

Brownwood: From Neighborhood to Nature Center

By Laura Bernal



When tides are very low at the Baytown Nature Center, visitors can catch a glimpse of former residents' swimming pools. Based on its position, this pool appears to have been built to connect to the bay.

All photos courtesy of author unless otherwise noted.

With hurricanes regularly striking the Texas Gulf Coast, experiencing multiple hurricanes and tropical storms in one's lifetime has become a rite of passage and a life marker for coastal residents. Even though Texans know how to prepare for these events, each storm has a unique trajectory and damage path, as Hurricane Harvey demonstrated in August 2017 when the Houston area experienced unprecedented flooding. Among the affected cities was Baytown, home to the ExxonMobil Baytown Complex. Amid emergency evacuations and rescues in numerous Baytown neighborhoods, Harvey revived dormant memories of the lost Brownwood subdivision, the city's "most exclusive address" in the 1940s and 1950s.¹

For most of the twentieth century, Brownwood was one of Baytown's most desirable neighborhoods, sitting on a peninsula surrounded by Burnet, Crystal, and Scott Bays. This changed with Hurricane Carla's arrival in 1961 when city officials and Brownwood residents had to confront the enemy silently destroying the neighborhood—subsidence, that is the sinking of the land. Ultimately, Hurricane Alicia's arrival in 1983 delivered the final deathblow, forcing residents

to concede their battle against nature. Against the residents' wishes, city officials bought the land and created the Baytown Nature Center. Yet, underneath that nature center façade, visitors can still find artifacts and the foundations of the homes that once stood there.

Prior to the colonization of Texas, the peninsula was home to "nomadic hunter-gatherers [who] discovered the ample food supply along the shore. These seasonal visitors were the forebears of...the Attakapas and Karankawas who ranged along the coast from Louisiana to south Texas," historian Margaret Swett Henson reported. Nathaniel Lynch, who later built the Lynchburg Ferry, became the first legal Anglo landowner in the area when he received a land grant from the Mexican government as part of Stephen F. Austin's original colony (the Old Three Hundred) in 1824. In 1892, Quincy Adams Wooster and Willard D. Crow bought more than 1,000 acres from Lynch's land grant and founded an unincorporated community called Wooster. Less than ten years later, in 1910, "Edwin Rice Brown Sr. of Mississippi bought 530 acres from the Wooster Estate for \$15,000 on which to raise cattle."² Brown hoped to find oil on the



The Brownwood subdivision sat on a peninsula surrounded by Crystal, Burnet, and Scott Bays. Across the tip, now known as Wooster Point, stood Goat Island, nestled between the neighborhood and the Houston Ship Channel.

Photo courtesy of Wikipedia.

land, a desire shared by many after the discovery of oil at Spindletop in 1901. About a decade after this discovery, a group of independent oilmen, including Ross S. Sterling, Walter Fondren, Robert Blaffer, and William Stamps Farish, met and founded the Humble Company. Their quest to expand their company's oil production led them to the Goose Creek Oil Field in present-day Baytown.

Against his lawyer's advice, Sterling acquired this oil field even though it only contained one dry hole. He and his team drilled multiple holes, bringing in "the first big well at Goose Creek before the end of 1916." By 1920, they had built a Humble Oil & Refining Company facility near the oil field, creating many new job opportunities that drew individuals and their families to the area. Neighborhoods grew up around the refinery, but officials controlled some of this growth by failing to provide "more adequate housing arrangements for the few hundred unskilled" Mexican and black laborers who lived in small rental houses. On the other hand, executives lived in stucco row houses.³ Even though these executives lived comfortably, they wanted to improve the quality of their housing, so they sought additional land.

The property closest to the refinery belonged to Edwin Rice Brown, Sr., who died just as refinery officials planned to contact him. Nevertheless, his heirs agreed to sell the land. Refinery officials completed the transaction in 1937 and began dividing the territory into hundreds of lots for the refinery's executives. The refinery had done something similar in the 1920s when it acquired East Baytown and Black Duck Bay, breaking them into lots available "on easy credit to white employees" after installing water, sewers, electrical lights, streets, alleys, and sidewalks. For those unaffected by racial deed restrictions, acquiring one of these coveted properties was an exciting moment. Residents began transforming Brownwood into the "River Oaks of Baytown," a reference to Houston's most elite neighborhood, but Mother Nature had other plans.⁴ Caught up in their excitement, residents overlooked the first warning signs of the danger lurking underneath the surface.

The discovery of oil at the Goose Creek Oil Field unleashed a vicious monster. When workers reached maximum production in 1918, they ignored the first signs of subsidence. In his memoir, Ross Sterling admitted that they "took out so much oil that the land [near the Goose Creek Oil

Field], which stood four feet above the water, sank to two feet under water." Subsidence also occurred on the "Gaillard Peninsula, near the center of the field, and other nearby low land[s]." Field workers responded by elevating surrounding structures, such as roadways and derrick floors.

Despite these modifications, the peninsula and vegetation disappeared, and the sinking spread to surrounding areas. Geologists studied the subsidence and agreed that the removal of "large volumes of oil, gas, water, and sand from beneath the surface" by refinery workers was to blame. This continued withdrawal of resources from the ground sunk 105,800 acre-feet of land in the Baytown-La Porte area between 1943 and 1953. Humble Oil officials tried to stop this by "using more surface water in 1964" and building "a 350-acre lagoon system for treating processed water before returning it to the San Jacinto River."⁵ Despite these changes, the damage to the neighborhood and surrounding areas was irreversible.

Brownwood residents took pride in their executive homes with manicured yards, but the community resembled many neighborhoods with about four hundred homes on a dozen streets.⁶ The subdivision had its own homeowner's association, the Brownwood Civic Association, which residents founded in 1947. Depending on their property's location, residents had a view of the San Jacinto Monument and passing ships. Besides oil executives, residents included educators, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and store managers.

Brownwood boasted several important features. The Wooster Cemetery stood at the tip of the peninsula until



Roxanne Gillum, now Roxanne Reeves Spalding, lived in this home located at 128 Bayshore Drive on Burnet Bay. Like many houses in the neighborhood, it had a pool.

Photos courtesy of Roxanne Reeves Spalding.



Even though most of the house foundations are gone, the vegetation shows where houses once stood, such as this palm tree near a bulkhead.

subsidence later destroyed most of the graves. Another small subdivision within Brownwood, Linwood Park, opened in 1955 between Crow Road and Mapleton Street. A few residents had businesses inside the subdivision. For example, the Underwood family owned Lea's Nursery, formerly known as Ware's Nursery, which sold a variety of plants, trees, shrubs, and flowers. Other businesses included Carew's Studio, Weikel's Beauty Shop, Haney Heating & Air, and The Printe Shoppe. Brownwood residents also had access to businesses outside the subdivision, such as a Jones 7-11-7 (once known as Smitty's Drive In), a robo-wash, and Westwood Park, where many Brownwood residents and those from nearby neighborhoods gathered.

Residents created a pleasant neighborhood, but they were not prepared for the storms that soon hit. The first major storm to come through was Hurricane Carla, which made landfall near Port O'Connor, Texas, on September 11, 1961. Baytown officials warned people about the storm's potential threat five days before it made landfall. On Friday, September 8, "Baytown City Manager, J.B. LeFevre called a meeting for department heads...to make plans for providing shelter, food and transportation" in preparation. Arrangements continued the following day with residents receiving a hurricane warning. As Hurricane Carla approached Texas, "Baytown's National Guard troops were pressed into action early Sunday night to evacuate an undetermined number of persons from their homes in Brownwood...Most of them were brought to [surrounding] Baytown schools and churches." School superintendent George H. Gentry made all school buildings available as shelters.⁷ Most Brownwood residents boarded up their homes and evacuated, but some stayed, forcing National Guard Troops to rescue them when their homes flooded.

Even though they had taken precautions, Brownwood residents experienced Baytown's most severe damage, primarily from floodwaters rather than the storm's high winds. Floodwater reached the middle of the first floor in many

houses, and mailboxes were under water. Since this was Brownwood's first major flooding event, Baytown residents volunteered to help those living in Brownwood. Humble Oil & Refining Company officials offered its employees help to rebuild following the storm, but "a number of Brownwood residents interviewed indicated...[they waited] a few days until their houses could dry out a little more" before deciding on their next step.⁸ While many residents chose to rebuild, some families left after Hurricane Carla, escaping the decline of property values and the long fight to save Brownwood.

Brownwood residents first attempted to protect their homes by proposing a levee to deter future flooding. More than 450 people met with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on March 6, 1962, urging the "construction of a 30-foot [high] levee to offer hurricane flood protection to almost 2,000 acres of residential areas in Brownwood."⁹ About twenty residents shared their experiences to support the levee, which helped garner support for the proposal, including from Governor Price Daniel. City officials addressed this request by raising one of the main roads five feet to act as a levee. As an extra precaution, many residents along the bays constructed bulkheads to protect their yards.



Days after a rain event, water remains on the streets of the former Brownwood neighborhood in April 2018.

In September 1967, Baytownians prepared for Hurricane Beulah's arrival. Brownwood residents set up a system to read tides hourly, starting a couple of days prior to the storm's landfall. Simultaneously, city officials implemented a voluntary evacuation and warned "residents to be prepared to move their household furnishings."¹⁰ Even though forecasters expected Beulah, one of the strongest hurricanes on record, to hit near the mouth of the Rio Grande, Brownwood was under a threat of tidal flooding, which did not materialize. As residents evacuated, police officers guarded the neighborhood from looters and illegal dumping. Their presence continued to adorn Brownwood during each evacuation until its final days as flooding occurred more frequently and subsidence advanced.

Less than two years later, unexpected storms unrelated to tropical weather flooded Brownwood. Known as the 1969 Valentine's Day Flood, the "torrential rains and treacherous tides" forced about 300 Brownwood residents to evacuate, and water "entered about 80 per cent" of



This foundation, located on MacArthur Avenue, still contains remnants of red carpet, white linoleum tiles, and red bricks.

the homes. Displaced residents returned to their homes a few hours later, only to quickly evacuate once more as tide levels rapidly rose again. Brownwood residents rebuilt their homes, and “public organizations as well as private businesses” provided some aid.¹¹ Residents also sought Small Business Association (SBA) loans to help cover the estimated \$250,000 in damages to furnishings and home contents in the 150 homes that flooded. Less than three months later, Baytown’s mayor Glen Walker proposed a land-based levee around the peninsula.

Even as officials proposed different solutions to help residents, the Brownwood neighborhood continued to flood. In October 1970, rains and rising tides flooded the subdivision. Hurricane Fern hit in 1971, and Tropical Storm Delia impacted the area in 1973. With each storm, the damage estimates increased. Subsidence made it harder for the water to recede, trapping it for days inside homes and in yards. Each time, residents had to evacuate, and only authorized personnel could remain. In 1979, flash floods and Tropical Storm Claudette once again inundated the neighborhood with water. On January 8, 1980, Brownwood residents had the opportunity to vote in favor of a bond to fund their evacuation and relocation, yet, they turned it down.

Hurricane Alicia delivered the final deathblow in August 1983. Once again, houses flooded, and city officials had to rescue those who refused to evacuate. By then, residents and city officials had established a routine for evacuations. Brownwood residents knew when to evacuate, what information city officials needed, and what to take. Nevertheless, some refused to leave. This decision endangered the lives of residents and rescuers. Norman Dykes, a former city engineer and public works director for Baytown, still remembers how responders dealt with one man who refused to evacuate during Alicia. The water had gotten too deep and the hour too late for them to assist him, so the man had to stay on his roof overnight. When they returned the following morning, he was glad to see them because he had spent the night fighting off water moccasins.¹² A Category 3 storm, Alicia hit just southwest of Galveston and across the bay from Baytown, putting Brownwood on the “dirty side” of the storm and sealing its fate.

Hurricane Alicia destroyed the neighborhood and resi-

dents’ hopes for the future. City officials barred homeowners from rebuilding, and angry residents retaliated by hiring attorney Andrew Lannie to file lawsuits against the city. As residents coped with these legal issues, they also had to deal with looters and illegal dumpers who took advantage when police barricades around the neighborhood were removed. This forced Baytown’s City Council to pass Resolution No. 897 on December 13, 1984, declaring a portion of the subdivision a hazardous, flood-prone area. City officials used the resolution to justify their decision to stop providing certain utility services to Brownwood. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) made offers on and bought many of the properties so that Baytown city officials could transform the area into a proposed park. Building the park took time, however, because the purchasing process was long and frustrating.

Some residents immediately accepted the buyout offers, but others declined and chose to pursue legal action. Several who did this owned multiple lots, which they bought as residents left, and they hoped to secure the lots’ full value by filing lawsuits. On average, most of the owners who accepted the buyout offers received between \$1,000 and \$2,000 for each lot. Norman Dykes represented the city, and officials advised him of the maximum amounts it would pay for the properties.¹³ When Dykes met with residents and their attorneys, residents declared their perceived land value, and Dykes responded with a lower amount. This negotiation continued back and forth, with residents reducing what they were willing to accept and Dykes raising his offer until they agreed on a number, typically the limit the city originally set. This negotiation was important because when residents bought their homes during the 1950s, they paid between \$15,000 and \$16,000. Even though a judge dismissed most of the lawsuits, a few residents received favorable rulings, including the Gillum family who received \$80,000 for their four lots.

On June 13, 1985, Olshan Demolishing Company in Houston won the \$157,700 contract offered by the Baytown



The City of Baytown installed this medallion at the Brownwood Educational Pavilion to indicate the peninsula’s original elevation in comparison to the vegetation and water in the background, which are noticeably lower due to subsidence.



Prickly pear cacti can be found throughout the nature center. By looking at a plant's thorns, visitors can determine if the plant was domesticated.



The remains of Brownwood indicate that many residents added non-native plants to their yards, and some have survived today. The belladonna lily, native to Cape Province in South Africa, is widely used as an ornamental plant. In its natural habitat, it grows among rocks and requires little watering. Yet, this one at the BNC adapted to its wetland habitat.

City Council to raze the remaining structures within the neighborhood. By October, the company had cleared 228 lots, including twenty-three vacant ones. The company did this by digging a giant hole parallel to the house, leveling the structure, scooping up the debris, and dumping it into the hole. Olshan workers then covered the hole with dirt, pounded it, and smoothed it out.¹⁴ As for the remaining properties, the company later hauled the structures off and destroyed them elsewhere. With the passing of Ordinance No. 5750 on January 31, 1991, the Baytown City Council officially closed and discontinued the use of the subdivision's roads.

In 1994 the Brownwood Marsh Restoration Project commenced transforming the former neighborhood into a nature center. This came about after a fifty-five-acre property in Crosby, Texas, where as many as ninety companies disposed of 70 million gallons of industrial waste lost its permit from the Texas Water Commission due to violations in 1973. The federal government stepped in to require the site to restore wetlands, as part of the legal penalties. The responsible parties formed the French Limited Superfund Site (French, LTD), which conducted an "extensive site selection study" before choosing the former Brownwood Subdivision for a \$1.8 million restoration of sixty acres of marshland. Workers pumped water out of the subdivision and removed remaining structures. Lyondell Chemical constructed flushing channels, a twenty-four-foot-wide gazebo, and created twenty acres of wetlands. Additionally, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department constructed a fresh water pond, an observation platform, walking trails, a

butterfly garden, a children's playground, and picnic areas.¹⁵ The introduction of a variety of plants and the creation of freshwater ponds facilitated the arrival of many birds and animals, earning the nature center a spot in the 500-mile Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail, which extends across East Texas.

The Baytown Nature Center opened on May 19, 2002, and as part of the ceremony, more than 325 former residents attended a homecoming reunion, which included a tour of their former neighborhood. They recorded interviews with Steve Koester, which are available on the Sterling Municipal Library's YouTube channel.

Since its opening, the nature center, which charges a nominal entrance fee to defray costs, has added fishing piers and a kayak launch. Most of the neighborhood's former roads serve as walking trails for visitors. Even though the majority of the residential structures were gone when the nature center opened, visitors can still find pieces pertaining to the neighborhood's history, such as foundations and artifacts, including bricks, tile, pipe fragments, a rusty fence, a fire hydrant, manhole covers, wooden poles, and pieces of carpet. A few foundations remain as well, but subsidence and the nature center's design have made them inaccessible.

The neighborhood's history is also evident in the center's vegetation where non-native and domestic plants such as iris, huisache, belladonna lilies, roses, and palm trees abound in former residents' gardens. On almost every street, visitors can find prickly pear cacti, which are decorative, a food source, and offer protection when placed parallel to a fence or underneath a window.

When the tides are low, usually in the early morning or late afternoon, visitors can see remains of the homes' in-ground swimming pools, bulkheads, and boathouses. In August 2015, the Baytown City Council passed Resolution No. 263, authorizing the incorporation of Westwood Park into the Baytown Nature Center's acreage. City officials removed most of the park's structures during the summer of 2017. Despite all of these historical details, most visitors only know the Baytown Nature Center as a place for fishing and birdwatching.

Although the Brownwood subdivision no longer exists, its legacy remains in the Texas Historical Markers for Wooster Point and Wooster Common School No. 38, the foundations, and artifacts hidden within the nature center's vegetation. More importantly, it survives in the memories of former residents, especially those who fought hard to save their homes. Unfortunately, it is also a warning about the lessons we have yet to learn. Surrounding neighborhoods that are also sinking can look to the property as a warning of what unchecked human activity can do. Whether we refer to it as a nature center or a ghost town, what matters is that this peninsula was once one of Baytown's most exclusive neighborhoods. Forgetting it means forgetting the residents' experiences and struggles, but it also means erasing a major chapter from Baytown's history.

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