



Spending the Night in a “Cowtown” Icon: The Hotel Texas

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

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(May 8, 2022) One of Texas’ most unique—and historic—cities is Fort Worth, a thoroughly modern urban place that still retains much of the “western flair” of its famous nickname of “Cowtown” and its related moniker of “where the West begins.” Fort Worth’s beginnings are certainly attributable to its western heritage, especially the stockyards, a key point on nineteenth century cattle drives, and the nexus for Texas’ meat packing industry. But Fort Worth has always been more than a “cowtown;” it has long been a key financial center of the state, and a city that takes its “business” very seriously. Any place that must conduct business also needs a place for those who conduct business to rest their head, and for years the preferred hostelry for those coming to Fort Worth to operate commercial concerns was the iconic Hotel Texas, a place whose heritage often paralleled the city’s own.

In the years directly before and during World War I Fort Worth began to diversify much beyond its former reliance on the cattle and packing industries. It became a location for insurance, banking, and other financial institutions, developments which led directly to a keen rivalry with its neighbor of Dallas. Amon Carter, perhaps the city’s greatest booster, famously packed a lunch every time he had to travel to Dallas so he would not have to spend any money there. When World War I ended in 1917, Fort Worth was truly a diversified and commercial place.

If business was now the most important factor in Fort Worth's destiny, business travelers needed a first class place to sleep. In order to solve that problem many of Fort Worth's top leaders put together a consortium to build just such a place. The prestigious architectural firm Sanguinet & Staats designed an iconic building that when it was finished became a focal point of the city's downtown. Named the Hotel Texas, the lobby was grandly designed and appointed, and it contained a state-of-the-art elevator system to transport visitors to its the thirteen floors. The movers and shakers of the city dined in its posh restaurant, patrons who would consummate an untold number of lucrative "deals" in the midst of luxury and sophistication.

The Hotel Texas' location at Main and 8th led to a building boom in the area. Almost directly across the street, in 1920, Sanguinet & Staats designed and helped to build the Farmers and Mechanics National Bank, which at 24 stories was the tallest building in Texas for a few years after its opening (a fact that Fort Worth made sure Dallas knew). Soon developers built other financial and related buildings, and the area around the Hotel Texas became the center of Fort Worth's commercial activity. The hotel added an opulent ballroom in 1961 as the hotel became as much of a social center as a business nexus. It was now a "grand dame" of the downtown district, but it still had another significant act to play in the city's and region's history.

John F. Kennedy decided to make a campaign trip to Texas in November 1963, primarily to try to mend some political fences and to try to heal a serious factional split in the state's Democratic Party. His itinerary took him to Fort Worth on the evening of November 21, and he and the First Lady checked into the Presidential Suite of the Hotel Texas for what would be the last night of his young life. The next morning the President rose and conducted a morning press conference in front of the hotel and then, along with Vice President Johnson, left to board Air Force One for the short trip to Dallas where he had a scheduled motorcade through that city's downtown. Of course, he didn't finish that ride as Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated him from his perch in the Texas School Book Depository.

Although probably not related to its role in altering American history, after the Kennedy assassination the Hotel Texas went into a period of decline. It did receive a needed facelift when the Tarrant County Convention Center was built adjacent to the Hotel in 1968, and when Sheraton took over the hotel at approximately the same time it added an annex with additional rooms across the street. Sheraton sold the hotel to the Hyatt Corporation in 1979, who closed it for extensive renovations. When it reopened as a Hyatt Regency in 1981, not much was left of the original interior. Hyatt operated it until the 1990s, when it became a Radisson. Hilton Hotels took over the operation in 2006, and they operate it today.

So, the next time you are in Fort Worth, go and see their revitalized downtown, perhaps catch a production at the Bass Performance Hall, and book a room at the former Hotel Texas. You can then "sleep with some history" in one of Texas' great cities.