

Jill,

On a recent trip across the Big Sky Country between Abilene and Fort Worth, I poked around Thurber (last covered in Texas Highways in 1995). I was surprised by what's now available to visitors at one of Texas' most celebrated ghost towns.

The newest and grandest addition is the W.K. Gordon Center for Industrial History of Texas, opened last fall as part of Tarleton State College (<http://www.tarleton.edu/~gordoncenter>). The highly-professional permanent museum tracks the life and industries of Thurber with lively and interactive displays. Its growing special collections library and research area is the state's only such facility devoted to industrial development in Texas and the Southwest. Noted historian and author, T. Lindsey Baker, is director.

You probably know Thurber's significant story, a tale in three parts.

From 1888 to the 1930s, it was a total company town, founded and controlled by Texas and Pacific Coal Co. (later, Texas Pacific Oil Company).

Coal birthed Thurber, which was the most important mine site in Texas for 30 years, producing 3,000 tons of bituminous coal daily to feed steam locomotives, mainly of the Texas and Pacific Railroad (no official connection). Thurber assured the coal supply that helped railroads open up the Southwest.

Next, the company established the finest brick plant west of the Mississippi, worked by European immigrants from 18 ethnic groups. Manufactured from rich deposits of shale clay, Thurber brick paved hundreds of miles of Texas roadways, including Austin's Congress Avenue, Galveston's sea wall, and much of Fort Worth. Thurber became the only totally unionized town in the world, with both English and Italian locals.

Finally, plant manager W. K. Gordon discovered oil for the company in nearby Ranger, setting the stage for the West Texas oil boom. (Endowments from his daughter-in-law, Mrs. W.K. Gordon, Jr., who lives in Erath County, financed the new museum, along with TXDOT funds.) Ranger oil helped finance America's troops in World War I. And, because of that wealth, every Thurber home had running water and electricity, making it the first totally-electrified city in the United States.

By 1900, the town had 200 houses, 30 stores, waterworks, churches, schools, offices, stables, and an opera house. It was the largest town between Fort Worth and El Paso.

As trains converted from coal to diesel in the 1920s, and as asphalt replaced brick highways, business dwindled, and the company abandoned Thurber. By

the late 1930s, it was a ghost town. Virtually all of its buildings were dismantled or sold--many became homes still in use within a 50 mile radius.

All that remain on their original sites are the general mercantile, the ice house smokestack, a couple of private homes, and building foundations. For three decades, the mercantile store has been the famed SmokeStack Restaurant, a favorite stop of travelers along I-20, which bisects the ghost town. (The Bennetts own the eatery, as well as Thurber's century-old cemetery with 1,000 markers divided in ethnic quarters. They let visitors borrow the key to the cemetery to take a look at the many ornate and unique markers.)

Almost as soon as Thurber closed, former residents began holding annual reunions in the ghost town. Ancestors continue the unbroken tradition via the Thurber Historical Assn. ([www.thurbertexas.com](http://www.thurbertexas.com)). Next to the new museum, at the base of New York Hill (so-named when company managers moved here from New York), the group has relocated and restored several Thurber originals--a miner's residence, St. Barbara's Catholic Church (named for the patron saint of miners), and the town bandstand. The structures are open for tours by appointment. To celebrate Thurber's Italian heritage, the association set up two lighted bocci ball courts and hosts annual tourneys (March and October). The annual Thurber reunion (June) features tours of the structures and cemetery, guided by period-costumed docents--as well as bocci games and music.

Thurber's second restaurant, New York Hill Restaurant, overlooks the heritage park and the old town site. On an adjacent hill above the new museum sits Greystone Castle. Visible for miles along I-20, this elegant, 24-room English-style castle offers a dramatic silhouette with tall corner turrets. Open to registered guests only, the castle overlooks 4,000 acres and caters to hunters and group events up to 33 people. The Orvis Company endorsed Greystone Castle as one of 30 elite wingshooting destinations worldwide.

Jill, I also perused three close-by towns strung along the original Texas & Pacific Rail line--Strawn, Mingus, and Gordon.

Thurber was located on a spur off this main line, which remains in use. That's why Mingus (formerly Thurber Junction) was not only a rail stop but also a stop on America's last regularly-scheduled stage coach route, which provided mail service to Thurber. Situated just inside "wet" Palo Pinto County, Mingus is now a regional entertainment hub. There's the Trio Club, a popular western swing dancehall opened in 1952, and the White House Lounge, a local pool hall and hangout since the 1930s. Another bar serves as home base to a recreational motorcycle club, the Cossacks. Mingus is a colorful--and safe--sidetrip.

In Strawn, I came across Mary's, a 1940s tavern with down-home eating that regularly draws crowds from Fort Worth. Locals tend toward at another eat-shop, Flossie's. The historic Bankhead Highway (America's first designated coast-to-

coast route) ran through town. The abandoned but intact Bankhead Hotel still sits beside the rail tracks. Also in Strawn, I dropped by a handmade soap shop called An Ancient Art Handcrafted Soap Company. Two single moms make delightful olive oil-based herbal and aromatherapy soaps for retail and wholesale customers across Texas, including some high-priced hostelrys.

Gordon has an old-fashioned downtown with a couple of eateries, hardware store, and car dealership still located in its original 1920s building. The structure-like most buildings and streets in the three towns--is made of red Thurber brick.

Between Strawn and Thurber, there's also the Davidson Cemetery, enclosed by a red Thurber brick wall and boasting an detailed, arched brick entrance.

Jill, I propose a story with photos on Thurber and surrounds. I think the area could make a nice two-day visit along an isolated stretch of I-20. There are even a couple of bed and breakfasts near Thurber, as well as a respectable, locally-owned motel on I-20. The article could run as a Just Passing Through, but I think there's enough of visual interest for a nice four-to-six page presentation, keyed off the new museum. Timing could relate to the annual reunion, if you choose.

I look forward to hearing the collective wisdom.