

Milano's roots start with the railroad
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MILANO - Milano is one of the many steel rail cities platted and named by railroads in the 19th century. But what distinguishes this Milam County town from its trackside kinfolk is that in a matter of seven years, this town experienced two railroad births and three names.

Originally christened Milam City when the International & Great Northern Railroad arrived in 1873, the hand-written application for a post office was either poorly scribbled or misread, Basil McGregor's 1965 *The History of Milano* stated. When the approved documents arrived, the post office was approved for the town of Milano. Aside from two monikers on records, the second township platted by the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railway also was named briefly Temple in honor of Bernard Moore Temple, GC&SF chief construction engineer before his surname was bestowed upon a new city near Belton in Bell County.

No one really takes seriously the tale that Milano was named by a pioneer family. According to a widely circulated story, the settlers stopped their wagon at the site that eventually became Milano. The husband asked the wife if she wanted to settle here. Looking around at the post oaks, deep sand, red clay outcroppings and brush, she declared "My, land. No." Hence, the name Milano. The Handbook of Texas Online stated that one story suggests that the town was named for Milano, Italy, because of the similarity of the climates. It also offers that the postal authorities declined to call the town Milam City because a Milam already existed in Texas, the Handbook stated.

The original railroad town was platted on the south side of the railroad tracks about 1 mile west of the current location when the I&GN laid track across the Brazos River 30 miles from Hearne to Rockdale. There were stories, however, that an unnamed settlement existed in this area beside a spring-fed watering hole on a trail used by wagon traffic and cattle drives that cut through southwest to Caldwell before the railroad was surveyed, McGregor's book stated.

In October 1874, John G. Lowry was appointed as Milano's first postmaster. The 12-block town also boasted a grocery store, saloon, hotel, school, railroad section house and homes for railroad employees. The next month, a desperado named Stark Reynolds took over Milano and held the town at bay for a few days. He shot an elderly, crippled man, although not fatally. Even though news of the shooting was widely circulated, none of the law officers in Milam County were anxious to arrest him. He was eventually captured by Texas Rangers in Kimble County. In the spring of 1880, J.A. McGee's store was broken into, the safe forced open and \$1,800 stolen, and the building was set on fire. Meanwhile, a new town called Milano Junction was in the works, 1 mile east of the original township. It became a ghost town and later burned to the ground.

The Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railway announced that starting in September, it would begin freight service at Milano Junction. Passenger service for GC&SF's Texas Midland Route began Dec. 12, 1880.

Dr. Weldon Green Cannon, history professor emeritus at Temple College, who tracked the arrival of Texas trains in his dissertation titled "Bernard Moore Temple: Binding Texas with Steel Rails," said GC&SF owners routinely named towns along the route from Galveston after stockholders, businessmen, directors and officers.

No records have been found to explain why Temple was privileged to have his name bestowed upon a new town, yet railroad records show that the name "Temple" was given to a small town at the junction of GC&SF and I&GN, Cannon said. For reasons unclear, the Milam County town called Milam City and Milano, had been named Temple on GC&SF paperwork.

A local account contends that Temple offered to build a roundhouse in Milano, but some residents objected. Temple became angry, promptly withdrawing his offer that would have brought growth and prosperity to Milano. Temple then asked railroad executives to call the town Milano Junction. His name was given to the new city in Bell County.

The railroad junction of the GC&SF and I&GN did not have an interlocking signal system, so an iron gate was used at the crossroads to stop trains from opposite companies from colliding at the intersection, McGregor wrote. Milano Junction

grew, with businesses and families moving from Old Milano. Hotels, stores, lodges, churches, restaurants, blacksmith and barber shops, and saloons opened.

By the 1880s Milano had blossomed into a commercial center with 500 residents. It served as a shipping point for cotton and hides produced in the area, the Handbook of Texas Online stated. Truck farming became an important industry for Milano in the 1920s, with tomatoes, watermelon and cantaloupes as the principal crops. Milano reached a peak in 1939, when 920 residents were counted. The population has stayed close to 400 residents since then. In addition to being a railroad junction, Milano sits at the crossroads of U.S. Highway 190, U.S. Highway 79, and Texas 36.

Milano was placed in the international spotlight on Nov. 5, 1960, when country music singer Johnny Horton was killed by a drunken driver at the overpass on Texas 36.

Though many small Texas towns established by the railroads have become ghost towns, Milano has survived.

"My understanding is that Milano survived because it is located at the junction of two railroads," attorney and Milano native James Walker, 59, said. "That location might not be terribly significant today, but it once was extremely significant. The town was a center of commerce. Additionally, the town is at the crossroad of two highways. I am sure that the highways also facilitated commerce. Milano once had a bank, a boarding house and several cafes."

Not all businesses have been welcome additions to Milano's economy. The Milano First Baptist Church put a rowdy honky-tonk out of business in 1931 by buying the structure and reinventing it as a tabernacle for fellowships and revivals, Walker said.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Milano boasted four grocers, a general store, and about a half dozen gas stations. Sloan's Cafe in downtown Milano served such hard to find country delicacies as black-eyed peas and cracklin' cornbread, and Hartley's Station not only sold oil, gasoline and kerosene, but was the town's bus station, served food, and offered the most generously packed, hand-dipped ice cream cones in town. Walker's grandfather Thornton Walker, his dad, Luther Walker, and brother Steve Walker operated Walker's Station from 1927 to the 1990s, selling gasoline, and oil products as well as groceries and livestock feed, and in the its last years of operation, barbecue and all the trimmings. Another Milano mainstay E.C. Westbrook & Son general merchandise still stocked buggy whips in its massive inventory when it closed in 1981, citing supermarket competition from area towns. The store originated in 1880 as J.D. Peeples' Store that was handed from father to son, and sold to E.C. Westbrook Sr. in 1954, McGregor's book stated.

The Alamo-styled Milano School is by design unique to this small town, Joy Graham of Rockdale said. Mrs. Graham, former Milam County Historical Commission chairman, who operates a Little Bit of History research facility in Rockdale, believes the town's ability to stay alive while other train-made villages of its kind faded away is a tribute to the people who settled in the area.

Milano residents are "unselfish, persevering, God fearing, considerate of others, honest people," Mrs. Graham said.

Today, freight trains roar through town, and caravans of motor vehicles drive through enroute to other parts of the state. Milano incorporated as a city in the 1970s calling itself Milano, dropping the Junction. Today, there is still a railroad and highway junction, in addition to a U.S. Post Office, public school system, livestock sale barn, convenience store, truck stop, barbecue restaurant, flea market and several other businesses operating in Milano selling farm and ranch supplies and fencing. The town is headquarters of the Post Oak Savannah Groundwater District serving Milam and Burleson counties.

In a venture to preserve a piece of Milano history, the city council is striving to restore the First State Bank building donated by Marjorie Bailey. Now called the Bailey Bank Building that once housed a store and U.S. Post Office.

"As a visitor to the small town, it might appear to be a 'sleepy little town'" but the "quality of life" is not as complicated as it is in large cities", Mrs. Graham said.