

A View Through History

With Kyle Schiller Barrett

Milam History Prominent in Upcoming Rockdale Celebration

This upcoming July 4th weekend will be a chance to celebrate many things for Americans, such as freedom, liberty, and patriotism. But unlike other past July 4th weekends, this year's U.S. Independence Day will also be a time to reflect on an important anniversary in Milam County's history. This year the City of Rockdale is celebrating its 150th Birthday, and everyone is invited to join in celebrating this historical milestone.

The Sesquicentennial (or 150th anniversary) of Rockdale will commemorate this southern Milam County town's founding in 1874. Events are scheduled from Thursday, July 4th to Sunday, July 14, 2024; a full ten days of celebrating the past and future of Rockdale, Texas.

In the late 1800's, the United States was recovering and rebuilding after the nation's devastating Civil War. The time of Reconstruction in the 1870's brought change to the South, and Texas was no exception. Railroads began winding through our state, bringing prosperity to the people of Texas. It was in this setting that the City of Rockdale was born.

Located on the William Allen survey, Rockdale was laid out by the International and Great Northern Railway in 1874. A year earlier however, three men, George Green, B. F. Ackerman, and Frank Smith sold 400 acres of land to the I&GN Railroad for a townsite. The railroad was laying track from Hearne to Austin and the track reached the site for the new town in February 1874. But what would this new town be called? As the sale of town lots began in September 1873, the area was already growing just sixteen miles south of the County Seat at Cameron. Mrs. B. F. Ackerman named the new town after a nearby rock formation in the area. A large rock, measuring twelve feet high and with a circumference of twenty feet, according to the TSHA Handbook of Texas. Rockdale was incorporated in 1878.

Rockdale began to develop as the first major railroad town in Milam County. It became a shipping and supply point for the area's farmers. Milam's production of cotton, wool, fruits, vegetables, grains, and livestock helped make Rockdale an important shipping center for the county. This also increased the population and by 1884 the town had 1,700 residents. It boasted an opera house, a bank, a weekly newspaper, five churches, two schools, and two cotton gins.

In 1891, the railroad again aided in the growth of Rockdale, as the San Antonio and Aransas Pass Railroad built a section of track between Lexington and Cameron. This gave Rockdale the benefit of both a north-south and east-west railroad line. Plus, several lignite coal mines were established near Rockdale in the 1890's giving the town an economic boost. At one time, there were 7,000 rail cars filled with lignite coal being shipped out of Rockdale each week.

In the early 1950's, Rockdale had another big economic development that increased its population. That's when the Aluminum Company of America or ALCOA came calling. Having found an inexpensive way to convert lignite coal into electricity, ALCOA decided to locate a new aluminum plant near Rockdale and the coal mines at Sandow. The town's population exploded from 2,300 in 1954 to 6,300 in 1958. Unfortunately, ALCOA shut down its plant near Rockdale in 2008 causing a slight population decrease to around 5,400 residents. However, the loyal Rockdale natives and new citizens are currently hoping to see a population increase soon. In 2024 the population numbers around 5,300 residents. It's these citizens who are working to bring this year's Rockdale Sesquicentennial to life.

The ten-day celebration will feature historic sites to view such as the 1895 Rockdale City Hall, which is still undergoing a huge restoration phase and looks amazing. Also, historic structures like the 1906 Railroad Depot Museum will be open. A tour of historic churches will be held, the historic Kay Theater will host special movie showtimes, and a community art exhibit is to be held at the Patterson Civic Center. The Milam County Historical Commission will partner with the El Camino Real de los Tejas Committee to bring historic displays, books, and informative talks on Texas and Milam County history to the Lucy Hill Patterson Memorial Library. A drone light show on July 4th will begin the sesquicentennial celebration. Also planned is a car show, a quilt show, a parade, and a big splash birthday bash with food, games, and live music. A time capsule ceremony and a picnic in the park will round out the Rockdale 150th birthday party. You won't want to miss any part of this birthday celebration.

If this sounds like too much to remember, don't worry, a 72-page magazine is available with all events, schedules, dates, times, places, etc. all relating to the Rockdale Sesquicentennial. It also features articles on the history of Rockdale and has many photos of historical markers focusing on the history of Milam County. This free publication was created by the Rockdale Reporter in conjunction with the City of Rockdale and the Rockdale Sesquicentennial Committee. You can pick up a free copy of this "FYI" magazine at the Milam County Historical Museum located at 112 W. First Street in Cameron. It is also available at the Cameron and Rockdale Chambers of Commerce, the Cameron and Rockdale Railroad Museums, and at many other local businesses and offices throughout our county.

None of us, alive today, remember the founding of Rockdale, Texas. However, there are those of us life-long Milam County residents that remember the Rockdale Centennial in 1974, when the city turned 100 years old. That was a big celebration! Yet, this year's 150th Birthday for Rockdale promises to be even bigger and better! So, plan on joining the folks in southern Milam County between July 4th and July 14th for the Rockdale Sesquicentennial. It's sure to be a celebration chock-full of Milam County history, heritage, and hospitality.

If you are planning to visit the Milam County Historical Museum, Old Jail Museum, or the Railroad Museum in downtown Cameron, please note that all the museum complexes will be closed July 4th through 6th, 2024. We are encouraging our staff and volunteers to spend the holiday with their families and to participate in the events in Rockdale. Our normal hours are Wednesday-Saturday from 10am-3pm.