

# **Sweeny townsite land purchased for \$1 per acre**

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Sweeny once had a luxurious hotel and a thriving bullfrog shipping business.

Neither of these are part of the present day scene, but many more lucrative businesses have taken the place of the bullfrog enterprise. And it is interesting to go back and look at some of the things that happened in the early history of the town.

Third and fourth generations of some of the pioneers of the area are still living in Sweeny and taking an active part in the affairs of the community just as did their grandparents and great-grandparents.

Until her recent death, residing in Old Ocean, where she had been postmistress, was Mrs. Kathryn Bannister, a descendant of the John Sweeny family for whom the town was named.

John and his family were among Stephen F. Austin's colonists who received land grants in the area. The Sweeny Cemetery is located on the site of the Sweeny plantation home.

The townsite of Sweeny was originally owned by William and Thomas Sweeny, John's sons, who carried a load of mules to Nashville, Tenn., to raise capital to purchase two grants of land, for the then fabulous price of \$1 per acre.

No remnant of the Sweeny plantation is left to identify the possessions of the family who gave the town its name. Of the five or six plantation homes in the area, only one house is still standing — by the 1960s, the house on the Levi Jordan plantation, unoccupied, but owned by descendants of the original owner.

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Several teen-agers who came here with their parents as early as 1910 have grandchildren who have recently entered the Sweeny schools.

J. R. Smith, whose father, Travis Smith, was among the first settlers in East Columbia; and Mrs. Ethel Parten Winscott, whose family was one of the first three families to make their homes here, have served in a sense as the historians of the community.

Their scrapbooks and vivid memories provide for any newcomer with a little time on his hands many interesting stories related to happenings in the area back in the early 1900s.

The John Partens, the Emmett Rimmers and the

Levi Hankins were the first families in Sweeny. They came from Missouri in 1910.

However, they were proceeded here by the railroad linking Houston to Brownsville, Travis Smith's general store, and the Bernard Development Co.

Smith had erected his store, the first business house here, on the west side of the railroad track, where his son, J. R. Smith now owns a beautiful home. Later, in 1911, when what is now Main Street was cleared, Smith moved his building on the north side of the track.

The two-story frame building housed a general store on the first floor and a hotel on the second floor. The rooms were partitioned off only by curtains for what privacy they afforded. But guests were plentiful there until the Bernard Land Development Co. constructed a "real fine" hotel down the street.

This building also housed the Post Office, with Travis Smith as the first postmaster. When his young son J. R. took over the operations of the

store, he also ran the post office until 1943, when a separate building was constructed and Herman Vezey became the postmaster.

Mrs. Winscott said that they lived at Smith's hotel until her father secured a four-room tenant house on the Levi Jordan plantation for the family to live in.

Rimmer built a beautiful two-story home for his family, the home later occupied by Mr. and Mrs. John Arrington. About a year later Parten completed his family's new home about three miles from the Rimmers.

Mrs. Winscott recalled that the meals prepared and served to the hotel guests and Smith were prepared by a Negro couple named Johnson, who lived on the place, and she said the hot biscuits that she ate then were the best she ever tasted.

Following the group to Sweeny within the next couple of years were the Chenaults, the Ellises, the Arringtons, the Warters, Ballards, and Woodrums. Coming close

behind this group were the Meadors and the Lindseys.

The railroad and the stories about the land "as rich and fertile as the soil of the Nile Valley" attracted a Kansas real estate man, Herbert D. Heard, who founded the land development company.

Andrew K. Waters and his father established the first shipping shed. Produce from the truck farms in the area did a thriving business, and as

many as 15 carloads per day of vegetables were shipped out during the spring and fall seasons.

Also, the Old Ocean lake was abounding with an abundant supply of bullfrogs, and the shipping of live frogs to Houston was a big business then.

Heard, who wanted to prove to all passer-bys, traveling by rail, that the land here was the finest for agricultural growth, planned and laid out the park near the railroad. He planted fruit trees and beautiful flowering shrubs as a living proof of the soil's ability to produce.

Warters also pioneered Sweeny's first water system which he sold to the City of Sweeny when it incorporated in 1945.

Miss May Rice, a graduate of the University of Ohio, was the first school teacher. She held classes in 1911 in a one-room frame building for nine-grade school pupils and two high school students. She was paid the sum of \$60 per month.

She tutored the two high school students before regular classes each day, and they also studied with her during the noon hour.

When the desks did not arrive on time for those first classes, the men of the community cut and hewed benches from logs to serve the first students.

A fine two-story brick building was constructed in 1912, and a class of six graduated in 1915. Among those were Miss Ethel Parten, the salutatorian.

The beautiful building was destroyed by fire in 1917, and all records were burned. Available school records date back to 1927 at which time there were 236 enrolled students.

Fire and storm damages has marked the end to many of the business houses constructed in 1911. Only four of the original business houses still stand. Besides Smith's store, they are the buildings more recently occupied by Kimmey-Boswell's, Your Gift Shop and the Cinderella Shop.

The latter shop once housed the town's first drug store, and was owned by a Dr. Eades, the town's first doctor.

And, if you ever hear anyone say those "cotton pickin' Baptists" it may not necessarily be a disparaging remark—that is exactly how the First Baptist Church, the first local congregation to have its own building, got its start.

A Houston minister came down in 1912 and held a revival. Following this, A

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