

EAST TEXAS HISTORICAL JOURNAL

Volume 49 Issue 1 Article 8 3-2011

The Crucible of Milam County: Railroad Construction and Community competition in Late Nineteenth-Century Texas Philip G. Pope

Benjamin and Joseph Loewenstein came to Rockdale from Prussia in 1873. shortly before the arrival of the I&G. upon arriving, they opened a dry goods tore 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 1&67 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'~: Daily Texan credits the Scarbrough store as having "started the downtown business district."²⁵ In August of 1875, C. H. Coffield arrival 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 74 * VOLUME XLIX NUMBER I 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 i 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."