

ACROSS THE TRACKS

By Hazel Adams Richardson

In 1903 there were 18,859 souls in Brazos County. Among these souls were several ladies who found Bryan, to say the least, an uncivilized town. The streets were unpaved, muddy wallows, in fact. There were fifteen saloons in town, two on each block. Drunks reeled up and down the streets all day. Everybody carried a gun. One could hear the popping of guns all day. In the back of saloons gambling and eating carried on. Hangings on the court house lawn were usual. Cows, horses, cats and dogs roamed up and down the muddy streets. There were no parks; no library; no culture.

The intrepid ladies who found all of this so distasteful lost no time in doing something. They organized – a club which was called The Mutual Improvement Club. Their first projects included getting the animals off of Main Street, establishing a city park, and a free public library. They were 100% successful in these projects. The ladies were not only intrepid. They were cultivated and they were powerful and knew those in the state who had influence and wealth. When they got to the Library bit they went the direct route. They had heard that Andrew Carnegie was giving away thousands of dollars to establish libraries throughout the country; so they wrote to Mr. Carnegie's secretary, whom they knew and asked for money to build a free public library in Bryan. Their request was granted. Mr. Carnegie agreed to give the City of Bryan \$10,000 to build a building if the City would agree to give \$1000 a year to run the library. Minutes of the City Council reflect many times that the City had to borrow money to keep their part of the bargain.

It was a grand and festive day when the Library opened on December 14, 1903. Books were obtained by a party. Major L. L. McInnis who was on the first faculty of A&M and the first Library Board had a party at his house. Admission was by a book. Everyone in Brazos County was invited and 1000 good books, some of them still on the library shelves, were collected.

It is interesting to speculate on what else the citizens were doing on that day. Old files of the Bryan Eagle help us. In the evening the Baptist Church had a party honoring their new pastor and his wife. Mr. George A. Adams went to Millican to collect taxes. Miss Robbie Seale returned from Benchley in time for the Library opening, Mr. J. W. Coulter returned from market, and Dr. R. H. Harrison returned from Houston.

Immediately when the Library opened it became the cultural and civic center of the community. Every club in town and every church temporarily without a meeting place gathered in its auditorium.

The grand old building at 111 S. Main Street has its greatest historic association with John Bell Hood's Texas Brigade, which developed from the Texas Brigade, organized in Virginia in 1861. It originally included the 1st, 4th, and 5th Texas regiments. The brigade participated in at least twenty-four battles, among them Gaines' Mill, Second

Manassas, Antietam, Chickamauga, and Gettysburg. In the Battle of the Wilderness General Lee personally led the Texans in one of the charges.

The survivors of Hood's Brigade formed a Reunion Association in 1872 for the purpose of annual meetings. To these meetings came nationally and internationally famous people who were proud to speak to these great soldiers who had been part of the finest fighting outfit ever to be raised on the Western Continent. Beginning in 1919 until 1934, when there were none surviving, the Veterans met in Bryan every year in the Carnegie Library. The stone set in the front of the library is engraved, "Hood's Brigade – Bryan our last headquarters and this building our last home."

The first historical medallion to be placed on a building in Brazos County was placed on the Carnegie Library by the Texas Historical Survey Committee on December 5, 1964. In December 1969 an historical marker was placed on the front of the building by the Historical Survey Committee.

Sixty-six years to the day, December 14, 1969, from the opening of the old Library we moved across the tracks to a new building, leaving behind echoes and memories of a glorious past.

Now the old building has been renovated and is occupied by the Bryan City Planning Department and the Traffic Department. It is hoped in a few years that it will become a much needed historic museum for this community.