

By Yvonne Salce

Celeste Caldwell remembers a time when horse troughs and wooden wagons dominated the unpaved, dusty streets of Bryan.

It was a time when saloons and gambling parlors occupied every corner of Main Street, and thugs like Bonnie and Clyde were on the loose.

The 91-year-old Bryanite moved to the small town in 1921, where she and her husband, John Sealy Caldwell, took over the family business, The Caldwell Jewelry Store.

Because of the railroads, businesses profited in the late 1800s. William Joel Bryan, founder and nephew of Stephen F. Austin, sold the land for the railroad right-of-way for a \$1 in 1859. In 1860, Bryan sold the one-mile square townsite to two surveyors of the Houston & Texas Central Railroad for \$3,200.

The new Bryan speculators gained control of the lots surrounding the site of the county courthouse with hopes of profiteering off businessmen, who might wish to develop a business district around the courthouse. But local businessmen refused to pay their exorbitant prices and purchased lots on the

west side of the tracks, in what came to be known as Main Street.

So the stores were built along the railroad and the usual public square never developed. Merchants were able to take freight directly off the train and into their stores. The wide streets of downtown Bryan provided sufficient room for a team of five yokes with a wagon to turn around.

In 1867, the first wooden stores were built. In order to escape the mud of the unpaved streets and the manure of the oxen and horses used for transportation, covered porches were built for the stores.

Along with Bryan's booming business success came the Wild-West society of saloons, gambling parlors, dance halls, hangings and shootouts.

"Bryan was as wet as it could be," Caldwell says. "Main Street had many saloons."

During this time, many referred to

A look back at Bryan...

Bryan as the "evil area" or "the town with four churches and forty saloons."

In the late 19th century, it was said that as many as 17 to 21 saloons occupied the town of 3,000 people. The average was two saloons for each business block and drunkenness was common. Drunks could be seen everyday on the streets, and although the possession of guns was illegal, it was done. Rowdy citizens often disturbed the peace with the shooting of guns.

In a letter to a relative, Mrs. Sara A. Dobson described Bryan on Nov. 21, 1866: "...the moral atmosphere is bad here. Stores are open on the Sabbath, country people come in and buy the same as other days, wagons loaded

with cotton and other goods are passing and repassing all the time; drinking, gambling, stealing, shouting and horse racing fill up the picture."

But also in 1866 came the First Baptist Church, and townspeople were optimistic that a better day was dawning. The church was organized in what previously was a tenpin alley and a saloon. The congregation used 12-inch planks placed upon beer kegs for temporary seats.

It's been said that Texas A&M University, formerly the Agricultural and Mechanical College, was deliberately built outside of Bryan in order to protect the young men from the town of ill repute. A coalition of women worked to have the

college built four miles outside of Bryan. Later, Brazos County paved a road between the twin cities, which was among the first of the asphalt roads in the state.

Caldwell remembers when the Aggies would come into town looking for jobs. The trolley provided transportation between Bryan and College Station. "We'd take the trolley to A&M and go dancing at Sbis Hall," says Caldwell. "The military parties were the liveliest ever, and the uniformed men were the best-looking things."

Rivalry often existed between the Aggies and the Bryan boys, especially if girls were involved.

"Some of the girls were so taken with

off their uniforms, they were often very disappointed," Caldwell says.

The Aggies brought a lot of business to Bryan, and as a result the town has always been loyal to College Station. Early businesses in Bryan included three restaurants, an ice house and a meat market. There were no paper products, and fresh vegetables were hand-delivered to houses, along with chickens and turkeys.

"I've always found Bryan to be charitable and friendly," Caldwell says. "And I've always been happy in Bryan."

After her husband's death in 1956, Caldwell took over the jewelry store and operated it until 1986. She recalls the times when she and John Sealy would cross the county line into Bryan.

"Back in God's country," he would say.

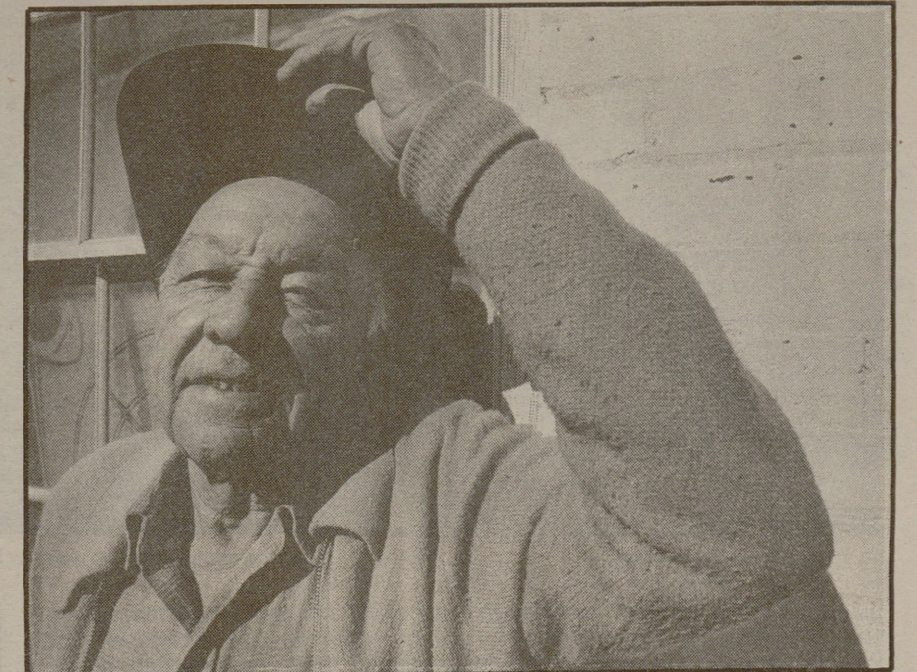
And for Caldwell, Bryan is "the best place in the whole world."



Photos By Phelan M. Ebenhack

Left: Jessie Agad waits for customers at the City Barber Shop in downtown Bryan. He has been shining shoes at the business for 34 years.

Below: Bryan resident Jose Gonzalez passes time in the downtown area Friday afternoon. Gonzalez has seen downtown undergo many changes since moving to Bryan in 1936.



...with an eye for downtown's future

By Kevin M. Hamm

It is common knowledge in Bryan that the city was built around "the rivers, the railroad and A&M." And although the Brazos and Navasota Rivers, the Southern Pacific line and Texas A&M University are all still alive and well, Bryan fell along the wayside somewhere — especially the downtown area.

Some say the decline in downtown started when Post Oak Mall was built in College Station. They say the convenience and comfort of the mall — climate-controlled chain-store shopping — enticed customers from the small, specialized shops in the downtown area, eventually causing the shops to close.

Others claim it was the shopping plazas built in the late 1960s and early 1970s that started the slide. Still others hold it was the population boom in College Station in the 1960s, when the University made joining the Corps of Cadets optional and began admitting women.

Whatever the reason, Bryan's early history was typical of many small Texas towns of the period.

Bryan was founded in 1859, but it was not until 1866 and the arrival of the railroad that it was considered a town. In that same year, voters decided to move the seat of Brazos County from Millican to Bryan.

The city's welfare originally depended on the cotton crops in the surrounding area. The downtown area had a cotton press that was used by growers from miles around. After the cotton was ginned and pressed, the railroad would take it to Galveston, where it would be shipped to the textile mills on the East Coast.

Eventually, as merchants moved into downtown, cotton became a less integral part of Bryan's economy. The press shut down, and Bryan became a cultural and business center for the smaller communities surrounding it.

From the mid-1960s until the 1980s, downtown Bryan was in decline: historic buildings crumbled and, instead of their being restored, modern facades were erected on building fronts to disguise the effects of years of neglect. Many businesses moved away or closed.

The downtown area's double-wide streets are hemmed in by old, elegant

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