Varied communities add cultural richness to Williamson County
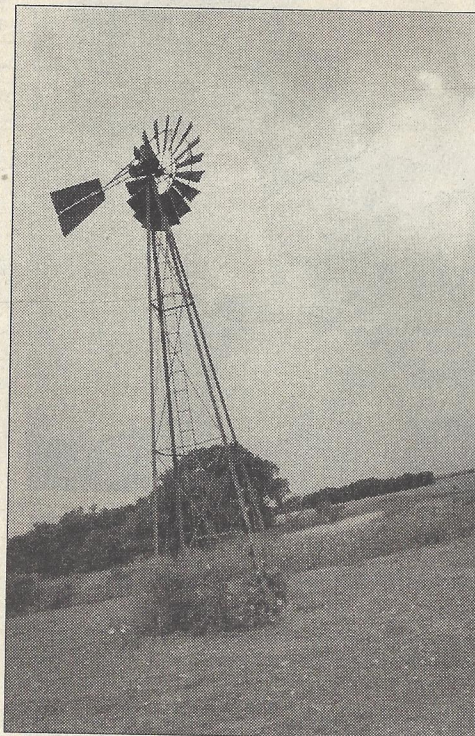
By DONNA BOWMAN BRATTON

Williamson County is one of the nation's fastest growing counties, with a population estimated at 310,000. There are many reasons people choose to set roots within the county's 1,123 square miles: the convenient commute to work, family-friendly neighborhoods and schools, and quiet retreat from the high-pressure metropolitan scene. To truly appreciate the charms that Williamson County has to offer, it's worth getting to know the town histories that shaped the community. Take time to wander off the beaten path to glimpse into Williamson County's past and future. The 180-year-old buildings that stand in downtown regions are testament to the will of the pioneer spirit and the cultural diversity that shaped our community.

In the late 1800s, countless small towns and settlements dotted the county, only to be abandoned for towns with railroad service and economic advantages. The 20 or so surviving communities that encompass Williamson County today have much in common. Most developed around new railroad service and weren't "official" until a post office was established. All encountered the hardships of drought, wars, the Great Depression, and declining livestock and agriculture markets, to survive into the 21st century.

Following is a snapshot of a few of those Williamson County gems today.

Florence

At the northwest edge of Williamson County on Farm Road 195 lies Florence. With an estimated population around 1,100, Florence has experienced both feast and famine. Originally settled in the early 1850s, the town went through many names before adopting the current name in 1857.

Cattle, wheat and corn were significant industry for local farmers after the Civil War. By the 1890s, Florence had become self-sufficient with retail stores, mills, churches, schools, lodges, hotels, doctors, photographers, a stone quarry, a bank, a cheese factory, and the short-lived Florence College. In 1927, the population had grown to 1,000. The town seemed to be booming until the Bartlett and Western Railway abandoned the line serving the community. As was the fate of many other small towns, the loss of railroad services, from which many were so dependent, proved devastating to local commerce.

Today, Florence appears content as a bedroom community, conveniently located between Belton and Georgetown and surrounded by farms, ranches and working stone quarries.

Jarrell

Founded in 1909, the small town of Jarrell was established on Donahoe Creek at what was to become the intersection of Interstate 35 and FM 487. The original settlers of this community certainly had progress in mind; after all, the land conveniently sat within the proposed Bartlett and Western Railway, a continuance from Florence. The railroad's potential for Jarrell seemed so certain to residents of neighboring Corn Hill that most of their residents packed up their belongings and moved to Jarrell. A steam-powered tractor was used to haul at least 20 of Corn Hill's houses to Jarrell.

By 1914 Jarrell's population peaked at 500 residents who enjoyed the convenience of electric lights and a movie theater. However, as was the case with other communities reliant on the cotton industry and devastated by the close of the B&W railroad, Jarrell's progress and population slipped into decline by the 1930s.

Divided by I-35, Jarrell's flat lands serve farmers and ranchers well. Unfortunately, those lands were the site of two tragic battles against nature. May 17, 1989, brought a deadly tornado that destroyed much of the town, killed one person and injured others. Rebuilding was still in progress in some areas when one of the deadliest tornadoes on record struck eight years later. May 27, 1997, a five-mile-long monster bore down on Jarrell at 3:40 p.m. Nearly a mile wide, the F5 tornado ravaged every corner of the community, leaving little but devastation in its wake. In all, the tornado hit four Central Texas counties. No community was hit as hard as Jarrell with almost 30 fatalities, numerous injuries, and entire neighborhoods erased from the landscape. Many survivors rebuilt their lives and their community, optimistic that nature certainly wouldn't deal a third devastating blow.

Since incorporating as a city a few years ago, Jarrell is adding new vigor to its efforts to attract business and employers, capitalize on its strength, and develop the city's infrastructure.

Walburg

Almost 12 miles north of Georgetown on FM 972 lies the quaint, sleepy town of Walburg. Like Jarrell and Florence, working farms and ranches dot the landscape. However, only a handful of businesses are in operation, though new developments are sprouting up on the outskirts of town.

A great number of the population is related

Windmills lend a rural air to Jarrell's landscape.

Heather Mabry

TOWNS

Areas throughout county boast distinctive flavor

in some way, adding to the community's close-knit feel. Many people have left for careers only to return for retirement. Others have spent their entire lives in Walburg. Talk to anyone in this serene community, and you'll be pleasantly regaled with the town history.

In 1881, German immigrant Henry Doering moved to the area and opened a general store the following year. By 1886, he added a post office and named the town after his birthplace of Walburg, Germany.

It is difficult to determine the current population of Walburg, but suffice it to say there are more cattle and horses than humans.

The Walburg Restaurant, known locally as The Mercantile, is housed in Doering's original Mercantile building. It was opened in 1987 by German natives bringing authentic German cuisine. Yodelers and German music create a Bavarian atmosphere.

Continuing the German tradition, The Walburg Restaurant hosts the annual Oktoberfest festival and Mayfest celebration.

Granger

Twelve miles east of Walburg and 17 miles northeast of Georgetown on Highway 95 lies Czech-settled Granger, the childhood home of comedian Rip Torn and oft-visited location of his cousin, Sissy Spacek.

In 1882, its fertile black land and a railroad intersection of the Missouri, Kansas and Texas lines guaranteed prosperity as a ship-
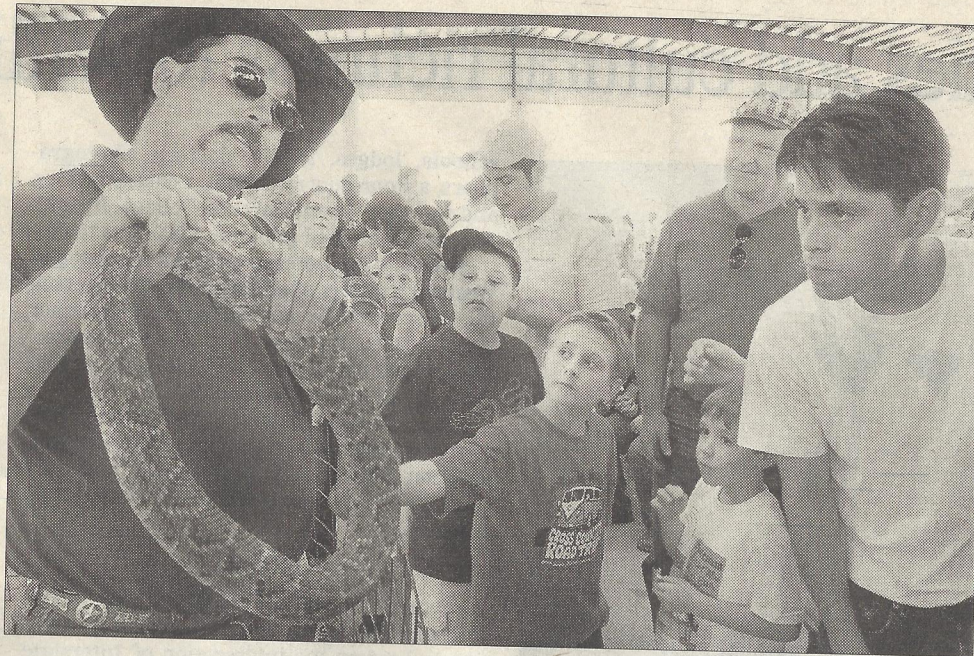
Taylor's annual Rattlesnake Roundup lures thrill-seekers to watch experts wrestle with the snakes.

Mark Ashley

ping point for the growing cotton industry. By 1890, Granger had three churches, a hotel, a college and five gins. Twenty years later, electric lights, an ice factory and cotton mills joined the town, following the 1905 opening of The Storrs Opera House.

Paved streets became reason for celebration as Granger was the first town with less than 5,000 residents to enjoy such convenience. Czech immigrants flocked to the fertile farm lands, establishing strong religious and educational cultures.

Today, Granger enjoys an estimated population of 1,299 and encompasses .67 square miles. Fishing and camping are popular along the 4,400-acre Granger Lake.

Taylor

Eleven miles south of Granger on Highway 79 is Taylor, once one of the most active shipping ports in Central Texas with strong German and Czech roots. The 13.6 square miles of land were initially auctioned off in lots during 1876, in anticipation of the arrival of the International-Great Northern Railroad. By 1878, Taylorsville (as it was called until 1892) already had a population of 1,000 and 32 businesses. Unfortunately, all but three of those

businesses were destroyed by fire in 1879.

The town was quickly rebuilt and by 1890, was a bustling center of commerce, including the state's first savings and loan institution. To avoid another disastrous fire, a new 100-man volunteer fire department was opened with a water line from the San Gabriel River.

By the early 1900s, Taylor had proclaimed itself "the largest inland cotton market in the world." Indeed Taylor was a bustling city of commerce. By 1940, 7,875 residents and 225 businesses called Taylor home.

Today Taylor is home to approximately 15,000 residents. Rebounding from a period of decline, the community is thriving with a hospital, 34 churches, numerous recreation facilities and active businesses. The historic downtown district features the unique architectural styles of early Texas. Annual events include the "Lights of Blackland" Christmas tour, Taylor Rodeo, International Barbecue Cookoffs and Rattlesnake Roundup.

Hutto

Just west of Taylor and east of Round Rock on Highway 79 is Hutto, declared the "Official Hippo Capital of Texas" by the 2003 Texas Legislature in recognition of the unique school/town mascot. The large, inactive cotton gin skirting Highway 79 is practically the town welcoming sign.

The community was first settled in 1854 by rancher James Emory Hutto, who in 1876 sold five acres of land for the railroad station when the International-Great Northern Railroad came through. Many of the earliest immigrants were German, Danish or Swedish.

By 1884, Hutto had 200 residents, three churches, five gins and a school. As an important cotton market, Hutto's population

TOWNS

Areas still show Czech, German influence

reached 700 in 1896, but the decline of the cotton industry and economic turmoil created a temporary hardship to the town.

The Hutto Heritage Museum serves visitors today with photos, antiques, a horse-drawn carriage and period memorabilia illustrating the history of this one-square-mile town. The community is growing rapidly and enjoying a revival with new, local businesses and family subdivisions.

October's Hutto Old Tyme Days provide an annual gathering of the culture and entertainment venues enjoyed by the 1,400 residents. And, of course, hundreds of decorated concrete hippos adorn numerous store and office fronts. To prove that everything's big in Texas, visit Henrietta the Hippo on downtown East Street, reportedly weighing 14,000 pounds.

Round Rock

Ten miles south of Georgetown on Interstate 35 is Round Rock, the largest city in Williamson County with 26.1 square miles within its borders. The community was initially settled by Tennessee native Jacob M. Harrell in 1848.

This new settlement was first called Brushy Creek until it was changed to Round Rock in 1854. Harrell was certainly involved in the naming as he and the postmaster frequently fished from the anvil-shaped limestone rock in Brushy Creek near their homes. The rock's significance didn't begin there, though — early cattle drivers and wagon trains traveling the Chisholm Trail often crossed Brushy Creek near the unusual rock formation. The rock even served as a guide for Native Americans and early settlers of a safe, low-water crossing. Old wheel ruts in the area are still visible today.

In 1876 the International-Great Northern Railroad came to town. Not surprisingly, the community grew around the new railroad line and a year later, numerous businesses were in operation, including a broom factory, lime plant, hotels and a cheese factory that later provided two-thirds of the town payroll during the Great Depression.

The notorious outlaw Sam Bass hoped to capitalize on Round Rock's new prosperity by setting his sights on the local bank, only to lose his own life in the ensuing gunfight with sheriff's deputies, but not before his gang shot Deputy A.W. Grimes — the county's first law enforcement officer to die in the line of duty. The famous Sam Bass shoot-out and capture are commemorated annually during the city's Frontier Days celebration.

Peak population in Round Rock between 1900-1960 was 1,400. Quietly growing as a bedroom community to Austin, Round Rock soon became a hotbed of manufacturing and commerce. By 1980, the population had risen to 11,812. Once computer-related industries such as Dell Computers came to Round Rock, approximately 300 businesses followed. The 1990 population of 31,000 has risen to almost 80,000 today.

The construction of overhead highways and the congestion of traffic illustrate the current growing pains of Round Rock as it breaks away from suburbia and teases a metropolitan culture. Residents and visitors enjoy the annual Frontier Days celebration, Daffodil Days, ghost tours of historic downtown, El Amistad festival, Christmas Family Night, concerts on the green, and numerous other activities. The city is also home to Dell Diamond and the AAA Round Rock Express.

Liberty Hill

Fifteen miles west of Georgetown on Highway 29 is the agricultural community of Liberty Hill, once a frontier village along the Comanche Trace. Now the two-square-mile area is home to many original, preserved structures and growing subdivisions.

Responding to widely distributed posters advertising free land grants, the first settlers of Liberty Hill arrived by covered wagon in the 1840s from Tennessee, Arkansas and the Carolinas. South Carolina natives John Thomas and Amelia Bryson, along with their six children, were among the most active founding families, quickly building a log cabin to be used as a church and school. Shortly after their home was built, the Brysons opened their home as a stage stop, charging $1 for two hot meals and a bed for the night.

In 1853, a post office was opened three miles west of the present town site. The first postmaster, William Oliver Spencer, initially submitted the name Liberty for the new town but found that the name had already been taken. The slightly revised name of Liberty Hill was officially recognized the same year. When the railroad bypassed Liberty Hill in 1882, the township shifted and the population's growth was slow until the late 1990s.

Today, with a population around 1,400, Liberty Hill is struggling to break free from its primarily role as a bedroom community for Austin and surrounding areas. Still, residents find the family, country atmosphere welcoming. Each year the community holds a Fourth of July celebration and a springtime barbecue.