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GHOST TOWNS IN HAYS COUNTY, TEXAS

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Sarasota Club
San Marcos, Texas
1978

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INTRODUCTION

My interest in this topic, Ghost Towns in Hays County, began about ten years ago when Mrs. Tula Townsend Wyatt gave an extemporaneous talk on Lost Post Offices of Hays County. (The scheduled speaker had failed to arrive!) She spoke with knowledge and enthusiasm.

Several years later, an article in The Texas Club Woman suggested that a study of ghost towns in one's community would be worthwhile.

With these incentives, I began working. As a comparative newcomer to the area, I had no first-hand information on any of the towns. The information presented in this paper is summarized from the written accounts listed in the bibliography and conversations with several long time residents. I should be pleased to learn of additional sources or facts and of errors in those presented herein.

In such a presentation as this, the many human interest stories of a community are lacking. If the reader knows about any of these, I would like to hear about them.

My sincere appreciation goes to Mrs. Tula Townsend Wyatt who has allowed me full use of the information in her collection in the San Marcos Public Library.

I am also indebted to Dr. William Emory. He and Mr. Gordon Hyatt had made a study of early post offices in Hays County and he made this information available to me.

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Introduction--con't.

Mrs. Barkley's book on central Texas (listed in the bibliography) has a very informative chapter on Hays County.

Mr. Dudley Dobie, whose book on Hays County is also listed in the bibliography, gave me encouragement when I mentioned this project to him.

I heartily recommend an in-depth study on any or all of the places mentioned. All are interesting.

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WHAT IS A GHOST TOWN?

The third edition of the Columbia Encyclopedia (one volume) copyright 1963, defines a ghost town as "a once flourishing American community, which through a variety of reasons, usually economic, has lost most of its former life and activity." (p. 823)

This definition easily explains the large number of these communities in Hays County. Climate, soil deterioration, lack of transportation could easily cause farmers to move. Desire for better educational facilities and sometimes unrealized expectations caused an exodus from some places. In almost every case, however, the basic cause was economic.

But, whatever the cause, there is interesting history in each ghost town.

LIST OF GHOST TOWNS

Yell

Goforth

Allen's Prairie, Manchac, and Mountain City

Cannonville and Hays City

Stringtown

San Marcos de Nave

Science Hall

Bear Creek, Capt's Mill, and Johnson Institute

Mechanicsville

Mount Gainor

Mount Sharp

Gatlin

Barton Creek and Fitzhugh

Henley and Millseat

Hugo and Purgatory

Center Point

Turnersville

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YELL

Of all the ghost towns in the county, none had a more interesting array of names. Although the final name by which this area was called was not Yell, it is this name that is most often used. Originally called West Point, the community was located about twenty-two miles northwest of San Marcos, near Dripping Springs.

The first settler, S. H. Pryant, came in 1869 and was followed by the families of Frank Davis, Jack Massey, Tom George, Elisha McCuiston, W. Garnett, and Dodsworth.

In 1874, three families came from Bastrop and settled nearby. Among these was a circuit-rider Methodist preacher named Mordecai Yell. The first postmaster was Thomas G. Bell, and it was when this post office on the Blanco-Driftwood Road was opened that the name Yell was adopted. This was to honor the preacher of that name. The office opened in February, 1890.

However, the Post Office Department objected to the name as it might become confused with another post office named Tell. As a result of this ruling, the name was changed to Good.

Miss Jennie Weaver, a school teacher at Yell, had the post office in her home for a time. It is reported that she was the one who changed the name from Good to Best!

There were a number of people who served in the post office in its varied locations, but in 1907 the post office was moved to Driftwood.

Too bad that it became a ghost town. Perhaps, in time, it might have become--Better!

ALLEN'S PRAIRIE, MANCHAC, AND MOUNTAIN CITY

These three names are, of necessity, to be considered together.

It was in 1835 that Phillip Allen acquired property in Hays County about a mile and a half west of present day Buda. Mr. Allen did not bring his family to the County until 1846, but, even so, they were the first settlers in the community. In fact, the first wedding in the area was that of his son, J. V. Allen, to Miss Martha Good; the date, June 15, 1859. The ceremony was performed by Mr. George Golden, who organized a Cumberland Presbyterian Church here in 1855. This was the first church in the area.

Mr. Allen's settlement became known as Allen's Prairie and was the northern boundary of a larger community which extended about seven miles north and south and was three or four miles wide. The local post office that was opened in the home of James Bunton on March 16, 1854 was given the name Manchac. The name Mountain City is the one most often applied to the area, but it was not until the post office was moved to Colonel Haupt's store that the name was changed. Dr. Emory gives the date of the removal of the post office as October 24, 1860.

It is interesting to note that Miss Fannie Manlove who wrote a lengthy article on the history of this area said that she did not know the name of the first post office. Dr. Emory's study supplied this information.

Miss Manlove's article in the Kyle Newsof April 20, 1928 lists the names of the twenty families who were the original settlers. They were: Allen, Barton, Buntons (three families), Breedlove, Black, Brown, Carr, Day, Golden, Haupt, Manlove, Moore, Porter, Rectors (two families), Stephenson, Turner, and Vaughan.

These families were interested in education and religion, as well as farming. The first school was organized about the same time as the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. The first two teachers were named Gibson and Francis. Miss Manlove prefaced the names with the word Professor. But the teacher who brought fame to the community was a Mr. John Edgar who came from Nashville, Tennessee. He and his family proved to be excellent educators. His pupils were "well grounded in the 'threeR's' and the advanced pupils were experts in math and Latin" according to Miss Manlove's account.

A union Sunday School met in the new school house. The first superintendent was James Stephenson, followed by a Dr. Rector. Some of the early ministers were Langdon, Rennick, Roach, and Young. A Mr. Carrington, of the Christian Church, preached occasionally, as did Bishop Gregg of the Episcopal Church.

During the Civil War, the post office was the center of village life. As the stage coach from San Antonio to Austin came through, the people gathered to hear the news. A Colonel D. E. Moore, who had a strong voice, usually read the newspaper to the crowd assembled at the post office. This was the only "news broadcast" available!

Even among the trying times of the 1860's, Mountain City continued to attract newcomers. Mrs. Hall's thesis lists: S. C. Glasscock, Julius Schmidt who had the first blacksmith shop. Don Wilson who had a dry goods store with several clerks; W. W. Puckett, Nelson, and others. Later came D. A. Young, a successful merchant, and Mr. Casselberry was one of the good farmers."

With this continued growth, why did Mountain City become a ghost

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Allen's Prairie, Manchac, and Mountain City

town? In 1881 the railroad came through the place where Kyle is now located and--almost all of Mountain City moved to this more convenient location.

It is interesting to note that at present, 1978, a community called Mountain City Oaks is being developed near the old Mountain City.

Mrs. Archie Weatherford has given this information about a later settler. Mr. Archie Weatherford's mother and her first husband, the Reverend Mr. Jesse King, a Presbyterian minister, went to serve in Mountain City in 1877. He died at the age of thirty years. She then moved to Kyle and later married Mr. William Campbell Weatherford, father of Mr. Archie Weatherford of San Marcos.

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CANNONVILLE AND HAYS CITY

The county seat of Hays County is San Marcos which is located in the southeast corner of the county. However, in at least two instances, the location of the county seat has been challenged.

About 1850, William Cannon laid out a would-be town on his ranch which was located about four miles south of Dripping Springs. He argued that the county seat should be in the central part of the county and that his ranch was the desirable spot. He called his town Cannonville. He built a crude building of logs which he called the court house. Dudley Dobie says that "court did meet there for a time."

A post office operated there from August 28, 1857 until November 10, 1859 when it was moved to Capt's Mill. The postmaster was Albert Heaton.

A school that had first been located at Pounds Chapel, then at Cherry Springs was moved to Cannonville. These three sites were within a radius of three miles. Later, in 1862, this school was moved to Gatlin. But, in spite of all this activity, Cannonville did not become a lasting settlement, much less the county seat.

Another attempt to move the county seat was begun in 1908 after the court house in San Marcos burned. In that year, Hezekiah Williams laid out a town which he called Hays City. It was about eleven miles north of San Marcos and was nearer the geographical center of the county.

Mr. Williams made elaborate plans for a town. He built a

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Cannonville and Hays City

two-story hotel, a church, and a lumber yard. He even bought a printing press and for a short time published a paper called the Hays City Enterprise. Lots were laid out and extensive advertising was used to attract settlers. But nothing came of the plan.

Two year years after Mr. William's death, which occurred in 1914, a silent movie entitled "Down by the Rio Grande" was made at the location of his ill-fated town. The leading parts were played by famous movie stars of that era: William S. Hart and Lillian Russell!

Later, the Baptist church building was moved from its Hays City location to nearby Wimberley where it is used by the First Christian Church.

San Marcos remains the county seat; Cannonville and Hays City are only memories.

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STRINGTOWN

One of the most interesting of the early settlements was the one known as Stringtown. It was located a few miles south of present day San Marcos on what is now called the Hunter Road. It was then part of the stage coach road that stretched between Austin and San Antonio.

In 1849 Mr. John D. Pitts who had purchased land from General Burleson, encouraged friends and relatives from Georgia to come to the area. They built their homes on both sides of the road. Because the houses were spread over about eight miles, the community became known as Stringtown.

Mrs. Zora Malone Talbot has covered the history of the place in a book called Stringtown. She tells of the difficulties and hardships, but also includes descriptions of the happy times that made life very pleasant.

In a newspaper article (Kyle News April 20, 1928) Judge Ed R. Kone paid a glowing tribute to the industry of the people and the beauty of the countryside in this area. To him, Stringtown represented all that was commendable in pioneer living.

Today, however, only the rock walls on the Hunter Road remind passersby of the people who once lived in this place.

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SAN MARCOS de NEVE

This was the original San Marcos. A DAR marker now indicates the place on the old San Antonio Road near the meeting place of the San Marcos and ^{Blanco}~~Guadalupe~~ Rivers.

A complete record of the establishment of "Villa de San Marcos de Neve" is in the Tula Townsend Wyatt Collection in the San Marcos Public Library.

Briefly, this was the situation. Spanish settlers, recruited from Mexico, reached the site in 1808. But there were many problems that doomed the settlement almost from the start. Indian raids which resulted in many losses, especially cattle and horses, created fear. Finally, a flood that almost destroyed the place caused them to lose so many possessions that they abandoned the area in 1810.

This was an early ghost town.

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SCIENCE HALL

About thirteen miles northeast of San Marcos near Goforth was a community called Science Hall. It came into existence about 1871. Two brothers, Whit and J. L. Andrews, bought land in this sparsely settled area and started the town. A school was erected which was called Science Hall and, from this name, the town was so designated. A Mr. Pyle and Mrs. Willie A. Andrews were the first teachers. It was Mrs. Andrews who gave the school its name.

In 1883, Mrs. Andrews moved to Kyle where she taught in the Kyle Seminary for a year. She then returned to Science Hall and started a private boarding school for girls. She called it Science Hall Institute. The school operated very successfully for several years, but Mrs. Andrews finally sold out and moved to Austin.

At one time, there was a gin, a store, blacksmith shop, and a church in addition to the school. The post office which opened in March, 1890 was closed in 1892 and moved to Buda.

The earliest settlers, in addition to the Andrews, were the Lynches, Jimmy Goforth, John and Louis Franks, Tom Howe, and the Reverend Mr. David Porter.

Some of the other teachers of the school were: O. A. Whipple, E. H. Phinney, Holland Bell, Robert Bell, Major J. M. Adams, Richard Cavitt, the Reverend Mr. C. C. Peck, and the Misses Mollie Lynch, Laura Hayes, Belle Schmidt, Myrtle Watson, and Mrs. E. C. Andrews. These names were listed in the Kyle News of April 20, 1928.

When the farmers sold out, another ghost town was formed.

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BEAR CREEK, CAPT'S MILL, AND JOHNSON INSTITUTE

Another settlement made near a stream was on Bear Creek in north Hays County, about thirty miles from San Marcos. A Mr. Capt was the first settler and the grist mill that he put up in 1851 or 1852 was called, of course, Capt's Mill. Unfortunately, the mill was washed away in 1867.

The post office that had been at Cannonville was moved to Capt's Mill in November, 1859. This served the community until November, 1866. The post master was Mr. Thomas Johnson.

Other early settlers were John W. Wuthrich, Isham Good, and a Mr. Long who were there by 1853. Frederick Wille came in 1856 and John Wahrenberger and Ove Oldham came in 1858.

This settlement was in the vicinity of Johnson Institute, an area which took its name from the school established there by Mr. Thomas Johnson. The school was founded in 1853.

Mr. Johnson was born in Virginia in 1805. He moved to Missouri and taught there for five years before moving to Texas about 1844. He taught school at Lockhart and other places before buying the land on which he erected his school.

According to local reporters, the school was an unusually good one. There were forty pupils enrolled the first year and at the time of Mr. Johnson's death in 1868 there were two hundred. It was a coeducational, boarding school that prospered as long as Mr. Johnson lived. It was not successful after his death and was closed in 1872.

It was later made into a boys' camp and called Friday Mountain Camp. There is a historical marker at the site today.

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MECHANICSVILLE

Only in the Tyla Townsend Wyatt Collection was there any mention of the name Mechanicsville, but it is an interesting account.

Thomas Gilmer McGehee moved to his headright league (in San Marcos) in December, 1846 and started the first farm in Hays County. Here he built his home and a few other buildings and by the time of the Civil War, a small village emerged on the east side of the San Marcos River.

In 1867 Mr. McGehee laid out a town at the point where the old San Antonio-Nacogdoches Road crosses the river. There were two streets: McGehee, which ran east and west; and River Street, which ran north and south. The settlement was called Mechanicsville, but it was also known as "Scratch-Under." None of the family seemed to know the source of this second name unless one of the sons who served in the Civil War provided it.

But neither name survived; by the 1880's there was nothing left of the town. This one time settlement is now a farm owned by Mr. J. D. Cummings.

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MOUNT GAINOR

Located below the joining of Farm Road 150 and Ranch Road 12 was the settlement known as Mount Gainor, also spelled Gaynor. There was a post office here from 1872 till 1879. However, it is said that Mount Gainor really came into existence when a school district was organized and a one-room school erected on land given by Charlie Seal. The first teacher was Gilmer Bell. This was in the year 1906.

The community was well known for its many social activities. There were barbecues which sometimes lasted for three days, picnics, games, and dances.

In 1907 a union Sunday School was organized and a Baptist church came into being the same year. A Literary Society and a 4-H Club for ladies and girls, as well as many sports teams, contributed to the community spirit.

Some of the early citizens were: Messers and Mesdames T. G. Bell, S. K. Conn, H. R. Harmon, R. L. Jennings, B. F. Quick, T. M. Quick, George Simon, and Ed Wood. Also, Mr. B. T. Pursley, Mr. A. J. Watson, Mr. J. C. Quick, superintendent, Mr. Pete Turner, Mr. Will Bell, Mr. Ira Gage, Mr. Charlie Bell, and Mrs. Hamp Stubbs. (Kyle News, April 20, 1928)

But, in spite of all these settlers and their many activities, "the old community is gone now" to quote Mrs. Barkley.

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MOUNT SHARP

Mount Sharp was located on Onion Creek, about twenty-two miles northwest of San Marcos. The settlement began soon after the Civil War with the coming of the L. S. Jennings family who were among the earliest settlers. Mrs. Jennie W. Garison who wrote an article on Mount Sharp for the 1928 Kyle News remembered with pleasure an elderly man known as "Grandpa Gaynor" who was also an early settler.

The community was once a part of another ghost town, Yell. However, in 1905 a post office was established here with John M. Ross as the first postmaster.

Prominent among the first buildings was the school which was also used as a church. There was a place for camp meetings.

Among the early settlers were William Pursley, John G. Weaver, Wyatt Warrick, and Marion Massey. Also, Hugh Odom, John Haywood, a Mr. Wagoner, Mrs. Harmon, and a Mr. William Garnett, a later settler.

Mrs. Garison emphasized that Mount Sharp possessed many fine public spirited citizens who built a wonderful community.

But--Mount Sharp, too, is now a ghost town.

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GATLIN

The settlement, Gatlin, was located between Dripping Springs and Wimberley and was one of the oldest Hays County communities. It was established before the Civil War, about 1856. The names of Wanslow, Garrett, Massey, and Lee were those of the early settlers. As was the case in almost all of the early settlements, Gatlin was located near water; in this case, Gatlin Creek.

There were no other settlements nearer than Dripping Springs, to the north, and Wimberley, to the south. This isolation created problems, not the least of which was the fear of Indian raids. This fear became a reality to a Mr. Moore who was killed and scalped while rounding up his horses.

But in 1862, in spite of their difficulties, a school was established. This school was moved to Gatlin from Cannonville, but it was first located at Pounds Chapel, then moved to Cherry Springs. Quite a journey!

A Mr. Johnson, who was also a minister, was the first teacher. Mrs. Irison, who later became Mrs. Bill Caldwell, followed. They continued their work for many years. But as the area below Gatlin became more thickly settled, the school was moved (again!) down the valley. Then, Gatlin, too, joined the list of ghost towns.

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BARTON CREEK AND FITZHUGH

Until 1898 there was a community called Barton Creek on the Hays County-Travis County line. The name was derived from the Creek which flowed through the area. As this was also on the main trail of cattle driving, the old Austin-to-Llano Road, the town developed, but the progress was not rapid. As in most pioneer situations, the first buildings were logs and the Barton school was so constructed.

The first church, Baptist, was held in a brush arbor in good weather. In inclement weather, the school house was used. When the Methodist church was started, it was served by circuit riders. Among these was the Reverend Mr. W. H. H. Biggs who was assisted by a local minister named McIntosh. Between these two good men, great spiritual growth was shown in the community, according to an account in the Kyle News of April 20, 1928.

Among the names of early settlers was that of Col. G. W. Brackenridge of San Antonio who was once a resident. Riley, Keese, Cade, Adams, Fairchilds, Greer, and Lewis were also early residents. The first store keeper was Mr. Tom Saverns who started his business in 1899.

A later school building came into existence because of the diligent work of some of the citizens. Chief contributor was Mr. N. J. Adams for whom the school was named; it was later called Rock Springs School.

It was in 1898 that the name of the community was changed to Fitzhugh. This change was made by an English lady, Mrs. E.A. Brewer,

who started the post office. This name was derived from a small stream that ran through the community. Just why Mrs. Brewer changed the name is not known. Perhaps she thought Fitzhugh sounded more aristocratic. The post office was closed in 1914, but there are still people living in the community.

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HENLEY AND MILLSEAT

The original Henley settlement on Onion Creek in northern Hays County was made by a man of that name in the 1880's. He acquired land in the area and built his home there. The house was later destroyed by fire.

There were later settlers, some of whom built temporary homes, then left. A Dr. L. Smith from DeWitt County bought land from Henry Lawrence and set up practice. He also served as justice of the peace for several years.

Sometime in the early 1880's, Captain M. L. Reed and a McCarty family settled in the area. Captain Reed built his house at the site of the old Henley chimney. He also had a store and became the first postmaster in the post office which he started. He served in that capacity until his death in 1916. The post office continued in operation until the 1960's.

Between Henley, which was on the Hays-Blanco County line, and Dripping Springs, on present day Highway 290, John W. Crow started a store. He also managed to get a post office started and he became the postmaster. He named this small settlement Millseat, but the source of the name is unknown. Mrs. Barkley noted that Millseat had only a school and a one-room building. The post office was in operation from September, 1886 until November 1909. It was then moved to Henley.

Both places are now ghost towns.

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HUGO AND PURGATORY

Hugo was an early settlement in southern Hays County, ten miles west of San Marcos on the old stage coach road to Blanco. It was originally called Purgatory (or Purgatory Springs) for its location near the head of Purgatory Creek which flows into the San Marcos River within the city limits of San Marcos. Purgatory Creek originates, appropriately, at the foot of a low mountain ridge known as the Devil's Backbone.

The name of the settlement, but not the creek, was changed to Hugo, probably when the post office was established in 1896 and quite likely because the Post Office Department would not accept the name of Purgatory. Dr. Emory's records show that a post office existed at Hugo from 1896 to 1909. Elizabeth Fox was the first post mistress.

At one time there was also a school, a church, and a store. The school was established on January 9, 1877, with seventeen pupils. The first trustees were James R. Burleson, James L. Williamson, and J. N. Clayton. A one-acre tract of land was donated about 1897 by Oscar Owen for a new school and church. The families in the community made contributions to pay for the materials that went into the frame structure. Classes were held in this building until about 1928, when the school was consolidated with the San Marcos Independent School District. A little later the building was put up for sale by the School District and is now owned by Mr. and Mrs. J. Q. Cliett of San Marcos.

The former students of the school and their descendants have

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Hugo and Purgatory

held annual reunions in San Marcos for the past several years.

The first was on October 10, 1970. A list of those attending and their current addresses was included in an article in the San Marcos Record of October 15, 1970. The most recent was held on October 7, 1978, fifty years after the school closed, with a record attendance. A picture of those attending the "dinner and gab session" appeared in the San Marcos Record of October 12, 1978.

By 1940 Hugo was an empty ghost town. The school building is the only structure remaining, but Hugo Mountain, just to the north, overlooks the site, the school building, and the head of Purgatory Creek.

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CENTER POINT

Center Point was largely a farming area, about five miles southwest of San Marcos. A school was established here in 1877. It was named for Mr. T. J. Davis who owned land in the area and was one of the trustees. J. S. Brown and W. W. Randle were also trustees. The teacher received \$42.30 a month.

A cotton gin was built here and the settlement became known as Center Point. The Handbook of Texas (Vol. I, p. 322) says that the area existed "as a school for Latin Americans for a number of years after the initial consolidation of schools in the County."

Today a DAR marker indicates the location of this ghost town.

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TURNERSVILLE

Turnersville was another ghost town that was only partially in Hays County. It was on the Hays-Travis County line, four miles east of Buda.

This community was named for the Mr. William Turner who purchased land in the area. The "portion of land" which he first bought was paid for with a "fine pair of boots." When he added more land, he paid all of twenty-five cents an acre for it!

At one time there was a school, a store, and a blacksmith shop in the town. But when the Turner children became of school age, Mr. and Mrs. Turner moved to San Marcos and Turnersville was no more.

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