

# Brenham's got more than Blue Bell

By *Stacey Roberts*  
Staff Writer

Few realize Brenham was a town long before Blue Bell stickied the chin of a Texas child. Founded in 1844, Brenham has a history that stems back far past the 79-year-old ice cream factory. It is the self-proclaimed birthplace of Texas and the county seat of Washington County.

Brenham's boundaries span a mere 6.1 square miles but six blocks in the downtown are dominate the town and are the focus of Brenham's past and future.

Brenham received its name from Richard Fox Brenham who was part of the founding Mier Expedition that settled Washington County. Although it probably held no satisfaction for Brenham, he became the town hero (and subsequently the town name) when he lost his life while helping other expedition members escape from a Mexican prison.

After the Civil War, Brenham was occupied by Federal troops. According to local folklore, Brenham was none-the-better for having had the troops in the city. The troops assigned were battalions of black soldiers who clashed bitterly with the white townspeople. Much of the city was destroyed by fire during the unrest.

Some of the buildings that were not destroyed are still standing and are being restored as part of the city's revitalization program.

Revitalization in the town is not synonymous with growth, however. Brenham is a small town determined to stay small, or at least retain the small-town look.

Doug Hutchinson, director of economic development for the revitalization, says the project is not just to restore the downtown

buildings for their own sake but also to recruit new businesses to put in them.

"The look of a downtown reflects how incoming businesses see their potential income," Hutchinson says.

For a city to receive aid in the restoration process, the buildings must be registered with the Department of Interior, Hutchinson says. In Brenham there has been a slight controversy over the registration process. Some downtown merchants fear registering their property will prohibit needed improvements, such as air conditioning and remodeling for growth, from being added. Hutchinson says this fear is unwarranted since improvements such as these aren't prohibited by registration.

So far, only a few buildings have been completely restored. The most significant is the Bassett & Bassett Banking House built in 1873. Bassett & Bassett is a three-story building with a slightly Italian look. Originally designed to house a bank, law offices and a cotton exchange, the building has been modified once before, in the early 1900's, to add the third floor and a beautiful skylight.

The H.F. Hohlt Company Department Store, 1914, was built with an open-air mall, which was very contemporary at the time. The Main Street Project renovations retained most of the original design, yet added a covered atrium to light the mall.

"Presently there are 11 other buildings in the downtown area which are under reconstruction," Hutchinson says. "We are very excited about one area in particular - the Ant Street complex."

Two buildings of the six in the Ant Street complex have been completed - the Ant Street Saloon and Restaurant and Unicorn Books, Records and Nostalgia. The exterior of the saloon and restaurant are as authentic as you might expect. The surface is

Walking into the saloon you may think you've just walked into a Clint Eastwood movie. The only lighting is from a few antique Tiffany lamps - one with silhouettes of pyramids and camels - and from whatever light can make it through the stained-glass windows.

A huge bar lines one wall, which Delbert Huntsman, owner of the saloon and restaurant, says was made in Pennsylvania and dates back to 1886. The dark oak bar encloses a beautiful antique mirror which reflects the interior of the saloon.

Bolted in front of the bar are stools that once sat in a Chicago court house, which if legends are to be believed, seated the likes of Al Capone in the 1920's. Stuffed animal heads stare out from the walls, invisible behind the clutter of oil paintings of saloon girls and other antiques.

The restaurant is one of the few places in the complex where modern conveniences can be found (salad bar, hot plate, etc.), yet Huntsman swears everything is original except for the ceiling fans.

Upstairs is a game room which houses pool tables made in the late 1800's, dart boards and more faded paintings of scantily-clad girls. The only lighting for the room is from windows and a deep-set skylight, added so electricity would not be needed.

The Unicorn bookstore is much smaller and serves both as an antique store and used book and record exchange. The only part of the bookstore that is not authentic is the purchase counter which the owner points out "was made by hand."

The owner, John Haradon, serves as part-time historian for the complex as well as part-time renovator. He is currently working on one of the complex buildings once thought to be just "an ugly, pink stucco building."

"I was looking at the thing one day and saw an awning sticking

out that looked like limestone," Haradon says.

It turned out that Haradon was right and the building is a complete limestone structure that Haradon has spent many months on, chipping away at the false store front.

While finding the buildings behind the facades can be hard enough, Haradon says unearthing the history of the structures can be even harder.

"I spent some time in the tax records and found out the past owners of buildings," he says. "They don't tell you about who actually used the buildings and for what. The real history comes from reading old newspaper clippings of the Banner Press."

Both Huntsman and Haradon say the Ants Street area had a bad reputation in the late 1880's when the street was lined with saloons, casinos and houses of ill repute. If the men have their way, the area will regain some of its former life, if not its racy reputation.

"Basically, we're turning Ants Street back into an entertainment area but in the vein of Austin's Sixth Street," Huntsman says. "I hope to bring in entertainment that will retain the old-fashioned feeling such as bluegrass bands and other folk music."

Haradon says he hopes the new businesses in Ants Street will also work toward a Sixth Street appearance with antique stores, boutiques and small clubs.

While in Brenham, don't forget to tour the private homes that have been in the city for years. The Washington County/Brenham Chamber of Commerce offers a brochure with a wonderful walking map of many historic homes.

And inevitably, although Brenham does have a lot to offer on the historic side, Blue Bell offers a tour of their facilities and free samples, too.