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The Crucible of Milam County: Railroad Construction and Community Competition in Late Nineteenth-Century Texas

BY PHILIP G. POPE

Since shortly after it gained independence from Mexico in 1836, Texas began plans for building railroads. During the next twenty-five years, when railroad expansion across the Midwest gave rail cities such as Indianapolis and Chicago more power and prestige, Texas rail lines remained only in the planning stages. True railroad construction in Texas did not begin until 1851, and by the start of the Civil War, Texas had granted fifty-eight rail charters, over five million acres of land, and nearly two million dollars to various rail companies, only to be rewarded with a mere 468 miles of track among ten short rail lines located in East Texas and along the Gulf Coast. Rail conditions in Texas were much like those across the rest of the South; in 1840, forty-four percent of the nation’s rail mileage could be found in the South, but by 1850 the South possessed only 26 percent of the nation’s rail mileage.¹

During the Civil War, attention and resources were diverted away from building and maintaining railroads in Texas. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, railroad companies resumed building and improving their rail lines in Texas at a rate that outpaced that of prewar growth. Such railroad expansion contributed directly to the prosperity or decline of existing towns in Texas. The lumber industry in the Big Thicket of East Texas, for example, advanced as rail lines penetrated the region in the 1850s, and then surged again after the war as railroad building resumed, in the process creating towns that would become economic centers in the region.

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Such activity was not limited to the Big Thicket. By 1870, the International & Great Northern Railroad Company (I&GN), whose line began at St. Louis, traveled south through Missouri, cut a southwest line through Arkansas, entered Texas near its northeast corner, and extended its line to Hearne, in Robertson County, Texas.²

In the summer of 1873, the Galveston Daily News reported a new town would be built along the line of the I&GN approximately thirty miles west-southwest of Hearne. The future townsite consisted of four hundred acres purchased by the I&GN from area land owners George Green, B. F. Ackerman, and Frank Smith. It was speculated that the town would be named Milam City. By that September, however, and perhaps due to the fact that a Milam City already existed in Sabine County, the town was instead named Rockdale. In November, with the aid of convict labor, workers completed the track to Rockdale, which would be the terminus of the rail line for the next two years. From the beginning, there were lofty expectations for the new town, for during this time, railroads were viewed as “the engines of change” that brought modernity and growth.³ The railroad also incorporated Rockdale into a nationwide and regional network of cities associated with the railroad.

Why, when the I&GN built through Milam County, did the track not go through Cameron, an established town and county seat? The most important rail hub east of Rockdale was Palestine. At Palestine, one I&GN track headed south to Houston and Galveston, while the other track headed southwest with Austin and San Antonio as future objectives.⁴ A straight line drawn from Palestine to Austin would cut Milam County almost exactly in half, with Cameron lying above the line and Rockdale below. There is more involved, however, in building a rail line than simply finding the shortest route between two points, as an often winding rail route from Missouri to Texas can attest to.

From its entry into Texas near the state’s northeast corner
to Austin, the I&GN Lone Star line traveled through thirteen Texas counties. Of these thirteen counties, the I&GN traveled through only four county seats: Jefferson, Marshall, Palestine, and Austin. Part of the reason for the bypassing of county seats can be explained by examining town character and finances. The railroads often sought concessions from existing towns in exchange for building a line through their town. Dallas, for example, provided the Houston & Texas Central Railroad a combination of cash, bonds, and land to build its tracks through the city.5

Just as important as town character and finances were the issues of geography and topography in relation to the sitting or location of towns. The elevation of Milam County ranges from 306 to 648 feet. The majority of the county is made up of rolling plains, but there are concentrated areas in which the elevation changes greatly. Along the San Gabriel and Little Rivers, and along Alligator and Clays Creeks, for example, the elevation often varies more than one hundred feet. When planning where to build a rail line, a route of least resistance that is within certain geographic parameters is preferred. A flat route is ideal, but if not possible, the lowest grade is most desirable. A locomotive could more easily pull a train up a gradual incline than it could a steep one. In addition, more hours, material, and money were required to build a track across a river or other type of embankment.6

The Little River flows into the county near its northwest corner and flows east-southeast through a third of the county before turning northeast toward Cameron. At that point it meanders around the south side of the county seat and cuts northward just east of town, before flowing southeast again and meeting the Brazos River. The San Gabriel River, Alligator Creek, Clays Creek, Big Elm Creek and other smaller waterways cut through the northwest quadrant of the county before flowing into the Little River and thus the Brazos. Rivers and streams course through the upper half of Milam County, the most convoluted
merging of which occurs around Cameron. The half of the county below Brushy Creek and the Little River, in contrast, has only a handful of smaller creeks and streams.\(^7\)

Although Rockdale and Cameron are roughly equidistant from an imaginary line running from Palestine to Austin, the more southerly route through Rockdale provided fewer barriers to rail construction. Building an east-west rail line through Cameron would have entailed crossing the Brazos into the county, the Little River at least three times, and the San Gabriel River at least once. Over the years, these rivers had broken from their banks and caused major damage during periods of heavy rainfall. In addition, bridges crossing these rivers proved unreliable at times. When heavy rains caused area rivers to flood the surrounding land, their waters sometimes unsettled, and even washed away, the bridges.\(^8\) Taking the southern route through Rockdale provided a more level grade with fewer rivers for the railroad to cross than a northern route through Cameron would have provided.

In the summer of 1873 Rockdale began to establish itself within the county. People were moving to town, houses were being constructed, and businesses were being put in place so that by the time the railroad was completed to Rockdale on January 27, 1874, the new town experienced “good local trade.” Five lumberyards operated in town to support this rapid growth. Roads were being laid in all directions from Rockdale and accommodating bridges were built across the Little and San Gabriel rivers and Brushy Creek. To help support the necessary infrastructure, the citizens of Rockdale voted in May 1874 to incorporate, and in June the county judge issued the order, creating the “Town of Rockdale,” which a year later was amended to the “City of Rockdale.” By contrast, Cameron would not permanently incorporate until 1889, as previous attempts to incorporate in 1856 and 1873 proved temporary. In addition to its road and rail connections, Rockdale was also connected with Galveston, another city on the I&GN, through a direct telegraph
connection. Perhaps due to the connectivity of Rockdale, the county newspaper, *The Messenger*, moved from Cameron to Rockdale in 1874. By the late spring of 1874 Rockdale claimed a wagon trade of over one hundred miles, from the Brazos River west to Georgetown, and from Giddings north to Waco. Area farmers and merchants traveled to Rockdale to do their business instead of Calvert, Bryan, Houston, or other railroad towns. Daily stage coach service was established between Rockdale and Belton, the county seat of neighboring Bell County. At the time, no rail service existed in Bell County. For surrounding areas, Rockdale was the closest town that had a direct connection with distant places. Because of this, Rockdale held an advantage over many nearby towns. In such a situation, the importance of a town with transportation connections was greater than its relative size may suggest.

In 1933, the German geographer, Walter Christaller, introduced the concept of Central Place Theory to help explain how urban settlements evolve and how they are situated in relation to each other. A Central Place serves a surrounding area with goods and services that are unavailable in these communities. Although Christaller formed his theory to explain urban places, one could apply the same general theory to Milam County, and as such, Rockdale could be considered a Central Place in Milam County. Other towns in the county provided basic services like basic dry goods and food. Cameron provided high order services through the functions associated with being a county seat. By having a railroad connection, Rockdale provided a high order service to the surrounding towns, including Cameron. This being the case, the spheres of influence for Cameron and Rockdale overlapped through most of the county, creating an immediate competition for dominance via each of their unique advantages. Cameron, as the county seat, had established itself in terms of governmental services.

Thus, while Rockdale was successful as a rail point, Cameron
maintained itself as the seat of county government. On April 9, 1874, however, an event occurred which would ignite the competition between Milam County's two main towns. At one o'clock in the morning, the courthouse in Cameron was "wrapped in flames." When the fire was extinguished, it was discovered that the only item not destroyed from the courthouse was a single surveyor's book. When discussions began regarding rebuilding the courthouse, there was some debate as to where the new courthouse would be placed. The main question pertained to location: should the county seat remain Cameron, or should Rockdale, a bustling new town with better transportation, be awarded the title? In 1874, citizens voted to keep the county seat at Cameron instead of moving it south to the newer town of Rockdale. Then in 1880, after six years of sometimes heated discussion during which some in Cameron accused Rockdale citizens of torching the courthouse, the voters of Milam County decided the issue with a second vote regarding the placement of the county seat. The vote kept the status quo: by granting Rockdale 1,618 votes, and awarding Cameron 1,861 votes, Cameron remained the seat of county government. Rockdale may have lost the battle for county seat, but it proved that it could wage a good war. For the next seventy years, Rockdale waged a generally quiet but consistent war with Cameron for not only survival, but for dominance in Milam County. 12

While Cameron rebuilt its courthouse, Rockdale developed networks with its hinterlands and major cities. In the fall of 1874, representatives of the I&GN and Rockdale leaders presented to the citizens of the area a plan to populate the surrounding countryside. The plan provided that within four months "hundreds of white immigrants" would be brought into the county, although they hoped that actual numbers would rise into the thousands. Their purpose would be to aid in the coming year's crop and provide local businesses with a larger consumer base. The Galveston Daily News boastfully reported that young Rockdale, a population estimated at 1,800, was "doing more business that a half dozen old-fashioned, gray-haired cities,"
and that it already had the look of a bustling railroad town, with “two or three banks, fifty or sixty banks merchants, and plenty of saloons.”

Three years later, one could still find boastful commentary about Rockdale in the Galveston paper. It reported that many kinds of crops could be successfully grown in the area around Rockdale, and that the land was well suited for the raising of livestock. Available land sites were described as having plenty of trees available for fencing off the land and erecting homes, and that wells of “30 to 60 feet never fail through the driest of summers.” The mention of dry summers was a rare departure from the generally glowing reviews. *The Galveston Daily News* reported that six dry goods stores, eight grocery stores, two hardware stores, two drug stores, four churches, three schools, three hotels, an Odd Fellows hall and a Masonic lodge, and numerous other businesses could be found in Rockdale. An increasing number of Rockdale citizens, estimated at nearly two thousand, supported these businesses. Rockdale claimed to be a railroad town that conducted “extensive trade with the counties of Milam, Bell, Lee, and Burleson from its central location.” Conversely, the same paper described Cameron as being “an old town of about 500 inhabitants” that was “12 miles distance” from Rockdale which also served as its shipping point.

Information found on maps published by the I&GN in 1878 also painted a positive picture of Rockdale and the surrounding area and recommended emigrants settle there, while casually dismissing Cameron. Visually, Rockdale appears to be the most important town in Milam County. Its name is printed in all capital letters, the only such town between Palestine and Austin to be so denoted on the map. In addition to the rail line running through town, wagon roads are shown radiating from Rockdale to the other Milam County towns of San Gabriel, Thorndale, Davilla, Bryant’s Station, and Cameron. Two other wagon roads head south from Rockdale to the Burleson County towns of Lexington and Caldwell. The wagon roads from Rockdale reach north into Hamilton County, northwest into Runnels County, and west into
Menard County. This type of promotional literature was not new, as developing towns across the country had used similar tactics to shape imaginations in the promotion of a town.¹⁵


This map reveals much about the other transportation routes in the area. One of Milam County’s important antebellum towns, Port Sullivan, appears to only have one wagon road which connects it not with another county town, but with Robertson County’s Hearne, across the Brazos River. Cameron also
appears to have but one road of service, and that road leads to Rockdale.

With direct access to the only railroad that ran through the county and numerous wagon roads, Rockdale was assuredly the transportation hub of Milam County. Although there were most certainly more roads that served these other towns, it is clear that the publishers of the map intended to provide travelers with a map that would shape their actions and attitudes in a manner that would favor Rockdale and the associated rail line. This is yet another reminder that publishers favored the enterprising towns that sought, and got, the railroad.

The narrative information on the maps also made Texas, and specifically the area around Rockdale, seem like a desirable location. The heading of the verso of 1878s “The Correct Map of Texas” states that “Texas wants one million emigrants annually for 20 years.” The emigrants could purportedly enjoy “low taxes and good government” as well as “cheap land.” Milam County is described as having good soil for growing numerous crops, especially around the bottomlands of the Little River. Rockdale is described as the most important town in the county, and as having a number of businesses, schools, and churches. In addition to being the main town in Milam County, Rockdale also reportedly served as “the principal shipping point for the rich and populous county of Bell.” Gause and Milano, the other county towns listed on the map are described as small towns that are surrounded by good land. Cameron, however, is depicted simply as an old town, although the county seat, and is virtually dismissed. 17

Cameron reasserted itself as an important town in Milam County in 1881 when the Gulf, Colorado & Santa Fe Railway (GC&SF) came through town. The GC&SF entered the county from the south, crossed the I&GN line at Milano, continued north to Cameron, and then swung west through Buckholts and out of the county. This rail line began at Galveston, bypassed Houston, ran north to Dallas and up through Oklahoma. Ten years later, the San Antonio & Aransas Pass (SA&AP) Railway
provided Cameron with a north-south line, and connected it by rail with Rockdale. Significantly, the SA&AP selected Rockdale as the site of its local headquarters. South of Rockdale, the line continued to Yoakum where it met another SA&AP line that served Houston, San Antonio, and south Texas.18

Although Cameron now became somewhat more accessible and its population increased after receiving direct rail service (500 citizens in 1878, 800 in 1884, and 2,000 in 1892), the impact the railroad made on the town was not as significant as that upon Rockdale. By the time the GC&SF and the SA&AP came through Cameron, rail service had already been established in the county. Certain ladies of Cameron’s upper class during this time felt more compelled to shop for dresses in the up and coming Rockdale than in their older town. Cameron was also not as important a point on either rail line as Rockdale was on the I&GN. Rockdale was the end of the line for two years, whereas Cameron was never intended to be a destination, but rather just another town along the line. In contrast to Rockdale’s designation on I&GN maps, SA&AP maps denoted Cameron in regular type, the capital letters being reserved for Waco to the north and Yoakum to the south.19

The railroad also had a greater impact on Rockdale than on Cameron because of the towns that the different rail lines connected. The I&GN connected Rockdale with the state capitol (Austin), which, at a little over sixty miles away was the closest city. Milam County was located on the fringe of Austin’s hinterland, its area of influence. Houston, meanwhile, was about 140 miles away, Dallas 150 miles away, and San Antonio 155 miles away from the population centers of Milam County.20 Arguably, the most important rail line to go through Cameron was the SA&AP, but because its link with Rockdale better connected it with other area towns that also led to more of Cameron’s residents traveling to Rockdale and other towns for services. Cameron, in other words, lost out to Rockdale for several reasons.

However, this did not mean that Cameron gave up. There was
an attempt in 1894 to construct a railroad west from Cameron to Georgetown, close to the regional hub of Austin. For whatever reasons, the proposed Trinity, Cameron and Western line never came to fruition. Perhaps the existing and parallel I&GN line presented too much competition. Rockdale had already secured and established a line toward the regional hub, and there was just not enough demand for another such line from Milam County.

Cameron still claimed the county seat, but Rockdale seemed to have an edge in the fields of business and progressive citizens. In an 1893 publication listing prominent individuals of Milam and surrounding counties, more of the county’s progressive and successful businessmen are shown as living in Rockdale than in any other county town. These Rockdale business leaders include J. S. Perry, Benjamin and Joseph Loewenstein, E. M. Scarbrough, and C. H. Coffield. In the course of running profitable businesses and being actively involved in a number of civic and fraternal organizations, these men provided business leadership during Rockdale’s first twenty years. They also helped to make Rockdale recognizable as a “town of young men...and...youthful enthusiasm and energy.”

Some of these stories reveal how the town of Rockdale lured the enterprising. For example, J. S. Perry was a lawyer who, in 1874 left the established town of Cameron for the new railroad town of Rockdale. Within two years, Perry was elected County Judge of Milam County, and a few years later, elected by the people of Milam, Brazos, and Burleson counties to represent their interests in the State Senate. In the 1890s he served as mayor of Rockdale, president of the Rockdale Cotton Oil Mills, and director of the Rockdale Improvement Company. Under Perry’s leadership, Rockdale “prospered as never before, and it was mainly through his management that the town acquired its very efficient system of water works and electric lights.”

Benjamin and Joseph Loewenstein came to Rockdale from Prussia in 1873, shortly before the arrival of the I&GN. Upon arriving, they opened a dry goods store that came to be one of the most successful in the area. In addition to their store, they also
operated the Rockdale Brick Works and helped build seven brick business buildings in Rockdale. The brothers were described as being “public-spirited...standing ready at all times to put their money in any legitimate enterprise and subscribing liberally for the promotion of local industries.” To this extent, Benjamin helped to establish the First National Bank of Rockdale, and served as its vice president. He also served on the bank’s board of directors. Joseph served on the local school board and was a member of a number of fraternal organizations including the Masons, Knights of Honor, and the American Legion of Honor. Both of the Loewenstein brothers were also active in the Hebrew order, B’nai B’rith. By associating with, and being active in, a number of orders and social clubs, these citizens could identify themselves as “members of the ascendant urban elite.”24 Having a progressive, visionary mindset would help these, and other men, lead Rockdale to success.

E. M. Scarbrough came to Texas in 1867 and settled at Bryant’s Station, working for the merchant firm of Hale & Evans before moving to the railroad town of Hearne in 1870. In 1874, however, Scarbrough moved back to Milam County, relocating to Rockdale. He had in fact lobbied the I&GN to build through Rockdale, and eventually became its mayor. In 1882, Scarbrough partnered with Robert Hicks, forming the firm of Scarbrough and Hicks, which the 1893 publication described as “one of the largest and financially solid establishments in this section of the state.” Scarbrough’s training in Rockdale served him well. After seven years there, he departed for Austin in 1889 where he would build that city’s first skyscraper and fully air-conditioned department store. Located on Austin’s Congress Avenue, The University of Texas at Austin’s Daily Texan credits the Scarbrough store as having “started the downtown business district.”25

In August of 1875, C. H. Coffield arrived in Rockdale, and ever since the Coffield name has been associated with the town. Partnered with Hugh Witcher, Coffield engaged in a successful mercantile business in Rockdale, and with Benjamin
Loewenstein, helped organize the First National Bank of Rockdale and held a stake in the Rockdale Improvement Company. Coffield also participated in the fledgling local lignite industry and real estate. Like many other business leaders in the area, Coffield was a Mason and Knight of Honor. He was also one of the earliest town boosters, claiming Rockdale to be “the best town of 2,000 people in Texas.”

It is doubtful that Coffield or others would have had much success in the lignite industry had it not been for the proximity of the railroad. The existence of lignite around Rockdale had been known at least since 1866, but it was not until 1890 when Herman Vogel began his operation three miles east of Rockdale that lignite began to be mined in Milam County. The lignite in Milam County was described as being “equal to the best quality utilized and far superior to much” that was being used in Western Europe. In 1892 the Rockdale Mining and Manufacturing Company, of which Coffield was president, purchased land adjacent to Vogel’s and also began mining lignite. By 1895, Vogel had demonstrated enough promise in the venture that he could be counted on to initiate other mining activities. With the aid of five other individuals, he formed the Black Diamond Coal Company. The success of these early lignite ventures was naturally due to the great amount of lignite present. The presence of good transportation facilities, however, played an equally important role. These early mines were located near the track of the I&GN, making the transportation of the lignite to other towns fairly easy.

While business and industry were important to Rockdale, agriculture was still the most important form of business county-wide. The Farmers’ Alliance had a strong presence in Milam County, as is evidenced by the number of businesses that fronted support for the Alliance. When the Alliance decided to boycott jute bags because of their artificially high prices, Rockdale merchants joined them by refusing to order any jute bags. Rockdale was the main shipping point for agricultural goods in Milam County, receiving “the larger portion of the crop of Milam
County,” an accomplishment that the local paper trumpeted. In 1887, roughly 7,400 bales of cotton were received at Rockdale, while in contrast, Cameron received only about 5,000 bales; five years later, Rockdale received over 15,000 bales, and Cameron just under 14,000. Although Cameron narrowed the margin, Rockdale still commanded the cotton trade in Milam County.

The importance of farmers to county merchants was evident in an 1898 letter to *The Rockdale Messenger*, penned by a Cameron citizen concerning some cases of smallpox:

> The statement that Cameron has attempted to make the outside world believe that the danger was insignificant, etc., is not only absolutely false but it is more. Rockdale being a rival town, and the time being at hand when the farmers make their arrangements with the merchants for the new year, one must justly conclude that it was done for the purpose of benefiting Rockdale at the expense of Cameron and was definitely malicious.

Cameron grappled with smallpox from the middle of November through the middle of December 1898. City officials downplayed the cases, saying that they were “confined to negroes,” and that the cases were “mild” and “isolated.” *The Rockdale Messenger* described the first two deaths in Cameron caused by smallpox as being “an old negro otherwise infirm with age, and a young stiff-necked negro, who refused medical assistance.” When the disease was finally contained, Dr. W. W. Greer, the county health officer called upon those in the county to come back to Cameron to conduct their business. A state health officer, after meeting with Greer, traveled to Rockdale on his way back to Austin in an attempt to ease their fears. If there was any doubt before, the disagreements arising from the smallpox episode confirm that Rockdale was in competition with Cameron.

As evidenced by the previous letter, the press played a key role in developing ideas and opinions of those in the county. As
Blaine Brownell mentions in *The Urban Ethos in the South*, this boosterism in newspaper form was nothing new, as the press had been used in a number of successful cities as a tool of growth though boosterism.\(^30\)

The first quarter-century of existence brought much change and growth to Rockdale. The town quickly went from nothing but a brushy patch of land to a busy railroad terminus. After the railroad connection was made through to Austin, Rockdale had to reposition itself and sustain itself as a destination. Although Rockdale appeared not to have a future as a major national center, city leaders could strive to establish their locale as an integral regional center, along the lines of Paris and Texarkana, which prospered due in large part to their linkages forged by the Texas and Pacific Railroad.\(^31\) Through these formative years, civic and business leaders along with a local paper helped guide the growth of the town. While the realized growth of Rockdale remained somewhat muted as compared to the vision of such town leaders, the burgeoning regional center nonetheless managed to present itself as a viable challenger to Cameron for dominance in Milam County.

**Endnotes**


4 David Rumsey Map Collection “Map of the International and Great Northern Railroad. Lone (Star) Route and Connections” (1878) http://www.davidrumsey.com/maps770067-22085.html. “The Correct Map of Texas” Woodward, Tieman & Hale: St. Louis (1878) map located at University of Texas at Arlington, Special Collections, Map Room.


7 Soil Survey for Milam County, Texas, 191.

8 David Ray Galbreath, compiler, Index of Road and Bridge
Commissioners Court Minutes, Milam County, Texas, Volume A thru Volume 15, 1874-1981, (Frankston, Texas: by the author, 2004); Dallas Morning News, 9 April, 1900.; Mabel Charles, Personal Journal, private collection. Ms. Charles (1903-2002) was born in and raised in the Duncan community, educated in Cameron, lived most of her life in the Tracy community near the San Gabriel River, and spent the last years of her life in Rockdale, living all her 99 years in Milam County. She was active in county organizations including the Milam County Heritage Preservation Society, and had a passion for local history.; Galveston Daily News, 4 December 1874.


13 Galveston Daily News, 27 October, 1874, 7 November, 1874.; Batte, History of Milam County, Texas, 75. According to Batte, a movement to bring immigrants into Milam County was attempted in 1873 by B.F. Ackerman, George Green, J.W. McCown, Jr., William McGregor, and C.R. Smith when they formed the short-lived Milam County Real Estate and Emigration Association.


Louis (1878).; Morrissey, Mental Territories, 129.


21 Dallas Morning News, 4 October, 1894, 14 November, 1894.


23 History of Texas Together with a Biographical History of Milam, Williamson, Bastrop, Travis, Lee, and Burleson Counties, 344, 824.


26 History of Texas together with a Biographical History of Milam, Williamson, Bastrop, Travis, Lee, and Burleson Counties, 824-826.


28 Dallas Morning News, 18 November, 1886.; Rockdale Messenger, 4 July, 1889, 18 July, 1889.; Dallas Morning News, 2 December, 1885, 22 November, 1887, 10 February, 1889, 7 January, 1893, 16 January, 1893.; Jute bagging was used to hold together cotton bales. At the time, the Alliance-preferred alternative was cotton bagging.

29 Rockdale Messenger, 22 December, 1898.; Dallas Morning News, 23 November, 1898, 26 November, 1898,2 December, 1898, 19 December, 1898, 23 December, 1898.

30 Brownell, Urban Ethos in the South, 65.