

History of San Jacinto County

The area that was later to become San Jacinto County had been explored and claimed by white settlers by 1820. The first to homestead claimed that land along the Trinity River. By 1840, the town of Swartwout was prosperous and it was predicted that it would eventually compare in size to Houston. The Pony Express route that left Huntsville going east to Zavalla (Lufkin area) had a stop at Rankins before reaching Swartwout. This writer believes that Rankins was none other than present day Coldspring which had been settled by Rankin families.

By 1847 the increase in population moved people inland from the Trinity River and a Post Office was established at Coonskin on January 18, 1847 and two months later the name was changed to Fireman's Hill with Joseph Graves as postmaster under both names. To maintain a post office at the time required doing \$5.00 of business quarterly plus filling out a form.

Fireman's Hill was located near the north end of Rose Hill Road and by 1847 had become quite a community. Henry F. Gillette had come to his wife's family home and opened an Academy (a pay school) that history records as one of the best of its day in all of Texas. To add to its importance as a community, the Mt. Moriah Masonic Lodge (#37) rented the upper story of Gillette's school building for their meetings. The Swartwout Masonic Lodge building which also housed a school on the ground floor had moved to Livingston. So, those Swartwout families living on the west side of the Trinity River turned to Fireman's Hill for the education of their children and Masonic Lodge membership.

By 1848 growth had moved even further away from the Trinity River and the town of Coldspring had become a prosperous community. Located among numerous springs, the name had to be evident. I.T. Patrick, John W. Sanders, F.H. Rankin and General James Davis are names that are recorded for the giving of land for churches and for schools in the new town. But the post office remained Fireman's Hill until 1850.

On October 30th, 1850, the United States Post Office Department officially recognized the new town of Cold Springs (spelling later changed) and named John W. Sanders as its first postmaster. Sanders and Patrick were in partnership in a mercantile business whose two story building (referred to as a "store house") would have cer-

tainly been the home of the new post office. By 1852 the community of Fireman's Hill saw Gillette's two story building move to Coldspring and continue its use as a school on the ground floor and Mt. Moriah's Lodge #37 to once again meet upstate.

The year of 1917 was a year of progressive growth for the town of Coldspring, that is, the new town site of Coldspring. Yet, in the 1917 Telephone Directory there are only two families that were not descended from the early settlers to the area. One of those family names was Greenaway.

This family had come from their home in Australia and opened a furniture factory in Houston prior to their move to Coldspring. Mr. Greenaway built a sawmill here on a creek behind Coldspring Terrace and, whether planned or not, he came at an opportune time to the town that was in a period of change. The courthouse had burned in the old town and a new site had been chosen which surely would have a need for new lumber.

The Carnes Hotel in old town was purchased by Mr. Greenaway and the local newspaper informed the public that good lumber was for sale cheap from that site. There had been a number of contractors for the courthouse construction and Mr. Greenaway's timing was that he filled that position and saw the new public structure to as near completion as it got for many years to come.

By 1918 the Greenaway Hotel was advertised in the local paper as located in the new town site and what a credit to the town's growth: now there were two two-story buildings in town! Also, this up-to-date hotel had all the comforts of a city hotel. There were 18 rooms, a toilet, and a large dining room. And on the first court date it was filled to capacity.

There were several daughters and one son in the Roy Greenaway family and the friends who once fondly recalled their friendship in those years are now deceased. But though the Greenaways moved to all parts of the country, most have been brought back in death to Oakwood (Methodist) Cemetery for burial.

Trapp, Billie. *The History of San Jacinto County.*

Adapted from www.sanjacintoco.com.

Sources: Grover Ramsey of Austin, Texas

General History

A HISTORY OF SAN JACINTO COUNTY, TEXAS

by

Billie Trapp

H.D. Thompson, one of the earliest settlers of San Jacinto County, wrote in the obituary he prepared for himself and which appeared in an 1895 newspaper:

... I have lived in three counties and never moved; first Liberty, then Polk, and now San Jacinto. I am the oldest (living) settler in the county; cut the first brush to start Cold Springs. I have lived in three governments and never moved. Nine years in the Mexican Government, Lone Star nine years and now the United States ... May God continue to bless the people of San Jacinto County.

Since the County did not come into existence as a separate entity until 1870, its early history is included in that of its parent counties: Liberty, Polk, Montgomery and Walker. The two latter were derived from Old Washington, and Polk from Liberty, so this County traces its descent from two of the original municipalities. Named for the river which traverses it and which, in turn, was named for St. Hyacinth, and sharing its name with the battle which broke Mexican power and assured Texas Independent, part of the present County was included in Austin's settling of the "Old Three Hundred."

The first land grant in the County was made in 1833. José Vehlein was granted an empresario's commission by the Mexican government to bring settlers into this area, which was then part of the Nacogdoches District. In 1835, the land on which the County seat, Coldspring, is located, was granted to Col. Robert Rankin, an American Revolutionary officer whose sons served in the Texas Army. One of his sons, Frederick H. Rankin, was well known to all East Texans as one of its most progressive pioneers, but also as a personal friend of (and an Indian Agent for) Sam Houston. Frederick Rankin was a member of the Coldspring Masonic Lodge and donated the land for the Methodist Church built in 1848, still used today. He, as well as Henderson Yoakum, were trustees of this Church.

When the rumblings of revolution started, Houston sent Frederick H. Rankin to the Alabama and Coushatta Indian Tribes' three villages within this County to secure their promise not to enter the hostilities.

The Alabama and Coushatta (Coashatta, Koasati, Costehe) Tribes had settled along the Trinity River at the turn of the 19th century, later being granted 2 leagues of land to each tribe by the Texas Congress. This land, however, was taken from the Indians by white settlers and they were again homeless and landless until 1854 when, upon the recommendation of General Houston, the State of Texas purchased approximately 1,280 acres of land for the Alabama Tribe, which at that time had decreased

to about 340 Tribal members. The Coushattas never had provision made for them, so eventually most of this tribe went to live with the Alabamas.

General Sam Houston was a frequent visitor to this County, traveling to meet with the Indians at the home of his brother-in-law, Vernal B. Lea. Lea's home, four miles East of Coldspring, is marked with a Centennial marker and known as Council Hill.

It is said that if Houston was unable to meet the Indians there as planned, signal fires were lighted on Signal Hill (on Farm Road 224, North of Coldspring), and a new meeting place was designated. An early account of the life of this great man states that after his term of office as U.S. Senator was over, he planned to retire to his Plantation home, "THE RAVEN," and raise sheep. This retirement lasted only for a year, as he did not agree with Texas politics and left his farm to enter the gubernatorial race of 1857. In 1860, he visited Coldspring during one of his whirlwind tours, speaking against disunion.

Governor George T. Wood settled in the Point Blank area in 1839. His first home was located on BEN ASH HILL (named for the Indian Chief whose home had first been there) near the river. After the death of an infant child, Governor Wood decided the River was "sickly" and moved to present-day Point Blank, where there is now a marker on his home site. His family is buried by his side at the small community cemetery at Point Blank. The inscription on his monument says: "George Tyler Wood, Born March 12, 1795, at Cuthbert, Randolph County, Georgia. Died September 5, 1858. Was a member of the Congress of the Republic of Texas in 1841-2, and was Governor of the State of Texas in 1847-49. Here Sleeps a Just Man." A marker on the Courthouse Square in Coldspring commemorates his public career.

The Trinity River was settled many years before communities were named. There were numerous Steamboat landings such as Drew's Landing, Johnson's Bluff, Swartout, Grace's Landing, Patrick's Ferry, Jones' Bluff, Harrell's Landing, and Barnett's Ferry. Almost all the large plantations had a landing so that supplies could be brought in without the necessity of long trips overland. At this time of our history, only two roads were used. They followed old Indian trails. One of these led from Montgomery to Nacogdoches via Swartout; the other from Lynchburg to the Sabine River via Patrick's Ferry.

Swartout was the largest of the early settlements on the Trinity River. It was an important landing before the interruption of the Civil War, and was the site of a ferry crossing from San Jacinto to Polk County until 1930, as was Patrick's Ferry. It is said that Indians forded at

this spot as early as 1690 when LaSalle made this crossing, but there is nothing left of it.

San Jacinto County came into being as a separate entity in 1870, when a local son, J.V. Lea (son of Vernal B. Lea) was in the Legislature. It was at that time the smallest county in the State. One of the first judges to hold Court in San Jacinto County was Judge Larkin G. Cleveland. Robert S. Lovett studied law under Judge J.V. Lea. His amazing career as a railroad lawyer began in this small County, as did that of colorful criminal Houston District Judge C.W. Robinson. Judge Norman G. Kittrell was born near Raven Hill. Judges J.R. Burnett and Edwin Hobby, Father of Governor W.P. Hobby, also had their roots in San Jacinto County.

For years, the possibility of getting a railroad through the County was a topic of never-flagging interest. Anti-railroad feeling was strong, and through influence and refusal to sell rights-of-way, the railroads were unable to come into much of the County. But in 1881, the Houston, East and West Texas Railroad extended its lines across the Southeastern part of the County. The town of Shepherd was created along that line, becoming the principal station. Sawmills sprang up all along the railroad line, for now there was to be an outlet for the nearly two billion feet of pine found here. About 1900, a lumber railroad was built from Fostoria (on the Santa Fé RR line) to Coldspring, carrying timber and a few passengers—if there was room.

San Jacinto County is abundantly blessed. It has over 50 miles of shoreline on the Southerly edge of Lake Livingston, a 90,000 surface acre fresh water reservoir for the City of Houston. It is a hunting and fishing paradise with innumerable lakes and streams. There is a huge National Forest named after Sam Houston partly in the County, and within that National Forest, in San Jacinto County, is a 310 acre recreation area called Double Lake, which offers campsites, nature trails, peace, quiet, and serenity, as does the public State Park on the Lake, Wolf Creek Park. Together, these attractions and others such as proximity to the Big Thicket, attract well over a quarter million people annually who visit or vacation here. San Jacinto County's small communities and peaceful way of life are also added attractions. Yet Houston is only one and a half hours away, reached on excellent highways. The 1880 census showed a County population of 6,186; a hundred years later, in 1980, San Jacinto County's population had grown to 11,000, attributable in part to the many subdivisions which have brought many retired families to live in harmony with the descendants of the original settlers, and those who came after them.