

DESDEMONA, TEXAS

A Boom Town Ghost Town

History in a Pecan Shell



Settlement of Desdemona began around 1857, making one of the earliest communities west of the Brazos River. Settlers built a small fort to protect themselves from Indian attack and in 1875 the Funderburg brothers acquired the land that had once been old fort and began to develop.

Originally the town had been called Hogtown, for it's location on Hog Creek. A post office was granted in 1877 under the name Desdemona (not the heroine of Othello, but for the daughter of the community's JP. The town has been shown on maps and on records as Desdemonia or Desdemonia, but the unusual name spared the town confusion with other post offices.

Peanut farming became an important part of the economy early on and Desdemona's population went from 100 in 1892 to over 300 by 1904. In September 1918, a driller named Tom Dees, struck oil and Desdemona was catapulted (for better or worse) into a bona-fide Texas boomtown. Population estimates of the period suggest that there may have been as many as 16,000 citizens, speculators, workers and camp followers during the zenith of the 1919-1922 boom.

Those smart enough to have invested in Tom Dee's Hog Creek Oil Company were able to sell \$100 shares for over \$10,000, but aside from these new fortunes, Desdemona had some huge problems. Rains flooded the town and overflowed pools of standing oil. Influenza and typhoid fever broke out. Sanitation and public health were enough to strain the town to its breaking point, but on top of this they also had to combat the lawless element.

Citizens banded into a group called The Law and Order League. But when one of their leaders (Pastor J. A. Kidd of the Rockdale Baptist Church) became too vocal - the church was set afire on the night of November 27, 1920. The blaze was soon extinguished, but now all Desdemonites were united in outrage. The church was a beloved landmark and even the non-Baptists were furious at the act and especially the perpetrators. Texas Rangers who had been conducting roving patrols of the boomtowns of Eastland, Ranger and Cisco now descended on Desdemona, arresting 125 men and expelling at least that many prostitutes.

Oil production fell from over seven million barrels of oil in 1919 to less than three million in 1921. By 1922 the boom was over and Desdemona had experienced one of the most drastic population fluctuations in Texas boomtown history. Fires in 1920 and 1921 destroyed entire blocks, leaving the town today where it may have naturally evolved had oil not been discovered. In 1936 Desdemona dissolved their city government.

Sources:

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Interview with Desdemona native Joe Grimshaw, February 2004