

ABSTRACT

Kirvin and Streetman:
A New History of the Northwest Section of Freestone County,
1900 - 1950

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A social history of the northwest section of Freestone County, Texas, focusing mainly on the towns of Kirvin and Streetman, 1900 - 1950, reveals the developments, the tragedies, the stories, and the obvious themes running through these communities' histories. Kirvin and Streetman ultimately became quiet communities, with little to no activity, but they were once vibrant, active places full of people, businesses, and human life. By studying these communities, new insight emerges into how they were similar, different, and how they related to one another.

Kirvin and Streetman: A New History of the Northwest Section of Freestone County,
1900 to 1950

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
Chapter	
1. An Overview of Freestone County	1
<i>Physical Features of Freestone County</i>	2
<i>History of Freestone County</i>	5
<i>Freestone County Communities</i>	16
2. A New History of Kirvin, Texas	21
<i>Kirvin in the 1920s</i>	25
<i>Monte Akers in Kirvin's History</i>	36
3. A New History of Streetman, Texas	51
<i>Race Relations in Streetman</i>	56
<i>Community Activities</i>	60
<i>Streetman's Contribution to Major League Baseball</i>	63
<i>Decline in Streetman</i>	72
<i>Streetman Remembered</i>	75
4. Comparison of Kirvin and Streetman and Conclusions	78
BIBLIOGRAPHY	87

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CHAPTER ONE

An Overview of Freestone County

Freestone County is located in East Central Texas in the center of a group of counties once known as the Trinity Star.¹ To the east of Freestone County is Anderson County, to the south, Leon County, to the west, Limestone County, and to the north, Henderson and Navarro counties.² Today, this east-central county is bounded on the northeast by the Trinity River.³ Interstate Highway 45 and Texas State Highway 75 run north-south through the county, while U.S. Highway 84 runs northwest to southeast. Freestone County covers 892 square miles of coastal plain upland, with an elevation ranging from 600 to 900 feet above sea level.

Historically, the main communities in Freestone County have been Teague (4885), Kirvin (133), Donie (206), Streetman (207), and Wortham (1148). Fairfield (3306), located on Interstate Highway 45, has been the county sea

¹John Leffler, "Freestone County," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/FF/hgf2.html>, 1.

²Ibid.

³"Freestone County," *The Texas Almanac 2006-2007*, (Dallas, TX: The Dallas Morning News, 2006), 223.

since 1851.⁴ Other smaller communities include Dew, Lanely, Cotton Gin, Freestone, Stewards Mill, Butler, and Winkler, the last of which is on the border of Freestone and Navarro counties. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the total population of the county, including towns and surrounding areas, was 18,597.⁵

Physical Features of Freestone County

The landscape of the county is generally a smooth, even plain with a gentle slope from northwest to southeast. The area is timbered with mesquite on the west, while the eastern half of the county has almost every kind of oak, hickory, and walnut. A scattering of pine groves on the western bank of the Trinity River provides drainage for the entire county, with the exception of a small area in the southwest. Springs are common in the deep sandy areas.⁶ Among Freestone County's natural minerals are natural gas and lignite coal.⁷ Rainfall averages about forty-two inches per year, and temperatures range from an average high of 94

⁴Ibid, populations shown are from the 2000 U.S. Census, as reported by *The Texas Almanac*.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Leffler, 1.

⁷"Freestone County," 223.

degrees in July to an average low of 36 degrees in January. The growing season lasts for 263 days.⁸

Other physical features of the county include its rolling Blackland and sandy, loam soil.⁹ The Texas Blackland Prairie, which touches Freestone County on its west side, is a distinct physical region stretching three hundred miles from the Red River to near San Antonio.¹⁰ The dark, heavy clay soil is arguably the most fertile soil west of the Mississippi River.¹¹

The Blackland Prairies, together with the Eastern Cross Timbers, and Grand Prairies, constitute the physiographic regions of Central Texas. These prairie belts roughly parallel each other in an irregular north-south direction and comprise major physiographic features.¹² North of Sherman, the Blackland Prairies abruptly strike west-east, terminating just east of Clarksville, Texas. The narrowest part of the Blacklands occurs midway between

⁸Ibid.

⁹"Freestone County," 223.

¹⁰Rebecca Sharpless and Joe C. Yelderman, eds., *The Texas Blackland Prairie-Land, History and Culture*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 1993), intro.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid, 24.

Austin and San Antonio, Texas, where the prairie constricts to a width of of thirty miles.¹³

The Blacklands developed on the outcrop of muds and chalks of Late Cretaceous age. Deposited over time that ended more than sixty million years ago, these rocks now form the foundation of the Texas Blacklands. The modern soils, deep, chalky, and extremely fertile, developed from the weathering of these ancient muds. Over time, plants developed that were well suited to the Blacklands soil and climate.¹⁴

The Blackland Prairies of Texas are also of significant commercial interest and great importance in the human history of Texas.¹⁵ And Freestone County is touched by this significant piece of land as well as a defining characteristic of Central Texas.

Agriculture was the base of Freestone County's economy at its founding and during the remaining years of the nineteenth century. The county's more recent economy is based primarily on natural gas, mining, stone quarry, agribusiness, the railroad, a state prison, various

¹³Ibid, 26.

¹⁴Ibid, intro.

¹⁵Ibid, 24.

manufacturing, and two electricity generating plants.¹⁶ Other commerce in the county includes oil, telephone operations, hospitals, and museums. The county also offers recreational activities such as fishing, hunting, lakes, a state park, historic sites, and coon hunting.¹⁷

While agriculture is not the economic base it was in the nineteenth century, farming and ranching remain a big business in Freestone County into the 21st century. Much land is available for hunting leases. Hardwood and firewood is marketed. Beef cattle are raised and hay is produced. Farms in the county also produce strawberries, melons, pecans, and peaches, evidence of agricultural diversity.¹⁸

History of Freestone County

Archeological evidence shows that the area that became Freestone County was inhabited from the late Holocene era to the arrival of the Spanish.¹⁹ In the early historic period of the county, the area was inhabited by Caddoan Indians, but by the 1830s, these included the Kichais, who had a small community near present-day Butler, and the

¹⁶"Freestone County," 223.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Leffler, 1.

Tawakonis, who lived around Tehuacana Creek.²⁰ Other tribes appear to have used the area for hunting and trading. Both the French and the Spanish were familiar with the area during colonial times, but it seems the French had relatively more influence with the Indians in the area, a fact which limited Spanish presence.²¹

In the mid 1820s, the new Mexican government opened Texas to American colonization, which opened uninhabited tracts of land to immigration contractors and empresarios. David G. Burnet was one of the first to secure a grant for land that would become Freestone County.²²

Burnet received permission to settle 300 families in the area within six years. Burnet made little progress executing these conditions until after 1830, when he joined with other empresarios to form the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company.

It is unclear how many of those landholders actually took up residence in the area. The locally produced *History of Freestone County*, however, cites several families who settled in the area under empresario Burnet. One was the Henry Awalt family, approved on 22 December

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

1826, and who settled just west of Stewards Mill.²³

According to Tisdale family records, the Awalt and Tisdale families were the only families living in that part of what is now Freestone County in the late 1820s.²⁴ Another example was the Longbotham family, who came to Texas from Alabama in 1834 with the David Burnet Colony.²⁵ Robert B. Longbotham was awarded a tract of land by the government of Mexico that included present-day Wortham, originally named Longbotham.²⁶

After the Republic of Texas was established in 1836, the company's rights to land in the area were terminated. During the early years of the republic, the area was considered Indian land, and therefore dangerous. Few whites moved into it until the Indian Treaty of 1843.²⁷ Nine groups participated: the Delawares, Chickasaws, Wacos, Tawakonis, Kichais, Anadarkos, Hainais, Biloxis, and

²³Fred Ferguson and Christine Watson Marsters, "Awalt, Henry," *History of Freestone County, Texas*, Freestone County Historical Commission, 1978, 234.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Paul Culwell, "Moody, Addie Longbotham," *History of Freestone County, Texas*, Freestone County Historical Commission, 1978, 493.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Leffler, 1.

Cherokees. The treaty stated that all hostilities should cease between them and the white settlers.²⁸

The years following the treaty saw many whites moving into that region, and by 1846, every county bordering Freestone had been organized. One of these, Limestone County, included the land that would later become Freestone County.²⁹ That area would continue to grow with people and settlements.

In 1847, the steamboat *Roliance*, made its way up the Trinity River. Other steamboats followed, bringing supplies for settlers in the area, and additional settlers. Because the population of Limestone County was rapidly expanding, the Texas Legislature divided it to form Freestone County in 1850. By 1851, the county was organized and the center town of Mound Prairie changed its name to Fairfield, and was chosen to be the county seat of government. Other early Freestone County towns were Cotton Gin, Avant Prairie, Butler, and Bonner Community.³⁰

Freestone County, at its origins, was characteristically southern. By 1860, the county's economy

²⁸W.E.S. Dickerson, "Indian Relations," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/II/bzi1.html>, 5.

²⁹Leffler, 2.

³⁰Ibid.

was quickly developing toward the model provided by slaveholding areas to the east. The 1860 federal census only enumerated the free white population. A separate "slave schedule" was used to list each slaveholder, the number of slaves he owned, and the sex, age, and color of each slave.³¹ The census found that of the county's total population of 6,881, approximately 3,600, or more than half, were slaves. At that time, Freestone County ranked tenth out of ninety-nine slave-holding counties in Texas.³²

Together, there were fifty-seven slaveholders in the county who owned twenty slaves or more in 1860. The United States agricultural census found 417 farms, encompassing 282,803 acres, in the county that year.³³ More than half of these were small farms, but already, a few extensive plantations had been established.

Corn was the county's most important crop at this time; however, cotton production was also becoming well-established. Farmers also produced large quantities of tobacco. Other crops included wheat, oats, and sweet

³¹Stephen R. Butler, *Historical and Genealogical Handbook of Freestone County, Texas*, (Richardson, TX: Shoestring Publications, 1997), 13.

³²Ibid.

³³Leffler, 2.

potatoes.³⁴ Ranching was also important to the county's economy. The agricultural census listed almost 19,300 cattle and 7,700 sheep in 1860.³⁵

Occupations other than farming were numerous, although usually very limited in scope. According to historian Philip Dale Browne, "of planters, farmers, white farm hands, and over seers, there were a few more than five hundred eighty; all other trades, occupations, and professions, not including students of medicine, law, and divinity, included some two hundred and thirty."³⁶

Residents of Freestone County began to found cultural institutions by the early 1860s. A combination school and Masonic lodge appeared in Fairfield in 1853. At least two colleges were established before or during the Civil War, including Fairfield Female Academy (1860) and Woodland College for boys (1863). Also established by 1860 were thirteen churches, mostly Methodist and Baptist.³⁷

Freestone County experienced heavy involvement in the South's tumultuous effort of forming the Confederate States of America and fighting the Civil War. John Gregg and W.M.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Philip Dale Browne, "The Early History of Freestone County to 1865," (M. A. Thesis, University of Texas, 1925), 88.

³⁷Leffler, 2.

Peck represented Freestone County at the Texas Secession Convention in Austin, held on 28 January 1861, and on 23 February, Freestone County residents voted 585 to 3 in favor of secession.³⁸ According to Browne, "The tide of public sentiment in the county was too strong for the anti-secessionists; they were either alienated or swept along with an irresistible enthusiasm for separation."³⁹

Preparations for Confederate military action were undertaken and 529 men were available for duty.⁴⁰ The records are too incomplete to determine precisely how many different Confederate army units contained men from Freestone County.

Among these units was the famous John Bell Hood's Texas Brigade, organized in Virginia on 12 November 1861, under the command of Lewis T. Wigfall, commander of the 1st Texas Infantry.⁴¹ Hood's Texas Brigade was probably the only military unit containing Freestone County men who served in the eastern theatre of the war. All of the other units containing men from Freestone County served in the western theatre, as part of the Army of Tennessee or in the

³⁸Browne, 123.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Leffler, 2.

⁴¹Monte Akers, "Freestone County Men Served Confederacy," *The Fairfield Recorder*, 17 April 1986.

Trans-Mississippi Department, located west of the Mississippi River.⁴² The Freestone County contingent suffered many casualties but served well in the Civil War.⁴³

Reconstruction began in Texas on 17 June 1865, when U.S. General Gordon Granger assumed command of all federal troops in Texas. On the 19th of that same month, he proclaimed the emancipation of Texas slaves.⁴⁴ Texas did not suffer as severely as other states of the Confederacy, and Freestone County less than many other places in Texas.

"For Freestone County, the war was the end of an era, and a way of life was gone," asserted local historian Michael Edd Bonner.⁴⁵ Like most areas of the South, the county's economy was adversely affected by the Civil War. Because Freestone County maintained its agricultural dependence, it declined slowly over the hundred years after the war.⁴⁶ The loss of slave labor and the lack of good transportation slowed the economy. In 1870, the area's

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Leffler, 2.

⁴⁴Philip Dale Browne, "Reconstruction after the Civil War," *History of Freestone County, Texas*, Freestone County Historical Commission, 1978, 52.

⁴⁵Michael Edd Bonner, "Freestone County in the Civil War," *History of Freestone County, Texas*, Freestone County Historical Commission, 1978, 39.

⁴⁶Ibid

production of corn and cotton were lower than it had been in 1860.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, the county experienced growth during this period. By 1870, the agricultural census counted 1,029 farms in the area, more than double the number ten years earlier, and a population increase to 8,139. The county still lacked a good transportation system through the nineteenth century; however, the area profited by the proximity of the Houston and Texas Central and the International-Great Northern railways (the railways skirted the county to the west and south) during the years between 1870 and 1900.⁴⁸ The population grew and the number of "improved" acres of farmland tripled during this period.⁴⁹

A significant rise in cotton production explains the county's economic growth in the late nineteenth century. Other aspects of agriculture developed at this time as well. Corn production was big and cattle ranching flourished. Poultry became important for the local economy.⁵⁰

This economic activity was further encouraged in 1906, when the Trinity and Brazos Valley Railway was built across

⁴⁷Leffler, 2.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Leffler, 3.

⁵⁰Ibid.

the county and partly solved the transportation problem. Despite the boll-weevil infestation that plagued Texas farmers beginning in 1903, the economy continued to grow during the first two decades of the twentieth century.⁵¹ The number of farms, acreage, and people increased.

In the 1920s, however, agriculture radically declined. Between 1920 and 1925, the county lost 777 farms. During the 1920s, when Prohibition was in effect, one of the most lucrative businesses in the county was bootlegging. This activity centered around the community of Young. Illegal whiskey, known as "Freestone County Bourbon Deluxe," was transported out of the county by car, boat, truck, and plane. This illegal enterprise helped offset the downturn in the economy, and a good number of local families gained wealth from the liquor trade, but the economy never fully recovered. Cotton production dropped severely, and the population of the county waned by 1930.⁵²

The economic slump continued through the Great Depression of the 1930s. Cropland harvested in the county declined. Land planted in cotton declined. The number of farmers dropped, as well as the overall county population.⁵³

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

Freestone County experienced an economic slump that lasted until around 1970, but the degeneration ceased after the arrival of a major traffic route through the county.

"It is one of the busiest distance traffic routes, running 245 miles from Dallas to Houston, and an economic force of some importance in Fairfield and in Freestone County," stated *The Fairfield Recorder*.⁵⁴ Interstate 45 arrived in Freestone County around the fall of 1970, immediately becoming one of the busiest traffic arteries, rivaling or outdoing Interstate 35 running from Dallas-Fort Worth to Austin and San Antonio.⁵⁵ The highway runs along the west side of Fairfield, touching it more than any other town in Freestone County.

During that time, Interstate 45 helped spawn economic growth in Freestone County. I-45 or "The Highway," as it is commonly called, encouraged varied business development in the county. Today Interstate 45 is still encouraging economic growth for Freestone County.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the population increased significantly when new businesses arrived. Farming and livestock businesses remained important, but the biggest gains for the county resulted from the lignite

⁵⁴"I-45 Spawns Economic Growth," *The Fairfield Recorder*, 17 April 1986.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

coal mining industry. By 1988, the mining industry employed over 500 workers. The public utilities industry more than doubled its workforce from 1980 to 1986 when a new electric plant just outside of Fairfield opened. Service and retail industries also grew, and the population increased from 14,830 in 1980 to 20,946 by 1990.⁵⁶

Freestone County Communities

Like most typical East Texas counties, Freestone County has experienced its share of both prosperity and regression, its share of population growth and decline. The county has witnessed the establishment, the flourishing, and the demise of many of its small communities. Communities that once thrived, have declined, or no longer exist at all. Among these were: Burleson, Caney, Butler, St. Elmo, Dew, and Donie. Luna, Shanks, Midway, and Tehuacana were others. Birdston, Cade, Couthman, Turlington, and Woodland were still more.

One example, the community of Cotton Gin, located on Texas Farm Road 1366, twelve miles west of Fairfield, was established in 1848, near the site of a mule-powered cotton gin built by Dr. James S. Wills.⁵⁷ The 1860 census reported

⁵⁶Leffler, 3.

⁵⁷Timothy Palmer, "Cotton Gin, Texas," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/CC/hnc.99.html>, 1.

508 residents.⁵⁸ By the time of the Civil War, Cotton Gin rivaled Fairfield in size and importance,⁵⁹ having many fine homes, several Protestant churches, nine saloons, a weekly newspaper, three medical doctors, several stores, and a school.⁶⁰

In 1871, Cotton Gin was dealt its first blow; the Houston and Texas Central built a railroad through the area but did not come to Cotton Gin. Many of the town's residents moved to nearby Mexia, the new railroad town in Limestone County.⁶¹ Then, in 1906, the Trinity and Brazos Valley Railroad established Teague, located only six miles from Cotton Gin, as a division point. Even more people moved away to Teague, and eventually there were not enough people to keep the churches going. The school was torn down after consolidating with Teague, the newspaper perished, and stores closed.⁶²

When in 1976, Jim Alderman's grocery store closed, only one business remained in Cotton Gin, Charlie Donahue's feed mill and welding shop. "Cotton Gin, once a bustling

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹John Banta, "One Shop Left in Cotton Gin," *Waco Tribune Herald*, 10 June 1976.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Palmer.

⁶²Ibid.

town with hopes of becoming the county seat of Freestone County, doesn't even have a grocery store anymore," reported the *Waco Tribune Herald*.⁶³ The population dropped to twenty-eight by 1968 and continued at that level in 2000.⁶⁴

A Freestone County community that has actually been identified as a "ghost town" is Stewards Mill. Stewards Mill is located at the intersection of Farm to Market Road 833 with Farm to Market Road 2547, on the old route between Fairfield and Streetman.⁶⁵ It was first settled in the 1850s and named after the water-powered gristmill constructed by Washington Steward, a native of South Carolina. That mill was one of many that served the large area between Dallas and Houston.⁶⁶ In 1867 Dr. James I. Bonner opened the first store, known as Stewards Mill Store. It served the area, in the same building, for over one hundred years.⁶⁷ A post office came in 1872, and the first church building in 1876. Stewards Mill's first school began in the 1880s, but in 1929, it consolidated with Fairfield.

⁶³Banta.

⁶⁴Palmer.

⁶⁵T. Lindsay Baker, *Ghost Towns of Texas*, (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), 155.

⁶⁶Ibid, 153.

⁶⁷Ibid, 154.

Stewards Mill maintained its population until after World War II but has since declined considerably. Two reasons may be attributed to the town being bypassed by the modern federal highway and to the general consolidation of agriculture and reversion of cultivated fields to stock raising.⁶⁸

In 1964 the Stewards Mill Store was recorded as a Texas historical landmark.⁶⁹ Today it has no businesses; its immediate area has about half a dozen scattered occupied residences and about the same number of abandoned houses. Baker commented, "The sites of some former structures are still evident from foundation stones, uneven ground, and still living daffodils, irises, and lilies in the yards of long-demolished homes."⁷⁰ In 1990 the population of Stewards Mill was estimated at twenty-two.⁷¹

The northwest section of Freestone County contains a number of communities or settlements that were once alive, active, and recognized as official towns. The northwest section also contains the towns of Kirvin and Streetman. Each contain elements of a community that has lived through

⁶⁸Ibid, 154.

⁶⁹Cris Cravens, "Stewards Mill, Texas," *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/SS/hns85.html>, 1.

⁷⁰Baker, 155.

⁷¹Cravens, 1.

better times, but each is still alive and recognized as an actual town.

The two towns have similarities, differences, and are related in various ways. Each shares similar experiences in its founding, economics, community life and activities, and gradual decline. These two towns have made contributions on the community-wide scale and the national scale as well. Surprisingly, both of the little communities have made a significant mark on history.

Kirvin and Streetman still have thriving populations, homes, and buildings; they are not ghost towns yet, but they are only fragments of what they used to be. This thesis seeks to tell the stories of these communities - establishment, prosperity, and decline. Another purpose is to relate these communities to each other, to show their commonalities and their disparities. A final purpose is to explain how they each made a contribution to history.

The community of Kirvin, in Northwest Freestone County, was born in the early nineteenth century with the building of the railroad through the area. It flourished for the first two decades after its founding but abruptly declined around 1925, never returning to its former glory, but leaving a significant history behind.

CHAPTER TWO

A History of Kirvin, Texas

The town of Kirvin developed because of the railroad, enjoyed a couple of decades of prosperity, and then suddenly declined. Kirvin is located in the northwest corner of Freestone County, at the junction of Farm to Market Roads 80 and 1449, just eight miles southeast of Wortham.¹ Kirvin was named for Judge O.C. Kirvin, who donated the land for the railroad coming through the area. Judge Kirvin was the county judge and would later become district judge.²

The Trinity and Brazos Valley Railway, or the Boll Weevil, or Taters & Bean Vine, as the railroad was sometimes called, first ran through the area in 1905, and a year later, in 1906, the town was established.³ The railroad, which came from Teague on its way to Waxahachie, missed the community of Woodland, which was the center of

¹Cris Cravens, "Kirvin, Texas," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles.view/KK/hlk9.html>.

²Ibid.

³E.M. Prouty, "Kirven, As I Remember it," *History of Freestone County, Texas*, Freestone County Historical Commission, 1978, 140.

attraction at that time. Woodland was located about three-quarters of a mile from Kirivn.⁴

About three miles south of Kirvin was the thriving farm community of Nip'N Tuck, now known as Shanks.⁵ Named for Matthew and Robert Shanks of Alabama, who settled in the area with their families in 1859, Shanks was off Farm to Market Road 80, eight miles west of Fairfield.⁶ In 1870 a school was built, and in 1899, a post office was established. It operated until 1906 when it was replaced by rural delivery.⁷ At the time Kirvin emerged, Shanks was in full bloom, having a cemetery, school, a store a, blacksmith shop, and a "hardshell" Baptist Church.⁸ The little community faded when Kirvin experienced its growing pains.

Soon a town site formed on about 100 acres that was divided into lots, both residential and business. Streets were laid out and many businesses opened. Among these were two gins, three cottonseed houses, two grist mills, two

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Christopher Long, "Shanks, Texas," The Handbook of Texas Online, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/SS/hvsew.html>.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Prouty, 140.

cotton yards, and a large cotton warehouse with approximately a one thousand-bale capacity.⁹

Kirvin grew by leaps and bounds over the next few years. The town was incorporated in 1911.¹⁰ At that time, Kirvin had three churches, three banks, two cafes, three doctors, a feed and seed store, a telephone exchange, two barber shops, a pool hall, three or four grocery stores, two gas stations, a confectionary, and a light plant.¹¹ Kirvin even had a "picture show," a large two-story hotel, and a roller skating rink. Kirvin continued to grow and more businesses opened. Because there was so much news to report, there were three weekly newspapers in Kirvin.¹²

The Kirvin Free School District, later to become Kirvin Independent School District, was established 9 April 1906. The schoolhouse was a small frame building located on block twelve, lots one and two.¹³ As Kirvin's population grew, the modest school house became too small for all its students.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Cravens.

¹¹Prouty, 141.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Linda Carter, "History of Kirvin School," *History of Freestone County, Texas*, Freestone County Historical Commission, 1978, 142.

In 1914, the school district borrowed money from the Kirvin bank to build a new school. After its completion, "the students of Kirvin School district entered school in one of the most modern two-story brick school buildings," according to historian Linda Carter.¹⁴ The school had ten grades and an auditorium that played an important part in the lives of the students and the community. The auditorium served as a venue for many plays, minstrels, and programs.¹⁵ Kirvin School athletes, known as the "Kirvin Kings," were recognized for their participation in sports, winning numerous trophies in volleyball, baseball, track, and basketball.¹⁶

By 1914, the same year the new school was built, Kirvin had a population of about 800, eleven businesses, three weekly newspapers, and a bank.¹⁷ Because of an oil boom in the nearby town of Mexia, Kirvin was one of the fastest growing communities in Freestone County at the time.¹⁸

In May of 1922 an event happened in this community that proved infamous. Tragic and divisive, it would change

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Carter, 143.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁸Paul Jennings, "The First Last Time," *The Texas Observer*, 25 August 2000, <http://www.texasobserver.org>, 1.

the history of the county forever. An event so controversial, its memory was gradually suppressed, so much that few know about or later spoke of it. An event typical of the time period, but so scandalous and disgraceful, it did not appear in the modern published county history. This event shocked the community, the county, the state, and the nation.

Kirvin in the 1920s

The decade of the twenties was a tumultuous one characterized with serious social tension. Wayne Oaks described this sentiment in his 1967 student research paper, "Mob Hysteria - Kirvin, Texas, 1922":

America moved to new heights of industrialism, yet much of the reforms of the previous decade waned; the prophets of prohibition won victory with the passage of the 18th Amendment, yet the consumption of alcohol soared to new limits; the revival of puritan religious dogma was offset by the emergence of syndicated and widespread crime; the international awareness that partially characterized the first two decades of the century was paralyzed by a return to isolationism and nationalism in the third . . . When acute tension afflicts a society, insecurity and fear rapidly develop. When these factors combine, intolerance triumphs. And when these factors reach fever proportions the end result is all-too-frequently an outbreak of hysteria.¹⁹

Kirvin did not escape these chaotic times. In 1999, journalist Don Ross would describe 1922 Kirvin: "In 1922, Kirven was a cotton-growing community of perhaps 1,000

¹⁹V. Wayne Oaks, "Mob Hysteria - Kirvin, Texas, 1922," (Term Paper for History 5360, Southwest Texas State College, 1967), 1.

people, black and white The nation was heading full bore into the Roaring '20s Kirven was on the edge of an oilfield boom Whites lived in anxiety that blacks would one day rise up against them In such a culture, lynchings and maltreatment were justified by some as necessary to keep black people 'in their place.'"²⁰

The town's economy was based on agriculture, even though surrounding areas had produced considerable amounts of oil. Because agriculture provided much of the population's livelihood, Kirvin, like many of the towns in the area at the time, had a African American population of about 30 to 35 percent.²¹ "Kirvin, then, was not unlike other small Texas communities Kirvin and the surrounding area could have been transplanted with little notice to virtually any other region of the South in 1922," said Oakes.²²

The decade of the twenties was also characterized by racial violence and lynchings. In a paper titled "America Invented Lynching," writer Monte Akers discussed the history of lynching in the United States. Lynchings began in America in the 1700s. By the late nineteenth century,

²⁰Don Ross, "Murder, Racism: A town in 'Flames,'" *USA Today*, 1 April 1999.

²¹Oakes, 2.

²²Ibid.

racial hatred made lynching a common occurrence. One to four occurred every week between 1882 and 1927. Most victims were black. In 1923 the body count began to drop drastically, and by the 1940s there were no lynchings in the South. By 1953 there were none in the United States.²³

While lynchings occurred everywhere, they were more common in the southern states, including Texas. According to the *Handbook of Texas*, there were 468 Texas lynching victims between 1885 and 1942. Only Mississippi and Georgia surpassed Texas in its numbers. Texas lynchings were random and unexpected and seemed to occur in cycles and waves that spread from community to community. In the spring of 1922, there was a four-week span of lynchings in Allentown, Bryan, Conroe, Kirvin, Plantersville, and Waco.²⁴

There was about a month-long spree of racial violence in Kirvin, Texas, in 1922. It began with the death of a white girl and ended with the deaths of many blacks and several whites.

There were various renditions of the story, but the basic facts were clear. On 4 May 1922, Eula Ausley failed to arrive home from school at the expected time. Eula was a white woman, seventeen years old and the granddaughter of

²³Monte Akers, "America Invented Lynching," 3.

²⁴Jennings, 1.

the John T. King, patriarch of the prominent King family in Kirvin. King was one of Freestone County's largest landowners and one of Kirvin's most revered citizens. He adored Eula and showered her with attention, as did her grandmother and uncles.²⁵ When Eula did not arrive home, her grandparents became worried and asked their son Otis to search for her.

Her body was found in a secluded place of brush and shade trees near the banks of Grimestone Creek. The *Waco Times-Herald* stated, "Her throat had been cut, her head was crushed and there were about twenty-seven stab wounds in her face and the upper portion of her body."²⁶ She was found naked and mutilated, and it first appeared that she had been decapitated. Her head was beaten into the ground and her tongue had been cut out and was lying near her body. In an interview years later, a witness, J.C. Whatley, said, "Her pretty features were wrecked, her eyes staring and vacuous, her nose broken and split, her mouth blasted."²⁷ Eula would have graduated from high school in just a few weeks.

²⁵Oakes, 3.

²⁶Quoted in Oakes, 3.

²⁷Monte Akers, *Flames after Midnight*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999), 36.

News of Eula Ausley's murder spread quickly. Within hours, a manhunt ensued. Calls for bloodhounds from the state prison at Huntsville were sent out. "Snapp" Curry, one of the King's black field hands was the first suspect caught and arrested. His estranged wife reported seeing him with blood on his shirtsleeves the previous day. Curry was taken into custody by the Freestone County sheriff, Horrace Mayo. Mayo attempted to get Curry out of Freestone County, but on the way to Waco, his car was stopped by a mob, so Mayo proceeded to take Curry to the county jail in Fairfield.

On the way, Curry implicated two other black men, Moses Jones and Johnny Cornish.²⁸ All three were taken into custody at the jail in Fairfield. A crowd was already forming outside when they arrived. Curry was questioned, and then a special committee appointed by the sheriff reported the news of his confession to the growing crowd outside. The crowd demanded the release of the prisoners. The *Kirven Commercial Record* stated, "Mr. Mayo was seized around the arms and yanked outside the door A number of men rushed the jail and overpowered the deputies inside Seizing the Negroes, the crowd without a

²⁸Jennings, 2.

shout or shot, packed them into automobiles . . . and began the return trip to Kirven."²⁹

Curry was castrated sometime in the evening. The lynch mob returned to Kirvin, and a crowd gathered in a vacant lot in the center of town.³⁰ The size of the crowd varied with different accounts. Some sources said there were as many as a thousand spectators, and others reported only a hundred or so. Men began gathering wood and other flammable materials. A farm plow was brought out, and Curry was the first victim chained to it. *The Kirven Commercial Record* described the scene after that:

Soon the flames began to lick the doomed Negro who constituted to answer questions from the crowd by giving more details of the crime, his answers checking exactly with his previous statements. After having been burning for several minutes, he was asked if the other Negroes were guilty, and he answered that they were equally guilty with him. In the meantime, the gray haired old grandfather, a patriarch in appearance, arrived upon the premises and a most affecting scene took place. In a shaking voice the old man questioned the two remaining Negroes and told the crowd he was convinced they were guilty.³¹

Jones was then soaked in gasoline, tied to the plow, and set on fire. Cornish was tied and dragged back and forth through the fire until he was burned to death. This public display of "justice" was a social event. A druggist

²⁹"Four Negroes Pay Penalty for Brutal Murder," *The Kirven Commercial Record*, 7 May 1922.

³⁰Jennings, 2.

³¹"Four Negroes Pay Penalty for Brutal Murder."

opened his store and served cold drinks to the crowd, which included children as well as adults. For one hour and fifty minutes, hundreds of citizens watched with approval while three black men were burned to ashes.³² Oakes later described the crowd's attitude, "There were no tears for the victims, but as the crowd looked on they observed an old man silently crying There were tears of sympathy for him The man was Eula's grandfather."³³

Jones succumbed to the flames just as day was breaking. The mob began dispersing, but the fire continued until noon.³⁴ After the fire was extinguished, some of the onlookers picked out pieces of bone and what they thought were organs from the ashes, to take home as souvenirs.³⁵ The Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* stated, "By late Saturday, Kirvin was reported quiet, people had returned to their daily routine, and the overwhelming sentiment of the people was that Eula Ausley's death had been revenged."³⁶

The terror continued the next day. Shadrick Green, another of the King's black field hands, was found hanging

³²Oakes, 23.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Oakes, 23.

³⁵Jennings, 2.

³⁶Oakes, 24.

naked from a tree halfway between Kirvin and Fairfield. His body was riddled with gun shots. "Green was the fourth black who has paid with his life for complicity or knowledge of the death of Miss Eula Ausley King . . . ," reported the *Kirven Commercial Record*.³⁷ Other blacks were killed also. For the next three weeks, a wave of racist killings threatened Freestone County. Local newspapers only reported two more deaths, but anywhere from twelve to twenty-seven deaths occurred.³⁸

The racial terror finally ended after the all-black community of Simsboro, located just outside of Kirvin, was attacked by a posse led by the King brothers. The posse met armed resistance organized by a black World War I veteran. Two blacks and two posse members were killed as a result of the "battle."

The death of two white men provoked calls to end the bloodshed. County officials produced a resolution that stated, "The killing and terrorizing of Negroes in this county must now cease."³⁹ The King family released a statement claiming they believed all the guilty parties had been punished and that no more violence would be

³⁷"Nero Found Hanging to Tree," *The Kirven Commercial Record*, 7 May 1922.

³⁸Jennings, 2-3.

³⁹Ibid, 3.

tolerated.⁴⁰ On the same page, beside a newspaper article titled "School Girl Assaulted, Stabbed and Murdered by Fiendish Blacks Near Town," the King family's card of thanks stated:

We desire to return to our neighbors and friends, as well as to the people of Freestone, Limestone, and Navarro counties, our sincere thanks for their assistance in running down the murderers of our darling, Eula King-Ausley. We especially are thankful for the firm, orderly manner in which those who assisted in the investigation of the traged, obtained the facts, punished only those whom all the evidence clearly showed were guilty of the fiendish crime. While the punishment meted out to these brutes will not bring back our darling, yet the swift manner in which it was administered will probably be an example which will prevent a repetition of such a crime in this section. May God's blessings be upon you is our prayer.⁴¹

The plow that Cornish, Jones, and Curry were tied to remained in the center of town until World War II, when a farmer and son hauled it off and sold it for scrap metal.⁴² For three generations, the incident was omitted from published county histories. The most detailed of these books contained a timeline of major events in the county's history. The entry for 1922 noted, "Freestone County has gained a notoriety deeply to be regretted," and nothing more.⁴³

⁴⁰John T. King, "Card of Thanks," *The Kirven Commercial Record*, 7 May 1922.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Jennings, 3.

⁴³*History of Freestone County, Texas*, 134.

The racial violence in Kirvin made state and national news. Reports of the lynching and subsequent brutalities were reported in surrounding cities and states.

An account of the incident appeared in the *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, with an article titled "Three Burned by Texas Mob for Murder of Girl." The report read, "Three colored men were burned here [Kirvin] at dawn for the assault and murder of Eula Ausley, pretty 17 year old girl, whose body was found near here mutilated by thirty stab wounds."⁴⁴

In large, bold letters, the *Arkansas Democrat* in Little Rock, Arkansas, stated, "Race War Threatens Texas." The story reported events in Austin, Fort Worth, and Corsicana, Texas, that all related to the racial violence in Kirvin. It recounted the lynching in Kirvin and stated, "The three Negroes were taken from officers who had them in custody . . . one of the Negroes is said to have confessed . . . implicating the other two, but they maintained they were innocent until the last."⁴⁵ It also reported from Austin stating, "Governor Neff ordered two detachments of State Rangers to be sent immediately to

⁴⁴"Three Burned by Texas Mob for Murder of Girl," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, 7 May 1922.

⁴⁵"Race War Threatens Texas," *Arkansas Democrat*, 8 May 1922.

Fairfield . . . to prevent an uprising of Negroes which Sheriff Mayo . . . said was imminent."⁴⁶ The governor ordered the detachments after he received Mayo's message claiming that African Americans of the county were threatening to avenge the deaths of three blacks who were burned at Kirvin on Saturday morning.

The community of Kirvin was never the same after the month-long episode of racial violence. "The happening left a racial stain on Freestone County, and particularly, on Kirvin," admitted *The Fairfield Recorder* in 1999.⁴⁷ By the end of the 1920s, Kirvin had practically dried up. Several factors contributed to Kirvin's degeneration.

Because of the lynchings and related incidents of racial violence, many blacks left the area and never returned. In 1923 a black church and school were burned at Kirvin. Several young white men of the community were suspected of arson.⁴⁸ No arrests.

White farmers, who grew cotton, discovered they could not make money without the cheap field labor provided by blacks. The oil boom never hit Kirvin like it did in areas

⁴⁶Quoted in Ibid.

⁴⁷"Book Details 1922 Tragedy at Kirvin," *The Fairfield Recorder*, 25 February 1999.

⁴⁸"Negro Church and School Burned at Kirvin," *The Dallas Morning News*, 4 January 1923.

nearby. By 1925 the population had dropped to 288.⁴⁹ The bank closed, as did other businesses. And a series of mysterious fires destroyed many of the buildings downtown. The majority of the remaining buildings were torn down for their bricks.⁵⁰ The school consolidated with the Wortham schools in 1949, and the population continued to decrease.⁵¹

In 1999, the *Fairfield Recorder* described present-day Kirvin: ". . . Kirvin with its current population of about 100, goes its quiet way, unmindful of an effect it had on Texas Street signs are in place over the 100-acre town-site that had such promise at the start of this century Streets are largely empty of homes or business places."⁵²

Some argued that Kirvin's decline and its racial violence were not related. The same *Fairfield Recorder* article claimed that the racial violence that plagued the county in 1922 cannot be blamed for the community's demise. It stated, "Small non-county seat towns all over the

⁴⁹Cravens.

⁵⁰Jennings, 5.

⁵¹Cravens.

⁵²The *Fairfield Recorder*.

southwest United States have similar records, starting with World War II.⁵³

Monte Akers and "Flames after Midnight"

Writer Monte Akers's arrival and interest in Freestone County history would put Kirvin back in the public eye. Akers provided a supporting source of the idea that Kirvin's decline was associated with its acts of racial violence in 1999 when the University of Texas Press published his book about the incident in Kirvin titled, *Flames after Midnight - Murder, Vengeance, and the Desolation of a Texas Community*.

Akers had always been fascinated by southern history. He received his undergraduate degree in history from the University of Texas at Arlington, and then he went to law school at the University of Houston. Akers moved to Freestone County in 1981 to work for Dow Chemical.⁵⁴

The first week Akers was in Freestone County, a co-worker whispered seven words to him: "Kirvin is where they burned the niggers."⁵⁵ In 1986 Akers was elected the chairman of the Freestone County Historical Commission,

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Monte Akers Oral History Interview (interviewed by Erin Capps on 23 April 2005, in Round Rock, Texas. Recording in Capps' possession).

⁵⁵Akers, 3.

which resulted in his learning some of the county's dark secrets. "That is when the story seized me and would not let go," recalled Akers.⁵⁶ At first, Akers's main intention was just to preserve the recollections of those who had witnessed the event, but he was later driven to uncover more of the facts and the "whys" of the story. "What I ultimately discovered is that nobody knew all the facts Much of the truth had been lost or hidden The story was more tragic, more ironic, and possessed more far-reaching impact The truth was more than I could dream to understand in seven words."⁵⁷

Akers spent more than a decade researching old records, reading old newspaper accounts, and interviewing witnesses to write his book. A book review in the *Austin Chronicle* stated, "That length of study allows Akers to tell the story behind the story -- he doesn't neglect a single possibility of what could have happened, and he is able authoritatively to dispute fallacious notions of the event that have built up over the years in that kind of hushed but steady accretion of rumor and legend that is at once so alluring but ultimately frustrating to the historian."⁵⁸

⁵⁶Ibid, 5.

⁵⁷Ibid, 5.

⁵⁸"Book Reviews, Flames after Midnight," *Austin Chronicle*,

Akers stated in the book's prologue, "This is not a pretty story It skims the joy off the pan of conversation It asks thistle questions and offers scorpion answers, but needs to be told."⁵⁹ The book continued by telling Eula Ausley's story and the story of her family, the Kings. It then covered the murder, the manhunt, the lynching, the succeeding acts of racial violence, the final cessation of those acts, and the impact the events had on the community of Kirvin. The book also placed guilt of Eula's murder on an enemy of the Kings, the Prowell family.

Akers faced difficulties and opposition in his pursuit of the facts. The first difficulty he encountered was finding anyone who knew anything about what happened. The story was old and hardly a hot topic any longer. After finding witnesses, the author had to persuade them to talk about what happened. Akers experienced differing responses from the witnesses he found; some were more than happy to talk, while others did not want to think about it, much less talk about it with a stranger. Some were helpful and detached as well.⁶⁰

12 March 1999.

⁵⁹Akers, 3.

⁶⁰Akers Oral History Interview.

In the first years of the research project, Akers only occasionally interviewed a witness, not making a spectacle of himself in any way, so few paid attention to the project. When he moved from Freestone County in 1990, he seriously began thinking of turning the story into a book, a process that took nine years. As the book moved closer to publication, Akers grew concerned that someone in the county who had influence with the University of Texas might try to prevent the book's publication. Fortunately, that did not happen.⁶¹

Once word got out about the book's publication, Akers received what he considered a "veiled threat." He received a call from a man who had considerable authority in Freestone County -- the same man he thought might try to block publication of the book. The man called to say that a friend of his was writing a book about John Gregg, a Confederate general who lived in Fairfield before the Civil War. The caller knew Akers had researched Gregg's life and wanted to know if it would be permissible to give the friend Akers's name and address. Akers agreed. "The caller's response was something like, 'Are you sure you want someone writing a book to know your address and phone numbers?' In other words, the underlying message

⁶¹Ibid.

was, 'I know where you live and others who are interested in what you're interested in may come visit you," said Akers.⁶² Nothing came of it, however.

Although Akers was accused of being an agitator, trying to stir up trouble for the community, or trying to make a profit selling books, he wanted to promote recognition of the past and eventual healing.

In the prologue of *Flames after Midnight*, Akers compared America's painful racial past to the death of a loved one: "Those who prefer that the past remain buried are in the first stage of the grieving process, that of denial Others are in the second stage, anger Others occupy the third stage, sorrow Still others are in the final stage, which is healing Healing requires knowledge, as well as acceptance, neither of which can come until stories such as this one are finally told."⁶³

Like anything else, there were mixed reactions to *Flames after Midnight*. On the local level, the book was welcomed by the black communities and those who liked the author, but it met hostility in other corners. Some thought the author was trying to stir up trouble or profit from the county's history. Akers actually lost money on

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Akers, 8.

the book, and he never really expected to make any.⁶⁴ On the national level, the book received good reviews for its attention to research and detail, its commitment to telling every aspect of the story from every possible perspective, and its narrative quality.

While some local citizens supported the book, others were outraged by its publication. "I believe Mr. Akers released his book in an effort to cause problems for us in Freestone County The Kirvin incident happened 77 years back and there was no reason to open up old wounds of this county We sure don't need an agitator to cause problems I can find no praise, only contempt for what he has tried to do to this county," asserted Quinton D. Morrow in a letter to *The Fairfield Recorder*.⁶⁵ In another letter, Morrow's wife, Betty, expressed the same sentiment: "The residents of this county DO NOT APPRECIATE this writer's 'opening a can of stinky worms' for his personal recognition and gain."⁶⁶

One of the greatest opponents of the book was a former sheriff and friend of Akers. J.R. "Sonny" Sessions, whose

⁶⁴Akers Oral History Interview.

⁶⁵Quinton D. Morrow, "Letter to the Editor - Re: Monte Akers' Book 'Flames after Midnight,'" *The Fairfield Recorder*, 4 March 1999.

⁶⁶Letter by Betty M. Morrow in response to efforts trying to tear down the fence that separates black and white at Cotton Gin Cemetery.

family had associations with the Kirvin story, never spoke to Akers again and told reporters he refused to read the book.⁶⁷ Sessions received one of the first copies of the book signed by Akers with an apology for not telling Sessions he was writing the book. Sessions did finally read the book and later offered critiques of it.⁶⁸

Sessions's ancestors moved from Alabama to Freestone County in 1842. His father and grandfather served as sheriffs of the county. While not holding the office of sheriff at the time of the lynchings, Sessions's father and mother were living in Kirvin and knew of the incident at the time it was happening. His family went to "extreme measures to protect the blacks that were working for them" stated Sessions, during the terror that followed the lynchings.⁶⁹ This fact was not in the book, but an irrelevant side story, about Sessions's father, was. That was one of Sessions's main complaints with the book.⁷⁰ Sessions also added that later people said to him that the

⁶⁷Akers Oral History Interview.

⁶⁸J.R. Sessions Oral History Interview (interviewed by Erin Capps on 5 July 2005, in Kirvin, Texas; recording in Capps' possession).

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

"lynchings would never have happened if my daddy were sheriff at the time."⁷¹

Sessions's other main critique of the book was the credibility of its sources. "All of his sources wouldn't have been good sources 50 years before [now], and they certainly weren't then. Most of them were senile," said Sessions. After the book was published, Sessions talked with members of the J.C. Whatley family. (Whatley was quoted extensively in the book.) Even they questioned his reliability. They said to Sessions, "Nobody believes what J.C. says." Sessions summed up the local response he saw from the book, "He [Akers] thought it was going to go big and it was a flop here. Local people just passed it by completely."⁷²

Not all local response was negative. In a letter to Akers, longtime Freestone County resident Sherry Bryd expressed her appreciation for the book: "I wish to compliment you on the fine and professional job you did in recounting the historical event of Freestone County I thank you for this education because now I can better

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Ibid.

relate to the people and their personalities and struggles more so."⁷³

Another supporter of Akers's book was Joycie Burns, long-time resident of Freestone County and a leader in the local NAACP chapter. Burns's insurance business was the only place in the county where one could purchase Akers's book.⁷⁴ Burns read the book and "loved it."⁷⁵ Her only critique of it was, "I can't say the actual incident, how it happened was very factual, but the overall picture fit in the time."⁷⁶

When Freestone County citizens first learned of Akers's book, the question arose of whether he was an agitator, trying to stir up trouble, or a healer, trying to facilitate healing between the black and white communities. Burns responded, "Yes he is [an agitator], let's say you have a pot of beans here and you're trying to cook them, and you never stir them, what happens? They're going to burn, they're just going to sit there, but you have to be an agitator You've got to stir it up before it can become what it is supposed to be If he had never

⁷³Letter to Monte Akers from Sherry Byrd, 5 April 1999. Copy of letter in author's possession.

⁷⁴Joycie Burns Oral History Interview (interviewed by Erin Capps on 3 July 2005, in Teague, Texas; recording in Capps' possession).

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid.

touched this, you have people in Freestone County that knew all about it, but if he had never touched it, it would still be dormant."⁷⁷

As a book, *Flames after Midnight* received attention in many local newspapers. The *Teague Chronicle* reported, "A dark side to Freestone County has been thrust into the light with the release of a new book" ⁷⁸ The article neither applauded nor condemned Akers's book but reported what the book was about, and critiqued it, stating, "Writing nonfiction with the skill of a novelist, Akers paints a vivid portrait of a community desolated by race hatred and its own refusal to face hard truths." The article also raised the question of how the book might improve race relations in the future.⁷⁹

The *Mexia Daily News* announced the book signing that was to be held at the Teague Community Center and described what Akers's book had done for the community. J. David McCartney praised Akers's obvious in-depth research. He also pointed out that the Kirvin story was not about white versus black but was the story of the county's citizens and their recognition of truths, even if they were savage.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸"Book Reveals Dark Side of Freestone County History," *The Teague Chronicle*, 25 February 1999.

⁷⁹Ibid.

McCartney stated, "Kirvin in 1922 is about the Cain in us all, about our shame, about fleeing from our acts This book is about us."⁸⁰ He concluded his article by describing the impact of reading *Flames after Midnight*:

Flames . . . makes us aware that the human heart is capable of committing the most diabolical of deeds and will without the (true) love of God. *Flames after Midnight* brings us face to face with the fact that our own hearts have secrets, and so do our towns and turning the search light on them is painful. But light brings health and growth to life and *Flames after Midnight* lets us know of the growth and health we have achieved (thus far) since that May of 1922.⁸¹

The release of *Flames after Midnight* received other media attention as well. After the book's publication, the author was interviewed at Kirvin by KWTX-Channel 10 reporter Mike Barger. The station broadcast a two-part story on the book and the events of 1922.

The book was also reviewed in numerous non-local newspapers and magazines. A review in *Mississippi's Art and Soul* magazine stated, "Monte Akers weaves a frightening story of our history, which we might prefer to ignore His facts are well researched, corroborated and extensively footnoted His analysis of the facts

⁸⁰J David McCartney, "Local Author to make Teague Community Center Book Signing," *The Mexia Daily News*, 2 March 1999.

⁸¹Ibid.

is thorough and arguably correct."⁸² The reviewer concluded by hauntingly describing how the book affects a reader:

If you sleep peacefully you will not after reading *Flames after Midnight*. If man's ability to be cruel nauseates you, then this book will not alleviate your queasiness. If you think your friends and neighbors are understanding people who will deal heroically with misfortune, this book will change your mind. If you want to know why some Americans distrust and shy from our justice system, then read this book. If you want to know what shadows of evil lurk in all of us spend an afternoon visiting Kirvin, Texas. If you watch the news on the Balkans and think that it can't happen here, find out how it almost did.⁸³

Akers's book received coverage in *USA Today* as well. Don Ross stated, "*Flames after Midnight* vividly captures that culture in all its repugnance, exploring the tenor of the times"⁸⁴

A filmmaker from Rhode Island, Gode Davis, was putting together a film about lynching and became very interested in *Flames after Midnight*. Akers has become involved in that project. There is always the possibility that the book might be made into a film one day.

New information about the infamous events did trickle in after the publication of the book. Akers received information about new witnesses, and he was able to interview them. He also received additional photographs of

⁸²Deborah Lewis Branton, "Flames after Midnight," *Mississippi's Heart and Soul*, May 1999.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴*USA Today*, 1 April 1999.

the King men, Eula, and of the burning at Kirvin. In the background of the picture, white children dressed in their Sunday best can be seen.

Despite the publication of Akers's book and the sustained attention it received, what happened in Kirvin is still a subject people just do not want to talk about. Not many people know of the incident; they know only bits and pieces of biased facts.

Today there is no visible evidence at Kirvin that any event so horrible took place there over eighty years ago. There is just an open grassy space where the burning occurred. There is no marker. The event is clearly not used for promoting tourism. "I would be surprised if any Chamber of Commerce in the area would welcome the kind of tourism the Kirvin story might generate," Akers said.⁸⁵

Kirvin's population in 1990 was 107 and remains around that number today.⁸⁶ No businesses exist there now. The Kirvin Methodist Church still holds services.

Today the majority of the population would agree that a mob taking the law into its own hands by killing persons for a crime they did or did not commit, is wrong. What happened in Kirvin was terrible, most would agree, and it

⁸⁵Akers Oral History Interview.

⁸⁶Cravens.

will have to be confronted at some time. "Time" seems to be the most universal answer to Kirvin's question. Time, much time, will restore and heal communities.

At a book signing in Teague on 6 March 1999, Akers witnessed an unexpected healing. The family of the young white woman whose murder started the violence in 1922 met some of the families of the lynch victims. There was obvious tension between the families at first. That tension turned into dialogue, and that dialogue led to expressions of love and understanding between black and white Americans. The healing witnessed that day by the author and other book signing attendees was remarkable.

Kirvin was founded, flourished, and declined in a short time. Though its history is brief, the small community made its own contribution to local, state, national, and racial history.

Another Northwest Freestone County community was Streetman. While its rise and fall were less dramatic, it was similar to Kirvin in a number of ways.

CHAPTER THREE

A History of Streetman, Texas

A community in northwest Freestone County with a less dramatic physical rise and fall is Streetman. Like Kirvin, it emerged with the railroad, prospered during the first half of the nineteenth century, and declined slowly over a time because of several factors.

Streetman, which celebrated the centennial of its founding in 2006, is on US Highway 75 and the Freestone County-Navarro County line, thirteen miles north of Fairfield.¹ The majority of the town is in Freestone County; however, about one-third is in Navarro County. Streetman was established as a station on the Trinity and Brazos Valley Railway in 1905, and settlement of the town began the next year. The town was named after an advance agent for the railroad, Judge Sam Streetman of Houston, who surveyed the town.² The post office moved from the nearby community of Cade in 1907, and soon many businesses opened to meet the needs of farmers in the area. The town's first

¹Cris Cravens, "Streetman, Texas," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/SS/hls81.html>.

²Ibid.

newspaper, the *Streetman Enterprise*, began publication in 1912, and the town was incorporated in 1914.

By that time Streetman had numerous businesses and a considerable population. The community had several churches and separate schools for whites and blacks. Streetman's population eventually started declining after World War II. Families left for a number of reasons, and many of them did not return. Soon the school closed and by 1990, Streetman's population was only 260.³

The area around Streetman once consisted of many defunct communities that declined or whose citizens moved to Streetman when the Trinity and Brazos Valley Railroad ran through that place. Streetman would eventually face the same fate as these communities, but it experienced a relatively greater number of successful years and made its contribution to history in a more recognized way.

Cade Chapel, formerly called Cade, was a rural community located on Farm Road 246, two miles west of Streetman. Anglo-American farmers settled there in the 1870s. In 1883 Ansel and Alice Coleman, some of whose ancestors still live in the area today, deeded the site to

³Ibid.

the Missionary Baptist Church for a cemetery and construction of a church and Masonic hall.⁴

A post office was also established in November of that same year. By 1890 Cade had a population of twenty-two and around 1900 the population had risen to 100 residents, served by two flour mills and gins, a blacksmith, a general store, and a grocery store.⁵ The area later known as Streetman began to thrive with the arrival of the railroad, partly explaining why Cade's post office closed in 1907 and moved there. Today the cemetery, still in existence and maintained by the Cade Cemetery Memorial Association, remains the most visible sign of the old community.

Another early community in the Streetman area was Birdston, which was located on Farm Road 416, two miles northeast of Streetman.⁶ A post office opened there as early as 1866, but the town was probably settled before the Civil War. In 1885 the town had two steam gristmill and cotton gin combinations, a sawmill, five churches, a public school, and an estimated population of 250.⁷ Like Cade,

⁴Laurie Jasinski, "Cade Chapel, Texas," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/CC/hncbf.html>.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Christopher Long, "Birdston, Texas," *The Handbook of Texas Online*. <http://tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/BB/hrbeh.html>.

⁷Ibid.

Birdston's decline began after 1900, when many of its residents moved to Streetman, because of its new railroad. Birdston no longer appears on Texas highway and county maps, and like Cade, it is only marked by a cemetery.⁸

Much like Birdston is St. Elmo, located on Farm Road 416 in northern Freestone County. The name St. Elmo supposedly came from a popular nineteenth-century novel. Families from Georgia, Alabama, and Florida settled there around 1849. In 1872 the Little Hope Baptist Church was organized and a post office established. The first school opened in 1850, closed during the Civil War, and rebuilt and re-opened in 1875. The local Baptist congregation held its services in the schoolhouse until 1886, when it bought six acres encompassing the school grounds and the local cemetery, and changed the church's name from Little Hope to the more optimistic name of New Hope.⁹

Like Birdston and Cade, St. Elmo's population began to decline in the early 1900s when the Trinity and Brazos Valley Railroad built through nearby Streetman.¹⁰ All that is left today of St. Elmo is the New Hope Baptist Church, the St. Elmo cemetery, and a few dwellings.

⁸Ibid.

⁹ Cris Cravens, "St. Elmo, Texas," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/SS/hrsl.html>.

¹⁰Ibid.

Other small communities in the Streetman area included Tehuacana Grove, Midway, Winkler, and Tehuacana. Each of these experienced circumstances like those of Cade, Birdston, and St. Elmo. All of these communities were similar to Streetman in that all were once lively, thriving communities, but, over time, diminished as populations declined, leaving little reason for them to remain. In spite of the small evidence of Streetman today, it has a rich, proud history.

Streetman was considered a boom town in the 1920s and 1930s. The railroad caused businesses to flourish and the population to increase. In 1921, Streetman experienced the oil boom. "Streetman is now in the midst of a boom that has put real estate up in the last thirty days Town lots and other real estate that were considered by the owners to be worth little a few weeks ago are now changing hands at prices unheard of in Streetman," the *Dallas Morning News* reported¹¹ Eight wells were being drilled within a five-mile radius of town, which pumped the economy while it lasted.¹²

¹¹"Streetman Waking up to Oil Boom," *The Dallas Morning News*, 13 November 1921.

¹²Ibid.

In 1930 U.S. Highway 75 was soon built through Streetman, bringing additional prosperity.¹³ Filling stations and cafes now appeared along the highway to serve the travel trade. "While the highway was being built there were such heavy rains during the winter months that trucks and cars had to be pulled down the muddy road by teams of horses and mules," reported one source.¹⁴

Race Relations in Streetman

Streetman was a typical East Texas community when it came to relations between white and African Americans citizens. The African American population played a considerable role in both size and economic growth in Streetman. Most citizens of Streetman do not recall a "foreign" population (immigrants), but they do remember interactions with African Americans. "I don't remember any Spanish people, even in 1950 They had a German sect at Ennis, but not around here . . . I don't remember Czechs, Irish, Italian, or any other [immigrant population] ever being mentioned in this area," recalled Winnie Easterling.¹⁵

¹³Ibid, 157.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Winnie Easterling Oral History Interview (interviewed by Erin Capps on 29 March 2006, in Streetman, Texas. Recording in Capps' possession).

"I was under the impression there were as many black families as white in Streetman," added Patricia Henderson.¹⁶

There was little interaction in Streetman between black and white people other than shopping at the same places in town on Saturdays and necessary interaction because of blacks' domestic and agricultural work. "I remember as a child being familiar with the black women or men who came to work The women to iron and do house work, and the men who came to help with the cattle round up and the fence building," recounted Henderson.¹⁷ On Saturdays, when everyone came to town to shop, Henderson remembered little socializing between the races other than just speaking.

Streetman was a divided town, both geographically and racially. "They had a south part of town, called the "flat" where the blacks lived They kept to their part of town and we kept to ours," recalled Jimmy Ross Young.¹⁸ African Americans in Streetman had their own school. When provisions were being made for white scholastics of Streetman in 1907, a similar plan emerged in

¹⁶Patricia Henderson Oral History Interview (interviewed by Erin Capps on 8 March 2006, in Fairfield, Texas. Recording in Capps' possession).

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Jimmy Ross Young Oral History Interview (interviewed by Erin Capps on 1 April 2006, in Streetman, Texas. Recording in Capps' possession).

the same building for the African American education. Little information is available concerning the schools, but as characteristic of the time, the enrollment was low, attendance was poor, and the value of the building and furniture were less than that of the white school.¹⁹

Kirvin was not the only town in the area to experience the tragedy of a lynching. In 1922, the same year of Eula Ausley's murder, a black man named George Gay was hanged illegally in Streetman.

Florine Grayson, a school teacher, was attacked in the early morning on 11 December 1922. "The Negro threw a sack over her head and tried to choke her into insensibility Struggling, the young woman frustrated the Negro's designs and, reaching the porch of her home, fainted," the *Dallas Morning News* reported.²⁰ News of the attack circulated all over the county and in a short period of time, people from Freestone, Limestone, and Navarro counties began to arrive in Streetman. Gay was caught three miles outside of town about three hours after the attack.

¹⁹Grace Grayson and Rubie O'Neal, "Streetman Independent School District Streetman Schools (Black)," *History of Freestone County, Texas*, Freestone County Historical Commission, 1978, 161.

²⁰"Negro Hanged by Mob at Streetman," *The Dallas Morning News*, 12 December 12 1922.

There were efforts to get Gay out of town by Sheriff Horrace Mayo and County Attorney J.E. Woods. Relatives of the assaulted woman and "a well-known resident of Streetman" pleaded with the mob to allow the law to take its course, but their pleas fell on silent ears.²¹ "All roads leading out of Streetman were picketed and about three miles out on the Teague road, the car containing Sheriff Mayo and the Negro were stopped by other autos The Negro was taken out and hanged, reported the *Dallas Morning News*."²²

Gay was strung up to a tree with a chain around his neck and questioned. He pleaded for his life and implicated another black resident in the crime, then hanged and his body riddled with bullets. The crowd then dispersed, and the only hotel in Streetman that accepted black occupants burned that evening.²³

Despite such segregation, little social interaction, and the tragic lynching that occurred in 1922, race relations in Streetman were, on the whole, considered good. According to Jimmy Ross Young, "We didn't have any problems and everybody got along Some of them were like

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

family . . . There was a lady who worked for my grandmother and we considered her part of the family."²⁴ Such was the early history of a segregated Central Texas community.

Community Activities

During the town's boom years, local businessmen of Streetman sponsored "Trade Days," an event that drew huge crowds on Saturdays. "On Saturdays, everybody came to town. The alleys would be full of wagons and mules, and of course those that had cars would be on Main Street. Everybody came to town on Saturdays That's just what you did," remembered Jimmy Ross Young, a life-long member of the Streetman community.²⁵

"People in Streetman did not travel much, but people [in general] in those days did not travel much," remembered Virginia Sims White.²⁶ Streetman residents traveled to Dallas or Houston for various purposes, perhaps to visit someone gravely ill in a hospital. The passenger train came through Streetman from around 1920 to 1950 and took passengers to Union Station in Dallas.²⁷ The passenger

²⁴Young Oral History Interview.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Virginia Sims White Oral History Interview (interviewed by Erin Capps on 30 March 2006, in Waco, Texas. Recording in Capps' possession).

²⁷Ibid.

train, called a "dinky" could take passengers to Corsicana as well.²⁸ "It was a local train that would come through once a day We used to ride it to Corsicana and go to the movies," said Young.²⁹ The train also transported passengers to Teague and Kirvin. Trains were not the only means of travel, though. Some people still used wagons, others had cars, and Streetman had a bus system.

A seasonal activity that brought the community together was the picnic. One barbecue picnic at Streetman, in 1910, attracted a crowd of 2,000, or more, people.³⁰ Memorial Day picnics and celebrations sponsored by the cemeteries also reunited people from both Streetman and those who had moved away. "It was a fundraiser and also a good time to socialize and a time to support the local cemeteries to keep them in good order," said Henderson.³¹

From 1945 to 1956, Streetman had a rodeo arena, built by the men in the area.³² The Rodeo was a very popular form of recreation during that time. "Streetman had a very big rodeo, a very active rodeo group People from

²⁸Young Oral History Interview.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰"Picnic at Streetman," *The Dallas Morning News*, 25 July 1910.

³¹Henderson Oral History Interview.

³²Minze, 157.

Fairfield, Corsicana, Blooming Grove, and all those surrounding areas came to participate," later recalled White.³³

Another community activity was the annual homecoming. "Starting around 1952 or 1953, a group of Streetman citizens came together and decided to have an annual homecoming It was the highlight of the season, usually held during the summer months," remembered White.³⁴ Men barbequed and women brought side dishes. It was a time for families to get together. It was also a time for those who had grown up in Streetman, but moved away during World War II to return for a reunion.³⁵

The community had many other activities that included church gatherings, school plays, and tent movies. Traveling medicine shows passed through occasionally.³⁶ At one point in its history, Streetman even had skating enthusiasts. "At one time the Streetman school building was still standing, the people in town got together, knocked out a wall, and made a [roller] skating rink for the kids I got to go skating there numerous times,

³³White Oral History Interview.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Minze, 157.

but we had some kids at that time who were pretty destructive; they vandalized it and soon we had no skating rink It was fun while it lasted," remembered White.³⁷

Ultimately, Streetman's favorite form of entertainment was baseball. "It was a little community that loved baseball," said Henderson.³⁸ Baseball was an activity that brought everyone in the community together, no matter what age or gender. "Daddy farmed and when he could, he'd play baseball every night That was the big pastime at that time," said White.³⁹ Streetman's ball players, who had a nice ball park built by the people in the community, played other area teams, sometimes winning and sometimes losing. The town also had a very active and successful women's team who traveled to all the nearby towns around Streetman.⁴⁰

³⁷White Oral History Interview.

³⁸Henderson Oral History Interview.

³⁹White Oral History Interview.

⁴⁰Ibid.

Streetman's Contribution to Major League Baseball

Streetman's love of baseball produced one of the greatest relief pitchers of all time, Fred "Firpo" Marberry. Everyone in Streetman long remembered Fred Marberry, the community proud to be his birthplace and home. He ultimately left his mark on Streetman and major league baseball.

Most sports historians recognize Fred "Firpo" Marberry of the Washington Senators as the first of the relief specialists in the major league.⁴¹ Arthur Daley later described Marberry as "a huge black-haired man who bore a superficial resemblance to Luis (Angel) Firpo, the Argentine heavy weight who almost dethroned Jack Dempsey."⁴²

Marberry acquired his nickname "Firpo" in 1924, while playing for the Washington Senators. When he joined the team, he was lean and lanky, and the team management sent him home during the off-season and asked him to gain weight before returning to training camp. Marberry obeyed, pushing the scales from 165 to 220 pounds, and was barely recognizable when he returned to training camp. A sports writer at the time suggested Marberry had overdone the weight gain and that he looked like heavy weight boxer Luis

⁴¹Arthur Daley, "He who Pitches Last," *New York Times*, 1 May 1960.

⁴²Ibid.

Firpo.⁴³ Marberry carried the nickname "Firpo" throughout his baseball career.

Fred Marberry was born on 30 November 1898 on a farm between Streetman and Kirvin, at a settlement called Israel. He attended Burleson School, near Israel, but did not graduate. While growing up, Marberry helped his father on the farm.⁴⁴ Baseball was a major pastime in Streetman at that time and young Marberry pitched for several teams in Streetman, even hiring out to other teams in the area. "Fred possessed a love and devotion to baseball which could never be measured," said local historians Verna Bonner and Mattie Marberry.⁴⁵

Marberry broke into professional baseball in the old Texas-Oklahoma League.⁴⁶ He first played for Mexia as a pitcher in 1922, and after playing one full season, was sold to a Southern League team in Little Rock, Arkansas. There, he played part of a season before being sold to the

⁴³Verna Bonner and Mattie Marberry, "Fred 'Firpo' Marberry Streetman's Contribution to Major League Baseball," *History of Freestone County, Texas*, Freestone County Historical Commission, 1978, 168.

⁴⁴Ibid, 167.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶"Washington Pitcher to Stop off at Streetman before Training Starts," *The Dallas Morning News*, 3 February 1931.

Washington Senators.⁴⁷ It was with the Senators that he experienced his greatest success as a professional player and earned his reputation as a winning relief pitcher.

Marberry's first season with the Senators was quite remarkable. The Senators, a team that had never made it to the World Series, won the American League pennant and the World Series in 1924. A *New York Times* writer in 1960 stated, "That was an era when play began in mid-afternoon and ended amid gathering dusk Marberry's whistling fast ball was wicked in the half-light of the late innings, and he was a chief contributor to Washington's winning the 1924 American League championship."⁴⁸

Sportswriters in the Washington, D.C., area credited Marberry's pitching arm as the determining factor in the year's competition.⁴⁹ That fact was confirmed about ten years later by *Dallas Morning News* sportswriter Happ Morse. Morse reported: "During the World Series of that year, Marberry, called in from the bullpen to relieve faltering starters, whizzed 'em by the New York Giants and personally saved three ball games for the Senators [Marberry's]

⁴⁷Bonner and Marberry, 167.

⁴⁸Daley.

⁴⁹Bonner and Marberry, 167.

strong arm and stout heart turned the trick then."⁵⁰ Morse described Marberry as "a big fellow . . . with a mighty heart and plenty of intestinal fortitude, which ball players give another name."⁵¹ In 1925 the Senators won the American League pennant again, but lost the World Series to Pittsburgh.

Marberry, whose home was in Corsicana, often visited his hometown Streetman in the off-season. For example, in February 1931 Marberry stopped in Streetman to visit relatives on his way to Hot Springs, before reporting for spring training.⁵² It was a special treat for the community, no matter what the reason for his visits.

Not long afterward, in 1932, Marberry was traded to the Detroit Tigers. In 1934 the Tigers won the American League pennant, but lost in the World Series to the St. Louis Cardinals. Marberry was released from Detroit in 1935; he tried to make the team at Washington again but was unsuccessful. His pitching was not as stellar as had been earlier in his career.⁵³

⁵⁰Happ Morse, "Age Keeps Big Fred Marberry From Winning," *The Dallas Morning News*, 3 October 1936.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

⁵²"Washington Pitcher to Stop off at Streetman before Training Starts."

⁵³Bonner and Marberry, 167.

Not wanting to drop down to the minor leagues but wanting to stay in baseball, Marberry decided to try umpiring in 1935. He explained, "I started thinking about it three or four years ago I've always looked ahead and figured there was a future in umpiring after I was through as a player."⁵⁴ He continued, "I probably could last a couple more years in the majors but my teeth have been causing trouble with my arm I don't want to go to the minors . . . I like the game and the big leagues."⁵⁵

He received special permission from the president of the American League, Will Harridge, to train as an umpire. On 17 June, 1935, Harridge announced Marberry's entry as a member of the American League umpire staff.⁵⁶ He attended school to learn American League umpiring techniques in Chicago, and then was sent out for active duty.⁵⁷

In twelve years, Marberry had pitched in the American League without ever being ejected from a game or fired for arguing with an umpire.⁵⁸ "Within the next few days, this

⁵⁴"Fred Marberry, Who has Never Been Fined or Suspended in a 12-Year Career, Now Umpiring," *The Dallas Morning News*, 20 June 1935.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁵⁶"Marberry to Try Hand at Umpiring," *The Dallas Morning News*, 18 June 1935.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸"Fred Marberry, Who has Never Been Fined or Suspended in a 12-Year Career, Now Umpiring."

mild mannered, even-tempered Texan will be given a blue serge suit and sent on to the diamond as an arbiter in the junior circuit," stated the *Dallas Morning News*.⁵⁹ Many wondered whether he would retain his sense of humor and "unruffled disposition." His response was, "I have never had any trouble as a player, and I don't expect to as an umpire If I call them right, there'll be no squawking But if they don't like my decisions they'll probably be on me as hard as anybody else."⁶⁰

Marberry grew unhappy with his new job in the profession because he was not allowed to associate with the players and the schedule was hectic. He quit umpiring after one year and returned home to Texas in 1936.⁶¹

He next decided to try playing in the minor leagues. He reached an agreement with Dallas Steers business manager Bob Tarleton in June 1936. "If he can regain his old-time form after a few days working out and convince himself that he can go into the Texas League, big Fred Marberry may be signed to a contract to join the Dallas Steers pitching staff," reported the *Dallas Morning News*.⁶² Marberry soon

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Bonner and Marberry, 167.

⁶²"Marberry to Sign Herd Contract if he Gets in Shape,"

began practicing with his new team, and made his Texas League debut on the mound for the Dallas Steers in the final game of their home stand against the Galveston Buccaneers on 29 June.⁶³

His fast ball no longer existed, but his slow ball still confused the batters he faced. "In most instances, the batter had swung before the ball reached him," recalled Bonner and Marberry.⁶⁴ Even in the minor league, however Marberry's performance could not match his earlier days. In October 1936 Marberry stepped on the mound in front of 12,600 fans for the Steers's most important game of the season. "He gave it all he had, but that arm, once dominant with speed and strength, failed under the load of overwork and he had to be relieved in the sixth inning Dallas fans gave him a great ovation as he left the mound and old Firpo deserved it," stated Morse.⁶⁵

Marberry continued in baseball until 1940, when he retired. "Big Firpo who has played in the major circuits, the Texas League, and once umpire in the American League, said he would enter the gasoline business here [in

The *Dallas Morning News*, 25 June 1936.

⁶³"Vet Marberry Hurls Tonight against Bucs," *The Dallas Morning News*, 29 June 1936.

⁶⁴Bonner and Marberry, 168.

⁶⁵Morse.

Corsicana],” noted the *Dallas Morning News*.⁶⁶ Marberry and his wife, Mattie, lived in Corsicana for the next six years. They moved there in 1945, where he owned and operated a Plymouth and Dodge auto dealership, which sold the after two years.⁶⁷

While traveling to Houston in 1949, Marberry was involved in a serious car accident that cost his left arm.⁶⁸ “Marberry’s car collided with an automobile driven by Rufus H. Long The accident occurred about two miles east of Mexia on the Mexia-Teague Highway,” reported the *Dallas Morning News*.⁶⁹ His left arm, severed above the elbow by the impact of the crash, was found in Long’s car. Hospital attendants concluded that Marberry’s “excellent physical condition” enabled him to survive the car accident.⁷⁰ His left arm was buried at Birdston Cemetary in Streetman!

Even after the accident, Marberry continued pitching in some American League Old Timers games. “Even though he was retired, baseball was his enduring love and was ever on

⁶⁶“Fred Marberry Quits Baseball,” *The Dallas Morning News*, 8 February 1940.

⁶⁷Bonner and Marberry, 168.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹“Marberry Loses Arm in Crash,” *The Dallas Morning News*, 3 October 1947.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*

his mind and lips," recalled Bonner and Marberry.⁷¹ He soon moved to Waco where he owned a recreation business near Baylor University.⁷² He sold that business and moved back to Mexia after suffering a severe heart attack in 1969. He remained there until his death on 30 June 1976 when he was buried, next to his arm, at Birdston Cemetary.⁷³

Fred "Firpo" Marberry's enjoyed a successful baseball career with an impressive record. During his twelve years in the majors, Marberry played 546 games, winning 146 games and losing eighty-seven. He had a run average of slightly over 3.50 and played in three World Series.⁷⁴ "Fred's greatest success was perfect control He could put the ball any place he desired and he also threw a very fast ball," stated Stanley "Bucky" Harris, manager of the Washington Senators.⁷⁵

Decline in Streetman

Streetman's decline was a more gradual process than was Kirvin's; it happened over a number of years because of a number of circumstances. The first setback Streetman

⁷¹Bonner and Marberry, 167.

⁷²Ibid, 168.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴"Fred Marberry, who has Never Been Fined or Suspended in 12-year Career, Now Umpiring."

⁷⁵Bonner and Marberry, 167.

experienced was a fire in 1934. "Fire of undetermined origin destroyed a two-story brick building in the center of the Streetman business section, resulting in a loss estimated at more than \$17000," the *Dallas Morning News* reported.⁷⁶ Firefighting equipment from Corsicana prevented the spread of the fire to other buildings, but was not able to suppress the original fire because of a lack of water.⁷⁷ Afterward, the need for some kind of fire protection became more apparent, and in 1940, the city purchased a new Chevrolet fire truck.⁷⁸

Streetman's population began to decline in 1940 and 1941.⁷⁹ Most of the town's inhabitants made their living by farming or ranching, and a major crop failure at that time devastated local farmers. World War II followed the crop failure, sending men to fight in the war and women to work in factories in cities. Most who left did not return. White recalled, "The war impacted Streetman because a lot of people left Streetman to work in the plants Many of the defense plants continued after the war with government contracts so there was work for people

⁷⁶"Heavy Loss Suffered in Fire at Streetman," *The Dallas Morning News*, 12 January 1934.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Minze, 157.

⁷⁹Ibid.

Why would they come back to Streetman and try to subsist off a few acres of land and a few heads of cattle Most of them stayed with their jobs unit retirement and then many moved back to Streetman after they retired."⁸⁰ Young observed, "The ones that stayed here mostly had farming and cattle They made a living off of that, but there were not many that could."⁸¹ Clearly, it was hard to make a living in Streetman. It was tough even for those who had inherited land and cattle, to make it in Streetman.⁸²

Another step in Streetman's decline was the closing of the schools. By the summer of 1947 there were not enough students to continue operating a twelve-grade school, making it necessary for the high school students to transfer to Fairfield. At the end of the 1949-50 school year, all grades would be taught in Fairfield. The Streetman School stood silent and deserted until it was torn down in the late 1950s.⁸³

A final blow to Streetman occurred in 1969-1970, when Interstate 45 bypassed the town, bringing more changes and

⁸⁰White Oral History Interview.

⁸¹Young Oral History Interview.

⁸²Easterling Oral History Interview.

⁸³Grace Grayson and Rubie O'Neil, "Streetman Independent School District Streetman School (White)," *History of Freestone County, Texas*, Freestone County Historical Commission, 1978, 164.

ruining more businesses. Streetman's 2000 population would be only 207.⁸⁴

Streetman Remembered

There is a pattern and unifying theme to how Streetman residents remember what used to be. "It was the typical small farming community in the 40s . . . a conservative community of people who were interested in keeping their homes and they had a strong family loyalty," remarked Henderson.⁸⁵ "It used to be that everybody knew everybody and helped everybody When one was hurting, everybody was hurting and almost all of us were connected by kin," stated Young.⁸⁶

Streetman was a comfortable, safe place, where people sat on their front porches and worked in their yards. It was also a place where everybody spoke to everybody else and could leave their front doors unlocked.⁸⁷ White described growing up in Streetman:

⁸⁴"Freestone County," *The Texas Almanac 2006-2007*, (Dallas, TX: The Dallas Morning News, 2006), 223.

⁸⁵Henderson Oral History Interview.

⁸⁶Young Oral History Interview.

⁸⁷White Oral History Interview.

Streetman was the safest place on earth. Everybody kept an eye out for each other. We had no crime and nothing to threaten us. It was like a movie set. There was all good and no bad. It was a time that will never be again, a very Ozzie and Harriet type of atmosphere. Everybody trusted everybody else because everybody had the same morals, the same goals. It was like we were all stamped out to the same mold.⁸⁸

On 29 April 2006 more than 400 people gathered in Streetman to celebrate the town's 100th birthday. "The Centennial became, in a real sense, a homecoming for many who once lived there, who attended Streetman schools, and who still call Streetman 'home,'" reported the *Freestone County Times*.⁸⁹ This was proof that while Streetman saw both growth and decline over the past century, it remained in the hearts and minds of those who lived there. The *Freestone County Times* concluded:

The city is somewhat of a "bedroom" community with most residents commuting to work in other towns, but families have discovered the joys of small town life in Streetman. Children's laughter and noise can be heard on many city streets. Front porch swings are still the favorite way to spend a spring Sunday afternoon. Perhaps the city's "glory days" are in the past, but life is good today in Streetman, Texas.⁹⁰

Streetman may have seen its "glory days," but it is interesting and important today because it was a significant small Texas town. The railroad established

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Julianne Dodge, "Streetman Celebrates Centennial," *The Freestone County Times*, 2 May 2006.

⁹⁰Ibid.

Streetman. Fred "Firpo" Marberry put Streetman on the map through major league baseball, and today it lives because people remember and love that community.

Streetman and Kirvin were two places in Northwest Freestone County with numerous characteristics in common. They differed as well, but each has its own history to tell.

CHAPTER FOUR

Comparison of Kirvin and Streetman and Conclusions

At the opening of the 21st century, Kirvin and Streetman have survived as sleepy towns with few inhabitants, little activity, and little if any commerce. Neither is located on busy travel routes. There are few reasons to travel to either community unless one lives there or is visiting someone else who lives there.

Based on the towns' later appearances, it is difficult to imagine there were ever many people, businesses, churches, news, schools, activities, and the normal hustle and bustle of town life. Not much survived of what used to be the towns of Kirvin and Streetman.

But, they are not defined as Texas "ghost towns." They still have population signs along the roads outside of town and are still listed as cities of Freestone County in the *Texas Almanac* and the *Handbook of Texas*.

Although now quiet, in the past the two communities were alive with activity. These little communities boasted of people, places, and stories. These towns, which now seem so insignificant, were both significant historically. They each made a contribution to local, state, and national

development. They were important in the overall framework of Freestone County history, Texas history, and American history.

The histories of Streetman and Kirvin are related in a number of ways and share many characteristics. There are, however, several differences worth noting. Among the major differences of the two towns are the way each declined and how long it took.

Kirvin, a successful town, had a very short lifespan. Founded in 1906, it enjoyed about two decades of growth and affluence, and then abruptly declined in population. Streetman, in contrast, enjoyed a longer, flourishing lifespan. While its most prosperous years were from 1920 to 1940, it was successful and active from its founding in 1906 until after World War II, after which it slowly decayed. Kirvin's decline was abrupt, while Streetman's was gradual.

The causes for decline differed as well. Streetman experienced terrible crop failures in the early 1940s, which caused making a living difficult for local farmers. World War II also affected the community negatively also, as men went off to war, and women went to the cities to work in the factories. After the war, those who learned

they could make an easier living in the cities did not return to Streetman.

Kirvin's population was in decline before factors such as the Great Depression or World War II could affect it. When African American citizens began dispersing to other parts of Texas, there was hardly anyone left in Kirvin to work the land. Cotton farmers could not make a living without the cheap labor the African Americans had provided. As people left, businesses, schools, and churches closed. Many of the downtown buildings burned down, leaving only a meager material culture in Kirvin. It all happened in a fairly short amount of time.

A great difference in the two communities is the loyalty and connectedness people felt toward the communities. In Streetman, land, typically over time, did not change ownership very much. Many of the families who owned land when Freestone County was first settled or when Streetman was first settled, remained in place far into the future.

Many who moved away from Streetman years ago would move back in their retirement years. Another example of community love and loyalty may be seen in one woman who has never moved her membership from First Baptist Church in

Streetman. Although she moved away from Streetman, she steadfastly wanted to keep her church membership there.¹

Besides contributing to American historiography, Kirvin and Streetman are similar in many other ways. The first characteristic the two shared was that they were similar in origin. The railroad played the major role in the establishment of both towns. The Trinity and Brazos Valley Railway built through the Kirvin area in 1906. Little communities such as Shanks and Simmsborrow moved to Kirvin because that was where the depot, the commerce, and the activity were developing.

Streetman was founded as a station on the Trinity and Brazos Valley Railway in 1906 as well. The smaller communities in the area, such as Cade, Birdston, and St. Elmo moved over to Streetman, where more activity was and attractions. Kirvin and Streetman were alike in that both induced the demise of many small settlements in their end of the county. These settlements' post offices and businesses moved to the railroad towns and rarely left visible evidence of earlier existences behind them.

Streetman and Kirvin were literally connected by the railroad. A Kirvin resident could travel on the passenger train to Streetman and a resident of Streetman could do the

¹White Oral History Interview.

same in the other direction. While travel was limited in the early twentieth century, friends and families from both towns visited each other by way of the rail line.

Both Streetman and Kirvin were incorporated around the same time - Kirvin in 1911, Streetman in 1914. They both experienced growth during the teens and twenties, with churches, schools, and new businesses being built. Both had several weekly newspapers during the period.

Streetman's and Kirvin's economies, outside of the railroad, were based on agriculture. The land areas surrounding each town were excellent farming country. They were mainly farming and ranching communities, growing cotton and raising cattle, which prompts another similarity. African Americans made up a substantial percentage in population in each town. Workers were needed to pick cotton, mend fences, and round up cattle; the African American population provided this workforce.

Both communities experienced fairly typical race relations for their time. Blacks and whites had separate churches, schools, and community activities. People of both races came to town to do the necessary shopping, but there was little social interaction. Most interaction, if it existed, was between employer and laborer. African

Americans were the domestic and agricultural workers for the local whites.

Lynching was an integral and tragic part of both communities' histories. In 1922, three men were burned at Kirvin; in that same year, one man was hanged at Streetman. While horror, tragedy, and atrocity cannot be measured, most would conclude that Kirvin's lynching was relatively more shocking and repulsive, and had worse consequences.

In Streetman a school teacher, Florine Grayson, was attacked by a black man, George Gay, but she was not seriously harmed. News of the attack traveled fast and a mob gathered. When they caught Gay, they hanged him by a tree and then shot his body full of bullet holes. Grayson's family pleaded with the mob to let justice take its course. Perhaps they remembered what happened in Kirvin only months earlier.

In Kirvin, the story was even more gruesome. A high school girl, Eula Ausley, was unspeakably, brutally murdered. A manhunt was organized to find the criminal. News again traveled fast, and a mob developed demanding the surrender of ones assumed to have committed the crime. The three assumed culprits, "Snapp" Curry, Johnny Cornish, and Moses Jones were chained to a plow and burned alive, and the burnings occurred while spectators from town watched.

The family of Ausley did not make efforts to demand that the law be upheld. Her grandfather acted as though justice had been done. Unlike Streetman, Kirvin experienced a month-long run of racial violence after the town's initial lynchings, with still more blacks killed.

Arson occurred in the aftermath of both incidences of racial violence. In Streetman the only black hotel was burned after the lynching of Gay. In Kirvin, in 1923, a black church and school burned to the ground.

The irony of it all is that both Streetman and Kirvin were thriving boom towns in their day, both extremely prosperous. Kirvin experienced its highest prosperity from its founding until the early 1920s. Streetman, on the other hand, experienced its greatest prosperity from 1920 to 1940. Both were listed in the *Texas Almanacs* as major towns in the early twentieth century, a glaring contrast from today.

Fire was a phenomenon each town experienced in its declining process. After 1922, a series of mysterious fires destroyed many of the main buildings in downtown Kirvin. In 1936, Streetman also lost several of its major downtown buildings to fire. Today, other than two churches still standing, there is no main street, no downtown, no buildings, and practically no evidence that there was ever

a town at Kirvin. Streetman still has a few of its original buildings and churches, but is only a fragment its former past.

A final similarity is that each community made its own unique contribution to history. Streetman made a huge contribution to major league baseball history, as the hometown of the famous major league relief pitcher Fred "Firpo" Marberry. His name, associated with Streetman, can be found in historical newspapers and baseball magazines nationwide. Streetman is where he got his start. He grew up in a town that loved baseball. Major league baseball might have never known Fred "Firpo" Marberry had it not been for Streetman and its love for baseball.

Kirvin's contribution, though less pleasant, was one in the tragic history of race relations in the county, the state of Texas, and the United States. What happened in Kirvin received attention in newspapers across the state and across the country. Kirvin received attention again with the release of Monte Akers's book in 1999.² Lynching is a very dark legacy for this country, and present-day quiet Kirvin is a part of that legacy.

Kirvin and Streetman are unimpressive today. They seem inconsequential in the grand scheme of life and

²Monte Akers, *Flames after Midnight*.

history. They could, one day, in the future, be a Cotton Gin or a Stewards Mill. What is important to remember is that they are not irrelevant to local, state, or national history. Each was once a vibrant community full of people, businesses, stories, activities, and lives. Such places must not be forgotten.

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