DIME BOX? MULDOON?

SOLVING THE MYSTERY BEHIND BLUEBONNET-AREA HISTORICAL AND UNUSUAL TOWN NAMES

By Ed Crowell

Just like people, towns have names that carry origin stories. Some town names honor a person, celebrate a landscape feature or commemorate an event. Others, however, involve surprising twists of fate. A state as big as Texas has plenty of odd, whimsical and intriguing place names. Here's a sampling of noteworthy town names declared more than a century ago in and near what is now Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's 14-county service area.

IN THE 1870S, settlers of an area north of Giddings included Joseph S. Brown, who opened a sawmill. A box at the mill was used for mail sent out under the name of Brown's Mill. Residents would put a dime in the box with their letters to cover the delivery cost.

DIME BOX

OLD DIME BOX

Trouble was that return mail sometimes was misdirected all the way to the similarly named Rio Grande Valley border town of Brownsville, 350 miles to the south.

The solution was to name the town something else — so why not Dime Box?

That worked fine until 1913 when the Southern Pacific Railroad built a line three miles away and much of the community moved closer to the railroad station. Those who stayed in the original settlement referred to their location as Old Dime Box.

Dime Box received national publicity in 1944 when the March of Dimes health-care campaign seized on the name for its annual fundraising kickoff and Life magazine photographed the town. And the 1982 best-selling book, Blue Highways, included a few pages on visiting Dime Box, where author William Least Heat Moon received an explanation as well as what he described as his best haircut ever.

Jay Godwin photo
ABOVE: A giant dime in a transparent box in front of Prosperity Bank commemorates the town of Dime Box. LEFT: In 1918, Noah Albers installed the town's water system.

LEXINGTON

WHEN A LEE COUNTY settlement got its first post office in 1848 it called itself Shaw after the local postmaster and school teacher James Shaw. Two years later the residents had a grander name in mind when they changed the name to honor the first battle of the American Revolution in 1775, which was in Massachusetts at Lexington (and hours later at nearby Concord).

New York Public Library Digital Collection
ABOVE: A stylized 1815 engraving depicts the Battle of Lexington in Massachusetts on April 19, 1775. LEFT: The R.M. Dickson store supplied groceries and clothing in Lexington, Texas, in the early 1900s.

Lexington Log Cabins and Heritage Society

THE NAMESAKE of this growing town (and county) is Philip Hendrik Nering Bogel, born in 1759 in Paramaribo, in what was then Dutch Guiana. His family moved to Holland when he was 5 and he grew up to become a tax collector and a supporter of the aristocracy.

He also may have been a thief. In 1793, he was accused of embezzlement and fled from Europe to Louisiana.

BASTROP

Bogel proceeded to call himself Felipe Enrique Neri, the Baron de Bastrop, and represented himself as a Dutch nobleman. He persuaded the Spanish governor of Louisiana to give him 12 leagues of land in northern Louisiana, promising to attract 500 settlers. He called his settlement Bastrop.

Following the United States' purchase of Louisiana in 1803, the Baron headed for Texas to start a colony there. First, he went to San Antonio, established a freight business and cozied up to officials.

Among his contacts was the Mexican governor. When Moses Austin, the father of Stephen F. Austin, sought a land grant to start the first Anglo-American colony in Texas, the Baron interceded with the governor on Austin's behalf.

Moses Austin died in 1821, just months after getting the land grant, but the Baron then supported Moses' son in his efforts to grow the colony. Three hundred families settled the huge grant area encompassing the lower Colorado and Brazos rivers.

Stephen F. Austin honored the Baron in 1827, the year the Dutch expatriate died, when he established his "Little Colony" for 100 families to the northwest of the original colony. He called the principal town site Bastrop.

The Mexican government promptly renamed it Mina for one of its heroes. But in 1837, the Republic of Texas incorporated the town and restored the name Bastrop.

Joe Stafford photo
ABOVE: A monument at the Bastrop County Courthouse in Bastrop honors the town's namesake, born Philip Hendrik Nering Bogel, who dubbed himself 'Baron de Bastrop.'

RIGHT: A quarry in Muldoon provided 'Muldoon Blue' sandstone used on buildings throughout the region. At one time the quarry, shown in this undated photo, was operated by convict labor.

Fayette County Heritage Museum and Archives

THE SMALL BURG in southwestern Fayette County began as part of an 1831 Mexican land grant to the Rev. Michael (Miguel) Muldoon, an Irish Catholic priest who ministered to Stephen F. Austin's Texas colony in 1831-32. Muldoon immigrated to Mexico a decade earlier and became the only priest appointed to serve non-Hispanic and largely Protestant Texans.

MULDOON

Many colonists simply accepted the Catholic faith because the Mexican government made it a requirement for securing their land. Those "converts" came to be called Muldoon Catholics.

Father Muldoon remained a confidant of Austin's even after Muldoon returned to Mexico. He visited Austin when the future "Father of Texas" was imprisoned in Mexico City for a year and a half and tried to get him released.

Muldoon never moved back to Texas after it won independence from Mexico in the Texas Revolution that ended in 1836, and his land was sold through Austin.

The town of Muldoon grew slowly after a railway reached it in 1888. Local quarries produced rock for the jetties built in Galveston. But the community peaked in the 1940s at about 200 people and today is home to half that many.

BELOW: This aerial view depicts Brenham some 30 years after its namesake, Dr. Richard Fox Brenham, died during an attempted escape from captivity in Mexico.

BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF
BRENHAM
WASHINGTON COUNTY TEXAS.
1873.

THE FIRST PERMANENT German settlement in Texas was on a league of land (4,428 acres) in Austin County granted to Johann Friedrich Ernst.

INDUSTRY

In 1829, Ernst, his wife and five children fled Oldenburg, Germany. Rightly or wrongly, he had been charged with embezzling money from the post office he operated there.

After running a boarding house in New York City for a couple of years, the family sailed to Texas and was granted the league of land from the Mexican government in 1831. Ernst built a house and called it Ernst's Place, welcoming immigrants and travelers on the main 90-mile road from Bastrop to San Felipe along the Brazos River.

One of the first crops Ernst planted was tobacco and he made cigars to be sold in Houston and Galveston.

Ernst began selling lots on his land in 1838 and a post office was established. The town name was declared Industry as a nod to the industrious residents and the developing cigar industry.

In a letter to friends in Germany, he extolled the virtues of Industry: "Each settler builds...a blockhouse. The more children the better for...field labor. Scarcely three months work a year. No need for money, free exercise of religion and the best markets for all products at the Mexican harbors."

The economy of the area moved on from tobacco to cotton crops to ranching. The town now claims fewer than 400 residents, but it proudly boasts of its place in Texas history where Germans first settled.

ABOVE: A detail from a stock certificate of the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railway Co., which arrived in what would become Somerville in 1880.

RAIL LINES BECAME the lifeblood of many new communities in the late 1800s, so it's no surprise that several towns wound up named for railroad executives.

SOMERVILLE

The Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railway Co. was chartered in 1873 to build a railroad from Galveston to Santa Fe, N.M. In 1880, one spur passed through the area that would become Somerville. Three years later a second spur ran there from Navasota. A surveyed town site, train depot and railroad yard soon followed. The town was named for the first president of the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe — Albert Somerville, a former mayor of Galveston.

WHEN IT WAS FOUNDED along a large bend of the Colorado River in 1837, La Grange could just as easily have been dubbed The Meadows.

That's because The Meadows is the English translation for La Grange, the name of an estate in France owned by the Marquis de Lafayette, a nobleman and military hero of both the French and American revolutions.

LA GRANGE

The Republic of Texas government thought so much of Lafayette that it named Fayette County in his honor and La Grange as the county seat three years after Lafayette's death.

Lafayette was revered because he left his comfortable estate in France to serve as a general in George Washington's army, helping to win several key battles of the Revolutionary War. He also persuaded the king of France to send more war aid to the Americans and later organized trade agreements between France and the United States.

Although Lafayette never visited Texas, the young republic's leaders greatly respected his heroism and willingness to lead fights against tyranny. Their own revolution against Mexican rule was not so different.

ABOVE: This 1791 portrait depicts Gilbert du Motier, the Marquis de Lafayette, as a lieutenant general. A decade earlier the Frenchman helped George Washington defeat the British.

Sarah Beal photo

ABOVE: Like some other towns in the region, Giddings' name is closely linked to the railroad — in this case, the Houston & Texas Central Railroad.

JABEZ D. GIDDINGS was one of four brothers from Pennsylvania who were Texas railroad pioneers and business leaders. The town of Giddings was founded in 1871 as a shipping point by the Houston & Texas Central Railroad (in which J. D. Giddings, a Brenham lawyer, was a stockholder).

GIDDINGS

Most historians say the town was named for him. Others, however, say his brother Dewitt C. Giddings, also a railroad investor and U.S. congressman from Brenham, was the namesake.

HAD THE NAMESAKE of this town proved successful on a Republic of Texas expedition into New Mexico in 1841 it is possible there would have been a Brenham, N.M. named in his honor.

BRENHAM

Dr. Richard Fox Brenham was born in Kentucky in 1810 and moved to Texas to join its war for independence as a surgeon. Later, as a doctor in Austin, he was befriended by Republic of Texas President Mirabeau B. Lamar. In 1841, Lamar chose Brenham as a civil commissioner for Lamar's attempt to persuade northern New Mexico to join — or at least trade with — the Republic of Texas.

Brenham was among 321 soldiers and diplomats called the "Santa Fe pioneers" who set out on an expedition to Santa Fe and other towns under the control of Mexico. They expected a friendly reception, but instead were met with a hostile governor and a bigger army. The Texans surrendered and were marched off to prison, where they spent several months before being released.

But that was not the last ill-fated expedition for Brenham. Soon he joined yet another expedition, this one a raiding incursion into Mexico at Ciudad Mier, across the Rio Grande between Laredo and McAllen.

The Mier Expedition resulted in the capture of Brenham and 175 other Texans. They were being taken to Mexico City when an escape attempt at Salado, Mexico, on Feb. 11, 1843, left Brenham dead.

The Washington County town of Hickory Grove decided the following year to rename itself Brenham to honor this hero of the Texas revolution and republic. He never got a chance to enjoy peacetime amid the town's bountiful trees and bluebonnets.

MCDADE

TO THE WEST OF Giddings, settlers of the community that became McDade wanted the railroad, too. So in 1869 they named their town for James W. McDade, a major stockholder in the Houston & Texas Central Railroad who lived in Brenham. He never lived in McDade, but two years after the town's founding the railroad reached there. ∎

McDade Historical Museum

ABOVE: Townspeople show off their finery in this 1907 photo of downtown McDade. The 2010 U.S. Census put the town's population at 685.