

TEXAS HIGHWAYS--MCKINNEY--MALLORY

(2286 words---Italicized copy can be cut for length purposes.)

Story and photographs by Randy Mallory

# Magnetic McKinney

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## A Happenin' Little Place

**S**herri Mraz cuts her famous chocolate chip pie with pride, and rests each piece neatly beside other deserts she's made from scratch that morning: the pies (banana split, strawberry cream cheese, and homemade coconut), and the cakes (carrot, Italian cream, and to-die-for chocolate). The sumptuous selections line Sherri's lunch counter as the noon crowd filters into her Pantry Restaurant, located just off McKinney's bustling downtown square.

These days, McKinney seems to be bustling all over. A few years ago, retirees opened antique stores downtown, then younger people followed with specialty shops. Both revel in the local turn-of-the-century architecture and small-town pace of life. On the west side, new neighborhoods sprawl resplendently with recreational activities galore. By virtually any standard, McKinney's a happenin' little place!

McKinney public information coordinator Judy Skowron agrees: "For several years, we've been one of the fastest growing areas in Texas. In two years we've seen 30 to 40 stores open downtown. Almost every building is occupied."

So what's happenin' in McKinney? Drive 30 miles north of Dallas on U.S. 75 (North Central Expressway) and find out for yourself.

Metroplex suburban sprawl slips away in the rearview mirror, and you pass several miles of mostly rural scenes before reaching Collin County's seat, population 31,250.

At Virginia Avenue, turn left to the new face of McKinney--an upscale, ultra-modern world of master-planned developments. Thousands of ex-urbanites (many employed by high-tech firms in Dallas and Collin counties) live in manicured neighborhoods with hike/bike trails, lakes, and golf courses where buffalo once roamed.

Turn right on Virginia and find the town's more traditional face tucked away along tree-lined avenues graced with turn-of-the-century homes.

Together, McKinney's two faces--contemporary and nostalgic--attract big-city transplants and travelers like a magnet. Much of the pull comes from McKinney's heart and soul: a refurbished old town center that's bursting at the seams with heritage and shopping.

*Early most mornings, downtown yawns awake with a battle of the barbershops, reminiscent of the Fifties, over on East Louisiana Street. Sleepy schoolkids drag out of Wayne's on one side of the street. Across the way, regulars saunter into the Palace for a trim.*

*Back on the square, savvy shop owners unlock trendy stores, and color-coordinated thirty-something runners whiz by. The scene jogs your memory that McKinney remains a small Texas town, but one with Nineties savoir faire.*

McKinney and Collin County (named for Collin McKinney, signer of the Texas Declaration of Independence) come by sophistication naturally...through cotton fortunes harvested in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

In the 1840s, rich blackland attracted families from Tennessee, Kentucky, and Arkansas, and established McKinney as county seat in 1848, says unofficial town

historian Helen Hall. *The first permanent settlers included a young James W. Throckmorton (governor of Texas, 1866-67), whose father found the place a paradise of flower-covered prairies and stream-laced woodlands. After the railroad arrived in 1872, farmers produced cotton to the land's capacity.*

The county lay at the northern edge of Texas' fine cotton-growing region. Mills in the Upper Midwest prized its top-grade cotton, which grew so high some farm kids had to climb the plants to reach the bolls, says Helen Hall. "We didn't have large plantations, mostly small farms," she adds. "If you had 40 acres, you had it made--enough corn for your animals and enough cotton for a good cash crop."

*Abroad, local cotton (known as "long staple Collin County") reaped respect at mammoth British mills that sent buyers to town during the long fall harvest. A small beetle dethroned McKinney's King Cotton in the Teens, however, when boll weevils decimated crops. With no remedy at hand, farmers adapted. Those in the rolling eastern half of the county turned to vegetable row crops, especially onions. Those in the western open prairies, called "The Flats," turned to ranching.*

In town, cotton and mercantile magnates turned to new ventures. *One of the most ambitious, John S. Heard, founded the Northern Texas Traction Company, which operated an electric interurban railway from Denison to Dallas in the early 1900s. (Note: I could not find exact dates, Nov. '88 article doesn't say, and don't have quick access to copy of Myers' book on interurban.) (See Texas Highways November, 1988.) Heard also built an opera house downtown to draw culture to McKinney. Today, the second-floor opera house serves only as storage, but downstairs in the same building, visitors dine at the Opera House Restaurant.*

Two museums--the Old Post Office Museum and the Farm Museum--recount the town's agricultural and business heritage.

Visitors discover the legacy of that heritage in nationally registered historic districts, which encompass some 1,700 buildings from the 1850s to the 1930s, many now restored.

Follow the local chamber of commerce's walking/driving guide past 29 homes, churches, and stores on a pleasant two-mile tour of old McKinney.

Up and down streets like Tucker, Church, and College, families relax on front porches and wrap-around verandas. Their homes showcase an amazing stylistic array--Victorian Italianate, Gothic, Art Deco, Prairie, Second Renaissance Revival, and Beaux Arts Revival, among others.

The 1904 Victorian Colonial home at 503 Tucker "played politics" as the boyhood home of a noted Texan, Rep. Ray Roberts, who served in the U.S. Congress from 1962 to 1981. The mid-1800s Gothic Victorian at 804 Tucker reflected the politics of the time: Construction began before the Civil War, but halted during the war for lack of materials and labor.

The tree-hidden, two-story home at 616 West Virginia once harbored outlaws Jesse and Frank James. Flanked by cornfields in the late 1800s, the home belonged to the James' cousin Captain F.M. "Tuck" Hill, one of the Confederacy's last leaders to surrender. "When things got too hot for them, Jesse and Frank took refuge in McKinney, where most people looked forward to their coming," says Helen Hall, whose late father-in-law fondly recalled the James boys' invitation to join them for a drink at a downtown saloon.

Just off the courthouse square, don't miss Chestnut Square, a block or so of buildings collected and restored by the Heritage Guild of Collin County. Period furnishings and clothing donated by area families fill five homes dating from before the Civil War to 1910. The guild recently added a church and country store, which gives the historical district the feel of a tiny village.

The oldest home, the Faires House (ca. 1853), got caught in historical crossfire...literally. Some historians claim that in 1864, Confederate guerrilla fighter Captain William Clarke Quantrell rode into town with 75 men to hang local sheriff and Confederate Captain James L. Reed, who Quantrell believed had deserted the army. Recent research reveals, however, that Reed had merely tried to reign in local pillaging by Quantrell's notorious raiders. In any event, a firefight ensued, and the nearby Faires House took a few stray bullets, which were dug from its bois d'arc foundation blocks when it moved to Chestnut Square. (Footnote: A posse from Van Zandt County later captured the fleeing sheriff and two kinsmen and hanged them near Tyler.)

One Chestnut Square house, the 1870 home of John H. Johnson (author of the state's homestead law), remained in family hands until restored by the Heritage Guild in 1987.

Another prominent family, the Dulaneys, paid fine attention to detail in a cottage (1875), as well as a larger house (1910) that serves as the guild's museum. The Dulaneys also imported exotic shrubs and trees like the prickly tri-foliate orange, the golden raintree, the jujube, and the English boxwood, all of which still flourish on the grounds.

Chestnut Square's plainest structure, the Taylor House (ca. 1863), hosted stagecoach passengers and, after the railroad, traveling salesmen in primitive upstairs lodgings. The house became known as the "Two-Bit Taylor Inn" because a bed and breakfast stay cost 25 cents.

Several blocks from Chestnut Square, a modern-day bed and breakfast has lived three lives. Tinsmith and implement maker J.P. Dowell enlarged an 1870 house on South Tennessee Street into an elegant mansion. But 100 years later, the house had deteriorated enough to play the haunted house in the 1973 movie *Benji*. After extensive restoration, the Dowell House now welcomes guests as a popular Federal/Classical-style B&B.

Other buildings on the walking/driving tour piqued Hollywood's fancy. A Victorian beauty virtually unchanged since 1898, the Gough-Hughston Home (1206 W. Louisiana) also appeared in *Benji*. The 1876 Old Collin County Courthouse (on the square) starred in *Murder in the Heartland* and Hallmark Hall of Fame's *An American Story*. An upcoming made-for-TV movie, *A Promise for Carolyn*, features the courthouse's unusual courtroom, in which the jury sits facing the judge and witness stand. The courthouse remains, unfortunately, closed to the public. The 1880 Old Collin County Jail (just off the square on S. Kentucky) has also appeared in several productions. And a couple of old-fashioned downtown bank exteriors showed up in several episodes of *Walker, Texas Ranger*.

Cowboy-oriented filmmakers--plus commercial and advertising producers--show up regularly at Storybook, an entertainment complex on McKinney's western edge, self-dubbed as "Texas' favorite party town."

Designed mainly for large group parties and company events, Storybook features a replica Old West town called Dry Bones. Bus tours and drop-in visitors can tour Dry Bones any day but Sunday. And on Thursday nights, energetic proprietor Linda Urry opens her mountain-style lodge to the public for dining and entertainment. With a huge stone fireplace on one side and an antique biplane suspended overhead from open rafters, visitors enjoy a lavish buffet of smoked brisket and lip-smacking homemade desserts. Cowboy sing-along songs set the tone for the evening, which culminates in a hayride to Dry Bones. There, an Opry House, a six-room hotel, saloon, general store, blacksmith shop, bank, and church (used regularly for weddings) give the look and feel of a western movie set.

Storybook also sports a Victorian mansion decorated year-round for Christmas, plus a cozy bed and breakfast cottage built like a railroad station.

Visitors drawn to McKinney's refurbished downtown come mainly with one thing on their minds--shopping. Specialty boutiques, antique stores, and galleries line downtown streets like interesting books on a library shelf.

"Sometimes, people come by in the afternoon, wishing they could stay longer in McKinney after discovering we have so much to offer," says Carolyn McGown, long-time owner of a downtown shop named the Little Red Hen, which the Texas Downtown Association recognized for the best renovation in 1995 in the under-\$25,000 category. (The association also recognized a nearby apparel store, Portfolio, for the state's best 1995 downtown interior.)

More than 60 downtown merchants display a wide variety of goods and foods within an easy walk of the square. Food wise, tastes range from British baked goodies to blue plate specials, from tearoom sandwiches in an antique setting to metro-style gourmet coffees in the converted lobby of a movie theater. Shopping wise, items range from backyard bird supplies to top-flight ski equipment, from angels and dolls to die-cast cars and trucks, from European kids' fashions to hip cowboy duds, from quilting supplies to contemporary art from across the nation.

McKinney's local art scene, displayed at galleries like Eclectic, seems on the rise. "Antique and gift shops in town got things rolling, and now the arts are taking off," says artist Tim Jaster, who displays at Eclectic and works in an old cotton mill-become-studio. "Probably 50 to 100 artists, writers, and photographers live here."

Art blends with philosophy and fun over at Woolenworks, a fiber arts emporium. Co-owners Wanda Huff and Leslie Kolkmeier made national news in the winter of 1994 for their "Blankets to Bosnia" project, which provided 320 hand-woven blankets to a Bosnian refugee camp.

Today, the affable pair claims that the "WOW" (Woodmen of the World) on the front of their restored 1914 building really stands for "Woolly Old Women." With pet angora rabbit "W.W." at their side, the women buy fleece from local sheep farms, work

it into yarn of many colors, and sell it to spinners and weavers. Woolenworks offers supplies and lessons for all sorts of fiber arts. The proprietors also throw two wild-and-woolly annual happenings. "Barn to Yarn" features rugmakers, lacemakers, felters, dyers, spinners, weavers, and even live woolly animals. The whimsical "W.W. 500" gets contestants racing decorated cars made from weaving shuttles down an elevated 30-foot track on the sidewalk out front.

"In addition to our main festivals--MayFair, HarvestFest, and Dickens of a Christmas--we try to have something happening downtown just about every weekend," says Erma Beeson, tourism director of the McKinney Chamber of Commerce. Some weekends, she adds, local history buff Jim Runge dresses as a local historical character and leads downtown tours which, Jim admits, "are as much entertainment as history."

For entertainment on the "wilder" side, take a short drive from downtown to the Heard Natural Science Museum and Wildlife Sanctuary. Built in the Sixties, the museum explores the world of natural history, as well as the history of its founder Bessie Heard and her family. (She was the daughter of local business pioneer John S. Heard.) The sanctuary's 274 acres protect diverse North Texas ecosystems, including marsh, river bottom, upland forest, and prairie.

Explains Heard director Steve Runnels, "We have a 50-acre wetland habitat with an outdoor lab for schoolkids. We have oak trees 200 to 300 years old. We've spotted 240 species of birds here. People can't believe there's this kind of sanctuary just 30 minutes from Dallas."

In 1988, the Heard launched a raptor rehabilitation program that now aids more than 200 birds annually (some 65 percent return to the wild), making it the largest raptor center in the Southwest, says raptor specialist Roger Wallace. "With rapid urbanization, raptors such as barn owls are disappearing here and elsewhere. But the ones that eat almost anything--like vultures, kestrels, and some hawks--have learned to adapt. They go after road kill, but many get hit by cars and end up here. People also



find baby birds and bring them to us, although it's not true that a baby out of its nest or one touched by humans will be abandoned by the mother." To dispel such myths, raptor interpreter Cyndee Haley presents 300 educational programs a year.

Natural treasures, historic districts, shopping and dining galore--no wonder McKinney's attractions draw visitors and newcomers like a magnet. Nostalgic charm resides comfortably side-by-side with contemporary style in this happenin' little place.