900, the editor of the *Messenger* continued chiding Rockdale citizens for not being proactive, lamenting that Belton had “got[ten] a move on her.” The neighboring county seat that previously lacked rail service seemed to be coming on strong, and the editor implied that Belton might leave Rockdale behind unless Rockdadians continued to press forward. Maybe Rockdale was just taking a brief rest, for by the year’s end, they had extended a telephone line to Davilla, one of the county towns in the hinterland, and their merchants advertised in force so that they were the place to visit when needing to make purchases.³⁵

³³ Ibid., 19 October, 1899. Abbott, *Boosters and Businessmen*, 4, 127. Brownell, *Urban Ethos in the South*, 65.

³⁴ Ibid., 9 March 1899.

³⁵ Ibid., 9 August, 1900. Ibid., 16 August, 1900.

The first quarter-century of existence brought much change and growth to Rockdale. The town quickly went from nothing but a brushy patch of land to a busy railroad terminus. After the railroad connection was made through to Austin, Rockdale had to reposition itself and sustain itself as a destination. Through these formative years, civic and business leaders along with a local paper helped guide the growth of the town. In a short period of time, Rockdale challenged Cameron for dominance in the county—and put up a good fight. At the start of the 20th century Rockdale was not through growing, as the *Messenger* editor may have implied, and those around the town would witness more growth and development in the years to come.

CHAPTER III

1901-1919: NOT JUST A BOOM TOWN

At the turn of the 20th century, talk in Rockdale moved back to natural resources. Just as lignite was a main topic of discussion in the previous decades, oil became the natural resource that now gained attention around Rockdale. A Texas state geologist hypothesized that oil lay beneath lignite beds, of which southern Milam County had plenty. The next few decades witnessed more talk and activity of oil around Rockdale. The same twenty years also saw infrastructure improvements, the creation of civic clubs, and increased political participation.¹

The *Rockdale Messenger* reported in 1901 that the Milam County towns of Sharp and Buckholts were improving. These towns, like others in the county, experienced growth as the county population rose from 24,773 in 1890 to 39,666 in 1900. Sharp was experiencing “a boom” with the presence of two stores, a new residence, and two more public wells. Buckholts, meanwhile, gained “several new residences, one or two business houses, and a German Lutheran church.” Meanwhile, the *Thorndale Thorn* touted all that its town had to offer, such as a bank, eight general stores, five saloons, two hotels, and one church, among others. It also mentioned that the town had a waterworks for its 700 citizens, but no water. In addition to water troubles, Thorndale apparently claimed “the darndest inconvenient passenger train

¹ *Rockdale Messenger* 31 January, 1901. Ibid., 14 February, 1901.

schedule of any town on the road.” Rockdale was at a different stage of development, however, than many other county towns. With established businesses and residences, Rockdale focused on involving their citizens in the improvement of the community.²

The Rockdale Business Men’s Association invited “every responsible citizen of Rockdale, who is desirous to assist in improving the public interest” to attend its meetings and be an active member in the organization. As with many cities in the “New South,” the association was made up of “progressive young men.” Doyle mentions how these organizations were not exclusively composed of young men, but offered “followers an identity with youthful energy and a buoyant idealism.” This association was not interested solely in those activities and businesses within the city limits, as is evidenced by their concern over the boll weevil affecting the cotton crop. The association met and invited area farmers to attend in the hopes of finding a way to exterminate the destructive pest. By reaching out to area farmers, Rockdale business men demonstrated an understanding that the welfare and prosperity of those outside the city limits and also outside the traditional business realm were vital to their interests.³

Local business leaders also took the initiative in improving one of Rockdale’s main thoroughfares, Cameron Street. A collection of businessmen located along east Cameron Street proposed to SA&AP agent J.A. Bashaw that if the railroad would deposit a sufficient amount of gravel to cover the street, the businessmen would see that

² Ibid., 14 February, 1901. *Thorndale Thorn* 14 February, 1902. *Texas Almanac* (Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1991), 166.

³ *Rockdale Reporter*, 28 February, 1901. Ibid., 23 May, 1901. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 176.

the street was graveled. With this, the businessmen presented the proposition at a City Council meeting that if the city would agree to grade the street, the businessmen would have the gravel hauled in and laid on the street. The Council passed the proposal by a 3-to-1 vote. The business leaders took the initiative to negotiate with, and get agreement from, different entities in an effort to make progress.⁴

The editor of the *Rockdale Messenger* apparently knew that Rockdale could benefit from active citizen participation, for he again called upon its citizens to take action. Citing a number of small cities in Texas that had Town Improvement Societies, the editor questioned why Rockdale did not have one. Moreover, the *Reporter* editor asked “Ladies of Rockdale” to form a similar organization that would help to improve and beautify the “city streets and public places.” Within a few years, Rockdale’s Civic League acted on a regular basis to improve the look of the city, even creating a Juvenile Civic League for the younger segment of the population.⁵

Numerous other organizations and clubs formed in Rockdale during the next two decades. In addition to the Civil Club and Business Men’s Association, there was the Cooking Club, Athletic Club, Auto Club, and Ye Merry Wives club. In contrast, Cameron citizens lagged behind in forming such clubs. Cameron’s Young Men’s Business Club, for example, was not organized until 1914, thirteen years after a similar club was organized in Rockdale. As Doyle cites in his study on Southern cities after the

⁴ Ibid., 13 June, 1901. Among those businesses and individuals were established names like Scarbrough & Hicks, B. Loewenstein & Sons, and J. F. Coffield, along with a name that would become familiar in the years to come: H. C. Meyer.

⁵ Ibid., 13 June, 1901. Ibid., 6 June, 1907. *Rockdale Reporter* 5 March, 1908.

Civil War, these organizations “became as important as neighborhoods in identifying and assimilating the members of the ascendant urban elite, and their wives and children, into an upper class.” While Doyle discussed Southern cities, the same ideas can be applied to Rockdale during the same time period.⁶

Table 3.1 Population of Milam County, 1870-1960

	Total	White	Non-White
1870	8984	6005	2979
1880	18659	14723	3936
1890	24773	18548	6225
1900	39666	29193	10473
1910	36780	27293	9487
1920	38104	29129	8975
1930	37915	29143	8772
1940	33120	25430	7690
1950	23585	18420	5165
1960	22263	18234	4029

Data from U.S. Census Population Reports, 1870-1960

⁶ Ibid., 31 March, 1910. Ibid., 11 September, 1913. Ibid., 14 June, 1914. Ibid., 17 March, 1910. *Cameron Herald*, 9 April, 1914. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 208.

Rockdale organizations also formed to put together well-advertised fairs and other forms of entertainment. While other county towns and communities put on fairs, none were better advertised in county newspapers than those in Rockdale between 1901 and 1919. Rockdale's Trade Day in 1904, for example, brought an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 people to town. In addition to livestock exhibitions and contests was a display by traveling cowboy showman Bill Pickett. That same year, Pickett became the talk of the rodeo circuit by showing off his unique bulldogging skill at the nation's premier rodeo, Cheyenne Frontier Days. Pickett's skill eventually took him to rodeos all over the world, and he later became the first black honoree in the National Rodeo Hall of Fame.⁷

Due in part to the popularity of the Rockdale fair and in part to the inconsistency of the Cameron fair, fair organizers boldly changed the name of the Rockdale Farmers' Fair to The Milam County Fair. The accessibility of Rockdale from other towns, the support of local merchants, and the consistency of the fair ensured that a good showing could be made most years. Other county towns like Cameron lacked the consistency, and community fairs like Friendship's were not of the same scale as Rockdale's.⁸

After years of successful Rockdale fairs, black citizens, who made up just under a quarter of the county's population, organized a Colored Farmers' Fair in 1911 with the help of Dr. B. Y. Aycock, superintendent of the Rockdale colored school. As with the regular fairs, Rockdale merchants lent heavy support for this new fair by providing a

⁷ *Rockdale Reporter*, 16 September, 1904. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "William Pickett" <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/PP/fpi4.html> (accessed August 8, 2006).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 22 June, 1913. *Ibid.*, 21 March, 1912.

substantial amount of advertising. On the first day of the inaugural Colored Farmers' Fair, an estimated 2,000 people from Milam and surrounding counties attended the event. The following years' Colored Farmers' Fair, opened by Dr. Blackshear of the Prairie View Colored Normal School, was another success. By attracting fair-goers from Milam, Lee, Burleson, Robertson, Falls, Bell, and Williamson counties, Rockdale reaped the benefits of putting on racially inclusive events. Both Rockdale fairs proved to be financial successes and helped local merchants sell their goods to a wider audience. The Colored Farmers' Fair was so popular that when organizers cancelled the regular fair in 1914 due to poor crops and rains that made some roads impassible, the Colored Fair still went on.⁹

In addition to the annual fairs, advertisements for other forms of entertainment filled sections of the *Reporter*. Various plays, such as Shakespeare's "Hamlet" with future "Birth of a Nation" star Sam DeGrasse, entertained locals at Rockdale's Opera House. Other, less sophisticated, events like Championship Wrestling matches featuring Texas' first wrestling star, Taylor's Pet Brown, used the stage at the Opera House to display their art. The Dixie Theater and the Rockdale Theater also offered motion pictures, a new form of entertainment.¹⁰

⁹ *Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide* (Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1941), 69. *Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide* (Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1951), 62, 63. *Rockdale Reporter*, 15 June, 1911. *Ibid.*, 27 July, 1911. *Ibid.*, 25 July, 1912. *Ibid.*, 11 June, 1914. *Ibid.*, 2 July, 1914.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 30 December, 1904. *Yahoo! Movies*, "Sam De Grasse" <http://movies.yahoo.com/movie/contributor/1800037404/bio> (accessed 27 August, 2006). *Rockdale Reporter*, 9 July, 1914. *The "Who's Who" of Professional Wrestling*, "Whatever Happened To...?#29" <http://www.1wrestlinglegends.com/crowbarpress/wht/wht29.htm> (accessed 28 August, 2006). *Rockdale Reporter*, 14 May, 1914. *Ibid.*, 9 July, 1914.

For those who preferred a more stimulating way to pass their time, Milam County provided a few different avenues for political participation. As with most of Texas in the early 20th century, Milam County was predominantly Democratic in politics, with Cameron serving as the Republican hub of the county. In 1910, local Socialists led by E. A. Green, proprietor of the Eagle Saloon, organized a group in Rockdale. When the *Reporter* editor announced that there would be a regular Socialist column, not wanting to turn off his base of support, he made sure to point out to his predominantly Democratic subscribers that the *Reporter* was “a democratic paper.” Though the Socialist group may not have been able to compete with the Democratic forces in the county, it did provide a political voice and an opportunity for political participation for a significant segment of people in the area.¹¹

In 1912, the Socialist candidate for vice president, Emil Seidel, stopped in Rockdale to pick up support for the upcoming election and spoke to an estimated 1000 people at the depot. A quarter-mile parade organized by Green, who was then the party’s state secretary, included a procession of one hundred girls waving red flags followed by one hundred boys waving American flags. After meeting with Rockdale mayor H. C. Meyer and local businessmen at the Wolf Hotel, Seidel addressed what the *Reporter* described as “the largest crowd that has ever attended a public speaking in

¹¹ George Norris Green, *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938-1957* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 11. *Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide* (Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1951), 487, 509. *Rockdale Reporter*, 7 July, 1910. *Ibid.*, 15 September, 1910. *Ibid.*, 17 March, 1910.

Rockdale.” Seidel’s speech highlighted his achievements as mayor of Milwaukee, which ironically included the closing of over 200 saloons.¹²

Two years later, Rockdale was again the gathering place for a number of Socialists as Eugene Debs came to town for another event again organized by Green. Advertised as the last chance to hear “the modern Demosthenes of the Social Revolution,” many attended the event. People traveled from all over Milam County, as well as other area towns like Georgetown, Taylor, Granger, and Giddings. A crowd close to 3,000 gathered at the Fair Grounds to hear a two hour oration by the renowned Debs.¹³

Later in the decade, sitting vice president of the United States, Thomas R. Marshall, visited Rockdale. Without much advance notice of the visit, the townspeople hastily decorated their town and erected a platform at Cameron and Ackerman streets, one of the main intersections in town. Thanks to those who spread the word on the streets of Rockdale and those who placed calls to citizens of Cameron, Thorndale, and Milano, a large and supportive crowd assembled to greet the vice president.¹⁴

During the same time period that Rockdale seized the political light from Cameron, it also managed to take a railroad division point from the county seat. In 1914, the SA&AP moved its switch yard and division headquarters from Cameron to

¹² Ibid., 1 August, 1912.

¹³ Ibid., 16 July, 1914. Ibid., 23 July, 1914. Ibid., 6 August, 1914. Interestingly, while Debs’ visit mentioned for three consecutive weeks in the *Rockdale Reporter*, there was not ever a single mention of it in the *Cameron Herald*.

¹⁴ Ibid., 24 April, 1919.

Rockdale, in the process relocating some 18 railroad jobs to the Regal City. Being the freight division point would transfer some consumer spending from Cameron to Rockdale due to the length of time it takes to make the necessary rail changes, sometimes requiring an overnight stay in town by the rail crew. With this change, Rockdale reasserted itself as the transportation center of Milam County.¹⁵

While those in Rockdale could take care of their desire for entertainment, their spirit of community, their duty of political participation, and their competitive nature, the need for religious salvation was not lost on a large number of its population. In the early 20th century, Milam County had a large number of churches of various denominations. It was Rockdale, however, that seemed to attract nationally known evangelists. George R. Stuart, an evangelist from Tennessee, traveled the all over the country holding revivals in big cities and small towns. In 1901 he held a ten day revival in Rockdale during which time 200 people were reportedly converted. Other well-known evangelists to visit Rockdale included John W. Marshall and Lockett Adair.¹⁶

In addition to its citizens taking care of their entertainment and their personal salvation, the city of Rockdale itself also began to take the condition of its streets and sidewalks more seriously. Prior to July 1901, Rockdale citizens, as part of their commitment to the city, performed maintenance work on city streets closest to their properties. As one may conclude, the appearance and condition of city streets varied

¹⁵ Ibid., 15 January, 1914. Batte, *A History of Milam County*, 121.

¹⁶ *Matchless Milam*, 21-32. *Rockdale Reporter*, 11 July, 1901. Ibid., 21 August, 1913. "History of the First Christian Church, Rockdale, Texas," collection at Lucy Hill Patterson Memorial Library, Rockdale, Texas.

greatly throughout town. Some citizens, due to age or physical condition, or simply unwillingness to participate as needed, caused some sections of city streets to be greatly neglected. In response to these issues, the city created a tax that would create a street fund in lieu of citizens performing street maintenance. In addition, the city council passed an ordinance prohibiting the littering of city streets and sidewalks. Seven years later, due to mismanaged funds, some wanted to repeal the street fund tax. Again the local paper, now called the *Rockdale Reporter*, called for citizens to think about the ramifications of not having the fund. “One road put in first class shape,” the *Reporter* wrote, “is worth a great deal more than twenty roads that are impassable.”¹⁷

While the city may have continued to take care of the streets, citizens were responsible for creating cement sidewalks in town. In 1910, the Civic League reached an agreement with some property owners to “put down cement sidewalks as soon as the cattle and horses [were] taken up from the streets.” In response to livestock roaming around in front yards and some property owners not taking action to improve the sidewalks in front of their property, the *Reporter* again put ink to paper and called for Rockdilians to take more pride in their town. Rockdale was compared unfavorably to similar sized towns in the vicinity like Taylor, which was moving quickly to put in new sidewalks, and Marlin, which had over 40 miles of sidewalks laid down.¹⁸

At the same time that Rockdale sought a consensus to improve its sidewalks, Thorndale ventured forth to improve its own sidewalks. Like Rockdale, Thorndale left

¹⁷ *Cameron Herald*, 11 July, 1901. *Rockdale Reporter* 5 March, 1908.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 17 March, 1910. *Ibid.*, 19 May, 1910.

the issue up to its citizens to lay new sidewalks in town. It was hoped that Thorndale would have “a mile or two” of cement sidewalks in a two month period. And as in Rockdale, livestock could be found in the front yards of Thorndale, prompting the editor of the *Thorndale Thorn* to urge citizens to remove animals to a more suitable area. Those in Cameron also felt a need to keep up with the other towns in Milam County. Prominent Cameron citizen Robert McLane led by example in having a cement sidewalk laid in front of his residence.¹⁹

A year later, the Loewensteins of Rockdale were busy laying cement sidewalks outside of the business district. Sidewalks were laid so that Rockdale schoolchildren would have a safe place to walk to and from school. Property owners took pride not only in their personal residences, but also around their rental properties. It seems that those in Rockdale realized the positive impact sidewalks would have on their property values as well as on aesthetics and usefulness.²⁰

The city government of Rockdale finally got involved in the issue of cement sidewalks in the latter half of 1911. The city council passed an ordinance that required cement sidewalks to be laid within the “fire limits,” the central and more developed section, of Rockdale. No longer would it be up to the individual property owner to choose whether or not to provide a good sidewalk in front of their property. Nor would it be left to the civic organizations to coax improvements out of the same property owners. Cements sidewalks were no longer an option in Rockdale, as they were

¹⁹ *Thorndale Thorn* 8 February, 1911. *Dallas Morning News* 3 February, 1911.

²⁰ *Rockdale Reporter* 15 June, 1911.

required to be laid within 90 days after the passage of the ordinance. Although the city backed off the issue of sidewalks a decade before, and during that time civic groups took the lead and made some progress in the arena of cement sidewalks, city officials now realized that in order to have uniform sidewalks and complete coverage throughout the city, official involvement was necessary.²¹

Building and improving sidewalks allowed Rockdale to demonstrate that its citizens could play an active role in the community, and that civic groups and local government could work together to achieve common goals. After civic leaders settled the sidewalk issue, they addressed the real challenge of road improvement and road construction. As the automobile became more popular and trade between county towns increased, good roads became an essential component of a successful town.

In March 1910, a number of Rockdale businessmen met and formulated a “good road movement,” a plan that would put “every road leading into Rockdale...in the best shape.” The first planned road improvement targeted the road that goes north from Rockdale to Minerva, a town near the physical center of the county, located about halfway between Rockdale and Cameron. The funds for improving at least this road came from Rockdale businessmen and farmers along the route who chose to donate. Building a good road from Rockdale to Minerva would accomplish a few goals. It would demonstrate a commitment from those in Rockdale to the surrounding area. It provided for a good and direct connection with a county town that was not located

²¹ Ibid., 17 August, 1911.

along a rail line. An improved road that went north through farmland would encourage more crops to be transported to, and marketed in, Rockdale, thus helping the local economy. But perhaps the most important function such a road would serve would be to enable Rockdale to expand its hinterlands closer to Cameron and help Rockdale lay a claim to the greater portion of the county that was situated south of the Little River.²²

Later in the same year, some Rockdale leaders discussed creating a new county out of a portion of existing Milam, Burleson, Lee, and Williamson counties, with Rockdale and Thorndale being the two main towns. The basis for this proposal was for securing good roads in the area mentioned. These leaders argued that the people in the area in question provided more than their fair share of tax money for their respective counties, and that their county seats of Cameron, Caldwell, Giddings, and Taylor all benefited at their expense. The only way these financially neglected areas got their roads built or improved was to have the “farmers on each road furnish the teams and the business interests of Rockdale furnish the money.” Regardless of whether the intent was to actually try to create a new county or just a ploy to get funds reallocated, good roads were clearly a major issue in Milam County.²³

By 1912, not content to be dependent upon county funds, Rockdale city government again cooperated with its citizens, this time in improving roads. Rockdale mayor H. C. Meyer, who would play a major role in the improving road system around

²² Ibid., 17 March, 1910. Ibid., 26 May, 1910. Midway through 1910, there were 43 automobiles registered in Milam County: Cameron and Rockdale each had 11; Thorndale 10; Buckholts, San Gabriel, and Burlington 3; Miverva and Tracy 1. Of the 43, 13 were owned by farmers.

²³ Ibid., 24 November, 1910.

Rockdale, met with Rockdale businessmen to formulate a plan to further improve area roadways. The outcome of the meeting was the creation of a privately-held road fund that local businessmen pledged to donate money to. This fund would purchase necessary road equipment and pay a team of workers to improve the roads, beginning with those in most dire need of repair.²⁴

Although there were funds, equipment and workers available, actually putting the roads leading to Rockdale in good condition often proved to be quite a task. Improving the road to Tracy, which is located northwest of Rockdale, substantiated just how difficult creating a good road could be. Having a good road to Tracy, which would then continue to Sharp and Davilla, could have a very positive economic impact on Rockdale. Because of the black land soil between Rockdale and Tracy, however, creating a good road for all weather conditions was a test. By the end of January 1914, a significant amount of time and money had been invested in improving the road, eventually making it “the only black land road in the county that autos can get over at all.” Aware of Rockdale’s commitment to build a good road to Tracy, citizens of Sharp and San Gabriel asked Rockdale representatives to meet with them to discuss building good roads that would reach further west in the county.²⁵

A few months later, though, the weather and the heavy use of the Tracy road made it difficult to travel, as Tracy resident John Charles required a six-mule team in order to travel to Rockdale over the road. Fortunately, when required, Rockdale

²⁴ Ibid., 30 May, 1912.

²⁵ Ibid., 29 January, 1914. Baker, *Ghost Towns of Texas*, 110. *Cameron Herald*, 5 March, 1914.

business firms like H. C. Meyer's Henne & Meyer could be counted on to provide further funding and equipment. Good roads were not constructed overnight and would require regular maintenance to keep them in good shape. Rockdale leaders realized the benefits that could come from being connected to other towns by good roads and were willing to make a lasting commitment to such projects.²⁶

For a variety of reasons—likely finances and attitudes—, other county towns were not as active as Rockdale in the building of good roads. Milano, for example, lacked adequate means to fund good roads around town. The town's residents depended upon the county allocated funds for their precinct to pay for their roads, as Milano's businessmen were not as active as Rockdale's when it came to roads. When the money in the county road fund had been depleted in 1915, roadwork around Milano and other county towns could not continue.²⁷

Other towns in the county, Cameron among them, were simply slower than Rockdale in building good roads. For instance, Cameron resolved to improve its streets only in 1915, three years after Rockdale addressed the issue of funding its road program. By that time, many of the city streets had become "an eye-sore." In contrast to Rockdale, Cameron did not seek a local enterprise to improve their streets, but instead called to firms as far away as Dallas to do the work. This work would be paid for not through private funds, but through the issuance of city warrants. In 1919 both Rockdale and Cameron received good news when officials revealed that a new state

²⁶ *Rockdale Reporter*, 14 June, 1914.

²⁷ *Cameron Herald*, 11 March, 1915.

highway, to be designated Highway 44, would be constructed through Milam County as a north-south route. The road would connect with the King of Trails, a road that ran between Dallas and Waco. This decision provided needed funding for county roads and also allowed for easier access to Milam County from other parts of the state.²⁸

By the end of the decade, good roads were still the exception rather than the rule in Milam County. Although most of the major roads were graveled, a number of dirt roads remained “mostly muddy” in the winter. After a series of heavy rains in the fall of 1919, the Tracy road proved impassable, forcing a Tracy citizen to travel to Rockdale via Cameron. This demonstrated the real need for good all-weather roads in the county, but more importantly, it demonstrated that Rockdale government would take action to improve its infrastructure. Rockdale established itself as a place to visit in order to conduct business, even if it sometimes meant taking a long route through other county towns.²⁹

In addition to the extensive discussions about roads during the first two decades of the 20th century, natural resources around Rockdale continued to be developed and a new generation of Rockdale leaders such as H. C. Meyer and E. A. Camp began to assert themselves in various ways that benefited the town. Although there was some talk of oil around the turn of the century, lignite still held sway in Milam County during the first decade and a half of the new century. In 1907, because the supply of lignite from Milam County could not keep up with demand, Taylor’s electric and water plants

²⁸ Ibid. *Rockdale Reporter*, 22 November, 1917. *Dallas Morning News*, 26 April, 1919.

²⁹ Mabel Charles, *Personal Journal*. *Rockdale Reporter*, 6 November, 1919.

faced a “lignite famine.” This brown coal played an essential role in the region’s economy and businesses.³⁰

Milam County, and specifically Rockdale, located above one of the world’s largest lignite fields, was a major center for lignite. In 1910 the Business Men’s Association hosted the Texas Lignite Association meeting in Rockdale. The monthly sales of this staple of their economy increased Rockdale’s economy anywhere from \$30,000 to \$50,000. In 1913, Rockdale dubbed itself The Lignite City, claiming to be “The Greatest Lignite Center in the World” with 300,000 tons produced annually that brought in over half a million dollars and directly employed 500 people.³¹

The demand was so great again in 1919 that there was a nationwide lignite shortage. Rockdale mine operators received constant calls from all over the state requesting lignite. At this point of peak demand, the mines put out about 25 rail cars of lignite daily. Mine operators would have liked to ship out a greater quantity of lignite, but were limited in terms of manpower and rail cars. Being located along two major rail lines allowed the lignite mines around Rockdale to maximize the available supply and quickly and effectively transport the material.³²

Although it had been hypothesized many years earlier, concerted drilling for oil did not commence in the county until 1914. It was not until a Rockdale conglomerate discovered a 600 barrel a day oil well in nearby Thrall in early 1915, however, that

³⁰ Ibid., 8 August, 1907.

³¹ Ibid., 8 August, 1907. Ibid., 31 March, 1910. Ibid., 7 September, 1911. Ibid., 13 February, 1913. Ibid., 13 March, 1913.

³² Ibid., 11 December, 1919.

those in Rockdale became excited about the possibility of oil in their own backyards. After this discovery, stockholders of the Rockdale Gas & Oil Company met and overwhelmingly agreed to resume drilling in earnest on the Doss farm, which was located five miles west of Rockdale. Wells on the Doss farm yielded a steady stream of oil the previous year, and locals hoped that further drilling would produce a gusher similar to the one in Thrall.³⁶

In addition to petroleum oil, cotton oil played an important role in the economy of agriculturally-based Milam County. In 1910 the Rockdale Oil Company erected a new cotton oil mill that the *Reporter* heralded by proclaiming “no where in the South will you find a more complete modern mill than this one here.” Three years later the company bought a controlling interest in the Thorndale oil mill. The company had a firm hold on the cotton oil mills in the southern half of Milam County. Being able to share costs and resources, the Rockdale Oil Company would be able to provide services at a very competitive price.³⁷

Rockdale had a dominant position regarding another natural resource: water. There was plenty of it around and it was of good quality. In 1906, Rockdale built a new water works that would make it “one of the best lighted and watered towns in Texas.” A water works official claimed that they could supply water to a town twice the size of Rockdale. Cameron, like Rockdale, had an abundant supply of water, but not of the

³⁶ Ibid., 9 April, 1914. Ibid., 4 March, 1915. *Cameron Herald*, 11 March, 1915. Ibid., 25 March, 1915. *Dallas Morning News*, 13 March, 1915. Ibid., 6 June, 1915. Ibid., 8 June, 1915. Ibid., 12 June, 1915.

³⁷ *Rockdale Reporter*, 24 March, 1910. Ibid., 6 March, 1913.

same quality. From the earliest settlements, water has been a deciding factor in determining where to establish a town. The presence of water is of primary importance, but given the choice, all else being equal, higher quality water would be preferred. This difference could help potential new county residents decide where to move. When boosters from around the county went to Waco in 1911 to participate in Milam County Day, Rockdale's contingent of 100 boosters could boast about their town's superior quality of water.³⁸

The early part of the 20th century saw a division of Milam county towns. The towns in northern Milam County had easier access to, and conducted business with, merchants in Cameron. Since the beginning of the 20th century, Cameron's population dropped from 3,341 in 1900 to 3,263 in 1910, and increased in 1920 to 4,298. Those in southern Milam County had a similar allegiance to Rockdale, whose population, along with that of the entire county, indicated similar trends. In 1900 Rockdale claimed 2,515 residents, dropping to 2,073 in 1910, and increasing to 2,323 in 1920. Cameron still relied on its status as county seat, while Rockdale maintained its momentum by continuing to be active and progressive. The failed attempt in 1915 by Rockdale's H. C. Meyer for state senate may have been a personal blow, but it allowed Meyer to continue guiding Rockdale's growth. He helped Rockdale build new roads, exploit its

³⁸ Ibid., 20 December, 1906. Ibid., 5 November, 1907. Ibid., 17 August, 1913. *Deepermind*, "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs" <http://www.deepermind.com/20maslow.htm> (accessed 31 August, 2006). *Rockdale Reporter*, 16 November, 1911. While Rockdale sent 100 boosters, Cameron supplied only 50.

natural resources, gain new rail service, create an inclusive environment, and achieve a higher level of civic cooperation.³⁶

³⁶ Batte, *A History of Milam County*, 111. Marshall, *Rockdale Centennial*, 24. *1964-1965 Texas Almanac*, 122, 125.

CHAPTER IV

1920-1936: THE HUB OF SOUTHERN MILAM COUNTY

The 1920s began with Rockdale continuing its momentum of growth, improvements, and prosperity, and Cameron beginning to reassert itself in the county. Lignite was still a major topic of interest and a source of revenue around Milam County, but over the next decade and a half, the talk of oil would relegate lignite to the sidelines. During this time period Milam County grappled with a natural disaster, race issues, and renewed discussion of dividing the county in half. In spite of the difficulties encountered, a number of improvements would be made throughout the county, with improved roads again capturing many local headlines.

In 1920, H. C. Meyer and the Rockdale Chamber of Commerce successfully lobbied the State Highway Commission to designate the I&GN Highway, which runs from Milano, through Rockdale, and on to Taylor, as an official State Highway. With this designation, Rockdale was the intersection for the two State Highways in the county, the I&GN Highway (43) and the SAP Highway (44), which travels north to Cameron and south into Lee County. Four decades prior to this decision, Rockdale was able to take advantage of being the first place in the county to have major rail lines intersect. The State Highway designation would enable more funds to be allotted to the

construction and maintenance of the roads. With the growing importance and functionality of roads, Rockdale maintained its enviable position in the county.¹

Once state officials designated the I&GN Highway as a state highway, Meyer, a member of the recently formed East & West Texas Highway Association, lobbied for the East & West Highway to run from Longview to Austin via Rockdale. The Longview to Austin stretch of road was referred to as the Reagan Branch of the Bankhead National Highway. The Bankhead National Highway was a major highway proposal that would run from Texarkana to San Antonio, essentially providing a road through East Texas that would connect that region to West Texas. Among a group that included representatives from towns all along the proposed route, Rockdale's Meyer was named chairman of the Association. This position gave him the power to orchestrate and promote a route that would go through southern Milam County and Rockdale, providing the town with increased traffic and commercial opportunities.²

In early 1921 the East & West Texas Highway Association, with Rockdale attorney E. A. Camp acting as spokesman, presented their plan to the State Highway Department in Austin. After hearing the presentation, the Commission unanimously voted to approve the plan as designed by the Association. Rockdale, then, secured a spot on the highway that was slated to run across the state from Texarkana to Laredo, if they could provide the required local road improvements. This road would also be

¹ *Rockdale Reporter*, 22 July, 1920.

² *Ibid.*, 10 October, 1920. *Dallas Morning News*, 31 October, 1920. *Ibid.*, 11 November, 1920. In November 1920 the I&GN would help Rockdale with another coup at the expense of Cameron when then President Elect Warren Harding stopped in Rockdale and spoke to a gathered crowd from an I&GN train.

eligible for state and federal funding, and that would in turn free up city and county funds to improve other area roads.³

In response to the success that Cameron citizens witnessed in Rockdale, they renewed their efforts in promoting the city to other county towns. Covering 161 miles over two days, a Cameron Commercial Club caravan of 200 citizens visited the southern county towns of Rockdale, Thorndale, San Gabriel, Davilla, Sharp, and Tracy on day one, and moved north to Buckholts, Yarrellton, Wokatay, Ben Arnold, Clarkson, Baileyville, Jones Prairie, Maysfield, and Burlington on the second day. The towns in southern Milam County were in alignment with Rockdale, but the towns in the northern half, due to rail, rivers, and proximity, had a stronger connection with Cameron. The trip likely had two main goals: to maintain Cameron's status in northern Milam County, and to improve its status in the southern half.⁴

As the decade of the 1920s began, Rockdale, among all county towns, seemed to have the brightest future. One important prospect was related to natural resources. Owned by eight different companies, the lignite mines around Rockdale employed about 2000 people that were working for eight different companies. Rail cars on the tracks adjacent to the mines were "full every day for more than half a mile." The Rockdale mine was said to have been the largest lignite mine in the world at the time, with a daily output of 120 tons of the brown coal. At the same time, oil in the Rockdale area tested as having a mix of hydrocarbons that would result in high gasoline content,

³ *Rockdale Reporter*, 20 January, 1921.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22 July, 1920. *Ibid.*, 5 August, 1920.

and even with oil prices hovering around a low \$1 per barrel, new wells were regularly being drilled.⁵

In September of 1921, the momentum was halted. On September 9, over 11 inches of rain fell on Milam County in less than 12 hours, and by the 15th the county had received about 40 inches of rain. This was one of the heaviest rainfalls in the history of the United States. The Little and San Gabriel rivers broke from their banks, as did Brushy and Alligator creeks. Raging rivers washed away rail lines throughout the county. Likewise, communication lines were knocked out for a period of days. As the waters began to recede, Cameron and the other towns north of the Little River remained isolated from the towns in the southern half of the county. Whether coming from Thorndale to the west or Gause to the east, the Little River could not be crossed. Students living south of the Little River missed the first week of classes at the new C. H. Yoe High School in Cameron. During this period of time, due to the state of the rivers and creeks, Rockdale was more accessible to the majority of the county than was Cameron.⁶

A sense of community and determination emerged from the terrible loss of livestock, crops, and ultimately, 63 lives. Rockdale Mayor H. C. Meyer declined an offer of aid from the Austin Chamber of Commerce because he felt that Milam County

⁵ *Dallas Morning News*, 23 December, 1920. *Rockdale Reporter*, 29 July, 1920. *Ibid.*, 28 July, 1921.

⁶ Gloria V. Martin, compiler, *Some Central Texas Obituaries* (Milam County Genealogical Society, 1996), 600-601. Edrie Wilson Browder, *Gause, Texas: A Legacy in Pieces* (Austin: Nortex Press, 1997), 92. *Dallas Morning News*, 11 September, 1921. *Ibid.*, 15 September, 1921. Mabel Charles, *Personal Journal*.

folk would be able to take care of the situation locally. He did, however, reserve the right to call for aid in the future if it was deemed necessary. The former Socialist organizer, Ed A. Green, himself being rescued after spending 30 hours in a tree, led a group of 50 men from Rockdale in a search for survivors. In the face of the destruction, Rockdale showed that it could pull together and act as a base of recovery.⁷

During the recovery and rebuilding of the county, however, the divisive Ku Klux Klan emerged from the shadows. In October 1921, Cameron Mayor U. S. Hearrell made the first public statement regarding the Klan in Milam County. Fearing the oppressive and illegal activities of the group in the wake of disaster, Hearrell prohibited marching through any public avenue while “masked, disguised, or hooded.” Until the following month, there had been debate as to the very existence of the Klan in Rockdale. In October the *Rockdale Reporter* office received a letter from the Klan which included a monetary donation of \$50 to be used for disaster relief. In the following edition of the *Reporter*, a section was dedicated to acknowledging the receipt of the funds, and where the funds were transferred. Extra effort seemed to be made to fully disclose how the funds were used, probably because the paper editor understood the power of the Klan, and sought to assure them that their funds had not been misappropriated or under-appreciated. In the subsequent *Reporter*, a column appeared

⁷ Martin, *Some Central Texas Obituaries*, 601. *Rockdale Reporter*, 16 September, 1921.

which described a number of Klan placards that were posted around town containing demands and threats.⁸

The following year Hearrell traveled to Dallas, and following an anti-Klan meeting, admitted the challenges that Cameron faced, but also stated that early resistance from the city government provided helped deter KKK local No. 111. The following week the Cameron American Legion condemned the Klan as being “incompatible with freedom.” These measures did little to dissuade Klan activities in Milam County, however, for within a six week period in 1923, the Klan held twelve demonstrations throughout the county. County Klan activity dropped off the following year when new Cameron Mayor and *Cameron Herald* editor J. B. White announced he was leaving the Klan. White cited corruption and secret political activity as the cause, adding that he could not “sin against democracy” any longer. With the decline of the Klan within the county, more attention could be focused on improvements and the local economy.⁹

Even with the disturbances that followed the flood, work in the Milam County oil fields did not stop for long. In May 1922, the Cameron Commercial Club called for a gathering to celebrate an oil well northeast of Cameron that was expected to be a big producer. Previously, the portion of Milam County south of the Little River experienced most of the success related to oil. Landowners and other interested parties

⁸ *Dallas Morning News*, 4 October, 1921. *Rockdale Reporter*, 22 November, 1921. *Ibid.*, 29 November, 1921. Fehrenbach, *Lone Star*, 645.

⁹ *Dallas Morning News*, 6 April, 1922. *Ibid.*, 13 April, 1922. *Rockdale Reporter*, 23 August, 1923. *Dallas Morning News*, 13 April, 1924. Fehrenbach, *Lone Star*, 645.

hoped that the success of this well would be a sign of good things yet to come in the oil fields of northern Milam County.¹⁰

By the end of the year, oil activity had also resumed in earnest around Rockdale. By November 1922 the price of a barrel of crude oil had risen from its nadir of \$1.00 to \$1.25. Within a month the price per barrel would be pegged at \$1.50, and then at \$1.75. The boost in prices gave a boost to large scale producers and wildcatters alike in the Rockdale-Minerva oil field. By February the following year, the price for oil increased to \$1.80 per barrel, just as one of the Coyle-Concord Company's wells began bringing in 120 barrels a day. Of course, not all area wells were as productive, with some producing only a barrel-and-a-half a day. In early 1923 the average daily production was just over 750 barrels a day, which was supplied by over 90 wells in the Rockdale-Minerva oil field. The possibility of a big oil strike, though, kept energy, hope, and activity high in the area.¹¹

Toward the latter part of 1924, both Cameron and Rockdale hosted local and regional oil companies as well as majors such as Sinclair, Magnolia, Humble, and Gulf. One could not find a house to rent, and would be fortunate to find a room in which to board in Cameron. In Rockdale, closer to where most of the activity was, the demand was even greater and some local capitalists built houses to rent to the oil crowd. Within the next year there would be 130 wells in the Rockdale-Minerva field. By 1928, however, the daily oil production from the field began to decline, and at the same time

¹⁰ *Dallas Morning News*, 29 May, 1922.

¹¹ *Rockdale Reporter*, 18 December, 1922. *Ibid.*, 12 February, 1923. *Ibid.*, 4 January, 1923.

the price per barrel dropped. The combination of these two events essentially ended the Milam County oil boom. The brief entry into the world of petroleum brought attention and money into the county, with most of it being concentrated around Rockdale.¹²

While oil was the hot topic around Rockdale, lignite still played in the mix of natural resources. Due in part to increased competition from, and distribution of, petroleum and electricity that lowered energy prices for consumers across the board, demand for lignite declined during the mid 1920s, but efforts were made by various parties to increase the demand for lignite. In 1924 a German inventor believed he had discovered a way to make lignite burn slower like coal. Two years later the I&GN experimented with using lignite to power some of their locomotives. The lignite powered locomotives were able to pull long and heavy freight just as well as coal powered units. One of the drawbacks to widespread use of the lignite, however, concerned the issue of refueling, as only a handful of locations were capable of refueling the engines with the fuel. In addition, lignite burned faster, and was less efficient than, coal: for an equal volume, coal was better able to facilitate long hauls. Within a few years the introduction of diesel powered locomotives caused the demand for lignite to drop once again. Demand for lignite would not see a substantial rise until the 1950s.¹³

¹² *Dallas Morning News*, 6 October, 1924. *Ibid.*, 28 October, 1924. *Ibid.*, 28 December, 1925. *Rockdale Reporter*, 13 December, 1928.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25 September, 1924. *Ibid.*, 4 March, 1926. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Coal and Lignite Mining" <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/CC/dkc3.html> (accessed September 11,

The growth that was caused by the brief boom magnified the need, drove the action, and provided money for a number of improvements in the county. While a number of towns in the county saw improvements, Rockdale and Cameron saw the greatest change. In 1921 Rockdale extended its sewer mains to the west side of town, and two years later Cameron followed suit. That same year, Rockdale extended its water mains to the southeastern part of town, which was occupied mainly by a minority population. That part of town had been deprived of city water service because the city had “not been able to find the funds to accommodate.”¹⁴

Improving streets and surrounding areas within county towns again became a main priority, and this time Cameron tried to get the jump on Rockdale. In late 1922, Cameron, with the assistance of the Cameron Commercial Club, asked voters to approve bonds that would pay to pave the city streets. At the same time, work began on installing 15 ornamental lights, which would eventually create an illuminated “white way” in the Cameron business district. It was not until the summer of 1924, however, that the funds were approved and the city streets were finally paved and lit as planned.¹⁵

Rockdale took a slightly different route in an effort to improve city streets in 1923. The Rockdale Chamber of Commerce, led by directors B. Ashby and Eddie Backhaus, obtained pledges from citizens to fund the graveling of Ackerman Street, the main entrance to town from the north and northwest and nearly impassable in bad

2006). Fehrenbach, *Lone Star*, 667. *Missouri Pacific Historical Society*, s.v. “MoPac: A History of Colorful Railroads” <http://www.mopac.org/history.asp> (accessed September 11, 2006).

¹⁴ *Dallas Morning News*, 3 December, 1921. *Ibid.*, 3 December, 1923. *Ibid.*, 29 April, 1923.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24 December, 1922. *Ibid.*, 31 December, 1922. *Ibid.*, 16 August, 1924.

weather, from the center of town north to the city limits. The following year the street was paved with burnt fire clay fragments, which reportedly made it “like an asphalt paved street in all weathers.” Later that same year the Chamber of Commerce, American Legion, local businesses and citizens provided the necessary funds to purchase a street grader and tractor for the city. Then in 1928, in an effort to outshine Cameron’s downtown, Rockdale installed 59 street lights to create its own “white way.”¹⁶

In late 1927, Lone Star Gas Company of Dallas proposed to extend its gas lines from Temple, south along the rail line to Cameron and Rockdale, on the condition that a majority of potential gas customers in each town agree to subscribe to the service. Rockdale’s Bonehead Luncheon Club, of which Ben Loewenstein and E. A. Camp were members, and the Rockdale Commercial Club, of which H. C. Meyer was chairman, took the lead in trying to secure at least 310 contracts, the quota that the gas company set. Meanwhile, the Cameron Commercial Club began its effort of securing at least 500 contracts, which was the quota assigned to Cameron.¹⁷

The idea of natural gas service received a warm reception in Rockdale and Cameron. The *Rockdale Reporter* did its part to see that Rockdale acquired at least the minimum number of contracts by publishing common questions about natural gas and testimonials from former Rockdale citizens who enjoyed gas service elsewhere. By the

¹⁶ Ibid., 21 October, 1923. Ibid., 20 April, 1924. Ibid., 6 September, 1924. *Rockdale Reporter*, 6 December, 1928.

¹⁷ *Rockdale Reporter*, 15 December, 1927. Ibid., 22 December, 1927. Ibid., 19 January, 1928.

first week of March 1928, Rockdale met and exceeded its quota, while Cameron was still hunting for roughly 40 more contracts. It was not until the final week of that same March that Cameron Mayor Judd Davis announced that his city secured the necessary number of contracts. With Cameron's quota attained, the Lone Star Gas and its franchised operator, Community Gas Company, planned to move quickly to extend the gas line further down the line from the town of Little River, and on to Rogers, Buckholts, Cameron, and Rockdale. A setback was encountered a couple of weeks later, however, when it was discovered that the numbers reported for Cameron were incomplete. Because of this shortfall, service to both Cameron and Rockdale had been delayed, as the gas company would only build through towns that met preset quotas. Located between Rockdale and the current gas lines, Cameron stifled the progress of extending gas lines south. Cameron leaders ironed out the discrepancies by the first part of May, and construction resumed to provide natural gas to the two towns, but not without a renewed sense of rivalry.¹⁸

Similar progress in the next most populous town, Thorndale, was slower than in Rockdale and Cameron. By the 1920s, when the two main county towns were paving and lighting their downtown streets, Thorndale citizens debated the benefits of incorporating, something that the citizens of Rockdale and Cameron decided decades before. In 1909 Thorndale citizens discussed the possible benefits of incorporation, but decided against it. Fourteen years later the question was again raised and a subsequent

¹⁸ Ibid., 2 February, 1928. Ibid., 15 February, 1928. Ibid., 8 March, 1928. Ibid., 29 March, 1928. Ibid., 12 April, 1928. Ibid., 10 May, 1928. Ibid., 26 July, 1928.

election was held. The vote totals were close, with the initial results showing a ten vote margin favoring incorporation. After questioning the validity of the vote totals, the issue of incorporation was tabled. It was not until 1929, twenty years after the initial discussion, that the voters of Thorndale, by a majority of 44, elected to incorporate. Later that same year the city of Thorndale decided to erect lights that would illuminate its Main Street.¹⁹

Although incorporated, and situated along a major rail line and highway route, Thorndale would still not be able to rise to the status of Rockdale or Cameron in the county. Its location near the edge of the county did not make it central point for others in the county to visit and conduct business. It also did not receive much business from neighboring Williamson County thanks to the competition there between Taylor, Georgetown, and Round Rock. Thorndale was able to experience a brief economic rise beginning in 1932 when the mineral water beneath its soil was coveted first by Crazy Crystals of Mineral Wells to produce medicinal crystals.²⁰

Two years later, the Rockdale owned Palmer Company operated out of Thorndale, using lignite to fuel the crystal plant. That same year, Rockdale's Mincryst Manufacturing Company, began producing the same type of crystals from the sulfur-rich water at Buckholts. Neither operation proved to have long term success, and the matter of drinking water, at least in Thorndale, took on greater importance. In the fall

¹⁹ *Thorndale Thorn* 16 April, 1909. *Dallas Morning News*, 22 May, 1923. *Rockdale Reporter*, 30 August, 1923. *Dallas Morning News*, 19 May, 1929. *Ibid.*, 8 November, 1929.

²⁰ *Rockdale Reporter*, 24 November, 1932.

of 1933, the Thorndale city waterworks lake was nearly dry. This prompted city officials to halt water service, and save the remaining amount for the use of extinguishing any fires. The following year, Thorndale citizens hoped to alleviate the water problem that had plagued the town since the beginning, and had most certainly caused some prospective citizens to look elsewhere due to the water situation. By a 5 to 1 margin, Thorndale voters approved a water well project that was expected to solve their dilemma. Unfortunately, since there was no evidence that there was a reliable water supply at any depth beneath Thorndale, there were no bids on the project and the plan was abandoned. This underscores the importance of natural resources in town development and decline.²¹

In addition to competing against each other in the realm of infrastructure improvements, Rockdale and Cameron competed against each other to provide their citizens with recreational opportunities that would help to improve their overall quality of life. In 1923, in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce, Rockdale formed a golf club which consisted of 54 members, 7 of which were from Cameron. Beginning in the spring of the following year, they met and played at the new 9-hole course that covered 66 acres of the tourist park. That fall, Cameron responded in kind by establishing a county club.²²

²¹ *Thorndale Champion*, 21 June, 1934. *Ibid.*, 19 July, 1934. *Rockdale Reporter*, 26 October, 1933. *Thorndale Champion*, 20 November, 1934. *Ibid.*, 13 February, 1935.

²² *Ibid.*, 14 September, 1923. *Ibid.*, 18 April, 1924. *Ibid.*, 19 October, 1924.

Baseball also proved to be a successful recreational diversion in Milam County. Throughout the first four decades of the 20th century, various towns in and around the county fielded teams that would play neighboring towns. In 1932 the well planned and thought-out South Milam County Amateur Baseball League was organized. The league was made up of eight teams representing Davilla, Gay Hill, Sharp, Thorndale, Rockdale, Sandow, Gause, and Milano. The three game league championship series between Davilla and Sharp attracted over 1000 spectators to each game, the first of which was played at Davilla, the second at Sharp, and the third at Rockdale. The importance of this league went beyond baseball, as it displayed the sense of community and association between the towns in the southern half of Milam County separate from the towns north of the Little River, with Rockdale serving as the hub of south Milam County.²³

The most important development during this time period for Milam County was the building of new highways. In 1920 and 1921 the focus was on improving roads within towns. As time progressed, and as the train schedules diminished, the importance of good roads that would connect with other towns and the development of state and federal highways increased. The issue of roads also highlighted the north-south division within the county. In November 1921, citizens of southern Milam County presented a petition to the County Judge and Commissioners' Court at Cameron

²³ *Rockdale Reporter*, 4 March, 1921. *Cameron Herald*, 30 April, 1931. *Rockdale Reporter*, 21 January, 1932. *Thorndale Champion*, 31 April, 1932. *Rockdale Reporter*, 21 April, 1932. *Ibid.*, 3 November, 1932.

requesting an appropriation to build a bridge across the Brazos River between Gause and Hearne. The bridge would be a significant accomplishment for southern Milam County, for it would be positioned along the I&GN Highway that ran through Thorndale, Rockdale, Milano, and Gause, giving those citizens a more direct route across the river. Further, the bridge was viewed as a key component in securing state and federal aid for the proposed Bankhead National Highway. The Commissioners' Court refused the petition and some in the southern part of the county felt slighted in this and other county road matters, and again called for a new county to be formed, the dividing line being the Little River.²⁴

During the next three years, interested parties in southern Milam County acted together with the singular goal of getting the stretch of the John H. Reagan Highway from Thorndale, through Rockdale, and on to Gause funded. Each town along the line set up a bond package, and voters approved all the packages. By 1925, the highway had been widened and improved across the county. In designating the road as State Highway 43, the State Highway Commission was able to provide the funds to further improve and maintain the highway. In concert with this action, a bridge was being constructed across the Brazos at Gause, and in 1927, with much fanfare, the bridge that the county declined to fund was finally opened. To that point, the Laredo to San Antonio stretch had been completed, as had the Austin to Thorndale stretch. With the

²⁴ *Dallas Morning News*, 18 November, 1921.

ensuing improvements, locals hoped that Highway 43 would become “one of the heaviest traveled highways in the State of Texas.”²⁵

Not content to sit back and reflect on their success in getting a state highway to go through southern Milam County, area leaders such as H. C. Meyer and E. A. Camp called for paving the new highway, making several trips down Highway 43 to Austin to lobby the Highway Commission. After four years of lobbying, significant segments of Highway 43 were finally paved in 1929. Due to political red tape, then the Great Depression, however, the highway was not completely paved through Milam County until 1932. The outcome of all the effort was an all-weather road that connected Rockdale to Austin and countless other towns across the state. Two years later, federal officials gave the highway federal designation as U.S. Highway 79. This was beneficial in terms of funding and visibility, as the route through Rockdale would be printed on nationally distributed maps. The result demonstrated that Rockdale leaders were resilient and not content to settle for second best.²⁶

Meyer also worked very diligently to get U.S. Highway 77 extended from Dallas through Cameron and Rockdale, Corpus Christi, and on to the southern United States border. As of 1929, the highway began at the Canadian border south of Winnipeg and went south to Dallas, making it a major national highway. Meyer met with leaders of

²⁵ Ibid., 2 August, 1923. *Rockdale Reporter*, 13 December, 1923. *Dallas Morning News*, 9 March, 1924. Ibid., 27 September, 1924. *Rockdale Reporter*, 14 May, 1925. Ibid., 27 October, 1927. *Dallas Morning News*, 17 October, 1927.

²⁶ Ibid., 18 November, 1926. *Dallas Morning News*, 5 May, 1926. *Rockdale Reporter*, 29 March, 1928. Ibid., 26 April, 1928. Ibid., 27 June, 1929. Ibid., 5 June, 1930. Ibid., 14 January, 1932. *Thorndale Champion*, 3 March, 1932. *Rockdale Reporter*, 14 June, 1934. Ibid., 29 November, 1934.

towns along the route of the proposed extension, and those at the current terminus in Dallas to get support for the proposal. In 1932, acting as president of the North & South Highway Association, Meyer received approval for the national highway to travel south from Dallas along the route that he proposed, including the stretch of Texas Highway 44 that connected Rockdale and Cameron. After the approval was given, Meyer and Ben Loewenstein traveled the approved route from Rockdale south to Brownsville to stimulate interest among those along the route with the hope of expediting the actual construction. With that act, Meyer had managed to have two federally designated highways meet in Rockdale, the only town in Milam County to have such a distinction.²⁷

²⁷ Ibid., 3 October, 1929. Ibid., 31 October, 1929. Ibid., 17 March, 1932. Ibid., 7 April, 1932. Ibid., 12 May, 1932. Ibid., 2 August, 1934. Ibid., 21 July, 1932.

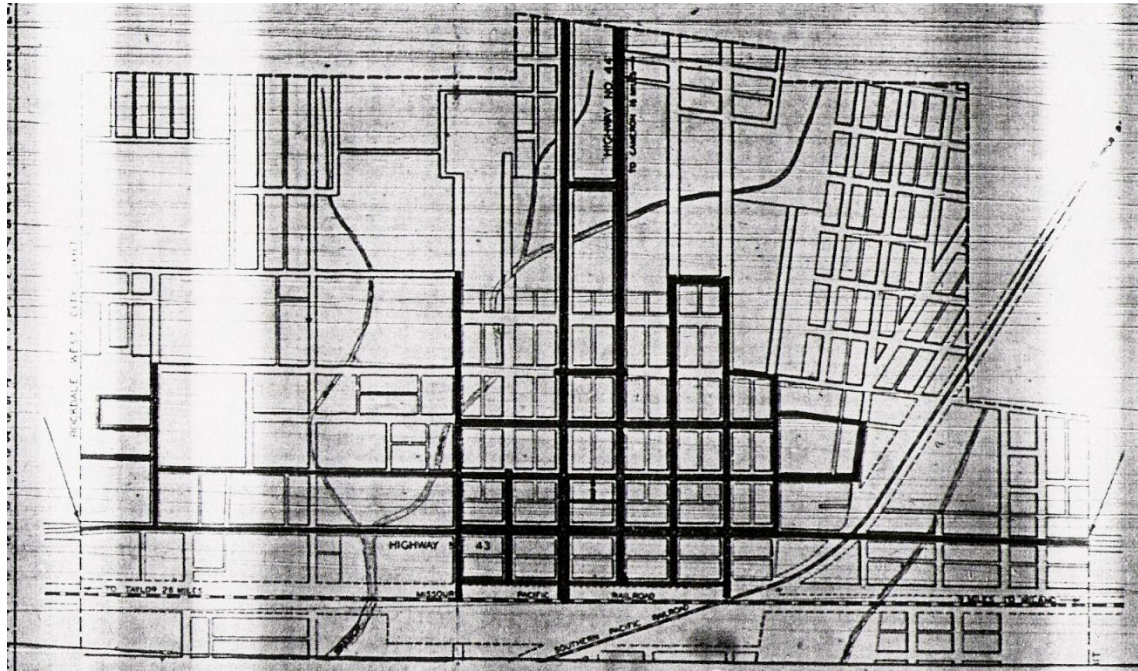


Figure 7. Official Map of Rockdale Showing extent of paved area. From *The Rockdale Reporter*, 10 October, 1929.

In 1932 Cameron managed to secure another state highway, 36, that would connect it with Temple. The acquisition of this highway, however, lacked the impact that Highway 43 had on Rockdale. Instead of being the first state highway in the county on which to travel east to west, it was simply another such highway.²⁸

In addition to major state and federal highway projects, there were a number of local road proposals during this period. As a result of the state highways, good roads connected Rockdale with many other towns in southern Milam County. Still, Rockdale leaders saw the need to improve roads leading to other southern county towns like San Gabriel, Sharp, and Davilla. A large portion of the funds for these roads came from the

²⁸ Ibid., 3 November, 1932.

Rockdale Commercial Club, as the members sensed the need to nourish their ties with these towns. For local roads, Rockdale leaders focused on improving roads from Rockdale directly to another town, so that Rockdale would be the ultimate beneficiary.²⁹

Cameron leaders, on the other hand, focused on improving roads that would lead out from Cameron and meander through a series of towns. In 1930, for example, the Cameron Chamber of Commerce held a road meeting in which it proposed to improve the route to Georgetown. This route was intended to involve Tracy, Duncan, Sharp, and San Gabriel, before exiting the county for Granger, Weir, and Georgetown. Any route that would serve these towns would not be straight, but would instead involve a number of twists and turns, due to the location of the towns and also of rivers and lakes.³⁰

Likewise, in 1936 Cameron leaders proposed to extend Highway 69, which ran from Hearne through Cameron, Port Sullivan, Branchville, Maysfield, and Silver City. The proposed extension would include the county towns of Pettibone, Sharp, and Davilla, before heading out of the county for Bartlett, Schwertner, Florence, and Lampassas. Again, there were two reasons why such a plan was not as good as those emanating from Rockdale. The route was an indirect one that included many turns. And perhaps more important, the route connected smaller towns with each other, having larger towns at either end. Travelers along the route had the option of going to Cameron or diverting to another town, perhaps Rockdale. An individual from Bartlett, for example, looking to conduct business to the east, would likely travel to Davilla on a

²⁹ Ibid., 3 October, 1929.

³⁰ *Dallas Morning News*, 15 March, 1930. Ibid., 19 March, 1930.

road that Cameron interests helped to improve. From Davilla, however, it was a straighter shot to Rockdale than it was to Cameron.³¹

Cameron's proposed routes gave people the option of going to Cameron or elsewhere. Roads coming from Rockdale really only provided good service back to Rockdale, as no other trade centers lay along these routes. The main highways at Rockdale made the town a local transition point for travelers to change their cardinal direction. They also provided the opportunity to reach a nationwide network of buyers and sellers. At the same time, the local roads from Rockdale gave the neighboring towns, and the hinterland, a more direct line to it. This increased a sense of dependence on Rockdale.

Roads connecting Rockdale to its hinterland played an important role during the depression decade of the 1930s. During this time, many people moved from cities and towns to rural areas as part of what has been dubbed the "back-to-the-land movement," as many living in organized towns and disillusioned by the harsh reality of the economy sought an agrarian harmony that could be found by living off the land. In addition, the slowing in the oil fields and lignite mines led to fewer employment opportunities in Rockdale. While Cameron maintained a fairly steady trend of population growth through the necessary functions of government and subsequent work programs, Rockdale's population declined, from 2,323 in 1920 to 2,204 in 1930, and 2136 in 1940. Although Rockdale's population declined, it continued to function as a

³¹ *Rockdale Reporter*, 9 April, 1936. *Ibid.*, 23 April, 1936.

successful trade center, due in part to the improved road system that better linked it with the surrounding hinterland that claimed an increasing number of individuals who still needed to purchase supplies and sell their goods.³²

Table 4.1 Populations of Cameron and Rockdale, 1890-1960.

	Cameron	Rockdale
1890	1608	1505
1900	3341	2515
1910	3263	2073
1920	4298	2323
1930	4565	2204
1940	5040	2136
1950	5052	2321
1960	5640	4481

Data from *1964-1965 Texas Almanac*

For anecdotal verification of Rockdale’s importance in the county and state, one could refer to the city’s July 4th celebration in 1936. In that centennial celebration year

³² Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 45-47. Batte, *A History of Milam County*, 111. Marshall, *Rockdale Centennial*, 24.

of Texas' independence, Rockdale secured the Light Crust Doughboys to provide entertainment throughout the day. The Doughboys were a popular western swing band at the time, and were hugely popular in Texas. Though industries and the economy fluctuated, and train schedules declined, the benefits of diversification, civic involvement, and a commitment to maintain and expand its hinterland remained. Between 1920 and 1936, due to the early and consistent actions of their town leaders, Rockdale solidified itself as the hub of southern Milam County, and further, it challenged Cameron for dominance within the county.³³

³³ *Rockdale Reporter*, 2 July, 1936.

CHAPTER V

1937-1950: TURNING THE PAGE

The years between 1937 and 1950 brought substantial change to Milam County. With the increasing mechanization and consolidation of farming, the rural areas within the county experienced a general decline. At the same time, new public buildings were erected throughout the county with the aid of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Rail service in the county also declined as passenger routes were abandoned, while there continued to be a push for improved roads throughout the county for the increasing number of passenger cars and commercial trucks. There were a few more attempts at making a profit by drilling for oil, but by the end of the 1940s, lignite was garnering more attention than it had in a couple of decades. There were also changes in political leadership, as H. C. Meyer and E. A. Camp gracefully exited the scene on their own accord, giving way to younger men with newer visions for their town. Through the short stories in the *Saturday Evening Post* and full-length novels of George Sessions Perry, Rockdale became known to many readers throughout the country.

Beginning in the 1920s and continuing through the Great Depression, changes in agriculture saw foreclosures and consolidation of farms across America. Many small farms ceased operating and the surrounding communities which they supported withered away. Evidence of this can be seen by looking at the Milam County communities of Norman Valley, Duncan, Lilac, Oakville, Friendship, Val Verde, and

Tracy, among others, all of which virtually ceased to exist during this time. While these communities were not able to continue, larger towns and cities began to provide the necessary services to those who remained in the affected locales.¹

Sharp was one of the county towns that managed to provide services to the withering communities. In 1929, the school's five teachers taught 85 students. By 1937, however, the Sharp school district grew so that 14 teachers were required to teach nearly 400 children from at least 5 different communities in a ten mile radius. That same year, some citizens of the larger town of Milano, located on Highway 79, asked that its school district, which covered the communities of Sipe Springs, Prospect, Sand Grove, Hanover, Sandy Creek, and Liberty be dissolved. Area citizens expected that Rockdale would absorb those students that attended school in Milano, but its citizens voted to keep the Milano school district active by a margin just under 3 to 1.²

Over the next two years, the WPA accommodated the Sharp and San Gabriel school districts by constructing new school buildings, each of which was expected become a focal point of their community. The new San Gabriel school project employed up to 65 workers who erected the impressive rock building by hand. The Sharp school, while not as ornate as the one at San Gabriel, was situated just off the

¹ Baker, *More Ghost Towns of Texas*, 16. Baker, *Ghost Towns of Texas*, 40, 110, 122. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Sharp, Texas" <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/SS/hns39.html> (accessed September 24, 2006).

² *Rockdale Reporter*, 11 February, 1937. *Ibid.*, 22 April, 1937. *Ibid.*, 27 May, 1937.

main road leading into town. The school at Sharp was described as being “modern and complete” with “the finest auditorium in the county.”³

The WPA was also involved in continuing the effort to improve roads within the county. Rockdale’s Young Men’s Business Club assisted the WPA in deciding what roads to improve. One of the roads that received attention was the Rockdale-Pleasant Hill road which ran south out of Rockdale and was slated for improvement in the 1935 farm-to-market road campaign. The road, “one of the important feeder roads in the Rockdale trade territory,” would be topped with six inches of schist, making it a good all-weather road that would also draw Pleasant Hill citizens closer to Rockdale. The Young Men’s Business League also secured the right of way for the widening and straitening of the Porter’s Prairie road south of Rockdale, creating closer ties to yet another county community.⁴

Like many American cities, the towns of Cameron and Rockdale also benefited from WPA projects in the city limits. The aging 1891 courthouse in Cameron received a new roof and complete renovation by the WPA. Due in part to the lobbying of Mayor E. A. Camp, Rockdale’s city hall was also completely rebuilt and modernized at little cost to the city. The WPA also constructed a high quality, modern post office in Rockdale. The new building, located on the old Ben Loewenstein homestead, contained some of the finest materials. The exterior was made of Elgin, Texas brick, Austin limestone, and Burnet, Texas granite. The lobby floor was made up of Tennessee

³ Ibid., 2 September, 1937. Ibid., 23 June, 1938. Ibid., 10 August, 1939.

⁴ Ibid., 7 April, 1938. Ibid., 29 December, 1938.

marble, with a terrazzo floor of three kinds of marble chips. Maple wood was used for the workroom floor, and oak in the offices. In addition, a large mural depicting the history of Rockdale, painted by Maxwell Starr, was prominently displayed inside. Not only did the new building provide Rockdale with a modern postal facility, but it also brought a renewed sense of pride to the city.⁵

Rockdale leaders renewed efforts in 1939 to see that Highway 77, was completed. Dr. I. P. Sessions spoke to the Rockdale Lions Club and urged its cooperation in helping to complete the paving of the entire highway, just as the Young Men's Business League had similarly pledged. At the subsequent Highway 77 Association meeting at Waco, representatives from Dallas to Corpus Christi were present, including twenty-five Rockdale citizens, who constituted over one-third of those in attendance. Former mayor and current State Board of Control member, and first president of the association, H. C. Meyer, who dedicated so much time and effort to the issue of good roads, called on his successors to continue building the highway. In the end, resolutions were passed to continue to work for total completion to Brownsville, where the highway would connect with the Mexican International Highway to Mexico City.⁶

⁵ Jon C. Teatford, *The Twentieth-Century American City* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 75. *Rockdale Reporter*, 2 December, 1937. *Ibid.*, 25 August, 1938. *Ibid.*, 22 September, 1938. *Ibid.*, 16 February, 1939. *Ibid.*, 20 April, 1939. *The Bryan-College Station Eagle Online*, "Depression-era murals still hang in Texas post offices" <http://www.theeagle.com/spotlight/books/texasreads/060604texasreads.php> (accessed September 25, 2006). *Texas Historical Commission*, "Texas Post Office Murals" <http://www.thc.state.tx.us/triviafun/trvmurals.html> (accessed September 25, 2006).

⁶ *Rockdale Reporter*, 11 May, 1939. *Ibid.*, 1 June, 1939.

In early 1941, the state Highway Commission, in conjunction with the federal government's national defense program, allotted funds to improve Highways 77 and 79 in Milam County. With thoughts of the conflict in Europe and Asia, federal officials designated these roads as routes of military travel in the state. For the same reasons, officials approved improvements for Highway 77 in Johnson County to the north. Resurfacing of Highway 77 near Cameron, however, was not approved. As a result, Cameron citizens felt slighted by the commission, one referring to Highway 77 as a "pie crust monument to complacency" that cut off traffic and business through Cameron.⁷

During the last decade, Milam County, as with many counties across America, enjoyed the improvements due to increased federal spending on public projects. In the war years (1941-1945), however, improvements in the county largely halted in order to concentrate efforts, resources, and manpower toward winning the war. The federal government restricted the use of many resources and materials for military use, and it placed strict price controls on available goods. Once the war was over, however, progressive activity resumed and leadership changed hands in Rockdale. In February 1946 E. A. Camp announced that after serving as Mayor of Rockdale for 15 years, that he wanted the "young men [who] saved our country" to take over control of the government, that the next generation had earned the right to govern itself. With this sentiment in mind, he asked voters not to place his name on the ballot, an act that effectively ended an era in Rockdale politics. Camp and H. C. Meyer played large roles

⁷ Ibid., 13 February, 1941. *Cameron Herald* 10 July, 1941. Ibid., 14 August, 1941.

in shaping the direction of Rockdale over the past four decades, taking the lead regarding roads, infrastructure, and taxes. 1946 was a turning point for Rockdale as new leaders began to emerge.⁸

That same year, civic leaders formed the City Progressive League to promote the growth and improvement of Rockdale. Among the members of this organization was Bill Cooke, son of John E. Cooke, longtime publisher of the *Rockdale Reporter*, who continued his father's work. In the city elections that March, J. B. Newton was elected mayor, Ernest Noack filled that school board seat that was vacated by long-serving H. H. Coffield, and Bill Cooke was elected chairman of the White Man's Primary. These men, among others, would help guide Rockdale in the years to come.⁹

Rockdale's Young Men's Business League renewed promoting efforts after the war, their most visual display being four large signs along the highways leading into Rockdale. The 13 ½ feet by 46 ½ feet signs alerted drivers that they were entering Rockdale, home of the "largest lignite deposit in the United States," as experts believed at the time. As part of the new promotional program, businesses in town displayed pamphlets touting the virtues of Rockdale. The Young Men's Business League also mailed the same pamphlets to industrial sections across the country.¹⁰

At the same time, Bill Cooke continued to boast about Rockdale in his *Rockdale Reporter*—just as his father had done years before. Cooke noted that Rockdale was

⁸ Rupert N. Richardson and others, eds., *Texas: The Lone Star State* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2001), 406. *Rockdale Reporter*, 7 February, 1946.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7 March, 1946.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18 July, 1946. *Ibid.*, 21 November, 1946.

accessible to the markets of Fort Worth, Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, Austin, and Waco, observing that two railroads and two highways connected Rockdale to the rest of the country and Canada. He boasted of the lignite resources, which were believed to be the second largest in the world at the time, and of the productive soils surrounding Rockdale which provided for successful crops. Rockdale was a great city, Cooke believed, and the challenge at hand was to inform more people about its greatness.¹¹

While Rockdale was regaining its stride that it had before the war, surrounding communities still faced challenges. Figures released in 1946 by the American Iron and Steel Institute and the United States Department of Agriculture helped to explain why many small farms were being replaced by larger outfits. According to their data, an average farm worker would put in 3,900 hours a year and receive an income of \$2250. A steelworker, on the other hand, would work an average of 2,240 hours and receive \$2543. Further, farmers had to invest their own capital in land, buildings, machinery, and equipment. Prices for farm equipment steadily increased, and as such, the small farmers were not able to meet their expenses as easily as the larger-scale operations were. Because of the decline of small farms, the supporting communities declined. In 1947, five community school districts in the county—Bethlehem, Millerton, New Salem, Eagle, and Oak Hill—were forced to consolidate into the Rockdale school system.¹²

¹¹ Ibid., 25 July, 1946. Ibid., 1 August, 1946.

¹² Ibid., 14 November, 1946. Ibid., 17 July, 1947. Baker, *Ghost Towns of Texas*, 122.

In an effort to renew farm-to-market road building, and taking action so as not to become irrelevant like so many rural communities, citizens from Sharp, Duncan, Lilac, Tracy, Friendship, and other area communities formed the Norman Valley Road Association in 1947. Without having one particular connection in mind, the residents made their desire for an improved road known. Rockdale's Young Men's Business League, headed by W. P. Hogan, saw an opportunity in this movement. With construction of the Rockdale-Tracy farm-to-market road to begin soon, the League, and perhaps the Association too, saw an opportunity to extend that road all the way to Sharp. This would provide Sharp and the surrounding communities with the farm-to-market road they desired, and it would also provide another route of commerce to Rockdale. The road meeting in the Sharp school auditorium attracted about 450 people, including long-time road promoter and League member E. A. Camp. Camp told the assembled group that the League would cooperate with building new roads to the area in any way possible.¹³

Significant progress toward a good road to Sharp was achieved in 1948 when the Texas Highway Department was given the green light to build a bridge across the San Gabriel River between Rockdale and Tracy. This farm-to-market road, designated as F. M. 487, caused those in Sharp to become hopeful that it would be extended toward them. That same year, the Texas Rural Roads Association pushed the legislature to pass key farm-to-market legislation. The following year, the City of Rockdale and many

¹³ Ibid., 11 December, 1947. Ibid., 18 December, 1947.

civic groups sent letters to state and national representatives urging them to support the pending legislation for improved rural roads. By taking such action, Rockdale not only hoped to secure more commercial activity, but also to gain a greater allegiance of those in the county communities south of the Little River.¹⁴

While progress was being made in building better county roads, railroads were feeling the crunch of increased automobile travel and were looking to cut some of their losses by eliminating routes. In July 1947 the Southern Pacific (formerly the SA&AP part of the Southern Pacific system) applied to the Railroad Commission to abandon its Texas & New Orleans (T&NO) rail line between Waco and Yoakum. For years, this had been a popular route for those in Rockdale who wished to travel to Waco or to Cameron for the day. The discontinuation of the line would affect more than people's routines, as it would isolate certain towns like Lexington and Rosebud that would lose their passenger and mail service, and become "inland centers."¹⁵

To organize a protest, the Waco Chamber of Commerce called for a meeting at Rockdale, the main central point along the line. Fourteen towns along the line met in Rockdale, with Young Men's Business League president W. P. Hogan presiding, and veteran Milam County politician E. A. Camp assuming a key role. The charge of the meeting was to put together evidence that would demonstrate how the loss of the rail service would negatively affect a large number of people. The Southern Pacific,

¹⁴ Ibid., 15 April, 1948. Ibid., 6 May, 1848. Ibid., 5 May, 1949.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3 July, 1947.

meanwhile, claimed that due to the improving road system, they were losing money because people were traveling in private cars and busses.¹⁶

At the same time that the T&NO application to discontinue train service was before the Texas Railroad Commission, the other rail line going through Rockdale, the Missouri Pacific (Mo-Pac, and formerly I&GN) removed express mail service from its day train. Although they kept the service on the night train, the express mail company did not operate its Rockdale office at night. This action, in conjunction with the pending end of the T&NO and its associated express mail service, would mean that Rockdale, along with numerous other towns along the affected lines, would lack express mail service of all kinds.¹⁷

Almost a year to the day that the initial hearing for abandonment was put forth in Rockdale, the Texas Railroad Commission declined the request to have the T&NO cease operations. The Commission cited the 26 cities and towns along the route between Waco and Yoakum that would be “adversely affected.” The Southern Pacific subsequently appealed to have the decision reversed, and by the following summer, the request to end service was approved. At that time, Representative Robert Poage of Waco began looking into getting “highway post office service” for the affected towns.¹⁸

On August 14, 1949, after 58 years, passenger and express mail service along the T&NO line through Rockdale ceased. While the line retained its freight service,

¹⁶ Ibid., 10 July, 1947. *Dallas Morning News*, 19 October, 1948.

¹⁷ *Rockdale Reporter*, 25 December, 1947.

¹⁸ Ibid., 22 July, 1948. Ibid., 7 July, 1949. *Dallas Morning News*, 19 October, 1948.

changes were made due to the elimination of mail service. As the Mo-Pac still ran express mail service at night along a different line, a night expressman was set to be housed at Rockdale. To replace the lost mail service, the federal government provided for highway mail service to cover the area. One route ran from Waco to Cameron, and the other ran from Yoakum north through Rockdale to Cameron. Although freight service still operated along the rail line, it was the end of an era with the reduction of mail and passenger service in Rockdale.¹⁹

By 1949 it appeared that the days of drilling for oil in Milam County had passed. What few wells produced oil did so in low quantities, due perhaps to over drilling and lack of regulations two decades prior. By this time the focus swung back to lignite. It was hypothesized that lignite might bridge the gap between the end of the petroleum age, which some thought was near, and the beginning of the atomic age. Backers of this hypothesis cited Germany's dependence on lignite that helped to power its war effort. The Germans procured gasoline, lubricants, rubber, explosives, paint, and dyes from their lignite reserves. It was thought that the lignite fields in Texas and the northern plains provided enough reserves to sustain a prolonged dependence on lignite, whereas the oil fields of Texas and California were thought to have a finite life.²⁰

At the University of Texas at Austin, Dr. E. P. Schoch conducted experiments to make lignite more transportable. In its raw state, lignite loses moisture and becomes brittle when exposed to air for prolonged periods of time. Dr. Schoch attempted to

¹⁹ *Rockdale Reporter*, 11 August, 1949. *Ibid.*, 18 Aug 1949.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1 February, 1940. *Ibid.*, 8 September, 1949.

make lignite light enough to economically ship long distances while not losing any of its potency, and also to help it stand up better to the elements. The lignite found in Germany had a different makeup than that of the lignite around Rockdale. The German lignite was easier to form and more durable. Since 1920, Dr. Schoch tried to find a way to make domestic lignite like that in Germany, and by 1949, it appeared that he was close to discovering that formula. Should this prove possible, it could breathe new life into Rockdale.²¹

During this time period, Rockdale was also put on the map by something other than natural resources, rails, or roads. Author and Rockdale native George Sessions Perry achieved success with his writing, much of which was focused around Rockdale. In 1937 Perry sold his first story, "Edgar and the Dank Morass" to the *Saturday Evening Post*. Perry did not consider himself much of a writer at the time, but for the next two decades, he continued to churn out widely read articles and stories. These would further help focus attention on Rockdale.²²

In February of 1938, Perry sold his fourth story to the *Saturday Evening Post*. At the same time, results for best story of 1937 were released. His "Edgar and the Dank Morass" was listed fourth among the top twelve in the readers' poll, out of a field of 200 stories. Among editors, the story was listed fifth. In January 1941, even before it was released, Perry's "Hold Autumn in Your Hand" was in its second printing, having

²¹ Ibid., 22 September, 1949. Ibid., 29 September, 1949.

²² Ibid., 21 October, 1937. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Perry, George Sessions" <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/PP/fpe40.html> (accessed September 25, 2006).

already received rave reviews from trade journalists. By the end of the year, it received the Texas Institute of Letters' Best Texas Book of the Year award. Early the following year the book, set around Rockdale, received the National Book Award. Two years later, work had begun turning the novel into a film, eventually released as "The Southerner." In a 1942 review of Perry's "Texas: A World in Itself," another book based around Rockdale, the reviewer described Perry as "one of the first-rate American novelists of the generation."²³

During World War II, Perry put his fiction aside to serve as a war correspondent. During a break in 1944, he returned to Rockdale and spoke at a Young Men's Business League function where the group was trying to sell war bonds. While there, he told of his experiences of being under attack in a submarine, of coming ashore at Sicily, and hearing bombs constantly go off. The next year he gave radio interviews in San Antonio and Dallas in which he talked about his most recent book, "Where Away," and of his hometown of Rockdale. Also in 1945, Perry wrote "Saturday Afternoon" for the *Saturday Evening Post*. The article, about a Saturday afternoon in Rockdale, included a number of snapshots from around town, including a barber shop, bank, general mercantile, and a street scene.²⁴

²³ *Rockdale Reporter*, 10 February, 1938. Ibid., 23 January, 1941. *Dallas Morning News*, 26 October, 1941. Ibid., 11 February, 1944. Ibid., 23 July, 1944. *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Perry, George Sessions" <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/PP/fpe40.html> (accessed September 25, 2006). *Rockdale Reporter*, 15 October, 1942.

²⁴ Ibid., 13 January, 1944. Ibid., 20 January, 1944. Ibid., 18 January, 1945. George Sessions Perry, "Saturday Afternoon," *Saturday Evening Post*, 26 May, 1945.

Perry's *Cities of America*, published in 1947, described 22 American cities. Among the cities he covered were New York, Dallas, Chicago, Boston, and Rockdale. Rockdale does not logically fit in among the crowded field of 21 nationally and regionally known cities. In his mind, however, Rockdale possessed a certain quality that enabled it to rise to the level of these metropolises, and he would inform the reader why. Through multiple works of fact and fiction, Perry introduced the rest of the country to Rockdale. His words and his pictures painted a favorable, pastoral, and relaxed picture of Rockdale. He did for Rockdale what Larry McMurtry would do for Archer City, Texas decades later. There was, however, a difference. While McMurtry and Archer City have had a sometimes contentious relationship, Perry embraced Rockdale, and Rockdale embraced Perry. Current University of Texas professor and Texas literature expert Don Graham places the importance of Perry's works alongside those of renowned Texas authors J. Frank Dobie and Walter Prescott Webb, and southern author William Faulkner. Perry's most well-known novel, *Hold Autumn in Your Hand*, Graham claims, played an important role because it did not fall back on the Lost Cause defeatism present in much southern literature, but instead, "transformed the cotton-based novel into a celebration of labor...thereby making a simple cotton farmer into a hero of modestly mythic proportions."²⁵

²⁵ George Sessions Perry, *Cities of America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947), 255. *AOL Money & Finance*, "Writer Larry McMurtry Won't Close Bookstore After All" http://articles.news.aol.com/business/_a/writer-larry-mcmurtry-wont-close/20050805124109990001 (accessed September 25, 2006). Don Graham, *Giant Country: Essays on Texas* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1998), 75-76.

Between 1937 and 1950, Rockdale citizens learned how to successfully cope with change. While some Milam County towns struggled with the hard economic times and new technology, Rockdale and Cameron managed to come through intact. Populations of both county towns increased modestly between 1940 and 1950, with Rockdale's climbing from 2,136 to 2,321, and Cameron's from 5,040 to 5,227. When significant railroad lines were abandoned, Rockdale was in better position than most in the county, as they were able to place greater reliance on roads and highways. When political stalwarts aged and began to fade from the scene, a new generation of Rockdilians accepted the challenge and became leaders in their own right. When oil could no longer be depended on, the glimmer of lignite appeared on the horizon. Through books, magazines, and a talented local writer, a large audience was introduced to Rockdale.²⁶

²⁶ 1951 *Texas Almanac*, 75. Marshall, *Rockdale Centennial*, 24.

CHAPTER VI

1951-1954: RENEWED LIFE

Between 1951 and 1954, changes occurred in southern Milam County that would forever change the county and confirm that Rockdale would maintain its significant role in the county. The change would be ignited by a multi-national company finding a new way to utilize a well known natural resource. This change was made possible by the existing rail and road systems surrounding Rockdale, the natural resources that were readily available, and the attention previously paid to improving the city infrastructure. In the beginning of 1951 Milam County appeared much like it had over the previous decade. Cameron provided the essential functions of a county seat, Rockdale was the hub of the southern half of the county, and Sharp served as a center for some of the rural communities.

The small communities around Sharp continued to show that by coming together to support a local cause, they could better prolong their way of life in their individual communities. In May 1951, members of the Tracy Methodist church and the Duncan and Tracy Home Demonstration clubs organized a musical show to be performed at the Sharp school auditorium to raise funds to rebuild and remodel the church at Tracy. Farmers, bankers, clerks, cowboys, and other professionals who moonlighted as musicians came from all over Central Texas to donate their time and talents to raise the needed funds. Not having the luxury of being able to raise funds through issuing bonds,

these communities persevered through farm consolidation and uncertain rainfall by banding together.¹

Also in the first half of 1951, Cameron citizens showed a renewed spirit toward improving the quality of their roads. Utilizing county and state funds, and recently approved municipal bonds, the City of Cameron improved the three main roads leading into town, with the hopes of attracting more commerce. In addition, it planned to improve its side streets so its residents would be able to travel over smooth roads. Cameron had finally decided to compete with Rockdale concerning secondary roads.²

By June, however, most of the attention in Milam County focused on the possibility of the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) building a \$100 million aluminum ore reduction plant near Rockdale. During the preceding years, there had been a mild but renewed discussion of lignite and the benefits that could be gained from its use. And since January 1951 serious discussion took place behind the scenes to explore the possibility of locating a plant near Rockdale. The second week in June, however, the lid blew off and talk of lignite, Alcoa, and jobs consumed Milam County. Amidst the excitement, Congressman Bob Poage informed his constituents that while he had been working on the project for many months, nothing was yet definite. He advised people that the location of the plant was a contest between Texas and Louisiana, but, he

¹ *Rockdale Reporter*, 10 May, 1951.

² *Cameron Herald*, 8 February, 1951.

added, “if it comes to Texas it will come to Milam County,” and “if it comes to Milam County Rockdale will be right in the big middle of it.”³

Rockdale had a few factors going for it in landing the plant. Aluminum refining consumes large amounts of electric power, and the large lignite field that was located close enough to the surface to easily allow strip mining would be able to provide a nearly inexhaustible supply of fuel for the generation of electricity. The proximity to rail lines would provide for easy and convenient transportation, and it could utilize the plentiful supply of water that was provided by nearby creeks and rivers. In addition, the United States Bureau of Mines supported locating the plant at Rockdale because it was “interested in having the lignite deposits developed.” The improvements that Rockdale made to their water and sewer system would also enable the city to grow at a fast clip without having too many growing pains. In Richard C. Wade’s *The Urban Frontier*, he says that 19th century Pittsburgh possessed “all the classic requirements of a great city” by having plenty of water, coal, “ready access to farm lands, and a market area of almost limitless extent.” Although on a smaller scale and in a different century, Rockdale shared these same characteristics with Pittsburgh. The Louisiana site, however, lacked the lignite to power a plant, but it offered a deep water port and a limitless supply of water.⁴

³ *Rockdale Reporter*, 7 June, 1951.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7 June, 1951. *Dallas Morning News*, 9 June, 1951. *Rockdale Reporter*, 3 March, 1949. *Ibid.*, 14 June, 1951. Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier: Pioneer Life in Early Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Lexington, Louisville, and St. Louis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972) 10.

Three weeks after the newspapers announced the possibility of a plant, there was still no official word regarding the location. J. G. Puterbaugh, president of the McAlester Fuel Company, who purchased the rights to many of the local lignite mines with the assistance of E. A. Camp three decades prior, met with a number of local business leaders to explain that nothing was definite. The group agreed to do all it could to cooperate with Alcoa during the decision process. This included putting its best foot forward, but not becoming overly optimistic or speculative. The Young Men's Business League also assured the involved parties that they would act in the best interests of Rockdale and cooperate with the involved parties in any way possible, and Mayor W. P. Hogan sent a letter to Alcoa offering the full cooperation of Rockdale, and pledging, if selected, to help make the venture "pleasant and successful."⁵

On July 26, 1951 the officials announced that Alcoa would build its new aluminum smelting plant near Rockdale—an announcement that would forever change the area. The announcement would also alter the future of lignite, as the plant would be the first to burn lignite to create electricity. The estimated annual capacity of 85,000 tons of aluminum production would help supply an increasing demand for aluminum by both consumers and the government's defense program. Already the most diversified town in the county, Rockdale would have yet another component to its economy that would employ an estimated 1,000 people when in full operation.⁶

⁵ *Rockdale Reporter*, 28 June, 1951. *Ibid.*, 22 April, 1954.

⁶ *Thorndale Champion*, 26 July, 1951. *Cameron Herald*, 26 July, 1951. *Rockdale Reporter*, 26 July, 1951.

With the announcement made that Alcoa would definitely build near Rockdale, the city council met to discuss improvements and expansions that needed to be made to accommodate the population increase that would accompany the plant. The most pressing demand was for housing to accommodate the influx of workers and their families. As it had done for decades, Rockdale's Young Men's Business League answered the call and began a campaign for a quality house, either for sale or rent, to be built on every residential lot. The League met with lot owners who wanted to build and arranged for them to meet with builders. For owners who did not wish to build on their lots, the League found people who were willing to build and pay a fair market price for the lot. By the end of September 1951, 58 new houses were under construction, with an additional 20 houses planned. By the same time the following year, 353 new houses had been built within the old city limits.⁷

To accommodate this growth, the city itself needed to grow. By October 1951, the city circulated petitions to those living west and northwest of the present city limits, seeking to expand the city limits. The results were overwhelmingly in favor of annexation. Over the next two years, the city added three square miles to its area. Included in incorporation was the need to provide the area with water and sewer service; this resulted in laying about 100,000 more feet of new water and sewer lines.

⁷ Ibid., 2 August, 1951. Ibid., 9 August, 1951. Ibid., 27 September, 1951. Ibid., 11 September, 1952.

Thankfully, both the water and sewer system had been greatly improved the previous decade, so the only task was to physically extend the lines.⁸

Changes were also made in the older part of town. These included the installation of Rockdale's first five traffic lights, three of which were located along Highway 79, the main route through town that would be traveled going toward the Alcoa plant. In addition, Mayor Hogan ordered 300 parking meters to be installed in downtown Rockdale, and for much of the associated parking to be changed from parallel to diagonal, so as to make more efficient use of space.⁹

Rockdale, at a distance of 8 miles, was the closest town to the plant site. Thorndale was 9 miles away, Taylor 14, and Cameron 24 miles distant. Being close to the site, Thorndale applied to have a road built from their city to the plant. Unfortunately for those hopeful citizens in Thorndale, the application was denied. Instead of building a 9 mile road, it was determined that the more feasible route would be to construct a farm to market road half that distance that would shoot off of a widened Highway 79 between Rockdale and Thorndale.¹⁰

The news did not get any better for Thorndale. In January 1952, the Thorndale city council announced that it only had four weeks worth of water remaining in their supply lakes. This was a familiar problem for Thorndale, as previously they had been forced to have water shipped in from neighboring towns. Later that summer it would be

⁸ Ibid., 4 October, 1951. *Dallas Morning News*, 9 August, 1954.

⁹ *Rockdale Reporter*, 11 October, 1951. Ibid., 24 January, 1952. Ibid., 6 March, 1952.

¹⁰ *Cameron Herald*, 27 September, 1951. *Rockdale Reporter*, 9 August, 1951. Ibid., 24 January, 1952. Ibid., 22 October, 1953.

forced to have water from Valley Junction shipped in on the Mo-Pac. When city officials decided to drill water wells late that same summer, the wells came up dry. An editorial in the *Thorndale Champion* openly asked whether the city was going to experience “great growth,” or simply remain “a whistle stop.” While Thorndale would inevitably experience some growth due to the size and proximity of the Alcoa project, its substandard water supply and unimproved road connection, among other factors, prevented it from experiencing the growth that was hoped for.¹¹

On the April 22, 1954, the *Rockdale Reporter* printed a map (figure 7) indicating the location of the Alcoa plant in relation to surrounding towns. This map reveals how readily a community’s proximity can be emphasized visually. On the map, the plant is depicted as easily reachable from Rockdale via one of two routes. Individuals coming from Cameron or Hearne, according to the map, would be forced to travel through Rockdale, whose city limits take up a substantial area of the map. Thorndale, the first town west of Rockdale on Highway 79 is not depicted, nor are the routes from Thorndale to the plant, which do not require one to travel through Rockdale. Instead, Highway 79 simply leads to Taylor. In addition, there is no indication of towns or roads south of the plant and Rockdale.¹²

¹¹ *Thorndale Champion*, 24 January, 1952. *Ibid.*, 8 May, 1952. *Ibid.*, 24 July, 1952. *Ibid.*, 21 August, 1952.

¹² *Rockdale Reporter*, 22 April, 1954.

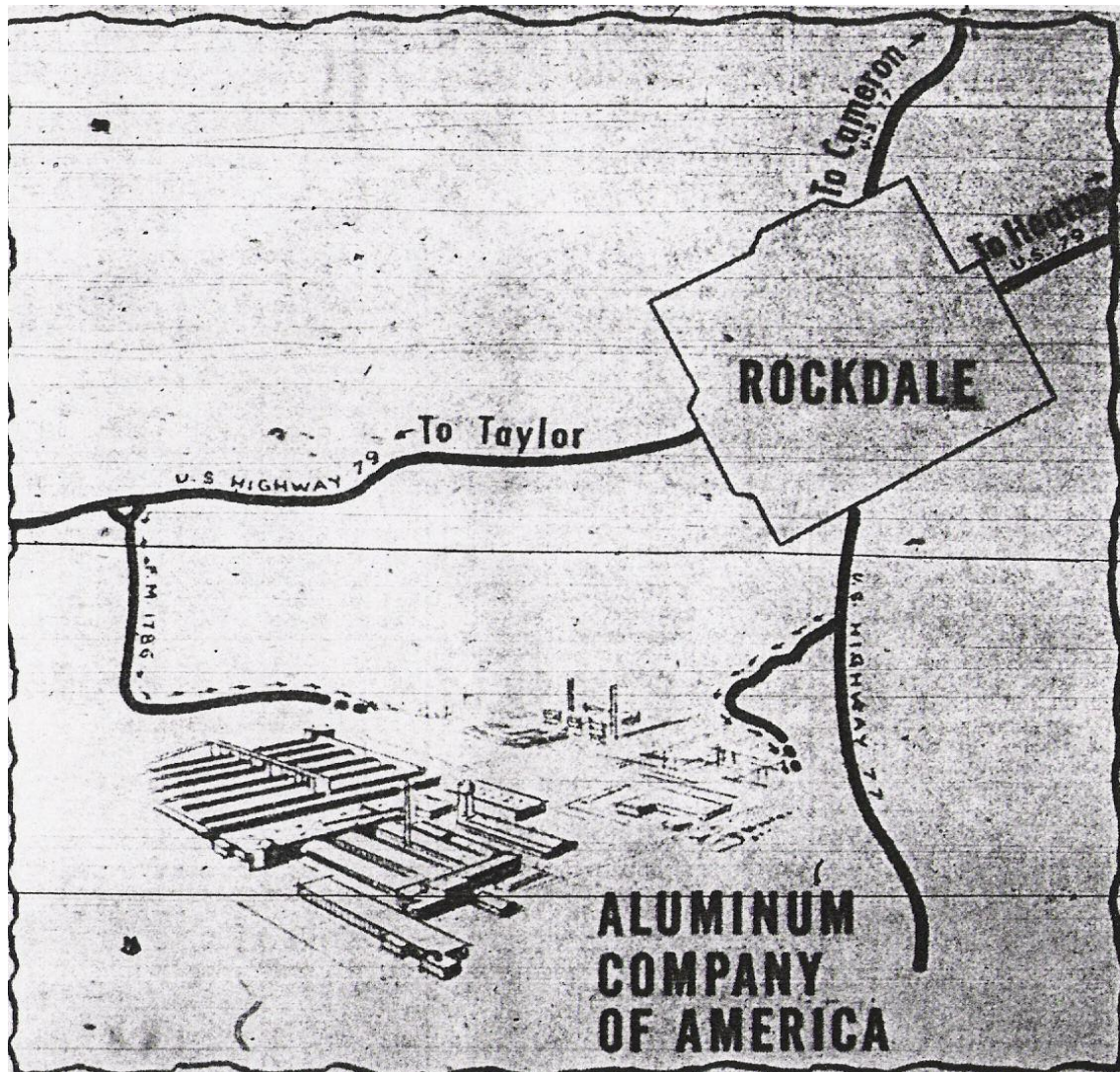


Figure 8. Map depicting proximity of Rockdale and Alcoa Plant. From *The Rockdale Reporter*, 22 April, 1954.

While Thorndale was having difficulty changing and capitalizing on the plant, the tide had definitely turned in Rockdale. By the time 1952 rolled around, two symbols of old Rockdale were gone. The old railroad tower, erected by the I&GN, and once the town's only source of sending and receiving telegraphs, was torn down, as

newer automatic equipment negated the need for the tower. Also torn down was the Lucas Gin, the “last remaining sign of once-mighty King Cotton in Rockdale.” While agriculture and the railroad would continue to play important roles in the future of Rockdale, the apex of their eras gave way to a new enterprise that the people of Rockdale embraced.¹³

In 1952, when the time came for Rockdale citizens to vote on a bond issue for extending the water and sewer lines to the new areas of Rockdale, they showed their overwhelming support for the project, as promised, by a margin of 15 to 1. As the vote was being conducted, work continued on clearing more acres on which to build housing. Voters also approved the issuance of one million dollars in bonds for new schools, which were greatly needed since the population of the city more than doubled since the beginning of the decade, from 2,311 in 1950 to 4,950 at the end of 1953. The following year voters approved issuing bonds for paving streets and pouring concrete curbs in the new additions. Rockdale citizens remained true to their word by supporting the Alcoa project in any way possible.¹⁴

An interpretive map printed in the *Rockdale Reporter* on July 24th, 1952 (Fig. 9) indicates the importance of lignite and Alcoa to Rockdale. Texas is pictured much larger relative to the rest of the states, visually depicting what George Sessions Perry wrote of Texas in his *Texas: A World in Itself*. Texas, Perry wrote, is “that big—too

¹³ *Rockdale Reporter*, 20 September, 1951. *Ibid.*, 25 October, 1951.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27 March, 1952. *Ibid.*, 19 March, 1953. *Ibid.*, 10 December, 1953. *Dallas Morning News*, 21 May, 1952. *Rockdale Reporter*, 17 December, 1953.

Alcoa also did its part to improve the community in which they were being accepted. The company created a new 850 acre lake near the plant, using water piped in from the San Gabriel and Little rivers, fully stocked it with fish, and left it open for the public to use. In town, they donated a site for a public pool and provided half of the funds needed, the rest being matched by the city. The company established scholarship funds for college for the children of the employees, most of whom were citizens of Rockdale. With the presence of Alcoa, the city was able to provide services of a quantity and quality that would not have previously been possible—at least not so rapidly and at so little financial cost. Also, had it not been for the increase in population, Rockdale would not have received two new medical clinics to better maintain the health of its citizens.¹⁶

In addition to bringing people, jobs, and growth to Rockdale, the Alcoa plant also brought more attention. In 1952, General Anastasio Somoza, president of Nicaragua, visited Rockdale to see the new lignite powered plant, where the first unit of the smelting plant was operational. Mayor Hogan and Rockdale oil man and investor H. H. Coffield met Somoza and his three-plane entourage at Rockdale's Coffield Airport and gave him the grand tour of the city and plant. Meanwhile, George Sessions Perry penned a feature story about Rockdale, "The Town Where it Rains Money," in the *Saturday Evening Post*. The following year, Dallas Mayor R. L. Thornton spoke about how developments in natural resources could spark the growth of existing cities. He

¹⁶ *Dallas Morning News*, 11 October, 1953. *Rockdale Reporter*, 7 January, 1954.

specified how Rockdale capitalized on a new industry in aluminum, which was “built on faith and courage.”¹⁷

In 1954 the Alcoa plant was fully operational. The changes and growth that Rockdilians witnessed over the previous three years were as great and as lasting as the town had witnessed since its first three years of existence. Rockdale diversified further, welcoming one of the world’s largest and most important companies. While the city experienced an expected amount of growing pains related to infrastructure and a housing squeeze due to the rapid population increase, the benefits that citizens received seemed to outweigh the pains for most part. Rockdale’s population quickly grew from 2,321 in 1950 to 4,481 in 1960. The high-water mark likely occurred in 1957 when the *Texas Almanac* estimated 6,300 persons in Rockdale. Cameron, meanwhile, grew at a slower pace, from 5,227 in 1950 to 5,640 in 1960, although a similar population crest was experienced in 1957 with an estimated 7,500 people residing in the city. The population of the county during this interval, however, declined from 23,585 in 1950 to 22,263 in 1960.¹⁸

The decline of the county population can be largely explained by the decrease of the rural population caused by the increased mechanization of farming, along with the rapid development of manufacturing and petrochemical industries following World War

¹⁷ Ibid., 26 June, 1952. Ibid., 22 April, 1954. Ibid., 18 December, 1952. *Dallas Morning News*, 4 December, 1953.

¹⁸ Batte, *A History of Milam County*, 111. Marshall, *Rockdale Centennial*, 24. *Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide* (Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1953), 587. *Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide* (Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1957), 607. *Texas Almanac* (Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1963), 251.

II. In 1940, there were 367,066 farmers in Texas, and by 1950, that number dipped to 266,000. In Milam County the number of farms decreased from 3,288 in 1940 to 2,805 in 1950. Only a generation before, over 5,000 farms operated in the county. With the mechanization of agriculture, the same amount of land could be farmed with fewer people. In addition, the elevated costs of these new farming implements priced some farmers out of the market, causing the consolidation of land.¹⁹

In the previous decade, with the increased building of roads to connect it with other towns, Rockdale established itself as the hub of southern Milam County. By 1954, one could legitimately argue that Rockdale was the most important city in the county. In 1953 the Rockdale Chamber of Commerce was established, and it adopted as its slogan, “Rockdale, a Future as Big as Texas.” In addition to the growth, expansion, and money, Rockdale gained an intangible; it gained a confidence and a swagger.²⁰

¹⁹ *Texas Almanac and Industrial Guide* (Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1951), 62, 67, 72, 182, 186.

²⁰ *Rockdale Reporter*, 22 April, 1954.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

From the time that Rockdale was formed for the coming International & Great Northern rail line, it began to challenge Cameron for dominance of Milam County. Simply being located along a rail line, however, did not automatically mean that Rockdale would be able to continue such a challenge. Many factors, from geography to railroads, and natural resources to civic leadership over a number of decades must be considered to understand why Rockdale had success, why Cameron could not dominate the entire county, and why other towns were not able to similarly compete.

Prior to the railroad coming through the county in 1873, most of the population and commercial activity in the county was located north of the Little River, which divides the county in two halves, with the county seat of Cameron being the focus of activity. In addition, towns along the established river and overland trade routes experienced a nominal amount of success. For a number of reasons, including geographic, economic, and political, the railroad crossed the southern half of Milam County, leading to the demise of many existing towns. Without improved bridges, crossing the Little River was quite a task, so much so that some of those on the north side chose to abandon their towns on the north side for the opportunities that were expected in one of the new railroad towns.

For two years, Rockdale was the end of the rail line, which meant that merchants to the west traveled to the new town in order to buy and sell goods with the larger, connected markets. This activity attracted a number of smart and insightful businessmen who took measures to ensure that Rockdale would remain an important town after the rail line was completed to the west. Future generations of local business leaders and boosters continued to put forth effort to see that Rockdale did not lose any momentum that this early push provided them, continuing to seek new businesses, improving the town infrastructure, and utilizing their natural resources. These leaders realized that simply having a high order service alone would not make a successful town. In future years, Texas towns like Seagraves in Gaines County would show declines when the railroad arrived. Cain City in Gillespie County would experience only brief prosperity. As Carl Abbott points out in his *Boosters and Businessmen*, civic leaders of towns played an important role in the success or failure of towns.¹

Throughout the history of Rockdale, local leaders attempted to build and strengthen relationships with surrounding communities. These relationships were of many natures, including recreational, economic, and service related. By reaching out to these communities, Rockdale created a dependable hinterland that provided the city with a reliable trade area. With the Little River being so difficult to cross in the early

¹ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Gaines County"
<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/GG/hcg1.html> (accessed April 15, 2006). Ibid.
"Gillespie County" <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/GG/hcg4.html> (accessed April 15, 2006). Abbott, *Boosters and Businessmen*, 4, 126.

years, Rockdale enjoyed a natural boundary that helped it to establish a trade territory consisting of the entire southern half of the county.

While the railroad and local leaders had much to do with the success of Rockdale, it is doubtful that they could have consistently challenged Cameron for county dominance had it not been for the natural resources present in southern Milam County around Rockdale. On the most basic level, the soils around Rockdale provided the ability to grow good crops and the surrounding rivers helped to supply an adequate amount of water. Beneath the surface, the presence of oil provided a brief economic boost, but nothing compared to that which would accompany the demand for the millions of tons of lignite in the 1950s when Rockdale's population nearly tripled to 6300.²

Throughout the history of Rockdale, local leaders saw the need to diversify the local economy. Unlike many county towns, Rockdale did not depend on a single economic activity for its existence. Of course Rockdale depended on the railroad, and like many county towns, it depended on agriculture. In addition, however, it also utilized its oil and lignite. When the railroad began to decline, the town prepared by building good roads that would connect it with other points across the county, state, and nation. When the increased mechanization and consolidation of farms hurt many surrounding communities, Rockdale pursued other commercial avenues.

² *Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide* (Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1957), 607.

Local organizations advertised the virtues of Rockdale along the highways for travelers to see and boosters traveled to other towns to promote their city. Unlike any other county town, Rockdale claimed an author who wrote favorably about Rockdale to a national audience. Through his many *Saturday Evening Post* articles and books, George Sessions Perry provided a great quality and scope of advertising and pride to Rockdale.

The question of whether Rockdale would continue to contest Cameron for county dominance was settled in 1951, when Alcoa announced that it would build a \$100 million dollar plant near Rockdale. The diversification, stability, money, growth and confidence that the project brought with it ensured that Rockdale would be an important town in Milam County, and the dominant town in southern Milam County, for years to come. Rockdale's prominence within the county did not occur overnight. Natural resources, combined with a tradition of strong leadership that was not content to relax and enjoy the present state of affairs, enabled Rockdale to become the most powerful town in southern Milam County and challenge Cameron for county dominance.

CHAPTER VIII

AFTERWORD

Although this study ends in 1954, the trends presented herein continue today. Rockdale is still competing for dominance of the county. More than half a century later, the Alcoa plant is still in operation, continuing to make a significant contribution to the local economy. Like all industries, however, Alcoa has brought some trying times. Over the years there have been a number of cutbacks and layoffs at the Rockdale plant. Today there is discussion of a \$900 million project at the plant which could bring an estimated 1000 new workers to town. At the same time, environmentalists are trying to halt the project, claiming that the ecological costs stemming from air and water pollution caused by industry outweigh the economic benefits. Rockdale and many of the surrounding towns are already seeing a population increase from an overflow out of Austin.¹

Cameron has sustained itself as the county seat, is still the center of action in the northern half of the county, and has benefited from multiple generous contributions from Temple businessman and Houston Astros owner Drayton McLane, Jr. Thorndale, like other county towns, has experienced some recent growth due to the Austin

¹ *Rockdale Reporter*, 31 August, 2006.

overflow. Milano, meanwhile, has continued to struggle, with talk resuming yet again of having its schools consolidate and become part of the Rockdale system.²

Sharp, which was a center of rural activity in the 1950s, has since become a near ghost town. In 1960, the effects from farm consolidation and a changing economy forced the school to be consolidated with Rockdale. In 1980, there were three businesses, but today there are none. The roof of the WPA-built school has begun to collapse on the east side. San Gabriel's WPA-built school is also abandoned, as that town has become a ghost of its former self. Likewise, Tracy has no businesses or school, and its church became inactive two decades ago. The farm to market roads that were at one time so desired, are now part of another reality few might have anticipated in the early 1920s. These roads enable the large farming operations to take their crop to market, and allow travelers to speed past the shells of old buildings.³

² *Cameron Herald*, 16 March, 2006.

³ *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Sharp, Texas"

<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/SS/hns39.html> (accessed July 27, 2005).

REFERENCES

Primary Materials

Books

Gibbs, Carol Sue. *Yarrellton and North Elm News from The Cameron Herald: 1895-1945, Milam County, Texas*. The Cameron Herald Inc.: Cameron, 2000.

Tewalt, Susan J. and Mary L. W. Jackson. *Geological Circular 91-1* "Estimation of Lignite Resources in the Wilcox Group of Central and East Texas Using the National Coal Resources Data System" (Austin: Bureau of Economic Geology, 1991).

Newspapers

Cameron Centinel/Cameron Herald. 1895-2006.

Dallas Morning News. 1885-1954.

Galveston Daily News. 1870-1889.

Rockdale Reporter. 1876-2006.

Thorndale Thorn/Thorndale Champion. 1902-1952.

Maps

"Buckholts Quadrangle" United States Geological Survey, 1909, reprinted 1912. Map

- located at University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections, Map Room.
- “Detail of Cities and Towns in Milam County, Texas” Texas State Highway Department, 1957. Located at the General Land Office, Austin, Texas.
- “General Highway Map, Milam County, Texas” Texas State Highway Department, 1936. Located at the General Land Office, Austin, Texas.
- “General Highway Map, Milam County, Texas” Texas State Highway Department, 1957. Located at the General Land Office, Austin, Texas.
- “Gray’s Railroad Map of Texas” O.W. Gray & Son, Philadelphia (1877). Available at *American Memory* [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gmd:@field\(NUMBER+@band\(g4031p+ct000559\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gmd:@field(NUMBER+@band(g4031p+ct000559))).
- “Map of the International and Great Northern Railroad Lone (Star) Route and Connections” Woodward, Tiernan & Hale, Map Engravers: St. Louis. Rand, McNally & Co, Map Engr’s Chicago (1878). Available from *David Rumsey Map Collection*, <http://www.davidrumsey.com/maps770067-22085.html>.
- “Map of the San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railway and Connections” (1893) Available at *Bill Roberts’s Home Page*, http://www.wcroberts.org/Images/1893_SAP_Map.jpg
- “Milam County” General Land Office, June 1918.
- “Milam County Map” August Gast & Company: St. Louis (1877). Map located at the General Land Office, Austin.

“The Correct Map of Texas” Woodward, Tiernan & Hale: St. Louis (1878).

Map located at University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections, Map Room.

“Railroad Map of Texas, 1926,” compiled by Ira D. Dodge. Available at *American Memory*, [@field\(NUMBER+@band\(g4031p+ct001207\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/gmd).

“The Roads of Texas” Shearer Publishing: Fredericksburg, Texas (1999).

“Taylor Sheet” United States Geological Survey, 1894, reprinted 1916. Map located at University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections, Map Room.

Collections

“International & Great Northern RR Co.” 1871-1908. Railroad history folders. Texas State Archives, Austin.

Government Publications

Bureau of the Census. *Abstract of the Twelfth Census, 1900*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904.

Bureau of the Census. *Housing Construction Statistics, 1889 to 1964*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966.

Bureau of the Census. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Volume VI, Population*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1933.

Bureau of the Census. *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Volume III, Population*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913.

Bureau of the Census. *County and City Data Book*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1957.

Bureau of the Census. *County and City Data Book*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1967.

Bureau of the Census. *County Data Book*. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1947.

Kaiser, W. R., W. B. Ayers, Jr., and L. W. LaBrie. *Lignite Resources in Texas, Report of Investigations No. 104*. Austin, TX: Bureau of Economic Geology, 1980.

United States Department of Agriculture, *Soil Survey for Milam County, Texas*. United States Department of Agriculture. Washington, D.C., 2004.

U.S. Decennial Census Publications. *U.S. Agriculture Census Reports, 1880-1960*. Microfilm.

U.S. Decennial Census Publications. *U.S. Population Census Reports, 1880-1960*. Microfilm.

Works Progress Administration. *Works Progress Administration Ground Water Survey, Project 3763: Milam County, Texas*. Austin, 1937.

Journals

Charles, Mabel. *Personal Journal*. Private collection, Horseshoe Bay, Texas.

Secondary Materials

Books

Abbott, Carl. *Boosters and Businessmen: Popular Economic Thought and Urban*

- Growth in the Antebellum Middle West*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981.
- Abbott, Carl. *The Metropolitan Frontier: Cities in the Modern American West*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1993.
- Allison, Dorothy. *History of the Milam County Courthouses, 1822-1991*. Cameron, Texas: Main Printing Inc., 1991.
- Baker, T. Lindsay. *Ghost Towns of Texas*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986.
- Baker, T. Lindsay. *More Ghost Towns of Texas*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003.
- Batte, Lelia M. *History of Milam County, Texas*. San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1956.
- Beckhusen, Venetia and Mary Ann Eanes. *Facts and Stories About the Milam County Courthouse and its People*. Milam County Preserve Our Past Committee, 2002.
- Browder, Edrie Wilson. *Gause, Texas: A Legacy in Pieces*. Austin: Nortex Press, 1997.
- Brownell, Blaine. *The Urban Ethos in the South, 1920-1930*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975.
- Cobb, James C. *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Doyle, Don H. *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990.

- Economic Survey of Texas*. St. Louis: Southwestern Bell Telephone Company, 1928.
- Estell, Dora Lucile. *And Then Came The People: The Story of Czech and German Immigration to Milam County*. Privately printed, 1996.
- Fehrenbach, T. R. *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans*. New York: Da Capo Press, 2000.
- Fischer, Mrs. Walter E. *A History of St. John's United Methodist Church, Rockdale, Texas*. Privately published, 1973.
- Galbreath, David Ray, compiler. *Index of Road and Bridge Commissioners Court Minutes, Milam County, Texas, Volume A thru Volume 15, 1874-1981*. Frankston, Texas: by the author, 2004.
- Gibson, Charles Mac. "Organized Labor in Texas from 1890 to 1900." M.A. thesis, Texas Tech University, 1973.
- Goodwyn, Frank. *Lone Star Land: 20th Century Texas in Perspective*. New York: Alfred A. Knoph, 1955.
- Graham, Don. *Giant Country: Essays on Texas*. Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1998.
- Green, George Norris. *The Establishment in Texas Politics: The Primitive Years, 1938-1957*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984.
- Henderson, Katherine Bradford. "The Early History of Milam County." M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1924.
- History of Texas Together with a Biographical History of Milam, Williamson, Bastrop, Travis, Lee, and Burleson Counties*. The Lewis Publishing Company: Chicago,

- 1893.
- Jackson, Chandler. "Where is Your County Seat?" M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Arlington, 1996.
- Jordan, Terry. *Texas: A Geography*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1984.
- King, Dick. *Ghost Towns of Texas*. San Antonio: Naylor Co., 1953.
- Lengert, Margaret Eleanor. "The History of Milam County." M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1949.
- McIlvain, Myra Hargrove. *6 Central Texas Auto Tours*. Burnet, Texas: Eakin Press, 1980.
- McPherson, James. *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Marshall, Ida Jo, ed. *Rockdale Centennial: A History of Rockdale, Texas 1874-1974*. The Rockdale Reporter: Rockdale, 1976.
- Martin, Gloria V., compiler. *Some Central Texas Obituaries*. Milam County Genealogical Society, 1996.
- Martin, Roscoe Coleman. *The People's Party in Texas*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970.
- Maxwell, Robert S. *Texas Economic Growth, 1890 to World War II: From Frontier to Industrial Giant*. Boston: American Press, 1982.
- Milam County Heritage and Preservation Society. *Matchless Milam: History of Milam County, Texas*. Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1984.

- Morrissey, Katherine G. *Mental Territories: Mapping the Inland Empire*. Ithica, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Perry, George Sessions. *Cities of America*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947.
- Perry, George Sessions. *Texas: A World in Itself*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1952.
- Shropshire, Emma Lou, Bonnie Belle Holder, Janette Bledsoe, and Joyce Angell. *A History of First Baptist Church, Cameron, Texas*. Austin: Nortex Press, 1994.
- Teaford, Jon C. *The Twentieth-Century American City*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993.
- Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide*. Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1926.
- Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide*. Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1933.
- Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide, 1941-1942*. Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1941.
- Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide, 1943-1944*. Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1943.
- Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide, 1949-1950*. Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1949.
- Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide, 1952-1953*. Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1952.
- Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide, 1954-1955*. Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1954.
- Texas Almanac and State Industrial Guide, 1958-1959*. Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation,

1958.

Texas Almanac, 1964-1965. Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1964.

Texas Almanac, 2000-2001. Dallas: A. H. Belo Corporation, 1999.

Wade, Richard C. *The Urban Frontier: Pioneer Life in Early Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Lexington, Louisville, and St. Louis.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972.

Webb, Walter Prescott. *The Great Plains.* New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1931.

Wheeler, Kenneth W. *To Wear a City's Crown: The Beginnings of Urban Growth in Texas, 1836-1865.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968.

Worster, Donald. *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1950s.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Zlatkovich, Charles P. *Texas Railroads: A Record of Construction and Abandonment.* Austin: The University of Texas at Austin, 1981.

Articles

The Handbook of Texas Online. The General Libraries at the University of Texas at Austin and the Texas State Historical Commission. Available at [http:// www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/index.html](http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/index.html).

“2 Austin buildings get historical markers.” *Daily Texan Online.* Available at <http://www.dailytexanonline.com/media/storage/paper410/news/2002/11/15/StateLocal/2.Austin.Buildings.Get.Historical.Markers-497676.shtml?norewrite200608131820&sourcedomain=www.dailytexanonline>.

com.

“A history of the International And Great Northern / Missouri Pacific depot and of the railroad’s history in San Antonio.” *Texas Transportation Museum*. Available at <http://www.txtransportationmuseum.org/IGN.htm>.

“About Cameron, Texas.” *Cameron Chamber of Commerce*. Available at <http://www.cameron-tx.com/aboutcameron.html>.

“Central Place Theory.” *Revision Notes*. Available at <http://www.revision-notes.co.uk/revision/176.html>.

“Depression-era murals still hang in Texas post offices.” *The Bryan-College Station Eagle Online*. Available at <http://www.theeagle.com/spotlight/books/texasreads/060604texasreads.php>.

“Electricity of county rivalries has long burned out.” *Austin American-Statesman*. 27 October, 2005.

Federal Aid Road Act of 1916: Building the Foundation.” *U.S. Department of Transportation*. Available at <http://www.fwha.dot.gov/infrastructure/rw96a.htm>.

“From 1916 to 1939: The Federal-State Partnership at Work.” *U.S. Department of Transportation*. Available at <http://www.fwha.dot.gov/infrastructure/rw96c.htm>.

“High-value Oregon ag commodities.” *Oregon Department of Agriculture*. Available at <http://www.oregon.gov/ODA/commodities.shtml>.

“Historic Scarbrough house to be demolished.” *Daily Texan Online*. Available at <http://www.dailytexanonline.com/media/storage/paper410/news/2001/02/27/News/Historic.Scarbrough.House.To.Be.Demolished-698843.shtml?norewrite200608131820&sourcedomain=www.dailytexanonline.com>.

“History.” *Rockdale Chamber of Commerce*. Available at <http://www.rockdalechamber.com/history.html>.

“History of the US Highway System.” *US Highways*. Available at <http://www.gbcnet.com/ushighways/history.html>.

Jones, Ken. “W. K. Gordon Center and the History of Thurber.” Available at <http://www.tarleton.edu/~gordoncenter/history.html>.

Kirk, Russell. “The Attack on Leviathan: Donald Davidson and the South’s Conservatism.” Available at <http://as.clayton.edu/jkohler/Kirk%20on%20The%20Attack%20on%20Leviathan.htm>.

“Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.” *Deepermind*. Available at <http://www.deepermind.com/20maslow.htm>.

“Milam County, Texas – History.” *TXGenWeb Project*. Available at <http://www.geocities.com/milamco/milam-009c.htm>.

“MoPac: A History of Colorful Railroads.” *Missouri Pacific Historical Society*. Available at <http://www.mopac.org/history.asp>.

Perry, George Sessions. “Saturday Afternoon.” *Saturday Evening Post*, 26 May, 1945.

Perry, George Sessions. "Confessions of a Part-time Farmer." *Saturday Evening Post*, 28 May, 1949.

Perry, George Sessions. "I Hate to See Those Cotton Pickers Go." *Saturday Evening Post*, 15 October, 1952.

"Sam De Grasse." *Yahoo! Movies*. Available at <http://movies.yahoo.com/movie/contributor/1800037404/bio>.

Sonis, Michael. "Central Place Theory after Christaller and L6sch: Some further explorations." Available at <http://www.ersa.org/ersaconfs/ersa05/papers/18.pdf>.

"Texas Post Office Murals." *Texas Historical Commission*. Available at <http://www.thc.state.tx.us/triviafun/trvmurals.html>.

"The Building of the C&O Railway." *WVa-USA*. Available at <http://www.wva-usa.com/history/mthope/cando.php>.

"The Story of New Town." *City of Round Rock, Texas*. Available at <http://www.ci.round-rock.tx.us/Planning/rrcollection/mainstreet/newtown>.

"Walter Christaller: Heirarchical Patterns of Urbanization." *Center for Spatially Integrated Social Science*. Available at <http://www.csiss.org/classics/content/67>.

"Whatever Happened To...?#29." *The "Who's Who" of Professional Wrestling*. Available at <http://www.1wrestlinglegends.com/crowbarpress/wht/wht29.htm>.

"Writer Larry McMurtry Won't Close Bookstore After All." *AOL Money & Finance*.

Available at http://articles.news.aol.com/business/_a/writer-larry-mcmurtry-wont-close/20050805124109990001.

Online Databases

Geospatial & Statistical Data Center, University of Virginia Library. *Historical Census*

Browser. Available at

<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/php/county.php>.

Collections

“History of the First Christian Church, Rockdale, Texas.” Located at Lucy Hill

Patterson Memorial Library, Rockdale, Texas.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Raised in Houston, TX; Singapore; Hong Kong; and Lake Forest, IL, Philip Guy Pope graduated from Texas Tech University in Lubbock in 2001 with a B. B. A. in Management and a History Minor. While managing a business in Dallas and Addison, TX, he obtained an M. A. in History at the University of Texas at Arlington in 2006. With interests in Texas History, the American Civil War, and the 20th Century American West, he plans to continue sharing his passion for history with others. No matter where life may lead him, Pope will always consider himself from Texas and of Milam County.