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BONHAM COTTON MILLS

by Beverly Christian

Although nothing remains of it but a pile of rubble, Bonham Cotton Mills can hardly be said to have been cut down in its prime. Its life spanned the biblical three score years and ten. Its products served the nation in two World Wars, and they were essential to Texas tomato farmers for nearly half a century. At its peak, the mill required 170 bales of Texas cotton every week in order to meet its required production of 325,000 yards of cloth. That is quite a record, but it omits a vital ingredient. Bonham's people invested in the mill, Bonham people operated it, and Bonham people were employed by it.

The story of the mill began on May 12, 1900. On that day, the 192 local residents who had subscribed all of the stock elected nine directors to charter Bonham Cotton Mills as a Texas corporation.¹ Capital stock was set at \$150,000, divided into 1500 shares at \$100 each.² In retrospect, it was an auspicious occasion. At the time, the announcement that major industry would be brought to Bonham probably caused little stir. Not even the naming of a drugstore owner to manage the textile mill was extraordinary; the publisher of *Fannin County Favorite* had been a practicing physician.³ And it probably was known that twelve building lots in South Bonham had been acquired in the corporate name eight days earlier on May 4.⁴

On June 5, 1900, the site for the manufacturing facility was acquired from Texas & Pacific Railroad, described in the deed as "beginning 760 feet west of Main Street and 142 feet south of the middle of the main railroad tracks" Construction of the two-story cotton mill was begun immediately and required a full year. Local masons were hired, and the brick was hand-made with sand hauled in from the northern portion of Fannin County and fired at the site.⁵ The manufacturing building covered two city blocks, extending from the end of Bill Street past Henderson to the end of Gates Street. The office was connected to the plant by a common wall with the cardroom. Floors were of tongue-and-groove maple, designed to withstand the vibration of the heavy, belt-driven machinery. A high smokestack was built to vent the smoke from coal, which was used for fuel until 1912, when Texas Power & Light Company brought its transmission lines to Bonham.

Additional water power was available from Powder Creek which traverses the mill property. Steam was forced through jets from the engine room into the manufacturing departments to maintain the high humidity required in textile operations. Foot bridges connected the east and west entrances of the mill to Bill and Gates streets, and Henderson Street extended across Powder Creek and around the plant to connect with Bell Street at the office. The opener room and warehouses were situated across the creek along Henderson Street.

Beverly Christian lives in Bonham, Texas.

Sixteen tracts of building lots, ranging from several acres to one or two lots, were acquired in the first years with most of them purchased in 1900. The tenant houses, which ranged in size from three rooms to six and featured steep-pitched roofs, were of boxed, or single-wall wood construction. They were disposed variously among other houses along South Fifth and South Sixth Streets and some cross-streets between. A Surveyor's Plat of "properties formerly belonging to Bonham Cotton Mills" filed in 1958 shows the discontinuous location of the lots.⁶ Just how many of the houses were ready for occupancy when the mill opened for business in the spring of 1901 is not known. But operations began with 1500 spindles and 150 looms.⁷ John C. Saunders, mill manager, had spent the months while the mill was under construction studying textile mills in the Southeastern United States. So far as is known, neither he nor any of the investors had prior experience with textile milling.

Earliest editions of the local newspaper date from 1905. On March 16 of that year, the *Fannin County Favorite* records the formation of a Board of Trade, predecessor of the Chamber of Commerce. Named as president was John C. Saunders. Vice President was S.B. Howard, a sponsor of fine stock fairs and an original stockholder in First National Bank and Bonham Cotton Mills. Secretary-Treasurer was Dr. J.M. Terry, publisher of *Fannin County Favorite* and also an original mill stockholder. The Board stated as its goal to "promote the spirit of enterprise and encourage new industry." Its organizing principle was stated as "price, quality and service being equal, home people shall receive our patronage." Adopted as projects were to push for installation of city water and sewerage and to try to obtain interurban service between Bonham, Greenville, and McKinney.

In 1906, Bonham Cotton Mills charter was amended to raise capital stock to \$200,000 divided into 2000 shares at \$100 each, an indication that business was expanding. The next year, a project was undertaken that still is regarded as the crowning achievement of the mill. It was a joint venture with the community at large. The Free Kindergarten was founded in 1907 by Mrs. E.F. White and Mrs. P.B. Weaks, who announced in the press that their church, First Methodist, was the organizing agency. Miss Katherine Phillips, an Episcopalian, was engaged to teach the twelve students in one room of a residence on South Fifth Street, a site that was near the cotton mill. Through the years Miss Phillips had as assistants Mrs. Chester Marston, a Carlton College graduate who was organist for First Baptist Church, and Miss Margaret Tobin, a piano teacher who belonged to St. Elizabeth's Catholic parish. Mrs. Barnett McAnally, a conservatory-trained violinist, also was one of the assistants.

From its inception until it came under the Community Chest umbrella years later, the kindergarten's affairs were administered by a board composed of two ladies from each church in town. Mrs. E.F. White, wife of an original mill stockholder, was first president, and during her tenure the board obligated itself to provide a new upright piano for the

kindergarten. The debt was paid before any interest was due.⁸ Other presidents included Mrs. John C. Saunders, wife of the mill manager, and Mrs. C.H. VanZandt, their daughter.

By the second term, John C. Saunders, acting on behalf of the corporation, supervised construction of the permanent facility that would house the kindergarten for fifty years. The building was provided with utilities and maintenance furnished, and appears as Lot 40 on the Surveyor's plat recorded in 1958 of "properties formerly belonging to Bonham Cotton Mills." Miss Phillips served as kindergarten teacher for forty-five years. She is quoted in the May 8, 1950 *Bonham Daily Favorite*: "The mill has always been one of our best friends. The employees and owners always come to our assistance when we call on them." Juanita Spencer reports that more than 2,000 students attended the institution through the years.

Throughout the months of this investigation, the overwhelming response of local residents — former mill employees as well as the Saunders family and the downtown business community — attests to the vital role of the kindergarten in introducing children to their community. The institution was situated at the corner of South Fifth and Bill Streets, one block from the foot bridge across Powder Creek to the mill. The provision for free child care as early as 1907 is believed to be unusual, if not unique. Furthermore, the wide acceptance of the kindergarten, which drew children from nearly all of the neighborhoods of Bonham, has been credited to the quality of instruction that students received.

The 1910 Decennial Census enumerates 196 residents who gave as their occupation "cotton mill," including four foremen and one superintendent. This figure remained stable for thirty years. The South Bonham neighborhood reflected thirty-seven heads of households who had business occupations, including grocers, draymen, restaurant keepers, hotel operators, newspaper and city employees, cotton oil mill workers, and one each, baker, soft drink bottler, photographer, optician, milliner, and insurance salesman. Ten said they owned farms. Sixteen listed railroad occupations, and two were public school teachers. Of the mill workers, twenty-eight were under the age of sixteen years; the youngest, eleven. But all of them belonged to family units with at least one other employee who was an adult.

Bonham installed city water and sewerage in 1910. In 1911, the mill mortgaged sixteen tracts to secure issuance of 200 bonds of \$500 each, to mature in five years.⁹ Presumably, the funds were used to install water and sewerage in the mill properties. Electricity was installed in 1912, and in 1914 the downtown area received paved streets and sidewalks. Bonham received its second industry in 1916. Southwest Pump Company was founded by two local residents, John Catron and R.E. Risser. But Bonham's self-containment — like other towns and cities across the land — came to an end with World War I.

Bonham Cotton Mills was sold to Consolidated Textile Corporation, registered in Delaware but with offices in New York, for \$575,000 in September 1920. The sale included the plant and forty-six tenant houses. By terms of the agreement, John C. Saunders was retained as manager.

On June 1, 1921, Consolidated Textile Corporation mortgaged all of its plants, real estate, and equipment to Chase National Bank of New York to secure issuance of \$5,000,000 in twenty year bonds at eight percent. Fannin County Deed of Trust Records contain ninety pages of description of the properties, located in Berkshire (North Adams) Massachusetts, Lynchburg, Virginia, Raleigh, North Carolina, Almanace County and Cleveland County, North Carolina, Henderson, Kentucky, Mitchell County and Walker County, Georgia, and Fannin County, Texas.¹⁰ Supplemental indentures were recorded April 4, June 13 and November 2, 1923, and May 25, 1925.

A few weeks after the Stock Market crash in October 1929, Consolidated Textile Corporation became bankrupt. All of its plants were closed in 1930, and for the first time since the cotton mill opened in Bonham, local citizens became aware that they numbered several hundred dependents in the population. In 1930, there was no structured system of unemployment compensation or social welfare and Bonham's people were confronted with an idle factory and numerous kindergarten students whose parents were not at work.

On December 27, 1930, the *Bonham Daily Favorite* announced a public meeting to investigate reopening the mill with local investment.

The plant and houses that had been sold a decade earlier for \$575,000 could now be bought back for \$100,000. A firm of Southern textile engineers had appraised it at \$275,000. But two of Bonham's three banks had failed, and there was much apprehension, as evidenced in the press.

Early in 1931, the *Bonham Daily Favorite* made a litany of advising cotton farmers to decrease production and to "raise your living at home." On January 6, foreign competition was cited, with forty-five percent of the world's supply of cotton produced by other than American farmers. Southern American farmers were urged to improve staple lengths and to rebuild worn-out soils.

Coverage of other depressed areas included idle steel workers in Ohio. The survey of per capital wealth in 1930 showed that Texas' figure was \$1,986 compared with \$2,946 nationally. Average per capita wealth in the South was \$1,800; however, Texas ranked behind fourteen Southern states. The National average per capita income in 1930 was \$750.

Bonham Cotton Mills was again chartered as a Texas corporation January 23, 1931, with capital stock set at \$200,000 divided into 2,000 shares at \$100 each.¹¹ One-half of the total paid, as required by law, and the \$100,000 was invested by Bonham people. But in 1933, when proof of final payment was filed, majority stock was shown to be in the hands

of the Higginbotham & Bailey trusts in Dallas, Texas.¹² On January 24, 1931, however, the *Bonham Daily Favorite* banner headline proclaimed, "BONHAM COTTON MILLS TO REOPEN FEB. 2," and the lead story was titled "Nearly 200 People Will Be Put Back to Work with a \$10,000 Monthly Payroll."

The body of the story revealed that employees would return to work full-time, five and one-half days a week. The 16,000 spindles would require 200 bales of cotton to fill, and the estimate was that between 5,000 and 10,000 bales of cotton would be purchased annually. The mill was described as "the only plant in Texas or west of the Mississippi River that manufactures light sheeting. . . . It is also the largest textile plant in Texas. . . . One line of goods manufactured is sheeting for tomato frames, and there is already considerable inquiry for this character of cloth."

"As the tomato acreage in East Texas as well as South Texas will be unusually large this year, it is seen there will be a great demand for that kind of cloth."

The story continues with the announcement that former employees would be given preference, but that a long list of applications was on file at the mill office. Local businessmen who had worked to sell stock were recognized, then, "to J.C. Saunders must go major part of the credit for efforts to have the mill bought by men financially able to operate it and to make it a success . . . It is no small matter to secure a plant that will give employment to two hundred people and spend ten thousand dollars a month in salaries alone."

Mr. Saunders survived for three more years. Though he was manager of the mill at the time of his death on August 23, 1934, he was well into his seventies. He was succeeded as manager by Herbert A. Burow, a Texas A&M graduate who had served apprenticeships in every department of the mill.

During the depression years, appeals became necessary in the press for contributions to the kindergarten teachers' salaries. Responses came, sometimes from distant places. In 1936, Mark McMahon, a Fort Worth attorney who had attended the kindergarten as a child, enclosed a check with his letter praising the efforts of Miss Katherine Phillips as teacher. A few days later, the contribution of Misses Hannah and Caroline Rosenbaum of Orlando, Florida, was given press. They were the daughters of M. Rosenbaum, a Prussian immigrant who had been an early businessman in Bonham and was an original stockholder in both First National Bank and Bonham Cotton Mills.

Texas Almanac gives the dollar value of manufactures in Bonahm for 1939-40 as \$1,129,477 from cotton gins, cotton mill, cottonseed oil mill, the new Kraft Cheese plant, and Southwest Pump Company. The *Almanac* figure for 1945-46 from virtually the same sources is \$1,906,376. A substantial amount of the increase must have represented Bonham

Cotton Mills sales, although Southwest Pump Company was also engaged in war production. In 1946, the cotton mill amended its charter to raise capital stock to \$400,000, and again in 1950, capital stock was raised to \$600,000. That was the fiftieth anniversary of Bonham Cotton Mills, and it was celebrated with open house and a special section in the *Bonham Daily Favorite* on May 8, 1950.

The list of 192 original stockholders in 1900 was published in a story titled "One Hundred Ninety-Two Persons Held Stock in Bonham Cotton Mill When First Organized in 1900-J.C. Saunders Elected First Manager." Local histories contain most of the names, identifying them as bankers, owners of businesses of various sizes, and professional people such as lawyers, doctors, ministers, and educators. There are also a number of women stockholders on the list.

Tenured employees of the mill were accorded "star billing," with several stories and photographs of groups who had long service. One story, titled "62 Employees of Mill Have Total of 2200 Years Service," lists those names in categories as "more than 40 years," "30 to 39 years," and "25 to 29 years." Page one of the section features a photograph of three women who had worked the entire forty-nine years since the mill opened in 1901. The accompanying story is titled "Three Women Set Record: Have Been On Job for 49 Years - All Three Now in Spinning Room."

Still another list was of seventy-one employees of the mill who served in World War II. One was killed in action. The account of John C. Saunders' trip to the southeastern states to study the textile business, and a brief history of the mill's fifty years, appears. Herbert Burow's educational and civic accomplishments and his memberships in manufacturing associations are recounted. And there were stories which reveal the names of all of the foremen and the superintendent and the assistant manager.

Employment was given as 350, with a weekly payroll of \$15,000 projected to \$780,000 annually. The size of the mill was reported as 17,200 spindles and 426 looms. In 1950 there were three shifts daily for continuous twenty-four-hour running time to produce 325,000 yards of cloth weekly. And one story titled, "Employment at Mill is Stable," revealed that the mill enjoyed the lowest rate of unemployment compensation possible, one-tenth of one percent.

Also announced in the May 8 edition was that the mill had sales offices in Los Angeles, Kansas City, Chicago, New York, and New Orleans, all directed from the Bonham office. Other than light sheeting, the mill manufactured drills which were sold to manufacturers of clothing, tents, awnings, and sporting goods. Bonham Cotton Mills was classified as the largest narrow sheeting mill west of the Mississippi River.

The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade of 1947 began to have an effect on the domestic textile industry by the mid-1950s. Some indication of the problem is found in correspondence to Congressman Sam

Rayburn in 1956. One letter, dated August 8, 1956, from H.A. Burow, manager of Bonham Cotton Mills remarked, "I certainly hope that you will be able to get some relief for our industry in the very near future before it is too late." Another, dated July 28, 1956, was from Frank W. Smith, manager of Texas Textile Mills in McKinney, which closed soon after. Smith said, "I feel sure that you have used your influence to bring about an equalized tariff on textiles, but it looks like we have had some opposition. As you probably know, millions of yards of Japanese textiles are arriving in this country, and surely our industry should not be crippled from this source."

But the definitive explanation is supplied by C.S. Tatum, president of Pilot Mills Company of Raleigh, North Carolina, in his letter to Mr. Rayburn dated May 21, 1956.

Tatum said that U.S. tariffs had been reduced by two-thirds or more, yet American products moving abroad "find few trade barriers which have been lowered by more than a shaving, while most of them are higher . . ." He predicted that the entire U.S. textile industry "is in a fair way to be wiped out completely if some restraint is not put upon the Japanese mills."

On October 6, 1958, Bonham Cotton Mills merged with Brenham Cotton Mill, Inc.¹³ Combined capital stock was \$750,000. Herbert A. Burow retired as manager, and Claud Mast of Brenham assumed control of both plants, with Wade Webb sent to oversee the Bonham operation. Four years later, the merger was dissolved. Brenham underwent reorganization, and the Bonham plant was chartered as Red River Textile Mills, Inc.¹⁴ with Harry McDowell as registered agent and manager. Capital stock was set at \$150,000, and a drive was launched by R. Eugene Risser, Jr. and Ray Peeler, Jr., local businessmen, to sell stock at \$20 per share to raise operating funds. The forty-six tenant houses were offered for sale at prices ranging from \$500 to \$1500, on terms, to their occupants.¹⁵

In 1962, Red River Textile Mills, Inc. employed 285 workers with a weekly payroll of \$16,500.¹⁶ Sales from manufacturing in Bonham for 1961-62 totaled \$8,700,000, according to *Texas Almanac*.

The \$250,000 realized through local efforts to sell stock was exhausted by 1966. Mortgages are recorded in that year, and again in 1968 by Otto Goedecke of Hallettsville, who became involved with the Bonham mill at the time Red River Textile Mills, Inc. was organized.¹⁷ In 1970, the mill closed in bankruptcy, and title passed to Walter E. Heller & Company.¹⁸ Ironically, *Texas Almanac* gives dollar amounts for sales from manufacturing in Bonham as \$15,452,000 for 1970.

On May 6, 1972, the Secretary of State of Texas filed forfeiture of charter against Red River Textile Mills, Inc. for non-payment of taxes. On November 9, the local newspaper released a story concerning the U.S. Labor Department adjustment payment that was available to former employees of the mill.

In 1973, Unico Mills of Georgia acquired the real property and machinery of Red River Textile Mills, Inc.¹⁹ Shortly thereafter, Stanley Gibbs Wrecking Company of Bonham successfully bid to demolish the manufacturing plant, the buildings that brought industry to Bonham in 1900. That process continues, with a lone workman cleaning brick that was hand-made and fired at the site, of Fannin County sand.

In 1977, the old kindergarten building was removed from the corner of South Fifth and Bill streets to make way for a modern, single-family dwelling. The work of the kindergarten remains in the memories of countless Bonham residents of all neighborhoods.

In 1979, title to the property which begins “760 feet west of Main Street and 142 feet south of the middle of the main railroad tracks” was recorded in Fannin County Deed Records by Stanley and Mary Fitzwater Gibbs.²¹ That is the present status.

Did Bonham Cotton Mills — like some earlier civilization — spring up, accomplish its tasks, and then vanish? Historian T.R. Fehrenbach concludes *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans* with the observation that if civilizations fall, the earth remains. “Texas, under any name, would go on forever,” he says. Bonham Cotton Mills would seem to demonstrate the thesis.

NOTES

¹The list appears in the May 8, 1950 edition of *Bonham Daily Favorite*.

²File number 009265-0 in the Office of the Secretary of State of Texas.

³As recorded on the historical marker displayed at *Bonham Daily Favorite*.

⁴As recorded in Vols. 74, 75 and 77, Fannin County Deed Records.

⁵Information supplied by John T. Lofton, superintendent of the mill from 1939-58.

⁶Recorded in Volume 2, Surveyor's Records of Fannin County, pp. 363-367.

⁷According to the May 8, 1950 *Bonham Daily Favorite*

⁸From an undated clipping supplied by Mrs. White's daughter, Mrs. Elizabeth Hendrix.

⁹Vol. 3, pages 447-453, Fannin County Deed of Trust Records.

¹⁰Vol. 18, pages 1-91, Fannin County DOT Records.

¹¹File number 058581-0 in the office of the Secretary of State of Texas.

¹²*Ibid.*, filed January 10, 1933.

¹³Merger of file 058581-0 with 071959-0, Brenham Cotton Mill, Inc., chartered August 25, 1937, capital stock \$150,000.

¹⁴File 181798 in the office of the Secretary of State of Texas, capital stock \$150,000.

¹⁵According to Mrs. Luciel Ball, former mill employee, interviewed August 2, 1985.

¹⁶Floy Crandall Hodge, Fannin County's Pioneer Families, p. 41.

¹⁷Vol. 110, p. 277, and Vol. 502, p. 282, Fannin County DOT Records.

¹⁸Substitute Trustee's Deed Vol. 520, p. 74, Fannin County Deed Records.

¹⁹Bill of Sale Vol. 3, p. 119; Vol. 545, p. 657, Fannin County Deed Records.

²⁰Vol. 574, p. 295, Fannin County Deed Records.

²¹Vol. 590, p. 379, Fannin County Deed Records.