



SECTION 2: HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY

The funding for this document was limited and as a result budget money was directed primarily toward the analysis and planning of Land Use, Transportation, Parks and Recreation, and Civic Image. However, in order to raise awareness of the community's historical roots a very limited history section focusing on the early 20th century has been included as a non-funded component of this study.

Rather than presenting a traditional community history section, the history of Whitehouse will be recounted entirely as it was experienced by residents of the City. Four individuals were identified by the Plan Steering Committee as possessing a wide range of perspectives and experiences relating to life in Whitehouse throughout the 20th century. Each of these residents has lived within Whitehouse for the majority of their adult life including Nancy Shahan Coats, Joe Pat Hagan, Acker Hanks, and Richard Waller. In association with this planning program oral history interviews were conducted with each of these individuals in order to provide the basis for this historical account.

Many other residents within the community have played pivotal roles in Whitehouse's history. However, limited funds and time constraints dictate that this portion of the study will have a narrow focus. As this history will be far from comprehensive, more information on Whitehouse history can be found in Shirley Smith's numerous books. Acker Hanks also wrote a weekly series of articles about growing up in Whitehouse which was published in the Tri-County Leader.

The Farm and Commerce

The 20th century dawned in Whitehouse in a radically different manner as it closed. Today the average citizen commutes to work in Tyler, is dropped off or drives to school, and is involved in a wide variety of activities beyond

***"[Socially things revolved around] the churches and schools. Usually once a year there was a huge spring dance at about the closing of tomato packing time."
- Acker Hanks***



work, school, and church. A sentiment shared by each interviewee was that early Whitehouse was dominated by school, church, and life on a farm.

"There were as many as five tomato sheds here in Whitehouse and that gave people an opportunity to work [away from the fields]."
- Acker Hanks

The dominance of agricultural production in the economy allowed even a small community such as Whitehouse to thrive and remain self-sufficient in a relatively isolated manner. Farming dominated most people's time; however, many residents found gainful employment in ancillary agricultural activities. Processing tomatoes at the various packing sheds was one such employment opportunity. Because a great deal of work needed to be completed within a short time a wide range of individuals worked at the sheds.

The dominance of agricultural production in the economy allowed even a small community such as Whitehouse to thrive and remain self-sufficient in a relatively isolated manner. Farming dominated most people's time; however, many residents found

"The tomato sheds were all along the railroad track starting in front of the old mercantile. People would stay very late to get all the work done. The freight trains would come and bring boxcars. Sometimes we'd be at the store until two o'clock in the morning."
- Nancy Shahan Coats

"My mother was a notary and the lease hounds would come into town and look Mama up. [Some of the people couldn't read and they] would say 'Now if Miss Nell says this document is okay then we'll sign it.'"
- Nancy Shahan Coats

Many families not only farmed but also supplemented their incomes through other side jobs and specialties. One result of Whitehouse's relative isolation was a need for residents to possess a wide range of skills and abilities. Nell Shahan not only ran Shahan's Store with her husband but also acted in various other capacities including operating the Fire Department's alarm and working as a notary.

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Shahan's Store with her husband but also acted in various other capacities including operating the Fire Department's alarm and working as a notary.

While farmers drew their primary income from the production of crops or ranching, the time period between planting and the harvest of tomato and cotton crops also allowed farmers the opportunity to take on other projects. These activities offered a hedge against crop failures in bad years and kept children and farm hands busy during otherwise slow times.

"We had odd jobs during the middle of the summer. Once we had laid the crops we had [time to do other things my father] thought of to do. He bid on all kinds of jobs like putting in the sewer system at the school. We spent six weeks of hard hand digging [on that job]."
- Joe Pat Hagan



Farmers and ranchers contributed greatly to many of the public works projects still in use within the community today. Building projects ranging from sewer systems and structures on school campuses to early incarnations of present day highways were constructed as side jobs of people engaged in agriculture during the majority of the year.

"The County hired [an engineer] to build [what would become 110] from Tyler to Whitehouse. He came down here when I wasn't even a teenager and hired wagons to haul gravel. He paid us five dollars a day for a team and driver to haul the gravel... and that is how it was built."

- Acker Hanks

"There was a huge peach market in the area but when they begin to disappear tomato crops took their place."

- Acker Hanks

A variety of crops have been grown commercially within Whitehouse. Early in the 20th century peach production was dominant among local farmers. In subsequent years that was replaced with tomatoes and to a slightly lesser extent cotton. Green tomatoes were grown and packed

locally then shipped to distribution plants throughout the country by rail. Rose production was also under way early in the community's history. However, successful cultivation and growth of this particular crop required a significant amount of expertise and a high initial investment. As

"In the early days tomatoes were king... that was it... everybody farmed. During tomato season a lot of people... that's the only job they had. When they worked at the tomato sheds they could make enough money to get all the food they needed until the next year."

- Joe Pat Hagan

"Rose growing was prominent here in town. C. L. Nix, [one of our many successful] basketball coaches is the biggest rose grower in the country. The Freeman brothers and Alan Bostic grew a lot of roses too. For a few people it was [their biggest crop]."

- Richard Waller

a result, most residents made their primary living by growing tomatoes. Following World War II ranching, rose cultivation, and hay farming became dominant over all other crops. Though diminished in scale, these three agricultural activities remain in production to this day. C. L. Nix is one of

many successful farmers engaged in rose production in and around Whitehouse. These producers sell rosebushes nationally in addition to rose petals and stemmed roses throughout the region. Ranching tradition has also continued and remains common throughout Whitehouse and on surrounding land within East Texas.



"When I was growing up people were very involved in agriculture. We grew green tomatoes and were bailing cotton... There were about five tomato sheds."
- Richard Waller

During much of the early part of the 20th century raw crops were grown, harvested, and processed within Whitehouse. Initially tomatoes dominated this trade and as many as five tomato sheds were built within the community to support the many individual farmers. The tomatoes were cleaned, sorted, and packed at these facilities. Residents of Whitehouse of all ages, educational attainment, race, and gender frequently worked at the sheds during harvest, and could earn very good wages in the process. These wages were often all a family needed for the year.

"[My father] would start in the Rio Grande Valley and work his way up here by tomato harvest time. We and the Pettigrews, all the rest of the blacks and whites, we didn't know the difference at the time, were all harvesting. [We would] take them in the fields and haul them up to the shed."
- Joe Pat Hagan

"During the tomato season I spent a lot of time at the tomato shed. I thought if I could just get old enough so that I could pack tomatoes... I watched Agnes Horton, a native of Whitehouse, as she packed tomatoes very very fast. Another person I liked to watch was Jennie Sue Hagan."
- Nancy Shahan Coats

Once packed, Whitehouse tomatoes were shipped by rail throughout the country. For logistical reasons, most of the tomato sheds were located south of Main Street along the railroad.

Cotton was also grown, harvested, and processed in the community. Several cotton gins were established by local farmers and merchants to handle the crops. Rail transportation was extremely important for this particular crop and further established the

"Daddy, Alvin Shahan, and Mama, Nell Shahan, bought the cotton gin, probably in the early 50s. Cotton was good during that time so I spent a lot of time at the cotton gin. Farmers would bring their samples up to the store and my daddy would take the sample and feel the staple and know how much it was worth. After he'd bought their cotton it would be shipped out by rail to Tyler and then on somewhere else."
- Nancy Shahan Coats

relationship between Whitehouse and the rail line during its early history. The commerce making up Whitehouse's early economy did not end with the sale of crops. Farmers, and the workers who supported them, created customers and patrons for many businesses and churches.



"When I was growing up Whitehouse Mercantile and Shahan's Store were the two principal stores. There weren't any stores on Highway 110 except on the corner. A man named Harmon ran a service station [where the welcome sign stands today]."
- Richard Waller

The two most well-known and successful retail establishments within Whitehouse during the early to mid-20th-century, were the Whitehouse Mercantile Company (Image 2.1) and Shahan's Store. These stores served many of the residents' requirements with products and services

ranging from daily purchases to once-in-a-lifetime needs.

Both stores specialized in certain goods; however, each carried a wide variety of wares. Purchases including clothing, food, dry goods, and toys were common within both establishments throughout this period in history. The community's first bank, farm implements, and even caskets were on hand if needed at the



Image 2.1: The Whitehouse Mercantile Company was one of two prominent retail establishments within Downtown Whitehouse during the early to mid-20th-century. Image source: Jackson Photography, <http://www.jbjphoto.com/>

Mercantile. Shahan's Store also offered gift wrapping and served ice cream,

"In the store my daddy always said you had to have a lot of traffic to do any good. So Mama and Daddy had ice cream. I guess they had about ten or twelve choices of flavor, and that was a big deal. They would give two dips for a nickel. And the people loved the ice cream. So that was a drawing card for the store."
- Nancy Shahan Coats

lunch meat, and cheese which was popular with both children and people working in town. Since refrigeration had yet to become widely available, dairy products or food items which needed to remain cold were often bought on the same day as they were consumed. Ice cream and other similar products were popular treats capable of encouraging frequent visits.



***"You could go in [the Mercantile] and buy anything from caskets on up. [Farm equipment, hardware], anything you wanted they had it."
- Acker Hanks***

The Postal Office was also located in each of these stores at one time or another during the City's early history. Residents had few if any reasons to travel beyond Whitehouse for retail needs because of these and other establishments within the community.

The local merchants also provided other services not generally associated with modern retail stores. Although Whitehouse was able to support several banks throughout its history, many farmers and residents relied upon credit issued by local retailers in order to survive bad harvest years or to expand their agricultural operations. Alvin

***"[Alvin Shahan who ran Shahan's Store] probably financed 90% of the farmers here because he sold on credit. He would sell them fertilizer and seed and you could pay him when you harvested. Some people could pay him and some couldn't. That was the store you went to where you could buy your groceries all on credit if you wanted to. There's no telling how many dollars he lost. But if you needed he would help you. I don't think he ever said no to anyone, he helped everybody."
- Joe Pat Hagan***

Shahan, one local merchant, is fondly remembered for his generosity and willingness to help his fellow community members.

***"If anyone needed their groceries delivered my daddy would deliver their groceries and I'd go along with him. We would sometimes stop and pick up the neighborhood kids, especially Kenneth Dickson. [I remember] seeing Daddy load sacks of feed on the fenders."
- Nancy Shahan Coats***

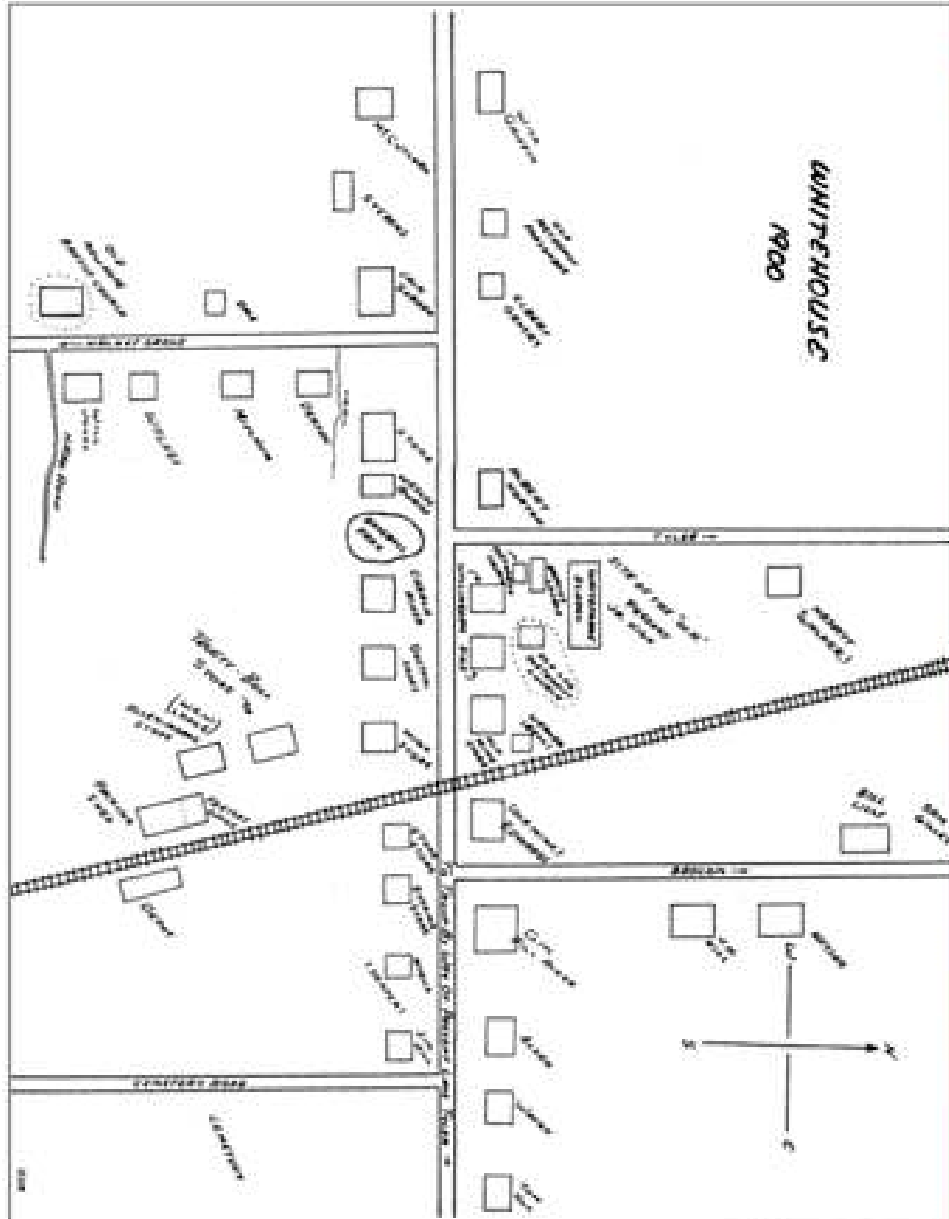
The proprietors of stores within the community offered other services as well. Customers at Shahan's Store could have their purchases delivered if they did not have a car or lived too far out of town.

During these days it was uncommon for families to have even a single automobile. As a result, many of the early vehicles in Whitehouse served multiple needs and were used for many purposes such as delivery vehicles. Some of the stores also functioned as gathering places for small groups of people. These impromptu gatherings were particularly common among the children as well as adults who had retired from farming.

"In Shahan's Store we had a wood-burning potbelly stove. At night people would come to the store and visit. The kids would play checkers and sit around the stove. It was neat people would come at night."



Note: this page folds out on printed copies, please download Map 2.1 for a full resolution version of this map



Map 2.1: Historic Town Site
Map of Whitehouse
Circa 1900



THE CITY OF

Note: this page folds out on printed copies, please download Map 2.2 for a full resolution version of this map

WHITEHOUSE

WHITEHOUSE

THE CITY OF

WHITEHOUSE

Image 2.2:
Commerce in Early
Whitehouse

1890s - The Whitehouse, Texas, Courthouse. The building was constructed in 1890 and is a fine example of late 19th-century architecture.

1911 - Parade float during the Western Park Celebrations. The float is decorated with banners and flags.

1910s - Street scene in Whitehouse, Texas, showing early 20th-century commerce and architecture.

1920s - Group of people, including children, sitting on a bench. This image likely depicts a community event or school gathering.

1930s - Group of people, including children, sitting on a bench. This image likely depicts a community event or school gathering.

1940s - Group of people, including children, sitting on a bench. This image likely depicts a community event or school gathering.

THE CITY OF

WHITEHOUSE

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Prepared for the City of Whitehouse, Texas by Butler Planning Services
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School and City Incorporation

School and education were always considered important in Whitehouse. The school system was growing and prospering long before the City was incorporated. Many influential superintendents, principals, and teachers

"In 1955 I graduated from high school. There were 14 in our class. We had some excellent teachers along the way. Miss Mozelle Brown was my first grade teacher. We read Dick and Jane and she would let different boys and girls go around and read to the older ones."
- Nancy Shahan Coats

worked to make the education received at Whitehouse schools worthwhile and

"Whitehouse has always been noted for having a good school system. When we integrated we never had problems like in other parts of the country. People learn to get along."
- Richard Waller

valuable. Several of the contributors to this historic account were also involved in teaching and school administration. The school system has been a strength and draw for the community's population growth throughout its history.

Not only was attaining a high school education important, but most students went on to attend and succeed at college. Tyler Junior College and various trade schools within Tyler were popular choices. Many students who graduated from Whitehouse High School also went

"[My dad] knew what time school was over and how long it took you to get from school to home, change your clothes, get on your bicycle, and ride it down here. And if you were a little bit late he'd say 'I guess you must be doing something else today because you're late.'"
- Joe Pat Hagan

to colleges which would later become major State Universities such as Texas A&M University and Sam Houston State University. It was not unusual for both

"I graduated with 13 people and knew them all. That's when superintendents taught some classes. And the percentage of kids that went off and made it in college was probably as good as it is today. Out of my class everyone except two or three went to college."
- Joe Pat Hagan

men and women to attend college. Many women received degrees or certificates from colleges and trade schools in teaching or business. It was also common for public school students who attended school in Whitehouse to have jobs or work part-time in farming.



***"In about 1930 there were five school districts around here. Including Bunkum, Walnut Grove, Mount Zion, Copeland, and Stone Fort (where Pleasant Hill church is today). Those were all independent districts. Whitehouse went to them with the idea of consolidating into one district."
- Acker Hanks***

A variety of factors contributed to the eventual success of the Whitehouse Independent School District (WISD). The first of these was the 1930s consolidation of six school districts which make up WISD's present-day District boundary. By consolidating these rural districts with Whitehouse, the District

was able to draw students from a large area within Smith County. This consolidation also played a critical role in the eventual building of the District's tax base when a General Electric plant (today the facility is known as Trane) was built south of Tyler. This occurred in the early 1950s, shortly after development of Lake Tyler began in the late 1940s.

***"General Electric put the plant [that later became Trane] in which Whitehouse schools got tax revenue from... prior to that the School District had always struggled [for money]."
- Joe Pat Hagan***

***"The year I graduated from high school I was the basketball team's manager. That was all we had, but the teams were outstanding."
- Nancy Shahan Coats***

Whitehouse was known throughout the State for having a strong basketball team. Shortly after consolidation, the District built a basketball gymnasium which was the first such facility constructed in Smith County. Other schools in the area were still playing on open outdoor courts.

Coaches such as William Ward and C.L. Nix were a few notable individuals in Whitehouse basketball history.

Both girls and boys teams were successful in competition but the boys in particular were champions of several State tournaments. Many students from families still strongly represented in Whitehouse were successful basketball players at both high school and collegiate levels.

***"We had a powerful basketball team, no football, they didn't start football until [more recently], but they played a lot of basketball. My wife was a basketball player. She once scored 58 points in a [high school] game."
- Richard Waller***



Though his tenure was somewhat brief William Ward coached his team to victories not only in East Texas, but also at a tri-state tournament in Shreveport, Louisiana where the Whitehouse basketball team won the championship. Many of

"The following of the Wildcats started in the 1930s when they built the consolidated school [and] the first gymnasium in Smith County. They hired a fellow named William Ward to be the basketball coach. The first team that Mr. Ward coached went to Louisiana and played in a tri-state championship and won. He stayed here for a few years, and then went to Tyler Junior College. He took his whole team with him, and they won some State championships. In a 10-year period from 1930 to 1940 there were 22 boys here that went on to play college ball, and two of them went on to play professional basketball. Of course professional basketball then wasn't like it is now... you had to hold down two jobs to afford to play."
- Acker Hanks

his players eventually followed him to Tyler Junior College where he also coached

"James Shahan was an outstanding basketball player [and] played for TJC back in the 30s. He left and got a scholarship to play for Baylor University and graduated there."
- Nancy Shahan Coats

teams to State colligate championships. Many players used their skills at basketball to attend other colleges and universities such as Baylor University and Sam Houston State University. Several players from Whitehouse also played professional basketball and baseball.

The School District also played a critical role in the establishment of several public utilities, as well as the eventual incorporation of the City itself. Superintendent Lawrence Smith was one of the particularly influential school administrators in this regard. In order to lower heating costs for school buildings within the District

"[The School District] started looking at the sewer and water [situation]. To drill a well they needed to have an incorporated City. So [Lawrence Smith] was instrumental in getting the City incorporated. He was school superintendent and he was doing all these things to try to help the schools; but, at the same time he was kind of getting the City running. So he probably contributed more than anyone that I know of in getting the City incorporated and getting that first water well built."
- Joe Pat Hagan

he approached Lone Star Gas about establishing service for the community. Until this time no public utilities had been constructed within Whitehouse. Even school buildings used wood-burning stoves for heat.



***"There was a gentleman by the name of Lawrence Smith who was superintendent. He worked to get the City incorporated so that the schools could get services."
- Acker Hanks***

The gas company made a deal with Superintendent Smith in which they would construct lines to the school if he could sign up 20 additional customers, which he did. In order to secure municipal water and sewer services, Superintendent Smith also played a pivotal role in the initial efforts to incorporate Whitehouse as a city.

Several other superintendents, administrators, and City leaders were notably influential in the early days of City government. The City needed to construct several major public works projects including water acquisition, treatment, and distribution as well as a system for treating and transporting sewage.

***"The first mayor we had, Mr. Langford, had a great impact. I can look back on the problems he had to start with [and realize that they] were so much greater than the rest of us had [to manage as mayors]. Just getting started was hard for him [with incorporation]."
- Acker Hanks***

***"[For a long time] contractors could come in and just build a street and then walk off and leave it. Then the City had to pick them up which threw the City into debt. They are just now beginning to get the streets up to par."
- Acker Hanks***

Significant settlement of the original Whitehouse town site began in the mid-1800s, with some initial exploration and development occurring through the first Stephen F. Austin land-grant immigration period. Official incorporation did not occur until the mid-1900s. Because development and activity within the area, which would later become Whitehouse, predated incorporated government by almost 100 years, the municipal government has been in a state of catch up for most of its official history. Mayor Langford and Superintendent Harold Higgins were credited as being pivotal in the continuing development of both the City and School District. Even into the late 1960s school remained somewhat different than it is today. Until this time all school buildings were still grouped together on the site currently occupied by Brown Elementary.

***"When I started teaching in 1957 the school built where Brown is today was still the only one."
- Acker Hanks***



Students of all ages were allowed to eat lunch off-campus until the early 1970s. Waller's Grocery, which later became Betty Shaw's Café, was popular with students both during lunch and after school (Image 2.3). From the 1950s on many stores and restaurants became weekend hangouts for local kids after work and farm chores had been completed.

"[My first store] was a hangout for younger guys because I had the short order counter, a jukebox, and a pinball machine. I also had the school lunch hamburger business at noon. They didn't have a quarantine to stay on campus so we'd make lunches. We had probably 40 or 50 kids during the noon hour."

- Richard Waller



Image 2.3: The short order counter at Waller's grocery was a popular hangout for kids during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Students also frequented the restaurant at the Lake Tyler Marina after hours to play the jukebox and dance. During these years when cars were becoming more affordable kids also went to the movies in Troup and later in Tyler. Though money for gas was always a consideration, in later years students would visit the outdoor dance floor at Tyler State

Park for the Saturday night dances. These events were very popular during this period of time in Whitehouse.

Modern Conveniences

Electricity was routed into Whitehouse during the late 1930s, which brought the ability to light homes and store food in electric refrigerators. Until that time, most people either cooked food fresh from their own fields or bought it that day at one of the

"Electric lights came here in the early 1930s. I don't know whether they went west or not, but they came through town."

- Acker Hanks

"[When I was younger we] already had electricity. You had a cord hanging out of the ceiling with a pull chain."

- Joe Pat Hagan

grocery stores. Prior to electrification, the only form of refrigeration common within the community was to lower food in a closed bucket down into a private water well.



"My mother and father and grandmother and grandfather had the first phones that I knew anything about. There was no central switchboard... they could just talk to each other. Finally, they got a phone system where everyone was hooked into it."
- Acker Hanks

Telephones also made their way into Whitehouse in the early 20th century. The first lines were strung between private homes and mostly linked families together or houses in town to the home owner's farms. Eventually a central system was established allowing for switchboard operated telephone calls beyond the community. Even after the system was established many farms located beyond the original town site did not immediately get service until the late 1950s. Local stores and churches often acted as intermediaries between the residents of these homes and the outside world. It was a regular occurrence for merchants who did have telephones such as Alvin Shahan to run messages out to

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"I'd been told that during World War II when men were being discharged not many people had a telephone in Whitehouse or a radio. Mother and Daddy had a telephone and a radio at the store and people would come up to listen. There was also a gentleman who was discharged from the Army whose parents lived out in the country. So he called the store and my daddy got in the car and went out and told his parents that he'd been discharged and needed to be picked up."

- Nancy Shahan Coats

rural farms and homes. This unofficial message service was particularly important and appreciated during and following World War II, when many families longed for news about their loved ones overseas.

"[Back in the early 1930s] we had two freight trains and four passenger trains a day. There was a huge water tower on the side track that would hold several thousand gallons of water. Late in the afternoon, the train going north would pull onto the side track and fill the steam engines in about two minutes. [The railroad hired a laborer] to refill the tank every morning. It took him all day [to finish and had to be done] seven days a week... cold, rain, or shine."
- Acker Hanks

Water service, the original motivating factor behind City incorporation in Whitehouse has always been on the minds of residents and was a sign of modernization in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Early in the 20th century the only running water in Whitehouse was in the homes of residents who built private storage tanks using gasoline powered pumps. The railroad also provided water for trains from their elevated storage

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tank. Filling this tank required an entire day of lifting water in buckets by a laborer. In less than two minutes the tank was emptied into a waiting locomotive and the process would begin again. In more recent history, City officials have also had to get creative to address water infrastructure problems.

For much of its early history as an incorporated City, Whitehouse only had one water well which supplied water to the entire population. At one point, this well broke suction and the Public Works staff was forced to improvise a solution. Fortunately, the City had recently constructed

"[During some of my time as water superintendent] we only had one well. It broke suction one summer afternoon and the City was out of water. We had just drilled a second well, but we didn't have it connected to the system yet. We had one City fire truck which we carried down to where we had drilled the well and ran a fire hose back up the highway to the closest fire hydrant. We pumped water with the fire truck and refilled [the main elevated] storage tank next to Austin Bank. The truck ran for about a week. Men would kill it and check the oil and then put it back to pumping water. So one of the good jobs that our first fire truck did was supply water to the people of Whitehouse."
- Richard Waller

a second well which had not yet been tied into the water system. In coordination with the Fire Department, City staff placed a fire truck next to the brand new well and ran hoses from it to the nearest fire hydrant on State Highway 110. This improvised solution allowed completion of the primary water delivery system and resulted in minimal service interruption for the citizens of Whitehouse.

The Depression, the WPA, and World War II

"The only thing I ever heard about the Depression here was the people had money but they couldn't buy anything. I always thought that nobody had any money but my mom always said we had money... there just wasn't anything to buy with the rationing. Of course during that time farmers made out better than average because they were delivering food [and were exempt from some rationing as a result]."
- Joe Pat Hagan

Many worldwide events failed to significantly alter life in Whitehouse prior to the Great Depression and World War II. Two of the causes of the Depression were drought and crop failures. These factors did not strongly impact farming in Whitehouse and as a result many residents did not feel the influence of the Depression as

strongly as those in other parts of the country. On the contrary, because so



many residents in Whitehouse were actively involved in food production even rationing on products such as rubber was relaxed during the war.

One long-lasting impact of this era was the Works Progress Administration (WPA) construction in and around the community. Local WPA workers constructed several public works projects on the school campus. The most recognizable of these construction

"I was going to elementary school during the WPA days. I saw the men making those rock walls. They just hauled all the rocks in and used 'em. A lot of the fellows who worked on it became bricklayers after that was over. They learned the trade through the WPA."

- Richard Waller

projects are the rock wall and rock gymnasium on the Brown Elementary School

"The WPA rock wall was started in 1934 or 1935 and wasn't finished until 1940. The wall is not all that was built. They built several other buildings including the rock gymnasium.

People learned to lay these rocks and we had a number of people in the Whitehouse area that became good bricklayers."

- Acker Hanks

campus. Workers also built a rock cottage which was used for home economics classes as well as other ancillary structures around the campus. The WPA programs not only gave Whitehouse residents who were not farming a paycheck but also allowed many people to develop marketable construction skills. Some of

these men were able to become master bricklayers and worked in construction following the Depression and World War II.

WPA construction was either responsible for or strongly influenced many private sector projects. Several homes were constructed in the same rock style in and around Downtown Whitehouse both during and after the WPA programs were in effect. A few examples still remain including homes, retaining walls, and ancillary buildings such as barns and outhouses.

"We had a state-of-the-art outdoor toilet because it was built by the WPA. It had a concrete floor and an automatic trip that dropped the lid when you went to go out by itself. So we had people who came from down the road to use it because that way they didn't have to put the lid down."

- Joe Pat Hagan



"I left Whitehouse after the war and then came back. I graduated from high school in 1940 and there were 43 in my graduating class. That was the largest class that ever finished here until integration. The next three years after I graduated there were less than 10. The reason for that is everybody left the farm and went to the shipyards during World War II."
- Acker Hanks

Another noticeable impact of the war on Whitehouse was a pronounced drop in population. Towns throughout the country, which were dominated by agriculture, experienced emigration of young men who volunteered or were drafted to serve in the Armed Forces.

Many cities also experienced a loss of older men, younger women, and in some cases entire families. Many such laborers left farms in order to work in shipyards or urban factories producing goods and weapons for the wartime effort. The population did not start growing again until the war was over. Factories returned to normal production, and soldiers returned from overseas tours or homeland deployment.

"World War II started and my daddy moved to Beaumont and worked in the shipyards. [Once the war was over] we came back to [East Texas]."
- Richard Waller

Transportation and the Shift from Agriculture

"We grew everything. [That] didn't change much until World War II came. More jobs came available and people were leaving the farms. Until then it was a strictly farming community."
- Richard Waller

As the population began to return to Whitehouse from urban and port cities following the war effort a distinct shift began to occur. Until the 1930s few people commuted from Whitehouse for employment. With the focus on agriculture and relative isolation many

residents lacked the option of working elsewhere. Initially the only mode of transportation out of Whitehouse was either by rail or by horse. Although the economic change brought on by mobility did not occur in mass until after World War II, several Whitehouse residents did have automobiles early during the 20th century. The first automobile owned

"My wife's grandfather [S. M. Griffin] bought the first car that was ever owned here. It was shipped in here in a crate. They had to uncrate it and put it together down off the rails. There was no gas station in Whitehouse so they hooked it behind a wagon and drug it to where he lived west of town. Then they took the wagon to Tyler to get gas."
- Acker Hanks



within Whitehouse was bought by S. M. Griffin. The car was delivered by train and had to be assembled at the station. Since the closest gas station at that time was in Tyler, even buying gas took a lot of effort in those days. Early commuters faced a daunting drive because no direct

routes existed between Whitehouse and Tyler or Whitehouse and Troup. The

"[When I was younger] going to Troup or Tyler was a big deal. By the time I'm remembering we had a pickup. Tyler was maybe 30 minutes away because the road was winding and you had to go to Downtown."
- Joe Pat Hagan

typical route taken to Tyler involved long stretches of unpaved roads and originally required the driver to forge a creek because no bridges had been built by that time. Even after the road, which would later become State Highway 110 was paved, travel into Tyler still required nearly half an hour.

Even though cars became more widespread many people could not afford to purchase one. Taking the bus into Tyler or Troup was more common. The buses also ran mail and followed a route running from Troup in the south to Tyler in the north. The bus stop in

"I can remember a bus would run. The bus would bring the mail down to the post office and then it would go on to Troup. So there was transportation from Troup to Tyler. There was a service station [at the intersection of 110 and Main Street run by Mr. Harmon]. The bus would stop there and go into Tyler. We rode the bus two or three times but by then Mama and Daddy had a car."
- Nancy Shahan Coats

Whitehouse was located at the service station formally occupying the northeast corner of the State Highway 110 and Main Street (FM 346) intersection. For

"Everyone was walking or riding a horse. Few teachers even had cars back then. A lot of times they rode the school bus if they lived on a bus route. I bet there weren't over three or four school buses when I started to school."
- Richard Waller

many years automobiles gradually became more common, but many residents still rode buses or horses because cars remained expensive and difficult to maintain. Even teachers working in Whitehouse frequently rode school buses if they had the option.



***"By the mid to late 30s a lot of people were working in Tyler. My father would farm in the spring and then in the mid-30s he got a car and he'd go to Tyler to carpenter. He'd take me and pay me \$0.75 a day and buy my lunch for \$0.25."
- Acker Hanks***

As automobiles slowly became more prevalent, a shift which had begun slowly prior to World War II figuratively shifted into higher gear. What began as a trickle of commuters in the late 1930s and early 1940s was transformed almost overnight during the postwar population boom.

Government policies during and after the Great Depression also acted to discourage farming. In addition, the rising costs associated with the business could not keep up with prices for vegetables and other agricultural products. This price difference further discouraged new farmers from entering the profession.

The final factor in the shift of life in Whitehouse from the farm to employment in Tyler was the education level and industrial experience citizens had received in various capacities during World War II. With little fanfare or notice by most members of

***"[Life shifted from farming to other jobs] in the 50s. Daddy's gin burned but shortly after that the government paid farmers not to grow crops anymore. And so that was the end of the tomato business and cotton business. The people's children by that time had begun leaving the farm anyway. They were going to college and educating themselves to do something else. So I don't remember it being a great big deal except that it was sad that we didn't have tomatoes and cotton anymore."
- Nancy Shahan Coats***

the population, life in Whitehouse shifted from agricultural self-sufficiency to economic reliance on Tyler for employment. This paradigm shift in lifestyle

***"I would say in 1960 on up, as far as the general store was concerned it was not as booming because that era was gone. People were beginning to have cars and they could make trips into [Tyler]. When Daddy died in 1965 business had slowed down. By the time Mother passed away in 1982 we knew that the business of the general store was over. There was no [way we could afford] to keep it open."
- Nancy Shahan Coats***

impacted other elements of community life in Whitehouse. Many of the longtime retail institutions such as Shahan's Store found competing with national franchises too costly. With the death of Nell Shahan, her store closed in 1982, and with it yet another chapter of Whitehouse history.



Things that Made Whitehouse Special

Throughout its history Whitehouse has had an indescribable characteristic that made a small farming town appealing to many people of different races and backgrounds. The rich life offered by farming and a small community nurtured many "native" residents and attracted many others.

"My love for the City, the schools, the churches, that's the most important thing for me... ever since I got back here Whitehouse has been my main interest."

- Acker Hanks

"[Whitehouse] just got to be one of those places that people liked to move to. And I'm talking about people from [all over] like New York. And you ask them how did you ever find this place? Well they heard somebody [talk about what it was like here]. Whitehouse has just got to be one of those places where people wanted to move to."

- Joe Pat Hagan

Although most people within the community were either farmers or worked in support of agriculture, many received college degrees and in the process passed on opportunities to move elsewhere. The intangible draw the community had over its children

has also applied to people who discovered the community in adulthood. Today, many people who were around for the early days of the community fondly remember their childhood. They also reminisce about the unique way in which they grew up and the town and the people that played a pivotal part in it.

"Mother and Daddy bought the store [in Whitehouse] in 1935... I grew up in [a] marvelous place."

- Nancy Shahan Coats

"Troup was a railroad town at one time. As the railroad came through it was called Stumptown. Its name was later changed to Troup. Whitehouse didn't have a name back then but eventually got its name from the [locomotive drivers talking about the] first buildings that were built here. The church, school, and gathering places were built out of logs that were white washed. That's how it got its name."

- Acker Hanks

No history of Whitehouse would be complete without recounting the story of its naming. The freight and passenger trains that have strongly impacted life in the community predated much of the formal development within the town. Long before an

organized government existed trains would stop at "the white houses" to take on water, passengers, and freight. This was in reference to many of the original



buildings erected near what is today Brown Elementary. Many of the structures including the original church and school were whitewashed. Thus, the name "Whitehouse" was used to identify the railroad stop and was later adopted by the schools and community.

Celebrating History

The primary way in which Whitehouse keeps its historic heritage alive is through the YesterYear Celebration. This annual festival is held during the summer months and includes a variety of activities intended to remind people of how life started out in the community.

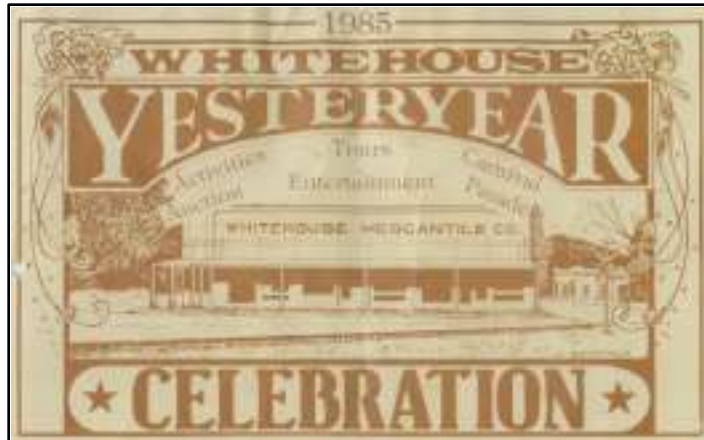


Image 2.4: 1985 YesterYear Celebration program cover

The celebration has taken on a variety of formats throughout the years. Historical reenactments focusing on indigenous people, the "Wild West," early



Image 2.5: YesterYear Celebration carnival held in the City Park on Main Street

settlement, and/or life on the farm have been presented. Arts and crafts fairs, parades, golf tournaments, and carnivals have also been a part of the celebration throughout different parts of its history. Each year Mr. and Mrs. YesterYear are selected giving one couple the opportunity to share



their personal experiences of life in the community. A YesterYear Princess and Royal Court are also coordinated during the opening ceremonies and ball.

One cherished yet unofficial YesterYear tradition was the reopening of Shahan's Store during the celebration. For a decade beginning in 1983, before structural problems and right-of-way acquisition for the Main Street (FM 346) widening project made

"In 1982 Mama passed away on June the 20th. So, we kept the store open till the first part of August then closed it. Then, in 1983, we had a YesterYear celebration so our family decided that the day of the parade we would open Shahan's Store [and sell ice cream and cheese]. We started out with five or six containers that day. We also bought cheese to sell. As we prepared for this I didn't think we would have very many people come. That day people were lined up inside the store and out west of the store in the vacant lot. It was unbelievable to me. That day we sold about six or seven hundred ice cream cones and all the cheese. It was a marvelous day. So after that grand occasion for the next nine years we opened the store each YesterYear. People continued to come and it was just a marvelous experience."
- Nancy Shahan Coats

it impossible, the children and grandchildren of Nell and Alvin Shahan reopened the store and sold ice cream and cheese. During the celebration adults were able to relive some childhood memories, and kids were able to experience a small part of everyday life in Whitehouse as it had been for much of the previous century: friendly service and "two scoops for a nickel."