

I Survived the Circle

By Randy Mallory

Headed north on US 77, I grip the wheel tightly and yield at Waco's circle, the most famous of Texas' few remaining historic traffic circles. Too bad this adrenaline rush isn't a merry-go-round ride; I could just hang on and enjoy the sights. This is *serious* driving.

Watch that truck slowing ahead! Good, he's veering off to LaSalle Avenue. Blue sedan approaching from Valley Mills Drive! Okay, she waves me on and eases in behind. My heart-pounding circumnavigation passes five roadways where I can get off—look out for that sports car changing lanes!—or where others can merge into the circuitous flow.

Out of the corner of my wide eyes, I notice several restaurants on the circle—Trujillo's and El Chico for Mexican, Rudy's for barbecue, and Texas Roadhouse for steaks—plus the Comfort Suites Hotel. The new hotel's upper floors offer the best view of the two-lane circle and the 200-foot-diameter, five-pointed brick Texas star sprawled across its raised island.

I also spy two landmark eateries largely responsible for the circle's survival—Health Camp Burgers & Shakes and the Elite Circle Grille.

Health Camp Burgers has served home-style burgers, fries, and shakes on the circle for 55 years. With a juicy Health Camp cheeseburger and rich chocolate shake under my belt, I soak up its old-fashioned ambiance. Aging photos line the walls—an aerial shot of the circle in the 1940s, a sepia print of the joint when burgers cost 25 cents, and a fading photo of the double-meat, double-cheese "Super Health Burger."

Super Health Burger? Oxymoron? "If you don't eat, it's not healthy," laughs current owner David Tinsley.

Actually, the restaurant's founder, the late Jack Shavitz, got the name, Health Camp, from an egg farm in the Midwest. "My customers love this place just the way it is. I'd be tarred and feathered if it changed much," David adds.

One thing's for sure. The Health Camp's window seats offer front-row traffic watching. "It's sort of a spectator sport," says David. "This is where people ought to take their driving test. If you can drive the circle, you can drive anywhere." To encourage circle runs, Health Camp—a long-time hangout for Baylor University students—sells brightly-colored T-shirts proclaiming "I Survived the Circle."

The circle was built in 1933 on the Dallas to San Antonio highway. In the mid-1960s, Interstate 35 was completed only a stone's throw west of the circle. An I-35 widening project two decades later included a plan to revamp the circle for improved traffic flow. Local protests ended up in the governor's office, forcing a prompt exit of any such notion.

"The circle was part of Waco's history for generations, and we wanted to make sure it stayed that way," recalls circle cheerleader Sammy Citrano, then co-owner (with David Tinsley) of Health Camp and the historic Elite Cafe. (Sammy now owns another Waco landmark eatery, George's Restaurant.)

Current Elite owners are Creed and Lynn Ford of Austin. They recently remodeled the restaurant's Spanish Colonial exterior and Art Deco interior. They also added an upscale menu with a Texas accent—including Shiner Bock-battered onion rings and Dr. Pepper barbecued ribs.

I choose a spicy trout fillet in a crunchy cornflake crust, served with jalapeño jelly sauce, rice, and steamed veggies. Then I peruse discreetly displayed historic photos and memorabilia. There's a photo of the Elite when it opened in 1941, an original menu ("large sirloin, \$2.75; shrimp kabob, \$1.75"), and hand-colored prints of historic restaurants.

Three Greek immigrants—brothers Victor, George, and Mike Colias—established the Elite with the slogan “Where the Elite Meet to Eat.” One notable patron—a Fort Hood soldier named Elvis Presley—fit the bill. (There’s now an Elvis Room honoring “The King,” including a photo of him at Fort Hood.)

The popular restaurant once offered carhops and curbside service 24 hours a day, but also became a popular dinner house for locals and visitors navigating the circle. Travelers planned dinner stops at the Elite. Young men proposed marriage to their sweethearts here.

“People have strong memories of the Elite and the circle,” says Creed Ford. “It’s rewarding to keep that tradition alive.”

A few Texas cities still construct small, landscaped circles—especially in neighborhoods—to calm traffic in low-volume areas. But the state hasn’t built a major circle in decades and, in fact, has removed famous (or infamous, depending on your experience) circles in places like Lubbock, Dallas, Henderson, and Mexia.

Yet the Waco circle survives, now handling some 50,000 vehicles per day, although it was designed for 3,000. (Other surviving circles include those in Fort Worth, Kilgore, Houston, New Braunfels, and Weatherford.)

As I exit Waco’s circle and head for I-35, I remember that traffic engineers also refer to circles as rotaries, an apt name. In Britain and Australia, they’re roundabouts. Then there’s London’s Piccadilly Circus, a bustling landmark junction of five busy streets.

Hmmm. The Waco Circus? Works for me!

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The Waco traffic circle is located at the intersection of LaSalle Ave., Circle Dr., Valley Mills Dr. (Loop 396), US 77, and I-35 north frontage road. The following numbers are area code 254, except as noted: Elite Circle Grille, 754-4941; Health Camp Burgers & Shakes, 752-2081 ;

Trujillo's, 756-1331; El Chico, 662-2750; Rudy's, 750-9995; Texas Roadhouse, 662-1177;
George's Restaurant 753-1421; Comfort Suites Hotel 877/424-6423.

RESOURCES:

- Sammy Citrano
- David Tinsley, Health Camp
please send copy
- Creed Ford, Elite Circle Grille or via Susan Friedman (PR)
- Rick Charlton, Waco City Traffic Operations Administrator
rickc@ci.waco.tx.us
- TXDOT/Waco—Ken Roberts, public info; re: traffic count
- TXDOT *Transportation News*, Vol. 21, No. 7; re: traffic count, history.