

Early Times in Lee County, Texas

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Generally on this training net we discuss technical issues directly affecting our ability to perform our volunteer task of providing emergency radio communications for served agencies in case of failure of normal modes of communication. This is a noble undertaking. Why do we do it?

One answer is because we love it here in Lee county. The land is beautiful, with vistas at every turn. The rural setting is appealing, especially compared to the urban areas most of us lived in prior to relocating here. The people are hardworking, honest and thrifty. Our mission of giving to help others fits right in with the character of Lee county.

Recognizing that one works hardest to protect that which we love, it behooves us to have at least a passing knowledge of the timeline, events and people which allowed our county to become the wonderful place to live that it is today.

The direct impetus for creating Lee county was a Texas tradition that local government should be accessible to its citizens in no more than a single days round trip on horseback. Thus, 10-20 miles from to the county seat was considered most desirable in much of central and east Texas. In the three decades leading up to the Civil War this wasn't a terrible problem because almost no one lived in what is now Lee county. The ancient El Camino Real (Hwy 21 stretching across Texas from Bexar to Nacogdoches) was basically the only way across the territory. The Yegua creeks, (East, West and Middle) along with Elm creek and Sandy creek to the north, dissected the land into smaller bits impassible during times of heavy rain. Yegua is Spanish for "wild mare" and was reason enough for settlers to look elsewhere.

The first sizable settlement within what became Lee county was called Evergreen. It was located on FM 1624 between Hwy 21 and Hwy 77. The only thing remaining of the site is the magnificent oak tree that was already notable in size when Abner Kuykendall was granted a league of land by Stephen F. Austin in 1831. The tree still stands and has a Texas Historical Marker that you will want to stop and read some time. Mr. Randal Heck, a wounded survivor of the Battle of San Jacinto, took title to a portion of the grant in 1856 and in September of that year the town of Evergreen was surveyed. It remained the largest town in the area for the next 15 years.

The majority of people living in the area were of German decent. Like their countrymen in New Braunfels and Fredricksburg they claimed allegiance to the Union and supported Governor Sam Houston in arguing against Texas secession from the United States. Hotter heads won out.

The coming of railroads in the early 1870's changed everything. In April of 1871 the town of Lexington was incorporated in what was Burleson county. Two years later in April of 1873 the town of Giddings was incorporated in what was then Washington county. The legislature created Lee county in 1874, named for Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Legislatures in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Mississippi and both the Carolinas also carved out new counties named for the General in a direct rebuke to Reconstruction policies after the war.

J.D. Giddings, attorney and developer from Brenham, headed up extension of the rails westerly towards Austin from the existing Burton terminus and the county seat was named after him. James Shaw, another veteran of San Jacinto, took title to land north and west of Evergreen and the community of Lexington was formed in the 1850's, though it was not incorporated and not of any real size until the arrival of the International and Great Northern Railroad. The town is reputedly named in honor of Lexington, Massachusetts. Speaking of place names, you may know that the tiny community of Fedor where I reside was named for Fedor Soder, a merchant from Paige. He built his residence and a store at Fedor, though nothing remains of either structure. It was in his store that the manager, a Mr. Kueffel, and his clerk were murdered, directly leading to the famous Christmas Day Massacre in Paige.

I have completely omitted an entire field of study that is the lawlessness occurring in Lee county from the 1870's until the early 1900's. The Knobbs near Blue were a notorious hideout for criminals of every sort. Bill Longley is the most famous local gunman and whole books are dedicated to his greatly exaggerated exploits. He was raised in Evergreen. The Indian depredations in the area are another topic for discussion some other time. In fact, during the same 1873 legislative session that formed Lee county, another act was passed forming a permanent troop of "minute men" to secure the frontier west of Austin from Indian troubles. That group became the Texas Rangers in the 1890's.

I close with a journal entry of a trip through Lee county as published in the New Orleans Times-Picayune on July 30, 1871