

A HISTORY OF  
FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF BRYAN  
c. 1995

The First National Bank of Bryan is located in the City of Bryan, Brazos County, Texas. The county is located between the Brazos and Navasota Rivers, bordered in the north by El Camino Real, which is the path that Moses Austin took when he travelled to San Antonio to seek permission to establish a colony from the Spanish governor. Initially part of Washington County, the flood-prone Brazos River prompted the Texas Congress to split off the territory to the east of the river and create a separate county on January 31, 1841. The county was initially named Navasota County until James A. Head, the representative of the county in the Texas Congress, offered a bill in 1842 that changed its name to Brazos County, as it is known as today.

The first sustained growth in the county came with the railroad. In 1859 the Houston and Texas Central Railroad obtained a right-of-way through Brazos County and laid tracks from the town of Millican the following year. William Joel Bryan, a nephew of Stephen F. Austin who had served as Sam Houston's translator in his talks with Santa Anna after the Battle of San Jacinto, surveyed the land he owned along the right-of-way that was located to the northwest of Millican. Plans were drawn up based on the survey, and a town was started that was named in Bryan's honor. By 1866 construction resumed on the railroad and by the time the first train reached the new Bryan station on August 19, 1867, the county seat, the regional post office, and many local businesses had relocated to the new town. Formal incorporation of Bryan was completed with an act of the Texas Legislature in 1872.<sup>1</sup>

Among the businesses that joined the migration from Millican to Bryan was a money-lending organization started by Milton Parker and W.H. Flippen in 1862. The two moved the private bank to Bryan in 1867. Parker sold his share to Flippen, who later sold out to Guy M. Bryan, the son of the town's founder. Born in Brazoria County, Texas, on January 25, 1843, he settled in Bryan in 1866 and soon became active within the community. In 1873 Guy Bryan started a private bank to meet the needs of the growing community, acquiring two partners, Major

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<sup>1</sup> *Brazos County History: Rich Past—Bright Future*, (Bryan, TX: Family History Foundation, 1986), p. 29-30.

Frank Clarke and Dr. J.W. Howell. The office of Clarke, Bryan, and Howell, as the firm was known, was located on Main Street in downtown Bryan.<sup>2</sup>

In 1886 Bryan consolidated with another local banker, J.S. Fowlkes, and became the first bank to receive a national bank charter under legislation recently passed by Congress. On January 15, 1886 the first board of directors' meeting of the First National Bank of Bryan was convened, with Guy M. Bryan, J.S. Fowlkes, J.W. Howell, W.R. Howell, and S.J. Howell as its directors. Fowlkes was named president, Bryan vice president, J.W. Howell cashier, and W.R. Howell assistant cashier. The bank initially possessed a capital stock of \$100,000, with Bryan, Fowlkes, and J.W. Howell each holding 250 shares. The remaining shares were evenly divided between S.J. Howell and W.R. Howell. On March 9, the board approved the leasing of space in Fowlkes and Ticby, which became the first location of the bank's offices.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the late nineteenth century, cotton was the main cash crop in the Brazos valley and as such played an important part in the business of the First National Bank. At its September 13, 1887 meeting, the board decided "that cotton receipts be held by [the] bank until [the] cotton is ready for shipment."<sup>4</sup> The bank's role in the local economy is also evidenced by the business that it did with professors from the recently established Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College, the institution today known as Texas A&M University. Yet the bank's growth in this period was not assured, and cashiers were told at the May 12, 1891 board meeting "to make no loans to regular customers until money got easier."<sup>5</sup>

In January, 1892 the composition of the board underwent a change. Fowlkes resigned and J.W. Howell took over as president of the bank, a post he would occupy for the next eighteen years. Guy Bryan remained as vice president while another future leader of the bank, H.O. Boatwright, became the cashier.<sup>6</sup> Within three years Boatwright became the largest single shareholder in the bank. He later served as vice president and president of the bank as well as Federal District

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<sup>2</sup> *Bryan Weekly Eagle*, September 8, 1921; *Brazos County History*, p. 438.

<sup>3</sup> First National Bank of Bryan, Board of Directors' Minute Book, vol. 1, p. 1, 11-12.

<sup>4</sup> Minute Book, Vol. 1, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Minute Book, Vol. 1, p. 61.

<sup>6</sup> Minute Book, Vol. 1, p. 66.

Reserve Elector after the establishment of the new Federal Reserve System in 1914. Boatwright also played an important role in the community, serving most notably as the vice president of the Bryan Building & Loan Association, an organization established by the Commercial Club (forerunner of today's Chamber of Commerce) in April, 1919 to improve roads and encourage homebuilding in Bryan.

The bank prospered over the next several years, growing along with the rest of Bryan. Bank meetings established a regular pattern. The stockholders typically met in December to elect the Board of Directors for the upcoming year and in January to elect the officers, which usually involved reelecting the officeholders from the previous year. The board normally met once a month, though there were a few occasions where the meeting was postponed due to a lack of quorum. By 1903 J.W. Howell became chairman of the board, a position he held until his death on August 5, 1920. Boatwright assumed the position of president of the bank, steering it through the tumult of the First World War and into the prosperity of the 1920s. Boatwright's tenure also saw the expansion of the role of the bank. Such expansion led to the outgrowing of the space at Tichnor & Fields. In 1919 the bank constructed a new building for their increasing staff at 108 N. Main, which would be its home for the next half century. The bank began bidding to administer financial services for both the Brazos County government and the Brazos County school system in 1927, and accepted a \$50,000 deposit from the State in 1928.<sup>7</sup>

Boatwright's tenure as president of the bank also saw the onset of the Great Depression. At their December 10, 1929 meeting, the board discussed their concern with the slow lines, and a "further urgent collection policy [was] approved" to deal with defaulting loans.<sup>8</sup> The board also decided at their April 30, 1930 meeting to establish a cotton sales department to sell the cotton seized as collateral on defaulted loans.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the officers at the bank announced at the October 13, 1931 board meeting that they would take a voluntary 10 percent reduction in their salaries.<sup>10</sup> Through such measures and through careful management of business, the bank survived the economic crisis that collapsed many banks throughout the nation.

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<sup>7</sup> Minute Book, Vol. 2, p. 1, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Minute Book, Vol. 2, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> Minute Book, Vol. 2, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> Minute Book, Vol. 2, p. 47.

Boatwright, however, did not live to see the survival of the bank, dying on August 12, 1933. He was replaced as president of the bank by Travis M. Bryan, his son-in-law and vice-president of the bank. Born in Giddings on September 5, 1892, Bryan first worked in the bank as a runner and stenographer and was named assistant cashier in 1917. After taking a leave of absence in 1918 to serve in World War I, he was named cashier in 1921 and became vice-president on February 14, 1933 after the death of L.L. McInnis, who served 42 years as vice-president of the Bank. Travis Bryan continued Boatwright's work in steering the bank through the Depression, demonstrating the business skills that would aid the growth of both the bank and the community as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

Though the bank survived the Depression, desperate times loomed ahead. The possibility of American involvement in the war in Europe loomed, a prospect that the board declared was "to be regretted." At their January 14, 1941 meeting the board decided to operate a "most conservative business" in a wartime economy, dreading the coming conflict.<sup>12</sup> The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 quickly changed matters for the bank, much as it did for the rest of the nation. The board decided on June 9, 1942 to buy 10,000 of every issue of U.S. bonds for the duration of the war, and played a major role in war bond drives in the Brazos Valley. By the end of the war, the bank sold \$5,047,542.90 of the \$12,401,753.40 worth of U.S. bonds in the entire Brazos County, making it the single highest seller of bonds among the banks and government institutions in the region.<sup>13</sup> The bank even organized a campaign to raise funds for the purchase of a P-51 plane, the "Spirit of Bryan," for the war effort. Travis Bryan was on hand for the ceremonies donating the plane to the United States Army Air Force.<sup>14</sup>

The single greatest impact the war had on both the bank and the Brazos Valley was in the establishment of Bryan Field, an airbase for the training of pilots. As early as May 10, 1942, the First National Bank board discussed the possible establishment of "a large air training center near Bryan." The plans were formally

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<sup>11</sup> *Bryan Weekly Eagle*, June 30, 1937.

<sup>12</sup> *Minute Book*, Vol. 2, p. 159.

<sup>13</sup> *Minute Book*, Vol. 2, p. 172, 207.

<sup>14</sup> *Minute Book*, Vol. 2, p. 176; *Bryan Daily Eagle*, January 20, 1964; Interview with Travis M. Bryan, Jr., April 11, 1995.

approved in the summer of 1942, and the bank handled the banking needs of all but one of the businesses contracted to construct the base. The influx of new business along with the fact that workers only came into town at night led the bank to introduce night deposit boxes, becoming the first bank in the nation to provide what is today a standard banking service. Over the next two and a half years Bryan Field brought \$9 million into the local economy. Both Travis Bryan and the bank were at the forefront of the unsuccessful campaign to keep the base open at the end of the war.<sup>15</sup>

For the next several years Travis Bryan lobbied hard to reopen the base, periodically reporting the progress of his efforts to the board of First National Bank. The Korean War helped his efforts, and at the February 13, 1951 board meeting it was announced that the airfield, now known as Bryan Air Force Base, would be reactivated in order to train pilots. Travis Bryan's lobbying was crucial to the decision, as the "Chamber of Commerce admittedly was unable to get the job done," and Mr. Bryan's personal role was emphasized when he learned of the decision to reactivate the base through a phone call from President Harry S. Truman.<sup>16</sup> The end of the Korean War, however, diminished the need for the base. Despite the lobbying of First National Bank and Travis Bryan to locate the proposed Air Force Academy at the site, its closure was announced to the board on March 11, 1958. The loss of the base emphasized the need for a diverse economy, and Travis Bryan joined with other business leaders in seeking to bring a variety of businesses to the Brazos Valley.<sup>17</sup>

Despite this setback, First National Bank continued to play a major role in the community. The bank continued to serve as the County depository throughout the postwar period and sold the 27-acre Travis Park to the city. First National lent the money to build the park in 1949 and took a deeded trust on the land, gaining it when the park folded. The sale of the park on October 9, 1956 was negotiated on terms favorable to the city, as the primary goal of the bank was to provide a place for the community's children to play. The city recognized this generosity by formally naming the park in Travis Bryan's honor.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Minute Book, Vol. 2, p. 172, 202-3.

<sup>16</sup> Minute Book, Vol. 2, p. 256; Interview w. Mr. Bryan.

<sup>17</sup> Minute Book, Vol. 2, p. 288; *Brazos County History*, p. 438.

<sup>18</sup> Minute Book, Vol. 2, p. 315; Travis Bryan Jr. interview.

The decision to sell the park was one of Travis Bryan's last major decisions, as he died on February 11, 1964. His place as leader of the bank was taken by his son, Travis M. Bryan, Jr. Born on April 14, 1922, Travis Bryan, Jr. served in the United States Navy during World War II and was first elected to the board of First National Bank on January 8, 1946. He served as president of the bank until 1974, when William D. Barkley took over the office which he continues to hold to this day. Under Travis Bryan Jr.'s leadership, First National Bank continued its innovative policies, including the introduction of computers into the bank. At a special meeting of the board on October 28, 1965, its members authorized the leasing of a Burroughs B-300 computer for \$6,000 a month, becoming the first business in the Brazos Valley to use the new technology. To defray costs, the bank sold time on the computer to other local businesses, finding the greatest interest among pharmacists seeking faster processing of their accounts.<sup>19</sup>

The computer's vast size took up much space and highlighted the cramped conditions of the old building. Its limited space, both for bank offices and parking for the customers, brought about the decision to relocate. First National opened its new offices on June 21, 1976 at 2807 S. Texas Avenue, the present location of its headquarters.<sup>20</sup> The bank's move away from downtown Bryan, however, did not diminish the institution's commitment to the people, and this commitment is evident up to the present day. An example of this ongoing commitment was seen on March 23, 1993, when the board approved a gift to the community of the property adjacent to the Palace Theater, which was undergoing a major redevelopment program by the city.

First National Bank continues to this present day as a thriving institution serving the needs of the Brazos Valley. With assets totaling over \$174 million it continues to serve the traditional agricultural needs of the region while standing at the forefront of efforts to diversify the commercial and industrial interests of the area. The bank is planning to play a major role in the community's future, recently purchasing land at the corner of Rock Prairie Road and Highway 6 for a new branch in the southern part of the region in recognition of the community's growth in that direction. Yet these plans involve more than simply providing banking services to the Brazos Valley. First National realized that the bank's success is tied

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<sup>19</sup> Minute Book, Vol. 2, p. 435; Travis Bryan, Jr. interview.

<sup>20</sup> Minute Book; June 15, 1976.

to the success of the region and continues to work for the community as a whole. The bank remains one of the preeminent contributors to area charities, donating each year to the United Way and other groups. The appointment in November 1991 of Tim Bryan to the position of vice-chairman and future leader of the bank reaffirms both the bank's heritage and its commitment to use the bank for the good of the people of Brazos Valley.