

# THURBER

Liveliest ghost town in Texas.

## Story and photographs by Randy Mallory

Halfway between Fort Worth and Abilene, travelers and truckers ride hell-bent for leather along Interstate 20 where it slices through Thurber. Surely some of the non-stop passers-by notice the century-old, 148-foot brick smokestack Surely some of the non-stop passers-by spot the century-old, 148-foot brick smokestack that rises from rolling ranchland alongside I-20 alongside I-20. But few slow down to explore one of Texas' most heralded "ghost" towns.

"Ghost" town...that's what reference books call Thurber. I recently sidetracked off I-20 at exit 367 looking for life. I found Thurber and surrounds alive and well...with fascinating history, fine food, and a weekend's worth of laid-back doings.

Thurber's pulse pounds proudly at the \$3.2 million W.K. Gordon Center for Industrial History of Texas. Opened in 2002 by Stephenville-based Tarleton State College, it's the state's only museum and research center focused on the industrial past of Texas and the Southwest. The 10,000-square-foot facility uses lively interactive exhibits to trace Thurber's boom to bust history.

Coal breathed life into Thurber. Railroads pushed across Texas in the 1880s, and Thurber was the state's only source of bituminous coal, preferred for use in steam locomotives. Texas and Pacific Coal Company (so-named to flatter a top client, Texas & Pacific Railroad) operated a mine here and named the company town for investor Horace K. Thurber. For 30 years, Thurber was Texas' major coal producer, mining 3,000 tons a day.

In 1897 the company added what became the finest brick plant west of the Mississippi. The plant used otherwise unmarketable small coal nuggets to fire local shale into bricks. These

rock-hard red bricks built Thurber's self-sufficient company town of 200 houses, 30 stores, utilities, churches, schools, offices, saloon, and opera house. Thurber bricks also built roads and projects across Texas—such as Galveston's seawall, Austin's Congress Avenue, and the streets of Fort Worth's stockyards.

Thurber's peak population (perhaps 8,000 to 10,000) during the 1910s made it the largest city between Fort Worth and El Paso, one of the state's few totally electrified towns, and one of the nation's only all-unionized communities.

The company's entrepreneurial genius was W. K. Gordon, namesake of the new center. (His daughter-in-law, Mrs. W.K. Gordon, Jr. of Fort Worth helped fund the museum.) Gordon forge successful coal and brick operations and, in 1917 at nearby Ranger, also struck oil for his company, setting the stage for the West Texas oil boom.

Ironically, the oil boom overflowed company profits but drowned the town. In the early 20th century, trains converted from coal to diesel oil, and oil-based asphalt replaced brick for roadway construction. By the late 1930s Thurber was a ghost town. Virtually all of its buildings were dismantled or moved to surrounding areas where many remain in use as homes.

The Gordon Center chronicles Thurber's highs and lows. An 18-minute film, shown in an opera house mock-up, provides the skeleton. Well-crafted displays flesh out the story in a replicated company town setting within the center's walls.

Turn-of-the-century music emanates from a bandstand overlooking a railway platform, a 1920s Model-T work truck, and a model of Thurber's iconic smokestack. A replica Concord passenger coach recalls one of America's last stagecoach routes, which ran from Thurber to the rail line at nearby Mingus. A model coal-mining shaft—complete with pinging pick axes—shows a miner on his side digging coal from a narrow vein. Period artifacts and tiptop historical photos illuminate the work and home lives of miners who represented 18 nationalities, especially recent

European immigrants. An interactive CD-ROM display lets you hear their stories and see more photos. Push a button on a scale-model of the McCleskey No. 1 well (where W.K. Gordon hit paydirt) and launch a column of “black gold” through the wooden oil derrick.

As soon as Thurber closed, former residents began holding annual reunions near the few remaining structures. Descendents continue the tradition during the annual Thurber Reunion (June 11, 2005) at the Thurber Historical Association Park, located next to the Gordon Center.

The park boasts relocated and restored Thurber originals--a miner's residence, bandstand, and St. Barbara's Catholic Church, named for the patroness saint of miners. Period-dressed docents guide visitors through the buildings during the reunion (also every Saturday, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., or by appointment). To honor Thurber's Italian heritage, the association set up two lighted bocce ball courts used during the reunion and annual tourneys in March and October.

During the reunion, docents also lead tours of Thurber's cemetery, where 1,000 markers (many ornate and unusual) lie in separate Catholic, Protestant, and African-American quarters. (Another historic graveyard, the Davidson Cemetery, is three miles from Thurber and features a handsome wall and arched entry built of Thurber bricks in 1922.)

Thurber Cemetery is owned by the Bennetts—mother Andrea and son Rusty. They also own what's left of old Thurber—including the towering smokestack, an ice house, filter plant, fire station, doctor's home (where Andrea lives), and superintendent W.K. Gordon's home (where Rusty lives). The Bennetts turned Thurber's mercantile store into the Smokestack Restaurant, an I-20 favorite since 1971. The eatery dishes up home-cooked breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily (it also houses Thurber memorabilia and the key to the cemetery, which you can “check out” for a do-it-yourself tour).

I ducked into the Smokestack for a scrumptious chicken fried steak smothered in cream gravy and got a ghost story for desert. “I feel a presence in my home,” Andrea told me. “An original Thurber icebox keeps opening by itself, and pans fall from kitchen shelves on their own. I guess I do live in a ghost town.”

From old Thurber, a two-mile jaunt north on Texas 108 quickly crosses the county line and eases into Mingus. A century ago, Erath County voted dry, so Thurber relocated its company tavern, the Snake Saloon, across the line in Palo Pinto County. The drinkery boasted a bar as long as two train cars. Today, half a dozen or so bars make Mingus “saloon central.” Foremost is the Trio Club, a popular western swing dancehall since 1952. During my visit, the Kelly Spinks Band of Brownwood ground out steady shuffle beats as regulars and out-of-towners two-stepped around a spacious, slick dance floor.

Texas 108 leads from Mingus five more miles to “shopping central” at Strawn.

A historic rail line (once traveled by the Texas & Pacific) bisects the tiny burg. So does the unmarked historic Bankhead Highway, America's first designated southern coast-to-coast route. The abandoned but intact Bankhead Hotel sits on the route beside the railroad tracks downtown.

A downtown stroll passes several specialty shops. I moseyed into An Ancient Art Handcrafted Soap Company, where Becky Lenoir and Shanah Coe make delightful olive oil-based herbal and aromatherapy soaps. My senses soared over intermingled aromas of lavender, almond, sage, and mint. The retail-wholesale outfit is housed in a thick-walled building built of red Thurber bricks...as is Spirit of the West Candles, located around the corner. That's where Kate Nowak (great-granddaughter of old Thurber residents) and Amy Atkins make western-themed candles of clean-burning soy-based wax.

A morning of browsing uncovered more hand-crafted goodie—at Machining Crafters (metal

silhouette cut-outs), The Yellow Rose (custom embroidery), Treasures and Traditions (quilts and lamps), the Eccentric Elephant (tile mosaic stepping stones and frames), and offbeat metal sculptures by Marc Rankin sprawled across a vacant lot (including a five-foot dung beetle).

Fort Worth day-trippers know Strawn as home of a 1940s tavern named Mary's. I followed two couples on a motorcycling weekend into the front room, where locals lined a long table and newspaper testimonials covered a wall with praises for owner Mary Jane Treater's ribs and T-bone steaks. Numerous Mexican food choices caught my eye, and the potent salsa and fresh tortilla chips sent my taste buds south of the border.

After lunch, I detoured north on Texas 16 to admire the Prairie Style of the Thomas House Bed and Breakfast (the 1917 home of Randal B. Thomas, whose ranch produced the McCleskey #1 oil well) and the red-brick charm of the Robinson One-Room School (a 1930s building once dubbed the smallest school in Texas).

Back in Thurber, I located the steps leading from the historical park up New York Hill. After the 1917 Ranger oil strike, the company moved its headquarters from New York City to Thurber. To house relocating executives, it built a neighborhood atop a ridge overlooking town. A mile-long red-brick walkway connected the homes with downtown.

The abandoned walkway now leads to Thurber's other popular eatery, New York Hill Restaurant. Owners Janis and Les Mills offer home-style breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily. Original town artifacts and old photos lend a historic touch to the eatery, which boasts a grand view of Thurber.

A short walk from the restaurant, I admired a bronze map that pinpoints key sites—then and now—located below. As I surveyed the scenery, I remembered what Gordon Center director, T. Lindsay Baker, had told me: "People once came here from all over the world to gamble on starting a new life. It's fascinating how they lived and how they responded to

economic changes that turned a boomtown into a ghost town. With the opening of our new museum, we hope Thurber will have a new lease on life.”

I watched traffic rumble through this resurrected ghost town and wished more folks would pull off and take a look around.

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## RESOURCES

--T. Lindsay Baker or LeAnna Biles; W.K. Gordon Center for Industrial History of Texas

--Rusty/Andrea Bennett, Smokestack Rest

--Jonnie Goodwin; Thurber Historical Assn. ([www.thurbertexas.com](http://www.thurbertexas.com))

--Lesly/Jafnis Mills. New York Hill Restaurant

--James Rexroat--Trio Club, Mingus

--Cleo Savage, The White House Lounge

--Mary Jane Treatter, Mary's in Strawn

--Shanah Coe or Becky Lenoir; Ancient Art Handcrafted Soap Co.

--Finis Butler, Robinson One-Room School

--Marc Rankin, sculptor

--Texas Handbook Online for various topics