



## **HISTORY**

### **Early Times**

Millions of years ago, the earth was fractured by the Balcones Fault. Running through what is now central Texas, the escarpment was cut by the Brazos River, and created dramatic limestone bluffs preserved in Cameron Park and points west. Mastodons from the east and mammoths from the west traveled to the area. The largest nursery herd of Pleistocene-era mammoths has been unearthed and preserved. Waco is named after the Waco Indians, the first inhabitants of this area. The Wacos were a branch of the Wichitas and were closely related to the Tawakonis. The tribe lived in beehive shaped huts, 20- to 25- feet high, made of poles, buffalo hides and rushes.

### **Rugged Frontier**

In 1837, the Texas Rangers arrived intending to build a fort at Waco Village. Texas Secretary of War William S. Fisher ordered them here to protect the white frontier after a Comanche raid at Ft. Parker near Groesbeck. The Rangers spent three weeks cutting a road through the woods and building a bridge over Cow Bayou. However, it was decided the outpost was too far from any white settlement to offer any protection. In 1845, a settlement was established in the area by a rugged Scot named Neil McLennan. In early 1849, surveyor George B. Erath laid out the first streets of Waco. Lots were sold for \$5 each. Among the first buyers was a Texas Ranger, Shapley P. Ross. Captain Ross opened a ferry across the river in 1849 and built the first house in Waco with help from Armstead Ross, who was the first African-American to arrive in Waco. The City of Waco was incorporated on August 29, 1856.

### **Texas Cotton Palace**

In the mid- to late-1800s, the fertile soil of the Brazos valley drew plantation owners from the deep South. As the turn of the century approached, Waco was one of the world's leading producers of cotton. In 1894, the first Cotton Palace Pageant was held in Waco. The opulent building which housed the month-long exhibition was destroyed by fire and rebuilt in 1910. Although the historic Cotton Palace building no longer exists, the Cotton Palace Pageant is still held in Waco each year in late April.

### **Civil War and Beyond**

McLennan County supplied 2,200 volunteers to the Confederacy, out of a county-wide population of about 8,000. Six of McLennan County's volunteers became generals. Although Waco was in a severe and desperate condition at the war's end, it

recovered rapidly. Ranchers and cattlemen soon began driving cattle north. As the Chisholm Trail became more and more popular, cowboys and their herds crossed the Brazos River in Waco. In 1870, the 475-foot Suspension Bridge was opened as the first pedestrian/wagon bridge across the Brazos. A year later, the Waco and Northwestern Railroad reached Waco. It was followed by the Cotton Belt, and later by the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroads making Waco a hub of commerce for the state of Texas.

### **Waco - a Center of Learning**

In 1886, Baylor University moved to Waco from Independence, Texas. Founded in 1845 under the Republic of Texas, Baylor is the oldest continually operated university in Texas. Paul Quinn College, Texas' oldest liberal arts college for African-Americans, was moved to Waco in 1881. The school was named in honor of Bishop William Paul Quinn, longtime AME missionary. The college relocated to Dallas in the early '90's.

### **Waco's Multicultural Heritage**

Waco celebrates its rich cultural heritage in many ways. From the museums to the many buildings, churches and homes, Waco celebrates the traditions and historic significance that each culture brings to the community. Hispanics, African-Americans, Czech, Norwegians, and others have contributed to the building of this city.

### **Waco Today**

The historic Suspension Bridge is the centerpiece of present-day Waco and is surrounded by lovely city parks. Indian Spring Park is on the west bank and Martin Luther King, Jr. Park is on the east bank. A beautifully landscaped riverwalk connects the bridge to the Waco Tourist Information Center and the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame & Museum at Fort Fisher. West of the bridge is the beautiful 416-acre Cameron Park. Waco's downtown is vibrant and growing, with many restaurants, shopping, and attractions located in easy walking distance.

### **Bellmead**

The community of Bellmead began in the mid-1920s, when the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad chose the site for its locomotive shops. Several hundred people were employed at the shops, and families began moving to the area. The first school was called Bellmead in honor of Belle Meade Farms, a prominent horse farm in Tennessee. Residents of the community voted to incorporate in 1939, but the incorporation was soon dissolved for lack of water, sewage, and fire services. The

Bellmead economy revived in 1942, when Waco Army Air James Connally Air Force Base opened just northeast of town. The population was reported at twenty-five in the early 1940s, but it increased rapidly after World War II, rising to 800 by 1949. The community was reincorporated in 1954 with a mayor-alderman government. As of the census of 2010, there were 9,901 people.

## **Hewitt**

The City of Hewitt was established following the donation of land by John A. Warren, the town's first businessman, in the 1880s. Warren purchased the approximately 40 acres. Many of Warren's descendants still live there. The town site was named Hewitt in 1883 for George A. Hewitt, an employee of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas (KATY) Railroad. In 1890, only 60 residents called Hewitt home. The city grew slowly but steadily until the late 1970s, when the population exploded, giving way to a 700-percent population boom. Hewitt Texas was ranked #44 by CNNMoney Magazine's 2007 Top 100 places to live.

## **McGregor**

McGregor, first known as McGregor Springs, is an incorporated town sixteen miles southwest of Waco on U.S. Highway 84. It was established in 1882 at the intersection of the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe and the Texas and St. Louis railways. The new town was named McGregor Springs in honor of Gregor Carmichael McGregor, a doctor who gave the railroad right-of-way to cross his land. Advertisements for excursion trains to the prospective city appeared in Texas newspapers, and on September 7, 1882, a state land commissioner sold lots at auction from the back of a railroad flatcar. Because of its favorable location, McGregor drew much of its early population and several businesses from nearby small communities like Banks and Comanche Springs in McLennan County and Eagle Springs in Coryell County. By 1884 McGregor had a wide variety of businesses, a weekly newspaper, a school, and several hundred residents. The town adopted a city charter in November 1886. The next decade or so brought the addition of two hotels, a national bank, a washing-machine factory, a tannery, a cottonseed oil mill, and an artesian waterworks. The census of 1890 gave the population of McGregor as 774, but other estimates for the same time period were as high as 1,500.

McGregor continued to prosper in the early 1900s as the commercial center and shipping point for much of western McLennan County. Although the number of residents and businesses fell slightly during Great Depression, the community weathered this period well. The local economy received a significant boost in 1942, when the United States Army announced plans to build the Bluebonnet Ordnance Plant on 18,000 acres just southwest of town. As a result of this new industry, the

population of McGregor tripled in three months to more than 6,000. After World War II it fell back to about 2,000, and the ordnance plant was converted to a variety of peacetime industries, such as stove and furniture manufacturing. In the 1950s part of the old plant was converted to manufacturing rocket engines, solid propellants, and gas generators. Much of the rest of the land was either sold to individuals or given to Texas A & M University for the development of an experimental farm and research center. In 2000 the population was listed as 6,563.

## **West**

The City of West traces its origins to the formation of McLennan County on January 28, 1850 by an act of the State of Texas. It was one of four small settlements located within this region, the others being Waco Village, Erath and White Rock. West was originally known as “Bould Springs” (later Bold Springs). Settlers were attracted to the region by the availability of both woodlands and blackland prairie.

By the 1880’s, the Missouri-Kansas-Texas Railroad created new job opportunities, attracting a new wave of European immigrants. Many of the immigrants who made their way to West were Czechs and Germans.

Dubbed by the Texas State Legislature as the “Czech Heritage Capital of Texas“ and “Home of the Official Kolache of the Texas Legislature,” the community is proud of their heritage. That heritage has been celebrated at the annual Westfest each Labor Day since 1976. The festival featuring polka bands, dancing, arts and crafts, Miss Westfest, baking contests, and more, is one of the largest Czech Polka festivals in the state.

On April 17, 2013, a fire broke out at a fertilizer plant that stored ammonium nitrate, a fertilizer that can be used as an explosive. The massive blast killed 15 people, including 12 first responders, and injured at least 200. It destroyed nearby schools, an apartment complex, and a nursing home and damaged hundreds of homes in the surrounding area. The tight-knit community rallied around those affected, baking kolaches for first responders, providing temporary lodging, and helping each other to rebuild.

Today, visitors to west stroll along Main and Oak Streets looking for special antiques and enjoying traditional Czech food favorites.